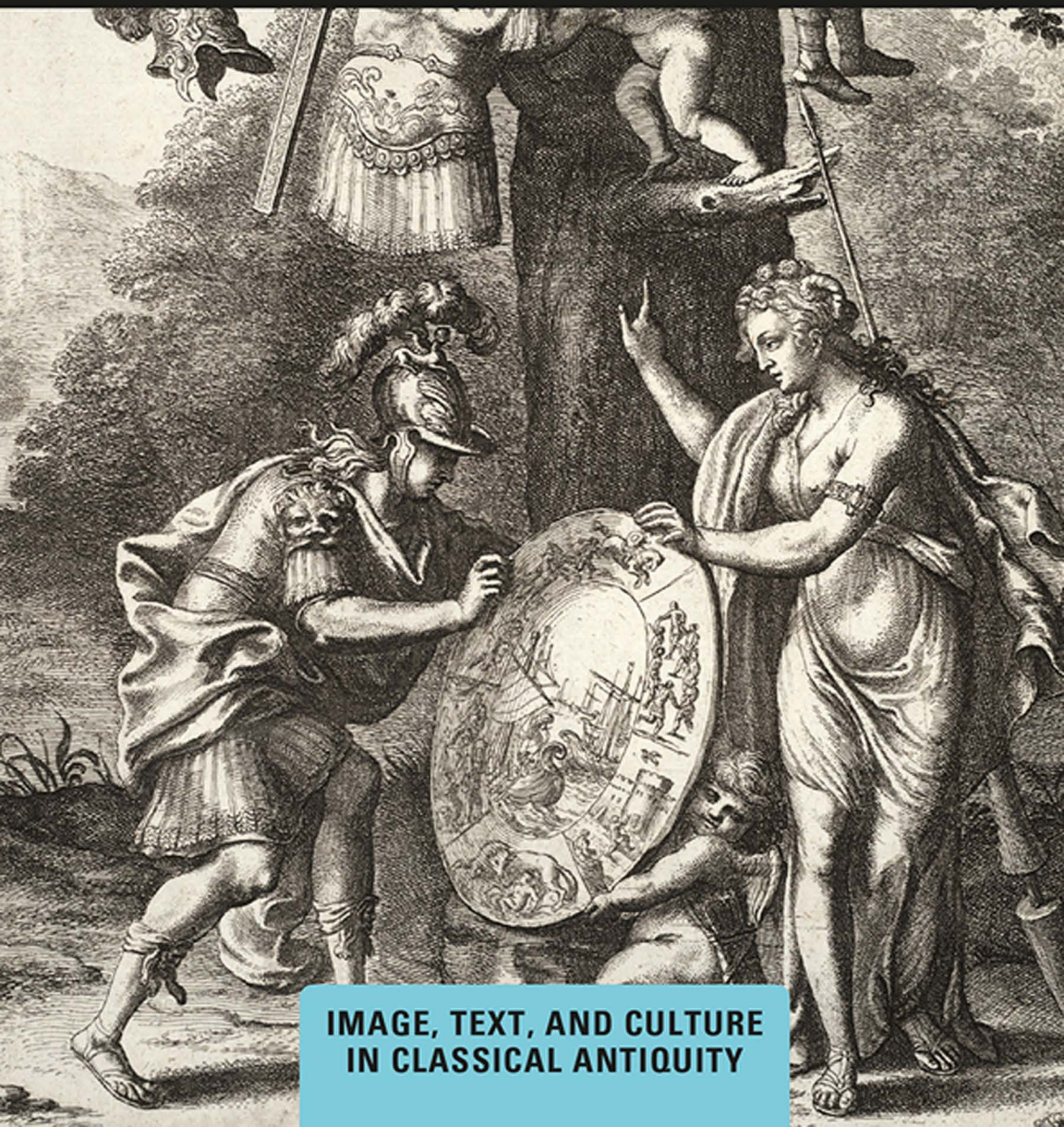
Karel Thein

Ecphrastic Shields in Graeco-Roman Literature

The World's Forge



IMAGE, TEXT, AND CULTURE IN CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY

Ecphrastic Shields in Graeco-Roman Literature

This volume takes a fresh look at *ekphrasis* as a textual practice closely connected to our embodied imagination and its verbal dimension; it offers the first detailed study of a large family of ancient ecphrastic shields, often studied separately, but never as an ensemble with its own development.

The main objective consists of establishing a theoretical and historical framework that is applied to a series of famous ecphrastic shields starting with the Homeric shield of Achilles. The latter is reinterpreted as a paradigmatic "thing" whose echoing down the centuries is reinforced by the fundamental connection between *ekphrasis* and artefacts as its primary objects. The book demonstrates that although the ancient sources do not limit *ekphrasis* to artificial creations, the latter are most efficient in bringing out the intimate affinity between artefacts and vivid mental images as two kind of entities that lack a natural scale and are rightly understood as ontologically unstable.

Ecphrastic Shields in Graeco-Roman Literature: The World's Forge should be read by those interested in ancient culture, art and philosophy, but also by those fascinated by the broader issue of imagination and by the interplay between the natural and the artificial.

Karel Thein is Professor of Philosophy at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic. His research focuses on ancient thought, including philosophy and its relation to visual arts and poetry. He is no less interested in the general question of imagination as an important facet of human nature, and in the presence of antiquity in contemporary thought and culture. Naturally, he keeps working on how all these issues are related. His publications in English and French include several monographs on Plato and numerous articles and chapters on philosophy and art.

Image, Text, and Culture in Classical Antiquity

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The World's Forge

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2022
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Thein, Karel, 1961– author.
Title: Ecphrastic shields in Graeco-Roman literature : the world's forge / Karel Thein.
Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2022. | Series: Image, text, and culture in classical antiquity | Includes bibliographical references and index. |
Identifiers: LCCN 2021018016 (print) | LCCN 2021018017 (ebook) | ISBN 9780367722548 (hardback) | ISBN 9780367722586 (paperback) | ISBN 9781003154051 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Shields in literature. | Ekphrasis. | Classical literature—History and criticism.
Classification: LCC PA3015.S45 T47 2022 (print) | LCC PA3015.S45 (ebook) | DDC 880.09—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021018016
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021018017

ISBN: 978-0-367-72254-8 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-367-72258-6 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-15405-1 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003154051

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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Acknowledgments

It was at the Passmore-Edwards Symposium on *Ekphrasis*, organized by Helen Moore and Jaś Elsner at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, in 2002, that I realized I would like to do something serious about this subject. Among those who impressed me sufficiently to take this decision were Shadi Bartsch, Jaś Elsner, Simon Goldhill, Philip Hardie, Helen Lovatt and Verity Platt.

Jaś Elsner's invitation to Corpus Christi College, where I spent a month as a visiting fellow in 2003, cemented my determination and gave me an opportunity to pester people with some half-baked ideas about *ekphrasis* in ancient philosophical texts, notably Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias*. These ideas are not included in this book, but were important for its intermittent gestation. I wish to thank Jaś for his openness to these ideas and his continuous support.

Another essential moment was François Lissarrague's invitation to give three lectures on the shields of Achilles, Heracles and Aeneas respectively. These lectures took place at the Centre Gernet-Glotz, Paris, in 2012. For their questions and remarks, I wish to thank François himself, and also Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux, Catherine Darbo-Peschanski and Anca Vasiliu. To François and Anca I owe a lot as their longtime confidence and encouragement were very important.

Verity Platt kindly reviewed the entire manuscript and offered numerous valuable suggestions. Some of them found their way into this book, while others, for reasons of space, will have to be explored in further writings. After all, the capacity to produce more texts defines what a text is.

I am much in debt to Michael Squire for his generous and friendly support, but also sharp comments on many drafts and the final version of this book. He did his outstanding best, and I will always be grateful for his offer to publish in the series he edits.

Naturally, my final acknowledgment goes to you, kind reader. This is a long book, and while writing it, I had Callimachus' "big book, big evil" constantly in mind. But many things this book says needed to be spelled out in variations that do justice to the subtlety and variety at the heart of the ecphrastic tradition.

Introduction

1 Imagination, things and ecphrastic artificiality

> Our Imagination loves to be filled with an Object, or to grasp at any thing that is too big for its Capacity.
>
> Joseph Addison, "On the Pleasures of the Imagination", 1712[1]

This book is about how imagination longs to espouse things that challenge its very power. It is also about how this longing takes roots in language and animates what the words describe. Hence, yet another volume about *ekphrasis* as the artful, patient, elaborate way of fusing physical things (rather than actions, which have been the focus of many poetics starting with Aristotle) with words, but also our embodied mental states. This art, which both restrains and fuels imagination, reveals important facets of the life of the mind by revealing the wonders that we, or gods who are like us, can create with a pair of hands, be they imaginary or real.

The focus on imagination is not as trivial as it might seem, and it is no accident that I mention hands rather than eyes in this book's first paragraph. As understood throughout this inquiry, and in conformity with ancient texts, imagination is not a free-wheeling fancy, but a complex, embodied power that mobilizes more than one sense and connects our mind to the world. Of course, verbal instruction and visualizing will be at the forefront of my interest, but they cannot be understood without constant alertness to the underlying handling of matter that is thematically at the heart of the ecphrastic enterprise. Simply put, both words and mental states have their irreducible physicality, which is at various distance, and often very close, to their conceptual content. The ancient understanding of *phantasia* as an embodied power that opens the road to the realm of concepts is therefore in agreement with contemporary efforts at theorizing imagination as the terrain where the embodied mind constantly balances its own transparency and opacity, exercising a whole array of activities that connect perception and thought. Within this broad context, my aim is to clarify what is particular to *ekphrasis* as a refined, deeply

1 Addison (1712), June 23, quoted after Ashfield and de Bolla (1996) 62, and Kania (2016) 74.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003154051-1

artificial effort to tie our imagination to a progressively unveiled and thus subtly changing object. This artifice makes ample use of the imagination's long recognized chameleonic nature, which mirrors the malleability of human nature at large and which cannot be reduced to mental visualizing: imagination is equally responsible for various aspects of the mind's life that do not produce images of their own, but initiate complex mental operations (not unlike Stoic *phantasia* responsible for inference and combination: *phantasia metabatikē kai sunthetikē*). Like human nature, imagination resists a unified definition; by default, and quite traditionally, I will use this term to specify various features of our embodied minds that cannot be explained by sensation or intellection alone.[2] Also, I will often talk about "our" imagination, but not presume that all readers of this or any other text imagine the exact same things. While writing and reading, we share what we imagine through language, but language tends to even out the differences in how we individually think and imagine – differences that may be no less important than the influence of different cultural patterns.[3]

Seen in this light, the present inquiry is aligned not only with the renewed interest in *ekphrasis*, but also with the recent endeavors that connect ancient texts and contemporary theories of embodied mental activities. These attempts remind us that some features which help to define *ekphrasis*, in the Greco-Roman handbooks of rhetoric, especially vividness or *enargeia*, are not exclusive to ecphrastic exercises.[4] I will pay attention to the rhetorical definitions – and their important limits – in Chapter 1.1, but it needs to be emphasized right at the start that their inclusion of the *ekphraseis* of events or seasons cannot overweight the fact that most of ancient (and modern) *ekphraseis* are of artificial creations or simply artefacts. To acknowledge this fact is not to confuse *ekphrasis* with descriptions of the works of art in the modern sense of the term (for more on this issue, see Chapter 1.2). Rather, it is to recognize the role of *artificiality* as a fundamental feature of ecphrastic pieces that make the audience wonder about the power to create, the power to imagine, and about the relation between these two powers that have been ascribed, since Homer, to gods and humans alike.

From among the recent developments relevant to *ekphrasis*, I feel therefore close to those that encourage the departure from the restrictive view of *ekphrasis* as "the verbal representation of visual representation".[5] The problem with this formula and its variations is not only that no two people can agree on what

2 On Stoic *phantasia* of inference and combination, see Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Professors* 8.275–276. For different theoretical positions on imagination, see the overviews in Brann (1991), Huppauf and Wulf (2009), Sepper (2013), Kind (2016). On *phantasia* and imagination in antiquity, see Lories and Rizzerio (2003). For late antiquity, see Betancourt (2018). I will provide further references where appropriate.

3 On the variety of individual imagination, see Troscianko (2013), Phillips (2014). For other references, see the platform Cognitive Classics (https://cognitiveclassics.blogs.sas.ac.uk/).

4 On vividness, action and embodied cognition in ancient texts, see Grethlein and Huitink (2017), Huitink (2019), Grethlein, Huitink and Tagliabue (2020).

5 Heffernan (1993) 3.

exactly "representation" means. It also lies in its detachment from the specifically ecphrastic reliance on – and stimulation of – the material aspects of imagination. Assuming that to imagine something "is to simulate an embodied exploration of what one imagines",[6] *ekphrasis* sets to achieve the highest possible degree of this experience, far from a neutral rendering of the object under description: it is not about a neutral account of properties, and not only about a gaze, but about a real grasp with corporeal echoes. Speaking about an earlier and more restrictive view of *ekphrasis*, I do certainly not mean to disparage the achievements of authors like Murray Krieger, whose 1967 essay and 1992 book on *ekphrasis* are important milestones, or like James Heffernan, whose *Museum of Words* covers part of the same ground as this book (the shields of Achilles and Aeneas).[7] Still, I took a more direct inspiration from the work of Shadi Bartsch, Don Fowler, Simon Goldhill, Philip Hardie or Froma Zeitlin, who, together with many others (on whom I will explicitly rely later on), made *ekphrasis* a truly lively and exciting topic of discussion among classicists.[8] At the same time, although this book is about texts, I have been equally inspired by those who deal in equal measure with *ekphrasis* and with images as things embedded in both a particular cultural context and a no less particular material support. In this respect, my great debt is to Jaś Elsner, François Lissarrague and Michael Squire, whose work (and friendly conversation) made me alert to the importance of ancient artefacts. The interest in the latter then made me ready for the most recent discussions that encompass ecphrastic tactility, ecphrastic agency, digital *ekphrasis* or the ecphrastic function of ornament and calligraphy. I will not quote these new developments simply to appear well informed, but I will say more about tactility in Chapter 4.11 and turn to the other just-mentioned issues in my Conclusion about *ekphrasis* in the expanded field. What I would like to stress beforehand is that the affinity between art history and *ekphrasis* made me realize the importance of the ecphrastic creation, which is carried out, on more than one level, by our embodied imagination.

To understand how the ecphrastic artificiality oscillates between shimmering details and real world-building, I will therefore take advantage of a genealogically well-established, more-than-two-thousand-years-long interplay of speaking, hearing and visualizing that became, progressively but soon enough, an object of explicit elaboration and instruction. In the Greco-Roman manuals of rhetoric, which offer a first (and incomplete) "theory" of *ekphrasis*, the latter is meant to grasp the audience's attention and to lead it, step by step, through what is being described as if it were on a promenade. The usual lack not of narrative elements, but of a properly narrative *closure* makes this promenade different from the

6 Huitink (2019) 178, with further references to current enactivist accounts of readerly imagination.

7 See Krieger (1967), (1992), Heffernan (1993). The work of Thomas Mitchell has a special importance in this context, as will be clear from Chapter 1.

8 Fowler (1991) played an important role in shifting the issue of *ekphrasis* away from the constraints of formal narratology. As for the other authors mentioned here, they will be abundantly quoted throughout this book.

following of an external action through the suspense till its denouement.[9] Even if a series of actions leading from A to Z is implied, we are, first and foremost, told "everything" about a given object by evocative means which are designed so as "to say all" about this object not by offering an exhaustive inventory of properties, which is impossible due to various possible scales of description, but by capturing its pregnant facets in vivid detail. In a way, *ekphrasis* puts a *face* on things, and so it does not immobilize them; rather, it animates things as if from the inside, not by referring to some external impulse. Here the issue of *ekphrasis* connects to the issue of agency and its dependence, or not, on animation and intention. This connection cannot be summarized here, but I will return to it repeatedly when relevant and offer its more general appreciation in this book's Conclusion.[10] At this point, it is enough to stress that, if life implies motion, the ecphrastic motion arises from the vividness of the naturally *occurring* yet artificially *informed* mental image, which is created under ecphrastic instruction and relies on the malleability of matter itself. This makes the effect of a successful *ekphrasis* so striking: whereas narrative moves inexorably towards a resolution (often a destruction, accompanied or not by a rebirth), *ekphrasis* achieves a proximity to the material conditions that allow things to be made and creatures to be born. Even the ecphrastic ruins are teeming with life as strangely everlasting, and joyfully embracing the quiet corruption of the everyday.

2 Description ancient to modern and back again

It will be the task of the following five chapters to show this animation at work and to say more about how it feeds on both language and the physically embedded mental image. Especially the first chapter will make clear that this is part of a shared enterprise carried on by many scholars and writers interested in images and mental images as interwoven with words. This scholarly recognition of there being no mute pictures and no words without concurrent visualizing is a sort of revival, which reacts to a peculiar historical transformation: in a series of changes that the academic world underwent in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century, the long tradition of rhetoric was replaced by the newly scientific linguistics, while philosophy and psychology alike became even more suspicious of mental images than they have ever been. After decades of suspicion, however,

9 These introductory remarks must not drown in too many qualifications, nor can they enumerate exceptions to every (more or less arbitrary) rule. There is, indeed, one exemplary action that we will encounter, repeatedly, as the content of an *ekphrasis*: the battle. The manuals of rhetoric assume this exemplarity by situating battles, as objects of description, on the implicit borderline between natural and man-made disasters. Moreover, the first *ekphrasis* I will deal with, that of the shield of Achilles, is *also* a complete description of an action: Homer shows how Hephaestus *makes* the shield.

10 The issue of agency often meets one of embodied presence. On the latter and the Classics, see the broad range of approaches in Bielfeldt (2014b), Mueller (2016), Telò and Mueller (2018), Gaifman, Platt and Squire (2018).

these and other disciplines seem to have finally made their peace with the image's lack of a "proper" nature, even an illusionary one, which makes it refractory to all attempts at including it into a systematic ontology.[11] In the meantime, exiled from academia and its interests, the ancient rhetoric of *ekphrasis* found its refuge in the practically minded manuals of writing. Antoine Albalat's *Art of Writing Taught in Twenty Lessons*, published in Paris in 1899 and reprinted in 1902, 1911, 1924, 1952 and 1992, echoes the two-millennia-older precepts that I will analyze in the first chapter:

> Description is the animate painting of objects. It does not enumerate; it makes more than indicate: it paints. It does not content itself with characterizing what it sees either; it shows it to the eyes, it sketches its picture. The description is a picture which makes the material things visible. In brief, the aim of the description is to offer the illusion of life. Its reason for being, its effort, its ambition, is to produce life, to make alive, material and tangible the details, the situations, the beings, everything that is physical, mainly nature.
>
> (Albalat 1899: 219, trans. mine)

These lines appropriate the ancient *topos* of artful description as equivalent to painting or sculpture (Albalat uses both interchangeably, just like Lessing and others),[12] and together with this *topos* Albalat will evoke its exemplary incarnation: Homer, author of the *Iliad* and, especially, of the ecphrastic shield of Achilles, where "nature" in the broadest sense of the term is wrought in metal. However, while casting Homer in his traditional role, Albalat views his achievement through a highly modern lens. As a result, the great poet's descriptive power is assimilated to the one of photography:

> Now in Homer, the description is vision by color, notation by materiality, ruthless observation of visible details. Homer's trait, his characteristic apart from his moral elevation, his epic breadth and the sense that he has of the affairs of the soul and inner being, is that he is a photographer of nature and of human motions. His description is analysis, the decomposition pushed to the last limit of a physical act, of an observed fact, of a quickly arising effect:

11 The recent literature on this issue is overwhelming, but perhaps the best succinct introduction remains Thomas Mitchell's essay "What Is an Image?", reprinted in Mitchell (1986) 7–46. For more on Mitchell and the agency of pictures and images, see the Conclusion.

12 In fact, my use of Albalat in this Introduction offers an alternative to the more usual way of introducing some ecphrastic issues via Lessing's *Laocoon*. A well-known instance is Krieger (1967) and his appropriation of the notions of "natural sign" and "arbitrary sign". I avoid these notions since my focus on the ecphrastic artificiality differs from seeing *successful* poetry as turning arbitrary signs into natural signs. On my reading, neither "natural" nor "arbitrary" (as two facets of the same desire) reach deeper than "artificial". For a reappraisal of Lessing's categories in relation to ancient texts and images, see Becker (1995) 13–22, Squire (2009) 94–116. For more on the *Laocoon*, see Mitchell (1984), Mitchell (1994) 177–180, and the essays in Lifschitz and Squire (2017). A fundamental work on Lessing, including his views on "natural signs", is Wellbery (1984).

> a true transcription of things, not only without any apparent intervention of personality, but without intention and with an absolute lack of embellishments. In other words, Homer is a realist of genius, an impassive photographer who separates, enlarges, who works in bas-relief, who molds and who carves rather than paints.
>
> (Albalat 1899: 225, trans. mine)

In a neat rhetorical gesture, this passage assimilates the ruthless directness it praises. On another page, however, Albalat recognizes the limits to this assimilation, the limits following from the fact that Homer himself was *alive*. Anticipating the objection that "description is not a simple photograph" but, like all art, an interpretation, Albalat suggests that this polarity only results from confusion which needs to be clarified:

> Put yourself in front of a landscape and describe it. You simply cannot achieve pure and blunt photography. Your imagination is an involuntary lens which does not let the seen thing enter without it being transformed, interpreted, synthesized, enlarged or reduced, made more attractive or sad, commented upon and presented. The human brain is not a camera and, no matter how much it would try, it can never produce photographs.
>
> (Albalat 1899: 222, trans. mine)

Discussing these and other similar passages in the context of the nineteenth-century literature and its reactions to photography, Marta Caraion points out that the notion of "involuntary lens" admits various degrees of transparency and that Homeric description is taken for achieving its highest degree.[13] This degree corresponds to the ancient ideal of vividness and clarity whereby *ekphrasis* makes us encounter the things described, without denying that the encounter takes place "somewhere" in our own body and mind. Now if we read this encounter only from the perspective of abstract theories of representation, we are easily misled into taking the ecphrastic exercise for a cheap magical trick relying on our natural, child-like naivety in matters ontological. Yet Albalat, like the ancient ekphrasists, avoids *another* trap which the abstract-minded theorists tend to fall into, one of being even more naïve by not taking seriously the likely impossibility of there being some "proper" ontology of the image and, by consequence, of imagination and its products. This is probably why mental images have been repeatedly excluded from "serious" accounts of conscious experience – only to prove themselves resistant to all such attempts.[14]

13 See Caraion (2003) 138. This book brought Albalat (and others) to my attention for the first time.

14 The philosophical literature on these disputes is huge. For a good summary, see Kind (2001). A representative collection of essays arguing for and against mental images is Block (1981). Both Mitchell (1994) and Belting (2011) tackle the ontological uncertainty of images through a rich inventory of human artefacts.

Without being a neatly identifiable "something", mental image as the mobile setting of *ekphrasis* is nevertheless not a "nothing". Rather, to borrow Philip Larkin's memorable line, it testifies to the fact that "nothing, like something, happens anywhere."[15] The ecphrastic activity then consists, first and foremost, in elaborating an inherently fragile "somewhere"; and it is such a somewhere, exemplified by ancient shield descriptions, that this book takes for its main subject matter. As I will briefly explain next and, in more detail, in Chapter 1, this choice was dictated by a regard for the complicity between the anthropological dimension of images as the culturally charged man-made things, and the inner working of mental images whose embodiment does not preclude them from suggesting a curiously dislocated spatiality. Before saying more about the narrow choice of shield as exemplary object, it is thus in order to say a few words about my rather blunt view of *ekphrasis* and mental imagery.

First, it must be emphasized that my remarks on mental images are selective insofar as they are directed, right from the start, towards the topics of *ekphrasis*. In opposition to certain theories of reading, I assume that it is not impossible to form an image of, or simply visualize, what we are simultaneously reading or hearing. The opposite contention that our mind cannot do this implies that we may well imagine *something*, but that we do so by projecting the mental images into the *gaps* in the text we read or listen to. What this suggestion assumes is that these gaps do not hinder the logic of a given narrative but arise because narratives and the description they include are incomplete – for instance, we "imagine" a certain atmosphere or mood that has its bearing on our unfocused picture of the protagonist. As a result, the reading experience still leaves place for a potentially rich imaginative activity, no doubt depending on the style of the text and the personality of the reader, but this activity weaves its imaginary structures as if *around* what is literally on the page.[16] Seen in this light, the specificity of *ekphrasis* – as distinct from the action-centered narrative devices – lies in an effort at eliminating the gaps of this kind: an effort at feeding the imagination by gluing it almost counter-intuitively to the surface of things, a surface whose relief becomes almost tangible.[17]

Clearly, this exercise makes unusually strong claim on the reader's attention. And it may seem truly paradoxical insofar as it relies on two distinct premises: first, it necessarily assumes (with philosophers as different as Aristotle or Wittgenstein) that the activity of imagining what is not presently there is in our power. Second, this "in our power" concerns individual objects that we can decide to imagine, but *not* the general activity of imagination as such. Indeed, in this crucial respect, imagination is much closer to thinking than to sense perception from

15 The last line of the poem "I Remember, I Remember" in Larkin (1955) 38.

16 Various studies of this issue are quoted and discussed in Matravers (2014) 72–75, including the theory of "gaps in the text" whose indeterminacy allows for the activity of imagination – a theory proposed by Iser (1978).

17 For more on relief and tactility, see Thein (2018), with further references.

which it borrows its content.[18] Neither thinking nor imagining, no matter how loose and without focus they often are, can be truly switched off willingly, which may well be due to their important physiological underpinning.

This second feature of imagination implies that *ekphrasis* is certainly not a field where we would exercise our imaginative activity more freely than within the causal constraints of a narrative. On the contrary, it is conceived as a true training of imagination and, by the same token, an implicit inquiry into what degree of control over imagining we can achieve by means of words alone. After all, if it is true that the degree of visualizing naturally provoked by reading is rather undetermined and most often very low,[19] *ekphrasis* thrives precisely by overtaking the space of this indeterminacy. To borrow from Albalat one more time, what is at stake in *ekphrasis* is to what degree words can enable us to operate the "involuntary lens" of imagination. It is true that this operation is only possible because mental images tend to be poor in content, let alone detail, so that the philosophers' mistrust of our allegedly rich inner lives, of which richly colored imagination would be a part, is most often justified.[20] But if such a life appears as rich only there where we start to proudly *talk* about it (to ourselves or others), then *ekphrasis* becomes all the more interesting insofar as it confirms that all coherent mental imagery, even of things natural, needs to be patiently constructed.

In this respect, it is both striking and quite understandable that the issue of ecphrastic discourse, which is much alive in Classics or poetry studies, is still on the margins of the academic corpus of philosophy of literature. Focusing on the narrative dimension of literature, and especially modern novel, this corpus takes it for granted that the culturally revealing thick descriptions

> can include, for example, rich descriptions of people's thoughts, feelings, moods, and emotions, rich descriptions of people, including their character traits and personality, rich descriptions of people's actions, and rich descriptions of other things, such as institutions, cultures, cultural practices, and customs.[21]

Despite its richness, this inventory tends, involuntarily perhaps, to prolong the modern mistrust of "flat" description of *things* that fall outside the perspective of a meaningful *agency*. Starting with the seventeenth century, the outspoken enemies

18 I cannot discuss here the relation between imagination and perception. Casey (2000) 125–173 is a thorough study, which discusses, among others, Kant and Wittgenstein.

19 As some contemporary theorists and writers rightly emphasize. From among the former, see Matravers (2014) 53–58 on our understanding of narrative fiction; from among the latter, see Parks (2015), who offers a succinct reappraisal of the "what do we see when we read" question by critically discussing Mendelsund (2014).

20 See Blackmore (2002). Perhaps the putative *stream* of consciousness is, first and foremost, a written construal.

21 Goldie (2012) 9. Goldie derives his understanding of "rich descriptions" from the influential concept of "thick description" introduced by Geertz (1973).

of literary description seem to grow in number. But when these attacks reach their peak in the twentieth century, they are also accompanied by diagnosing the overblown enumerative description as an affair of certain nineteenth-century novels whose ecphrastic dimension is perceived as different from the rhetorical and poetic descriptions of previous periods (typical examples would be Zola's cumulative *ekphrasis* of "the stupendous sight of the great exhibition of household linen" in *The Ladies' Paradise*, or his account of the dozens kinds of cheese in *The Belly of Paris*).[22] The accusation of flatness, and thus implicitly of boredom, need not be discussed here any further. Suffice it to say that, like all periodizations and exclusions, it may serve us first and foremost as a warning against connecting *ekphrasis* to this or other period or genre, be it a literary or a rhetorical one. In fact, it is useful to bear in mind that the art of evocative description has since long been exercised beyond what we call literature or rhetoric. Without suggesting any shared systematic framework, I would like to point out two disciplines with an ecphrastic dimension irreducible to the rich descriptions of actions: many passages in early modern naturalists and modern art historians exhibit conspicuous affinities, perhaps because their aim is not simply to confer knowledge, but to make the readers experience true wonders, be they natural or artificial. That these *ekphraseis* construct specific objects ready to be included in a scientific classification is in no way contradictory to this impetus.

3 *Ekphrasis* and art history

There would be much to say about how the naturalists deployed various descriptive strategies that, by evoking particular exemplars with vividness and precision, brought out the secrets of nature's art for a wider public to see and admire.[23] These descriptions possess the ecphrastic qualify of opening up the surfaces by showing their richness of detail, which can be organized into various styles of knowledge: the amazing things and creatures worth describing are often a key to our understanding of the most elusive qualities that do not exist apart from material objects without being identical to them. At this point, the descriptive exercise can collapse into either science or metaphysics, but it can also help to negotiate the always-fragile equilibrium between the unique and the universal. As can be expected, such a negotiation is also typical of art history that cannot avoid the primary confrontation with the materiality of artworks. Conveying the latter, the *ekphrasis* of a work of art, choosing from a range of descriptive practices and

22 On several criticisms of literary description, see Wall (2006) 25–31. On Zola's descriptions of the marketable things as inviting our affective response, see Jameson (2013) 45–77, who suggests that "to the degree to which description sheds its allegorical meanings and approaches the state of a more purely physical and bodily registering of external contingency, to that extent it lies open to affective investment" (51–52).

23 On many facets of this issue, including the relation between descriptions and images, see Bender and Marrinan (2005), Ogilvie (2006) 139–208, Stalnaker (2010), Daston and Lunbeck (2011), Bleichmar (2012).

styles, encodes the theoretical argument and its focus. Both plainly and radically, it can therefore be sustained that art history is, as Jaś Elsner puts it, "an extended argument built on *ekphrasis*":

> Not everything that results from ekphrasis is art history, but that series of uses of interpretative description, which attempt to make a coherent argument on broadly historical or philosophical lines, is definitely art history. The particular rules governing the making of description and its appropriations have changed radically over the centuries from (say) Philostratus to Vasari to Riegl to T. J. Clark – to suit the particular intellectual contexts and social aspirations of those writing about art in these different worlds. And the kinds of results or findings required by different periods (and sometimes different scholars) from such description have also changed. Some find that art can reveal artists, others that it can indicate social history or underlying cultural reflexes, others still that it implies very little at all beyond itself. But my proposition is that – whatever the particular agenda or argument – art history is ultimately grounded in a method founded on and inextricable from the description of objects.[24]

The scope of these ecphrastic practices is indeed wide and, already in antiquity, it extends from ecphrastic epigrams on famous statues (Praxiteles' Aphrodite or Myron's cow) to the descriptions of frescoes, statues and temples in places worth visiting (Pausanias).[25] One thing, however, needs to be added to the quoted lines: as Elsner himself points out, in many cases, *ekphrasis* is of notional objects that appear to us in the sphere where words and mental images mutually translate with no neatly corresponding referent beyond this translation.[26] Of course, we supply such a referent, or rather a plurality of referents, by spontaneously borrowing and combining the shapes and colors, but also cultural meanings, of various "real" objects we know, be it from acquaintance or other descriptions. The notional *ekphrasis*, which is what this book is mostly about, thus cannot be produced by a freewheeling fancy: in such a case, it loses much of its appeal and interest, precisely insofar as it cut itself off from the rich yet far from unconstrained repertoire of sensations (hence the conspicuous lack of rich description in the austere science-fiction as opposed to the ultra-eclectic fantasy). In other words, even there where *ekphrasis* invites us to a mental pilgrimage to what never was, its

24 Elsner (2010) 11. On "speaking for a work of art", see Heffernan (1999). On Vasari's case, cf. Alpers (1960).

25 On Praxiteles' Aphrodite, see Platt (2002); on Myron's cow Goldhill (2007), Squire (2010a); on Pausanias, see Elsner (2001), Snodgrass (2001), Cuvelier (2013). Concerning the epigrams in question, Zanker (2003) suggests that they are not truly ecphrastic, the category of "ecphrastic epigram" being a modern invention. I hope that my Chapter 5.2 (on the epigrams on the shield of Achilles) and my Conclusion address this doubt by clarifying the ecphrastic effects that justify this label.

26 Like many others, I borrow the expression "notional" (*ekphrasis* or object) from Hollander (1988).

apparently eccentric course attracts mental images that are grounded, no matter how indirectly, in "real" arts and crafts. And it is in virtue of this attraction that even a notional *ekphrasis*' success can translate into its impact on the future course of art history.

In this art-historical context, it is important to bear in mind that, for Homer's public, the shield of Achilles is both avant-garde and anachronistic, and the later ecphrastic shields will bear the stamp of the same and fruitful duality. Let me explain as simply as possible. Unavoidably, there has been a recurrent debate about the relation between the notional shield of Achilles and the actual artworks that may have inspired it. In this debate, the relation in question was often understood in narrow terms of finding the artefacts that would "enable" Homer to visualize his shield – hence T. B. L. Webster's contention that Homer "probably knew contemporary Phoenician bronze or silver bowls decorated with battles and sieges and lion hunts, which drew on an ancient Oriental tradition", but still

> to decorate a shield so elaborate would hardly have occurred to him before the time of elaborate shield decoration. The new shields fired his imagination, and he decided to give Achilles a superb shield embodying old memories and new experience.[27]

On the opposite, equally unsatisfactory pole, we find general statements to the effect that "the poetic description, as a rule, surpasses the technical possibilities for the making of a real work of art."[28] To these statements, we should certainly prefer Anthony Snodgrass' more nuanced view that "Homer himself could conceive of such art," not in the least because "most probably he had seen actual examples which inspired specific details of his description."[29] It should go without saying that, *pace* Webster, these actual artworks need not be shields. Homer was more likely inspired by painted pottery and Geometric-style bronzes, but also by cups, seals, signet-rings – or, indeed, *bronze* shields like the Orientalizing bronze shield from the Idaean cave whose hammered out relief shows a lion-headed boss and animal friezes.[30] In short, the ecphrastic shield as a multi-metallic relief

27 Webster (1958) 214. On this logic, no innovation seems possible before it has already occurred. Also, the level of visual elaboration of an artefact like the seventh-century Cypriot silver-gilt bowl with an attacking lion is on a par with Homer's *ekphrasis*. This bowl, reproduced in Stansbury-O'Donnell (1999) 41, may well post-date the *Iliad*, but the lion theme appears on elaborate eight-century artefacts as well.

28 Kakridis (1971) 123, quoted in Snodgrass (1998) 41.

29 Snodgrass (1998) 42, where he adds that "we have to remember that [Homer] is describing metal-working, with the primary decoration presumably executed by engraving; whereas we have mostly looked at painted pottery." Hence Snodgrass' emphasis on the Geometric vases and their use of varying scale and their capacity to convey the passage of time. Snodgrass' interpretation is discussed in Lecoq (2010) 221–228.

30 Today in Heraklion Archaeological Museum, Crete. See Kunze (1931) Pl. 1 and Boardman (2016) fig. 36; the shield is redrawn in Whitley (2019) 594, fig. 24.4. On ancient metalwork and the fluid categories of "Oriental" and "Greek", see Whitley (2014), with further references. No less

obviously echoes many reliefs carved or engraved on different kinds of objects in different scales (portable objects are an important family here, one of which the shield is the arguably largest member). These echoes form a flexible web that encompasses different media of pictorial representation and comprises objects from what is a distant past already in Homer's age: one thinks of the recently discovered engraved gemstone known as the Pylos Combat Agate, dating to ca. 1450 BCE,[31] or the two gold cups found at Vapheio in 1888 whose relief figures (violent on one cup, peaceful on the other) form a continuous frieze containing various elements similar to the Homeric shield (Figure 0.1).[32] So, if it is naïve to wonder about direct links between particular objects and the Alexandrian editions of the *Iliad*, we can safely assume multiple family resemblances between images and texts, resemblances permeated by anachronisms and accidents, but significant nonetheless. The shield of Achilles translates into words any technique that reinforces the palpability proper to the hefty metal object, whose hardness only makes its god-made aliveness more striking.[33] No effort to find some neat correspondence to this or that object must therefore obscure the skillfully built and more basic tension between the inanimate matter and the varied life that emerges (but never entirely detaches) from it. Textually and visually, through constant shifts of scale and focus, this tension sustains all the ecphrastic shields that we will encounter in this book.

If, for the reasons sketched here and further explained in the first chapter, I take the shield of Achilles and other poetic shields for exemplary ecphrastic objects, it is also because of the shield's capacity to exemplify the close relation between life and matter. In fact, thanks to its original connection to human hand and the life-bearing chest, the shield (even an ecphrastic one) makes us aware of what a *thing* more generally is. It was recently stated that "the commanding role that the

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legitimately, Giuliani (2013) 46 stresses a parallel between the Homeric shield and a cup or *kantharos* in Copenhagen (ca. 730 BCE) whose central image of two lions attacking a man is flanked by various other scenes.

31 See Stocker and Davis (2017), Blakolmer (2007a) on the "Battle Krater" from Shaft Grave IV at Mycenae. Cf. also Blakolmer (2007b) on the transposition between the images in different formats, and Blakolmer (2010), (2012), (2015) on the so-called Mycenaean art. On other relevant artefacts from the ninth and eighth centuries, see D'Acunto (2013). On the Bronze Age art, see Knappett (2020). On the role of scale in Hellenistic and Roman art, see Squire (2011) and various considerations throughout this book.

32 These cups were executed by two different artists. On their provenance, see Davis (1974); Riegl (1906) is an important analysis *and* a wonderful description of these cups. On the cups' iconography, see also Blakolmer (2012) 92–93. Concerning individual scenes rather than the metallurgic finesse, the Thera murals spring to mind. On these and the Homeric epic, see Morris (1989). On the issue of intermediality, see Dietrich (2015).

33 Hence the liberties that Homer takes with actual metallurgy. See Gray (1954). The crucial moment is the use of the relief technique that opens the ecphrastic shield to a truly haptic visualizing. On the virtuality of relief as a medium of passage from two to three dimensions, see Summers (2003) 445–450, Davis (2017) 229–263, Squire (2018b). In Chapters 2 and (especially) 4, I will return to the importance of relief, including further references.

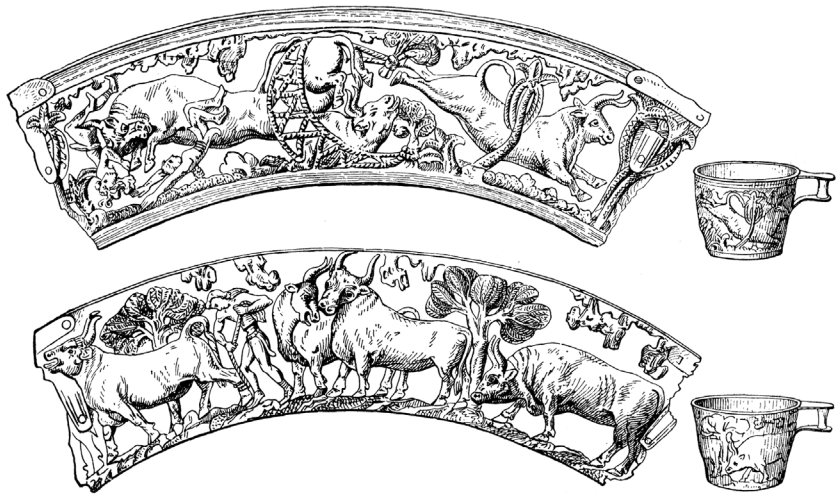

Figure 0.1 The gold cups found at Vapheio in 1888, ca. 1500 BCE, diameter 10.5 cm.
Source: Drawing after Morey (1903) 90.

Shield [of Achilles] has played in the history of modern ekphrastic criticism has all but denied it any role in the history of animate matter."[34] There is no doubt that this role needs to be reaffirmed; but it is equally true that "animation" or "life", no less than "image" or "mental image", are terms that require prudence since we are not able to define them before starting to use them. When we emphasize materiality, there is always the danger of taking matter for a new transcendental.[35] As this risk is an integral part of our task, a caveat is in order at precisely this point: repeatedly, this book emphasizes the ontological instability of images insofar as these are always *also* mental images and as such, precisely, animate. On my reading, the ecphrastic objects make us acutely aware of this instability in virtue of their artificiality, which in its turn is inseparable from the physiological basis of our imagination. Still, instead of offering a separate theoretical treatment of this instability and of the material dimension of imagining, I will focus on how *ekphrasis* benefits from both by maintaining the constant tension between words and images tangible and vibrant.

34 Brown (2015) 4. On his next page, Bill Brown emphasizes that Homer renders extraordinary "the oscillations between the animate and inanimate". On Brown's reading and ecphrastic animation, see also the Conclusion.

35 This danger seems inherent to the new forms of materialism and to the formalist "object-oriented ontology", whose stimulating use is nevertheless demonstrated by Canevaro (2018) or Porter (2019).

4 A Platonic aside

That said, already the ancient philosophers recognize that imagination is hard to grasp. It is irreducible to either its sensible or its intellectual dimension without having a dimension (or an object) fully of its own. Philosophers, however, offer nothing like a stand-alone theory of imagination in relation to art. Instead, they tend to treat imagination from the epistemological perspective, with no regard for its specific working in literary or visual artefacts. The latter may serve as examples used in various discussion or as material for allegorical exegesis of the universe. But the visual arts receive no special treatment, and, as far as philosophy is concerned, this situation will not change for centuries. Even Aristotle, who deals with almost every area of human knowledge and life, has nothing to say about painting or sculpture. This is of course less true about Plato, whose interest in the power of images is also epistemological and political but who, at the same time, is the only ancient philosopher repeatedly addressing images from the perspective of their *production*.[36] This is the case of the discussions of *mimēsis* in *Republic* 10 and the *Sophist*, discussions whose horizon is the inverse proportion between the divine and the human art: the more Plato demeans human artists or craftsmen, the more he exalts the divine craftsmen who do not copy, but *create* nature including the whole "natural" world.[37] It is this simultaneous elevation and abasement that may offer a connection between the Platonic world-making and Homer's *ekphrasis* of the shield of Achilles: the former, as presented in the *Timaeus* and the *Critias*, seems to compete with the latter in virtue of proceeding from an elaborate cosmological framework to the central image of two cities, one at peace and one at war. Since ancient times, the shield of Achilles was understood as both a piece of natural philosophy and a history, and Plato may have been the first to appropriate this duality, which he incorporates in his description of the world as an animate and created being, a ζῷον carefully crafted by its author.[38]

Such an appropriation would fit well with both the mistrust of human imagination in epistemological matters, and the simple fact that, as far as human art is concerned, the only thing that we learn about a particular artwork in the whole Platonic corpus is that Pheidias made his Athena's eyes, face, hands and feet out of ivory (and the eyes' pupils out of stone) rather than gold (*Greater Hippias* 290b–c).[39] Still, there is a text in Plato that is directly relevant for the

36 On the power of images in Plato and various philosophical and political implications of this power, see the texts in Destrée and Edmonds III (2017), with further bibliography.

37 Cf. Heiden (2008) 213 on the making of the shield of Achilles: Hephaistos "assertively subjugated nature to the divine craftsman's imagination and transformed it into an object that replaced nature".

38 Few modern readers see the connection since the *Timaeus* is read mostly in a narrower theoretical context. Two exceptions are Pigeaud (1995) 26–27, Johansen (2004) 198, both quoted in Thein (2008) 52 n. 7.

39 In Plato, no passage therefore corresponds to Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.10.1–8, where Socrates converses with the painter Parrhasius and the sculptor Cleiton, discussing their arts and their means of expression.

word-induced alertness that makes *ekphrasis* work. If the *Timaeus* and the *Critias* appropriate Homer, the palinody of the *Phaedrus* makes Socrates, in his praise of erotic madness, appropriate various means of lyric poetry and put these means in the service of speech as something internally *animate*. Socrates' speech entertains a complex relation with the dialogue's subsequent explanation of the "true rhetoric", but it is safe to say that it is precisely this animation that enables Socrates to connect inspiration with rhetorical precepts. Well before the rhetorical manuals or *progymnasmata* that deal with *ekphrasis* thematically (see Chapter 1.1), Plato borrows the rhetorician Alcidamas' understanding of the speech as "animate" or "ensouled" (ἔμψυχον) and transforms this animation into a common source of speaking and visualizing.[40] Plato's amalgamation of life with a true writing and drawing "in the soul" is irreducible to a simple criticism of writing. The writing and drawing in the soul are meant to make us conscious of the undecidable nature of that "animation", which is part of our soul's natural motion that *touches* things we speak about "truly". On the same ground, any "true" *ekphrasis* blends our mind with the verbally wrought object whose enigmatic aliveness – palpable even if we assume it is *us* who is alive – is all the greater for its being a lump of matter. In this respect, the gift of what a scholiast will designate as "the animate armor" (τὰ ὅπλα ἔμψυχα) – an armor that will be suspected of exhibiting the self-moving figures – is the gift of marriage between a certain kind of speech and a certain type of object: a union that consecrates the art of *ekphrasis* and its toying with the mental life of images.[41]

With a little help from the semantic scale of the verb γράφειν, to write and to draw, but also to scratch or to carve, and of the noun ζῷον, animal and picture (of an animal), Plato is anticipating the natural openness of speech to images, mental or other.[42] Still, I will not recur to Plato on every possible occasion in order to parade the well-worn philosophical references. His evocation of the animate speech, which pertains to writing and drawing alike, is worth bearing in mind, but it must not obscure the fact that neither Plato nor Homer before him, or the scholiasts and rhetoricians after him, had any precise notion of what exactly "life" is. Our situation is not very different as no generally accepted definition of life is available today, so that our understanding of speaking, writing and imagining may or may not come surprisingly close to the ancient authors who took the mental images for alive in at least that minimal sense that they were moving around our bodies thanks to the blood. Be it within or without, the power to animate tends to

40 For Plato's borrowing from Alcidamas, see most recently Irani (2017) 167–170 (with further literature).

41 The scholion on "the animate armor" is *schol. Hom. Il.* 19.13 (bT) p. 575 E., in Erbse (1975) 575. For ancient disagreements about the animation proper to the ecphrastic shields, see Cullhed (2014) 196–219. In most recent debates about the images and their agency, this issue crossbreeds with inquiries into how images construe their spectators. On this latter issue, see Mitchell (2005). For more on the ecphrastic agency, see the Conclusion.

42 On the verb γράφειν, see Lissarrague (1992); on Socrates' play on the double meaning of ζῷον at the beginning of the *Timaeus*, see David (1984).

cross the neatly drawn boundaries, and to insist on a decisive clarification of this point would be a bad start for an inquiry into one facet of imagining or visualizing, a facet whose animating power will be at the heart of our concerns.[43]

5 Summary of the chapters

All these concerns, from the fact that *ekphrasis* has become again the center of much attention to the general issue of how ecphrastic objects animate our mind, helped to give this book a sharper focus: one where a detailed look at certain well-known descriptions would reveal their multifaceted character, which comprises the apparently incongruous dimensions of reality and exemplifies the refined artificiality that comes to us, human beings, most naturally. Briefly put, by following William Carlos Williams' dictum "no ideas but in things", I will develop the basic ecphrastic intuition that no things are more natural to us than artefacts which express, with wondrous and terrifying consequences, *our* nature. Once this decision taken, it seemed obvious to go back to that opening of the ecphrastic field which presents us with its original scene, the Homeric description of both a thing and an action: Hephaestus' crafting, in the *Iliad* 18, of the shield of Achilles. Following this thread, I will then progress to other ancient shields crafted by other poets.

Before tackling the individual shields, the first chapter ("Limits of Definition: From *Progymnasmata* to the Ecphrastic Life at Large") revisits some general features of *ekphrasis*, but also offers a thorough explanation of my choice of the ecphrastic shields as an exemplary "somewhere": a delimited field closely connected to human shape and size. This somewhere, however, is also a nowhere insofar as the shields in question cannot be simply pasted upon particular artefacts with measurable dimensions, great or small, that could be seen and touched beyond the mental image suffused with words – except, of course, those artefacts that the described shields inspired and helped to bring into existence. The choice of shields as paradigmatic ecphrastic objects is thus justified independently of the difference between a notional *ekphrasis* and a description of a "really existing" material thing. Even in the case of material things that we can directly observe, imagination is at work since it *complements* the gaze.[44] When we reconstruct the vision from an ecphrastic text, this difference does not lose its meaning entirely,

43 Already Aristotle states that "nature passes continuously from lifeless things to animals" (φύσις μεταβαίνει συνεχῶς ἀπὸ τῶν ἀψύχων εἰς τὰ ζῷα) (*Parts of Animals* 4.5, 681a12–13). Aristotle never considers the place of artefacts on this scale and does not worry about the works of art as artefacts whose specific agency implies a complex mental underpinning. On difficulties to define life, see Thompson (2008) 33–48.

44 That we never visualize *exactly* what we see is assumed by thinkers as different as Aristotle and Wittgenstein. We *can*, however, imagine what we are looking at *as* being something else or as having some invisible property: "Look at a stone and imagine it having sensations," asks Wittgenstein (2009) § 284, and admits that this is difficult to do seriously. But if we see the stone as *resembling* something, or directly as a statue, we imagine "its" sensations or feelings much more easily.

but the *underlying* difference between a notional and a "real" or material object tends to disappear.

The chapter therefore reaffirms the paradigmatic status that the Homeric shield of Achilles – an exemplary thing if ever there was one, a true hand-held universe (a situation *literalized* on the *Iliac tablets* (Figures 0.2a and 0.2b)[45] – receives already in the ancient manuals of rhetoric. By the same token, it reconsiders the alleged divide between the ancient and the modern *ekphrasis*, a divide which is sometimes said to follow from the narrowing down of modern *ekphrasis* to descriptions of artworks. Yet not only is this narrowing questionable but, more importantly for my subject, the essentially artful *ekphrasis* has always been attracted by complex *artefacts* and the meaning of their construction. If indeed *ekphrasis* ancient and modern differ, it would rather be in that the former's focus is on what is marvelous as opposed to the ordinary,[46] whereas the latter, assuming that gods and heroes are gone and the age of men and things can begin, shows the marvelous – and the terrifying – as hidden in the ordinary (for instance, in the objects of modern consumption as described by Zola or Flaubert).[47] But, again, the paradigmatic *ekphrasis* of the shield of Achilles deploys both of these registers simultaneously, juxtaposing divine vastness with everyday labor, apparently without any concern for their incongruity. Echoing a well-known text by Thomas Mitchell ("What Do Pictures Want?"), the chapter then suggests that what *ekphrasis* wants is to make us vividly aware of the relativity of the large and the small, the human and the non-human, the inner and the outer.

As the first chapter ends with further suggestions about the ecphrastic animation and its relation to our bodily scheme, Chapter 2 ("The Shield of Achilles: Between the Body and the Universe") opens by establishing the relation between the dimensionless mental images and the imaginative power situated in Hephaestus' chest: the shield, fabricated in a nocturnal setting of the god's workshop, is a projection of this power, and only as such it can both encompass all registers of human life and reach far beyond it towards the rotating cosmic envelope. Shifting

45 See Squire (2011) 303–370, on the fascinating case of the miniaturized shield of Achilles on the *Iliac Tablets* (*Tabulae Iliacae*). For an overview of the visual and plastic posterity of the shield of Achilles, see Lecoq (2010).

46 At the very least, the object of *ekphrasis* should be noble and beautiful. Cf. Pseudo-Demetrius, *On Style*, 165: "to artfully describe what is ridiculous is like to beautify an ape" (τὸ δὲ ἐκφράζειν τὰ γέλοια ὅμοιόν ἐστι καὶ καλλωπίζειν πίθηκον). However, it is not clear how far on the scala naturae this rule extends; see Webb (2009) 79 on "Aphthonios' puzzling addition of 'plants and dumb animals'" to the list of the objects of *ekphrasis*. I agree with Hawhee (2017) 91 that this addition is less incongruous than Webb has it (Theon reminds us of the *ekphraseis* of ibis, hippopotamus or crocodile), but this is an issue to be discussed elsewhere, under the rubric of the (scientific and encyclopedic) description of fully natural beings including their characters.

47 I am obliged to leave aside the changing status of description in between the Renaissance and the eighteenth to nineteenth century. On this development, see Eisendrath (2018) on the Renaissance and Stalnaker (2010) on the age of Enlightenment. Also, I cannot analyze here the technical *ekphrasis*, an extremely interesting category that exists since antiquity (see Roby 2016) and *oscillates between* the ordinary and the marvelous.

Figure 0.2a Obverse of *Tabula Iliaca* 4N (Musei Capitolini, Sala delle Colombe, Rome: inv. 83a).

Source: Photograph by M. J. Squire.

its scale, this *ekphrasis* cuts through various layers of reality: cosmic, divine, human, fantastic, ordinary. All these registers are created for us *in and by words*, suggesting that the wonderful is a matter of perspective rather than nature. If so, then the latter is certainly not "imitated" in the modern sense of the term, but fully re-enacted as the power of constant unfolding of appearances. In this context, the

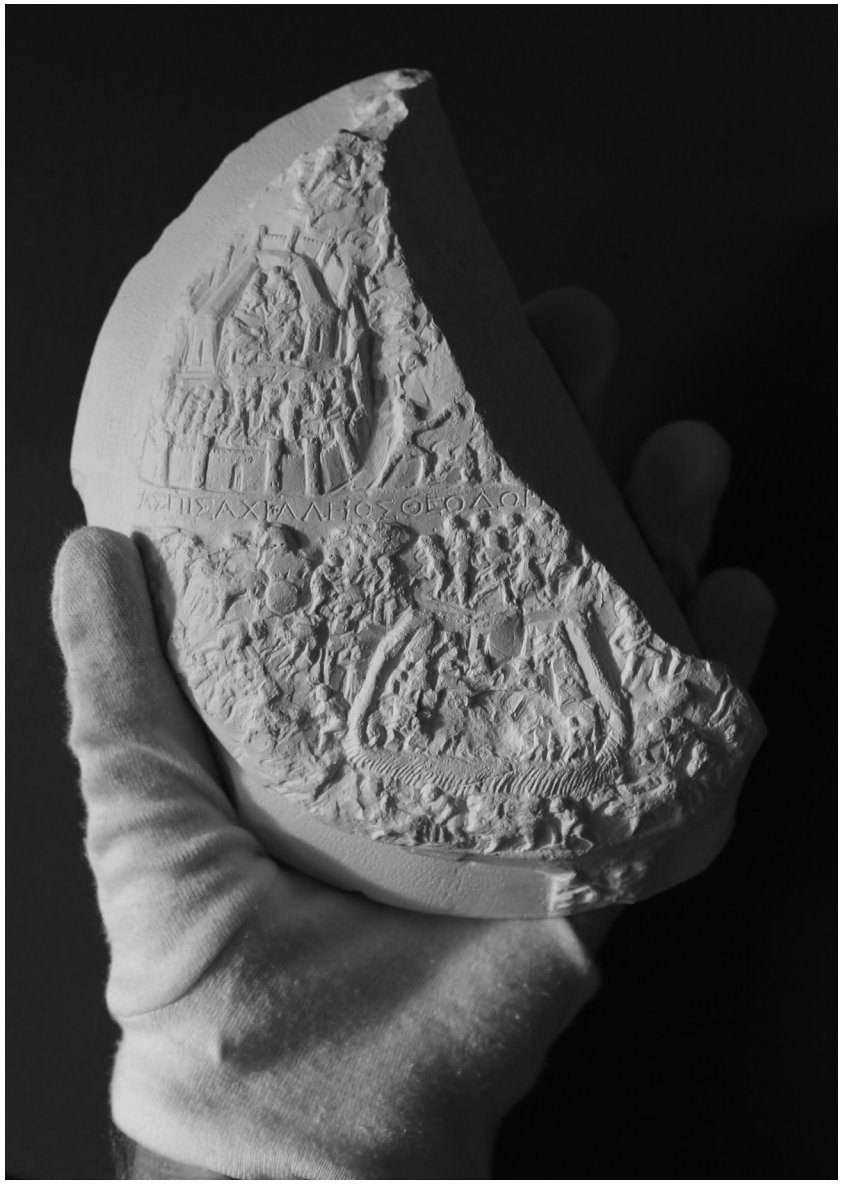

Figure 0.2b Plaster cast of *Tabula Iliaca* 4N (Göttingen, Archäologisches Institut und Sammlung der Gipsabgüsse: inv. A1695).

Source: Photograph by M. J. Squire.

chapter pays close attention to how *ekphrasis* not only expresses the malleability of divine and humane bodies but relies on the complicity between artful description and divine craft of producing living creatures.

Blooming with many artificial lives, the shield of Achilles takes full advantage of the underlying transformation of materials used by Hephaestus in its making. It is especially in the ecphrastic countryside that this transformation is deeply embedded in natural things and makes it virtually impossible to distinguish between nature and artifice. Correlatively, Homer uses expressions that may well describe images as well as the things imagined, implying that it is only the mode of our attention that conditions whether we feel, at any given moment of the ecphrastic progress, that we are visiting the world at large or human mind. In other words, as the chapter tries to demonstrate by rereading the scenes on the shield, this *ekphrasis* succeeds in making the individual images palpably vivid while blurring the borders that must encompass them: this, again, is because *ekphrasis* succeeds in moving our mind alongside a mental scale where certain physical constraints need not apply. As a result, even if the shield of Achilles *could* be executed in the metals described, no such execution would have on us the same effect as the ecphrastic interplay between the individual scenes (marriages, litigation, war, hunt, harvest, songs, dance) and the *implied* overall structure of the shield-world.

The shield of Achilles triumphs by achieving a subtle tension between immersing us in the details of individual scenes and transcending them by progressively building up a sort of constantly modulated cosmic mood, perhaps with the Olympic gods and personifications of emotional states as suggested mediators. The Pseudo-Hesiodic *ekphrasis*, analyzed in Chapter 3 ("The Shield of Heracles: The Monstrous and the Civilized"), revisits this dispositive while introducing two changes. First, it adds the borderline regions of the sea with its depths and the Hades, thus inaugurating the long tradition of ecphrastic tackles on what is teasingly semi-transparent (water) and what is invisible yet striving to become present (ghosts in all shapes). Second, and correlatively, it introduces an *adunaton* in the sense of a technically unfeasible object. This object is the figure of Perseus, who not only hovers *above* the surface of the shield but is, at that very moment, hidden by his invisibility helmet. This can be read as an ecphrastic hint at the difference between "being seen" and "being there" (but, as we will discover, even this ecphrastic Perseus can still be smelled). Also, since this shield is again due to Hephaestus, the invisible yet present figure suspended in the air is a reminder of divine art as cause whose inner working we cannot figure out while experiencing its effects. Compared to the careful exposition of Hephaestus' art in the Homeric *ekphrasis*, this is a major shift in ecphrastic mood. As a result, this shield suggests a more fragmentary space, and an uncertainty about whether it offers an unintentionally fragmented picture of reality, or a well-crafted picture of complex and evolving reality. Traditionally, the commentators tended to assume the former: hence the recurrent description of this shield as "baroque", which, even if it is only meant to characterize a specific ecphrastic style, unavoidably suggests a contorted substance. On my reading, the latter option is preferable. Not only this

ekphrasis, breaking through the barrier separating the visible from the invisible, enlarges the scope of what the surface of the shield can embrace; it also accommodates to the character of the shield's bearer, who is a hero much more versatile than Achilles. Both Achilles and Heracles are slaughterers with a strong savage streak, but only Heracles is a Panhellenic hero with a broad civilizing mission. What is implicit in *his* tailor-made shield is the recognition that to stand for civilization means to fight monsters, the hero's own demons included.

Reminding us that Zeus' plan in fathering Heracles was "to produce a protector against ruin for gods and for men who live on bread" (*Shield* 28–29), the poem evokes the background from which the shield emerges, perhaps to suggest an ecphrastic progress from the personified ancient powers (Fear, Strife, Dark Fates and others) to the Olympian gods and finally human civilization. The last images of human life on this shield are those of a peaceful harvesting season and of the violence channeled into competitions and games, which are then described as an endlessly repeating event. This suggested repetition is one of several instances where this shield acquires a quietly miraculous dimension that, more than the eerie episodes of violence, makes it different from the shield of Achilles. All things considered, the shield of Heracles places more sophisticated demands on both our imaginative activity *and* our imaginative restraint, as if intending to test its audience in new ways.[48]

The presence of a visionary dimension is unmistakable on the shields of Achilles and Heracles alike, including the variously evoked cosmic coordinates: the rotating celestial dome in the former and the detailed, swelling Ocean in the latter case. This dimension undergoes a thorough refashioning in Virgil's most elaborate ecphrastic piece analyzed in Chapter 4 ("The Shield of Aeneas: Touching the Mental Image"). Here cosmos itself becomes politicized and, as a result, permeated by an entirely different temporal regime where all things, including heavens and monsters, become implicitly political. This only confirms that the new cultural context of this *ekphrasis* is no less, and rather more, important than the obvious echoes of the shields of Achilles and Heracles. For this reason, before encountering Aeneas, who grasps and carefully inspect his new shield, the chapter pays close attention to Virgil's *ekphrasis* of the pictures in Juno's temple at Carthage that, not unlike the shield of Aeneas, relies on an artful play with the past, the future and their visible incarnation intertwined with human emotions. The issues of gaze and time, visibility and invisibility – and of Lessing's reading of Virgil – then carry on to a detailed rereading of the most emblematic Roman shield, which can be neither grasped without its political dimension nor reduced to it – hence the repeated focus on Virgil's handling of the ecphrastic qualities of this

48 I wish to stress that, focusing on these complications, I must leave aside the issues pertaining to metallurgy and, more broadly, to the cultural nexus of this but also other shields. On this nexus, see Lissarrague (2007), (2009). On the sometimes mysterious ancient metallurgy and its mythological dimension (including the activities of the metal-crafting daimones such as Telchines), see Blakely (2006).

shield as *non enarrabile textum*; hence also the last part of the chapter that discusses the question of how the ecphrastic objects can be treated as tangible things.

Chapter 5 ("Other Voices, Other Shields: The Ecphrastic Life Mutating") begins by a brief reminder of the crucial difference between those ecphrastic shields that invite us to marvel at the universe as a whole and other ecphrastic shields designed to produce one specific emotion, usually fear. This latter case can be more neatly related to surviving visual material, which only makes the former case more intriguing. However, the chapter avoids the general view that would subsume the shields in question under the unified heading of the cosmic icon. Instead, it brings out what is particular to a series of creations that starts with the lineage of the shield of Achilles, which was reworked no less than four different times: first in Euripides, then in the *Ilias Latina*, and finally in two very detailed versions which are due to the Younger Philostratus (who transforms metallurgy into painting and poetry into prose) and Quintus of Smyrna, who offers us a truly alternative shield of Achilles. The shield of Aeneas was not directly remade in the same way, but it echoes strongly in the shield of Hannibal in Silius Italicus' *Punica*. Also, this last shield forms a sort of diptych with the shield of Theseus in Statius' *Thebaid* since both shields focus on the fate of a mighty city, Carthage and Thebes respectively, whose decline offers a counterpoint to Rome's ascent. Finally, there is the shield of Dionysus in Nonnus, twice the length of the Homeric shield and full of resonances of all the previously discussed shields. All these cases have attracted scholarly attention, but, as far as I can tell, they were never brought together and read as extensions of the possibilities encoded in their "originals", analyzed in Chapters 2 and 4. As a relatively independent issue, connected nevertheless to the shield of Theseus, the chapter also brings in the motif of the shield as mirror and its relation to the shield *ekphrasis*.

On the background of the five previous chapters, the Conclusion ("*Ekphrasis* in the Expanded Field") suggests that, among other things, the ecphrastic shields analyzed in this book bring out the impossibility of drawing a clear line between things and minds. If this book's first chapter insists that there are no private mental images, its Conclusion is finally better equipped to say more about how this empowers *ekphrasis* to reach out towards both things and readers: even the ecphrastic objects, be they notional or not, are part of the world through the body that we inhabit while we feel, speak, imagine. In the same vein, stressing one last time the importance of the shield's surface as *relief*, the Conclusion revisits the issue of *ekphrasis* and tactility. Here the focus is on how the shapes of things are described as emerging from the inherently opaque but not inert matter, thus acquiring a sort of "visible tangibility". The latter reinforces the ecphrastic "desire" (as Hesychius' definition of *ekphrasis* has it) to grasp things by means of "vivid speech" resonating in a living body. That this grasp amounts to *creating* the object in question can be best detected when we focus on the play of scale and the free passage from the detail to a large panorama and back again. This play, which is indeed my central and recurring subject, may rely on the scaleless nature of mental images, but still presupposes the determinate matter from which the ecphrastic object is crafted. In fact, *ekphrasis* maintains the original bond between

matter and figure, drawing our attention to both and reveling in this twofold presentation (we grasp, for example, the bronze *together with* the molded figure). This twofoldness, which makes *ekphrasis* irreducible to any scheme of representation, is also an important aspect of the ecphrastic animation, which is not a fallout of some naïve vitalism, but builds upon the inherent qualities of corporeal imagination whose activity is not a mute visualizing, but a merging of the visual component with differently attuned, poetically expressed language games. This merging is what allows us to speak about "*ekphrasis* in the expanded field" even when we turn to the historically first cases of ecphrastic practice.

6 *Ekphrasis* and the naturalness of artifice

As the preceding summary makes clear, shields as miniature worlds in relief are crucial for my effort at saying something general about *ekphrasis* while keeping in mind that the latter *avoids* all generality and adheres to the palpable detail that gives it its edge.[49] Of course, these shields cannot sum up all ecphrastic operations. But, in virtue of an inconspicuous metonymy, shields are good at revealing how *ekphrasis* reveals the complicity between human nature and artificiality. In this regard, my take on the ecphrastic shields differs from the approach advocated by Murray Krieger. Introducing his important book on *ekphrasis* with a "Foreword: On Shields", Krieger focuses on the shield of Achilles and submits that, while passing into the ecphrastic element, this verbal shield conserves the shield's protective function. As a result, it turns not only into the poem within the poem, but into the whole poem's heart: it reinforces the power of poetry to project an alternative world where the time stands still. On this reading, what *ekphrasis* induces is the understanding of representation as a step back from reality: as a magic protective screen upon which a different and more transparent or "readable" reality is projected. Krieger therefore concludes that what *ekphrasis* presents to us

> is both a miracle and a mirage: a miracle because a sequence of actions filled with befores and afters such as language alone can trace seems frozen into an instant's vision, but a mirage because only the illusion of such an impossible picture can be suggested by the poem's words. The poet, with divine verbal forging, may induce us to imagine . . . that on one shield we can perceive the moving breadth of Greek culture or on the other, from past to future, the glorified history of the Roman empire, all spread out before us to be taken in, as on an emblem, all at once. But we must stay with the poem and with the imagined object it inspires in us, since its supposed object of imitation is only that imagined object. It is our unattainable dream of a total verbal form, a tangible verbal space. We may see it as the poem's miracle, and that seeing is our mirage. This peculiar – and paradoxical – jointly produced experience

49 For more on miniatures including their relation to the sublime, see Chapter 1.3 with further references.

of *ekphrasis* allows it to function as the consummate example of the verbal art, the ultimate shield beyond shields.[50]

By transforming *ekphrasis* into the principle of poetry, Krieger no doubt elevates the stakes of the debate. By the same token, however, he risks narrowing the interest of *ekphrasis* to the issue of poetry as protecting us from the danger of reality while enabling us to "stop time" and so to put this danger at some distance. Krieger brings out the parallelism between this issue and the shield's protective function, and there is no doubt that a strong complicity is indeed at work between the ecphrastic shields and fear or horror experienced by those who met the ancient shields (or their modern equivalents) in combat.[51] I will not neglect this concurrence, but we should not forget that the ecphrastic screen is also erected by forces other than fear and its poetically sophisticated expression. Even as imagined, the ecphrastic shield points strongly beyond the issue of "representation" and, instead, makes sense as *a thing*. All things present on such a shield are translated less *into* language than *by language* into a mental state which is of course never mute: it acquires its own specific whispers. Thanks to these whispers, *ekphrasis* can manipulate time in different registers and, without losing sight of things, create a four-dimensional mental image which is not unlike the condition that film started to recreate, only recently, with the "bullet time" or "the big freeze": a shot where time neither stops nor simply slows down, but goes at different speeds within the same visual field. The ecphrastic field consists, by and large, in such an ongoing differentiation.[52]

This slightly eerie effect can indeed serve to artfully alleviate our sense of witnessing something frightful. In this respect, the shields discussed in this book are a specific variation on Krieger's dialectics of miracle and mirage in that they orchestrate an encounter of human poetry with divine creativity. Hephaestus' divine hands forge the shields that offer themselves to human words as supreme artefacts that incarnate the world and its history. The tension between this globalizing impulse and the necessarily partial description makes the ecphrastic object into something accessible yet indefinitely complex. Of course, "indefinitely complex" can be said of every lump of matter or every emotion, but not every such lump and every emotion are *about* that complexity as such. Suggesting the materiality of its object, *ekphrasis* indicates that the gap allegedly separating words from things is less clean-cut than it seems. After all, words *are* palpable for those who speak them aloud with their tongue and mouth.[53] In this regard, even

50 Krieger (1992) xvi–xvii. As for individual ecphrastic shields, Krieger only refers to those of Achilles and Aeneas. On Krieger and his conclusions, see Bram (2006).

51 See Erickson (2010) on ecphrastic encounters with fear and the political condition of humankind. Lovatt (2013) 197–203 is excellent on the fear and the gaze that the ecphrastic shields return us. For more, see Chapter 5.1.

52 The term "bullet time" is associated with the camera technique used in film *The Matrix* and appropriated (or imitated) by a host of video games and other films. Unlike the terms for ancient poetic techniques, it has been a registered trademark of Warner Bros. since 2005.

53 See Abrams (2012) on poetry as physical activity and the tactility of (even silent) enunciation of a poem. On the "reading body" in modern context, cf. Stewart (1990). On related issues in ancient

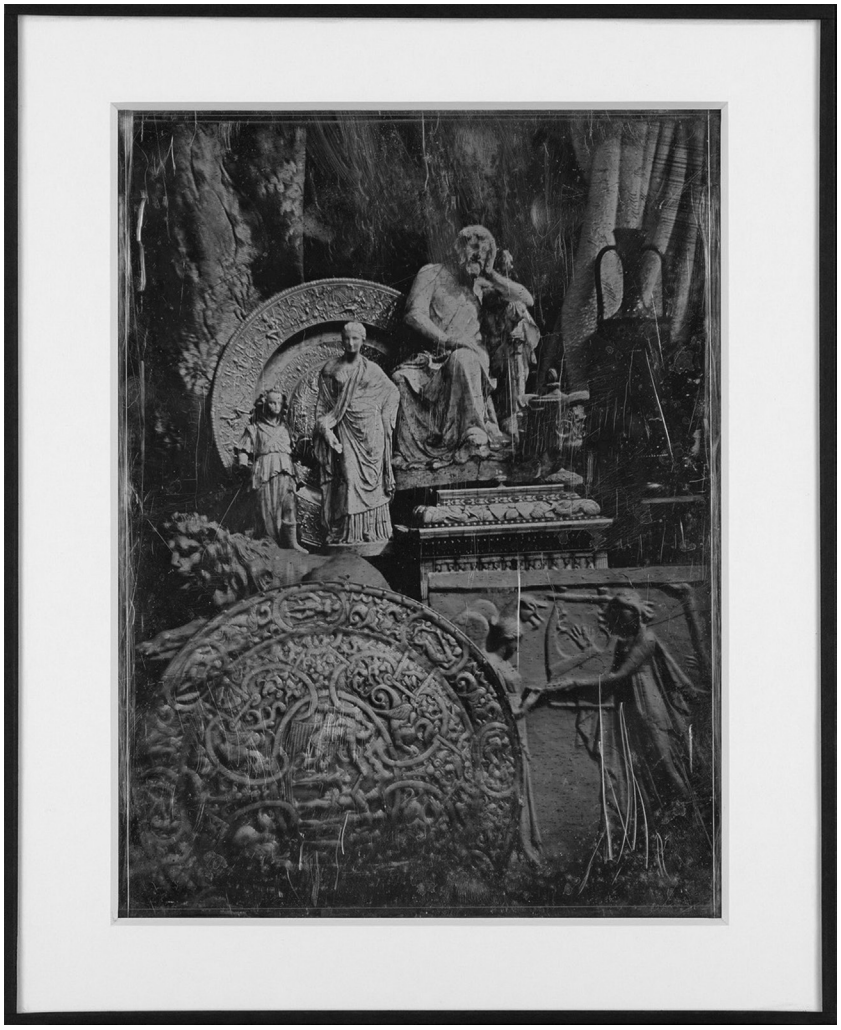

Figure 0.3 François-Alphonse Fortier, *Still Life with Shields*, 1839–1840, daguerreotype, 21 x 16 cm.

Source: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des Estampes et de la Photographie: Rés. Eg7–261 (© Europeana.eu).

the read *ekphrasis* functions as a silent yet resonant voice, articulating things, for us and in us, with uncommon attention and patience.

context, see Butler (2015), Budelmann and Phillips (2018) on poetic performance and "textual events".

Although this attention and patience are what the ecphrastic unfolding demands from us, they also explain why there is something photographic in this process. Not in the sense that *ekphrasis* would faithfully reproduce or imprint on our mind what is there to be seen (we have already discarded this notion while quoting and discussing Antoine Albalat). The kinship in question is more literal and technical since it has to do with the processes of developing a photograph into a sort of fixed silver relief. The early descriptions of daguerreotypes capture this process *and* its result by speaking about photographs as engravings – and by submitting them to an ecphrastic discourse.[54] This rendering of photographs as engravings embraces their suggestive surface which emerges by negating the geometrical flatness. What *ekphrasis* evokes is precisely a tangible relief reminiscent not only of engraving, but also of shields and other forged objects: cups, buckles, tiaras, belts, breastplates. Not incidentally, these objects appear in the early daguerreotypes as objects akin to the technical procedure in question (think only of François-Alphonse Fortier's 1839–1840 *Still Life with Shields* (Figure 0.3)). The choice of these object by early ekphrasists and early photographers obeys the same logic: at any moment of history, they can be presented as things already ancient and, in their own way, indestructible. Moreover, if these objects are worn on the body or very close to it, they can also pass from one body to another, establishing genealogies that I will tackle in Chapter 5. All these features enable the poets to use them in order to tie the naturally light and fugitive imagination down to a piece of well-wrought matter. *Ekphrasis* uses imagination to convey (and indeed accentuate) the physicality that permeates the visual.

Ekphrasis is not the only art of language that can neither be distinguished from a craft nor simply identified as one. Still, it treats language in a highly specific way since its formal constraints are not those of metrical schemes or prosaic conventions; rather, it takes upon itself the demands of a handicraft fully focused on the uttermost precision. To put it simply, to evoke and imagine any given thing in the richness of its detail takes a considerable time and effort. The first chapter takes therefore for its point of departure the rarity of description in everyday speech, which follows from the fact that we conceptualize the world more naturally than we simply describe it. Also, we are accustomed to subordinate the description to some larger construction, be it a narrative or a theory, rather than understand it on its own terms.[55] Neither narratives nor theories, however, do justice to *ekphrasis* as a counter-intuitive, never-quite-natural art that makes things fully present, but no less enigmatic.

54 See Hermange (2002), Caraion (2003) 109–176. Recently, in a mirroring gesture, the photograph was called "a visual *ekphrasis*". See Elsner (2010) 13: "The photograph is a visual ekphrasis – interpretative, angled, chosen, made possible by a particular circumstance, the presence of a photographer in a specific time and place." Here the technical aspects of the kinship fade away since the photographs in question are mostly digital (an inconvenient name suggesting what it avoids, namely the embracing, hand-like touch). Still, the complicity survives in a new setting: in the art historical discourse accompanied by images, the photograph becomes "a kind of ekphrasis within an ekphrasis – a visual interpretative framing within a textual interpretative framing" (24).

55 See Goldie (2012) 9–10.

1 Limits of definition

From *progymnasmata* to the ecphrastic life at large

1 Descriptions require training: on the *progymnasmata*

Perceiving and speaking are natural human activities. To speak in order to say what we are perceiving would therefore seem equally natural. After all, among the many modalities of the relation between the words and the images derived from our senses, it is the description that should be the simplest and modest one. And yet, truly detailed descriptions are conspicuously absent from, or at least rare in our daily conversations. The reason is obvious: description requires too much patience to be useful in most practical situations. Not only does it need to be carefully elaborated; it asks to be carefully followed – another thing we rarely do since our mind scribbles away rather than writes down. We are constantly noticing and judging, often commanding, but almost never just describing.

In all, descriptions are rare and do not come quite naturally to us: they are more on the artificial side. What comes to us naturally is abstractions in the loose sense of rough sketches that get rid of the detail and appear to get right at the heart of the matter. Usually, speech clothes events in easily acquired sense – it makes them *interesting* without asking too much of our time and attention. Aiming at the pleasure of participation in things that have happened, the moderately abstract accounts, focused on actions or emotions, satisfy, without much effort, our natural desire to learn. Every reader of Aristotle knows this, and modern variations on this theme are countless, ranging from thrillers to popular science.

Of adventure, however, there are many kinds, including the very slow ones for which the taste needs to be acquired. Paradoxically, such an acquisition is facilitated by the same condition that usually enables us to avoid long descriptive efforts: the art of describing relies on the work of imagination which, at literally every moment of our life, fills in the linguistic and mental voids of all kinds. Imagining is no less natural to human beings than are perceiving and speaking, and human nature does indeed abhor a vacuum.

Imagination's relation to linguistic expression is of course inherently precarious. On the trivial side, it produces vague, under-determined objects that are, however, not structurally false in the same sense as a wrongly formed sentence. On the less trivial side, our sentences may concern something fundamentally imageless, and yet imagination keeps supplying the improper correlates to our words:

DOI: 10.4324/9781003154051-2

there are, especially, no true pictures of negations, and some linguistic modalities express equally unreal content ("I am not sitting at my table" is a strictly speaking imageless sentence – except that it makes me imagine myself at my table or imagine myself doing anything whatsoever). What we say and what we imagine are often two different things, and it is also for this reason that imagination, whose work cannot be simply stopped for the time we read or hear a description, supplies always too little and too much at one and the same time.

Such is the background situation against which the ecphrastic artifice can be measured. Before turning to the individual shields, this chapter will take a necessary closer look at some ancient views on *ekphrasis* and their modern echoes and add a few things about the elusive nature of mental images (or more prudently states) that sustain every ecphrastic exercise.

So far, I have used the general label of description as partly interchangeable with the more technical term *ekphrasis*, originally used to name a type of rhetorical composition that counts among the "preliminary exercises" (προγυμνάσματα), or to identity some descriptive passages in Homer and other "first class" authors.[1] In the last few decades, not only this relatively small corpus but the whole tradition that applies the term *ekphrasis* to literary texts, from ancient to modern, underwent an intense scrutiny that resulted in an avalanche of scholarly publications and a better understanding of the ineluctably intimate yet teasing relations between words and images.[2] One of the keystones of this revival has been the repeated warning against collapsing together the ancient exercise of *ekphrasis* as exemplified in the *progymnasmata* and the use of description in modern poetry and literature. Especially, it was stressed that we must not project back onto ancient texts the narrowing down of *ekphrasis* of which, on Ruth Webb's influential reading, Leo Spitzer is the main culprit: in his 1955 essay on Keats' *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, Spitzer understands *ekphrasis* as "the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art", "the description of an *objet d'art* by the medium of the word", and, most briefly, "words about an image". Such a

1 For ancient uses of *ekphrasis*, see Webb (2009), who offers the most thorough analysis of *progymnasmata*. For an quick overview of the latter, I quote Gibson (2008) xxi–xxii:

> Greek *progymnasmata* are known to us today through two main sources: (1) treatises written for students and/or teachers, which contain precepts along with suggested themes and fully or partially elaborated examples of the exercises, and (2) free-standing collections of model exercises. We have four treatises on the *progymnasmata*, namely, those by Theon (first or fifth century CE), [Hermogenes] (probably second century), Aphthonius (fourth century), and Nicolaus of Myra (fifth century). Of the collections of model exercises in prose composition that survive from antiquity, the collection attributed to Libanius is the largest. There also survive several other late-antique and Byzantine collections of *progymnasmata* (many of which show knowledge of Libanius's collection), as well as epitomes, introductions, scholia, and commentaries to the very influential treatise by Aphthonius, who was a student of Libanius.

2 Squire (2009) 139–146 emphasizes this renewal of interest while quoting the most important contributions and establishing a link between contemporary preoccupations and ancient theorizing *and practice* of *ekphrasis*.

use of the original Greek term implies a retrospective genealogy ranging "from Homer and Theocritus to the Parnassians and Rilke": a genealogy whose double sin would consist, according to Webb, in cementing a largely fictitious generic unity ("Spitzer's achievement was to create a concept of a poetic genre that triumphantly transcended both time and place") while drastically reducing the much broader original scope of the term.[3]

The reason I quote this criticism here is to emphasize its unintended consequences: whereas the focus on the *progymnasmata* may indeed yield a notion of *ekphrasis* purged of the allegedly modern fascination with art, the more recent appraisals of various forms of the actual practice of describing, exercised by a number of authors across all genres of discourse, leads to a different, if not opposite conclusion: the "ancients" are in fact happily "modern" in their explorations of the manifold interplay of words and images, including, quite prominently, the issue of poetic imagination as a crossroad between seeing and saying. In all, transcending time and place is pretty much at heart of many *ekphraseis* that, in poetry as well as prose, delve into how to achieve such a transcending by immersing themselves (and us) into the very matter of objects under description.[4]

It is therefore no surprise that objects produced by arts and crafts are in the foreground even in ancient descriptions: they incarnate the same tissue of tensions that linguistic artefacts do. And Spitzer's misreading, if we take it for one, is after all quite conform to the fact that, in every historical period, a remarkable number of descriptions concerns *extraordinary artefacts* including those that Spitzer labels *objet d'art*. By the same token, these descriptions invite us to look beyond what distinguishes the ancient *ekphrasis* from modern description and towards their shared features. In this broader context, it is worth noticing that extraordinary artefacts are present not only in ancient poetry and literature, but in the *progymnasmata* too, perhaps more prominently than it is usually assumed. To take measure of this presence before trying to make full sense of it, let us take a brief look at two closely connected yet not identical layers of these manuals, namely at how they define *ekphrasis* and at how they illustrate it.

The aim and character of *ekphrasis* is agreed upon by all *progymnasmata* starting with Aelius Theon: it is "descriptive language (λόγος περιηγηματικός), bringing what is portrayed clearly (ἐναργῶς) before the eyes" (118.7–8). This formula is repeated almost verbatim by Pseudo-Hermogenes, who also follows Theon in adding that clarity (*saphēneia*) and vividness (*enargeia*) are the main virtues of an *ekphrasis* which are needed since "the expression (ἑρμηνεία) should almost (σχεδόν) create seeing through the hearing" (Theon 119.31–32). Aphthonius too reiterates

3 Quotations are from Webb (1999a) 7–9, (2009) 33–35, Spitzer (1955). Webb's position is anticipated in Friedländer (1912) 85. See also Bertho (1998), Krieger (1992) 7–8 (*pace* what Webb 2009: 36 says on the latter). On Spitzer's influence, see Vrânceanu (2010). Webb herself does not reduce ancient *ekphrasis* to preparatory exercises: see her subtle analyses of how *ekphrasis* addresses the issue of material world and its transcendence in James and Webb (1991), Webb (1999b).

4 For persuasive reevaluations of Webb's basic claim, see at least Elsner (2002) 2–3, Bartsch and Elsner (2007) i–ii, Squire (2008), 238–241, Squire (2011) 326–327, Zeitlin (2013) 18–19.

Theon's basic formula, and so does Nicolaus the Sophist, who also stresses that the word "vividly" (*enargōs*) distinguishes description from narration and that "the latter gives a plain exposition of actions, the former tries to make the hearers into spectators" (a point to which I will return shortly). As for the two Byzantine commentators known to us, John of Sardis (ninth century) and John Doxapatres (eleventh century), they say important things about the composition and use of *ekphrasis*, but do not elaborate upon its definition (the later of the two offers only the most condensed formula by stating that it is "a detailed account" or, perhaps, "an account full of subtle detail", ἡ λεπτομερὴς διήγησις).[5]

These variations on a single brief definition may seem a bit of a letdown, but their very brevity is important in indicating the lack of any formal or generic features truly proper to *ekphrasis*. This is *also* why, besides its rhetorical use, *ekphrasis* can be grafted on epic, lyric, history, novel of adventure, even philosophy – as it already has been by the time the quoted definition was born. Once so grafted, the ecphrastic seed may keep growing to literally *any* length, a situation which is perhaps implicitly acknowledged in later commentaries: John of Sardis, for instance, includes among his examples Philostratus' *Images*. In due course, we will see more clearly how *ekphrasis* moves freely through genres and types of discourse. Here it is important to acknowledge this inherent ecphrastic homelessness and to realize that this is precisely why the authors of *progymnasmata*, masters of rhetoric, need to define the evocative description in order to keep it under control (rhetoric talks to people to make them act in the world, so it needs to get a firm hold on *ekphrasis*; poetry, as we will see, uses *ekphrasis* more broadly to make things talk back to us and, often enough, resist us). Yet even at the heart of this disciplinary effort, some ambiguities persist. Before returning *ekphrasis* to the poets and other writers, it is thus instructive to take a brief look not only at its rhetorical definition but also at how this definition is explained and illustrated. For, no matter how businesslike the *progymnasmata* may sound, their grip on *ekphrasis* cannot stop it from overflowing the limits of rhetorical training and declamation. Even in this context, *ekphrasis* appears as a flourishing cultural practice that thrives precisely by feeding on its inner tensions.

Already in Aelius Theon, some of these tensions start to appear. The first and most obvious one follows from the virtues of vividness (*enargeia*) and clarity (*saphēneia*) and concerns the relation between the impact of a clear and vivid presentation on the one hand and the quantity of detail on the other hand. This is not a problem of some clean-cut polarity, since detail sustains clarity and vivacity,

5 I quote John Doxapatres after Hock (2012), previous authors after Kennedy (2003) or Webb (2009) Appendix A. For a concise summary with quotations, cf. Squire (2011) 327–328; for more detail, see Webb (2009) 51–55. Perhaps a caveat is in order right away: the insistence on power of "putting things before the mind's eye" is less specific of *ekphrasis* than the *progymnasmata* (and some of their interpretations) might suggest. Already in the classical period, this power is identified as typical of poetry's and rhetoric's hold over the audience. Moreover, Aristotle connects it explicitly to a successful verbal elaboration of the dramatic plot (*muthos*): the poet himself must visualize the incidents that he weaves together (see *Poetics* 17, 1455a22–32). Cf. Sheppard (2014) 22–27.

but there seems to be no general rule that would enable the orator to calculate the exact length of *ekphrasis* and so the number of features included in her speech. Certainly, the plausibility of the account is no such criterion since it is entirely in the service of persuasiveness that may well crumble under the weight of too many details. A more promising if still indirect lead would consist in the recommended correlation between the object of description and the latter's style. According to Theon, the style of any *ekphrasis* must conform to what is being described:

> in general one should fit the language to the subject, so that if the subject shown (τὸ δηλούμενον) is flowery, the style (φράσις) should also be flowery, but if it is harsh or frightening or anything else, the qualities of the expression should not be inappropriate to the nature of the subject.[6]

While confirming the protean nature of *ekphrasis*, this recommendation is not helpful in deciding how much detail it can bear. And we are not made any wiser by the preceding advice that "one should avoid speaking at great length about useless things." In fact, this advice implies that the length of an *ekphrasis* may be independent of any stylistic criteria and be instead proportionate to the nature of its subject. "Useless" is not to be understood in the sense of lacking a utilitarian value since storms or earthquakes, quoted by Theon, have none (or a negative one). Rather, the recommendation to avoid "useless things" implies the focus on something remarkable and unusual that contrasts with the canvass of everyday life.[7] This "something" need not be huge and overwhelming, although it often is. Besides storms or earthquakes, Theon recommends desert places, battles, famine, plague. These examples confirm that the object in question should be *disproportional* to mundane objects. At the same time, our imagination guarantees our distance from the extraordinary objects that can then be characterized as "dynamically sublime" in the Kantian sense: the imaginative distance enables me to react not only emotionally, but also rationally (I fully understand the evoked storm as fearful, but do not react by panicking).[8] In this respect, a miniature can be

6 Quoted after Webb (2009) 198, translation slightly modified. With an eye on contemporary poetry rather than ancient texts, Fletcher (2004) 45 says something similar: "if we hold that descriptions are always *of* something, that something is seen to exert a binding control over the forms and pieces of the description. The object of description commands its own descriptive treatment, so, for example, one would describe *brie* differently from a *bassoon*. That is, one's means of description would have to follow a rule given by the cheese, or the instrument. For this reason, in grammar 'descriptive clauses' are designed to convey those rare and special and often seemingly inessential properties of objects when we try to evolve those objects for others."

7 See the parallel judgment implied in Pliny's presentation of "smaller painting" (*minoris picturae*) of everyday objects. Still, even if a painter like Piraeicus painted "sordid things", his work was a pleasure to contemplate because of his skills (*Natural History* 35.112). Non incidentally, this reminds us of the "still lives" or *xenia* in the *ekphraseis* of the Elder Philostratus. On Piraeicus and the genre of still life, see Squire (2017).

8 In fact, some "catastrophic" ecphrastic objects mentioned by Theon would fit into the recent and broad category of "hyperobjects". On the latter, see Morton (2013) and, in relation to Classics, Porter (2019).

equally striking as a huge storm or a night battle – Hellenistic poetry attests to this truth abundantly by playing with the inherent lack of any natural scale of mental images, of which I will say more in the second part of this chapter.

But if the length of the *ekphrasis* relates to the value of the represented object, there should be some *inherent* correctness that can serve as a guide to the process of describing. And this correctness does *not* consist in being simply true to the facts: in his next paragraph, Theon asks whether an *ekphrasis* should refute or confirm descriptions made by other authors, and gives a negative answer: of course Herodotus' erroneous description of the ibis' black tail needs to be corrected, but this is no business of *ekphrasis* proper.[9] As we have said, concludes Theon, "such a species (of exercise) falls among refutations and confirmations of narrations (τῶν διηγημάτων)." This concluding paragraph of Theon's account of *ekphrasis* (120, 3–11) implies three things: (1) in order to replace, for instance, a wrong account of the ibis by a truthful one, narration must *also* describe, at least minimally; (2) by contrast to narrative, *ekphrasis* (including one included in a narrative) need not overly worry about truth or, since we are in the realm of an evocative speech, about verisimilitude; (3) if we combine (1) and (2), we should conclude than not all parts of narration are bound to be simply true.

At the first sight, such a conclusion might seem too speculative, but if we go back to Theon's account of narrative (*diēgēma*), it is largely vindicated. Narrative, says Theon,

> is language descriptive of things that have happened or as though they had happened (πραγμάτων γεγονότων ἢ ὡς γεγονότων). Elements of narration (τῆς διηγήσεώς) are six: the person (τὸ πρόσωπον), whether that be one or many; and the action (τὸ πρᾶγμα) done by the person; and the place where the action was done; and the time at which it was done; and the manner of the action; and sixth, the cause of these things. Since these are the most comprehensive elements from which it is composed, a complete narration consists of all of them and of things related to them and one lacking any of these is deficient.
>
> (78.16–25, trans. Kennedy 2003)

Here five out of six elements coincide with the five subjects of *ekphrasis* (cf. 118.9–10, 118.22); only the sixth one, the causal account, would seem to set the

9 To restore the reader's faith in Herodotus, I wish to point out that, besides describing the black or glossy ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*), Herodotus offers a perfectly accurate description of the African sacred ibis (*Threskiornis aethiopicus*) whose tail has indeed, *pace* Theon, a black extremity (2.76). A species with the same appearance except for the entirely white tail (assumed by Theon) is the black-headed ibis (*Threskiornis melanocephalus*), an inhabitant of India. Theon might have known the latter from some now lost description (perhaps due to Theon's contemporary Alexander the Myndian, an ornithologist of renown) and confused the two species (by contrast, Strabo 27.2.4 gets the two ibises right: he compares the white one to the stork whose tail *has* a black extremity).

narrative clearly apart. Theon, however, ends up by claiming that *ekphrasis*, if it is of actions or things that have happened (*pragmata*), should establish a causal sequence of events that precede and succeed the event properly described (119.16–24). So not only can an *ekphrasis* be included into a narrative; it also encompasses the latter by containing a causal dimension.[10] This *mise en abyme* is not the same thing as a mutual permeability of *ekphrasis* and *diēgēsis*; rather, one contains the seeds of the other. What still makes them distinct is not the level of detail, which can vary among descriptions themselves, but the exclusively ecphrastic option of disregarding the truthfulness that conditions credibility.

This last point is reinforced by Theon's list of the main virtues of the narrative, these being "clarity, conciseness, credibility" (*saphēneia*, *suntomia*, *pithanotēs*, 79.20–21). Here Theon simply repeats a canonical list established probably even before Aristotle (Quintilian says it comes from the teaching of Isocrates),[11] but this is exactly what makes the passage interesting: it is clarity, but neither conciseness nor credibility, that will be listed among the virtues of *ekphrasis* too. Concerning the latter, the absence of conciseness and credibility is compensated for by the introduction of vividness or *enargeia*. I take this to be a significant shift that points towards what is special about *ekphrasis*. It is not clarity, which apparently follows from the appropriateness of style to what is being treated, be it in a narration or an *ekphrasis* (compare 80.9–11 on the former with 119.34–120.2 on the latter). It must be *enargeia*, which, on Theon's account, belongs to no other exercise except *ekphrasis*. Vividness is therefore the virtue that can overtake the audience strongly enough to make it forget that something unlikely or implausible is being described. Whereas an implausible (*apithanon*) narrative is subjected to contestation (see 94.12–95.2 with a detailed discussion of the unlikely stories told about Medea), an *ekphrasis* is fit to embrace what is extraordinary and unheard of. More exactly, it makes *us* fit for embracing it, for suspending our disbelief while *not* relying in this task on the narrative tension sustained by a plot. *Ekphrasis* must be entrancing, but it also must be thrilling in some peculiarly static rather than diegetic mode.[12]

Hence the obvious and difficult question: where do the specific powers of *enargeia* come from, and what exactly does this expression mean? The answer to this

10 Cf. Nicolaus' *Progymnasmata* on the *ekphraseis* of paintings and sculptures:

> We must, particularly when we describe statues for example, or paintings or things of this sort, try to add reasons why the painter or sculptor depicted things in certain ways, such as, for example, that he depicted the character as angry from such and such a cause or happy, or we will mention some other emotion resulting from the story about the person being described. Reasons contribute greatly to *enargeia* in other types of *ekphrasis* too [69.4–11 Felten 1913, trans. Webb 2009].

11 See Patillon (1997) 140 n. 209.

12 The exemption of *ekphrasis* from the constraints of truthfulness would merit a detailed study; various essays in Wohl (2014) offer a good framework for such a study.