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# Notes for a Theory of Tanka Prose: Ekphrasis and Abstract Art

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1

*. . .the desultory story of what the poet thinks and feels as he contemplates the painting.*
*—James A. W. Heffernan*

Ekphrasis is not easy to pin down. Some have defined it simply as the poetic encounter with art (painting),[1] in many cases taking that encounter to be antagonistic or a struggle for supremacy, while others have defined the ekphrastic poem as merely descriptive of the subject-matter represented in the painting. The widespread tendency in contemporary ekphrasis has been to focus on the poet's side, defining ekphrasis in terms of the poet's analytical or emotional reaction. These foci are possible mainly because most ekphrastic poetry is written about figurative paintings of recognizable things or persons, and such paintings come with a narrative already attached in some way. The ekphrastic poet joins immediately in discourse with the work and its story and, by implication, its painter and his/her intentions.

But, there is another view, one first recognized by W. J. T. Mitchell, that states that while presenting the painting is ekphrasis' principal task and while the ekphrastic poem cannot make the painting literally present (an ideal but unattainable goal made even more difficult because the paintings depicted and discussed are imaginary), what the poet can do is attempt to present the painting (which is actually absent) as a virtual presence, an evocation or insinuation of *solidity* conjured up by the poem.

> This "solidity" is exemplified in such features as descriptive vividness and particularity, attention to the "corporeality" of words, and the patterning of verbal artifacts. The ekphrastic image acts, in other words, like a sort of unapproachable and unpresentable "black hole" in the verbal structure, entirely absent from it, but shaping and affecting it in fundamental ways.[2]

Whatever else the ekphrastic poet may seek to do, then, she/he must work to bring the painting into the poem, so to speak, recognizing that this is not literally possible with words alone. One may still explore the objects in the painting, recovering a feasible version of the narrative there, but always in such ways as to induce an intuition of the represented in the mind's eye of the reader. The saliency of this demand can easily be seen by simply imagining that the painting in question is not some wholly familiar painting like the *Mona Lisa*, that everyone knows by name, but some wholly unfamiliar painting in an unknown style, or even an imaginary one.

Part of the charm of ekphrasis derives ironically from just this ultimately practical impossibility; the physical experience of viewing a painting cannot be displaced by mere words. Visually, an apple, say, presents an incalculable number of possible visual experiences that the brain sorts and abbreviates, but which words cannot exactly encompass. With a painting of the apple (even in the hands of a master of *trompe l'oeil*) these imagined but endless aspects are crudely caught by brush and paint, frozen in an illusion at yet another remove. The marks on the canvas, the angle and distance of our perceptions, the light, and the cultural conventions of viewing paintings create an entirely different visual experience—impression of a real apple—even when the curious eye cannot help but burst the illusion by slipping off its focus onto the streaks and scratches in the bits of different colored oil or the stringy texture of the brush strokes.

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[1] Throughout this paper the art component of ekphrasis will be taken to be painting.

[2] W. J. T. Mitchell. *Ekphrasis and the Other.*

Which is why so many critics of abstract art would prefer to keep trying to talk about it as if it were no different, fundamentally, from figurative art, just somehow more stylized or distorted. Such critics weirdly keep looking for the real objects or phenomena surreptitiously portrayed under the abstractions (what's really behind them or posing as them or in them), finding traces of sunshine or apples or (even more arbitrarily) the direct expression of emotions in the paint. The phenomenological fact is, by the bye, that we would actually do better as pure ekphrasists if we looked beyond or under the visual illusions to understand the play of paint on its flat surface even in figurative paintings.

So, if we rule out discovering disguised subject-matter as the way to the deeper truth of the abstract painter, we are left only with the surface of the canvas, the composition of colors, shapes, line, and textures. With no apparent "meaning," the abstract painting presents the ekphrastic poet with special problems. Consider any abstract painting and you can't help (or if that's not true, then with a little help) imagine the painter reaching, judging, moving, reflecting, changing, mixing, scraping, brushing, and so on. If the abstract painting gives expression to something, the question is to what? There have been many suggestions as to what the abstract painting expresses, such as the artist's inner state, the body's motions in making the painting, or something that, more simply, knows no other instantiation than it has received in the physicality of the inarticulate mixtures of pigment.

2

*Art with any serious aspirations toward realism still has to take into account the fact that reality escapes laws of perspective and logic, and does not naturally take the form of a sonnet or a sonata.—John Ashbery*

The natural gulf between words and images is crucial. If the ekphrastic poem cannot really replicate the painted picture, what is its purpose? To stimulate the reader to imagine the painting, I would argue, and at the same time recognize the difficulty of doing so. For the traditional ekphrastic poet, working with verse alone (verse here referring to writing constructed around rhythmic, musical form, metaphorical representation, and indirection), this complex can often seem out of balance, the sentiments expressed appearing odd or excessive for lack of a vivid object before the mind of the reader.

This question comes up over and over: why can't ekphrasis simply be any poem about a painting? You have only to imagine a prohibition against naming paintings in the poems somewhere or against publishing reproductions alongside them, to appreciate the hopeless irrelevance of much ekphrastic poetry. Somehow, and this has become more generally recognized, at least among ekphrasis theorists, the painting must come into the reader's imagination qua painting, a physical thing of color and form, which, if it can't literally be seen, can be imagined to be seen.

Standing before the painting, the poet looks, sees, and then, trying to record, salvage what has been seen; but immediately it begins to slip and fade, losing detail after detail, until only the memory of a memory of having recorded something remains. The poetry enters here, just when all the vivid visual images are being lost. What is there to say now, to recall? A vague recollection of color, a general sense of shapes (round or square, blurred or clear), and the remembered effort to uncover something, anything, recognizable—an apple, a star, a field of grain, a beach. So the poet must invent (on the strength of a fading memory and as fast as possible because it is fading all the time) a verbal work of art to represent an original object known now only in the scattered threads and motes of some half-remembered thought.

The difficulty really is to portray in the static present-ness of a poem the drawn-out, tenuous, fragmented, forgetful, circulating, and puzzling process of viewing a painting. At the end of trying unsuccessfully (as it must be every time, of course) to encompass the painting before us, the ekphrastic impulse nevertheless drives us to "recreate" both the work and our response in words.

3

*[T]he reader of much ekphrastic poetry and criticism could be forgiven for thinking that painting had remained unchanged since the Renaissance.*
—David Kennedy

Very little of contemporary ekphrasis deals with abstract art.[3] The obvious reason, of course, is that the abstract composition contains no convenient narrative, no recognizable objects, no people, and no lexicon with which to translate it. Nevertheless, when poets encounter abstract paintings they routinely tend to search for meaning in the ordinary ways, decoding the unconventional and unrecognizable lines, shapes and colors as if they were stand-ins for sorrow, for trees and the ocean and the sky. They believe, perhaps, that the history of painting (Impressionism to post-Impressionism to Expressionism to Abstract Expressionism?) is nothing more than the gradual elimination of a clear focus.

Problems arise when the purpose of the ekphrastic poet is to describe the abstract work in question. In the conventional figurative painting the artifice of pictorial representation is used to create the visual illusion of things in the world, and this allows the poet merely to point out the drama or *tableau* arising in the canvas. From the word tree in the poem, the reader imagines a tree, but the abstract painting is not the picture of anything else. A flat surface covered with black rectangles and ovoid shapes or carefully arranged and repetitious grids do not represent cathedrals, horses, or a boat. Nor are they puzzles for which we must guess the solution.

For exactly the reason that there are no ocean waves or desert buttes in the abstract painting, the attempt to describe such a painting is endless. Name the object in a figurative work and the simplifying power of language takes charge; readers can form images of things in their own minds. But try to describe an abstract painting, and there is no end to it because there are no conventional names for the figures painted there; evidence of a single brushstroke is as significant as the largest formal gesture.

The ekphrastic poet hesitates before such a task. Describing the abstract painting in poetry will of necessity force the poet to shift away from habitual tone, rhythm, and delicate allusion to become starkly prosaic. Abstract painting is, in this sense, *anti-poetic*: to draw the reader to an intuition of an abstract painting (something by Agnes Martin, Richard Diebenkorn, or Mondrian) the ekphrastic poet has to put aside song and take out chain, transit, and T-square.

4

*The poem must convert the transparency of its verbal medium into the physical solidity of the medium of the spatial arts.—Murray Krieger*

Most "ekphrastic" poetry does little more than record the poet's emotional reaction to a painting or invite us to imagine eccentric contexts in which to understand the painting's implied story. The core of ekphrasis, however, lies somewhere else. If we go back to Homer's originating text, *Achilles' Shield,* the defining effect of the elements of story as well as the profusion of visual images there is to make us feel the forged, metallic presence of that shield; the pounded object arises in the poem as a thing of overwhelming possibility.

In hissing flames huge silver bars are roll'd,
And stubborn brass, and tin, and solid gold;
Before, deep fix'd, the eternal anvils stand;
The ponderous hammer loads his better hand,
His left with tongs turns the vex'd metal round,
And thick, strong strokes, the doubling vaults
rebound.

—Homer, *Illiad*, Book XVIII

It seems real though we never see it.

[3] Some notable exceptions to this rule are Jorie Graham's "Pollock and Canvas," from *The End of Beauty* and Sharon Dolin's ekphrastic poems on Richard Diebenkorn and Joan Mitchell in her book *Serious Pink*.

But, what about accompanying reproductions, someone asks? Don't they bring the painting into the poem? Perhaps the time will come when vivid reproductions of all art work is universally available, but then something very different from ekphrasis will likely define their relation to poetry. Of course, no poem can perfectly recreate a painting in words; that was never the point of ekphrasis. The ekphrastic poem struggles to bridge the gap that defines the ekphrastic experience, which is the too solid viewer before the too mute painting. Vivid recreation of the painting remains the goal, bringing the painting over and into the mind. There are shortcuts, of course, for the traditional figurative painting; we recognize a cow of sorts just hearing the word—cow. But there are no such shortcuts for the abstract painting—only description, and afterwards, perhaps, explorations of mood and association.

5

*The contemporary painterly poem shares many of the characteristics of it predecessors of the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries, but with a strong emphasis on its ability to embody the painting's formal strategies and with less emphasis on its mimetic potential.*

*—Michael Davidson*

Visualizing the modern abstract painting in words requires more than merely describing surface features of the canvas. There are, by and large, no conventional names for most of the effects achieved in a painting by any of the Abstract Expressionists, for example, so descriptions necessarily remain visually uncertain. One possibility for conjuring up the distinctive physicality of such paintings (which are often referred to as "action" or "gestural" paintings) is to recreate in words the process of their production. Typically (that is, true for many but not all), the Abstract Expressionist "method" began with what Richard Diebenkorn referred to as "besmirching" and Robert Motherwell called "doodling or scribbling," which created the painter's problem on the canvas and set in motion a process of problem-solving. Trial and error, painting over, erasing, scraping, rubbing, blotting, and other techniques registering the artists' frustration and inspiration are visible on the canvas. These *pentimenti* (*e.g.,* traces of previous painting still visible in the layers) reveal the painter's process (I almost said progress). Following the cues revealed there allows us to imagine the work coming into being. The abstract painting reveals its own creation through time, its stages are visible on the canvas, and by describing and manifesting these the ekphrastic poet has a firm footing on which to perform the magic of making us "see" the stratigraphy of the painting.

Even though it is not possible to translate the markings of an abstract painting as one might recognize the familiar objects in a still life or landscape, it is still possible to track the evidence of their creation and to see just where the painter had made determinations about color, shape, position, tone, weight, balance, composition, and the like. Such tracking is probably a task more like geographical mapping or reading a mechanical drawing than searching for the right metaphor (although it must sometimes be like that, too) or catching a sensitive feeling in flight. You wouldn't want poetry or rhetoric to get in the way; the most direct and unambiguous descriptions would be best. Of course, once the painting had been transported in this way into the poem, then the heart's encounter with the painting would require the more vehement trajectories of lyric verse.

6

*Tanka is always written in the present tense, and aims to capture a single moment in time. It's a starting point that forces you to find the most succinct way to convey a simple snippet of life in an evocative manner. There are infinite possibilities within its structure . . ..*

*—Laura Maffei*

Few would take exception to the above description of tanka as a poetic form; if anything, the wider practice of tanka-writing has turned to an even more bijou form than Maffei suggests. Here, for example, is a prize-winning tanka by a widely-known practitioner, Beverley George:

rip-tide—
slowly I return
an occupied shell
to the surging sea
between us

And another "minimalist tanka" by the master—Sanford Goldstein.

my kid
carrying it
home,
her lopsided
heart

In terms of length (19 syllables, for George, scarcely longer than a haiku, and only 12 for Goldstein, not as many as a haiku) and scope, it is hard to imagine these as compelling instruments for ekphrasis. The poems, of necessity, hardly get going when they come to an end. Tanka is, of course, a powerful instrument for catching the tiny edges of an emotion, seeing to the deepest heart of a sunset, or recording a sudden vision. But, they are simply too brief and too elliptical to bear the weight of a serious ekphrastic encounter.

Moreover, tanka by themselves restrict the ekphrastic to intimations of the emotions of the poet and make it difficult if not impossible to convey a clear sense of a painting being considered. As a preliminary foray, I want to look at a selection of tanka from the *Ekphrastic Tanka* feature, edited by Patricia Prime, that appeared in *Atlas Poetica.*

The first is a tanka by Tracy Davidson on the *Mona Lisa:*

what secrets hide
behind those hooded eyes
that pale countenance
did you dare dream your fame
would last for centuries

I would observe, first, that nothing besides the poet's sentiment about Da Vinci's painting has been conveyed. The "hooded eyes" and "pale countenance" are the only direct references to the painting itself, but if you didn't already know the picture or have a reproduction of it at hand, these phrases might very well refer to a living person (or a kitten) or would convey nothing at all. Somehow, as I keep saying, ekphrastic poetry must draw the plastic artwork into view or else all we can mean by ekphrasis is poetry written by a poet maybe with a painting in mind.

Here is another example from the same source, this one by Chen-ou Liu concerned with Edward Munch's *Scream:*

alone at twilight
doing tonglen practice
I see the face
in The Scream
. . . and mine overlapping

Again, whether you enjoy this tanka or not, it is clearly about the poet and not the painting. If you did not already know the painting, this tanka would indeed be puzzling.

Here is a final example of ekphrasis in a single tanka: this one is by Grant Savage, also from *Atlas Poetica.*

waiting room
the thousand sporting naiads
of my schizophrenia
as if by magic
from Monet's Water Lilies

The main thing to notice about this poem is that beyond mentioning *Water Lilies* by name (not alerting us that there were at least 250 water lily paintings by Monet), it has nothing whatever to do with a painting. It is a poem entirely about the poet's psychologically induced reverie while looking at the Monet. In the case of this single, stand-alone tanka (and this is crucial) we have no idea whatsoever about the painting itself. It would be impossible, in the case of this single tanka (moving as it is) to know even that it was about a painting at all, let alone one of the *Water Lilies,* if we were not told. This same debility, I would argue, undermines all the ekphrastic tanka in the *Atlas Poetica* feature; without specific

reference to or reproduction of the art the poet had in mind, none of these tanka could easily be recognized as ekphrasis at all.

I do not mean to criticize these tanka; they are fine enough in themselves, but ekphrasis is not merely synonymous with poetry itself; there is the integral necessity of the plastic art as part of it. Brief allusions to well-known paintings by name will not do. The emphasis on the poet's inner state must be augmented by creation of a real presence of the painting in question.

7

*Beyond that opportunity, however, tanka prose promises to reclaim tanka's venerable past, for tanka came to maturity with its prose accompaniment, whether in the form of a memoir or a romance, a poem-tale or a military chronicle.—Jeffrey Woodward*

Tanka prose (as an instance of *prosimetrum*) provides an unmatched instrument for ekphrastic writing, superior in this regard to verse (or tanka) alone. It is crucial to understand the operative differences between the prose and verse elements of tanka prose (apprehended as a single poetic form) in respect of what they can and cannot contribute to ekphrasis, each taking up different parts of the enterprise. The prose allows direct, express, and complicated descriptions of visual and narrative experience; the verse is able to body forth emotional responses, and to bridge, via its metaphors and imagery, between the worlds of the visual and the verbal, the present and the absent. The prose and tanka can be further distinguished in ways analogous to *realis* and *irrealis* moods—the verse performing as *subjunctive* (in a subordinate clause) to the prose's *indicative* (in an independent clause) of an idealized English sentence.

Here, for example, taken from the internet, is an ekphrastic tanka prose by Mary Mageau based on Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror:*[4]

. . . young and beautiful, her arms cradle a large oval mirror as she gazes at her reflection, surrounded by bold diamond shaped geometric patterns, vertical and horizontal stripes rendered in vibrant saturated hues—pigments chosen for their emotive source of colour rather than to express the intended scene. . .

looking back
from the depths
of the mirror
her image
as an old woman

hard, angular features
framed in sombre colour
nature's reminder
that time ages
all lovely things

This illustrates much of what I have been saying. The prose section presents the viewer's experience of the painting, a description of its major features, together, crucially, with this gesture toward the imagined method of its making:

> . . . rendered in vibrant saturated hues—pigments chosen for their emotive source of colour rather than to express the intended scene

Now, of course, this prose does not fully "render" Picasso's painting, but it does convey the facticity of it into the poem, keeping it present.

General discussion of the point I am trying to make can only carry us so far. I would ask you to consider for a moment one last (and the ekphrastically strongest) tanka from the *Atlas Poetica* issue; Naomi Beth Wakan's tanka on Kandinsky's *First Abstract.*

a child's smudges with
the sophistication of placement
that only comes
with years of careful looking
years of slowly removing the subject

Now, what happens if we append a prefatory prose passage to this tanka, creating a tanka prose

[4] Mageau, Mary. *Art and Nature as Inspiration.* 9 April 2014. <https://marymageau.wordpress.com/2014/04/09/picasso-girl-before-a-mirror/> Accessed 9 September 2015.

designed to help bring the look and feel of Kandinsky's painting into the poem?

Against a pale background, a flurry of irregular shapes swim like nothing we've seen before; are they the wild discoveries of a new Zoology, a fantasia under the microscope. You can feel the painter's impulse, see where the brush pushed around, stopped, dipped back into the watercolor, then drew a clear line, where it wiggled, where it blurred, and where the penciled outlines were barely filled with colored wash. It is excited; it is moving quickly. A black smear repeats itself and an intricate red drawing, small and assertive, wrestles for central position.

a child's smudges with
the sophistication of placement
that only comes
with years of careful looking
years of slowly removing the subject

I suppose it's not really a question whether words can take the place of the painting in the sense of making us really see the exact picture in the mind's eye; the very possibility of that has been disputed since the Greeks. But, what the prose does is evoke the presence and dynamic of a real painting and helps us to visualize something to reflect that. And the prose can roughly pluck details from the visual object, details that help us entertain the intuition of a real painting (even, ironically, when there is none, as when the ekphrasis invents one for its own purposes). The prose tries to drag suggestive evidence of a concrete artwork back across the barrier between what we can hear and what we can "see" metaphorically.

8

t*he quick sleeved*
*transparency of light*
*dividing two worlds*
—Patricia Prime

Strictly speaking, of course, verse forms are inadequate to describe fully the figures and narrative of even a representational painting, its particular trees, rivers, skies, clouds, people, and so forth. They are even less useful for rendering the non-representational swirls, swatches, smudges, blurs, layers, patterns, shapes, washes and stripes of an abstract painting or to indicate the exact processes by which we can imagine a non-figurative painting coming into being. The demands of purely poetic form, the music, the indirection, word-play, allusive and metaphorical propensities keep it, as it were, at arm's length. Thus, ekphrastic poets are more often than not driven to shift attention away from the literal content or other specific descriptions of the painting under consideration and focus on their own feelings about it or arising from it. Very often there is no effort at all to depict the painting in ways that readers might distinguish it from any other painting, even in their imaginations.

Ekphrastic poetry, to quote James Heffernan's dictum, ought to be the "verbal representation of a visual representation." Don't we have to take the "verbal representation" aspect to include crucially allusion, metaphor, allegory and other non-literal poetic depictions? The ekphrastic poem qua poem must always be a little askew or tangential to the painting before it. Because of its double-ness, tanka prose, as we have seen, is the perfect instrument for ekphrasis, allowing straightforward descriptions not normally available within the strictures of verse (and even the simple poetic form of tanka has it sstructural, topical, and spiritual rules). Speaking now only of abstract painting, the surface of the canvas can be described in detail, allowing the reader something closer to an actual (albeit imaginary) viewing.

Adding the tanka, then, gives full sway to the poet's feeling about the painting brought onto the stage by the prose, what it suggests and promises, its associations and moods. But, wait. Now there are two elements at work; the tanka ricochets off the prose, the prose persists and enriches the verse, and the two together make it possible to achieve a truly ekphrastic experience, and one in which the painting itself is not lost. What I mean is the painting stays in the ekphrastic poem along with the poet's sensibilities.

Ekphrasis, as I have said and repeated, is double (the painting and the viewer); but, so is the tanka prose. *Ekphrasis is weakened by writing in which the painting under view is allowed to fade or even disappear in favor of expressions of the poet's desire and feelings.* Feelings in the absence of the stimulus that gives rise to them are only half present, however, and thus the opportunity provided by the necessity of the prose of tanka prose to direct and focus tanka's power to depict emotion and insight.

9

*The painter called his "crudities"*
*uncertain stumblings others call*
*regrets*
*and tuck away*
—Sharon Dolin

Here in the final section and by way of a conclusion (and to make my point more concretely) I want to present an ekphrastic tanka prose concerned with Richard Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park #90*.

Proof

Let AB designate a line from one end of a canvas to the other; draw another line that's shorter, and then others that are shorter still, all up and down, all parallel. Then come at those lines with other now rigidly perpendicular lines, lines across, lines at right angles to those, and then, for no apparent reason, three lines, all within the boundary, parallel to each other and at some angle (I'm guessing 23°). I count sixty-two enclosed plane figures, more or less, all in colors from the red-yellow segment of the spectrum. And, oh, yes, flick a brush load of black or blue there, let it start to dry, and then go over it with gold wash.

none of them have names
these *Ocean Parks*, so no help there
still they might be
pictures of something, don't
you think, all those figures?

if he'd cut a window
we'd be looking for a roof
to cast its shadow
like an oak over a farmhouse
somewhere in painter's country

An intricate grouping of carefully executed geometric shapes fitted into the limited space of a canvas implies, I grant you, deliberateness and, perhaps, even meaning. The more so when, in one quadrant, the corners of eleven assorted polygons of different sizes come neatly together. Being executed and arranged with such care, they might, indeed, be representations of something. Ah, but what?

no blues, this is dirt
painting in the colors of mud
remembering from Euclid
tiny wires connecting this
to higher celestial harmonies

yes, yes, so you say
but what does it really mean?
then someone said it
makes you look inwardly
deeper than you can touch

The truths of mathematics are perfectly true. They are analytic and *a priori*, matters of definition. "Let ABC be a right-angled triangle having the angle BAC right. I say that the square on BC equals the sum of the squares on BA and AC." You don't even have to see it to know it is true.

puts us nearer
discovering what is being
said in paint language
what's the difference between
brown yellow, yellow red?

what if there was
a form of synesthesia
turning colors into words
we could sit down then and read
it off: "Dick, Jane, and Sally"

The longer I look at it, the muter I am struck. I see myself on the outside looking in, asking what does that say about me? Do these forms mirror my brainscape, do they bare the circuitry of my ideas? I search into the corners and gather threads of insight in the architecture of it. Down in the bottom, though, is only rest, the fullness of a dreamless night. And, there's the perfection in it . . ..

no need to trouble
what is or is not a tree
trapezoids are
easier to define and draw
and always—lineal

I dream of making
it myself, my long straight edge
surrounded by pots
of earthy mixtures, flattened tubes
burnt umber, the cadmiums

*cartographie*

find coordinates
on first principles, use
peg and rope geometry
to establish your baseline
then draw frequent yellow offsets

straightening curvature
to its right angles, long lines
reaching into it
flattening the circular
abhorring all that's round

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