

Women Painting Words and Writing Pictures:
Re-configuring Verbal and Visual Art in Contemporary
British Women's Poetry

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The lineage and the language of the so-called 'ekphrastic' poem, popularised by male Romantic poets as John Keats in "To a Grecian Urn" (1819) or P.B. Shelley in "On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci" (1819), seem to reaffirm the notion of the woman as aesthetic object and of the man as observer or contemplator. Traditionally, the poems that associate the verbal and the visual tend to establish a tension between the act of *looking* and the act of *reading*, which in turn accentuates the objectification of the woman verbally represented on the page. But if the theories about the interaction of verbal and visual artistic media are as old as poetry itself (Horace's *Ut pictura poesis*), the notion that the 'ekphrastic' process can imply the control and possession of the woman represented in that work of art is relatively recent.

This paper proposes to analyse the way in which contemporary British women's poetry, embodied by such diverse authors as Stevie Smith, Lynette Roberts, Liz Lochhead and Carol Ann Duffy, contested and re-used the technique of *ekphrasis* in order to adapt it to its own purposes. The respective works of Lochhead and Duffy not only revise the traditional representation of woman through art history but also suggest the *verbal* as a form of revision, a reconfiguration of the *visual* and of the limitations that it often imposes. In turn, Smith's work suggests the importance and the ambivalence of the act of *seeing*, it is a mixed art that uses the friction between the visual and the verbal (rushed sketching and parallel commentary) as a deliberate strategy of contestation. Roberts, as an assumed painter and poet, insists on the separation of the several media that she utilises, sensing that her profusely coloured verbal art should evoke the visual without recurring to the illustration as such. These women poets and artists seem, therefore, to reconfigure and problematize the supremacy of the verbal through the strategic use of the visual in their own art.

... the images of a poet [...] are compact of a thousand suggestions of which the visual is only the most obvious or the uppermost.

(Virginia Woolf, *The Cinema*, 1929)

In his groundbreaking works *Iconology* (1986) and *Picture Theory* (1994), W.J.T. Mitchell has treated the relation between literature and the visual arts as a ‘paragonal’ struggle for dominance between the image and the word; his history of literature is, thus, fundamentally seen and interpreted as a conflicted response to visual art. Writing specifically about ‘the poetics of *ekphrasis*’, James Heffernan defines it as “the verbal representation of visual representation” and sees it as an enduring genre, with us for nearly three thousand years (*Museum of Words*, 1993: 3).¹ Heffernan also argues that *ekphrasis* “evokes the power of the silent image even as it subjects that power to the rival authority of language” (*ibidem* 1), it “stages a contest between rival modes of representation: [...] the driving force of the narrating word and the stubborn resistance of the fixed image” (6, my emphasis). But he significantly adds that the context it stages is often powerfully gendered:

[...] the expression of a *duel between male and female gazes*, the voice of male speech striving to control a female image that is both alluring and threatening. (1993: 1, my emphasis)

Heffernan also reminds us that besides *ekphrasis*, or the representation of a painting or sculpted figure in words, the influence of the visual arts in literature takes at least two other forms: ‘Pictorialism’, a method that generates in language effects that are similar to those created by pictures (namely, focusing, framing, scanning, etc.); and ‘Iconicity’, a process embracing not only visual properties but other sets of relations, including sounds, resulting in “a visible resemblance between the arrangement of words or letters on a page and what they signify”, typical of the ‘pattern poem’ (*ibidem* 3). Heffernan sees *ekphrasis* as an especially

¹ As ancient, Heffernan reminds us, as the famous description of ‘the shield of Achilles’ in Homer’s *Iliad*. *Ekphrasis* during the Greek period included descriptions of such battle implements, as well as fine clothing, household items of superior craftsmanship (urns, cups, baskets), and exceptionally splendid buildings. In the twentieth century, W. H. Auden re-envisioned Homer’s story in his poem “The Shield of Achilles,” replacing his images with apocalyptic ones: barbed wire and bare fields, rape and murder, bureaucrats and sentries.

interesting technique because it entails *prosopopeia*, or “the rhetorical technique of envoicing a silent object” (6); he argues that “Ekphrasis speaks not only *about* works of art but also *to* and *for* them” (*ibidem* 7), thus staging a revolution of the image against the word: “In talking back to and looking back at the male viewer, the images envoiced by *ekphrasis* challenge at once the controlling authority of the male gaze and the power of the male word” (Heffernan, 1993: 7).

Paradoxically, Heffernan only traces his poetics of *ekphrasis* in a strictly male tradition that goes from Homer to Ashbery, and includes names such as those of Shakespeare, Shelley, Keats, Browning and Auden.² No female tradition of ekphrastic poetry is mentioned, including the figure of Sappho, the names of Felicia Hemans, Letitia Landon and Christina Rossetti in the nineteenth century, and the more recent ones of Stevie Smith, Carol Ann Duffy and Liz Lochhead, just to refer a few.³ Notwithstanding this neglect, Romantic *ekphrasis* such as it was practised by the poets of the first and second generations, and some Victorian poets as well, would be sustainedly commented upon and criticised by contemporary British women poets.

John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (1819), a poem that explicitly feminises the work of art, figuring it as “a still unravished bride”, paradigmatically reflects the inherent tendency of *ekphrasis* to conceive aesthetic relations between poet and art object in terms of gender and sex role. P. B. Shelley’s poem “On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci” (1819), in its turn, muses upon a painting of Medusa’s silent and decapitated head, which is also

² One relatively recent example of *ekphrasis* is W. H. Auden’s poem “Musée des Beaux Arts” (1940). The poem’s description of the ploughman in Brueghel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* provides an interpretation of the poem and places the image in the context of Auden’s visit to the Brussels Museum and the other works of the “old masters” kept there.

³ A female tradition is not only implicit in the poetic representations of images and sculptures of the Greek poetess and other mythological or historical women, present in the works of Hemans and Landon, but also in the Pre-Raphaelite poems of Christina Rossetti (“In an Artist’s Studio”) and Elizabeth Sydall.

gazing at the petrified male observer. As Mark Sandy argues (*Poetics of Self and Form*, 2005), “both these lyrics alternate between the art work as poetic subject and its observer as the subject of the poem”, both “confront the price that must be paid for attaining an ideal and immutable beauty” (78).

Both Shelley’s imaginatively retrospective account of his experience in the Florentine Gallery and Keats’s invented recollection of a museum visit dissolve a distinction between the consciousness of the observing subject and the artistic object under observation. Whether imagined or real, these artworks become for Keats and Shelley symbols which enable a dialogue of the self with the self (Sandy, 2005: 79).

Typically, these male poetic accounts of aesthetic experience do not contemplate or include the ‘dialogue of the self with the Other’, the feminine, as this one is not given a voice of its own in the poem (being either dead or petrified).

The emergence of the feminine Other, and its problematization as an art object, would occur in later poets, namely in Robert Browning, who deliberately reverses the Ovidian myth of artistic creation, *Pygmalion and Gallatea*, in several of his poems, namely “My Last Duchess” and “Women and Roses”.⁴ In the latter, and as an emerging artist, Browning contemplates and questions his feminine objects in the following terms:

II
Round and round, like a dance of snow
In a dazzling drift, as its guardians, go
Floating the women faded for ages,
Sculptured in stone, on the poet's pages.
[...]

IV
Stay then, stoop, since I cannot climb,
You, great shapes of the antique time!
How shall I fix you, fire you, freeze you,
Break my heart at your feet to please you?
Oh, to possess and be possessed!

(lines 4-7, 16-20, my emphasis)

⁴“My Last Duchess” (1845) is a dramatic monologue based on a Duke’s contemplation and commentary of his deceased wife’s portrait, a Renaissance fresco, and behaviour. It raises important gender and artistic issues in terms of objective and subjective representation.

Feminist critics have long been concerned with male appropriations of the female body, but only recently have women art historians and critics given sustained attention to the way that this colonisation is reflected in male theorising about the nude – the visual art form which, for Danette DiMarco, is probably the most concrete example of this gender imperialism.⁵

Within the verbal arts, a similar challenging of the ‘nude’ tradition could be said to inform the Feminism of contemporary British poet Carol Ann Duffy, labelled the poet of "post-post war England: Thatcher's England".⁶ It is the title poem from her 1985 collection, *Standing Female Nude*, that is most central to a deconstruction of the traditional attitudes toward this issue. Conversely, an instructive example of a poem which epitomises the male tradition can be found precisely in Robert Browning's "With Francis Furini," published in his 1887 collection, *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day*.

Aside from their oppositional stance, what makes this Duffy/Browning pairing so provocative, for DiMarco, is “the way that both employ a dialogic format and incorporate the voices of absent others: Browning's poem is structured as a conversation with the Renaissance painter Furini in which the tradition of nude painting is defended; Duffy's poem is structured as *the response of a female model to the male artist who is painting her*” (1998: 1, my emphasis). She encodes and deconstructs the ideology informing traditional arguments, whereby her poem functions as a defense of

⁵ See her journal article entitled “Exposing Nude Art: Carol Ann Duffy’s Response to Robert Browning” (*Mosaic*, 1998). Particularly important here is Lynda Nead's *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (1992) which deliberately takes issue with Kenneth Clark's hitherto authoritative study, *The Nude: A Study In Ideal Art* (1956). Nead foregrounds the way that Clark's study ignores and/or evades gender issues, and in the process she identifies and challenges a philosophic tradition which presents the male artist as translator of matter into form and which positions the female model as the object to be transmogrified.

⁶ The original label is by Allen-Randolph (1995). A philosopher by training, Duffy has published a number of collections of her poetry - *Selling Manhattan* (1987), *The Other Country* (1990), *Meantime* (1993), *The World's Wife* (1999) and *Rapture* (2005). In 2009, she became the UK's twentieth Poet Laureate and is now one of Britain's best known and most admired poets.

the model. The techniques employed by the two poets serve, for DiMarco, to foreground issues of authority, and particularly Duffy's subtle manipulation of the dramatic monologue format serves to enlist the kind of reader/viewer participation that is central to post structural and post modern art criticism (*ibidem* 2).

Although for Browning the problem of critical standards and appreciation of nude studies was the narrow-mindedness of the Victorian public, his conception of art's human character becomes problematic as he argues here for an archetypal beauty and simplicity implicit in the female form; Furini's models were real enough but his ambition was to paint

*That marvel! which we dream the firmament
Copies in star-device when fancies stray
Outlining, orb by orb, Andromeda --
God's best of beauteous and magnificent
Revealed to earth -- the naked female form.*
(lines 139-43, my emphasis)

Browning argues for the form of woman as *a sign*, constructed by God and man, to signify a mysterious Other that is both related to and distinct from men's experience. To preserve the innocence of the gaze, then, Browning's idealisation of the female figure strips both women and men of their sexuality and historical circumstances.

In contrast, Duffy's deliberate engagement with her era's typical individualist economic issues is revealed in "Standing Female Nude", published in the 1980s or midway into Thatcher's rule. Her dramatic monologue "features a single speaker, an artist's model, speaking within the specific situation of readying to leave the studio after six hours of posing, being paid, and being shown the painting" (Kinnahan, 2004: 142-3).⁷ Nevertheless, we are given details of the lives of both the painter and the model: both are in

⁷ Linda Kinnahan's chapter on "The Poetics of Public Discourse in Carol Ann Duffy" is included in her larger work, *Lyric Interventions* of 2004, in which she explores linguistically innovative poetry by contemporary women in North America and Britain, situating a half century of women's experimentation and bringing attention to the cultural contexts of nation, gender, and race.

France and poor, but *he* is being heralded as a “genius”. Through the arrangement of her words, her tone and her silences, Duffy reveals the essence of the woman model; the speaking lyrical self undergoes a dismantling that reveals the ideological foundations of class and gender. “The poem involves several levels of representation: the poem’s representation of the model; the model’s representation of her experience; the artist’s representation of the model; the museum’s representation of the painting” (Kinnahan, 144).

Six hours like this for a few francs.
Belly nipple arse in the window light,
he drains the colour from me. Further to the right,
Madam. And do try to be still.

I shall be represented analytically and *hung*
in great museums. The bourgeoisie will coo
at such an image of a river-whore. They call it Art.

Maybe. He is concerned with volume, space.
I with the next meal. [...]

[...]
He possesses me on canvas as he dips the brush
repeatedly into the paint. Little man,
you’ve not the money for the arts I sell.
[...]

[...] When it’s finished
he shows me proudly, [...] I say
Twelve francs and get my shawl. *It does not look like me.*

(lines 1-9, 18-20, 26-8, my emphasis)

The ‘self’ is dispersed here within various discourses: economics and class, the body, Art. She is defined by the bourgeoisie as a “river-whore”, and by the male artist as both a site of commodification and desire: unable to afford her, he possesses her “on canvas” and this possession becomes *that* of the museum and the middle class. “Artistic representation objectifies the woman just as patriarchal economic structures objectify her as a commodity to be bought, sold, possessed” (Kinnahan, 144). It is not just that the speaker’s representation is bought, sold, possessed, gazed upon;

but also the speaker *herself* is a literal commodity, selling her body for the money to survive (145). Thus, Duffy's poem seems to suggest that the self and its language are always grounded in material circumstances. But its final statement is the nude model's laconic comment that "It does not look like me", a brief assertion of self that subversively escapes the tyranny of representation, and that corroborates the arbitrary nature of authorised artistic language – "They call it Art".

Although the female writer's re-examination of painting's assumptions and expectations is by no means limited to the twentieth century, "the interdisciplinary push of Modernist experiment and the new possibilities offered by cinema and photography meant that poets as diverse as Stevie Smith, Lynette Roberts and Liz Lochhead seemed particularly conscious of the visual" as a privileged aesthetic category (May, 2011: 45).

Due to her art training and her subsequent period as an art teacher in Glasgow and Bristol, in which she variously questioned the Western tradition, Liz Lochhead (1947-) is the one who "most deliberately engages with and attempts to rewrite the male ekphrastic tradition" (May, 45).⁸ In her early poem entitled "Object" (1972), in which she significantly poses for an artist, she offers resistance to that tradition by showing "the process of female portrait-making" as "continually refracted" (45).

In the first part, the poet imagines the problems the artist is confronted with in the process of representing her, but still

⁸ Scottish poet and playwright Liz Lochhead was born in Lanarkshire. Her first collection of poems, *Memo for Spring*, was published in 1972 and won a Scottish Arts Council Book Award. A performer as well as a poet, she became a full-time writer, performance poet and broadcaster. Her plays include *Blood and Ice* (1982), *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* (1989), *Dracula* (1989), *Cuba* (1997), and *Perfect Days* (1998). She translated and adapted Molière's *Tartuffe* (1985) into Scots, and the script of her adaptation of Euripides' *Medea* (2000). Her latest work is a new collection of poetry, *The Colour of Black and White: Poems 1984-2003* (2003) and a new romantic comedy for the stage, *Good Things* (2006). Her work is concerned with the patriarchal inflexions of cultural memory and legend (myths) and it develops subversive narrative strategies.

criticises his ‘single-angled’ view as implicitly limited by the rigid dictates of canvas and perspective:

I, love,
am capable of being looked at
from many different angles. *This*
is your problem.
In this cold north light it may
seem clear enough.
You pick your point of view
And stick to it, not veering much –
this
being the only way to make any sense of me
as a formal object. Still
I do not relish it, *being*
stated so – my edges defined
elsewhere than I’d imagined them
with *a crispness I do not possess.*
The economy of your line does not spare me
by its hairsbreadth.

(lines 1-17, my emphasis)

In the second part, the sitter’s verbal description *competes* with the visual one of the artist, setting up a dialogue between sketch and text, detectable in the expression “being stated so”. As in Duffy’s poem, the model does not recognise herself in the artist’s representation, and believes it to be *his* problem, not hers, that he can only draw her ‘economically’, as “a formal object” and “with crispness” she does not possess. Hers is, therefore, “an aggressive challenge to the formal certainties of the picture” (May, 46) and to the act of objectification, which is also the subject of the poem. ‘The reductions and elevations’ suffered by women in art are indeed present in much of Lochhead’s poetic output.

There is a great concern with depicting women throughout art history, as is the case of the triptych poem series “The Furies”, in which the poet refuses to perform ekphrastic double-objectification and chooses instead to individualise the female figure. Thus, after situating Pieter Brueghel’s painting (*Dulle Griet*, 1562)⁹ in its

⁹ The central figure in the painting is a woman depicted running in a scene of nightmarish intensity; madness and folly seem to be the dual and related themes of the *Dulle Griet*.

historical context, the poet suggests the tensions she feels between the object's domestic realm in her "mantelpiece" and her own academic appreciation of it, finally deciding for a subjective empathy for or identification with the character of Mad Meg, a figure of Flemish folklore:

Oh that kitchen knife, that helmet, that silent shout,
I knew Meg from the inside out.
All she owns in one arm, that lost look in her eyes.
These days I more than sympathise.

(lines 18-21, my emphasis)

Lochhead also deals with the problem of how a contemporary female visual artist might respond to that tradition, namely in her 1970 poem entitled "Notes on the Inadequacy of a Sketch at Millport Cathedral", in which she closely and critically analyses her own drawing. The poet assesses both her visual representation and her verbal depiction of this process in her poem, in which the problems of reductionism and formalism that affected "Object" seem to resurface:

I selected what seemed to be *essentials*.
[...]
[...] But its plain
setting down in black and white
wasn't enough. Nor underlining
certain subtleties. *This sketch became*
a simile at best. It's no metaphor.

(lines 35-42, my emphasis)

Assuming that the metaphoric becomes the mode to which all art aspires, this visual seems to offer "a failed figurative language, a tentative facsimile rather than a transformative work of mimesis" (May, 47). Thus, Lochhead proposes the verbal as a medium of revision, of reconfiguration of the visual, both often needing to work in complementary symbiosis.

If Lochhead's poetry attempts to release female art objects and to rewrite them as individuals, Stevie Smith (1902-1971) had

tried precisely to prevent her work and public persona from becoming objectified, “working hard to make her oeuvre a *process* rather than a product” (May, 49).¹⁰ The importance and the ambivalence of the visual, and of the act of *seeing*, in Smith’s life are present already in her early essay of 1937 entitled “Art”, in which she not only offers a curious description of the National Gallery in London but also asks the question ‘how do people see pictures?’ (May, 49). Smith’s three autobiographical novels, published between 1937 and 1949, further suggest a writer’s mind composed of still images and haunted by galleries, paintings and art critics.¹¹

If in her poem “Salon d’Automne”, Smith atypically dismisses an exhibition of nude female painting as “pedantic and unsympathetic”, in another entitled “Deeply Morbid” she describes the experience of a secretary who is taken into a magical land through a Turner painting in the National Gallery; the suggestive Blakean tone and the mixed-media subject of the poem become enhanced by the “contest between Joan’s monotonous world of type and the ineffable possibilities of a painted sky” (May, 50):

[...]
Before the pictures she seemed turned to stone.

Close upon the Turner pictures
Closer than a thought may go
Hangs her eye and *all the colours*
Leap into a special glow
All for her, all alone
All for her, all for Joan.

[...]
Where the awful light of purest
Sunshine falls across the spray
There *the burning coasts of fancy*

¹⁰ An earlier Englishwoman poet, Florence Margaret Smith worked as a commercial secretary and lived in the suburbs of London, taking care of her aunt and writing poetry, novels and theological works. Although chronologically belonging to the so-called ‘Auden generation’, Smith would remain largely unclassifiable. In the 1960s she would give several readings and performances of her poems. Apart from death, common subjects include loneliness; myth and legend; absurd vignettes, usually drawn from middle-class British life, war, human cruelty and religion.

¹¹ The novels, concerned with the personal and political malaise in the immediate post-war period, are the following: *Novel on Yellow Paper*, *Over the Frontier* and *The Holiday*.

Open to her pleasure lay.
[...]

The spray reached out and sucked her in
It was hardly a noticed thing
That Joan was there and is not now
(...)
Gone away, gone away
All alone.

She stood up straight
The sun fell down
There was no more of London Town
She went upon the painted shore
And there she walks for ever more
Happy quite
Beaming bright
In a happy happy light
All alone.

(lines 19, 20-5, 38-44, 51-6, 57-65, my emphasis)

Morbid Joan's colourless, dreary life is suddenly given a meaning or a purpose through the contemplation of art, and her literal absorption into what she sees is so complete that she *becomes* part of the painting. This rather unexpected trick on the part of the poet is just one of Smith's many deceptive visual techniques, and it may serve as a thin disguise of her own situation as a spinster secretary. But this is also part of her ability to create repeated versions of herself, "competing editions of the authentic original" (May, 54).

That Smith was tenaciously committed to her own art is suggested throughout her career by her insistence on publishing her poems with doodled illustrations. Between 1951-2, she even managed to produce three BBC programs, significantly entitled "Poems and Drawings". Arbitrarily matched to their verbal counterparts, the illustrations suggest both the hurried sketch and the darkly caricatural influence of Goya and George Grosz.¹²

An intermedial art that utilises the friction between the visual and the verbal as a deliberate form of contestation is precisely suggested by Stevie Smith's balancing between the forms. This

¹² Grosz was a German artist known especially for his savagely caricatural drawings of Berlin life in the 1920s. He was a prominent member of the Berlin Dada and New Objectivity group during the Weimar Republic before he emigrated to the United States in 1933.

occurs, namely, in her famous poem “Not Waving but Drowning”, in which a “perplexing mismatch between the poem’s male speaker and the female figure depicted in the illustration” (May, 51) becomes obvious. The addition of another possible referent in the form of this enigmatic figure aims to disorientate a reader that has already faced the overwhelming ambiguity of the poem’s final stanza, which we can interpret as being uttered by the drowning man himself or by the poem’s narrator:

Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning:
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.

[...]

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.

(lines 1-4, 9-12, my emphasis)

Thus, by juxtaposing opposite representations, Smith “questions the efficacy of visual representation” in this case, and “uses art to deflect the gaze of the reading audience” (May, 54). Also the poem seems to warn its readers against the often deceptive nature and scope of the human eye, which tragically mistakes the drowning man/woman’s appeal for a mere salutation. The artificial boundaries of gender, which the visual makes more evident, are also disrupted because the “moaning dead man” of Smith’s poem may represent any suffering human being, including woman or the poet herself.

A contemporary of Smith, the Argentine-Welsh painter and poet Lynette Roberts (1909-95), the only Latino-Welsh modernist, embarked in the early 1940s on an intense creative period of painting and writing, often in ill-health, poverty and bleak

isolation.¹³ She had studied at the Central School of Arts and Crafts during the 1930s and her exceptional and original work brings into focus the ‘visual literate’, as well as the groundbreaking use of cinematography in her poetry. But, from the beginning, Roberts insisted on separating her various media: while her paintings suggest Primitivist colour schemes and subjects,¹⁴ her poems indicate that she reworked Imagist aesthetics; they seem to rely “on visual perception and an *optic poetics* that goes beyond traditional ekphrasis” (May, 55).¹⁵

For example, her shorter poem “Rainshiver” suggests the visual through the actual imprint of the words on a page; not through the usual recreation of a painting or the register of sense impressions, but through “an organic union of those competing modes” (May, 56):

Rain
Chills the air and stills the billing birds
To shrill not trill as they should in
This daffodil spring.

(lines 1-4)

In other poems, her ‘poetic and textual canvas’ is informed by a profusion of colour and form, from the description of a rural winter as a “cupboard of darkness” to the Welsh soils which glisten with a “green impaled with age” (May, 56).

The dense linguistic surface of Roberts’ work is immediately striking in *Gods with Stainless Ears*, written between 1941 and

¹³ Lynette Roberts was born in Buenos Aires to an Australian family of Welsh descent. The family moved to London during the First World War. Roberts and a friend sailed to Madeira and she hired a small house high up the hill. It was during those long days of freedom that Lynette found her vocation as a poet. She then met and married the Welsh poet and editor William Ronald Rees Jones; two children were born but her marriage would eventually fail. Through the Second World War years Roberts wrote and studied in quiet penury in a rented cottage at Llanybri, later moving into a caravan. She was a friend of Robert Graves and also met and corresponded with T.S. Eliot at Faber.

¹⁴ Primitivism is a Western art movement that borrows visual forms from non-Western or prehistoric peoples, such as Paul Gauguin's inclusion of Tahitian motifs in paintings and ceramics. Borrowings from primitive art have been important to the development of modern art.

¹⁵ Roberts had two collections published by Faber in her lifetime, *Poems* of 1944 (a second impression came out in 1945), followed by *Gods with Stainless Ears. A Heroic Poem*, of 1951.

1943, and subtitled ‘A Heroic Poem’, written from the port of Swansea, which was heavily bombed during the war. The excellence of the writing lies in the relationship created between locality and the distances and presences of war. The rural landscape in the piece is shot through with modern mythical dimensions; the vertiginous juxtaposition of perspectives is partly achieved through the clash of registers, including scientific, technological and archaic ones:

In fear of fate, flying into land Orcadian birds pair
And peal away like praying hands; bare
Aluminium beak to clinic air; *frame*
Soldier lonely whistling in full corridor train,
Ishmaelites wailing through the windowpane,
[...]
(lines 31-5, my emphasis)

The construction of the poem suggests a four dimensional cube, bringing together opposite sides or facets: the immediate and the eternal; subjective physicality and objective consciousness; the referential rhythms of speech or language and the abstract contemplation of meaning in words; words as communication and words as pattern; the order of nature and the order of angels.

Roberts further disrupts and coerces the tradition of the male epic through the language of film and documentary (deliberately using words like “frame” and “cut”). The generic fluidity of cinema is for her a promise of liberation from the reductive gaze implicit in that male tradition. She herself explains in her Preface that “when I wrote this poem, *the scenes and visions ran before me like a newsreel* [...] the poem was written for filming, especially *Part IV*, where the soldier and his girl walk in fourth dimension among the clouds and visit the outer strata of our planet” (May 58, my emphasis):

We by centrifugal force ... rose softly ...
Faded from bloodsight. We, he and I ran
On to a steel escalator, the white
Electric sun drilling down on the cubed ice;
Our cyanite flesh chilled on aluminium
Rail.

(lines 540-46)

Precise observation is caught up in dynamic metaphor; the imagery seems unnatural and artificial, moving restlessly between acute visual and verbal sensibilities. Thus, and as May stresses, “Roberts not only draws on a visual aesthetic to inspire and structure her work, but equally asks for a peculiarly visual response to interpret it” (2011: 58).

All these poets and many others, including U.A. Fanthorpe (1929-2009), Elizabeth Jennings (1926-2001) and Eavan Boland (1944-), rework and recreate both ancient and contemporary male forms of verbal and visual art. While Fanthorpe’s poems denounce a voyeuristic male public, which prefers to look instead of reading and art instead of literature,¹⁶ Jennings is interested in religious art and believes that the visual offers unity, form and accurate hand to her own poetry.¹⁷ Like Lochhead, Boland questions male representations of women at several points and warns of the reductive process of representation.¹⁸ Although women’s *ekphrastic* tradition may still be a ‘hidden’ or developing poetic genre, working both as *part of* and *against* a Western aesthetic tradition, these poets repeatedly take this legacy into their own life and experience, and manage to transform it back into Art.

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¹⁶ U. A. Fanthorpe’s poems that balance verbal and visual representation are “Women Ironing”, “Portraits of Tudor Statesmen”, “Three Poems for Amy Cook” and “Painter and Poet”.

¹⁷ Jennings has collections significantly entitled *A Way of Looking* (1955) and *The Sonnets of Michelangelo* (1961), and a series of poetic tributes to Caravaggio, Chagall and Goya.

¹⁸ Boland has several poems that critically evoke the art of painters like Chardin, Renoir and Degas.

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