



Episode 2: The Body Electric

[Audio from the soundtrack of *The Body Electric*]

Emer McGarry: Hello and thank you for joining us for episode two of The Model's new podcast. This week we're delighted to present some new work by the multidisciplinary artist, Suzanne Walsh and before we do that, I continued my conversation with Tara Bergin and I asked her if she could share some of her own favourite examples of ekphrastic writing with us.

[Audio of pages rustling...]

Tara Bergin: This is the sound of the selected poems of Frank O'Hara being opened.¹ This book is full of ekphrastic poems but I remember being very impressed by his poem, *Why I Am Not a Painter*. Firstly, because of the title, I didn't know you could have titles like that in poetry and then because of the laid-back style, that tricks you into thinking it's very off-the-cuff. It still sounds really modern to me and it still makes me laugh.

Another favourite is W.N. Herbert's² excellent poem about a Henry Moore sculpture in Scotland³ - *The King and Queen of Dumfriesshire* - in which the sculpted forms become a couple sitting in a car with their sandwiches and flask of coffee; their favourite argument resting in the backseat and the glove compartment full of endearments they refuse to take out and use.

¹ *The Selected Poems of Frank O'Hara* (ed.) Donald Allen, 1974 & revised 2005; *Frank O'Hara, Selected Poems* (ed.) Mark Ford, 2010.

² Scottish poet, W.N. Herbert also known as Bill Herbert.

³ *Two Piece Reclining Figure* (1959) by Henry Moore.

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I am taken by ekphrastic poems, that shock me with the way they play fast and loose with their source material, for example Sylvia's Plath's *The Disquieting Muses*, which takes a de Chirico painting as its title.⁴ Parts of the poem do seem to be describing the painting, for example when she talks about the three figures standing their vigil in gowns of stone.

[Audio – Sylvia Plath reads from *The Disquieting Muses*.

'Day now, night now, at head, side, feet, /They stand their vigil in gowns of stone, / Faces blank as the day I was born...']

Tara Bergin: But in other parts the poem seems charged with specific childhood memories, a world away from the original painting, like when she describes drinking Ovaltine with her brother during a storm.

[Audio - Sylvia Plath reads from *The Disquieting Muses*.

'You fed/My brother and me, cookies and Ovaltine/ And helped the two of us to choir: ...']

Tara Bergin: Plath's poem is really good example of how you can use ekphrasis as a means to write about a topic that's very important to you, but maybe you haven't been able to

⁴ Italian artist, Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978) was the founder of the scuola metafisica art movement, which influenced the surrealists.



find a way of approaching it before. I also loved the title of the Elizabeth Bishop's poem, *Large Bad Painting*,⁵ because it showed me that not all ekphrastic poems need to be in praise of a work of art. But I suspect that my interest in ekphrasis has its roots in my fascination with the way we retell things: jokes, stories, songs; folksongs with their changing versions are part of this. For example listen to these first two lines of the traditional Scottish song, *The Parting Glass*, sung here by White Raven.⁶

[Audio - White Raven sings the opening line from *The Parting Glass*,
'Oh, all the money that 'ere I had, I spent it in good company.']

Tara Bergin: And now listen to it retold my Bob Dylan in the first four lines of his song *Restless Farewell*.

[Audio - Bob Dylan sings *Restless Farewell*,

'Oh, all the money that in my whole life I did spend,
Be it mine right or wrongfully,
I let it slip gladly to my friends,
To tie up the time most forcefully...]

Tara Bergin: The combination of honouring the past while taking from it something to call your own is one of the exciting results of ekphrasis. So, are cover versions a type of

⁵ *Large Bad Picture* by Elizabeth Bishop was published in *The New Yorker*, April 20, 1946 issue, p36.
www.newyorker.com/magazine/1946/04/20/large-bad-picture

⁶ Cork-born, Kathleen Dineen is the founding director of White Raven, a vocal trio whose repertoire includes Medieval, Renaissance and Irish traditional music styles.

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ekphrasis and where does this leave poems in translation? I think these are probably questions for another podcast, so I'll leave it there.

[Audio of harmonica-playing from Bob Dylan's *Restless Farewell*]

Emer McGarry: And that was Tara Bergin, there introducing us to some of her favourite examples of ekphrastic writing. Now, Suzanne Walsh is a multidisciplinary artist who created a number of new pieces for this project in response to the visual artwork of AE Russell.⁷ And here Walsh reads one of these pieces, entitled, *Between the Lights*.

⁷ AE is the pseudonym of George William Russell (1867-1935). Born in Lurgan, Co. Armagh, AE was to become a prominent politician, a well-known poet, artist and mystic.

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Suzanne Walsh

Portrait sketch by AE Russell

Between the Lights / For You Only We Exist

Are you there now, are you there, are you? / I'm here, this is me this is where me is /
There is something that speaks to us / But only in the time we have /

Is there a way I've been? / Could tell you where we go but only
I haven't seen the sun / So small and red / See how it passes /
Only passes / Full but so much / Wanted to come true / I wanted to speak /
To say to say to say / Real is everywhere and not only here /
Some are comes and feels for us, but not now / Not forever /

I'm only here because I am / Yes, for who do I speak?
Tried, tried but there is a long way down it is / Oh it is down /
Is it follow, they said they said? / To be under is always
And the lights swirl in the not-here trees / I did lose and fall until I
Are you there now, are you there are you? / Almost there you are /
Coming to the end or else I'll be / Filling the day I'm in / Would love
If the sphere passes / The dark over and / The time is come /

Forward tomorrow can be / And I will ask it / Tell me how so much lit up /
Ask for me / Sometimes we can be / But not always
It's the dark and the inside for us / Can never be I only wanted
Only wanted and then and then / Wouldn't want to stay
Not when it is bright and under the light is cold /
What is there, where there is? / Nothing is nothing /
We were we / We can't be unless we are /

Our always is here / So much so much so much
But less so now / Our only is what brings us closer /
We feel always

Here

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Emer McGarry: And that was Suzanne Walsh reading their new work *Between the Lights*.

In episode four we will bring a very special performance by Walsh, of the same name, which they also composed in response to the esoteric interests of AE Russell. In the meantime, I hope you'll join us next week, when we continue the conversation with Tara Bergin about ekphrasis and we also hear some very different new pieces of writing, composed in response to artworks from The Niland Collection; this time by Alice Lyons and Claire-Louise Bennett. As always full credits, bios, and further information is available on our website www.themodel.ie

[Audio from the soundtrack of *The Body Electric*]

[Running Time 10:30 minutes]