

## Ekphrasis and the Ontological Problem of Pastoral

This paper synthesises two problems: ekphrasis and pastoral. Ekphrasis is here understood as the verbal counterpart of a material object, which has not only been the focus of recent literary theoretical attention (e.g., Elsner, Squire), but is also part of current scholarly activity in the wake of a “New Materialist” turn to objects (Purves, Telò & Mueller). Pastoral continues to pose literary and interpretative problems, with a long philosophical and theoretical tradition (Schiller, Halperin, Berger). This paper will connect the two problems through their connections to the ontological distinction between words and things, that is, between *thinking*—characterised by the linguistic order of meaning—and *being*, the mute, material order of objects.

On the one hand, it is easy to see the relevance of ekphrasis to the ontological problem of thinking and being, since ekphrasis, in staging the verbal counterpart of objects, precisely confronts language with materiality. But ekphrasis has not usually been approached at this level: existing scholarship on ekphrasis either reads ekphrasis thematically in order to draw a meaning from the objects described or considers the rhetoric and context of ekphrasis as an education or formation of psychological subjects (Goldhill, Elsner). The first part of the paper outlines what it means to approach ekphrasis ontologically, drawing on early Deleuze, Lacan, and in particular Paul Fry’s argument that ekphrasis in poetry represents a desire to escape the order of significative meaning that is constantly imposed by our existence as subjects of language.

Linking ekphrasis to pastoral, I argue that the escape from signification is also the essential characteristic of pastoral, both in the sense that this is the way in which we approach pastoral as contemporary critics within the long tradition of interpreting pastoral, and as the way in which Theocritean pastoral, in particular, understands itself. This is realised in the

persistent notices in the scholarship of the naturalness of pastoral and its refusals to yield to meaning, and in the programmatic pastoral contrast of the urban and the rustic itself, where the urban represents—beyond any particular *kind* of sophistication—the sophistication of meaning itself, as opposed to the direct presentation of non-signifying being in nature. I compare Berger's classic distinction between weak and strong pastoral and Goldhill's aporetic conclusions on the framing-vs.-framed nature of Hellenistic sophistication in Theocritus in order to argue that what the reception history of pastoral has trained us to do is precisely to read pastoral as the escape from signification, framed ekphrastically in the ontological confrontation of words and things.

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