

## Brushing History against the Grain: Victims in Irish Ekphrases\*

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**Abstract:** This paper aims at investigating the ways in which Irish poets portray victims in modern Irish history. In their ekphrases, they attempt to resuscitate the excluded from official national history. Yeats invents an imagined community of the Ascendancy in his reminiscence of Lady Gregory and Synge. Unlike Yeats's pride in the victims who once established a great tradition of Ireland, Heaney expresses his guilty conscience as he depicts ancient victims sacrificed to their communities, which reminds him of contemporary sectarian violence, the Troubles. Whereas Yeats's ideal nationhood reflects his aristocratic class ideology, Heaney's, represented in his bog poems, aspires to open-ended national identity. Muldoon and Durcan indict oppressive state apparatuses through the images of victims. If Muldoon exposes how systematically an individual is surveilled in a state psychiatric hospital, Durcan criticizes the authoritative state juridical system that takes control of the private realm of one's body.

**Key words:** ekphrasis, Yeats, Heaney, Muldoon, Durcan

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**제목:** 결을 거슬러 역사 솔질하기: 아일랜드 엑프레이스에 나타난 희생자들

**우리말 요약:** 이 논문은 아일랜드 시인들이 역사가 낳은 희생자들을 기술하는 방식을 탐구하는 것에 목적을 둔다. 예술작품에서 영감을 얻어 시로 표현한 엑프레이스 장르를 통해 이들은 민족의 공식적인 역사 이면에 잊혀진 이들을 되살리는 시도를 한다. 예이츠는 레이디 그레고리와 싱의 초상화로부터 영감을 받아 영국계-아일랜드인들이

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아일랜드 사회를 지배하던 과거 전통을 이어받아 상상의 공동체를 건설한다. 에이츠가 희생자들을 통해 전통에 대한 자부심을 드러낸 것과는 달리, 히니는 공동체를 위해 희생당한 이들을 기억하면서 자신의 죄책감을 표현하는데, 이는 당대 북아일랜드 사태를 떠올리게 했기 때문이다. 또한 에이츠는 지배계급 이데올로기를 반영하여 고정된 민족 정체성을 추구한 반면, 히니는 늑지에 관한 시에서 특정한 관점에 고정되지 않는 민족 정체성을 구상하고 있다. 현대시인 멀둔과 더킨은 희생자들의 이미지를 통해 국가권력 기관의 폭력성을 폭로한다. 멀둔은 정신병원에서 철저히 감시되는 한 개인을 그리고, 더킨은 한 개인의 사적 영역인 신체마저도 통제하는 국가사법 시스템을 비판한다.

**주제어:** 엑프래시스, 에이츠, 히니, 멀둔, 더킨

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## I. Introduction

Official history has always been written by the winners, and in it the losers have been forced to remain mute. Historicism consistently silences the losers' voices and stifles not-yet-heard stories of the past. In contrast, stories of the winners are displayed in national museums to glorify achievements of the past. Serving as an ideological state apparatus, the museum resounds with victors' voices, recorded as official knowledge. In "Museum and Learning" Declan Kiberd argues that Irish museums are preoccupied with the ideology of the triumphant nationalism espoused by the state so that the task of curators is "to resist this notion of a knowledge which has been stabilized once and for all, and to mount displays which recognize that history is an open process, never concluded, not even fully representable, and seldom agreed over by its chief interpreters" (225). Since the establishment of the Irish Free State, the Irish have celebrated its glorious past, ceaselessly producing social outcasts. In order to redeem the victims' voices and past once nullified, one has to "brush history against the grain" (Benjamin 392); the task is made possible by an excavation and remembrance of the past.

Brushing the official Irish history against the grain, Irish poets, such as

W.B. Yeats, Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, and Paul Durcan, attempt to resuscitate the forgotten, those excluded from official history, and give voice to them again. In their ekphrases, poems written about or inspired by works of art, they excavate and remember the past, exposing the oppressive state that has the power to indoctrinate its citizens, convincing them that the past is completely over. Although they lived in different places and eras, in this comparative research I will demonstrate how steadily the Irish poets express their concerns with victims of modern Irish history. First, Yeats and Heaney have in common their search for ideal nationhood through the images of historical victims. They, however, differ from each other in that whereas Yeats shows his nostalgia for the lost great tradition of the Ascendancy via the images of historical victims, Heaney finds his guilty conscience in the pictures of ancient victims sacrificed for the sake of nation. In addition, they consider Irish landscapes the core of national identity: Yeats in the soil and Heaney in the bogland. If Yeats's rural landscape presupposes ruling-class ideology of the Ascendancy as he defines Irishness, Heaney's bog does not delimit the boundary of national identity. In succeeding the Irish poetic tradition of ekphrasis on victims, contemporary poets Muldoon and Durcan call state apparatuses into question. Muldoon exposes how systematically an individual is surveilled and abused by a mental institution; Durcan reveals authoritative and oppressive aspects in Irish juridical system.

## II. Yeats and Heaney

Like art museums that reflect state ideology, individual poets can also envision their ideals in their personal poetic museums, that is, ekphrases. With their elegiac moods, Yeats and Heaney recall those who have been lost in the history of a nation. They awaken the memories of the past, deliberately

obliterated by state ideology. In "The Municipal Gallery Revisited" Yeats laments the loss of a noble tradition of the Ascendancy. He considers the Anglo-Irish, such as Lady Gregory and J.M. Synge, victims in modern Irish history, sacrificed in the course of establishing the Irish Free State. Anglo-Irish aristocrats and the Catholic middle-class bourgeoisie competed against one another to seize hegemony in the post-revolutionary state. As the initiatives of founding the newly liberated state were given to the latter, the former and their virtues eventually vanished from the surface of modern Irish history. "In despair" (30) Yeats anticipates his inability to find "the selfsame excellence [of the Ascendancy] again" (32), his hope for an imagined community frustrated along with them. Hoping to recover the past glory of the defeated, the poet evokes the iconic names of Lady Gregory and Synge while looking at their portraits in the municipal gallery. Similarly, Heaney shows his considerable concerns with historical victims. In "The Tollund Man" and "Bog Queen" he shows victims of ancient sacrificial rituals. Inspired by the pictures of the ancient mummies, he expresses an urgent historical demand to revitalize their once expunged presence. In addition, in "Bogland," inspired by T. P. Flanagan's painting, Heaney excavates collective memories of the nation, long buried behind official history. The ekphrases of the two poets thus have in common the voices of the dead brought back to modern history in order to establish their ideal nationhood.

Despite the similarities between the two, Yeats and Heaney differ in their attitudes toward victims. Yeats straightforwardly expresses his great pride in the Ascendancy, specifically in sharing with Lady Gregory and Synge their honorable legacies: "I say my glory was I had such friends" (55). In contrast, reflecting the Troubles (the 1960-90s), Heaney shows a sense of guilt when he depicts victims in terms of sacrificial rituals. In "The Tollund Man" he vividly describes a mummy's well-preserved body found in Denmark in 1950 and the ritual process of the goddess of the earth, who required victims to

bring fertility to the land. He sympathizes with the victim, hoping to compensate his guilt for his inaction during the sectarian violence, in which his Catholic neighbors are murdered. He becomes uneasy with his encounter with the mummified man in the closing lines—"I will feel lost, / Unhappy and at home" (43-44)—because the ancient ritual reminds him of the political crisis in Northern Ireland since the 1960s, both of which sacrifice individuals for the sake of a community. Although he imagines that the Tollund Man may bring his dead Catholic neighbors back, risking "blasphemy" (21), he finds himself a mere helpless bystander, lingering at the murderous scene; hence unhappiness and a guilty conscience arise. Along with his guilty conscience, Heaney insinuates his voyeuristic interest into the mummy: "Naked except for / The cap, noose and girdle, / I will stand a long time" (9-11). When Heaney portrays the mummy with a modifier "Naked" (9), it confuses the identity of the poet himself and the victim because the modifier "Naked" opens stanza 3, in which the only explicit subject is "I" of the speaker (Johnston 117). Obviously, the subject of "Naked" must be the Tollund man; however, the enjambment questions the speaker's bewilderment, becoming the victim helplessly exposed to the collective violence of "the pointing hands" (38). Simultaneously, the speaker's nakedness reveals Heaney's shame at his irresponsibility toward the victim. Accordingly, if Yeats's victims conjure up a once great tradition worth being preserved in his pride, Heaney's victim of a foreign land continually reminds him of the Troubles and casualties in his native land, through which the poet inscribes his shame and guilt in the poem.<sup>1)</sup>

The two poets also differ in their search for the source of national identity. In "The Municipal Gallery Revisited," Yeats finds it in the concrete basis of the Ascendancy, while Heaney, particularly in "Bogland," envisages a malleable national identity. Both of the poets find the source of the nation in rural landscapes: Yeats in the soil and Heaney in the bogland. The landscapes

are believed to conserve the nation's legacies. Yeats believes Irish identity lies in the soil, where he finds the spirituality of the peasantry in "contact with the soil" (43). For Heaney, the bogland is considered a reservoir of cultural and historical memories:

So I began to get an idea of a bog as the memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it. [...] I have a tentative unrealized need to make a congruence between memory and bogland and, for the want of a better word, our national consciousness. (*Finders Keepers* 23-24)

Distinguished from American prairies, the Irish bogland is a symbol of the Irish conscious, in which deposits of history are kept intact, such as "the skeleton / Of the Great Irish Elk" (9-10) and white "Butter" (13), still "salty" (15). The landscapes of the soil and bogland, however, reflect the poets' different styles. If Yeats uses a lyrical, romantic style with an emphasis on "the time and space of 'the past' and 'the far away,'" Heaney searches for "'here' and 'now,' based upon a more realistic view of life" (Hong, "Utopia in Yeats's and Heaney's Poems" 146). They also reveal disparate socioeconomic backgrounds. Yeats finds "Deep-rooted things" (37) of a great Irish tradition in the soil on which noble mansions, such as Lady Gregory's Coole Park, were established. Yeats intimates his self-esteem in the Ascendancy, a utopian society in which aristocratic landlords and peasants were believed to live together in harmony, preserving the "Dream of the noble and the beggarman" (47). Readers may criticize him for his aristocratic ideology as he tries to revive the old class system. In addition, when his nostalgia for the Ascendancy is "stimulated by his interest in F. Nietzsche's attack on democratic vulgarity" and "his shock from Easter Rising and the spread of communism" (Hong, "W. B. Yeats as an Anglo-Irish" 5), he undeniably speaks for his caste privileged since the eighteenth century.

Yeats's Ascendancy, however, cannot be treated as a mere ruling-class ideology. Because the Anglo-Irish tried to distinguish themselves both from English colonialism corrupted with capitalism and from Irish Catholic middle-class bourgeois culture tainted with materialism, his search for spirituality and tradition in the Ascendancy sounds justifiable.

In contrast to Yeats, Heaney does not reveal any explicit class consciousness. His class consciousness as a Catholic farmer's son in Northern Ireland seems to melt into the bogland. Like an archaeologist, in his "inwards and downwards" (24) look, Heaney attempts to excavate the national essence, which is by no means concrete nor fixed:

The ground itself is kind, black butter  
Melting and opening underfoot,  
Missing its last definition  
By millions of years. (16-19)

Irish national identity is that which cannot be defined or reduced to any one solid virtue: "The bogholes might be Atlantic seepage. / The wet centre is bottomless" (27-28). Beyond cultural and geographical boundaries, Heaney finds Irish collective consciousness open to multiple possibilities, unfixed and malleable. In "Heaney and Homecoming" Richard Kearney analyzes Heaney's bog poems in terms of his construction of national consciousness "not in the manner of an insular, self-righteous nationalism" (221). He even compares Heaney's search for Irish consciousness to homecoming:

The wet centre, as Heaney concedes, is *bottomless*. Bogholes of receding memory lead back to a fathomless ocean flow that transcends our grasp. Homecoming, poetically understood, means therefore that our literal or geographical home is actually de-centred. The very process of homecoming reminds us that we are now displaced, in exile, estranged (*unheimlich*). (221, emphasis in original)

Arguing against Kearney's postmodernist reading of Heaney, Edna Longley maintains that Irish identity in the poem does not fall into postmodern, centerless, or self-cancelling directions. Instead, Heaney attempts to excavate "some charge of primal energy or embod[y] some remembered feeling" (qtd. in Longley 237) in that bottomless center that never drains out. Whether the bogland be indefinable or charged with national essence, it is evident that Heaney considers it a bountiful resource of Irish collective memories.

Appreciating the portraits of great figures or the pictures of historical remnants, Yeats and Heaney imagine their ideal communities. Their museumization projects request their readers not to close modern history in which the victims are easily neglected. In other words, their museumization aims to reconstruct history. In order to perpetuate the virtues of the Ascendancy, Yeats recalls the voices of the once flourished and forgotten. And he justifies his museumization task by showing the honorable and glorious tradition to the readers. In "Bog Queen" Heaney senses the necessity of the task to resuscitate the lost voice, too. He shows how persistently the dead has long been waiting for her resurrection to history, repeating the line "I lay waiting" (1, 16) through a long hibernation for centuries ("My skull hibernated" (39)). The poet, however, shows an ambivalence toward museumization by sidestepping from it. The victim's body is found between the native bogland and the demesnes wall of the Ascendancy, where the poet might demystify Yeats's idealization of the utopian Ascendancy. Upon rescue from a long forgotten history, the body is soon sold to a museum as a mere historical exhibit. Kiberd contends that Heaney refuses "to connive in the common curatorial desire to present anything old as an art work, an effect most often achieved by removing the object from its first enabling context" (232). Cut from her own historical context, she immediately loses her original identity: "The plait of my hair, / a slimy birth-cord / of bog, had been cut" (50-52). Ironically, Heaney's victim just remains as the defeated in modern



history again, imprisoned in the showcase, helplessly exposing her “hacked bone, skull-ware” (54). Her story becomes stabilized again. Nonetheless, through the ekphrasis, Heaney gives her a chance to speak out and requires readers or gallery visitors to take active roles in reconstructing her story. By so doing, the dead finally “rose from the dark” (53), awakening from the history of the victors.

### III. Muldoon and Durcan

When victims rise from a long forgotten history in ekphrases, readers can call into question the violence that marginalizes them. If in “Leda and the Swan” Yeats attributes the subject of violence to a somewhat inhuman agent, such as the cycle of history, contemporary poets Paul Muldoon and Paul Durcan question the violence of the state authority in dealing with victims. Yeats describes Leda as a victim, whose sacrifice is considered inevitable to open a new civilization. As the helpless female body is raped, the speaker vividly delivers the scene with a voyeur’s interest as if he were a secret observer of a new history. For Yeats, the violence, whether it be exerted by a transcendent existence like God or colonial power, it is a necessary evil to begin a new age. Violence seems to be justified; nevertheless, Yeats leaves the relationship between knowledge and power unresolved, and the legitimacy of the Free State in question.<sup>2)</sup>

In “Edward Kienholz: The State Hospital,” inspired by Kienholz’s installation art, Muldoon describes a patient hospitalized in a mental institution. Like Yeats, he assumes a voyeuristic view as he looks into the cell through the grate of an iron door locked from the outside. Strapped to the lower bunk of his bed, a naked man is asleep. As a gallery visitor, the poet invites the readers as observers to the scene, calling them “we” (4); yet

the poet is somewhat actively engaged in the event, conjecturing the patient's physical condition: "we may assume" (4). He even anticipates that the patient is to be abused: "He will have been beaten by an orderly" (6). The patient seems to lose consciousness in that in the original art work the patient's head contains a "fish bowl" (11), in which two black fish swim to form his eyes and mouth. Imprisoned and isolated, all he can do is dream of "one bright idea" (14), imagining his self-image. As in a comic strip, he is dreaming of himself, represented as a dream bubble lit by neon light, probably hoping for a better and a freer future. Muldoon, however, reveals that the patient's hope fails: He dreams of himself, not as a well man or as a free man but as his current self, strapped, asleep, his consciousness adrift within the small fish bowl. As long as the patient is imprisoned by his thoughts, reiterating his helplessness, he is incapable of escaping the asylum.

The image of the patient, for Muldoon, serves as an allegory to deal with socio-political issues of the era along with the shock effect produced by defamiliarization; this is the way in which Muldoon distinguishes himself from Heaney, his poetic mentor, who deals with political conflicts in Northern Ireland more directly than Muldoon does (Lee 316). In the poem above, Muldoon pays attention to anomalous state power, not to the abnormal patient. He does not explain what mental disorder the patient has; instead, he aims to disclose how the caged victim is dehumanizingly abused in the mental hospital. As in "Anseo" he exposes oppressive authority of school, an ideological state apparatus, and its violence passed down from generation to generation, he questions the state power that treats individuals with brutal violence through the state institution. The state apparatus that once segregated the helpless patient from his community now turn him to a mere docile body deprived of his will.

If Yeats appropriates works of art in a larger historical context as discussed earlier, Muldoon deals with the violence of state power in terms of

the public; Durcan does the same but in a more private key. If Yeats “sacralizes” art and the museum, Durcan “desacralizes” it in his personal appropriation of art (Loizeaux 48).<sup>3</sup> In “Study of a Figure in a Landscape, 1952,” Durcan provides a dialogue between a father and a son. In the original painting by Francis Bacon with the same title, a man seems to squat in the middle of the bush. Viewers may not immediately guess what the man is doing because Bacon intentionally blurs the outline of the man’s body. Durcan actively participates in the painting and creates an imaginary conversation; and it is the point at which he is distinguished from other poets of ekphrasis who are devoted to describing the original art works.

In his creative interpretation of the painting, Durcan reveals the characters of the father and the son. The father relentlessly asks his son whether the son’s bowels moved that morning. The son answers him back in articulate words as if he stood in court during the trial: “Yes, Daddy” or “I am, Daddy.” Suspicious of his son’s answers, the father, like a prosecutor or judge, tenaciously interrogates him. It turns out that the son had not evacuated his bowels that morning. After the long trial, the son feels the need for a toilet. Still badgering him, the father even counts to three to make him run for the toilet. Overwhelmed by the father’s authority, the son confesses that he cannot do it. And the poem ends with a sinister line: “Don’t, Daddy, don’t, Daddy, don’t, Daddy, don’t” (54), which reminds the readers of the previous line, “but don’t beat me, Daddy” (16). The young boy has been ill treated by his father, whose violent and authoritative temper oppresses him. Durcan’s father was a state circuit judge, who sent Durcan to a mental institution to undergo several electric shock treatments and submit to heavy sedation. Here, the father’s domestic violence is closely associated with the state court system that exerts brutal power over its citizens. Durcan accordingly vindicates the young victim abused by father’s domestic violence, inseparable from the state apparatus.

#### IV. Conclusion

For both Durcan's and Muldoon's victims in the original works of art by Bacon and Kienholz, their heads as well as their bodies are rendered abnormally. In other words, they have lost their will to lead their own lives. They are subject to state power, treated as prisoners or caged animals. Worse still, the victims are forbidden to speak out for themselves. Their bodies, or rather their meat asks the readers to be concerned with their suffering. In *Francis Bacon: the Logic of Sensation*, Gilles Deleuze puts it:

Pity the meat! Meat is undoubtedly the chief object of Bacon's pity, his only object of pity, his Anglo-Irish pity; it retains all the sufferings and assumes all the colors of living flesh. (21)

The victims' helpless bodies represented in the ekphrases now urge the readers to willingly participate in reconstructing history. The ekphrases disclose both of the poets' and the readers' implicit connivance with the violence, whether it be their aesthetic distance or voyeuristic inaction. Since Yeats remembered the once great tradition, through ekphrases on victims Irish poets have been excavating the buried traces of the nation, envisaging new national identity, and questioning oppressive state power, brushing the official history against the grain.

#### Notes

- 1) Heaney's guilty conscience is also evident in "Summer 1969," an ekphrasis of Francisco Goya's paintings in the Spanish Art Museum, all of which represent bloody violence and massacre: *Shootings of the Third of May* (1808), *Saturn Devouring His Son* (1819-23), *Fight with Cudgels* (1820-23).
- 2) In "Lapis Lazuli" Yeats aesthetically approaches a work of art with an emphasis on its permanence and autonomy, whose view can be compared with Derek Mahon's. Writing about the

same art work, in “Lapis Lazuli” Mahon focuses on its raw materiality instead of its transcendent virtue.

- 3) For more ekphrases of Durcan, refer to the following collections: *Crazy about Women* (1991) and *Give Me Your Hand* (1994); for a scholarly article, refer to Yeonmin Kim’s “Paul Durcan’s Ekphrasis: The Political Aesthetics of Hybridity.” *Irish University Review* 44.2 (2014): 381-97.

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