

# Reverse Ekphrasis: The Visual Poetics of Nancy Morejón and Rolando Estévez

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*Painting is silent poetry,  
poetry is painting that speaks.*  
—Simonides

In 2012, an international conference was held at the University of Missouri, titled *Cultural Bricolage: The Artist Books of Cuba's Ediciones Vigía*.<sup>1</sup> The conference included attendees from the university, but also scholars who traveled from as far as Sweden to participate in this meeting, which celebrated Cuban art and literature. Perhaps the most impressive aim was to include the community of Columbia, Missouri, at large: students of all ages, their instructors, local artists, galleries and their visitors, and patrons of the public library. Fourteen venues around the city of Columbia featured exhibits revolving around the conference, some with artist books.

The Museum of Art and Archaeology on the university's campus had a special exhibition of the work of Rolando Estévez Jordán, one of the founders of the Vigía press. Ediciones Vigía was founded in 1985 in Mantanzas, Cuba, and produces artist books, crafted by volunteer artisans in series of 200.<sup>2</sup> These handmade books are collaged from repurposed materials, such as butcher paper, fabric, aluminum foil, string, and photocopies of handwritten text. They feature moveable parts, openings, closures, as well as add-ons, such as puppets, wands, and pitchforks. Estévez was one of the driving forces behind this creative output and has claimed that the use of found and recycled materials was not out of need, but out of "aesthetic necessity" (Alegría et al. 831). He is also responsible for an astonishing collection of one-of-a-kind works, which now reside in the Museum of Art and Archaeology. The work/book/suitcase *Fui llevado a un cine de barrio mientras mi madre hacia su maleta* (2008), contains a poem (on the scroll) describing the tragic story of Estévez's family's departure from Cuba when he was sixteen years old, leaving him behind (Behar and Suárez 67).<sup>3</sup> The suitcase itself communicates portability and departure, but as is the case with many of Estévez's works, the viewer literally unpacks them as they unpack the meaning. *Fui llevado a un cine de barrio mientras mi madre hacia su maleta* contains household items such as a saucer, a strainer, clothespins, and lipstick. The items are evocative of a household and give the viewer a glimpse of something that seems personal and private.

The same themes can be seen in *La silla*, an assemblage gathered inside a shopping bag made of collaged craft paper with multicolored paint decorations, its

title in black ink. Inside the bag is a decorated wooden box containing five water-colored pages with information on the artwork. Also in the box is an accordion-folded banner with a poem by Estévez handwritten on one side and a painting on the other; both viewed vertically. The poem and the painting focus on the sea, a symbol of both freedom and isolation to many Cubans.<sup>4</sup> Like the poem contained in the suitcase in *Fui llevado a un cine de barrio mientras mi madre hacia su maleta*, the personal story of Estévez is told in this poem, but here also illustrated on the other side of the banner: “For my mother, who doesn’t live in norths or souths,” but rather on a chair in the sea “halfway between the two shores” (71–72). As with *Fui llevado a un cine de barrio mientras mi madre hacia su maleta*, the one-of-a-kind *La silla* invites the viewer to unpack each element of the work and reminds us of portability and movement, creating a visual and physical struggle for the viewer (Larson 84).

When Estévez arrived in Columbia, Missouri, as a featured artist and speaker for the *Cultural Bricolage: The Artist Books of Cuba’s Ediciones Vigía* conference, he brought with him another one-of-a-kind artwork, which he had created for the University’s Museum of Art and Archaeology: a sculptural book consisting of five scrolls lashed to a used oxen yoke. The yoke was carved from a single block of wood; two rusty iron railroad spikes are driven into the yoke and two melted candles perch on top of it. A removable wooden finial having two attached brass bells and wound with raffia crowns the top of the work. A length of thick jute rope, decorated with pieces of raffia and parts of dried sunflower blossoms, is draped around the yoke. The scrolls are crafted from handmade paper and are adhered to backings of brown woven cloth, except for the one in the front, center, which serves as a title page.

At the conference’s opening reception at the Museum, Estévez unrolled the scrolls, as poet Nancy Morejón read her poem “Amo a mi amo,” which is handwritten on one of the scrolls. This collaborative, live performance delighted the audience. A translation in English of the poem by David Fry, “I Love My Master,” is inscribed on the second of these scrolls. The third scroll bears the title of the artwork: *Amo a mi amo/I Love My Master*, in Spanish and in English, in white, painted, vertically arranged, capital letters. The bottom of this has two paper fold-out flaps on which Morejón’s name is painted.

On the back of the scroll with the original Spanish text is another piece of collaged paper, bearing a watercolor-painted lamp, the Ediciones Vigía logo. According to Estévez, the oil lamp appears in all the works of Vigía and is “not really a logo but a symbol.” The oil lamp serves as an icon to remind us that Vigía press is “a beacon of acceptance, shelter, and artistic exchange for many authors and artists” (Dunigan 78–79).<sup>5</sup> Next to the lamp is the artist’s signature. A text, handwritten in black ink, identifies the title of the work and gives the particulars of the artwork, including the name of the author of the poem, the name of the

artist, the date of the artwork, the name of the person meant to be honored by the work, and the name of the translator of the poem (Cordones-Cook 45).

Estévez unfurled the scrolls one by one on the small stage in Pickard Hall's auditorium. Morejón's compelling voice described the thoughts of the female slave as she wrestled with the conflicting emotions she felt toward her master. The audience perceived her anguish and empathized with her untenable position as Estévez revealed the final two scrolls, which depict characters from the poem: a slave and her master. The master, a nude man, is painted on the scroll consisting of pieces of handmade and collaged paper. He is shown frontally and holds a whip in his left hand. His lower legs are obscured by vegetation: both painted and actual leaves. The woman's lower legs are similarly covered, by painted and actual adhered leaves, as well as a painted sunflower blossom. Also portrayed frontally and nude, she holds a dagger in her right hand. The act of unrolling the scrolls became an act of revealing both the two main characters and the emotional toll involved in their story.

Morejón is perhaps best known for her poems that are feminist in orientation, such as "Mujer negra," yet her poems also have a distinct race consciousness. Neither focus controls her poetic voice. Real black women, including her mother, aunt, and grandmother, as well as fictional protagonists, appear in different roles in her poetry. Her female characters are empowered and self-aware; they think and act. Morejón delves "into deep historical and mythical roots, activating awareness of slavery and subjugation." "Amo mi a amo" examines the power her master has over the slave, but it also reveals her own inner thoughts, and "her lonely condition of sexual objectification, where gender determines the specific master/slave relationship" (45). The artist Estévez describes the yoke in his work as being a "heavy, rustic, primitive element," and states that he sees the two characters as being yoked to one another: "they are both enslaved" (*Un libro único por Estévez*). As he finished unrolling the scrolls in the Columbia performance, he weighed down their ends with rough stones, then inserted into the yoke the wooden finial covered with raffia, its bells gently tinkling, and lit the candles on either end. A hush fell over the crowd as Morejón ended her poem and Estévez stepped back; the result was as if the audience had participated in a sort of religious ritual. Were the candles lit in honor of her epiphany and emancipation; the end of his tyranny over her and perhaps the end of his life? In the last lines of the poem:

I can see myself with knife in hand, butchering him like innocent cattle.  
Deafening drumbeats no longer let me  
hear neither his sorrows, nor his complaints  
The tolling bells call me,

Morejón has freed that woman "from the erotic perspective . . . presenting the evolution of a slave . . . from submission toward the epiphany of awareness and assumption of agency" (57). The contest between contrasting emotions presented

by Morejón's narrator call to mind the Roman poet Catullus' elegiac couplet "Odi et Amo" and the anguish expressed with force and brevity in only two lines: "Odi et amo. quare id faciam fortasse requiris, / nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior" ("I hate and I love. Perhaps you ask why I do this? / I do not know, but I feel it happening and I am tormented") (85). The connections are clear between these painful love/hate relationships. Catullus, a master of the epigram, does not present a resolution to the dilemma as Morejón does, though. The bold contrast of Catullus' "I hate and I love" portrays the conflict in the narrator's mind, as does the word play in the Spanish *amo* and *mi amo*.<sup>6</sup>

Another Roman poet provides an example of ekphrasis, a literary mode which I believe joins this work by Estévez and Morejón to other literary uses of ekphrasis, in a figurative way, much as the oxen yoke can be seen as having a linking function. Etymologically, ekphrasis represents the Greek *ek* "out" or "from" and *phrasis* "speaking," "pointing" or "describing." A simple definition of ekphrasis is a literary description of a visual work of art, or a "verbal representation of a visual representation." James Heffernan refines this definition in order to make the link from classicism to postmodernism (*Museum of Words* 3; *Ekphrasis and Representation* 299). John Hollander has coined the term "notional ekphrasis" for descriptions that create their own artwork; they are a figment of the author's imagination (209–19). The goal of ekphrasis is to stop time, causing the momentum of the narrative to become lost by becoming lost in the object described, much as we would respond to an object in a museum. Ekphrasis is an act of disruption.<sup>7</sup>

DuBois and Putnam view these descriptions, at least in classical literature, as synecdoches for the bigger epics in which they appear—in this light, ekphrasis is the significant part of the whole of the poem.<sup>8</sup> Heffernan presents the struggle that ekphrasis stages between word and image for mastery as gendered. As he argues, "in talking back and looking back at the male viewer, the images envoiced by ekphrasis challenge at once the controlling authority of the male gaze and the power of the male word." (1–7) Heffernan sees a duel between male and female gazes; the voice of male speech striving to control a female image.

I am arguing that the act of reverse ekphrasis is a work of art created from a literary description, but this does not just apply to an illustration. Estévez has created an entity; a representation of the poem down to the yoke. The creation of the whole joined together. Reverse ekphrasis shares many of the characteristics of ekphrasis, including the response the reader has. In this case, the response to the written word is expressed in the sculptural work by Estévez rather than a narrative discourse about an artwork. This interactive quality invites us to participate in both the sculpture and the poem. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Estévez has performed metaekphrasis—he has transcended a work of art and gone beyond it to create a three-dimensional representation of the words of Morejón. The addition of the live performance of word and art adds to the experience and

creates the value of metaekphrasis. By their collaboration, Estévez and Morejón did not merely effect a reversal of ekphrasis, they created a unique contemporary form that abolished the chronological relationship between poetry and the visual arts.<sup>9</sup>

I list here some well-known and striking examples of ekphrasis; one or more will be familiar to you and will serve to ground this discussion. In the *Iliad* (Book 18.478–608) an account is given of the Greek hero Achilles's shield. All the scenes and figures on the shield are described in great detail, in a passage that goes on for one hundred and thirty lines. Another poem by the Roman poet Catullus has an extended description of the abandonment of the princess Ariadne by the hero Theseus, depicted on the coverlet of a marriage bed (64.50ff). More modern examples include the amusing description of poorly executed Renaissance paintings in Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (Part 2, Chapter 7). In the poem "Ode to a Grecian Urn," John Keats describes a piece of ancient pottery, another example of ekphrasis that has inspired a great deal of scholarship. Herman Melville provides an account of the painting hanging on the wall at the "Spouter's Inn" in *Moby Dick*. Finally, poets Wystan Hugh Auden and William Carlos Williams both describe in poems the famous painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* by Pieter Breughel.

By examining more closely an example of ekphrasis in the Roman poet Vergil's *Aeneid* (1.453–493), I will explain the use of this mode in Morejón's poem and Estévez's artwork. In Book One of the *Aeneid*, the Trojan Aeneas has arrived in Carthage, soon to meet its queen, Dido, and begin their doomed love affair. Aeneas has escaped from Troy, during its destruction by the Greeks, and has ended up in northern Africa. Waiting for the queen, he becomes emotionally moved as he views the artwork on a temple erected by the Carthaginians. The paintings on the temple's walls depict battle scenes from the Trojan War, scenes of battle which Aeneas either witnessed or participated in.<sup>10</sup> Vergil offers a description of what Aeneas is seeing on the temple and, more importantly, his response to the artwork, in this famous example of ekphrasis:

. . . [Aeneas] sees the Trojan battle lines,  
and the war already known throughout the world by fame,  
he sees the sons of Atreus, and Priam, and Achilles, cruel to all of them.  
He stands stock still and weeping, says, "What place, Achatas,  
what region on earth is not full of our trials?  
Look, there's Priam! Even in this place too, are rewards for glory;  
there are tears for human happenings and mortal matters affect the mind.  
Lay aside your fear: this fame will bring some sympathy to you."  
Thus he speaks, and he nourishes his soul on an inanimate painting,  
and groaning, he makes his face glisten with copious tears. (*Aeneid* 1.456–465; my  
translation)

On the temple wall frescoes, Aeneas watches the warriors circling the city: the

Trojan fighters chasing the Greeks, and the Trojans in turn pursued by the great Greek hero Achilles. A young Trojan prince, Troilus, just a boy, is shown being slain by Achilles, his death piteously rendered and thus described by the poet. As he is being dragged behind Achilles' chariot, the dust is written upon by his spear. Then the Trojan women appear in this artwork on the temple walls, true victims of the war. The Trojan hero Hector is shown dragged around Troy, before his body is turned over to his grieving father, Priam. Aeneas groans at this point, for having witnessed all these things, he is seeing them again (1.485). He even sees himself pictured in battle, and then the tragic death of Penthesilea, the Amazon queen who dared to war with men—a reference to Dido and her own future tragic death.

The power of these images in the *Aeneid* threaten the hero and in turn are linked to Dido. She is a threat to male authority, as are the Amazons, represented by Penthesilea, who “rages” and “burns.” Dido has commissioned these frescoes that so move Aeneas, who is enchanted by them, and then by her. She becomes a threat to the mission to found Rome.<sup>11</sup> The paintings have the same effect as Medusa, a female monster in Greek mythology: they petrify and threaten to unman the hero. “The conflict between word and image becomes a conflict between male authority and the female power to enchant, subvert, or threaten it” (*Museum of Words* 108).<sup>12</sup> Heffernan presents this episode as an example of the genderization of ekphrasis. Here in the epic we see Aeneas has a “feminine” response to the art he is viewing, but as a hero he is moving toward more “masculine” action. The stationary object is passive and therefore feminine, at the mercy of the controlling word (masculine).<sup>13</sup> Can we then view Morejón's narrator describing the beauty in the world and accepting her status and treatment by her master, very much a “feminine” response, until she describes (and perhaps, carries out) the “masculine” action of butchering him with a knife?

To Aeneas the pictures he is viewing are suddenly transformed into events: the ekphrasis “has been made real by the personal interpretation of the pictures” (Williams 45). Aeneas is walking past the pictures and suddenly we are thrown into the events of the Trojan War; we are not given a catalog or a series of photographs, but rather a personal interpretation, that is, their impression on the viewer. Further, the narrator allows the hero to “influence the reader,” and Aeneas' reaction to the mural forges a link to that reader. We “lose track of Aeneas” and his reappearance is powerful (a groan at line 486); even more emphatic than his re-entrance at line four hundred and seventy.<sup>14</sup>

*Enargeia* is a rhetorical term from antiquity; it is the ability to make visible. One can trace a psychological process from that act, where it is argued that through *enargeia* the innermost mind and deepest emotions of a listener (or reader) can be touched. Goldhill calls this the “psychology of influence”: the ability to make something visible by words is the pinnacle of ekphrasis and a way to provoke emotion.<sup>15</sup> According to Elizabeth Bearden “ekphrasis provides a formal key” to the

impressions of the characters, it reveals their spirit and essence, and in turn guides that of the audience. “The action of vividly drawing an image before the mind’s eye” (*enargeia*) is also the representation of identity—a character’s, but also that of the reader, narrator, viewer, and artist (4).

Vergil describes what Aeneas is feeling—his response: “He halted, he wept, he cried. ‘Look, there’s Priam!’” and his words, which identify this as a place where there are rewards for glory and tears for human lives, tells us that he hopes to find pity and sympathy in a country that would feature artwork on such a universal yet personal subject as the Trojan War. Vergil states, “He nourishes his soul on an inanimate painting.” The frescoes cannot nourish Aeneas; they are “insubstantial, useless.” To Putnam, art reproduces the past without its deeper implications (25). And yet they remind Aeneas and evoke great emotion. There is a stirring of deep feeling in the viewer (Aeneas) and the reader (us) as we are told what he is looking at, and his response to it. The same is true of the figures on Estévez’s scrolls. Morejón’s poem is inscribed there as an act of picturing the figures. We are drawn to the narrator and sympathize with the cruelty she suffers. The figures are not presented as the poet describes them in her text, though. Rather, they appear as the paper dolls of childhood—we can “dress” them as we see them through Morejón’s words: the slave will wear “this muslin robe he has imposed on me . . . these vain lace dresses he has forced on me without pity.” We imagine the master in a uniform when we read of his days in the sun and his plunderous war, or the fine garments he might wear as he “gives lashings in the caldron of the sugar mill.” They are both nude, so we can imagine them in the cane fields where they “surreptitiously made love.” They are unprotected, and their lack of covering makes both vulnerable and perhaps equal in this way. As they inhabit separate scrolls, they are separate in their culture, their standing, their gender, their outlook, and their understanding of one another.

Morejón’s poem, along with its accompanying English translation, takes an equal position on the scrolls on the other side of the two figures who are central in its narrative. In Estévez’s sculptural book we have a reverse ekphrasis, in which the text is within the art, rather than the art being in the text. Estévez describes himself as “organically” adding . . . ‘the text.’” This is not a matter of illustration, but rather a visual interpretation which causes the viewer to go deeper into the poem and realize the implications in the mind’s eye. Albert Corn calls this experience a “grounded instance of seeing,” shaped by forces outside the artwork, aspects drawn from the viewer’s own experience.

Ekphrasis also creates an intellectual and emotional exchange. Vergil’s description of Aeneas’ response to what he sees on the temple walls in Carthage creates an intellectual and emotional response in the reader, as does Morejón’s poem and Estévez’s composition. Estévez has the opportunity to define his own thoughts about Morejón’s poem, but allows the viewer insight into the poem as

well. The artist has undergone an intellectual and emotional experience provided by the poet, which he then translates into the completion of the work. Milner and Milner cite research that demononstrates the rationale behind using ekphrasis in teaching: once the connection between a poem and a painting is recognized, intellectual and emotional engagement is increased (162–63). I have used the example of ekphrasis from a Roman poet, because that tradition has informed my appreciation and understanding of poetry, and how it is shaped. Furthermore, its resonance proves to me that Morejón’s poetry is as fine and deep as the works from more than two thousand years ago.<sup>16</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The conference was supported by Mizzou Advantage, an initiative that invests in the University of Missouri’s faculty, staff and students to support research, networking events, high-impact conferences, speakers, instructional development, and faculty hires. Professor Juanamaría Cordones-Cook was the organizer of this conference, as well as the 2016 conference, *Afro-Cuban Artists: A Renaissance*, where this paper was first presented. She is also the producer and director of a documentary, *Un libro único por Estévez* (2012), which examines the creative process for this one-of-a-kind work.

<sup>2</sup> Rolando Estévez Jordán is renowned for his art as well as his poetry. One of the founders of the publishing collective Ediciones Vigía in Matanzas, Cuba, he has since created his own publishing house, El Fortín. A volume of the *Afro-Hispanic Review* (Fall 2012) was devoted to Estévez’s artwork, poetry, and vision: see especially in this monographic issue, William Luis’ “Editor’s Note.” See also the Gallery on the website *Artist Books of Cuba’s Ediciones Vigía* [vigia.missouri.edu/slideshows/bricolage09](http://vigia.missouri.edu/slideshows/bricolage09) for a catalog of the more than one hundred Vigía works at the Museum of Art and Archaeology, including those mentioned in this article.

<sup>3</sup> Translated by David Fry in Behar and Suárez.

<sup>4</sup> See Behar and Suárez, Larson 2015 for more on this idea.

<sup>5</sup> See Peggy Sue Dunigan’s article regarding the 2003 interview of Estévez with Linda Howe. See Lareson’s essays regarding Estévez’s use of the lamp. In addition, the lamps can reflect the context of their appearance, for example, the lamp extending from the head of the Virgin Mary, a lamp with wings, and a lamp containing a fish instead of the wick and flame. The wick for the lamp which appears in “Amo a mi amo” is shown as a dagger extending into the stem of a sunflower blooming out of the top of the lamp.

<sup>6</sup> See especially Williams and her discussion of the gap between love and mastery, as well as the progression in the poem as the speaker awakens to her condition.

<sup>7</sup> DuBois (7); Putnam (2–3); and Krieger (1–28).

<sup>8</sup> DuBois suggests three functions of ekphrasis as it appears in epic narrative, not rigid categories, but overlapping (citation, milestone, and synecdoche) (5–8).

<sup>9</sup> Thank you to the anonymous reviewer for this insight.

<sup>10</sup> As Austin points out, Vergil would have been familiar with such paintings of Trojan War scenes.

<sup>11</sup> Author’s translation.

<sup>11</sup> Like Cleopatra and other females who threatened the Roman order.

<sup>12</sup> The antagonism between word and image is not a master thread of ekphrasis, Heffernan warns, just a strand of its fabric 1993 (109).

<sup>13</sup> Heffernan (23); DuBois (31), Putnam (3).

<sup>14</sup> Putnam (23, 33); DuBois (34); this is the first time in epic narrative where the hero sees himself.

<sup>15</sup> See Quintilian 6.2.29 and Goldhill 4 and 7.

<sup>16</sup> Thanks to the director of the Museum, Alex W. Barker, for his leadership, and to my husband, Robert Seelinger, for his insight and helpful comments. The ancient poets, Homer, Apollonius of Rhodes, and Vergil, were the focus of my dissertation. I have had the good fortune to work at the Museum of Art and Archaeology for the past ten years, but it took the influence of Juanamaría Cordones-Cook and the inspiration of Nancy Morejón to remind me what it is that I love. I am grateful to them both.

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### Rolando Estévez: *Amo a mi amo*



Fig. 1. *Amo a mi amo* (2012). Mixed media. Photograph: Jeffrey B. Wilcox Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri.



Fig. 2. (left) *Amo a mi amo* (2012).



Fig. 3. (right) *Amo a mi amo* (2012).