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A Picture's Worth a Thousand Words

Ekphrasis poetry can be writings about any art form: dance, film, photography, etc., but more specifically I will be using the term to refer to poems written about paintings. This type of poetry can be used to provide “interesting commentary” to a painting or even describe a piece of artwork imagined by the poet in order to have a “multi-faceted... [and] dreamlike expansion of the subject at hand” for the reader to understand and visualize (Corn, np). I want to recognize how art can impact other art forms by learning more about how art has affected poets and vice versa. I will argue that, ekphrasis poems have their own value and don't just describe the artwork, but instead add special dimension to the painting by developing emotion and feelings in the reader. By analyzing the paintings done by Pieter Brueghel and the subsequent poems written by William Carlos Williams around those paintings, I will reveal the special relationship that ekphrasis poems have and the beauty that comes from the parallels between these two modes of expression.

Poets have been turning to artwork as a source of inspiration for their writing for centuries. Ekphrasis poetry has a well-established history “dating back to Homer's description of the Shield of Achilles in *The Iliad*”, then continuing with “Keat's quintessential ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’” during the Romantic period, to twentieth-century examples like “Auden's ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ inspired by Pieter Brueghel the Elder's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* and Sexton's ‘The Starry Night’ inspired by Vincent

Van Gogh's painting of the same name" (Moorman, 46). Even Plato, in *The Phaedrus*, observed that "when paintings and poems are put together, they 'seem to talk to you as if they were intelligent'" showing how more dimension and knowledge is added to both art forms when working together (Moorman, 46). Art has the power to inspire language and writer Jan Greenberg stated it perfectly when she said, "What the poet sees in art and puts into words can transform an image... extending what is often an immediate response into something more lasting and reflective" (Greenberg, 4).

"Visible speaking" is a magical occasion where "a work of visual art has somehow managed to convey an exchange of speech", which requires "enormous skill... in order to convey visual information of this kind, along with the passions and emotional nuances" needed to reach the audience (Corn, np). A description of the painting is usually needed, but more importantly, the poet must provide a "special angle of approach not usually brought to bear on the original" to give the reader a unique and new point of view different from the visual artform (Corn, np). The "result" of ekphrastic poetry is not merely to create a "verbal 'photocopy' of the original painting... but instead a grounded *instance* of seeing, shaped by forces outside the artwork" due to the poet's own experiences (Corn, np).

Ekphrastic poems are a special blend of the original artist's intent from their painting with an autobiographical touch from the writer. As poet Mary Jo Bang explains, when she approaches writing an ekphrastic poem, she rewrites over the already existing work of art in order to "impose a new narrative on it, one that is partially suggested by the artwork itself and partially by something that comes from within" whether that thing is "an autobiographical moment" or sometimes a larger concern like

“social or political or intellectual” showing the dual purpose of the pre-existing work and the author’s autobiographical account (Bang, np). The poet could also choose to focus on a part of the painting that was not the painter’s main focus, but something which brought up a special feeling in the author forcing the reader to consider why the poet wants the observer to notice what they saw. The time and place that the poet is in while writing about the painting also gives a great amount of insight from when the original painting was set which combines to showcase ekphrasis poetry’s importance. The reflections and feelings that come from the confluence of a work of visual art and the writings of the poet give ekphrastic poetry personal and historical context that not many other forms of poetry can achieve.

The memories, associations, or emotions derived from looking at a painting will always be different for everyone, and ekphrasis poetry is a direct mode of transport for poets to reveal exactly what a painting means to them through literary elements such as diction, voice, and tone. An author’s word choice could be compared to the visual artist’s brushstrokes, medium, and color, and the piece of art can touch on the differences and/or similarities between the author’s point of view and the painter’s perspective. The poet’s purpose in their ekphrasis poem could agree or disagree with the painter’s original message which gives both of the art forms new “emotional and intellectual engagement... [which] is extended to new dimensions” when brought together (Moorman, 47). There is more for the reader/observer to respond to simply due to the combination of artists’ minds when art forms are integrated with one another.

A poet that is known for their skill around ekphrasis poems during the twentieth-century is William Carlos Williams who I will be analyzing for this essay, specifically their

collection of poems titled *Pictures From Brueghel*. This Imagist Poet uses a number of Pieter Brueghel's paintings for inspiration, and I will be analyzing the connections between William Carlos Williams' "The Dance" with Brueghel's *The Peasant Dance*, the poem "The Hunters in the Snow" with the painting *Hunters in the Snow (December/January)*, and lastly Williams' poem "Haymaking" with Brueghel's picture of the same name.

Pieter Brueghel depicted the "world as the scene of man's widespread activities culminated in the Netherlands in the sixteenth century" during a time when there was extreme tension "between the growing interest in natural sciences and the spiritual disciplines which determined their basic relations in society day by day" (Sip, 1 & 11). Williams Carlos Williams most likely was fascinated with Brueghel's pictures which were "crowded with philosophic thoughts" and as fellow painter and artist biographer of the early seventeenth-century, Karel van Mender, notes that "one sees few pictures by him which a spectator can contemplate seriously and without laughing" showing how interesting Brueghel's paintings were and a subject that one could easily find inspiration and joy from (Sip, 11). Brueghel's work is comparative to Hieronymous Bosch' artwork in many ways, but he has a specific and "excellently clever manner of working... by making small landscapes and tiny figures" that are most amusing (van Mender, 234).

Brueghel's paintings *Haymaking* and *Hunters in the Snow* are part of a six part series titled *The Months*. The compositions of these six paintings are different from his earlier works since they are "considerably more complex" with "human figures, animals and buildings form[ing] an intrinsic part of the scene" and color palettes more rich with colors "skilfully selected to evoke the light and mood of each month" (Sellink, 202). The

“dominant” whites, greys and blues in *Hunters in the Snow* “evoke the short cold days of December and January” which contrasts greatly from the “golden glow” of the fields in *Haymaking* which represents the months June and July (Sellink, 202). The series presents “illustrations of country life at different times of the year” showing summer as the “time for gathering hay and vegetables” and winter as the time for “ice skating and other entertainments” (Sellink, 202). The pictures all showcase man’s relationship to nature and “to the world as God’s creation” and representing the “months by showing people at work in panoramic landscapes was enterprising and totally innovative” at the time which might suggest why William Carlos Williams found two out of the six paintings in the series as inspiration for his own ekphrasis poems (Sellink, 202).

I’ll start first by analyzing William Carlos Williams’ “Haymaking” which goes into detail of the peasants’ lives in the painting during the early summer months as they work in the fields. The Renaissance, happening during the time of Brueghel’s life, puts an emphasis on the arts and sciences, and Williams argues that the workers’ job of making hay is another form of art and science different than which is presented in books. The first line states that “The living quality of the man’s mind stands out” explaining how the peasants who physically exert themselves out in the fields have an interesting life that the typical Renaissance man can not equate with (Williams, 8). The haymakers have a special craftsmanship in turning grass to hay that is a form of artwork which Williams emphasizes by exclaiming “art, art, art!” (Williams, 8). In the painting, Brueghel conveys a peaceful atmosphere of an idyllic field with soft colors and hardworking people with contented faces and giving them an almost musical quality by saying “over which the wind played men with scythes tumbling the wheat in rows”

(Williams, 8). One man intently works on his scythe in the front left hand corner of the picture showing how these workers and farmers have unique artistic talents that are specific to them. The peasants are unbothered by everything around them, set on finishing their job and going along with the beauty and art of nature. The layout of the “three planes differentiated by colour” creates a “harmonious effect” in the painting making it almost envious to be there (Sip, 16). Williams connects to the reader that the people in the picture have a simple, but beautiful life as they get to enjoy “the patient horses no one could take that from him” (Williams, 8).

Nature moves quietly along in its rhythmic seasonal pattern and Brueghel displays each seasons’ “fresh joys, new beauty and novel gifts” that it has in store for the workers’ daily life (Sip, 24). With each new season “everything undergoes change and yet the essentials remains unchanged” and since Brueghel is able to create art from a “mass of useful facts accumulated by the natural sciences that was free to soar to new heights” he is able to create a coherent picture “of the changing yet constant world” (Sip, 23). *Hunters in the Snow* presents the early winter scenes of a quaint town making the best of what nature has given them, which is an extremely harsh winter featuring quite a lot of snow and ice. Brueghel shows hunters coming into the scene with nothing, but a single small fox, “soggy, exhausted, and hunched against the cold”, which contrasts greatly from his *Haymaking* painting where women carried full baskets of fruit in the summer (McAloon, np). The subjects try to enjoy what they can from the punishing environment such as ice skating and warming by the fire and, even though the hunters are returning without being successful, they come upon this spectacular image on their way back to town that is uplifting and striking. Brueghel manages to

capture winter's harsh beauty while also celebrating man's relationship with nature, even when it's difficult.

In ekphrasis poetry, the poet encounters a "piece of the world already shaped" where "order is imposed, details chosen.. free[ing] the writer to confront the feeling, to enter the landscape, to concentrate on language to respond to or describe the world" which William Carlos Williams does in "The Hunters in the Snow" (Hollman, 27). Williams gives the reader an "over-all picture" of the "winter icy mountains in the background" then brings the reader's attention to the left forefront of the painting where the "sturdy hunters lead in" (Williams, 5). Williams then leads the reader deeper into the painting to view the inn with a broken sign where the "inn yard is deserted but for a huge bonfire that flares wind-driven tended by women who cluster about it" (Williams, 5). It is interesting how Williams contrasts the feeling that no one is in the inn yard since it's deserted and yet it's crowded by a huge fire and five women all around it, showing how the "landscape is covered by snow, but it does not lack life" (Baldwin, np). Williams then talks about the skaters at the bottom of the hill and all the "pattern" that is created from the silhouettes of the hustle and bustle going on below. Williams believes that, even though "Brueghel the painter concerned with it all" is able to capture all aspects of a peasants daily life in the December and January months, Brueghel "has chosen a winter-struck bush for his foreground to complete the picture" stating how this small worn down brush is somehow the most important aspect that Brueghel presents in the painting and without it the story would be incomplete (Williams, 5). The reader and observer's attention is brought back to nature with the bush being brought up, reminding

us that Brueghel's main intent is to expose humans' relationship with their surroundings and nature.

The last poem and painting combo I will look at is William Carlos Williams' poem "The Dance" based off of Pieter Brueghel's painting *The Peasant Dance*, or also known as *The Village Kermis*. Brueghel sets a festive scene with people running, playing music, kissing and dancing throughout the busy town. The main characters in the *The Peasant Dance* "gambol through the picture" as we see "wonderful images of [a] couple kissing directly behind the men squabbling at the table, and [a] man dragging his unwilling wife from the inn to dance [which] are typical of Brueghel's humour" (Sellink, 247). Although the painting cannot produce any sound, the viewer can almost hear all the fighting, yelling, and singing that is produced from the rowdy people presented in the painting, also seen throughout are the representations of the seven deadly sins. Brueghel puts the observer directly in the action of the painting, as we are left to wonder whether these people are enjoying themselves or just living their best life until they ultimately die.

Williams provides emotional intensity to the painting, as the reader starts to feel dizzy and drunk by the word choices and punctuation as they read "The Dance". Big jugs in the painting can identify to the observer that the characters in the picture are most likely drinking alcohol, but Williams confirms this by his lack of periods in his poem which creates non stop movement and a feeling of continuous chaos. Williams says that "the dancers go round and around" giving a dizzying feeling to the reader who feels as if they are participating in the dance just by reading the words (Williams, np). The reader is deafened by the "squeal and the blare and the tweedle of bagpipes" and thrown

around by “kicking and rolling about the fairgrounds” making the reader get lost in the celebration, almost too drunk to care what happens (Williams, np). The constant mention of body parts like bellies, hips, and butts puts the reader alive right in the painting, with their body parts mixed in and jumbled with those of the party goers. Williams adds in an interesting visual aspect to his ekphrasis poem by putting “In Brueghel’s great picture, The Kermis” at the very beginning and end of the poem to create a picture frame that holds together the remnants of the picture with words (Williams, np).

It is interesting to note that Williams had such a fond love for Brueghel’s art, but it’s Brueghel’s paintings that had such a profound impact on the poet that made him need to respond to the pictures in his own words. Though almost four centuries separate the artists, Brueghel living in the sixteenth-century and Williams writing in the twentieth-century, they are able to hold similar thoughts and ideas and share respect in each others art through ekphrasis poetry. The daily life of peasants during the Renaissance in The Netherlands provided William Carlos Williams the ability to speak on nature, art and life of people he can’t quite possibly know, but Brueghel presents the scenes as so relatable that we can understand their attitudes and lifestyles. It’s beautiful to be able to connect with the writer and be able to see their exact inspiration and know that a visual piece moved them so much they just had to put down their feelings and thoughts toward it, adding more to the painting itself even though nothing has changed the visual aspect of the artwork.

Ultimately, in ekphrasis poetry the author is in control of what they want the observer to see and get out of the painting they are writing about. Their meaning and

description can be the same as the painter or more abstract and personal, but either way it adds to the story and creates a strong connection between the visual and verbal arts. William Blake exclaimed that “Poetry, painting and music [are] the three powers to converse with paradise” showing how when different art forms work together it creates a beautiful and unique understanding for the people enjoying them (Blake, np). In dialogues between the artist and the writer, such as Pieter Brueghel and William Carlos Williams, the viewer “can feel premonition and liberation, and sense how precision becomes resonance” (Hollman, 27). Art inspiring other art is how most creatives further creation in expressive and artistic fields allowing for more comprehension, questioning, and analyzing. Visual art is supposed to make the viewer feel something and when that person has the ability to write down the effect the art had of them then it allows art to have power and a voice.

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