

The creative function
of ekphrasis in the
work of Shelley,
Keats, and
Wordsworth



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Aesthetic critics and writers of the 18th century wrestled with a number of questions regarding beauty, nature, mimesis, art, and the sublime and how they all related to one another. One of these queries concerned mind and matter – that is, whether beauty is a property of the object itself, or a projection of the viewer. This seems a question that Eliot posits by separating the two potential sources of beauty, suggesting, by ‘let us love [...] too’, that beauty is found both within the ‘formed’ object and within the ‘human sympathy’ and should be treated with equal reverence and appreciation. However, this very linguistic separation exposes a frustrating kind of estrangement between the subject and the viewed object, something perhaps encompassed in the sublime poetry of the romantics, in which greatness lies beyond reach and full apprehension of the poet. However, it is ekphrasis, a form described plainly by Gotthold Lessing as a ‘verbal description of a visual artefact’ that strives to close perceived ‘gaps’ between the subject and the object, as the poet attempts to make their words achieve an affinity with the visual object described; melding together the ‘divine beauty of form’ and the human perception, judgement, or ‘sympathy’ towards or of it. As James A. W Hefferman suggests, ‘ekphrastic poetry turns the work of art into a story that expresses the mind of the speaker’, indeed pointing out the merging of mind and matter, yet importantly illuminating the fatal flaws in the aim of the ekphrastic poem. The visual object can never be described in a totally ‘pure’, un-objective way by the words, which are both naturally loaded with the opinions of the poet, and also exist in ‘time’, as Lessing explains, whilst art exists in ‘space.’

What thus arises in the canonical ekphrastic poetry of Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats is a strong sense of frustration that the sense or visual presence of <https://assignbuster.com/the-creative-function-of-ekphrasis-in-the-work-of-shelley-keats-and-wordsworth/>

the object can never quite be understood or reached through their words. However, it is in the nature of this obstruction, where the poems flux between nearness to the object, and frustration that it cannot be fully reached, that a new 'form' is produced and animated by the poem. What arises is a revision that arises to substitute the original object, borne of both the beauty of form and the viewer's judgement.

One of the primary tensions working throughout Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', Shelley's 'On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery', and Wordsworth's 'Elegiac Stanzas, Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle, In a Storm, Painted by Sir George Beaumont' is that between stasis and movement. In Keats' 'Ode' particularly, there is an intense frustration with the inert nature of the urn:

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,/Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time[.]

The sibilance of 'still', 'silence', and 'slow time', are indicative of a tonal anger at the urn's seeming unwillingness to yield anything to Keats, whose desire is to 'ravish' the urn and spill its secrets and mysteries. This is a frustration of the visual object; it has no language other than image, and thus words are at odds in trying to depict them. Shelley has a similar problem in his depiction of Leonardo Da Vinci's Medusa, which is doubly indolent, in being piece still in itself, but also representative of a figure whom turned anyone who looked at her into stone:

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
death.'

The animations of the statue here are vague, as what Shelley sees only 'seems' to be, and the 'agonies' he perceives 'struggle underneath' what he sees as an only partially penetrable layer of indifferent stillness. For Keats and Shelley, these works of art are indeed beautiful in form, but their poems suggest that their motionlessness is somehow hindering of this beauty. For example, Keat's choice of 'foster-child of silence and slow time' carries connotations of wrongfulness and misplacement, as though the urn has become the child of silence and slow time though was never meant to be. On this matter, Frederick Burwick suggests that 'although [Keats] deliberately insists upon [the urn's] stasis as necessary condition to its permanence as art, the poet nevertheless posits the very temporal movement he pretends to deny'. Indeed, Keats poses frenzied questions about the urn's inaccessibility, yet in the act of doing so, creates dynamism and movement in the object he is trying to depict:

What men or gods are there? What maidens loth/What mad pursuit? What
struggle to escape?/What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? [8-10]

Keats points diexically to the urn with 'there', and in spite of his assertion that it is silent and unyielding, the image he goes on to present is of 'mad pursuit', 'escape', and 'ecstasy'. Similarly in Shelley's 'medusa', the figure apparently lying with a fixed gaze has hair that actively grows as Shelley describes:

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And from its head as from one body grow,/As [...] 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
[17-21]

The 'growth' here is all happening in the present, as the hairs 'curl and flow' then 'lock' in tangles. The image here of the grass growing out of a 'watery rock' also seems particularly illuminating in wider terms of Shelley and Keats' ekphrastic methods. Both perceive a visual, solid image, and grasp at it in words by labeling in their titles the object which they are focused on, natural linguistic signs, 'urn', 'medusa', that point directly to the. As Murray Krieger indicates in his writing on ekphrastic poetry, that it is the 'romantic quest to realize the nostalgic dream of an original, pre-fallen language of corporeal presence', a language that 'in spite of its limits, [can] recover the immediacy of a sightless vision built into our habit of perceptual desire since Plato.' Both writers find that this quest nears on impossible however, and though they can evoke the visual artefact in part, they find themselves forced to grow and expand outwards from the solid 'rock'-like artefact. Their inability to present the visual artefact with spacial immediacy in words creates a new, temporal, dynamic image, which David Kennedy suggests 'asks to be judged and evaluated as a work of art in [its] own right'.

In the case of Wordsworth's 'Peele Castle', the struggle between stasis and movement is in the inverse, but the principle of creating a new artefact remains the same. For Wordsworth, Beaumont's depiction of the castle seems all wrong – Wordsworth knew it as a place surrounded by 'calm' and '<https://assignbuster.com/the-creative-function-of-ekphrasis-in-the-work-of-shelley-keats-and-wordsworth/>

quiet', yet perceives in the painting a ' lightning, [...] fierce wind, and trampling waves'. He feels mournful in the face of the painting, as he cannot connect his own mental image of the place with it:

Not for a moment could I now behold/A smiling sea, and be what I have been:/The feeling of my loss will we'er be old;/This, which I know, I speak with mind serene. [37-40]

Wordsworth ascertains that the artefact has stumped him – it has surpassed his own imagination and image of the castle. However, by this point in the poem it is too late; he has already created his own ' work of art' before the reader has even encountered a real glimpse of Beaumont's painting :

Ah! then, if mine had been the Painter's hand [13][...] I would have planted thee, thou hoary Pile/Amid a world how different from this [17-18][...] Thou shouldst have seemed a treasure-house divine [21]

The final lines of Shelley's poem could easily be viewed as ekphrastic on their own:

A woman's countenance, with serpent-locks,/Gazing in death on Heaven from those wet rocks. [39-40]

In fact, these lines in isolation read almost like an evocative imagist poem – a movement to appear years after Shelley's death. This raises questions about the aims of the ekphrastic poem, if an artifact can be drawn up in so few words. As I have discussed, the frustrating inaccessibility of the visual artifacts in these poems produces a new visual, based on the temporal

perceptions the poet makes upon viewing and reflection, whether these are <https://assignbuster.com/the-creative-function-of-ekphrasis-in-the-work-of-shelley-keats-and-wordsworth/>

seemingly generated on the spot (Shelley), or drawn from existing knowledge (Wordsworth). I would also argue that these ekphrastic poems allow a space in which Shelley, Wordsworth, and Keats are able to prove the match of their 'human sympathies' to the beauty of the form they cannot reach; in other words, they pose that their frustration is not a defeat but a natural property of the object. Keats for instance, closes his poem with the famous lines:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. [49-50]

Though these lines have been interpreted broadly, in at least one sense here Keats is expressing that his frustrations are not unique, and in fact perhaps the ability to divulge something more than simple 'beauty' from the urn is not necessary. In Shelley's case, any obscurity is answered with his nudges towards the sublime:

the midnight sky/Flares, a light more dread than obscurity./'Tis the tempestuous loveliness of terror' [31-33]

His inability to fully capture the artefact in words is 'justified' in a sense by his evocation of the sublime with 'loveliness of terror' – the fullness of the artefact is unreachable, but this again is a property of the thing itself.

The ekphrastic poems do not, then, serve to simply and purely attempt to replicate the visual in words, but instead, as Hefferman states, 'the verbal version of a work of visual art remakes the original'. They are a project to draw closer together the form and the subject, where in doing so,

Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley's frustrated reflections on their inability to apprehend and reflect the object create it anew, an object imbued with themselves and their subjective judgments of the original. The poems could even be perceived, as Kennedy posits, as a 'critical discussion of visual representation', animating a story and life behind the seemingly static and unyielding artifact.