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**Review: *Ekphrasis, Memory, and Narrative After Proust: Prose Pictures and Fictional Recollection* by Leonid Bilmes, London: Bloomsbury, 2023, 256 pp., ISBN 9781350336834, h/bk £85, e-book £61.20**

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Review of *Ekphrasis, Memory, and Narrative After Proust: Prose Pictures and Fictional Recollection* (2023) by Leonid Bilmes.

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‘Some twenty–five years after defining ekphrasis as the verbal representation of visual representation,’ writes James A.W. Heffernan, ‘I have come to see the limits of this definition’ (2019: 258). Such a statement by a seasoned scholar of ekphrasis testifies to a sustained and generative reassessment of this term within intermedial criticism in recent years, emphasizing what Heffernan calls its profoundly ‘[p]rotean’ nature (2019: 265). This sea change in the critical understanding of ekphrasis is emblemized in Renate Brosch’s call for ‘a broader view’ of the term that ‘would take account of an expanded domain of visual images available for ekphrastic writing as well as of the fact that it is not a visual *representation* being represented but the *perception* of a visual image that is translated into verbal form’ (2018: 226, my emphasis). Here, Brosch stresses the historical dimension of our relationship to images and insists on attending to the complex yet often opaque processes involved in visual perception. The move from ‘the verbal representation of visual representation’ to the verbal *translation* of a visual *perception* dispenses with the assumption that ekphrasis must remain dedicated to rendering a visual work of art into writing. Odes to Greek urns or musings on *The Fall of Icarus* are not, in the new school, the only forms of ekphrastic writing. There is an irony here since, as Heffernan notes, this recent reevaluation of ekphrasis is a partial return to ekphrasis’ original, more expansive definition from antiquity—Theon defined it as ‘exhibitionistic [literally ‘leading around’] speech, vividly leading the subject before the eyes’ (2019: 257).

Leonid Bilmes’ *Ekphrasis, Memory, and Narrative after Proust: Prose Pictures and Fictional Recollection* (2023) enters ekphrasis studies with a precise concern that emphatically enriches the field’s expanding understanding of an ancient technique. Defining ekphrasis simply as ‘vivid *prose* description’ (thereby echoing the broader definition of the term from antiquity) (13), Bilmes’ study concentrates on ‘mnemonic ekphrases’ in particular—that is, the way that certain writers use vivid, focalized description to stage the recollection of a memory–image (5). But, for Bilmes, mnemonic ekphrasis is not simply a subtype of ekphrasis. The book’s unique project rests on three claims that argue for an intrinsic relationship between memory and ekphrasis. First, that memory is an irreducibly visual medium (even if other senses are involved). Second, that the operation of ekphrasis is always in some way reliant on describing an image as it hovers in the ‘mind’s eye’ (14). Third, that ‘ekphrastic speech is composed with a view to being ... *memorable* for the audience’ (6, my emphasis). This latter claim will inform the text’s sustained concern with what makes a literary description especially vivid or captivating. By privileging the role of memory, *Ekphrasis, Memory, and Narrative after Proust* offers a novel reading of Proustian imagery and an informative articulation of the temporal and psychological dynamism contained within acts of ekphrasis.

We learn more about memory and ekphrasis by studying writers that explicitly and dramatically conjoin the two. *Ekphrasis, Memory, and Narrative after Proust* tracks the staging of the description of memory in the works of Vladimir Nabokov, W.G. Sebald, Ben Lerner, Ali Smith, and Lydia Davis. The study devotes one chapter to each author, with a focus on their novels and short stories. While these writers share a general interest in the task of translating memory into prose, what specifically connects them as a group, according to Bilmes, is that their approach to ekphrasis is ‘implicitly or explicitly indebted to Proust’s generic model’ (216). This text is therefore not so much a study of the *direct* influence Proust bears on contemporary memory-writers (or the way they reference his work) as it is a selection of authors who attempt to picture memory in prose, and who thus unavoidably work through Proust’s ‘blueprint’ (83). Foremost among the issues Proust’s writing inaugurates, Bilmes suggests, is ‘ekphrastic hope’ (154) or ‘ekphrastic desire’ (120), whereby the text’s captivating description of a memory-image would seek to eliminate all traces of itself *as* writing and would instead perfectly hold, recover, and transmit that image to its intended audience. But this ekphrastic hope is always haunted by its shadow, ‘ekphrastic fear’, which is ‘the knowing that voice may blind vision, that the text itself may engulf the scene of its conjuring’ (211). An exploration of the generative struggle between this hope and fear, framed as a paradox, underwrites the examination of writing memory after Proust. It’s worth noting, too, that in this formalist and philosophical inquiry into the antagonism inherent within the Proustian mode of writing memory-perception that issues of history, politics, and categories like race, gender, and sexuality are left chiefly in the background of this critical conversation. This offers one avenue in which Bilmes’ work—interested in perception, memory, desire, and fear—could be usefully developed by future scholars.

Chapter one, the longest section of the book, argues that the staging of involuntary memory throughout Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* ultimately prioritizes the visual over other senses. Further, Bilmes argues that ‘what makes Proustian ekphrases distinct (and, crucially memorable) are precisely the *visual metaphors* that compose them’ (35). At first, these claims may seem modest, but they serve as a platform for a careful examination of involuntary memory throughout *À la recherche du temps*. Bilmes traces the intricate poetics of Proust’s painterly and surprising descriptions, revealing how Proust uses metaphor, analogy, and ‘as if’ formulations to slow the rhythm of diegetic time and thereby enthrall the reader. Chapter two continues this study of Proust, further emphasizing the implicit fear, irony, and self-reflexivity that stalks the nostalgic hope of Proustian narration in its quest for making the past present.

Chapter three moves to Nabokov's *Ada*, where Bilmes underscores the dilation of narrative time that ekphrastic depiction produces (thus illustrating how temporality is spatialized through ekphrasis' work of translation, just as it voices images). Drawing on Mark Currie's work on futurity in narrative form, this chapter also explores how *Ada* theorizes several ways that the future is positioned in relation to memory. Turning to Sebald's *Austerlitz* in chapter four, *Ekphrasis, Memory, and Narrative after Proust* examines the role of photographs and archives as dangerous supplements to personal memory. Chapter five's discussion of Lerner's cultivation of 'anticipatory memory' (151) and 'collective gazing' (159) is roughly ten pages and the ideas, sadly, feel underdeveloped. Nevertheless, its reading gestures at promising insights about Lerner's interest in the role of the digital image in connecting various spectators.

Chapters six and seven are the most unique chapters (and, in this reader's opinion, accompany the chapters on Proust as the most dazzling). In its final sections, the book begins to 'emphasize [the dimension of] voice' in memory-description (215). Chapter six examines how the 'vocal rhythm' (168) of *How to Be Both*'s ekphrastic description 'fosters the sense of our *participation* in the protagonist-narrator's seeing' (166). Further, by exploring the 'unstable intermedial "transposition"' of ekphrasis within Smith's novel (173)—an unstable translation whereby image changes into text, sight into hearing, object into subject, diegetic narration into ekphrastic voice, stillness into motion—this chapter theorizes the revelation of a third 'common thing' that emerges within the experience of encountering vivid description (176). Such an inquiry into a 'common thing'—or a bothness that undoes prior dualisms—connects to the introduction's discussion of WJT Mitchell's 'imagetext' (7) as well as various other neologisms within the study that insist on blending seemingly distinct terms, like the elaboration of Jacques Rancière's 'sentence-image' (45), or the analysis of Proust's 'ironized nostalgia' (83). Chapter seven's reading of Davis, meanwhile, serves as a limit case to the book's study. Rather than picturing memory, Bilmes illustrates how *The End of the Story* describes the inability to remember. While previous authors like Sebald have demonstrated an underlying dynamic between memory and forgetting, Davis, this chapter argues, most forcefully dramatizes how 'the sense of absence ... haunts every ekphrasis of memory's sightings' (197).

This overview captures the central threads of *Ekphrasis, Memory, and Narrative after Proust*, but does a disservice to the detailed readings of the poetics of memory, which is the study's greatest feature. Bilmes pays precise attention to the forms of his authors' prose, with special care dedicated to the modulation of narrative rhythm, the operation of metaphor and analogy, and the grammar and syntax of described perception within contemporary literary writing. These readings, which are often surprising and

thorough, are supported by extensive references to a vast literature on memory from antiquity onwards. They also provide a balanced engagement between intermedial critics (particularly WJT Mitchell and Liliane Louvel) and prior critical work on the book's selected authors. While there's a gesture toward neuroscientific research into memory in chapter one, there's a greater emphasis throughout on phenomenological and continental approaches to perception, writing, and memory (with several citations from, among others, Henri Bergson, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot, and Jean-Luc Nancy). At times, the sense of argument within individual chapters seems to fade among the explication of additional conceptual frameworks or the introduction of further intertexts, but these supplementary materials are always clearly explained and, overall, *Ekphrasis, Memory, and Narrative after Proust* provides an effective study of contemporary prose's poetics of memory. Furthermore, each chapter manages to develop the insights of the previous entries so that the final picture produced by *Ekphrasis, Memory, and Narrative after Proust* shows us, paradoxically, that no image-description can conclusively disremember its textuality, just as no memory can be recalled without being transformed by its first being forgotten. Such a study will be useful for critics interested in the text's selected authors, invaluable for those wishing to follow Brosch's call to expand the general field of ekphrasis, and unforgettable for scholars interested in how contemporary prose works and writes with images.

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### Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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