

REVIEW ARTICLE

Ekphrasis in the Age of Cervantes¹

MARCIA L. WELLES

This collection of eclectic essays stems from an NEH seminar at the University of Chicago in 2003, titled "Recapturing the Renaissance: Cervantes and Italian Art." Typically such volumes offer the opportunity of presenting different aspects and approaches towards a topic, and *Ekphrasis in the Age of Cervantes* is no exception. It conveys the diversity of the use of ekphrasis in the period, and may well inspire the publication of a sustained and vigorous monograph that will complement Emilie Bergmann's foundational *Art Inscribed: Essays on Ekphrasis in Spanish Golden Age Poetry* (1979).

Frederick A. De Armas, editor of the volume and author of the final essay, explains in Part I ("A Preface") the focus on the topic of ekphrasis and traces the literary history of this rhetorical technique. The title of his prefatory essay, "Simple Magic: Ekphrasis from Antiquity to the Age of Cervantes," refers to a passage from Canto 33 of Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* and is a play on another title, Robert Alter's *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre*. The phenomenal success of visual reproductions of

¹ *Ekphrasis in the Age of Cervantes*. Edited by Frederick A. De Armas. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2005. 241 pp. ISBN: 0-8387-5624-7.

the windmill encounter (I, 8) is the subject of a now-classic essay by E. C. Riley. It is not surprising, therefore, that De Armas analyzes this particular scene to specify Cervantes' innovative contribution to the ekphrastic tradition. We may recall that Don Quixote invokes the magical powers of the maleficent and particularly ill-willed enchanter Frestón to explain the visual disparities between windmills and giants. This apparently "simple magic" represents for De Armas Cervantes' transformation of a literary tradition, for he creates here a new kind of ekphrasis, no longer dependent on an external stimulus: "It is the magic of Ur-ekphrasis, the description of the creation of an art object in the character's mind. And, this imagination has as one of its functions to foreground the imaginative qualities of the text itself" (18). According to the editor, the rhetorical term "ekphrasis," as used and understood in the period from the 1530s to the 1650s, is capacious both in terms of what is described and how it is inserted in a text, and has endless combinatory possibilities. Its function can be "allegorical, emblematic, decorative, or veiled" (22). It can be based on an existing work of art ("actual") or on an imagined one ("notional"), or it can refer to a work not named or described ("allusive"), to cite but a few examples (22). The permutations possible are reflected in an analysis of the appearance of Galatea at the beginning of Cervantes' pastoral novel, which is deemed "not only true, dramatic, and transformative, but also combinatory" (22), and is, in addition, allegorized (23). Because of this dizzying diversity, one assumes, the book is organized not according to the *theoria* of ekphrasis but rather to its *praxis* in a variety of texts, primarily, but not exclusively, by Cervantes. This organizing principle results in individual essays that are wholly distinct and must, accordingly, be discussed separately.

This prefatory section includes a scholarly though rather dense essay by Deborah Cibelli, "Ekphrastic Treatments of Salviati's Paintings and *Imprese*," which introduces theoretical issues on the relationship between the visual and literary arts in Italy and demonstrates the influence of the Florentine painter Francesco Salviati on literary works of different genres. Ekphrases of his work appear in Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, in the emblem

literature of Paolo Giovio (the “emblematic ekphrasis,” 33), and in Torquato Tasso’s epic poetry (“ekphrasis of transposition” or “associative ekphrasis,” 33). Duke Cosimo de’ Medici the First was clearly the epicenter of the convergence of art and literature: his was the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence that Salviati decorated with frescoes; Vasari dedicated to him, his patron, the 1550 and 1568 editions of the *Lives*; to him Giovio dedicated his *Dialogo dell’imprese* (1555). It is no wonder that the allegorical interpretations of Salviati’s paintings and *imprese* tended to the aggrandizement of the Medici court. In Tasso’s work critics have noted certain general stylistic features shared by both painter and poet, and one particular image, that of the moth and flame (*Gerusalemme liberata*, Canto 4, stanza 34), was depicted by Salviati in preparatory drawings circa 1550, bearing the same spiritual message. Góngora’s use of this image in his sonnet “De la ambición humana” provides the necessary segue to Spain.

Part II, “The Painted Text in the Age of Cervantes,” is dedicated to writers of the period other than Cervantes. Represented here are three different authors, Cristóbal de Villalón, Calderón, and Góngora, as well as three different genres. By means of a careful, stylistic scrutiny, Kathleen Bollard (“Ekphrasis and the Renaissance Student: Classical versus Biblical Authority in Villalón’s *El scholástico*”) offers a focused argument in favor of a different interpretation of the relationship between the descriptions at the close of the first book (possibly an “actual” ekphrasis) and those at the beginning of the second (most likely a “notional” ekphrasis). The first set of paintings, located within the confines of the palace of the Duke of Alba, depict scenes from the Old Testament, including the sacrifice of Isaac and the story of Joseph and his brothers; the second ekphrasis, which occurs in a garden, is a description of a beautiful fountain sculpted with scenes of Aeneas when he arrives at Carthage and meets Queen Dido. If the contiguous biblical and humanist themes are read as a unified narrative (as posited by José Miguel Martínez Torrejón in his standard 1995 interpretation of this work, *Diálogo y retórica en el renacimiento español: El escolástico de Cristóbal de Villalón*), the preliminary scenes of violent death cast their dark shadow over

what follows, thus negativizing the garden's significance: the splendid *locus amœnus* acquires the sinful and threatening connotations of the Garden of Eden. The important consequence of Bolard's argument for the separability of these ekphrases is to reinforce Villalón's dedication to the humanist cause: "Thus Villalón models his advocacy of classical works as pedagogical tools throughout *El scholástico*, and nowhere more strongly than in his ekphrastic [*sic*] representation of Aeneas's time in Carthage" (72).

In a fascinating study, "Eucharistic Conjunction: Emblems, Illustrations, and Calderón's *Autos*," inspired by the prevalence of floral and vegetable imagery in the *autos* and by Calderón's obvious interest in botanical knowledge (96 n. 9), John Slater broadens our understanding of the epistemological foundations of the baroque period. The connection between emblematic literature and the symbolic language of the *autos* is now generally accepted. Slater extends the consideration of the "combinatory technologies" (79) of joining word and image to include *res herbaria* (as botanical matters were referred to at this time, 81), the publication history of which closely parallels that of emblem books. One such volume bears the tantalizing title of *Ekphrasis* (Fabio Colonna, 1606). Emblems, it is stated, "almost never stray from the ideal to intrude upon the world of the living" (93). Slater makes the surprising—and compelling—observation that scientific illustrations and dramatic allegory share a characteristic that the emblem eschews: "if we consider an illustration to be a kind of allegorical tableau that diagrammatically represents an object with physical existence, and an *auto* to be an allegory that portrays the fates of living humanity—metonymically represented by the play's audience—it is apparent that the technology by which both genres, either typographically or dramatically extend themselves toward the concrete, is very similar" (93). Using Juan José Nieremberg's term "sacramental" to characterize this view of the world, Slater explains: "In the sacramental understanding of the natural world, visible phenomena indicate the existence of hidden causes, forces, and qualities, just as a sacrament discloses through a visible sign the existence of an invisible grace" (96 n. 7). Such an epis-

temology, I might add, is not limited to Spain. The eccentric English physician, humanist scholar, and fervent Christian Sir Thomas Browne (1605–82) was in addition an avid botanist, as is evident particularly in *The Garden of Cyrus* (1658), and sought the revelation of divine mysteries in his scientific inquiries.

The final essay in this section is by Steven Wagschal (“From Parmigianino to Pereda: Luis de Góngora on Beautiful Women and *Vanitas*”), who focuses on a particular sonnet, “Mientras por competir con tu cabello.” He uses the term “veiled ekphrases” (104) to indicate implicit references in the poem to artistic images, and asserts that “his [Góngora’s] poetry may have had a significant impact on the history of European art” (104). The *carpe diem* theme has classical roots, and is developed most famously in the Spanish Renaissance in Garcilaso’s sonnet, “En tanto que de rosa y azucena.” Góngora’s poem is indeed an exemplary instance of the transformation of the *topos* of the *carpe diem* into a *memento mori*, a later example of which is Andrew Marvell’s stunning “To His Coy Mistress.” The thesis of the essay is that the poem is related to the genre of *vanitas* painting: unfortunately, the arguments presented to prove this connection are not convincing. Wagschal first notes differences in the floral imagery between Garcilaso and Góngora, and ascribes Góngora’s changes to a process of Christian allegorizing, influenced, perhaps, by Juan de Borgoña’s religious frescoes on New Testament themes in the antechamber of the Cathedral of Toledo, which the poet “would have had occasion to see” on his way to and from Salamanca (108). Thus, for example, by replacing Garcilaso’s *azucena* (symbolizing the Virgin’s purity) with *lilio* (associated with the Virgin’s suffering), and by replacing *rosa* (associated with love) with *clavel* (associated with “Christ’s blood and passion” [108]), “Góngora is introducing suffering into his *imitatio* where the other poets did not” (108). If one places this particular poem in the wider context of the poet’s oeuvre, however, such choices are unexceptional: the floral eroticism of the “Fábula de Polifemo y Galatea” includes much of the same imagery, and the suggestion has never been made that the “lirio,” “clavel,” and “fugitivo cristal” of the amorous encounter between the two beautiful youths

have allegorical meaning. The crux of Wagschal's thesis lies in the analysis of the lady's neck in the poetic portrait. The literary sensitivity of the critic is evident, but flaws in reasoning undermine his argument. The "hermoso cuello" in Garcilaso's portrait becomes a "luciente cristal" in Góngora's poem. By connecting this image to a painting treatise where the shape of classical vases is recommended to artists as a model for a woman's neck (and invoking Parmigianino's "Madonna dal collo lungo" in which both a vase and a long neck appear), Wagschal commits an act of interpretive literalization: the metaphoric "like" of Góngora's image is elided, and the neck is transformed by the critic into an actual crystal vase. Moreover, he adds, the locution "may be an adaptation" (109) of a translation of Herrera's in which the phrase "cristal luciente" signifies a mirror (109). Literalization and intertextual conjecture lead to the conclusion that enables connection to the common symbolic language of *vanitas* paintings: "Thus the neck is both a mirror and a delicate, fragile, and shiny crystal" (112). The alleged new metaphor created by merging mirror and neck vase signifies the forging of "two generic traditions into one: the opposing poles of *carpe diem* and *vanitas*, pagan and Judeo-Christian traditions" (116). There follows the astonishing assertion that "In early modern iconology, Góngora contributes to the development of *vanitas* painting" (114), with reference to Antonio Pereda's *Allegory of Vanitas*, which "may be the first attempt in art to respond to Góngora's challenge in its depiction of nothingness on a globe" (116). Wagschal, noting the lack of specificity of the markings on the globe of the world depicted, opines that this "suggests that Pereda used the technique of *pentimento*, that is, he may have painted over a land or water mass on the sphere, in a sense marking its erasure.... Pereda may be suggesting, in a Góngorine vein, that painting can make things vanish as can poetry" (115). *Pentimento*, though, is not a technique and therefore not intentional: it is a spontaneously occurring process due to a change in the refractive index of oil paint over time.

The three essays of Part III are dedicated exclusively to *Don Quixote*. In a fine essay that combines careful textual analysis with relevant biographical information, Ana María Laguna ("Ekphrasis

in the Prologue to *Don Quijote* I: Urganda ‘the Unknowable’ and the Mirrors of Fiction”) expands the usually more restrictive sense of “ekphrasis” as necessarily including references to art to mean “any verbal description of any visual manifestation” (128). The genre of the prologue, “a supposedly nonfictional conduit between author and readership” (130), is fictionalized in Part I of *Don Quixote*, constituting what one critic has termed a “trompe l’oeil” for the readers (132). In order to relate the text of the prologue to the first introductory poem that frames the novel, that of “Urganda la Desconocida,” Laguna continues her use of optic terminology, applying the concept of anamorphosis to literature. Using the famous example of Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*, in which a flat, oblique form is quite undecipherable when the painting is viewed frontally, but reveals itself as a normal picture of a skull when viewed from another angle, Laguna proposes two readings of the prologue material, one “frontal” (the prologue) and another one oblique (Urganda’s poem). When viewed this way, “like Holbein’s skull, Urganda’s poem produces a corrective and complementary effect on the literary critique conveyed by the implied author of the *Prologue* by providing specific allusions that enlighten and amend the seemingly compliant attitude of *Don Quixote*’s implied author” (132). Because visual trickery and perspective play are so predominant in *Don Quixote*, it is tantalizing to have recourse to the concept of anamorphosis. One wonders whether it is entirely accurate when applied to the relationship between these specific texts: the anamorphic image is usually characterized as distorted and requires a shift in viewing position in order to be deciphered. Using different critical terminology, can we not consider this ludic poem in “versos de cabo roto” an intertextual strategy designed to engage in a subtle dialogue with the prologue?

William Worden returns to one of the subjects of the introductory essay, “Simple Magic”: the visual nature of Cervantes’ novel, that has engendered a prolific line of illustrators. The title of his essay, “The First Illustrator of *Don Quixote*: Miguel de Cervantes,” points to the fact that—very early in the text (I, 9)—there appears an ekphrasis of Don Quixote’s battle with the Biscayan,

in which the images described are accompanied by identifying names. While these visual images are greeted happily as irrefutable proof that the manuscript found by the "second author" is in fact a continuation of the previous chronicle, Worden shows that the "truth factor" of pictorial representation is severely compromised, undermined by Cervantine irony. The three figures are not, in fact, well represented as stated. The need for labeling representations reduces them to the abysmal artistic level of the maligned painter Orbaneja, from *Úbeda* (II, 3); the labels themselves are erroneous (Sancho "Zancas" instead of "Panza"); the very fact that the presumed author of the chronicle, Cide Hamete Benengeli, is a Muslim and therefore prohibited from representing human and animal figures, makes these illustrations highly suspect. This is but one more example of Cervantes' wily play with the "truth." This scene is indeed a "microcosm of the work as a whole" (144), in which the pen proves mightier than the painter's brush, as it were, and the author maintains his creative dominance.

Paradoxically in this collection dedicated to ekphrasis, the "irrepresentability" of Dulcinea is Cristina Müller's topic ("Individuation, Ekphrasis, and Death in *Don Quixote*"). In the opening paragraph Müller describes her essay as an ontological inquiry of personal identity and individuation, and states that the "relationship between individuation and death is revealed in the experience of Dulcinea as an impossible ekphrasis" (156). Differing from other studies that insist on the absolute distinction between the *hidalgo* and the Knight, this critic argues for a necessary and logical relationship between the identities of Alonso Quijano and Don Quixote, concluding that only at the moment of death, when he returns to his former identity, does the Knight fully achieve individuation. Only then does he confront the "meaning of death and temporality, as experienced in one's corporal otherness. The otherness is represented in his case by the body of Alonso Quijano, always there while being none the less the Other" (168). After the "real" peasant woman replaces the imaginary Dulcinea (I, 10), Don Quixote is not able to capture the image of his beloved in words. This incapacitation, argues Müller, is

precursory to the recognition of “what is being hidden and obscured in language, ultimately unspeakable death” (169). This is a complicated essay, and in spite of its many acute observations remains somewhat opaque. An ontological inquiry of personal identity is, of course, a complex philosophical topic. It becomes even more difficult when applied to literary characters, especially when combined, as it is in portions of the essay, with myth criticism.

Part IV, the final section, is dedicated to studies of Cervantine texts other than *Don Quixote*, and includes two essays on *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda* and one on “El retablo de las maravillas.” Both Ignacio López Alemany (“A Portrait of a Lady: Representations of Sigismunda/Auristela in Cervantes’ *Persiles*”) and Eric C. Graf (“Heliodorus, Cervantes, La Fayette: Ekphrasis and the Feminist Origins of the Modern Novel”) converge for their discussion of the *Persiles* on the portraits of Auristela/Sigismunda. The circulating portraits of Auristela, López argues, remain external images, and correspond to a Petrarchan type of love that has damaging effects, while the “true” portrait of Sigismunda, the one imprinted on Periandro/Persiles’s soul, is a personal and spiritualized internal image, and corresponds to a Catholic sacramental model: “Auristela somehow symbolizes the object of Petrarchian [*sic*] love, while Sigismunda becomes the object/subject of ‘reciprocal and matrimonial’ love, as encouraged after the Council of Trent in order to fight with ‘heroic fidelity’ the ‘right to divorce’ that Protestantism accepted” (212–13). Since Petrarchism is a literary convention, the dichotomy thus described is infelicitous, although the examples cited from the text clearly differentiate between love as *cupiditas* and love as *caritas*, and the contrast between a portrait (commissioned) as an external image, and a spiritualized, internal portrait in a lover’s soul as the higher good is certainly valid. But there are many examples in plays of a beautiful woman’s portrait igniting love without the dire “pernicious consequences” of Petrarchan love (213). The fact that a portrait of Auristela provokes rivals to combat is not surprising, given the prevailing concept of the portrait as “not merely a copy of an original but in some way inseparable from, or al-

ternative to, the original itself" (McKendrick 12). Possession of a portrait is equivalent to possession of the person, which makes the illicit (non-consensual) capturing of a female image tantamount to theft, and its illicit circulation and sale tantamount to prostitution. The danger lies in the portrait itself, if misused and abused, rather than in the "type" of love it may inspire.

Eric C. Graf focuses on key scenes in the *Aethiopica*, the *Persiles*, and *La Princesse de Clèves* to show the fundamental role of the romance of late antiquity on the development of the novel in the late Renaissance, directing our attention to Cervantes' specific indebtedness to Heliodorus in the *Persiles* and, in turn, to La Fayette's indebtedness to the *Persiles* in her own novel. The basic thesis, clearly stated and well documented, is that "*the novelistic struggle against the epic is both generically and ideologically feminist*" (192, italics in original), and the close analyses of the three ekphrases demonstrate how female agency plays a crucial role in averting the potential for violence between male rivals for a female, thus breaking the typical ruthless cycle of revenge. Graf's fine literary analysis is marred by a contentious running commentary on a "currently fashionable mode of dogmatic feminism" (178), against which he is consciously positions himself by means of his "rigorous recognition of the role played by the major classical sources" (194) and attention to—within their historical and political contexts—the reactionary aspects of a post-Tridentine "Catholic feminism" (191) espoused by Cervantes and La Fayette. He mentions such scholars as Ruth Anthony El Saffar, Diana de Armas Wilson, Nancy Miller, and Joan DeJean, whose work is pioneering, but "has been anti-authorial and theoretical in the extreme" (193). In his conclusion he writes that "today's feminism...is more likely than not just as brutally self-serving and potentially genocidal as any other ideology" (198). Such allegations are puzzling. The work of the scholars cited is neither strident nor prone to the "theoretical obfuscations" that apparently "haunt the work of today's feminist academics" (195). It does not warrant criticism such as this.

The "Retablo de las maravillas" is a complex gem of a work, a wonderful "scandal" according to the sense of its Greek etymological root *skandalon* as a "trap" or "snare." Nowhere is the power of

language to create visual images from memory alone—imagined, real, or read—more apparent. Frederick De Armas's selection of this *entremés* as the subject for the final essay ("Painting with Blood and Dance: Titian's *Salomé* and Cervantes's 'El retablo de las maravillas'") is particularly felicitous, for it provides a reprise of the concept of "simple magic" that he applied to Cervantes' ekphrastic capabilities in his introductory essay. De Armas reminds us that, unlike the "Ur-ekphrasis" of Don Quixote's imagination, the purpose of the magic in the "Retablo" is knowingly to deceive for the purposes of financial gain, exploiting contemporary fears and prejudices, manipulating the social pretensions of common people. Assuming that Cervantes "probably took his images from the visual art and thus created exphrases" (220), De Armas suggests emblematic and heraldic imagery as a possible source for some of the visions conjured up by the theatrical entrepreneurs, Chirinos and Chanfalla, which may well include implicit references to Cervantes' rival, Lope de Vega. The *Salomé*/Herodius figure merits the most sustained attention. While the discussions of Titian's two paintings of the subject are detailed and informative, many of the claims of their interpretive relevance to the "Retablo" are nugatory, for they remain unsubstantiated. The problem is not evidentiary. We must resign ourselves to the fact that, unless new documentation is uncovered, we cannot know for certain whether Cervantes either saw the paintings or had access to copies. The problem lies elsewhere: the style of argumentation is fragile. For example, the decapitated head of St. John the Baptist in the Rome painting of *Salomé* is apparently the artist's self-portrait (224), which De Armas sees as a "meta-artistic reflection on art and the artist" (224). He adds that "the decapitation may serve to point out that once the painting is executed, the artist loses his power over the image and it is now up to the spectator to bring meaning to the work" (224). Even though art-historical analyses are not provided to support such a reading, this statement is acceptable, and certainly interesting, as an interpretive move by the critic. But by the next paragraph it appears as proven fact, as "Titian's view" rather than "a view that Titian might have had": "Perhaps as a reaction to Titian's view of the author's lack of

power to control the meaning of his images, Cervantes introduces the producers Chirinos and Chanfalla who carefully control the reaction of the audience to their fake art" (224). In addition, the wording of the statement is unclear, leaving the reader wondering about the seemingly impossible transmission of Titian's view of authorial control to Cervantes, a confusion that is surely unintentional. Ingenious parallels are drawn, but they are far-fetched and tend towards speculative excess, such as the suggestion that the "bloody head of John the Baptist also intersects with Cervantes' interlude: It recalls the 'impure' blood of New Christians" (225). Why, may we ask? It would be useful for readers to know if there is any Titian scholarship on the possibility or probability of such a reference. De Armas's imaginative approach to the interrelationship between art and literature is to be commended, and his appreciation of art is profound. The fact that his work undoubtedly serves as an example for young scholars makes it all the more imperative that his interdisciplinary studies be a model of responsible, judicious scholarship.

Professor Emerita
Dept. of Spanish
Barnard College, Columbia University
New York, NY 10027
dwelles@nyc.rr.com

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