

## ‘What shall be our new ornaments?’ Description’s Orientations

On 12<sup>th</sup> June 2014, the poet Jonty Tiplady posted the following note on-line:

Ever since I was a boy I was searching for a better description [...] Coming up with a better description is [something]. I need to come up with a better description. But each time it starts again. Each time we obsess again to understand what it was better, to describe the breakdown of the previous description [...] What would it mean to recover from the compulsion to describe like an addict comes off a drug? [...] Each time I live a life without description, I want to go back to a better description, back to the factory of the description.<sup>1</sup>

Description as addiction? Would we admit such a condition and acknowledge a general state of dependency? The confession is suggestive, not only in being a performative re-description of a speech act conventionally understood as constative, but also in its turning of the regulatory aspects of the age-old discourse of description, those repressive injunctions that have sought to control and restrict a register of composition believed to be prone to indulgence and excess in its formal operations -- parataxis; amplification; *enargia* -- and so constitutionally at risk of betraying an ostensibly utilitarian function.<sup>2</sup> Tiplady is also tendentiously framing those diagnostic forms of thinking and writing more usually understood as anti-descriptive, or rather, as understood to have overcome description in the interests of attaining the higher ground of interpretation and critique. As such, the confession carries more than personal resonance, because it is this implied hierarchy, articulated variously over the centuries and according to which description is and should remain a lesser or secondary register, that has been subject recently to a sustained re-evaluation the avowed aspiration of which -- ‘Building a Better Description’ -- is unequivocally a call to return to the factory and keep faith with description’s promises, however dependant or symptomatic the commitment.<sup>3</sup>

The re-purposing of description as a mode peculiarly appropriate to the times began in earnest in 2009, in a special issue of *Representations* devoted to ‘The Way We Read Now’. The context as established is already relatively familiar, and perhaps of only parochial interest, but it bears repeating as counterpoint to Tiplady’s provocation and as frame for what follows here. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, editors of the 2009

volume, acknowledge its origins in a 2006 event intended to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, 'the book that popularized symptomatic reading among U.S. literary critics'.<sup>4</sup> While not intending a sustained argument against the hermeneutics of suspicion, Best and Marcus identify signs of a generational shift in the humanities, away from symptomatic reading as method and, more generally, as orientation, and towards forms of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in the defining essay of this generational shift, calls 'reparative reading'.<sup>5</sup> Symptomatic reading is polemically interpretative and strategically paranoid, concerned with the meaning that matters as being 'hidden, repressed, deep'. 'Surface reading', conversely, operates in its various guises according to an alternative metaphoric, one of susceptibility, immersion, literalism, forgetfulness, weaknesses, and above all, surfaces and proximity. And so arrives description: 'Attention to surface as a practice of critical description [...] We want to ask what it might mean to stay close to our objects of study, without citing as our reason for doing so a belief that those objects encapsulate freedom. We pose this question, in part, out of a sense of political realism about the revolutionary capacities of both texts and critics'.<sup>6</sup>

Come 2016 and description has emerged as perhaps the emblematic term for the kinds of writing imagined and advocated in the 'post-hermeneutical' environment<sup>7</sup> -- not least, so the editors acknowledge, because 'description is everywhere, a ubiquitous and necessary condition of scholarship'.<sup>8</sup> Description as invoked here is far from being new or radically reconceived; indeed, to imagine as much would be to enact yet one more cycle of heroically sceptical overturning, albeit the performative contradiction is impossible entirely to avoid when scepticism has provoked the identification of something other than itself. It is instead a matter of reclamation and transvaluing, and in being so, in keeping with a historical discourse attendant on description that is characterised by opposing valuations of a relatively stable set of constituent parts. Several of these parts are evident in the 'better' description proposed by the editors: the literalism and tautology that are acknowledged and re-valued rather than rejected as impossible or quietistic; the scripting or writtenness of description, according to which the mode is unashamedly and actively an effect of style and so of the creative potentiality of writing; the constitutional pull of

description towards detail and contingent particularity, the eco-critical and queer phenomenological possibilities of which are readily apparent; and so forth.

The avowed intention is thus re-descriptive, with the risk involved being that of repeating description's constitutional tendency, so the story goes, to get precisely nowhere; its tendency, that is, to stop the clock so as to allow the potentially redundant and obstructive accumulation of accidentals. The editors, along with the most inventive of the practitioners, work conceptually from within the conventions to hand, turning them around and about. It is to this project, concerned with the inhabitation of description's own register, that I want to contribute here, in the selection of texts and in the adopted critical mode -- but with one significant difference. The frame established for description's revival is so wide as to be almost all-encompassing, as indicated in the forbiddingly numerous disciplines and contexts cited in the extensive notes, and in the crossings between widely differing contextual understandings of the practice. This breadth of framing is understandable to the extent that the revival is pitched as a matter not only of periodic methodological change but also of the fraught question of the health and continuance of the humanities, and of the latter's presence or otherwise as acknowledged beyond an immediate institutional location. Tactically to work from within description's framings, however, may mean the shrinking rather than expansion of reach and remit. Rather than claim description as 'everywhere... ubiquitous and necessary', I suggest the possibility that it is in writing a relatively infrequent thing -- that it comes rarely -- and more gratuitous than justifiable; and that therein lies its promise and its potential. Again, description as framed in recent accounts appears as an endlessly mobile force, expandable in reach to the point of meaning almost anything; or rather, of meaning almost everything. Most speech acts can be conceived as description or as descriptive. Hence, in part, the addiction and the rhetoric of betterment, enacted one turn at a time as the remit expands. The re-description that follows here is intended to counter such expansiveness by appropriating and inhabiting the historical identification of description as variously secondary, 'an auxiliary discourse', an identification that appears across the ages and that straddles creative and critical (interpretative) fields.<sup>9</sup> Description thus conceived is a minor thing, perhaps not even a thing at all so much as an orientation, akin to what Sedgwick, reading a Proustian ekphrasis, calls 'the structure of a need';<sup>10</sup> or an inclination, to borrow from another recently proposed

model of relation.<sup>11</sup> To acknowledge our desirous investment in the forms of our describing, a desire that need not be expressive of dependency, is to admit the degree of fantasy involved. The writing invoked and imagined, whether defined contextually as creative or critical, has what we might call a feeling for description: a feeling for the feeling that description can have.<sup>12</sup> It tends towards generic conventionality in the sense of the set-piece, whether as standing alone or framed within its setting. Identifying or, again, imagining this rare but significant strain of contemporary writing, together with some of its near antecedents, has required a brief '*nonce* taxonomy' -- four elements in total -- that is also performative in its desire to make something in the act of naming it as being so -- playfully, selectively, hopefully, if perhaps also a little preciously.<sup>13</sup> The interest throughout is less in 'the thing described', albeit relationality is a central concern, than it is in 'the actual movement of the description'.<sup>14</sup>

### **Mere Description**

To begin, there is the matter of description as tending to signify that part of writing most likely to be felt as skippable with impunity, because nothing, or nothing much, happens there. This is in effect the corollary of the notion that description is ubiquitous; for to be everywhere requires, surely, a certain translatability, an absence of active character? Absence, or lack, let's say, is differently understood depending on context. Description is conceived most generally as inhibitive of progression in its reliance on a variously expansive scenario of stopping in order to survey and convey a scene, or of being still in order to conjure a scene for similarly static auditors. This despite description's having been charged, perhaps more in the past than recently, with a reliance on the time-bound passage of syntax, so as being poorly equipped to relay the simultaneity and all-overness of perception. And to prohibit time is to prohibit narrative, hence the belief that descriptive passages in novels or other narrative-inclined writing can and should be the first to go when time is of the essence and we are reading for the plot. If we are inclined to be generous we might allow that description here is supplementary, and as such necessary, to the main matter of what happens next.

Similarly, description is at best preparatory to the activity of interpretation, and at worst, rendered redundant by it; by interpretation, that is, conceived as an action and

an event, compared to which description is inactively passive: a non-event. And in being passive, even if only relative to the ostensible character of another mode of writing, description is quietistic, hence the really stinging charge of its being constitutionally conservative and essentialising. To interpret is gradually over time to explain the matter at hand as being at least partly otherwise to itself, hence the proximity of interpretation to translation; whereas to describe is to risk repeating what is already evident, even when such evidence is nothing more than the tautological naturalisations of ideology and received convention. Again, if we are inclined to be generous we might allow that a degree of preparatory repetition of the material in question is necessary in order to clear or prepare the ground for the activity of interpretation.

All of which only slightly exaggerated backstory is intended to explain description's trademark adjectival inheritance: mere, as in 'mere description' and the 'merely descriptive'. Marcus, Love and Best, editors of 'Description Across the Disciplines', acknowledge the continued currency of the adjectival charge over a wide range of contexts, adding that the 'explicit discomfort' expressed in the public accusation of 'mere description' is a means 'tacit[ly]' of disavowing the necessary inseparability of description and interpretation.<sup>15</sup> The insignificance of the mere is not thereby countered, however, but rather recuperated as further evidence of necessity, in its signifying the minor or secondary: 'Description makes objects and phenomena available for analysis and synthesis'; as such, it is 'a core, if unacknowledged, method in all scholarship and teaching'. A first response to the charge of the mere is thus to re-state description's formative role on the path to interpretation. A second, as suggested above, seeks to discount by transvaluation the very notion of description's being merely anything. Either description is mere, in its being benignly preparatory, or it isn't, in its being rather something else instead.

But what if we were to hold close what Brian Glavey calls 'the mereness of mere description'?<sup>16</sup> The phrase already sounds promising. Bruno Latour, in asking 'What is so wrong with "mere descriptions"?', appears to be thinking along similar lines.<sup>17</sup> And yet while the Latourian register is undoubtedly germane to the current revivalism, in seeking to work past a default mode of critique, it is also another transvaluing according to which description is revealed as 'the highest and rarest achievement'.<sup>18</sup> Surely it can no longer be mere in being so distinguished? And so we

forego the promise of this apparently innocuous inheritance from description's discourse. Mere, after all, is a promising proposition. Its etymological hinterland lies with gleam and glitter, thence with the clear and the bright, and, via *merus* -- unmixed -- a figuring of the true and the genuine. It offers thus a co-existence: the mere as nothing-less-than and the mere as nothing-more-than. Extrapolating from the gift of such an inheritance, we can say of the mereness of mere description that its distinction or quality resides in its being absolutely itself in its insignificance: no more than what it is, hence prone to easy dismissal as not enough, especially, according to those critics of description through the ages, when it is too much. Seeking to substantiate such a claim, we might align description with the interesting as conceived by Sianne Ngai, an alliance made possible in part via a shared affiliation to the mere: as Ngai says, "“Interesting” almost always seems to come with “merely” attached to it, as if to highlight its structural indeterminacy, or what Hegel would call its lack of content’.<sup>19</sup> Description, as orientation as much example, is a case of the merely interesting in the historically-inflected sense established by Ngai, a judgment ‘based not on an existing concept of the object but on a feeling, hard to categorize in its own right, that in spite of its indeterminacy aptly discerns or alerts us precisely to what we do not have a concept for (yet)’.<sup>20</sup> Description's interestingness certainly carries the sense of ‘affective as well as conceptual indefiniteness’ in those relatively rare instances where the possibility of mereness feels to have been essayed in writing.<sup>21</sup> Hence, for example, Kathleen Stewart's attempts to articulate what she calls ‘ordinary affects’ through an ethnographic project of avowedly descriptive prose. Ordinary affects are here akin to the provocations of an everyday interestingness and to the glittering insignificance of things mere. They are those happenings that come fleetingly ‘into view’ (the visual metaphor is in keeping with ekphrasis as a bringing to the mind's eye) when through the ‘density and texture’ of the assemblage of the ordinary, ‘something feels like *something*’.<sup>22</sup> ‘They give circuits and flows the forms of a life’, but as such -- in inhabiting a ‘reeling present’ -- are resistant to the objectifying structurings of ‘representational thinking and evaluative critique’. Hence a descriptive register intended as a ‘contact zone’: ‘to fashion some form of address that is adequate... to say something about ordinary affects by performing some of the intensity and texture that makes them habitable and animate’. Stewart's is a serial form -- ‘an assemblage of disparate scenes’ -- reminiscent of the quintessentially ‘merely interesting’ variations of conceptualism. The tendency is towards a kind of

anecdote, but the cumulative effect, as she gathers examples of like-minded writing, is of what Stewart calls elsewhere ‘strangely realist description’, intermittent evidence of an ‘improvisatory conceptuality, a germinal aesthetic’.<sup>23</sup>

The nearest equivalent in contemporary fictional prose is Claire-Louise Bennett’s *Pond*. Recent innovative fiction, in its Anglo-American guise, is often either resistant to the inherited descriptive tendencies of the prosaic -- in the work, say, of Lydia Davis, Ali Smith, Nell Zink and Diane Williams -- or intent conceptually to inhabit that tendency so as to turn it from within, in the likes of Ben Marcus and Tom McCarthy.<sup>24</sup> Bennett’s *Pond* falls somewhere in-between. It makes no claim to contemporaneity; indeed, it refuses the imposition of such an idea, in a series of sly hints. ‘I’m not sure what now is about’, so the narrator admits.<sup>25</sup> The refusal is played out in part in the writing’s merely descriptive register, akin to Stewart’s serial articulation of ordinary affects in ‘strangely realist’ textural lightness.<sup>26</sup> Bennett’s pond has ‘absolutely no depth whatsoever’, which shallowness marks it out from its unavoidable precursor -- Thoreau’s pond at Walden -- and from those associations suggested and produced variously by depth.<sup>27</sup> The surface is where we are in *Pond*; and of course, the surface is where we are with description, hence the age-old charge of its being constitutionally, even dangerously, inclined to linger over the incidental. Yet even the profundities that might result from descriptive acuity are similarly batted away -- ‘Everyone has seen a sunset -- I will not attempt to describe the precise visual delineations of this one’, hence a motivic resistance to conventions of writerly signifying: ‘Not a metaphor, nothing like that... I don’t want to be in the business of turning things into other things’.<sup>28</sup> *Pond*’s life is in the ‘minor consellations’ of its ‘strangely intimate’ way with matter: in its pens, coloured straws, control knobs, shells and compost.<sup>29</sup> Hence the delivery of a pair of Japanese tapestries does not occasion ekphrastic detailing or framed allegory; indeed, ‘they can hardly be thought of as tapestries at all -- they aren’t much more than two pieces of old black cloth in two separate frames with some rose-gold flecks here and there’.<sup>30</sup> Description frames the ‘one small diagonal area of cloth’ that is decorated, but decides as it goes that large areas of undecorated cloth are not the result of unpicking but are rather just as they appear: ‘Nothing had been undone; there hasn’t ever been more than this [...] just these few details showed enough’.<sup>31</sup> The merely strange realism of Bennett’s descriptions, here and elsewhere, registers a world neither present for human perusal -

- 'I guess what has always frustrated me is the emphasis on the human. We live in a very anthropocentric culture, and the affiliated notion of convenience disgusts me' -- nor other in a respectfully ecological sense.<sup>32</sup> It would be convenient to be able to say that Bennett writes prose akin in its descriptions to the speculatively realist ekphrastic register identified by Timothy Morton, a register of 'intimacy with an alien presence' of co-objecthood: describer and described.<sup>33</sup> Morton's conception chimes with Bennett's up to a point, but it fails to catch the hovering affective ambience, the nothing-less-than-but-nothing-more-than, of mere description. *Pond's* narrator remains variously indifferent (to use her own word) to the lure of description as a finding and fixing of perspective, and to the comfort that accrues from such certainty. She inclines instead towards an 'arrangement of feeling' according to sensation and impression (two more motif words), an 'errant poignancy' that stays with rather than overcomes its surface tensions.<sup>34</sup>

### **Description's Gratuity**

Description's interest as imagined in a register of the merely, a register the foregoing has sought to cherish rather than disavow, lies at one of end of a discursive inheritance. Facing it from a position ostensibly of opposition is the forceful framing of description as decorative and so auxiliary. The opposition is only ostensible because, as already indicated by the idea of the merely, there is a relation between the glittering and the insufficient; a relation, that is, between insufficiency, as being not enough, and the supplemental or excessive. Each is positioned as teetering on the brink of the proper of writing, either weakly prior to it or indulgently additional. The response in each case has tended to be a mobilising of essentially suppressive or repressive injunctions.<sup>35</sup>

'Description decorates'.<sup>36</sup> Lisa Robertson, writing obliquely on the 'important decorative work' of weather description, evokes here, so to turn, this core motif of the general discourse attendant on the mode. As with all such constituent parts there is a retraceable logic at work in the identification and fixing of attitudes across a range of forms of writing, albeit the respective motifs can each carry a different connotation at different historical moments. The motif of description as decoration stems in part from the more general notion of rhetoric as comprising essential and ornamental elements, with the rhetorical form of ekphrasis, allied more broadly with *enargia*,



being an instance of the latter.<sup>37</sup> The tendency of description towards the form of the set-piece leads to its characterisation as ‘gem’, if standing alone, or ‘cyst’, if framed within a larger context (to borrow colourful characterisations from two recent accounts).<sup>38</sup> Description thrives on amplification; and so whether gem or cyst, there is the potential frustration, by disruption or halting, of progression; the frustration, that is, of the time within which narrative or argument unfold. More specifically, it is not amplification per se that brings description into disrepute, rather the nature of the expansion. As evident prominently in the statements supporting a revival of the mode at the present time, the surface is where description resides. To describe is rhetorically to display a scene, so to make it vividly present for the auditor. Hence description is prone to being framed as an ornament twice over: in relation to the substantial text on or in which it sits and in its own visualising operation. Description details – ornaments; embellishes; decorates -- because detailing is its object; and of course, decoration, in connoting a form of superficiality (hence the ‘certain essential superficiality of description’), can be deemed both worryingly meaningless -- the purely decorative parallels the merely descriptive in this regard -- and prone constitutionally to excess, even to supplanting the host body.<sup>39</sup> The gendered and sexualised resonances are all too apparent: to borrow from Grant Scott’s history of the discursive fixing of ekphrasis, ‘The mistrust of finery and ornament at least in part... stems from a fear of its origins in the feminine unconscious. To embellish is to do women’s work; to declare plainly and straightforwardly to further the “manly” cause’.<sup>40</sup> Hence the aforementioned regulatory impulse: ‘At root, the definitions conceal a desire to repress fancy, ornateness, and rhetorical flourish’.<sup>41</sup>

Now, this is not to suggest that the mainline of this element of the discourse has not been reversed -- by Robbe-Grillet and the nouveau-romanciers, most pointedly, whose avowedly anti-humanist ‘interest’ in the mode ‘no longer lies in the thing described, but in the actual movement of the description’, thereby making of decoration a defence against all manner of anthropomorphism and the like.<sup>42</sup> I am seeking to trace here, not a reversal, rather something finer and perhaps less easy to articulate; something like an occupancy of the discursive inheritance, a working both with it and from within. Lisa Robertson hints at such an occupancy in *The Weather*, from whose short prose introduction, presented as an insert in the volume, I have been quoting.<sup>43</sup> The specific field is ‘the rhetorical structure of English meteorological

description', a field inhabited by Robertson after the manner of a 'spy'.<sup>44</sup> Weather description in its more scientific register has been regulated by a variously de-ornamenting imperative, one consequence of which has been a disavowal of the affective life, potentially, of a common currency of weather talk. Robertson inhabits and shifts the language from within -- 'Like a little weather demonstrating formal inexhaustibility, the empirical description is the site of its own transgression' -- and so inherits by embracing the gendering of what is claimed and celebrated now as 'important decorative work': 'my sex is a problem within sincerity [...] I want a viable climate. I'll make it in description';<sup>45</sup> for 'description itself must offer shelter'.<sup>46</sup> Hence a glittering written work of 'Becoming ornament' -- 'We would, with ultra-enriched and devoted femininity, decorate for them' -- and an employment of 'description' itself, this merely common word, as ornament dispersed within the ekphrastic environment of the poem: 'Everything I'm writing about / begins as the robin as the song / sparrow begins is description / animals are description sparkling'.<sup>47</sup>

As Michel Beaujour notes, it is in its set-piece ekphrastic mode, hence as it acquires a degree of what we would identify now as 'aesthetic autonomy', that description came to lay itself open to charges of being 'gratuitous': 'tainted with the dubious reputation of sophistry: a profitable but somewhat undignified display of skill, an ungentlemanly indifference to usefulness, truth, justice, wisdom and the common good'.<sup>48</sup> Robertson inherits as part of her work's ambience description's regulation as intended to preclude a drift towards gratuitous ornament; and as with the idea of the merely, it is in the term of the regulation itself -- its gratuitous inclinations -- that we can gather description's possibilities. The very idea of the gratuitous description registers the seductions it seeks to manage: uncalled for and unearned; and in being unearned, linked, however supplementarily, to currency and exchange. But then also, in being a gift, somehow outside of exchange precisely in so far as believed to be prone to immoderation.

Where Robertson works the decorative surface of description, it is in the 'ekphrastic embroideries' of another arch-describer, Wayne Koestenbaum, that the laws against gratuitousness are flouted, and with them a whole repressive apparatus attendant on the mode.<sup>49</sup> Koestenbaum gestures towards elements of this apparatus in saying of his art writing that it 'has no wish to occupy a superior vantage, looking down on art; nor does [it]... desire to occupy a position of inferior vantage, looking up to art. Nor does

[it]... propose a relation of equal footing, a mutual, interactive gaze'.<sup>50</sup> The writing in question has instead been 'swallowed' by its object: it is '*inside art*'. Koestenbaum is clearly no 'closet ekphrastic', willing to accept only the hedging of a '*seepage* of rhetoric from the visual to the verbal'.<sup>51</sup> Hence 'The Desire to Write', an essay comprising a series of set-piece fantasy descriptions of paintings by Picasso, Matisse and Picabia. The generic framings of ekphrasis are adopted, but rather than seek to control the inclinations of the register, however sophisticatedly ('inclinations' is a word he uses), the writing luxuriates in them: 'I write to multiply occasions for stimulation and to magnify my power to experience pleasure'.<sup>52</sup> Koestenbaum has admitted elsewhere to loving 'the "k" in ekphrasis, like the "k" in Elektra'.<sup>53</sup> And why not, given it is the letter conjoining writer and mode? The link is gratuitous, I should think, and therein resides the clue. The 'k' is the kick or the sting, to feel the risk of which, perhaps even the threat (for the author as much as for the image or the reader), the writing needs to register the restraint being flouted, the restraining of a constitutional tendency to drift, between details and without end.<sup>54</sup> The tendency is acknowledged in these openly desirous pieces as they admit wanting various relations with their images: not only 'to dwell' with them and their figures or to imitate, but 'to be' them, even 'to traverse and to destroy'. The prose essays the standard ekphrastic registers -- a narrative account of the provoking scene; a formalist description of its shapes and colours; a materialist marking of its substances -- but admits alongside such generic staples the wilder identificatory fantasies of dreaming and, repeatedly, of stages of arousal. There is a gratuitous breaching of boundaries in the drift between registers and relations some of which are incommensurable, especially as that drifting happens in writing voyeuristically aware of its own excitements. Koestenbaum's word for this drift is 'looseness', prompted by the application of oil paint to pencil sketch in a Matisse: 'a looseness of morals... or a looseness of writerly technique'.<sup>55</sup> As he admits, 'I often feel like the victim of my own elation'.<sup>56</sup> To borrow from another such ekphrastic indulgence, it is prose which seriously 'overflow(s) the seams'.<sup>57</sup> In so being, and in its flaunting of a gratuitousness akin to the subversive uselessness, the 'undue pleasure', of the aesthetic, the writing comes close to outing description as being, in the words of Beaujour, 'functionally perverse'.<sup>58</sup>

### **Description's Correspondences**

Walter Pater is an obvious antecedent to Koestenbaum, Ruskin too, but the presiding spirit is Roland Barthes, the late Barthes of the ekphrastic *Camera Lucida* and in particular of 'Rasch', an extraordinary descriptive response to Robert Schumann's *Kreislarian*. The music is conceived by Barthes as having its own body accented in sounding, as it 'curls up', 'stretches out', 'wakens', 'declares', 'throbs' and 'irritates'.<sup>59</sup> Koestenbaum's desiring conceit, its verbs in particular, has its origins here in Barthes's interruptive (non-developmental) and desirously affected fragments. The verb is for Barthes a liberation from the adjective, that staple of description that makes of the register not a sign of vitality, as suggested by the classical conception of ekphrasis, but, in its 'feigning' illusion of animation, quite the opposite: 'The adjective is the instrument of this illusion; whatever it says, by its descriptive quality alone, the adjective is funereal'.<sup>60</sup> The way out of this deathly relation -- we feel the deathliness as it reverses the ekphrastic encounter conceived as animating -- does not come by renewed efforts towards 'some substantive or verbal periphrasis', but rather by a change in our conception of the (in this case) musical object, thereby 'to shift the fringe of contact between language and music'. Hence *Kreislarian* heard as 'this body that beats', that pulses, with a repertoire only some of the movements of which are nameable. And in perhaps the most flagrant flouting of descriptive protocol, Barthes admits the possibility that '[He] alone [can] hear them', the sounds of this beating body; admits, that is, the possibility of 'hallucinated evidence'.<sup>61</sup> Description is being led astray.

Barthes's shifting of the fringe of contact between language and its object is his way of evading description's 'predicative fatality'.<sup>62</sup> The effect is a turning of the relationality of description: the inherited scenario, both spatial and temporal, of describer and described, a scenario framed repeatedly in the discourse of description as being, *inter alia*, deferential, overbearing, co-optive, anxious, frustrated or estranged. Varieties of the same conceptual turning appear intermittently in Barthes's late works, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* in particular, with its serial play on the possibility of non-mimetic or analogical forms of being-with. These include the 'contrary excesses' of the copy, understood as 'feigning a spectacularly *flat* respect' for its object, and the systematic distortion; and comparison, at once 'literal and vague', as a form of '*deporting*' of the object.<sup>63</sup> The serial inventions of Barthes's late prose, in which individual items encroach on and leak into their nearest neighbour, is

pluralising; and yet at the risk of disavowing the performative mobility of the writing, we can identify a series of figures of the relation that have as at least one of their motivations a desire to re-describe description: to shift its fringe of contact.

The reimagining of description's relationality, with all that might imply, is one prominently Barthesian inheritance evident in Eve Sedgwick and, in particular, Leo Bersani. There is a moment in the work of each when they alight on an ekphrastic passage from Proust, and in accounting for it, elaborate the promise of description suggested by Barthes. In Bersani's case, on which I shall concentrate, there is the additional resonance of the passage from Proust appearing in the course of a book that is itself a singular instance, in form and register, of description's contemporary promise, and which offers a near antecedent to the contemporary writing gathered here. Arthur Danto is one of very few critics to have recognised the text in question, *Caravaggio's Secrets*, written by Bersani with Ulysse Dutoit, in these terms: as a 'collaborative ekphrasis', one that 'addresses us as members of an ekphrastic community', but that does not 'construe ekphrasis as if it were merely the equivalent of an image' (we can let pass for now Danto's 'merely').<sup>64</sup> The collaborative composition as itself a form of relational practice is significant in being of a piece with the ethics of ekphrasis elaborated in the writing. The Proust moment occurs as Bersani and Dutoit attempt to move beyond the dualism inherent in the conventional accounts of Caravaggio's presentation of himself in his own canvases. Marcel is describing buttercups found on the Guermantes Way, in all their yolky yellowness. An encounter of this kind tends in Proust to follow a characteristic descriptive arc whereby the otherness found in the world, in being identified as such, provokes an 'appetitive relation': an anxious desire to understand 'the object's hidden, precious depths', and in so doing, to appropriate and incorporate difference.<sup>65</sup> The satisfaction of physical devouring -- the imagined ingestion of the buttercups-as-eggs -- enacts by sublimation a relationship of knower and known, the latter having preserved by expansion an integrity only temporarily threatened, albeit pleasurably. On this occasion, however, the chain loops back to the buttercups, in themselves and as viewed. Marcel takes pleasure in the sight but it is a 'generous' pleasure experienced as a form of 'connectedness' or '*nonsadistic* relation', a being both implicated in the world and apart from it: 'Through his pleasure he "corresponds" with and to that which is at once different and identical to himself -- a segment of the world's

appearance'.<sup>66</sup> Hence what is later described by Bersani and Dutoit as 'an active insertion into the movement of being': 'We are not *cut off* from anything: nothing escapes connectedness, the play of and between forms'.<sup>67</sup> 'Nothing escapes connectedness' might stand as a motto for the current vogue for description, in the latter's seeking to testify to the mode as 'connect[ing] us to others -- to those described, to the makers of what we describe, to other describers'.<sup>68</sup>

Bersani and Dutoit's 'collaborative ekphrasis', written in a style that invites in its turn a kind of puzzled participation on the part of the reader, is an exemplary forerunner of contemporary ekphrastic practice. And yet its exemplarity is such to preclude extrapolation as paradigm. It stands rather as the third item in the present series of four, a series that is, again, discontinuous and devoted in each of its instances to description conceived in such a way as to admit its happening, not everywhere and always, but infrequently; a relatively rare thing, in writing, whether as a form of paradoxically constituted mere-ness, as gratuitous ornament or, now, as a particular form of correspondence, a form elaborated by Bersani and Dutoit.

The Caravaggio book can be set alongside that other signal work of contemporary ekphrasis, T.J. Clark's *The Sight of Death*, a quasi-meditative experiment with the repeated viewing of single images over time and with a register of processual writing in which such viewing is held, as a chord is sustained in tonal music, rather than resolved after the fact in the achievement of interpretation.<sup>69</sup> The two are markedly different, but each in its own way, and with varying degrees of explicitness, is concerned specifically to establish a form of relation or relations with its objects, a form the establishment and sustaining of which happens in and through the descriptive register. As complementary instances of a relatively late turn to description, Clark's recent work is the more sustained of the two; but it is Bersani who speculates broadly on 'new modes of relating and relationality', some of which are not in fact new, but rather, 'ways that exist anyway, but which we are trained, culturally, not to notice'.<sup>70</sup> Description as I am imagining it here is one such inherited but newly resonant form of relationality in writing, a form of the 'non-identical sameness' that preoccupies late Bersani and which he identifies variously as 'homoness, inaccurate replication... similitude... likeness'.<sup>71</sup> As we saw with the reading of Proust's buttercups, 'relational being' thus imagined is non-dualistic, non-appropriative, non-identificatory and non-interpretative. Interpretation is replaced by

what Bersani calls ‘correspondences of forms’: ‘the continuation of all things elsewhere’, a continuation that ‘in contributing new inscriptions’ is also ‘an accretion’.<sup>72</sup> Correspondences thus conceived are the aforementioned ‘inaccurate replications’ in which the universe consists, through ‘perpetual and imperfect recurrences of forms’ that guarantee a ‘kind of looping movement’ between object and subject, each finding itself and being found in the other.<sup>73</sup> As this suggests, Bersani is articulating nothing less than ‘an ontological regime of correspondences in which the discreteness of all things... is superseded, not by universal fusions but [again] by the continuation of all things elsewhere’. The shattering of the self is replaced by ‘self-dispersal’: ‘the pleasure of finding ourselves harboured within [the world]’.<sup>74</sup>

Descriptive correspondence as an instance of inaccurate replication: this is what I take from Bersani and what is worked out in detail in his collaborative readings with Dutoit (and elsewhere). Perhaps ‘inaccurate replication’, in the loopingly reciprocal sense proposed, is a term suitable for the discontinuous series of descriptive registers noted here. Description’s constitutionally relational operation would shift away from one of the many modes assigned to it through the ages -- commemorative; enumerative; contemplative; melancholic; elegiac; deferential; passive-aggressive; paranoid; alienating -- and settle instead on a kind of ‘mysticism’ or ‘mystical orientation’.<sup>75</sup> Such a mode will likely be a rare achievement, but all the more valuable for being occasional.

### **Description’s Praises**

Malcolm Bowie recognises in Bersani’s recent work the practice of ‘criticism as an ecstatic and epiphanic art’, one of ‘intensities’ by force of which a visual or verbal element is ‘affirmed’.<sup>76</sup> Description is not the only register essayed in the writing, but it is the one with the richest resonance, in terms of discursive inheritance, and the most potential, in terms of a frustrating or disavowing of ostensible distinctions between what would now be recognised as critical and creative orientations. Affirmation, marked by Bowie in Bersani, is one of the means and of the symptoms of this disavowal, linked as it is the classical conception of ekphrasis; in particular, to ekphrasis understood as a type of discourse evident in two of the three branches of rhetoric: the judicial or forensic, and that ceremonial display of praise or blame

known as *epideictic*. While the two branches are equally purposive and prompting of judgement, it is the latter that tends to be identified as the origin of description practised as a semi-detached or detachable rhetorical exercise. And it is the appraising relation of description as praise -- as linked to 'thanks and acts of grace... a sort of gift-in-return' -- that draws it within the range of those reparative critical modes suggested by Eve Sedgwick.<sup>77</sup>

Of those registers of description loosely gathered in series here the praiseful is perhaps the rarest. Descriptive work of the attentively celebrative variety has never been more common than it is now, especially in essayistic nature writing the ironic flowering of which has been the most prominent literary symptom of ecological crisis. And yet much of this writing, however dutifully well-informed, lacks an inclination towards description; lacks, that is, a descriptive orientation -- a being within and without its inherited convention -- such as I have sought to identify in various forms across a disparate and discontinuous range of texts. This orientation in its praiseful register is nowhere better displayed than in the *Journals* of the English poet R.F. Langley, a series of set-piece daybook entries describing flora and fauna, buildings and art works. Langley acknowledges the Victorian origins of this kind of diaristic descriptive prose, and its more recent antecedents in the 'ambiance of avowal' of eidetic description in phenomenology and forms of psychoanalytically inflected contemplation.<sup>78</sup> The inheritance is palpable in writing that makes no claim to innovation or intervention in establishing a 'generous sameness' between itself and its provoking occasions, and, in its gratuitous pleasurableness, between itself and the reader.<sup>79</sup>

At the heart of the volume are five extended entries describing time spent in the medieval church at Westhall in Suffolk.<sup>80</sup> It is in three of these five entries that Langley sounds a singularly affirming note of praise, what in the present context we might identify as mere praise.<sup>81</sup> The note is struck in the entry dated August 1992: 'So long since I wrote. A year. Who cares? What then? Little'.<sup>82</sup> A daybook is mere description. Convention suggests that it is also a notating of the scale of things, the composition of prose as an establishment of scale. The little that it matters, in the grand scheme of things, does not, however, remain 'still'. It is taken up further in this long paragraph of ekphrasis with reference to the 'Heartstopping littleness of the huge space. The unreasonable strength of everything which is nothing more'.<sup>83</sup> The merely



is the nothing-more-than, and yet littleness is serving here to predicate the sheer and paradoxical size of the inside -- of the provoking space as well as of the writing it has provoked, the blocked space of the prose as it passes from outside to in, then out again into the fields, then back via a butterfly passing into a side aisle. All is at once elsewhere and 'here, still'. The confirming and organising 'I' of the describer of the scene is barely mentioned, replaced by a self-othering 'you' (the standing outside oneself of the ecstatic); and while the space of the composition is filled by sensory registerings of sound, smell, and above all, light as it passes into the inside space, the markings of such do not confirm the coincident presence of the describer -- *pace* a classically phenomenological or aesthetic orientation -- nor the matter of description as a making present. Rather, description, like the space it attends, appears to have passed 'beyond all normal uses, messages, instructions', hence this singularly ecstatic register as a form of 'paying tribute'.<sup>84</sup>

Touch appears first to act in its conventional role as the sense most confirming of haecceity: of 'uncommented Westhall' as 'just matter'. Description notates the matter of the world in its remaining merely itself regardless of commentary: 'Uncaught... unspeakable... uncommented... unmoved'.<sup>85</sup> As such, 'when you touch, you have not touched, because their thingness is so dense, so alien'.<sup>86</sup> And yet deference to what is 'just matter', one of description's default modes, is not accompanied here by a self-chastising melancholy of distance or belatedness, describer to described, a melancholy which is only another means of establishing perspective and so of confirming one's own place. The relation now is different, closer to the 'self-dispersal' imagined by Bersani. The dryness that signals age -- the bat droppings; the powder; the dry stone -- lays claim to 'your hand and feet as stuff', while 'the fragment of freestone you take with you in the glove compartment' intermingles old and still with new and mobile such that each 'stops' where it is in the other.<sup>87</sup> The dent of grass-head on finger 'takes the fingertips away from you, in the place beyond'; takes all of you as you are now, 'at risk, half gone'. And in the most extraordinary instance of 'non-identical sameness', the very church itself appears actively to describe the light to which it yields: 'Astoundingly full, undiminished, attending to the changes of light through every day, never losing connection with the whole world under the sky, but never less than complete, as it is now, and now'.<sup>88</sup> Thus the building itself, both replete and open, is described as describing.

Langley channels each of the three descriptive orientations: the merely that is occupied rather than overcome or sublimated; the desirously gratuitous and ornamental; and an accretive non-identical sameness. The vividly praising note proposed here as the fourth orientation -- ‘What it is, this evening, is this: glorious. Glories’ -- sounds another form of relationality, an affirming testimony ecstatic in the scale-bending sense of turning outside in and in, out, so as to make an open field of ‘co-perception’ in which description’s relations, its likenesses, are almost hallucinatory, ‘split and stretched and quivered, quivering’.<sup>89</sup>

The highs of the Langleyan register are of an order different to those invoked by Jonty Tiplady. The hit of confirmation -- of world, self or achieved statement -- is not in their gift, nor do they seek an understanding better than the one that came before. Like those other registers of contemporary writing the inclinations and antecedents of which I have sought to mark, they inhabit rather than seek either to disavow or step outside their discursive inheritance. They are an orientation in writing, blurring of the boundaries between, on the one hand, the critical or explanatory, where words are avowedly about that towards which they point, and on the other, the ostensible freestandingness of the art work. Similarly, they occupy a commons of contemporary writing in which inherited distinctions of mode or form no longer pertain; for description, as now viewed, has always been constitutionally hybrid, the creative strain in the critical (hence the discursive anxieties) and vice versa (hence the lowly reputation). Such writing offers glimpses of description as being what Lyn Hejinian calls a ‘particular and complicated process of thinking’: ‘phenomenal rather than epiphenomenal’, ‘a method of invention and composition’ requiring not a theory but a poetics.<sup>90</sup> It ‘should not be confused with definition; it is not definitive but transformative’.<sup>91</sup> The writing thus essayed, some of the possibilities of which have been gathered here, displays the orientations of our ‘new ornaments’.

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<sup>1</sup> Tiplady’s text, along with its location, has since disappeared.

<sup>2</sup> Grant F. Scott, ‘The Rhetoric of Dilation: Ekphrasis and Ideology’, *Word & Image*, 7 (1991), pp. 301-10.

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<sup>3</sup> Sharon Marcus, Heather Love, and Stephen Best, 'Building a Better Description', *Representations*, 135 (Summer 2016), pp. 1-21. This is the editors' introduction to a special issue of the journal on the subject of 'Description Across Disciplines'.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction', *Representations*, 108 (Fall 2009), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Sedgwick's essay, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', appears in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, published in 2003 (Durham and London: Duke University Press), but is acknowledged there as having its origins in work published as far back as 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Best and Marcus, p. 11, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Emily Apter and Elaine Freedgood, 'Afterword', *Representations*, 108 (Fall 2009), p. 143.

<sup>8</sup> Marcus, Love and Best, 'Building a Better Description', p. 1. The emergence of description as a favoured mode over the course of the early 2010s can be seen also, for example, in the Spring 2014 special issue of *New Literary History* (45, 2), on the subject of 'Interpretation and its Rivals'. Rita Felski, as editor, suggests that 'we are now in the midst of the method wars', hence the issue's titular topic (p. 1). Description's contested relationship with interpretation is the reason for its being proposed, and more so, for its emblematic status. See also Felski's *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Heather Love, 'Close But Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn', *New Literary History*, 41 (2010), pp. 371-91; Rónán McDonald, 'After Suspicion: Surface, Method, Value', in Rónán McDonald (ed.), *The Values of Literary Studies: Critical Institutions, Scholarly Agendas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 235-48; and Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski (eds), *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Philippe Hamon, 'Rhetorical Status of Description', translated by Patricia Baudoin, *Yale French Studies*, 61 (1981), p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'The Weather in Proust', in *The Weather in Proust* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 32.

<sup>11</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*, translated by Amanda Minervini and Adam Sitze (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> On description in contemporary literature -- the novel, in this instance -- as offering a form of readerly consolation, see David James, 'Critical Solace', *New Literary*

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*History*, 47.4 (2016), pp. 481-504. James acknowledges the relation between contemporary novelistic description and those descriptive registers of critical practice suggested by the likes of Marcus, Love and Best.

<sup>13</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), p. 23. Wayne Koestenbaum, an inveterate describer invoked in what follows, refers to his most recent descriptive sequence as ‘nonce interpretation’ (*Notes on Glaze: 18 Photographic Investigations* (Brooklyn NY: Cabinet, 2016), p. 15).

<sup>14</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, ‘Towards a New Novel’ (1962), ‘*Snapshots*’ and ‘*Towards a New Novel*’, translated by Barbara Wright (London: Calder and Boyars, 1965), p. 146.

<sup>15</sup> Marcus, Love and Best, ‘Building a Better Description’, p. 2. The editors proceed to assert that description’s workings are ‘rarely as simple as its critics imply’.

<sup>16</sup> Brian Glavey, *The Wallflower Avant-Garde: Modernism, Sexuality, and Queer Ekphrasis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 136.

<sup>18</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p. 137.

<sup>19</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 135. Ngai herself draws on Latour’s linking of interesting critical writing with the ‘network’ as, specifically, a ‘technique of describing’ (p. 114).

<sup>20</sup> Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 116.

<sup>21</sup> Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, p. 117.

<sup>22</sup> Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp. 1-3. Compare Stewart’s essay in the description-themed issue of *Representations*, where she refers to ‘an activation of the details of something suddenly somehow at hand’ (‘The Point of Precision’, *Representations*, 135 (Summer 2016), p. 40).

<sup>23</sup> Stewart, ‘The Point of Precision’, p. 43.

<sup>24</sup> On the consolations of description in contemporary fiction -- Cormac McCarthy, W.G. Sebald, Kazuo Ishiguro -- see James, ‘Critical Solace’.

<sup>25</sup> Claire-Louise Bennett, *Pond* (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2015), p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> Kathleen Stewart, ‘The Point of Precision’, p. 35.

<sup>27</sup> Bennett, *Pond*, p. 40.

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<sup>28</sup> Bennett, *Pond*, p. 126, pp. 164-65.

<sup>29</sup> Bennett, *Pond*, p. 49, p. 76.

<sup>30</sup> Bennett, *Pond*, p. 25.

<sup>31</sup> Bennett, *Pond*, p. 30.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Claire-Louise Bennett: Modes of Solitude, Embodiment and Mystery’, interview with Susanne Stich, *Honest Ulsterman* (June 2015), <http://humag.co/features/claire-louise-bennett>

<sup>33</sup> Timothy Morton, ‘Here Comes Everything: The Promise of Object-Oriented Ontology’, *Qui Parle*, 19.2 (2011), pp. 170-71.

<sup>34</sup> Bennett, *Pond*, p. 110, p. 48.

<sup>35</sup> Cynthia Sundberg Wall notes the eighteenth century in particular as a period of exception to the rule of the denigration of description as ornament (*The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 25). The first chapter of Wall’s book, ‘A History of Description, a Foundling’, provides a helpful overview of the life and times of the mode (pp. 7-40).

<sup>36</sup> Lisa Robertson, ‘Introduction to *The Weather*’, *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office of Soft Architecture* (Toronto: Coach House, 2011), p. 60.

<sup>37</sup> Michel Beaujour, ‘Some Paradoxes of Description’, *Yale French Studies*, 61 (1981), p. 42. My reading here and throughout the present essay moves relatively freely between description and ekphrasis, using the latter on those occasions where others, dealing with the same material, have done so before me (as in the case of Sedgwick reading Proust or, as we shall see, Danto reading Bersani and Dutoit), and when referring specifically to verbal accounts of visual artworks. As Ruth Webb suggests, however, ekphrasis understood specifically as writing that seeks to describe visual art is a recent historical development, a narrowing of the broad remit of an ancient rhetorical mode: ekphrasis conceived as ‘the use of language to try to make an audience imagine a scene’ (*Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), p. 3). The difference between the two terms, ekphrasis and description, is a matter not of respective subject matter but of emphasis: ‘in the ancient definition the referent is only of secondary importance; what matters... is the impact on the listener’ – that is, the ‘effect’ of the verbal performance, ‘over and above any formal or referential characteristics’ (Webb, pp. 7-8).

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- <sup>38</sup> Hamon describes description as a ‘a sort of radically different textual cyst’ (‘Rhetorical Status’, p. 5), while Beaujour makes the analogy with ‘gems (‘which they often “imitate” in primarily descriptive literature, such as the poetry of the French Parnassiens’ (‘Some Paradoxes’, p. 42)).
- <sup>39</sup> Edward S. Casey, ‘Literary Description and the Phenomenological Method’, *Yale French Studies*, 61 (1981), p. 187.
- <sup>40</sup> Scott, ‘The Rhetoric of Dilation’, p. 305. The classic account is Naomi Schor’s *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*: ‘To focus on the detail and more particularly on the *detail as negativity* is to become aware... of its participation in a larger semantic network, bounded on the one side by the *ornamental*, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the *everyday*, whose “prosiness” is rooted in the sphere of social life presided over by women’ ((New York and London: Methuen, 2006), p. 4).
- <sup>41</sup> Scott, ‘The Rhetoric of Dilation’, p. 305.
- <sup>42</sup> Robbe-Grillet, ‘Towards a New Novel’, p. 146.
- <sup>43</sup> The insert is given the title ‘Introduction to *The Weather*’ in Robertson’s *Occasional Work*. A rhetorical question from this short text has been borrowed as the title of the present essay.
- <sup>44</sup> Lisa Robertson, ‘The Weather: A Report on Sincerity’ (2001), <http://www.dcpoetry.com/anthology/242>
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>46</sup> Lisa Robertson, *The Weather* (London: Reality Street, 2001), p. 30.
- <sup>47</sup> Robertson, *The Weather*, p. 60, p. 24; ‘The Weather’.
- <sup>48</sup> Beaujour, ‘Some Paradoxes’, p. 30. For further instances of gratuitousness as a motif in the discourse of description, see Scott, ‘The Rhetoric of Dilation’.
- <sup>49</sup> Wayne Koestenbaum, *Notes on Glaze*, p. 102.
- <sup>50</sup> Wayne Koestenbaum, ‘Fag Limbo’ (2004), *My 1980s and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), pp. 199-200.
- <sup>51</sup> Bryan Wolf, ‘Confessions of a Closet Ekphrastic’, *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 3 (Spring 1990), p. 185. Emphasis added.
- <sup>52</sup> Wayne Koestenbaum, ‘The Desire to Write’ (2011), *My 1980s*, p. 301.
- <sup>53</sup> Charlie Fox, interview with Wayne Koestenbaum, *White Review*, online issue (February 2013), <http://www.thewhitereview.org/interviews/interview-with-wayne-koestenbaum/>

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<sup>54</sup> On this subject, see Koestenbaum's ekphrastic 'Restraint' (*Notes on Glaze*, p. 22).

<sup>55</sup> Koestenbaum, 'The Desire to Write', *My 1980s*, p. 304.

<sup>56</sup> Koestenbaum, 'The Desire to Write', *My 1980s*, p. 314.

<sup>57</sup> Koestenbaum, *Notes on Glaze*, p. 13.

<sup>58</sup> Beaujour, 'Paradoxes of Description', p. 58. Koestenbaum refers to the ekphrases of *Notes on Glaze* as 'nothing but the investigations of a failure to see, and confessions of undue pleasure taken in the labyrinth of saying' (p. 15).

<sup>59</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Rasch' (1975), *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, translated by Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 299-312.

<sup>60</sup> *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, translated by Richard Howard (London: Papermac, 1995), p. 68. Robbe-Grillet had said much the same thing of the adjective, as noted and glossed by Barthes in the early essay, 'Objective Literature' (*Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1972), pp. 13-24).

<sup>61</sup> Barthes, 'Rasch', p. 302, p. 303.

<sup>62</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice' (1972), *The Responsibility of Forms*, p. 269.

<sup>63</sup> *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, p. 44, p. 58.

<sup>64</sup> Arthur C. Danto, 'Caravaggio's Gaze', <http://linguafranca.mirror.theinfo.org/br/caravaggio.html>. On Bersani's collaborative writing with Dutoit, see also Brian Glavey's 'Leo Bersani and the Universe' (*Criticism*, 52 (2010), pp. 321-22).

<sup>65</sup> Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Caravaggio's Secrets* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1998), p. 68. The commentary on Proust, from which I quote liberally, runs from pp. 67-71.

<sup>66</sup> Bersani and Dutoit, *Caravaggio's Secrets*, p. 71.

<sup>67</sup> Bersani and Dutoit, *Caravaggio's Secrets*, p. 72.

<sup>68</sup> Marcus, Love and Best, 'Building a Better Description', p. 14.

<sup>69</sup> T.J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006). Clark's critical writing here and in the work that followed is occupied variously with the process of description as that mode presents itself today, both within the frame of art-critical writing and beyond, in

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implied relation to contemporary visual culture. See also ‘Poussin’s Sacrament of Marriage: An Interpretation’, *New Literary History*, 45.2 (2014), pp. 221-252.

<sup>70</sup> Nicholas Royle, ‘Beyond Redemption: An Interview with Leo Bersani’, *Oxford Literary Review*, 20 (1998), p. 188. Bersani repeatedly acknowledges his debt to late Foucault in thinking ‘new relational modes’ (for example, in ‘Father Knows Best’ (2010), collected in *Thoughts and Things* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 12)

<sup>71</sup> As collated in Glavey, ‘Leo Bersani’, p. 322.

<sup>72</sup> Leo Bersani, ‘Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject’, *Critical Inquiry*, 32.2 (2006), p. 164, p. 170, p. 169. This essay offers the best account of Bersani’s thinking in his later works.

<sup>73</sup> Bersani, ‘Psychoanalysis’, p. 168, p. 169.

<sup>74</sup> Leo Bersani, ‘Re-perusal, Registered’, *Henry James Review* 32.3 (2011), p. 280. Sedgwick’s ‘The Weather in Proust’ ends on a similar note.

<sup>75</sup> Glavey, ‘Leo Bersani’, p. 319; Sedgwick, ‘The Weather in Proust’, p. 34.

<sup>76</sup> Malcolm Bowie, ‘Bersani on Proust’, *Oxford Literary Review*, 20 (1998). pp. 30-31. Bowie notes the Proustian moment in the Caravaggio book.

<sup>77</sup> Hamon, ‘Rhetorical Status’, p. 3; Sedgwick, Introduction, *Touching Feeling*, p. 8.

<sup>78</sup> Edward Casey, ‘Literary Description’, p. 182.

<sup>79</sup> Pleasure, according to Hamon -- ‘the pleasure of producing it [description] and the pleasure of consuming it’ -- is one of the ‘blind spots’ of the discourse of description (‘Rhetorical Status’, p. 25). ‘Generous sameness’ is taken from Langley’s *Journals* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2006), p. 79).

<sup>80</sup> The entries in question can be found on pp. 35-39, 60-62, 62-64, 69-71 and 81-82. For a reading of Langley’s descriptive prose in its relation to the ekphrastic inclinations of his poetry, see Conor Carville, “‘The Degree of Power Exercised’: Recent Ekphrasis’, in Peter Robinson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 286-302.

<sup>81</sup> I have been influenced in thinking about the relation of description and praise by two very different critical works in which the latter is invoked: Susan Stewart’s *The Poet’s Freedom: a Notebook on Making* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2011), which includes a section devoted to praising as an act and orientation related variously to poetry and the poetic (pp. 29-52); and Stanley Cavell’s *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard



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University Press, 2005), in which praise -- ‘an idea of praise, or appraising, or appreciating, or, one might say, transference’ -- describes a critical register intended to determine the ‘grounds of... pleasure and value in the working of the object’: ‘The idea remembers that the ability to praise guards against the threat of skepticism’ (p. 4, p. 67, p. 3)

<sup>82</sup> Langley, *Journals*, p. 60.

<sup>83</sup> Langley, *Journals*, p. 61.

<sup>84</sup> Langley, *Journals*, p. 60.

<sup>85</sup> Langley, *Journals*, pp. 60-61.

<sup>86</sup> Langley, *Journals*, p. 61.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Langley, *Journals*, p. 60.

<sup>89</sup> Peter Larkin, ‘Being Seen For Seeing: A Tribute to R.F. Langley’s *Journals*’, *Intercapillary Space*, <http://intercapillaryspace.blogspot.co.uk/2008/08/being-seen-for-seeing-tribute-to-r-f.html>. Marcus, Love and Best refer in passing to the possibility of description’s scalic shifts as a form of ‘ecstatic dispossession’ (‘Building a Better Description’, p. 14).

<sup>90</sup> Lyn Hejinian, ‘Strangeness’ (1988), *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), p. 138.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.