

‘A SHABBY OLD COUPLE’: SEAMUS HEANEY’S EKPHRASTIC

IMPERATIVE

‘Ekphrasis’ is the name given to the description in words of a real or imaginary painting or sculpture. Homer’s description of Achilles’ shield and Keats ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ are paradigmatic examples. Theorists of ekphrasis quite properly distinguish between descriptions of paintings, sculptures, or pots that really exist and descriptions of imaginary ones, such as the two examples I have given. Auden ‘The Fall of Icarus’ and Ashbery ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’ describe (though that is of course not quite the right word; ‘read’ might be better) paintings by Breughel and Parmigianino, respectively. These paintings do really exist and can be set beside the poems. (Miller and Asensi 1999: 409)

As Hillis Miller and Asensi point out, ekphrasis has been a central trope in the repertoire of the aesthetic, as it speaks towards the human desire for mimetic representation of the world in which we live. The urge to represent reality through the iconic text, or the verbal text, is central to the ekphrastic imperative, as words attempt to represent real paintings or else imagined ones, but in both cases, the fusion of the iconic and the textual is what is in question. Ekphrastic poets are drawn to ‘portraiture, landscape, pictures of people in a landscape, and still-lives, and somewhat less to sculpture’ (Spiegelman 2005: 8).

As a tenet of classical poetic theory, the term owes a significant debt to the work of Quintus Horatius Flaccus, better known as Horace, and specifically lines 361 to 365 of his *Ars Poetica*:

*Ut pictura poesis: erit quae, si propius stes,
te capiat magis, et quaedam, si longius abstes.
haec amat obscurum, volet haec sub luce videri,
iudicis argutum quae non formidat acumen;
haec placuit semel, haec deciens repetita placebit.*

A poem is like a picture: one strikes your
fancy more, the nearer you stand; another, the
farther away. This courts the shade, that will wish
to be seen in the light, and dreads not the critical
insight of the judge. This pleased but once; that,
though ten times called for, will always please.) (Horace 1926: 481)

The importance of the role of the verbal representation of the visual is significant to any study of poetry, which itself can be seen as the most iconic and visual genre of language. Attempting to overcome the ephemerality of language, and the difficulty of freezing the image or moment in time, can be seen as a structuring function of the layout of the poetic text. Unlike prose, where page length, and the location of the word on the page, will differ in different editions of a book, in poetry, as in the extract above, the final word on the third line will always be '*videri*', no matter how different the editions in which the poem is published. The generic specificity of this point is significant, even in translation, as a different translation of these lines would offer no guarantee that the final translated words on the third line would always be 'wish'. Hence the visual appearance of the original poetic line can be seen as a fusion of the textual and the iconic: 'Homer's account of how Hephaestus made Achilles' shield in *Iliad* has often been interpreted as a symbol for the poem itself, each being the product of shaping skill' (Ford 2002: 116). Indeed, when Plato was devising his theory of poetry, he first referred to images in a mirror and then to the work of a painter, before finally applying 'the distinctions drawn from both these illustrations to define the mimetic character of poetry' (Abrams 1953: 33).

However, the dawning of the Enlightenment, and the desire to carve out a discrete space for rational thought, through its expression in rational and logical language, attempted to carve up the aesthetic into specialised areas. This meant that and the grand comparisons of the likes of Horace between the arts were gradually whittled down so that the verbal and

visual image, the iconic and the textual signifiers were kept separate. Indeed, it was the Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, who issued a call to 'blow up the Chinese Wall that stands between the primary antithesis of the "language of logic" and the "language of images"' (Rodowick 2001: 31-32), and his aim would seem to be a fusion of a surface description which can gesture towards a deeper one. So, while ekphrasis is 'generally taken as a verbal representation of visual representation' (Spiegelman 2005: 112), at a more nuanced level, it can also provide some access to the unconscious and to aspects of the Lacanian Real

Ekphrasis, at its core, deals with description. Gerard Genette distinguishes two types of description: 'ornamental and significant. The second clearly relates to the level of the story; the first to that of the discourse, which explains why for a long time it formed a perfectly coded rhetorical 'piece': *descriptio* or *ekphrasis*, a very highly valued exercise in neo-rhetoric' (Barthes and Heath 1977: 96). I will argue that for Heaney, ekphrasis enables him to enunciate Genette's significant description, which can be seen as a mode of access to aspects of the Lacanian Real. Frederic Jameson makes the point that our access to 'the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualisation, its narrativisation in the political unconscious' (Jameson 1981: 26). The 'Real' is a Lacanian term which refers to the world beyond language, to that which cannot be symbolised in language, it is 'what resists symbolisation absolutely' (Lacan 1991: 66); it is that which is 'without fissure' (Lacan 1988: 97) and it is always appearing 'at the same place' (Lacan 1988: 235). It suggests feelings, emotions and meanings which lie beneath the symbolic order, things that have an effect but which cannot be said. It also 'has connotations of matter' and of the body 'in its brute physicality' (Evans 1996: 163). It refers to something that is there but which is difficult to express, and it is difficult to explain as Lacan himself changed his opinion on the term over the course of his work. It is related to, but not the same as, the unconscious, and the aesthetic

can be one of the areas through which it can be accessed through the resonances of the image, be that image textual or iconic.

In this chapter, I will look at the occurrence and significance of ekphrasis in the work of Seamus Heaney. While at first glance, Heaney may not be seen as an especially ekphrastic poet, nevertheless, I think that there is a case to be made that some of his more telling poems draw on this ekphrastic dimension, and this chapter will begin with an analysis of 'The Seed Cutters', drawn from Breughel, part of a short sequence entitled 'Mossbawn: Two Poems in dedication for Mary Heaney', in *North* (Heaney 1975: 10). It will progress to 'Summer 1969', based on Goya's 'The Shootings of the third of May', which is the fourth poem in his brief sequence 'Singing School', also in *North* (Heaney 1975: 69-70); it will then focus on 'A Basket of Chestnuts', based on the 1973 Edward McGuire portrait of Heaney that is now in the Ulster Museum, from *Seeing Things* (Heaney 1991: 24-25). The culmination of the chapter will be in an analysis of some of Heaney's bog poems as ekphrastic in tenor, as they draw, not on the real figures, but on the representations of those figures in P.V. Glob's book, *The Bog People: Iron-Age Man Preserved* (Glob 1977).

Throughout the history of aesthetics, the connections between words and images are strong and permeable. Ekphrasis, the idea of describing a real or imaginary picture, is a strong imperative of the synesthetic imperative of poetry, as well as underlining how poetry attempts, as well as using rational discourse, to also engage with the emotive, the haptic and the unconscious. For Heaney, poems about the visual are a significant aspect of his work. His use of the visual is very often a form of trans-cultural juxtaposition. When asked by Dennis O'Driscoll which painter Heaney would like to have been, the answer is interesting on a number of levels. Heaney focuses on the twin desire of picking someone artistically similar 'a kindred spirit', while at the same time wanting to 'pick somebody completely different':

Forget Breughel, therefore, and think of the Piero who did the picture of the scourging of Christ. I'd like to be him, as Euclidean as he is dreambound. But then too I'd like to be the Douanier Rousseau who did that painting of the poet and his muse as a shabby old couple standing in their ordinary old doorway. A worn-out image of themselves as bride and groom. (Heaney and O'Driscoll 2008: 335)

What is most interesting here is how Heaney values the imagining of the ordinary, the diurnal, the mundane, as a way of getting in touch with significant issues, or what we might term aspects of the Lacanian Real. One could see all of the poems under discussion as ekphrastic enunciations of the real of this 'shabby old couple': a Real that is enunciated in images of the ordinary, as 'poetry – like the other arts – evokes sensuous presentations, only it does so by means of natural language' (Markiewicz 1987: 535).

This use of the ordinary to impart significance can be seen in one of the dedicatory poems of one of his darkest books, *North*, entitled 'The Seed Cutters'. It is an ekphrastic poem in its mode of enunciation, beginning as it does with an apostrophe to an artist: 'They seem hundreds of years away. Breughel, / You'll know them if I can get them true' (Heaney 1975: 10). Heaney has always felt an affinity with the work of Breughel, telling O'Driscoll that he feels 'at home in front of a Breughel cornfield' (Heaney and O'Driscoll 2008: 334). It is the mixture of the numinous and the ordinary in Breughel's pictures that attracts Heaney, and I would suggest that it is part of his overall attraction to an ekphrastic mode of writing

I always felt at home with his scenes – the hayfield, the peasant wedding, the hunters in the snow, children's games. Things looming large and at the same time being pinned down in the smallest detail. Birds on a winter tree. (Heaney and O'Driscoll 2008: 174)

It is no accident that Heaney uses the phrase 'at home' when speaking of Breughel's work as there is what Sigmund Freud would call a homely (*Heimlich*) or 'native' quality to both Breughel's paintings and to the Heaney poem, and we will return to this aspect of the poem

later in the discussion. It is also no accident that he speaks of the contrast between 'looming large' and 'detail', because for Heaney, this is the value of the iconic image – as he tellingly puts it: 'anything can happen in a gallery' (Heaney and O'Driscoll 2008: 374). In terms of the unconscious location of the aesthetic impulse, Heaney uses ekphrastic imagery to explain how he has been affected by a sudden turn in a gallery to be confronted with the appearance of an unlooked for picture.

He tells of seeing Giorgione's *Tempest* in a gallery in Venice, having been very familiar with its reproductions, and having a good sense of its content, 'the woman and baby, the big overcast sky, the unconsoling space at the centre', and is surprised by the sudden effect of the real picture:

But when I saw it in the gallery in Venice I was moved in a completely unexpected way. The picture was smaller than I'd imagined, the physicality of the pigment made the menace and. mystery of the scene more palpable, so that there was this sudden 'making strange'. That same unpredictable deepening of purchase, a feeling of being dropped through some trapdoor of perception face with a Magritte. Not so much surreal as photo-real or superreal - a close-up, an almost primitivist view of a man's toilet table. Great solitude, great sorrow even, implicit in the rendering of a comb and a shaving brush, in the grain of the wood of the table. There was something grievous about the dark greens and plum blues. Woeful without being pathetic. *Lacrimae rerum* in the teeth of a comb. (Heaney and O'Driscoll 2008: 334-35)

If we are looking for a reason for Heaney's fascination with the visual image, we need look no further. It is the effect of the detailed image which impresses him, as the carefully-rendered detail creates an associative train of thought which can see the tears of humanity signified in the teeth of a comb. What is being signified here is beyond, or above or below the rational: it is a glimpse of the Lacanian real.

This sense of dropping through a trapdoor in perception is to be found in 'The Seed Cutters'. In a book where the customs and rites are dark, atavistic and violent, these

'calendar-customs' are positive, and point to a series of unthinking rituals that are life-enhancing as opposed to life-destroying. In a book that had been long awaited, in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday when on 30 January 1972, soldiers of the Support Company of the 1st Battalion Parachute Regiment opened fire on the marchers in the Rossville Street area, killing 13 and leaving a further 13 injured from gunshots. Nationalist opinion was outraged, and Thomas Kinsella produced an angry polemical poem *Butcher's Dozen* (Kinsella 1972), while John Montague produce *The Rough Field* (Montague 1972), both books which expressed anger at colonisation and at the hegemonic power of the unionist-loyalist-British political position. Given Blake Morrison's view that people were looking for the emergence of new 'war poets' (Morrison 1982: 55) to chronicle the conflict, there had been some expectation that Heaney would produce a direct response to the ongoing violence in Northern Ireland. Given the overt reaction to the political situation in the other two books, Heaney's approach was seen as more oblique, but his ekphrastic imperative here allowed him to address the issue with that 'deepening of purpose' which the visual image can inspire.

There is some degree of critical consensus that this poem is outside of the timeframe of the rest of the book. Heather O'Donoghue sees the seed cutters as being 'outside time' (O'Donoghue 2009: 193), while Edna Longley sees the poem as occupying 'a truly timeless zone' (Longley 2001: 90); while Neil Corcoran notes that the poem remains 'as it were, outside the frame of *North*' (Corcoran 1998: 99). However, I would disagree. What is at work here is the congruence of ritual across time, and the sense that these calendar-customs will endure just as other ones have endured. What Breughel, 'hundreds of years away', and Heaney, in the contemporary present, are describing is consistency of human endeavour, the people in the corn-field, the kneeling seed-cutters noting that the:

... tuck and frill

Of leaf-sprout is on the seed potatoes

Buried under that straw. With time to kill
They are taking their time. (Heaney 1975: 10)

The symbolic signification here is that, despite the violence that follows in the gallery of the book, the trapdoor of perception at the beginning locates the reader in a more optimistic frame. Seeds herald new growth, and metaphorically signify hope for the future. These poems are in the same gallery; they just offer a different significant description of the other exhibits.

Rand Brandes, in an interesting and informed discussion of various working titles used by Heaney, notes that the original title of *Wintering Out* (Heaney 1972) a book in which the first bog poems appear, was 'Winter Seeds', which was taken from 'The Tolland Man': 'His last gruel of winter seeds / Caked in his stomach' (Heaney 1972: 47). Brandes sees this title as 'relatively optimistic', suggesting 'seeds of a new life and hope' (Brandes 2009: 22). In an analogous way, the seed cutters signify endurance, a protaining and retaining of life and values that will endure beyond the dark-watermarks of feud and killing. As part of two poems in dedication to Heaney's aunt, Mary, this poem demonstrate the presence of the real, of an enhancing ritual which is not attenuated by the political and religious sectarian killing that is part of the broader context of Heaney's experience. This, too, is part of that context; it is the opposite of the *lacrimae rerum* (the tears of things), and instead the image of the sustaining tasks suggests a *gaudium rerum* (a joy of things), or perhaps a *perseverantia rerum* (persistence of things), that is conjured up by the image of these people kneeling 'under a hedge, behind a windbreak Lazily halving a root' (Heaney 1975: 10). Here is the parallel with the 'ordinary doorway' of which he spoke earlier, as the poet and his muse attempt to access the real through the ordinary doorway of these sustaining rituals.

In a book about the influence of the past, this image suggests the sustaining power of the anonymities of the past, what Corcoran terms 'painterly images of beneficent tranquillity,

of home-keeping and community' (Corcoran 1998: 99), and what Michael Parker has called a world of 'solidarity' (Parker 1993: 126). The painterly image is one to which Heaney will return later in the same book, as he looks for more 'images and symbols adequate to our predicament' (Heaney 1980: 56); the seed cutters are such symbolic figures, arresting our gaze through their constancy and their a-political work on the land. They are anonymous symbols of human activity which can sustain and outlast periodic violence, and they are a visual image on which Heaney can call as a way of expressing an attitude to his own political context. But it is to another ekphrastic image that Heaney sees as adequate to the predicament of being a writer attempting to give voice to feelings about the violence that our discussion now turns:

While the Constabulary covered the mob
Firing into the Falls, I was suffering
Only the bullying sun of Madrid. (Heaney 1975: 69)

In terms of poetic narrative this could not be any clearer. While the civil rights protests in Northern Ireland were drawing a violent reaction from the Royal Ulster Constabulary, Heaney was on holiday in Madrid, listening to details on the radio, and feeling the demand to frame some form of response. And this poem demonstrates an ekphrastic response, as it is through art that he is able to penetrate to the real of his views on the violence. This ekphrasis is not the surface description that is noted in the images he sees 'on the television' of 'celebrities' who 'arrived from where the real thing still happened' (Heaney 1975: 69). Rather it is to be found in the 'cool of the Prado' where:

Goya's 'Shootings of the Third of May'
Covered a wall-the thrown-up arms
And spasm of the rebel, the helmeted

And knapsacked military, the efficient

Rake of the fusillade. (Heaney 1975: 69-70)

Here his response to violence in Northern Ireland is to describe the Goya painting and later, another Goya image of Saturn devouring his children and finally:

that holmgang

Where two berserks dub each other to death

For honour's sake, greaved in a bog, and sinking.

He painted with his fists and elbows, flourished

The stained cape of his heart as history charged. (Heaney 1975: 70)

This ekphrasis has moved far beyond the celebrities and their sound-bite interviews which skim the surface of the 'real thing', as ekphrasis itself expands beyond mere description: 'looking leads to absorption in space and through time. Specific detail leads to generalized significance. Often, one cannot determine which is more important to the poet: visual accuracy or abstract conclusion' (Spiegelman 2005: 108).

Goya provides that trapdoor in perception of which we spoke earlier. In Goya he finds his own perception and response, and this is what has a lasting effect on him and not the urging to 'Go back,' and 'try to touch the people' (Heaney 1975: 69). Heaney has spoken of the impression these pictures by Goya in the Prado had on him, and interestingly, this effect is unconscious as opposed to willed. He tells that he 'wasn't there to study examples of art in a time of violence', instead he was there 'to be in the presence of masterworks that stood their ground and, in that way, steadied you and settled you'. In these paintings he is struck by, and tries to describe, Goya's portrayal of 'visionary catastrophe – the scarlet blood in the picture of Saturn devouring his children, the levitation of the witches in the picture of the witches' Sabbath' (Heaney and O'Driscoll 2008: 182-83).

For Heaney, the overpowering force of these images proves to be instructive. The violence is terrific and surreal and beyond the norms of television reportage; Goya is able

to probe the real of violence in these images. There is an aspect of the violence that goes beyond the political and, indeed, that almost goes beyond representation, and Goya's pictures have internalised this. Lacan has observed that the margins of a small etching by Goya, we find written: "the sleep of reason produces monsters." It's beautiful and, as it's by Goya, it is even more beautiful: we can see the monsters' (Lacan 2008: 81). This is the core of the ekphrastic value of Goya for Heaney; this is what Heaney found 'overwhelming' when he was confronted by these pictures, and about which he noted that they 'can make you reel' (Heaney and O'Driscoll 2008: 183). I would suggest that they make him reel because they offer him a glimpse of the Real. He makes this very point when going on to talk about the value of Goya. He is talking of his childhood, and about tinkers who were living in the vicinity, and he describes a 'scareful fight' a few yards away from his home in Mossbawn, and while he was not close to see the detail, he remembers in the 'middle of the day, grown men howling and battling and bleeding':

I'll never forget the fear and danger. It was the unprepared nature of the fight and the fury of it that was so scareful. Battle fury, I suppose. The kind of thing you tend only to see nowadays in close-up special effects in the cinema. Ever since I saw Goya's 'black painting' of the two berserks beating hell out of each other, clubs and coat-tails flying, I've associated it with that afternoon. It's like a dream to me still. The descent of the angel of violence. (Heaney and O'Driscoll 2008: 241)

What is interesting here is mode of the ekphrastic description of this scene. It is almost a double ekphrasis at work, as he describes the Goya painting 'Duel with Cudgels', which shows two men fighting with clubs while sinking in a bog or marsh, as a holmgang of two berserks fighting. However, even as he invokes the Scandinavian term for a fight with rules, he uses an idiolect that would be more usually associated with a description of the fighting tinkers in Mossbawn: they were 'beating the hell out of each other'. So, he is not describing the fighting *per se*, but the emotional effect of the sense of 'fear and danger'; the 'scareful'

nature of the fighting; the 'battle fury' caused by 'the descent of the angel of violence'. And of course this is the real power of the aesthetic, not just the ornamental description that can be achieved through television images.

What Heaney learns from his experience of Goya is that it is the real of violence, its unconscious, and that this is a cogent and ethical role for the artist in the face of violence. And the ekphrastic power in 'Summer 1969' is to be found in the tone of the poem: there is little of the guilt or the *angst* that has pervaded Heaney's reactions to violence, and the pressure on him to comment on this. In the same sequence, 'Singing School' he has spoken of this pressure to poetically engage with the violence as his 'responsible *tristia*'; he has voiced a sense of a pressure to use his gift like a 'slingstone' to be 'whirled for the desperate' (Heaney 1975: 72). This *angst* is an ongoing trope in Heaney's writing, as instanced in the overt question from 'The Flight Path', written some twenty one years later: 'When, for fuck's sake, are you going to write / Something for us?' (Heaney 1996: 25), and as explained in his Noble lecture when he speaks of being bowed 'like some monk bowed over his *prie-dieu*' because he knows 'himself incapable of heroic virtue or redemptive effect, but constrained by his obedience to his rule to repeat the effort and the posture' (Heaney 1995: 20-21).

What we find here in his ekphrastic use of Goya is a trust in the power of art to respond, and the trust that the images adequate to his predicament will come, and he will know them when he is ready, because of their overwhelming nature. In his best descriptions of the effects of violence, Heaney is able to touch on the scaresome, overwhelming, visceral aspects of violence which make the reader or spectator 'reel', and in this sense, art, by foregrounding the defamiliarizing nature of violence, touches on the real of violence. Lacan sees the real as being 'that which always lies behind the automaton' (Lacan 1977: 53-54), it is that which creates monsters which lie dormant until that angel of violence descends, and it is in his depictions of violence that Goya becomes an ekphrastic exemplar for Heaney.

As Harold Bloom has noted that the value of the influence of Goya is that 'violence comes in many forms and none are of value' (Bloom 1985: 35), but I would disagree. Heaney is using Goya as part of his learning curve, and it is instructive to remember that this poem is in the sequence entitled 'Singing School', a title taken from Yeats's poem 'Sailing to Byzantium'. In this poem, Yeats, desiring to emulate the artistic unity and coherence of the Byzantine civilisation, makes the point that: 'Nor is there singing school but studying / Monuments of its own magnificence' (Yeats 1965: 193). It is not the value of violence per se that is at issue in Goya's paintings or in Heaney's ekphrastic descriptions of them; rather it is the attempt to represent those sleeping monsters of violence, which can never actually be overtly shown. This is clear in another ekphrastic poem, 'A Basket of Chestnuts'.

The eponymous basket of chestnuts was to be part of a portrait of Heaney that was to be painted by the artist Edward Maguire, and which is to be found on the back cover of the original edition of *North* from 1975. Heaney tells of how Maguire arrived at their house on the 'lookout for any props that might add a bit of character to the background or the foreground, and settled on this basket of chestnuts that I'd gathered "golden-bowelled as a moneybag"' (Heaney and O'Driscoll 2008: 328). Clearly, this leads the reader to expect that the poem will feature this 'golden-bowled' basket of chestnuts, which will figure in the portrait. However, in the portrait, the basket is absent:

Since Edward Maguire visited our house
In the autumn of 1973,
A basketful of chestnuts shines between us,
One that he did not paint when he painted me —

Although it was what he thought he'd maybe use
As a decoy or a coffer for the light
He captured in the toecaps of my shoes.
But it wasn't in the picture and is not. (Heaney 1991: 25)

So, in this ekphrastic poem, the eponymous object of description, the basket of chestnuts, is an absent presence which haunts the consciousness of the poet, and of his portrait. The portrait has Heaney sitting at a table, reading a book, and looking straight out at the viewer, and on looking at the first stanza, one would expect the usual adjectivally strong, detailed description of the chestnuts. However, the poem begins with what he terms a 'shadow-boost', a 'giddy strange assistance / That happens when you swing a loaded basket'. He goes on to describe that defamiliarising process again, as he outlines the 'lightness' that inheres in the weight as the basket reaches the limit of its upswing: 'your hands feel unburdened, / Outstripped, dismayed, passed through', and then 'comes rebound – Downthrust and comeback ratifying you' (Heaney 1991: 24). Here Heaney is describing a basket that is not in the portrait, even though it is in his poem, so it is what might be termed an unconscious ekphrasis as he represents what is almost beyond visual or linguistic expression through this absent presence.

This delight in the ordinary, and in the process of remembering the basket of chestnuts, is ratified by his discussion of the dialectic of heaviness and lightness, and more specifically, of the effects of both: both are seen to be of value, both are seen as the image of each other, and the absent basket stands for that which is there, but which cannot be represented, that which, as Jacques Derrida would have it 'exceeds the alternative of presence and absence'. He makes the point that in terms of representation that a certain alterity 'to which Freud gives the metaphysical name of the unconscious – is definitively exempt from every process of presentation by means of which we would call upon it to show itself in person' (Derrida 1982: 20). I would argue that this is ekphrasis at a deeper level; it is the attempt to depict what cannot be represented but which is still present in an unusual but pervasive way – the monsters of Goya's unconscious have become the chestnuts here, a 'shadow boost' which 'differs from, and defers itself' (Derrida 1982: 20). The unconscious,

either as a root of violence, or as a source of artistic creativity, can be represented through a special type of language, and I would argue that poetry is just such a language, as it can create this becoming-space which can read 'the traces of "unconscious" traces' (Derrida 1982: 21).

The traces of the specific basket was to feature as an aspect of the portrait 'shines between' Heaney and Maguire, even though it remained unpainted: 'But it wasn't in the picture and is not' (Heaney 1991: 24) . As the poem coheres in the final stanza, the image of the shadow-boost takes on a broader tenor: what is in the picture is 'comeback, especially for him' (referring to Maguire), while:

...the basket shines and foxfire chestnuts gleam
Where he passed through, unburdened and
dismayed. (Heaney 1991: 25)

The repetition of the terms used about the basket in the opening two stanzas, but here referring to the painter and Heaney, the two artists who, in their different ways, "see things" anew, is telling. The chestnuts, absent from the portrait, are present in the poem: the 'shadow-boost' and 'rebound' enact the sense of complexity and wholeness that has become the most significant part of Heaney's developing aesthetic sense. The complications of what can and cannot be represented, whether in a picture or in a poem, are addressed here, suggesting that perhaps such an absence is 'merely a distant presence, one which is delayed or which, in one form or another, is idealized in its representation?' (Derrida 1988: 7). Heaney's own view is that the painter 'might have glossed over the skin of the chestnuts into the toes of my boots. If you look at the painting, you'll see that the footwear is positively lustrous' (Heaney and O'Driscoll 2008: 328), so in this sense, the poem is a 'becoming-space' which allows for the translations between presence and absence as a way of representing the unconscious at work

ekphrastically; such a space 'makes possible both writing and every correspondence between speech and writing, every passage from one to the other' (Derrida et al. 1981: 27).

Thus, through the ekphrastic mode, Heaney is able to express aspects of the Lacanian real and of the unconscious, both in the sense of anonymities that run through life, in the Breughellesque 'The Seed Cutters', through the monsters of the unconscious in the Goya-inspired 'Summer 1969', through the Maguire portrait in 'A Basket of Chestnuts'. I think that the fusion of text and image as a mode of expression is a strong line in his work, but its apotheosis is undoubtedly to be found in his bog poems. Their ekphrastic nature has seldom been noted in the abundant secondary literature on Heaney, but it is a well-documented fact that his initial impetus came from a book on iron-age victims of sacrifice who had been preserved in bogs, a book which he bought himself as a Christmas present in 1969. Heaney tells of the impact of the images from the book on him: 'Opening P. V. Glob's book *The Bog People* was like opening a gate, the same as when I wrote "Bogland"' (Heaney and O'Driscoll 2008: 157). But this gate was one towards which Heaney had been moving since the beginning of the violence in Northern Ireland.

In *Preoccupations*, he makes it clear that he has a philosophical imperative towards finding 'images and symbols' which would be 'adequate' to the predicament of those in Northern Ireland who were living through this upsurge in civil strife. And Heaney is clear what he does not want: he does not want to engage in 'liberal lamentation' that citizens should 'murder each other' over the 'matter of nomenclatures such as British or Irish'; nor does he mean 'public celebrations or execrations of resistance or atrocity' (Heaney 1980: 56). Instead, what he is looking for is some way to get his 'feeling into words' or to put it more accurately, his 'feel into words'. He first achieved this in his early poem 'Digging', and interestingly he describes this as a poem where he felt that he 'had let down a shaft into

real life' (Heaney 1980: 41), and he was looking for some form of becoming-space where, just as Goya was able to represent his monsters, and Breughel the anonymities, and Maguire the chestnuts, he would be able to represent some deep ekphrastic description of the unconscious real of the violence in Belfast and Derry:

I mean that I felt it imperative to discover a field of force in which, without abandoning fidelity to the processes and experience of poetry as I have outlined them, it would be possible to encompass the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity. (Heaney 1980: 56-57)

He finds these 'befitting emblems of adversity' in Glob's book, which was concerned with 'preserved bodies of men and women found in the bogs of Jutland', and who were 'ritual sacrifices to the Mother Goddess, the goddess of the ground'. Heaney's connection between these iron-age sacrificial victims is by now well known, and was the motive force behind his bog poems. There is nothing new here.

What is significant for our discussion is the initial trapdoor in perception which set up the connection. It was not the symbolic connection between regenerative sacrifices to a mother goddess who was a personification of territorial belonging and ownership, nor the politico-religious parallelisms that set up this connection. Instead, it was the ekphrastic connection, one that parallels his unconscious connection with the work of Breughel and Goya, that drew him to this book. Heaney says it was 'the unforgettable photographs of these victims blended in my mind with photographs of atrocities, past and present, in the long rites of Irish political and religious struggles' (Heaney 1980: 57-58), and he told O'Driscoll that the minute he 'saw the photographs, and read the text', he knew that 'there was going to be yield from it', and the key reason for this is because 'even if there had been no Northern Troubles, no mankilling in the parishes' he would still 'have felt at home with that 'peatbrown head' – man utterly familiar countryman's face' (Heaney and O'Driscoll 2008:

158). It is the iconic image, the visual text, of the photograph of the face in Glob's book that is the initial attraction – this is what speaks to Heaney and this is what moves him. As well as being creative, the unconscious can also be a source of our atavisms, and I would make a textual connection here between two aspects of the poetic gallery of North. To refer back to the seed-cutters, he talks of seeing 'at the centre a dark watermark' (Heaney 1975: 10), and this darkness is symbolic of Goya's monsters, the angel of violence which can descend, and this dark image is a connection between the ekphrastic image of the seed cutters and the poems which derive from the homely picture of the peat-brown head of the Tollund Man (Heaney 1972: 47). Heaney's sense of being at home with the image of the head, segues with his already-noted sense of being at home with the work of Breughel, and lead us back to the discussion of 'The Seed Cutters', where mention was made of the Freudian notion of the *Heimlich*.

For Freud, the uncanny, or *Unheimlich*, would seem at first to be the opposite of the *Heimlich*, 'the opposite of what is familiar; and we are tempted to conclude that what is "uncanny" is frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar' (Freud 1955: 220); however, a long critique of the etymology leads him to the different conclusion that among its different 'shades of meaning the word "*Heimlich*" exhibits one which is identical with its opposite, "*Unheimlich*". What is *Heimlich* thus comes to be *Unheimlich*' (Freud 1955: 224). Thus for Freud, the uncanny is not the unfamiliar; rather is it:

something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression. (Freud 1955: 241)

As we already noted, 'The Seed Cutters' presents a classic ekphrastic image of a Breughel scene: an agrarian organic communion, however, there is also an *Unheimlich* aspect to this image:

With time to *kill*...
Each *sharp knife* goes
Lazily *halving* each root that *falls apart*...
And, at the centre, a *dark watermark*. (Heaney 1975: 10)

The 'dark watermark' is the defining factor in the plural subjectivity within which the subject of the enounced seems to be imbricated: 'all of *us...our* anonymities'. These anonymities can be benign, like the timeless practice of sowing seeds for the future; they can also be malign, like the two berserks in the holmgang. In both cases, there are unconscious drives and pulsions at work, and Heaney's ekphrastic imagination symbolises these in stark, dark colours and pigments in the rest of the gallery that is *North*:

I am cradled in the *dark* that wombed me... (Heaney 1975: 12)
...the nails
were *darkened*... (Heaney 1975: 15)
...Compose in *darkness*... (Heaney 1975: 20)
...To where the *dark-bowered* queen
Whom I unpin,
Is waiting.... (Heaney 1975: 31)
... my brain *darkening*
A jar of spawn... (Heaney 1975: 32)
...and I rose from the *dark*
hacked bone, skull-ware... (Heaney 1975: 34)
...The cured wound
opens inwards to a *dark*
elderberry place... (Heaney 1975: 36)
...I am the artful voyeur
of your brain's exposed
and *darkened* combs... (Heaney 1975: 38)
...Her broken nose is *dark* as a turf clod... (Heaney 1975: 39)
...Ground that will strip
its *dark* side... (Heaney 1975: 41)

...his name

Will rise on water, and on these *dark* seepings:

Smerwick sowed with the mouthing corpses

Of six hundred papists... (Heaney 1975: 46-47)

...a dream of loss

and origins-the cradling *dark*... (Heaney 1975: 52)

...At night on the balcony, gules of wine,

A sense of children in their *dark* comers... (Heaney 1975: 69)

...*Dark*

cyclones, hosting, breaking; Saturn

Jewelled in the blood of his own children... (Heaney 1975: 70) [*all my italics*]

This anaphoric use of 'dark' paints the book in black and bleak colours, and acts as an extended metaphor of the dark forces of Goya's monsters, though the use of 'cradling-dark' also points towards the nurturing aspects of the anonymities. The thematic connection between these images of *Unheimlich* darkness, and the 'dark watermark' which is constitutive of the collective, ideological and territorial subjectivity, deconstructs the received reading of the dedicatory poems as being outside the main structural patterns of the text.

For Heaney, the visual is another way of uncovering the real of experience, and when ekphrastically fused with poetry, there is an aesthetic power at work which can add to our understanding of the human condition, in all of its complexity. Though at times language, the symbolic order, can mask the real of what is happening, paradoxically, language is our only way of trying to understand the real:

Speech as such is instituted within the structure of the semantic world which is that of language. Speech never has one single meaning, nor the word one single use. All speech always possesses a beyond, sustains various functions, encompasses several meanings. Behind what a discourse says, there is what it means [*veut dire*], and behind what it means, there is again another intended meaning [*vouloir-dire*] (Lacan 1991: 242)

This chapter has suggested that ekphrastic poetry is Heaney's way of accessing this 'beyond' of language. The ekphrastic poem is a becoming-space for the understanding of the multi-valent meanings of life. The poems studied here have provided glimpses of a benign and malign real which is at the core of experience. I would argue that the seed cutters, the duelling berserks, the basket of chestnuts and the photograph of the Tollund Man have dropped us through the trapdoors of perception and provided far clearer insights into the politics and culture of Northern Ireland than any number of 'zoom lenses, recorders and coiled leads', or of celebrity interviews or:

the jottings and analyses
Of politicians and newspapermen
Who've scribbled down the long campaign from gas
And protest to gelignite and sten. (Heaney 1975: 57)

The Heimlich is imaged in the ordinary old doorway of which we spoke in the beginning of the chapter, and part of the power of the aesthetic is that through this doorway can be seen the Unheimlich, the monsters of Goya and the descending angel of violence. The couple of power and muse may be old and shabby, but their ekphrastic gaze is clear and piercing and uncanny.

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