



"An archaeology of the spirit" – Louis le Brocquy's Image of Bono (2003)

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The subject of this painting is an Irish rock singer, who is also recognised all over the globe as a philanthropist and humanitarian activist against Third-World disease and poverty. He is known simply as Bono, a childhood nickname. Some people will be familiar with moving, sounding images of Bono on the television, whether speaking about debt relief or HIV/AIDS at global summits or singing in concert or on pop videos with his hugely successful group, U2. Some will recognise him from U2's album covers. With Bono as its lead singer and lyric writer, U2 has made a deep mark in late modern social history and culture. The band has been releasing music since 1980 and sold more than 100 million albums, but has also lent its support to organizations such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace, and the Burma Action Campaign.

Since the early days of U2, through the lyrics of songs, Bono has not been afraid to take on the establishment and cultivate a rebellious image. He confronted head-on issues including Northern Ireland's 'troubles'. Songs like 'Sunday Bloody Sunday' called attention to such atrocities as the shooting dead of 13 unarmed civil rights marchers by British paratroopers in Derry on 30 January 1972. Famously, Bono repeatedly announced at concerts that this was 'not a Rebel song' (i.e., not an IRA [terrorist] song), suggesting its motives were strongly humanitarian rather than political or sectarian. But it is only more recently that Bono's public image has broadened to encompass his role in advocacy, particularly with regard to debt relief and the treatment of HIV and AIDS in Africa, which has brought him attention and recognition as a humanitarian in his own right.

Few people will be unfamiliar with Bono's singing voice, which is powerful and heroic. In fact, this sound exemplifies the singing voice of the rock anthem for his generation, and is hardly separable from its sweeping political agenda¹. Few people will not have seen Bono's face in photographic images in books and magazines, on the web, or on the covers of his band's best-selling albums. It is a face that is easily recognisable in the world today, even without the distinctive wraparound tinted eyeglasses. Yet, people are probably less familiar with pictures of Bono in artworks, such as this *Image of Bono*, executed in 2003 by the nonagenarian artist, Louis le Brocquy (b. 1916), Ireland's pre-eminent living painter. The image is in the public domain: a small digital file of the picture can easily be found using the web (try [Wikipedia!](#)). The actual painting is in the collection of the National Gallery of Ireland, in Dublin. Shown in the 'Posing Questions' exhibition is a high-quality photograph of the same image in the form of a poster. The artist has approved its display but, as the label accompanying it records, insists that the work itself can only be fully appreciated by experiencing the original.

How can this image be described? What seems to be happening in it? Slightly above the centre of this large portrait-shaped canvas (it measures 122 x 81 cm) looms the portrait head of Bono. The face is as if appearing or disappearing, magically and momentarily, for the viewer from out of a kind of cosmic mist or veil painted in blue and red stippling on canvas. Some of the face seems to have pierced through this veil to inhabit the viewer's side, as it were. The straight mouth, with a thin upper lip and reddish lower one; the forward-arching and flared nose; one piercing blue eye, hooded by a creased brow, all seem to have passed through the veil, to be seen. The rest of the face is as if seen through it. The left side of the face, from the forehead down to the chin, metamorphoses through a series of rippling shadows into the ether-like surround. Only the right side of the subject's face is

articulated in paint, to show vestiges of the ear, bulging white forehead, hairline and profile of the hair. The brownish hair, still stippled with red and blue, stands back at the top from a slightly receding hairline and falls behind the ear in a 'mullet' hair-style.

The gaze of the figure's left eye is especially piercing, an effect won by the iris' particular shade of blue, and the hooded shadowing outline and white skin of the eyelid above. Despite the naturalism of the facial features here, a gauzy veil of white paint lies across the outer half of the eye. At first, the intensely staring eyes, backed up by the firm but essentially good-humoured set of the mouth, do appear to be 'the windows of the soul' in this painting. But there is another 'eye'-area: the looping, lobed area of forehead above Bono's right eye, which is painted pure white. Although this is the only part of the painting free of the blue and red stippling, like the focal points at the mouth and eyes, it too seems to be the source of rippling, outward-moving waves. Whitish curls alternate to the right with a lock of hair that falls across the middle of the forehead and its echoes, finally joining up with the echoes of the entire side of the face, which seem to embody the reverberations of the mind or spirit.

While the upper part of the head is described and given form through white, the lower part, below the eyes, appears more consciously sculpted and chiselled with furrows and grooves of skin tapering down from the bridge of the nose and around the mouth. The transition from paint and light to sculpted skin is focussed at the bridge of the nose. Here fanning rays of white paint above and left are divided from the skin-like fall of the nose by a dark, scumbled line that creeps across the bridge of the nose out of the dark shadow to the right.

The head is sited somewhat above the centre of the canvas. The chin, more clearly than elsewhere in the facial profile, fuses, through a kind of topography of skin and painterly hillock and shadow, with the stippled continuum in the lower half of the canvas. That continuum continues up the sides and across the top of the painting, creating a painted frame on the canvas within the picture frame. It is only the upper half of the head that seems to enjoy a formal spatial background, rendered with an orange-brown base layer of paint and demarcated by the straight-edged painted frame. The face of Bono, although a striking likeness, is semi-abstracted, and the temporal/physical setting around the head is indeterminate, as is the format and genre. The suggestion of a picture frame, painted above the head, is seemingly contradicted by the lack of one below.

Although physically 'finished' as an oil painting in the classical sense, the painted image itself appears to have been only part captured. Shadows and waves suggest its transitory quality, even amidst the eternal, ether-like sense to the surrounding area. The sides of the head remain behind the veil, not to be observed or described directly. At the same time, the rippling and echoing of forms away from the head suggest something seen through or on a moving surface like water – or, metaphorically, canvas. Perhaps it is this 'incomplete' state which makes the painting suggestive of something more or something else – something to be provided, at least in part, by the viewer. The picture could more accurately be described as a study towards a portrait, and yet it is not, again in a traditional sense of oil painting, unfinished: the canvas is covered in paint to the extent that the subject is or was situated somewhere and for some time as the artist's subject (even if 'only' in his mind); he is recognizable to the viewer; and the artist has released the picture from the studio.

Still, as the title of the painting, *Image of Bono*, makes clear, this is not a portrait in the traditional sense of the word. Louis le Brocquy has written of his painting practice as a process of discovery not unlike science, rather than being a special form or communication, or self-expression or creativity. He has described it as 'an archaeology of the spirit'. With regard to portraiture, according to the artist, the visuality of modern life has made such a thing as a finished portrait virtually impossible to achieve: 'In order to produce a human image which has some kind of contemporary relevance, you have to recognise that certain factors which have arisen in the last hundred years have revolutionised the way we look at things. Because of photography and the cinema on the one hand, and psychology on the other, we can no longer regard a human being as a static entity, subject to merely biological change ... Replacing the single definitive image by a series of inconclusive images has, therefore, perhaps something to do with contemporary vision, perceiving the image as a variable conception rather than a definitive manifestation in the Renaissance sense ... Repetition, on the other hand, implies not linear but *circular* thought, a merry-go-round interpretation of reality, another form of completion, another whole, which can be entered or left at any point. This latter counter-Renaissance tendency is, curiously enough, already evident here and there within our Irish tradition, from the Books of Kells and Lindisfarne to *Finnegan's Wake*.' So, a le Brocquy head is not presented as a

finite statement which sets out to provide answers, but it is a complete work akin to an open-ended report in a revolving 'interpretation of reality'.

The global context of Image of Bono

In its original form, this essay was written for the catalogue of the larger exhibition, 'Self & Other', which toured Japan in 2007-2008, but in the end the organisers regretted they were unable to include the work among their selected loans from Europe. Since 'Self & Other' lives on both in a catalogue and also, conveniently, in virtual form via VCM online, it remains possible as well as relevant to ask how *Image of Bono* relates to the theme of that exhibition. Although the image was not shown at all in 'Self & Other' and is shown in 'Posing Questions' only as a poster rather than in its original form, this discussion of it therefore bridges the two exhibitions.

The contemporary section of the 'Self & Other' is visualised not necessarily as being beyond distinctions like 'east' and 'west', but rather about a shared style that has materialised through globalisation. Primarily through its subject, but perhaps in other ways too, the Image of Bono embodies values of benevolence and social justice as the aspirations of a new global community in this age. As emerges in the work of the film-maker and critic Trinh T. Minh-ha, on the globe, there can be 'east' and 'west' within both 'east' and 'west'. In part a former colony of the United Kingdom, le Brocquy's and Bono's country, Ireland, can be seen one of those 'east' within 'west'. In this respect, it is remarkable that Bono's concern about poverty and hunger stands alongside that of another Irish rock musician, Sir Bob Geldof, co-organiser of the original Live Aid concerts in aid of famine relief in Ethiopia in 1985. Arguably, their activism today stems from having grown up in a country where people have never forgotten the effects on Irish society of the potato famines of the 1840s, where they remain mindful of the reason (a plant disease called blight), as well as of the *laissez faire* policy of the colonial administration toward Ireland while ordinary people had nothing to eat. Through his position as an Irish rock star, Bono can use the 'bully pulpit' to campaign against what might be called the collateral damage of globalisation – the way that as new wealth is created, still the poorest get poorer. In the context of this exhibition, that idea is intriguingly present in the make-up of the *Image of Bono*, through its essentially Irish style and subject.

What is that stylistic Irish-ness? What is what we might call the bloodline of the *Image*? On one hand, there is the artist's identity as an Irishman, and, on the other, the role of Irish art and culture in his work. Louis le Brocquy was born in Ireland in 1916. Throughout Europe this year conjures images of the Somme battlefields, but it is hardly possible to mention this date in Ireland without also recalling that it was the year of the Easter Rising (or '16 Rising'), an insurgency initiated by the militia in the centre of Dublin that was put down by the British. The anniversary of the Rising is marked annually in the Republic of Ireland as the founding moment of the modern independent state. Growing up in Dublin after Irish independence in 1921, le Brocquy was self-taught as an artist, but one senses that the social concerns he harbours must also have been nurtured from an early age by a family world-view. His mother was one of the founders of Amnesty International in Ireland; his early works include a painting of refugees in mid-twentieth-century Belfast. Despite a facility with portrayal of the human figure, Louis le Brocquy actually rejected the idea of becoming a portrait painter early in his career. He left Ireland shortly before World War II, in 1938, to study art in Europe's museums. He returned to Ireland, which was officially neutral during the war, in 1943, but moved to London after its conclusion, in 1946, where he became well-known in the contemporary art-world. A decade later, in 1956, le Brocquy represented Ireland at the Venice Biennale, where he won a major prize. Two years on, in 1958, he married the Irish painter Anne Madden and together they moved to work in the south of France. Later, le Brocquy and Madden returned to Dublin, where they continue to live and work.

From the 1970s, le Brocquy has been acclaimed for his series of heads of literary and artistic figures, but it is also insightful to acknowledge his many collaborations with Irish writers, including Samuel Becket and Seamus Heaney. In 1969, le Brocquy created lithographic brush drawings for Thomas Kinsella's translation of the Irish epic, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (*The Cattle Raid of Cooley* or *The Táin*). In 1988, Samuel Becket asked le Brocquy to illustrate his last book, *Stirrings Still*; le Brocquy also designed the set and costumes for Becket's play, *Waiting for Godot*.

The period of the mid 1970s marks a turning point. Le Brocquy was one of a number of international

artists commissioned by a Swedish gallery owner to contribute to a portfolio of aquatints of thirty-three winners of Sweden's prestigious Nobel prizes. He selected W. B. Yeats as his subject, later remarking: 'From among the several Irish Nobel prize-winners at that date – [Samuel] Beckett had not yet received his award - I chose [W.B.] Yeats as my subject, having known him when I was a boy and because of his vast and mysterious personality. I made a number of studies for my final aquatint, and was struck by their diversity. It was then I realised that a portrait can no longer be the stable, pillared entity of Renaissance vision - that the portrait in our time can have no visual finality ².

When Le Brocquy then went on to make various series of images of Irish Nobel prize-winners, so began what his chronicler and son Pierre has identified as the fifth distinctive period of Louis le Brocquy's career, 'Portrait Heads' (1975-2007). In these series, le Brocquy made images of a community of individuals, most of them Irish, most of them artists. These included W.B. Yeats (again), Oscar Wilde and James Joyce, as well as friends and contemporaries: the playwright Samuel Beckett, the painter Francis Bacon, the poet Seamus Heaney, and the subject of the *Image* under discussion, the pop icon, Bono. Others include the Andalusian poet Federico García Lorca and Nelson Mandela. The only woman in this group is his wife, Anne Madden. On his choices of subjects for portrait heads, le Brocquy has said: 'I'm drawn to their work, yes, certainly, and in each case, before beginning to paint, I have tried to steep myself as deeply as possible in it. On the other hand, I don't think of them so much as famous or brilliant men but as vulnerable, especially poignant human beings who have gone further than the rest of us and for that reason are more isolated and moving. Above all, I was drawn to the journey they had made through life and the wide world of their vision'. The portrait heads become meaningful in belonging to this select group of human beings, but can also be taken individually. Similarly, the artist's engagement with each individual is played out through a series of responsive images, but that is not to diminish the completeness of a single image such as this.

With regard to the genesis of this painting, it is worth knowing that le Brocquy and Bono first met in the 1980s, when U2 was becoming a phenomenon, and that the artist began a series of watercolour and oil heads of Bono beginning in 1990. This particular *Image of Bono* was commissioned of le Brocquy by a corporate sponsor of the National Gallery of Ireland, and unveiled there on 20 October 2003 as part of the ceremony to mark the re-opening of the National Portrait Collection. On that occasion, the artist described the work as follows: 'In the past I have painted an extensive series of interiorised head images of artists such as Samuel Beckett and Francis Bacon, W.B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney, whom I see as extraordinary instances of human consciousness. In more recent years, I have made a number of similar studies of Bono, whose spirit and whose radiant energy I admire so much. But a painting destined for the National Portrait Gallery presents a different challenge; to make a recognisable image of Bono's outward appearance, while attempting to portray what I conceive to be the wavelengths of his inner dynamism ³.

This commission of one of le Brocquy's portrait heads gives an imprimatur to the genre in the artist's oeuvre, and recognition of the part it plays in a process of discovery about a modern Ireland. Over the years, this genre of 'portrait heads' has come to highlight the social and artistic networks of the south Dublin area, where the artist lives. Heaney, for instance, was born in County Derry in Northern Ireland, but lives close to south Dublin in the hills of northern County Wicklow. Bono is a rock star and international activist, but he is also a family man at home in Ireland, and part of this south Dublin society. The nickname Bono dates to his school days in Dublin; his real name is Paul Hewson (born 1960), and he is married to Ali and lives with their four children in Dublin's beachfront suburb of Killiney.

Another part of modernity in Ireland is the legacy of invasion, conflict and assimilation with the Gael population over many centuries. Vikings (from the 9th century) and Normans (in later 12th century), and later English and Scots all wrested and settled parts of Ireland. Louis le Brocquy himself bears what is presumably a Norman-Irish surname – like Samuel Beckett and singer-songwriter Chris de Burgh, another member of this south Dublin network.

All of this matters because it is sometimes said that le Brocquy's heads evoke a specifically Irish notion of personhood ⁴, whereby the head is a kind of sacred box or repository containing the ingredients of personality, character and spirit. Dorothy Walker has spoken more broadly of 'the head-cult of the Celts in which the magic box of the skull was thought to be the domain of ancestral spirits ⁵. A contemporary Irish head arguably asserts in some form a collective or shared quality, in distinction to the narcissistic self of much of the late-modern West that is shaped by individual experience rather

than genealogy or collective values. 'Like the Celts', the artist has written, 'I tend to regard the head as this magic box containing the spirit. Enter that box, enter behind the billowing curtain of the face, and you have the whole landscape of the spirit' 6. So, perhaps it is appropriate to depict heads in this form, not just disembodied, but also pared down to a kind of birth or death state – or, one might say, a life state. Now, the technical choreography of the painter, in light of his community with the human subject, remains the mediating work.

This essay concludes with remarks provided by the artist (LleB) in response to questions posed by the author (SMcC) 7:

SMcC: In your recent retrospective exhibition at the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin (Louis le Brocquy and his Masters: Early Heroes, Later Homage at Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, 14 January - 30 March 2007), you showed your regard for Japanese figural art by hanging Japanese woodblock prints next to some of your early figure paintings. How do you suppose the native Irish concepts underlying your *Image of Bono*, such as the idea of the head as a magical box containing the spirit, might be received in other cultures, both in Europe and Asia?

LleB: Admittedly the concept of the head as a magic box containing human consciousness originated in Celtic Ireland. It is none-the-less difficult to imagine that such a fundamental idea is not repeated elsewhere. Difficult, for instance, not to perceive in the Japanese Buddhas of contemplation, the Dhyani-Buddhas, something of a similar nature.

SMcC: What do you think you discovered about yourself in the process of painting this image of Bono? Or, to put it another way, to what extent would you recognise the Image of Bono as also a self-image?

LleB: It is said that a painter tends to paint his own self-portrait in depicting others. Indeed I have noticed this tendency when painting 'interiorised' images of Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Francis Bacon and Seamus Heaney. I never knew James Joyce, but the others – including Bono – were old friends, which gave me further insight when painting them. At the same time it must be acknowledged that this artist views his subject not only from arbitrary photographs – which he always uses – but also from areas of the mind which includes the unconscious. Seen from within himself, it is not surprising that the artist might enter into the equation. It is understandable after all that the painter's handwriting, his way of working, his recognizable style must necessarily contribute to the work in hand.

Bibliography and suggestions for further reading

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Notes

1. I should like to thank Antonia Couling, editor of *The Singer* magazine, for her help with these remarks.

2. From 'Portrait Heads', W.B. Yeats, at [Le Brocquy website](#) (cited 14 April 2008).

3. See [Le Brocquy website](#), Chronology of a Life, Oscar Wilde & Bono (cited 14 April 2008).

4. See, e.g., Fintan Cullen, *The Irish Face: Redefining the Irish Portrait* (London: National Portrait

Gallery, 2004), p. 73. I am grateful to Brian Durrans for this and the following reference.

5. Dorothy Walker, *Modern Art in Ireland* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1997), p 63; cited in Cullen, *The Irish Face*, pp 72-73.

6. Louis le Brocquy, 'The Human Head: Notes on Painting & Awareness', 18th Distinguished International Department Lecture, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, Dublin, 14 November 2005 (edited citation from Actes du Colloque 'Corps-Poésie-Peinture', Faculté des Lettres de Nice, *Métaphores*, no. 5 [Nice, February 8, 1979]); see also [Le Brocquy website](#) 'Quoting the Artist'.

7. Email communication with the artist, dated 27 April 2008, via Pierre le Brocquy