Romantic Ekphrasis and the Intellectual Culture of Sensibility

by

Jennifer Emily O’Kell

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Graduate English Department
University of Toronto

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Abstract
This thesis examines the intersection of poetry about art, the culture of sensibility, and eighteenth-century aesthetic thought in Romantic literature. These converging discourses allowed poets to suggest insights into the necessary conditions of sympathetic exchange, and the limits of what sympathy can accomplish. This thesis proposes ambitious changes to our understanding of Romantic ekphrasis in order to offer a subtle but crucial change to our understanding of the culture of sensibility. It considers a broad range of Romantic ekphrases – some well-known poems by Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley, and some largely unstudied poems by Cowper, Mary Russell Mitford, Henry Hart Milman, Barry Cornwall, and others – reading these texts against multiple historical contexts. One of these contexts is the eighteenth-century idea that the visual arts represent only a single, “pregnant” moment, whereas literature represents successions of events. Moral philosophy and the philosophy of the sister arts are bound up with one another throughout the eighteenth century; David Hume’s formulation of sympathy as instinctive and visual comes to be associated with painting and sculpture, while Adam Smith’s formulation of it as an imagined reconstruction comes to be associated with literature. Another key context is the ekphrastic tradition, especially its understudied eighteenth-century portion. This thesis is the first study to adequately investigate the archive of eighteenth-century ekphrasis. In the light of these contexts, it argues that Romantic ekphrasis was a site of ongoing intellectual activity within the culture of sensibility. Romantic thinkers inherited a set of questions about the role of emotion and affect in ethical conduct, and about the role of the arts, not only in producing emotion, but also in shaping how we grapple intellectually with emotion. This thesis brings to light some of the intellectual tools that early nineteenth-century poets brought to bear on these questions.
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1 Introduction

Sister Arts and Sister Feelings: The Interrelation of Sensibility and Aesthetics in the Eighteenth Century

One might not think that John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” has anything left to tell scholarship. This most studied of poems, however, has something left to tell us about how the Romantics addressed questions that matter now more than ever: questions about the role of emotion and affect in ethical conduct, questions about the role of the arts, not only in producing emotion, but also in shaping how we grapple intellectually with emotion. In the sphere of politics, in the sphere of popular culture, in the sphere of “the arts” as traditionally conceived, and in the sphere of humanistic study that is under relentless pressure to justify itself in utilitarian terms, these questions count. “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and other ekphrastic poems from early nineteenth-century Britain cannot answer them, but they can shed light on how thinkers of another era confronted comparable questions, and what intellectual tools they brought to bear on them.

This thesis seeks to make a subtle but crucial modification to how we think about the culture of sensibility. We already know that the culture of sensibility took shape in the arts, and did some of its best thinking about psychological and ethical questions within the arts, especially literature and drama. I will here consider how thought about the arts and thought about the psychology of what we would now call empathy shaped each other in the eighteenth century. I will examine how, in the early nineteenth century, that legacy made poetry about the visual arts a different entity than it is now, and different than we habitually credit it with having been. I will do this in part by fleshing out our history of Romantic ekphrasis to include more, and more varied, poems than we usually look at; and I will do it in part by stripping away some layers of accumulated anachronism from the poems we do read. In short, this thesis seeks to make that subtle but crucial change to how we conceive of sensibility by making several ambitious changes to how we conceive of Romantic ekphrasis.
The convergence of several eighteenth-century discourses opened up a space in Romantic poems about art for exploring both the necessary grounds and the limits of what thinkers at the time called sympathy. This thesis is about the intersection of poetry about art, the culture of sensibility, and eighteenth-century aesthetic thought. These three traditions meet in early nineteenth-century poems about art, where they are refracted in varying combinations and used to suggest insights into the philosophical questions underpinning the culture of sensibility. Where aesthetic and sentimental thought converge in Romantic ekphrasis, they create the conditions for the poems to explore the necessary conditions of sympathetic exchange, and the limits of what sympathy can accomplish. This thesis examines some of those explorations, grouping them according to the specific intellectual tools they use: conceptual frameworks, such as the fixity of art, the figurative potential of art, and the role of art as a public medium or forum, that were mainstream at the turn of the nineteenth century and that intersected with ideas about sympathy.

Both the study of ekphrasis and the study of sensibility stand to gain from being brought together. Several scholars have already pointed out that the culture and literature of sensibility continued into the early nineteenth century. I am offering an enriched understanding of how it did so, and what it looked like. Likewise, several scholars have pointed out that the Romantic era saw a proliferation of ekphrastic poetry, at least in comparison with the eighteenth century, when so little ekphrasis was composed at all, and that many Romantic ekphrases were lyric. In actuality, claims about the flowering of ekphrasis in the Romantic period are overstated. The number of ekphrases composed certainly increased in the first decades of the nineteenth century, but it was a modest increase: poems about art didn’t burst into staggering popularity until the mid-1820s, after the advent of the literary annuals and the rise to immense fame of Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon. The significance of Romantic lyric ekphrasis lies less in its quantity than in the ideas refracted in it. I am offering a lens through which we can look at a substantial subset of this emerging genre. Some of the ekphrases that have been the keystones of our current theories of ekphrasis look very different through the lens of the cultural legacies I am tracing.
Scholars have established the ongoing relevance of eighteenth-century moral and sentimental philosophy, on the one hand, and of eighteenth-century aesthetic thought, on the other, to the literature and culture of the early nineteenth century. Moreover, the influence of those philosophical discourses on one another comes as no surprise – eighteenth-century thinkers tended to define aesthetic categories in terms of feelings. The implications of that mutual influence for the Romantic-era culture that inherited both discourses, however, has not been sufficiently explored. This project offers a thorough examination of how that historical interplay between moral and aesthetic thought is refracted in Romantic culture. I will argue that the interrelatedness of these two philosophical traditions was a crucial part of the intellectual legacy that poets of the Romantic era inherited and reworked in their ekphrastic poetry.

The present, introductory chapter first situates this thesis within two existing bodies of criticism, and then examines the evolving relationship between sentimental and aesthetic thought in the eighteenth century – an important starting point for all of the discussions in the chapters that follow. I begin by contrasting the formulations of sympathy in the works of David Hume and Adam Smith. I examine Smith’s construction of his own work as a calculated response to Hume’s, and his juxtaposition of his own concept of sympathy (as an imaginative reconstruction of someone else’s experience) with Hume’s concept of it (as an instinctive reaction to visual cues). I then examine eighteenth-century British thought surrounding the “sister arts,” especially the work of James Harris, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and Erasmus Darwin, and an English translation of the famous *Critical Reflections* of the Abbé du Bos, along with such well known writers as Joseph Addison and Edmund Burke. I look especially at differently inflected versions of the idea that the visual arts represent only a “single moment,” a “pregnant moment,” or a “punctum temporis,” whereas literature represents successions of events and builds its readers’ interest gradually. I argue that moral philosophy and the philosophy of the sister arts are bound up with one another throughout the eighteenth century, and that Hume’s formulation of sympathy as instinctive and visual comes to be associated with painting and sculpture, while Smith’s formulation of it as an imagined reconstruction comes to be associated with literature. Lastly, I examine how the idea of the “single moment”
represented in a work of visual art metamorphoses, in the Romantic period, into the related idea that the objects represented in visual art are held static in an infinite succession of identical moments, as though held in an indefinite theatrical tableau. The historical material offered in the present chapter informs the entirety of this thesis, and it becomes especially prominent in the fourth chapter.

1.1 Criticism and Methodologies

1.1.1 Sensibility

This thesis, in exploring the poetry of sensibility as it evolved and intersected with poetry about art in the early nineteenth century, is nonetheless not a project about feeling: it is a project about ideas about feeling – a study of an intellectual rather than an affective culture. Although a number of scholars have worked with the assumption that the literature of sensibility explores a set of ideas rather than taking for granted a set of principles, Adela Pinch brings that assumption into the foreground in her 1996 book Strange Fits of Passion by examining not only a variety of genres, but also a mix of disagreeing authors: some conventionally associated with sensibility, such as David Hume and Charlotte Smith, and some conventionally seen as critical of sensibility, such as Jane Austen. By formulating her study as a history of a set of questions rather than a history of a set of valorized beliefs, Pinch is able to point out the continuity in these authors’ approaches to the subject. In Strange Fits of Passion, some of the concerns usually associated with attacks on the cult of sensibility thus appear in a new light. The idea that “feelings were getting out of hand” (1) emerges as part of the same cultural project of interrogating the nature and origins of emotion and sympathy that fostered the literature of sensibility itself.

In a similar vein, in her 1994 book Bearing the Dead, Esther Schor makes a case that it was the elegiac mode of literature\(^1\) that furthered the philosophical project of Adam Smith the most. Smith, she points out, identifies sympathy for the dead as the starting

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\(^1\) Schor is careful to specify that she means by this all forms of “textual mourning,” not only elegiac poetry (3).
point of sympathy for the living. According to Schor’s careful reading of Smith, “the moral authority of the dead, not of a transcendental God nor of the individual human body, ‘guarantees’ the social circulation of sympathy, pity, compassion, approbation, and censure by which the living regulate their actions” (37). Schor goes on to study the colossal moral importance of the concept of mourning in eighteenth-century culture, and the consequent emergence in literature of the concept of the elegiac, in addition to a tradition of elegies that shared chiefly formal characteristics or that imitated Latin elegies: a mode or mood rather than a genre. The implications of Schor’s observations for our readings of the poetry of sensibility are enormous. If the elegiac mode is in fact a taking-up of Adam Smith’s ideas, then most of the melancholic poetry of sensibility is a far cry from the solipsistic self-absorption it has sometimes been made out to be. Rather, it is a means of circulating the most important kind of sympathy to a wider audience. Although less explicit than Pinch that the poetry she studies is making a specifically intellectual contribution to understanding feeling, Schor, too, emphasizes an intellectual context for texts that might initially seem to dwell on emotion at the expense of reason.

In the chapters that follow, I will focus less on the fact of sensibility’s presence in the poems than on the specific ideas about sensibility that are worked out or interrogated, and on the insights about feeling that each poem aspires to offer its readers by means of its dealings with art. To that end, I will devote a substantial portion of the project to investigating the means by which those insights are obtained: the discourses that made poetry about art so culturally fertile, and the specific strands of those discourses that each poem takes up as the tools of its investigation. The works of moral philosophy I use as measures of the reading public’s access to ideas, of course, do not necessarily constitute the whole of the canon of ideas to which the poems respond, although it is often a convenient shorthand to refer to an idea most famously articulated by a given philosopher as her or his idea. When this project refers to Wordsworth’s reworking of Adam Smith’s formulation of the self, for example, it does so without necessarily assuming that Wordsworth had Smith, in particular, in mind. Rather, this project takes such philosophical texts to be records of a climate of ideas of which they are the most prominent surviving witnesses. It was a climate of specifically sentimental ideas that
fostered the philosophical and analytic complexity of Romantic ekphrases, many of which either draw on clusters of ideas as grounding assumptions or select particular ideas for scrutiny and interrogation.

Implicit in the claim that philosophical work was carried on in poems and other types of imaginative literature is the assumption that ideas put forward by philosophers had a much broader cultural life. Michael Bell makes a case for this assumption as historical fact, arguing not only that the emerging genre of the novel in the eighteenth century was a more effective tool for exploring the ideas behind the culture of sensibility than was philosophy itself, but also that those ideas were already in circulation when the philosophers began attempting to systematize them. Bell contends, for instance, that “the manner of argument, on all sides, suggests that the participants were largely assuming what was to be proved” (17), and he cites the example of the third Earl of Shaftesbury, whose influence was due in part to “his articulating what many were ready to believe” (29). Julie Ellison, too, argues in *Cato’s Tears* that the culture of sensibility predated the Scottish Enlightenment, and in fact grew out of a particular kind of civic discourse in elite circles in the late seventeenth century. The role of imaginative literature in the life of such ideas has been complex. The fact that Goethe’s publication of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* famously sparked a wave of suicides across Europe suggests that the literature of sensibility had considerable cultural influence, and could lend sentimental ideas widespread circulation, even ubiquity.

This thesis is in part an exploration of how poems think: how they grapple with and work through complex ideas, and perform philosophical work above and beyond what the philosophy of their day could accomplish.² And while the poets who composed the poems were actively engaged in the intellectual problems of their culture, they generally

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² I am choosing my metaphor carefully, attributing the thought here to the poem, not the poet. I do not intend to replicate Helen Vendler’s method of seeking in poems traces of their authors’ evolving thought processes, including moments where poets have changed their minds. Vendler, in *Poets Thinking*, looks at “the way thinking goes on in the poet’s mind during the process of creation” (6). By contrast, I am interested in the ways that poems walk their readers through a process of thought, tacitly posing questions, testing possible answers, and in some cases acting out a careful reconstruction of a poetic speaker’s consciousness arriving at those answers.
did not articulate in prose the often complex ideas that I have found latent in their poems, nor is it clear that they could have done so. This thesis takes poetic discourse to be capable of giving voice to ideas that are, by the rigid standard of discursive prose, half-formed, ill-formed, unformed, or unconscious. I take as a starting point the supposition that the type of thought that happens in poems is fundamentally different from the type of thought that is recorded in, for example, prose treatises. Even where a poem seems to suggest something definite, I do not look for it to suggest something that is consistent with the known views of the poet on that subject. In fact, I see serious limitations to the mode of scholarship that takes a poet’s published essays or letters as a means of elucidating the poems, as if the poems were nothing more than a distillation of what is spelled out more clearly elsewhere. The thinking that happens in poems is more amorphous than that – more accommodating of ambiguity and indeterminacy. This thesis is, in part, a tribute to the intelligence of poems.

The contributions of poetry and novels to the working out of ideas as well as to their popularization has been the focus of most of the best studies of the literature of sensibility. John Mullan, for example, posits that novelists were able to transcend some of the difficulties faced by philosophers. According to Mullan, moral philosophy cannot simply “serve as a privileged explanatory discourse” for the culture of sensibility, and, what is more, David Hume’s writing “acutely probes exactly that incapacity of philosophy – ironically realized for him [Hume] when philosophy is posing its most searching and ambitious questions” (15). Novelists, Mullan suggests, could imaginatively construct special relationships with their readers that allowed them to pose some of those searching questions without requiring a totalizing explanation: they could

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3 Jerome McGann, in *The Poetics of Sensibility*, nicely pinpoints the paradox inherent in the systematic manner in which eighteenth century culture “scrupulously re-explored” the “unteachable” spontaneity of feeling, noting that, ironically, it was a “passion for enlightenment” that “drew the quest for the reasons of the heart” (43). It is little wonder, then, that Hume expressed the frustration that Mullan has identified, and Hume was not alone. James Chandler has pointed out that Adam Smith – the last of the major moral philosophers to take up questions of sympathy and ethics – “closed his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* with a general critique of ‘casuistry’” in which Smith insisted that “the effort to produce a rational and minute calibration of precept to situation must necessarily fail” and that moral education must take place by means of “open-hearted intercourse” (141). In short, it seems that no one was more aware than the philosophers of the limits of what thinking about sympathy and morality in the abstract could accomplish.
“concede that habits of sociability were limited or exceptional,” but still “position each private reader as the exceptional connoisseur of commendable sympathies” (13). Michael Bell takes a similar line of argument somewhat further, arguing that, as the philosophical conceptions of sympathy put more and more emphasis on the role of imaginative reconstruction, the novel became the genre in which writers could best “actively explore[…] the condition of ethical life.” Sympathy itself, according to such formulations, “took on the character of an internal fiction” (57). Bell’s most important philosophical touchstone is Adam Smith, and especially the idea of “the ‘impartial Spectator’ whom Smith posed as the internal monitor of the ethical life” (44). In the work of Smith, Bell argues, sympathy is “less a movement of individual feeling and rather an imagined arena in which the subjectivities of all human others, and of the self, are reconstructed in a manner which has to be both emotional and judgmental at once. The compelling analogy is with the novel” (44).

For my purposes, the most crucial element of Bell’s analysis is his discussion of the sentimental novel’s generic debt to the philosophical tale. Bell does a series of nuanced close readings, pointing out the ways in which novels had the ability to “dramatize” weaknesses in sentimental theory. When he posits this ability as a key element in the larger evolution of the novel, however, he brings the genre of the philosophical tale into the discussion as both an analogy and an ancestor of the sentimental novel, arguing that

The philosophical tale was often devoted, as in Candide (1759) and Rasselas (1759), to challenging “ideas” with “experience”. Yet the form cannot give experience as such, only an idea of experience. What passes for experience in a fiction can only ever be an exemplary conception of it and one way of looking at the history of the novel form is as a continuing attempt to overcome this contradiction. The novel gives ever greater weight and complexity to the representation of experience, without ever fully escaping, so much as disguising, the form of the philosophical tale, the governing structure of a worldview.

(22)
According to this view, the novel of sensibility shares with the philosophical tale the characteristic of being an imaginative testing ground for ideas. The increasingly detailed and realistic representations of social life in novels of the eighteenth century stems from the social nature of the ideas about feeling, sympathy and ethics that were the heart of the literature of sensibility – ideas that required increasingly complex fictive situations in which to be tested. But, in spite of that detail and complexity, these novels remained at some level thought experiments, testing with increasing detail a specific set of ideas.

The argument of this thesis is resonant with Bell’s analysis of eighteenth-century novels of sensibility. The fact that similar arguments can be made about novels and poetry of sensibility should come as no surprise. As Gabrielle Starr has argued, novels, especially in their representations of emotion and individual subjectivity, shared strategies with lyric poetry, and *vice versa*. In Starr’s words, “[t]he broad cultural revaluation of emotional life and individuality brings literary forms close together, [and] encourages shared solutions to shared problems” (10), such as a particular “understanding of the relationship between readers and texts” (7). In the light of studies like Starr’s that reveal the dense web of mutual influence between verse and prose genres, it is only to be expected that what Bell observes about novels should also be true of a genre like lyric ekphrasis. The early nineteenth-century poems I study, like the novels Bell discusses, and like philosophical tales, are testing grounds for the abstract or generalized ideas with which they engage. They seem intended not only to draw on such ideas for poetic effect or to help engage the reader’s sympathy, but also to further the reader’s intellectual understanding of those ideas.

It is not only fiction that scholars have identified as being deeply bound up in the philosophical project of sensibility, and the poems I shall examine share strategies not only with novels, but also with plays. David Marshall argues that in fact the compelling analogy, in Bell’s terms, is not between Smith’s idea of the “case” and the novel, but
rather between Smith’s idea of spectatorship and the theatre. In *The Figure of Theater*, Marshall contends that

> [f]or Smith, sympathy depends upon a theatrical relation between a spectator and a spectacle, a relation that is reversed and mirrored as both persons try to represent the other’s feelings. We need this sympathy, we thrive upon it, and even when we are alone we double and divide ourselves in order to play the part of our own spectators. Thus the theatrical structure of sympathy is both acted out between people and internalized. (190)

If theatricality is fundamental to how a philosopher as influential as Adam Smith characterized sympathy, then it should come as no surprise that a number of the lyric poems examined here use a certain theatricality in their explorations of sympathy. Although each poem’s strategy is different, this thesis will come back again and again to the idea that many of these lyrics are *enacting* instances of sympathy, or constructing their speakers as playing the part of a sympathetic spectator.

Like Pinch, Schor, Chandler, and Marshall, I highlight the continuities between the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century, rather than the discontinuities. One important way in which scholars of the culture of sensibility in the early nineteenth century sometimes seem to contradict one another is in our differing attitudes to the word “Romanticism.” Although I use the word “Romantic” in this thesis, I use it as a shorthand for the awkward phrase “early nineteenth-century British.” Rather than attempt to define a Romantic movement, I conceive of early nineteenth-century British texts as products of and contributions to a shared climate of ideas. I am interested in how these texts participated in the cultural milieu they all shared. As a consequence of my scepticism about the existence of a Romantic movement, it may look as though I conceive of the relationship between the literature of sensibility and Romantic literature

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4 Like Marshall, James Chandler, in “Moving Accidents,” identifies the concept of the impartial spectator not as an analogy between Adam Smith and novels of the period, but rather between novels and plays. Chandler, drawing on Shaftesbury, observes “the incorporation of the soliloquy form into modern authorship and the production of ‘conscience’ as an impartial spectator internalized within the writer’s mind” (163).
in different terms than some scholars whose work has in fact influenced my own, such as James Chandler and Christopher Nagle. While I wholeheartedly concur not only with Chandler and Nagle but also with Ellison, Knowles, and Pinch that the early nineteenth century in Britain can be usefully thought of as part of an evolving culture of sensibility, I, like Pinch, stop short of identifying an unsentimental “Romanticism” within the culture of the period. I choose to rethink entirely the proverbial hostility of the Romantic era to sensibility, rather than to look for a coherently unsentimental Romantic movement positioning itself within but against an ongoing culture of sensibility.

Another term that sometimes creates the illusion of scholarly divides where there is in fact only differing terminology is “sentimental.” The word “sensibility” has long plagued scholars with its failure to produce an adjectival derivative. When a text participates in the Victorian culture of sentimentality, we unhesitatingly call it sentimental. When a text participates in the eighteenth-century or Romantic-era culture of sensibility, what term should we use? Jerome McGann, in *The Poetics of Sensibility*, favours “sensibilious,” and a few other critics have taken his cue; the word does have a prior existence in early modern Latin. Byron used the somewhat more mellifluous term “sensibilitous,” albeit with the intention of mocking his subject, but his word has not caught on. Since I think of eighteenth-century sensibility and Victorian sentimentalism as phases of the same massive cultural phenomenon, existing on a continuum rather than being rigidly distinct, I am quite comfortable asking “sentimental” to do double duty.

**1.1.2 Ekphrasis**

The critical consensus that scholars of ekphrasis reached in the 1990s, and that has since made work like mine possible, is that Romantic ekphrasis marks a departure from a very

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5 Chandler accepts the notion of Romanticism as a movement that rejects sentimentalism, and looks for some of the hidden continuities between them. Nagle, in a similar vein, frames Romanticism as a movement *within* a larger culture of sensibility – one that converts the sexual undertones of sensibility into a sublime aesthetic of indefinite desire. Both scholars concede that the culture of sensibility was alive and well in the early nineteenth century. They differ from a scholar like Pinch only in arguing that the particular subset of that culture that they have labelled “Romantic” relates to sensibility or sentimentalism in an antagonistic way. Both Chandler and Nagle are selective about which early nineteenth-century authors and works they are willing to term “Romantic.”
old set of conventions. These scholars drew both on Ian Jack’s seminal work on the influence that the art world had on Keats, and on the work that scholars such as Jean Hagstrum and Murray Krieger had done on the relationship between poetry and eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, and they identified the Romantic period as the period in which the poetic aims of ekphrasis changed for good. One part of the shift that these scholars identified is that ekphrasis became divorced from its roots in narrative genres like epic and romance. The archetypical classical, medieval and renaissance ekphrases are all passages in sprawling epics and romances. The most famous Romantic ekphrases, by contrast, are all sonnets and odes: lyrics. Grant F. Scott, in The Sculpted Word, articulated the generic shift as one of size, saying that “[w]here we are struck by the epic scope of Classical ekphrasis – even Philostratus overwhelms us with the copiousness and variety of his images – we are forced to acknowledge the distinctly more diminished and lyrical scale of the Romantics” (15). Other critics have discussed the generic shift in terms of an intensified interest in the response of the viewer, who is usually also the poetic speaker, to the artwork – a preoccupation with, in Shelley’s words, the “gazer’s spirit.” James Heffernan articulated it as an abandonment of the story-telling impulse that seems to govern so much earlier ekphrasis, saying that

[from Homer to Shakespeare, ekphrasis is driven by the pressure of narrative, which not only makes the verbalized work of art recall or prefigure what happens in the story that surrounds it but also turns graphic or sculptural stasis into process, arrested gesture into movement. (91)

In place of the story-telling impulse, Heffernan saw Romantic ekphrasis as the starting point of an overwhelming interest in the fixity of the visual arts and in the artwork’s own durability. Heffernan called this preoccupation an “ideology of transcendence,” and he identified its lingering presence in twentieth-century critical works such as Krieger’s early essay on ekphrasis, which, Heffernan points out, “treats ekphrasis as a way of freezing time in space” (5).

Although these critics’ claims are compatible with one another, the fact that they have offered different accounts of what made Romantic ekphrasis distinct from earlier
ekphrasis suggests that there is no single, clear-cut way in which it was distinct. I would argue that the ekphrastic tradition on which the Romantic poets drew was so varied and complex that, in fact, what stands out about Romantic ekphrasis is not so much its break from tradition as its synthesis of disparate parts of that tradition. If, for example, we follow Scott and take the scale of the poems to be the thing that changed, then the shift happened much earlier, and short Romantic ekphrases follow in the footsteps of their immediate predecessors: eighteenth-century ekphrases are almost all shorter than the “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” and many of them consist of a single quatrain or couplet. If we say that a preoccupation with viewer-response is what sets Romantic ekphrasis apart, then we must account for Shakespeare’s interest in subjective interpretation in “The Rape of Lucrece.” If anything, I would suggest that Romantic ekphrasis is at least as hard to characterize collectively as ekphrases from earlier time periods, and this thesis will not attempt to find homogeneity in so diverse a body of texts. Rather, what interests me is the differing ways that Romantic poets were able to find in art as a subject-matter for poetry a range of opportunities to test ideas about subjectivity, feeling, and sympathy.

How we tell the history of ekphrasis depends on what kinds of works we include, and, for the purposes of this study, I have found it useful to be as inclusive as possible. The term “ekphrasis” dates back to classical Greece, but its original meaning was simply vivid description. Our current usage of the word to refer to literature about art is a twentieth-century development, initiated by Leo Spitzer in 1955. Since the emergence of the term in criticism is so recent, the kind of literature we think of when we discuss “ekphrasis” has inevitably been shaped by the ekphrastic poems that have received the most attention within the last seventy years. We think, on the one hand, of Homer’s description of Achilles’ shield, and, on the other, of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”; the more a poem or passage resembles one of these, the easier it is to classify it unhesitatingly as ekphrastic. As a consequence, most attempts at coming up with a sharply demarcated definition of ekphrasis are at risk of perpetuating an unnecessarily small canon of texts. The Romantic poets did not think of poems and passages about visual art as a separate genre called “ekphrasis,” and they certainly did not follow the delineation of the genre that is now current when they selected earlier works by which to
be influenced. On the contrary, ekphrastic poems of the early nineteenth century show the influence of a huge range of earlier texts, spanning not only the chronological spectrum from Homer, to Spenser, to Pope, to Cowper, but also the generic spectrum from passages in epic, to epigrams, to verse epistles to painters, to the prose works of Addison, or Burke, or Reynolds. It is thus necessary to study some poems and prose works that fall outside the usual definition, although my insistence on keeping the definition of the ekphrastic tradition as broad as possible is specific to the period I study; a study of late twentieth-century ekphrases would have to take into account instead a tradition that looks much more like the “canonical” list of English ekphrases.⁶

1.2 The Sisterhood of Sensibility and Aesthetic Thought

Although British aesthetic discourse in the eighteenth century considered poetry and painting to be sister arts, that discourse itself had a sister. Developments in aesthetic philosophy paralleled developments in moral philosophy. They became prominent together, and ideas from each informed the subsequent development of the other. The dichotomy in eighteenth-century thought between poetry’s narrative capacity and painting’s immediate visual impact mirrored the split between two popular formulations of how sympathy works: either instantaneously in response to visible emotional display, or deliberately by means of imaginatively reconstructed circumstances. In the Romantic period, that parallel persisted, but became differently inflected as Romantic culture developed a preoccupation with emotional fixity. The literal fixity of visual art had been constructed all along as a means of eliciting instantaneous, instinctive, visual sympathy; it now came to be used, in addition, as a figure for extreme emotion. It was in this cultural climate that the links between aesthetic and sentimental discourse that had been present from the start became the material that poets worked with as they explored the

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⁶ Scott cites Lucian’s ekphrases from the first century C.E. as the turning point when ekphrasis became in practice “a specialized genre devoted to objets d’art” (1); English writers who wrote about art, however, did not use the term to describe their own work until after Spitzer had reintroduced it. It should nevertheless be noted that, although the Romantics did not use the term to refer to their own poems about art, some English-language poets in our own time do use it. For example, in an interesting example of cross-pollination between literary scholarship and literature, several acclaimed Toronto-area poets (among them Ruth Roach Pierson and Susan MacLeod) have offered workshops on composing ekphrases.
role of story-telling in sympathy, and as they probed the limits of sympathy in the absence of temporal sequence. Recognizing the relationships within that cluster of ideas can shed new light even on some of the best-known of Romantic ekphrases.

1.2.1 The Philosophy of Sympathy

The two frameworks for thinking about sympathy that would come to be linked with the two chief sister arts are most strikingly articulated by David Hume and Adam Smith; it is thus worth first examining what these two philosophers say, and, just as crucially, what they do not say. Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is in implicit yet pointed dialogue with Hume’s *Treatise on Human Nature*. Although Smith does not directly refute Hume’s construction of sympathy, he nonetheless sets up his argument in such a way as to draw attention to the ways in which he differs most significantly from his predecessor, repeatedly borrowing Hume’s examples and tweaking them so as to highlight his own interpretation of them. Both the extent of the differences between the two philosophers’ ideas and the care with which Smith distances himself from Hume are helpful for understanding how these ideas co-exist with each other and interact with eighteenth-century and Romantic ideas about art. The difference between Humean and Smithian conceptions of sympathy underpins perhaps the most important strand of thought I shall argue Romantic ekphrasis explored – a strand of thought to which this thesis will return many times. That strand of thought is the subject of the sub-section that follows this one, but, to grapple with it, we must first establish with as much clarity as possible the distinction between Humean and Smithian sympathy – a distinction first highlighted by Smith himself.

For readers in our own age, it can be difficult to see the complexity of Smith’s response to Hume, not least because Smith’s ideas have attained such cultural dominance that we risk failing to notice their absence in Hume’s *Treatise* – we risk reading Hume’s conception of sympathy through Smith-coloured glasses. As a measure of the pervasiveness of Smith’s ideas about sympathy in our own culture, consider the common catchphrase of contemporary folk-ethics *put yourself in so-and-so’s shoes*; imagine what it feels like to be in so-and-so’s circumstances. I say “folk-ethics” rather than “ethical
ideology” because I think of the precept as generally passed down orally from generation to generation within western culture, rather than disseminated through cultural structures that benefit or are controlled by those with economic or political power. I would suggest, however, that some of the implications of the term “ideology” should be brought to bear in this case: the foundational nature of putting oneself in another’s shoes for most people’s day-to-day ethical thinking is not only immense, but inescapable. The precept has so rooted itself in our culture as to seem obvious or natural. And this ethical imperative to imagine oneself in someone else’s circumstances is strikingly similar to Smith’s idea of sympathy: imagining oneself in the “case” of another, or changing places “in fancy.” Put yourself in her or his shoes is a different and more specific precept than the widespread, more-or-less Judeo-Christian one do unto others as you would have them do unto you, but so ubiquitous is the popularized rendition of Smithian sympathy that they are treated as synonymous. Putting oneself in another’s shoes – what we call empathy – is precisely what Adam Smith calls sympathy, but it is not what Hume calls sympathy. In fact, Smith uses a sequence of tacit allusions to Hume to foreground this difference.

In his basic conception of sympathy, Hume’s emphasis is on the progression from idea to impression to sympathetic passion: if an idea of someone else’s passion is the mere awareness of it, an impression is a vivid or forceful awareness of it, which, if it becomes forceful enough, becomes a sympathetic passion, as if the sympathizer were feeling a facsimile of the original passion. The first and most emphatic time Hume lays out this fundamental basis of his understanding of sympathy, he claims that the original idea of the passion is conveyed by “external signs in the countenance and conversation.” He makes no mention of the sympathizer understanding or conjecturing about the sympathizee’s circumstances – there is no putting oneself in another’s shoes. The sympathizer becomes aware of the sympathizee’s passion because it is evident in his affective displays. The conversion of this idea into sympathetic passion is paradoxically both incremental and instantaneous: Hume says that “[h]owever instantaneous this change of the idea into an impression may be, it proceeds from certain views and reflections” (2.1.11.3). Hume does mention “the relation of cause and effect” (2.1.11.8),
but the effect he’s referring to is not the sympathizee’s passion (caused by some event or circumstance), but rather the “external signs” in the sympathizee’s countenance (caused by the passion).

Hume’s use of the term “imagination” is, like his fundamental idea of sympathy, treacherous ground for a modern reader accustomed to using the term in common parlance. Hume lists a series of things that intensify sympathy: resemblance of any kind between sympathizer and sympathizee, geographical proximity, familial ties, and acquaintance. In the course of listing these, he mentions the “imagination” making “the transition,” but the transition in question is not the transition of an idea into an impression. Rather, it is the transfer of vividness and force from the sympathizer’s conception of himself to his conception of the other party, which enables the conversion of an idea into an impression and then a sympathetic passion. More crucially still, Hume’s “imagination” is not a faculty that posits hypothetical scenarios or does any story-making. Hume’s “imagination” in this portion of the Treatise is a largely visually-driven faculty (as the name imagination implies) that is responsible for marshalling or governing the vividness that distinguishes impressions from ideas. The imagination here must “convey to the related idea [i.e. the idea of a passion felt by someone who resembles oneself] the vivacity of conception, with which we always form the idea of our own person” (2.1.11.5). Thus, in all of his opening discussion of how sympathy works

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7 Marshall makes this mistake. He quotes Hume’s statement that “[n]o force of imagination can convert us into another person, and make us fancy, that we, being that person, reap benefit from those valuable qualities, which belong to him,” and he then states that “[f]or Smith, the imagination seems to have all of these powers: it can convert us into another person and transport us back and forth, offering both identity and difference” (The Figure of Theater 179). Smith, to be sure, conceives of the imagination as a faculty capable of the make-believe that we are in another person’s position. But what Hume is saying is precisely that the imagination – the faculty that musters the intensity of our impressions – cannot muster so much intensity that it would be the equivalent of such an act of make-believe.

Saul Traiger outlines some of the scholarly debate surrounding Hume’s use of “imagination,” especially when it is paired with “memory.” Noting the disagreement over whether imagination is defined primarily as a faculty or as a type of idea, Traiger argues that, for Hume, the imagination is responsible for ideas that are “faint and languid” relative to the ideas governed by memory, and that “need not retain the form and order of any prior complex impressions” (63). Ideas of the imagination can indeed be fictive or unreal, but we do not mistake them for reality or deem them “appropriate as inferential starting points” because they lack the “force and vivacity of memory ideas” (64). But if Hume does posit the imagination as a faculty able to assemble complex ideas that have no correspondent in sense experience, he does not, in his discussion of sympathy, posit the imagination as constructing narratives, as Smith later will.
and what factors intensify it, Hume is working exclusively with a visually-driven conception of sympathy that, for all its multi-stage processual nature, he declares to be instantaneous.

Only much later does Hume discuss something that looks, at first glance, like the put-yourself-in-another’s-shoes kind of sympathy that is the cornerstone of so much contemporary folk-ethics, but even here a careful reading reveals something else entirely. He calls it the sympathy of “general rule” (2.2.7.5 italics his) – sympathy with passions that the sympathizees do not seem to feel – noting that “the communicated passion of sympathy sometimes acquires strength from the weakness of its original, and even arises by a transition from affections, which have no existence” (2.2.7.5). He gives a series of examples: a level-headed or indifferent fortunate man for whose good fortune we rejoice, a person who is stoic in the face of misfortune whom we pity, an obliviously foolish person for whom we feel embarrassed, a sleeping person who never saw his murderer coming, and lastly an infant prince who does not understand that he’s been kidnapped and is in danger.

Hume’s explanation of the “pretty remarkable phenomenon” of our sympathy in such cases is two-fold (2.2.7.5). He first claims that “the imagination is affected by the general rule, and makes us conceive a lively idea of the passion” (2.2.7.5). It is a general rule that misfortune makes people grieve, as we “find from experience.” That general rule not only makes us “conceive” of the expected or usual passion on behalf of an unfortunate person, but also provokes the imagination and makes the conception a vivid one. The second part of Hume’s explanation is that “[a] contrast of any kind never fails to affect the imagination” (2.2.7.6). The imagination thus gets not one but two stimuli: one from the general rule that prompts the sympathizer to conceive a lively idea of the passion in the first place, and a second from the sheer contrast between the liveliness of the sympathizer’s conception of the passion and the apparent passionlessness of the person observed. The sequence of Hume’s claims here implies that it is this second stimulus to the imagination that serves to convert the lively idea into an impression and then a sympathetic passion.
I would like to draw attention to two small but crucial distinctions with regard to Hume’s notion of the sympathy of general rule. The first is that conceiving of a passion on the basis of a general rule deduced from one’s general experience of people is not equivalent to changing places in the fancy (to borrow Smith’s formulation) with the specific person observed. The second is that, for Hume, it does not matter in such cases whether the sympathizee is truly indifferent or merely putting on a show of indifference. According to Hume, sympathy is driven first and foremost by visual stimuli – in fact, he begins his explanation of the sympathy of general rule with a reminder that “pity stems from the imagination,” and thus “depends, in a great measure, on the contiguity, and even sight of the object” (2.2.7.4). If the person observed displays the external signs of the passion that the general rule leads us to expect in any given situation, then those external signs will alert us to the existence of the passion and trigger the imagination to enliven our awareness into sympathy. If the person observed does not display those external signs, or rather displays the external signs of indifference, then the general rule tells us to expect one thing, and the contrast between what we expect and what we see is sufficient to enliven our conception of the expected passion into sympathy. To be sure, Hume’s explanation seems to apply much more readily to the examples of the stoic sufferer and the level-headed recipient of good fortune than it does to the person murdered in his sleep or the kidnapped infant prince. Experience surely would not allow the average eighteenth-century gentleman to construct an informed general rule about how princes feel when they are kidnapped. It is precisely this inconsistency that Smith makes use of in The Theory of Moral Sentiments, borrowing and rearranging Hume’s examples in such a way as to draw attention to his own innovation.

Smith’s formulation of sympathy is very different from Hume’s. At the start of his Theory, he states that “we have no immediate experience of what other men feel,” and thus can only have an “idea of the manner in which they are affected” by “conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation” (1.1.2). Smith here changes the terms of the discussion in two crucial ways. First of all, he shifts away from Hume’s concept of resemblance, focusing instead on analogy – a related but certainly not synonymous concept. For Hume, we sympathize most easily with those who resemble
us. For Smith, by contrast, we conceive of others by analogy with ourselves, imagining ourselves in “the like situation,” or conceiving of another as if of ourselves. Smith resorts to several phrases to convey this idea: “changing places in fancy” (1.1.3), which implies an imaginative projection of the self into the other person’s situation; “bringing the case home to himself” (1.1.4), which implies the opposite, an imaginative reconstruction of the situation around the self; and “an analogous emotion” (1.1.4).

Moreover, Smith gives his own concept of analogy far more scope and significance than Hume does his concept of resemblance. For Hume, the resemblance between oneself and another makes one’s conception of that other person more vivid or lively, but it does not displace the process of perceiving external signs of emotion. By contrast, the logical principle of analogy is the core of Smithian sympathy.

If the assertiveness with which Smith differentiates his own ideas from Hume is not sufficiently clear from his opening, he goes on to refute Hume by parroting his phrasing and re-interpreting his evidence. Hume says, in a burst of forthright sounding first-person discourse, that “[a] cheerful countenance infuses a sensible complacency and serenity into my mind; as an angry or sorrowful one throws a sudden damp upon me” (2.1.11.2). Smith tacitly evokes Hume when he says that “[a] smiling face is, to every body that sees it, a cheerful object; as a sorrowful countenance, on the other hand, is a melancholy one” (1.1.6). Not only the basic observation, but even the phrasing here, is derived from Hume. The formulation a smiling face...; as a sorrowful countenance... echoes Hume’s own (a cheerful countenance...; as an angry or sorrowful one...), and Smith’s use of cheerful, sorrowful, and countenance, albeit in different positions within the syntactic construction, seems designed to reinforce the allusion. Moreover, Smith’s re-casting of the original observation in the third person – every body that sees it instead of Hume’s my mind – is a tacit concession that the observation itself is correct.

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8 The echo of Hume in Smith’s wording is all the more startling when set against the contrasting example of Henry Home, Lord Kames, whose Elements of Criticism was published in 1762, a few years after Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments. When Kames makes the same point, his wording is very different: “I cannot behold a man in distress without partaking of his pain; nor in joy, without partaking of his pleasure” (35). There are no cheerful countenances or smiling faces here, in spite of the fact that Kames elsewhere devotes considerable time to discussing the effects of visible affect.
Where Hume uses this observation to support his claim that sympathy is fundamentally driven by the (usually visual) perception of external signs of passion, Smith explains the phenomenon away not once but three times, treating Hume’s text as a pre-emptive objection to his own argument that he must refute. His first counter-argument is that some displays of passion, such as a show of anger, cannot evoke sympathy at all unless the observer knows the circumstances producing the passion: an unexplained show of anger, Smith says, will disgust the onlooker or provoke sympathy for the offending party. His third and last explanation of the effects of cheerful or sorrowful countenances is that our sympathy with unexplained affective display is “imperfect,” and consists mostly of curiosity, until we know the “cause” of the emotion (1.1.9). The desire to learn another person’s circumstances might, if fulfilled, lead to sympathy, but it is not in itself equivalent to sympathy. Smith’s second rebuttal, however, is more than an explanation of the phenomenon in question; it is also a clever inversion of Hume’s principle of the sympathy of general rule. Smith claims that expressions of grief and joy “suggest to us the general idea of some good or bad fortune” (1.1.8). Where Hume claims that a given set of circumstances suggests to the onlooker a general rule about how people feel in comparable situations, Smith argues the reverse: that the unexplained display of feelings suggests to the onlooker a general rule of what situations provoke comparable reactions in most people. Hume claims that we infer someone’s happiness from his good fortune; here, Smith argues that we infer his good fortune from his apparent happiness, and that it is the presumed good fortune, not the smile per se, with which we sympathize. In short, Smith borrows Hume’s observation (that smiling faces make one happy), his phrasing (both the overall syntactic construction and much of the diction), and his argumentative strategy (using the notion of a general rule or general idea to explain away observations that seem to disprove or complicate his central argument). But he uses this rhetorical mimicry to showcase how utterly different his conception of sympathy actually is.

Remarkably, Smith uses this strategy of mimicry with a difference a second time, reworking and reinterpreting the very observation that Hume explains away with an appeal to the principle of the general rule to begin with. In support of his fundamental argument that sympathy “does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from
that of the situation which excites it” (1.1.10), Smith gives a list of examples: objects of sympathy who do not seem to feel the passion that others feel on their behalf. Not only the presence of the list itself, but also most of the entries, are an echo of Hume. Smith begins with a person who is oblivious to his own rudeness – comparable to Hume’s example of the person oblivious to his own foolishness. Smith then adds a lunatic too mad to understand that he has lost his reason, a sick infant too young to understand his danger, and lastly the dead. The lunatic is Smith’s innovation, but the sick infant looks like a quotidian revision of Hume’s kidnapped infant prince, and the generalized dead

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9 Hume’s list reads:

From the same principles we blush for the conduct of those who behave themselves foolishly before us, and that though they show no sense of shame, nor seem in the least conscious of their folly. […]

We have also instances wherein an indifference and insensibility under misfortune increases our concern for the misfortunate, even though the indifference proceed not from any virtue and magnanimity. It is an aggravation of a murder, that it was committed upon persons asleep and in perfect security; as historians readily observe of an infant prince, who is captive in the hands of his enemies, that he is more worthy of compassion the less sensible he is of his miserable condition. (2.2.7.5-6)

Smith’s list reads:

We sometimes feel for another, a passion of which he himself seems to be altogether incapable; because, when we put ourselves in his case, that passion arises in our breast from the imagination, though it does not in his from the reality. We blush for the impudence and rudeness of another, though he himself appears to have no sense of the impropriety of his own behaviour; because we cannot help feeling with what confusion we ourselves should be covered, had we behaved in so absurd a manner.

Of all the calamities to which the condition of mortality exposes mankind, the loss of reason appears, to those who have the least spark of humanity, by far the most dreadful; and they behold that last stage of human wretchedness with deeper commiseration than any other. But the poor wretch, who is in it, laughs and sings, perhaps, and is altogether insensible to his own misery. […]

What are the pangs of a mother, when she hears the moanings of her infant, that, during the agony of disease, cannot express what it feels? In her idea of what it suffers, she joins, to its real helplessness, her own consciousness of that helplessness, and her own terrors for the unknown consequences of its disorder; and out of all these, forms, for her own sorrow, the most complete image of misery and distress. The infant, however, feels only the uneasiness of the present instance, which can never be great. […]

We sympathize even with the dead, and overlooking what is of real importance to their situation, that awful futurity which awaits them, we are chiefly affected by those circumstances which strike our senses, but can have no influence upon their happiness. (1.1.10-13)
like a more widely applicable version of Hume’s sleeping murder victim. Conspicuously absent from Smith’s list are Hume’s much less far-fetched opening examples: the calm recipient of good fortune and the serene sufferer of ill fortune.

Smith’s re-working of Hume’s list accomplishes two rhetorical purposes. One the one hand, like the “smiling face” passage, it signals his engagement with Hume, priming his reader to attend to the differences in his argument. On the other hand, Smith’s slightly different examples shift the list’s emphasis away from a contrast between the passions expected and the passions displayed, and toward a contrast between the passions expected and the passions actually felt. For Hume, since sympathy depends on the sight of external signs of passion, it doesn’t matter if the unfortunate stoic is feigning his heroic patience. As long as he seems above sorrow, it will produce the contrast in the observer’s mind that heightens the expectation of sorrow into actual sympathetic sorrow. For Smith, the point of the examples is that they showcase the extent to which sympathy is regulated by the limits of one’s ability to change places in fancy with another. An observer might conjecture that the unfortunate stoic is feigning his patience, and might sympathize with a sorrow he believes to be really felt. But the same observer will not conjecture that the laughing lunatic really grieves for his lost sanity, or that the sick infant really worries about his chances of survival, or that the dead really feel the discomfort of being buried. Even when our reason knows the sympathizee is oblivious to any suffering, our fancy cannot recreate that obliviousness for us, and so we feel sympathetically what it can recreate.

The pointedness of Smith’s revision of Hume reveals a deep-seated tension between his own view of sympathy as an imagined reconstruction and Hume’s view of it as an instinctive and instantaneous response governed by sight. Smith himself evidently considers the distinction between his own and Hume’s formulations significant enough to be worth the trouble of painstakingly reframing Hume’s examples. But if Smith’s version has attained extraordinary cultural dominance in our own time, it did not achieve it immediately. Rather, these two conceptions of sympathy existed side by side in eighteenth-century thought, opposed to each other though they were. Furthermore, it was their co-existence that facilitated the flourishing of a particular strand of aesthetic
thought. As I shall argue, these two formulations of sympathy – as visual and as imaginative – were deeply bound up with two ways of thinking about the arts, one a conception of how visual arts affect their viewers, and the other a conception of how literature affects its readers.

1.2.2 The Philosophy of the Sister Arts

The study of aesthetics as a discipline was born in the eighteenth century, and discussions of aesthetic ideas and the arts are everywhere in the works of eighteenth-century British philosophers. Although aesthetic philosophy as such is usually said to have originated in Germany with Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* in 1750, there was already a long conversation in full swing in England, dating back to Shaftesbury and Addison, about the experiences of beauty and sublimity. As Ronald Paulson puts it, “English aesthetics in the eighteenth century consisted of a succession of theories promulgated by the third Earl of Shaftesbury, Joseph Addison, William Hogarth, Edmund Burke, Richard Payne Knight, and Uvedale Price which focused on the response of a spectator” (1). Moreover, that conversation had in turn grown out of yet another. As Timothy Erwin has noted, early eighteenth-century British thought about the arts was dominated by a debate about the relative importance of “design” and “image” – form, arrangement, or outline, and detail, colouring, or vividness. Addison’s theories actually represent the start of a shift in British philosophy away from seeking objective criteria for assessing beauty in artwork and toward investigating the psychological mechanisms by means of which we perceive beauty – primarily in nature, and only secondarily in art. David Marshall articulates the scholarly consensus about this shift in his 1988 book *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy*, saying that “the transition from classical aesthetics (with its emphasis on a priori rules and principles) to the pre-Romantic aesthetics of the eighteenth century (with its emphasis on subjectivity and affect) centered on the question of the effects that a work of art had on its reader or beholder” (2).

The line of thinking in eighteenth-century philosophy that influenced early nineteenth-century poetry the most is that which deals with the relationships between the so-called “sister arts,” poetry and painting (and usually also music and sculpture). Addison,
discussing the imaginative pleasure to be found in tracing the resemblance between mimetic art and the objects it imitates, arranges these four arts on a spectrum, with sculpture being most mimetic, painting the second-most mimetic, poetry the third-most, and music the least mimetic (347-9). Inevitably, of course, this kind of spectrum implies a hierarchy. For much of the eighteenth century, a misreading of Horace’s phrase *ut pictura poesis*\(^{10}\) was taken as a kind of aesthetic law: a good poem should be as much like a picture as possible. As Hagstrum notes, “[t]he Horatian dictum was launched on its career in modern Europe with the prestige of Renaissance painting behind it” (68), and it achieved considerable cultural authority. As the eighteenth century wore on, however, the picture-poem hierarchy slipped upside-down. The sublime came to be more highly valued than the beautiful, and suggestion came to be seen as more integral to artistic effectiveness than representation: think, for instance, of Erasmus Darwin’s praise of a sculpture that suggests a recumbent human figure by representing only its head and feet in two niches, five feet apart (120). As a result, music and poetry worked their way to the top of the hierarchy, while painting and sculpture tumbled to the bottom. As Lawrence Lipking suggests, although we should not ignore the continuities in the philosophy of the “sister arts” in the eighteenth century, “neither can the movement from pictures to words and music, over a period of less than fifty years, be ignored” (19).

One important idea that emerged within the discourse of the sister arts was the idea of the *punctum temporis*, or single point in time, to which the visual arts were deemed confined – an idea that is still very widespread. W.J.T. Mitchell, in *Iconology*, observes that

\[\text{[w]hen the argument is made that some paintings represent temporal events, scenes from a narrative, for instance, or even a sequence of images that suggests movement, one can expect one of the following replies: (1) the temporality implied in a narrative painting is not directly given by its signs, but must be inferred from a single spatialized scene; (2) such temporal inferences, and the clues which}\]

\(^{10}\) Correctly translated, the phrase means “as it is with pictures, so it is with poems,” but for many centuries it was taken to mean “as it is with pictures, so it ought to be with poems.” For a detailed discussion of the history of *ut pictura poesis*, see Hagstrum, p. 9.
suggest them, are not the primary business of painting, which is to present forms in sensuous, instantaneous immediacy, and not to aspire to the status of discourse or narrative. (100)

In eighteenth-century British discourse, however, only the first of these assumptions was widespread. Painting was indeed thought to be capable of representing only a kernel of a narrative that implies the rest. Doing so, however, was considered painting’s primary business for as long as history painting maintained its prestige.

The idea that the objects represented in visual art are frozen in a single posture, and that only one “moment” is depicted, is an idea that became prevalent in eighteenth-century writing about the “sister arts,” and it continued to be prominent in the Romantic period. The influence of early aesthetic philosophers such as the Abbé Du Bos and James Harris is evident in late eighteenth-century works by Reynolds and Darwin, whose influence in turn is evident in Romantic texts such as those in the quarterly magazine *The Annals of the Fine Arts*, founded in 1816. From the outset, however, this idea was presented in ways that suggest a profound connection with the culture of sensibility. The philosophers who discussed the atemporality of visual art in comparison to poetry began from the assumption that the purpose of both arts was simultaneously to represent and to evoke the “passions.” Moreover, those philosophers talked about the single moment of painting and the temporal spread of poetry in terms comparable to those in which they talked about the two distinct kinds of sympathy articulated by Hume and Smith: a sympathy impelled by visual displays of affect, and a sympathy impelled by an imaginative leap into someone else’s circumstances.

Two important texts on the sister arts were published within a few years of each other at the same London printing house: Nugent’s translation of Du Bos’s *Reflections* (1748) and Harris’s *Three Treatises: The First Concerning Art, The Second Concerning Music Painting and Poetry, The Third Concerning Happiness* (1744). Du Bos comments twice upon painting’s confinement to a single instant. The first time, he takes the case of a picture that tells a story or “represents an action,” and explains one of painting’s
shortcomings as a vehicle for narrative. A picture that shows an action, Du Bos says, “shews only an instant of its duration” (71). Du Bos says this for the purpose of explaining that painting cannot provide the kind of narrative context that makes an unremarkable “sentiment” seem remarkable: “it is impossible for the painter to express the sublime, which those things, that are previous to its present situation, throw sometimes into an ordinary sentiment” (71). A calm expression of resignation, Du Bos explains, becomes sublime if we know that the person who utters it does so in the face of tremendous loss or suffering. The second time Du Bos discusses painting’s confinement to an instant, he reverses his formulation, analyzing not painting’s limited abilities at story-telling but rather poetry’s ability to “paint” an enormous succession of “pictures.”

“The poet,” Du Bos says, “presents us successively with fifty pictures, as it were, which lead us gradually to that excessive emotion, which commands our tears.” In both cases, painting’s confinement to one moment or picture is important because it impedes either the representation or the evocation of an emotion. Four years prior to the publication of Nugent’s translation of Du Bos, James Harris had published his Three Treatises. Harris had probably read Du Bos in French, and their works share a number of ideas, chief among them the idea that “every picture is a Punctum Temporis or Instant” (Harris 63). Harris deduces from this that historical paintings are most “intelligible” when their subjects are well known, so that “the Spectator’s Memory will supply the previous and the subsequent” (64-5). The best subjects for paintings, Harris suggests, are those “whose Comprehension depends not on a Succession of Events; or at least, if on a Succession, on a short and self-evident one” (2).

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11 All quotations from Du Bos are taken from Nugent’s translation of 1748.

12 Du Bos does not generally favour poetry over painting; in fact he exalts painting as by far the more effective art. He considers “sight” to have “a much greater empire over the soul than any of the other senses” (321), and consequently considers the visual arts to be the most affecting. Poetry can only approximate the vividness of a picture, but its ability to tell an extended story compensates for its other weaknesses, and renders it moving.

13 A related idea that the two philosophers share is the idea that painting operates by means of “natural signs” (Du Bos 322), whereas poetry uses the “artificial signs” of language. Harris, however, rather than straightforwardly conceding poetry’s inferiority on this ground, develops a fully-fledged theory of onomatopoeia, although he does not use that term, thus making the case that poetry combines natural and artificial signs (71-2).
These ideas about the different functions of the visual and verbal arts continued to appear in widely read philosophical texts about art in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Sir Joshua Reynolds states in his annual lecture to the Royal Academy for 1778 that “[t]he Painter’s art is more confined” than the poet’s, and that “[w]hat is done by Painting, must be done at one blow” (205). Not only the underlying idea, but also the language of blows is strongly reminiscent of Nugent’s translation of Du Bos, which states that “[a] picture […] makes but one attack upon the soul, whereas a poem assails it for a long time, and always with new arms” (329). Erasmus Darwin, in 1789, uses ideas and language reminiscent of Harris, especially Harris’s formulation of “co-existent” vs. “successive” objects of representation (Harris 32). Darwin’s Interlude III states that in one circumstance the Pen and the Pencil differ widely from each other; and that is the quantity of Time, which they can include in their respective representations. The former can unravel a long series of events, which may constitute the history of days or years; while the latter can exhibit only the actions of a moment. The Poet is happier in describing successive scenes, the Painter in representing stationary ones. (122)

This kind of continuity indicates that English thinkers at the close of the eighteenth century were still actively drawing on the pool of ideas about art and time to which earlier philosophers such as Du Bos and Harris had contributed. Moreover, the similarities in wording suggest that the earlier writers had some degree of direct influence on the later.  

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14 Reynolds’ Discourses were collected and published in 1797, several years after his death, but, according to Pat Rogers’ Introduction, the original lectures had been attended by intellectual luminaries (3), and were influential.

15 Darwin published his aesthetic thought as a series of prose dialogues, inserted as “Interludes” in his poem The Botanic Garden. The dialogues are between “Bookseller” and “Poet.”

16 Still more strongly suggestive of Harris’s direct influence on Darwin is the similarity in their comparisons of music and poetry. Both writers make detailed comparisons of the units of poetic metre to the units of musical time (Harris 73-74, Darwin 123-27).
In the whole cluster of ideas about art’s limitation to an instant and poetry’s ability to tell stories, the single idea whose formulation is most consistent from Du Bos to Reynolds to Darwin is the idea that poetry can build up the reader’s or listener’s interest gradually. Du Bos states that on account of the many instants that poetry can represent, it is “far easier, without comparison, for the poet than the painter, to make us grow fond of his personages, and to interest us in their destinies” (72). He later says, as previously mentioned, that the enormous succession of “pictures” that poetry generates enables it to “lead us gradually to that excessive emotion, which commands our tears” (329). Reynolds says that poetry “operates by raising our curiosity, [and] engaging the mind by degrees to take an interest in the event” (205). Darwin states that, “[w]here the passions are introduced,” the poet “has the power gradually to prepare the mind of his reader by previous climacteric circumstances” (122).

Within this fairly consistent set of formulations, what varies most is how tightly bound up each writer’s version is with the language of sensibility. Sir Joshua Reynolds is the least sentimental of the three: his formulation does include an appeal to a “passion,” but the passion in question is specifically our “prevalent disposition” to feel “anxiety for the future” (205). Readerly investment in plot is itself a passion, according to Reynolds, but he does not venture into a discussion of sympathetic passion. Du Bos and Darwin, by contrast, work from the assumption that it is the passions of the “personages” that interest us, the passions for which our minds are gradually prepared, and the passions that eventually prompt our sympathetic tears. The contrasting example of Reynolds highlights the extent to which Du Bos at the beginning of the century and Darwin at the end were thinking about visual art and poetry within sentimental frameworks.

The idea that art should evoke sympathetic emotion was a crucial part of eighteenth-century aesthetic philosophy, and it became more so as the century wore on. One of the best known aesthetic thinkers of eighteenth-century Britain, Edmund Burke, buttresses his 1757 theory of the sublime and beautiful with a theory of sympathy. According to Burke, in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, the arts affect their audiences in two ways. The first is by pleasing the wit with the skill of their imitation. The second is by representing things we would want to
see in real life, and Burke proposes sympathy as the passion that makes us want to see
those things, whether in real life or in art. Burke privileges representations that draw on
sympathy, denigrating genres that engage their viewers’ attention solely by means of “the
power of imitation, and [by] no cause operating in the thing itself.” In a still life, for
example, “a cottage, a dunghill, the meanest and most ordinary utensils of the kitchen,
are capable of giving us pleasure” (45). Burke contrasts such genres to those in which
“the object of the painting or poem is such as we should run to see if real” (45). In the
preceding section, Burke has already stated that we prefer to watch real to imagined
suffering. “Chuse a day on which to represent the most sublime and affecting tragedy we
have,” he says, “appoint the most favourite actors,” then “let it be reported that a state
criminal of high rank is on the point of being executed in the adjoining square; in a
moment the emptiness of the theatre would demonstrate the comparative weakness of the
imitative arts, and proclaim the triumph of real sympathy” (43). Burke has already made
it clear what kinds of objects “we should run to see if real.” According to the hierarchy
of general preference he sets up, people would rather see a real beheading than a picture
or performance of a beheading, and would in turn rather see a picture of a beheading than
a picture of a bowl of apples. The more opportunity a poem or painting offers for
sympathizing, the greater its effect on its audience.

Even the work of the comparatively unsentimental Harris and Reynolds is underpinned
by the assumptions of the culture of sensibility. Reynolds states in his lecture for 1778
that poetry, unlike painting, “exerts its influence over almost all the passions” (205), and
in the 1786 lecture that “[t]he great end of all those arts is, to make an impression on the
imagination and the feeling” (295). Harris wrote for the most part about the
“intelligibility” of paintings, rather than their emotional effect, but even he stated that the
most “affecting” and “improving” subjects for art or poetry, and “such of which the Mind
has the strongest Comprehension” are those subjects that “give us an Insight into
Characters, Manners, Passions, and Sentiments” (84-85). Here, both the subjects

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17 Elsewhere in the same lecture Reynolds uses the comparable terms “imagination” and “sensibility” (283).
recommended and the terms on which they are recommended are redolent of the culture of sensibility: the best subjects are passions and sentiments, and they are the best because they are “affecting.”

While the eighteenth-century assumption that evoking feeling is the goal of the arts may not be in itself surprising, the crucial point to be made about it is this: it is symptomatic of a more profound conceptual link between aesthetic philosophy and the culture of sensibility. Eighteenth-century thinking about the sister arts was dependent on thinking about sympathy from the outset, and vice versa. The Abbé Du Bos, in attempting to account for the arts’ “power of moving” people, proposes a basic theory of the moral function of sympathy, saying that “Nature has thought proper to implant this quick and easy sensibility in man as the very basis of society.”

Because men are otherwise prone to selfishness, Du Bos explains,

> Nature [...] has thought proper to form us in such a manner, as the agitation of whatever approaches us should have the power of impelling us, to the end, that those, who have need of our indulgence or succour, may, with greater facility, persuade us. Thus their emotion alone is sufficient to soften us; whereby they obtain what they could never compass by dint of argument and conviction. We are moved by the tears of a stranger, even before we are apprized of the subject of his weeping. (32)

This formulation of what sensibility is and how it works, published in French in 1719, is typical of the subsequent tradition of eighteenth-century British sentimental philosophy, and we can recognize in this passage the mode of sympathy that Hume was to propose in 1740: the instantaneous sympathy that arises from the mere sight of distress. Du Bos also complicates his theory of sympathy in many of the same ways that the British philosophers who followed him would do. As Marshall observes, Du Bos

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18 Marshall, in *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy*, comments that “[l]ike many of his contemporaries, Du Bos asserts that sympathy is natural. Anticipating Rousseau, he argues that nature, in order to counter the ‘amour-propre’ that evolves from ‘amour de soi’ [...] constructed people so that ‘the emotions [...] of everyone who comes near to us would have a powerful sway over us’” (17).
“acknowledges that people are strangely attracted to spectacles of real suffering or misfortune.” Marshall points out that Du Bos “suggests that ‘ennui’ compels us to seek out objects and emotions that will stir and occupy our souls” (Surprising Effects 23), much as Burke later suggests that our mental organs’ need for exercise compels us to seek out terrifying spectacles (123). Du Bos’s primary aim, however, is not to expound the moral importance of sensibility, or even to offer a theory of sympathy, as Hume and Smith will later do, but rather to account for the power of the arts, which take such scenes of distress as “the subjects of their imitations” (32). The widespread influence of Du Bos suggests that, when sentimental moral philosophy emerged in Britain, it emerged from a matrix of ideas in which visual art and visual sympathy were already associated with one another.

This conceptual link between the single moment of painting and instantaneous, visual sympathy extended to a comparable link between the story-telling ability of poetry and the idea of sympathy that gained currency in the later eighteenth century: sympathy as an imaginative exercise in inhabiting someone else’s circumstances. The two modes of sympathy – one based on instinctive response to a visual cue, and the other based on imaginative reconstruction of circumstances – mirror the two chief “sister arts.” Painting makes a vivid impression that can be taken in at a single glance; poetry recounts the “previous” and “subsequent” of a given moment, thus conveying the circumstances of the chief characters. The two conceptions of sympathy were not equals in eighteenth-century thought, however. One lost ground in the public imagination to the other. As one conception of sympathy became more prevalent, the sister art associated with it gained prestige, and as the other conception of sympathy became less prevalent, the corresponding sister art lost prestige. Du Bos, early in the century, wrote only of instantaneous, instinctive sympathy; and he strongly favoured painting for its immediacy, in spite of its limitations in story-telling. By midway through the century, Burke, who favoured poetry over painting for its suggestiveness – for leaving room for a leap of sympathetic imagination – explained that sympathy, which he defines in terms that seem to prefigure Smith’s, is the source of beauty and sublimity alike (41).
Burke outlines his conception of sympathy in his *Philosophical Enquiry*, published in 1757, two years before Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. He states that sympathy makes us “enter into the concerns of others” and be “moved as they are moved” (41). It is “a sort of substitution, by which we are put into the place of another man, and affected in many respects as he is affected; so that this passion may either partake of the nature of those which regard self-preservation, and turning upon pain may be a source of the sublime; or it may turn upon ideas of pleasure” (41). Later, he rephrases his definition with considerable consistency, saying “the nature of this passion is to put us in the place of another in whatever circumstance he is in, and to affect us in a like manner; so that this passion may, as the occasion requires, turn either on pain or pleasure” (47-48).

Burke’s definition is less invested in the active reconstruction of another’s circumstances than is Smith’s – he outlines no imaginative leap. Furthermore, he uses the very Humean word “transfuse” when he states that “[i]t is by this principle chiefly that poetry, painting, and other affecting arts, transfuse their passions from one breast to another” (41), implying that sympathy is a passive process of feelings seeping out of one person and into another. Burke’s repeated emphasis, however, on “the concerns of others,” “the place of another,” “substitution” of the self for another, and another’s “circumstance” strongly prefigures Smith – and, indeed, Smith may have been influenced by Burke. All that is lacking from the core of Smith’s definition of sympathy, in Burke’s formulation, is changing places with another in fancy.

In only one other place does Burke complicate his proto-Smithian model of how the passions get from one person’s consciousness into another’s. In his discussion of “the celebrated physiognomist Campanella,” he proposes a mechanism of deliberate mimicry, in which impersonating another person’s affect will prompt one to feel that person’s passions.

When he had a mind to penetrate into the inclinations of those he had to deal with, he [Campanella] composed his face, his gesture, and his whole body, as nearly as he could into the exact similitude of the person he intended to examine; and then carefully observed what turn of mind he seemed to acquire by this change. So that, says my author,
he was able to enter into the dispositions and thoughts of people, as
effectually as if he had been changed into the very men. I have often
observed, that on mimicking the looks and gestures, of angry, or placid,
or frightened, or daring men, I have involuntarily found my mind turned
to that passion whose appearance I endeavoured to imitate. (120-21)

This observation, however, which Burke makes as part of his exploration of the various
ways people come to feel pain and fear, is not linked to his discussion of either sympathy
or the arts. He presents it as a separate mechanism by which one can set about adopting
someone else’s feelings, distinct from the mechanism of sympathy. A careful reader
might deduce that Burke’s understanding of how feelings are communicated is not quite
as straightforwardly proto-Smithian as his definition of sympathy seems to indicate, but
Burke himself quarantines this discussion, keeping his theory of sympathy unified by
treating affective imitation as a separate psychological process.

The main thrust of aesthetic and moral philosophy may seem to have evolved to reject
the pictorial along with the simpler formulation of sympathy as an instinctive and
instantaneous response to affective display, but the cultural heritage left to the Romantics
was less unanimous than the trajectory from Du Bos and Hume to Burke and Adam
Smith might imply. The idea of visual sympathy did not simply fade, as Smith’s
formulation suggests it ought to; the two conceptions of sympathy co-existed in
Romantic culture, like the two chief sister arts, in productive dialogue with one another.
When Erasmus Darwin, for instance, in his Interludes to The Botanic
Garden, introduces
the difference in available “quantity of Time” between poetry and painting, he does so in
the context of a discussion of how the two arts represent the passions: painting by
making affect visible, and poetry by making a character’s circumstances available to the
imagination. There is a crucial feature, Darwin says,

which belongs both to the pictorial and poetic art; and that is the
making of sentiments and passions visible, as it were, to the spectator;
this is done in both arts by describing or portraying the effects or
changes, which those sentiments or passions produce upon the body.

(121)
This explanation, attributing figuratively to poetry the visual display of affect that belongs literally to painting, may seem to conflate the roles of the two arts. But it is on the very next page that Darwin explains that poetry “can unravel a long series of events” while painting “can exhibit only the actions of a moment.” Immediately afterwards, Darwin deduces from this that

[w]here the passions are introduced, as the Poet on the one hand has the power gradually to prepare the mind of his reader by previous climactic circumstances; the Painter on the other can throw stronger illumination and distinctness on the principal moment or catastrophe of the action. (122-23)

He may not use the term sympathy, but there can be little doubt that this is what Darwin is describing. Painting makes available the “passions” of those represented by visually displaying them at their most intense, i.e. by deploying the inner mechanism of sympathy proposed by Hume. Poetry does so by elaborating the circumstances that produce the feeling, i.e. by deploying the sympathetic mechanism favoured by Smith. Darwin thus expounds the sisterhood of poetry and painting by attributing to both the power of representing the passions, and by attributing to each a means of doing so that is consistent with one of the two modes of sympathy that had for decades competed in philosophical discourse. That he would do so in 1789 argues strongly not only that aesthetic and sentimental philosophy were still bound to one another in British intellectual culture at the turn of the nineteenth century, but also that poetry and imaginative sympathy co-existed peacefully in the public mind with painting and instinctive sympathy.

The sorority of aesthetic and moral philosophy that I have just traced has the potential to illuminate the intellectual work accomplished by a number of Romantic ekphrastic poems. The sonnet by Mary Russell Mitford discussed in Chapter 3 is one; it collapses the distinction between instinctive and imaginative sympathy while also implicitly using a painting as a model for its own poetic project. Barry Cornwall’s “On the Statue of
Theseus, One of the Elgin Marbles\textsuperscript{19} is another. This poem demonstrates a viewer’s response to a piece of visual art that, while striking in the immediate visual impression it generates, does not elicit sympathy for the figure depicted, seemingly because the affect it represents repulses rather than prompts fellow-feeling, as though the poem is enacting Adam Smith’s observation that we are more likely to sympathize with the target of unexplained anger than with the person displaying such anger.

Aye, this is he,
A proud and mighty spirit: how fine his form
Gigantic! moulded like the race that strove
To take Jove’s heav’n by storm, and scare him from
Olympus. There he sits, a demi-god,
Stern as when he of yore forsook the maid,
Who doating saved him from the Cretan toil,
Where he had slain the Minotaur. Alas!
Fond Ariadne, thee did he desert,
And heartless left thee on the Naxos shore
To languish. - This is he who dared to roam
The world infernal, and on Pluto’s queen,
Ceres’ own lost Proserpina, did lay
His hand: thence was he prison’d in the vaults
Beneath, till freed by Hercules. Methinks
(So perfect is the Phidian stone) his sire,
The sea-god Neptune, hath in anger stopp’d
The current of life, and with his trident-touch
Hath struck him into marble.

The frieze’s posture exudes arrogance – eliciting awe perhaps, but certainly not sympathy. Rather than simply responding to the statue with awe, however, the speaker

\textsuperscript{19} Barry Cornwall wrote a substantial number of ekphrases later in his career, many of them for the illustrated literary annuals. This poem, however, predates the bulk of his ekphrastic output; it was published in 1820 in \textit{A Sicilian Story, with Diego de Montilla, and Other Poems}. 
finds an appropriate object of sympathy in the process of recalling the stories associated with the mythological Theseus. In order mentally to establish that this is in fact a statue of Theseus, the speaker tests the statue’s affect against the deeds attributed to him, each time confirming that the statue really does represent the demi-god who committed those crimes. As a consequence of calling the mythological stories to mind, the speaker begins to experience the mode of sympathy habitually linked with literature – gradually beginning to feel for Ariadne on the basis of her circumstances. He first recounts Theseus’ abandonment of Ariadne, and only afterwards addresses her sympathetically in apostrophe, as though the act of calling her circumstances to mind is what enables him to shift from narrating to sympathizing. Once he begins sympathizing, the speaker’s sympathy for Ariadne and vicarious vexation with Theseus even prompts him to imagine that the statue is the “real” Theseus, punished by Neptune for his misdeeds by being turned to marble. “On the Statue of Theseus” is thus at least in part an elucidation of how the two modes of sympathy conventionally associated with the “sister arts” might interact in the case of one art borrowing material from another. If visual sympathy fails because the statue’s subject matter does not elicit it, the literariness of that subject matter might provide food for sympathy on the basis of narrated circumstance. The sculpted Theseus’s affect may be visible, but it doesn’t lead to sympathy; Ariadne’s affect – and, indeed, Ariadne – are not visible to the speaker, but his knowledge of her circumstances, once he calls them to mind, is sufficient to produce a sympathetic response.

1.2.3 Storytelling, Stasis, and Sympathy in Romantic Ekphrasis

After the turn of the nineteenth century, the cluster of ideas that we find in Erasmus Darwin persisted, but the idea of the visual arts presenting only a single moment underwent a crucial metamorphosis. James Heffernan gets to the heart of this metamorphosis when he states that “[t]he romantic poets and painters radically revised” existing formulations and that “the idea that visual art could make such a [fleeting] moment transcend time became an article of romantic faith” (93). His term for the new cluster of ideas is “the ideology of transcendence,” and it includes both the idea that artworks themselves will endure and the idea that art perpetuates a transitory moment, holding the figures it represents in postures that would normally be fleeting. Neither of
these ideas is quite the same as the idea that art is confined to the representation of a single moment. If anything, the notion that art perpetuates an otherwise transient appearance is an inversion of the earlier idea: rather than a pregnant moment from which the previous and subsequent elements of a narrative can be deduced, we are left with a static moment that negates the progress of narrative or the passing of time.

This idea of perpetuating a pose has elements in common not only with the earlier idea of painting selecting a single moment, but also with developments in the language of the theatre as it borrowed from and changed the language of painting. At the end of the eighteenth century, Lady Emma Hamilton became famous for her “attitudes”: poses held as though to replicate a work of art, usually a classical sculpture. The word “tableau,” which in its English usage had originally meant “a vivid or picturesque scene or description,” and had long been associated with painting, as its etymology suggests, shifted semantically in the late eighteenth century to mean “a group of people or objects positioned so as to form a vivid or picturesque scene” (OED); this use of the word still suggests an analogy to painting, but assumes that living bodies are involved. The word shifted again in the early nineteenth century to take on the theatrical meaning of “a representation of the action at some stage in the play (especially a critical one), created by the actors suddenly holding their positions” (OED). The first cited example of this last definition dates from 1808. Martin Meisel, in his history of nineteenth-century dramaturgy, defines a tableau as a moment in a play in which “the actors strike an expressive stance in a legible symbolic configuration that crystalizes a stage of the narrative as a situation [i.e. an emotionally laden scenario], or summarizes and punctuates it” (45). Meisel identifies the tableau as “[t]he fullest expression of a pictorial dramaturgy” (45) that he argues is characteristic of the nineteenth-century theatre. Although this pictorialism reached its height, Meisel argues, in the mid-late nineteenth century, its origins can be traced as far back as Diderot’s theatrical criticism (41) The OED’s dating of this usage of the word tableau certainly suggests that such a dramaturgy was already gaining ground in the Romantic period. A related concept, the tableau vivant, emerged toward the end of the Romantic period: the Oxford English Dictionary traces the term no further back than 1821, and defines it as “a silent and motionless group
of people posed and attired to represent a well-known character, event, or work of art."

The word “vivant” tacitly acknowledges the roots of “tableau” in the language of painting; the term “tableau vivant” is linguistically the opposite of “nature morte,” the French term for still life. The tableau vivant, however, was fundamentally a theatrical undertaking. I would suggest that what Meisel identifies as a cultural habit of using the metaphor of pictures to set the terms of stage performance is one half of a two-way exchange that also shaped Romantic Britain’s ideas about real pictures. The language of tableaux may have originated in the realm of painting, but its inflections changed permanently when the culture of the theatre co-opted it; and that change, in turn, seems to have become a tool that some Romantic poets were able to use in their constructions of painting itself. Rather than the kernel of a narrative, pictures came to be associated with actors laboriously holding their postures at a critical moment.

The Romantics’ fascination with theatrical tableaux and their recasting of painting in that mould are part of a more general preoccupation with fixity or stasis at moments of narrative climax or emotional intensity. This preoccupation is most vividly evident in the Romantics’ habit of representing characters dying of grief: not wasting slowly away, but collapsing in moments of unbearably strong feeling. Byron’s Haidee and Scott’s Brian de Bois-Guilbert are two of the most striking examples, both collapsing spontaneously in fits of intense emotion, but others who die more explicably are Baillie’s De Monfort, Coleridge’s Ordonio (Remorse), Moore’s Hinda (Lalla Rookh), and Hemans’s Leonor (The Forest Sanctuary).

Given visual art’s associations with tableau and with the selection of a single, crucial moment within a story, it is no surprise that at least three poets made an explicit connection between the visual arts and the popular motif of emotion so strong that it brings itself to halt in death or madness. As Heffernan has pointed out, Byron figures Haidee’s death in Don Juan as a kind of metamorphosis into sculpture, using metaphors of statues or marble no fewer than three times in his representations of her prior to her

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20 According to McGann’s notes to the Oxford edition, the name is spelled Haidee in the original editions of Canto II, but Haidée in Canto III (1048).
death (132). Moreover, when Haidee is in her coma, it is the unchanging visibility of her “ruling passion” that constitutes her resemblance to a statue (Don Juan 4.481). Letitia Elizabeth Landon, probably influenced by Byron’s example, uses a similar set of tropes in The Troubadour, where Leila, a minor character, is figured as a statue in the moment when she is discovered to be dead. Leila’s intense and long-suppressed feeling kills her; her deceptively calm demeanour is finally all that is left of her, as the attributes of life linger uneasily in her reflection in a fountain while she herself becomes indistinguishable from sculpture (205). An earlier example, less well-known to current readers but widely circulated in its day, is the Newdigate Prize Poem for 1812, Henry Hart Milman’s “The Belvidere Apollo.” In the poem’s final verse-paragraph, Milman draws on a scientific account of a French girl who supposedly died of love for the celebrated statue, 21 but he represents the girl as becoming statue-like herself in the process of “perish[ing] of despair.”

Yet on that form in wild delirious trance
With more than rev’rence gazed the Maid of France,
Day after day the love-sick dreamer stood
With him alone, nor thought it solitude!
To cherish grief, her last, her dearest care,
Her one fond hope – to perish of despair.
Oft as the shifting light her sight beguiled,
Blushing she shrunk, and thought the marble smiled:
Oft breathless list’ning heard, or seem’d to hear,
A voice of music melt upon her ear.
Slowly she waned, and cold and senseless grown,
Closed her dim eyes, herself benumb’d to stone.
Yet love in death a sickly strength supplied:
Once more she gazed, then feebly smiled and died.

21 Milman’s footnote attributes the story of the French girl to “the work of M. Pinel sur l’Insanité.” More than a decade later, Barry Cornwall published a much longer poem inspired by the same story, entitled “The Girl of Provence” (1823).
In this poem, as in *Don Juan* and *The Troubadour*, the girl is “herself benumb’d to stone” by her desperate love. According to the poem, her strong feelings make her resemble a statue, just as the Apollo Belvidere’s powerful affect makes it resemble a real god, displaying “stern delight,” “insulting ire,” and the “settled majesty of calm disdain / Proud of his might, yet scornful of the slain.”

The Romantics were not the passive inheritors of the linked philosophical traditions of the sister arts and moral philosophy. Heffernan is quite right that they reworked those ideas. Understanding the intellectual heritage they were working with in as much detail as possible, however, allows us to see more clearly when these poets are participating in their own culture’s theatrical appropriation of the *punctum temporis* idea, when they are speaking back directly to older iterations of it, and when they are doing something more radical, as I shall argue in Chapter 4 that Keats and Shelley do, in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci,” respectively. The presence in Romantic culture of this linked cluster of ideas made poems about art an especially rich medium for thinking about sympathy: not only for representing instances of sympathy by enacting a viewer’s response to an artwork, but for thinking through what sympathy is, how it relates to the narrative element that was thought to be present in visual art only in germinal form, and how it relates to the instantaneous visual impression that the plastic arts were thought to be supremely capable of bestowing.

### 1.3 Argument and Plan

Each of the chapters that follow focuses on two poems, situating those poems within a specific strand of Romantic discourse, and contextualizing them with shorter discussions of other poems – other works by the same authors, or other works printed in the same venue of publication. Only in the second chapter are the two central texts by the same author. The central texts of each chapter are paired because they use similar elements of Romantic discourse to further their explorations of sentimental questions. It is thus the contextual material that is the unifying thread for each chapter. The second chapter, for example, gives a history of the ekphrastic tradition that the Romantics inherited – a
tradition that will help to illuminate the poems discussed in later chapters as well. Although much has been written about the ekphrastic tradition, including how it bears upon the Romantic period, the existing body of scholarship contains significant gaps, most notably a dearth of material on eighteenth-century poetry about art. The second chapter thus includes extensive archival work aimed at filling in those gaps so as to present as accurate as possible an account of the influences on Romantic writing from within what we now call the ekphrastic tradition. The third chapter, by contrast, focuses not on a tradition but on a new discourse that emerged in the Romantic era, as professional artists began collectively to forge a public space in which they could speak with authority about their vocation. Building on research by John Barrell and Jon Klancher, I examine the pages of the quarterly *Annals of the Fine Arts*, launched in 1816, along with its predecessor, a weekly magazine called *The Artist*, to trace some of the art world’s self-fashioning in the public eye.

Chapter 2 examines two poems by William Cowper: a translation of a Latin poem by Vincent Bourne called “The Tears of a Painter,” and the longer “On the Receipt of My Mother’s Picture.” These are set in the context of prior traditions of ekphrasis and of elegy, two genres that were much more fluidly conceived of in the early nineteenth century than they usually are now. The chapter argues that the two poems explore the boundary between appropriate and excessive grieving. They do so in part by reworking the conventions of a very specific type of ekphrasis that had been popular in the eighteenth century, namely portrait poems, in which paintings were habitually credited with capturing the spirit or mind of their subjects. Cowper was able to put this trope to much more pointed use in these elegiac poems than in the kind of celebratory piece that had been typical of portrait poems throughout the eighteenth century.

Chapter 3 looks at poems published in *The Annals of the Fine Arts*, focusing on a sonnet by Mary Russell Mitford about a sketch by Haydon and on an anonymous poem about a memorial statue of two children; the two poems were printed together in the second volume of the *Annals*. Situating these poems in the context both of the other poems printed in the *Annals* and of the general tenor and structure of the magazine, I argue that they find ways to co-opt the posture of editorial disinterestedness and authority adopted
by the *Annals* to accentuate the intellectual work they do in testing out ideas about sympathy. The Mitford sonnet, I argue, synthesizes the two concepts of sympathy – imaginative and visual – whose history I have traced in the present chapter. The anonymous poem uses sympathy for an imagined viewer to test the limits of an appropriate affective response to an artwork on the part of its speaker, an idea closely related to the ones explored by the Cowper poems discussed in Chapter 2. The two poems in the *Annals* accomplish their respective thought experiments more effectively because they are juxtaposed with one another and with the self-consciously professional discourse that surrounds them in the magazine.

*The Annals* had sufficient visibility that Wordsworth published two sonnets there, six months after the poems I have selected for study in Chapter 3. It offered a venue where those writing about art in any genre could publish, even if they did not already have eager publishers or an established audience. The mix of established and anonymous authors who made use of it suggests that there was a demand for such a venue: that there was an ongoing cultural conversation in which a wide range of writers wished to participate. When I move on to my discussions of productive tensions in the ekphrases of Keats and Wordsworth in Chapters 4 and 5, these comparatively unknown ekphrases will serve as a reminder that the “great” poets whose work was also published in the *Annals* did not write poems about art in primarily in the context of the ekphrases by Homer or Spenser that we are inclined in the present day to take as the cornerstones of an ekphrastic tradition. On the contrary, the lesser-known ekphrases from the *Annals* demonstrate the existence of a flourishing poetic conversation about the relationship between art and sensibility.

The fourth chapter of this thesis centres on two of the poems that have most influenced contemporary studies of ekphrasis as a genre: Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and Shelley’s “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci.” The first is a monument of the current canon both within and without work on ekphrasis, and a foundational text for a tradition of criticism that sees ekphrasis as dealing with issues of stasis and temporality. The second is the cornerstone of W.J.T. Mitchell’s influential theory of ekphrasis as a gendered encounter with a feminized, sometimes threatening artwork. I situate these
poems in the context of the historical coupling of sentimental and aesthetic thought that I have outlined in this chapter, and I further explore two strands of that tradition that are especially pertinent to the poems by Keats and Shelley. One is Adam Smith’s formulation of sympathy for the dead as a sympathy based on willing self-delusion, with which Shelley engages in “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci,” and the other is the historically specific inflection of the idea of the visual arts stopping time that underpins “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” As part of this exploration, I offer a corrective to the anachronistic language of space and the spatial that pervades contemporary reconstructions of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourse of the sister arts. Chapter 4 argues that “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and “On the Medusa” draw on and challenge the conventional pairing of visually-impelled, instantaneous sympathy with theories of the efficacy of the visual arts, and that they do so to push at the boundaries of how sympathy can be conceived. “Ode on a Grecian Urn” challenges the culturally ubiquitous assumption that the visual arts should necessarily engage their viewers within a sympathetic paradigm, while “On the Medusa” challenges the assumption that visually-driven sympathy is necessarily instantaneous, or that sympathy driven by circumstances requires an imaginative leap on the part of one fully conscious mind reconstructing the activities of another.

The fifth and final chapter looks at Wordsworth’s “Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle in a Storm, Painted by Sir George Beaumont,” and at Keats’s “Ode on Indolence.” Both poems, I argue, use the tradition of allegorical ekphrasis, and combine it with metaphors of masque and pageantry, to draw attention to the performativity of their own construction and to their densely allegorical figuration. They do this in order to stage the process of testing the limits of their speakers’ ability to know themselves or moderate their emotions in the absence of an interlocutor outside themselves. That testing resonates with Adam Smith’s idea that we achieve the impressive virtues founded on self-control by sympathizing with a would-be spectator whose sympathy we in turn desire. The fifth chapter argues that, in the two poems it examines, Smith’s idea is transfigured into pointed explorations of the feasibility of
substituting a figurative projection of the self for a real interlocutor in an attempt to achieve self-mastery.

The eight sustained readings of the central poems of the four chapters that follow this one are surrounded by shorter discussions of other poems, including a large number of eighteenth-century and Romantic ekphrases. I hope that the accumulated weight of these shorter readings will offer my readers a fairly balanced picture of how Romantic ekphrasis engaged with the intellectual culture of sensibility, and of how the ekphrastic poems that did so compare to their siblings that did not. More crucially, this project offers an overview of what Romantic poems about the visual arts had to work with when they did engage with sensibility. Taken together, these chapters offer a birds’-eye view of how the various discourses feeding into Romantic ekphrastic poetry had the potential to intersect: the philosophical history that informs my reading of “On the Medusa” also informs my reading of Mitford’s sonnet, or of “Ode on Indolence.” The history of ekphrasis that shapes my interpretation of Cowper also shapes my interpretation of “Peele Castle.” The understanding of how the Annals of the Fine Arts functioned in Romantic culture that underpins my readings of the lesser-known poems in Chapter 3 also underpins my readings of a cluster of poems by Keats and Wordsworth that were published there, including “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” The total meaning of the chapters that follow, in other words, is cumulative.
2 William Cowper and the Ekphrastic Tradition

2.1 Why Study the Ekphrastic Tradition?

In the spring of 1799, the reclusive poet William Cowper, now famous chiefly for his long, meditative blank verse poem *The Task* and his short lyric “The Castaway,” translated a Latin poem composed earlier in the century by his own schoolmaster Vincent Bourne. The poem is “Lachrymæ Pictoris” – “The Tears of a Painter” – and it recounts an anecdote about the ancient Greek painter Apelles creating a commemorative portrait of his dead son. Cowper’s translation is a fascinating artefact – in itself rich and complex in its construction of emotion, but particularly revealing when studied both in juxtaposition with Bourne’s original and in the context of the tradition of ekphrastic writing that Cowper inherited. “The Tears of a Painter” makes an illuminating test case for the usefulness of a balanced understanding of the ekphrastic conventions that poets of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had to work with. This chapter will examine what poetry about art written in earlier periods looked like from a Romantic perspective, and explore how that context could be absorbed and used by a poet deeply engaged with the culture of sensibility. It will begin with a survey of earlier poems about art, focusing on the understudied ekphrases of the eighteenth century, and using “The Tears of a Painter” as a lens to bring the historical material into focus. This chapter will then return to the poem, pairing it with a second ekphrastic poem by Cowper, “On the Receipt of My Mother’s Picture.”

Cowper’s rendition of “The Tears of a Painter” sketches an emotional trajectory for Apelles as he creates a work of great personal significance under tremendous psychological strain, and that trajectory is established chiefly by means of the shifting ways in which Apelles relates to his own painting.

APELLES, hearing that his boy
Had just expired, his only joy,
Although the sight with anguish tore him,
Bade place his dear remains before him.
He seized his brush, his colours spread;
And—“Oh! my child, accept,” he said,
“(‘Tis all that I can now bestow,)”
“This tribute of a father’s woe!”
Then, faithful to the twofold part,
Both of his feelings and his art,
He closed his eyes with tender care,
And formed at once a fellow pair.
His brow with amber locks beset
And lips he drew, not livid yet;
And shaded all that he had done
To the just image of his son.

Thus far is well. But view again
The cause of thy paternal pain!
Thy melancholy task fulfil!
It needs the last, last touches still.
Again his pencil’s powers he tries,
For on his lips a smile he spies:
And still his cheek unfaded shows
The deepest damask of the rose.
Then, heedful to the finished whole,
With fondest eagerness he stole,
Till scarce himself distinctly knew
The cherub copied from the true.

Now, painter, cease! Thy task is done.
Long lives this image of thy son;
Nor short-lived shall the glory prove,
Or of thy labour or thy love.

The way Apelles relates to the painting by the poem’s end is starkly different from the way he relates to it at the outset, and the trajectory from one to the other is fascinating. The painting begins as Apelles’ “tribute” to his lost son, its creation fuelled by his “woe.” As the poem progresses, however, the language begins to suggest ever so faintly that the
painting, impossibly, expresses the son’s feelings as well. The pronouns are slightly ambiguous, often requiring the reader to infer when they refer to Apelles and when to his dead son: “he closed his eyes,” “he seized his brush,” “on his lips a smile he spies” (italics mine). While few readers would be confused by these pronouns for more than a passing moment, the grammatical ambiguity is just sufficient to suggestively blur the distinction between Apelles’ artistic agency and his dead son’s passivity, Apelles’ grief and his son’s seeming peace, especially in the first instance, in which a reader might expect “he closed his eyes and gathered his thoughts,” or some other formulation in which Apelles closes his own eyes. That whisper of a blurred boundary between father and son leaves us with the suggestion that Apelles is both expressing his own anguish and ventriloquizing his son’s apparent calm contentedness.

That subtle hint that the painting impossibly expresses the dead son’s feelings becomes much more pronounced, and much more clearly a product of Apelles’ own mind, in the second verse paragraph. After he has succeeded in capturing his son’s physical appearance with verisimilitude, Apelles applies himself with renewed energy to capture the boy’s smile, only perceived on the corpse after the first, literally representative phase of artistic creation is complete: “[a]gain his pencil’s powers he tries, / For on his lips a smile he spies.” Whether the child’s corpse really has a smile is beside the point. Apelles looks at the body anew, as if obeying the poetic speaker’s injunction to “view again / The cause of [his] paternal pain,” and this time he “spies” the smile – either perceiving a smile subjectively where there isn’t one, or perceiving for the first time an expression previously overlooked. In either case, he perceives and seeks to capture in paint a display of contentedness rather than a physical feature, and in either case the smile bears no relation to any state of mind really felt by the boy, since a smiling corpse can surely be assumed to be no happier than a frowning one. In first seeing and then painting the smile, Apelles uses the portrait as a medium through which he can imagine an ongoing emotional state for his son and then express it on his behalf.

Lastly, Apelles’ attitude to his painting shifts again upon its completion. No sooner is it a “finished whole” than it becomes a visual object to which Apelles responds with rapture, succumbing to the verisimilitude that he himself has created, like a sort of
paternal Pygmalion, and approaching the painting with “fondest eagerness” as virtually indistinguishable from his real son. Since these lines are not present in the Latin original, Cowper evidently made a considered choice to deploy the conventional praise of an artwork as mimetically faithful in this rather unusual context. Rather than the site of Apelles’ expression of an imagined affective state on behalf of his son, the painting is now a stand-in for the son – a surrogate loved one toward which Apelles can direct his affection. Over the course of the poem, then, Apelles relates to the painting in three quite distinct ways: as a means of expressing his own “woe” and paying “tribute” to his son, as a means of imagining and attributing to his son an emotional state, and as a deceptively lifelike stand-in for his son.

“The Tears of a Painter” concludes with a comment that implicitly valorizes the very emotional process it has just traced, linking the value of the painting to the agonized effort that Apelles puts into its creation. “Long lives” the “image,” Cowper exclaims in apostrophe to Apelles, and then, shifting into an understated double-negative, says “Nor short-lived shall the glory prove, / Or of thy labour or thy love.” The understatement is pointed: none of Apelles’ works survived into the modern era, and Cowper’s present-tense “long lives this image” is thus limited in scope to his imaginative reconstruction of Apelles’ present moment. The glory of Apelles’ labour and love, by contrast, is not only extant, but also something to which Cowper himself can contribute. It is the story about the painting, rather than the painting itself, that survives. What is more, it is the story, rather than the painting, whose “glory” survives: the glory of Apelles’ labour and the love that inspired it, rather than the glory of an accomplished piece of artwork.

If this much can be gleaned from reading the poem alone, the nuances of Cowper’s translation nevertheless become clearer when it is taken in the context, not only of the Latin original, but also of the tradition of ekphrastic writing that Cowper inherited – and this is true as well of Cowper’s better-known ekphrasis “On the Receipt of my Mother’s Picture out of Norfolk: the Gift of my Cousin, Ann Bodham.” In fact, an accurate survey of the ekphrastic tradition available to Romantic poets will make for better-informed readings of all the poems discussed in this thesis. The poems examined in this thesis all find, in art as their subject-matter, opportunities for exploring the burning questions of
the culture of sensibility, and they do so by drawing on the intellectual resources (ideas, structures of thought, conceptual frameworks, productive ambiguities) of several thriving discourses related to visual art. These include the discourse surrounding art as a public profession, the philosophical discourse of the “sister arts,” and the concept of the sympathetic spectator or viewer. The three chapters that follow this one will focus on the ways in which some Romantic ekphrases put to work the elements of these discourses that were made available by art as a subject-matter for poetry. First, however, it will be helpful to establish a more direct context, namely the amorphous set of existing traditions of poetry about the visual arts. My purpose is not to show that the Romantics were the first to use poetry about art to explore ideas about human emotion – they were not – but rather to show how, in so using it, they exploited the intellectual resources available to them. The fluid conventions of existing poems about visual art was one of those resources.

Like the ekphrases I discuss in subsequent chapters (and like some earlier ekphrases, such as the one in Shakespeare’s “Rape of Lucrece”), the poems by Cowper that I examine here are interested in how the experience of looking at art interacts with other elements of affective experience, although these texts are not, as the later poems are, specifically concerned with ideas about sympathy. Cowper’s poems are about the personal and particular significance of an artwork for a specific viewer, and in this respect they resemble the short ekphrases about specific, really existing portraits that were comparatively popular in the eighteenth century, as I shall discuss in the section that follows. But they transfigure the conventions of portrait-ekphrasis in their investment in the idea of a viewer’s response as a process, rather than as a static event – an investment they share with the slightly later poems that are my chief focus. Many eighteenth-century ekphrases are poems about portraits, often written for specific occasions and addressing specific recipients; many praise portraits for capturing the spirit, as well as the outward appearance, of the sitter. Cowper’s poems make use of those traditions, but they also resist them, marking unconventionally-chosen occasions, and registering ambivalence about the idea of a portrait representing spiritual qualities. They do this for the purpose of exploring the emotional stakes of memorial portraiture,
probing the experiences of grief by seeking out the limits of portraiture’s ability to mitigate it in a wholesome fashion. “The Tears of a Painter” and “On the Receipt” both adapt the convention of praising portraits for capturing the spirit of the person portrayed, transposing that convention onto an elegiac context quite different from the modes of ekphrasis popular in the eighteenth century, and using it as the cornerstone of their constructions of types of grief that are unsustainable or even, in the case of “On the Receipt,” theologically problematic.

2.2 Eighteenth-Century Ekphrasis

Romantic poets writing about the visual arts had an assortment of traditions on which to draw, many of which have been helpfully elucidated by other scholars, but the eighteenth-century portion of those traditions is understudied, and its characteristics may surprise those familiar with what came before. Indeed, the fact that eighteenth-century poems about art have so little in common with the familiar ekphrases of Homer, Shakespeare, Keats, and Auden may in part account for their critical neglect: they are not, in general, momentous or highly charged, nor do they evoke any Classical grandeur. Notwithstanding the general consensus that Romantic ekphrasis, as a body, is not quite like any of its predecessors, eighteenth-century ekphrasis is actually the more dramatic break from tradition. Romantic poets writing about art thus had a still more complex pool of literary influences and predecessors to navigate than other scholars have acknowledged. Moreover, since poetry about art had never been collected or codified, let alone labelled in English with the impressive term ekphrasis, the traditions available to the Romantics were fluid; describing a painting did not necessarily involve evoking Homer or Virgil. Inevitably, recent poems about art – eighteenth-century poems – had an immediacy of influence on Romantic ones, and it is only by giving eighteenth-century poems a prominent place in our understanding of the traditions inherited by the Romantics that we can really understand how the texts studied in this thesis situate themselves in and against those traditions.

Several critics have offered historical surveys of poetry about art, each with a different purpose; combined, their accounts offer a helpfully balanced picture of what poetry about
visual art looked like prior to the eighteenth century. The collective effort of these scholars, while it requires supplementing with additional information about the eighteenth century, is a crucial building block for understanding, not only Romantic ekphrasis, but indeed the context for the very eighteenth-century material that is absent from the accepted account. Scott, interested in outlining how Keats took up the idea of antiquity, gives a useful survey in *The Sculpted Word* of some of the influential ekphrases of the classical tradition, starting with Homer’s description of the shield of Achilles. He observes that, in the early classical passages that are now most readily recognizable as ekphrasis, “the things described – shields, cups, brooches, cloaks, tapestries – are not nominally works of art but utilitarian objects that are personal and portable” (1). Keats was not, of course, the first modern poet to write ekphrases in a similar vein. As we shall see, eighteenth-century poets wrote poems that, if not about shields and cups, are certainly about decorated objects rather than works of art per se: garden ornaments, obelisks, funerary monuments, cut-silk portraits, and so forth. James A. W. Heffernan, whose primary interest lies in the relationship between ekphrasis and gender, offers a reading of the passage of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* describing the rival tapestries woven by Minerva and Arachne, which I will discuss at more length shortly. He also expands the scope of his study to include a different genre: the advice-to-a-painter poem. Interested in tracing the influence of this genre on “Peele Castle,” he identifies it as originating in a series of odes written by Anacreon in the sixth century B.C.E., mostly requesting that the painter represent the poet’s mistress. Heffernan points out that the genre “resurfaced in seventeenth-century England,” where it was “made to serve other purposes” (100). As with the decorated-object ekphrases examined by Scott, advice-to-a-painter poems continued to be composed in the eighteenth century, and, indeed, “The Tears of a Painter,” in its two apostrophes to Apelles, evokes the conventions of the genre. Jean Hagstrum, in his 1965 study, discusses a very broad category that he calls “iconic poetry.” Under that rubric, he examines some texts that fit in tidily with the tradition of poems about urns and shields that is now mainstream reading in the study of ekphrasis; he points out, for instance, that many medieval ekphrases describe the decoration on temples. But he also discusses everything from Early Modern emblems, to Greek epigraphs, to passages that draw on the conventions of
allegorical painting, and some of the works he examines look very little like ekphrasis as most scholars know it. The heterogeneity of the works Hagstrum investigates has some advantages: it lends to the prevailing account of pre-eighteenth-century ekphrasis a roundness and thoroughness that it would otherwise lack. It is also crucial to note, however, that Hagstrum adopts this strategy in order to cope with the difficulty of finding poems from the eighteenth century that are actually about visual art. The idiosyncrasy of his work will thus offer a useful starting point when I come to discuss the comparable idiosyncrasy of eighteenth-century ekphrasis.

Two patterns emerge in the work of these scholars that are particularly helpful for setting up our understanding of both eighteenth-century and Romantic ekphrasis; the first of these is the recurrence of figuration in ekphrastic writing. A frequent element in poems about art prior to the eighteenth century is the investment of artworks with figurative meaning; and that element has taken a variety of forms that is worth examining. The early modern period produced a number of symbolic and allegorical ekphrases, not only in the faux-medieval ekphrases of a work like the *Faerie Queene*, but also in emblem books, in which, as Hagstrum has pointed out, the words explicate the allegorical or analogical meaning of the picture – as if verbally completing a visual parable.22 Figuration, indeed, had been an important convention in poems about art since long before the early modern period. Homer’s description of Achilles’ shield, for all that it seems narratively driven, nevertheless has figurative significance. As Scott puts it, the images in the shield represent everything that is *absent* from the world of *The Iliad*: peaceful cities, agriculture, weddings – normal life, in other words (2). Heffernan’s reading of the tapestries in the *Metamorphoses* suggests the symbolic importance of the tapestries’ pictorial depictions of the gods: Minerva, Heffernan suggests, is “[o]utraged just as much by the content of these pictures as by the virtuosity that created them” (52). In both cases, meaning inheres in the mere presence of the objects depicted in the artworks. What is symbolic about the shield is the simple fact that it represents elements.

22 Hagstrum cites an early eighteenth-century writer (Francis Quarles) who called the emblem a “‘silent Parable’” (95).
of normal, civilian life. Arachne’s tapestry is defiant by virtue of the very stories to which it alludes. An allusion to a story of the gods behaving badly is intrinsically a criticism of divine authority; an allusion to a specific narrative is a symbolic act because there is a symbolic meaning inherent in the narrative. A similar type of figuration recurs in the Romantic poem “On the Monument to be Placed in Lichfield Cathedral,” discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis: a funerary sculpture of two sleeping girls achieves figurative significance because the bare fact of representing sleep, in the context of a cathedral niche, carries certain symbolic implications.

If figuration had been present in ekphrasis from Homer onward, it achieved new dominance in medieval literature. Hagstrum has observed that, where classical antiquity had valued in art “the rhetorical and critical notion of enargeia, or lifelike vividness,” the culture of the “medieval centuries” sought instead “to remove the pictorial from the external and natural and associate it with the internal and supernatural” (129). In other words, the medieval expectation of art was that it would represent the unrepresentable – it would be figurative. In many medieval ekphrases, pictures represent kernels of recognizable narratives that come to function as symbols, much as the incidents depicted in Arachne’s tapestry function as symbols of divine depravity. Heffernan points out that the temple decorations in Chaucer’s “Knight’s Tale” offer commentary on the main action of the story by evoking well-known narratives (63). To take a different example, the temple decorations in the “Parliament of Fowls” do the same, despite the extreme brevity of Chaucer’s treatment of each story. After naming the protagonists of some dozen love stories that end in death, Chaucer’s comically simple narrator says only “Alle these were peynted on that other syde, / And al hir love, and in what plyte they dyde” (293-94). The point of the passage is not to tell any story whatsoever, but to allude to as many stories as possible. The point of commonality among all of the narratives is that the characters were in love and that they died. Their symbolic function is to demonstrate the greatness of Venus: the paintings of these mythological characters are, in effect, trophies, like the broken bows of ex-virgins hung on the wall beside them.

The second pattern I want to draw attention to in the existing histories of ekphrasis is a concern in ekphrastic writing with viewers’ responses to artworks; although this is
sometimes treated as a feature of Romantic ekphrasis, it is in fact a very old tradition, and its manifestations in eighteenth-century and Romantic writing make more sense in the light of its history. To take a very early example, Scott says of Virgil’s description of Aeneas’ shield that “what most distinguishes the shield from its antecedents […] is the centrality of Aeneas’s response” and Virgil’s “interest in the psychology of aesthetic response and in ekphrastic empathy…” (8). He makes a similar observation about Philostratus’ *Imagines*, arguing that it pokes fun at the idea of a viewer’s “awe before the mimetic fidelity of the image” (13). But, of all the instances of this kind of preoccupation with viewer response, the ones most actively taken up by the Romantics are early modern. Shakespeare’s ekphrases are much more interested in what the onlooker thinks and says than in the work of art itself. Hagstrum says of the extended ekphrasis in “The Rape of Lucrece” that “Shakespeare’s aim was […] dramatically to relate the paintings to the human being who confronts them” (79), an aim that is apparent in many of the first-person lyrics studied in this thesis: “On the Receipt of My Mother’s Picture,” “Peele Castle,” “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” and others. Heffernan offers a useful reading of the same ekphrasis from “The Rape of Lucrece,” arguing that Lucrece herself interprets the painting of the fall of Troy as a series of emblems of her own condition: Helen’s rape as an emblem of her own, Hecuba’s sorrow an emblem of her own, and the invasion of Troy an emblem of the invasion of her own body (77-9). There is a crucial difference between this – representing a viewer finding symbolic meaning in an artwork – and representing an artwork as transparently symbolic. In Chaucer’s ekphrases, the burden of symbolic interpretation is placed on us, but the symbolism of the artwork is obvious. In “The Rape of Lucrece,” the symbolic meaning that Lucrece attributes to the painting of Troy is subjective: she identifies herself one moment with Helen (because Helen has been raped), one moment with the city of Troy (because Troy has been violated), and one moment with Hecuba (because Hecuba is sad). In short, Shakespeare seems less interested in using the ekphrasis as an opportunity to mine the story of Troy for its potential symbolism than in representing the subjective and personal process by which one viewer goes about investing the story with meaning. A similar observation could be made about “The Tears of a Painter,” written two centuries later: the poem is less interested in praising the verisimilitude of Apelles’ painting than in showing the
process of Apelles himself reacting to that verisimilitude, finding in the painting a spiritual likeness to his son that it does not really possess.

Shakespeare’s representations of viewer response extend beyond exploring the process of investing art with symbolic meaning to include another kind of response: the kind of rapt attention to *trompe l’œil* effects that had received attention in classical ekphrasis, and that Scott sees parodied in the *Imagines* (and, again, “The Tears of a Painter” evokes this in Apelles’ final near-inability to distinguish “[t]he cherub copied from the true”). The most famous work of art in Shakespeare’s *oeuvre* is, of course, not a work of art at all, but the real, living Hermione – a “sculpture” whose lifelike appearance startles her husband into wishing to embrace her, and who eventually sheds her supposed status as art to reclaim her husband, title, and long-lost daughter (*The Winter’s Tale* 5.3). The dramatic relation between the viewer and the static “artwork” in this case turns out to be so intense – and reciprocal – that the conventional effusions about the artist’s skill in creating illusion with which the passage begins dissolve into absurdity in the long moment of suspense between Paulina’s first injunction to Hermione to come to life and Hermione’s first spoken words. What an audience member ends up admiring is not the skill of a sculptor or painter, but the skill of an actor who can maintain near-total stillness for long enough to be convincing. This scene from *The Winter’s Tale* may not meet most scholars’ expectations of an ekphrasis, but it is nonetheless part of the amorphous set of traditions that Romantic poets writing about visual art had at their fingertips – one might see its influence, for instance, in the moving frieze-figures of “Ode on Indolence” (discussed in Chapter 5), and reading either Cowper’s “On the Receipt of My Mother’s Picture” or “The Tears of a Painter” against *The Winter’s Tale* lends an extra layer of poignancy to those lyrics about confronting a portrait of a loved one who really is dead.

Written discourse about art in the eighteenth century was plentiful, and familiarity with the work of Addison, Shaftesbury, Reynolds, and Darwin, to name only the most famous few writers on the subject, might make one expect that eighteenth-century England would have produced dozens of ekphrases. If the flourishing discourse of the “sister
arts,” discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, were not sufficient, John Barrell’s magisterial study *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt* might lead a reader to expect numerous weighty poems about the salutary effects of history painting on the British polity. But in truth eighteenth-century England did not produce a particularly large body of poetry about art, and what it did produce is no longer widely read. The work of Jean Hagstrum shows the strain of this disconnect between philosophical discourse and poetic output. Determined to examine the variety of ways in which literature related itself to its “sister arts” in the eighteenth-century, Hagstrum evades the scarcity of ekphrases from the period by stretching his concept of “iconic poetry” to the breaking point, as I mentioned earlier, including in it everything from epigraphs to emblems, and defining virtually all personifications as pictorial by default. The poems about visual art that were published in the eighteenth-century are now rarely anthologized; finding them requires some diligence, but that diligence is necessary if we are to see clearly how the Romantics adapted the conventions of poetry about art that were available to them.

What one finds does not line up tidily with the corpus of works most commonly studied as ekphrastic. Looking through the collected poems of Thomson, Gray, Beattie, Collins, Pope, Swift and Dryden, one finds only a tiny handful of poems about art. Swift wrote a rather nasty series of satires about a cut-silk and paper portrait (the start of a much longer series of fictive replies and pardons), and his famous “Stella’s Birthday” poem for 1720 uses an elaborate conceit comparing Stella’s face to a painted sign outside an inn. Pope, showing the influence of the intellectual climate in which he worked, wrote an “Epistle to Mr. Jervas with Dryden’s Translation of Fresnoy’s Art of Painting” (first published in 1716), in which he recalls himself and Jervas being “[s]mit with the love of Sister-Arts.” He also wrote a ten-line poem called “Extemporaneous Lines on a Portrait of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Painted by Kneller” and a quatrains “On Drawings of the Statues of Apollo, Venus, and Hercules.” John Dyer wrote an epistle “To A Famous Painter,” in which he first catalogues the painter’s skills and then concludes with two delightful couplets that mock the idea of a poet dictating a subject for a painter. Robert Burns published several very short, comic pieces about portraits, along with a four-quatrains
poem called “Verses Intended to be Written Below a Noble Earl’s Picture” (written in January of 1787). If this seems a scant collection of poems to represent an entire century, searching the *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* database reveals only a handful more. In and of itself, this might be dismissed as the result of inaccurate transcriptions, especially of book titles, in the *ECCO* database, which impede searches by making some items impossible to find; the disproportionately small number of items in a search for “art,” however, in contrast to a search for a different subject, such as “theatre,” suggests to me that there simply were not many publications about art, relative to other subjects.23 It was only by combing through the relevant six volumes of Robert Anderson’s famous *Works of the British Poets* that I was able to assemble a large enough body of eighteenth-century ekphrases to substantiate a generalization. I catalogued only eighty-three ekphrases from Anderson’s immense anthology, in addition to those that were duplicates of the ones I had found using other means – about a hundred poems in all.

Of this modest body of ekphrastic poems, almost all are short or mid-length poems about either real art or real artists, seemingly out of keeping with an English tradition that begins with the notional ekphrases of Chaucer, Spenser, and Shakespeare, all describing extensive, even improbable, works of art, and that eventually leads to the equally

23 A subject search for “art” under “Literature and Language” produces ninety-one entries: dictionaries of, essays on, and guides to the arts, biographies of artists, catalogues of collections, treatises on the art of war, or the art of horseback-riding, and only one poem – John Dyer’s *The Ruins of Rome* (which contains many architectural descriptions, but nothing that stands out about specific works of art). A subject search for “artist” produces no results, although a title search for “artist” will produce many texts illustrated by artists. A search for “picture” produces only one result: a beginner’s Latin textbook. A search for “sculpture” produces a lone treatise on ancient art and poetry. A search for “portrait” produces only two editions of the bizarre entry: *A Poetical, Supplicating, Modest, and Affecting Epistle to those Literary Colossuses, the Reviewers. By Peter Pindar, Esq.*. A search for “painting” produces fifty-two results, including several poems or books of poems: the most relevant of these are a pair of verse epistles by Hayley, and a fascinating anonymous poem entitled *Pindarick Ode on Painting: Addressed to Joshua Reynolds, Esq.*, published by itself in 1767. This substantial poem (334 lines long) pays tribute to painting for its ability to capture fleeting mental visions, to convey copious and detailed information quickly and without tedium, and to move its viewers emotionally; in the process, it imagines several hypothetical paintings and describes several real ones. All of these searches can be easily expanded by searching under “Fine Arts” as well as “Language and Literature,” but this produces no poems.
imaginative notional ekphrases of Keats and Auden. A few of the eighteenth-century poems are rambling verse essays on aesthetics or the sister arts, such as “An Essay on Painting. To the Right Hon. Thomas Earl of Pembroke,” by Walter Harte. Harte’s 500-odd line “Essay on Painting” begins with an “argument” outlining its contents:

A parallel between painting and poetry—Advice to a good painter; influenced by Titian—An universal notion of beauty—That we must not despair—A luxuriant fancy, or too much exactness often faulty—Decency still to be preserved—Repose and solitude—Nature to be imitated—in a fault, whether to be corrected or not—The *Je ne sçai quoi* of beauty—Draperies—An encomium on painting—The episode of Mimicina—Sculpture—Innovations faulty—Sometimes to be admired—Invention—Union of colours—Immoderate ornament—The Landscape—Design—The principal figure of a picture—Modesty in a painter—Harmony of colours—The surprise—Optics—The obscura camera described; its use in painting—Disposition of objects—Two equal lights to be avoided in the same picture—Truth to be observed—Travelling, its use—Another parallel between poetry and painting—Their distinct excellencies considered—Painting far more lasting and universal—Yet derived its light first from poetry—Its rise and progress through all ages—An account of the most celebrated painters, with their several characters—Conclusion, with an address to the Earl of Pembroke.

Such sprawling verse discourses are the exception, however, rather than the rule. Most eighteenth-century ekphrases are quite short, some of them consisting of only a single

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24 The prevalence of poems about the whole *oeuvre* of a given artist makes John Hollander’s distinction between “actual” and “notional” ekphrasis—i.e. ekphrasis about a real or imaginary artwork—impossible to maintain, since the distinction assumes that an ekphrastic poem is about a single artwork.

25 Twenty-five of the eighty-three poems in Anderson’s anthology are very short indeed: twelve lines or fewer.
couplet or quatrain. A few are either translated or imitated from Latin or Greek texts.\textsuperscript{26} But the vast majority are occasional pieces: charming relics of the social milieu of literary England, addressed as a compliment to a particular person or honouring a particular occasion. The habit of writing poems about visual art to mark occasions is one that persists and is transfigured in Romantic writing. The occasions to which the eighteenth-century poems respond range from the creation of a portrait,\textsuperscript{27} to the death of an artist, usually an artist personally known to the author,\textsuperscript{28} to the erection of a public monument. Samuel Garth, for example, wrote “On Her Majesty’s Statue in St. Paul’s Church-Yard,” which describes the “awful form” of Queen Anne and the “four mighty realms” that sit “[b]eneath her feet.” It comments extensively on the respective demeanours of the attendant statues that personify the four realms: Britain, Ireland, France, and “India.”\textsuperscript{29} Garth’s poem is atypical in paying so much attention to the appearance of the monument; many eighteenth-century poems with titles referring to monuments discuss only the person commemorated, rather than the monument itself. In addition to the erection of a new statue, the fate of existing artworks could in some cases elicit a few poems – at least two celebrate Lady Pomfret’s gift of her statue collection to Oxford.\textsuperscript{30} A few ekphrases are about decorations for private estates, such as Shenstone’s “On a Statue of Venus de Medicis,” which appears in Anderson’s \textit{Works} as the sixteenth of nineteen “inscriptions” by Shenstone (some of them in Latin)\textsuperscript{31} intended mostly for

\textsuperscript{26} Dryden and Addison, for instance, both translated portions of Ovid’s \textit{Metamorphoses}. Dryden’s translations include “Pygmalion and the Statue, from the Tenth Book,” and Addison’s include “The Story of Aglaouris, Transformed into a Statue.” Aglaouris, for those not familiar with the myth, is turned into a statue by an impatient Mercury when she attempts, out of envy, to bar him from her sister’s bedroom.

\textsuperscript{27} Matthew Prior, for example, wrote “On seeing the Duke of Ormond’s Picture at Sir Godfrey Kneller’s,” and George Granville wrote “Lady Hyde, sitting at Sir Godfrey Kneller’s for her Picture.”

\textsuperscript{28} James Thomson, for instance, wrote an “Elegy on the Death of Mr. Aikman the Painter,” whom he evidently considered a good friend.

\textsuperscript{29} The fourth attendant statue actually represents North America, personified in Aboriginal garb.

\textsuperscript{30} One such poem is “Verses occasioned by Lady Pomfret’s Present of some Antique Statues to Oxford, the Streets whereof were foolishly said to be Paved with Jacobites,” by a Paul Whitehead, and one is “On Lady Pomfret’s Presenting the University of Oxford with her Collection of Statues,” by Edward Lovibond.

\textsuperscript{31} A substantial minority of the poems about visual art composed in England in the eighteenth century are in Latin.
garden ornaments: eight of them on seats, three on urns, one on an obelisk, and so forth. The eight-quatrains inscription for the statue, presumably a replica of the Venus de Medici, is among the most extensive of the nineteen. It offers the statue as a model of good decorating, taking Venus’ apparent “coy reserve” as an analogy for a well-landscaped estate, and instructing the “boastful sons of taste”

Who plan the rural shade;  
Learn hence to shun the vicious waste  
Of pomp, at large display’d.

Let sweet concealment’s magic art  
Your mazy bounds invest;  
And while the sight unveils a part,  
Let fancy paint the rest.

Despite this variety, one type of poem about visual art stands out as overwhelmingly popular in the eighteenth century. Sixty-seven of the eighty-three ekphrases in Anderson are about specific portraits. Most seem intended to flatter either the artist or the sitter; many are published with explanations of the contexts in which they were originally composed and presented to the objects of their flattery. The most serious in tone of these ekphrases turn the portrait into an opportunity for moral commendation, either praising the artist’s ability to capture the inner grace of the sitter, or lamenting the impossibility of doing so. Pope’s “Extemporaneous Lines on a Portrait of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Painted by Kneller” is an excellent example of this common type of

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32 Grant Scott helpfully points to the importance of the often critically neglected “portrait poem genre” in his chapter “Keats and the Urn,” in *The Sculpted Word* (124-31), and again in “Shelley, Medusa, and the Perils of Ekphrasis.” His reconstruction of the portrait ekphrasis tradition, however, strikes me as skewed. His cornerstone example is in fact a poem about a history painting of Medea; although it does draw on some of the conventions of portrait-ekphrasis, it is far from typical of the genre. In discussing his second and third examples, James Vale’s “Verses on Seeing the Portrait of Miss C—N” and the anonymous “On Looking at the Picture of a Beautiful Female,” Scott does not comment on their urbane and understated charm – the hallmark of the portrait poem in its eighteenth-century heyday.

33 Heffernan has observed that “the most notable seventeenth-century poems we have on actual portraits praise the artist’s ability to make a face and figure express the mind” (92). In the eighteenth century, such poems were (by the standard of ekphrasis) extremely common.
eighteenth-century poetry about art. Pope begins by noting the visible features represented in the portrait, then expresses a wish to “draw” in his poetry Lady Montagu’s corresponding, hidden virtues:

The playful smiles around the dimpled mouth,
That happy air of majesty and truth;
So would I draw (but oh! ’tis vain to try,
My narrow genius does the power deny;
The equal lustre of the heav’ny mind…

The lengthy parenthetical clause suspends the verb “draw” for a line and a half before the speaker permits himself to name its object, the “equal lustre of the heav’nly mind,” the expression of the speaker’s modest self-doubt actually postponing even the mention of the quality that he wishes figuratively to “draw.” Overcoming the hesitation, however, the speaker proceeds to detail the virtues he has just declared himself unequal to representing:

The equal lustre of the heav’nly mind,
Where ev’ry grace with every virtue’s join’d;
Learning not vain, and wisdom not severe,
With greatness easy, and with wit sincere;
With just description show the work divine,
And the whole princess in my work should shine.

What interests me about this poem are the features that Pope attributes to the painted portrait, for they are not physical features, but details of expression and bearing that the reader is meant to take as reflections of Montagu’s interiority. For example, the picture shows “playful smiles around the dimpled mouth.” A smile and a dimple are tangible enough, but a playful smile goes beyond simply recording what Montagu looks like. This smile expresses a specific state of mind. Moreover, the fact that the smiles are “around” her mouth, rather than on it, suggests a degree of movement that a painting can only hint at. The most obvious reading is that Montagu is smiling in a way that suggests that she is playful, and that the dimples created by that smile, themselves shaped like smiles, are literally around (i.e. framing) her mouth, but such a reading is destabilized by
the language, which is itself playful, for Pope pointedly does not say “the dimples around
the smiling mouth,” but rather “the [...] smiles around the dimpled mouth,” rendering a
straightforward reading dependent on a reader’s interpolation. A second possible
reading, made available by that ambiguity, is that the smiles themselves are personified
as playful – that they are playing around her mouth, coming and going, or shifting. The
“happy air of majesty and truth” that Pope attributes to the painting is still more abstract
– a kind of impression of Montagu’s bearing that hints at her moral stature. It would be
all too easy to read the text as juxtaposing the portrait’s painted representation of
Montagu’s body with the poem’s own, verbal representation of her mind (for this is what
the line “the equal lustre of the heav’ly mind” suggests). In actuality, the opening
couplet of “Extemporaneous Lines” credits Kneller’s painted portrait with capturing
expressions that implicitly reveal the very virtues that Pope wishes to “draw” more
explicitly in his verse. Although Pope’s brief poem is more clever in its juggling of these
motifs than most, the motifs themselves are typical of the genre: most eighteenth-century
portrait-ekphrases are meant to flatter, many express modest doubt about the poet’s own
abilities, and many praise the portrait for capturing the sitter’s moral, as well as physical,
beauties.

Eighteenth-century ekphrasis constitutes a fairly coherent, if small, body in and of itself;
it is only when it is compared to the ekphrastic traditions that preceded and followed it
that certain absences become conspicuous. The tradition of figuration in ekphrasis did
not continue unbroken until the Romantic period. Curiously, although eighteenth-
century literature is teeming with examples of personified abstractions, they aren’t
ekphrastic. Hagstrum comes closer than any other critic to identifying this surprising
trend when he designates poems that use such personifications as “iconic” poems. His
reasoning is that they draw on the conventions of allegorical painting, and therefore, he
claims, would have called up images in the minds of their readers (144) – highly stylized
images, but images nonetheless. What Hagstrum omits is that these supposed images are
not described as belonging to an actual picture. If personified abstractions were
considered the hallmark of allegorical painting, then it is difficult to account for the
almost total absence of ekphrastic representations of such abstractions, especially in an
age that used personification with such enthusiasm.\textsuperscript{34} One notable exception to this absence is Andrew Tooke’s 1698 translation of the French school book \textit{The Pantheon: Representing the Fabulous Histories of the Heathen Gods and Most Illustrious Heroes}, which, according to ECCO, was reprinted many times throughout the eighteenth century. In this educational text, the youthful Palaeophilus responds to the Pantheon’s murals both before and after they have been explained to him, and his responses help to guide those of young readers. The explanations themselves often unpack the supposed allegorical meaning of the myths depicted or the iconographic meaning of the gods’ painted attributes, treating the murals as having a largely figurative significance. Given the work’s dismissive attitude to the allegories it explains, however, it should perhaps be no surprise that the text remained popular long after allegorical ekphrasis had fallen out of fashion.

The other conspicuous absence in eighteenth-century ekphrasis is sensibility. Given how many Romantic ekphrases mine the visual arts for ways of grappling with questions of how sympathy works, when it fails, and what role it plays in regulating the emotions, a reader looking back on the urbane occasional ekphrases of the eighteenth century might be surprised to see so few that engage with such questions. The century that produced the works of brooding introspection that are usually identified as poetry of sensibility – \textit{Night Thoughts}, “The Deserted Village,” “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” “The Castaway” – produced fairly few ekphrases in that vein, even by the standards of a century that produced fairly few ekphrases at all. An early exception is Thomas Tickell’s “Thoughts Occasioned by the sight of an Original Picture of King Charles I: Taken at the time of his Trial.” The speaker of this poem accuses the painter of being hard-hearted

\textsuperscript{34} Nicholas Halmi’s work on the emergence of a specifically Romantic idea of the symbol offers a useful perspective on why allegorical ekphrasis vanished during the eighteenth century. Eighteenth-century literary criticism, Halmi points out, took a stern stance with allegory, defining it, not as a rhetorical figure, but rather as a genre of “narrative that refers to meaning outside itself,” and insisting that the narrative ought to be “strictly and transparently separate from the meaning it presents to the intellect”: in other words, allegory must be obvious and therefore dull. As a result, Halmi explains, allegory was used almost exclusively in “didactic and satirical literature” (9). This does not, however, fully account for why personified abstractions and other forms of figurative signifiers did not make their way into at least some eighteenth-century poetry about art.
because he painted competently instead of breaking down before so moving a sight. Tickell died in 1740; insofar as this is a poem that engages with the culture of sensibility, it is thus a very early instance. Another exception, from later in the century, is Edward Young’s “On Michael Angelo’s Famous Piece of the Crucifixion, Who is Said to Have Stabbed a Person that he Might Draw it More Naturally.” This short poem, published in Anderson with a footnote acknowledging that “the report [about Michelangelo murdering his model] was propagated without the least truth,” goes into gothic detail not only about the model’s suffering but also about Michelangelo’s methodical study of it.

   Whilst his Redeemer on his canvas dies,
   Stabb’d at his feet his brother weltering lies:
   The daring artist cruelly serene,
   Views the pale cheek and the distorted mien;
   He drains off life by drops, and deaf to cries,
   Examines every spirit as it flies:
   He studies torment, dives in mortal woe,
   To rouse up every pang repeats his blow;
   Each rising agony, each dreadful grace,
   Yet warm transplanting to his Saviour’s face.
   Oh glorious theft! oh nobly wicked draught!
   With its full charge of death each feature fraught:
   Such wondrous force the magic colours boast,
   From his own skill he starts in horror lost.

Young’s poem, even while it revels in its own sensationalism, is hostile to the project of understanding the passions too well, or representing them too accurately; it is interested, instead, in the cost of too perfect an understanding or too true a representation of human suffering. Even this poem, however, seems more deeply engaged with the questions of sensibility than the majority of eighteenth-century ekphrases. Thus, the fact that a substantial number of poets did choose to write about art in order to think about feelings in the early nineteenth century marks something of a departure from contemporary practice, if not from the longer tradition of ekphrastic poems. Eighteenth-century poets
may have written copious texts exploring ideas about feeling, but they rarely did so when writing about art.

The importance for early nineteenth-century writers of that contemporary practice – of the eighteenth-century portion of the ever-shifting ekphrastic tradition – should not be overlooked. Poets continued to write short, lyric ekphrases, often about real works of art. The occasional pieces that dominated eighteenth-century ekphrastic writing did not vanish from the world of letters in the Romantic period. Even the portrait of Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* functions much the way Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s portrait does in Pope’s “Extemporaneous Lines,” revealing Darcy’s true, likeable character by means of a smile. On the other hand, as any reader of Keats and Wordsworth knows, allegory and other complex forms of figuration re-emerged. And, as the later chapters of this thesis shall argue, ideas from aesthetic philosophy, such as the idea that art can stop time or preserve the transitory, found their way into poetry. In Romantic poetry, then, the tradition of earlier ekphrastic writing is only one of several pre-existing and emerging discourses that poets drew on in poems about the visual arts. This thesis as a whole aims to trace, not every discourse that fed into Romantic ekphrasis, but all of the discourses that played a significant role in making ekphrastic poetry a fertile ground for testing out ideas in the ongoing culture of sensibility. It is the goal of this thesis to unpack some of the ways in which Romantic poems mined the discourses surrounding the visual arts for potential insights into the workings of sympathy. The remainder of the present chapter will begin that process by examining how one poet, William Cowper, mined the specific tradition of eighteenth-century portrait ekphrasis for insights into the workings of grief.

### 2.3 Cowper’s Reworking of Eighteenth-Century Conventions

The two ekphrases by Cowper to be examined here look very different in the light of their predecessors than they do without that context. In some respects, both are fairly conventional ekphrases. Both construct some kind of artistic production – Apelles’ act of painting or a poetic speaker’s act of versifying – as a response to a particular occasion, and as a duty or tribute to a particular person. More importantly for the purposes of this
exploration, both poems draw extensively on the conventions of portrait poems as modelled by Pope and others – conventions that they subtly undercut. In particular, both poems resist the tradition of praising a portrait for capturing the spirit of its subject. “On the Receipt of My Mother’s Picture” and “The Tears of a Painter” are both fundamentally about grief, and about portraiture’s ultimate inability to replace a lost loved one. Cowper draws on the conventions of eighteenth-century ekphrasis in order to critique them, and that critique is part of his exploration of what appropriate or inappropriate mourning looks like – for inappropriate mourning, in these poems, turns out to look a lot like a traditional portrait-ekphrasis. In both poems, the conventional trope that a portrait might capture the mind, heart, or soul of a lost loved one is tacitly revealed to be a pernicious one, associated with an unwholesome, even sinful, refusal to grapple with loss.

Because both these poems are about grieving, as well as art, it is necessary to situate them in a second tradition: the tradition of other poems about grieving, which was much more robust in England than the ekphrastic tradition. While it makes sense in hindsight to call this “the elegiac tradition,” doing so is as much a retrospective imposition of current terms as is calling poems about art “the ekphrastic tradition” – a necessary shorthand for talking about poems with shared subject matter and influence, rather than an established genre that the poems’ authors would have recognized. Where the term “ekphrasis” simply was not in use the eighteenth century, however, the term “elegy” was, and the evolution of its meaning over time makes talking about the elegiac tradition tricky. Not all of the poems that comprise it were labelled elegies at the time, nor were all the texts published as elegies poems about death and mourning. No history of English poems about death and grieving is complete without “Lycidas,” for example, but Milton published “Lycidas” as a monody. Problematically, neither term – elegy or monody – referred exclusively to poems about death and grief. Stuart Curran, in “Romantic Elegiac Hybridity,” uses the definitions provided by eighteenth-century lexicographers as a way of pinpointing the difficulties of relying on eighteenth-century labels. He points out that “Johnson’s dictionary, giving three definitions, seems to have established the range of expectations for the elegy […] ‘1. A mournful song. 2. A funereal song. 3. A short poem
without points or affected elegancies’ (1777)” (238). Curran adds that, “in the second half of the eighteenth century” the term elegy could just as easily refer to any poem composed in “the verse form known as the elegiac stanza” (238). As for monody, Curran observes that its definition “is even looser. Johnson derives it strictly from its Greek roots: ‘A poem sung by one person not in dialogue’”; and only one eighteenth-century lexicographer “limits its application to […] ‘A funeral ditty sung by one.’” (238)

In spite of this ambiguity surrounding the terms, however, there is a recognizable lineage of poems about mourning in English verse that is pertinent to a complete understanding of “The Tears of a Painter” and especially of “On the Receipt,” which marries the conventions of elegy with those of ekphrasis; that lineage emerges most clearly in the juxtaposition of several subsets of the elegiac tradition. Lorna Clymer discusses the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century funeral elegy specifically, as distinct from other subgenres such as the pastoral elegy, the epitaph, the monody, or other poems written in an elegiac mode. The funeral elegy in this period was very much connected to actual funerals: elegies were “pinned to the hearse or tomb,” or “read over the coffin during the burial ceremony” (175), and typically took the posture of “exploring] the meaning of death urgently, as if near an open grave, and relatively briefly, as if the devastating focus could not be sustained indefinitely” (171). Crucially for an understanding of “On the Receipt,” however, even these short poems had a specific convention of moving through several phases or types of utterance: a “traditional movement through” or “customary three-part narrative of lament, praise, and consolation” (172, 183). Moreover, that convention of a three-stage speech beginning with lament and ending with consolation, influenced eighteenth-century verse that does not otherwise fit Clymer’s rubric for funeral elegies. Her discussion culminates with a reading of Edward Young’s immensely popular Night Thoughts, which is by no means brief, does not adopt an attitude of speaking over an open grave, and indeed is not an immediate and occasional response to a single death. And yet, Clymer argues, it follows the pattern established by funeral elegies, moving through a sequence of lament, praise, and consolation. As a precedent for “On the Receipt,” Night Thoughts is especially important in that, as Clymer argues, “[i]ndividual book titles suggest how the poem’s
slow progress – from grief and praise to brief and finally lasting consolation – is not without suspense, even real dramatic tension,” and the whole poem “unfolds incrementally, as if what is represented corresponds in some realistic way to what is being experienced by the narrator himself, moment by moment” (181). The formulaic conventions of public funeral elegies, in this vast poem, seem to be deployed in the service of enacting a realistic mental or psychological process.

The enactment of a psychological process with varying degrees of realism or apparent sincerity is a recurring theme in studies of the elegiac tradition. David Shaw, in Elegy and Paradox, stops short of adopting Peter Sacks’s psychological framework for thinking about elegy, in which the unfolding of the elegy both represents and is the “work of mourning” – the coming to terms with loss. Shaw points out that some influential elegies, most notably “Lycidas,” are famously feeble enactments of true mourning. For the purposes of talking about what he calls confessional elegy, however, Shaw proposes a model that strongly resembles Sacks’s, in spite of its fundamentally different theoretical grounding. In Shaw’s model of confessional elegy, the poem retrospectively re-enacts the process of achieving a transcendent insight that has allowed the mourner to become an elegist to begin with. The fact of the poem being a poem implies that the mourner has already reached this point before beginning, but the poem nonetheless traces the steps of getting there (50-51). Shaw, of course, designates “Lycidas” a classical, rather than a confessional, elegy, and yet what “Lycidas” has in common with both Shaw’s confessional model and Sacks’s psychoanalytic “work of mourning” model is an element of stage-by-stage re-enactment. The speaker starts by stating who is dead and expressing grief, and ends by expressing consolation; somewhere in between, the speaker tries out a series of other attitudes. And if “Lycidas,” which Shaw highlights as far less profoundly concerned with the inner mental workings of the mourning process than the elegies he designates as “confessional,” nonetheless includes such a substantial portion of this kind of processive enactment, then we can hardly underestimate how fundamental such enactment is to poems of mourning as an evolving genre in the English tradition.
Cowper’s two ekphrases under discussion here, then, are not unusual in setting out a representation of grieving that moves in stages. “On the Receipt” is the more conventional of the two, since it is uttered in the first person, and since it concludes with a gesture of acceptance that acknowledges the theological truths Cowper held dear: its final attitude is the desirable one according to the poem’s own terms – the attitude that Cowper, as poet, sanctions. “The Tears of a Painter” is unusual by the standards of poems about mourning in that it is told in the third person, and in that, as I shall argue, Apelles’ concluding attitude is not the desirable one – not an attitude to the lost beloved that a profoundly religious and profoundly reasonable poet like Cowper could possibly sanction. But the very oddity of “The Tears of a Painter” by the standards of poems about grieving can point us toward something important. In spite of its third-person narration and unconventional ending, the poem nonetheless, like most elegies, and like “On the Receipt,” presents or re-enacts stages of mourning. They also both explore such stages intellectually – again, like many elegies – asking questions and positing answers about what is or is not a desirable, a reasonable, a sustainable reaction to loss, and about which passions and feelings are the right ones. In these two poems, however, it is the opportunities created by the genre of portrait-ekphrasis that facilitate the intellectual testing. In the case of “On the Receipt,” because it is a more conventional elegy, this element of the intellectual testing of various processes of grieving might be easily overlooked, but becomes more apparent when it is paired with “Tears.”

The ekphrastic tradition of praising a portrait for capturing its subject’s spirit is transformed, in “On the Receipt,” into a symptom of psychic distress on the part of the speaker. Of course the poem is also an elegy, and the step-by-step reconstruction of an emotional process is conventional in elegies. Nevertheless, the fact that this elegy is also a response to a portrait allows Cowper to explore not only the shifting attitudes the speaker adopts, but also the emotional and ethical viability of those attitudes, all of which are eventually displaced in favour of the religious consolation that typically concludes an elegy. Religious consolation, in “On the Receipt,” is more than just the expected resolution of an elegiac poem, however, and more than a hard-earned truth that the speaker struggles to attain; it stands in contrast to the attitudes conventional in portrait-
ekphrases. The resolve with which the speaker eventually claims religious consolation solidifies interpretive possibilities that are only hinted at earlier in the poem: that the speaker’s initial reactions to the portrait, while perhaps necessary as preliminary steps toward spiritual truth, are in and of themselves problematic.

To return to the test case of “The Tears of a Painter,” situating it in the context of eighteenth-century ekphrasis enables us to see both the ways in which it is conventional for its time and the ways in which it turns convention on its head. Translations of Latin ekphrases and narrative ekphrases derived from Classical source material were both relatively common throughout the eighteenth century; “The Tears of a Painter” is both of those, and, in addition, it is a translation of a poem that is itself an eighteenth-century ekphrasis. The poem itself is not an occasional piece, as so many ekphrases of its era were, but it does construct Apelles’ creative act as occasional: commemorating his son and marking the occasion of the boy’s death. But the changes that Cowper makes to the Latin original in the process of translating it reveal something about the nature of his exploration of grief in the poem. Although the alterations are subtle, Cowper’s version is more focused in its exploration of grief as a process that unfolds, rather than as a static state: Cowper examines the toll that grief takes. Moreover, Cowper’s version is more thoroughly embedded in eighteenth-century conventions for poems about art than is Bourne’s.

These two changes are not coincidental, for Cowper’s re-working of eighteenth-century ekphrastic conventions, especially the conventions of portrait-ekphrasis, helps him sharpen the poem’s focus on the cost of Apelles’ grief. Cowper’s most significant changes to Bourne’s original reveal that his use of ekphrastic conventions is part of a systematic exploration of a specific, unwholesome emotional process. The trajectory of Apelles’ increasing emotional investment in the painting’s resemblance to his child culminates in his rapturous gazing – an invention of Cowper’s, not present in Bourne’s original. But the trajectory by which Apelles gets to that rapture is one deeply bound up in the tradition of portrait-ekphrasis. Half-way through the poem, the speaker’s description of Apelles’ activity shifts, the two descriptions mirroring the two conventional praises bestowed upon portraits in ephemeral occasional poems. Initially,
Apelles paints to achieve literal verisimilitude; after the turning point, he paints to capture the spirit of his dead child. “The Tears of a Painter,” however, does not construct Apelles’ success at the latter as something to be unqualifiedly praised, suggesting instead that his attempt to capture his son’s expression is part of his process of succumbing to the psychological corrosion of intense grief. When Apelles strives for physical verisimilitude, the poem’s language carefully separates his act of painting from his expressions of affectionate grief. When he strives to capture his son’s spirit, that separation evaporates. Given this trajectory, and given that Apelles’ ecstatic gazing at his own painting is entirely Cowper’s addition, I would argue that the speaker’s final apostrophe to Apelles is more invested in a firm distinction between reality and illusion than my initial reading, without the context of eighteenth-century ekphrastic conventions or of Bourne’s original poem, would have suggested.

Even the fine details of the poem’s re-working of the conventions of portrait ekphrasis are specific to Cowper’s transfigured rendition of Bourne’s original. Apelles’ address to his son, asking him to “accept” the painting, is present in both versions, but the word “tribute” is specific to Cowper’s (see Figure 1); in Bourne’s version, although Apelles’ request that his son “accept” his “lamentations” does indeed suggest that the lamentations are a kind of gift, a different choice of word in the translation would have downplayed the associations that the word “tribute” had for eighteenth-century readers: it was frequently used as a way of describing elegies, but it was also used to describe compliments.35 The addition of that word, so familiar from polite exchanges in the

35 Arguably the most famous use of the word “tribute” in eighteenth-century poetry is Gray’s “frail memorial” that “[i]mplores the passing tribute of a sigh” on behalf of the rural dead. But the futility of that tribute, paid by strangers to the unlistening dead, is part of the pathos of Gray’s “Elegy.” The purpose of a verbal tribute is generally that it does not go unheard: that it is public, even when the addressee is deceased. Eighteenth-Century Collection Online contains twenty-one entries under “Literature and Language” with the term “tribute” in the title. As with any search of ECCO, this number is probably misleadingly small, given ECCO’s notoriously limited text-recognition software, but the texts it produces are nonetheless a useful random sample. Some of these entries are for specifically elegiac tributes, such as two editions of An Elegiac Tribute to the Memory of the Rev. John Fletcher, Late Vicar of Madeley, Shropshire (1785 and 1785), or The Druid’s Monument, a Tribute to the Memory of Dr. Oliver Goldsmith (1774). Some of the entries are for poetic “tributes” to the living, such as two editions of Original Poems. By a Lady, Dedicated to Miss Ann Henderson. A Tribute to Gratitude and Friendship (1785 and 1786). In either case, the word is used figuratively to imply the humility of the person offering praise, gratitude, or
sphere of print culture, tacitly brings the painting into line with such exchanges, constructing Apelles’ creation of the portrait as a marriage of the convention of writing portrait-ekphrases as a means of paying elegant compliments with the convention of writing verses as a means of honouring the dead. And if the bare word “tribute” is insufficient to suggest this connection, it is cemented by Apelles’ parenthetical aside that “’[t]is all that [he] can now bestow.” This self-deprecating acknowledgement of the inadequacy or futility of the gesture is another addition of Cowper’s not present in Bourne, and it brings the creation of the painting still further into line with the conventions of literary compliments, including portrait-ekphrases such as Pope’s “Extemporaneous Lines,” in which the speaker modestly expresses doubt about his ability to fulfill the task of flattery he has set for himself.

The two bursts of activity on Apelles’ part that I noted in my initial reading of the poem take on new meaning if we juxtapose “The Tears of a Painter” with a typical portrait-poem like “Extemporaneous Lines.” It is conventional in such poems to establish a distinction between the portrait sitter’s body and her or his mind or soul, and it is equally conventional to then insist that the portrait in fact represents both, impossibly capturing mental or spiritual qualities in the physical medium of paint. (Pope, of course, suggests this with some subtlety, rather than stating it, and he draws attention to the impossibility of what he suggests by declaring that the “playful smiles” are “around,” rather than on, Lady Mary’s mouth – a fluidity that could not really be represented in paint.) “The Tears of a Painter” plays fast and loose with that tradition,
Figure 3: “The Tears of a Painter” (emphasis added to highlight Cowper’s most substantial changes) and a modern translation of “Lachrymæ Pictoris (re-lineated for ease of comparison). Translation by Paul Franz. For the Latin original and the translation in its original formatting, see Figure 2.
establishing the binary of body and soul in its descriptions of Apelles’ painting, not for the purpose of revealing anything about the deceased subject of the painting, but rather for the purpose of showing the reader two distinct phases in Apelles’ process of grieving – a process that culminates, not in healing or acceptance, but rather in psychic damage.

Apelles first paints physical features, and his act of painting them is initially kept carefully separate from his expressions of sorrow and affection for his son. His initial burst of activity is described in terms of verisimilitude, and Cowper’s version goes out of its way to downplay the emotional significance of that fidelity to physical appearance. Although the first description of the picture is surrounded on all sides by affective language, such as the “anguish” that Apelles feels at the sight of his son’s “dear remains,” the language actually used to describe the portrait is emotionally neutral. Cowper specifies, as Bourne does not, the “twofold part” (“either duty” in the Latin) that Apelles is faithful to – “his feelings and his art” – but, in Cowper’s version, Apelles’ feelings and art at first seem to be separate. Cowper adds that Apelles exhibits “tender care” in closing his real son’s eyes, but he adds no such modifier to his act of painting a “fellow pair” of eyes: closing the child’s eyes is his fidelity to his feelings of tenderness and care, and painting a “fellow pair” is his fidelity to his art. In enumerating the other physical features that Apelles paints, Cowper changes “not yet pale / Lips” to “lips […] not livid yet.” This switch is surely a studied one, for it is metrically unnecessary – Cowper could as easily have said “not pallid yet” – and it has several subtle implications. On the one hand, whereas “not yet pale” suggests that the child is so recently deceased as not yet to look unambiguously dead, Cowper’s “not livid yet” connotes the much more modest implication that the child’s body has not yet started to decompose. More crucially, the expression “pale lips” has associations with the language of sorrow and melancholy that the phrase “livid lips” does not, and Cowper’s replacement of the word has the effect of removing a key piece of emotional language from the first description of what Apelles paints. Furthermore, Cowper removes a still more prominent layer of emotional language from his description of Apelles’ first phase of painting when he calls the picture the “just image of his son,” rather than calling it, as Bourne does, “his sad work” (“lugubre [...] opus”). The first verse paragraph contains, of course, a great deal
of emotionally charged language, but Cowper very pointedly does not apply any of it to Apelles’ actual act of painting.

Cowper’s careful separation of Apelles’ feelings of “anguish” and “tender care” for the real boy and his mimetic accuracy in making the painting extends only as far as the midpoint of the poem, and heightens the contrast of Apelles’ second phase of work, in which that separation vanishes, and Cowper begins to use affectively charged language to describe the picture and act of creation. In the second verse-paragraph, Cowper replicates all of the affective language associated with the painting in the Latin: he translates Bourne’s “sad work” (this time “opus triste”) as “melancholy task.” More tellingly still, Cowper renders “loveliness yet suffused the cheeks with redness” as “still his [i.e. the dead child’s] cheek unfaded shows / The deepest damask of the rose.” The phrase not only calls to mind the standard eighteenth-century conventions for describing blushes, but also removes grammatical agency from Bourne’s “loveliness” in order to
give it to the dead child’s “cheek,” thus heightening the faint suggestion that the boy’s rosy cheeks are an affective display rather than a mere biological fact. In this couplet, the poem’s language begins to suggest to the reader exactly the kind of impossible show of affect on the part of the dead child that Apelles himself perceives when he “spies” the boy’s smile. Cowper’s second verse-paragraph, in other words, makes the same move that any clever eighteenth-century portrait ekphrasis would. It describes Apelles’ creation of a portrait that transcends the representation of mere features and captures facial expressions, and it implies, very subtly, that those pictured facial expressions convey something about the mental or spiritual state of the portrait’s subject, in spite of the evident impossibility of their doing so.

The purpose of Cowper’s deployment of the conventions of portrait ekphrasis becomes evident in his two most substantial changes to Bourne’s original poem, which, taken together, transform the poem into an exploration of emotional process. In Cowper’s version, the poetic speaker instructs Apelles to “view again / The cause of [his] paternal pain” – i.e. to look again at his son’s body; in Bourne’s poem, the speaker instructs Apelles only to “continue […] pouring forth [his] lamentations.” Cowper’s added emphasis on Apelles’ gaze highlights the shift in what Apelles is doing. In the first half of the poem, he was painting physical features; in the second half, he is painting expressions. He now “spies” the smile on his son because he is, as the speaker suggests, viewing his son’s body again – seeing it anew. This is not a continuation of the same expression of lament, but rather a revisiting with a difference. Cowper’s still more dramatic change is to omit entirely the lines in which Apelles “transfer[s]” what he sees onto his panel, as he continues the process of mimetic representation he began in the poem’s first section. Cowper replaces these two lines with a four-line account of Apelles’ reaction to his own finished artwork:

Then, heedful to the finished whole,
With fondest eagerness he stole,
Till scarce himself distinctly knew
The cherub copied from the true.
These lines add an entirely new element to the poem. The language here suggests, as nothing else in the poem has, the depth of Apelles’ grief: his “fondest eagerness” is fond both in the sense of affectionate and in the older sense of irrational; his perception is not “distinct[…]”; he may be “heedful,” but he is also stealing – sneaking, tiptoeing – up to the painting that he himself has made, as though tacitly aware that his actions are not quite right. In adding the account of Apelles’ enraptured gazing, Cowper transforms the accounts of the painter’s two phases of work that precede it. Initially able to be equally “faithful” to his “feelings” and his “art” by keeping them separate, Apelles then revisits his work to add an emotional component to its physical verisimilitude, subjectively attributing an affect of contentment to his son’s body that may or may not really be present; he then moves into a third phase – one that does not produce any new “last touches” to the painting – in which his awareness of reality appears to waver. The three phases appear to be part of a progression, as Apelles attributes more of his son’s real self to the painting in each successive part of the poem. What initially looks like a suitable “tribute” to the dead child – a piece of portraiture marking an occasion and following the conventions of a polite portrait-poem – becomes in retrospect the first phase of Apelles’ increasing disorientation under the influence of intense grief. Indeed, the poem’s emphasis on Apelles’ subjective process of reading meaning into his painting hearkens back to older ekphrases like the one in “The Rape of Lucrece,” which, as Heffernan observes, also traces a viewer’s frantic, not entirely rational response to an artwork in a moment of unimaginable emotional strain as Lucrece identifies her own experience first with one depicted figure and then with another, constructing not an allegory but rather a disordered heap of emblems in which every element of the artwork signifies the same thing.

In the light of Cowper’s addition of Apelles’ rapturous gazing, the speaker’s two concluding couplets of apostrophe to Apelles appear much more decidedly preoccupied with re-asserting the boundary between reality and illusion than they may seem at first glance. Immediately after the four lines Cowper adds, when the speaker exclaims “[n]ow, painter, cease! Thy task is done,” it is not instantly clear, as it is in Bourne’s original, that Apelles is to “cease from signifying [his] pain by painting.” In Cowper’s
version, the speaker could as easily be asking Apelles to cease from gazing in delusional rapture – to recognize that his “task” of painting is complete and that succumbing to illusion is not his task. The pointed understatement of the concluding couplet, which I highlighted in my initial reading of the poem, takes on a new sharpness if read in this light. The speaker appears to be offering consolation when he says

Long lives this image of thy son;
Nor short-lived shall the glory prove,
Or of thy labour or thy love.

The “glory” of Apelles’ love, though characterized here as merely not “short-lived,” had by Cowper’s day outlived the fabled painting by two millennia. One might, as I have earlier suggested, interpret this as granting a greater value to Apelles’ act of affectionate tribute than to the painting itself, and thus take the speaker’s apostrophe as offering Apelles a viable form of consolation. But the discreet double-negative that draws attention to the longevity of Apelles’ glory relative to that of the painting also, by extension, draws attention to the still lesser longevity of the boy: if the glory of Apelles’ love will outlive the painting, the painting will in turn outlive the still-rosy cheeks and not-yet-livid lips of the child’s body, which have in turn outlived the personality that once animated them. However long-lived Apelles’ glory may be destined to be, his son is dead, and the speaker’s concluding apostrophe to Apelles seems intent on reminding the reader of that fact – reminding us, in short, that the illusion Apelles succumbs to in the added lines is only an illusion.

Arthur C. Benson, commenting in 1895 on Cowper’s “The Jackdaw,” adapted from Bourne’s Latin “Cornicula,” observed that “Cowper's [version] is in no sense a translation. It is a poem of which the line of thought is suggested by Bourne, and at a few points touches the Latin poem; but the turn, the colouring is Cowper's own” (426). “The Tears of a Painter” could be characterized in almost the opposite way. Much of it is a faithful translation of “Lachrymæ Pictoris” – as faithful as a rendering into tetrameter couplets of a poem written in Latin can be – and the turn and colouring are thus frequently Bourne’s. But its “line of thought” is quite different; what look like small added touches are in fact significant additions that alter the poem’s intellectual arc.
Cowper’s version is much more deeply embedded in the tradition of poems about portraits that flourished throughout the eighteenth century. Moreover, it is preoccupied, not only with conveying Apelles’ grief, but with tracing the toll that grief takes on Apelles, in a way that the Latin poem is not. Moreover, those two differences are closely related, for the poem’s reworking of the conventions of portrait ekphrasis is an integral part of how it lays bare to the reader the psychic cost of Apelles’ “tribute” to his lost child.

By eighteenth-century standards, William Cowper wrote a robust body of ekphrases, of which “The Tears of a Painter” is one of the more extended and interesting. Among the others is an epistle “To Sir Joshua Reynolds” requesting that he paint “French disappointment, British glory”; this poem fits comfortably both within the conventions of eighteenth-century occasional poems about pictures (in this case the occasion is a military victory), and within the much older genre of the advice-to-a-painter poem. Cowper also wrote a very short poem meant to be sent with a portrait of himself to a friend – still more typical of eighteenth-century ekphrases in that it is not only about a portrait but also thoroughly embedded in social exchange. He also translated several other poems about paintings, including one about a picture of a sleeping child, and another, a short comic poem, about an incompetently done portrait, and at least one other by Bourne: a poem about a portrait by Denner. But the most extended – and also the most widely read – of Cowper’s ekphrases is “On the Receipt of my Mother’s Picture out of Norfolk: the Gift of my Cousin, Ann Bodham,” composed in 1790 and published in 1798.

“On the Receipt” is a meditative poem, of a hundred and twenty-one lines, of fond reminiscence about Cowper’s mother, affectionate grief at her loss, and pious reflection on futurity. “The Tears of a Painter,” as we have seen, is a complex exploration of how artistic creation can enable or facilitate grieving. In both poems, the works of art are subjects for poems not because they are inherently interesting, but rather because they express or elicit suitably sentimental feelings when produced or contemplated in a
familial context. As I have earlier observed, poems about art in the eighteenth century usually treated the art in question as a component of ongoing social exchange; they were lighthearted occasional poems, and they took works of art, usually portraits of people known to their authors, as an excuse to say something charming. Cowper’s ekphrases are a curious inflection of that genre of ekphrasis: occasional poems that take the portraits as an excuse to say something touching. Rather than setting out to make their readers smile, these ekphrases set out to make their readers weep. “On the Receipt,” like “The Tears of a Painter,” does more than blend the conventions of eighteenth-century ekphrasis with those of the meditative, elegiac poetry that was popular in the late eighteenth century and that Cowper himself was well known for. Like “The Tears of a Painter,” the poem transfigures the conventions of portrait-ekphrasis, putting them to work and interrogating them in the service of a nuanced reconstruction of the experience of grief.

Like many eighteenth-century poems about works of art – especially commemorative works of art – “On the Receipt” dwells at much more length on the person commemorated than on the artwork per se: the speaker’s engagement with the picture itself is concentrated in the first twenty lines of the hundred-and-twenty-one-line poem. Like many eighteenth-century poems about portraits, it begins by busying itself with exclamations over the portrait’s verisimilitude – a verisimilitude that captures the sitter’s “intelligence” as well as her features. But unlike a typical eighteenth-century ekphrasis, “On the Receipt” combines these conventions in order to undercut them. The convention of praising a portrait for capturing its subject’s spirit is transformed, in this poem, into a symptom of psychic distress on the part of the speaker: an emotionally disruptive and unsustainable wish for the impossible. The poem’s speaker bestows blessings on the “art that can immortalize” his mother, but he does so as an early part of a process of having his “filial grief” renewed by that very art, and of struggling anew to come to terms with his grief. And while that stage-by-stage unfolding of a psychic process may be typical of eighteenth-century elegies, “On the Receipt,” by bringing that elegiac convention into uneasy co-existence with ekphrastic conventions, is able to do more. The fact that the occasion for the elegy is the speaker’s reaction to a portrait allows Cowper to explore
with considerable rigour the reasonableness and goodness of the speaker’s initial attitudes, later dropped (as they are in most elegies) in favour of religious consolation.

Kevin Barry reads “On the Receipt” as a poem that pulls in two incompatible directions. Making this point by drawing a distinction between its apparent meaning and its true significance, he argues that its “meaning is the consolation of remembered joy. Its significance is the repetition of remembered anxiety. Its meaning is a narrative of checks and balances. Its significance is a pattern of further decomposition” (82). In the poem’s present moment, Barry contends, the speaker seeks consolation by insisting on the “identification of the picture with the mother, the replacement of her absence by its presence. This narrative depends upon a convention of representation by which difference is abruptly stated as identity” (82). In his accounts of his memories, the speaker seeks consolation in his own past happiness. In both “narrative lines,” Barry argues, the consolation to be found is partial at best. In spite of his insistence that his childhood was happy, the memories the speaker recounts are almost entirely of loss, separation, and sorrow; and the picture very pointedly is not his mother. I would argue, however, that these insights can be refined considerably by putting the poem in the context of earlier eighteenth-century ekphrases, and previous elegies. What look like contradictions are in fact stages in a psychic process of regaining equilibrium in the face of a stimulus that renews an old grief – a process that Cowper reconstructs in meticulous detail. I would further suggest that what looks like a dependence on “a convention […] by which difference [between the portrait and the real person] is abruptly stated as identity” is actually a subtle critique of a convention in which a poem attributes both material and spiritual truth-telling to a portrait.

Of course, Cowper uses the conventions not only of portrait ekphrasis but also of elegy in “On the Receipt,” and he is not the first poet in the English tradition to take the convention of elegiac poetry enacting an inner emotional process and use it to grapple with ideas about the relationship between feeling and theology, even specifically in the context of grief for a parent or child. Lisa J. Schnell discusses a similar phenomenon in the elegies of several early modern women for their lost children. According to Schnell, the untitled elegy that is by far Mary Carey’s most extended, written in 1657, starts out
with the expected, culturally sanctioned consolation that God has taken back the child that was always his, but from there it launches into a series of protests against that tidy consolation. In Schnell’s formulation, religious consolation is the “prescriptive work of mourning that Protestantism and patriarchy demanded” (495), and the poems of Carey and others resist it. In “On the Receipt,” by contrast, although the speaker’s protests against his own previously-achieved acceptance and his initial resistance even to acknowledging the reality of his mother’s death are terribly moving, they also set up the speaker’s eventual acceptance and consolation to be equally moving. Shaw observes that “many Romantic and modern elegies codify, not the triumphal ritual decrees of ‘Lycidas,’ but the caesural breaks or dashes that keep testing the conventions of pastoral and confessional elegies against a mourner’s grievous reticence” (243); I will here argue that, in “On the Receipt,” such reticence, or perhaps resistance to consolation, is enacted, but that it is not the chief way in which the poem means – that the text is completely and unambivalently invested in the resolution that does away with the speaker’s hesitation. Unlike the authors Schnell examines, Cowper was very much not a woman writing from within a patriarchal culture that used theology as a tool of its dominance. He was, however, a profoundly religious man tormented by fear of his own damnation, a fear most famously expressed in the final stanza of “The Castaway,” in which the speaker compares himself to another “destin’d wretch” whose analogously inevitable doom is of the body only:

No voice divine the storm allay’d,
No light propitious shone;
When, snatch’d from all effectual aid,
We perish’d, each alone:
But I beneath a rougher sea,
And whelm’d in deeper guls’ than he.

Such a fear of damnation – such a mistrust of one’s own spiritual instinct for good – is palpable in the speaker’s attitude to his own shifting attitudes in “On the Receipt.” The process of mourning that the poem enacts is one in which the speaker cannot rely on his initial reactions to be good or viable, no matter how viscerally they are felt. Religious consolation, in “On the Receipt,” is not a theological prescription that the poem resists,
but rather a hard-won truth to which the speaker eventually lays claim. And that hard-won truth retrospectively gives new meanings to the various movements or emotional phases that precede it: on the one hand, they are justified as preliminary stages in the speaker’s eventual arrival at consolation, but on the other hand they are more clearly shown to be premised on falsehoods by their very contrast with the theological truth with which the poem ends.

The speaker’s first reaction to the sight of his mother’s portrait is to equate the picture with the person it represents, but that reaction is quickly, if subtly, undercut. In the extended apostrophe to his mother with which he begins, the speaker bursts into ecstatic exclamation. Within three lines he has begun to assert that the figure in the portrait is one and the same as his real parent, and within five lines he has revised his initial recognition that “those lips” do not have “language” to a claim that “[t]hose lips” are silent because “[v]oice […] fails,” implying that they do possess language or a voice that has temporarily fallen silent:

Oh that those lips had language! Life has passed
With me but roughly since I heard thee last.
Those lips are thine—thy own sweet smile I see,
The same that oft in childhood solaced me;
Voice only fails, else how distinct they say,
“Grieve not, my child, chase all thy fears away!”

The speaker then repeats the assertion, saying that the “meek intelligence of those dear eyes” now “shines on [him] still the same,” but in this second iteration the fervour has drained out of his formerly ecstatic tone. The statement that his mother’s “intelligence” shines out of the portrait is interrupted by a parenthetical clause longer than the statement itself, invoking a conventional blessing on the art that has produced the likeness:

The meek intelligence of those dear eyes
(Blest be the art that can immortalize,
The art that baffles time’s tyrannic claim
To quench it) here shines on me still the same.
The parenthetical clause not only comes between the subject (“meek intelligence”) and verb (“shines”), but also draws attention to all of the reasons why the speaker’s mother’s intelligence does not shine on him still the same: time has a tyrannic claim to quench it; it is mortal.

In a new verse-paragraph, the poem shifts into enacting a very different stage in the speaker’s emotional process. The speaker begins a new apostrophe, in a more moderate tone, explicitly drawing a distinction between the portrait and the person portrayed, and it is this apostrophe that charts the course that most of the rest of the poem will follow. The speaker addresses the portrait as a “[f]aithful remembrancer of one so dear,” calling it a

[…]welcome guest, though unexpected here!
Who bidst me honour with an artless song,
Affectionate, a mother lost so long.

He then sets himself to the task the portrait has bid him do, saying

I will obey, not willingly alone,
But gladly, as the precept were her own.

In this second apostrophe, there are no assertions of the impossible beyond the most commonplace personification: the portrait is a “guest” who “bids[…]” the speaker honour his mother with a poem, but, crucially, he obeys “as [i.e. as if] the precept were her own,” the “as” signalling his awareness that it is not, even as the analogy makes his task a joyous one. He then distinguishes explicitly between the portrait’s ability to evoke his memories of his mother and its ability actually to be her, acknowledging that the identification of the painted figure with his real mother in which he indulged only a few lines before is a “dream” or “reverie” created by “Fancy”:

[…] while that face renews my filial grief,
Fancy shall weave a charm for my relief,
Shall steep me in Elysian reverie,
A momentary dream that thou art she.

It is this second apostrophe that sets the terms of the remainder of the poem: it will honour his mother, and it will allow his imagination briefly to console him with the
illusion that she is present. These terms being set, overt discussion of the portrait virtually vanishes from the text. After these opening twenty lines, the speaker delivers a further hundred and one lines about his memories of and affection for his mother, during which he mentions the portrait twice: once seven lines later when he exclaims over “that maternal smile,” and once in the third-to-last line of the poem when he refers to the picture as “this mimic show of thee.”

If the poem makes a show of the speaker acknowledging the reality that the picture is only a picture, its details nonetheless register the pain of his doing so. He begins with an expression of longing – “Oh, that those lips had language!” – that conveys both the intensity of his reaction to the portrait and his immediate, instinctive knowledge that he wants more from it than a picture can give. On the heels of that exclamation, the speaker complains that “[l]ife has passed / With [him] but roughly since [he] heard [his mother] last.” That complaint conveys a great deal of information. It provides further context for the speaker’s intense grief for his mother – the mother whose loss evidently ushered in a period of “but [i.e. exclusively] rough” experiences. It also reveals for the first time the seeds of his initial conflation of the portrait with his real mother that occupies most of the first verse paragraph: he addresses the portrait as “thee” and talks of how long it has been since he “heard thee,” even while acknowledging that hearing is something he cannot now do because “those lips” do not have language. The portrait may lack a voice, but he still insists on addressing it as his mother in the context of talking about hearing her. In the wake of such an exclamation and such a statement, the speaker’s assertion that the picture’s lips truly are his mother’s lips takes on a note of defiance. Rather than immediately acknowledge the futility of talking about having “heard thee last” to a picture, the speaker asserts the impossible in ever more categorical terms for the remainder of the first verse paragraph: “thine,” “thy own,” “the same,” “distinct.”

A similar emotional strain shows in line twenty-seven, a number of lines after the speaker appears to have moved into a calmer phase of his progression toward consolation. Having already acknowledged that it is only a “momentary dream” that the picture is his mother, the speaker nonetheless takes the picture’s facial expression as an answer to a question addressed to his real parent. And while the speaker’s posture of
believing that the portrait’s expression is answering his query is clearly only a posture—a very conventional way of playing with the limits of apostrophe—the poetic form registers a hint of struggle, suggesting the speaker’s intense wish to believe the impossible, and the force of his temptation to let himself believe it, simmering beneath the polite surface of the poetic trope. The speaker asks

My mother! when I learned that thou wast dead,
Say, wast thou conscious of the tears I shed?
Hovered thy spirit o’er thy sorrowing son,
Wretch even then, life’s journey just begun?

He begins to answer his own question with tentative conjectures, but quickly foregoes the conjectures in favour of an assertion reminiscent of the first verse paragraph:

Perhaps thou gavest me, though unfelt, a kiss:
Perhaps a tear, if souls can weep in bliss—
Ah, that maternal smile! It answers—Yes.

The speaker’s sudden apparent certainty here is undercut by the deviations in poetic form. Even as the portrait’s smile seems to bring tidy closure to the speaker’s rhetorical question, the line is the third in a rhymed triplet—the only deviation from heroic couplets in the poem. And while the speaker’s apparent supposition that the portrait’s expression can meaningfully answer a question directed at a departed soul looks like a conventional extension of apostrophe into an imagined dialogue, the slant rhyme of “yes” with the exact rhymes “kiss” and “bliss” suggests that the trope is discordant—that it has transgressed the limits of benign conjecture.

It is no coincidence that the first memory the speaker recounts, after this outburst, is one that allows him obliquely to name the process of painful desire for the impossible that he has just enacted. The memory is of watching his mother’s hearse depart and of being told by her “maidens” that she will return. Explaining why he believed these false reassurances, the speaker says that

What ardently I wished I long believed,
And, disappointed still, was still deceived.
By expectation every day beguiled,
Dupe of to-morrow even from a child.

The adult speaker, unlike his childhood self, has not “long believed” what he has “ardently wished for,” but the ardency of his wishing – his temptation to let himself be beguiled – is made clear precisely by the strain in the language with which he acknowledges that it is not so, or indulges in poetic conventions that recreate the “momentary dream” that it is so. The adult speaker may be the dupe of art only in fancy, where his infantile self has been the “dupe of to-morrow” in earnest, but the linking of that susceptibility to the sheer force of desire is a constant, and his statement that he has been a dupe “even from a child” suggests strongly that, to some degree, he remains one.

Even in the crucial moment when the speaker first explicitly acknowledges the distinction between the painted figure and his real mother, his equivocal language registers some ambivalence at doing so. When he tells the portrait he “will obey, not willingly alone, / But gladly, as the precept were her own,” the speaker’s apostrophe exhibits what Barry calls a “syntactic oddity.” Barry observes that, “although the final clause directs us to read that the speaker will obey not only willingly but also gladly, the metrical expectations and the syntactic order prepare us for a quite different reading: namely, that the speaker is alone not by his own choice but by hers [i.e. his mother’s]” (85). Explicitly, the speaker declares that the picture has bid him honour his mother with poetry and that he will obey the picture’s request as gladly as if it were his mother’s. But the phrasing is ambiguous. As Barry suggests, it is not until after he has said “not willingly alone” that the speaker adds “but gladly,” and in the intervening moment the reader is apt to interpret “not willingly alone” as a complaint: I will obey, notwithstanding that I am unwilling to be alone. I would push this insight further, and suggest that the completion of the syntactic unit does not entirely resolve the ambiguity. Is the speaker not only willing, but also glad to do the picture’s bidding, or is he unwilling to be alone, but nonetheless glad to do the picture’s bidding? In the context of the poem, the first of these is clearly the primary meaning, but Cowper’s choice of syntax briefly opens up other, conflicting interpretive possibilities. Thus, even as the speaker explicitly acknowledges the distinction between the portrait and his mother, even as he backs away from the ecstatic but wilful mis-recognition with which the poem opens, and
even as he shifts gears from futile longing to *glad* make-believe, his language is equivocal enough to suggest pain and inward struggle.

By the time the poem concludes, the speaker has regained his hard-won acceptance of loss, and, not by coincidence, his attitude to the picture has shifted considerably. He still apostrophizes his mother, but he is now apostrophizing his real mother – her soul, not truly lost to him, but absent because she is in heaven. He now distinguishes without ambivalence or equivocation between his absent mother and the picture, which he refers to as “this mimic show of thee.” Acknowledging the impossibility of really reliving his childhood, the speaker expresses contentment with seeming to have done so. “Time unrevoked,” he says,

> ...has run
> His wonted course, yet what I wished is done
> By contemplation’s help, not sought in vain,
> I seem to have lived my childhood o’er again;
> To have renewed the joys that once were mine,
> Without the sin of violating thine:
> And, while the wings of fancy still are free
> And I can view this mimic show of thee,
> Time has but half succeeded in his theft—
> Thyself removed, thy power to soothe me left.

The speaker’s terms have altered considerably since the first three verse paragraphs. A hundred lines previously, he had forecast that “fancy” would “weave a charm for [his] relief,” but he now pairs “the wings of fancy” with the much more staid term “contemplation,” and he speaks not of charms and relief but rather of “renew[ing] the joys that once were [his].” Where the picture had been first “thee” (his mother), and then a “faithful remembrancer” of her and a “welcome guest,” it is now merely a “mimic show”: a silent representation that evokes his mother without engendering any expectation of illusion or verisimilitude. Thus, although the speaker explicitly gives “the wings of fancy” a place in his consoled psyche, those wings are not quite as “free” as he claims: their more extravagant flights have been displaced by the common-sense attitude
of these concluding lines. As I have earlier suggested, it is standard in elegiac poetry for a concluding attitude of consolation to displace the attitudes adopted by the speaker at earlier points in the poem, but a crucial distinction here is that the initial attitudes being displaced are not only, or even chiefly, lamentation, but rather a particular reaction to the picture itself: an attitude of exuberant mis-recognition. Remembering is one thing, and imagining is one thing, but ecstatically addressing a picture or misrecognizing a portrait as containing or exuding the “intelligence” of a departed soul are a far cry from the balanced renewing of past joys that the speaker calmly champions in these last lines.

The real meat of Cowper’s critique of conventional portrait-ekphrasis is to be found in how the speaker achieves this shift: in the content of what lies between his still-conflicted willingness to be reassured by the picture’s “maternal smile” and his calm reference to the picture as “this mimic show.” At line 80, having elaborated on a series of memories of his childhood, the speaker begins another rhetorical question, this time to be answered without the help of the portrait:

Could those few pleasant hours again appear,
Might one wish bring them, would I wish them here?
I would not trust my heart—the dear delight
Seems so to be desired, perhaps I might.—
But no—what here we call our life is such
So little to be loved, and thou so much,
That I should ill requite thee to constrain
Thy unbound spirit into bonds again.

It is only here, in the words “unbound spirit,” that we get the real stakes of the poem’s critique. The speaker cannot truly bring himself to wish his mother alive again because he knows her to be better off where she is: according to Cowper’s unquestioningly Christian worldview, in paradise. And if her physical body would be a prison, how much more so would be the portrait, if the “intelligence” of her eyes could truly shine out of it. The trope of praising a portrait for capturing its subject’s spirit – and I say capturing advisedly – is absurd because it would be undesirable, even if it were possible, for spirits to be captured or bound by things of the material world. The convention of blessing art
for immortalizing a human spirit is still more absurd, since, in Cowper’s worldview, human spirits are already immortal. This trope of capturing the spirit, in an urbane occasional piece such as Pope’s “Extemporaneous Lines,” seems innocuous enough, but Cowper’s poem suggests that it is not always innocuous – perhaps even that the language of immortality and immortalization has no place in a purely secular, conventional metaphor for praising art. The very intensity of the speaker’s desire in the early sections of the poem for its literal fulfillment, a desire revealed in the subtleties of Cowper’s manipulations of poetic form, necessitates the trope’s rejection in the poem’s conclusion. In these concluding lines, the portrait’s significance becomes precisely that it does not warrant the conventionally hyperbolic blessing the speaker had originally bestowed upon it. The importance of the picture is that it merely appears to have captured the speaker’s mother’s spirit, without actually having done so: its verisimilitude is an illusion of the material senses, and for it to be otherwise would be a violation of the mother’s state of eternal joy.

In the light of this turning point, the words “mimic show” at the poem’s end are a tacit censure of the speaker’s own initial reaction to the portrait. A mimic show is, of course, silent, and the poem thus in one sense ends where it began, with the observation that “those lips” do not “ha[ve] language.” But where the first iteration of this observation is phrased as a protest and followed by twenty lines that exude emotional turmoil, the second is an acknowledgement of the advantages of the portrait’s silence: it is not real, and the speaker can enjoy it without committing the “sin of violating” his mother’s “joys.” But if the speaker’s revised attitude stands as a tacit reproach of the willful protest against the reality of his loss in his first reaction to the portrait, his initial reaction is not, for all its excesses, unusual. It is a version of the most conventional kind of poetic statement about a portrait, slightly re-worked to suit the context of a speaker viewing a portrait of a deceased loved one. The poem’s conclusion, then, is not only a critique of the speaker’s own energetically defiant mis-recognition of the portrait as his mother; it is also a critique of the conventions of portrait-poems: conventions that cannot, Cowper implies, be transposed without consequences to a context in which the emotional stakes are higher than urbane social exchange.
If “The Tears of a Painter” is about the psychic cost of paying a tribute to a lost loved one – about the toll taken by unresolved grief – “On the Receipt” is about the emotional challenge of acceptance, a challenge that must be met anew now that the picture has “renew[ed] [the speaker’s] filial grief.” Both poems use subtle twists of language to reconstruct emotional processes, and both poems explore the ramifications of those processes by turning the conventions of portrait ekphrasis inside out. In the case of “The Tears of a Painter,” the process Cowper reconstructs is the painter Apelles’ trajectory of slow breakdown under the pressure of intense grief, and that process takes shape in part as a shift from one kind of conventional praise for Apelles’ work to another. In “On the Receipt,” the very conventions of portrait ekphrasis become an early stage in an elegiac process that culminates in their rejection. In both cases, Cowper scrutinizes the specific convention of praising a portrait for capturing its subject’s spirit or expression, and he does so in order to pose questions about what kinds of grief and protest at the loss of a loved one are viable.

Cowper’s poems about art offer an opportunity to examine the ways in which the poetic conventions of ekphrasis could be put to use, but they are also a useful starting point for some of the ideas discussed in the other chapters of this thesis. In part this is because Cowper’s writing was influential. In Chapter 5, for instance, I will examine the discourse of spectatorship in Wordsworth’s “Peele Castle”; much of how “Peele Castle” grapples with that discourse is by shifting its addressee between a figure in a painting and a real person (although, crucially, the real person is not the deceased brother whom the poem laments). This fundamental similarity to “On the Receipt of My Mother’s Picture” is very unlikely to be a coincidental product of their shared culture, however. It is much more likely the result of Wordsworth’s reading of, and admiration for, Cowper. But, in other ways, Cowper seems to work with the same set of culturally available tools of thought as the other poets whose work I examine. In Cowper’s poems one sees an insistent focus on the fantasy that visual art can preserve – even immortalize – things that
would otherwise be fleeting. For instance, Cowper’s epistle “To Sir Joshua Reynolds” opens by addressing Reynolds as the “Dear President, whose art sublime / Gives perpetuity to Time.” But, while Heffernan refers to the notion that visual art can stop time as the “ideology of transcendence,” it is nonetheless important to recognize that even the Romantic ekphrases that are least ironic in tone are not as blinded by the fantasy of preservation by art as the term “ideology” suggests. The concluding apostrophe of “The Tears of a Painter” suggests that Apelles’ painting will have the kind of long life his son did not, even if the poem’s conclusion subtly undermines the idea of art transcending time by hinting at the fact that Apelles’ verbally constructed and narrated “glory” has significantly outlived the “image” on which it is supposedly based. The opening passage of “On the Receipt,” as I have noted, includes a parenthetical blessing of “the art that can immortalize” and that “can baffle time’s tyrannic claim / To quench” the intelligence of his mother’s eyes, and, however thoroughly undermined that sentiment is by the end of the poem, its presence nonetheless offers a link to the somewhat later poems discussed in Chapter 4, which interrogate that fantasy of fixity or preservation in different terms.

There are also, however, ways in which Cowper’s work does not fit the same patterns as many of the poems discussed in the other chapters of this thesis. Much of this thesis will explore refractions and extensions of the ideas of the moral philosophers in Romantic poetry – and thus much of it will be concerned with how these poems take up questions about how sympathy works. Cowper’s poems do not operate within the intellectual framework of natural morality or a moral sense; their grappling with questions of what is right and good is much more theologically grounded, as I have suggested in the case of

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36 Heffernan observes that “[t]he idea that a work of visual art perpetuates a fleeting appearance is so deeply embedded in the ideology we inherit from the romantic period that we may be startled to learn just how recently this idea has emerged in the history of discourse about art” (91). Of course the idea that poetry can preserve transitory things (such as people) is very old: Shakespeare’s promise to the fair young man of his sonnets that “this” – the poem – will immortalize him “so long as men can breathe or eyes can see” is only the most famous of myriad examples. But the idea that visual art can achieve this did not become nearly as popular nearly as quickly. That idea did, as we have seen, emerge in classical ekphrastic poetry, but it did not achieve the kind of widespread dominance that it still possesses until the Romantic period.
“On the Receipt.” In many ways Cowper is thus an outlier in the literature of sensibility, since (notwithstanding that he is usually termed a poet of sensibility, and his poems are certainly full of feeling) the questions about feeling he is asking are somewhat differently inflected than those posed by the moral philosophers, and differently inflected from those posed by Wordsworth, Mitford, Keats, and Shelley in the poems I shall discuss in subsequent chapters.

2.4 Poetry about art in the early nineteenth century

A few decades after Cowper composed his rare ekphrases of sensibility, art was a comparatively popular subject for poetry – but it was not the massively popular genre it has sometimes been made out to be. Byron wrote an elegiac lyric ekphrasis entitled “Written Beneath a Picture” in 1812 and included short ekphrases in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. Shelley wrote “Ozymandias” in 1818 and “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci” in 1819. Felicia Hemans’ work, as Grant F. Scott points out in “The Fragile Image,” is laden with ekphrases, from a poem called “The Dying Gladiator” published in her very early collection *The Domestic Affections* in 1812 to her long narrative of artistic production, “Properzia Rossi,” published in *Records of Woman* in 1828. Keats’s ekphrases include not only two of his odes, but also his sonnet on the Elgin Marbles and a number of descriptions in his longer poems, most notably “Endymion.” Wordsworth wrote twenty-three poems about paintings in addition to his famous 1805 poem “Elegiac Stanzas, Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle, in a Storm, Painted by Sir George Beaumont” (Heffernan 94), and Peter Simonsen has identified Wordsworth’s later work as exhibiting an “ekphrastic turn” in his study *Wordsworth and Word-Preserving Arts*; while it is true that many of Wordsworth’s ekphrases are so late that they fall well outside what we normally define as the Romantic period, a respectable number of them were published prior to 1821. Poetry about art was popular – more popular than it had been in the eighteenth century, to be sure. But it was hardly ubiquitous, and its popularity in the Romantic period has sometimes been overestimated by scholars of ekphrasis, beginning with Ian Jack’s influential study. Jack states that “there could be no more vivid illustration of the fashion [for ekphrasis] than the subjects set for Prize Poems at Oxford at this time. In 1806 the subject was ‘A Recommendation of the Study of the
Remains of Ancient Grecian and Roman Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting,’ while from 1810 to 1820 the subject every year was a work of classical art or architecture...” (Jack 215). Jack makes no mention of the topics for 1807-1809, nor could I find any of them. The topics for 1810-1820 were the statue of the Dying Gladiator, the Parthenon, the Apollo Belvidere, the Pantheon, Niobe, the Temple of Theseus, the horses of Lysippus, the Farnese Hercules, the Colosseum, the Iphigenia of Timanthes, and the temple of Diana at Ephesus. But can one university’s prize poems be taken as representative of the literary culture of Britain? The topics for the Chancellor’s Medal poems at Cambridge for the equivalent period look very different: from its founding in 1813 until 1824, the topics were Columbus, Boadicea, Wallace, Mahomet, Jerusalem, Imperial and Papal Rome, Pompeii, Waterloo, and “Evening”: people, places, and events, but never works of art or architecture. Oxford’s Newdigate prize certainly lent lyric poems about art a certain prestige, but Cambridge’s establishment of a competing prize with such different topics suggests that the ekphrastic bent of the Newdigate Prize was seen as part of the unique ethos of the prize itself—a situation more consistent with a moderate increase in the popularity of writing about art than with a major watershed in English letters.

This, then, is the most fundamental context for the works discussed in the three chapters that follow: poetry about art, while not terribly popular in the eighteenth century, nonetheless had a loose and evolving set of conventions associated with it, ranging from dense symbolism and allegory to polite literary compliment. Furthermore, while poems about art did not suddenly become the most influential genre in British letters, they did enjoy a modest rise in popularity, in part because discourse about the visual arts in general began to find its way to a more prominent place in the print culture of Romantic Britain. The chapter that follows will explore how one aspect of the art world’s

37 The only source I have been able to find for this information is an 1824 book entitled *Illustrations, Historical and Descriptive, of the Oxford Newdigate Prize Poems, with Engravings*. The book does not contain the actual poems that won the prizes—only engravings of the artworks and buildings themselves, with prose descriptions.

38 My source for this information is an 1859 edition of *A Complete Collection of the English Poems which have Obtained the Chancellor’s Gold Medal in the University of Cambridge*. 
increased visibility became a tool available to writers of ekphrastic poetry as they asked searching questions about the workings and function of sympathy.

3 Ekphrasis and Public Discourse in the *Annals of the Fine Arts*

This chapter focuses on poems published in early nineteenth-century journals about the fine arts, chiefly James Elmes’s quarterly *The Annals of the Fine Arts*, a magazine that has long been famous for publishing “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and “Ode to a Nightingale,” and that has recently begun to be studied as a literary phenomenon in its own right. This chapter traces its two keystone poems’ participation in their publication context in much the same way that other chapters trace poems’ participation in their larger cultural context. As Jon Klancher has shown, the pages of the *Annals* were the most prominent vehicle for a discourse that was gaining ground in the Romantic period: a discussion of art led by practicing artists who claimed for themselves the position of experts and professionals. The present chapter examines the convergence, in ekphrastic poetry, of this new, public self-fashioning of the art world with ideas about the function and functioning of sympathy. The *Annals* not only provided a ready venue for the publication of ekphrastic poems, but also created a discursive context that such poems could incorporate, exploit, and respond to. A small group of ekphrastic poems published in the *Annals* take advantage of that context, their speakers’ voices adapting to the self-consciously public ethos of the *Annals* in ways that fine-tune their intellectual engagement with ideas about sympathy: how it works, what it accomplishes, and what role it should play in a generalized viewer’s response to art. Moreover, the poems’ engagements with ideas about sympathy in turn heighten the histrionic public-ness of their rhetorical posturing, reinforcing their participation in the journal’s construction of itself as the public face of a public community.

The first half of this chapter, building on Klancher’s research about *The Annals of the Fine Arts* and its predecessor *The Artist*, sets up the readings in the second half by outlining the emergence of an art-world discourse that was self-consciously, even
ostentatiously, public, and examines the role of poetry, including ekphrastic poetry, in that discourse. I take Klancher’s finding – that the Annals and its predecessor The Artist mark the emergence and flourishing of a discourse generated by practicing artists positioning themselves as authorities on art – as a starting point for my own work. I have gone over the archival ground again in the process of concurring with Klancher, and added another level of detail to the existing body of research on the Annals where the aims of this chapter require it. The chapter thus includes a thorough overview of the contents of the Annals, particularly the role of poetry in the journal’s pages, which I hope will prove useful to scholars interested in the journal, whether or not they are studying sensibility. For the purposes of this thesis, however, that research serves the specific purpose of furthering my understanding of how the poems explore the intellectual questions of the culture of sensibility.

The second half of the chapter examines two poems that draw on that discourse in order to think about sympathy. Mary Russell Mitford’s “Sonnet to Mr. Haydon,” read in the context of its venue of publication, appears to borrow a rhetorical posture from that venue: a posture of quasi-editorial disinterestedness that renders its shift at the volta to a posture of obsessively reiterated sympathetic grief all the more striking by contrast. In setting up that shift to be as noticeable as possible, the poem draws attention to its defiance of Adam Smith’s distinction between his own formulation of sympathy as imaginative and an older formulation of it as instantaneous and visual.39 The anonymous poem “On the Monument to be placed in Lichfield Cathedral to the Memory of two only Children,” which is announced in the Annals (and deservedly so) as a work with a complex circulation history, takes on, as a result of the venue and circumstances of its publication, the appearance of a conspicuously public utterance. Consequently, its enactment of its speaker’s struggle for emotional moderation in the face of a compelling artwork assumes an added weight of significance, drawing attention to the poem’s exploration of imaginative sympathy as a tool of self-regulation.

39 See introductory chapter of this thesis.
The two poems that form the heart of this chapter explore ideas closely related to those taken up by the poems discussed elsewhere in the thesis, but this chapter will argue that the specific ethos of the Annals offers these ekphrases a different strategy for approaching such ideas. The intertwined strands of thought about the “sister arts” and the distinction between visual and imaginative sympathy that permeate much eighteenth-century aesthetic and moral philosophy, discussed in the introductory chapter of this thesis, are one such set of ideas. Those ideas will form the backbone of Chapter 4’s investigation of poems by Keats and Shelley, but they also make an appearance here, some of their complexities teased out by a speaker who initially assumes the disinterested posture of a reviewer moving through a self-conscious process of bestowing seemingly public praise on an artwork in sentimental terms. Also present are the ideas about sympathy and spectatorship that form the unifying thread of Chapter 5. These ideas are explored in less detail in the poems from the Annals than in the poems by Wordsworth and Keats in Chapter 5, but they are nonetheless present, informing the showy postures of sympathetic viewing that are crucial to how the poems in the Annals make use of their ostentatiously public venue of publication. But while both of these groupings of ideas are present in the ekphrastic poems printed in the Annals of the Fine Arts, they do not form the core of those poems’ intellectual work. Instead, these sets of ideas play out in the Annals in the service of exploring what role sympathy can and should play in the making and viewing of visual art. Moreover, in the poems investigated here, the ideas that feature so prominently in the keystone texts of other chapters are inflected differently, re-shaped by the texts’ affiliation with the Annals and its histrionic self-imagining as a site of public discourse.

3.1 The Cultural Context of the Annals

3.1.1 Discourse about Art: The Artist

During the early decades of the Romantic period, amid the moderate flourishing of lyric ekphrastic poetry, a new element became prominent in prose discourse about the arts: artists deliberately and self-consciously stepped into the public sphere as authors in order to influence public debate about the arts. This new element could reasonably be said to date back to Sir Joshua Reynolds’ unrelenting pursuit of the status of a
professional: his rigorous self-education, his self-appointed role as a hub of polite discourse, and of course his immensely influential public lectures as president of the Royal Academy. It was, however, a marked departure from public discourse about the arts as it had existed for most of the eighteenth century. In one sense, the British discourse of art as a matter of national concern was already old by the Romantic period. John Barrell traces its evolution over the course of the eighteenth century, arguing that writers promoting the visual arts did so by borrowing the civic humanist language of a public virtue consisting of public spirit and integrity in office among those in a position to devote themselves to national governance. The traditional prestige of history painting is grounded in that discourse: paintings of great leaders in moments of heroism will inspire young men to become great leaders themselves. The type of public discourse about art whose slow demise over the course of the eighteenth century Barrell examines, however, is quite different from the type that emerged, beginning with Reynolds’ dogged pursuit of the status of a genteel professional, in its place. When Barrell talks of public virtue, he is referring to the virtue of fulfilling civic duty – a virtue that could only be attained by a tiny elite. By contrast, when Jon Klancher argues that artists entered the public sphere during the Romantic period, he means the Habermasian public sphere of ongoing political, cultural, and economic discourse accessible to all literate members of society, and mediated largely by periodical publications and other forms of print culture.

As Klancher has shown, the movement of artists assuming the role of public spokespersons gained momentum with the short-lived weekly publication *The Artist* (1807), whose editor Prince Hoare sought to destabilize the authority of learned, privileged connoisseurs and collectors, and to establish the practising artists in the public eye as professionals with knowledge and authority. Klancher makes the case that *The Artist*, despite its rapid failure as a publication, was an important first step in the collective attempt of practicing artists to gain the credibility that would eventually enable the ambitious young painter Benjamin Robert Haydon’s testimony to outweigh that of the learned Richard Payne Knight. In 1816, Haydon wrote a pamphlet that Klancher

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40 *The Artist* ran from March 14 to August 1, 1807: 21 issues in total.
identifies as “the decisive testimony” of the Elgin Marbles debate – the piece of writing that, more than any other, secured Parliament’s purchase of the Marbles. Klancher traces a powerful link between these cultural moments nine years apart, identifying in Haydon’s pamphlet rhetoric derived from The Artist – the language of “professional men,” defined in opposition to connoisseurs and amateurs. Haydon’s pamphlet is a public document, written by a practising artist, that argues for the right of artists to participate in debate about the role of the arts in British culture, and it uses that argument as a key rhetorical strategy for actually winning a public debate. Klancher situates the Annals in this context. Haydon, of course, was a regular contributor to the Annals of the Fine Arts and a friend of the journal’s founder and editor James Elmes; he is usually thought to have influenced the content of the Annals considerably. Moreover, Haydon’s pamphlet of “decisive testimony” is favourably reviewed in the first issue of the Annals. The Annals is the heir apparent of the still young tradition of a new kind of public sphere – one in which those with practical knowledge of the arts could compete for credibility with the established elite.

3.1.2 Poems from The Artist

One question that Klancher has not addressed is the extent to which the burgeoning genre of poetry about art figured in the art-world discourse that flourished in the years leading up to the founding of the Annals: were the two phenomena related, and was there overlap between them? The Oxford Prize poems, of course, were written by exactly the kind of privileged, educated connoisseurs and dilettanti whose authority Prince Hoare set out to challenge in his publication of The Artist, and The Artist itself contains very little poetry, which seems to suggest that the two were quite separate. But Hoare included literature among the arts he sought to professionalize, suggesting that the impulse to reject aristocratic amateurism in the visual arts was not inherently bound up in an impulse to reject their traditional sorority with poetry. Moreover, the few poems published in The Artist do participate in the paper’s self-fashioning as a public venue for artistic discourse.
An “Ode, to the Honourable W—— L——” urges its addressee to take seriously the public duty imposed upon him by his innate artistic ability. Introduced by the editor as a “poetical exhortation [...] to a young gentleman of distinguished talents,” the poem addresses itself to a “[t]hrice happy youth,” lucky enough to be favoured not only by “all the tuneful Nine” but also by “Fortune.” The poem reminds this young person that “not amid the gawdy throng / Of fashion’s idle train / Is caught the soul-inspiring song” – that in order to fulfil the promise of his abilities he must seek “Inspiration” in solitude, beside a “slow-winding stream,” on a “woody mountain’s side,” in a “gloomy dell,” in a “forest sear,” amid “alpine snows,” or in “hollow caverns drear.” Yet if this ode insists that artistic achievement requires solitary, private reflection, it also insists that such achievement is a public act with public consequences. It its final stanza, the poem pleads

Let not the precious boon of heaven
   Alight on thee in vain! ——
   And O! far less, the blessings given
   Be proved to thee a stain!

It then bids the young gentleman

   In Freedom’s, in Religion’s cause,
   Expect the wise man’s just applause;
   While curses dire, both loud and deep,
   The tyrant’s advocate await.
   Bitter remorse, and self-turn’d hate,
   Shall once more “murder sleep.”

“Ode, to the Honourable W—— L——” may urge its addressee to forgo the realm of the social in the short term, but it also reminds him that the cultivation of personal talent is inevitably a contribution to a social and public sphere. In appearing in The Artist, the poem also pre-emptively makes a public spectacle of the young man, even if the public in question is limited to readers of The Artist. With his identity only partially veiled, W. L. is introduced to the readership of The Artist as a young person of abilities – a rising talent
to take note of.\textsuperscript{41} Even if only a few readers recognized the initials, young W. L. is here brought momentarily into the spotlight, and the expectation of his future performance is established. As a consequence, his success or failure in his artistic ambitions would be equally public; the poem’s very publication denies W. L. the chance to be an inconspicuous failure.

Another poem, published in \textit{The Artist} on May 16, 1807, explores a different facet of an artist’s relationship with the public. “The Dead Alive,” a short satirical piece, tells the story of a painter named Milo who “enjoy[s] a starving kind of fame,” painting well-respected landscapes that he cannot sell. Milo fakes his own death, and his works are auctioned off to “crowds of Conoscenti” [sic] for high prices; Milo then emerges from behind a screen, asks that his patrons “forgive / This harmless strategem to live,” and promises that “since you’ve been thus lib’ral to my ghost, / I’ll paint you better things at half the cost.” In “The Dead Alive,” the artist’s public is perverse and hypocritical, willing to pay exorbitantly for the work of a recently dead painter (or for “daubings Poussin never drew” and “[v]ile copies, father’d upon Claude”), but unwilling to pay at all for the same works while the painter lives. The painter, however, is dependent on that perverse public. In narrating Milo’s comically implausible method of coaxing a living wage out of his crowd of admirers, “The Dead Alive” mocks the irrationality and gullibility of well-to-do patrons of the arts. But by representing a painter dependent on an unreasonable public to begin with, the poem also advocates for artists to the broader public – at least to those interested enough in art to be reading Hoare’s periodical. Like any satire, “The Dead Alive” offers at least the potential that those reading it will be pre-

\textsuperscript{41} The identity of W. L. cannot be definitively established, but it is possible that the poem’s author is addressing the landscape painter William Linton, who at the time of the poem’s publication (on April 18, 1807) was about to turn sixteen (on April 22, 1807). Although not from parents as affluent as the poem’s reference to “Fortune” would seem to suggest, Linton had shown considerable promise in landscape painting even as a teenager, practising during holiday visits to an estate in Windermere held by his mother’s family. At sixteen, Linton was articled for five years in a merchant’s office in Liverpool, temporarily putting a halt to his aspirations as an artist; if a well-meaning mentor were going to enjoin him not to forget his true calling, four days before his sixteenth birthday would have been the time to do it. Linton \textit{did} continue to practice painting, making “truant” visits to the Lake District (DNB), where the streams, mountains, and dells recommended by the author of the “Ode” would have been in abundance. Of course the phrase “the tuneful Nine” suggests that W.L. may have been a writer, rather than a painter.
emptively taught to do better – that wealthy patrons reading *The Artist* will be
discouraged from treating still-living English painters with the same perverse disregard
as the “Conoscenti” in the poem. In a weekly journal meant to serve as a public forum
for professional artists, this satirical commentary is particularly significant, in that it not
only participates in the journal’s presentation of the visual arts as a profession, but also
offers an implicit commentary on the relationship between the artists who contribute to
*The Artist* and the art-world amateurs, patrons and critics at whom that self-presentation
as professionals is aimed.

Where “Ode, to the Honourable W—— L——” makes use of the public nature of *The
Artist* to encourage a young artist to remember the public nature of an artistic career,
“The Dead Alive” speaks more directly to the public audience itself, tacitly requesting
the same respect and support for accomplished living artists that the journal itself sought
to foster. Both poems, in other words, are very much part of the professionalizing
discourse about the fine arts that was emerging in the period, and that Prince Hoare
actively sought to foster. Poems constructing themselves as public utterances in print
periodicals may have been nothing new, but poems doing so as part of a broader impetus
to emancipate the fine arts from aristocratic patronage, joining their voices to an
emerging chorus of professional artists dominated by painters and sculptors, was a
phenomenon made possible by the character of *The Artist* itself. After a lapse of years,
that possibility reappeared and grew in a new journal, creating a space in which
ekphrastic poems could tacitly support the visual arts’ assertion of their claim to public
status; furthermore, in this new venue, poems could make use of that self-assertion,
participating in it partly to refine their thinking through of questions about sympathy.

3.2 The Annals of the Fine Arts

3.2.1 Description

A decade after the publication of Hoare’s short-lived weekly journal, another periodical
about the arts made its debut. Klancher argues that the newer periodical, launched in the
wake of the Elgin Marbles controversy, “basked in the glow of the artists’ victory over
their long-time antagonists the connoisseurs” (254). I would argue that it did more than
bask. The pages of Elmes’s quarterly journal reveal a determination to continue asserting the position of the fine arts as deserving of widespread public attention, and an equal determination to assert the position of the Annals itself as the chief venue and mediator of active public discourse about the arts. Eventually, a tension develops in the journal’s pages between Elmes’s attempts to be an even-handed mediator of a genuinely equitable debate and his attempts to advocate for the specific interests of practicing artists, and that tension forms a crucial part of the context that the ekphrastic poems I examine make use of as they engage the intellectual culture of sensibility.

The Annals of the Fine Arts was edited by James Elmes and published quarterly, each issue following roughly the same format, with some variation from one quarter to the next; the final issue of each annual volume came out on January 1st of the following year, with a Preface to the whole volume. Each issue started with a series of essays or letters from correspondents that took up roughly half of the journal, and ended with a) a list of “Notices of Works in Hand” (i.e. works of art currently being created), b) a few pages of “Original Poetry,” and c) some back matter such as a list of paintings and their purchasers from a prominent exhibition or an annual registry of professional artists’ names and addresses. In between was a long series of reviews (of exhibitions, of books, and of prints), some anecdotal or biographical material about prominent artists, and the “transactions” of various societies that supported the arts, most prominently the Royal Academy and the British Institution, but also the Artists’ Benevolent Society, the Society of Dilettanti, the American Academy of the Fine Arts, and even the Highland Society of London, should they happen to elect an artist as an honorary member.42 Jeffrey Cox wittily – and not inaccurately – labels the Annals “a kind of Chronicle of Higher Education for early-nineteenth-century artists” (150), noting that “the Annals of the Fine

42 I have seen all seventeen issues of the Annals at Harvard’s Houghton Library, and I have photographic reproductions of all of the poems from the copies in the Houghton collection. Since I do not have photographic reproductions of any entire issues, however, my overall description of the non-poetic content of the journal is based on the full-issue PDFs that are available online: 1-3, 8-11, and 15-16 (nine of the total seventeen issues). The issues are numbered consecutively but begin with a three-issue volume, so that the volumes go 1.1-3, 2.4-7, 3.8-11, 4.12-15, and 5.16-17, and the spring issue, rather than the last issue of the year, is always a multiple of 4. Issues 10, 11, and 14 contain no poems.
Arts, which McGann identifies as one of the ‘chief ideological organs’ of romantic classicism, strikes me less as promulgator of an ideal of classical art than as a trade journal” (149).

The first few issues of the *Annals* are self-consciously even-handed, the editor even stating that he hopes to overcome the mutual hostility between the Royal Academy and the much newer British Institution by printing their transactions side by side. By the third volume, however, battle lines are drawn. The *Annals* become fiercely opposed to the Academy, denouncing its exclusionary politics, its failure to promote grand genres such as history painting, its disappointing exhibitions, and the poor quality of its once-renowned lectures. Although a few opposing articles are printed, they are laced with editorial footnotes contesting the authors’ arguments. Where the Royal Academy had once – just a decade before – stood for the enfranchisement of the professional artists who were its fellows and professors over and against the leisured amateurs who governed the British Institution, it came to stand – in the eyes of James Elmes – for a narrow-minded and exclusionary professional establishment that discouraged new talent and that pandered to the taste for portraiture amongst wealthy clients.

Much of the material in the *Annals* is anonymous – so much so that it is difficult to know how many of the supposed correspondents were actually the editor’s inventions. A few correspondents habitually signed their names (John Bailey and John Britton, for instance), but most signed only their initials: A.Z., D.Z., S.K., C.J.S., W.A., H., and so forth. Haydon, the *Annals’* most regular named contributor by far, and the driving force behind the circle of artists and writers out of which the magazine grew, signed his work alternately as Benjamin Robert Haydon, B.R. Haydon, or B.R.H. A few regular correspondents used distinctive pseudonyms, such as Philo-Graphicus, Statuarius, Philotecton Londinensis, and Somniator. Somniator, whose articles consisted of prose dream-vision attacks on the Royal Academy, became something of a fixture in the later issues of the *Annals*. The prefatory material to the fourth volume even includes a short play starring “Editor,” “Somniator,” and “The Ghost of Barry” (a recently deceased painter who had stood up to the Royal Academy), all three of them exclaiming in triumph over the *Annals’* astonishing feat of having survived to the end of its fourth year.
– double the life-span of its weekly predecessor *The Artist*. But was Somniator a real correspondent, or, as seems more likely, a pseudonym for either Elmes or Haydon?

For all that some of the supposed correspondents may have been masks for either Elmes himself or Haydon, the fact remains that the *Annals* busily cultivated the appearance of being a democratic public forum with a variety of eager contributors. Much of the journal’s most explicit self-fashioning takes place in its paratextual material – not only the Preface to each volume, printed at the end of the year when the issues were collected together, but also the notes “To Correspondents” with which most individual issues begin. The ninth issue, the second in Volume 3, begins with a note to correspondents that is fully five pages long, defending the journal from the charge of printing an undue quantity of writing by and about Haydon (332-36) – defending it, in short, from the accusation of being insufficiently public, accessible, and democratic. More typical, however, are shorter notes to correspondents that make much of Elmes’s difficulties finding room for the supposedly immense quantity of correspondence he receives. The eighth issue begins with a one-page note to correspondents that mentions fully nine submissions from readers: a letter by Haydon about the politics of history painting, a report on an architecture-related trial, a description of a painting by Mr. Ward, a letter and some verses from “E.C.,” a “second Letter from an English painter at Rome,” a catalogue of Tomkins’ prints submitted by “C.P. Student,” two letters from “Mr. C - - e,” and some type of apparently hostile correspondence from an “H.D.” and an “A.Z.Y” (x). The majority of these are mentioned in order to excuse their absence from the eighth issue. Some are “unavoidably postponed to our next,” some will be “in our next, if possible,” and some are “under consideration.” Few of these items, however, actually make it into the *Annals* at any point, and a cynic might doubt that some of them ever existed, particularly since so much of the material that did appear in the *Annals* throughout its four year life span consisted of lengthy extracts from other publications. The report on the trial really does appear in the next issue, as does the letter from Rome. The description of Mr. Ward’s painting is eventually cancelled, because, according to Elmes’s statement in the “Works in Hand” section for issue 10, he “really could not find room” (527). If any of E.C.’s correspondence found its way into Volume 3, I have not
found it, nor have I found C.P. Student’s catalogue of Tomkins’s prints, or Mr. C - - e’s two letters. Haydon’s letter is postponed repeatedly because, as Elmes admits in another note to correspondents six months later, Haydon hasn’t finished writing it (336). As this last example attests, Elmes’s mere promise that a given item will appear “in our next” is no guarantee of its existence; some of what goes on in the notes to correspondents may well be an ostentatious attempt to make the Annals look like a more thriving site of dialogue than it was. At any rate, Elmes certainly does not downplay the volume of correspondence he receives from readers.

What makes the note to correspondents for the eighth issue especially revealing is the overtly partisan debate that bookends its detailed list of postponed items. Elmes begins by diving straight into what was by then the Annals’ ongoing critique of the value and integrity of the Royal Academy, saying

Not one of the questions put by us in our last Number to the supporters of the present system of the Royal Academy have been satisfactorily answered; or even attempted beyond general denials, and some little abuse. They may therefore be considered as admitted, for we have had much conversation with many able friends and defenders of that Body, who have been compelled, however reluctantly, to admit their justice.

Attacks on the Academy are a running theme in the Annals, and at the end of 1818 Elmes uses the Preface to Volume 3 to make a sustained argument for his critique, but this note to correspondents from the start of 1818 immediately frames that running theme as a lively conversation. Moreover, it frames the Annals itself as both the site and the moderator of that conversation, as well as a vocal participant: “we” have put questions to the readers, and “we” are determining what kind of response constitutes a satisfactory answer. Unsatisfactory answers – “general denials, and some little abuse” – will not, it is implied, be printed. Elmes’s use of the verb “admit” is surely pointed: he claims that the absence of satisfactory answers suggests that his questions can “be considered as admitted” (which of course reveals that the questions were really arguments), and many able defenders of the Academy have been “compelled” to “admit their justice.” In the other sense of the word, however, none of the opposing faction’s actual arguments are
admitted into the pages of the Annals. This insinuation is made more explicit towards the end of the note, when Elmes says

As to H.D., A.Z.Y., and all such correspondents, we put such letters where they deserve—into the fire. To differ with some men is a crime; unable to refute by argument, they descend to the meanness of inferring bad motives. We shall persevere as we have began [sic], and beg these writers, if they want insertions, to send us reasonings, and not ipse dixits.\(^{43}\)

Here Elmes both reminds his readers of the “some little abuse” he claims to have received, and pointedly reminds his would-be correspondents that he holds the power of bestowing the “insertions” they supposedly vie for and covet. In short, the paratextual materials reveal the extent to which the Annals wanted to be—and tried very hard to present itself as—a genuinely public forum for discussion.

The seeming contradiction between the self-consciously public, democratically accessible ethos of the Annals and the sheer volume of art-world insider squabbling that actually went on in its pages\(^{44}\) lent the journal a special kind of appeal. On the one hand, readers who were not part of the art world could catch glimpses of its inner workings, learn about the alliances and rifts between celebrity artists, and read a steady stream of anecdotes and short biographies. On the other hand, readers of all stripes could find themselves tacitly invited to join the conversation. Those not well enough versed in art to compose whole articles could still write to recommend extracts from other works—a practice for which the pages of the Annals provide ample precedent (D.Z, for example, sent in an extract from a letter signed R.J.L. that was published in Barry’s Works).\(^{45}\) It is precisely this mix of insider glimpses into the art world and open invitation to participate that the two poems discussed in the second half of this chapter recreate and exploit. The

\(^{43}\) **Ipse dixit**: “he, himself, said it”—i.e. an unsupported assertion relying on the authority of the person making it.

\(^{44}\) For example, Haydon complaining about the Academy’s treatment of his students, which produced a reply from a semi-anonymous contributor, to which Elmes added many hostile footnotes.

\(^{45}\) The extract appeared in issue 3.8, in the spring of 1818.
Mitford sonnet has all the glamour of an insider piece – a semi-anonymous piece of correspondence from a poet to a painter that appears to lift back the veil from their friendship. The anonymous poem “On the Monument,” by contrast, is an extract from another publication submitted by an unnamed reader. The fact that they fit so comfortably into the characteristic content of the Annals inevitably draws the reader’s attention to the public and performative elements of their speakers’ utterances.

3.2.2 The Role of Poetry in the Annals

In the pages of the Annals, poetry is ambiguously one of the fine arts or a part of the verbal discourse that surrounds the fine arts. The Annals of the Fine Arts was never meant to be a literary magazine, and in general poetry is not discussed as one of the arts. Painting, sculpture, engraving, and architecture are the most popular subjects. Gardening is at least as frequently mentioned as poetry. Poets are not included in the list of working artists at the back of each volume. In other words, if we take the Annals to be paradigmatic, the privileging of professional expertise and the structuring of a new kind of public artistic sphere were driven by forces within the profession of the specifically visual arts, and do not seem to have extended to the literary, musical or dramatic arts.

Nevertheless, poetry does appear, if only rarely, among the fine arts to which the journal attends. The first issue contains a long essay on Thomson’s poem Liberty as one of the five substantial essays at the start of the issue, and the early issues of the Annals include items such as a verse toast given at an art society dinner – items that blurred the lines between the seemingly insular world of artists and the world of poets and poetry. Moreover, as I have argued, the earlier journal The Artist had set a precedent for including poets, novelists, and playwrights in the class of contributors who stood to gain stature from the democratization of art discourse.

The most obvious way in which poetry was included in the Annals is also the trickiest to assess. Poetry seems to have been important to how Elmes conceived of the journal, but original poetry about the fine arts wasn’t so easy to come by. Only about half of the poems published in the Annals (thirteen out of twenty-seven) comfortably fit that description. Moreover, it is hard to know what to make of the placement of the “Original
Poetry” section at the back of the journal. On the one hand, the back is a position of comparative prominence – almost as easy to find as the front. On the other hand, several issues (three out of the total seventeen) lack a poetry section altogether, with no explanation in the paratextual material. Did Elmes simply run out of verses to publish? Or was he too caught up in publishing unusual and lengthy features such as the “Answer to an Attack upon the Annals” that takes up a great deal of space in the tenth issue, and did he simply run out of pages? Although the first issue of the Annals specifies that the original poetry section is devoted to poems about the fine arts, subsequent issues are less strict on this point. One poem actually has nothing to do with the fine arts at all.

Across the fourteen issues in which it appeared, the “Original Poetry” section of the Annals included twenty-seven poems in total, a little less than two-thirds of them actually recent and original. The evident difficulty of finding enough original poetry to maintain the section is attested to by the evolution of its title: at the start of the second volume, the name of the section changed from “Original Poetry on the Subject of the Fine Arts” to simply “Original Poetry; “On the Fine Arts” reappeared briefly in the sixth number (the third in Volume 2), only to vanish for good. In the final two numbers of the journal, the section is titled simply “Poetry.”

The poems culled from various sources to compensate for the shortage of original works vary. The third number of the Annals contains a four-page extract from a previously published verse critique of a British Gallery exhibition five years earlier. The sixth number, for the fall of 1817, contains a poem congratulating Henry Tresham on his election to the Professor’s Chair of Painting of the Royal Academy in 1807 (Tresham held the post until 1809 and died in 1814). The seventh, eighth and ninth numbers contain only original poems, but the tenth and eleventh contain no poems at all. The twelfth issue includes an elegant sonnet extracted from the Literary Pocket Book, edited by Leigh Hunt, along with a poem from Charles Lamb’s new book, which functions as advertising for Lamb as much as filler for the Annals. The only poem in the journal’s final number is a Latin poem about one of Haydon’s pictures, extracted from The Champion.
Of the fourteen original poems published in the *Annals*\(^{46}\), ten of them are unambiguously about art or the arts. Of those ten, one is in Italian. Three of them deal explicitly with art-world politics. Only one poem, Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” has nothing whatsoever to do with the fine arts, but several others are only tenuously related to art. “Lines Addressed to Susan, in America” mentions Susan’s portrait only briefly, although the lengthy editorial comment that precedes it emphasizes the importance of the portrait in inspiring the poem’s composition. Still more tenuously, “Monody on Francis Gray, Esq. who died January last, in his thirty-fifth year” says nothing whatsoever about art, but the prefatory material explains that Francis Gray was a great supporter of the arts. “Stanzas on seeing several Views of the Grounds at White Knights, painted by T. C. Hofland, Esq.” is recognizable as an ekphrasis only because of its title: the poem itself talks of the Duke of Marlborough’s taste in cultivating his estate, but does not mention Hofland or his paintings.

As in *The Artist*, the poetry section of the *Annals* seems to have contributed to the journal’s self-presentation as a public forum, especially in the early issues. The poems in the first number are an epistle to Haydon commenting on his role in the Elgin Marbles debate and a verse address to a charitable artists’ society, thoroughly in keeping with the journal’s publication of the proceedings of such societies. The second number contains three poems, two of which derive their chief interest from their air of contributing to such a public forum. The first of these is a satirical quatrain about Richard Payne Knight, Haydon’s principal opponent in the debate over the Marbles, entitled “On the Evidence

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\(^{46}\) It is possible that some of these fourteen poems were in fact previously published elsewhere, but not noted as such in the *Annals*. Although Elmes carefully notes the prior publication of several poems, he does not acknowledge the prior publication of Keats’s two sonnets “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles” and “To Mr. Haydon with a Sonnet on Seeing the Elgin Marbles,” both of which had appeared simultaneously in the *Champion* and the *Examiner* a year before their appearance in the *Annals* (Stillinger 428), nor does he acknowledge the prior publication of Wordsworth’s two sonnets “Upon the Sight of a Beautiful Picture” (which had appeared in Wordsworth’s 1815 *Poems*) and “To B.R. Haydon, Esq.” (which had appeared in both the *Champion* and the *Examiner* in 1816). For complete publication histories of these poems, see the editorial matter of Stillinger’s edition of Keats’s *Complete Poems* and of Ketcham’s volume of Wordsworth’s *Shorter Poems, 1807-1820* for the Cornell Wordsworth series. The fourteen poems I am treating as original are those for which I myself can find no earlier record of publication.
given before the Select Committee of the House of Commons respecting the value of the Elgin Marbles:"

While Day believes them ’bove all price,
Knight thinks a small sum would suffice;
Thus still we find that Day and Knight
Differ as darkness does from light.

“On the Evidence” offers very little to its readers beyond a clever pun on Knight’s name, and the invocation of some traditional poetic tropes to complement that pun. The reader’s pleasure in perusing the poem depends entirely on “getting” the pun and recognizing the allusion to recent events.

The second poem in Volume 1, issue 2 of the Annals, while a less overt intervention in public debate, showcases still better Elmes’s determination that the poetry section should participate in the ethos of the Annals as a vibrant public forum. When combined with its editorial preface, it amounts to an art-world inside joke made accessible to a wider audience – it exploits the celebrity of an established artist even as it constructs that celebrity for the benefit of the non-initiate and humorously undermines it in the name of tongue-in-cheek partisan politics. “Lines Addressed to T. Phillips, Esq. R.A.,” by “William Lewis, Artist,” is introduced with an editorial preface apologizing for its poor quality and explaining that

[w]e insert the following verbatim et literatim, to shew our impartiality,
and that we might not be accused of keeping back a panegyric on a Member of the Academy; but we fear the Gentleman here lauded, will not be very proud of his poet, unless, as it has been suggested to us, Mr. Lewis is quizzing his friend Phillips.

The poem itself, while neither boldly original nor exquisitely executed, would be merely a banal poem of praise without this preface to pique the reader’s interest. A reader encountering the poem without comment would be as likely to be bored by its predictable tropes and sometimes confusing syntax as to take any comic delight in them. In a moment of hyperbole, Lewis declares that Phillips is “[n]ot vainly called the Titian
of the day,” and, rather conventionally proclaims that his paintings show “[g]reat nature’s charms arrayed in beauty’s dress.”

Lewis reworks the equally conventional praise that the painter preserves the faces of his subjects beyond their own lifetimes. In doing so, he makes the first of several abrupt shifts, moving suddenly from praising a specific painting of a Mrs. Whitmore to imagining the circumstance of a generalized bereaved person looking at a painting of a lost loved one. “Who,” the poem asks,

... but in deepest admiration fix’d,
Must own a Whitmore’s charms pourtray’d by thee,
Or oft with Love and tender sorrow mix’d,
Gaze on the face they’ve long been used to see.

Perhaps long since laid in the silent tomb
Or else in distant countries far away
Or torn from parents in its earliest bloom,
In youth’s sweet morning or in manhood’s day.

After the abrupt shift from Mrs. Whitmore’s painting to a generalized painting, the hypothetical mourner’s possible relationships to the painted figure here extend for fully six lines. The new sentence (and new quatrain) that concludes this passage, however, shifts again to a different kind of conventional praise, exclaiming

But these [i.e. such lost loved ones] thy graceful pencil bids to live
And may recall the soul to Virtue’s way.

The sudden introduction of the idea of paintings deterring their viewers from bad behaviour is then explained as an extension of Phillips’s ability to preserve lost loved ones in portraits: it is the portrait of lost loved ones that may recall the soul of the bereaved viewer to virtue.

47 This is a reference to Phillips’s 1810 painting of Catherine Thomason, Mrs. Thomas Whitmore, of the Apley estate in Shropshire. The National Trust collection includes an 1850 reproduction of this painting by Charles Turner, also a member of the Royal Academy.
Haply the gentle look may seem to give
The kind advice which bids them not to stray.

These shifts – from Mrs. Whitmore’s portrait, to a generalized viewer looking at a portrait of a deceased loved one, to the various fates that might have separated the viewer from the loved one, to the morally salutary effect of such paintings on such bereaved viewers – are slightly hard to follow, in spite of the thoroughly conventional nature of each piece of praise. The poem’s syntax does not help; while not so muddled as to impede comprehension, it nonetheless seems inexpertly constructed. The plural pronoun “they” (in “the face they’ve long been used to see”) stands in only awkwardly for the person or persons postulated in “[w]ho but [...] must own [...] or gaze,” and the objective inflection of the plural in “advice which bids them not to stray” is still harder to assign an antecedent to in the wake of the singular “soul” (“may recall the soul”). The plural “these” refers not to the viewers, but to the faces of lost loved ones, in spite of the singular “face” in “gaze on the face they’ve long been used to see.”

These minor flaws in the poem’s execution might escape notice, except that “Lines Addressed to T. Phillips” both begins and ends with a discussion of its own inadequacy – a conventional disclaimer thoroughly in keeping with the conventional tropes of the poem itself, but one that opens up a space for the interpretation that Elmes’s editorial note suggests. The poem begins by calling itself “[a]n humble tribute” to a much greater “worth,” and the speaker laments that “[s]mall power have I alas too small to sing / His magic art whose work’s almost divine.” The poem ends on a still more pronounced note of modesty:

Farewell, great man! thy works best speak thy praise,
Yet let the Intention sanctify the deed,
Poets alone cannot confer a name,
Thy fame is fixed without a Poet’s aid.

This concluding stanza, in implying that the “deed” of writing the poem requires apology – that Lewis’s good intentions must be invoked to compensate for the poem’s inability to “speak” Phillips’s praise as well as his own works do – opens up a space for the interpretation that Elmes claims has been “suggested” to him – that Lewis is well aware
of how faulty the poem is, and sent it to be published as a friendly, self-deprecating jest. But the self-effacing opening and conclusion certainly are not decisive evidence in favour of such a reading. In the absence of editorial comment, the poem could be reasonably perceived as ludicrously bad, but it might just as reasonably be perceived as merely insipid – hackneyed, but not so hackneyed as to provoke laughter.

The editorial preface gives the poem interest by enacting a carefully balanced set of postures. It flaunts the journal’s supposed impartiality by pointing out that “Lines Addressed to T. Phillips” praises a member of the Academy, the institution to which Haydon and his faction (including Elmes) were vehemently opposed. But even in laying claim to such impartiality the editorial comment reveals the real bias of the Annals by immediately pointing out how bad the poem is. It prepares readers to be amused by the ham-handedness of the poem, but at the same time diffuses any sense of its own mean-spiritedness by acknowledging that, in all probability, the poem was meant as a joke. Lastly, even as it slyly undermines the prestige of Phillips’s position as a Royal Academician by framing the panegyric as ludicrous, the editorial preface also tacitly frames Phillips as a person of sufficient interest that his “quizzing” by his friend is worth reading. And in generating an aura of celebrity for established artists, the Annals helps to construct the art world of London as a public sphere of which it, the Annals, is the forum.

It is not only in the early numbers of the Annals that poetry participates in the journal’s self-construction as a venue of public discourse. George Stanley’s irregular sonnet48 “On Seeing the Portrait of Wordsworth, by Haydon” makes a show not only of its own public-ness, but also of the public context of two poems published six months earlier. Stanley’s poem appears in the ninth issue (the second in Volume 3), in June 1818, sixth months after Wordsworth himself had published two sonnets in the Annals, one of them addressed to Haydon. As Elmes’s footnote points out, the portrait in question was on display in the Spring Garden Exhibition at the time of the poem’s publication. The irregular sonnet thus acts in part as an advertisement for Haydon’s work. It does more

48 The poem is only 13 lines long, but it is structured very like an Italian sonnet: it is in iambic pentameter, with the rhyme scheme abba cdec dfgfg (stanza breaks added for ease of reading).
than that, however. It is composed in imitation of Wordworth’s own Miltonic style, beginning

Great intellect is here! whether it speak
The Poet’s or the Painter’s genius high
Contemplating the things remote that lie
Beyond the sight of other mortals.

But Stanley’s poem echoes more than Wordworth’s style. In the exclamatory syntax of its opening, in its pairing of a generalized poet and painter as comparable artists using a “whether... or” clause, and even in its designation of genius as “high,” it echoes Wordworth’s own sonnet “To B.R. Haydon, Esq.,” published in the *Annals* six months previously. Wordworth’s sonnet opens

High is our calling, Friend!—Creative art
(Whether the instrument of words she use,
Or pencil pregnant with ethereal hues,)
Demands the service of a mind and heart,
Though sensitive, yet, in their weakest part,
Heroically fashioned.

In echoing Wordworth’s, Stanley’s poem seems to be joining a pre-existing, very public, conversation between Wordworth and Haydon. In reality, however, it does not so much join as create that conversation. It does this by bringing into public view a context that remains unspoken in Wordworth’s poems. Wordworth’s two sonnets in the seventh number of the *Annals* roughly coincide chronologically with Haydon’s drawing of his portrait,49 and their appearance in the magazine Haydon was so involved in may well have been a gesture of kindness to Haydon in the wake of the portrait-

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49 Haydon had worked with Wordworth twice, once in 1815, to make a life mask of him in preparation for including a portrait of him in his massive history painting *Christ’s Entry into Jerusalem*, not completed until 1820, and once in 1818, to draw the chalk portrait referred to by Stanley. Haydon would, of course, work with Wordworth a third time in 1842, painting the famous full-length portrait of the elderly Wordworth on Hellvellyn, head bowed and arms crossed, a painting that would in turn prompt Elizabeth Barret Browning to commemorate it with a sonnet.
sitting. Nevertheless, Wordsworth’s two sonnets make no mention of the portrait. The first is about an unrelated, possibly fictive landscape painting, and the other – the one addressed to Haydon – is about painting and poetry as careers and callings. The two poems are not a public gesture of thanks for the specific action of drawing Wordsworth’s portrait. Stanley’s poem, however, brings Haydon’s drawing into the discussion. Stanley’s poem frames Haydon’s portrait as a form of “praise” for Wordsworth, observing that “while the Poet’s genius seems to strike, / The Painter’s claims the praise his pencil gives.” According to Stanley’s construction of the conversation, Haydon’s portrait is a public and explicit, if non-verbal, panegyric about Wordsworth’s “genius.” Stanley does not explicitly mention Wordsworth’s sonnet to Haydon, but his canny imitation of it tacitly brings the sonnet into conversation with the portrait. Stanley’s poem presents itself as praise for both artist and poet, but what it praises is the evenly matched exchange of public praise they give each other. That exchange never actually took place, but Stanley’s reproduction of Wordsworth’s syntax creates the illusion that it did, generating the public conversation the irregular sonnet appears to join. The irregular sonnet, in short, very busily participates in the overall project of the Annals – the project of bringing practicing artists into the limelight, making their voices publicly heard, and investing them with prestige and authority.

Given that a number of the poems published in the Annals take full advantage of – and participate in – the journal’s ethos as a deliberately public venue, it should come as no surprise that the journal contains some specifically ekphrastic poems concerned with ideas about sympathy that do the same. An anonymous and unnamed blank-verse poem of sixty-two lines, published in the second issue side-by-side with the quatrain about Richard Payne Knight and the panegyric addressed to Phillips, tells a story of two young Englishmen travelling to Sicily and weeping over the ruins that memorialize the death of

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50 The fact that Wordsworth alludes to the “pencil” of the visual artist, rather than the brush, subtly suggests that he did write the poems in response to having his portrait taken. Haydon staked his reputation on his paintings, but the 1818 portrait of Wordsworth is a chalk sketch – much closer to pencil than to paint.

51 The first of these two sonnets is discussed further in Chapter 4 of this thesis, and the second in Chapter 5.
Nicias in battle. The poem is just as deeply entrenched in the Annals’ project of constructing artists as public figures as are the two poems that accompany it in the journal’s pages: it is announced as commemorating “an interesting incident in the early life of an artist, now decidedly at the head of his profession,” partially identified in the poem’s last line as “—x—n” (probably John Flaxman).52 The poem praises Flaxman’s youthful display of emotion, tacitly claiming that the weeping reveals his moral superiority. The emotion is “sacred” and “pure,” produced by “the best sympathies of human kind / In their best hours.” The poem also links Flaxman’s superior sensibility to his artistic career, exclaiming that

…it was not Pity’s tear alone
That gemm’d the traveller’s eye, and from his breast
Wrung the big sigh—although to him unknown,
It was the sense of loftier feelings given
But to the chosen few— ’twas rapture’s tear,
The tear of genius— ’twas the Artist’s tear.

Similar, if less thorough-going, engagements with the issues of sensibility appear in other poems. A verse contribution from a C.J.S., published in the eighth issue alongside Keats’s two sonnets to Haydon, expresses its speaker’s “anguish” at seeing a painting of The Judgement of Brutus and his “awe” at seeing one called Christ Rejected. Faced with two paintings that show sons sentenced to death by their fathers, the speaker relies on his feelings to guide him toward observing the moral difference between Brutus’ sons dying “for their own crimes” and Christ dying “for all mankind.” A sonnet by William Hayley, published in the twelfth issue, praises Prince Hoare (erstwhile editor of The Artist) for maintaining open lines of communication with foreign art academies even during wartime. Hayley attributes to Hoare a “boundless sympathy and zeal” that has “refin’d” his mind and allowed him to inspire his “native land” to better conduct. As a consequence, Britain can, in turn, inspire “the heart of genius to expand.” Sympathy and

52 John Flaxman is listed as “Professor in Sculpture at the Royal Academy, and Sculptor to Her Majesty” in the directory of practicing artists at the end of Volume 1 of the Annals.
zeal, in this poem, radiate outward from Hoare and make “new wonders” of art possible throughout Europe. Printed opposite Hayley’s sonnet is a poem that takes up the question of the spiritual implications of outward affect. In Lamb’s poem about Da Vinci’s *The Virgin of the Rocks* (taken from Lamb’s recently published *Works*), Mary’s expression of “trembling passion / Of devout admiration” contrasts the angel’s expression of “such a perfect joy / As no dim doubts alloy.” Mary’s “trembling passion” is trembling because she is as yet excluded from full knowledge of the divine.

Elsewhere in this thesis, I have had and will have occasion to discuss yet more ekphrastic poems from the *Annals* that take up the questions of the intellectual culture of sensibility. George Stanley’s irregular sonnet is comparably preoccupied with the question of what outwardly expressed affects reveal about Wordsworth’s interiority, describing Haydon’s sketch of Wordsworth as having an “eye” that “looks searching into Heaven,” and crediting Haydon with having “portray[ed] with majesty / The soul her prison struggling through to find / Employment suited to her powers.” A number of other ekphrastic poems that appear in the *Annals* and that I shall discuss in other chapters likewise explore ideas associated with the philosophy of sensibility: Wordsworth’s sonnets “Upon the Sight of a Beautiful Picture” (Chapter 4) and “To B.R. Haydon, Esq.,” (Chapter 5), Keats’s “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles” and “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (both discussed in Chapter 4), and Henry Hart Milman’s Newdigate Prize poem “The Belvidere Apollo” (discussed in the introductory chapter).

For the purposes of this thesis, the question is not only how many ekphrases that engaged with the philosophical questions of sensibility appeared in *The Annals*, but also, more crucially, what intellectual work they accomplished by making active use of the journal’s vision of itself as a democratic art-world forum. The two poems that I will discuss in the pages that follow both achieve insights into the workings of sympathy: one of them generates a paradoxical synthesis of two modes of sympathy, staging a deliberate intervention in the philosophical tradition outlined in the introductory chapter of this thesis, and the other tacitly posits imaginative sympathy, even for a purely hypothetical mourner, as the only effective tool of emotional self-regulation. But both poems’ explorations of sympathy are refined and sharpened by the public character of their
speakers’ utterances. Mitford’s speaker adopts the tone of an editor or reviewer, referring to herself as “we” and thus constructing her response to Haydon’s painting as that of a generalized and impartial viewer. The speaker of the anonymous poem “On the Monument,” although he stops short of an editorial “we,” nonetheless moves through a series of rhetorical postures too histrionic to sound private, and contrasts his own, disinterested response with that of a hypothetical viewer personally invested in the work of art. The rhetorical strategies of both poems vibrate in tune with the ostentatious public-ness of the Annals as a whole, but those rhetorical strategies are also part of how the poems explore sentimental questions.

3.3 Sympathy and the Posture of Public Reviewing in Ekphrastic Poems

The fifth issue of the Annals (the second issue of the second volume – published in the summer of 1817) offers two ekphrases that very carefully construct their own participation in the public sphere: one is a Petrarchan sonnet by Mary Russell Mitford entitled “Sonnet to Mr. Haydon on a Study from Nature, exhibited at the Spring Garden Exhibition, 1817,” and the other is an anonymous poem in elegiac quatrains entitled “On the Monument to be placed in Lichfield Cathedral to the Memory of two only Children. By F.L. Chantrey, Esq.” It is true that these poems’ aura of being public utterances is heightened by an accident of their publication – a layer of meaning added by their juxtaposition with one another, rather than anything intended by their authors. Nevertheless, much of the poems’ intellectual work is accomplished by means of studied posturing on the part of their speakers. The speakers of both poems adopt the posture of the disinterested viewer of an artwork, and both speakers use that posture to think through complex ideas about sympathetic response to visual arts, carefully enacting sympathetic processes that stretch the culturally dominant paradigms for thinking about sympathy inherited from eighteenth-century moral philosophy. Mitford’s sonnet synthesizes the two modes of sympathy – the visual and instantaneous and the narrative and imaginative – that philosophical convention treated as separate or opposed; it does so

53 F.L. Chantrey is the name of the sculptor, not the author of the poem.
in order to frame its representation of sympathetic grief as intense to the point of paradox or impossibility. The anonymous poem, concerned less with pushing the limits of representing sympathetic grief than, like Cowper’s elegiac ekphrases, with establishing the appropriate extent of an emotional response to an artwork, moves through a series of rhetorical postures, as though the speaker is experimenting with sympathetic reactions of varying abandon and restraint. Ultimately, he relies on the imagined spectre of an object of sympathy – a bereaved mother – as the yardstick by which he measures the moderation or intemperance of his own response, and in doing so explores a question central to Adam Smith’s moral philosophy: the role of imaginative sympathy in moderating emotional distress.

The selection of the two poems for the same issue is a canny choice on the part of editor James Elmes: if the poems make use of the self-conscious publicity of the Annals to augment the theatrical postures of their speakers, the journal in turn makes use of the poems to further its agenda of promoting the authority of practicing artists. Of the two poems, the first is the work of an author of comparative visibility, Mary Russell Mitford, but it is attributed in the Annals to M*** R****** M******, thus leaving the work of name recognition and attribution to the reader. It is also addressed to Haydon, without mentioning the fact that Mitford had been in Haydon’s company when she saw the drawing. The poem thus offers the reader the impression of a glimpse into an insider’s world of artists and their personal friends. The paratexts of the second poem identify it as submitted by an anonymous reader, who got it from a friend, who extracted it from the Morning Chronicle. This poem, in contrast to Mitford’s sonnet, generates the

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54 For a description of the encounter, see Paul O’Keeffe’s biography of Haydon, p. 174.

55 The poem actually appears in the Morning Chronicle twice: once under the title “Lines on the Monument,..,” in its entirety, on May 27, 1817, when the statue it describes was on display in London, and a second time with no title, only in part (the first three stanzas) on November 3, 1817, after the statue had been placed in its permanent home in Lichfield Cathedral – and, of course, after the poem’s publication in the Annals. The second, partial printing of the poem claims to have extracted it from The Sheffield Iris, and more or less the same article (attributing it to the Iris) appears in the Gentleman’s Magazine for November 1817 and the Tickler for April 1821. Meredith McGill has noted the commonness of such multiple reprintings in an American context, observing that “[u]nauthorized reprinting was so widely practiced in this period that the designation of a poem, article, or tale as an ‘original’ referred not to the quality of its contents, but to the fact that the book or periodical in which it appeared was the site of its first
impression of a broad, democratic and actively participating reading public, in which anonymous contributors could vouch for the aesthetic value both of a statue and of a poem – in this case because the poem is in “such exquisite keeping with the beautiful composition which is the subject of [its] eulogy.” In short, although the two poems present themselves in vastly different ways, they both present themselves as taking part in a larger cultural conversation about art, and their juxtaposition lends that conversation both the glamour of an exclusive peek into the world of professional artists and the egalitarian appeal of democratic participation. Moreover, that juxtaposition fuels the ongoing cultural project of *The Annals* and of *The Artist* before it, balancing the insider’s authority of practicing artists and poets with the appearance, at least, of radically democratic reader participation, to the total exclusion of aristocratic patrons or learned connoisseurs.

### 3.3.1 “Sonnet to Mr. HAYDON on a Study from Nature, exhibited at the Spring Garden Exhibition, 1817.”

‘Su le labbre un sospiro, su gli occhi un pianto’ Tasso.

“Tears in the eye, and on the lips a sigh!”

Haydon! the great, the beautiful, the bold,

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printing” (2). That insight extends to the British printing scene: the *Annals*, of course, dropped the “original” from the title of its “original poetry” section for precisely this reason: that so much of its poetry was not original in this sense. Nevertheless, the fact that the magazine draws such attention to the prior life of “On the Monument” is significant in itself. The poem is published in the *Annals* with the following note:

To the Editor of *ANNALS of the FINE ARTS.*

SIR,

The following lines seem to be in such exquisite keeping with the beautiful composition which is the subject of their eulogy, that I think they fully deserve to be placed in the poetic pages of your valuable publication; but perhaps, having already appeared in the Morning Chronicle, your rules may preclude their admission. I wish I could inform you of their author, but as I obtained them only through a friend, who extracted them from the Morning Chronicle, it is not in my power.

I am, Sir, yours, &c.

W. S. I.
Insofar as “Sonnet to Mr. Haydon” is a poem about the nature of good art, it starts from the assumption that the ability to express and elicit powerful feeling constitutes artistic value (an assumption markedly different from the assumption underlying Cowper’s ekphrases: that it is an artwork’s personal relevance that renders it moving).

Furthermore, the poem implicitly holds itself to a similar standard of poetic value, using the kind of expressive manipulations of syntax that had long been standard in the literature of sensibility, with the apparent purpose of provoking a reaction in the reader. “Sonnet to Mr. Haydon” puts its emphasis on the symptoms of overwhelming grief in a pictured figure, and on witnessing and sympathetically recreating that grief. The poem pushes the assumption of the artistic merit of eliciting sympathy to its logical extreme, challenging the idea that such sympathy is inherently pleasurable, and valorizing the painting’s capacity to afflict the viewer with psychic pain. Its most daring intellectual work, however, is what it does with the notion of a single moment of representation in a painting. Mitford’s sonnet may be first and foremost a panegyric on Haydon’s works – and one work above the others – but the terms of its praise, and the linguistic and formal strategies with which that praise is expressed, constitute an intervention in the ongoing discussion of the interrelated ideas of verbal and visual representation and of
instantaneous and imaginative modes of sympathy that had featured prominently in
British aesthetic discourse for several decades. At the same time, the poem’s publication
in the *Annals* signals its participation in the burgeoning conversation within the art world
about the relative authority of practicing artists. As a publicized piece of private
 correspondence from one artist to another, “Sonnet to Mr. Haydon” participates in the
 project of the *Annals* by its very existence, but it also adopts a rhetorical strategy that
 further cements its affiliation with that project. It uses a posture of almost editorial
disinterestedness to make its speaker’s eventual succumbing to sympathetic emotion
more striking, thus drawing attention to its careful manipulation of conventional thought
about aesthetic and sympathetic response in representing a sympathetic grief that is,
contrary to convention, both instantaneous and circumstantial.

In spite of the poem’s overt claim to being a piece of personal correspondence made
public, the speaker of “Sonnet to Mr. Haydon” adopts a carefully calculated pose of
even-handed assessment. Like Cowper’s “The Tears of a Painter,” “Sonnet to Mr.
Haydon” deals with one of the archetypical scenes of the literature of sensibility, namely
a parent grieving for a lost child, but neither the poem nor the picture makes any of the
biographically-based claims to sincerity that are so prominent in Cowper’s ekphrases.
The poem’s title, presumably borrowing the title of the picture itself, refers to it as a
“Study from Nature,” but the fact that the poem’s title says it is “on a Study from
Nature” (italics mine) rather than “on his Study from Nature” or “on the Study from
Nature” seems calculated to blur the distinction between the picture’s title and a simple
descriptive tag: The poem’s title suggests that the poem’s author or speaker either labels
or concurs in labelling the piece a study from nature, thus beginning the poem on a note
of description inextricably linked with judgment. The poem’s speaker refers to herself
in the first person plural in a manner that initially suggests not the personally invested
viewer but rather the disinterested reviewer. She allots Haydon’s two ambitious history

56 O’Keeffe identifies the sketch as a drawing of “an exotically dressed young woman, who may have been
Patience Smith, his ‘Gypsy’” (174).

57 Or himself. There is no particular evidence that the speaker is female, especially given the semi-
anonymous attribution of the poem to M*** R****** M****** in the *Annals.*
paintings their due measure of praise before turning to the picture she prefers. Even the allusion to Niobe in the second quatrain and the partial suppression of Mitford’s identity in the attribution contribute to the impression that the emotions represented, including the speaker’s, are generalized rather than personal. For a poem that presents itself as a tribute to a painter from his friend, “Sonnet to Mr. Haydon” constructs both the picture’s representation of grief and the speaker’s reaction in surprisingly general terms.

“Sonnet to Mr. Haydon” starts with a loose translation of its epigraph from Tasso that immediately sets the text of the poem in tension with the privileging of “natural” feeling in the title: “‘Tears in the eye, and on the lips a sigh!’” The epigraph names two symptoms of feeling dear to the literature of sensibility – a sigh and a tear – without specifying whose affective symptoms they are; indeed, at first it seems that they are Haydon’s sigh and tear, since his name is the first word of the second line. The poem’s first line not only translates the epigraph but also adds an exclamation mark not present in the Italian, thus implying a certain fervour on the part of the speaker in uttering the line. That fervour, however, is undercut by the very fact that the line is a translation, and thus explicitly not a spontaneous or “natural” expression of feeling. The exclamation mark thus functions only nominally as an expressive device; its chief effect is to bring the epigraph yet more completely in line with the conventions of sensibility. It is as if Mitford deliberately invokes the ritualized literary heritage of sensibility and juxtaposes it with her speaker’s posture of authoritative and balanced assessment, daring her readers to find them incompatible.

As the poem progresses, the terms of its praise gradually shift to suggest that Mitford is invoking the capacity to produce sympathetic reactions as the sole measure of artistic value. Immediately after delivering the exclamatory translation of the epigraph, the speaker exclaims “Haydon! the great, the beautiful, the bold,” thus suggesting terms of praise that are jarringly unrelated to the tears and sigh of the epigraph. The reader is even momentarily allowed to assume that it is Haydon himself who is great, beautiful and bold, before the speaker clarifies that it is in fact the subjects of his two most
ambitious paintings – Solomon and Christ – who are thus praised: “Thy wisdom’s king, thy mercy’s god unfold.”

“Haydon!” is the subject of the imperative “unfold,” and it is the great, the beautiful and the bold that he is to reveal. Half way through the octave, however, the speaker enacts the process of turning from those two paintings (“these”) to a third (“this”), which she praises as “of the soul,” saying “[t]hese art and genius blend in unison high, / But this is of the soul,” the words “but this” falling tidily at the start of the second quatrain. While “of the soul” may not be obviously a term of more exalted praise than “unison high” of “art and genius,” it is at least a term that conflicts less with the tears promised in the first line. Moreover, the speaker’s verbal act of turning away from the first two paintings suggests that it is this third picture, rather than the more ambitious, historical works, that is the true object of the sonnet’s praise.

That act of turning away is never reversed, even when the speaker attempts to stop looking at the third picture, and the ideals of greatness, beauty, and boldness are permanently displaced by the extravagantly emotional terms in which the speaker praises the “Study from Nature.”

The terms in which Mitford’s speaker praises the sketch become more and more affectively intense as the sonnet progresses, but, as this happens, Mitford’s emphasis shifts from the picture’s representation of grief to the speaker’s experience of it. The second half of the octave attributes to the study “the majesty / Of grief,” and likens that grief to Niobe’s, asserting that “[t]he majesty / Of grief dwells here; grief cast in such a mould / As Niobe’s of yore.” The allusion to Niobe, of course, seems finally to deliver the tears promised by the sonnet’s epigraph and first line. The sestet, however, says very little about the pictured woman’s grief; it mentions her “visage of despair” only once.

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58 The poem’s footnotes identify the paintings as “The Judgment of Solomon” and “Christ’s Entry into Jerusalem, now painting [i.e. currently being painted].”

59 It should perhaps not be a surprise that Mitford, interested in praising an artwork for its representation of emotion, should turn away from two ambitious history paintings toward a “study from nature” – a sketch. In The Visual and Verbal Sketch, Richard Sha observes that “[i]f the aesthetics of the sketch makes it look nonideological and thus allows it to be more ideologically persuasive, its resistance to the excesses of art – polish – makes it more artful insofar as the artist is not interested in ornament for the sake of ornament or artifice for the sake of artifice. As the spontaneous delineation of […] the artist’s feelings on the spot, the sketch aligns itself with nature, as opposed to culture” (3).
Instead, the sestet says a great deal about the speaker’s sympathetic feelings in viewing the sketch:

   The tale is told—and who can e’er forget
   That e’er has seen that visage of despair!
   With unaccustomed tears our cheeks are wet,
   Heavy our hearts with unaccustomed care,
   Upon our thoughts it presses like a debt,
   We close our eyes in vain; that face is there.

The speaker’s feelings are not only powerful enough to make her cry, but are also involuntary and self-perpetuating. They weigh on the speaker’s thoughts “like a debt,” suggesting not only that they recur, but also that they contain a subtle element of guilt, and a lingering desire to act in some way that will pay the debt and alleviate the need repetitively to think about it. The sonnet concludes with the statement that the speaker actually cannot escape the sight of the pictured woman’s sorrowful countenance – that the sight is so deeply imprinted on her mind that averting or closing her eyes is futile. Even the repetition of “the tale is told” and “unaccustomed” seem to mimic the unstoppable recurrence of the speaker’s extravagantly sympathetic emotions.

Given that the painting’s capacity to elicit a powerful affective response seems to be the cornerstone of Mitford’s praise, it should perhaps not be surprising that Mitford’s own sonnet is set up as though it is intended to transmit as well as to represent the speaker’s sympathetic feelings. Not only the copious exclamation marks but also the complex and sometimes broken syntax seem intended, as they so often are in the literature of sensibility, to represent a degree of emotion that transcends the expressive capacity of words. The syntax frequently mimics the speaker’s fraught experience of seeing the sketch. The first time the speaker utters the phrase “the tale is told,” in the second-last line of the octave, it is part of the enjambed statement “the tale is told / All at a glance.” The enjambment curtails the reader’s ability to pause at the end of the line, and mimics the headlong rush in which the speaker apprehends the pictured woman’s circumstances. The second time the phrase appears, in the first line of the sestet, it is followed by a heavy caesura that emphasizes the finality of the past tense “told,” preemptively
mirroring the speaker’s inability to forget or un-see the pictured woman’s face: the phrase is transformed from a statement of the picture’s expressiveness to a statement of its effect on a viewer. The most crucial tool that the poem uses to evoke the reader’s sympathy, however, is the speaker’s self-construction. One the one hand, the undefined “we,” with its overtones of an editorial review, sets the speaker up to sound disinterested. On the other hand, it becomes increasingly clear that the tears and sigh of the epigraph belong, not only to the grieving mother, but also to the “we” – to the speaker. As the speaker’s disinterestedness dissolves in the face of the study’s representation of grief, the authorial “we” becomes less convincingly that of a dispassionate reviewer. Moreover, as the syntax mimics the experience of seeing the sketch, thus making that experience available to the reader, I would posit that the repeated “we” becomes an open invitation. We, the poem’s readers, can join the “we” who are distressed by the picture, and our affective participation in the poem’s scenario of viewing the sketch is facilitated by the same plural self-reference that initially makes the speaker sound so much like an emotionally neutral reviewer.

The speaker’s complex posture as a disinterested viewer who is inexorably overcome by the picture’s affective power is especially significant in the light of what “Sonnet to Mr. Haydon” does with the intellectual heritage associated with the visual arts; the means of both representing and evoking grief that Mitford attributes to the sketch is presented as the fusion of two traditionally distinct conceptions of sympathy. The picture affects its viewer instantaneously and, of course, by means of vision. That effect, however, is figured as story-telling: Mitford’s speaker says that “the tale is told / All at a glance.” Moreover, no sooner has the speaker said that the “tale” has been instantaneously told, than the poem actually presents the tale, with as much concision as its verbal medium will allow, by ventriloquizing the subject of the picture exclaiming “a childless mother I!” Here, too, the poem’s syntax attempts to approximate the speed with which the tale is supposedly “told” by the picture, for the stock situation of “a childless mother” is presented in its succinct entirety before the grammatical subject (“I”) and the elided verb (“am,” or perhaps rather “have become”) appear to do the work of turning that situation into the bare bones of a “tale.” In short, “Sonnet to Mr. Haydon” conflates an act of
seeing and an act of hearing and understanding: an apparently instantaneous visual impression and a temporally derived knowledge of the painted woman’s circumstances (she had a child; she no longer has a child; the child has died or been taken from her).

The idea of an artwork conveying a “tale” in a single “glance” is an inversion of an idea that came from aesthetic philosophy and that had gained popularity in England by the end of the eighteenth century. The notion that a painter should select the “pregnant moment” was by this time a comparative commonplace, most notably popularized by Sir Joshua Reynolds, who insisted in his Discourses that painting, unlike its sister poetry, must make its impression on the viewer “at one blow” (205). Mitford’s phrase “all at a glance” seems to echo the very wording that Reynolds used. Reynolds, however, did not contend that painting should tell a tale “at one blow,” but rather simply that it must have its effect on the viewer “at one blow.” He proposed that poetry, while less powerful in any one instant, has all the advantages of suspense and plot – in effect, of narrative. Mitford’s statement that the painting’s instantaneous effect consists of telling a tale is a suggestive collapsing of categories. “Sonnet to Mr. Haydon” may co-opt two sets of terms that were commonplace in contemporary discourse about art, but it co-opts them in order to create a paradox: an impossible embedding of the temporally expansive concept of the “tale” within the temporally compressed concept of the picture’s instantaneous effect.

I would argue that this paradox of the picture telling a tale at a single glance serves a very specific purpose within the sonnet: to synthesize two popular ideas about sympathy. Both the idea of feeling sympathy upon hearing a tale and the idea of registering another person’s feelings “all at a glance” have a long history, as the introductory chapter to this thesis explains. David Hume proposed that sympathy is prompted by the observation – usually the sight – of “external signs in the countenance and conversation” (2.1.11.3). Adam Smith privileged the former mode of sympathy virtually to the exclusion of the latter. “Sympathy,” he claimed, “does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it” (1.1.10). But if sympathy was primarily an imaginative reconstruction of circumstances according to Smith, the idea Hume proposed about it had also found its way into the general culture. For example, Adela Pinch, in
tracing the idea that “feelings are learned from women,” has identified an excerpt from
the Tatler in which Steele recounts being overwhelmed with sorrow as a child on
witnessing his mother crying, without having any idea what had prompted her grief
(Strange Fits 81). The philosophical legacy of the eighteenth century included two quite
distinct, if not mutually exclusive, ideas about how sympathy works: one involving the
sight of symptoms of feeling, and the other involving the imaginative reconstruction of a
situation that prompted feeling. “Sonnet to Mr. Haydon” refuses that distinction,
insisting that the sketch’s “tale” (that is, the stock situation) is comprehended precisely
“at a glance,” just as the pictured woman’s affective symptoms are. By refusing the
conventional distinction between poetry’s temporal tale-telling and painting’s
instantaneous visual effect, “Sonnet to Mr. Haydon” is able to attribute two modes of
eliciting sympathy to one work of art, and the study’s extraordinary power to affect the
speaker is constructed in part as an effect of that doubling. The speaker is bombarded
with two kinds of sympathetic stimuli: she perceives the symptoms of the pictured
woman’s grief in the same glance in which she understands the woman’s “tale” of loss.
In so deliberately collapsing two sets of categories that philosophical thought usually
took to be separate, “Sonnet to Mr. Haydon” suggests the limitations of such distinctions,
and implies that the most powerful sympathy cannot be so tidily labelled.

“Sonnet to Mr. Haydon” looks at first glance to be participating in the Romantic fashion
for stories of static or self-perpetuating emotion discussed in the introductory chapter of
this thesis, in that the speaker ends up in a kind of static or cyclical psychic state, unable
to banish the image of the childless mother’s grief, much as Keats’s Isabella is unable to
relinquish her attachment to the basil plant; the sonnet, however, is doing much more
than conform to this literary trope. If those narratives of unflagging emotion are
themselves an important way in which the idea of the single or pregnant moment became
differently inflected in the Romantic period, as I have suggested that they are, this poem
nonetheless goes beyond participating in that fashion. It draws directly on the sister
discourses of moral and aesthetic philosophy, actively exploring and expanding
traditional ideas about sympathy. To do so, it relies on its speaker’s posture of publicly
delivering a balanced assessment of three artworks – a posture that comes to function
quite differently at the end of the poem than at the beginning. That posture, in turn, is accentuated by the sonnet’s publication in the *Annals of the Fine Arts*. The quarterly’s steady pursuit of the status of a public venue makes the speaker’s “we” seem all the more akin to a reviewer’s when it first appears – an apparently seamless continuation of the editorial voice that dominates the rest of the journal’s pages – and thus renders all the more remarkable the speaker’s dissolution into tears before a sketch described as paradoxically telling a tale. The poem’s sentimental epigraph may conjure expectations that the text will immerse itself uncritically in feeling, but in fact it makes a pointed intervention in the intellectual culture of sensibility by refusing to treat as separate two modes of sympathy that were usually presented as opposed – that Adam Smith, indeed, had gone to some lengths to distinguish from one another. And that intellectual work is highlighted by the speaker’s initial attitude of impartial, public reviewing, which conspicuously breaks down, drawing attention to the unconventional nature of the speaker’s sympathetic response by drawing attention to the suddenness and extremity of her response in the first place.

3.3.2 “On the Monument to be placed in Lichfield Cathedral to the Memory of two only Children. By F. L. Chantrey, Esq.”

The anonymous poem “On the Monument” appears at first glance to have more in common with Cowper’s ekphrases than with the self-consciously experimental “Sonnet to Mr. Haydon” with which it appeared in the *Annals*. Like Cowper’s poems, it deals with a representation of the deceased, and it takes up ideas of verisimilitude and the potential of portraiture to assuage parental grief. It does so, however, from a perspective reminiscent of the editorial “we” in Mitford’s sonnet: that of the disinterested viewer encountering the work apparently for the first time. And as with Mitford’s sonnet, that posture takes on a new and enriched meaning in the context of the poem’s publication in the *Annals*. The poem appeared in a journal that promoted itself as the public arbiter of artistic discourse, and achieved widespread publication in a range of other periodicals, as its paratexts in the *Annals* announce (the *Morning Chronicle*, and later the *Sheffield Iris*, the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, and the *Tickler*). Moreover, like Mitford’s poem, it is about
a work of art on display in London at the time of its publication. The aura of publicity that the poem thus acquires subtly alters it, making its speaker’s posture of disinterestedness more decisively performative. In the context of the *Annals*, that posture comes across not merely as an enactment of one speaker’s response to an artwork, but as a *public* enactment of a response. Its very publicity lends that response at least the façade of philosophical authority by giving it the appearance of a typical or generalizable response. Moreover, although the poem does not engage as directly as “Sonnet to Mr. Haydon” with the existing aesthetic discourse of its day, it nonetheless uses its aura of public performance to think through a question about sympathy. This speaker does not simply respond to the experience of seeing the statue. Rather, he experiments with a series of responses in which sympathy proves possible only when he is rigorous in maintaining the distinction between the real (what is) and the imagined (what might be), carefully avoiding the realm of delusion (what cannot be). I will argue that the trajectory of the speaker’s experimentation suggests an insight into one of the uses to which the psychological mechanisms of sympathy could be put, and addresses a question that had featured prominently in Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*: the question of the relationship between a grieving person and a sympathetic onlooker.

The statue, which is called “The Sleeping Children,” uses the lifelike representation of sleeping children in a funeral monument to generate tension between its potential for consolation and its impulse to represent the impossible. It is a life-sized white marble representation in a realist mode of two girls reclining in each other’s arms on a large stone pillow. The sculpture is very explicitly a funeral monument, for the names of the deceased girls are engraved on the side, and it is working with the clichéd metaphor “the sleep of death.” That metaphor comes with a weight of theological overtones, including the Christian idea of death as a literal sleep from which one awakes on Judgement Day. As the anonymous poem insists, however, the girls in the sculpture do not look metaphorically or spiritually asleep. They simply look asleep, and nothing about their

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60 The statue’s title is not mentioned in the *Annals*. 
representation suggests that weighty theological abstractions should be brought to the viewing experience. If anything, the sculpture is as much a posthumous portrait of the two girls as a gravestone.

The poem’s speaker begins his response to this monument on a note of calm admiration, using language suggestive both of the statue’s evocation of loss and of its literal verisimilitude, but without overtly alluding to either, saying

Soft, as when faintly from the evening sky,
The rainbow steals, and bitter tempests cease,
Fading from beauty to eternity,
Recline these forms of gentleness and peace.

The softly twining arm—the leaning head,
By fondness couch’d—the sacred calm that throws
Its halcyon spell around the holy bed
Where loveliness and innocence repose.

The Speaker elides “softly” to “soft,” as though to register the apparent softness of the stone pillow. In the second stanza, too, he uses diction that suggests pillows and sleep: “softly,” “leaning,” “couch’d,” “bed,” “repose.” The statue’s function as a funeral monument is likewise suggested throughout the first two stanzas in words that have overtones of death or resurrection: “faintly,” “fading,” “eternity,” “sacred,” “holy,” and “innocence.” All of this, however, is innuendo; however real, even presumed, the idea of death as a temporary sleep might have been for most nineteenth-century readers, the poem hints at, rather than expressing, that metaphor, and the spiritual hope it carries with it, and it hints at, rather than stating, the fact of the girls’ death. The speaker barely describes the statue, specifying only the relative position of one girl’s arm and the other’s head. He describes the “calm” mood it evokes, but refers to the girls as abstractions such as “loveliness and innocence” rather than as real children who have died. Even the poem’s emphasis on its own artistry evokes the statue’s technical sophistication. The speaker delivers an extended simile (“as when faintly from the evening sky, / The rainbow steals, and bitter tempests cease, / Fading from beauty to eternity”) before
naming its tenor, the sculpted girls, to whom he refers only obliquely, as softly reclining “forms of gentleness and peace.”

The third stanza marks a notable departure from the first two. Rather than using language that seems to absorb and reflect the qualities of the statue, it announces itself as a subjective, even enthusiastic, response:

Oh! they are more than art! I see the breath,
Fan those pure lips—the hovering smile I see
Hang on those brows; and cannot deem that death

Could hold them thus entranc’d so tenderly.

The speaker’s speech patterns become exclamatory, and he hyperbolically praises the statue as “more than art.” He then expands that hyperbole until it becomes a statement of delusion: “I see the breath / Fan those pure lips.” The stanza concludes with a statement that takes the outward form of a judgement: the speaker “cannot deem that death / Could hold them thus entranc’d so tenderly” (emphasis mine). Notwithstanding the word “deem,” however, that statement elides the difference between the sculpted girls and the dead girls they represent, and is less a judgement than a refusal of rational judgement. The speaker succumbs to the statue’s verisimilitude, treating its realism as reality and conflating the stillness of the statue with the real girls’ trance or sleep of death. That conflation allows the statue’s verisimilitude momentarily to negate the fact of the real girls’ death: the illusion that the sculpted children are real becomes the illusion that the real girls are still alive.

The speaker quickly rejects this illusion and reasserts the fact of the children’s death; the language remains exclamatory, but the tone shifts from rapt admiration to regret and awe, as the speaker says

Alas! they sleep not—tho’ no shade of gloom
Doth o’er the pale soft placid features play;
It is the fearful slumber of the tomb—
It is that rest which passeth not away!
Although the word “gloom” appears only as a negation – there is “no shade of gloom” – the rhyme with “tomb” emphasizes the dreary sound of the long vowels, in effect creating the very gloom the speaker wishes to deny. The anaphora in the third and fourth lines emphasizes the absolute fact of the statement “it is” in contrast to the speaker’s erring attempt to “deem” the girls living in the previous stanza. The characterization of the sleep of death as “fearful slumber” even adds a note of horror to the sombre tone of the stanza. The biblical locution of the last line seems intended to mitigate that horror, but it also establishes yet more firmly the inarguable finality of the children’s death – implicitly framed as the will of an omnipotent God.

Having retreated from his own impulse to succumb to the statue’s illusion of life, the speaker imaginatively constructs the response of the girls’ mother to the monument, sympathetically attributing to her the delusion he himself has succeeded in rejecting. “Still might affection lean,” he says,

\[
\text{o’er such a bier,}\\
\text{By the calm cheek and breathing breast beguil’d;}\\
\text{Still might the anguish’d mother’s fruitless tear}\\
\text{Linger in hope upon her sleeping child!}
\]

At first his act of imaginative sympathy is sedate and generalized: he imagines only a personified “affection” leaning, “beguiled,” over the sculpture. In the second half of the stanza, however, the speaker imagines the “anguish’d mother’s fruitless tear,” paradoxically generated not by grief but by an unrealizable “hope.” The imagined mother grieves in a kind of limbo: “still might affection lean o’er such a bier” suggests that her mourning is indefinite or even perpetual (italics mine). The mother’s “anguish” necessarily co-exists with her “hope,” for the protraction of her anguish and her posture of hanging over the statue are predicated on her being deluded by the statue’s verisimilitude. Moreover, the speaker not only imagines the mother trapped indefinitely by the conflicting emotions of hope and anguish, but also registers a conflicted sympathetic relationship with her. On the one hand, his persistent and anaphoric use of the conditional “still might” maintains his distance from the bereaved mother by emphasizing that she is a hypothetical construction. On the other hand, his use of
increasingly intense affective language as he moves from imagining “affection” to imagining an “anguished mother,” combined with his concluding exclamation mark, indicates that he is as enthused in his sympathy with the mother by the end of this stanza as he had been in his rapt ecstasy of delusion two stanzas earlier.

That enthusiastic act of imaginative sympathy evidently assists the speaker in regaining his own grasp of reality, for, in the concluding stanza, he appears to have retreated entirely from the seductive power of the monument’s verisimilitude, acknowledging that

 [...] they are pass’d away for evermore—
These cheeks—these lips—are pallid as their own;
For them, life’s struggles of dismay are o’er,
Cold—cold—and silent as this icy stone!

Not only in pointing out the children’s exemption in death from “life’s struggles of dismay,” but also, and more crucially, in drawing a parallel between their current state and the artistic medium, the speaker implies a critique of the other reactions in which he has indulged. While it is conventional for an elegiac poem to pass through a phase of denying the reality of death, in this case the speaker’s indulgence in that phase is a kind of willful misinterpretation of the statue that is the poem’s subject, as the poem’s final line makes clear. Not only is the girls’ death a fact, it is a fact that is part of the total figurative meaning of the statue. The monument’s lifelike representation of repose may stand in for the vehicle of the conventional metaphor “the sleep of death,” but the ghostly white, unmoving and “icy stone” of its medium figures the tenor: death. As the speaker finally asserts, “[t]hese cheeks—these lips—are pallid as their [the real, dead girls’] own.” To have succumbed so thoroughly to the statue’s verisimilitude as to have overlooked its medium – the deathly pale and unyielding marble – is to have underestimated not only the technical accomplishment that could make stone look like a pillow but also the spiritual meaning that the statue embodies by means of its medium.

The speaker’s critique of his own erstwhile enthusiasm, however, is slightly incomplete, for “On the Monument” registers a hint of discomfort with its concluding posture of acceptance. The substitution of dashes for commas in “[t]hese cheeks – these lips – are pallid” suggest hesitancy on the part of the speaker as he sets up the terms of the
comparison “pallid as their own.” The repetition of the dashes in “cold – cold – and silent” suggests yet further hesitation – a morbid lingering over the concept of coldness, and perhaps even an unwillingness to bring the second comparison, “silent as this icy stone,” to its completion. The alliteration of “silent as this icy stone” mimics the hushed whispers that will surround the monument in its final resting place in Lichfield Cathedral, presumably also the girls’ final resting place. Lastly, the emphasis on temperature in “cold – cold – ” and “icy,” while it emphatically counteracts the earlier emphasis on “soft,” nevertheless concludes the poem with a tactile image: an image both devoid of comfort and very much of this world.

Still more telling than the punctuation and diction, however, is the unusual figurative structure of the first comparison. “Cheeks pale as marble” is the conventional simile hovering in the background of the comparison in the second line. The speaker, however, calls the statue’s real marble cheeks “pallid,” a word usually reserved for people, thus subtly personifying the statue. That personification has the effect of making the comparison between the statue’s cheeks and the girls’ strangely literal. If the point of analogy is pallor, then it applies literally to the cheeks of the dead girls; the element of figuration has shifted from the comparison, where one would expect it, to the personification of the statue. Moreover, the personification reminds us once again of the statue’s extraordinary verisimilitude; in so doing, it blurs the line between the monument and the real children, and gestures toward the powerful illusion from which the speaker has so carefully retreated. Thus, while the comparison looks at first glance like a simile that makes explicit the figural meaning of the monument itself, the figurative structure of the line in fact resists the speaker’s overt assertion of the girls’ death and his own acceptance.

“On the Monument,” then, is a poem that adopts a complex sequence of postures in relation to the affective power of a work of visual art. Easily dismissible on first glance as self-indulgently sentimental, it nonetheless enacts a struggle for emotional restraint in the presence of a compelling work of art; at the same time, it subtly registers discomfort with its own hard-won emotional restraint, suggesting a certain degree of ambivalence about the relative merits of the responses with which it experiments. More crucially, the
poem enacts an instance of sympathetic imagination that suggests an insight into some of the functions of sympathy itself: the speaker attributes a response similar to the one he has just rejected to an imagined construction of a bereaved parent, as though he can establish his own emotional moderation only by imagining circumstances that would warrant a lack of moderation. The poems discussed in Chapter 5 of this thesis explore alternatives to Adam Smith’s theory that one can moderate one’s own grief by sympathizing with the sympathy of an onlooker; the onlooker’s sympathetic grief is necessarily less intense than one’s own first-hand grief, and so sympathetically bringing one’s own feelings into line with the onlooker’s sympathetic feelings will involve lessening their force. “On the Monument” comes at the question of the relationship between a sympathetic onlooker and a grieving person from a different angle: what happens when the onlooker, who is not personally bereaved, experiences feelings that require moderation? Can imagining or sympathizing with someone who is bereaved lessen the onlooker’s grief by reminding him of the purely imaginative and sympathetic nature of his feelings? “On the Monument” would seem to suggest that it can.

In order to make that complex suggestion, “On the Monument” depends on its speaker moving through a series of rhetorical attitudes, enacting in each one a different possible response to the artwork before him. Moreover, it depends on its speaker’s successive responses being generalizable: abstract possible reactions of a typical viewer comparable to Smith’s generalized sufferer and spectator – for only if the speaker is thus typical does his trajectory of affective responses take on philosophical significance. The poem’s conformity to the ethos of the Annals is part of how it achieves this effect. Like Mitford’s sonnet, “On the Monument” seems remarkably at home in the pages of the Annals. Taken in this context, the poem reads as a verse review: like “Sonnet to Mr. Haydon,” it is about a work of art on display in London at the time of its publication. And a review, of course, is meant to put forward the representative reaction of a generalized viewer. In any other context, the elements of review embedded in the text of “On the Monument” would probably be too subtle for most readers to note. But the poem’s publication context in the Annals emphasizes the impersonality of its expression of a spectator’s reaction to seeing the statue evidently for the first time, without obvious
preconceptions, and it emphasizes the sheer theatricality of the speaker’s soliloquy-like exclamations. The intellectual work that “On the Monument” accomplishes is thus dependent on its (possibly accidental) participation in the *Annals*’ quest for the public’s attention. In the *Annals*, “On the Monument” achieves a kind of symbiotic harmony, its topicality and performativity playing into Elmes’s project of making the *Annals* as loud a public mouthpiece for the art world as possible, while the context provided by the *Annals* in turn grants the poem the appearance of impersonal authority. Thus, and only thus, does its exploration of the moderating effect of sympathy on one’s own feelings become, not a personal confession or anecdote, but an intervention in the intellectual culture of sensibility.

The *Annals*, as Klancher has shown and as its pages reveal, is a publication very much embedded in the art world of its day, and articulating an anti-aristocratic position within that world. Other chapters in this thesis examine poems written in very different contexts. “The Belvidere Apollo” and its fellow Newdigate poems were written by Oxford undergraduates, deeply embedded in precisely the milieu of connoisseurship against which the *Annals* raged. “On the Medusa” was composed by Shelley, in Italy, writing politically radical texts in the Florentine Gallery. It is worth remembering that these contexts were interrelated: that Shelley admired Keats, who published in the *Annals*, and that Wordsworth enjoyed the patronage of Sir George Beaumont and yet also published in the *Annals*. Although the two poems that are the keystone texts of this chapter use and transfigure their context in the *Annals* to further their intellectual explorations of sensibility, the questions about sensibility that they confront are inseparable from the questions asked by other poems, published both in and out of the *Annals* – or, in the case of Keats and Shelley’s posthumous texts, not published by their authors at all.

The two poems I have focused on in this chapter are both fundamentally concerned with how sympathy works and what it accomplishes in the context of a viewer confronting an artwork. “Sonnet to Mr. Haydon” constructs an extreme sympathetic response as a superlative tribute to an artwork that Mitford’s speaker praises solely in sentimental terms. “On the Monument” conjures sympathy with a hypothetical grief as the antidote
to too extreme a response to an artwork. But the intellectual work accomplished by these two poems is not self-contained: it is part of the same intellectual culture that occupies the remaining chapters of this thesis, and the parallels between the ideas explored in these two poems and those explored in other Romantic ekphrases reveal just how embedded in that culture the poems in the *Annals* are. “On the Monument” is *both* about the role of sympathy in a viewer’s response to art *and* about imaginative sympathy as a tool of self-regulation, like the poems discussed in my concluding chapter. “Sonnet to Mr. Haydon” is *both* about sympathetic response to figures in a picture *and* about the intellectual legacy of the eighteenth century, which left the verbal and visual arts linked, respectively, to two different conceptions of sympathy. It would make no more sense to study the poems in the *Annals* without the context of other Romantic ekphrases than to study Romantic ekphrasis without the *Annals.*
No poem has featured more prominently in the study of ekphrasis than “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” and it is a poem with a number of famously baffling interpretive cruxes: several *double entendres*, a shift in speaker of indeterminate length, and some lines of deeply ambiguous tone, such as the one quoted above. The only Romantic poem that rivals the ode’s influence on contemporary studies of ekphrasis is one by Shelley – not, as one might expect, “Ozymandias,” but rather the posthumously published fragment “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci,” which gained the attention of scholars of ekphrasis following the publication of W.J.T. Mitchell’s “Ekphrasis and the Other.” “On the Medusa” is still more riddled with ambiguities than “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” and this effect is compounded by the fact that it *is* posthumously published, never finalized to Shelley’s satisfaction. There is something striking about the fact that these poems, which have significantly shaped the scholarly community’s understanding of ekphrasis as a genre, are so full of ambiguity as to make it especially difficult to reach interpretive consensus about them.

Reading these poems in the context of the intellectual culture of sensibility can help to shed light on some of their ambiguities, and, because of the poems’ prominence, such a reading can reveal idiosyncrasies about the history of criticism about ekphrasis. While the previous chapter explored poems whose primary point of commonality was their venue of publication and the shared conceptual vocabulary that came with it, the present chapter focuses on two poems whose most obvious commonality is their canonicity within the field of ekphrasis studies. The two poems are not exploring the same question: “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is concerned with the long-standing assumption that evoking sympathy is the chief purpose of the visual arts, whereas “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci” is concerned with what kinds of sensations can be sympathetically shared, and whether the sympathizer and object of sympathy both need to be conscious in
order for the sharing to occur – the fact of the object of sympathy in question being a figure in a painting is merely a convenient way to explore that concern. These two poems, however, also share a conceptual vocabulary. Both of them draw on – and challenge – the by-then traditional linking of the visual arts with one mode of sympathy and literature with another. Both poems rely on their readers knowing the conventional eighteenth-century wisdom that the plastic arts can evoke sympathy instantaneously, by means of sight, and that poetry can do so by means of presenting sequential circumstances to the imagination.

As the Introduction to this thesis explains, eighteenth-century British philosophers, as they explored the respective properties of the sister arts, especially poetry and painting, came back again and again to two ideas: that the purpose of all the arts is to elicit affective responses from their audiences, and that poetry is able to build up readers’ interest gradually, whereas painting is not. These thinkers started from the assumption that all the arts set out to engage the emotions and sympathies of their audiences. In explaining how poetry and painting, respectively, accomplish this, aesthetic philosophers relied on two different conceptions of how sympathy functions. In explaining painting, they talked of immediate, instinctive sympathy with vividly depicted affective display. In explaining poetry, they talked of the prior circumstances of characters building sympathy up gradually. The Abbé Du Bos, for instance, thought painting’s confinement to a single moment of representation impeded the evocation of emotion because it cut off the possibility of representing prior circumstances, but he thought that this disadvantage was outweighed by the immediacy of painting’s visual impact (321).

These two conceptions of sympathy closely parallel the explanations of it offered by Hume and Smith, respectively. Sympathy for Hume is driven by the sight of its object, and limited or enabled by how visible the external signs of the original passion are. Sympathy for Smith is an imaginative reconstruction of circumstances around a projection of one’s self, limited or enabled by how available the circumstances

61 For a fuller discussion of Du Bos, see the introductory chapter of this thesis.
themselves are to the sympathizer’s imagination. This parallel between the two ways the arts supposedly achieved their effect and the two ways sympathy was most famously explained is most tidily revealed in English letters by Erasmus Darwin, who, in 1789, attributed to painting the ability to display the passions at their most intense – and most visible – by showing the “changes, which those sentiments or passions produce upon the body” (121). He attributes to poetry the ability to make “passions visible, as it were,” not literally, by showing them, but rather by explaining the “previous climacteric circumstances” that have produced the passions.

Romantic culture had a preoccupation with fixity that altered the terms of the discussion. The Romantics habitually described the experience of intense emotion as an experience of fixity – sometimes even figuring intense emotion as turning people into statues. That figuration is writ large in a new usage of the word “tableau” to refer to stage actors stopping and holding their poses silently at a crucial moment in a play – becoming, as the word tableau suggests, a figurative painting just as their characters reach their highest pitch of emotion. This new cultural habit of imagining the stillness of the plastic arts as a metaphor for an experience of extreme emotion added a new element to the older discourse surrounding the single moment represented by a work of art. Shifting focus away from the artist’s selection of a single moment from a pre-existing narrative of many moments, this new way of thinking about art emphasized instead the stillness itself, conceiving of static figures as removed from their narrative contexts and held fixed, as though in a theatrical tableau. (This reconception, in turn, dovetailed with a new way of thinking about artworks as objects – permanent objects that could be kept intact indefinitely in museums.) Without losing its association with a specifically visual and instantaneous conception of sympathy, visual art came to be thought of as not only representing affective symptoms vividly, but also preserving moments – and feelings – that would otherwise be fleeting.

The two poems by Keats and Shelley discussed in this chapter use their engagements with visual art as opportunities to interrogate the modes of sympathy associated with the “sister arts.” These poems seem at first simply to participate in the Romantic fashion for representing strong feeling held static – by death, or by its own intensity – and for
representing the subject experiencing such feeling as a piece of visual art. Both poems, however, do something more radical than that. In both cases, the feeling subjects are not akin to art, or metaphorically represented as art; they are figures in works of art. And both poems do more than simply use the traditional sisterhood of moral and aesthetic philosophy to buttress or intensify their representations of feeling. “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci” actively interrogate the very kinship between aesthetic thought and thought about sympathy on which they draw.

The two poems challenge the long-standing sorority of sentimental and aesthetic thought in different ways, and they do so in order to take on different questions, but both are concerned with the limits of sympathy as it was traditionally conceived. “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” like a number of Keats’s ekphrases, explores the relationship between the visual arts and feeling, and does so with a note of scepticism, suggesting in the end that eliciting sympathy is not necessarily the goal of the visual arts. The “Ode” works at the frontier of the philosophy of sensibility: if understanding how sympathy and feeling work is part of the intellectual project of sensibility, then so, of course, is understanding when and why sympathy might fail – might be undesirable – might, in fact, become an omnipresent cultural impulse that a viewer of artwork needs to work to escape. The “Ode,” after painstakingly staging a failed sympathetic engagement with a work of art, concludes by offering a model of engagement that is outside the framework of sensibility. Shelley’s posthumously published “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci” explores a different intellectual frontier, testing the limits of how sympathy had been conventionally defined, and tearing down divisions between concepts long assumed to be opposed: sympathy that is visually driven, and sympathy that is gradual.

In “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci,” Shelley takes the experience of sympathy for an artwork as an opportunity to challenge assumptions about the limits of sympathetic subjectivity, and to extend emotional agency beyond the bounds of the animate. By constructing an instance of a viewer feeling with a sympathetic object who is both dead and an artistic construct, Shelley might seem to be echoing observations such as the one made by Adam Smith that we routinely sympathize with the dead. The feeling with that Shelley represents, however, does not conform to either of the two models of sympathy
that Smith and the other moral philosophers had proposed. Rather, Shelley implicitly challenges the idea that visually-driven sympathy for affective display is necessarily instantaneous, as eighteenth-century theories assumed, or that processive, gradual sympathy necessarily requires an active effort of imagination. Moreover, by having his hypothetical viewer of an artwork vicariously experience what it is to be a passive medium of an unnamed agent’s artistic efforts, Shelley challenges the very notion of the conscious self that underpins the philosophical tradition in which thinkers such as Smith, and even Hume, worked.

In “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” Keats stages, step by step, a failure of sympathetic response to an artwork, and he does so in order to articulate a subtle resistance to the dominant assumption that such response is either a reasonable or a desirable objective of the visual arts. I read the poem as an enactment of a psychological process – a process of a viewer trying to engage with an artwork. That viewer, the poem’s speaker, may not have many defining characteristics, but the psychological process staged in the poem’s language is very specific, and it unfolds one step at a time. We see the speaker come to the urn with a conventional set of expectations about how he is to relate to it, and we see those expectations disappointed; we witness in the poem’s language the speaker’s frustration, his changing tactics as he makes repeated attempts at engaging meaningfully with what he sees. In the chapter following this one, I will make a similar argument about “Ode on Indolence” – that it, too, stages a mental process, and that its speaker, like the speaker of “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” is in this sense a character in a miniature dramatization of one possible psychological process. In “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” Keats conspicuously refuses to employ the Humean model of sympathy as cued by visual stimuli that was conventionally associated with the visual arts. In doing so, he seems to set sympathy up to fail. His speaker, deprived of the narrative context of the scene represented on the urn, and insistently trying to imagine his way into sympathetic engagement with figures whose circumstances he does not know, succeeds only in imagining what it’s like to be a figure on an urn, and his attempt at sympathy is revealed to fall short as the poem unfolds. Keats uses the tradition of sentimental philosophy selectively in order to show it fail, but he shows it failing for a purpose. The fact that the speaker persists in labelling
the urn a “friend to man” in spite of that failure is a tacit defiance of the longstanding assumption that the purpose of the arts is to represent the passions and evoke sympathetic engagement. “Ode on a Grecian Urn” draws on the closely bound traditions of sentimental philosophy and the philosophy of the sister arts in order to divorce them from one another, tacitly proposing a value for the arts that is dependent on their capacity for provoking abstract thought, rather than on their assumed participation in sentimental exchange.

As the poems discussed elsewhere in this thesis, such as Barry Cornwall’s “On the Statue of Theseus” and Mitford’s “Sonnet to Mr. Haydon” make clear, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci” are not alone in drawing on the intersection of aesthetic and sentimental thought. These two poems are selected for detailed study here not only because they make especially complex and provocative use of the same coincidence of philosophical traditions, but also because they have been so central to thought about ekphrasis in the last twenty years. They thus enable me to accomplish two tasks simultaneously: to further explore an important strand of Romantic ekphrasis of sensibility, and to bring to light some of the complex history of the study of ekphrasis within the scholarly community.

4.1 Temporal and Instantaneous: The Anachronism of Assuming Lessing’s Influence

Before we can fully understand what Keats does with the conventional distinction between art’s ability to make an immediate, visual impact and poetry’s ability to build up interest slowly, it is helpful to clarify what he does not do. The fact that “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is as famous as it is can make attempting a new interpretation of it feel like acting out an overdetermined script. Of course the “Ode” is about stopping time; that is where the idea of ekphrasis as striving for atemporality came from. As I shall argue, however, scholarship about ekphrasis is founded on a habit of misunderstanding the philosophical tradition Keats had access to. And, although the misunderstanding is slight, it has had important consequences. We are in a better position to see what the “Ode” does with the idea that the visual arts do not tell stories when we recognize that, in
1820, articulating that idea did not necessarily entail any reference to the visual arts being *spatial*. The smaller “quantity of time” (Darwin 122) available to the visual arts, relative to poetry, was not correlated with a correspondingly larger quantity of space, nor was poetry assumed to be less spatial in its representations than painting. The poem’s thematic concern with art’s inability to unfold stories in time is usually engaged by contemporary critics in language that is anachronistic. Moreover, our critical language does more than simply supplant the language the Romantics themselves would have used. It has obscured what was for the Romantics one of the most important facets of the time-stopping idea: its connection in the philosophical thought of the day with ideas about how sympathy is produced, and its connection with conventions for representing strong feeling. I want to suggest that, for the Romantics, the relationships between visual art and poetry and between stasis and sequential narrative came loaded with another set of associations, and that, as a result, those relationships could provide an intellectual framework for thinking about sympathy and story-telling, emotion and stasis. It is that framework that Keats takes full advantage of in “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”

The version of the art-stopping-time idea that contemporary theorists of ekphrasis use was imported into the discipline by Murray Krieger; it has so entirely supplanted earlier permutations of the idea that it has become difficult even to perceive that there were earlier permutations. In order to see eighteenth-century and Romantic thought about the arts clearly, we need to uncouple the idea of atemporality from the idea of spatiality – an association that is anachronistic for the period. Krieger’s work initiated a subset of theoretical works about ekphrasis that is preoccupied with time, and with space, and with how arts that work in these media compete with or complete one another. Language is temporal; art is spatial; Krieger and those who have followed his approach confront the paradox of how temporal language can attempt to re-mediate spatial objects. More recent scholars have adopted Krieger’s terminology of the spatial and the temporal. Mitchell, in *Picture Theory*, offers the common-sense corrective that although “images, pictures, space, and visuality may only be figuratively conjured up in verbal discourse,” this does not mean “that the conjuring fails to occur or that the reader/listener ‘sees’ nothing” (96). Even within his corrective, however, he resorts to the word “space,” and
he refers elsewhere to “visual-spatial culture” (31). The space-time binary is so persistent that even the best-informed critics anachronistically perceive it in texts where it is not present. For example, David Marshall, in his essay in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, states that “the notion that painting should represent a moment had been used to delineate the temporal properties of writing and the spatial properties of painting” (695). The example he cites is from the Abbé Du Bos, but the passage from which he quotes states only that one can comprehend a whole picture instantaneously, rather than having to imagine it piecemeal; neither there nor anywhere else in his *Critical Reflections* does Du Bos mention the spatial properties of the visual arts: instantaneously comprehensible is not the same concept as spatial. And yet, so persistent is this language of the spatial that what Cheeke has identified as the “most cogitated” element of ekphrasis studies is, in his words, “the traditional binarism of space and time” (5).

Given the persistence of the language of space and time, it is worth examining where these terms came from before Krieger imported them, and why their appeal is so widespread. As the title of Krieger’s early essay “Laokoön Revisited” would suggest, the explicit source of the terminology of the spatial is Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who argued in 1766 that the arts excelled at different types of representation. Although Lessing gave examples of a number of differences between the respective abilities of poetry and painting, the most important distinction he made was between the static, spatial representation best done by visual art and the temporal, narrative representation best done by poetry. Lessing’s influence has been considerable. The idea of a time-space binary in the relationship between literature and art can be traced in the work of philosophers and theorists from Oscar Wilde to Gérard Genette, and these thinkers in turn have influenced theorists of ekphrasis.62 Lessing’s influence on the Romantics is sometimes taken as a given, even in studies that attempt to historicize Romantic ekphrases’ preoccupation with stopping time. Heffernan’s chapter on Romantic

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62 Heffernan cites Genette’s distinction between narrative (“‘pure process’”), and description (which “suspends time, [and] spreads the narrative ‘in space’”) (5); Genette’s definition of description is strikingly similar to Lessing’s definition of the visual arts, as though description were literally a type of painting with words. Cheeke draws on Wilde’s “The Critic as Artist” to argue that Wilde “rearticulated Lessing’s theory of difference, with its implicit privileging of literature over the plastic arts” (24).
ekphrasis in *Museum of Words* rightly identifies the Romantic period as the age when the idea of art stopping time became popular, and astutely notes that it is “deeply embedded in the ideology we inherit” from the period (91). But even Heffernan overestimates the influence in England of *Laocoön*.

In his 1986 book *Iconology*, Mitchell reads *Laocoön* closely in order to destabilize Lessing’s categories, noting that “the notions of space and time fail to provide a coherent basis for their [i.e. poetry and painting’s] differentiation” (103). Painting’s representation of spatial bodies, Mitchell points out, is still mediated, rather than direct: “[p]ainting presents bodies indirectly, through pictorial signs, but it does so less indirectly than its presentation of actions” (102), and the same can be said of poetry’s representation of temporal sequence. Although my interest is not in the coherence or incoherence of Lessing’s ideas, but rather the anachronism of assuming their ubiquity in Romantic Britain, Mitchell’s analysis is helpful by virtue of what it reveals about the standing of Lessing’s ideas even in the late twentieth century. The rigour with which Mitchell must proceed in challenging Lessing’s authority, two hundred and twenty years after the original publication of *Laocoön*, speaks to the ubiquity of those ideas in our own intellectual culture, and the care we must take to step back from Lessing if we are to see Romantic British thought about the arts accurately. Mitchell observes that “the curious power his text has had over all subsequent attempts to comprehend the differences between poetry and painting” stems from Lessing’s “cunning exploitation of the iconophobic and iconoclastic rhetoric that pervades the discourse we call ‘criticism’ in Western culture” (112).

However great his influence in later decades, the likelihood that Lessing directly influenced Romantic British thought about the sister arts is negligible. The only concrete evidence we have of direct influence is Fuseli’s citation of Lessing and his paraphrase of

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63 Heffernan is surely right that the concept of art’s supposed temporal transcendence is part of our ideology now, for it was an idea that was taken for granted in studies of ekphrasis until he historicized it. Whether “ideology” is the right word for how the idea functioned in the Romantic period, when it was much newer and thus less entrenched, is another question. As this chapter will show, the relationship between visual art and time was more like a loose cluster of ideas with which writers interested in art were actively experimenting.
the central argument of *Laocoön* in 1801. But Thomas De Quincey published his partial translation of *Laocoön* in 1826 with a preface that introduced the work as something new to English letters – a corrective to British culture’s fixation on German poetry at the expense of German prose. It is decidedly not a preface to a work already in substantial circulation in British culture. (By contrast, in 1748, when Thomas Nugent published his translation of the Abbé Du Bos’s *Critical Reflections on Poetry, Painting and Music* of 1719, his preface looked very different. “There have been very few books published of late years,” Nugent began, “that have met with a better reception, or attained to a greater reputation in the learned world, than the following *Critical Reflections.*”) Prominent British aesthetic thinkers such as Sir Joshua Reynolds or Erasmus Darwin do not cite Lessing’s work, in spite of the fact that Darwin’s aesthetic writing is conspicuously set up as part of an ongoing intellectual conversation. Still more telling than the absence of citations, however, is the absence from British writing of Lessing’s particular formulation of the idea that visual art exists outside time. It was Lessing who popularized the idea of the spatial in opposition to the temporal. Other philosophers, including the widely read Abbé Du Bos, had already introduced comparable binaries, such as “co-existent” vs. “successive” objects (Harris 32), and one vs. many moments or “pictures” (Du Bos 329). It is these earlier permutations of the idea that we find both in philosophical writings such as Reynolds’s *Discourses* and Darwin’s Interludes to *The Botanic Garden*, and in ekphrastic poetry from the Romantic period. Edmund Burke, although he disagrees with Du Bos’s conclusions, borrows his conceit of poetry presenting a multitude of pictures. Whereas Du Bos claims that the tragic poet whose

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64 On the basis of this paraphrase, James O’Rourke identifies a possible chain of influence by means of which Keats might have adopted Lessing’s terms: Fuseli taught both Haydon and Severn (62). All of the examples that O’Rourke gives as evidence of Lessing’s influence on the *Annals* circle, however, are more consistent with earlier versions of the stopping-time idea. Indeed, the excerpt of an essay by Lord Viscount Sidmouth that O’Rourke provides to establish the subject’s prevalence in the *Annals* actually quotes Sir Joshua Reynolds, although O’Rourke does not identify the quotation; moreover, since the essay’s brief preface in the *Annals* identifies it as the Oxford prize essay for 1779, it predates even Fuseli’s introduction of Lessing’s ideas into British thought.

65 For example, Darwin has the character of the Bookseller in his “Interlude I” quote Sir Joshua Reynolds in order to set up his own persona’s citation of Lord Kames in reply (48). Darwin also lists as “three of our celebrated artists” the cosmopolitan grouping of Reynolds, Fuseli, and Angelica Kauffman (49).
work is performed “presents us successively with fifty pictures, as it were” (329), Burke praises Milton’s imagery in *Paradise Lost* in strikingly similar terms, explaining that “[t]he mind is hurried out of itself, by a crowd of great and confused images; which affect because they are crowded and confused” (57). Even Percy Bysshe Shelley, whose *Defence of Poetry* was written twenty years after Fuseli’s public citation of Lessing, does not use Lessing’s formulation. The idea that the opposite of “temporal” is “spatial” is one that would not have seemed logically necessary or even intuitive to the Romantics.67

4.2 “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: Art Beyond the Limits of Sympathy

Romanticists studying ekphrasis, such as James A.W. Heffernan and Grant F. Scott, have been less inclined to take the “Ode” as paradigmatic of a whole genre than have generalists less invested in historicizing the emergence of the ekphrastic tradition as we now know it. But both Heffernan and Scott have nonetheless devoted considerable time to the “Ode” – more so than any other single poem about art from the period. But while

66 Burke is unusual for his century in the limited attention he gives to sympathy in his discussion of the relative merits of the sister arts. In his section on sympathy, he does state that it is “by this principle [i.e. sympathy] chiefly that poetry, painting, and other affecting arts, transfuse their passions from one breast to another, and are often capable of grafting a delight on wretchedness, misery, and death itself” (41). Later, he says that words are the best medium for inspiring sympathy, because “there are no tokens which can express all the circumstances of most passions so fully as words” (158), and we feel sympathetic emotion most clearly when we understand the other person’s passions as completely as possible. Following the combined logic of these two statements, one might assume that, according to Burke, conveying the passions clearly and precisely would be the goal of the arts. In general, however Burke is actually much more concerned with the terror of sublimity than he is with sympathetic emotion of any kind, especially in the arts. Most of his discussion of the relative merits of poetry and painting occurs within his extended discussion of the advantages of obscurity. He says of poetry that “[i]ts apparitions, it chimeras, its harpies, its allegorical figures, are grand and affecting,” but that “[t]hese figures in painting would be clear enough, but I fear they might become ridiculous” (59).

67 A notable exception is Blake, who does pair the terms Time and Space – in fact, he declares them twins and spouses. In *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, he says that “Time and Space are Real Beings, a Male & a Female. Time is a Man, Space is a Woman, and Her Masculine Portion is Death” (K 614 qtd in Damon 404). In *Milton*, he says that “Los is by mortals nam’d Time, Enitharmon is nam’d Space” (24:68 qtd in Damon 379). Blake’s abstractly metaphysical writings on Time and Space, however, are far removed from any discussion of the sister arts, in spite of the fact that Blake himself navigated the relationship between verbal and visual art constantly in his work as an engraver. The likelihood that Blake’s prophetic writings about eternity had any impact on how his contemporaries thought of the relationship between poetry and painting is, to say the least, negligible, and he himself does not seem to have been engaged in the discussion of how many moments a given art can represent.
my own reading of the poem owes real debts to the insights of Scott and Heffernan, it owes a still larger debt to the very misinterpretation of the philosophical tradition, dating back to Krieger, that I have just traced. Precisely because the prominence of ideas about time vs. space in studies of ekphrasis results from the apparent presence of those ideas in the “Ode,” the “Ode” is the poem that most stands to benefit from correcting the misperception – from shifting our language from our own era’s dichotomy of temporal and spatial back towards the eighteenth-century dichotomy of temporal and atemporal, moving and static, many moments and one moment.

According to Heffernan’s chapter on Romantic ekphrasis in Museum of Words, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” “forges a mordant critique of transcendence [i.e. the idea that the visual arts can transcend time], and more especially of the notion that any work of visual art can satisfactorily represent it [i.e. such transcendence]” (110). The poem does this, he argues, in two ways. First of all, the urn itself is imaginary – not a real artefact that has survived the ravages of time, but a false one, untouched by time because it does not exist to be touched. Second of all, although the poem seems to use the language of “iconophilic homage” (115), it insistently returns to “the language of narration – more precisely of prediction” (113). It is, Heffernan argues, as though the poem enacts an impossible struggle to escape the temporality of linguistic representation itself. He suggests that this apparently impossible escape actually succeeds, but only in the urn’s utterance, rather than the speaker’s, when the verb is “drops out” of the urn’s “chiastic utterance,” so that language really does take on “the juxtapositional effect of sculpture” (115). Like Heffernan, I note the paradoxical nature of the speaker’s attempt to address the static figures as if they existed in time and could hear him. But I would contend that the speaker’s impulse to do so, rather than first and foremost acting out Romantic culture’s fascination with the idea that artworks exist outside of time, is in fact best understood as acting out Romantic culture’s assumption that one is supposed to sympathize with figures in works of art.
Scott, in *The Sculpted Word*, offers a very different reading than Heffernan’s, performing the daunting task that had led Mitchell to “capitulate[…]”68 – namely applying to the poem Mitchell’s own theory of ekphrasis as a gendered encounter between viewer and art object. Scott not only attributes to the speaker of the “Ode” an unease with the silent, feminized urn’s potential to reduce him to a comparable silence, but also traces a similarly gendered pattern in the response of critics to the “Ode,” saying that criticism has tended to follow the path of the poet as he escapes from the frustrating embrace of the urn/bride into a more comforting and inspiring little aphorism. Most critics are drawn toward this concluding phrase, then, not so much because it presents an intriguing logical problem but because it offers a means of escaping the rest of the ode and its unsettling implications of feminine power and thwarted male sexuality. (120-21)

Although I agree with Scott that the last stanza of the “Ode” seems to indicate a desire on the speaker’s part to escape from something oppressive, I would contend that in fact he is escaping not from the urn’s oppressively feminine silence but rather from an impulse to engage sympathetically with visual art – an impulse that was very deeply embedded in Romantic culture.

While Heffernan and Scott’s interpretations of the “Ode” yield these productive insights, the larger field of ekphrasis studies has, as I have suggested, sometimes imposed readings on the poem that take it out of the context of its own era; moreover, the anachronism in the way critics have understood the “Ode” has been reinforced by scholarship’s propensity to see the “Ode” as a cornerstone text of ekphrasis as a genre. “Ode on a Grecian Urn” has stood at the heart of ekphrasis criticism since its inception. Leo Spitzer revived the term and attributed to it its current meaning specifically to categorize the “Ode.” He did so at a time when the “Ode” was already at the forefront of many scholars’ minds on account of its association with New Criticism, especially

68 Scott says that “Mitchell, able to generate only a slim paragraph on the poem, capitulated, citing ‘weariness with its monumentality’” (119). Scott cites a “confessional letter to the author” as his source for this quotation (200n).
Cleanth Brooks’s famous 1947 study *The Well-Wrought Urn*. Murray Krieger’s 1967 essay on ekphrasis is a kind of extended tribute to the “Ode” – Krieger’s reading of the “Ode” is his most extensive, and much of the rest of the essay discusses urns in other literature in order to draw connections to it. Not surprisingly, given this critical history, the “Ode” is often taken as somehow paradigmatic of ekphrasis as a genre, competing for such archetypical status chiefly with Homer’s description of the shield of Achilles. Conventionally, scholars of ekphrasis see “Ode on a Grecian Urn” as the ultimate articulation of art’s atemporality. Stephen Cheeke says in his 2008 book, for instance, that the Ode is “probably the most sustained and densely worked meditation we have upon a certain set of paradoxes that, as we shall see, are central to ekphrasis [...]. Principally, these are the paradoxes of silence/speech, of stillness/movement, and of time/eternity” (45). While these “paradoxes” can indeed be seen in the poem, part of the appeal of that reading, as I have suggested, is that it can be made to intersect with Lessing’s idea that visual art cannot represent anything other than the spatial, and the spatial is a category that has been superimposed on the poem. Scholarship’s impulse to see the “Ode” as foundational for a genre that is, according to such theories, intrinsically spatially oriented has given us a motivation to retain the anachronistic reading that is now mainstream.

The “Ode,” however, shares fewer assumptions with Lessing’s *Laocōon* than is usually thought, and it can be more productively read in conjunction with the work of earlier thinkers who had a greater influence on Romantic British culture, such as the Abbé du Bos and James Harris. Keats’s speaker seems to come to the urn with an assumption thoroughly in keeping with those of most eighteenth-century theorists of the sister arts: that the urn’s purpose as art is to represent and evoke emotion, and that appreciating it will consist of sympathizing with the figures it represents. More specifically, the driving assumption of the first and fourth stanzas of the “Ode” seems to be the idea articulated by Harris that the visual arts are most effective when they represent stories whose particulars are well-known. The speaker desires to know what Harris calls “the previous
and the subsequent” elements of the story to which the urn alludes; in the absence of that knowledge, he imaginatively reconstructs the figures’ circumstances as best he can.

Conspicuously absent from the speaker’s engagement with the urn is the kind of instantaneous sympathy that Du Bos had proposed as fundamental to the visual arts. While Smithian sympathy had become the normative way of conceiving of sympathy in general, Romantic culture made an exception when dealing with the arts, preserving the concept of instantaneous, visual sympathy put forward by Du Bos and Hume to account for the power of painting. Keats refuses that exception, and uses the construction of sympathy prevalent in the intellectual culture of his day selectively: the “Ode” enacts an attempt at sympathy that is wholly dependent on a Smithian, imaginative mode of sympathy – a mode long associated, not with the visual arts, but with the verbal. As this enactment unfolds, stanza by stanza, Keats’s speaker gives a great deal of attention to the fixity of the urn, but does so in the process of trying to make an imaginative leap into the figures’ circumstances. Where earlier thinkers such as Du Bos and Reynolds had proposed that the limitations created by the fixity of visual art were more than compensated for by its capacity to represent with great vividness the most affectively intense moment of a story, Keats’s speaker finds his sympathy inhibited by the urn’s fixity because it suppresses the befores and afters of the figures’ situation. In the absence of a known narrative, the speaker imagines the experience of being physically and emotionally static, as though the figures on the urn could have a temporal, even narratable, experience of being pinned in their punctum temporis. He constructs the frieze on the urn less as a single moment than as an infinite proliferation of identical moments: a “story of changelessness,” in Heffernan’s words (113). The speaker tries to divorce his act of sympathy from any dependence on narrative by sympathizing with the figures themselves, rather than with the characters they presumably represent. But the mode of sympathy he is trying to engage in – imaginative reconstruction of circumstances – cannot function in the absence of any narrative whatsoever. Instantaneous, visual, sympathy is never in play. That story of changelessness, of course,

69 For a fuller discussion of Harris, see the Introduction to this thesis.
proves inhospitable to sympathy – so much so that, as we shall see, the speaker forges a more successful sympathetic connection with the “little town” that is not actually represented on the urn than with any of the figures that are.

The question is why Keats chose to omit the conception of sympathy as visually driven and instinctive – a conception that, although largely displaced by imaginative sympathy in general thought, was nonetheless popular in discussions of the visual arts. The failure of imaginative sympathy in the face of a work of visual art suggests a need to re-conceive the objectives of the visual arts – and to account for the fascination of an artwork that does not represent a known story and does not elicit sympathy. I would posit that it is such a re-conception, however enigmatic, that the final stanza of the ode offers at the conclusion of the poem’s step-by-step enactment of failed sympathy: an idea of what art’s friendship to mankind might consist of that can account for some visual art’s resistance to sympathetic identification. By restricting his speaker’s idea of sympathy to an imaginative identification incompatible with visual art and then representing that identification failing, Keats offers a resistance to the very idea that underpinned the eighteenth-century philosophical tradition of linking the sister arts with sympathy to begin with, namely the assumption that the purpose of all art is to evoke sympathy. As the following pages will demonstrate, in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” Keats tacitly suggests that in fact the plastic arts may not and need not evoke the passions – that their value lies in something else entirely, namely their ability to provoke abstract thought or offer viewers a window into an ongoing intellectual debate.

We can see more clearly the purposefulness of Keats’s engagement with the philosophical link between the sister arts and sympathy by comparing the “Ode” to a poem that almost certainly influenced it: Wordsworth’s “Upon the Sight of a Beautiful Picture,” which was published in the Annals of the Fine Arts two years before Keats’s “Ode.”

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70 Its title in the Annals is “Sonnet Upon the Sight of a Beautiful Picture”; it is printed in the Cornell Wordsworth series, and is usually referred to, as “Upon the Sight of a Beautiful Picture.” When it appeared in the Annals, the poem had been previously published in 1811. Heffernan takes this poem to be
Praised be the art whose subtle power could stay
Yon cloud, and fix it in that glorious shape;
Nor would permit the thin smoke to escape,
Nor those bright sun-beams to forsake the day;
Which stopped that band of travellers on their way,
Ere they were lost within the shady wood;
And shewed the bark upon the glassy flood
For ever anchored in her sheltering bay.

Soul-soothing Art! which morning, noon tide, even
Do serve with all their changeful pageantry!
Thou, with ambition modest yet sublime,
Here, for the sight of mortal man, hast given
To one brief moment caught from fleeting time
The appropriate calm of blest eternity.

Much of “Upon the Sight of a Beautiful Picture” sounds like a recycling of “Peele Castle”: the words “glassy” and “pageantry” both appear in “Peele Castle,” and the “appropriate calm of blest eternity” in the last line of this sonnet sounds eerily like the idyllic vision Wordsworth’s earlier speaker claims he would have painted. As the discussion of “Peele Castle” in the next chapter will reveal, however, the overlap is more linguistic than intellectual. It is in fact “Ode on a Grecian Urn” that most stands to benefit from being juxtaposed with “Upon the Sight of a Beautiful Picture.”

Wordsworth’s sonnet, unlike the “Ode,” does not mention the idea of an artwork’s physical permanence or durability, but it does, like the “Ode,” explore the idea that the figures in a work of art are held fixed. In Wordsworth’s poem, the verb “stay” in the opening line is transitive: “Praised be the art whose subtle power could stay / Yon cloud.” Art’s staying power is not its own power to endure, but rather its power to

an unfettered expression of what he calls the “ideology of transcendence,” even using it as the epigraph to his chapter on Romantic ekphrasis (91-93).
compel the things it represents to remain in place – to “fix” the cloud in a “glorious shape.” That power is framed in the language of authority. Art will not “permit” the cloud or the sunbeams to leave; it has “stopped” the travellers, just as it has “stay[ed]” the cloud. The hours “serve” art. That authority, however, by and large comes across as protective. The poem links ideas of sublimity and authority, beauty and propriety, and it finds in the art object a synthesis of these conventionally opposed pairs of concepts. The artist’s sublime and protective authority is what enables the beauty and propriety of the objects represented. The state of being held static within the painting is one of security. The smoke has not been allowed to “escape,” or the sunbeams to “forsake the day”; the travellers are not “lost”; the ship is “anchored in her sheltering bay.”

The language of safety and security is plentiful in the sonnet, but what is not plentiful is the language of feeling, let alone of sympathy, and it is in this difference that we can see just how determinedly plentiful it is in “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” In “Upon the Sight,” “Art” is apostrophized as “[s]oul-soothing,” and the poem’s insistent language of safety is soothing in turn; moreover, the spectre of danger that lingers in words like “escape,” “forsake,” and “lost” intensifies the soothing effect of the assertions of security that negate those words. But “Upon the Sight,” unlike Keats’s “Ode,” is not primarily a poem about feeling. The speaker does not directly express any feelings; he does not sympathize with any of the figures in the painting, or with the artist, nor does he ask any sympathy of the reader. The sonnet starts with the idea of art holding a cloud static, and ends with the more abstract idea of art extracting a moment from “fleeting time” in order to bestow upon it an “appropriate calm.” Between the catalogue of specific figures held in place by art and the generalized abstraction of catching a moment from “fleeting time,” the only transition is an apostrophe to “Soul-soothing Art! which morning, noon tide, even / Do serve with all their changeful pageantry.” Keats’s “Ode” also starts with the idea of an artwork holding figures static, and also ends with an abstraction, but it gets from one to the other by means of a densely worked enactment of sympathy failing.

71 I use propriety here in the etymological sense of being in one’s own, fitting place – the ship is in her sheltering bay, not a sheltering bay – and this seems also to be evoked by Wordsworth’s “appropriate calm.”
Keats adopts the idea that art can fix and hold its objects, but does something quite different with it, imagining the consequences of stasis for those objects in terms of strong feeling, rather than safety.

Readers conditioned to interpret the “Ode” as a poem “about” stasis may find themselves surprised by its beginning, for there is no clear juxtaposition in the opening stanza between an unchanging or static urn and temporal flux; on the contrary, the poem’s concern with stasis emerges and evolves only as the subsequent stanzas unfold, and, in the first stanza, the static and the shifting are blended by the stanza’s slippery verbal play.

Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme.

The famous pun on “still” does suggest the urn’s stasis: “thou still unravish’d bride” could mean “thou as-yet unravished bride,” and it also hints at “thou unmoving, unravished bride.” But that suggestion is subtle almost to the vanishing point. The phrase “unravish’d bride of quietness” is likewise ambivalent, suggesting both that the urn’s own life story has been arrested at a moment of unfulfilled desire and that the urn is not yet wholly allied with quietness, perhaps not even quiet. Time, in this stanza, is not rapid or headlong or even relentless, but “slow,” and wed to “silence.” The urn’s status as the “foster-child” of that marriage implies that its familial allegiance to slow time and silence may be ambiguous or incomplete, like its unconsummated marriage to “quietness”: it is a foster-child rather than a birth-child.

As the stanza moves into a series of questions, the urn seems still less static. The speaker’s questions act as an oblique description, and it is a description teeming with movement. The speaker’s interrogation gains momentum as the questions themselves become ever shorter. Lines 5-7 contain a single, long question:

What leaf-fring’d legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
The question may have multiple parts, but the fact that they are all presented in a single interrogative slightly restrains the headlong rush of the questioning. Lines 8 -10, however, each contain two short questions:

- What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
- What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
- What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

The frequency of the question marks, the repetition of “what,” and the disappearance of the verb “are” after the first of these questions all suggest that the speaker’s pace of questioning has quickened. In the version published in the *Annals*, line 9 contains three extremely short questions – “What love? What dance? What struggle to escape?” – the quickness of the syntax creating much the same aura of hurry as the phrase “mad pursuit.” Moreover, while the first question asks about the identity of the figures and the setting, the later questions name actions and passions more often than figures or objects: “love” and “dance” in the *Annals* version, “mad pursuit” in the *Lamia* version; “struggle to escape”; “wild ecstasy.” The questions, far from conveying any sense of the urn’s stasis, give the impression that the urn represents movement, or at least that the speaker perceives it as doing so. Thus, although critics reading the poem as deeply invested in the idea of stasis have often made much of the word “still” in the opening line, the urn is only ambiguously associated with silence and stillness in the first stanza.

In the poem’s third line, the speaker addresses the urn in terms that would have struck some readers of the *Annals of the Fine Arts* as philosophically old-fashioned. The speaker calls the urn a “Sylvan Historian” and attributes to it the ability to “express / A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme.” This statement defies some of the principle aesthetic tenets of its era, boldly contradicting the established idea that the visual arts are confined to a single moment of action or that poetry is better able to relate sequential events than its sister arts. The idea that a work of visual art tells a story was at best a

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72 “Ode on a Grecian Urn” was first published in the *Annals of the Fine Arts* under the title “On a Grecian Urn”; in the same year, it was published as “Ode on a Grecian Urn” in Keats’s most famous and successful volume, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems*. The *Lamia* version is usually taken as definitive.
conservative one in 1820, grounded in the traditional prestige of history painting, but called into question by the already long-established discourse of the sister arts. Of course the theory of the “pregnant moment” was itself grounded in history painting. The philosophy of the sister arts consistently suggests that the visual arts can and should represent scenes from stories. But it also consistently suggests that the visual arts are less good at telling stories than they are at maximizing the emotional impact of key moments within stories that are already well known. Keats’s choice of the word “express” when his speaker credits the urn with telling a “tale” is pointed. He uses the word “express” in a sense that was already archaic in the nineteenth-century: “[t]o represent by sculpture, drawing, or painting; to portray, delineate, depict” (OED). The archaic usage seems calculated to draw attention to the antiquatedness of the idea of art telling a tale, in contrast to the much more current idea of art expressing the passions of the figures depicted. Keats’s speaker, however, says not only that the urn can express a tale, but that it can “thus express / A flowery tale” (emphasis mine), suggesting that the urn has already told or is in the process of telling its tale. The fact that the speaker then questions the urn about that tale for six lines suggest that the urn isn’t expressing its tale very clearly, but the speaker never acknowledges this. At this early point in the poem’s staging of his reaction to the urn, the speaker seems to see what he wants to see, his perception conforming to his expectations: he comes to the urn with an outdated expectation of its capabilities, and perceives it telling a tale effectively even in the face of his own confusion.

The speaker’s transition to treating the figures as static is belated and gradual: it is only once he has finished stating the abstract value of imagined experience and starts actually trying to imagine the figures’ experience that he begins to note their fixity. At the start of the second stanza, he ceases to address the urn as an artifact, and begins to address the

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73 Sir Joshua Reynolds, in his 1771 Discourse, stated that “Invention in Painting does not imply the invention of the subject; for that is commonly supplied by the Poet or Historian. With respect to the choice, no subject can be proper that is not generally interesting. It ought to be either some eminent instance of heroick action, or heroick suffering. There must be something either in the action, or in the object, in which men are universally concerned, and which powerfully strikes upon the publick sympathy” (117). Barrell argues that the prestige of history painting was founded in the discourse of civic humanism: that paintings of worthy deeds would inspire young men to public spiritedness (3).
figures represented, as though he has imaginatively entered the world of the figures, but he does not immediately begin trying to reconstruct their experience. For as long as he only comments upon the superiority of the imagined to the real, the speaker continues to address the figures as temporal beings.

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
   Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear’d,
   Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.

The speaker enjoins the “pipes” represented to “play on,” as though they can hear him and register his approval, and perhaps could even stop playing if they chose. He even compares the imaginary pleasures represented on the urn to “melodies” – the least directly mimetic but also the most dependent on sequential progression of the sister arts.

It is in the fifth and sixth lines of the stanza that the speaker suddenly seems to perceive the figures differently, abruptly realizing their immovability, and attempting to reconstruct their experience without knowing anything about them except that they are immovable.

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
   Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
   Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
   For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

The content of the declarative “thou canst not leave / Thy song” contradicts the assumptions inherent in the imperative “play on”: if the youth cannot leave his song, then there seems little need to tell him to keep playing. This apparent paradox marks the start of the speaker’s attempt imaginatively to access the figures’ experience: to sympathize with them. He begins by observing the figures’ circumstances, and then proceeds to surmise what their feelings must be, first imagining that they must be grieved by their situation (since he instructs the lover not to grieve), and then rhapsodizing about the advantages of their “[m]ore happy love,” with “happy” here suggesting both fortunate
and joyful. As Grant Scott puts it, the speaker “improvises a series of empathetic effusions” (132). But the speaker’s attempt at sympathy is hampered by the fact that, as the opening stanza has made clear, he does not know what story is represented on the urn. The only circumstance he can observe is that the figures are on an urn: that they are static representations. In the absence of a known story, the speaker reconstructs the experience of stasis itself, imagining the feeling of being eternally frozen in a single moment: in his attempt at sympathy, he is looking at the representations themselves, rather than at what they represent. He sustains this imaginative exercise for the better part of two stanzas.

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d,
For ever panting, and for ever young;
All breathing human passion far above.

The speaker’s shift from the broadly approving injunction “play on” to the observation that none of the figures can move coincides with his attempt to move past his generalization about the advantages of imagined experience and actually to imagine the figures’ experiences – to sympathize with them.

The speaker’s attempt at sympathy falls conspicuously short, its failure enacted in a series of incongruities and in the famously unwieldy line “More happy love! more happy, happy love!” The experience the speaker tries to imagine is an impossible one – the experience of being a work of plastic art – and his attempt to reconstruct it is riddled with self-contradictions. As Heffernan has observed, the speaker’s imperative to the bold lover not to “grieve” suggests that the lover’s feelings are not as fixed as his pose, and that he could grieve or is grieving. The speaker’s construction of the figures’ “happy love” as “forever panting” seems preemptively to undercut the idea that it is superior to “breathing human passion” (113-14 – italics mine). More crucially, the sympathetic
emotion the speaker ultimately expresses in these stanzas comes across as hopelessly strained. A number of critics have pointed out the awkwardness of the “happy love” line. Helen Vendler, in *The Odes of John Keats*, posits that “what is being said is palpably subordinated to the effect of incoherent envy,” and she cites an older critical tradition in which it was “assumed that Keats lost control of his poem in this stanza” (138). Vendler’s interpretation is at its most insightful, however, when she suggests that the speaker approaches the figures as a “passionate sympathizer” but that his “fever of identification” is “defensively over-prolonged through an extra stanza” (124). I would argue that the famously hollow sounding “happy!” line is a deliberate demonstration of the speaker’s uncertainty. The excessive repetition comes across as forced – as though the speaker is attempting to convince himself or to compensate for his lack of conviction. The line enacts the speaker’s realization of his failure in a determined attempt to sympathize with the figures by imagining their circumstances.

In the wake of that failure, the speaker makes a second attempt at sympathy, this time with a different set of figures – presumably those depicted on the other side of the urn. In the fourth stanza, the speaker reverts to asking the urn for its narrative context, as he had in the first stanza, again asking questions that function as description. This time, however, the speaker asks for different information.

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead’st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?

As in his first attempt to engage interpretively with the urn, he addresses the figures in the vignette directly, but he asks only once, in general terms, for their identities, contenting himself with addressing a priest whose identity remains “mysterious.” What he asks for is, in James Harris’s terms, the “previous and subsequent.” The speaker wants to know where, “[t]o what green altar,” the procession is going, and from where,
from “[w]hat little town,” it has come. He once again addresses the figures as if he has entered their world, but this time goes further, treating the moment represented as if it were a moment in a temporal sequence, and referring to “this pious morn” as if the figures themselves required such specificity in order to understand the question.

Both the idea of the urn’s fixity and the speaker’s apparent impulse to sympathize resurface at the end of the fourth stanza, but this time the speaker’s sympathetic energy is redirected in ways that suggest the limitations of the plastic arts in evoking sympathy. Immediately after referring to “this pious morn,” the speaker apostrophizes the “little town” from which he imagines the figures have come.

And, little town, thy streets for evermore
   Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
   Why thou art desolate, can e’er return.

The speaker begins by obliquely reasserting the fixity of the figures, telling the town that its streets will be silent forever. But when he tells the imaginary town that “not a soul to tell / Why thou art desolate, can e’er return,” he subtly anthropomorphizes it, treating it as a feeling agent and thus as a fit object of sympathy. In effect, the speaker’s address to the town implies both that it has a continued temporal existence and that it has a species of interiority: it has the agency to wonder why it is desolate, and a temporal experience of being forever, indefinitely, desolate. The very word “desolate” implies that the town feels its abandonment – that it is lonely, as well as alone. Although the speaker’s construction of the town’s desolation is considerably more subtle than his single-minded construction of the lovers’ supposed happiness, his sympathy with the town is also less thwarted than his sympathy with the lovers in the first vignette. Since the speaker tells the town what its situation is, he fulfils its supposed desire for explanation even in the act of implying that it has such a desire; he is able not only to imagine the town’s temporal experience of desolation, but also to behave benevolently toward it. Vendler asserts that

74 I use “anthropomorphize” rather than “personify” advisedly. Although the town is personified by the speaker’s apostrophe, I want to stress my interpretation of this moment as indicating the speaker’s desire to find an object of sympathy, and I have thus chosen the term to denote a psychological process rather than a rhetorical choice.
the speaker “enters into the life of the religious scene, prolonging it forward and backward with tenderness and feeling” (125); that feeling is a fellow-feeling, not with a human figure, but rather with an inanimate and unpictured town, empty of its inhabitants.

The “tenderness” of the speaker’s address to the town stands in contrast to the forced tone of his address to the lovers, and I would suggest that we can and should note the oddity of this. Where the speaker’s attempt to sympathize with the human figures has fallen short, his sympathy with the town, which relies on the imaginative fiction that a town can feel in the first place, is comparatively successful. What makes the town accessible to imaginative sympathy when the human figures are not is precisely the fact that it is not represented on the urn. As I have suggested, the figures on the urn resist sympathy because their state of being permanently arrested by the work of art that represents them is opaque to sympathetic imagination. The little town is not permanently arrested by the work of art on which it is not represented, and it is thus available to the sympathetic imagination. The fact that the speaker resorts to sympathizing with the town that is not actually portrayed suggests, still more powerfully than his failed sympathy for the figures that are, that visual representation cannot evoke sympathy.

The final stanza marks a return to apostrophizing the urn itself, but the idiom and tone of the poem have changed.

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,
“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,”—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

The speaker uses affective language sparsely, and with a tone of deliberate aesthetic distance. The men and maidens are “overwrought,” a term that, in one of its senses,
frames whatever emotions or passions the figures might feel as undesirable or excessive. The “woe” that the speaker foresees in the future is “other woe / Than ours”: implicitly, the woe of coming generations, but framed here not as our children’s woe or woe like ours, or even as other people’s woe, but rather simply as “other” woe, not “ours” but not attributed to any actual suffering agents. The urn, in this stanza, is not a bride or foster-child, but rather an “Attic shape” and a “fair attitude” – belonging to aesthetic rather than human and familial categories. Indeed, the word “attitude” in effect names the metaphor at the heart of the poem’s construction of the figures as arrested in the middle of their movements: an “attitude” is a theatrically held pose indicative of “some action or mental state” (OED). The urn is not a “Sylvan Historian,” but a “Cold Pastoral”: the genre remains the same, but the urn is figured as a text or example, rather than an author, and the word “cold” suggests that it is both lifeless and devoid of emotion. Even the famous double pun in the first and second lines of the final stanza calls attention to its own artifice. The urn is wrought all over with braid of men and maidens; the urn represents a breed of overwrought men and maidens; the pun depends on the strange and archaic spelling “brede,” and thus denies readers the option of appreciating it without noting its ingeniousness. The tone of the last stanza is self-consciously clever and emotionally distant – a far cry from the impetuous questioning of the first stanza, the eager effusiveness of the third, or the “tenderness,” in Vendler’s word, of the fourth. The language in this last stanza seems, if anything, to enact the urn’s role of “teazing” those who encounter it out of thought – or perhaps into a more abstract kind of thought.

I suggest that the final stanza’s distant tone and conspicuous artificiality constitutes a resistance to the paradigm of aesthetic response that relies on sympathetic engagement. The blatant artifice of the whole stanza has the effect of undercutting the speaker’s construction even of the town as an object of sympathy by reminding us of the literal artifice of both of the Greek scenes. We may or may not have engaged sympathetically

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75 Like “tableau,” “attitude” was imported into English from French as a term that referred to the visual arts, and that how Johnson defined it. Like “tableau,” “attitude” was appropriated in the latter half of the eighteenth century to refer to poses held by living people (OED). Lady Hamilton’s famed attitudes probably assisted, but did not begin, that trend, which the Oxford English Dictionary traces as far back as James Harris.
with the figures or the unpictured town, but we have watched the speaker do so, and here the poem’s language points out to us how fruitless the speaker’s sympathetic engagement has been. The overwrought emotion of the figures is less apt to provoke sympathy if we are reminded that it is also wrought: made. Nobody is arrested and held in place, because the figures on the urn are merely figures, and the “little town” is a fiction – an invention of the speaker’s imagination. The final stanza’s posture of contemplative distance removes what Lord Kames would have termed the “ideal presence” of the little town: the temporary mental illusion of its real presence that enables the speaker to be moved by its desolation but that is instantly destroyed by the reflection that it is not real (Kames 91-96). The final stanza of the “Ode,” by highlighting and mirroring the urn’s artifice, retrospectively shows the speaker’s earlier attempts to suspend his disbelief and sympathize with the figures to have been misguided. The last stanza does not merely alienate us from the attempts at sympathetic engagement in the rest of the poem, however. The speaker foretells that the urn will “remain […] a friend to man,” but its friendship to humankind will consist of uttering a statement equating beauty and truth. Is this assertion the extent of the urn’s answer to the “woe” of humankind? As I shall argue, the urn’s famously enigmatic statement, by intervening in a fashionable but abstractly intellectual debate about the value of realist representation, offers an alternative to the sympathetic paradigm of aesthetic response: the urn speaks, not to the heart, but to the mind, and it knows no other way of speaking.

A great deal has been made of the ambiguity of the final two lines of the “Ode.” How much does the urn say? Who is addressed as “ye” – the urn, the reader, mankind? How are we to interpret the statement about truth and beauty? A number of these difficulties, however, have been helpfully clarified by careful historical research. James O’Rourke has found evidence both in correspondence and in the Annals of the Fine Arts themselves that “the paired use of these words [beauty and truth] was a commonplace in Keats’s

Kames says that, “[i]n contradistinction to real presence, ideal presence may properly be termed a waking dream; because, like a dream, it vanisheth the moment we reflect upon our present situation” (91), and he argues that “in reading, ideal presence [is] the means by which our passions are moved,” and thus “it makes no difference whether the subject be a fable or a true history” (94-5).
circle, particularly in relation to the Greeks” (53). Moreover, the words had a very specific meaning. Truth, far from being a vague abstraction, was a term used “to oppose an aesthetic realism to the representation of imaginary ideas” (54). In the discourse of the Annals of the Fine Arts, and in Keats’s own circle, “beauty” typically referred to ideal beauty and “truth” to realist representation. In this context, the statement “beauty is truth” necessarily sounds less like a mystical aphorism and more like an intervention in an argument: beauty is truth. Of course its meaning is still ambiguous to a degree, since the urn could be saying that the beau ideal is more genuinely realistic than any purported artistic realism, or it could be saying that realism is more beautiful than any purported imaginary ideal. The chiasmus of “beauty is truth, truth beauty” suggests that the urn is saying both of these things. Seen in the poem’s context of publication, the urn’s equating of truth and beauty cuts to the core of a significant quarrel within the art community.77

77 As Stillinger has demonstrated, there is no sound textual basis for assuming that the urn speaks the entirety of the last two lines. At most, the extent of the urn’s utterance is ambiguous in the early copies of the poem. In the Lamia version, it is clear that the urn says only “Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty.” Moreover, given the persistence with which the speaker apostrophizes the urn throughout the poem, and especially in the last stanza, “ye” could address the urn just as easily as it could mankind or the reader. The change in pronoun from “thou” to “ye” certainly enables ambiguity, but it does not negate the more intuitive interpretation that “ye” is the urn. As O’Rourke has observed, “it is a curious fate for a poem to become as canonized as the ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ through a critical history whose primary goal has been to dissuade the reader from believing what the poem seems to say” (46).

One reason why some recent criticism has resisted the disambiguation of the Lamia version’s quotation marks around “Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty,” and has resisted interpreting the “ye” in the final two lines as addressing the urn, seems to be discomfort with a male speaker informing a feminized urn of what the limits of its knowledge are and ought to be. The only recent studies that have taken the “ye” to most obviously address the urn are those that see the speaker as threatened by the urn’s feminine inscrutability, such as Scott’s. But to argue that the male speaker is attempting to contain the urn’s castrating power by imposing a limitation on its knowledge is to conflate the speaker’s construction of the urn as both feminine and story-telling in the first stanza with his very different construction of it in the last. The language of the final stanza’s apostrophe to the urn is not coherently gendered: “fair attitude” sounds faintly feminine, but “Attic shape,” “Cold Pastoral,” and “friend to man” do not. Moreover, once we are aware that “Beauty is Truth” is not an inscrutable conundrum, but rather a moderating position in a current, very public debate, it is difficult to see the urn’s confinement to that debate as an uncomfortable silencing of the urn by the male speaker. Even if we take “ye” to be unambiguously the urn, the limitation articulated by the speaker amounts to an insistence that the urn can participate only in the debate over the relative value of naturalistic representation and the beau ideal: all the urn knows or needs to know is a very cerebral set of aesthetic ideas. Moreover, what is excluded by that limitation – what the urn doesn’t know anything about – is the realm of changeable emotion. The discourse it can’t participate in is the one the speaker has been trying to engage it in for four stanzas, to no effect: the discourse of sympathetic exchange. The speaker’s feminization of the urn in the opening stanza is part and parcel of his attempt to sympathize with its representations; when that attempt fails, he ceases to address the urn as a virgin bride.
What the speaker’s shift into a stylized mode of discourse has in common with the urn’s intervention in aesthetic debate is that both sidestep the question of a sympathetic relationship between art object and viewer. What is conspicuously absent from the urn’s statement is anything to do with feeling; the urn’s answer to the “woe” of humankind is not the ecstasy, bliss, or happiness that preoccupied the speaker in his initial response to it, but rather a valorization of a particular kind of visual mimesis. The final stanza of “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” then, does not offer an unqualified commendation of visual realism; what it does offer is a repudiation of a sympathetic paradigm for the visual arts. The urn, in effect, will not console mankind so much as distract us from our “woe”; and it will distract mankind not by offering us happier feelings with which to sympathize, but rather by giving us something outside the realm of feeling to ponder. It will tease us out of feeling. Of course, if teasing us out of feeling is where the “Ode” ends, it is certainly not where it began. The final stanza, with its tacit suggestion that the visual arts have a purpose other than evoking sympathy, can have such a meaning only in the context of the whole poem and the speaker’s failed attempts at sympathetic engagement. Only by first showing a speaker trying to sympathize and failing can the “Ode” juxtapose visual art’s suitability for evoking abstract intellection with its apparent unsuitability for evoking sympathy. This, I would suggest, is what motivates the poem’s pairing of visual representation with a conception of sympathy that accords ill with it. In taking sympathy to be an imaginative act and in representing a work of visual art as impenetrable to sympathetic imagination, the opening stanzas of “Ode on a Grecian Urn” set up the final stanza to do more than suggest art’s capacity to articulate abstract thought. In the context of the preceding stanzas, the final stanza tacitly proposes that capacity as a challenge to the long-standing assumption that the primary object of the arts is to appeal to the passions by means of sympathy.

“Ode on a Grecian Urn” is not the only ekphrastic poem in which Keats eschews sympathy for the figures depicted in favour of some other kind of reaction: given how mainstream the assumption that evoking sympathy is the purpose of art was, Keats’s small body of free-standing ekphrases is conspicuous for the very absence of that assumption. His 1817 sonnet “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,” for example, may
announce itself as participating in the tradition of sensibility, but it nonetheless avoids any representation or expression of sympathy. The speaker delivers an effusion about his own rather rarefied feelings:

My spirit is too weak—mortality
   Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,
   And each imagined pinnacle and steep
Of godlike hardship tells me I must die
Like a sick eagle looking at the sky.
   Yet ’tis a gentle luxury to weep
   That I have not the cloudy winds to keep
Fresh for the opening of the morning’s eye.
Such dim-conceived glories of the brain
   Bring round the heart an undescribable feud;
So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,
   That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
Wasting of old time—with a billowy main—
   A sun—a shadow of a magnitude.

These lines exude sensibility: the speaker has a weak spirit, an intuition of mortality weighs heavily on him, weeping over his mortal limitations is a gentle luxury, he feels an undescribable feud or a dizzy pain – all of these suggest a man of feeling whose very sensibility incapacitates him. The speaker here feels a great deal, and describes his feeling with startling clarity. In fact, what he describes is all feeling, and nothing of the marbles themselves.78

Strikingly, the speaker’s reaction, while powerful, is not sympathetic; he does not enter into the imagined life of the figures. Rather, his reaction is a two-fold awe before a magnificent artistic achievement and before the equally sublime power of time to undo that achievement. The sonnet is the utterance of one artistic creator doubting that he can

78 Sophie Thomas makes a related point when she notes that “the poem is not about looking at the newly acquired Elgin Marbles […]. Rather, it charts a response to that event that reconfigures the act of looking in complex ways” (29).
live up to the precedent of another, and simultaneously acknowledging that his creations, too, will be someday marred, perhaps obliterated. Compared to Cornwall’s 1820 poem about the Elgin Marbles’ Theseus, discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, Keats’s “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles” seems downright radical in its break from the normative way of relating to art, in that it does not ponder – or even mention – the art’s representational content. Cornwall’s poem, like the “Ode,” interrogates ideas about sympathy and art, but only up to a point. The speaker cannot sympathize with the marble Theseus because his affect is so haughty as to repulse sympathy; but Cornwall’s speaker still sympathizes with someone, drawing upon his knowledge of the Theseus myth to supply him with a fit object of sympathy in the abandoned Ariadne. By contrast, Keats’s speaker in “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles” is overwhelmed by feeling, without the aid either of any narrated set of circumstances or of any vivid impression of passion expressed by the figures themselves, but his feeling is entirely on his own account. “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is thus not alone among Keats’s ekphrases in challenging the popular assumption that the visual arts ought to elicit sympathy: his praise of the Elgin Marbles utterly refuses that same assumption.

Keats’s “On a Leander Which Miss Reynolds, My Kind Friend, Gave Me,” another sonnet written the same year, likewise evokes the conventions of sensibility, and could even be said to be about sympathy, but it nonetheless resists a sympathetic paradigm for the value of art. This poem, like “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,” uses several of the conventional tropes of sensibility: a swooning man, sympathetic maidens, physical symptoms of sympathy (downcast eyes radiating chastened light). In this poem, however, the speaker does not react to the tiny artwork at all. Any reaction to the representation engraved in the gem is displaced onto the vaguely delineated “sweet maidens,” the addressees of the poem’s opening imperatives. The poem’s octave

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79 According to Stillinger’s note, the poem was probably composed in March of 1817, but was not published until 1829. The “Leander” in question was “one of James Tassie’s popular ‘gems,’ glass-paste reproductions [...] of ancient cameo medallions” (Stillinger 428n). According to the 1898 Dictionary of National Biography, Tassie also made enamel, cameo-style portraits of his contemporaries, and his gems were not only popular, but esteemed in their day as art. Catherine the Great of Russia purchased a collection of them, and Tassie exhibited at the Royal Academy beginning in 1769 (374).
prepares the maidens to see something that will affect them emotionally: they should come with down-cast eyes, and they should hold hands, because they are too gentle to witness Leander’s death “untouch’d.”

Come hither all sweet maidens, soberly
Down-looking—aye, and with a chastened light
Hid in the fringes of your eyelids white—
And meekly let your fair hands joined be.
So gentle are ye that ye could not see,
Untouch’d, a victim of your beauty bright—
Sinking away to his young spirit’s night,
Sinking bewilder’d mid the dreary sea.

The sestet describes a short series of moments: Leander purses his lips while still swimming, as though to kiss Hero; Leander loses consciousness and begins to sink; Leander’s arms and shoulders gleam as he fades from view beneath the surface; Leander disappears and his breath bubbles up to the surface.

'Tis young Leander toiling to his death.
Nigh swooning, he doth purse his weary lips
For Hero’s cheek and smiles against her smile.
O horrid dream—see how his body dips
Dead heavy—arms and shoulders gleam awhile:
He’s gone—up bubbles all his amorous breath.

The first of these moments is described in the most detail, while the others are delivered in rapid succession, prefaced by the exclamation “O horrid dream.” The poem’s tone, however, does not encourage us to interpret “O horrid dream” as a sincere expression of dismay on the part of the speaker; where the speaker of the “Ode” loses himself in the exclamatory “happy, happy love!” line, the speaker of this poem seems firmly in control of his utterance. The choice of a dash rather than an exclamation mark following “O horrid dream” may not have been Keats’s, and perhaps should not be taken alone as indicating a more measured tone, but “O horrid” is conventional in a way that “More happy” is not, suggesting that the speaker remains distanced from his own exclamation. The speaker comes across more as a guide than as a viewer reacting to the engraving.
himself, and the exclamation and imperative “O horrid dream – see how his body dips / Dead heavy” seems intended to bring the sympathetically viewing “maidens” to a higher pitch of horror. Indeed, the speaker’s description of the maidens’ bright eyes and white eyelids suggests that he observes them with a mix of interest and erotic pleasure – and that his motive for encouraging their sympathetic horror is mingled with a voyeuristic desire to watch them feel. Although the poem unmistakably draws on the conventions of the poetry of sensibility, and although it is largely about a particular set of viewers and their potential sympathetic reaction to an artwork, it sidesteps any expression of such a reaction on the part of its speaker, turning the sympathetic reaction itself into an object to be viewed. Taken together with “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles” and the “Ode,” this poem suggests that Keats was using ekphrasis in part to experiment with resisting the paradigm of sympathetic response as the chief end of the visual arts.

Romantic culture inherited two conceptions of sympathy that, while not mutually exclusive, had nonetheless competed for dominance for a century. The idea of sympathy as instinctive and visually driven had been associated with the visual arts from the beginning, but it had also lost ground in the intellectual mainstream of Britain to the idea of sympathy as an imaginative act. “Ode on a Grecian Urn” deliberately omits the possibility of instinctive, visual sympathy in order to enact in some detail the failure of imaginative sympathy to render the visual arts meaningful. But where some of the later eighteenth-century philosophers of the sister arts, such as Burke, denigrated the visual arts along with visual sympathy, the “Ode” does not assert, or even suggest, the superiority of poetry to painting or sculpture. Instead, it concludes by drawing attention to the artifice of the visual arts as a feature that enables an abstract form of aesthetic thought even while it hinders sympathy. The “Ode” distances itself from sympathy as a potential reaction to art by first showing sympathetic engagement falling flat and then offering a viable alternative – a way in which the visual arts can have value independently of their ability to evoke sympathy.
4.3 “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci”: Sympathy Beyond the Limits of Sentience

The unfinished “On the Medusa” did not gain a prominence comparable to that of the “Ode” in studies of ekphrasis until the 1990s, when the advent of W.J.T. Mitchell’s new theoretical approach to ekphrasis brought it suddenly and decisively to the forefront. Mitchell, in 1992, and Heffernan, in 1993, each examine the poem in the context of their respective theories of ekphrasis (in Mitchell’s case, a theory of ekphrasis in general; in Heffernan’s case, a theory of Romantic ekphrasis); Scott, in 1996, offers an expanded reading grounded in Mitchell’s theoretical foundation. Each reads the poem as simultaneously embodying and critiquing the norms of ekphrasis, although they differ significantly as to what those norms are. In “Ekphrasis and the Other,” Mitchell argues that “On the Medusa” both exemplifies and questions a convention of ekphrasis as a gendered encounter with a feminized artwork, while Heffernan argues that it both exemplifies and questions Romantic culture’s assumption that the visual arts could somehow transcend time. These readings take the poem to be chiefly concerned with the cultural function of art, but construct the poem as less politically charged than one might expect a work by Shelley to be. Being alert to the poem’s political undercurrent, however, does not mean ignoring its engagement with the discourses surrounding the arts. These readings stand to be enriched by a recognition that for sculpture to act as a metaphor for emotional petrification is conventional in Romantic poetry. To read “On the Medusa,” as Heffernan does, as if it were a commentary only on a culturally dominant idea that art can transcend time is to overlook its participation in its culture’s vocabulary for representing feeling and the passions. To read it, as Mitchell does, as interrogating something inherently paralyzing or threatening about the visual arts is likewise to overlook the fact that to the Romantics it was feeling itself that was often figured as paralyzing. The viewer’s spiritual paralysis in the face of the painting of Medusa has less to do with anything intrinsically petrifying about the visual arts than with the philosophically daring ideas about feeling and sympathy that the poem subtly proposes. And sympathy, in Shelley’s oeuvre, is a cornerstone of hope for social and political renovation.
Mitchell proposes his theory of ekphrasis as a gendered encounter between the viewer and the artwork in his influential essay “Ekphrasis and the Other,” first published in *South Atlantic Quarterly* in 1992, and republished in *Picture Theory* in 1994. Mitchell explicitly chooses “On the Medusa” as the cornerstone text of his new theory, saying that Medusa is the perfect prototype for the image as a dangerous female other who threatens to silence the poet’s voice and fixate his observing eye. Both the utopian desire of ekphrasis (that the beautiful image be present to the observer) and its counterdesire or resistance (the fear of paralysis and muteness in the face of the powerful image) are expressed here. All of the distinctions between the sublime and the beautiful, the aesthetics of pain and pleasure, or of the masculine and the feminine, that might allow ekphrasis to confine itself to the contemplation of beauty are subverted by the image of Medusa. Beauty, the very thing which aestheticians like Edmund Burke thought could be viewed from a safe position of superior strength, turns out to be itself the dangerous force: ‘it is less the horror than the grace’ that paralyzes the observer.

(*Picture Theory* 172)

Mitchell adds, however, that “On the Medusa” is more than simply the perfect example of the ekphrastic mechanism that he identifies: the poem also critiques that mechanism. “On the Medusa,” Mitchell argues, seems “designed to deconstruct, not just the repression of Medusa, but the genre of ekphrasis as a verbal strategy for repressing/representing visual representation”; it does this deconstruction by systematically effacing the mediation of the painter, describing the image as if Medusa were really present (173).

Picking up the thread of Mitchell’s argument, Grant F. Scott offers a reading of “On the Medusa” in his 1996 chapter “Shelley, Medusa, and the Perils of Ekphrasis.” Adopting Mitchell’s definition of ekphrasis as articulating an encounter between a hopeful spectator and a threatening, feminized artwork, Scott takes Mitchell’s claim that the poem is a prototype of the genre to yet a further extreme. He argues that the myth of Perseus and Medusa itself constitutes a “primitive allegory of ekphrasis,” in which
Medusa’s cave resembles a gallery, Perseus resembles a gallery viewer, and Medusa “represents an aesthetic trap that threatens to realize what is only a metaphoric possibility in the *ut pictura poesis* tradition: the fate of speechlessness and paralysis” (319, 320). Perseus, in this reading of the myth, “becomes the first great practitioner of the genre” of ekphrasis (320). In spite of the ahistorical flamboyance of this claim, when he comes to his reading of what Shelley does with the myth, Scott notes some important differences between “On the Medusa” and conventional ekphrasis as defined by Mitchell: that the speaker seems to crave and enjoy, rather than fear, the overwhelming and perhaps emasculating power of the image; that the roles of the speaker/viewer, Perseus, and Medusa herself are blurred by the poem’s slippery language; that the poem “affirms “a poetics of aesthetic encounter which remains wholly antithetical to the predatory gazing of the eighteenth century” (330).

Heffernan also devotes a substantial discussion to “On the Medusa,” close-reading it to make the most of its ambiguities and interpreting it as a challenge to what he deems Romantic culture’s dominant mode of thinking about art. He argues that the “gazer” whose spirit is turned “into stone” is not an unnamed viewer of the painting, but rather Medusa herself, since it is Medusa who lies “gazing” at the sky; he thus concludes that the poem is about beauty’s capacity to petrify even itself. Like Mitchell, Heffernan draws attention to the breakdown of the conventional binary of the sublime and beautiful in the poem’s description of Medusa, but he reads the poem as critiquing the idea of art transcending time. If, as Heffernan argues, Romantic culture idealized art’s ability to preserve the fleeting and to endure indefinitely in museums, then this poem seems to resist that paradigm by representing such preservation and endurance as horrifying. Heffernan pits the Romantic “ideology of transcendence” against the petrifying capacity of the image of Medusa that is “graven,” in his reading, on Medusa’s own spirit: art here signifies a petrification that is deathlike and to be avoided.

These three readings of the poem – especially Mitchell’s, which stands as the seminal interpretation of the poem within ekphrasis studies – are notably apolitical by Shelleyan standards. While it is true that all three construct the poem as resisting or destabilizing mainstream ideologies, they are ideologies at several removes from practical politics.
Mitchell and Scott argue that the poem resists a mode of writing about art that has its root in patriarchal social structures; Heffernan argues that it resists a mode of thinking about art that removes art from the ordinary, transactional world. What they do not discuss is how Shelley’s poem brings the painting of Medusa to bear upon the affairs of the ordinary, transactional world. An older study of the poem, ignoring its status as an ekphrasis entirely, offers a reading of it that is much more in keeping with the mainstream of Shelley criticism. McGann’s 1972 essay “The Beauty of the Medusa” makes it clear that the Shelley who wrote the poem is the same Shelley who wrote *Prometheus Unbound* or “England in 1819.” McGann is interested in the potentially radical political symbolism of Medusa – a woman punished by all-powerful gods for events not her fault – and Shelley’s poem is only the starting point of his discussion of the ways in which Minerva/Athena’s treatment of Medusa was taken as a prototype of unjust tyranny in Romantic and post-Romantic thought.

Reading “On the Medusa” as an ekphrasis does not necessarily preclude reading it in the context of Shelley’s famous radicalism. In fact, unpacking what the poem does with sympathy, and the way it uses the discourse of the visual arts to do it, allows us to see an added layer of its radical subtext. McGann himself observes that “[t]he fascination [Medusa] arouses has been translated into a sympathetic process” in the poem, and that the reader’s sympathy with a victim of tyranny is crucial to the poem’s effects (8). Moreover, sympathy and love are keywords that Shelley returns to again and again: in the “Defense of Poetry,” for example, or in “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” in which he addresses a Spirit of Beauty that is a “messenger of sympathies” (42) and that has taught him to “love all human kind” (84), imploring that spirit to “free / This world from its dark slavery” (69-70). Shelley’s consistently articulated vision that sympathy and love are “the great secret of morals” is a fundamental part of his impulse to hope for a world free of tyranny and injustice (“Defense of Poetry” 682). Sympathy, for Shelley, is radical.

As I shall show, reading “On the Medusa” as an ekphrasis and noting its interactions with conventional ideas about art clarifies what it does with ideas about sympathy, ideas that lend further complexity to the poem’s demand that its readers sympathize with the
tyrannized Medusa. Using slippery language and densely worked metaphors to present a viewer who seems to absorb feelings, sensations, and thoughts from a painting of a dead woman, Shelley offers several challenges to existing ideas about sympathy. Pushing to a new extreme Adam Smith’s observation that we sympathize with the dead even when doing so involves constructing a fiction of their continued bodily sentience, Shelley represents a form of sympathy for the dead that requires no such fiction. Not only does he refuse to align instantaneous sympathy with visual stimuli and gradual sympathy with notions of reconstructed circumstances, but Shelley also refuses to ground sympathy in the apparently common-sense assumption that either the sympathizer or the object of sympathy need to be conscious. Shelley was far from the first in British letters to position sympathy as a cornerstone of ethical renewal, but existing representations of sympathy, measured against “On the Medusa,” seem drastically to underestimate its potential scope.

“On the Medusa” is never explicit that the interaction it represents between viewer and artwork involves sympathy, and perhaps Shelley himself would have resisted the use of the term. It may seem counterintuitive to examine Shelley’s construction of sympathy in a poem that does not use the word “sympathy” at all, but “On the Medusa” is not the only posthumously published text in which Shelley probes conventional ideas about sympathy, re-constructing or re-defining the concept in unusual ways. He does not always name sympathy as such, and the ideas he proposes are not consistent from one posthumously published text to the next, but these texts nonetheless suggest a pattern of ongoing exploration. In his famous passage on the subject in “A Defense of Poetry,” Shelley carefully avoids the word “sympathy,” although what he describes is readily recognizable as such. He states that “[t]he great secret of morals is Love,” which he defines as “a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action or person, not our own,” and he adds that in order for Love to achieve this moral force, “a man must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own” (682). Here, Shelley systematically appropriates to his redefinition of “Love” the attributes usually ascribed to
sympathy: identification with another, putting oneself in another’s “place” by means of imagination, feeling another’s pleasure or pain as if it were one’s own.

I would argue that this calling of a concept that would have sounded to most readers like sympathy by a different name – love – is carefully set up in the preceding sentences, which prepare the reader to be a little more likely to notice the slight misalignment of idea and signifier.

But poetry acts in another and diviner manner. It awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar; it reproduces all that it represents, and the impersonations clothed in its Elysian light stand thenceforward in the minds of those who have once contemplated them, as memorials of that gentle and exalted content which extends itself over all thoughts and actions with which it coexists. The great secret of morals is love...

(682).

Within one paragraph, Shelley first states that poetry offers “unapprehended combinations of thought” and “makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar.” Then he states that poetry “reproduces all that it represents.” Lastly, he redefines love as sympathy. While “unapprehended combinations of thought” is most easily read as a way of describing metaphor, Shelley leaves open-ended the question of how thoughts can be combined. Appropriating to one concept a term that usually means something related but separate is certainly one way of re-combining existing ideas, or of making a familiar idea seem unfamiliar. Moreover, between his statement that poetry offers hitherto “unapprehended combinations of thought” and his offer of an unconventional combination of ideas, Shelley asserts that poetry “reproduces all that it represents,” thus further preparing his reader to note that what follows reproduces the process described immediately before. The apparently aphoristic style of the “Defense” here enables the juxtaposition of Shelley’s assertion that poetry can offer new combinations of ideas with an actual recombination of existing ideas.
Simply linking the terms “sympathy” and “love,” or observing that they are related, would hardly have been unusual, but omitting the term “sympathy” entirely and substituting the word “love” is more daring than that – a much more radical way of combining or juxtaposing the two ideas. “Love” has its own connotations: intense and vulnerable personal attachment, but also divinity and boundlessness. It is by far the older, more conventional term, and, especially in the context of a discussion of morals, its connotations are theological. “Sympathy” is a word associated with secular moral philosophy – the philosophy that had sought to separate morals from religion. To state that sympathy and love are related, or that sympathy is a means of achieving love, might have sounded in 1821 like a subordination of the philosophical concept of sympathy to amatory attachment, but it might as easily have sounded like a conservative tempering of secular thought with religious language; to call sympathy “love,” and to thus appropriate to the idea of sympathy the connotations of divinity and boundlessness associated with it, is quite the opposite.

Elsewhere, Shelley defines “Love” not as sympathy, but as a kind of impulse to seek sympathy: not as the identification itself, but as the drive to identify. In his fragmentary, posthumously published essay “On Love,” he calls Love

that powerful attraction towards all we conceive, or fear, or hope beyond ourselves, when we find within our own thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void, and seek to awaken in all things that are, a community with what we experience in ourselves.

He goes on to say that

[i]f we reason, we would be understood; if we imagine, we would that the airy children of our brain were born anew within another’s; if we feel, we would that another’s nerves should vibrate to our own; that lips of motionless ice should not reply to lips quivering and burning with the heart’s best blood. This is Love.

The wished-for experience he describes here is sympathy. In “On Love,” however, unlike in the “Defense,” Shelley does not hesitate to use the term sympathy. If anything, he uses the term conspicuously, both before and after his definition of Love, as a means
of clarifying the relationship between the two concepts. He begins the essay by lamenting that he has not received sympathy from other people, saying when [...] I have thought to appeal to something in common, and unburthen my inmost soul to them [other men], I have found my language misunderstood, like one in a distant and savage land. The more opportunities they have afforded me for experience, the wider has appeared the interval between us, and to a greater distance have the points of sympathy been withdrawn. [...] I have everywhere sought sympathy, and have found only repulse and disappointment.

In stating this before defining Love as the impulse to strive for communion with others, Shelley is making it clear that Love is the craving for sympathy. Curiously, however, Shelley never uses the term sympathy in his attempts actually to describe the sought-after communion, although he does signal his participation in the intellectual tradition of sensibility by alluding to A Sentimental Journey. Instead, he reserves the term as a kind of shorthand for talking about the lack or failure of such communion, returning to the word at the end of the essay when he says that “in solitude, or in that deserted state when we are surrounded by human beings, and yet they sympathize not with us, we love the flowers, the grass, the waters, and the sky.” Here, both verbs, “sympathize” and “love,” are standing in for the effusive definitions that precede them in the essay: to sympathize is to understand and share the intellectual, imaginative, emotional, and spiritual experience of another, and to love is to seek such sympathy from another.

If Shelley’s strategies for constructing the relationship between the terms “Love” and “sympathy” are noticeably different in “On Love” than they are in his “Defense of Poetry,” his actual definition of Love is also crucially different. In “On Love,” Shelley proposes that each person has an inner concept of an idealized self, “deprived of all that we condemn or despise, the ideal prototype of every thing excellent and lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man.” Love, in “On Love,” is the compulsion to find resemblances to this idealized self in the external world: it is not an identification with the good in others, as it is in the “Defense,” but rather an impulse to identify others with the good in oneself. In the “Defense,” his manifesto as a poet,
Shelley accomplishes something specific. By not naming sympathy, or rather by naming it something else, he can insist on a fresh set of associations with the concept. In “On Love,” he explicitly articulates twin concepts of love and sympathy, in which sympathy is defined fairly conventionally as a shared experience of someone else’s inner life. The essay’s discussion of sympathy is somewhat unconventional by the standards of a philosophical text, however, in that it is the object or recipient of sympathy, rather than the sympathizer, whose experience concerns Shelley, and whose craving for sympathetic communion is a motivating force for action. Furthermore, the essay’s treatment of sympathy is still more unconventional in that the inner experiences to be sympathetically shared are not just emotions, but also thoughts, reasonings, and imaginative fictions: the “airy children of our brain.”

“On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci” shares elements with both essays. Like “On Love,” it stretches the concept of sympathy, expanding it to include shared experiences well beyond feeling or the passions. Composed roughly a year and a half before “A Defense of Poetry,” “On the Medusa,” like the “Defense,” rethinks the concept of sympathy without naming it as such (albeit using a very different strategy for rethinking it). Never revised for publication, “On the Medusa” does not offer nearly as familiar a formulation of sympathy as either essay, nor does it offer a conclusive theory of sympathy’s moral function, as does the “Defense.” What it does offer is a representation of a response to an artwork – a representation in which the viewer seems paradoxically to be both struck with intense feeling and as insentient as the painting of the dead Medusa. The feelings named in the poem – pain, agony – seem to belong to both Medusa and the viewer, without either of them having the consciousness or even the grammatical agency to feel them in the conventional sense of the word.

The poem’s status as a fragment makes widely differing interpretations more than usually difficult to reconcile, and a skeptic might doubt that the poem can bear the weight of a reading close enough to tease out a reconceiving of sympathy as nuanced as the one I am attributing to Shelley. “On the Medusa” seems at first glance more problematic in this respect than some other fragments. Keats’s “Ode on Indolence,” discussed in the next chapter, was also not published during its author’s lifetime, but, unlike “On the Medusa,”
“Ode on Indolence” has a fixed number of stanzas, the order of which has been authoritatively determined. “On the Medusa,” by contrast, is variously reconstructed as having five or six stanzas. Most strikingly, “On the Medusa” has two words missing. This does not mean that the poem did not participate in the discourses of its day, or that the interpretations of it that have been proposed within ekphrasis studies could not be enriched by noting the elements of the poem that, finalized or not, signal its participation in the those discourses. Nevertheless I have wrestled with the question of just how much focused explication the poem can support.

My first answer to this is that the text is not as unfinished as some of the controversies surrounding its “extra stanza” might lead one to believe. The disputed “sixth” stanza was not published by Mary Shelley, but rather was “found” by Neville Rogers, who pieced it together from two fragments on two different pages of Mary Shelley’s notebook transcription in the Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts (Rogers 9-12). The copy of “On the Medusa” in the Bodleian manuscript is incomplete: the poem is spread across pages 97, 98 and 100 of the manuscript, but stanza 3 and most of stanza 4 are missing, making it unlikely that this copy is the version Mary Shelley was working from when she published the poem. Moreover, even if the transcription were an authoritative source text, it offers no justification for linking the two fragments into a single stanza. The two partial stanzas are on pages 97 and 100; the first follows stanza 5, while the second follows the final two lines of stanza 4. Moreover, what neither Rogers nor any of the scholars who have adopted his sixth stanza have acknowledged is that the five stanzas published by Mary Shelley are in in a very particular verse form: not a nonce stanza invented for the occasion, and not an English ode stanza expected to be irregular, but rather the comparatively prestigious Italian form ottava rima, all too appropriate for a poem composed in Florence about an Italian painting in the Uffizi gallery; in spite of the technical demands of the form, all five stanzas are metrically regular except for the two

80 The manuscript is available in facsimile in Volume 2 of Irving Massey’s *The Bodleian Shelley Manuscripts*.

81 I.e. eight-line stanzas of iambic pentameter, rhymed abababcc.
missing words, and consistently rhymed. Rogers’ sixth stanza, by contrast, is wildly irregular, containing nine lines and rhyming ababcddc, a deviation that Rogers cavalierly dismisses as “a typical Shelleyan irregularity by which Mary would not have been disturbed.” In other words, the two short fragments that have been grafted together to construct it both appear to be unfinished beginnings of normal ottava rima stanzas, one consisting of the first four lines of a stanza, and the other consisting of the first five.

It is a woman’s countenance divine
With everlasting beauty breathing there
Which from a stormy mountain’s peak, supine
Gazes into the night’s trembling air.

It is a trunkless head, and on its feature
Death has met life, but there is life in death,
The blood is frozen--but unconquered Nature
Seems struggling to the last--without a breath
The fragment of an uncreated creature

Both partial stanzas appear to be early attempts specifically at the first stanza. Both begin with “It,” the first word of the poem as we have it, and both contain other words, phrases and images that survive in the first stanza as Mary Shelley published it. Medusa’s countenance is “divine,” as her horror and beauty are “divine” in the first stanza. She is on “a stormy mountain’s peak, supine,” while in the first stanza she is “upon the cloudy mountain peak supine.” She “gazes” into the air, as she is “gazing” at the sky in the first stanza, and the air is “trembling,” like the “far lands [that] are seen tremblingly” in the first stanza. “Unconquered Nature” is “struggling” within Medusa, as her pain is “struggling underneath” in the first stanza. By contrast, only one phrase from either of the discarded fragments recurs in any other stanza of the poem as Mary Shelley published it: “a woman’s countenance,” which appears in the concluding couplet of the last stanza. Rogers suggests, in fact, that Mary Shelley’s reason for omitting what he takes to be the sixth stanza might have been “the fact that it seemed repetitious” rather than its irregularity (17). A more likely explanation for both its repetitiveness and Mary
Shelley’s decision to omit it, however, is that it consists of two rejected drafts of the first stanza.

If the disputed “sixth stanza” is really two rejected partial drafts toward the first stanza, then it seems unreasonable to consider the text of “On the Medusa” more unstable or less capable of withstanding close reading than the text of any other posthumously published Romantic poem; only the two missing words render it fragmentary at all. Given its posthumously published state, “On the Medusa” cannot stand beside “Ode on a Grecian Urn” as a public document of its author experimenting with resistance to culturally dominant ideas. With this caveat, however, I would suggest that the poem has posed problems for criticism that can be resolved only by recognizing how it uses and resists discourses about art and sympathy from its own time. The reading of “On the Medusa” that sees it as being about the potentially paralyzing nature of the visual arts misses the Romantic literary conventions the poem is playing with (in which paralysis is typically figured as becoming artwork, not the result of looking at artwork), and it misses the poem’s subtle reworking of the conventional pairing of ideas from aesthetic and moral philosophy.

“On the Medusa” cannot readily be labelled an enactment of a sympathetic attempt, as “Ode on a Grecian Urn” can, because there are no actors: the sympathy that is suggested has no obvious subject or object. Sensations and emotions – things that are usually felt by someone – are presented as having independent existence. Pain is figured as light that radiates out from Medusa, who may or may not be conscious enough to feel it, and eventually fills the sky. The poem’s syntax increasingly allots grammatical agency to nearly everything but Medusa, including the snakes that are her own hair, thus emphasizing still more Medusa’s passivity and dubious state of consciousness. Eventually, grammatical agency dissolves altogether in the convoluted syntax of the final stanza, and yet feelings – pain and torment – continue to be present. Given that sympathy in Romantic literature is almost always constructed as the recreation of someone else’s emotional experience within one’s own consciousness, it may seem odd to conclude that a poem in which nothing has a clearly defined consciousness is actually a poem about sympathy, and I would certainly not suggest that “On the Medusa” is about
sympathy in any of the usual senses, in which one conscious agent sympathizes with another. Rather, I would suggest that the “gazer”’s reaction to the painting of Medusa is a sympathetic one in a technical, etymologically precise sense: a reaction of feeling with the painted Medusa, or rather of sharing feelings with her, or partaking of sensations that one would normally expect to be Medusa’s. Moreover, it is not primarily Medusa’s pain with which the viewer sympathizes. It is her very insentience that the viewer seems to feel with or come to share with her. The gazer’s agency and consciousness are slowly erased from the text in tandem with Medusa’s. Lastly, the dominant metaphor of the second stanza suggests that the viewer of the painting becomes, like the painting, a passive medium for the representation of Medusa. It is thus not only the dead Medusa’s insentience, but the painted dead Medusa’s insentience that the viewer partakes in.

The poem’s language resists received ideas about sympathy in two ways. First, the sympathy represented in this text is unconventional in and of itself. It is not confined to shared emotions or passions. It is a feeling with that includes all that the object might feel: passions, but also physical sensations. It is also a hybrid of the two conventional formulations of sympathy. Visually cued and instinctive but also processive and gradual, this sympathy defies the traditional distinction between instantaneous and imaginative

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82 I will continue to refer to the viewer’s sympathy as a feeling with Medusa, as a strategy for stripping away some of the conceptual baggage that the word sympathy had, even in 1819. Even this term, however, remains problematic, because it still implies that both Medusa and the viewer are actively feeling something, which I shall argue is not the case. Any verb—feeling, sharing, partaking—presents the same challenge, since the poem offers sustained resistance to consciousness and agency as we know them. I have chosen the term feeling with to highlight what I see as Shelley’s own paring down of the concept of sympathy to its absolute bare bones, freed from the weight of philosophical formulations that the word had accrued in the comparatively short time it had been part of English usage. What he then does with the concept, however, cannot be readily expressed in a single word or phrase.

83 I am not the first to suggest that this metaphor is grounded in the concept of sympathy. In “The Beauty of the Medusa,” McGann states that “The fascination [Medusa] arouses has been translated into a sympathetic process” in which she “impresses upon the sympathetic observer the very essence and source of her dazzling beauty: her image is sculptured on the gazer’s soul, which is turned to receptive stone…” (8). Since McGann said this in 1972, however, fully twenty-four years before publishing his magisterial Poetics of Sensibility, it should not be a surprise that he uses the term sympathy somewhat loosely, evidently taking the metaphor of sculpting simply to mean that the reader is likely to empathize with Medusa and be spiritually enriched by the sight of the painting: her beauty “become[s] part of the gazer’s now humanized and harmonized life” (8).
modes of sympathy, and thus also the traditional pairing of instantaneous sympathy with the visual arts. The poem defies the expectations that visual sympathy is necessarily instantaneous or that gradual sympathy relies on imagination. Second, “On the Medusa” also upends the literary conventions surrounding the trope of people turning to stone, challenging the conventions about what kinds of inner experiences Medusa’s power to petrify can metaphorically signify. I shall argue that it does both of these things in order to make a space for a type of sympathy that is impossible to represent, or even imagine, within the confines of either set of conventions, and thus to challenge the idea that we sympathize with the dead by deceiving ourselves, as Adam Smith had hypothesized.

“On the Medusa” breaks the conventional definitions of sympathy into their component parts and scrambles them, taking processiveness from one definition, visual stimulus from another, and assembling a new concept of sympathy that can accommodate an experience of feeling with a figure that ought otherwise to be inaccessible to sympathy. Furthermore, the model of sympathy that the poem tacitly constructs can accommodate such an experience without resorting, as Smith does, to the idea that we “overlook” realities in order to achieve such sympathy (1.1.13). By denying the reader a viable approximation of consciousness with which to sympathize, the poem suggests an understanding of sympathy that does not rely on the sympathizer’s assumption of self-aware consciousness in the object of sympathy. Where Smith’s formulation of sympathy with the dead, as I shall show, relies on the sympathizer suspending disbelief in the fiction that the dead feel being buried and forgotten, “On the Medusa” suggests a mode of feeling with in which the sympathizer actually has a vicarious experience of insentience.

“On the Medusa” is not the only ekphrastic poem in which Shelley explores the effect on the viewer of the symptoms of strong feeling represented in an artwork, and its philosophical boldness can be spotlighted by juxtaposing it with a poem that treats the issue of viewer response less directly, and that interrogates instead the logical basis for any kind of emotional reaction to an artwork. The traveller who relates the bulk of “Ozymandias” treats emotion and symptoms of emotion as entirely legible/transparent: Ozymandias’ pride and scorn could be “read” by the sculptor, who could in turn stamp
onto the stone both Ozymandias’ heart, which fed the passions, and his own artistry, which “mocked” or imitated the passions.

‘[…]

Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.

The traveller’s assumption of affective transparency, however, is quickly undermined, and the sonnet in fact suggests that the link between the passions supposedly signified in a work of visual art and the representation of outward affect that does the signifying is a profoundly unstable one.

The double meaning of the inscription on the pedestal destabilizes the traveller’s assured declaration of affective legibility, drawing attention to a subtle paradox buried within it. Not sufficiently aware of the ironies he is about to utter to mark the sonnet’s turn with the more conventional “but,” the traveller goes on to say

And on the pedestal these words appear:
“My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!”
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.’

The obliteration by time of Ozymandias’ kingdom and “Works” ironizes the original meaning of the inscription (despair of equalling me), displacing it in favour of a different meaning (despair of your works lasting any better). In the light of that fairly obvious irony, we are more likely to retrospectively perceive the irony in the traveller’s earlier statement that the passions “survive” because they are preserved on “these lifeless things.” The symptoms of the passions may be “read,” recorded and preserved, but the traveller figures the passions themselves, paradoxically, as surviving on a “lifeless” medium. Shelley could as easily have said “endure,” derived from the Latin “durus”
(hard) without altering his meter; he chose “survive,” a word derived from the Latin “vivere” (to live), thus drawing out the element of paradox in the traveller’s statement (OED). These ironies undermine the traveller’s confident assumption that the links between the statue and the real face, the real face and the heart, are transparent. The poem’s equivocation hints at the unknowability of Ozymandias’ long-dead heart, even while the traveller’s vivid language conjures up all too well the affective verisimilitude of the statue. “Ozymandias” thus suggests a disconnect between the extraordinary affective displays of which the visual arts are capable and the feelings, passions or emotions that those displays supposedly signify. The traveller succumbs to that verisimilitude and believes he understands Ozymandias’ scornful heart, feeding on its own bad passions, but he believes this at the expense of the logic of his utterance. So too, the poem suggests, the viewer of an artwork takes an impassioned face as a legible record of feeling at the risk of being mistaken. “Ozymandias,” rather than representing sympathy for a figure in an artwork, speaks to the logical – or illogical – grounds of such sympathy.

“On the Medusa” requires special attention in part because it does something more complex in this respect than does “Ozymandias.” Medusa’s “real” experience is just as inaccessible, just as unknowable, as Ozymandias’; but where the strong impression generated by the statue’s features in “Ozymandias” is displaced onto a self-contradicting traveller, the speaker of “On the Medusa,” relating the reactions of a generalized “gazer,” confronts the fact of the gazer’s sympathy without making any concessions either to the knowability of Medusa’s feelings or to the unreliability of the gazer. Instead, “On the Medusa” takes apart the conventional definitions of sympathy, reconstructing them in order to make them accommodate an experience of feeling with an enigmatically expressive painted representation of a dead figure from myth. “On the Medusa” does not sidestep Medusa’s insentience: she is presented in the first word of the poem as “it,” rather than “she.” And yet, as I shall argue, “On the Medusa” is very much a poem about sympathy, however radically redefined.

The feeling with that is suggested in “On the Medusa” is of a strange kind: sensations and emotions seem to exist independently, belonging to Medusa or to the viewer of the
painting without either of those figures consciously feeling them, and this ambiguity surrounding both of their feelings enables a certain degree of slippage between them. The poem’s metaphors sidestep the question of whether Medusa is conscious in any conventional sense. Pain emanates from her, readily perceptible, irrespective of Medusa’s own awareness of it. One of the dominant metaphors of the first two stanzas is the representation of pain as light: an inversion of the equally synaesthetic but far more conventional representation of joy or pleasure as light.

It lieth, gazing on the midnight sky,
Upon the cloudy mountain peak supine;
Below, far lands are seen tremulously;
Its horror and its beauty are divine.
Upon its lips and eyelids seems to lie
Loveliness like a shadow, from which shine,84
Fiery and lurid, struggling underneath,
The agonies of anguish and of death.

Yet it is less the horror than the grace
Which turns the gazer's spirit into stone;
Whereon the lineaments of that dead face
Are graven, till the characters be grown
Into itself, and thought no more can trace;
'Tis the melodious hue of beauty thrown
Athwart the darkness and the glare of pain,
Which humanize and harmonize the strain.

“The agonies of anguish and of death” are here presented as a light that shines, “fiery and lurid,” out from under a loveliness that is figured, equally unconventionally, as a “shadow.” In the second stanza, “pain” is figured as light again: as a “glare” that is partially veiled by the “melodious hue of beauty.” Whether Medusa herself actually feels

84 Mary Shelley’s edition reads “shrine” here, and the editors at Romantic Circles have preserved “shrine,” but later editions emended it to “shine,” which makes more syntactic sense.
this pain in any recognizable sense is beside the point; the pain has its own, independent, “fiery” existence.

The unconventional figure “loveliness like a shadow” echoes one of Shelley’s most pointed explorations of the nature of figuration itself, written three years prior to “On the Medusa” in 1816, and published in 1817. “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” a poem addressed to the Spirit of Beauty, opens with the statement that “[t]he awful shadow of some unseen Power / Floats though unseen among us.” As the pointed repetition of “unseen” and “though unseen” makes clear, not only the power itself but its shadow is in fact unseen; the power’s perceptible effects are, paradoxically, imperceptible. Karen Weisman observes that, in “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” Shelley “figure[es] […] the process by which the sceptical mind establishes emblems of its desired other” (48). Shelley’s “obtrusive” use of simile, she argues, “calls insistent attention to the lyrical process: in rejecting the absolute equivalents of metaphor in favour of the obtrusiveness of the mere likeness proposed by simile, Shelley refuses the presumption of surely locating his spiritual anchor even while he advertises the frenetic quality of his urge to do so” (48). In trying to describe or name the unseen power, Shelley’s speaker resorts to similes and analogies that are themselves insistently intangible: “like moonbeams that behind some piny mountain shower” (5); “like memory of music fled” (10); “like […] music by the night-wind sent / Through strings of some still instrument” (32-4). And if the vehicles of these similes are incorporeal, their tenors are radically abstract: “the awful shadow of some unseen Power,” in the case of the first two examples (1), and the “light” of the Spirit of Beauty,” in the case of the second (32). As these examples reveal, the similes themselves are modifying metaphors – shadow and light – for something else that cannot, apparently, be named directly. A third metaphor for the Spirit of Beauty, “nourishment” for “human thought” (44), is modified by a yet more ineffable simile: “like darkness to a dying flame” (45). If the “thou” addressed in the poem is nourishment to human thought in the same sense that darkness is nourishment to a dying flame, then we must reconsider the apparently conventional and straightforward meaning of “nourishment” in this context: darkness may render a dying flame visible, but does not feed it in the usual sense in which a flame can be fed – with fuel. At the culmination of
“Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” Shelley’s speaker admits to the inadequacy of his tropes to convey the nature of either the Spirit of Beauty or that spirit’s presence and effects in the world, proclaiming his “hope […] [t]hat thou, O awful LOVELINESS, / Wouldst give what’er these words cannot express” (69-72).

“Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” has in common with “On the Medusa” not only its staging of a speaker’s not-quite-conscientious mental process – in this case a process of attempting without success to name a power whose presence he senses but cannot describe – but also its use of slippery and layered figuration to find a middle ground between what is experienced at the level of full consciousness and what is not experienced at all. In “On the Medusa,” a more conventional representation of sympathy for a painted figure might tell us simply that Medusa’s features express pain; this poem by contrast makes pain the active agent, rather than the thing expressed or felt by an active agent. It is the “agonies” themselves that are “struggling,” as though they are conscious agents who actively seek to shine out from under the shadow of loveliness. And while the first iteration of the pain-as-light metaphor seems calculated to be as disturbing as possible, the second iteration suggests that in fact the light of pain is the least disturbing element of the painted Medusa. Initially, the “lurid” light of pain emanates from Medusa’s mouth and eyes, partially hidden by her presumably half-closed “lips and eyelids.” In the second stanza, however, “the darkness and the glare of pain” seem to be the elements that “humanize and harmonize” the painting. The syntax here is ambiguous, but only up to a point. It is possible to read the plural verbs “humanize and harmonize” as referring to “the melodious hue of beauty” as well as to “the darkness and the glare of pain,” and it is possible to read them as referring only to “the darkness and the glare of pain,” but it is not possible to read them as referring only to the singular “melodious hue of beauty.” Syntactically, the poem demands that we interpret the “glare of pain” as one of the

85 This second possible reading leaves “Tis the melodious hue of beauty” as a parallel clause to “It is less the horror than the grace,” which forces “the melodious hue of beauty” to be another iteration of the “grace” that “turns the gazer’s spirit into stone.”
humanizing features of the painting. The light of pain, then, is credited with the agency not only to “struggle” to escape from under the shadow of Medusa’s beauty, but also to create harmony over and against the melody – the “melodious hue” – of that beauty, and to render the painting – the strain or song – human.

The apparent agency of pain itself at the expense of the agency one might expect for Medusa is reinforced in subsequent stanzas by the proliferation of other objects that likewise have agency at Medusa’s expense. In the third stanza, grammatical agency is located entirely with the vipers of Medusa’s hair, literally around Medusa’s head instead of in it. “Hairs which are vipers” is the subject of every verb in this stanza: grow, curl, flow, lock their long tangles in each other, shew, saw. And while one might expect vipers to do things – to be the subjects of such active verbs – the phrase “[h]airs which are vipers” gives priority to their status as hairs. Growing, curling, and flowing are all conventionally actions attributed to human hair, and “lock,” when used as a noun, is a conventional collective noun for hair, but in this case these words are all used to denote things that only a viper could do.

And from its head as from one body grow,
As [    ] grass out of a watery rock,
Hairs which are vipers, and they curl and flow
And their long tangles in each other lock,
And with unending involutions shew
Their mailed radiance, as it were to mock

It is possible that Shelley had “Peele Castle” (discussed at length in the next chapter) in mind when writing this line. The idea that “the glare of pain” might “humanize” the painting is reminiscent of Wordsworth’s line “a deep distress hath humanized my soul.” There is a crucial difference, however, between “distress” humanizing a poetic speaker’s soul and “the glare of pain” humanizing a work of visual art, particularly with the addition of the musical metaphor, in which the painting is a “strain” that is not only humanized but also “harmonize[d]” by the glare of pain. It is a fairly tame proposition to suggest that a soul that is already a human soul can be made more human, or perhaps more humane, by suffering, especially if (as “Peele Castle” strongly suggests) suffering is an integral part of human experience – what it means to be united with “the kind” in both senses of the word. What Shelley’s poem suggests, however, is far more radical. Pain not only renders more human/humane a painting of a creature who is herself not fully human, but also improves the painting’s aesthetic qualities, figured in musical terms. Moreover, that pain is itself figured as light, as part of Shelley’s unconventional scheme of figuring suffering as light and beauty as darkness in this poem.
The torture and the death within, and saw
The solid air with many a ragged jaw.
The grammatical agency of the viper-hairs is thus doubly unsettling: it is unsettling because they are extensions of Medusa’s body, still alive and moving when she is dead or dying, and given the status of subjects of active verbs when she is not, and it is unsettling because the vigorous actions of the viper-hairs are denoted using words eerily close to the more sedate verbs one would expect hairs to be the subjects of. “Hairs which are vipers” is also the implied subject of the infinitive “to mock” – the viper-hairs show their radiance as if to mock the torture and the death within Medusa. Mock, of course, can mean *imitate*, as it does in “Ozymandias,” or it can mean *taunt*. If we take it to mean *taunt*, then it suggests that torture and death are feeling agents capable of registering the taunts. If we take it to mean *imitate*, then the phrase “as it were to mock” suggests that the vipers are (or at least appear to be) showing their radiance in order to mimic the fiery and lurid light of torture and death. In either case, the phrase “as it were to mock” ambiguously suggests that the viper-hairs show some kind of intention to mock – to taunt or to imitate – and that suggestion of intent is striking, particularly when it is immediately juxtaposed with the image of their “ragged jaw[s],” so clearly animal in nature.

As the final two stanzas progress, the attributions of agency to objects and entities shifts from the non-human but concrete to the wildly abstract. The “poisonous eft” that peeps into Medusa’s eyes is sitting on a stone, very nearly as concrete an object as one could imagine. But the “bat, bereft / Of sense” that has “flitted” out the cave and that “comes hastening” after Medusa is a “ghastly” bat – horrifying, but with the connotations of the word’s cognate, “ghostly.” Buried within the restrictive clause that modifies “the cave” is another grammatical subject – “this hideous light” – which has “cleft” the cave. It is not clear whether the cleaving is metaphorical or literal: has the light emanating from Medusa *actually* created the cave by cleaving a rock in two, or has it only “cleft” the darkness of the cave? More crucially, it is not clear whether “this hideous light” is the “mailed radiance” of the vipers’ scales or the fiery and lurid glare of pain emanating from Medusa’s eyes and mouth.
And from a stone beside, a poisonous eft
Peeps idly into those Gorgonian eyes;
Whilst in the air a ghastly bat, bereft
Of sense, has flitted with a mad surprise
Out of the cave this hideous light had cleft,
And he comes hastening like a moth that hies
After a taper; and the midnight sky
Flares, a light more dread than obscurity.

At the end of the fourth stanza, the phrase “the midnight sky / Flares” moves grammatical agency still further from either the animate world or from Medusa herself: where the eft, the bat, and the vipers are all animate creatures, and where the vipers and “this hideous light” are both parts of Medusa, the midnight sky is part of the inanimate background of the painting. The fact that its flaring is “a light more dread than obscurity” is not surprising in the context of the poem, since light has all along been signifying pain and death, and darkness or shadow has been signifying beauty. The Burkean sublime evoked by “dread […] obscurity” is here a strategy for intensifying the horror of the light, but light has been established as the lurid glow of pain from the opening stanza onward. Now, however, the “dread” light is dissociated from Medusa herself. In being produced by the sky, the light has increased massively in scale compared to the lurid glare struggling out from under Medusa’s eyelids. But it has also lost its metaphorical ability to stand in for a specific being’s pain. Insofar as the “dread” light still, by sheer force of precedent, evokes pain, it is a generalized pain – a kind of bleak pathetic fallacy.

In the fifth stanza, grammatical agency becomes so diffuse as almost to fall apart.

'Tis the tempestuous loveliness of terror;
For from the serpents gleams a brazen glare
Kindled by that inextricable error,
Which makes a thrilling vapour of the air
Become a [ ] and ever-shifting mirror
Of all the beauty and the terror there –
A woman’s countenance, with serpent locks,
Gazing in death on heaven from those wet rocks.

What, one might ask, is the antecedent of *it* in “‘Tis” – what is it that is “the tempestuous loveliness of terror”? Is it the immediately preceding noun, “a light more dread than obscurity,” the attribute of the midnight sky; or is it the “grace,” not mentioned since the second stanza, that was also the antecedent of *it* in “‘Tis the melodious hue of beauty thrown / Athwart the darkness and the glare of pain”? In the second line, it is not the serpents themselves that gleam, but rather a “brazen glare” that gleams *from* them: a glare gleaming is a strangely redundant phrasing that calls attention to itself, and thus to the care with which the serpents are refused grammatical agency. Moreover, the “brazen glare” is modified by two radically ambiguous clauses. The glare is “[k]indled by that inextricable error.” “Error,” here, is presumably used in its latinate sense to mean the literal wandering or winding of the serpents, and it is inextricable because the serpents are inextricably entwined with one another. Nevertheless, the description of the “brazen glare” continues to turn back on itself: it is gleaming *from* the serpents because it has been kindled *by* the movement of the serpents. The clause that follows presents the reader with yet another unclear antecedent: it is not clear *what*

[...] makes a thrilling vapour of the air

Become a [ ] and ever-shifting mirror

Of all the beauty and the terror there.

“Which” could refer either to the “error” of the twining serpents or to the “brazen glare” they kindle. It is not clear what it means for a vapour to become a mirror. If the antecedent of “[t]is” in the first line of the stanza is the dread light in the midnight sky, then it makes sense that the vapour of the air should be stated to reflect Medusa’s pain.

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87 Rogers identifies the phrase “inextricable error” as a “Latinism” borrowed from Virgil, and meaning “inextricable windings” (15-16); McGann argues that the latinate meaning is secondary, and that “error” chiefly “refers to Medusa’s original ‘sin,’ punished so harshly by Minerva” (9). If McGann’s suggestion adds a potential layer of complexity to the phrase, however, “inextricable windings” seems the much more fundamental meaning of the phrase. The *Oxford English Dictionary* confirms that “windings” was a standard poetic meaning of “error” until well into the nineteenth century, and this is also how Milton famously uses the word in *Paradise Lost* (4.239). It is certainly very like Shelley to use words in ways that are profoundly informed by their history and etymology (as, indeed, I am arguing that he implicitly does with the very concept of sympathy in this poem).
and death, since the sky does seem to reflect the light of pain emanating from Medusa. Not only is it not clear, however, that 'tis refers to the dread light, it is also not pain and death that the vapour reflects, but rather beauty and terror. Indeed, “all the beauty and the terror there” is the one abstraction in the final stanza that is clearly explained, and it refers to the transparently comprehensible image in the final couplet:

A woman's countenance, with serpent locks,
Gazing in death on heaven from those wet rocks.

The vapour is a mirror, not of the light that has been acting as a slippery metaphor for pain, but rather of the image represented in the painting at its most easily apprehended. How either the “error” of the serpents or the “glare” gleaming from them has made this happen is never explained, and the poem thus ends, paradoxically, with a concrete image that renders the abstractions of the final stanza more baffling, rather than less.

The convoluted games Shelley plays with grammatical agency in this poem are a crucial part of how he constructs sympathy – feeling with, or having felt sensations in common. The agony struggling to escape Medusa’s eyes, the glare of pain, and the torture within are all clearly Medusa’s agony, pain, and torture. They belong to her (or rather to “it,” as Medusa’s head is called in the poem). And yet she (or it) does not feel them, per se, because she/it does not do anything, except lie supine, gazing at the midnight sky. The feeling can exist, and it can be clear whose feeling it is, without any guarantee of the proprietor of the feeling being conscious of it. In some sense, then, even the objects that reflect or mock the light of Medusa’s pain can be said to feel with her: to sympathize. If the sky flares with a light that is akin to the lurid light struggling to escape Medusa’s eyes, then the sky seems to have that pain just as much as Medusa does, and it is not presented as either more or less conscious of pain than Medusa is. As I shall show, Adam Smith’s formulation of sympathy tacitly relies, not on the object of sympathy being conscious, but on the sympathetic viewer imagining that the object of sympathy is conscious, and imagining that the object of sympathy is experiencing things that are sufficiently familiar to be comprehensible. Given how diffuse consciousness and agency are in this poem – given how unclear it is whether Medusa feels – one might assume that Shelley is going out of his way to make Medusa impossible to sympathize with. Yet in
spite of this, as I shall argue, he represents the viewer of the painting as sympathizing with her.

The viewer is not constructed as a self-aware consciousness any more than Medusa is. We get no clear sense of a poetic persona as viewer, or even of an individual viewing consciousness, but rather a vague, third-person reference to a “gazer.” The very petrification of the gazer’s spirit is represented as an inevitable result of the painting’s attributes: the “grace” of the painting is the agent that “turns the gazer’s spirit into stone.” Sensations are described in the passive voice, as if in an inventory or gallery caption. “[F]ar lands are seen,” but the reader is not told by whom; presumably they are seen by the viewer of the painting, but this is not specified. Except for the fact that Medusa is facing upwards, there would be room for the interpretation that it is Medusa who sees the far lands; and, although Perseus is not mentioned in the poem, there is room for the interpretation that it is Medusa’s slayer who sees them. The lands are “seen tremblingly,” but it is not clear whether this means that the lands appear trembling because they are partially veiled by cloud, or whether the unnamed viewer of the lands is characterized as trembling. Loveliness “seems to lie” upon Medusa’s features, but the poem does not specify who perceives this seeming. For the duration of the first stanza, the reader is reliant on the fact that the painting is named in the title to indicate that these things are “seen” by someone looking at a work of art.88

The second stanza, the only portion of the poem that uses the conventions of discourse about the visual arts in any recognizable way, gestures explicitly toward the presence of a viewer of the painting, however nebulous. It is in this stanza that the poem’s speaker uses language such as “grace,” and “hue of beauty / Thrown athwart the darkness and the glare,” and this language sounds recognizably like eighteenth-century art criticism, in which the respective relevance of forms and colours was fiercely debated.89 “Grace” is a

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88 As Sophie Thomas observes, Shelley does not “refer[…] to the fact that he looks at a painting of the Medusa – rather, the illusion is of an unmediated scene of seeing” (167).

89 For a detailed discussion of the eighteenth-century debate about the relative importance of “design” and “image” – outline or general shape, and colouring or detail – see Timothy Erwin’s essay “The Ecliptic of the Beautiful.” Sir Joshua Reynolds usually uses the terms “colours” and “composition” (89, 212), and he
word typically used to praise form, whereas “hue,” “darkness,” “glare,” and even “thrown athwart” are terms typically used to describe the colouring of a painting. The musical metaphors – the “melodious hue” and the need to “harmonize the strain” – are likewise an instance of fairly conventional borrowing from one sister art to furnish analogies for another. All of these gestures toward the language of the visual arts suggest a viewing consciousness assessing the painting. The second stanza, moreover, refers explicitly to such a viewer, as no other stanza does: the “gazer.”

Even in the second stanza, however, the viewer emerges only just distinctly enough to be erased again. Named only as “the gazer,” the viewer is suggestively aligned with Medusa herself by the verbal echo of Medusa’s “*gazing on the midnight sky*”\(^{90}\) (emphasis mine). All mention of the gazer then vanishes from the poem. In the remaining stanzas, just as grammatical agency seems to move further and further from Medusa herself, the concept of a viewer – even the recognition that the poem’s subject is a painting – becomes fainter and fainter. By the time we get to the poem’s concluding lines, “all the beauty and the terror *there*” (emphasis mine) does not refer to all the beauty and the terror in the painting, but rather to all the beauty and the terror staring up towards the sky “from those wet rocks.” The beauty and terror are reflected by “the vapour of the air,” not by anything outside the painting. Not only the named “gazer” at

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\(^{90}\) Heffernan argues that we are in fact meant to interpret “gazer” as literally referring to Medusa – an ingenious, if counter-intuitive, reading. While it is true that no reading of the poem is complete without an acknowledgment of the verbal play that blurs the boundary between the viewer and Medusa, it seems wilfully clever to assume that such play is to be taken as wholly undoing the scenario implicitly set up by the title: this is a poem about a painting, and when it says that something is “seen,” we are to assume that it is seen by whoever looks at the painting. And while the “ever-shifting mirror” of the fifth stanza does belatedly enable a the possibility that Medusa’s own beauty could turn her spirit into stone as she gazes at the sky, it is surely not possible that Medusa herself could be the gazer who sees the far lands below. Thomas offers a sensible alternative to Heffernan’s reading in pointing out that, “[w]hile ‘gazer’ could as easily refer to the Medusa as to the poet, it is also possible that the process of petrification is happening to both” (167).
the painting, but also even the scenario of there being a painting that enables the existence of a gazer, is obliterated from the text. I would argue that this comparable vagueness with which Medusa’s consciousness and the gazer’s consciousness are constructed, and the synchronized erasure of any hint of their consciousnesses from the poem, constitute a strange kind of sympathy. Medusa’s pain, which she can only ambiguously be said to feel and which humanizes the painting for the unnamed “gazer,” is as much the gazer’s pain as it is hers; and Medusa’s sinking into ever more remote states of non-consciousness, evoked through her increasing remoteness from grammatical agency, is mirrored by the viewer’s disappearance from the text, suggesting that her increasing insentience, too, is somehow shared.

Central to the poem’s representation of the viewer’s strange, amorphous sympathetic experience is the figuration of the gazer’s spirit as turned into stone, which appears at first to be simply a clever marriage of two literary conventions. On the one hand, it is in keeping with the Romantic fashion for representing violent emotions as producing stasis in those who experience them, and for figuring those emotions as a metamorphosis into statuary. In Romantic literature, being or seeming turned to stone usually signifies being struck motionless with intense feeling, like the hapless “Maid of France” who is “benumb’d to stone” by her fatal infatuation in Milman’s oft-reprinted Newdigate Prize poem “The Belvidere Apollo.” On the other hand, the use of that figure in the context of Shelley’s poem adapts the myth of Medusa, transforming the Gorgon’s power physically to turn onlookers to stone into a metaphor for an emotional experience by replacing the gazer’s body with the gazer’s spirit. The lines that follow, however, which adapt yet a third literary convention, destabilize the signification of the spirit-into-stone metaphor. The very old convention of figuring profound mental impressions as engravings on the mind or heart91 is not wholly compatible with the Romantic convention of figuring a person in the grip of powerful feeling as turned to stone.

91 The *Oxford English Dictionary*, in its history of the verb “grave,” cites as an early example John Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* (1390), in which a lover states that his “hert is growen into stone” upon which his lady has “a printe of loue grave” (OED).
The gazer’s spirit, we learn in these lines, is not a fixed, immovable, unchanging stone, but rather an artistic medium in the process of being engraved; and rather than becoming a statue of him- or herself, as Medusa’s victims conventionally do, the gazer’s spirit is to bear the image of Medusa. It will be a stone

Whereon the lineaments of that dead face
Are graven, till the characters be grown
Into itself, and thought no more can trace.

If we were tempted to read “graven” as an adjective meaning simply that the stone bears an image of Medusa’s face, the temporal marker “till” discourages us, suggesting instead that “are graven” is a verb indicating a kind of extended moment – the moment of the gazer’s spirit being transfixed – in which Medusa’s face is in the process of being “graven” onto the stone. The end-point specified by the “till” clause is somewhat nebulous. The graving will continue “till the characters be grown / Into itself,” but what is “itself” – the face of Medusa, or the gazer’s spirit? Does the phrase mean till the engraving on the gazer’s spirit is transformed into the actual “dead face,,” or does it mean till the engraving is grown into the gazer’s spirit so deeply that “thought no more can trace”? The “till” clause thus suggests the existence of an end-point to the process of engraving, only to disappoint the reader: the end-point is unclear, and the process of engraving thus seems indefinite. The gazer’s spirit being turned to stone thus does not straightforwardly signify the gazer’s emotional fixity, as Romantic convention might suggest: it seems also to signify an indefinitely prolonged, passive subjection to an external creative force. The viewer’s passivity in this figuration furthers her or his feeling with Medusa, who, by virtue of her deadness, is also passive; passivity becomes something that Medusa and the viewer share. Moreover, the indefinite temporal extension of the “are graven… till” clause suggests that the gazer is caught in some kind of liminal state, akin to Medusa’s state of being caught between the last vestiges of life and utter insentience.

The indefinite nature of the gazer’s subjection to an unnamed creative agent not only completes his or her apparent sympathy with Medusa’s very deadness, but also points to another set of Romantic conventions for thinking about sympathy that the poem
undermines. In addition to interrogating the necessity of the sympathizer’s assumption of self-aware consciousness in the object of sympathy, “On the Medusa” presents a mode of sympathy that defies the traditional distinction between instantaneous and imaginative sympathy. Like “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” this poem represents sympathy for an artwork in a way that undercuts the philosophical alignment of the visual arts with a model of sympathy that is both visual and instantaneous. Where Keats’s poem does this by acknowledging only sympathy that is founded on imaginative effort, “On the Medusa” does it by slowly revealing the visual sympathy it represents to be an ongoing and thus not instantaneous phenomenon. The gazer feels with a figure in a painting, and indeed with the painting itself, and, as the very word “gazer” implies, it is a feeling with that is visually impelled. Moreover, the allusion to the myth of Medusa striking her victims into stone by the sheer force of her physical appearance suggests that the gazer’s reaction here is similarly involuntary – an instinctive, perhaps an undesired, response to a strong visual stimulus. But where visually impelled and involuntary sympathy is usually equated with instantaneous sympathy in eighteenth-century and Romantic thought, the feeling with presented in “On the Medusa” is processual rather than instantaneous.

In representing a viewer feeling Medusa’s insentience with her, Shelley interrogates the ubiquitous, unspoken, “common sense” assumption that the sympathetic self must be conscious, or that the conscious self cannot sympathize with a state of being other than consciousness. A particularly vivid example of such an assumption at work is to be found in Adam Smith’s theory of sympathy’s role in society. “We sympathize even with the dead,” Smith observes,

and overlooking what is of real importance to their situation, that awful futurity which awaits them, we are chiefly affected by those circumstances which strike our senses but can have no influence on their happiness. It is miserable, we think, to be deprived of the light of the sun; to be shut out from life and conversation; to be laid in the cold grave, a prey to corruption and the reptiles of the earth; to be no more thought of in this world, but to be obliterated, in a little time, from the
affections, and almost from the memory, of their dearest friends and relations. (1.1.13)

Such sympathy relies on an imaginative construction of the impossible: of the conscious mind’s experience of being a corpse. This type of sympathy, which Smith highlights as especially important, is thus based on a fiction, for what Smith describes is sympathy for an explicitly fictive construction of dead “consciousness” – one that the sympathizer knows to be false. Smith states that we sympathize with the fictive sensory experience of a corpse, as though a corpse could feel, instead of with the real intellectual or spiritual experience of souls in paradise or hell. Implicitly, the tangible circumstances of a corpse make its supposed experience of dead-ness available to a living imagination even though a corpse experiences nothing, while the unknowable circumstances of departed souls make their experience unavailable to imagination, even though, according to Smith and most of his contemporaries, departed souls do have experiences.

This recognition of the paradox of grieving while believing in an afterlife makes Smith’s theory of sympathy a particularly revealing pairing with “On the Medusa.” Shelley, of course, did not believe in a Christian afterlife, and so dead-ness to Shelley would have meant something different than dead-ness as it is represented in The Theory of Moral Sentiments. Although The Theory of Moral Sentiments explicitly presumes a Christian afterlife, however, according to Smith’s theory of sympathy, deadness for the purposes of sympathy actually means something much closer to what deadness would mean to an atheist: a state of being a formerly conscious organism reduced to permanent insentience and material decay. Smith goes on to state that “our sympathy can afford them [the dead] no consolation” and that this fact “seems to be an addition to their calamity” (1.1.13). Because sympathy is the only means we have of alleviating distress, according to Smith, we are paradoxically oppressed with a yet stronger sense of the urgency of sympathizing with the dead. As Esther Schor observes, sympathy for the dead in Smith’s view is “not given freely; rather it is an ‘indebted’ consideration for the moral value with which the dead endow the living,” and it is this indebtedness that makes sympathy for the dead “an originary act of sympathy [that provides] the motivation for all subsequent occasions of sympathy” (5). It is the known impossibility of an effective sympathy for
the real experience of dead-ness that gives sympathy for the dead its moral weight in Smith’s system. But effective sympathy is only impossible if sympathy itself is necessarily the reconstruction in one conscious mind of what it takes to be the experience of another. “On the Medusa” plays on the idea that sympathy for the dead is equivalent to sympathy for the purely fictive by representing an object of sympathy that is both. As I have argued, it also subtly reworks the concept of sympathy itself, making room for an alternate model of the relationship between sympathy and consciousness—a model in which sympathy for the insentient need not be based on a falsehood.

When Shelley composed “On the Medusa” in 1819, it was not a new idea that people do in fact sympathize with the dead; not only had that idea been a cornerstone of Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* sixty years previously, but also it was well established as part of how Romantic culture conceived of sympathy. Nor was it a new idea that people sympathize with painted figures, for that idea is the foundational assumption of most eighteenth-century writing on the “sister arts,” and continued to be crucial to Romantic understandings of the role of the arts. “On the Medusa,” however, seems less interested in pointing out the fact that one can and does sympathize with Medusa than in using the potential for such sympathy as a way of getting past the conventional boundary between sentient and insentient. If one can feel for the insentient merely by looking, without relying on the intercession of the imagination, then one might feel one’s way outside of consciousness, circumstance, or time. Moreover, insofar as the poem does address the more mainstream ideas about sympathy and the arts available to Shelley’s contemporaries, it does so in order to subvert them. “On the Medusa” does not so much collapse the distinction between the two conventional ideas of sympathy as break them down into their component parts. It suggests that the binary of visual/instantaneous and imaginative/gradual sympathy is reductive, simply by presenting a type of sympathy that such a binary cannot account for.

Keats and Shelley address two facets of the same problem: both stage encounters between a viewer and an artwork in order to push past the limits of a philosophical
paradigm that could not account for all the possible responses to all the art available to the Romantics. A Grecian urn might not tell a recognizable story, and might not depict the passions in a recognizable way—it might be impervious to sympathy according to the models of sympathy that Keats’s culture acknowledged. Does it therefore fall short as a work of art, or is a value for the sister arts conceivable that does not rely on an appeal to sympathy? A viewer might have a powerful response to a painting that is, according to those acknowledged models, neither fish nor fowl: neither instantaneous nor imaginative. Is it therefore not sympathy, or can a new model of sympathy be constructed? Can sympathy, in fact, be thought of without relying on the idea of a conscious self, or could the experience of sympathy for an artwork be what guides us past the limitations of that kind of post-Cartesian self-construction? These are the questions posed by “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci.”

The ideas about “ekphrasis” that scholars have used these poems to construct strain under the sheer intellectual sophistication of the poems’ own engagement with the philosophical issues of sensibility. However influential they have been for later writers of poetry about art, these poems did far more in their own era than celebrate or aspire to the atemporality of art, or express the simultaneous appeal and terror of the silent visual object. They are subtly wrought and substantial contributions to the intellectual work of the culture of sensibility. Yet, perhaps because of the important role these Romantic poems have played in the formulation of the broad theories of ekphrasis that have been popular in literary criticism, even studies of specifically Romantic ekphrasis have often seen them through the lens of one such theory or another.

The “Ode” was published in a venue devoted to the arts, like the other poems from the Annals discussed in the previous chapter, and it seems to respond directly to the Wordsworth sonnet published there before it; “On the Medusa” was never published during Shelley’s life. The “Ode” is thus more vitally a part of the same ongoing cultural conversation about art and sympathy. “On the Medusa” is much more an outlier, recognizably speaking to concerns raised elsewhere in Shelley’s oeuvre, but asking different questions than the other Romantic ekphrases discussed in this thesis so far. But “On the Medusa” demands to be read alongside the “Ode” because, while the questions it
asks may be idiosyncratic, the conceptual vocabulary it uses to ask them is closely related to that of the “Ode.” Both poems speak back to a long tradition in aesthetic and moral philosophy of allowing two, mutually exclusive conceptions of sympathy to co-exist, one framing sympathy as an instantaneous response to visible affective display, and the other framing it as a gradual response to imaginatively reconstructed circumstances. Both poems make use of that tradition, and both poems use it counter-intuitively, tacitly proposing conceptual challenges to its intellectual underpinnings.

“Ode on a Grecian Urn” inverts the expected affiliation of the visual arts with instantaneous sympathy in order to enact an attempt at sympathy that fails, and thus to make a space for an alternative to the assumption that the arts exist chiefly to evoke sympathy. “On the Medusa” defies the expectation that visual sympathy be instantaneous in order to create a space for a mode of sympathy that can take a viewer of art outside the limits of living consciousness.

Pairing the two poems, then, tells us how flexible an intellectual tool Romantic ekphrasis could be for thinking about the questions associated with sensibility. Of the many strands in the complex web of poetic and philosophical traditions that were available to Romantic authors writing about the visual arts, “On the Medusa” and “Ode on a Grecian Urn” draw almost exclusively on one: the parallel in moral and aesthetic philosophy between the two most commonly proposed theories of sympathy and the two most commonly discussed of the “sister arts.” Yet the two poems draw on this strand of thought to pose startlingly different questions.

Each chapter in this thesis so far has addressed how one strand in that web of traditions opened up a space in Romantic ekphrasis for thinking about feeling or sympathy: first the tradition of poems about art, then the emerging public discourse surrounding the art world, and here the philosophical traditions of sympathy and the sister arts. The remaining chapter will do the same, examining how two well-known Romantic ekphrases revive and make use of the old tradition of allegory in ekphrasis, which had been out of fashion in the eighteenth century. But it will also do something further, for the two poems to be discussed there, Wordsworth’s “Peele Castle” and Keats’s “Ode on Indolence,” also ask a question in common, exploring the role of sympathy and self-
spectatorship in the moderation of one’s own feelings. In some sense, then, this chapter and the next accomplish opposite ends, the current demonstrating the flexibility of one tool of thought made available by art as a subject matter, and the next demonstrating the especial aptness of another such tool to explore a single problem in the philosophical tradition of sensibility.
5 Sympathy, Self-Spectatorship, and Self-knowledge in Wordsworth and Keats

Two well-known Romantic ekphrases, by different authors, share a striking detail. In “Peele Castle,” Wordsworth’s speaker praises his patron George Beaumont’s painting for showing a “pageantry of fear.” In “Ode on Indolence,” far more usually compared to its more famous sibling “Ode on a Grecian Urn” than to anything by Wordsworth, Keats’s speaker asks his personified personal demons why they appeared to him “in so hush a masque.” Pageantry and masque: the words conjure up ideas of Renaissance courts, of stylized drama, and of transparent allegory. What, one might ask, are they doing in Romantic ekphrastic poems?

One might speculate that masque is no more surprising a thing to find in a Romantic lyric than ekphrasis itself. Masque was not, as Jeffrey Cox has pointed out, an “eccentrically antiquarian” form of drama in the early decades of the nineteenth century (125). Cox cites a number of masques performed or published in London between 1715 and 1819, including a stage revival of Milton’s *Comus* in 1815, and he examines Leigh Hunt’s “learned prefatory essay on the history of the masque,” published in 1815 with Hunt’s own masque *The Descent of Liberty* (124). Yet if the form was not eccentrically antiquarian, it nonetheless maintained its historical associations. Cox observes that Hunt locates the origin of the form in Italy, arguing that it developed in England from Italian sources when private masquerades held in great houses to celebrate events such as a marriage or a birth were merged with the public pageants of the Tudor monarchs with their allegory and personification. (126)

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92 The OED defines “masque” as “[a] form of courtly dramatic entertainment, often richly symbolic, in which music and dancing played a substantial part, costumes and stage machinery tended to be elaborate, and the audience might be invited to contribute to the action or the dancing.” “Pageantry” is “[p]ageants or tableaux collectively; the public performance or display of these,” while “pageant” is “[a] play in a medieval mystery cycle” or “a show or play, usually wordless, exhibited as part of a festival or public celebration.”
Cox argues that Hunt was able to draw “now on the prestige of an older aristocratic form, now on the vitality of popular celebrations,” using the conventions of masque both for sheer dramatic effect and for their historical associations with courtly pageantry (127). If masque and pageantry maintained their associations with the courtly life of bygone eras, and especially with copious personification and allegory, then the question remains: what are they doing in two Romantic ekphrases, given that figuration – allegory, personification, and symbolism – had virtually vanished from ekphrastic writing for a century?

Another possible answer is that these two poems are part of the Romantic era’s enthusiasm for medievalism in literature. “Ode on Indolence,” indeed, evokes the conventions of the medieval dream-vision, and of the ekphrases that such dream-visions so often contain – the temple of Venus in “The Parliament of Fowls,” for example, or the temple in “The Temple of Glass.” Moreover, both “Ode on Indolence” and “Peele Castle” harken back to modes of ekphrasis that had gone decidedly out of favour in the eighteenth century, in that they take the works of art they describe to be fraught with symbolic, even allegorical, meaning. I would argue that both poems do this in order to pose tacit questions about the fundamental conception of selfhood that underpins the philosophy of sensibility: both poems are about the potentials and limitations of self-recognition in the absence of some other person or consciousness. Both ask whether an individual mind requires another mind to reflect it back to itself. That question has its roots in eighteenth-century sentimental philosophy. The idea of masque or pageantry is particularly pertinent to such questions precisely because some of the most influential eighteenth-century ideas about sympathy are grounded in scenarios in which the self either is, has, or desires an audience.

Where the two poems by Keats and Shelley in the previous chapter shared an intellectual vocabulary – the pre-existing sorority of instantaneous sympathy and the visual arts in eighteenth-century and Romantic discourse – “Peele Castle” and “Ode on Indolence” share more: they share an intellectual vocabulary of pictorial allegory and its theatrical counterpart, masque, and they also probe a shared philosophical question about the self’s potential for autonomy that grows out of the philosophy of sensibility. “Peele Castle”
and “Ode on Indolence” take up a strand of the ekphrastic tradition that includes Spenser and Shakespeare. They can also be productively situated in a genealogy of ideas that stretches back through the age of sensibility to the philosophy of Adam Smith. Keats’s tacit questions about self-recognition are further from Smith’s than are Wordsworth’s, and even Wordsworth was not necessarily writing back to Smith in particular. Nevertheless, “Peele Castle” does offer a revision and interrogation of a culturally prevalent idea about the relationship between sympathy and selfhood, of which Smith’s articulation is a prominent and lucid example. Smith’s moral philosophy may not have been the intended subject of the poems, but it is a useful touchstone for showcasing how those poems used the conventions of ekphrastic poetry to take on culturally important questions about selfhood and self-recognition. “Peele Castle” and “Ode on Indolence” are thought experiments in what one might call self-spectatorship – in finding a way to see oneself as an outsider would – a concept that lies at the heart of The Theory of Moral Sentiments.

Adam Smith insists much more rigorously than his predecessor David Hume on the boundaries of the self, and one result of this is that he posits a mode of sympathy that relies on being the witness or spectator of another’s passions, rather than simply absorbing them. Where Hume suggests that it is the similar psychological makeup of all people that allows emotion to pass from breast to breast, and that one person’s “idea” of another’s feelings “is presently converted into an impression,” which in turn “acquires such a force and vivacity, as to become the very passion itself, and produce an equal emotion” (2.1.11.3), Smith rejects the idea that emotions are so instantaneously and effortlessly contagious. We cannot, he contends, actually know what others feel, but rather must make an imaginative effort to reconstruct their feelings. Since we constantly desire both to offer and to receive “fellow-feeling” (1.2.1), according to Smith, we are perpetually imagining ourselves in fictive situations – “cases” – that are analogous to the situations of those we see around us.

Crucial to Smith’s theory of sympathy is his explanation of the effectiveness of sympathetic consolation. Smith posits that when a sufferer wishes to receive sympathy he imagines himself in the “case” of a spectator, specifically the spectator with whom he
is actually interacting. It is in the act of sympathizing with that spectator’s sympathy for
him that he finds his grief moderated: a process that puts the sufferer at a remove from
his own feelings. Smith contends that the sympathy of another person “alleviates grief
by insinuating into the heart almost the only agreeable sensation which it is at that time
capable of receiving” (1.2.2). That agreeable sensation, however, turns out to involve a
complex social and psychological mechanism. “[T]he emotions of the spectator,” Smith
explains, “will still be very apt to fall short of the violence of what is felt by the sufferer,”
and “[t]he person principally concerned is sensible of this, and at the same time
passionately desires a more complete sympathy,” which he can only obtain by “lowering
his passion to that pitch, in which the spectators are capable of going along with him”
(1.4.7). That lowering – although it is aimed at procuring sympathy – is also
accomplished by means of sympathy. “As nature teaches the spectators to assume the
circumstances of the person principally concerned,” Smith claims,
so she teaches this last in some measure to assume those of the
spectators. [...] As they are constantly considering what they
themselves would feel, if they actually were the sufferers, so he is as
constantly led to imagine in what manner he would be affected if he
was only one of the spectators of his own situation [...] and as the
reflected passion, which he thus conceives, is much weaker than the
original one, it necessarily abates the violence of what he felt before he
came into their presence. (1.4.8)
This sympathy-with-the-sympathizer is not an obscure example of Smith’s theory pushed
to its logical extreme; on the contrary, according to Smith it is the foundation of the most
impressive type of virtue: that based on self-control (1.5.1). It is the type of sympathy
that can account within a sentimental system of morality for virtues other than simple
compassion. Virtue, Smith contends, is achieved by internalizing the abstract idea of an
“impartial spectator” – by creating a “man within the breast” who stands in, when we
decide how to act, for a real observer whose sympathy we would crave.93 We can stand

93 Marshall, tracing the history of this idea prior to Smith, observes that “[t]he characterization of the
impartial spectator as the ‘man within the breast’ [...] recalls Butler’s discussions of ‘the witness of
outside ourselves, according to Smith, by imagining a fictive person who would stand outside, and sympathizing with that fictive person. It is thus by positing a self that is more self-contained than Hume’s and a sympathy that requires imaginative effort that Smith formulates a system in which one must stand outside one’s self in order not only to receive the pleasure of sympathy but also to function ethically in the social sphere. Thus, when Wordsworth and Keats use ekphrasis to take up the idea of being one’s own spectator, they are not simply participating in (or critiquing, in Keats’s case) the Romantic glorification of the independent individual mind; they are testing the limits of a concept of selfhood that played a crucial role in the moral framework of the culture of sensibility.

“Peele Castle” draws on some of the pre-eighteenth-century conventions of allegorical ekphrasis, and that borrowing enables the poem to enact a process of artistic interpretation that is also a process of self-recognition: to represent a self that is its own viewer. By insistently personifying the objects depicted in a work of art, and intensifying that personification by transposing the conventions of portrait-ekphrasis onto a poem about a seascape, Wordsworth’s speaker is able to freight that work of art with allegorical potential. He uses the painting as a figurative vehicle for elements of his own psyche, interpreting the painting as an allegorical representation of his own mental struggle, and thus becoming the audience of that struggle. Wordsworth experiments in using self-spectatorship to moderate his grief, but without an actual or imagined spectator with whom to sympathize, as though he is trying to remove sympathy from Adam Smith’s moral equation. Whether or not Wordsworth had Smith specifically in mind when he composed “Peele Castle,” his representation of self-spectatorship without the aid of another person, especially as a means of moderating grief, is philosophically significant – a canny reworking of an important strand of sentimental thought.

conscience’ and Hume’s discussions, in his Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals, of the moral value of considering how we appear in the eyes of those who regard us. But it is Shaftesbury who expounds a “doctrine of two persons in one individual self” and calls for an ‘inspector or auditor [to be] established within us’” (The Figure of Theater 176).
“Ode on Indolence,” like “Peele Castle,” presents art as a vehicle of figuration and allegory, and uses the figure of masque/pageantry to draw attention to what it is doing. Rather than embedding this move in as thoroughgoing an engagement with the ekphrastic tradition as Wordsworth does, however, Keats embeds it in a counter-intuitive repurposing of a very current discourse about art: his speaker uses the analogy of a static artwork to signify the style of movement adopted by the three figures that appear to him. Moreover, Keats uses the figurative potential of the visual arts to suggest something very different than what Wordsworth suggests in “Peele Castle.” Where Wordsworth’s speaker achieves not just self-spectatorship but also self-recognition by looking at art, Keats’s speaker uses the very concept of art – an art that is fundamentally apart from himself and inscrutable – as a way of keeping self-recognition at bay, in hopes of prolonging a pleasurable state of indolence. Keats’s speaker, like Wordsworth’s, participates in an act of self-spectatorship mediated by art, rather than by another person, viewing his own psyche at a distance by figuratively locating it in an artwork. Unlike Wordsworth’s speaker, however, Keats’s speaker achieves no self-awareness or self-mastery; the linguistic details of the poem suggest that he neither succeeds in remaining indolent nor recognizes the change in himself. Where Wordsworth uses the figurative potential of ekphrasis to push past the conventional limits of self-reflexive subjectivity, Keats uses it to deflate the claims of the supposedly self-aware subject.

5.1 A Spectator of Oneself: Self-Figuration and Sympathetic Self-Sufficiency

In a poem about visual art and poetry written some twelve years after “Peele Castle,” Wordsworth complicates the expected relationship between sympathizer and object of sympathy. The poem is an untitled sonnet addressed to painter Benjamin Haydon (“To B.R. Haydon, Esq.”), published in the Annals of the Fine Arts in 1818, and in it Wordsworth offers a challenge to the very notion that the sympathizer and object of sympathy are distinct by expressing a fellow-feeling that has been shared all along, before a sympathetic exchange has taken place. This sonnet draws an explicit parallel between painting and poetry, bringing the two together under the umbrella term “creative art.” The sonnet’s speaker (who, like the speaker of “Peele Castle,” inhabits the persona
of Wordsworth) recognizes in Haydon a counterpart of himself. Addressed to the promising but financially insecure Haydon from the long established Wordsworth, the sonnet begins with the statement “[h]igh is our calling, Friend,” suggesting a fellowship between the poet and the painter in its use of the pronoun “our” still more than in its address to Haydon as “Friend”. It then generalizes about the artistic profession in a way that suggests an understanding of the two men’s careers as fundamentally similar. The sonnet offers more than simply the encouragement that even the great Wordsworth went through a period of early obscurity, however.

High is our calling, Friend!—Creative art
(Whether the instrument of words she use,
Or pencil pregnant with ethereal hues,)
Demands the service of a mind and heart,
Though sensitive, yet, in their weakest part,
Heroically fashioned—to infuse
Faith in the whispers of the lonely muse,
While the whole world seems adverse to desert:
And oh! when nature sinks, as oft she may,
Through long-lived pressure of obscure distress,
Still to be strenuous for the bright reward,
And in the soul admit of no decay,—
Brook no continuance of weak-mindedness:—
Great is the glory, for the strife is hard!

The fellow-feeling offered here is not quite a sympathetic transaction after the manner usually imagined by the philosophers of sensibility. After the opening address, the speaker never again refers either to himself or to his addressee, but instead offers general statements about the “mind and heart” of the artist, or the “nature” that may “sink[...]” under the strain of an artistic career. These generalizations are tinged with just enough affective display to suggest that the speaker has experienced everything he describes: the need for courage, the tentative “[f]aith in the whispers of the lonely muse,” the “obscure distress.” The absence of any distinction between poetry and painting, or even between I and you, however, means that these experiences belong just as much to the addressee as
to the speaker. The poem offers sympathy of a sort, on the basis of Haydon’s circumstances, but it is a sympathy brought about not by the speaker’s imagination of Haydon’s “case,” but rather by the sheer force of analogy between one artist’s case and another’s. Wordsworth need not imagine Haydon’s circumstances, because he remembers them.

Both Hume and Smith claim that it is easier to sympathize with someone whose circumstances resemble one’s own, and Smith hypothesizes that this is because the imagination is faced with a smaller divide to bridge. Bridging a divide, however, is not what the sonnet to Haydon shows. Instead, it shows a speaker who describes his own experiences at exactly the minimum level of abstraction necessary to elide the distinction between his own circumstances and Haydon’s. By dissolving the difference between himself and his addressee, the speaker makes his sympathy reciprocal by default. The addressee must already feel the speaker’s past suffering, because it is identical to his own; his sympathy with his sympathizer requires no separate effort on his part. In this poem, the sympathetic spectator (the speaker), instead of initiating an exchange of sympathy, presents himself as a fellow-sufferer, substituting fellowship, and the mutual understanding that comes with it, for sympathy in the usual sense. Wordsworth’s haunting elegy “Peele Castle” challenges common expectations about sympathetic exchange in a different way, using the art object itself as a placeholder for the object of sympathy, and thus not only erasing the distinction between sufferer (in this case the speaker, rather than the addressee) and sympathizer, but also eliminating the expected presence of a second person to begin with.

Peter Simonsen identifies “Peele Castle” as the poem in which Wordsworth first turns to ekphrasis – a mode that he used regularly for the rest of his life. Wordsworth does not, however, turn to ekphrasis as it was commonly written by his immediate predecessors. “Peele Castle” uses elements of the tradition of subjective-response ekphrasis, and cleverly repurposes the conventions of portrait ekphrasis discussed in Chapter 2, to

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94 For a discussion of this idea in the works of David Hume and Adam Smith, see the Introduction to this thesis.
construct a complex structure of figuration that governs both the speaker’s interpretation of the painting and our own interpretation of the poem. Since that figurative structure is fundamentally allegorical, I shall argue that “Peele Castle” also draws on a third, very old mode of ekphrasis, virtually unseen in new poetry in England for the whole of the eighteenth century: the tradition of emblematic and allegorical ekphrasis.

In perhaps the definitive reading of the poem as ekphrasis, James A. W. Heffernan, in *Museum of Words*, takes “Peele Castle” as a prime example of what he calls the “ideology of transcendence”: a propensity of Romantic thought to insist that both visual art and the images it represents exist outside of time, fixed and imperishable. What the speaker’s imagistic memory of the castle and the hypothetical picture of “steadfast ease” that he would have painted have in common, according to Heffernan, is their apparent existence outside of time. In the speaker’s memory, each day is like the previous; in the hypothetical painting, there is no movement or change. This vision of timelessness, motivated by the “fond illusion” of the speaker’s youthful heart, gives way, in the second half of the poem, to a description of Beaumont’s real painting, which the speaker interprets as expressing a profound stoicism: speaker and castle alike are able to “transcend contingency” by being impervious to it (107). Heffernan argues, however, that the second type of transcendence, attributed to the real picture, is just as problematic as the first, since it in fact relies on a distortion of Beaumont’s painting. “[T]he almost level sea in Beaumont’s picture,” Heffernan argues, “is hardly a ‘deadly swell’ evincing the ‘anger’ Wordsworth anthropomorphically attributes to it” (106); even if one disputes this interpretation of the sea in the picture, the castle, rather than withstanding the waves, is visibly crumbling. The objects in the painting do not transcend contingency, Heffernan argues, and the speaker’s interpretation of the picture proves to be driven by the same ideology of transcendence that it seems to escape.

Heffernan’s observation that the poem at least slightly misrepresents the painting, however, could be taken in a different direction. Rather than regarding it as evidence of delusion on Wordsworth’s part, I take it as evidence that the poem is drawing attention to its speaker’s interpretive act. That act, I argue, is motivated by the speaker’s apparent need to view himself from a distance, as if he were his own spectator, in the absence of a
sympathetic companion. Wordsworth’s speaker does not so much react to the painting as co-opt it; his description of it differs somewhat from the real painting because it is the means by which he externalizes his own mental process. The ease with which Wordsworth’s original readers could compare the description to the real picture ensures that the speaker’s co-opting of the painting is observable, and the “dramaturgy” of the poem’s language, as Marjorie Levinson calls it in *Wordsworth’s Great Period Poems* (113), makes that observable process seem very much like a performance. Wordsworth’s speaker uses the painting as a prop in a stylized enactment of his own psychological process. He puts on a show of interpreting objects in a picture as actors performing the very effort at fortitude that he himself is also performing. The speaker is thus a performer in and spectator of his own pageantry of inner strength. His projection of his own psyche onto a painting, in allowing him to become the audience of a drama that in fact unfolds within his own mind, creates an instance of self-spectatorship that is dependent neither on the presence of a real, external spectator, nor on the imagined presence of an impartial spectator, with whom to sympathize. It thus resists the formulation of sympathetic self-spectatorship that allows Adam Smith to argue that sympathy is fundamental to the sterner virtues. Wordsworth’s speaker achieves the self-mastery that Smith valorizes, but he does so without requiring, or reciprocating, the pity of another.

Nothing about the title of “Peele Castle” prepares the reader for the poem’s dense figuration. The title, “Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle in a Storm, Painted by Sir George Beaumont,” immediately identifies the poem as being about a work of art, and it identifies it as being a piece of polite social exchange, in keeping with most eighteenth-century ekphrases: the poem praises a work painted by Wordsworth’s

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95 Common academic practice is to refer to the poem as “Elegiac Stanzas,” but, in the interests of specificity, I will call it “Peele Castle.” Wordsworth wrote in 1808 a poem called “Elegiac Stanzas, composed in the churchyard of Grasmere, Westmorland, a few days after the Interment there, of a Man and his Wife, Inhabitants of the Vale, who were lost upon the neighbouring mountains, on the night of the nineteenth of March last,” and in 1822 he published yet another poem entitled simply “Elegiac Stanzas.” Texts of these poems are available in *Shorter Poems, 1807-1820* and *Last Poems, 1821-1850*, in the Cornell Wordsworth series.
friend and patron. The poem’s first line, however, already indicates that Wordsworth is hearkening back to older kinds of poetry about art. The line has nothing to do with Beaumont, or with his painting, but rather with the speaker’s very personal reaction to the painting: “I was thy neighbour once, thou rugged Pile!” Like Cowper’s “On the Receipt of My Mother’s Picture,” this is a poem exploring a very specific viewer’s response to an artwork – a response conditioned by his personal circumstances. Not until the eleventh stanza will Wordsworth fulfil the title’s tacit promise that he “commend” his friend’s painting. And while there is certainly a long tradition prior to the nineteenth century of poems doing nuanced explorations of viewer response, the delay in the speaker’s commendation would have been striking to a readership conditioned by eighteenth-century conventions. Wordsworth’s speaker begins by addressing the subject of the painting – a common strategy in eighteenth-century poems about portraits – and, as he does so, a steadily increasing element of interpretation creeps into his recollection of what he saw when he lived near the castle.96

I was thy Neighbour once, thou rugged Pile!
Four summer weeks I dwelt in sight of thee:
I saw thee every day; and all the while
Thy Form was sleeping on a glassy sea.

So pure the sky, so quiet was the air!
So like, so very like, was day to day!
Whene’er I look’d, thy Image still was there;
It trembled, but it never pass’d away.

How perfect was the calm! it seem’d no sleep;
No mood, which season takes away, or brings:
I could have fancied that the mighty Deep

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96 Marjorie Levinson identifies a “dialectical swerve toward subjectivity” in the shift from the title, which mentions only the painting, to the first stanza, which addresses first the painting’s subject (the castle), then the speaker’s personal memory of the castle, then the castle’s abstract “form” (Wordsworth’s Great Period Poems 104).
Was even the gentlest of all gentle Things.
The speaker here subtly shifts from recalling facts to recalling his own interpretation of those facts. In the first stanza, he states “I was,” “I dwelt,” “I saw,” and “thy form lay.” By the third stanza, he says instead “it seemed,” and “I could have fancied that.” Rather than moving on to say anything about Beaumont or Beaumont’s painting, Wordsworth’s speaker then describes the picture he himself would have painted, if he could have rendered his subjective interpretation of the landscape visible.

Ah! THEN, if mine had been the Painter’s hand,
To express what then I saw; and add the gleam,
The light that never was, on sea or land,
The consecration, and the Poet’s dream;

I would have planted thee, thou hoary Pile!
Amid a world how different from this!
Beside a sea that could not cease to smile;
On tranquil land, beneath a sky of bliss:

Thou shouldst have seem’d a treasure-house, a mine
Of peaceful years; a chronicle of heaven:—
Of all the sunbeams that did ever shine
The very sweetest had to thee been given.

A Picture had it been of lasting ease,
Elysian quiet, without toil or strife;
No motion but the moving tide, a breeze,
Or merely silent Nature’s breathing life.

This hypothetical painting is described in terms that were, in 1807, unusual in a poem about art: the imagined picture is constructed as aggressively figurative. Objects within the painting are repeatedly personified both by the attribution of feeling and affective display to inanimate things and by the speaker’s apostrophe to the castle. Moreover, within this apostrophe, Wordsworth steadily increases the scope of his figuration. He
first says that the castle would have seemed a “treasure-house” of “peaceful years”: within the picture, the castle would have had the appearance of storing a figurative treasure, rather than the literal goods it was built to protect. In the following stanza, however, the scope of Wordsworth’s figuration radically expands, from an object within the picture to the whole of the picture, as the speaker says that the entire painting would have been a “picture” of “lasting ease.” As Heffernan has observed, “as Wordsworth moves from remembering what he saw to imagining what he would have painted, his language grows less visual, more figurative, and yet also more abstract, until at last his hypothetical picture becomes a painting of ‘steadfast peace’” (101). Where Heffernan makes this observation in order to draw out the irony of a hypothetical picture being described in less than entirely visual language, however, I would argue that the idea that a painting can represent an abstraction instead of an object is precisely the point. What Wordsworth imagines is a symbolic painting: an emblem.

If both the delay in the speaker’s commendation of Beaumont’s picture and the densely figurative construction of the hypothetical painting would have been striking to Wordsworth’s readers, what happens after the commendation is still more striking. The sea, the ship, the sky, and the castle may all be personified, but Wordsworth manipulates the conventions of ekphrastic poetry that he had inherited from the eighteenth century to intensify that personification. The commendation of Beaumont’s picture for appropriately capturing the “spirit” of its (the painting’s) subject borrows the conventions of eighteenth-century portrait ekphrases, transposing them into the context of a painting about a seascape.

Then, Beaumont, Friend! who would have been the Friend,
If he had lived, of Him whom I deplore,
This Work of thine I blame not, but commend;
This sea in anger, and that dismal shore.

Note that Heffernan is quoting the later version of the poem, not the original 1807 published version. The familiar version that Heffernan quotes includes several changes that Wordsworth did not adopt until much later. According to the editors of the Cornell Wordsworth series, Wordsworth adopted the line “a treasure house divine,” in lieu of “a treasure house, a mine,” in 1845, and he adopted the line “a steadfast peace that might not be betrayed” in lieu of “a faith, a trust, that could not be betray’d,” in 1836.
Oh, ’tis a passionate Work!—yet wise and well;
Well chosen is the spirit that is here;
That Hulk which labours in the deadly swell,
This rueful sky, this pageantry of fear!

And this huge Castle, standing here sublime,
I love to see the look with which it braves,
Cased in the unfeeling armour of old time,
The light’ning, the fierce wind, and trampling waves.

When Wordsworth praises Beaumont’s painting, he does so on the basis of the “spirit that is here.” The painted scene, according to the logic of this phrase, is not a mere physical appearance, but rather a being that has a soul or spirit. Wordsworth commends a landscape painting for something like the same reason that Pope and Cowper commend paintings of people: for conveying a suitable impression of the mind of the painted subject. He goes on to give examples of specific affects that represent the “spirit” in question. Where Pope notes Lady Montagu’s dimples and playful smiles, and where Cowper recognizes his mother’s “own sweet smile,” Wordsworth admires the “sea in anger” and the “rueful sky” of Beaumont’s painting. It would be going too far to say that he treats Beaumont’s landscape exactly as if it were a portrait: he does not say “well-captured” or “well-painted is the spirit that is here,” but rather “well-chosen,” implying a recognition that the spirit represented is fictive. Nonetheless, Wordsworth commends Beaumont’s landscape in language that is conventional in poems about portraits, thus implicitly attributing a human quality to the elements of the painted scene.

The poem makes no secret of the fact that the figuration of the castle and its environs as either emblems of peace and bliss or emblems of suffering and fortitude is the product of the speaker’s state of mind. The transitional stanzas between the description of the imaginary painting and the commendation of the real one make this explicit:

Such, in the fond delusion of my heart,
Such Picture would I at that time have made:
And seen the soul of truth in every part;
A faith, a trust, that could not be betray’d.

So once it would have been,—’tis so no more;
I have submitted to a new control:
A power is gone, which nothing can restore;
A deep distress hath humaniz’d my Soul.

Not for a moment could I now behold
A smiling sea and be what I have been:
The feeling of my loss will ne’er be old;
This, which I know, I speak with mind serene.

If there were any doubt that the speaker’s perception or interpretation of the castle is a direct index of something inside himself, the line “be what I have been” resolves it. Wordsworth could, without altering the meter or rhyme, have offered “see” and “seen”; given that the speaker is expressing the difference in what he would now choose to paint when beholding a smiling sea, nothing could be more logical than to say “Not for a moment could I now behold / A smiling sea and see what I have seen.” He says instead that he cannot be what he has been: he is, in and of himself, different. I would argue, however, that the unrelentingly emblematic construction of paintings, real or imaginary, in “Peele Castle” does more than offer a measure of the change in the speaker from his remembered to his current self, for that measure could have been given without treating the castle as if it were the subject of an eighteenth-century portrait.

“Peele Castle” is hardly unique in representing a viewer reacting to a work of art in a way that is conditioned by personal circumstances, and that reveals something about her or himself. Cowper’s “On the Receipt of My Mother’s Picture,” like “Peele Castle,” is the imagined utterance of a single speaker who inhabits the identity of the poet himself and who enacts his own response to the painting. Like “Peele Castle,” “On the Receipt” is a fundamentally elegiac poem that mourns a deceased family member, that opens with an apostrophe to the subject of the painting (Cowper’s mother), and that emphasizes the
memories evoked by the picture. To take a much older and more famous example, the
ekphrasis in “The Rape of Lucrece” represents a viewing subject in a state of emotional
distress who interprets a painting, entirely subjectively, as emblematic of the conditions
causing that distress, much like “Peele Castle.”

“Peele Castle,” however, is as striking for its difference from these analogues as for its
similarity. The picture to which “Peele Castle” responds does not bear the kind of
obvious relationship to Wordsworth’s grief for his brother that the portrait in “On the
Receipt” bears to Cowper’s grief for his mother: it is very decidedly not a picture of John
Wordsworth. Cowper names his mother in the poem’s title and expresses explicit
longing for her. Even Lucrece, who, like Wordsworth’s speaker, looks at a painting that
is not directly relevant to her circumstances, explicitly compares the painted scenes she
looks at to her own situation. Wordsworth never specifies that it is his brother he
mourns, nor does he explain the relevance of a painting of a ship in distress to John’s
death at sea. All he actually says is that his artistic vision and perception of the world
have changed: he responds explicitly to the aesthetic qualities of the picture, and only
implicitly to its personal meaning. His distress is not mentioned until the ninth stanza,
his feeling of loss until the tenth, and his lost loved one – never named – until the
eleventh. “Peele Castle” is about grief, to be sure, and the shift in the tenor of the
speaker’s figuration bears witness to the change in himself. But the poem also enacts the
speaker’s own process of recognizing that change and moderating that grief; to see how it
does so, we need to look as much at the change in the mode of his figuration as the
change in its content.

98 For a more detailed discussion of the ekphrasis in “The Rape of Lucrece,” see the first chapter of this
thesis.

99 Wordsworth’s readers could safely be assumed to understand the allusion, for the sinking of the Earl of
Abergavenny under John Wordsworth’s command was a highly publicized event, but the poem itself
suppresses any and all explicitly personal details. For a detailed study of the relationship between “Peele
Castle” and Wordsworth’s response to the news of John’s death, see Richard Matlak’s work on the subject:
either his article “Captain John Wordsworth's Death at Sea,” or Part II of his book Deep Distresses:
The structure of the figuration that Wordsworth’s speaker attributes to Beaumont’s painting is fundamentally allegorical: within the speaker’s interpretation, the painting functions as an allegory insofar as it contains multiple vehicles that interact with one another in a manner that is as consistent with their figurative identities as with their literal ones. The castle is more than just an object to which the speaker attributes the outward symptoms of his own feelings, as one would expect in a conventional pathetic fallacy. On the contrary, the castle takes on the role of the stoic hero in the “pageantry of fear” by braving the storm. The very word “pageantry,” suggestive as it is of a highly stylized, symbolic or allegorical drama, signals the mode of figuration that Wordsworth is using (and, of course, the word is itself used metaphorically). The presentation of a sequence of personifications in a procession or pageantry may have been highly conventional, but it was not a conventional way to interpret a painting within a poem, and I would thus argue that the word’s use here draws attention to itself – and, by extension, to the allegorical nature of the interactions between personifications in the

100 I use the term allegory here in its broadest sense, to mean a network of personifications that work together to convey an abstract meaning. I use it this way, not because the Romantics themselves would have used it this way, but rather because allegory, in its usual sense, is the term that most readily captures the point I want to make. As Halmi points out, Romantic literary thinkers such as Coleridge adopted the restrictive, eighteenth-century definition of the term allegory (9), in which the vehicles of allegory have little or no identity or meaning other than figuration, and interpreting the text is a purely analytic exercise in decoding. I thus label “Peele Castle” allegorical with full awareness that Wordsworth himself would not have used the term. The Romantics’ ideas about allegory, however, are historically idiosyncratic, and their restrictive definition of the term did not prevent them from using allegorical writing in the more inclusive sense of the word. Perhaps the most standard definition is that given by Abrams in his Glossary: “a narrative, whether in prose or verse, in which the agents and actions, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived by the author to make coherent sense on the “literal,” or primary, level of signification, and at the same time to signify a second, correlated order of signification.” Frederick Burwick, in Romanticism: Keywords, gives a comparable definition of allegory before moving on to discuss Coleridge’s famed objections to allegorical writing. Allegory, he says, is a “play of personification,” in which the substitutions [comparable to those of metaphor] are more elaborate and complex because they become engaged in narrative action, typically aided by the trope of prosopopeia, personifying emotions, beliefs, values, and institutions, and converting a mental setting into an external, physical landscape” (6). A poem that is nothing more than a dull exercise in decoding figuration – what the Romantics would have unhesitatingly called an allegory – certainly fits these definitions, but so do the myth of Cupid and Psyche, “Whoso List to Hunt,” The Faerie Queene, “A Musical Instrument,” “Goblin Market,” and Animal Farm, and so does Wordsworth’s treatment of Beaumont’s painting in “Peele Castle.” The objects in the painting participate in a miniature narrative in a way that makes as much sense at the level of tenor as at the level of vehicle. The waves, personified as fierce and trampling, buffet the castle, personified as stoic.

I have not encountered the same difficulty in terminology with “Ode on Indolence,” in which the figures lack any identity other than their metaphorical meaning: Keats’s poem, I think, can safely be labelled allegorical even by Coleridge’s definition.
speaker’s interpretation of the painting. Wordsworth sets up the premise for a story about the relationship between the feeling agent (represented by the castle) and whatever forces the angry sea and rueful sky represent: perhaps the feeling self’s own bad passions, or, more likely, a seemingly malevolent world outside the self.

That allegory, however prominent in the poem, is not inherent in Beaumont’s painting; it is something that Wordsworth “reads into” it, much as Shakespeare’s Lucrece reads emblems of her own suffering into the painting of Troy. Contrary to J.D. O’Hara’s assertion that Wordsworth would have been able to “read the picture as easily as ever Sir Thomas Browne read an emblem or Lamb or Hazlitt a Hogarth print” (74), Beaumont’s painting is not stable in its signification. Even if one chooses to see the painting as an emblem, one might just as easily interpret the ruined castle as the type of old age succumbing to life’s hardships, or one might link its uninhabitable state to some kind of spiritual emptiness. One might point out how ineffectual a safeguard it is for the struggling vessel in the water, and think of it as an ironic precaution against the wrong type of attack. Within the real painting, in other words, there is no pageantry of fear and fortitude; moreover, since “Peele Castle” was first published in a volume that featured an engraving of Beaumont’s painting as a frontispiece, Wordsworth’s readers would have been able to judge for themselves the extent of the interpretive liberties the poem takes with the image.

Given that “Peele Castle” was printed with an engraving of the painting that “suggested” it, and given that it attributes to that painting a morally commendable allegorical meaning, it is tempting to argue that Wordsworth treats Beaumont’s painting like an emblem-book illustration in need of a caption. “Peele Castle,” however, sounds very little like a caption explicating a morally appropriate interpretation of a work of art. The poem announces its subjectivity too loudly: the interpretation of the painting that it puts forward is too obviously individual. Moreover, the speaker’s poetic voice is too

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101 O’Hara himself tacitly acknowledges this; his own statement that “the engraving [of the painting] might surprise those whose impression of it is gained solely from what ‘Elegiac Stanzas’ conjures up” (72) belies his insistence that its “sense” is “clear enough” (75).
powerful, his measured tone too hypnotic, and the poem’s language too formal, with its several apostrophes and its slow transition from a remembered past to an altered present. In short, if we see “Peele Castle” as the textual portion of an emblem, we do so at the cost of ignoring some its most notable features.

The crux of the speaker’s figural interpretation of the painting is the word “pageantry”: in order to see the complexity of the way Wordsworth has his speaker relate to Beaumont’s painting, we must first acknowledge the kind of speech act that the whole poem is constructed to be. The speaker’s act of subjectively importing an allegory “into” Beaumont’s painting is part of his enactment of his own process of mourning – a process that includes a shift in his perception of his own subjectivity. I do not use the term enactment here lightly, for the whole of “Peele Castle” is a pageant, in the sense of a stylized drama in which the speaker interacts with personified abstractions. The speaker begins by apostrophizing the subject of the painting (the castle), proceeds to describe the painting obliquely in another apostrophe, this time to the painter, and concludes with two final apostrophes that double as performative utterances: a farewell to “the heart that lives alone,” and a welcome to “fortitude” and “patient cheer.”

Farewell, farewell the Heart that lives alone,
Hous’d in a dream, at distance from the Kind!
Such happiness, where’er it be known,
Is to be pitied; for ’tis surely blind.

But welcome fortitude, and patient cheer,
And frequent sights of what is to be borne!
Such sights, or worse, as are before me here.—
Not without hope we suffer and we mourn.

Some readers might object that the numerous apostrophes make the poem more of a conversation than an enactment; some would even say that the conversational apostrophe is so typical of Romantic lyric that it hardly bears comment in “Peele Castle.” Michael Macovski, for example, suggests that the “recurrence of the apostrophized listener” is characteristic of Romantic lyric. Macovski argues that “the rhetorical inclusion of even a
mute listener implies the form of a dialogue,” and that “Romantic apostrophe accordingly becomes a rhetorical synecdoche or figure for dialogue” (11). My contention that the apostrophes in “Peele Castle” make it sound more like a soliloquy than a conversation hinges on an older and more specific understanding of apostrophe, and I would argue that the type of apostrophe present in “Peele Castle” is very different from the conversational type of address that can stand in for dialogue in the way Macovski suggests.

Traditionally, an address to a specific auditor is not necessarily an apostrophe. According to J. Douglas Kneale, true apostrophe, as it was understood from the Classical period through the nineteenth century, is a “diversion [that] redirects the speech to someone other than the original hearer” (151). Kneale rules out any address in the opening line of a poem, including the opening address of “Peele Castle,” on the grounds that there is no prior addressee from whom the speaker can turn away. The crucial characteristic of apostrophe, however, is that its rhetorical effect is intended for the auditor who hears, or rather overhears, the address, rather than for the addressee. The location of a direct address in the opening line of a poem does not negate the possibility that the address is a figurative turning away from an implied auditor. A useful touchstone for illustrating the difference is a poem like “To My Sister,” which opens with an address from which the speaker never turns, but it is an address to a person supposed to be present to the speaker in the moment of utterance; in the strictest sense, that is not an apostrophe. “Peele Castle,” by contrast, opens with an address to an inanimate object that is not present, except in the form of a painted representation. The speaker’s words are not meant to be heard by the castle; they are meant to be heard by an implied auditor. When the speaker begins to address Beaumont, his words are intended for the same auditor. When he addresses the abstractions “fortitude” and “cheer,” his words are still intended for the same auditor. In all three addresses, the speaker’s utterance may be directed at one object, person, or concept, but the effect of his utterance is meant for an implied auditor who “overhears” him. The opening apostrophe to the inanimate and absent castle establishes the expectation that the poem’s apostrophes are true apostrophes – intended for an implied auditor other than the addressee. The poem can thus only with difficulty be constructed as tacit dialogue or colloquy. It is much
more akin to drama, in which the actors’ words are “overheard” by the audience. The poem is constructed as the acting out, in a stylized form, of a psychological process. The speaker’s interpretation of Beaumont’s painting as an allegory is part of that process: in order formally to “welcome fortitude,” he must first recognize fortitude, and he recognizes it by projecting it onto an object in a painting and then interpreting the painting allegorically.

While I do not wish to underrate the extent to which “Peele Castle” is so moving precisely because it is personal and we do know how both the poem and the painting relate to Wordsworth’s very real loss of his brother, I would nonetheless posit that it is only by acknowledging the poem’s stylized, dramatic qualities that we can account for its power. Marjorie Levinson, although she acknowledges the “conspicuous dramaturgy of the description” of Beaumont’s painting (113), also interprets “Peele Castle” as a poem riddled with internal contradictions, rather than as a self-conscious acting out of their resolution, and she suggests that “[t]he narrator […] does not understand the drama staged by his discourse” (116). If we take the poem to be confessional – to be an expression of Wordsworth’s feelings rather than an enactment of the process of changing them – then we encounter the kind of problem that Levinson identifies: the sheer inconsistency of the speaker’s binary oppositions, the oddity of his finding a gauge of supposed reality in a painting, and the consistency with which everything he perceives – both in his remembered past and in his supposed present – is made to reflect the contents of his own head. Levinson’s reading of “Peele Castle” is built upon a fundamental recognition of the extent to which there is nothing in the poem that seems external to the speaker’s subjectivity. Indeed, she interprets the poem as an elegy, albeit an unconscious one, for objectivity itself: a poem that registers “the loss of a concept of external and independent otherness” (102). Nowhere is the absence of external and independent otherness more evident than in the speaker’s description of Beaumont’s painting. Heffernan, citing Levinson, makes a concerted case for “Peele Castle” moving only from one delusion driven by transcendental ideology to another delusion driven by the same ideology; he argues that Wordsworth “implicitly claims that he has found the truth in
Beaumont’s picture – more precisely in what he takes to be its staging of the conflict between the raging elements and the persevering castle” (106).

Such a reading stops short of acknowledging just how artificial “Wordsworth’s” awakening to reality is in this particular poem. Wordsworth, or rather Wordsworth’s speaker, does not claim to find objective truth in Beaumont’s painting, but instead enacts or stages the process of projecting a subjective truth there – of investing a morally neutral painting with a profound but very personal symbolic meaning. Moreover, insofar as we can see “Wordsworth,” the speaker of the poem, as an actor performing this pageantry of subjective interpretation, then we can also see that the Wordsworth who composed the poem chose not to have that speaker actually express much sorrow. In other words, we can see the speaker acting (behaving, but also performing) with emotional restraint, so that the poem enacts the adoption of fortitude in its affect as well as in its concluding rhetorical posture. If we take ourselves, as readers, to be in some sense also spectators of the speaker’s enactment, the speaker has, without the intercession of a sympathizer, “lower[ed] his passion to that pitch, in which the spectators are capable of going along with him” (Smith 1.4.7). The subjective viewer of an artwork here sees himself in the painting, not because he is too blind to see anything else in it, but because he cannot recognize his own altered self without the mediation of an interpretable object. “Peele Castle” treats the work of art, not merely as an object capable of calling up emotions, but also as a site of self-recognition that is dependent on the viewer’s ability both to see and to be seen – to suspend the dichotomy between himself as interpreter and the painting as object of interpretation.

If we compare “Peele Castle” once more to the ekphrasis in “The Rape of Lucrece,” we can see the importance of its dramatic form. The ekphrasis in “The Rape of Lucrece” is represented almost entirely in the third person, in spite of the fact that elsewhere in the poem both Lucrece and Tarquin deliver long monologues. Although Lucrece, like Wordsworth’s speaker, interprets a painting allegorically in order to come to terms with her own trauma, she does so silently, and we observe her only with the help of a neutral and omniscient narrator. Wordsworth’s speaker, by contrast, not only looks at a painted spectacle, but also adopts the posture of being a spectacle himself. He projects his own
aspiration of fortitude onto a painting and looks at it, and he also assumes a theatrical posture of welcoming an implicitly personified “fortitude” in a way that suggests he either has or requires an audience. The speaker represents an ekphrastic encounter with a painting (of which he is the viewer) that he figures as a pageantry (of which he is also the viewer), but he represents that encounter by staging it, thus putting himself in the position of an actor who is to be watched. By using the poetic form as well as the metaphor of pageantry, Wordsworth’s speaker is able to be both spectacle and audience – to be, in essence, the viewer of himself.

If the importance of the dramatic element is highlighted by a comparison to “The Rape of Lucrece,” the very particular thing Wordsworth does with figuration can be clarified by comparing “Peele Castle” to another Wordsworthian lyric: a lyric that, as read by Paul de Man, dramatizes the process of a viewing subject investing an object with symbolic significance. De Man, in his early essay “Symbolic Landscape in Wordsworth and Yeats,” notes a similar enactment in the sonnet “Composed by the Side of Grasmere Lake,” and he contends that “one can observe the juxtaposition of two very different attitudes toward a landscape, held together by a dramatic progression which constitutes the key to interpretation” (126). “Composed by the Side of Grasmere Lake,” however, hints at a different relationship to the figurative than “Peele Castle.” According to de Man, the poem’s dramatic progression, from a strictly literal to a deeply symbolic interpretation of nature, culminating in a moderately symbolic middle ground, is a tacit commentary on the two-fold vision of nature that Wordsworth offers: to find “tranquility” in nature, one must be able to see both its material presence and its symbolic potential at once. The pageantry staged by “Peele Castle” calls for no such balance. Wordsworth’s speaker explicitly rejects the type of figuration presented in the first half of the poem, and he not only commends the “pageantry of fear” that he perceives in Beaumont’s painting, but also adopts pageantry as a mode of expression in his stylized, performative “welcome” to “fortitude, and patient chear” in the poem’s finale. Insofar as “Peele Castle” offers a dramatic progression in the speaker’s attitudes to figuration, it is a progression toward an increasingly allegorical, increasingly stylized, and increasingly theatrical mode of figuration. Only by drawing on the resources of
allegory and theatre is Wordsworth’s speaker able to recognize and finally articulate his own effort at fortitude.

The care with which “Peele Castle” uses its dramaturgy to take on the issue of self-spectatorship stands yet more strikingly if we compare it to another ekphrastic poem from the period that seems at first glance to use very similar strategies to explore very similar issues about suffering and emotional growth. Heffernan situates “Peele Castle” in relation to two earlier ekphrases: Southey’s “On a Landscape of Gaspar Poussin” of 1795 and William Lisle Bowles’s *The Picture* of 1803. Southey’s poem treats the idyllic scene in the painting as a welcome relief from sordid reality. Bowles’s poem, about a Rubens painting of a summer morning, praises its value as a respite for the world-weary, but also draws attention to the “disturbing sight of a creeping hunter with phallic rifle in hand,” in Heffernan’s words (102). Wordsworth’s poem, Heffernan argues, likewise deals with ideas of “calm and disruption,” but treats these “as stages of a personal narrative rather than spatially juxtaposed elements of a single picture” (104). If Wordsworth adapts Bowles’s poetic strategy of juxtaposing calm and disruption in “Peele Castle,” however, Bowles in turn adapts Wordsworth’s. His poem “On a Landscape, Painted by Miss Coward, of Bath,” published in 1809, is yet more similar to Wordsworth’s, and thus offers a yet more revealing contrast: it, too, uses a speaker’s reaction to a painting as an index of his growth from a past youthful idealism to a mature capacity to confront hardship.

Both the picture itself and the speaker’s eventual commendation of it in “On a Landscape” are strongly reminiscent of “Peele Castle,” as though the later poem were starting and ending with a tribute to the earlier. Like “Peele Castle,” “On a Landscape” is inspired by a picture that was painted by someone known to the author, and that depicts a castle, an ocean, and at least one ship. The poem begins

How lovely shines the Pictured Scene, array’d
As with the hues of nature, hills and woods,
And ocean-stream remote! The broad brown oak
Stretches his ancient arms, and length of shade,
High o’er the nearer glens; and the wild ash,
Hangs wavering on the upland croft, whose ridge,
With distant sheep, amid the goss and fern,
Is dotted: gleams of momentary light
Shoot o’er the long-retiring sands, and fall
Direct upon the battlement and tow’rs,
Of Carey’s mould’ring Castle: the low shore
Stretching far on its level line, reveals
The silver-shining main, that spreads beyond,
To the pale ray of morning: through those hills,
On either side blue-op’ning, the dim sails
Hang, as departing: one, with partial light
Touch’d, ere it fades; the other looks a speck,
Which the first airy spleen would dissipate,
So brief and evanescent seems its shade.

As in “Peele Castle,” the speaker concludes the poem by commending the painting on
the basis of its moral or spiritual fitness – in this case, not for telling the truth, but rather
for offering an illusion that is spiritually useful, saying

…such things I loved,
But loved them as companions of an hour,
Lonely, or said [sad?], forgotten in the crowd.
Still they were near my heart, and still mine eye
Sought every charm of nature; every light
That deck’d her forests, and each ev’ning scene,
When west away the crimson clouds were hung,
Seem’d like a tender thought.

Therefore I prize,—
Though all romantic visions long have flown,
Which never when they flatter’d most, deceived,
Yet wearied oft with many and sight and sound
Of sadness in the living world, I prize
A view like this—as beautiful, as still—
And pray that peace and happiness may wait
Thy latest years, fair Artist, whose nice touch
Has thus in softest light array’d a scene,
That Happiness and Peace, might wish their own.

More crucially, the speaker of this poem, too, takes viewing the painting as an opportunity to reflect on the differences between his youthful self and his current, mature self, remembering a time when a peaceful scene seemed to express the truth of the world. Immediately after the opening description of the picture, he exclaims

So charms the lucid Landscape! oh, when life
Was new, I thought the smiling world was such,
So sweet, so softly shadow’d! Fancy then
Call’d up all pleasant semblances, that shone
In the aërial distance, and the eye
Of young poetic Rapture, as it glanced
From scene to scene, in vernal beauty gay,
Saw only, in this weary world, the smile
Of peace, and love’s sweet sunshine.

Of course, where Wordsworth’s speaker takes Beaumont’s painting to represent the real world, full of dangers and disappointments, Bowles’s speaker takes Miss Coward’s painting to represent the pleasant world he once imagined: Miss Coward seems, in fact, to have created something much like the picture of “lasting ease” and “Elysian quiet” that Wordsworth’s speaker claims he would have painted in his youthful naïveté. And although the symbolic element is considerably less pronounced in “On a Landscape” than in “Peele Castle,” the painting is still constructed as having some degree of figuration. The speaker states that he once “thought the smiling world was such [i.e. like the painting],” implying that the painting symbolically represents an imagined state of the world. Moreover, he refers to “love’s sweet sunshine,” thus assigning a specific symbolic meaning to the “pale ray of morning” depicted in the painting. The painting, in other words, is constructed as possessing a symbolic meaning, and it represents a specific phase in the speaker’s trajectory of emotional growth.
The picture is not the only vehicle of figuration in “On a Landscape,” however, and it is the introduction of a narrative, rather than pictorial, allegory that most significantly distinguishes this poem’s strategies for thinking about the speaker’s self-hood from those of “Peele Castle.” The painting may be symbolic, but it is not allegorical – the components of its figuration do not work together to form an overarching figurative meaning, nor are they personified – and the allegory that the poem does present is in the form of a story, separate from Miss Coward’s picture. After assigning symbolic meanings to the painting, the speaker presents a complex epic simile, comparing the immature self to a boy who meets and eventually offends a nation of fairies. 102

As the Child,
That play’d in summer by a devious stream,
Enticed by beck’ning Fairies from his path,
Who said “Come follow us, and we will show
Scenes beautiful, and rare;” he follow’d them,
Through subterraneous windings, dark and strange,
Till now they saw a country, fairer far
Than this Terrene: a pale and peaceful light
Sat on the vales, more clear than of the moon,
And softer than the sun’s: aërial youths
With golden “tresses like the morn,” he hail’d
His fellows! “Here, I will for ever live,”
He cried, “I love not the sad earth I left;
Be this sweet land my home.” So day by day,
He sought that land of shadows, till elate,
One morn, he told to Matron Truth the tale,
“And bring,” she sternly cried, “(for I would know
If true or false thou speak’st,) from that strange land
Some token.” By the secret path he sought

102 Bowles includes three footnotes, one identifying Carey-Castle, in Pembrokeshire, as the castle in the painting, one attributing the story of the child to “Sir Richard Hoare’s Translations,” and the third providing Hoare’s text of the story.
The vale of fairies, and at setting sun,
Brought in his hand a golden ball, and show’d
Delighted: when the unsubstantial toy
At once fell from his grasp, and while loud laughs
Of unseen imps were heard, he stood abash’d,
And saw the treasure vanish’d, and the eye
Of Truth more stern. He sought in vain, at morn,
The well-known path, by the same river’s side;
But every trace was lost, and the wild way
For ever hid from mortal search!

So fares
The fond and youthful vot’ry, in the realm
Of gay Imagination!

Having presented this story in the form of a simile, the speaker goes on to parse its meaning – a meaning that is allegorical in the same sense as Beaumont’s painting in “Peele Castle,” in that its overall meaning emerges from the interaction of several personified component figures. The fairies represent “Love, and Hope,” their land “the realm / Of gay Imagination,” while the scolding of “Matron Truth” represents the “real ills of this hard world.”

——Love, and Hope,
Buoyant and bright, are his associates then,
All fairy children; and his heart is sad,
When on the real ills of this hard world
He thinks.—He woes [woos?] poor Fancy’s imagery,
And when indignant Truth, with stern rebuke
Appears, he looks around, and they are gone!
So seem’d the scene to me, and so the toys
Of early Fancy shone, when this wide world,
I thought all loveliness, and deck’d with hues
Soft as this Pictured Scene!

These things were dreams
Brief shadows of a solitary hour,
No more:—for ill beseem’d it, in a world,
Where we must struggle hard, spell-bound to sit
And image airy likelihoods, and forms
That fade, ere we can say they are; and lose,
So idly lose, the dignity of Truth,
Of Virtue, and of Manhood. Else indeed
The poor Enthusiast, till his hairs were grey,
 Might still lie dreaming by a summer brook,
In ruminating fancy, gend’ring forms,
Like countless insects, of distemper’d thoughts,
That Wisdom, waking from her sombrous trance,
Would brush away.

Crucially for a comparison to “Peele Castle,” although the story and its allegorical gloss set up the terms of the speaker’s final commendation of the painting, the speaker nonetheless never makes the picture itself tell a story, and never locates his process of coming to terms with hardship within the painting. The painting, in short, enacts nothing—stages no pageantry—even within the speaker’s very personal interpretation of it. As a consequence, although the speaker recognizes in Miss Coward’s picture the view of the world he himself once occasionally indulged in, he does not recognize in it the picture himself: a feeling agent actively grappling with suffering. In looking at the painting, he does not become his own viewer.

Self-recognition, of course, is a theme that recurs in the Wordsworth canon: in The Prelude, in “Tintern Abbey,” and in many other poems. The idea that looking at something, such as a castle, a sea of clouds, or the banks of the Wye, enables the poetic speaker to recall some portion of a former self is a recurring Wordsworthian motif. In fact, Wordsworth’s speaker in “Tintern Abbey” recognizes his former self in Dorothy much more explicitly than he here recognizes his present self in the painted castle, when he says to her

…in thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while
May I behold in thee what I was once. (116-20)

“Peele Castle” does something fundamentally different, however. It tests the kind of relationship between sympathy and the moral functioning of the self that Adam Smith had proposed, bringing it into productive tension with the kind of self-recognition that Wordsworth so persistently represents: a self-recognition that involves seeing oneself reflected in someone or something else, rather than seeing oneself through someone else’s eyes. The posture of emotional restraint that Wordsworth’s speaker adopt and the curious doubling that allows him to be his own viewer seem to echo Smith’s moral theory. These parallels suggest that Wordsworth was drawing on ideas that were widely circulated in eighteenth-century and Romantic thought, but Wordsworth tacitly challenges the idea of self-spectatorship that Smith articulates. By making his speaker both spectator and spectacle, without the intercession of another person, real or fictive, in the role of observer, Wordsworth interrogates the theory of self-spectatorship, as though conducting a mental experiment in how necessary sympathy really is to Smith’s theory. Wordsworth’s speaker does not put himself in the case of a spectator in order to receive sympathy. Rather, the idea of either a particular spectator or an idealized one is taken out of the equation. In order to make himself his own spectator without having a companion with whom to sympathize, Wordsworth’s speaker relies on a work of art to act as a kind of place-holder for himself, the sufferer, so that he can in turn adopt the position of onlooker. Insofar as the speaker achieves the kind of moderation of his grief that, for Adam Smith, depends on the company of a friend, he does so alone. “Peele Castle,” like much of Wordsworth’s poetry, has long been recognized as a monument to a

103 In his discussion of a sufferer receiving sympathy, Smith talks of the spectator as a real person, actually present and offering sympathetic consolation (1.2.1-1.4.8). In virtually all other contexts, Smith’s discussion of the desire for sympathy includes both the desire for real sympathy and approbation from real people, and the desire for the sympathy and approbation of the imagined “man within the breast” – an internalized figure whose relationship to real people is complex. This figure can sometimes protect our peace of mind from the discomfort of false accusations, but he must also occasionally be “awakened” within us by the opinions of real people (3.2.32, 3.3.38).
particular notion of self-sufficient and autonomous subjectivity; its engagement with visual art, however, reveals it as a testing ground for the autonomous subject’s capacity to soothe itself.

5.2 An Obtuse Spectator of Oneself: Self-figuration and Misrecognition

Unlike “Peele Castle,” “Ode on Indolence” does not explore a specifically sentimental formulation of the self. Where Wordsworth’s poem, for all that it foregoes sympathy as a means to self-mastery, is nonetheless recognizably exploring the same questions that Adam Smith had explored in The Theory of Moral Sentiments, Keats’s poem is not. It is however, asking questions that have continuities with the questions confronted by writers like Smith and Wordsworth who were dealing with a sympathetic concept of the self. Keats, too, is asking how a consciousness might achieve self-awareness, and at what point that consciousness will require someone or something else to reflect its contents and activities back to itself. Like Wordsworth, Keats is further asking what happens when that something else is not a person, but rather a placeholder – a non-human object with the potential figuratively to represent the self to itself.

Like its more famous counterpart “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” “Ode on Indolence” draws on and challenges an idea that had by this time become common in Romantic thought, namely the idea of visual art as the motionless and durable preserver of temporal moments; like the opening stanza of “Grecian Urn,” the poem consistently ascribes to art, not stillness, but rather movement. Theresa Kelley, in her essay “Keats, Ekphrasis, and History,” makes a case for Keats’s ekphrastic poems as a group articulating a subtle resistance to the aesthetic ideals of Hazlitt and especially Haydon. Kelley offers a model of poetic composition whereby poets make use of the cultural materials they find at hand, but “contort” them slightly so as to express ideas that may in fact challenge the expected use of those materials. Kelley carefully qualifies her argument, insisting that she does not “believe Keats explicitly decided that he would challenge Haydon’s aesthetic principles,” but rather that the “figural pathways of Keats’s resistance to Haydon are more subtly embedded in his poems about works of art” (214). Kelley’s insights open up
the poems’ engagements with these issues, but I would argue that the “Ode on Indolence” does more than simply question the ideas about the “Sister Arts” that were prevalent in the art world of Romantic London and that Haydon in particular promoted. It draws on ideas from the mainstream of art-world discourse to ask a much bigger question: to stage the process of a consciousness hiding from self-awareness.

Like “Peele Castle,” “Ode on Indolence” explores the limits of self-recognition, although it does so in a different context: rather than presenting self-recognition as part of a process of grief and consolation, this poem presents it as part of the speaker’s shift from inactivity to activity. The poem enacts its speaker retelling an encounter with three externalized components of his own psyche, and ineffectually trying to contain the effect of that encounter (namely rousing him from his indolence). As Willard Spiegelman points out, the fact that love, ambition, and poesy are externalized in an ode on indolence is striking: a “curious absence.” “Alone among the six odes,” Spiegelman observes, “‘On Indolence’ neither personifies nor addresses its titular subject” (84); instead, it personifies three elements of the speaker’s psyche that the speaker himself seems loath to acknowledge. The speaker’s attempts at containing the effects of the three allegorical figures, or “shadows,” begin with comparing the shadows to figures on an urn – to artworks. Their resemblance to art seems temporarily to obscure their allegorical meaning: it is “so hush a masque” that he does not recognize them. The speaker’s attempts end with him treating the urn that originates in the vehicle of his own simile as if it were a real urn, as he insists more firmly (if futilely) on the shadows’ status as artworks.

As in “Peele Castle,” a crucial word in the speaker’s construction of the three shadows draws attention both to the allegorical meaning inherent in them, and to the element of performance in the speaker’s own utterances: the word is “masque,” here meaning “mask” the first time the speaker uses it, but spelled archaically to conjure up associations with stylized, allegorical drama. “Ode on Indolence,” like “Peele Castle,” constructs visual art as fundamentally allegorical, and it, too, is akin to an enactment or a pageantry. Moreover, like the speaker of “Peele Castle,” the speaker of “Ode on Indolence” performs an act of interpretation. Where the speaker of “Peele Castle”
interprets an artwork as an allegory about his own psyche, the speaker of “Ode on Indolence” interprets an allegory about his own psyche as an artwork. Where Wordsworth’s speaker performs his interpretation in order to become his own spectator and achieve consolation and self-mastery, Keats’s speaker performs his to avoid, or at least postpone, the self-recognition that would force him into literary activity. However misguided, Keats’s speaker seems to equate the very concept of art with an interpretive opacity that he covets for his own mind, as though, in relegating parts of himself to the status of art, he could avoid having to know himself. Art, in this poem, is not a convenient receptacle or vehicle for parts of oneself that one must see from a distance if one is to see them at all, but rather a mask – a disguise – that the speaker uses to hide parts of him from himself.

Often thought of as a kind of rough draft of “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” the posthumously published “Ode on Indolence” has been comparatively marginalized in studies of ekphrasis, although it often figures in studies of Keats’s odes. No poem presents a more compelling case for defining ekphrasis as broadly as possible than does “Ode on Indolence,” for the status of the three shadows is ambiguous. They bear an obvious resemblance to works of classical sculpture (they are in sandals and white robes), and the speaker says that they are “strange” to him, “as may betide / With vases, to one deep in Phidian lore,” suggesting that their very strangeness is a characteristic of engravings on an urn, if not of large-scale carvings like the Elgin Marbles. But is there really an urn in this poem? The most extensive reading of the poem as an ekphrasis is that of Grant F. Scott, who identifies a key reason, in The Sculpted Word, why the poem is not clearly ekphrastic by present-day standards even though it does clearly draw on ideas about art and on the pre-eighteenth-century tradition of poems that treat art as allegorical. The first overt suggestion that the figures are images in a work of art comes in the form of a simile. As Scott puts it,

[t]he figures are never fully there, as the urn will be later, and we are never sure whether they are mere phantom personifications, Spenserian allegorical figures, or actual characters from a bas-relief urn. Thus,
Keats’s simile remains elusive: are they like figures on a marble urn, or are they figures on an urn? (96)

Scott situates “Ode on Indolence” in a tradition of poems about indolence, and reads it through the lens of W.J.T. Mitchell’s theory of ekphrasis as a gendered encounter. He argues that the feminized figures on the urn transgress the “ordinary protocol of ekphrasis,” in which a male viewer gazes at a feminized work of art (97). When the figures turn their heads and stare at the motionless speaker, they embody “a number of powerful feminine Others” (118) that Keats, Scott argues, found genuinely threatening. I would push in a different direction Scott’s insight that Keats’s speaker seems to find the three shadows threatening. “Ode on Indolence” is, like “Peele Castle,” a poem about viewing oneself: the speaker is disconcerted by the figures’ movement and gaze, not because the figures are feminine, but rather because they are figments of himself that he has wilfully misrecognized.

Keats treats art as a site of ambivalent self-recognition elsewhere, in his famous sonnet “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,” discussed in the previous chapter. The speaker of that poem recognizes his own artistic limitations when confronted with the Parthenon friezes, and he enacts those limitations in the poem’s fragmentary syntax – a verbal rendering of confusion. But while the speaker appears to have achieved a certain self-awareness as a result of his encounter with the Marbles, that self-recognition is only ambiguously communicated to the reader. Because what the speaker recognizes in himself is the limitations of his poetic expressive abilities, and because those limitations are writ large in the poem’s broken language, they are imperfectly articulated; the speaker’s limitations are symbolically enacted, rather than cogently described, and these modes of representation are in this case mutually exclusive. While the “Elgin Marbles” sonnet has some elements in common with “Ode on Indolence,” however, art in the “Ode” is more than an object that prompts self-recognition: it is a figure for the self, and a tool that the speaker ambivalently and ineffectually uses to limit his self-recognition.
The slippery figuration of “Ode on Indolence” is crucial to its effects, and it is thus worth looking closely at a preliminary example. The speaker does something peculiar with a metaphor in which a summer’s day stands in for the state of his own mind; what he does with that metaphor is a useful jumping-off point for what he does with the still more crucial simile of figures on a vase. The metaphoric terms in which the speaker describes his state of mind at the start of the “Ode” eventually seep out of the realm of metaphor into an ambiguously literal description of the season. The speaker states in the second stanza that “The blissful cloud of summer-indolence / Benumbed [his] eyes”; in the fifth, he recalls that his “soul had been a lawn besprinkled o’er / With flowers, and stirring shades, and baffled beams.” Thus far, the language of muted daylight and spring weather is entirely metaphorical, and refers solely to the speaker’s state of mind. “Baffled beams,” however, is followed in most editions by a colon,\textsuperscript{104} and the colon is followed by four more lines about the weather:

\begin{quote}
The morn was clouded, but no shower fell,  
Tho’ in her lids hung the sweet tears of May;  
The open casement press’d a new-leaved vine,  
Let in the budding warmth and throstle’s lay.
\end{quote}

Were these four lines separated from the two preceding them by a period, they would be almost unambiguously literal – a straightforward description of the setting. The colon, however, leaves open the possibility that these lines are an elaboration of the soul-lawn metaphor. The vehicle of the metaphor, while never quite free from its status as a vehicle, nonetheless spills over into near-reality, as though the speaker were uneasily shifting from awareness of himself to awareness of external things. This is not the only instance, however, in which the speaker avoids self-awareness by seeming to forget that what he is describing originated as a metaphor for his own mind. He does something similar with an artwork that begins as a vehicle-within-a-vehicle – a simile describing “shadows” that are themselves personifications – but that eventually, and impossibly, seems to take on a concrete existence.

\textsuperscript{104} This is Stillinger’s punctuation, and it was Milnes’s in the original 1848 publication. Stillinger does not comment on this particular detail, either in The Texts of Keats’s Poems or in “The Text of Ode on Indolence.”
Fully a stanza before he explains that he is indolent and enjoying his indolence, the form of the speaker’s language registers his inaction. The “Ode” begins with a statement in the passive voice:

One morn before me were three figures seen,
   With bowed necks, and joined hands, side-faced.

At the grammatical level, the speaker does not admit to doing anything – not even to seeing. The three figures, by contrast, are the grammatical subjects of all of the active verbs in the first stanza: they step, they pass, they come again, they are strange to the speaker.

   And one behind the other stepp’d serene,
   In placid sandals, and in white robes graced:

They pass’d, like figures on a marble urn,
   When shifted round to see the other side;

They came again, as when the urn once more
   Is shifted round, the first seen shades return;

   And they were strange to me, as may betide
   With vases, to one deep in Phidian lore.

The eerie image of the figures appearing and disappearing as though on an urn that is “shifted” gets much of its eeriness from its passive-voice presentation: the figures pass “like figures on a marble urn, / When [it is] shifted round to see the other side.” As Scott suggests, the urn in the simile “appears to be propelled by a mysterious force that challenges the speaker’s autonomy and agency […]. Who exactly does the ‘shifting round’?” (102). If the figures’ movement seems to be controlled by some other force, and if the ghostly figures are in turn possessed of more agency than the speaker, then the speaker’s lack of grammatical agency suggests a profound degree of indolence indeed.

When, in this inactive state, he initially describes the three shadows, the speaker presents them, not as art, but as like art. The word “figure,” with which the speaker first labels the beings he sees, can mean “graven image,” but it can also mean “emblem or personification,” or simply “outline of a person” – and these figures are both personifications and outlines. It is only retrospectively, in the light of the simile, that
“figures” seems also to mean “graven images.” Even within the simile, the speaker blurs the line between art and non-art, calling the figures on the hypothetical urn “shades.” The word’s most direct meaning here is simply silhouette, for “shade” in early nineteenth-century Britain was a colloquial term for a silhouette portrait (OED). In the next stanza, however, the speaker will call the figures “shadows,” and the unusual choice of the word “shades” prefigures the ghostliness of “shadows” as much as it conjures up the concrete image of “side-faced” images on an urn.

The extended simile in the first stanza is counterintuitive: the commonality between the three shadows and engravings on an urn is their mode of movement. Like the more widely studied “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” “Ode on Indolence” concerns itself with the popular Romantic idea that visual art does not or cannot represent temporal progression. Where “Ode on a Grecian Urn” explicitly pushes that idea to its logical extreme, however, “Ode on Indolence” subtly undermines it. Keats here toys with and inverts the expectation that art can “immortalize” a transitory being, as Cowper had suggested it could when he blessed “the art that can immortalize / The art that baffles time’s tyrannic claim / To quench [his mother’s mind or spirit]” (“On the Receipt” 8-10). The three figures are like art precisely in their means of being transitory: they are like figures on an urn in that they appear and disappear like figures on an urn that is being “shifted.” Moreover, they proceed to adopt yet more modes of movement that are very un-frieze-like indeed: they turn their heads to face the speaker, and then hastily vanish. Stasis, in this poem, is a feature not of sculpture but of language – and specifically of the narrative portions of the speaker’s language. Movement, and even disappearance, by contrast, are here features of figures on urns.

Even within the first stanza, the speaker shifts from figuring the shadows’ bizarre movement as art-like to explaining their strangeness as a function of their status as art – as though he has forgotten that they are artworks only within his own similitude. Having noted that the figures are “strange” to him – perhaps strange in the sense of bizarre, but certainly strange in the sense of unfamiliar or unrecognized – the speaker explains away their unfamiliarity. While he does not explicitly claim to be “deep in Phidian lore” himself, he does say that failing to recognize figures on a vase is understandable to
someone who *is* deep in such lore, learned on the subject of the Elgin Marbles. ¹⁰⁵ One can read this to mean that he does not recognize the shadows because they are the wrong type of art: he would recognize them if they were a large-scale frieze, but cannot, given that they are images on a vase. One could also read it to mean that vases in general are so inscrutable that even those learned in Greek antiquities do not always recognize the figures on them. Either way, however, the figures’ strangeness is a function of their status as figures on a vase. The explanation is a little startling, given that until this point in the poem there is no vase or urn, but rather three shadowy beings who appear and vanish as though being propelled on one.

The speaker’s unstable characterization of the figures as like a hypothetical urn or on a real urn turns into a different kind of oscillation in attitudes in the second stanza. Now expressing wonderment that he “knew [them] not,” the speaker calls their resemblance to images on an urn a “masque.”

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How is it, shadows, that I knew ye not?
How came ye muffled in so hush a masque?
Was it a silent deep-disguised plot
To steal away, and leave without a task
My idle days? Ripe was the drowsy hour;
The blissful cloud of summer-indolence
   Benumb’d my eyes; my pulse grew less and less;
Pain had no sting, and pleasure’s wreath no flower.
   O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense
   Unhaunted quite of all but—nothingness?
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The “masque” or mask in which the shadows were “muffled” seems to be their disguise as immobile urn decorations (or things that resemble immobile urn decorations) passively being shifted round, and the speaker implies that this disguise obscures their meaning. (Indeed, this proves to be the case, for it is in turning their heads and thus adopting a type of movement that is *not* characteristic of images on urns that the three

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¹⁰⁵ The Parthenon friezes, or Elgin Marbles, are fabled to have been made by the sculptor Phidias.
shadows eventually reveal their allegorical identities.) Rather than explaining away the shadows’ strangeness as natural or understandable, their urn-like movement is now itself in need of explanation: an obstacle to the speaker’s recognition of them for which the speaker demands an account. He even tacitly accuses the figures of conspiring in a “deep-disguised plot” – a plot that is disguised and secret, but also a plot that involves disguise. In the stanza’s concluding lines, however, the speaker changes his attitude again, asking, in effect, why the shadows were not plotting to steal away, and why they did not remain unidentifiable: “O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense / Unhaunted quite of all but—nothingness?” If, at the start of the second stanza, the speaker takes a tone of one betrayed because he has not recognized the figures, at the end of the stanza he takes the same tone because he has.

The speaker’s ambivalent attitude to recognition of the figures corresponds to an oscillation between past-tense narrative and direct address. “Ode on Indolence” is not made up entirely of apostrophes, as “Peele Castle” is – on the contrary, it begins with past-tense narration. The second stanza begins with an interrogative apostrophe to the three shadows, questioning them about the events just narrated: “How is it, shadows, that I knew ye not?” The middle part of the stanza returns to narrative: “Ripe was the drowsy hour.” It is not clear whether this narrative is still addressed to the three shadows – an elaboration of the speaker’s question about their conduct – or whether he has returned to the narration in which he refers to the shadows as “they” in the first stanza. The second stanza concludes with another apostrophe to the shadows, but expressing a very different attitude, and thus leaving unresolved the question of whether the preceding lines were an expansion of his first question or a narrative interlude that has changed his mind about what he wishes to ask.

The crucial word “masque” signals both the type of speech act that the speaker repeatedly slips into in the second stanza and the allegorical meaning that the shadows’ resemblance to an urn is impeding. The word points us to a set of metaphors and an element of linguistic construction that “Ode on Indolence” shares with “Peele Castle.” The archaic spelling of “mask” as “masque” is suggestive of pageantry, for masques, like pageantry, are a highly allegorical type of drama in which human actors become
personifications, often by wearing masks. Strikingly, the figures in the poem, far from acquiring their allegorical meaning by donning a mask, as human actors would do, conceal it by doing so. “Masque” here signifies a disguise that obscures, instead of generating, the allegory. Moreover, the speaker’s introduction of the word just before he recognizes the personifications and just after he himself has launched into an apostrophe is no coincidence. For a human speaker to address three personified abstractions is, in effect, to stage a masque. Since the last stanza is also an apostrophe, that element of the masque recurs, along with the word itself, for, in the final stanza, the speaker asks the figures to become once more “masque-like figures”: he is here using the term entirely to signify the figures’ status as allegorical personifications.

The allegorical meaning of the three shadows becomes abruptly clear when they decisively defy the expectations generated by the comparison to images on an urn, and move in a way that the simile cannot account for.

A third time pass’d they by, and, passing, turn’d
   Each one the face a moment whiles to me;
Then faded, and to follow them I burn’d
   And ached for wings, because I knew the three:
The first was a fair made, and Love her name;
   The second was Ambition, pale of cheek,
   And ever watchful with fatigued eye;
The last, whom I love more, the more of blame
   Is heap’d upon her, maiden most unmeek,—
I knew to be my demon Poesy.

The speaker presents the “meaning” of the figures themselves as unambiguously allegorical in spite of his evident difficulty deciphering it. Once he recognizes them, the speaker does not say that he guessed at their meaning, but rather that he “knew the three.” In a poem in which neither art nor metaphor are stable categories, these quasi-artistic figures evidently have firm identities as allegorical personifications of Love, Ambition and Poesy. Yet it is only by transcending the normal limitations of images on urns – by turning their heads and then abruptly vanishing – that the three figures can
make their identities recognized. In other words, the figures assume their unambiguous status as allegorical personifications only in the act of rendering yet more questionable their status as art—as though they cannot be fully bas-relief figures and fully allegories at the same time.

The figurative meaning of the three shadows, once it is revealed, renders all the more striking the speaker’s ambivalent justifications of his failure to recognize them, for they are personifications of elements of his own psyche. If their meaning is as stable as the speaker suggests when he claims to know the three, then why does it take him so long to recognize them? Given that all three allegorical meanings pertain to his own desires and impulses, it is still more bizarre that he “knows” them only on the third time of asking.

Helen Vendler observes in The Odes of John Keats that the speaker projects “onto an urn-Doppelgänger his internalized ambition, love, and poesy” (24), and she identifies his “penitent” exclamation at his failure to recognize them as the “single most memorable moment” in the poem (28). Although I would not necessarily characterize the speaker’s exclamation as penitent, Vendler is surely right that the tone in the second stanza registers conflict. The speaker’s shifting attitudes to his own failure to recognize the shadows have everything to do with the shadows’ status as figures for his own mind. Moreover, his ambiguous characterization of the shadows first as like images on an urn, then simply as images on an urn, has everything to do with his failure to recognize them.

After the identity of the shadows is revealed, the speaker’s desire to renounce the figures, to deny their power, and to maintain his own stasis is made manifest in the repetitiveness of his language. As he tries to contain the effects of his recognition of the figures, he uses an almost incantatory form of repetition. At the start of the fourth and fifth stanzas, the speaker repeats elements of his narration of the moment of recognition in the third, but with a disapproving gloss each time.

They faded, and, forsooth! I wanted wings:
O folly! What is Love? and where is it?
And for that poor Ambition—it springs
From a man’s little heart’s short fever-fit;
For Poesy!—no,—she has not a joy,—
At least for me,—so sweet as drowsy noons,
And evenings steep’d in honied indolence;
O, for an age so shelter’d from annoy,
That I may never know how change the moons,
Or hear the voice of busy common-sense!

A third time came they by;—alas! wherefore?
My sleep had been embroider’d with dim dreams;
My soul had been a lawn besprinkled o’er
With flowers, and stirring shades, and baffled beams:
The morn was clouded, but no shower fell,
Though in her lids hung the sweet tears of May;
The open casement press’d a new-leaved vine,
Let in the budding warmth and throstle’s lay;
O shadows! ’twas a time to bid farewell!
Upon your skirts had fallen no tears of mine.

“They faded,” he says, echoing “then faded” from the third line of the preceding stanza, before adding “and, forsooth! I wanted wings: / Oh folly!” The rest of the fourth stanza is a vigorous repudiation of love, ambition, and poetry, and the order in which the speaker repudiates the figures is exactly the order in which he identifies them in the third stanza, thus intensifying the impression that this stanza is almost ritualistically recreating the previous. In the fifth stanza, the speaker exclaims “A third time came they by,” echoing “A third time pass’d they by” from the start of the third stanza. Again, he adds an exclamation of his own disapproval: “alas! wherefore?” Even as he shifts once more into apostrophe in the final two lines of the fifth stanza, he echoes the opening line of the second stanza: “O shadows!” echoes “How is it, shadows.” The order in which the speaker repeats himself at the start of the fourth, the start of the fifth, and the end of the fifth stanzas is inverted: he repeats these elements in the opposite of the order in which he had originally uttered them (in the third line of the third stanza, the first line of the third stanza, and the first line of the second). What began as stalling – an exact repetition of elements in the third stanza in the fourth – has become regression, as though the
speaker is trying to move backward toward the poem’s opening. In the act of repudiating love, ambition and poetry in order to preserve his indolence, he enacts his mental stasis linguistically.

The desire to resist or contain the shadows’ influence that is manifested in the language of the fourth and fifth stanzas is revealed to be disappointed in the final stanza; even as he claims to be banishing the three shadows and remaining indolent, the form of the speaker’s language registers energy and activity. Having stated in the final lines of the fifth stanza that the moment of their turning to face him was an appropriate “time to bid farewell,” the speaker attempts to bid them farewell in his present moment.

So, ye three ghosts, adieu! Ye cannot raise
My head cool-bedded in the flowery grass;
For I would not be dieted with praise,
A pet-lamb in a sentimental farce!
Fade softly from my eyes, and be once more
In masque-like figures on the dreamy urn;
Farewell! I yet have visions for the night,
And for the day faint visions there is store;
Vanish, ye phantoms, from my idle spright,
Into the clouds, and never more return!

The speaker’s farewell to the figures and his imperative to them to “vanish” and go back to the urn are an exercise in futility. They have vanished, and it is their very vanishing that has roused him from his stupor and disturbed his indolence in the first place. (Most obviously, the fact that what we read is an ode suggests that the speaker has not succeeded in banishing his demon poesy; the speaker is actually uttering poetry in the act of banishing that “maiden most unmeek”).

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106 As Joel Faflak observes, where his predecessor De Quincey had attempted to “psychoanalyze the psychic process of poetry within prose,” Keats “moves back into poetry to explore how this process functions firsthand. He psychoanalyzes within the contemplative form of Poetry its self-observational other – the poetry of Poetry” (201). In “Ode on Indolence,” Keats explores the process of being roused from indolence to write a poem, but he does so within the poem, making the success of the rousing a foregone conclusion.
That contradiction is writ large in the linguistic mode of the final stanza. The past-tense narrative entirely gives way to performative speech acts (farewells, banishments, imperatives) and apostrophe. The repetition and passive forms of speech that characterize much of the narrative portions of the poem make a final, rather halting appearance, as though in their death throes – as though the speaker’s very mode of indolent speech has fractured. He says, for instance, that “for the day faint visions there is store,” but not until after he has said “I yet have visions for the night,” substituting a “there is” construction for the more decidedly active “I have” construction. This second line reads awkwardly, as though he has caught himself making himself a grammatical subject, and hastily corrects the slip. In the very act of banishing the “phantoms” back to the “dreamy urn” to be once more “masque-like figures,” the speaker ironically ceases to be merely a viewer of the figures and becomes, for the second time, an actor. Since the linguistic form of his apostrophe contradicts its substance, he is an actor whom we view with a certain ironic distance – if not exactly a pet-lamb in a sentimental farce, not a hero of self-perception and self-consolation like Wordsworth’s speaker either. Keats, far from unambiguously identifying his speaker with himself, here allows his speaker to proclaim rather grandly a banishment that is patently ineffective.

The fact that the speaker’s language in the final stanza strongly suggests his futile desire to remain indolent sheds some light on the problem raised by Grant Scott, quoted earlier:

> the figures are never fully there, as the urn will be later, and we are never sure whether they are mere phantom personifications, Spenserian allegorical figures, or actual characters from a bas-relief urn. Thus, Keats’s simile remains elusive: are they like figures on a marble urn, or are they figures on an urn? (96).

By the end of the poem, the speaker commands them to “be once more / In masque-like figures on the dreamy urn.” The urn may be “dreamy,” perhaps even “dreamed,” but it is still “the dreamy urn,” not the hypothetical “a marble urn” of the opening stanza, implying that it has somehow spilled out of the simile and acquired a real existence. That implication, however, is in the realm of the speaker’s wishful thinking – part of the final stanza’s bold but ironic performance of speech acts that have the opposite of their
stated effect. As long as the three shadows moved only in ways that could be characterized by the analogy of images on an urn, their meaning remained opaque to the speaker; and as long as their meaning remained opaque, he remained indolent. In demanding that the shadows resume a real status as images on urns that they appear never to have had, the speaker is demanding that they be more decisively contained than ever by the similitude. He is demanding that they cease to have existence beyond the vehicle of a simile that described only part of their movement – the part that had no effect.

For Scott, “Ode on Indolence” is the poem in which the work of art actually is threatening to the viewer, because it actually does turn and gaze right back. The observation that the three figures are at their most threatening to the speaker at the moment in which they turn their heads is a crucial one, and it is certainly at that moment that the speaker’s desperate repetitions and repudiations begin. It is the figures’ forcible imposition of their own allegorical meaning, however, as much as it is their reciprocal gaze, that seems to distress the speaker. The subtext of the speaker’s injunction to the figures to return to the “dreamy urn” on which it is not really clear that they were ever located is the idea that, if the figures could only be persuaded to stay art – to stop turning their heads, to stop defying the limitations that were assumed by Romantic thinkers to pertain to art – then they would have no intrinsic allegorical meaning, and their interpretation could be controlled or neglected by the viewer.

If “Ode on Indolence” lends itself to studies of the link between ekphrasis and the controlling gaze, its primary reason for exploring its speaker’s desire not to recognize the meaning of the allegorical figures – indeed, its reason for drawing on the ekphrastic tradition at all – nevertheless seems to be to represent a particularly extreme kind of self-estrangement. Strictly speaking, there isn’t an art object in this poem. “Ode on Indolence” represents an encounter between the speaker and three figures that are neither objects of aesthetic enjoyment nor the product of a deliberate act of creation on the part of an artist. It is the very ambiguity of the figures’ status as art that enables the “Ode” to make, not merely a work of art, but the very concept of art fulfill a new role. Keats strips the concept of art of the associations it had come to have – permanence, stasis – and
destabilizes the notion of art as an identifiable category. What we are left with is a set of visual conventions (white robes and sandals, a side-faced perspective, figures in procession one behind the other), and a powerful sense of the figures’ strangeness. They are strange (unfamiliar) in that the speaker does not recognize them, and they are strange (unusual) in their mode of appearing to him; on both counts, he compares them to figures on an urn. It is not that the speaker sees a work of art and perceives it as strange or fails to recognize it. Rather, he perceives the figures as a work of art because they are strange— their art-like appearance is “so hush a masque.” The characteristics of art, or at least the particular kind of art specific to urns and vases, if not “Phidian” art, have become a way of signifying that which is strange or misrecognized. Moreover, the shadows Keats’s speaker tries so hard to ignore are figures for his own interiority, and the change he resists is a change to himself. Like Wordsworth’s speaker in “Peele Castle,” Keats’s speaker becomes, in the process of an ekphrastic encounter, his own viewer, but he views himself obtusely, and wilfully so. If Wordsworth’s speaker uses the experience of viewing a work of art as a means to become reacquainted with himself, Keats’s speaker uses the abstract idea of looking at a work of art as a means of staying as estranged from himself as he can: if he cannot truly remain indolent, he can at least fail to acknowledge that his indolence has been disturbed.

The question of whether an autonomous consciousness can be its own spectator to any good purpose may seem, at first glance, somewhat removed from the concerns of the culture of sensibility. It is linked, however, to the concept of sympathetic consolation articulated by Adam Smith—a concept that, in Smith’s formulation, is crucial to sympathy’s role in the higher-order morality of self-mastery and the other sterner virtues. The culture of sensibility that continued to flourish in the Romantic period was not concerned primarily with promoting sympathy and sentiment, but rather with continuing to ask sophisticated questions about their role in ethics. And however invested much Romantic poetry might be in articulating the claims of the poetic self to autonomy and self-knowledge, in these poems such supposed autonomy and self-knowledge is interrogated in ways that highlight their connection to the intellectual culture of
sensibility and the moral philosophy that gave it its intellectual momentum. “Peele Castle” recombines the conventions of pre-Romantic ekphrasis to show an autonomous self that requires no sympathetic spectator; by contrast, “Ode on Indolence,” in deflating the claims of such a supposedly autonomous self, tacitly re-inscribes the necessity of a human interlocutor in the moral functioning of the self – not necessarily a sympathetic interlocutor offering consolation, but some external consciousness that can jostle the mind out of its fantasies about its own state. “Ode on Indolence” does not seem to be speaking back directly to the ideas articulated by Smith, but it does seem to be speaking back to those implicitly tested by “Peele Castle,” as though picking up the thread of the conversation without directly addressing the first speaker.

This chapter has explored how a very specific tool could be used in two different poems to explore a very specific kind of question: how the trope of pageantry or masque, used in an ekphrasis and drawing on the very old tradition of treating artworks as allegories, could be used to explore ideas about self-recognition, self-awareness, and self-mastery. These questions, especially as they are inflected in “Ode on Indolence,” do not bear the same direct and irrefutable relationship to moral philosophy as do the questions about the type and purpose of sympathy the visual arts could prompt explored in the previous chapter, or the questions about viable processes of grieving explored in the first chapter. Nonetheless, the questions about self-recognition – and the possible uses of self-spectatorship mediated by art – posed by “Ode on Indolence” and “Peele Castle” share recognizable continuities with ideas drawn from moral philosophy. The shift of those questions away from the form that is traceable in Adam Smith’s work is a measure of the flexibility of the culture of sensibility. The fact that poetry about art accommodated the intellectual needs of such differently modulated incarnations of the same set of questions likewise attests to the adaptability of the discourses that art as a subject matter brought with it.
6 Conclusion

6.1 Ekphrasis and Sensibility After 1820

I once planned to extend the historical scope of this thesis at least to 1830; in looking at ekphrases of the mid 1820s, however, I became convinced that I was seeing a phase of British cultural history distinct from the one I had been examining, and that doing justice to it would require as many chapters again as the five included here. To extend the investigation of Romantic ekphrasis and the culture of sensibility past the early 1820s is to confront the questions of just how much ekphrastic poetry was produced during those decades, why it became so inordinately popular, and what role particular poets and publication venues had in popularizing it. It is also to confront the questions of how the literature of sensibility was evolving, and whether it can be thought of as part of the same phenomenon as Victorian sentimentality. The question of whether ekphrastic poems dealing with the questions of sensibility or sentiment began to look different in the mid-1820s, just as ekphrasis itself was gaining in popularity, has the potential to shed light on bigger issues surrounding the liminal decades between what are conventionally thought of as the Romantic and Victorian periods. It is well beyond the scope of this thesis to answer those questions, but it is nonetheless worth considering what it would look like to confront them.

In his article “Late Romantic Ekphrasis,” Peter Simonsen has identified the 1820s and 1830s as a period of “unprecedented proliferation” of ekphrastic writing (319). In addition to the obvious choices – Hemans and Landon – Simonsen names several authors, such as Leigh Hunt and Thomas Hood, not to mention the ekphrases Wordsworth composed in the last two decades of his career, to which Simonsen has devoted a separate book entitled Wordsworth and Word-Preserving Arts. In the decade after the death of Byron, however, it was Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon who had virtually no rivals for prominence in the poetic marketplace. A study of ekphrasis in this period of its newfound popularity would thus need, above all else, to account for the staggering ekphrastic output of England’s two most popular “poetesses.” As Grant F. Scott has observed in “The Fragile Image,” “Felicia Hemans wrote more
ekphrastic poems than the major Romantic poets [i.e. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Percy Shelley, and Keats] combined, thirty-eight to be exact” (36).

Terence Hoagwood and Kathryn Ledbetter, in the “Life of Letitia Elizabeth Landon” that accompanies their online edition of The Keepsake of 1829, make the still grander claim for L.E.L. that she “wrote hundreds of poems about art.” If one defines “poems about art” broadly enough, this is perhaps not an exaggeration. Landon wrote at least forty-eight lyric verse ekphrases, in addition to a long, narrative poem called The Vow of the Peacock that was inspired by a painting, countless ekphrastic passages in other narrative poems such as The Troubadour and The Golden Violet, a series of fifteen poems labelled “Subjects for Pictures,” several other poems with similar titles such as “Outlines for a Portrait,” a series of poems labelled “Medallion Wafers” that imagines the circumstances of the correspondence to which the wafers might be affixed, a few poems like “The Painter’s Love” that are tangentially related to the visual arts, and at least one short story that pivots around the interpretation of a painting. To be sure, much of that ekphrastic output was driven by the literary marketplace: Landon wrote poems to go with prints in the elegant literary annuals. But much of it was spontaneous. In fact, although Landon published a poem called “Juliet After the Masquerade” in The Literary Souvenir of 1828, where it was printed beside an engraving of Thomson’s painting by the same name, her better-known work by that title is a different poem. It was published three years earlier, in a volume of Landon’s own compositions (The Troubadour), and without pictorial accompaniment. It is this earlier poem, along with one of its fellows from the same volume, that I shall here take as test cases of how ekphrastic poems in 1825 might be read.

“Juliet After the Masquerade” is one of twelve “Poetical Sketches of Modern Pictures” published in The Troubadour; Catalogue of Pictures, and Historical Sketches. In 1825, when The Troubadour was published, Landon had already made a name for herself

107 Medallion wafers were a type of fashionable stationery accessory: elegant and brightly-coloured seals for letters, usually bearing the image of an antique medallion or seal, often in white against a coloured background. For a description of how they were made, see the Saturday Magazine for February 16, 1839.
writing poems for the *Literary Gazette*, worked as the Gazette’s chief reviewer, published two books of verse, received a number of positive reviews, and been beset by the first of many rounds of scandal and gossip. *The Troubadour* is thus what one might call high L.E.L. – a work of her early maturity. It predates her development of a satirical narrative style in her novels, but it is the work of an established professional writer who had already positioned herself in the marketplace as a consistent producer of languid, richly sentimental writing, not the work of a literary ingénue. Moreover, Landon had already published eighteen ekphrastic works by 1825. “Poetical Sketches of Modern Pictures” begins with an epigraph from one of Landon’s own poems from the *Gazette*; it was her most ambitious series of ekphrases to date, but, as her epigraph reminds us, Landon had already established herself as a poet deeply inspired by the visual arts.

6.2 L.E.L. in 1825: A Test Case

Given the lush style, improbable plots, and romanticized settings of the works for which Landon is best known, it may come as a surprise to her readers that many of her ekphrases register a suspicion of the visual arts as false, fictional, even misleading. In fact, I would hypothesize that Landon’s ekphrastic corpus can be read as a sustained exposé of the emotional consequences of living in a world saturated with visual art. A short poem entitled “Moonlight. T. C. Hofland,”109 published in the *Literary Gazette* in

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108 For a discussion of Landon’s satiric, novelistic style, see Tricia Lootens’s essay “Receiving the Legend, Rethinking the Writer: Letitia Landon and the Poetess Tradition.”

109 I have found three paintings by Hofland that this poem might be referring to. One, entitled *Windsor and Eton from Clewer Meadows by Moonlight*, painted in 1820, features a boat on still water and some sleeping cows and geese on the shore in the foreground, with the buildings of Windsor and Eton in the distance. The second, entitled *Moonlit Landscape* (date unknown), depicts a more or less Italian-looking city rising on a hill beside a river, with drooping trees on the opposite bank, a boat beside them, and an arched bridge in the middle background; in the immediate foreground, a road runs through some tall grass and low shrubs. Images of both are available on the BBC’s *Your Paintings: Uncovering the Nation’s Art Collection* website. The third and most likely painting, entitled *An Ancient City – Moonlight*, was exhibited in 1820, according to *The Exhibition of the Royal Academy 1820* (20). In 2012, the original painting was held by Richard Taylor Fine Art, but the firm appears to have sold the painting, which is no longer available for preview on their website. The painting must have been a success, for Hofland painted several other signed versions of the same picture, mostly dated to 1829, and variously titled *Italianate moonlit river landscape, thought to be the River Tiber, Rome* or *Moonlit View Of An Italian City*. These are widely available online, for example at www.arcadja.com and www.mutualart.com. In all versions of
1824, illustrates this suspicion nicely. The speaker begins by expressing delight in the escapist beauty of the painting, exclaiming

   A luxury of deep repose! the heart
   Must surely beat in quiet here. The light
   Is such as should be on the poet’s harp
   When he awakens his first song of love,
   Echoed but by the wind and nightingale.
   There is a silver beauty on the leaves—
   The night has given it; and the green turf
   Seems as just spread for fairy revelling.

The last five lines of the poem, however, exhibit a marked turn; indeed, the speaker literally turns from the painting, stating

   I will not look on it—it is too fair!
   Its green, moonlighted loveliness but mocks
   The hot and hurried scenes in which we live.
   GOD! that this Earth should be so beautiful,
   And yet so wretched!

The poem’s form underscores its suspicion of aesthetic conventions. Its twelve and a half lines of iambic pentameter with a turn after the eighth line invoke the conventions of the sonnet, but stubbornly reject any of a sonnet’s strategies for creating aesthetic closure: a fourteenth line, a rhythmically closed ending, or rhyme. The speaker’s enthusiastic embrace of the painting’s beauty, and her hopeful speculation that “the heart / Must surely beat in quiet here,” suggests the profound appeal of the painting’s aestheticized landscape, and the refuge for “the heart” it seems to offer, but her rejection

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the picture, two peasants stand on a grassy bank in the foreground. Buildings rise behind some trees on the opposite shore, and the city is visible on both shores in the background. The picture is dominated by the river itself, with several red-and-white covered boats and an arched bridge, and by the impressive silhouette of the nearest buildings against the moonlit sky.

Or his. As with the Mitford sonnet discussed in Chapter 3, there is no indication of the speaker’s gender in this poem.
of the painting as “too beautiful” indicates the emotional cost of that escapism. The speaker first explains that the painting’s beauty only “mocks,” rather than providing substantial refuge from, the real world; she then bursts into an impassioned exclamation that registers the psychic pain caused by the juxtaposition of a “green, moonlighted loveliness” that is not real with the “hot and hurried scenes” that are. Breaking off mid-line, the speaker seems not only distraught at the inevitable failure of the painting to provide true “repose,” but also artistically hindered – her own poetic utterance cut short by her problematic exposure to the very artwork that prompted it.

The longer and more ambitious poem “Juliet After the Masquerade. By Thomson” (1825), although it is couched in L.E.L.’s signature opulent style, is nevertheless a searching investigation of the dangers of the emotional life aspiring to the ideals of art. It draws attention to the instability of the relationship between a viewer’s feelings and a work of art, and it implies that the arts – including literature – are complicit in the emotional mis-education of impressionable young readers and viewers. Riddled with equivocal language, the poem makes the works of art and literature that Juliet encounters do double duty. On the one hand, it uses them to pick up elements of the Romeo and Juliet story, and thus to showcase its own aesthetic consistency with the painting that inspired it and with the play that inspired the painting. On the other hand, within the self-contained “reality” of the story, the poem also reveals glimpses of Juliet’s deeply ambiguous relationship to the various artistic productions that surround her. What initially looks like a poem in which Juliet fulfills part of her destiny turns out, on closer inspection, to be an interrogation of the idea of destiny: Juliet’s “fate” is not the decree of a higher power, but rather the result of her cultural conditioning by the arts. The poem acts as a commentary on how the Romeo and Juliet love story functions in L.E.L.’s culture – as a model of “true love” to which young girls, according to the logic of the poem, aspire at their peril. Moreover, the subtlety and equivocation of Landon’s language leaves her own readers, should they happen to be young girls, with an interpretive choice. The text is overtly didactic only in its repetition of some hackneyed sentiments about the inevitable sorrows of love, and can thus be taken two ways: either as an attack on the kind of acculturation that leads young girls to form doomed
attachments, or as an aesthetically appealing set-piece that recycles the Romeo and Juliet story and thus perpetuates the impractical ideal of love even unto disaster.

“Juliet After the Masquerade” carefully situates itself in a tradition of retellings of the Romeo and Juliet story. Many of the objects it mentions are specifically represented in the painting after which it is named: the couch on the terrace, Juliet’s “cap and plume,” her lute, two marble statues, and even the “white cloud o’er the moon” that the speaker will not mention until the final four lines. In fact, although the poem adds elements that are not in the painting, it subtracts as little as possible, and certainly introduces nothing that contradicts Thomson’s construction of the scene. In thus elaborating on the scene without altering anything already represented, the poem adopts the same strategy with respect to the picture that the picture adopts with respect to Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Thomson’s painting represents a character from Shakespeare’s play, but not a scene from the play. Rather, it presents Juliet in the moments between the masquerade and the famous balcony scene, presumably in the interlude during which Romeo is evading the jests of his friends. This particular painting thus offers an opportunity to enter the tradition of telling the Romeo and Juliet story without actively rewriting it, and Landon carefully avoids challenging either Shakespeare’s play or Thomson’s painting on any details of their renditions of the story.

The fidelity of “Juliet After the Masquerade” to an existing tradition points to a *double-entendre* at the end of the first verse paragraph that in turn registers a subtle ambivalence toward the tradition in question. Mentioning the couch, the poem’s speaker specifies that it is the very couch on which Juliet had been seated earlier in the day to read “some minstrel’s love-lorn page.” The speaker then interjects “Alas, tears are the poet’s heritage!” This interjection can be interpreted variously. It can mean that poets are prone to sorrow or usually have unhappy love lives – the interpretation that most closely

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111 Not all of Landon’s ekphrases are so true to their source material. For example, the poem that immediately follows this one, “The Combat,” considerably censors the content of the painting that inspired it. In “The Combat,” Landon mentions neither the woman clinging beseechingly to the conqueror’s thighs and groin nor the inordinate nudity of all the figures in William Etty’s *The Combat: Woman Pleading for the Vanquished*. Landon’s poems describe a woman who flings herself down in despair before the conqueror.
aligns it with Landon’s own very successful poem “The Improvatrice” and with the tradition of Mme. de Staël. It can also mean that tears, sorrow, and unhappy love are the inherited subject matter that poets have to work with. The ambiguity of this statement hints that Landon’s choice to represent doomed love might not be a free choice, and that the poem’s fidelity to its sources does not necessarily constitute endorsement of them; Juliet’s story, with its tragic ending, may be “the poet’s heritage” rather than the poet’s chosen subject.

The poem’s equivocal language renders it ambiguous whether the parallels between Juliet’s feelings and the objects around her are really “there,” objectively described by an omniscient speaker, or whether these descriptions are focalized through Juliet, who perceives the world through the lens of her own feeling. The speaker says of Juliet’s terrace that “[i]t was a solitude / Made for young hearts in love’s first dreaming mood.” Outside the “reality” of the poem’s world, this statement is literally true, since the solitude was in fact “made” by a painter for the fictional figure of Juliet. Within the poem’s world, however, it begs the question: made by whom? The speaker then describes

Two graceful statues of the Parian stone,
So finely shaped, that, as the moonlight shone,
The breath of life seem’d to their beauty given,
But less the life of earth than that of heaven.
’Twas PSYCHE and her boy-god, so divine
They turn’d the terrace to an idol shrine,
With its white vases and their summer share
Of flowers, like altars raised to that sweet pair.

There can be no question that the statues of Eros and Psyche have parallels to Juliet’s feelings, alluding as they do to the mythic, allegorical marriage of love and the soul and the soul’s subsequent, hard-earned immortality; Juliet is in love, and she is about to achieve immortal fame as a figure in art and literature. It is less clear, however, whether that parallel is the work of some higher power who knows Juliet’s fate and has equipped her with appropriate statues, whether Juliet falls in love because she has been taught by
the presence of the statues to consider love and her soul as belonging together, or
whether the statues are the result of an improbable but unimportant aesthetic decision by
the painter, Thomson – meant for the viewer of the painting and the reader of Landon’s
poem, but not for Juliet. The language of divinity, and the grammatical agency given to
the statues in the statement “they turn’d the terrace to an idol shrine,” perhaps suggest
that Juliet’s world is overseen by a higher power who orchestrates such coincidences.
But the word “seem’d” tidily and preemptively undercuts that suggestion by implying
that the statues’ lifelike appearance is an illusion that only Juliet sees.
The poem’s account of how Juliet relates to literature and music is the turning point at
which the text begins strongly to imply that the arts have conditioned Juliet to fall in
love. The speaker recounts that Juliet

… murmur’d over many a snatch of song
That might to her own feelings now belong;
She thought upon old histories she had read,
And placed herself in each high heroine’s stead,
Then woke her lute, – oh! there is little known
Of music’s power till aided by love’s own.
And this is happiness [...]

In this account, we have ready access to Juliet’s interiority. It may or may not have been
Juliet to whom the statues seemed alive, but we now know that Juliet’s feelings line up
with the feelings expressed by the songs she sings, and we know that she imagines
herself in the “stead” of fictional characters. Moreover, we learn something about her
past experience. We know, now, that she has learned these snatches of song that did not
at the time belong to her own feelings, that she has learned to play the lute without
having “known / Of music’s power,” and that she has read old histories. Now that she is
in love, she can inhabit the “I” of the lyric speaker when singing love songs. She can
also imaginatively inhabit the role of the heroine of a romance more fully than when she
had initially read the “old histories.” Juliet’s act of imaginative identification with the
high heroines of romance is phrased in a way that is virtually indistinguishable from
Smithian sympathy: she “placed herself in each high heroine’s stead.” This phrasing,
however, belies the conspicuous difference between what Juliet is doing and Smith’s idea
of putting oneself in someone else’s “case” in order to understand his or her feelings. Juliet is pointedly not trying to understand someone else’s feelings by thinking her way into that person’s circumstances. Quite the opposite: the fact that she places herself in “each high heroine’s stead” now, when her own feelings already correspond to theirs, suggests that falling in love has made such imaginative identification more personally satisfying. It is no coincidence that Landon’s speaker says “this is happiness” immediately after representing Juliet comparing herself to the heroines of romance, for it is precisely her new-found ability to identify with such heroines that seems to make Juliet happiest.

The subtle insinuations that art and literature have conditioned Juliet to fall in love offer a powerful commentary on the poem’s self-conscious alignment with a tradition. Within her world, Juliet is an ingenuous reader of histories and viewer of artworks, but in the reader’s world she is the subject of an enormous body of literature and art. She may imaginatively adopt the subject-positions of heroines of romance, but she is also a literary heroine in her own right. Having no less famous a “high heroine” than Juliet imagine herself in the “stead” of heroines she has read about seems calculated to appeal to young readers who would like to imagine themselves in Juliet’s “stead,” as though the poem makes Juliet over in the image of its own readers, but I would suggest that in fact Landon’s Juliet is a cautionary example.

The poem concludes by foreshadowing Juliet’s own tragic death, but first it takes her as a pretext for a generalized prediction of love outlasting the happiness it produces:

And this is happiness: oh! love will last
When all that made it happiness is past,—
When all its hopes are as the glittering toys
Time present offers, time to come destroys,—
When they have been too often crush’d to earth,
For further blindness to their little worth,—
When fond illusions have dropt one by one,
Like pearls from a rich carkanet, till none
Are left upon life’s soil’d and naked string,—
And this is all what time will ever bring.

Speaking from within the reality of the poem, the speaker here seems to know nothing of Juliet’s future, and to utter only a universal piece of wisdom. This passage is not only lengthier than the foreshadowing specific to Juliet that follows, but also written in an idiom of apparent sincerity that stands in contrast to the later passage’s careful conventionality. Repeating “when” in clause after clause, the speaker seems to pick up momentum, as though becoming more vehement with each subsequent prediction. The first “when” clause is only a single line long; the second and third each take up a couplet; the fourth is three lines long. The series of “when” concludes with the summative comment that “this is all what time will ever bring,” the word “all” emphasizing the cumulative nature of the speaker’s list of future woes. The simple statement that “love will last” is overpowered by the momentum of the “when” clauses and their grim predictions of misery. As the passage reaches its climax, its diction takes a momentary plunge into the ordinary that intensifies the impression of the speaker’s sincerity by breaking the stylistic veneer that the rest of the poem uniformly displays. As the speaker compares fond illusions dropping away from real experience to beads falling from a necklace, the diction plummets from the highly wrought, poetically conventional “pearls” and “carkanet” to the emphatically ordinary “soil’d and naked string.” Coming as it does immediately after the speaker has labelled Juliet’s new self-identification with literature as “happiness,” this passage, with its impassioned warning of the miseries of love, seems specifically to deflate Juliet’s potential as an appealing “high heroine” with whom to identify.112

The final lines of “Juliet After the Masquerade” predict Juliet’s own misery and death specifically, breaking off from the preceding passage’s display of apparent sincerity to remind the reader of the poem’s place in a poetic and artistic tradition. The speaker turns

112 This passage also subtly points to some of the hints in the text of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet that it should not be taken as an aspirational model of true love – hints that Landon seems to have been astute enough to catch. Romeo and Juliet’s love, which has for centuries been taken as an archetype of perfect love in spite of those hints, appears perfect precisely because the protagonists die abruptly. Shakespeare compressed the narrative of his source materials so that Juliet and Romeo die within a few days of meeting one another – their “fond illusions” about one another never drop away. For a discussion of Shakespeare’s compression of the story, see Jill Levenson’s Introduction to the Oxford Romeo and Juliet.
from the generalizations about love to ask about the future of the particular love story at hand, saying

— And that fair girl, — what can the heart foresee
Of her young love, and of its destiny?

The question is pointedly rhetorical. The heart does not need to foresee anything, for everyone knows exactly what will happen to Juliet. Without explicitly acknowledging this, however, the speaker answers her own question by drawing attention to a visual detail, saying

There is a white cloud o’er the moon, its form
Is very light, and yet there sleeps the storm;
It is an omen, it may tell the fate
Of love known all too soon, repented all too late.

The speaker’s observation of the white cloud, a detail drawn directly from Thomson’s painting, re-establishes the poem’s connection with a very specific work of art. By identifying the cloud as an “omen,” the speaker draws attention to the fact that this visual detail is someone else’s aesthetic choice – not a coincidental bit of scenery, but rather a detail selected by an artist to carry symbolic weight. Moreover, in order for so “light” a cloud to function as a symbol of future sorrow, both the artist who painted it and his intended viewers must know the story of Romeo and Juliet.

The final six lines of “Juliet After the Masquerade” may seem clumsily obvious as mere foreshadowing, but their real purpose is to bring the poem’s construction of Juliet as a cautionary example into immediate juxtaposition with its self-conscious alignment with a literary tradition. In highlighting how scrupulously faithful she is to that tradition, Landon ironizes that fidelity. Even while she reproduces the appealingly naive, starry-eyed adolescent love of the Romeo and Juliet story, Landon draws attention to just how much a reproduction hers is. At the same time, she takes the Juliet story as an opportunity to represent a naive reader whose experience is shaped by her reading, and to

113 Of course, the concluding couplet also echoes Shakespeare’s Juliet: “My only love sprung from my only hate, / Too early seen unknown and known too late” (1.4.251-2).
offer a vehement warning of the sorrows of such experience. Implicitly, Juliet and her tears may be the poet’s heritage, but the lesson offered to impressionable young readers is the poet’s choice, and L.E.L., so often denigrated in the century after her death for supposedly writing poetry of unrestrained passion, chooses to do something more than offer yet another doomed heroine as a model of femininity. In fact, she moves the burden of choice onto the impressionable reader herself, offering a poem that can be read either as a pretty elaboration on the Juliet story or as a tacit condemnation of the way stories like Juliet’s have functioned in Western culture. Visual art, in “Juliet After the Masquerade,” is part of a matrix of cultural productions that risk educating the emotions in problematic ways. By simultaneously highlighting her own and Thomson’s fidelity to a tradition and that tradition’s complicity in a certain kind of emotional mis-education of girls, Landon recuperates Thomson’s painting, showcasing its visual detail but appropriating its construction of feeling for her own purposes.

Landon’s shrewd challenge to literary and artistic sentiment, buried within a poem that seems at first glance to luxuriate in that very sentiment, offers a tantalizing glimpse into the ekphrastic poetry of her era. Even Landon’s immense oeuvre of poems about art, however, let alone two examples, cannot single-handedly answer the question of whether ekphrases of sensibility changed their character, or took up fundamentally different questions than they had in the preceding decades. The question remains an intriguing one, offering as it does a possible window into the continuities and shifts in the culture of sensibility as the nineteenth century wore on.

6.3 L’Envoi

This thesis is a study of what happens when writers of immense intellect who care deeply about what it means to act or live with goodness and integrity engage intellectually with some of the buzz-worthy cultural productions of their day, and with the discussion, the philosophizing, and, yes, the sheer chatter, that makes up the buzz.

Perhaps it should thus not be a surprise that this thesis once contained an extended
reading of a piece of pop-culture. It was located in the chapter on “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci.” It was a clever reading of an episode of Doctor Who called “Blink,” featuring the terrifying and undeniably ekphrastic monsters the Weeping Angels – murderous, time-shifting statues that can move unimaginably fast, but only when no one is looking. Suitable for a conference paper, the reading of “Blink” has been cut because it did not fit especially well in the genre of a doctoral thesis. That reading, however, was an important part of the process of writing this particular thesis. Doctor Who (and the fuss in the fan community about it) is part of how I think about my world, just as the Elgin Marbles (and the fuss in the fan community about them) were part of how Keats thought about his world. Art and museums were one of the trendy new social experiences for the Romantics, and they used the materials at hand – this brave new world of pictures and galleries and books of prints – to think more profoundly about the questions that mattered. It is my hope that, if we can see them doing so, we can learn to do so ourselves. The chic and newly accessible media of our own day are not oil paints and marble, but rather films, television, dystopian trilogies, blogs, tweets, and YouTube videos. Scholars who study prestige subjects like Romantic poetry often ignore those genres. But Keats wouldn't have. Keats didn’t. No doubt many intelligent people in Romantic Britain did not use the visual arts as a “way in” to the conundrums that face human decency in an alienating world (Coleridge, for example, did not). But Keats did. Shelley did. Wordsworth, Mitford, Cowper, and others – they did. I have used their use of the visual arts, as I have used Doctor Who show-runner Steven Moffat’s use of the visual arts, and as I have used a thousand other artefacts of cultural production, to think through those conundrums. The excising of “Blink” notwithstanding, this thesis is itself an artefact of my own will both to use cultural productions to think, and to see how great minds of a previous era used cultural productions to think, about how people relate to one another.

Eighteenth-century moral philosophers identified a problem with sympathy: the limits of our ability to extend it to those who are remote from ourselves. That problem is not getting less urgent. In the world that has been so grossly mislabelled a global village, our smallest actions, even the well-intentioned ones such as eating quinoa, have
consequences for those we will never meet. In terms of the effects we have on each other, the world is small. But we are more than ever isolated from each other. We have less and less face-to-face time even with our closest friends. Economic inequality is growing, rendering our understanding of the lived experience of others more abstract – even those in our own culture, our own city, our own neighbourhood, if they happen to be of different economic strata. Our failures of compassion have never been more of a problem than now.

Com-passion. Sym-pathy. The words are cognates. We are not the first generation, the first era, of imperial, capitalist, anglophone culture to confront these questions. What is most valuable about this project is the question of how the Romantics did and how we might use the arts to attempt, even if in vain, to conceive of a compassion and a goodness and a clemency that are up to the challenge the world throws at them.
Works Consulted


114 Note: *ECCO* lists the first edition, of 1744, but the link associated with that listing leads to the second edition.


“Soft, as when faintly from the evening sky” [“On the Monument to be placed in Lichfield Cathedral”]. *Morning Chronicle* 3 November 1817. *Nineteenth-Century British Library Newspapers*. Web. 22 June 2012.


