

Introduction to Modern Poetry

Objects, Landscapes, People: Description in Modern Lyric

Lecturer:
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This lecture will focus on how modern poetry approaches the outside world by means of description.

“Description” does not sound very “sexy”, especially when it comes to lyric poetry. However, as a way of artistically grasping the world around us, it becomes an essential strategy in modern poetry.

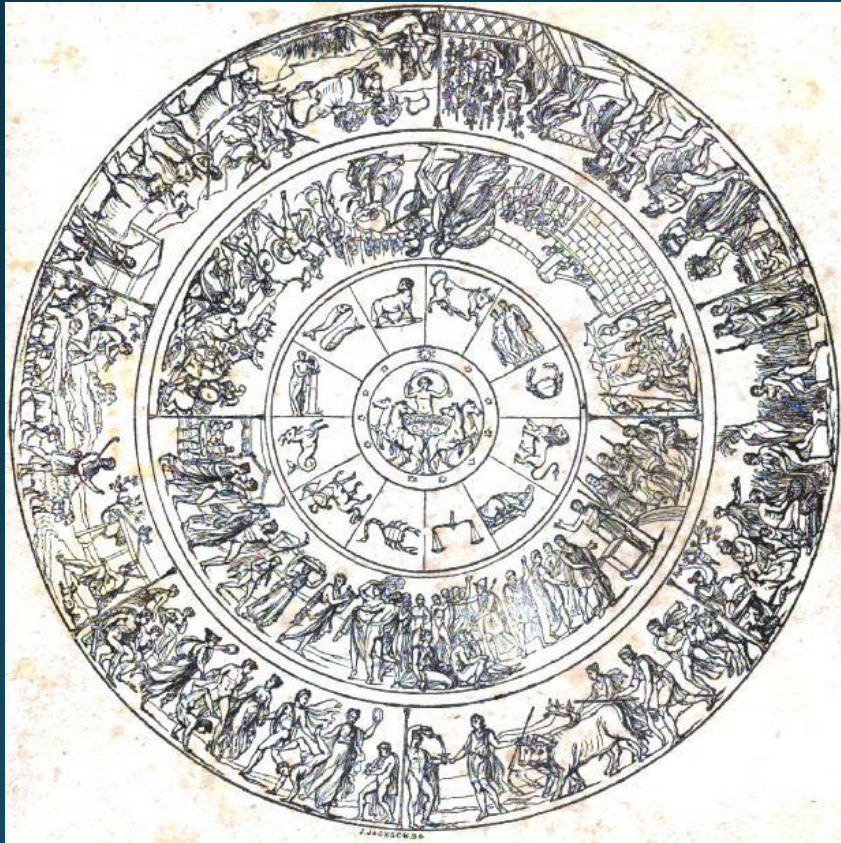
The concept of description – using words to create an image of a “real” thing – brings to mind the idea of the mimetic, imitative, derivative nature of art, which was famously criticized by Plato in his *Republic*.

While Plato condemns art as a copy of a copy (copying the things of this world which themselves are just copies or images of the eternal „ideas“), Aristotle defends artistic “imitation” as a means of learning, of gaining knowledge. The epistemological value of description (and the problems it involves) is important for 20th century poets, as we will see.

But before we move on to the 20th century, we will briefly have a look at some older texts from the long tradition of description in poetry.

Although the title of the lecture promises objects, landscapes and people, in the end, we will mostly focus on descriptions of objects in poetry.

The earliest famous poetic description in European literature comes from Homer. In Book XVIII of *The Iliad* he describes the shield that Hephaestus, the divine smith, made for Achilles during the war of Troy. This description starts a long and fruitful tradition of the s.c. *ekphrasis* (or *ecphrasis*) in poetry: a description of a work of art in a poem. You can read the long description of the shield [here](#).

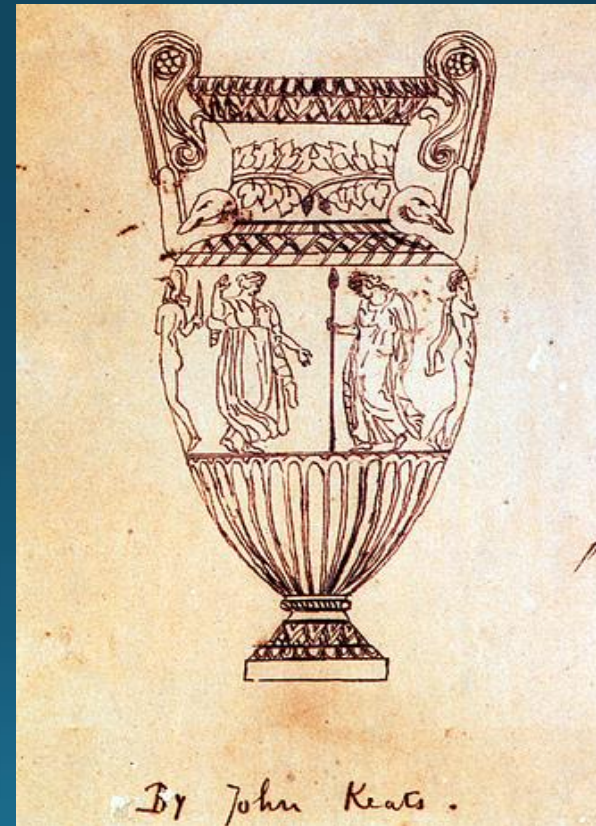


Of course, the shield is imaginary, but based on the description it might have looked something like this.

Another important ekphrastic text I want to bring to your attention comes from the Romantic period, but it thematically reaches back into antiquity – it is a poem by John Keats, the young English poet famous for his Odes, one of which is the “Ode on a Grecian Urn”. The poem deals with an ancient Greek urn, or vase.

Keats was not describing an existing vase, but rather an imagined ideal.

To give you an idea of what he imagined, here is a sketch of a Greek urn made by Keats himself (he traced it from an engraving).



Ode on a Grecian Urn

John Keats

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
For ever panting, and for ever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede

Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;

Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

Volumes and volumes have been written on this poem. There have been critical debates and disagreements about virtually every line of it (the last two lines being a particularly rich source of controversy), but I want us to think about just a few points.

- Note that the poem is in fact a dialogue between the speaker and the vase – or rather, it is the speaker's address to the vase, which seems to reply in the last two lines of the poem. However, the interpretation of the last two lines has caused much controversy. Partly due to the fact that the position of the quotation marks is a matter of debate: there were no quotation marks in the original version of the poem, while the version published during Keats's lifetime puts only "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" in quotation marks. Later editors mostly agree on the present form with the two last lines in quotation marks.
- A great part of the description of the vase consists of questions (the first and the fourth stanza in particular). What is the effect of these? How would the poem be different if straightforward description were used?
- Note the many negations in the second stanza (some ten of them in ten lines: unheard, not to the sensual ear, no tone, thou canst not leave, nor ever can, never, never canst, do not grieve, she cannot fade, thou hast not thy bliss). How do they relate to the questions? It is rather unusual to create a description using questions and negations, isn't it? What kind of emotion do they create?
- The word "happy" is repeated six (!) times in the third stanza. What do you think about such strong emphasis? The source of the alleged happiness is the eternal nature of the depicted scenes and people (stressed by the word "ever" repeated six times, too, in the stanza).

- Think about the tension between silence and sound (the depicted musicians are playing pipes and timbrels or tambourines, but no sound is heard, of course, the vase is “a bride of quietness”, etc.) and between dynamic movement and static eternity (the “wild pursuit” of the figures on the vase is perfectly static, captured on the vase forever).
- What is the atmosphere of the fourth stanza? Think about the image of the “little town” – it is not seen on the urn, the speaker imagines it only (he offers three different possible settings of the town he can’t see: by a river, by the sea, in the mountains); it is empty and silent “for evermore” because its inhabitants have left and have been captured (forever) on the urn. Logically, it is wrong – we know the real people would go back home regardless of the fact that they have been depicted in a picture. Art and life do not mix up in this way, but Keats suggests they do. Consider all the possible implication of this suggestion.
- And you can (and should, of course) think about the last stanza and the last lines, which have confused so many critics for so long – some of them think they spoil the poem (some of them think they redeem it)... Does the final equation of beauty and truth relate to what was going on in the previous stanzas?

Keats's poem hints at two mutually connected questions which became central for Modernist (or avant-garde) poetry in the first decades of the 20th century (if you're not sure about Modernism, please google it, there are plenty of online resources on the movement):

- the question of the relationship between art and the external world
- the question of our abilities to understand and capture the external objects we see

While for the Romantics description in poetry usually leads to the speaker's private meditation, there is an important tendency among modernist and later poets to return the description back to the things.

Modernists are turning away from the Romantic subjectivity and egotism to focus their attention on things around them and to the description of them. The American poet William Carlos Williams summed the turn to things in his famous line "No ideas but in things", another American poet, Wallace Stevens, speaks about the "plain sense of things" and of "things as they are".

At the same times, modernism is characterized by skepticism, a distrust of the ability of language to convey meaning in a straightforward way, a doubt about the possibility to know the world around us and to capture it in words. Rather than the thing itself, what comes into the centre of attention is the description of the thing, our attempt to capture the external world in words.

At the heart of many of modernist poems there is the fundamental realization that perfect description that would actually BE the thing described is impossible; description in poetry is a work of art, not a copy of the world, it is an autonomous entity, with a very complex and potentially problematic relationship to the object of the description.

In part IV of his poem "Description Without Place" (1945) Wallace Stevens writes:

“Description is revelation. It is not
The thing described, nor false facsimile.

It is an artificial thing that exists,
In its own seeming, plainly visible

Yet not too closely the double of our lives,
Intenser than any actual life could be”

Wallace Stevens, from “Description Without Place”

Think about these six lines defining description. What do they say about the relationship between description and the thing described? Is there a hierarchy of the two?

How does Stevens approach the classical concept of “mimesis” as the basis of art?

What does the word “revelation” suggest? What context does it come from?

In this passage, Stevens seems to be quite optimistic about art (about description): he denies the derivative, dependent nature of art, and in a very modernist way claims the autonomy of art, its “artificiality” and potential superiority over “life” (it is “intenser than any actual life could be”).

For many modernists the autonomy and independence of art from life is a source of its power, they are also often conscious about its limitations. It is great to accept the autonomy of art and play with it, enjoy it creatively (just think of the wildness and freedom of so much avant-garde poetry), but at the same time the autonomy easily draws us away from the things we wanted to focus on. Description may be a revelation, but it does not necessarily reveal the thing it describes.

When speaking about modernist lyric description it is impossible not to mention yet another American poet – Marianne Moore, who is famous for her detailed and weird descriptions of animals, particularly strange animals.

Her poem “The Pangolin” from the 1930s deals with an animal which has only come to many people’s attention recently, as a possible source of the novel coronavirus (the link in the transmission of the virus from bats to humans). Despite this recent negative publicity, pangolins are fascinating animals for many reasons, and Moore – who knew them only from scientific books and articles – considered them a fit subject of a poem. The first part of the poem consists of a detailed description of the animal.

It is great to read the poem without knowing anything about pangolins, but a picture is rather helpful. Learning about pangolins’ way of life also helps one’s understanding of the poem.

from

THE PANGOLIN

Another armored animal—scale
lapping scale with spruce-cone regularity until they
form the uninterrupted central
tail-row! This near artichoke with head and legs and
grit-equipped gizzard,
the night miniature artist engineer is,
yes, Leonardo da Vinci's replica—
impressive animal and toiler of whom we seldom hear.
Armor seems extra. But for him,
the closing ear-ridge—
or bare ear lacking even this small
eminence and similarly safe

contracting nose and eye apertures
impenetrably closable, are not; a true ant-eater,
not cockroach-eater, who endures
exhausting solitary trips through unfamiliar ground at night,
returning before sunrise; stepping in the moonlight,
on the moonlight peculiarly, that the outside
edges of his hands may bear the weight and save the
claws
for digging. Serpentine about
the tree, he draws
away from danger unpugnaciously,
with no sound but a harmless hiss; keeping

the fragile grace of the Thomas-
of-Leighton Buzzard Westminster Abbey wrought-iron
vine, or

rolls himself into a ball that has
power to defy all effort to unroll it; strongly intailed, neat
head for core, on neck not breaking off, with curled-in feet.
Nevertheless he has sting-proof scales; and nest
[...]



These are only the first stanzas of the poem. You can read the whole thing [here](#).

We cannot delve into the poem in much detail here. If you find it intriguing, there are several great critical readings and commentaries by some eminent scholars [here](#).

Consider the relationship between art (poetry, visual art) and science in the language and style of the description. Is the language scientific, poetic? Does the register switch at points? What about the role of visual arts? How does the figure of Leonardo da Vinci relate to the art/science dichotomy? What does the tension (correlation?) between the two (art/science) say about our approaching the world around us?

Would Wallace Stevens's thoughts on description as revelation and as an autonomous artificial thing apply to this poem? How?

Why does Marianne Moore write about a creature as weird and unusual as a pangolin? What is the effect on the reader? Why would one want to read a poem about such creature?

Modernists are very well aware of the questions and problems arising from the chasm between “art” and “life”, between the description and the described object, but they usually enjoy the power of the art to create artifacts independent of the model. In his famous poem “Arte poética” (1916), the Chilean avant-garde poet Vicente Huidobro says: “Why do you sing the rose, oh poets, make it bloom in the poem” – calling on the poets to create freely and independently (he also wrote a manifesto called “Non serviam!”, I will not serve, in which the poet refuses to be a blind servant to mother Nature).

However, some poets, especially later ones, grow doubtful about this independence and autonomy and ask questions about the responsibility towards the “life”, or, even more fundamentally, about the very possibility to cross the chasm between art and life.

An ethical question of this kind seems to be hidden behind one of the most beautiful descriptive poems in modern Irish poetry, Seamus Heaney’s “The Grauballe Man”.

The poem, written in 1970s, describes one of the “bog bodies”, the mummies of prehistoric people found in bogs (this particular one in Denmark). You can read more on the mummy [here](#).



The Grauballe Man

by Seamus Heaney

As if he had been poured
in tar, he lies
on a pillow of turf
and seems to weep

the black river of himself.
The grain of his wrists
is like bog oak,
the ball of his heel

like a basalt egg.
His instep has shrunk
cold as a swan's foot
or a wet swamp root.

His hips are the ridge
and purse of a mussel,
his spine an eel arrested
under a glisten of mud.

The head lifts,
the chin is a visor
raised above the vent
of his slashed throat

that has tanned and toughened.
The cured wound
opens inwards to a dark
elderberry place.

Who will say 'corpse'
to his vivid cast?
Who will say 'body'
to his opaque repose?

And his rusted hair,
a mat unlikely
as a foetus's.
I first saw his twisted face

in a photograph,
a head and shoulder
out of the peat,
bruised like a forceps baby,

but now he lies
perfected in my memory,
down to the red horn
of his nails,

hung in the scales
with beauty and atrocity:
with the Dying Gaul
too strictly compassed

on his shield,
with the actual weight
of each hooded victim,
slashed and dumped.

First, note the structure of the poem. It consists of twelve stanzas and may be divided into two halves of six stanzas each. The first half is the description per se – in great detail the mummified body is described.

Note what means are used to describe the body: as if he had been poured in **tar**, a **pillow** of turf, a **black river** of himself, the **grain** of his wrist, like a **bog oak**, the **ball** of his heel, like a **basalt egg**, as a **swan's foot**, his hips are a **the ridge and purse of a mussel**, his spine an **eel**, the chin is a **visor**, the **vent** of his slashed throat... The words in bold type are things to which the parts of the body are compared – they are actually not there, they are imagined, but it is them that build the poem, that carry the description on and give it all charm and power and beauty. Because the body – which is simply a dry corpse of a murdered man soaked in a bog long time ago (not a thing one would automatically consider beautiful or charming) – is described as an object full of charm and power and beauty.

To the extent that the seventh stanza actually questions the appropriateness of the words “corpse” or “body” to describe the object.

What about the speaker? Where is he? Not present at all in the first six stanzas, as if the body of the Grauballe man was right in front of us. Then the questions change the tone and the perspective, they implicitly introduce the observer, who actually finally appears at the end of the eighth stanza as “I”. We learn that what we see is not the body, but the “perfected” memory of a photograph seen by the poet.

In the last two stanzas we have moved from the image of the body to the speaker’s memory, where the body lies in a very different context than the original bog or museum.

Think of the two new images introduced in the last two stanzas. The Dying Gaul (a marble Ancient Roman statue, see below) and “each hooded victim, slashed and dumped”.

Now, as we saw in our talk on elegy, with some poems it is necessary to know the context. Like Longley’s “The Ice-Cream Man”, this poem was written in the time of The Troubles in Northern Ireland and the “hooded victims” are a direct and explicit reference to the sectarian violence that was going on then.

Heaney contrasts a beautiful piece of art depicting death (the Dying Gaul, who is perhaps too perfectly arranged on his shield) with the real atrocity of the actual brutal murders. What does art do with death? Is creating beauty and appropriate reaction to the atrocity of violent death? How does the contrast at the end of the poem relate to the description of the Grauballe man? What is Heaney saying about poetry and art in the face of inexplicable violence? What is the relation of art and life here?

The Dying Gaul



The American poet Elizabeth Bishop, who wrote the following poem, is another master of modern description in poetry. The poem called “Poem” is about a painting – it is an ekphrastic poem –but it is also very much about art and life. In this case the painting is a real one, done by the poet’s great-uncle and given to her by a relative at some point. Looking at the tiny picture she realizes that she knows the place depicted in it – it’s the Canadian village where she grew up (and where the great-uncle grew up, too, a generation before her).

Poem

Elizabeth Bishop

About the size of an old-style dollar bill,
American or Canadian,
mostly the same whites, gray greens, and steel grays
– this little painting (a sketch for a larger one?)
has never earned any money in its life.
Useless and free, it has spent seventy years
as a minor family relic handed along collaterally to owners
who looked at it sometimes, or didn't bother to.

It must be Nova Scotia; only there
does one see gabled wooden houses
painted that awful shade of brown.
The other houses, the bits that show, are white.
Elm trees, low hills, a thin church steeple
– that gray-blue wisp – or is it? In the foreground
a water meadow with some tiny cows,
two brushstrokes each, but confidently cows;
two minuscule white geese in the blue water,
back-to-back, feeding, and a slanting stick.

Up closer, a wild iris, white and yellow,
fresh-squiggled from the tube.
The air is fresh and cold; cold early spring
clear as gray glass; a half inch of blue sky
below the steel-gray storm clouds.
(They were the artist's specialty.)
A specklike bird is flying to the left.
Or is it a flyspeck looking like a bird?

Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!
It's behind – I can almost remember the farmer's name.
His barn backed on that meadow. There it is,
titanium white, one dab. The hint of steeple,
filaments of brush-hairs, barely there,
must be the Presbyterian church.
Would that be Miss Gillespie's house?
Those particular geese and cows
are naturally before my time.

A sketch done in an hour, "in one breath,"
once taken from a trunk and handed over.
*Would you like this? I'll probably never
have room to hang these things again.
Your Uncle George, no, mine, my Uncle George,
he'd be your great-uncle, left them all with Mother
when he went back to England.
You know, he was quite famous, an R.A....*

I never knew him. We both knew this place,
apparently, this literal small backwater,
looked at it long enough to memorize it,
our years apart. How strange. And it's still loved,
or its memory is (it must have changed a lot).
Our visions coincided – "visions" is
too serious a word – our looks, two looks:
art "copying from life" and life itself,
life and the memory of it so compressed
they've turned into each other. Which is which?
Life and the memory of it cramped,
dim, on a piece of Bristol board,
dim, but how live, how touching in detail
– the little that we get for free,
the little of our earthly trust. Not much.
About the size of our abidance

along with theirs: the munching cows,
the iris, crisp and shivering, the water
still standing from spring freshets,
the yet-to-be-dismantled elms, the geese.

Geography III (1976)

Just a few small hints for you:

Think about the complex set of relationships between the poem, the picture, the landscape and the memory.

Consider the line “Heavens, I recognize the place, I know it!” How does it change the tone and the pace of the description?

What is the descriptive strategy in this poem (in *The Grauballe Man*, the object was described primarily by similes – what is the description based on here)?

What is the role of the many concrete details in the poem? The names?

In *Ode on a Grecian Urn* we saw the traditional theme of the passing of time as opposed to the eternity of art (“ars longa, vita brevis” the Latin saying goes) – how does Bishop’s poem deal with it?

I would like to close out talk with a brief look at a Czech poem, by a contemporary poet Petr Borkovec, translated into English by a contemporary Irish poet, Justin Quinn.

Hyacint

by Petr Borkovec

Šedivý taft, stuha běžných dní
mírně se modrá vánočnými svátky.
V trojdílném okně, v bílé mříži,
v odlitku nebe, v kusovitém sněhu

hyacint vyplázl květ. Hlíza –
karmínový skarab, vetchý, vyhnílý.
Kly kořínků kolem – náramek
na jásavě zeleném svalu. Jak had

dávicí fialové zvíře.
Dávicí měňavou myš, rybu, ptáka,
jenž otevřel peří k voskové kůži,
Ticho zmlklo, kusovitý sníh

vyplňující záhyb stuhy.
Žádný rytmus, tlak, žádný prudký motiv.
Jen zelená hněd' vlastních očí,
tolikrát zkoumaná, tak známá.

Hyacinth

translated by Justin Quinn

Taffeta, grey ribbon of days,
goes gently blue at Christmas.
In a three-part window, white bars,
the cast of the sky and bits of snow,

the hyacinth blooms forth – its tuber
a dingy crimson scarab, hollow.
Tusks of roots lie round – bracelet
on a bright green muscle. Like a snake

devouring some purple creature,
an iridescent fish or mouse, some bird
whose plumage turns to waxen skin.
Silence deeper, bits of snow

filling out the folds of ribbon.
No rhythm, pressure, no strong motif.
Only the green-brown of those eyes,
searched so much, so known.

(Field Work, 1998)

Once again, I will ask you to consider the structure, the “movement” of the poem.

Four short stanzas, the first one introduces the scene (time and place, winter, window), the second and the third one describe the object of the title of the poem, the hyacinth, the last one moves away from the flower back to the window and the snow outside. The first and the last stanzas are static and silent, the description of the flower is dynamic. How is the dynamism achieved?

Think about the colors in the poem – is there a change, a development?

How is the flower described? Could one compare the strategy using similes (animal similes for a flower) to The Grauballe Man?

What about the focus, the perspective? I’m not completely sure, but I think we have the poet looking out of the window, focusing at the world outside (the sky, the snow), then at the hyacinth which is probably standing between the two window panes, and finally at the window pane itself. What is it he sees in the glass?

I decided to close with this particular poem because it shows yet another – perhaps the most important – moment of the complex relationship between art and life, between the description and the thing described: At the end of the poem the focus shifts from the object of the description to the window pane in front of it, and the speaker sees the reflection of his own eyes. He is returned from the object back to himself, from the other to “so known” own self. There is no way to ultimately reach out to the other through description because the description is always more of us than the other, the object.

Perhaps all effort at description in poetry is best summed up by Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentinian writer, poet and essayist:

"A man sets himself the task of portraying the world. Through the years he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and people. Shortly before his death, he discovers that that patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his face."

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