Alchemy & Ambiguity: Poetic Responses to Visual Art, Primarily Portraiture

by

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Candidate’s Declaration

I certify that the thesis entitled ‘Alchemy & Ambiguity: Poetic Responses to Visual Art, Primarily Portraiture’, submitted for the degree of Master of Arts, is the result of my own work and that where reference is made to the work of others, due acknowledgment is given.

I also certify that any material in the thesis which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by any university or institution is identified in the text.

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George Douglas Raitt

4 October 2006
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Summary

My study concerns the problem of how the visual work of art, primarily portraiture, and the ekphrastic poem complement each other at the site of the viewer/reader to produce meaning. I conclude that ekphrastic poetry can reveal something new to the viewer/reader about the work of visual art, and I demonstrate how this happens using my theoretical framework and methodology. I adapt the thinking in the literature to argue that the poet and viewer/reader in ekphrasis share something with Martin Heidegger’s preserver who restrains usual knowing and looking to allow meaning to emerge from the work of art. I adapt the concepts of seeing and seeing-as and the Peircean concepts of symbol, icon and index to elucidate the kind of switching involved in this restraint. I argue that Heidegger’s concepts of world and earth are implicated in the production of meaning, and show that images of earth occur in ekphrases on portraits and how they affect the viewer/reader. I critique the contemporary definition of ekphrasis (as the verbal representation of visual representation) and show that the process of representation is unstable and that visual and verbal representation introduces changes, which I call “mutations”. I argue that ekphrasis contributes to the field of difference in which the viewer/reader encounters the art work, and demonstrate how mutations influence the production of meaning from the art work informed by the poem.
Introduction

John Hollander conceived and wrote his book *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* in an effort to understand what he had done in his ekphrastic poem 'Effet de Neige', first published in 1985, in which the poet responds to a "snow effect" landscape painted by Claude Monet in 1867 (Hollander 1995: 343). As Ruth Webb has noted, the Greek word *ekphrasis*, an oral description, has been appropriated in English to cover both a wide range of descriptive writing in poetry and prose about persons, events, times and places, and a class of poetry responding to actual works of art (Webb 1999: 7).

My interest in ekphrasis in the latter, narrow, sense has its origins in my experience some years ago in the portrait studio, when I contemplated my own efforts as a student of portraiture. The sitters were models, unknown to me, who generally sat in silence and, after a few glances at the finished works, departed and were never seen again. There is a feeling of satisfaction in creating a good likeness, and a tinge of mystery associated with not knowing exactly how it happens, which is occasionally compounded when a portrait that is not a good likeness of the sitter nevertheless appears strangely compelling. As Barbara Bolt has noted, in her recent book *Art Beyond Representation*, in the interaction between artist, sitter and the materials of painting, the work of art can take on a life of its own (Bolt 2004: 3).

I have experimented a number of times writing poems in response to portraits and self-portraits, in an endeavour to capture the feeling, which is difficult to render in words, of the studio and the unexplained process by which something about the sitter is captured in the work of art. I had a feeling that poetry might somehow help me understand this process. In the present study, I investigate ekphrases on portraits where the poet responds to a painting made by another person, and I, the viewer/reader, contemplate the painting informed by the poem. I argue that ekphrastic
poetry complements the work of visual art to reveal something new to the viewer/reader about the art work. I develop a theoretical framework and methodology to show how this happens.

According to Norbert Lynton, portraiture 'satisfies a core and common desire to meet and know others .... It is knowing others that gives life and purpose to knowing oneself' (Lynton 2001: 45). My interest, however, is provoked by the deeper mystery associated with the intervention of both the artist and the poet in the viewer/reader's encounter. This thesis was conceived and written in my attempt to begin to understand the relationship between ekphrastic poetry and the work of visual art in this crowded encounter.

Helen Vendler, in her recent paper on Ashbery's 'Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror', which I discuss in Chapter 4, likens Parmigianino's self-portrait to an "alchemical chamber" (Vendler 2005: 65-66). As if to illustrate the inherent ambiguity of the ekphrastic encounter, Vendler does not clarify whether this chamber is the artist's studio, the artwork in which the materials of painting come together, or the space within the viewer/reader where painting and poem are transformed into meanings. The latter is my focus in this thesis.

Virtually no sustained attention has been given in the literature on ekphrasis to poems responding to portraiture. A portrait is generally a likeness of an actual person, made from life, by drawing, painting or photography. Tom Mitchell proposes at the end of his influential paper 'Ekphrasis and the Other' that the ekphrastic relationship will be affected by 'the kind of visual representation' concerned, and notes a number of kinds of artwork, including portraiture, that are not considered in his study (Mitchell 1994: 181).

While there is passing reference in the literature to a long standing interest of poets in portraits, I cannot find anything on late twentieth-century ekphrases on portraits, which is the focus of this thesis. There have been several papers on poetry responding to portraiture from Late Antiquity to
the Early Modern period, which appears predominantly to take the form of encomium, or praise of the artist who captures not merely the exterior likeness of the sitter but the mind or soul of the sitter (see for example, Claire Pace 1986: 10-11, John Hollander 1988 211-213, Norman Land 1994: 89-90).

Hollander devotes only a few lines in The Gazer's Spirit to developing the proposition that poetry responding to portraits may amplify 'intricacies of representation' from mute brushstrokes which in turn may have amplified 'spiritual depths' observed from life (Hollander 1995: 42-43). While I would like to believe this, I tend to agree with Harry Berger, who criticises attempts by various observers to construe paintings as revealing the 'inner states of sitters' as 'irresponsible and undemonstrable' (Berger 1994: 94).

Like Hollander, I find encomiastic poetry reductive, and seek more interesting possibilities in poetry that responds to the painting in other ways. Hollander observes that a poem on a portrait can, more interestingly, 'declare the painting to present a revisionary' interpretation or 'use the image as an occasion for presenting its own revision' (Hollander 1995: 43). Hollander thus concludes his remarks on ekphrases on portraits without pursuing that interesting thought. I argue that these 'revisions' are rather important, and have not been studied before in the literature on ekphrasis. I prefer to call these changes "mutations" to widen the concept beyond the intentions of the painter and the poet. I argue that "mutations" are fundamental to the way in which the painting and the poem work at the site of the viewer/reader to create meaning (in the abstract sense, which embraces polysemy). My discussion of "mutations" is informed by Estelle Barrett's concept of 'mutant enunciations'. These are "new and unexpected significatory effects" of a process operating in visual art that 'produces difference rather than the reproduction of the same' (Barrett 2000: 255-257). I argue that ekphrastic poetry operates in a similar way to contribute to the field of difference in which the viewer/reader encounters the painting.
The literature on ekphrasis has too many currents and cross-currents for me to navigate them all in this thesis. According to thinkers such as Ulrich Weisstein and James Heffernan, ekphrastic poetry, in the narrow sense of poetry responding to actual works of art, has received considerable attention over recent decades without, apparently, any common ground emerging about what the term ekphrasis means or, indeed, any sound foundation emerging for thinking about the relationship between poetry and painting (Weisstein 1982a: 257, 1993: 1-3; Heffernan 1998: 189). Tamar Yacobi notes several areas of ‘healthy unrest’ in the wider discourse on ekphrasis, including the way current thinking favours ‘agonistic over harmonious interart encounters’ (Yacobi 1998: 21-22). My study examines the relationship between portraiture and ekphrastic poetry and how they produce mutations which operate together at the site of the viewer/reader to produce new meanings.

I will begin in Chapter 1 by locating my study in relation to some of the controversies in the literature. I will then examine some ekphrases by John Hollander (‘Duck-Rabbit’ and ‘Effet de Neige’), in which he ponders upon the poet’s encounter with art. This will assist me develop a theoretical framework which makes it possible to conceive that ekphrastic poetry can reveal something new to the viewer/reader about the work of visual art, and how this may happen. I argue that it is possible to develop a theoretical framework to demonstrate that ekphrastic poetry complements the visual work of art by facilitating the emergence of meaning from the work of art that would not emerge from either taken alone, and to demonstrate how this happens. This approach is not limited to ekphrases responding to portraiture, but has that end in view.

I critique the contemporary definition of ekphrasis as the ‘verbal representation of visual representation’ (Heffernan 1993, Mitchell 1994) in Chapter 2, and draw further on Hollander’s poem ‘Effet de Neige’ to develop a methodology for examining the connections between visual details in the painting and the responses of the poet in the poem and their influence on the viewer/reader.
In Chapter 3, I will compare my approach with the approach in the literature to canonical ekphrases by Shelley, responding to the painting *The Medusa* once attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, and by Auden, responding to Brueghel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. Canonical examples of ekphrasis on which much of the literature has been based concern mythical subjects, and it is against this background that Ashbery’s ‘Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror’ has been discussed in the literature. I argue that, with some adaptation, ideas in the literature can be of assistance in examining ekphrases on portraiture by poets from the mid twentieth-century to the present time, which are the focus of my study.

The approach I develop through those chapters is leading towards Chapter 4, where I discuss Ashbery’s ‘Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror’, in which Ashbery responds to Parmigianino’s 1524 anamorphic self-portrait. I argue that, although this poem appears to have contributed to the resurgence of interest in ekphrasis in the 1980s and 1990s, the literature does not explore the particular implications of ekphrasis responding to the painting as portraiture. For example, Vendler has recently studied the poem as “colloquy” between Ashbery and the absent Parmigianino in which Ashbery creates a self-portrait reproducing the “aesthetic of distortion” he shares with Parmigianino (Vendler 2005: 4). I approach the poem as an ekphrasis on a portrait, and examine how the painting and the poem produce difference rather than reproduce the same.

Chapter 5 brings me to my study of certain ekphrases of R. S. Thomas from the 1980s and Paul Durcan from the early 1990s responding to portraits, particularly portraits of men. I examine these poems from a different perspective to much of the literature which analyses Ashbery’s work mentioned above and the ekphrases of R. S. Thomas responding to paintings of women. The poems I examine have not been considered in the literature. Nor have the Australian poems I consider in Chapter 6, by Fay Zwicky from the late 1990s and Peter Steele from 2003, been considered in the literature. These Australian poems provide a kind of limit case for ekphrasis, in that in Zwicky’s case the poet is the portrait sitter,
and in the case of Steele the poet is responding based on detailed knowledge of the life and literary work of the sitter. They enable me to consider how the degree of engagement between portrait and poem affects the ekphrastic encounter and to further differentiate my approach from current thinking in the literature.

Chapter 7 sets out my conclusion that it is possible to develop a theoretical framework in which ekphrastic poetry complements the work of visual art to facilitate the emergence of new meaning from the work of art informed by the poem, that would not emerge from either taken alone, and to show how this is influenced by mutations in the painting and the poem that operate at the site of the viewer/reader. I support these conclusions with observations concerning the ekphrases on portraits examined in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. I believe that my study of ekphrases responding to portraiture offers insights that may be applied to other kinds of ekphrasis and may have wider implications for our understanding of ekphrasis.
Chapter 1

Ekphrasis and the problem of illumination

The site of investigation

There are repeated references in the literature on interart studies, from the nineteenth-century to the present day, to the “mutual illumination” of the arts, particularly visual arts and literature (Weisstein 1982a, 1993, Vendler 1993). I believe that the concept of “illumination” is not used with technical precision but simply reflects a belief that such studies offer insights into the respective arts. I propose that there are a number of areas of study embraced within the concept of “illumination” which are easily conflated but can usefully be distinguished to place my study in its context within the literature on ekphrasis. I argue that the site of the viewer/reader has not been isolated or specifically studied in the literature, and that this site allows me to avoid some controversies in the literature.

The first area of “illumination” I want to consider is that which John Hollander has called the ‘poetic process’ by which ekphrastic poetry is produced (Hollander 1988: 209). There are a number of influences that have been examined in the literature, which tend to centre on the paragonal relationship between visual arts and literature, that is, the relationship in which the arts compare themselves and compete with each other. In the 1990s thinkers such as James Heffernan, Shimon Sandbank and Katy Aisenberg considered that the most promising area for study is that proposed by Tom Mitchell in Iconology: the competitive struggle between the verbal and visual arts (Mitchell 1986: 3; Heffernan 1993: 1; Sandbank 1994: 226; Aisenberg 1995: 2). This struggle has been transposed by some thinkers, such as James Mirollo and Helen Vendler, into a competitive struggle between the poet and the artist (Mirollo 1996: 136; Vendler 2005: 71-72).
A number of thinkers have explored the possibility of collaborative relations between poetry and painting. Some, like Mieke Bal, argue that the word-image opposition prevents us conceiving of a collaborative interaction (Bal 1991: 39). Others, such as Brian Wolf, Stephen Scobie and Lawrence Starzyk, argue that the visual needs language to become complete (Wolf 1990: 194-195; Scobie 1997: 6-8; Starzyk 2002: 5). Some, including Andrew Becker and Grant Scott, argue further that collaboration is only possible where poetry does not challenge the power of painting, that is, there is an irresolvable power imbalance (Becker 2003: 3-4; Scott 1994: 37-38; see also Scobie 1997: 21 and Starzyk 2002: 8).

In a recent article, Mitchell argues that the visual and the verbal are stereotypes, because the visual involves other senses such as touch and hearing (Mitchell 2005: 261). I will say more about this in the next section of this chapter. However, Mitchell remains of the view that the relationship between sensory or semiotic elements continues to be affected by issues of ‘dominance/subordination’, and that this still requires further analysis (Mitchell 2005: 262).

Nicola Creighton notes an ekphrastic model in art historical literature which relinquishes the struggle for dominance and seeks instead ‘an entente in which [image and word] could acknowledge their heterogeneity and cease rivalry’ (Creighton 2004: 53-54). Further, Hans Belting proposes a different approach to ‘grasp images in their rich spectrum of meanings’ than proposed generally by Mitchell in Iconology, by focusing on the ‘perceiving body on which images depend’ (Belting 2005: 302). Mitchell too, in his recent article, acknowledges that the viewer/reader is a potentially useful site for study (Mitchell 2005: 261-262). However, before I turn to discuss that site, I want to consider whether certain modes of analysis in the literature are suitable to be applied at my chosen site of investigation.

Mitchell develops a model for investigating the dialectic between image and ekphrastic text out of which he derives the concepts of ‘ekphrastic
indifference, hope and fear', which he calls the 'three phases or moments of realisation' concerning the problem of ekphrasis (Mitchell 1994: 152-154). These concepts continue to be used by thinkers on ekphrasis (for example Tabios 2003 and Hollenberg 2003).

Mitchell begins his discussion of ekphrasis with an anecdote about a routine by two radio comedians: one would show the other his holiday photographs and both would comment on the places portrayed; after building this feeling of shared intimacy between the two, one would comment that he wished the listeners could see the pictures (Mitchell 1994: 151). The first of Mitchell's phases is indifference, which 'grows out of a commonsense perception that ekphrasis is impossible', that the comedian's photographs 'can never be made visible over the radio' (Mitchell 1994: 152). The second of Mitchell's phases, ekphrastic hope, arises when 'we imagine in full detail the photographs we hear slapping down on the studio table', when ekphrastic description 'begins to seem paradigmatic of a fundamental tendency in all linguistic expression' (Mitchell 1994: 153). The third and final of Mitchell's phases, ekphrastic fear, occurs the moment we sense that 'the imaginary desire of ekphrasis might be realised literally and actually', that if 'we could see the photographs [it would] spoil their whole game, the moment when we wish for the photographs to stay invisible' (Mitchell 1994: 154).

Mitchell acknowledges that he treats the structural relationship modelled above 'mainly as an affair between a speaking/seeing subject and a seen object' (Mitchell 1994: 164). I argue that the "radio pictures" model is concerned with the site of production of the ekphrastic poem, and is not entirely apposite where we are investigating the site of the viewer/reader to whom the artwork is available.

The second area of "illumination" is the reading of the poem, which in twentieth-century literary criticism tends to be divorced from the circumstances of its production. Mitchell considers the reader to be an additional dimension to his model that I have described above, 'the re-
conversion of the verbal representation back into the visual object in the reception of the reader' (Mitchell 1994: 164). In a recent article, Mitchell proposes that the 'crucial rule of ekphrasis' is that the art object 'is never made visible or tangible except by way of the medium of language' (Mitchell 2005: 263). Again, I argue that this model assumes the absence of the work of visual art and is not entirely apposite to my study where I am investigating the site of the viewer/reader to whom the artwork or a reproduction is available to see.

The last area of "illumination" I want to consider, which is the subject matter of this thesis, is the reading of the work of visual art informed by the poem. There are provocations in the literature that ekphrastic poetry may 're-inform' our viewing of the artwork (Hunt 1980: 6) or may help us 'construe art to deep effect' (Hollander 1988: 209) or may make it possible for us to 'truly see' the painting (Vendler 1993: 58) or to 'reread the image in a new way' (Brinzeu 2001: 10) or may help us 'read pictures' (Heffernan 2002: 62-63). I argue that these provocations have not yet been explored in the literature on ekphrasis. While these propositions might appear to be obvious, I argue that, without a reasoned argument to sustain them or to identify how this works, they are no more compelling than the impression of our senses that the earth is flat.

Accordingly, I argue that ekphrastic poetry can "illuminate" the work of visual art to which it responds, that is, can change the way we look at the work of art. More specifically, I argue that ekphrastic poetry complements the visual work of art to facilitate the emergence of new meaning from the work of art that would not emerge from either taken alone. In the next section of this chapter I develop a theoretical framework that makes it possible for us to conceive how such "illumination" may take place.

My study is focussed on the site of the viewer/reader and the production of meaning by the work of art complemented by the poem. For the purposes of my study, I am the viewer/reader. In the next chapter I will consider
whether I or anyone else can speak for other viewer/readers, or indeed whether it is necessary to do so.

The Duck Rabbit and Heidegger’s preserver

Hollander ends The Gazer’s Spirit with a short discussion of his own ekphrastic poem ‘Effet de Neige’ (snow effect) which responded to Claude Monet’s 1867 painting Road Toward the Farm, Saint-Simeon, Honfleur. In this section, I argue that it is possible to develop a theoretical framework to investigate the site of the viewer/reader, considering first the viewer’s response to the painting alone. In the final section of this chapter I consider this poem in more detail and develop my framework to examine the response of the viewer/reader to the painting informed by the poem.

The poem is a dialogue between “seeing” and “saying”. According to Hollander, the voice in the poem is ambivalent about whether ekphrasis can overcome seeing’s ‘implicit skepticism about the authenticity even of poetic language in the realm of the truly visual’ (Hollander 1995: 343).

Hollander confides that the approach of Paul Fry in ‘The Torturer’s Horse: What Poems See in Pictures’ is ‘closely allied’ to his own (Hollander 1995: 350, footnote 8). Fry believes that ekphrastic poetry ‘is in no sense an adequate art criticism’ and that ‘What poems say about pictures does not explain pictures, it explains poems’ (Fry 1995: 70). Fry draws on the thinking of Martin Heidegger in his discussion of ekphrasis, and I propose to develop this thinking below.

More recently, Heffernan has expressed doubt whether we can speak for pictures at all, and proposes that ‘To learn to read pictures, we must first unlearn most of what we have been conditioned to think of them’ (Heffernan 2002: 62-63). I propose in this section to develop a theoretical framework to investigate the nature of this “unlearning”, based on Heidegger’s concept of the preserver, a viewer who restrains ‘usual knowing and looking’, and the distinction between seeing and seeing-as
which has been discussed in similar terms by Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein and others – and through his poetry, by John Hollander.

Hollander’s ambivalence about the relationship of ekphrastic poetry to visual art is apparent in two poems published in a special issue of Word & Image in 1999 devoted to ekphrasis: ‘Emblem’ and ‘Duck-Rabbit’ (Hollander 1999: 5-6). In ‘Emblem’, he muses that, while it might appear that our hopes for interpretation of a picture ‘would be gratified by the lust of verse to gloss explain rescue the truth from the merely visible’, these hopes:

... fall victim to the moralising
words that want to make home truths out of
strange sights And those words which
have the nobler task of making the invisible
just that much harder to ignore are
set the menial task of making an old saw
out of an energetically framed visual
enigma ...

(Hollander 1999: 5-6)

I argue that ‘making the invisible just that much harder to ignore’ is a nice rendering of the “illumination” of the work of visual art by ekphrastic poetry that I argue for in this thesis.

In his Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein made some observations on the nature of seeing and its relationship to the interpretation of what we see, which may be called seeing-as (Wittgenstein 1953: 193-198). Wittgenstein illustrates this with the Duck-Rabbit figure, derived from Jastrow, that can be seen as a rabbit’s head or as a duck’s head, but not both at the same time:
Mitchell, in his book *Picture Theory*, contests the exclusivity of the disjunction which may be perceived in the figure, and suggests that the concept of the mind interpreting pictures, seeing different aspects of them, ‘explains nothing’ and that Wittgenstein ‘restored the wildness’ of the hybrid creature by re-drawing Jastrow’s *Duck-Rabbit* to make it recognisable as a hybrid (Mitchell 1994: 64-71). Mitchell refers to a passage in which Wittgenstein suggests that he may perceive the drawing as a “duck-rabbit” without engaging in *seeing-as* (Mitchell 1994: 52; Wittgenstein 1953: 195).

As William Earle notes, we may learn, with experience, to see Wittgenstein’s drawing as a ‘duck-rabbit-picture’ (Earle 1997: 306). However, I would distinguish this from what we see depicted in the drawing. I argue that *seeing*, which I equate with perception, recognises the *Duck-Rabbit* as just a shape, and it is only *seeing-as*, which I equate with knowledge, that gives us options for interpreting and naming what we see. Wittgenstein appears to favour distinguishing a concept of *seeing* from a concept of *seeing-as*, yet regards the two as intimately connected (Wittgenstein 1953: 195-198).

I will use the expression *seeing-as* to refer to the many layers of visual and verbal interpretation that arise from experience, knowledge, theory and analysis. I am accordingly using the expression in a wider sense than others have used it. I prefer *seeing-as* to “seeing an aspect” because the
latter conflates the seeing of a visual detail with seeing-as. The visual
detail is a property of the object, which can be distinguished from what the
visual detail may be seen as (Wittgenstein 1953: 212, see also 199-201).

Richard Wollheim is another thinker who considers that Wittgenstein's
discussion of the Duck-Rabbit demonstrates that judgment is not external
to perception (Wollheim 1980: 219-220). This leads him to propose that,
in Wittgenstinian seeing-as one 'cannot simultaneously see x as y and be
visually aware of the features of x sustaining this perception' and
accordingly if one can be aware of the 'sustaining features', one is
engaging in interpretative seeing of a different kind (Wollheim 1980: 213).
However, he accepts that in Wittgenstinian seeing-as where we see x as f,
'we must be able to imagine how x would have, or would have had, to
change or adapt itself in order to take on the property of being f' (Wollheim
1980: 222).

I have experimented by trial and error re-drawing Wittgenstein's Duck-
Rabbit by eliminating or changing a visual detail to stabilise it as either a
duck or a rabbit. It is easy to stabilise the duck by eliminating the dimple
of the rabbit's "mouth". However, to see the Duck-Rabbit as a rabbit, we
have to both attend to the dimple and restrain our knowledge that the
bifurcated "ears" would not appear the way they are depicted if they were
seen in profile view.

Given our ability to restrain or apply that knowledge, and because a duck's
bill in profile need not be bifurcated, it is not as easy to re-draw the "ears"
and stabilise the figure as a rabbit.
I argue that it is not seeing-as that strikes us and allows us to see the object in a new way, but the restraint of knowledge and experience which clears the way for a fresh seeing of the visual detail that supports seeing it as something new.

In my experiments with these drawings I produced a PowerPoint animation by which I can switch back and forth between Wittgenstein’s Duck-Rabbit and my re-drawn Duck or Rabbit to “see” the difference. I will return to this concept of switching in Chapter 2 when I develop my methodology for examining differences – which Hollander calls “revisions” – between the ekphrastic poem and the painting to which it responds.

In the poem ‘Duck-Rabbit’, Hollander responds to Wittgenstein’s Duck-Rabbit drawing:

... our certainty that the eye’s
Mind will necessarily be left with
An indubitable Dabbit is unbearable.

We have not quite made up our mind about what
To do about this yet. About these oppressive constructions
Of an image crudely odd of an elusive
Object far more elegantly so. (Hollander 1999: 6)

I infer that Hollander is making a sardonic comment on attempts by some thinkers to ‘rescue the truth from the merely visible’ through words and to create a hybrid “Dabbit”.

I argue that Hollander’s poems show us that poetry can reveal things about visual art simply by the viewer not making up his or her mind about naming or interpreting what is seen, perhaps not even seeking meaning. I want to propose that the viewer is in this respect like Heidegger’s preserver, a viewer who allows the meaning of the work of art to emerge, and will draw on some of Heidegger’s thinking from The Origin of the Work of Art. It will also be useful to explore what I consider to be some of Heidegger’s blind spots, which I will do in Chapter 2, in order to prevent them becoming blind spots in my thinking.
In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger proposes that the work of art emerges from the interplay between *earth* and *world* (Heidegger 1971: 47-48). I interpret *world* as the culture of a given people, and *earth* roughly as the earth without us (Heidegger 1971: 47-48; see also Heidegger 1973: 93).

Julian Young points out that Heidegger later moved away from characterising the origin of the work of art as the primal opposition (*urstreit*) between *world* and *earth* in favour of “happening” (*ereignis*) (Young 2001: 64). Beltling too regards images as “happening”, and proposes the site of the viewer/reader, who “fill[s] them with personal experience and meaning”, as a relevant site for study (Beltling 2005: 302-303 and 306). I believe it is difficult to study *ereignis* unless we have some way of understanding such “happenings”. Accordingly, I am happy to adopt the dialectic of *world* and *earth* as part of my theoretical framework as this enables me to study possible influences.

When I first read *The Origin of the Work of Art*, I was excited by Heidegger’s ekphrasis on Van Gogh’s painting of *Old Shoes*, and by his *associative thinking* in imagining the shoes in use in the field by a peasant woman. It did not worry me that the shoes might not have belonged to a peasant woman (see Derrida 1987; Jameson 1991: 6-16; Franklin 1991; Payne 1992), but I was troubled that Heidegger was able to undertake the analysis *without* the actual painting. I have no experience of the rural world in which Van Gogh worked, and my first association on reading the passage was with old leather bushwalking boots, which enable us to keep our grip on earth in rough places yet separate us from it. While noting various criticisms of Heidegger’s particular example, Barbara Bolt too concludes that his theory models the viewer as being open to the possibility of experiencing the painting in a different way (Bolt 2004: 104).

I argue that *associative thinking* may operate within or outside signification to produce meaning, and in Chapter 2 will develop a methodology to examine this in my study of ekphrasis. In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes proposes
that connotation is a form of association ‘immanent in the text’ and is to be distinguished from, and preferred over, association of ideas, which tends to be subjective (Barthes 1970: 8). For example, applying this to a work of visual art, one might respond to the idea of old shoes rather than to details in the painting, such as the twisted leather laces, or the worn stitching and the gleam of brass hobnails (see the colour reproduction of Van Gogh’s Old Shoes in Jameson 1991: 11).

In his article ‘The Third Meaning’, Barthes proposes that there is a process operating with the visual that is like signification but transcends the conventions of signification: he calls this process significance and says it leads us to a meaning ‘beyond culture, knowledge, information’ (Barthes 1982: 43-44). This apparently derives from Julia Kristeva, who called significance a transformative literary practice that ‘drives toward, in and through language’ (Kristeva 1984: 17). Barthes says that, although significance is outside articulated language, its effect can be recognised by more than one person (Barthes 1982: 55-56). Others, such as Mitchell, are concerned about the subjective nature of the position of the viewer (see for example, Mitchell 2005: 262).

In Camera Lucida, Barthes says that there is something about portrait photographs to which he responds that cannot be expressed or analysed: the air of a face (‘the expression, the look’) (Barthes 2000: 107). In the photograph of his mother that he will not show us he does ‘much more than recognise her... I discover her: a sudden awakening, outside of “likeness” ...’ (Barthes 2000: 109). He describes the air as ‘a kind of intractable supplement to identity’, without which a photograph will simply record ‘my identity, not my value’ (Barthes 2000: 109-110).

Heidegger acknowledges that it would be self-deception if his description of the Van Gogh painting was subjective, merely his own projection onto the painting (Heidegger 1971: 35). Hunt also cautions us that:
All poets, in fact, ... are seeking their own reflection in what they write about. A painting, despite its otherness, its art object-ivity, becomes a mirror for the poet's subjectivism. (Hunt 1980: 20)

However, Heidegger's rejection of the artist as "genius", and his proposition that the artist is inconsequential in the process, like a passageway (Heidegger 1971: 39), suggests to me that intention is largely irrelevant, and as a corollary, that meaning can emerge despite the intentions and world view of the artist. That is, despite the poet's subjectivism. As I show throughout this chapter, John Hollander has a certain world view about the ability of poetry to illuminate painting - I argue that this does not determine the meanings that the reader may derive from his poetry. I argue that the same may be the case where the viewer/reader functions as a preserver, and it is this function I want to investigate.

The crux of Bolt's project is to examine the artist's 'experience of being like a passageway' (Bolt 2004: 105). As she notes, there is no reason why artists should not be thought of in the same way as preservers, who 'suspend our usual way of looking and thinking about the world' (Bolt 2004: 107). Young points out that Heidegger describes preservers in such a way that we may infer they are 'an entire culture, a people' (Young 2001: 51). I have no hesitation in adapting Heidegger's theory to apply it to individual viewers, as the test will be whether it assists our understanding of ekphrasis.

I argue that we can appropriate elements of Heidegger's theory of art to consider the poet's 'experience of being like a passageway', and more specifically for my thesis, how the viewer/reader shares and builds on this experience when his or her viewing of the painting is informed by the ekphrastic poem.

Heidegger proposes that the work of art 'makes public something other than itself' (Heidegger 1971: 19). He says the nature of the work of art is to reveal truth (aletheia), however, he is not talking about truth in the
depiction of reality, or that the painting by Van Gogh ‘depicts a pair of actually existing peasant shoes’, but the revelation of the true nature of the shoes, indeed of beings as a whole, through the interplay of world and earth (Heidegger 1971: 36, 54). Heidegger says that, to reveal the truth in the work of visual art, the viewer must ‘restrain all usual ... knowing and looking’ so as to preserve the work, to allow the work to ‘be a work’ (Heidegger 1971: 64).

While Heidegger does not elaborate how this “restraint” is put into effect, I argue that the words ‘restraining all usual knowing and looking’ suggest that the preserver restrains seeing-as in order to look at the work of visual art using perception approximating mere seeing. The key word is “usual”, and I say “approximating” because Heidegger does not believe that seeing wholly eliminates knowledge and experience. As Fry has pointed out, while Heidegger considers that seeing-as constitutes an interpretation, he considers that seeing ‘bears in itself the structure of interpretation’ and is ‘derived from’ seeing-as by a ‘certain readjustment ... a failure to understand it any more’ (Heidegger 1971: 189-190; see also Fry 1995: 26).

I argue that mere seeing involves at least visual knowledge and experience. To illustrate this, take the rare case of people who have been blind from birth but have their sight restored as mature adults, which Oliver Sacks describes in An Anthropologist on Mars. He concludes that, while the patient he describes had acutely developed abilities that complemented his sense of touch, the patient could not cope with the visual world because he lacked the acquired visual knowledge and experience to do so (Sacks 1995: 103; see also Gregory 2004: 106-108). In a recent article, Mitchell uses similar examples to argue that vision and touch are intimately connected, and ‘there is no such thing as pure visual perception’ (Mitchell 2005: 263-264). Despite this, Mitchell argues that ekphrasis involves ‘two rigorously separated sensory and semiotic tracks ... which requires completion in the mind of the reader’ (Mitchell 2005:
It is the purpose of my study to examine this interaction at the site of the viewer/reader.

Young points out that the origin of the work of art has 'no intrinsic relation to the theory of truth' propounded by Heidegger (Young 2001: 64). I believe that I can apply Heidegger's theory to the emergence of meaning without engaging with metaphysical issues. That is, we may take it that meaning may emerge, in Bolt's words, 'beyond representation'.

Heidegger's concept of restraint is also similar to the literary technique known as defamiliarisation, through which art removes objects from what Viktor Shklovsky called the 'automatism of perception':

... art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived, and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar" ... (Shklovsky 1998: 19; see also a similar comment by Shelley 2003: 698)

The key points I draw from this discussion are the concept of the *preserver*, the restraint of *seeing-as*, the ability of the poetic response at the site of the viewer/reader to produce meaning within and outside signification and, finally, the complicity of *earth* in this process. I will argue in Chapter 2 that the ekphrastic poem contributes to this restraint, and develop a methodology to investigate and explain how this works.

Heidegger also says that the work of art reveals meaning about *earth*. He considers that *world* and *earth* are related concepts that do not exist independently of each other, that the earth is 'self-secluding' and only appears when perceived and *preserved* as that which is by nature 'undisclosed and unexplained' (Heidegger 1971: 45-47). To illustrate this, he says that the burden of a stone escapes us when reduced to a calculated weight and the shine of a colour is lost when measured in wavelengths, so *earth* cannot be revealed in this way (Heidegger 1971: 45). This suggests to me that merely descriptive poetry cannot reveal what is inchoate in our experience of *earth*. 
I believe it is this point that Paul Fry foregrounds in ‘The Torturer’s Horse’ in his brief discussion of Heidegger’s thinking (Fry 1995: 84). Fry proposes that ekphrastic poetry ‘discovers the meaningless of the non-human in pictures’ (Fry 1995: 70):

Poetry ascribes to all painting the alleged ability of Courbet “to paint an object convincingly — say a distant pile of wood — without knowing what it was”. Poetry sees in painting the freedom not to signify, and the very fact that it must trope nonsignification ... is what illustrates its own unalterable destiny, which is always to mean something: to obstruct the obvious with truth, always helplessly to burden with significance [in the sense of signifying] the obviously insignificant thinghood of things. (Fry 1995: 83-84)

Heidegger considers that earth cannot be revealed by ‘ordinary speakers and writers’ who ‘use up’ words, but it can be revealed by poets (Heidegger 1971: 46). I argue that Fry is being unnecessarily pessimistic about the ability of painting and poetry to convey meaning outside signification, and propose that we should consider the influence of earth. This influence is apparent in landscape painting, such as the one I will consider in the next section. However, it may not be so readily apparent in relation to portraiture. While I believe that human beings are earth, I propose that Willard Spiegelman’s recent study of ekphrasis in the wider sense of literary description provides me with a basis to demonstrate the relevance of earth in ekphrases on portraits. Spiegelman proposes that images of landscape in the poetry of John Ashbery serve to ‘focus our senses and to steady us’ within the ‘murkier opacities’ of his poetry (Spiegelman 2005: 142-143). Spiegelman finds a lack of ‘stability and identity’ in Ashbery’s poetry (Spiegelman 2005: 141). I suggest that there is a corresponding lack in portraiture, and that images of earth play a corresponding role in ekphrases on portraits.

I argue that the poet responding to visual art can make associations from visual details in a work of art and can convey something in poetic language that re-informs our viewing of the work of art, and so facilitates the emergence of meaning within and outside signification. It is in this region that the conventional or learned relationship between the visual and
meaning breaks down, and I argue that ekphrastic poetry complements the visual work of art to facilitate the emergence of meaning from the work of art at the site of the viewer/reader that would not emerge from either taken alone.

**Monet, Hollander and ‘Effet de Neige’**

I would like now to return to John Hollander’s poem ‘Effet de Neige’, and to consider whether Monet’s experience of the road towards the farm, recorded in his painting, may be a manifestation of the interplay between world and earth, and whether Hollander’s poem, by an element of restraint, helps reveal what is inchoate in this experience.

In this section I deliberately set out my responses to the painting and the poem without “censoring” them. I believe I cannot reliably “censor out” information to comply with norms which seek to constrain what I may consider when I respond to the painting and the poem. I will develop my methodology in Chapter 2 and will analyse the relationship between the painting and the poem in terms of the differences that may be observed, and their impact on the viewer/reader. I will also consider whether I have the capacity to “normalise” the viewer/reader function by prescribing what other viewer/readers might or should take into consideration or feel in response to the painting informed by the poem. I recognise that I am using the term “normalise” slightly differently from its usage in the discourse on visual culture (see for example Tony Schirato and Jen Webb 2004: 144).

Hollander states in *The Gazer’s Spirit* that he ‘had been engaged, on several occasions while seeing the picture in the Fogg Museum at Harvard, by the small white brush stroke, angled at about forty-five degrees from right to left at the very end of the road’ and that ‘the brush stroke ... became rather important’ (Hollander 1995: 343). As I will be referring to the poem frequently in this chapter and the next, I set it out below in full, with a reproduction of Monet’s painting, in the same relative
position as in Hollander's book, with line numbers added for reference purposes (not counting headings).

**Effet de Neige**

*for Andrew Forge*

**SAYING:**
Figures of light and dark, these two are walking
The winter road from the St. Simeon farm
Toward something that the world is pointing toward
At the place of the road’s vanishing
Between the vertex that the far-lit gray
Of tree-divided sky finally comes down to
And the wide arrowhead the road itself
Comes up with as a means to it sown end.
Père and Mère Chose could be in conversation
Or else, like us, sunk into some long gaze
Unreadable from behind – they are well down
The road, but not far enough ahead
For any part of them we can make out
To have been claimed by what we see of what
They move against, or through, or by, or toward.
Toward ... that seems to be the whispered question
That images of roads, whether composed
By the design of our own silent eyes
Or by the loud hand of painting, always puts.
Where does this all end? What is the vanishing
Point, after all, when finally one reaches
The ordinary, wide scene which begins
To reach out into its own vanishing
From there. Toward ...

**SEEING:**

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::

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**SAYING:**
Yes. You’d want that said, (if you
Want anything said at all, which I still doubt)
– The place the road ends, that patch of white paint
Marked with a dark stroke from the left, encroached
Upon from the right by far trees, that white place
Sits at the limit of a kind of world
That only you and I can know. Les deux
Choses, Mère and Père, undreaming even of fields
Of meaning like these – the world created by
That square – Oh, 56 x 56
Centimètres – that the height of the canvas
Cuts out of its width (81). Unfair
To mark that square, perhaps: were Mère and Père
Chose to walk out of it, they'd have to pass
Out of the picture of life, as it were, out
Through the back of the picture at the patch of white
At the end of the road. Even if they are staring
Down the long course of the gray slush of things
How can they get the point of how a world
Like theirs ends? From what distant point of vision
Would their world not remain comfortably
Coextensive with everything? How could they know?
What can we know of whatever picture-plane
Against which we have been projected? What ...
Wheel tracks entrench themselves in snow, yet painted
Traces of those deep cuts lie thickly upon
The high whites spread over the buried earth.
Shadows keep piling up as surfaces
Are muffled into silence that refuses
To pick up even the quickening of wind
In dense bare branches, or the ubiquitous
Snaps of ice cracking in the hidden air.
Silence. Your way of being. Your way of seeing
Still has to be intoned, as in a lonely
Place of absorbing snow, itself to be
Seen. What you know is only manifest
When I am heard, and what I say is solely
A matter of getting all that right ...

SEEING:
:
:
:
:
:

SAYING:
I know,
I've drifted somewhat from the distant heart
Of the matter of snow here. Both of us have grasped
That patch of white at the very end of the road
As it sits there like an eventual
Sphinx of questioning substance, or a sort
Of Boyg of Normandy ...

SEEING:
:
:
:
:
:

SAYING:
Yes. The obvious
Standing in the way of truth. A white
Close at the end of distance the two Chose
People might see at the opening
Out of the road into a way across
Wide, whited fields, a way unframed at last
By trees – or might see as the masonry
Of a far barn, just where the road curve sharply
Right, and appears from here to be overcome
By what it seems to have moved toward. In any
Event, the end of the painted road ends up
In white, in paint too representative
Of too much truth to do much more than lie
High on this surface, guarding the edge of Père
And Mère Chose's square of world, even as they
– now that you notice it – have just moved past
The edge of that other square cut from the right
Side of the painting, the world of that wise, white,
Silent patch of ultimate paint. You are
Grateful, I know, for just such compensations,
That neither the motionless farm couple trudging
Toward that still dab of white that oscillates
From point to point of meaning – open? closed? –
Nor, indeed, the bit of paint itself can know of.

SEEING:
:
:
:
:

SAYING:
Mère and Père Chose are walking away from the
Two of us, Docteur and Madame Machin, who stand
Away from their profundity of surface.

SEEING:
:
:
:
:

SAYING:
The truth, blocking the path of the obvious.

Hollander dedicated the poem, and indeed *The Gazer’s Spirit*, to Andrew
Forge, an artist and art professor at Yale with whom Hollander lectured on
“Word and Image” for many years (Hollander 2002). Andrew Forge’s art
work ‘reinforces the suggestion that language might not be fully up to the
task of dealing with’ painting (Wilkin 1996: 2). I begin to feel that the
ambivalence of the voice in the poem about the ‘authenticity even of poetic
language in the realm of the truly visual’ may reflect Hollander’s view of
the world.

In *The Gazer’s Spirit*, Hollander cites the painting’s title in French. The
Harvard Art Museums’ translated title is *Road Toward the farm, Saint-
Simeon, Honfleur*. As if to show us that “saying” is unreliable, the voice in
the poem tells us that the two figures are walking ‘from’ the farm (line 2).
Based on the many paintings Monet made of this scene it seems clear that
the figures are walking towards the farm (see Lewis 2000).

While the poet’s mind is busy interpreting the ‘white place at the road’s
vanishing’ (line 4), speculating whether it represents white fields or a barn
(lines 78-80), the poet’s eye may be tracking back and forth across the
painting. What it sees is not recorded in the poem, but this silence is
recorded in the poem by the dots of “seeing”. These dots, a succession of
colons, are at first "read" by the reader as a pause, repeated until the impatient eye moves on to the next words in the poem, when saying resumes the "dialogue". Perhaps this visual technique mimics the movement of the eye across the painting, however, it cannot show us the effect of the visual on the viewer/poet, suggesting that, while this cannot be rendered in words, we must look to the words to see if the poet has responded to visual details in the painting.

There are a number of details in the painting that the poem foregrounds. Line 42 refers to the 'long course of the gray slush'. The voice in the poem observes the melting snow, but in the same passage remarks upon 'the ubiquitous/ Snaps of ice crackling in the hidden air' (lines 58-59). This seems incongruous, and I look again at the image. The discoloured roadway, wheel tracks, the snow patches by the roadside and on the embankment and hillside, the grey trees, upper branches fuzzy, perhaps the soft velvet buds of new growth not yet showing, all suggest a warming, maybe not spring but at least a respite that would make it worthwhile to take a stroll even at the risk of getting wet feet.

We don't have words to describe that feeling when your toes tell you that they and your socks are wet inside your boots, and that this feeling has been creeping up on you while your mind was otherwise occupied. Nor do we have words to describe that feeling you get when the pure white cover that conceals the scars we have inflicted on the landscape draws back, the regret at its passing quickly turns to anticipation of spring, and the wonder that emerging grasses put up new green shoots so soon after having been covered with snow.

I have written this, and noted these associations, while looking at the black and white reproduction in The Gazer's Spirit. I follow a link to the internet site of the Harvard University Art Museums and view a colour image which shows green grass along the fence-lines where snow has receded. I am struck by Monet's use of cerulean blue to darken the snow in the wheel ruts on the roadway, the snow patches on the hillside to the right of the
roadway, and on the high clouds in the top left corner of the painting. I recall a day of backcountry skiing in the Australian alps. As the afternoon wore on, the blue sky became more intensely blue, suffusing the snow with a blue glow, until quite suddenly I realised that there was not enough light to see, and the only way to discern whether the ground was level or falling away was by listening to the sound of the skis on snow.

I obtain a CD-Rom of the Monet painting from the Harvard Art Museums. I can now “zoom in” to see the brushstrokes: the cerulean blue is as intense as suggested by the reproduction viewed over the internet; details appear of branches rapidly brushed, not covering the underlying paint which can be seen in many dimples in the weave of canvas; Hollander’s white brushstroke appears to be a slightly muddy mixture of white and remnants of blue and browns, swept back by the artist’s finger to shorten a stroke that had gone too far into the bare trees at the bend in the road. I am quite certain that this stroke represents a snow drift in the lee of the farm building, its gable visible to the left (see Lewis 2000). Hollander’s ‘white brushstroke’ only appears bright because of the dark colours around it.

The voice in the poem focuses first on the ‘white place of the road’s vanishing’ (line 4) and the motif of the road, ‘Where does this all end?’ (line 20). Of the figures walking away from us, the voice says ‘Even if they are staring/ Down the long course of gray slush of things/ How can they get the point of how a world/ Like theirs ends?’ (lines 41-44). Monet certainly explored the motif of the road in his paintings in the forest at Fontainbleu in 1864 and 1865, and in his series of winter paintings of the road looking from both directions towards the St Simeon farm in 1865 and 1867, and repeated it in his effets de neige through the 1870s (Gordon and Forge 1983: 13, 20; Rathbone 1998: 80-83, 88-108; see also Lewis 2000: 39-47). I suggest that the experience of walking along a road or path with a companion, silently contemplating the future as the path curves out of sight like the future itself, would be relatively common, yet I feel the poet’s reference to the ‘long course of gray slush’ suggests a looking back at the
mistakes we tend to make in our lives. In January 1867 when Monet painted a number of *effets de neige* along the road to the St Simeon farm, he was probably aware that Camille Doncieux, with whom he had commenced a relationship against the wishes of his family, was pregnant with their child, and that he would come under increasing pressure to abandon her (Gordon and Forge 1983: 35-40).

Monet also explored the motif of the "observer" within the painting, who sees what we see and with whom we share this bond, in his work during the mid to late 1860s (Forge 1995: 13-14). Eliza Rathbone has noted that Monet often added details or changed his paintings later in the studio, and in relation to his first *effet de neige* in 1865, a view of the same farm road, the horse-drawn cart travelling away from the viewer toward the farm building was added later (Rathbone 1998: 80). The figures in the Monet reproduced above could easily have been added later, in the studio, for artistic effect. Hollander not only gives them and their thoughts and dreams a central place in the poem, but portrays them as an old married couple, and furthermore portrays another old married couple as imaginary viewers alongside us, in contrast to the solitary Monet whom I imagine standing by the roadside in failing light hastily finishing his painting.

The voice in the poem acknowledges in lines 66-67 that 'I've drifted somewhat from the distant heart/ Of the matter of snow here'. This snow, of which the voice in the poem says, 'The effective snow of observation lying on the ground/ Given by nature will soak into it' (lines 49-51), and 'The high whites spread over the buried earth/Shadows keep piling up as surfaces/ Are muffled into silence' (line 54). I argue that this section of the poem between lines 49 and 60 draws most noticeably on the poet's associations triggered by visual details in the painting.

The associations that the poet draws from the painting, of snow soaking into the buried earth, are close to my own, and it doesn’t matter to me that the poet’s associations of 'the quickening of wind' and 'ice cracking in the hidden air' (lines 58-59) are not. These are associations to do with earth,
just as the associations with the figures on the road are to do with world, and it does not matter for my purposes whether the painting or the viewer/poet’s associations correctly represent the factual conditions in which Monet found himself. I regard it as more important that the voice in the poem in these passages restrains the interpretative looking at the painting that is happening in the poem, and causes us to look at the painting in a new light.

The voice returns to the white place of the road’s vanishing, ‘the end of the painted road ends up/ In white, in paint too representative/ Of too much truth to do much more than lie/ High on this surface’ (lines 83-86), ‘the still dab of white that oscillates/ From point to point of meaning – open? closed?’ (lines 94-95), leaving us the viewer ‘standing away from their profundity of surface’ (lines 98-99). “They” are the couple walking away from us ‘undreaming even of fields of meaning like these’ (lines 32-33).

I argue that the ‘still dab of white’ and the oscillation of meaning is like Wittgenstein’s Duck-Rabbit: to name and interpret is an application of mind that leads us away from seeing and into irreconcilable binaries like truth/lie, open/closed, profundity/surface. There are many playful touches to the poem that suggest Hollander does not take seriously the ability of language to reason a meaning out of the visual details of the painting, but I will mention only the chiasmus of ‘The obvious/ Standing in the way of the truth .... The truth, blocking the path of the obvious’ (lines 72-73 and 100). Hollander in his commentary on the poem points out that “obvious” literally means “in the way” (Hollander 1995: 343). He also points out that the “Boyg” (line 72) was ‘the huge, black, occluding presence barring Peer Gynt’s way in Ibsen’s poetic drama’ (Hollander 1995: 343).

I agree with Paul Fry that ekphrastic poems do not explain pictures. Monet’s painting is not about the end of the road, nor will Hollander’s poem tell us anything about the end of the road. I argue, however, that despite the exegesis undertaken by the voice in the poem, which obscures the passages in which the poet responds to visual details in the painting,
the poet relates the “white” brushstroke to the slushy snow, the receding snow patches, emerging green grass and blue shadows. What lies at the end of the road is Monet’s finger print delineating the “white” brush stroke, an arm’s length away from the solitary Monet who I imagine contemplates his mistakes, new life and the unpredictable course of the future.

I argue accordingly that ekphrastic poetry complements the visual work of art to facilitate the emergence of meaning from the work of art at the site of the viewer/reader that would not emerge from either taken alone. I argue that ekphrastic poetry does this by contributing to the field of difference in which the viewer/reader encounters the painting.

I will elaborate on this in the next chapter, where I will examine the contemporary definition of ekphrasis as the ‘verbal representation of visual representation’ (Heffernan 1993, Mitchell 1994) and will draw further on Hollander’s poem to develop a methodology to examine canonical examples of ekphrasis, and examples of ekphrases on portraiture not previously considered in the literature, within my theoretical framework.
Chapter 2

Switching in and out of representation

In this chapter I will develop a methodology for examining the connections between visual details in the painting and the responses of the poet in the poem. I argue that ekphrastic poetry contributes to the field of difference in which the viewer/reader encounters the painting and develop in this chapter a methodology to show how this happens.

I develop John Hollander’s concept of “revisions” that the poet may make to the painting. I argue that a wider concept of “mutations”, covering intentional and unintentional differences, is fundamental to ekphrasis. I argue that mutations are endemic in painting itself due to the instability of “representation”. My investigation of mutations is informed by the Peircean taxonomy of signs comprising icon, symbol and index and the master tropes of literature, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. My approach, like the approach of Stephen Scobie in his study of writers and artists connected with Cubism, is informed by Saussurean and Peircean semiotics (see Scobie 1997: 87). However, my methodology examines the process by which mutations are created over time and arrive together, through the interaction of the painting and the poem, at the site of the viewer/reader to influence the production of meaning.

In the final section of this chapter, adapting Roland Barthes’ concept of the punctum, and having regard to Michael Fried’s recent article on it, I argue that the viewer/reader may bring things to the painting yet find them already there in the painting. I argue that it is beyond my power either to censor these things the viewer/reader brings to the painting or to speak for (represent) other viewer/readers. I argue that we should not fear this freedom but should study how it operates at the site of the viewer/reader to influence the production of new meanings from the painting informed by the poem.
I will use my methodology to study the influence of mutations in the
painting and the poem on the viewer/reader, and the influence of other
factors, such as art historical information about the artwork and
biographical information about the sitter, painter and poet. I will also return
to discuss what I consider to be some blind spots in Heidegger’s theory of
art that affect the theoretical framework I developed in the preceding
chapter, and propose a way of overcoming the problem. I will illustrate
these issues by reference to Hollander’s ekphrasis ‘Effet de Neige’.

The first of these issues is the very meaning of ekphrasis itself. While
there are a number of competing twentieth-century definitions, James
Heffernan’s 1991 definition of ekphrasis as ‘the verbal representation of
visual representation’ has achieved a high degree of acceptance during
the 1990s (Heffernan 1993, Scott 1994, Mitchell 1994, Hollander 1995,
Becker 1995). I will explore some problems with this definition with which
my methodology must engage.

Transposition and mutation

Claus Clüver argues for a wider definition, of ‘intersemiotic transposition’,
or translation of texts belonging to different codes such as painting and
poetry, because both occur within semiotic systems (Clüver 1989: 56-62).
It is clear that Clüver considers that a ‘successful’ intersemiotic
transposition requires ‘equivalence’ between poem and painting and
‘should not be considered less possible than a successful interlingual

However, as Pia Brinzeu points out, in a successful linguistic translation
the source text is replaced by the new text, but in the case of ekphrasis
where the painting is available for the viewer/reader to see, the ekphrastic
poem does not replace the painting (Brinzeu 2001: 9). This distinction is
particularly apposite to my study, as my discussion of Tom Mitchell’s
‘phases of realisation’ has shown in Chapter 1.
According to Brinzeu, ekphrasis is more than a translation, and for her, ‘transposition’ implies ‘an active, creative intervention’ which produces an end product that is not repeatable by other poets (Brinzeu 2001: 10). For my purposes I do not need to determine whether these changes are active and creative or just happen for any number of reasons. I propose to call all these categories of changes “mutations”, and to propose that they may be observed and studied at a number of points that may affect the viewer/reader. I regard this concept to be wider than Hollander’s concept of “revisions” mentioned in the preceding chapter, which has a connotation of intentionality.

Brinzeu adds to the point mentioned above, that the ekphrastic poem is not supposed to replace the painting, by proposing that the poet is ‘not supposed to remain an invisible translator’ (Brinzeu 2001: 12). One reason for this is that ekphrasis involves ‘selection and foregrounding’ of ‘only some elements’ of the painting (Brinzeu 2001: 11). Brinzeu points out that while ekphrastic description covers a large part of the painting, it never exhausts ‘the entire field of the painting’ (Brinzeu 2001: 10; see also Mieke Bal 1991: 34). I believe that this is emblematic of representation, and argue in the next section that the same reasoning may be applied to propose that we may observe mutations in the work of visual art.

We can examine the visual details in the painting that Hollander foregrounds in his poem, those that he does not mention, and those aspects of the poem that involve mutations, which may be creative, or just unexplained deviations from the painting. Hollander foregrounds the couple depicted walking on the road, first mentioned in line 1. Most of the poem is “about” them and their passage down the road, which he treats as a metaphor for life. He foregrounds the white mark at the end of the road (line 4), and the trees on either side which divide the sky (line 6). He foregrounds the grey slush of the road (line 42) and the receding snow patches (line 51) without referring to the emerging green grass that I have mentioned or the frequent traffic along the road that we may infer has turned the snow to slush. In lines 52-54 Hollander foregrounds the painted
traces of the wheel tracks on the surrounding snow patches, without naming the Cerulean blue I have mentioned. He mentions the encroachment of the trees to the right of the white stroke (lines 28-29), without identifying the artist’s finger as the instrument of encroachment. I argue that this foregrounding leads us to contiguous details or causes not mentioned by the poet.

Hollander does not mention the differences between the trees to the left and right of the road, the twisted tree to the right that frames the upper right quadrant, the unusual post and rail fence that lines the road, and the sky in the upper left quadrant that bears traces of the same blue as the wheel ruts. Nor does he mention the dark pyramid shape to the left of the white brushstroke that could be the gable of the farmhouse, or the unexplained shape to the right of the road behind the fence, possibly a pile of wood.

Hollander deviates from the painting in a few respects. He reverses the direction of travel of the depicted couple in relation to the farm house. He invents a second couple as viewer with us, outside the painting (line 98), who we may imagine watch Monet over his shoulder as he finishes the painting. This invention, the references to framing in lines 33-39, and the absence of other traffic on the well-travelled road, draws attention to the world outside the frame.

Hollander also makes associations with sounds and tactile sensations in response to the painting. For example: in lines 9-12 the voice in the poem imagines the couple in conversation, like a whisper we cannot make out; in lines 57-59 the voice imagines wind in the dense branches and snaps of ice cracking; in line 51 the voice speaks of snow soaking in, which I argue responds to the feeling of melting snow; and in line 93 the farm couple trudging suggests the sound and feel of walking through slushy snow. I argue that these associations are ironic, given the premise underlying the dialogue between “seeing” and “saying”, and that they constitute a binary pair, which the poet makes explicit in lines 30-31 by proposing that it is
only “seeing and “saying” that can know the world. Hollander’s foregrounding of this issue in his poem anticipates Mitchell’s discussion of it in his recent article (Mitchell 2005).

Like Heidegger’s concept of truth as unconcealment (aletheia), some of the mutations above demonstrate that what is foregrounded is often connected with something that remains concealed. That is, what is foregrounded in the poem may involve reference to omitted details. The following quote attributed to Auden comes to mind: ‘What does [the poet] conceal from the reader? What does he conceal even from himself?’ (from Mendelson 1999: xxi). I argue that the viewer/reader responds to these mutations in producing meaning, and that they have a fundamental role in ekphrasis.

While I find it difficult to conceive of an artistic work which “translates” what it represents with complete correspondence, that is, in which there are no mutations, we may consider the implications of observing an absence of mutations. Barthes argues that a ‘Photograph always carries its referent within itself … they are glued together…. a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see’ (Barthes 2000: 5-7). The implication of the signifier, and the artist, being invisible, is that the viewer seems to directly confront what is depicted. While I would argue that Barthes is over-optimistic about the capability of photography in this regard, he says that this effect is not possible with a painting, and that the viewer will always be aware of the painting as signifier (Barthes 2000: 76-77). I would therefore expect to find mutations in the painting and in the ekphrastic poem, and would have cause to consider the implications of being unable to observe them in a painting or an ekphrastic poem. I have chosen two poems by the Australian poet Peter Steele for discussion in Chapter 6, to confront this issue.

There is a further problem with the concept of ‘representation of representation’, to which I will now turn: painting does not exist solely within a semiotic system because, as I will elaborate in the next section,
brush strokes are both signs and not signs. As thinkers such as Bal, Estelle Barrett and Hans Belting have noted, for this reason we need more than just a semiotic toolbox (Bal 1991: 58; Barrett 2000: 258-259; Belting 2005: 304). I argue accordingly that meaning does not emerge from the painting, informed by the ekphrastic poem, wholly within a semiotic system. I argue in the next section that mutations are part of the process of representation that take us outside the semiotic system.

Beyond representation

I proposed in Chapter 1 that associative thinking may take us outside representation. I argued in the preceding section of this chapter that mutations occur in ekphrastic poems which take us beyond representation of the painting. However, Heffernan’s definition of ekphrasis noted above suggests that ekphrasis operates only within representation. In this section, I argue that mutations may also be generated in the work of visual art because “representation” is inherently unstable. I develop a methodology that examines the way the responses of the viewer/reader to the painting informed by the poem switch in and out of representation. I argue that focussing on switching is useful to avoid adopting a blind spot in my theoretical framework, from the thinking of Heidegger and Barthes, that privileges meanings that may be said to arise ‘beyond representation’. For Heidegger, this is truth as un-concealment (aletheia), about the ‘being of beings’, for Barthes it is meaning ‘beyond culture, knowledge, information’.

I will first examine the kinds of association Hollander makes in ‘Effet de Neige’. As I noted in Chapter 1, Hollander responds to certain motifs, or ideas, in the painting: the motif of the road and the observer. One does not need a painting to respond to these ideas. Hollander wonders in lines 16-20 whether he is responding to the ‘image of the road’, which I take to refer to the motif, or to the ‘loud hand of painting’, which I take to refer to the visual details in the painting. In this passage he plays on the dual meaning of “image” as either the signifier or the signified. I argue that Hollander is responding to that road of grey slush, and that old couple
trudging, and propose in my methodology to examine how the poet’s association of ideas is shaped by the visual details in the painting.

In her recent book *Art Beyond Representation*, Barbara Bolt discusses the way in which thinkers from the Enlightenment to the present day have analysed ‘representational thinking’. I believe that we ought to review how “representation” has been constructed from time to time. This will become particularly important when I examine Parmigianino’s anamorphic self-portrait in Chapter 4.

As I have done many times while thinking about representation, I look out from the window on the world in front of my desk. I see trees and shrubs tinged with bright green spring growth, an old eucalypt with orange-tipped new growth, the red flowers of the bottle brush, yellow flowers of the wattle. Branches and leaves sway and flutter in the occasional breeze. I hold my head perfectly still and close one eye then the other, noticing things move position as my perspective changes. I cannot describe for you everything I see, nor could a camera with its single lens capture it all. I pause for a moment imagining the grainy blur you get when a photograph is enlarged, and the square pixellation of an enlarged digital image, and wonder about details that are lost in photography.

In the time it takes to write this, the trees in the garden become still, but now trees in my neighbour’s garden are swaying in the breeze. The light has changed, the sky seems a duller grey, an almost imperceptible drizzle drifts and swirls about the treetops. What I have seen in one moment cannot be transposed into words, or pixels, or a photograph or a painting. I argue that a “representational” image or description of this scene will not correspond with the external world and correspondence cannot be verified: no one can occupy my viewing position while I am in it. Once I move, what I have perceived is gone and can never be completely recovered. I propose that representational paintings are replete with mutations, that is, respects in which the painting changes the perceived external world. Some changes are deliberate due to selective and compositional choices
of the artist, some unintentional due to the passage of time as the work progresses, the physical limits of brushes, materials and simply accidents.

I argue that painting operates simultaneously within and outside representation, and that representation itself shares this instability. I believe that this is acknowledged by a number of thinkers such as Tom Mitchell, Stephen Scobie, James Elkins, and Bolt. Bolt repeatedly cites Elkins to the effect that graphic marks ‘are simultaneously signs and not signs’ (from Bolt 2004: 166; Elkins 1998: 45-46; see also Scobie 1997: 15). She cites Mitchell to the effect that a painting as aesthetic object or signifier does not ‘represent something, except incidentally; it “is” something’ (from Bolt 2004: 170; Mitchell 1990: 15).

I have argued in Chapter 1 that Heidegger’s associative thinking is capable of working both within representation and outside it. To assist my examination of mutations, I will briefly consider the Peircean semiotic framework of icon, symbol and index as modes of signification. In Figure 1 below I have applied these modes of signification, by way of schematic example, to portraiture. These have been discussed by thinkers such as Bal, Harry Berger, Ernst van Alphen and Bolt in relation to painting and portraiture (see Bal 1991: 32-33; Berger 1994: 89; Alphen 1997: 250; Bolt 2004: 179).

Care is needed in adopting the Peircean usage of symbol, icon and index to assist me to explore the association between Saussurean signifier and signified. Peirce was talking about the relationship between sign (signifier) and object (referent), which is bracketed out in Saussurean semiotics (Chandler 2002: 36). The Peircean interpretant differs from the Saussurean signified because the interpretant itself becomes a sign in the mind of the interpreter (Chandler 2002: 33). The Saussurean signified is a mental construct referring only indirectly to things in the world, because the referent is taken not to be recoverable (Chandler 2002: 20).

The symbolic, iconic and indexical modes of signification are not mutually exclusive (Chandler 2002: 43). So clearly signification through these
modes directs us towards multiple meanings. I suggest, after Lars Elleström, that we may expect ambiguity and resulting indeterminacy to be inherent features of representation (see Elleström 2002: 101-103), and that mutations in ekphrastic poetry will amplify this inherent ambiguity.

As I first conceived mutations, they arise from the arrows in Figure 1 "overshooting" that which is represented, through the process of connotation or association of ideas mentioned above, to give rise to meanings "beyond representation", which is indicated in Figure 1 by the outer zone. I propose that the viewer/reader switches back and forth between meanings within and beyond representation, and that this is how Heideggerian restraint operates. However, I suggest that restraint may also involve switching from iconic or symbolic mode into indexical mode, as the latter does not involve an interpreting mind. While we still may see the graphic mark as an index of the artist, I argue that this involves restraint of seeing-as associated with the iconic and symbolic modes. I will elaborate on this below when I consider switching associated with the
tropes, particularly metaphor. Additionally, there is switching within each of the three modes associated with ambiguity.

I therefore propose to consider briefly the concepts of icon, symbol and index, not for their semiotic specificity, but to elucidate the concept of mutations. I believe that my concept of "switching" will be elucidated by Charles Peirce's discussion of how a sign would have to change to lose its character as sign (Peirce 1974: 170). In the iconic mode the signifier imitates the referent in visual or other respects. For example, Hollander's use of words like "slush" and "trudge" mimic the sound and feel of walking on a snow covered road. As Bal has noted, iconicity is not necessarily visual (Bal 1991: 32). Portraits and other forms of art that mimic external reality use this mode, but are not based solely on this mode because a painting cannot resemble the referent in all respects (generally being only a two dimensional representation) (Chandler 2002: 39-40). The mimetic accuracy of this kind of representation cannot be assessed without access to the referent. It is largely by convention that a portrait or other art work is taken to resemble the referent, which viewers generally cannot personally experience (Chandler 2002: 40).

As Peirce noted, an icon retains its character as such even though its object is imaginary (Peirce 1974: 170). Accordingly, as I suggested in the Introduction, a portrait that is not a good likeness of the sitter is still an icon and may still have forcefulness as a sign. I argue that mutations can arise in iconic representation through intentional or accidental deviations from mimetic accuracy. These will be easier to identify in the ekphrastic poem, but may be observed in the painting, due to the nature of graphic marks discussed above. I will say more about this in succeeding chapters in relation to specific paintings.

In the symbolic mode the relationship between signifier and signified is conventional, and must be learned (Chandler 2002: 37). Portraits can also symbolise gender, as I have indicated in Figure 1, or class or other attributes. Portraits displayed in a public gallery are by convention often
assumed to resemble the referent, and so are both iconic and symbolic representations. As Peirce observed, a symbol loses its character as a sign if it has no conventional or habitual meaning (Peirce 1974: 170. However, it will still be a sign even if meaning is ambiguous.

It will be apparent that my concept of mutations must also accommodate differences that arise through variability within the modes of representation, whether they be variations in the mimetic accuracy of an icon or ambiguities in the meanings attributed to a symbol. This is indicated in Figure 1 by the suppleness of the arrows which, like the meanings they point us to, are constantly in motion.

In the indexical mode the signifier is directly connected to the referent in some physical or causal way that does not depend purely on the interpreting mind (Chandler 2002: 37). Photographs are indices of their referent, by the nature of the chemical reaction of light with the photographic emulsion (Chandler 2002: 42). As Bal points out, graphic marks that provide us with a trace of the artist are ‘closer to indexicality than iconicity’ (Bal 1991: 33). I argue that Monet’s white brush stroke, which I have discussed at length earlier, is such a trace. I suggest that when we see this mark as an index of Monet, whether it was intentional or accidental (as we may infer from his finger-snap that shortened it), we restrain usual knowing and looking that seeks to identify what it represents. Bolt discusses indexicality at length in the context of the artist as channel and stresses the non-mimetic nature of the index (Bolt 2004: 182). I believe that I can extend this thinking to argue that the preserver may switch to indexical mode as a kind of reality check on what the graphic mark may be seen-as using the iconic or symbolic modes.

Peirce observes that an index remains a sign even if we cannot interpret its cause, giving the example of an observed hole in something, which remains an index whether we identify it correctly as a bullet hole or not (Peirce 1974: 170). When one applies indexicality to portraiture, as for other paintings, we may find a trace of the artist alive in the work.
However, despite an interesting provocation by thinkers such as Berger and Bolt to suggest that there may be a trace of the sitter in portraiture (Berger 1994: 89-90; Bolt 2004: 163) and that indexicality is implicated in this (Berger 1994: 99; Bolt 2004: 182), I argue that it is doubtful we may find an indexical trace of the sitter alive in the work. I argue that we may nevertheless usefully apply the concepts of icon, symbol, and index to the depicted subject matter to analyse the associations the viewer makes with depicted subject matter.

Suppose Monet’s white brush stroke refers to a pile of snow that has fallen from the farmhouse roof. We may regard the pile of snow as an index of the weather conditions which first cause a snowfall then a warming to cause the snow to slide off the roof. I argue that Monet’s painting of this scene is an icon and an index of his activity, but is not an index of the weather. The viewer, however, may make associations with such conditions based on the viewer’s experiences, which may be similar to what Peirce called ‘degenerate’ indexicality (Peirce 1974: 160 and 166).

In portraiture, as Berger argues, the sitter’s face or body has often been treated as ‘the index of the mind or soul’ (Berger 1994: 88). Berger argues convincingly against this view, and it is largely due to the strength of that argument that I am not convinced about his thesis that we may read the portrait as an index of the ‘sitter’s and painter’s performance in the act of portrayal’, which he concludes involves the sitter adopting a fictional pose (Berger 1994: 89-90). Berger argues that the portrait is a Peircian index of the act of portrayal that produced it (Berger 1994: 99). However, as this analysis requires an interpreting mind to respond to what we see depicted in the painting, I doubt there is the necessary physical or causal connection between the intentions of the sitter and artist and the painting to recognise it as a Peircian index of the act of portrayal. I will discuss this further in the next section, where I argue that the pose may be analysed as a mutation observable in the painting.
The final aspect of my concept of mutations that I want to discuss here is the relationship between the master tropes of literature and the Peircean concepts of icon, symbol and index. Tropes provide us with a means of analysing associations and substitutions (Chandler 2002:124-125), which are in some respects similar to my concepts of mutations and switching. As I mentioned above, we see from Hollander’s response to Monet’s painting of the road that there is a resemblance to our life’s journey: the future that curves out of sight; the mistakes we leave behind us; and, the end we know is there but cannot foresee. Peirce observed that this parallelism in metaphor is iconic (Peirce 1974: 157). However, we then substitute or transfer this association to give it symbolic significance (Chandler 2002: 127-128). Monet’s travellers down the road represent “us”. We accordingly may observe a mutation that takes us beyond iconic representation, then switches from iconic to symbolic representation. I will examine this further in Chapter 5 when I discuss the poem by R. S. Thomas responding to the portrait of Joseph Hone by Augustus John.

As I have argued above, when we make associations with the depicted object in painting based on causation or contiguity we treat the depicted object, not the painting, as an index. I believe it would be better to describe this effect as metonymic rather than indexical in the Peircean sense. I will examine this further in Chapter 3 when I discuss the poem by Shelley responding to the painting of the Medusa in the Uffizi.

I now want to consider whether, in terms of Figure 1, we can or should discriminate between meanings that emerge in the outer and inner zones of Figure 1. As I have suggested above, the relationship between a painting and what is signified according to any of the modes of signification is unstable, and meaning polysemous. Heidegger’s associative thinking and Barthes’ significance may take us through the membrane of signification to release meaning, depicted in Figure 1 as the outer zone, which is only constrained by our capacity to understand that which is ‘beyond culture, knowledge, information’.
As Bolt points out, twentieth-century thought has overturned the view that representation is a ‘reflection of reality’ (Bolt 2004: 16, footnote 3). I argue above that representation is not capable of that achievement. Bolt defines “representationalism” as a ‘mode of thinking that enables humans to express mastery over the world’ (Bolt 2004: 12). She says that “representation” is the vehicle to effect ‘this will to fixity and mastery’, and that Heidegger sought to critique it (Bolt 2004: 13). Bolt discusses Derrida’s argument in defence of representation that there is ‘an internal movement within representation [that overcomes] the presumed and stultifying fixity of representationalism’ and she argues on the contrary that there is a ‘movement from representation’ (Bolt 2004: 14; my emphasis). Bolt argues that Derrida’s différence is ‘a condition within representation’ (Bolt 2004: 34-37), and is to be distinguished from Deleuze’s difference, which ‘operates in a different register and against the grain of representation’ (Bolt 2004: 40). As I have indicated above, I prefer Derrida’s position, as I believe there is an instability operating within representation that may give rise to mutations. Either way, I argue that meaning emerges outside the system of signification, and that painting and poem work together at the site of the viewer/reader to achieve this.

Drawing on the thoughts of Deleuze and others, Bolt argues that signs exceed their limitations as signs where the sign system de-forms or “stutters” (Bolt 157-159). Bolt suggests that the artist can produce a ‘visual stutter’ by painting ‘perception itself’ to create a disjunction within the sign system (Bolt 2004: 161). This resonates with Heidegger’s concept of the preserver, who restrains usual knowing and looking.

I have come to the view that Heidegger’s theoretical approach is underpinned by the privileging of seeing over seeing-as, or as I have summarised this above drawing on Shklovsky, perception over knowledge. Bolt appears to come to a similar view, when she says that Heidegger privileges truth as unconcealment (aletheia) over truth as correspondence with the external world (Bolt 2004: 121). This underlies the distinction between seeing and seeing-as, or as Bolt notes, the ‘dualistic conception
of vision ... eye and mind' (Bolt 2004: 44, 126). I believe I must acknowledge the impact of this judgment on Heidegger's theory of art to prevent it operating as a blind spot that will affect my application of the theory.

Are we left with nothing if we withdraw this privilege? If we accord it are we guilty of harbouring the "natural attitude"? I argue that one way out of this impasse is to treat seeing and seeing-as, perception and knowledge, meaning beyond representation and meaning within representation, with indifference, by recognising "representation" as an unstable process within and outside signification. I argue that adopting as part of my methodology switching in and out of representation provides me with a mechanism for identifying mutations and giving effect to this indifference.

**Beyond the painting and the poem**

John Berger considers how the viewer's response to Van Gogh's *Wheatfield with Crows* is affected by the knowledge that the next day the artist killed himself (Berger 1972: 28). The effect of that knowledge is significant and impossible to ignore. Berger says that, where such knowledge comes to us in words, the words 'confirm their own verbal authority' by changing the painting’s 'original independent meaning' (Berger 1972: 28). I am examining how the painting and the ekphrastic poem work together to produce new meanings at the site of the viewer/reader. I therefore do not seek to privilege one meaning over another, and do not believe that I can prescribe what information the viewer should disregard (lest unacceptable meanings be produced).

I adapt Roland Barthes' concept of the *punctum* to argue that the viewer/reader may bring things to the painting yet find them already there in the painting. It is beyond my power to censor out extraneous factors and I need to adapt my methodology to study how they operate at the site of the viewer/reader to influence the production of meanings from the painting informed by the poem.
Barthes distinguishes the content of a picture which involves a kind of human interest, which he calls the *studium*, in which we 'encounter the photographer's intentions', from an element, a detail, which will break the *studium*, which he calls the *punctum*, 'this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me' (Barthes 2000: 25-27). He says it is not possible to perceive the *punctum* by analysis: 'The *studium* is ultimately always coded, the *punctum* is not .... What I can name cannot really prick me' (Barthes 2000: 42, 51). Barthes asserts that the *punctum* was not put there by the photographer intentionally (Barthes 2000: 47). He says, 'whether or not it is triggered, it is an addition: it is what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there* (Barthes 2000: 55)

The *punctum* has a temporal element, the *anterior future* ('this will be and this has been'): the sitter's future has been and is now in the viewer's past; and, in the case of the photograph of Barthes' mother as a child, her future death is as certain as her life before Barthes knew her is irrecoverable (Barthes 2000: 96-97, 103). Barthes illustrates his discussion of the *punctum* with the photographic portrait of Lewis Payne, sentenced to death and photographed while awaiting execution (Barthes 2000: 95-96). The circumstances of Payne's imminent demise are external to the photographic image, something that Barthes brings to the picture, but something he finds already there in the sitter's expression and posture.

In a recent article on Barthes' *punctum*, Michael Fried argues that the *punctum* is the 'artifact of the encounter' between the photograph and one particular viewer, Roland Barthes, suggesting it is not something that can be shared (Fried 2005: 546). I argue that this is too narrow a reading of Barthes, as information about the *anterior future* of Lewis Payne and other sitters may be shared by many viewers. Fried does not mention Barthes' assertion that the *punctum* is something the viewer adds to the photograph but which is already there.
I will briefly consider whether there are influences of this nature affecting the viewer/reader of Monet's painting and Hollander's poem 'Effet de Neige'. Hollander dwells upon the subject of old married couples in the poem. It is difficult not to be influenced by knowledge of Monet's strained financial affairs and relationship with his family, and the part Camille played in his life and art during the time he produced this painting on one of his regular visits to the auberge St. Simeon, a converted farm house frequented by artists (Gordon & Forge 1983: 35-40; see also Lewis 2000: 41-42). I argue that this knowledge may fleetingly add significance to details in the painting, but that of itself it determines nothing, and we should avoid a forensic enquiry into the artist's circumstances. As I argued in Chapter 1, a preserver finds meaning by not seeking it.

I have noted in Chapter 1 that Heidegger sought to explain the work of art otherwise than by reference to artistic genius, and to discern meanings generated by the work of art otherwise than by reference to the artist's intentions. Fried draws attention to the lengths to which Barthes goes to avoid being influenced by the artist's intentions, and I begin to wonder whether we are observing the effect of a blind spot. Barthes regards the "shock" of photographs which surprise the sitter, 'revealing what was so well hidden that the actor himself was unaware or unconscious of it' as being 'quite different from the punctum' (Barthes 2000: 32). Fried argues that Barthes considers such photographs to be "posed" by the photographer, so the viewer merely encounters the photographer's intentions, and it is for this reason that Barthes privileges his concept of the punctum (Fried 2005: 553). If I adopted such constraints in my theoretical framework, I would have to identify the intentions of the artist and poet so that I could direct myself to disregard them. As I have indicated above, I intend to have regard to mutations whether they may be intentional or not.

Barthes acknowledges that the "pose" can also indicate the sitter's attempt to impose his or her "persona" (Barthes 2000: 10-12). I argue that the viewer/reader will always encounter and respond to the intentions of the
sitter, artist and poet, in all their ambiguity and indeterminacy, and that it is impossible to bracket these out of consideration. I suggest that considerations about the pose will play out differently in painted portraits, where the sitter is often placed in a pose by the artist, and required to hold this for long periods despite boredom and fatigue. Accordingly, the discussion by Barthes and Fried about the pose in photography does not necessarily apply to my study. Since the sitter is likely to move in and out of pose during the sitting for a painted portrait, I suggest that the pose may not interfere with the viewer’s propensity to add something to the painting which is nevertheless already there. I propose, adapting the thinking of Harry Berger mentioned above, that we may analyse the pose as a mutation and examine its effect on the viewer/reader, without the need to make forensic findings about the intentions of the sitter and artist.

I argue further that it is appropriate to consider extraneous influences such as art historical information about the artwork and biographical information about the sitter, artist and poet, including the poet’s world view, as these influences operate to produce meaning at the site of the viewer/reader. As I will show in Chapters 3 and 4, the literature on ekphrasis is replete with these references, although they are often elevated beyond mere influences operating at the site of the viewer/reader. For the purpose of my study, I am the viewer/reader. While practically this is the only site I can occupy, as it is difficult if not impossible to place myself at the site of production of the painting or the poem, and I find it impossible to speak for all viewers, some thinkers argue further that it is important to ‘allow the personal to surface’ (Gen Doy 2005: 143; see also O’Toole 1994: 29-30).

Finally, I suggest that critics cannot speak for the viewer/reader, and to the extent they seek to prescribe what the viewer/reader might or should take into consideration or feel in response to the painting informed by the poem, they “normalise” the viewer/reader function. So when Helen Vendler tells us, in relation to Parmigianino’s self-portrait, which I discuss in Chapter 4, that ‘the viewer will feel embraced’ (Vendler 2005: 70), I feel only the critic’s stifling embrace.
As I have argued earlier in this chapter, I believe that I need more than merely a semiotic toolbox. For this and the reasons below, I do not propose to adopt Michael O'Toole's semiotic model (O'Toole 1994). He applies this model to Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts', which I discuss in Chapter 3 of this thesis, and makes many points with which I am in agreement. However, while O'Toole does not rule out differences between Auden's poem and Brueghel's painting as being significant (O'Toole 1994: 165), these are more important in my methodological framework than his comparative semiotic analysis of the painting and the poem as separate artifacts (see O'Toole 1994: 161). Further, O'Toole's model gives "priority" to the features of the painting while not ruling out 'later consideration' of extraneous facts when 'their relevance has been proved' by details in the painting (O'Toole 1994: 181). In appropriating Barthes' punctum, I do not build this "priority" into my framework.

I want to acknowledge also Valerie Robillard's intertextual model (Robillard 1998). Robillard proposes that regarding ekphrasis as the verbal representation of a visual work fails to 'account for the myriad alternative ways in which contemporary literary works touch on the visual arts' (Robillard 1998: 55). She develops an intertextual model to trace the 'manner and degree to which the two arts may be seen to interact' (Robillard 1998: 56). However, Robillard's model focuses on traces and degrees of sameness, and approaches the painting and poem in apparent isolation from other "texts", whereas I wish to study difference, in the form of mutations, in a broader context. I will test my model in Chapter 6 on some examples of ekphrastic poems which appear to have a low degree of intertextual intensity with the work of art.

Figure 2 below illustrates my methodological framework, which focuses on the links observable by the viewer/reader between the art work and poem, as well as extraneous information, knowledge and experience.
I propose to examine the changes that occur in the process of visual and verbal representation ("mutations"), and the associations from visual details in the painting, which are recorded in the poem. I propose to examine the connections between coded and uncoded marks in the painting and the responses in the poem that switch in and out of signification, between the iconic, symbolic and indexical modes and between ambiguous meanings. I argue that all these are implicated in "illumination" in the sense I propose for my study. The symbol "M" indicates possible areas where mutations may occur.

I might adopt a strictly confined analysis, indicated in Figure 2 by the vertical relation between art work and its mutations, the poem and its mutations, and the meaning they produce at the site of the viewer/reader. In examining mutations introduced in the poem, it will be apparent that the poet has introduced extraneous factors, indicated in the bottom bar of Figure 2: interpolation and extrapolation of narrative elements; references to the poet's experience of the art work; and references to the poet's
experience of writing the poem. These may be embedded in the poem and may stimulate the curiosity of the viewer/reader.

Finally, I argue that it is impossible to direct myself as viewer/reader to disregard extraneous factors, indicated by the extreme left and right ends of the bottom bar of Figure 2: the sitter’s anterior future (his or her future which is past when we see the painting); the poet’s anterior future; and of course, their life that was behind them when the painting and the poem were made.

I believe that I must also consider readings of the painting and of the poem that have been made independently in the literature in order to argue that my approach is novel and demonstrates how ekphrastic poetry complements the visual work of art to facilitate the emergence of new meaning from the work of art that would not emerge from either taken alone.

In the next chapter, I consider the case of canonical ekphrases on mythological subjects and argue that paintings which illustrate mythical subjects have some differences and some similarities with portraiture which may inform my approach to portraiture in Chapter 4.
Chapter 3

Myth and mutation in ekphrasis

In this chapter I apply my approach to canonical ekphrases by Shelley, responding to the painting The Medusa once attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, and by Auden, responding to Brueghel’s Landscape with the Fall of Icarus. I argue that paintings which illustrate mythical subjects have some differences and some similarities with portraiture, and this informs my approach to portraiture in later chapters. I test my methodology against readings in the literature of canonical ekphrases on mythical subjects in preparation for the next chapter, in which I examine Ashbery’s canonical ekphrasis on Parmigianino’s anamorphic self-portrait.

Pia Brinzeu proposes that ‘in the case of mythological characters, whose story is known’, the viewer/reader can evoke the mythological context, but this is not possible in the case of a subject unknown to the viewer/reader, where the viewer/reader must create a story (Brinzeu 2001: 10-11). I argue, however, that myths do not create a “known” context, as they are replete with mutations, and that learning to deal with these mutations is a useful preparation for investigating ekphrases responding to portraits.

The texts inscribing the mythical character of the Medusa are clearly replete with mutations: the willful seductress becomes an innocent victim of rape; the gaze that petrifies with fear becomes one that literally turns to stone; the hideous appearance of a creature both male and female becomes a vision of female beauty; and, finally it is her beauty that petrifies men.

The myth of Icarus appears also to be replete with mutations: from act of hubris to human error; from the gods to man as god; from distraught father to absent father; and finally, from concern to indifference at the suffering of our fellow human beings.
Not only may the encounter with the painting and the poem be influenced by the underlying myth, but the viewer/reader must select an account or interpretation of the myth from the substantial body of literature that has developed around the myth. I argue also that the painting itself shows mutations from the myth, which should be investigated as an influence on the viewer/reader.

I will also examine art historical information about the artwork and biographical information about the artist and poet that the literature on ekphrasis brings to the artwork, and will consider whether, in Barthes’ words, it is ‘already there’ in the painting for the viewer/reader to see.

**Shelley and Medusa**

As John Hollander notes, the painting that Shelley saw in the Uffizi in 1819 may have been inspired by Vasari’s description in 1550 of a lost painting by da Vinci (Hollander 1995: 144). Shelley was clearly under the impression that Leonardo was the artist, although this origin seems now to be disproved.

The unfinished first five stanzas of Shelley’s poem were published by Mary Shelley after Shelley’s death and, as Hollander so nicely understates the position, ‘Mary Shelley may indeed have collaborated with him on it’ (Hollander 1995: 144; see also Catherine Maxwell 1989: 173). The lacunae in the original are filled below with Hollander’s suggested words (Hollander 1995: 143-145). Of the sixth stanza, first published in 1959, Hollander says it may or may not be authentic, however, Maxwell says it is spurious, a collection of fragments from Mary Shelley’s notebook (Hollander 1995: 145; Maxwell 1989: 173). I argue that this ambiguity about authorship of the poem highlights the ambiguous role of the male author we see reflected in the painting and the poem.
On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci,  
in the Florentine Gallery

It lieth, gazing on the midnight sky,  
   Upon the cloudy mountain peak supine;  
Below, far lands are seen tremblingly;  
   Its horror and its beauty are divine.  
Upon its lips and eyelids seems to lie  
   Loveliness like a shadow, from which shine,  
Fiery and lurid, struggling underneath,  
The agonies of anguish and of death.  

Yet it is less the horror than the grace  
   Which turns the gazer's spirit into stone;  
Whereon the lineaments of that dead face  
   Are graven, till the characters be grown  
Into itself, and thought no more can trace;  
   Tis the melodious hue of beauty thrown  
Athwart the darkness and the glare of pain,  
Which humanize and harmonize the strain.
And from its head as from one body grow,
   As [river] grass out of a watery rock,
Hairs which are vipers, and they curl and flow
   And their long tangles in each other lock,
And with unending involutions show
   Their mailed radiance, as it were to mock
The torture and the death within, and saw
The solid air with many a ragged jaw.

And from a stone beside, a poisonous eft
   Peeps idly into those Gorgonian eyes;
Whilst in the air a ghastly bat, bereft
   Of sense, has flitted with a mad surprise
Out of the cave this hideous light had cleft,
   And he comes hastening like a moth that hies
After a taper; and the midnight sky
Flares, a light more dread than obscurity.

Tis the tempestuous loveliness of terror;
   For from the serpents gleams a brazen glare
Kindled by that inextricable error,
   Which makes a thrilling vapour of the air
Become a [dim] and ever-shifting mirror
   Of all the beauty and the terror there –
A woman's countenance, with serpent locks,
Gazing in death on heaven from those wet rocks.

It is a woman's countenance divine
   With everlasting beauty breathing there
Which from a stormy mountain's peak, supine
Gazes into the [mid]-night's trembling air.
It is a trunkless head, and on its feature
   Death has met life, but there is life in death,
The blood is frozen – but unconquered Nature
Seems struggling to the last – without a breath
The fragment of an uncreated creature.

The dual meanings of the word ‘lieth’ in the first line, repeated in line 5, have been remarked on in the literature (see Tom Mitchell 1994: 173; Grant Scott 1996: 8). Perhaps again, the voice in the poem is telling us that “saying” is unreliable.

We may recall that Medusa was one of the Gorgons, three sisters who were all once beautiful, however, one night Medusa lay with Poseidon in one of Athene's temples, which enraged Athene, who changed Medusa and her sisters into winged monsters with glaring eyes, huge teeth, a
protruding tongue, brazen claws and serpent locks, whose gaze turned men to stone (Robert Graves 1960: 127).

We may also recall Athene’s role in the death of Medusa: Perseus found the three Gorgons asleep, among the shapes of men and beasts turned to stone, and looking at the reflection on the bronze shield given him by Athene, with Athene guiding his hand, he cut off Medusa’s head, upon which Pegasus and Chryasor, begotten by Poseidon, ‘sprang fully grown from her dead body’ (Graves 1960: 239). Perseus returned home with the Medusa’s head, and used it in battle to turn his adversaries to stone, before giving the head to Athene, who fixed it on her aegis (Graves 1960: 239-241).

When I first saw a reproduction of the painting I was struck by the highlights which give the serpents their lifelike shapes, tormented writhing shapes. I was initially puzzled by the references to ‘beauty’ (lines 4, 14, 38 and 42), ‘grace’ (line 9), ‘loveliness’ (line 33) and ‘countenance divine’ (line 41). According to the myth, the face of the Medusa should be hideous. Turning the page on its side to look at the image of the face in a more normal aspect, the features seem to me to be recognizable human features, which appears to be a departure from the myth.

I turn to Graves and his sources to learn more about the mythical character, seeking answers – was Medusa an innocent victim or, even if guilty, was the punishment meted out by Athene unjust, and was Medusa transformed at death from a hideous creature back into a beautiful woman – but I find no explanation, only ambiguity. I turn to the literature to see how other thinkers have responded to the painting and the poem. Carol Jacobs says that the poem ‘seems intent upon describing the painting ... in a manner that no longer menaces ... the human beholder’ (Jacobs 1985: 170). Heffernan sees a struggle between poetry and art:

... virtually all ekphrasis latently reveals ... the poet’s ambition to make his words outlast their ostensible subject, to displace graphic representation with verbal representation.... [however] neither gains absolute victory over the other (Heffernan 1991: 311-312)
Mitchell equates the image with the feminine and the text with the masculine, and suggests that ekphrasis is the attempt by verbal representation to ‘repress or take dominion over language’s graphic Other’ (Mitchell 1994: 170-173). Grant Scott takes a similar approach, stating in relation to the male poet, ‘He must translate [the feminine image’s] beauties into words without compromising the boundaries of his own fragile selfhood’ (Scott 1996: 2). Both Mitchell and Scott argue that the poem deconstructs the strategic separation of male viewer and dangerous female Other by the voice in the poem surrendering to the image (Mitchell 1994: 173; Scott 1996: 6-7).

Scott regards the confrontation between Perseus and Medusa as ‘a primitive allegory of ekphrasis’, in which the poet may become paralysed and speechless if overcome by the image (Scott 1996: 4). Scott develops the gendered metaphor in describing the ‘Medusa effect’ as ‘the tendency for the poet-viewer to become paralyzed by the powerful beauty of the art object’, and the ‘Pygmalion impulse’ as the desire, enabled by the power of the male gaze, to bring life to the still artwork (Scott 1999: 64). Lawrence Starzyk, however, argues that the privileging of the verbal is ultimately a pyrrhic victory because ekphrasis is merely a projection onto the visual which reveals that the visual is the dominant force in the dialectic, controlling the poet through his or her repressed fears (Starzyk 2002: 4-8).

As Jerome McGann suggests, Romantic artists generally considered Medusa to be innocent, and ‘Shelley would not have been able to see her as anything but a victim of the tyranny and cowardice of established power’ (McGann 1972: 4). Barbara Judson says that ‘the viewer does not enjoy mastery, because his consciousness is riveted and then altered by the victimisation he perceives’, however, the viewer is ambivalent about this because he realises that his sympathy challenges the social order (Judson 2001: 138). My own response to the painting, however, is initially one of curiosity about the causes of the Medusa’s death. I accept this cannot be explained satisfactorily from the myth. However, I am left with a
feeling, about which I have no ambivalence, that her death cannot be justified.

While Mitchell considers that the 'treatment of the ekphrastic image as a female other is a commonplace in the genre', he regards this is 'an overdetermined feature' of ekphrasis, recognising that the viewer is not always male (Mitchell 1994: 168). Mitchell nevertheless regards 'Medusa [as] the perfect prototype for the image as a dangerous female other who threatens to silence the poet's voice and fixate his observing eye' (Mitchell 1994: 172).

I am left with a feeling of unease at these analytical readings. I notice that the snakes are distracted in their torment, and the Medusa gazes upwards and away from me, so I feel no threat from these instilled sources of fear. I argue that these thinkers are concerned with the site of production of the poem, rather than with the production of meaning at the site of the viewer/reader. None of the thinkers mentioned above has considered how a female viewer might respond to the image, which suggests that they are not investigating the site of the viewer/reader.

Looking at the painting, the black and white reproduction in The Gazer's Spirit, I am again struck by the reflected light which highlights the serpents and other creatures gathering around the severed head and gives them their lifelike shapes. Now I see that Shelley makes repeated reference to this light: 'lips and eyelids ... shine/ Fiery and lurid' (lines 5-7); 'the glare of pain' (line 15); 'mailed radiance' (line 22); 'hideous light' (line 29); and 'the midnight sky/ Flares, a light more dread than obscurity' (lines 31-32). Now I wonder about the source of this 'brazen glare' (line 34).

Following Jacobs' earlier discussion, Heffernan discusses at length the meaning of the lines 'Yet it is less the horror than the grace/ Which turns the gazer's spirit into stone' (Heffernan 1993: 121-122). Jacobs proposes that it is 'the grace of art rather than the horror of the subject matter [that] turned the gazer's spirit into stone' (Jacobs 1985: 173). Heffernan suggests the gazer is the severed head of Medusa (Heffernan 1993: 121-
122; see also Jacobs 1985: 167, 175). Scott disagrees, suggesting that ‘the gazer must be the viewer of the painting, the ekphrastic poet, Medusa, and Perseus – all at once’ (from Heffernan 1993: 217 n. 52). In a subsequent article, Scott says the gazer is Medusa, ‘who usurps the traditional generic role of the male observer’ (Scott 1996: 7). Hollander says that there is an additional gazer: ‘the reader who looks through the text of the poem at the invoked image’ (Hollander 1995: 145).

There is of course another absent contender: the goddess Athene, who guided Perseus’ hand. As Jacobs has noted, the light comes from Perseus’ shield (Jacobs 1985: 166). And its source? Jacobs suggests that the source of illumination is the ‘mailed radiance of the serpents’ involutions’ (Jacobs 1985: 172). However, I argue that the source of the light is all the beauty and the terror of the goddess Athene. I recall a feeling that there was something incongruous in the reference to ‘a light more dread than obscurity’ (line 32), and believe that this could refer to the cause of Medusa’s banishment into obscurity. I read again the ambiguous reference to the ‘tempestuous loveliness of terror’ (line 33), this time convinced it refers to Athene.

I return to Heidegger’s approach of association. The Medusa’s head is converted on death into a protective device, a thing made for use, first by Perseus, and later by Athene as part of her aegis. How does it gain this protective (apotropaic) power? I suggest it gains its power as a reminder of the power of Athene. I argue that Shelley’s poem draws our attention to the ‘brazen glare’ and enables us to look afresh at the painting, to see the absent source of light, loveliness and terror. In so doing the painting and the poem complement each other to make it possible for us to see Medusa as the Other of Athene.

I would be quite happy to stop here, having produced a reading that has not been noted before. I argue that Shelley too stopped here, with the suggestion that the viewer absorbs ‘the lineaments of that dead face’ until ‘thought no more can trace’ (lines 12-13). That is, I cannot produce a
satisfactory explanation of Medusa's predicament and death from what I know about the myth, and my viewing of the painting informed by the poem produces a new awareness of the unexplained relationship between Medusa and Athene. I could go on to analyse this Otherness between the two mythological figures, which I discover has been remarked upon before in the context of the myth (see for example Graves 1960: 17, Gilbert & Gubar 1979: 34, Creed 1993: 166).

Mitchell refers to the political imagery of the early nineteenth-century, in which Medusa is associated with French revolutionary anarchy and Athene with British justice (Mitchell 1994: 175). However, Mitchell draws on the Freudian analysis of the Medusa myth noted by Neil Hertz, which associates Medusa with the male fear of castration, or revolutionary violence, and the serpents with a fetish object standing for the metaphoric missing penis of the mother (Mitchell 1994: 174-176; Hertz 1983: 185; see also Freud 1922: 85). Possibly Shelley's use of the words 'mailed radiance' in line 22 in relation to the serpents is an unintentional pun suggesting maleness. In any event, I argue that most of these thinkers do not consider the relationship of Otherness between the two female figures. Barbara Creed, however, argues that the separation of the daughter, or the loss of control exerted by the daughter over the mother, can be experienced as symbolic castration (Creed 1993: 107).

I can see the initial transformation of Medusa into a hideous creature as marking a kind of separation from the maiden goddess Athene. I could easily read the myth as a salutary lesson to young girls, and possibly a metaphor of transition to motherhood. I could also read the myth as supporting the patriarchal order (since Poseidon suffers no ill consequences). However, I argue that to pursue these leads draws us into interpreting the myth rather than responding to the painting informed by the poem. I prefer to explore in more detail the mutations in the myth of Medusa, and in the painting and the poem, which I argue operate to produce new meaning at the site of the viewer/reader.
The first mutation I want to examine is that Medusa as willful seductress becomes an innocent victim of rape. Hesiod says that Poseidon ‘lay down with her among the flowers of spring/ in a soft meadow’ (Hesiod 1973: 32). Ovid, however, says that Poseidon carried out many rapes by subterfuge, changing form to deceive his victims, and says that Poseidon changed into a bird to rape Medusa (Ovid 1987: 124).

The second mutation is the gaze that petrifies with fear becomes one that literally turns to stone. Hesiod and Euripides describe the aegis as causing panic (Hesiod 1973: 167; Euripides 1954: 78). Michael Simpson, translator of Apollodorus, notes that Ovid ‘borrows’ from Homer’s description of the battle in the hall from Book XXII of The Odyssey, however, in Ovid’s account in Metamorphoses the opponents are turned to stone, whereas in Homer, they stampede like cattle through fear of Athene’s aegis (from Apollodorus 1976: 86).

The final mutation I want to examine is the hideous appearance of a creature both male and female becomes a vision of female beauty, and the source of Medusa’s power to petrify men becomes her beauty, not her ugliness. As Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet note, paintings of the Gorgon in ancient Greece showed the Gorgon as ‘part human, part animal, she is also a fusion of genders. Her chin is bearded or bristly ... she is frequently given male sexual organs’ (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988: 194). Graves notes that the Gorgon Medusa had ‘so ugly a face that all who gazed at it were petrified with fright’ (Graves 1960: 239). Lucian, however, suggested that it was her beauty that stunned beholders, turning them to stone in wonder (Lucian 2003: 43; see also Pizan 2003: 57).

I argue that these mutations contribute to the metonymic power of the painting in substituting the effect of Medusa’s death in place of the indeterminate causes of her predicament, the ‘inextricable error’ mentioned in line 35 which has been discussed by a number of thinkers (see Rogers 1959: 16, McGann 1972: 5, Jacobs 1985: 173). Hollander
quotes Walter Pater, who concluded that the painting 'exercises its power through all the circumstances of death' (from Hollander 1995: 144). The myth does not answer our questions about these circumstances, and it is for the viewer/reader to fill in the resulting lacunae.

I want to consider now some of the mutations in the poem, and whether by these mutations Shelley makes himself visible. We can examine the visual details in the painting that Shelley foregrounds in his poem, those that he does not mention, and those aspects of the poem that involve mutations, which may be creative, or just unexplained deviations from the painting. Shelley foregrounds the 'hairs which are vipers' (line 19), the 'serpent locks' (line 39) and again, the highlights, 'mailed radiance' (line 22) and 'brazen glare' (line 34). He foregrounds the other creatures hovering around – the 'poisonous eft' (line 25), 'ghastly bat' (line 27) – and in doing so foregrounds the painting's departure from the myth, because these creatures are not turned to stone. Scott describes these creatures as 'victims' (Scott 1996: 10), however, they do not appear to me to be depicted in the painting or the poem as such.

As noted above, Shelley foregrounds the recognisable human features struck by light (lines 5-6), the 'lineaments of that dead face' (lines 11), which are respects in which the artist deviates from the myth. By this means I argue he foregrounds the possibility of Medusa's re-transformation, 'there is life in death' (line 46).

There is virtually nothing in the painting that Shelley passes over, although it is difficult to discern detail in the black and white reproduction in The Gazer's Spirit. The observing frog in the lower right corner is not specifically mentioned. This appears to be a benign character, and I notice that the hovering bat appears likewise benign, in contrast to Shelley's description of it as 'ghastly' (line 27). Shelley appears to deviate from the painting by referring to the mountain peak and lands far below (lines 2-3 and 43), which I cannot discern in the reproduction. I argue that Shelley also invents another viewer alongside us – the gazer in line 10 on
whose own face 'the lineaments of that dead face/ Are graven' (lines 12-13).

A number of thinkers argue that Shelley has treated the painting and its signified as one, that is, as if the severed head were directly present instead of being mere paint on canvas (Jacobs 1985: 166; Mitchell 1994: 173; Scott 1996: 7). I argue, however, that the mutations I have identified above suggest that Shelley responded to mutations in the painting, and that neither the artist nor Shelley are invisible translators of the myth and painting respectively. These mutations cause me to look at the painting afresh, not as a mere illustration of the myth, but as an original contribution to the artistic myth of the Medusa, and so produce new meaning at the site of the viewer/reader.

We can now ask, what does the viewer bring to the painting informed by the poem, that we may find already there? Hunt has proposed that the poet sees his 'own reflection' in the painting (Hunt 1980: 20). There is much to suggest that Shelley identified with Medusa as a victim of the social order. However, while we can only speculate about the influences on Shelley when he saw the painting, the circumstances of Shelley's life are difficult for me to ignore. I argue that I can identify Shelley with Perseus, victim and victor in one.

According to Margaret Crompton's biography of Shelley, he was expelled from Oxford in 1811 for refusing to recant his atheistic views (Crompton 1967: 29). Within a matter of months he eloped with a schoolgirl friend of his sisters, Harriet Westerbrook (Crompton 1967: 38). In 1814, while Harriet was pregnant with their second child, Shelley eloped with Mary Godwin, who coincidentally was 16, the same age Harriet had been when she and Shelley eloped (Crompton 1967: 79). Harriet committed suicide in 1816, and the following month Shelley married Mary (Crompton 1967: 129, 145). Harriet's father then commenced legal action for custody of the children, which in 1817 was awarded to a guardian on the grounds that Shelley and Mary were not fit parents (Crompton 1967: 148-150).
In March 1818 the Shellesys left England with two infant children of their own, the estrangement from Shelley's family complete (Crompton 1967: 159-160). By the time they arrived in Florence in October of 1819, these two children were dead, largely as a result of the constant unsettling travel, and Mary was expecting her third child (Crompton 1967: 168-169, 175-176). Shelley apparently spent much of his time in the Uffizi while Mary was preparing for the birth (Crompton 1967: 181). In Britain, working class agitation for social reform had been repressed, and in September of 1819 Shelley received news of the Peterloo massacre, where a peaceful reform demonstration was 'ridden down by drunken yeomanry', which left Shelley's blood boiling (Judson 2001: 136; see also Matthews 1970: 23 and Cross 2004: 187).

I argue that Shelley probably saw in Medusa's unjust fate the reflection of the hopelessness of Shelley's own challenge to the social order, that brought him to Florence leaving a trail of destroyed lives behind him. Judson similarly concludes that 'Medusa figures a dead end for Shelley's politics' and he 'finds in her at last only the portrait of his own despair' (Judson 2001: 151). However, if we see the painting informed by the poem as drawing attention to the relationship of otherness between Medusa and Athene, we might question whether Shelley pondered upon the death of Harriet and Mary's role in it, perhaps his own role as instrument, like Perseus, while he gazed upon the painting in the Uffizi. We might also question Mary Shelley's role as she wrote the fragments of the poem in her notebooks, guiding Shelley's hand.

I argue that it is impossible for me to put out of my mind the underlying myth or context, including the poet's own life and world view, when viewing the painting informed by the poem, and these all contribute to the production of meaning at the site of the viewer/reader.
Auden and Icarus

I this section I examine Auden's poem 'Musée des Beaux Arts'. Hollander calls this the 'most influential ekphrastic poem of late modernity' (Hollander 1995: 249). As Heffeman notes, Landscape with the Fall of Icarus was 'the only painting Brueghel did of a mythological subject' and it depends on a text for its meaning (Heffeman 1993: 150). However, just as myth appears to be indeterminate, we cannot be sure whether either of the two Icarus paintings in Brussels attributed to Brueghel are by him or unknown artists (Grossman 1977: 190; see also Weisstein 1982b: 57, n. 1).

As a number of people have noted, Auden's poem alludes to at least two other paintings attributed to Brueghel: The Massacre of the Innocents (c. 1566) at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, thought not to be authentic (Grossman 1977: 198); and, The Census at Bethlehem (c. 1566) in the Musée Royaux des Beaux Arts, Brussels. As Heffeman has noted, Brueghel depicts these scenes from Christian mythology taking place in a 'snow-covered Flemish village' (Heffeman 1993: 147).

Rose-Marie and Rainer Hagen point out that the Netherlands during this period was under Spanish rule, and The Census at Bethlehem depicts not the officials of the Emperor Augustus in Biblical times but Spanish Hapsburg tax collectors such as were in Brueghel's time levying tax under orders from Madrid (Hagen & Hagen 2000: 47-48). This painting depicts children playing safely on a frozen pond (see Plate 117 in Grossman 1977). The Massacre of the Innocents portrays distraught parents trying in vain to dissuade or prevent the soldiers from slaughtering the innocent children. Many have looked for a 'torturer's horse' scratching its behind on a tree as in Auden's poem, however, there is no sign of it (see Plates 112 and 113 in Grossman 1977).

The references in the first lines of the poem to the 'Old Masters' may be regarded as ironic, given the difficulty of authenticating the paintings to Brueghel or anyone else, and the allusion in the painting to the Netherlandish proverb 'No plough stands still for a dying man' is not the

Brueghel, *Landscape with the fall of Icarus*, c. 1558

**Musée des Beaux Arts**

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window
or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life
and the torturer’s horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.
In Brueghel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

I suggest that the "commentary" in the paintings about suffering does not represent the wisdom of the Old Masters unless they were departing from the classical myths which they were apparently illustrating. I turn to the usual sources to fill out my sketchy knowledge of the Icarus myth. We may recall that, according to myth, Daedalus fled from Athens after being convicted for murdering Talos, the son of his sister Perdix, by throwing him from the Acropolis (Graves 1960: 312). Talos was his pupil and Daedalus was afraid that Talos, even at a young age, was a more promising craftsman (Graves 1960: 312). Graves notes that 'the soul of Talos ... flew off in the form of a partridge' and Perdix killed herself on hearing of his death (Graves 1960: 312).

Daedalus and his son Icarus were held in exile on Crete, and since the king, Minos, controlled the land and sea, Daedalus had to use the sky for his escape (Graves 1960: 312). However, Icarus disregarded his instructions and flew too close to the sun, the wings of wax and feathers failed, and Icarus fell to the sea and drowned, whereupon Daedalus buried his body on the island of Icaria, watched by a delighted partridge, the soul of Perdix avenged (Graves 1960: 313). Graves notes that some say that Daedalus and Icarus escaped by boat, and that Icarus drowned by falling from the boat into the sea (Graves 1960: 313).

I was quite excited to observe in the painting a large bird on a branch looking out to sea where Icarus is drowning (above and to the left of the fisherman – see detail in Hagen & Hagen 2000: 60), only to find that Ulrich Weissstein had already identified this as a partridge (Weissstein 1982b: 59) and Michael O'Toole had previously noted the mythical significance of it (O'Toole 1998: 160). In this enlargement the trail of feathers floating in the
sky, dislodged from the wings of Icarus, is clearly visible above Icarus, which appears incongruous against the ship sailing before a brisk breeze.

Graves and his sources do not answer my questions about Icarus – was he the victim of his own youthful exuberance or was he suffering for his father's murder of Talos or disrespect of the gods? With my mind full of questions about the Icarus myth, I return to the poem and find only more ambiguity. The reference in lines 5-6 to the aged 'reverently, passionately waiting/ For the miraculous birth' could mean either the birth of Christ awaited at Bethlehem, or to the life after death that Christians anticipate. The reference in lines 7-8 to children who did not specially want death to happen, 'skating/ On a pond at the edge of the wood' could relate to the children playing happily and apparently safely on the frozen pond in The Census at Bethlehem. In line 10 'the dreadful martyrdom' could be a reference to the death of the innocent children in The Massacre of the Innocents, to the death of Christ, or to anyone. In lines 14-15 it is noted ‘how everything turns away/ Quite leisurely from the disaster'.

From the suffering of the watching parents in The Massacre of the Innocents my thoughts turn to death, the one thing we cannot learn about from watching others. We cannot understand their suffering, nor can we know what it will be like for us. To the viewer, Icarus and his vain struggle against death are remote, even comic. We cannot help him, we cannot experience his suffering. As if in a dream or a pantomime we may urge the sailors to look behind the ship, or the fisherman close by to look up, but none of us can move, none of us can intervene. The last stanza has this dream-like quality, this hope that something could or might have been done, yet resignation to the fate of Icarus. Brueghel has portrayed that moment when it is not too late, that moment that would be replayed in the mind of the absent father wishing to alter the course of events.

However, in this case I argue that Auden was not responding to the Icarus myth but to the paintings. I turn to the literature to see how other thinkers have responded to the painting and the poem. Hsuan Hsu develops the
museum theme, suggesting that by situating the viewer in the museum, where one 'never has quite enough time to spend observing each painting', the poem suffers from a guilty conscience 'precisely because it cannot access the suffering portrayed in the paintings it describes' (Hsu 1999: 167). Paul Fry points out that the paintings to which the poem refers imply a Biblical sequence (Fry 1995: 73). Heffernan notes that the appeal of Icarus to his absent father ('the forsaken cry' in line 16) mimics the cry of Christ from the cross (Heffernan 1993: 151). Thomas Dilworth and William Hyde also compare Icarus with Christ (Dilworth 1991: 181; Hyde 2003: 68).

Katy Aisenberg regards the ekphrastic dynamic as the struggle between word and image (Aisenberg 1995: 34-35). Aisenberg believes that if ekphrastic poetry achieved the ultimate silencing of the image, the image would lose its otherness and the words would be turned to stone, and it is the fear of this that explains the poet's reticence to completely 'ravish' the image (Aisenberg 1995: 39-40). She believes that the relationship between words and images needs 'to be addressed more explicitly as a gender issue in ekphrasis' (Aisenberg 1995: 55).

Turning to 'Musée des Beaux Arts', Aisenberg considers that 'A meditation on a real painting seems to provide Auden with one fuller answer as to how to reconcile the imposition of one art over another in poetry' (Aisenberg 1995: 58). Aisenberg considers that 'nature's lack of concern' and 'man's inhumanity to man' are the meaning of this painting that Auden's poem reveals to us (Aisenberg 1995: 61-63; see also Weisstein 1982b: 78-79, Mendelson 1999: 5, Hyde 2003: 68). However, Fry questions 'whether the contrast between suffering and the indifference of casual volition is something that the poem finds in Brueghel's paintings' (Fry 1995: 73). Aisenberg considers that the poem is so popular because:

It externalises what we feel we do when we see a painting: we interpret it and master it. In this poem we recognise our desire for acts of mastery and the poem is the inspired representation of this desire. What we may not see is Auden's careful illustration of the
danger of pretending to have complete mastery or sympathetic understanding. (Aisenberg 1995: 64-65)

James Mirollo considers that awareness of the ‘persistent conflict between word and image’ elucidates both the poetry and Brueghel’s painting (Mirollo 1996: 131). He calls this rivalry ‘image envy’, by which he means antagonism between writers and painters, possibly because art is a collectible investment whereas books generally are not (Mirollo 1996: 135). Mirollo regards ekphrasis as one of a number of ‘appropriative gestures’ that cope with ‘image envy’ (Mirollo 1996: 136). So he regards ekphrasis as an opportunity for the writer to ‘engage the visual work ... [with a] virtuoso display of literary skills in describing it’ (Mirollo 1996: 136). Another gesture, or strategy, is to ‘treat the visual work as a text having meaning and therefore needing interpretation’ (Mirollo 1996: 136).

Further, Mirollo considers that there is a way that painters can fight back through their art ‘to resist interpretation by privileging pictorial over literary meaning’ (Mirollo 1996: 139). He considers that Brueghel deploys this defence in Landscape with the Fall of Icarus, because he ‘deflects interpretation by his ironic, capricious presentation’ of the literary sources (Mirollo 1996: 140).

I am uneasy about a number of aspects of these readings. I find it hard to believe that Auden was competing with Brueghel. In responding to the painting informed by the poem I, as viewer/reader, do not seek to privilege the painting or the poem, and have no capacity to give priority to any meaning that may emerge from one or other. In so far as John Berger would have the viewer disregard the verbal, and Mitchell would have the reader disregard the visual, I argue that “the horse has already bolted”, and it is too late to “normalise” the site of the viewer/reader in this way. I argue that in many respects the thinkers on ekphrasis mentioned above are concerned with the site of production of the poem rather than with the production of meaning at the site of the viewer/reader. I want to explore in more detail the mutations in the myth of Icarus, and in the painting and the poem, which I argue operate to produce meaning at the site of the
viewer/reader. Peter Green, translator of Ovid, and others have noted the mutations introduced by Ovid into the myth between his first and second rendering in *Ars Amatoria* and *Metamorphoses* (from Ovid 1982: 74; see also Hoefmans 1994).

The first area of mutation concerns the characterisation of the death of Icarus, from act of hubris by Daedalus to one of human error. In the *Ars Amatoria*, Daedalus humbly pleads for the forgiveness of the gods in transgressing their ‘starry dwellings’ (Ovid 1982: 192). Marjorie Hoefmans points out that the downfall of Icarus is caused by too closely approaching the ‘sun god’ (*dea*) (Hoefmans 1994: 7; Ovid 1982: 193). As Hoefmans has noted, in *Metamorphoses*, the humility of Daedalus before the gods in *Ars Amatoria* is gone (Hoefmans 1994: 3). Daedalus ‘set his mind and altered nature’s laws’ (Ovid 1987: 177). As they fly away from Crete the angler, shepherd and ploughman think they must be gods (Ovid 1987: 178). According to Hoefmans, in *Metamorphoses*, the downfall of Icarus is caused by too closely approaching ‘the stellar body of the sun’ (*solis*) in place of the ‘sun god’ of *Ars Amatoria* (Hoefmans 1994: 7). Hoefmans argues that this mutation implies an acceptance of the teaching of Epicurus, that the natural world functions without interference from the gods (Hoefmans 1994: 8-10; see Lucretius 1951). I argue that Daedalus cursing his art after the incident reflects the Lucretian belief that the death of Icarus was not caused by divine intervention but by human error. Hoefmans implies that Daedalus undergoes a metamorphosis and becomes ‘like a god’ (Hoefmans 1994: 13). I argue that Ovid has re-told the myth to portray the rise of humankind to supplant the gods.

The second area of mutation concerns the artist’s departures from the myth. Ovid records in both the *Ars Amatoria* and *Metamorphoses* the distraught father’s search for Icarus (Ovid 1982: 193; Ovid 1987: 178). However, in the Musée Royaux des Beaux Arts version of Brueghel’s *Icarus*, Daedalus is nowhere to be seen (whereas in the other version in Brussels, in the Van Buuren collection, which is otherwise identical, Daedalus is seen flying back in search of Icarus) (Weisstein 1982b: 79;
Heffernan 193: 149; see also O’Toole 1998: 154). I argue that the painting to which Auden responds foregrounds Icarus, and yet, even though Daedalus is absent, the painting by metonymic association refers to Daedalus. Further, I argue that the presence of a ship may be, but is not conclusively, a departure from the myth (see Graves 1960: 313 and Horace 1983: 72-73; compare Heffernan 1993: 148-149).

I argue that the most significant mutation that emerges is created by Brueghel’s synoptic treatment, in which events occurring in the myth at different times and places are depicted in the one scene, situated in Brueghel’s own world. Although Weisstein has located two woodcuts illustrating Ovid’s Metamorphoses, from 1497 and 1545 respectively, that portray in one synoptic image Daedalus and Icarus both during the fall and during the subsequent burial, he is more cautious about this conclusion (Weisstein 1982b: 64 and 72-76). O’Toole more confidently says the ‘collapsing of the two episodes seems rather odd’ (O’Toole 1998: 154). I argue that it is this synoptic treatment which makes it possible for Mirollo and others to conclude that Brueghel revises Ovid so that the farmer, shepherd and fisherman are ‘unaware of, or indifferent to, rather than astonished’ by Icarus falling from the sky (Mirollo 1996: 143).

The third category of mutations are those in the poem by which Auden makes himself visible. There are few details that Auden actually foregrounds, and a massive amount of detail that Auden passes over in all three paintings. He foregrounds the children skating on a pond (lines 7-8). He foregrounds what the painting Massacre of the Innocents leaves out of the frame: the ‘untidy spot’ where the ‘dreadful martyrdom’ runs its course (lines 10-13). I argue that this synecdochal reference contributes to the indexical effect of the painting, as does his metonymic reference to the absent Daedalus, the ‘forsaken cry’ (line 16). Auden also foregrounds the shining sun that obscures the sea horizon (line 17), the minute white legs of Icarus drowning, and the ‘expensive delicate ship’ (line 19).
I have already mentioned some of the things he invents. The everyday people ‘eating or opening a window or just walking dully along’ (line 4), the aged waiting for birth/death (lines 5-6), the dogs going on with their ‘doggy life’ and the torturer’s horse (line 12). For me, these contribute to the painting’s synecdochal implications, that life outside the frame is exactly as it appears inside the frame.

We can now ask, what does the viewer bring to the painting informed by the poem, that the viewer finds already there? Did Auden see his “own reflection” in the painting? According to Edward Mendelson, Auden ‘had always insisted that his good fortune and the good fortune of those like him could not be divided from the suffering of others left outside. Someone’s success invariably required someone else’s failure’ (Mendelson 1999: 208). Auden went to Spain in early 1937 to serve as a volunteer ambulance driver supporting the forces of the socialist government against the fascist rebels (Mendelson 1999: xvii, 20). During the first half of 1938, he traveled to China to report on the Sino-Japanese war, returning after 6 months through America (Mendelson 1999: xviii). It was during this return trip that he decided to go back to America to live indefinitely. During the rest of 1938, Auden spent most of his time in Brussels where presumably he visited the Musée Royaux des Beaux Arts (Mendelson 1999: xviii; Vries 2003: 5). We may question whether he read about the victims of the Spanish reign of terror in the Netherlands in 1567, during Brueghel’s time (see Grossman 1977: 198 and Hagen & Hagen 2000: 93). After the Munich conference between Chamberlain and Hitler, in September 1938, as Mendelson notes, ‘the world was tense with the anticipation of war’ (Mendelson 1999: 20). ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ was written late in 1938, portraying Brueghel’s ship sailing on indifferent to the suffering of Icarus, a few weeks before Auden sailed for New York in January 1939, leaving Europe on the brink of war (Mendelson 1999: 5). As Hollander so gently puts it, Auden may have seen his own reflection in the painting (Hollander 1995: 251).
But has Auden deceived us and himself? I argue that human indifference is Auden’s projection onto the painting, which hangs quite nicely on Brueghel’s synoptic treatment, without which such a projection would not be possible. If Brueghel followed Ovid’s Metamorphoses, as I argue he did, painting the scene in the setting of his own time, the shepherd, ploughman and fisherman were not turning their backs on Icarus, and it may be doubted that the ship likewise was present in the same space and time.

The assertion that the old masters were never wrong about human suffering, and understood well its human position appears highly ironic. The human position of suffering may also be ironic, if you posit that forces beyond our control cause it, since it can be inferred that it is the human position to suffer. I argue that the painting, informed by the poem, contains strong metonymic reference to the relationship between Icarus and his absent father. I, as viewer/reader, may identify with Daedalus re-living in one synoptic, bitter, vision the triumph and disaster of the flight from Crete. Perhaps the voice in the poem may be considered after all to be speaking in the voice of the loving father, not the disillusioned world-traveller-poet.

We may question whether the suffering of Icarus and Christ resulted from their respective fathers’ choices to expose them to the risks of mortal life – choices that were nevertheless made in an abundance of fatherly love. We may question whether sons must always suffer for the wrongs of the patriarchal social order, and whether Auden could not bring himself to stay in Europe for the sacrifice of sons that was to follow. All of these metaphoric readings, having lesser or greater connection with the painting, occur to me. I argue, therefore, that the poem re-informs my viewing of the painting to release new meanings, that suffering is inherent in the human condition rather than necessarily the result of human volition and indifference, which was the world view that Auden brought to the painting.
Implications for portraiture

I argue that myth, rather than providing a known context for a poet responding to a painting about a mythical figure, offers only ambiguity and indeterminacy, and that learning to deal with this mutability will prove useful when we come to ekphrases on portraiture. I argue that, despite the poet’s possible subjectivism, meaning can emerge from the painting informed by the poem that is not determined by the poet’s intentions or views of the world.

In the next chapter I consider how the approaches in the literature to the above canonical ekphrases have been applied to Ashbery’s ‘Self-portrait in a convex mirror’, which was influential in provoking much contemporary literature on ekphrasis. I will show that mutations play a key role in the emergence of meaning at the site of the viewer/reader, and how this subverts the intentions and world view of the artist and poet.
Chapter 4

Self-portraiture and the representation of representation

I discussed the definition of ekphrasis as ‘the verbal representation of visual representation’ in Chapter 2. There is a related discourse concerning ‘the visual representation of visual representation’, pictures that refer to themselves or other pictures and so may illuminate the nature of visual representation. Tom Mitchell calls these “metapictures” (Mitchell 1994: 35). As Gayana Jurkevich has noted, this kind of ‘visual embedding’ is known today as mise-en-abyme, and Velazquez’ Las Meninas is an instance of it (Jurkevich 1995: 286). Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt identifies recognisable paintings after Rubens in Las Meninas that are said to ‘represent the status of painting as a liberal art’ (Stratton-Pruitt 2003: 130).

Thinkers such as Andrew Becker and Maria Rubins argue that the concept of mise-en-abyme applies to the visual embedded within ekphrastic poetry, in which the viewer-poet’s response to the embedded work of art is said to guide the response of the reader (Becker 1995: 57; Rubins 1998: 12). In the present chapter I want to unpack these ideas and examine the special case of self-portraiture, with reference to John Ashbery’s ‘Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror’, which responds to Parmigianino’s self-portrait of the same name. This will assist me make the transition from the literature on ekphrasis, with its focus on art concerning mythical subjects, to portraiture, which is the focus of my study.

I argue that Las Meninas is an instance of self-portraiture, and I will use it to explore the relationship between artist and viewer in self-portraiture. I suggest that the lives of actual persons are just as indeterminate as those of mythical figures and, consequently, that the viewer/reader cannot simply read the painting or the poem as a representational code that enables the
viewer/reader to know the sitter/artist or poet. That is, what we think we know does not determine meanings that are produced at the site of the viewer/reader. I propose that there will be many mutations present in the painting and the poem, some of which will involve mutations in the “myth” of the sitter’s life and anterior future, which influence the production of meaning at the site of the viewer/reader. I argue that ekphrasis on self-portraiture provides us with a special case of the artist and poet concealing something from themselves and from the viewer/reader.

In the final section of this chapter I will review the literature on Ashbery’s poem. It is rare in the literature for it to be analysed as an ekphrastic poem in the narrow focus of my study, and rarer still for it to be analysed as an ekphrasis on a self-portrait. I argue that there are threads in the literature on Ashbery’s poem that show inchoate recognition of the instability of representation and the potential importance of the way in which the process alters reality, which I argue can be extended to recognise the fundamental role of mutations in the ekphrastic encounter.

**Fact and fiction in *Las Meninas***

Philippe Lejeune considers whether there is any way of recognising, from within a painting, whether it is a self-portrait: the answer is no, unless you know whether the artist is right or left handed, because a self-portrait can only be made from life with a mirror, in which case the reflected image is reversed, ‘your right hand is to the right of the picture, and so appears to be your left hand’ (Lejeune 1989: 110-111).

Because our faces are asymmetrical (see for example Bates 2001: 150), it is this reversal in the mirror that means we can never see ourselves the way others see us. Perhaps it is this asymmetry that leads Richard Brilliant to observe that ‘our mirrored reflection ... separat[es] the image of myself to me from the image of myself to others’ (Brilliant 1991: 146-147).
As Lejeune notes, 'nothing prevents a painter from representing himself, as Velazquez did in Las Meninas, the way that other people must see him', that is, to appear as if it had been painted by someone else (Lejeune 1989: 111). I suggest that we cannot fully appreciate Las Meninas unless we acknowledge that it is a fictitious work, and that a forensic enquiry into the work’s perspectival construction serves no practical purpose. We cannot in this work engage in the direct connection which Lejeune argues applies in other works of self-portraiture:

The painting is like a sheet of glass without silvering: the painter is behind (on the other side in relation to me), and I surprise him in the act of looking at himself. Suddenly we become ... contemporaries. The self-portrait is the only pictorial genre that has given me the poignant feeling, which Barthes describes so well ... in Camera Lucida ... (Lejeune 1989: 115)

The source of this poignancy is I believe Barthes’ concept of anterior future: the sitter’s future that has been and is now in the viewer’s past; and, in the case of the photograph of his mother as a child, her future death is as certain as her life before Barthes knew her is irrecoverable (see Barthes 2000: 96-97, 103).

Richard Brilliant describes the relationship between artist/sitter and viewer in self-portraiture as one in which the viewer has the option of either taking the sitter’s place or remaining separate (Brilliant 1991: 144). I observe that in painting a self-portrait the artist switches repeatedly between these positions. Joanna Woods-Marsden describes the relationship as a 'process of negotiation' between three parties – artist, sitter (the self that has become other) and viewer (Woods-Marsden 1998: 34). I suggest that it is the reversal of the mirror image – itself a kind of anamorphosis – that adds to the poignancy of this negotiation by placing us in the position of the artist 'looking at himself'. I argue, after Lacan, that an anamorphic image holds us in a specific viewing position and makes us aware that we are being held (see Lacan 1976: 92 and Gen Doy 2005: 46).
Richard Brilliant points out, in relation to Parmigianino's self-portrait, that the distorted image from the convex mirror makes the viewer feel like an intruder between the artist and his reflected self (Brilliant 1991: 157), and further that the painting distances the artist from his reflected self (Brilliant 1991: 158). I argue that the image reflected in a plane mirror is a mutation, and that the mutation of the anamorphic image is a further mutation which changes the dialectical relationship between sitter/artist and viewer.

![Velazquez, Las Meninas, 1656.](image)

Lejeune argues that Velazquez’ self-portrait in *Las Meninas* is a fictitious image. According to Antonio Palomino, contemporary biographer of Velazquez, the artist is depicted holding the brush in his right hand (from Stratton-Pruitt 2003: 3). The painting draws attention to this by depicting the kneeling menina handing the infanta a drink, both using their right hand. The painting could only be an image from life if the whole plane between the viewer and the painting were a mirror: if Velazquez were
really standing behind the infanta and the meninas such a mirror would be the only way he could see them for "our side". In any event, the painting could not have been made from a reflected image because Velázquez would have had to reverse his image (and the infanta and menina who also appear right handed) and could not have captured a reflection of himself from the point of view indicated by the painting's perspective. That is, if Velázquez were standing at the point of view, which is approximately opposite the elbow of the figure in the far doorway, his reflection would be straight in front of him. If he were standing where he is depicted, the perspective of the room would be different.

I propose that there are two conflicting views of the world in Las Meninas. The first I call the "window on the world", after Svetlana Alpers, in which the picture plane is like a window with the artist and viewer together on one side looking out on the world, and in a true iconic representation the painting and the depicted scene become indistinguishable (see Alpers 1983: 288). The second, which I call "mirror on the world", in which the picture plane is a large mirror, allows the participants to see themselves reflected. We cannot begin to imagine this, because the reflection and perspectival scene is different for everyone in the scene. This view of the world differs from Alpers' 'second mode' because, I argue, a single image such as she proposes cannot be determined without the intervention of a fixed viewing point (see Alpers 1983: 289).

I propose that in conventional self-portraiture these two views of the world coincide to bring us into the dialectical relationship with the artist that Lejeune has noted. I suggest also that, since Velásquez has made a fictitious work, a forensic enquiry such as embarked upon by Joel Snyder, to establish the "facts" about the painting and its perspectival construction (Snyder 1985: 547), like the debate between Heidegger and Schapiro about the owner of the shoes depicted by Van Gogh, solves nothing.

Let us look again at the painter's right hand, his fingers lightly gripping the brush, in his left hand the palette and a handful of spare brushes. Michel
Foucault notes that the artist is depicted working, gazing intently at his sitters, but the canvas with its back to us ‘prevents the relation of these gazes from ever being discoverable’ (Foucault 1966: 4). As a number of twentieth-century thinkers have noted, this is the moment when the artist’s body transforms perception into the work of art (see Lucie-Smith 1987: 14, Stratton-Pruitt 2003: 128). What is depicted is the indexical moment. I propose in Chapter 2 that switching into indexical mode grounds the viewer/reader’s senses and effects a restraint of usual knowing and looking. Gary Shapiro suggests that Foucault engages with the indexical moment and restrains knowledge about the symbolism of the depicted characters and their life at court (Shapiro 2003: 235). However, I argue in Chapter 2 that what is depicted in the canvas may trigger associations that are not themselves indexical, and we must remember that we are confronting a painting not the depicted scene.

I suggest that the painting’s implications for self-portraiture have not been fully explored: the fictitious work created by the artist displaces the mutual gaze between artist and viewer, that is, the viewer’s relationship with the artist. I argue that a similar displacement is at work in Parmigianino’s anamorphic self-portrait. In the next section I propose that mutations in the myths that have arisen around the lives of the artist and the poet contribute to mutations in the painting and the poem that operate at the site of the viewer/reader to produce meanings from the painting informed by the poem. Ashbery’s 550 line poem, first published in 1974, is reproduced in the Appendix to this thesis, with line numbering for ease of reference.

We may reflect on whether Ashbery is telling us something in the first line of his poem when he refers to Parmigianino’s reflected left hand as his ‘right hand’. Woods-Marsden has remarked upon this reversal (Woods-Marsden 1998: 134), while many people have overlooked it (see Brilliant 1991: 157, Heffeman 1993: 177 and 224, n. 61, Franklin 2003: 11, Vendler 2005: 64 and Spiegelman 2005: 170).
Lives of the artist and the poet


It is clear from Ashbery's poem that the life of Parmigianino, which was well known to him in the early 1970s from the works of Giorgio Vasari and Sydney Freedberg, and even the way the painting entered Ashbery's life, provides a context for the poem. As Ashbery cites Vasari and Freedberg in his poem, I turn dutifully to these sources to find out more about the artist's life, and my interest is pricked by the following passage in Vasari:

[Parmigianino] was liberally endowed with the richest gifts of a painter, giving his figures a certain sweetness and lightness of pose peculiar to him.... God intended him for a painter, and if he had not conceived the whim to solidify mercury and so make himself rich, he would have been a unique artist. But he wasted time in seeking for what could never be found, and neglected his art to the detriment of his life and reputation. (Vasari 1963: 6)

Ashbery has not mentioned Parmigianino's *anterior future*, which the art historian Arthur Popham describes as a "tragedy" (Popham 1953: 20). In lines 351-352 Ashbery echoes Vasari, suggesting that love, like alchemy,
leads 'into a vague/ Sense of something that can never be known'. Ashbery tells us in lines 256-257 that he first saw the painting in Vienna in 1959 'with Pierre' and I am curious about this reference. I continue reading about the lives of the artist and poet with heightened interest. Helen Vendler describes the poet Pierre Martory as Ashbery's 'lover' (Vendler 2005: 63). However, it is clear from Ashbery’s own writings that such a term is inadequate to describe their relationship over many years (Ashbery 2004: 268).

I do not believe it is possible to recover the facts of Parmigianino's life, nor to fill in the large gaps in Ashbery's life that he has left for us in his selective autobiographical references in the poem. However, we may identify a number of mutations in the lives of the sitter-artist and poet that I argue operate to produce meanings at the site of the viewer/reader. We may observe Parmigianino change from child prodigy to young man trapped by his persona and then to tragic genius. We may observe Ashbery change from child prodigy to young man trapped by his persona and then to established man of letters. It is said in the literature that we may observe a change in world views about the conception of “self” between the time of Parmigianino and Ashbery. I suggest we may observe a change between Ashbery's conception of self (according to a number of critics) and that disclosed in his poem.

Francesco Mazzola, who became known as "Parmigianino", was born in 1503 in Parma, into a family of painters, and showed an early talent for painting, being brought up by his uncles after the death of his father (Freedberg 1971: 35). “Parmigianino” is helpfully translated by Joe Thomas in modern day idiom as 'the little guy from Parma' (Thomas 2002: 1). Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror was one of several paintings that Parmigianino prepared in 1524 to take to Rome, on the advice of his uncles 'to take a specimen of his work in order to obtain an introduction to the patrons and artists' (Vasari 1963: 7).
Vasari describes Parmigianino as 'a handsome man, with the face of an
angel rather than a man' (Vasari 1963: 8). When people, including
Ashbery in line 71 of the poem, describe the painting as a "conceit" they
may be referring to vanity at his good looks, his ingenuity in conceiving of
the perspective view, or his skill in painting, or possibly all three (see
When I first saw a photograph of the painting I was not sure whether the
sitter was male or female. Was this merely Francesco's conceit at his
good looks, as others have suggested, or Francesco calculating upon
gaining the protection of the Papal court? I argue that Francesco knew
what modern day Disney artists know, that 'baby-faced proportions release
our feelings of protectiveness' (see Bates 2001: 144). Perhaps it is this
that causes Ashbery to refer to the construction of the painting as a 'life-
obstructing task' (line 464), a suggestion that Parmigianino created a
persona which trapped him for the rest of his life.

It is easy to overlook, having only seen photographs of the painting, that it
is anamorphic, and if we were to look upon it from slightly off-centre its
three-dimensional distortion would be apparent. That is, viewed from any
angle other than dead centre we would not recognise Francesco's portrait
but would see only distorted shapes. The painting is only about 24
centimetres (10 inches) in diameter, and is mounted in a circular frame to
resemble an ornamental convex mirror (see Brilliant 1997: 157 and further
reproduction in the next section of this chapter). Contemporary thinkers
have generally ignored the frame, and have tended to treat the painting as
being identical with its photographic signifier. I argue that the art object
differs significantly from its photographic signifier. I will say more about
this in the next section.

As Cecil Gould notes, Parmigianino was over 21 years of age during his
time in Rome, yet still under the control of his uncles (Gould 1994: 55). It
was only in 1531, when Parmigianino returned to Parma, that he moved
out of his uncle's house (Gould 1994: 125). Immediately he was
contracted to paint a large vault in the S. Maria della Steccata, and
although he undertook a significant part of the work, it was still incomplete 8 years later, which Vasari blames on his obsession with alchemy (Vasari 1963: 12; see also Freedberg 1971: 86 and Gould 1994: 154). According to Vasari, Parmigianino was imprisoned for a time, as a result of these difficulties, and after his release was overcome by his obsession with alchemy, becoming unkempt and melancholy and dying of a fever in 1540 at the age of 37 (Vasari 1963: 12-13). Ashbery mentions this account of Parmigianino's life in a 1964 art review (Ashbery 1989: 32). However, Sylvie Béguin argues that Vasari does not fairly portray Parmigianino's difficulties at the Steccata (Béguin 2000: 9). She suggests that these were caused by 'bad administration of the work site' (Béguin 2000: 11). Béguin further points out that it was Parmigianino's loyal friends who helped him escape from prison (Béguin 2000: 9).

Cecil Gould speculates, on the basis of 'the totality of his art' that Parmigianino's 'instincts were bisexual' (Gould 1994: 164). According to Thomas, Parmigianino's drawings 'include overtly homoerotic images and male nudes' and his work appeals to gay audiences (Thomas 2002: 2-3; see also Béguin 2000: 16-17). David Ekserdjian refers to one homoerotic drawing, described by Popham as 'indecent', and suggests that 'the time has surely come to confront what our forebears preferred to ignore' (Ekserdjian 2003: 46-47; see Popham 1971: 161). Gould also notes that Parmigianino seemed to have a lifelong 'extraordinary fondness' of depicting Phrygian caps in his art, sometime combined with 'another obsessive image - two bearded men deep in conversation in the middle distance' (Gould 1994: 162-163). No doubt this creates a field-day for Freudian analysis (see for example Hertz 1983, to which reference has been made in Chapter 3). However, a more simple explanation may be plausible, that Parmigianino craved freedom from his persona as child prodigy and from the guardianship of his uncles.

Having consulted these art historical sources, I begin to feel that the causes of the "tragedy" of Parmigianino's life may be as elusive as for the mythological figures examined in Chapter 3. Despite the speculations of
art historians, the details of Parmigianino’s life appear to remain unknown, and I feel uncomfortable with attempts in the literature to define the relationship between the painting and Ashbery’s poem by reference to the sexuality of the artist and poet.

Many regard the sixteenth-century as a time when artists were competing for recognition and patronage in the ‘highly competitive court culture’ (Woods-Marsden 1998: 3). In Parmigianino’s time, painting was a manual occupation of low rank, whereas poetry was an intellectual occupation of high social rank (Woods-Marsden 1998: 3; see also Lucie-Smith 1989: 10 and Mirollo 1996: 135). Woods-Marsden argues that ‘the development of the self-portrait, an art form designed specifically for the affirmation of the artist … bears visual witness to this struggle for social acceptance’ (Woods-Marsden 1998: 5). She points out that, in his 1524 self-portrait, Parmigianino ‘is dressed as a noble courtier in fur and cambric, and his hand, transformed into something attenuated, white and aristocratic, is adorned with a gold ring’ (Woods-Marsden 1998: 133). She also points out, as others have noted before, that Parmigianino has ‘banished all evidence of the paraphernalia of painting – easel, paint, brushes – that must have been visible in the mirror’ (Woods-Marsden 1998: 134; see also Stamelman 1984: 616 and Vendler 2005: 68). While I am not surprised, given the small dimensions of the painting, that Parmigianino may not have bothered with the minute detail of the room about him, I am prepared to accept that the depicted persona is a mutation from the reality of his circumstances. However, it is one that I argue he has made evident for us: he has removed all evidence of his trade except the mirror’s edge, but has faithfully recorded the broken panes of glass in the windows of his room. That is, I suggest, we may identify mutations within the art work without the need to return to Parmigianino’s room.

According to David Lehman’s biographical essay, Ashbery too was a prodigy, becoming a published poet at a young age and, unlike Francesco, leaving home at a young age to pursue his studies (Lehman 1998: 119-132). In 1956, Ashbery went to France on a Fulbright scholarship, and it
was then that Ashbery commenced a relationship with Pierre Martory (Lehman 1998: 154; Ashbery 2004: 269). Ashbery first saw Parmigianino’s painting in 1950 in the New York Times review of Freedberg’s book (David Herd 2003: 541). Ashbery saw the original painting in 1959 in Vienna with Pierre Martory (as is mentioned in line 257 of the poem). However, it was not until Ashbery came across a book of reproductions in a bookstore in 1973 which featured the painting on the cover, that he began writing about it (Lehman 1998: 315-316; Herd 2003: 541). Ashbery clearly held more than a passing interest in the painting, which has woven itself into his life over the course of about 25 years. However, as Helen Vendler has noted, Ashbery tells us only those details that he wants us to know, and withholds other details about his life over this period (Vendler 2005: 67).

Woods-Marsden points out that the emergence of the humanist subject, capable of human agency and individual subjectivity, became associated in the sixteenth-century with a conception of the self ‘as something to be fashioned and created rather than discovered’ (Woods-Marsden 1998: 15-16; see also Lucie-Smith 1987: 10 and Joanna Woodall 1997: 15). I argue that the selection and foregrounding of certain details by Parmigianino and by Ashbery creates mutations in the representation of their lives in their art, and that the persona constructed by Ashbery is no less a construction than the persona constructed by Parmigianino.

I want to consider how Ashbery’s construction of a persona in his art differs from his view of the world, and to argue that there is a mutation operating here which subverts the poet’s world view. Many critics have seen in Ashbery’s poem ‘The Picture of Little J. A. in a Prospect of Flowers’ references to the poet’s self, which implicitly may be compared with the young girl with the promising future in Marvell’s seventeenth-century poem ‘The Picture of Little T. C. in a Prospect of Flowers’ (see Ferguson 1970: 439). James McCorkle has argued that Ashbery felt the tensions arising from living in a homophobic society in the United States during the 1950s (McCorkle 2000: 89, fn. 5), and that this is evident in that
poem (McCorkle 2000: 83). The voice in the poem, presumed to be the poet’s, self-referentially describes his head as ‘a pale and gigantic fungus’. Herd regards this as a picture of Ashbery’s younger self, something to be escaped, not a picture of promise to be fulfilled (Herd 2003: 539). I argue that Parmigianino’s self-portrait shows that these are one and the same. Yet Herd then draws a positive metaphor from ‘fungus’, as something that takes its shape from its environment, ‘so the identity of the young Ashbery ... is to be located not in some psychologically framed interior, but in the circumstances in which he finds himself’ (Herd 2003: 539). I question whether Ashbery is simply reacting against Sartre’s assertion that human beings possess subjectivity, ‘instead of being a kind of moss, or a fungus’ (from Hall 2004: 72).

Lehman argues that the world view that Ashbery brings to poetry is that ‘it is okay for a poem to chronicle the history of its own making – that the mind of the poet, rather than the world, could be the true subject of the poem’ (Lehman 1998: 3). Again, Lehman argues that ‘For Ashbery, it is important to remember, the poem is the performance of an experience rather than a commentary on experience’ (Lehman 1998: 105). Lehman tells us that ‘Ashbery’s consciousness is his self, but a self that is inseparable from the rush of phenomena that bombards it on all sides, to which it is extraordinarily welcoming’ (Lehman 1998: 108). Herd too considers that his poetry ‘doubts the existence of a self’ to be expressed in his poetry (Herd 2003: 537).

I would like to return to the echo of Vasari in lines 351-352, and the question I posed above, whether love may be for Ashbery what alchemy was to Parmigianino. David Lehman quotes Nell Blaine, an artist in New York during the heady days of the late 1940s and 1950s, saying that Ashbery was sad about his love life and lonely (from Lehman 1998: 64). This is hardly anything special or a unique subject matter for poetry. Yet the opening lines of Part VI of the poem, ‘A breeze like the turning of a page/Brings back your face’ (lines 311-312), still gives me the feeling, which I associate with a futile search, of fanning the pages of a book, the
page edges rustling past my thumb and that slight breeze brushing my face. I don’t think Ashbery is talking about Francesco here. These are associations that remind us of someone. Ashbery would have us believe that his self is nothing more than his consciousness from moment to moment, but here he evokes memory. According to Willard Spiegelman, this is rare in Ashbery’s poetry (Spiegelman 2005: 141). I suggest that these associations and mutations are subverting Ashbery’s world view, that consciousness is inseparable from the momentary rush of phenomena.

I argue that Ashbery evokes a desire for someone missing from the painting, the poem and possibly his life. Perhaps it is Pierre Martory, with whom he saw the painting in Vienna in 1959, perhaps someone else. It doesn’t matter who it is, just that it is a desire for someone who is missing, a desire with which the viewer/reader can identify. Perhaps our own desire for love, someone who is absent, perhaps even the self we want to be, is similar to the obsession that led Parmigianino away from his life and work. Through the broken window panes in Francesco’s room we see a twig-shadow. Perhaps this has triggered Ashbery’s memory of twig-shadows on sidewalks (line 381). For me, Ashbery is saying in line 398, ‘You can’t live there’, that Francesco cannot live in the frozen present of the painting, just as Ashbery could not live forever in the cresting wave of New York of the 1950s, and we cannot live in the ‘present’ (line 384) which Ashbery’s world view tells us is all there is to consciousness, nor for that matter can we live forever in the recollection of one authentic moment from our past.

Lines 435-436, ‘the principle of each individual thing is/ Hostile to, exists at the expense of all the others’, echoes Auden’s world view, as described by Mendelson, as I have noted in Chapter 3. Lines 459-462, ‘the history of creation proceeds according to/ Stringent laws ... things/ Do get done in this way, but never the things/ We set out to accomplish’, correspond with my own world view, as I have constructed it in my theoretical framework in Chapters 1 and 2, so it is easy to accept that Francesco’s simulacrum,
intended to gain the favour and protection of the Papal court, obstructed his life (line 464). I argue that Ashbery’s poem too can reveal something that he did not set out to accomplish. Adopting Ashbery's world view about creativity, we may conclude, as does Willard Spiegelman, that whatever he set out to do in the poem, especially a pronouncement that ‘This is what the portrait says’ (line 39) is not to be taken at face value (see Spiegelman 2005: 169).

By the omission from the poem of Francesco’s anterior future, I argue, whether Ashbery intended it or not, that the poem re-informs our viewing of the painting. What is absent is a view of Francesco from a point of view other than that which he constructs for us. And so it is with Ashbery's poem. He appears not to be interested, or believe, in the self, or our ability to “know” Parmigianino through his painting, but I believe the most affecting passages that respond to details in the painting display a desire for an absent someone, a recollection ‘out of time’ (the poem’s concluding line), not merely the rush of phenomena that bombards the viewer in the ever cresting present.

I may think I know Francesco’s secret, his future that is behind me, but I don’t. Ultimately my ‘moment of attention’ is poignant because I cannot protect Francesco from his future, and the knowledge of his life gives me tiny comfort in mine.

I have come to accept that Ashbery’s poem is too long for a line by line analysis in this thesis of visual details in the poem that he foregrounds, those that he does not mention and those aspects of the poem that involve mutations. I have mentioned above those mutations that affect me most. In lines 445-448 Ashbery equates the game “Chinese whispers” with artistic creation itself, and provides a nice analogy for my model of ekphrasis, in which I examine not the ultimate message, but how it has changed as it has passed into the painting and from artist to poet to viewer/reader. In the next section I argue that my approach is novel in the literature on ekphrasis and show how my approach extends the thinking in
the literature to allow us to read the painting informed by the poem in a new way.

**Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror**

![Image of Parmigianino's Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror, c. 1524.](image)


In this section I propose that Parmigianino’s painting has been constructed or “framed” by contemporary discourse on ekphrasis: the three dimensional art object has been replaced by a two dimensional photographic representation. By restoring the frame, the photograph above reminds us of this. The highlights on the frame are reflected light but I infer that the gleaming highlights around the edges of the painting are fake. The gleaming “reflections” around the lower edges of the painting are cropped out in most photographic reproductions (compare the photograph at the start of the previous section, Plate 16 in Hollander 1995, with the above photograph, Plate XII in Béguin 2000; see also the
photograph on the cover of Vendler 2005). This may be because it is difficult to place the camera aperture at the dead centre viewing position, perpendicular to the picture plane, and consequently the photograph is not perfectly round. It may be because these gleams are simply regarded as distortions that add nothing to the portrait. In any event, what we see represented in a photograph is not the art object. The one authentic experience of it in Ashbery’s encounters over all those years was with Pierre Martory in Vienna – this is just a fact, no matter what we may construct out of it.

I argue that the way the painting has been constructed in the literature, and consequently the way Ashbery’s poem has been constructed, constrains our thinking by focusing on the site of production of the poem and, to the extent that the site of the viewer/reader is contemplated at all, by normalising that site. I argue that my approach is novel and makes possible new readings.

John Dixon Hunt in 1980, was prompted by Ashbery’s poem to argue that ‘A painting, despite its otherness, its art object-ivity, becomes a mirror for the poet’s subjectivism’ (Hunt 1980: 20). According to Hunt, ekphrasis gives the poet a ‘double focus’, in that it requires ‘balancing between something already achieved and exercise of a personal sensibility still in process of formation’ (Hunt 1980: 21). This he finds at work in Ashbery’s poem (Hunt 1980: 22). As Hunt remarks, ‘sometimes the syntax does not entirely distinguish between the poet and the painter’ (Hunt 1980: 23). Hunt suggests that ‘what the poet finds in the visual mode we may find in his reflections’, however, he does not elucidate what we may find in Ashbery’s reflections (Hunt 1980: 24). I argue that recognising that the poet has entered into the dialectic between the artist and sitter (self that has become other) does not tell us how meanings are produced. I argue that Hunt’s comments show inchoate recognition of the significance of indifference and switching between ambiguous positions. I argue that I have extended this beginning in the present thesis.
Michael Davidson takes ‘Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror’ as an example of postmodern ekphrasis, which he argues is exemplified by the substitution of Heideggerian or non-representational truth (*aletheia*) for correspondence with external reality or representational truth, and undermines the traditional hierarchy between poetry and painting derived from Lessing’s *Laocoon*, in which art is spatial and poetry temporal, all of which is achieved by ‘presenting the poet directly in acts of thinking and reflecting’ (Davidson 1983: 71-72). Davidson argues that this is evidenced in Ashbery’s poem by his ‘wandering style’, in which Ashbery is ‘alternately a detached observer and confused subject’, and by which ‘closure is endlessly deferred’ (Davidson 1983: 75). I argue that Davidson’s comments also show inchoate recognition of the significance of *indifference* and *switching* between ambiguous positions. I argue further than the painter and the poet become visible through the mutations that emerge in their works. I argue that to attempt to distinguish between intentional and unintentional mutations would engage us at the site of production of the painting and poem, and for my purposes I need only consider the impact of mutations at the site of the viewer/reader.

I suggest that Parmigianino’s self-portrait has been constructed by Ashbery in his ekphrastic poem, and by the 1980s literature on the poem, according to a particular view of the world. I do not seek to show that this view is wrong, simply that it may tend to have a normalising effect upon meanings that may emerge at the site of the viewer/reader.

According to Richard Stamelman, Parmigianino’s painting ‘presents an image of artistic unity that expresses faith in the representability of world and self through art’ (Stamelman 1984: 611). He suggests that Parmigianino depicts an image of self ‘at once complete and unchanging’ (Stamelman 1984: 609). He argues that Ashbery denies that such a conception of self ‘can exist, let alone be represented’ (Stamelman 1984: 611). He proposes that Ashbery depicts himself through the rush of ‘sensations, thoughts and impressions’, and in so doing deconstructs the painting and ‘representation itself’ (Stamelman 1984: 608).
Stamelman argues that Ashbery's postmodernist world view is that 'painting and poetry can represent nothing other than their own difficult, often thwarted efforts at representation' (Stamelman 1984: 611). The artist is unable to filter out the rush of sensations and thoughts and so is unable to create a painting that conveys a 'single truth' (Stamelman 1984: 612). Stamelman says that Ashbery deconstructs the painting by 'placing it in the present of the poet's consciousness' (Stamelman 1984: 619). Stamelman says that Ashbery has portrayed himself as decentred, which 'can only be expressed by a decentred representation' (Stamelman 1984: 623). Stamelman is apparently using the term “decentred” to suggest both that the humanist subject has been displaced by a subject determined by outside forces, and that a fixed and unitary meaning has been displaced by polysemy and endless deferral.

I argued in Chapter 2 that “representation” is incapable of creating a fixed correspondence with external reality, and that we should avoid creating and privileging a binary opposite to “representation” constructed in this sense. I suggest that Parmigianino's anamorphic painting does not represent itself as unitary and unchanging, as even a small movement from the central point of view of the three dimensional art object would show, if we were standing before the painting instead of a photograph of the painting. We may see the painting and the poem differently if we approach the painting not as a sign with an immanent meaning but as a sign which operates through difference, that is, through the mutations which have been introduced into it by the process of representation. I argue, after Lacan, that Parmigianino's anamorphic painting makes us aware that we are being held "in position" by the painting (see Lacan 1976: 92). We might have forgotten this, as the literature presents us with countless reproductions of a two dimensional photograph of the art object, had not Ashbery foregrounded the only authentic way to experience the three dimensional image, when he refers to the time he saw it in Vienna with Pierre Martory in 1959. As Ashbery says, speaking of the day it was created by Parmigianino or, I imagine, that day in which Ashbery
experienced the painting, 'no previous day would have been like this' (line 382). I do not believe that this elevates that particular day, because, of course, every other day has been and will be unique.

Lee Edelman argues that, by fetishizing the "lack" of self, Ashbery affirms the power of the absent phallus (Edelman 1986: 105). Edelman argues that the poem's fetishistic fixation on Francesco's hand turns it into a 'metonymic substitute for the phallus whose absence the text so boldly advertises' (Edelman 1986: 106). As you would expect, it is almost inevitable that this fetishizing of lack leads to a homosexual desire 'informing [the poem's] relationship with the image of Parmigianino' (Edelman 1986: 109). I argue, approaching the matter from a different direction, that the distorted hand foregrounds the anamorphic nature of the art object.

James Heffernan has undertaken the most sustained analysis of the poem as ekphrasis, dedicating 20 pages to it in his book (Heffernan 1993: 169-189). The poem confirms his view of the ekphrastic 'struggle for power between the image and the word' (Heffernan 1993: 189). It is a gendered struggle, and a heterosexual one at that: 'the vanity of the mirrored image leads almost inevitably to its gender', which in 'Western literature ... is typically imaged as female' (Heffernan 1993: 180). He goes on:

To depict one's own reflection, then, is seemingly to align oneself with the stereotypically female image of vanity, with all that is empty and useless without a male to invade, impregnate, and fill it up. Vasari does not fully grasp what he implies when he represents Parmigianino's painted face as essentially, even transcendentally female .... Nor does Freedberg think of vanity when he quotes [Vasari's] words .... In Ashbery's redaction of Freedberg's redaction of Vasari, ideal beauty collapses into the "hole" of female inner space, the wavy fluid of the painted womb that englobes the painted face.

Thus, it would seem, Ashbery uses the poetic word to subdue and even negate the power of the image. He makes it female by castrating it, representing the pseudo-phallic hand ... (Heffernan 1993: 181)
Later, however, Heffernan describes the image as ‘erotic and chilling’, suggesting maybe that the image has the power to castrate (Heffernan 1993: 187-188). Heffernan argues that ‘Ashbery’s poem simply makes explicit what all ekphrasis entails and implies: the experience of the viewer, and the pressure of that experience on his or her interpretation of the work of art’ (Heffernan 1993: 183). However, Heffernan does not relate the painting to Parmigianino’s subsequent life, or to Ashbery’s life and experience of the painting, although he mentions the influence of Ashbery’s world view about the self (Heffernan 1993: 185).

Helen Vendler has recently emphasised the importance of the reader in Ashbery’s poetry generally and in ‘Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror’ (Vendler 2005: 58). She remarks upon the importance of the recreation of Ashbery’s 1959 viewing experience in the poem, which connects the reader with every previous viewer (Vendler 2005: 63). Vendler makes a number of remarks which I argue are inchoate recognition of my concept of mutations: the alteration of reality caused by the anamorphosis (Vendler 2005: 64); the distortions in the poem created by selecting details from Ashbery’s life and omitting others (Vendler 2005: 67); and Ashbery’s “refraction” of Parmigianino’s self-portrait (Vendler 2005: 73).

However, I argue that Vendler “normalises” the site of the viewer/reader by prescribing that ‘the viewer will feel embraced’ (Vendler 2005: 70), and that the ‘illusionistic afterglow’ of the shared intimacy will subside (Vendler 2005: 66). Vendler also argues that the poet struggles with the artist to preserve his own self-hood, that Ashbery has had to execute the artist in lines 528-530 to preserve his own originality, and that we are imperfect observers prone to the same risk as ‘creators of our own modern selves’ (Vendler 2005: 72). Elsewhere, Vendler has argued that poetry must be intimate to be true to itself, yet impersonal ‘so that it can be true for others’ (Vendler 2004: 190). I argue that, just as the artist and poet intervene in the process of representation, and mutations arise in and through their intervention, it is not reasonable to expect the viewer/reader to be invisible, nor is it useful to attempt to normalise the site of the viewer/reader in the
production of meanings by requiring the viewer/reader to be "impersonal" or "objective".

Willard Spiegelman investigates ekphrasis in the wider sense of literary description, and examines the way Ashbery uses images of landscape in the manner of classic ekphrasis, to interrupt a narrative and 'focus our senses' (Spiegelman 2005: 143). However, he too notes that Ashbery’s sentences alternate offer and deny referentiality (Spiegelman 2005: 142). I argue there is inchoate recognition here of switching as a methodology for coping with ambiguity. Spiegelman also notes that landscape for Ashbery has a Heideggerian connotation of placing being in context (Spiegelman 2005: 146). I have a sense, however, that Spiegelman is seeking a code for Ashbery’s landscape imagery. For example, the weather is an image of change (Spiegelman 2005: 160), and the night is an image of ‘sexually enticing ... spiritual presence’ (Spiegelman 2005: 144). Spiegelman also argues that Ashbery’s endings ‘usually offer catharsis, a fulfilment that is simultaneously a draining, a climax that also subdues’ (Spiegelman 2005: 167).

More relevant to my study, however, are images which respond to details in the painting. Spiegelman mentions few examples of these. The raindrops at the window and swirling autumn leaves (lines 35-36) suggest that life outside the frame is totally unlike what we see in the painting. The snowfall which has occurred while we were asleep (lines 244-246) suggests that things happen outside our room, “right beneath our noses”, without us noticing. I argue that these images relate to associations and show us mutations at work.

I argue that Parmigianino’s subsequent life, Ashbery’s life and experience of the painting and world view about the self all contribute to mutations that operate at the site of the viewer/reader to produce meanings from the painting informed by the poem. I argue that the male viewer/reader is not constrained by the readings of the poem in the literature – that is, it is not mandatory to feel embraced by the fetishised hand, to be fulfilled in a
climax that also drains and subdues, and to be warmed in the afterglow of this encounter – and that the painting informed by the poem may produce yet more meanings at the site of the viewer/reader.

In the next chapter I apply my methodology to some examples of ekphrases on portraiture from the 1980s and 1990s, which do not appear to have been studied in the literature on ekphrasis. These examples will enable me to develop my argument on works unencumbered by the literature on ekphrasis.
Chapter 5

The male portrait re-considered

Considerable attention has been given in the literature to male poets responding to paintings of female sitters. I argue that this tends to encourage a gendered approach to ekphrasis in which word and image relations, like gender relations, are constructed as a struggle for dominance. As I have noted in Chapter 3, Tom Mitchell recognises the prevalence of this approach in the literature, and certain problems with it (Mitchell 1994: 168; see also Terry Eagleton 2003: 4). I suggest this approach has a tendency to constrain our thinking and exclude other readings. In this chapter I seek to avoid these issues, and will give further consideration to the neglected area of the ekphrastic encounter with a male sitter, without adopting certain analyses in the literature that treat such an encounter as analogous to a sexual encounter.

I note that Willard Spiegelman says he has refrained from adopting a gendered approach in his recent study of literary description (Spiegelman 2005: 7). I will develop Spiegelman’s ideas, mentioned in the previous chapter, to argue that images of landscape that arise from associations with details in the portrait are manifestations of Heideggerian earth. In the previous chapter I argued that mutations occurred in the painting through its anamorphic nature, and I had little to say about the “pose”. In this chapter we will confront the pose, and I will develop my analysis in Chapter 2 of the role of the pose in mutations.

In the next section of this chapter, I will examine two of R. S. Thomas’s ekphrastic poems responding to portraits of men, which have not been considered in the literature: Portrait of Joseph Hone by Augustus John, and Portrait of Dr Gachet by Vincent Van Gogh. The first was published in The Stones of the Field in 1946 and the second in Between Here and Now in 1981 (see Thomas 1993). As noted above, my examination of these
poems is partly a reaction to the attention that has been given by thinkers such as Elaine Shepherd, John Ward and Helen Vendler to the many ekphrastic poems by R. S. Thomas on paintings of women (Shepherd 1996: 12; Vendler 1993: 61; Ward 2001: 129). Helen Vendler in particular has examined his ekphrastic poems responding to paintings of women, and has concluded that, while ekphrastic poetry may illuminate the painting, the artist, the sitter or the poet, for Vendler, these ekphrastic poems help us know the poet and his poetic art better (Vendler 1993: 64 and 80-81). I suggest that this approach focuses on the site of production of the poem. However, Vendler also proposes that R. S. Thomas’s poems enable us to ‘truly see’ the painting (Vendler 1993: 58). I want to explore this kind of illumination without adopting the gendered approach and by focusing on the production of meaning at the site of the viewer/reader by the painting informed by the poem.

I will also examine two of Paul Durcan’s ekphrastic poems responding to portraits of married couples: Portrait of the Artist’s Wife and Self-portrait by the Irish painter William Leech; and Mr and Mrs Andrews by Gainsborough. In examining these poems I will consider how the male viewer/reader responds to the painting of the man, informed by the poem. According to one reviewer, Durcan’s poems change the way the viewer looks at the paintings (Gale 2003: 5). Paul Durcan’s first book of ekphrastic poems, Crazy About Women, was published in 1991, comprising poems written by Durcan on art works at the National Gallery of Ireland chosen by him for an exhibition (Durcan 1991). Durcan’s second book of ekphrastic poems, Give Me Your Hand, was published in 1994, comprising a similar collection written for an exhibition selected by him at the National Gallery, London (Durcan 1994). According to Elizabeth Loizeaux, Durcan’s ekphrastic poetry is engaging ‘not in a struggle against the image, as current ekphrastic theory would have it, but in a struggle with the museum whose wordmakers (curators/art historians, directors, etc) usually control the interpretation of images’ (Loizeaux 1999: 85). This is a struggle I am happy to take up, as I develop my argument
that I cannot speak for (represent) other viewer/readers, and that my approach does not seek to “normalise” the production of meaning at the site of the viewer/reader.

R. S. Thomas

R. S. Thomas (1913-2000) was born in Wales. His father was a sailor, and the young Thomas spent his childhood with his mother in various British seaport towns while his father was at sea (Gale 2002: 4). He entered the priesthood at his mother’s suggestion, and between 1936 and his retirement in 1978 served as vicar in a handful of Welsh towns, which acquainted him with Welsh farming life (Gale 2002: 4). Thomas developed his interest in poetry after meeting Mildred Eldridge, a painter, who he married in 1940, and to whom he remained married until her death in 1991 (Gale 2002: 4).

I proposed in Chapter 4 that the poet’s world view does not determine the outcome of the ekphrastic encounter, and that we may observe mutations in the poem which involve departures from the poet’s world view. Accordingly, I am interested in Thomas’s world view. In his poetry, it is said that Thomas portrays poor Welsh farmers and their struggle with the landscape in a way that exemplifies what has been called ‘the human predicament’ (Gale 2002: 5). It is said that Thomas was disenchanted with the modern world and the crisis of faith caused by what has been called the clinical and impersonal ‘scientific world view’ (Gale 2002: 6). Ward regards Thomas as ‘one of the leading three or four religious poets of the twentieth-century’ (Ward 2001: 7).

All of the paintings from Between Here and Now come from Germain Bazin’s book Impressionist Paintings in the Louvre. Ward argues that Impressionist artists ‘attempted to render snatches or glimpses of the everyday world’, to capture surfaces through colour and light, but in so doing something was lost (Ward 2001: 130-131). Shepherd argues that what the Impressionists lost by focusing on surface texture and the effect
of light was the *subject*, and that Thomas’s project with ekphrastic poems is ‘replacing the subject’ (Shepherd: 1996: 31). I suggest that this again draws us to the site of production of the poem. I argue that we may observe, through the operation of mutations at the site of the viewer/reader, something taking the place of the sitter, but not necessarily the absent sitter himself.


**On a Portrait of Joseph Hone by Augustus John**

As though the brute eyes had seen  
In the hushed meadows the weasel,  
That would tear the soft down of the throat  
And suck the veins dry  
Of their glittering blood.  
And the mouth formed to the cry,  
That gushed from the cleft heart  
And flowed coldly as spring water over  
The stone lips.
We again see ambiguity in the first line of the poem, with the use of the word ‘brute’, that may refer to animals lacking the reason of human beings or to the animal nature of humans or, as I was surprised to find, to a Briton or Welshman. This could also suggest that the ‘brute eyes’ may be those of the artist, who was Welsh, however, my first thought was to wonder whether the artist and poet were revealing something about the sitter.

Augustus John (1878-1961) was a Welsh artist who, according to Michael Holroyd, was an impatient artist, ‘believing that a picture should be finished in one or two sittings’ (Holroyd 1996b: 11). The painting above seems consistent with that view. Holroyd notes that Augustus John’s portraits were renowned for his superb draughtsmanship and psychological insights (Holroyd 1996b: 9-10).

There are no illustrations in Thomas’s Collected Poems, and it took me some time to locate a reproduction of the painting, in black and white in John Rothenstein’s 1944 book on the painter (Rothenstein 1944: 23). R.S. Thomas may have seen a reproduction of the painting in Rothenstein’s book, however, judging from his response, which has been described as ‘powerful, if unexpected’ (Easton and Holroyd 1974: 190), he is likely to have seen the original in colour. Easton and Holroyd also reproduce the painting in black and white, and refer to a letter from Joseph Hone about the sitting, in which Hone stated that the artist was not happy with the painting, and expressing Hone’s relief that the artist’s wife had ‘persuaded him not to work on it further’ (from Easton and Holroyd 1974: 190). It was not until the occasion of the Tate Gallery’s exhibition ‘Gwen John and Augustus John’ in September 2004 that I was able to see the painting reproduced in colour (Jenkins and Stephens 2004: 193). The artist has sketched in the detail of the sitter’s jacket in light and dark browns, with an incongruous splash of light blue on a lapel and in the background behind the sitter’s right ear, and has filled in the background with patterns of the same browns mixed with light and dark yellow ochre. I cannot discern what these colours and patterns represent, or if they represent anything at all, but they remind me of fallen autumn leaves.
Joseph Maunsell Hone (1882-1959) was ‘a distinguished Irish biographer’, born into ‘a family of outstanding Irish artists’, who is ‘best remembered for the biography of his friend and contemporary W. B. Yeats, published in 1942’ (Jenkins and Stephens 2004: 193). He was also a contemporary of Augustus John, and the two seem to have moved in the same social circles (see Holroyd 1996a: 391 and Gifford Lewis 1994: 140). I would guess that they knew each other quite well over many years, indeed, I infer from references to Augustus John in Hone’s biography of Yeats that Hone may have approached his own sitting with trepidation.

Hone records that Augustus John came to Galway in 1907 to prepare a portrait to appear in Yeats’ then forthcoming Collected Works (Hone 1962: 222). Hone quotes from a letter of Yeats regarding the portrait – ‘[John] exaggerates every little hill and hollow of the face till one looks like a gypsy grown old in wickedness and hardship’ (from Hone 1962: 222). Yeats was appalled at the finished etching and rejected it for publication (Hone 1962: 223). Hone does not exaggerate when he says the usually urbane Yeats is portrayed in it as ‘an unshaven drunkard, a melancholy English bohemian’ (Hone 1962: 223; see reproduction in Jenkins and Stephens 2004: 92). However, Hone goes on to observe that, with the passage of time, Yeats ‘began to feel that John had found something closer than character and by that very transformation made it visible’ (Hone 1962: 223). I propose that these exaggerations produce mutations.

Hone records that in June 1930 Yeats again sat for his portrait by Augustus John, and that Yeats contemplated in his diary whether the artist, by selecting lines and features in one’s appearance, could reveal faults that Yeats had ‘long dreaded’ (from Hone 1962: 414). At least one commentator has noted that Yeats ‘had long been fascinated by the contrast between a person’s internal and external selves – between the true person and those aspects that the person chooses to present as a representation of the self’ (Gale 2003: 13). However, by 1937, as John Hollander notes in The Gazer’s Spirit, Yeats expressed doubt, in ‘The Municipal Gallery Revisited’, a poem responding to paintings of his late
friends, whether painting was capable of showing anything of the real person (Yeats 2000: 117-118; Hollander 1995: 42-43). I suggest that we may doubt whether paintings or poems may mean the same to anyone who did not know the sitters. Accordingly, with my questions about the lives of the sitter and artist un answered, I return to the painting and the poem, wondering if I will ever know whether Augustus John and R. S. Thomas are sharing a cruel in joke about Joe Hone.

Thomas s poem offers a striking association, and looking again at the painting, the head tilted back, which exposes the throat on the sitter s left, we see from the unusual highlights in the eyes, nose, lips and chin, that the light was directed straight at the sitter. No doubt the sitter was patiently assuming the pose directed by the artist. While we don t have weasels in Australia, and I have never seen one, the sitter does look strikingly like a rabbit caught in the spotlight. As I proposed in Chapter 2, the visual metaphor operates by the icon overshooting the sitter and resembling a timid creature such as a rabbit, and this symbolic timidity is transferred back to the sitter or possibly to men as a whole.

The gaze of the sitter is pointing to something external to the painting, but it is for us to fill in the nature of this intimidating element. Can the sitter s persona withstand the scrutiny of the renowned artist? Can the distinguished biographer cope with the glare of his subject? Can any of us avoid being defined by the gaze of others? Are we any less vulnerable and in control of our lives than a timid creature of the meadow?

To explore these associations leads us away from the painting, and I want to examine the visual details in the painting which I argue involve mutations, those that Thomas foregrounds, those that he does not mention, and those aspects of the poem that involve deviations from the painting. The artist makes himself visible by brush strokes that clearly do not completely mimic reality, and become more sketchy away from the key facial features of eyes, nose and lips. I suggest that these brushstrokes, particularly the background patterns in earth tones, are both
'signs and not signs'. I propose also that the pose produces mutations: the posture does not look very comfortable; and the light shining directly into the eyes appears unusual. Thomas makes himself visible by foregrounding the wide eyes staring into the light (the 'brute eyes' of line 1), the face turned up exposing 'the soft down of the throat' (line 3), and the slightly parted lips (the 'mouth formed to the cry' of line 6).

Thomas does not mention the colours of background and jacket, which remind me of autumn leaves and earth. However, he invents the coldness of spring water, the sounds of which may mimic a muffled cry, and alludes to the deathly coldness of 'stone lips' in line 9, all of which I take as allusions to earth, which I find more compelling when I see the painting reproduced in colour. I argue that these mutations cause us to look at the painting afresh, not as a mere representation of the sitter, but as a work of art which produces meaning beyond representation, at the site of the viewer/reader. By pausing to consider whether the sitter has been "posed" by the artist, and the brush strokes sketching in skin tones, unruly hair and strange background shapes, I argue that the viewer/reader switches between these meanings, indeed between what is inside and outside the frame. The ambiguity of the poet's words 'brute eyes' adds to this inability to settle. It is the sensation of earth, the coldness of spring water and stone, that exerts what Spiegelman calls a 'stabilizing function' (Spiegelman 2005: 155).

We can now ask what does the viewer bring to the painting informed by the poem that we find already there? I can safely say that I know nothing about the sitter's anterior future. Did the poet see his own reflection in the painting? It is possible that Thomas has projected his world view, in which men are creatures of earth, and more vulnerable than we think. This is a view that I am content to go along with. I argue that the poem through an association of vulnerability causes us to re-consider the painting not as a likeness of the sitter, in which the sitter's facial expression could be read as portraying the sitter's interiority. We might go on to interpret the source of the light or apprehension, but this was not a meaning we were seeking.
Germain Bazin, in *Impressionist Paintings in the Louvre*, describes the creation of this painting in detail, based on the record of Van Gogh's letters to his brother Theo. Van Gogh spent a year at the asylum in St Remy during 1888-89 in which he painted between 'the harrowing crises of anguish and madness' (Bazin 1958: 233). In May 1889 he was sent by Theo into the care of Dr Gachet, who Van Gogh considered eccentric. Van Gogh described the portrait in a letter to Gauguin as 'Dr Gachet wearing the distressed expression typical of our times' (from Bazin 1958: 232). Bazin says that 'the sitter holds a branch of digitalis (symbol of specialisation in heart disease)' (Bazin 1958: 232).

According to Judy Sund, Van Gogh perceived Dr Gachet as a brother, resembling himself both physically and mentally (Sund 2000: 221). For this reason, Sund considers that the painting is 'both geared to the sitter and self-referential' (Sund 2000: 221). Sund argues that the portraits Van Gogh made 'of people with whom he so closely identified should also be seen to reflect the artist’s attitudes toward his own illness and his
assessment of his ability to live with it' (Sund 2000: 227). Within weeks of painting the portrait, Van Gogh killed himself (Sund 2000: 227). I bring this knowledge to the painting and find it already there in the sitter’s eyes and posture, which would not inspire in me the confidence to place my life in this man’s hands. The saying “Physician heal thyself” comes to mind. It is the irony of the healer who we know has failed that Thomas foregrounds in the first few lines.

**Van Gogh. Portrait of Dr Gachet**

Not part of the Health Service:
no one to pass his failures
on to. The eyes like quinine
have the same medicative
power. With one hand
on cheek, the other
on the equivocal
foxglove he listens
to life as it describes
its symptoms, a doctor
becoming patient himself
of art’s diagnosis.

This painting too has brushstrokes that are ‘signs and not signs’, and we may conclude that the artist and the poet remain visible in the process. Thomas foregrounds the ‘eyes like quinine’ (an ambiguous reference to the bitter taste of a healing substance), the hand on cheek and the listening pose. He foregrounds the ‘equivocal foxglove’, an explicit reference to the dual properties of foxglove as the source of the heart medication *digitalis*, but also a poison. With these tiny mutations Thomas gives us images of *earth* that mimic Van Gogh’s world view: life is a bitter pill to swallow; it may kill or cure. This also provides an ambivalent image of medical science, which we could apply to the doctor, or to humankind as a whole. The poem mimics equivocation: to treat life with patience; or to become its patient.

It has long been recognised that an appearance of melancholy occurs when sitters are bored and distracted through long hours of sitting (Harry
Berger 1994: 99). Despite this, it is hard to resist the temptation to “read” the sitter’s posture. Ward says that Thomas’s image of the doctor listening to life ‘picks up’ the body language of the sitter in a listening pose (Ward 2001: 133). To me, it is the pose you use to listen when you are not listening. The eyes stare, but not to a focal point. It is the stare of reverie. None of us can reach inside him, just as he could not reach inside Van Gogh. I switch between this attempt to read the sitter’s posture and the knowledge that the “pose” could simply mean he was tired and bored.

I sense a certain irony in the painting informed by Thomas’s poem, because art, like the doctor, cannot tell us what is wrong, and poetry, like the doctor, cannot relieve the viewer/reader of the burden of forming his own response. I argue that the painting, informed by the poem, presents the very lack of clear reading that subverts the artist’s apparent intention. I will now consider two poems which appear to be influenced by the poet’s world view, and will examine further the subversive effect of mutations.

**Paul Durcan**

Paul Durcan was born in Dublin in 1944, the son of two lawyers (Gale 2003: 1). His poetry ‘rejoices in the gentle and ordinary’, and often ‘castigates the Catholic Church for what he sees as its disregard for human life’ (Gale 2003: 3). His 1985 poetry collection, *The Berlin Wall Café*, dealt with the breakup of his marriage to Nessa O’Neill, with whom he had two daughters (Gale 2003: 4). His 1990 collection, *Daddy, Daddy*, deals with the death of his father (Gale 2003: 4). Durcan’s poetry appears to have been widely acclaimed in Ireland, however, he has often been ‘labeled as [a] performance poet or, in the light of his often outrageous and theatrical verse, not a poet at all’ (Gale 2003: 6).

William Leech (1881-1968) was an Irish painter. His father was a Professor of Law in Dublin (Snoddy 2002: 345). Leech was educated in Dublin and by private tutors in Switzerland, where he became fluent in French (Snoddy 2002: 345; Campbell 1984: 111). He later studied art in
Paris and lived in Brittany to pursue his art, spending little time in Ireland after 1910 (Snoddy 2002: 345). In 1912 he married Elisabeth Saurin, having waited until she divorced her first husband, but they separated about 2 years later (Snoddy 2002: 346; see also Campbell 1984: 111). Leech and Saurin never divorced, and their marriage ended only when she died in 1951 (Kennedy 1997: 93).

The portrait of May Leech (1882-1965), wife of William Leech, was not made around 1920, as the notes in Durcan’s book indicate (see Durcan 1991: 145). The apparent 46 years between her portrait and the artist’s self-portrait below seemed incongruous, as does the treatment of this couple by the poet, and caused me to find out more about them. In the year of her marriage to the artist, around the time of the portrait reproduced below, May was 71 years of age. I suggest that Durcan has brought to the painting events in the lives of the sitter and artist, and their anterior future, which he finds already there in the details of the paintings.

Leech, A Portrait of the Artist’s Wife, c. 1953.

According to Brian Kennedy:

In 1919 [Leech] met May Botterell, the wife of a distinguished London lawyer. The relationship between them blossomed, but they were very discreet for fear of scandal. May Botterell supported Leech financially and emotionally, although their involvement forced the artist to avoid publicity by curtailing the exhibition of his works in London.... When Percy Botterell died in 1952, May was free to marry Leech.  (Kennedy 1993: 31)

This biographical detail appears similarly understated in Campbell 1984, Kennedy 1997, and Snoddy 2002. Denise Ferran notes that May Botterell was independently wealthy, which allowed her to support Leech, to establish her own home nearby, and to spend time at her family home with her three children (Ferran 1996: 72). Leech stopped exhibiting in London in 1921, a sacrifice he made to protect his personal life from publicity (Ferran 1996: 73). Ferran notes that Leech’s reputation as an artist in London ‘soon faded’, and he did not even attend his regular exhibitions in Dublin, due to his ‘desire for personal anonymity’ (Ferran 1996: 89).
Leech's studio was damaged during the Blitz, and he subsequently moved into May's flat on the fifth floor of 20 Abbey Road, where they lived during the 1940s and 1950s (Ferran 1996: 87). Ferran notes that Leech made a series of studies of May sewing or reading in his studio and later at Abbey Road (Ferran 1996: 264). The painting of her reproduced above was called *Au cinquième* (On the fifth floor) or *May Leech on the Fifth Floor*, the first time he was able to use her married name in the title to a painting, following their marriage in 1953 (Ferran 1996: 264). May Leech died in 1965, and Leech acknowledged in a letter to his agent the next year that 'you cannot be a recluse all your life as I have been and have worldly success' (from Ferran 1996: 97). In 1968, Leech made out his will and soon afterwards took his own life, as his father had done before him (Ferran 1996: 97-98; see 70-71). Ferran notes that the self-portrait of the artist reproduced above shows him 'self-consciously wearing his black hat to cover his bald head', with one of his "Aloe" series in the background (Ferran 1996: 288). The aloes were painted on trips to the south of France and Tunisia between 1917 and 1920 and his paintings of them were well received when exhibited in the 1920s (Ferran 1996: 75).

With the *anterior future* of these sitters weighing on my thoughts I return to the paintings and the poem. I see now the wedding ring on May's finger. The simple pose, like the several others in which Leech painted her, seems relaxed and not at all introspective — perhaps the sitter dozes while the artist works. I argue that Durcan in the first 3 lines is projecting his knowledge about the lives of the sitters.

**A Portrait of the Artist's Wife/A Self-Portrait**

My sweetest wife  
Although pain is our sole portion  
I do thee honour.  
I can no more disown you in your melancholy  
Than I can disown you in your sleep.  
But should your melancholy like sleep  
Roam from your cheekbones, what then?  
Should you disown melancholy
What then would become of fidelity? 
There might not be – 
If you were to glance up now
– You will not glance up now – 
You would see me as I am: 
A tiger on the wall; 
Black hat, hornrims; 
Flesh, bone, fur, lip; 
A brace of eyes; 
Brandy glaring out through every pore. 
My sweetest wife, 
How you must hate me. 
You and I in our green world 
Of green pain; 
Potted plants among the potted plants; 
You in your brown haute couture frock, 
I in my brown shop coat; 
Knees of clay.
The rooftops – not the bridges – 
Of Paris far below.

I want to explore associations that arise for me from the painting and the poem. The line ‘My sweetest wife’ is repeated in line 19, and although colloquially correct, it occurs to me that the words suggest more than one wife. The ‘honour’ alluded to in line 3 is the marriage referred to in the painting’s title. One needs external sources to bring the full significance of this recent event to the ring depicted in the painting.

The ‘melancholy’ of lines 4-8 is an association of the poet that enables us to read the sitter’s posture either as boredom during the sitting or a reflection on her life. The poem acknowledges that this could be ‘melancholy’ or ‘sleep’, and again I find myself switching between the two, a reality check on the poet’s projection. In line 7 the poet foregrounds the sitter’s cheekbones, to which I will return below, and in lines 8-9 evokes the marriage oath “in sickness and in health” with the question ‘Should you disown melancholy? What then should become of fidelity?’.

From external sources we may see Leech’s self-portrait as a reflection on his life, against a background of one of his most critically successful paintings. The poem, however, invents a ‘tiger on the wall’ (line 14), suggesting a trophy bagged by a hunter, and invites us to see May as the
hunter and Leech as the victim. I feel a little affront on behalf of the artist at the line ‘Brandy glaring out through every pore’ (line 17), yet find this an effective image of a belligerent old man. In line 24 the poet foregrounds May’s brown frock, to which I will return below, yet labels this ‘haute couture’. I argue that this is a projection by the poet, which suggests he has little sympathy for the self-imposed pain of the sitters, the woman who left her family, and the man who became a “trophy husband”. Yet the voice in the poem speaks to me softly, and if there is disdain it is restrained.

Line 20, ‘how you must hate me’, suggests that the trophy may not have been quite as good as anticipated, that May bagged an artist at the height of his career, which subsequently faded. It could also be read ironically, to suggest the opposite, that the artist resented giving up his career for private domestic bliss.

I would like to explore some images in the poem that I propose are images of earth and world triggered by the painting. Lines 21-22, ‘green world of green pain’, may not have any meaning other than to lead into line 23, where the poet associates the sitters with ‘potted plants’, foregrounding the plants we see in each painting. Perhaps the green is a reference to Irish Catholicism and the pain imposed by the inability to divorce and remarry. ‘Potted plants’ may have a colloquial meaning – I associate the expression with isolation and restriction imposed from without. The expression ‘knees of clay’ in line 26, derived contiguously from “feet of clay”, a character flaw in an otherwise respected person, is an association I find suggested by the colours of the sitters’ garments – her ‘brown frock’, an orange-brown, and highlighted sleeve of orange – his coat with light tan and orange-browns.

Durcan may or may not have known that the painting was made in London. This doesn’t matter, his association with Paris is drawn from the French title and the view of rooftops below, and the distinction between the rooftops and bridges of Paris causes me to question – possibly a
reference to a popular twentieth-century song about finding love beneath the bridges of Paris, to be distinguished from the reality of domestic life above the rooftops.

I argue that it is impossible not to bring my knowledge of the past lives and *anterior future* of the sitter and artist to the painting, and to find them already there in the details that Durcan has foregrounded. Ironically, the artist’s intentions about keeping his private life separate from his art are subverted in this response, which defines him by reference to his relationship with this woman, and treats him as an invisible translator. I return to the paintings looking for mutations foregrounded by Durcan’s poem, and questioning my response to a man who apparently has failed to establish himself in a career and as a provider.

I see the tones of May’s cheekbones and her frock, which Durcan foregrounds. The colours and brushstrokes are bold, clearly ‘signs and not signs’. The artist has worked quickly to capture the scene of light and shadows before the sun moves, to capture the over-exposed highlights on her left shoulder and the fingers of her left hand and her hair, which take on a yellow tinge from the building in the background below. Working quickly to catch this light, there is no time to think about their first meeting, past or future love-making, whether she is awake or dozing, or what stories are held on the pages of the book or magazine resting on the arm of the chair.

Durcan foregrounds the green world, the black hat, hornrim glasses, florid complexion and the brown shop coat. Looking again at the painting I see that there is complexity in these things that the poem does not mention. The aloes are alive with colour – purples, oranges, yellows – in fact very little green although this is the dominant effect. The edges of the hat are tinged with the surrounding colours where the artist has dappled the edges to effect the curve of the brim and crown. The florid complexion shows pink touches of shadow, but highlights of yellow ochre on his cheek facing the light, and on his moustache, matching the tan highlights on his coat.
The artist is not looking at us with a searching expression, he is depicted in the indexical moment of painting, searching in the mirror for these tones of light and shade and the position he must resume between concentrating on applying paint.

The poem foregrounds the indexical moment in lines 11-13, 'If you were to glance up now/ ... You would see me as I am'. This is the point that the poet shifts attention to Leech’s self-portrait, and I argue that this an important mutation. If May Leech were to have looked up she would have seen Leech as artist. The paintings informed by the poem remind me that these paintings are indices of the artist as artist and the mutations cause me to question the things I think I know about the sitters’ past lives and anterior future and my response as a man (based on my world view) to the figure of the male artist.

I turn now to another painting which, informed by Durcan’s poem, leaves us wondering who is hunter and who is hunted. I first saw a reproduction of Gainsborough’s portrait of Mrs and Mrs Andrews (1750) in John Berger’s Ways of Seeing (Berger 1972). Berger reproduced close-ups of the faces of each sitter, and I will return to these below. Mr Andrews’ expression is blank. He looks bored. Mrs Andrews looks un-amused, even severe.

Berger wishes to contest the views of other writers on art who see the painting as an enchanting depiction of the recently married couple communing with nature:

They are landowners and their proprietary attitude towards what surrounds them is visible in their stance and their expressions.... The sentence of poaching at the time was deportation. If a man stole a potato he risked a public whipping ordered by the magistrate who would be a landowner.... The point being made is that, among the pleasures their portrait gave to Mr and Mrs Andrews, was the pleasure of seeing themselves depicted as landowners ... (Berger 1972: 106-8)

Although I considered that Berger was judging Mr and Mrs Andrews harshly, not for anything they have done but on the basis of an assumption that they are land owners complicit in the injustices he mentions, I thought no more about it until I read Paul Durcan’s poem on the painting. The poem speaks to me with an affected English accent and shocks me with its contempt for these unknown people and its breathtaking flight of fancy as Mrs Andrews murders him with his own gun to get control of the land. I suggest that there are views of the world operating here, and I want to see if I can observe mutations in the painting and the poem which subvert these world views.

**Mr & Mrs Andrews**

Tweet-tweet-tweet-tweet-tweet-tweet-tweet.
Twitter-twitter-twitter-twitter-twitter-twitter-twitter.
Boo-boo-boo-boo-boo-boo-boo.
He is sulking because he wants his din-dins.
Fanning myself in the Suffolk desert
I mince round a corner of horizon
And there in the midst of all that silly sand
Is a wrought iron garden seat
Peaking out of old oak tree,
Stooks, sheepies, poppy
And, choreographed on seat,
Oneself.
The sort of dream out of which stuff is made.
Oneself
In most a la modish blue frock, 15
Pink high heel slippers,
Floppy hat,
And, lounging up against rail of seat
Like a skimpy stag against its scratching post,
One's very own chap, 20
A spaniel in his parts
Sniffing,
Taking time off from his economics lectures
Or his ballet classes or whatever.
Bobsie Andrews and Me: 25
We two drips together dripping.
I murder him
With his own gun.
The nice thing is that the neighbours
Think it an accident.
I think my feeling was that I did not really want
To have to share the landscape.
It is a rather fetching landscape
In spite of all the suffocation
And I think I will rather enjoy it on my own 30
For the next fifty years
And not spoil it with children and inheritance
And all that sort of thing.
Fetch.

I look again at Mrs Andrews' expression. It is a disdainful expression, even smug, self-satisfied. I imagine she has caught her man and married well. As Durcan observes, Mr Andrews has 'a spaniel in his parts' sniffing as it would the genitals of another dog. Perhaps she has played on men's weakness to achieve her conquest. I look at her posture again in this light: straight back, sitting upright literally and figuratively on the "seat of power".

My eyes keep straying to the distant storm clouds, dark below but with billowing white surfaces where the sunny break that illuminates our subjects strikes the clouds. I imagine the countryside during this sunny break, with the threat of possible rain squalls hanging over the scene to enhance the pleasure of that fleeting moment in which I know from experience that the sights and smells of the countryside are crisp and
fresh. I see now that Durcan foregrounds the countryside in his first three playful lines. This image of earth provides me with a diversion from making unpleasant decisions about the people I see portrayed.

Gainsborough, Mr & Mrs Andrews (details), c. 1750.

I turn to William Vaughan’s book on Gainsborough for more information about the painting. He regards their expressions as ‘disconcertingly smug’ (Vaughan 2002: 56). The couple had been married for one or two years, and Gainsborough knew both of them from childhood ‘but not as an equal’:

They were from established families; he was from the lower edge of respectability…. The artist knew those looks this couple were giving him and recorded them with characteristic exactness…. Theirs was an arranged marriage, forged by their parents to secure the integrity of the estate both parties had a share in. If the Andrews had little love for Gainsborough, they probably did not have much for each other either…. (Vaughan 2002: 56-7)

I am struck by the information about the arranged marriage. It appears that the couple were married in 1748 when he was 23 and she 16 years of age, and that Mr Andrews had inherited half of the estate from his father in 1735 and half from her father when he died in 1750 (Rosenthal and Myrone 2002: 62). Vaughn also notes that the farmland scenery depicts improved land management, with fenced paddocks, and rows of grain ploughed in regular furrows (Vaughn 2002: 57; see also Rosenthal and Myrone 2002: 62). The poet’s reference in line 24 to Mr Andrews ‘taking
time off from his economics lectures' suggests that Durcan was familiar with some of this background.

Durcan may also have known that, until the late nineteenth century, under English law a married woman virtually ceased upon marriage to have legal existence, and her property became vested in her husband (Starke and Higgins 1974: 494). Accordingly, I doubt that Mrs Andrews could be described as a 'landowner', or that the husband's death would reverse this situation. Whether this is an intentional irony on the poet's part, or as I would guess simply his lack of interest regarding legal history, I look for details in the painting which may have triggered the thought association that she might murder her husband. I do not take the poem as making authoritative statements that Mrs Andrews actually killed her husband or the actual legal consequences of her husband pre-deceasing her, but examine the mutations that the poem makes from the painting.

Looking at Mr Andrews' posture, it is evident that he may think she is as much his possession as are the depicted lands. Durcan foregrounds Mr Andrews' posture, 'like a skimpy stag against its scratching post' (line 19). Yet this is a back-handed compliment, indicated by the adjective 'skimpy', and the reference to 'ballet classes' in line 24, which draw attention to the rather vacant, un-heroic expression on the sitter's face. Durcan also foregrounds the dog sniffing the gun, which the poet associates with Mr Andrews' private parts (lines 21-22). The transformation of Mr Andrews into a brute is complete in the last line, when we infer that the command 'Fetch' is addressed to him rather than the dog.

Looking at Mrs Andrews' posture, on the other hand, I no longer see the arrogance of power. She sits rigidly, her legs crossed at the ankles. Where I imagined her sitting bolt upright on the metaphoric seat of power, I notice that she would have to be sitting on several large cushions to be so high on the garden seat, and it seems that Gainsborough has exaggerated her posture for artistic effect. I see now that Durcan has foregrounded the way Mrs Andrews appears 'choreographed' on the seat (line 11). I look
again at the close-ups of Mr and Mrs Andrews. The highlights about her lips and mouth confirm a tension that her body displays. I propose that this is a picture of resistance, which the poem reveals. However, I am interested in how the male viewer/reader responds to the painting of Mr Andrews informed by the poem. I argue that the painting and the poem subvert the dominance of the male gender role by suggesting that the man is led by his prick, and having inherited the estates, has nothing more demanding to do than to use it – yet even this is not going to be easy.

Implications for ekphrasis

In this chapter I have examined four ekphrases on male portrait sitters and responses by a male viewer/reader which portray men as vulnerable and unable to control events in their lives that typically men have been expected to control.

I saw in R. S. Thomas’s response to the Portrait of Joseph Hone that the life of the sitter may be beyond the reach of the viewer/reader, and that the viewer/reader responds to mutations in the painting and the poem to create meaning that may not relate to the specific sitter but to men as a whole. This is similar to ekphrases on mythical figures, where a reliable story does not generally exist, but differs from the approach suggested by Pia Brinzeu, where the poet may simply invent a story about the sitter. In contrast to this, in the case of Paul Durcan’s response to the Portrait of Mr & Mrs Andrews, we again lack an anterior future, but do not lack views of the world concerning ownership of property and the role of men, which I suggest the viewer/reader can find already in the painting.

In the case of Thomas’s response to Portrait of Dr Gachet we have by contiguity a story, the anterior future of Van Gogh, and I argue that the viewer/reader responds to mutations in the painting and the poem to create meaning that may relate to the specific sitter or to men as a whole in questioning roles of reliance and responsibility. I suggest that the influence of the anterior future in producing meaning is demonstrated
again in the case of Paul Durcan’s response to Leech’s *Portrait of the Artist*, where I find that details of the lives of the sitter and artist are already there in the painting.

I argue that, through *switching* between meanings associated with coded and uncoded marks, and by responding to the painting as an index of the artist, the viewer/reader may restrain this knowledge and respond to mutations in the paintings and the poems, which releases meanings that enable us to question our view of the world. I suggest that images of *earth* in the painting or triggered by mutations in the poem play a role in this process of restraint.

In the next chapter I consider some Australian examples of ekphrases on portraiture from the 1990s to the present time, which do not appear to have been studied in the literature on ekphrasis. I examine two poems by Fay Zwicky that I will use to develop the thinking of Roland Barthes and Michael Fried mentioned in Chapter 2 about the role of the pose in ekphrases on portraiture. I examine two poems by Peter Steele that I will use to test the fundamental role of mutations in ekphrasis in the limit case where mutations appear to be absent.
Chapter 6

Limit cases of ekphrases on portraits

In this chapter I will examine some contemporary Australian ekphrases on portraits which enable me to test my approach to ekphrasis in some limit cases. I will examine Fay Zwicky’s ekphrasis on a portrait of herself, ‘Portrait’, and the associated poem ‘Wiping the Canvas’, from The Gatekeeper’s Wife (Zwicky 1997). If ever a poet knows the sitter’s story, and can observe the encounter between artist and sitter, this is it. On the other hand, if ever the poet conceals things from herself and from us, this would be it, since the sitter/poet can be expected to keep some secrets.

Fay Zwicky (1933–) was born in Melbourne, Australia, and during her career was a concert pianist from 1950 to 1965, a lecturer in English at the University of Western Australia from 1972 to 1987, and an editor of literary journals (Gale 2003: 1). Although born into a Jewish family, Zwicky’s parents and both grandmothers were born in Australia, and she attended a Church of England school during the 1930s and 1940s in ‘the cranky moral earnestness’ of Melbourne (Zwicky 2000: 225, 228, 234). She grew up ‘in a family without religious dogma, and the haziest connections with Jewish origins’, which led to a ‘sense of being a stranger both to one’s own and to one’s adopted culture’ (Zwicky 2000: 227). Zwicky describes the Australia in which she grew up as ‘a country of transient allegiances, a country where you can re-invent yourself over and over again, where you can invent your community, your own mythology’ (Zwicky 2000: 225). I suggest that this world view elevates ambiguity and indeterminacy to a way of life which lacks a sense of home.

I will then return to the theme of ekphrases on portraits of men, and will examine two poems by Peter Steele (1939–) responding to portraits of male British literary figures, ‘Johnson’ and ‘To Mr Sterne, from Chicago’, from his book Plenty: Art Into Poetry (2003). Peter Steele is a Jesuit priest
and Professor of English at the University of Melbourne. Not surprisingly, the poems reflect the poet's detailed knowledge of each sitter's life and works. These poems appear to respond mainly to the lives of the sitters, and appear to have a strong sense of home, but not an Australian one. I use these poems to test the role of mutations in ekphrasis in the limit case where mutations appear to be absent, that is, the poem appears to respond to the sitter's life rather than to the art work.

Portrait of Fay Zwicky

The poem I want to examine responds to a pen and ink portrait of Fay Zwicky made by Louis Kahan (1905-2002) for the cover of her Poems 1970-1992. Pen and ink is a medium in which graphic marks are both signs and not signs. Lines and collections of lines indicate shadow, and highlights are indicated by white space. We need not have seen the sitter to know that this portrait contains mutations.

Lou Klepac says that Kahan's arrival in Australia 'is not the predictable story of so many other artists with a European background escaping from Nazi persecution before the war or arriving as immigrants after the war' (Klepac 1990: 7). Yet this description applies to the Australian milieu into which Kahan arrived, and I argue that Zwicky's poem shows some knowledge of his background. I suggest that the life of the artist provides a sounding board for the poet to consider her own place between the culture of her origins and Australian culture.

Kahan's father was a tailor in Vienna, and he learnt that trade, although his skill in drawing had been recognised at an early age (Klepac 1990: 7). His parents emigrated to Perth before the war, but he was not to be reunited with them until he arrived in Australia in 1947 (Klepac 1990: 11). At the outbreak of the war, Kahan was in France and, to avoid being interned, he joined the French Foreign Legion (Klepac 1990:9). He remained in Algeria after being demobilized by the Vichy Government, and began to teach
himself to paint, supporting himself with income from portrait commissions (Klepac 1990: 9).


**Portrait**

Though they lived for years in the same town, they met later as strangers.
The poet asked if he would draw her in his 87th year for her book jacket.
Businesslike he agreed.
And although he is older than she and famous,
They are both of the same archeological stratum marked Tough, crossers of many bridges in countries marked Entrance or Exit.
Their pasts have intersected unknowing.
He once knew her late mother, a formidable judge who went at things head on, said he could show them a thing or two about drawing and died knowing what’s what.
The daughter’s different.
Not to understand's her goal, out of key
with the sublime. She knows a lively line
on sight, knows gorgeous language lies,
that the oppressor's tongue can lure, seduce,
that art is a compulsion to mastery.
Men watch women.
Women watch themselves being watched.
She has always been the watcher,
seen the scars, discolorations, damage, loss,
creeping arthritis, middle class teeth scraped
twice a year. Paying attention
to lifelong facts her lot.
Despite the facts she doesn't know the score.
It seemed an easy thing to do, to sit
and let the master work his miracle,
humming away over the black pots and nubs,
the sunny room, the light, the harmless ease of it.
Not aiming to convince, she sits at his request
on a high stool, focuses on a metal figure in the window,
slips easily into silence crystallized
As still as Lot's wife.
He sits her high in semi-profile, assesses contours,
facial planes, the angle of the jaw, powerful surge of nose,
the peering eyes like some tranced visionary.
Why then now it is done does she feel floodlit,
targeted, consumed and wrung? Her feathers skewed
and dragged, heart a muffled drumbeat,
hers own cortège.
That's wonderful, she says aghast.
Too much dying, too much growing up in that face
she thinks, that's my grandmother she says going on
to spot her father, mother, a couple of sisters
and an aunt. Where's she in all this family webbing?
'They see their ancestors before they see themselves,'
says Lily who has seen it all before.
The poet's not quite ready for the weighted face.
Is anyone ever ready for exactly who they are?
She's a strong woman, he says, adding a hint of bitterness
to the mouth. She's a good woman, he says, with kind intent.
Oh no I'm not, she thinks, I'm weak and cowardly.
Who is this stranger that will front her book,
trying to recall her younger self before
she was torn from sleep into this remote, severe
and sorrowful mourner and mother?
Cues from others' definitions:
Do I look old?
Very well, I'll be old.
Do I look wise?
I'm not, but for your sake –
Don’t be fooled. I’m slow and stupid.
Or have you seen what’s hidden all this time
and I’m the last to know?
The way we see ourselves,
the way we’d like to be can never fit
the artist’s bill who forces you to flower
to fruit before you know what’s what or
who is watcher, who is watched,
like God, beyond forgiveness.

Wiping the Canvas

As if we started like a gasp in the heart
of an unseen artist moving supple
between oil and pen.
No permission asked, none granted.
A stroke here, dash there, symptoms
Surging into being; the long vague wash
of indeterminate blue, shouting blasts
of red and ochre.
Half asleep, we catch creation’s rustle
hum and bang. A daily fear,
mind and breath out of gear in buzzing air.
We gasp before the process of
our own creation.
Not allowed to peer too close,
some cheat, complain about the haze,
the blur, the thickness of the paint,
the lack of focus. A quick glance here,
a wink, no questions, please.
We’re entertaining stillness.
Suddenly the canvas has been wiped,
the brush strokes stop and start again,
we think we’ve seen ourselves in innocence
absolved, obscure.
We try to bolster confirmation
from indifferent strollers, learn the
meaning of a work in progress from the hints:
a casual frivolous dig, the sympathetic twitch,
blurt of rage, censorious whine, indulgent
purr are all we have to give us definition.
How we rate, unseen, unlived, hang on such
flimsy stills.
Do, but also seem, say the sages.
What’s invisible is useless.
Reason’s demeaned that doesn’t wear
a reasonable face. The image that you
think you are, the face that’s happening
right here, stops short of what’s projected
The poem commences with the irony that the artist and poet once lived in the same town but were still strangers (lines 1-2). The artist, with his colourful, long and successful life – and link to the old world by virtue of his origin and his having known the poet’s mother – is someone with whom the poet seeks to identify (lines 8-11).

Zwicky seems to respond to the experience of having a portrait made, similarly to W. B. Yeats as noted in Chapter 5, by suggesting that the artist reveals things about the sitter they didn’t know about themselves. She asks ‘Is anyone ready for exactly who they are?’ (line 52). She asks ‘have you seen what’s hidden all this time/ and I’m the last to know?’ (lines 66-67). We may recall from Chapter 2 that Barthes suspects that we merely encounter the artist’s intentions when the artist “shows off” in this way. Zwicky sees herself revealed as a ‘remote, severe/ and sorrowful mourner and mother’ (lines 58-59). Yet the ‘powerful surge of nose/ the peering eyes like some tranced visionary’ (lines 38-39) are simply the effect of the artist posing her ‘high in semi-profile’ (line 37) and asking her to focus ‘on a metal figure in the window’ (line 34).

The pose selected by the artist is the first mutation we can observe. It has long been recognised that the pose selected here, viewing point slightly from below, with the sitter looking off into the distance, portrays the sitter as heroic or resolute (see for example Harry Berger 1994: 107). A fleeting image of a wise old owl crosses my mind. Zwicky has foregrounded this mutation in line 33 when she points out that she was ‘not aiming to convince’ and that she was seated this way at the artist’s request. She claims to have been framed – ‘She’s a strong woman, he says, adding a hint of bitterness/ to the mouth’ (lines 53-54) – to which she replies ‘I’m weak and cowardly’ (line 55). Rather than feeling heroic and wise, she feels ‘consumed and wrung’, like a disoriented bird, her ‘heart a muffled
drumbeat’ (lines 41-42). Yet she has started off the poem telling us that she is ‘marked Tough’ like the artist (line 8). The muffled heartbeat and soft feathers of a bird held in the hands are sensations, not sounds, and hard to describe unless you have had the same experience. I suggest that this is an image of earth associated with the sitter’s body, about which I will say more in a moment.

At the beginning, ‘She has always been the watcher’ (line 23), yet by the end of the poem she does not know ‘who is watcher, who is watched’ (line 72). The poet contrasts herself with her mother, who knows ‘what’s what’ (line 14) whereas the artist has forced a self on her before she knows ‘what’s what’ (line 71). Zwicky tells us that ‘not to understand’s her goal’ (line 16), yet she ‘knows gorgeous language lies/ that the oppressor’s tongue can lure, seduce/ that art is a compulsion to mastery’ (lines 18-20). She may be telling us that the voice in the poem is unreliable and so might be the things she thinks she knows.

Despite paying attention to the facts of her body, ‘scars, discolorations, damage, loss, creeping arthritis, middle class teeth’ (lines 23-28), she inhabits a younger self, torn from sleep into this remote older self (lines 57-59). This is something we can all experience, like Yeats, by looking in the mirror. I argue that this image of waking up suddenly older is just as much an image of earth creeping up on us as Ashbery’s snowfall in ‘Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror’ that happened while we were sleeping. The artist forces you to go to seed before you are ready, and while Zwicky suggests this is a mutation, so she says is the way we see ourselves (lines 68-71).

There are thus several mutations the poet makes from her own myth: tough/timid; watcher/watched; ingenue/manipulator; family member/stranger; younger self/sorrowful mother. The most telling mutation is from someone who resembles her family members to someone who does not even resemble herself (lines 48 and 56), from someone who resembles her mother to someone who is unlike her mother. We may
doubt whether what is shown in the frame – her appearance – tells us anything about what is outside the frame – her self.

In 'Wiping the Canvas', Zwicky adopts a procreative metaphor for artistic creation – 'gasp in the heart' (line 1), 'moving supple' (line 2) and 'surging into being' (line 6). This may be a metaphor for our own creation, in which likewise we have no say. If the portrait is an index of the artist, the sitter is an index of her parents (I acknowledge that Peirce had some doubts about heredity – Peirce 1974: 159). I suppose that there is comfort in a sense of heredity and origin if all else is changeable.

In lines 25-31 Zwicky introduces the observer (a theme introduced in lines 60-64 of 'Portrait'): 'How we rate, unseen, un-lived, hang on such/ Flimsy stills'; and line 33, 'What's invisible is useless'. This appears to be ironic. Clearly the pose is unreliable, which is foregrounded by the poem, and I am invited to conclude that the visible is useless. However, I recall the voice in 'Portrait' has said 'gorgeous language lies' (line 18), and the breathless praise of the picture in line 44. I conclude that I cannot trust either the seeable or the sayable.

In lines 27-38 when the poet speaks about 'what’s projected/ On that bare wall over and over' I have an impression of flimsy stills repeated too fast to see individual images, just the shifting edges as the images change, reminding us that while we have been sleeping, becoming a stranger to ourselves, others have been watching us change. This is the final mutation in the poem, from still to flickering image.

I bring no anterior future to this work of visual art, only a general sense that entropy is a one-way process. However, I have a strong sense of the accumulation of past lives of the poet as musician, academic, mother, daughter, poet and literary critic. I wonder whether the art work was necessary for the exploration of her world view. I look again. The pen and ink sketch shows us every mark in its creation, in a way a painting does not. These lines were added sequentially by the artist in an accumulation of graphic marks as he hummed away over his ink pots and nibs, his
thoughts of the pose now forgotten as he concentrates on the light falling on her features in the sunny room. The artist's lines informed by the poet's lines finally reveal a face that likewise has accumulated the lines, discolorations and possibly scars of life and aging.

**Peter Steele's portraits of Johnson and Sterne**

The next poem I want to consider continues to question who is watcher and who is watched. The painting is unfinished, which I believe makes the artist, James Barry (1741-1806), extremely visible. We can see what the artist did, as well as what he started to do but never finished, and all of these graphic marks can create mutations. As John Berger has observed in relation to the works of Van Gogh, it is impossible to look at the artist's work and to put out of your mind the future that was before him (Berger 1972: 28). As I read Walter Strickland's biographical essay on James Barry, I am struck by Barry's *anterior future*.

Barry was born in Cork and at the age of twenty-two set out for Dublin where he was introduced to Edmund Burke who was impressed by his talent (Strickland 1913: 35-36). Burke took Barry to London in 1764 and introduced him into the circle of Sir Joshua Reynolds, then provided Barry an allowance to study in Rome for four years (Strickland 1913: 36). According to Strickland, Barry was an opinionated and argumentative man who ran into 'perpetual strife with every one he met', who returned to London in 1771 'full of ambition and a high opinion of his powers, but without the real training or technical equipment to enable him to carry out his lofty ideals' (Strickland 1913: 37).

In July 1777 Barry commenced his great work, six large murals in the Great Room of the Royal Society of Arts in the Adelphi illustrating “Human Culture”, which took him nearly seven years to complete (Strickland 1913: 38-39). Although this earned him the gratitude of the members of the society, and financial rewards, according to Strickland, 'as we look upon the pictures we feel that Barry's struggle to be great was hopeless, and
that his brush was unable to carry out what his mind had conceived' (Strickland 1913: 40).

Barry's career subsequently deteriorated, and after constant 'insults and accusations' against his fellow academicians, culminating in his 'Letter to the Dilettanti Society' in 1797, he was 'removed from the Professorship of Painting, and afterwards expelled from the Academy' (Strickland 1913: 41). For the remainder of his life he lived 'in a house with broken windows, with hardly a bed, in solitude, poverty and squalor' (Strickland 1913: 41). The unfinished portrait of Samuel Johnson was sold to the National Portrait Gallery after his death (Strickland 1913: 43). The painting appears to be a study for the mural at the Society of Arts, The Distribution of Premiums in the Society of Arts (Steele 2003: 7-8).

Peter Steele appends a short biographical note on Samuel Johnson, to the poem and the painting, which is reproduced below. It seems that the poet pays little attention to the painting or to the artist, and a great deal of attention to biographical details about the sitter. I will rehearse some of these details, but nevertheless want to examine mutations and how these operate at the site of the viewer/reader. According to Leopold Damrosch's biographical essay, Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) was born the son of a 'hardworking but never very successful bookseller', and 'It soon became apparent ... that he was an intellectual prodigy' (Damrosch 1989: 4). By the 1750s, Johnson was established 'as the leading critic of the age', completing A Dictionary of the English Language in 1755 (Damrosch 1989: 6-7). Audiences 'responded to the richness of his thinking, expressed in a style that was ornate and at the same time vivid and muscular' (Damrosch 1989: 4).

Johnson's sight and hearing were damaged by a childhood tubercular infection 'which he contracted from his nurse's milk' and 'he was afflicted by a neurasthenic condition which he believed he had inherited from his father' (Damrosch 1989: 4). According to Roy Porter, Johnson's Christian faith was a mixed blessing, for although religion calmed his fears of death, he
saw himself as a sinner and feared divine retribution (Porter 1984: 46). However, despite Johnson's inner fears he was outwardly 'fearless and indifferent to danger' and was affectionately known by his friends as "Ursa Major", the Great Bear (Porter 1984: 43).

Barry, Samuel Johnson, c. 1778.

No longer young, Johnson stood for an hour in the rain in his native Litchfield, in penitence for once having refused to help his vulnerable father there. 'Arcturus' was sometimes used to name the 'Great Bear' constellation: Johnson himself was tagged 'Great Bear' on occasion. (Steele 2003: 62)

Johnson

Bearing the rain at the spot where his father's hopes withered and vanished, he stood grieving for starved goodness. The water veined him over — taking his measure, coursing the earth — while the old man bowed there, fool and king at once.
Naked, naked the spears of heaven said,
try as he might to swathe about him
the admiral's cloak of language. Nothing salved
the broached heart's perpetual rawnness,
though leaf on leaf rose and fell at their spine.

But stand he did, as if on trial for love,
the botched flesh bearing its ruin,
the mind now a kind of Arcturus, and now
its own dog at a baiting, readied
for harsh weather, for a long night, and the dawn.

I want to consider how the painting introduces mutations. The first of
these is the pose. Barry depicted himself and other people he knew as
characters in his murals (see Fintan Cullen 2004: 101-105). I do not know
what role Barry had in mind for Samuel Johnson, and approach the
painting as any other in which the artist has placed the sitter in a pose,
simply to hold him still during the sitting, which can easily be resumed in
subsequent sittings. I argue that, after this initial placement, the activity of
the painter, and the work, takes over.

As noted above, Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792) was an early supporter
of Barry. Below is a detail of a portrait by Reynolds of Samuel Johnson,
held in the collection of the Tate Gallery (Tate 2005). I am struck by the
differences between the Reynolds and Barry portraits. Even as an
unfinished work, Barry’s portrait has a raw energy about it. The face is
rounder, the nose broader, and the lips more clearly defined, the mouth
relaxed (whereas in the Reynolds the lips are slightly apart as if the sitter
were about to speak). The eyebrows are more relaxed (whereas in the
Reynolds the sitter’s left eyebrow is arched, giving a look of
consternation). The eyes look sharply to the sitter’s left where, curiously,
there appears a profile view of another person painted over (whereas in
the Reynolds the sitter looks straight at us, the viewer).
Damrosch recounts the episode mentioned in Steele’s poem:

[Johnson] felt bitterly constrained by his parents’ modest circumstances, particularly when lack of funds forced him to leave ... Oxford ... in 1729 after little more than a year of residence. Throughout his life Johnson was tormented by fears of unworthiness.... Back in Litchfield his rebelliousness was directed towards his father, whose business by then was failing. On one occasion Johnson refused to take his sick father’s place at a bookstall he kept on market days at a town called Uttoxeter. His father died in 1731; fifty years later, by way of penance, Johnson returned to Uttoxeter and stood bareheaded for an hour where the bookstall had been, ‘exposed to the sneers of standers-by and the inclement weather’. (Damrosch 1989: 4)

I turn to see how the poem introduces mutations to this story. By now I expect to see an ambiguous word in the first line, and I simply note the pun on ‘bearing’ the rain. It is curious, however, that Steele uses the name ‘Arcturus’, the “bear guard”, or as some translate, the “bear watcher”, in place of ‘Ursa Major’, the “Great Bear”. I wonder whether the portrait tells us more about the Great Bear or the Bear Watcher, James Barry.

It appears that Steele is responding in his poem to Johnson’s reputation for courage and determination. However, I propose that the choice of the particular episode from Johnson’s life is a deviation from the painting no less a mutation than Durcan’s image of Mrs Andrews killing her husband
with his own gun. The lines 'grieving for starved goodness' (line 3) and 'fool and king at once' (line 5) suggest Johnson's feelings of inadequacy that date from his youth. I bring this knowledge to the painting and find it already there.

The 'spears of heaven' (line 6) appears to be a reference to divine retribution. This image of earth makes me look again at the aged unprimed canvas and the earth tones with which Barry has sketched the study, perhaps intending to paint over the blocked out areas later. I am not sure about the meaning of the words 'leaf on leaf rose and fell at their spine' (line 10). It could refer to the turning of the pages of a book, or to the accumulation of pages written by Johnson throughout his career. However, images of rain drops pelting leaves cross my mind. The image of the cloak of language is a nice image of world and its ineffectiveness against both rain and human nature.

The reference in line 12 to the 'botched flesh' could be a reference to the flaws in each of us that cause aging and death, or could refer to Johnson's fear that he had inherited his neurotic condition from his father, and had his sight and hearing affected when he was a child because his mother gave him over to be fed by a nurse. As with Zwicky's poem, the image of the body and its flaws is, for me, an image of earth. In line 13, Steele is referring to the bipolar mind as alternating 'bear guard' and 'bear baiter'. The poet suggests that Johnson, after his reconciliation not so much with his father as with his younger unforgiving self, is 'readied for harsh weather, for a long night, and the dawn', suggesting death and resurrection, a reference to Johnson's Christian faith.

I argue that Steele has responded to the painting by choosing an episode from Johnson's life that can be held by the viewer/reader in a relationship to the painting, and gives rise to mutations even if the departure is very great. Clearly the painting depicts no rain. However, the painting informed by the poem suggests outward strength, while the direction of the sitter's gaze suggests an apprehension, and the obliterated figure,
perhaps the object of the sitter's gaze, is suggestive of something missing or something feared — his father or his younger (and still) flawed self? I argue for these reasons that the poem has a relationship with the painting that re-infoms our viewing of the painting in a way that merely reading about Johnson's life, or knowledge of his literary works, would not.

I now want to examine a poem on another flawed man: Laurence Sterne. Not surprisingly, in his poem and the appended biographical note, Steele shows detailed knowledge of the life and literary works of Laurence Sterne, some details of which I will rehearse below. Steele's poem responds to the marble bust of Sterne made by Joseph Nollekens (1737-1823). Nollekens, according to the editor of *Nollekens and His Times*, was the 'most fashionable sculptor of his day' yet was a miser who 'lived in circumstances of unexampled squaror' (from Smith 1949: v-vi). At the age of 13, Nollekens was apprenticed to an eminent London sculptor, and after 10 years service, during which time Nollekens won several prizes for his modelling, he left London for Rome (Smith 1949: 3). During his time in Rome he moved in the same circles as James Barry, whose wrath Nollekens incurred, and it was in Rome that Sterne sat for him, 'and that bust brought him into great notice' (Smith 1949: 4).

The art object pictured below is a three dimensional work. The picture below is not from Steele's book, although the appended note, part biographical, part commentary on the poem, is from Steele's book. The bust is shown in left profile, facing away from the viewer. The photographic reproduction in Steele's book is in right profile, and the viewer looks directly into the sitter's eyes. This reminds us that the viewer/reader is free to move about, but the photograph holds us in position.
Laurence Sterne (1713-1768) was born in Ireland, his father an ensign in the British army (New 1985: 3). As Melvyn New notes in his biographical essay, Sterne completed his schooling and obtained a degree from Cambridge, after which he became a curate, spending ‘almost his entire adult life ... as a rural clergyman’ (New 1985: 3). Sterne married in 1740, and the couple had a daughter but not, apparently, an easy life together (New 1985: 3). The first two volumes of Tristram Shandy were published in 1760 and were an immediate success, however, ‘as knowledge spread that the author was a clergyman, the reception ... was being influenced more and more by a sense of outrage’ at his bawdy wit (New 1985: 6). Sterne did not accede to this pressure (New 1985: 16). According to New, Sterne had a view of the human condition in which ‘his body as well as his soul, his loins as well as his head and his heart' must be taken into
account (New 1985: 18). In the final years of Sterne's life, New observes that 'he once again concentrated all his attention on this one simple truth: man is a creature surrounded by mysteries and riddles, and the final mystery is the interweaving of desire and death' (New 1985: 19).

In early 1762 Sterne left England for France for health reasons: he had intermittently suffered from tuberculosis since college days, and had now broken a blood vessel in his lungs — it happened at night and in his own words he had 'bled the bed full' (from New 1985: 7). Tuberculosis was not then curable, although it is now. Further volumes of *Tristram Shandy* followed in 1765, and he 'carried on ... numerous flirtations that belied his married state, his age and his cloth — but not, perhaps, his encounter with death' (New 1985: 7). In October 1765 Sterne left England for France and Italy, returning to England in July 1766 (New 1985: 7). It was apparently during this trip that he met Nollekens in Rome and the bust pictured above was made. Sterne died in London on 18 March 1768 of pleurisy, three weeks after the publication of his second great work, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (New 1985: 8). As Steele observes in his poem, the day of Sterne’s death was the day after St Patrick’s Day.

According to New, we may gain an insight into Sterne’s world view through his literary works, which 'lack the structural clues provided by an orderly, sequential plot and ... his language is replete with ambiguities and allusions, ironies and ambivalences' (New 1985: 8). Walter Shandy displays 'comic reliance upon theory', becoming a satiric victim 'because reality consistently undercuts ... a priori reasoning' (New 1985: 10). According to *Tristram Shandy*, Walter, 'like all systematic reasoners ... would move heaven and earth ... to support his hypothesis' (from New 1985: 11). As New observes, this is one aspect of the “hobby-horse”, the principal feature of which is indicative of human nature: that we can recognise the absurdity of others when they are 'mounted and galloping', but not when we are on our own (New 1985: 12). Steele alludes in the poem to Uncle Toby's hobby-horse, to explain 'exactly how and where he
was wounded’ (in the groin) by ‘play[ing] out the siege [of Namur] in miniature on the bowling green of his country home’ (New 1985: 12).

Sterne’s digressiveness builds ‘into the form of his work his primary insight about communication: namely, that it takes place best by indirection; that the surest way toward comprehension is not the straight line of reason, but rather the parabolas and zigzags and roundabouts of feeling’ (New 1985: 11). According to New, Sterne believed that ‘reliance upon the mind of man’ provides us with no answer to the ‘riddles of human life’ (New 1985: 15). Walter Shandy cannot ‘accept the world as anything but what his mind would make it out to be, so that reality constantly eludes him’, and the last demonstration of ‘the fragility of human reason and the inadequacy of human solutions’ is Walter’s discussion of the ‘inane subject of the white bear’ (New 1985: 16). This is the passage in Volume 5, Chapter 43 that Steele refers to in his appended note to the photograph and the poem.

To Mr Sterne, from Chicago

Today, old hand of chance and farce, the snow
feathers a lake that could play font
to all of Yorkshire. By towers of glass and steel
they dyed the river yesterday
in St Patrick’s name, and plied the jigs and reels,
the Mob watching as though human.

Had you no lodging, off with the picaros,
I’d sit you down at the Billy Goat
and stoke you with dubious beer and gossip, thinking
your fame and panache a bluffed out hand,
the heart of the matter caught in marble frankness –
that, young, you filled the bed with blood

and then laid joke, lubricity and haver
against the bony insurrection.
Yesterday’s green was not for bowling, nor
this milling white the den of a bear
who’d eat a mortal mind for breakfast: but
I send you greetings on this your death-day,
who stared at bed and plot and grave, supposing
all three parts of a song
whose air is captured less in the end by the wise
than by some few, their kit taupe
or a suit of lights, or the patched gear of survivors,
walking fast as the lake shelves.

By an odd, very Shandy-esque, association, Steele places the voice in the poem in Chicago the day after St Patrick’s Day (line 4), that is, on the anniversary of Sterne’s death (line 18). Perhaps it did snow while Steele was there. In any event this may be an association with the whiteness of marble – whiteness that gives a deathly coldness to the person depicted – both the snow and marble being an image of earth. Steele contrasts this with the bizarre world of Chicago celebrating an Irish festival by dyeing the river, with skyscrapers and gangsters overshadowing the occasion.

In Sterne’s day tuberculosis was a terminal illness without treatment. He must have known the prognosis from his college days – perhaps the episode of 1762 was a wake-up call – just as we know that when the bust was made in 1766, Sterne had not long to live. Steele foregrounds Sterne’s anterior future: ‘your fame and panache a bluffed out hand/ the heart of the matter caught in marble frankness’ (lines 10-11). While this anterior future is external to the work of visual art, it is something that I bring to it but find already there.

Steele also foregrounds Sterne’s world view, suggesting that he ‘stared at bed and plot and grave, supposing/ them all three parts of a song’ (lines 19-20): “bed” I take to refer to our nature as reproductive beings; “plot” perhaps an ironic reference not to the controlled plot woven by an author but to life’s mystery and chaos and a pun on a graveyard plot allocated for future occupation; and “grave”, our mortality, that must have weighed upon Sterne from his youth.

In lines 21-22 Steele suggests that the ‘song of life’ is less understood by the wise than by ‘some few’, who Steele alludes to obliquely. A ‘suit of lights’ is the clothing of matadors. The ‘patched gear of survivors/ walking
fast as the lake shelves' could refer to survivors of Great Lakes shipwrecks, of which there have been many, including in the Chicago River, to which Steele has referred. Steele appears to be suggesting that it is only when we have stared death in the face that we begin to know what life is all about. The line 'walking fast as the lake shelves' creates a nice image for me of wishful thinking, like running in the rain to keep dry, as we are still out of our depth no matter how fast we tread water.

By taking us to Chicago to celebrate an Irish festival the poet mimics the digressiveness of Tristram Shandy and Uncle Toby's bowling green battlefield. This is quite appropriate and in character for Sterne, who had an Irish birthright, and whose bust was made in Rome while he and the sculptor were on escape from England. I argue that mutations and their effect on the viewer/reader can be observed even if the poem departs very significantly from the art work. By the poet's associations, I am reminded that, like the white bear, the white marble statue, and indeed earth, does not answer our questions or make judgments: 'How would the white bear have behaved? Is he wild? Tame? Terrible? Rough? Smooth? Is the white bear worth seeing? Is there no sin in it?' (Sterne 1995: 429).

**Implications for ekphrasis**

I have described the poems considered in this chapter as limit cases. You might wonder whether it was necessary for Fay Zwicky to see the art work in order to explore her life, her world view, and her self in the poem. She most surely could have written the poem without the picture. However, the experience of sitting and seeing her image revealed by the artist is clearly central to the poem, and I do not doubt for a moment that it is an ekphrasis of the type I have chosen to study.

In the case of Steele, however, his response to the life and works of Johnson and Sterne could have been written without the art work. Apart from the reference to marble in the poem on Sterne, and the association of whiteness that links his experience in Chicago with the bust and the image
of the white bear from Sterne’s literary work, there is little engagement with
the art work. There is even less engagement with the art work in the poem
on Johnson, unless you count the references to earth and rawness in the
poem to be triggered by the earth-tones and rawness of the unfinished
painting. In this event we have to trust the poet that the poem actually has
been composed in response to the art work.

I argue that, whether the poet has responded to the painting by choosing
an episode from the sitter’s life or by associating the sitter with an event,
these can be held by the viewer/reader in a relationship to the painting,
and give rise to mutations even if the departure is very great. That is,
mutations and their effect on the viewer/reader can be observed whether
the “degree of intertextual intensity” is large or small.

I am led to propose that the same approach I have developed in this thesis
could be used to study the interaction between poems that have been
written about a sitter where the poet has not seen the portrait. This, of
course, would not be ekphrasis, and is beyond the scope of my study, but I
believe completes my trajectory away from the approach of Tom Mitchell
mentioned in Chapter 2, to which I will return in the next chapter, where I
conclude my study.
Chapter 7

Conclusion:

Seeking for what could never be found

The site of investigation

My interest in portraiture springs from what is for me the “atmosphere” of the portrait studio and the unexplained process by which something about the sitter is captured in the work of art. I had a feeling that ekphrastic poetry written in response to portraits might somehow help me understand this process. This thesis was conceived and written in my attempt to begin to understand the crowded encounter between sitter, artist, poet and viewer/reader that I find happening in ekphrases on portraits. As I observe in Chapter 1, ekphrases on portraits have been noted by Tom Mitchell as an unexplored area in the literature, and have been the subject of provoking comments by John Hollander, but have not been studied in detail as I have done in this thesis.

I have appropriated Helen Vendler’s imagery of the “alchemical chamber” – and the words of Giorgio Vasari in the title to this chapter – to describe the site of the viewer/reader where painting and poem are transformed into new meanings. I suggest in Chapter 1 that this is a site that has not been isolated or specifically studied in the literature on ekphrasis, and that current methods of analysis in the literature are not suitable to be applied at my chosen site of investigation. The poems I examine in the penultimate chapter are limit cases that make it possible to understand and differentiate my approach from that of Mitchell, who considers the crucial rule of ekphrasis to be that the work of art is accessible only through the ekphrastic text. I argue that he is investigating the site of production of the text and the forces embedded in the ekphrastic text at
that point. It is natural, therefore, for him to blindfold the viewer/reader and to study ekphrastic poems without studying the work of visual art.

The site of the viewer/reader has been acknowledged recently by Mitchell and Vendler, and by Hans Belting, as a useful subject for investigation. My study concerns the problem of how the visual work of art and the poem complement each other at the site of the viewer/reader to produce new meanings. I have developed a framework to investigate how this works, to avoid being blindfolded or blinkered by the existing approaches in the literature on ekphrasis. At my chosen site of investigation, I could argue in the limit case that it is not necessary for the poet to see the artwork, and that the viewer/reader can respond, according to the same process I have identified, to a portrait of a sitter and a poem about that sitter produced solely from the poet's knowledge about the sitter's life. That would not be ekphrasis as I have studied it. However, the limit case helps us understand and differentiate my approach from that of Mitchell and others in the literature.

Using my theoretical framework and methodology, I have demonstrated that ekphrastic poetry can reveal something new to the viewer/reader about the work of visual art, and I demonstrated how this happens. I adapted the thinking of Martin Heidegger and several other twentieth-century thinkers to argue that the poet and viewer/reader in ekphrasis share something with Heidegger's preserver who restrains usual knowing and looking to allow meaning to emerge from the work of art. Indeed, I suggest they share something with Heidegger's conception of the artist as a channel for meaning to emerge. Adapting the thinking of Heidegger and others on the concepts of seeing and seeing-as to elucidate the kind of switching involved in restraining usual knowing and looking, I argue that ekphrasis plays a role in this restraint. I will say more about switching below.

I develop my theoretical framework in Chapter 1 by reference to John Hollander's ekphrastic poem 'Effet de Neige' because this and some other
of his ekphrastic poems have not been studied in the literature, and I find his thinking about ekphrasis, through his poetry, assists me take a new approach. Monet’s painting ‘Effet de Neige’ is, of course, a landscape, and I wondered as I was drawn to it how I could relate it to portraiture. I argue that Heidegger’s concepts of world and earth are implicated in the role of the artist and the preserver, and the viewer/reader in ekphrasis, in the emergence of meaning. I propose in Chapter 1 that human beings are earth, yet I felt that there must be something more than this operating in ekphrasis. Willard Spiegelman’s recent study of ekphrasis in the wider sense of literary description, particularly his study of images of landscape in the poetry of John Ashbery, provides me with a basis to demonstrate the role of earth in ekphrases on portraits. I argue, after Spiegelman, that images of landscape in ekphrases on portraits can focus our senses amid the ambiguity and indeterminacy of the lives of sitter, artist and poet that confront the viewer/reader in the ekphrastic encounter.

Mutations and switching

I propose in Chapter 2 that the contemporary definition of ekphrasis as the verbal representation of visual representation requires some unpacking. I argue on the basis of work by a number of contemporary thinkers that the process of representation is unstable and that visual representation introduces changes, which I call “mutations” to cover both intentional and unintentional changes. I suggest that verbal representation also introduces mutations. I argue that ekphrasis contributes to the field of difference in which the viewer/reader encounters the art work, and it is these mutations that influence the production of meaning from the art work informed by the poem.

John Ashbery puts this nicely in his poem ‘Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror’ when he refers to the game of “Chinese Whispers”. I am not seeking to interpret the final “message” but to examine the way the message changes at critical points of transformation in the ekphrastic process. I demonstrate that these mutations — whether they concern the lives of the sitter, artist
and poet, or the work of visual art and the poem – produce meaning when they are received at the site of the viewer/reader.

Informed by the Peircean division of signs into symbol, icon and index, I develop a methodology for examining mutations. As part of this methodology, I examine switching between meanings within and beyond representation, between ambiguities, and between the symbolic, iconic and indexical modes. I suggest that visual tropes involve switching between the symbolic, iconic and indexical modes. I argue that switching to and from the indexical mode implements the restraint of seeing-as which I propose is the mode of operation of Heidegger’s preserver.

Using John Hollander’s poem ‘Effet de Neige’, I develop my theoretical framework and methodology in Chapters 1 and 2. I show how mutations arise from the poet selecting and foregrounding certain visual details in the painting, and drawing attention to contiguous details by omission. I show how the associations that the viewer/reader makes are influenced by details in the artwork, information about the artwork and the lives and views of the world the artist and the poet. I show that the poet’s view of the world does not determine meanings that emerge. I show how images of earth arise from the painting informed by the poem that ground the senses of the viewer/reader. I show how the indexicality of graphic marks grounds the viewer/reader amid the ambiguities that emerge from the artwork and the poem.

I apply my approach in Chapter 3 to canonical examples of ekphrasis and compare my approach with approaches in the literature. In the case of both Shelley’s poem ‘On the Medusa’ and Auden’s poem ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’, the approach in the literature, which treats the ekphrastic poem as the product of a struggle between the visual and verbal, constrains the meanings that may emerge, generally without reference to the site of the viewer/reader. I show that new meanings emerge when we investigate the site of the viewer/reader, having regard to mutations in the myth and in the paintings and the poems. I show that the viewer/reader is
influenced by metonymic associations which take us outside the frame. I propose that these examples of ekphrasis have some similarities which assist my examination of ekphrases on portraits: the lives of actual persons appear to be just as indeterminate as those of mythical figures.

**Ekphrasis and portraiture**

The approach in the literature, which treats the ekphrastic poem as the product of a struggle between the visual and verbal, applied to Ashbery's 'Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror', constrains the meanings that may emerge, generally without reference to the site of the viewer/reader. I suggest that references to the viewer/reader in the literature tend to "normalise" the site by prescribing what the viewer/reader may consider and how the viewer/reader should respond. On the basis of work by a number of contemporary thinkers, I propose that the self-portrait provides a special case of the artist and the poet concealing something from themselves and from the viewer/reader. I demonstrate that new meanings emerge influenced by mutations in the lives of the artist and poet and in the painting and the poem. In particular, the anamorphic character of the painting can be viewed as a mutation, and the omission by Ashbery of Francesco's *anterior future* is also a mutation which influences the viewer/reader.

I have examined several portraits where I do not know the sitter's *anterior future*. These are *Portrait of Joseph Hone, Mr & Mrs Andrews* and *Portrait of Fay Zwicky*. As Pia Brinzeu suggests, some poets may invent a story, as Paul Durcan has done. However, R. S. Thomas and Fay Zwicky appear to have produced a visual metaphor of the sitter as vulnerable creature, in which images of *earth* play a significant role.

Portraits like that of Parmigianino, where I think I do know the sitter's *anterior future* are *Portrait of Dr Gachet, Portrait of the Artist's Wife/Self-portrait, Samuel Johnson* and *Bust of Laurence Sterne*. I find it impossible to censor out this knowledge, and argue that, instead of trying to disregard
this information, it is useful to study how this operates at the site of the viewer/reader. In each case I can find this anterior future already there in the work of art. Here I find also images of world and earth. Dr Gachet is part of a world that looks after people, and the tools of his trade are products of earth. May Leech wears a wedding ring, and Paul Durcan creates an image of potted plants growing within limitations placed on them. The rain bearing down on Johnson is both earth and the conscience of world. Laurence Sterne is a zoological curiosity, wild yet tame, and unpredictable.

In virtually all the art works mentioned above, I can read the art work as an index of the artist. This has the effect, like the images of earth, of grounding my senses and stilling my thoughts, as I switch back and forth between various possibilities. I have shown how the pose makes visible a mutation, which triggers a visual metaphor, in the case of Portrait of Joseph Hone and Portrait of Fay Zwicky. I argue that the intentionality of the pose is overtaken by the indexicality of the art work.

In concluding my remarks on the portraits considered in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, I want to suggest what it is that I and many other thinkers about ekphrasis may be seeking, that can never be found. Van Gogh’s painting of the Old Shoes is considered to be largely irrelevant to Heidegger’s theory of painting. Similarly, the paintings that have given rise to canonical examples of ekphrasis discussed in this thesis are, according to current thinking in the literature on ekphrasis, largely irrelevant. I suggest that this search for general rules that govern the ekphrastic encounter is in many ways like the search for the secret of alchemy that Vasari says ruined Parmigianino’s life. I believe it is important, therefore, that our theories and generalisations should be relevant to the paintings, and my project aims to keep the paintings firmly in sight. In doing so, I acknowledge that one preferred theory or model of ekphrasis, or one preferred meaning of a painting informed by a poem, is something that can never be found.
Wider implications for ekphrasis

My conclusions have a number of implications for the further study of ekphrasis. I have shown in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 that ekphrases on portraiture and self-portraiture complement the visual work of art to facilitate the viewer/reader producing meaning from the work of art that would not emerge from either taken alone. I have demonstrated the role of mutations and switching in this process. The ekphrases on mythical figures that I considered in Chapter 3 raise some similar issues to portraiture, which assist me develop my approach to portraiture. While the focus of my study has been portraiture, the theoretical and methodological framework I have developed is not limited to that genre, and I believe could be developed and applied to other kinds of ekphrasis. Finally, the poet is no less a viewer than the artist or the viewer/reader, and I propose that the theoretical framework and methodology I have developed in this thesis could, with further work, be adapted usefully to provide new insights into the production of the ekphrastic text and the forces and meanings embedded in it at that point.
Appendix

Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror
John Ashbery

Part I

As Parmigianino did it, the right hand
Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer
And swerving easily away, as though to protect
What it advertises. A few leaded panes, old beams
Fur, pleated muslin, a coral ring run together
In a movement supporting the face, which swims
Toward and away like the hand
Except that it is in repose. It is what is
Sequestered. Vasari says, “Francesco one day set himself
To take his own portrait, looking at himself for that purpose
In a convex mirror, such as is used by barbers...
He accordingly 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, he set himself
With great art to copy all that he saw in the glass,”
Chiefly his reflection, of which the portrait
Is the reflection once removed.
The glass chose to reflect only what he saw
Which was enough for his purpose: his image
Glazed, embalmed, projected at a 180-degree angle.
The time of day or the density of the light
Adhering to the face keeps it
Lively and intact in a recurring wave
Of arrival. The soul establishes itself.
But how far can it swim out through the eyes
And still return safely to its nest? The surface
Of the mirror being convex, the distance increases
Significantly; that is, enough to make the point
That the soul is a captive, treated humanely, kept
In suspension, unable to advance much farther
Than your look as it intercepts the picture.
Pope Clement and his court were “stupefied”
By it, according to Vasari, and promised a commission
That never materialized. The soul has to stay where it is,
Even though restless, hearing raindrops at the pane,
The sighing of autumn leaves thrashed by the wind,
Longing to be free, outside, but it must stay
Posing in this place. It must move
As little as possible. This is what the portrait says.
But there is in that gaze a combination
Of tenderness, amusement and regret, so powerful
In its restraint that one cannot look for long.
The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts,
Makes hot tears spurt: that the soul is not a soul,
Has no secret, is small, and it fits
Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention.
That is the tune but there are no words.
The words are only speculation
(From the Latin speculum, mirror):
They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music.
We see only postures of the dream,
Riders of the motion that swings the face
Into view under evening skies, with no
False disarray as proof of authenticity.
But it is life englobed.
One would like to stick one's hand
Out of the globe, but its dimension,
What carries it, will not allow it.
No doubt it is this, not the reflex
To hide something, which makes the hand loom large
As it retreats slightly. There is no way
To build it flat like a section of wall:
It must join the segment of a circle,
Roving back to the body of which it seems
So unlikely a part, to fence in and shore up the face
On which the effort of this condition reads
Like a pinpoint of a smile, a spark
Or star one is not sure of having seen
As darkness resumes. A perverse light whose
Imperative of subtlety dooms in advance its
Conceit to light up: unimportant but meant.
Francesco, your hand is big enough
To wreck the sphere, and too big,
One would think, to weave delicate meshes
That only argue its further detention.
(Big, but not coarse, merely on another scale,
Like a dozing whale on the sea bottom
In relation to the tiny, self-important ship
On the surface.) But your eyes proclaim
That everything is surface. The surface is what's there
And nothing can exist except what's there.
There are no recesses in the room, only alcoves,
And the window doesn't matter much, or that
Sliver of window or mirror on the right, even
As a gauge of the weather, which in French is
Le temps, the word for time, and which
Follows a course wherein changes are merely
Features of the whole. The whole is stable within
Instability, a globe like ours, resting
On a pedestal of vacuum, a ping-pong ball
Secure on its jet of water.
And just as there are no words for the surface, that is,  
No words to say what it really is, that it is not  
Superficial but a visible core, then there is  
No way out of the problem of pathos vs. experience.  
You will stay on, restive, serene in  
Your gesture which is neither embrace nor warning  
But which holds something of both in pure  
Affirmation that doesn’t affirm anything.

Part II

The balloon pops, the attention  
Turns dully away. Clouds  
In the puddle stir up into sawtoothed fragments.  
I think of the friends  
Who came to see me, of what yesterday  
Was like. A peculiar slant  
Of memory that intrudes on the dreaming model  
In the silence of the studio as he considers  
Lifting the pencil to the self-portrait.  
How many people came and stayed a certain time,  
Uttered light or dark speech that became part of you  
Like light behind windblown fog and sand,  
Filtered and influenced by it, until no part  
Remains that is surely you. Those voices in the dusk  
Have told you all and still the tale goes on  
In the form of memories deposited in irregular  
Clumps of crystals. 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? I see in this only the chaos  
Of your round mirror which organizes everything  
Around the polestar of your eyes which are empty,  
Know nothing, dream but reveal nothing.  
I feel the carousel starting slowly  
And going faster and faster: desk, papers, books,  
Photographs of friends, the window and the trees  
Merging in one neutral band that surrounds  
Me on all sides, everywhere I look.  
And I cannot explain the action of leveling,  
Why it should all boil down to one  
Uniform substance, a magma of interiors.  
My guide in these matters is your self,  
Firm, oblique, accepting everything with the same  
Wraith of a smile, and as time speeds up so that it is soon  
Much later, I can know only the straight way out,  
The distance between us. Long ago  
The strewn evidence meant something,  
The small accidents and pleasures
Of the day as it moved gracelessly on,
A housewife doing chores. Impossible now
To restore those properties in the silver blur that is
The record of what you accomplished by sitting down
"With great art to copy all that you saw in the glass"
So as to perfect and rule out the extraneous
Forever. In the circle of your intentions certain spars
Remain that perpetuate the enchantment of self with self:
Eyebeams, muslin, coral. It doesn’t matter
Because these are things as they are today
Before one’s shadow ever grew
Out of the field into thoughts of tomorrow.

Tomorrow is easy, but today is uncharted,
Desolate, reluctant as any landscape
To yield what are laws of perspective
After all only to the painter’s deep
Mistrust, a weak instrument though
Necessary. Of course some things
Are possible, it knows, but it doesn’t know
Which ones. Some day we will try
To do as many things as are possible
And perhaps we shall succeed at a handful
Of them, but this will not have anything
To do with what is promised today, our
Landscape sweeping out from us to disappear
On the horizon. Today enough of a cover burnishes
To keep the supposition of promises together
In one piece of surface, letting one ramble
Back home from them so that these
Even stronger possibilities can remain
Whole without being tested. Actually
The skin of the bubble-chamber’s as tough as
Reptile eggs; everything gets “programmed” there
In due course: more keeps getting included
Without adding to the sum, and just as one
Gets accustomed to a noise that
Kept one awake but now no longer does,
So the room contains this flow like an hourglass
Without varying in climate or quality
(Except perhaps to brighten bleakly and almost
Invisibly, in a focus sharpening toward death—more
Of this later). What should be the vacuum of a dream
Becomes continually replete as the source of dreams
Is being tapped so that this one dream
May wax, flourish like a cabbage rose,
Defying sumptuary laws, leaving us
To awake and try to begin living in what
Has now become a slum. Sydney Freedberg in his
Parmigianino says of it: "Realism in this portrait
No longer produces an objective truth, but a *bizarria*...
However its distortion does not create
A feeling of disharmony.... The forms retain
A strong measure of ideal beauty," because
Fed by our dreams, so inconsequential until one day
We notice the hole they left. Now their importance
If not their meaning is plain. They were to nourish
A dream which includes them all, as they are
Finally reversed in the accumulating mirror.
They seemed strange because we couldn't actually see them.
And we realize this only at a point where they lapse
Like a wave breaking on a rock, giving up
Its shape in a gesture which expresses that shape.
The forms retain a strong measure of ideal beauty
As they forage in secret on our idea of distortion.
Why be unhappy with this arrangement, since
Dreams prolong us as they are absorbed?
Something like living occurs, a movement
Out of the dream into its codification.

Part IV.

As I start to forget it
It presents its stereotype again
But it is an unfamiliar stereotype, the face
Riding at anchor, issued from hazards, soon
To accost others, "rather angel than man" (Vasari).
Perhaps an angel looks like everything
We have forgotten, I mean forgotten
Things that don't seem familiar when
We meet them again, lost beyond telling,
Which were ours once. This would be the point
Of invading the privacy of this man who
"Dabbled in alchemy, but whose wish
Here was not to examine the subtleties of art
In a detached, scientific spirit: he wished through them
To impart the sense of novelty and amazement to the spectator"
(Freedberg). Later portraits such as the Uffizi
"Gentlemen", the Borghese "Young Prelate" and
The Naples "Antea" issue from Mannerist
Tensions, but here, as Freedberg points out,
The surprise, the tension are in the concept
Rather than its realization.
The consonance of the High Renaissance
Is present, though distorted by the mirror.
What is novel is the extreme care in rendering
The vellutine of the rounded reflecting surface
(It is the first mirror portrait),
So that you could be fooled for a moment
Before you realize the reflection
Isn't yours. You feel then like one of those
Hoffmann characters who have been deprived
Of a reflection, except that the whole of me
Is seen to be supplanted by the strict
Otherness of the painter in his
Other room. We have surprised him
At work, but no, he has surprised us
As he works. The picture is almost finished,
The surprise almost over, as when one looks out,
Startled by a snowfall which even now is
Ending in specks and sparkles of snow.
It happened while you were inside, asleep,
And there is no reason why you should have
Been awake for it, except that the day
Is ending and it will be hard for you
To get to sleep tonight, at least until late.

The shadow of the city injects its own
Urgency: Rome where Francesco
Was at work during the Sack: his inventions
Amazed the soldiers who burst in on him;
They decided to spare his life, but he left soon after;
Vienna where the painting is today, where
I saw it with Pierre in the summer of 1959; New York
Where I am now, which is a logarithm
Of other cities. Our landscape
Is alive with filiations, shuttlings;
Business is carried on by look, gesture,
Hearsay. It is another life to the city,
The backing of the looking glass of the
Unidentified but precisely sketched studio. It wants
To siphon off the life of the studio, deflate
Its mapped space to enactments, island it.
That operation has been temporarily stalled
But something new is on the way, a new preciosity
In the wind. Can you stand it,
Francesco? Are you strong enough for it?
This wind brings what it knows not, is
Self-propelled, blind, has no notion
Of itself. It is inertia that once
Acknowledged saps all activity, secret or public:
Whispers of the word that can't be understood
But can be felt, a chill, a blight
Moving outward along the capes and peninsulas
Of your nervures and so to the archipelagoes
And to the bathed, aired secrecy of the open sea.
This is its negative side. Its positive side is
Making you notice life and the stresses
That only seemed to go away, but now,
As this new mode questions, are seen to be
Hastening out of style. If they are to become classics
They must decide which side they are on.
Their reticence has undermined
The urban scenery, made its ambiguities
Look willful and tired, the games of an old man.
What we need now is this unlikely
Challenger pounding on the gates of an amazed
Castle. Your argument, Francesco,
Had begun to grow stale as no answer
Or answers were forthcoming. If it dissolves now
Into dust, that only means its time had come
Some time ago, but look now, and listen:
It may be that another life is stocked there
In recesses no one knew of; that it,
Not we, are the change; that we are in fact it
If we could get back to it, relive some of the way
It looked, turn our faces to the globe as it sets
And still be coming out all right:
Nerves normal, breath normal. Since it is a metaphor
Made to include us, we are a part of it and
Can live in it as in fact we have done,
Only leaving our minds bare for questioning
We now see will not take place at random
But in an orderly way that means to menace
Nobody—the normal way things are done,
Like the concentric growing up of days
Around a life: correctly, if you think about it.

Part VI.

A breeze like the turning of a page
Brings back your face: the moment
Takes such a big bite out of the haze
Of pleasant intuition it comes after
The locking into place is “death itself,”
As Berg said of a phrase in Mahler’s Ninth;
Or, to quote Imogen in Cymbeline, “There cannot
Be a pinch in death more sharp than this,” for,
Though only exercise or tactic, it carries
The momentum of a conviction that had been building.
Mere forgetfulness cannot remove it
Nor wishing bring it back, as long as it remains
The white precipitate of its dream
In the climate of sighs flung across our world,
A cloth over a birdcage. But it is certain that
What is beautiful seems so only in relation to a specific
Life, experienced or not, channeled into some form
Steeped in the nostalgia of a collective past.
The light sinks today with an enthusiasm
I have known elsewhere, and known why
It seemed meaningful, that others felt this way
Years ago. I go on consulting
This mirror that is no longer mine
For as much brisk vacancy as is to be
My portion this time. And the vase is always full
Because there is only just so much room
And it 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, in the refined, assimilable state.
But what is this universe the porch of
As it veers in and out, back and forth,
Refusing to surround us and still the only
Thing we can see? Love once
Tipped the scales but now is shadowed, invisible,
Though mysteriously present, around somewhere.
But we know it cannot be sandwiched
Between two adjacent moments, that its windings
Lead nowhere except to further tributaries
And that these empty themselves into a vague
Sense of something that can never be known
Even though it seems likely that each of us
Knows what it is and is capable of
Communicating it to the other. But the look
Some wear as a sign makes one want to
Push forward ignoring the apparent
Naïveté of the attempt, not caring
That no one is listening, since the light
Has been lit once and for all in their eyes
And is present, unimpaired, a permanent anomaly,
Awake and silent. On the surface of it
There seems no special reason why that light
Should be focused by love, or why
The city falling with its beautiful suburbs
Into space always less clear, less defined,
Should read as the support of its progress,
The easel upon which the drama unfolded
To its own satisfaction and to the end
Of our dreaming, as we had never imagined
It would end, in worn daylight with the painted
Promise showing through as a gage, a bond.
This nondescript, never-to-be defined daytime is
The secret of where it takes place
And we can no longer return to the various
Conflicting statements gathered, lapses of memory
Of the principal witnesses. All we know
Is that we are a little early, that
Today has that special, lapidary
Todayness that the sunlight reproduces
Faithfully in casting twig-shadows on blithe
Sidewalks. No previous day would have been like this.
I used to think they were all alike,
That the present always looked the same to everybody
But this confusion drains away as one
Is always cresting into one's present.
Yet the "poetic," straw-colored space
Of the long corridor that leads back to the painting
Its darkening opposite—is this
Some figment of "art," not to be imagined
As real, let alone special? Hasn't it too its lair
In the present we are always escaping from
And falling back into, as the waterwheel of days
Pursues its uneventful, even serene course?
I think it is trying to say it is today
And we must get out of it even as the public
Is pushing through the museum now so as to
Be out by closing time. You can't live there.
The gray glaze of the past attacks all know-how:
Secrets of wash and finish that took a lifetime
To learn and are reduced to the status of
Black-and-white illustrations in a book where color plates
Are rare. That is, all time
Reduces to no special time. No one
Alludes to the change; to do so might
Involve calling attention to oneself
Which would augment the dread of not getting out
Before having seen the whole collection
(Except for the sculptures in the basement:
They are where they belong).
Our time gets to be veiled, compromised
By the portrait's will to endure. It hints at
Our own, which we were hoping to keep hidden.
We don't need paintings or
Doggerel written by mature poets when
The explosion is so precise, so fine.
Is there any point even in acknowledging
The existence of all that? Does it
Exist? Certainly the leisure to
Indulge stately pastimes doesn't,
Any more. Today has no margins, the event arrives
Flush with its edges, is of the same substance,
Indistinguishable. "Play" is something else;
It exists, in a society specifically
Organized as a demonstration of itself.
There is no other way, and those assholes
Who would confuse everything with their mirror games
Which seem to multiply stakes and possibilities, or
At least confuse issues by means of an investing
Aura that would corrode the architecture
Of the whole in a haze of suppressed mockery,
Are beside the point. They are out of the game,
Which doesn’t exist until they are out of it.
It seems like a very hostile universe
But as the principle of each individual thing is
Hostile to, exists at the expense of all the others
As philosophers have often pointed out, at least
This thing, the mute, undivided present,
Has the justification of logic, which
In this instance isn’t a bad thing
Or wouldn’t be, if the way of telling
Didn’t somehow intrude, twisting the end result
Into a caricature of itself. This always
Happens, as in the game where
A whispered phrase passed around the room
Ends up as something completely different.
It is the principle that makes works of art so unlike
What the artist intended. Often he finds
He has omitted the thing he started out to say
In the first place. Seduced by flowers,
Explicit pleasures, he blames himself (though
Secretly satisfied with the result), imagining
He had a say in the matter and exercised
An option of which he was hardly conscious,
Unaware that necessity circumvents such resolutions.
So as to create something new
For itself, that there is no other way,
That the history of creation proceeds according to
Stringent laws, and that things
Do get done in this way, but never the things
We set out to accomplish and wanted so desperately
To see come into being. Parmigianino
Must have realized this as he worked at his
Life-obstructing task. One is forced to read
The perfectly plausible accomplishment of a purpose
Into the smooth, perhaps even bland (but so
Enigmatic) finish. Is there anything
To be serious about beyond this otherness
That gets included in the most ordinary
Forms of daily activity, changing everything
Slightly and profoundly, and tearing the matter
Of creation, any creation, not just artistic creation
Out of our hands, to install it on some monstrous, near
Peak, too close to ignore, too far
For one to intervene? This otherness, this
"Not-being-us" is all there is to look at
In the mirror, though no one can say
How it came to be this way. A ship
Flying unknown colors has entered the harbor.
You are allowing extraneous matters
To break up your day, cloud the focus
Of the crystal ball. Its scene drifts away
Like vapor scattered on the wind. The fertile
Thought-associations that until now came
So easily, appear no more, or rarely. Their
Colorings are less intense, washed out
By autumn rains and winds, spoiled, muddied,
Given back to you because they are worthless.
Yet we are such creatures of habit that their
Implications are still around en permanence, confusing
Issues. To be serious only about sex
Is perhaps one way, but the sands are hissing
As they approach the beginning of the big slide
Into what happened. This past
Is now here: the painter's
Reflected face, in which we linger, receiving
Dreams and inspirations on an unassigned
Frequency, but the hues have turned metallic,
The curves and edges are not so rich. Each person
Has one big theory to explain the universe
But it doesn't tell the whole story
And in the end it is what is outside him
That matters, to him and especially to us
Who have been given no help whatever
In decoding our own man-size quotient and must rely
On second-hand knowledge. Yet I know
That no one else's taste is going to be
Any help, and might as well be ignored.
Once it seemed so perfect — gloss on the fine
Freckled skin, lips moistened as though about to part
Releasing speech, and the familiar look
Of clothes and furniture that one forgets.
This could have been our paradise: exotic
Refuge within an exhausted world, but that wasn't
In the cards because it couldn't have been.
The point. Aping naturalness may be the first step
Toward achieving an inner calm
But it is the first step only, and often
Remains a frozen gesture of welcome etched
On the air materializing behind it,
A convention. And we have really
No time for these, except to use them
For kindling. The sooner they are burnt up
The better for the roles we have to play.
Therefore I beseech you, withdraw that hand,
Offer it no longer as shield or greeting,
The shield of a greeting, Francesco:
There is room for one bullet in the chamber:
Our looking through the wrong end
530
Of the telescope as you fall back at a speed
Faster than that of light to flatten ultimately
Among the features of the room, an invitation
Never mailed, the "it was all a dream"
Syndrome, though the "all" tells tersely
Enough how it wasn’t. Its existence
Was real, though troubled, and the ache
Of this waking dream can never drown out
The diagram still sketched on the wind,
Chosen, meant for me and materialized
In the disguising radiance of my room.
540
We have seen the city; it is the gibbous
Mirrored eye of an insect. All things happen
On its balcony and are resumed within,
But the action is the cold, syrupy flow
Of a pageant. One feels too confined,
Sifting the April sunlight for clues,
In the mere stillness of the ease of its
Parameter. The hand holds no chalk
And each part of the whole falls off
And cannot know it knew, except
550
Here and there, in cold pockets
Of remembrance, whispers out of time.
References


