The Legacy of Laocoon

Robert Buch

> He gazed and gazed and gazed and gazed
> Amazed, amazed, amazed, amazed.

These lines by Robert Browning titled 'Rhyme for a Child Viewing a Naked Venus in the Judgement of Paris' provide one of the most succinct and eloquent examples of the possibilities, and the sophistication of ekphrastic speech.[1] Browning's "Rhyme" is a poem about the power of the image, the fascination images can exert on viewers, their capacity to strike, startle, and transfix us before them. This fascination is linked, in turn, to erotic attraction, and the lines thus expose the gender relations so often inherent in the 'drama' between beholder and image: the female body as a kind of magnet, a source of mystery and unending wonder, but then as well, potentially, as a threatening and petrifying Medusa.[2] The epigram also happens to be a perfect instantiation of the energetic force of metered language, its ability to delight and confound us. In its sheer repetitiveness Browning's iambic tetrameter produces a strange kind of crescendo. (If read aloud, a remarkable array of possibilities opens up, depending especially on cadence and on the pauses one chooses to put between the words). The dénouement or relief of this tension, if I can put it like that, is only brought about once we are given the poem's title and with it we begin to understand, that is, to *see* the scene the epigram has managed to create – with essentially no more than four words. These four words and the title 'draw' not just the scene of a young boy before the canvas, speechless and spellbound, but also, by implication, the scene on the canvas, Venus watching, whether with serene detachment, satisfaction, or pity – it's up to us to decide, or rather, to imagine – the stunning effect of her beauty. Browning's epigram encapsulates

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[1] Quoted from John Hollander, *The Gazer's Spirit. Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 266.

[2] Interestingly enough, Browning actually wrote these lines apropos of an encounter with a twelve-year old girl, not a boy, called Laura, at Grosvenor Gallery in front of a painting of a naked Venus. The girl, Laura Troubridge, later related the episode in her memoirs: "I wandered off by myself, coming to a standstill before a picture representing the 'Judgement of Paris.' Before Paris stood the goddess Venus, and in his hand was the golden apple he was about to bestow on her. I was not exactly shocked, but somewhat taken aback at the entirely undraped condition of the lady." Browning quoted in Lady Laura Troubridge, *Memories and Reflections* (London: Heinemann, 1925), pp. 44-45.

not just the long-standing competition between the verbal and the visual arts, it also features their mutual reinforcement and collaboration, producing what a semiotician might call an image-text, shuttling back and forth between word and image, the letters on the page and the images which gave rise to them – and to which they return us.

In what follows I want to discuss this 'traffic' between image and text by way of two paradigmatic moments in its long history and reflect on their aftermath in our present: The idea of ekphrasis as it is discussed in the Progymnasmata, the Greek handbooks of oratory written during the time of the Roman empire; and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's famous vindication of poetry over against painting in his Laocoon essay, published in 1766. At first glance, the two historical instances under review seem diametrically opposed: the rhetorical appeal to the power of the image versus Lessing's rejection of the ideal of pictorial representation. But a closer look will revise this picture showing that there is in fact a very similar tendency at work in both these reflections on the relation between image and text. Ultimately the look back serves to look ahead, namely at the ekphrastic poetics of the latter part of the twentieth century. There is, to be sure, something anachronistic in juxtaposing the ancient paradigm of ekphrasis, an eighteenth-century poetological treatise, and the works of a couple of late modernist authors, Claude Simon and Peter Weiss. However, appreciating that there is a very similar ambition at work in Lessing and the rhetorical tradition, against whose notion that poetry ought to be like painting (*ut pictura poesis*) he ostensibly turns, will go a long way in accounting for both the continuity and departure of the late twentieth-century heirs of the ekphrastic legacy.

I

As Ruth Webb has demonstrated in her seminal article, '*Ekphrasis* Ancient or Modern: The Invention of a Genre,' the most surprising aspect about the history of the term 'ekphrasis' or 'ekphrastic' for the modern student of literature is probably that it does not actually mean what it is widely assumed to mean. People outside of classics departments generally take ekphrasis to mean simply the description of an image, the verbal rendering of a visual work of art, and hence the representation of a representation. But in fact, as Webb has pointed out, this meaning was assigned to the term only relatively recently, if by one of the most erudite and eminent representatives of comparative literary studies: namely, Leo Spitzer.[3] If you consult the Greek handbooks of

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[3] Ruth Webb, '*Ekphrasis* Ancient and Modern: The Invention of a Genre,' *Word & Image*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1999), p. 10. This reference is to Spitzer's essay 'The "Ode on a Grecian Urn" or Content vs. Metagrammar,' *Comparative Literature*, vol. 7 (1955), pp. 207-225. See

composition and rhetoric, written in the first, second, third, and fourth century and setting the curriculum for the study of composition for subsequent centuries, the so-called Progymnasmata (i.e. preliminary exercises), you will find that the term actually referred to the description of a great variety of subjects, from cities to battles, festivals, monuments, and people, without, however, according any privilege of place to works of art.[4] It is not that artworks have no place at all in the Progymnasmata. One of them mentions the Homeric description of the shield of Achilles, a locus classicus of the modern literature on ekphrasis, another references the *Imagines/Eikones* by Philostratus the Elder which date from the middle of the third century; and a third gives instructions on how to describe a statue or picture, even if it is merely one example among others.[5]

There is, however, a more overt connection to the visual, namely in the aims of the rhetorical exercise. The defining feature of ekphrastic speech was not its subject matter nor any special techniques, but rather the effect it sought to bring about in the audience, an effect that was invariably described in terms of presence, vividness, perspicuity, distinctness. The Greek term for this objective was *enárgeia*; its Latin equivalents were *evidentia*; *inlustratio* or *perspicuitas*. So the idea was to match the vividness of visual perception, to conjure up *phantasiai* or *visiones*, inner or mental images in the audience members. Or, as Nikolaus of Myra puts it in his Progymnasma, "to make the hearers into spectators."[6] While the authors of the manuals did provide some instruction on how to make this happen, the more explicit strategies on how to bring about this transformation can be found in their Roman counterparts and predecessors. According to Cicero and Quintilian (as well as the Greek author known as Longinus), the way to do so was for the orator to simulate the presence of the object and render or re-enact his own emotional response in reaction to it. No longer speaking to and for the audience, oblivious to his own role and surroundings, the orator affects emotional involvement in the scene he describes.[7] The aim was to bring about a similar oblivion, or *oubli de soi*, in the

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also Fritz Graf, 'Ekphrasis: Die Entstehung der Gattung in der Antike,' in *Beschreibungskunst – Kunstbeschreibung. Ekphrasis von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, eds Gottfried Boehm, Helmut Pfotenhauer (Munich: Fink, 1995), pp. 143-155.

[4] George A. Kennedy, ed. *Progymnasmata. Greek Textbooks of Composition and Rhetoric* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), pp. 45-47, 86, 117-120, 166-168, 218-221.

[5] Kennedy, ed. *Progymnasmata*, p. 46 (Theon on the Shield of Achilles); p. 218 (Aphthonius/John of Sardis on Philostratus); p. 167 (Nikolaus on describing a statue or a picture).

[6] Kennedy, ed. *Progymnasmata*, p. 166.

[7] See, for instance, Quintilian, *Inst. Or.* VI, 2, pp. 26-36; (Pseudo-)Longinus, *On the Sublime*, XV, 1-3; Cicero, *De or.* II, 189, III, p. 202. See also Rüdiger Campe, 'Affizieren

audience. The effort is about making them forget themselves so as to *see* before their inner eyes what the speaker is describing. It is important to see that the visualisation these speech acts aim to produce is not predicated on specific rhetorical features or certain figures of speech, but on the rhetor's performance and its impact on the audience. Ultimately, it is the latter that accounts for the success or failure, the absence or advent of the sense of presentness, the semblance of immediacy.[8]

One of the most fitting illustration of this dramaturgy can be found in the Elder Philostratus's *Imagines/Eikones*, not coincidentally a collection of descriptions of (imaginary) artworks, from the third century AD. Here the speaker, time and again, affects having been transplanted into a world, along with his audience, whose features he describes in minute detail – only to undo and dispel the hyperrealistic visualisations that he urged in his listeners so as to reveal that the description was not of reality but merely of a representation. Thus in one of the first episodes of the *Imagines*, titled 'Hunters' (Book 1. 28), after an emotionally charged description of a hunt Philostratus interrupts himself exclaiming:

> How have I been deceived! I was deluded by the painting into thinking that the figures were not painted but were real beings, moving and loving – at any rate I shout at them as though they could hear and I imagine that I hear some response – and you did not utter a single word to turn me back from my mistake, being as much overcome as I was and unable to free yourself from the deception and the stupefaction induced by it. So let us look at the details of the painting; for it really is a painting before which we stand.[9]

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und Selbstaffizieren. Rhetorisch-anthropologische Näherung ausgehend von Quintilian Institutio oratoria VI, 1-2,' in *Rhetorische Anthropologie. Studien zum Homo rhetoricus*, ed. Josef Kopperschmidt (Munich: Fink, 2000), pp. 135-152; Bernhard F. Scholz, '"Sub oculos subiecto": Quintilian on Ekphrasis and Enargeia,' in *Pictures into Words. Theoretical and Practical Approaches to Ekphrasis*, eds Valerie Robillard and Els Jongeneel (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1998), pp. 73-99.

[8] As Bernhard Scholz puts it, "it is not the presence of certain *enárgeia*-signals in the text which turns us from readers into spectators, certain textual elements to which the reader has to pay attention in order to undergo that transformation, but the experience of undergoing that metamorphosis which allows us to say that the text in question possesses *enárgeia* and hence deserves to be called 'ekphrastic.'" Scholz, 'Quintilian on Ekphrasis and Enargeia,' p. 79.

[9] Philostratus, *Imagines*, I, 28, trans. Arthur Fairbanks (London, New York: Loeb Classical Library, 1931), p.109. "As a reader, one is frequently under the impression that it is not a picture, an artistic representation, that is being described, but something real, an actual event … At the same time, the semblance of unmediated presence is merely one tendency, if a striking one. It is counteracted by the desire not to allow the reader's awareness of the image to fade, but rather – and this is part of the play with the boundary – to keep it alive."

The semblance of immediacy that characterises the beginning of the description is abruptly dissolved. The sense of presence gives way to a sense of feigned self-deception. Ironically, what begins with a *metalepsis*, to use Gérard Genette's term, a switch or jump from the presumed order of reality within the fiction – the onlookers are part of the hunt – to the virtual order of pictorial representation – we are before a painting featuring a hunting scene – quickly appears to return to the former mode, describing the scene as though it were presently unfolding, in a space contiguous with that of the speaker and his listener, who have to be thought of as beholders at the same time.[10] The irony at work here is further heightened in the last sentence of the description which effects a curious doubling: "The lad still in the pool, still in the attitude in which he hurled his javelin, while the youths stand in astonishment and gaze at him *as though he were a picture*."[11] Not only does the 'other' space of the representation have its own set of beholders, the youths gazing at their motionless companion, the presumed reality of the pictured scene is asserted precisely by the fact that it features a figure that calls to mind a picture. The scene is one of absorbed gazing on multiple levels.

To sum up, ancient ekphrasis originally does not refer to descriptions of visual representations. It is perhaps best described as a strategy or, better still, a dramaturgy by which the rhetor 'seduces' his audience to give themselves over to the conjuring power of his words, the power to evoke vivid images, scenes, or episodes, to produce, in a word, a sense of presence, only to then revoke this very feat so as to reveal, and vaunt, his own virtuosity. This is how ekphrasis stands both for a certain hyperrealism – spelling out details which ordinary perception does not register – and an act of self-referentiality, breaking the spell it achieved in order to draw attention to the performance and the

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Winfried Eckel, 'Wissen und Sehen. Überlegungen zum Problem literarischer Bildbeschreibung,' in *Das visuelle Gedächtnis der Literatur*, eds Manfred Schmeling, Monika Schmitz-Emans (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1999), pp. 93-94 (my translation; cf. "Man hat als Leser immer den Eindruck, hier werde nicht ein Bild, eine künstlerische Darstellung beschrieben, sondern etwas Wirkliches, ein reales Ereignis … Es ist nun allerdings zu betonen, daß dieser Versuch, eine unmittelbare Gegenwärtigkeit der Bildgegenstände zu suggerieren, lediglich eine wenngleich auffällige Tendenz darstellt. Denn ihr widerspricht im Gegenzug die Absicht, das Bildbewußtsein des Lesers nicht völlig verschwinden zu lassen, sondern – auch das gehört zum Spiel mit der Grenze – zu einem gewissen Grad wachzuhalten.") Cf. "The very transgression of the boundary of the image and the real is simultaneously the relentless reassertion of that boundary." Jas Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 35.

[10] Gérard Genette, *Métalepse* (Paris: Seuil, 2004). For a passing reference to Philostratus's *Imagines*, in connection with Diderot's *Salons*, see pp. 80-81.

[11] Philostratus, *Imagines*, p. 115. Emphasis added.

performer that ought to be credited for this achievement: the rhetor's skillful speech act.

II

Ek-phrazein itself means to describe something exhaustively, "in full," [12] leaving nothing unaccounted for. It is a description, as it were, without any remainder. For the modern authors turning to ekphrastic modes of writing, it will indeed become, as we shall see, an experiment in descriptive excess, or an exercise in excessive description. The threat of a very similar kind of excess is what prompted Lessing to write his famous Laocoon essay.

Lessing's treatise, published in 1766, owes its abiding appeal to its media-theoretical reflection on the different arts and as a contribution to semiotics. The German antiquarian's distinction between the temporal and spatial arts; bodies and actions; material and immaterial signs have been taken up and contested by a broad range of scholars, starting with his contemporaries such as Herder and Goethe and on to twentieth-century critics like Irving Babbitt, art theorists like Clement Greenberg, and semioticians such as Tsvetan Todorov. [13] Rather than entering into the intricacies of Lessing's notoriously digressive argument, I want to draw attention to the author's crucial realignment of the field of poetic theory. As is well known, Lessing's *Laocoon* is mounting an attack on the image, dismantling the privileged and exemplary status of the visual arts. At the same time, the author is invoking the image in an attempt to vindicate the superior power of the verbal arts. "*In the*

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[12] Webb, 'Ekphrasis ancient and modern,' p. 13; Webb rejects the alternative account of the term's etymology according to which it means giving voice to a mute object. Cf. Graf, 'Ekphrasis: Die Entstehung der Gattung,' p. 143.

[13] See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Kritische Wälder. Erstes Kritisches Wäldchen* (1769) in *Werke. Schriften zur Ästhetik und Literatur 1767-1781*, ed. Gunter E. Grimm (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1993), Vol. 2, pp. 63-245; Johann Wolfgang Goethe, 'Über Laokoon' (1798) in *Werke. Hamburger Ausgabe*, ed. Erich Trunz (Munich: Beck, 1998), Vol. 12, pp. 56-66; Irving Babbitt, *The New Laocoön* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1910); Clement Greenberg, 'Towards A Newer Laocoon' (1940) in *Collected Essays and Criticism. Vol. 1. Perceptions and Judgements 1939-1944*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 23-38; Tzvetan Todorov, 'Ästhetik und Rhetorik im 18. Jahrhundert. G. E. Lessing: Laokoon' in *Das Laokoon-Projekt*, ed. Gunter Gebauer (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1984), pp. 9-22. For a systems-theoretical perspective on the renewed interest in the Laokoon in twentieth-century art criticism and aesthetic theory see David E. Wellbery, 'Aesthetic Media. The Structure of Aesthetic Theory Before Kant' in *Regimes of Description. In The Archive of the Eighteenth Century*, eds John Bender, Michael Marrinan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 109-211.

Laocoon poetry is still viewed in terms of the paradigm of painting."[14] Or rather, painting is demoted from its privileged position in the hierarchy of the arts, but the primacy of the image is retained. (It is easy to overlook the fine line which is at issue here since the German word *Bild* encompasses the ideas of image, picture, as well as painting.) Lessing's *Laocoon* reconfigures poetic theory by displacing the paradigm of mimesis and its inevitable Platonic overtones – the visual arts represent or 'imitate' their objects more successfully than any of the other arts – in favor of a model where 'Täuschung,' illusion or deception, which for Lessing remains the objective of all art, is a matter less of imitation than of the imagination. The most successful instantiation of 'Täuschung,' illusion/deception, the semblance of presence the ancients called *enárgeia*, occurs not by way of mimetic, external reproduction, but before the inner eye, in the imagination, that is, in the subject's absorption into the world conjured up by the work of art. And in this task the 'dynamic' verbal arts prevail over the 'static' visual arts which Lessing blames for arresting rather than mobilising the flight of the imagination, blocking rather than facilitating the act of self-forgetting on which such imaginative transport is predicated. Needless to say that there is a detailed argument behind these claims, which are further modified in the course of the essay. (Thus, the visual arts, for instance, are able to counteract their constitutive stasis through the idea of the 'pregnant moment.') The implicit shift I wish to emphasise here is that along with the dismantlement of the mimetic paradigm Lessing turns poetics from a normative work- and author-centered perspective into one ultimately concerned with the processes of reception, or better still, with the strange kind of absorption, which is the measure of successful aesthetic experience.[15] Even though the primary target of Lessing's invectives is the ekphrastic poetry of his contemporaries, exemplified by the Swiss poets and critics Breitinger and Bodmer and their 'Schilderungssucht' – their 'addiction to depiction' as one might render Lessing's disparaging neologism – the argument he mounts is ultimately very close to the shift discussed above from ekphrasis in the sense of the representation of a representation (the one we inherited from Leo Spitzer) to ekphrasis as designating an exercise that aims at bringing about a kind of

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[14] David E. Wellbery, *Lessing's Laocoon. Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 227. Emphasis in the original.

[15] This is not to say that the *Laokoon* is devoid of normative claims, quite the contrary. However, part of its innovation consists in grounding these claims in medial differences. On the notion of absorption with respect to eighteen-century art criticism and art theory see Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality. Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

oubli de soi in the spectators and/or listeners, as suggested by the theorists of ancient oratory.

As I said earlier, Lessing's arguments are digressive, ostensibly unsystematic, circuitous and above all too elaborate to be recapitulated here in all of their details. [16] But it's useful to recall one of the less salient and nonetheless crucial distinctions that is underlying much of Lessing's thought in the *Laocoon*, including the famous opposition between the spatial and the temporal arts and their respective subjects, bodies and actions. Lessing's notion of successful aesthetic experience and its failure revolves around two poles: materiality on the one hand, and aliveness/animation, *Lebendigkeit*, on the other. The crucial achievement the artwork, whether literary or painterly, needs to accomplish is to efface its own materiality so that the beholders' imagination is not hampered by it. Where the work does not succeed in transcending its own materiality, the imaginative animation which the artwork is to bring about stalls, the imagination gets stuck, worse still, in a drastic and telling example, it is paralysed at the sight of fragmented *physis* and (un-)dead matter. The example of this dramatic foundering is drawn from the ekphrastic poetry that was so important to Bodmer and Breitinger and that is the very target of the *Laocoon's* polemical energy: Albrecht von Haller's famous poem *Die Alpen* (The Alps, 1734), a favorite of the Swiss theoreticians. Due to the temporal character that is constitutive of the verbal arts (according to Lessing), ekphrastic poetry cannot but present its subject sequentially, that is, part after part, thus effecting a fragmentation that is at odds with the instantaneous and synthetic character of human perception. For whatever we perceive, we perceive at once, say, a face, and the parts we do not perceive, say, the back of a head or any other familiar object, are easily supplemented by the imagination. Lessing's critique of Bodmer and Breitinger, developed apropos of von Haller's description of Alpine 'herbs and flowers,' culminates in the famous question: "Ich frage ihn nur, wie steht es um den Begriff des Ganzen?"[17] Rather dramatically, it is true, but also consistently within the terms of Lessing's treatise, descriptive literature must be viewed as having a

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[16] See Inka Mülder-Bach, *Im Zeichen Pygmalions. Das Modell der Statue und die Entdeckung der 'Darstellung' im 18. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Fink, 1998); *Das Laokoon-Paradigma: Zeichenregime im 18. Jahrhundert*, eds Inge Baxmann, Michael Franz and Wolfgang Schäffner (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000).

[17] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laokoon: oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie*, in *Werke und Briefe 1766-1769*, ed. Wilfried Barner (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1990), vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 125-126. "I ask him [=the poet] only: what about the conception of the whole?" *Laocoön. An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 87.

mortifying and deadening effect: it 'kills' its subject and it mortifies the imagination. Another way of describing the symptomatic dilemma of 'painterly poetry' is to say that it seeks to depict bodies – i.e. the subject of the art form it seeks to emulate – rather than action, the verbal arts' proper subject. The positive counterexample to the aberration that is ekphrastic poetry is the epic poetry of Homer. Here, the whole is preserved because the actions at the center of the narration form a continuity, episodes supplanting one another in an uninterrupted flow driving toward the presumed resolution, the plot engaging and absorbing the imagination, maintaining it in suspense, focused on the actions and events that make up the story.[18]

If the artwork is threatened by being overtaken and eclipsed by its own materiality, cutting short the processes of animation, both of the depicted scene and the imagination, aliveness is at the opposite end of the spectrum. It is, in a sense, at once the aim and the vehicle of aesthetic experience. The compelling work of art is characterised by the presence-effects it succeeds in achieving.[19] It transforms artifact (itself) into presence, readers into viewers, materiality into aliveness, or in a slightly different vocabulary, dead matter into spirit. The aliveness of its performance fuels the imagination and is in turn enhanced or better still further enlivened by her (the imagination), in a mutually reinforcing dynamic.

There is of course another important dimension routinely associated with Lessing's classical treatise on the boundaries between the arts. (The German subtitle of the work is 'Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie.') It is in fact via a discussion of the question of pain that Lessing charts the boundaries between, and the limits of, these different modes of representation. As an admirer of the restrained expressivity of classical sculpture, Lessing stipulates that the sight of extreme pain, of violent suffering, and agony thwarts the very ability to insert ourselves imaginatively into the depicted world, to enter, however vicariously, the realm of fiction. Drastic expressivity disrupts the virtuality of representation, and (what could effect) compassion, a key term in the Enlightenment's and therefore in Lessing's lexicon, is supplanted by disgust. The confrontation with affective and physical excess makes us recoil

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[18] Cf. "In Homer's epic poems, … narrative transcends itself by producing, in the course of its own »progression«, an imaginative drama behind which it tends to disappear." Inka Mülder-Bach, *Im Zeichen Pygmalions*, p. 148 (my translation; cf. "In den homerischen Epen … transzendiert sich die Erzählung, indem sie im Prozeß ihres eigenen 'Fortschreitens' ein imaginatives Drama erzeugt, hinter dem sie sich selbst tendenziell zum Verschwinden bringt."). See also p. 140.

[19] I owe the term 'presence-effects' to Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *The Production of Presence* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

from, rather than put ourselves into the place of, the suffering other. As Lessing puts it, quoting an observation by his friend and interlocutor Moses Mendelssohn, "feelings of disgust are…always real and never imitation."[20] The theory of aesthetic experience as theory of absorption and empathy is thus elaborated against the foil of its opposite: violent disturbance and disruption via the abject dimension of our physicality. In the terms invoked earlier, the tension between materiality and aliveness is operative here too as that between irreducible corporeal excess, undoing the subject's balance, and the ability to be touched, transported, and transformed by the sight and sense of our shared pathos.

III

For all its resoluteness and vigor, Lessing's farewell to the doctrin of *ut pictura poeisis*, that is, to the idea that poetry should aspire to be like painting, was not heeded in the centuries that were to follow. [21] Literature continued, and continues, to turn to the visual arts – with the dynamic relation between words and images soon encompassing the new visual media, notably film and photography, as well. In the last century the realm of 'intermediality' has indeed become so broad and diversified that one is hard pressed to say anything that would not be hopelessly general and inadequate about this burgeoning field. If I propose some observations on the legacy of Laocoon in the twentieth century, I want to do so with respect to two European authors

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[20] *Laocoön*, p. 126 ("Die Empfindungen des Ekels sind also allezeit Natur, niemals Nachahmung." *Laokoon*, p. 169). See David E. Wellbery, 'Das Gesetz der Schönheit. Lessings Ästhetik der Repräsentation' in *Was heißt »Darstellen«?*, ed. Christiaan L. Hart Nibbrig (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994), pp. 175-204; Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust. Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, trans. Howard Eiland and Joel Golb (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), especially, pp. 25-102. On the crucial role of pity in Lessing's poetics see Hans-Jürgen Schings, *Der mitleidigste Mensch ist der beste Mensch. Poetik des Mitleids von Lessing bis Büchner* (Munich: Beck, 1980).

[21] "Pictures do not figure less but even more in the literature around 1800. There is, in fact, a remarkable boom. Language is used to 'paint' in the thriving ekphrases, in portraits of artists, paintings and statues featured in fictional literature or in the tableaux vivants." Helmut Pfotenhauer, 'Die nicht mehr abbildenden Bilder. Zur Verräumlichung der Zeit in der Prosaliteratur um 1800,' *Poetica*, vol. 28 (1996), pp. 345-355: 346. (My translation; "Bilder in der Literatur um 1800 werden nicht weniger; eher im Gegenteil. Sie haben eine auffällige Konjunktur. Mit Sprache 'gemalt' wird in den prosperierenden Bildbeschreibungen, in den Künstlerbildern der fiktiven Texte, den Gemälden und Statuen, oder in den tableaux vivants.") Cf. *Laokoon und kein Ende*, ed. Thomas Koebner (Munich: Edition Text + Kritik, 1989). On Lessing's critique of the doctrine of *ut pictura poesis* see Hans Christoph Buch, *Ut pictura poesis. Die Beschreibungsliteratur und ihre Kritiker von Lessing bis Lukács* (Munich: Hanser, 1972).

whose writing has been marked by the ekphrastic, by the appeal of the image, and to the visual arts more generally, but also by a certain mistrust vis-à-vis pictorial representation, a skepticism regarding the ambition and promise of the image(-text).

The French novelist and Nobel laureate Claude Simon and the German playwright and novelist Peter Weiss both started their careers as painters and artworks play a major role in their writing. So does description, more particularly ekphrastic description, not only in the narrow (Spitzerian) sense of the verbal description of artworks, but also in the sense of the ekphrastic as a kind of excess in description. Simon began as a member of the Nouveau Roman movement whose signature trademark was, indeed, the prioritising of description over against plot and character, action and psychology. The shared affinity for description is also in evidence in Weiss, starting from his earliest publications in German whose family resemblance to the Nouveau Roman was already noted by the first reviewers. Unlike the writers of the Nouveau Roman, however, Simon and Weiss, incidentally, also shared the preoccupation with traumatic history: the experience of the Spanish Civil War, World War I and II, and the genocidal violence of the twentieth century.

As I said, the writing of these two authors can be termed ekphrastic in the double sense of featuring elaborate descriptions of artworks and of being marked more generally by a certain descriptive excess. Yet, the distinction between the restricted and the more capacious notion of the ekphrastic is somewhat misleading in that the moments of such excess description often operate via the analogy with painting, describing a scene, character, or object as representational, that is to say, as though they were an image, or even their own image. As a consequence the reader's notion of whether a given moment is 'real' or whether it is merely rendering a representation is unsettled, very much in the vein of the metaleptic operation seen above in the Elder Philostratus. There is a continual blurring, then, between the diegetic dimension, the realm of events narrated, and descriptions that take on a life of their own, to the point of invading and eclipsing the realm of diegesis.[22]

The excessive descriptions are generally too elaborate and too extensive to be quoted in their entirety. A few brief, but representative examples will have to suffice. One of the best-known instances in Peter Weiss is his novelistic trilogy *The Aesthetics of Resistance* (1975 / 1979 / 1981) which begins with a powerful depiction of the battle between gods and titans on the extraordinary Pergamon Frieze in Berlin, a struggle in which the novel's

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[22] Roland Barthes, 'L'effet de réel' (1968), in *Littérature et Réalité*, ed. Gérard Genette (Paris: Seuil, 1982). On the concept of diegesis see Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane E. Lewin, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 27.

protagonists, strangely involved and overwhelmed by the beauty of the violence around them, catch a glimpse of their own violent fate.[23]

> All around us the bodies rose out of the stone, crowded into groups, intertwined, or shattered into fragments, hinting at their shapes with a torso, a propped-up arm, a burst hip, a scabbed shard, always in warlike gestures, dodging, rebounding, attacking, shielding themselves, stretched high or crooked, some of them snuffed out, but with a freestanding, forward-pressing foot, a twisted back, the contour of a calf harnessed into a single common motion. A gigantic wrestling, emerging from the grey wall, recalling a perfection, sinking back into formlessness.[24]

In keeping with this beginning, the description, extending over seven pages, shuttles back and forth between the focus on detail and the disorienting sense of the whole. One the one hand, it features bodies, divine, human, and animal, entangled in one another, thrust forward, striking, ducking, scrambling for cover, overpowered and overpowering, in a spectacle at once triumphant and traumatic. On the other hand, the frieze as a whole starts to resemble a moving surface, a sea of marble out of which figures appear and disappear, emerging only to be reabsorbed in the confusing mass of battle, constantly wavering (or suspended) between victory and defeat, glory and oblivion: "recalling a perfection, sinking back into formlessness." In a sense, this dynamic encapsulates the project of Weiss's *Aesthetics of Resistance*: to wrest from oblivion the story of the largely nameless collective that formed the anti-Nazi resistance movement and to inscribe their sacrifice into an iconographic lineage, ranging from Pergamon via a host of other iconic artworks, paintings

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[23] Another example, perhaps even better known, is Weiss's Marat/Sade play which can be regarded as a dramatisation of Jacques-Louis David's famous *Death of Marat* painting. For more detailed readings of these two instances of ekphrasis in Peter Weiss see my book *The Pathos of the Real* (London, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), pp. 111-112 (Pergamon frieze) and pp. 90-96 (*La mort de Marat*).

[24] Peter Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), Vol. 1, p. 3. "Rings um uns hoben sich die Leiber aus dem Stein, zusammengedrängt zu Gruppen ineinander verschlungen oder zu Fragmenten zersprengt, mit einem Torso, einem aufgestützten Arm, einer geborstenen Hüfte, einem verschorften Brocken, ihre Gestalt andeutend, immer in den Gebärden des Kampfes, ausweichend, zurückschnellend, angreifend, sich deckend, hochgestreckt oder gekrümmt, hier und da ausgelöscht, doch noch mit einem freistehenden vorgestemmten Fuß, einem gedrehten Rücken, der Kontur einer Wade eingespannt in eine einzige gemeinsame Bewegung. Ein riesiges Ringen, auftauchend aus der grauen Wand, sich erinnernd an seine Vollendung, zurücksinkend zur Formlosigkeit." *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), Vol. 1, p. 7. Regarding the text of the trilogy, thus far, only the first volume has been translated into English. Subsequent translations from the second volume are my own.

for the most part, up to Picasso's *Guernica*.[25] This form of commemoration through the pictorial archive is torn between the resistance to glorification and pathos, between a certain commitment to an unsentimental, unflinching realism and the irresistible urge to exalt the forgotten efforts of those who perished in the struggle against Nazism. The continual appeal to the canon of *pathos formulae*, to use Aby Warburg's apt term, seems to belie the subliminal desire for transfiguration. But then such transfiguration is frequently counteracted by the memory of extreme anguish and agony. The persistence of a traumatic excess that cannot be metabolised becomes particularly salient in a set of descriptions of two Dutch paintings, by Brueghel the Elder and the Younger, featuring the horrors of war. Once again, they are paintings of battle and devastation, of bodies in a state of panic and terror, persecuted by a monstrous enemy in an apocalyptic setting:

> scores of skeletons, under the din of bells, trumpets and kettledrums … emerging from underground shelters, armed with scythes, hatchets, torches, millstones, and hunting nets ready to seize their human prey, throwing them head-on into the water, driving them into cages, through narrow pathways and onto the bare hills, tying them on wheels, decapitating and hanging them on the gallows that line the scene.[26]

As the narrator scans the abundance of gruesome details on the images, he is seized by a kind of perceptual and affective delirium. Rather than being drawn into the image, as is so often the case in the novel, Brueghel's repulsive hybrid creatures reach out of the canvas to touch, embrace, and caress the beholder. The painted scene becomes tactile, sensory experience. The 'intimacy' between the amateur and the artwork gives way to a physical closeness that is too close.

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[25] Most prominently Géricault's *Le Radeau de la Méduse*, Goya's execution paintings, Delacroix' *La Liberté mène le peuple*, and many others. The tradition Weiss invokes is mostly Western, but not exclusively, see, for instance, the extended description in the third part of Angkor Wat, *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), Vol. 3, pp. 99-108. For a catalogue raisonné of the artworks featured in *The Aesthetics of Resistance* see Nana Badeberg, 'Kommentiertes Verzeichnis der in der "Ästhetik des Widerstands" erwähnten Künstler und Kunstwerke,' in *Die Bilderwelt des Peter Weiss*, eds Alexander Honold, Ulrich Schreiber (Berlin: Argument, 1995).

[26] Angkor Wat, *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), Vol. 2, p. 148. "Heerscharen von Skeletten, die, zum Lärm von Glocken, Fanfaren und Kesselpauken … vorquellend aus Bunkern, sich mit Sensen, Hacken, Feuerzangen, Pechfackeln, Mühlsteinen, Fangnetzen über die Menschen hermachten, sie kopfüber in Tümpel warfen, sie in Käfige, Hohlgänge und auf die öden Hügel trieben, sie räderten, enthaupteten und an reihenweise aufgestellte Galgen knüpften." The two paintings described here are the Younger Brueghel's *The Triumph of Death* (1597) and the Elder Brueghel's *Dulle Griet* (c.1562).

It is a confrontation with freakish bestiality and base materiality, the quintessential bearers of disgust: excrement and vermin.

> In front of this image the unnatural moved in on us, unchecked, licking, groping, stroking our skin in a terrifying manner, turning their bristles, suckers, trunks, tusks, and claws against us… Feathered pack monkey-like sitting in suspended bubbles, under glass bells, inside giant eggshells, their muzzles and beaks wide open, ready to spew bile, pitch, … on a roof an ogre, legs spread, his clothes wrapped up, exposing his ass, stoking with a spoon in the shit flowing from it. Barrels of crawling muck, beetles with hats and fishing rods, spiders setting up harp strings to catch their prey, crossbreeds between maggots and fish, insects and rodents, this was the scum that usually hid itself from us, working incessantly, the parasites, bearers of the plague … and whoever succeeded in crushing them at all would see how as they burst open they would multiply into swarms of vermin. [27]

While the ekphrastic description seizes on the carnivalesque and grotesque character of the Brueghels' bestiary, the narrator 'reads' the brief spell of delirium and vertigo induced by the paintings differently, in a more allegorical key, as it were. Excrement and vermin are the reminders of corporeality and betrayal, weakness of the spirit and of the flesh in those engaged in the struggle that demands both the recognition and overcoming of these very shortcomings. In other words, the abject dimension in the Dutch paintings features the possibility of moral and physical corruption. It epitomises a kind of evil that the narrator and his companions had been unable to imagine and were quick to suppress after having been confronted with it (during their time in Spain). The Elder and Younger Brueghels' nightmarish and apocalyptic visions bring home a lesson as quickly learnt as it was forgotten: the ruthlessness of the conflict that the novel recounts. The pictures are also said to supplement an inadequacy

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[27] Angkor Wat, *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, Vol. 2, p. 150. "[A]ngesichts dieses Bildes drang das Unnatürliche ungehemmt auf uns ein, beleckte, betastete uns, strich uns grauenhaft über die Haut, streckte uns Borsten, Rüssel, Saugnäpfe, Hauer und Krallen entgegen. … in aufgehängten Blasen, unter Glasglocken, in hohlen Rieseneiern hockte äffisches, gefiedertes Gesindel, Schnauzen, Schnäbel aufsperrend, bereit, Galle und Pech zu spein…auf einem Dach saß, mit gespreizten Beinen, ein Unhold, die Kleider gerafft, den Arsch entblößend, mit einem Löffel stochernd im vorquellenden Kot. Diese krabbelnden Jauchetonnen, diese Käfter mit Hüten und Angeln, die Spinnen, die Harfestränge zum Einfangen der Beute spannen, diese Kreuzungen zwischen Maden und Fischen, Insekten und Nagern, das war das Gezücht, das sich sonst vor uns verborgen hielt, das am Werk war ohne Aufenthalt, das waren die Parasiten, die Pestbringer…und wem es überhaupt gelang, sie zu zerquetschen, der würde nur sehn, wie sie sich, beim Aufplatzen, zu Schwärmen von Ungeziefer vermehrten."

of the imagination, "eine Unzulänglichkeit unsrer Phantasie," [28] namely, the inability to contemplate the possibility of defeat and to confront it critically. Here, as in other ekphrases of the book, it is the visual arts's capacity to resuscitate past dysphoric experience and make them available for the present: both as a necessary antidoton against naïve political idealism and, paradoxically, a resource for its renewal. [29] Clearly, the narrator is at pains to give an intellectual account, a sort of rationalisation for the resistance fighters' unmistakable fascination with the graphic images of agony and violence. He does so by turning the morbid preoccupation into a crucial aspect of their *bildung*, the education and training that prepares them, ultimately, for their death.

For all the variety of the paintings singled out in the trilogy, many of them resemble one another. The political (auto-)didacticism notwithstanding for which the narrator seeks to enlist them, they often feature amorphous clusters of bodies, panic-stricken and claustrophobic subjects in situations of crisis and turmoil with no way out. Hence the characteristic coincidence of opposites: hyperactivity and exhaustion, agitation and paralysis, throbbing and standstill.

The difficulty of discerning the truth in the oxymoronic conjunction of animation and lifelessness, the troubling semblance of live presence and inorganic stillness in the same object is also what transfixes the Simonian narrators before what they see. Simon's ekphrases share a number of characteristics with Weiss's dramatic descriptions, especially when they deal with similar subjects. Thus, in a chapter called 'Bataille' in Simon's novel *La Bataille de Pharsale* (1969) the narrator studies four battle paintings, by Poussin, Piero della Francesca, Brueghel the Elder, and Uccello. In the course of the description the detached attitude of the amateur with its focus on composition and technique gives way to an intensely personal and painful experience of the pictures, one in which the narrator is overwhelmed by his own traumatic war memories. [30] If in Weiss, the descriptions are often erratic and disorderly right from the beginning, mimicking the turmoil, panic, and anguish featured on the works they depict, Simon frequently begins with an orderly, almost pedantic account of scenes – that may or may not be painted,

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[28] Angkor Wat, *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, Vol. 2, p. 151.

[29] In this respect, *The Aesthetics of Resistance* could be well read as a project of immunisation. See Johannes Türk, *Die Immunität der Literatur* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2011).

[30] Claude Simon, *La Bataille de Pharsale* (Paris: Minuit, 1969) pp. 101-121; *The Battle of Pharsalus*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Braziller, 1971), p. 70ff. See *The Pathos of the Real*, pp. 81-85.

but we suspect they are – which is first disturbed and then disrupted by the intrusion of other images.

A somewhat less dramatic and more restrained example is the opening of *Les Géorgiques* (1981), a novel in which the French revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, the Spanish Civil War, and the Second World War form parallel and at times intertwining narrative threads. Though not his final novel, it is often regarded as a kind of summa of Simon's oeuvre. The description, once again too long to be reproduced here, functions like a portal to the book. It is a skillful exercise, at least for the first page and a half, in preserving the ambiguity of what it is that we are given to see, that is, whether it is a real scene or a drawing. The fastidiousness of the description, the meticulous attention it devotes to detail, is responsible both for its reality-effect and for the parallel suspicion that what is described is in fact a picture, precisely because that seems to be the only way of accounting for the inordinate interest in physical detail. The ambiguity begins with the first sentence – "La scène est la suivante:" – opening the curtain, as it were, on what could be the view of an actual space, a stage, or the pictorial space it finally turns out to be. (The sentence is translated into English, quite aptly, I believe, as "This is what we see:") This 'scene' features two men, a younger one standing, and an older one sitting, both of them nude. It proceeds to describe the appearance of their bodies, their poses, and the space that surrounds them. The depiction of the bodies is particularly ambiguous drawing on a strategy we came across earlier.

> A second, younger figure – also naked – is standing on the other side of the desk in the classical pose of the athlete at rest … In his case constant physical exercise has also developed a strong set of muscles, so far free from blemish. The biceps of the folded arm bulges visibly. The torso, whose pectoral and abdominal muscles are boldly drawn [*dessinés*], brings to mind those artistically moulded breastplates of Roman armour which reproduce with perfect academic accuracy in bronze the details of the male body.[31]

The description performs a doubling, comparing the drawing's second figure to a statue – 'torso' is of course ambiguous (as are the 'scène,' 'personnage,' and 'dessinés' of the original French) – and his athletic upper body to its prototype

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[31] Claude Simon, *The Georgics*, trans. by Beryl and John Fletcher (London, New York: Calder/Riverrun Press, 1989), p. 7. "Un second personnage plus jeune, nu lui aussi, se tient debout de l'autre coté du bureau, dans la pose classique de l'athlète au repos … Chez lui également une pratique constante des exercices physiques a développé une forte musculature, pour l'instant sans défauts. On voit se gonfler le biceps du bras replié. Le torse, don't les pectoraux et les abdominaux sont fermement dessinés, fait songer à ces plastrons des cuirasses romaines artistiquement modelés, reproduisant dans le bronze les détails d'une académie parfaite." *Les Géorgiques* (Paris: Minuit, 1981), pp. 11-12.

on Roman armour plates. Later on, the light captured on the drawing will be said to evoke the illumination in an artist's studio with naked models posing, and the description in fact goes on to sketch, however briefly, the studio situation. Ironically, the scene on the picture reminds the beholder of other instances of artistic reproduction, of preexisting models, instructing readers how to visualise a given sight by resorting to stock images (very much as in Philostratus's skillful handling of his listeners' gaze).

The ambiguity of the description turns out to be itself reflected in the ambiguity of the drawing, which the 'scene' is finally revealed to be. It is made up of two different modes representation: one hyperrealist, one abstract. The first is at pains to render the relief and complexion of the human bodies, using shading and even coloration (as it turns out, the heads of the two figures are painted in oil whereas the rest of their bodies are done in pencil), whereas the second contents itself, almost as in architecural drawing, with a few lines to suggest the space in which the two men are placed. The first achieves nothing less than *trompe l'œil* – as is noted apropos of another instance of reproduction within the picture, namely the written note the older character holds in his hand – and a sense of completion. The second, by contrast, constitutes 'a form of diagrammatic drawing' whose 'descriptive geometry' presupposes, according to the beholder, a shared set of conventions

> which…offer the spectator not existing monuments but combinations and collections of forms that are purely imaginary, referring only to themselves, and the grey lines, incredibly fine,…mark the division not between solids (flesh, wood or marble) and the air around them, but between white surfaces that interlock as their inflexions and angles dictate.[32]

As in the tradition of ekphrasis, both drawing and description (which are in fact one) oscillate between generating what one would call the 'image-effect' and the exposure of the very strategies at work in creating this image in the mind. These strategies are predicated as much on the description of a given object, often rendered as its own image (think of the Roman breastplates), as on the clever appeal, as in this instance, to the codes of visualisation.

There is still another dimension that ought to be mentioned. While the gaze scanning the picture seems drawn in, absorbed even, by the technical mastery of the drawing, ostensibly disregarding the subliminal drama that is

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[32] Simon, *The Georgics*, p. 8. Cf. "proposant aux regards non pas des monuments déjà existants mais des combinaisons et des assemblages de formes nés de leur imagination, ne renvoyant qu'à eux-mêmes, et les lignes grises, d'une incroyable finesse, … tracent des frontières non pas entre solides (les chairs, le bois ou le marbre) et l'air qui les entoure, mais entre des surfaces blanches qui s'emboîtent selon leurs inflexions et leurs angles." *Les Géorgiques*, pp. 12-13.

staged in the sketch, in the very last lines the hermeneutic neutrality is finally abandoned. It is especially the older man's "gaze fixed, as if hypnotised," on the written note that in turn arrests the beholder.[33] This 'fixed gaze,' staring at rather than reading the note, absorbed by something written, a message presumably, that will not be revealed – this fixed gaze is what concludes the preamble and opens the novel, anticipating in many ways not only the Simonian narrator's searching gaze fixed on his past, yet unable to penetrate the texts and images amassed in the book, but also the reader's efforts to follow him on this search.

Simon's ekphrases have often been read as *mise en abyme*, reflections of the conflicting ambitions at work in his writing: to produce the semblance of presence, of being there, to transform, in the terms used earlier, readers into spectators; but also to undo the sense of immersion the poetics of excessive description can achieve. However, in much of Simon's writerly engagement with images this tension assumes a more antagonistic form. It can be described as the confrontation between the ekphrastic and the iconoclastic: intensely 'real' memories of the war *and* the inability to integrate them into coherent narratives, to consign them to a fixed place in an orderly whole. But the interminable descriptions are not only a turn against the putative order of narration. They are also turning on themselves, as it were. For as vividly and exhaustively as Simon's ekphrastic descriptions recreate whatever objects, scenes and sights/sites invade the narrators' memories, they also simultaneously work at their disintegration, at the continual fragmentation and proliferation of the images – whether seen, remembered, imagined, be they mental or material. In other words, the excess of description is both productive and destructive, mimicking the very paradox of traumatic memory: the inability to remember and the inability to forget.

To sum up, there are two principal reasons then for the continual appeal of, and to, the ekphrastic in the late modernist poetics of the two authors considered here. On the one hand, it is a means of achieving a kind of hyperrealism, at once real and unreal, focusing on the minute details that usually escape our attention. These close-ups and the sustained foci on the material texture of a given section of the world often have a disconcerting and uncanny effect, raising expectations of an insight, a revelation that would justify tarrying with what would otherwise remain on the margins of perception and consciousness. The other dimension of ekphrastic description is, as we saw above (from its ancient champions to its modern inheritors), the opposite tendency, namely to draw attention to its own making, to abandon the

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[33] Simon, *The Georgics*, p. 11; *Les Géorgiques*, p. 17.

convention by which the 'art' in the 'artifact' or artwork conceals itself and to expose and parade it instead. It is the moment of self-referentiality and self-reflexivity, cherished by a modernist and late modernist sensibility. In both Peter Weiss and Claude Simon access to reality, more specifically to historical experience is mirrored, refracted, and intensified in series of images, often iconic representations of war, violence, and suffering, and the forms of their commemoration. But these very images are also called into question, dismantled and denounced. It is a double gesture that is at work here of *mis en image* and *démontage*, taking issue with but also acknowledging the inescapably mediated character of our experience and especially our memory. In fact, the violent and traumatic history at the core of their works – revolving, as I said, around the Spanish Civil War; the two world wars; and the genocide – is captured in a constant inundation and flight of images, overwhelming and eluding the characters in their attempts to make sense of the violent experience of their past. The writers's deployment of images can thus be viewed as an attempt to render a reality that is too much, too real to be assimilated and metabolised by the psychic apparatus, in a word, traumatic, and at the same time frustratingly elusive and unstable, captivating the narrative subjects precisely in as much as it escapes them.

In the terms developed above, there is the notion of being absorbed by the image, both in a positive and in a negative sense, in a captivating and in an unsettling way. But that is not all. There is yet another aspect in the late modernist appeal to the image. It is true, for the most part we encounter different versions of the amazed, mesmerised, and mystified gazing with which we began, the forgetting of the self in the face of the arrested movement and dynamic stillness of pictorial representation. But images are not only conjured up to draw on and reenact the spell they can have on the beholders. Apart from the ambition to effect the kind of absorption and abandon advocated by Lessing as the essential feature of aesthetic experience – a powerful and persistent ambition to this day, in spite of our alleged aversion to illusionistic realism – there is also that which Lessing sought to keep out of the picture: violent disruption. The images conjured in such great numbers by the late twentieth-century masters of ekphrastic virtuosity often become the site of this very disruption. The passion of the image, if I can call it like that, is thus accompanied by a countervailing impulse, the impulse to destroy it, the iconoclastic pathos of breaking through, shattering the hyperrealist illusion, to upend the closure and self-sufficiency of visual representation, and to revolt against the promised meaning and putative mystery and magic of the image.