I’m trying in all my stories to get the feeling of the actual life across—not to just depict life—or criticize it—but to actually make it alive. So that when you have read something by me you actually experience the thing.

—Hemingway, 20 March 1925

“He had rehearsed / Her homely Tale with such familiar power,” writes Wordsworth in the 1814 Excursion, “that the things of which he spake / Seemed present” (33). The “as if present” motif, as modern as it is classical, has a venerable history and still enjoys a long afterlife among poets and novelists. Wordsworth’s praise of the speaker’s almost magical conjuring—Hemingway’s ideal—might have been drawn from Homer, Quintilian, or Longinus, or from ancient textbooks that prescribe the virtues of ekphrasis.

Classical ecphrasis is neither Scott’s “topos of stillness” (Sculpted xii) nor Hollander’s “mimesis of mimesis” (Gazer’s 6); nor is it preoccupied with enabling “silent figures of graphic art to speak,” as Heffernan suggests (“Ecphrasis” 304). Ecphrasis in antiquity had to do with a notion of vividness that makes imaginative eyewitnesses of the audience. But from the late nineteenth-century French classicists to the American New Critics to the literary theorists of the late twentieth century, the impulse to define ecphrasis as the description of works of art (however “art” is defined) has tended to efface the well-attested defining properties of classical ecphrasis, and even of its sequels in much later European literature. Those sequels were far more vigorous than our heritage from twentieth-century theory would lead us to expect. Even in the late eighteenth century the classical idea of vivid description, the “as if present” notion, was still as alive and well among influential rhetoricians as it was among poets. Hugh Blair, whose work remained popular well into the nineteenth century, wrote in 1783 that description is
“the great test of a poet’s imagination” and that “a true poet makes us imagine that we see it [the subject] before our eyes [. . .]; he gives it the colours of life and reality” (404). The difficult question about the strange fate of vivid description in European literary theory is: Just what does this “vividness” entail and why has it been at times so highly valued and at others so severely disparaged? In this chapter I would like to focus on the earliest extant usages of the term _ekphrasis_ (Latin _descriptio_) and related terms, such as _enargeia_ and _phantasia_ in Greek and _evidentia_ and _repraesentatio_ in Latin. I will also briefly examine the ecphrases of some ancient authors who apply the notion as set forth in the progymnasmata. The ecphrastic practice of Ovid, for example, who scarcely figures in the twentieth-century theory, was deeply and continuously influential on medieval and modern European literature. I will forgo detailed discussion of one ancient writer who might be expected to receive substantial attention: Philostratus, whose descriptions of paintings (perhaps imaginary) are associated primarily with the emergence of the twentieth-century notion of ecphrasis and have received ample attention from other commentators.

The stable notion of ecphrasis that persisted long after the fall of the Roman Empire, throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and into the recent past was secured in part—like so much else in our high canonical culture—by the stubborn persistence of antique textbooks that were readily at hand to be widely copied and disseminated after the advent of printing. So successful was the Renaissance distribution of such basic teaching materials that Milton’s grammar school education at St. Paul’s in London was almost identical to Ovid’s in Rome. “Milton read the same school authors, practiced the same imitative exercises of translation and paraphrase, and wrote and spoke themes on the same sort of assignments” (Clark, _John Milton_ 4). Their first lessons in rhetoric followed a curriculum set forth in the progymnasmata, four Greek versions of which are extant from the imperial period: those of Theon (first century a.d.), pseudo-Hermogenes (possibly second century a.d.), Aphthonius (fourth century a.d.), and Nicolaus (fifth century a.d.). The set of exercises appears to have been more or less settled by the time Quintilian discussed them near the end of the first century. Several Greek and Latin versions of all these progymnasmata were available in Europe throughout the Middle Ages and were widely disseminated in the schools of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe (Clark, _Rhetoric_ 180). They owe their phenomenal success to the sound pedagogical principle of proceeding from the known to the unknown through a series of graded exercises, each building on what has been learned in the last (Clark, _Rhetoric_ 181). All the exercises are imagined as “parts of a speech and not [. . .] complete speeches,”