Paul Durcan’s notion of ekphrasis has more to do with an imaginative leap than with any real correspondence with the image. That is, he uses the actual painting as a springboard into his own imagination, where he finds the images his poem explores. In the words of Bryan Robertson:

We don’t read Paul Durcan to have a picture’s content or message handed to us but to add another dimension, a fresh image to our sense of life. Enjoying Durcan as I do, I should be just as happy to read poems inspired by a take-away or a pair of old trousers but in this book he uses paintings with characteristic insight—and poetic license. Often the poem makes us think again about a cherished painting.¹

The poem shows no interest in the symbol-laden aspect of the Marriage of Arnolfini. For instance, although it mentions the “barefootedness” of the double portrait, it fails to comment or explore. Notice how the man’s wooden clogs are not just untidily but prominently left in the foreground, while the woman’s red slippers are demurely shown in the background next to the bed... not only left next to the bed, but also made the same color as the bed. Think about the expensive oranges left carelessly about the room, the single candle lit in the chandelier, the upraised hand of the man, the Stations of the Cross around the mirror, and the image of St. Margaret and the dragon on the head of the bed. Not to mention a yappy little dog. All these things cry out for explanation and suggest how wrong it would be to consider this merely a “realistic” image about life in fifteenth-century Burgundy. Finally, why did the painter write his name graffiti-like across the wall? The custom was to leave a discrete signature in the lower right-hand corner.

Much has been written about this painting and its iconography. The painter is plainly trying to tell us something. Unfortunately, he speaks a dead language. Although viewers of Van Eyck’s day would have had little trouble understanding the clogs, the fruit, the candle, the dog, and all the rest of it, we must use educated guesses. There is much disagreement. For example, our textbook Great Masters of Western Art tells us: “On the far wall is a mirror, reflecting the couple and another figure, which is almost certainly the painter, who takes up the position of spectator at the door while carrying out the portrait” (31). Take a close look. How many people do you see in the doorway? We should also bear in mind that spatially—that is, within the illusion created by the image—it is we

who are reflected in the mirror, we who have come to this open doorway (the frame) to witness whatever is going on there.
Part 2

By now you have learned to be skeptical of self-proclaimed authorities on the Internet. Let’s look at the National Gallery’s text, which begins by telling us: “This work is a portrait of Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini and his wife, but is not intended as a record of their wedding.” However, it offers no evidence for any of the information in this claim. As Rose-Marie and Rainer Hagen remind us:

> Van Eyck gives no indication of the identity of his sitters either on the panel or in any other document, and it was only some 100 years after the work was executed that it was described in an inventory as: “A large panel painting, Hernoult le Fin with his wife in a room.” (41)

It may well be that “Hernoult le Fin” is the French version of “Arnolfini,” but the fact remains that the attribution comes after a century of silence. The majority of art texts blithely assert the identity of the man and woman, as well as many other circumstances, but we cannot be sure. Our ignorance is not total, as in the case of cave paintings, but there is still far more conjecture than certainty about this painting.

The National Gallery seems to base its opinions on the work of Edwin Hall, published in 1994. His interpretation of the image satisfies some but far from all art historians and iconographers. Many still insist that this painting is a marriage document, in part due to the painter’s signature in Latin, which may be rendered as “Jan Van Eyck was here,” followed by the date 1434. Given the wealth of material written about this image, each of us can decide. It may be useful to know that before the Council of Trent (1545–1563), Catholics—and there were no Protestants at the time of Van Eyck—did not need to marry in church. In fact, marriage was the only sacrament routinely performed by lay people. Folks simply declared themselves husband and wife at home and then went to take communion together the next morning as a way of announcing the deed.

As in the Italian Renaissance, painters in the north found new patrons in the secular world, particularly among merchants and bankers, many of whom were becoming as rich and powerful as the noble families around them. In the early fifteenth century, two Arnolfini brothers left Lucca, Italy, to open a branch of the family business in Bruges, economic capital of the Duke of Burgundy’s lands. Traditionally, Giovanni Arnolfini is said to be the man in the portrait, but it could as easily be his brother Michele or even some other man entirely.

In addition to portraits that clearly underscore the increasing importance of a middle class, Van Eyck painted exquisite works on religious themes and, we are told, images as erotic as Botticelli’s Birth of Venus, although the ideal female body is quite different in the north, to judge by his Eve in the famous Ghent Altarpiece (at right). The pregnant belly, as well as the modest pose, may link her to the goddess, but the proportions are quite different from Italian standards,

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not to mention the face. In any event, many of his paintings were destroyed in the wars and religious movements that crisscrossed that area of Europe just before and after the rise of Protestantism, which leads Catherine Reynolds to observe:

The misguided belief in the inherently small-scale preciosity of Netherlandish art is matched by a common misapprehension of its subject matter as overwhelmingly religious, appealing to the emotions to the detriment of the intellect. Apart from portraits, few secular paintings survive from before the sixteenth century and knowledge of the range of subject matter has to be supplemented from other art forms—tapestries, book illustrations, and prints—and from written evidence. Italian admirers recorded that both Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden painted erotic pictures of nude women bathing, pictures which have fallen victim to prudery or changing canons of physical beauty. Eyes accustomed to Raphael [of the Italian High Renaissance] would find Jan van Eyck’s Eve hard to accept as the ideal she represented to contemporaries (148).³

Part 3
We have looked at Van Eyck’s handling of shallow space in the Annunciation panel and with Eve in her nook, and his handling of interior, room-sized space in the Marriage of Arnolfini. In the Ghent Altarpiece he worked on vast panoramas of exterior space, such as the Adoration of the Lamb (at left). While the religious image is as central to the composition as it is to the theme, the sweeping landscape contains cities and forests, meadows and mountains, atmospheric perspective, and a cast of thousands. This interest in believable landscape—in landscape not as mere backdrop as Botticelli used it, nor as the fantastic vistas Leonardo liked—would clearly influence later painters like Bruegel, who gave a more important role to landscape than to any of the figures seen there. The exercise of a hallucinatory imagination, particularly the view of hell found in Van Eyck’s Last Judgment—a fragment of which is seen at right—, would influence later painters like Hieronymous Bosch.

But without doubt his handling of light through the medium of oil painting is Van Eyck’s most important contribution. As Janson points out:

In the work of Jan van Eyck, the exploration of the reality made visible by light and color had reached a limit that was not to be surpassed for another two centuries (292).4