

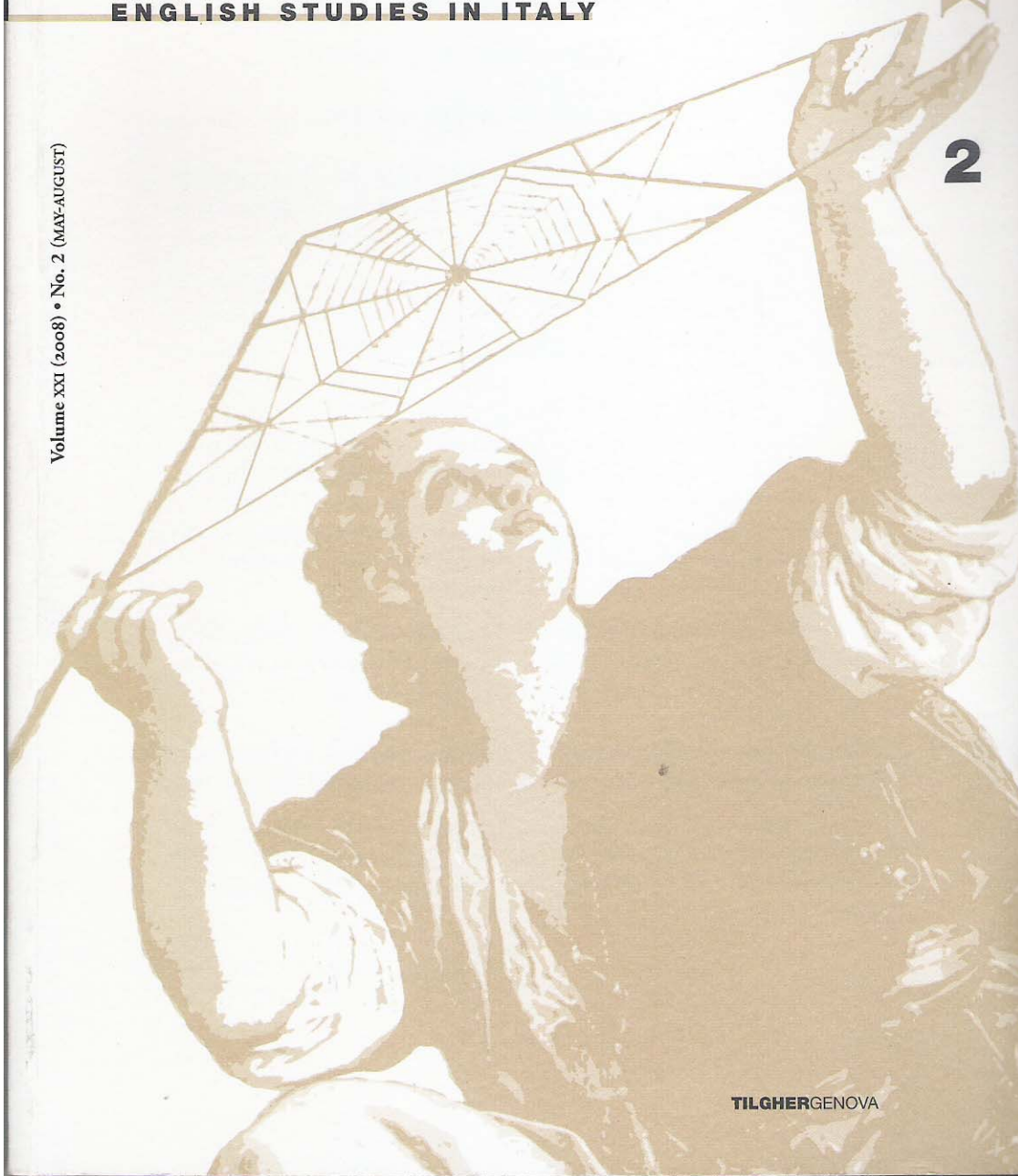
# Textus

ENGLISH STUDIES IN ITALY

XXI (2008)

2

Volume XXI (2008) • No. 2 (MAY-AUGUST)



TILGHERGENOVA

**TEXTUS**  
English Studies in Italy  
*Rivista dell'Associazione Italiana di Anglistica*

*Consiglio Direttivo*  
*Editorial Board*

Carlo Maria Bajetta (Aosta), John Douthwaite  
(Genova), Oriana Palusci (Napoli)

*Segretario di Redazione*  
*Editorial Secretary*

Ian Harvey

---

*Redazione*  
*Editorial Office*

Dipartimento di Scienze della Comunicazione Lin-  
guistica e Culturale – Sezione di Anglistica  
Piazza S. Sabina 2  
16124 Genova (Italy)

---

*Casa Editrice*  
*Publisher*

Tilgher-Genova s.a.s.  
Via Assarotti 31/15  
16122 Genova (Italy)  
Tel. + 39.010.839.11.40 – Fax + 39.010.87.06.53  
E-mail: [tilgher@tilgher.it](mailto:tilgher@tilgher.it) – <http://www.tilgher.it>

---

I dattiloscritti e ogni corrispondenza di natura **redazionale** devono essere indirizzati alla Redazione della Rivista. I dattiloscritti dei contributi pervenuti, anche se non pubblicati, non vengono restituiti.

Richieste di informazioni su prezzi e disponibilità, ordini di abbonamento o di fascicoli separati, reclami, ecc. devono essere inviati **alla Casa Editrice**.

*Manuscripts and all editorial communications should be addressed to the Editorial Office. Manuscripts, whether published or unpublished, will not be returned.*

*Any request for information about prices and availability, as well as orders, claims, etc. should be sent to the Publisher.*

---

Condizioni di vendita - Terms of sale →

## TEXTUS

è presente su **Internet** all'indirizzo

**[www.tilgher.it/textus.html](http://www.tilgher.it/textus.html)**

Nel sito sono disponibili i sommari dei fascicoli arretrati, il sommario dell'ultimo fascicolo pubblicato, il sommario del prossimo fascicolo, ecc.

È possibile acquistare on-line in formato PDF singoli articoli, singoli fascicoli e annate arretrate. È inoltre possibile abbonarsi on-line alla versione digitale (PDF) della rivista.

## TEXTUS

is on the **Internet** at the following address:

**[www.tilgher.it/textuse.html](http://www.tilgher.it/textuse.html)**

On the web site you may find: contents of the back issues, contents of the latest issue, contents of the next issue, etc.

It is possible to purchase on-line single articles, single issues and back volumes in PDF format, and to subscribe on-line to the digital (PDF) version of the journal.

TEXTUS  
English Studies in Italy

Volume XXI (2008)

No. 2 (May-August)

ANGELS AND MESSENGERS

edited by  
Alessandra Violi and Elisabeth Bronfen

---

CONTENTS

Alessandra Violi and Elisabeth Bronfen	<i>Introduction</i> .....	197
Sybille Krämer	<i>Messenger-angels: Can Angels Embody a Theory of the Media avant la lettre?</i> .....	221
Francesca Montesperelli	<i>Electric Angels</i> .....	235
Julia Straub	<i>Diaphanous Angels. Julia Margaret Cameron's and Walter Pater's Go-betweens</i> .....	261
Greta Perletti	<i>"A Medium that Bears Up Our Spiritual Wings". Sensibility, Pathology, and the Angelic Body in Victorian Culture</i> .....	279
Arianna Antonielli	<i>The Deification of the Fallen Seraph: Revisions of the Myth in Anatole France's La Révolte des Anges and Clark Ashton Smith's Schizoid Creator</i> .....	295
Chiara Sciarrino	<i>Ekphrastic Representations of Angels in Anglo-Irish Literature</i> .....	315
Pietra Palazzolo	<i>Without a Tepid Aureole: Angels and Messengers in Contemporary Literature and Film</i> .....	333
<i>Contributors</i> .....		351

(Instructions: p. 354)



TILGHER-GENOVA



TEXTUS

Registrazione presso il Tribunale di Genova  
n. 36 del 16.6.1988

Direttore responsabile: Renato Venturelli  
Proprietario: Associazione Italiana di Anglistica  
Editore: Tilgher-Genova s.a.s.  
Stampato presso la Microart's S.p.A. in Recco (Genova)  
per conto della Casa Editrice Tilgher-Genova s.a.s.

ISSN 1824-3967

© Casa Editrice Tilgher-Genova s.a.s.  
Via Assarotti 31 - 16122 Genova (Italy)  
[www.tilgher.it](http://www.tilgher.it)

Poste Italiane S.p.A. Spedizione in A.P. - D.L. 353/2003  
(conv. in L. 27/02/2004 No. 46) - art. 1 comma 1  
DCB Genova - No. 2/2008

Chiara Sciarrino

*Ekphrastic Representations of Angels in Anglo-Irish Literature*

---

What is the use of a book  
without pictures or conversation?  
(Lewis Carroll)

*Introduction*

*Ekphrasis*, a sub-category originally meaning simply *description*, is a term now commonly used to denote poetry or poetic writing concerned with the visual arts, artistic objects and/or highly visual scenes.

It is “the description of an *objet d’art* by medium of the word” (Spitzer 1955: 218); “the imitation in literature of a work of plastic art” (Krieger 1967: 7); “the literary description of real or imagined works of visual art” (Bender 1972: 51) or “the description in verses of an object d’art” (Kurman 1974: 1).

Some scholars differentiate between texts describing pictures (*ekphrasis*) and texts interpreting and commenting on pictures (*Bildgedicht*). The distinction made by the eighteenth-century German critic, Lessing, in his 1766 book *Laocoön*, is of fundamental importance to the debate on the interrelations between pictorial art and literature: the writer’s and the painter’s problems are linked to the material of the respective art. The painter works with “figures

and colours in space", whereas the author works "with articulate tones in time" (Lessing 1959: 875).

The problem, though, seems to be more complex than that indicated by Lessing. As John Dixon Hunt claims:

Modern literary criticism and formal discussion of the visual arts have proceeded along separate paths and there often appears little scope for a *rapprochement*. They can join forces most easily in the study of the history of ideas, but such inquiries do not readily insist upon the crucial differences that exist between figurative and verbal expression. (Dixon Hunt 1971: 47)

The object which it refers to was extensively studied in the past and is now one of the major fields of research among comparatists, literary theory critics as well as art theory critics. New theories of literature and pictorial art as well as alternative research methods have added new and vital aspects to the study while losing their way because of its obvious interdisciplinary nature.

Far from siding with the well-known Oratian formula "ut pictura poesis" or with Simonides of Keos's "Poema loquens pictura, picture tacitum poema debet esse", which preceded it, in most recent times, a whole series of species and subspecies of forms of interaction between art and literature has been detected. John Dixon Hunt, in a 1980 lecture entitled "On Poems on Paintings", distinguishes some types: 1) poems in which a work of art is described, commonly known as *ekphrasis*; 2) poems in which the act of contemplating a painting is created; 3) poems on living or imaginary artists; 4) poems on the visual arts in general, but, more generically, literary texts in which the poet, inspired by the evoking power of a specific work of art, works out some images that have a mediated relationship with the visual arts that inspired it; 5) poems that distinguish themselves for a particularly visual quality (Dixon Hunt 1980: 1-27).

In "Literature and Arts", Mary Gaither deals with some methodological issues and highlights three main approaches to comparative studies of arts and literature: 1) relationship of form and content; 2) influence; and 3) synthesis. After claiming that both form and content are unable to provide descriptions and/or solutions to problems of style, technique and fiction, Gaither concludes by giv-



ing seven categories of approach to the study of the relationship between art and literature: 1) details of a literary text elucidated by a picture; 2) details of a picture clarified by a literary text; 3) concepts and motifs of literature clarified by the art of design; 4) motifs of pictures elucidated through literature; 5) and 6) literary-linguistic forms and literary-stylistic expressions in literature and art; 7) borderlines between literature and art (Gaither 1949: 163-164).

Bram Dijkstra lays emphasis on the contribution such a relationship gives to the creation of a piece of writing: it is, he claims, a question of methodology as well as of motive. In other words, analyzing the influence of painting on literature means understanding the aesthetics of the writer himself/herself, his/her perception and view of the world, and his/her *raison d'être* as a writer: "A poet's response to painting can tell us why he is a poet and why his poetry has taken its specific form" (Dixon Hunt 1971: 156)

One of the leading scholars in the area, Ulrich Weisstein, has the merit of having added, in a seemingly more precise way, two more categories: "literary works constituting or literally recreating works of art" and "literary works sharing a theme, or themes, with works of art" (Weisstein 1981: 23).<sup>1</sup>

Questions of form should not be left out: how is the transposition of a verbal enunciation made into an iconic representation; what does one lose and what does one gain during such a metamorphosis; what is left of the original and in what way is this absorbed by the copy; to what extent is any form of art inspected and limited by its own material mediums; what are the most conspicuous varieties of verbal-visual contamination; and, finally, which are the ideologies that support such forms?

Nor can the content issue be neglected: what is the role played by the presence of visual images within a text? And within the deployment of the plot? Does it express, satisfy or upset the feelings, the nature of the character himself/herself?

A critical approach to such questions is necessary in order to

<sup>1</sup> Weisstein gives 1917 as its year of birth, this being the year when Oskar Walzel published his famous *Wechselseitige Erhellung der Künste (Reciprocal Illumination in the Arts)*.



understand the nature of the relationship in both directions between the visual arts and the literature produced in Ireland and to examine more carefully the representation of angels within this literary corpus.

## 2. *Anglo-Irish Writing and the Visual Arts*

The poet, literary critic and professor at Queen's University Belfast, Edna Longley, deals with the parallelism between poetry and visual arts, giving us with her essay "No More Poems about Paintings" an overview of the use of this rhetorical device as it appears in the works of Irish writers. By stressing, as the title itself suggests, its presence within Anglo-Irish literature, she makes the important point that "poetry's consciousness of painting inevitably highlights and measures its aesthetic self-consciousness, tilts the see-saw away from history" (Longley 1994: 227). From it we can learn about aesthetic history and the history of poetry itself.

\* \* \*

The threefold terror of love; a fallen flare  
 Through the hollow of an ear;  
 Wings beating about the room;  
 The terror of all terrors that I bore  
 The Heavens in my womb.  
 (W.B. Yeats, "The Mother of God", 364-365)

One of the first major poets to use the ekphrastic motif in Anglo-Irish literature was the Nobel Prize Winner William Butler Yeats. "I would have all the arts draw together," Yeats wrote in his 1937 *Essays and Introductions*. Yeats almost constantly drew on painting and used painting in different ways throughout his work. He himself would later proclaim that it was natural for him to see analogies between poetry and painting which was, up to the end of 1890s, mainly that represented by the Pre-Raphaelites. What Yeats loved most about their art were indeed the associations with literature, the

enthusiasm for Dante, Shakespeare and Chaucer and for qualities, such as colour and rhythm, that he could associate with poetry; some religious ideas, such as the ones found in Rossetti's paintings; some motifs like the poppy, the lily and especially the rose.

From 1911 to 1925, the visual arts became almost a constant source for his poetic images. In particular, artists and works of art are from now on explicitly referred to, often to debate about issues of art and about the value of works of art. This culminates with the work *A Vision*, in which his knowledge of art ranges from Byzantine mosaics to Michelangelo, from Botticelli to Mantegna, from Poussin to Titian. Indeed, two of its books are dated "finished at Syracuse, January 1925", that is, during his visit to Sicily with his wife and the Pound family. There he admired the Byzantine mosaics of Monreale and the Cappella Palatina, of which numerous images-postcards are now kept at the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin together with the ones of the Basilica San Apollinare Nuovo and the Basilica di San Vitale in Ravenna, which he had visited with Lady Gregory in 1907. To this, Yeats added frequent visits to the Borghese Palace and to the Vatican Galleries in 1925 which helped him to make comparisons between profane perfection and divine beauty.

The legacy of William Butler Yeats had a profound effect on much of Anglo-Irish poetry of the last century. One of the significant examples of the influence of his interest in the visual arts is the recurrence of the theme of "Leda and the Swan" in the poetry of Cork-born Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin (1942).

\* \* \*



They came back again to *The Annunciation*.

She couldn't get it out of her head: this girl had been told that she was to be the mother of God. She closed her eyes tight, trying to comprehend the enormity of such a revelation, but it was beyond her.

"Just look at the depth of the field, and the symmetry and rhythm of those columns," Dan said. "I never realised the angel's wings had those colours." "I thought angels wings were white." "They're like a rainbow from another world." She wasn't religious as such, but the fresco gave her a woman's sympathy for the Virgin. "She's like a convent girl," she said. "Maybe she was." "A young nun, do you mean? Look at the light from her bodice!" "You'd almost need sunglasses. It's coming from the angel, of course.

(Philip Casey)

Yeats's most famous poem "Leda and the Swan" certainly came as a support to Ní Chuilleanáin's interest in Correggio's *Leda and the Swan* – which she could admire at a Berlin museum – and which drew her even closer to the Italian painter's work. A few years earlier, in 1963, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin had paused over, admired and written about Correggio's frescoes in Parma Cathedral. From it, the poem "Fireman's Lift" came out. The assumption of the Virgin, as it is depicted in the frescoes, gave the Irish poet the opportunity to experience the importance of what she calls "the life of the body" not only within history but also in the way "we perceive language and visual beauty". As she wrote, from that moment on, she would concentrate on one aspect, "the way art shows bodily effort and the body's weight". The image of the Virgin is seen surrounded, and her body is lifted up, helped, sustained by a crowd of angels running after each other, towards the blue sky: the Virgin becomes a reflection of the poet's mother, who was in the last years of her life looked after by some nuns:

Teams of angelic arms were heaving,  
Supporting, crowding her [...]  
Their heads bowed over to reflect on her  
Fair face and hair so like their own  
As she passed through their hands. We saw them



Lifting her, the pillars of their arms  
(Her face a capital leaning into an arch)  
As the muscles clung and shifted  
For a final purchase together  
Under the weight as she came to the edge of the cloud.  
(Ní Chuilleanáin 1994: 10-11)

Similar to the architecture of the dome, able to make the visitor feel at ease and taking part in the beauty of its materiality and its spirituality, Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry seems to wrap the reader up in the divine motif, making it an occasion for drawing attention to her personal sphere of affection. The poet also seems to share Correggio's representation of the Madonna as an independent, strong woman. Her verses are

a return of the feminine, shifting or indeterminate points of view, an emphasis on the body and desire, a disjunction between different levels of reality, mobile or disappearing borders or frames, startling metamorphoses, sudden or fleeting references to the sacred, and the housing in architecture of her own art. (Johnston 1997: 203)

Saints who are women, be they Saint Theresa, the Madonna herself otherwise named the Virgin, prevail in Ní Chuilleanáin's poetry: from the "Vierge Ouvrante", written during a stay in Italy, onwards, emphasis is laid on the physicality through which one can achieve some kind of spirituality, no matter if this is austere Catholicism or mere desire for someone or something to believe in.

Representations of ecstatic moments are a recurring motif in Anglo-Irish literature. They narrate the history of the encounter with God. They focus on the feelings the news about an unexpected pregnancy and later about the presence of divinity arouse in a woman's heart. They stress the strength the female figure possesses once she is told about the coming of Christ; they picture a virgin who is made saint and is surrounded by angels.

\* \* \*

Art and religion are, then, two roads by which men escape from circumstance to ecstasy. Between aesthetic and religious rapture there is a family alliance. Art and religion are means to similar states of mind.

(Clive Bell)

What is art, what are its main objectives, its places and what are the feelings it arouses? Such are the questions that the novelist Deirdre Madden (1960- ) – born in Co. Antrim, but one could say more European than specifically Irish – has more than once asked herself in her work.

Her first novel, *Hidden Symptoms*, published in 1986, while starting the longer aesthetic discussion that takes place in her later novels, already seems to anticipate what becomes a constant preoccupation: defining the religious nature of artistic inspiration and the type of religiosity practised in Italy, the country which is the setting for her novel. The protagonist, a Belfast girl called Theresa, on holiday in Rome with her twin brother Francis, enchanted by so many artistic beauties – Michelangelo's *Pietà* included – starts asking herself what art represents, what it alludes to and what it means to believe especially for all those tourists that daily visit the Holy City.

The description of Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa of Avila*, with its sacred eroticism, to use a term coined by George Bataille, encourages the author to tackle the issue of a more approachable, understandable form of art which the protagonist can easily identify with.

Bernini's columns – a description of which follows in the book – make up a construction both within and outside the world, with on the one hand their essence of open-endedness, pluralistic instability and on the other their image of universal symmetry, precision and religious celebration, and seem to affirm the impossibility of a precise definition of the arts as well as the realization of their illusory nature.

Neither words nor images are able to express what is the main theme of the novel, i.e., the confusing incoherence of life.

*Ekphrases* take up plenty of room in the 1992 novel *Remembering Light and Stone*. Mainly set in Italy, in a village in Umbria, it describes the life of a young Irish woman named Aisling. With a conversational tone and an almost travel-book style, Aisling tells about



the cultural events that characterize her time spent with Ted, an American who teaches Art History.

Sometimes, as is the case with the Sistine Chapel and Saint Peter's, the world of art is able to engender dismay and a sense of infinitude towards what is the ungraspable, unreachable and all-present power of Christianity, a feeling which is so strong as to cause nightmares:

I was thinking of the churches, all the churches where the raw power of Christianity could speak to me from the anguished face of a painted angel, over the roar of the traffic, in the heat of the night, as I lay there wrapped in a sheet, feeling the pulse of my own heart, and hearing the voice of a tormented angel scream down through the centuries to me. (Madden 1994: 9)

With something always new for those who love addressing it, art also conveys a sense of the limits imposed by stability while stressing the impossibility of giving voice to changes:

Looking at the paintings, I was struck, as always, immutable they were. There was San Giorgio himself, holding the village on its covered dish, as he had done now for over five hundred years, through so many wars and revolutions. As Ted and I stood there, people in Prague were climbing into the West German embassy gardens [...] Huge social changes had taken place since the frescoes were painted, including changes in the religious sensibilities of people, so that while the paintings did not alter, the ways in which they were viewed were now completely different. (25)

Through her trip towards self-discovery, Aisling, who comes from a country where the cult of God is obsessively taught, ends up by questioning the religious nature of arts and the relationship between art and religion. Referring to Ted, she thinks:

For a long time it was a bit of a mystery to me why he loved early religious art so much. Then I realised that people often like what you wouldn't expect, and that you can tell a lot about someone by the sort of painting they prefer. For instance, I was amazed when I read somewhere that Raphael was Dostoevsky's favourite artist [...] Religion interests me in terms of its relation to a given society, and of course above all in its connections with art, but that's as far as it goes [...] The idea of faith doesn't interest me at all. (129)



She then denies the very same religious nature of art, distancing herself from it. Duccio's *Maestà*, originally placed on the main altar of the Cathedral of Siena, now in the Cathedral's Museum, also contributes to refer back to her cultural background and the use of religious images:

I was conscious of the huge construction of theology and iconography which no longer had any relevance for me, but which informed every inch of the *Maestà*. The Madonna was beautiful, as beautiful as Aphrodite. I thought of the paintings I'd seen that morning in the gallery, and now I saw them all in the same way, like magnificent images painted on doors to the past that were shut and locked. I thought of the plastic shrine I'd had as a child. The memory of it still meant something to me, because it was ugly but simple, and what I had lost while looking at the *Maestà* was faith in all things that weren't simple. I couldn't relate the painting to faith any more, and I couldn't relate the shrine to anything else. (136)

Visual arts fill the novel with their essence, their complex forms. From the coloured houses in Burano to the Byzantine Church on Torcello, from the mosaics of Saint Mark's to the Roman ruins, detailed descriptions dominate, sometimes accompanied by bitter considerations upon the state of museums in Italy as well as by reflections on the differences between the various artistic forms and the various epochs.

Overall, the writer remains faithful to the subject matter of Christian iconography and from time to time she exploits it in different ways. For instance, when it comes to dealing with the topic of the depiction of one instant of the life of one man, Jesus Christ, she does so not just to replicate a canonical icon of Christ, but to draw attention to an issue which has become too dear to her: the physicality of religious characters. The picture in question is Holbein's painting of the *Dead Christ* which – she specifies – attracted Dostoevsky.

The picture represents Christ just taken down from the cross. His face is terribly disfigured by blows, the eyes open. As the author herself explicitly states, it “shows Christ as a dead man, after he had been taken from the cross, his body already beginning to decom-

pose. There is no sense of divinity, no sense of anything but death” (Madden 1994: 129).

In the novel that bears the title of a quotation from Frida Kahlo, *Nothing is Black*, published in 1992, Deirdre Madden, takes up some more aesthetic issues. One relates to the differences between religious art and contemporary art, the former being in some way meant or destined to convey a meaning of death, the latter endowed with a social function.

The novel is the story of three women who find themselves in a remote part of Donegal at a defining moment of their lives: the wealthy Nuala, who owns a restaurant with her husband Kevin, has come to stay with her cousin Claire, who leads a solitary life as a painter; Anna, Claire’s neighbour from Holland, longs for a reconciliation with her daughter.

Again in this novel, Deirdre Madden makes a theoretical distinction between the spiritual and the physical aspects of art, as when Claire recalls her ex-boyfriend’s words:

People in Europe now aren’t interested in art because it has to do with death. It teaches you how to die, and people don’t want to know about that. In that way art is religious. There was always, until this century, a distinction between things which were true art, connected with religion, and things which had a social function, which were decorative or for entertainment. (Madden 1992: 8-9)

Madden takes up the topic of the “spiritual dimension of art” and she does so explicitly when making Claire admit that the first time she really appreciated religious art was during her visit to the Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna. While showing a book of the mosaics to Nuala, she confesses:

The arrogance of it, for Theodora and Justinian to have their portraits put up like that in a church, above the high altar beside representations of Christ and the saints. For all that, the images of the dead faces touched her more than she could understand. Is this the only possible immortality? Nothing more than this? The decadence of it, the richness of the gold, and the shimmering colours. The Imperial portraits were a strange combination of vulnerability and brute power. [...] For days afterwards she could not stop thinking about



the mosaics, was haunted by them, not wanting to believe how much of existence was embodied in those stern faces. (18-19)

The choice of these mosaics, with their celebration of secular power, offers Deirdre Madden a great opportunity to make her point and justify it to the reader. We have two examples of that which come straight from Madden's closer look at the emperor Justinian, "clad in purple and with a golden halo, standing next to court officials, a Bishop, some guards and deacons" (18). The halo around his head gives him the same aspect as Christ in the dome of the apse. Christ and Justinian then appear very much alike: both share God-like and human-like traits. There is no clear distinction between the two figures, no specific iconographic references that make us think in some other way.

Religion has by now withdrawn, has quietly, silently taken a step backwards. Claire has changed, she has lost her faith.

Madden's religious motif which she tries to distance herself from by way of using it, exploiting it as much as she can, is well grounded within the Irish cultural background of the 1960s and '70s.

Madden's characters live, come from and have run away from a country that still seems to be conservative and narrow-minded.

As one of the main studies on Ireland of those days specifies "Catholicism was overwhelmingly the majority creed" (Fallon 1999: 184). In a society where faith and culture were so intimately intertwined, where Catholicism was seen as "a nationality as much as a religion [...] a matter of public identity rather than of private faith" (O'Toole 1994: 123), it is still possible to find a remote place where characters take possession of some form of pure, simple lifestyle which resembles that of the ancient religions. Catholicism to their eyes can break people's spirits:

Do you know anything about the ancient religions, Nuala? They are good, they are very wise, These religions are mentally sound, not like Christianity which is fundamentally neurotic, and so the end is neurosis. The ancient religions are more complete, their gods and goddesses are more psychologically true, more complex, more in the image of humanity than is the case with Christianity. And yet you know, there is something very strange in this: that Ireland isn't a



Christian country at all. What I like about Ireland is that just below this crust of Catholicism it is pure paganism. (Madden 1992: 126-127)

Finally, when we turn to her latest novel *Authenticity*, published in 2002, we are not surprised to find that two characters, Julia Fitzpatrick and her partner Roderic Kennedy, are artists too.

A novel of passions and obsessions more easily describable by visual art rather than by words, *Authenticity* offers considerations on the religious nature of art, opinions on the relationship between literature and visual arts as well as examples of *ekphrases*.

Again, as in *Nothing is Black*, religious art is associated with decadence. It is not a coincidence that, when one of the characters, a depressed lawyer with a strong interest in the arts, named William, stops at the National Gallery in London, it is Mantegna's *The Agony in the Garden* he is interested in.

He will certainly find no consolation in the view of Christ who we know is about to die. The images of Judas in the background arriving with soldiers to arrest him; the indifference of both the "walled city" – which could obviously stand for his Dublin – and his sleeping disciples well serves as a sort of identifying process through which the author indirectly underlines the lack of attention William has been paid, and anticipates his tragic end (he commits suicide).

Religious images then become images, pure means by which the writer overtly eludes the doctrinal function of their being, of their essence. Art is then deprived of all its religious content. "If I see another angel, I'll scream," William's wife, Liz, asserts at a certain point.

Art has taken the place of revealed religion. "Tomorrow," William thinks, for one second, "will be Sunday and the galleries would be crowded [...] Loss of faith was taken for granted" (Madden 2002: 115).

Deirdre Madden's novels offer various examples of what comparatists define as subcategories of the relationship between arts and literature: *form and content and influence and synthesis*. Madden has read up on the iconographic meaning of many works of art. She is

familiar with the content of the Holy Scriptures. She discusses aesthetics, philosophy of art, differences between art and literature, and she does so sometimes a bit confusingly by proposing opposing perspectives on such topics. In placing the visual arts in such a central position within her work, she confronts the problem of redefining and dealing with the representation of the divine in literature. As Erwin Panofsky puts it, the divine is here reduced to mere subject matter for human consciousness as well as, I would add, to an occasion to discredit the powerful presence of religion in Ireland.

\* \* \*

There seems to be plenty of room for art and for the subject of angels in one of the last collections of poems by the Belfast-born Medbh McGuckian (1950- ). In *The Book of the Angel*, published in 2004, she seems to mainly focus on artistic representations of the Catholic creed while using the trope of painting as a metaphor for the poetic act.

In the old Irish *Liber angeli*, or “Book of the Angel”, Saint Patrick discusses his position as an ecclesiastic with an angel in Armagh. In the collection of poems that bears the same title, Medbh McGuckian meditates on three important issues: religion, its relation to the secular and to national identity. As the title suggests, the collection centres upon the image of the angel, often ambiguously identified although always seen as a messenger, an in-between creature who mediates, who suggests transition. The collection, which is divided into five parts, focuses on a different way of looking at the relationship between the “I” of the poet and Christ.

The traditional role of the angel understood as a messenger is fully exploited by the poet in order to give voice to the conflict between the divine and the earthly world. The angel is firstly the angel who announces the coming birth of Christ, who foretells human salvation, as in *A Chrisom Child*:

It is impossible to tell  
From the brocade and feathers  
Of the robes, wings and hair of Gabriel,



From the tartan cloth of the angel,  
whether he has already spoken. (McGuckian 2004: 30)

The Annunciation has not yet been revealed, or better, the poet cannot really tell it has. Is it because that very instant, that very glimpse she has is more important than what comes before or what follows or is it because she misses the whole point of the religious event?

Gabriel, as an angel, plays “an ambiguous role”, carrying both the joy of eternal life and the desolate vision of physical death. The Annunciation is thus deprived of all its positive meaning and is enriched with the presence of such ambivalent terms as “heaviness” and “delicacy”, “cold” and “extraordinary” which prefigure the identification of Christ with the child of the title. Death, as brought about by the visible, felt crucifix the angel is compared to, is that of the child but above all of Christ.

The theme is taken up again in another poem from the same sequence, *A More*. The Madonna is caught with a pale yellow book in her hands and with an almost sun-like halo above her head, symbol of divinity. The angel is explicitly described as not having human-like features: “seems to have no body/beneath his drapery: no feet appear below” and with his wings “halfway between rising and sinking” (32).

The angel and the Madonna appear once more in *The Angel Musician*. The poem consists of opposing images related to the two figures, the Madonna being beside a “dry tree” – possibly a metaphor for her pregnancy – contrasts with the living tree behind the angel. Colours predominate: from her “berry-pink mouth” to the red and white roses of Gabriel’s crown which are missing in this angel; from her green chamber to the white of the dove, everything seems to suggest that the animated context they are in is more important than the mere ekphrasis of the messenger, who does not play any instrument nor does he play music. The “she” of the Madonna and the “he” of the gendered angel become one in the poem *Modello*, where the two are caught while conversing “directly in a bright daylight,/ her hand overlapping his draped elbow,/ as though a garden flowered foolishly /above the town houses”.

Sometimes angels take the place of Pagan Muses as in the second part of the book, where the Muses are variously portrayed as Christ, Mary, saints or angels. As in McGuckian's life, the sacred and the profane combine together in *The Parents of Dreams*:

It seems divine  
and winged  
as a bird that shows itself  
only twice;

or the antiworld  
that surrounds the world  
and sets a snare  
in the path of the sun.

A new skin  
rolling over the old earth (14)

Some other times, angels are turbulent, confused, lost in the same way human beings are, kept so busy by daily life as to forget all about sacredness: "The agitation of wingless angels/Throughout the pathways of the world/It is not the path that just happens" (McGuckain 2004: 61). As from "Red Angels" (*ibid.*: 36) they suffer and are sorry for "the nuptial meaning of her body", for the physical pain a woman has to endure when giving birth to a child. Seraphims keep all their characteristic traits, as from Isaiah's book, when depicted while holding "a burning coal" in their hands and "a candle for the dying". Jesus Christ's birth has taken place: we are left with a desolate porch setting where no human life is felt, seen, heard, where living things can turn eternally inanimate in their association with death. Life has taken over with its silence and desolation. Christ is born and yet He is, like other human beings, destined to die.

McGuckain portrays angels as in-between creatures, fallen yet spiritual; dark though with wings, unreachable, evanescent though humanized as the last lines of the concluding *Poem Rhyming in J*, state:

Words remain on the shore, but when the angel  
falls in love, with his different prayer movements,  
he is the perfect human. (85)



## REFERENCES

- Bell C., 1949, *Art*, Arrow Books, London.
- Bender J.B., 1972, *Spencer and Literary Pictorialism*, Princeton U.P., Princeton, p. 51.
- Dijkstra B., 1971, "Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams: Poetry, Painting and the Function of Reality", in Hunt 1971, pp. 156-171.
- Fallon B., 1999, *An Age of Innocence, Irish Culture 1930-1960*, Gill & Macmillan, Dublin.
- Gaither M., 1949, "Literature and the Arts", in *Comparative Literature* 1, University of Oregon, Eugene (OR), pp. 153-170.
- Hagstrum J., 1958, *The Sister Arts: the Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London.
- Hunt J.D., 1971, *Encounters, Essays on Literature and the Visual Arts*, Scottish Academic Press, Edinburgh.
- Hunt J.D., 1980, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror on Poems on Paintings*, Bedford College, London.
- Johnston D., 1997, "'Our Bodies' Eyes and Writing Hands': Secrecy and Sensuality in Ní Chuilleanáin's Baroque Art", in S. Bradley and M. Valiulis Gialanella (eds), *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, pp. 187-211.
- Krieger M., 1967, "Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry: or, *Laokoon* Revisited", in F.G.W. Mc Dowell (ed.), *The Poet as Critic*, Northwestern U.P., Evanstown, pp. 3-26.
- Kurman G., 1974, "Ekphrasis in Epic Poetry", in *Comparative Literature* 26, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, pp. 1-13.
- Lessing G.E., 1959, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2, Hanser, München.
- Longley E., 1994, "No More Poems about Paintings", in E. Longley, *The Living Stream, Literature and Revisionism in Ireland*, Bloodaxe Books, Newcastle Upon Tyne.
- Lund H., 1992, *Text as Picture, Studies in the Literary Transformation of Pictures*, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter.
- Madden D., 2002, *Authenticity*, Faber & Faber, London.
- Madden D., 1986, *Hidden Symptoms*, Atlantic Monthly, Boston.
- Madden D., 1992, *Nothing is Black*, Faber & Faber, London.
- Madden D., 1994, *Remembering Light and Stone*, Faber & Faber, London.
- McGuckian M., 1991, *Marconi's Cottage*, Gallery Books, Oldcastle, Co. Meath.
- McGuckian M., 2004, *The Book of the Angel*, Gallery Press, Co. Meath, Ireland.
- Ní Chuilleanáin E., 1994, *The Brazen Serpent*, Gallery Press, Co. Meath, Ireland.
- O'Toole F., 1994, *Black Hole, the Disappearance of Ireland*, Green Card, New Island Books, Dublin.
- Praz M., 1970, *Mnemosyne. The Parallel between Literature and the Visual Arts*, Oxford U.P., London.
- Spitzer L., 1955, "The 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', or Content vs. Metagrammar", in *CL*, 7, pp. 203-25.

- Walzel O., 1917, *Wechselseitige Erhellung der Künste. Ein Beitrag zur Würdigung kunstgeschichtlicher Begriffe*, Reuther Reichard, Berlin.
- Weisstein U., 1981, "Comparing Literature and Art: Current Trends and Prospects in Critical Theory and Methodology", in S.P. Scher and U. Weisstein (eds), *Literature and the Other Arts = Littérature et les autres arts = Literatur und die anderen Künste: Proceedings of the IXth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association 1979*, 3, Institut für Sprachwissenschaft der Universität, Innsbruck, p. 23.
- Wellek R., 1942, "The Parallelism between Literature and the Arts", in *English Institute Annual for 1941*, Columbia U.P., New York, pp. 29-63.
- Yeats W.B., 1937, *A Vision*, Macmillan, London.
- Yeats W.B., 1961, *Essays and Introductions*, Macmillan, London.
- Yeats W.B., 1989, *Yeats's Poems*, ed. by N. Jeffares, Gill & Macmillan, Dublin.