

EKPHRASIS AND IDEOLOGY IN A SELECTION OF TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY BRITISH POEMS

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ABSTRACT

The paper draws upon a selection of twenty-first-century ekphrastic poems by Maggie Butt, Brian Doeherty, Pauline Kirk, and Margaret Wilmot which denote certain ideas which seem to have inspired the poets to make them. The art of making ekphrastic poems conveys the inner reasoning of the poets to the reader. Modern works of art, art from the Middle Ages, or even prehistoric implements are complements to modes of expression of the poets' ideas. The paper parses the poems by making recourse to ut pictura poesis, and identifies the ideology or the unit-idea lying behind, or piercing through, the poems. The paper evinces the relevance of making ekphrastic poems to enabling poets to express the abstract, or the ineffable.

Keywords: *aesthetic response; displaced people; life; mediascapes; unit-idea;*

INTRODUCTION

The Oxford Dictionary defines the 1632-ekphrasis as “an explanation or description of something, esp. as a rhetorical device”, and the present-day ekphrasis as “a literary device in which a painting, sculpture, or other work of visual art is described in detail”.¹ *The Poetry Foundation* website defines ekphrasis as “‘Description’ in Greek”, and an ekphrastic poem as “a vivid description of a scene or, more commonly, a work of art”, and also specifies that “Through the imaginative act of narrating and reflecting on the ‘action’ of a painting or sculpture, the poet may amplify and expand its meaning”.²

It is precisely in this last part of the definition that ideology comes into play. Before the ekphrastic poem reaches the reader, the poet must have found a meaning of the work of art and his or her ideas about the work of art will suffuse his or her poetics.

If the work of art is viewed as a text, understanding such a text is equivalent to finding the question to which the text is the answer.³ The dialogue between question and answer resides in language, and understanding such a dialogue, according to Gadamer, “is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of

1 OED | *Oxford English Dictionary*.

https://www.oed.com/dictionary/ekphrasis_n?tab=meaning_and_use&show-all-quotations=true#5971834. Accessed: 16 August 2023.

2 *The Poetry Foundation*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/ekphrasis>. Accessed: 16 August 2023.

3 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (Second. Revised Edition. Translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marsh) (London, New York: Continuum, [1975] 2004), 366–7.

view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were”.⁴ When trying to understand a text, Gadamer says that in the “hermeneutical conversation” the text can speak “only through the other partner, the interpreter”.⁵ What the interpreter makes of the text in terms of language and what the text poses as a “subject matter” to be understood have to reach a point which Gadamer names a “fusion of horizons”.⁶ From this point on the «text» represented by the work of art becomes an ideology or a simple unit-idea⁷ to serve the poem in the making.⁸ So the poem will reach the reader with an ideology or a simple unit-idea which diffuses actually from the ekphrasis.

The Oxford Dictionary defines ideology in 1796 as “The study of ideas; that branch of philosophy or psychology which deals with the origin and nature of ideas”, and particularly as “The system introduced by the French philosopher Etienne Condillac (1715–80), according to which all ideas are derived from sensations”.⁹ Since 1896, ideology has been defined as “[a] systematic scheme of ideas, usually relating to politics, economics, or society and forming the basis of action or policy”, and also “the forming or holding of such a scheme of ideas”.¹⁰ In this paper, whether the definition of ideology will stay with the former definition, or with the present-day one, depends very much on the poem.

As far as the twenty-first century goes, Marshall Berman prophesies a perpetual change and adaptation of the *status quo* of the relations in “the culture of modernism”, as the dishevelled “fast-frozen relations” of *The Communist Manifesto* will go on into “new visions and expressions of life” which are brought about by the same economic and social drives which have been transforming both the world and the lives of the people since the modern era.¹¹ Marshall Berman’s 1982 vision of the modern era found an exquisite metaphor in Zygmunt Bauman’s 2000 “fluid modernity” in which the radical change of the space-time relation has made the “patterns of dependency and interaction” amongst institutions and individuals to lose shape and to become malleable, while at the same time, though being continually reshaped, not maintaining “their shape for long”.¹² What Bauman noted at the beginning of the twenty-first century about the disengagement of institutions from individuals in society are aspects being felt throughout the globe as globalisation has come with sweeping changes in social life.¹³

However, Arjun Appadurai suffuses the twenty-first century with mediascapes, which make up a vast cultural palette of narratives based on real-life images and produced by mass media.¹⁴ Appadurai deems that such narratives are incentives for real-life changes, or seeds of imagination for “acquisition and movement”, and that the effect of this imagination

⁴ Ibid., 370–1.

⁵ Ibid., 389.

⁶ Ibid., 390.

⁷ Arthur Oncken Lovejoy, *The great chain of being. A study of the history of an idea* (With an Introduction by Peter J. Stanlis) (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2011), 3.

⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 396–7.

⁹ OED | Oxford English Dictionary.
https://www.oed.com/dictionary/ideology_n?tab=meaning_and_use#907373. Accessed: 16 August 2023.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air. The Experience of Modernity* (Baskerville: Penguin Books, [1982] 1988), 348.

¹² Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Malden, MA, USA: Polity, 2000), 6–8.

¹³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization. The Human Consequences* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, [1998] 2005), 45–54.

¹⁴ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* [Chapter 2, 1990] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 35–6.

on those looking for ways to settle in other places in the world is to spur fantasy and volition.¹⁵ People following such an impetus would succumb to motives impinging them to leave their place of origin and heritage. Unless such motives are war-determined, political, economic, social, religious, historical, ideological, and unless they force the people to look for protection elsewhere, such people might be ontologically driven¹⁶ in their search for other places to live in. They would generally be called migrants.¹⁷ However, there are also displaced people who are driven out of their original environment by external forces. They are called refugees.¹⁸ Citing the rising number of refugees under the care of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees from 2 million in 1975 to 27 million in 1995, Zygmunt Bauman stresses that the destination of such “forced emigrants” “is somebody else’s choice”:

If they do not move, it is often the site that is pulled from under their feet, so it feels like being on the move anyway. If they take to the roads, then their destination, more often than not, is of somebody else’s choice; it is seldom enjoyable, and its enjoyability is not what it has been chosen for. They might occupy a highly unprepossessing site which they would gladly leave behind – but they have nowhere else to go, since nowhere else they are likely to be welcomed and allowed to put up a tent.¹⁹

Such changed lives of displaced people are depicted in Maggie Butt’s poems in the sequence “Torn” of her 2021 collection of poems *everlove*.²⁰ The poems are inspired by Mary Behrens’s collection of photographs “Run”. The photographs represent ethnoscares²¹ of displaced people²² taken from various media sources (the internet, history books, etc.) and processed by using a technique of distortion and reassembling.²³ Hence, the poems are thoroughly impregnated with ethnoscares inspired from mediascares. The forms which the poet has chosen to make recourse to in order to put her poetic vision of the displaced people

15 Ibid.

16 Constantin Noica, *Şase maladii ale spiritului contemporan* (Bucureşti: Humanitas, 1997), 11–12.

Note: Constantin Noica sees man’s incapability to find determinations—which nevertheless include those related to a particular place and time—as an ontological attitude in life and defines it as a malady of the spirit. Since the malady manifests itself by making people incapable of finding determinations, Noica names it *horetitis* after the word “determination” or *horos* in Greek. For the English translation, see Constantin Noica, *Six Maladies of the Contemporary Spirit* (Translated by Alastair Ian Blyth) <https://www.amazon.com/Maladies-Contemporary-Spirit-Constantin-Noica/dp/1841022039>. Accessed: 16 August 2023.

17 UN | *Refugees and Migrants*. <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/>. “While there is no formal legal definition of an international migrant, most experts agree that an international migrant is someone who changes his or her country of usual residence, irrespective of the reason for migration or legal status.” <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/definitions>. Accessed: 14 May 2025.

18 UN | *Refugees and Migrants*. <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/>. “Refugees are persons who are outside their country of origin for reasons of feared persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or other circumstances that have seriously disturbed public order and, as a result, require international protection. The refugee definition can be found in the 1951 Convention and regional refugee instruments, as well as UNHCR’s Statute.” <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/definitions>. Accessed: 21 August 2023.

19 Bauman, *Globalization*, 86–7.

20 Maggie Butt, *everlove* (The London Magazine Editions, 2021), ISBN 978-1-5272-8623-8.

21 Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 33–4.

22 United Nations. <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/refugees>. At the end of 2021, the United Nations announced that “[t]here were 89.3 million people forcibly displaced world-wide”. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/refugees>. Accessed: 21 August 2023.

23 Maggie Butt, *everlove* (Online: MB MAGGIE BUTT, 2021), <https://www.maggiebutts.co.uk/poem-torn>. Accessed: 6 February 2023.

into poetry vary from a displaced person's monologue—to the poet's address to a displaced person—to an ekphrasis proper. The ekphrasis has been constructed similarly to the description of the bas-reliefs on Achilles's shield which Hephaistos wrought, that is, the images in the poems become dynamic by evoking the displaced people's tribulations, aspirations, and moves.²⁴ Narrations aside, the poems are endowed with the poet's lyrical perspective on encountering the displaced people in Behren's work.

The first poem in the sequence, "Torn", is terribly unsettling since it denotes the actual external force whose result is the displacement—

someone
 someone took your life
 your life and tore it down the middle
 down the middle then crossways into smaller
 smaller pieces as if it was a letter
 a letter from an unfaithful lover
 pieces flying to the wind.
 So now you know that the gods, the fates
 the fates, the gods
 care less for you than a scrap of paper
 a scrap of paper.
 And though you run about
 run about and catch them all
 all blowing and raining about you
 like ticker-tape
 tickertape
 you can't see how
 how you could begin
 begin to stick them together
 stick them together
 to make a life again.
 So you tuck them carefully
 carefully into your pocket and walk
 and walk
 and walk.²⁵

The hiccup-kind of word-repetition stresses the woe at facing a torn life. It suggests crying over the perceived loss. The poet's voice in the imagined dialogue with the displaced person is marked with these repetitions which sound as if being the displaced person's crying lamentations proper. Together, they double or intensify the image of the displaced person's sufferings. Furthermore, the displaced person's image is so evocative of the condition in which the displaced person finds themselves that it has managed to impress the poet up to imparting her voice in order to convey the feelings of desperation and despondency, and a

²⁴ Homer, *The Iliad* (New York: Chartwell Books, 2022), 267–71.

²⁵ Maggie Butt, "Torn", in *everlove* (The London Magazine Editions, 2021), ISBN 978-1-5272-8623-8, p. 9.

sense of emptiness, of vacuity, which is suggested by the seemingly endless repetition of the verb “walk” at the end of the poem.

In “Toil”, Maggie Butt shows how being a refugee is just a particular condition which justifies blaming external factors by showing that it implies shifting from a profession or specialist labour—

You used to work once.
In a bank perhaps, a school,
or on a building site.
Your work had name and status
in which you dressed every morning.
I am a carpenter, you’d say,
a mathematician, a housewife,
an HR consultant.²⁶

to something else—

Now your work is laying a bedsheet
on the floor, heaping it with the objects
you can’t bear to leave behind:
family photographs; letters; addresses;
a candle-holder your daughter made;
your favourite book; a change of clothes;
if you are lucky, some money
and jewellery, stuffed into a sock;
your phone; food which won’t moulder.
Your job is to tie this sheet
corner to corner, and carry it.
Your new work has a name too:
the one who seeks refuge
and is reviled.

The poem tells the reader that the work of art which inspired it reveals that the locals stereotype and despise the displaced person by calling him or her—

the one who seeks refuge
and is reviled.

The use of the word «revile» denotes abuse from the entourage. The poem also transmits that the displaced person reluctantly complies with the name given to him or her by the locals—

But you clothe yourself in it
because you have no other.

26 Maggie Butt, “Toil”, in *everlove* (The London Magazine Editions, 2021), ISBN 978-1-5272-8623-8, p. 10.

Such words support Bauman's affirmations, and attest that the displaced persons experienced their predicament as, to all intents and purposes, an external locus of control.

From a slightly different perspective, "Own" reiterates, in a dramatic monologue format, the main stances iterated in "Toil"—the refugee's displacement—

you belong
nowhere
certainly not here

the rude behaviour of the locals—

hurried on by their soldiers and police
who resent even their mud
sticking to your feet,

and the unavoidable condition—

You belong only to the land
of dogged determination
own the language of survival.²⁷

"Crush" is a depiction of throngs of people amassing into a vessel bound for a destination of immigration—

This ship is now. Its people cram at the rails
rails and hang from the ladders like mussels
mussels from a rope, roil in the seas beneath
beneath the ladders, waiting for a handhold.²⁸

The poem depicts the force of the people's imagining a future for themselves in spite of the ongoing hardship—

Each one with a breathing heart, a mind
a mind teeming with schemes. Each one
each one a soft machine of hope.

The effect of imagination on social life, as Appadurai has put it, is just as strongly marked in "Walk" as in "Crush"—

To put one foot before the other
towards an un-named abyss, following
the stream of people as if there was a leader

27 Maggie Butt, "Own", in *everlove* (The London Magazine Editions, 2021), ISBN 978-1-5272-8623-8, 14.

28 Maggie Butt, "Crush", in *everlove* (The London Magazine Editions, 2021), ISBN 978-1-5272-8623-8, 22.

at the front with a destination held
in her imagination like a display at a museum.²⁹

The force which determines Maggie Butt to compare the destination of the “walk” in the photograph with the vividness of “a display at a museum”, in spite of no-end-of-the-walk in sight, connects what the photograph suggests with the effect of mediascapes on people’s imagination.

A particular case of people displacement is Maggie Butt’s “Map”.³⁰ The ekphrasis of this poem comes from a multitude of mediascapes and ethnoscaes. Waves of people moving over the globe from time immemorial down to these days are metaphorically symbolised by isobars which “shift” from place to place. The narrative poem is so constructed as to be deciphered by the reader with the help of a whole lot of information previously stored from school lessons, or books, but mostly from mediascapes: newspapers, documentaries, films—particularly films:

Animated isobars swoop in from the sea, peppered with arrows
showing wind direction, shadows of clouds across the land, bands of
rain approaching from the west: our species blows out of Africa in all
directions, hunting the herds, seeking rich pasture; resting and tilling
the land until dust-storms of hunger or malice pick us up like houses
in a typhoon, bowl us onwards. We are driven into slavery, wandering
in the desert, weeping by the rivers of Babylon, in tears amid the alien
corn; we are Europeans spreading like contagion in oak ships and steel
superiority, herding thousands of Africans against the prevailing winds
to lands where they will harvest wealth for their owners; we are
American settlers lined up across the prairie, where a pistol-shot starts
us racing on horses, in wagons, to grab and stake and claim, pushing
the First Nation before us like a wave; we plough and plant for a few
generations until the wind carries away the soil and we are Oakies in
our piled-high trucks, faces turned hungerhard towards the setting sun;
we are the human debris of the hurricane of the second world war,
families with pushcarts and prams, trudging west; we are the kicked up
dust of all the wars since. So then, nothing new, people gusted into
piles like autumnleaves, the isobars shifting again, coming this way.

It is only in the last line that the reader gets the gist of the poem: that it is about how the people are “gusted into/ piles like autumnleaves”. The poem depicts a manifestation of force which has an external origin, and takes various forms. The poem shows in a coherent sequence of images the human drive through history and from one place or continent to another place or continent. The ontological drive which pushes people in search for a better life as migrants is rhetorically mixed with the condition of forcefully displaced people. The poet refrains from stereotyping either, but nevertheless she translates the fragility of human

29 Maggie Butt, “Walk”, in *everlove* (The London Magazine Editions, 2021), ISBN 978-1-5272-8623-8, 11.

30 Maggie Butt, “Map”, in *everlove* (The London Magazine Editions, 2021), ISBN 978-1-5272-8623-8, 13.

life, or how easily volition turns to submission in people. Both will and submission are well noted. The ontological drive moves people—

our species blows out of Africa in all
directions, hunting the herds, seeking rich pasture; resting and tilling
the land

or—

we are Europeans spreading like contagion in oak ships and steel
superiority, herding thousands of Africans against the prevailing winds
to lands where they will harvest wealth for their owners; we are
American settlers lined up across the prairie, where a pistol-shot starts
us racing on horses, in wagons, to grab and stake and claim, pushing
the First Nation before us like a wave; we plough and plant for a few
generations

or—

families with pushcarts and prams, trudging west.

However, the condition of the displaced in “Map” is not so much that of refugees proper as it is the condition of people forced to change their course in life by external loci of control—

dust-storms of hunger or malice pick us up like houses
in a typhoon, bowl us onwards

or “slavery”, or “wandering in the desert”, or—

we plough and plant for a few
generations until the wind carries away the soil and we are Oakies in
our piled-high trucks, faces turned hungerhard towards the setting sun;

or “we are the human debris of the hurricane of the second world war”, or—

we are the kicked up
dust of all the wars since.

Whereas the ontological drive in people moves them from place to place, there is a pervading obstinacy of a spiritual drive which comes from outside and forces the people towards other moves which they seem far less determined to make. The two kinds of forces are depicted in turn. The ontological drive moves the people into action; then the spiritual drive acts and forces the people into displacement as a result. It is as if the poet has an inkling that there is a power which acts irrespective of the human ontological drives. However, the name “spiritual drive” covers a multitude of external loci of control: climate changes,

political oppression and war, famine. It is in the metaphor of “isobars” that this spiritual stance hovers above human transfiguration. It is precisely in this counter-representation of displaced people, as a result of different kinds of historical, climatic, political, or economic twists, that the inadequacy of stereotyping the present-day hordes of displaced people is made obvious.

Turning from the ekphrasis to the ideology in these *everlove* poems, the reader has to ponder upon a number of things. Modernism determined Cleanth Brooks to say that modern poetry is difficult since the poem is no longer being openly presented to the reader. Instead, the reader is burdened with the responsibility of interpreting the poem. The poet is making use of “symbol rather than abstraction, of suggestion rather than explicit pronouncement, of metaphor rather than direct statement”.³¹ On the other hand, irrespective of the modernism movement as such, Brooks’s statement is in tune with the reader-response theory of the sixties, of which Wolfgang Iser has been one of the theorists.³² For Iser, interpretation of literary texts would produce a wide variety of meanings. Therefore, instead of asking what a text means he asks what the impact of a text is on readers and what responses it would elicit from the readers. Iser maintains that his hermeneutical approach stems from the existing premises of interpretation: the intention of the author, the message of the text, and the “value manifested in the harmonious reconciliation of textual ambiguities”—all of which “constituted the background to the theory of aesthetic response”, which is innate to the reception theory. However, the aesthetic response is brought about in the reader by imagination. Since the aesthetic response manifests as a virtual reality which is inexistent before the reading of the text, Iser devises it through an interface between the reader and the text, and an interface between the text and the context, since the literary text embeds elements taken from the “social, historical, cultural and literary systems that exist as referential fields outside the text”.³³ Iser writes that the elements taken from the reality to be modelled within a text make for a special disposition which differs from that found in reality and thus attracts attention to itself. Literature addresses whatever problems may exist between such elements. However, it is the reader who deciphers any such problems, and in doing so the “multifariousness” of life is evinced. This is the proof that literature is neither autonomous nor a representation of life as such.³⁴

On the other hand, when a reader appropriates a text, his or her conscience appropriates a variant of reality which eluded them before: “we are transported to a realm outside our bodily existence, having the illusion of leading another life. We are with and simultaneously outside ourselves, and we obviously enjoy such a doubling”.³⁵ This is the point at which Iser envisages the effect of reception theory on literary anthropology. Confronted with a makeshift reality, the reader comes to realise facets of himself or herself which were previously unknown to them. Iser believes that this is the reason why humans need fiction. People need to define themselves in relation to what is unknown to them: “ideas

31 Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn. Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (London: Dennis Dobson Ltd, [1949] 1960), 70–1.

32 *The Poetry Foundation*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms?category=213>. Accessed: 18 January 2023.

33 Wolfgang Iser, “Do I Write for an Audience?”, *PMLA*, Vol. 115, No. 3 (2000): 311. Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/463451>. Accessed: 29 November 2022.

34 *Ibid.*, 312.

35 *Ibid.*, 312–3.

can be brought forth in consciousness from an as yet unknowable state of affairs, indicating that the presence of the unknowable does not depend on any preceding experience”.³⁶ Ultimately, Iser avows that aesthetic response answers to the reason why readers imagine things when dealing only with written text, and that literary anthropology answers to the reason why people need to know not only themselves, but also something outside themselves.³⁷ With a similar meaning, Cleanth Brooks argues that poetry resists being explained by paraphrase or equated with rational statements: “The poem, if it be a true poem is a simulacrum of reality [. . .] by being an experience rather than any mere statement about experience or any mere abstraction from experience”.³⁸

Therefore, in interpreting Maggie Butt’s poems the first impact of the readers with the poems comes from the poet’s sensations expressed through ekphrasis. They are rhetorically charged with the poet’s ideology. This selection of poems written at the beginning of this century do manage to draw attention to the paradigm of human suffering in forced dislocation.

It is precisely in the distinction between the inner perspective of the people changing places that the condition of being a displaced person can be evaluated as a degrading condition and, as such, stereotyped. Indeed, Maggie Butt’s ekphrasis overwhelms the reader with suggestions of how refugees might be stereotyped in the way they are perceived by locals. The suggestions are not judgemental; they reveal a condition which is better avoided since it shows discouraging perspectives for displaced people. There is no judgement in differentiating people who are ontologically driven from those who are forcefully displaced. The images simply suffuse the reader with ideas about what the images depicted have instilled in the poet, and lead to an ideology of conduct towards displaced persons. The poet avows that her intention was “to ask readers to imaginatively inhabit the experience of the displaced person, (as I was able to do through Mary Behrens’ work) so as to regard them with humanity and kindness”.³⁹ Similar thoughtful vibes emanate from the artist Mary Behrens’s acknowledgement in *everlove*: “However intangible these experiences are for me, the series is an attempt at empathy with the plight of families and citizens who are on the run from some trauma and/or dislocation beyond their control”.⁴⁰

As far as stereotyping goes, *metanoia* or the “transformative change of heart”⁴¹ requires one to keep the mind permanently open to the new. With a spirit like that it should hardly be acceptable to subdue one’s mind to stereotypes. What stereotypes do is clutter the mind with behavioural mental funnels through which every passing mental vision and perception gets out in a form which instead of being as is, gets distorted. Such distortions may easily be associated with Mary Behrens on-purpose distortion of the series of photographs of refugees in “Run”.

³⁶ Ibid., 313.

³⁷ Ibid., 314.

³⁸ Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn*, 194.

³⁹ Note: The poet shared her idea with the author of the paper by electronic correspondence.

⁴⁰ Butt, *everlove*, 8.

⁴¹ Merriam-Webster Dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/metanoia>. Accessed: 21 August 2023.

Brian Docherty's ekphrastic poem "On a Clear Day"⁴² has been written by following Sean O'Brian's rules⁴³ for writing ekphrastic poems. The poem's subtitle "After Maureen Gallace, *Sandy Road*, 2003"⁴⁴ discloses the inspirational point of departure for creating the poem. In the poet's own words, the poem "was written on 16/4/2017, in Westcliffe, Colorado, in the home of my friends Doris and Mark Dembosky when I was visiting them. Doris showed me *The New Yorker* magazine of 7/4/2017, where I saw the Maureen Gallace painting, and sat down to draft the poem".⁴⁵

According to O'Brian's Rules, an ekphrastic poem, rather than being a literal description of a work of art, should view a picture as "part of a complete world", and refer, either directly or "from a different angle", to what "might happen" in the picture. The poem should express "the rules of the world" in the picture, that is, how "are the inhabitants to behave? How do they live? What is important? What is forbidden? What do they believe? In short, how does the place work?". Another step in making the ekphrastic poem is that the poet should "imagine the point of view of someone who lives in [the] picture-world", create a mesh of information thereof but with "no need [for the speaker in the poem] to explain", and with the speaker "likely to imply a good deal while appearing to talk about something else".⁴⁶ Indeed, all these markers have been implemented with gusto by Brian Docherty, who further explains: "Most of these are first person monologues where the person in the image addresses the reader. In 'On A Clear Day' it is possibly Doris speaking, or someone living in Sandy Road. This may be a place in Utah".⁴⁷

However, trying to analyse the poem from the viewpoint of the reader-response theory, it may be found that the poem inspires good-natured feelings as opposed to a sense of end-of-time immediacy. What is most interesting about the poem is the fact that—supposing that the reader has no inkling about "the rules" of making ekphrastic poetry—he or she finds that the poem allocates poetic space to convey ideas about the painting rather than to describe it as such—an observation which is in tune with "the rules".

Interpreting the poem is highly enhanced by the poet's making use of easily recognizable collocations and popular culture syntagms, all of which being hopefully able to lead to a "fusion of horizons" with the poet. The poem abounds in intertextuality, such as the references to the Internal Revenue Service;⁴⁸ the Grateful Dead's⁴⁹ song "The Golden Road

42 Brian Docherty, "On a Clear Day", in *London Grip Magazine* (Winter 2018). <https://londongrip.co.uk/2018/11/london-grip-new-poetry-winter-2018-9/#docherty>. Accessed: 20 January 2023.

43 Sean O'Brian, "The Rules".

Author's note: I have received this text from Brian Docherty, who described its author as follows: "Sean O'Brien is a leading British poet, playwright, novelist and critic. He is Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Newcastle. He told me he devised 'The Rules' in 1989, and he hadn't seen anything like it before". Brian Docherty says that it is his model in writing ekphrastic poems and that he has been writing ekphrastic poems since 1995.

44 *artnet*. <https://www.artnet.com/>. Artist: Maureen Gallace (American, born 1960), Title: Sandy road, 2002. Sandy road by Maureen Gallace on artnet. Accessed: 12 November 2022.

45 O'Brian, "The Rules".

46 Author's note: The poet shared his idea with the author of the paper by electronic correspondence.

47 Author's note: The poet shared his idea with the author of the paper by electronic correspondence.

48 *Internal Revenue Service*. <https://www.irs.gov/>. Accessed: 21 August 2023. Also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Internal_Revenue_Service. "The Internal Revenue Service is the revenue service for the United States federal government, which is responsible for collecting U.S. federal taxes and administering the Internal Revenue Code, the main body of the federal statutory tax law." Accessed: 21 August 2023.

(To Unlimited Devotion)⁵⁰ the “Resident Alien”⁵¹ television series, which has the same name as a comic book which was actually the inspiration for the series; the British television sitcom “Love Thy Neighbour”,⁵² which is also a collocation as well as a Scriptural commandment;⁵³ the collocation “white picket fence”,⁵⁴ the feature film “First Snow”,⁵⁵ or the poem The First Snowfall”.⁵⁶ The chances are that with such a plethora of intertextual references, the reader might be able to enlarge the horizon of means with which he or she is able to perceive an ideology hidden behind the poem.

The bottom line in the poem seems to be the very philosophy of life, as stated by the description of life on Earth as being like a road, or as being destined to get somewhere else: “This is not a road, it is a destination”. The poem defamiliarizes abbreviations of well-known and statusy organisations like the IRS—

Nobody knows, not even us or the IRS
how we got here, what we did to get here.

By looking at all the intertextual references, and also by looking back at the making of the poem by employing “the rules”, the poem does imply a certain ideology by merely putting it into the words of the speaker in the poem. Brian Docherty creates a symphonic decor for his ideology about what life is and what life should be. The very construction of the decor by employing intertextual references is a statement in itself. The poet refrains to instil any preconceptions into his reader; he leaves his reader to construe the meaning of the poem alone. Actually, Docherty has conceived a virtual image of his ideology by giving the reader a number of cues from which to derive a meaning. However, it is only by the last line that one can perceive an end to what has been stated in the beginning of the poem, namely, that life has also an end not just a beginning—

these mountains behind you are 40 miles away,
first snowfall might be sooner than you think.

49 Wikipedia. Grateful Dead was an American rock band. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grateful_Dead. Accessed: 21 August 2023.

50 Wikipedia. “Golden Road to Unlimited Devotion” — Grateful Dead song. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Golden_Road_\(1965%E2%80%93931973\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Golden_Road_(1965%E2%80%93931973)). Accessed: 10 August 2023.

51 Wikipedia. “Resident Alien” is an American science fiction mystery comedy-drama television series.” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resident_Alien_\(TV_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Resident_Alien_(TV_series)). Accessed: 21 August 2023.

52 Wikipedia. “Love Thy Neighbour” is a British television sitcom. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love_Thy_Neighbour_\(1972_TV_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love_Thy_Neighbour_(1972_TV_series)). Accessed: 21 August 2023.

53 BibleGateway. <https://www.biblegateway.com/>. “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” Matthew 22:39. <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2022%3A37-39&version=KJV>. Accessed: 21 August 2023.

54 Wikipedia. “Picket fence”, “Picket fences are particularly popular in the United States, with the white picket fence coming to symbolize the ideal middle-class suburban life.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Picket_fence. Accessed: 21 August 2023.

55 Wikipedia. “First Snow” is a 2006 thriller. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Snow_\(2006_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Snow_(2006_film)). Accessed: 21 August 2023.

⁵⁶ poets.org. “The First Snowfall” by James Russell Lowell (1819–1891). <https://poets.org/poem/first-snowfall>. Accessed: 21 August 2023.

The humanitarian ideology remains nevertheless a straight one: life must have a purpose (“a destination”) and in it people should refrain from making attachments (“be ready to barter”) instead of friends—

learn to love having folks round for meals.
So, are we friends forever? I truly hope so.

However, it seems that a parallel sense might emerge here and there. For example, Brian Docherty states that he does not understand the reference to “First Snow”, and adds that: “‘first snowfall’ in the last line is literal; Westcliffe has long, cold winters, and the mountains are the Sangre de Cristo Mountains”.⁵⁷ The reference to “Resident Aliens” made him notice that it “has a double meaning, aliens as from another planet, but ‘resident aliens’ are [also] non-US citizens living in the USA”.⁵⁸ Both these disclaimers show that the chances are that there might arise genuine interpretations from a reader-response viewpoint. Looking back at Wolfgang Iser’s theory regarding the confrontation with a makeshift reality, the literary anthropology, and the reader’s need to define himself or herself against something outside of himself or herself, different interpretations seem rather needful.

Pauline Kirk’s poem “Axe Head”⁵⁹ is a lyric composition about traumatic assumptions. Her poem “Axe Head” is tinged with worries about a climatic changed world. It is a euphemistic poetic stance on the ecosystem. Though not clearly belonging to Eco poetry since its message is rather implied than professed, the poem clothes the form of ekphrastic poetry. Delivered in free verse as a narrative monologue of the poetess herself, the poem commends the craftsmanship of ancient people in making implements such as the axe head found on a track on a hillside in Southern England and exposed for admiration.

Subtle references to the present-day way of living (“my car and supermarket”) connected to the otherwise humble appearance of the flint utensil (“With your subtle shades of grey, /your flaked, chipped edge”) transpose the reader from the present to the past and from a ready-made living style—

Put me in our cold, hostile History
without my car and supermarket,
and I would be lost, starving.

to the ability of making one’s own things. The transposition hints at a possible fearful future condition of humans in the case climate change shifts for the worse—

to ancestors we call
primitive, yet whose skills we may need
forty burning summers ahead.

⁵⁷ Author’s note: The poet shared his idea with the author of the paper by electronic correspondence.

⁵⁸ Author’s note: The poet shared his idea with the author of the paper by electronic correspondence.

⁵⁹ Pauline Kirk, “Axe Head”, in *Owlstone* (Thalia Press, 2002).

Pauline Kirk's poem "Kirkby Malham, North Yorkshire"⁶⁰ brings the idea of a peaceful mind sensed around a mediaeval church. Originating somewhere between the seventh and the nineteenth centuries, St Michael's Church in the village of Kirkby Malham in North Yorkshire,⁶¹ England is described in Pauline Kirk's poem as a point in space and time where for a few moments, as long as the poetess remained on the spot, there was a special kind of peace ("Here there is peace – /but not silence").

The remainder of the poem stresses that kind of peace by denoting particular noises sensed in the near vicinity of the church: the clock in the church tower, the "sigh" of the trees in the churchyard, the poet's steps on the "slabbed stone", little noisy moves and exchange of chirps made by swifts and jackdaws—

swifts
swirl in noisy delight, tying roof
to gable, to empty street.
Jackdaws twang in conversation.

Then, the vista expands towards the sides of the valley nearby, where cattle and sheep make their specific noises—

And in the distance
sheep bleat, while cattle
breathe along valley sides.

Even a plane is heard ("Across my skyline a plane /murmurs a trail"), and the poem returns to the church gate where wood stretches—

Leaning on an ancient gate
I hear the wood
stretch in afternoon heat.

The finale of the poem reaches a peak of exaltation by putting together movement, sound, and peace, only to accentuate the special kind of peace the poetess felt in the vicinity of the St Michael's Church in Kirkby Malham, North Yorkshire—

All is sound and movement –
and utter peace.

Pauline Kirk's ekphrasis is of the mediaeval church but instead of describing the physical, the palpable, the poet opted for an ephemeral, impalpable description since the sensations emanated by the mediaeval shrine she was not able to feel except in contrast with the surrounding sounds. The ideology in Pauline Kirk's poem is that there is a psychological, or perhaps a metaphysical, perception in us which transcends any kinds of sounds around us.

60 Pauline Kirk, "Kirkby Malham, North Yorkshire", in *The Poetry Church*, edited by Tony Reavill, Volume 25, (Winter-Easter, 2014).

61 *Wikipedia*. "St Michael's Church, Kirkby Malham". https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Michael%27s_Church,_Kirkby_Malham. Accessed: 17 August 2023.

Whether this is the peace acquired in deep prayer or by drawing near holy spots on the Earth remains to be deciphered, but the poem stands as a memento of such a kind of peace.

A different ideology has Pauline Kirk implied in the “Unattributed”,⁶² a poem inspired by a group of carved figures representing the entombment of Christ and entitled “Cappelletta del Santo Sepolcro”. The Cappelletta del Santo Sepolcro (the Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre) belongs to Chiesa Parrocchiale San Giuseppe Lavoratore (the Parish Church of St Joseph the Worker), a catholic church in the town of Desenzano Del Garda, Italy.⁶³ The website of the church provides us with the following description of the group of biblical figures: “Complex of eight figures, certainly attributable to the end of the sixteenth century, representing the dead Christ, the mangled Madonna supported by two pious women (Mary wife of Cleopas and Mary Magdalene), the Apostle John and Joseph of Arimathea”.⁶⁴

The poem describes the carved “figures of biblical persons” gathered round Christ—

Hands outstretched, shoulders bowed,
friends grieve round a corpse
living still in wood and paint.

The line “living still in wood and paint” suggests that the biblical theme of Christ’s entombment has continued over time right up to now, and then the poem reiterates this in a concentrated way suggesting at the same time the permanence of the relation between personal feelings and the biblical theme: “Tunic and hose dress a sorrow already /centuries old, yet that touches now”.

Immediately after that, as if stressing the aforementioned, there comes the poet’s awe at the condition of creating anonymously—

My modern mind requires signature,
ownership.

And again, the anonymous creator proper is reason for the poet’s wondering—

Who spent their nights
shaping faith, instead of tables?

And how could he file wood
fingernail thin, catch character
through ochre and vermilion?
And how could he not long

to be known, remembered?

62 Pauline Kirk, “Unattributed”, in *The Poetry Church*, Volume 16 (Autumn Christmas 2011), ISBN 978-0-9561802-5-4.

63 Chiesa Parrocchiale San Giuseppe Lavoratore, Catholic church, Via Giuseppe Garibaldi 1 – 25015 Desenzano Del Garda. <https://capolaterra.it/storia/>. Accessed: 24 August 2023.

64 Ibid.

The ideology emanating from the poem is that works of art can endure and be much-admired irrespective of authoring them, and the ending line “My question hangs on silent air” reinforces it.

Margaret Wilmot’s poem “Self-Portrait as a Chechen Woman”,⁶⁵ though lyric in mood, comes out as a narrative poem. It is written in free verse and enjambment. The nexus resides in the ekphrasis of the poem—

Only a stretch of rug,
wide as the sea, and one canvas still
left tugging at the wall.

The poem hardly professes to “present” a work of art. However, with the ekphrasis having evolved and distanced itself from its source in the eighteenth century’s Book of Homer’s Iliad in describing the shield of Achilles, Margaret Wilmot’s poem makes resorts to the image depicted on a work of art in order to convey a psychologically clothed assuaging for a female subject. Composed as a direct address to that female subject, the poem conceals from the reader the identity of the female subject—whether the poet, somebody else, or even the reader himself or herself—

Woman, lay down your fears – the worst
and worse have been

but this is a new day.
Look up – the window is a mirror

filled with sky, a beach sheared clean by tides
where canvas reigns. Birds call.

Let go into the wind.
Follow the swell – set sail.

The poem is even subtler. The reader cannot see whether the canvas is indeed a work of art, or just a stretch of beach on which someone’s imagination identifies a web of fears left by past traumatic experiences. However, there is a mention of an artist—

The artist paints heartbreak as if
she knew it well

but who the artist is remains uncertain.

The aporia is just a rhetorical means. All these unknowns in the poem aim at one purpose: to assuage. In the absence of a clear subject of the assuaging, of the reality of the image of a woman with a weapon in her hand—

65 Margaret Wilmot, “Self-Portrait as a Chechen Woman”, in *Poetry Salzburg Review* No. 36 (Winter 2020). <https://www.poetrysalzburg.com/psr-no36.htm>. Accessed: 28 December 2022.

A woman
with a Kalashnikov –

her weary face, human as war, tells us
Be off, there's nothing more to take

and even of the poet herself as the author of the assuaging message, the poem becomes extremely vivid. Actually, the assuaging is the poem.

CONCLUSION

Then again, is this ideology? It might be. The root of the poem, of such poems in general, seems to be a unit-idea, a seed—perhaps the size of a seed of mustard as in Matthew 17:20, “faith as a grain of mustard seed”⁶⁶—which the poet plants trustfully in his or her readers so as to make them think. Or, thought begets ideas, and ideas go back to how Wolfgang Iser sees the effect of reception theory on literary anthropology and, ultimately, to facets of the reader which he or she were unknown to before.

Each poet in this paper has tackled the subject matter of the poems with warm lyricism, feelings of compassion for human fellows, thorough recognition of the frailty of life, a thoughtful perspective on death, a strong desire for care and attention towards the other, and, above all, a most respectful tenor and consideration towards the reader.

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⁶⁶ BibleGateway (KJV).

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2017%3A20&version=KJV>. Accessed: 17 August 2023.

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