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REVIEW

Jerzy Jarniewicz. 2013. *Ekphrasis in the poetry of Derek Mahon.*

Among the contemporary Irish poets Derek Mahon's place has long been secure. Named in the same breath with Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley, Mahon has developed one of the most easily-recognisable poetic voices of the English language. Just as Heaney may well be remembered for his meticulous, verging on obsessional, attention to detail: "rasping sounds," "guttery, snottery" (9) ink; and Longley for his redemptive cataloguing of the natural world, all the "thyme, valerian, loosestrife" (192) – so Mahon might go down in history as the visual, indeed the "painterly poet." In view of the above praise, it does seem rather surprising that critical evaluations of his poetry are sparse. Apart from frequent mentions in various studies of contemporary Irish poetry, the last decade has brought only two works of criticism on Mahon, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon* (2002) – a collection of essays edited by Elmer Kennedy-Andrews and a monograph of the same title by Hugh Haughton (2007). Now the two are joined by Jerzy Jarniewicz's *Ekphrasis in the Poetry of Derek Mahon*.

Unlike Haughton, Jarniewicz does not train his critical eye on Mahon's entire oeuvre, poring over it in quest for recurrent motifs and examples of the Mahonian "ironic conscience" so well-known from his anthology primer "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford" (1975). Instead,

he concentrates on a group of lyrics that take as their subject various paintings from Paolo Uccello to Mark Rothko and beyond; at the outset Jarniewicz asserts that his is going to be "an examination of Mahon's most important ekphrastic poems focusing on the issues specific to ekphrasis – primarily concerning the boundaries of (intersemiotic) translatability and representation" (12). Such narrowing of critical focus allows Jarniewicz to probe deeply into the particular aspect of Mahon's poetry. However, it soon becomes clear that from the in-depth readings of individual lyrics Jarniewicz manages to derive postulates that underlie Mahon's poetry in general.

From the beginning Jarniewicz reveals a keen eye for reading the paintings that Mahon adverts to in his lyrics. Dealing in detail with John Lavery's "Daylight Raid from My Studio Window, 7 July 1917," whose reproduction adorns the cover of Mahon's *Collected Poems* of 1999, the critic concludes that the "painting, despite its traditionalism, is […] riddled with ambiguities of confinement and open space, imprisonment and liberation, creation and destruction, seeing and knowing" (34). It is these ambiguities or inner tensions that constitute "a visual introduction to the bulk of the poet's work" (34). Yet, paintings do not simply represent in the visual form the themes that the poet elaborates in his lyrics; what Jarniewicz traces in Mahon's ekphrastic lyrics is the intertwining of images presented in the paintings and in the poems. As a result, the discussion of the visual and the verbal material reveals an on-going dialogue between the *pictura* and the *poesis*, with one art evoking in its own material ideas and concepts that are creatively taken up in the other.

In his critique of "Winter in Cushendun" by a late twentieth century Northern Irish artist, Maurice Wilks, and Mahon's lyric "Cushendun in Winter" from *Life on Earth* (2008), Jarniewicz comes to comment on the opening line ("North light on the snowlight on a little bridge") that verbally reworks the snow-topped landscape of the picture:

> Mahon builds an image of double light, the light from above and the light from below, coming together in the snow-covered surface. In objective, physical terms, the two lights cannot be distinguished. The snow shines

> with the light reflected from its surface; it is the same light that comes from above, though affected by the qualities of the snow […] In sharp opposition to this circuit is the little bridge: the bridge stands between, the lights merge; the bridge is a no-man's land between two territories, the lights lie upon one another, forming a luminous unity, which gives birth to the poem. (138)

Thus the bridge, as a "unity in-between," enters a double context. On the one hand it is the bridge depicted in Wilks's painting; on the other, by being re-appropriated in the poem (one might wish to think of an act of "intersemiotic *mis*reading"), the bridge becomes a locus of intersemiotic communion. Moreover, as Jarniewicz is quick to notice, by instantiating such a meeting of the visual and the verbal Mahon "tries to create a sense of community […] that would bring together the poet and the painter" (137).

The space "in between" the two semiotic codes becomes a potent notion in Mahon in that, argues Jarniewicz, it is in this liminal space, at once belonging to the art of painting and poetry, that multiple meanings appear and are kaleidoscopically sustained by the double pull of colours and words. A pertinent example of such a creative interrelation of *pictura* and *poesis*, and also one of the most remarkable examples of Jarniewicz's critical craft, comes in the chapter devoted to Pieter de Hooch's "A Courtyard in Delft with a Woman and a Child" and Mahon's "Courtyards in Delft" (1981). The painting is briefly, albeit lucidly, discussed as an example of the seventeenth century Dutch school: "The world of the Dutch Protestants of which [the then paintings] are emblematic claims to have nothing to hide," and so de Hooch's work "offers itself like a latter-day billboard, a kind of self-advertisement of the transparent life-style of the Protestant population of the city" (99–100). However, "the painting veils much of what must have been there: the troubling signs of the history of Dutch colonialism" (106). It is on this hidden aspect of the painting that Mahon focuses; "his poem thus supplements, rather than describes, de Hooch's painting by introducing the silenced themes" (106) among which there are colonial violence and militancy, suppression of women and

ruthless pursuit of wealth. Aptly using Derrida's trope (rather than concept) of "supplement," Jarniewicz shows the poem to illuminate the silenced side of the painting.

However, it is not only the intricate mutual relations, benign or not, between poetry and painting in Mahon that Jarniewicz unravels. Approaching the poet's sole lyric on surrealist art "The Realm of Light" (2008), Jarniewicz notices that Mahon seeks not so much to compose his lyrics as "paintings' Others," revealing of or elaborating on their "silent" content, but to fashion in words the effects that could incorporate the way visual arts work. Therefore the defamiliarising technique of René Magritte's "The Empire of Light" is rendered by Mahon through a metaphor: "a lamp post's yellow light / abuzz on shutters." By giving sound to the colour, the poem deranges the sensual perception of the image, thereby overcoming the principal weakness of the visual arts implicit in the classic ekphrastic formula of Simonides: *pictura poema silens, poema pictura loquens*. This unusual metaphor, according to Jarniewicz, establishes an air of "surreal eeriness" by characteristically verbal means. It transpires here that poems are for Mahon as much words to be spoken as the material, inscribed signs, whose meaning depends on their mutual relations on the page.

In Jarniewicz's reading, Mahon becomes a poet of an indomitable "appetite for the visible world" (255) whose implicit nature can almost come to be articulated in the ekphrastic mode. The final point the critic makes about Mahon, although it has been a running idea throughout the study, is that the poet's examples of verbal appropriation of visual images inadvertently demonstrate that all our experience of the world is mediated through semiotic codes. After all, verbal signs refer to visual signs that refer to presence of an image that is "always already" gone. Thus the dialogue between Mahon's ekphrastic poems and the many paintings that he has used in his work reveals its supplementary nature: signs always evoke other signs.

Jarniewicz is thus as good as his word; the selected poems of Mahon's that he concentrates on are shown to be fundamental to the poet's entire output. As a result, Jarniewicz's study

achieves more than just an in-depth analysis of a particular aspect of a poet's work, for what he does in fact is isolate and critically investigate a core of Mahon's poetics; that elusive part of the writer's work from which all the creative branches start. There is hardly a thing the book lacks. Jarniewicz keeps his eye fixed on the subject, writing most lucid and well-argued literary criticism, although his book may also appeal to the non-specialist reader. The many passages devoted to art criticism never lapse into mere trite description, maintaining a discipline of insight. Mahon's poetry in Jarniewicz's treatment becomes a lively, multi-prong engagement with the contemporary world and its discontents. This is as much as any criticism of a genius writer can hope to accomplish.

Jarniewicz, Jerzy. 2013. *Ekphrasis in the poetry of Derek Mahon*. Piotrków Trybunalski: Naukowe Wydawnictwo Piotrkowskie przy Filii Uniwersytetu Jana Kochanowskiego. 276 pages. ISBN: 9788377260562

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