



Episode 3: The Body Electric

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

Emer McGarry: Hello, and you are welcome to episode three of The Model podcast. This week, we're going to continue our conversation with the writer, Tara Bergin and we're also going to hear some very different new pieces of ekphrastic writing, composed in response to artworks from The Niland Collection; this time by writers, Claire-Louise Bennett and Alice Lyons.

Now, ekphrasis has a long history as an important literary technique, and one of the earliest known examples, in fact goes all the way back to Homer's description of Achilles shield in the *Iliad*, so I wondered then, what is it about ekphrasis, that continues to intrigue writers to this day, and I asked Tara Bergin, if ekphrasis enables a writer to get to grips with the human condition in a way that other literary techniques don't.

[Audio of a ball hitting a hard surface]

Tara Bergin: What is the human condition? The living condition I suppose is to move, to communicate and at its most basic, to breathe, and ekphrasis happens because one thing gives breath to another. Ekphrasis is all about inspiration, and the word 'inspire' comes from the Latin word, meaning to breathe.

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[Audio of a ball hitting a hard surface]

The human condition maybe suggests something extra to do with language and reason or our ability to transfer knowledge from generation to generation. These things are also central to ekphrasis – a work of art speaks to someone and when they respond with a new work, it speaks through them too.

[Audio in a continuous loop of a ball hitting a hard surface]

Yeats said, ‘Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. I am a crowd. I am a lonely man. I am nothing.’ What did he mean by this? I think he’s talking about the human condition. I think he’s saying that his job as a poet is to write about what we already know, but to show it to us in a new light and this is what ekphrasis does quite directly.

Emer McGarry: So, sometimes it’s the expression of what it is to be human in a work of art that sparks the interest of a writer. Here, Alice Lyons reads her new work, *Battenberg Hat* and discusses her interest in the figure of John Butler Yeats and his portrait of Elizabeth Pollexfen.

Alice Lyons: A few years ago, I had the honour of serving as the poet-in-residence for the Yeats Society here in Sligo and one of the things I did during that residency was to read the letters of John Butler Yeats, the father of the poet [William Butler Yeats], and the painter Jack Yeats and the publishers and artists, Susan and Elizabeth, also known as Lilly and Lolly Yeats, who had the press in Dublin and I feel like Yeats, John Butler Yeats had a reputation

as a profligate; as a man who
couldn't provide to the

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circumstances that the family expected for his wife and his children. He was an artist and a freethinker.

I see him as *the* animating force behind the careers of his children, and you really find this in his letters. So, in this portrait of his mother-in-law, Elizabeth Pollexfen, that he has drawn and that I have written this poem about, there's this incredible severity and strict stiffness that you see in the portrait and I always have the sense that this very animated and talented and free thinking and very loving father in many ways, very creative, and encouraging of his children in their pursuits of creativity and freedom, that he married into this family that felt he was a disappointment. So, the hat that his mother-in-law is wearing, I have called a Battenberg hat.



Portrait of Elizabeth Pollexfen by John B. Yeats, oil on canvas

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Alice Lyons

Portrait of Elizabeth Pollexfen by John B. Yeats

Battenberg Hat

In the sumptuous upholstery my floralness almost seasprays out
of the picture.

I expended the Raw and Burnt Umber profligately on the frock and the back.

Uppermost in the mind is that Battenberg hat
the cascading black buttons that issue

from your throat brooch of ebony.

Bone Black went into them - such tusk stuffs as shipped in from the Congo.

[This painting was made by a disappointing son-in-law
whose father made sure that paper was provided for drawing
whose mother tried to keep paper from him.]

Forgive me for not finishing the hands in your lap. I left
a small jamón serrano for your gustation.

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Emer McGarry: That was Alice Lyons there reading her new work *Battenberg Hat*. Don't forget to join us next time for a very special performance by the artist, Suzanne Walsh, but today we leave you with Claire-Louise Bennett reading her darkly humorous new work, entitled, *Lobe*, composed in response to the portrait sketches of AE Russell. As always, you'll find credits, bios and further information on our website www.themodel.ie

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Claire-Louise Bennett

Portrait Sketches by AE Russell

Lobe

Can't do it. Never could.

Where to start? Where does a face begin?

The nostril from out which the breath comes?

The lips out of which your saying something to me comes? Your ears through which my saying something to you in reply goes? My saying to you. I can't do it. Don't know where to begin.

Your eyes of course. Your eyes. Closed or open? Would I share them?

Your eyes.

Would I let others into your gaze. Would I have you look away.

Your skin is it. Which is not paint and even less so canvas. Even less. Less.

And less again.

And what then.

Where to finish? Where does it end? With the lobe is it? The lobe.

The lobe.

The lobe.

And stand back.

And stands back.

And what exactly am I looking at?

There you are then. On and on. I'd change and you'd remain the same. The same. Or not. Day in day out. Or not. I'd change. Or not. Green jumper one day orange the next. Eating an apple. Winding a watch.

Perhaps you'd reveal another side of yourself. A revelation. Suddenly. And how.

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With my hanging you there.

With my standing here.

Or not.

Waiting.

Or not.

Searching.

Or not.

What are you without me?

I'll open the door very quickly perhaps. First thing. Catch you unawares. Or not.

I won't see you at all will I. I'll see the time I spent. The day that was in it. I'll hardly see you at all.

No I cannot. Never could. Always one eye bigger than the other. An inhuman eye. In the wrong place. Always the mouth unkind. Always the nose too slender, too sharp, too long. No one would believe it. They would be very cross in fact. Believe nothing.

Believe nothing.

I scribbled you out. That's what I did. Very thoroughly. Tight little spirals over and over. Starting with the eyes of course. As if that was in any case what they were always leading to. Infinite spirals. Not a likeness. No. Never a likeness.

Chaos.

One eye bigger than the other and so on. Would have looked at home on anything. Living or dead. Monstrous.

Monster.

Something took over. I scribbled you out. It was tremendous. I felt great.

Galvanised.

There you were at last. Live, live. Live in the lively unruly line by which I obliterated your every senseless feature.

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

[Running Time 9:58 minutes]