

The Significance of Ekphrasis in the Select Works of Mark Doty

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Abstract

Ekphrasis in literature has a longstanding experience and huge potential because of the image's simple nature of keeping before us a concept we have not fully realized. Mark Doty is an iconic figure of an era in which artists were driven to reevaluate abstract forms of modernism due to the same societal challenges including political unrest, skepticism about language and the need to see the world in new ways. His interactions with works of art can both inspire and reflect the external shifts they experience. This research article investigates how Mark Doty has utilized the device of ekphrasis to define and reevaluate what is significant to him. Then why should we figure out the writings of Mark Doty as significant to this discussion? Simply put, he shows how poet in the United States around the end of twentieth century dealt with the concept of representation in quite different ways. The determination to verbally portraying visual images has served a significant role in the evolution of each of his literary styles, even though he begins at distinct position on the line from abstraction to realism and arrived at different places through different ways. He also demonstrates a radical departure from the modernist abstraction that informed much of the forms' origin, towards a realism that incorporates the recognition that everything is abstract and the belief that any representation is an illusion. This research paper also focuses on how the poems of Mark Doty fit into the term called 'ekphrasis' i.e., it shows the relationship between art and literature. The research follows 'Poetic Analysis' of Mike Allen as a methodology in which he says that poetic analysis is a form of qualitative study that is both aesthetic and creative.

Keywords: Ekphrasis, Mark Doty, modernism, visual images, realism

1. Introduction

Ekphrastic poetry is a type of analysis or description poetry that can be used to any type of visual art. Ekphrasis is a literary term for describing an artwork in writing. Poets may draw inspiration for a single poem from any part of the painting, or they may use the artwork as a whole. Poems written in the ekphrastic style describe an artwork; they can offer commentary on, or positive critique of, the paintings themselves (Rathika, E., & Vijayalakshmi, V, 2022). Notwithstanding their differences, Mark Doty discusses shared community with earlier generations of American poets: a dedication to the visual image as an integral part of his writing. Ekphrasis appears in his writing as a deliberate attempt to identify, in which he analyzes and critique every element of his artistic style. His interactions with works of art can both inspire and reflect the external shifts they experience. This research article investigates how Mark Doty has utilized the device of ekphrasis to define and reevaluate what is significant to him. Then why should we figure out the writings of Mark Doty as significant to this discussion? Simply put, he shows how poet in the United States around the end of twentieth century dealt with the concept of representation in quite different ways. The determination to verbally portraying visual images has served a significant role in the evolution of each of his literary styles, even though he begins at distinct position on the line from abstraction to realism and arrived at different places through different ways. He also demonstrates a radical departure from the modernist abstraction that informed much of the forms' origin, towards a realism that incorporates the recognition that everything is abstract and the belief that any representation is an illusion.

Well beyond the realm of spiritual values, he employs the illusion of representation and concerned with public or private ways of depicting the passage of time through history and memory. In this article, we are also exploring how Mark Doty ekphrastically reevaluates the forms and goals of his poetry in the light of the aesthetically and ethical difficulties posed by the representational encounters. The body of this research article also examines Mark Doty's poetic illusion, circling back to the question of why and how time is shifted in ekphrastic poetry. It delves into the ways in which Doty employs classic works to legitimize his own and others' positions on the spectrum between public and private spheres. The objectives of this research are:

1. How and why time is controlled in ekphrastic poems?
2. What consequences does the control over time have by discussing Mark Doty and his poetic illusion?

2. Literature Review

A type of poetry called ekphrasis talks about real work of art. Despite being used in poetics today, the phrase has its roots in classical rhetoric, and in a broader sense, ekphrasis is also a logical result of the long-standing affinity between poetry and painting/visual arts in

western art, which Aristotle considered to be imitative since they both employ mimetic representation. In the research article titled *Painting, poetry and parallelism: ekphrasis, stylistics and cognitive poetics* (2005), Peter Verdonk mixed stylistic techniques with those of cognitive poetics, a field that has accepted the idea that any act of language usage may be connected to underlying mental processes including memory, experience, imagination, emotion and perception. Along with these, he also attempts to demonstrate how his interpretation and analysis of the poem's rhetorical devices can be linked to specific underlying cognitive structures.

In *Contemporary Poetry and Ekphrasis* was published in 2002, Peter Barry saw 1990s as a resurgence of critical interest in ekphrastic poetry which refers to or comments about an artwork like a statue, photograph or painting. Here, the aim of this article is to further divide both 'actual ekphrasis' and 'notional ekphrasis' subgenres to speculate on why ekphrastic poetry is currently such a popular subgenre, and look at some recent examples.

The research article titled *Ekphrastic Double Exposure and the Museum Book of Poetry* was published in 2013, in which Tamar Yarobi describes ekphrasis as an intermediary quote or re-representation. Here, the researcher contends that their analysis- both separately and in combination- results in theoretical, interpretive and even art- historical implications that go beyond any of the individual situations. He also mentions a poem by Paul Durean, as a reference, a picture by Giovanni di Palo from the fourteenth century is recreated with a lyrical monologue that is supposedly spoken by David Hockney, a painter from the twentieth century. The last section of this article reviews the results and significance of the peculiar combination and makes a case against academic attempts to divide ekphrasis into 'literary description' and 'art critical interpretation'.

The Romantic aesthetics of dialogue and communication among the various arts has become more vital than ever in recent decades, owing to the primacy of the image in everyday life. Isolation and compartmentalization impede us in a worldwide society, whereas the Romantic concept of belonging encourages us to look beyond and develop bridges. In *Painting Words: Aesthetics and the Relationship Between Image and Text*, Moreno, B. D. G., & González-Moreno, F. meant to foster interdisciplinary study and inspire more communication between art and literature, in keeping with the Romantic ethos.

Ekphrasis is now widely used to refer to the verbal or written portrayal of works of art. However, in the ancient world, it crossed many borders, spanning a wide range of descriptions, all of which shared the trait of vividness. In the article *Before your very eyes: Pliny Epistulae and the ancient theory of ekphrasis* Chinn, C. M. believes that Pliny offers a unique viewpoint on the ancient idea of ekphrasis, which has influenced how the word is used now in numerous ways. In *Ekphrasis, poetry and emplacement: 'writing with' visual art* (2012), Marcelle Freiman explores the potential uses if visual reaction and related visual interpretations in poetic composition. This process is developed within specific geographical and societal settings and he contends that the interaction with other people's creative works in the process. This conversation is an essential component of engaging with difference in the investigation of recognising a unique and expansive poetics.

3. Methodology

The Current study is purely qualitative, and the chosen poems are of Mark Doty's, a renowned American poet. This research paper focuses on how the poems of Mark Doty fit into the term called 'ekphrasis' i.e., it shows the relationship between art and literature. The research follows 'Poetic Analysis' of Mike Allen as a methodology in which he says that poetic analysis is a form of qualitative study that is both aesthetic and creative. Since poetry is more of an art than a science, it allows social-scientific and critical scholars to explore their concepts with more fluidity and freedom. This study seeks to examine how history and memory deal with the aesthetic and ethical issues that occur in some interactions with depiction, as well as how writing ekphrastically compels poets to re-evaluate the forms and purposes of their poetry.

4. Results

Ekphrastic poetry has a desire to bring paradoxes together, with the work of art serving as an intermediate between opposing, anxious and contrasting points of view. It has been said that the use of an ekphrastic object in a poem constitutes 'an acknowledgement of the unbridgeable hermeneutic gap between poetry and the real' (Barry, P, 2002, p.157). In fact, the ekphrastic object frequently serves as the marker that draws attention to this narrative gap. It acts as a bridge between the poem and the external world, and it is frequently located between paragonal discourses that are constructed from false dichotomies, such as those between art and nature, between durability and timelessness, between stillness and motion. In addition, time appears as a key aspect with which ekphrastic writing is more concerned within. James Heffernan, a renowned literary critic, argues that time should be a prime issue for discourses that exist between the objections of static and movement, and it is significant that ekphrasis should caught between the 'fixed forms' of visual language and 'narrative thrust' of words (Hefferenan, J.A., 2004, p.4)

Mark Doty might argue with Heffernan on two key issues: (i) visual arts are static; written words is always narrative (ii) the idea of subverting the temporality of narrative by ekphrasis, which is being 'the ornamental digression that refuses to be merely ornamental' (3). By following the footsteps of Graham and Wright, renowned American writers, Doty uses it as a main idea, as it provides both a framework and physical foundation for mental activity. He interacts with works of art in an unconventional fashion, letting them penetrate entire poems and employing them as a contextual basis to get a hold on his ideas. In the poems of Mark Doty, time is not presented as an abstract term because it is subjective in nature. His two main contradictory assertions are: impermanence and cohesiveness. When analyzing Elizabeth Bishop's article "Croton" for *Source* (2002), he stressed the difficulty of expressing everything real without referring to its underlying diversity:

this lonesome leaf's a study
 never finished, since
 we aren't sure what one
 of anything is. And therefore
 we must begin the work again. (Doty, M, 2003, 40)

Animals serve as a metaphor for the eternal nature of environment in most of his poems: as they are both 'themselves/ and nothing but// an instance of some/ more general rule' (2). His poetry generally use language to address the conflict between the pointlessness of individual's existence and the stability of many. He goes back to the opening stanza of "croton" towards the end, testing out several variations of the words and the word order in order to emphasize that there is no true way to look at everything. Thus, what we know and how we interpret it adapts and evolves in real time:

Try: this elliptical isle's coral
 and aglow, beautifully barred
 with lesser island's tropical sable.
 Try: this lonesome leaf's islanded,
 autobiographical. Or:
 Enisled, this ellipse is coral and sable... (40)

The same theme is developing in 'Van Gogh, Flowering Rosebushes:1889', the third section of 'Where you are' from *Sweet Machine* (1998), but with a stronger emphasis on space and time. All innate and living things have a finite lifespan, but Doty decides to publish about are especially heartbreaking because of their shortness and fragility as they have been preserved in art and to some extent, removed from time. Again, presence and motion are highlighted in contrast in this poetry.

these waves
 of arriving roses, the tumbling rose
 of each arriving wave. (11)

Again, inspired by the natural world in its willful rejection of stillness, the final chiasmas of the poem use physical emphasis to underline the poem's recurring themes. Though Doty does not use this one linguistic trick to make concepts like time and order, most of his ekphrasis is characterized by its emphasis on showing an effect rather than settling for a simple description. His perspective on the depictions of nature and time consequences are grounded in his curiosity with the periodical rhythms of the natural world, particularly as they relate to the still life genre. Doty says that he feels inspired to write because he wants to 'create a form to resist the passage of time, and in part a desire to make a shape that will stand against the disorder of experience', as he said in a recent interview (Friedman,J, 2003).

Ekphrastic writing addresses fundamental desires such as the urge to make something lasting, to exercise some control over time, and to give the reader a clearer and more immediate depiction of reality. It is intriguing that he talks about creating a shape or form rather than conveying a story. Doty's poetry is deeply motivated by the need to give the written word substance, and by adopting elements of visual arts. He seeks to concentrate and condense these elements into a still more real expression, yet, unlike Jorie Graham's comparable ambition, this does not lead to abstract idea. Particularly when discussing the visual arts, such as painting, Doty often tries to structure language into a static rather than space-time construction, modifying structure with juxtaposition and formation, and abandoning the significance of words in favor of their direct consequences on sound and image. However, he is cognizant of the challenges involved in attempting to capture the clarity of a purely visual form through written means.

Zbigniew Herbert points out that language must go to great lengths to accomplish a mere replica of what painting does in an instant; arranging his sentences to describe a canvas, he writes, is like hauling heavy furniture around a room. (Doty, M, 2003, p.218)

The ekphrastic impulse will be difficult to satisfy since it exists in an unexplored special and temporal possibilities between words and images. According to Krieger, ekphrasis represents 'our unattainable dream of a total verbal form, a tangible verbal space (Krieger, M, 2019 p.xvii). 'Door to the River' deals with this tension between change and stability in its eighth chapter. Doty's explanations of De Kooning's painting resemble the artist's own disinterest to be described in narrative terms, and thus the transition of still images into words and action is resistant to ekphrasis (Heffernan, J.A., p.5)

He means, I think, there's an out,
 built of these fistfuls of yellows.
 Means, I think, there's a door,
 in this passionate and hard-own
 approximation, in this rough push
 and lemon smear, this difficulty.

There's- what? (Doty, M, 1998, p.77)

Like painting, the poem is a 'huge composition which invites/ and resists at once' by encapsulating the impression of different forces brought in balance by their opposition against each other (77). The ability to build through the barrier is resisted, despite the fact that it represents a door, a way out of stagnation, rather a way into purpose. Doty seems to be fighting off the desire to present a narrative because he wishes to support the artwork on its own terms:

Can you just walk between the yellow
word *field* and the green word *door*
and not demand to penetrate
the primed and stubborn scrim
toward some clarity beyond forms? (78)

Knowing that time is being depicted precisely or subjectively and that is pointed by the complex nature of the artwork and the method of how the poem adopts and mimics its complex aspects rather than becoming abstract itself. In addition, this process reveals how Doty is shaping and molding time in order to portray time as a flexible medium. He does this by linking time and movement with colour, influencing a sense of ambiguity between stasis and movement and by holding and releasing the time-space movement of the poem. The poem then moves on with an 'emerald pull', 'the hurry// of intimately related and endlessly varied/ yellow',

Our possession
is yellow and green, dialectic
occupying the meadows,
arranging for us this moment
and the next. (77)

As a narrative device, this notion of mobility is established in the artwork before the painting is incorporated into the poem. Doty recognizes the illusion of stillness by treating it as a text instead of a fixed object, as Michael Davidson labels as a characteristic of the 'recent painterly poem' (Davidson, M, 1983, p.78). However, the painting's position conveys an emotion rather than a narrative. To strengthen this idea in his poems, Doty uses repetitions again and again thereby referring enduring fact and the denied significance of the image of the door. By 'sparking the whole field into something//like a quivering although entirely still', he evokes the feeling of an eternal world in which motion and stillness coexist (80). By introducing himself into the poem as a still figure quietly viewing the turmoil, whose sight is drawn towards the door, Doty further expands the temporal and geographical limitations of the poem, the tone, painting, and the moment appear limitless. The poet perceives death at some point as a necessary release from such terrible continuation, but the contrasting energies of 'still movement' cannot be maintained endlessly in the poem, as the ultimate desire of life of everything goes towards death:

I am not afraid
to die, I'm afraid to continue
in this tumult of collisions
and vanishing (Doty, M, 1998, p.78)

The poem's recurring theme of a door through which one must pass in order to reach the poet's 'bright core/ breathing' remains an unfulfilled aspiration (77-78) while Doty views passing by this doorway and experiencing a moment of perfect equilibrium, he is conscious of the fact that time has not stood still:

This moment of equipoise
is one more movement of light
and flesh and grass passing through
the corridor, the world's wild maw
of dynamic motion. (81)

In the beginning part of 'Four Cut Sunflowers' in *Atlantis* (1996), Doty poses a direct question 'what is any art but static flame'? thereby he directly illustrates the dynamic nature of these paradoxes in ekphrastic writing (4). In many of Doty's work, concepts like rigidity and glide are common themes, 'of an image at once grasped and yet slipping away through the crevices of language', and the differences between the arts of 'being' (images) and of 'becoming' (words) in which we are all placed (Krieger, M, 2019, p.11). This implies that his poetry brings the future, with its mixed emotions of belief and despair. In his poetry, the way in which individual elements reflect and reveal the passage of time is one of his central concerns with the physical world. Paintings are artifacts that have close connection to the past than other types of objects do because they not only become a vision of the past impressions and experiences over time, but also, they reflect the past in the same way. Doty's poetry frequently makes use of paintings as a means of reversing time and establishing a

connection to an earlier period in history. This is evident in an Italian mural:

...his eyes meet our dead on
with a shocked- and shocking- immediacy:
animal eyes staring five hundred years
but new as the surprise of yellow primroses. (Doty, M, 1994, p.71)

The bring sun on a white stone wall symbolizes the transmission of shared experience in the 2002 film *Seeing Venice*:

He [Bellotto] felt precisely that physical sensation, and when we look at this little patch of wall, we feel it too- our bodies and his conjoined, across a gap of time wider and deeper than any canal. (Doty, M, 2002)

Place like Venice, which has been altered by the passage of time, makes our relationship to Bellotto's work that is more vivid. When we see a painting of a public space, we are also involved into the picture as it becomes our personal experiences, our interpretations and our recollections of the place. As Doty points out, these depictions over time serve as a backup of the socio-cultural memory; for instance, following the second world war Bellotto's paintings of Warsaw were employed in the state's reconstruction. The contrast between the stability and temporality is another historical paradox in Doty's work, represented through the use of memory retained in things. This is best seen in his essays on the still-life genre. Still-life is one of the difficult art forms to describe in words since it is motionless type of art. According to Doty, it is the most silent art form and he finds that framework for his poems and his ideas on temporality in the simple formations and scenes of everyday things are seen in still-lives, which are not as recognizable in the memory as Bellotto's landscapes. On their edge of life with their 'drying, the petals curling/ into licks of fire' (*Atlantis, 4*), the sunflowers in 'Four Cut Sunflowers, One Upside Down' are frozen in time. Doty is less concerned with the barrier between the two and the way in which art permanently places certain objects on the border:

... they burn
with the ferocity
of dying (which is to say, the luminosity
of what's living *hardest*. (5)

What he appreciates about 'The War Correction' from *My Alexandria* (1993) is not just the genre's weakness, but also the fruit's decaying appearance, as if they were kept out of time:

He's built a perfection out of hunger,
Fused layer upon layer, swirled until
What can't be tasted, won't yield,
almost satisfies, an art
mouthed to the shape of how soft things are,
how good, before they disappear. (Doty, M, 1993, p.37)

Doty's description of still lives, which typically feature flowers and fruits, artifacts according to natural changes, suggests an ekphrastic imagination, a song of resistance that sets forms against proximity and time over richness. Though they go beyond this, in the way he writes still lives, his words attempt to assume some of the qualities of the images they depict. He does this by constructing allusions of sound and colour through the layering of metaphors and imageries:

Iridescent. Watery
prismatics: think abalone,
the wildly rainbowed
mirror of a soapbubble sphere,
think sun on gasoline. (12)

In order to depict texture and colour in detail. Doty uses art language like the names of oil colours (yellow is never simply yellow, 'Naples', 'Chrome', and 'Cadmium') and substances like 'camelbone and tin, cinnabar' and 'verdigris', 'silver', 'black onyx', and 'coral' (*Atlantis, 2*). His poetry never treats colour as something straightforward, rather it shows how colour is inextricably linked to light and is shaped by natural phenomena, paints and crystals. It appears that oxidised iron, rusted metals and misted glass- colours that result from deterioration and are affected by time- are some of his favourites:

bruised and mottled
rusts; acid, lichenous
greens: vitriolised,
excruised, pearled. (Doty, M, 1994, p.53)

This regard for destruction and imperfections does not dispute the passage of time, but rather sees it as necessary to a constructive interaction with nature and uses it as a raw material. The 'evidence of time' shows that these things exhibit after being used gives them individuality and makes them beautiful (Doty, M, 2001, p.30). these things are examples of the 'ordinary sublime' (36), or the ordinary transformed into the remarkable and magnificent by the ordinary powers of light and time:

These objects are in use, in dialogue, a part of, implicated. They refuse perfection, or rather they assert that this *is* perfection, this state of being consumed, used up, enjoyed, existing in time. (40)

The poem's language creates a space itself through its detailed descriptions of physical attributes and words filled with imagery. According to Murray Krieger, this represents an ekphrastic activity because the poet, while arranging his ideas and images on the text, is creating a vivid representation of a physical object. Doty uses literal sense to the words by filling them with picture, sound and symbolism, and he does the same with the paintings in order to emphasize the materiality. He describes some ingredients of the paints like tin oxides and lead are used as pigments which are prone to oxidation. Therefore, it is undeniable that the items shown and the materials employed to depict them are influenced by the passage of time, although time itself cannot be portrayed objectively. The ideas of the ekphrasis that are given on the blank page only embodies its plurality. The impact that the time has on it as a real object, can be constrained quite conveniently than on a painting. Perhaps, Derek Walcott used this point to explain the historic nature of the original text:

There is only one painting: anything else is reproduction [...] whereas a novel or a poem can be held, and shared. There's not a single object. (Burnett, P, 2001, p.171.)

The cynical representation of eternal life in works like Sappho's fragments suggests that the simplest way to achieve longevity is through reproduction. Doty accomplishes this for sheer pleasure and he says that ekphrasis allows the accessibility by removing the focus from the original artefact, i.e., the combination of verbal and visual in one expression shows the artificial and deceptive nature of each.

5. Conclusion

Mark Doty desires to interconnect pictures in various ways to address the issue of visual clarity, historical reconstruction and the growing images of the 21st century dominated by public and media. To varying degrees, he cautions against the risks of cynical viewing and figurative acts that aims to exploit such passivity. By examining the poems of Mark Doty, it becomes clear that his ideas are contradictory to the ideas of W.H.Auden. He fearlessly explores the ways in which poetry can be used, from resensitizing a language jaded by its usage. Rather than having an impact on large number of people, the significance of these changes may lie in the huge influence on artistic thought. Although while the metaphoric picture or object is a vital component of each ekphrastic act, the imagery is often the least significant aspect of the performance. It's just a diversion from the poem's true drama. With the seemingly simplest and least philosophical approaches towards representation, Mark Doty's vividness of his descriptions on the realization are merely indicators of a phase in his own subjective process. Ekphrasis gives the framework for the engagement and analysis required to follow these indications and discover the boundless, self-renewing possibilities of where they can lead us.

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