
Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice by Ruth Webb

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‘*Ecphrasis*’, defined by James Heffernan [1993, 3–4] as a ‘verbal representation of a visual representation’, established itself as the buzzword of comparative literature and visual culture departments at the end of the 20th century. Championed by the likes of James Heffernan [1993], John Hollander [1995], and W. J. T. Mitchell [1994] in particular, *ecphrasis* has constituted the dominant model for theorizing the paragonal relationship between what can be seen and what can be said—the ways in which visual and textual media work at once collaboratively and competitively with each other.¹ Ever keen to associate the cutting-edge with ancient precedent, classicists have very much followed suit, tying modern thinking about *ecphrasis* to its supposed archaeology in the Graeco-Roman world.² An unsuspecting Greek word, barely known or used before the 1960s, has subsequently been thrust to the fore of the humanities: it has generated a whole industry of ‘intermedial’ or ‘iconotextual’ criticism, among a broad range of different disciplinary specializations.³

¹ In addition to the work of Leo Spitzer (discussed on pages 33–35 of the book under review), earlier foundational studies include Krieger 1967, Bergmann-Loizeaux 1979, and Dubois 1982. For my own overview of this scholarly history, see Squire 2009, 138–146.

² For two surveys of scholarship, see Elsner 2002, Bartsch and Elsner 2007. For a more detailed (but by no means exhaustive) bibliography, see Squire 2009, 141–142 and n197.

³ On ‘iconotexts’, see Wagner 1995; on the ‘intermediality’ of *ecphrasis*, see the excellent discussion in Klarer 1999 [esp. p. 2]. For one of many recent championings of *ecphrasis* as a transhistorical concept—as a ‘literarische Tradition der Grossdichtung in Antike, Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit’—see Ratkowitsch 2006.

But what exactly do *ancient* concepts of *ecphrasis* have to do with more *modern* appropriations of the term in the late 20th and early 21st centuries? That is the question which Ruth Webb explores in this book—an at once abridged and expanded version of her much cited 1992 doctoral dissertation at the Warburg Institute. Webb focuses almost exclusively on the Greek rhetorical handbooks, or *Progymnasmata*, of the second through sixth centuries AD—above all, on the work of Theon, (pseudo-)Hermogenes, Aphthonius, and Nicolaus. Webb consequently situates ancient Greek theories of *ecphrasis* within the specific demands of ancient Greek rhetorical practice: exploring ‘the range of meaning of the term as it was used in antiquity’ [1], together with its subsequent influence on Greek literary criticism and historiography, she demonstrates the cultural remove of ancient understandings of *ecphrasis* from those that predominate in the modern academy. Where modern critics are said to have defined *ecphrasis* around its *artistic* subject matter, ancient writers are shown to have used it within a specific and culturally contingent ‘set of ideas about language and its impact on the listener’ [1]. Webb’s interest in the ancient ‘oral conception of language’ [98], in turn touching upon notions of visual imagination, memory, emotion and reader response, therefore lends the project an interdisciplinary relevance that transcends the *Progymnasmata* alone: ‘this is almost as much a study of ancient psychology as of rhetoric’, as Webb puts it [5];

the study of *ecphrasis* and *enargeia* provides important information about ancient habits of reading and deeply rooted attitudes towards texts, which are seen as inviting imaginative and emotional involvement. [195]

The book is structured in seven discrete chapters, topped and tailed by an introduction and conclusion. Webb begins by defining her subject against modern definitions of *ecphrasis*: while ‘there was indisputably a strong tradition of describing real or imaginary works of art in oratory, historiography, epigram, epic and other poetry’, she writes, ‘there is no evidence that these were considered to form a single genre, or that the genre had a name, still less that the name would have been “ekphrasis”’ [1–2]. To understand ‘what ekphrasis was, how it functioned and what its purpose was’, Webb instead ‘mines the rhetorical handbooks of the first centuries CE’, concentrating on ‘the rhetorical theory and practice of ekphrasis for the

simple reason that it is in the rhetoricians' schools that ekphrasis was defined, taught and practised' [3].⁴

Webb advances her argument—or so it seemed to me—in three overlapping sections. The book's first three chapters contextualize the term '*ecphrasis*' itself: chapter 1 ('The contexts of ekphrasis') situates the phenomenon within the broader framework of ancient reader response, surveying its subsequent reception and historiography; the second chapter ('Learning ekphrasis: The *Progymnasmata*') proceeds to explore the specific terminology in which the rhetoricians discuss *ecphrasis*; the third chapter ('The subjects of ekphrasis') summarizes the range of subject matter prescribed for *ecphrasis*—regardless of its referent, *ecphrasis* is presented as 'part of an intimate communication between speaker and addressee which has an impact on the recipient which is always imaginative, and often emotional' [85]. The second part of the book homes in on Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*. Examining the particular rhetorical uses of *ecphrasis*, at least according to Quintilian, Webb explores its relation to Greek ideas about first *enargeia* or 'visualization' ('*Enargeia*: Making absent things present'), and second *phantasia* or 'imagination' ('*Phantasia*: Memory, imagination and the gallery of the mind').⁵ The third and final part of the book examines surviving examples of *ecphrasis* in a range of literary texts. The sixth chapter looks to Sopatrus the Rhetor, pseudo-Dionysius, and Menander Rhetor, comparing the respective uses of *ecphrasis* in declamation and epideictic ('Ekphrasis and the art of persuasion'). Chapter 7, by contrast, widens the book's perspective to include brief mention of Achilles Tatius, Lucian's *De domo*, Heliodorus, and Philostratus' *Imagines* ('The poetics of ekphrasis: Fiction, illusion and meta-ekphrasis'). A brief conclusion restates the centrality of *enargeia* to Greek rhetorical definitions of *ecphrasis*—'the vividness that makes absent things seems [*sic*] present by its appeal to the imagination' [193].

⁴ For the argument, which is at the crux of Webb's 1992 doctoral dissertation, see also Webb 1999. Throughout, Webb places particular emphasis on the *Progymnasmata* of Theon, although she rather downplays controversies about a supposed fifth-century date [cf. 14n3 on Heath 2002–2003].

⁵ It is unfortunate that Webb was unable to consult Hagemeier 2008.

Webb is remarkably adept at moving from the micro- to the macro-scale. She demonstrates an exemplary sensitivity to the intricacies of Greek language and terminology, yet proves no less comfortable with her Genette [7–9], Tompkins [23–24], and Hamon [105–106]. Mindful of her mixed audience [cf. xiii], she provides an excellent appendix containing all the key texts discussed together with careful translations and some interpretative notes. As a scholar based in both Paris and London, Webb forges numerous intellectual bridges between British and French perspectives on the ‘Second Sophistic’ (especially Francophone work on ancient systems of memory, rhetoric, and emotion). In addition to offering a masterfully polyglot survey of the field, Webb cites extensive chunks of the most important French texts in the footnotes, accompanying these with her own helpful translations.⁶

This is without doubt the most important monograph on the *Progymnasmata* to have been published. It situates the explicit discussion of a standardized rhetorical trope within much larger ancient traditions of theorizing seeing: the result will be essential reading for anyone interested not only in the *Progymnasmata* but also in the pre-modern epistemology of vision. Webb’s grounding of *ecphrasis* within ancient theories of rhetoric proves a timely antidote to those critics who have raided the *Progymnasmata* for apposite definitions and labels, and who have not paid due attention to the specific ideologies, functions, and readerships that lay behind their production.

But—at least to my mind—some problems inevitably remain. Let me focus on just three. My first difficulty with the book is structural—about the coherence of its chapters, which add up to less than the sum of their parts. This no doubt reflects the checkered archaeology of the project—the fact, as Webb confesses, that the book ‘has undergone several permutations over the years’ [xiii]. But the multiple layering of perspectives sometimes obscures the clarity of Webb’s thesis. The argument about the ‘modernity of the modern definition’ of *ecphrasis*, for example, is treated in the introduction

⁶ My only complaint is that German criticism is conspicuously underplayed: it is puzzling that there should be no mention of Boeder 1996, and Graf 1995 is incorrectly cited. And why no engagement with the important and highly relevant work of Iringard Männlein-Robert?

[5–7] and becomes a *leitmotif* throughout the book. And yet it frequently distracts—not least in the first chapter [28–37], in a section originating in her doctoral thesis but which is rather unhelpful here—effectively turning the chapter into a second introduction (‘this study aims. . .’ [36]). The organization of chapters and subsections exasperates these difficulties. The second chapter’s excellent introduction to the *Progymnasmata* seemed to me to belong in the first, for example, and the third chapter’s discussion of the ‘subjects of ekphrasis’ is likewise pre-empted by the second [esp. 54–55]. Given Webb’s argument that *enargeia* and *phantasia* form part of the same discourse, the decision to split the two themes across the fourth and fifth chapters seemed to me slightly misguided; I subsequently got lost in the miniature subsections of the sixth chapter. Although Quintilian is nicely introduced in these chapters, other authors and texts are left hanging—not least Longinus, to whose discussion of *enargeia* Webb frequently returns but without any introductory contextualization. These difficulties are testimony to the creativeness of the book: the project seems to have grown too intellectually ambitious for the structure artificially imposed upon it. Still, they may make the volume an unfriendly introduction for undergraduates and the uninitiated.

My second reservation has to do with the actual *content* of the book: I remain unconvinced by Webb’s decision to treat the *Progymnasmata* in isolation from the much larger literary history of *ecphrasis*—both in antiquity and, indeed, beyond. As I see it, the strange, puzzling, and contradictory claims of the rhetoricians about *ecphrasis* can only be understood against (and as part of) the broader Graeco-Roman interrogation of the nature of vision. When the *Progymnasmata* define *ecphrasis* as a ‘speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes’, they are resonating against theories about visual-verbal relations on the one hand, and about visibility and invisibility on the other. Webb is quite right to insist on the Greek term’s breadth of meaning. But as she admits, *ecphrasis* was always understood to interrogate the nature of sight and insight, regardless of particular subject: ‘any ekphrasis rivals the visual arts in that it seeks to imitate their visual impact’; so it is, as Webb continues, that ‘any ekphrasis is haunted by the *idea* of the work of art’ [83–4: cf. 194]. In this sense, I would argue that ancient concepts of *ecphrasis* very much foreshadow the critical projects of intermedial

criticism in the later 20th century.⁷ More fundamentally, I cannot see why the *Progymnasmata*'s rhetorical discussions of *ecphrasis* should be read in isolation from the production of literary texts.⁸ Webb admits that 'many of the poetic descriptions of works of art... do fulfil the basic requirement of "placing before the eyes" and seem to rival the visual arts, as ekphrasis should' [3]. And yet, on the previous page, Webb had insisted 'that there is no evidence that these were considered to form a single genre' [1–2]. I'm confused and I suspect that the author is too.

Part of the problem here lies in our quest for neat classification: like the authors of the *Progymnasmata* themselves, classicists are sticklers for discrete rhetorical categories. But while Webb correctly argues for a much more complex definition of rhetorical *ecphrasis* than scholars have been wont to assume, her reluctance to treat the phenomenon from a perspective *beyond* the *Progymnasmata* seems unduly reductionist in scope. One thing demonstrated by the publication in 2001 of Posidippus' third-century poetry book, for example, is its organization of epigrams according to discrete artistic subject matter. Now, it has been said that these are not '*ecphrastic*' because

⁷ I would therefore maintain that 'modern' definitions of *ecphrasis* as 'a verbal representation of a visual representation' [Heffernan 1993, 3–4] very much align with 'ancient' thinking. The evolution of Webb's thinking over the last 20 or so years lead her at times to agree—as when she discusses the 'ultimate closeness' [37] of 'ancient' to 'modern' concepts of *ecphrasis*.

⁸ Recent work suggests that I am not alone: compare, e.g., Francis 2009 on the earliest *ecphraseis* of Homer, *Iliad* 18 and Hesiod, *Theog.* 570–615 and *Op.* 60–109:

The relationship between word and image in ancient ecphrasis is, from its beginning, complex and interdependent, presenting sophisticated reflection on the conception and process of both verbal and visual representation. [3]

Still more important is Chinn 2007 on Pliny, *Epist.* 5.6.42–4: in response to Webb's earlier work, Chinn talks 'in Pliny's time of a conception of ekphrasis that is more "modern" than we might have expected' [2007 265]. As I have argued elsewhere, the difficulty lies in isolationist approaches to the *Progymnasmata*, understanding them as 'purely' rhetorical texts removed from other forms of literary (or indeed artistic) production and criticism.

they are not sufficiently ‘vivid’ or ‘descriptive’.⁹ But as recent scholarship has shown, such poems self-consciously play with the boundaries between physical image and mental impression as well as between visualized image and verbalized text; they toy with a ‘trialectic’ of what Irmgard Männlein-Robert calls ‘voice, writing and image’.¹⁰ All this, I think, suggests that the rhetorical discussions of *ecphrasis* in the *Progymnasmata* are very much attempts to rationalize, categorize, and order a much older and more extensive literary phenomenon; and to reorient that phenomenon, moreover, for specific rhetorical ends.¹¹

Of course, the objection might come that the *Progymnasmata* were simply not that sophisticated or engaged.¹² In part, I would have to agree. But the *Progymnasmata* certainly were aware—or so it seems to me—of their paradoxical claim: exactly how it is that words *could* bring about vision? Webb is spot on in suggesting that ‘rhetoricians tend to place emphasis on the *ability* of words to create presence, rather than the problematic nature of that presence’ [105]. But there can be no doubting that the rhetoricians knew that they were speaking in metaphors: hence, for example, Theon’s and Hermogenes’ qualifier of ‘almost’ (σχεδόν) bringing about seeing through hearing, or Hermogenes’ acknowledgment of the formulaic derivation

⁹ See Zanker 2003, 61, 62: ‘These poems were very rarely intended to give a vivid description... They were poems *about* statues, paintings and gems’ (cited by Webb in apparent agreement on 2n2). For my own response to this debate, see Squire 2010a and 2010b.

¹⁰ See especially Männlein-Robert 2007; compare also Prioux 2007 and 2008 as well as Tueller 2008 (also absent from the bibliography).

¹¹ I should once again come clean about my own interest here developed in part of a forthcoming book on the *Tabulae Iliacae* or ‘Iliac tablets’ [Squire 2011, esp. ch. 7].

¹² Cf. Bartsch 1989, 7–14:

The approach these handbooks take proves to be relatively dry and matter-of-fact; they provide guidelines for content and procedure rather than provide suggestions on function in a literary context, and their theory, if it deserves the name, strays within bounds too narrow to reveal how such passages might be manipulated for broader aims. [9]

As Bartsch demonstrates, the *Progymnasmata* are therefore at their most revealing when set against other texts—which is why, I think, Webb’s seventh chapter is her most successful.

of the simile ('as they say'—ὡς φασιν). Webb states that the book 'is leaving aside the question of what the mental experience expressed by the claims to "see" actually might have been' [24n34]. This strikes me as a problematic intellectual maneuver: for the ancient dialectic between sight and insight—what Richard Wollheim [1980, 205–229] calls 'seeing as' and 'seeing in'—intersects on a much larger level with ancient dialectics about theorizing sight and insight on the one hand, and images and texts on the other. When Longinus complains of *enargeia* that it not only persuades the listener but also *enslaves* [δοῦλοῦται] him [98], or when pseudo-Dionysius laments the problematic *fictiveness* of *ecphraseis* [154], they are harking back to longstanding Greek debates about what vision is, and therefore about the extent to which words can capture visual experience.¹³

This brings me to a third and related issue: chronology. As her title suggests, Webb uses the *Progymnasmata* to reconstruct an 'ancient' phenomenon in 'theory and practice'. But it seems worth asking at least the question of whether these texts reflect a specific cultural moment in the development of late antique thought. As the book proceeds, 'ancient' becomes an ever looser category: we move backwards and forwards from Longinus and Quintilian in the first century AD, through late antiquity, even into the writings of Augustine and the still later Byzantine world; by the end of the book, the 'ancient' is bracketed together with the 'medieval' [195] in stark contrast to the 'modern'.¹⁴ Of course, this sort of 'big picture' approach has many advantages. But it also runs the risk of collapsing historical difference. In particular, I wonder what Webb makes of John Onians' claim [1980] that the late antique championing of the imagination as found in the *Progymnasmata* reflects a peculiar cultural historical moment—that the rhetorical championing of the imagination went

¹³ In this capacity, Webb has lots to say about Aristotle but much less about Plato. As I have argued in Squire 2010b [cf., e.g., Rouveret 1989, 14–15; Goldhill 1998, 207–210; Steiner 2001, 33–35], the crucial text here is Xenophon, *Mem.* 3.10.

¹⁴ See p. 27, on how 'ancient "criticism" [is] a very different phenomenon from modern literary criticism'.

hand in hand with the increasing abstraction of the contemporary visual arts.¹⁵ As Webb hints [190–191], this cultural history is somehow bound up with the rise of Christianity whereby *ecphrasis* served ‘to bring out the spiritual qualities of a monument or work of art’ [190]. Despite (or rather because of) Webb’s overarching argument about ‘modernity’ and ‘antiquity’, I left the book feeling rather puzzled about the terms in which these debates had been framed.

These three qualms should not detract from the overwhelming merits, value, and importance of the book.¹⁶ The sheer number of observations along the way—about Pausanias’ *Periegesis* as a self-consciously *ecphrastic* text [54—particularly revealing in the light of Webb’s analysis on 157], the analysis of Thucydides’ ancient reception as the master of *ecphrastic* razzle-dazzle [19–20, 69–71, 195], or Webb’s superb overview of Philostratus’ (meta-)meta-*ecphrastic* project in the *Imagines* [187–190]—will launch this monograph onto all manner of different reading-lists. And rightly so. Still, the book’s chief virtue seems to me to lie in its analysis of ‘persuasion in ancient theory and practice’ rather than that of ‘*ekphrasis*’ and ‘imagination’. Those fields, I think, still remain wide open; and initial indications suggest as many continuities as discontinuities between ‘antiquity’ and ‘modernity’.

A final eulogy of the book’s presentation: Ashgate have done an almost faultless job in producing the book. It would have been useful to have a separate *index locorum*, and it is frustrating too not to have more subentries in the general index. But I found no glaring mistakes

¹⁵ See also Onians 1999, 217–278:

Not only was it inherent in this visual imagination that it did not need to be limited by the reality of what was presented to the eyes, it was actually desirable for one to be able to imagine the exaggerated and the false. . . . As art becomes less and less descriptive, the accounts of art become more so. [261]

¹⁶ Errors are otherwise few and slight. I list them here in the hope of a future (and more affordable?) paperback edition: p. 34 (three lines from bottom) misquotation—missing definite article; p. 35 (eight lines from bottom) ‘classical and archaeology’; p. 40 (second paragraph, second line) mistaken symbol; p. 55 (second paragraph, five lines down) mistaken typeface; p. 73n35 mistaken symbol; p. 117n37 (penultimate line) omitted verb. Occasionally, textual references are omitted—as with the passage of Plutarch that is cited on p. 20.

in the Latin or Greek. The wonderful choice of dust-jacket should also not go unmentioned: where we would usually expect to see a picture, Ashgate gives us Aphthonius' verbal definition of *ecphrasis*—as visualized in a 1591 manuscript. 'Ancient' writers would have very much appreciated the wit.

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