

EKPHRASIS: Saying Goodbye to a Work of Art



The one certainty of a holiday is our having to say goodbye to it. I still remember how, as a child, I used crane my neck and look back at the Rock of Cashel as it receded, its massive grey becoming smaller and paler. Just before it faded to a dot, a sudden bend whipped it from my sight. It was the victory of reality over dream, necessity over wishful thinking.

How often have we turned at the door of a gallery room to take a last look at a painting or sculpture – often not, by any objective standard, the best – which has seized our interest? There are, for each of us, particular works which evoke a sense of *déjà vu*, a longing for the unattainable, for some kind of perfection or permanence. Whatever the feeling, however ill-defined or dimly felt, there is an impulse to stand at the door for one last look. I never look at *Toward Night and Winter* by Frank O Meara in the Hugh Lane Gallery – and I've seen it countless times – without instinctively thinking that I was there, in that place, at that time. It's strangely reassuring to know myself, after all these years, still capable of a thought so opposed to fact and logic.

What do we bring home with us? Memory, a wish to return; sometimes, even, a fear of going back, that the work, seen again, will lose its magic? Sometimes it's best just to imagine. As Tarry Flynn's uncle said about the farm, 'Shut your eyes and you'll see it better.'

Ekphrasis is the poetic re-interpretation of a visual work of art. Many Irish poets have explored this genre, notably Eavan Boland and Derek Mahon. At its best, it results in a work of art fit to take its place alongside its inspiration. The difficulty lies not in interpreting the work, but in attempting to recapture the experience of standing before it, or turning round for that last glance. Like Tarry's uncle, I've found it necessary to look with the closed eyes of the exile, sometimes adding a layer of fiction in order to preserve the essence of the experience – and then to walk away, letting the poem sit. Some of it is true, some not quite so, but all, I hope, is authentic.



Toward Night and Winter

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LES NYMPHEAS

The girl in front of Monet's
lilies stands as though before a screen
where every iridescent colour plays
the music of her teens,
losing herself in violet, or perhaps
dreaming of the first girl Monet kissed.

So still is she, the light
turns and envelops her; she seems to be
assuming a far lily's almost-white,
the dark weeds' mystery,
as if she were discarding layer by layer
herself, the self she thinks herself, that other

the moment lays upon her,
and suddenly how slim she has become,
spectral even, her breath the merest tremor:
she takes the colours' warmth
with her into the foggy Tuileries,
its gravelled lines, its sharp October trees.

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An archive of his poetry and translations can be found [here](#)