

Museum Pieces: Poems About Art

Jeffery Alan Triggs

1989

Expressive poets, from the romantic period to our own, have labored under the double threat of belatedness and solipsism.¹ On the one hand, their work can be seen as a struggle (Harold Bloom might term it Oedipal) to establish their identities in the shadows, as it were, of strong and influential precursors. At the same time, expressive poets are more or less constantly in danger of falling into a subjectivity that may prove an impenetrable barrier to their readers, and thus into a kind of voluble silence. Writing poems about paintings and other works of visual art has been one means, both of overcoming such subjectivity and at least side-stepping the issue of literary belatedness. Poetry about art is still, of course, belated, but it enjoys a more reassuring metalinguistic relation with its subject. Poets as disparate as Keats, Rilke, Auden, William Carlos Williams, Pound, and Richard Wilbur have used this approach at one time or another, as we shall see with differing emphases and differing senses of the possibilities of the form.

Remarkable as many of the poems about art have been, it is equally remarkable that there have not been more of them. There are definite limits to this kind of poem. No major poet has made poetry about art his life's work (as, say, certain composers have devoted themselves entirely to *Lieder*). Many poets have sampled the form, either as a corrective for intense subjectivity or to take the measure of a theme suggested by art, and then drawn back into what one might call the area of life studies. Yet the poems about art are more than just exercises; they include some of the most beautiful poems in the Western tradition. This essay proposes to investigate poetry about art as a distinct sub-genre with its own typical concerns, possibilities, and limitations of expression.

It is worth considering at this point the problem of such poems being, so to speak, at a second remove from experience. What I referred to as the area of life

¹Copyright ©1989 by Jeffery Triggs. All rights reserved.

studies is not really as simple as it might seem. In recent years, it has become fairly common to speak of a poem as *reading* other poems. This is perhaps the essence of Harold Bloom's elaborate theories of belatedness. As George Steiner notes, much of the "charged substance" of Western poetry "is previous poetry: Chaucer lives in Spenser who lives in Dryden who lives in Keats"(22). In a similar vein, Richard Poirier has argued that "the kind of coherencies we should start looking for" in literary study "ought to have less to do with chronology or periods than with habits of reading...and with the way poets 'read' one another in the poetry they write"(100-01). This amounts to a view of poetry as metalanguage, an operative form of critical discourse that takes as its object not "the real thing" but a system of signs itself covering "the real thing". Roland Barthes defines a metalanguage in *Elements of Semiology*, as "a system whose plane of content is itself constituted by a signifying system"(90). Semiology, of course, recognizes many orders of signs other than language itself, including the visual signs of painting and the visual and plastic signs of sculpture. Poems about art are thus distinguishable from other poems not because they are uniquely metalinguistic but because they take as their objects visual and sometimes plastic significations.

Poems of this kind share a number of defining characteristics. They attempt to mediate, first of all, not natural objects or linguistic objects but works of plastic art, paintings, sculptures, or in the case of Keats a painted vase. Though engagement of such art calls into play a number of senses, the initial stimulation of the poems is primarily visual. Interestingly, poems about music, where the auditory sense predominates, are much more rare. Indeed, language has a peculiar difficulty dealing with the experience of music. The attempt to describe sound invariably takes refuge in awkward visual metaphors. (Baudelaire's metaphor of the sea is among the best of these.) Poets seem more interested in and more capable with the music that, "when soft voices die, / Vibrates in the memory" (Shelley, "To —"), or "spirit ditties of no tone" (Keats, "Grecian Urn"), or even the "music" that is really a metaphor for the sounds of nature. Images and story, which the visual arts possess in abundance, come more easily into verse than the relatively abstract emotions, no matter how powerful, suggested by a piece of music.

And images and story provide an anchor in objectivity for the poet's feelings. Yet if a poem about art is to be more than a versified art history lecture, it must somehow get beyond the work of art itself, either by dramatizing the interplay of the poet's feeling with the objective image of the work, or by suggesting some other relation between what is inside and outside of the frame.² The frame of a

²Indeed, some poems, like "Lilith" by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (interestingly a painter himself),

painting provides useful limitations on the imagination of the poet (comparable in its way to the limitations of strict form), but what is interesting *as poetry* is the pull of his imagination against the frame, the tension between a static, objective image and the poet's dynamic, subjective response. Thus, when considering a poem about art, it is usually interesting but not essential to know the work of art itself. The poem provides a concrete linguistic equivalent of the images of the art work, with the important addition of the dimension of time.

The concept of time as it comes into play here is actually somewhat ambiguous. The work of art does not make use of the dimension of actual time, as music and poetry do, though it may imply time in its stilled motion. The poet may play with this implied time, as any apprehender of the work of art is expected to do. Richard Wilbur does this, for instance, in "The Giaour and the Pacha," based on a painting by Delacroix, by taking up the elements of the painting in time and presenting them as dramatic characters:

The Pacha sank at last upon his knee
 And saw his ancient enemy reared high
 In mica dust upon a horse of bronze,
 The sun carousing in his either eye,

Which of a sudden clouds, and lifts away
 the light of day, of triumph;...

* * * * *

Imbedded in the air, the Giaour stares
 And feels the pistol fall beside his knee.

"Is this my anger, and is this the end
 Of gaudy sword and jeweled harness, joy
 In strength and heat and swiftness, that I must
 Now bend, and with a slaughtering shot destroy

The counterpoise of all my force and pride?
 These falling hills and piteous mists; O sky,
 Come loose the light of fury on this height,
 That I may end the chase, and ask not why." (187)

treat the subject painting as a mere transparency. In "Lilith," Rossetti seems to ignore the issue of the subject as painting altogether, and proceeds to a conventional, "expressive" sonnet on Adam's first "wife." Rossetti dedicates quite a few of his poems to "pictures," but as he never really engages the issue of the subject *as art*, I have not considered them here.

Shifting from the past tense to the present, and then offering the speculations of a first person speaker (the Giaour), Wilbur suggests a past, present, and future for the painting's figures. The Pacha's killing evokes the moment past, while the Giaour's troubled thoughts at slaughtering "the counterpoise" of his "force and pride" effect the present moment (the moment of the image) and imply the future, into which his regret proposes to last. By providing such thoughts for the Giaour, of course, Wilbur is "reading" Delacroix's image, just as any critic or other viewer might, and expanding the image against the limits of its frame. He remains



Figure 1: Delacroix, *The Giaour and the Pacha*

comfortably outside the frame, however. The characters of the painting, under his direction, speak for themselves as objective entities. Unlike Keats or Rilke, Wilbur makes no overt attempt to interact personally with the images of the painting. The poem is one of any number of possible readings or translations of the painting,

each tugging against the necessary finiteness of the original work of art. (Indeed, much the same thing might be argued, in the manner of Walter Benjamin, about a translation of a poem.) Wilbur's poem fleshes out the dimension of time suggested by the painting, but it remains basically within the terms of the painting, and does not take up the other aspect of time that a work of plastic art may suggest: eternity, the work of art itself standing outside time and thus in a confrontational relation to the perceiver.

Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" deals extensively with this other aspect of time. Indeed, Keats plays also with the urn's time, in manner similar to Wilbur's, when he speculates, for instance, about the village that has been left deserted, or toys with the notion of the lovers who cannot consummate their kiss "Though winning near the goal," but he is ultimately concerned with the urn as a "Cold Pastoral," depicting the eternal landscapes of Tempe and Arcady. The poem opens with an invitation for the silent urn to speak from its pastoral seclusion outside time to its time-bound perceivers: "What men or gods are these?" The urn, of course, frozen in time and timeless at once, cannot speak for itself, and so Keats takes up one image after another, imaginatively recreating the time of the urn and then contemplating the urn as an object outside time: "Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought / As doth eternity." Indeed, this teasing out of thought, carefully limited by the images of the urn itself, provides the imaginative body of the poem. The second, third, and fourth stanzas represent the struggle (and play) of Keats's imagination with the silent images of the urn questioned in stanza one. The images provoke various moods in the poet, ranging from celebration of the urn's timeless estate ("Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter") to a kind of envy of its timelessness ("Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed / Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu"), and finally to melancholy awareness of the urn's Arcadian isolation from the concerns of human beings in time ("little town, thy streets forevermore / Will silent be; and not a soul to tell / Why thou art desolate can e'er return."). Keats's ultimate judgment of the urn, much debated by the critics, is ambiguously negative. The urn, though "a friend to man," is still a "Cold Pastoral," whose speech, as imagined by Keats from the silence of its images, is self-referential, a tautology of its plastic form: "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,'—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." It is not, of course, all that a human being needs to know, who knows in time. The urn, as a work of art, stands ultimately outside of time, and like Rilke's "*Brunnen-Mund*" speaks not to us, but murmurs endlessly to itself. Unlike the speaker in whom the voice of a nightingale induces a state between waking and sleeping, the speaker in "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is left distinct and untouched (in

a literal sense) by the art object of his meditation.

This is not the case in what is perhaps the second most famous poem (after Keats's "Ode") about a work of plastic art in the western tradition, Rilke's "Archaischer Torso Apollos."³ The object of Rilke's meditation is interestingly a fragment, a headless torso that might easily seem simply "*entstellt*," or disfigured. Only an effort of the imagination, the poet/viewer's now as well as the sculptor's, can restore its energy. Unlike Keats's urn, whose soul is stillness and silence, Rilke's torso is perceived in terms of energetic movement and communication, its center being not the missing head, the *Haupt*, but the loins, the place of procreation, that "*Mitte, die die Zeugung trug*." The torso is not easily read, however. The "*Augenäpfel*" of the "*unerhörtes Haupt*," which we might expect could be easily picked, read, and made our own, are not available to us, and so we must seek something more strange, the torso's *Schauen*, its deep gaze, within, which we can only imagine from the remaining suggestion of it. The torso still "glows" with this gaze, but it has been *zurückgeschraubt*, or turned down like the gas in a candelabra. The signification of the torso, lacunal in itself, must be completed by means of the poet's metalanguage. As in a teleological argument, we are expected to deduce the source of energy from its effects, the "bend of the breast" that "blinds" us, and the "smile" that still runs to the loins. Indeed, as a work of art, the torso is not Arcadian and timeless, but persisting in time, and challenging to us in time. The "translucent plunge" of the shoulders glistens "*wie Raubtierfelle*," like the fur of a wild beast. The living energy implicit in the metaphor of the wild beast's fur is now intensified in a second metaphor: the torso bursts out from all its borders "*wie ein Stern*," or like the wild flux of fire that envelops a star. The torso, as imaginatively viewed by Rilke, is not a self-enclosed, timeless entity, but something constantly testing and straining at the boundaries of itself. But the torso has this power only on the subjunctive possibility that we see it with Rilke's imaginative intensity. Then, and paradoxically, it sees us without eyes, speaks to us, and unlike Keats's urn, changes us irremediably. "*Du mußt dein Leben ändern*," unlike "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," is not self-referential, but aimed

³This is only the most famous of quite a few poems Rilke wrote about paintings, stained glass windows, and other works of art. Rilke had a number of important connections with the plastic arts; his wife and several close friends were artists. The form of the poem about art was particularly congenial to him at the time of his work for Rodin, the writing of *Neue Gedichte*, and his obsession with penetrating the essence of various "things." His method is thus to penetrate the work of art and identify with its subject so completely that it is often hard to determine if a particular poem is actually about a painting, or simply treats a "painting-like" subject. In "Archaischer Torso," the speaker and the object are more distinct than this, making it more clearly an example of the genre.



Figure 2: Brueghel, *The Fall of Icarus*

at the viewer in the full force of its meaning. The energy of the torso persists in its call on our attention—after this, *you* can never be the same. In our perceiving it, we bring the torso to life, and at the same time the torso meddles with us, and Rilke's poem dramatizes this experience of art and the energy that mediates the two constituents, viewer and object, of the experience.

Rilke was a poet to whom the ironic stance was utterly foreign. His torso is treated as if it existed on at least equal footing with its perceiver. Beyond the title, there is no suggestion of a creator and his artifice. When we move to a poem like "Musée des Beaux Arts" by W. H. Auden, we encounter a different set of coordinates, a different ordination. Auden insists, first of all, on an explicit aesthetic and ironic distance from the object of his meditation. The poem is about Bruegel's "Fall of Icarus," but its title focuses our attention not on the painting but the museum in which it hangs. There is no question of an intense, Rilkean engagement of the painting. We approach it quite consciously as museum visitors. The tone of the poem is dry, conversational, and ironic, almost that of an off-hand lecturer:

About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window
or just dully walking along...

Auden's free verse lines, with their casual caesuras and prose-like pace (the frequent semi-colons suggest a tumble of afterthoughts), set up and reflect the main point and lesson of the poem, what one might call the banality of suffering, the rather unromantic notion that even "martyrdom must run its course / Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot / Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse / Scratches its innocent behind on a tree." The painting is used, almost another afterthought, as an exemplum of this phenomenon of human nature. It is thus for Auden one subject among others (the museum, the myth itself, the suggested interlocutors at the museum), united only metalinguistically with these. Auden begins his contemplation of the painting with a quite ordinary and prosy transition: "In Brueghel's *Icarus*, for instance." The painting is not locked in a mystery of timelessness, nor does it challenge our own existence with its intensity of being; it is an artifact, to which we may point, and from which we may draw a lesson before continuing on our way. Indeed, the speaker, passing dryly through the museum, is only slightly more observant than the characters in the painting, who continue with whatever work they are doing and do not notice "Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky." Like the characters in the painting, the speaker's voice is "leisurely" and "calm," and like the situation of the painting, ironical.

Icarus, of course, is a highly charged, romantic myth of human aspiration, and was never treated by Elizabethans or Romantic poets with anything but high seriousness. Brueghel mitigated the intensity of his subject in a busy painting that shifts the focus from the impulsively romantic Icarus to the common people. Following Brueghel in this, Auden controls the powerful myth with filtering layers (such as his off-hand tone and indirect approach, the device of presenting the museum before the painting) which surround his experience. Part of this is the explicit presentation of the subject painting as a work of art, and even the mention of the artist's name. In this Auden goes beyond Wilbur, who treats the Pacha and Giaour as primary subjects of dramatic immediacy. Auden's Icarus is a secondary subject, whose moment of time stands aesthetically apart from the time of the poem, the speaker's trip through the museum.⁴

⁴To see this more clearly, one should compare Auden's poem with Stephen Spender's lyric



Figure 3: Brueghel, *The Kermess*

William Carlos Williams writes about Brueghel also, but without the distancing self-awareness of Auden. The typical Williams lyric aims at an ingenuous colloquial simplicity, which the best poems achieve. “The Dance,” about Brueghel’s “The Kermess,” is not different from many other of Williams’s poems in this respect. Although it explicitly names a painting as its subject, “The Dance” presents its *image* with simplicity and directness:

In Brueghel’s great picture, The Kermess,
the dancers go round, they go round and
around, the squeal and the blare and the
tweedle of bagpipes, a bugle and fiddles

entitled “Icarus.” Spender writes delicately and romantically about a hawk, “The aristocrat, superb of all instinct” who “almost had won / War on the sun,” and who calls to mind the mythical character. Spender’s poem deals with myth mediated through nature, Auden’s with myth mediated through art. Spender writes with pure romantic feeling, Auden with ironic detachment. It can be argued, I think, that Auden, standing at an ironic remove from his subject, is less lyrical, but also less in danger here of having his wings melted.

tipping their bellies (round as the thick-
sided glasses whose wash they impound)
their hips and their bellies off balance
to turn them. Kicking and rolling about
the Fair Grounds, swinging their butts, those
shanks must be sound to bear up under such
rollicking measures, prance as they dance
in Brueghel's great picture, *The Kermess*.

As usual, Williams is busy breaking the back of the pentameter line, though here the "off balance" verses with their extreme enjambments echo, or reflect, the off balance positions of the dancers in the painting. In fact, the effect of the rhythm is of just such a continually deferred falling as we imagine for the characters of the painting. Williams's rhythms actually create, in a way none of the other poems we have considered do, the motion, and thus the time of the art image being described. In Auden's poem, the speaker's time and the moment of Icarus' fall are aesthetically distinct; in Rilke's poem the torso's presence in time invades and overwhelms that of the speaker; in Keats's poem the urn stands outside the speaker's time; in Wilbur's poem the speaker accepts the time of the painting's characters as a dramatic condition. Williams reinvents the time of the painting. The overall form of "The Dance," like the dancing it describes, is circular, and thus at once dynamic and static. This also reflects the condition of the painting, where motion is stilled and yet constant motion is suggested. The poem fairly twirls from its first line to its last, which being the same as the first, may be said to begin the poem again, and so on. Williams is not simply transcribing the painting, of course. His imagination is at work, implying the vigorous motion and suggesting "the squeal and the blare and the / tweedle of bagpipes," a far cry from Keats's "spirit ditties of no tone." We should remember, however, that the "ditties" of Brueghel's painting are in themselves "of no tone." The disposition of this poet is to provide them with one. The tone of the poem is one of festive intoxication with the human condition. Beyond the notation that the events described take place in a "picture," no distinction is made between the world of art and the world of human life. Simply by not recognizing a barrier dividing these worlds, Williams mediates effortlessly between them. Williams's poem would like to disappear in its subject; it can be seen as a metalanguage only in the sense that translation cannot help being at some level a metalanguage.

Ezra Pound, Williams's contemporary and friend, is not nearly so innocent or so comfortable with the border vaguenesses of life and art. The *Yeux Glauques*

section of “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” deals in considerable detail with Burne-Jones’s “King Cophetua,” a huge painting that dominates one room of the Tate Gallery in London. Pound’s concern, however, is primarily the ironic relation of life to art, specifically the tragically ironic relation of the model Elizabeth Siddal to the characters she portrayed in so many Pre-Raphaelite works.

Foetid Buchanan lifted up his voice
When that faun’s head of hers
Became a pastime for
Painters and adulterers.

The Burne-Jones cartons
Have preserved her eyes;
Still, at the Tate, they teach
Cophetua to rhapsodize;

Thin like brook water,
With a vacant gaze.

Poor Elizabeth Siddal, Rossetti’s wife, who modeled for “The Girlhood of the Virgin Mary”⁵ as well as the Beggar Maid of “King Cophetua,” and perhaps also the prostitute of the poem “Jenny,” is seen by Pound as hopelessly muddled between life and art. “Questing and passive.... / Bewildered that a world / Showed no surprise / At her last maquero’s / Adulteries,” she is drawn to suicide. Most of the poets we have considered are concerned primarily with the relation of a work of art and its perceiver. Pound complicates this relation with consideration of the work’s inspirer and progenitor. In other words, he would operate not only on the relation between language and metalanguage but the relation between language and “the real thing”. Indeed, the weight of historical allusion is to this effect. The poem is at once a comment on the misunderstood reception of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. But the painting itself remains in focus. The effect of Elizabeth Siddal’s eyes on the perceiver at the Tate (“The thin, clear gaze, the same / Still darts out faunlike from the half-ruin’d face”) leads Pound back through the artifice of

⁵Dante Rossetti’s own poem about “Mary’s Girlhood,” his first exhibited painting, is a straightforward celebration of the painting’s symbolic values, a gloss that evades both the ambiguities of the painting’s conception (his use of his own wife as a model for Mary) and the ambiguities of our perception (the clash of cultural and temporal views—Mary is depicted wearing a typical Victorian costume, for instance). Pound, on the other hand, is explicitly concerned with the interplay of three times—the Beggar Maid’s, Elizabeth Siddal’s, and his own.

the painting to its model and her very human fate. The poem thus imagines and articulates three distinct times: the time of the viewer, the time of the painting, and the time of the painting's model, as it were the mimetic object. Pound's lines are thus suffused with the human mystery of art, the magic by which the living human gesture is taken up, congealed into artistic form, and then released into living human perception. And Pound is acutely aware of the ways the humans—the simple, tragic model or the ironic, compassionate observer—suffer in their contact with the inscrutable timelessness of art itself.

What Roland Barthes claimed of the photograph, that death is its *ειδος*, its distinctive form (*Camera Lucida* 15), is true to some extent of any art representative of the fixed human image, as well of the poems that treat such art as their subject. The people in these paintings are dead and they are going to die (see *Camera Lucida* 95). The frozen timelessness of Keats's urn mocks at men as much as it befriends them. The invitation to change our lives given by the torso of Apollo is as terrifying in its way as the angels of *Duineser Elegien*. Icarus' death, amazing in its banal circumstances, dramatizes, more or less, our own. The Pacha and the Giaour, we needn't hesitate to say, are both now in their different afterlives. Even Brueghel's peasants dance over and over a *Totentanz*, which is after all the dance of life with centuries of dust upon it. Pound senses this too, perhaps even more clearly than the others. The Beggar Maid who still stirs us today is dead Elizabeth Siddal, whose body Rossetti once exhumed in order to retrieve the poems he had impetuously buried with her.

In their differing styles, all poems about art confront this fact of the deathly impenetrability of time. The imaginations of the poets range against it and assault it in different ways—passionate, ironic, innocent—and, indeed, this imaginative stir is the stuff of their poetry, but ultimately they are left with their own timefulness in the presence of images that last longer. Poetry about art constitutes, therefore, a tragic genre, a genre of human limitations from which most poets eventually turn away.

Works Cited

- Auden, W. H. *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1966.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.
- . *Elements of Semiology*. Trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith. New York: Hill and Wang, 1968.
- Keats, John. *The Poetical Works of John Keats*. Ed. H. Buston Forman. London: Oxford University Press, 1950. First published 1908.
- Poirier, Richard. *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*. New York: Random House, 1987.
- Pound Ezra. *Personae: The Collected Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound*. New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., 1926.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Neue Gedichte und Der Neuen Gedichte anderer Teil*. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1977. First published 1907, 1908.
- Rossetti, Dante Gabriel. *Poems by Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1895.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Shelley*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: New American Library, 1966.
- Spender, Stephen. *Selected Poems*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1964.
- Steiner, George. *On Difficulty and Other Essays*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- Wilbur, Richard. *The Poems of Richard Wilbur*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963.
- Williams, William Carlos. *Collected Later Poems*. New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., 1963.



Figure 4: Burne-Jones, *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid*



Figure 5: Rossetti, *The Girlhood of the Virgin Mary*