

Poetry and the Arts (ENG 266)
Professor Jeff Dolven

Readings for Monday (2/7)

Traditional, “Oh the Wind and the Rain”
Thomas Morley, “April Is in My Mistress’ Face”
Dmitri Tymoczko/Jeff Dolven, *Prophetiae Sibyllarum*

Plus things to listen to linked on the class website

Readings for Wednesday (2/9)

W. H. Auden, “Musée des Beaux Arts”*
Homer, the shield of Achilles (from the *Iliad*)
John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”
Yusef Komunyakaa, “Blackamoors, Villa La Petra”*
Marianne Moore, “Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish”*

*see links to images on the class website

Plus excerpts from:

Horace, *Ars Poetica*
Gotthold Lessing, *Laocöon*
W. J. T. Mitchell, “Ekphrasis and the Other”
Plato, *The Republic*

Exercise (due 5PM on Sunday 2/6)

Make a rendition of one of the texts assigned on Wednesday or Monday (or a portion—at least four lines) that is sonically interesting, and record the result. There are many ways of realizing these simple instructions: make a short song, for whatever instrumentation; make a melody (or cadenced recitation), with yourself/and or others singing the words; find an existing piece of recorded music that can be a setting for the words, and sing or speak them over it; and so on. The point of the exercise is to think about how language and music interact, and how they find equivalences (or meaningful differences) in each other. Your exercise should be submitted as an audio file and accompanied by a short essay (300-500 words) describing what you have done and how it relates to the questions of the course.

Oh the Wind and the Rain
Traditional

There were two sisters came walkin' down the stream
Oh the wind and rain
The one behind pushed the other one in
Cryin' oh the dreadful wind and rain

Johnny gave the youngest a gay gold ring
Oh the wind and rain
Didn't give the oldest one anything
Cryin' oh the dreadful wind and rain

They pushed her into the river to drown
Oh the wind and rain
And watched her as she floated down
Cryin' oh the dreadful wind and rain

Floated 'till she came to a miller's pond
Oh the wind and rain
Mama oh father there swims a swan
Cryin' oh the dreadful wind and rain

The miller pushed her out with a fishing hook
Oh the wind and rain
Drew that fair maid from the brook
Cryin' oh the dreadful wind and rain

He left her on the banks to dry
Cryin' oh the wind and rain
And a fiddlin' fool come passing by
Cryin' oh the dreadful wind and rain

Out of the woods came a fiddler fair
Oh the wind and rain
Took thirty strands of her long yellow hair
Cryin' oh the dreadful wind and rain

And he made a fiddle bow of her long yellow hair
Oh the wind and rain
He made a fiddle bow of her long yellow hair
Cryin' oh the dreadful wind and rain

He made fiddle pegs of her long finger bones
Oh the wind and rain
He made fiddle pegs of her long finger bones
Cryin' oh the dreadful wind and rain

And he made a little fiddle of her breast bone
Oh the wind and rain
The sound could melt a heart of stone
Cryin' oh the dreadful wind and rain

And the only tune that the fiddle would play
Was oh the wind and rain

Hey Ho, the Wind and the Rain
William Shakespeare (from *Twelfth Night*)

When that I was and a little tiny boy,
With hey, ho, the wind and the rain,
A foolish thing was but a toy,
For the rain it raineth every day.
But when I came to man's estate,
With hey, ho, & c.
'Gainst knaves and thieves men shut their gate,
For the rain, & c.
But when I came, alas! to wive,
With hey, ho, & c.
By swaggering could I never thrive,
For the rain, & c.
But when I came unto my beds,
With hey, ho, & c.
With toss-pots still had drunken heads,
For the rain, & c.
A great while ago the world begun,
With hey, ho, & c.
But that's all one, our play is done,
And we'll strive to please you every day.

April is in My Mistress' Face
Thomas Morley

April is in my mistress' face,
And July in her eyes hath place;
Within her bosom is September,
But in her heart a cold December.

Prophetiae Sibyllarum | Dmitri Tymoczko

Program notes

Jeff Dolven's poems propose statistics as the modern analogue of prophecy. The contemporary Sibyl teaches that one in five Baltimore children will develop asthma, that one in sixteen hundred Chicago children is homeless—giving us the kind of ambiguous foreknowledge familiar from myth. Like the ancient Sibyls, Jeff's are associated with a specific city; unlike their predecessors, these newfangled Sibyls articulate solid statistical facts. This mixture of scientific and prophetic language was meaningful to me both on an intellectual level and as the father of two small children. (I never realized how much anxiety is associated with parenting.) The end of the piece, which alternately includes and omits the words "barely," gestures toward an acceptance of the painful possibilities inherent in life.

1. Sibylla Baltimoris

Unto us a child is born
One of twenty-eight
Of any hundred here
Whose breath comes too hard.
I read the news in leaves of glass
Fond fathers pull from rearview mirrors.

2. Sibylla Clevelandiae

Lo let a glass be raised
To greet the one in any eight
Whose blood will turn
From salt to sweet:
Spilt sugar spells this fate on the tabletops.

3. Sibylla Chicagonis

Behold the day is nigh:
The flight paths up above converge
Over one of sixteen hundred
To sleep in the street.
The windows shaking in their frames
Look to the life to come.

4. *Sibylla Washingtonii*

May a place be set
For one of ten by ten by two
Who will live behind a lock
Without a key.
So the vigilant sirens cry to me.
So may a place be kept.

5. *Sibylla Philadelphiae (HIV)*

Let the starry host proclaim:
This child is of the point oh one
Who will not pass
The clinic's test.
The needle of the broadcast tower
Points to his door.

Carmina Chromatico quae audis modulata tenore, Haec sunt illa quibus nostrae olim arcana salutis, Bis senae intrepido cecinerunt ore Sibyllae

[These songs which you hear, sung with chromatic progressions, are those in which the 12 Sibyls once with confident voice sang the secrets of our salvation.]

6. *Sibylla Camdenis*

Hark how the choir of angels sings:
The child is born
Who will not stay:
The overpass shadows the oh point nine
Who lingers with us barely
Long enough to count.

Instrumentation: Five singers (A-T-T-Baritone-Bass)

I've found the subject mentioned in
 Accounts of suicides,
 And even seen it scribbled on
 The backs of railway-guides.

25 Does it howl like a hungry Alsatian,
 Or boom like a military band?
 Could one give a first-rate imitation
 On a saw or a Steinway Grand?⁴
 Is its singing at parties a riot?
 30 Does it only like Classical stuff?
 Will it stop when one wants to be quiet?
 O tell me the truth about love.

I looked inside the summer-house;
 It wasn't ever there:
 35 I tried the Thames at Maidenhead,
 And Brighton's⁵ bracing air.
 I don't know what the blackbird sang,
 Or what the tulip said;
 But it wasn't in the chicken-run,
 40 Or underneath the bed.

Can it pull extraordinary faces?
 Is it usually sick on a swing?
 Does it spend all its time at the races,
 Or fiddling with pieces of string?
 45 Has it views of its own about money?
 Does it think Patriotism enough?
 Are its stories vulgar but funny?
 O tell me the truth about love.

When it comes, will it come without warning
 50 Just as I'm picking my nose?
 Will it knock on my door in the morning,
 Or tread in the bus on my toes?
 Will it come like a change in the weather?
 Will its greeting be courteous or rough?
 55 Will it alter my life altogether?
 O tell me the truth about love.

January 1938

1940

Musée des Beaux Arts⁶

About suffering they were never wrong,
 The Old Masters: how well they understood

4. Brand of grand piano.
 5. Resort town on the English Channel. *Thames at Maidenhead*: the river Thames, as it runs

through a town west of London.
 6. Museum of Fine Arts (French).

Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking
dully along;

- 5 How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
10 That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

- In Brueghel's *Icarus*,⁷ for instance: how everything turns away
15 Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
20 Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

December 1938

1940

In Memory of W. B. Yeats⁸

(d. Jan. 1939)

I

- He disappeared in the dead of winter:
The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,
And snow disfigured the public statues;
The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.
5 What instruments we have agree
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

Far from his illness
The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,
The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;
10 By mourning tongues
The death of the poet was kept from his poems.

7. *The Fall of Icarus*, by the Flemish artist Pieter Brueghel (ca. 1525–1569), the painting described here, is in the Musée d'Art Ancien, a section of the Musées Royaux des Beaux Arts, in Brussels. Daedalus, the legendary Athenian craftsman, constructed a labyrinth for Minos, king of Crete, but was then imprisoned in it with his son, Icarus. Daedalus made wings of feathers and wax, with which they flew away, but Icarus flew too near the sun, the wax melted, and he fell into the sea.

The poem also alludes to the Nativity scene in Brueghel's *Numbering at Bethlehem*, skaters in his *Winter Landscape with Skaters and a Bird Trap*, and a horse scratching its behind in his *Massacre of the Innocents*.

Cf. William Carlos Williams, "Pictures from Brueghel" (p. 1283).

8. The Irish poet and dramatist William Butler Yeats (b. 1865; see pp. 1188–1211), died in Roquebrune (southern France) on January 29, 1939.

Pieter Breughel the Elder, "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus"



conspicuous among heroes, and he shot up like a young tree,
I nurtured him, like a tree grown in the pride of the orchard.
I sent him away in the curved ships to the land of Ilion
to fight with the Trojans; but I shall never again receive him 440
won home again to his country and into the house of Peleus.
Yet while I see him live and he looks on the sunlight, he has
sorrows, and though I go to him I can do nothing to help him.
And the girl the sons of the Achaians chose out for his honour
powerful Agamemnon took her away again out of his hands. 445
For her his heart has been wasting in sorrow; but meanwhile the
Trojans
pinned the Achaians against their grounded ships, and would not
let them win outside, and the elders of the Argives entreated
my son, and named the many glorious gifts they would give him.
But at that time he refused himself to fight the death from them; 450
nevertheless he put his own armour upon Patroklos
and sent him into the fighting, and gave many men to go with him.
All day they fought about the Skaian Gates, and on that day
they would have stormed the city, if only Phoibos Apollo
had not killed the fighting son of Menoitios there in the first ranks 455
after he had wrought much damage, and given the glory to Hektor.
Therefore now I come to your knees; so might you be willing
to give me for my short-lived son a shield and a helmet
and two beautiful greaves fitted with clasps for the ankles
and a corselet. What he had was lost with his steadfast companion 460
when the Trojans killed him. Now my son lies on the ground, heart
sorrowing.'

Hearing her the renowned smith of the strong arms answered her:
'Do not fear. Let not these things be a thought in your mind.
And I wish that I could hide him away from death and its sorrow
at that time when his hard fate comes upon him, as surely 465
as there shall be fine armour for him, such as another
man out of many men shall wonder at, when he looks on it.'

So he spoke, and left her there, and went to his bellows.
He turned these toward the fire and gave them their orders for working.
And the bellows, all twenty of them, blew on the crucibles, 470
from all directions blasting forth wind to blow the flames high
now as he hurried to be at this place and now at another,

wherever Hephaistos might wish them to blow, and the work went forward.

475 He cast on the fire bronze which is weariless, and tin with it
and valuable gold, and silver, and thereafter set forth
upon its standard the great anvil, and gripped in one hand
the ponderous hammer, while in the other he grasped the pincers.

First of all he forged a shield that was huge and heavy,
elaborating it about, and threw around it a shining
480 triple rim that glittered, and the shield strap was cast of silver.
There were five folds composing the shield itself, and upon it
he elaborated many things in his skill and craftsmanship.

He made the earth upon it, and the sky, and the sea's water,
and the tireless sun, and the moon waxing into her fullness,
485 and on it all the constellations that festoon the heavens,
the Pleiades and the Hyades and the strength of Orion
and the Bear, whom men give also the name of the Wagon,
who turns about in a fixed place and looks at Orion
and she alone is never plunged in the wash of the Ocean.

490 On it he wrought in all their beauty two cities of mortal
men. And there were marriages in one, and festivals.
They were leading the brides along the city from their maiden chambers
under the flaring of torches, and the loud bride song was arising.
The young men followed the circles of the dance, and among them
495 the flutes and lyres kept up their clamour as in the meantime
the women standing each at the door of her court admired them.
The people were assembled in the market place, where a quarrel
had arisen, and two men were disputing over the blood price
for a man who had been killed. One man promised full restitution
500 in a public statement, but the other refused and would accept nothing.
Both then made for an arbitrator, to have a decision;
and people were speaking up on either side, to help both men.
But the heralds kept the people in hand, as meanwhile the elders
were in session on benches of polished stone in the sacred circle
505 and held in their hands the staves of the heralds who lift their voices.
The two men rushed before these, and took turns speaking their cases,
and between them lay on the ground two talents of gold, to be given
to that judge who in this case spoke the straightest opinion.

But around the other city were lying two forces of armed men

shining in their war gear. For one side counsel was divided 510
 whether to storm and sack, or share between both sides the property
 and all the possessions the lovely citadel held hard within it.
 But the city's people were not giving way, and armed for an ambush.
 Their beloved wives and their little children stood on the rampart
 to hold it, and with them the men with age upon them, but meanwhile 515
 the others went out. And Ares led them, and Pallas Athene.
 These were gold, both, and golden raiment upon them, and they were
 beautiful and huge in their armour, being divinities,
 and conspicuous from afar, but the people around them were smaller.
 These, when they were come to the place that was set for their ambush, 520
 in a river, where there was a watering place for all animals,
 there they sat down in place shrouding themselves in the bright bronze.
 But apart from these were sitting two men to watch for the rest of them
 and waiting until they could see the sheep and the shambling cattle,
 who appeared presently, and two herdsmen went along with them 525
 playing happily on pipes, and took no thought of the treachery.
 Those others saw them, and made a rush, and quickly thereafter
 cut off on both sides the herds of cattle and the beautiful
 flocks of shining sheep, and killed the shepherds upon them.
 But the other army, as soon as they heard the uproar arising 530
 from the cattle, as they sat in their councils, suddenly mounted
 behind their light-foot horses, and went after, and soon overtook them.
 These stood their ground and fought a battle by the banks of the river,
 and they were making casts at each other with their spears bronze-headed;
 and Hate was there with Confusion among them, and Death the 535
 destructive;
 she was holding a live man with a new wound, and another
 one unhurt, and dragged a dead man by the feet through the carnage.
 The clothing upon her shoulders showed strong red with the men's blood.
 All closed together like living men and fought with each other
 and dragged away from each other the corpses of those who had fallen. 540
 He made upon it a soft field, the pride of the tilled land,
 wide and triple-ploughed, with many ploughmen upon it
 who wheeled their teams at the turn and drove them in either direction.
 And as these making their turn would reach the end-strip of the field,
 a man would come up to them at this point and hand them a flagon 545
 of honey-sweet wine, and they would turn again to the furrows

in their haste to come again to the end-strip of the deep field.
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.

550 He made on it the precinct of a king, where the labourers
were reaping, with the sharp reaping hooks in their hands. Of the cut
swathes

some fell along the lines of reaping, one after another,
while the sheaf-binders caught up others and tied them with bind-ropes.

There were three sheaf-binders who stood by, and behind them
555 were children picking up the cut swathes, and filled their arms with them
and carried and gave them always; and by them the king in silence
and holding his staff stood near the line of the reapers, happily.

And apart and under a tree the heralds made a feast ready
and trimmed a great ox they had slaughtered. Meanwhile the women
560 scattered, for the workmen to eat, abundant white barley.

He made on it a great vineyard heavy with clusters,
lovely and in gold, but the grapes upon it were darkened
and the vines themselves stood out through poles of silver. About them
he made a field-ditch of dark metal, and drove all around this
565 a fence of tin; and there was only one path to the vineyard,
and along it ran the grape-bearers for the vineyard's stripping.
Young girls and young men, in all their light-hearted innocence,
carried the kind, sweet fruit away in their woven baskets,
and in their midst a youth with a singing lyre played charmingly
570 upon it for them, and sang the beautiful song for Linos
in a light voice, and they followed him, and with singing and whistling
and light dance-steps of their feet kept time to the music.

He made upon it a herd of horn-straight oxen. The cattle
were wrought of gold and of tin, and thronged in speed and with lowing
575 out of the dung of the farmyard to a pasturing place by a sounding
river, and beside the moving field of a reed bed.

The herdsmen were of gold who went along with the cattle,
four of them, and nine dogs shifting their feet followed them.

But among the foremost of the cattle two formidable lions
580 had caught hold of a bellowing bull, and he with loud lowings
was dragged away, as the dogs and the young men went in pursuit of him.
But the two lions, breaking open the hide of the great ox,

gulped the black blood and the inward guts, as meanwhile the herdsmen were in the act of setting and urging the quick dogs on them. But they, before they could get their teeth in, turned back from the lions, 585 but would come and take their stand very close, and bayed, and kept clear.

And the renowned smith of the strong arms made on it a meadow large and in a lovely valley for the glimmering sheepflocks, with dwelling places upon it, and covered shelters, and sheepfolds.

And the renowned smith of the strong arms made elaborate on it 590 a dancing floor, like that which once in the wide spaces of Knosos Daidalos built for Ariadne of the lovely tresses.

And there were young men on it and young girls, sought for their beauty with gifts of oxen, dancing, and holding hands at the wrist. These wore, the maidens long light robes, but the men wore tunics 595 of finespun work and shining softly, touched with olive oil.

And the girls wore fair garlands on their heads, while the young men carried golden knives that hung from sword-belts of silver.

At whiles on their understanding feet they would run very lightly, as when a potter crouching makes trial of his wheel, holding 600 it close in his hands, to see if it will run smooth. At another time they would form rows, and run, rows crossing each other.

And around the lovely chorus of dancers stood a great multitude happily watching, while among the dancers two acrobats led the measures of song and dance revolving among them. 605

He made on it the great strength of the Ocean River which ran around the uttermost rim of the shield's strong structure.

Then after he had wrought this shield, which was huge and heavy, he wrought for him a corselet brighter than fire in its shining, and wrought him a helmet, massive and fitting close to his temples, 610 lovely and intricate work, and laid a gold top-ridge along it, and out of pliable tin wrought him leg-armour. Thereafter when the renowned smith of the strong arms had finished the armour he lifted it and laid it before the mother of Achilleus.

And she like a hawk came sweeping down from the snows of Olympos 615 and carried with her the shining armour, the gift of Hephaistos.

Turning to Poison while the bee-mouth sips:
 25 Aye, in the very temple of Delight
 Veiled Melancholy has her sov'reign shrine,
 Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
 Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;^o *sensitive*
 His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
 And be among her cloudy trophies³ hung.

May 1819

1820

Ode on a Grecian Urn

I

Thou still unravished bride of quietness,
 Thou foster child of silence and slow time,
 Sylvan^o historian, who canst thus express *rustic*
 A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
 5 What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape
 Of deities or mortals, or of both,
 In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?⁴
 What men or gods are these? What maidens loath?
 What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
 10 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

2

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
 Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
 Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,
 Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
 15 Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
 Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
 Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
 Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
 She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
 20 Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

3

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
 Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
 And, happy melodist, unwearied,
 Forever piping songs forever new;
 25 More happy love! more happy, happy love!
 Forever warm and still to be enjoyed,
 Forever panting, and forever young;
 All breathing human passion far above,
 That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed,
 30 A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

3. Symbols of victory, such as banners, hung in religious shrines.

4. Tempe and Arcady (or Arcadia), in Greece, are traditional symbols of perfect pastoral landscapes.

4

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
 To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
 Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
 And all her silken flanks with garlands dressed?
 35 What little town by river or sea shore,
 Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
 Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
 And, little town, thy streets forevermore
 Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
 40 Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

5

O Attic⁵ shape! Fair attitude! with brede⁶ *woven pattern*
 Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
 With forest branches and the trodden weed;
 Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
 45 As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
 When old age shall this generation waste,
 Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
 "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"⁶—that is all
 50 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

May 1819

1820

To Autumn

I

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
 Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
 Conspiring with him how to load and bless
 With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;
 5 To bend with apples the mossed cottage-trees,
 And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
 To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
 With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
 And still more, later flowers for the bees,
 10 Until they think warm days will never cease,
 For Summer has o'er-brimmed their clammy cells.

2

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
 Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
 Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
 15 Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing⁷ wind;

5. Greek, especially Athenian.

6. The quotation marks around this phrase are absent from some other versions also having good authority. This discrepancy has led some readers

to ascribe only this phrase to the voice of the urn; others ascribe to the urn the whole of the two concluding lines.

7. Blowing the grain clear of the lighter chaff.

Blackamoors, Villa La Pietra

I was here before the blackamoors
were photographed & cataloged,
when they first ran up to me

& then receded into their poses,
descendants of archival Hamites
destined to serve their brothers

& sisters in a red baroque room,
each silent as an iron doorstep.
Some peered out of perches

askance, shining lanterns & sconces,
ready to please, or eager to cast
a guiding light among centuries

of shadows, a patina of mystery
lost in Tuscan dusk. At least
their attire isn't stitched rags.

If ebony & alabaster could talk,
Lord, the volumes of gossip
among gold-leafed tributes

we would hear as vinegar turns
back to wine, driftwood to bread.
They've been perfectly arranged,

& almost reveal whose sweat
glosses their smooth skin
in these rooms of rehearsal.

I saw one shift slightly & blink,
or maybe it was a dark hum
coming from the olive grove,

a feeling brought across the sea.
They are not claw-footed props
& furniture for drunken nights

posed to grab a hat or fur coat,
dressed in skeins of filigree
& false gems, offering a bowl

of black grapes to each envoy
or a guest holding a dagger
behind his upright back.

**AN EGYPTIAN PULLED GLASS BOTTLE
IN THE SHAPE OF A FISH**

Here we have thirst
and patience, from the first,
 and art, as in a wave held up for us to see
 in its essential perpendicularity;

not brittle but
intense—the spectrum, that
 spectacular and nimble animal the fish,
 whose scales turn aside the sun's sword by their polish.

Polychrome glass vessel in the form of a 'bulti'-fish (British Museum)



HORACE

sic mihi, qui multum cessat, fit Choerilus ille,
quem bis terve¹ bonum cum risu miror ; et idem
indignor quandoque bonus dormitat Homerus,
verum operi² longo fas est obrepere somnum. 360

Ut pictura poesis : erit quae, si propius stes,
te capiat magis, et quaedam, si longius abstes.
haec amat obscurum, volet haec sub luce videri,
iudicis argutum quae non formidat acumen ;
haec placuit semel, haec deciens repetita placebit. 365

O maior iuvenum, quamvis et voce paterna
fingeris ad rectum et per te sapis, hoc tibi dictum
tolle memor, certis medium et tolerabile rebus
recte concedi. consultus iuris et actor
causarum mediocris abest virtute disertis 370

Messallae, nec scit³ quantum Cascellius Aulus,
sed tamen in pretio est : mediocribus esse poetis
non homines, non di, non concessere columnae.
ut gratas inter mensas symphonia discors 374

et crassum unguentum et Sardo cum melle papaver
offendunt, poterat duci quia cena sine istis :
sic animis natum inventumque poema iuvandis,
si paulum summo decessit, vergit⁴ ad imum.
ludere qui nescit, campestribus abstinet armis,
indoctusque pilae discive trochive quiescit, 380

ne spissae risum tollant impune coronae :
qui nescit versus tamen audet fingere. quidni ?
liber et ingenuus, praesertim census equestrem
summam nummorum vitioque remotus ab omni.

¹ terque *aCM*. ² opere δ : opere in *aM*.

³ nec scit *VB* : nescit *aCM*. ⁴ pergit *BC*.

^a *Dormitat* = ἀπονυστάζει. Cf. ἐν ἐπιστολῇ γράψας . . .
ἀπονυστάζειν τὸν Δημοσθένην (Plutarch, *Cicero*, 24).

^b Poppy-seeds, when roasted and served with honey, were
considered a delicacy, but were spoilt if the honey had a
bitter flavour.

so the poet who often defaults, becomes, methinks, another Choerilus, whose one or two good lines cause laughter and surprise; and yet I also feel aggrieved, whenever good Homer "nods,"^a but when a work is long, a drowsy mood may well creep over it.

³⁶¹ A poem is like a picture: one strikes your fancy more, the nearer you stand; another, the farther away. This courts the shade, that will wish to be seen in the light, and dreads not the critic insight of the judge. This pleased but once; that, though ten times called for, will always please.

³⁶⁶ O you elder youth, though wise yourself and trained to right judgement by a father's voice, take to heart and remember this saying, that only some things rightly brook the medium and the bearable. A lawyer and pleader of middling rank falls short of the merit of eloquent Messalla, and knows not as much as Aulus Cascellius, yet he has a value. But that poets be of middling rank, neither men nor gods nor booksellers ever brooked. As at pleasant banquets an orchestra out of tune, an unguent that is thick, and poppy-seeds served with Sardinian honey,^b give offence, because the feast might have gone on without them: so a poem, whose birth and creation are for the soul's delight, if in aught it falls short of the top, sinks to the bottom. He who cannot play a game, shuns the weapons of the Campus,^c and, if unskilled in ball or quoit or hoop, remains aloof, lest the crowded circle break out in righteous laughter. Yet the man who knows not how dares to frame verses. Why not? He is free, even free-born, nay, is rated at the fortune of a knight, and stands clear from every blemish.

^a The Campus Martius in Rome.

'Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry'

of my inward eye, then would I, in order to be free of this limitation, set a great value on the loss of the former. The *Paradise Lost* is not less the first epic poem since Homer on the ground of its providing few pictures, than the story of Christ's Passion is a poem because we can hardly put the point of a needle into it without touching a passage that might have employed a multitude of the greatest artists. The Evangelists relate the facts with all the dry simplicity possible, and the artist uses the manifold parts of the story without their having shown on their side the smallest spark of pictorial genius. There are paintable and unpaintable facts, and the historian can relate the most paintable in just as unpictorial a fashion as the poet can represent the least paintable pictorially.

We are merely misled by the ambiguity of words if we take the matter otherwise. A poetic picture is not necessarily that which can be transmuted into a material painting; but every feature, every combination of features by means of which the poet makes his subject so perceptible that we are more clearly conscious of this subject than of his words is called painterly, is styled a painting, because it brings us nearer to the degree of illusion of which the material painting is specially capable and which can most readily and most easily be conceptualized in terms of a material painting.

XV

Now the poet, as experience shows, can raise to this degree of illusion the representations even of other than visible objects. Consequently the artist must necessarily be denied whole classes of pictures in which the poet has the advantage over him. Dryden's Ode on St Cecilia's Day is full of musical pictures that cannot be touched by the paint-brush. But I will not lose myself in instances of the kind, from which in the end we learn nothing more than that colours are not tones and that eyes are not ears.

I will confine myself to the pictures of purely visible objects which are common to the poet and the painter. How comes it that many poetical pictures of this kind cannot be used by the painter, and, *vice versa*, many actual pictures lose the best part of their effect in the hands of the poet?

Examples may help us. I repeat it – the picture of Pandarus in the Fourth Book of the *Iliad* is one of the most finished and most striking in

all Homer. From the seizing of the bow to the very flight of the arrow every moment is depicted, and all these moments are kept so close together, and yet so distinctly separate, that if we did not know how a bow was to be managed we might learn it from this picture alone.¹¹⁶ Pandarus draws forth his bow, fixes the bowstring, opens his quiver, chooses a yet unused, well-feathered shaft, sets the arrow on the string, draws back both string and arrow down to the notch, the string is brought near to his breast and the iron head of the arrow to the bow; back flies the great bent bow with a twang, the bowstring whirs, off springs the arrow flying eager for its mark.

This admirable picture Caylus cannot have overlooked. What, then, did he find in it to render it incapable of employing his artist? And for what reason did he consider fitter for this purpose the assembly of the carousing gods in council? In the one, as in the other, we find visible subjects, and what more does the painter want than visible subjects in order to fill his canvas? The solution of the problem must be this. Although both subjects, as being visible, are alike capable of actual painting, yet there exists the essential distinction between them, that the former is a visible continuous action, the different parts of which occur step by step in succession of time, the latter, on the other hand, is a visible arrested action, the different parts of which develop side by side in space. But now, if painting, in virtue of her signs or the methods of her imitation, which she can combine only in space, must wholly renounce time, then continuous actions as such cannot be reckoned amongst her subjects; but she must content herself with actions set side by side, or with mere bodies which by their attitudes can be supposed an action. Poetry, on the other hand –

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But I will turn to the foundations and try to argue the matter from first principles.¹¹⁷

My conclusion is this. If it is true that painting employs in its imitations quite other means or signs than poetry employs, the former – that is to say,

¹¹⁶ *Iliad*, IV, 105–26.

¹¹⁷ The following deductive argument had in fact formed the basis of Lessing's plan for the whole work: see Introduction, pp. xiii–xv.

figures and colours in space – but the latter articulate sounds in time; as, unquestionably, the signs used must have a definite relation to the thing signified, it follows that signs arranged together side by side can express only subjects which, or the various parts of which, exist thus side by side, whilst signs which succeed each other can express only subjects which, or the various parts of which, succeed each other.

Subjects which, or the various parts of which, exist side by side, may be called *bodies*. Consequently, bodies with their visible properties form the proper subjects of painting.

Subjects which or the various parts of which succeed each other may in general be called *actions*. Consequently, actions form the proper subjects of poetry.

Yet all bodies exist not in space alone, but also in time. They continue, and may appear differently at every moment and stand in different relations. Every one of these momentary appearances and combinations is the effect of one preceding and can be the cause of one following, and accordingly be likewise the central point of an action. Consequently, painting can also imitate actions, but only by way of suggestion through bodies.

On the other hand, actions cannot subsist for themselves, but must attach to certain things or persons. Now in so far as these things are bodies or are regarded as bodies, poetry too depicts bodies, but only by way of suggestion through actions.

Painting, in her coexisting compositions, can use only one single moment of the action, and must therefore choose the most pregnant, from which what precedes and follows will be most easily apprehended.

Just in the same manner poetry also can use, in her continuous imitations, only one single property of the bodies, and must therefore choose that one which calls up the most living picture of the body on that side from which she is regarding it. Here, indeed, we find the origin of the rule which insists on the unity and consistency of descriptive epithets, and on economy in the delineations of bodily subjects.

This is a dry chain of reasoning, and I should put less trust in it if I did not find it completely confirmed by Homer's practice, or if, rather, it were not Homer's practice itself which had led me to it. Only by these principles can the great manner of the Greeks be settled and explained, and its rightness established against the opposite manner of so many modern

poets, who would emulate the painter in a department where they must necessarily be outdone by him.

Homer, I find, paints nothing but continuous actions, and all bodies, all single things, he paints only by their share in those actions, and in general only by one feature. What wonder, then, that the painter, where Homer himself paints, finds little or nothing for him to do, his harvest arising only there where the story brings together a multitude of beautiful bodies, in beautiful attitudes, in a place favourable to art, the poet himself painting these bodies, attitudes, places, just as little as he chooses? Let the reader run through the whole succession of pictures piece by piece, as Caylus suggests, and he will discover in every one of them evidence for our contention.

Here, then, I leave the Count, who wishes to make the painter's palette the touchstone of the poet, that I may expound in closer detail the manner of Homer.

For one thing, I say, Homer commonly names one feature only. A ship is to him now the black ship, now the hollow ship, now the swift ship, at most the well-rowed black ship. Beyond that he does not enter on a picture of the ship. But certainly of the navigating, the putting to sea, the disembarking of the ship, he makes a detailed picture, one from which the painter must make five or six separate pictures if he would get it in its entirety upon his canvas.

If indeed special circumstances compel Homer to fix our glance for a while on some single corporeal object, in spite of this no picture is made of it which the painter could follow with his brush; for Homer knows how, by innumerable artifices, to set this object in a succession of moments, at each of which it assumes a different appearance, and in the last of which the painter must await it in order to show us, fully arisen, what in the poet we see arising. For instance, if Homer wishes to let us see the chariot of Juno, then Hebe must put it together piece by piece before our eyes. We see the wheels, the axles, the seat, the pole and straps and traces, not so much as it is when complete, but as it comes together under the hands of Hebe. On the wheels alone does the poet expend more than one feature, showing us the brazen spokes, the golden rims, the tyres of bronze, the silver hub, in fullest detail. We might suggest that as there were more wheels than one, so in the description just as much more time must be given to them as their separate putting-on would actually itself require.

W. J. T. Mitchell

Ekphrasis and the Other

This otherness, this
"Not-being-us" is all there is to look at
In the mirror, though no one can say
How it came to be that way.

—John Ashberry

undying accents
repeated till
the ear and the eye lie
down together in the same bed

—William Carlos Williams

An anyone who grew up in the age of radio will recall a popular comedy duo called "Bob and Ray." One of their favorite bits was a scene in which Bob would show Ray all the photographs of his summer vacation, accompanying them with a deadpan commentary on the interesting places and lovely scenery. Ray would usually respond with some comments on the quality of the pictures and their subject matter. Although I can't recall any of the particular gags along the way, I do remember one line that always seemed to come up as an aside to the listening audience. Bob

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would say to Ray, "I sure wish you folks out there in radio land could see these pictures." Perhaps this line sticks in my memory because it was such a rare break in the intimacy of Bob and Ray's humor: they generally ignored their radio listeners, or (more precisely) pretended as if the listener was sitting with them in the studio, so fully present to their conversation that no special acknowledgment was required. If one can imagine what it would be to wink knowingly at someone over the radio, one can understand the humor of Bob and Ray. One can also, I think, begin to see something of the fascination in the problem of ekphrasis, the verbal representation of visual representation.

This fascination comes to us, I think, in three phases or moments of realization. The first might be called "ekphrastic indifference," and it grows out of a commonsense perception that ekphrasis is impossible. This impossibility is articulated in all sorts of familiar assumptions about the inherent, essential properties of the various media and their proper or appropriate modes of perception. Bob and Ray's photographs can never be made visible over the radio. No amount of description, as Nelson Goodman might put it, adds up to a depiction.¹ A verbal representation cannot represent—that is, make present—its object in the same way a visual representation can. It may refer to an object, describe it, invoke it, but it can never bring its visual presence before us in the way pictures do. Words can "cite," but never "sight" their objects.² Ekphrasis, then, is a curiosity: it is the name of a minor and rather obscure literary genre (poems which describe works of visual art) and of a more general topic (the verbal representation of visual representation) that seems about as important as Bob and Ray's radio photographs.

But this curiosity tends to give way to stronger feelings when we move to the second phase of ekphrastic fascination, which we may call "ekphrastic hope." This is the phase when the impossibility of ekphrasis is overcome in imagination or metaphor, when we discover a "sense" in which language can do what so many writers have wanted it to do: "to make us see." This is the phase in which Bob and Ray's "radio magic" takes effect, and we imagine in full detail the photographs we hear slapping down on the studio table. (Sometimes Bob would acknowledge this moment in a variation on his punch-

line: instead of a wish, an expression of gratified desire—"I'm sure glad you folks could look at these pictures with us today.") This is like that other moment in radio listening when the "thundering hoofbeats of the great horse Silver" make the giant white stallion with his masked rider gallop into the mind's eye.³

It is also the moment when ekphrasis ceases to be a special or exceptional moment in verbal or oral representation, and begins to seem paradigmatic of a fundamental tendency in all linguistic expression. This is the point in rhetorical and poetic theory when the doctrines of *ut pictura poesis* and the Sister Arts are mobilized to put language at the service of vision. The narrowest meanings of ekphrasis, "giving voice to a mute art object," or "a rhetorical description of a work of art," give way to a more general application that includes any "set description intended to bring person, place, picture, etc. before the mind's eye."⁴ Ekphrasis may be even further generalized, as it is by Murray Krieger, into a general "principle" exemplifying the aestheticizing of language in what he calls the "still moment." For Krieger, the visual arts are a metaphor, not just for verbal representation of visual experience, but for the shaping of language into formal patterns that "still" the movement of linguistic temporality into a spatial, formal array. Not just vision, but stasis, shape, closure, and silent presence ("still" in the other sense) is the aim of this more general form of ekphrasis.⁵ Once the desire to overcome the "impossibility" of ekphrasis is put into play, the possibilities and the hopes for verbal representation of visual representation become practically endless.

But the "still moment" of ekphrastic hope quickly encounters a third phase which we might call "ekphrastic fear." This is the moment of resistance or counterdesire that occurs when we sense that the difference between the verbal and visual representation might collapse, and the figurative, imaginary desire of ekphrasis might be realized literally and actually. This is the moment when we realize that Bob and Ray's "wish" that we could see the photographs would, if granted, spoil their whole game, the moment when we wish for the photographs to stay invisible. It is the moment in aesthetics when the difference between verbal and visual mediation becomes a moral, aesthetic imperative rather than (as in the "indifferent" phase of

ekphrasis) a natural fact that can be relied on. The classic expression of ekphrastic fear occurs in Lessing's *Laocoon*, where it is "prescribed as a law to all poets" that "they should not regard the limitations of painting as beauties in their own art." For poets to "employ the same artistic machinery" as the painter would be to "convert a superior being into a doll." It would make as much sense, argues Lessing, "as if a man, with the power and privilege of speech, were to employ the signs which the mutes in a Turkish seraglio had invented to supply the want of a voice."⁶

The tongue, of course, was not the only organ that the mutes in the Turkish seraglio were missing. Lessing's fear of literary emulation of the visual arts is not only a fear of muteness or loss of eloquence, but of castration, a threat which is re-echoed in the transformation from "superior being" to "doll," a mere feminine plaything. The obverse of ekphrasis, "giving voice to the mute art object," is similarly denounced by Lessing as an invitation to idolatry: "[S]uperstition loaded the [statues of] gods with symbols" (i.e., with arbitrary, quasi-verbal signs expressing ideas) and made them "objects of worship" rather than what they properly should be—beautiful, mute, spatial objects of visual pleasure.⁷ If ekphrastic hope involves what Françoise Meltzer has called a "reciprocity" or free exchange and transference between visual and verbal art,⁸ ekphrastic fear perceives this reciprocity as a dangerous promiscuity.⁹

Ekphrastic fear is not some minor curiosity of German idealist aesthetics. It would be easy to show its place in a wide range of literary theorizing, from the Marxist hostility to modernist experiments with literary space, to deconstructionist efforts to overcome "formalism" and "closure," to the anxieties of Protestant poetics with the temptations of "imagery," to the Romantic tradition's obsession with a poetics of voice, invisibility, and blindness. All the goals of "ekphrastic hope," of achieving vision or a "still moment" of plastic presence through language become, from this point of view, sinister and dangerous. All the utopian aspirations of ekphrasis—that the mute image be endowed with a voice, or made dynamic and active, or actually come into view, or (conversely) that poetic language might be "stilled," made iconic, or "frozen" into a static, spatial array—all these aspirations begin to look idolatrous and fetishistic.

The interplay of these three “moments” of ekphrastic fascination—fear, hope, and indifference—produces a pervasive sense of ambivalence, an ambivalence focused in Bob and Ray’s photographs: they know you can’t see them; they wish you could see them, and are glad that you can; they don’t want you to see them, and wouldn’t show them if they could. But to describe this ambivalence as I have done is not to explain it. What is it in ekphrasis that makes it an object of utopian speculation, anxious aversion, and studied indifference? How can ekphrasis be the name of a minor poetic genre and a universal principle of poetics? The answer, I think, lies in a network of associations that seem to gather, like iron filings on a magnet, around the semiotic, sensory, and metaphysical oppositions that ekphrasis is supposed to overcome. In order to see the force of these oppositions and associations, we need to reexamine the utopian claims of ekphrastic hope and the anxieties of ekphrastic fear in light of the relatively neutral viewpoint of ekphrastic indifference, the assumption that ekphrasis is, strictly speaking, impossible.

The central goal of ekphrastic hope might be called “the overcoming of Otherness.” Ekphrastic poetry is the genre in which texts encounter their own semiotic “Others,” those rival, alien modes of representation called the visual, graphic, plastic, or “spatial” arts. The terms of this otherness are the familiar oppositions of semiotics: symbolic and iconic representation; conventional and natural signs; temporal and spatial modes; visual and aural media. Unlike the encounters of verbal and visual representation in “mixed arts” such as illustrated books, theatrical presentations, film, and shaped poetry, the ekphrastic encounter is purely figurative. The image, the space of reference, projection, or formal patterning, cannot literally come into view. ~~If it did, we would have left the genre of ekphrasis for concrete or shaped poetry, and the written signifiers would themselves take on iconic characteristics. This figurative requirement puts a special sort of pressure on the genre of ekphrasis, for it means that the textual Other must remain completely alien; it can never be present, but must be conjured up as a potent absence or a fictive, figural present. These acts of verbal “conjuring” are what would seem to be specific to the genre of ekphrastic poetry, and specific to literary art in general, insofar as it obeys what Krieger calls “the ekphrastic prin-~~

Between ourselves—for *you* won't denounce me to the tragic poets or any of the other imitative ones—all such poetry is likely to distort the thought of anyone who hears it, unless he has the knowledge of what it is really like, as a drug to counteract it.

What exactly do you have in mind in saying this?

I'll tell you, even though the love and respect I've had for Homer since I was a child make me hesitate to speak, for he seems to have been the first teacher and leader of all these fine tragedians. All the same, no one is to be honored or valued more than the truth. So, as I say, it must be told.

That's right.

Listen then, or, rather, answer.

Ask and I will.

Could you tell me what imitation in general is? I don't entirely understand what sort of thing imitations are trying to be.

Is it likely, then, that I'll understand?

That wouldn't be so strange, for people with bad eyesight often see things before those whose eyesight is keener.

That's so, but even if something occurred to me, I wouldn't be eager to talk about it in front of you. So I'd rather that you did the looking.

Do you want us to begin our examination, then, by adopting our usual procedure? As you know, we customarily hypothesize a single form in connection with each of the many things to which we apply the same name. Or don't you understand?

I do.

Then let's now take any of the manys you like. For example, there are many beds and tables.

Of course.

But there are only two forms of such furniture, one of the bed and one of the table.

Yes.

And don't we also customarily say that their makers look towards the appropriate form in making the beds or tables we use, and similarly in the other cases? Surely no craftsman makes the form itself. How could he?

There's no way he could.

Well, then, see what you'd call *this* craftsman?

Which one?

The one who makes all the things that all the other kinds of craftsmen severally make.

That's a clever and wonderful fellow you're talking about.

Wait a minute, and you'll have even more reason to say that, for this same craftsman is able to make, not only all kinds of furniture, but all plants that grow from the earth, all animals (including himself), the earth itself, the heavens, the gods, all the things in the heavens and in Hades beneath the earth.

He'd be amazingly clever!

You don't believe me? Tell me, do you think that there's no way any craftsman could make all these things, or that in one way he could and in another he couldn't? Don't you see that there is a way in which you yourself could make all of them?

What way is that?

It isn't hard: You could do it quickly and in lots of places, especially if you were willing to carry a mirror with you, for that's the quickest way of all. With it you can quickly make the sun, the things in the heavens, the earth, yourself, the other animals, manufactured items, plants, and everything else mentioned just now.

Yes, I could make them appear, but I couldn't make the things themselves as they truly are.

Well put! You've extracted the point that's crucial to the argument. I suppose that the painter too belongs to this class of makers, doesn't he?

Of course.

But I suppose you'll say that he doesn't truly make the things he makes. Yet, in a certain way, the painter does make a bed, doesn't he?

Yes, he makes the appearance of one.

What about the carpenter? Didn't you just say that he doesn't make the form—which is our term for the being of a bed—but only *a* bed?

Yes, I did say that.

Now, if he doesn't make the being of a bed, he isn't making that which is, but something which is like that which is, but is not it. So, if someone were to say that the work of a carpenter or any other craftsman is completely that which is, wouldn't he risk saying what isn't true?

That, at least, would be the opinion of those who busy themselves with arguments of this sort.

Then let's not be surprised if the carpenter's bed, too, turns out to be a somewhat dark affair in comparison to the true one.

All right.

Then, do you want us to try to discover what an imitator is by reference to these same examples?

I do, if you do.

We get, then, these three kinds of beds. The first is in nature a bed, and I suppose we'd say that a god makes it, or does someone else make it?

No one else, I suppose.

The second is the work of a carpenter.

Yes.

And the third is the one the painter makes. Isn't that so?

It is.

Then the painter, carpenter, and god correspond to three kinds of bed?

Yes, three.

Now, the god, either because he didn't want to or because it was necessary for him not to do so, didn't make more than one bed in nature, but only one, the very one that is the being of a bed. Two or more of these have not been made by the god and never will be.

Why is that?

Because, if he made only two, then again one would come to light whose form they in turn would both possess, and *that* would be the one that is the being of a bed and not the other two.

That's right.

The god knew this, I think, and wishing to be the real maker of the truly real bed and not just *a* maker of *a* bed, he made it to be one in nature.

Probably so.

Do you want us to call him its natural maker or something like that?

It would be right to do so, at any rate, since he is by nature the maker of this and everything else.

What about a carpenter? Isn't he the maker of a bed?

Yes.

And is a painter also a craftsman and maker of such things?

Not at all.

Then what do you think he does do to a bed?

He imitates it. He is an imitator of what the others make. That, in my view, is the most reasonable thing to call him.

All right. Then wouldn't you call someone whose product is third from the natural one an imitator?

I most certainly would.

Then this will also be true of a tragedian, if indeed he is an imitator. He is by nature third from the king and the truth, as are all other imitators.

It looks that way.

We're agreed about imitators, then. Now, tell me this about a painter. Do you think he tries in each case to imitate the thing itself in nature or the works of craftsmen?

The works of craftsmen.

As they are or as they appear? You must be clear about that.

How do you mean?

Like this. If you look at a bed from the side or the front or from anywhere else is it a different bed each time? Or does it only appear different, without being at all different? And is that also the case with other things?

That's the way it is—it appears different without being so.

Then consider this very point: What does painting do in each case? Does it imitate that which is as it is, or does it imitate that which appears as it appears? Is it an imitation of appearances or of truth?

Of appearances.

Then imitation is far removed from the truth, for it touches only a small part of each thing and a part that is itself only an image. And that, it seems, is why it can produce everything. For example, we say that a painter can paint a cobbler, a carpenter, or any other craftsman, even though he knows nothing about these crafts. Nevertheless, if he is a good painter and displays his painting of a carpenter at a distance, he can deceive children and foolish people into thinking that it is truly a carpenter.

Of course.