

‘Clearances’ for Ekphrastic Poetry: Virginia Woolf’s and Seamus Heaney’s Cultural En-Gendering of Reverse Ekphrasis

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Abstract: *This paper studies excerpts from Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse and certain early poems by Seamus Heaney as instances of what I call “reverse ekphrasis”. Heaney’s “Clearances” sonnets describe various house activities so vividly as to conjure them before the reader’s eyes like in a genre painting. So too does “Digging”, Heaney’s profession of faith. Such uncanny artistic similarity of these two manifestly different kinds of poems, examined alongside fragments of the dinner party scene in Woolf’s novel, indicates the cultural en-gendering (in Teresa de Lauretis’ terms) of artistic topoi.*

Keywords: *reverse ekphrasis; genre painting; still life; en-gendering (Teresa de Lauretis); To the Lighthouse (Virginia Woolf); “Clearances” (Seamus Heaney); “At a Potato Digging” (Seamus Heaney); “Digging” (Seamus Heaney); “The Wife’s Tale” (Seamus Heaney);*

Three men at the table, two speechless and astonished, the central, frontally facing one – in a red tunic with a white shawl over his left shoulder and arm – actively gesturing, with a fourth man standing close by, watching them blithely and uncomprehendingly. Neither the food before them – roast chicken, rustic bread, fruits (apples, figs, pomegranates and red and white grapes) in a basket teetering on the table edge – nor water and white wine concern the seated men. Rather, they are absorbing something the central man has said and/or done, right hand reaching out frontally. This mysterious act, the man seated at his left, with arms extended to both sides in a large gesture, finds astonishing, and the one across the table finds so unbelievable that he virtually leaps from his chair. Mine is the academic, emotionally shallow description of Caravaggio’s *Supper at Emmaus* (1601), one of the most famous religious genre paintings that feature the risen Christ appearing before two of his disciples on their way to Emmaus (NRSV, Lk 24.30-31).

Here is a better crafted description, though not of Caravaggio’s *Emmaus*:

Now all the candles were lit, and the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candle-light, and *composed*, as they had not been in the twilight, *into a party round a table* [...].

Some change at once went through them all [...] and they were all conscious of making a party together in a hollow, on an island; had their common cause against that fluidity out there. (Woolf 250-1, emphasis added)

In *To the Lighthouse* (1927), the light and shade contrasts for the dinner guests in Virginia Woolf's *composition* ("the faces [...] *composed* [...] into a party round a table") may evoke to the readers Caravaggio's chiaroscuro in *Emmaus*. Should they actively engage in construing the description, if at all, as ekphrastic, the readers may perceive the evocation of a genre painting featuring a genteel dinner party or a religious composition like Caravaggio's *Emmaus*. Indeed, Woolf must have been familiar with *The Supper at Emmaus*, acquired by London's National Gallery in 1839, for in the first part of the twentieth century all acquisitions were on display.

What I find so special about this excerpt from *To the Lighthouse* is its descriptive force, alongside visual self-consciousness ("they were all *conscious* of making a party together"), in a narrative focused on the (inner) conversations of hosts and guests. This paper examines descriptions of either daily routine or habitual pastime in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and Seamus Heaney's early poetry, whose vividness may liken them to an ekphrasis (in the modern sense) of still lifes and genre paintings. Whilst I focus on the scope of *reverse ekphrasis* (my term), paramount to understanding such cases is the *en-gendering* (Teresa de Lauretis's term) of identities and roles, i.e., the implicit generation and/or performance of identities and roles according to gender-'appropriate' social expectations (see de Lauretis 1-49, esp. 32-8, 42-3).

Ekphrasis past and present and reverse ekphrasis

In the 1990s, W. J. T. Mitchell couched the contemporary *pictorial turn* in western philosophy and science in terms of "picture theory". The pictorial turn names the "postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourses, bodies, and figurality" (Mitchell 16). A decade before, in theorising the "iconic projection" in his *Text as Picture: Studies in the Literary Transformation of Pictures* (Swedish original 1982), Hans Lund examined the literary use of pictorial structures and framing, intended to depict the text's reality as if it were a picture. Earlier still, Martin Heidegger, in his 1938 lecture "Die Zeit des Weltbildes" ("The Age of the World Picture"), declared the rise of the "world picture" (qtd. in Mirzoeff 4), while with his posthumously published

Philosophical Investigations (1953) Ludwig Wittgenstein began his philosophical career with a “‘picture theory’ of meaning” (qtd. in Mitchell 12). Since the final decades of the twentieth century, the growing theoretical interest in the cross-pollination of the literary medium with artistic ones (the fine arts and music) has resulted in the emergence of Interarts Studies and Intermedial Studies.¹ Indubitably, ekphrasis has been grist to the mill of such studies.

Ever since Leo Spitzer famously interpreted, in 1955, Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” as an instance of *ekphrasis*, i.e., “the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art” (Spitzer 207), the West has neglected the capacious scope of the ancient rhetorical and poetic practice. Although “ekphrasis includes descriptions of non-representational arts” (Webb 7), modern theorists tend to pay lip service to Spitzer’s definition of it as “the description of an *objet d’art* by the medium of the word” (Spitzer 218), hence as “‘une transposition d’art’, the reproduction through the medium of words of sensuously perceptible *objets d’art* (*ut pictura poesis*)” (207). Thus, James A. W. Heffernan has famously defined ekphrasis as “the verbal representation of visual representation” (*Museum of Words* 3); for him, “traditional ekphrasis generates a narrative from a work of art that is still in both senses” (“Ekphrasis: Theory” 35).² As Ruth Webb (11-14) and Valerie Robillard (257-8) show in their respective overviews of the literature, the definition of ekphrasis has shifted from naming (in terms of *enargeia*, “vividness”) “the descriptive skills of the student of rhetoric and his ability to produce the experience of *enargeia* in his audience” (Robillard 258) to identifying descriptions of artworks within texts (ekphrasis).³ Indeed, there is “no common ground of agreement on what the term ekphrasis means” (Heffernan, “Ekphrasis: Theory” 35), for “both the general and the particular meanings remain very much alive in current critical discourse, which has at once preserved and amplified them” (36). In ancient times, *progymnasmata* authors regarded *enargeia* – whether of “persons (*prosopa*), places (*topoi*), times (*chronoi*) and events (*pragmata*)” (Webb 11) – as “a type of speech (*logos*)” with a particular “effect upon an audience” (11): to “appeal[] to the mind’s eye of the listener, making him or her ‘see’ the

¹ See, for instance, Claus Clüver’s (32-4) overview of the literature on intermediality and Gabriele Rippl’s edited volume *Handbook of Intermediality: Literature, Image, Sound, Music*.

² However, Heffernan acknowledges that “[w]hat is probably the earliest definition comes from Ailius Theon of Alexandria, generally assigned to the first century of our era”, who defines “ekphrasis simply as *a way of describing just about anything visible*” (“Ekphrasis: Theory” 35; my emphasis). Quoting Ruth Webb’s original Greek definition provided by Ailius Theon, Heffernan translates it thus: “Ekphrasis is exhibitionistic (literally ‘leading around’) speech, *vividly leading the subject before the eyes*” (36; my emphasis).

³ This narrowing down of the application of the term ekphrasis may owe, historically, to the fact that “[b]y the fifth century, ekphrasis had come to denote the description of visual art” (Heffernan, “Ekphrasis: Theory” 36).

subject-matter, whatever it may be” (11-12). However sparse nowadays (Robillard 258), ekphrasis still aims to create the *illusion* of the object’s physical presence in the text (Cunningham 61), in fiction as much as in art criticism (Wagner 14).

I have demonstrated elsewhere (Ciobanu, “*Ut pictura poesis*”) that certain literary descriptions which do not purport to describe any image or artwork may nevertheless be deemed ekphrastic by virtue of their vividness. I have called such instances *reverse ekphrasis* precisely to highlight their evocative power (*enargeia* qua modern ekphrasis) *in the absence* of any reference/allusion to a (pictorial) artefact as the object of description (hence ‘reverse’). My reason for pushing the modern concept beyond its current limits has been to account for the heretofore untheorised case – to the best of my knowledge – of modern texts which *seem to elicit an ekphrastic reading* of a description that in itself has no explicit (or implicit) artistic referent. In propounding the notion of reverse ekphrasis, I have argued that “it is the alert reader who may regard certain descriptions as verbal remediations – and thus generic trans-mediations – of painting genres thanks to *structural* affinities which, as Irina Rajewsky argues in a slightly different context, ‘cue’ the reader ‘to apply painting-bound schemata” (qtd. in Ciobanu, “*Ut pictura poesis*” 35). Such structural cues perceptible to the reader, also addressed by René Wellek in “The Parallelism between Literature and the Visual Arts” (qtd. in Eidt 13) and Michael Riffaterre in “Syllepsis” (625-6), if in contexts unrelated to ekphrasis, arguably make a strong case for distinguishing between run-of-the-mill descriptions within narratives and descriptions whose vividness may strongly evoke a visual scene akin to a landscape painting, portrait, still life or genre painting. Quite importantly, *reverse ekphrasis* regards such vivid descriptions from the perspective of the *reader* engaging with the text. The theory of figure–ground organisation, a gestalt theory adopted by cognitive linguistics, can illuminate the process. In Peter Verdonk’s summary, human attention works through the figure–ground dynamics of focusing and defocusing (240-1). Thus, “our attention is captured by the figure or, the other way round, *we create a figure precisely because we concentrate our attention on it*” at the expense of the background (241, emphasis added). Simply stated, reverse ekphrasis identifies the overall result of the reader’s projection of an extratextual figure – the painterly reference ‘reconstructed’ by the reader – onto a description not earmarked as ekphrastic. This identification is enabled by structural clues in the text which gesture towards pictorial framing, reminiscent of painting, photography or cinema.

Ekphrastic Still Life cum Genre Painting: Virginia Woolf

I have demonstrated elsewhere that the scene of Mrs Ramsay’s art-informed appreciation of her daughter’s dish of fruit for the dinner party, in *To the*

Lighthouse, is an instance of reverse ekphrasis (Ciobanu, “*Ut pictura poesis*” 44-45). Here I will only highlight a few findings relevant to my subsequent examination of Heaney.

The ekphrastic passage (Woolf 259) proceeds from rendering the composition akin to still life paintings, only to subtly graft in further pictorial suggestions (Ciobanu, “*Food for Thought*” 147-155). Mrs Ramsay – here, the reader’s (intratextual) proxy – couches the fruit dish qua unacknowledged *still life* composition in terms of picturesque shapes of a natural landscape turned into a *landscape painting* – a trifold remediation:

Her eyes had been going in and out among the curves and shadows of the fruit, among the rich purples of the lowland grapes, then over the horny ridge of the shell, putting a yellow against a purple, a curved shape against a round shape, without knowing why she did it, or why, every time she did it, she felt more and more serene; until, oh, what a pity that they should do it – a hand reached out, took a pear, and spoilt the whole thing. (Woolf 259)

The incongruous oyster shell (“horny ridge of the shell”) may likely owe to Woolf’s familiarity with the National Gallery’s Dutch still lifes (Ciobanu, “*Food for Thought*” 149-150 and Table 1.1). Its shape, alongside the fruit shapes (“lowland grapes”), contributes to the sensuousness of Mrs Ramsay’s description of the fruit dish. Furthermore, the *shapes*, *colours* and *shadows* of the fruits evoke the picturesqueness sought in landscape in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century (Wall 1). Indeed, the “picturesque” of the romantic age named an aesthetic attitude of appraising natural scenery by recourse to art (Chilvers 357-8; Murray, Murray 314-15). Woolf’s scene aestheticises everyday life – and the “aestheticisation of everyday life is a constant theme in Woolf’s writings” (Humm 219) – through reverse ekphrasis of still life and landscape painting. With its dual focus on Mrs Ramsay’s lingering gaze and her disapproval of Augustus Carmichael’s voracious plundering of the fruit dish, the text subtly suggests one further possibility of reverse ekphrasis: the lush forms of the fruit composition recall the *female nude genre*.

Arguably, in this scene the readers may notice two crucial dimensions of cultural en-gendering. First, the object of aesthetic looking is en-gendered through multiple pictorial modulation. Second, ways of looking are en-gendered too, even as “looking together united” Mrs Ramsay and Carmichael (Woolf 250). Indeed, Mrs Ramsay’s art critical engagement with the dish sounds rather masculine, as may be her (unsuccessful) *possessive* protectiveness of the original arrangement. This literary case recalls feminist insights into the “genderization of science” (Evelyn Fox Keller, qtd. in de

Lauretis 42) through “the association of scientific *thought* [and *gaze*, I would add] with masculinity and of the scientific *domain* with femininity” (de Lauretis 42, my emphasis).

Let us see, against this background, if reverse ekphrasis may be found at work also in some of Seamus Heaney’s poems, rightly noted for their descriptive force.

Ekphrastic Genre Painting: Seamus Heaney

Heaney may be celebrated for his politically involved poems, for his poetic accomplishment or for his poetic manifesto as an Irishman who exchanged potato digging for poetry writing. However, he is not typically praised for the ekphrastic genre painting implicit, I argue, in some of his poems.

Quite tellingly, the Irish poet points self-consciously to the painterly resonances of his descriptions. Sonnet 1 of “Clearances”, an eight-sonnet sequence from *The Haw Lantern* (1987) dedicated to Heaney’s mother, includes in line ten the phrase “genre piece”:

Call her “The Convert”. “The Exogamous Bride”.
Anyhow, it is a genre piece
Inherited on my mother’s side
And mine to dispose with now she’s gone. (“Clearances” 1, ll. 9-12)

Yet, the recollection of the great-grandmother

crouched low in the trap
Running the gauntlet that first Sunday
Down the brae to Mass at a panicked gallop (“Clearances” 1, ll. 5-7)

is the kind of mental image not simply couched metatextually in the pictorial allusion (whose faint ekphrasis fades cinematically into reverse ekphrasis), but also relegated to insignificance. Insofar as it belongs to the maternal/feminine side of the poet’s legacy, the recollection matters little, for Heaney can “dispose with [it] now she’s [mother is] gone” (l. 12). Arguably, “[a]nyhow” (l. 10) further augments this sense of insignificance. As we shall see soon, the strong verb “dispose” is absent from Heaney’s vocabulary in the description of another recollection of his ancestors – in “Digging”.

Sonnet 2 of “Clearances” describes a kitchen welcoming the family to breakfast:

Polished linoleum shone there. Brass taps shone.
The china cups were very white and big –
An unchipped set with sugar bowl and jug.

The kettle whistled. Sandwich and tea scone
Were present and correct. In case it run,
The butter must be kept out of the sun.
And don't be dropping crumbs. Don't tilt your chair.
Don't reach. Don't point. Don't make noise when you stir.
("Clearances" 2, ll. 1-8)

The description is another instance of reverse ekphrasis of a genre piece centred, moreover, as in the painterly case, on a still life. In this complex intermedial scene the visual is enriched both kinaesthetically and especially acoustically with the evoked sounds of orders and prohibitions, conceivably issued by the mother to her young child and 'staged' in a dramatic monologue. Hence also the sense the reader may have of a short film documenting the life of the lowly, where everything is "present and correct" (l. 5) – *expected*: unchipped tea set, sandwiches and scones, polished linoleum and shining brass taps. Gender roles too are present, if left inaudible: *who* polished everything, put the kettle on the stove, baked the scones, prepared the sandwiches and set the table? Not only does the implicitly masculine recollecting voice ignore the family members present in the scene, but it also relegates domestic agency to invisibility, hence to insignificance.

The second stanza of Sonnet 2 again promises, but never fully discloses, a genre piece, whose protagonists may not be the same as in the first one: the bald bespectacled grandfather (ll. 10-11) – one whose grandchild goes unmentioned – opens the door to his daughter (l. 12) to "sit down in the shining room together" (14). Is the room the early kitchen or not? Is it shining thanks to the sun entering through the window or to the unidentified woman who keeps it clean and polishes its metalware? Both stanzas, therefore, deceptively promise two genre pieces – most likely separated by the lapse of time – for both frustrate expectations of an identification of the protagonists.

Heaney's Sonnet 3 does not even identify the location of the domestic scene which it describes. The readers may infer that the action may be set either in the kitchen or in the backyard:

When all the others were away at Mass
I was all hers as we peeled potatoes.
They broke the silence, let fall one by one
Like solder weeping off the soldering iron:
Cold comforts set between us, things to share
Gleaming in a bucket of clean water.
And again let fall. Little pleasant splashes
From each other's work would bring us to our senses. ("Clearances" 3,
ll. 1-8)

Mother and son are described peeling potatoes busily (likely for the family lunch) at a time when they should be attending Mass. In this reverse ekphrasis of a genre piece enhanced acoustically, the splashes (l. 7) of peeled potatoes (l. 2) falling into the “bucket of clean water” (l. 6) “broke the silence” (l. 3). The scene pits off gendered family duties and religious duties seemingly universal, but conceivably performed by the *pater familias*.

The second stanza focuses on the wake rite for the dead mother, indicative of a time lapse comparable to that of Sonnet 2. Furthermore, the reverse ekphrasis of the genre piece again uses memory, as Sonnet 1 does, if to reach back to the early scene of stanza 1:

I remembered her head bent towards my head,
Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives –
Never closer the whole rest of our lives. (“Clearances” 3, ll. 12-14)

Heaney’s may be a moving scene of mother–son intimacy, of pseudo-pre-Oedipal bliss: “*I was all hers* as we peeled potatoes” (l. 2), “Never closer the whole rest of our lives” (l. 14). Nonetheless, the recollected image of the “fluent dipping knives” (l. 13) arguably indicates not so much how mother and child used to connect through housework as, especially in retrospect, how the two have grown separate over time along lines of gendered activity. Reading Sonnet 3 of “Clearances” alongside “Digging”, I would argue that “our” in the former (l. 13) proves to be ambivalent: it is a disjunctive ‘her and my’ knives, not a conjunctive ‘our’ work. “[O]ur” pits retrospectively mature Heaney’s masculine fluency at creative intellectual work against feminine – in young Heaney’s case, feminised – fluency at routine kitchen work, never regarded as creative.

Sonnet 5 depicts mother (identified pronominally in lines 4, 13 and 14) and son taking the bed linen off the line to fold them neatly for storage:

But when I took my corners of the linen
And pulled against her, first straight down the hem
And then diagonally, then flapped and shook
The fabric like a sail in a cross-wind,
They made a dried-out undulating thwack. (“Clearances” 5, ll. 3-7)

Whilst genre paintings which focus on the lowly do not typically depict such activity, Heaney’s reverse ekphrasis transcodes both domestic routine and destitution, for these are “sheets she’d sewn from ripped-out flour sacks” (l. 14). The repetitive activity – on that occasion as well as on countless others –

So we'd stretch and fold and end up hand to hand . . .
Coming close again by holding back
In moves where I was x and she was o (“Clearances” 5, ll. 8, 12-13)

retains none of the dullness of routine house chores, for Heaney sublimates it twice: in the suggestion of a dancing ritual, with the x and o (ll. 12-13) shorthand for hugging and kissing, and, less mundanely, through poetic recourse to the admittedly banal simile of “[t]he fabric like a sail in a cross-wind” (l. 6). It is precisely the poetic transcoding of menial work which distances it from its everyday milieu, with its gender and social strictures, without acknowledging properly those who typically perform it, but rather he (*sic*) who can render it in poetic or painterly terms.

Such distancing, I would argue, becomes most apparent in Heaney's celebrated “Digging” (from *Death of a Naturalist*, 1966). Arguably, the writer's profession of faith doubles as a genre-piece reverse ekphrasis enhanced acoustically:

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,
Loving their cool hardness in our hands. (“Digging”, ll. 3-14)

Critics have acclaimed Heaney's transmogrification of the ancestral spade, now discarded (l. 28), into a pen, as highlighted in the opening and closing stanzas. Digging can be done – metaphorically – with a “squat pen” (ll. 2, 30), the closing line (l. 31) argues. Metaphor apart, recollection is yet another way to ‘dig’ into the past (ll. 7, 27), as Heaney often does in his early poems. Yet, the higher standpoint (and separation) from which the father's digging is viewed in this recollection – the window – not only affords an excellent framing of the genre piece to better elicit reverse ekphrasis, but also intimates the (implicitly hierarchical) social distance interposed between the poet, who recollects and also writes about his childhood memories of home, and his father

or grandfather who digs potatoes. Time lapse as social distance is unselfconsciously identified as “look[ing] down” (l. 5) from both the window (l. 3) and the distance of twenty years (l. 7). Furthermore, references to the sound of digging and the smell of turf and freshly dug potatoes generate an indubitable evocative force, the ancients’ *enargeia*. For Roland Barthes, the power of ekphrasis engenders “the reality effect” (*l’effet du réel*): the presentation of “the knowable, touchable real” (Cunningham 62) as verbal illusion which *signifies* the *category* (rather than the content) of *the real* (Barthes 148). Such *effet du réel* occurs in painting too for the shapes, colours and shades make the foods of still lifes and genre paintings look savoury and inviting.

As an *ars poetica*, “Digging” can perform what the sonnets of “Clearances” cannot or would not: metaphorically continuous ‘masculine’ activities en-gender a patrilineal continuity of sorts, a possibility which the ‘feminine’ chores of “Clearances” resolutely foreclose. “Never closer the whole rest of our lives” (“Clearances” 3, l. 14) may be read to signify, beyond discontinuation of physical proximity and emotional closeness, a socio-culturally en-gendered un-bonding of son from mother. Poetry – and the Poet – can only emerge in the wake of the definitive Oedipal rupture with the maternal feminine after exhausting its resources.

“At a Potato Digging” (from *Death of a Naturalist*, 1966) further confirms my contention about “Digging” regarding poetry-making as socially en-gendered role affordability. The explicit ritualisation suggested in the reverse ekphrasis of the same genre piece of digging, visible already in Part I (“At a Potato Digging” I, ll. 12-16), is fully developed as the “spill[ed] / Libations of cold tea” (during the white bread and tea lunch) ending the eight-line Part IV. Furthermore, Heaney’s passive voice – “White bread and tea in bright canfuls / Are served for lunch” (“At a Potato Digging” IV, ll. 3-4) – obliterates the figure who has prepared this frugal lunch and now serves the humble harvesters.

Conversely, “The Wife’s Tale” (from *Door into the Dark*, 1969) shows indubitably who waits on the harvesters: a woman, who not only brings them their meal, but also butters her husband’s slice and pours him a cup (ll. 14-15). This dramatic monologue barely recognises her contribution: the nod to the white cloth laid on the grass (l. 11) and the “That looks well” (l. 10) appraisal are soon undercut through the gender role reinforcement of “I declare a woman could lay out the field / Though boys like us have little call for cloths” (ll. 12-13) *followed by a wink* (l. 14). Unsurprisingly, after lunch she is simply dismissed as not belonging to the circle responsible for the good yield (ll. 16-17, 28-30), who will “ke[ep] their ease”, “grateful, under the trees” after her departure (ll. 34-35):

And that was it. I'd come and he had shown me
So I belonged no longer to the work.
I gathered cups and folded up the cloth
And went. [...] (“The Wife’s Tale”, ll. 31-34)

A male poet cannot identify his activity metaphorically with the woman’s when kyriarchal society makes a woman wait on the lowly male farmers – hence the female voice of “The Wife’s Tale”. The scene of the husband priding himself before his wife (l. 31) that he had made the earth produce “good yield” (l. 28) “as if he were the land itself” (l. 29), as she notices, generates ambiguity (see also Brearton 77-8). The juxtaposition of his proud gesture and her silent remark sways, in terms of gender roles, between the paradigmatic topos of masculine insemination of the land/woman and the audacious, though hardly unprecedented, claim of masculine identification with an otherwise feminised land or rather Mother Earth. Nonetheless, precisely this masculine claim *cross-voiced* as the wife’s ‘aside’ *can* ground the male poet’s claim to the metaphorical harvesting of poetry from memories of the past and reflections on the present. Buttering someone else’s thick slice – only to see oneself subsequently dismissed as undeserving much credit – certainly cannot.

Such early poems by Heaney can yield to manifold interpretations from as many theoretical standpoints. Mine here is declaredly feminist, grounded as it is in Teresa de Lauretis’s theorisation of the en-gendering of roles in society. Heaney the poet’s recollection of home severs ties as much as it tries to conceal doing so. The distancing concerns, as critics have long noticed, professional ties, yet also, I would add, gender-based ties. Heaney never suggests having transformed metaphorically – so as to extricate himself from and transcend – his mother’s, but his father’s and *forefathers’*, work. Menfolk’s *work* can be appropriated metaphorically and sublimated, but womenfolk’s? Spade can transcend to pen, but peeled potato cannot to well-wrought poem. Conversely, a *biological capacity* such as childbirth can be, and has been, appropriated metaphorically, including by Heaney.

Nevertheless, the deftly obliterated concealment of such ultimately gendered severance reveals itself through the quasi-idealisation of Heaney the child’s home in the figure of the all-abiding mother, never watched from a window but from close quarters and while joining in her chores. Precisely such intimacy in the performance of housework requires all the more to be subsequently disavowed, which Heaney does, as we have seen: “Never closer the whole rest of our lives” (“Clearances” 3, l. 14). Heaney’s is a classic quasi-idealisation of home, despite indigence, as a “stable symbolic centre – functioning as an anchor for others” (Massey 180) thanks to the anchor-figure of the mother. Such idealisation renders home the space of authenticity and stability and therefore the *original* spring of poetic life. Nonetheless, it is no

overstatement that this stability of life of/on the hearth – typically coded female (Massey 180) – pitted as it is against the increments of politics and history, cannot be truly cherished by the mature poet. It is only through the tension between such recollections and his witness of contemporary turmoil in Northern Ireland that his poetic energies can come to fruition, Heaney suggests.

Conclusion

This examination of vividly descriptive scenes in *To the Lighthouse* and some of Heaney's early poetry has shown how well they recall early modern still lifes and genre paintings, in a mode I have dubbed reverse ekphrasis. In both authors, reverse ekphrasis implicitly points, moreover, to the en-gendering of a space of acting where the characters or voices may not have a stable gender identity as a function of one's sex. Rather, Mrs Ramsay's mind/gaze, in the fruit-dish scene of the dinner party, in *To the Lighthouse*, boasts the penetrative attributes associated with masculinity. In Heaney, certain domestic scenes obliterate the agent and thus obliterate the feminisation of both hearth and domestic chores, hence also of the young boy who helps his mother. Others reclaim a metaphorical continuity with one's forebears' activities, if redeemable as masculine. Still others may be spiced up by gendered irony in counterpoint with cross-voiced blaming, articulated from an androcentric perspective. Yet, no matter in whose voice Heaney writes, what emerges is a picture – a genre piece? – of irredeemably traditional identity en-gendering, where the humblest work gets dignified enough at metaphorical level if it can be associated with men, but not with women.

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