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Postmodern Ekphrasis in the Poetry of Anne Compton, Anne Carson, and Anne Simpson

by Wanda Campbell

> *I think the beauty of an art object is part of the gift that you give to the receiver, the listener, the observer, to make it worthwhile for them to spend whatever time of their life they spend trying to understand it.*
>
> —Anne Carson "Gifts and Questions"

One hesitates to wade into a discussion of what Fredric Jameson has called "the deplorable recrudescence of works of art about art and artists in the most recent years of the postmodern era" (131), and yet because, as Linda Hutcheon points out in *The Politics of Postmodernism,* the borders between "the discourses of art and the discourses of the world (especially history) are regularly crossed in postmodern theory and practice" (33), these borders seem a worthy site of enquiry. Defined by James Heffernan as "the verbal representation of visual representation" (3) the tradition of ekphrastic poetry (from the Greek for "telling in full") is a long one, stretching back to Homeric times and enjoying particular popularity among the Romantics and Moderns. But what can it tell us about postmodern poetics? In his book entitled *Picture Theory*, W.J.T. Mitchell asks "How can ekphrasis be the name of a minor poetic genre and a universal principle of poetics? The answer lies in the network of ideological associations embedded in the semiotic, sensory, and metaphysical oppositions that ekphrasis is supposed to overcome" (156). By looking at ekphrastic poems by Anne Compton, Anne Carson, and Anne Simpson, we begin to see the significance of postmodern ekphrasis, especially as practiced by women. In his introduction to *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery,* Heffernan suggests that ekphrasis is "intensely paragonal" and "powerfully gendered" (1) as well as being "dynamic" (5) and "obstetric" (5). Though Heffernan limits his discussion to male poets, his description is surprisingly pertinent to a discussion of ekphrastic work by women. All four of his terms deserve elaboration because they contribute to overcoming the lack of agency that Hutcheon sees as characterizing the postmodern which, in contrast to feminist positions, "has no theory of

positive action on a social level" (22). By "paragonal" Heffernan means that ekphrasis "stages a contest between rival modes of representation: between the driving force of the narrating word and the stubborn resistance of the fixed image" (6), and it is this struggle that results in art that is "dynamic" as opposed to static, active as opposed to passive. Poems focused on motion instead of stillness open the door for change and suggest a variety of possible outcomes. For Heffernan, the "gendered" aspect of ekphrasis is largely a matter of a male poet gazing at representations of women painted by other men, but when the gaze is female, the postmodern polyphony is heightened and traditional hierarchies are destabilized. The most evocative of Heffernan's adjectives in relation to a discussion of female ekphrasis is "obstetric" which comes from the Latin for "midwife. Limited to representing a single moment, "the artist must choose the one which is most suggestive [*pragnantesten*, most pregnant with meaning]" (Gotthold Lessing qtd. by Heffernan 193), but the ekphrastic poet as midwife can carry that pregnant moment to fruition. In other words, ekphrastic poems *deliver* what the visual work only implies, even if this is only a meandering map of the poet's mind in motion. Rather than recording what was, they reflect on what is and what might be, thus challenging the status quo. As Harriet Zinnes says of Carson's postmodern use of scraps of the past: "They become not what they were but what they are now" (3) and it is this ability to make "all time contemporaneous" (Zinnes 5) that allows ekphrastic poems to engage powerfully with notions of history and change.

In postmodern ekphrasis, the traditional triangle of conversation between the experience of artist, poet, and reader, or what Mitchell calls the "ménage à trois" (164), is extended to even more voices, a polyphony that challenges navigation and draws attention to the breakdown of hierarchical binaries by exposing the mind at work through the transformative power of metaphor. As Simpson writes, "Metaphor flickers *between*: between writer and reader, between art and viewer, between past and present. In fact, it is characterized by this movement between things, fostering possibility where it could not have existed previously" ("Orpheus" 78). This process is not, as Michael Davidson points out, just a modernist gathering of fragments to be shored against our ruin, but rather a postmodern engagement with these cultural traces that are at once inscribed and challenged. "History is generated (not represented) out of the poet's active interchange" (Davidson 71) with the many voices and visions that find their way into the poem, including the poet's own voice and vision. Postmodern ekphrasis is often distinguished by the insertion not just of the "eye" of the poet but also of the autobiographical "I" which modernism

seemed so anxious to reject. In her essay "Beyond Confession, The Poetics of Postmodern Witness," Alicia Ostriker writes:

> without a consciousness that desires, suffers, and chooses, there is no ethical or political model for the reader. [...] The poet is not simply a phantom manipulator of words but a confused actual person, caught in a world of catastrophe that the poem must somehow both mirror and transcend. (319-320)

When the viewing eye/I is female, and when, as is so often the case, the subject of the work of art is female, new configurations emerge. According to Hutcheon, postmodernism's double encoding "as both complicity and critique" (163) can result in a kind of impasse, but feminisms (her plural) and other recognitions of difference offer political agency and opportunities for resistance (153). "Feminisms," she writes, "have *made* postmodernism think, not just about the body, but about the female body; not just about the female body, but about its desires—and about both as socially and historically constructed though representation" (139).

Postmodern ekphrasis seems intent upon blurring distinctions including those between painting as a spatial form and poetry as a temporal form; not surprisingly, the ekphrastic poems under consideration are particularly concerned with time. "Why are you so drawn to the idea that time is visible?" (211), asks Compton of Simpson, and the same question could be asked of Carson. The convergence of the spatial and the temporal is yet another example of what Hutcheon describes as fringe interference; "two stones thrown into a pond make ripples which meet and, at the point of meeting, something new happens" (114), a something new that can be considered postmodern. This undoing of hierarchical relationships between time and space, text and context, author and reader, painting and poem, "rather than being aesthetic play, is a critical task involved in studying the role of language in the realm of human knowledge" (Davidson 78). At a time when meaning is considered "unstable, contextual, relational and provisional" (Hutcheon 64), we are still able to see and speak, though these activities are inevitably complicated by distortion and desire.

Contemporary Canadian women poets other than Compton, Carson, and Simpson have, of course, worked with the ekphrastic form (e.g., Stephanie Bolster discusses her use of the form with Compton), but these three are held together by more than just the arbitrary connection of their first name. In addition to shared gender, nationality, age (all were born within a decade of one another) and even genre of preference, they share a passion for "art that offers its audience an aesthetic and affective experience" (Compton *Meetings* 12). Compton has published an illuminating

interview with Simpson entitled "Writing Paintings and Thinking Physics," and Simpson quotes from Carson in an essay on poetry and memory. The latter two have been compared by reviewers, a comparison that seems apt given their interest in visual arts. According to Monique Tschofen, "Carson claims she was a painter before she was a creative writer… To read the body of her work is to be immersed in an exquisite frenzy of the visible" (31), and Carson herself said in an interview, "I mostly think of my work as a painting" ("Gifts" 22). Simpson is trained as a visual artist and said to Compton, "I paint when I write. I write paintings" ("Writing" 213).

Of the three, Compton at first appears to be the most traditional in her approach. Indeed one reviewer of *Opening the Island* (2002) writes dismissively, "Familiarity with male painters' work signals Compton's breeding: she apologizes for Cézanne, swoons over Monet and Vermeer—only an aging Renoir gets a little backtalk from this traditionalist" (L'Abbé 137-38). However, this "backtalk" in "A Thin Woman Looks at Renoir's *The Bathers* 1918-1919" begins to signal new directions. Though the traditional ekphrastic triangle is still in evidence, the viewer is inscribed both in the title and in the poem asking questions of the artist and deciding whether to weigh the image and find it wanting. Renoir's passion for "pellucid round shapes" (*Opening* 48) might be explained by his boyhood painting vases in Limoges, but it is outside the experience of the "thin" viewer. Ultimately she asks, "Shall I vilify your crippled longing? Or, close my eyes also?" (*Opening* 48).

In "Victoria's Recitative" which appears in Compton's Governor General's Award winning *Processional* (2005), the ekphrastic equation becomes much more complex as the number of voices has multiplied well beyond the *ménage à trois*. By adopting the voice of the subject of the painting, Victoria Kynaston, the poet seeks to challenge the "stimulating negation" (*Processional* 66) that has put women and their desires under erasure in both art and history. Compton was drawn to write about this painting in the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton, because she was "struck by the contradiction between the facial expression and the pose" (*UNB*). At a poetry reading in 2008, Compton indicated that though much had been written about the artist Allan Ramsay, she could find no mention of this painting, and a quick survey of books about him including Alastair Smart's 1992 biography *Allan Ramsay: Painter, Essayist and Man of the Enlightenment* confirms this lack of commentary. Consequently, Compton was free to invent the conversations between the artist and the woman he painted.

Compton's poem first appeared as part of an exhibit in the Beaverbrook Art Gallery entitled "Writing on the Wall," further blurring the distinction between image and text, but the title points to yet another sister art also associated with the temporal rather than spatial. By referring to Victoria's discourse as a "recitative," that intermediary form between singing and speech found in opera and oratorio, the poet not only draws attention to Handel's last work written while he was going blind, but further compounds the ekphrastic synaesthesia or "fringe interference" (Hutcheon 114) that characterizes the poem as postmodern.

The poem's epigraph about the colour blue is from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, not the literary Goethe we are accustomed to, but rather the same man speaking through science and optics:

> *It may be said that blue still brings a principle of darkness with it....As a hue it is powerful, but it is on the negative side, and in its highest purity is, as it were, a stimulating negation.* Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*

This discussion of blue relates to the hue of Victoria's dress, but also to the woman wearing the dress who must challenge the negation Ramsay attempts to impose upon her by portraying her as static and chaste. "A woman is, a man does" (*Processional* 66). By encouraging Victoria to think of Jephthah's daughter and the "aria of abnegation" given to her by Handel, Compton's painter invokes the tragic daughter from Judges 11 who is sacrificed, either literally or by being doomed to perpetual virginity, by a father's careless vow. In Handel's oratorio (with libretto by Thomas Morrell), the daughter is not nameless as she is in Judges 11, but is given the name Iphis, a gender neutral name meaning "force" or "force directed against someone." In the poem, however, Victoria chooses to call Jephthah's daughter Valeria, meaning "strength" despite the fact that the painter would like to make "the lascivious eye" of the female subject as blank as those of Greek statuary (66). The phrase, "a cataract on choice" (66) suggesting both waterfall and portcullis, alludes to Handel's cataract surgery and alerts us to the "blindness" of the male gaze in negating female desire, just as Jephthah negates his daughter's power to choose life.

When Heffernan described ekphrasis as "the expression of a duel between male and female gazes" he had in mind "the voice of male speech striving to control a female image that is both alluring and threatening" (1), but in the hands of a female poet, postmodern ekphrasis becomes something new. What is being looked at and by whom has changed. The women of Compton's poem (female subject/s, female poet, and female reader/s)

refuse an imposed passivity and seek power instead, through knowing and naming, through desire that disrupts decorum. The poem concludes with Victoria's defiant assertion: "Mr. Ramsay is pleased to know / many things though he does not know me" (*Processional* 67) and makes reference to the strength that women share across time. "Ours." Appropriately, the poem's final possessive pronoun is a homophone for a unit of time.

Time is also a central preoccupation of Anne Carson's ekphrastic "HOPPER: *CONFESSIONS,*" which appears in *Men in the Off Hours* (2000). This series of ten poems responds directly to Edward Hopper's paintings of America, from his most famous diner scene *Nighthawks* (1942) to an early etching *Evening Wind* (1921). Carson explores lonely images of women waiting, but also establishes a conversation with the eleventh book of Augustine's *Confessions* (A.D. 397) through direct quotation and a final poem that examines concepts of time and eternity explored by the "confessions" of Augustine, Hopper, and Carson herself. The entire suite is preceded by an epigraph from Hopper, "I hope it does not tell an obvious anecdote for none is intended," and in an interview Carson explains this choice of epigraph:

> I think I was trying to withdraw from the project of narrativising the paintings, which is what they first of all demand of any viewer: you see the couple sitting in the café at three o'clock in the morning and you think of the story. And I believe that's the last thing he wanted to have people do to his paintings, but everybody does it anyway. And I did in those poems, so I wanted to put his point of view in there to be fair, but he lost. ("Gifts" 22)

Again, the intentions of the male artist are challenged in a way that radically reinterprets Heffernan's notion of a "duel between male and female gazes" (1), and the poems produce rather than reproduce an experience that is at once spatial and temporal.

Carson's poems give us an opportunity to apply Joseph M. Conte's categories of "seriality" and "proceduralism" as described in *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (1991):

> The series is determined by the discontinuous and often aleatory manner in which one thing follows another [...] procedural form consists of predetermined and arbitrary constraints that are relied upon to generate the context and direction of the poem during composition. No longer able to suppose that a grand order is either discernable or desirable in the world, the poet discretely enacts a personal order that, if not cosmic, is not less real. (Conte 3)

Both of these "strictly postmodern innovations" (Conte 3) appear to be at work in Carson's suite. Aspects of seriality or aleatory composition, akin to the throwing of dice, are reflected in the fact that is it difficult to ascertain a rationale for the sequence of the poems. The poems as they appear are titled after the following works of art: *Nighthawks* (1942), *Automat* (1927), *Room in Brooklyn* (1932), *The Barber Shop* (1931), *Western Motel* (1957), *Office at Night* (1940), *Summer Interior* (1909), *Eleven a.m.* (1926) and *Evening Wind* (1921), but the dates of the paintings do not proceed in any discernable order, neither by chronological or reverse chronological order by date, nor by any of the other cycles we might expect, the cycle of a day or of a relationship or of a life, though the slightly edited quotations from Augustine as translated by Edward Bouverie Pusey (1800-1882) that end each poem but the last do proceed primarily in the order in which they appear in the Eleventh Book of *Confessions.*

However, the use of rhyme, repetition, circularity, mirrored lineation, and the close correspondence between ekphrasis and epigraph in poems such as "Automat," signal some of the predetermined aspects of the procedural form. Unlike traditional form which emerges out of certainty, procedural form "is a generative structure that constrains the poet to encounter and examine that which he or she does not immediately fathom" (Conte 16). Using both serial and procedural forms, postmodern poets contest hierarchies and recognize indeterminacy and discontinuity "not as elements of disorientation or as a disruptive chaos, but as an essential aspect of their own investigation of contemporary existence" (Conte 19). In Carson's "Automat," subject and object are noted and negated, shuffled and reshuffled. Rhyme and refrain spin into the darkness like the reflected lights in the plate glass window of the painting after which the poem is titled. Aptly, this painting appeared as the cover of TIME for August 28, 1995 to introduce a cover article entitled "The Evolution of Despair." The movement between luxury and despair, past and present, mundane and divine culminates in a fragment from Psalm 130, which reads in full "Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord." Here as elsewhere, Carson has edited out the "O Lord" as if to suggest that art is a search for the daily in the divine, not the other way around.

Throughout the suite, the spatial and the temporal are both inscribed and challenged, but nowhere so explicitly as in the final poem "The Glove of Time by Edward Hopper" which Carson describes as "my own sort of pasted-on response to the whole experience of looking at Hopper" ("Gifts" 23). In all his works, she argues, "he seems to be trying to paint time. There's really nothing else in them, no other questions in them than 'what

does time feel like?'" ("Gifts" 23). In contrast to the first nine poems that are titled after actual Hopper paintings, the last poem is titled for a painting that does not exist though Carson proceeds to explore it ekphrastically as if it did. In lieu of a single static image, she offers a collage of kinetic actions implied by several canvases, the light hitting the wall (a frequent image of Hopper's but certainly one that appears in *The Barber Shop*), the road dropping away (*Western Motel*), the glove being removed (the woman in *Automat* is wearing a "lone / glove"). "I see no evidence of another glove," writes Carson in the final poem, and yet is this not precisely what the reader is being asked to hold as evidence? "Here, you hold this" (*Men* 60).

Throughout the last poem, there are shifts in point of view, in syntax, in depth of field, as well as what Carson refers to as "true mistakes" (Stanton 34). Questions are posed as statements, and the poet sees errors but refuses to correct them because "words are not a sentence" (*Men* 59), implying both the grammatical unit and the death sentence. Intermingled with the mind's movement between non-existent painting and poem in process are fragments of text from Arthur Rimbaud's poem "Sensation" (1870), John Ashbery's poem "At North Farm" (1987) and Jean Luc Godard's film *King Lear* (1987). Ashbery, whose use of language Carson describes as "painterly, but in a cognitive way" ("Gifts" 23) is a noted practitioner of postmodern ekphrasis (Davidson 77). Though not ekphrastic like Ashbery's famous "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" which is drenched with "postmodern self-referentiality" (Heffernan 174), "At North Farm" is full of images that are in motion. Curiously, Carson has removed the word "furiously" when quoting from Ashbery's sonnet-like poem in which the sestet precedes the octave: "Somewhere someone is traveling furiously toward you, / At incredible speed, traveling day and night…" (1). Without the word "furiously," movement is emphasized over menace, though there is certainly violence inherent in the allusion to Godard's *King Lear*, which is, as the intertitle "A Film Shot in the Back" suggests, a fragmented film with a troubled production history. Just as Compton introduces the temporal modes and methods of music into her text about spatial art, Carson introduces the modes and methods of *motion* pictures which are at once visual and auditory. "It so happens / paint is motionless. / But if you put your ear to the canvas you will hear / the sounds of a terribly good wheel on its way" (*Men* 59). This apparent allusion to "Time's wingèd chariot" that Andrew Marvell's male always hears "at [his] back" (24) reminds us the poem is about time and its passage. In Carson's poem it is the glove that is "shot in the back," assailed while in flight or, to return to the movie metaphor,

filmed from behind. What is the glove of time? The phrase is syntactically ambiguous suggesting either that time contains or is contained. A glove looks like a hand but is not a hand, though it can be measured. "It so happens / a good evening glove / is 22 centimeters from hem to fingertip" (*Men* 60). The mind's activity is evidence that art is not empty. Art is evidence that time is not empty. Time is evidence that eternity is not empty. And it hurtles toward us (or away), furiously.

"Bearing all of the past into the present, to me, is the work of the poet," says Simpson in conversation with Compton ("Writing" 212). "I am striving for the same thing that I strive for in visual terms. That is, can I get at all the brushwork of the world?" ("Writing" 206). In her first and second collections, *Light Falls Through You* (2000) and *Loop* (2003), Simpson offers several ekphrastic poems including "Seven Paintings by Brueghel" which brings together medieval paintings and aerial photographs of the post 9-11 World Trade Center landfill site on Staten Island, but in keeping with the work of Compton and Carson, this discussion centers on two poems that address representations of the body. In the first poem, "The Body Tattoo of World History" called "a signature Simpson piece" by Compton ("Writing" 222), the ekphrastic impulse is still operational though less overt. Unlike the other works I have been examining where the artwork is named in the title, the ekphrastic connection is not made explicit until the Endnotes: "It was Hawkinson's *Wall Chart of World History from Earliest Times to the Present* (1997) that triggered the writing of the 'The Body Tattoo of World History'" (*Loop* 92). Simpson's choice of verb here is interesting given the poem's focus on violence throughout history. The work of art to which Simpson responds is not an image of a female, though the body and its injuries are a central concern and Simpson, like Carson, is deeply interested in time and how the temporal and spatial intersect. "I wanted to find a way to say that the body contains time, and also that it is marked, or let's say tattooed, by time" ("Writing" 223). In both the poem and the 33 foot drawing in red ink that "triggered" it, a script about history and a script about the body are "written in blood" ("Writing" 223). As American artist Tim Hawkinson explains,

> …the imagery can be read as representative of the rise and fall of history's world powers, or as empires swallowing up diminishing ones and in turn taking their places. This drawing is akin to a timeline with no beginning and no end. It can also be read as a mapping of the internal structures of the human body (to include intestines, organs, and such). I originally saw this drawing as a scroll which could be read by following the images with one's index finger. During the creation of WALL CHART the paper was scrolled vertically;

> only a 3 ft. window of paper was visible at any one time. Hence, the past was forgotten. (3)

The past may be irretrievable but Simpson is not content to let it go. "If the world can't grieve for itself, we have the responsibility to do the grieving for it" ("Writing" 207). This poem is, in part, a lament for Yancy Meyer, a nineteen year old university student who was stabbed to death while working the nightshift at an Antigonish convenience store. Though he is not named in the poem itself, we discover in the Acknowledgements that the poem "is dedicated to the memory of Yancy Meyer's creative spirit. May it shine" (*Loop* 93). At a reading, Simpson spoke of walking down the hall shaking with rage after hearing the news of his death, and how she asked permission of the family to write and publish this poem about their son. Simpson's elegiac grief extends not just to Yancy, but to all those who have passed out of time before their time. Though the image of "the nameless woman" of the Steppes that appears on the body's right toe (*Loop* 47) confirms none are immune, the poem suggests it is primarily male bodies that succumb to violence and premature death. If the female body is subject to the gaze, the male body is subject to the gash: Yancy Meyer, the soldiers of Alexander the Great, the bird-headed hunter of Lascaux, even the elephant Jumbo crushed by the machine, all marked by "a tattoo of wounds" (49). The poem concludes "*History is whatever / lingers*," or as Hutcheon puts it in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, "History's meaning lies not in 'what hurts' so much as in 'what we say once hurt'—for we are both irremediably distanced by time and yet determined to grant meaning to that real pain of others (and ourselves)" (78).

Simpson describes poetry as "the knife that cleaves through linear time" ("Writing" 226), an image that informs a discussion of "The Visible Human" in *Quick* (2007), a poem that is even less explicitly ekphrastic than "The Body Tattoo of World History." In what may well be an example of the "intertextual, interactive aesthetic" that signals a post-postmodernism marked by "electronic technology and globalization" (Hutcheon 181), the work of art the poem responds to—if it can even be called that—is mentioned in the Endnotes: "'The Visible Human' owes a debt to the U.S. National Library of Medicine's Visible Human Project, which has recorded, in cyberspace, cross-sectional images of the thinly sliced cadaver of Joseph Jernigan, who was executed for murder in Texas in 1993" (*Quick* 105). The poem's long lines appear in boxes like thin slices of cadaver in perpendicular alignment with the bottom of the page, but the narrative is still linear, unfolding left to right. Unlike the cyber body of Jernigan which can be navigated from a variety of directions to prepare medical students

for doing surgery, the video tour posted on the internet is presented as a narrative from head to foot, which is also how the poem unfolds. Despite the inclusiveness of the title, "The Visible Human," the figure described is clearly male and Simpson emphasizes the "single testicle" and the engagement with violence both personal and public that leads to a presence where there should have been absence. Ironically, though a 59 year old "visible female" has since been encoded in more detail, her more advanced age and death by heart attack make her less attractive to medical science, while Jernigan was only 39 and in good health (Lienhard).

In a postmodern twist, Jernigan the artist also becomes the work of art only because he made history by living and dying and living again by the sword. But Simpson's closing challenge, "You're meant to be gone" (*Quick* 71) implies this is not the kind of history we want to make. "Can poetry," asks Ostriker, "convey the betrayals of the body within the violence of human history without either endorsement or surrender?" (330). Here the visible human is at once inscribed and challenged. In her conversation with Compton, Simpson says:

> The body is so beautiful, and I don't mean that in terms of young women who are beautiful or that sort of thing. In art school, we had to draw figures carefully, and these could be old guys off the street. There was one I remember in particular, George. I remember thinking how beautiful the body is, despite its ugliness. It is so remarkable a thing. (210)

Once again the "duel between male and female gazes" is reinvented in the hands of a female poet. There is resistance implicit in any postmodern practice of ekphrasis, but particularly so when female poets challenge art made largely by males, art marked by erasures and evidence of time and other treasons. The challenge mounted by Compton, Carson, and Simpson arises from the interaction of multiple voices from past and present. Instead of Ostriker's "I," Simpson is more likely to give us "we," the "we" that must look carefully at all the brushwork of the world and learn both to laud and lament. Because "art goes on, in a way the merely human cannot" (Simpson, "Orpheus" 73), it can be an effective vehicle for reflecting, and reflecting upon, the postmodern condition. To articulate our struggle is to begin to solve it. To name our wound is to begin to heal it. To admit our ugliness is to begin to be beautiful.

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