Interpretation as Art:

A Collection and Examination of Ekphrastic Poetry

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Critical Introduction

Introduction

My thesis project consists of a collection of eighteen poems that seek to engage and expand the poetic tradition of ekphrasis, the practice of writing poems based on works of art in other media. This mode of poetry has fascinated me with both its long history and its variety of form and subject, and I have explored my own corner of this tradition. In particular, I tried to push the boundaries of ekphrasis, allowing myself to include the conventional poetic exploration of visual fine arts such as painting and sculpture, while also applying the same ekphrastic techniques to other media less commonly examined with this type of poetic exploration, such as film, television, or popular music. I view ekphrasis less as a poetry about artistic subjects and more as a means of establishing a conversation between media and creating works that enrich both the subject and the analysis of that subject by their juxtaposition. The ekphrastic urge, by this definition, is a thriving part of the poetry written in English in the last half century. While there are many high profile examples of ekphrasis in the canon of English poetry, I intend to spend comparatively little time with famously anthologized and analyzed poems such as Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess” or Wordsworth’s “Elegiac Stanzas, Suggested by a Picture of Peel Castle, In a Storm, Painted by George Beaumont,” and instead focus on contemporary poets as far apart within English language poetry as the New Formalist Timothy Steele and self-defined “sci-fi poet” Tracy K. Smith. Both have had great success working within the ekphrastic realm of reference, exploration, and exegesis, often on subjects that do not fit into the mode traditionally.
Definitions and Terminology

An effective discussion of ekphrastic poetry requires clear language for the several moving parts involved: the work being examined, the work doing the examination, and the creators of each. For the purposes of this project, I have assigned the term “ekphrastic subject” to the work of art which inspires or engages with an ekphrastic poem, shortened to “subject” where appropriate. In keeping with this paradigm, the artist who created an ekphrastic subject is termed the “subject artist,” while the creator of the ekphrastic poem itself is the “ekphrastic poet.”

Ultimately, a working framework designating a poem as ekphrastic became necessary for this project to unify the different works and approaches I took. Considering my own explorations and the examples set by my literary models, I settled on the following definition to describe my work: An ekphrastic poem is any work of poetry which incorporates thematic, symbolic, or narrative elements of a separate work of non-literary art into itself. This is a purposefully broad definition, allowing for great variance, and the most important distinction is what this definition leaves out. The only clear limitation I imposed on the subject of an ekphrastic poem was that other works of literary art could not be ekphrastic subjects, because of the shared medium. The core of ekphrasis is its transmedia nature, the way that it converts emotions and ideas that are presented elsewhere in a distinctly other manner into the written word, and by doing so celebrates not just the process of conversion, but the original medium as well. Without this change in medium, a poem cannot be called ekphrastic, and instead becomes merely referential. While this is a seemingly simple restriction, it imposed several limitations on the form and content of my work. All of my poems focusing on films, television, or music had to maneuver carefully around elements like dialogue or lyrics to avoid an overly literary focus. In one case, I challenged this
definition in writing about the manuscript of *Beowulf*, though the focus of the poem became the physical text rather than the story it conveyed.

**Interpretation as Text and Art**

I was attracted to studying ekphrasis because it allows for the merging of creative and critical approaches to art. Ekphrasis allows for the interpretation of an artistic text to become a text in its own right, emphasizing the relationship with that which it interprets by bringing a specific understanding to the forefront. The relationship between creative and critical works is generally symbiotic, with critical work requiring a text to examine, and the text being enriched in interpretation by such close attention. Ekphrasis is essentially criticism that replaces an authoritative aim with an artistic one. Rather than looking at a text and finding a conclusion to draw and defend, these works focus on the emotional and interpretive processes involved in drawing conclusions. The interpretive ideas of an ekphrastic poem is supported by artistic means rather than analytical, though a critical understanding is still of use. Ultimately, the ideas of an ekphrastic work maintain a critical bent, and the process of examination is what becomes the core of the new text. In this way, ekphrasis is defined not by the poem having a subject from another medium, but by the depth of the conversation between the poem and its ekphrastic subject.

The relationship between the ekphrastic work and the ekphrastic subject can vary significantly, from direct description to distant inspiration. I tried to make my own poetry explore as many different possible definitions and uses of ekphrasis as possible. The poems started from the common foundation of a real work of art, but I drew no limits on what types of artwork I examined. I focused on exploring technical aspects of ekphrasis, including not just the medium of the subject but also the approach to that subject: how directly the poem references the work aestheti-
cally, whether the work is considered in a vacuum or in the context of its creation, and other variations in responding to inspiration brought on by the ekphrastic subject. I am particularly interested in creating poems that function not only as independent works but also as well-considered critical analysis of their subjects. Given the close examination required to write poetry on a work of art, it is natural to me to attempt to use that poem to participate in analytical discussions about the work. The organizing principle of the collection is a desire to achieve a conversation and an exchange of ideas between the poem and the ekphrastic subject, the poem and the reader, as well as between the poem and its critical context, in whatever way is most apt for a given subject.

In exploring the technical aspects of how ekphrasis is used within a poem, I recognized three major roles that an ekphrastic subject can fulfill in the structure of a given poem. While these roles are not mutually exclusive, in any given ekphrastic poem the ekphrastic subject tends to serve primarily as the setting of the poem, as a central object within the poem, or as a more distant thematic guide. Which of these roles an ekphrastic subject fills in a poem is linked to the narrative and poetic distance between the subject and the poem, and accounts for the range of poetic techniques that fall under the ekphrastic umbrella. Ekphrasis as a concept brings up several questions of perspective, voice, and character that must be satisfactorily answered in light of the focus on a single, theoretically tangible object. If the ekphrastic subject is the focus of the poem, how do the world and language of the poem relate to that subject? Is the speaker viewing the subject as a work of art, or are they a part of the work? What about the reader? Is the poem fundamentally discussing the work of art from within or without? The formal elements that determine the answers to these questions must be clear and effective in order for a reader to follow the poem, without overbearing the artwork or the poem’s thematic content. The directions this
positioning can take can determine how the poem is experienced and just what being “about a piece of art” functionally means.

For instance, poems which use their ekphrastic subject as their setting tend to be tied very closely to that subject, and there tends to be an exploratory nature to these poems. These are poems where most if not all of the poem’s dramatic situation takes place within the world of the ekphrastic subject; the action of the poem is “within the frame,” so to speak. Helen Pinkerton’s “On an Attic Red-FIGured Amphora (490 B.C.) by the ‘Berlin Painter’ in the Metropolitan Museum” is a prime example; the figures presented on the amphora are the characters of the poem’s action, and while passing reference is made to the ekphrastic subject’s status as an art object, the poem is primarily concerned with the world that object presents rather than the world in which the object exists. This impulse to peer around the edges of a painting’s frame and view what surrounds the art has a long tradition in ekphrastic poetry. The archetypical Classical ekphrasis is foundational to this ekphrastic mode, often imagining impossibly complex and animated myths depicted on their subject works, creating their own mini-narratives which thematically dovetail with the epic’s larger arc. The episode of the Shield of Aeneas in Virgil’s Aeneid is one of the best known examples.

Of my own poems, “Terror of Mechagodzilla” and the “Triptych” series fall into this category, focusing on taking what is established by the ekphrastic subject about a given world and expanding upon it with details not presented originally. Everything that is described in them is confined to the world of the ekphrastic subject being described. The position of the speakers varies between these poems to present distinct narratives, but ultimately they all use their position interior to the ekphrastic subject in order to explore the world of that subject more fully. Using an ekphrastic subject as setting provides a connection between the poem and the subject, remov-
ing the burden of establishing a setting and dramatic situation with the poem itself, and opens up a set of pre-established imagery and detail to be called upon. This allows the poem to build upon those details as a cornerstone for its own thematic and formal concerns. Of course, this technique also runs the risk of the poem becoming too reliant on the ekphrastic subject and on the assumption that the reader of the poem is making similar interpretive leaps regarding the subject.

By contrast, poems which view their ekphrastic subject as a central object expressly place that subject within a unique setting and dramatic situation. Rather than the ekphrastic subject containing the poem, this ekphrastic technique is marked by the poem containing the ekphrastic subject as a real object within the larger setting. A common manifestation of such a technique is to imagine the poetic speaker viewing the ekphrastic subject in a museum or a similar context, but it can also involve the creation of the ekphrastic subject or as a central prop of the dramatic situation. For example, Robert Browning’s famous poem “My Last Duchess” begins by establishing an examined work within the poem: “That’s my last duchess painted on the wall,/ Looking as if she were alive. I call/ That piece a wonder, now.” The primary factor that defines an ekphrastic subject as a central object is that the poem gives context to the subject rather than the subject giving context to the poem. Often these poems focus on the act of interpreting the ekphrastic subject and the process of viewing it. A distinct speaker is often required to establish this, providing details that establish a world apart from but connected to that of the ekphrastic subject. Timothy Steele’s “Siglo de Oro,” for instance, utilizes a clear “us as opposed to other” dichotomy in the beginning lines of the poem to separate the world of the artistic from that of the poem’s reality: “We draw distinctions between life and art/ But barriers break down.” Even if that dichotomy gradually blurs, the reader is expressly brought to the locations of the actual ekphrastic works to view them as objects. A working knowledge of the ekphrastic subject’s history
and the current location in which it is being displayed is particularly important for this ekphrastic technique to be successful. Once the ekphrastic subject exists as an object, it is possible to judge it as such within the realm of the poem, to consider its merits and issues. William Wordsworth’s “Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peel Castle, In a Storm, Painted by George Beaumont” is a paramount example of such criticism within the poem. When the poem’s speaker laments that:

Thou shouldst have seemed a treasure-house divine

Of peaceful years; a chronicle of heaven;—

Of all the sunbeams that did ever shine

The very sweetest had to thee been given.

it highlights the ekphrastic subject’s perceived imperfections, and it is that lack of perfection that provides the poem’s emotional ruminations. While this method is not as intimate as using the ekphrastic subject as the setting of a poem, it still maintains a very close relationship between the two; the primary difference is that rather than exploring the ekphrastic subject, the poem is now reacting to it. This technique also allows for the ekphrastic poem to engage in direct criticism of the ekphrastic subject comparatively easily.

I took this approach in “The Raft of the Medusa Crosses the Channel to London” and “Scribe B,” in which the creators of the ekphrastic subjects examine the process of creation, and in the “Memories of…” series, which highlight experiencing the ekphrastic subjects as a member of the subject’s audience. Rather than exploring the world within the ekphrastic subject or subjects, I decided to explore the world around it. Because the narrative thrust of “The Raft of the Medusa Crosses the Channel to London” relies on both the intrinsic story presented within the painting and the circumstantial story that surrounded the work’s display to the public, being clear
in poetic positioning was crucial. Focusing the voice of the poem in the persona of the artist, Théodore Géricault, allowed both stories to be told coherently and in parallel while cultivating emotional attachment to the ultimate fate of the work. The existence of the poem exterior to the ekphrastic subject allows that subject to be an actor in the poem’s dramatic situation. I used a similar technique in “Memories of…” series, depicting the speakers viewing the spaces and the works inside explicitly as art objects to place focus on how those works are experienced.

The final method of relating an ekphrastic poem to its ekphrastic subject involves the greatest separation between the poem and the ekphrastic subject: using the ekphrastic subject as thematic inspiration. Of course, most if not all ekphrastic poems do this to some degree, but often in conjunction with or as a consequence of one of the other methods. Poems which use their ekphrastic subject exclusively as inspiration, however, must rely on different techniques in order to establish their connection to the subject. By default, viewing the ekphrastic subject as either the setting or central object of a poem involves some amount of description of the ekphrastic subject. Poems that use their subject primarily as a thematic guide generally forgo all but the most cursory description of that subject, focusing instead on a unique reaction to it. This connection means these poems are much more distant, with the central subject being only an implicit rather than explicit presence. This does provide a level of poetic freedom the other two types do not, as the poem is not tied down to a specific dramatic situation and can still draw on the creative elements of the ekphrastic subject as required. Tracy K. Smith’s poem “My God, It’s Full of Stars” often utilizes this technique of expressionistic references to connect to an ekphrastic subject, invoking the milieu of artists like David Bowie and Charlton Heston without repeating the content of their work. Poems such as this, however, raise questions about their claim to the term “ekphrastic” at all, being so distant from their subjects that any connection at all could feasibly
be denied. Indeed, often the most salient feature connecting such a poem to its ekphrastic subject is a direct reference in the title of the poem to signal the poem’s inspiration. In such cases, symbolic and thematic similarities are under greater scrutiny and must be particularly strong. “Out in the Yard” was my attempt to maintain such thematic connection without expressly referencing the ekphrastic subject by describing the emotional state it invokes rather than the images by which it invokes that state.

When I started to conceptualize the poems in this collection, I decided to vary my formal approach to ekphrasis rather than attempt to set a single approach. The intent behind this was to find the most appropriate way of approaching the issues presented by any one poem or ekphrastic subject, rather than to curate my potential subjects in order to fit a form or force a given poem into an unsuitable approach. The hope was that this variation would highlight a sense of exploration that would serve as a backbone to the collection, uniting the works in their difference. This is, of course, not the only option for organizing a collection of this type. Helen Pinkerton’s “Bright Fictions” section of her collection *Taken in Faith* is much more tightly organized, with a consistent titling scheme that clarifies the name and creator of the poem’s ekphrastic subject and ordering the poems based on a rough chronology of their subjects. I chose not to use such a precise system categorization in order to leave multiple avenues open for exploration, but I recognize the unifying power such a system holds. Instead, I approached each poem and ekphrastic subject differently, which meant deciding several poetic elements of ekphrasis on a case-by-case basis.

I chose to organize my collection as a whole relative to how great a challenge the poems posed to the traditional ideas of ekphrasis. After my introductory poem, each succeeding poem pushes the envelope more than the last. This order is only a rough estimation, but it provides an
interesting structure and establishes the collection as a progressive journey into the hinterlands of the form. Thus, “The Raft of the Medusa Crosses the Channel to London” begins the ekphrastic journey, and the elegiac and somewhat definition-stretching “Scribe B” ends it. The major exception were poems done in series, which I elected to present together and at a place in the collection which fit the level of exploration presented in the series as a whole.

One aspect of each of the poems that took specific consideration was formal structure. I wanted each poem to fit well with its form, and to be sure for the form to be a significant part of each poem’s experience. I feel particularly confident in the form of “Scribe B,” in which I tried my hand at alliterative long line verse. I had been exploring the concept for the poem for some time, imagining the circumstances and emotions of one of the two scribes whose distinct handwriting is evidenced in the only extant manuscript of Beowulf, but I hadn’t found a satisfying way of expressing it. Eventually, I decided that the best way to present the idea was to mirror the form of the Old English poem in question. The short, stalwart lines and the focus on alliteration dovetailed well with the emotional content, and the broad, open formatting of the form lent a considered dirge-like pace that helped to shape the dramatic situation in the process of writing. In this poem, I used the form to highlight and harmonize with the content. In other cases, however, I used the form of a poem as a counterpoint to the content, as I did in “The Terror of Mechagodzilla.” The ekphrastic subject of this poem is clearly less serious than most of the collection, and that lack of gravitas was a large part of its inspiration. One of my most common forms for this project was iambic pentameter, and I decided to emphasize and work with the more lighthearted subject by utilizing the same distinctive formal pattern.
Critical Contexts

Ekphrasis has been the subject of much critical analysis in the last few decades, nearly all of which has focused on its traditional definition as an interaction between verbal and visual art solely. Ekphrastic theorists like Stephen Cheeke proclaim that “The history of ekphrasis as a literary mode and practice is intimately bound up with the body of thought and theory upon the broader relation of the sister arts,” and in doing so limit the mode and technique to a few prescribed subjects, the specific “sister arts” of painting and sculpture (Cheeke 20). This is not to say that theory has not been fruitful in mining intriguing conclusions from the ekphrastic space it has defined, of course. Cheeke is among the many to note the intriguing relationship of vision and voice and the complimentary limitations of poetry and painting, as he wonders whether “…the poet’s desire to possess the representational skills of the painter betray a latent anxiety about writing” (Cheeke 16). While he presents it in a psychoanalytic way, Cheeke is touching upon a key element of ekphrasis here: the ability of the poet to choose subjects in such a way as to provide a type of stimulation and representation that words are unable to convey on their own. Yet I argue that this is a phenomenon that does not require limitation to painting or sculpture; that similar thematic resonance can be achieved with the motion of film, or the auditory stimulus of music, or the interactivity of digital media.

Another line of contention around ekphrasis centers on the critical value of the works themselves. Ekphrasis can be viewed as a gray area in the otherwise cleanly defined world of literary and art criticism, as it is both commenting upon art and seeking recognition as art in its own right. The critic Bernadette Fort, in her essay “Ekphrasis as Art Criticism,” contemplates at length “…whether ekphrasis can serve the purpose of art criticism and inform reliably not only about the subject matter of a work of art, buts its aesthetic conception and technical execution”
Fort’s eventual conclusion is that yes, ekphrasis can indeed hold critical value, and that examples exist “in which the literary devices of ekphrasis are used at the same time to call up a visual image and to offer a means of disclosing. . . the artistic principles underlying the production of these effects” (Fort 62). Fort’s “critical ekphrasis” is, to my mind, one of the most powerful uses of the literary mode, and also one of the most difficult. I believe that there is much room for critical work to have aesthetic merit and for artistic work to provide significant conclusions. I also believe, however, that ekphrasis is a difficult means of practicing this, as the inherent inter-media nature of the form requires a working knowledge of multiple disparate critical discourses to both create and decode, both that of the art being commented upon and the art providing the commentary.

**Literary Models**

Grounded in these theoretical and critical approaches, a key tool for preparing to craft ekphrastic poems of my own was to examine existing ekphrastic poems in depth. By exploring the inner workings of poems which exemplify varied approaches to the ekphrastic impulse, I was able to better hone my own approaches, and position my own work more comfortably within the ekphrastic tradition.

A particularly inspirational poem for this project has been Timothy Steele’s “Siglo De Oro,” which I examined in depth as an artistic model for my own work. Steele’s poetry is, in general, rigid in form and structure, using more traditional frames to explore his chosen topics. His work is creative largely through how it manages and flourishes under constraint, and the natural flow and ease with which he utilizes iambic pentameter to capture grand statements and everyday situations alike has had a definite effect on my own writing, bringing rhythmic concerns to
the forefront of my mind during the writing process. The iambic line became one of my most productive tools in crafting poems in no small part due to the influence of Steele’s New Formalist style. In many ways, Steele’s “Siglo De Oro” follows his regular formal pattern: a rhyme scheme and metrical rhythm are established early and followed throughout the poem. Yet the poem also seems to do something otherwise unthinkable in Steele’s work: it breaks a traditional rule.

The poem is clearly written in an ekphrastic mode, describing and exploring works of historically relevant art, and the half of the poem that focuses on Velázquez’s famous painting *Las Meninas* is flawlessly traditional. The poem also uses the exact same mode and structural framework to examine Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, however, and in doing so fundamentally breaks the traditional approach to ekphrasis, which holds that the subject work must be visual, not literary, art. Steele spends the poem deliberately mirroring his examination of the two works, and at no point seems to think that the difference in medium has an effect on how to explore the works’ emotional impact. What matters to Steele is that the two works are roughly historically contemporaneous and that both challenge how “We draw distinctions between life and art.” This insight was key in my initial speculations on ekphrasis. In light of the poem being written by a scrupulous follower of literary tradition, the obvious challenge to ekphrasis’ assumption of subject in “Siglo De Oro” dramatically highlights how the mode could be pushed and brings up many questions about it in both critical and artistic contexts, chief among them: where is the limit to ekphrasis? This was a question which I found fascinating, and thus decided to pursue in depth, but in his poem Timothy Steele does not appear to be overly concerned with such an exploration.
In general, Steele’s approach to ekphrasis is marked by a distinct confidence that his choice of subject is entirely appropriate, to the point that the speaker seems unaware that a conflict of definition is even possible. Ekphrasis is applied evenly to both works with no regard to their medium. This evenhanded, casual approach allows Steele to use the tools ekphrasis provides without miring the poem in scholarly debate. If the poem asks at all how ekphrasis should treat literary art in comparison to visual art, it answers that question quickly and decisively with the second stanza’s first word: “Likewise.” The poem then moves to revel within one of the great ekphrastic themes, namely the connection between artistic images and human experiences of reality.

Once the ekphrastic urge has been established, the power of the poem’s firm structure becomes clear. On a macro level, the six stanzas of the poem are paired off into three distinct pairs, each of which has mirroring images drawn from the two works of the Spanish masters that Steele has put under his lens. This first pair of stanzas is concerned with the ways that the great works work upon and examine their audiences. The works themselves are the actors in these stanzas, and both stanzas end with an image of the audience imprisoned in the work, as Don Quixote and Sancho leave us “Entranced in a story they’ve escaped,” and Velásquez is “. . . disinclined/ To treat us as exterior to the scene.” These characters are so vivid that they become the most animated and human consciousnesses of the poem. Thus, art is becoming life on the page, the vivid nature of these characters formally backing the poem’s central concept.

The next pair of stanzas focus on the speakers’ own explorations of the works from the inside. The first person plural voice again comes to the forefront in the first of these stanzas on “Las Meninas,” taking on the tone of a museum curator explaining the work to a tour group. There is a distinctive leading consciousness to the “we,” a knowledgeable leader that the reader
is listening to and accepting as an authority. In contrast, the second “Don Quixote” stanza for-goes the pervading second person voice altogether, instead examining from a distance a puppet show in which there is a human literally inhabiting the body of the delusional knight, filling out the puppet and channeling the character totally. This is a metaphorical act of subsuming, the au-dience having become the work. The discord between these two approaches to the same idea is intriguing, providing the reader with varied ways into a single idea. Both convey the ways in which art is a performative act on the part of the audience, but by varying the voice Steele gives each work a distinct feel and avoids a repetitive hammering on a relatively focused point.

The final stanzaic pair zooms out to consider the audience of art as inherently an art ob-ject itself. For the first time, the distinct media of the two works are considered, as is the creative process itself. In contrast to the wild humanity presented in the active characters of the first stan-zaic pair who converse with the audience and the work, the young artists who work in response to the masters are presented in lofty language that allows little personality, conveying individual visual moments rather than any sense of self: “As if engaged in visual tit for tat/He took the Mas-ter’s pose and point of view,” or “And when the dying Don’s illusions fail,/ She weeps and sets the book back on its shelf” are images abundant in artistic resonance and lacking in empathic connection to the subject. In these final stanzas life has become art, beautiful but unbreathing. Steele wraps up the whole poem with a contemplation on the value of the two qualities which have become so murky throughout the poem. By calling the author’s work “more substantial than herself,” his conclusion calls to attention the fleeting nature of life and the endurance of art, inviting the reader to ponder an existential conundrum.

Throughout the poem, the idea of mirrored pairs appears repeatedly. Most apparently, mirror images populate the imagery of the Velázquez stanzas, a carefully considered way of in-
teracting with a masterwork whose genius lies in reversed perspective. In his introductory exploration of the painting intended to familiarize the reader with artistic and critical context of *Las Meniñas*, Steele lingers on how “. . . we, in the background’s mirror, find/ Ourselves reflected as the King and Queen.” Steele uses this striking artistic detail, long discussed by art historians as one of the painting’s hallmarks, as his avenue for performing ekphrastic alchemy and transforming the reader into the viewer of a work they are not actually viewing. This smoothly leads to the third stanza and the extended image of Velázquez’s viewer, and thus Steele’s reader, physically entering the painting and examining the Royal Court and their relationships, and then to the fourth stanza’s description of Don Quixote performing the same artistic miracle of subsumation. Steele’s ekphrastic conversation with Velázquez allows him to explore the intricacies of a detail and use that to provide a thematic image which he centers his poem around.

This technique of utilizing and expanding a detail within the examined work to serve as a skeleton for poetic exploration allows a writer to interact meaningfully with the work. This puts Steele’s poem, and to some extent any poem which follows this model, in an interesting position of humility towards the subject. Ekphrasis does have a tendency toward reverence, and focusing on only certain details or aspects of the subject work reinforces the primacy of that work. A hierarchy of scale is established, wherein the ekphrastic work presents itself as subservient, merely explaining and exploring a section of a far larger work than itself. However, this is a somewhat illusory effect, as the ekphrastic work has and is often exercising the power to access meaning in the subject work that may not have been easily accessible before the poem was introduced. By placing themselves in a subservient position, however, ekphrastic works lend themselves and their ideas a certain borrowed legitimacy, trading on the reputation of already established work
so that they can work from a position of artistic legitimacy and move from there, rather than having to move towards artistic legitimacy on their own.

A clear place to start exploring the limits of ekphrasis is at its origins. The ekphrasis of Aeneas’ shield from the *Aeneid* is among the prototypes of ekphrastic poetry, itself drawing from Homer’s description of the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*. Here the poetic mode is in infancy, still entrenched within the Classical use as a rhetorical exercise showcasing descriptive ability. The visual nature of the art being examined is essential in Virgil’s ekphrasis; Classics scholar Michael C. J. Putnam defines Virgilian ekphrasis as “. . . an encapsulation of visualized art wherein a verbal medium strives to both delineate a spatial object and. . . to capture the instantaneity of a viewer’s perspective” (Putnam 208). Presented as it is within a foundational Roman myth, this extended ekphrasis is less about the object itself and more about the story the object proclaims, a story which fits well into the politicized and perhaps even propagandized narrative of the work as a whole. The emotion that Virgil draws from the shield is presented as unambiguous patriotism, although close examination of the ekphrasis and the epic in general open up more subversive possibilities.

The stated emotional content and clearly visual medium of the art presented in the *Aeneid* does not leave the definition of Classical ekphrasis as clear cut and applicable to modern examples as one might think. An often forgotten aspect of the ekphrasis of Aeneas’ shield actually invites one of the greatest challenges to a strict definition of ekphrasis: as far as can be known, the shield itself is not real. No such object ever existed or could exist, and the entirety of its artistic content is invented by Virgil with the primary purpose of serving his narrative and ideological goals. Putnam prefaces his entire book by proclaiming that Virgil “. . . manufactures artifacts within his text for us to see with our mind’s eye” (Putnam ix). In light of this, defining ekphrasis
as the intersection between poetry and visual art is highly problematic. The oldest prototypes of the form fail on the basis of being based on, in the strictest sense, no work of art at all. Yet here the tropes of the form are codified, and disqualifying Virgil on these grounds would seem patently ridiculous. So, perhaps ekphrasis should be defined more by the rhetorical and tonal aspects of a work, by the intent of the author to open up an artistic dialogue with more than just themselves, their work, and their reader. These rhetorical exercises of classical examples emphasized not just description but also the way images were interpreted and how interpretation could be made to reach specific conclusions. Virgil’s Shield of Aeneas is clearly impossible to render as an actual physical object, but his description of it is useful within his narrative to highlight the understanding of heroism he wishes to portray. He uses his poetic acumen to walk the reader through to that conclusion, crafting specific types of emotional resonance in the process. At the core of ekphrasis is the attempt to create in the reader a specific emotional state in accordance with the poem’s interpretation of the ekphrastic subject.

The rhetorical aspects of ekphrasis are thus one of the clearest indicators of the form. Even among poets with seemingly disparate styles, the language they utilize to signal the entrance of another work and another artist into the enclosed world of a poem tends toward a certain commonality. One of my more non-traditional models for ekphrastic poetry is the work of Tracy K. Smith, whose poetry is often dependent upon references to twentieth-century popular culture, particularly science fiction. Her work is ordered and regulated by distinct forms, but the tone of her work is as different as night and day from the tight formalism of Steele’s work. Yet when they seek to introduce an external artist and their art to a poem, both Smith and Steele use similar structures to do so. In “My God, It’s Full of Stars,” Smith begins a section detailing an imagined encounter with Charlton Heston with the following lines: “Charlton Heston is waiting
to be let in. He asked once politely. A second time with force from the diaphragm. The third time, He did it like Moses: arms raised high, face an apocryphal white.” Tied up in the single word “apocryphal,” she conveys her own interpretation of his performance in the film The Ten Commandments, and the emotional weight that interpretation carries. In her view, the performance was powerful, emblematic, and yet in a very specific way wrong, and so the rest of the imagined conversation with the actor is processed through that interpretation. The reader is placed in an emotional context entirely reliant on the persona’s visceral reaction to this film, and so, in my view, the poem is inherently ekphrastic. Though Smith takes a far more critical view of Heston’s filmography than Steele does of Velázquez’s painting, she still uses an extremely similar construction to what Steele uses in “Siglo De Oro: “Likewise, Las Meniñas, self-portrayed. Velázquez looks out at us as we stand Before the work to which he’s turned his hand.” Both poems seek to make an artist into a vivid presence through careful examination of his work, utilizing details of the observed object to inform the personality and proximity of an absent creator. Quite literally, this method of ekphrasis seeks to enter the poet and reader into a conversation with an artist, simulating a back and forth of ideas between the persona of the poet and the poet’s vision of the artist-peer. This method lets the poet be subsumed into the persona, so that the guiding hand on the poem’s content becomes invisible. Of course, this is far from the only means of introducing or crafting ekphrastic poetry, but it is an easily recognizable form of it, and one which I explore in my own work.

Conclusion

Through approach or subject, I endeavored for my poems to challenge the form, conversing with other art. That conversation is the highest goal of my work, to draw inspiration in as
many ways and from as many distinct traditions as I can, so that the conclusions garnered will be new, thought-provoking, and beautiful. Finding unique and meaningful interpretations of artwork and then poetic means of expressing them has been a very rewarding experience. Of course, this collection only represents my individual experience of exploring ekphrasis. The works I used as ekphrastic subjects and the poetic forms I used to examine them are distinctly colored by my personal experiences. There is room in ekphrastic criticism for many alternative interpretations of the form, and my definition of the form itself is only a personal guideline. The nature of attempting to expand a form is that success is relative to the viewer, and it is entirely reasonable for my work to be viewed as either too nontraditional to be considered ekphrasis, or viewed as not breaking any rules at all, and both viewpoints could be correct. Ultimately, my poems must stand on their own, as their own artistic endeavors.
Bibliography

Critical Sources


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Ekphrastic Subjects


Interpretation as Art

A Collection
Ekphrasis

The tickling in your nose, the scratching throat
That warns of imminent disease, held back
By faltering immunity and will,
Maintaining barest functions to spite
The monolithic bug. Write off the day
To fight for normalcy, to get well soon,
To long bedrest, to chicken soup, to you.
So goes the dread rhinovirus, and so,
Art grabs the eyes, the heart bloody-minded.
Magritte or Velázquez serve to infect
By brush and thought, to move the mind afar
And lead to realms bizarre. Their work arrests,
It centers viewers’ lives around itself,
Resists your resistance, and lays you up
With a bad case of new inspiration.
The Raft of the Medusa Crosses the Channel to London

The new-old King was not
Impressed, and Paris saw
Conflict in the conflict
Of Frenchmen and the Tide
Emblazoned high on the Salon wall.
The necks of nobility and the nascent
Middle-rich crane
To see my lost souls,
Abandoned when the ship
Ran aground. Gossip and gold
Acclaim it brought in swells,
But not a buyer. At the end
I lifted my bedraggled survivors
From their frame
Surrounded by the greats
Of Rome and Greece
And Christian Saints who shone
With lights of propriety.
I rolled them into a tube,
And set off, desperate.
Paris of late sees
Only new dawns, new days,
And the newly blood
Red bricks always build
Assuredly stable architecture.
Achilles can bleed. France cannot.

Now I hear shanties rise
And sea-ropes creak
As the captain lays out his course
Of action for my commission.
The passage will be swift and sure,
And I’m not to say a word
About my cargo, it being
Artistic contraband. The sailors
Would call it an ill omen,
And so the masterwork
Is stored away below,
With the spare sails, its kindred.
Would that I could lash it to the masts
To catch the breeze.
Let the seas see
What they wrought,
And the sailors face the crimes
Of their brothers far afield.
The waves will crash across this ship,
Within the hold and out alike,
But only I will know.

When my painted refugees
Spy London at last,
They’ll have a home in that sight,
Hung close to the rescuing
Eyes who flock to the dark coast
By way of Piccadilly.
No longer lost in the rafters,
Their desolation will be
Crowded at last.
There, a Frenchman sunk
Is victory, and yet the Brits
Will pay to mourn these people
France failed. The Raft
Will wait here on Circe’s Isle,
Adored, yet longing
To reach again the shores of home.
This twin odyssey
Will be forgiven for lacking
Classicism and enjoy
The halls of home
And the loyalty of countrymen.

Subject Notes: Theodore Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa* is considered to be a classic example of French Romantic painting. It depicts the aftermath of the sinking of the frigate Medusa, which sank off the coast of Africa in 1816 after being abandoned by her captain. The sinking set adrift 147 people, all but fifteen of whom died. The event, and Géricault’s painting, became controversial as an example of the incompetence of the French government under the restored monarchy, and the painting saw little acclaim in France before being shown in London to huge crowds.

Ekphrastic Notes: This poem inhabits the persona of the subject’s creator and traces its journey after creation. The ekphrastic subject is used both for thematic resonance and to provide the dramatic situation, and the subject itself is an object within the poem rather than the setting.
Triptych I: Sales

She stands before the painted sky, the work
Nonchalantly left ignored. She owns
That sky by default, by right of creation.
But you. You are new, you have potential.
(The consummate self-advertiser, that
Le Brun, an artisan selling Your Grace
Nobility.) You buy her brush, her hat,
The promise held within pearl earrings, lace,
A dress, pristine, with nothing out of place.
Stand still and smile, hold scepter and globe tight.
The Master sees how best to let the light
Bring out your majesty. Forget your fall
That looms ahead, and stay in painted grace.

Subject Notes: Madame Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun was a hugely influential portrait artist of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century who worked widely with European nobility. She was the personal portrait artist of Marie Antoinette up until the French Revolution, after which she spent time working for nobility in Italy and Russia. Her work was in high demand, and she enjoyed great commercial success in her lifetime. This self-portrait from 1782 highlights her personal grace and technical skill, qualities which made her attractive to noble customers.
Ekphrastic Notes: Given the overtly commercial nature of the ekphrastic subject, this poem directly addresses the nobility that is the subject’s implicit audience. All of the poem’s action takes place within the frame as either direct description of the ekphrastic subject or as a hypothetical description of what it implies.
**Triptych II: Sublime**

He stands before the painted sky, among,
Above and alien to that which is
Beyond the scope of men with jaunty coats.
He sees divine, but we... we see a man;
Obstructive in diminutiveness.
Humans better relate to redheads than
The vast expanse of Friedrich’s Nature-God.
What Alpine path led Wanderer to see
The Zirkelstein here? Who will Wanderer
Come home to when the Sea of Mist subsides?
Perhaps a lover, young, a cobbler’s son
Who works the leather, waits for Wanderer’s
Return from God, for love’s mundanity.

Subject Notes: Caspar David Friedrich was a German landscape artist of the nineteenth century whose work often contained religious overtones focusing on the majesty and glory of God’s creations on Earth. This work, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, depicts a composite view of the German Alps, and particularly notable is the Zirkelstein, a distinctive square mountain visible in the upper right of the work.
Ekphrastic Notes: The challenge in this poem was to create character from a figure expressly left faceless in the ekphrastic subject. To achieve this, the poem inhabits the world of the ekphrastic subject, but explores beyond what is seen in the frame to speculate on what is unpresented.
**Triptych III: Surreal**

He stands before the painted sky, unseen.
The where and how of fruit and man, unsaid.
We’re up a tower, then, I think. The stones
As old as sin and sea, and built to fit
Exactly where the fruit would be when he
Walked by. I wonder who foresaw the need
To engineer a tower so a hat
Can cut across a stem, just once, just now?
Who doomed those stones to wait erosion out,
The whipping wind, the pitting spray, the crack
Of roots that lacerate their granite bones,
Until the tree bore fruit to hide his face?
And yet the fit of rock on rock holds true.

Subject Notes: Belgian surrealist René Magritte’s work is among the most famous of the twentieth century, and it often actively resist attempts by viewers to assign it narrative or meaning. His images are bold collections of incongruous elements, presented almost casually so as to imply that the breakdown of reality is the most natural process in the world.

Ekphrastic Notes: As with the other Triptych poems, this poem explores what is unsaid about the person and situation presented within the ekphrastic subject. Here, the poem is in direct conversation with the ekphrastic subject, attempting to establish causes for explicitly inscrutable details.
The Triptych series as a whole engages with the artistic tradition it is named for, juxtaposing three individual works with similar thematic and structural content to create a greater whole.
Riace B

Half-blinded by the sea, made hollow by
The tide which bore us hence, I lived as home
To fish. I saw them flutter through my eye,
And didn’t care for the grace denied to Rome.
We fell, and then Poseidon's brood had claim
To masterworks for use as they saw fit.
My stalwart brother didn’t yield his frame,
And rather kept his watch. He did acquit
His duty well, abandoned to the silt.
My fish swam by his greening sunken heap
Until the day those bastards who had spilt
Us yanked us from my useful, peaceful deep.

To be adored, as was my brother’s wish,

Does not assuage my empty eye of this.
Riace B. 460-450 BC. Bronze. Museo Nazionale Della Magna Grecia, Reggio Calabira.

Subject Notes: The Riace Bronzes are considered to be the finest extant examples of Classical Greek Bronze sculpture, and were dredged from the ocean off the coast of Riace, Italy. The bronzes depict two life-sized warriors, and were likely cast overboard from a floundering boat sometime in the Roman period. Riace A, the older of the two statues, is largely intact, while Riace B shows some signs of wear, including a missing eye. Original Greek Bronze statues in such complete condition are vanishingly rare, as most were melted down in antiquity.
Ekphrastic Notes: This poem takes an internalized, persona-based approach to ekphrasis, focusing on imagining the work’s own reactions to its history and the sensation of being viewed as an art object.
Calder’s Planets

They drift in orbit on long lazy wires
Laced through themselves and left
To meander under carefully curated wind.
Precise work, these; cut and counterbalanced,
Welded, weighted, and painted.
Then the light is brought upon them,
Snaking down from the ceiling just so,
Calculated and contrived, coercing
Shadows to a great fall to a wall
Where they wander, lost and alive,
Suddenly on a plane apart
From their bold, bright creator.
And after all this, the whole contraption
Gets left nameless, known by numbers
And the appellations of learned viewers.

Who assembles these Calders as they tour
The world, exhibit to exhibit? They are not the sort
To travel as themselves. The actors
In each abstract are too precarious,
So one imagines they’re packed alone,
Indexed, and passed on with careful testaments

As to their proper creation, piece by piece.

When it falls time to unpack them,

Set each set aside together,

And make scrap metal art once more

In a process two parts puzzle

Three parts ritual, until each is set

In the proper circumstances of their sanctity

Who gets to handle the mobiles

With their own hands? Who plays the role

Of Calder, with the tedium and euphoria

Of rigging impossible balances?

Subject Notes: Alexander Calder was an American abstract sculptor of the early- to mid- twentieth century. His works, done in sheet metal and wire, are notable for their use of precarious balances and precise alignments. A key component of his work is often the shadows they cast, and as such museums that display them must follow specific instructions on how to assemble and light his works to achieve the intended effect.

Ekphrastic Notes: This poem is a relatively straightforward ekphrasis, taking a descriptive route before broadening out to look at the logistics of the ekphrastic subject as well. This emphasizes
the subject’s existence as a physical object, and helps to ground the poem given that the subject expressly has no inherent narrative thread to follow.
The Empire Strikes Back: In The Carbonite Chamber

In the last moments
Before I’m turned to stone,
You say it. And you don’t need to.
You had politics and duty and war,
And I had a scoundrel image
Unbefitting the task at hand.
I’m the careless rogue
Who knew all along,
But that means I care.
Gone is the old hope
For a miracle of circumstance,
Lost where we left it
In the rocks between the stars.
Here in the clouds,
When our lives are slipping
Like so much mist,
Our images fade to reality,
And you love me,
And I know.

Subject Notes: According to popular Hollywood legend, Han Solo’s line “I know,” in response to Princess Leia’s confession of love at the end of The Empire Strikes Back was ad libbed by actor Harrison Ford. The script called for Solo to say “I love you too,” but Ford felt that the line did not fit Han’s personality. The interpretation of the line in the film has varied among fans and film critics alike, ranging from boorish and self-centered to comforting.
Ekphrastic Notes: This poem’s ekphrastic subject being an iconic moment of an iconic film, it was a chance to present a work that was only secondarily ekphrastic. The details of the ekphrastic subject take a back seat to the romantic content and motivation, and yet those details are still used to craft the central images of the poem.
Hologram

The light lattice,
Laser-lined
Dust of creation,

A beautiful nothing given form
By the very impurities of the air.

From nothing, something,
The manifestation of intent
Into a million unique versions of the whole.

Inside Alice Cooper’s Soul,

See the motes float

By the jewels and the teeth,
Ephemerality
Comparatively so much more solid

Than a long lost moment
When ants and éclairs
Dripped down two frail
And failing frames.
Luminous memories
Holding out alone.

The Dali Museum, St. Petersburg, Florida.

Subject Notes: Holography is a process for capturing and displaying a three dimensional image that utilizes lasers and refraction. The process is complex and generally considered impractical,
but it does provide a unique means of capturing an image, which attracted the attention of Surrealist artist Salvador Dali. In 1973, Dali met with rock musician Alice Cooper to create a work of art entitled *First Cylindric Chromo-Hologram of Alice Cooper’s Brain*, which depicts Cooper seated and wearing, among other things, a model brain covered in real ants and a chocolate éclair.

Ekphrastic Notes: This concept was intriguing for ekphrastic treatment, because, strictly speaking, the ekphrastic subject has no physical existence. This technicality does not disqualify the subject as art, and so it does not disqualify it from ekphrastic treatment, but it does provide unique thematic avenues of exploration. Inspiration for this subject initially came from examining examples of Classical ekphrasis whose subjects were explicitly imagined artifacts.
Who Killed Laura Palmer

Lynch leads us to a waterfall, and the saws
That he sharpens peacefully. The ghosts are still
Asleep, and Laura’s life is limbo locked.
What David wants: the supernatural,
Suspense, jelly doughnuts. What Laura wants:
Fire, walk with me. Between them, us, confused.
We like confused. Don’t we? Confusion breeds
Speculation, the type best left unsolved.
“The killer is immaterial,” we moan
Like owls whispering to the night,
“Don’t tell, don’t say, don’t show.” This ghost story
Seems too strange for open and shut,
The portals to else-whos and else-whats
Can’t be sated by a name;
Don’t tuck us in, just keep the door cracked open.

Subject Notes: *Twin Peaks* was a supernatural crime drama created by David Lynch that aired from 1990 to 1991 for a total of two seasons. The show was set in the idyllic and eponymous town, and focused on solving the increasingly bizarre murder of a teenager named Laura Palmer. Consensus among the show’s cult following is that actually revealing Laura’s murderer in the second season was a mistake that led to low ratings and cancellation.

Ekphrastic Notes: Dealing with dialogue in audio-visual media was an ekphrastic challenge, given the stance that ekphrastic poetry could not be based on other literary media. Here, a single iconic phrase was utilized as a detail, but the poem as a whole focuses on the visual aspects of the ekphrastic subject and the audience’s reaction to the subject, neatly circumventing the troublesome written component.
Out in the Yard

I play in here, in the comfort of umbrage,

Staying in the smallest space I know I can fit,

Looking for smaller.

Here’s a little corner, a core of coiled muscle

And tensed up synapse fully furnished with furtive thoughts

And a labyrinth of lost ideas all marked to the exit

With frayed bailing wire and the ball of yarn the cat played with

That feels warm in my hand, an embryonic sweater,

Laid on the ground to lead through a brilliant

Red path that just skirts the Minotaur but

It breaks after a few dark feet, frayed through,

And I pick up the yarn and roll it again,

The broken line that I know knows the way around,

I know it knows, I know it knows, I know it “no”’s,

It curls up in the corner like me, the ball of yarn

All frayed by the sweater it might have been, the big sweater,

Nice and warm by Grandma with the sleeves too long,

They flop down off the arms, too big,

Getting soaked as the sleeves drag in the gray mush snow by the side of the road,

Too big, too much space in the closet,

Falling all over other people’s place settings at dinner,
While Grandma’s smile fades as her work is covered
In Cousin Jack’s mashed potatoes and gravy,
Roll up the sleeves, too big, too big,
Run to the wash, trip,
Fall,
And roll the sweater up with me in it,
Pack it away in the corner,
I’ll sit and trace the knitting to find the smallest space,
Look for smaller.

Subject Notes: Francisco Goya is one of the most popular and influential painters of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. He was the court painter of Spain for a long time, and his early work is as notable for its use of bright, bold color as his later work is for lacking it. Around the turn of the century, Goya’s failing health and fear of mental illness prompted him to paint many images of human bodies in physical and psychological torment. *Courtyard with Lu-
natics, painted in 1794, was the among the earliest of these works, and depicts the inmates of an asylum living in shadow and squalor.

Ekphrastic Notes: The psychological content of the ekphrastic subject is the crux of the poem, which almost completely eschews describing the subject visually. This means that the poem is distant from its ekphrastic subject, maintaining only an inspirational and thematic link to the painting.
The Terror of Mechagodzilla

The Cosmic Monster roars with borrowed voice.
He mocks his stolen form with ruby eyes
And laser knees, packed full with fear and fire,

A mirror to the King in gray, not green.
Grand spines of steel and iron grin set fast,
Made just for this, a royal coup, intrigue

In Tokyo. A nemesis from space
Arrives while music swells and buildings fall,
Just strong enough to keep the fighting fresh.

They meet in open fields and cities ringed
By tanks with matchstick guns. The pose is struck,
And terrors rise to meet in conflict won

By might of jaw and right of merchandise.
A usurpation, noble claims revoked
And fiefdoms ripped from rightful lordly claws,
While human serfs with faulty plots support
Their chosen king. The royal duel begins
At last. First flourish, feint and flaming breath

All by the King are struck, yet yield no hurt
Upon pretending steel. Glass eyes glow red,
Space powers surge, the tables turn. Who dares

Deny the primacy of Cosmic rule
And yet defy its wrath? Then all at once
An overthrow: as humans flip a switch,

The tyrant slumps, all power lost. The King
Regains his feet, and, battered rubber suit
Still grand, tears off the traitor’s stolen head.

Subject Notes: Mechagodzilla is a character from Japanese film studio Toho’s long running Godzilla franchise of monster films. Mechagodzilla, also known as the Cosmic Monster, was introduced to the series as a villain, a robotic duplicate of Godzilla created by space aliens to defeat the original and allow them to conquer the world. By the time of Mechagodzilla’s introduction to the series in the 1970s, Godzilla films had become silly rather than scary, with the main draw being the spectacle of giant monsters fighting each other.

Ekphrastic Notes: The main tension in this poem is the disparity between the seriousness of the ekphrastic subject and that of the ekphrasis that presents it. Intentionally begun as a lighthearted exercise, this poem plays the stereotypical descriptive ekphrasis as straight as it can.
Memories of the Pergamon

This one room is a world of its own,
Stolen away so that you enter a past
As idealized as the forms flowing
Around their own altar. Snakes coil
In presumptuous agony,
Failing to support their debased giants.
The victorious pantheon, classically
Impassive, looks no less noble
For being faceless. It is all smashed,
A wonder, millennia past its intention,
Taken from Turkey to ring this room
In Berlin with imagined heritage.

This is the introduction to the jewel
Of the Museumsinsel. The West Facade
Demands to be seen, and so it is
Unmissable, installed just at
The threshold. This is curation doing
Magnificence to the magnificent,
The art of presenting art. Each room
Stands isolated, immemorial, so by the time
You make the journey from the Altar
To the Ishtar Gate, guarded by
Slender dragons and burley lions
Set in a mosaic of blue
Glazed brick that lines the entrance
To the mighty sixth-century
City of Nebuchadnezzar II, you’ve lost
Berlin amidst the advancing ancients.

You pass the architecture and grand gates,
Take a right at the Arabian tapestries,
And come to find the final room.
There is a small window, the only hint
Of an outside, the light lancing
Through a torrent of timid museum dust
Onto a table of unremarkable stone
And Assyrian pedigree. An altar,
The placard proclaims, not nearly
A match for the Hellenistic wonder
At the entrance. Carved into it,
Two forms seem identical. A single king,
One sitting, one standing. The old king
Moves. He is the first comic book,
Sequential art in utero, and the only
Living thing among the relics.
The Pergamon Museum, Berlin, Germany

Subject Notes: The Pergamon Museum in Berlin houses a vast collection of ancient art and architecture from the Middle East and Mesopotamia. Inside the museum, whole buildings have been carefully reconstructed and placed on public display, including the museum’s namesake, an altar covered in relief friezes dating to the 2nd century BC and originally built at Pergamon, on the western coast of modern-day Turkey. It is one of five museums on the Museuminsel, an island on the Spree River in Berlin. A relatively minor artifact in the collection is an altar depicting two images of a king in the same frame, thought to be the first attempt at sequential art. Construction of the museum was completed in 1930, it was modernized in the 1990s after German reunification, and I visited it in late 2010 with my mother.
Ekphrastic Notes: Rather than being based on a single work, this poem takes an entire museum collection as its ekphrastic subject. The poem attempts to follow the flow of the museum’s layout and highlights salient works or buildings in the Pergamon’s collection to cultivate the collection’s atmosphere and unify it.
Memories of the Peabody Essex Museum

The knick-knacks and ephemera of exoticism
Are hung next to the battered bowsprits
And the sailor’s scrimshaw that Salem celebrates
Even after witches supplant merchants
In the halls of Hawthorne’s Customs House.

These collections were cargo in a colonial keel,
Brought to Salem, a city of sails, in centuries past:
Impractical porcelain ware, decorated door knobs,
A house brought wholesale and set up new
To show how the other hemisphere lives.

The whole building billows where brick meets pane,
Soft ceiling curves and vaulting spars, an elegant hall
For far-off treasures designed to be sold.
Exportation is the art of exploiting exploiters,
Crafting grotesque and homeless goods sold as spirits from afar,

Orphaned works conceived in the trade winds,
Born on journeys away from home, misshapen
And monstrous, with a rare gift of direction,
Hailed in the only halls they’ve ever known,
At peace with existence as a piece.
Subject Notes: The Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, houses collections of primarily American, Asian, and nautical art, reflecting Salem’s past as an international trade port, with the architecture of the museum itself deliberately evoking maritime imagery. One of the Museum’s largest permanent collections is of Asian Export art, consisting of ornamental trade goods made in Asia explicitly to be sold on the European market. I grew up just a few towns away from the museum, and have visited it periodically while growing up in Massachusetts.
Ekphrastic Notes: In this poem, the ekphrastic treatment of the museum’s collection focuses on the context in which it is presented, examining what signifies something as art. A mixture of descriptive ekphrasis and narrative ekphrasis is employed, and the museum and the collection it houses are melded into a single subject.
Memories of Seeg

If angels dance on heads of pins,
And God makes great from small,
I wondered where St. Peter sits
Come Mass-time in this hall?

The pastel Gates of Heaven smile
Earnestly on row on row
Of empty pews that look back on
God’s halls in Rococo.

I entered Ulrich’s Pilgrim Church
Apostate, not its flock.
I hold at best ancestral claim
To stand inside and gawk

As sonorous salvations drift
Through healthful Alpine air,
Echoes of the thousand births
Here baptized through the years.
A furtive glance was all I got,
Not pilgrim nor parishioner,
And so the Spirit, curt but kind,
Left my soul without a stir.

I was not saved beneath the gaze
Of angels, saints, the Son.

St. Ulrich’s house was more concerned
With Seeg, the roof of Christendom.

Subject Notes: Seeg, Germany, is a tiny village in the Bavarian Alps, just on the border of Austria. My maternal grandfather’s family has lived in and around the village for several generations, and I visited it with my mother in late 2010. The village has fewer than 2,500 residents, yet
the Catholic church in the village, known as St Ulrich’s Pilgrim Chapel, is decorated on the interior with a stunning Eighteenth century Rococo fresco depicting angels surrounding the Gates to Heaven. The surprise of finding such a magnificent space in such an unassuming town was the highlight of the trip.

Ekphrastic Notes: The poems in the *Memories of...* series take buildings and spaces as their ekphrastic subject, and seek to capture the feelings cultivated by those spaces and the art within them. In this poem, the spiritual context of the ekphrastic subject guided the content, creating a complex interaction between that spiritual context and the speaker experiencing it.
Replicants

There is still a sun. It still rises.

Down among the alleys

Where languages, lives, and lies

Turn back on themselves

There is so very little light,

The stars get lost and lose

Their vigil in the night.

In this lost city, Roy Batty sees

Shining shadows. Synthetic eyes

Hold out with weak, conflicting hope

Of escaping from the endless black

Into dusky days and neon nights.

Too tired to live amidst the night,

Too dangerous to venture in the day,

But still there is a sun.

And still it rises.

Subject Notes: Loosely based on the Phillip K. Dick novel Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, Ridley Scott’s 1982 science fiction film Blade Runner is considered to be an archetypal example of neo-noir film. The film has had a rather tumultuous history, ranging from a troubled production to editorial confusion and several cuts are available, but the strong performances in the film and the stunning visuals have made it a classic.

Ekphrastic Notes: Given the ekphrastic subject’s status as an adaptation in its own right, this poem focuses specifically on the lighting in the film, which is only applicable to the film. This clarifies the ekphrastic subject and distances the poem from the subject’s own literary roots, allowing both to stand on their own terms.
Alpha Nocturne

You are quiet tonight,

Finally. We’ve had our daily loud silence

For breakfast, the usual Old Crow

And recrimination for lunch, then the bottles

On every step of the old oak stairs

Chime and vibrate with our voices

As we wish each other dead over dinner,

A chorus of tiny, boozy echoes. Now,

You are quiet tonight,

Passed out, pale face reflected

In the mirror we hung above the bed

A thousand years ago last July.

We have traded roles night by night,

Narcissus and Echo in turn,

Both loudly transfixed by the reflections

Of two bright selves, doomed to waste

Our lives and loves on one another.

You are quiet tonight,

And I want to leave you there.

Your silence could not withstand
The roar of the engine

As I crank into gear

And pull away.

Who am I to sully this decrepit beauty

With fresh, merciless hope?

But I never could let sleeping dogs lie,

And when your voice raises itself through sleep

To whisper “I love you”

To the reflection in the mirror,

I whisper “I love you” right back.

Subject Notes: The Mountain Goats are a long-running indie rock band headed by songwriter John Darnielle. Their 2002 album *Tallahassee* marks a transition in the band’s career, as they moved from recording largely on cassettes for very limited release to working in a proper recording studio with record label 4AD. The songs on the album all tell the story of the failing marriage of the so-called “Alpha Couple,” two recurring characters in Darnielle’s earlier songs who are defined by their toxic, codependent, but extremely passionate love affair and the fact that songs about them always included the word “Alpha” in the title.
Ekphrastic Notes: Engaging with an ekphrastic subject that has no specific visual component necessitated a different approach to this poem. The narrative is directly following that of the subject album, and the mood was drawn from its depressed soundscape. The sensory details employed in the poem are mostly aural in order to tie in to the experience of the music.
Scribe B

So. The scop sings verses

The old scribe held dear

At the word-wright’s own burial.

Words rise with his pyre

To Heaven, then to ash.

The hearths and halls are darkened

By our brother’s passing.

Braver men mourn him.

I am moved to fear,

Imagining his quill left still.

A mentor and mass-leader,

His mind and memory held

In high regard the stories

Of heroes long past.

Gone is the old scribe’s

Graceful hand,

His work as yet undone,

Half-finished lines falling

Onto my shoulders.

Our work is memory,

So I will remember him.
The scribe and the scop will be

Held in my lines, my letters,

With the hero-prince:

Travelers through the ages.

Tribute and elegy,

Fair due to those who

Fight darkness day by day.

Let the task begin,

The letters flow.

I cannot create

Characters as he did,

To imitate the lost

Insults his effort.

To continue the Codex

And in continuity create

Lasting lines.

Long will he live.

Beowulf will bring

Bright memory, bound

So scribes like us

Stand side-by-side with heroes.

Subject Notes: The only extant manuscript of the Old English poem Beowulf is found in the Nowell Codex. Much about the text is unknown, including its age and whether it is the original manuscript of the poem or a copy from an older work. It has been established, however, that two separate scribes, each with distinct handwriting, were responsible for writing the work. Scribe A wrote the first 1939 lines, and Scribe B completed the rest of the poem. The relationship between these two scribes is a mystery, and each scribe is responsible for other texts within the Nowell Codex; Beowulf is the only text in the Codex both scribes worked on.

Ekphrastic Notes: This poem plays with the fact that ekphrasis is traditionally limited to responding to visual rather than literary art by choosing the physical manuscript of a poem as the ek-
phrastic subject. This led to a focus on the handwriting and technical aspects of the book’s creation, which in turn created the persona of the second scribe. The form is a slightly modified take on alliterative long lines, the form in which Beowulf and most other Old English poems were composed.
Appendix: Referenced Poems

On an Attic Red-Figured Amphora (490 B.C.) by the “Berlin Painter” in the Metropolitan Museum

Helen Pinkerton

The one young singer, clay-red on sheer black,
Flings back his head in joy, advances dancing.
Drawn lines of kithara, khiton, sash and back
Repeat the amphora’s fictile lines, hold time
Controlled, almost, in space’s turned dimension.
His will, Apollo’s now, seeks the sublime.
Archaic art. Yet clarity and tension
Seem threatened by the singer’s imminent rapture.
Quest for the god, young soul, might prove your capture.
On Leonard Baskin’s Etching *Benevolent Angel*

*Helen Pinkerton*

I, too, have felt the fire of being burn
Till all my flesh and my mind, too, seemed ash,
And I as if I were not. There, at the turn
Of what is not and of what is, forms flash
Out of and into being. So, from black
Seemingly shapes itself your angel’s white—
Arms, cheek, and plumage—while, equal in power,
Black eye and wing emerge ready for flight.
For both, the existential ground is bright.
The Aeneid, Book 8, lines 626-728

Virgil, Translated by Theodore C. Williams

...He pictured there
Iulus' destined line of glorious sons
marshalled for many a war.

In cavern green,
haut of the war-god, lay the mother-wolf;
the twin boy-sucklings at her udders played,
nor feared such nurse; with long neck backward thrown
she fondled each, and shaped with busy tongue
their bodies fair. Near these were pictured well
the walls of Rome and ravished Sabine wives
in the thronged theatre violently seized,
when the great games were done; then, sudden war
of Romulus against the Cures grim
and hoary Tatius; next, the end of strife
between the rival kings, who stood in arms
before Jove's sacred altar, cup in hand,
and swore a compact o'er the slaughtered swine.

Hard by, behold, the whirling chariots tore
Mettus asunder (would thou hadst been true,
false Alban, to thy vow!); and Tullus trailed
the traitor's mangled corse along the hills,
the wild thorn dripping gore. Porsenna, next,
sent to revolted Rome his proud command
to take her Tarquin back, and with strong siege
assailed the city's wall; while unsubdued
Aeneas' sons took arms in freedom's name.
there too the semblance of the frustrate King,
a semblance of his wrath and menace vain,
when Cocles broke the bridge, and Cloelia burst
her captive bonds and swam the Tiber's wave.
Lo, on the steep Tarpeian citadel
stood Manlius at the sacred doors of Jove,
holding the capitol, whereon was seen
the fresh-thatched house of Romulus the King.
There, too, all silver, through arcade of gold
fluttered the goose, whose monitory call
revealed the foeman at the gate: outside
besieging Gauls the thorny pathway climbed,
ambushed in shadow and the friendly dark
of night without a star; their flowing hair
was golden, and their every vesture gold;
their cloaks were glittering plaid; each milk-white neck
bore circlet of bright gold; in each man's hand
two Alpine javelins gleamed, and for defence
long shields the wild northern warriors bore.

There, graven cunningly, the Salian choir
went leaping, and in Lupercalian feast
the naked striplings ran; while others, crowned
with peaked cap, bore shields that fell from heaven;
and, bearing into Rome their emblems old,
chaste priestesses on soft-strewn litters passed.

But far from these th' artificer divine
had wrought a Tartarus, the dreadful doors
of Pluto, and the chastisements of sin;
swung o'er a threatening precipice, was seen
thy trembling form, O Catiline, in fear
of fury-faces nigh: and distant far
th' assemblies of the righteous, in whose midst
was Cato, giving judgment and decree.

Encircled by these pictures ran the waves
of vast, unrestful seas in flowing gold,
where seemed along the azure crests to fly
the hoary foam, and in a silver ring
the tails of swift, emerging dolphins lashed
the waters bright, and clove the tumbling brine.

For the shield's central glory could be seen
great fleets of brazen galleys, and the fight
at Actium; where, ablaze with war's array,
Leucate's peak glowed o'er the golden tide.
Caesar Augustus led Italia's sons
to battle: at his side concordant moved
Senate and Roman People, with their gods
of hearth and home, and all Olympian Powers.
Uplifted on his ship he stands; his brows
beneath a double glory smile, and bright
over his forehead beams the Julian star.
in neighboring region great Agrippa leads,
by favor of fair winds and friendly Heaven,
his squadron forth: upon his brows he wears
the peerless emblem of his rostral crown.
Opposing, in barbaric splendor shine
the arms of Antony: in victor's garb
from nations in the land of morn he rides,
and from the Red Sea, bringing in his train
Egypt and Syria, utmost Bactria's horde,
and last—O shameless!—his Egyptian spouse.
All to the fight make haste; the slanted oars
and triple beaks of brass uptear the waves
to angry foam, as to the deep they speed
like hills on hill-tops hurled, or Cyclades
drifting and clashing in the sea: so vast
that shock of castled ships and mighty men!
Swift, arrowy steel and balls of blazing tow
rain o'er the waters, till the sea-god's world
flows red with slaughter. In the midst, the Queen,
sounding her native timbrel, wildly calls
her minions to the fight, nor yet can see
two fatal asps behind. Her monster-gods,
barking Anubis, and his mongrel crew,
on Neptune, Venus, and Minerva fling
their impious arms; the face of angry Mars,
carved out of iron, in the centre frowns,
grim Furies fill the air; Discordia strides
in rent robe, mad with joy; and at her side,
bellona waves her sanguinary scourge.
There Actian Apollo watched the war,
and o'er it stretched his bow; which when they knew,
Egyptian, Arab, and swart Indian slave,
and all the sons of Saba fled away
in terror of his arm. The vanquished Queen
made prayer to all the winds, and more and more
flung out the swelling sail: on wind-swept wave
she fled through dead and dying; her white brow
the Lord of Fire had cunningly portrayed
blanched with approaching doom. Beyond her lay
the large-limbed picture of the mournful Nile,
who from his bosom spread his garments wide,
and offered refuge in his sheltering streams
and broad, blue breast, to all her fallen power.
But Caesar in his triple triumph passed
the gates of Rome, and gave Italia's gods,
for grateful offering and immortal praise,
three hundred temples; all the city streets
with game and revel and applauding song
rang loud; in all the temples altars burned
and Roman matrons prayed; the slaughtered herds
strewed well the sacred ground. The hero, throned
at snow-white marble threshold of the fane
to radiant Phoebus, views the gift and spoil
the nations bring, and on the portals proud
hangs a perpetual garland: in long file
the vanquished peoples pass, of alien tongues,
of arms and vesture strange. Here Vulcan showed
ungirdled Afric chiefs and Nomads bold,
Gelonian bowmen, men of Caria,
and Leleges. Euphrates seemed to flow

with humbler wave; the world's remotest men,

Morini came, with double-horned Rhine,

and Dahae, little wont to bend the knee,

and swift Araxes, for a bridge too proud.
My God, It’s Full of Stars

Tracy K. Smith

1.

We like to think of it as parallel to what we know,

Only bigger. One man against the authorities.

Or one man against a city of zombies. One man

Who is not, in fact, a man, sent to understand

The caravan of men now chasing him like red ants

Let loose down the pants of America. Man on the run.

Man with a ship to catch, a payload to drop,

This message going out to all of space. . . . Though

Maybe it’s more like life below the sea: silent,

Buoyant, bizarrely benign. Relics

Of an outmoded design. Some like to imagine

A cosmic mother watching through a spray of stars,

Mouthing yes, yes as we toddle toward the light,

Biting her lip if we teeter at some ledge. Longing

To sweep us to her breast, she hopes for the best

While the father storms through adjacent rooms

Ranting with the force of Kingdom Come,

Not caring anymore what might snap us in its jaw.

Sometimes, what I see is a library in a rural community.
All the tall shelves in the big open room. And the pencils
In a cup at Circulation, gnawed on by the entire population.
The books have lived here all along, belonging
For weeks at a time to one or another in the brief sequence
Of family names, speaking (at night mostly) to a face,
A pair of eyes. The most remarkable lies.

2.
Charlton Heston is waiting to be let in. He asked once politely.
A second time with force from the diaphragm. The third time,
He did it like Moses: arms raised high, face an apocryphal white.
Shirt crisp, suit trim, he stoops a little coming in,
Then grows tall. He scans the room. He stands until I gesture,
Then he sits. Birds commence their evening chatter. Someone fires
Charcoals out below. He’ll take a whiskey if I have it. Water if I don’t.
I ask him to start from the beginning, but he goes only halfway back.
*That was the future once*, he says. *Before the world went upside down.*
Hero, survivor, God’s right hand man, I know he sees the blank
Surface of the moon where I see a language built from brick and bone.
He sits straight in his seat, takes a long, slow high-thespian breath,
Then lets it go. *For all I know, I was the last true man on this earth.* And:
*May I smoke?* The voices outside soften. Planes jet past heading off or back.
Someone cries that she does not want to go to bed. Footsteps overhead.
A fountain in the neighbor’s yard babbles to itself, and the night air
Lifts the sound indoors. *It was another time*, he says, picking up again. 

*We were pioneers. Will you fight to stay alive here, riding the earth Toward God-knows-where?* I think of Atlantis buried under ice, gone

One day from sight, the shore from which it rose now glacial and stark.

Our eyes adjust to the dark.

3.

Perhaps the great error is believing we’re alone,

That the others have come and gone—a momentary blip—

When all along, space might be choc-full of traffic,

Bursting at the seams with energy we neither feel

Nor see, flush against us, living, dying, deciding,

Setting solid feet down on planets everywhere,

Bowing to the great stars that command, pitching stones

At whatever are their moons. They live wondering

If they are the only ones, knowing only the wish to know,

And the great black distance they—we—flicker in.

Maybe the dead know, their eyes widening at last,

Seeing the high beams of a million galaxies flick on

At twilight. Hearing the engines flare, the horns

Not letting up, the frenzy of being. I want to be

One notch below bedlam, like a radio without a dial.

Wide open, so everything floods in at once.

And sealed tight, so nothing escapes. Not even time,
Which should curl in on itself and loop around like smoke.

So that I might be sitting now beside my father

As he raises a lit match to the bowl of his pipe

For the first time in the winter of 1959.

4.

In those last scenes of Kubrick’s *2001*

When Dave is whisked into the center of space,

Which unfurls in an aurora of orgasmic light

Before opening wide, like a jungle orchid

For a love-struck bee, then goes liquid,

Paint-in-water, and then gauze wafting out and off,

Before, finally, the night tide, luminescent

And vague, swirls in, and on and on. . . .

In those last scenes, as he floats

Above Jupiter’s vast canyons and seas,

Over the lava strewn plains and mountains

Packed in ice, that whole time, he doesn’t blink.

In his little ship, blind to what he rides, whisked

Across the wide-screen of unparcelled time,

Who knows what blazes through his mind?

Is it still his life he moves through, or does
That end at the end of what he can name?
On set, it’s shot after shot till Kubrick is happy,
Then the costumes go back on their racks
And the great gleaming set goes black.

5.
When my father worked on the Hubble Telescope, he said
They operated like surgeons: scrubbed and sheathed
In papery green, the room a clean cold, a bright white.
He’d read Larry Niven at home, and drink scotch on the rocks,
His eyes exhausted and pink. These were the Reagan years,
When we lived with our finger on The Button and struggled
To view our enemies as children. My father spent whole seasons
Bowing before the oracle-eye, hungry for what it would find.
His face lit-up whenever anyone asked, and his arms would rise
As if he were weightless, perfectly at ease in the never-ending
Night of space. On the ground, we tied postcards to balloons
For peace. Prince Charles married Lady Di. Rock Hudson died.
We learned new words for things. The decade changed.
The first few pictures came back blurred, and I felt ashamed
For all the cheerful engineers, my father and his tribe. The second time,
The optics jibed. We saw to the edge of all there is—
So brutal and alive it seemed to comprehend us back.
We draw distinctions between life and art,

But barriers break down. To our surprise,

Sancho and Don Quixote analyze

The very book in which they're taking part—

Pointing out places where the plot's not clear,

Disparaging the way their author's shaped

Their characters, until we feel that we're

Entranced within a story they've escaped.

Likewise, in *Las Meniñas*, self-portrayed,

Velázquez looks out at us as we stand

Before the work to which he's turned his hand.

Behind the princess and a kneeling maid,

He manages perspective, disinclined

To treat us as exterior to the scene,

So that we, in the background's mirror, find

Ourselves reflected as the King and Queen.

The painting's surface is itself profound,

And, by the artist's leave, we might presume
To pass into the picture and the room.
Indeed, already the Infanta, crowned
With light gold hair, invites us with her gaze;
Her female dwarf and second maid appear
To recognize us, while a man surveys
Proceedings from a doorway in the rear.

Illusion meets with similar success
When, at the puppet show, the Don lays waste
To villains made of paper pulp and paste
To save a puppet damsel in distress.
Drama absorbs him, and if now and then
He's crazily empathic and naïve,
He shows that life is most compelling when
It's shaped into persuasive make-believe.

Once, in the Prado's great Velásquez room,
We found a young art student copying
The Maids of Honor and examining
The old enigma of who spectates whom.
As if engaged in visual tit for tat,
He took the Master's pose and point of view,
While we who watched comprised a group like that
Formed by the princess and her retinue.
Another student, in a world of snow
And winter twilight, reads on to the end
Of *Don Quixote*; a few flakes descend
Irresolutely to the yard below.
And when the dying Don's illusions fail,
She weeps and sets the book back on its shelf
And then, in a ruled notebook, starts a tale
Or poem more substantial than herself.
My Last Duchess

Robert Browning

That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf’s hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will ‘t please you sit and look at her? I said
‘Frà Pandolf’ by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, ‘t was not
Her husband’s presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek: perhaps
Frà Pandolf chanced to say, ‘Her mantle laps
Over my lady’s wrist too much,’ or ‘Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat:’ such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart -- how shall I say? -- too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate’er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, ‘t was all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace -- all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men, -- good! but thanked
Somehow -- I know not how -- as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody’s gift. Who’d stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech -- (which I have not) -- to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, ‘Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark’ -- and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
-- E’en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene’er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will 't please you rise? We'll meet
The company below then. I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!
Elegiac Stanzas, Suggested by a Picture of Peel Castle, In a Storm, Painted by George Beaumont

*William Wordsworth*

I was thy neighbour once, thou rugged Pile!

Four summer weeks I dwelt in sight of thee:

I saw thee every day; and all the while

Thy Form was sleeping on a glassy sea.

So pure the sky, so quiet was the air!

So like, so very like, was day to day!

Whene'er I looked, thy Image still was there;

It trembled, but it never passed away.

How perfect was the calm! it seemed no sleep;

No mood, which season takes away, or brings:

I could have fancied that the mighty Deep

Was even the gentlest of all gentle things.

Ah! then, if mine had been the Painter's hand,

To express what then I saw; and add the gleam,

The light that never was, on sea or land,

The consecration, and the Poet's dream;
I would have planted thee, thou hoary Pile
Amid a world how different from this!
Beside a sea that could not cease to smile;
On tranquil land, beneath a sky of bliss.

Thou shouldst have seemed a treasure-house divine
Of peaceful years; a chronicle of heaven;—
Of all the sunbeams that did ever shine
The very sweetest had to thee been given.

A Picture had it been of lasting ease,
Elysian quiet, without toil or strife;
No motion but the moving tide, a breeze,
Or merely silent Nature's breathing life.

Such, in the fond illusion of my heart,
Such Picture would I at that time have made:
And seen the soul of truth in every part,
A steadfast peace that might not be betrayed.

So once it would have been,—'tis so no more;
I have submitted to a new control:
A power is gone, which nothing can restore;
A deep distress hath humanised my Soul.
Not for a moment could I now behold
A smiling sea, and be what I have been:
The feeling of my loss will ne'er be old;
This, which I know, I speak with mind serene.

Then, Beaumont, Friend! who would have been the Friend,
If he had lived, of Him whom I deplore,
This work of thine I blame not, but commend;
This sea in anger, and that dismal shore.

O 'tis a passionate Work!—yet wise and well,
Well chosen is the spirit that is here;
That Hulk which labours in the deadly swell,
This rueful sky, this pageantry of fear!

And this huge Castle, standing here sublime,
I love to see the look with which it braves,
Cased in the unfeeling armour of old time,
The lightning, the fierce wind, the trampling waves.
Farewell, farewell the heart that lives alone,

Housed in a dream, at distance from the Kind!

Such happiness, wherever it be known,

Is to be pitied; for 'tis surely blind.

But welcome fortitude, and patient cheer,

And frequent sights of what is to be borne!

Such sights, or worse, as are before me here.—

Not without hope we suffer and we mourn.