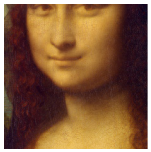
George Szirtes

Sister Arts: Cohabitations, Credits and Debts

The Gerald Finzi Poetry Lecture

delivered at the University of Reading in March 2012





MANY YEARS AGO when I was still teaching in schools but publishing books of poetry I would sometimes — in fact annually — be asked by whichever music teacher or other teacher it happened to be to write words for music, not specifically for individual songs but for a longer dramatic piece that required a story and a stage presentation that would contain songs. Sometimes the piece was what you might call serious, at other times light. Sometimes the music was complex and ambitious, sometimes it was set in the realm of the musical. I enjoyed writing all this, producing it on stage, and, occasionally even acting in it. I liked the music. I only noted that when the parts that were songs were actually sung most of the words were inaudible. Whatever my craft was it counted for little. Naturally, I thought. That's what happens.

Then one day, quite late on in this succession of a dozen or so libretti, settings and productions, there was a new teacher of music in a new school who asked me to write something. A*ny idea what you would like of me?* I wondered.

Vowels, he answered.

Pne POETRY NORTHEAST

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It had never been put quite so bluntly to me but I could see what he meant. One sings with an open mouth. You can't sing consonants. Consonants appear but essentially as the, sometimes, comical lower orders, as in *Pa-pa-pa pa-pa-pa-Papageno* or maybe a nice stagy *Grrrrrowl*. You can do *fa-lal-las* or doo-wops, or even the odd *Awopbopaloobop Alopbamboom* but it's the vowel that does the singing, springing from the embrace of the consonant, free at one bound.

Simply writing a series of vowels wouldn't do of course. There had to be more. It is the area of *more* I want to explore here. What, after all, do composers want of poets? Or, to put it another way, what is it about poetry that composers desire? While we're at it, since I am more conversant with visual art than with music, what is it that those famous sister arts, painting and poetry, have in common? What do they give, what do they take, where do they meet most productively and why there?

It is at this thankfully early point that I can take a cue from Gerard Finzi, that extraordinarily setter to music of poetry by people such as Thomas Hardy, Thomas Traherne, A. E. Housman, Walter de la Mare, Shakespeare and many others. In his own Crees lectures of 1955, where he discusses the relationship of music to words, Finzi tells us how:

> A few years ago an experiment was made at the BBC. Six poets of some standing were commissioned to write a poem especially for musical setting. The authors were to remain temporarily anonymous, and the poems were sent to half a dozen British composers who were to set one that particularly appealed to them.

> At the same time the composers were asked what had attracted them to a particular poem, whether they were drawn to any of the others; whether any seemed quite unsuitable; how soon, after choosing the poem, did musical ideas come; whether a general impression or a precise musical concept came first, and so on. Indeed the questions, had it been possible to answer them, would have provided case-histories to throw some light on musicians' approach to poetry, even possibly on musical inspiration. Here, indeed, were words for music. And what was the result?
>
> Full of expectancy, several of the composers opened their envelopes with high hopes, only to be followed by utter despair. At least one was heard to mutter "what sort of people do they think we are." As far as I know, only one of the poems was ever set to music, and nothing more was heard of the scheme.

"What sort of people do they think we are?" is a good question. Finzi doesn't tell us what it was that caused such cries of despair. Let's then think what it might have been.

Perhaps there weren't enough vowels for a start. But there must have been *some*. Not quite as many maybe as in Keats who learned his open vowels from Spenser, nevertheless enough to build a tune on.

Perhaps there was too much use of devices like enjambment that make for phrases of irregular length. But don't composers make free with individual lines of poetry in any case? Their idea of time is rarely metric in the iambic pentameter sense. A vowel in their hands lasts as long as they want, never mind the consonants.

Perhaps it was something else. Perhaps it was ideas. Ideas are hard to set to music: there are few settings of Pope's Windsor Forest. But you do have Britten's settings of Donne's Holy Sonnets. Ideas fuelled by passion and declaring themselves through images are open enough to musical interpretation.

Perhaps it was pace. Thoughts switch rapidly, as do images. Maybe music requires an implied unity of mood that offers a clear sustainable base.

It might have been any combination of these things: we cannot tell. Certainly Gerard Finzi's own songs tend to be in elegiac, pastoral mood, the poems he chose clear, wistful, regretful, and generally full, tending to the delicately ripe. Hardy's visitings of the dead in Finzi's *By Footpath and Stile* cycle being a reasonable demonstration of that.

In discussing Vaughan Williams Finzi himself offers an example of what should not be set:

> And now Dr. Vaughan Williams has set to music Shakespeare's incomparable blank verse (not his lyrics, intended as songs for music!) and has chosen such a passage as:
>
> *How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank! Here will we sit, and let the sound of music Creep in our ears;*
>
> Such words are, emphatically, not to be set to music. They might inspire music, but it would be music pure, not music misusing the words and obtaining a mixed effect by dubious association. I know that many musicians do not hold this view, but it is my opinion and I believe it to be the opinion of the majority of poets who

understand the art of music.

So there is a distinction between poetry that might inspire what he calls music pure, and poetry that might be set. Finzi, of course, set some of Shakespeare's lyrics, quite beautifully in my opinion — *Fear no More The Heat o' The Sun* especially.

Having mentioned poets who understand the art of music, Finzi rounds off his paragraph with the resoundingly clear caveat that "very few poets understand anything at all about the art of music" and, having said so, moves on to the composer's view:

> The process from the composer's angle is this. He may read some lines. Instantly, with the reading, musical phrases will bind themselves to the words, like Pirandello's 'Six characters in search of an Author' crying for birth; music may even be brought about by the sounds, irrespective of the sense. When Holst set Robert Bridges "Say who is this with silver hair," he wrote "I did the first of the Bridges poems the moment I caught sight of the words. Since when I have been wondering what they mean."

What things mean is the big question. Why do those seven words of Bridges mean so much that was unknown yet powerful to Holst? Is it the vowels, the open a's at the beginning and end of the phrase Say and hair and the closing of the mouth in the middle to u, then flat i's 'who is this with silver'? It might be so.

But isn't the effect of such things very different in poetry and music? Let's take one rather gorgeous song by Finzi. I choose it for its sheer brevity. It is his setting of Walter de la Mare's poem "The Birthnight":

Dearest, it was a night
That in its darkness racked Orion's stars;
A sighing wind ran faintly white
Along the willows, and the cedar boughs
Laid their wide hands in stealthy peace across
The starry silence of their antique moss:
No sound save rushing air
Cold, yet all sweet with Spring,
And in thy mother's arms, couched weeping there,
Thou, lovely thing.

The drumbeat of d in darkness in the second line answers dearest in the first, the mouth rears and rolls at racked pushing through, till the mouth opens wide on night which is then echoed by Ori on. There is a natural break at the end of line two. The i's continue through sighing, sighing themselves as it were. The wind runs through line 3, every word an expulsion of air from the lungs, the soft w's gently whispering and sighing till the great *whoosh* of white, where the air practically sprints by us only to be given another lift, a second wind if you like, by willows, at which point the verse settles briefly on boughs, which is also an expulsion of breath and results in the broad mouths of laid their wide hands. Then follows a little soft sussurance with stealthy peace across the starry silence, the wind rising again in silence, closing down on moss but still hissing. You need a break there, a moment of silence so that you can take a run at the rushing air which is fairly dizzy, freezing us on cold that is paradoxically sweet with Spring, sweet almost like a birdcall. Couched is vital for the catch in the throat of weeping, which is echoed by thou. The whole poem sees birth in

terms of a wind that builds and dashes, releasing that lovely thing into the world gently but momentously.

De La Mare has an exquisitely crystalline ear. His word music is self-sufficient. Complete. Now see what Finzi does with it.

The d's are separated in the long flow and the broad ah in was which, as a word and a unit of rhythm, is of far less importance in the poem. Racked is gentled, so you can have the broad a in stars. Down to moss it is the calm that reigns in Finzi, broad, wide, with a kind of tenderness but without the sound of wind. Rushing gets lost before the wide air and cold almost vanishes so the paradox of it being sweet with Spring loses force. Couched is reduced in effect. The broad peace that dominates the setting ends the poem, the little cry of thou also diminished before the long eee of thing.

This is not, let me emphasise, a criticism of Finzi's beautiful song, simply an attempt to demonstrate that what Finzi hears is not what de la Mare hears. Finzi hears the overall state of the poem as feeling: de la Mare's poem is a process in which the mood varies and in which there is a dramatised sense of place. Finzi doesn't diminish the material: he delivers a different material.

What then is the 'material'? Why is Shakespeare's blank verse suitable for what Finzi calls 'music pure' but not for setting? Why do apparently inane song lyrics hang around in our minds and open the doors to memorable music? Where is the region where the sisters meet and serve each other?

In order to begin examining that question I want to turn to the other sister, painting, and see where that leads us.

It was famously Walter Pater who, in 'The School of Giorgione' chapter of *The Renaissance*, told us that all art continually aspires towards the condition of music. Pater begins that chapter by distinguishing between the arts, saying:

> It is the mistake of much popular criticism to regard poetry, music, and Painting — all the various products of art - as but translations into different languages of one and the same fixed quantity of imaginative thought.

... and going on to qualify this as follows:

> although each art has thus its own specific order of impressions, and an untranslatable charm, while a just apprehension of the ultimate differences of the arts is the beginning of aesthetic criticism; yet it is noticeable that, in its special mode of handling its given material, each art may be observed to pass into the condition of some other art, by what German critics term an Anders-streben-a partial alienation from its own limitations, by which the arts are able, not indeed to supply the place of each other, but reciprocally to lend each other new forces.

It is from here that he proceeds to the famous sentence:

> All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music. For while in all other works of art it is possible to distinguish the matter from the form, and the understanding can always make this distinction, yet it is the constant effort of art to obliterate it. That the mere matter of a poem, for instance — its subject, its given incidents or situation; that the mere matter of a picture — the actual circumstances of an event, the actual topography of a landscape

— should be nothing without the form, the spirit, of the handling; that this form, this mode of handling, should become an end in itself, should penetrate every part of the matter: — this is what all art constantly strives after, and achieves in different degrees.

And this is true in the sense that we don't expect music generally to invite differentiation between matter and form, or to imitate life too closely, whereas imitation was the very stuff of visual art and literature.

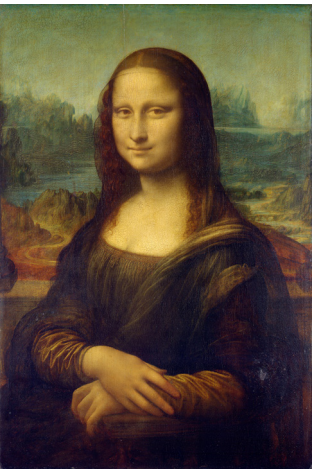
In the Renaissance that Pater is discussing verisimilitude was a kind of necessary qualification for greatness. Giorgio Vasari, author of *The Lives of The Artists*, who is not to be trusted in all factual matters but is a good guide to taste and expectation, tells in his life of Giotto how the great proto-Renaissance artist Cimabue

Portrait of a Carthusian (detail)
by Petrus Christus, 1446
Metropolitan Museum of Art

> going one day on some business of his own from Florence to Vespignano, found Giotto, while his sheep were browsing, portraying a sheep from nature on a flat and polished slab, with a stone slightly pointed, without having learnt any method of doing this from others, but only from nature; whence Cimabue, standing fast all in a marvel, asked him if he wished to go to live with him.

The pinnacle of Giotto's imitative art according to Vasari is best demonstrated through this anecdote:

> It is said that Giotto, while working in his boyhood under Cimabue, once painted a fly on the nose of a figure that Cimabue himself had made, so true to nature that his master, returning to continue the work, set himself more than once to drive it away with his hand, thinking that it was real, before he perceived his mistake.



Mona Lisa
by Leonardo da Vinci, c.1503-19
Musée du Louvre, Paris

In other words the value of a work in this case is partly dependent on it seeming to be something else, not the work. The paint reaches maximum power by not seeming to be paint but something else: a natural object. One should be fair to Vasari and allow that he did not base his valuation of Giotto entirely on the way he painted realistic flies.

Nor would we think, looking at Giotto's marvelous work — Giotto being one of the greatest of painters, in my opinion — that his grasp of photorealism was particularly convincing. It is not what we *go* to him for. We go to him for a new understanding of religious drama and of the human part in it, so the religious and the divine become comprehensible in human terms.

Vasari understands this of course, but the sheer technical possibility of painting the way Giotto painted is not beside the point to him. It is bringing alive, the way the fly is alive, that is, for Vasari, a central concern of art.

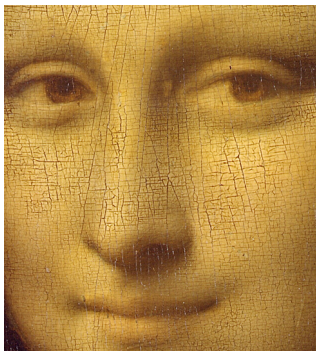
When Vasari comes to discuss Leonardo da Vinci, he once again concentrates on the impression of life. Here he is on the Mona Lisa in Volume 4 of the *Lives*:

> The eyebrows, through his having shown the manner in which the hairs spring from the flesh, here more close and here more scanty, and curve according to the pores of the skin, could not be more natural. The nose, with its beautiful nostrils, rosy and tender, appeared to be alive. The mouth, with its opening, and with its ends united by the red of the lips to the flesh-tints of the face, seemed, in truth, to be not colours but flesh. In the pit of the throat, if one gazed upon it intently, could be seen the beating of the pulse.

Let us now return to Pater and his understanding of the same painting.

This is the famous passage, from the chapter on Leonardo.

> The presence that thus rose so strangely beside the waters, is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all "the ends of the world are come," and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions. Set it for a moment beside one of those white Greek goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity, and how would they be troubled by this beauty, into which the soul with all its maladies has passed! All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there, in that which they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the reverie of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants: and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands. The fancy of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern thought has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought



Mona Lisa (detail)

upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life.

This is very different from Vasari's description of the painting. Here, La Gioconda is an object of desire, an exotic disease of the imagination, a product of history, embodying the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the reveries of the middle age, and so on. She is, besides, a vampire, a revenant, a mutable figure, now classical, now Christian, and finally 'the idea of humanity as wrought upon by and summing up in itself all modes of thought and life.'

In comparing Vasari's perception of the Mona Lisa with Pater's we understand that we are dealing with two different ways of seeing. Both seem to be trying to present an object to us — the same object — but from different points of view: one, Vasari's, as a miracle, not so much of verisimilitude — since Vasari did not know the sitter — but of lifelikeness or liveliness, or at least a conjuring of presence imbued with life; the other, Pater's, as a complex image of power that is composed of feelings about women, desire, mothers, guilt, danger, failure and a great many other things. Pater is trying to articulate an internal condition triggered by the painting. Where Vasari sees imitation, Pater sees imagination; where Vasari sees paint transformed into the conjuration of physical life, Pater sees the power of metaphor and association, a mutable spirit.

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Ekphrasis is a Greek term meaning "an extended and detailed literary description of any object, real or imaginary" but is generally used in reference to words about visual images. It served as an exercise in rhetoric where it might be described as 'a vivid description

intended to bring the subject before the mind's eye'. And latterly, and more simply still, as a form of poetry that deals with art. Strictly speaking, ekphrasis is deemed to have three phases. One of the leading theoreticians of ekphrasis, W. J. T. Mitchell, has an essay in which he demonstrates these phases. He begins with the idea of radio photographs, recalling a radio comedy show in which a duo called Ray and Bob discuss photographs. Bob shows Ray photographs and Ray responds. The radio audience can't see anything of course and that precisely is the point of the joke. No one expects to see photographs over the radio. There is not the slightest chance you could. This, says Mitchell, is the stage of *ekphrastic indifference*.

Mitchell's prime referent for *ekphrastic hope* is the description of the Shield of Achilles in the *Iliad* but he returns to Ray and Bob in the process:

> This is the phase when the impossibility of ekphrasis is overcome in imagination or metaphor, when we discover a "sense" in which language can do what so many writers have wanted it to do: "to make us see." This is the phase in which Bob and Ray's "radio magic" takes effect, and we imagine in full detail the photographs we hear slapping down on the studio table (Sometimes Bob would acknowledge this moment in a variation of his punchline: instead of a wish, an expression of gratified desire — "I'm sure glad you folks could look at these pictures with us today.") This is like that other moment in radio listening when the "thundering hoofbeats of the great horse Silver" make the giant white stallion with his masked rider gallop into the mind's eye.

The third stage, *ekphrastic fear*, is realised thus:

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

He elaborates on ekphrastic fear further:

> It is the moment in aesthetics when the difference between verbal and visual mediation becomes a moral, aesthetic imperative rather than (as in the first, "indifferent" phase of ekphrasis) a natural fact that can be relied on. The classic expression of ekphrastic fear occurs in Lessing's Laocoön, where it is "prescribed as a law to all poets" that "they should not regard the limitations of painting as beauties in their own art." For poets to "employ the same artistic machinery" as the painter would be to "convert a superior being into a doll." It would make as much sense, argues Lessing, "as if a man, with the power and privilege of speech, were to employ the signs which the mutes in a Turkish seraglio had invented to supply the want of a voice."

Going from the idea of converting a superior being into a doll, Mitchell very rapidly, in fact rather startlingly, offers for the rest of the essay, an account of ekphrasis arguing that:

> The "otherness" of visual representation from the standpoint of textuality may be anything from a professional competition. to a relation of political, disciplinary, or cultural domination in which the "self" is understood to be an active, speaking, seeing subject, while the "other" is projected as a passive, seen, and (usually) silent object. Insofar as art history is a verbal representation of visual representation, it is an elevation of ekphrasis to a disciplinary principle. Like the masses, the colonized, the powerless and voiceless everywhere, visual representation cannot represent itself; it must be represented by discourse.

Let me repeat for emphasis,

> Like the masses, the colonized, the powerless and voiceless everywhere, visual representation cannot represent itself; it must be represented by discourse.

I emphasize this because this is the move that enables him to arrive at the conclusion that:

> The voyeuristic, masturbatory fondling of the ekphrastic image is a kind of mental rape that may induce a sense of guilt, paralysis, or ambivalence in the observer.

"What sort of people do they think we are?," the composers asked. "Rapists, voyeurs, masturbator," Mitchell answers, meaning writers. He then takes one of the most famous so-called 'ekphrastic' poems — Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, ending with the famous lines "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, — that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" — and deals with them, writers, roughly:

> Perhaps the scholarly controversy over the boundary between

> what the urn says and what Keats says reflects a kind of ekphrastic disappointment. If the poet is going to make the mute, feminized art object speak, he could at least give her something interesting to say.

The key problem for Mitchell is rooted in

> a fundamental tendency in all linguistic expression. This is the point in rhetorical and poetic theory when the doctrines of *ut pictura poesis* and the Sister Arts are mobilized to put language at the service of vision. The narrowest meanings of the word *ekphrasis* as a poetic mode, "giving voice to a mute art object," or offering "a rhetorical description of a work of art," give way to a more general application that includes any "set description intended to bring person, place, picture, etc. before the mind's eye." Ekphrasis may be even further generalized, as it is by Murray Krieger, into a general "principle" exemplifying the aestheticizing of language in what he calls the "still moment." For Krieger, the visual arts are a metaphor, not just for verbal representation of visual experience, but for the shaping of language into formal patterns that "still" the movement of linguistic temporality into a spatial, formal array.

I think we may consider most poetry to be, broadly speaking, the shaping of language into formal patterns that "still" the movement of linguistic temporality into a spatial, formal array, which would then make most poetry into an act of rape, which is in fact what Mitchell argues.

The key, criminal phrase in arguments about the sister arts, *ut pictura poesis* comes from Horace's *Ars Poetica*, part II lines 361-5. I'm not a Latinist, so am happy to give the brief passage in Ben

Jonson's 1640 translation:

> As painting, so is poesy. Some man's hand
> Will take you more, the nearer that you stand;
> As some the farther off; this loves the dark;
> This fearing not the subtlest judge's mark,
> Will in the light be viewed; this once the sight
> Doth please; this ten times over will delight.

'As with painting so with poetry'; in other words, some paintings look better when you get closer, some look better from further off; some prefer light, some prefer obscurity. The invitation is to apply this to poetry.

The American poet John Hollander put together a major and expensive, fully illustrated anthology of poems about pictures, titled *The Gazer's Spirit*. In it he refers to Horace, pointing out that poetry first likens itself to painting, not the other way round. He instances Leonardo da Vinci when Da Vinci claims that *painting is nobler and more powerful in effect* because it approaches through the preferred sense of sight, and balances this with Lessing's view in Laocoön that poetry is superior because, unlike painting, it includes time passing and can present the invisible and the imaginable.

Harold Bloom in his review of this anthology was critical of Hollander's view, remarking that

> The Romantic tradition is particularly vexed by the dangerous formula "Ut pictura poesis"; Keats only seems to compose a speaking urn, and Turner does not paint silent poems. When criticism has been tempted by these analogies, it has ended in

> confusion, glorious as that can be in Ruskin or in Pater.

And he goes on in Mitchell's vein, accusing the poets in the anthology of appropriating, adding:

> Hollander's poets [and by this, we may possibly understand, all poets writing about pictures] may seem to bow reverently before the paintings they seek to appropriate, but usurpation is not always a reverent process. Poets rather ruthlessly want to write their poems, and pragmatically the gazer's spirit often reduces even the most awesome painting to so much *materia poetica*.

Again the accusing terms: ruthless appropriators, usurpers. As if the whole world of experience were not *materia poetica*!

'I recall Pater's description of the Mona Lisa,' writes Yeats in his Introduction to the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* in 1936, wondering whether Pater's description foreshadowed 'a poetry, a philosophy where the individual is nothing', a place of flux where objects lose their contour and where, he tells us, 'human experience is no longer shut into brief lives'.

It is the importance of this question that led Yeats to read Pater's description as poetry, indeed to form it as poetry, and to begin his anthology with the excerpt from Pater divided into lines to form a poem he calls "Mona Lisa":

> She is older than the rocks among which she sits;
> Like the Vampire,
> She has been dead many times,
> And learned the secrets of the grave;
> And has been a diver in deep seas,

And keeps their fallen day about her;
And trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants:
And, as Leda,
Was the mother of Helen of Troy,
And, as Saint Anne,
Was the mother of Mary;
And all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes,
And lives
Only in the delicacy
With which it has moulded the changing lineaments,
And tinged the eyelids and the hands.

Pater himself did not write a poem; it was Yeats who read the poem into it. I have written above that "In comparing Vasari's perception of the Mona Lisa with Pater's we understand that we are dealing with two different ways of seeing. Both seem to be trying to present an object to us — the same object — but from different points of view." Yeats seems to be seeing a third thing through Pater's writing. To Yeats, the object described by Pater is of secondary importance. He does not consider Leonardo da Vinci, let alone the original sitter, Lisa del Giocondo. He is thinking about Pater's text and where it may lead in terms of poetry and philosophy. The object — Leonardo's painting of Lisa del Giocondo — continues to exist in its own right of course, and has not been exhausted by either Vasari or Pater, although perception of it is modified by both. Other perceptions continue to modify it, and none of these perceptions excludes another. Such perceptions build expectations but so do many other things: the idea of authenticity, the idea of value, the idea of its place in the development of visual

The Feast in the House of Levi (detail)
by Paolo Veronese, 1573
Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice

The Feast in the House of Levi (detail)

art, the picture's condition, history and provenance and so forth. What we see — what Professor Mitchell might see — is contingent on a great many factors.

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One of these factors is text. The great majority of paintings in western art until the twentieth century had their origins in text. Giotto's painting, and many of Leonardo's paintings, were predicated on readings of the Bible, the various apocrypha and their interpretations. We identify figures and events because we recognize them from stories. Byzantine art works entirely on religious imagery in which the individual visual image and the hierarchical arrangement of visual images is dependent on doctrine, and are in fact embodiments of doctrine. They are not primarily there for the purpose of aesthetic admiration, but rather to bring the viewer into the visual presence of that which is first articulated in words.

Later, during the Early Renaissance, those same stories would still be embodied in visual images. But a new element appears, particularly in Giotto: the viewer is invited to identify with figures and events as on a stage, in other words to engage sympathetically. Sympathy implies interpretation. When Vasari praises Giotto's gift of rendering presence in terms of the illusion of life, he is doing so from a position in Giotto's future, when the whole of the past seems to be mounting towards a form of interpretation for which that illusion of presence is vital. He understands full well that his greatest hero, Michelangelo, is not a re-creator of actual physical presence but of presences in the imagination, for which, however,

a perfect understanding of the body is necessary. Michelangelo himself still uses text: his God, his Adam and his Eve would not be there without the Bible. It is just that the text is understood to be flexible, not purely doctrinal.

The limit of the freedom from text as doctrine is demonstrated in the Counter-Reformation by the trial of the painter Paolo Veronese, brought before the Inquisition for his rendering of the Feast in the House of Levi.

This is how it worked:

From the Report of the sitting of the Tribunal of the Inquisition on Saturday, July eighteenth, 1573 (per Charles Yriarte's translation from Italian in Francis Marion Crawford's *Salve Venetia*, New York, 1905. Vol. II: 29-34):

> *Q. In this Supper which you painted for San Giovanni e Paolo, what signifies the figure of him whose nose is bleeding?*
>
> A. He is a servant who has a nose-bleed from some accident.
>
> *Q. And the one who is dressed as a jester with a parrot on his wrist, why did you put him into the picture?*
>
> A. He is there as an ornament, as it is usual to insert such figures.
>
> *Q. Who are the persons at the table of Our Lord?*
>
> A. The twelve apostles.
>
> *Q. What is Saint Peter doing, who is the first?*
>
> A. He is carving the lamb in order to pass it to the other part of the table.

Q. What is he doing who comes next?

A. He holds a plate to see what Saint Peter will give him.

Q. Tell us what the third is doing.

A. He is picking his teeth with a fork.

Q. And who are really the persons whom you admit to have been present at this Supper?

A. I believe that there was only Christ and His Apostles; but when I have some space left over in a picture I adorn it with figures of my own invention.

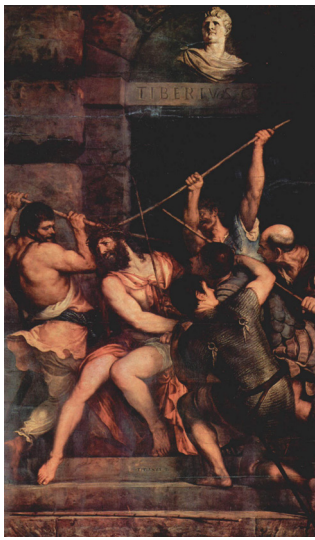
Diana and Actaeon
by Titian, 1556–9
National Gallery, London

When the inquisitors pointed out that in Michelangelo's Last Judgment there were no such 'drunkards nor dogs nor similar buffooneries' as Veronese had painted, he answered: 'Mine is no art of thought; my art is joyous and praises God in light and colour.'

It may well be, one should note in passing, that the inquisitors were looking at Veronese's painting in much the same way as Professor Mitchell looks at ekphrastic poems. Veronese is committing a rape of the virgin text. Mitchell's Inquisition find Keats guilty of both rape and banality, but Keats is beyond punishing. The actual Inquisition finds Veronese guilty of blasphemy but, thanks to powerful protectors, the painter is merely instructed to correct the offending figures.

Before leaving the High Renaissance I want to consider the way the term 'poetry' is used in the visual art of the time. I mean Titian's use of the term *poesie*, to refer to paintings with mythological subjects, such as the *Diana and Actaeon* in the National Gallery that he painted

for Philip II of Spain in the 1550s. That simple equation might lead us to assume that work dealing with classical mythology should be regarded as a form of visual poetry to differentiate it from subjects dealing with conventional religious imagery that presumably have a more didactic function. *Diana and Actaeon* refers to one kind of text, the *Crowning with Thorns* to another.



The Crowning with Thorns
by Titian, 1542-3
Musée du Louvre, Paris

The suggestion is that didactic work — that is to say, work with a didactic text — is not poesie, but classical mythology, work with a less officially authoritative or fixed text, with less dogmatic value. That seems to be Titian's understanding. Looser text offers more opportunity for sensuousness, even voluptuousness, that whole hazy but intense region of feeling where shadows and rich colour are more eloquent than clear formulations. Classical mythology is not a body of clear ideas and precepts for the artist of the Renaissance: it is an occasion in which human beings may indulge themselves by recognizing their longings.

Yes, but there is also the *poesie* of Giorgione, Titian's fellow student in the studio of Giovanni Bellini. Giorgione dies in 1510, long before Titian paints his pictures for Philip II and certainly before Veronese painted his offending painting. Bellini himself was moving from the harder-edged Florentine style paintings to a softer, more atmospheric style rich in colour. Giorgione and Titian took this soft style a step further so that we may now, a little crudely perhaps, think of the Venetian School as sensuous and poetic, as opposed to the intellectual and architectural School of Florence. What Giorgione does is something different: his relation to text is vestigial, fragmentary, imprecise, almost, but not wholly independent. Giorgione's two best known paintings (if they *are*

The Tempest
by Giorgione, c.1508
Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice

Concert Champêtre
by Giorgione (and/or Titian), c.1510
Musée du Louvre, Paris

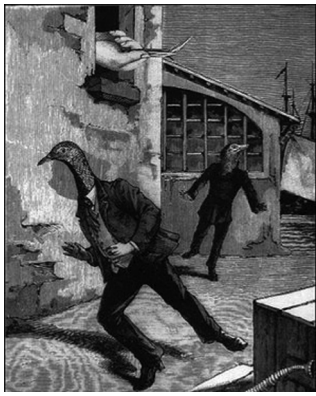
by Giorgione), *The Tempest* and *Concert Champêtre*, are generally referred to as *poesie* but it would be hard to discern a clear classical mythology in either.

And here we approach the nub of the matter. The relation of the sister arts is imprecise, with considerable license on both sides. It is hard to pin it down in terms of property law. We do not consider Veronese to be a rapist of text, though in Mitchell's terms we should do. Titian invites erotic feeling by not relying on specific text. He pays homage to text but establishes a territory between texts, including a text whose codes involve aspects of desire, power and gender relations as understood by his patrons and, it seems, fully assimilated and felt by him. Giorgione's offer of text is in terms of mystery and flirtation. His female figures in their settings refer us to visual language as much as to written text. The connection is almost broken. Interestingly enough there are few poems, as far as I know, about Giorgione's works. We can if we like construct a text to predicate an unknown, undiscovered Giorgione — the weather shall be thus, the disposition of the figures thus, the degree of display thus, the distance from text thus, but we know the poetry is in them already.

The fact is that, right through Romantic art and into the late nineteenth century, visual art has taken subjects from written textual sources, whether that is poetry or plays or mythology, or history. It is only at the beginning of the twentieth century, with Modernism, that the idea of a literary subject is questioned, though even then, in Surrealism there is the implication of events as text close to written language — one has only to think of Max Ernst's *Une Semaine de Bonté* to see how close narrative, albeit disjunctive

narrative, is to the production of image.

And poets have continued, ever more busily to write about visual art, whether that is in terms of painting, sculpture, photograph, cinema, or indeed conceptual art in ways that might not be described as appropriation, more as conversation, a fascinating game of ideas where the mind gallops off in several directions at once, to find itself gamboling in its own ambiguous fields.



from Une semaine de bonté by Max Ernst, 1934

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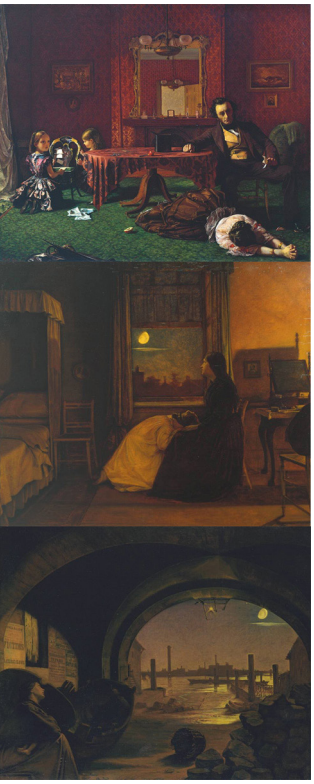
I began with music and would now like to draw these threads together. Speaking as someone who has spent decades writing poems inspired by visual images and patterning them into a kind of form or stillness — in other words one of Mitchell's rapists — I am forced to question the whole issue of poetry and ekphrastics, in which there is an assumption that the aim of a poem is to conjure and speak for the picture, or in some way to appropriate its qualities and make off with them. Is that what happens between the arts?

When Finzi takes De La Mare's "The Birthnight," he does not assert that he has replaced the poem, defined it, improved it, appropriated it or represented it by a discourse. In effect he has done in music what every reader does in his or her mind when reading a text; that is, follow his own hunches and inclinations to respond, and in his case to produce a sumptuous piece of music for which the world is richer, in much the same way as it is richer for Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," whose meaning, however complex, is *pace* Professor Mitchell, not banal, but if one were less keen in driving a point home, might include an understanding that Keats, who



Past and Present (triptych)
by Augustus Leopold Egg, 1858
Tate Modern, London

had nursed his brother Tom through consumption and death, and had just learned that he himself was suffering from consumption, might have supposed his own time to be too short to attain what he desired — in which supposition Keats was right.

Nor do I think that Keats is writing a precisely ekphrastic poem because while he describes some elements of the urn, it is hard to see the whole. We get a list of the figures, some musical instruments, the priest, the heifer, some forest branches and trodden weed but I don't think we could reconstruct the vase from the poem except in a rather general way. My contention is that we are not ever supposed to. The point is a balancing of various possibilities: pursuit combined with stillness, unfulfilled desire with fulfilment, mortality with immortality and the complexity of the idea of beauty and truth, which does not simply mean a rudimentarily politicised, rather extreme form of prettiness and a documentary or indeed moral certainty, but is also to be read the other way around, as it is in the forgotten second half of Keats's tag where truth is beauty, meaning whatever truth, including the truth of tuberculosis. It's not *either/or*, it's both. To be doing both, to be in fact doing several things at the same time, is the entire point of Keats's poem, of any poem, indeed of any work of art.

Ekphrasis, in so far as it is "an extended and detailed literary description of any object, real or imaginary," or labours at "giving voice to a mute art object," or offers "a rhetorical description of a work of art," or is indeed "[a] set description intended to bring person, place, picture, etc. before the mind's eye," seems to me beside the point as far as art goes. No one actually thinks that is what happens. If that did happen in poetry, Mitchell — and Bloom

— might be right. But good poems do both much more and much less. Poems that do work along lines that seem to be vaguely *ekphrastic* — in other words they concern themselves with trying to sum the appearance of a picture by bringing it before our mind's eye seem rather dull to me. Good poems are usually busy doing something else.

Part 1 of 6 of Marriage à-la-mode
by William Hogarth, 1743–5
National Gallery, London

Joseph Stalin (detail)
by Samuel Johnson Woolf, 1937
National Portrait Gallery, Washington

At one stage, while constructing a Masters course about Writing the Visual, I came up with a list of the kinds of picture that seemed to have offered possibilities for creative commentary. There were:

a) Poems about *portraits*, in which the poem is less about the portrait than about the person depicted. If the portrait is mentioned at all as a work of art it is for its effect on the writer as a memento of the sitter. This is all about *presence*. A good example might be Cowper's poem on the receipt of the portrait of his mother: "O that those lips had language!'

b) '*Picture as detective fiction.*' Here again the writer disregards the painting as an object and reads a narrative into the subjects depicted. Victorian narrative painting gladly offered many such hostages to fortune. In this kind of picture the objects depicted serve as clues in the solving of the narrative.

c) Not quite same as (b) is 'picture as *speculative fiction.*' I am thinking here particularly of Lichtenberg's gorgeous *Commentaries on Hogarth* in which the philosopher takes each one of Hogarth's engravings series and playfully concocts a gossipy commentary filling in narrative details that Hogarth does *not* show but that might have taken place to bring the actually depicted scenes about. This is so consciously mischievous as to be positively delightful.

d) Related to (b) above, is the official *didactic icon*. Here one could include all pictures that are intended to teach, instil, stress or correct notions of hierarchy. The iconography of any religion falls into this category, so, in a painting of the life of Christ, we may recognize the various events and figures referred to in the sacred text. There are fascinating comparisons of the art of Stalinist Russia with that of Nazi Germany: which political figure is shown in which position? Which way is the Leader facing? Everything is significant. Ideally, everything that is visual should be easily translated into text of the most unambiguous kind. Dogma, as we have said before, must be clear and firm.

Landscape with the Fall of Icarus
attrib. Pieter Bruegel, c.1590-5
Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

e) *Paysage moralisé.* Here a landscape with figures is presented in a number of possible frameworks that relate to existing narrative texts but take certain liberties with them. Greek or other myth, or Shakespeare or Dante or Goethe, or indeed history: all offer well-known stories that are recognized but not treated as dogmatic statements or as problems to be solved. They are primarily invitations to consider the human condition. No wonder most poems are based on this kind of work — the text, being incomplete, invites completion or at least extension. Keats speculates on a Grecian urn. Auden considers Breughel's 'Fall of Icarus'.

f) *Vanitas* is rather like (d), the didactic icon. Here too everything is known or at least knowable. Here be skulls, bubbles, peachy complexions, mirrors, pipes, flowers, short-lived insects. You name it: we've got it. And let's not forget the Darkness. Darkness is befitting to *vanitas* because its chief message is: *You are going to snuff it*. Not much to be said about it because, like the didactic icon, it is already saying it, is *already* text. Usually. You could still turn an

elegant poem on it, or even a decent piece of music pure.

g) There is a class of speculation about the artist rather than the art, the poetic products of which we could term, after Browning, *dramatis personae*. As we recall, Browning wrote long poems voiced for Fra Filippo Lippi and Andrea del Sarto. *The Lives of the Artists* (to take another title, this time from Vasari) can make a good human document. Most fiction works down this line for obvious reasons: artists, being people, tend to change. Pictures don't.

Vanitas
by Jacob de Gheyn II, 1603
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

One might suggest a similar set of classifications for the other arts, for music as poetry or art, for poetry as either art or music, for art as music or poetry.

In my T. S. Eliot lecture in 2005 I took a poem by a relatively neglected Georgian poet — "The Midnight Skaters" by Edmund Blunden — which describes skaters at night on a frozen village pond. The pond itself is deep and treacherous and at the bottom of it sits Death 'with his engines set', waiting for the ice to crack. At the end of the poem, Blunden encourages his skaters to skate on, to use Death as though they loved him, and to

> Court him, elude him, reel and pass,
> And let him hate you through the glass.

I argued that language was something like the ice over a frozen pond. That language was thin, slippery, and liable to crack; that everything about language was contingent; that words were not things or events in themselves except in their own uncertain realm; that even the relations between words in syntax (the basic form of pattern) was far from assured. I argued that the task of the

poet was to execute a dance on that ice, and that often the thinnest parts of the ice were most exciting. The point is that skates cut patterns on ice which is itself a pattern and that the pond beneath was a kind of death without which there would be no ice; that the patterned crystals of ice itself, ice as language, were the products of the metaphysical cold that is our planetary condition.

Painter when painting
a portrait of a lute player
by Marguerite Gérard, a.1803
The Hermitage, Saint Petersburg

All forms of communication are contingent, the arts above all. In a very early poem a good friend of mine, the poet Peter Scupham, wrote about a puppet play in which a child asks whether the puppets moved by magic or string. The answer for the children in the poem is: magic. My adult answer would be — must be — string, but would assert that string itself is miraculous, an extraordinary ordinary thing whose sheer existence in both the world of things and in the word that conjures it, is a form of magic. That the string that holds the arts together is much like the string that holds any language together. That string is magic, in short, simply by being string, much like the ice which is just ice.