

Capstone Proposal

Working Title: The Ekphrastic Tradition in Poetry: Homage and Innovation

Student name and NKU email address _____

Signature

Date

Capstone Director Name and NKU email address _____

Capstone Director Signature

Approval Date

Honors Program Director, Ernest Smith, Ph.D.

smithe11@nku.edu

Honors Program Director Signature

Approval Date

I. Introduction and Context

I first became aware of the ekphrastic tradition in poetry in my ENG 151H class when the course instructor introduced a poem by Sylvia Plath, "Two Views of a Cadaver Room," which contained a reference to a painting by Pieter Brueghel the Elder ("The Triumph of Death" 1562). As someone who has always been interested in both poetry and painting, it intrigued me that there could be a relationship between these two art forms, for I had previously considered poetry to be language that arose from "inspiration" or "emotion," not language crafted in conscious response to another piece of art. I looked up more information on Plath, a poet I'd read before,

and found out that she actually produced several poems in response to painters, such as the twentieth century abstractionist Giorgio di Chirico. When I looked up more information on Brueghel, I found that several modern poets had written poems in response to different Brueghel paintings, such as W.H. Auden's famous poem "Musee des Beaux Arts."

The more I looked into it, the more I found out. Ekphrasis refers to a literary description of a work of art, but the original Greek word simply meant "to describe." A more recent definition, by John Hollander, contends that "one could call ekphrastic poems generally those which involve descriptions or other sorts of verbal representations of works of art" (4). Apparently, early examples of ekphrasis, loosely defined, can be found in the literature of antiquity, such as Vergil's *Aeneid* or Homer's *Iliad*, when the shield of Achilles is described. But ekphrasis poetry gained steam during the Renaissance and Baroque periods, and during the Romantic period, produced a masterpiece in John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

I know from my ENG 151H class that the modern period has seen a number of important poems in the ekphrastic tradition, but at this point I know little more than what I have written here. At the same time, I have several questions that should help to focus my research and direct my investigation.

II. Research and Exploration Plan, with Research Questions

I hope to produce a Capstone project that will trace the tradition of ekphrastic poetry, and at the same time highlight the innovations of writers who have written

works in this mode. Among the questions that will drive, but not limit my research, are the following:

- Is there a particular type of art that draws poets to respond to it, or is it simply a matter of an individual art work speaking to the sensibility of an individual poet?
- In connection with my first question, why do certain paintings and art works continue to generate poetic responses, even when other poets have already written on that work?
- As literary periods have evolved, has ekphrastic poetry become less of a “literal” response to a work of art? Has the modern period responded more loosely to art works that have inspired poems?
- What is the lineage of ekphrastic poetry? Do poets honor a tradition, or are they attempting to break new ground and become more innovative in their work?
- Who are the greatest practitioners of ekphrastic poetry in the English-language tradition?

III. Timeline (enrolled in HNR 491 for Spring 2010 and Fall 2010)

- December 2009: finish 3-page proposal and get approval from project director and Honors Program Director
- January 2010: Refine research plan with project director
- February/March 2009: Conduct research by reading in the field and by visiting museums; meet with project director every 2-3 weeks

- April 2009: Final draft versions of first 2 chapters (first half of project)
- Summer 2009: field work to collect visuals and copyright granted for visual items I want to include in final project
- August/September 2010: Meet with project director every two weeks as I draft, revise, and finalize second half of project
- October/November 2010: Final version of project completed, in regular consultation with faculty project director
- December 2010: Present summary/synthesis of project at Congress of Honors; file final version of complete project electronically, with Honors Program; attend Honors Program recognition ceremony; commencement

IV. Working Bibliography

Heffernan, James A.W. *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1993.

Hirsch, Edward, ed. *Transforming Vision: Writers on Art*. The Art Institute of Chicago. Boston: Little Brown, 1994.

Hollander, John. *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1995.

Stevens, Wallace. "The Relations between Poetry and Painting." *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. New York: Random House, 1951. 159-176.