A Historiographical Study of Ekphrastic Poetry: A Rendezvous of Minds

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

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

Palabras claves: ecfrasis, poesía, retórica, enargeía, prosopopeya, arte visual
Literature and art are inherent to human endeavor; their concatenation of activities may be well described employing the famous simile of the Roman poet Quintus Horatius Flaccus (Horace 65-8 BCE)—Ut pictura poesis. Both sister arts, as they have been nominated, converge into a profusion of encounters enriching and molding each other at their play. Aristotle also pointed out the affinity of both arts when asserted that “some artists, whether by theoretical knowledge or by long practice, can represent things by imitating their shapes and colours, and others do so by the use of the voice” (Aristotle, 384-322 BC, as cited in Verdonk, 2005, p. 234). Ekphrastic poetry is a term commonly used in modern times to describe a visual work of art. But, its history can be traced back to the Greco-Roman or Classic Antiquity Period. The purpose of this endeavor consists not in providing a pretentious, exhaustive study of this term but more in tracing specific spatio-temporal features along its path to witness the birth of a literary genre from its very swaddlings and to recognize the intertwined and various facets of the ekphrastic tradition, whose dynamism is a constant. The fusion or osmotic relationship of mimetic representations is a reversal of the classic thought oculus mentis or the mind’s eye, for “the language of ekphrastic poetry is expected to call the image to mind, to conjure it up,

**Abstract**

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

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

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

A painting is a silent poem; a poem is a silent picture. *(Plutarch)*
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Based on the premise that ekphrastic poetry captures the pictorial representations in words, it can be affirmed that ekphrasis is imbued in the art of rhetoricians. Simon Goldhill’s “What is Ekphrasis For?” (2007) alludes to a first century description of ekphrasis by Theon, who defines it as “a descriptive speech that brings the thing shown vividly before the eyes” (p. 3). Goldhill (2007) argues that this definition “utilizes a key rhetorical idea that goes back to Aristotle, the notion of enargeia—the ability to make visible” (p. 3) or vividness. This assertion invokes the power of the word in making the receptor viewers and listeners, which may, in Goldhill’s words (2007), “emasculate, defeat, humble its audience” (p. 4). The power enargeia exerts on the listeners who become viewers through the impression or phantasia, in Quintilian terms, allows it to enter their minds (Goldhill, 2007, p.4) manipulating their thoughts and imagination at its play. Ekphrasis turns into a weapon of power discourse, whose gaze can turn the listener or viewer into stone. This relationship of slaver vs. slaver/gazer and gazee are inverted. Through her tapestry, which is a female tradition, the gazee undermines the status quo of society by defying ultimate authority—the goddess Minerva, recuperating her speech in the eyes of her oppressor (Minerva) and in the eyes of her gazer, at the same time giving the victimized women portrayed in her tapestry: Europa, Leda, Antiope, Danae, Aegina, Proserpine and Mнемосyne the opportunity to tell their horror, atrocious stories of rape by immortals: Arachne, of Maeonia, wove, at first the story of Europa, as the bull deceived her, and so perfect was her art, it seemed a real bull in real waves. Europa seemed to look back towards the land which she had left; and call in her alarm to her companions—and as if she feared the touch of dashing waters, to draw up her timid feet, while she was sitting on the bull’s back. And she wove Asteria seized by the assaulting eagle; and beneath the swan’s white wings showed Leda lying by the stream: and showed Jove dancing as a Satyr, when he sought the beautiful Antiope, to whom was given twins; and how he seemed Amphitryon when he deceived Alcmena; and how he courted lovely Danae luring her as a gleaming shower of gold; and poor Aegina, hidden in his flame, Jove as a shepherd with Mnemosyne; and beautiful Proserpine, involved by him, apparent as a spotted snake. (Ovid, 43 B.C.-17 A.D. or 18 A.D. Book VI)

In Ovid’s Metamorphoses (43 B.C.-17 A.D. or 18 A.D.), Arachne vindicates herself in the eyes of society by denouncing mistreatment and oppression by immortal
beings. Pride is no longer justification for the horrific acts of gods and goddesses. Her woven images portray brutality against female mortals. Her narrative panels are no longer silent. Metamorphoses become the vehicle of sordid violence against female mortals. Arachne, indeed, wove all around the web a pattern of interlaced savage acts against mortal women who did not deserve their fate in the hands of bestial gods and goddesses. At the end, she succumbs to the envy of Minerva, but her story and that of many women outlive the woven panels defying the gender politics of Rome. Her sin and that of many women was to have the courage to defend themselves, thus not subduing the self to the desire and willful, fickle nature of immortals. This gendered political issue turns even more significant in *Metamorphoses* when this frame story provides an analogy for Ovid’s banishment by Augustus for supposedly opposing the moral rules of his empire in the poem, the *Ars Amatoria* (The Art of Love). The envoicing of these women becomes his own way of protesting against his being silenced by Augustus. This dystopic society conveyed in the poem and in the tapestries parallels his chaotic ancient Roman society. In the same way that Minerva could not find a fleck or flaw in Arachne’s art, Augustus may have unjustly punished Ovid for seeing amorality where there was not, for revenge or for wanting to get rid of a subversive poet. Is this a matter of censuring perfect art? Rage ripped these webby and wicked power relationships:

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

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

In the light of this tradition, this ambitious historical endeavor prances through centuries, from Homer’s description of the making of the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad* to modern ekphrastic poetry in order to have a better understanding of this practice, so old yet so unconversant. It focuses on the steady, ekphrastic practice of prosopopoeia as a means of unsilencing the gazee and in which its narrativity both speaks out and pours the poet’s verbality, which is the origin of the word.
I will defy the rules of chronology by starting with the end—what ekphrasis signifies in contemporary times: “the verbal representation of visual representation” (Heffernan, 1991, p. 3). The unostentatiousness of this term paradoxically both facilitates and deters the understanding of the range of scope of this phenomenon. This plain definition carries a heavy load of thousands of years on its back; its invisible, massive weight has been put to oblivion to the modern eye. Even if this meaning is expanded to specify its taxonomy—poetry “addressing not only works of visual art, such as paintings, tapestries and sculpture, but also architectural art, and functional artefacts such as goblets, vases, and weaponry like swords, shields and suits of armor” (Verdonk, 2005, p. 233), it is an unbearable task to imagine what carries on its back. This customary manner can be traced back to the 8th century BCE, “about the time that writing originates in Greece, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that ekphrasis is as old as writing itself in the western world” (Heffernan, 1991, p. 9). In spite of this, this practice is not well-versed in Costa Rica. Internationally, publications have flourished among classical literature scholars in terms of the etymology, taxonomy and narratology of ekphrastic poetry. It has suffered even variations in its spelling—“ecphrasis” or “ekphrasis.” As Hollander (1995) has indicated in his book The Gazer’s Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art, “ecphrasis” is “frequently spelled in the directly transliterated form, ekphrasis” (p. 5). The latter spelling will pervade this text as a reminder of the origin of this vocable, ἐκ and φράσις phrásis, ἐκ meaning “out” and φράσις speech or way of uttering vocally. Nonetheless, confusion and debate remain in terms of what characterizes this “sub-genre” of poetry and what differentiates it from pictorialism and iconicity. Heffernan’s “Ekphrasis and Representation” (1991) mainly differentiates ekphrasis from these two forms in that the former focuses on representational art whereas pictorialism and iconicity aim at the representations of natural objects and artifacts” (p. 299) Likewise, there is no agreement between what a narratized description is vs. a descriptized narration. Indisputably, this contention of ideas originates in the old rivalry where the ekphrastic practice becomes a battle field between “the rival modes of representation: between the driving force of the narrating word and the stubborn resistance of the fixed image” (Heffernan, 1991, p. 6).

This territory that becomes more mysterious the more it is explored is exuberant and rich for the seed of research—a land where different literary discourses emerge and where communication turns into an encounter of minds. The relevance of the reconnaissance of this area goes beyond the incursion into a tradition, for it has become “a literary mode” (Heffernan, 1991, p. 298). This was not the case in late antiquity where ekphrasis was not a genre per se but part of the Greek rhetorical tradition. The earliest definitions of this term can be found in rhetorical treatises like the Progymnasmata—basic exercises in rhetoric, “which offer the definitions of ekphrasis as ‘speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes’ belong to the first centuries CE” (Webb, 2009, p. 15). To bring the vividness of the subject matter before the eyes assumed relevance in a culture of orality and aurality. Its virtues; therefore, according to Chapters on
Ekphrasis in the Theon’s *Progymnasmata* (118.6-120.11) are

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

The above quotation evidences the importance on the effect of ekphrasis when presenting a subject so vividly as if the audience were there. Certainly, ekphrasis is rooted in this tradition but not exclusive to it. In the myriad versions of the *Progymnasmata* from the 1st to 5th centuries CE, several authors devoted to the discussion of the subjects for ekphrasis, as can be observed in the table below presented by Ruth Webb (2009) in her book, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (p. 64).

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Subjects for ekphrasis</th>
<th>Parts of narration</th>
<th>Subjects for enkōmion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theon</td>
<td>Events, persons, places, times, <em>tropoi</em></td>
<td>Person, event, place, time, manner (<em>tropos</em>), cause</td>
<td>[Persons and inanimate objects/abstracts]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ps.-Hermogenes</td>
<td>Persons, events, places, states of affairs (<em>kairoi</em>), times</td>
<td></td>
<td>Persons, abstract entity (<em>pragmata</em>), mute animals, plants, mountains and rivers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aphthonios</td>
<td>Persons, events, seasons, places, mute animals and plants</td>
<td>Person, event, place, time, manner (<em>tropos</em>), cause</td>
<td>Persons, events, seasons, places, mute animals and plants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nikolaos</td>
<td>Places, seasons, persons, festivals, events, paintings and statues</td>
<td>Person, event, place, time, manner (<em>tropos</em>), cause</td>
<td>Persons, abstract or concrete entities <em>pragmata</em></td>
</tr>
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to the table above, rhetoricians could com-
pose *ekphrases* of events, places, people,
times, seasons, festivals, animals, and art. In
a translation of the *Progymnasmata*, Chap-
ters on Ekphrasis, Nikolaos asserts that ek-
phrasis differs from *diegesis* (narration) in
that the former goes into details (Leipzig,
1913, as cited in Webb, 2009, p. 203). He
makes his point with the following illustra-
tion: “it is characteristic of *diēgēsis* [69] to
say ‘the Athenians and the Peloponnesians
went to war’, but it is characteristic of an
ekphrasis to say that each side made this or
that type of preparation and used this or that
manner (*tropos*) of equipment” (Leipzig,
1913, as cited in Webb, 2009, p. 203). He
further explains ekphrases of works of art
and how they should

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

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

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

Prosopopoia and *enargeia*, constant char-
acteristics of ekphrastic descriptions, buck
and bound throughout time. In Achilles’s
shield (Homer’s *The Iliad*, 8th BC), the
vivid description of its forging and how
this piece of art envoices the silent object
entice the spectator by bringing the sub-
ject matter before the eyes:
And he [Hephaestus, a smithing god], forged on the shield two noble cities filled with mortal men. With weddings and wedding feasts in one and under glowing torches they brought forth the brides from the women’s chambers, marching through the streets while choirs sang the wedding song rose high and the young men came dancing, whirling round in rings and among them flutes and harps kept up their stirring call—women rushed to the doors and each stood moved with wonder. And the people massed, streaming into the marketplace where a quarrel had broken out and two men struggled over the blood-price for a kinsman just murdered.

One declared in public, vowing payment in full—The other spurned him, he would not take a thing so both men pressed for a judge to cut the knot. The crowd cheered on both, they took both sides, but heralds held them back as the city elders sat on polished stone benches, forming the sacred circle, grasping in hand the staffs of dear-voiced heralds, and each leapt to his feet to plead the case in turn, Two bars of solid gold shone on the ground before them, A prize for the judge who’d speak the straightest verdict. (18.472-501)

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

In the Byzantine period (late Antiquity and Middle Ages 1453), these distinguishing features—prosopopoia, enargeia, and phantasia—impression remain. Ovid’s Metamorphoses (43 B.C.-17 A.D. or 18 A.D.), aforementioned, excels in unsilencing the female depicted in the tapestry—object of the gazer and in converting the object into subject. Another literary form of the ekphrastic tradition that flourished in the Hellenistic Period (328 BCE-31 BCE or 330 CE) is the epigram. “There is a highly developed discourse of viewing in Hellenistic culture, for which the notion of phantasia-impression is crucial” (Goldhill, 2007, p. 2), which becomes very significant for this form for its brevity. Scholars have debated about if the epigram belongs to the ekphrastic practice; notwithstanding, Heffernan (1991) points out that if one considers the prosopopoic nature of ekphrasis of envoicing a silent
object, the genealogical link of ekphrasis and sepulchral epigrams like “I am the column of Xenvares, son of Meixis, upon his grave” (600 B.C.) remarked by academics such as Leo Spitzer and Jean Hagstrum makes sense (p. 302). This condensed mode may even be gendered. Female epigramists like Nossis, Erinna, Anyte entered the hegemonic intellectual group thorough their writing. “For the degree to which male and female sophoi [wise] actually share the authoritative language and rhetoric of ekphrastic viewing is in itself significant” (Goldhill, 2007, p. 14). I accord with his view in the sense that even though it is hard to deviate from the power discourse, at least they could speak from it. To illustrate this form, I will refer to two of the most anthologized epigrams about Myron’s bronze sculpture of a cow, which apart from the ekphrastic features mentioned, they contain a lot of realism. Indeed, epigramists try to prove its verisimilitude: “If a calf sees me, it will low; a bull will mount me, and the herdsman will drive me to the herd” or “If Myron had not fixed my feet to this stone, I would have gone to pasture with the other cows” (Demetrius of Bithynia, Anth. Pal. 9.720, as cited in Goldhill, 2007, p. 16). From these epigrams, one can elucidate how prosopopoeia is inherent to ekphrasis.

This peculiarity of ekphrasis continues through Medieval Period. Dante Alighieri, in his 14th century epic poem Divine Comedy Purgatorio Canto X, executes with care and exactness the description of the marble sculptures Dante and Virgil marvel at in this journey through the First Terrace: The Prideful. Just after their expedition through inferno,
Since she who turned the key to open up
Love on high was also imaged there,
And her attitude appeared stamped with the words:
“Behold the handmaid of the Lord,” as sharply
As a figure is engraved on sealing wax. (10.40-45)

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

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

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

Similarly, when Dante and Virgil shifted their “sight and gazed further/ Past Mary, in the same right-hand direction” (10.50-55), the carved figures lured them blurring their dexterity to behold the true nature of objects. They looked at
The blurring of the senses is the power of *enargeia* giving the silenced object such vividness that the object becomes a *vérité* subject. All, the singing of the choirs, the incense, and King David’s dancing before the Ark of the Covenant, beguile the senses of the gazers to the point they embrace their representational world.

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

This diffusion of image and word continues through the Modern Period (late 16th century up to early 20th century). Probably the greatest shift in terms of definition and practice is in the 19th century, with the onset of the museum age and the emergence of the public art museum, and with this, the hegemonic culture of collecting and displaying. “This growing institutionalization and democratization of visual culture” (Loizeaux, 2008, p. 19) narrow down the scope of the definition of ekphrasis provided in the rhetorical treatises like the *Progymnasmata* as ‘speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes.’ With the birth of the public art museum, modern ekphrasis became arrested in time as “the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art, which description implies, in the words of Theophile Gautier, ‘une transposition d’art,’” the reproduction through the medium of words of sensuously perceptible *objets d’art (ut picture poesi)” (Spitzer, 1955, p. 207). Museums started to hire poets transforming them into curators and art...
critics (Loizeaux, 2008, pp. 31-32). This is perhaps the moment when modern ekphrasis rises “as a prevalent poetic genre” (Loizeaux, 2008, p. 32)—the moment in which, the ekphrastic poem becomes a junction of painter, poet, reader, and work of art in order to bring the signifier into being in this rendezvous of minds.

Bibliography


