Chapter 1

Breaching the Boundaries:
The European Inter-Arts Tradition

. . . poetry is a speaking picture

(Simonides of Ceos [556–467 B.C.E.])

1. Definition Deficit

In antiquity, the word ecphrasis1 signified a digressive description of any kind, both in literature and nonfiction. Subsequently, the meaning narrowed, and in modern scholarship the term designates only verbal description of the visual arts. The ecphrastic procedure can therefore be seen as an intersemiotic translation, which transforms plastic signs into verbal.2 Ecphrasis has broad application: it can figure in art criticism, in epic, drama, and lyric poetry, in prose as well as verse. Although here the primary focus is on ecphrasis in lyric poetry, a concise overview of this tradition in European literature and the treatment it has received in recent literary criticism may be useful to illustrate the diversity of ecphrastic forms and the range of scholarly approaches to the subject.

The last few decades have witnessed increased interest in ecphrastic texts and poetics, stimulated perhaps by recognition of the merit of the interdisciplinary approach, as Wallace Stevens counseled, to “study poetry by studying painting.”3 While all scrutinize ecphrasis as a nexus of the plastic and verbal media, scholarly books display a wide range of perspectives on this poetic phenomenon. James A. W. Heffernan, the author of a comprehensive diachronic study of ecphrastic verse from Homer to postmodern poetry, distinguishes ecphrasis from seemingly analogous pictorialism and iconicity. According to Heffernan, “pictorialism generates in language effects similar to those created by pictures.”4 Instead of

M. Rubins, Crossroad of Arts, Crossroad of Cultures
© Maria Rubins 2000
representing a specific painting, the pictorialist method uses the “verbal equivalent of pictorial precision in order to represent a set of objects.” Iconic poetry does not transpose pictures either; rather, “it apes the shapes of pictures in order to represent natural objects.” While recognizing that pictorialism and iconicity enhance the visual appeal of the ecphrastic text, Heffernan emphasizes its idiosyncratic qualities:

An ekphrastic poem may use pictorial techniques to represent a picture and may be printed in a shape that resembles the painting it verbally represents. Nevertheless, the specificity of ekphrasis consists in its explicit representing of a representation itself: “What ekphrasis represents in words . . . must itself be representational.”

In *The Sister Arts*, Jean Hagstrum elucidates the particular meaning of pictorialism: “In order to be called ‘pictorial’ a description or an image must be, in its essentials, capable of translation into painting or some other visual art. *It need not resemble a particular painting*” (emphasis added). These definitions distinguish between pictorialism as a style and ecphrasis as a “form defined by topic.” A pictorialist poem, therefore, can have any subject matter, but the pictorialist style is especially effective when used in ecphrastic verse. On the other hand, icon differs from ecphrasis only if one views it from the semiotic perspective, as does Heffernan. In this case, the iconic verse proper is best of all illustrated by the pattern poems of Guillome Apollinaire or John Hollander, texts formatted in the shape of an object that is also the subject of the work. Contemporary literary criticism, however, almost always uses “ekphrastic” and “iconic” interchangeably. Ulrich Weisstein, for example, considers the iconic poem “an artistic variant of the rhetorical *ekphrasis* ‘description.’” He writes further: “The iconic poem, derived from the ancient epigram or inscription, must be regarded as the poetic strain of *ekphrasis*.”

Ecphrasis is frequently referred to as a topos, a fairly unsatisfactory definition, for ecphrastic texts are extremely diverse and do not necessarily deploy stock formulas, as the term would imply. Other authors treat ecphrasis as a genre, a definition which is also too restrictive, however, because to qualify as a genre, description of art would have to occupy the entire length of a given text, and this is not the most common mode of ecphrasis. Even when used in short poems, ecphrasis often forms only an episode within a poem, and can occur within a range of different genres. Should the whole poem be iconic, iconicity alone may not completely capture its generic nature, as in John Keats’s famous ecphrasis “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” where the genre is clearly defined in the title, or William Wordsworth’s “Peele Castle,” which the author specifically dubbed as “elegiac stanzas.”