Reflections of reflections of reflections: Shelley and the terrifying necessity of fragmentary art

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This article is concerned with an analysis of Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery' as a reflection (in the ekphrastic sense) of the Uffizi painting of Medusa (formerly attributed to Leonardo da Vinci) with a special emphasis on the necessary fragmentary nature of the text and its impact on any subsequent criticism of the painting and the mythology it represents.

Figure 1. Flemish Artist, Head of Medusa, 16th century, Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Creative Commons.

In 1819, while living in Florence, Percy Bysshe Shelley came upon a painting in the Uffizi gallery of Medusa's decapitated head, known typically as the Gorgoneion, a name describing both its shield-mounted and just-severed states.[1] At the time, the painting was incorrectly attributed to Leonardo da Vinci (it still resides in the Uffizi, but it is now simply acknowledged as being of Flemish origin, artist unknown; hereafter called the Uffizi painting), thus Shelley's draft title of the unfinished poem, 'On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery.' Despite the incorrect attribution to da Vinci, there is no question that Shelley crafted his poem from his impressions and interactions with the painting, and this effort represents his only clearly expressed ekphrastic poetic output. This article is concerned with an analysis of the poem as a reflection (in the ekphrastic sense) of the Uffizi painting with a special emphasis on the necessary fragmentary nature of the text and its impact on any subsequent criticism of the painting and the mythology it represents.

According to poet and critic James Heffernan, perhaps the most influential critic to explore ekphrasis after W.S Di Piero, ekphrastic poetry is a 'representation of representation in that it is a literary reflection of visual art.'[2] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), in *The Limits of Painting and Poetry*, suggests that we can *only* appreciate some characters of mythology, like Medusa, as reflections, especially when considering characters of myth who are closely associated with the divine.[3] The implication is that the greater the distance of a character from the consumer, in terms of background, lifestyle, successes and failures, the less real that character appears. Harold Bloom (1930-2019) echoes this sentiment in *The Western Canon:* we may appreciate any character of art or literature as a figure of mythology or folklore, codified or otherwise, which is to say, of a formal mythology with sacred underpinnings, like Perseus is to Greek Myth, or of a less formal mythology, like Paul Bunyan is to American folklore.[4] In the first case, we tend to identify figures of sacred myth as reflections of the ideal, and so it is not necessary that we see ourselves or our communities in the exploits of Perseus. In the second case, we tend to identify figures of folklore as reflections of ourselves (in individualistic cultures) and of our communities (in plural cultures). In either case, the art form, whether literary or visual, serves a philosophical and social purpose, providing a method of processing what would otherwise be appreciable but inaccessible by virtue of an insurmountable barrier separating apprehension of the world in terms of human understanding, and that which is beyond human understanding. Thus, works of ekphrastic art are not merely translations of one form to another (say, a painting to a poem, suggesting that one form explicates the other), nor are they amalgams of multiple art forms (suggesting that a poem about a painting somehow melds the two), rather ekphrasis is the act of representing the representation itself, which results in highlighting for the consumer the similarities and differences between the artefacts.[5] This process enhances the value of both the visual and the literal but does not devalue one or the other—we *may* appreciate Shelley's poem without ever seeing the painting, and the visual work, likewise, does not require any literature to justify or explicate its beauty.

The ekphrastic form is sometimes viewed with derision, primarily because it is reliant upon an extant work of art, and in this way, it may be argued that ekphrasis is inherently unoriginal and derivative. Lessing, perhaps anticipating post-structuralism, famously decries ekphrasis, arguing that it is an expression of utility not aesthetics, and so it is not properly poetry, since poetry is temporal and visual art is spatial—this is to say, from this perspective, visual art is a static representation, while poetry is fluid; visual art is a reflection of a moment in time, and poetry is the reflection of an event (properly, a series of moments).[6] Thus, even an artistic attempt to impart a sense of motion in a static piece is still no more than a snapshot in time, while a poem of the same subject necessarily delivers to the consumer the perception of action and motion, of change, movement from one thing to another. In this way, Lessing sees poetry as generally inferior to visual art because of its mutability, and he sees in this mutability the promise of ambiguity powerful enough to individualise poetry such that it can have no universal value. Lessing's criticism (which many often think of as a criticism of Horace and *Ars Poetica*, rather than a criticism of forms of art), is bolstered by G.F.W. Hegel (1770-1831), especially in Hegel's chapters on 'The Religion of Art in Ancient Greece' in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807).[7] Hegel is in turn bolstered by other scholarly luminaries of both art and philosophy, each reflecting the other, and building upon the other's work.

Since the early 20th century, many critics have argued in favour of ekphrasis as a legitimate poetic form equal in stature to any other, and

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1 *The Lives of the Most Excellent Architects, Painters and Sculptors* (1550, revised and expanded 1568, by P. Vasari) accounts for the misidentification of the Uffizi painting. In The Medusa Reader, ed. by Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) pp. 60-61.

2 James Heffernan, 'Ekphrasis and Representation' in *New Literary History*, 22 (1991), 297-316 (p. 300).

3 G.E. Lessing, *Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. E.A. McCormack (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 169.

4 Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 7.

5 Marjorie Garber, 'The Gorgon, Paradigm of Image Creation' in The Medusa Reader, pp. 262-269.

6 Carol Jacobs, *Uncontainable Romanticism: Shelley, Brontë, Kleist* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 13.

7 G.F.W. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 424-429.

some have promoted its value above other forms. Ludwig Wittgenstein thought of ekphrasis as perhaps the most powerful poetic form. He saw it as a volatile form of poetry in terms of its danger *to* poetry, arguing that the most proficient use of the form might be so effective that it perfectly reflects the artefact, installing an image in the mind that supplants the poet's words such that the image is remembered, and the poetry forgotten.[8] In *Picture Theory* (1994), William Mitchell argues that Shelley's poem is the embodiment of fear. Echoing Wittgenstein, Mitchell sees Shelley's depiction of Medusa as one of the better examples of poetic description that may ultimately be so powerful that it fully eclipses itself, effectively bringing the image to life in the consumer's mind such that only the image survives.[9] Taken to its extreme, if ekphrastic poetry is capable of fully sublimating the cognitive meaningfulness of the poet's words into mere image (an image that is effectively the persistent recollection of the consumer, that is the average consumer recalls the image and not the words), then we may argue for the life of the fictitious image just as we would the life of a living image, and in this way the image—fictitious or otherwise— *is* alive. However, the *subject* of ekphrasis is important in this theory: after all, an urn or a sunflower are otherwise benign objects in the world, whereas Medusa may be the most dangerous subject a poet could ever undertake to portray, especially using ekphrasis, since the more perfect the poet, the more real the image, and the more real Medusa, the more petrified the poet. Of course, whether we are talking about Medusa as depicted by Homer, Herodotus, Plato, Aristotle, or Ovid (and we'll beg off discussing later permutations), it is never quite clear whether the magic of paralysis results from seeing or being seen—that is to say, does Medusa petrify her victims when she actively sees *them*, or when they actively see *her*? What we do know from the literature (that is, what all the literature uniformly agrees upon) is that Perseus is only able to succeed through the use of his shield as a kind of object-in-the-middle that mitigates the power of Medusa's gaze.[10] This begins the tradition that Medusa 'must be seen through the mediation of mirrors [...] and through the medium of paintings and descriptions,' which is to say, visual and literary artistic reflections.[11]

Francoise Frontisi-Ducrox, a Hellenist and philosopher at the Louis Gernet Centre, considers the reflection of Medusa 'a necessary and sufficient condition of her visibility,' which is to say she is otherwise invisible.[12] Her nature as a being who cannot be engaged on her own terms makes her a tragic figure, especially through the lens of modernity, since she can only be apprehended as a *reduction* of her being. Whereas other gods and demigods may consciously mitigate their ontological presence when amongst mortals, Medusa cannot. Her only engagement with another being whom she does not kill *through* that engagement, is Perseus, who effectively kills her with her own unwanted power. Thus, any description of Medusa, whether visual or literary, can only be a reflection of Medusa. The problem for the poet is whether or not to deliberately fall short, or to follow through: if the poet is authentically successful in their ekphrastic exercise, then they will never finish the poem, because their perfect reflection of Medusa will petrify even them; likewise, no reader or listener could ever consume the poem in-full before it consumed them. Thus, we arrive at a not entirely unreasonable, though admittedly fanciful explanation for the fragmentary nature of both the poem and the painting.

Louis Marin has argued that Shelley's reflection of the Uffizi painting is the 'displacement from one temporality to another, a passage from the moving, linear time of life and history' as represented by the painting 'to the time of representation with its immobility and permanence.'[13] This interpretation suggests that an image can enjoy both a literal and a figurative existence, and in the case of ekphrastic texts, it is the representation of the same image in two forms, visual and literary, thus the thing represented and reflected remains unchanged by the various media through which it is appreciated, even while those various means of reflection allow for a multitude of interpretations. Marin calls this the 'Medusan Effect,' a 'displacement of temporalities' between that which is to be reflected by art and the art that so reflects, 'applied intransitively to itself, reflecting itself, and thereby producing its own petrifaction.'[14]

However, Marin's theory presents a unique problem for the ekphrastic text: the instantiation principle informs us that it is impossible for a property to exist for which there is no object. If the success of an ekphrastic text is measured by the elimination of that text as it achieves its telos of perfect reflection (as Wittgenstein argues), then there would be nothing so reflected. Much like if all red objects in the universe disappeared, then the property of redness would likewise disappear, the Medusan Effect itself reflects the process of removing an object from

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8 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 66-68.

9 William Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 172; echoing Wittgenstein, ekphrasis becomes 'the verbal representation of visual representation.' (p. 152).

10 Garber, pp. 271-273.

11 Mitchell, p. 50.

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12 Garber, p. 262.

13 Louis Marin, *To Destroy Painting* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 266.
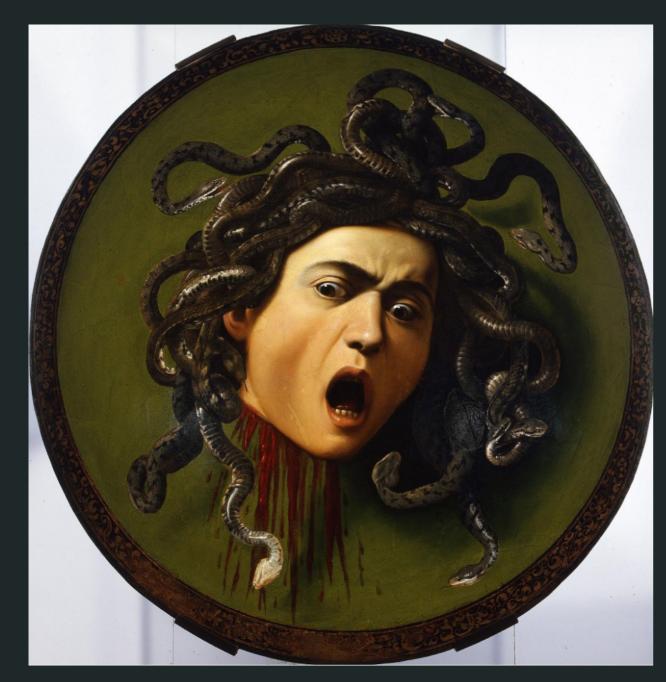
14 Marin, p.60.

Figure 2. Caravaggio, Unsigned, Head of Medusa, 16th century, Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Creative Commons.

the world as it is transitioned from a living subject to a fixed, artistically-represented subject. Certainly, we may render representative art of still extant objects—if we paint a picture of a sunflower, the sunflower itself does not vanish. However, unless the painting is incrementally updated and altered to reflect the real-time life of the sunflower, then the captured image is of the sunflower as it once was and not as it is or will be.

The Uffizi painting effectively performs the task of Perseus' shield, facilitating the consumer's apprehension of Medusa, while Shelley's poem, especially as we consider the era in which it was written, reflects the painting for those who cannot view it in person. Significantly, the myth of Medusa's severed head informs us that whatever power her living gaze held in terms of effecting paralysis or petrification, her severed (and presumably dead) head retains that power with no degradation of impact: Perseus mounts the head upon the Shield of Athena, and returns the shield to the Protector of Athens, whereupon it is used in a number of subsequent myths and stories against various invaders of the Greek city-state. The shield thus adorned is known as the Gorgoneion, and it cannot be viewed by an Olympian god or a mere man without an intervening medium, hence

a visual or literary artefact serving as an offset reflection.[15]

The scene depicted by the Uffizi painting and Shelley's poem would seem to occur at some point between the murder of Medusa and the mounting of her head upon the shield. It should be further noted that in both the Uffizi painting and Shelley's poem, we cannot see Medusa's eyes and she cannot see us, a fact that, with the mythology firmly in mind, allows our visual and literary artists the opportunity to render their work without being consumed by it. The Uffizi painting's unusual perspective (a post-mortem, pre-mounted Medusa as opposed to the typical ready-for-battle Gorgoneion shield, as we see with Caravaggio) affords Shelly the opportunity to avoid a mere reflection (his poem) of a reflection (a painting of the shield) of a reflection (Medusa's head), which facilitates the unique beginning of Shelley's poem, his turn away from the standard ekphrastic formula of mere description of an object to a prose-like cold open, *in medias res*: 'It lieth, gazing...' as though we were there, at the very scene of the crime, the very moment following her murder, Perseus' sickle dripping with her blood, her blood steaming in the air of the chill island morning.[16]

This personalisation of the moment

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15 William Hildebrand, 'Self, Beauty and Horror: Shelley's Medusa Moment' in *The New Shelley: Late Twentieth-Century Views*, pp. 150–65.

16 All quotations from 'On the Medusa' are Percy Bysshe Shelley, from 'On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci, In the Florentine Gallery,' *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. by Jack Donovan and others (Harlow, England: Longman,

captures the terror of the painting, various vermin, frogs, bats, insects, and rats, fleeing her slowly-cooling body, itself just visible in the surrounding shadows, her last gasp, the last of her own breath misting the air, mouth forever open in a now-silent scream. 'It lieth, gazing' and so the painting itself is less the subject of the poem, and it is, instead, the *painting's* subject, and the moment of her death we are drawn to, and it is her gaze, now eternally persistent, filled with her own reflection, reflecting her very death, this is the unifying motif of the poem, perfectly reflecting the centre-focus of the painting.

Fittingly, this is the gaze that paralyses with fear, that petrifies. 'Yet is less the horror than the grace / Which turns the gazer's spirit into stone'[17] and so, Shelley causes us to ponder—who is petrified and who is the petrifying? Poetically, Shelly must be referring to the 'I' of the text; but in terms of ekphrasis, it must be the consumer, the reader or the listener, we who experience the phenomenon of Medusa through the medium of the poem, who are turned to stone. Not once does Shelley mention Perseus by name, though by our knowledge of the myth we might naturally attempt to interpose him between us and the Medusan gaze. And again, 'It lieth, gazing' quite naturally suggests that it is Medusa gazing, thus her spirit is

petrified, not ours (or Perseus' for that matter). And yet, if this is true, what are we to make of Shelley's apparent neutering of Medusa, the use of *itself* instead of *herself*?

> Yet it is less the horror than the grace
> Which turns the gazer's spirit into stone,
> Whereon the lineaments of that dead face
> Are graven, till the characters be grown
> Into itself, and thought no more can trace (ll. 9–13)

Perhaps Shelley is devaluing the Medusan gaze on account of her death ('dead face'), and so the petrifying gaze is now a freeform entity all its own (*it* rather than *her*): *it* (the untethered gaze resident now in the spiritless head) engraves *its* modality (or powers) onto the gazer's (Medusa at the quantum instant of death-by-petrification), and so petrifies the gazer (Medusa) 'into itself' (now a freeform power) thus we have Medusa's death as 'thought no more can trace' and the entangled instant of the gaze-as-entity: the gazer is Medusa's mirror image as she sees herself seeing herself.

In the poem's final transformation this image itself appears as a mirror image written in the poem's characters:

> For from the serpents gleams a brazen glare
> Kindled by that inextricable error

> Which makes a thrilling vapour of the air
> Become a [ ] and ever-shifting mirror
> Of all the beauty and the terror there –
> A woman's countenance, with serpent locks,
> Gazing in death on heaven from those wet rocks. (ll. 34–40)

Carol Jacobs, a Victorian scholar at Yale, writes about the problem of the 'ever-shifting mirror' of line 37, theorising that it 'resembles both the painting and the poem; but that reflection is also the image of a work of art produced from within the work of art.'[18] This would suggest that the image of the 'ever-shifting mirror' serves as a kind of serial reflection that in turn represents the poem from within the poem, in a Russellian it's-turtles-all-the-way-down sense. This might address the problem of the gazer's identity by enabling all possible gazers: the reader's, the listener's, the writer's, Medusa's, and the post-mortem freeform power of paralysis itself, all converging in Shelley's 'ever-shifting mirror.' However, the central problem with Shelley's mirror isn't its function in the poem, but rather its very presence in the poem—there is no indication of a mirror in the painting. One key feature of an ekphrastic text is that it never adds to that which it represents. An ekphrastic text may creatively interpret what it describes, but it cannot represent, even as metaphor, elements which do not

exist in the reflected subject. Shelley's 'ever-shifting mirror' is too close to syllepsis, even if purely rhetorical, and so the mirror's possible reality necessarily disrupts the function of a traditional ekphrastic text, and its presence renders the poem less persuasive as an accurate reflection of the painting.

Nonetheless, there is no reason to entirely dismiss the power or professional quality of Shelley's poem as a legitimate ekphrastic text purely on account of a debatable instance of rhetoric. There are any number of interpretive techniques available to account for the 'ever-shifting mirror' of line 37, including Jacobs' own theory that the mirror is merely a poetic device used to describe the play of light upon and through Medusa's final breaths, rendered quite evocatively in the painting as a soft mist escaping her open mouth.[19] Moreover, the image of the 'ever-shifting mirror' reflects the reflection of Shelley's words *as* a reflection of the painting, which *itself* reflects the death of Medusa: altogether, an 'ever-shifting mirror'.

Finally, it is this reflection of a mythological death, imaginative in its very nature, with which the interdisciplinary critic (of the Uffizi painting and the Shelley ekphrasis) is most concerned. 'It is in this sense,' writes Jacobs, 'criticism might

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2011), i–iv.

17 Shelley, ll. 9–10.

18 Carol Jacobs, 'The Monstrosity of Translation', in *MLN*, pp. 763.

19 Jacobs, p. 18.

well be regarded as an act of the Imagination.'[20] Certainly, one role of criticism is to objectively evaluate a work of art, to explicate and identify its cultural value and its impact on both the consumer of art and the domain of art. Any criticism of the Uffizi–Shelley duo ought not favour one element over another even though we must agree that Shelley's poem cannot exist without the visual art it so beautifully reflects. Nonetheless, and despite the concerns of Wittgenstein, it is difficult to reasonably contend that the Uffizi painting can ever again undergo a truly independent analysis, one separate from Shelley's influence upon it through the medium of his poem. In this way, the Uffizi painting has become a fragment unless it is so married to Shelley's forever-fragmentary text. Likewise, criticism is a form of ekphrasis, reflecting that which it analyses, and like all good philosophy, never fully resolving itself, never reaching a final conclusion: reflections upon reflections upon reflections, always moving closer to truth, and so always, at the last, avoiding paralysis.

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20 ibid., p. 18.