

‘The voice, made plaintive by distance...’ⁱ

‘O, the rain falls on my heavy locks
And the dew wets my skin,
My babe lies cold...’

The Lass of Aughrim

Visitors to Maeve Rendle’s installation *Gretta’s Gabriel, Gabriel’s Gretta*, 2014, find themselves sharing a room with two monitors of unequal size, each mounted on its own white plinth and facing away from the other. The footage playing on both screens is similar, but not identical, both featuring a close-up, locked off shot from an oblique angle of the back of the same young man’s head and left shoulder. Dressed casually and wearing a pair of earmuff headphones, it is immediately evident that in both instances he is engrossed in an activity that requires considerable concentration. His two filmed ‘performances’ turn out to be quite different, and of unequal length, though both involve a rendition of the same piece of music. This is the traditional Irish song *The Lass of Aughrim*, to which we see him listen attentively and repeatedly in silence for some time (this source soundtrack is inaudible to us) before eventually joining in. In one case (*Gretta’s Gabriel*) he whistles along with awkward caution, while in the other (*Gabriel’s Gretta*) he sings the lyrics with the voice of an accomplished tenor, though he fluffs and glosses over certain words and phrases. It is unclear whether this is due to lapses of memory or concentration, or on account of the indistinct quality of the recording he has been enjoined to replicate.

The generative structure of *Gretta’s Gabriel, Gabriel’s Gretta* is one familiar from Rendle’s work across a range of media, including live performance (e.g. *on summary in freedom*, 2014 ongoing), video (e.g. *Mabel*, 2013, *La Berma’s Voice*, 2008), photographic installation (e.g. *double and nothing*, 2012) and text pieces (*in the first, in the second, in the third*, 2014, a work also included in this exhibition, which is derived from the same literary source as *Gretta’s Gabriel, Gabriel’s Gretta*). Much of Rendle’s work is based on the same principle of setting in motion a systematic procedure that is either inherently susceptible to gradual entropic breakdown or deliberately forced in that direction. (The verb ‘unravel’ recurs frequently in her account of her practice.) On this occasion the clinical detachment suggested by such a conceptual premise is pitched against the emotional fervour of the originary material from which the work unwinds. *The Lass of Aughrim* is a version of a ballad of Scottish origin best known as *Lord Gregory*, which recounts the tragic death of a young woman and her illegitimate child and the grief of the aristocratic lover from whom she was cruelly kept apart. Crucially, the recording from which Rendle’s work derives is taken from a climactic scene in John Huston’s 1987 film adaptation of James Joyce’s classic short story ‘The Dead’, from his early collection *Dubliners*, 1914. Toward the end of the narrative the principal character, Gabriel Conroy, while preparing to leave his aunts’ annual Christmas party, is struck by the vision of his wife Gretta on the staircase as she listens enthralled to a party-guest singing this tragic song. In a flurry of self-regarding ardour, which has been mounting all evening, he misinterprets her rapture, only to discover later that it has nothing at all to do with their life together and is based rather on the memory of a doomed suitor from her youth.

It is this drama of self-absorption and misinterpretation that is amplified and iconised in Rendle’s work. Much has been made of the importance to Joyce’s early writing of his secularized conception of the originally sacred *epiphany*, by which he meant the sudden, unexpected manifestation of the essence of a subject, object, event or situation. The scene on

the staircase in 'The Dead', on the other hand, is one of all-too-human misrecognition as ironically opposed to divine revelation. Writing, more recently, of the epiphanic nature of the encounter with the Other, Emmanuel Lévinas has argued that it is precisely this encounter that affords the I access to Infinity. Yet while Lévinas insists on the intrinsically *face-to-face* nature of this engagement, Rendle's youthful tenor pointedly faces away from us, the viewers, toward a blank wall, just as the two plinth-mounted monitors face away from each other. Removed and unrecognisable, acoustically isolated by his headphones and visually obscured by his literal *volte-face*, he is presented to us as unknowable. He is an icon of solipsistic absorption and compromised communication.

For Joyce the longing for perfect communion with another is a delusional dream of mastery ('He longed to be master of her strange mood'). It leads to misunderstanding and ends, at best, in pathos. Already, in his story, the singer, one Bartell d'Arcy, 'seemed uncertain of his words and his voice' and this uncertainty is both disconcerting and contagious. Gretta's posture of rapt attention strikes her husband as significant, for instance, but of what exactly he is unsure: 'There was grace and mystery in her attitude as if she were a symbol of something.' Of course Rendle's point of departure for *Gretta's Gabriel, Gabriel's Gretta* is not Joyce's short story, but the secondary source that is Huston's adaptation of this story for the cinema. So, prior to Rendle's attentions this original moment of false revelation has already been refracted through the mediation of the myriad skills and subjectivities involved in the creation of a feature film, those of the director and principal actors in particular. (The film features Anjelica Huston and Donall McCann as Gretta and Gabriel, respectively.) The failings and illusions, the disconnections and misconceptions that are at the heart of Joyce's 'The Dead' resound and reverberate in Rendle's elaborate response to it. The faltering nature of the multiple interpretations of *The Lass of Aughrim* relayed to us by the artist's proxy serves to emphasise further the fallibility and alienation by which all human attempts at communication and aspirations to mutual comprehension have always been burdened.

Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, February 2015.

ⁱ Quoted from James Joyce's 'The Dead' in *Dubliners* (1914).

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