

The Poetics of Absence: A Study of Picture Theory in Anne Carson's Ekphrastic Poetry

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Abstract

This study examines the role of ekphrastic poetry in Anne Carson's oeuvre through the lens of picture theory, exploring how her work reimagines the relationship between visual and verbal representation. Carson's poetry, particularly in the collection "Short Talks," is a radical engagement with visual art, where ekphrasis transcends mere description to interrogate the philosophical and emotional dimensions of viewing. The main argument of this research is that Carson employs ekphrastic poetry as a medium to question the stability of visual and linguistic meaning, using extant and lost artworks as metaphors for absence and fragmentation. The paper addresses three central questions: (1) How does Carson recontextualize ancient and modern visual art within contemporary poetics? (2) How does her engagement with art reflect her broader thematic concerns, such as eros, loss, and temporality? (3) How does Carson's use of ekphrasis align with or challenge traditional form definitions? By situating Carson's ekphrastic poetry within the theoretical paradigms of Picture Theory, this study argues that her work destabilizes the boundaries between text and image, inviting readers into a dialogue where the act of seeing becomes inseparable from interpretation and emotion. The study employs close readings of key poems, including "Short Talk on Mona Lisa," "Short Talk on The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Deyman," and "Short Talk on the End," alongside theoretical

frameworks from W.J.T. Mitchell on visual culture and semiotics. Carson's fragmented and hybrid forms blur the distinction between visual and literary art, reconfiguring ekphrasis as an act of creation rather than mere representation. This study ultimately situates Carson's ekphrastic poetry as a transformative force that challenges conventional narratives of perception and interpretation.

- **Keywords:** Anne Carson, ekphrastic poetry, picture theory, visual art, absence, fragmentation, interdisciplinary poetics, memory, representation.

المخلص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في دور الشعر الوصفي الفني في نتاج الشاعرة آن كارسون من خلال منظور نظرية الصورة، مستكشفة الكيفية التي تعيد بها أعمالها صياغة العلاقة بين التمثيل البصري والتمثيل اللغوي. ويُعد شعر كارسون، ولا سيما في مجموعة «أحاديث قصيرة»، انخراطاً فنياً وفكرياً عميقاً في الفنون البصرية؛ إذ يتجاوز الوصف الفني حدود السرد والوصف التقليدي ليصبح أداة تستجلي الأبعاد الفلسفية والانفعالية المرتبطة بفعل الرؤية والتلقي.

تنتقل الدراسة من فرضية أساسية مفادها أن كارسون توظف الشعر الوصفي الفني وسيلةً للتشكيك في ثبات المعنى البصري واللغوي، مستثمرة الأعمال الفنية الموجودة والمفقودة على السواء بوصفها رموزاً للغيب والتشظي. وتسعى الدراسة إلى الإجابة عن ثلاثة تساؤلات رئيسية: كيف تعيد كارسون توظيف الفنون البصرية القديمة والحديثة ضمن سياق الشعر المعاصر؟ وكيف يعكس انشغالها بالفن موضوعاتها الفكرية الأوسع، مثل الحب والفقد والزمن؟ وإلى أي مدى ينسجم توظيفها للوصف الفني مع المفاهيم التقليدية لهذا الفن أو يتجاوزها؟

ومن خلال وضع شعر كارسون الوصفي الفني ضمن الأطر النظرية لنظرية الصورة، تجادل الدراسة بأن أعمالها تزعزع الحدود الفاصلة بين النص والصورة، وتدعو القارئ إلى حوار يصبح فيه فعل الرؤية مرتبطاً ارتباطاً وثيقاً بالتأويل والاستجابة العاطفية. وتعتمد الدراسة منهج القراءة التحليلية الدقيقة لعدد من النصوص الشعرية المختارة، منها «حديث قصير عن الموناليزا»، و«حديث قصير عن درس التشريح للدكتور دايمان»، و«حديث قصير عن النهاية»، مع الاستفادة من الإطار النظري المتعلق بالثقافة البصرية وعلم العلامات.

وتبين الدراسة أن الأشكال الشعرية الهجينة والمتشظية التي تعتمد عليها كارسون تؤدي إلى طمس الحدود التقليدية بين الفن البصري والفن الأدبي، بما يعيد تشكيل الوصف الفني بوصفه فعلاً إبداعياً وخلاقاً، لا مجرد وسيلة للتمثيل أو الوصف. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن شعر كارسون الوصفي الفني يمثل قوة تحويلية

تسهم في إعادة النظر في المفاهيم التقليدية للإدراك والتأويل، وتفتح آفاقاً جديدة لفهم العلاقة بين الصورة والنص في الشعر المعاصر .

الكلمات المفتاحية :

آن كارسون، الشعر الوصفي الفني، نظرية الصورة، الفن البصري، الغياب، التشظي، الشعرية متعددة التخصصات، الذاكرة، التمثيل .

Introduction

Ekphrastic poetry is a type of analysis or description poetry that can be used in any visual art. Ekphrasis is a literary term for describing an artwork in writing. Poets may draw inspiration for a single poem from any part of the painting, or they may use the artwork as a whole. Poems written in the ekphrastic style describe an artwork; they can offer commentary on, or positive critique of, the paintings themselves (Rathika, E., & Vijayalakshmi, V, 2022).

The term ekphrasis originates from the Greek words *ek* (out) and *phrasis* (expression), meaning "to speak out." It traditionally refers to a verbal representation of a visual work of art. As Mitchell explains in *Picture Theory*, ekphrasis is a "representation of representation" that mediates between two modes of artistic expression—visual and textual. He notes, "Ekphrasis is not simply the verbal description of visual art but a transformation that alters the boundaries of the original image" (Mitchell, 1994, p. 151).

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's well-known essay, "Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry" (1766), addresses the division between word and image as static and unbridgeable, as does Murray Krieger in his essay "Ekphrasis and the Still Movement in Poetry; or Laocoon Revisited". Here he argues that ekphrasis uses a "plastic object as a symbol of the frozen, stilled world of plastic relationships which must be superimposed upon literature's turning world to 'still'

it" (p. 266) and that the fundamental opposition at work is that between the spatial and the temporal medium. However, much poetry tries to embrace the physical qualities of art and to place emphasis on the physical form of words. Despite conceding that poetry has special time-space powers, he sums up his discussion with the notion that: "Time, in this unique empirical particularity, must always be celebrated in its flow even if we arrest it to make its movement a forever-now movement. Or else poetry is hardened into static, Platonic discourse that has lost touch with, indeed that disdains to touch, our existential motions" (p. 287).

In his book, *Ekphrasis*, Krieger does not mainly revise his ideas on the separation of word and image into temporal and spatial media; thus, in his definition of the term, he describes ekphrasis as both "a miracle and a mirage": "A miracle because a sequence of actions filled with befores and afters such as language alone can trace seems frozen into an instant's vision, but a mirage because only the illusion of such an impossible picture can be suggested by the poem's words" (p. xvii).

In his book *Picture Theory*, Mitchell argues that any division into opposite and separate qualities is a false and imposed one: "all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous; there are no 'purely' visual or verbal arts" (p. 5). He does not only argue the case for celebrating the implications of this statement in the artistic world, but also in the academic world that studies it: "The clear separation of 'faculties' (corporeal and collegial) on the basis of sensory and semiotic divisions is becoming obsolete and is now being replaced with a notion of humanistic or liberal education as centrally concerned with the whole field of representations and representational activity" (p. 6).

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Heffernan defines ekphrasis as “the verbal representation of visual representation,” a definition which he considers “sharp and elastic at the same time” (p. 3). He points out the complexity behind its apparent simplicity, while remarking the fact that pictorialism and iconicity are excluded, as ekphrasis for him only “represents representation itself” (p. 4). Even though this definition does not explicitly limit the application of ekphrasis to the visual arts, implicitly, the fact remains that the representation of a pre-represented subject practically ascribes ekphrasis to this realm. Heffernan’s definition seems to have been quite influential, as later definitions of the concept tend to resemble his, e.g., “verbal re-representation in words of a prior visual representation” (Kafalenos, p. 289), or “mimesis in the second degree” (Yacobi, p. 600).

Critic Mary Ann Caws underscores the transformative power of ekphrastic poetry, noting that “the ekphrastic poem does not merely reflect the visual; it refracts it, producing a prism through which the reader sees both the art and the poet’s unique vision” (*Ekphrasis in Poetry and Art*, 2010). This refractive quality allows ekphrastic poetry to serve as both a mirror and a lens, offering a multilayered experience of the original artwork.

One of the defining characteristics of ekphrastic poetry is its inherent subjectivity. The poet’s interpretation becomes an integral part of the dialogue with the artwork, often revealing as much about the poet as it does about the art. W.J.T. Mitchell, in *Picture Theory* (1994), argues that ekphrasis is “a rhetorical act that destabilizes the boundaries between the visual and verbal, ultimately making the invisible visible”. This destabilization creates space for the poet’s personal and cultural perspectives to inform the interpretation of the artwork. Mitchell’s central thesis revolves around the idea that the relationship between

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images and words is not merely one of opposition or complementarity but one of dynamic exchange and interdependence.

Mitchell's picture theory extends his earlier work on the "pictorial turn," emphasizing the importance of images in the cultural and theoretical landscape. He critiques the linguistic and textual dominance of poststructuralist theories, arguing for a revaluation of visual representation. As Mitchell asserts, "We are living in the midst of a pictorial turn, where visual images dominate not only communication and mass media but also theoretical discourse" (Mitchell, 1994, p. 16). Here, Mitchell positions the visual as a pivotal medium for understanding how meaning is constructed, challenging the privileges of linguistic frameworks in semiotics and deconstruction.

One of the core concepts in *Picture Theory* is the "image-text" relationship, where Mitchell examines how images and texts coalesce or conflict within representation. He deconstructs the assumption that images are static and immediate while texts are dynamic and interpretive. Instead, he proposes that both mediums operate within a shared representation framework, stating, "Images are not merely mute surfaces; they are embedded with narrative possibilities, and texts are not purely abstract codes but are saturated with visuality" (Mitchell, 1994, p. 89). This perspective destabilizes traditional binaries, urging readers to consider how textual and visual elements interact differently.

Mitchell's *Picture Theory* further introduces the concept of the "imaginary witness," where the viewer of an image assumes an active role in interpreting and reconstructing its meaning. He claims that "images do not simply show us the world; they also tell us how to see it" (p. 9). Mitchell's notion of ekphrasis as an

act of revision—where the text transforms the visual—is central to Anne Carson's approach to ekphrasis. Her work exemplifies how ekphrasis can transcend traditional boundaries by incorporating fragments, nonlinear narratives, and visual-textual interplay.

Ekphrasis in Anne Carson's Poetry

Anne Carson, a distinguished contemporary poet, essayist, and translator, has profoundly impacted the literary world with her unique blend of classical scholarship and innovative poetic techniques. Through her works, Carson revitalizes ekphrasis, transforming it into a deeply intellectual and emotional dialogue that transcends the boundaries of traditional poetry. Anne Carson's use of ekphrasis is fundamentally dialogic. She does not merely describe art; she converses with it, questions it, and allows it to inform her poetic process. Her works are marked by a constant interplay between the visual and the verbal, challenging the reader to consider the dynamic relationship between these two modes of expression.

Carson presents herself as a poet who paints, both metaphorically and literally. 'I mostly think of my work as a painting', is one way she answers questions about the visual in her poetry (McNeilly, p. 22); 'I wanted to be a person who made drawings', she explains to another interviewer, claiming that *Short Talks* was meant as a book of drawings and only became poetry because 'nobody liked the drawings' (Fleming).

"Short Talks" is a small collection, but its rich investigations of the relation between language and the visual constitute the bedrock on which Carson builds her later poetry. The collection opens on a short introduction which starts with an

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absence of words, 'early one morning words were missing', and ends with a resolution to continue working with them, 'well you can never work enough' (pp. 23-24). In between, she sketches a method: 'I began to copy out everything that was said. The marks construct an instant of nature gradually, without the boredom of a story' (p. 23). Starting with everyday language, 'everything that was said', she moves towards poetry in a way that suggests painting, adding marks after marks to gradually 'construct an instant of nature' on a canvas. Carson still uses the same metaphor to speak about her poetry in an interview more than a decade after: 'you create a surface that leaves an impression in the mind no matter what the words mean. It's not about the meaning of each word adding up to a proposition; it's about the way they interact with each other as daubs of meaning, ... daubs of paint' (McNeilly, p. 22).

In between the absence of words and their necessity, the introduction describes a method of the in-between. Carson is not interested in crafting little propositions from the meaning of the words she uses, the meaning of the stories she tells or that of the images she looks at, but in the interactions, the movements in-between. The rest is boredom, she writes. And she insists: 'I emphasize this. I will do anything to avoid boredom. It is the task of a lifetime' (p. 23). In one of the 'Short Talks', she explains: 'When I think of you reading this, I do not want you to be taken captive, separated by a wire mesh lined with glass from your life itself, like some Elektra' (p. 42). To look for the meaning of things in themselves is to posit that they exist independently from the cloth into which they have been woven, as something stable that could be grasped, used and proposed for literary consumption. Neither painting nor poetry works that way.

In her collection, *Short Talks* is a collection of prose poems, many of which are only a few lines long. Despite their brevity, they carry immense weight, capturing

moments of insight or fragments of memory with startling precision. Each "talk" is akin to an ekphrastic snapshot, offering not a comprehensive narrative but an evocative glimpse. The form embodies Carson's interest in fragmentation and multiplicity; her refusal to pin down meaning mirrors the complexity of interpreting art.

1. "Short Talk on Mona Lisa"

Her poem "Short Talk on Mona Lisa" offers a compelling exploration of ekphrasis and the art of absence. Carson's engagement with the Mona Lisa is not a traditional celebration of da Vinci's painting but a poetic meditation on silence, longing, and the enigmatic power of absence, encapsulated in her unique approach to language and imagery.

Carson subverts the tradition of ekphrastic emphasis on the relation between visual and verbal media by focusing not on what is visible in the Mona Lisa but on what remains unsaid and unseen. The poem's structure mimics a philosophical inquiry into the painting's essence, capturing the tension between presence and absence. The poem begins with the enigmatic statement:

"Every day he poured his question into her, as you pour water from one vessel into another, and it poured back" (Carson, 2015, p. 48).

This metaphor frames the relationship between the artist and the subject as a reciprocal yet incomplete exchange. The use of water as a metaphor highlights fluidity and impermanence, qualities that starkly contrast the fixed and timeless nature of a painted portrait. The "question" the artist pours into Mona Lisa is never explicitly defined, reinforcing the theme of absence. By leaving the content

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of this question unstated, Carson invites readers to reflect on the nature of artistic inquiry and the gaps it seeks to fill.

(Figure 1: Mona Lisa –



Leonardo da Vinci, Portrait of Lisa Gherardini, c. 1503–19, oil on poplar panel, 77 x 53 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris)

Carson's focus shifts from the painting as an object to the psychological and emotional process behind its creation. She dismisses conventional interpretations of the Mona Lisa as a symbol of "mother, lust, etc.," steering the reader toward a more abstract understanding of artistic endeavor:

"There is a moment when the water is not in one vessel nor in the other - what a thirst it was, and he supposed that when the canvas became completely empty he would stop" (Carson, 2015, p. 48).

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Here, Carson employs the image of water suspended between two vessels as a metaphor for the liminal space of creation, where meaning is neither fully formed nor absent. The phrase "what a thirst it was" encapsulates the artist's insatiable longing for something unattainable. This thirst transcends mere physical or emotional desire, symbolizing an existential yearning tied to the act of creation itself.

The emptiness of the canvas, rather than signaling completion, becomes a paradoxical goal for the artist. This inversion of artistic intent, where the aim is not to fill the canvas but to achieve a kind of absence, reflects Carson's broader preoccupation with the power of negation. In this context, absence is not a lack but a presence in its own right, a space where infinite possibilities reside.

Carson's portrayal of the Mona Lisa moves beyond the passive objectification often associated with art. She imbues the figure with agency and resilience: "But women are strong. She knew vessels, she knew water, she knew mortal thirst." This assertion reclaims the Mona Lisa from the artist's interpretative grasp, emphasizing her independence from the narrative imposed upon her. By stating that "women are strong," Carson challenges the historical tendency to reduce female figures in art to mere muses or symbols. In Carson's hands, the Mona Lisa becomes a knowing participant in the creative exchange, fully aware of the dynamics of absence and longing that define her existence. The repetition of "she knew" reinforces this agency, presenting the Mona Lisa as an embodiment of wisdom and endurance. Her understanding of "vessels," "water," and "mortal thirst" aligns her with the natural and elemental forces of life, transcending her status as a painted image. In this reading, the Mona Lisa is not a passive recipient of the artist's "question" but an equal, if silent, partner in the creative dialogue.

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Carson's "Short Talk on Mona Lisa" exemplifies the art of absence by foregrounding what is omitted, unsaid, or unseen. The poem's refusal to offer a definitive interpretation of the Mona Lisa mirrors the painting's own enigmatic quality. This interplay between the visual and the verbal, the present and the absent, creates a rich field of meaning that resists closure. The central metaphor of water suspended between vessels captures the essence of ekphrasis as a dynamic process rather than a fixed representation. Just as water is neither fully contained in one vessel nor the other, the meaning of the Mona Lisa is neither entirely in the painting nor in the viewer's interpretation. It exists in the space between, a liminal realm where absence becomes presence.

2. "Short Talk on the Anatomy Lesson of Dr Deyman"

Carson's poem "Short Talk on the Anatomy Lesson of Dr Deyman" is inspired by Rembrandt's haunting painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Deyman*.

(Figure 2:



The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Deyman by Rembrandt, 1656, Oil on canvas, 100 x 134 cm, Amsterdam Museum)

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At the heart of Carson's poem is the absence of Black Jan's humanity, reduced to his "chopped open cerebrum" and "pure soles" by the scalpel of Dr. Deyman and the brush of Rembrandt. Through her vivid imagery, Carson reclaims the silenced narrative of Black Jan, whose life and death are frozen in the clinical detachment of both art and anatomy. She writes:

"Cut and cut deep to find the source of the problem, Dr. Deyman is saying, as he parts the brain to either side like hair" (Carson, 2015, p. 58).

This line underscores a dual absence: the dissection obliterates Jan's personhood, while the visual medium renders him as a lifeless object for scientific inquiry and artistic contemplation. In *Picture Theory*, Mitchell posits that images function as "living" entities with their own semiotics, yet they often erase the lived experiences of their subjects. Carson channels this erasure by focusing not only on Jan's dissected body but also on the emotional and societal void his death creates, a void filled by Else Ottje's probable grief and the public's fascination with anatomy.

Carson's emphasis on the painting's perspective—Jan's "violent frontal foreshortening," draws attention to the power dynamics embedded in artistic representation. In Rembrandt's work, Jan's feet loom unnervingly large, his body stretching unnaturally backward toward the gory center of his exposed brain. Carson replicates this unsettling perspective in her verse, making the reader confront both the intimacy and alienation of Jan's form:

"One wonders if Else ever saw Rembrandt's painting, which shows her love thief in violent frontal foreshortening, so that his pure soles seem almost to touch the chopped open cerebrum" (Carson, 2015, p. 58).

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Here, Carson juxtaposes the tenderness of “pure soles” with the brutality of the exposed brain, emphasizing the paradoxical intimacy of Rembrandt’s artistic gaze. Mitchell’s assertion that images oscillate between presence and absence—the presence of representation and the absence of the real—resonates in Carson’s work. The painting’s vivid detail highlights Jan’s physicality while simultaneously erasing his identity, relegating him to an object of voyeuristic inquiry.

Carson’s poem immerses the reader in the historical moment of 1656, a time of relentless winter and pervasive hunger. The poem’s opening:

“A winter so cold that, walking on the Breestraat and you passed from sun to shadow you could feel the difference run down your skull like water” (Carson, 2015, p. 58).

This mirrors the chilling dehumanization of Jan’s fate. The biting cold seeps into every aspect of life and death, freezing Jan’s narrative into a moment of stillness, ready for Rembrandt’s canvas and Dr. Deyman’s scalpel.

The historical backdrop Carson provides—Jan’s brief prosperity with Else Ottje, his violent crime, and eventual execution—contrasts with the clinical finality of the anatomy lesson. The frigid January day of Jan’s execution mirrors the emotional coldness with which he is dissected and immortalized. Mitchell’s theory suggests that images can create a “surplus of meaning,” a tension between what is shown and what is withheld. Carson exploits this tension, using the cold as both a literal and metaphorical absence—a void that consumes Jan’s life, love, and humanity.

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The dissection of Jan's brain, described as "parting the brain to either side like hair," reveals not the source of his criminality but the ineffable sadness that permeates the human condition. Carson writes: "Sadness comes groping out of it" (p. 57). This line encapsulates the poem's central theme: the futility of trying to reduce humanity to its physical components. Dr. Deyman's quest to "find the source of the problem" through dissection mirrors the broader human desire to rationalize and contain grief, violence, and mortality. Yet, as Mitchell argues, images—and by extension, the narratives surrounding them—often fail to capture the complexity of their subjects. Carson's poem becomes an act of defiance, restoring to Jan the emotional depth that both Rembrandt's painting and Deyman's scalpel strip away.

Carson's speculation about Else Ottje's experience, "One wonders if Else ever saw Rembrandt's painting" (p. 58), introduces a poignant counter-narrative. Else, as the absent witness to both Jan's death and its artistic immortalization, represents those excluded from the official histories of art and science. Her presence in the poem underscores the personal cost of the public spectacle of Jan's execution and dissection. Mitchell's theory highlights the political dimensions of representation, emphasizing whose stories are told and whose are silenced. Carson's inclusion of Else reclaims some of this silenced space, suggesting that her grief is as significant as Jan's fate.

3. "Short Talk on the End"

Anne Carson's poem "Short Talk on the End" is a compelling example of ekphrastic poetry that explores the intersections of visual art and poetic expression. Drawing inspiration from Rembrandt's *The Three Crosses*, Carson meditates on themes of light, absence, and transformation. By invoking Picture

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Theory, this essay explores how Carson's poetic language echoes the dynamic interaction between image and text, engaging with the painting's visual power to probe metaphysical questions about presence, transience, and perception.

(Figure 3



Christ Crucified between the Two Thieves: The Three Crosses, Rembrandt van Rijn, Dutch, ca. 1660)

In “Short Talk on the End”, Carson’s opening line—“What is the difference between light and lighting?”—immediately situates the reader in a space of inquiry. The question suggests a duality between natural illumination (light) and the deliberate orchestration of vision (lighting), a duality mirrored in Rembrandt’s etching. *The Three Crosses* depicts the crucifixion scene with a masterful manipulation of chiaroscuro, a technique that uses stark contrasts between light and dark to guide the viewer’s gaze. Similarly, Carson’s poem manipulates the reader’s attention, encouraging us to consider the ephemeral nature of illumination and its capacity to frame our understanding of existence.

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In this sense, absence becomes a central motif in both the painting and the poem. Rembrandt's etched plate grows darker as the crucifixion scene unfolds, symbolizing the waning of life and the approach of death. Carson's use of the word "rains" imbues this transformation with a sense of inevitability and natural rhythm, linking the physical decay of matter to the cosmic order. The poem, like the painting, constructs meaning through what is no longer visible, emphasizing the gaps and silences that define human experience.

Carson's line "Rembrandt wakens you just in time to see matter stumble out of its forms" encapsulates the transformative power of art. The phrase "wakens you" suggests an awakening of perception, a heightened awareness that transcends ordinary seeing. In *The Three Crosses*, Rembrandt achieves this awakening through his manipulation of line and texture, which render the physicality of the figures both vivid and ephemeral. Carson mirrors this effect in her language, where the staccato rhythm and repetition of "Darker. Darker." mimic the gradual fading of light in the etching.

This transformation is not merely visual but also metaphysical. The phrase "matter stumble out of its forms" implies a dissolution of the boundary between the material and the immaterial. In Christian theology, the crucifixion represents the ultimate transformation—Christ's transition from mortal to divine. Carson's poem echoes this spiritual dimension, suggesting that the end is not merely a cessation but a passage into another state of being.

Both "Short Talk on the End" and *The Three Crosses* painting derive their power from what they withhold. Rembrandt's etching, with its progressive darkening, invites the viewer to imagine the unseen elements of the scene—the cries of the onlookers, the weight of the cross, the trembling earth. Similarly, Carson's sparse

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language and fragmented syntax create spaces for the reader's imagination to fill. The poem's brevity mirrors the fleeting moment it describes, reinforcing the idea that art's power lies not in capturing reality but in evoking its essence.

Conclusion

Anne Carson's "Short Talks" vividly examines the art of absence through her engagement with picture theory, blending the visual and the verbal in ways that challenge the boundaries of representation. In "Short Talk on Mona Lisa," Carson dissects the iconic painting not by focusing on its presence but by emphasizing its elusive gaze and the void it leaves for interpretation, inviting readers to confront what remains unseen in the world's most famous smile.

Similarly, in "Short Talk on The Anatomy of Dr. Deyman," she explores the ruptures in Rembrandt's anatomical precision, crafting a poetic narrative that highlights the fragmented nature of memory and mortality inherent in the dismembered corpse. Lastly, "Short Talk on the End" captures the paradoxical tension between finality and endlessness, reminding us that absence—whether of a subject, a story, or a life—continues to resonate long after the conclusion.

Through these poems, Carson does not merely translate images into words; she interrogates the silences and absences that linger at the edges of representation. Her ekphrastic method becomes a dynamic interplay between what is depicted and what is omitted, allowing the reader to engage with art not as a static object but as a living, breathing conversation. By foregrounding absence, Carson redefines the function of ekphrasis as not only a means of poetic description but as an exploration of the spaces left behind by art, memory, and language.

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Ultimately, Carson's "Short Talks" invites us to see absence not as a void but as a powerful artistic and existential presence. In engaging with these poetic fragments, we come to understand that the essence of art often lies in what it withholds, challenging us to look beyond the surface and engage with the unspoken, the invisible, and the ineffable. In doing so, Carson reshapes the way we think about art, poetry, and the profound beauty of absence.

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