REPRESENTATION BEYOND REPRESENTATION:
MODES OF EKPHRASIS IN CONTEMPORARY NARRATIVES

By

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My work examines the role of contemporary forms of *ekphrasis* (writing about art) in narrative fiction as an important mode that problematizes representation and the status of the novel in the late 20th century. I analyze representations of visual art in novels by British and American authors as diverse as Peter Ackroyd, John Banville, Julian Barnes, A.S. Byatt, Tracy Chevalier, Mary Gordon, Salman Rushdie, and Susan Vreeland. The classical genre of ekphrasis has traditionally been associated with poetry rather than with prose and most of the criticism in this area focuses on its use in lyric texts as well. This is the first study that looks at ekphrasis in contemporary novels. I argue that these novels resolve the crisis of this “exhausted” genre by transferring the discussion of the problem of verbal representation to the description of paintings. As representations of representation, these novels are examples of metafiction that confront the crisis of the novel in the late twentieth century while overcoming it at the same time.

Ekphrasis is a genre that has been defined as the verbal representation of visual representation and in the last decades a surprising number of authors have incorporated descriptions of art in their novels. More than simply referring to a painting in passing or using it as a metaphor, these authors place painting and writing about painting at the core of their novels.Ekphrasis functions as a *mise-en-abyme* for larger issues of the “postmodern” crisis of
representation and story-telling. One of the central questions I address is why these contemporary authors write novels about painting at a time when both the genre and the art form have been pronounced dead. I argue that these contemporary novelists move from re-presentation to forms of Darstellung (a presencing or staging) of possible stories behind the pictures they are describing. The study explores this concept thematically with each chapter corresponding to a different genre of painting: the still life, the portrait, the nude, and the history painting. Central concerns include perception and story-telling, identity, the reversal of ekphrastic gender conventions, and historiography.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Ekphrasis aims to be all of literature in miniature . . . it focuses on the interarticulation of perceptual, semiotic, and social contradictions within verbal representation.

—W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*

Works of art bring something new into the world rather than reflecting something already there. This something new is constitutive rather than being either merely representational or, on the other hand, a revelation of something already there but hidden. Works of art make culture. Each work makes different the culture it enters.

—J. Hillis Miller, *Illustration*

There are no rules. Everything is possible.

—Peter Ackroyd, *Chatterton*

This study analyzes representations of visual art in recent narrative fiction and concentrates on the role of ekphrasis in novels by British and American authors as diverse as Peter Ackroyd, John Banville, Julian Barnes, A.S. Byatt, Tracy Chevalier, Mary Gordon, Salman Rushdie, and Susan Vreeland. I argue that these novels resolve the crisis of this “exhausted” genre by transferring the discussion of the problem of verbal representation to the description of paintings. As representations of representation, these novels are examples of metafiction that confront the crisis of the novel in the late twentieth century while overcoming it at the same time. The opening epigraphs introduce the main arguments of this study and what, for me, are the principal concerns of the novelists in this study: first, ekphrasis is more than just writing about art but pertains to “all of literature”; second, representations create something new rather “than reflecting something already there”; and finally, the texts with which I am concerned remind us of the power of story-telling where indeed “everything is possible.”

Ekphrasis is a genre that has been defined as the verbal representation of visual representation and in the last decades a surprising number of authors have incorporated
descriptions of art in their novels. More than simply referring to a painting in passing or using it as a metaphor, these authors place painting and writing about painting at the core of their novels. In these works ekphrasis functions as a *mise-en-abyme* for larger issues of the ‘postmodern’ crisis of representation and story-telling. The study addresses the question why these contemporary authors write novels about painting in a time when both the genre and the art form have been pronounced “dead.” By placing another form of representation at the center of their novels, these authors manage to engage critically with the crisis of representation while displacing this engagement onto another art form. I argue that these contemporary novelists move from re-presentation to forms of *Darstellung* (a presencing or staging) of possible stories behind the pictures they are describing. The study is organized thematically with each chapter corresponding to a different genre of painting: the still life, the portrait, the nude, and the history painting. Central issues are perception and story-telling, identity, the reversal of ekphrastic gender conventions, and historiography. I will begin with definitions of ekphrasis and an overview of the field. Then I will briefly trace a development of examples of ekphrastic writing from classical examples to the present. Finally, I will discuss a new theoretical framework for the study of contemporary ekphrastic prose and outline the four chapters.

**Definitions of Ekphrasis**

The word “ekphrasis” comes from the Greek words *ek* (out) and *phræein* (speak, tell, declare, pronounce) (ἐκφρασίς). An explanation of the origin of the term *ekphrasis* proves to be much easier than the definition of the genre of *ekphrasis* itself and its development over the centuries. Definitions range from “an extended and detailed literary description of any object, real or imaginary” (Oxford Classical Dictionary), “a set description intended to bring person, place, picture, & etc. vividly before the mind’s eye” (Saintsbury 491), “graded preparatory exercises (*progymnasmata*) designed to teach basic rhetorical skills to school boys” (Grove Art
online), “the special quality of giving voice and language to a mute art object” (Hagstrum 18), “verbal representation of a visual representation” (Mitchell 1994, 152), to “the literary representation of visual art” (Heffernan 1). Whereas writers from antiquity and romanticism typically used the genre in its more traditional sense, namely writing a poem with a work of art as a subject, in the twentieth century we see writers such as Peter Ackroyd, John Banville, Julian Barnes, A.S. Byatt, Tracy Chevalier, Mary Gordon, Salman Rushdie, and Susan Vreeland play with the mode of ekphrasis. In this study I analyze the way contemporary authors in particular appropriate and use ekphrasis—a genre traditionally associated with poetry rather than with prose. Most of the scholarship in this area focuses on its use in poetry as well; however, especially in the twentieth century, ekphrasis has also been embraced by many novelists who use ekphrasis as a mis-en-abyme for issues of representation.

Texts such as Jean Hagstrum’s influential *The Sister Arts*, W.J.T. Mitchell’s *Picture Theory*, and John A. W. Heffernan’s *Museum of Words* are important in the way they define ekphrasis and its characteristics, and in their analysis of classical examples the earliest being Homer’s description of the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*. In his discussion, Hagstrum focuses on the prosopopoeial effect of ekphrasis as he stresses the goal of the writer to give a voice to a mute art object. In their works on the genre, both Heffernan and Mitchell focus on the concept of representation of visual art, whereas I would like to argue that the contemporary authors in this study have abandoned the idea of a mimetic representation of a work of art and focus more on the event of the subjective viewing which is doubled as the reader experiences the event through the character. By foregrounding the subjective experience the authors are able to address the

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1 As stated above studies of ekphrasis have largely been of its use in poetry and they provide helpful definitions of the ways it has been used. Besides Hagstrum and Heffernan, other scholars in the field of ekphrasis are Mary Ann Caws (*The Art of Interference: Stressed Readings in Verbal and Visual Texts*, *The Eye in the Text: Essays on Perception, Mannerist to Modern*, and *Reading Frames in Modern Fiction*) and John Hollander (*The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art*). W.J.T. Mitchell’s *Iconology* is also important.
limitations of verbal representation. Furthermore, they overcome the crisis of representation by displacing it onto the painting.

Whereas Hagstrum predominantly focuses on the differences between visual and verbal arts, critics Murray Krieger and Wendy Steiner point out important similarities in their effect. In *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*, Krieger makes an important statement about the traditional differentiation introduced by Lessing of literature as temporal and visual art as spatial. Krieger, however, points out that “we are moving toward a semiotic—and hence verbal model, in which time invades space in the arts Lessing treated as spatial no less that space invades time in the arts Lessing treated as temporal” (209). This argument proves to be important because it stresses the similarities of the so-called *sister arts*: we perceive verbal and visual art in ways that are both temporal and spatial. Steiner, author of *Colors of Rhetoric*, points out that “the common feature of the arts is that they evoke images (by whatever means), thus appealing to the senses, especially sight” (9). I argue that the novelists under analysis here work with *ekphrasis* in much the same way as for them the importance lies in the similar effect that both arts have on the reader: both arts evoke a “picture” in the viewer’s or reader’s mind.

Some scholars do look at the integration of ekphrasis in novels rather than poetry, but they use the term in a much broader definition and do not incorporate contemporary texts in their studies. In her book *The Visual Arts, Pictorialism, and the Novel: James, Lawrence, and Woolf*, Marianna Torgovnick analyzes what she calls “pictorialism” in selected novels by these authors. She defines pictorialism as the use of painterly vocabulary in substitution for writerly words and does not include examples of description of visual art. In *Literary Realism and the Ekphrastic Tradition*, Mack Smith includes various kinds of visual art in his definition of ekphrasis, such as
the puppet show in Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* or films in Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Neither one of them, however, develops a theory of contemporary forms of ekphrasis.

Whereas some of the novels under consideration feature notional ekphraseis such as Rushdie’s *The Moor’s Last Sigh* and Banville’s *Ghosts*, most of the novels use well-known paintings or at least well-known painters that are often reproduced on the cover of the given novel. Thus the reader automatically juxtaposes the character’s description of the painting with his or her mental image. Instead of bringing an unknown or absent painting before the reader’s mind’s eye, the ekphrastic passages heighten the reader’s experience of the character’s subjective view of the painting as they notice the differences between their own and the character’s mental image.

The often self-reflexive and metafictional characteristics of many contemporary texts are reinforced in ekphrastic novels as these narratives entail representations of representation. Instead of merely re-presenting or presenting again something that already exists, these texts have an impact on the (ideo-)culture they enter.² Rather than being merely mimetic or ‘postmodern,’ the use of the mode of ekphrasis in these novels serves to draw the reader’s attention to looking at things from more than one perspective, as if with a kind of imaginary or phenomenological *anamorphosis*. The description of paintings dramatizes the false or constructed nature of fiction or the inevitable fictionality of all experience and the paintings often illustrate these self-reflexive issues as a subtext. At the same time, ekphrasis celebrates the world-making power of story-telling.

² See epigraph from Miller’s *Illustration*. Moreover, in *The Singularity of Literature* Derek Attridge argues that “Singularity exists, or rather occurs, in the experience of the reader . . . as the repository of what I have termed an ideoculture, an individual version of the cultural ensemble bay which he or she has been fashioned as a subject with assumptions, predispositions, and expectations” (67).
Many contemporary texts attempt to integrate art and life including popular forms, popular culture, and everyday reality. This integration recalls Bakthin’s notion of ‘carnival,’ of joyous, anti-authoritarian, and liberatory celebration in this context and adds a sense of energy and freedom to some contemporary works. In a way, all ekphrastic narratives fall in this category as they include art and life in an often very playful way. This playfulness can be read as an acknowledgement on the authors’ part that mimetic representation is impossible and we are forever faced with “the abyss” which is always already there. However, instead of despairing at this prospect contemporary authors turn to a playful use of language to create fictive worlds rather than trying to represent reality.

This study primarily looks at ekphrastic passages and their functions in contemporary novels in English from the 1980s up to the present. The texts I have chosen differ from such “textbook examples” such as Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” Browning’s “My Last Duchess,” and Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” in so far as the authors in this study don’t set out to give a “literary representation of a visual art” as Heffernan defines the genre (1). Many of the contemporary ekphrastic texts are less “replications” than “transformations” of a painting. In some cases authors invent a narrative about the figures in a painting or about the person who painted it. “Replications” would seem to be closer to the attempt to verbally represent a visual text, whereas “transformations” imply the act of change, a translation from one medium to the other and in the act of translation elements are changed or lost.

In the following chapters I establish a theory of a contemporary version of the genre of ekphrasis. I argue that these authors don’t face the “the problem of ekphrasis [as] the verbal representation of visual representation” that W.J.T. Mitchell describes in his book Picture Theory (152). According to him, the main problem that any writer who attempts ekphrasis faces
is, “a verbal representation cannot represent—that is, make present—its object in the same way a visual representation can. It may refer to an object, describe it, invoke it, but it can never bring its visual presence before us in the way pictures do. Words can ‘cite,’ but never ‘sight’ their objects” (Mitchell 152). The goal of the narratives in this study is, however, not necessarily just to “make present” the work of art in the mind’s eye of their readers. This goal recedes to the background as most contemporary authors agree that mimesis in this mode is not possible at all. Instead they use ekphrasis to develop new modes of characterization, historiography, and narration and use it as a mode of overcoming the crisis of representation.

Ekphrasis can be called a special case of a description, namely that of an object of art. But what is special about a description of a painting? Mitchell addresses this question in Picture Theory; he argues that the language or style of a text doesn’t tell us if a given passage is ekphrastic—whether it responds in some way to a painting or not. Because of this characteristic of language, it can often be impossible for the reader to realize that certain passages are ekphrastic and this fact is something that the authors in this study play with as they bring up questions about what art really is or what it is that makes an artist an “artist.” This question introduces another characteristic of contemporary novels, as they often question or even erase the boundaries between high and low art.

The distinction between description and narration that is part of the discourse on ekphrasis needs to be analyzed further as well. Traditionally narration has been associated with plot and thus with temporal progression, whereas description is linked with spatial perception. The texts in this study, however, often play with and reverse these expectations as the descriptive parts show a temporal progression and are vital for the understanding of the story, often more so than the narrative.
We distinguish between modernist texts in which the self (the speaker) is articulating matters of history and myth as for example in T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” or W.H. Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts,” and “postmodern” texts in which authors use allusions to history and myth to articulate the self (of the characters). In my analysis of ekphrastic texts, we will see how contemporary authors appropriate and change the genre to fit their needs. Their techniques can be seen as “postmodern” because they allude to figures from paintings (myth) and to art history (history) in order to express the self of the character who perceives the painting, instead of foregrounding the mimetic representation of figures in the paintings as is customary in traditional ekphrasis. Rather than simply replicating the scene from a painting, these authors transform the painting in their “translations” or “re-visions” to a “personal verbal version” of the character through whose eyes we see the work of art.

Heffernan makes a similar argument in his discussion of John Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” that deals with Parmigianino’s painting of the same title. He says that “to write a poem about a self-portrait in a convex mirror is inevitably to find oneself—or imagine oneself—mirrored by it, as the poet later suggests when he says that the painting of the rounded reflecting surface is so carefully rendered ‘that you could be fooled for a moment / Before you realize the reflection / Isn’t yours’” (Heffernan 174). Indeed, in many of the ekphrastic texts under consideration here, characters seem to respond to a detail or aspect of the painting they personally identify with. What starts out as a description of the painting, becomes a meditation on the self. The paintings then function as mirrors in which the characters recognize (parts of) themselves. However, just as mirrors do not necessarily reflect the exact picture but also distort the image, paintings also mediate their subject which is something I take into consideration as
almost all the novels in this study actually show the process of painting which draws attention to the perception of the artist and his mediation of reality.

**The Development of the Ekphrastic Tradition**

I place my readings of contemporary ekphrastic narratives in a theoretical framework that is influenced by deconstruction, phenomenology, semiotics, and reader-response theory. Before I outline a new theoretical framework for my discussion of ekphrasis in contemporary narratives, it is nevertheless necessary to look at the ekphrastic tradition. I will discuss several examples of ekphrastic writing from antiquity to the beginning of the twentieth century to show certain developments in the genre that are important for my discussion of the contemporary examples of ekphrastic prose. According to William H. Race the *descriptio* or *ekphrasis* is “one of the standard writing exercises in rhetorical exercise books of late antiquity” (Race 56).³ Race’s treatment of ekphrasis strictly as a poetic genre is limited to an overview of its development up to the early twentieth century. He does not pursue an analysis of the development of ekphrasis beyond stating that “descriptive poems, particularly *ekphraseis* of paintings, have been very popular and constitute a flourishing subgenre” (75). Some of the examples and characteristics he discusses will, however, be useful as they will help to open up ways to analyze ekphrasis as a stylistic device in contemporary novels.

One characteristic Race talks about brings our attention to one problem of the genre: the sheer impossibility of giving a full description of the object under consideration. This impossibility is something that contemporary authors such as Ackroyd, Byatt, Vreeland, Chevalier, and Rushdie, just to name a few, are very aware of but which does not pose a real

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³ Race’s chapter on “Ekphrasis” in *Classical Genres and English Poetry* gives a useful overview of the development of the genre and its changing characteristics. He further explains the origin of the genre saying: “These school texts, called *progymnasmata*, left their mark on medieval poetics, and enjoyed a revival in Renaissance schools. They defined *ekphrasis* as ‘an expository speech which clearly brings the subject before our eyes’, and among the topics they deemed appropriate for extended description were people actions, places and seasons” (Race 56).
problem as the accurate “representation” of a work of art is no longer the primary goal. One example Race uses to illustrate this problem is a poem by Aphthonius about the acropolis of Alexandria, which concludes with the statement: “Indeed, its beauty is greater than words can tell, and if anything has been omitted, it happened because of wonder” (quoted in Race 56).

According to Race “‘wonder’ was . . . one of the standard topics of the *descriptiones* from Homer on” (56). Peter Schwenger and reader-response theorists such as Wolfgang Iser and Roman Ingarden also argue that the reader’s imagination has to fill the gaps in any description. As it is impossible for any author to give a complete description of a painting s/he has to count on the readers’ imagination and memory to complete the picture in their minds. In *Art and Illusion* art historian E.H. Gombrich introduces a similar theory of perception in which he emphasizes the “ beholder’s share” and the role of “visual habits” in forming what each individual sees (154ff). This aspect of classical ekphrasis is still visible in contemporary forms which use descriptions of paintings to reveal something about the character through whose eyes we see the given painting (the focalizer).⁴

After its highpoint in antiquity, we see a renewed interest in the ekphrastic genre among the poets of the Romantic period one famous example being Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” According to Race Romantic ekphrasis differs from classical examples in so far as the “reaction of the poet as a viewer takes on much greater importance” (72). This development prefigures the way contemporary authors look at *ekphrasis* because they, too, focus on the reaction of the viewer (usually one of the characters in a novel) to the painting, often more so than on the description of the work of art. In Keats’s poem the reader is constantly “aware of the speaker’s

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⁴ See Mieke Bal, *Looking In* (44). She also points out that it is important “to ascertain which character focalizes on which object. The combination of a focalizer and a focalized object can to a large degree be constant or it can vary greatly. . . . Conversely, the image a focalizer presents of an object also says something about the focalizer” (50).
presence” and the ekphrasis “actually serves as a springboard for an impassioned meditation by the poet. Instead of letting the scene speak for itself . . . the poet becomes an interpreter, an in the case of an imaginary work of art the only interpreter” (Race 74). Race’s comment proves to be important for my study as it introduces the idea of ekphrasis as “translation” or “version” rather than a perfectly mimetic reproduction of a work of art. And in this process of translation authors will increasingly focus on the interpreter and less and less on the work of art. Another aspect of Romantic poetry, the temporal progression, is also essential as Race points out in his analysis of Keats’s poem: “Far from a mere description of the vase, the poem is in fact a record of the poet’s process of understanding the meaning of the scenes before him” (74). In contemporary ekphrastic narratives the temporal process of the individual perception and understanding of a work of art plays a central role.

According to scholars of the genre such as Hagstrum and Heffernan, ekphrastic poems from the Romantic period often display a relationship between the powerful writer or speaker on the one side and the mute and usually female art object on the other. In later nineteenth-century poetry, we then find important intermediate examples between poetry and prose such as for example Robert Browning’s “To My Last Duchess.” The dramatic monologue exemplifies some of the possibilities that novelists have in their very playful use of ekphrasis. In the narrative of the dramatic monologue the primary goal is not to make the reader see the art object or to give it a voice, but to characterize the speaker. This poetic genre presents a “first-person narrator” who, unintentionally, reveals much about himself or herself. The same rules apply to the incorporation of ekphrasis in contemporary novels where the description of a painting does not only want to bring the work of art to the readers’ minds but where ekphrasis is used to reveal something or inscribe something onto the character who is describing the painting. What does he or she focus
on, what doest he or she not look at, what does he or she identify with? Even if it is the narrator who is describing the painting (e.g. in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*), it still shows something about the character through whose eyes we see in that particular moment.⁵ Here, writers that come to mind would be authors such as Henry James, Edith Wharton, Oscar Wilde, and Thomas Hardy, who slowly move away from omniscient narration to focalization through characters and who focus on subjective perception rather than objective narration. In their work, processes of perception are already moving to the center of attention, as they will be particularly in the oeuvre of modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. To illustrate this development I would like to look briefly at one of the central scenes from Henry James’s *The Wings of the Dove* in which Lord Mark shows Milly the Bronzino portrait which looks so much like her:

> Perhaps it was her tears that made it just then so strange and fair—as wonderful as he had said: the face of a young woman, all splendidly drawn, down to the hands, and splendidly dressed; a face almost livid in hue, yet handsome in sadness and crowned with a mass of hair, rolled back and high, that must, before fading with time, have had a family resemblance to her own. The lady in question, at all events, with her slightly Michael-angelesque squareness, her eyes of other days, her full lips, her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds, was a very great personage—only unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead. Milly recognised her exactly in words that had nothing to do with her. ‘I shall never be better than this.’ (*The Wings of the Dove* 220–1)

In this scene we clearly see the painting through Milly’s eyes and not the narrator’s. This passage shows that James uses the ekphrastic description of the Bronzino painting to give an insight to Milly’s consciousness rather than trying to give a voice to the woman in the portrait or achieving an accurate vision of the painting in the reader’s mind.

⁵ In her book *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* Dorrit Cohn describes narrative fiction as “the only literary genre, as well as the only kind of narrative, in which the unspoken thoughts, feelings, perceptions of person other than the speaker can be portrayed” (Cohn 7).
Many modernist authors try to represent verbally the different complicated processes of
perception such as hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and maybe most of all seeing.\(^6\)
Perception differs not only from person to person but also changes in time for one single person.
Cultural and personal memory strongly influence the way we perceive something and on top of
that other factors such as mood, lighting, etc. play an important role in this process. Critic Mieke
Bal describes this experience as the “here-and-now of the event of looking at art, and the input of
cultural memory in that act” (1999; 173). The painting becomes a mirror, the other, a window
into imagination, a passage to another world.

**Theoretical Framework and Chapter Outline**

I place my readings of contemporary ekphrastic narratives in a theoretical framework that
is influenced by deconstruction, phenomenology, semiotics, and reader-response theory. Each of
the four chapters corresponds to a different genre of painting: the still life, the portrait, the nude,
and the history painting. Central issues are perception and story-telling, identity, the reversal of
ekphrastic gender conventions, and historiography.

Chapter 2 analyzes ekphrastic narratives such as Chevalier’s *Girl With A Pearl Earring*
(2000), as well as Byatt’s *The Matisse Stories* (1995), *Still Life* (1996), and *A Whistling Woman*
(2002) as forms of a self-reflexive apology for the novel while returning to story-telling at the
same time. Through their use of ekphrasis these texts foreground the process of perception and
representation. Like a still life painting, these descriptions privilege the everyday and, in an
anamorphous fashion, draw the reader’s attention to it. The chapter goes on to show that instead
of mourning the inability to represent, these texts go beyond the gap of representation and
unearth powerful stories behind the images they describe. Rather than simply undermining the

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\(^6\) See also the work of the so-called “impressionist” writers such as Ford Madox Ford and Joseph Conrad.
truthfulness of mimesis, these narratives foreground the power of language to bring to life a fictional world that is realistic like a *trompe-l’oeil* painting. By maintaining the balance between self-reflexivity and story-telling, Byatt and Chevalier manage to move past this crisis of representation as they create powerful illusions of presence that have a transformative effect on the culture they enter. Ekphrasis here is no longer “verbal representation of visual representation,” but a fulfillment of the desire to create a story behind the visual. Furthermore, these ekphrastic texts remind us that deception is an integral part of art and story-telling and of the pleasure that lies in that deception.

In discussions of the *sister arts*, critics point out their similarities as well as their differences and they also describe a certain competitiveness between the arts: which is “better,” verbal or visual arts? This rivalry is closely connected with a hope for both visual and verbal arts to survive through centuries but at the same time it illustrates that both verbal and visual arts are aware of their ephemerality. The genre of painting that is especially important in this context is that of the still life or *nature morte*. Both terms express a paradox in that they point to something that is alive and dead at the same time. In her definition of ekphrasis, Wendy Steiner introduces the concept of the “pregnant moment” that she takes from visual arts and says that “dependent as it is on literary sources, the pregnant moment in painting has in turn generated a literary topos [	extit{ekphrasis}] in which poetry is to imitate the visual arts by stopping time, or more precisely, by referring to an action through a still moment that implies it” (41). Both Chevalier and Byatt take “pregnant moments” in paintings as their occasion to create worlds behind and around them. This definition of the ekphrastic genre also introduces the characteristic of ephemerality. When Steiner says that “the very perception of a literary work is thus a reminder of temporal impermanence of humanity itself” she also reminds us of the idea behind the still life that is
usually associated with the topoi of memento mori and vanitas (41). The idea of ephemerality of the arts appears as a topic in the novels under consideration here, such as Ackroyd’s Chatterton and Byatt’s Still Life. Especially Ackroyd is aware how on the one hand books are wasting away in dusty libraries, but on the other he shows how they can live on through variations and intertextuality in novels to come.  

Each description has the goal to render the given scene, character, or in the case of ekphrasis an art object, in such a way that the reader will be to be able to imagine it. Thus ekphrasis is a special form of hypotyposis. However, this undertaking proves to be abyssal—no matter how detailed the description, there is always something more that one could describe. Faced with this problem the author has to, in Derrida’s words, “economize on the abyss,” which means that although faced with an impossible task the author still tries to achieve the effect of an inner vision in the reader. In “Economimesis,” Derrida defines mimesis as an act in which something is gained as we can tell in the part of the word that is related to the word economy (272f). That what is gained here is the complete image that is created in the reader’s mind as s/he fills in the gaps by falling back on memory. In classical definitions of ekphrasis this effect is called energeia. Description, mimesis, and ekphrasis are all forms of translation than can never

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7 Steiner argues: “But many poems using this topos (of the stopped moment) have been content to express the idea of art’s overcoming time without themselves overcoming it. They fail where the visual arts seemingly succeed; what they gain from the topos is an example of what they can merely aspire to. For whatever social mechanisms do exist for the perpetuation of verbal art—and they are obviously extensive, beginning with the repeatability of print itself—the outcome is lacking in spatial extension and in the coincidence of aesthetic experience with artifact characteristic in painting. Thus literary topos of the still moment is an admission of failure, or of mere figurative success” (Steiner 42).

8 “Vivid description of a scene, event, or situation, bringing it, as it were, before the eyes of the hearer or reader” (OED).

9 Aristotle calls energeia “the rhetorical effect that is achieved by an orator who is able . . . to set things before the eyes of the auditor” (Hagstrum 12).
achieve an entirely mimetic vision and thus each ekphrasis involves a form of betrayal. The reader always has to fill in the gaps, so the final effect in his or her mind is never an exact mimetic version of what is being described. Both Byatt and Chevalier address this crisis of representation and are able to overcome it at the same time as they displace it onto the site of the painting.

In the chapter “Restitutions” in *The Truth in Painting*, Derrida discusses two readings of a certain Van Gogh painting of two shoes by Martin Heidegger and Meyer Schapiro respectively and shows how both their readings are influenced by their ideology and philosophy. Derrida’s reading is a great example of one characteristic of the way we read or perceive art and how the reading or perception of works of art is always a singular event. Both Heidegger and Meyer Schapiro see the two shoes and immediately draw conclusions about them: that it is a “pair” of shoes, that they belong to a poor and old peasant etc. Heidegger talks about Van Gogh’s painting as an example; he knows that there is more than one painting by Van Gogh that depicts shoes of some sort, but doesn’t specify which one he is talking about. For him the shoes enfold the truth of the peasant woman working in the field. The art historian Meyer Schapiro wants to prove Heidegger wrong, but doesn’t really think about what Heidegger “does” with the painting. He argues that the shoes in the painting didn’t belong to a peasant, but to a city-dweller. He even claims that the shoes in the painting are indeed van Gogh’s very own shoes.

In his discussion of the two readings, Derrida seems initially to be concerned with the question whether the two shoes are really a pair, and not the same shoe twice, or two left shoes. But this question that really nobody can answer leads us to the opening question of Derrida’s book: what is the truth in painting? It seems that Derrida just wants to prove a point with his

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10 See Derrida’s “+R” in *The Truth in Painting*. 
argument, namely that the whole discussion whether Heidegger or Meyer Schapiro is right is not really what is important. He writes, “One of the two is a specialist. Painting, and even Van Gogh, is, so to speak, his thing, he wants to keep it, he wants it returned” (281). He is talking about Meyer Schapiro who apparently has not really paid that much attention to what it was that Heidegger was doing or why Heidegger is talking about the painting, but just wants to prove him wrong and reclaim the subject of painting and in particular Van Gogh. Maybe Derrida wants to show how both readings of the painting make sense: Meyer Schapiro’s reading of the shoes as a self-portrait as well as Heidegger’s reading of the shoes as belonging to a peasant woman. The point of Derrida’s reading here is that there is not one true interpretation or reading of a painting. Each painting has a different truth for each person who looks at it. Derrida seems to be stressing that Heidegger’s use of the painting has its flaws and Meyer Schapiro doesn’t get the point of Heidegger’s reading of the painting, he just wants to be “right” and wants only to reclaim his territory (art history and Van Gogh in particular). That is why Derrida complains about the way both Heidegger and Meyer Schapiro formulate their interpretations in such a final way (using words such as “clearly”) not allowing for other readings as if there were only one “truth in painting.” As the readings in this study will show many authors play with exactly this idea: one and the same painting holds different truths for each and everyone who takes the time to look at it, to read it.11

11 A third example in this reading of Van Gogh’s shoes can be found in Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism* in which he adds another reading of the painting(s). He too reads into the painting (maybe too much) and appropriates it for his own purpose. He offers two “interpretations”: the first “the willed and violent transformation of a drab peasant object world into the most glorious materialization of pure color in oil paint is to be seen as a Utopian gesture, an act of compensation which ends up producing a whole new Utopian realm of the senses, or at least of that supreme sense—sight, the visual, the eye” (Jameson 7). He then also refers to Heidegger’s interpretation of the painting in “The Origin of the Work of Art” which according to Jameson reads in the painting “the heavy tread of the peasant woman, the loneliness of the field path, the hut in the clearing, the worn and broken instruments of labor in the furrows” (Jameson 8). J. Hillis Miller discusses Derrida’s reading of Heidegger and Schapiro in *Illustration* and highlights Heidegger’s argument that “something otherwise hidden is revealed in a special way in the graphic arts, made present there” (80).
Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes in *The Prose of the World*, “the foundation of truth is not outside time; it is in the opening of each moment of understanding to those who will take it up and change its meaning” (144). This kind of opening reminds of the multiple frames we can find in almost every text such as titles and chapters or more literal frames such as doorways, windows, or actual frames of paintings. A frame indicates that something is a work of art. In the context of the novel for example, frames such as these indicate that a plain description might be depicting a work of art that requires a particular reading. Each reading is “an event which opens new possibilities of meaning and feeling . . . or, more accurately, the event of such opening, that we can speak of the literary. . . . This process of initiation, this movement into the unknown, is experienced as something that happens to the reader in the course of a committed and attentive reading” (Attridge 59). Mieke Bal argues that works of art occupy a different space than other objects, “a space which in the case of painting is marked by the four sides of the frame [and which] means that the work is built to travel away from its maker and from its original context, carried by the frame into different times and places” (*Key Writers on Art* 16). In the case of ekphrasis the author literally takes the painting and weaves it into an entirely new context.12 In the novels I discuss here, the novel itself becomes the frame(work) or context for the painting that asks the reader to look again.

Through the integration of ekphrasis in novels, taking it away from the traditional medium of poetry, contemporary authors step away from the dual relationship of the writer and the art object to more complex situations of viewing and perception. The circumstances of the viewing are extremely important, who views the painting and when, because each viewer approaches a

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12 In the different texts I look at, the paintings literally travel through time, some show the paintings as they are created, other show them in different context, and others just look at reproductions of the paintings.
work of art with his or her specific “cultural baggage” to use Mieke Bal’s term. The novelists in this study are aware of the importance of the personal memory for our perception and use ekphrasis to give insights into their characters. Even if it the same person who perceives a particular painting multiple times each viewing will be different as Derek Attridge argues: “Because it happens as an event singularity is not fixed; if I read the poem tomorrow [or look at a painting] I will experience its singularity differently” (70).

I will address this singularity in Chapter 3 which explores the way contemporary authors use ekphrasis to address the problem of representing the self. In both Vreeland’s *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* (1999) and Ackroyd’s *Chatterton* (1988) paintings and portraits in particular function as uncanny sites that force the characters to go through a destructuration of the self. Instead of the mimetic representation of a painting, the texts in Chapter 3 focus on representations of the “event” of the viewing of a work of art, the subjective process of perception, and the way these perceptions change the way the characters perceive themselves. These ekphrastic narratives force the reader to be attentive to the experience of the character who functions as a surrogate “reader” of the painting. This attentiveness is then turned into an attentiveness to ourselves. By using ekphrasis to address the problem of representing the self, these authors have found a way to reflect on the crisis of representation while displacing it into the world of the novel. Moreover, these texts break with the gothic in that they do not represent a world of stasis and repetition compulsion. The repetitions in the novels by Vreeland and Ackroyd always come with a difference. In the context of Vreeland’s novel the encounters with the uncanny have a “therapeutic” effect, whereas in Ackroyd’s novel, these experiences result in other forms of production: the characters overcome their anxiety of influence.

13 See *Looking In. The Art of Viewing* (3).
As I have already established, a clear definition of the term seems impossible: Is ekphrasis a genre or a mode of writing? What are its characteristics? What makes description of a painting different from any other description? Has the genre of ekphrasis changed over time? The examples I have discussed so far seem to suggest that with the advent of modernism there seems to be a shift from *ekphrasis* as a form representation of an art object to a form of *ekphrasis* that is more concerned with the event of the viewing. This development is especially interesting as it parallels or reflects the rise of phenomenology.

The emphasis for contemporary novelists in their use of ekphrasis lies thus less on the accurate verbal representation of visual representation (which is not possible anyway) but rather on the way the character(s) perceive the painting and what their individual perception/reaction tells us as readers about the characters. In this context Mieke Bal’s “theory of spectatorship” is central.\(^{14}\) The representation of the painting becomes secondary to the representation or description of the individual “event” of viewing the painting. Ekphrasis becomes something that can be seen as not only “transformative” but also “performative.” Considering that the term ekphrasis can be translated as “speaking out” or to pronounce or declare underlines this performative character of the mode.

In this sense each viewing is an event and each viewer “completes” the painting in some way and the viewing of the work of art can only ever be an event in the present, and because each viewing consists of a series of viewings, each “present” dissolves into a now, and therefore a relay. Bal sees in paintings a polysemy of signs, which means that each reader will read the signs in a different way. The meaning of the work of art does not reside in the painting nor does

it exist in the viewer; it is rather this “event,” that spectral quality, which is disclosed to each individual in a particular temporal context.

Peter Schwenger argues that “because postmodern authors feel that mimesis is impossible, they play with the reader who has to fill in the gaps—‘we can’t resist filling in the gaps to create a stable image’” (56). Here it is important to note that in ekphrastic narratives we are looking at that process on two levels: we as readers complete the image, and the character(s) as readers/viewers of the image in the text complete the image each filling in the gaps from their personal and cultural memory and each viewing / reading is a singular event. Paintings can function as “mirror of reality” but as pointed out earlier a mirror does not always merely reflect—it also distorts and mediates (Schwenger 2). Examples of a character looking at a painting can both be a mirror-effect of self-recognition, but also often the moment of seeing the other or opposite, something we want to be but are not or something we had not realized we were yet. In any case, these moments are central to the perception of identity. Moments like this can be seen in novels as early as Henry James’s, over Iris Murdoch’s *The Bell* to novels by Ackroyd and Vreeland that I will discuss in detail in the Chapter 3. Sometimes in these moments the alien self becomes less alien and these ekphrastic scenes show that the self is composed of many fragments. Schwenger argues, “We are . . . said to ‘identify’ with a character who is other than ourselves—who is nevertheless to a great degree made up of and by ourselves. Our ‘selves’ in more versions that one, thus oscillate continually during the act of reading” (69). Looking at a painting can thus serve as a form of self-analysis in which the character realizes something about herself / himself. The gaze at the painting turns into a gaze at the self.

Moments of revelations for the fictional characters can then in turn cause readers to think about themselves and recall similar situations in their own lives. Reader-response theorist
Wolfgang Iser says that in reading “we have the apparently paradoxical situation in which the reader is forced to reveal aspects of himself in order to experience a reality that is different from his own” (quoted in Schwenger 69). In the fictional reality of the novel readers find presences as well as absences that make them think about themselves and the painting that a character describes becomes mirror-like not only for the character but also for the reader.

Traditionally, the mode of ekphrasis is a very gendered concept with a usually male poet giving a voice to a mute female figure in a painting. The model also involves the desirous “male gaze” at the female subject. Chapter 4 examines texts by contemporary female authors who reverse ekphrastic gender conventions. In classical ekphrasis critics describe a power structure between the powerful male poet who gives a voice to the passive female art object. Ekphrasis (which literally means ‘to speak out’) thus gives a voice to the silent art object, as it entails *prosopopoeia*, or the rhetorical technique of envoicing a silent object. Chapter 4 shows how narratives such as Byatt’s *The Matisse Stories* (1995), Vreeland’s *The Passion of Artemisia* (2002), and Gordon’s *Spending: A Utopian Divertimento* (1998) radically change this hierarchy. Each of these texts features female and male artist figures who engage critically with the way the female body has been represented in art primarily in the genre of the nude. Thus, these authors integrate the criticism of the gendered hierarchy that constitutes the very reality of these works. The gaze no longer displays the male poet’s desire and power over the female subject; instead, the gaze becomes reciprocal as the characters give the mute figures in the paintings a voice and the paintings give the characters a voice at the same time. Vreeland represents Artemisia Gentileschi as the first successful female painter who finds a voice through her work. In *The Matisse Stories* Byatt stages a series of encounters with painting that juxtapose characters’ reactions ranging from empowerment, threat, disgust, to admiration without taking sides; the
stories remain ambiguous. In Spending Gordon creates a utopian world in which all gender roles within the art world are reversed. This reversal comes with a series of problems though whether financial, religious, or sexual.

This gendered tradition in ekphrasis goes back to the story of Philomela’s rape in Ovid’s Metamorphoses. After being raped by her sister’s husband who cut out her tongue so she wouldn’t be able to tell anybody about the crime, Philomela weaves the scene of her rape. In his treatise Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry, Lessing characterizes art as female, beautiful but silent, whereas poetry is male and has the power of speaking out. In my analysis of works of female authors and in other texts where we have female characters who are artist this relationship is reversed, as female authors or artists look at female and male figures, thus the gaze no longer displays the male poet’s desire and power over the female subject, and instead becomes a gaze of an equal to an equal. The act of looking at a painting becomes similar to looking in the mirror. As we contemplate the paintings in the text, we can see several levels of self-recognition: the author, the reader, and the character(s) may all identify themselves with or against certain paintings. Instead of the hierarchical structure in classical examples of ekphrasis in which the powerful male gives a voice to the passive and mute female, the act becomes reciprocal as the authors give the mute figures in the paintings a voice, and at the same time, these paintings give the authors their poetic voice. In these examples of feminist ekphrasis the act of prosopopoeia becomes twofold.

Chapter 5 focuses on Banville’s Ghosts (1994), Barnes’s The History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters (1990), Rushdie’s The Moor’s Last Sigh (1997), and Ackroyd’s Chatterton (1988), all of which show history as narrative existing only as a human construct and establish history paintings as sources for historiography only to expose them as being narratives as well. The
Chapter shows how these texts question traditional ways of representation and representation of the past in particular. Each of these narratives complicates the way we think about history and how history is written. Although the novels are very different in subject matter, each of them offers revisionist ways to look at history in self-reflexive and performative ways. All four ‘histories’ emphasize the story within (hi)(s)tory and thus the narrative process. Furthermore, these four novels are also examples of metafiction, and while they critique conventional ways of recording history, they also celebrate the world-making power of story-telling. In this context I discuss the figure of the “survivor” that stands for the historical witness that has the authority to re-present the past but at the same time functions as an emblem for the story-teller who has the authority to distort and create. Rather than being nostalgic retrospectives, these novels look at the past as part of the present and the future. The characters in these novels “never wholly die” because they survive (or are re-vived) with every new reader who opens the book. I close with a discussion of the representations of catastrophes in the context of Walter Benjamin’s “angel of history” and his notion of the “storyteller.”
CHAPTER 2
REPRESENTATION BEYOND REPRESENTATION

The relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other’s terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say.

—Michel Foucault, “Las Meninas”

My task . . . is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, above all, to make you see.

—Joseph Conrad, Preface to The Nigger of the Narcissus

In “Sending: On Representation” Jacques Derrida states, “The great question, the generative question, thus becomes, for this epoch, that of the value of representation, of its truth or its adequacy to what it represents” (310). This question is also at the heart of contemporary ekphrastic narratives. In Chapter 2 I will analyze examples of ekphrasis that have rarely been discussed before as such. Ekphrastic poetry has been the subject of many studies; however, few only critics have talked about ekphrastic prose narratives. The novels I analyze here don’t simply refer to a painting in passing or use it as a metaphor; instead, painting and writing about painting are central to these novels as they function as a mise-en-abyme for larger issues of the crisis of representation and story-telling. I will discuss narratives by two contemporary writers that approach this crisis in different ways: Tracy Chevalier and A. S. Byatt. Byatt’s work is often explicitly self-reflexive and addresses the crisis of representation through language directly in authorial asides, conversations between characters, and intertextual references. However, by

1 See Chapter 1.

2 Mark Currie writes in Postmodern Narrative Theory: “Recently there has been a renewed interest in the interaction of words and images, not only as multimedia juxtapositions, but in ekphrastic [sic] power of the written word to construct pictures. . . . The idea that language is not adequate to express everything in the human mind may be older than the hills, but it characterizes a distinctly modern crisis in the relative ability of words to document visual experience. In the context of postmodern theories of identity as increasingly superficial and visual projections of meaning, it is a crisis which lies at the heart of the question of the importance of narration to identity (Mark Currie 127).
maintaining the balance between self-reflexivity and storytelling she manages to move past this crisis of representation as she creates powerful illusions of presence. She is also interested in the relationship between perception and language and how our knowledge of language informs our perception and vice versa. Tracy Chevalier’s novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring* on the other hand, is more implicitly self-reflexive. Instead of direct references to the impossibility of mimetic description she uses her characters and the plot to confront the crisis of representation. Her characters let the readers experience subjective perception and thus representation vicariously through them. Each of the texts I will discuss here, demands that their readers to read attentively, respond actively, and engage critically with the problematic issues of perception and representation. I want to look at Tracy Chevalier’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring* as well as A.S. Byatt’s *The Matisse Stories*, *Still Life*, and *A Whistling Woman* to illustrate examples of these authors’ fascination with perception and representation in general and that of art in particular. By foregrounding the process of perception and representation, they move beyond the gap of representation. Ekphrasis here is no longer “verbal representation of visual representation,” but a fulfillment of the desire to create a story behind the visual image (Heffernan 3). I agree with Heffernan when he argues that “classic ekphrasis salutes the skill of the artist, and miraculous verisimilitude . . . postmodern ekphrasis undermines the concept of verisimilitude” (4). However, that is not the main function of contemporary ekphrasis by any means. Rather than simply undermining the truthfulness of mimesis, ekphrasis moves on to celebrate the power of language to bring to life a fictional world that is realistic like a *trompe-l’oeil*.

In his analysis of Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*, Jacques Lacan discusses the concept of *anamorphosis* featured in the painting in the form of a skull that can only be recognized from a certain angle. Lacan describes this singular object as “a trap for the gaze” (88). He goes on to
ask, “What is it that attracts and satisfies us in trompe-l’oeil? When is it that it captures our attention and delights us? At the moment when, by a mere shift of our gaze, we are able to realize that the representation doesn’t move with the gaze and that it is merely a trompe-l’oeil” (112). Contemporary ekphrasis often does the same: we are caught up in the representation and the story and at each point that we realize that the representation is not truthful, not mimetic, we enjoy the fact that we have been deceived, even if only for a moment. (I will return to this thought in my discussion of Byatt’s A Whistling Woman at the end of Chapter 2).

The crisis of representation is connected to the fact that re-presentation always refers to something in the world. Derrida defines re-presentatio as signifying the fact “of rendering present, of a summoning as a power-of-bringing-back-to-presence” (307). Thus, if representation is the “power-of-bringing-back-to-presence,” it does not create anything new but shows us something that is already there, that we wouldn’t necessarily have looked at in the first place, like a still life painting which brings the everyday into a new context and draws the reader’s attention to it. Whereas this form of representation is still part of contemporary ekphrasis, it has become more complex. The multiple points of view in the novels I analyze, for example, remind the reader that there is not just one perspective but countless perspectives that are all equally valid and possible.

The crisis of representation that has been at the core of many twentieth-century texts is also at the core of ekphrastic writing. Contemporary authors find themselves faced with an aporia: on the one hand they see language as arbitrary, limited, and always already interpreting; on the other hand, they also realize the “world-making power of language,” as well as its ability to tell stories and to make things happen. While they address this aporia, Byatt and Chevalier manage to do something even more important: they move beyond this gap. I argue that ekphrastic texts force
the reader performatively to consider the analytical process of reading in general while at the same time foregrounding the power of language not as a matter of *re-presenting* but of *darstellen* (stage, create). The German word *Darstellung* differs in its meaning from representation insofar as it is a presencing not of something pre-existing but of something imaginary (as if, *als ob*). It is a staging of something new, an event.

Instead of mourning the impossibility of representing the world mimetically, ekphrastic writers celebrate the fact that reading novels can open new worlds to us. When we start reading the first page of a book we enter into the world of the novel’s characters that “arises ‘magically’ before the reader’s mind’s eye,” as J. Hillis Miller describes the experience (23). He calls this an “open sesame” effect that addresses the magic power of language to make things happen like this formula opened the way into the mountain for Alibaba in *Thousand and One Nights*. This performative power of language is important in that it plays a crucial part in the history of ekphrasis, since from the very beginning the main goal of the ekphrastic writer/speaker was to make something appear in their reader’s mind’s eye. Thus, I read the novels under consideration here in Miller’s sense as “performative utterances” (37) that make a particular world appear visually in our mind’s eye. Literature is thus a form technology from the Greek *tekhne*—to make appear. Ekphrastic texts can be seen a special case of making a work of art appear in the reader’s mind since they self-reflexively refer to the visual imagination. The power of language is a notion that is integral to the ekphrastic texts because it is through their use of language that these authors leave the crisis of representation behind. Instead of a representation of something absent, they use language to imagine something new and to make it present through words.

The sources for these new worlds are the paintings. In *Right of Inspection* Derrida talks about a desire to “spin yarns” about visual representation we are faced with. Derrida writes about
“the abyssal inclusion of photographs within photographs” that is similar to the double structure of ekphrastic narratives (V). He argues that this inclusion “takes something away from looking, it calls for discourse, demands a reading. These tableaux . . . provoke a deciphering beyond any simple perception. Instead of a spectacle they institute a reader, of either gender, and instead of voyeurism, exegesis. But the interpreters can read and demonstrate their competence only by telling stories” (V italics mine). The same abyssal structure within ekphrastic narratives also strengthens the demand for a reading. The characters within the stories through whose eyes we see the paintings are also only able to interpret, to tell their story out of a myriad of possible stories. The same goes for the author who chooses to tell one particular story that originated in their reading of (a) painting(s).

I have established that any attempt to describe is always already incomplete and selective. The contemporary authors whose work I will analyze are aware of that and thus count on the imagination of their readers to complete the image in their head. Thus, the importance of the role of the active reader in the process of meaning-creation is emphasized. The concept of wonder that is a theme in ekphrastic texts from early on remains important in contemporary texts as well.³ Allusions to wonder refer self-reflexively to the impossibility to describe something fully and at the same time foreground the world-making power of language. However, language also has the power to evoke things that are not on the page. For Maurice Merleau-Ponty vision is above all a question of reconstruction.⁴ In The Phenomenology of Perception, he writes, “when I look at the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not only the qualities visible from where I am, but also those which the chimney, the walls, the table can ‘see’: but the back of my lamp is nothing

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⁴ See Lacan’s discussion of Merleau-Ponty in “Anamorphosis” (81f).
but the face it shows to the chimney” (81). Similarly, the part of the picture that language doesn’t or cannot describe, the gaps that are always already there, create the urge to reconstruct or unearth the secret behind the painting. The invisible is rendered visible in the mind’s eye of the reader. Hillis Miller says that literature keeps secrets, but those gaps are there to be filled in by the reader (39).

Novelist Henry James is especially aware of the way we read visually as one of his goals in writing was “to show and not to tell.” This style of writing demands that the reader has a capacity to think visually. Every time we read a novel, we see its world again since novels and paintings are texts that always remain to be read. This “seeing again” comes with a difference though. According to Miller, “re-reading . . . is re-vision. To re-read is to see again what James calls the ‘matter of the tale’” (55f). We “see again” but every re-reading shows a slightly different version of the world of the novel as we focus on different aspects and as the time that has elapsed since our last perusal will have changed us and thus the “vision” will be new and different. Exactly this experience is often doubled in contemporary ekphrastic texts as we experience a character’s changing perception of the same artwork through time.

Writing about art is a characteristic of novels that have been called metafiction or theoretical fiction and can be seen as another form of intertextuality. Another characteristic of metafictional texts, the direct involvement of the reader, is also important for my study: as much as we can identify certain elements of form or context as characteristic of metafiction such as self-reflexiveness and a preoccupation with the relationship between language and the world, the involvement of the reader is equally important. Mark Currie stresses that the “literary text and its reading are inseparable and reflexivity is as much a function of reading as it is an inherent property of the text” (10). The doubling of perceptive situation with the character being a
surrogate reader within the text adds another dimension of self-reflexivity as the attentive characters show the readers to be attentive as well, to the text as well as to themselves as they read.5

This attentiveness is an integral part of aesthetics which, from its beginnings, was concerned not simply with beautiful objects but with the “faculty of perception” as Martin Seel points out in his discussion of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica* (2). Ekphrastic writing is also more than just the description or celebration of beautiful objects. More importantly, it engages critically with issues of perception. Attentiveness to the text is often turned into an attentiveness to ourselves. In his preface to *Aesthetics of Appearance*, Martin Seel writes, “in perceiving the unfathomable particularity of a sensuously given, we gain insight into the indeterminable presence . . . of our lives. Attentiveness to what is appearing is therefore at the same time attentiveness to ourselves” (xi). Thus, ekphrastic texts show how important it is to be an attentive reader and that in analyzing the process of perception, we can see how by being attentive to an art object, we are at the same time attentive to ourselves and thus learn something about ourselves in the process.6

As discussed in the introduction, I will look at ekphraseis as descriptions of a singular “event of viewing” a work of art, as encounters with an aesthetic appearing, rather than as descriptions of a work of art in the traditional sense of the word. In principle, any object that can be perceived with the senses can be an aesthetic object but it also depends on the time and

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5 As Mario Klarer writes, “the very structure of literary allusion to pieces of visual art necessarily carries a highly charged self-reflexive potential. By alluding to or verbally describing a piece of visual art ekphrasis has to come to terms with two kinds of questions: where are the limits of word and image and where are the limits of art and nature?” (2).

6 Seel also points out that only humans have the capacity for perceiving something as or something that. For the aesthetic encounter to happen, he points out that besides the aesthetic object and the being who can know conceptually there has to be attentiveness on the side of the perceiver. Only with that attentiveness is the observer open to the aesthetic appearing of the object.
situation. Seel defines “aesthetic objects [as] objects in a particular situation of perception or objects for such a situation; they are occasions or opportunities to perceive sensuously in a particular way” (21). Seel’s explanation of aesthetic perception also touches on what he calls “phenomenal individuality” or what I have already discussed in the context of Bal’s writings and the example of Derrida’s Chapter on Van Gogh’s shoes: that every event of perceiving or encounter is singular, even if the same aesthetic object and the same observer meet again. Each encounter thus has a momentary character; all its characteristics appear simultaneously. 

Finally, a look at Michel Foucault’s interpretation of Diego de Velazquez’s Las Meninas at the beginning of The Order of Things introduces important implications about representation of representation that relate to the texts I will analyze. Foucault discusses how representations are capable of not only representing objects but also are themselves as cognitive principles. This is another way of calling Velasquez’s painting about painting meta-art. One of the important points Foucault makes about Las Meninas is that the observing subject, the human being, is absent from this painting that is mostly a representation of perception (and a representation of representation for that matter). In earlier examples of ekphrasis that is also the case, since it is usually the “poetic I” or an omniscient narrator who describes the painting, not a character that is part of the world of the story. Unlike Velazquez’s painting, the contemporary narratives that I analyze here put the subjective observer at the very center. According to Foucault, “the painter’s gaze . . . accepts as many models as there are spectators” (4). Similarly, in ekphrastic prose, a painting can be described in an endless number of ways. Foucault says that the “mirror provides a metathesis

7 Seel goes on to quote Heidegger from his lecture on the temporality of the world relations: “what becomes accessible . . . in the now is the transitory in its transition and the resting in its rest.” (28). Besides the singularity of each encounter, Seel also emphasizes that every aspect of the aesthetic objects is present simultaneously. According to him, “conceptual inaccessibility of the nuances of the sensuous phenomenon [is] responsible for this inexhaustibility [and] the impossibility of a complete characterization of all of its sensuously discernible features” (27). Thus a mimetic representation of such an aesthetic encounter is impossible.
of visibility that affects both the space represented in the picture and its nature as representation” (8). The paintings in the novels I am discussing here function in much the same way as they call attention to their own nature as a representation as well as the novel as representation.

**Tracy Chevalier: The Story Behind the Paintings**

Tracy Chevalier’s novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring* could be called a “biography” or “history” of the life of painter Johannes Vermeer. Only very few facts are known about the life of this seventeenth-century Dutch painter and Chevalier takes one of his paintings, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, as the source of inspiration for her novel. This particular painting is particularly interesting because it is different from anything Vermeer had painted up to this point. He started with religious scenes, but the majority of his work is made up of interiors and portraits of one or more models that he painted in his studio. In all of them we see the window of his studio or at least the light coming from the left, the wall in the background, sometimes adorned with a map or another painting, as well as furniture and decorative objects. In the painting that gives Chevalier’s novel its title, *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*, we have none of that. The background is very dark and all we see is a young girl turning and looking over her shoulder directly at the observer, unlike most of Vermeer’s paintings in which the models look out the window, in a mirror, or at whatever they are holding in their hands. What is also unusual about the painting is the dress and headdress of the girl: a turban in blue and yellow. In her novel, Chevalier takes advantage of the fact that we know only very little about the painter Vermeer and uses this and other paintings Vermeer worked on in the same time period as the source for a story of the origination of this outstanding painting and the mysterious girl who posed for it. Her main goal is not to re-present or re-create the paintings she refers to, even though she implicitly

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8 The only critic who has looked at the role of painting in Chevalier’s novel is Deborah H. Cibelli. She takes a cultural studies approach and focuses on the Griet’s character as well the recreation of the time period.
engages with the impossibility of doing so. Instead, she creates a novel that grows out of her desire to unearth a story behind Vermeer’s paintings. The novel evokes the paintings that are attributed to the time period of 1664–1666 and gives us ekphraseis not only of the finished paintings but also gives insight into the process of composition and painting.

The girl’s direct gaze is Chevalier’s queue to make the act of perception a central theme for her novel. In *Vermeer and the Invention of Seeing*, Bryan Jay Wolf discusses the painting and its “economy of . . . presentation, the way that it condenses onto a single figure, with minimum detail, the issue of seeing” (138). In her novel Chevalier creates a household where not much is spoken between the maids and the family and looks are of great importance. The fascination with the visual becomes what connects the young maid Griet with her master Johannes Vermeer.9

As much as Chevalier’s novel is about Vermeer, Griet, and the painting, it is also about painting, perception, and seeing itself. From the very beginning, the novel is filled with tropes for seeing: painting and ekphrasis itself as we see Vermeer’s paintings through Griet’s descriptions of them. Wolf describes Vermeer’s “ways of seeing that link spectators to their objects, artists to their subjects, viewers to their canvases, and figures within the canvases to each other and to the painted spaces they inhabit” (9). Chevalier also uses seeing to link characters and objects. Wolf says about Vermeer’s painting of the girl: “It encompasses Vermeer’s deepest feelings about perception. . . . Her turn to the viewer *interrupts* whatever bodily narrative she might otherwise tell. . . . She summarizes for us, as for Vermeer, the split between seeing and doing” (139). This ambiguous moment between seeing and doing that is typical for all of Vermeer’s work opens up the possibility of an abyssal number of narratives, of which Chevalier tells one.

9 Peter Webber’s film adaptation of the novel makes great use of this emphasis on looking; a very quiet yet powerful film.
Chevalier’s novel shows the distinction between narration and ekphrasis as description that is generally central to the discussions of ekphrasis to be problematic. Although over the last centuries ekphrasis may be associated more widely with poetry than with narrative, the earliest examples of the ekphrastic mode are in the epic such as Homer's description of Achilles’ shield in *The Iliad*. According to Webb, ancient theoreticians of ekphrasis disregarded “the fundamental distinction between narration (unfolding of time) and description (the problematic verbal representation of an object, constituting a ‘narrative pause’) upon which so much modern theory of description and its interpretation is based” (12). I argue that ekphrastic passages in novels such as *Girl with a Pearl Earring* are no longer just ornament or a “narrative pause” but rather performative passages that are central to the plot and often function as narrative impulses or even more. Chevalier collapses the distinction between description and narration, between representation and reality. Reducing ekphrasis to mean “description of a work of art” would indeed take away from the prominent role of ekphrasis in Chevalier’s novel.

The novel starts when sixteen-year-old Griet, daughter of a tile-painter, starts working as a maid for the family of painter Vermeer after her father becomes blind in an accident at work. In her first-person narration, she tells her new life in a very matter-of-fact fashion that reflects her Protestant upbringing, but from the very start her narration also reveals her attentiveness and eye for colors and compositions even in everyday objects. Thus, in the very first scene when the Vermeers come to meet their prospective maid at her father’s house, Vermeer is struck by the

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10 Loiseaux argues that, “In the twentieth century the generic development of ekphrasis has fed the critical impulse to separate it from the surrounding text. If we take Homer’s description of Achilles’ shield as the convenient origin of ekphrasis, its history reads as a gradual move from narrative embeddedness to, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the independent lyric. In emerging out of narrative, ekphrasis appears in modern times finally to have shed its relation from the surrounding text (76f, footnote 6).

11 The distinction between narration and description are hard to establish semiotically since "the differences which separate description and narration are differences of content" (Mitchell quoting Gerard Genette, *Figures of Literary Discourse*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 136).
way Griet has arranged the sliced vegetables neatly in a circle according to their color and says, “I see you have separated the whites. . . . And the orange and the purple, they do not sit together, why is that?” and Griet answers, “The colors fight when they are side by side” (5). From the beginning, it is clear that although Griet doesn’t know much about painting she is very attentive, as her close descriptions of Vermeer and his wife show, and has a strong sense for colors. Later, when she arrives at the Vermeer’s house she describes seeing the four Vermeer daughters who “were arranged in order of size” (14). This observation indicates once more her strong sense for composition. After the Vermeers have left, her father reminds her that she has actually seen his View of Delft. He says, “Do you remember the painting we saw in the Town Hall a few years ago, which van Ruijven was displaying after he bought it? . . . With the sky that took up so much of the painting, and the sunlight on some of the buildings” (7). Griet remembers the painting even down to details such as the sand in the paint that made “the brickwork and the roofs look rough” and “the long shadows in the water, and tiny people on the shore nearest us” (7). Her good recollection of the painting is another sign of her interest in painting and the strong impact it has on her since she “remembered thinking that I had stood at the very spot many times and never seen Delft the way the painter had” (8). She experiences how a painting can change the way you see something familiar such as the town you live in.

Chevalier incorporates many of the few details we know about Vermeer’s life such as the paintings Maria Thins owns. Those with religious content have a strong effect on Griet. As a Protestant she feels very uncomfortable to come to work in a Catholic household and paintings such as that of the “Virgin Mary, and one of the three kings worshipping the Christ Child” make her feel uneasy (19). The crucifixion scene makes Griet call the living room the “Crucifixion room” and at night she covers the smaller painting of Christ on the Cross that she finds hanging
above her bed in the cellar so she can sleep. These Catholic subjects irritate Griet and she tries not to look at them. In a time period when paintings were not to be seen everywhere, people associated a greater power with them.

Griet’s strong visual sense is illustrated in the way she describes her surroundings and in her relationship with her master where looks are more important and more frequent than words. They also share the eye for composition. As she starts cleaning her master’s studio where he works on his latest painting, she sometimes sees what needs to be changed about a painting’s composition before he does. For example, she changes the position of the blue cloth in *A Lady Writing*, the second painting Vermeer does of van Ruijven’s wife, and then of course in the portrait Vermeer paints of her—the pearl earring.

As mentioned earlier, the novel is told in first-person narration from Griet’s point of view, so we either see the paintings Vermeer is working on through her eyes or through her descriptions when she tells her blind father about them. The first painting that we “see” is *Woman with a Pearl Necklace* (c. 1664) in which patron van Ruijven’s wife is standing in front of a mirror putting on a necklace. Before Griet ever looks at the painting, we start to visualize what it depicts as she starts to clean Vermeer’s studio for him. He has given her the special task to be especially careful with the corner of the room where Mrs. Van Ruijven poses for the painting and so we see the actual objects that are in the painting first: “a powder brush, a pewter bowl, a letter, a black ceramic pot, blue cloth heaped to one side and hanging over the edge” (34). Chevalier, however, not only describes the scene as it can be seen in the actual painting, she

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12 Chevalier also includes the following paintings by Vermeer: *Woman with a Water Jug* (c. 1664–65), a second portrait of Van Ruijven’s wife, this time looking directly at the viewer entitled *A Lady Writing* (ca. 1665), and finally, *The Concert* (c. 1665–66) that van Ruijven commissioned as a companion piece to the earlier *The Music Lesson* (ca. 1662–64) as well as the famous *The Pearl Earring* (ca. 1665) which was the inspiration for Chevalier’s novel. Numerous other paintings by Vermeer are mentioned, such as *The Milkmaid* (ca. 1658–60), his famous *View of Delft* (ca. 1660–61), one of Vermeer’s few outside paintings, and *The Girl with the Wineglass* (ca. 1659–60).
also incorporates details that are hidden in the painting but that she found by comparing
Vermeer’s paintings. Besides many of the pieces of clothing and objects that Griet describes
such as the yellow hermelin coat that appears in several paintings, we also recognize the corner
of Vermeer’s studio where he situates most of his scenes, and one chair has lion heads on each
end of its back. But as Griet remarks to Maria Thins at one point, “In the painting there are no
lion heads on the chair next to the woman” (36). By observations such as, this Chevalier
narrativizes the process of the composition of the paintings that make the novel appear so
“truthful” and “authentic.”

The first literal ekphrasis of this painting occurs when, on her weekly Sunday visit at her
parents’ house, Griet describes it to her blind father who is eager to learn what Vermeer is
working on. Chevalier addresses the problem of ekphrasis as a mimetic recreation implicitly
through the dialogue between Griet and her father whose inability to see makes him a surrogate
reader. When he asks her to describe the painting she answers, “I don’t know if I can in such a
way that you will be able to see it” and he answers, “Try. . . .It will give me pleasure to imagine
a painting by a master, even if my mind creates only a poor imitation” (47). The mode of
ekphrasis is supposed to do just that: create the painting in the mind’s eye of the listener, but as
Chevalier shows here performatively through the conversation between Griet and her father, a
mimetic description cannot achieve this effect. Griet begins, “So I tried to describe the woman
tying pearls around her neck, . . . the light from the window bathing her face and her yellow
mantle, the dark foreground that separated her from us,” but only when she adds, “The light in

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13 Another example of this technique follows with the description of the next painting Vermeer works on. Van
Ruijven’s has commissioned another portrait of wife, this time sitting on a table writing (A Lady Writing). Once
more, Chevalier uses the painting to tell the story of how it might have been composed. So at first van Ruijven’s
wife wears the pearls around her neck, but Vermeer tell her, “Don’t wear the necklace. Leave it on the table,” which
is where we can now see it in the painting (128). Later Griet mentions that he had his wife’s jewelry box brought up
to the studio, which we also see in the painting (130).
the back wall is so warm that looking at it feels the way the sun feels on your face,” her father seems to understand. Only through analogy can Griet convey the painting to her father; a mimetic representation (or ekphrasis in the traditional sense) is thus impossible.

The painting known as *Woman with a Water Jug*, a portrait of a baker’s daughter holding a silver water pitcher, is introduced once again when Griet’s father asks her to describe it. This time she is not able to fully satisfy her father with her ekphrasis of the painting. Griet says, “The baker’s daughter stands in a bright corner by a window. . . . She is facing us, but is looking out the window, down to her right. She is wearing a yellow and black fitted bodice of silk and velvet, a dark blue skirt, and a white cap that hangs down in two points before her chin” (90). She continues to point out that the white of the cap is not really white, but that “when you look at the cap long enough . . . you see that he has not really painted white, but blue, and violet, and yellow” (90). Her father gets impatient with her since she doesn’t seem to be able to tell him exactly what the “story” of the painting is. He asks, “What is she doing?” and Griet can only answer, “She has one hand on the pewter pitcher sitting on a table and one on a widow she’s partly opened. She’s about to pick up the pitcher and dump the water from it out the window, but she’s stopped in the middle of what she’s doing and is either dreaming or looking at something in the street” (90). As she describes to her father, “[Vermeer’s] paintings don’t tell stories” (91). They rather show a moment between events, something might happen or it might not. Vermeer’s paintings don’t give a static representation and don’t look “posed,” and his models seem so real because they seem to be caught in the glimpse of a moment. His paintings are like snapshots and don’t obviously “tell a story”; they rather give insight into the person portrayed while staying
ambiguous enough to appeal to each viewer in a different way.\textsuperscript{14} This is the ambiguity that Chevalier takes advantage of as she incorporates them in her story about Vermeer.

According to Wolf many critics have interpreted \textit{Woman with a Pearl Necklace} as a \textit{vanitas} portrait.\textsuperscript{15} He, however, disagrees and argues that for him the painting is “defined by images of reflection and self-reflection, from the thematic of mirror and woman to the subtle highlighting that appears upon the surface of the enameled vase. . . . The painting is not about judging but about \textit{seeing}” (176). Whereas I agree with Wolf that all of Vermeer’s work is about seeing, I think his paintings also have a \textit{vanitas} character in the sense that they might all be called still lives rather than typical portraits; they show a person caught in the moment of contemplation and that implies the fleetingness of time. Like a snapshot or a photograph, their presence already means that the moment is gone, the person may be dead. All of his portraits are atypical portraits because they show the model(s) in profile or with their heads turned in contemplation toward an object or out the window. Only rarely do they look out at the observer and if so they usually look over their shoulder. \textit{Woman with a Pearl Necklace} is about viewing, with the empty chairs that invite the viewer in. The woman doubles the viewer of the painting and leads our look inwards as well.\textsuperscript{16}

The most powerful trope for seeing in \textit{Girl With a Pearl Earring} is the \textit{camera obscura} that Vermeer uses to perfect the perspective in his paintings. At the time this device was a fairly new invention as is illustrated in Tanneke’s description; she calls it “a wooden box that you look in and—see things” (55). Griet, when given a chance to look through it the first time, has a very

\textsuperscript{14} I will explore this idea more in Chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{15} He goes on to say, “They read the mirror . . . as a caveat for female narcissism” (176).

\textsuperscript{16} Wolf says about \textit{Woman with a Pearl Necklace}, “what she sees in the mirror is not just herself, but the machinery of perception: the conditions of spectatorship that underwrite a painting such as she appears in” (180).
strong reaction: “she [stands] up so suddenly that the robe drop[s] . . . on the floor” (57). She can see the “painting” without the woman in it and can’t understand how it got into this box. Vermeer explains about the lens and the light falling through it thus projecting the scene on the glass, but Griet doesn’t know what the word ‘image’ means. She asks, “What is an image, sir? It is not a word I know” (58). This entire experience makes her uneasy and she requests that he leave her alone while she takes another look. She sees the objects become clearer and clearer, the colors become brighter, “assembled before [her] eyes on a flat surface, a painting that was not a painting” (59). Griet still doesn’t understand how the camera obscura works or why her master needs it as he says to make him see better.

This episode draws our attention to the fact that as an ekphrastic description doesn’t realistically reproduce the painting, so does a painting not necessarily represent the exact reality of its subject matter. Nevertheless, it shows how the artist sees the scene or painting and gives us a representation of the event of perception. Wolf describes the camera obscura as an “ungainly seeing machine that literalized the newly interior spaces of Cartesian thought . . . it provided a picture of how the process of looking itself occurred, revealing not what the seventeenth-century viewer saw, but how he saw: the manner in which the world became intelligible by being brought indoors, set within the mind’s interior chambers” (32). Vermeer’s paintings are reminiscent of that kind of interior chamber of contemplation and the observer is invited to self-inspection along with the model that we identify with. This effect is doubled in Chevalier’s novel since we observe Griet’s startled reaction to the camera obscura, we imagine Vermeer’s paintings, and in doing so we are also invited to self-inspection.

Another aspect of the camera obscura that is significant here is that in order to see the image the viewer has to look through a hole, similar to peeking through a keyhole, spying on the
scene within. Thus, the *camera obscura* opens up the context of voyeurism and the implications that comes with it. It is an intrusion of sorts; we intrude on the world of the model caught in a private moment of reflection. We then in turn reflect about ourselves. The attentiveness to the painting, the quiet moment portrayed, makes us attentive to ourselves. With its focus on the interior of the house and the interior of the characters and their perceptions, the entire novel becomes an ekphrasis of Vermeer’s paintings. Like the image of the painting in a box, so are the women (Griet and his other models) trapped in Vermeer’s studio for months at a time posing for the painting. They are also trapped in their lives as wives or maids, with only their interior life as their relief.

Vermeer’s technique of using several colors to create one specific effect is illustrated in the scene where Griet recalls how he teaches her to “see.” She says that she “thought that you painted what you saw, using the colors you saw” (99). Chevalier then lets us see through Griet’s eyes that Vermeer creates certain colors through layers of what Griet comes to call “false colors” that he uses to make us see the real color. Griet describes how Vermeer doesn’t paint the objects and outlines, but that “instead he painted patches of color—black where her skirt would be, ocher for the bodice and the map on the wall, red for the pitcher and the basin it sat in” (100). When she finally asks him about this he makes her look at the clouds and asks her what colors they are. At first she replies, “Why, white, sir;” but when he asks her to look again, she realizes that they are grey, and blue and yellow and green as well (101). Griet who has been attentive to her surroundings from the beginning, becomes even more so now. She discovers that “when the light shone on the wall. . . . it was not white, but many colors” (101) and says that “after that I could not stop looking at things” (102). Griet becomes attentive to all details around her and
comes to see everything aesthetically. Readers experience all this through her and thus the novel trains us to see aesthetically.

Chevalier’s novel unearthes a story behind Vermeer’s paintings that is in keeping with the atmosphere Vermeer creates in his paintings: an introverted community with female characters that are trapped in the house. She also manages to capture the ambiguity and the transitoriness of the paintings. We are never sure what the model is thinking of or what they are about to do. As Griet tries to explain to her father, the paintings don’t tell a story, at least not an obvious one. Chevalier shows the impossibility of an exact mimetic representation, while at the same time creating a vivid staging of the life of the Vermeer family. She has moved on from a representation to a *Darstellung*, and thus has gone beyond the crisis of representation.

**A.S. Byatt: Perception, Painting, and Reality**

Certain characteristics of ekphrastic texts have changed and new characteristics have become important as writers of prose have embraced the genre. In his discussion of John Keats’s poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” John Race emphasizes the importance of the emotional state of the speaker and the meditative nature of the poem. Byatt’s narratives are also highly meditative in nature. However, the themes are not limited to the nature of truth and beauty, but include the capacity of language to represent reality and the influence of language on how we perceive reality. In her works, Byatt explores both the power and the limitations of storytelling. In *The Matisse Stories* she is primarily concerned with the question of what makes art “art.”

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17 Byatt’s short story “Christ in the House of Martha and Mary” which was published in the collection *Elementals*. *Stories of Fire and Ice* is very similar in structure to Chevalier’s novel. The story is less explicitly metafictional than her other works which I will discuss. It is a mediation on perception in the form of an ekphrastic narrative on Diego Velázquez’s painting *Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*. Like Chevalier’s novel, Byatt’s story recreates the origination of the painting and explores at the same time how we see the world and in turn ourselves.
Byatt’s work is highly self-reflexive and, like many other contemporary texts, her novels critically and performatively reflect the crisis of narrative and representation. This kind of fiction has been called metafiction or, to use Mark Currie’s term, theoretical fiction. He argues that incorporating such theoretical discourse in a novel gives it “a critical function, the ability to explore the logic and the philosophy of narrative without recourse to metalanguage” (52). Byatt explores primarily the way language creates images in the reader’s mind’s eye and the symbiotic relationship between verbal and visual language. Another characteristic of theoretical fiction is that it “is a performative rather than a constative narratology, meaning that it does not try to state the truth about an object-narrative but rather enacts or performs what it wishes to say about narrative” (Currie 52). Byatt also doesn’t attempt to state anything explicitly about mimesis and ekphrasis; she rather explores all possible permutations of the relationship of language and images in performative ways. Often, she uses her characters’ thoughts or conversations between characters to reflect on these issues.

The works of Byatt are meditations on the problematic nature of the representational nature of the arts. In the opening paragraphs of her short stories in The Matisse Stories Byatt illustrates this struggle to depict but never fully achieving it as she adds one long sentence after another to her introduction of the setting, thus performatively showing the abyssal process of description. Two stories in this collection are written in present tense which intensifies the feeling of the experience of viewing being simultaneous with the reading. By using present tense, Byatt stresses the experience of the viewing and the temporality of reading a painting. The reader encounters a series of tableaux that the texts guide us through.

Byatt’s dedication to the collection The Matisse Stories, “For Peter Who taught me to look at things slowly. With love,” evokes the central condition for aesthetic perception—
attentiveness.\textsuperscript{18} Everything can be a work of art if the viewer looks at it closely and with attention. This attentiveness differentiates perception from aesthetic perception. Byatt illustrates this idea in the passage in “The Chinese Lobster” where Gerda Himmelblau compares Perry Diss favorably with her other colleagues, “many of whom, Gerda Himmelblau believes, do not like paintings” (94). If somebody doesn’t “like” e.g. abstract art, chances are that he or she won’t really pay any attention to it. The activity of “seeing” acquires a special meaning in \textit{The Matisse Stories}.\textsuperscript{19} It comes to mean more than just perceiving something with one’s eyes and becomes synonymous with “understanding.” In the first story, “Medusa’s Ankles,” Susannah’s husband suddenly “sees” her for the first time when she returns from the salon with a new hairdo (27). In the second story, “Art Work,” Debbie describes Robin’s paintings: “They are miraculous, they are like those times when time seems to stop, and you just \textit{look} at something, and \textit{see} it, out of time, and you feel surprised that you can see at all, you are \textit{so surprised}, and the seeing goes on and on, and gets better and better” (51). In this context Byatt introduces art as a way to help us see or understand the world around us better. Finally, in “The Chinese Lobster,” the last of three stories, art professor Perry Diss accuses his student Peggy Nollet of not being able to “see” and also of never having spent more than a half hour “\textit{looking at Matisse}” (107–8). He says, “that woman \textit{isn’t an artist}, and \textit{doesn’t work}, and \textit{can’t see}, and should not have a degree” (108, 112). Peggy sees Matisse’s paintings as misogynistic and in her artwork she covers prints of his paintings in feces which in her professor’s eyes shows that she doesn’t understand Matisse’s work.

\textsuperscript{18} Byatt has been said to be “preoccupied with the problems of perception” (Kenyon 54).

\textsuperscript{19} The stories appeared on their own in the following magazines before they were published separately: “Medusa’s Ankles.” \textit{Women’s Journal} (September 1990); “Art Work.” \textit{The New Yorker} (20 May 1991): 36–51; “The Chinese Lobster.” \textit{The New Yorker} (26 October 1992): 90–100.
Byatt once said in an interview that she would like to write the way the French painter Henri Matisse painted (Kellaway quoted in Kelly 54–55). In *The Matisse Stories* and *Still Life* Byatt illustrates the difficulties of representation in a postmodern world on many levels: what is art, and what is aesthetic perception, but also how can we describe art, and how what role does language have in the way we perceive the world around us. At the same time she creates fictional worlds that the reader gets lost in.

A.S. Byatt has a very visual way of thinking which she describes in her essay “Still Life / Nature Morte” in her collection of critical essays *Passions of the Mind*. She writes

> I don’t know how much is known about the difference between those who think with mental imagery and those who don’t. I very much do—I see any projected piece of writing or work as a geometric structure of various colours and patterns. I see other people’s metaphors—if there is an iconic content to a metaphor I will ‘see’ a visual image on some inner mental screen, which can then be contemplated more precisely, described discursively. (*Passions* 13–14)

Byatt attempts to write in a way that her readers will be able to “see” visually while reading. In both *Still Life* and *The Matisse Stories* she comments on “bad storytellers” who are not able to do exactly that. In *Still Life*, Frederica thinks that one of her boyfriends, Nigel, is “not a perfect storyteller” and she couldn’t “form[] . . . [a] very clear impression of any of his companions” (289). And in “Medusa’s Ankles,” Susannah calls Lucian a bad storyteller, because she cannot see an “image” of the people he tells her about (13). Byatt’s main criterion for good story-telling is the ability to make it possible for the person listening to construct a mental image of the characters in the story, which is reminiscent of Conrad’s goal in his preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* where he writes, “My task . . . is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, above all, to make you see” (v).

20 Kathleen Coyne Kelly writes in her book on the British author, “*The Matisse Stories* is Byatt’s tribute to Henri Matisse’s method and to his palette. Matisse, we are told, is Byatt’s favorite painter; . . . Matisse experimented with translating pure color into form; in *The Matisse Stories*, Byatt uses color in much the same way. In each story, colors often serve as objective correlates to both theme and character” (Kelly 54–55).
How does Byatt go about achieving this effect of making her stories appear on her readers’ “mental screen”? Another passage from her essay in Passions of the Mind illustrates Byatt’s preference for description, and in particular the use of adjectives, as one way in which she tries to appeal to the visual imagination of her readers. She says

what interested me was the abused and despised adjective, that delimiter of plain nouns which if properly used, makes every description more and more particular and precise. A Tree, of many One. A large tree. A large, rugged tree. A large rugged, lopsided tree. In a novel with paintings and adjectives somewhere in the center, colour adjectives became particularly important. (Passions 18)

Byatt talks about her novel Still Life in this particular essay which I will discuss in more detail later in this Chapter, but we can easily find this style in The Matisse Stories as well. All three stories consist of long passages of description and an abundance of color adjectives. In The Matisse Stories colors appear in all variations: specific colors such as vermilion (118), scarlet (90), cream (5), crimson (26), and copper (26) as well as colors that are specifically qualified such as jade-green (90), venous-blue (26), battleship-grey (13), and fuchsia-red (26). Through this use of adjectives and qualifiers, Byatt does more than just attempt to solve the “dilemma of conveying colour” (Kenyon 80). She performatively shows the dilemma of visual representation by using unusual metaphors or analogies which only seemingly make her description more specific. With the abundance of these adjectives she really shows performatively that no matter how specific she tries to be, the color each reader imagines will still be slightly different.

The colors pink and sky-blue appear like a leitmotif in all three stories in The Matisse Stories. Those colors are typical for Matisse and can be found in most of the paintings featured in Byatt’s stories. Sky blue seems especially prominent: in “Medusa’s Ankles” it appears in the painting as well as in the description of the salon: “a kind of sky blue, a dark sky blue, the colour of the couch or bed on which the rosy nude spread herself” (5); in “Art Work” Mrs. Brown states about the tank-top she made for Jamie that Debbie wants to throw away: “I’ve got a use for a bit
of sky-blue” (59); and finally in “The Chinese Lobster” the Dean of Women Students’ last name is the German word for sky blue—*himmelblau*. The color scheme and the themes that connect the stories in *The Matisse Stories* form a literary “triptych.”

In an interview with *Salon Magazine* Byatt talks about a narrative style that is central for her work—description. Talking about the writer B.S. Johnson she says

> he was writing things like ‘James Joyce was the Einstein of the novel. It will never again be possible to give people names, or to write narrative that goes forward, or to describe things.’ This just made me very angry, because it seemed to me that life was so varied and complex that it took up all your energy, and yours would never be the same as anybody else’s description unless you are a bad writer. (italics mine, *Salon Magazine*)

Byatt’s writing is full of descriptions that are indeed very singular. Byatt’s statement supports my argument that each description (of a painting) is singular, no description is exactly like the other. To take Byatt’s statement further, a good writer or an attentive writer will always be able to describe a singular event of perception that will be unique and different from other descriptions.

The three short stories in *The Matisse Stories*, all feature one or more painting by Henri Matisse. I will focus on the second story, “Art Work,” which begins with a depiction of the painting *Le silence habité des maisons*. We encounter the painting as a reproduction in a monograph on Henri Matisse by the art historian Sir Lawrence Gowing.\(^{21}\) Instead of a color reproduction (like the one on the cover of the Vintage edition) the image in question is “very small and in black and white” (31). Gowing’s description of the original painting—“the pictures . . . have extraordinary virility. At last Matisse is wholly at ease with the fierce impulse”—is juxtaposed with the impression of the black and white image: “It is a dark little image on the page, charcoal-grey, slate-grey, soft pale pencil grey, subdued, demure” (32). What is important

\(^{21}\) For a detailed discussion of “Medusa’s Ankles” and “The Chinese Lobster,” see Chapter 4 on Ekphrasis and Gender.
here is Byatt’s emphasis on the ambiguity of reproduction as she repeats the phrase “it may be” in her description. Moreover, she evokes a classic part of ekphrasis, that of wonder, when the narrator remarks, “It is a pity there are no colours but it is possible, tempting, to imagine them. . . . We may imagine it” (31–32). This stress on the importance of imagination shows that the impossibility of an exact description has indeed a liberating effect. We are free to imagine our own virtual reality.

In “Art Work,” we also find how Matisse’s forms and shapes appear even in the setting, with Natasha’s “bedspread [that] is jazzy black forms the textile designer would never have seen, without Matisse” (34). Furthermore, Natasha herself becomes one of Matisse’s “supine women” with her “face . . . white and oval and luminous with youth” and her “arms and legs [dangling] beyond the ruffled rectangle of this spread” (34–35). The movement from a description of the illustration to the setting makes the reader experience the importance of an attentive close reading not only in the context of art, but also of the everyday setting of an apartment.

A theme that can be found throughout the stories is the opposition of writing and painting, especially the representation of visual objects. The description of Le silence habité des maisons is one example of ekphrasis where Byatt uses this special form of description to bring Matisse’s painting to the mind’s eye of her readers. In his book Picture Theory, W.J.T. Mitchell defines “the problem of ekphrasis [as] the verbal representation of visual representation” (Mitchell 152). The main problem that Byatt and any writer who attempts ekphrasis face, in Mitchell’s words is that “a verbal representation cannot represent—that is, make present—its object in the same way a visual representation can. It may refer to an object, describe it, invoke it, but it can never bring its visual presence before us in the way pictures do. Words can ‘cite,’ but never ‘sight’ their objects” (152). What Mitchell says here is correct to a certain extent; however, words can “make
presen” and bring a “virtual presence before us” as I have argued earlier. The picture ekphrasis creates on a reader’s mental screen is specific to each individual. And more than that, the texts I am looking at here, also show that each reader of a picture sees something different and a picture in itself is always already an interpretation, a translation of its own.

Byatt describes the two paintings in great detail suggesting their forms and colors. If we look at the rest of the narration, however, everything else is described in an equally comprehensive way, whether character or setting. So how is verbal representation of visual arts different from other description? Mitchell addresses this problem, saying that

> ekphrastic poetry may speak to, for, or about works of visual art, but there is nothing especially problematic or unique in this speech: no special conjuring acts of language are required and the visual object of reference does not impinge (except in analogical ways) upon its verbal representation to determine its grammar, control its style, or deform its syntax. Sometimes we talk as if ekphrasis were a peculiar textual feature, something that produced ripples of interference on the surface of verbal representation. But no special textual features can be assigned to ekphrasis, any more than we can, in grammatical or stylistic terms, distinguish descriptions of paintings, statues, or other visual representations from descriptions of any other kind of object. (1994, 159)

To relate Mitchell’s argument to *The Matisse Stories*, the realization that the language in ekphrastic passages bears no distinctive features that would differentiate it from description of things other than art brings along certain implications. Throughout the text, we find descriptions that seem very similar to the description of the paintings. In “Art Work” Jamie’s chickenpox are presented as a “humped and varied terrain of rosy peaks and hummocks, mostly the pink of those boring little begonias with fleshly leaves, but some raging into salmon-deeps and some extinct volcanoes, with umber and ochre crust” (36) and Mrs. Brown’s bruises become “chocolate and violet stain on the gold skin” (43). For Byatt’s novel then, Mitchell’s extended, general definition of ekphrasis applies “that includes any ‘set description intended to bring person, place, picture, etc. before the mind’s eye’” (1994, 153). Everything in the stories is turned into art through description that is attentive to detail.
The problematic nature of representation is central to all three stories; they all ask the question if mimetic representation is at all possible. In the discussion of ekphrasis Mitchell talks about three different categories that are connected with ekphrasis: ekphrastic fear, ekphrastic hope, and ekphrastic indifference. Ekphrastic fear is the apprehension that it is not possible to represent at all (Mitchell 1993, 163). In “Art Work” Debbie thinks looking at Robin’s work: “She saw that it was a serious attempt at a serious and terrible problem, an attempt to answer the question every artist must ask him or herself, at some time, why bother, why make representations at all?” (51). But there remains ekphrastic hope “in which the impossibility of ekphrasis is overcome in imagination or metaphor, when we discover a ‘sense’ in which language can do what so many writers have wanted to do: ‘make us see’” (Mitchell 152).

Ekphrastic indifference then defines the state of mind when one comes to accept that the visual description can never be the entirely truthful (Mitchell 163).22 Byatt’s work incorporates all three categories: she addresses ekphrastic fear through sentence structure and her characters, the fact that we are looking at a complete narrative shows that she, as well as her characters who are artists, nevertheless have ekphrastic hope. Finally, the juxtaposition of representations of ekphrastic fear and hope shows that Byatt has reached the state of ekphrastic indifference; she has moved beyond the ekphrastic fear, the crisis of representation.

22 Kelly addresses the same theme when she writes about Robin, the “neorealist” painter, who stands for the struggle of any artist who tries to make representations. She writes, “When a painter or novelist attempts to incorporate this awareness of the difficulties of representation into her or his work—the thing to be represented and the process of representation itself—we might understand this attempt as a move from an ‘innocent’ realism to a more knowing postmodern vision” (Kelly x). Kelly proceeds to point out the parallel to Byatt’s own work: “Byatt attempts to negotiate the space that exists between realism and other modes of representation. Her vision is at once focused on the flawed lives of everyday individuals—albeit very smart and introspective individuals—and on the language that she uses to construct such characters. . . . Byatt specializes in this paradox that underpins realism—the ‘implausibility of the realist commenting on the creation of realism,’ as Kenyon puts it (55). In other words, Byatt complicates the realist project by reflecting on the process of writing realistic fiction itself. She writes realist fiction and, while doing so, questions its ability to imitate life; she is too steeped in Renaissance and Romantic notions of art and representation to do otherwise. ‘My characters are real and also metaphors,’ she says” (Kelly ix–x). Like Matisse, who in the 1900’s “confronted the crisis of representation” (Gowing 17), Byatt shows how artists at the end of the twentieth century still face that same dilemma.
As *The Matisse Stories* revolve around descriptions of art and artist the reader is confronted with two questions: What makes art ‘art’? And what makes an artist an ‘artist’? In *The Matisse Stories* description makes no distinction between objects that are “traditionally” regarded as art and other objects. In “Art Work” we see Mrs. Brown’s clothes and the jumpers she makes for Jamie and Natasha, as well as the Dennison family’s old clothes she collects in a plastic bag, become “art” when her work is displayed in the Callisto Gallery. It almost seems as if the exhibition transforms her into a different person as she suddenly turns from Mrs. Brown the maid into Sheba Brown the artist.23 All the three stories ask the question: Does a work of art only become “real” art when it is displayed in an exhibition, and at the same time can anything that is displayed become art?24 Instead of explicitly answering the question for us, Byatt shows performatively the complexities that factor in qualifying the status of something as art.

All artists are constantly faced with the task of representation. Byatt’s stories suggest that there is no such thing as a “truthful representation” or an exact reproduction. Still it is possible to translate an object into another medium and maintain its central idea through the use of metaphor and analogy. With *The Matisse Stories*, Byatt has created short stories that are highly self-reflexive in that they engage in questions of representation and art on several levels. Robin’s struggle with representation serves as a *mise-en-abyme* of the underlying theme of the

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23 This question is further complicated in the example of the lobster in the last story. When Gerda Himmelblau enters the restaurant she passes the familiar shrine with the Buddha and perceives a new object: “a display-case . . . It resembles cases in museums, in which you might see miniatures, or jewels, or small ceramic objects” (91). This description creates the expectation that a work of art will be found in the case, but when she looks inside she finds it to be a fish tank with “merely” a lobster and crabs inside which, however, as mentioned earlier, are, described very much like a work of art.

24 Walter Benjamin discusses one aspect of this question in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction:” “In the same way today, by the absolute emphasis on its exhibition value the work of art becomes a creation with entirely new functions, among which the one we are conscious of, the artistic function, later may be recognized as incidental” (Benjamin 224–25). He implies that an everyday object can be turned into a valuable work of art through exhibition.
(im)possibility of mimesis. This self-reflexivity is maybe even more apparent in Still Life where the narrator directly addresses the issues of representation of sensuous perception.  

**A.S. Byatt: A Still Life Comes Alive**

Before entering the world of Byatt’s novel Still Life, readers have the title itself to think about as well as several epigraphs. The genre of painting that the title of the novel evokes, the *still life*, also called *nature morte* or *vanitas*, sets up central themes for the novel. According to Norman Bryson, a still life painting is a ropography (from the Greek term *rhopos* meaning trivial objects, small wares, trifles) (63). These paintings portray “things which lack importance, the unassuming material base of life that importance constantly overlooks” (63). Byatt also draws attention to the seemingly trivial in her novel about the everyday life of the Potter family set in rural England of the 1950s in which she describes such typical events of family life as Christmas dinners and pregnancies in a very detailed way. What is often overlooked in novels becomes the main content of her novel. Byatt’s intention is the same as that of still life painter whose “whole project forces the subject, both painter and viewer, to attend closely to the preterite objects in the world which, exactly because they are so familiar, elude normal attention. Since still life needs to look at the overlooked, it has to bring into view objects which perception normally screens out” (Bryson 87). For Bryson, “the enemy is a mode of seeing which thinks it knows in advance what is worth looking at and what is not: against that, the image presents the constant surprise of things seen for the first time” (65). Byatt’s narrator acknowledges the problem of this kind of

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25 The novel shows Byatt’s interest in “the theory and the gap between signifier and signified in the much wider sense of the gap between our mental images, our words and the world” (Kenyon 80). Byatt attempts to bring “the thing itself” to her readers’ mental eyes and at the same time she takes up the impossibility of this endeavor as a theme” (Kenyon 81).

26 *Still Life* (1985) is the second part of a tetralogy which starts with *The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), *Babel Tower* (1996), and *A Whistling Woman* (2002). Each of these novels engages with issues of representation, but *Still Life* stands out in the way it juxtaposes visual with verbal representation.
inattentive seeing and at the same time admits that art cannot change this. The narrator says, “Art is not the recovery of the innocent eye, which is inaccessible” (116). Nevertheless, Byatt sets out to show us that paintings and novels can make us see things in a new way, show us familiar things in a different light. If she cannot make us see innocently, she forces us to become aware of the processes of perception that “we have learned over time” (116). She knows that “we always put something of ourselves—however passive we are as observers, however we believe in the impersonality of the poet, into our descriptions of our world, our mapping of our vision” (117). These narratorial asides make the reader think about this “part of ourselves” that informs our perception at all times.

The epigraphs of the novel introduce the main issues Byatt tackles in the novel. The first epigraph from Marcel Proust’s *Du coté de chez Swann*, “words present to us little pictures of things,” evokes the power of language to create a visual reality.\(^27\) The second one from Proust’s *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*—“I endeavored to find beauty where I had never imagined it could be: in the most everyday objects, in the profound life of natures mortes”—illustrates the function of still lives to make us pay attention to and realize the importance of the overlooked. The last quote from Cuvier illustrates the *memento mori* aspect of still life painting; “dead substances are borne towards living bodies . . . [to finally] escape from them again one day so as to fall once more under the laws of inanimate nature [nature morte].”\(^28\) The reminder of our own mortality is intrinsically connected to the call for more attentive perception and to representation in general. Byatt asks us to seize the day and enjoy the beauty of the everyday.

\(^{27}\) This is one in a series of allusions to the world-making power of language. Another one that stands out is to Mallarmé’s *Crisis in Poetry*: “I say: a flower! and outside the oblivion to which my voice relegates any shape, insofar as it is something other than the calyx, there arises musically, as the very idea and delicate, the one absent from every bouquet” (218).

\(^{28}\) Quoted in Foucault’s *The Order of Things*. 
Whereas *The Matisse Stories* show Byatt’s fascination for Henri Matisse, her novel *Still Life* is in a sense tribute to Vincent Van Gogh. Especially the character Alexander Wedderburn in *Still Life* is obsessed by Van Gogh’s paintings. In *Still Life* and *The Matisse Stories*, Byatt problematizes representation through language in descriptions in particular and in writing in general. Since language is always already an interpretation, even a seemingly objective description is interpretive and thus mimesis is an impossible task. The possibilities to describe a scene or a painting are infinite. Byatt shows that everything we have read or seen, our mental vocabulary so to speak, informs the way we perceive everything around us, or as J. Hillis Miller says in *On Literature*, “we see the world through the literature we read” (20). On the one hand we cannot understand (“see”) words we don’t know, but on the other hand, what we read still makes us see the real world differently. Byatt exemplifies this reciprocity in her description of Frederica Potter’s summer in France. Byatt writes, “[Frederica] was taken everywhere. To the covered fish market at dawn to buy fish for a bouillabaisse, which held no romance for her for she had not then read Ford Madox Ford’s description of the great bouillabaisse in the Calanques, nor Elizabeth David’s description of the color and patterns of fish on the stalls” (60). This scene shows that reading about something such as a fish soup in a romantic context can change the way we perceive it. Byatt describes how reading about something influences our experience of it. The same applies to a painting: we experience the *Mona Lisa* differently from any other portrait of a woman, because we have heard so much about it.

Throughout the novel Byatt interrupts the personal narration with the different characters as focalizers to insert commentaries in first-person. These commentaries work as *Verfremdungseffekte* (alienation-effects), taking us out of the world of the characters for a

29 Critic Olga Kenyon describes this novel as “a tour de force . . . with the aim of capturing ‘the thing itself’ like a painter” (Kenyon 77).
moment and forcing us to think about the theoretical implications these commentaries bring up.

In one of these commentaries the first-person narrator addresses the connection between perception and language: “But words, acquired slowly over a lifetime, are part of a different set of perceptions of the world. They have grown with us; they restrict what we see and how we see it” (63). Thus our vocabulary is directly related to what we see or don’t see. A relationship of vocabulary to perception also accounts for the singularity of the event of each visual perception. Since each life is singular, everybody acquires a different vocabulary, and thus perceives the world differently. Byatt, however, brings up the problem of relativism when she says, “I am trying to account for the paradox of the sameness of so many accounts, in language, of the strange, the exotic, the new” (63). The sameness is a result of communities that exist in spite of singularity.

Perception is deeply linked to language for we can only perceive consciously what we know. For Frederica and Alexander, who is a playwright, it is hard to find their own voice as writers in their attempt to describe the southern French landscape. When Frederica tries to “set down the southern landscape [she finds] her tradition of looking at landscape was deeply Wordsworthian . . . [she] had words for tea-party behaviour and shopping discriminations in North Yorkshire matrons. She had a variety of words, and was adding to them. . . . She saw new things, paradoxically, in old clichés” (63). At another point she calls her account of Frederica’s time in Cambridge “chill and clinical” although it was “perceived as . . . rich, confusing, full of emotion” (136). Byatt (or rather the narrator) explains that the reason for this deviation is that “the language with which I might try to order Frederica’s hectic and somewhat varied sexual life in 1954–55 was not available to Frederica then. She had the physical and intellectually classifying adjectives, but she did not believe herself to be primarily conducting research but
looking for love, trust, ‘someone who would want her for what she was’” (136). At another point Byatt says, “A writer is a man haunted by voices” (75).  

Van Gogh’s paintings, visual vocabulary as opposed to words, open a way for Frederica and Alexander to describe the landscape in a “new” way. Intermediality, or “making the old new” becomes the way out of derivativeness. Byatt writes, “Provençe is as he painted it; we use his images as icons by which we recognize certain things, the cypresses above all, the olive, some configurations of rock and vegetation . . . He came, as Frederica did not, with precise aesthetic expectations. He expected to see ‘Japanese’ subjects, the colors of Monticelli, the forms of Cézanne and Renoir, the southern light lauded by Gauguin as a mystic necessity” (65). For Alexander, the objects that van Gogh painted, come to stand for the human drama he is looking for in his play. He becomes “obsessed by the yellow chair, of which the yellow chairs in his own cell were close relations, generic descendants, the rush the same, the back the same, the varnish less lemon and ruddier” (74). Alexander starts to visualize what he wants to write. Byatt says, “Working with words on a painter who was also an articulate writer had taught him [Alexander] that; you could see things before saying them, indeed without saying them” (175). Interestingly, we never get to read any part of Alexander’s play; we are left to imagine it.  

Byatt continues her exploration of how perception and language are connected. In a series of passages, she exemplifies a literary device that illustrates the way we describe things, that is by analogy. When we see something our mind inevitably makes connections. She writes, “But you cannot exclude from the busy automatically connecting mind possible metaphors, human flesh for fruit flesh” (177). Those connections are analogies: something we see reminds us of something else that we have seen before and that we already have a word for. Alexander thinks,

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30 In Chatterton Ackroyd describes Philip having exactly that problem; everything he writes sounds like the writers he admires.
“But analogy was a way of thought and without it thought was impossible. Nevertheless, he was troubled by the sense that it was possible for, say, Vincent van Gogh to get nearer to the life of the plums than he ever could. Both metaphor and naming in paint were different from these things in language” (177). One important recurring theme is that of the comparison of painting and writing. Byatt says, “Paint itself declares itself as a force of analogy and connection, a kind of metaphor-making between the flat surface and purple pigment and yellow pigment and the statement ‘This is a plum.’ ‘This is a lemon.’ ‘This is a chair.’” (177). 31 Byatt’s meditation continues

we know paint is not plum flesh. We do not know with the same certainty that our language does not simply, mimetically, coincide with our world. There was a cultural shock when painters shifted their attention from imitating apples to describing the nature of vision, paint, canvas. But the nausea that Jean Paul Sartre felt on discovering that he could not, with language, adequately describe the chestnut tree root is a shock of another kind . . . he did at least evoke it with metaphors, sealskin, serpentine, a tree root connected to the world by a man describing a vision of unconnectedness. (178).

This passage once more affirms that mimesis is impossible since language is not mimetic. We can only approximate reality through analogies and metaphors that in themselves remain insufficient but may evoke the real object especially when the audience has experienced the object themselves. We can only understand each other’s experiences through analogy. Ironically, while Byatt uses the narratorial asides to explore these points, she manages nevertheless to create the world around the Potter family. The reader gets immersed in their world and there is hardly a death in recent fiction so shocking as Stephanie Potter’s who dies in a very unexpected and

31 Kenyon points out how in Still Life “[Byatt] spends pages showing how difficult it is for language to conjure up the richly purple sheen of a plum” (Kenyon 81).
therefore even more tragic household accident. We experience her death through her perspective as she is electrocuted by an ungrounded refrigerator.³²

Byatt addresses the relativism that the negation of mimesis suggests through a discussion between minor characters Professor Wijnnobel and Juliana Belper. At a dinner at which the “new university” is discussed, Wijnnobel calls the statement that “everything is relative” “simplistic nonsense” and continues to argue that “we cannot have the idea of random happenings or chaotic conditions without simultaneously . . . having . . . a concept of order, an order of numbers, of form, of order” (191). His position is thus dialectical unlike Juliana Belper’s who argues “that everything was now relative, we had lost our sense of certainty and absolute values, we perceived the world as fluid, random, and chaotic, and that our art forms must reflect the fragmented and subjective nature of our perception of the world” (190). Byatt makes us aware of the fact that writers have to rely on previous writers in order to be able to communicate.³³ For her the modernist/imagist motto “make it new” is thus only feasible to a certain extent. In another authorial aside she writes,

art is not the recovery of the innocent eye, which is inaccessible. ’Make it new’ cannot mean, set it free of all learned frames and names, for paradoxically it is only a precise use of learned comparison and the signs we have made to distinguish things seen or recognized that can give the illusion of newness. I had the idea that this could be written innocently, without recourse to reference to other people’s thoughts, without, as far as possible, recourse to simile or metaphor. This turned out to be impossible. One cannot think at all without a recognition and realignment of ways of thinking and seeing we have learned over time. We all remake the world as we see it, as we look at it. (116)

³² For an excellent discussion of the role of death in Byatt’s work, see Sue Sorensen’s article “Death in the Fiction of A.S. Byatt.” Her death is part of a net of images and allusions to the memento mori theme that runs throughout the novel: enjoy your life because you could die soon.

³³ Ackroyd addresses the same problem in Chatterton: Grandma Joel: She wanted to explain the entire material and spiritual world in terms of imitation. . . . That’s all it means. Where there is no tradition, art simply becomes primitive. Artists without any proper language can only draw like children” (110). Fritz Dangerfield: “He wanted to be separate from everything. He had his own alphabet because words made him feel unclean. He wanted to start all over again.” “As a result, he was unintelligible” (116).
The only character in the novel that is capable of such innocent seeing is a child, Daniel and Stephanie’s baby William: “because he was new, he was barely used to horizontal and vertical framing patterns, he was not separated from his mother” (116) Byatt's narrator continues: "I know that for some readers these words [colors she refers to] will call up clear images on an inner eye; they will in some sense ‘see’ purple and gold, whereas others will not. No two men see the same iris. Yet Daniel and William and Stephanie all saw the same iris” (116). In these last two sentences, Byatt comes back to her initial query about the possibility of similar descriptions and her answer is that closely related individuals such as Daniel, Stephanie, and William, individuals who share a close community, may come close to be able to perceive the same things.

Byatt sees visual imagination as an important part of human existence as is illustrated through her characters: Alexander Wedderburn is obsessed by “the human need to make images” (186). Wijnnobel says, “picture forming seems crucial. . . . We cannot perhaps picture our picture making. Even with all our windows we shall only catch glimpses of the real world. . . . that it is our need and our duty and our delight to picture it” (296). His meditation on the question “what is real, what is true?” leads him to an example of a girl that walks across the courtyard that can be seen, “optically, amorously, medically, sociologically” (196). But these are all ways of seeing that are very different from seeing her aesthetically. He then, however, goes on to show the interconnections between similar ways of seeing: “What Kepler discovered about optics Vermeer applied and exemplified in the light and color of the View of Delft. And from that painting Marcel Proust picked out the patch of yellow wall and associated it for all time . . . with and exact, irreducible vision of truth, order, and likeness” (297). For Wijnnobel picture-making or picturing is a way to make sense of the world around us, to see order in the chaos much like
story-telling in general (as I will discuss in the Chapter 5.) He continues, “Great intuition . . . perceives order and likeness in the differences and multitudinous movements of the universe. Intuitions of order fail, and are succeeded by others, but we persist in seeking” (297). We make sense of the world through representation (painting or story-telling). It gives us the feeling that we can control our lives and how we will be remembered. Representation also reassures us that we were here, that we exist; but at the same time it also reminds us of our own mortality; it functions as a memento mori. With the crisis of representation comes thus a loss of control. We want to inscribe our selves and our memory and wonder how we will be remembered. In Chapter 5, this question will become central as it will focus on the representation of the past and the need for survivors to tell their story (when we talk of survivors it is always implied that others have died).

A.S. Byatt: We Are “Mocked With Art”

At the end of Chapter 2, I want to look briefly at Byatt's novel A Whistling Woman, the last installment in the tetralogy about the Potter family which brings me back to the opening question: why do we need representation? Throughout the novel Byatt alludes numerous times to William Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale. Critic Richard Meek argues that in The Winter’s Tale Shakespeare uses ekphrastic representations “to reflect on the possibilities and limitations of his own poetic and dramatic art” (398). I posit that Byatt does the very same: she explores the boundaries of language to represent and create a fictional world. She celebrates the “world-making” possibilities of novels and at the same time addresses their limitations through ekphrasis.

In the context of the performance of the play, Byatt also engages with the deceptive nature of art, a characteristic of ekphrasis. The works of art described in classical examples are often praised for their lifelikeness (trompe-l'oeil) and mistaken for reality by the viewer. Such a
deception is described in the final scene of *The Winter’s Tale* when Leontes sees the statue of his wife Hermione. The Potter family goes to see a performance of Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*. Frederica’s father, Bill Potter, remarks that he never liked the late romances because he thought they were trying to hide the fact that they were tragedies through a happy ending. After seeing the final scene where the queen Hermione who was believed to be dead reappears once again, Frederica’s father comes to a new conclusion. His change of mind is caused by Leontes’ thoughts as he is looking at the statue of his late wife Hermione: “The fixture of her eye has motion in’t, / As we are mocked with art.” Indeed, this passage proves to be central for Byatt’s explorations of representation and for my study of contemporary ekphrasis in general.

Bill Potter comes to the conclusion that the happy ending shows why we need art, why we need representations of happy endings, even though we know they don’t exist. He says,

> “I’ve just *understood*. Never too old. . . . The thing about the late comedies—the thing is—that they do, the effect they have, isn’t anything to do with fobbing you off with a happy ending when you know you witnessed a tragedy. It’s about art, it’s about the necessity of art. The human need to be *mocked with art*—you can have a happy ending, precisely because you know in life they don’t happen, when you are old, you have right to the *irony* of a happy ending—because you don’t believe it.” (401)

This epiphany is indeed closely connected with the idea of ekphrasis and its meditation about art and why it is necessary. Art tricks us and mocks us and we find pleasure in realizing that we are mocked, that we have been deceived. Byatt does the same in her novels: while creating a realistic world she uses performative means to remind us that we are reading a novel while leaving us the pleasure of the story. Jacques Lacan comments on that same enjoyment in his discussion of the pleasure of the *trompe-l’œil* in the section “What is a Picture” in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* that I have quoted at the beginning of this Chapter. For him the pleasure of representation doesn’t lie within mimesis; it arrives in each moment that we realize that we have been deceived. He writes, “The point is not that painting gives an illusory
equivalence to the object. . . . The point is that the *trompe-l’oeil* of painting pretends to be something other than what it is” (112). Thus the pleasure lies in the *Täuschung*, in being deceived, but also in the moment when we realize that we are being deceived.34

Representation may be impossible, but it is still possible to deceive, if only for a moment. Byatt transcends the crisis of representation as her readers get immersed in the world of her novels, to see it as reality, on the one hand; on the other hand, she frequently takes readers out of that world and make them engage critically with the problems of representation through language. She thus draws attention to the very act of what she is doing and the language that both make world-making possible, and which problematize it.

Byatt alludes to *The Winter’s Tale* several times in *A Whistling Woman* and refers to the last scene twice at the end of the novel. The first time in the performance of the play I discussed above and then again at the very end of the novel. After the long battle for her son’s custody in the divorce from her husband Nigel, Frederica seems to have found a new partner in Luk. Frederica and her son Leo look for Luk and as they see him in the distance she is described in a way that reminds of the earlier description of Hermione’s statue: “Luk looked up, and saw Frederica standing on the skyline” (427).

The novel itself is the only one of the four that seemingly ends happily with Frederica and Luk as a couple. Frederica is pregnant and a carefree future seems to lie ahead for the new family: “The world was all before them it seemed” (427). As readers of the tetralogy, we know, however, that life goes on after those seemingly happy endings: people die, people fall out of love, etc. Just like the ending of Shakespeare’s play, the fairytale conclusion of the tetralogy appears highly ironic. Having followed Frederica through four novels, through university, the

34 “Mocked” can mean both “to represent accurately” and “to ridicule.” Also see Meek’s discussion of Shakespeare’s play (405).
loss of her sister, her unhappy marriage to Nigel and the consequent divorce, and the bitter custody battle for her son Leo, we would wish for her to “live happily ever after.” We are so immersed in the world of the Potters that we mistake it for reality. However, the attentive reader realizes that the end is just an illusion; the characters are fictional. The ending in itself is highly self-reflexive: it is so similar to a fairy-tale ending, that it calls attention to its very fictitiousness. The ending may seem to be inconsistent with the rest of the tetralogy; however, on second thought, the happy ending is a perfect conclusion to Byatt’s meditations on art and representation, life and mortality; to repeat Bill Potter’s words: we need to be mocked with art because the pleasure lies in the discovery that we have been deceived.

So why is art necessary? What is the “value of representation”? These questions are at the heart of Byatt’s work and her fascination with ekphrasis. Art and representation are necessary because (only) through representation do we really ‘see’ the world. Representations of reality and especially self-reflexive representations of the act of perception draw our attention to the fact that each process of perception and representation is highly subjective. More importantly, Byatt uses ekphrasis to make her readers aware of the importance of attentive perception of not just art, but also their everyday surroundings. Furthermore, she reminds us that deception is an integral part of art and story-telling and of the pleasure that lies in that deception. In Chapter 3 I will pursue the possibilities that ekphrasis as Darstellung rather than representation gives authors such as Susan Vreeland and Peter Ackroyd in their interest to create characters that discover their selves and the other within themselves.
CHAPTER 3
THE UNCANNY AND ART: PERCEIVING AND CONSTRUCTING THE SELF

This otherness, this
“Not-being-us” is all there is to look at
In the mirror, though no one can say
How it came to be this way.

—John Ashbery, “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror”

The wholly other is ghostly and takes the form of an apparitional promise [with] something already there, a revenant form some immemorial past, and yet heralds or invokes or demands a future.

—J. Hillis Miller, *Others*

[The relation of doubles] is marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self. And finally there is the constant recurrence of the same thing—the repetition of the same features or character-traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or even the same names through several consecutive generations.

—Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny”

In his essay “The Uncanny” Sigmund Freud describes how in the case of doubles “the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self” (251). The uncanny experience of looking at a portrait of another person entails a similar destabilization of the self. The following readings of Susan Vreeland’s *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* and Peter Ackroyd’s *Chatterton* show how they stage the destabilization of the self through their characters’ uncanny experiences with a painting/portrait (the other).

Ekphrases of paintings, and as we will see, of portraits in particular, are intrinsically uncanny.

Several characteristics of the uncanny also define the ekphrasis: repetition, a focus on the visual, and experience of liminality prove to be especially interesting (Royle 89). Vreeland’s stories are repetitive in the sense that they all describe a different character’s experience with the
same Vermeer painting over the course of several centuries as we move back in time from the present to seventeenth-century Holland, but each story is repetitive with a difference. Each character responds to the painting in a unique way according to their “cultural baggage” that not only characterizes them for the reader, but also functions as a moment of self-realization. The uncanny effect of experiencing something familiar in the unfamiliar or something unfamiliar in the familiar has not the gothic effect of stasis, but functions as a trigger for a new realization or epiphany about the self. Whereas the characters in Vreeland’s *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* are only connected through their ownership of the painting in question, Ackroyd’s *Chatterton* shows how all the characters are interconnected even if they are separated through time. Throughout the three time levels there are multiple echoes and repetitions, but they all come with a difference as well or to quote Tennyson’s famous lines from *In Memoriam:* they are “the same, but not the same.”

Both Vreeland’s and Ackroyd’s stories create interior worlds of the main characters in which the painting plays the role of a catalyst. The characters look at the painting repeatedly, but every now and then, they describe the uncanny or gothic effect when something about the painting strikes them particularly and makes them take a second look. This looking-again constitutes the destabilization of the self. In *Nightmare on Main Street* Mark Edmundson describes repetition-compulsion as “an ultimate dead-end Gothic state in that it represents the complete triumph of past traumas over future possibility” (144). It is in this that both Ackroyd and Vreeland’s texts constitute a break from the gothic. In the context of ekphrasis within their

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1 “The same gray flats again, and felt The same, but not the same; and last Up that long walk of limes I past To see the rooms in which he dwelt.” Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam A.H.H.*
novels the compulsion to repeat is not a sign of stasis or fatalism, but of an opening of future possibility to change or to adapt.

Another important characteristic of the uncanny is its link to the visual with many examples such as the *double* or the *déjà vu* relying entirely on visual perception. Royle points out that “Freud’s essay ‘The Uncanny’ may appear to be pervasively concerned with the visual. Its occularcentrism is perhaps nowhere more marked than in its focus on castration and the fear of blindness . . . no doubt uncanny feelings are often generated by strange sights, unveilings, revelations, by what should have remained out of sight” (Royle 45). No wonder that portraits and eyes looking out and in often evoke uncanny feelings of being watched with the eyes in the painting seemingly following the onlooker. In both Vreeland’s and Ackroyd’s novels, the experience of looking at another human figure in a painting involves feelings of an uncanny nature. Either the viewer recognizes herself or something about herself (something familiar) in the unfamiliar painting. Or, she may suddenly see an unfamiliar aspect of a familiar painting. In any case, the experience is often similar to an epiphany about the self.

Finally, the uncanny often appears to be a secret encounter and an experience of liminality (Royle 2). These characteristics illustrate that each encounter with the uncanny is singular and is often an experience of entering a new realm that results in an epiphany or revelation for the individual. Whereas Vreeland’s examples can be called liminal experiences of the self, Ackroyd creates moments when looking at a painting functions almost as a portal to another realm or time. Encounters like these are at the heart of ekphrastic novels such as Ackroyd’s *Chatterton* and Vreeland’s *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*.

Like many contemporary authors Ackroyd and Vreeland depict a fragmentation of the “self” and expose it as a cultural and rhetorical construct that is configured differently in
different situations. Ekphrastic texts, however, stage the fragmentation through the representation of a painting. Instead of relying on the arbitrariness of language (puns, names, etc) or other motifs of fragmentation to illustrate the disintegration of the unified subject, these authors displace this fragmentation onto the characters’ experience of looking at a painting and particularly a portrait, thus doubling and emphasizing the perceptive situation of the fragmented self. They present how an encounter with the other in the form of a portrait involves a look that makes you look also at yourself. Rather than representing distorted realities, these ekphrastic texts incorporate experiences of fragmentation, liminality, and singularity in the world of the novel using the characters as surrogates for the readers.

Furthermore, these texts do more than point out the disintegration of the self; the other in the form of the portrait threatens identity, but it also “informs it” (Robbins 29). This “formation” is central to both Ackroyd’s and Vreeland’s texts. They use ekphrasis to show how characters experience moments in which they are forced to question their identity, but more importantly, they in turn “re-form” their sense of self. In her discussion of the uncanny, Julia Kristeva describes this effect in Strangers to Ourselves. She writes, “If anguish revolves around an object, uncanniness, on the other hand, is a destructuration of the self that may either remain as a psychotic symptom or fit in as an opening toward the new, as an attempt to tally with the incongruous . . . uncanniness occurs when the boundaries between imagination and reality are erased” (188). In both Ackroyd’s and Vreeland’s novels, the characters go through a kind of “destructuration of the self” that opens them up to a new sense of self, however temporary this sense of self may be. The paintings in these novels function as uncanny sites that confuse reality and imagination. The reader experiences the uncanny moment of fragmentation and re-formation vicariously through the characters and in turn starts to reflect on his or her self.
Literature and art are both intrinsically uncanny and it is often “impossible to conceive of the uncanny without a sense of ghostliness, a sense of strangeness given to dissolving all assurances about the identity of a self” (Royle 16). Reading a novel about somebody looking at a painting thus doubles the uncanniness as well as the questioning of the self. Nicholas Royle calls the uncanny “a crisis of the proper” and takes this thought about the connection of the uncanny and the notion of the self even further when he says that the uncanny evokes “feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced” (1). Thus each reading of an ekphrastic passage shows us performatively the fragmented self and the other within the self, but at the same time also reveals a truth about the self; a truth that was there before, since the uncanny is also “an experience of being after oneself, in various senses of that phrase” (Royle 16). The viewer experiences a “displacement or an estrangement (dépaysement) that seems at first to bear only upon the world of objects [that] also affects us and the relation that we maintain with ourselves” (Lomas 95). Thus, the uncanny can estrange us from our familiar self as well.2

If ekphraseis of portraits in contemporary texts try to evoke the image of the person depicted at all, it is only to reflect the character looking at the painting. Thus the painting is no longer a representation of a real person but instead becomes a mirror for the character looking at it, or as Oscar Wilde puts it in one of his aphorisms in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: “It is the spectator, not life, that art really mirrors” (6). As Jacques Lacan argues in “The Mirror Stage,” looking at oneself in a mirror, and similarly also at a portrait, is important for the constitution of the ego. For Lacan the ego is dependent upon external objects or an other.3 In

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2 Or, as Derek Attridge phrases it, “The other can emerge only as a version of the familiar, strangely lit, refracted, self-distanced” (76).

each moment we look at our reflection or at a portrait, we also experience a sense of the uncanny, not necessarily in the sense of spookiness, but as a moment of or experience of an epiphany, of finding out something about oneself as we find something other in ourselves.

Before I start the close readings of Vreeland’s and Ackroyd’s novels, I will briefly trace the development of ekphrastic prose narratives that incorporate portraits in the nineteenth century such as Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Oval Portrait,” and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Each of these texts features an example of a description of portrait that makes us associate them with the sense of the uncanny. Gothic stories or stories influenced by the gothic often feature an old castle with paintings of ancestors looking down on us from the walls. These portraits usually have a spooky effect since even though they depict relatives long passed away, they still seem to look out at the characters “as if” they were alive. Being portrayed thus is a way of living eternally at least in that form. Paintings show something that is always already past. Portraits of people who have since passed away have a certain uncanniness about them and even if the model is still alive, the moment of portraiture is always already gone. Looking at a portrait makes that person come alive again because “every reading is a return of the dead” (Royle 147). The event of reading brings the dead back to life. We encounter “the ghostliness of ancestral voices and intertextual hauntings” (Royle 147). Portraits thus form a paradox as they represent both life and death at the same time, or as Byatt puts it in *Portraits in Fiction*, a “life-in-death, a kind of false eternity” (Byatt 6).4

In Walpole’s gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto*, one of the most uncanny moments occurs when the figure in the portrait of Manfred’s deceased grandfather suddenly sighs and then

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4 In *Chatterton* Ackroyd uses the phrase “never wholly die” several times in reference to the painting of Chatterton as well as to Charles. Whereas Chatterton has a life in death through his writing and Wallis’s painting, Charles also has a life in death through Edward, his writing, and for his son also in the same painting by Wallis.
proceeds to step out of the canvas to follow Manfred around the castle. The event of perception makes the dead person come to life again. Manfred is struck with an “inability to keep his eyes from the picture” and throughout the novel sight and visions play an important part in creating the uncanny and gothic effects such as ghosts, doubles, and shadows (24). However, unlike in the contemporary ekphrastic texts the description of the painting is not closely connected to the characterization; it is rather a staple gothic element in the plot of the novel.\(^5\)

Like Walpole’s novel, Edgar Allen Poe’s short story “The Oval Portrait” shows this return of the dead quite vividly, but once again the ekphrasis of a portrait is used for a gothic effect, this time making the connection between life, death, and painting quite literal. A stranger comes to an abandoned castle and is mystified by all the paintings. One painting in particular strikes him with an “absolute lifeliness of expression” (189). At first he doesn’t notice the “oval portrait” but then “the rays of the numerous candles . . . [fall] within a niche of the room which had hitherto been thrown into deep shade by one of the bedposts. [He] thus [sees] in vivid light a picture all unnoticed before. It [is] the portrait of a young girl just ripening into womanhood” (189). The story behind the painting, found in a volume the narrator discovers in his bedroom, explains that the artist painted this portrait of his lover and as he was painting the model slowly withered away. It seemed that the more “lifelike” the painting got the less life was in her. Upon completion the painter exclaims, “This is indeed life itself!” only to find when turning to his beloved that, “She was dead!” (191). The painting that is so lifelike is now “life itself” and the model is dead. Thus, Poe’s story foregrounds the central cause for the uncanniness of paintings: paintings freeze the image of a person in time, and as the painting remains forever as it was, the

\(^5\) An interesting example of an early twentieth-century text that builds on the gothic examples is Vera Caspary’s noir Laura famously adapted for the big screen by Otto Preminger where the portrait of an allegedly murdered woman by the name of Laura has an uncanny effect on the detective investigating her death, Mark McPherson. The uncanny effect is increased when Laura finally reappears in flesh and blood. See also Hitchcock’s Vertigo and Rebecca.
model will irrevocably grow old and die. The uncanny element in looking at a portrait then is that something that is clearly from the past has a vivid effect in the present moment.

Whereas Walpole and Poe use a painting to generate a certain reaction in their reader, Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* foregrounds the main character’s reactions and thoughts. One of the aphorisms in the preface to the novel that I referred to earlier becomes emblematic for the effect of a painting on a viewer. Wilde writes, “It’s the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.” This aphorism is central to my discussion of Vreeland and Ackroyd. A short analysis of central passages from Wilde’s novel illustrates my point that in the contemplation of a painting, and in particular a portrait, is similar to looking into a mirror. In this process the person looking at the painting contemplates the painting at the same time as she contemplates herself.6

The ekphrastic passages in Wilde’s novel are focalized through Dorian giving the reader insight into his mind. Seeing Basil Hallward’s finished painting for the first time has a profound effect on Dorian. It makes him stand back: “When he saw it he drew back, and his cheeks flushed for a moment with pleasure. A look of joy came into his eyes, as if he had recognized himself for the first time” (65). Dorian sees something familiar in the unfamiliar painting which makes this an uncanny experience. He sees himself in the painting and recognizes himself. To recognize comes from the Latin stem *cognosco* which means to examine, inquire, or learn the prefix re- standing for again (*OED*). His experience and re-examination of his self is thus intrinsically related to seeing the portrait.

In the course of the novel Dorian’s perception of himself continues to be linked to the portrait. If we consider the painting to be a mirror for Dorian’s character, then it might be feasible that the changes that Dorian begins to notice in the painting are not changes in the

6 Wilde’s novel is a special case of ekphrasis it not just any portrait that Dorian looks at but his portrait. However, a discussion of these ekphraseis is still crucial for my argument about ekphrasis and the gothic.
painting at all but changes in his self-perception. The experience of discovering these alterations is once again uncanny

as he was turning the handle of the door, his eye fell upon the portrait that Basil Hallward had painted of him. He started back as if in surprise. . . . the face appeared to him to be a little changed. The expression looked different. One would have said that there was a touch of cruelty in the mouth. It was certainly strange. . . . The quivering, ardent sunlight showed him the lines of cruelty round the mouth as clearly as if he had been looking into a mirror after he had done some dreadful thing . . . there were no signs of any change when he looked into the actual painting, and yet there was no doubt that the whole expression had altered. It was not a mere fancy of his own. The thing was horribly apparent. (126f)

The experience catches Dorian by surprise, and as he examines it he thinks he sees changes (“it appeared to him to be a little changed”). The wording here shows that the change is a matter of Dorian’s singular perception at that moment, and when he looks at the painting more closely “there were no signs of change” (126). The third person narration here must be read more like an example of free indirect speech or focalization,⁷ so that the line, “It was not a mere fancy of his own,” is not an objective statement, but rather Dorian trying to justify his own changed perception to himself.

When Dorian goes to look at the painting for the last time he uses the term “mirror” for the effect of the painting: “For it was an unjust mirror, this mirror of his soul that he was looking at” (250). After trying to redeem himself and coming back to see if it has had an effect on the painting he finds out that there hasn’t been a positive change. Looking at the painting that he calls his “conscience” he sees the same horrible version of himself; his evil deeds have changed his perception of himself forever. The destruction of the painting stands metaphorically for his suicide and the fact that the painting seems unchanged to his servants illustrates that their perception of their master has not changed.

⁷ The different examples of ekphrasis of portraits that I discuss in this Chapter move from objective/omniscient to free indirect speech/focalization/interior monologue thus highlighting the importance of the subjective singular perception.
These three examples of ekphrasis of portraits show a development from a mere gothic effect to a performative means of representing how the self and the other are closely connected. However, even gothic texts such as Walpole’s can be read as analogies of a search for the self. The plots are situated in an antiquated space that hides secrets from the past. The threats come from within the house or the interior, which metaphorically stands for the self. As the characters uncover the secrets of the house we often discover secrets hidden in their subconscious. The most famous and literal example for the other hidden within the self is Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* where Jekyll’s alter ego, Mr. Hyde, exists within him and breaks through at times.

In contemporary ekphrastic novels authors still play with the notion of the self and the portrait. In both *Chatterton* and *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* the viewing of paintings is closely connected to a destabilization of the self. Whereas a sense of the uncanny still persists, Vreeland’s *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* and Ackroyd’s *Chatterton* focus less on the gothic element and actually break with the gothic. Instead of the preoccupation with stasis and repetition compulsion these authors emphasize the differences, however small, in each experience of the uncanny. In Vreeland’s stories the uncanny encounter leads to an epiphany for the given character. In Ackroyd’s novel, encounters with the paintings are connected to a series of other uncanny experiences of liminality that eventually complicate our notion of original. Most importantly, they open up new possibilities of creation as *Darstellung*.

8 In the introduction to the *Cambridge Guide to Gothic Fiction* Jerold Hogle writes that “This tug-of-war affects central characters and readers alike, frequently drawing them toward what is initially ‘unconscious’ . . . to confront what is psychologically buried in individuals and groups, including their fears of the mental unconscious itself and the desires from the past now buried in that forgotten location. After all, several features of the gothic . . . eventually became the basis for Sigmund Freud’s *fin de siècle* sense of the unconscious as a deep repository of very old, infantile, and repressed memories or impulses, the archaic underworld of the self” (3).

9 Another example would be the monster in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, in which she externalizes the other through the monster.
Susan Vreeland: Uncanny Encounters with Art

She thought of all the people in all the paintings she had seen that day, not just Father’s, in all the paintings of the world, in fact. Their eyes, the particular turn of the head, their loneliness or suffering or grief was borrowed by an artist to be seen by other people throughout the years who would never see them face to face. People who would be that close to her, she thought, a matter of a few arms’ lengths, looking, looking, and they would never know her. (242)

This passage from the end of Girl in Hyacinth Blue which describes Vermeer’s daughter Magdalena’s thoughts as she looks at her father’s portrait of her, expresses the idea that is central to Vreeland’s novel: it is impossible to know the model or the painter for that matter by looking at a painting. What is possible is to see one’s self in the painting. Looking at a painting or reading a painting is a singular event and also an encounter with the other. In each story Vreeland represents such a singular encounter between a singular work of art and a singular person in a singular place and time. Thus when Magdalena says, “People . . . would never know her” she is addressing exactly what the book performatively engages with: the impossibility of knowing any other (242). The stories that make up Vreeland’s Girl in Hyacinth Blue show that each individual, or ideoculture, to use Derek Attridge’s term,10 will never know Magdalena, the model for the painting, or the artist Vermeer for that matter; however, an attentive and responsible reading of the painting causes each character (and vicariously the reader) to confront the other within themselves and thus realize something about themselves that was hidden before.

Each of the eight stories in Girl in Hyacinth Blue features one character who has a special relationship with the painting; someone who is open to it and who responds to its otherness. Even though there are at least one if not more ekphrastic passages in each of the stories a reader can never fully visualize this fictitious Vermeer as each individual highlights different aspects of

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10 In The Singularity of Literature Derek Attridge argues that “Singularity exists, or rather occurs, in the experience of the reader . . . as the repository of what I have termed an ideoculture, an individual version of the cultural ensemble bay which he or she has been fashioned as a subject with assumptions, predispositions, and expectations” (67).
the painting that depicts a young girl sitting at a window pausing in her sewing. Instead of an omniscient narrator, Vreeland uses focalizers through whose eyes we see the painting. The ekphrastic passages thus reveal something about the character but they never form a coherent or clear image in the readers’ mind. What all descriptions have in common though is that they show the uncanny effect the event of perception can have on the beholder. Either somebody looking at the unfamiliar painting for the first time finds something familiar in it, or a person sees something new and unfamiliar in a well-known painting that they have not seen there before. In each case this uncanny encounter threatens, and at the same time informs, the character’s sense of self.

These moments are uncanny precisely because they entail an experience of liminality, in which event we discover a secret within the painting and at the same time within ourselves. Just like the uncanny is a singular event, so is literature and reading in general: What is uncanny to one reader may not be uncanny to another. This singularity is performatively expressed in the multiple perspectives and singular encounters or readings of the painting in *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*. The painting represents something that is completely other even though it is familiar at the same time. Each section tells the same story with a difference: A character finds her-/himself in a personal and cultural crisis, is drawn to the painting, and through looking at it attentively and

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11 Griselda Pollock mistakenly identifies the painting as Vermeer’s *The Allegory of Painting* (1667). The girl in this painting wears a blue dress, but she holds a book and an instrument. In Vreeland’s descriptions, however, the girl is “looking out a window while sewing” (40) and there is no mention of the painter figure that is so prominent in *The Allegory of Painting*. I argue that the painting Vreeland describes is a fictional painting. Since the attribution of Vermeer’s painting in the novel is unclear this theory strengthens the idea that Vreeland invented a painting. The “occasion” for the book (similar to Chevalier’s) is the little amount that is known about Vermeer and his work.

12 Royle says that literature is uncanny (15). We can take this further and say that art is uncanny as well. So is any encounter with every other. More importantly, Royle says that the uncanny is a reading effect (44). That means that reading anything in our environment can be uncanny.

13 I use the term other as J. Hillis Miller defines it in his introduction to *Other*: “an element of the ‘completely other’ that inhabits even the most familiar and apparently ‘same,’ for example my sense of myself or of my neighbor or my beloved” (1).
describing it, she gains the insight or the strength to make a change in her life. These experiences are epiphanies or revelations that lead the character to learn something about themselves that had been hidden before. This finding out is something that is intrinsically uncanny (to find something that was supposed to be hidden). The stories are thus examples of a refusal of the gothic; instead of describing a neurosis, the uncanny experience here actually functions as therapy.

Moments like this can be seen in novels as early as James’s (see introduction) or Murdoch’s *The Bell.* Sometimes in these moments the alien self becomes less alien and these ekphrastic scenes show that the self is composed of many fragments. Schwenger argues: “Our ‘selves’ in more versions than one . . . oscillate continually during the act of reading” (Schwenger 69). We compare ourselves to the other and our sense of self is thus in constant flux during the encounter with a text. Looking at a painting can thus serve as a form of self-analysis in which the character realizes something about himself/herself. Thus the gaze at the painting turns into a gaze at the self and through the encounter with the book the reader experiences a similar encounter. Art, whether it is a painting or a novel makes us think as Vreeland reminds us in her epigraph to *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* that is taken from one of the most famous examples of the ekphrastic tradition, John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Vreeland chooses the following lines: “thou, silent form! dost tease us out of thought / as doth eternity.” These lines draw our attention to the important function of art that is a theme throughout all the stories: that it makes us think. Indeed, all the ekphraseis in the novel describe not so much the painting, but rather the characters’ thoughts about themselves that are triggered by the encounter with the painting.

14 See Royle, 3.

15 In Murdoch’s novel Dora Greenfield has always admired Gainsborough’s *Portrait of his two daughters chasing a butterfly* in the National Gallery in London, but one particular time she comes to see it “in a new way” that informs her sense of self.
The first story “Love Enough” introduces the theme of identity as something that is created. We are introduced to Cornelius Engelbrecht, a teacher of mathematics, as someone who “invented himself” and who “purposely design[s] himself” to become “invisible” (1). The painting is the one thing that connects him to his German father who stole the painting from a Jewish family in the Nazi era. It becomes his “secret obsession” and stands for his inner turmoil about his father’s horrific deeds (1). On the other hand, the admiration for its beauty is the one thing they have in common.

Cornelius is the only character in all the stories who is not only obsessed with the painting, but also with its authenticity. The reason for this obsession is not a desire to sell it for a lot of money or “rock the art world” as Richard says a “newly discovered Vermeer” would (9). The need for the painting to be authentic lies much deeper in Cornelius’s desire to come to terms with his father’s past. He is trapped between the disgust of what his father did in the past and a desire to understand him. Looking at the painting he feels close to his father who had locked the painting away in his study after the family moved to the US and looked at it with a “self-satisfied posture” (20). Cornelius is the only character in the cycle of Vreeland’s stories who remains stuck in the compulsion to look at the painting again and again without being able to move on.

Cornelius is driven to find out about what really happened when his father obtained the painting and so he “read[s] like a zealot on two subjects: Dutch art and the German occupation of the Netherlands” (19). The reason why he wants to prove the painting’s provenance is that, “if the painting were real, so was the atrocity of his father’s looting. He’d had no other way to obtain it” (19). He is trapped in this secluded life, which revolves around the painting and his father’s guilt. This struggle culminates one day in his attempt to burn the painting, which he thinks, “would be doing penance for his father if he himself wouldn’t enjoy it more” (25). If the painting
were not an original Vermeer “the enormity of the crime [would shrink]” and then, maybe he could keep it (27).

As much as his father’s crime disgusts him, he has also come to love the painting. The painting was even more important to him that his marriage. His ex-wife recognizes that when she says that “he loved things rather than people” (20). He treats the painting almost as if it were his lover and the night he wants to burn it he touches it which reveals his obsession to be an erotic, sexual obsession with girl in the painting (25). Toward the end of the story the reason for his need for the painting to be authentic is solely concerned with his life. Only if the Vermeer is authentic can he justify the way he has been living all his life: “He had to find some authentic reason for living as he had” (29).

The story, which is partly told from Richard’s point of view and partly from a third person point of view, ends as it began with Richard’s thoughts on Cornelius life. He asks: “Would you enjoy it any less if you were to learn it wasn’t authentic?” (30). Considering Cornelius’s obsession with the painting, and the fact that it is the center of his life, he would most certainly enjoy it less. Richard himself pities Cornelius and thinks, “Poor fool, ruining his life for a piece of cloth smeared with mineral paste, for a fake, I had to tell myself, a mere curiosity” (35). However, Cornelius is maybe more concerned with what the authenticity means in the context of his father’s crimes.

The ekphrastic passages in the next story “A Night Different From All Other Nights” display nothing like the joy of ownership and obsession with the authenticity that we found in “Love Enough.” The same painting reveals a different truth to each of his owners. The story revolves around young Hannah Vredenburg, daughter of a Jewish family living in Amsterdam during the Nazi occupation of Holland. With her as a focalizer in the third person narration we
gain insights in the mind of the quiet girl whom her grandmother describes as “lazy and apathetic” and says that “she never talks” and “has no interests. No friends” (47). Unlike Cornelius, Hannah doesn’t look at the painting as an object of monetary value and the fact that it might be a Vermeer is not of importance to her. What matters, is that she recognizes part of herself in the representation of a young girl much like herself quiet and introspective. The painting functions as a mirror in which Hannah finds something of herself that had been hidden before. Peter Schwenger talks about paintings as a “mirror of reality” but as pointed out earlier a mirror does not always merely reflect—it also distorts and mediates (2). Examples of a character like Hannah looking at a painting can both be a mirror-effect of self-recognition and the moment of seeing the other, something we want to be but are not, or something we hadn’t realized were yet. In any case these moments are central to the perception of identity as the look at a painting makes you “look” at yourself.

“A Night Different From All Other Nights” shows the painting as mirror that reveals Hannah’s newfound sense of self. When she looks at the painting she finds her alter ego. She describes the

    girl her own age looking out a window while sewing. . . . The girl wasn’t working, at least not at that moment. Her hands were lax, the buttons on the table like flat pearls yet to be sewn on, because what was going on in her mind was more important. Hannah understood that. (40)

This passage shows that the painting speaks to her; more than that, it “cast a spell over her” (40). Looking at the quiet girl in the painting, Hannah feels like she understands her need to think. She can see herself in the girl who “seem[s] more real that the people in the room” (41). She also felt validated when her father bought a painting that resembles her so much. She thinks that her “father buying it seemed to honor her in a way that made her feel worthy” (42).
Hannah feels misunderstood by the members of her family. At one point she overhears a conversation between her mother and grandmother in which they talk about her apparent “apathy.” She thinks that that “wasn’t true. She did want things. Only she couldn’t say what. It was too impossible now. Wanting anything seemed crazy” (48). This passage displays how crucial the cultural background reflected in each of the stories is for the individual character’s perception of the world. Being Jewish in that moment in time is an integral part of Hannah’s ideoculture. How can she start holding on to things that she knows she might soon lose? Hannah is very intuitive, but she is not good at expressing her intuitions with words. She feels that “things were happening. Bigger than preparations for Passover. Beyond the candle glow there were things. There were things. Nothing was the same. Hilde acted as if it was Great-grandmother Etty’s time” (50).

Each story describes a singular encounter with the painting and with the other which is already part of them. For Hannah this revelation comes looking at the painting now it became clear to her what made her love the girl in the painting. It was her quietness. A painting, after all, can’t speak. Yet she felt this girl, sitting inside a room but looking out, was probably quiet by nature, like she was. But that didn’t mean the girl didn’t want anything, like mother said about her. Her face told her she probably wanted something so deep or so remote that she never dared breathe it but was thinking about it there by the window. And not only wanted. She was capable of doing some great wild loving things. Yes, oh, yes. (51)

Here ekphrasis is no longer a description of a work of art but becomes a meditation on the self. Instead of bringing the painting before the reader’s mind’s eye, ekphrasis illustrates the thought process in Hannah’s mind. She realizes that she is like the girl in the painting, quiet on the outside but full of thoughts and wants on the inside. This re-cognition informs her sense of self and instead of just being compelled to look at it again and again, this encounter actually makes her more confident.
After this “epiphany” Hannah finds the strength to express herself to her mother and grandmother for the first time. Their conversation about the painting reveals their differing perspectives and readings. Her grandmother thinks the girl in the painting is looking at “her future husband,” which reflects her generation and her background (56). For the first time Hannah brings herself to disagree. She replies: “I mean it doesn’t matter what she’s looking at. Or what she’s doing, or not doing. . . . It only matters that she’s thinking” (56). Unlike in the traditional sense of prosopopoeia which means, “a rhetorical figure by which an imaginary or absent person is represented as speaking or acting,” this story reverses the act of giving a voice. Instead of a poet or character giving a voice to the inanimate object, the painting gives a voice to the character. This pivotal moment then gives her the strength to do what no one else could: she kills her family’s pigeons, because she knows that it is necessary to protect her family as Jews were no longer allowed to own them in Amsterdam. This moment is life changing for her and when she sees the “candlelight illuminate the girl in the painting, she knew why this night was different from all other nights. Real living had begun” (59). The painting gives Hannah the strength to become an adult.

The third story “Adagia” is also set in a time of change. When Laurens van Luyken’s daughter announces that she will marry without Fritz asking him for her hand he asks himself if that was “a herald of how life would be in the new century?” (61). His wife Digna wants to give the painting to their daughter as a wedding gift, but Laurens refuses. He loves it because it reminds him of a long lost love. Digna, who always thought he bought it as an anniversary gift

Prosopopoeia is also related to personification as the OED explains: “A rhetorical figure by which an inanimate or abstract thing is represented as a person, or with personal characteristics.”
for her, can’t understand why he says, “I wouldn’t want to be without it” (65). She answers, “‘I
never knew you were that attached to it’” (66). ¹⁷

Once again an ekphrastic passage reveals something about the main character.

Laurens’s description reveals his nostalgic feelings that bind him to the painting that
reminds him uncannily of his lost love

in the veiled atmosphere of a light fog blowing in, the osier heads bending and rustling
seemed to him like ghosts beckoning. / ‘It . . . I bought it to commemorate a period in my
life, and for that reason I can’t let it go. . . . It reminded me of someone I knew once. . . .
The way the girl is looking out the window . . . waiting for someone. And her hand.
Upturned, and so delicate. Inviting a kiss. (67)

After telling his wife the story he also comes to a life-changing realization. He thinks, “In the
end it’s only the moments that we have, the kiss on the palm, the joint wonder at the furrowed
texture of a fir trunk or at the infinitude of grains of sand in a dune. Only the moments” (71).
After hanging on to the memory of Tanneke for so long, he realizes that he has equally important
moments he has shared with his wife, and that these moments make up life. He wants to tell her,
“Notice. Pay attention. Notice this and never forget it, he wanted to say.” This appeal underlines
the importance of aesthetic perception. Now looking at the painting that “there was nothing so
vital as paying attention, and perfecting the humble offices of love” (78). He realizes how “How
love builds itself unconsciously, he thought, out of the momentous ordinary” (80). His wife
comes to the same conclusion and tells him to “Look long enough . . . out or in, and you’ll be
glad you are who you are” (81).

The story entitled “Hyacinth Blues” is told by a first person narrator named Claudine, a
young Frenchwoman married to a Dutchman and appears to be a letter to French friend. The first

¹⁷ Interestingly this brief conversation reflects the changing reception of Vermeer’s work throughout the centuries.
He was forgotten for almost two centuries and only ‘re-discovered’ in 1866 through an article by critic Thoré
Burger.
person point of view allows an insight into Claudine’s mind and early on we find out that she is unhappy in her marriage and in Holland. In fact she only loves “one Dutch thing . . . a small painting Gerard [her husband] bought [her] of a young girl whose skin had the sheen of transparent peaches” (84). What she notices about the painting is “a sweet, naïve expression on her face, though at first I thought it a bit vacant” (84). She interprets this “vacancy” as a sign for the effects of incest among Dutch villagers who “are cut off from each other by water, always water. Such inbreeding that more than a few of the ladies are half-witted or dividedly curious in a bovine sort of way” (84). More than this impression she comes to associate the girl in the painting with the daughter she can’t have due to her “barrenness” (84). This thought fills her with feelings of “tenderness and melancholy” rather than superiority (84).

As she comes to see the girl in the painting as her daughter and she thinks that “If [she] had a daughter, [she] would dress her in the colors of only the freshest hyacinths and tulips” (85). Overall the girls seems too poor to her to be her daughter so she makes “inquiries at the artists’ guild to have a string of pearls painted in around the poor girl’s naked neck” (85). To her the provenance of the painting does not matter. Her husband tells her that it “was by a minor artist, some Johannes van der Meer” but for her it is the girl that matters. She thinks she was “lovely, and . . . claime[s] her with all [her] heart” (85). The painting is important to her because of what it represents to her and not because it may or not be valuable.18

As in the previous stories there comes a moment in the story where the main character’s perception of the painting changes in an uncanny and at the same time revelatory way. This change occurs when she decides with a heavy heart to sell the painting in order to raise money to

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18 At this time (around 1810, there is a clue in the allusion to Beethoven) Vermeer is considered a minor artist. The dealer asks her if she’s sure it’s a Vermeer, and she says “Positive. There are papers, but at the moment they are inaccessible to me.” (105). “There’s no signature. If there was a chance those papers said a van Mieris, I’d give you two hundred guilders, but for only a Vermeer, phugh” (106).
be able to leave her husband and go back to France. Claudine herself notices the change when she thinks,

I couldn’t keep my eyes from the girl in the painting. What I saw before as a vacancy on her face seemed now an irretrievable innocence and deep calm that caused me a pang. It wasn’t just a feature of her youth, but of something finer—an artless nature. I could see it in her eyes. The girl, when she became a woman, would risk all, sacrifice all, overlook and endure all in order to be one with her beloved. (105)

Instead of a vacancy and naiveté she now sees potential of strength and passion in the girl and as she realizes that she also finds the strength to believe in this potential for herself. She says to the art dealer, “This is more than a curio, my good man . . . you are looking into the guileless soul of maidenhood” (105).19 This statement once again reflects her attachment to the painting. She finally sells it as a van Mieris whose work is more popular at the time than Vermeer to get more money. More than just illustrating Vermeer’s changing popularity, this episode also shows the paintings deeper significance for Claudine who has come to look at the girl as her daughter. For her, selling the painting without its papers makes it “an illegitimate child” (107).

The following story “Morningshine” leads the reader further into the history of the painting. A young couple finds it in a basket with a baby drifting in the water during a flood with a note saying: “Sell the painting. Feed the child” (114). At this point the painting still comes with its papers and Saskia calls the baby “Jantje, little Jan, after the name on the paper” (118). Saskia is discontent with her life and she feels the painting gives her what she can’t have. She feels trapped in her marriage and her domestic duties and the painting represents the freedom of leisure time she doesn’t have. She calls it “Morningshine” and tells her daughter Marta, “You’ll be just like her someday,” and “make[s] up stories of the young woman . . . how she became

19 This episode explains the lost papers in the previous stories.
famous for her sewing” (121f). The painting gives her hope, if not for her own life, for the future of her daughters.

Whereas Claudine in the previous story likes the hyacinth blue color, it takes on a symbolic role for Saskia. For her it stands for the life she doesn’t have, for all things fine. She thinks, “How glorious to drape oneself in blue—the blue of the sky, of Heaven, of the pretty little lake at Westerbork . . . the blue of hyacinths and Delftware and all fine things” (122f). She associates the painting with a better life and after she has to part with the painting she buys “fine blue Leiden wool to knit a soft woolly for each of her three children” as a however poor substitute for the painting (154). Saskia sees an “other” in the painting, a woman she is not. More importantly she comes to see the woman as Jantje’s mother, “a fine lady in a fine home” (123). She has a notion that “only fine folk have their portraits painted” (124) and tells her husband that “Jantje came from a good home. In Groningen or Amsterdam. A home with a map on the wall and nice furniture and a mother who wore blue” (126). Still she lives vicariously through the painting which represent all the things she can’t have such as “the Oriental tapestry on the table, the map on the wall, the engraved brass latch on the window—since Saskia couldn’t have these things in reality, then she wanted them all the more in the painting” (123).

The flood has put the family in extremely dire straits and there comes a point when she can no longer refuse to sell the painting. When she talks to the first dealers she finds out that the painting is worth more than they thought. She isn’t familiar with the name Vermeer but the art dealers are. Finding out that the painting is more valuable than she thought sets of a new stream of thoughts about the way they found the painting. Saskia asks herself, “Why would such a young woman who could afford to have her portrait painted by a great artist, why would she, how could she have given away her son?” (135). Saskia then comes to see the painting in a
different way. She realizes that the woman in the painting “wasn’t at peace the way that artist painted her” and notices the “rigidness of her spine [which to her] showed the ache in her soul” (135). Saskia finally identifies with the woman in the painting because she sees herself in her, “a desperate woman with frailties just like her, temptations just like her, a woman who had needs, a woman who loved almost to the point of there being no more her anymore, a woman who probably cried too much, just like her, a woman afraid, wanting to believe rather than believing” (135f). This ekphrastic description gives us a new “version” of the painting and at the same time and more importantly we see Saskia more clearly through her description.

Saskia and Stijn’s differing perceptions of the painting show their diverging perceptions of life. For her with the exception of the painting “there’s nothing beautiful up here” (138). Furthermore, Saskia can’t understand Stijn to whom she says, “All you see in life is work. Just planting, hauling, shoveling, digging. That’s all life is to you. But not to me, Stijn. Not to me. There’s got to be some beauty too” (145). Stijn tries to understand her but doesn’t realize the special meaning of the particular painting for her. When she finally goes to sell the painting he allows her to take some of the money to buy herself another painting. However, Saskia loves the painting because she can see herself in it, when she can pick another painting she can’t find anything that speaks to her like this one: “But none of them meant anything to her” (154).

Finding out who Vermeer is validates her love for the painting and she takes pride in owning it. This pride is illustrated when she keeps repeating the name walking through Amsterdam. She thinks, “in her hands she was carrying a Vermeer. . . . She was carrying a Vermeer” (151). Her final description to the art dealer also reveals that feeling for she comes to also value the painting for its fine execution. She tells the dealer to “look at the window glass” and points out that it is “Smooth as liquid light. Not a brush stroke visible. Now look at the
basket. Tiny grooves of brush strokes to show the texture of the reed. That’s Vermeer” (153). The value of the painting is once again connected to the characters’ personal identification with it.

The story “From the Personal Papers of Adriaan Kuypers” is told in first person from the point of view of the young Adriaan Kuypers who falls in love with a young woman, Aletta Pieters who turns out to be the mother of the Jantje in the previous story. This section explains how Adriaan a young intellectual falls in love with the strange Aletta. Although the story doesn’t give us insight in her precise perception of the painting, Adrian’s descriptions of her reaction let us now that it has a big impact on her on several levels. Her first reaction to seeing it is very emotional. Adriaan describes “[finding] her crying on the floor of [his] aunt’s countryhouse in a hump of gray skirt, all the defiance drained out of her” in front of the painting (157). When she calms down she tell Adriaan that her “Papa said she had eyes like that, like pale blue moons, and hair like hers, that golden brown color, only in braids. She died when I was born” (161). The painting thus triggers her strong emotional because Aletta sees something familiar in the unfamiliar painting, her mother. Aletta’s other reactions to the painting reveal her superstition. At first she associates the face with “the ghost of the witch of Ameland Island” (159). Later on in the story she is startled by noise and “when she [finds] the painting of the girl having fallen off the wall, she screamed and backed away, her breast heaving, and her hands pulling at her hair” and takes this as a sign that “something terrible is going to happen” (173). Looking at the outcome of the story with her hanged and one of her children dead, she is right.

Adriaan’s description of the painting shows him as a complete opposite of Aletta. Whereas she is very superstitious, he is educated and very rational. He describes the girl with her “mouth . . . slightly open, glistening at the corner, as if she just had a thought that intrigued her, an effect
that made her astoundingly real’ (161). Like Hannah he sees her not as passive but as thinking. He summarizes this perception when he calls her the “embodiment of Descartes’s principle, ‘I think therefore I am’” and more importantly he realizes that “she was everything Aletta wasn’t—peaceful, refined, and contemplative” (161).

Aletta is aware of that difference as well. She asks Adriaan: “You think somewhere girls actually live like that—just sitting so peaceful like?” (163). Adriaan realizes that there is no way to answer her question that “would make her less forlorn. There were no words I could give her to diminish the distance between her and the young woman in the painting” (163). The peace that the painting represents for both Adriaan and Aletta becomes uncanny for her, “an estranged ordinariness” (Royle 4).20 At the end of the story Adriaan reveals that he has been influenced by Aletta and her superstition because when he exposed the baby he also puts a cabbage leaf in the basket for good luck (170).

The penultimate story “Still Life” brings us to the time of the production of the painting and the character of Johannes Vermeer himself. He struggles to paint faster to be able to support his family, but that might violate his belief that his paintings need to be “grounded in deep beds of contemplation, the only way living things could be stilled long enough to understand them?” (220). Through his thoughts we learn that in his paintings he tries to “still life,” to show the truth in life.

His daughter Magdalene is anything but still and he feels that, “there [is] something in this girl he could never grasp, an inner life inscrutable to him. He was in awe of the child’s flights of fancy, her insatiable passion always to be running off somewhere, her active inner life” (220). This activeness is the challenge for him as a painter. He longs, “to still it for a moment, long

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20 According to Royle, “the uncanny is a ‘philosophically significant form of disquiet’” (4).
enough to paint, for eternity, ah” (220). For him, painting is understanding, showing a truth. So when he decides to paint his daughter he asks himself, “Was it possible to paint with good conscience what he did not understand? What he didn’t even know?” but he comes to the conclusion that “painting [is] the only way even to attempts to know it” (220f).

His representation of his daughter shows her “not in the act of doing anything. Any intended action was forgotten and therefore it was full of peace” (222). This image is very different from the active girl that he thought he couldn’t paint. That doesn’t mean that it is a misrepresentation though. He can’t depict her running around; however, the contemplative posture looking out of the window also represent her—her inner self—as Vermeer understands it.

Magdalena, however, sees herself differently. Her sense of self changes and the last story “Magdalena Looking” exemplifies the process the perception. The participle of looking here, brings us back to the way our sense of self is constructed. We form our notion of our “self” through our experience of the world. Magdalena is visual like her father. One day after climbing on a mountain outside of town she thinks, “From that great height, oh, what she could see. If only she could paint it” (224). Attentive observation is at the core of her being [She stood there looking, looking, and . . . (225)]. She herself feels overlooked though as a daughter. More than anything she wants to be a painter (228), but because she is a girl nobody takes her seriously. The only reason she wants to be painted by her father is that this would mean that “he would look and look and pay attention” (228).

When she finally looks at the painting again she experiences the uncanny because it represents a version her and her life that doesn’t exist anymore. She is “touched . . . deeply” when she sees it and realizes that it “would be looked at, marveled at, maybe even loved by viewers of his painting” (232). Although she is looking at a painting of herself it also reflects a
person she does not know anymore, her self as other. She thinks, “Almost a child she was, it seemed to her, gazing out of the window instead of doing her mending, as if by the mere act of looking she could send her spirit out into the world. And those shoes! She had forgotten. . . . a bubble of joy surged upward right through her” (239). At this point in her life when her family has lost everything the painting evokes a happier time in her life. Through Magdalena’s experience we experience a subjective viewing of the painting.

The story, and the book, ends on the central passage with which I started my analysis, that is so central for the entire book. Each person is singular, each work of art is singular and so is every “reading” of a work of art. Vermeer’s portrait of his daughter comes to represent something different for each character: a son’s struggle to come to terms with his father’s past, a sister or friend, an old love, a daughter, the possibility of a better life, or a peaceful life. Mimetic representation is unattainable and the stories of Girl in Hyacinth Blue show this impossibility in a performative way. This impossibility is not mourned, however, because even though mimetic representation is not possible, what is gained is an insight into the multiple truths that arise out of each singular work of art, and results in a freedom of interpretation that is worth to be celebrated. Every reading is also an encounter with the other of the text, and at the same time the other within our selves.

**Peter Ackroyd: Overcoming the Gothic**

It was then that he saw the picture. He had the faintest and briefest sensation of being looked at, so he turned his head to one side and caught the eyes of a middle-aged man who was watching him. For a moment he stood gazing back in astonishment. . . . It was a portrait of a seated figure: there was a certain negligent ease in the man’s posture, but then Charles noticed how tightly his left hand gripped some pages of manuscript placed upon his lap, and how indecisively his right hand seemed to hover above a small table where four quarto volumes were piled on top of each other. Perhaps he was about to put out the candle, flickering beside the books and throwing an uncertain light across the right side of his face. He was wearing a dark blue jacket or top-coat and an open-necked white shirt, the large collar of which billowed out over the jacket itself: a costume which might have seemed to Byronic, too young, for a man who had clearly entered middle age. His short
white hair was parted to display a high forehead, he had a peculiar snub nose and a large mouth, but Charles particularly noticed the eyes. They seemed to be of different colours, and they gave this unknown man (for there was no legend on the canvas) an expression of sardonic and even unsettling power. And there was something familiar about his face. (11)

In Peter Ackroyd’s *Chatterton* ekphrasis plays a crucial role not only for the development of plot, but more importantly for the way characters are connected to each other even if they are separated by centuries. Several paintings interconnect the three time levels of the novel with each one featuring poets and artists as central characters: Charles Wychwood (twentieth century), George Meredith and Henry Wallis (nineteenth century), Thomas Chatterton (eighteenth century). Ackroyd stages a world that shows that creation always relies on previous examples. Everything that is created in the novel is a version or adaptation of something that already exists. *Chatterton* is full of repetitions of images, of situations, of plots, but each repetition come with a difference. Thus Ackroyd is able to show the importance of the past for the present and the future. Instead of proliferating an “anxiety of influence” *Chatterton* with its endless quotations and allusions is a celebration of influence that leads to the creation of something new. The characters in Ackroyd’s novel overcome the gothic fear of stasis, of being doomed to compulsively repeat, as they realize that taking earlier examples of paintings or literature as a model can be very liberating when one plays with them to create something new rather than representing something pre-existing. As Meredith explains to Wallis: “The poet does not merely recreate or describe the world. He actually creates it. And that is why he is feared. Peter Ackroyd *Chatterton*” (157). The various artists in *Chatterton* have either already realized that, or they will come to realize it.

Charles’s friend Philip Slack’s problem as a young author had been that the novel he attempted to write consisted only of “pages filled with images and phrases from the work of other writers whom he had admired . . . had become a patchwork of other voices and other styles,
and it was the overwhelming difficulty of recognizing his own voice among them that had let
him to abandon the project” (70). As the pamphlet that Charles finds in the church in Bristol
says, “Chatterton knew that original genius consists in forming new and happy combinations,
rather than in searching after thoughts and ideas which had never occurred before” (58). The
novel shows that there are only a limited number of themes and ideas but an endless number of
variations on these themes. After Charles’s death, however, Philip feels that he can write the
story of “how Chatterton might have lived on” (232). He is finally able to overcome his anxiety
of influence and imagines the possibility of the creation of something new as he plans on
continuing Charles’s project on Chatterton.

The plot of the novel is set into motion with poet Charles Wychwood’s uncanny encounter
with a painting that he comes to believe portrays the eighteenth-century poet Thomas Chatterton
in middle age. From this moment on the he tries to prove just that and sets out on a quest to
“solve the mystery” as he tells his son Edward (17). This quest leads him to Bristol where he
finds manuscripts that seem to corroborate his theory. He sets out to write a revised biography of
Chatterton but his efforts come to a sudden end when he dies of an undefined condition that he
has been suffering from.  

Charles’s initial glimpse of the painting features all the typical elements of an uncanny
experience. He has come to O’Leno’s Antiques to sell some books and after having “the faintest
and briefest sensation of being looked at,” he turns his head to see the painting (11). As
mentioned earlier, portraits in which the model is looking directly out at the viewer often evoke
the feeling of being looked at. This moment is uncanny because it only lasts for a very short

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21 I disagree with Garcia-Caro who argues that Charles’s death is a “death by portrait” and compares it to the death
of Dorian Gray (165). Whereas Dorian’s destruction of the painting symbolizes his suicide, Charles’s death and the
destruction of the painting representing Chatterton in middle age don’t even occur at the same time. Only after his
death does Harriet give the painting to the Cumberland and Maitland who have Merck try to restore it. While he is
working on it some kind of chemical reaction destroys the painting.
moment, and goes away when one realizes that it is not a person but the representation of a person that looks out. The passage in *Chatterton* makes it appear as though in that brief instant the figure in the painting becomes alive for Charles as he “[catches] the eyes of a middle-aged man who was watching him” so that all he can do is “gaz[e] back in astonishment” (11). The portrait shows somebody who has been dead for a long time but seems alive at the same time in the event of the viewing. Garcia-Caro notes that this particular painting “introduces into the text of a degree of uncertainty about the status of the present in its relation with history” and thus “the gothic invades the present space with its unsettling effect” (165). In a doubling of this gothic effect, Charles comes to believe that this painting shows Chatterton to have lived to middle age after his assumed death at seventeen.

The feeling of being looked at by an “other” in the painting results in a demand to be read. Charles is open to that demand and spends a long time looking at the painting. At home he cleans the canvas with a wet cloth and his connection with the painting is deepened as “fresh colours and contours seemed to issue form Charles’s hand, and it was as if he had become the painter—as if the portrait was only now being completed” (22). This scene shows the singularity of the event of a viewing of art because in way the painting is being completed in that exact moment as Charles uncovers the paint from under the dust.

After the initial uncanny experience of the figure in the painting appearing to be alive and looking at Charles, he is compelled to look at it again and again trying to discern the details. He sees “a portrait of a seated figure . . . his short white hair was parted to display a high forehead, he had a peculiar snub nose and a large mouth” (11). What strikes Charles most are his eyes which “seemed to be different colours, and they gave this unknown man (for there was no legend on the canvas) an expression of sardonic and even unsettling power” (11, italics mine). Charles
experiences the uncanniness of ambiguity here. The eyes are “different colours” and that peculiarity in the representation inscribes the man in the portrait with “unsettling power” (11). Most uncanny though is that in this painting that Charles has never seen before he sees “something familiar about his face” (11, italics mine).²² He sees something familiar in the unfamiliar—the uncanny. This feeling of the familiar is rather vague and intuitive though as he cannot identify what exactly it is about the face that is familiar. Instead of being paralyzsed by this experience, however, it functions as a trigger for Charles’s quest to find out more about Chatterton and sparks his idea to write a new biography of the poet. The uncanny encounter with the past becomes a creative impulse.

The different paintings in the novel also function as connections between the three time levels of the novel. The painting of the middle-aged Chatterton appears in a scene with Meredith and his wife. He comes across a painting that could be the same one Charles found among some discarded paintings in a shop. It is described as a portrait “of a middle-aged man, without a wig, sitting beside a candle; his right hand rested lightly upon some books, the titles of which were indistinct” (173). His description is very similar to that narrated through Charles’s eyes and Meredith’s reaction is also very similar to Charles’s reaction. He says to his wife Mary, “This face is familiar . . . is it a poet, I wonder?” (173). He experiences the same feeling of familiarity, of a connection between him and the person in the painting. He identifies to a certain extent with this person, because he assumes that he is, like him, a poet. Even though he doesn’t think it is Chatterton, his response to seeing the painting is remarkably similar to Charles’s. The painting establishes a connection between Chatterton, Meredith, and Charles even though they are separated by centuries. They are all poets that create rather than represent. Chatterton even

²² This is an example of the basic definition of the uncanny as something familiar in something unfamiliar (see Royle).
invents a fictional poet “out of thin air, and yet [Rowley] has more life in him that any medieval priest who actually existed” (157).

Henry Wallis’s well-known painting of Chatterton also has a profound and uncanny effect on Charles and functions as another connection between the three time levels. After Charles and his son Edward go to see Henry Wallis’s painting at the National Gallery, the novel enters the second storyline and stages the creation of said painting. The painting functions as a portal between the different time levels. Wallis has asked his friend the poet George Meredith to pose as the seventeenth-century poet. In order to recreate the death scene as accurately as possible Wallis has found “the lodgings in which Chatterton transpired” (136). When Meredith arrives at these very lodgings for the first time he himself has an uncanny experience. As he enters “he step[s] back quickly when he [sees] Wallis’s body lying on a bed, on arm trailing down upon the floor” (136, italics mine). This is the exact pose that Meredith himself will take on later as we know from the finished painting. Meredith is startled because seeing Wallis lying there like that is a realistic tableau “vivant” of a dead “body.” But then “the body [speaks]: ‘Don’t be alarmed, George. I’m rehearsing your part’” (136). The word “part” introduces the intricate doublings of this scene that occur throughout the novel. First, Wallis is rehearsing the part that Meredith is going to play, that is reproduced in Wallis’s painting, that prefigures Charles’s vision of his death and also his actual death, and retroactively also becomes synonymous with Chatterton’s death even though nobody really knows how he was found in that room in Brooke Street. The copy becomes more important than the original.

In the course of the novel Henry Wallis’s painting of the death of Chatterton becomes a “mirror” for Charles. When Edward and Charles go to the National Gallery to see it, Charles doesn’t want to look at the body at first, and when he finally does look at it he sees himself lying
there instead of Chatterton (or Meredith). His “vision” prefigures his own death scene that echoes Chatterton’s. He feels,

   someone now standing at the foot of the bed, casting a shadow over the body of the poet?
   And Charles was lying there, with his left hand clenched tightly on his chest and his right arm trailing upon the floor. He could feel the breeze from the open window upon his face, and he opened his eyes. He was able to look up and, her face in shadow beside the garret window, he saw Vivien standing above him. (132)

When Charles actually dies his vision comes true: “Charles reached down with his right hand and touched the bare wooden floor” and he touches “the torn fragments of the poem which he had been writing” (168f). Charles seems to realize this mirroring of Wallis’s painting because he shouts, “No! . . . This should not be happening. This is not real. I am not meant to be here. I have seen this before, and it is an illusion!” (169). Finally, after he gains consciousness one last time, “his right arm [falls] away and his hand trail[s] upon the ground, the fingers clench[] tightly together; his head slumped to the right” (169). He has become another model for the painting.

   At the end of the novel, Wallis’s painting has become a lieu de mémoire for Edward. He not only cherishes the memory of visiting the National Gallery with his father, Wallis’s portrait of Meredith as Chatterton has become a portrait of his father for him. As he finally looks at the “man lying upon the bed . . . he step[s] back in astonishment: it was his father lying there” (229). He recognizes his father and oddly the painting of him as a dead person promises to Edward that Charles will never be really gone. He thinks, “He had seen his father again. He would always be here, in the painting. He would never wholly die” (230). Even more interesting is the fact that he probably sees his own reflection in the glass covering the painting and thus sees his father in his own resemblance. The theme of living on through generations and through art is central to Chatterton.

   Besides the two paintings of Chatterton another painting by the artist Joseph Seymour called Bristol Churchyard. After the Lightning Flash plays an important role in Ackroyd’s novel.
Novelist Harriet Scrope sees Seymour’s painting “of a child standing in front of a ruined building” for the first time in an art magazine that she picks up at her friend the art historian Sarah Tilt’s house (35). In this painting “the child stare[s] out from the canvas, while above him [rise] a series of small decayed rooms” (35). Harriet notices that Seymour “had carefully painted the torn wallpaper, the broken pipes, the abandoned furniture, all of which seemed to spiral inwards towards a vanishing point in the middle of the painting” (35). She is fascinated with this painting that seems to have the effect of a turning spiral as it leads the viewer’s attention to the boy in the center. In contrast to the detailed surroundings “the face of the child was featureless, abstract” (35). When Harriet discusses her struggles to write her memoir with Sarah she pictures Seymour’s painting of the “child standing in front of the ruined building” and closes her eyes (36). This happens right after Sarah points out to Harriet that her problem is not that she has nothing to say, but rather that she has “too much to say” (36). The reason why Harriet is so fascinated by Seymour’s painting seems to be that it represents a child who has its whole life before them. This feeling is illustrated when Harriet replies, “I wish . . . that I could begin all over again” (36).23

This particular image is echoed several times throughout the novel not in other paintings but in visions or in real life thus connecting the various characters. Early on in the novel for example when Charles leaves O’Leno’s Antiques he finds “himself gazing through the ground-

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[23] Another uncanny moment occurs later in the novel when Sarah brings Harriet a catalogue of the Seymour exhibition at the Cumberland and Maitland gallery. Sarah clearly indicates that she is not excited about his work. Harriet finds the painting of the boy once again, but only vaguely remembers having seen it before at first. She says, “I must have seen this one before . . . I know this one” (108). Sarah goes to look at it and now sees “the reproduction of the painting in which a small child was looking out from the interior of a ruined building” and she also notices that “something seemed to be touching his shoulder” (108). At this point she seems more intrigued as well and they decided to go to the gallery to see the original. When Sarah sees the actual painting she suddenly is very impressed with the “confidence with which this ‘realistic’ scene had been placed in a more abstract setting” (117). The following ekphrasis shows the effect of the painting that didn’t show entirely in the reproductions described before: “The face of the child was still indistinct, but the building now seemed to swirl around him; it was the vortex into which he was about to be sucked” (117). Sarah now admits that she “prefer[s] Seymour’s later style” (117). This comment is ironic because the reader just found out that Seymour’s assistant Merk painted all his later work.
floor window into a bare room; the curtains were half-drawn but he could distinctly see a young child standing upright in a corner of the room. He was holding his arms stiffly against his sides and seemed to be staring back at Charles, who noticed a small bird perched on the child’s right shoulder” (13). This scene prefigures Seymour’s painting in which Sarah notices “something . . . touching his shoulder” (108). This something could be the bird Charles sees on the boy’s shoulder.

When Charles is in the hospital and as he looks out of the open window he sees: “the rooftops gleaming after a sudden shower slowly turning into smoke . . . with a roar the sunlight broke against the side of a white building; in front of it stood a young man smiling and pointing to a small book which he was carrying in his right hand. ‘Like the painting,’ he said and everything moved away” (165). It is not clear which painting Charles is thinking of here, but it is reminiscent of the different sightings of Chatterton that occur throughout the novel. Also, near the end of the novel in the section that describes the events leading to Chatterton’s actual death, there is an incident that also reminds of the scene depicted in Seymour’s painting. Chatterton witnesses a house collapsing and thinks he sees a child inside (208f). It is unclear who that boy is. He might be a vision of Chatterton or maybe a vision of a young poet symbolizing the power of writers to create something new.

The paintings in Chatterton are uncanny sights and sites that trigger experiences of liminality. They are echoed throughout the novel and also reappear as strange visions. Ackroyd stages the slightly different and ever changing encounters with the paintings to show the power of story-telling and art to keep something alive. The characters and artworks thus live a life in death, as they are reborn in new forms, “the same, but not the same.” Ackroyd foregrounds the connections between the past, present, and the future.
Through the Vermeer painting and the similarities in the characters’ encounters with it, Vreeland achieves a similar effect of connecting the past and the present. The repetitions in both novels show both connections between the past and the present. Furthermore, the encounter with the painting becomes productive rather than having a destructive effect as each character’s notion of self is in-formed by their encounter with the painting.

I will return to the themes of repetition and storytelling in the Chapter 5 where I discuss them in the context of examples of ekphrastic historiographic metafiction (I will also come back to Ackroyd’s *Chatterton*). In Chapter 4, I concentrate on the gendered context of ekphrasis. Whereas I only discussed the differing reactions of men and women to the painting in *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* in passing, I will compare and contrast male and female perspectives in my analysis of narratives by Susan Vreeland, A.S. Byatt, and Mary Gordon that challenge the ekphrastic convention of describing a power structure between the powerful male poet who gives a voice to the passive female art object. At the center of the third chapter will be representations of another genre of painting: the nude. As I have shown in this chapter the character looking at the painting (focalizer) is crucial for the ekphrasis. So what happens when a women looks at the representation of a nude woman? Or a woman looking at a nude man?
CHAPTER 4
REVERSING GENDER CONVENTIONS

But the essential way of seeing women, the essential use to which their images are put, has not changed. Women are depicted in a quite different way from men—not because the feminine is different from the masculine—but because the ideal spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him.

—John Berger, Ways of Seeing

Examples of classical ekphrasis display a hierarchy between the powerful male poet who gives a voice to the passive and mute female art object. Mitchell describes canonical examples of the genre as “a suturing of dominant gender stereotypes into the semiotic structure of the imagetext, the image identified as feminine, the speaking/seeing subject of the text identified as masculine” (154). In this chapter I will analyze the ways contemporary female authors reverse this power structure as they give a voice to paintings, female characters, and in turn themselves.

The genre of painting that this chapter focuses on is the nude, which John Berger describes in Ways of Seeing as the “one category of European oil painting [in which] women were the principal, ever-recurring subject. . . . In the nudes of European painting we can discover some of the criteria and conventions by which women have been seen and judged as sights” (47). What Berger says here about nudes in oil painting is equally important for the genre of ekphrasis where women have always been the passive gender. In the context of film Laura Mulvey has argued that “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female’ (27) and that films objectify women in relation to “the controlling male gaze” (33), presenting the “woman as image” (or ‘spectacle’) and men as the “bearer of the look” (27). Susan Vreeland in The Passion of Artemisia, A.S. Byatt in “Medusa’s Ankles” and “The Chinese Lobster,” the first and third story in The Matisse Stories, as well as Mary Gordon in Spending: A Utopian Divertimento, present nudes as a way of empowering female characters and through them, the (female) readers. It is no longer the poet’s “male gaze” that is assigned the power and the female gaze or rather
look becomes as important. Furthermore, instead of treating both spectatorship and gender as homogenous concepts, the novels in this chapter show a variety of viewpoints, male and female, but not limited to this gendered distinction. In their use of ekphrasis these authors complicate our understanding of spectatorship.

Before I begin the close readings of the texts by Vreeland, Byatt, and Gordon I will discuss Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* as an earlier example of ekphrasis in narrative prose that introduces the role of gender in the field of ekphrasis. Berger writes in *Ways of Seeing*: “Men act and women appear” (47). This statement could be the slogan of the world Wharton creates in her novels where women are literally seen as a spectacle (from the Latin verb *spectare*: to look). The particular example I will discuss here is *The House of Mirth* and its heroine Lily Bart. Wharton, who usually just mentions works of art, offers a long description of the *tableau vivant* scene where Lily and other young women are displayed for the viewing pleasure of men. Already in the opening pages of the novel when Lily’s character is first introduced, we see her through the eyes of Lawrence Selden as she “appears” out of the steam at Grand Central. Selden thinks to himself that any time spent with Miss Bart should be “diverting” and that “as a spectator, he had always enjoyed Lily Bart” (26). Lily is very much aware of the fact that she is a diversion, a spectacle and thus puts a lot of effort in her appearance(s). Therein lies Lily’s dilemma; she cannot act, she can only try to appear in the most desirable way to change her fate.

The famous *tableau vivant* scene epitomizes the role of young women in New York society of the late nineteenth century. The Welly Brys, newly rich and trying to make their way

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2 When Lily asks Selden if it is really her that he has come to see at Bellomont he even answers: “Because you’re such a wonderful spectacle. I always like to see what you are doing” (79).
into society, host a party with *tableaux vivants* which are seemingly an upper class diversion. However, the recreation of famous paintings is really a spectacle for the men in the audience and a way for young women to present themselves in the most favorable way and thus maybe procuring a husband. For this affair Mrs. Fisher has “induced a dozen fashionable women to exhibit themselves in a series of pictures which, by a farther miracle of persuasion, the distinguished portrait painter, Paul Morpeth, had been prevailed to organize” (135f). The paintings that Morpeth chooses for the occasion such as Boticelli’s *Primavera* or Miss Smedden who “showed to perfection the sumptuous curves of Titian’s Daughter” require that the women display much more of their bodies than the conservative society allowed on a regular basis.\(^3\)

However, it is Lily’s representation of Sir Joshua Reynolds’s *Mrs. Lloyd* that causes the most commotion in the audience.

here there could be no mistaking the predominance of personality—the unanimous ‘Oh!’ of the *spectators* was a tribute, not to the brushstroke of Reynolds’s ‘Mrs. Lloyd’ but to the flesh and blood loveliness of Lily Bart. She had shown her *artistic intelligence* in selecting a type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself. It was as though she had stepped, not out of, but into, Reynolds’s canvas, banishing the phantom of his dead beauty by the beams of her living grace. (138f, italics mine)

Wharton stresses here not only the reaction of the audience but also that Lily is fully aware of what she is doing. She has selected a painting that would present her, not the other way around. Ned Van Alstyne reaction is probably exactly what she wanted to achieve. He says, “Deuced bold thing to show herself in that get-up; but, gad, there isn’t a break in the lines anywhere, and I suppose she wanted us to know it!” (139). Even though Lily realizes that she can use her role as a spectacle to her favor in certain ways, she still cannot take control over her life and eventually, she dies without having achieved what she wanted: to trick the system and marry somebody she

\(^3\) Goya, Carry Fisher, the provocation of her frankly-painted smile, Kauffmann nymphs garlanding the altar of Love and a Watteau group of lute-playing comedians (138).
loved and who could support her. Wharton exposes the passive role of women, but doesn’t offer a way out of this situation.

The authors under consideration in this chapter use ekphrasis to do exactly that. Ekphrasis becomes a way for them to empower female characters. Vreeland’s novel is a take on the Künstlerroman as we follow the life of sixteenth-century Italian painter Artemisia Gentileschi, herself daughter of an esteemed painter. Artemisia only became a canonical painter in the last century and Vreeland traces her artistic development starting with the famous rape trial. Thus, from the very beginning, the novel is as much about gender as it is about art. Vreeland’s presents Artemisia as the first female artist to be successful in a world that was dominated by men. Vreeland emphasizes that Artemisia didn’t simply copy what the male painters of her time were doing. Furthermore, she focuses on Artemisia’s artistic vision to work within the current subjects of her time, namely religious scenes and historical portraits. She undermines these common topoi, however, through her choice of topics and compositions are entirely informed by her perspective as a woman. She picks aggressive, independent women, such as Judith, Susanna, or Cleopatra. Whereas the male painters use the pretext of the biblical or historical context to represent the female body, Artemisia reveals the hypocrisy behind these pretexts. Byatt’s characters are equally drawn to and repulsed by Matisse’s representations of the female nude. In “Medusa’s Ankles” the main character falls in love with his Pink Nude which represents a woman she can identify with, whereas art student Peggi Nollett in “The Chinese Lobster” sees Matisse’s work as misogynist and degrading to women and defaces his work symbolically with blood and feces. Finally, Mary Gordon’s Spending goes the farthest in reversing the traditional gender roles. However, instead of simply exchanging the male/female roles she shows the
complications that arise when a woman painter takes on the male nude, whether they are financial, religious, or sexual.

**Susan Vreeland: RevisITing the Story of Artemisia Gentileschi**

Artemisia Gentileschi is a seventeenth-century painter but as Mieke Bal points out she is an artist who is “a fabrication of the last decades of the twentieth” (ix). Her story is very much tied into twentieth-century revisioning of the past and she has been the subject of several monographs, two novels, and a film. The way Vreeland presents Artemisia in her biographic *Künstlerroman* as an independent woman reflects very much on the century it is written in. From the beginning Vreeland describes Artemisia Gentileschi as curious young woman who is eager to learn to paint. The academic way to learn to paint was to copy the masters and practice the common themes. Like Chevalier, Vreeland uses the artist’s paintings to flesh out the story behind each of them.

Vreeland chooses to start her novel with the famous trial in which her tutor Agostino Tassi is accused of raping her. The trial and the shame that it involves for Artemisia make her stronger and seem to inform her entire oeuvre. With the trial Vreeland introduces the traditional gender conventions associated with ekphrasis: the passive female put on display. Artemisia knows that it is Tassi who is on trial, but it still feels as though she is the one on trial and the one who gets punished. Not only does she have to endure the *sibille*, the contraption that almost breaks her

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4 Bal continues to say that “during the era of feminist revisionism of the art-history canon, she was (re)discovered as one of the first women making great art” (ix).


6 Bal does point out that much of the discourse concerning Artemisia has “sexualized the artist to the point of explaining her art if not through, at least systematically with reference to, the artist’s rape by her tutor Agostino Tassi” (x).
fingers to make her confess. Even more degrading than this initial torture is the procedure Artemisia has to endure to prove to the court that she is no longer a virgin. Two midwifes examine her with the notary looking on and separated from the audience by just a sheer curtain (14). She realizes that this “was how they wanted to display [her]—as if caught in the act” (15). Thus the ekphrastic notion of women as passive and as a spectacle to be put on display is introduced at the very beginning and then reversed step by step as Artemisia works to represent strong women in her art.

Several art historians have pointed out that one prominent characteristic of Artemisia’s work is the “narrative element” (Bal xv). Looking at the various subjects she painted, it is striking how she paints narrative moments that differ from the standard way of representing these topoi such as *Judith and Holofernes* or *Susanna and the Elders*. This quality is something that Vreeland takes advantage of and focuses on in her novel, especially in the ekphraseis. Griselda Pollock points out the “remarkable choice of moment, arrested and arresting, in the *Cleopatra*” (Bal xvi). In most of the paintings Vreeland chooses to include in her novel, she focuses on exactly that narrative element as she foregrounds the story behind the still moment she captures and thus emphasizes Artemisia’s changes in the composition and the depiction of female figures in particular. When Artemisia paints *The Angel* for Michelangelo Buonarotti the Younger she is disappointed because “[t]he painting did not have invenzione. It did not tell a story” (100). In a conversation with her friend Gallileo Gallilei, Artemisia says that “The best paintings depict a specific narrative moment” (144).

Before the trial at the beginning of the novel Artemisia had already painted one of her paintings that would become one of her most famous: *Susanna and the Elders* (1610). Artemisia’s friend and mentor, Sister Graziella, points out that in that painting, “[Artemisia]
showed her intimidation at the lewd looks of those two men, her vulnerability and her fear. It shows that you understood her struggle against forces beyond her control” (21). Vreeland tries to tie the innovations in Artemisia’s art to the story of her life. The major difference that she establishes between Artemisia’s art and that of her male contemporaries is that she makes “a masterpiece reflect [her] own feelings and experience” (21). She paints female figures from a female perspective, not as a voyeur, but as an equal. The biblical story describes the virtuous and beautiful Susanna who is bathing in her garden when two elders approach her. Lusting after her, they threaten to accuse her of adultery if she does not sleep with them. She refuses and is falsely accused by them, but her innocence is proved and prevents her from being stoned. Earlier examples of paintings of Susanna by such artists as Tintoretto and Carracci seem to use the biblical story as an excuse to paint a female nude who is either aware of or seemingly enjoying the attention of the elders spying on her. Berger describes these paintings as showing “the subject (a woman) [being] aware of being seen by the spectator. She is not naked as she is. She is naked as the spectator sees her. Often—as with the favourite subject of Susannah and the Elders—this is the actual theme of the picture” (49f). Artemisia’s version, however, differs from these earlier ones in so far as her Susanna is not put on display showing the female body in a passive position. In her painting Artemisia twists her body away from the elders fighting them off with her hands, her facial expression clearly showing her to be frightened, vulnerable, and repulsed at the same time.

Even though Artemisia’s representation of Susanna differs from those of her male predecessors the male audience still looks at the nude as a sexual object. Later in the novel when Artemisia shows her paintings to the members of the Accademia in Florence, they “pass[] over the Woman Playing the Lute without comment and peer[] at Susanna’s nakedness with the same
lewd voyeurism the elders did, as though titillated that it was pained by a woman with a shaded reputation” (71). They know about Artemisia’s trial and look at her not just as a woman, but a “whore,” which is going to make it even harder for her to be accepted into the Accademia (69).

The painting that the members of the Accademia actually comment on is the first painting Artemisia begins to work on after the trial: *Judith Slaying Holofernes* is another well-known biblical story that had already been painted by many famous male artists. The academy members comment that “most women painters who aspire professional esteem consider a conservative emulation of the masters sufficient for their hopes. To aspire to such expressive singularity [referring to her Judith] with *invenzione* like this, might jeopardize your precarious achievement, as well as your unprecedented petition, as a woman, to our Accademia” (69). Artemisia’s paintings, even though they do not depict new subject matter, seem to focus on the *invenzione*, the “new perspective.”

Vreeland uses ekphrasis to illustrate the difference in thinking between Artemisia and two male painters: Caravaggio and her father. Artemisia remembers the time her father showed her Caravaggio’s Judith: “She was completely passive while she was sawing through a man’s neck. Caravaggio gave all the feeling to the man. Apparently, he couldn’t imagine a woman to have a single thought. I wanted to paint her thoughts, if such a thing was possible—determination and concentration and belief in the absolute necessity of the act” (12). Artemisia is drawn to the story of Judith exactly because of those elements that she finds lacking in Caravaggio’s version. About her father’s version of Judith she says: “[it] was so angelic and delicate she could never have done the deed without the intervention of God” (11). In her version of the painting she presents Judith as an active, intelligent, and determined woman who knows exactly what she is doing. The most visible difference between Caravaggio’s painting and Artemisia’s is the composition
which places Judith and her maid over Holofernes’ body rather than beside him. This way the
focus is shifted from Holofernes’ head to the group of three and the act of cutting off the head.
Even more importantly the blood that comes splashing out of the open head wound that she
represents in more vivid and realistic way as it stains the white sheet.

Like Chevalier, Vreeland incorporates the origination of the painting into the plot in order
to show Artemisia’s thought process as she is changing the composition. She describes how
Artemisia sees a fishmonger “carrying two baskets of dried fish. She had her sleeves rolled up
and her muscular arms were thick and ropey like the veined arm of Moses in San Pietro in
Vincoli” (11). She then decides to change the arms in her sketch and that her “Judith would have
one knee up on the tyrant’s bed, hacking like a farm wife slaughtering a pig” (12). Her changes
foreground not the beauty of the female body but instead the determination and strength.
Vreeland also makes the blood part of the plot when she describes how Artemisia cuts herself
while she is working on her version: “a few drops of blood had landed on the white bedcovers of
Holofernes’ bed. The deep brilliant red against the white thrilled me. I . . . mixed vermilion and
madder to match the red, and added more. Streams of it. . . . If Rome craved spectacle, then I
would give them spectacle” (28f). The fact that it is her own blood that is mixed in with the paint
stands symbolically for the pain she has to endure to make her way in the art world. She knows
that the academy wants spectacle, but instead of using the female body as spectacle, she creates a
forceful female character who causes a spectacle.

In her painting of Judith, Artemisia presents the female body differently than her male
contemporaries. She focuses on the strength of the arms and the way her body would be
positioned in the moment of cutting somebody’s throat. In both paintings, Artemisia is able to
depict strong female characters and finds strength to continue her painting career through these
female subjects. Vreeland even goes as far as interpreting Artemisia’s portrait of Holofernes as a likeness of Agostino’s. She wants to “catch Holofernes the instant he knew he was about to die, like Agostino’s face when [she] had called him a murderer” (28).

To attract Cosimo di Medici’s attention Artemisia decides to paint another Judith, this time with richer dresses after Florentine style. He then commissions another painting of Judith depicting another “moment of her story” (116). Inspired by Michelangelo’s David she decides to paint “the moment after the slaying when Holofernes’s head is in Abra’s basket, the two women could be alarmed by some new danger, a noise in the camp” (117). She is looking forward to the “challenge [of] paint[ing] a sound” (117). As she is departing further from the traditional version she gets even more exited. She thinks, “It would be new. I would be all mine. And it would not be for an age when women hide their skills in deference to men, even husbands” (117).

It is important that Vreeland chooses to show how Artemisia doesn’t only look to her contemporaries for inspiration. One specific painting that also depicts nudes and has a profound effect on her is Masaccio’s Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden (1426–8). She is “transfixed” by the fresco that depicts a “bleak, brown setting without a hint of garden” (62). She sees how “Adam covered his bowed face with his hands. Eve’s eyes were wounded hollows nearly squeezed shut, and her open mouth uttered and anguished cry that echoed through time and resounded in my heart” (62). Whereas the figures of Adam and Eve are nude in this fresco the focus is not on the nakedness but on the anguish they feel as they are sent out of paradise. Artemisia finds it easy to identify with Eve since like her she has been ‘expulsed’ from Rome as well. She says, “Between Eve and me, I felt no gulf of centuries,” referring to the centuries between Eve and her, but also the two centuries between the present and the time Masaccio painted the fresco (62).
Artemisia’s first supporter in Florence, Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger, is also the reason she is finally admitted into the Accademia. When she shows him her *Susanna*, he is able to see the artistic qualities in it, rather than the nude woman. He tells her, “That’s real flesh your Susanna is wearing. Those lines on her neck, the crow’s feet at her underarm, the fold of flesh below her stomach—male painters wouldn’t think of those details. . . . Your interpretation will change how the world thinks of her” (86). Impressed by her talent, he proceeds to commission a painting for a memorial gallery to his great-uncle Michelangelo: “One figure. A female nude. I want her to represent Inclinazione, by that to mean his natural talent. A quality you share with il divino” (87). He trusts in her ability to represent the female nude and explains to her that, “Life drawing of nude models is not permitted in the Accademia. Painters have to imagine women by using young male models, and their imaginations aren’t trustworthy. In painting after painting, they create only the ideal. Your touches of realism are beyond their conception” (87). In his descriptions of Artemisia’s paintings, the reader “sees” the important differences in her depictions of the female body.

Vreeland uses other female characters as foils for Artemisia to show how her way of looking at gender roles is really exceptional. While working in Florence, Artemisia is allowed as a member of the Accademia to hire a model to pose for her. Vanna, who has modeled before, is very content in her role. When Artemisia asks her if she “ever wanted to paint,” she answers, “Never. Why go through all the agony? Men paint. Women pose. It’s the way things should be” (98). Vanna represents the common sentiment on this issue of the time. Artemisia is the only one who even questions these gender roles.

Vreeland includes another important friendship that develops when Artemisia meets Galileo Galilei at Cosimo di Medici’s house. Unafraid, she enters a conversation about art with
him and several other men. Galileo says to her, “I believe you have a mind open to the universe of the eye, not cramped by the dictum of authorized belief” (147). He encourages her to stick to her own ideas and beliefs. She tells him about the painting of Magdalen she is working on and points out to him that “[t]he Magdalen was the sister who had the nature to dwell in a thinking plane occupied mostly by men. . . . Anyone who expressed a reasoned thought, even just an inquiring thought—all men. Biblical women display acts of faith and spirituality’ (145). Once more, Artemisia is drawn to a biblical figure she can identify with. After her description Galileo points this out and says that like Magdalen, Artemisia has “[a] meditative mind [and looks] at things from another perspective” (145).

When she starts working on her Penitent Magdalen (1615–16) Artemisia decides that “[s]he must be ironic, contradictory, and ambiguous. She’d have furrows in her forehead, tears in her eyes, the upper and lower eyelids read and swollen in shale for her past, yet she’d still be in sumptuous silk, still wearing jewelry, just having prepared herself, with her mirror nearby, for the next philanderer. The ambiguity would be in her tears. What were they really for? (153). Instead of representing her in misery, she decides to depict her just before the moment of conversion, “the moment of renunciation when Eros still holds her, when her min reels with what dark future she might have if she followed the drift of her life, at that moment she might dread having to give up the things she still wants” (153). This description emphasizes Artemisia’s focus on representing women who think independently and her ability to depict ambiguous narrative moments.

The next painting Vreeland focuses on is Artemisia’s version of Cleopatra’s suicide. Once again she shows how Artemisia finds parallels in her character: “She was defeated in a war by a Roman emperor and didn’t want to be paraded through the streets of Rome on display. Rome has
always loved a *spectacle*, especially of a *woman humiliated*” (202f, my italics). In this passage it is clear how Artemisia identifies strongly with the Egyptian queen, since she also has been humiliated and abhors Rome’s love for scandal. Artemisia doesn’t paint the asp’s bite marks; she considers “each breast, an upper arm, even her throat” but her model Renata suggests that she shouldn’t paint it at all. She says, “Maybe she just willed herself to die. Or maybe she loved enough in her life that she’s passing to the other realm . . . mystically . . . being called there by Marc Antony before the asp hurts her” (203). Once again it is the moment just before the event that she depicts. Vreeland does not address the “gap in the drapery” in the *Cleopatra*. Bal calls the gap a “narrative prolepsis” that announces the arrival of the women who are to discover Cleopatra dead, and who will kill themselves in turn, a scene following the suicide proper on its heels, and one that Artemisia depicted some ten years later” (xvi).

When she is asked to paint *Lucrezia* (1621), Artemisia finds it hard for the first time to identify with her subject. She tells Cesare, her new patron: “I have no desire to celebrate a woman who killed herself to escape the shame of rape” (209). She finally comes to the conclusion that she needs to paint her before her suicide when she is “reconsidering what the world has told her, questioning her martyrdom, but she is not aiming. Her wrist has to be painted unbent, the dagger upright” (219). Once again, Vreeland makes ekphrasis part of the depiction of Artemisia’s thought process rather than an accurate description of the finished painting. It is more important to illustrate the choices Artemisia makes as she decides on the composition of each painting since her thoughts reveal the way she is breaking away from convention and how her changes depict the female figures in an entirely different way. She decides not to focus on the shame Lucrezia must have felt, but the ambiguous moment before the suicide. Thus she
emphasizes Magdalen as a complex female character who is taking an active role and is making a conscious decision, rather than concentrating on her shame.

At the end of novel, her dying father asks Artemisia to “[d]o a self-portrait...And allegory of painting. For all time” (315). The painting *Self Portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (1630) is just referred to and never described in the novel. Still the way that Artemisia paints this theme is symbolic of her entire oeuvre. The painting is a self-portrait and shows her in the act painting from an unusual angle, from above. She doesn’t idealize her beauty, but instead shows her concentrated and focused with the light emphasizing her hand and eyes, and thus the craft.

**A.S. Byatt: Five Ways of Looking at Matisse's Nudes**

Whereas Vreeland’s novel focuses mainly on one central protagonist and her re-visions of well-known themes, Byatt’s short stories “Medusa’s Ankles” and “The Chinese Lobster” each feature several characters that stand for different readings of Matisse’s paintings of women. Instead of featuring one view predominantly, Byatt once again represents opposing viewpoints and instead of featuring “one” reading gives us several different ones that are all equally valid. Both stories depart from the traditional male/female hierarchy associated with ekphrasis and offer new versions of how female or male characters relate to a work of art.

Art historian Lawrence Gowing points out how Matisse puts together flat areas of color and explains that “in effect, the double meaning of the design provided a new formulation, as original as it was sharp and clear, of something enigmatic and unexplored in the flatness of painting” (Gowing 37). Matisse worked with the combination of certain colors, which he doesn’t change to indicate shadow or depth. Gowing writes: “The combination of red and green offers precisely the reverse. It denies depth; it insists on the painted surface” (Gowing 11). Through the detailed description of characters as well as the setting Byatt achieves a similar flattening and with this the same “ambiguous equivalence of figure and field” that Gowing found to be “a
recurrent theme for the rest of Matisse’s life” (Gowing 38). The flattening in both Matisse’s and Byatt’s work brings everything to the same level, foreground and background, character and setting, but by juxtaposing the two, Byatt leaves it to the reader to take sides in the created oppositions and the flatness remains ambiguous. Her characters often represent opposites and show two sides of a debate.

In “Medusa’s Ankles” Susannah is attracted to Lucian’s hair salon by a poster of Matisse’s *Pink Nude (Le nu rose)* in the display. Right away she finds it “odd” to find this painting of a voluptuous woman in a window “where one might have expected the stare . . . of the model girl” (3). The reason why Susannah is drawn to the painting and the salon is that she identifies with Matisse’s depiction of the pink nude that is much more realistic than the photo-shopped images of fashion models that so often dominate the décor of a hair salon. For a woman in her forties it is hard to find any images she can identify with because the models “were all girls now, not women” (3). The ekphrasis of the painting focuses on the beauty of the full-bodied form of the woman depicted: “the rosy nude was pure flat colour, but suggested mass. She had huge haunches and a monumental knee, lazily propped high. She had round breasts, contemplations of the circle, reflections of flesh and its fall” (3). The words “mass,” “huge haunches,” and “monumental knee” might sound negative in another context, but in the description of the Matisse through Susannah’s eyes they become celebrations of the female body.

Susannah likes the salon and the hairdresser Lucian because she identifies with the rosy nude and she feels comfortable in the salon which is decorated in the same pink and blue resembling “the interior of a rosy cloud, all pinks and creams, with creamy muslin curtains here

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7 According to Kelly, “Byatt’s novels are often sites of controversy: she passionately uses description and allusion and metaphor as if they could capture some truth, while her plots are often open-ended and celebratory of the inability to do so” (Kelly xiii).
and there, and ivory brushes and combs, and here and there—the mirror-frames, the little
trollies—a kind of sky blue, a dark sky blue, the colour of the couch or bed on which the rosy
nude spread herself” (5). She feels that he “soothe[s] her middle-aged hair” and “[comes] to trust
him with her disintegration” (7). As soon as Lucian changes the décor, Susannah doesn’t feel as
comfortable anymore.

Sir Lawrence Gowing, the art critic that Susannah recommends to Lucian in “Medusa’s
 Ankles” and author of the monograph on Matisse, which is featured in “Art Work,” describes
Matisse’s style as “dealing with colour itself” (11). He says that Matisse “arrange[s] [colors] to
provide the sharpest, clearest oppositions” (Gowing 11). Byatt uses colors similarly to create
oppositions, as for example in “Medusa’s Ankles” where the color scheme of the Pink Nude is
opposed to the metallic, almost post-human palette used in the redecorated salon such as
“battleship-grey and maroon” which remind Susannah of “dried blood and instruments of
slaughter” (15). The colors and Matisse’s painting seem to remind her of days of her youth when
she was “Suzie . . . not Susannah [and] she had made love all day to an Italian student on a
course in Perugi.” (22). It seems that it makes her “[remember] her own little round rosy breasts,
her long legs stretched over the side of the single bed, the hot, the wet, his shoulders” (italics
mine, 22). When she returns to the salon after it has been redecorated the new grey and metallic
color scheme makes her see herself in her age with her “greying skin, these fakes, these fragile
stretches with no elasticity” (italics mine, 19). This example shows how paintings can have both
positive and negative effects on a person’s perception of themselves.

Incidentally, Susannah enters the redecorated salon on the same day she has to appear on
television to accept a prize she has won. She tells Lucian that “[she] needs to look particularly
good this time” (16). In the changed environment of the salon she no longer feels comfortable
and is “in a panic of fear about the television, which had come too late, when she had lost the desire to be seen or looked at” (19). She thinks about how “the cameras search jowl and eyepocket, expose brush-stroke and cracks in shadow and gloss” (19). Even her speech would not be able to distract or leave a lasting impression since “mere words, go for nothing, fly by whilst the memory of a chipped tooth, a strayed red dot, an inappropriate hair, persists and persists” (19). Her fear of being on television amplifies her feeling of being uncomfortable in the newly decorated salon. In addition to that, Lucian can’t finish her hairdo and leaves her in the care of one of his employees Deirdre. When Susannah sees herself in the mirror after Deirdre finishes, she exclaims, “It’s horrible . . . I look like a middle-aged woman with a hair-do” (23). She literally explodes and starts throwing things at the mirrors in front of her. While the rosy nude had a calming effect on Susannah and actually seemed to increase her self-confidence, the black-and-white photos of young models have the exact opposite effect on her. Ekphrasis in “Medusa’s Ankles” problematizes representations of the female body in our culture and shows the effect they can have on women who can’t live up to the perfect image that is so often presented.

The third story in The Matisse Stories, “The Chinese Lobster,” tells the story of three people: art student Peggi Nollet, her advisor professor Perry Diss, and the dean of Women’s Studies, Gerda Himmelblau who is called to decide on Peggi’s accusations that Perry Diss harrassed her sexually. The story starts with each of two professors arriving at a Chinese restaurant and a parallel is established between the women in Matisse’s paintings and the lobster in the display case at the restaurant that both Gerda and Perry notice. The lobster is tellingly referred to with the female pronoun. “She” is trapped inside the case: “the lobster . . . moves her
long feelers and can be seen to move her little claws on the end of her legs, which cannot go forward or back” (91). Women are trapped like the lobster to be looked at, doomed to die.

Byatt introduces the theme of ambiguities and oppositions through Matisse’s paintings such as *Luxe, calme et volupté*, *La rêve, Le nu rose, Le nu bleu, Grande robe bleue, La musique, L’artiste et son modèle, La joie de vivre*, and *La porte noire* (106, 112). Perry Diss tells Gerda Himmelblau: “When I was a young man . . . it was all easy and flat. What a fool. And then, one day I saw it” (115). The flattening in both Matisse’s and Byatt’s work brings everything to the same level, foreground and background, character and setting, but by juxtaposing the two Byatt leaves it to the reader to take sides in the created oppositions and the flatness remains ambiguous.

The activity of “seeing” acquires a special meaning throughout *The Matisse Stories*. More than just the activity of perceiving something with the eyes, it comes to mean more the “to see” in “to appreciate”, to “pay attention,” and “to understand.” In “Medusa’s Ankles” Susannah’s husband suddenly “sees” her for the first time (27). In “The Chinese Lobster” Perry Diss accuses Peggi Nollet of not being able to “see” (108); he says “that woman isn’t an artist, and doesn’t work, and can’t see, and should not have a degree” according to Perry Diss (108, 112) and also of never having spent more than a half hour “looking at Matisse” (107–8).

Byatt shows the importance of the singularity of each viewing as she contrasts Susannah’s character who identifies with Matisse’s models with the character of Peggi Nollett in “The Chinese Lobster.” The art student’s dissertation project entitled *The Female Body and Matisse* consists of reproductions of Matisse’s paintings that she covers in blood and feces (95). Unlike Susannah who can see herself in the pink nude, Peggi argues that Matisse distorts the female body, “[accumulating] Flesh on certain Parts of the Body which appeal to Men and tend to
imobilise [sic] Women such as grotesquely swollen Thighs or protruding Stomachs” (97). She has written a letter of complaint to Dr. Gerda Himmelblau, the dean of Women’s Studies, accusing her dissertation supervisor professor Perry Diss of sexually harassing her. Her letter of complaint, which is full of typos and grammatical errors, shows that besides that accusation she is also very unhappy about the fact that he is “completely out of sympathy with [her] feminist project” (96). She is obviously aware of the tradition in art history that is also part of the ekphrastic genre but says Perry is not. She asks, “what does he know about Woman or the internal conduct of the Female Body, which has always until now been MUTE and had no mouth to speak” (96). Her project thus has the goal of giving a voice to those female models Matisse has painted. She goes on to say that “[h]is criticisms of what [she] has written so far have always been null and extremely agressive [sic] and extremely destructive. He does not understand that my project is ahistorical and need not involve any description of the so-called development of Matisse’s so-called style or approach, since what [she wishes] to state is essentially critical, and presented from a theoretical viewpoint with insights provided from contemporary critical methods to which the cronology [sic] of Matisse’s life of the order in which he comitted [sic] his ‘paintings’ is totally irrelevant [sic]” (96). Peggi also points out that Matisse’s women “tend to have no features on their faces, they are Blanks, like Dolls, I find this sinister” (97). She feels that Matisse is representing women as objects without any individuality.

Perry Diss is presented in total contrast to Peggi as a conservative art critic who believes in the “masterpiece” and doesn’t see how Peggi’s work is meant to disturb (108). Gerda Himmelblau is caught in the middle seeing both Peggi’s and Perry’s legitimate and untruthful claims. She clarifies that Peggi is not well physically and mentally and has tried to kill herself at least twice. Furthermore, she tells Perry that “she suffers from anorexia” and explains that the
“potato sack clothes” are “designed to obscure the fact that she has starved herself, apparently, almost to a skeleton” (112). Gerda’s explanations introduce once again the important ekphrastic theme of the subjectivity of perception. She describes how what an anorexic person sees in the mirror is different from what we see: “we see—staring ribs, hanging skin . . . she sees—grotesque bulges, huge buttocks, puffed cheeks” (114).

They both try to answer the question “why Matisse?”—why has Peggi chosen Matisse’s paintings for her project? In trying to answer, Gerda refers to Matisse’s painting *Luxe, calme et volupté* which represent something Peggi cannot bear—well-being (115). She says, “there has always been a resistance to these qualities in Matisse, of course. Feminist critics and artist don’t like him because of the way in which he expands male eroticism into whole placid panoramas of well-being” (116). Perry’s point is equally relevant though. He says that “you can daub the whole of the Centre Pompidou with manure . . . and you will never shock as many people as Matisse did by saying art was like an armchair” (116f). He quotes Matisse: “ ‘What I dream of, is an art of balance, of purity, of quietness, without any disturbing subjects, without worry, which may be, for everyone, . . . something soothing, something to calm the brain, something analogous to a good armchair which relaxes him from bodily weariness” (117). He brings up the pleasure in life, that you can only enjoy a color after you have been blind, we should worship the colors—“for it is the thing itself” (118).

Byatt certainly raises the question of whether Peggi Nollet’s work is depreciating Matisse’s oeuvre. Professor Gerda Himmelblau sees Peggi Nollet’s project as a form of protest and considers it “work” (109) whereas Professor Perry Diss thinks that it “desecrates” (106) and only refers to it as “so-called Work” (105). Gerda Himmelblau points out to Perry Diss that “in recent times . . . art has traditionally had an element of protest” (107). Perry Diss however has a
different conception of art; for him it is connected with work and understanding of colors: “if she
could have produced worked copies of those—those masterpieces” (107). Byatt doesn’t single
out one opinion as the correct one; instead, she lets them stand next to each other as equally
valid.

Perry’s statement raises the question what exactly it is that makes a work of art a
“masterpiece.” Gerda Himmelblau admonishes Perry Diss saying: “You have to be careful about
the word masterpieces” and rightfully so, because what is considered a masterpiece depends
entirely on the time and place the work of art is in (107). Van Gogh, whose paintings nowadays
sell for several millions, didn’t sell at all during his lifetime. At age 27, Matisse was still painting
in a fairly traditional style (La desserte, 1897) and it took a while before he became famous
along with the other members of the group called Les Fauves (Gowing 7–8). Perry Diss himself
is described as “almost an important painter, but probably not quite” and whose work is “[a]t the
moment his work . . . out of fashion” (123). Often it takes a long time for a work of art to be
considered a “masterpiece,” often long after the artist’s death.

The story “The Chinese Lobster” remains open-ended and many of the questions it raises
remain unanswered. Most importantly, the sexual harassment remains open. The story shows
performatively that it is not necessary to take sides; Peggi’s view of Matisse’s work is just as
valid as Perry’s. Not everything is “clear and simple, and single” as in the moment somebody
wants to commit suicide as Perry describes it (123). The stories in Byatt’s collection show a
world that is complex and in which multiple views and perceptions exist at the same time.

Mary Gordon: Reversing the Roles

In her novel Spending: A Utopian Divertimento, Gordon inverts all traditional gender roles
associated with the art world and ekphrasis as Berger describes it: “the individualism of the
artist, the thinker, the patron, the owner: on the other hand, the person who is the object of their
activities—the woman—treated as a thing or as abstraction” (62). Instead of a male artist the story is told by a female painter named Monica Szabo; instead of a female muse she finds a male muse, and instead of a male patron a female patron. Monica starts painting nude men the way that women have been portrayed. More importantly, for her final project she wants to “paint women, looking, not as a desiring man, but as a painter who was one of them” (277).

In the opening pages of the novel Monica gives a talk at a small gallery in New England and she introduces the idea of the “male muse.” She says, “there is a tradition that male painters get to take advantage of: the woman who’s a combination model, housekeeper, cook, secretary. And of course she earns money. And provides inspiration. All over the world, girls are growing up dreaming of being the Muse for some kind of artist. Looking at their bodies in mirrors thinking: ‘Maybe some man would like to paint that.’ . . . where are the male Muses?” (16). This question is the premise for the novel, which starts out as a “utopian divertimento,” a diversion or experiment8 that tries to answer the question “what if” there were a male muse and what would happen. Monica herself refers to the essay by Linda Nochlin entitled “Why have there been no great women artists?”. Nochlin comes to the conclusion that “art is not a free, autonomous activity of a super-endowed individual . . . but rather, that the total situation of art making . . . occur[s] in a social situation, are integral elements of this social structure, and are mediated and determined by specific and definable social institutions, be they art academies, systems of patronage, . . . artist as he-man or social outcast” (Nochlin 158). Gordon explores and questions this “situation of art making” in her novel.

The theme of spectatorship which is so central to ekphrasis runs throughout the novel. Monica thinks to herself:

8 Divertimento is Italian for diversion, pastime, pleasure. The word stands for a light-hearted musical “composition designed primarily for entertainment, esp. a suite of movements for a chamber ensemble” (OED).
what an odd thing it is, this business of looking and being looked at. Being looked at is a bit like being tasted. It doesn’t have to feel like being eaten up, so that there’s nothing left of you. How can it be, though, that something is being taken away from you—your manifestation—yet the consumption adds something? I have been added to by being looked at by men. And subtracted from. (18f)

The male muse promptly appears in the shape of “B,” an admirer of Monica’s work who tells her that he has “looked at [her] a lot” at the school where she teaches and at gallery openings (20). B then goes ahead to offer to be her “muse,” to take care of her needs so that she can concentrate on her work. He explains that he is “interested in the problem of the woman artist, but [he’s] sick of dead-end discussions about why there’s no female Picasso” (40). He tells Monica, “I’ve seen the way you live, it’s too hard. I’d like to . . . perform an experiment. (40f). His offer, which seems to be the answer to Monica’s question, poses other complications and problems from the very beginning. As we find out it is not that easy to reverse the gender roles in the artist/muse relationship. Monica immediately brings up the preconceptions that are associated with a woman who takes money from a man. She says: “Is that what you have in mind for me? To be the mistress of a great man?” (25). B’s response is: “You might be a great man yourself” (25). Does that mean she can’t be a woman and a great painter?—This question reappears throughout.

In the course of the novel Monica finds out how she benefits from having a male muse but also what problems this brings with it. When B asks her, “What do you think you need that would give you the optimum conditions for work?” she answers quickly, “Space and time” (41). With B’s support she is able to get just that, time off her teaching position and a place to paint. Throughout this experience she is very aware of and worried about the connection between sex and money, the literal spending of money that is involved in their relationship. She knows that there is always the “potential to be called a whore” (48). She starts “to think about money in a new way” (74) but also realizes that if he had asked to marry her she would have “much less
Gordon uses actual ekphrasis to play through the experiment even further. Monica will start to use B as her model to pose for a series of nudes, thus inverting the traditional male painter—female model relationship. While Monica is looking for new ideas for subjects she happens to look at her muse after they had just had sex. B says to her, “I’m completely spent.” His posture as he is sitting on a chair makes Monica think of Carpaccio’s *Meditation on Christ’s Passion* and other examples of paintings that depict Christ after he has been taken down from the cross by Pontormo, Mantegna, and Rosso Fiorentino. She realizes that to her, “they were all dead, but they didn’t look dead” (55).

Her ekphrasis of Carpaccio’s painting makes the point even clearer: “And the MAN himself, the Redeemer, whom the inscription on the seat where Job is sitting assures us LIVETH, is really worn out. Despite the wounds he’d inflicted, a crescent shape on his left breast, a deep horizontal cut on his right hand, he doesn’t look dead. He’s just had it, for now” (58). She then plans to paint a series of “spent men” after the old Masters. She tells her friend Michael: “I have an idea for a whole series of paintings. My idea is that many of the deposed Christ’s aren’t deposed Christs at all, but just your ordinary postcoital Joe. You know the little death, not the big one” (72).

When B first approaches her, he tells her that he thinks she is a “very, very good painter” and that “one day [she] might be great” (21). His “praise” make her angry because she thinks that “this cult of the Master . . . [is] beside the point” and “destructive” (21). She continues to tell him about how at one of her opening she had overheard two men talking about her work saying,
“Well, it’s OK, but it’s not Matisse” (21). She paints because it is what she wants to do, she doesn’t aspire to be a “master,” whatever that means.

Her series on “spent men” after the masters help her to see herself in their tradition. In Italy looking at the originals she feels that she “[is] with them. [She] wasn’t measuring [herself] against them” (85). She feels that she can contribute something, change something that the masters before haven’t seen. She thinks, “[h]ow could I settle a score with Michelangelo? Only to say this, calmly and with amusement: I will paint what I have seen, which is something you didn’t” (88).

The ekphrastic roles of the male onlooker and the female object are reversed when Monica starts to paint B who models for her “spent men” series. She considers how strange it must be for him to have a “woman looking at him, stealing from him, consuming him, erasing then recreating him” (102). She continues her meditation thinking “about what an unusual thing it is for a woman to be looking at a man’s body” and that “[l]ooking at women’s bodies was something men have always been told was a good thing. . . . But women have been told to live with our eyes cast down. Warned against male beauty, warned to keep our eyes on one ball only: the ball of the good provide. When women were first allowed to study painting formally in the nineteenth century, they couldn’t look at the male nude. For them, marble and plaster. Statues and casts” (102f).

She describes how she “would paint [her] spent men in the posture and with some of the surroundings of the Italian Masters, but in [her] own style . . . [a]nd then, overlaying the figure, I would trace a white outline . . . of the figure of the Master./My paintings would include the relation of the past—art and / faith—to the present; the working female artist. Touched by the past but not shaped by it entirely” (132f). Later on she says that she is “enjoying incorporating
the work of the Masters into my own work; . . . I was painting vision. . . . I was making a comment about women looking at men, which I believed was different from the way men looked at women, and that this hadn’t been well recorded in the history of art” (194).

After her the opening of the exhibition that causes quite a stir with the religious right, Monica gets invited to be interviewed by Charlie Rose. He also picks up on this theme and says her “art show . . . uses the idea of old Masters to say something about how we see today” (201). She brings up that “as an artist, the way [she] look[s] at what’s before my eyes is partly determined by what other artist have seen before [her]” (203).

Another twist in this experiment is the female version of the rich male patron. In Monica’s case it turns out to be a female patron. Peggi Riordan sees Monica’s exhibition but since all the paintings sold out at the opening night, she approaches Monica to commission a painting. She says, “I never commissioned a painting before. It’s rather a new role for me, the patron” (213). The character of the female patron is equally new and unusual as the male muse. Monica decides to paint a triptych for her consisting of another spent man in the center, a version of Lelio Orsi’s *The Dead Christ Flanked by Charity and Justice*, with a portrait of Peggi as the donor and a group of artists (community) in the wings (218).

Another complication of the experiment occurs right after Peggi decides to give Monica one of her New York apartments. B, who is an investment banker, loses all his money. He is devastated and only at first does Monica think that it won’t matter because she will be able to sell the apartment. She tells him, “this couldn’t have come at a better time. Don’t worry about being broke. I’m rich” (229). Even though she is able to give him the start-up money to get back into business, it takes a long time for him to recover from this blow. Monica realizes more and more
how money and sex are connected. “Money and sex, sex and money. Men and women. Women and men. Having money after not having money” (238)

Her final project will be her version of Ingres’s *Turkish Baths*. She comes up with that idea while she is at the Russian baths with Peggy. She describes her as “dignified in her nakedness, her flesh suggested a reserve not of renunciation, but of self-regard” (275). She describes her inspiration for the painting and compares it to how she came up with the idea for the spent men. Sitting in the bath with Peggy she thinks, “it’s comfortable and safe . . . as she said that . . . it came to me, as it had come to me seeing B sitting on the chair the night he reminded me of the Carpaccio, that I was seeing a version of something I’d seen before. It was Ingres’s *Turkish Bath*” (276). Her description continues though to point out the important differences she imagines

but this was different. This was woman’s world. A world in which the nakedness of bodies was not about being seen, but about the body’s own well-being. The nakedness of women, removed from the pleasure of men. / And unlike the Ingres harem, there was a great variety of bodies, some young with long legs and firm breasts, bodies that you understood were desirable by anybody, man or woman, whose currency was noticeable even in the milky neutrality of the grotto. . . . You could look at them and divide them in two: the desirable and the undesirable. But it seemed to me there were far more interesting ways to see them. (276)

She wants to represent women as women are seen by other women, “removed from the pleasure of men” (276). Her work is a re-vision, a seeing again, of male painter’s versions of the human body. The particular space here is not a “harem” which is a term inscribed with the male ownership of women. The Russian baths in this case are a space in which the women are “removed” from men, free to be whatever they are. She says

all of them, in their variety, represented something more interesting than what we’d been told were the desires of men. / It came to me then: I wanted to paint groups of women’s bodies, relaxed, unself-conscious. I wanted to grant to all their nudity the attentiveness of voluptuous paint. I wanted to grant this to the nudity of bodies not usually seen in art. I would resee the bodies of women, as one of them. Perhaps I’d put myself in. . . . I would paint women, looking, not as a desiring man, but as a painter who was one of them. (277)
All these examples of ekphrasis critique and comment on the way women are portrayed and perceived. They juxtapose the “male gaze” with a female gaze that is no longer voyeuristic. Vreeland’s novel substitutes the male artist who gives a voice to the female subject with a strong and independent female artist figure whose own paintings are re-visions of paintings of women by men. Byatt’s stories highlight the subjectivity of perceptions of the female body and use ekphrasis to emphasize the validity of each perception. Finally, Gordon’s novel explores the ekphrastic gender roles by inversing them, and more importantly taking the question of the “great women artist” and complicating it. Their female characters are not just aware of being a “spectacle,” they work against this perception and thus change it. In the last chapter I move from the critique of representations of women to novels that critique and revise representations of history while foregrounding the importance of story-telling at the same time.
CHAPTER 5
HISTORIOGRAPHY AND STORY-TELLING

Nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective. Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future.

—Svetalana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*

[Let us rephrase] the question of mourning not as an exercise in nostalgia, but as a call to reinterpretation and thus to change. . . . Unlike nostalgia films, spectral films investigate the past in order to raise questions regarding the future.

—Alessia Ricciardi, *The Ends of Mourning: Psychoanalysis, Literature, Film*

Why do contemporary authors such as Julian Barnes, Salman Rushdie, Peter Ackroyd, and John Banville write novels about history and painting, forms or concepts that all have been pronounced “dead”? ¹ In their novels *The History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters, The Moor’s Last Sigh, Chatterton, and Ghosts*, ekphrasis plays a central role in functioning as an emblem for their interest in (recreating) the past. My analysis of the four novels shows that Barnes, Rushdie, Ackroyd, and Banville do more than simply present a plot in a historical setting or recreate a certain period; they engage critically with the past and the way the past has been written. In doing that they are all examples of what Linda Hutcheon calls “historiographic metafiction” (105). Their novels question and critique traditional ways of representation and representation of the past in particular. Furthermore, they show history as narrative existing only as a human construct and establish paintings as sources for historiography only to expose them as being narratives as well. To come back to my initial question then—why would contemporary authors be interested in writing novels about history and art?—the answer is that precisely because the novel, painting, and history are deemed to be dead, they want to show how important it is to not

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¹ Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the “end” of history in 1989 the year *The History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* was published. See also John Barth’s essay “The Literature of Exhaustion” for the death of the novel.
only remember the past but also to interrogate the past in order to understand the present and future.

The common aspect of these novels that I am most concerned with is the interest in painting, which as Roland Barthes says is also a form of narrative. The self-reflexive characteristics of metafiction are reinforced in ekphrastic novels. The description of paintings dramatizes the false or constructed nature of fiction or the inevitable fictionality of all experience and the paintings often illustrate these self-reflexive issues as a subtext. The idea of historiographic metafiction is by no means new, so what I argue about these novels expands on the conceptions of this genre. Each of the examples that I am looking at here includes representations of paintings, most of them examples of history painting. This genre of painting often depicts a serious narrative or an exemplary action usually taken from a written source. Whereas in the nineteenth century most history paintings dealt with ‘history’ in its modern sense (exploration of the past), in the fifteenth century the term was defined more in the sense of the Latin word *historia* meaning ‘story.’ The term comes from Battista Alberti’s use of the word *historia* (lat. story) to describe a narrative picture. This definition introduces the fact that history painting, much like any representation, is not necessarily accurate in its depiction of actual events and that it is a “re-telling” of a story. By incorporating history paintings, authors of

2 See Barthes, “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narration,” 79.

3 In *A Poetics of Postmodernism* Linda Hutcheon’s addresses the importance of *ekphrasis* in historiographic metafiction. She writes, “The issue of narrativity encompasses many others that point to the postmodern view that we can only know ‘reality’ as it is produced and sustained by cultural representations of it. . . . In historiographic metafictions, these are often not simple verbal representations, for *ekphraseis* . . . often have central representational functions” (121). In the novels I am discussing here, paintings also become a way of knowing the past, and more than that, they are starting points for meditations on historiography.

4 Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa* is an example of history painting, but also the paintings of Aurora Zogoiby which depict events from her family history as well as from the history of India, and finally, Wallis’s *The Death of Chatterton* which represents a historic event as well. The only exception would be Vaublin’s paintings in *Ghosts* that are closely modeled after Watteau’s *fêtes galantes*.

5 The term comes form Battista Alberti’s use of the word in his treatise on painting *De Pictura* (1435).
contemporary historiographic metafiction foreground and emphasize the constructed nature of any representation of history and its reliance on story-telling. Thus, as much as these novels are about history, they are also about story-telling. In their novels these authors explore the human need to tell stories so as to make sense of things, to see symmetry where there is no symmetry, a beginning, middle, end. Books like these show that there is no one way of reading, or one particular message. Instead it celebrates story-telling for its own sake.

In what ways do these novels differ then from the texts of the historian or biographer? The novels by Ackroyd, Rushdie, Barnes, and Banville each complicate the way we think about history and how history is written. Although the novels are all very different in subject matter, they all offer revisionist ways to look at history in self-reflexive and performative ways. All four histories emphasize the story within the history, meaning the narrative process. As Hayden White points out, all historiography is also narration.6 The narrative strategies or structures these authors use offer new ways for us to think about history: Ackroyd connects three different time periods over three centuries, Rushdie gives a first person account of the history of an entire family and country, Barnes offers “10 ½” new accounts of different historical events, and Banville explores the ways a historian (re)constructs the life of a painter.

All four novels feature self-reflexive elements in that they are implicitly about storytelling. Talking about Melville’s *Moby Dick* in *On Literature*, J. Hillis Miller says, “the storyteller is a survivor. If there is to be a story, there must be someone left to tell the tale” (73). And indeed without a witness stories can’t exist. Each of the four novels is told (at least in part) by a survivor: at the point he writes down the story, Rushdie’s Moor is the only survivor of the Dagama-Zogoiby clan; Charles Wychwood pieces together the stories of two writers who have

long passed away; Barnes also complicates the role of the survivor as witness in several of his stories (the woodworm, the raft, etc.); the narrator of Banville’s Ghosts is survived life in prison.

I argue that the survivor is an emblematic figure of the story-teller. These authors celebrate the power of those characters but also question their motifs. They show that even if you try to be truthful any story is subjective and selective and so is everybody’s reading, but that doesn’t make these readings less valid.

In *Postmodernism*, Jameson argues that historical novels are written out of nostalgia for a certain period in the past and argues that the “historical novel can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only ‘represent’ our ideas and stereotypes about that past . . . we are condemned to seek history by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach” (Jameson 25). I agree with Jameson insofar that any representation of a given past period always reveals something about the author and the time period the book is written in. To go even further, the reader of a text then brings to bear on the text his or her time period and cultural baggage as I have discussed in the context of Mieke Bal’s interpretation of the event. My readings, however, will show that representing the past is about more than the futile effort to evoke a past time period. The re-presentation of a certain time period is not what Banville, Barnes, Rushdie, or Ackroyd have in mind. Instead, they want to draw our attention to the way history is written and to the importance of questioning traditional historiography. More importantly, they create alternate worlds and histories within their texts.

Jameson uses the word nostalgia, but what exactly does this mean? The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition shows that the word does not really make sense as the motivation for any of the four novels: “homesickness. Also in extended use: Sentimental longing for or regretful

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7 See introduction.
memory of a period of the past, esp. one in an individual's own lifetime; (also) sentimental imagining or evocation of a period of the past.” In the case of the novels that I analyze in this chapter we could speak of “imagining or evocation of the past.” But I would argue though that the imagining or evocation cannot be considered to be sentimental. Instead of describing the past mimaetically, the novels try to evoke the past in a performative way, as they are not talking about the past in retrospective way but use the language and stylistic devices of the given period.

In this context Alessia Ricciardi offers a perspective on nostalgia that illustrates my argument in my discussion of the four novels. In her introduction to The Ends of Mourning Ricciardi she introduces the genre of what she calls “spectral films”

in contrast to the stylistic fetishism of the past and celebration of the retro typical of commercial motion pictures, spectral cinema relentlessly rephrases the question of mourning not as an exercise in nostalgia, but as a call to reinterpretation and thus to change. . . . I oppose a new visual strategy of mourning that could be called the ‘spectral film.’ . . . Unlike nostalgia films, spectral films investigate the past in order to raise questions regarding the future. (9, italics mine)

Ricciardi is talking about films here, but what she says can equally apply to fiction and I will call the examples in this Chapter “spectral novels” since they, too, are not an “exercise in nostalgia” but rather a call to reinterpretation of history. Both Barnes and Ackroyd offer a different aspect of well-known historic events and a famous literary figure; Rushdie writes a new kind of family history, and Banville uses the figure of a biographer to illustrate the problems of writing about the past. The nostalgia in these cases is not a sentimental evocation but rather a fresh look at the past event showing that there is not one truth about the past but rather many truths. A single truthful mimetic representation of a past event proves to be impossible and is also not what the authors are aiming for. They recall the past in order to make the reader aware of its implications for the future.
In his studies on the conventions of writing about history, Hayden White shows that even though historiography seems to be scientific and objective any historical writing is nevertheless a verbal fiction. If we take White's argument a little further, there doesn’t seem to be a difference between the work of a historian and that of a novelist after all. Authors of historical fiction have the same claim to being truthful as historians, maybe even more so because they show a greater awareness of history as a narrative, that is, a human construct. Barnes, Rushdie, Ackroyd, and Banville play with the idea that history is accessible to us only as texts (texts in the widest sense, also including paintings). Like many contemporary authors they attempt to integrate art and life including popular forms, popular culture, and everyday reality. This integration recalls Bakthin’s notion of ‘carnival’ and adds a sense of energy and freedom to these works. This playfulness can be read as an acknowledgement on the authors’ part that mimetic representation is impossible and we are forever faced with “the abyss,” which is always already there. Instead of despairing at this prospect contemporary authors turn to a playful use of language. They acknowledge that history happens and also that the past is irrecoverable. But for them the goal is not necessarily to recuperate the past but to show the different layers and the past’s connections to the present. In their historiographic approach, however, they show that narration still takes place as each text or painting narrates a version of the past.

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8 Another important term coined by Hayden White is “emplotment.” He explains how a set of events can be emplotted in any number of ways: “The production of meaning in this case can be regarded as a performance, because any given set of real events can be emplotted in a number of ways, can bear the weight of being told as any number of different kinds of stories. Since no given set or sequence of events is intrinsically tragic, comic, farcical, and so on, but can be constructed as such only by the imposition of the structure of a given story type on the events, it is the choice of the story type and its imposition upon the events that endow them with meaning. The effect of such emplotment may be regarded as an explanation, but it would have to be recognized that the generalization that serve the function of universals in any version of a nomological-deductive argument are the topoi of literary plots, rather than he causal laws of science” (44).

9 The idea that mimetic representation through narrative is impossible is not new by any means. Roland Barthes writes in “Structural Analysis of Narratives” that “in all narrative imitation remains contingent. The function of narrative is not to ‘represent’, it is to constitute a spectacle still very enigmatic for us but in any case not of a mimetic order” (123f).
Their use of multiple or alternative perspectives draws our attention to the constructed character of history.\textsuperscript{10} The main focus of these authors is not the mimetic reconstruction of a time period or a character but to analyze the way the period or a particular historical figure has traditionally been represented. The novels in this Chapter are all self-reflexive since they consciously deal with writing and in particular writing about history or biography. Barnes’s novel states already in the title that it is a “history of the world” which consists of first-person accounts, third-person reports and letters. Rushdie’s Moor is locked up in a room forced to write down the story of his family and Ackroyd’s \textit{Chatterton} is a biography of a writer in which most of the characters are writers as well.

I will start with an analysis of Julian Barnes’s \textit{The History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters} focusing on the motif of the “catastrophe.”\textsuperscript{11} In my discussion of Salman Rushdie’s \textit{The Moor's Last Sigh} one of the central terms is “palimpsest” which comes to stand for the central technique that Aurora Zogoiby uses for her paintings of history of both her family and her country as well as for Moraes’s narrative. For my discussion of Peter Ackroyd’s novel, \textit{Chatterton}, I want to come back to Ricciardi’s notion of the “spectral text.” I will end this Chapter with a reading of Walter Benjamin’s “angel of history.”

\textsuperscript{10} The novels I will analyze in this Chapter all fall in the category of the meta-historical novel in which “the presentation of a historical event is substituted by a retrospective look at history . . . [the] focus shifts from attention to historical figures and events to the analysis after-the-event, a historiographic analysis of history, the reconstruction from the here and now and a retrospective making sense. Combination of mono- and multiperspectival narration helps to show the constructiveness of memories, identity and historiography. Rather than representing history the focus lies on the reflection about the reconstruction of historical contexts and the problems of historiography” (Nünning 165).

\textsuperscript{11} One recurring motif in this novel is that of “catastrophe” and Walter Benjamin's writings on history and Jacques Derrida’s discussion of the archive are especially useful in this context.
John Banville: The Author as Creator

Before I begin my close readings, I will briefly analyze John Banville’s novel *Ghosts* which I read as an allegory of writing about the past and story-telling. This reading will set up the way I analyze the other novels. I will specifically talk about the role of the narrator, the painter whose life he tries to document, as well as his paintings. *Ghosts* is told by a first person narrator, Freddy Montgomery, who tells his readers to refer to him as “little god.” He is an art historian who is trying to reconstruct the life of a painter. The fact that he chooses to be called ‘a god,’ even though a “little” one, alludes self-consciously to the fact that a narrator is the god of the universe he creates. He has the power to create and to destroy. Critic Anja Müller argues that Freddy “can be read as a caricature of the postmodern storyteller who despairs at his paradoxical endeavour to represent in an age that has challenged the very notion of representation” (186). His ghost-like appearance is stressed when he says: “And I, I am there and not there: I am the *pretext* of things, though I sport no thick gold wing or pale halo. Without me there would be no moment, no separable event, only the brute, blind drift of things. . . . (Yes, it would appear that after all I am required.)” (39). Here, he self-reflexively alludes to his role as narrator. He is “required” because without him nothing would exist: he is literally the “pre-text” (39). He describes himself as “only a half figure, a figure half-seen, standing in the doorway, or sitting in a corner of the scrubbed pine table with a cracked mug at my elbow, and if they try to see me straight, or turn their heads too quickly, I am gone” (39). Once again, he describes self-

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12 McMinn argues that “most modern novelist show a passing or referential interest in the world of art, quoting from it repeatedly, but rarely constructing entire fictions around the idea of a parallel art which speaks a silent language [like Banville]” (137). This study shows, however, that Banville is by no means the only author who does that.

13 Peter Schwenger notes that Banville’s narrator frequently corrects himself and makes “adjustments” that “[allow] us to see the slippages of fiction . . . these evidences of the fictional lie are held in tension with fiction’s creative power” (Schwenger 20f).
reflexively his role as the creator of the story foregrounding his invisibility, but highlighting his omnipresence at the same time.

“Little god” tries to piece together the life of “of a long-dead and not quite first rate master” despite the difficulties he is facing (39). Everything about the painter is uncertain, even his name which might be: “Faubelain, Vanhobelin, Van Hobellijn” (35). The narrator admits at one point that this uncertainty is what attracts him to the painter. Once again self-reflexively drawing attention to his role as author, he calls Vaublin a “manufactured man,” his subjects of “melancholy pantomime appeal to [him] deeply, some quality of quietude and remoteness, that sense of anguish they convey, of damage, of impending loss,” and he mentions that he painter seems to be always remote and “unable to do anything for [his subjects] except bear witness to their plight” (35). Just like Vaublin, the narrator seems to be only the witness to what is going on on the island. He is also only bearing witness and has only a ghostlike presence. Vaublin thus becomes a double for the narrator.

Throughout the novel more and more parallels between the writer and the painter become apparent. Vaublin is described as “the painter of absences, of endings. His scenes seem to hover on the point of vanishing. How clear and yet far-off and evanescent everything is, as if seen by someone on his death-bed who has lifted himself up to the window at twilight to look out a last time on a world he is losing” (39). This description can be easily applied to the narrator himself who seems to leave more out that he includes as well, leaving it to the reader to fill the gaps. The characters he describes have a ghostlike quality, and he himself is like a ghost who is recording the world around him as it is slipping away.

The reconstruction of the painter’s past also leads to attempts to put the memories his own life back together. As he looks at the visitors he is overcome with an “eerie sense of recognition
that only comes in dreams, a memory floated up—though memory is too strong a word, and at
the same time not strong enough—of a room in the house where I was born” (39). His life is just
a series of images that are not necessarily in a causal or temporal relationship. Indeed, his
description reminds of Benjamin’s description of the past as a picture. He writes, “The past can
be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never
seen again” (255). He speaks of a series of “emblematic fragments from the deep past that seem
mysteriously to constitute something of the very stuff of which I am made” (39). This emphasis
on fragments is also central to the other examples of historiographic metafiction that I will
analyze in this Chapter. Instead of mourning the fragmentation of reality they all highlight the
“mysterious” connections between the fragments. In the following three sections, I will analyze
Barnes’s, Rushdie’s, and Ackroyd’s novel which resemble Banville’s Ghost in their critique of
traditional historiography and more importantly the creative power of the storyteller to create a
reality.

**Julian Barnes: Turning Catastrophe into Art**

“How do you turn catastrophe into art?”

—Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* 125

How do we seize the past? Can we ever do so? When I was a medical student some
pranksters at an end-of-term dance released into the hall a piglet which had been smeared
with grease. It squirmed between legs, evaded capture, squealed a lot. People fell over
trying to grasp it, and were made to look ridiculous in the process. The past often seems to
behave like that piglet.

—Julian Barnes, *Flaubert’s Parrot* 14

You can define a net in one of two ways . . . But you could, with no great injury to logic,
reverse the image and define a net as a jocular lexicographer once did: he called it a
collection of holes tied together with string. / You can do the same with a biography. The
trawling net fills, then the biographer hauls it in, sorts, throws back, stores, fillets and sells.
Yet consider what he doesn’t catch: there is always far more of that. The biography stands,
fat and worthy-burgherish on the shelf, boastful and sedate: a shilling life will give you all
the facts, a ten-pound one all the hypotheses as well. But think of everything that got away, that fled with the last deathbed exhalation of the biographee.

—Julian Barnes, *Flaubert’s Parrot* 38

Julian Barnes is interested in history and biography as the preceding quotations from his novel *Flaubert’s Parrot* show. The title of the novel I am interested in here, *The History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, already indicates that historiography will be a central concern. More than that, it ironically refers to the seemingly impossible task to tell the history of the world in one book—especially in not eleven but “10 and ½ chapters.” In each chapter, Barnes takes widely known stories such as that of Noah and his ark and retells them from a new, often unlikely, perspective. He questions the traditional ways in which history is told and thus shows that no representation of the past can ever be complete or entirely truthful. His earlier novel *Flaubert’s Parrot* addresses some of the same issues. A recurring question in this novel is: “How do we seize the past? Can we ever do so?” (14).

If we were to use the terms biography and history almost synonymously, we could see the opening passage from *Flaubert’s Parrot* above about the net of the biographer as the germ for Barnes’s history or biography of the world. The biographers of the world, the historians, gather all the information they can, select and then create a (hi)story. Barnes looks at different parts of history and seems to make it his purpose to catch “everything that got away, that fled with the last deathbed exhalation of the biographee” (38). However, in his seemingly futile attempt to write a “history of the world,” he achieves something more important: he offers a new look at history even if it doesn’t succeed in compressing the history of the world into 10 ½ chapters, and this is what the book is really trying to do. Barnes tells us that even though history books give us the false idea of knowing everything (or at least everything important) about the past, we really do not and cannot know everything. Moreover, he shows us the importance of not taking
everything we read in history books for granted, but to question and interpret what we read and
to understand that there are always infinite versions of an event. Barnes criticizes
traditional/conservative historiography that focuses on the ruling classes rather than on the
working class, the victors rather than the losers, and the catastrophes rather than the happy times.
So instead of focusing on the obvious, Barnes brings the “woodworms” of history to light and
shows that every (hi)story is worth being told and that these stories need to be told to balance the
monoperspectival reports of traditional historiography.

In Barnes’s novel, time is cyclical rather than linear in that it brings back in waves certain
motifs and questions. It consists of seemingly unconnected stories which nevertheless form a
whole. Each story asks how historiography works and points out how certain aspects of the past
such as the woodworms in the Bible or the lawsuit in France are always neglected. I agree with
Salman Rushdie who calls Barnes’s work “the novel as footnote to history, as subversion of the
given, as brilliant, elaborate doodle around the margins of what we know we think about what
we think we know. This is fiction as critique” (241)—Barnes’s fiction critiques conservative
historiography. Jackie Buxton calls the novel an “interrogation of grand narrative” and offers an
interesting reading of Barnes’s novel in context with Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the
Philosophy of History” (56). Both Barnes and Benjamin construct a historiography that is not
teleological nor based on cause-and-effect and progress. Buxton’s reading of Barnes’s History is,
however, too negative when she says that “for Barnes, the history of the world is a continuing
series of ironic coincidences and unlucky accidents” (95). The leitmotifs and themes that appear
in each of the 10 ½ chapters prove that they are more than just tragic or ironic coincidences,
instead they show that certain questions and problems are intrinsically linked to the human
condition. Buxton continues her pessimistic reading when she points out a passage from Barnes’s
Flaubert’s Parrot where the narrator asks: “Does the world progress? Or does it merely shuttle back and forth like a ferry?” (105). However, this is exactly the point, since both Benjamin and Barnes don’t believe in progress, but in an eternal return of the same questions. That is why it is so important for both authors to not only remember the past, but to try and learn from it.

In her comparison of Barnes and Benjamin, Buxton introduces the Benjaminian concepts of “quotation” and “constellation.” She says, “quotation gives voice to the dead so that they may speak to the present moment . . . it fosters an illuminating recognition of both the past and the present by way of their defamiliarizing conjunction” (98). So when the same themes reappear throughout the Barnes's novel and throughout history, they are “the same, but not the same,” to borrow Tennyson’s phrase once again. History’s self-quotation brings a familiar element into a new context of the “Jetzt-Zeit” [now-time] in what Benjamin calls a constellation. So instead of looking at history as a linear telos-oriented progress, a succession of cause-and-effect, Barnes, too, looks at history more as a constellation. The history of the world Barnes is describing is full of connections and motifs that can be seen as connected by “lines of flight.”14 Additionally, time in Barnes's novel has a rhizomatic structure, which means that events do not necessarily occur in a chronological order; instead, time seems to form a three-dimensional structure without a center or forward direction. The crossing points of the lines of flight are points of energy similar to the Benjaminian concept of the constellation.

One motif that is repeated throughout Barnes’s novel is that of the ark. The first chapter, “The Stowaway,” retells the story of Noah’s ark; “The Visitors” is set on a cruise ship in the Mediterranean; “The Survivor” tells the story of a shipwreck; “Shipwreck” tells the story that

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14 The term was coined by Deleuze and Guattari. These lines of flight interconnect through time and form points of energy, and thus can be said to form a “rhizome.” Deleuze and Guattari define the term as follows: “The rhizome connects any point to any other point; and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature... It has neither beginning nor end” (21).
Géricault’s based his painting *The Raft of the Medusa* on; “Three Simple Stories” mentions the Titanic, Joshua and the Whale, and the St. Louis, a ship that was supposed to take Jews from Hamburg to Cuba; and finally “Project Ararat” alludes to a spaceship. All these ships (or boats or rafts) are arks in the sense that they helped one or several people survive. The word “ark” shares its root with the word archive from the Greek *arkhe* which has several meanings.\(^{15}\) It can mean house, beginning (commencement), and commandment. The word ark in the English language can mean boat, chest, or box. To look at the novel as a whole as an ark or an archive is very telling, especially with respect to historiography. To look at historiography as an archive makes more sense than to look at it as a chain of events. Derrida says, “the archive is never closed. It opens out to the future” (68). That is true (or at least Barnes reminds us that it should be true) with respect to historiography as well. Historiography can never be closed either; it not only continues chronologically into the future, but also diachronically from any given point in the past, a fact that most history books deny, or at least don’t talk about explicitly.

The archive works against forgetting and Barnes’s novel shows that there is much more to remember than what the history books tell us. The archive has a hypomnesic function as it helps us remember what we might else forget. Our memory depends on external support and supplements. Derrida writes, “The archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of memory. *There is not archive without a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority*” (emphasis mine, 11). Barnes’s novel functions in much the same way, since in his archival historiographic novel he works against our forgetting of events that have not been deemed important enough to be recorded in the past. Repetition of certain motifs is also crucial in the novel. Derrida writes furthermore that,

\[^{15}\text{see Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever* (x).}\]
the question of the archive is not, we repeat, a question of the past. It is not the question of a concept dealing with the past that might already be at our disposal or not at our disposal, an archivable concept of the archive. It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. A spectral messianicity is at work in the concept of the archive and ties it, like religion, like history, like science itself, to a very singular experience of promise. (36)

I consider Barnes’s novel to be an archival work, and Derrida’s reading that the archive is not about the past but about the future ties in with my ideas about the emergence of these historiographic novels. They talk about the past in order to make readers think of the future. The “spectral messianicity” of the archive Derrida talks about is similar to what Ricciardi defines as the spectral film’s interest in the future.

Interestingly, Derrida also talks about a “nostalgic desire for the archive” which brings me back to Jameson’s concept of nostalgia (91). Whereas Jameson adds a negative connotation to nostalgia, for Derrida it is more of a passion, what he calls “an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement” (91). This desire to learn about the origin or place of commencement is driven by our questions about the present and the future. The novel as an archive functions hypomnesically as an exterior structure that helps us remember and makes appear. Ekphrasis is nothing else but a hypomnesic technique that makes the painting appear in the reader’s mind’s eye.

In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” Benjamin says, “The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again. . . . For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (Illuminations 255). I argue that we can read the word image here as a literal image or a mental image. Constellations happen and then fluctuate and disappear. For the historian it is important to describe these
fleeting images and to show the connection to the present, to make the present “recognize” the image as its own image. Thus historiographers should make appear the connections between present and past to show that there are some questions that will always face us.

Another recurring motif in Barnes’s novel is that of catastrophe, from the flood in the bible, to the shipwreck of the Medusa and the sinking of the Titanic. Instead of seeing Barnes’s focus on disaster as ironic and coincidental, I argue that he shows us that catastrophes are an integral part of life itself and no matter how much we “progress,” they are bound to happen.16 In his novel Barnes performatively asks us to do the same, to read the motifs in the different chapters not as coincidences but rather as pieces of a puzzle that form a greater picture.

The chapter of Barnes’s novel that is of most interest to me is the one entitled “Shipwreck” about Géricault’s painting *The Raft of the Medusa*. The painting was the success at the Paris Salon in 1819. Géricault took the tradition of history painting to a new level as he chose a subject that was not classical but a contemporary disaster. In his painting he both criticizes the French government, which tried to cover up the shipwreck, and at the same time he gives a stunning depiction of human suffering. It is not a coincidence that Barnes picks a history painting that takes an event and turns it into a philosophical truth about human suffering. The chapter comprises two sections, the first focusing on an account of the events relying heavily on Savigny and Corréard’s *Narrative of a Voyage to Senegal*, an eyewitness account of the shipwreck.17

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16 To cite Benjamin once again I would like to refer to his discussion of the angel of history, Benjamin’s reading of Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus*. Benjamin describes him with “his face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. . . . [A] storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress” (*Illuminations* 257f). The image of the angel of history exemplifies the view of history that is not linear but holistic. Benjamin critiques historiography that focuses on the linear progression of events instead of looking at the whole of history and calls for a view of history that doesn’t single events out and orders them chronologically, but that sees the connections or constellations.

17 Barnes notes that chapter 5 “draws its facts and language from the 1818 London translation of Savigny and Corrédard’s *Narrative of a Voyage to Senegal*, the second part relies heavily on the Lorenz Eitner’s exemplary *Géricault: His Life and Works.*
Barnes takes the “facts” (dates and numbers) from their report and also mimics the language of the time. Although the section seemingly tries to give an objective view of the events, the very beginning of the section shows that it is a narrative that “emplots” and “narrativizes.” Barnes opens the chapter with the words, “It began with a portent” (115). Only in retrospect can the event of the boy drowning and maybe starving on the raft (if he ever made it onto it) be interpreted as a portent as an omen or foreshadowing of the events to come. The number of people on board makes the reader wonder whether it is the actual number or a symbolic number. It says, “There were 365 people on board” (117). The idea of the number 365 of course implies the number of days in a year. This symbolic number is reminiscent of the use of numbers in the Bible where numbers are used metaphorically rather than literally. Barnes comments on the attitude of the passengers toward the cultures they encounter: they “noted” and “reflective passengers ascribed” (115). The tone seems to be very “objective” but the narrative devices show that the facts have been embellished by Barnes and/or by his sources.

The same process of emplotment or aesthetization is revealed in the depiction of the event by Géricault, described and analyzed in the second part of “Shipwreck.” Barnes describes how the painter went to great lengths to be historically accurate, spent a lot of time doing research; he even had a model of the raft built. Then, as Barnes shows, followed a number of decisions which Géricault made for artistic reasons rather than being motivated by the goal of historical accuracy.

The second part of the chapter starts with a central question for the whole book: “How do you turn catastrophe into art?” (125). In a way that is what Barnes is trying to do in his novel as he talks about a series of catastrophes from the great flood described in the Bible, to the sinking of the Titanic to personal catastrophes. Barnes says, “We have to understand it, of course, this catastrophe; to understand it, we have to imagine it, so we need imaginative arts” (125). So what
the “imaginative arts” (which we can understand as painting and literature and maybe even 
historiography) do, according to Barnes, is to help us understand catastrophes by imagining the 
event for us. According to the OED definition of the word “imagine,” the artwork literally 
pictures something for us that is not present to the senses. Thus art is supposed to help us 
understand reality, nature and catastrophes. Since we all are familiar with personal catastrophes 
little or small, it is easy to identify with representations of catastrophes for all of us.

Barnes alludes to supposedly “well-known” facts about Géricault and the event of the 
Medusa thus at the same questioning time their truthfulness. For example, he says that Géricault 
“shaved his head before he started the picture, we all know that.” Do we really all know that? It 
is mentioned in Géricault's biographies, but does that make it true? Another moment when 
Barnes questions the facts is when he asks: “Is that what happened?” With this question Barnes 
draws attention to the fact that we can never be sure about what really happened, even if we have 
“proof”. But is it important to know every detail?

The next section mostly just lists “facts” such as dates, business transactions etc.: “Journey 
took place from June 17th to July 17th 1816. / Savigny and Corréard publish their account 16 
month later in November of 1817. / Géricault buys the canvas in February of 1818 (more than 1 
_ years after the event) and finishes it another year later in July 1819” (?). By giving us this list 
of “facts” Barnes shows in a performative way that the only aspect we can rely on in 
historiography or biography are dates. These dates form the skeleton of any writing about history 
which by “emplotting” these facts, to use Hayden White's term, turn the facts into narrative.18

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18 According to Barnes Géricault read Savigny and Corréard’s report and talked to other survivors (e.g. the carpenter 
who built a scale model of the raft on which G positioned wax models) Savigny, Corréard, and the carpenter are 
recognizable in the painting (126). Delacroix posed for one of the figures.
In my discussion of the problems of historiography I have talked about the problems of accurate representation since each event there is made out of infinite number of details and also viewpoints. Barnes addresses this problem as well as he points to the act of selection that any representation of an historic event calls for. The section starts with the phrase: “Let us start with what he did not paint” and is followed by a list of aspects: “The Medusa striking the reef; / 2) The moment when the tow-ropes were cast off and the raft abandoned; / 3) The mutinies in the night; / 4) The necessary cannibalism; / 5) The self-protective mass-murder; / 6) The arrival of the butterfly; / 7) The survivors up to their waists, or calves, or ankles in water; / 8) The actual moment of rescue” (129). With this list Barnes stresses the necessary process of selection that is part of any representation.

The answer to Barnes question, “What did he paint then?,” shows that artistic conventions prove to be as important if not more important than verisimilitude (130). Barnes describes how Géricault starts by trying to be as truthful to life as possible (similar to Henri Wallis in Ackroyd’s Chatterton), building the model of the raft and reading the report. Soon matters of composition take over when Barnes describes how Géricault chooses to depict a “man being held up on top of a barrel and waving a large cloth,” a change from an earlier print. Barnes explains the artistic reason for the change when he says, “reality offered him a monkey-up-a-stick image; art suggests a solidier focus and an extra vertical” (my emphasis, 131). Furthermore, Barnes points out that Géricault places twenty figures on the raft which means that “Géricault has dragged some of [the bodies] back from the deep to help with his composition” (131). Géricault was an accomplished painter after all and composition wins over realism; we see muscular bodies instead of starved ones.
In the end, the artistic ambition is to create an “eternal” depiction of a specific scene that metaphorically stands for a general human condition. Isn’t it the goal of every artist to create something that appeals to everybody, that touches everybody, that everybody can identify with? Barnes asks, “What has happened? The painting has slipped history’s anchor” (137). I would argue that Barnes wants to point out that the painting is not intended as a snapshot from a crime scene or a piece of evidence for historians, but that it is art above all other things. The passage continues:

This is no longer ‘Scene of Shipwreck’, let alone ‘The Raft of the Medusa’. We don’t just imagine the ferocious miseries of the fatal machine; we don’t just become the sufferers. They become us. And the picture’s secret lies in the pattern of its energy. . . . All that straining—to what end? There is no formal response to the painting’s main surge, just as there is no response to most human feelings. Not merely hope, but any burdensome yearning: ambition, hatred, love (especially love)—how rarely do our emotions meet the object they seem to deserve? How hopelessly we signal; how dark the sky; how big the waves. . . . Catastrophe has become art; but this is no reducing process. It is freeing, enlarging, explaining. Catastrophe has become art: that is, after all, what it is for. (137)

Barnes explains that conscious interpretation of this painting that shows a catastrophe shows us that “we are all lost at sea, washed between hope and despair, hailing something that may never come to rescue us” (137). Contemplating the painting, we can identify with the figures on the raft. A final observation that Buxton leaves out in her analysis: there are catastrophes in many of Barnes’s stories, but there are also always survivors.

Salman Rushdie: History and Story-Telling as Palimpsest

In his novel *The Moor’s Last Sigh* Salman Rushdie uses ekphrastic passages to illustrate the palimpsest-like character of history—the history of India and at the same time the family history of first person narrator Moraes Zogoiby, the “magic child” and “time traveler” (219). The paintings that Rushdie describes are palimpsestes as well; layers of images in which Aurora Zogoiby, Moraes’s mother, portrays her life and her family’s as well as the history of India. *The*
*Moor’s Last Sigh* is also a meta-historical novel, a novel that has history as its subject, and self-reflexively recognizes itself as a narrative, a layering of narratives, voices, and stories.

Even though or maybe because the novel is told from a first-person point of view the reader finds out about the exact circumstances under which Moraes has written the book only at the very end of the novel. Moraes is the sole survivor of the Zogoiby-DaGama family and after his parents’ deaths he travels to Spain to get back his mother’s paintings assumed to have been stolen by Vasco Miranda, a painter and his mother’s former lover, who always wanted to be a part of the Zogoiby family. He is forced to write down his family history by Vasco, who says to Moraes, “If Zogoibys [sic] are to be wiped off the face of the earth—if the wrong-doings of the father, yes, and the mother, too, are to be visited upon the son—then let the last Zogoiby recount their sinful saga” (421). Moraes realizes that he is in the same situation as Scheherazade in *1001 Arabian Nights*. This allusion refers to the central theme of story-telling for its own sake as opposed to accurate representation. He thinks, “He had made a Scheherazade of me. As long as my tale held his interest he would let me live” (421). So like Scheherazade, Moraes is awaiting his death and the stories he is writing become a means of survival. Following the advice of his fellow prisoner Aoi Uë who tells him to “spin it out,” he draws the story of his family out as much as he can, starting with his great-grandparents (421). His narrative isn’t linear; it circles as he goes off on digressions reminiscent of Lawrence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, as he frequently introduces minor characters whose stories continue only for a few pages. The notional ekphraseis of Aurora’s paintings function as cultural representations of the reality of Moraes’s account of his family history and as an analogy for the structure of his historiography as the layers of the palimpsest illustrate the multiple layers and countless stories that are part of Moraes’s history.
The title of the novel, *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, and the name of the first-person narrator, Moraes, are both closely connected to paintings in the novel. Moraes Zogoiby writes:

I no longer remember when I first heard the family story which provided me with my nickname and my mother with the theme of her most famous series of paintings, the ‘Moor sequence’ that reached its triumphant culmination in the unfinished, and subsequently stolen masterpiece, *The Moor’s Last Sigh*. I seem to have known it all my life, this lurid saga . . . but in spite of long familiarity I have grave doubts about the literal truth of the story, with its somewhat overwrought Bombay-talkie *masala* narrative, its almost desperate reaching back for a kind of authentification, for evidence. (77f)

Moraes tells stories that he himself has heard many times: “the legends of the battling da Gamas of Cochin! I tell them as they have come down to me, polished and fantasticated by many re-tellings” (11). In the end, it doesn’t matter if they are true or not. The Indian word masala that Moraes uses in this context means according to the *OED*: “Mixture of spices. In extended use: a person who or thing which comprises a highly varied mixture of elements; (esp. in Indian cinema) a lengthy film musical characterized by a variety of interwoven, usually predictable themes.” Moraes doubts the literalness of the oral history about his family that like any history and especially oral history is a “masala” narrative, a mixture of different voices. He still tells it though and like the palimpsests of his mother’s paintings, his stories form a collage of his family’s history and that of India. For him “[Bombay] was an ocean of stories; we were all its narrators and everybody talks at once” (350).

Moraes often self-reflexively reveals that he is unsure of some of the stories he is telling. He says that “it is difficult for [him], after all these years, to know what to believe. . . . The old biographer’s problem: even when people are telling their own life stories, they are invariably improving on the facts, rewriting their tales, or just plain making them up” (135). More importantly he points out, that “the truth of such stories lies in what they reveal about the protagonists’ hearts, rather than their deeds” (135). Similarly, we get to know Moraes through his stories more so than the actual events. He describes the way time changes the way we
remember certain things and people. For examples, Moraes describes how his father Abraham “was beginning to paint a new layer over his past . . . and as a father, too, age had painted a palimpsest-image over the memory of the man who had hugged my newborn form and wept comforting words” (241). Other metafictional asides are more humorous and remind the reader of his role and authority as story-teller. In the section “Bombay Central” Moraes and his girlfriend Uma are arrested for smuggling narcotics. They make a suicide pact and flee, but are caught. The officer makes them take the pills and just in that moment Moraes interrupts the story addressing the reader directly: “Reader: . . . in went the fatal pill. /But—as you will have divined—I did not die” (292). It turns out that one of the pills was not fatal. The point is that we already know that he won’t die because he is the storyteller and we are not at the end of the book yet.

Moraes describes Aurora’s painting *The Scandal*, which hangs in the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi” in detail. This painting functions as a mis-en-abyme for the novel (101). Moraes says that it is “Aurora at her best . . . this densely crowded picture . . . the dance if not of bodies but of tongues, and all the tongues of the highly coloured figures whispering lick-lick-lick into one another’s ears are black, black, black” (102). He goes on to “point out some of its thousand-and-one anecdotes, for as we know Aurora had learned much from the narrative-paintings traditions of the South” (102). The painting is an emblem for the stories that are passed on from generation to generation. It is also a painting of Aurora’s “family history” and the figures at the heard of the angrily swirling spiral [are] based upon Abraham and herself” (103).

Aurora’s work is colorful and fantastic; nevertheless it is through her work that Rushdie introduces the question of realism. At one point, she is going through an artistic crisis which lets her question what is real. Moraes writes, “In the decade after the Independence, Aurora fell into
a deep creative confusion, a semi-paralysis born of an uncertainty not merely about realism but about nature of the real itself” (my emphasis, 173). She is torn between the influence of her husband Abraham who wants her to paint naturalistically, and Vasco Miranda who, like Aurora, loves imaginary worlds. Moraes goes on to say,

The spirit of the age, and Abraham’s own preferences, dragged Aurora towards naturalism; but Vasco reminded her of her instinctive dislike of the purely mimetic, which had led her to reject her Chipkalist disciples, and tried to turn her back towards the epic-fabulist manner which expressed her true nature, encouraging her to attention once more again not only to her dreams but to the dream-like wonder of the waking world. . . . ‘We are . . . a magic race. . . . Forget those damnfool realists! The real life is always hidden—isn’t it? (174)

Her creative struggle encompasses one of the central problems of (artistic) representation: she questions the merit or possibility of the “purely mimetic” and opens up the possibility of “dream-like” art to be more truthful. In a description of a later picture entitled Mother-Naked Moor Watches Chimène’s Arrival “painted like many of the mature Moors in the layered manner of the old European masters” Moraes even goes even further (247). He argues that “art, ultimately, [is] not life; that what might feel truthful to the artist . . . did not necessarily bear the slightest connection to events and feelings and people in the real world” (247).

Throughout her life Aurora captures the past and future of both her family and India in her work. J.M. Coetzee’s review of the novel, “Palimpsest Regained,” calls ekphrasis “a handy device to recall the past and foreshadow the future . . . Aurora’s paintings project her son into the past as Boabdil; the entire history of India, from mythic times to the present, is absorbed into a great phantasmagoria on the wall of her bedroom” (171). Moraes describes this mural early in the novel: Aurora’s father discovers that she has painted on the walls of her room: “He began to see her visions: she had put history on the walls, King Gondophares inviting St Thomas the Apostle to India . . . [he] began to pick out family portraits, portraits not only of the dead and living but even of the never-born. . . . The room was her act of mourning” (59–61). This
description shows that Aurora’s art is not only prophetic and historical but also highly personal. Already as a child painting becomes her “act of mourning” the death of her mother who died of lung cancer at the age of 33. In her paintings Aurora deals with her personal and national history and present and resolves it for the future. The importance of the palimpsest in Rushdie’s novel lies therein that in the layers of Aurora’s paintings/collages lies not only the past of India but also a reading of the future. Through remembrance she can see into the future.

Alessia Ricciardi’s ideas about mourning show its importance for the way we should face history. She argues that, “the most significant artworks of contemporary culture are not works of mourning in the Freudian sense . . . they function as resonant texts, textures, instances of an incipient spectropoetics, complicated webs of temporality in which memory is not only taken in, introjected, or accrued, but reworked, projected, and given back” (13). Aurora’s paintings reveal a world and a view of history that is non-linear and where everything is connected. They show her awareness of the connections of the past to the future. Later in the novel Aurora once more finds an outlet for her sadness about the loss of her daughter Ina in her work. The painting Moor and Ina’s Ghost Look into the Abyss is “the first in the ‘high period’ of the Moor series, those high-energy, apocalyptic canvases into which Aurora poured all her agony of death of a daughter, all the maternal love that had remained unexpressed for too long” (236). However, this is just part of her creative source, since just like in the mural she painted as a young woman in this painting she puts her “larger, prophetic, even Cassandran fears for the nation, her fierce grief at the sourness of what had once, at least in an India of dreams, been sweet as sugar-cane juice” (236). The art in the novel becomes like a mis-en-abyme device the microcosm of the whole novel, since the paintings encapsulate the main topics of the book: India and the Zogoiby family.
Aurora paints her imaginary country in the form of a palimpsest. Moraes describes that “often she painted the water-line in such a way as to suggest that you were looking at an unfinished painting which had been abandoned, half-covering another” (226). The boundaries in her paintings aren’t rigid. Moraes says that she told him to “Call it Mooristan. . . . Call it Palimpstine” (226). He describes her painting as “a vision of weaving, or more accurately interweaving . . . she was using Arab Spain to re-imagine India, and this land-sea-scape in which the land could be fluid and the sea stone-dry was her metaphor . . . of the present, and the future that she hoped would evolve” (226f). Aurora uses her paintings to piece together her imaginary utopian country out of images of the past. Thus the palimpsest is her way, and Rushdie’s as well, to take pieces of the past to imagine the future. Aurora’s interest in the past is nostalgic in the sense that Svetlana Boym describes it when she says that “nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective. Fantasies of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future” (Boym xvi).

In her third phase that as Moraes says is also called her dark phase “almost every piece contained elements of collage . . . found items, black moor, semi-allegorical figure of decay” (301). A collage is like an assemblage of quotations, an analysis of the past and present. Moraes’s interpretations or readings of his mother’s paintings throughout the course of the novel show his awareness of her work as her way of incorporating her life, her pain, and her fears into her art. His readings become a model for us as readers, an example of how to approach art not as mimesis but as a conscious working out of personal and national issues of the past that are linked to those of the future.

Finally, it is important that he points out that like in her previous paintings, the ‘Moor in Exile Series’ feature “[t]he unifying narrator/narrated figure of the Moor” (301). The figure of
the Moor, Moraes, is also the unifying figure for the entire novel. The survivor of the family, the
time-traveler, who creates this vivid palimpsest of stories and paintings.

Peter Ackroyd: Spectral Connections

None of it seemed very real, but I suppose that’s the trouble with history. It’s the one thing
we have to make up for ourselves. (Chatterton 226)

So the greatest realism is also the greatest fakery? (Chatterton 139)

Peter Ackroyd's Chatterton could be the posterchild for what Linda Hutcheon calls
historiographic metafiction. From the very beginning our attentions is directed at the fragmentary
nature of the past and how traditional historiography fails to do this nature justice. Before the
reader gets to the first chapter he or she has to take several hurdles. The first page offers a brief
biographical blurb of Thomas Chatterton's life and work as well as a note on Henry Wallis's
painting of the poet painted several decades after his death. This information printed in italics
resembles an encyclopaedia entry or a paragraph in a history book in its selection of dates and
events. The fact that it in italics calls attention to the fact that it is printed and composed of
words, of language. The only detail that stands out is the fact that the entry ends on the note that
even though there is one contemporary portrait of Chatterton “the image of this marvelous boy
has been fixed for posterity in the painting . . . by Henry Wallis” (1). Thus the relationship
between representation and reality is questioned from the very beginning of the novel.

One of the most important themes within the novel is the distinction between the real and
the fake. Through many examples the novel shows that there is no such thing as a fake or a lie,
but there are always multiple truths. Even though Wallis's portrait is not a portrait of Chatterton
but of George Meredith the poet who posed for Wallis, we still have come to associate it with
Chatterton. He lives on through this painting. The same goes of course for Rowley, the medieval
poet invented by Chatterton. Even though is fictional his work (written by Chatterton) his work
makes him more real than other people who are long forgotten. In *Chatterton*, Ackroyd gives us a collage of representations of the historical figure Chatterton, in poems and paintings. The fact that none of the sources seems to “get it right” is not important, or as Dana Shiller puts it, “although [Chatterton’s life] did exist, there is no privileged rendition of it” (554). Ackroyd uses gothic elements to create the uncanny feeling of connections between the three time levels of the novel. His recreation of Chatterton’s language mimics Chatterton’s evocation of Rowley. Although Rowley is an invention of Chatterton’s, he has become a reality.

The first chapter of the first part is preceded by a series of fragments that introduce the three time levels of the novel. They are reminiscent of the scraps of paper that are described in the biography which were found in Chatterton's attic room after he committed suicide. These fragments are exemplary for the way any past event is reconstructed—through other texts. Each fragment also introduces themes and motifs that are important for the entire novel. The first scene introduces Chatterton and the idea of the Romantic wanderer (2). This image is associated with freedom of thought and imagination. Charles Wychwood is also described as a wanderer in the first chapter [O'Leno asks him if he is of “a wandering nature” (9)]. The second fragment features George Meredith and Henry Wallis. Meredith calls himself “a model poet” which is an example of the self-reflexive nature of the novel and the playful use of language that can be found throughout the novel. The word model takes up the thread of the different versions of the word family of copy, original, real, fake, forgery, that the novel revolves around. Meredith also states that he “can endure death” but that “it is the representation of death [he] cannot bear” (2). This statement illustrates that even though a representation is not the real thing it can be more real and thus more frightening. Death is of course a special case, since although we will all experience it someday we cannot talk about it or represent it. The third fragment introduces
Harriet Scrope and Sarah Tilt. In this section the theme of (mis)quotations appears for the first time. Harriet quotes Wordsworth’s “Revolution and Independence” but she changes the wording slightly. Quotations are central to the novel; everything is a quote or an echo of something. In the last fragment Charles Wychwood experiences one of his severe headaches and a vision of Thomas Chatterton. This is the first of a series of uncanny encounters that bridge time and form a constellation in the Benjaminian sense of the word.

These fragments reappear later in the novel as parts of the chapters. Reading the novel for the first time this has an uncanny and performative effect. The reader has the feeling of encountering something familiar, something that they have read before and they have. But on closer inspection we find that the passages are slightly changed and the first one is not repeated at all. The epigraphs to the first part taken from Chatterton's own poetry both uncannily seem to prefigure his own untimely death. The verses from “An Excellent Balade of Charitie” talk about a face that is “withered, forwynd, deade” and the excerpt from “The story of Wylyam Canynge” talks about a flower that is broken “ynn ytts prime.”

In his novel Chatterton, Peter Ackroyd sets out to weave an intricate web of allusions and quotations which in a way are forms of remembrance of the people who uttered them in the first place. Ackroyd is aware of lines of flight connecting certain moments in history forming a net in a novel that is set on three time levels (Chatterton’s, Wallis and Meredith’s, and Charles Wychwood’s). Like Barnes and Rushdie, he sees history in a non-teleological way. The myriad of quotations in Ackroyd’s novel are remembrances of the poets’ work and the same goes for the ekphrastic passages imagining the painters’ work. These allusions and quotations reinstate the poets/artists with life and prosopopoeially give them their voice back even though their books may be “rotting away” and their paintings are doomed to disintegrate from the very moment they
are painted. By remembering and transporting these past moments into the Jetzt-Zeit Ackroyd acknowledges their work and the universality of the topoi that they deal with. The way that the quotations are spoken by the characters and make sense in the individual situation shows how art/poetry is eternally meaningful. So when Harriet says to Edward, “He has gone far, far away into the silent land,” she is quoting Christina Rossetti’s words, but they nevertheless have a very personal meaning for Edward.  

In Ackroyd’s novel several paintings are of importance which Susana Onega calls “transhistorical palimpsest[s]” (71). The fictional portrait that Charles Wychwood finds at O’Leno’s Antiques sets the whole plot in motion. In his reading of the novel as a take on the detective novel Garcia-Caro argues that in *Chatterton* “the plot of detection is used to delve into the sense of uncertainty about cultural constructs: texts and paintings” (170). He points out that the painting “is construed around a number of different texts which create a distortion of the ‘official’ version of reality, of history, and the representation becoming the pre-text to establish a whole series of inquiries on the nature of the ‘real’ and the representation of reality” (170). The painting is referred to in several notional ekphraseis and especially Charles feels a special connection to it as well and this is just one in a series of uncanny connections and moments that appear throughout the novel. This painting turns out to be a palimpsest as well. Stewart Merk says as he inspects the painting, “it’s not so much the varnish that has cracked, right? It’s the paint. There are so many different layers . . . there’s definitely another painting behind this one, and there may be more” (205). And his analysis is confirmed when he takes of the varnish and

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19 Throughout the novel there are countless allusions, quotations, and misquotations such as the famous line from Christopher Marlowe’s *Faustus* (3), Wordsworth’s “Resolution and Independence” (3, 179), Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” (38), Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” (42), Blake’s “London” (47), Shelley’s “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” (55), Blake’s “Vala” (60), T.S. Eliot’s *Ash Wednesday* (100), *Moll Flanders* (119), Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (127), of course Meredith’s *Modern Love*, the Kubla Khan restaurant (145), Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, Horace, Hardy “The Selfsame Song” (151).
sets the painting’s strange self-destruction into motion as each layer of paints slowly dissolves leaving only the titles of the books. These remnants show the theme of the survival of literature throughout the novel.

In one scene Meredith calls Wallis a “resurrectionist.” He says “Henry. You can bring the dead to life, I see” (156). In the same way Ackroyd resurrects a number of artists in his novel. Nothing ever wholly dies as long as we remember and as long as we value. When Edward, Charles’s son, goes back to the National Gallery to see the Wallis painting that he saw with his father once more, the painting becomes alive for Edward and he recognizes that “it was his father lying there” (229). Ackroyd writes:

Edward blinked three times, trying not to cry. He could not move and after a few moments he realized that he was staring at the reflection of his own face in the glass, just in the place where his father’s face had been. And now Edward was smiling, too. He had seen his father again. He would always be here, in the painting. He would never wholly die. (230)

The phrase “never wholly die” reappears at the very end of the novel when in a fantastical moment Chatterton on his deathbed is joined by Meredith and Charles:

I will not wholly die, then. Two others have joined him—the young man who passes him on the stairs and the young man who sits with bowed head by the fountain—and they stand silently beside him. I will live for ever, he tells them. They link hands, and bow toward the sun. / And, when his body is found the next morning, Chatterton is still smiling. (234)

Ackroyd’s novel is one part in an intertextual web of artworks that keep each other alive. By quoting and alluding to Chatterton, Meredith, and Wallis, Ackroyd keeps them alive and thus they will “never wholly die.”

The comparison between original and copy is a theme throughout the novel, and Ackroyd seems to indicate that there is no difference in value. Derrida sees the opposition between original and copy more in the context of quotation. He writes:

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20 Wallis says, “Neither he [Meredith] nor Chatterton could now wholly die” (170).
And this is the possibility on which I want to insist: the possibility of disengagement and citational graft which belongs to the structure of every mark, spoken or written . . . every sign, linguistic or non-linguistic, . . . in small or large unit, can be cited, put between quotation marks; and in doing so it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new context in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. (185)

Thus we can look at the quotations, allusions, and ekphraseis in *Chatterton* as ideas in a new context. They are the same and yet not the same. Charles at one point alludes to Thomas Hardy’s poem “The Selfsame Song” which alludes to this idea that although the bird that sang the song years ago may be dead, the song is still alive. In the same way the writers Ackroyd quotes may be dead, but their words are still important in the new context of the novel.

Andrew Flint, a successful novelist and biographer,\(^{21}\) who is currently working on a biography of George Meredith, argues the exact opposite of the idea of history in which “nothing wholly dies.” He says to Charles, “Do you realize . . . that nothing survives now. There is no history any more. There is no memory. There are no standards to encourage permanence—only novelty, and the whole endless cycle of new objects. And books are simply objects—consumer items picked up and laid aside . . . and poetry is no different. Poetry is disposable, too.

Something has happened during the course of this generation—don’t ask me why. But poetry, fiction, the whole lot—none of it matters any more.” Charles answers, “Yes, they survive. But don’t you realize that it’s just another kind of death? Five hundred books of poetry published in any one year—they’re piled up in the library stack, or they gather dust on the shelves . . . they are preserved, yes, but only as reminders of all that remains unread, will never be read. . . . We can’t think of posterity. There is no posterity” (150). Charles disagrees with Flint’s pessimistic view. He says, “Of course words survive. How else could Chatterton’s forgeries become real poetry? . . . And there are lines so beautiful that everything is changed by them. . . . A child can read a

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\(^{21}\) An ironic echo of Ackroyd who is a novelist/biographer himself.
poem, and his whole life can be changed too. . . . That is why it is such a wonderful thing to have
the vocation of a poet . . . and when we read his poetry, we can join him there. . . . And there are
ture poems because there are true feelings, feelings which touch everyone. . . . And if poetry
doesn’t matter, Andrew, why is that there are people who find their only comfort on earth
reading it” (151). The discussion between the two writers illustrates the central theme of the
ovel: that despite the threat that literature may disappear it never will because new works of art
keep the old alive.

For Charles, as for Ackroyd, fiction or poetry is quoting and bringing it to the present. As
the pamphlet that Charles finds in the church in Bristol says, “Chatterton knew that original
genius consists in forming new and happy combinations, rather than in searching after thoughts
and ideas which had never occurred before” (58). There are only a limited number of themes and
ideas but an endless number of variations on these themes. Thus what Harriet thinks of as a
crime, the fact that she “stole” plotlines from the author Harrison Bentley is not a crime after all
(68f). Her work was praised for her prose style and not for her plots and as Philip realizes: “And
so what did Harriet’s borrowings matter? In any case, Philip believed that there were only a
limited number of plots in the world (reality was finite after all) and no doubt it was inevitable
that they would be reproduced in a variety of contexts. The fact that two of Harriet Scrope’s
ovels resembled the much earlier work of Harrison Bentley might even be coincidental” (70).
Charles agrees: “Why should it matter? Everyone does it” (104). After all Ackroyd celebrates
Chatterton not as the “greatest forger in history . . . [nor as] the greatest plagiarist in history . . .
[but as] the greatest poet in history!” (94). It seems that Ackroyd agrees with Umberto Eco who
says “writers have always known (and have told us again and again): books always speak of
other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told” (20).
While reading Ackroyd’s work the question might come up whether every detail is realistic or truthful. Ackroyd’s answer could be similar to something Harriet says to Charles early in the novel when she rehires him to help her with her memoirs. She says: “You told me that reality is the invention of unimaginative people” (39). This statement rings true at other moments in the novel. When Wallis goes to great length in his recreation of the scene of Chatterton’s death, the elaborate *mis-en-scène* is merely a way to get his imagination started. He draws his first sketches in the very room that Chatterton died in and follows “Catcott’s account Chatterton’s death [which says] that pieces of torn manuscript were found beside the body” (137). He picks George Meredith, a poet as his model, but once he finishes his sketches he finishes the larger painting in his studio. Ackroyd describes the process in all its stages: “But Wallis was now drawing the scene he had devised; he used black chalk, fastened on a port-crayon, and said nothing at all until he managed to sketch the curve of Meredith’s arm. [He says to Meredith,] ‘I can add the details in the studio. I just need the general effect now’” (139). Meredith describes the process: “Then you will transfer that small picture to a larger canvas. At the end of some weeks, or even months, the painting will be complete. . . . It will be lovely, but there is no need to talk of reality. You will have created a costume drama, a tragic scene worthy of Drury Lane. These visible things are stage props, mere machinery” (139f). This scene is reminiscent of Barnes’s description of Géricault’s process painting *The Raft of the Medusa*. For Wallis the model is just the starting point and the aim for realism is abandoned for composition and aesthetic effects.

Wallis’s painting becomes the portrait that we associate Chatterton with today although the man who posed for it was another poet. The question of who will be recognized in the painting arises in a conversation between Wallis and Meredith. Wallis says, “You will be immortalized” and Meredith answers, “No doubt. But will it be Meredith or will it be Chatterton? I merely want
to know” (141). The question is answered in the book: it will be both Chatterton and Meredith who are recognized in Wallis’s painting and as we see at the end depending on the viewer it might be neither since for Edward it becomes an image of his father. The three poets that meet in a spectral moment at the end of the novel also meet in Wallis’s painting and the painting becomes a *mis-en-abyme* of Ackroyd’s rhyzomatic, spectral time structure. *Chatterton* is a “spectral” novel in Ricciardi’s sense of the term since it investigates the past and at the same time deals with questions about historiography today and how it is important to remember the past and past art(ists) since their truths are still valid today and will be so in the future.

**Epigraph: Benjamin’s “Angel of History”**

Benjamin says that the angel of history sees a single catastrophe— does that mean that everything is lost? If we look at the etymology of the term “catastrophe” we see that it comes from the Greek for “overturning, sudden turn, conclusion.” If we look at history not as a linear progression but as one single catastrophe (conclusion), we understand Benjamin’s concept of history without progress or telos. The angel of history sees that whole, whereas historiography often only sees the progression of events without connections.

Benjamin’s idea of the function of art then also proves to be important for this analysis. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* Benjamin writes, “the function of artistic form is as follows: to make historical content . . . into a philosophical truth” (182). This statement means that artists who take a historical event should try to stress the universality of the historical moment they are depicting instead of just mimetically representing it in paint or words. Thus when Géricault paints the Medusa, his main focus is not just to give an exact presentation of the event but also to show a “philosophical truth”: people in crisis, a universal condition of mankind.

Instead of looking toward the future, seeing the past as a linear progression to the future, we should remember the things past, think about the constellation the past event forms with our
present and that is going to be redemptive. In the last part of his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” Benjamin stresses the importance of remembrance to understand the future. According to him historians should “stop . . . telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he [should grasp] the constellation which his era has formed with a definite earlier one” (*Illuminations* 263). The task of the historiographer thus is to show the threads, the connections, the lines of flight, which set moments of the past into constellations with the present and that is exactly what Barnes and Ackroyd are doing. They don’t see historical subjects as “monads” unconnected with the past or present, but as moments in a rhyzomatic structure. Benjamin’s discussion of calendars as “historical monuments of a historical consciousness” is also important in this context because they make us remember the same day in years past and they make us see the connections (*Illuminations* 261f).

Benjamin is also interested in the figure of the storyteller. In “The Storyteller” he laments the disappearance of the storyteller and goes on to remind us of the importance of the activity of story-telling as a means to pass on experiences rather than information. A story differs from an accurate report of an event insofar as it “preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time” (14). Benjamin ends his reading of Herodotus’ story about the Egyptian king Psammenitus by showing that the power of the story lies in its ambiguity. He writes, “[t]hat is why this story from ancient Egypt is still capable after thousands of years of arousing astonishment and thoughtfulness. It resembles the seeds of a grain which have lain for centuries in the chambers of the pyramids shut up airtight and have retained their germinative power to this day” (5). The paintings in contemporary ekphrastic narratives function as seeds of grains as well and their power is to “arouse . . . thoughtfulness” in each event of reading.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with human’s entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature, but by historical circumstances as well. The fifth century . . . saw the birth of the late Roman art industry and the Vienna Genesis, and there developed not only an art different from that of antiquity but also a new kind of perception.

—Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”

Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and then only, does it come into existence. At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till Art had invented them.

—Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying”

[The artist’s] painting or his prose acts upon us like a course of treatment that is not always agreeable. When it is over, the practitioner says to us, "Now look." And at this point the world (which was not created once and for all, but as often as an original artist is born) appears utterly different from the one we knew, but perfectly clear. Women pass in the street, different from those we used to see, because they are Renoirs. . . . Such is the new and perishable universe that has just been created. It will last until the next geological catastrophe unleashed by a new painter or writer with an original view of the world.

—Marcel Proust, The Guermantes Way

In the previous chapters I have explored contemporary modes of ekphrasis as a way of addressing the crisis of representation while foregrounding the performative and world-making powers of story-telling at the same time. The quotations from Benjamin, Wilde, and Proust beautifully encapsulate the idea that lies at the heart of this study: literature and painting are performative. They change the way we perceive the world around us, they make us see things for the first time, and thus create a new world. This study shows that novels can do the same as the works of art described above. While these novels create imaginary worlds and characters, their use of the mode of ekphrasis also opens up ways to investigate and critique conventions of
representation whether they are connected to language, identity, gender, or history and in doing this they shed new light on issues that readers might otherwise overlook. In doing this, these novels have a “constitutive” effect that J. Hillis Miller refers to in the epigraph at the beginning of this dissertation. He says, “Works of art bring something new into the world rather than reflecting something already there” (151). I have argued that these ekphrastic novels are forms of Darstellung rather than re-presentation and, more importantly, that they have an impact on each (ideo-)culture they enter. These contemporary ekphrastic narratives foreground various ways of representation as well as processes of perception and thus draw the reader’s attention to looking at things from different angles much like the anamorphous skull in Hans Holbein’s The Ambassadors.

While I have concentrated on contemporary literary representations of art, an extended analysis of the various paintings themselves would be equally insightful. An analysis of the work of artists such as Artemisia Gentileschi, Theodore Géricault, Henri Matisse, Vincent Van Gogh, Johannes Vermeer, and Henri Wallis that are described in these novels shows that these works of art are examples of meta-art as well. Like the ekphrastic narratives I am concerned with here, they draw attention to the fact that they are representations and forms of Darstellung in a self-reflexive way. Their constructed or composed nature makes them stand out as forms of presencing or staging, rather than mimetic representations of that which already is.

The paintings draw attention to themselves in a variety of ways: The most explicit example I have briefly discussed earlier is the anamorphous skull in Hans Holbein’s The Ambassadors (1533). The distorted representation forces viewers to look at the painting from different points of view and thus makes them aware of their role as interpreters. Another painting that draws the reader in is Diego Velazquez’s Las Meninas (1656) which presents or stages the process of
painting (we see a painter and a canvas) as well as various lines of sight that highlight the
different acts of perception taking place. All the paintings that are described in the novels also
juxtapose, superimpose, and mix different perspectives; they emphasize lines of sight and thus
draw the viewers in and make them aware of their own role as spectator and the responsibility
that comes with this role. The contemporary novels I am concerned with thus “train” us to read
these paintings in a specific way focusing on their self-reflexive and critical nature. As a result,
the paintings demand that the viewer/reader questions his or her role in seeing and thinking of
the world.

Through the multiplication of representation, whether it appears in ekphrastic narratives or
in paintings themselves, meta-art critiques representation and at the same time overcomes the
crisis of representation. These self-reflexive and performative elements may be concentrated in
contemporary ekphrastic narratives, but as these narratives point out, the same tendencies have
always been present in works of art as a “crack” that breaks open within representation itself
drawing our attention to the fact that they are art.¹ More importantly, this moment of breaking
open happens each time somebody reads a given novel or looks at a given painting, thus
demanding a reading and having an effect in each event of perception—past, present, and future.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Doris Bremm received her M.A. from the Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn, Germany, where she majored in American literature and minored in British literature and art history. She has taught several classes in the English Department at the University of Florida including Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature as well as twentieth-century British and American literature. She received the English Department Teaching Award in 2006. Her research interests, which have inspired the doctoral dissertation, include American and British literature, the contemporary novel, intersections between literature and the visual arts, and post-structural theory.