

Art Imitating Art Imitating Nature: Ekphrasis in W. G. Sebald's *After Nature*

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Since W. G. Sebald describes so many paintings in *After Nature*, passages of his poem may initially come across as dry, cataloged descriptions of paintings—i.e. what images his readers would see if they had the paintings in front of them instead of his printed words. In reality, however, Sebald is actually participating in an ancient tradition practiced by artists from all mediums. The Greek term *ekphrasis* is used to refer to this practice of describing or capturing the essence of one work of art in another work of art—frequently to dramatic effect (“Ekphrasis”). *After Nature* is a perfect example of ekphrasis because it highlights the ekphrasis of others, particularly the 16<sup>th</sup> century painter Matthias Grünewald, while thus being an example of ekphrasis itself. In fact, the situation is even more complex than we might initially comprehend after a cursory reading of Sebald’s poem, particularly in light of the idea that an artist is a “witness” creating a personal testimony through his art. The layers of ekphrasis involved in creating *any* work of art, let alone *After Nature*, are so numerous that the poem makes an interesting statement about the relative importance of the original source of inspiration for a work of art to its viewer or witness.

If we’re going to discuss issues of “originality,” however, we have to step back and consider how we should define the term “original” in the first place. For example, Matthias Grünewald may have been the person who conceived of the design for the

paintings on the Isenheim Altarpiece and then actualized his vision of those images with paint, but the images he painted were based on familiar scenes described in the Bible and other Christian texts, which in turn were written accounts of stories that had been handed down from generation to generation, and which told of events that reportedly had taken place in the past. Indeed, Grünewald is not the only artist to have ever painted these scenes before, either, and he was surely influenced by many other different versions of the same subject matter. Who, then, can we really identify as the “original” artist?

It would seem that Sebald would like us to acknowledge nature as—if not an artist, per se—at least the common source of inspiration for artists: hence, the title of his poem. As Colin Riordan proposes in his essay “Ecocentrism in Sebald’s After Nature”: “The immediate reference in both the translated title After Nature [sic] and the original *Nach der Natur* [sic] is not to nature but to art—to the representation of nature, and the extent to which authenticity can be achieved” (50). But is nature itself the ultimate “authentic” source? The transcendentalists or Platonists might argue that anything in this world is itself only an imitation of the theoretical ideal “essence” of that object. In other words, anything that exists in our world is merely the result of an attempt to embody that thing’s true essence in our physical world—but that nothing will ever be able to perfectly replicate the exact, pure, ideal conception of itself. If this theory, then, does apply to not only man-made objects, but also to any physical manifestation of anything at all, we can conclude that even a tree or a cloud or a

raindrop are each individual “attempts” to exemplify in reality the ideal concept of a tree or a cloud or a raindrop. I use the term *attempts* loosely because there is no person actively making the attempt to create these things; to rephrase it more specifically for our purposes here, there is no “artist” actually creating these works of “art.”

Or can we just argue that “Mother Nature” is the artist? Even if there is no conscious mind behind the design (although your specific religious beliefs might argue that there is), Nature is still constantly producing new imitations of these things—such as the tree or the raindrop—just as an artist creates representations himself through the works of art that he produces. Perhaps, therefore, Nature really *is* an artist of sorts, after all. Thus, if the Platonists have their way, she may not technically be the “original source” of/for everything in the world, but she can at least be considered the original artist/work of art after which all other artists fashion their work. In this case, any time a person creates a work of art (i.e. “after nature”), he is automatically producing an example of ekphrasis because Nature herself is a sort of work of art.

Indeed, the act of simply viewing nature, or any work of art, for that matter, automatically adds another degree of removal from the original source. As any Impressionist could tell you, the human eye has its own unique method of perceiving whatever is in front of it and then processing that information in the brain. The brain must then reassemble those bits and pieces of information and translate them into the image that we interpret to be an accurate representation of the thing(s) in front of us. Of course, no two people will perceive any given scene or object in the exact same

way, even if they are in the same spot, and both have clinically perfect vision, neither are color-blind, etc. The act of seeing, therefore, can itself be considered to be a process of “creating art,” in that our brains are required to create their own images out of the information provided to them by the eyes<sup>1</sup>—in other words, our brains are constantly carrying out their own ekphrastic processes every time that we look at something.

The eyes, therefore, are *witnesses* to reality as they perceive it. The concept of the witness is one that is very important to Sebald in all of his writings, not only in *After Nature*. As is indicated in the third and final section of the poem, Sebald has a great preoccupation with the Second World War and its effects on his native country of Germany in particular, although *After Nature* only barely scratches the surface of the matter, compared with other works of Sebald’s, such as *On the Natural History of Destruction*. In *After Nature*, it may seem at first glance that Sebald only really addresses this concept of “the witness(es),” and their role in history, in the last part of the poem, but his earlier sections—particularly the first, in which he concerns himself mostly with the artist Grünewald, but also with works of art by other artists—also deal with this idea through their handling of the notion of ekphrasis. An individual can be a witness to the world around himself not only through the process of observation, but he can also create art as a sort of lasting testimony to what he’s witnessed.

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<sup>1</sup> And if the eyes are viewing things with the aid of corrective lenses, whether rose-colored or not, that might just add another layer of complication to the issue!

How can an artist, however, fashion a work of art faithfully after nature in the event that he cannot possibly have direct access to the specific aspect(s) of nature which he is depicting? More precisely, how can he provide a truthful testimony of something when he didn't even "witness" it himself? Putting aside for a moment the issues of the ways in which the brain processes visual information—let alone the concerns inherent in the artist's ability to then transfer the image in his mind to the blank canvas in front of him—how can an artist ever "accurately" render a scene that is not based on what he can see directly in front of him?<sup>2</sup> Wouldn't every work of art "after nature" by definition have to be created from a still-life scene or a human model posed in front of him? For instance, how can someone who's never been to the beach ever hope to paint a seascape? Or in the case of artists like Grünewald, who wanted to depict Biblical events such as Christ's crucifixion—yet who obviously had not witnessed these events firsthand, how could they capture the reality of such scenes? Answers reside in how they could have drawn on the sorts of pain and suffering which they had experienced/witnessed in their own lives: e.g. the devastation brought about by harsh storms or droughts, plagues or warfare, even social injustices or poverty. Incorporating these details from real life lends a sense of realistic and identifiable desolation to their rendering of the scene.

In fact, this is precisely what Sebald suggests Grünewald did in his 1505 portrayal of the Crucifixion: referring to the dark background of the painting

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<sup>2</sup> Or from a photograph, but again, that would only add yet another layer of ekphrasis to the mix, as would painting from a *memory* of a sight he had witnessed.

(representing the extinguished sunlight that accompanied Christ's death), Sebald reasons that:

Most probably Grünewald painted  
and recalled the catastrophic incursion  
of darkness . . . after nature,  
for in the year 1502, . . . the moon's shadow  
slid over Eastern Europe . . .  
and Grünewald . . .  
will have travelled to see this event of the century,  
. . . the eclipse of the sun. (30)

In this case, not only would Grünewald have had an idea as to how the landscape might have appeared as the sun was temporarily blocked by the moon, but if he really had witnessed it, he would no doubt also have a distinct memory of how people had reacted to such an awesome event. When replicated in his Crucifixion painting, this aspect of psychological realism makes the image all the more powerful to the people who view it because they can better relate to the people pictured in the scene. In this way, the painting thus becomes Grünewald's dramatic testimony of the reality with which he *was* familiar, when it came to awesome historical events.

Indeed, Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece features another level of realism inherent in its composition. The work had been commissioned for a monastery which maintained a hospice of sorts for people suffering from various skin diseases. In his

creation of the assorted paintings on the altarpiece, then, Grünewald depicted a few figures—most notably the images of the dead and dying Christ—as sufferers of the sorts of skin diseases that the actual patients at the monastery had. Thus, when they came before the grand altar, the first sight that would have greeted their eyes would have been the rendering of Christ hanging limply on his cross, seemingly afflicted with the same sort of condition they themselves had. Grünewald’s rendering of Christ in this manner, fashioning his body after those of the monastery’s patients, meant that those infirm and perhaps dying people were invited to view their heroic Savior as having experienced the same torments with which they themselves were familiar. They may not have known what it was like to be nailed to a cross, but they could certainly identify with his withered-away frame. So although Christ may not have suffered from these particular ailments in real life, he became all the more real to these later followers; the notion that he too had been a mortal and truly suffered for the sins of others was made effectively clear to those who found themselves before that image of him.

In our case, however, we’re not seeing the painting, we’re only reading or “witnessing” the words Sebald has chosen<sup>3</sup> to describe it; in other words, our information is, at least, secondhand. And if a picture really is worth a thousand words, we’re definitely being short-changed, as Sebald describes only certain aspects and

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<sup>3</sup> Let’s not forget, however, the role of the translator! For those of us not reading the poem in German (Sebald’s native language and the one in which he wrote all of his works), we must also take into consideration the fact that we are actually reading someone else’s interpretation of the words Sebald himself had initially chosen.

figures of the works he includes in his poem, which raises the question: are we meant to envision the original painting which Sebald is describing (or possibly even read his words in conjunction with the image—or at least a copy of it—in front of us), or are we supposed to generate our own mental pictures of the scenes he is describing for us? Or are we even further removed from the “original” image—i.e. is Sebald creating his own unique image out of the words he’s using to describe the painting in question, and then leaving it up to us to assemble our own personal images from his choice of words? In short, can we still fully appreciate the poem without being familiar with the images Sebald is referencing?

Let’s consider what Sebald writes of Joachim von Sandrart, the first person to have written about Grünewald: “At Isenheim, Sandrart had not been, / but had heard of the altar-work there, / which, he writes, was so fashioned that / real life could scarce have been other” (Sebald 10). Sandrart had never actually seen Grünewald’s masterpiece himself, and yet he nevertheless felt he had a firm enough grasp of it from what other people had said about it; we’re left, then, to trust his testimony that vouches for the reliability of his sources/witnesses. Sebald assures us, however, that “We may trust that report by Sandrart, / for a portrait in a Würzburg museum / has preserved him, aged eighty-two, / wide awake and with eyes uncommonly clear” (9). Sebald would never have been able to meet Sandrart face to face, as they had lived several hundred years apart, but he nevertheless judges him to have been a trustworthy witness based on an artistic rendering of him which has

survived. It may seem risky to trust an unnamed artist's depiction of another person's character, but Sebald has faith in ekphrasis and its ability to convey the essence of truth, and it is this faith that we too are invited to adopt in regards to Sebald's own work.

But it's not just Sebald—or any artist, for that matter—that we're supposed to trust. Rather, the artist's ability to accurately depict nature—to capture the essence of truth—in his work, insists that we must rely upon it in order to properly experience and fully understand the meaning of what he has laid out before us. In other words, we need to have faith in the artist's execution of ekphrasis in order to trust that he is providing us with an accurate portrayal of the essence of the original source. Some critics would argue that it's bad enough to model one's subjects after other artistic renderings of them, rather than the actual figures themselves, as Marilyn Stokstad writes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American painter, Thomas Eakins, in her book entitled *Art History*: “Eakins, who taught anatomy and figure drawing at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, disapproved of the academic technique of drawing from plaster casts. In 1879 he said, ‘At best, they are only imitations, and an imitation of an imitation cannot have so much life as an imitation of nature itself’” (1022). Perhaps Eakins had more of a problem with the anatomical accuracy of the sculptures he saw than the process of ekphrasis itself, but he does seem to have a point. Imagine what he would have thought about the idea of someone trying to create a “realistic” work of art with one of Pablo Picasso's cubist renderings of the subject matter constituting his

only basic knowledge of the figures! People who would agree with Eakins, then, must wonder at my argument that not only can art modeled after art modeled after art (etc.) retain essential characteristics of the original subject matter in the various artistic representations, but these sorts of elements of truth can also be found in works of art depicting scenes/subjects which the artist never actually witnessed in the first place.

True, there will always of necessity be an element of “filtering” that will have occurred<sup>4</sup> simply by virtue of the fact that any individual’s gaze constitutes his own unique perception of the work of art in question (not to mention the “filtering” of the individual then trying to convey his impression of the piece to yet another person). But the point is not to recreate the original work in exact detail, since that would have to be an exact copy of the work in its original medium. Rather, the point of ekphrasis is for an artist to capture what he interprets as being the *spirit* of an existing work of art (whether focusing on only part of it, or the piece in its entirety) in his own work. It is precisely this sort of interpretation which Sebald describes Grünewald as having done, and which, by doing so, Sebald performs himself—proving that the essence of nature/truth can still shine clearly through a work of art/the artist’s testimony, even if the work isn’t modeled directly on the exact subject it’s portraying even if the artist wasn’t a direct witness of the subject he depicted.

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<sup>4</sup> Whether or not it may be as drastic as a cubist depiction.

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Submit your art. Upload your creations for people to see, favourite and share. Status update. Post an update. Tell the community what's on your mind. Journal. Post a journal. Share your thoughts, experiences and the tales behind the art. Literature. Submit your writing. Upload stories, poems, character descriptions & more. Poll. Ask the community. Find out what other deviants think - about anything at all. Anti-mimesis is a philosophical position that holds the direct opposite of Aristotelian mimesis. Its most notable proponent is Oscar Wilde, who opined in his 1889 essay *The Decay of Lying* that, "Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life". In the essay, written as a Platonic dialogue, Wilde holds that anti-mimesis "results not merely from Life's imitative instinct, but from the fact that the self-conscious aim of Life is to find expression, and that Art offers it certain beautiful forms through Nature imitating Art. Collection by Victoria McCaulley Beach. 208. It symbolizes a symbolic relationship between nature and humans. Totem poles often have very interesting religious and historical meanings interpreted through the mythical beings from the familial history. Grande Route Beautiful World Beautiful Places Robert Mapplethorpe Winding Road Santa Maria Pathways Shades Of Green Beautiful Landscapes.