

Ruskin's View  
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What is an *ekphrasis*? I ask you.

You look at me as though I had mentioned an exotic African animal.  
You may have made a groaning sound.

Well, it is from the ancient Greek word meaning *to speak*, I said. It is usually a response to a work of art. In other words, a painting may represent a sculpture, and vice versa; a poem might portray a picture. In fact, given the right circumstances, any art may describe any other art-form, so this is a brief ekphrasis on your life.

You are groaning again.

You seem like a grumpy old man. Well, perhaps not that old, though it appears that way, your nose is bent and dripping, your chin tucked into your collar.

You had a barrow-boy's belligerence. No, don't raise your eyebrow, it's true. And you had the intelligence of bartering, counting the change, you knew the price of things. You were good at real estate. My colleagues remember you, a schoolboy who began with daubing images on stone walls. You walked long distances and contemplated the weather. You were fit. *Fitter and turner* the schoolmasters unkindly called you. While others drew rude things in class, you sketched a whale spouting; just curves and suggestions – your mind's eye already abstract, like the leviathan's, pained, blowing blood above.

No, don't pout. I know you are thinking of how they made you colour in, fill in, hand colour engravings. Institutions: how you hated them; they educated people out of their essential calling, you said. And yet, you wanted deeply to belong to them. To find respect. But you never abandoned the conviction that to fill in was just background noise. Some people spoke like that, and even wrote what they spoke, without reflection, just background noise in written form. You didn't have much time for sitting around over a pewter of small beer grinding the hours to dust, stumbling home. You never stumbled; you had discipline, watchful as a cat in a house full of cats.

So you sketched on stone and then painted stone buildings and then cast them against the darkening sky and they loved you for them. Real estate was royal estate. It was all too solid, don't you think? You wanted them to melt into air. As a boy you already saw apocalypse in them; ruination; fire. You were what they called a river-rat, hugging the poisonous ether of the Thames, its people enslaved to all kinds of misery and slowly dying; you saw that in their eyes. That allegiance confused everyone. You never spoke about it. *Just do it*, you muttered. That was your motto. Walk the walk, don't talk the talk.

We were sitting on the bishop's terrace at Kirkby-Lonsdale on the river Lune. I painted a scene here called *Ruskin's View*. All fresh and different, you could drink the limpid water from a cupped hand. Oh Cumbria! Oh safety and security! Oh patrons living on country estates, entertained by the bliss of countless meandering poets!

Children were jumping off the old Roman bridge into the shallow water. One or two may have perished quite recently. You were painting maidens bathing by the ruins. Then they grew foggier, more

haunting, spectres in the stream, their eyes full of death. You stopped filling in.

You said filling in came from the outside and was fraudulent. Like heavy plotting in novels. Joining the dots. But disaster, you insisted, came from the inside. Watching the swiftness of the river around its bend I saw your face light up. It was rare, this lighting up. I don't expect it ever occurred much in company. I saw the furtiveness with which you attempted to hide this emotion. A grumpy old man's practice of taking out a hanky and blowing loudly. A tugboat sound; riverine industry and its noise was what you liked. Even when young they said you did not speak much. Yes, you didn't like talk; you were focussed elsewhere. Why did an artist need to speak? you asked. Or a writer, or any other being who tried to do something different? Sit quietly alone. Watch the speed of the water and listen for the cries of disaster.

In the evenings you would sit very still, not drawing, not reading, not speaking. I have seen the way you work, sketching furiously, doing very inspired work for half an hour, then sweating, out of breath, palpitations in your chest, sitting down and needing the reward of sunshine. Inspiration took it out of you, depleted that frightening energy; used it up. It was because you saw everything in a flash. The whole composition, the genius of its provocation. Once laid down though, you worked on it remorselessly, hour after hour. Perspiration, it seemed, was much more calming for you.

In your younger days they said you kept ahead of taste, sailing before the rest; they called you the "over-turner"; it wasn't exactly praise. You had the reputation of being a novelty. Someone who showed at a

funfair. Did magic tricks. After their satire they started to hate you. It's the usual thing with art they do not understand. Then you were accepted by the Royal Academy and those who mocked you suddenly didn't know *how* to hate you. Victory. You had confidence and had become somewhat redoubtable. Hate and fear tempered their outbursts. It was the best thing you could have done: to force your way into their grudging admiration.

I doubt if this would have happened had you not been depressed. Down in the doldrums you understood. Down there you knew failure. Down there you were familiar with the dregs, the desolation, the despondency, the duplicity of hope. All the "D" words.

You were walking along the riverbank and somewhere downriver dining on stones, paintbox on your knees in the miasma of London's black-lung district, on a war-footing with life, you came across a black man bogged in the mud, maybe he was a coal porter or a stoker, but no, he was an African on closer inspection, and he glanced at you with a bloodshot eye, not in fright nor superciliously, but with a curiously confident air of divine resignation and yet with the brief exhaltation of flight, as a hawk unhooded briefly before its freedom, and you knew then that you were nowhere near down, nowhere near doomed, but over-reaching, reaching over, you clasped his hand and helped him up the bank from the malodorous mud and in a swift moment he was gone.

It was then you saw sea-monsters and snow-storms and the sunrise balling up in fire, and you fought back with colour. I don't know how you did it. As a young man I know little of the forge, the anvil, the fierce redness of hell. But when you painted, the devil of depression melted and your soul hardened, dipped in water.

That brought you round. I remember there was an exhibition at the Academy. John Constable was on the hanging committee. He removed one of your paintings and hung his own in its place. You let him have it. You could have walked up to him and said: "It is fitting, Constable, that you police public hangings." Or you could have said: "Use a scraper, Peeler, for your work is lacquered enough to emblazen a brothel."

But you did nothing of the kind. You didn't have the words. Habituated to waiting on tow-paths or frosty meadows for the sunrise or sunset, you stored your patience for the next year and then, when allowed to exhibit by some fortuitous decision – your painting being hung next to one of Constable's – you daubed on your paint and then spat on the canvas and rubbed it in, creating the most revulsed groans from your rival. You said not a word. On your grey and dismal seascape of snowburst and spit, you suddenly executed a small doubloon of red lead, so bright it startled all who were there to witness it. No one knew what to make of this blood-red eye rising from the deep. Indeed you then left the gallery, prompting Constable to remark that you had, quote-unquote, turned up and "fired a gun". It went to the heart of Johnny Constable's limp-wristed landscape.

And now to the heart of darkness. You only mentioned this once to me. It was after your acclaimed national and nationalistic success in 1839 when you displayed your great painting, *The Fighting Téméraire*. We were sitting in the small damp pub below Samuel Johnson's lodgings – you remember the public house where you had to step down into its bowels, having come off a small square and alleyway. You bought me an exquisite Portuguese Madeira and became quite voluble – unusual for you – I mean both buying a drink and speaking – and you said

your temerity occluded a darker purpose. You were working on a painting with a very long title. You did not disclose what that was. The background noise of other men made you cautious. There was a ship; the *Zorg*, you said; a name from the Dutch. You should never rename a ship, you said. Brings bad luck. They couldn't read the name on the side when the slavers bought it – its bow crusted with salt and worn by wind and wave. *Zong* they re-christened it, sold for a song, barely seaworthy. In 1781, while bringing slaves from Africa, the smallpox ran its riot. Packed like sardines, head to foot, crushed into the hold, there broke out pustules, fever, diarrhoeia, suffocating stink, the human cargo unable to move for their manacles, neck rings, ankle bolts and fetters.

You were downing the Madeira like small beer. Foaming a little. You had suddenly become like other men, merged into the noise of their coarse laughter and shouting. The Royal Academy will shit itself, you said. They insure our paintings like live cargo, a thousand times what a life would cost. The *Zong's* captain knew this too. No good delivering a hundred dead bodies. Best to throw them overboard alive to make the claim: lost at sea.

I looked at you: wrapped in your long scarf, boots scalloped in ice and beer rinds, the thawing fire and your reddening face brought me the secret fantasist that you were, the social hero, the fraudulent and factual, the clandestine and professional sides of you. You knew already that the nation's false pride and its shame, your indignation, and history's leavening impartiality, would all speak against you. Those flailing black arms in the parted sea would be memorialised in the back part of your squalid studio – a dusty oil unsold, which I then bought and kept on my wall for twenty-eight years. It haunted me so. I

put it up at Christie's and it passed without a single bid. The critics called it "a kitchen accident", "the contents of a spittoon", a "detestable absurdity." I on-sold it to an American from Boston. It was not part of your bequest to the Tate. England did not buy it back, but the painting had kept its fire in its waters. I am not a political man, but if I were reduced to rest your immortality upon any single work, this would be it. Especially since after this painting, they passed the anti-slavery act of 1840.

I have my position, and did not risk it in the way you did. I'm ashamed I played both sides, a hybrid academician, but I preferred a living reputation to a dead one.

Speaking of which ...

Downriver you kept another mistress other than your housekeeper. The solitude of her conversation; flirtation itself. How it flatters you to know you are still desirable, now that you are old and ill. Your paintings grew whiter. Did you have cataracts?

I've done a few waterfalls in my time, you said.

No, I mean in your eyes. Milton wrote how his own were dimming: "So thick a drop serene hath quenched their orbs".

Milton was a word man. I simply walked into that light. It's natural; the mind's eye.

You have money now, and not much time. You only take day-journeys and do not linger past your favourite hour of dusk. You keep discretion too, for you had been a favourite child and when they ceased to understand you, it is only upon hindsight that you can rely. You are

becoming abstract and difficult, and today we should all reconsider difficulty and abstraction. You guarded your art from communality. You broke daylight open with a violence that crystallised our vision. What more noble calling was there?

I've never wanted to be nobility. The common people understand my humour... that's to say, my temperament.

The French were meanwhile gaining ground with the benefits of your techniques. But isn't that always the case? Art that goes unsung provokes song when all that's left of other reputations is mouldy time, when all bets are off. What goes round will come round. The sun still shines and the apocalypse visits daily. You had been there all along, way before: picking up the threads of light, mining the dark tunnels of vision with a small flame and a canary on call. Then your explosions. You saw it all at once, and executed perfection.

And then, an appeasement of the terrible moment. The cold; the light. Shining still; at the river's mouth.

Goodbye old friend. Here you are again.

Turning.

Returning.