A Poetic of Disunity: Selves and Silence

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Abstract: A Poetic of Disunity: Selves and Silence
by Stephen Lawrence

This thesis comprises a creative work, the manuscript of a book of poems, *A Spiritual Problem is a Chemical Problem*, and an exegesis, *A Poetic of Disunity*, which explores topics that arise from the collection of poems.

A. Creative component: *A Spiritual Problem is a Chemical Problem*
The creative component of this thesis consists of a manuscript collection of poems. The poetry in part draws upon less commonly employed poetic discourses – political and scientific – amongst more 'customary' poetic topics such as sex and death.

The collection proceeds generally from larger-scale, sometimes expansive, voice-based pieces, progressing towards restraint and condensation, moving towards minimal word-use and silence. However, several earlier poems express a density more likely to appear in later poems, and some later pieces adopt character or expository speaking voices.

The 'problem' invoked in the collection's title is addressed in many of the poems. The inherent contradiction of the title's assertion allows explorations via disunity and multiplicity: as well as individual poems invoking topics such as politics, sex and science, the collection's structure is at times intermingled and discontinuous.

B. Exegetical component: *A Poetic of Disunity*
The exegesis explores topics that emerge in the context of the collection's progression from expansiveness and use of multiple voices, to its creative application of small forms and silence.

Writing about the collection's author in the third person – the poet 'Lawrence' – I eschew self-reflexivity to offer a decentred consideration of traits of my poetic, such as disunity of theme, diversity of voice and avoidance of privative writing. The latter characteristic allows a distancing from fixity and directly autobiographical writing, to more readily reconfigure self and release voice into poetry.

Other key traits discussed are disunity, explorations of self and employment of appropriation. Reverberation between personal and public/political discourses is also a major topic of the exegesis. As well as regarding the collection's responses to modern political events, it looks at selected contemporary Australian poets who, in recently published collections, merge public and personal: Barry Hill, who depicts a political and spiritual journey towards a version of self-understanding, followed by Jennifer Maiden, J.S. Harry and Robert Adamson. The latter three poets specifically address the private and social affects of global events – particularly, the September 11 attacks and the war in Iraq – which aligns with one of 'Lawrence's' poetic interests.

The latter section explores the collection's movement towards a miniaturist ethic, dissolution and silence. As well as fragmentation, these smaller pieces, self-scrutinising, seek to elide themselves. Disassembling themselves into tinier fragments, the poems made a show of bringing his writing to an end. They cease to be poems: the collection's emergent ethic is to wrap itself in silence. The collection traces movement towards "giving," as the poet says, "the language back to itself"; it is a means by which one may come to terms with the subsuming, and the absence, of self.

Declaration

This work contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution to Stephen Lawrence and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Signed ....

Stephen Lawrence

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A spiritual problem is
a chemical problem

poems

by

Stephen Lawrence

CONTENTS

POETRY

poetry unfurls

self-important bannerets

beneath its titles

PRECARIOUS

one goldfish broke the surface, shocked
at the jelly air, sputtered to deeper cold.
I gasped diving into its flicking red veil,
breathed bubbles out, out and not in again.
water poured ice around my heart, stilled.
it was the warmest day of my life.

when they found me they dried me up.
the fish swam away and I went quiet,
still and drifted asleep now, almost away.
they found all the red veins they needed.
sparks went through, lit the blood in me,
it was the most electric day of my life!

it wasn't as good as seeing the dentist
but it was better than having sore teeth.
my chest got buzzed, it went crack
like a walnut. all of me was inside.
excited, my heart nearly swam out of me.
that was the precarious part of the day.

I painted the way, they showed me colour.
that fish made a mouth-bubble, its orange tail
skittered. I said thanks for finding everything.
my head stopped pushing and buzzing
it was the most precious day of my life.

and that's the end of my wonderful day.

READING WITH CIGAR

The orphaning, the hardship, the bereave of love.
Hatred is kind of love, is a breed of love, isn't it?

Spines of unread books have frowned for decades
from high shelves through mote-adorned sunlight;

my conscience fingered one down. *Absalom, Absalom.*
I lay aside Henry James' selected short stories.

Embattled now for a half-year, stuffing Faulkner's pages
into my mouth, sentences as long as paragraphs,

paragraphs as long as chapters, near-choked me.
Not a being, an entity, but a commonwealth.

I made to slap it shut then a signpost teased, echo
to navigate, dry plaint of words, long-due chapter-end.

Grim commentaries glimmered from black corners.
The brain recalls just what the muscles grope for.

I quit its improbable, weightily imparsable sentences.
Months later, I lifted the book from a gritty bench.

Reopened, in the crook of pages 146 and 147, the middle
passage at which I had left off, were dark smudges:

cigar ash, tapped by another generation bemused,

a becalmed reader taking stock at this middle passage.

He has peace now, even if the peace be mostly despair.

I again put down *The Aspern Papers* for *Absalom*'s maw.

Sutpen rooms' interior bleakness surpassed even James'

crumbling Venetian palace's mystic rites of ennui.

I will read the book, but hasn't it already defeated me?

That shame which is such a part of love's declaring.

I began again to cram my mouth, gagging on typeface,

half-poisoned. I lacked, lacked the cow-gullet to digest it.

Knotted webs of loathing ended in conflagration.

I gave him nothing, which is the sum of loving.

AFTER THE BUDAPEST CONFERENCE I

How robust is Shor's factoring algorithm
when quantum gates are exposed to error models?

My girlfriend leased rooms with her fiancé.

I bring bottles to their apartment, take photographs,

put my hand on her soft shoulder. Bright

onscreen, our eyes and faces grin shades of red.

I explain my work on a napkin: $S(L,r) = \Sigma\, Pr(j,h,r)$

"S is success," I say. "But quantum decoherence

may not allow physically realistic computing."

"That's sad," they laugh together. Isn't it?

"And yet the probability of success is non-zero."

Love and the wine grant us understanding.

Her fiancé pours again. "Can you quantify success?"

My brightest student never asked such a question.

"Despite discrete error, Shor's algorithm

renders the problem tractable." "That's good?"

We laugh together, hooray, toast luck.

Talk phases to small-home fittings.

I ask everything about their soft furnishings.

Loving farewells red-shift out of sight.

The equation shows success should be improbable.

I follow public spaces across town to my hotel,

Across Heroes' Square's gates and architecture,

snow helmets chieftains and stone horses.

Gentle gusts fan flakes over sculptures' geometries,

assembling a dim, Indian-tapestry Mandelbrot.

Love thrives in error, flourishes in airlessness.

A new wind, icier, spins the snow away into space.

SEE ABOUT SEEING, THINK ABOUT THINKING

Outside the stone-floored stadium bar. I bought a beer,

watched the crowd passing and congealing

before the game. I read the mob, made up the rest.

A man walked past. His hair was thin, like mine,

but shorter. A beautiful woman trailed behind.

I sought coarseness in her. I didn't find it.

The couple talked with some men. He wiped his brow,

looked at me. It was electric. He sent a man over.

His wife held her head aside, pondered the exit.

Behind me I heard. "You're fucked, man." I didn't turn.

"Get out alive." I teetered; "You're hair's beautiful."

A passing guard melted him, froze his fury. "Cunt."

_____

Home, I let the dogs slurp at me through the slats.

They snuffled away from my skirt to the sliding door,

showed proudly they were good at guarding our house.

The porn crew hadn't wrapped up. One, pigtail flapping,

blinked in the wind. The girls pulled on their one-pieces,

were handed crop and cash. One waved at me. "Cunt."

My husband would give me the shop and keep the house.

The lawyer came onto me: "You're hair is so beautiful,

and you're smart." He can wait, but will be useful soon.

I'm pregnant, but won't tell him. I'll deal with it, like last year,

a bad year. I would have walked to the beach, but it smells

of kelp and seaweed, and the wind will coil my hair.

LOVE/SEX

Awake, my heart, to be loved;

awake, be awake!

_____

I felt you weaving –

*   *   *   *   *   *   *

– into my being.

_____

It was for sale, I want it

so I buy your love.

_____

your lips slide open –

a million tiny silver

fish change direction

_____

basking in her radiance

she can make me real

_____

You exchange glances.

You think Of course not. She thinks

Of course not. You fuck.

_____

What is more awe-inspiring

than two beings conjoined?

_____

raised her rump to him,

breasts splayed, presented herself

as a dinner plate

_____

Sex is tea; love is sugar.

Just a dash of sugar.

_____

Coffee is like sex;

tea is like love. I want tea.

And I want coffee.

_____

I orgasm, I achieve

the Paroxysm.

_____

I ask for nothing;

and more, I give her nothing.

The sum of all love.

_____

Above all, I seek to be

he who completes you.

_____

"Wit dies when love blooms."

I hesitate, then say it:

"When love dies, wit blooms."

_____

You will learn to despise me:

I'll encourage you.

_____

She: "Don't you trust me?"

He: "I trust you, <u>and</u> I want

an explanation."

_____

I love it that you love me,

but I don't love you.

_____

"I've had an affair."

"Well, if it makes you happy."

"It does." "Then enjoy."

_____

Her real might be the real one –

that's a dreadful thought.

_____

I've no place for you,

it was only ever words.

Have a joyful life.

_____

SHE: "They die earlier; it's the only break we get."

HE: "It's the break <u>we</u> get."

THE NEW RAIN

sky in flood... plunge lands...
the air has states not places...
water dusts... gold cobble...
        (Les Murray)

1.

cut and brought from those vales of tears,

temperate forests, skyscrapers of water

tuber-towers solving altitude's thirst

tree's artful transformations, dances,

strainings, duets with gravity, gratefully

chopped and bent into tough structures

crafted artefacts hard as cousin iron

wood-framed houses' beams tighten

eagerly ease out of soft acquiescence

caper in delight now, snap and crack

liberated from muffling dampness

that once pressed in from drizzly air.

2.

humans are taunted by flawless ants

and other highly evolved things of earth

with drought-proof exo-carapaces
perfected for the bright afterlife

our inefficient water-bag leakages
squander the universe's precious energy

we hold in concert inefficient artesia
a lavish disorder of ichor and dark fluid

arrayed to dry bones, reluctant with vigour
drizzling liquid wastage onto pure sands

3.

the world has cast rain out of its skies
dried to wisps and distant muttering

no flamboyantly moulded cumulus
pose and nudge their sisters overhead
grandly menacing creeping life
as they once did, to split their bellies

and douse the unmoved landscape
with pointless, suicidal immolation

4.

blue is the new grey, red is the new green

earth consolidates pure as lunar radiance

the world returns to its true state of dust
desiccation's purity, intense rock-colours
unavailable in a former world of irrigation

the past was rain-streaked with crying,
the future is lucid, unmuddied, unchaotic

CLIMATE TESTIMONIALS

It was a buzz, it was a thrill, thrilling...
A thrill... and exhilarating.
It was just awesome. Awesome,
It was just awesome.
No words, no words can really... you can't...
The majesty, the thrill, the... the...

Under Layer

Some say

When you start to get whiffy,

your body is failing you.

I say

You're more of a man,

your self, your reality

your body is even more present,

somehow, more there with you.

When this happens

your midweight bodyfit

is breeding a critical mass

of your petrie bacteria –

thermalwear sponging it

hot against your skin.

I say

At 8000 metres

in the Nepalese Himalayas,

the best home cooking

is under your long-sleeved

two-tone crewe and boxers.

You share the elation

of the mountains – its ether –

with your microbes,

with a billion companions.

I say

Your presence seeps through

even densest wool.

Good, man-made

polyprop holds you in,

lets you breathe yourself –

sometimes for weeks.

And to me, that's good.

Mid Layer

Alone, single-handed,

live from Namibia.

This is my dispatch:

Hiking winter Deadvlei

I layered for survival.

One with the environment,

I became their continent.

Bulked up to midlayer

to ward the Atlantic winds

(which were cold, very... cold),

an overtop rock zip

in aged bronze, yak and oyster

(cold, very... so cold)

I created a lockstep multiclimate

for myself, myself alone.

_____

I, tented down for base camp

over stark-orange terminal moraine,

spread balm on Alpine burn –

raw scalp, ears, torn mica chips.

My ultramarine balaklava

and moss neckwarmer, lost in drifts,

would have built a clothing system

to control my head's climate.

My zip hoodie left me vulnerable

down the glacier's border zone;

it may have made me compromise

Carson team's scientific mission.

Outer Layer

Climate gives space dimension;
Climate makes air vast.

Globemaster expedition:
Frontline – Antarctic Sound,

grounded burgs and shelf
fragments lean becalmed.

Outer clothing system: felted
global jacket, charcoal and olive,

fibres lock for wind resistance.
This is a water planet.

But water is not only fluid.
It is blade-hail, heavy-drift snow,

rock-ice ranges. Smell subzero;
exhale. Words are clouds.

With inner climate optimised
the world is mine to breathe.

I sought achievement;
I learnt humility.

I sought accomplishment;

I found understanding.

PRACTICAL WISDOM

Reality and

subjective reality

are not the same thing.

──────────

Exclusionary

over-rationalisation

yields skewed conclusions

──────────

Objectivity

is inadequate for our

full understanding.

──────────

My beliefs are true

through biological luck

rather than knowledge.

──────────

Practical wisdom

lies in decision-making,

not talking values.

──────────

Not everything is

something from no point of view,

and yet, some things are.

_____

Two alternatives

are incompatible; I

don't exclude either.

This is my claim to knowledge;

this is how I feel the world.

THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

I will say this again so you can hear.

I will say it again so that you can hear.

I am pleased to have the opportunity

to speak to the report – this report

by the Public Bodies Review Committee,

'Towards Better Performance Reporting.'

I congratulate the Review Committee

on the work it has done conducting

the workshops and compiling this report.

And I am pleased to have the opportunity

to speak to this report – this report

which provides the honourable members

here in the Legislative Assembly

with evidence that the government

is failing the people of this State.

The report shows that some ministers –

such as the Minister for Fair Trading

who is at the table – that these ministers

are interested only in theatrics.

I will say it again so that you can hear:

they are interested in mere theatrics

and they are not interested in delivering

services to the people of this State –…

I commend your ruling, Mr. Acting Speaker:

there is obviously no point of order here:

I am not attacking the Minister

I am talking about his committee's report,

a report making a number of assumptions,

making a number of incorrect assumptions

and a number of misleading assumptions

which I shall now run through here.

The Auditor-General has documented

in front of the budget committees

that Treasury is complicit, that Treasury

is complicit in failing the people –…

The Honourable Member may wish,

may wish to gag debate on the failure,

the failure of the government

to deliver basic services, to deliver –…

Thank you, Mr. Acting Speaker

I am aware of Standing Order 67.

I am aware that Standing Order 67

warns against members repeating

repeating sentiments already expressed

at the risk that they may be ordered

to resume their seats on the ground

on the ground of repetition.

However, the Acting Speaker will be aware

that at the time he took the point of order

I was responding to an interjection –…

I appreciate your ruling, Mr. Acting Speaker

and I advise I will present fresh argument

in dealing with this report here today,

this report that shows the failings

the consistent, habitual failings

of the government towards the people –…

Thank you, Mr. Acting Speaker

for advising me of your earlier ruling.

I will confine my remarks to the report

to the subject-matter of this report;

to avoid repetition, I am moving now

to a new part of my contribution.

I stated before that the Treasury

was complicit in allowing the failure –…

I thank you, Mr. Acting Speaker,

for your ruling on this matter

and I shall now resume my seat.

REPARTNERED

At fifty, he repartnered. Sylwia
was Polish. She showed him pictures
of woods surrounded by mountains.
He plumbed Europe's dark heart.

She left her old husband for him.
He left his wife when she discovered
them together in the marital bed;
to repent was too much bother.

He created memories for his new wife.
Sylwia was flattered, to start with –
they were complicit in a fairy tale,
a new history that had always been.

Their past life was in Australia,
her face, smooth skin, a dark mole,
pasted over historical heads
in sun-bleached photographs.

They had honeymooned in Uluru,
holidayed in Tasmanian forests,
renewed their vows in Daintree,
had a blue-eyed child, lost it.

"No," she said. "I must leave you."

Sylwia lived with a Danish woman,

then a younger Romanian man

by the Black Sea, for a time.

Years later, they met by chance

at a beach resort in Broome.

He ate seafood with Sylwia,

their younger partners swam.

"Are you happy now?" he asked.

"The answer is obvious," she replied.

She showed a faded picture of a child

in black-and-white, with a slash of red.

A MAN WHO CEASES TO BE A FATHER

their fishing trip

floated them as far out to sea as they could go

without coming back

his throat caught

in the last sentence sending a ripple along

a row of schoolfriends

wristchains hiss

against mobiles, they push deeper

through ruffled murmurs

hair-touching Mexican wave

seeking tissues balled for weeks

in bags' side pockets

family photo montage

sport, boats, sky, party exposures

of the hoarded past

accompanied by

last year's favourite rapper, *muthafukker*

got what comin

not yet classic

to parents' friends who narrow misted eyes

at the funeral planners

collared MC invoking
god's sponsorship, electric organ love
eclipsing the ghost

behind the quantum
the furthest star, floats his dead son
in this walnut coffin

poetry fills the program
a boy remembered, his football story:
'he kicks me and I go pop'

EQUATIONS

your planet bakes us life

humans are equations' DNA

we keep plump brains alive

cleverest let us be manifest

here! – a piece turns inside

the mind of this salt swimmer

between tepid islands – no

his heart stopped let it sink

krill will return it to purity

our howl fissures – enoonmai

I am not yet – na ebbirac

look now in the Caribbean

eetanam – a sea-calf born

weight it – physicist will be!

keep it distant from weighty

elements, strong weather

a host's mind should mature

let it grow – nowonmai

dance fire-warm its blood, wash

bathe the sow – sutelsue be

cells knit – etalumucca – our hoard

to explain beauty is our vanity

emosmai, eno emosmai

we will make the stars denote

AFTER THE BUDAPEST CONFERENCE II

I was thinking about the stock market

The tray clamped my cash, I paused

Everything useful is done binary

Then a man snatched the bank's notes

proffered like a practical joke

from its small toothed platform

He grabbed the money, shoved me

I fell, the man stomped on my foot

Our superposition was complete

He breathed on my face, deeply

looked both ways and then ran

Maybe I was the unhinged one

Flakes fell over me, boat-hooked

my lashes, hissed on my skin

And I tried to tell each one apart

for as long as memory would hold it

I saw the direction each came from

and I could tell them all apart

Some were twins, from the same place

Then a wind shook light off the Square

made my system a shimmering mockery

dissolved my method, my money

Sometimes I am nowhere sometimes

I am somewhere at the same time

Heat leaks away and my state deteriorates

SOMETHING NEEDS MY ATTENTION I: RACE TO A POEM

A delirium of repetition, infraverbal,

climbs to threshold, tumbles me out of bed.

What could make my body tug itself

reluctantly from under this bed's quilt,

plan a slanting path to the laundry –

the hard-tiled night laundry, of all places?

An outlandish combination of chemicals

in one warm pool, urges its filtrate

to rescue this thought from oblivion;

its tiny influence squirts a wisp of extra serum

sets off a memory relay, a race to a poem.

I slap to this shadowed room, finger-greet

a clothes-hook, an ironing board;

I negotiate a cupboard door's substance,

spine it back into position. A pencil

breathes invisible words across its mat, this poem

fixes to the page, an elbow nudges aside folded washing.

Its tilting pile's moon-grey outline –

fresh-kill warmth leached into space –

resolved to ashen thermalwear, socks, briefs,

waiting to find their wardrobe resting places;

Before I rejoin my sleeping self… What else?

A reminder from the spinal brain: Go piss.

EFFACE MY SYNOPSIS

It is a question I like friends to ask me

but cannot answer. What's the story about?

Well it's about it's about two men

well it's about one man who gets visited

by two men who return from the future –

I roll my eyes – and they want him to do things,

different things, conflicting things, so he'll survive,

so one of them will survive… anyway… –

my beloved brews us coffee – anyway…

I roll my eyes. I have bathed in my narrative

and am now nude and dripping, with no towel.

I ask my friends to feed our Japanese goldfish

while I bring cups. It's an honour I offer them:

the fish's genes are so spliced they are barely alive.

I want to efface my synopsis. I sigh in anticipation;

I will have to surface briefly, ask them about

their new house, workplace, partner, pet.

Maybe I will stay silent, or go on talking.

TARA'S GONE REAL

tara splayed her hand on the table
to silence me; a high-wire show
for the interview panel, a gesture
of intercession between adversaries,
nudging my resolve, the forum's solidity.

tara doggedly showed me her nape.
she knew we were acting, then forgot,
silently freaked, almost left her body.
sweat trickled, we saw she'd gone real,
invented complicity, transported to belief.

i escalated, half real half play no pity,
illustrated outrage, smug lamentation
at natalie accusing me of harassment –
"she's in it for the money." tara cautioned
"you'll have a turn to tell your version."

when tara permitted me to speak
natalie's actorly glare burnt higher
eliciting reprimand – "he's lying" –
daring tara to action, to admonishment,
testing her commitment to equality.

the timer buzzed, panel members clapped
tara cried, laughed at herself crying;

we all laughed, gentled her touchdown

as tara returned from chairing

the simulated conciliation meeting.

SHARE HOUSE IN DULWICH

The crumbling rental oscillated –
frantically social, eerily deserted.
Paper-yellow walls riven
with lightning bolt cracks, light fittings
crowned in dust, ceiling roses

a daguerreotype containing all
that had happened in ninety years, reflecting
its ghosts back to those who contemplated them,
made offerings of thought –
time, concentration, the tribute.

ONE SAD HOUSE

When she steps carefully inside.

It touches her abdomen,
at the same time grasps her throat,
pushes all wind out of her lungs;

it wrenches her arms
into full nelson, pulls her face
down to a dull, throw carpet;

it drags her fingers
along a flaking skirting board
turning them into a kickboard.

Voices congregate below,
vibrate chambers of her belly:
two children, sisters, lament.

She weeps without control.

WHAT QUANTUM GRAVITY LOOKS LIKE

The universe duplicates

every time we look.

_____

Countless dimensions

will be needed to survive

the four we're lost in.

_____

Time keeps everything from

happening at once.

_____

Time does not exist;

there is only more likely

and less likely.

_____

There is not single now, now.

And there never was.

_____

We feel a river.

In reality there is

only the ocean.

SCIENCE HAIKU

human brains are not
sufficiently complex
to be self-conscious

_____

some atoms are caught,
held in concert, shimmering
intelligently

_____

When something becomes
one thing or another thing
quantum gates open.

_____

The left or right glove?
Spukhafte fernwirkungen
collapse wave function.

_____

The great lesson of
the universe: things are more
complex than you think.

GEORGE BUSH OPPOSES STEM CELL RESEARCH

Each life is a gift –

these children I've brought today

are former embryos;

each of us started this way

and life can't be exploited.

There is no such thing

as a spare embryo.

these kids remind us

each embryo is complete,

genetically intact.

This Bill will cross a

critical ethical line

and will bring about

destruction, dismemberment

of emerging human life.

'LEEZZA 'KU

Rice's advice to Bush:
punish France, forgive Russia,
ignore Germany.

_____

We know that Saddam
cavorts with Al-Qaida,
said Condoleeza.

_____

In South Korea:
Command Post Tango is at
the front line of freedom.

_____

We're on the right side
of freedom's divide and must help
those on the wrong side.

_____

I punish. I give.
Condoleeza strides the tarmac.
I give. I punish.

LOOKING OUT FOR AUSTRALIA

Note excessive or
unusual purchases
of explosives.

—————————

My new neighbour takes
flight training; they don't teach him
to take off or land.

—————————

"Drop the warhead. Now.
You're acting suspiciously!
Face to the floor, dad."

—————————

"It doesn't add up,"
he thought. He called the Hotline,
anonymously.

—————————

With mobiles, retain
numbers in the memory.
Or carry this card.

—————————

It's a small jingle –

"Be alert, but not alarmed!" –

called the Fear Slogan.

_____

I ask my children,

"Who in your class wants war? Hm?

Name names. I want names."

_____

Just last week I thought

it was cool to bomb Iraq;

now, I'm terrified.

_____

for more scary stuff:

nationalsecurity

.com.au

_____

Health professionals

and human rights groups will

pick up the pieces.

FUCK POETRY

Virgil led Dante

through mezzanine tiers of dead

people. But, screw that.

——————

You only get poetry

with a lot of help.

——————

Reading a translation is

kissing through a veil.

——————

Don't stretch yourself. Buy a book

about poetry.

——————

Hiatus in manuscript

*   *   *   *   *

——————

Poetry has failed,

completely, on any scale

you'd like to mention.

——————

Should poetry be funded,

or should it be taught?

_____

You teach kids to read.

You point them at some writing.

You hope they get it.

SHORT MOVIE

I started making short movies at school

on my brother's mobile. My friends were in them:

on the bus, the Riverland excursion,

walks with Celeste, a neighbour with a rake.

I'd download them, join them together as a story.

In my bedroom with Elise's friends dancing,

acting the movie of *Friday the 13*^{*th*}.

My brother was Crazy Ralph:

"Doomed..." he did. "You're all doomed."

When the guy grabbed Celeste in the park

near the courts I dropped the phone.

It showed him chucking her against the tree,

hitting her with the rake.

I didn't say shit, call police or anything.

I visited his flat sometimes and got laid.

There's a bit where the sound goes off.

You see my brother's face and his friends.

SKIN GAME

"You said you didn't have sex with her.
You didn't say you let her strip naked
before you turned her down. Prick."

"So? And?"

"So it's an affair. Practically an affair.
And you led her on." "She got naked.
Yes I suggested she pull her clothes off.

I wanted to see how far she'd go.
I knew exactly how far I would go.
Now I know how far you will go.

Aren't you cold?"

"Here it is. Here they are. Praise them.
You always said you loved my breasts."
"Your skin. I like your skin. Hers was…
dry. Yours is… I like you in the nude."
"You did have an affair with her."

"It's all good."

FAMILY NOTE

On our front verandah
I measured the chance
of being struck by a bolt.

"I've achieved all that
I'm going to achieve;
it's a good time to go."

The storm withdrew,
the sky glimmered.
I coaxed her outside.

She fondled my cock –
"I see god," I said –
then she strolled inside.

A cloud flickered
"Take me now,"
I implored the sky.

MONDAY

Sex Thursday, Friday,
Saturday, Sunday;
storm Monday night.

The rhythmic slapping
of flesh against flesh,
lusty, hearty, luscious.

"I'm a fuck machine,"
I crow. Full of thunder,
the sky engulfs my words.

MANDRAKE DROPS A V.

I marvel at my veined hands
turn them before my eyes

they plan my next feat
a flame-being surge
Spiderman emission

I power my corpuscles
platelets crave circulation

sap surges, exalts fire
radioactive infra-red
up its kryptonite-green trunk

I gesture with my fingers
master of blood, web-pulse
direct power to extremities

The charge builds, the root
screams in release, release.

SOMETHING NEEDS MY ATTENTION: TAKE A PISS

Silent as a standing Buddha

divine the sluggish landscape

gentle this focal twig clear

feign distraction, wait hard

eyes inflow womb-dark

persuade into divulging

tenderly advocate its dip

urge reluctant flesh to decant

stir too-pampered muscles

into a lighter slumber

affiliate with tissue and duct

sponge, sidle at long last

under the waterfall

uncover a hoard of gold.

I FEEL MY RESEARCHER STRONGLY TONIGHT

I feel my researcher strongly tonight –
again, it's about sex, or lack of it,

that's why she is home, up so late.
My papers graduated to her kitchen table –

she's reached a low point – my slipping
moraine is badged by coffee rings.

I wish I could materialise her, do more
than invoke comfort across the years.

I send this depth-charge into the future:
"You are beautiful, all you need you have."

But she wants sleep without annotation –
so summons a guest, doffs her glasses,

clears papers from the dining bench
with her bare struggling buttocks.

LOVE'S VASELINE

all he wanted

the only thing he and his little silken helmeted cock wanted –

it could be me

or it could be the asian nun smiling in her wheelchair on the tv –

he'd never pay

for that european peasant, her pelt her arse her dangling tits –

needy girlfriend

she and I spoke twice, our periods are synchronised –

I don't leave him

but he's a fucker, bloody fucking fucking fucker –

then I do leave

and know every time you come in her sleek cunt, regret will stab –

it will stab you

fucker – the rest of your life – then sex will die and you'll be dead

PODCAST

When I arrived home,
I wasn't drunk.

I found my wife with
her talkative friend

who cuts her hair
listening to the BBC

on the office iMac,
Ice smoked in her glass.

She waved the drink
with some dexterity

and her ice didn't spill
onto the carpet.

"It's a vodkast!"

SPASMS

1. Awake

Is my wakefulness
a dreamlike state constrained by
sensory input?

_____

Is my wakefulness
one intrinsic brain function
and sleep another?

_____

Awake, brain input
comes from the senses; asleep
it comes from neurons.

2. Express

A black hole's core is
a place where matter becomes
probability.

_____

Electrofluid
floating verbs warp, unstable,

exchange each other.

_____

Describing atoms,
language can only be used
as in poetry.

_____

Noting the item,
not observing the item,
changes the item.

FIONA ON THE WEEKEND

Fiona works in a factory

next to a young Afghan.

He has beautiful eyes,

she asks if he is Christian.

He asks if her legs are open

on Friday and Saturday nights.

HIATUS IN MS

****

****

****

****

****

****

****

****

ENCODES HER BLOWS,

processes the pain. tropical. burst.

straw. he materialises by her ear,

nudges, elbows. nods with sad, with know,

points out a flower detail in her landscape,

adds a new fine insight, with fluid, with offer,

on the man she spends, she faces critiquing

with frayed, wild reason, with perfect, with rage.

him. him. she loves him so. his enfold.

his encrypt. he laces a garland over her hair.

prod. trap. she is molten hatred. strewn.

he examines her matter, her stifle, her

frame, her see, her point, her word, her.

TWO BUDDHIST

two Buddhist
walk, river at high

weep "sister?"
"cross without boat"

monks' vows
may never touch

one carries
wades to the far

her home
farewell, walk on

"unthinkable
chastity, it felt?"

"brother
must live our promises

helped, left her
yet you carry her still"

ELIZABETH COSTELLO

Do the right thing –

for the right reason, the wrong,

no reason at all.

_____

the silence of beasts

arduously descended

to reason's gabble

_____

To understand, we

immerse our intelligence

in complexity.

_____

as her desire fades

she perceives a universe

ruled by desire

THE EARLY BUSH PRESIDENCY

"Mr President:

Why did you seek the White House?"

"I had a calling.

"I had a calling.

People with very strong faith

are more tolerant.

"I will raise taxes,

bring down the big surpluses,

make government small.

"Strike terror abroad.

Advance Middle East freedom.

And we will prevail."

_____

Bush said to Woodward:

"I have no outside advice –

just our war council."

I don't call around asking:

'What do you think we should do?'"

CHOOSING THREE GIRLS FOR THE BAND

The band boys asked me, as they do,
to choose three girls. It's one of my jobs
as I pack up the gear onstage afterwards
I kinda like the job – not in a good way.

I say, hey you like drums? get over there.
you stay, for Vlad. you, yes you – for me.

you. no need for you now. oh yeah go.
I know I break your heart don't I, oh yeah –
then you get angry don't you, fuck you dear.
then, yes, it changes you – not in a good way.

WHITE NUMBERS

1. Platonist, or not?

Mathematical
entities, such as numbers,
are timelessly real;

or they are free creations
of human speculation.

2. Law of the Excluded Middle

If one is not true
the other proposition
must therefore be false.

By definition, Plato
is either right or wrong.

HER BREASTS

a shawl cast out of an apartment window
the sky gives tender way to silk descending

i cup both hands above my uncovered chest
making a chalice that offers form to gravity

the air is induced aside for her dear breasts
finding their place against my fingers' cage

a nipple docks with my palm's heraldic M
the other i wrap within the crook of two fingers

i acquire, enfold and sculpt, press against time
nestle her contour into the past's gentle mould

ANCIENT SHIT

older than stone footsteps
faded to wry sallow powder
its tincture of habitation,

from grey fissured pipes
cheating time for years,
from neglected wardrobes

so faint it is comforting
convivial, inviting space.
my parents' tranquil pet –

pea-brained and soulless –
relaxing its dank bowels
into a last decrepit month

blends with breakfast smells
toast and fig toppings,
dry muesli rots to dust.

an intruder, pleads humanity,
the day offers a welcome
in the bone-warm domicile

their last home invites languor.
done cleaning their unit,
my husband arrives by car

I hug him for no reason

for every reason, for life,

many sweet minutes at a time

LOSE A BREATH, GAIN A BREATH

its tadpole-hinge spasms,
warps, twitches attention,
its deco nine adorns
each in-draught of air;

it's a tic, bedecks treetips,
spur needling into text,
its foetal curl contracts
residue of ghostly letters

LOVERS REMEET

Two thoughts locked in dance

unravel their minuet's

spiral DNA:

1.) "We have so much to say."

2.) "We have nothing to say."

COUNTERPANE

dark pure and complex
as the skin over my eyes
i blink in a flake of light

the oxygen runs out
my next breath is through
the bone of my head

INTELLIGENCE

Intelligence draws
intelligence to itself.
It will seek itself;

it will feed, grow on itself;
it will replicate itself.

FEELING AND THOUGHT

Every feeling

and thought derives from neuro-

chemical events.

A spiritual problem

is a chemical problem.

JERRY FALWELL EXPLAINS WHO BEARS RESPONSIBILITY FOR TERRORIST ATTACKS

God will not be mocked.

Secularists, unionists,

gay rights proponents

and abortion providers:

I say, "You made this happen."

THE FIRST LADY

Afghanistan will

be wonderful for tourists,

it is so exotic

and has a very, very

fascinating history.

STATUES OF SADDAM

Statues of Saddam

bend, then hang on. One more yank

disembowels the dictator:

leg bones, then a pole of guts

pours into the public square.

FALLUJAH

I fire a bullet

at my horse's head, because

a fly lands on it.

My horse drops dead, and the fly

buzzes off to the next horse.

THE MULLAHS ON DR RICE

She offends us –

the queen of violence and war,

ugly chimpanzee.

ACTS DESTROY MEANING

wisdom is aphoristic

words destroy the real

experience destroys love

words destroy the real

 "The rest is silence."

(Angels sing; drums sound within.)

The real destroys words.

EIGHT-SYLLABLE POEM

giving away

intimacy

AFLOAT

Say "No" to gravity.

FOUR SYLLABLES (two poems)

years without tears

_____

use is abuse

MY HAND IS ALIVE

my hand is alive

me alive. whatever is

me alive is me

DEATH GNOMES

death is not a life event
death is not lived through

death creates intimacy
and it makes distance

things grow shallower for us
as he comes near death

it can't be experienced
so do not fear death

your death is an event in
other people's lives

LAST HAIKU

through its natal tube

does the train's lamp shine, or does

caboose arrive first?

_____

light blows through my skin –

the firm gentleness of light,

light's cool, x-ray peace

_____

Ich hab' ihn erblickt:

ich freue mich auf meinen Tod,

ich habe genug!

_____

Sola la muerte –

death, only death, death alone,

nothing but death, death

THE MOMENT

it's not the moment
it's the moment
after the moment.

EIGHT SYLLABLES

There I was here.

There I am now.

EIGHT GNOMES

This is barely a poem –
it's an addenda.

_____

If the centre doesn't hold,
maybe it shouldn't.

_____

strings gushed out – broad, flat fissures –
rust-pierced water tank

_____

Best advice: Enjoy yourself,
and pretend the rest.

_____

'Why train the internal life?'
'It's our last solace.'

_____

This ode summarises my
final period.

_____

rock carvings, creatures obscured
turning to chaos

_____

* * * * * * *

* * * * *

_____

The stars. I don't want to say
anything more than this.

Exegesis

pertaining to the collection of poems

'A Spiritual Problem is a Chemical Problem'

A Poetic of Disunity: Selves and Silence

by

Stephen Lawrence

CONTENTS

A Poetic of Disunity: Selves and Silence

1 Introduction

It is not uncommon for poets to find employment – indeed, careers – in fields unrelated to their art. T.S. Eliot worked in a London bank; Wallace Stevens devoted his working life to an insurance company, expressing the creative benefits of such a disparity in moral terms: "It gives a man character as a poet to have daily contact with a job" (Longenbach 1991, p.109). The subject of the present exploration, poet Stephen Lawrence, spent over ten years of his working life in an Australian government human rights agency, and found public service discourse to be "terra rosa" for a poet (Lawrence 2004, p.11). As well as gaining graduate and postgraduate qualifications in English literature, psychology and education, he worked as a business owner-manager for eight years, and taught in Adelaide Middle-school, Secondary and Tertiary institutions. The discourses of these territories play a conspicuous part in his poetic.

Concomitantly with working in teaching, business and the public service, he has been involved in local and Australian poetry culture: as well as regularly publishing and performing, for two years he convened Australia's longest-running poetry and poetry publishing organisation, Friendly Street poets; he has received literary prizes, grants and residencies; he has edited books, anthologies and journals; and has judged local and national poetry awards. Notably, for the purposes of this essay, Lawrence co-judged the biennial John Bray Poetry Award – administered by Arts SA, and awarded at Writers'

Week held during each Adelaide Festival of Arts – in 2002, 2006, 2008 and 2010. This role involved intensive reading and evaluating, as well as producing extensive annotated commentaries, around 400 poetry books by Australian authors published since 2000. He also reviewed several dozen collections for the *Journal of Australian Studies* and *Wet Ink* magazine over the same period.

This decade led to Lawrence's familiarity with recent Australian poetry; it also caused alterations in his poetic production and periods of decline in his creative output. As well as periodically intensive immersion in Australian poetry, his subsequent PhD candidature led to the absorption of contemporary literary criticism in the field – scrutiny of various poetics and theories of poetics – which in turn led to further uncertainties in his poetic production. I suggest that Lawrence's poetic – of multiplicity, as I shall further discuss – rejected constraint perceived by (even hypothetically) adopting or preferencing a literary theory or other poets' approaches in his own creative practice. He came to choose silence as a poet over perceiving his creativity to be constrained through being 'named' by another. "Through this thicket of academia, my creative writing went to ground," he said: "it slipped away from the categories I had created to explore" (Lawrence 2003).

Lawrence, asked how he defined and placed his own poetry – particularly in the context of the effect of concentratedly reading and critiqueing/judging hundreds of other Australian poets' published collections since 2001 – replied: "My own writing is all over the place." This response could seem glib, inconsequential or evasive (which may partly be due to the interview context). However, by engaging with his answer I hope to discern characteristics of this poet's personal poetic. By examining Lawrence's

aesthetic – which is one, I suggest, of disunity and multiplicity, indicated not only by the effect of his first-hand knowledge of multiple workplace discourses, but by his words quoted above – I find a trajectory from diversity of voice towards dissolution and silence. In this context I also wish to discuss the overlap and reverberations between personal and public/political discourses.

2 Self and Politics

2.1 Disunity of theme

Lawrence's poetry and his three published collections have had little discernable topical or thematic unity. Even form has been fluid, with poems reframed as fiction, and short stories rewritten and published as poetry – such as his 2006 poem 'Repartnered,' which reached published form anthologised as a short story[1]. More notably, his first published poetry collection, *Her Mother's Arms*, was reworked from prose fiction. The poems in this collection were held together by a discernable narrative, and a thematic attempt to reconcile scientific training with human reactions. This was also true of his later verse narrative, *Urban Ghost,* which cohered through a 'storyline' and the development of thematic material.

---

[1] *WORD*, 2007, p.1.

The notion of narrative has been anathema to some literary theorists. Its strategy of unification and 'stabilisation' through plot and character – Lyotard's "customary knowledge" – is feared to legitimise established ideologies. Commentators from Althusser in the 1940s to McGann in the 1980s have been dissatisfied with narrative's assertion of continuity and its implications of stability, omniscience and stage-managed satisfactions – indeed, of conservative and bourgeois values, which have been anathema to many critics of recent decades. The persistence, even the revival, of narrative poetry arises, according to American poet and critic Dana Gioia, from resistance to "the diminishment of the common cultural context" (Gioia 1992, p.254). This may imply a return to conventional storytelling, but narrative poetry can also adopt strategies of subversion and play around sequence and coherence, inviting deconstructive readings.

A poetry sequence claiming a discernable narrative is nevertheless likely to be a fragmented form in comparison to traditional fiction, more readily allowing experimentation and multiplicity. *Urban Ghost* (2007) is Lawrence's poetic narrative examining ownership, self-definition, and the colonisation of domestic spaces: the central figure, a coherent and developing character named Louisa, seeks to claim perceived empty spaces in other people's lives by entering homes in the owners' absence. Ultimately, she acknowledges the need to find means of making effective human contact – and becomes 'colonised' herself, and potentially stabilised, through her pregnancy:

No,
there is no question
that she will keep the baby,

no doubt
that she will stay with Dominic,
commit herself.

And with this decision
she instantly feels more tangible.
   ('Precious Breath')

This poem occurs near the end of the sequence, and internal narrative displays Louisa making decisions that will allow her to feel corporeal. She employs the absence she has so far been subject to – negativities that have to this point dominated her character: "No,… no question… no doubt" – as her tools to arrive at proactivity and reality.

Keats wrote that the poet is "an emptiness filled by the real world" (Malkoff 1977, p.29), and I will discuss this notion in the context of Lawrence's and other poets' – particularly, selected active Australian poets' – multiple and absent selves.

This poet's other published collections contain poems and sequences that aspire to multiple and/or disparate poetics. The third collection, *How Not to Kill Government Leaders*, was lengthy (136 pages) for a book of poetry that is not a 'selected' or 'collected' works; it held three sections whose headings loosely grouped topics within which sub-topics also abounded. For example, its first section contained poems concerning ontogenetic development, as well as a scattering of politically based pieces and a series of 67 poems in haiku format.

Lawrence's most recent collection, *A Spiritual Problem is a Chemical Problem* – poems written in the course of his PhD candidature – is also divided into three sections. These

sections do not precisely give an overarching construal of the contained poems, whose subject-matter – at times employing public discourses of politics and science – bleeds across borders. The boundaries of this collection, then, are permeable, allowing the possibility of other or deeper categories to be gleaned by readers. The poet quotes Pablo Picasso's cautionary words in defence of the diversity of his approaches: "The several manners I have used in my art must not be considered as an evolution or as steps toward an unknown ideal" (Gladwell 2008, p.40).

'Diversity' of poetic may not preclude an overarching and unifying ethic, but it is renewable, open and subject to ongoing life-experiences and input. Such an aesthetic may be characterised as early career and provisional, rather than achieved and stable derived through, say, further decades of active experience as a creative writer (which would bring the poet under discussion to his seventh or eighth decade). However, some elements of his poetic have been stable for over more than forty years of writing, including selection of voices and appropriation of texts, discussed below. These two things, disunity and voice, may be related: philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of 'reflexivity,' or relinquishing what is fixed and singular, is at the same time "a central part of finding a voice" (Hunt & Sampson 2006, p.27).

Multiple forces are at work behind any creative assembly. ADFA Associate Professor Susan Lever's article on 'ratbag writers' in the *Journal for the Study of Australian Literature* invokes Australian artists who refuse to notice or abide by accepted contemporary intellectual attitudes, yet "continue to produce obstinately challenging texts" (Lever 2005, p.13).

Poet J.S. Harry may be an example of this kind of refusal. (Harry, and another Australian poet who demonstrates a similar ethic of plurality, Jennifer Maiden, will also be discussed in further length below: 'Selected Australian poets who adopt political discourse,' p.139ff.). Unassociated with any Australian poetic school or movement, Harry's elusivity and varied disposition leads her to be seen as "a poet of mesmerising and disorienting variety,… continually in flux" (Duwell 1996, pp.15-17). Her poems generate space within which meaning and identity adopt multiple speaking positions, and rejects even structural compartmentalisation. This even includes formal prefacing, which is called (already distanced via the voice of the author's character), "the 'face' you see before the 'face' of the other writing" – warning of poetic disjunctions and questionings, even absences, to come:

It is later now than it was then, whenever that was.

Between one line & another there is white

space
   ('A Preface?')

Images and recurrent subjects within Harry's writing can be elucidated to constitute an interpretable 'poetic.' The entry for Harry in *Australian Writers, 1975-2000* argues that her poetic "ascribes to language the role of webbing together a self and a meaning that is plastic, subject to change, and accommodating of other, apparently opposite modes of being" (Diamond 2006, p.143).

Australian Poet Jennifer Maiden also adopts a strategy of plurality. She takes multiple viewpoints – dialogic rather than monologic – as the means by which her poems

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penetrate political discourse, and her analytical frameworks, often sequential, frequently tests arguments by setting them in opposition.

> 'Darling, they're about to invade Afghanistan.'
>   But she said, 'I don't object to that. I don't like the Taliban.'…
> I said: 'If it stops there'…
>   She interrupted dejectedly, perhaps with autobiography, 'Guilt isn't good in a violent situation. You keep on repeating the thing you're guilty about. It's as if that will make it real enough to solve something.'
>   ('George and Claire Do New York,' pp.65-66)

The poet uses dialogic strategies, but not to create consensus or closure. Seeking a precise public position creates in Maiden "a vaguer, rather than more focused, sense of the self" (Duwell 2005). I will give more space to discuss these poets below.

Lawrence does not directly align himself with either Harry's or Maiden's poetics, although he presents public and capricious selves in his poetry, often in a political context:

> Rice's advice to Bush:
> punish France, forgive Russia,
> ignore Germany.
> …
>
> We're now pursuing
> democracy rather than
> just stability.
>
> I punish. I give.

> Condoleezza strides the tarmac.
> I give. I punish.
>   ('’Leezza ‘Ku’)

However, he does not posit a multiply located ‘I’ "as a product of social discourse and potential conductor of its change," as do Maiden and Harry, as well as more overtly feminist poets and those with a political agenda discussed by Linda Kinnahan in her exploration of such poets in the US and the UK (Kinnahan 2004, p.xiii). The voices Lawrence applies are individual to the poem or sequence – sometimes political, such as the above example, but as often without political context. Neither are his poems set in calculated opposition to each other, or employed to develop an overarching authorial argument, as Harry and Maiden attempt. Rather, Lawrence's adopted selves and dislocate voices are commonly unique to each poem, thus his collections reflect the multiplicity of a diverse poetic.

Nevertheless, there are patterns that can be found.

2.2 Self, voice and appropriation

> One must write outside oneself. I'm fed up with writers who put a fictional gloss over their own squabbles and troubles. It's a form of conceit, and usually it's very tedious.
> (Flann O'Brien, *The Dalkey Archive*)

Explorations of the self and personal emotions – the writer's self-consciousness – are seen as a primary force underlying the writing and performance of contemporary poetry.

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Poetic language is a marker of a personal interaction with the world. However, it was not always thus.

Sappho and Catullus are often cited as examples of early writers whose subject is personal love; however, their subject-matter is not the private and taboo subject-matter of Sylvia Plath, and the distinction between 'private' and 'public' cannot be used in the same way as later periods (Malkoff 1977, p.94). In this early Greek period, the two figures primarily forming our Western conception of the individual, Plato and Aristotle, insisted on poetry's use in terms of rationality and social/political involvement, respectively. Indeed, the emotional/personal and the rational/social were modes considered not only discrete and at variance but in conflict: Plato banished poets from his Republic as an "ungovernable mob of unruly particulars" (Eagleton 2007, p.13).

The Western lyrical tradition was rarely personal. Poet John Donne, who came close to acknowledging the private in his poetry, treated subjectivity and objectivity as mutually exclusive. And, still in many ways the pre-eminent poet of the English language, Shakespeare the dramatist kept self and personal opinion locked away from his fictional and historical characters. His autobiography was more commonly sought in the non-dramatic sonnets, which may have been more likely to display hints of an identifiable 'I.' However, his separation of art from expressions of the personal has been acknowledged by most critics and artists over the centuries, including Robert Browning, who opined – disputing Wordsworth's view that the sonnets held the key to Shakespeare's heart (ironically in one of Browning's most directly personal poems) – that if "Shakespeare unlocked his heart… the less Shakespeare he!" ('House,' 1876).

Personal confession, in the Western mind, derives from religious practice. The fourth-century *Confessions* of St Augustine was a core text of early Christianity, and confession became a sacraments of the Catholic Church at the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century. Although "a literature of self-exploration" grew from this (Gill 2006, p.5), poetry of personal confession, though acknowledged as therapeutic/purgative, was mocked by one of the eighteenth century's pre-eminent writers, Alexander Pope:

> Poetry is *a natural or morbid Secretion from the Brain*. As I would not suddenly stop a Cold in the Head, or dry up Neighbour's Issue, I would as little hinder him from necessary Writing. It may be affirmed with great truth, that there is hardly any human Creature past Childhood, but at one time or other has had some Poetical Evacuation, and no question was much the better for it in his Health. …
>
> I have known a Man thoughtful, melancholy, and raving for divers days, but forthwith grow wonderfully easy, lightsome and cheerful, upon a Discharge of the peccant Humour, in exceeding purulent Metre.
>   ('The Necessity For Bad Poetry' 1727, pp.?)

However, the 'inward turn' of eighteenth and nineteenth century Romantic poets allowed acknowledgement of the deep claims of human emotion. William Blake's line, "Man was made for Joy & Woe" ('Auguries of Innocence') – as well as being an expression of Blake's frequent presentation of conceptual opposites and paradox – can be seen as a call to recognise humans as "feeling creatures" (Orr 2006, p.40). A Romantic premise had it that humans perceive the outer world only through the inner self; thus Wordsworth, who claimed to discover Shakespeare's 'self' in his sonnets (above), also called for poetry to express the "spontaneous overflow of personal feelings," and Coleridge put it:

> I may not hope from outward forms to win
>
> The passion and the life, whose fountains are within
>
> ('Dejection: An Ode' 1802)

At the end of the nineteenth century, explorations of self were part of the craft and role of many poets "in a teasing out of language as a marker of a personal encounter with the world" (Garlick 2002, p.vii). And forms such as dramatic monologue, which was one of British poetry's canonical forms[1], in Victorian times combined "expressive utterance with referential enactment," blending personal subjectivity with political contexts (Slinn 2002, p.46).

In the early twentieth century, Freud's theories of the mind in part asserted the significance of subjectivity in definitions of the self. Within the discipline of psychology this notion continued to hold authority and was built upon – for example, Developmental psychologist, Howard Gardner, defined self in 1983 as "an invented figure of speech—a fictitious entity of the mind" (Orr 2002, p.38) – and it gained wider influence in the scientific, artistic and general culture. The influence of Freud's theories was a factor in the large number of poets, some highly influential, who came to express inner conflict and turmoil in their art.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, Modernist poets obliquely described internal states and individual anguish by adopting a depersonalised tone and 'public' voices. T.S. Eliot famously wrote, in an early essay, that an artist's progress is "a continual extinction of personality." American academic Kirsten Painter, in her book

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[1] Not all British writers considered these forms consistent with poetry: Coleridge recalled being told by a teacher, "the connections of a Declamation are not the transitions of poetry" (p.3 n.1).

tracing streams of Modernism, argues that some of these poets – resiling from the sensitive poetic selves centrally presented in the preceding Symbolist, Pre-Raphaelite and Decadent artistic movements – carefully balanced their presentations of "poetic self and concrete thing" (Painter 2006, p.1), employing techniques of collage and irony in their poetry.

The later, Confessional poets – partly inspired by Freud's broadening of the concept of subjective significance, and partly as a reaction against Modernism's impersonality (though sometimes using techniques of indirection employed by Modernists) – adopted, to some extent, the trafficking of information from their own personal lives. This was a particularly American movement, as the expressive self was more closely aligned to that country's mainstream poetic. The label 'Confessional' was launched in a 1959 review by M.L. Rosenthal of poet Robert Lowell's collection, *Life Studies*. Rosenthal's essay asserts that the poet removes the mask that the Symbolists maintained, for 'soul's therapy,' displaying a face that is unequivocally his own: "it is hard not to think of *Life Studies* as a series of personal confidences" (Rosenthal in Price 1972, pp.71-75).

However, Lowell also at times employed the (commonly) non-autobiographical tool of self-satire:

> I was a stuffed toucan
> with a bibulous, multicoloured beak.
>   ('My Last Afternoon With Uncle Devereux Winslow')

And other post-War poets — also defied the likening of self with voice. This included including another major US poet John Ashbery, who insisted that his poems were

neither autobiographical nor confessional, and discriminated between 'representative' and 'personal' poems (Shoptaw 1994, p.1).

There has been much and scrupulous discussion by major theorists over the adoption of voice via the disownment or reconfiguration of self. Indeed, "a considerable sector of twentieth-century modern and postmodern literary work takes, as one main mission, the prizing apart of utterance and person" (Wesling 2003, p.164, 25n). It may be useful, as one means of approaching modern notions of self and voice, to address the concept of 'modes of being.'

Several writers and philosophers consider that 'being' has no meaning except in its relation to existence and action outside itself. Marcel Proust, towards the end of the final volume of his *magnum opus*, famously said: "Through art alone are we able to emerge from ourselves to know what another person sees of a universe, which is not the same as our own" (Proust 1954, p.932). Heidegger attempted to quantify this in philosophical terms and from the artist's standpoint, distinguishing between a privative 'present-at-hand' mode and a fuller 'ready-to-hand' mode of understanding being.[1]

Later theorists dealt with notions of author and self in various ways. Foucault postulated an impersonal organising principle engaging with contemporary discourses (Foucault 1977, p.138); Barthes proposes the detached 'scriptor' rather than an author or an autobiographical self (Barthes 1977, p.147); a little later, Derrida and subsequent commentators invoked 'de-toning' as an approach to absenting the self, "in the sense of

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[1] I invoke Heidegger aware that he considered poetry's task was only to serve politics and philosophy (Schroeder 2007), and will discuss relationships between poetry and politics below.

distancing ourselves from fixity in language" (Hunt & Sampson 2006, p.32). These ways of compromising the notion of 'author' are also intended to demonstrate the freedom writing is allowed by moving past the ego and autobiography towards unowned voices. Barthes' scriptor, for example, is a means to organise the voices of texts.

It may be seen that authors are banished to the state of being the disembodied hand of a scriptor, conduit of an agenda outside their awareness. Although it is a kind of demolition, writers are also allegedly freed, and given tools to work within this 'freedom.' The vaporised author (more euphemistically labelled 'decentred'), Foucault suggests, may in any case only have been a 'classification' for grouping voices and differentiating them from others'. It is possible to see this as empowering for the creative artist and not as erasure.

Overt explorations of private self in creative verse – the subjective, 'personal' mode of confessional poetry – has little direct place in Lawrence's poetic. He addresses the subject on occasion, but usually with distancing irony:

> When confronted
> I claim Writer's Privilege
> and absent myself.
>   ('Increasingly Hazardous Accumulations,' 50)

This haiku deals with a common assumption aligning a poet with views expressed in his/her poetry. The short poem arose, in turn, from an earlier haiku published in his 2002 collection:

Wheelchairs are boys' toys;

rendered immobile, women

would rather stay put.

   ('Hazardous Accumulations,' 61)

This provoked an aggressive confrontation by an outraged reader who had mistaken the

poem's voice for the author's. To this extent, certain of Lawrence's poems may be seen

to be autobiographical, but it also demonstrates the difficulty of classifying identity.

Confessional poetry can be seen to be part of the heraldry of identity, and also perhaps

therapeutic as Pope suggested above. Although the Romantic period in England gave

licence to the exploration of self in poetry, the modern personal mode is a far cry from

Keats' assertion that a poet has no identity, "continually informing and filling some

other Body" (Keats in Malkoff 1997, p.28).

However, within the modern questioning of truth and authority, Confessional writing

has also become fluid in its placement of identity, seeking strategic self-effacement or

subversion. Robert Lowell admitted invention lay at the core of much of his so-called

Confessional poetry; and although Anne Sexton's poetry is considered the apotheosis of

Confessionalism, her texts sometimes read as a "provocative pastiche and rejection of

orthodox readings of confessionalism" (Gill 2004, p.425). In a similar way, Lawrence

employs strategies and markers resembling those used by Confessional poets in some of

his poems, but rather than merely employ poetic form as an identity mark, he claims

licence to investigate the discourses of 'the unowned self' liberated from personal,

sometimes even fixed, identity – such as in the above examples, and his 2006 poem 'Tara's Gone Real':

> she knew we were acting, then forgot,
> silently freaked, almost left her body.
> sweat trickled, we saw she'd gone real,
> invented complicity, transported to belief.

This poem overtly plays with the adoption and perception of mutable identities – including that of the poetic 'self' complicit in the role-play, as well as the playacting character, Tara, who is obliged to alter her identity, and becomes confused and distressed negotiating the permeable boundaries between levels of actuality.

Lawrence's poetry, though not directly acknowledging the tools provided by Theorists' proffered 'freedoms' and proliferations, seeks to apply and arrange his voices within the spaces cleared by such writers.

2.2.1 The affliction of self

Unlike Pope, who amusingly judged poetry as a cure for an affliction (p.115 above), Lawrence has expressed a view that the production of poetry is itself a kind of affliction. Writers, he has stated, can irrationally assume themselves to be 'great' or noteworthy though not yet discovered by an undiscerning world – and this can align with a mutual, competitive suspicion:

The years I have been involved in organising, judging and attending poetry readings and events have confirmed my sad reflection that a large number of participants in the poetry 'community' appear to despise one another, with varying degrees of covertness.[1]

He has asserted and illustrated biographically that poets – and this can apply to other creative practitioners – are often drawn together not by common values or interests but by a common obsession of which they may feel somewhat ashamed. This may take the form – like a child caught in the oral or anal phase of Freud's stages of psychological growth, restricted within the ego boundaries inherent in their developmental structures – of a certainty that the privative 'present-at-hand' mode of poetry, described by Heidegger above, is its most evolved form. Some poets' highest artistic goals appear to Lawrence to be a vacuous and egotistical form of confessionality, and their perceived posterity relies upon achieving this in their writing.[2] However, he asserts that the attempt to transcribe one's adjoining or emotional environment is secondary to the artistic act. As other commentators note, it is not sufficient to portray the self as "a stick figure 'I'" (Orr 2002, p.38) – and one means of doing this is through derisively ironising the voice of his poem.

Lawrence has creatively approached the issue of poetic 'self' a number of times – particularly in his longer poems. Some of these poems will be discussed below, but he also addresses it directly in 'Climate Testimonials.'[3] This sequence of poems,

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[1] Lawrence 2003.

[2] A few commentators have described the writing of poetry as the expression of a psychological illness, with greater or lesser levels of mockery – such as Alexander Pope's reference to it as a "morbid Secretion from the Brain" (Pope 1727).

[3] Parts of this sequence are published in the *Journal of Australian Studies Review of Books*, the *Creative Arts Review* and *Antipodes*.

containing three respective voices, puts on display, through oblique ridicule, the self-involved discourse of some adventure-seekers' 'testosterone testimonials.' He attempts to demonstrate – directly charging sportspeople and adventurers, but also implicating those with similar inward focus, such as authors and poets – the difficulty that a sensibility locked in the framework of self may have to articulately convey, in this case, solo wilderness experiences in language. The first voice ('Under Layer') unwittingly undermines its own authority to credibly observe the environment and the insights it invokes by employing variations of the word 'you,' referring to himself in the second person, at least 18 times; the third speaker's crescendo of rhetoric is similarly unconvincing:

> I sought achievement;
> I learnt humility.
>
> I sought accomplishment;
> I found understanding.
>   ('Outer Layer')

There is no certainty, the poet suggests, that such attainments or experiences lead to insight. Rather, they may produce a false echo of profundity, fading to inarticulateness as it is filtered through conceitedness in a dance of word-repetitions – an impervious, knotted selfhood of the 'present-at-hand' mode:

> *It was just awesome. Awesome,*
> *It was just awesome.*
> *No words, no words can really... you can't...*

The majesty, the thrill, the... the...

Lawrence's justification for his poetry is to insist – perhaps arrogantly, and arguably with no less self-deception – that he pursues it as an intellectual endeavour. The production of poetry is his means of honing the techniques and skills of his chosen craft, as well as exploring the 'other' and identities outside of his own modes of being.

2.2.2 Sexuality

However, sexuality, to some a self-involved and 'I'-defining artistic topic[1], appears regularly within Lawrence's aesthetic: poems about sex and sexual relationships occur throughout all of his collections. A clear precedent is Walt Whitman, who wrote openly about sexuality throughout his poetic career:

> Be composed—be at ease with me—I am Walt Whitman,
>   liberal and lusty as Nature
>   ('To a Common Prostitute').

This poet declared towards the end of his life: "Sex is the root of all: sex—the coming together of men and women: sex: sex" (Reynolds 2005, p.105). Rachel Blau DuPlessis revives early Modernist poet, Mina Loy, citing her 1913 feminist manifesto in which she expounds the centrality of the sexual embrace in exploring desire, the gender struggle and its meanings (DuPlessis 2001, p.52). And many major poets throughout the last century also placed sexual love in a primary position within their poetic: William

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[1] Baudelaire proclaimed: "The more a man cultivates the arts, the less randy he becomes... Only the brute is good at coupling, and copulation is the lyricism of the masses. To copulate is to enter into another – and the artist never emerges from himself" (Richardson 1994, p.50).

Butler Yeats, Ezra Pound, Robert Graves, Dylan Thomas and Ted Hughes each described the sexual act as an analogy for transcendent religious and aesthetic experiences, and a means of unifying spiritual with physical existence.

Sexuality is a subject regularly employed by Lawrence in his poetry, and Lawrence has often cited poet Ted Hughes as a major creative influence. Some of his published poems have clear links with Hughes' aesthetic or use of imagery: most notably in this context, 'Eden,' from Lawrence's 1998 collection, addresses genital sexuality in a quasi-religious context as the key to original sin as well as human life and awareness:

> Newly embowelled,
> With the small tell-tale irregularities of God's wounds hanging
>
> From the place
> Like the unretracted birth-cord.

This piece evokes, in particular, Hughes' poem in the 'Crow' series, 'A Childish Prank,' which ends with lines expressing the mythical moment that humans became self-aware: "Man awoke being dragged across the grass. / Woman awoke to see him coming."

Less commonly related to the quest for godhead and divine fusion that concerned his predecessors mentioned above, in later years Lawrence addresses the topic of sexuality in the context of exploring other and dialogic identities.

The human body and its sexual interrelations have been represented in printed and visual art from pre-history. The fecundity and sacredness of Stone Age figurines have a

sexual component, the 'Song of Solomon' is renowned for its expressions of sensuality

and even sexual coercion, and Renaissance art contains much erotic boldness.[1] Indeed,

it has become business for some modern critics to unearth sexuality, particularly

'transgressive' sexuality, throughout Western history, in the works of artists and writers

living in blissful pre-Freudian ignorance.[2] The 'stuffy' Victorian era is a prime target

(for example, Oulton 2007), moving forward to exploring revelations of homosexual

dynamics in poets contemporary with Freud, such as T.S. Eliot (Laity & Gish 2004) and

Wilfred Owen (Najarian 2002).

In addition to some queer and feminist studies' 'outing' of dead writers, the human

body's interactions, negotiations and collisions are also important to other contemporary

cultural and literary theorists. Foucault links the sexual act, including the "pleasure that

animated it," with modern confession (1978, p.63). Daniel Punday, attempting to define

a corporeal narratology, goes so far as to say that character bodies are the building

blocks of narrative events, and characters within narratives "become meaningful when

they touch and interact" (Punday 2003, pp.81-82).

Sexual tactility has evolved from ostensible passivity in some of Lawrence's earlier

poems. In 'Nudes at Toilet':

>   The armpit closed tight
>   in a grimace

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[1] Ontologically, Freud theorised that infant libidinal drives have no definite sexual object, and the 'pleasure principle' rules before identity and gender are established (Brottman 2005, p.81).

[2] This is not restricted to modern critics. Richard Payne Knight, a scholar and author from the Romantic period, who found "sanction for sexual love to lie in its omnipresence in nature," uncovered phallic and vulvular symbols in both pagan and Christian art (Hagstrum 1985, pp. 16-17).

determined

not to reveal the warm, odorous

intimate cavern within

   (Lawrence 1998, pp.41)

Even within the *tableaux vivants* of the nudes observed in this poem – not overtly

employed as a persuasive discourse, in the way much poetry from before biblical times

has been used – these lines nevertheless acknowledge the resistance of the viewed

subject to the voyeuristic viewer. Marilyn Yalom, in her survey of representations of the

female breast in art, opines that the eroticisation of the female form is primarily "a male

affair" (Yalom 1997, p.90). However, Lawrence – who frequently writes from a female

perspective in both his gendered poems and his fictional use of 'I' – gives care to

emphasise mutuality in his portrayals of gender, and even the eroticised female body:

   the air makes tender way for her breasts

   finding their place against my fingers' cage

    ('Her Breasts')

The poet ensures that the word "tender" is not an adjectival imposition on the female

form, but an act of gentle respect expressed by the environment itself ("the air") and by

implication the viewer who is soon to engage with the approaching feminine form. The

"finger's cage" acknowledges constrictive male appropriation and self-importance

disguised as reverence, but his hands reverently shape "a chalice that offers form to

gravity." The closing image is of the nipple purposefully "docking" with the man's

palm and fingers – a portrayal both heraldic and mechanistic, uniting female and male

activity. The image of physical engagement ironically denotes detachment from

confirming either a feminist or male heterocentric reading. Its dual ending allows the

poem's portrayal to remain balanced between such interpretations and perhaps freed from them. French thinker Emmanuel Levinas argued that, although the 'I' is prone to lose itself in erotic contact, such tactile interaction is decisive for "the 'upsurge' of the existent into being such that it can turn towards the other" (Syrotinski & Maclachlan 2001, p.46).

Lawrence was familiar enough with Levinas' writings to cite this philosopher's work on Self and Other in a paper presented to an international conference on 'Poetry and the Trace' in 2008:

> The Other helps one get to know the Self, via the 'trace.' Perhaps the trace can be seen as a kind of stimulus to a chemical reaction, a reactant or a catalyst, that helps bind the molecules of Self and Other.
> (Lawrence 2008, p.6)

It is thus likely that Levinas' work provides a further theoretical tool to justify Lawrence's own poetic, which insists on, as a part of claiming his untrammelled status as an artist, freedom and the artistic right to explore both genders in a creative context.[1]

This also aids him to investigate sites in the sexual landscape at which gender-bonding becomes dysfunctional. If Other can help define Self, it is at such places of rupture where Self and Other can play games of both merging and implosion. Several of Lawrence's poems concerning sexual relationships and their dysfunction are dialogic,

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[1] French Canadian novelist Daniel Gagnon suggested that "writing does not really have a sex" (Pons 2009, p.28 n19). This position has drawn Lawrence into ethically grey areas. Some of his poems and short stories have been submitted, and accepted, as the work of women, in the anonymous context of pen-name or competition submissions – such as 'The Culture of Trains' (shortlisted as a woman, in the Gawler Literary Competition, by the competition's judge), and 'A Bit of Fun at Home' (published under a pseudonym in female-only journal, the *Australian Women's Forum*).

and many of these take a male voice ('Repartnered,' 'Podcast') or produce an intergender dialogue ('Skin Game'). However, the frustrated and accusative anger of 'Love's Vaseline' is female:

> all he wanted
> the only thing he and his little silken helmeted cock wanted –
> it could be me
> or it could be the asian nun smiling in her wheelchair on the tv –
>
> he'd never pay
> for that european peasant, her pelt her arse her dangling tits –
> needy girlfriend
> she and i spoke twice, our periods are synchronised –
> i don't leave him
> but he's a fucker, bloody fucking fucking fucker –
>
> then i do leave
> and know every time you come in her african cunt, regret will stab –
> it will stab you
> fucker, the rest of your life – then sex will die and you'll be dead

A heterosexual partnership is flung apart in an accusative way, by the man's alleged actions and the woman's ferocious curses. The female voice's outrage produces hints of incoherence, through broken and restarted sentences, self-interruptions and repetitions. Her train of thought is broken, and her intentions unexpectedly reversed, by her overwhelming fury.

Yet there is a linear flow of subject-matter, as the focus of her ferocity is consecutively accused of lack of sexual control, an affair, and a substitute sexual partnership. The

staggered discourse is nevertheless a discernable narrative, and contained within a formal rhythm and structure represented in alternating short and long lines, and a symmetrical stanza structure. The poet's use of em dashes at the end of all but the last long line – as a kind of gesture at the 'finale' of each of her points – also gives form to the poem. A challenge the poet sets up for himself is to hold powerful anger within the poetic structure, balancing content and composition.

2.2.3 Appropriation

Another means by which Lawrence poetically explores 'other,' and identities outside of his own modes of being, is using the tool of appropriation.

With rudimentary alliteration, Lawrence's first poem, 'The Step,' juxtaposed the 1969 moonwalk with a US soldier in Vietnam stepping on a land-mine. Its conclusion – "the step's the same, on the moon or on a mine" – plagiarised/appropriated the by-line of a drawing by Australian cartoonist Paul Rigby. Lawrence's first published poem, 'Entropy' (Adam-Smith 1977, p.45), written in 1972, adapted the words of author Frank Herbert. This appropriation continued through the 1970s, evolving into the more general assimilation of material he had read – by Sylvia Plath ('Tulips'), various science fiction writers (Dick, Asimov, Wyndham, Bradbury, etc). – into his fiction and poetry. Through the author's twenties and thirties, he continued to assimilate written and visual texts, employing them as a starting point for creative works rather than directly requisitioning and reframing the material of others. By this point, the material included adaptations of Renaissance, medieval and Classical writings – reflecting his Honours and Masters Degree studies during this period. Published poems incorporating or

structuring themselves around this kind of material included: 'The Mirror-Fantasy,'
'The Eagle of Sestos,' 'Cupid's Day,' *Troilus and Cressida*, V, vii, 24-43,' 'Daphne
and Apollo' and 'The Nightingale.'

Over the next two decades, found texts continued to be reframed within his poetry.
Notably, some of his descriptive haiku or gnomic aphorisms sourced other authors, in
keeping with his ethic of appropriation. In this selection from the 'Hazardous
Accumulations' series, for example, Lawrence appropriated David Malouf, Vladimir
Nabokov and twentieth-century song lyrics, respectively:

    Bees swarm my daughter;
    they tell her she's a woman
    before she knows herself.

    A schoolboy is caught
    with a lass dressed as a lad
    in the prefect's room.

    One, two, three, four, five
    senses working overtime;
    truth bells softly chime.

    Bad, good – which to be?
    O, let a lady confess:
    I want to be bad.
      ('Hazardous Accumulations,' Lawrence 2002, pp.44-45)

And in his long sequence of 200 twelve-syllable poems, 'Gnomes' (many unpublished),
he cannibalised/reframed authors or sites as diverse as Jewish poet Hayyim Nahman

Bialik, twelfth-century Persian writer Omar Khayyam, twentieth-century American author Lorrie Moore, modern cinema and even his own poems:

> reading a translation is
> kissing through a veil
>
> Awake, my heart, to be loved;
> awake, be awake!
>
> blood clot in baby's nappy
> mouse heart packed in ice
>
> I have always relied on
> kindness of strangers.
>
> Hiatus in manuscript
> *　　*　　*　　*　　*

This approach seems to be an acknowledgement of Modernist intertextuality – a concept with which Lawrence's university studies surely made him familiar, and perhaps sympathetic to its central concern with plurality of voice and experience. However, it had been earlier acknowledged that poets manipulate echoes derived from their reading and listening – for example, poet Rupert Brook at the beginning of the twentieth century, insisted that "every man's brain is filled by the thoughts and words of other people's" (Brooke 1971, p.150).

As well as shorter poems, some of Lawrence's longer forms also manipulated words and/or images derived from other authors' writings – for example, 'Espaliered' and 'Graveside' employed ideas derived from American author Cormac McCarthy

(Lawrence 1998, pp.28 & 56). More commonly, texts sourced were an overt homage to prose writers who inspired the work: he acknowledged, in print and at readings, the research that produced 'Australian at Peace' (*Women's Weekly* 1945-48) and 'Fifteen Kinds of Footnote'[1] (Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote*). In the case of the latter, he sought and received Professor Grafton's written permission to send this sequence for publication. Grafton did not just give his consent, but also allowed his words to be used on the back cover blurb of Lawrence's 2002 collection.

Even Lawrence's early writing, beginning with a Vietnam War poem in 1969, sometimes employed voices expressing issues of politics and war. In the last ten years, global events have elicited a more active artistic response, and his production of such pieces became substantial. It will be useful here to briefly explore the history of relationships between poetry and the public discourse of politics, discussing Lawrence's poetic in the context of other contemporary Australian poets who both exemplify multiplicity and work creatively within this public mode.

2.3 A history of political and poetic engagements

> *Like old lovers, politics and the arts have shared an extended intimacy.*
>   (Barber & McGrath 1982, p.ix)

Poets often demand participation in public issues, some with more subtlety and technical skill than others. Here are some recent local examples:

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[1] This sequence explores the realm of scholarly citation – leavened at times with humour.

> …the main parties / are so confused
>   ('Catullus 117' – David Brooks)

> the army regains proxy control… with similar disastrous results… // Freedom /
> becomes a mob stoning a suspect…
>   ('Embedded' – Angela Gardner)

> …treasurers, trying not to snigger, / engage the newsmen with some swagger…
> A pin-puff where her needles gleam / is called George Bush.
>   ('Greed is Good' and 'He Sings Her' – Alan Gould)

> the high ground of Benaud, McGilvray; // the virtues of mateship (though never in
> finance) // …a laager of subtle excuses
>   ('John Howard' – Martin Langford)

> …So why / are we at war in Iraq? Those lazy / al-Qaeda louts, if only they'd get
> the finger out / & dispatch Mr. Howard to that Paradise / he so richly deserves, &,
> to keep him company, / those psychopaths Ruddock & Downer as well.
>   ('Sex & cheese' – Philip Hammial)

One might say that it is hard to keep them out of it. Not all poets are content to restrict themselves to purely aesthetic definitions of their art, and some can be willing to tap into the enticing power of recent and overwhelmingly violent events, also gaining artistic frisson from the adoption of political discourse and subject-matter.

It has been argued that poetry and politics are linked in an 'ethically primary manner.' Kate Flint suggests, in her collection of essays on the subject, that the two ways of viewing the world are "inescapably connected" (Flint 1996, p.xii). And political theorist Benjamin Barber supports, and eroticises, this connection in the heading quote.

Among Classical writers – Western civilisation's earliest literary authorities – I first invoke Aristotle, who defended poetry against Plato's exclusion of poets from his Republic. Poets represented bombast and rhetorical manipulation to Plato (who also excluded democracy from his ideal state); however, Aristotle famously remarked that without rhetoric there can be no truth. Poetry was also understood as a means of representing human activity, and for Aristotle it brought reality closer than did historical depictions. It is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, said Aristotle in his *Poetics*, but what may happen, and in this it more closely resembles philosophy: poetry "is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history." Prose, at that time, was seen as a debased form of representation compared to verse.

Public involvement was crucial to ancient Greek society. In his history of the Peloponnesian war, Thucydides said that one who takes no part in politics is "a man not that meddles with nothing, but that is good for nothing." Drama and poetry also played an important role in ancient Greek public life, and one of its purposes was to teach virtuous qualities. This ethical function was a political function. Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, saw poetry as a kind of political experience essential to cultivating virtue (Hewitt 2006, p.10).

Subsequent to the Greeks, the Roman Empire produced writers who entered public discourse in their poetry, such as Cicero and Pliny. Horace, too – who exemplified other poets of this time and their concern with self-presentation and identity, putting forward carefully crafted poetic personae – adopted the role of social critic, alluding in his poetry to the regime of Augustus and contemporary political events (McNeill 2001).

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Just as there has been an ancient association between the languages of science and art, there has also been a long-standing discussion about how the two approaches to describing the world may interact. Politics is defined as both the science and art of government; the art or practice of politics involves the application of power – whereas poetry can be seen as the exercise of meaning. It is possible that these two things can be braided together to provide support and justification for each other.

European verse and drama has continuously commented upon contemporary political and historical events. In eighteenth-century England, drama may have held a higher status than politics, history and even divine providence: in a similar way to Aristotle's poets touching reality more closely, creative writers during this period of the British Empire could also be seen to serve "a sort of higher interpretive truth" (Kingsley 2001, p.125).

Poetry often took a patriotic role in this era. (Patriotic verse was not invented in this period, though: like political poetry itself, it began in ancient Greece with Spartan poets such as Tyrtaeus (Canovan 1996, pp.188-189).) As well as pride in one's country and a call to arms, its intention was at least in part to invoke nationalistic solidarity over individual concerns. It could manifest as either public praise or blame, and there was a steady production of such public and political poems in this period:

> May never Minister (intent
> His private Treasures to augment)
> Corrupt thy State. If jealous Foes
> Thy rights of Commerce dare oppose,

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> Shall not thy Fleets their Rapine awe?
>   ('God Save King George')

This poem by John Gay in 1760 addresses issues of corruption, commerce and conflict both internal and external. The manufacture of this kind of poetry may be primarily attributable to almost continuous warfare between Britain and its continental adversaries (Griffin 2002, p.293), a cause of concern for English society leading to pressure exerted to extol and exemplify patriotism and duty. Sometimes, though, this kind of writing went beyond its role of patriotic reportage, building upon the models of Spenser and Milton by starting "to shape the imagining of the future" (Flint 1996, p.ix).

Global warfare is also a constant in the contemporary era – yet, supportive patriotism unqualified with irony or personal moral concerns is a strategy less often, though by no means always, applied by writers who address modern conflicts. Below, after continuing this brief review of political poetry up to our own century, I will survey certain modern Australian poets and their varying artistic reactions to social and public events.

Many writers, from Milton to Rousseau and Tolstoy, famously contributed to both art and political theory. On the other side, many political thinkers were writers who employed literary techniques to persuade. Seventeenth-century philosophers Hobbes and Locke, for example, presented theories of political society in the form of stories (Horton & Baumeister 1996, p.15). Goethe, one of the founders of modern thought, was both a poet and a government official – however, he kept these careers separate. Not so poet Shelley, whose life-work was social change. Shelley famously named poets "the unacknowledged legislators of the world"; unacknowledged, perhaps, because of post-

Enlightenment poetry's new, less-public focus on the internal and the transcendent, leading to its less certain readership – a "nightingale singing in the dark" he noted of his craft. And, in his private letters, Shelley considered poetry "very subordinate to moral and political science" (Kirsch 2007, pp.85-86). William Hazlitt, a literary critic contemporary with Shelley, also addressed poetry's inclination towards politics, citing Shakespeare and concluding that, "The language of poetry naturally falls in with the language of power" (Hazlitt in Craig 1982, p.23).

The Romantic period shaped modern views of creative literature, and uncertainty about the public role of poetry – how it may be a tool for political criticism and social change – carries over into the modern age.

In England across the twentieth century, many major poets did not reconcile, or resisted, even a playful merger. T.S. Eliot avoided contemporary politics in his poetic, saying he felt 'oppressed' by the notion, and it "frustrated his labour" (Eliot in Craig 1982, p.20) – although he leaned towards English traditionalism and monarchy. Ezra Pound, though insisting that the artist cannot be contained by party programmes, overtly supported Italian fascism. And Auden declared, at the outbreak of the Second World War, that those who write poems are "singularly ill-equipped to understand politics" ('The Poet and The City,' Auden 1963, p.84).

However, other writers denied that politics should be off-limits in their art. Kipling's prose and verse depicted (and praised) aspects of British imperialism, and Yeats eloquently expressed Irish patriotism, as well as memorialising patriotic heroes, in his plays and poetry. Indeed, some writers went further to claim that language and society

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perish when poetry is in decline. George Orwell, who put his political concerns into artistic form, said after World War II in his famous essay, 'Politics and the English Language': "the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language" (Orwell 1946).

Some commentators, philosophers and theorists also support this linkage, claiming that textual communication is cultural practice. I mentioned above that Heidegger considered poetry to exist for political purposes; and influential political theorist Hannah Arendt aligned humanity with political identity. Later, author and academic Paul de Man, in his famous resource for academic quotes, *Allegories of Reading*, argued that creative writing and politics can naturally conjoin:

> The conceptual language of the social contract resembles the subtle interplay between figural and referential discourse in a novel. It has often been said that Rousseau's novel *Julie* is also his best treatise on political science; it should be added that *The Social Contract* is also his best novel.
>   (de Man 1979, p.159)

And Richard Rorty, in his 1980 book critiqueing analytical philosophy, argued for the superiority of imaginative literature, echoing Aristotle, as a means of persuasion and "as a way of gaining a richer understanding of human life" (Horton & Baumeister 1996, p.11).

Rorty's arguments, which also appear to disallow poetry from playing a political role and acting in the real world, are not widely accepted. And the example of Beat poets of the 1950s and 1960s validated the wariness some writers had towards bedding down

with politics. Arguably, talented poets within the Beat movement – such as Gregory
Corso, who evidenced humour (a rarity in Beat culture), craft and wide reading in his
poetry – were infrequent and inadvertent within an artistic group that dogmatically cast
off politically suspect whiffs of poetic formalism, commonly replacing it with a debased
form of romanticism manifest in declarative expressions of autobiography. Chosen
almost at random:

> I sit in Lees. At 11:40 PM with
> Jimmy the pusher. He teaches me
> Ju Ju. Hot on the table before us
> shrimp foo yong, rice and mushroom
>   (John Wieners, 'A poem for vipers')

> if I don't get some rest I'll die faster
> If I sleep I'll lose my
>   chance for salvation—
> asleep or awake, Allen
>   Ginsberg's in bed
>   in the middle of the night.
>   (Allen Ginsberg, 'After Lalon')

> Not I outspoken but all others inspoken
> …
> hroor. VOOOR-NAH! GAHROOOOO ME.
>   (Michael McClure, 'Dark Brown'[1])

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[1] Some may consider this an appropriate colour to describe many Beat poems. Lawrence's use
of the implied term serves here as one means of discriminating between his poetic and the
Beats': when the word 'shit' appears, it is almost always given to a speaking voice within the
poem: "husband farting / And dogs shitting" ('Set Toil'), "Bring that shit over here. Yeah, the
whole box" ('Sonax Budget Classical Compact Discs'), "Farkin*shit*ouse! Sorry father" ('A Man of
Religion Attends His First Football Match'). It is a building-block of character.

Performative and vividly engaging in some of its posturing, the Beats produced little by way of political influence or coherent manifestos – although American author and poet Adrienne Rich later approved of the communal approach which was their "important legacy" to the growth of women's poetry movements (Rich 2003, p.175).

As well as political content, Lawrence has been drawn to the lack of formal scansion, performative tone, and appearance of autobiographical elements inherent in the Beat poetic. However, we have seen that his shifting, multiply located 'I' does not give as direct an appearance of being an autobiographical 'I' as do these poets; even political content is distanced from the personal and partisan, by his selection of voices either directly transcribed from major political players, or speculatively derived from the thoughts of frustrated middle-level bureaucrats:

> Whenever I'm with the Prime Minister
> I want to assassinate him.
> Not just pat his shiny head for the media,
> say "Stuffed up. Bad job" – but pull a gun
> Bang-Bang. Bang.
> ('How Not to Kill Government Leaders')

This fictional voice can clearly be discriminated from Lawrence's personal voice; it is important to the poet that this be an evident and defensible position, as he worked for many years in the public service and was conscious of problems that can emerge when readers, who may be unsophisticated or agenda-laden, directly align the author with characters represented in the poems.[1] In this case, the poet separates fictional 'I' from

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[1] 'How Not to Kill Government Leaders' was a subversive poem in several ways. It produced so much offense to his direct government superiors that, directly after scanning a pre-launch copy

Self by careful control over the stanzas' progressive revelation of his character's psychosis – its conscious and unconscious dimensions, the practicalities and impracticalities of his plan/whim, his familiarity with the milieu, the justifications and rationalisations used for both action and inaction – introduced through the posturing bravado of these opening lines.

American poet and teacher, David Wojahn, argues that from the 1960s poets' attempts to combine the personal and the political "remain for the most part failures,"

> plagued by reductive thinking, a clumsy shuffling between anemic anecdote and simplistic rhetoric, and a pervasive sense of futility. … Furthermore, we tend to look with [sic] askance at poems of political protest which do not fit the restrictive aesthetic and political confines (i.e. mildly left-leaning but never far left) of the period style.
> (Wojahn 2007, p.24)

Ailish Hopper, responding to Wojahn, wrote that although 'political' can imply 'limited' in literary terms, "the public… aspect of each of our lives is inextricable from the private, subjective and idiosyncratic. We should thus encourage more poetry that works at these intersections, not force a choice between them" (Hopper 2007, p.45).

Adrienne Rich has, in the 1990s, vehemently denied that poetry is without power. She postulated the unification of the public and the personal via identity politics – albeit

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of the book in which this poem was published, his line manager, a deputy Commissioner in a state government agency, refused him his request for time off during SA Writers' Week to attend his own book launch.

narrowing 'identity politics,' for the most part, to the politics of multiculturalism – in her well-known book *What Is Found There*. Yet this stance has been disputed by others who insist that almost any kind of political engagement means aesthetic failure (Erikson 1995).

Poetry may not resolve issues, writes Warwick Slinn in his book on poetry as cultural critique, but rather exposes their complexities; more, its formalist demands do not "satisfy the desire of cultural critics for a broader-based social and cultural criticism" (Slinn 2003, pp.9-10). Artists entering the fray may also have their work labelled 'political'; this is likely to relegate it to a sub-genre, giving it to be seen as banal, taking a particular and blinkered stand, or written to order. This kind of political poetry defies Keats' negative capability, in which the poet's creative process is necessarily "capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (Keats, Vol.1, pp.193-94). Many contemporary poets touch on public and political topics, but present as partisan and trite, reduced to a "haranguing stagy art" (DuPlessis 2005). However, others apply more sophisticated strategies to avoid the merely didactic or polemical. Below, I will investigate Australian poets such as Jennifer Maiden and J.S. Harry, who, without adopting overt political agendas, display the complexities and pan-referentiality of political issues in a poetic context, and further the discourse of both fields.

Although it is common for artistic intentions to suffer from partisan choices and expression, amongst recent Australian poets a small number, I argue, have succeeded in

sidestepping or utilising such self-imposed restrictions and 'unpoetic' elements, and are able to work gainfully at the intersections of public events and private poetics.

In the rare case of a poet catching the attention of popular or even literate media in Australia, a favourite journalistic approach is to elicit a response concerning poetry's lack of relevance to readers and society in general. Responses vary, including A.D. Hope's imperious answer to an interview question about what poets can do for Australia: they "justify its existence" (Hart 2008, p.12). Acknowledging Aristotle's argument that without rhetoric there can be no truth, in this case without further justification Hope's position may fail to convince beyond providing the theatrical satisfaction of repartee.

If poetry is not even at the centre of *literary* life in Australia, can it reasonably claim the right to speak for general culture? Tasmanian poet, critic and publisher Tim Thorne argues that poetry is almost the only discourse without a vested interest in degrading, polluting or manipulating language, in making language "subservient to a greater end. Whether that end is making money, having power – whether it's power within a relationship, or whether it's power in a political sense" (Thorne in Wessman 2007, p.191). Making a virtue of poetry's marginal status, unpolluted by influence, Thorne suggests it is these qualities that licence it to participate in the public arena. Its goal of enhancing the language – its 'untainted' condition, which Mallarmé said primarily serves to purify the words of our culture – may allow it to offer perspectives and insights inaccessible to other discourses.

The difficulties of political poetry compromising its own aesthetic, and thus limiting itself, are evident in certain poets who invoke public themes – for some of the reasons Wojahn sets out above, and in a similar way that the Beat movement was argued to be beneficial for neither poetry nor politics.

Poet Robyn Rowland, as one example, summons the recently commenced war in Iraq as a ready-to-hand metaphor, in her 2004 collection *Shadows at the Gate*. She invokes terror in Baghdad to illuminate personal issues that she and her intimates have experienced, such as cancer: "that creak of bone, sharp ache in the hip, / could be shrapnel from the first blast" ('Living with terrorists'). It is a reference point plucked from news reports which appears merely to provide inappropriate or bogus significance in the context of a poem about a personal subject. Though hesitant to place Rowland in this category, American poet Alan Shapiro talks of "the ambulance chaser poet who sniffs out catastrophes" in order to impress readers (Teresi 2007, p.12).

There are a small number of Australian poets whose collections intelligently and even provocatively engage with political and public issues. They do more than invoke global events to illuminate private matters, and they do not casually assume a political like-mindedness with the reader which would short-circuit complex considerations and sacrifice analysis for outraged ironising and sloganeering to the converted.[1] The poets I will closely refer to – Barry Hill, Robert Adamson, Jennifer Maiden and J.S. Harry – each balance or merge political expression with an individual aesthetic, working at the 'intersections' of public and private.

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[1] There are many references to this in recent Australian poems, even among established poets. Kevin Brophy, for example, has ten books published including four book of poetry, yet can resort in his verse to blandly ironic indignity: "*We eat money*, a General said today" ('"There never was a war that was not inward"').

As well as exploring Lawrence's poetic responses to modern political events, I will look at other Australian poets whom in their recently published collections merge the public with the personal – commencing with Barry Hill's personal journey through political and other themes towards knowledge. Then I will examine three other Australian poets who specifically concern themselves, sometimes over the course of their creative careers, with the effects of global events – particularly, the September 11 attacks and the war in Iraq.

2.4 A poetic of modern politics

2.4.1 Application of voice

Although, as I mentioned above, political voices previously appeared in Lawrence's writing, the events of 11 September 2001 encouraged a revision of this poetic. By the end of 2001, he commenced employing transcripts of the main political players' words in his poetry.

This approach was preceded by haiku using voices of participants in the World Trade Centre attacks, such as workers clearing Ground Zero and the father of a killed fireman, respectively:

> They come up to you.
> Ya can't eat all the cookies
> that they're giving you.

He's not a hero –

not any kind of hero –

a wall fell on him.

Broadcasting the testimony of living voices in his poetry was not consciously intended to subvert the role of "objective historiography," forestall closure on "the dynamically fractured and contentious domain of cultural memory" or invoke Foucault's "living openness of history" (cited in Budra & Zeitlin's collection of oral testimonies from the Vietnam War, p.3). However, I would summon Bakhtin in this context, who says that the word, the 'utterance,' is "always half someone else's" (Hunt & Sampson 2006, p.25).

Lawrence's haiku 'finger exercises' soon after the attacks on the World Trade Centre – reflecting the initial and universal confusion surrounding 11 September and its broad cultural implications, deferred into contemplation of immediate physical events – cleared the path for words of the key political players to enter the form, as they did shortly after this.[1]

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[1] The voices of non-political participants, however, never quite departed this form. Subsequent to the commencement of framing political leaders' words, quotidian voices of desperation recorded from Iraq occasionally also appeared in his haiku (a Japanese hostage pleading on video and a Baghdad resident on the departure of Saddam Hussein, respectively):

They say pull out troops.
English must get out Iraq
or they… cut my head.

He's gone. Iraq's free.
Now it's not safe to go out.
No lights, no water.

When the voices of political leaders of the time appeared in his poetry, they primarily 'transcribed' the words of former American President George Bush:

> Why did I seek the White House?
> I had a calling. …
>
> We're gonna kick ass.
> Find out if Saddam did this.
> See if he's linked.

and then-Australian Prime Minister John Howard:

> On fighting terror,
> Our Prime Minister told us:
> "Be tough as tungsten." …
>
> We must be vingilant against
> Jemaah Ismaliah.

Such voices dominated Lawrence's short poems for several years. They often seemed powered by outrage at the ironies, errors and oddities, arrogance and undemocratic-seeming manipulations both overt and implicit in many of these leaders' public statements.

These short poems resemble forms of caricature, in a similar way to political cartoons. Such cartoons are almost always negative, designed as texts "which display humorous incongruities and contradictions" (Mulkay 1988, p.203), often personalised to reveal underlying duplicity or to ridicule or debunk politicians' public policies and statements.

His short poems, though satirical, are less directly derisive because they don't resort to misrepresentation or overt caricature: instead, they directly transcribe the leaders' public words, retaining their order and intention (often provided by the poem's title, such as 'Bush on snubbing the Cuban President' and 'The Prime Minister on withdrawal from Iraq').

Lawrence continued writing this kind of short poem until the end of these leaders' time in power (2007 and 2008, respectively).

He did not only employ voices and discourse from the public sphere, however. His talk at Writers' Week 2000, without invoking theorists such as those mentioned above, asserted the freedom of the poet:

> Nowadays, poetry could not be further from mainstream intellectual discourse. It's seen as Writing's poorest, most embarrassing cousin. Poetry has no influence, it has a miniscule readership – and there's no money in it. The fact that poetry is practically ignored is its great strength. Because poets have no power, they have no paymasters or restraints on their expression. Versifiers have a freedom that no other writers have.

Claiming these freedoms – although they perforce come with responsibilities[1] – he did not just transcribe direct quotes in poetic form but attempted to create voices of other genders (including transgender) and races. Many of his poems, and both verse narratives, took female main characters, and he has also adopted Islamic and Asian voices in poetic structures.

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[1] Being unrestrained and powerless is not necessarily a virtue. During this same talk, Lawrence expressed being "afraid of total freedom, and so should all poets – a poet should have some formal craft under his/her belt."

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Several of his poems also took voices drawn from his workplaces. As well as linguistic parodies produced from the jargon of these milieus – about which I will say more below – he has also attempted to employ characters' speaking voices to poeticise his work experiences. Rather than create verse commentaries on direct experience, he poetically fictionalises real events and people. Adopting a persona serves to distance the poet from the poem, "by avoiding the inclusion of any personal information, and by maintaining an air of objectivity through the abstention from commentary on the proceedings" (Roberts 2006, p.23).

However, it is not only as a distancing technique that Lawrence employs personae: there is in his work a blending of approaches and a use of poetic tools for multiple purposes and the presentation of manifold personalities. He works with a combination of strategies rather than a monumentalised approach, and although I present here a set of approaches that Lawrence adopts in his work, and suggest an overall trajectory in his art, it is difficult to sum up or classify a single aesthetic.

Lawrence has noted that his poetic inspiration partly derives from the frisson of calculatedly mixing autobiographical truth with the fabricated:

> the timer buzzed, panel members clapped
> tara cried, laughed at herself crying;
> we all laughed, gentled her touchdown
> as tara returned from chairing
> the simulated conciliation meeting.
> ('Tara's Gone Real')

The Minister glanced my way, pointed

Like a Thai dancer, tapped his glasses. A job offer?

He had heard my piece at that breakfast Forum.

Clever but conservative. Witty but safe. Most apt.

I'll call his assistant, about a joint project, something.

    ('Professional Love')

I am not attacking the Minister

I am talking about his committee's report,

a report making a number of assumptions,

making a number of incorrect assumptions

and a number of misleading assumptions

which I shall now run through here.

    ('Legislative Assembly')

He does not attempt to prohibit such readers' questions as: 'How close is the author to the public servants presented in the poems?' and 'Are the poems intended to embody sycophancy/pathology/outrage, or something more infiltrative?' It takes skilful manipulation for life to produce art – beyond the completion of this kind of artwork, its reception by a reading or listening audience is out of the artist's control. Some artists, such as pre-Raphaelite painter Rossetti, have asserted that life is irrelevant to art; certain others, such as writer Jorge Luis Borges whose thought and art is immersed in theoretical contradictions, go so far as to say that life is subservient to art. These are artists who sidestep or make play of the ethics of argument – so it is less radical to suggest that art, even abstract and non-representational art, may be likely to begin with the artist's direct or indirect life-experience as its raw material, but then apply the manipulations of craft and voice to justify itself and its genus.

New and emerging writers are encouraged to have a distinctive 'voice.' It is not just a means of demonstrating maturity as a writer, able to manipulate self, but a way for a writer to consider and even aspire to a readership; Alison Deming's article on poetry and science in the journal *Creative Nonfiction*, insists that a poet should hold "some sense of audience in mind during the process of composition":

> If poetry today needs anything, it needs to move away from its insular subjectivity, its disdain for politics and culture and an audience beyond its own aesthetic clique. A poem reaches completion in finding an audience. The challenge today is to reach an audience not comprised solely of members of one's own tribe. We must write across the boundaries of difference.
>   (Deming 1998)

Finding one's own voice can mean allowing the speaking 'character(s)' in a poem to assert their own voice to an audience. The social world in poetry is "brought into being by the voice" (Pinsky 2002, p.23). In writing notes towards a first draft of a poem called 'Podcast,' Lawrence asserts he only became certain this collection of words would be a poem when he allowed the main character to make a drunken pun at the end: her awareness of her own state and its relation to her audience confirmed that the speaker had depth enough to assert herself within the context of the poem.

Writers are expected to develop individual voices, partly to assert their right to speak and thus claim their own authorial space. Sometimes, however, voices from outside this space – from the 'world' – can be more powerful or insistent than an author perceives his/her own to be. So we sometimes find such voices employed, through direct transcription, in the author's work.

Appropriating or transcribing voices is not, of course, limited to new poets. Many well-established Australian poets also draw upon speaking voices. Poet Steve Kelen, for example, writes on war and political affairs in his 2006 collection, *Earthly Delights*. When he quotes from voices directly involved in war, his own attempts at conveying outrage – for example, in the blandly ironic "America's interests need protecting. It takes firepower and brutality" ('All-American') – are overwhelmed by authenticities. Elsewhere, Kelen recognises that, say, Ground Control's drop-jawed response after a bombing raid is so powerful in its casual inarticulateness that he concludes his poem with these words, as the most effective way to bring it to a close:

> Just a puff of smoke on the screen. Ground
> Control responds, 'Dude!' he says, 'dude.'
> ('One Afternoon Over Baghdad')

Kelen may be aware – or have come aware through his experience as a poet – of the difficulty to artistically negotiate with, or incorporate, 'authentic' discourses, and that one's own poetic discourse may be put to shame by the contrast.

2.4.2 Parodic restructuring and poetic monologue

It can be a difficult balance to artistically negotiate between such discourses. Lawrence's 'solution' to finding equilibrium between voice and appropriation has been to apply the humour of mockery in the context of producing jarring resonances between public and poetic discourses. There are two ways he has attempted this:

1. by parodic restructuring rather than direct scorn: enforcing the seeming

   mismatch of placing short public statements within a poetic form; and

2. taking poetry into the realm of dramatic monologue, employing specialist

   language spoken by an insider, using voice and narrative, to dismantle and

   expose its manoeuvrings.

2.4.2.1 Parodic restructuring

In 2007, Lawrence produced a draft poetry manuscript entitled 'Voices of War,'

consisting of politician's 'sound bites' reframed as several hundred haiku. The

collection used direct transcriptions of phrases employed by US and Australian political

leaders, speaking to the media on current affairs both domestic and global, between

2001 and 2007.

These 'political haiku' used the form's syllabic structure, but rarely imposed the

seasonal implications of a traditional haiku. Many poets, readers and commentators

consider that poetry – let alone haiku, which are primarily tools for meditation – should

not contain such things as political messages. However, although the aesthetic

principles of the traditional haiku include observation of nature and the epiphanic

moment, Lawrence's use of the form is not without precedent, even in Japanese culture.

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Japan, forms developed in reaction to the

conventional form. The senryu introduced elements of humour into the structure, and

other haiku masters encouraged an opening out of the form, which included allowing in

a human element. Thus, writers from Western cultures drew upon the haiku. In the

twentieth century, Richard Wright produced hundreds of such poems near the end of his

life, expressing the "life and consciousness of a black American" in haiku (Hakutani &

Tener 1998, p.271); in the twenty first century, the political advisor in Don DeLillo's novel *Point Omega*, for example, links modern warfare to haiku (DeLillo 2010). Lawrence makes use of the form – overtly invoking the apparent mismatch between its traditional form and his imposed content, as one of his tools – to invoke and expose the stage-management of language.

Politicians' professional tool is the manipulation of communications; thus, his manuscript allowed political rhetoric to speak for itself, parading these language systems and sly manipulations, revelling in them and gently parodying them.

> We won't cut and run.
> What is the plan for Iraq?
> We won't cut and run.
>   ('Iraq Strategy')

> I don't think we are
> headed for a recession,
> we're in a slowdown.
>   ('Bush on the US Economy')

> he is a tyrant
> he lacks legitimacy
> he is unworthy
>   ('Bush on the Cuban President')

Lawrence argues that he does not take the speakers' quotes out of context: on the contrary, "a 17-syllable form is true to the spirit of these political leaders whose mediawise sound-bites aspire to prose haiku." Other writers have also noted that sound bites contain similarities to poetry, not only in form but intention, both being

compressed and symbolic, "condensing and encoding larger stories, ideas, situations, or emotive messages" (Scheuer 2001, p.83). Modern current affairs presented in electronic media rarely allow speakers time to employ more than the condensed imagery of a few spoken syllables on prime-time news sites coveted by these protagonists.[1] Indeed, it could be said that by transforming them to haiku, Lawrence leaves the sound bites in their context.

Jarred by the powerful implications and the media scrutiny accorded to the events of 2001 and 2003, almost all of his short poems by 2003 employed publicly spoken words by politicians – principally the Australian and US leaders, who acted as focal points to such events in their public statements – in the form of haiku or tanka.[2] Rather than resort to longer forms – as poet Adam Aitken has speculated was some poets' resistant response to the 'sound-bite' environment and "the marketing gurus who insist on 'the hook'" (Aitken 2003) – Lawrence's response was to provide carefully polished reflections in very brief formats. I will talk below of the merger of his poetic with the language of politics, but for now will suggest that aphoristic appropriation has been a life-long aspect of his poetic – in recent years turning to the requisition of the words of political leaders.

2.4.2.2 Poetic monologue

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[1] Jeffrey Scheuer is an American political journalist, and takes a partisan, anti-Conservative position. However, he cites useful statistical analyses from 1995 observing that the average time given to media statements by American Presidential candidates in television news reports shrank from 42.3 seconds in 1968 to 8.4 seconds in 1992 (Lowry & Schidler in Scheuer 2001, p.206, n.18).

[2] It may be difficult to consider this to encroach upon difficult ethical territory, as 1) the quotations derive from statements made on the public record, 2) he acknowledges the speaker in the poems' titles, and 3) he is able to cite the sources of these appropriations.

Writing poetry can be like laying out cut lengths of string; form, a poem's structure and appearance, can be as important a part of poetic creation as content. These dual aspects are often entwined in the progressive drafting of a poem. For example, these processes went hand-in-hand in the creation of Lawrence's 2008 poem, 'Reading with cigar.' As the drafts progressed, and the density of the words, long lines and subject-matter consolidated, he found means of lightening the appearance of the poem, and so ultimately spread its appearance upon the page from six-line to two-line stanzas. This extended what began as a 35-line poem to a poem spread across two printed pages. Perhaps this challenged casual readers to commit to a two-page poem; however, the compensatory effect of such an extension was a more open readability.

> Spines of unread books have frowned for decades
> from high shelves through mote-decorated sunlight;
>
> my conscience fingered one down. *Absalom, Absalom.*
> I lay aside Henry James' selected short stories.
>
> Embattled now for a half-year, stuffing Faulkner's pages
> into my mouth, sentences as long as paragraphs,
>
> paragraphs as long as chapters, near-choked me.
>   ('Reading with cigar')

Subject defines the approach that Lawrence takes within an individual poem, including its structure and appearance – but a voice, or more than one voice, commonly animates it. And this is a voice often specifically designed for spoken-word performance.

It had been noted by theorists that performativity – a dialogical counteraction to passive and isolated reading, which displaced readers' audiences from the rise of accessible printed material around the eighteenth century – has been particularly suited to connecting literature with society. Social philosopher, Theodor Adorno, argued that social resistance can be accomplished through language, and the "inner contradictory relationships" of society manifest themselves particularly in poems (Adorno in Slinn 1999, p.65). This may be so, but commentators can at times overvalue the direct influence of poetry which, in contrast to the linguistic spread of contemporary corporate and entertainment industries, "will always be cute and small; [albeit] as an art it is immense and fundamental" (Pinsky 2002, p.45).

I will say more about interactions between poetry and public discourses – particularly amongst poets who have had a direct influence on Lawrence's poetic – in the following section. Before this, I will briefly explicate his 2010 poem 'ancient shit,' which expresses coming to terms with the two poles of performativity and isolated reading. This is reflected in the poem's accommodating of the distant smell of faeces – "so faint it is comforting" – absorbing its presence into the speaker's private environment and merging it with domesticity:

> convivial, inviting space
> …
> blends with breakfast smells…
> the day offers a welcome
> in the bone-warm domicile

Détente between these two aspects of poetry – hearing and reading – does not come without struggle, yet it is represented not in the words' overt denotation but in the poem's structure. The poem's deep theme concerns time. The first word is "older," then each stanza passes through progressively shorter time increments – from many years to a month, and then from a day to the last words, "minutes at a time," framing the poem with the notion of temporality. A countervailing movement appears in its vowel-sounds, which open out and broaden in time with the progress of each stanza: shorter 'f-' and '-l' phonemes give way to 'in-' then the more expansive '-on.'

The sound argues with the words – performance in opposition to silent reading – and the poem seems to struggle against itself. However, love cleans up after shit, which is both remote and strongly present, in her parents' home. The poet resolves performativity with silent reading – and the poem's voice, both daughter and wife, resolves short minutes with a lifetime – in her solicitation of a closing hug with her partner.

2.5 Selected Australian poets who adopt political discourse

Lawrence's most 'popular' works[1] have been poems that adopt corporate, advertising and political voices.

> …[T]o write corporately
> Is certainly pleasant
> And has its own aesthetic

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[1] Lawrence received a publisher's invitation to submit a manuscript of poems, which led to the publication of his third book, in response to a 'corporate' monologue performed at Writers' Week 2000.

> Like eating icecream at the wheel of a fast car…
>   ('A Mackerel Green Sea').

This quote is from the poet, editor and critic Barry Hill, whom I discuss below. Hill's 2007 collection tracks a personal journey through politics and other fields, towards knowledge – also attempting to position his own poetic within political and other discourses.

I now wish to discuss certain recent Australian poets who employ the language of politics in their poems. I will focus upon those writers who balance and enhance these discourses, by the sophisticated sensibility they bring to their expression and integration of poetics and politics.

2.5.1 Barry Hill

I will begin with the poet I quoted immediately above, whose 2007 collection maps his journey of ideas, exemplifying the fruitful alliance of the personal and the public, the creative/poetic and the political. Barry Hill's *Necessity* is a selection from a decade of his poetry writing, unobtrusively sequenced to display the progress of the poet's ideas. Hill's life-journey, however, began well before the turn of the century: the first poems in *Necessity* demonstrate that his politically engaged family imparted an awareness of public events from childhood. The past, his parents – and, particularly, the history of party propaganda – have converged in memory and contributed to shaping his personality:

> …the Left rolls on, after a fashion.

> I can't tell as I speak
> If I'm buffed in its wake
> Its sound-system or both
> ('A Mackerel Green Sea').

Several of the characters in his books of fiction and biography from the 1980s, including his autobiographies, are portrayed following their own paths to self-discovery; thus, Hill is well-practiced at artistically structuring the 'personal journey'. He announces his path with a quote by George Oppen – "one must / Define for oneself, the word / Us," (p.9) – which also prefigures both the journey of search and the book's ending. Hill uses a conversational tone and vividly employs contemporary imagery, to open out his conceptual thinking and situate his role as a poet:

> The poet knows that
> *In the beginning was the deed.*
> He must combat this
> And remain useless.
> ('I Know a Poet With a Gun').

The voice is brash, at times even glib, though Hill mockingly employs the language of political rallies in this poem to position himself: "What does the poet want? / Love, and money. / When does he want it? / Now." The poet rejects the gun – a symbol of taking violent action, anathema not just to pacifists but to writers who have other tools – for use in "culture wars" and certainly as a response to the attacks on the Twin Towers: "Separate the revolver / From those smoking chimneys."

He acknowledges his leftist roots, opening with poems that portray the poet's unionist family and a defiant rail worker. The first twenty five pages of his collection are given the heading 'US,' and the unity of workers is his opening gambit in a book-length exploration of the relation between self and Other.

There are many Australian poets who take a partisan stand, positioning themselves on the 'Right' (Peter Kocan, Rod Moran) or the 'Left' (Pete Hay, Philip Hammial) when poetically addressing political issues.

Australian contemporary politics may be leaving behind the Left-Right dichotomy in public thinking – following political developments in Britain and the US from the 1980s, when a newly confident conservative movement shifted its strategies and territories, leading to both Left and Right seeking to claim politically centrist voters. This confused the formerly clear-cut nature of the dichotomy. Barry Hill is aware that individual public issues do not always invoke alignment along this spectrum, and he clears his own way of political side-taking. Brought up in a Leftist milieu, over the first one-third of *Necessity* he rejects side-taking and dogmatism:

> I always hated the way the Party blokes said correct
> and Marx's necessity sounded like an invitation
> to the torture chamber.
>   ('Canto 1: Ice')

This allows him to widen his perspective and more sophisticatedly explore middle paths, to better find his own. A political agenda can destroy the impulse to self-exploration: adopting a 'side' provides the illusion of indisputable correctness, and thus

impedes self-questioning. To remain politically uncommitted is particularly useful, as I suggest in my comments on poet Jennifer Maiden below, when addressing specific cataclysmic events on the world stage.

Hill is a serious poet of ideas, which his tone sometimes belies:

> Don't tell me all poetry is political
> when rain is not the lake
> any more than the river
> the ocean, the ocean
>
> > sky. OK, Sky.
> > Now that's
> > political.
>   ('Canto 1: Ice')

His poems, as University of Melbourne Communications teacher Gus Goswell notes in his review of *Necessity*, can be read as "a record of its creator's confusion, passions and ambitions" (Goswell 2007). Hill's journey is not unabashed, yet he openly allows uncertainty as part of his explorations:

> Swapping death masks,
> is that the way to go?
>
> Maybe yes, maybe no.
> *I don't know*.
>   ('Overture')

His path is also thoroughly signposted and solidly if poetically argued, as his further investigation invokes the authority of centuries of writers and politicians: Dante,

Wordsworth, Shelley, Lawrence, Pushkin, Machiavelli, Rousseau, Ghandi and Lenin. His poetry is packed with expressions of thought, ways of thinking and the exploration of dialectic – and the weighty names he calls upon are the icebreakers of his evolution, "steel and crunching / inviting sparks / you could still call / progress" ('Canto 1: Ice').

Like Canto 1, Canto 2 – exploring the 'radical idealism' of Shelley whilst talking and walking on the Bogong High Plains with his son – seeks "'intellectual beauty' / without hymn: a windless moment. Tinder-dry and kiss-quiet" ('Rousseau'). Fatherhood and relations between the generations is a topic Hill invokes in the first poem of this collection and to which he frequently returns. In this manifestation, he alludes to Shelley's view that poetry is in part defined by its transmission to future generations to "enable future readings of present conflicts" (Franta 2007, pp.112-113), giving this key theme a deeper resonance and pedigree, and advancing his own thought's evolution through the ideas of past political thinkers. The second Canto ends with air and calm purity – "the airborne synthesis / of stratospheric ideas" ('Dante') – as do the deep conclusions of his later poems.

His long sequence, 'The Prince,' primarily deals with imprisoned writer and Communist Antonio Gramsci, jailed by Mussolini from 1926 until he died in 1937. The poems convey the writer's inner development – Hill italicises words used by Gramsci – commencing in hope, with the linguistic expression of ideas and examination of the self:

> A pen to draft the plan of
> > *intense systematic study*
> > a pen to help concentrate

the inner life…

Task:

> to combat *monomania*
> *describe the common creative spirit*
> cut into language patiently

('Black Ink (Milan winter, 1927)').

Although focusing upon the inner life is a prerequisite, Gramsci intends to battle selfhood and summon universal truths. Hill frequently uses alternating and deepening inset lines, and unexpected enjambment, to convey the prisoner and the poet's concurrent growth – as well as to express the relationship between words articulated in thought and words expressed on the page.

From optimistic self-exploration, as the days of imprisonment stretch out, the incarcerated writer progresses towards an aspiration to selflessness. He suffers increasingly from his long isolation, yet maintains his resolve: "*I believe that a political prisoner ought / to be capable of drawing / blood from a stone*" ('The Rose (Turi in Puglia, winter, 1929)'). Interviewed about the poem sequence, Hill explains that, exploring ideas of civic nobility, he was drawn by Gramsci's "tenacious thinking" and his "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will" (Hill 2007).

Gramsci moves in the direction of transcendence and catharsis through art. His words are, by the latter stages of his imprisonment, unstable: "after so many days adrift / each man becomes a different / molecular structure" ('The Open Boat (*Clinica Quisisana*, Rome, no date, 1937)'). This echoes a statement he made eleven years before, and thus Hill hints at a broad intellectual coherence: "It will be the start of a whole new period of

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molecular existence" ('Gramsci in Prison'). Near the end, his 'raving' words also

express hard-won freedom, intellectual and emotional:

> *our sentiments are reborn artistically as beauty*
> *and no longer as shared passion still in motion within us*
>   ('Ravings (Turi, summer, 1933)').

Hill defers at the end of this sequence almost entirely to Gramsci's axioms, choosing to

do no more than transcribe the others' 'pearls.' This kind of deferral was discussed in

section 2.4, above, where it was demonstrated that Lawrence also applies techniques of

transcribing other voices for various uses in his own poems. He employs this kind of

transliteration as a means of conveying the 'character' of voice, such as the barely

articulate sportsperson on p.10 above, as well as a means of critiquing political or

bureaucratic players, in poem sequences such as 'Bush Opposes Stem Cell Research,'

'Action' and 'Jerry Falwell Explains Who Bears Responsibility For Terrorist Attacks.'

Lawrence also, like Hill, uses directly quoted voices, italicised within poems or

sequences, as the most effective way of displaying passion or ideas – such as weaving

interjections of William Faulkner's words (an author whose ideas also attracted the poet

for the toughness of his thinking, and his powerful representations of passion and

lovelessness) from *Absolom, Absolom* into 'Reading With Cigar':

> *The orphaning, the hardship, the bereave of love.*
> *…*
> *Not a being, an entity, but a commonwealth.*
> *…*
> *The brain recalls just what the muscles grope for.*

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In the closing poems of *Necessity*, Hill takes the reader further along his own path to acceptance. Indeed, he asserts that he has reached a kind of destination: "When you get to the centre, flowers await you" ('Sodden'). Travel-weary, shucking off direct engagement with the public issues that have so concerned him up to now, he ends his journey in contemplation and the flow of the Ganges, with the possibility of rebirth in the final couplet of the book:

> You could hear the seed syllables
> Crackling away inside you.
>   ('Himalayan Fire')

Elegant, not brow-beating like certain political poets but focused upon displaying the development of his thought, the poet has by now moved far from political affairs, the world and selfhood. Yet Hill has not abandoned the "thicket of words," and now achieves a blend of Self with Other – if not perhaps a union, at least a form of détente – opening and closing his simple final phrase with 'you.'

2.5.2 Public issue and three Australian poets

2.5.2.1 Introduction, poetry and criticism after 11 September 2001

Politics will continue to assert its influence, however, as the necessary expression of humans organising themselves in concert with others. Rather than taking Hill's personal path to 'enlightened renunciation,' some other poets continue to grapple directly with current and emerging public issues and events – sometimes over the course of their writing lives. I suggest that complexity of response and acceptance of multiple perspectives is likely to produce a sophisticated engagement with such topics,

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exemplified by three Australian poets who draw upon particular public events, and whom I will discuss now. I will also discuss similarities and alignments between these three poets and Lawrence's poetic work.

The most notable public events in recent years, having profound global political implications, were 11 September 2001 and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The growing certainty that Western political systems had overpowered all other systems also, as politically sensitive Marxist theorist Terry Eagleton noted, led to an arrogance that made political criticism less acceptable (Eagleton 2007, p.15). The World Trade Centre attacks may be seen as a reassertion of the real – that alternate versions of the world, 'authenticities,' were bombing and killing each other,[1] using the media as a battleground.

It has been suggested that these events marked the end of literary theory, reminding us that,

> while postmodernists may have been able to have characterised the first Gulf
> War as so televisual that its reality became intangible, it would be difficult to
> say that of the second one.
>   (Buttrose in Day et al 2006, pp.61-62)

In searching for approaches to criticism in the wake of these events, with a new urgency towards sustaining relevance amongst literary academics, it was argued there might be allowed "room for self-reflection":

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[1] Wallace Stevens said: "The real is only the base. But it is the base." This has gained a new and chilling resonance, as 'Al Qaida' translates into English as 'the base.'

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> While I would not see a return to the worst of confessional scholarship…, we might learn to dismiss less quickly the credit of personal insight, the value of a perspective that does not coincide with our own.
>
> (Stern 2003, p.637)

Poems, argued Adrienne Rich, allow us to resist forces that would reduce us to passive sufferers. Yet, with the events of 2001 and 2003, creative writers grew aware that invoking them could quickly overwhelm and devalue their art: American academic Rebecca Stern, from whose article on post-September 11 poetry and criticism I quoted above, expressed the view that "anything more than a 'nod' risks smacking of self-promotion or indulgence" (ibid., p.636). Polemical poetry in response to September 11 and the Iraq invasion has been criticised; at best, this kind of public engagement through poetry "remains only one of the axes along which poems can explore and transform a given reader's consciousness at a given historical moment" (Burt 2003, p.553). However, it has also been defended, even praised, by Gioia (for offering space for mourning and commemoration), Wilson (as 'a place for the genuine') and others.

Certain Australian poets who represent these particular events in their published collections, have chosen multiple and non-partisan approaches, and so bring sophisticatedly creative, intellectual and artistic depth to their discourses. Next, therefore, I want to discuss recent collections by three significant contemporary Australian poets who I suggest regularly work on this level of analysis: Robert Adamson, Jennifer Maiden and J.S. Harry. Each of these poets, according to poet and critic David McCooey,

have found a compelling poetic language with which to comment on the post 9/11 world (especially the war in Iraq) and that betrays neither the power of lyric poetry nor the reality of those suffering.

(McCooey 2006, p.22)

These three poets not only artistically blend the political with the personal but succeed in providing poetic means to explore these events' historical, cultural and philosophical implications. They achieve this by allowing complex, manifold perspectives into their explorations of modern politics and events – sometimes devoting an entire career to these investigations.

2.5.2.2 Robert Adamson

Robert Adamson has been writing poetry, and having his publishing poetry published, for over three decades in Australia. Early in his life, Adamson experienced family and relationship difficulties, drug addiction, transexuality, and periods in reform schools and prison. Over decades, his fiction and poetry – in autobiographical publications such as *Where I Come From* (1979) and *Wards of the State* (1990) – exorcised many of these events. Influenced at first by poets Rimbaud and Hopkins, he also adopted American influences, including the lyrics of Bob Dylan, whose "absence of sentiment" was one of his appeals (Adamson 2004, p.217).

An active poet by the 1960s, and coming to lead the younger 'generation of '68' who brought overseas and particularly American influences into Australian poetry, Adamson came up against the conservative nationalistic Jindyworobak poets, from whom he wrested control of the influential *Poetry Magazine*, which he edited for fifteen years.

The Goldfinches of Baghdad was published in 2006. Local avian wildlife populates almost every poem in this collection. He has a self-confessed obsession with animals, opening his autobiography with: "From as far back as I remember I've been fascinated by animals, compelled to get close to them in whatever way I could" (Adamson 2004, p.15). In particular, his fixation has been with birds, which began with keeping pigeons and rainbow lorikeets in childhood, continued with his theft of a rare bird from Taronga Zoo, then later with the poetic inspiration of Shelley's skylark and Hopkins' windhover (Smith 2004).

The avian wildlife with which Adamson populates almost every poem, drawn from his home region around the Hawkesbury River in NSW, is also a mechanism to explore distant and mythological locations; an American reviewer of *Goldfinches* explains that this device allows the poet to "transgress human boundaries, ignoring sign posts and political borders" (Romanos 2007, p.26). His book starts with a dream then a visitation, and textual surfaces feature throughout:

> In a dream on a sheet of paper I saw
> a pencil drawing of lovers: they seemed perfect,
> Adam and Eve possibly. Stepping into reality,
> I read lines of a poem on a piece
> of crumpled rag I kept trying to smooth.
>   ('A Bend in the Euphrates')

Sometimes erotic, Adamson's poems can be dreamy and shapeless – though they regularly contain oases of vivid human metaphor: "*I'm a husk each time / you wince*" ('The Grey Whistler'). David Malouf, in the foreword to Adamson's *New and Selected Poems*, celebrates his immediacy, and notes that all of his favoured poets are those "for

whom immense and tiny details, real objects in an apprehensible and particular form, are doors that open directly into mind" (Malouf in Adamson 2001, p.5). Sometimes, though, thought can be obscured by the vividness or inherent sexuality of the image itself:

> word-knots coming undone
> where your breast shines with sepia
>
> ink and the sheets blot out thinking.
> Smudged with love, your bum's a haze
> of lavender oil as I rub this in.
>   ('Éventail: For Mery in Paris')

This kind of observation – regarding the (male) obscuration of mental processes by their sexuality – can also be found in Lawrence's poetry:

> The rhythmic slapping
> of flesh against flesh,
> lusty, hearty, luscious.
>
> "I'm a fuck machine,"
> I crow. Full of thunder,
> the sky engulfs my words.
>   ('Monday')

The distraction represented in this recent poem appears less directly voyeuristic than Adamson's ("your breast… your bum…"), and more active and celebratory. Further, the conclusion of 'Monday' hints at derangement implicit in what is simultaneously loss and deification of the 'I,' in its engulfment by the heavens invoked by feelings of sexual

empowerment. However, both of these male poets are acknowledging – certainly, neither are mourning – the compelling cogitative disruptions of sexuality to other mental activities.

Despite the unifying conceit of poems about birds, Adamson's *Goldfinches* collection may not entirely coalesce. Perhaps, like the distractions of sex, its disunities might partly be due to the interruption of subjects that are potent distractions to him: interspersed with bird poems, family as well as love poems also appear throughout, and several pieces placed towards the end deal with Adamson's associations with friends and acquaintances.

It is around the middle of the book that some of his poems directly invoke the Iraq war. Although "a good political poem can take us to another dimension of understanding" (Kelen 2005, p.115), Adamson's faraway tone bars the reader from certain kinds of intensity:

> A goldfinch with a slashed throat
> was the subject of a masterpiece painted in the
> sixteenth century on the back of a highly
> polished mother-of-pearl shell—it burns
> tonight in Baghdad, along with the living,
> caged birds. Flesh and feathers, hands
> and wings. Sirens wail, but the tongues
> of poets and the beaks of goldfinches burn.
>   ('The Goldfinches of Baghdad')

The image is achingly poetic; the destruction of the artefact and its gorgeous shell casing, and the invitation for sensitive readers to be appalled, appears to be more important, more moving for the poet, than the bombs and the civilian casualties they cause.

The apotheosis of his conceit – the means by which we are transported to this act of destruction[1], Adamson's unification of bird and poet as victim – is wrapped, curiously, around a line break: "Flesh and feathers, hands / and wings." This may be evidence of tentativeness in Adamson's poetic. He employs odd enjambments elsewhere in the same poem, beginning several lines with prepositions, and turning the corner of other lines at definite articles: "painted in the / sixteenth century," and "along with the / articulate." However, it serves to distance the reader not just from the poet's intentions but the impact of the calamitous events portrayed.

This poem does not just provide the title of the collection but concludes his central section dealing directly with public events. And he ends this key piece with unqualified conflagration: humans are united with images of birds, and the 'songs' of both are consumed by a fire that incinerates rather than purifies. In the end, the poet sees only birds: "Falcons on their silver chains, the children / of the falcon trainer." Readers may be encouraged to weep at the death of avian beauty – all the more because human falconers chose not to release the birds, their 'children,' from their jesses to be able to escape above the flames – but could find it difficult to be wrenched by tragedy or human destruction. Readers may have been more affected if the poet's eye had

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[1] Trumping, for many allegedly culturally-sensitive, liberal-thinking people with short memories, Al Qaeda's much larger-scale public destruction of all pre-Islamic statues in Afghanistan only two years before.

concentrated less upon distancing mythologies of birds known for "singing death" such as nightingale and swan. His last word is that only the flames are fed; readers are invited to applaud the poet's lovely images and hiss at their annihilation, but are offered no hint of redemption.[1]

Adamson's blending of modern events and myth – his merging of "representations of the real and icons of the ineffable" (McCooey 2006) – has been noted, but it appears to compromise contemporary intensity. It may be that his image-enamoured approach allows him to fall into a form of emotional, and so artistic, disengagement; this kind of distancing is supported, and expressed, in Adamson's regular poetic references to textual surfaces, painting, writing on paper, and other exteriors and façades.

2.5.2.3 Jennifer Maiden

This kind of detachment has been postulated by Jennifer Maiden, as an outcome of her decades of poetic explorations concerning placing the self in relation to acts of war. War – battle zones and military activity – has been NSW poet Maiden's career-long concern. From her early poem 'The Problem of Evil,' assessing the Vietnam War, to her 2005 collection *Friendly Fire* in which she offers responses to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre, the tension between adopting ideals to define political solutions and the poet's disassociated stance drives her approach:

> The poem's solidity
> is not made of moral solution, nor
> of referential art, nor marred identity

---

[1] The nightingale commonly represents a mourning rape victim, and the swan merely dies in song. The phoenix is the most famous bird of fiery immolation; however, it is primarily a symbol of rebirth, and so finds no place in Adamson's flaming conclusion.

cut loose
   ('Slave Gold').

Throughout her writing career, Maiden has explored the nexus between public and

private life, between instinct and intellect, and between being part of an experience and

observing the same experience:

                    Experience
depresses, discolours his vision. …

Intellect being mostly the
knack of half-recovery
   ('The Border Loss').

Queensland academic Martin Duwell, who has published written commentaries on

Maiden for over two decades, notes her "obsession with incarnation and

disincarnation." As well as resisting "division and demonisation," he observes that a

precise public position creates in Maiden "a vaguer, rather than more focused, sense of

the self" (Duwell 2005).

In her 1993 collection, *Acoustic Shadow*, she posits a "Looser, softer, fumbling feeling /

at a self beyond an attitude":

                    it is not
my position to state this and then
complicate it out in many ways…

   the public and the private world

aren't one.

    ('The Science')

Language can be a "disincarnating force." Maiden explained, soon before the publication of *Friendly Fire* in 2005, that immersion in immediacy prevents conceptualisation; over-commitment to theory, however, leads to disengagement from reality. What was needed, she said, was "a mixture of the concept and the reality as a moral force" (Maiden 2004).

Beyond purveying pure 'statement' by this means, and clearing herself of a political attitude, Maiden, in *Friendly Fire*, gains access to a tone blending scrutiny and self-scrutiny with confidence and insight.

        Their scent
  is astringent, intimate and tenacious, although
        also
  I'll allow them sweet and haunting.

    ('Lily')

There is no war without representation, making its documentation an "aesthetico-political struggle" (Griggers in Kumar 1999, p.221); we have seen this struggle playing out to mixed effect in Robert Adamson's work, discussed above. Maiden grapples with this by simultaneously inspecting and introspecting, presenting and self-representing, giving herself licence to explore and portray the details of her own illustrative processes in the act of depiction:

  you don't need quotes, quoting

yourself…

in fact I meant that poems about poems

(in that case partly a child)

are not abstract because the abstract

in them works through to a deeper real.

　('Intimate Geography')

She is "deploying an analytical framework with its own vocabulary" (Duwell 2005),

and describes her own writing as "a laboratory for testing out ideas" (Maiden in Steger

2006).

Friendly Fire's core political sequence, the six George Jeffreys poems, contains an

introduction in which she explains that Jeffreys and his sometime lover Clare were

characters in her second novel. After the human context is anesthetised through the

spectacle of the WTC attacks, beyond

> *the pressure of events (in my old* Problem of Evil *phrase, 'the drug of*
> *immediacy')… you achieve a clearer view if you let the two sides talk to each*
> *other*"
> 　('George Jeffreys Introduction: George and Claire Do New York,' pp.60-62).

Many of her sequences, epitomised by the George Jeffreys poems, express a conceptual

process: she works through an idea or assumption which is returned to recurrently as a

means of rescrutinising and testing the supposition in the context of poetry.[1] Through

this framework of analysis and her allowance of dual postulations, the personal behind

the political ("the two sides") illuminate one another, and a "moral force" can be

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[1] This reflects the kind of 'dialogism' postulated by philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bahktin in which "speakers try to answer opposing viewpoints in their own statements" (Wesling 2003, p.11).

achieved which not only allows understanding but may provide a theoretical means to avoid conflicts such as Vietnam and Iraq. In the former, the US "was either too trapped in reality to remember its principles or too blinded by its principles to see the reality around it" (Maiden 1998).

The forcefulness of her poetry as a strategy in achieving intellectual outcomes has been noted since the beginning of her publishing career. John Tranter observed in her first collection the idiosyncrasy and tautness of her engagement with style and substance (Tranter 1975), and another fellow poet, Gig Ryan, described Maiden's poetry as assured, "obsessive yet self-deprecating," noting that her viewpoint is multiple and never singular (Ryan 2007). This is the key to political poetry, argues American academic Alicia Ostriker: "not the figure (the argument, the either/or, good vs. evil and so on) but the ground… 'plurality' or the 'multiple'" (Ostriker in Oktenberg 2000).

Part of Maiden's strategy of plurality is to give character to contemporary political participants. Lawrence's political poetry, too, suggests the personalities (sometimes self-contradictory, self-deceived or hypocritical) of such participants, but through implication by means of manipulating re-presented public voices, rather than providing additional commentary on their discourse:

"I had a calling.
People with very strong faith
are more tolerant.

"I will raise taxes,
bring down the big surpluses,
make government small;

    "strike terror abroad,

    advance Middle East freedom.

    And we will prevail."

      ('The Bush Presidency')

His short poetry commonly reflects the words of the then-US President, but also those of other major players, such as John Bolton, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and even Laura Bush. Similarly, in Maiden's earlier books, previous Australian Chief Weapons Inspector Richard Butler and former UN Ambassador Madeleine Albright have played speaking roles. And other major political players of the time appear in her 'Jeffreys' poems: as well as George W. Bush and Donald Rumsfeld, former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is characterised vividly as "insistent with that strange insistence / of a child rapid with its own agenda" ('George Jeffreys Woke Up in Kandahar'). Although Peter Pierce, in his review of *Friendly Fire*, opines that anger drives this portrait (Pierce 2005), it may also describe Maiden herself with her deft, defensible but difficultly assertive poetic practice. Maiden's approach also provides insight, in these and certain poems either side of the 'Jeffreys' series, into the deeply contradictory yet seemingly careless arrogance of the then-US President's verbal aggression and demeanour: "the eye-contact-first / smile that signals despair" ('George Jeffreys Woke Up in Baghdad'). Such a demeanour serves his public purpose and at the same time can defend deep vulnerabilities. An example of Bush's fractured syntax, his "functional dyslectic," is cited by the poet then glossed with a question:

    'It will take a long time to achieve

    chaos', on Iraq.

             …do the 'heh heh

heh's with which Junior punctuates

his little errors indicate

perhaps something cosier, more meant:

lethal little injections which

gauge decadence's deep greed for

the simple?

  (''Together We Will a Cheese Achieve'').

Her career-long development as a poet towards defining, portraying and merging the

personal and the political – "in truth if it is my thought, it / is my feeling" ('Abdullah

the Afghan Babe') – has led to a powerfully productive poetic interaction of feeling and

event:

                              If

the philosophy of revenge is thwarted

by suicide, as in the Towers, what,

thought Jeffreys, happens in the brain

which tries another target? Displacement

and infinite anxious frustration

                    like sadness

  ('George Jeffreys Woke Up in Berlin').

2.5.2.4 J.S. Harry

An Australian poet of a similar generation to Maiden, J.S. Harry, also portrays a

complex response to world politics. Indeed, the Poetry International website calls her

"one of Australian poetry's keenest satirists, political and social commentators, and

perhaps its most ethical agent and antagonist" (Brennan 2007). Despite this, Harry is not

associated with any Australian poetic school or movement – though her books were first

produced at a time when there was a surge of female poets being published in Australia,

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particularly through University of Queensland Press – and her elusivity and varied disposition has led her to be seen as "a poet of mesmerising and disorienting variety,… continually in flux" (Duwell 1996, pp.15-17). Her poems thus create space within which meaning and identity may adopt multiple speaking positions, and/or employ images that pose contradictory identities and the denial of certainty. An oft-cited poem from her first collection in 1971 concludes:

> The he that was friend of the little grenade
> liked poems that sat fairly in the middle of stillness
>   waving their feelers.
> The poems that he wrote were lumpy mattresses
> stuffed with kapok. Or flock.   (The little grenade
> wouldn't lie down and think in them—didn't lie down
> and feel one—ever.)
>   ('the little grenade')

There are a number of images and recurrent subjects within her writing, elucidation of which might be said to constitute an interpretable 'poetic.' This poetic, however, expresses an ethic of flux. Fleur Diamond's entry for Harry in *Australian Writers, 1975-2000* argues that she "ascribes to language the role of webbing together a self and a meaning that is plastic, subject to change, and accommodating of other, apparently opposite modes of being" (Diamond 2006, p.143).

In Harry's 2007 collection, *Not Finding Wittgenstein*, through language-games and multiplicity of subject-matter and narratives, she surveys, applies and tests history and philosophy against the present century's warzone. She does this through the comic and audacious mechanism of her character Peter, a rabbit in a children's book at the

beginning of the twentieth century, who travels, studies, learns, and presents the fruits

of these activities, culminating in Iraq in 2003.

One of Colin Dray's conclusions, in his substantial article on Harry's work, is that she

replicates Wittgenstein's undercutting of the belief that language conveys a speaker's

intentions:

> Harry's poetry is more concerned with the interpretations her readership
> draws from its language than in communicating absolutes.
>   (Dray 2005, p.199)

Her 'Peter Henry Lepus Poems' have evolved over twenty years. Throughout them, the

relationship between language, philosophy and reality – as well as the means by which

one can be transformed into another, or collide and even contradict each other – is

exhaustively scrutinised, often using comic means that involves Peter surveying and

testing various world-views and arguments.

The second half of the book takes Peter to Iraq. Immediately, approaches to truth are

bumped together and dissected:

> Peter wondered if pigs could fly
> & thinks, yes, they could, pink & squealing,
> if someone put them in a helicopter.
>   ('Far from the Shatt al-Arab')

Associations quickly attach themselves to the 'narrative': pigs remind him of being in a Muslim country, then of wild pigs in western New South Wales; flying connects to hearing warplanes overhead, and the parched sand to Australian drought.

The style is conversational, dendritic, even prosy, which enhances the comic and abrupt tone of Harry's linkages. Soon after his arrival in Iraq, Peter observes philosopher Ayer worrying over John Langshaw Austin's counter-argument, muttering about 'criteria of verifiability' under a rock in the Iraqi desert – until Peter breaks in: "*Parts of Baghdad are on fire*."

As well as being a reminder of the 'authenticities' of the September 11 terrorist attacks breaking into Western triumphalist intellectual and societal complacency, this also brings to mind Jennifer Maiden's combinations of introspection and inspection, choosing constantly and necessarily when to be absorbed in immediacy and when to be abstracted in ideals. Maiden herself describes Harry's "tendency to select two entirely different ontologies—views of being—and to juxtapose them logically but transformingly," which is not far from Maiden's own technique in her longer poems, creating "a perpetual atmosphere of real philosophical expansion resulting from seemingly playful conceptual clashes and couplings" (Maiden 1992, p.97).

Harry's approach is conducive to invoking various associations, then addressing them as the narrative takes its multiple and convoluted path. Like Barry Hill, her manifold approach is in part an aid to understanding the 'other,' communicating to the 'you':

    Is a language

known only to one person

a language at all?

    ('On the Outskirts of 'War'?')

At a 'Poets against the War' session of the 2007 Melbourne Writers' Festival, Harry explained that it was "easy to write 'screaming' anti-war poems but hard to get all the subtleties… Our job is to think of ways to keep our feelings alive without resorting to cliché and dumbing down the language" (Steger 2007).

Harry's style – including her regular and teasing use of textual apparatus such as italics, quotation marks (Peter's 'bunny ears'), tabs, font size, text spacing, bold and capitals – has been criticised as difficult or exasperating. Though intellectually and historically coherent, her conceit seems quirky, even madcap and bizarre. However, again like Hill, wisdom is perceived as a journey, traversing numerous landscapes, which the poet invites us to take:

Philosophical ideas
do not sprout
in the rural rabbit's consciousness –
nor, indeed, in any mind –
until education has taken root
(those roots gone down)
& something called
'great depth'
is reached.
    (''Zarathustra'?... Only a Draft')

Despite an outbreak of character-driven narrative over the last few dozen pages of *Not Finding Wittgenstein*, set in and around Baghdad, 'great depth' nevertheless involves being alone, outside the reach of language or surmise:

> This, then, is the purpose of both Harry's poetry and Wittgenstein's language games: to pursue an endless quest examining the bounds of language, analysing how the life and vibrancy that exist beyond the reach of communication are reflected in our selection of words.
>   (Dray 2005, p.203)

Harry's book ends with loss, absence, falsification, extinction: Josh has not found any of his wives (and at least one may be dead); Braid has left Max ("to travel back to Ur, & beyond"), and not having found the golden plates Max convinces himself they are forgeries; and Weasel has decided not to write an article on an extinct fish species: "'You can't get people worked up / about something that isn't there any more'."

2.5.2.5 Conclusion

Hill, Adamson, Maiden and Harry have spent lengthy writing careers developing their complex poetic perspectives, and acknowledge that such labours can produce a path rather than a destination; any conclusions made are not only contingent but may consist of vacancy or silence.

Part of being able to understand and apply multiplicity is having a sense of, even embracing, the idea of absence. Two of the poets I surveyed above write a poem about bats; both link this image to things no longer or as-yet unattainable through language. Robert Adamson hears a flying fox rattle in banana palms, and concludes: "The stars

flicker / letters from a dead god's alphabet" ('Winter Night'). J.S. Harry

characteristically employs the absence of fruit bats in the skies of Sydney due to

pesticide use, to take scholarly and linguistic research beyond its limits, in the context

of argument and at the same time to the limits of speculation:

> he is trying
> to learn what the sounds mean by studying
> how bats use them. *Why*? she asks him, he thinks, brutally,
> *Some things are…beneath*
> *&…below…words*, is all
> he can answer her. A deep breath. ***I am trying***
> ***to study EVERYTHING.***
>   ('The Batless Sky')

3 Performative temporal restraint and textual silence

3.1 Introduction

I noted above that elements of Stephen Lawrence's poetic have remained stable across

more than forty years of writing. In particular, this refers to the use and appropriation of

voices and of texts. This has not only manifested itself in the poet's creation of voices of

other genders and races, but has also been drawn from his various workplaces. I will say

a little about poetic discourses derived from his work experiences, including his

employment of marketplace-focused and scientific languages, which commenced his artistic trajectory towards an ethic of silence.

As a business manager/owner from the 1980s, then media writer for the *Adelaide Review* in the late 1990s, Lawrence received a direct and working understanding of the advertising milieu, its jargon, its journals, and the ways it can be employed to manoeuvre or manipulate people and organisations. There has been discussion of the uncertain place poetry has in the "peculiar context" of advertising and mass culture. This debate has been particularly rife in America, where the presence of advertising and popular culture is pervasive. Even in the nineteenth century, essayist and thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson drew upon words from advertising when, responding to Poe's dour and persistently rhyming poetry, he dismissed him as the "jingle man." In recent times, former US Poet Laureate and commentator Robert Pinsky posed the question: Is poetry at the opposite extreme of this culture and its intrusive and short-term ethic, and therefore cut off from "cultural reality," or can this polarity aid poetry's resistance to "cultural dissolution" (Pinksy 2002, pp.4-9)? As more semiotic modes have become available (television, internet), literature and technology can blend, and the role of poetry within various media grows more complex. One example, from Europe, is an English Prudential television advertisement employing poetry – not just in both spoken and text form but also superimposed upon in-screen surfaces – as part of its product advertisements (Goodman & O'Halloran 2006, pp.300-302). I will discuss the problematic and fluctuating relationships between poetic and other public discourses – in particular, political – below.

Working in education and then the public service from the mid-1990s allowed Lawrence to draw upon new discourses in the context of monological poetic parody. He had already created the template in earlier published monologues. His first such monologue took a long form (91 lines of poetry) giving space to invoke and develop a character; the piece used irregular line-lengths reflecting the character's pauses for emphasis and hesitation, and had no stanza-breaks encouraging a continuous reading:

> At the end, the voice-over –
> No, no-one in mind right now, Dave,
> Could be that weather dickhead from Channel 9 –
> But the voice, anyway,
> Will be. Say. You know. Something like.
> You know: Don't be a sheep.
> No, not that. But, you know.
>   ('Client: Family Furniture Discounters')[1]

This poem, written in 1994, resembles in technique and form his more recent 'Wisdom Statement' (2002) and 'Legislative Assembly' (2006). The latter monologue – also lengthy, and at 67 lines is the longest in the submitted collection – gives poetic voice to politicians debating in the parliamentary lower house:

> The report shows that some ministers –
> such as the Minister for Fair Trading
> who is at the table – that these ministers
> are interested only in theatrics.
> I will say it again so that you can hear:
> they are interested in mere theatrics
> and they are not interested in delivering

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[1] Peter McFarlane, ed., *Slice: The University Readings*, 1994.

services to the people of this State –…

('Legislative Assembly')

These works have been performed on several occasions as small-scale theatrical pieces, reminding one of the words of American poet, Robert Frost: "Everything that is written is as good as it is dramatic" ('A Way Out'). Narrative/performative structure forms a key part of Lawrence's poetic.

He sources raw material from his workplaces and their discourses of management and reporting. However, as well as his direct environment and professional interactions, his poems can also derive from other written texts. As a source of jargon and bureaucratic discourse, his writing is informed by such publications as the *Australian Dispute Resolution Board Newsletter* (containing articles attempting to structure and quantify interpersonal difficulties and their resolution), *Business Review Weekly* (BRW), *HR Monthly* (in which Lawrence's letters expressing criticism of the faddish concept of 'Emotional Intelligence' have been published a number of times), *Management Today*, the federal House of Representatives magazine *Around the House*, and Hansard transcripts. These sources have formed raw material for several of his large-scale poetic and dramatic pieces, notably the 'Public Action' sequence. In an article, 'Bureaucratic Voices,' he describes these direct sources of public service and management discourse as portraying "English in visible flux":

struggling nano-bots chew at the edges of language, excreting tiny changes that eventually solidify and build established discourse. It's a linguistic Green Room.
    (Lawrence 2004, p.11)

Much of this material, derived from and filtered through such sources, appeared in his 2002 collection, *How Not to Kill Government Leaders* – particularly in the third and final section (though, as mentioned above, topics bleed across boundaries, with the post-War observations of long poem 'Australians at Peace' placed in this section, and jargon-based monologues such as 'Acts' and 'Meeting With the County Board of Education…' in an earlier section). The latter section can be roughly divided into two parts:

1. the markets (reflections of the milieu) and the clients (presentations of products commissioned by imaginary corporate clients), and

2. the agencies (long poems containing voices from jargon-laden industries, set in presentation rooms of advertising companies and restructuring organisations).

As well as parody, in the former section he also attempts to epitomise and celebrate the modern advertised subject using poetic means. Encouraged by the early publication of three poems employing this poetic, in *Overland* in the 1990s ('National Gallery of Modern Art,' 'Porsche,' 'Writers' Festival – Poetry Symposium'), he continued to source visual texts. This time he adapted visual work from industry yearbooks such as *Graphis Poster, Graphis Design*, and those by the US and European Society of Illustrators – and employed images and research derived from several dozen media/advertising articles he published in the *Adelaide Review* from 1997 to 1999. In the latter section – 'the agencies' – he employed insider jargon, including advertising and consultant argot, from sources such as *BRW* and the *ADRB Newsletter* mentioned above, to depict characters' organisational intrigues.

So, as well as adopting voices from various work milieus, Lawrence has found poetic voices from related texts such as those mentioned. However, he has also sourced voices from beyond the environments in which he found himself employed.

Poetic manipulation of scientific discourse has taken the form of very short pieces – the aphoristic 'gnomes' (12-syllable, two-line poems) and haiku which he had earlier employed, producing several hundred such pieces since 2001 in both general and political contexts. Science-based examples of these two kinds of short poetic forms are:

> Time keeps everything from
> happening at once.
>
> The left or right glove?
> Spukhafte fernwirkungen
> collapse wave function.
>   ('Science Haiku')

This subject-matter aligns closely with an ethic of concision and silence which has arisen in his poetic roughly concurrently with the appearance of science-related poetry. It also relates to my invocation of Heidegger's 'present-at-hand' mode (above) when describing Lawrence's poetic avoidance of privative writing and, rather, seeking something resembling a 'scriptor' mode – distancing himself from fixity and directly autobiographical writing, to more easily reconfigure self and release voices into his poetry.

3.2 Performative temporal restraint and textual silence

Low and humble. 'Tell it low and humble.'
   (Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria*, p.452)

I have surveyed privative and public discourse – particularly political – in the context of poetic discourse. I will end by noting Stephen Lawrence's poetic's development towards minimisation and silence.

Earlier, I noted his assertion of some poets' mistaken sense of self-importance, and that inflated self-perception can lead to inappropriate expansiveness, particularly in a performative context. Lawrence's ethic of temporal restraint has emerged to reduce the likelihood of distracting and muting responses to content, rather than to circumvent negative audience reactions – indeed, he intends to provoke this on occasion.[1] Restraint and brevity, he has found, produces a focused and controlled audience reaction to the public presentation of writing.

An ethic of brevity has an important place in his writing, and it is also a means of effective communication on the page.

One source of this textual ethic is less intentional than imposed by external experience, from which we have seen other elements of his poetic also derive. As well as writing poetry, Lawrence has reviewed dozens of, and thoroughly read several hundred,

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[1] Certain voices in Lawrence's poetry, in keeping with their 'characters,' deliver offensive or provocative statements – concerning, say, feminism ('Partnershipping'), sexuality ('The Underground Banana Club,' 'Jerry Falwell Explains Who Bears Responsibility for Terrorist Attacks'), religion and politics ('The Early Bush Presidency,' 'The Mullahs on Dr Rice') or mental illness ('Aka Black').

Australian poetry books – particularly since 2000. This experience obliged him to reconsider whether his voice as a poet needed to be heard at all:

> Amongst the many poetic voices allowed between covers exist a large and diverse enough number of expert and powerfully effective poets who appear to successfully further this country's poetic discourse without input from myself. (Lawrence 2009)

This may not be a statement of false modesty: he has suggested that one's time might be as usefully spent analysing and promoting such poets as adding to the expressive chorus himself. This argument may discourage and even perhaps disallow new voices and poetics to be heard among the existing profusion of writers: finding it less than needful to add his own testimony is an individual response to scrutinising a very large number of poets' output. For some months after judging each of the biannual national poetry competitions, his creative output declined and draft notes remained fallow, as a response to the process of reading and delivering judgement.

Lawrence's choice of creative self-suppression is presented here partly as a reaction to an overwhelming hubbub of other creative voices. In the last thirty or forty years, US poetry has commonly expressed inclusivity and narrative momentum; however, a counter-movement has become apparent in which certain poets – such as Louise Gluck, and Thom Gunn in his later years – have chosen to omit action and narrative in their poetry (Rivard 2009, p.34). Lawrence's increasing artistic compaction, in response to a perceived din of poetic voices, is a similar response to these poets who choose incompletion, elision, and a spare, miniaturist ethic over an expansive narrational approach to space and time.

There are other reasons that an author may demarcate a limit beyond which the only personal or artistic response is silence. (A single writer may also have multiple motivations for adopting an ethic of silence.) Objectivist poet George Oppen ceased writing poetry and became active politically, finding the two discourses mutually incompatible. He began writing and publishing poetry again only after thirty more years, and in some of these later poems he explored this choice. His long sequence, 'Route,' is prefaced with a quote by Chinese poet Li Chi: "*the void eternally generative*." The poem argues that, through one's life experiences, an ethic of restraint and silence is built into achieving clarity; it is "Not to reduce the thing to nothing" but:

    If having come so far we shall have
    Song

    Let it be small enough.
      ('Route,' pp.184-192)

Wittgenstein, in his *Tractatus*, recommended not just that we say what we can clearly, but that which we cannot say we should pass over in silence. A different kind of personal choice of silence is exemplified by American Modernist poet Laura Riding, who lived in a similar period to Oppen, and ceased writing poetry as an outcome of a divergence between poetic artifice and the demands of her individual creed: for Riding, poetry as "a kind of rhetoric, a system of pure argument" could not avoid "cheating truth" (Auster 2003, pp.340-341). Poetic art is a kind of cheat. American poet and reviewer Michael Heller explained that at the same time speech denotes, "it instantiates

distance. We are never farther from something than when we name it in a poem" (Heller 1998, p.38). Riding stopped writing for 25 years.

Poets may also truncate their output, or make a show of doing so, in response to the overwhelming grandeur of nature or the artefacts of human civilization. This was a gesture perhaps more effective in the eighteenth century, where the natural landscape could still be perceived as overpowering rather than endangered. For example, minor Romantic poet William Parsons offered his renunciation thus:

> [I] Felt my own littleness, and want of strength,
> And thought no more to aim at works of length.
>   ('On Descending the River Po')

In recent times, some poets offer truncation or silence as a rejoinder to the noise of modern culture, as a strategy of contemplation. However, such a poetic need not be merely a defensive reaction or a form of withdrawal, but can be a component of its composition. Silence and brevity may be a poetic tool, applied as part of one's deliberate artistic intent.

Lawrence's published writing has included the occasional long poem. Sometimes they span several pages, such as 'Near Gillman' in *Beasts Labial*, 'Australians at Peace' in *How Not to Kill Government Leaders*, and 'Climate Testimonials' in the present collection.

Yet silence has never been distant to his poetic. Many of his poems and sequences constitute gaps, vacant spaces and unanswered questions. In *A Spiritual Problem is a Chemical Problem*, textual silences occur to the point of engulfing an entire poem:

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*********************
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*******************
**************************

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    ('Hiatus in MS')

There are historical precedents to this kind of typographical patterning as poetic 'form.' They can be traced back to the eighteenth century, a time when the printing revolution first allowed such play with forms on typeset and published texts. As well as Laurence Sterne's famous black and marbled pages, blank and asterixed passages, William Hayley, at the end of this same century, rewrote 'unspoken' music thus:

```
_____  _____  _____
____  _____  _____
___  ___  ___  _____
___  __  _____  _____
___  _____  __  _____
___  _____  ____  _____
```

    (Hayley in Bradford 1992, p.65)

Such kinds of creative games with significations and forms re-emerged in the twentieth century out of shape-experiments with free verse forms. Man Ray produced a near identical poem, 'Lautgedicht,' in 1924, playing with notions of obscured meaning and poems as visual texts. Twentieth century American poet Anne Fennelly devotes lines of her poetry to inarticulable text:

o   o   o   o   o   o   o   o   o

('The Presentation')

This strategy has been criticised as meaning "nothing and just about everything" (Rogoff 2005, p.194). The goal of 'Hiatus in MS,' however, is unequivocal: it is intentionally humorous and subversive. It may just be conceivable that the poem is the product of a publisher's computer error, if not for its title overtly notifying the reader. (Fennelly's poem leaves interpretation open, and even the title of Man Ray's poem is blotted out on the page.) As well as the 'joke' of obscured text, given mock verisimilitude by its authentic-seeming uneven line-breaks, Lawrence's poem is a means of representing the 'white syntax' of silence in a poetic and performative context.

Although larger forms occasionally recur, his creative ethic changed. Perhaps this has been as a result of 11 September 2001 (pp.22 & 50-51); perhaps in response to his reading of several hundred recent Australian poetry collections over the last ten years (pp.47-48); perhaps for other circumstantial, personal or developmental artistic reasons; and perhaps to respond to and shape an increasingly fragmented internal and external world.

In recent years, poems have emerged that reflected fragmentation of meaning unprecedented in Lawrence's poetic:

> prod. trap. she is molten hatred. strewn.
> he examines her matter, her stifle, her
> frame, her see, her point, her word, her.
>   ('Encodes Her Blows,')

> her home
> farewell, walk on

> "unthinkable
> chastity, it felt?"
>   ('Two Buddhist')

These poems epitomised the further dismantling of his poetry. The first of the two intentionally subverts/mistreats grammar, by 'nouning' adjectives and verbs, denuding words and stripping sentences of honorifics, placing a comma between the title and the poem (implying both a break and a continuity), and so on. Its disassembled hesitancy is a reminder of Wallace Stevens' later poems, open-ended and partial, representing "an indirect and incomplete movement toward its object" (Hillis Miller in Mazzaro 1970, p.99). It is a kind of dissolving verse: the woman's fierce feminine energy cannot be encoded, and is left an open noun, 'her,' after a strange sequence of descriptors forced into noun drag. 'Encodes Her Blows,' breaks itself down as it progresses, seeming to falter and collapse.

The second poem – based upon Krishnamurti's relation of a story about two monks who help a woman cross a river – examined the portrayal of meaning using text as stepping

stones between silence. It emphasised pauses and gaps used in telling the tale by eliding words and passages, paring down language yet conveying meaning despite the poem's absences. It interrupts sequence, both to privilege absence and invite a reader towards the possibility of constructing meaning from fragments. This process of writing, like the above poem, resembles the disassembly of poetry. Pulitzer Prize-winning poet James Tate says that poetry's backdrop is silence – it is almost reluctant to speak at all, and its "important work" is done offstage (Gunnars 2004, p.71). Perhaps, like Samuel Beckett, dramatist of impasse and absence, Lawrence was approaching an ethic of silence – even ceasing to be a poet.

Although not averse to larger-scale poetic projects, small gnomic forms and approaches increasingly entered his poetic. Shorter forms appeared even in advance of his haiku-length political pieces, before 11 September 2001, when he began a long series of very short poems, often in haiku form. The series had a loose concord, but shed all but one dimension. Resembling the segmented trunk of centipede-like forms in some of the paintings of Paul Klee, the haiku increments had individual character and effect, but were held in unity by their place in a string-length image able to be considered by the viewer as both a whole and a fragment.

As well as a means of aligning poetic and political discourses, discussed above, some of the content also reflects a miniaturist ethic. Small structures can more readily throw details and symmetries into relief: in the above poem, pairs of commas or hyphens can be seen to balance each other more overtly. Modern poetry, in comparison with other text-based work of our time, can be seen as a miniature art. This may not imply that

poetry is proportionately ineffective. When Wallace Stevens called the poet, in contrast with the Northern Lights, a "scholar of one candle," he was – as well as asserting that 'good sense' transcends mysticism – suggesting that the majesty of the aurora was as nothing until expressed by the artist.

As well as fragmentation, seeking smaller forms led to greater concentration of language. In contrast to the expansiveness of monologue forms, using fewer words raise the poems' intensity. For example, many of his haiku (excluding political haiku forms which employ an alternative ethic of reflective parody and critique of the sound bite, discussed above) are packed more densely – in keeping with the traditions of the form – than other poems:

> fine-polished marble
> fountains spit choreographed
> water droplets

> through its natal tube
> does the train's lamp shine, or does
> caboose arrive first?

> two thoughts locked in dance
> unravel their minuet's
> spiral DNA

Lawrence's small pieces, self-scrutinising, also sought to elide themselves. Employing a kind of un-speak, disassembling themselves into tinier fragments, the poems made a show of bringing his writing to an end – or at least experimented with the notion:

>   This is barely a poem –
>   it's an addendum.
>
>   This ode summarises my
>   final period.
>   ('Gnomes 19 & 20')

He labelled the latter his 'Last Gnome,' and noted his creative departure as 'a whisper and a self-reflective put-down.' He prefigured this in 2006, saying: "These are my posthumous works; I've produced them while still alive." This recalls Borges' short poem:

>   The goal is oblivion.
>   I have arrived early.
>   ('A Minor Poet')

Amongst the concluding sequences in the collection is 'Last Haiku' and 'Death Gnomes' – and these late poems are about mortality, incorporating several poems blotted black with the word 'death.' Physically painting out life on the page, sucking its oxygen, they illustrate nothingness. However, at the last, they resist dissolution. Derrida, in a *Le Monde* interview given three months before he died, also expressed resistance: "Less and less, I have not learned to accept death… I remain uneducated about the wisdom of learning to die" (Ganley 2004).

Lawrence's method of confronting death – or at least seeking a means by which acceptance may be found – is by invoking memory. Death can be seen as forgetfulness, absence – and art, like life, strains to fill its inconceivable void. Life resists it through

developing mnemonic skills. Again, there are literary precedents for such a notion: the speaking voice in T.S. Eliot's 'Little Gidding' opines, "This is the use of memory: / For liberation." Some of Lawrence's late poems are about 'forward memory,' too, attempting to map, or at least to gain a toehold on, the future or the time after death. They express struggles – at the last, overtly of Self – to push past the present moment into imminence:

> it's not the moment
> it's the moment
> after the moment
>   ('The Moment')

> There I was here.
> There I am now.
>   ('Eight Syllables')

Many times, however, the endeavour to elude or sidestep time is restricted, not just by the impermeability of temporality/sequentiality, but by the barrier of death:

> death is not a life event
> death is not lived through
> …
> it can't be experienced
> so do not fear death
>   ('Death Gnomes')

Ceasing to write poetry as an ethic, wrapping himself in silence, was a step towards Lawrence's show of 'giving the language back to itself.' A means by which one may come to terms with the absence of Self – finding solace, like Baudelaire, by subsuming

self "into a vaster, purifying dimension" (Broome 1999, p.292) – is to acknowledge that words and speech will continue beyond Self's extinction, and for the poet to make a show of leaving it to think of itself what it will.

The bravado implicit in this position is echoed in his collection's first poem: the banner of words will continue to unfurl while there remains language.

3.3 Conclusion

Noise can make a mockery of silence, as well-laid plans can falter and become absurd even to their perpetrators. One of Lawrence's last poems – a short sequence of gnomes and haiku, entitled 'Acts Destroy Meaning' – invokes Hamlet's final words in Act Five, Scene Two of Shakespeare's play:

> wisdom is aphoristic
> words destroy the real
>
> experience destroys love
> words destroy the real
>
> "The rest is silence."
> (Angels sing; drums sound within.)
> The real destroys words.

Horatio's response – "flights of angels sing thee to thy rest" – inadvertently contradicts Hamlet's last words. The playwright then builds upon the irony by having Fortinbras' army enter loudly at that moment[1].

Lawrence's final line, however, in the context of 'evidence' from Shakespeare's play, jarringly reverses the earlier and repeated assertion that "words destroy the real." (This piece – a poem presented to some extent in the form of a logical argument – may also pose another reversible question, about the relationship between poetry and scholarly argument.)

There are further literary allusions in this poem. The first two stanzas adapt phrases used by Brian Castro in his first novel *Birds of Passage*[2], which in turn reflect the view of Lacanian structuralism.

To conclude this survey of poetic selves and silence in the context of Lawrence's writings, I will examine two recent, interlinked poems of his; these poems reflect the various ethics employed and discussed in the course of this paper.

Lawrence has derived poetic voices from a range of texts, such as those mentioned in 2.2 above, 'Self, voice and appropriation.' He has also adopted voices from his various work milieus, and from outside the environments in which he found himself employed.

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[1] Lawrence may feel he can claim licence to appropriate this text, through his intimacy with it: he has taught and given lectures on Shakespeare's plays, from 1982 to 2009, and was awarded a Master of Arts for a research thesis on the subject of Shakespeare's flight imagery, which devoted its most substantial chapter to an exploration of *Hamlet* (Lawrence 1993).

[2] Castro's statements on voice and silence, made elsewhere in his novels and research, have had an influence on Lawrence's poetic trajectory: "taking on voice is a flight towards death" (Castro 2008), and "Speech… disfigures everything" (Castro 2009, p.240).

The poems I will discuss here draw upon a discourse falling into the latter category –
that of science. They are parts one and two of 'After the Budapest Conference.'[1]

There is a serendipitous nature to this choice of character and subject-matter: a family
member of the poet is presently carrying out post-doctoral work in the field of quantum
mechanics, and direct discussions with him as well as reading his published material
provided the source of these two recent poetic pieces (for example, Devitt 2009).

Both titles have a narrative motion, as do many of his poems (see p.107 and 149-150
above). The first concerns the protagonist's visit and interactions with a pair of friends,
in the city of Budapest, then his departure from them and arrival at Heroes Square in
another part of the city. The second poem concerns the same protagonist's attempt to
withdraw money from an automated teller machine, his assault by a thief, and his
resultant thoughts as he lies injured.

There is here perhaps not as much narrative momentum as some of his other poems,
such as 'Repartnered' or 'See About Seeing, Think About Thinking' – but the Budapest
sequence nevertheless provides an instructive example of poems that combine voice, his
core ethic, with a discernable storyline.

Lawrence resists direct confessionalism – such resistance is a characteristic of all of his
poems – and instead he explores an alternate identity, an 'other.' Also – exemplified in

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[1] *Antipodes*, Vol.20, No.1, 2006, and unpublished, respectively. Both occur in the creative
component of which the present work is the exegesis.

his poem 'Tara's Gone Real,' discussed on p.121 above – the 'I' represents not just another character but explores the mutability of identity. In the present poems, the narrator, though articulating what may be defined as confessional material, carefully undermines this. He enforces impersonality by, first, portraying his character's actions and not their underlying feelings ("I bring bottles to their apartment, take photographs, // put my hand on her soft shoulder"); second, he gives emotional responses, carefully equivocal, to fellow characters and not to the primary voice ("'That's sad,' they laugh together. Isn't it?"); and, third, the main character defines himself by the distance he constructs from emotional intensities: "Loving farewells red-shift out of sight."

This announcement of remoteness begins in the first line of the first poem, declaring that his girlfriend is engaged to another man. The statement may jar the reader, yet is presented as an unproblematic situation by the narrator. His emotional pleasure, even delighted fulfilment, is derived from his 'special' relationship with the couple. He presents and embodies a position in which the faintest tincture of feeling can be, or lead to, the most precious emotional states: "success should be improbable… Love thrives in error, flourishes in airlessness." He expresses comfort with improbability, drawing energy from this semi-vacuum state, and identifies with the cold displays of the chieftains' statues' and the geometric square.

In the second Budapest poem, this distancing leads to deeper understanding of the 'other,' represented by the thief/assailant: "Our superposition was complete." It also compels a loosening, even an abandonment, of self: "a wind shook light off the Square / made my system a shimmering mockery." However, the isolation that necessitates such understandings is presented as a potential annihilation of the protagonist's human

existence. In an echo of, say, Plath's last poem, such completion may be synonymous with death – a topic, along with silence, that latterly consumes the poet under discussion – and is the subject explored in the conclusion preceding this coda ('Performative temporal restraint and textual silence,' p.193 above).

Another foundation for these poems is the poet's use of scientific vocabulary. The poems in Lawrence's first published collection, a narrative sequence entitled *Her Mother's Arms*, dealt with resolving scientific training with human reactions. Here, scientific concepts form symbols, echoes and guidelines for personality and plot.

In the Budapest diptych, Lawrence employs concepts and terminology derived from academic theses and published papers on quantum mechanics and computing, interweaving them with character and narrative. The character in part justifies his attitude through equations and mathematical concepts, and his emotional preference is explained in terms of quantum computing. The likelihood of coherently aligning qubits (binary digits on a molecular level) is very low – but its 'nonzero' state delights the protagonist.

Shor's algorithm is referred to in various locations: the opening quotation, the body of the poem, and is shown in its full equation form in the third stanza. Also, words from this quotation echo throughout the poem: 'error,' 'quantum,' 'gates.' ('Error' is a key word – employed in the poem's opening, closing and central lines – referring to theoretical modelling that may lead to controlling quantum gate errors and thus qubits. Shor's algorithm is a theoretical procedure to solve phase shifts (Devitt 2008).) These are means of unifying the poem, as well as of connecting the personal with the

theoretical and emphasising this seeming paradox. It is a key image of the distance from 'success'; safe in improbability, it is a remoteness he accepts as a physicist, and chooses as a feeling man.

Lawrence has invoked scientific discourse in other poems – usually taking short, aphoristic forms. Providing examples, I noted above (p.193) that this discourse does not just express avoidance of private writing but is associated with his emerging ethic of brevity.

Noteworthy in the Budapest pieces is that scientific concepts, as well as weaving into these large-scale poems, are also incorporated in small forms within the same poems. This is particularly so in the second of the two, where aphoristic lines are integrated near the poem's end. These lines appear also to exist as a micro-poem – similar to the haiku or 'gnomes,' favoured in Lawrence's later poems – while at the same time constituting the poem's conclusion prior to its one-line coda: "Sometimes I am nowhere sometimes / I am somewhere at the same time."

These two gnomic lines closely recall some of the poems that conclude Lawrence's *A Spiritual Problem is a Chemical Problem* collection – such as the haikus '*Sola la muerte*' ("death, only death, death") and 'My Hand is Alive' ("my hand is alive / me alive. whatever is / me alive is me"), and the tanka 'Intelligence':

    Intelligence draws
    intelligence to itself.
    It will seek itself;

it will feed, grow on itself;

it will replicate itself.

These short poems employ word repetitions predominantly as rhetorical assertions. The couplet within the second Budapest poem is performing a further task, however: in the context of this longer poem, it affirms the linkage of Other with self – it verifies its twinning, or superposition.

This is the point at which the sequence changes from past to present tense – pushing into the future, seeking continuity beyond nothingness. It represents the end of overtly external perceptions in the poem. (This resembles the conceptual jolt offered in 'Acts Destroy Meaning,' quoted in full above, through its last stanza's shift from lower case to sentence case, giving emphasis and perhaps precedence to the contradictions that lead to its final reversal and negation: "The real destroys words.") The penultimate lines in the second Budapest poem, after an events-driven narrative, pose a purely internal insight. Employing words that leapfrog, fuse and evolve – "Sometimes… nowhere sometimes… somewhere" – the paradox presents the overall poem's key polarities of substance versus non-substance, being versus nonbeing.

The last line, evolving from the preceding couplet, presents an observation that combines both the internal and external. This seven-word line forms its own stanza – "Heat leaks away and my state deteriorates" – standing apart from the six-line verses that make up the body of the poem. The words reflect the conclusion of the first poem, with icy wind spinning snow "away into space." However, they do not possess 'poetic' adjectives descriptive of a visual scene; by contrast, they resemble a mechanistic warning, and, at the last, invoke the distancing concept of quantum states. The two

poems' conclusions offer different presentations of the same polarities: voice versus silence, material versus non-material, body heat versus the cold of dissolution.

The reader is warned of the implications of choosing dematerialisation, which is the inevitable destabilisation of the human array – in other words, death – before silence envelops the poem.

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