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Author(s): Diana Shaffer

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Ekphrasis and the Rhetoric of Viewing in Philostratus's Imaginary Museum

Diana Shaffer

The pool paints Narcissus, and the painting represents both the pool and the whole story of Narcissus. . . . Do you then expect the pool to enter into conversation with you? Nay, this youth does not hear anything we say, but he is immersed, eyes and ears alike, in the water and we must interpret the painting for ourselves.

—Philostratus, "Narcissus" (Fairbanks 1931, 89–91)

Ekphrasis, originally the Greek rhetorical exercise of evocative description, is understood today in its narrower sense as the literary representation of visual art. During the Hellenistic period, school texts known as *progymnasmata* used the term to refer primarily to the rhetorical description of places or characters. Deriving compositional techniques from the *progymnasmata*, and philosophical inspiration from the Skeptic and Stoic theories of *phantasia*, or vivid impressions on the soul, Philostratus adopts the schemes and techniques of *ekphrasis* as heuristic models for his prose miniatures. Incorporating the literary practice of interpreting works of visual art into other types of description and invention, Philostratus deploys the figure of *ekphrasis*, the rhetorical description of visual art, as the principal trope of the *Imagines*. In the *Imagines*, *ekphrasis* functions not only as an elegant literary *topos*, but also as a sophistic critique of the epistemological stability of viewing—a critique intended to unmask both the deceptions of mimetic illusionism and the assumed correspondence between representation and reality. *Ekphrasis*, then, encapsulates Philostratus's sophistic philosophy in memorable form and produces the dramatic effects of his unique prose style.

In manipulating dense figurative language, Philostratus handles verbal expression as though it were almost solid, painterly, and plastic; likewise, in invoking intertextual references to drama and mythology, he treats paintings as complex literary narratives. Intricately intertwining the schemes and tropes of *ekphrasis*, he endeavors to translate impressions

and representations from one medium (the pictorial) into another (the linguistic). Just as this attempted transfer calls attention to the mimetic qualities of each medium, it also paradoxically breaks the mimetic illusion and thus demands an act of interpretation. Even as it is rooted in precise verbal description, an *ekphrasis* inserted into a text requires authoritative explanation; consequently, in a double movement, the hermeneutic description of an inscribed image comprises a pivotal tactic in an author's narrative strategy. In the act of describing a picture, the author of an *ekphrasis* can assign thoughts, motives, and emotions that are not immediately visible to the painted characters; moreover, the author is free to add details to the picture brought in from myth, literature, and historiography. In addition, by embedding a pictorial description in a text to convey a hidden meaning, the sophisticated author can gently lead readers through a description of the details of the representation so that they will arrive at the desired interpretation of what is symbolized by the painting. The rhetorical presentation of pictorial art, then, sets an oscillation in motion between the real and the apparently pictorial and thereby blurs the boundary between what is present as actual detail in the described work of art and what is to be understood as the author's interpretation. Functioning emblematically, the condensed description of a pictorial representation reveals a world of signification behind the "veiled" description of the represented scene.

Two models of *ekphrasis* derived from antiquity elucidate the descriptive and interpretative dynamics of this enduring mode. Homer's account of the Shield of Achilles in book 18 of the *Iliad* marks the beginning of a long poetic tradition founded on the imitative nature of art and the assumed likeness of poetry and painting—two aesthetic ideas grounded in a commitment to mimetic illusionism. Homer's description of the Shield of Achilles, which visually depicts human events, exemplifies the aesthetic code later advocated in Aristotelian poetics; in contrast, Philostratus's *Imagines*, which is based on the dramatic interpretation and reenactment of visual art, exposes the interpretative dimension of ostensibly "objective" verbal description. Philostratean *ekphrasis* performs duplicitously: Purporting to describe pictures, it, in fact, interprets and embellishes them. The differences between the styles and aims of Homeric and Philostratean *ekphrasis* reveal the competing paradigms of description, interpretation, imitation, and invention in classical rhetoric and poetics. Whereas Homer's *ekphrasis* firmly grounds the tradition of the sister arts (poetry and painting) in the *mimesis* of human actions, Philostratus's *Imagines* explores the hermeneutic, persuasive, and prescriptive force of this ancient Trope.

Homer's 125-line description of the Shield of Achilles (18.483–608) furnishes the prototypical example of *ekphrasis* in the poetry of ancient Greece. The pictorial qualities of the meticulously described shield demonstrate the prevalence of imitation in the aesthetic practices of Homer's period. Comprehensively sketching the universe, scene by scene, episode by episode, panel by panel, Homer, through *ekphrasis*, focuses the reader's attention on the image of the shield. Beginning with the panoramic framework of the cosmos, Homer first describes the earth and the heavenly bodies, then narrows his focus to life in the *polis*, and finally proceeds to rural scenes. The movement from the universal to the particular, along with the exacting subdivision and collocation of individual vignettes, reveals Homer's acute sense of spatial arrangement. Likewise, his evocation of color and his play of light and dark disclose his skillful handling of these specific attributes of visual representation.

By returning to the workshop of Hephaestus at the opening of each vignette, Homer not only keeps the reader's eye fixed on the shield, but also reminds the reader of the presence of the artist. Homer's expression of wonder at the craftsmanship of the metal forged by Hephaestus celebrates the verisimilitude of the depiction: "The earth darkened behind them and looked like earth that has been ploughed / though it was gold. Such was the wonder of the shield's forging" (*Iliad* 18.548–49). These emblematic lines capture the central theme of Homer's *ekphrasis*. They express both the similarity and the difference between the visual representation and the world it represents. Homer reminds the reader that he is observing a beautiful rendering of the darkened, plowed field—wrought in pure gold—not the damp black earth itself. A similar passage from the vineyard scene focuses on the surface appearance of the worked metal: "He made on it a great vineyard heavy with clusters, / lovely in gold, but the grapes upon it were darkened / and the vines themselves stood out through poles of silver" (18.561–63). The careful but subtle contrasts between the gold vines, the darkened grapes, and the silver poles reinforce the likeness as well as the difference between the metallic medium and the world it represents.

Achilles' shield—an emblem of the life of man, portraying heavens and ocean, the seasons of the year, cities at war and peace, and the diversions of rural life—pays tribute to the craftsmanship of the artist and the miracle of his art. The reader is made aware of the difficulties the artist has overcome in his microcosmic representation of the universe. Within this microcosmic representation, the skills of visual and verbal depiction collaborate to insure the convincing representation of the external world. Just as Homer's *ekphrasis* refuses to state the mimetic primacy of either

the verbal or the visual arts, so it affirms their supplementary relation in the representation of the universe as perceived by the human eye and mind.

Homer's *ekphrasis* of the Shield of Achilles rests upon the assumed verisimilitude of poetry and painting. The mimetic code represented by this description finds its counterpart in an equally enduring legacy of interpretative *ekphrasis*, originating in the prose compositions of the Greek rhetors Lucian, and Callistratus the Philostrati. The word *ekphrasis*, stemming from the Greek *ek* (out) and *phrazein* (to tell, declare, pronounce) originally meant, as Jean Hagstrum relates, "telling in full" (Hagstrum 1958, 18, n. 32; Heffernan 1994). During the Second Sophistic, the term occurs frequently in the *progymnasmata*. These treatises, delineating elementary exercises in rhetorical composition for students in the Hellenistic schools, define *ekphrasis* as "an expository speech which clearly brings the subject before our eyes" (Race 1988, 56). Four exercise books, attributed to Theon, Hermogenes, Nicolaus, and Aphthonius, discuss *ekphrasis* (or *descriptio*) in detail.¹ According to these graded exercises, *ekphraseis* encompassing four topics—people, circumstances, places, and periods of time—constitute an essential component of rhetorical and compositional training. In Theon's words, the primary characteristic of this rhetorical device is its ability to create a vivid visual image for the reader, "bringing what is illustrated vividly before one's sight, such that one can almost see what is narrated" (Bartsch 1989, 9).

Starting from the rhetorical foundation provided by the *progymnasmata*, four master rhetoricians—Lucian, Callistratus, and the Elder and Younger Philostrati—elaborate these textbook exercises for more complex literary and artistic purposes. Their eloquent prose *ekphraseis*, interpreting works of plastic, visual art as though they were dramatic spectacles, enlarge the artistic potential of the *ekphrasis* by fusing it with other literary forms. Lucian skillfully deploys *ekphraseis* to pose enigmas for his puzzled audience before he intervenes to interpret the visual conundrums. Though Lucian expands the role of the condensed *ekphrasis* by embedding it in a larger narrative, the two Philostrati and Callistratus create the first written works to consist entirely of descriptions of visual art. Philostratus the Elder and the Younger compose a first and second set of prose *ekphraseis* collectively known as *Imagines* (or *eikones*).² Callistratus in turn models a set of *descriptios*, or vivid descriptions of action, gesture, and events, and on a series of figurative sculptures in bronze and stone.³ All four rhetors amplify the scope of the *ekphrasis*, not only to display their descriptive skills, but also to manipulate and exploit *descriptio* for more ambitious literary and ideological purposes.

The sophistic rhetors employ several standard techniques to expand the scope of the purely descriptive *ekphrasis*. First, they inject their descriptions with details that could not be present in the works they describe, such as sensuous descriptions of aroma and sound. Then, they impute psychological and emotional motives to the characters portrayed and add chronological references to events that precede or follow the subjects depicted. The sophistic rhetors introduce ancillary incidents and embellish their descriptions with mythological and historical allusions that shade the exact meaning of the episodes shown in the painting or sculpture. Because they assume their audience is familiar with common mythology, the sophistic rhetors freely distort well-known subjects, inventing contradictory dialogues and monologues for the characters represented in the painted compositions. Through these devices, they appeal to the curiosity and emotions of their readers and lead their audiences to the desired interpretation of the work of art under description.

The sixty-five *Imagines* of Philostratus the Elder encompass the full spectrum of painted genres that were popular during the Second Sophistic, including mythological and historical subjects, portraiture, landscape, and still life. Ostensibly based on panel paintings in a Neapolitan art gallery,⁴ the *Imagines* explores the ideological significance of the artwork on display. Adopting the persona of an art connoisseur, Philostratus the Elder leads a ten-year-old pupil through a sumptuous art gallery, pausing before each picture to praise and interpret the scenes depicted on the painted panels. For Philostratus, the formal properties of each painting reveal the moral or philosophical intention of the artist; the excellence of each picture depends upon its effective delineation of character, the pathos of the situation it represents, or the play of emotions it evokes. His expressive prose descriptions dwell on the sensuous representation of reality and the portrayal of character; however, these descriptions give equal weight to the role of education and history in the exacting interpretation of art.

One of the celebrated portraits depicts Comus, the spirit of revelry. The opening lines of the description frame Comus between splendid golden doors, bathed in soft light. "And Comus has come," Philostratus tells us, "a youth to join the youths, delicate and not yet full grown, flushed with wine and, though erect, he is asleep under the influence of drink" (Fairbanks 1931, 9). Adhering to the pictorial and descriptive conventions of his period, Philostratus sketches Comus's posture by moving from head to foot. As Comus's face falls forward on his chest, he grasps his ear to support the weight of his head. His lower left leg crosses over the right to make room for a torch, which sharply defines his body while casting

his face in shadow. All attention then focuses on the wreath of roses circling his forehead, which tips toward the picture plane: "The crown of roses should be praised, not so much for its truth of representation—since it is no difficult achievement, for instance with yellow and dark blue pigments, to imitate flowers—but one must praise the tender and delicate quality of the crown" (11). Going beyond mere visual description, Philostratus attempts to achieve full sensuous reality in the medium of words and even attributes sensations of fragrance and sound to his immediate visual perceptions: "I praise too the dewey look of the roses, and assert that they are painted fragrance and all" (11). "Do you not hear the castanets and the flute's shrill note and the disorderly singing?" (11–13). In subtle contrast to Homer's emphatic mimeticism, Philostratian *ekphrasis* praises the painter for conveying an interpretation of the world instead of reproducing external appearances.

The appeal to wonder is a standard feature of the *ekphrasis*. Homer uses the word *wonder* to draw attention to the verisimilitude of the depiction—"such was the wonder of the shield's forging" (*Iliad* 18.549), he exclaims. In Homer's *ekphrasis*, *wonder* refers to the amazement of external viewers as they marvel at the craftsmanship of the artist. For both Philostratus and Homer, effective art originates in imitation; however, Philostratus uses *mimesis* as the starting point for revealing a hidden intention. Comus embodies not only the spirit of revelry, but also its evil affects on the aging body. The reader is led to an awareness of Philostratus's ethical purpose in the concluding paragraph of the portrait, which contrasts Comus's crown to those of his frolicking companions: "Their crowns are no longer fresh but, crushed down on the head on account of the wild running of the dancers, they have lost their joyous look; for the free spirit of the flowers deprecates the touch of the hand as causing them to wither before their time" (Fairbanks 1931, 13). As Philostratus's literary interpretation of the painting unfolds, he passes quickly from the description of its compositional elements to the story it represents. He stresses brilliant color as a stimulus to the imagination, but he spends little time attending to pictorial attributes such as craftsmanship, perspective, and proportion. Though Philostratus does recognize technical expertise and convincing representation as a necessary means to effective expression, he admires a painted scene for the sentiment and the moral value it embodies more expressly than for its verisimilitude.

Philostratus's twenty-eighth *ekphrasis*, "Hunters," underscores the differences between his understanding of realism and Homer's. It opens with a description of the devastation wrought by the wild boar who "has bur-

rowed under the olive trees, cut down the vines, and has left neither fig tree nor apple tree or apple branch, but has torn them all out of the earth, partly by digging them up, partly by hurling itself upon them, and partly by rubbing against them." Philostratus claims to "see the devastation wrought by the creature" (Fairbanks 1931, 107), but he also embroiders the scene with interpretative elements that could not be present in the actual painting. He imagines the enraged animal's mane bristling, its eyes flashing fire, and sharp teeth grinding, yet he makes clear a moment later that the hunt has not yet begun and that the boar is still far away. Without transition, he gestures abruptly toward the youths, at some distance from the wild creature, and he shouts "it is gnashing its tusks at you, brave youths." This sudden shift directs the eye of the spectator to the elements Philostratus perceives to be significant and links the two halves of the painting only by the interpretative thread of his dramatic narrative. Then, he offers the remark that points to the theme of the entire *ekphrasis*: "How I have been deceived!" Philostratus exclaims:

I was deluded by the painting into thinking that the figures were not painted but were real beings, moving and loving—at any rate I shout at them as though they could hear and I imagine that I hear some response—and you did not utter a single word to turn me back from my mistake, being as much overcome as I was and unable to free yourself from the deception and stupefaction induced by it. (109)

Like Homer, Philostratus appeals to wonder, but he does not marvel at the verisimilitude of the representation; instead, he praises the painting's *trompe l'oeil* ability to deceive the eye about the material reality of the objects represented. The painting goes beyond realistic representation to create the impression that the viewer is beholding an actual hunt, not a painted image. In its precise detail, the painting evokes the very illusion of life, and Philostratus's description vies with this painted illusion. The purpose of this extreme veracity is to create the perception, if only for a brief moment, that the spectator is in the actual presence of the hunters and the boar. Then, the element of surprise shatters the intentional deception, imparting a sense of novelty, which leads the viewer to seek the deeper significance of the work. "So let us look at the details of the painting," he admonishes, "for it really is a painting before which we stand" (Fairbanks 1931, 109).

Although faithful imitation provides the starting point for Philostratus's *ekphrasis*, he looks behind the imitation to find the intention of the painter, then judges the painting for the ingenuity with which that intention is

conveyed. Motivated by both philosophical and psychological concerns, Philostratus allegorizes the relationship between art and reality and praises the ability of the skilled artist to manipulate and even deceive nature. Seeming to change the subject of “Hunters,” he moves from the wild boar to the group of youths, lingering for a moment on each one to describe his clothing, manners, education, and horse. The portrayal of the group of hunters, clearly “of noble parentage,” culminates in an extended passage praising the beauty and spirit of the one youth about whom the others gather:

And from shame of exposing himself unclad to those about him he wears a sleeved chiton of purple which reaches half-way down his thighs and likewise half-way to his elbows. He smiles and his eye flashes, and he wears his hair long, but not long enough to shade his eyes when the wind shall throw it into disorder. Doubtless many a one will praise his cheeks and the proportions of his nose and each several feature of his face, but I admire his spiritedness; for as a hunter he is vigorous . . . and he is conscious of the fact that he is beloved. (Fairbanks 1931, 111)

Carefully structuring his *ekphrasis*, Philostratus next describes the violence of the chase moment by moment before returning to the theme of art and reality with which he began. The two halves of the painting, the educated youths and the boar hunt, are coupled by the repetition of one key idea: Philostratus admires the artist’s ability to imitate and even deceive nature. Completing a circular composition, the first idea—artistic mastery (or deception)—indirectly announces the last—the difference between representation and reality. The *ekphrasis* concludes with an image of the beautiful youth, the hero of the hunt, who is “still in the pool, still in the attitude in which he hurled his javelin, while the youths stand in astonishment and gaze at him *as though* he were a picture” (Fairbanks 1931, 115; emphasis added).

It is only by reproducing the impression of the work of visual art that the rhetor can hope to rival the power of the graphic image. Thus, to produce an impact comparable in force to the pictorial re-creation of an event, Philostratus frequently describes figures as if they were moving, acting, and feeling; moreover, to imbue his *ekphraseis* with lifelike vigor, he attributes words to the depicted characters. Verbally addressing the youths in “Hunters,” Philostratus takes readers right into the image. Animating the *ekphrasis*, he commands: “Do not rush past us, ye hunters, nor urge on your steeds till we can track down what your purpose is and what the game is you are hunting” (Fairbanks 1931, 57). Totally engaged in the

pictorial image, the rhetor shouts at the youths before he interrogates the meaning of the picture. Then, inserting himself and his interpretation into the *ekphrasis*, he articulates a mode of desire that cannot be seen with the detached physical gaze. He reaches beyond the phenomenal world into the realm of emotions and presents not the actual, material picture, but the mode of desire that motivates the image: "For you claim to be pursuing a 'fierce wild boar'. . . . But my own opinion is that, as you were hunting the beauty of yonder youth, you have been captured by him and are eager to run into danger for him" (109). "Hunters," then, becomes a metaphor of sublimated sexual and textual desire. The *ekphrasis* acquires the force of the lover's gaze, and the beautiful youth, who captivates the others "as though he were a picture," symbolizes the covert desire of the literary text to equal the full presence of the beloved.

Philostratus employs several disruptive techniques to remind the listener that the pictorial images he describes resemble rather than reflect what they represent. He calls attention to the gap between objects in the world and their linguistic and pictorial representation by constantly invoking expressions of similarity and difference (e.g., "as if," "as though," and "almost"). The explicit expression of similarity in the final line of "Hunters" draws out the implied analogy between the rhetorical figure of *ekphrasis* and the pictorial image: The youths stand in astonishment and gaze at the one beautiful youth, the object of their desire—"as though he were a picture." The rhetorical definition of *ekphrasis*, demanding that the vivid visual passage describe the subject so clearly that listeners hearing the words would *seem to see* the subject before their very eyes, paradoxically turns upon the conviction that the language of the description should bring about sight through sound, *as if* the listeners were present as spectators. Forcefully converting listeners into spectators, the transformational power of the *ekphrasis* suggests difference even though the rhetorical definition of the term implies analogy.

Figurally defined as the evocation of a visual scene in all its details and colors, the *ekphrasis* performs a parallel function to the painted image. Simultaneously affirming the analogy and the rivalry of word and image, *ekphrasis* draws attention to the differences, not only between representation and the world, but also between the two media of representation—the pictorial and the linguistic. Whereas Homer's *ekphrastic* practice is mimetic, Philostratus's practice resembles *trompe l'oeil*. Philostratus underscores the cunning of both visual and verbal illusionism in his description of the painting of "Narcissus":

The painting has such regard for realism that it even shows drops of dew dripping from the flowers and a bee settling on the flowers—whether a real bee has been deceived by the painted flowers or whether we are to be deceived into thinking that a painted bee is real, I do not know. (Fairbanks 1931, 89–91)

Asking viewers to accept the reality of the described painting, the *ekphrasis*, like the represented painting, first creates the illusion of verisimilitude then breaks the mimetic illusion, foregrounding the fissures between the subject and its visual and verbal equivalents. Cautioning readers not to confuse these mimetic illusions with full enchantment, Philostratus directly confronts Narcissus, who has not been “deceived” by a painting, or become “engrossed in a thing of pigments or wax.” He admonishes the stupefied youth:

[B]ut you do not realize that the water represents you exactly as you are when you gaze upon it, nor do you see through the artifice of the pool, though to do so you have only to nod your head or change your expression or slightly move your hand, instead of standing in the same attitude; but acting as though you had met a companion, you wait for some move on his part. (91)

Extending the double maneuver of illusion and disillusion, Philostratus’s apostrophe to Narcissus instructs the audience not to succumb completely to the world represented by the description, but rather to acquiesce in and then critically respond to the illusion produced by the *ekphrasis*.⁵

Just as the *ekphrasis* encourages readers to think of representation as the function of two apparently incompatible processes, illusion and disillusion, so it insists that they discern the fluctuating dynamics of surface and depth. Narcissus mistakes the translucent reflection with which he falls in love for depth, and Philostratus condemns the perceptual naïveté that allows him to confuse his superficial image with the deeper reality the pool mirrors; indeed, the delusion of substance bewitching Narcissus coincides with the idealized lucidity that seems to create the illusion of transparent depth. Narcissus, who can neither break his enchantment nor embrace his limpid but insubstantial image, pictorially represents the paradoxes of mimeticism.

Philostratus’s perceptual and metaphorical devices inform readers that the verbal surface is itself a metaphor that makes linguistic representation appear to be a visual act. He translates the philosophical concepts of reflection and lucidity into imagery of surface and depth to represent the union of visual perception with subtle and acute intellectual discernment.

Describing a school of swimming tuna fish in the painting "Bosporos," he observes:

[I]n the bright gleam of the sea the colours of the fish vary, those near the surface seem to be black, those just below are not so black, those lower still begin to elude the sense of sight, then they seem shadowy, and finally they look just like the water; for as the vision penetrates deeper and deeper its power of discerning objects in the water is blunted. (Fairbanks 1931, 57)

Emphasizing the temporal unfolding of his own perceptual processes, Philostratus reenacts his perception of multitiered reflections in pools, rivers, and the sea, then deploys descriptions of luminous refracted surfaces to foreground the polyvalence and materiality of linguistic representation. Just like scintillating fluid reflections, *ekphraseis* depict not only objects and events, but also decorated surfaces; just as the painted image consists of deposited layers of pigment, the linguistic surface renders with equal color and evidence the face of real and imaginary things. Because the language of description is dense and opaque, Philostratean *ekphrasis* uncovers the paradox of representation in chronological stages. Readers must travel slowly through embedded layers of signification to discover the meanings encoded in these quasi-visual/quasi-verbal representations.

Philostratus dramatizes both the competition and the cooperation of word and image in the pursuit of knowledge. In very first *ekphrasis* of *Imagines*, "Scamander," Philostratus tests his pupil's understanding of textual authority: "Have you noticed, my boy, that the painting here is based on Homer, or have you failed to do so because you are lost in wonder as to how in the world the fire could live in the midst of water? Well then, let us try to get at the meaning of it" (Fairbanks 1931, 7). He advises his student to turn his eyes "away from the painting itself so as to look only at the events on which it is based" (7). Intimating that the single domain of language replaces the double domain of painting and text, the passage challenges the coupling of word and image, insisting "it is all from Homer" (9). Describing the painting the *ekphrasis* transforms the visual image into words, performatively claiming the superiority of the verbal medium as it masters its less powerful visual counterpart. Explicitly referring to another written source, the *ekphrasis* vigorously insists on the mediating level of linguistic representation. The opening lines of the *ekphrasis* express the desire of the literary text to bring the visual subject so vividly before the mind's eye that the painting is no longer needed; however, as the *ekphrasis* unfolds, it diverts attention from the

rivalry of word and image to the limits of language and problems of turning visual images into verbal equivalents. Concluding with the enigmatic last line “[i]n this Homer is no longer followed” (9), the passage invites listeners to create a picture that they can embellish in their own minds.

Ekphrasis, like *mimesis*, is a rhetorical term for the representation of reality. Founded on the alleged transparency of material surfaces and the immediate comprehension of substance and depth, *mimesis* depends upon deception as the image strives to convince viewers of its presence and reality. One of the most advanced *progymnasmata* of late antiquity, written by Hermogenes, judges *ekphrasis*, the tenth of twelve graded exercises, by the following criteria:

Ekphrasis is an account with detail; it is visible, so to speak, and brings before the eyes that which is to be shown. Ekphrases are of people, actions, times, places, seasons, and many other things. . . . The special virtues of an ekphrasis are clarity and visibility; the style must contrive to bring about seeing through hearing. However, it is equally important that expression should fit the subject: if the subject is florid, let the style be florid too, and if the subject is dry, let the style be the same. (Baxandall 1971, 85)

Thus, according to Hermogenes, clarity and visibility are the particular virtues of *ekphrasis*. Even though appropriate style can enhance a subject, *ekphrasis* basically functions as a window to the world. Naïvely assuming a one-to-one correspondence between representation and reality, Hermogenes’ model of *ekphrasis* as a transparent window corresponds to representational theories of visual and verbal art, which presuppose that these forms of expression can adequately represent material reality—without intruding between the audience and the object represented, either by the effects of style or presentation, or by drawing attention to themselves through reference to other textual sources. Philostratus’s *ekphraseis*, however, frame a challenge to these theories. He questions the status of mimeticism and the understanding of realism and illusionism. Dramatic style, hermeneutic interpretation, and intertextual reference tint the transparent glass of naïve mimeticism for the sophistic rhetor. At stake in this debate are not only secure knowledge and secure ethics, but also the authority of the *sophos* and Philostratus’s practices of viewing and interpreting the world.

Philostratus is often accused of holding a distorting mirror up to art because his descriptions fail to give clear indications of style, iconography, or architectural form; however, these expectations about the veracity or accuracy of an *ekphrasis* tacitly assume a distrust of rhetoric and an

attitude toward language as a transparent medium. Philostratus's *ekphraseis* fall short of the pictorialism expected of "realistic" or "objective" description because he inserts himself and his emotional reactions into the text. Nevertheless, Philostratus seems convinced that his *ekphraseis* are realistic: They are realistic precisely because they uncover the duplicity of mimetic illusionism. Philostratus rejects the pellucid glass of "objective" vision to focus instead on the transformation of phenomena through the experience and language of the describer. Although his descriptive devices initially create the illusion that the audience literally sees what is described, they ultimately shift attention to the impressions of the rhetor and the opacity of the medium of representation. They expose the fact that *ekphrasis*, like *mimesis*, depends upon the fallacy of presence; although it ostensibly brings the painting clearly before the eyes of the viewer, the viewer beholds not the painting but words—small hieroglyphs that interpose their opacity and structure.

Philostratus's frequent evocations of wonder and emphasis on the inexpressibility of what he sees rivet the audiences' attention, not only on the linguistic surface, but also on the emotive experience and the longing gaze of the describer. On the one hand, Philostratean *ekphraseis* describe material objects; on the other, they elicit interpretations that access an emotive, intelligible, and not purely sensible order. Like the skillful painter, the rhetor intends to make the listener see what the naked eye cannot; therefore, Philostratus's intensely emotional utterances articulate a reality more profound and unstable than the objectively optical. Just as the inquisitive viewer desires to get behind the surface of the picture to understand what it represents, so the accomplished rhetor aims to reach beyond the veneer of words to tap the intelligible reality they signify.

Philostratus's *ekphraseis* offer a sustained commentary on the difference between representation and reality and thereby foreground the illusions inherent in all traditional forms of *mimesis*. Undermining the concept of verisimilitude itself, Philostratus's *ekphraseis* reveal the tensions between description and interpretation and word and image characteristic of this ancient trope. Moreover, his *ekphraseis* dramatize both the futility and the fascination of the attempt to display the world in visual and verbal language. Contrary to Homer, who praises the supplementary relationship of word and image in the representation of the world perceived by the human eye and mind, Philostratus challenges the veracity of *mimetic* illusionism, pointing to the paradoxes of both visual and literary representation.

Dallas, Texas

Notes

1. These treatises, entitled *progymnasmata*, delineated exercises in rhetorical and historical composition for students in the Hellenistic schools. Four of these texts, dating from the late first to the fifth century A.D., attributed to Theon, Hermogenes, Nicolaus, and Aphthonius, discuss methods and examples of *ekphraseis*. The sections of these texts pertaining to *ekphrasis* can be found in Spengel ([1853] 1966). The passages for each of the four rhetors are located as follows: Hermogenes, 2.16–17; Aphthonius, 2.46–49; Theon, 2.118–20; and Nicolaus, 3.491–93. For an overview of these rhetorical handbooks, see Kennedy (1983, 54–73).

2. Classical scholars distinguish four Philostrati, who taught and wrote between the second and fourth centuries; however, the ascription of the *Imagines* is not settled. Scholars generally assume that Philostratus Lemnius, called “the Elder,” wrote the first *Imagines*, and that his grandson, called “the Younger,” wrote the second. For a detailed discussion of this problem, see Anderson (1986, 291–96).

3. The work of all three authors is collected in Fairbanks (1931).

4. The question of the authenticity of the paintings that Philostratus describes has never been resolved. Lehmann-Hartleben proposes an interesting argument in favor of their authenticity in his 1941 article. He contends that the sequence of the *Imagines* can be topographically reconstructed according to their placement on the walls of the gallery, though no logical or ideological reasons seem to account for Philostratus’s organization.

5. For an extended theory adapting Paul Ricouer’s concepts of “appropriation” and “divestiture” to explain illusion and disillusion in *ekphrasis*, see Becker (1971).

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