Literator - Journal of Literary Criticism, Comparative Linguistics and Literary Studies
ISSN: (Online) 2219-8237, (Print) 0258-2279

'Stepping into the painting': Franz Marc, Mary Oliver and the ekphrastic process

Author:
Tony Ullyatt[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of English and Comparative Studies, University of Fort Hare, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Tony Ullyatt,
chinkoa@vodamail.co.za

Dates:
Received: 28 Sept. 2016
Accepted: 31 Oct. 2017
Published: 14 June 2018

How to cite this article:
Ullyatt, T., 2018, '"Stepping into the painting": Franz Marc, Mary Oliver and the ekphrastic process', *Literator* 39(1), a1352. https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v39i1.1352

Copyright:
© 2018. The Authors. Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:
Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

This article discusses Mary Oliver's poem, 'Franz Marc's Blue Horses', as an ekphrastic poem. More specifically, the discussion opens with a brief overview aimed at an understanding of ekphrasis to show how its development through the centuries has altered definitions of what constitutes ekphrasis and how these fresh understandings have broadened its possibilities for the modern poet. Siglind Bruhn's ideas about the three stages of the ekphrastic process are then outlined. They trace the steps a poet has to follow in order to produce an ekphrastic poem; they follow consecutively, with the second depending on the first, and the third depending on the second. Understanding this process enables readers to appreciate the ways in which Oliver adheres to, or diverts from, it in producing her poem about Franz Marc. The discussion turns to Hans Lund's typology of the various verbal and visual relationships in ekphrasis that are open to the poet. His typology helps readers to consider answers to the following questions: what elements of the artwork does the poet make use of, and which does she exclude? In what ways are these elements deployed in the creation of her verbal text? And in broader terms, what is the nature of visual and verbal relationship in this particular poem? How tentative might that relationship be? After a description of Franz Marc's painting, *The Tower of Blue Horses*, as an Expressionist artwork, the discussion moves on to Mary Oliver 's poem. The text is conceptualised as Oliver 's 'script' as it takes up Stephen Cheeke's suggestion 'to imagine what happens next' after the poet's initial interface with the stasis of the artwork's pregnant moment. The article modifies the frequently used metaphor of the painting as a single frame from a film, replacing the solitary frame with the idea of a single scene as more credible metaphorically, the scene itself being divided into several segments reflecting the poem's structure. Thus, the *punctum temporis* (or pregnant moment) as a single scene from a film becomes the guiding metaphor of the article. Then, the article argues that Oliver develops her poem as a filmic narrative, offering readers a series of 'segments' depicting various aspects of the evolving narrative as she visualises it. These ekphrastic processes are explored in some detail. Reading the poem in a filmic way allows the poet to controvert the implicit stasis of the painting and, through the transmedialisation of the visual to the verbal, to create a dynamic narrative 'script', using the poem's segmented structure, to explore the text's meaning by offering readers a vivid evocation of her experience of Marc's painting.

Toward an understanding of ekphrasis

> It is hard to imagine western literature ... without what we can call ekphrasis – that pausing, in some fashion, for thought before, and/or about, some nonverbal work of art, or craft, a *poiema* without words, some more or less aestheticized made object or set of made objects. (Cunningham 2007:57)

Cunningham argues thus in support of his opening assertion that 'Ekphrasis is certainly one of literature's oldest and longest lasting effects and practices' (2007:57). Given this long tradition, one might ask: why do we still write ekphrastic poems? And, secondly, in what ways has the process of ekphrasis changed and developed since those early days? To the first question, Freiman (2012:5) cites this explanation from Susan Stewart (1993:31), who 'locates the need to write as being central to our sense of existence; a means of "inscribing" space with language and repeating the process'. If the need to write is inherent in our need to record our passage through life and the experiences accumulated along the way, then ekphrasis is one means of capturing our responses to the artworks we encounter on that journey, whether in museums, printed texts, or the electronic media.

Answering the second question, Sager (2006) explains:

> The rhetorical device of *enargeia* was ... a regular scholastic exercise of using words to create such a vivid, visual description that the object is placed before the listener's or reader's inner eye. *Enargeia* also encompassed ekphrasis as a form of vivid evocation. (p. 4)

Contemporary ekphrasis has broadened its scope dramatically, freeing itself from its exclusively descriptive function, to include all the major literary genres as well as some of the minor ones. At the same time and as might be expected, there has also been debate centred on what is, or should be, encompassed by the concept of an artwork, the 'more or less aestheticized made object or set of made objects' of Cunningham's opening words.

Whatever the nature of the debates, all presume a relationship between artwork and text which, in turn, presumes some sort of transmedial visual-verbal interdependence. The nature of this interdependence is stressed in a letter which the poet, William Carpenter, wrote to Gail Levin in 1995. Discussing Edward Hopper's work, Carpenter suggests that 'Hopper has "an emotional or aesthetic incompleteness (not failure!) in the image that demands completion in the other [verbal] medium"' (Levin 1995:11). In other words, one could ask whether it is possible for an ekphrastic poem to exist independently of the artwork that engendered it. In searching for answers to these questions, we need to look at what the ekphrastic process entails.

Ekphrasis as process: Siglind Bruhn and Hans Lund

In her long article, 'A Concert of Paintings: "Musical Ekphrasis" in the Twentieth Century' (2001:551–605), Siglind Bruhn draws on the vocabulary of literary ekphrasis to explicate her conceptualisation of the musical ekphrasis process. This conceptualisation constitutes an explanation of the *stages* in the process:

> As I understand it, what must be present in every case of (literary) ekphrasis is a three-tiered structure of reality and artistic transformation:
>
> 1. a real or fictitious 'text' functioning as a source for artistic re-presentation
> 2. a primary re-presentation of that 'text' in visual form (as a painting, drawing, photograph, carving, sculpture, etc.) or, for that matter, in film or dance ... i.e. in any mode that reaches us primarily through our visual perception
> 3. a re-presentation of that first [primary] re-presentation in poetic language (2001:559).

Although Bruhn describes what she perceives as 'a three-tiered structure of reality and artistic transformation', the process involves a sequence of re-presentations[1] initiated by the artist's production of an artwork based on reality. At the same time, each act of re-presentation is preceded by the act of interpretation.

1.Note that the word 're-presentation' is hyphenated throughout, except when quoting, to indicate that each re-presentation is achieved through the previous transmedialisation.

The ekphrastic process is well illustrated by Pieter Brueghel the Elder's painting, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (housed in the Musée des Beaux Arts), and by the well-known poems by William Carlos Williams, W.H. Auden, Michael Hamburger, Edward Field, Muriel Ruykeyser and Anne Sexton, among others, that re-present it. For the sake of brevity, the present discussion will explore only Williams's poem.

The text that Brueghel used was, most probably, a version of the myth of Daedalus and Icarus found in a contemporary translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Thus, Brueghel's painting would be the first re-presentation of that verbal, real-world object in visual form, constituting the artist's interpretation and transmedialisation of Ovid's words. The poems by William Carlos Williams et al. would then become interpretations and transmedialisations of Brueghel's artwork into poetic language. The poems are remarkably different, not least because, as Lund states succinctly, '[t]wo observers do not read a picture in exactly the same way' (1992:33). For the present purposes, these differences in re-presentation between Brueghel's painting and the consequent poems will be seen in the omissions, addition, emendations and other variations.

So how does Williams interpret and re-present Brueghel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*? We need to begin with some lines from Ovid's account (Ovid 1986):

> [Daedalus] flew ahead, anxious for his son's sake,
> Just like a bird that from its lofty nest
> Launches a tender fledgling in the air.
> Calling his son to follow, schooling him
> In that fatal apprenticeship, he flapped
> His wings and watched the boy flapping behind.
> An angler fishing with his quivering rod,
> A lonely shepherd propped upon his crook,
> A ploughman leaning on his plough, looked up
> And gazed in awe, and thought they must be gods
> That they could fly.
> [...]
> The scorching sun so close
> Softened the fragrant wax that bound his wings;
> The wax melted; his waving arms were bare;
> Unfledged, they had no purchase on the air!
> The boy was swallowed in the blue sea's swell. (pp. 177–178)

Figure 1 is Brueghel's visual reading or 'primary re-presentation' of those lines.

So how precisely does Brueghel's painting differ from Ovid's account? Of Icarus himself, we see only two pale legs, flailing as he plunges into the green sea where he drowns. Of the other dramatis personae of the original myth – Daedalus, the angler, the shepherd and the ploughman – the angler and the ploughman are busy with the daily tasks. To these, Brueghel adds the commonly overlooked character of a sailor in the rigging of the passing vessel. Ovid mentions neither ship nor sailor.



Source: Hagen, R.-M. & Hagen, R., 2000, *Pieter Brueghel the Elder*, Taschen, Cologne

FIGURE 1: Pieter Brueghel the Elder, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (Musée des Beaux Arts).

With his back toward the sea and the drowning Icarus, the shepherd gazes open-mouthed (perhaps in amazement) at something not depicted in the picture, possibly Daedalus who has just flown over them. This is the nearest Brueghel comes to acknowledge the father's role in the myth. Even the hills and coastal settlements along the shoreline, as well as the islands find no place in Ovid, either.

With a distinctly objectivist approach, Williams creates a poem characterised 'by a clean stripping of poetry to its essentials, by a holding of emotion at arm's length, and by vivid observations, restricted almost entirely to sensory experience' (Hart 1965:929). He presents his readers with what would seem to be an 'objective' account of Brueghel's painting. The poem's dispassionate diction and detached tone contribute to that apparent 'objectivity', resulting in an overall simplicity that belies the powerful emotions inherent in the tragic event. This ploy of objectivity is initiated by the opening line, where the poet deftly sidesteps the issue of creating his 'own' interpretation of the painting by asserting that what follows in the poem is 'According to Brueghel'. Indeed, the link between the painter and poet is strengthened by the latter's use of Brueghel's title.

In *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (Williams 1963:4), we find that only the ploughman – here called 'a farmer' – is mentioned: 'ploughing/his field'. Furthermore, of the poem's 21 lines, 12 are given over to the evocation of the season (including the ploughman/farmer), and only six to the myth itself. These proportions reflect the title's primary focus on the landscape, with the mythical figure of Icarus as a minor adjunct to the main subject. But even though the landscape serves as primary focus, Williams follows Ovid by omitting the hills and settlements as well as the islands evident in Brueghel's painting:

> According to Brueghel
> when Icarus fell
> it was spring
>
> a farmer was ploughing
> his field
> the whole pageantry
>
> of the year was
> awake tingling
> near
>
> the edge of the sea
> concerned
> with itself
>
> sweating in the sun
> that melted
> the wings' wax
>
> unsignificantly
> off the coast
> there was
>
> a splash quite unnoticed
> this was
> Icarus drowning

As readers, we have an almost descriptive report (characteristic of very early ekphrasis, we recall) of what the speaker chooses to see in the artwork. The poet offers a very strong focus on the painting's foreground and the characters in it, but omits the details of the tragedy's context: the setting, the distant cities and settlements, and the ship. There are occasional 'poetic touches', such as the anthropomorphising of the season: 'the year was/awake tingling/near/the edge of the sea/concerned with itself'. With these words, the poet reads the season as 'spring'. Icarus's whole adventure, its mythic significance and death are reduced to the relatively small detail of his legs vanishing within the whole grandeur of the flourishing landscape. And we are told, too, that his death, construed as 'unsignificant' (at least for the three onlookers), is reduced ironically to 'a splash quite unnoticed', which 'was/Icarus drowning'. Icarus's fall is brought to its inevitable conclusion in an almost off-handish manner: the youth dies by drowning.

Williams presents his readers with a subtle weave of description and elaboration of, addition to, and omission from, the visual image. Williams's transmedialisation of Brueghel's artwork is a highly selective interpretation, one that cannot be considered '[a]ccording to Brueghel'. Bruhn explains what happens in a poetic rendering of a visual image: 'Characteristically, it evokes interpretation or additional layers of meaning, changes the viewers' focus, or guides our eyes toward details and contexts we might otherwise overlook' (2001:559–560). Writing on the artwork of Yves Tanguey, Carl Jung suggests that modern art confronts the observer with questions: 'How will you react? What do you think? What kind of fantasy will come up?' (Wojtkowski 2015:5).

Ekphrasis as a visual and verbal relationship

Freiman (2012) observes:

> The process of writing a poem in response to an artwork is complex: it engages in the relationship of its own creative practice of making/writing and the creative work of another artist. (p. 4)

The process is also the subject of various debates and discussions.

Hans Lund identifies 'three main categories for the relation of text to picture: combination, integration, and transformation'. Here, attention moves away from the *stages* of the ekphrastic process, described earlier, to the *nature* of the visual and verbal relationship, and, more particularly, to three ways in which the viewer-poet may explore and/or exploit that relationship in the creation of his or her poem.

Although Lund explicates these three categories in some detail, for the present purposes, I shall extract only their gist:

> By *combination* I mean a coexistence, at best a cooperation between words and pictures. It is, then, a question of a bi-medial communication, where the media are intended to add to and comment on each other. Here, too, are found certain works ... by authors who combine and to a certain degree master the literary as well as the pictorial medium. Examples are William Blake, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Günter Grass. (Lund 1992:8)

Lund's (1992) second category – *integration* – is where:

> … we find stanzas in the shape of a goblet or hourglass and the like in the pattern poems of baroque poetry, as well as Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* and the concrete poetry of Modernism. (pp. 8–9)

His final classification is:

> … *transformation* – no pictorial element is combined with or integrated into the verbal text. The text refers to an element or a combination of elements in pictures not present before the reader's eyes. The information to the reader about the picture is given exclusively by the verbal language. (Lund 1992:9)

This category concurs with the second step in Bruhn's model of the ekphrastic process: the creation or production of 'a primary representation of [reality] in visual form'. That primary re-presentation – in the present instance, Franz Marc's painting – constitutes the pregnant moment or *punctum temporis* of the ekphrastic process and is the catalyst for transforming the poet's 'hermeneutic into performance' (Davidson 1983:7).

The artwork as *punctum temporis*

The notion of the *punctum temporis* in art finds an early expression in Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's (1887) *Laokoön: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (first published in 1766) in which he argues:

> Painting, in its coexistent compositions, can use but a single moment or an action, and must therefore choose the most pregnant one, *the one most suggestive of what has gone before and what is to follow*. (p. 92, [*author's own emphasis*])

For Cheeke, '[a]nother way of thinking about the stillness of an artwork, however, is to unlock that fixity and to imagine what happens next' (2008:61). Unlocking that fixity opens up possibilities for the poet to invent not only what happens next but also what might have led up to the pregnant moment.

The poet choosing to pursue the original descriptive function of ekphrasis would need to acknowledge that '[e]ven the most naked and seemingly objective verbal description is an interpretation' (Lund 1992:33). Michael Davidson (1983) elaborates on the role of 'reading' and interpreting the artwork, here exemplified by paintings:

> … the poet becomes a reader of the painter's activity of signifying. This act of reading is never passive, never recuperative since *its function is to produce a new text*, not to re-capture the original in another medium. The poet who reads another work of art transforms his hermeneutic into performance, just as the reader of the poem participates among the various codes of the text to generate his own readings. (p. 77, [*author's own emphasis*])

As part of the process of transforming his or her hermeneutic into performance, the poet would need to visualise a

narrative, a storyline leading up to, or following on from, the pregnant moment. However, an artwork may be a jumping-off point for a poet to develop a narrative only tangentially related to it.[2]

In discussions of the implied narrative in ekphrasis, authors often resort to the analogy of the *punctum temporis* as a single frame from a complete film. Of course, the comparison between an artwork and a frame from a film lacks a perfect fit, not least because the film's climax comprises more than one frame. The analogy is better served, therefore, by replacing the idea of a frame with the idea of a climactic scene.

A second matter raised by the *punctum temporis* is its centrality as the climax of the narrative. However, the word, 'centrality', suggests its position as the middle point of the narrative. This is not the case. It may be perceived as occurring anywhere in the narrative, depending on the storyline of the narrative itself. It is the scene that, more than any other, invites the intermedial storyline. Thus, the viewer-poet might visualise it as the opening scene of the narrative, the final scene, or at any other highly charged moment in between. In Oliver's poem, for instance, it might well be the surprising opening scene that serves to draw readers 'into' the painting with the speaker.

Der Turm der Blauen Pferde (*The Tower of Blue Horses*) by Franz Marc (1880–1916)

Franz Marc was a Munich-born artist and a founding member of *Der Blaue Reiter* group, established in 1912 as a part of the broader school known as Expressionism.

Despite difficulties in defining Expressionism, some broad characteristics may be detected. It was a movement that evolved primarily in Germany as a reaction against and/or to industrialisation's dehumanising effect, the burgeoning of cities, urban culture and its *modus vivendi*. In brief, the Expressionists rejected the ideology of realism (Murphy 1999:43). By rejecting any accurate depictions of reality, '[the Expressionists] sought to avoid the representation of external reality' so as 'to project themselves and a highly personal vision of the world' (Cuddon 1999:196–197). Referring specifically to Franz Marc and *The Tower of Blue Horses*, Begbie (1991) notes that Paul Tillich:

> … in his 1921 lecture delivered at Berlin University ... speaks of Franz Marc's 'Tower of Blue Horses' as destroying natural forms and colours in order to gain an insight into the inner truth of things. (p. 23)

It is this search for that inner truth that invites Oliver as a viewer-poet to take that initial step into the painting after she has visualised it as a portal to access such truth.

Marc painted numerous images of horses. *Die grossen blauen Pferde*, for example, depicts three blue animals and *Die drie roten Pferde* three red horses. But *Der Turm der Blauen Pferde* (*The Tower of Blue Horses*) would appear to be the only one featuring *four* horses. The painting was completed in 1913, but vanished in 1945 (see Figure 2).

The following description of the painting is intended to suggest some descriptive possibilities that the poet might deploy in the course of the ekphrastic process. (Most of the information here is drawn, or adapted, from Susanna Partsch, tr. Karen Williams, *Franz Marc, 1880–1916*, Cologne: Taschen, 2001.)

The Tower of Blue Horses is a substantial work, measuring 200 cm × 130 cm (Partsch 2001:44). The foremost horse seemed 'only a little less than life size' (Partsch 2001:47). This horse also carries an image of a crescent moon on it chest and a suggestion of stars on its flank.



Source: Partsch, S., 2001, *Franz Marc, 1880–1916*, transl. K. Williams, Taschen, Cologne

FIGURE 2: Franz Marc (1880–1916), *Der Turm der Blauen Pferde* (*The Tower of Blue Horses*).

2.For example, in Susan Ludvigson's 'Inventing My Parents: After Edward Hopper's "Nighthawks", (1942)', the poet offers a touching reminiscence of her parents enjoying a night out, shortly after the United States had become involved in the Second World War. The only link the poet makes with Hopper's painting is that she imagines that the couple sitting at the diner counter are her parents. Ludvigson's poem raises questions of how flimsy or tenuous the verbal text's interrelationship with the visual text can be, and whether the painting is the *punctum temporis vis-à-vis* the engendered poem's narrative or merely a starting point for responses connected only associatively.

More than three-quarters of the canvas, top to bottom, at the centre-right is taken up with a frontal view of four blue horses, each with its head turned toward the viewers' left. They are arranged in four ascending levels, the second, third and fourth animals each positioned a little above and behind the one in front of, and beneath, it, thus establishing a sense of three-dimensionality, an important element in Oliver's text.

In the remaining left-hand portion of the work, there is a sinuous abstract landscape over which an orange-yellow rainbow arches in the top left-hand corner. According to Partsch (2001:47), the moon and the suggestion of stars (on the front horse), together with the rainbow, constitute an attempt 'to portray the unity of creature and cosmos'.

Under the horse's belly, the colours are rich and earthy. Partsch (2001) argues that Marc tries to 'see and paint through [the animal's] eyes'. She suggests further that the painting:

> … holds us spellbound ... A group of four horses lights up before our eyes like a vision ... The mighty body of the foremost animal ... seems to emerge from the depths and stop immediately in front of the viewer. (pp. 46–47)

The power and energy in Marc's depiction of the horses' bodies is evident not only in their startling colour but also in the powerful lines of their musculature, which is particularly visible in the first two horses.

It is important to add that blue is associated with the sky and 'things far away' and 'is usually perceived as being transparent, pure, immaterial' like water. Blue is also 'the colour of the divine, of truth and ... of fidelity. It is also the colour of the unreal and the fantastic' (Becker 1994:43). Clearly, these symbolic meanings play an important role in any understanding of Marc's painting and in any reading of Oliver's poem.

Mary Oliver's poem

Mary Oliver's poem, 'Franz Marc's Blue Horses', appears in her volume, *Blue Horses*, published in 2014. The poem presumes that readers will construe it as an ekphrastic poem because of its titular link to Marc's artwork:

> FRANZ MARC'S BLUE HORSES
> I step into the painting of four blue horses.
> I am not even surprised that I can do this.
>
> One of the horses walks toward me.
> His blue nose noses me lightly. I put my arm over his blue mane, not holding on, just commingling.
> He allows me my pleasure.
> Franz Marc died a young man, shrapnel in his brain.
> I would rather die than try to explain to the blue horses what war is.
> They would either faint in horror, or simply find it impossible to believe.
> I do not know how to thank you, Franz Marc.
> Maybe our world will grow kinder eventually.
> Maybe the desire to make something beautiful is the piece of God that is inside each of us.
>
> Now all four horses have come closer, are bending their faces toward me as if they have secrets to tell.
> I don't expect them to speak, and they don't.
> If being beautiful isn't enough, what could they possibly say? (p. 43)

The following discussion explores what eventuates when the poet begins to explore the *punctum temporis*'s narrative possibilities. At the same time, the metaphor of the pregnant moment as one scene from an entire film structures the discussion of 'what happens next' by considering the poem as a narrative script divided into a series of 'segments', each contributing a different facet of the poet's response to the experience of the artwork.

Typographically, the poem consists of two parts, the first two lines separated from the remainder of the text. However, in terms of its subject matter, the poem may be subdivided into seven segments of differing lengths and focuses.

Segment 1:

> I step into the painting of four blue horses.
>
> I am not even surprised that I can do this.

The end-stopped opening line presents readers with a startling statement. Part of the impact of this statement lies in its transgression of the presumed intermediate space between the viewer-poet and the artwork, whether in a museum, in a printed volume or in the electronic media. The line also introduces the notion of movement between inner and outer worlds, between the worlds of reality and the artist's imagined one. We note, too, that Marc's world also assumes three-dimensionality for the speaker as she steps *into* it, leaving the outside world behind. In the 'outside' world, the painting remains two-dimensional and static, but, once the speaker has entered its world metaphorically, it becomes dynamic, starting a narrative journey rooted in the *punctum temporis.*

Accepting Krieger's assertion that the pregnant moment constitutes 'the representation of the soul of the narrative because it is *the* representative moment of it' (1992:89), then the speaker is entering into the *soul* of Marc's depicted world, and, in so doing, gaining what Paul Tillich called 'an insight into the inner truth of things'. This sets up the idea that to be able to explore the inner truth of things, one has to leave, or separate oneself from, the real-world in order to access those inner truths.

The impact of the first line is reinforced by the second, another self-contained assertion: 'I am not even surprised that I can do this'. Although, as readers, we are, or should be, surprised or perhaps disquieted, by the speaker's lack of surprise at the possibility, those familiar with Oliver's recent poetry might recall the line from the poem, 'Evidence' (2009:43): 'Keep some room in your heart for the unimaginable'. Of course, it is primarily in the world of reality that things are 'unimaginable', with all its constrictive

connotations: beyond belief, incredible, inconceivable, unthinkable and more.

We recall that even Lewis Carroll's Alice was taken aback that she could enter alternative imagined worlds by venturing down the rabbit hole or behind the looking glass:

> … she began looking about, and noticed that what could be seen from the old room was quite common and uninteresting, but that all the rest was as different as possible. For instance, *the pictures on the wall next to the fire seemed to be all alive*… (Carroll 1948:10–12, [*author's own emphasis*])

Although the mirror and Marc's painting would, self-evidently, constitute impassable boundaries in reality, both Alice and Oliver's speaker are able to pass through these portals to enter into, and explore, the worlds beyond. The entry of the narrators into those worlds opens up a range of possibilities considerably different, 'other', than their respective realities. These possibilities also serve to offer new insights and revelations to these main characters, insights and revelations which will affect their understanding of reality when they return to it. Indeed, the case of Oliver's speaker, her transliminal crossing recalls Hyppolite's 'first myth of outside and inside' (Bachelard 1994:212), as the move from outside to inside initiates her search for insight into Tillich's 'inner truth of things'.

The notion of movement continues in Segment 2, five lines devoted to the speaker's initial interaction and physical contact with the blue horses.

Segment 2:

> One of the horses walks toward me.
> His blue nose noses me lightly. I put my arm
> over his blue mane, not holding on, just commingling.
> He allows me my pleasure.

This segment initiates the interaction between human and horse that will take the speaker to the inner truth of things. As the speaker relishes the simple pleasure of human and animal interdependence, its harmony and wholeness as an end in itself, she evokes a prelapsarian Eden. It images an ideal world essentially devoid of fear and threat. It is quite clearly an idealistic, idyllic place, one that might well be considered a naïve vision, somewhat inappropriate in the context of contemporary violence. Yet it suggests the tone that the speaker wishes to evoke in the *punctum temporis.* There is a sense that the first horse's approach to the human speaker is tentative in its light touch of the nose, but exploratory as it seeks to establish trust so as to allow the human being to commingle and relish her 'pleasure' without any sense of 'holding on', of the animal's subjugation. There is no sense of threat or violence in this segment, only universal harmony.

Segment 3:

> Franz Marc died a young man, shrapnel in his brain.

After the pastoral tranquillity of the previous scene and its final word, 'pleasure', the abruptness of the cut in time and location, from the immediacy of the speaker's 'commingling' with the blue horses and its concomitant 'pleasure', is counterbalanced by the starkness of the speaker's emotionless statement about Franz Marc's death, with its flat quality of factual reportage. It serves as a reminder and dramatic contrast with the lost prelapsarian Edenic world, and how far humankind has come since with its knowledge of good and evil.

Filmically, this short scene, the first of two, may be visualised as a close-up of the speaker as she ponders on this abominable 'outside' reality as she and the horses commingle within the idyllic landscape she has recently entered. This is, however, a complex evocation of an 'outside' reality drawn from history, an 'outside' reality that is 'outside' and prior to the speaker's own current 'outside' reality. This segment may be construed as an aside, with a voice-over to reinforce it as a reflection, and as a bitter comment on the damage and destruction war causes to a country's culture and, particularly, its artistic world in this instance. It also functions as an introduction to Segment 4.

Segment 4:
Remaining inside the painting's inner world for the following segment, the speaker continues her internalised reflections, now focusing on the vexed and complex issue of human conflict, a subject initiated by the blunt reality of Marc's death in the previous segment. Here, the speaker is keeping worlds distinctly apart. Inside the 'painting's inner world', she contemplates a world into which she draws readers, but not the horses. So, she assumes a liminal space, straddling both worlds. This has implications for her subject position, and her relation to the painting, which guides her to more worlds:

> I would rather die than try to explain to the blue horses what war is.
>
> They would either faint in horror, or simply find it impossible to believe.

The impact of the phrase, 'I would rather die', lies in the ambiguous way it combines the hyperbolic tone of a colloquialism associated with embarrassment, on the one hand, with the serious literal tone of a statement of conviction, on the other. Perhaps the speaker's embarrassment arises from her being human in the idyllic environment, as well as despair, knowing how he perished. The more serious meaning suggests that the speaker is reluctant to introduce real-world violence embodied by the madness and ultimate futility of warfare, preferring not to defile the horses' inner world, the peaceable kingdom Marc has created. In this prelapsarian world, there is no need for the knowledge of good and evil such as humankind came to possess. The question remains: is it possible to recover that Edenic world, and, if so, how? This is one of the dilemmas the speaker uncovers in her pursuit of the inner truth of things. The dilemma is epitomised by the paradoxical interface of two 'outside' worlds – Marc's and Oliver's – as they come together in the painting's 'inner world'.

Segment 5:

> I do not know how to thank you, Franz Marc.

This is the second of the speaker's single-line contemplations, and, structurally, parallels Segment 3. In a similar way, this brief reflection may be construed filmically as a close-up of the speaker thinking, this time aloud perhaps. It also functions as an introduction to more extended reflections in Scene 6.

The statement provokes readers, who are 'outside' the speaker's situation, into searching for some possible reasons for the speaker's gratitude. Numerous possibilities come to mind: Is it for Marc's art in general? For this particular painting? For creating the imaginative, surreal portal for the speaker? For the inspiration she has found in the opportunity of entering his Expressionist world? For the revelations yielded in exploring that world? For the beauty the artist has created? For the ultimate sacrifice he made? The range and diversity of these possibilities (and others as well) suggest the boundlessness of her gratitude, and hence her difficulty in expressing it.

Because the speaker gives her readers no specific answers, a multiplicity of narrative possibilities are unlocked for them to consider. Carl Jung suggests that modern art confronts the observer with the following questions: 'How will you react? What do you think? What kind of fantasy will come up?' (Wojtkowski 2015:vol. 2, 5, footnote 3). The speaker's dilemma becomes the readers' dilemma, too. She thus merges her world (and subject position) with that of the readers.

Segment 6:

> Maybe our world will grow kinder eventually.
> Maybe the desire to make something beautiful is the piece of God that is inside each of us.

This segment contemplates two possible answers. Their tentative nature is captured in the repetition of the word, 'Maybe', although the crux of the scene lies in the phrase 'our world'. Which world is the speaker referring to: the 'outside' world of reality or the 'inner' world of the blue horses? Here she merges her outside reality with Marc's world or reality.

For the speaker, her sojourn in Marc's world has occasioned two essential thoughts brought about by her experiences there. The first is concerned with the betterment of the human condition; the second is concerned with the creative impulse. The speaker considers the possibility of a more compassionate and spiritually generous future for the human world, of reality becoming more aligned with the tranquil 'inner world' of the blue horses. However, mulling over the prospect of the human world becoming 'kinder', and remembering the circumstances of Franz Marc's death, she acknowledges the inherent difficulties of that eventuating with the introductory proviso: 'Maybe'. Her 'inner' world experiences do not blind her to the way things are, but rather offer her an ideal of how they might be. She is aware, too, that the process may well be a long-term one, transpiring only 'eventually'. The inner world and the outer worlds appear to be irreconcilable at this juncture, epitomised on a large scale, by the space between viewer and painting in a gallery. Perhaps this is another truth the speaker has uncovered in her journey.

The second notion arising from the speaker's experience of the blue horses' world is a need to understand the creative urge, 'the desire to make something beautiful'. The speaker attributes this urge to a perhaps naive assumption that creativity is a spiritual practice rooted in the idea of God as the archetypal creator of the universe, including the human species. Having the urge 'to make something beautiful' reveals the presence of God within each of us. From such a perspective, this urge finds manifestations in both Marc's painting and Oliver's poem.

The idea of God within each individual finds an earlier expression in 'At the River Clarion', another poem in Oliver's volume, *Evidence* (2009). In the following extract from that poem, the speaker seems to be more certain about God's presence:

> He's every one of us, potentially
> [....]
> And if this is true, isn't it something very important?
>
> Yes! it could be that I am a tiny piece of God, and
> each of you too, or at least of his intention and his hope.
> Which is a delight beyond measure.
> I don't know how you get to suspect such an idea. (p. 52)

We notice here the positive tone of words such as 'Yes!', 'very important' and 'delight beyond measure', as well as the speaker's sheer puzzlement toward, or an implicit criticism of, those who would doubt the notion. However, in 'Franz Marc's Blue Horses', the repetition of 'Maybe', together with 'eventually', stresses a more tentative, exploratory shift in tone in the speaker's reflections on making 'something beautiful', one that is doubtful about the fate of grand ideals in the current human condition.

The concluding six lines revert to the speaker–horses interaction, tying together her reflections in the penultimate section with her initial encounter with the animals in the second.

Segment 7:

> Now all four horses have come closer, are bending their faces toward me as if they have secrets to tell.
> I don't expect them to speak, and they don't.
> If being beautiful isn't enough, what could they possibly say?

With the passing of time, the other three horses find the courage to approach the human intruder. It is as if they, too, recognise the need for 'commingling'. Nonetheless, they do not touch the speaker, but there is an implicit intimacy in the way in which they bend their faces toward the speaker 'as if they have secrets to tell'. Telling secrets is generally presumed

to be a gesture of trust and friendship, although it can also be betrayed on occasion. Here, at what Kumin (1993:16) calls 'the intersection between the human and the natural worlds', the speaker does not expect the blue horses to communicate in words; that would be superfluous and unnecessary in their tranquil inner world. But the horses' body language cannot be ignored; it is as if the speaker has 'heard' the secrets they wish to convey. Furthermore, she understands and accepts that they do not need to speak because theirs is a different purpose: 'If being beautiful isn't enough, what/ could they possibly say?' In Oliver's argument, one notes some Keatsian resonances, not least from the concluding lines of the 'Ode to a Grecian Urn': 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty', – that is all/ye know on earth, and all ye need to know'. Oliver cites Keats quite often in both *A Poetry Handbook* (1994) and *Rules for the Dance* (1998), her prose works on writing poetry.

The horses' purpose is not to 'do' or 'say' – human urges in the 'outside' world – but to 'be', to epitomise their natural, divine loveliness. In doing so, they exemplify 'the piece of God that is inside each of us'. Here, we should recall the words of the mythologist, Joseph Campbell: 'The problem of making the inner meet the outer of today is, of course, the function of the artist' (2003:211).

The shifts in subject, chronology and focus between the 'scenes' exploit the filmic potential of what follows the initial pregnant moment. As the speaker passes over the threshold of the painting into its imagined world, the customarily presumed stasis of the artwork in the observer–artwork relationship is revisioned as a dynamic interactive one. The customary distance between the viewer-poet and the artwork (whether the artwork is viewed in the museum context or via media such as books, posters, photographs or electronic media) is dispensed with. In fact, by entering the painting imaginatively, the speaker engenders what happens next, as the imagined film abandons its stasis and begins its action, as the speaker begins the narrative as both the scriptwriter and the protagonist. This movement constitutes a very different stance on the ekphrastic process; here, the poet, rather than being a viewer-observer, becomes an integral part of the second re-presentation, to use Bruhn's terms.

Conclusion

In the ekphrastic process, the poet's primary function is to turn hermeneutics into performance. Part of the hermeneutic phase is to decide how this can best be achieved. It begins with the poet defining his or her role to be used in the performance. This involves developing a scenario in which the *punctum temporis* will be located to its best advantage and deciding what position he or she will take up in relation to the work of art as well as the responses it has engendered. For instance, will he or she assume a role outside the *punctum temporis*, as observer or commentator perhaps? What persona might a poet adopt? There are, of course, countless permutations available to poets.

The filmic approach to Oliver's poem and to the ekphrastic process provides an opportunity to show some of the diversity and experiences and subject matter (beyond mere description) which the poet can draw on in creating her verbal response to the artwork. The diverse segments of the text parallel the cut technique in film-making, offering no elucidation beyond the meanings that such juxtapositions may create or imply. Through the shifts or cuts between segments of her 'script', the poet produces what Bruhn calls 'additional layers of meaning' into her interpretation of Marc's painting, including shifts in time, the cause of the artist's death and the introduction of personal reflection and contemplation, none of which are manifest in the painting itself. This affirms Lund's (1992) notion of transformation:

> The text refers to all elements or combinations of elements in pictures not present before the reader's eyes. The information to the reader about the picture is given exclusively in verbal language. (p. 9)

Oliver's poem becomes an interpretation, a reading of the artwork, rather than just a vivid description of it. At the same time, it demonstrates some of the ways in which the scope of modern ekphrasis has developed from its original function.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

References

Bachelard, G., 1994, *The poetics of space*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA.

Becker, U., 1994, *The Continuum encyclopedia of symbols*, Continuum, London.

Begbie, J.S., 1991, *Voicing creation's praise: Towards a theology of the arts*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh.

Bruhn, S., 2001, 'A concert of paintings: "Musical ekphrasis" in the twentieth century', *Poetics Today* 22(3), 551–605. https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-22-3-551

Campbell, J., 2003, *The hero's journey*, New World Library, Novato, CA.

Carroll, L., 1948, *Through the looking-glass and what Alice found there*, Macmillan, London.

Cheeke, S., 2008, *Writing for art: The aesthetics of ekphrasis*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.

Cunningham, V., 2007, 'Why ekphrasis?', *Classical Philology* 102(1), 57–71. https://doi.org/10.1086/521132

Cuddon, J.A., 1999, *Dictionary of literary terms & literary theory*, 4th edn., Penguin, London.

Davidson, M., 1983, 'Ekphrasis and the postmodern painter poem', *Journal of Aesthetics & Art Criticism* 42(1), 69–79. https://doi.org/10.2307/429948

Freiman, M., 2012, 'Ekphrasis, poetry and emplacement: "Writing with" visual art', Paper presented at the AAWP 17th Annual Conference, Geelong, Victoria, 25 November 2012–27 November 2012.

Hagen, R.-M. & Hagen, R., 2000, *Pieter Brueghel the Elder*, Taschen, Cologne.

Hart, J.D., 1965, *The Oxford companion to American literature*, Oxford University Press, New York.

Krieger, M., 1992, *Ekphrasis: The illusion of the natural sign*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD.

Kumin, M., 1993, 'Intimations of mortality', *Women's review of books*, viewed 31 August 2016, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/i385137

Lessing, G.E., 1887, *Laokoön: An essay upon the limits of painting and poetry*, transl. E. Frothingham, Robert Brothers, Boston, MA. (First published in 1766).

Levin, G., 1995, *The poetry of solitude: A tribute to Edward Hopper*, Universe Publishing, New York, p. 40.

Levin, G., 2007, *Edward Hoppper: An intimate biography*, Rizzoli, New York.

Lund, H., 1992, *Text as Picture: Studies in the literary transformation of pictures*, The Edward Mellon Press, Lampeter.

Murphy, R., 1999, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Oliver, M., 1994, *A poetry handbook*, Harcourt Inc., Orlando, FL.

Oliver, M., 1998, *Rules for the dance*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA.

Oliver, M., 2009, *Evidence*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA.

Oliver, M., 2014, *Blue horses*, Penguin, New York.

Ovid, P.O., 1986. *The metamorphoses*, transl. A.D. Melville, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Partsch, S., 2001, *Franz Marc, 1880–1916*, transl. K. Williams, Taschen, Cologne.

Sager, L.M., 2006, 'Writing and filming the painting: Ekphrasis in literature and film', PhD thesis, Graduate School, University of Texas, Austin, TX.

Stewart, S., 1993, *On longing: Narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection*, Duke University Press, Durham.

Williams, W.C., 1963, *Pictures from Brueghel and other poems*, MacGibbon & Kee, London.

Wojtkowski, S., 2015, 'Wrestling with Azazel – Jung and modern art: A critical appraisal', *ARAS Connections* 2, 5, footnote 3.