(A Facsimile of) Portrait in Amber Lettering on Wordprocessor

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I[1] am grateful on this day, the first anniversary of Emilie Wylie's death, for the opportunity to say a few words on her work and its significance. I hope you have already seen **Deus Ex Machina II**[2] and I hope you'll see it again after reading this. A picture is worth a thousand words normally, but no one has determined the exchange rate when words are being used to describe the picture.

No one could have predicted that Emilie Wylie would be artistically significant. After all, she was nearly fifty when her first "painting" was displayed. And it is important to stress that she expressed no early interest nor talent in Art, quashed later by the pursuit of marriage and children.

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[1] This is a transcript of an informal talk I gave at the Metropolitan in 2024. I have, with some reluctance, allowed it to be anthologized. In the interest of keeping the breezy style of the original, I've made only a few changes; so let the reader be aware when s/he encounters prejudices or sloppiness, that I used no notes at the time, and was unaware of the Museum's (new!) policy of videotaping all lectures given on its premises. Two caveats: first, details of whatever pangs of conscience I experienced concerning my prejudices and sloppiness may be found in the footnotes; second, I used slides during the talk and obviously referred to them. The text has been rewritten so that all such references have been replaced by descriptions.

[2] Hereafter "DEM II."

Why is it important to stress this? Well, the afficionado is aware of Susan H. Ronstadt's thesis (Ronstadt 2020) put forth in her unauthorized biography: **The two faces of Emilie**. What thesis? Well, simplifying slightly, she argued that the trauma of growing up under Patriarchy at a time when social forces were beginning to overthrow it was so great that Wylie (and many women of her generation) developed multiple personalities. In Wylie's case, Ronstadt argues, there were two personalities. One, the "yuppie house-wife," was a woman with no real interests and no real personality of her own. The other (the "real" one) was a driven, extremely creative artist with deep hostilities towards men and the society she lived in; the latter persona never expressed herself directly other than when the apparent motivations of the surface personality gave her an outlet. Ronstadt uses this to explain the supposed gap between Wylie's talents and her goals. For example, on the "pretext" of applying computers and robotics to housework, she mastered both the hardware and the programming skills that would "have enabled anyone else to undertake prestigious research." It is hard to see here what irritates Ronstadt so much. Surely she is as aware as I am that Dupont marketed many of Wylie's inventions, swelling the Wylie income greatly. This is not typical housewifely activity (although I must point out that it was amazing what that woman didn't have to do to entertain successfully).[3]

Admittedly, there is a problem here that Ronstadt has tried to solve. Wylie showed genius in the research and marketing of certain kinds of goods. But such personalities rarely are **artistically** creative. You might think it would help to note that both she and

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[3] Perhaps Ronstadt's irritation is due to her awareness that the marketing strategy for Wylie's invented household products was directed primarily at women. Well, that's true. Some things **have not** changed as quickly as we would have liked, but businesspersons are acutely aware there is no profit in being a prophet. I suspect it is precisely this that troubles Ronstadt: Wylie's frank capacity to make money with such an individual's typical lack of concern for the "larger" social issues.

Anyway, I can't resist a last polemical point: the MPD literature strongly suggests that the trauma necessary to cause a child to develop a split personality is far beyond anything that Wylie could have experienced. I resist the impulse to cite sources.

her husband were frequent purchasers of the then contemporary art. But her understanding of it lay under something of a cloud since it was common knowledge that she always took threads from curtains, rugs, or other items in her home, to make sure that the candidate for purchase would fit snugly with her decor.[4]

Well, let's leave the "problem" aside for the time being. Since Wylie's husband played a role in DEM II, I won't put off any longer the observation that he was a canny inventor (too) who (also) had made sure he controlled a large share of the profits his work yielded. Dupont apparently got enough out of the both of them not to complain. The point is that they were rich, and at that time rich people who were interested in Art had clout there.[5] In this case the clout was strong enough that when Emilie Wylie completed something, not only was it displayed in a prominent gallery, but everyone knew about it and made sure to see it (once). **Deus Ex Machina** was a grossly amateurish (and incomplete) self-portrait done in oil with an axe (from Sears) embedded in its center. It looked as if someone who knew how to handle axes had, perhaps in rage, thrown the axe at the portrait. In fact, I can't remember any contemporary remarks on the painting **except for** jokes to the effect that her husband probably had done the most creative work on it.

Wylie's art career **really** began (and ended too!) when her representation DEM II was introduced in the same gallery in the summer of 1992. Let me try to give you a sense of what those significant few who saw DEM II "saw." The work was about eight feet high and seven feet wide, and curved enough towards the top that the viewer had to most

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[4] Eli Hauseman was quite piqued when he learned that a particular thread she was laying against his masterpiece for color comparison came from a toilet seat cover. But the purchase offer was so generous that he didn't complain further (at least in front of them).

[5] That changed after it became common practice to sell **shares** in a work. In my day, art connoisseurs and museums **owned** the works they exhibited.

uncomfortably crane his/her neck if s/he wanted to be close enough to see the details towards the top. To the side (as was customary) was a short description of the piece:

> The surface of **Deus Ex Machina II** is made from a newly developed light sensitive plastic which takes on permanently the complement of the light spectrum it is initially exposed to. The images, etched by laser technology similar to that currently being used in brain surgery, were computer assisted.

That was it. The sensitive viewer was forced to puzzle the rest out for him/herself. Not at all easy since this was the first of what subsequently came to be called **Perspective Sensitive Art**.

It is best if I now indulge temporarily in a bit of autobiography and describe what I saw. As I approached the representation, a cellophane sheen on the surface presented itself to my eye. This forced me to shift my position until something came into focus. No big thrill. What I saw was a photorealist (I barely suppressed a yawn) depiction of the NY skyline. The need to crane my neck to see the skyscrapers reaching up into the sky above caused a kinesthetic touch of reality which I regarded as cute, but superficial. Apart from that, the photorealism was computer assisted, and altogether I was prepared to give her a dull sort of credit for her honesty and nothing more. In addition I was irritated, for I like to shift position when viewing a representation, stepping backwards or

to the side in order to take in a detail. But this work would go alarmingly out of focus whenever I did so.[6]

The breakthrough was fast: I was puzzled by a collection — that really is the word — a collection of clouds in the middle of the sky. They were fuzzy, but not in the ways clouds usually are, for they were out of focus. Staring at the blur, I instinctively moved in such a way as to bring it into focus.

What a shock! I now saw an entirely different picture. The skyscrapers were still there but they jutted up into a surreal sky that looked like stained glass.[7] And instead of fuzzy clouds, I was looking up at something crashing through the glass sky over me: a somewhat deformed and hairy elbow. Surrounding it was the spray of the stained glass it had shattered and a jagged hole revealing —

Nothing actually. The spray of broken glass, and the elbow itself, were in the way.

As you might expect, this work was not slow to gain a kind of short-lived attention, and naturally, the attention was of the ideological sort. First, there were the usual atavistic

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[6] And in a most strange way. It would start to look like a three dimensional product: two layers of plastic with the figures on the top one superimposed on the bottom one — the sort of novelty item **writ large** that one used to get in a package of gum. You know the sort of thing: a baseball player, perhaps, who would swing his bat and roll his eyes if you moved the card he lived on.

[7] Many critics have commented on the change in light. The photorealist perspective is bright and sunny, the source of the light obviously coming from behind the out-of-focus clouds. However, the surreal perspective has a twilight lighting, the source of which is the stained glass sky itself! I should add that it is quite common in the literature to describe the phenomenon here as a “gestalt shift.” **This is a mistake**, as gestalt shifts are **not** dependent on the viewer moving his/her position.

claims that this was computer-generated and therefore not art.[8] Similar to this was the claim that if anyone deserved credit, it was her husband, who, it turns out, had developed the particular plastic so crucial to the work.[9] The initial responses to these complaints were not intelligent. Instead of pointing out, as I did later, that it is a deep misnomer to call the work computer-generated, that in fact, the work exploits the techniques at her disposal in the same rich way as painters and sculptors had exploited the development of new chemicals and materials throughout the ninteteenth and twentieth centuries, some opponents took the line that the attack was a chauvinistic one motivated by the content.[10] Whenever asked about these matters, Wylie would say coyly, "they haven't even scratched the surface."

There was yet another area of controversy.[11] The work was not sold. It couldn't be. Wylie insisted that she would only **rent it**. Everyone here can imagine the hostility that

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[8] Reagan 1992, Putnam 1992, Sonnenburg 1993, etcetera. In all fairness, everyone knew what she was capable of with brush and paint. She confessed to me years later that she was never able to do much artistically the traditional way. "But," she said, using one of those peculiar analogies to mathematics that she loved, and I rarely understood, "I can't add on my fingers either."

[9] Meese 1992, Cuttenlemmen 1992, Dicklestein 1992, etcetera. No response is necessary. Let me add here instead that she once claimed that the sole purpose of the work was to convince Dupont that the plastic was marketable. If that is true then she failed. The Art World was so uniformly hostile to her work that it was nearly twenty years before another artist took her approach as paradigmatic.

[10] What content exactly? Well, the interpretation (by Edel & Stumpf 1993 for example) was that lurking underneath the bright sunlight was Patriarchy — **but** a dying Patriarchy. To this (admittedly caricatured) summary I can do no better than respond as Harris 2000 did: that just because an elbow is monstrous and hairy **does not mean** that it is a male elbow. Admittedly, as Edel 2003 points out, the representation does have theological overtones and surely God is traditionally a **male** figure.

[11] Two areas actually. I'll discuss the second one here: a debate broke out over what kind of Art this was. Not painting, it was forcefully argued. Not sculpture, not etcetera. Never completely resolved, I like to think of DEM II as **sui generis**. And in more ways than one. As I mentioned, it was nearly twenty years before Dupont could successfully market the plastic. Although some new work now exists in this genre, lack of an oral tradition here has retarded development. This is, in my opinion, the fault of the initial and insensitive response to DEM II which, no doubt, killed Wylie's enthusiasm (she never did anything else artistically).

suggestion aroused. Although more common now, the practice is still controversial.[12]

Well, after the initial enthusiasm for polemic faded, the work receded into obscurity. It remained on display, through sheer financial pressure probably, for years, but it is to the credit of Sean Penn, whose name is known to everyone here, I'm sure, that the second stage of Wylie scholarship was launched. The arm in DEM II is gashed and bleeding slightly. Looking at the wound closely, Penn noticed peculiar deformities in the exposed skin around it. Technically it is difficult to magnify the area without losing focus, but Penn overcame that and recognized that the deformities were symptoms of parasites.[13] He published a small paper on the matter (Penn 1997) and then went to work magnifying the area further. He discovered that the work is visually composed of tiny microdot paintings laid out like stamps. The principle is familiar enough to anyone who has worn a sweater. Giving at a distance the impression of brown, up close a sweater may turn out to be a multicolored product. Which paintings were laid out like stamps? Well, **all of them**.[14]

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[12] At one time it was possible to sell oneself into indentured servitude, although now we find such an idea so repugnant that it is illegal. We are aware that people, in severe enough straits, will do anything and we must prevent them from inflicting upon themselves such injustice. In a similar way, people are becoming aware that it should be illegal for an artist to be able to alienate his/her creative products. Renting the use of one's creative products (be it a painting or a play) is one thing, selling them outright is another. Of course, there are deeply entrenched interests both in the art world and at large fighting the new thinking. But there were deeply entrenched interests supporting indentured servitude too.

[13] In particular, **Dracunculus medinensis**. I confess I don't know what to make of this thematically. But no one else does either.

[14] The matter is actually a little more complicated. There are apparent Picassos, the originals of which no one seems to be able to locate. Wylie and her husband, as I have mentioned, were very well connected in the Art World, and they may have been privy to work that is not generally available. But a consensus is beginning to form around the idea that she just designed some of them herself. This raises an interesting issue. In the last ten years, counterfeits and forgeries have come into their own as commodities (although their market value still lags behind original work by famous living artists, they have an edge in that they are still within the financial reach of individuals), and there is some desire to keep the classifications clear. DEM II points towards a time when this may not be so easy.

There are also two dimensional reproductions of sculpture and some ornamental art among the microdots, as well as a number of posters. One of Jimi Hendricks, for example. Notably, nothing of Judy Chicago's is there.

As can be imagined, this gave rise to more criticism, in particular, the accusation that DEM II is not Art. It is surprising, from this vantage point, that such a claim could have been taken seriously, but let me quote from an article of the time (Harris 2000) just to give the flavor of the polemical atmosphere.

> ... [O]ne cannot help but consider the possibility that the desire to exclude **Deus Ex Machina II** from the company of the **Mona Lisa** is due entirely to the fact that the kind of work involved in making it **is too hard**. There have been many sneers about Wylie's "artistic" abilities, but in fact, the techniques she utilized are not easy to master **at all**. She is using new materials, and surely it is traditional for great art to expropriate new materials and make them articulate; she doesn't use brush or pen, rather a computer — but that too is merely a **tool** waiting for the right mind to make it creative. What we are witnessing here is **fear**, fear on the part of the critics used to technically insignificant work, that evaluation will be hard, fear on the part of the artists that the work is **beyond** them. Well, so it will be, and so it is, and that is all to the good. I, at least, am tired of artists who think that a dead dog rotting in a plastic bag should be taken seriously, who line up a row of bricks and marvel at their own conceptual breakthroughs, or who do obscene things with sweet potatoes and expect accolades. An artist's work, at least when looked at over time, should be **hard** to do. It should take talent and not merely a taste for tack.

Harris certainly sounds angry, doesn't he? But he couldn't handle the hard cases, the careful critics who pointed out that surely it is peculiar to call a work of art something the majority of which is invisible to the naked eye.

In response, Harris invoked the notion of **transcendence**. Harris argued that there is built into the work a kind of Borgesian infinite regress. Of course, a copy of DEM II is among the reproductions (the last microdot in the extreme right hand lower corner) and

he argued on thematic grounds that it too would be composed of the canon. But this turned out not to be.[15] Rather, further enlargement revealed tiny solid dots.[16]

Harris worked hard to press the claim that transcendence is the theme of DEM II.[17] Perhaps he is right, but Wylie certainly never gave any signs of such concerns. Whenever I had occasion to ask her about the reason for a particular image, she would explain its presence in terms of the technical constraints of the plastic, the programming, and the goal of having, as it were, three representations in one. "Once the pa-

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[15] As I predicted. I have dealt with this matter elsewhere so let me just summarize my conclusions here. Literature is the most unrepentently theological art form and this is because it is the least anchored in technological development. Consequently, the notion of **possibility** expressed by literature is wider than that of any other art form. In this sense it is the **least real**. By way of example, I note that there is one and only one technological change of note for literature, and that is the shift from the oral to the written tradition. Literature was, as it were, reborn exhausted. But Art, Music, and all the other forms find their **substance** transmuted regularly by technology. So although Borgesian possibility belongs naturally where it originally arose, it just couldn't happen in an art form whose freshness depends so crucially on the exploitation of new substances for art products to be made out of and the refining of new tools to be used on these substances. Harris' naiveté is especially surprising in light of the fact that he is sensitive to this aspect of Art, as what I quoted of him during the lecture shows.

[16] Of course, even this led to an argument. Why solid dots? It was suggested (Ross 2002) that the dots are actually schematic eyes, and that a major thematic of the work is the dialectical transformation of objectivity into subjectivity. But others suggested the dots are an unavoidable side effect of the technique Wylie employed.

[17] On his side, admittedly, is the title of the work. Also the stained glass sky in the second perspective. And he works hard (although speculatively) for more. He suggests the two works are closely connected; in fact that the violence in both of them is the same and is merely being seen from different angles. The axe in **Deus Ex Machina** is the elbow of DEM II, and both are God (this thesis is known in the trade as "Harris' trinity"). It is just that in DEM II, we are seeing the axe from **inside the plane of the painting itself** (and presumably from inside the Artist's mind in some sense since **Deus Ex Machina** is a self-portrait). But why should the axe look like an elbow from inside the plane of the painting? Harris makes a brave response: Imagery in Artists is often obscure, and we often cannot explain why two items are being identified or why one should stand symbolically for the other. Well, maybe. But there is another problem. In the microdot reproduction of **Deus Ex Machina**, the axe is missing. Harris explains this (lamely) by suggesting that since the elbow is **in** the plane of the work, it has lost its transcendence. By way of contrast, when I asked Wylie about this, she covered her mouth with her hand, and said, "Oh my God, I forgot to put it in!" In my opinion this is a typical Wylie subterfuge. See the last paragraph of my talk.

So perhaps Harris' attempt to justify the microscopic qualities of DEM II on thematic grounds fails. Some critics, absconding from thematics, justify the techniques here as a development of secondary imagery (such as that found in van Gogh). But this suggestion misses the point of the complaint entirely since secondary imagery can be seen by the naked eye. Do we have any other response? Of course. **Who said** a work of art must be (totally) visible to the naked eye?

rameters are set," she said, "you're lucky if you find even one solution." This doesn't sound plausible but it will be some years before we will be in a postion to evaluate her claim, simply because no critic yet has the wherewithal to examine the constraints she was working under.[18] If she wasn't lying, DEM II **is** possibly a dead end. But more likely she did lie, and some day we will be able to explain the lie autobiographically. It is too soon for us to do so now, as the appropriate papers will not be released for decades. So all that is left for the time being is enjoyment of the work ... and a little bit of light speculation, with which I will end the talk.

I suspect, sometimes, that she **was** concerned with transcendence, thematically I mean. Transcendence in what sense? Well, just as God traditionally is supposed to supply the meaning of the universe, the **raison d'etre** of everything, so the artist is supposed to supply the meaning of his/her work by virtue of the intentions s/he possesses. These intentions are ones traditionally concerned with affecting the mind and emotions of the viewer, either by broadening his/her vision, or by delighting the emotions, horrifying them, etcetera.[19] Since the comments of the artist on his/her own work help focus the listener on these intentions, it was natural for one with the kind of logical mind Wylie had to regard her comments on the work as part of the work itself. What are the nature of these comments? One and all, they are a denial of any constraints — for example of artistic intention or meaning — a denial of any constraints on the work, except for

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[18] I certainly don't. I rarely understood what she was talking about.

[19] Now of course putting the matter **this** way makes it look old fashioned. Surely nobody was interested in this sort of thing much after the 1960's, many would protest. And they would be right! So to attribute to Wylie a studied opposition to these goals is not to attribute something original to her. And I don't regard Wylie as innovative thematically. She was innovative in her technique and the logical rigor with which she executed these old ideas. But in doing so she helped us (collectively) see our way to a different (older perhaps) picture of what Art should be. Her own picture of Art seems little different from something like Warhol's Art as Advertising, except that she was at least sincere about business; and consequently, since she had something to sell, was a lot better at making the money.

For the sake of my conscience, let me add that it is doubtful I am using "transcendence" exactly as Harris does.

financial or technical ones. This is, of course, as implausible as the reverse attitude, so common historically, which disdains all such nonartistic motivations. Her hatred went so far that it caused her to refuse to grant her work any meaning (an old move) or herself artistic autonomy (a move new with her). Why do such a thing? Who knows? Her “secularism” did violence imagistically to God as it simultaneously did violence ideologically to herself. But let me say this. Just as she failed in the short term to market a plastic, so she failed in the long term to deprive her work of meaning. It is out of her hands now and as is usual with great work, we shall interpret it as we please.

Thank you for your kind attention.