

# Ekphrasis as an Analytical Mode in Biography: Finding Vida Lahey's Romantic "Character"

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In 1958, Australian artist Vida Lahey (1882–1968) received the Medal of the British Empire for her services to art. The following year, the Queensland Art Gallery commissioned her to write the first history of Queensland art. By then, she had spent almost a lifetime studying, painting, teaching, and campaigning, accruing praise from activists, artists, and critics alike (MacAulay 11). She had personal and professional insights into a history she helped to shape as a dutiful public figure who was deeply conscious of her responsibilities as an ambassador for art. Lahey was only twenty, though, when she travelled to New Zealand in 1902. There, she joined Isabella Rose Brown, a relative by marriage, and proceeded by stagecoach on a sketching tour of the rugged Southern Alps (S. Lahey 141). Lahey's character was already sufficiently fashioned to identify those qualities that gave direction, strength, and energy to the emerging artist. Lahey created a memento of her trip, called *Souvenir of the West Coast*, which she sent to "Rose" to commemorate their adventure. *Souvenir* contains the first extant art that can be attributed to Lahey. There are twenty watercolors, many accompanied by selected poetry from Romantic poets: the American, John Whittier, features strongly; Wordsworth and Coleridge play cameo roles. The images are named and dated and extra detail is occasionally added as notes about what was eaten or experienced; there is also some dried and faded vegetation. More than a hundred and ten years old, the homemade binding of soft green cardboard is now coming apart. It is an object that tempts the biographer to imagine what it meant to Lahey and how, all these years later, her character may be better understood *through* this object.

What method, though, can be used to develop this source without it over-representing, or misrepresenting, the subject? How might biographers write a narrative that works with images generated by their subjects? What determines how far from the artefact a biographer may travel before historical credibility is lost? To what extent can it be claimed that this artefact is "art *as* fact" leading to a greater understanding of the young Lahey's qualities? Answers to such questions depend on the epistemological stance of the biographer.

Using the work of Roger Averill, this paper first sketches that epistemological terrain with the objective of highlighting the hybridity of

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biographical narrative: its highly variable combination of historical facts and literary imagination. This demonstrates that facts are heavily embedded in interpretations, and imagination can produce profound "truth effects" quite separate from fantasy. What both approaches

share, though, is an investment in constituting better-informed, insightful readers. In different ways, they transport readers into the subject's life, bring the subject into readers' lives, or bring the subject "to life." Biographies work persuasively upon readers, quickening their senses, engaging their emotions, and enlivening the facts.

Section two develops the argument that the hybridity of biographical narrative (the fluidity of fact and imagination) lends itself to ekphrasis as a biographical method. Ekphrasis engages textually with images created by a subject in ways that enable valuable and valid insights to the subject. Originally a mode of classical rhetoric, ekphrasis is a formal mode of persuasion, "its purpose . . . to invoke or animate the object and to persuade listeners or readers that they are *in its presence*" (Scott 1; emphasis added). Transportation of listeners into the object's "presence" makes biographical ekphrasis a method that animates narrative. Using Pieter Bruegel The Elder's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1558), the objective in section two is to become familiar with notational ekphrasis (text on imaginary art), actual ekphrasis (text about real paintings), and "reverse ekphrasis" (paintings on text). This section also demonstrates how ekphrasis and reverse ekphrasis "work" through cognitive poetics, bringing the reader and the subject into proximity through embodiment of the text.

The analysis of Bruegel's work is important because it so effectively highlights a *failure* in the ethics of representation, thus establishing the groundwork for section three. Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux suggests that the immediacy of painting in actual ekphrasis creates an experiential shift in the perception of time; she calls this a "portal" experience. The special feature of an ekphratic method in biography is that it consciously strives for this portal experience to generate presence, collapse time, encourage the reader's empathic imagination, and generate an embodied experience of the subject's lived reality via the narrative. Because there is no way to "prove" the same experience is generated, the veracity of this "portal" experience is at the heart of the representational ethics underpinning ekphratic narrative.

The ethical biographer's agenda is to remain as true as possible to the generation of shared features between what is known and what is imagined in a subject's experience. Adrienne Rich's poem *Mourning Picture* (1965), a poem on the painting of the same title by Edwin Romanzo Elmer (1890), is used as a counterpoint to Bruegel, to

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examine this imperative. The analysis aligns biographical ekphrasis with W. T. Mitchell's insistence on the social structure of ekphrasis in the field of representation as a "relationship of power/knowledge/desire" (180).

After seeking a metaphor for the mediating role of the ethical biographer, the final section puts an *ethical* ekphratic method into practice to generate insight to Lahey's character at the age of twenty. It applies the ekphratic method to a watercolor in *Souvenir* and examines Lahey's ekphrasis by proxy (her extracts from Whittier). Through ethical ekphrasis, then, I can argue for the Romantic nature of Lahey's character. I conclude with a reflection on the value of that exercise, because the use of ekphrasis is not without its drawbacks.

### **The Epistemological Terrain**

In 2001, Roger Averill nominated Bernard Crick as placeholder for the traditional biographer who is firmly anchored as authoritative parent of biographical narrative. Crick's approach—Averill calls it "externalist" (1)—is that of the objective empiricist who rejects speculative forays into the past, refraining, where humanly possible, from interpretive gestures. Appropriately, Averill does not fall into the trap of creating a dichotomy when he turns to the work of Michael Sheldon

to outline an “empathic” approach to biography. I say “appropriately” because the empathic approach to history is not alien to historians. In writing about scholarly biography, Susan Steggal notes that empathy, understood as “a positive caring interest” (24), was condoned by British historian Robin George Collingwood. After selecting and evaluating the evidence, Collingwood saw a role for what he called the “*a priori* imagination” used to form a “web of imaginative construction stretched between certain fixed points provided by the statements of [his] authorities” (Collingwood 242). This is not a fictitious flight of fancy; it is history constituted via an artefact or event from an identifiable context. Through *a priori* imagination, Collingwood suggests the historian may “re-enact” the subject’s thoughts. Since the 1970s, New Historicism has similarly privileged the anecdote, *because* it is subjective, as a method for imaginatively reconstructing history through testimony that “functions less as an explanatory illustration than as a disturbance, that which requires explanation, contextualization, interpretation” (Greenblatt, qtd. in Laden 2). New Historicists therefore create literary narratives about history that “persuade, and illuminate by way of rhetorical force” (Laden 7).

Such thinking underpins Averill’s understanding of Sheldon’s empathic biographical method. He notes that Sheldon “does not

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abandon the facts but rather makes a virtue of the author’s identification with the subject. . . . [T]he whole project is an act of sympathetic imagination” (2). Though Averill does not mention it, Sheldon is in the company of Samuel Johnson who also believed that imagination plays a role in biographical method: “all joy or sorrow for the happiness or calamities of others is produced by an action of the imagination, that realises the event, no matter how fictitious, or approximates it however remote, by placing us for a time, in the condition of him whose fortune we contemplate; so that we feel, while the deception lasts, whatever motion would be excited by the same good or evil happening to ourselves” (qtd. in Rollyson 442). As Rollyson points out, Johnson accounts for the potential gap between “what really happened and what we imagine happened” (442). This “deception” should not be discounted. Reader reception theorist Wolfgang Iser effectively suggests this gap reveals that representation is an instrumental construction designed to impact readers. “Reality,” he says, “may be reproduced in the fictional text, but it is there in order to be outstripped. . . . The reality represented in the text is not meant to represent reality; it is a pointer to something which it is not although its function is to make that something conceivable” (qtd. in Laden 5). Averill reads Sheldon, then, as representative of an empathic approach to biography that is epistemologically committed to the ideas that identification can create knowledge, imagination can be deployed without being conflated with the unattainable real, and a literary approach is essential. An empathic biographer, he suggests, “is obliged” to create “a novelistic sense of character,” complete with motives (2). He therefore calls his own approach “biographical characterization.”

Like the externalist approach, biographical characterization values research. It is, however, deployed differently in that research becomes fodder for a full development of character. Unlike Sheldon, and Richard Holmes who seeks biographical “acts of ‘recognition and love’” (qtd. in Averill 30), Averill does not feel compelled to sympathize with a subject. His “refraction of the life lived” (28) combines three levels of interpretation: that of the subject in documentary evidence contextualized with a critical eye, that of the interpretations of the subject’s contemporaries, and finally, that of the interpretation of the interpretations that the literary biographer shapes (27). While he applies

imagination and, following Ricoeur, sees the biographical process as a mimesis of the way that we narrate ourselves to form coherence in life (27), this imagination is not hagiographic. It is, rather, an “empirical imagination . . . not flights of fancy or full-blooded fictions but interpretive extrapolations from what is factually known” (29).

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This outline demonstrates the unstable boundaries between historical, biographical, and literary writing. Many writers of history, biography, and literature draw (though unequally) on the persuasive powers of narrative, give the nod to empathy, and deploy imagination, variously besieged here by the qualifiers *a priori*, sympathetic or empirical. They seek human “truths” that accommodate what Collingwood called the “outside” and “inside” of human history: the factual, spatially, and temporally specific history and the intangibles that can only be encountered through “interior” reflection (213). The borders between outside and inside, literary characterization, and historical veracity ebb and flow in biography, making it a hybrid narrative; it demands critical and imaginative readers capable of functioning across those boundaries. It is this permeability of boundaries, and—boundary-crossing behavior in readers—that lends effectiveness to ekphrasis as a biographical method. Ekphrasis is narrative that imaginatively engages readers with images to produce valid insights into the subject as a fully developing character.

#### **Ekphrasis, Reverse Ekphrasis, and Cognitive Poetics**

The term *ekphrasis* is Greek and means, “to speak out” (Loizeaux 12); however, in classical rhetoric, *ekphrasis* means speaking out *persuasively*. Therefore, it “involves vivid descriptions of places, persons or things; its purpose is to invoke or animate the object and to *persuade* listeners or readers that they are in its presence” (Scott 1; emphasis added). Homer’s engagement with the image on Achilles’s shield, for example, draws listeners into the action: “And once they reached the perfect spot for attack, a watering place where all the herds collected, there they crouched, wrapped in glowing bronze. Detached from the ranks, two scouts took up their posts, the eyes of the army waiting to spot a convoy, the enemy’s flocks and crookhorned cattle coming. . . . Come they did, quickly, two shepherds behind them, playing their hearts out on their pipes—treachery never crossed their minds. But the soldiers saw them, rushed them, cut off at a stroke the herds of oxen and sleek sheep-flocks glistening silver-grey and killed the herdsmen too” (qtd. in Scott 3). Homer places the scenes on Achilles’s shield at center stage—the narrative action delivers the listener into the intersection of the everyday and the heroic. Ekphrasis pulls the auditor into the scene so that both depicted and listening humans are engaged in the attack. This is an example of “notational” ekphrasis (Hollander 4): the shield is a fictional representation. “Actual” ekphrasis, again Hollander’s term, engages with material art objects. Poets reflect upon real paintings to

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“share the emotional experience and content with someone who had never encountered the work in question. The student of ekphrasis was encouraged to lend their [sic] attention not only to the qualities immediately available in an object, but to make efforts to embody qualities beyond the physical aspects of the work they were observing” (Welsh). Whether ekphratic poetry engages with an imagined representation or an actual painting, ekphrasis has the potential to reconstitute the listener’s subjectivity in alignment with the poet’s values. Ekphrasis has a synecdochic function—it does the cultural work of reproducing values, thereby creating specific subjects. This is the hidden agenda of ekphrasis: to recreate an experience and establish

a connection that moves the reader to the poet's view. In biography, ekphrasis seeks to align reader and subject through the text in ways the biographer values. But *how* does ekphrasis actually *do* this? In part, this is the field of cognitive poetics: the study of the ways readers process literary texts. Following cognitive linguists, Peter Verdonk suggests cognitive poetics is not simply a matter of understanding language as a linguistic process. Cognitive poetics draws on language *and* other cognitive abilities. To "thinking" as a cognitive function, Verdonk adds, "experience, imagination, learning, memory, perception, attention, emotion, reasoning and problem-solving . . . [so that] cognitive linguistics is *thoroughly experiential*" (235; emphasis added). Language is constitutive and Verdonk therefore finds cognitive poetics useful for analyzing how the sense of being present is produced by the persuasive rhetoric of ekphrasis.

In reading a poem about a painting that represents a wild dance, Verdonk analyzes the language to discover how it creates his experience of "feeling drawn into" (239) artwork he sees only with his mind's eye. The repeated continuation of a sentence from one line of poetry to the next without pause (*enjambment*, from the French verb "to straddle") creates a breathlessness that Verdonk suggests is also experienced when dancing. This link is strengthened because it occurs repetitively and rhythmically whenever the dancers are described as turning. The language constructs effects for Verdonk that mimic the action of the painting, taking him into the dance the painting and poem represent. Communication and meaning are achieved by "a meeting of minds . . . to the extent that the contexts of the communicating parties come together" (237), even though reader, poet, and painter are all spatially and temporally distinct as subjects creating that meaning.

Elevation of the poetic text, in classical ekphrasis and in cognitive poetics as a linguistic engagement, can be extended to a different text/image relation. The great stained glass windows that translated

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Bible stories into symbol-laden images for the illiterate also had a constitutive function. Instead of the listener being drawn in, the observer is interpellated via context-rich reading codes—a visual and spatial semiotics that uses the cognitive processes Verdonk identifies ("experience, imagination, learning, memory, perception, attention, emotion, reasoning and problem-solving"). The foregrounding of an image, for example, makes it larger, more dominant; various colors have different emotional impacts, particular symbols of suffering or holiness carry meanings that play on spiritual metanarratives of salvation or hope.

In what has been tentatively dubbed "reverse ekphrasis?" (Hunt), the image becomes paramount. For this term to function less tentatively than Patrick Hunt's question mark suggests, reverse ekphrasis must exceed illustration: it too must work persuasively; it too must carry the symbolic work of cultural transmission where values constitute specific subjects. Hunt describes Pieter Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1558) as reverse ekphrasis.<sup>1</sup>

Bruegel takes Ovid's story of Icarus (*Metamorphoses* 8.183–235) as a "primary referent," but Hunt suggests, "the Flemish retelling is nonetheless filled with Bruegel's personal moralizing." Forgetting the warning of Daedalus (meaning cunningly or skillfully wrought) his father and the inventor of his wings, Icarus flew too close to the sun, melted the wax that held his feathers together and plunged into the ocean before his father's horrified eyes. In the lower right corner of Bruegel's painting, tiny legs are all that can be seen of Icarus; Daedalus is physically absent. Most of the painting represents a spring landscape with a large ploughman thoroughly dwarfing a shepherd

and a fisherman.

Fig. 1. Pieter Bruegel, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels.

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Even less visible is a partridge perched on a branch close to the legs of Icarus. In a reproduction, this is so easily missed that Hunt highlights it as an inset:

In Ovid, when the partridge witnessed the fall of Icarus, it “Chirpt joyful, and malicious seem’d to sing” (8.360). This is because it was once Daedalus’s nephew, Perdix (meaning partridge). He was transformed into a bird by Minerva to save him from death when his jealous Uncle Daedalus threw him from a tower because the boy was as clever in his inventions as his elder. This attempted murder of Perdix, the mortal turned into a bird by an immortal, was the very reason for the exile of Daedalus to the island from which he and Icarus later flew. In Ovid’s verse, the human characters witness the flights of both Icarus and Daedalus: “These, as the angler at the silent brook, / Or mountain-shepherd leaning on his crook, / Or gaping plowman, from the vale descries, / *Th ey stare, and view ‘em with religious eyes, / And strait conclude ‘em Gods*; since none, but they, / T hro’ their own azure skies cou’d find a way” (8. 329–34; emphasis added). If Ovid’s message is that mortals should not consider themselves as clever as the gods who, like Minerva, clearly *can* turn men into real birds, then Bruegel should be reiterating this witnessing of Daedalus’s punishment. Yet his witnesses have turned away and the “malicious” partridge is almost invisible despite being Ovid’s testament to the death of Icarus.

The witnessing, alongside the misrecognition of flying men as gods is vital, however, to the doubled punishment that Ovid’s ill-fated Icarus represents: the proud and foolish Icarus who cannot do as he is told perishes, but more importantly, in Ovid, his death punishes Daedalus, who truly suffers when Icarus dies: “The father, now no more a father, cries, / Ho Icarus! where are you? as he flies; / Where shall I seek my boy? he cries again, / And saw his feathers scatter’d on the main . / Then curs’d his art (8.351–56). Daedalus is punished for the attempted murder of his nephew *and* his attempt to change the natural order

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by imitating Minerva’s metamorphosis of mortal into bird. Without observation and misrecognition, without the witnessing of the fall of Icarus, which echoes the fall of the innocent Perdix, the warning to those who would be like Daedalus or Icarus is not really represented.

In the painting, therefore, the smallness of the partridge diminishes the punishment of Daedalus; the ploughman, fisherman, and shepherd endorse the distinction between men and gods, but they do so without awareness of the risk of death associated with flaunting it. What appears to matter most to Bruegel is not the importance of all this to Ovid, but the naturalizing of man’s labor in the landscape: the field is ploughed and life continues regardless of any bigger picture attributable to pagan gods. According to Hunt, it was Bruegel’s custom to use his art to make a commentary on Flemish proverbs—this time, he suggests, it is: “No plough stands still just because a man dies.”

If this is so, the reason for the ploughman’s domination of the scene becomes clearer, and it does so via what Verdonk would call the cognitive aspects of the work: those that encourage viewers to adopt the perspective offered by Bruegel. The light in the foreground of the painting, for example, works as a spotlight to draw the eye, literally highlighting the importance of the lowly things upon which the light falls: the ploughman, the sheep, some of the furrows, the

ground on which the ploughman walks. The ferocious sun, so central to the action of Ovid's narrative, becomes a diffused light in the background of the painting. The smallness of the partridge means it can be completely overlooked. Bruegel created his landscape through very different management of some of Ovid's key features. Even the mini-ekphrasis (text on image) that is the title of the painting, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, prioritizes the landscape and tags Icarus onto visual cues, thereby encouraging them to fall into place. A lot more can be, and has been, said about this painting, but the value of this analysis is that it shows reverse ekphrasis working through certain cognitive mechanisms in a similar way to the ekphrasis of the dance in Verdonk's work. The painting is interpreted by following the cognitive leads. The use of image size, perspective, position, and light produce an embodied viewing experience (leading of the eye, for example) that aligns first impressions with the relevant values of the proverb, not of Ovid. Since none of the characters witness the fall of Icarus and the partridge is almost invisible, neither the fate of Icarus—nor, to a greater extent, the punishment of Daedalus—is needed to remind people of their relationship to the land.

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### **The Ethical Dimension**

In biography, facts have had a performative power to decree the authoritative status of the narrative—even though, like statistics, they can be arranged interpretatively in ways that are far from valuefree. Using ekphrasis as a biographical method works to validate the non-fantastic imagination as an authoritative, experiential means of bringing subject and reader into one another's presence. The mismatch between Bruegel and Ovid introduces a crucial ethical dimension for biographers who deploy ekphrasis. Does the poet (in ekphrasis), the painter (in reverse ekphrasis) or the biographer (in imaginative nonfiction) remain true to the subject? Is it even possible for the poet or art historian to give voice to an image (prosopopoeia) or for the biographer to use narrative to envoice a subject without, like Bruegel, recruiting the subject to a different perspective? Does the biographer's unconscious (the "auto" element in all biography) inevitably sidetrack, misinterpret, or even insidiously misrepresent the "bio," the facts of a life, when writing? Was Thoreau correct when he insisted, "There is no biography, only autobiography"? (qtd. in Wells-Krause 291).

Stephen Cheeke suggests that "writing for art exists and thrives under the knowledge of failure" (2). Yet, one might see the entire discipline of art history as founded on prose that is actually ekphrasis working through biographical understandings and examining the cognitive poetics of how meanings are produced (163–86). While an image will never actually speak, the forward movement of narrative and language nevertheless articulates the image both in the sense of linking to it and describing it. This occurs across the temporal gap between artist and viewer. In her examination of twentieth-century poetry and the visual arts, Loizeaux is less reserved than Cheeke about the "failure" of writing for art. In fact, she suggests the immediacy of painting and sculpture creates an experiential shift in the perception of time: "The work of art makes the past present and immediate. . . . The presence of the work of art, made in the past and perhaps depicting the past, opens a space in which present and past co-exist. . . . The work of art can function as a portal and as a place of contact" (21). Presence and embodiment, in other words, are delivered through collapsing the sense of linear time via ekphrasis. A portal experience facilitates the identification and the empathy underpinning the belief that ethical prosopopoeia is possible. When speaking of poetry envoicing an image, Loizeaux refers to the line "I am Effie"

in Adrienne Rich's poem *Mourning Picture* (1965), a poem on the painting of the same title by Edwin Romanzo Elmer (1890). A closer  
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look at the painting and the poem enables some analysis of the ethical "envoicing" of a painting, or a biographical subject.

Fig. 2. Edwin R. Elmer. *Mourning Picture*. 1890. Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, MA.

Effie was the name of Elmer's dead daughter. As a grieving father, Elmer painted her in the foreground, just as Bruegel painted the ploughman. Her image is larger than the parents' lives that are diminished by Effie's death; their forms disappear into the shadows. Given the title of the painting and the biographical details, it is safe to read this domination of the image as a projection of mourning: Effie filled Elmer's thoughts and re-materialized through the art. In the stillness of the image, she is caught forever at the age of her death. She remains silent and distant, unable to be with them just as they seem anchored to the place where she once played with her pets and toys. They can only sit and remember. In 1965, Rich wrote her poem: "Mourning Picture"

They have carried the mahogany chair and the cane rocker  
out under the lilac bush,  
and my father and mother darkly sit there, in black clothes.  
Our clapboard house stands fast on its hill,  
my doll lies in her wicker pram  
gazing at western Massachusetts.  
This was our world.

I could remake each shaft of grass

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feeling its rasp on my fingers, draw out the map of every  
lilac leaf  
or the net of vines on my father's  
grief-tranced hand.  
Out of my head, half-bursting,  
still filling, the dream condenses—  
shadows, crystals, ceilings, meadows, globe of dew.  
Under the dull green of the lilacs, out in the light  
carving each spoke of the pram, the turned porch-pillars,  
under high early-summer clouds,  
I am Effie, visible and invisible,  
remembering and remembered.  
They will move from the house,  
give the toys and pets away.  
Mute and rigid with loss my mother  
will ride the train to Baptist Corner,  
the silk-spool will run bare.  
I tell you, the thread that bound us lies  
faint as a web in the dew.  
Should I make you, world, again,  
could I give back the leaf its skeleton, the air  
its early-summer cloud, the house  
its noonday presence, shadowless,  
and leave this out? I am Effie, you were my dream.  
Like Homer, Rich has stepped away from the narrative. Homer focused  
on everyday details and movements to represent the soldiers,  
"crouched, wrapped in glowing bronze," scouts "waiting to spot a  
convoy" and shepherds, "playing their hearts out on their pipes"  
(qtd. in Scott 3). Similarly, Rich's description is grounded in material  
reality rather than the poet's persona. It is not simply a chair; it  
is a mahogany chair, not simply a rocker, but a cane rocker, not any

old bush, but the lilac bush, and not just a house, but the “clapboard house” standing “fast on its hill” possessing it (4). The title of the poem and the black clothes suggest grief; as in the painting, Effie is a powerful presence. Here though, that presence is evoked through the personal pronouns “my” and “our,” through her ownership of the pram, the parents, and the material world they all share. Taken together, this all constitutes “western Massachusetts.” The mourning could easily be for someone other than Effie, at least until the point

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where she (rather than the poet) shifts the perspective to the past: “This *was* our world.” (7, emphasis added).

From that statement onwards, the materiality starts to fade and the spiritual dimension Effie occupies is signified by the fragility of the material from this new perspective: “each” separate blade of grass (8), “every” leaf on the lilac bush (10); words like “map” and “net” (10, 11) spawn tenuous filaments that anticipate the web-like “thread” that “bound” Effie (26), umbilicus-like, to her parents. The “grief-tranced hand” (12) of her father crosses another threshold: a movement away from visual imagery that, even at its most insubstantial, remains solid in comparison to trances, shadows, and dreams.

In the space Effie occupies at this point in the poem, she is the agent reaching for the world through her dreams, touching it with light—a light that, in the painting and poem alike, falls on those things that matter to Effie: the spokes of the pram, the turned porch pillars—representative of the gateway, perhaps, through which she has passed. The “high early-summer clouds” (18) are forms that mimic her own liminal status: condensing vapor into liquid (spirit into flesh), they seek the earth yet remain distant, “high,” ethereal. This *is* Effie: “visible and invisible” (19), spiritual, but tied by her mourning to the material realm; remembering subject and remembered object, active and passive, speaking, but dreading the approach of silence.

In the final stanza of the poem, Effie imagines events that are inevitable but not yet real: the world will move on, the house become empty and the toys will be given away. Through these future acts, “the silk-spool will run bare” (25) —the fragile link between living and dead will fade. “I tell you,” Effie insists “the thread that bound us / lies faint as a web in the dew” (26, 27). Even though she makes the world again, speaks it into being, “give[s] back” structure (“the leaf its skeleton”), form (“the air its early summer cloud”) and presence (“the house stands fast”) (29, 30, 4), she cannot restore that fading thread—the life force that animates the world. This changes everything: “I am Effie, you were my dream” (32) and, like a dream, the world fades even as she becomes a haunting memory.

Loizeaux suggests that ekphrasis is a process that is “inherently social” (5, 12) and that, in prosopopoeia, the voice of the poet is “objectified” and then “embodied” in the image (23). As a poet, Rich’s voice is detached from her and her social context and attributed to Effie. If the ekphrasis works well, the experience of linear time collapses as a result of identification and empathy (the inevitable “auto” in biography). Loizeaux’s portal has opened: 1890, 1965, and the instant of recognition produced by the reading of the poem merge into an embodied experience of common humanity outside time—just

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like Verdonk’s experience of the dance. In this extraordinary case, the experience is also potentially outside the constraints of the physical world because a spiritual dimension rushes in from Effie’s location beyond the grave. When Rich vacates her voice, Effie occupies it. “I am Effie,” “I am Effie,” “I tell you” (19, 32, 26): these are the clear, authoritative, active statements of identity in the poem. Such statements

re-anchor the narrative perspective. Readers are presented with the possibility that the soul mourns its disembodiment, just as those left behind lament its journey onwards. Effie's perspective is that of the agent, the dreamer of the world. Perhaps, what Rich and Effie share is that sense of standing behind materiality: for Effie, it is the world she haunts but no longer inhabits; for Rich, it is the poem she writes but does not occupy. Though not identically, they are both outside the frame. Within the bibliographic conventions, however, unable to sacrifice her representational privilege completely, Rich retains agency. Representation is unavoidably structured by the social realities of Rich's power as a poet. The social nature of ekphrasis, particularly through prosopopoeia, returns us to issues of power and accountability in the field of representation. A far cry from the simple formula of "speaking out," ekphrasis is, as W. T. Mitchell says, "the social structure of representation as an activity and a relationship of power/knowledge/desire—representation as something done to something, with something, by someone for someone" (180). This is an accurate description of the enduring privilege of all cultural producers as well as the source of the ethical imperative not to indulge in what Averill called "flights of fancy or full-blooded fictions" (29). What has Rich done with that privilege in terms of being "true" to Elmer's initial painting? Unlike Bruegel, Rich aligns her representation and Elmer's more thoroughly. Elmer and his wife are seen mourning their daughter's passing because Rich foregrounds Effie in her poem, which represents visually her position in the hearts of her parents, dominating them as she dominates Elmer's painting. Rich takes the wistful sadness of Effie's painted face and reproduces it in the elegiac tone of the poem; she replicates the title of the painting without reorienting it. Rich's contribution, via her ekphrasis, is to strengthen the metaphysical dimension showing Effie's soul tethered in the material world by its own yearning and by the grief of those left behind; she has done this without being unfaithful to or minimizing the parents' grief.

#### **Finding Vida's Romantic Character**

The question of whether the voice that animates the image remains true to the original subject seems to turn, then, upon how the voice

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becomes embodied and the ethics of the "fit" between the two representations. Bruegel mediates through ventriloquism: he creates the appearance that Ovid's message is delivered through the painting. The painting, however, is a corrupted "script." Rich, on the other hand, mediates through a rather troubling mediumship. She steps aside and vacates her voice, which is then occupied by Effie. Through the disembodied Rich, Effie speaks in ways that are true to the original painting by Elmer in terms of the cognitive processing of the image and the poem. Even the metaphysical dimension, which some may be tempted to reject, works in this poem because it is wedded to the metaphysical shifts explored in the content. But this is a limited metaphor through which to understand how ekphrasis, at its best, legitimately creates an embodied epiphany through the experience of collapsing linear time to create insight into an historical character. Not all ekphrasis can be about mourning or death or spirituality. Perhaps a metaphor that helps to communicate an ethical role for the mediator—the imaginative, empathic creator of ekphrasis—is that of the dramatic understudy. Initially, an understudy is not the subject, but a substitute waiting in the wings, watching the actor, learning the lines, mimicking voice and gestures. The understudy, whose authority and expertise comes from research and preparation for the role, is able to step into the place once occupied by the actor/subject. What is then created is another representation very like that which was first enacted but never identical to it. The performance is

upheld by the theatrical context; in a similar way, the experience of the imagined subject in a biography, accessed through a collapsing of time, is held in place though this time by the historical evidence working alongside an emotional truth-effect.

It is the work of ekphrasis as a biographical method, then, to produce empathy and identification in the reader for the subject envoiced in the text, “while the deception lasts,” (qtd. in Rollyson 442) as Samuel Johnson says of biography. This is not at all to suggest that a biography is able to be continuously ekphrastic. It needs only to produce ekphrastic moments to draw the reader closer to an understanding of a particular, informed enactment of the subject. At other times, other biographical methods emphasize biography as representation. This kind of ekphrasis, to borrow from Iser, “is a pointer to something which it is not[,] although its function is to make that something conceivable” (qtd. in Laden 5). A biography also therefore has moments of critical distance, but an ekphrastic method will enable readers to experience the subject outside the spatial and temporal limits of history through Loizeaux’s “portal” and simultaneously legitimate biographers in their role of well-prepared understudy for the subject.

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This returns the analysis to Collingwood’s description of the *a priori* imagination as a “web of imaginative construction stretched between certain fixed points” (242; emphasis added). I use ekphrasis to aim for the cognitive shift that is Loizeaux’s “portal” experience by examining a page of *Souvenir to the West Coast* in the context of the lesson in ethical representation from Bruegel and Rich. As Lahey’s understudy, I am going to create this “web of imaginative construction” by also incorporating the “certain fixed points” by which it is pinned (34; emphasis added). By using this image to create a prose ekphrasis, and analyzing Lahey’s ekphrastic use of Whittier, I can argue for the deeply Romantic nature of her character.

The image I address is positioned to the right of the page; underneath is the title *Looking down Otira Gorge* with the date tag “Thurs. Feb 6th” to the lower right. On the left of the page is an extract of five verses from the twenty-eight verses of *The Seeking of the Waterfall*, by John Whittier. The name of the poem is included above the extracted verses. On the lower left, a note says, “Menu. 2 half sandwiches, 1 piece of cake (small!) 1 biscuit! chocolate!” This page is one in a sequence of four or five watercolors (one painting is unnamed) in a second batch that takes the Otira region as its theme. Collectively, they make up almost half of the paintings in the *Souvenir*. These landscapes with no characters in them and no apparent narrative content are the earliest existing paintings by Lahey. These are the immediate facts that constitute the “fixed points,” though there are others in a more distant orbit that will become relevant. Here is the image:

Fig. 3. Vida Lahey. *Souvenir of the West Coast*. Personal Coll. of Valerie Frearson-Lane, Perth.

A prose ekphrasis needs to bring this painting to life—to give it immediacy—so a shared context is set up as a prelude to the development of identification and empathy as the grounds for a shared meaning. To achieve this, the ekphrasis must carry specific values so it, with the biographer’s interpretation that follows, aligns

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the reader with the values in the ekphrasis and, to remain ethical, in the painting. As prose ekphrasis indicates the biographer enters a literary register; this is important particularly since the age of the painting means it has faded, thus detracting from its visual immediacy. An art critic might also suggest the immaturity of Lahey’s early style makes the painting less engaging—therefore, the ekphrasis has to

rejuvenate the painting and render it, as well as Lahey's character, accessible without moving away from an accurate representation of it ("doing a Bruegel"). So my ekphrasis of Lahey's watercolor could run like this: *This painting is dominated by movement. Water surges from the lower left corner of the frame, tumbling and rushing away from the viewer positioned at water level, about to plunge into midstream from a rock-strewn bend of the river. Broken white water swirls and eddies, chopping the surface, hacking it into competing currents that jostle between solid, bush-covered banks. These jut bluntly into the flood, competing with it for dominance. Ultimately giving up ground to the power of the water, the earth through which it carves a passage nevertheless directs the river in ever narrower confines into the distance. There, it blurs into a single white torrent; there, in the distance the gorge is born—and lost. Dwarfed by the wall of a distant mountain range, river and gorge disappear. Above, hangs a pale sky, an afterthought against the drama of water, resistant earth, and immovable mountains. It is a landscape apparently without human presence, complete, unsullied.*

*Closer inspection, however, reveals, center-right, a shaky road bordered by a fragile post-and-rail fence. It slopes drunkenly towards the river, inviting disaster, and strengthening the ominous power of moving water that fills two thirds of the painting. This road also disappears from view around the buttressed bank from which it has been etched by the hands of men, now invisible but once determined to make their mark no matter how small. In the distance, a single white line follows the curve of the river, losing its identity as a road and becoming nothing more than a part of the landscape itself.*

This prose ekphrasis describes the painting to stress the immediacy of the landscape. It places the viewer close to the water. It creates narrative tension, firstly, by personifying elements of the landscape. One is agile and moves and is powerful; the second resists, is "blunt" and responds slowly; a third overwhelms them both. Secondly, verbs are assigned to those elements; and thirdly, water and earth are in opposition to one another as competitors in the shaping of a scene. The ekphrasis then introduces the road-builders. They and their tenuous work are minor elements, however, in comparison to the landscape. The road lurches along until it finally disappears, just as they have

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disappeared. For some who have stood next to such a stream and had similar thoughts, my prose ekphrasis may be sufficient as a portal through which they can identify with Lahey as the artist creating such a scene. For those without a resonating experience or sufficient imagination and identification, it will be insufficient, so the task of creating a portal must continue. The biographer's commentary therefore steps away from the moment of ekphrasis to identify the values at work in it and the painting. *What matters most in Vida's painting is not the little road but the power of nature. The road exists only to underline that power. There is, in other words, a Romantic impulse at work in Vida's early art. The power of the sublime is dominant but so, too, is the tenacity of humanity. The will of humans will not crumble in the face of the sublime, but it is forced to acknowledge, as does this painting, the smallness of the human being in the grander scheme of things—these are key Romantic themes, the values that the painting harbors and encourages the viewer to share.*

My prose ekphrasis and its interpretation are more immediate than the factual description that preceded them, though they are the immediate facts that constitute the "fixed points" by which the ekphrasis is pinned. The representation of the biographical subject is becoming more fleshed, but the creation of empathy, insight, and identification can still continue. Lahey's ekphrasis via Whittier as a

proxy can be used to build upon a reader's understanding of her. The poetry reinforces something that she values as worthy in the painting. Knowing how ekphrasis works, it is reasonable to suggest that in selecting poems, she has tried to capture something of the painting that, in its turn, captures her experience of standing at the water's edge admiring nature's grandeur. So, what do these verses tell us of Lahey? Here is another space for imagination, but without a "flight of fancy" so wide that it becomes incredible. In other words, here is another moment to tether the "empirical" "subjective" "a priori" imagination to reality by recalling some facts to create Collingwood's "web of imaginative construction stretched *between certain fixed points*" (Collingwood 242). Looking at Lahey's selection from Whittier's *The Seeking of the Waterfall*, it is clear that she has retained his first verse as her own: "They left their home of summer ease / Beneath the lowland's sheltering trees, / To seek, by ways unknown to all, / The promise of the waterfall" (1-4). Lahey's choice of verse establishes a quest, the leaving behind of the easy life. It is a textual echo of her trip across New Zealand's Southern Alps at a time when stagecoach was the only way of travelling most of the route between Christchurch and Greymouth. Leaving the "lowland's sheltering trees" (line 2) behind, Lahey and Brown leave the coastal plains to

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embark on their adventure. This was also an intensifying of Lahey's experiences as a young adult in Queensland. She lived on the coastal plains at Pimpama, but her sawmilling family pushed deep into the bush of the Gold Coast hinterland, into the waterfall-strewn valley of Canungra, and thick rainforests of the tableland of Tamborine Mountain. She would hike with other artists up the slopes of Tamborine to the family's two room "humpy" (S. Lahey 256, 266, 288).

This was the site of her artist's camps with *plein air* painting at time when going to "isolated places" was a new, unfeminine way to engage with art (Hoorn 27). Adventuring forth was not a new experience for Lahey, though with New Zealand's Southern Alps, she broke fresh ground. Little wonder that Whittier's poem appeals. In her copying of the poem, Lahey skips a verse after the first, one in which the quest is attributed to "a hunter's tale," (line 6) and turns instead to Whittier's description of the waterfall. The next two verses personify the waterfall and river in Otira Gorge: "Somewhere it laughed and sang; somewhere / Whirled in mad dance its misty hair; / But who had raised its veil, or seen / The rainbow skirts of that Undine? // They sought it where the mountain brook / Its swift way to the valley took; / Along the rugged slope they clomb, / Their guide a thread of sound and foam" (Whittier 9-16). Animated by voice, the "mad dance" of the water and the "misty hair" of the spray with the light shining through it creates the water's swirling "rainbow skirts." At the same time, the poem deepens the mystery of the waterfall's unavailability, affording it a mythical status through association with the Undine, a female water sprite. Lahey's selection of verse also compensates for the absence of people and narrative action in the painting.

Furthermore, these characters are eager to engage with their goal, full of determined agency. They are people with whom Lahey can identify because she was from a family of pioneers and entrepreneurs who opened up their own country and loved it well. Her father was on three Shire Councils, and it has been suggested that the township of Canungra in the Gold Coast hinterland "owes its very existence" to the Laheys (Curtis 17, 23). A family member travelled to America (could this be why Whittier is known and loved so well?) to bring back "the first imported geared engine to operate in Queensland" (Morgan 21). The combined family business spent £26,000 on tramway lines and £80,000 on roads containing 2,615 feet of bridgework (Morgan

11, 19). The challenge of a rugged environment was nothing new to Lahey herself.<sup>2</sup>

Whittier's poem goes into much greater detail about the actions of these seekers of the waterfall, but Lahey deletes six verses in which Whittier elaborates on the quest and the hikers' increasing difficulty

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in finding the waterfall. It is not enough for Lahey that she has painted the scene in which she stood and thought about the people who went, like her family did, that way before her. She wants to introduce something more through the poetry: "Each called to each: 'Lo here! Lo there! / Its white scarf flutters in the air!' / They climbed anew; the vision fled, / To beckon higher overhead" (41–44). Lahey uses the poem to envoice the characters she is imagining. The image of Whittier's hikers then searching in vain is increasingly dominant in Whittier: over the next two verses they seek with "faint and ever fainter hope" (46), the sound of the water retreats, and then the sun sets. They are not able to find their waterfall; Nature eludes their grasp. Lahey selects Whittier's fourteenth verse for the final one she copies into her *Souvenir*: "'Here ends our quest!' the seekers cried, / 'The brook and rumor both have lied! / The phantom of a waterfall / Has led us at its beck and call'" (53–56). The voices of the seekers infuse the painting with more Romanticism. In the poem as well as in the painting (where the road fades to nothingness), Nature has outdone the humans who have been "led" at its "beck and call" until they end their "quest." In Lahey's rendition of Whittier's poem, humans are, therefore, positioned as eternal seekers after the ideal; their direct experience of it, even the search for it, will refresh them. The verses Lahey selected from Whittier's canon act in dialogue with her painting to create for Lahey a personal Romantic response to Nature. The poem fills the gaps in the painting, not least of all by populating it. On this particular page, there is, however, a direct reference to Lahey's presence through that most material of human needs highlighted by exclamation marks, revealing her enjoyment of the moment: "2 half sandwiches, 1 piece of cake (small!) 1 biscuit! chocolate!" The fact that Lahey was accompanied by Brown on her tour across the Southern Alps introduces two humans at a very specific date, February 6th, in a very specific place, Otira Gorge. Humans are present, then, beyond the frame of the painting, in the title, because only people can do the "Looking" down Otira Gorge, fictionally in the poem, and materially on the page. Within the painting, humans are present through the visual metonymy of the road and its message is the same as that of the selected Romantic verses: the human being is small in the grander scheme of things; Nature should be appreciated in all its splendor and power.

Indeed, in the remaining fifteen verses of Whittier's poem, this is precisely his message: the waterfall has not been found, but "to seek is better than to gain" (81) and along the way the pleasure of the journey is its capacity to link humans to "the long note of the hermit thrush" (72) or the "broad meadows belted round with pines" (75)

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or "the turquoise lakes, the glimpse of pond" (73). All of this then becomes the metaphor for the highest of moral values, to "seek the loveliest and the best" (112) as "Nature cheats us into truth" (108), which is ultimately "the old delight of seeking good!" (116). Lahey's life was spent seeking good in what she knew best, art itself. Years later, she would refer to art as "the only international language—a language which knows no barrier of place or time, and by which spirit speaks to spirit, and century to century" (V. Lahey, *Art* 1). As a subject, Lahey has now emerged much more fully. It is clear

that her values, at twenty, were Romantic. She was a woman of ideals with a capacity to take action in ways that exceeded the stereotypes of the day. She valued a connection with the sublime and it informed her early work. If space permitted, an analysis of other texts and images in *Souvenir of the West Coast* would reveal that a religious sensibility accompanied the Romantic but did not eclipse it. They were complementary. That Lahey even sent her *Souvenir* to Brown speaks volumes for her capacity for affection and connection, loyalty and gratitude.

### Conclusion

The use of ekphrasis as a biographical method is not without its pitfalls. The most direct ekphrases need to be true to the images they represent, avoiding ventriloquism that hijacks the original representation; claims of mediumship need to be avoided because they collapse the constructed nature of all narrative into the metaphysical, removing its contingency; “portal” experiences can never be assumed: they can only be struggled towards; imagination needs to remain tethered to “certain fixed points” (Collingwood 242) if it is to remain credible.

On the other hand, there is significant potential for the ekphratic method, as outlined here, to generate an imaginative field around an artefact, whether visual in the form of a painting or a photograph, or a “fact.” It encourages identification of values, recognition that mimesis is never perfect and that the imaginative field is always a “deception” that acts as a “pointer” to the “conceivable.” In turn, that which is made conceivable in this way can remain rational and grounded without being strangled by empiricism. At its best, an ekphratic method can transport a reader into a space where time itself is temporarily suspended and people can be linked by their common experiences in ways that exceed the linearity of history to have a situation where, as Lahey herself says, “spirit speaks to spirit, and century to century” (V. Lahey, *Art* 1). The “auto” element of

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all biography is the empathy that a good biographer uses, without abusing imagination, when deploying ekphratic method.

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### Notes

1. The dispute about whether or not current versions of this painting are copies of originals by Bruegel is irrelevant here.
2. For further details on the importance of family to Lahey, see Lovell.

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