

The Rhetoric of Ekphrasis

FRANK J. D'ANGELO

For the past six or seven years, I have been working on a scholarly textbook, tentatively titled *From Narrative to Argument: Rhetoric in Late Antiquity*, based on the *progymnasmata* of Greek sophistic educators under the Roman Empire. The *progymnasmata* were rhetorical manuals or handbooks designed to prepare students to present public performances of complete speeches. These manuals presented a series of preparatory exercises, arranged in order of difficulty, that broke down the art of persuasion into manageable units, each of which related to the study of rhetoric as a whole. For example, some exercises aided in the understanding and development of deliberative, judicial, and ceremonial speeches. Others aided in the understanding of the parts of an oration (exordium, narration, division, confirmation, refutation, peroration).

There are four surviving manuals, attributed respectively to Alius Theon (1st century A.D.), Hermogenes of Taurus (2nd century A.D.), Aphthonius of Antioch (4th century A.D.), and Nicolaus of Myra (5th century A.D.). The manuscript attributed to Hermogenes is of doubtful authenticity. Theon's manual is the oldest. Theon's original sequence of exercises included the chreia, the fable, the narrative, the commonplace, the description, the speech-in-character, the encomium, the comparison, the thesis, and laws, but this order was later changed to conform to the order of those texts (such as those of Hermogenes and Aphthonius) that were more popular. Theon does not include in his sequence the exercise on the gnome (i.e., saying, proverb), nor does he include refutation and confirmation as separate exercises. Further, he does not connect each exercise either to the three kinds of speeches or to parts of an oration. He does point out, however, that these exercises can be useful for composing all of the genres of composition—rhetoric, poetic, and historic (Kennedy 57).

Hermogenes' treatise is relatively simple. It consists of twelve exercises which include the fable, the narrative, the chreia, the gnome, the refutation and confirmation, the commonplace, the comparison, the speech-in-character, the description, the thesis, and laws. There are few examples in Hermogenes' text and few suggestions for developing the exercises. Unlike Theon, Hermogenes does not integrate refutation and confirmation into the sequence of exercises, but makes of them a separate exercise. He devotes a separate exercise to the gnome, but includes no exercise on vituperation (Kennedy 59).

The treatise of Aphthonius is one of the most fully developed of all the handbooks. It contains fourteen exercises arranged in order of difficulty—the fable, the narrative, the *chreia*, the *gnome* (or proverb), the refutation, the confirmation, the commonplace, the encomium, the vituperation, the comparison, the speech-in-character, the description, the thesis, and legislation (or laws). Aphthonius includes more models and a fuller discussion of how to develop the exercises than do Theon and Hermogenes (Kennedy 60).

Nicolaus' treatise is considered to be "the most thoughtful and mature of the four" (Kennedy 67). According to George Kennedy, Nicolaus' treatise "is a synthesis of earlier views, sometimes taken over word for word" (Kennedy 67). One of its chief virtues is that it connects each exercise to one of the species of rhetoric or to one of the parts of an oration. Like Aphthonius, Nicolaus gives clear definitions of each exercise, divides each exercise into parts, and provides suitable models and examples of each.

The *ekphrasis*, or formal description, was one of the exercises of the *progymnasmata*. In the sequence of exercises, it came after the commonplace, the encomium, the vituperation, and the comparison, suggesting that it has something in common with the rhetoric of praise and blame. (A description of a place, for example, can easily move into praising or blaming a place.) Yet in its treatment of characteristic subjects (for example, descriptions of persons, places, times, and events), it seems to be more closely related to the narrative. The history of the term suggests that there are differing concepts that must be taken into consideration if we are to understand its rhetorical uses. The term *ekphrasis* has been used to denote a rhetorical strategy, a rhetorical prose description of a work of art, and a poetic or literary genre.

As a rhetorical strategy, *ekphrasis* has been defined variously as "an expository speech, distinctly presenting to view the thing being set forth" (Nadeau 279), "an account in detail, visible as they say, bringing before one's eyes what is to be shown" (Baldwin 66), and "any elaborate digressive description embedded within rhetorical discourse" (Smith 11). In these definitions, *ekphrasis* is not described as if it were a genre, complete in itself (except in the sense in which description, as one of the four traditional forms of discourse—description, narration, exposition, and argumentation—can be considered a genre), but as a technique of persuasion, intended to be fitted into a part of a longer speech or discourse. As a technique of persuasion, it could be useful in any of the three kinds of speeches—deliberative, judicial, and ceremonial. Since description as a technique played an important part in other exercises, such as the narrative and the fable, some sophistic educators did not include it in the sequence of exercises (Clark 202).

The purpose of the exercise in description in the rhetorical tradition was to "prepare the boys to make their mature public addresses more vivid and hence more persuasive" (Clark 203). By penetrating the visual imagination of the listener and involving him in the subject of the speech, the orator can persuade more effectively than through logical argument alone" (Webb and Weller 332).

The subjects suggested for vivid, visual representation are “persons, places, times, and events” (James and Webb 6). Some educators also include descriptions of animals, plants, seasons, “and many other things” (Baldwin 35). Nicolaus of Myra is the only rhetorician in the progymnastic tradition to include works of art as a possible subject for description. He also includes descriptions of buildings, cities, and everyday objects (Kazhdan 1991). “For his model theme, Aphthonius describes in detail the Acropolis of Alexandria, comparing it and contrasting it with the Acropolis of Athens, and going into great detail over the halls, porticos, temples, and library” (Clark 202-03). The list of subjects of description suggested by Aphthonius, Theon, and Hermogenes indicates the close connection that *ekphrasis* has to the narrative. Persons, places, times, and events are “the standard elements of narrative” (James and Webb 7). The purpose of *ekphrasis* as a technique of description as it relates to narrative is to set the scene and to describe persons and events (James and Webb 7).

The close relationship that obtains between description and narration may be observed in the techniques that Greek educators in late antiquity prescribed for writing effective descriptions. For example, Aphthonius advises that “it is necessary for those who describe persons to go from the first elements to the last, that is to say, from head to foot; in describing things, from those earlier than these and those things now in these and whatever is wont to spring from these things; in describing times and places, from those surrounding and those within them” (Nadeau 279). Theon also connects *ekphrasis* to narrative in his account of descriptive techniques: “If we describe places, times, procedures, or characters, we will have along with the narrative that results from these themselves, starting-points for arguments based on nobility, usefulness, and pleasure” (Butts 433). In *Figures of Literary Discourse*, Gérard Genette points out the close relationship that obtains between narration and description: “Every narrative... comprises two kinds of representations, which however are closely intermingled and in variable proportions: on the one hand, those of actions and events, which constitute the narration in the strict sense and, on the other hand, those of objects or characters that are the result of what we now call *description*” (133).

According to the rhetorical handbooks, the two most important qualities of style in an *ekphrasis* are clarity and vividness, “for the style must through hearing operate to bring about seeing” (Clark 202). The appeal is to the senses, with the emphasis on realistic description. The idea is “to represent faithfully the things being described” (Nadeau 279). But the style of a description is more than “a simple window to visible phenomena” (Becker 8). It must also include “the judgments and emotions of the describer” (Becker 11). In addition to the qualities of clarity and vividness, educators advised speakers and writers to embellish the description with figures of speech (Nadeau 279) and to make the style appropriate to the subject and the occasion (Baldwin 36).

As a rhetorical prose description of a work of art, *ekphrasis* has been described variously as “the verbal description of a work of graphic art” (Dubois 3), “the verbal representation of visual representation” (Hefferman 3), and “a rhetorical description of a work of art” (Mitchell 153). The problem with these definitions, however, is that they neglect the role of narration and of praising and blaming in the conception of

ekphrasis as the rhetorical description of a work of art. For in this tradition, *ekphrasis* is a complicated genre that combines description, narration, and praising and blaming. In fact, description may play a subordinate role in this conception of *ekphrasis*. According to Svetlana Alpers, “*ekphrasis* originated in late antiquity as a rhetorical mode of praising and describing people, places, buildings, and works of art” (196). In *Art and the Roman Viewer*, Jas Elsner labels the kinds of prose descriptions of works of art that sophistic rhetoricians in late antiquity presented to their audiences as “rhetorical declamations” (25).

The tradition of *ekphrasis* as a “rhetorical description of a work of art” (Mitchell 153) had a separate development from that of *ekphrasis* as a formal description of people, places, times, and events and as one of the exercises of the *progymnasmata*. The former had its origins in the prose works of Philostratus the Elder, Philostratus the Younger, and Callistratus. Philostratus the Elder was a Greek sophist who taught in Athens, probably in the late second and early third century A.D. Because he shares his name with other sophists of this period, it is difficult to be more precise about his background. Philostratus composed a series of descriptions of paintings titled *Imagines*, “written as lectures or rhetorical exercises to display the powers of the sophist. Insofar as he was a teacher, they were models to be followed by his pupils” (Fairbanks xxii). The *Imagines* claims to be describing a series of paintings in an art gallery in a villa on the Bay of Naples. Philostratus has been invited by the owner to spend some time there. At the request of the young son of his host and of other young men, Philostratus delivers a series of lectures or declamations describing and interpreting the paintings. This is the context for the descriptions of the works of art in the *Imagines*.

Students of rhetoric are more interested in the *Imagines* for the light they shed on the rhetorical practices of professional speakers and educators during the “Second Sophistic.” Scholars of art history and criticism, however, view the *Imagines* “as one of the great ruins of antiquity” (Bryson 255). The archaeological metaphor used to describe the *Imagines* suggests that some scholars consider the *Imagines* to be “our most extensive account of what a Roman picture gallery, a Roman catalogue of pictures, and the Roman viewing of pictures may have been like” (Bryson 255). But other scholars question whether or not the gallery or the paintings ever existed. To Jas Elsner, the gallery may have been merely “a literary device for the fictional framing of his [Philostratus] descriptions” (24). “There is no external evidence,” he writes, “other than the text of Philostratus himself” (24).

Philostratus the Younger was the grandson of Philostratus the Elder. In about 300 A.D., he wrote a series of descriptions of paintings (*Imagines*) similar to that of his grandfather. He deals with similar themes and uses similar conventions. For example, the themes of ten of his seventeen descriptions of paintings closely match those of his grandfather. In addition, he uses the convention of addressing a real or imaginary audience, although the young boy that the elder Philostratus addresses recedes rapidly into the background of the young Philostratus’ declamations.

About Callistratus, we know very little except for what he tells us in the *Descriptions*. The *Descriptions* are a series of lectures describing and praising statues and the success of the artist. Callistratus uses many of the themes set forth by Philostratus the Elder in his descriptions of statues. But the young men who served as the audience for the Philostrati have disappeared. Like the descriptions of Philostratus the Younger, the descriptions of Callistratus seem to be subordinate to his more general aim of praising and blaming the sculptor or the work of art.

From a generic point of view, the *Imagines* of the Philostrati and the *Descriptions* of Callistratus seem to be “a series of rhetorical declamations in the form of *ekphrasis*” (Elsner 25). James Hefferman puts these “orations” squarely in the encomiastic tradition. “Classic ekphrasis,” he argues, “salutes the skill of the artist and the miraculous verisimilitude of the forms that he creates” (4). Hefferman goes on to maintain that it is “implausible to identify ekphrasis with anything like pure description” (6). The *ekphrases* of Philostratus the Younger, and Callistratus are rhetorical exercises dealing with works of art, intended to be used as models to teach students the art of declamation. The description and/or interpretation of the painting or the statue is a subordinate purpose.

The aims of *ekphrasis* in this tradition have been described variously as “to persuade and move an audience to believe in the verisimilitude of a textual reality” (Smith 37), “to teach the young to interpret paintings, and the work at hand” (Bartsch 17), “to praise the skill of the painter and to cultivate the taste of the observer” (Fairbanks xxv), to give “graphic accounts of dramatic events and by articulating the emotion aroused by the subject of the painting . . . to move the listener” (James and Webb 9), and “to display the power of the sophists” (Fairbanks xxii).

Much of the subject matter of the paintings and sculpture described by the Philostrati and Callistratus consists of scenes from literature, myth, and history. There are, of course, descriptions of landscapes and seascapes and a still life or two. But according to Arthur Fairbanks, “all but six or eight of the paintings described by Philostratus are based either directly on literary sources or on myths which found expression both in literature and painting. We may even say that in this epoch literature and painting actually vied with each other in the presentation of the same themes” (xvi-vvii). In terms of the rhetorical strategy of the speaker, “the ekphrasis aims to present the same subject as the painting, in an equally vivid way, and the speaker often underlines this by claiming to rival the painting” (James and Webb 8).

Just as there is a close relationship between description and narration in the progymnastic tradition, there is also a close relationship between description and narration in the tradition of *ekphrasis* considered as the rhetorical prose description of a work of art. According to Liz James and Ruth Webb, “ekphrasis evolved essentially as a technique for presenting events taking place in time rather than static objects. In Late Antique ekphrasis [sic] of paintings, narrative elements are predominant; the speakers frequently use their knowledge of the subject to mention events far beyond what could possibly have been represented in a picture” (7). Why did the Philostrati and Callistratus, in their descriptions of works of art, tend to turn static scenes “into micro-narratives” (Beaujour 33)? One response is that “the static

scenes depicted are fictitiously and surreptitiously endowed with motion (usually in overt or implicit imitation of the poetry these pictorial scenes are supposed to *illustrate*)” (Beaujour 33). Another and perhaps more important reason is “that paintings convey the dramatic actions of human and divine events represented as an illusion by means of perspective and naturalistic imitation. A knowledge of these events, which are drawn from literature and mythology, is prerequisite to a full understanding of the artist’s representation of them” (Land 33).

From a rhetorical point of view, as these declamations relate to the rhetorical situation, by turning these static scenes into micro-narratives, the speaker can provide a narrative context to enable the viewer to better understand what is going on in the painting. “In terms of the strategy of viewing, the painting described alludes to a literary context which Philostratus seizes and rearranges so that the picture can become its centre” (Elsner 30).

The techniques that sophisticated educators used to depict works of art varies from rhetorician to rhetorician. For example, Philostratus the Elder moves from painting to painting, discussing the meaning of each painting with his audience. He addresses both his immediate audience and his reader by an extensive use of the second person and by his constant questions (“What does the painting mean?” “What need is there of music in a desert place?”) and exhortations (“Now look at the painting and you will see just this going on.”). He alludes to the story that provides the context for his *ekphrasis* as told by Homer or some other poet (“Have you noticed, my boy, that the painting here is based on Homer . . .?”), retells parts of the story, and develops the theme. Then he describes the prominent features of the picture. From time to time, he may pause to praise some feature of the painting (“I praise, too, the dewy look of the roses, and assert that they are painted fragrance and all”).

Like the elder Philostratus, Philostratus the Younger moves from painting to painting, discussing the meaning of each. The young boy to whom Philostratus the Elder addresses his remarks is still present as a rhetorical convention (“Let us ask the youth, my boy, who he is and what is the reason for Apollo’s presence with him . . .?”), but appears less frequently in most of the declamations. Philostratus the Younger follows the conventions used by his grandfather of addressing his audience by using questions (“What is the meaning of the painting?”) and exhortations (“Now see how the contestants have already joined battle?”) to direct the reader’s perceptions. Like his grandfather, too, he alludes to the story or myth depicted by the painting (“That Orpheus, the son of the Muse, charmed by his music even creatures that have not the intelligence of man, all the writers of myths agree, and the painter also tells us . . .”), retells parts of the story, and praises the skill of the painter (“The painter is clever and exact in his craftsmanship; for if one examines the whole picture, nothing has been overlooked, not even as regards the attendants.”). However, Philostratus the Younger differs from the elder Philostratus in his handling of descriptive details. Whereas Philostratus the Elder describes only the main features of the painting, the younger Philostratus describes each painting in more definite detail. In describing a boar in a boar hunt, for example, he gives these descriptive details:

“you see how bloodshot is his eye, how his crest bristles, and how abundant is the foam that drips from his long upright tusks, which are unblunted at the point.”

Callistratus differs in his technique from that of the two Philostrati because he is describing a different medium and a different kind of work of art. For example, in describing a statue of Dionysus, who was believed to have visited India (hence the title, “On the Statue of an Indian”), he begins by giving the reader the name of the statue, tells where it is located, and mentions the material of which it is made (“By a spring stood an Indian, set up as a dedication to the Nymphs. The Indian was of marble verging on black”). Then he describes its prominent features (“it had thick wooly hair, shining with a hue not exactly black”) and praises the success of the artist (“it was perfected only as regards the composition of its limbs”). Although Callistratus includes more descriptive details in his *ekphrasis* than does Philostratus the Elder, his aim “is rather to praise, and the description is quite subordinate to his rhetorical encomium of the sculptor’s marvelous success in his work” (Fairbanks 379).

Like the treatment of style in the exercise on *ekphrasis* in the *progymnasmata*, the treatment of style in the prose description of works of art puts a strong emphasis on clarity and vividness. In discussing the role of *ekphrasis* in the ancient novel, Shadi Bartsch connects the two qualities of style in this manner: “Providing the reader with a vivid visual image was defined as the particular role of all *ekphrasis* [sic] The other quality of *ekphrasis* [sic], largely a function of that vividness, is its ability to move the hearer” (111). Clarity and vividness become the means by which the speaker or writer enables the audience to absorb the work of art into the mind. Clarity and vividness help the speaker to create an illusion that elicits an imaginative response from the viewer. “By penetrating the visual imagination of the listener and involving him in the subject of the speech, the orator can persuade more effectively than through logical argument alone” (Webb and Weller 332).

As a literary or poetic genre, *ekphrasis* refers to “poems which describe works of visual art” (Mitchell 152). The earliest classic example, often cited by scholars, is Homer’s description of Achilles’ shield in the *Iliad*. Another oft-quoted example is Virgil’s description of the shield of Aeneas in the *Aeneid*. During the Hellenistic period, *ekphrasis* appears in narrative poetry as “an isolated unit within discourse” (Dubois 6). Then it detaches itself from narrative and appears in a variety of non-narrative contexts, including lyric poetry.

In earlier poetic narrative, *ekphrasis* focused on everyday objects such as vases, bowls, flasks, combs, cloaks, sandals, garments, murals, tapestries, and the like. The description of everyday objects in early Greek literature leads W. J. T. Mitchell to conclude that “the earliest examples of ekphrastic poetry are not . . . principally focused on painting, but on utilitarian objects that happen to have ornamental or symbolic visual representations attached to them” (115).

Today, scholars label as *ekphrasis* only those poems that “entail engagements with particular and identifiable works of art” (Hollander 5). Some typical examples of *ekphrastic* poetry from the Renaissance on include Andrew Marvell’s “The Gallery,” William Wordsworth’s “Elegiac Stanzas” (suggested by a picture of Peele Castle in a storm), Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ozymandias” (a description of a statue of the ancient

Egyptian ruler), John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn," Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess," W.H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" (suggested by Brueghel's painting of Icarus), William Carlos Williams' Brueghel poems, such as "The Fall of Icarus" and "The Corn Harvest," and so forth.

The poetry of *ekphrasis* cannot easily be separated from its progymnastic and prose counterparts. It shares with them the situating of individual scenes within their narrative contexts, the description of select features of the work of art, the emphasis on clarity and vividness, and even the convention of praising and blaming the artist and the work of art. Of the poems with which I am most familiar in this tradition, Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" follows closely the conventions used by Philostratus the Elder, the younger Philostratus, and Callistratus in their prose declamations of works of art.

Although there is a tendency in recent scholarship to limit the definition of *ekphrasis* to descriptions of works of art, in the rhetorical tradition, educators in late antiquity assumed that speakers and writers should be skilled in scene-painting in the broadest sense. As a rhetorical strategy, *ekphrasis* was considered essential to all the major genres—epic, lyric poetry, pastoral, drama, history, and romance. "In the hands of the sophists of the second and third century," however, "the ekphrasis [sic] became a literary form that delighted audiences" (Clark 203).

*Arizona State University
Tempe, Arizona*

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