

Beyond Aesthetics: Ekphrasis and the Poetic Engagement with Art

Hossein Zamani Alavijeh

Faculty of Literature and Humanities, English Department, Kharazmi University, Iran

Email: hzamani_alavijeh@yahoo.com

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Abstract

The present study examines ekphrasis as a conduit for facilitating a more profound and meaningful engagement with the mysteries of the works of art and as a means of transcending established notions of aesthetics, dismantling the conventional subject/object dichotomy, resisting the pervasive technological enframing of our world, and fostering a mode of dwelling characterized by its poetic essence. The study aims to demonstrate that by intertwining language and visual representation, ekphrasis challenges our assumptions regarding the nature of beauty, invites us to see beyond the surface of things and opens us new possibilities for understanding and interpretation. Anchored in the philosophical framework of Martin Heidegger, the investigation illuminates the potent role of ekphrasis in disrupting customary modes of perception, compelling a reconsideration of our engagement with art in a manner that aligns with authenticity, immersive involvement and poetic mode of dwelling to cultivate a deeper embeddedness in the world and to foster a sense of wonder and appreciation in our encounter with the interconnectedness of entities.

Keywords: Ekphrasis, Work Of Art, Heidegger, Aesthetics, Enframing, Poetic Language, Authenticity, Representation

1. Introduction

In his “Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry; or Laokoön Revisited”, Murray Krieger (1967/2019), focusing on the works of poets such as Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley and Coleridge, examines the interplay between movement and stillness in poetry and the role ekphrasis plays in capturing the essence of temporal and spatial elements within the poetic context. The study delineates the tension between empirical singleness and archetypal inclusiveness, as poets seek to capture the timeless and universal aspects of human experience through language and imagery and highlights how the ekphrastic principle serves as a tool to transcend the limitations of literal reality and construct an aesthetic realm that embodies both movement and stasis, creating a form of eternal recurrence within the poetic context. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is exemplified to emphasize the interplay between motion and calmness, as well as the implications of decay in stillness. The author underscores the surrealistic paralysis and decay that accompany total stillness and also the poem's engagement with the concept of movement as both a source of liberation and a means of transcending the state of being becalmed.

In his essay “Ekphrasis and Representation”, James A. W. Heffernan (1991) discusses the historical and modern recognitions and definitions of ekphrasis and sheds light on the dynamic interplay between different forms of artistic representation. He contrasts Krieger's view of ekphrasis as a principle of poetics with Michael Davidson's perspective on contemporary painterly poems and proposes a new definition of the term as the verbal representation of graphic representation, distinguishing it from pictorialism and iconicity, which primarily represent natural objects and artifacts rather than works of representational art. Using John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and Percy B. Shelley's "Ozymandias" as two cases in point, he

examines the tension between graphic stasis and its permanence and the fluidity of verbal representation and narrative movement in ekphrastic literature and emphasizes how these poems reveal the ultimate inadequacy and limitations of all forms of representation, showcasing the struggle for power between rival modes of representation and the transient nature of artistic expression. Also, in his "Ekphrasis: Theory", Heffernan (2015) highlights the historical evolution of ekphrasis, from its general meaning of describing anything visible to its specific association with the rhetorical description of a work of art and mentions Krieger for oscillating between these extremes, defining ekphrasis as "word-painting" and emphasizing its role as the verbal counterpart of visual art. He continues to delve into the debate surrounding the naturalness of visual art and the conventionality of language, offering differing perspectives from art historians and literary theorists and, further, explores the distinctions between poetry and painting in their use of signs and their ability to represent actions and bodies. In another section, he delves into the distinct ways in which art criticism and ekphrastic poetry approach the representation of visual art and bring their unique elements to the interpretation of art. He discusses how art criticism typically focuses on the work of art, its representation, and the artist, while ekphrastic poetry may blur the line between the work and its representation and ignore the creator, as seen in John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn". Ekphrastic poetry, according to him, demands to be read as a work of art in its own right and requires the consideration of the poet and the poem itself.

However, transcending the boundaries of language and form, I aim to adopt a phenomenological Heideggerian approach to ekphrasis. Unlike the traditional analytical frameworks that may prioritize formal, historical, cultural, or semiotic dimensions, a phenomenological approach to ekphrasis, by centring on the lived experience and subjective perception of the observer, seeks to capture the essence of an artwork through the lens of individual perception, emotion and bodily presence, revealing the intimate connection between the viewer and the work of art and the immediate, embodied encounter with the visual stimulus. Rooted in the belief that the ultimate source of all meaning and value is found within human experience, phenomenology considers the traditional hierarchical view of all philosophical, scientific, and aesthetic systems and judgments as abstractions derived from the ebb and flow of the lived world. This perspective, thus, underscores the necessity of acknowledging the grounding of these abstractions in the context of human consciousness and lived engagement with the world. Rather than allowing the intrusion of preconceived notions or theoretical frameworks, it prescribes the practice of "bracketing" or "epoch" to suspend or set aside presuppositions and engage with phenomena in their unadulterated form.

2. Discussion

To begin with, it should be noted that while phenomenology is a significant aspect of Heidegger's philosophy, his overall thought extends beyond phenomenology to address broader existential and ontological questions. His phenomenology, in other words, differs from Husserl's in several key aspects. Husserl believed that consciousness is the foundation of all reality and sought to develop a pure phenomenology that would focus on the essential structures of consciousness, free from any assumptions about the external world. Heidegger, on the other hand, argued that consciousness is always already situated in the world as we are engaged participants in the world of everyday life rather than mere detached observers. Therefore, instead of bracketing or setting aside any preconceived notions of assumptions about the world in order to focus on the pure experience itself, he proposed that we cannot fully understand our experiences without taking into account our situatedness in the world as our experiences are always shaped and informed by our understanding of our being-in-the-world. Rather than focusing on the structures and objects of consciousness, his philosophy is concerned with the meaning of being in order to understand our existence and our place in the world. Throughout the 20th century, Husserl's transcendental idealism has often been understood as a subjective idealism that predefines what can manifest and in what manner. On the contrary, Heidegger's reconceptualization of intentionality, as Dasein's transcendence and its openness to being beyond entities has been seen as better aligned with a phenomenology that aims to accommodate the distinct phenomenological nature of divine revelation (Cassara, 2022).

Embracing his own phenomenological dictum, Heidegger argues that the crucial aspect of Dasein's experience lies in a primordial, practically engaged, "hands-on" existence where self and world are inherently unified and insists that this must be the starting point for any authentic description of ordinary human experience and their encounters with art as well. According to him, the prevalent scepticism in modern philosophy regarding the external world stems from a failure to reconcile the subject/object dichotomy and posits that commencing with this division renders subsequent attempts to bridge it futile.

His philosophical exploration of art constitutes a profound departure from conventional paradigms, particularly those that seek to encapsulate artistic endeavours within the limiting framework of representation and expression. Rather than a passive reflection, the crux of his argument lies in the contention that art is not a mirror but an active force that transcends mere imitation and a dynamic event, a truth-revealing occurrence and a conduit through which a deeper, primordial truth of Being is unveiled. In his conceptual dichotomy, the "earth" assumes the role of the foundational raw material, constituting the essential substratum of existence itself, while the "world" emerges as the contextual milieu engendered by the work of art. The artistic process, within this analytical framework, in a transformative act called "poiesis", transmutes the elemental earth into a multifaceted world and in this way, elucidates a reality that transcends mere mundane existence and reveals a profound interconnectedness between human existence and the world, a bringing forth - an unveiling of truth through the medium of the work of art. In

Heidegger's perspective,

The world is the self-disclosing openness of the broad paths of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of an historical people. The earth is the spontaneous forthcoming of that which is continually self-secluding and to that extent sheltering and concealing. World and earth are essentially different from one another and yet are never

separated... The work-being of the work consists in the fighting of the battle between world and earth. (1971, p. 49)

In other words,

The world grounds itself on the earth and the earth juts through the world. ...The world, in resting upon the earth, strives to raise the earth completely. As self-opening, the world cannot endure anything closed. The earth, however, as sheltering and concealing, tends always to draw the world into itself and keep it there. (p. 49)

Heidegger's text highlights the dynamic and interdependent relationship between the human world and the natural world. It is a relationship of conflict and struggle, but also of mutual support and enrichment. The world as the realm of openness and meaning, strives to bring the earth into its light, to reveal its hidden potential. The earth, on the other hand, as the realm of concealment and mystery, resists this encroachment, seeking to preserve its own inscrutability.

Through Van Gogh's painting of peasant shoes, one discerns a disclosure of truth about the lived experience of peasants, about the labour that shapes their lives, and about the earth that sustains them. The artist, through his creative act, transforms the shoes into a locus where the earth and the world converge. Heidegger's concept of "worlding" is particularly pertinent here as it emphasizes the artist's capacity to evoke Dasein's embeddedness in the world. Furthermore, Heidegger's concept of thingness or "das Ding" occupies a distinctive and significant place within his philosophical framework which deviates from conventional understandings of objects by delving into the ontological nature of things, challenging traditional dualisms and offering a reevaluation of the role of objects within the context of human existence. The concept of thingness is intimately linked to his critique of modern technology and its tendency to reduce things to mere resources, standing reserves, or calculable and manipulable entities, devoid of their authentic essence, within the framework of what he terms enframing or "Gastell".

Heidegger's renunciation of technology is exemplified in his mention of the hydroelectric plant constructed on the Rhine river which introduces it merely as a supplier of water power. In sharp contrast with this "monstrous" depiction of the river, there exists the poetic habitation of the natural environment of the river which points to the archaic wooden bridge which has spanned it over hundreds of years. He illustrates such poetic dwelling by referring to Hölderlin's - the well-known German poet - verses on the Rhine. Rhine as depicted in Hölderlin culminates in audiences' mere reverence and wonder. Both in his later ecriture and thinking Heidegger is lucidly obsessed with poetic style and Hölderlin sets the best example in this regard. He was well-aware of his incapability in fully running away from the language of metaphysics - which ultimately reveals itself as technological, calculative thinking - in his Being and Time. In his later phase of philosophizing he opts for a language presented by the poetic character of dwelling whereby Being could be thought in its essential unfolding. His intention, however, was not to reject philosophy in favour of poetry and merely put Being within the grasp of poetry but to assert that that the sort of philosophy which is in question is itself poetic.

Just as Heidegger sought to reveal the essence of Being through poetic dwelling in nature, ekphrasis enables us to unravel the layers of meaning and significance in its poetic revelations, guiding us towards a deeper understanding of Dasein's lived experience and an authentic mode of encounter with the world around him. It offers a counterpoint to technological enframing of entities, in particular the works of art, and its reductionist tendencies as it allows us to reclaim a sense of connection to the world and challenge the dehumanizing effects of technological clearing through poetic language. This could be exemplified in the case of Keats' ekphrastic poem, "Ode on a Grecian Urn". We could see how the urn itself becomes a symbol of the passage of time, as it preserves moments of beauty and desire in eternal stasis. Keats' mediation on the fleeting nature of human experience and the enduring power of art to capture and transcend time resonates with Heidegger's emphasis on the temporality of existence and the ways in which we navigate our relationship to the past, present, and future. Keats in his contemplation of the urn, captures the essence of the present moment as an eternal now, where the frozen scenes on the urn unfold in perpetual significance. The figures on the urn exist in a state of perpetual stillness, yet their presence evokes a sense of being-in-the-world that transcends the limitations of temporal existence. Keats' encounter with the picture of lovers, the musicians, and the villagers evokes a sense of presence and immediacy which appeals to the reader's sense of sight, sound, and touch to create a vivid and immersive experience that brings the scenes on the urn to life. The characters on the urn are disclosed as eternal god-like figures, interconnected with the world and thereby imbued with a sense of mystery, awe and wonder and this opens up new ways of understanding to us and challenges us to look at them beyond our familiar ways of thinking. Despite the absence of the narrator's subjective engagement within the poem, the depiction of the urn implies the presence of a human observer who elicits these images. While the nightingale in "Ode to a Nightingale" exists in isolation from human concerns, the Grecian urn, as a work of art, remains incomplete in its solitary state as it necessitates an audience which enables the urn to engage with humanity, convey narratives, and stimulate the imagination. Such interaction and imaginative engagement align with the broader tradition known as *ut pictura poesis*, which involves poets contemplating works of art as means of reflecting upon art itself (Bate, 1963). *Ut pictura poesis* is a Latin phrase literally meaning as is painting so is poetry which occurs most famously in Horace's *Ars Poetica*. Upon closer inspection, painting and poetry, as two expressive forms of art, exhibit distinct characteristics in their reception and appreciation. Painting presents a synchronic, visual experience, where the work of art is grasped instantaneously in its entirety. This immediate comprehension allows for a more direct and unified interpretation of the painted object or objects. Poetry, on the other hand, catering to the sense of hearing, unveils itself diachronically. As the readers progress through the sequence of words, lines and stanzas, the poem unfolds over time which means the readers must engage with the work at a more gradual pace to allow the meaning and imagery to accumulate and resonate within their minds. Therefore, in essence, the synchronic immediacy of painting allows for a sort of holistic appreciation, while the diachronic unfolding of poetry invites a more contemplative and evolving engagement with the work. Ekphrasis, as the art of vividly describing a work of visual art

through words, could serve as a powerful bridge between the synchronic nature of painting and the diachronic nature of poetry. By translating the visual qualities of a painting into language and the temporal framework of poetry, poets could reveal new multifaceted interpretations and offer unique ways of engaging with and understanding a given object that may not be immediately apparent to the viewer of the painting alone.

The transformative power of art, according to Heidegger, lies in its ability to shift our perception of objects from isolated entities in the theoretical contemplation of "present-at-hand" to vital elements seamlessly incorporated into the practical engagement of "ready-to-hand". Art prompts a mode of engagement wherein objects cease to be abstract entities and assume a vital, participatory role in the lived experience. Heidegger's concept of dwelling transcends conventional understandings of physical habitation, offering a rich and multifaceted exploration of our existential way of being in the world. Heidegger invites a reorientation of our relationship with the environment, urging us to perceive the dwelling not merely as an enclosure but as a dynamic and poetic engagement with the world. Poetic dwelling becomes a mode of being that involves a deep attunement to the world, a responsiveness to its call, and an active participation in the unfolding of meaning and significance and in its ability to evoke and disclose the hidden dimensions of existence, allows us to dwell in the world more authentically.

Heidegger's critique of modern philosophy's reliance on representation as a means of bridging the gap between subjects and objects is a central theme in his exploration of the relationship between art and existence as, according to him, it overlooks and subsequently fails to recapture the more basic level of engaged existence, a level that, according to him, involves a practical coping with equipment in which there is no clear subject/object dichotomy, as self and world remain intertwined and mutually determining.

Heidegger's exploration of the relationship between modernity and ancient ideals in art is not about resurrecting the past, but rather about redefining our approach to art in a manner that enables us to encounter and understand essential tensions, ultimately transcending the constraints of our current modes of understanding. He suggests that by immersing ourselves in a great work of art, we can perceive the movement and instability that underlie the entire intelligible order. He argues against seeking cognitive mastery over art through aesthetics or using aesthetics to extend our late-modern understanding of all things as inherently meaningless resources to be optimized. The ontological tension, characterized by the interplay between revealing and concealing, emerging and withdrawing, cannot be permanently stabilized and persists even in what is considered mastered. He challenges the traditional understanding of art as a mere object of aesthetic contemplation, emphasizing that the essence art lies not in its mere sensory attributes and aesthetic pleasure and beauty but in its ability to reveal the truth of the world in a new light. According to Heidegger (1979),

innumerable aesthetic considerations of and investigations into art and the beautiful have achieved nothing, they have not helped anyone gain access to art, and they have contributed virtually nothing to artistic creativity or to a sound appreciation of art. (p.79)

This is, of course, owing to the fact that

The artwork is posited as the "object" for a "subject," and this subject-object relation, specifically as a relation of feeling, is definitive for aesthetic consideration. (p. 78)

Therefore, for him,

The question of the origin of the work of art does not aim to set out a timelessly valid determination of the essence of artwork which could also serve as the guiding thread for an historically retrospective clarification of the history of art. The question is most intimately connected with the task of overcoming aesthetics, which also means overcoming a certain conception of entities as what are objectively representable. (1999, p. 354)

He articulates a fundamental aspect of phenomenological inquiry, which is the need to resist the impulse to force lived experience into preconceived conceptual categories, illustrating how metaphysical assumptions can lead us to dismiss or distort the richness of our encounters with the world. Heidegger draws upon Husserl's call to return to the things themselves, underscoring the imperative of maintaining a vigilant attitude that resists preconceptions and misconceptions and the commitment to openness and receptivity, as well as the willingness to question and deconstruct the seemingly self-evident assumptions that shape our understanding of reality.

His concept of clearing or "Lichtung" refers to the open space within which entities come to presence, a metaphorical space in which things are revealed and made manifest. For him, truth is not just a correspondence between a statement and reality, but is instead about the disclosure of beings within the clearing, the space within which Dasein's being-in-the-world occurs. By focusing on abstract concepts and general principles, metaphysics obscures the more primordial experience of the clearing and its role in revealing the world to us.

Heidegger's dichotomy between "present-at-hand" and "ready-to-hand" underscores the dynamism of human interaction with the world, illustrating how individuals oscillate between detached contemplation and engaged, practical involvement. Presence-at-hand involves a dispassionate mode of perception, where the focus lies on the isolated, objective properties and characteristics of the object and aligns with a contemplative stance, emphasizing the object's existence as an independent and discernible entity which is apprehended in a manner divorced from immediate practical engagement and abstracted from its contextual relevance. Ready-to-hand, on the other hand, characterizes the mode of encounter in which the efficacy of a tool becomes most apparent when it recedes into the background of conscious awareness, subsumed by the rational and practical task at hand. The object, therefore, seamlessly integrates into ongoing activity of the individual and the emphasis shifts from the object itself to the purpose it serves within a specific context.

The utilization of ekphrasis within literary discourse could be posited as a salient strategic tool for its capacity to circumvent the pitfalls of abstraction - a tendency in writing that often results in the detachment of language from tangible, sensory experiences - by anchoring expression in concrete and visually evocative imagery and creating a dynamic interplay between the verbal and visual realms. By immersing the audience in the rich tapestry of visual details, ekphrasis invites readers to engage not only intellectually but also sensorially with the subject matter and ensures a more palpable connection between language and lived experiences. By channelling the emotional resonances present in the visual medium, writers could infuse their narratives with a visceral quality and foster a more intimate and immersive reader participatory engagement to counter the potential detachment associated with abstract language.

Ekphrasis operates as a form of intermedial dialogue and a rhetorical vessel to navigate the intricate terrain between different artistic mediums and offer a unique lens through which the essence and form of one medium could be vividly conveyed through another. Unlike detached analysis or theoretical exposition, the rhetorical device invites the audience to partake in a sensory and imaginative experience to foster a heightened sense of engagement and appreciation. The illuminative liveliness of ekphrasis emerges from its ability to breathe life into the subject medium as it strives to encapsulate the soul of the depicted art. By carefully choosing words that resonate with the sensory and emotional aspects of the art being described, ekphrasis infuses a radiant vitality into the representation which transcends the boundaries of static description. Central to Heidegger's approach to art is the idea that art is not simply a vehicle for aesthetic pleasure or a means of representation, but rather a fundamental mode of revealing truth and shaping our understanding of being. Ekphrasis, therefore, could exemplify the transformative potential of poetic language in revealing the essence of artworks beyond traditional aesthetic analysis which resonates with Heidegger's call for a deeper engagement with the truth-revealing capacity of a work of art.

Through poetry we are able to encounter the world in its full richness and depth, beyond the constraints of expressive language. It is a mode of being that is open to the mystery and wonder of existence, and is receptive to the ways in which the world reveals itself to us. It involves a deep sense of belonging and connection to the world, as well as a recognition of our responsibility towards it. Heidegger viewed poetic language as a way of saying rather than describing, that is, it does not merely describe or represent things in the world; rather it opens up new ways of seeing and experiencing reality. It does not aim to capture the world in a static and fixed representation, but rather to create an open space for the revelation of truth. Through poetic language, ekphrasis has the potential to illuminate the thingness intended by Heidegger by creating a more authentic mode of engagement with visual art beyond its physical, objective form. In other words, by employing poetic language to convey the essence and significance of a visual artwork, ekphrasis can circumvent the reductionist and objectifying tendencies of enframing, allowing for a more profound encounter with the "thingness" of the artwork. The poet not only illuminates its visual elements but also conveys their own lived experiences, emotions and perspectives, thereby intertwining their existence with that of the artwork and its creator.

Through deployment of abstract adjectives to convey the essence of an object - be it a work of art, a person, a scene, or an experience - the writer imposes a subjective lens upon the reader which potentially restricts the reader's autonomy in constructing their own mental representation of the object of description. In fact, owing to the inherent nature of abstraction, the author's selection of vague or generalized descriptors does inadvertently preclude the reader's active engagement in envisioning the given object independently. Such an imposition, therefore, entails a guidance of the reader's imagination towards a particular interpretation aligned with the author's perspective. It could be argued that in the act of employing adjectives for the description of a given entity, the writer assumes the role of an authoritative figure, wielding influence not only over the text but also over the readers. While it may ostensibly seem the use of abstract adjectives may purportedly offer a broader canvas for the reader's imagination and grants them the latitude to independently envision the entity, a nuanced examination reveals a subtler imposition of the author's perspective whereby he simultaneously establishes parameters within which that imagination is expected to operate. Consequently, the reader's agency in forming their own interpretative space for diverse perspectives and individual assessments is constrained by the author's choice of adjectives and their imaginative and judgmental faculties are compelled to align with the author's preconceived judgements of the entity.

However, by strategic utilization of ekphrasis and providing an intricate description of an entity the writer adopts a posture divergent from that of an author and introduces a transformative dimension to language which extends beyond the constraints of mere adjectival description and assumes the responsibility of facilitating the reader's direct, impartial and unbiased engagement with the object of description by neutrally delineating its appearance. In other words, by leveraging ekphrasis, the writer purveys a discourse bereft of personal subjectivity and imparts agency to the reader by inviting them to actively partake in the sensory experience and form their own judgements. This departure from authoritarian imposition through ekphrasis represents a distinct paradigm shift which offers language a renewed potential which emancipates the text from the imprints of the author's subjective interpretations and allows the reader a more unbridled and personal encounter with the described entity. Ekphrasis, thus, emerges as a linguistic mechanism that empowers the language to function as a conduit, enabling the reader to perceive the entity through the author's eyes without coercively shaping their imaginative and judgmental faculties.

Furthermore, unlike the conventional use of adjectives that may imply a sort of conquest or possession on the part of the author, the essence of ekphrasis lies in relinquishing the writer's agency, allowing the object of description to appear independently. To put it another way, while the traditional use of abstract and conquest-oriented adjectives often carries a sense of ownership, positioning the writer as the subject in control, the distinctive quality of ekphrasis lies in its ability to strip away this agency, allowing the object to assert itself. Ekphrasis, therefore, refrains from modelling the object to fit the writer's narrative and facilitates an encounter where the object stands independently and unaffected by the writer's dominating influence.

The writer, then, consciously steps back, relinquishes agency to the object and becomes an observer rather than an interpreter. The object too, once passive in its role, becomes an active participant in the act of representation, contributing to a more egalitarian dialogue between the observer and the observed.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study underscores the transformative potential of ekphrasis as a conduit for transcending conventional boundaries and deepening our engagement with the mysteries of art. Drawing on the philosophical insights of Martin Heidegger, the investigation illuminates ekphrasis' capacity to disrupt customary modes of perception, inviting us to see beyond the surface of things and fostering a poetic mode of dwelling in the world. By weaving together language and visual representation, ekphrasis offers a pathway to challenge established notions of aesthetics and dismantles the subject/object dichotomy. This study, thus, advocates for the continued exploration of ekphrasis as a means of enriching our understanding and interpretation of art, while promoting authenticity and fostering a deeper engagement with the world around us. Through this immersive involvement, ekphrasis cultivates a more profound embeddedness in our surrounding and nurtures a sense of wonder and appreciation in our encounters with entities.

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