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Abstract
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Localities: Intercultural Poetics

EDITED BY
JOHN KINSSELLA
Kunapipi is a tri-annual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors, both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. The editorial board does not necessarily endorse any political views expressed by its contributors. Articles in this journal are refereed. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with footnotes gathered at the end, should conform to the MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association) Style Sheet. Wherever possible the submission should be on disc (software preferably Word for Windows, Wordperfect or Macwrite saved for PC on PC formatted disc) and should be accompanied by a hard copy, please include a short biography, address and email contact if available.

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American spellings have been retained

Front cover: Sokari Douglas Camp, ‘Gelede From Top to Toe’ 1994


*Kunapipi* refers to the Australian Aboriginal Myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol both of creativity and regeneration. The journal’s emblem is to be found on an Aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory in Australia.
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INTRODUCTION BY JOHN KINSELLA

Localities: Intercultural Poetics

One of the prime concerns behind the compilation of this special poetry issue of Kunapipi is to challenge the colonial/post-colonial binary, and to bring into question both the discourse surrounding this construct and, indeed, the terminologies themselves. The questions are socio-political and linguistic, cultural and epistemological. By including poetry from a wide range of localities – geographical, conceptual, aesthetic, spiritual, cultural, and ethnological – I am attempting to deconstruct the question into its multi-directional component parts.

When I originally sent letters of invitation to poets, I was surprised to find that many of recipients questioned the legitimacy of the term ‘post-colonial’. The questioning came on a variety of levels: whether any colony had indeed moved into a ‘post’ period; what the nature of the ‘colonial’ is in the first place; and the convenience of the terminology in defining and hegemonising a range of contradictory forces. The question of internal colonisations was most frequently mentioned: alternative threads working through and against the formation of a particular vernacular, the hybridising of the ‘colonised’ tongue/s, and the hybridising of the ‘mother’ tongue.

On an ethnic and cultural level, the poet Ai was concerned with a number of issues. She wrote: ‘Post-colonial? Hmm... Does that destination cover Ai? I guess I am, if I think of America as a former colony. You do know that I am part Japanese, and that I am part black, Choctaw Indian, Southern Cheyenne, Dutch and Irish, don’t you? Some anthologies mistakenly say I am part African. No, I am part American black. Anyway, I consider myself multiracial.’ Ai went on to trace an Irish connection, and at least in terms of surnames, an English link. Such is the rhizomic nature of the colonising impulse. The question is one of cause and effect, of intention. Occupation/invasion becomes pivotal to locating the agitprop angle on the discourse.

Veronica Brady in her article ‘“The Dark Side of The Moon”: Aboriginal Poetry’, writes, ‘For a non-Aboriginal critic to discuss Aboriginal poetry is therefore not a simple matter since it takes us to the frontier between cultures, a frontier, moreover, which, as we have said, is fraught with anxieties on one side and pain and growing anger on the other.’ The tensions that exist in many of the poems in this collection arise out of numerous concerns of this nature, even where they are not on the surface level of the texts. There is an implicit knowledge of what has been done, what one might be doing, and how this informs poetic language.

The poems range from the delicate lyric to complex lingui-politico-mythical song constructs such as Nathaniel Mackey’s ‘Song of the Andoumboulo: 40’, in which language reclaims spiritual connection, despite the weight of a ‘central tradition’, without didacticism. Douglas Barbour, in his ‘Contemporary Canadian Poetry circa 1998: Some Notes’, begins: ‘Notes only, and from a position I tend to think of as on the margin. But I have been reminded all too often of the fact that my margin is pretty close to many other peoples’ centres and so I can’t even make that claim with any sense of real justification.’

The point is, there’s always another centre, and the idea of a margin is a fluid one.
Mackey’s poem recentres over and over, or maybe it simply absorbs or bypasses the centre by incorporating traditions and strengthening cultural identity in the process. Is this possible? I’d argue it is. The issues of mixing and hybridity, of blood and language, nationalism and traditionalism, are explored in a variety of ways throughout the poems and articles. But, significantly, a number of the pieces, such as Drew Milne’s, Rod Mengham’s, and Robert Crawford’s examine internal movements of occupation and ‘absence’ within the texts themselves.

Tim Kendall’s article on Plath’s drafts is fascinating in the textual problems it poses, in the context of authenticity that must surround a volume such as this. Colonialism and post-coloniality become conceptual as well as geographic; the localities are fluid and interwoven. Metaphor, metonymy, the mnemonic, accrued memory, subverted mythologies, interaction between domestic and historical places, invade the binary. Occupation, territorialisation, absence. This is what language does. The connections and movements in many of the poems included are subtle, and their presentation within the framework of this volume runs the risk of forced contextualisation. But poetry has the strength to resist and accept such readings, over and over. Nothing is in, and nothing is out. Robert Crawford writes in Lilag:

Mapped an scanned, a karaoke
O gangrel souns I ken hae been

Mapread an spoken by my faither
I mony a cowpisseed biel...

So, you’ll find Scots and Americans, Australians and English, Irish and Canadians, among other ‘tags’, and poets whose locality is indecisive. But questions of locality are ever-present. In her brilliant article “Logocinéma of the Frontiersman”: Eugene Jolas’s Multilingual Poetics and its Legacies’, Marjorie Perloff opens with ‘Language as neurosis or language as “super-tongue for intercontinental expression”? For Eugene Jolas, a self-described “American in exile in the hybrid world of the Franco-German frontier, in a transitional region where people swayed to and from in cultural and political oscillation, in the twilight zone of the German and French languages” ..., language was clearly both.’

A questioning of borders. Of lingui-cultural sovereignties. Of a hybrid internationalism. Of a language of the avant-garde? In presenting poets from a wide range of localities, many of whom see themselves existing outside any kind of colonial/post-colonial framework, are we moving towards an ‘internationalism’ as an alternative, in which communication becomes identity, in which the macro absorbs the micro for the universal good? I hope not. Just another form of colonisation. The relationship needs to be more complex and interactive.

Perloff ends her article: ‘Not the melting pot, one of Jolas’s favorite images, but the particular values of a particular underrepresented culture, not the erasure of borders, but the focus on borders, not internationalism but national and ethnic awareness: this is the realm of mots-frontiere that has replaced Jolas’s dream of a “new language”, his “super-tongue for intercontinental expression”. Indeed, “intercontinental”, is now a word used sparingly and when it is, as in the case of those ICBMs with which we threaten weaker enemy nations, the vision is far from Utopian.’ The question of centrality that arises in this conclusion, the national ‘we’, is the focal point through which all these pieces must be read. The distancing implicit in critical language is up for question, and the notion of the ‘lyrical I’ vulnerable in the poetry. It’s not simply a question of beginnings and ends, and that’s what is being worked against here.
Ai

RWANDA

My neighbor used to come to our hut, bringing melons so sweet I thought I should not eat them, because I would die and haunt my family like a ghost with hard, black seeds for eyes. One day, he brought his uncle and two friends and they asked my father to go outside with them. I thought he had come to get permission to marry me and I was glad because I loved him, even though he wasn’t a member of my tribe, nor as educated as I was. I wanted to stay, but my mother gave me a basket of clothes to wash at the river. She said, “don’t come back, until they are as clean as the Virgin Mary’s soul.” “Mother,” I said, “I’ll never come back then.” “Shall I take my brother?” I asked, as he ran to my father’s side. I was laughing, when she hissed, “run” and I did because she frightened me. As I rounded the hut, I heard the “tat,” “tat,” “tat,” from guns like the ones the soldiers carry. I ran faster, still holding the basket. It was frozen to my hands and I still held it, even as I jumped in the river. I thought I would die, so I closed my eyes. When something bumped against me, I opened them and saw my father’s body, As he floated past me, his arm hooked around my neck, almost taking me under and I released the basket. I reached for my father, as bullets hit the water and I dove under him. His body shielded me, until I couldn’t breathe and had to break the surface for air. When I crawled onto the riverbank,
I hid in the grass behind the church.
Finally, when I was sure no one was around,
I beat on the rectory door.
until the priest opened it. "Hide me, Father," I begged.
Once inside, I was overjoyed to see my mother.
She told me when my neighbor shot at her,
she pretended to be dead
and while he dumped my father in the river,
she escaped and came here,
hoping I had survived.
She said we needed another place to hide,
but she could only find a small closet sized space
behind the altar, covered by a sheet of tin.
Only one of us could fit, so she made me go in
and covered the hole again.
When I heard screaming, I kicked the tin aside
and saw my mother was on fire.
I tried to help her, using only my hands
but when she was completely covered in flames,
I broke a stained glass window
with a statue of Saint Joseph and climbed out
As I crawled back to the river,
a shiver of wind passed over me
through the grass and trees.
When I stopped to rest,
fear coiled around me like a snake,
but when I told myself I would not let them kill me,
it took the shape of a bird and flew away.
I crawled back to the church,
because I wanted to find my mother’s ashes,
so I could bury them,
but my way was blocked by the rebels,
so I waited until dark.
Maybe I slept. I don’t know.
When I heard my neighbor’s voice,
it was as if I had awakened from a dream.
Relief flooded over me, until I sat up
and saw him standing above me, holding a machete.
"Sister," he said, "I won’t hurt you."
I knew he was lying and I tried to get away,
but I was too weak
and he fell on top of me, tearing at my clothes.
When he was finished raping me,
I thought he would kill me
but he only brought the machete close to my head,
then let it fall from his hands.
Dawn had come to the village
with more killing on its mind.
I heard screams and pleas for mercy,
then I realized those sounds were inside me.
They would never leave.
Now I am always talking to the dead.
Their bones are rattling around in my head.
Sometimes I can’t hear anything else
and I go to the river with my son and cry.
When he was a few days old,
I took him there for the first time.
I stood looking at the water,
which was still the color of blood,
then I lifted him high above my head,
but my mother’s bones said, “killing is a sin,
so I took him home
to raise him as if he really is my son
and not the issue of my neighbor,
who has returned to torment me
with skin that smells like burning flesh,
but in my heart I know
both his mother and father died long ago
and left this orphan to grow like a poisoned flower
beside the open grave that was my country.
Gillian Allnutt

GUILLAUME'S LOOM, HASTINGS, 1080

I made a loom for Mathilda, my English daughter.
Mathilde! I called. I wanted to show her
The strong clay rings I'd made to hold the thread
As hard and near as I held her. I wasn't proud
Of the rest - a rough affair of stick and thole
Cut from the worst English wood, I think hazel,
And English wool.

HER FATHER IN THE PATIENTS' GARDEN,
NEWCASTLE BOROUGH LUNATIC ASYLUM, 1919

I am not lost. I harbour my loneliness here
By the larkspur. Here, where the hand of my daughter,
Margaret's hand in hard love, took my elbow –
The smell of the ward's in my hair.
Behind me now, the black clocktower, the wall –
*O God, our ...* God, reported missing and presumed, etcetera,
When they built that wall.
I'll take my soul and sixpence when I go.
I'll go to Muriel, though she is laid
Aside. *My mother, Dad, my mother's ...* Margaret said.
The stones of the path in the patients' garden –
Narrow then wide, narrow then wide.

Note: The hospital, taken over by the Ministry of War during World War I, is now known as St Nicholas' Hospital.
John Ashbery

THE OLD HOUSE IN THE COUNTRY

The walls are whitish. Is it cold enough in here? No, it’s the statuary I came to see. And the gizzards, you wanted the gizzards too? No, it was buzzards I’d mentioned in my letter of introduction, which you seem to have lost, but I was reminded too of ancient blizzards that used to infest these parts. Ah, but gizzards breed sapience, there can be no other way. Allow me to pass in front of you while I keep you waiting in the draft that is colder than the room it besmirches.

Now we can see eye to eye, and it is a good thing. I would not have thought it easy to set off the smoke alarms had we been closer together.

“Now is the time for escape, you fool!”

Don’t you see it another way, back in the furrows that bore you, that nature knitted for you? I don’t know but something keeps getting in the way of our orderly patrolling of these rooms. I suppose it’s that I want to go back, really ...

And so you shall, on the 7:19. Meanwhile examine this bronze. I’ll get Biddy to set out the tea-things and that will save us some time.
Andy Brown

SOME KIND OF SEA LIGHT

'The root of all things is green,' says the Arab philosopher Haly.

Pollen analysis proves it. Even in the night the green comes over.

At midsummer, the vernal equinox, only one wavelength is visible.

But what of the colours we know as love; the urge to fall asleep inside the carapace? Stepping close, the light cuts understanding.

Our skins condense dismay. We face each other wordlessly papering over the cracks the way we use words to paper over the joins between things – not that things are joined but held apart;

not even that there are things themselves (if the Buddha's to be believed),

only the ideas of things, which brings us back to words themselves, the way they oscillate like the movements of a child's puzzle, shifting tiles one by one until a pattern is formed – ships in a sudden & luminous calm.

You know, I like boats. I see sea-green & it's the deep I want.
Robert Crawford

THE TELEPHONE

"The process in its two extreme stages is so exactly similar to the old-fashioned method of speaking and hearing that no preparatory practice is required on the part of either operator."

James Clerk Maxwell, 'The Telephone' (1879)

Teetering governors feed back
Information, summoning my father,

Robert Alexander Nelson Crawford,
Cut off, except in my own voice

Rising so confidently at his funeral
Past tears, singing as he would have sung.

Bell's story helps. His Dad a dogged Scotsman
Teaching himself how to say English right,

Obsessed with voice, the lassoing of lost sound,
Bell, the belligerently beautiful,

Whose Visible Speech tolls out for his dead boy,
Keens to the late, loved Edward Charles Bell

Whose brother will invent the telephone.
Schooling new tones, sieving and sifting pitch,

While tuning forks research a long held note,
Yon young, experimental ear strains hard

For whispers, the medium's feedback of caress.
Not through mere making and then breaking contact,

Nor through the yell of hurt, but via two linked
Closed curves in space, an embraced copper circuit

Transmits a psalm in telephonic strength,
Present though absent, stridulating. Bell,

Father of Charles and Alexander Graham,
Heard through the Boston School for the Deaf and Dumb,

Was gone by then, but his quick son believed
Edinburgh fuelled his ghost-acoustic, sensed
Remote phoneidoscopes, a twanging harp,  
Musicomathematics of loved sound.

'Hello? Hello?' is carrying and carried  
Through speakers, speaker, spoken, all impressing

Electromagnet, galvanometer,  
Tinned iron plate set in motion by a voice

Though itself voiceless, amenned by the faithful  
Knowing, then known, just given by the air.

DEINCARNATION

Each daybreak laptops syphon off the glens,  
Ada, Countess of Lovelace, Vannevar Bush,

Alan Turing spectral in Scourie,  
Babbage downloading half of Sutherland

With factors and reels, inescapable  
Whirring of difference engines.

Inverailort and Morar host  
Shrewd pioneers of computing.

Digitized, blue, massive Roshven  
Loses its substance, granite and grass

Deincarnated and weightless.  
Shaking hands with absentees,

Beaters, gutters have their pockets emptied  
Of any last objects, even a nanomachine,

A pebble, a lucky coin.  
Skulking on Celtic Twilight shores,

Each loch beyond is cleared of itself,  
Gaelic names, flora, rainfall

So close, the tangible spirited away,  
Cybered in a world of light.
LIGLAG

It’s sniauvin i the Howe o Alford;
Whaiskin liggars are wede awa.

A’ wark’s twa-handit-wark this season,
Screens daurk as a hoodie craw.

Torry-eaten databases
Yield scotch mist o an auld leid,

Bodwords, bodes, thin scraelike faces.
Peter an Major Cook are deid.

Nemms o places haud thir secrets,
Leochel-Cushnie, Lochnagar,

Luvely even untranslatit,
Cast-byes unnerneath the haar

Dreepin doon tae Inverbervie
When the haert’s as grit’s a peat.

Youtlin souns blaw frae the glebe.
Pour a dram an tak it neat,

Neat as Cattens, Tibberchindy,
Tomintoul or Aiberdeen,

Mapped an scanned, a karaoke
O gangrel souns I ken hae been

Mapread an spoken by my faither
I mony a cowpissed bield, a Bank

O Scotlan, or a Baltic dawn.
Skourdaboggie, auld an lank,

I key them intae this computer’s
Empire by a taskit wa.

Peterculter, Maryculter.
Tine haert, tine a’. Tine haert, tine a’.
SENSATION OF ANOTHER LANGUAGE

It's snowing in the Howe of Alford; gasping violently for breath, salmon that have lain too long in the fresh water are weeded out. All work is second-rate work that needs redoing in this season, screens dark as a carrion crow. Databases that are like exhausted land give up the small but wetting rain of an old language, traditional sayings expressing the fate of a family, portents, thin faces like shrivelled shoes. Peter and Major Cook are dead. Names of places hold their secrets, Leochel-Cushnie, Lochnagar, lovely even untranslated, stuff thrown away as unserviceable underneath the sea-mist dripping down to Inverbervie when the heart is ready to burst with sorrow. Feeble sounds, like those of dying animals, come from the field by the manse. Pour a dram and take it neat, neat as Cattens, Tibberchindy, Tomintoul or Aberdeen, mapped and scanned, a karaoke of wandering sounds I know have been mapread and spoken by my father in many a shelter pissed on by cows, a Bank of Scotland or a Baltic dawn. Like the last surviving member of a family, old and spare, I key them into this computer's empire beside a wall fatigued with hard work. Peterculter, Maryculter. If you let sorrow overcome you, you lose everything. If you let sorrow overcome you, you lose everything.
Imtiaz Dharker

BREEDING GROUND

I always knew I was carrying around
a breeding-ground
for the devil.

I mastered the art of nodding, smirking,
doing my hair just so
and wearing pink
to mask the stink of evil
lurking right inside my pride.

I could take the cleverest devil
for a ride.

A good thief cuts the glass
quite cleanly, without making a noise
and enters.

There's hardly any sign
that things have been disturbed.

That's how the devil got in,
slipped into my skin,
rearranged my thoughts
like old clothes at the change
of the season.

Slice off my fingertips.
I mustn't leave our prints.

I'm burgling myself, and I'm so good
I won't be caught.

There's nothing here I'm afraid to lose.
Room after room of dusty corners
and mouldy shoes.
But what the hell –
Where are all the precious things,
the gold I thought I had,
the soul waiting to be sold?
Robert Gray

VACANCIES

A dark room and
the sea, grown dark,

seems a building
opposite. Here

he sits without
the light and drinks,

feet up. And there’s
a view, switched on –

the big-chested
moon, come home, is

wriggling out of
her bright jumper.

A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD

The hollyhocks,
each spire of bells
in white or mauve,
lean from stone walls

all the way up
the muddy path
to the village
Sylvia Plath

is buried in –
from stony cracks
they bloom, inlaid
like candle wax,

in sodden, frail
conglomerate;
these ‘reach too high’
says Eliot.
I’ve no taste for romanticism
and calm my heart
to seek your room.

Something to do –
I’m not a fan;
yours aren’t the poems
I read again.

I find your grave
is small, child-like;
you’ve always seemed
claustrophobic,

but this – too sad
as final ground;
such narrowness
un-American.

A mince of earth,
a bare rose-cane,
a banal phrase
on your headstone –

had you the choice
that brought you here?
Your limbs were meant
for Florida

(Miss Bishop loved it).
My old disquiet’s
your will to work
artistic spite.

The marvellous gift,
its use so small –
that Ich, Ich, Ich
impossible.

It seems we choose
the known – ourselves;
what we prefer
is our own cells.
Hence your husband –
tough poetry,
leather jacket,
astrology;

the Bronte moors,
that sweeping clouds
pick to the bone
as if they’re birds.

Phantoms skirmish –
the raininess
that spills on stone
an ox-tail grease.

Stones everywhere –
their loaves, the road;
they truss the hills –
it seems they’re lead.

Fine, if one’s own;
bound to depress
you, a girl of
the Golden West.

Is art what comes
powerfully
upon the nerves –
a Nazi rally?

One can, with art,
choose emotion
reason approves,
not just sensation.

That great gifts fail
must overwhelm.
Despite white clouds,
a bank of elms

I leave. The church
of Heptonstall
glares like Batman
above the hill.
Dennis Haskell

THAT WORLD WHOSE SANITY WE KNOW

The plane dozed above the wavering green of
sun-bright South Australian farms,
intensities of gouged-out ochre rock,
a river's slithering invitation
before the arthritic land's
gnarled knuckle hills. On one
someone had patterned trees to give
all lingerers above
the message "Jesus Lives".

Lives, I suppose, in leaf and branch and limb
– natural certainties to worship Him.
I was leafing through poems by Derek Mahon
"who has hardly grasped what life is about"
and recalled yesterday's train, that couple
thrusting their "weighty books", Bible Tales
and What the Bible is All About
at me like a threat. I'd
fixed my eyes on the opposite
window's speeding riffs
of grass, and they'd
harangued each other and the air
all down the Sydney track.

In the news a politician's
try at suicide, Olympics plans,
a convicted nurse's
five hundred lashes.
Oh, to live with such atrophy of doubt,
cliffs of knowledge,
such certainty as
to carve all surprise
out of our lives!
The distant sea roughed up each edge of coast,
over each cricket pitch with its single I
and all lying-in-wait questions we flew,
then Adelaide dipped into view.
Seamus Heaney

SAINT BRIGID’S WISH

I’d like the King of Kings to have
The full of a deep bog hole of beer
And all of Heaven’s kith and kin
To be drinking out of it forever.

I’d like belief to be fermenting
And stills to be running holiness;
I’d like the flails of penitence
To beat a rhythm through the house,

I’d like the menfolk of high heaven
To be the men of the house I own.
I would broach the barrels of my patience
And draw the draught of satisfaction.

I’d like the cup of good to pass,
Alms and dole to go the rounds,
Bumpers of mercy on the house
And whatever they’re having for all hands.

from the eleventh century Irish

COLMCILLE THE SCRIBE

My hand is cramped from penwork.
My quill has a tapered point.
Its bird-mouth issues a blue-dark
Beetle sparkle of ink.

Wisdom keeps welling in streams
From my fine-drawn, sallow hand:
Riverrun on the vellum
Of ink from green skinned holly.

My small runny pen keeps going
Through books, through thick and thin,
To enrich the scholars’ holdings:
Penwork that cramps my hand.

from the eleventh century Irish
Of course no one sets out to discover artificial insemination, natural selection, wooden dentures while removing the garbage or paying the cleaner or adhering to the missionary like an upright quaker: no one is adequately prepared for the sight of the unfamiliar for the unfamiliar sight precludes preparation (not to overemphasize vision's importance, being the faultiest of our senses, open to trickery at every global corner: instances of vision's failures dwell everywhere, as do instances of failures caused by those failures – the veteran vacationer who neglects to remember that abandoning one's spot is always a risky venture (why someone recommended in some handbook or other to slip some kid a fiver to sit by the meter and say he's waiting for his father) – others' fortunes have been made while some of us rehearse: cases have been settled, fines levied, and the town's coffers topped off while we earnest myopians squint into the future, on the verge of deciding to settle a colony or further wander, unable to see beyond the third row in the theatre, if the woman on the screen is laughing or dry-heaving: how much richer our home movies and moving patterns would be if we relied on another to show us to our seats – if we let the tongue be our usher).
The last resort? To inch along, naturally.
And the cultivation of a pure anything.
Pollen is our primary cash crop,
as in Short Pump and Powhatan County.
The pharmacist works over-time sorting antihistamines,
his nose now mucronate in its glaring.
O the fragility of the nasal cavity!
The etiolation of devotion!
Margining profits from phlegmatic effulgence!
Not for this do we hold our noses
to the learned tomes. Febrile hours are upon us.
Witness: the distribution of cotton swabs
to the exclusion of other respectably perfect implements.
(The competition folded years ago, –
a classic case of mismanagement
and weaning from the trough;)
such a laissez-faire languor can lose thousands,
more if you’ve got it.) (And the opportunity costs involved:
unthinkable!) The ledger has superseded the finger
as gesture – the platonic and the downright erotic.
The prescription should be a carpal affair.
Frieda Hughes

WOOROLOO

Wild oats pale as peroxide lie down among
The bottle brushes. A beaten army, bleaching.
Life bled into the earth already, and seeds awaiting,
Stiff little spiked children wanting water.

Above the creek that split apart the earth
With drunken gait and crooked pathway,
Kookaburras sit in eucalyptus. Squat and sharp-throated
They haggle maggots and branches from ring-neck parrots.

I have watched the green flourish twice, and die,
And the marsh dry. In this valley I have been hollowed out
And mended. I echo in my own emptiness like a tongue
In a bird’s beak. My words are all gone.

Out of my mouth comes this dumb kookaburra laugh.
How my feathers itch.

THE FACE

Born blank, it was made up by children,
At school, with wax crayons
And small fingers sticky with sugar
From half-eaten chocolate.

It was scribbled on at home,
His mother’s notepad. Thrown-away words
Sank pock-marks in those soft, white features,
Until he saw himself, a mass of chewed gum
And other people’s pieces.
He had been added to by everyone,
Their fingerprints tattooed him.

Old enough to shave,
He took the blade and made
His own shape from his chin,
He sank his cheeks and sculpted creases in.
He made his face a famous thing
Until it was the signature
With which he built his prison.
OPERATION

My head is lead, neck all bent
When I try to lift this melon,
I have no control. The stalk drags its fruit.
Sullen, he sits on the bed edge
Watching me helpless.

I am a damp moth with wings sticking to sheets,
Folded in creases – my chrysalis is split open
But a tube anchors me,
Leaking into my blood from a plastic bladder,
I am diluting.

He waits for me to connect my parts.
A leg slides to the floor, only minutes now
Until they lock the door, lock me in, leave me staring
Into the dark and seeing the needle
Sewn in to the open hole in my hand.

I hold still the medicine ball
That sags between my shoulders and sit,
Like a top-heavy hinge.
A small clown in open back gown,
Pale face and blood spots across my belly.

Each wound hole knitted with a single stitch,
Closing the small mouths of protesting flesh
In two bloody pouts. I am unhooked and escaping.
Each arm a dead albatross rooted in a shoulder blade,
Each leg a tree dragging mud and earth.

I am a monster of pieces.
My spirit watches from the corner
And follows at a distance,
Doesn’t recognise its home,
I am alone.
THIEF

It was years before I dug her out
From where her shadow lay, like a bloodstain
Beneath the black stones I had
Weighted her down with.

Her smile was crooked,
She had been dead awhile.

Back then, when the small child watched,
She said she was a relative. She beckoned,
A sweet promise coated the lips that kissed, like honey,
But her eyes were empty already.

When the child reached small hands
Into those holes, she found nothing
Behind the sounds the mouth made,
But the tongue flapping.

'Come live with me!' it cried,
Nostrils spread above like nose wings
As if the face would take off from its neck-end
Like a ghastly bald crow.

Seeing her mother was a shadow not hearing,
The father not found
To know his daughter was disappearing,
The child became blank, wiped clean like a pale sea stone.

Made herself as hollow as a dead tree,
Not worth having.
Her days were as lost as marbles, even her name
Had rolled between a crack in the floorboards.

She was stolen after all, and in her silence
The visitor grew dim. Uncertain. Receded like a dull fox
Just before dawn, barely left a scent behind
On door frames and bed linen, then was gone.
CHANGES

I wore another woman once.
She arrived in a bucket of dye;
And began as a blond streak
With a blush like a carrot.

There I was, face beaten by the cold
In a cut-off winter, and a six-foot hearth
Burning paper left by the last supper:
The boyfriend, his girlfriend, her boyfriend

Eating without me.
Their chicken bones left to spit and crack
With the books and the bills and the savings certificates
Of total strangers. I was warm for two weeks.

This woman woke,
The streak had spread, her head was red,
Her face like stone. She swept up her ashes
And dressed differently.

She borrowed me awhile.
In fact, I had to take me back
When she married without me
And left me holding the husband.

It was only a very small box,
But the bottle inside poured me out
And coloured me in. I was found at last, in my own skin,
Still wearing her creases.
AFTER SAPPHO

Because I am alone tonight
Anne Parillaud, in a little black dress,
a shift of savage emptiness,
unwraps her present like a child—

she grasps the meaning of the thrill,
takes out the bodyguard and the boss
in a swift, efficient kill—
let the Pleiades be where they will.

Because I am alone tonight
the moon is careless of its light
and Anna Kournikova slams
the ball home in a breaking smash

and though she’ll never win the match
frankly I couldn’t care less—
the point of tennis is to watch
her body moving in a dress.

But still no other flesh or face
can take your television place
and I am hurting at the bone
because tonight I lie alone.
Anthony Lawrence

A PHOTOGRAPH OF JOHN BERRYMAN ON THE IRISH COAST

You look past him
over his tweed shoulder
to calm water
which places you looking North,
on the West Coast
or South, on the East.

He is looking back,
the land on his left, his animated hand
cought between foam and sand
which locates him
where he’d rather not be –

hanging for a pint
a long way from the pub.

A THORN IN THE BLOODLINE

Let the fake bereavement of the dead
iron-magnate’s will-excluded son come to pass.
His torment hammers like slammed metal
through an empty foundry.

It will pass, but first he must hunt for sympathy
among the light-starved geraniums
in his analyst’s window box,
forking out pieces of himself
like counterfeit money: this part ruined
because of papa’s loaded hand;
this because of the savage autocracy of the home.

“Well, if there’s nothing else, I can see you ...”
“There is one thing.”
“Yes?”
“At a sanatorium on the Hawkesbury River,
from a high barred window
overlooking oyster farms, I saw my father
bloody his hands on a wall after visiting me.”
"What did you do?"
"Nothing, but I said: 'From this bleak height, money bags, opened, oil-polluted oysters match your broken fists for tenderness.'"

"And then?"

DISPERSING THE HEAT

Eavesdropping on the solemn, descriptive airs of an unattended police car radio is something I endorse enthusiastically.

It's simple. Drive or walk into any police station car park. It's important you maintain a disinterested demeanour as you apply the handbrake or stop walking. Have a story ready should a uniform approach you peripherally, as is the nature of its temperament and training: "I am a victim of road rage seeking refuge" is good.

Likewise "I had a pain in the chest while driving," "I needed somewhere to take the piss" is not recommended.

Lean casually from the window of your car, your head at a sensitive angle, or stand peering myopically into the sun.

If approached while assuming this last position, plead ignorance of your name, age, address and occupation. Giggle. Say "harum scarum"

These cautionary words are essential, yet will not be necessary if all previous instructions are remembered.

Anticipate monotony. Police are not exempt from idle chat. But listen. Somewhere in every wavelength
there is a crime worth hearing.
And should your own description crackle
accurately from the dash,

do not underestimate reverse psychology –
stay where you are and be quiet,
or better still, get on the two-way

and have fun dispersing the heat:
The suspect is naked at Town Hall Station.
He is believed to be in his late thirties,

with a birthmark like a cuttlefish
on his left buttock. Approach with extreme irony
then fellate him to the ground.
Philip Levine

I CAUGHT A GLIMPSE

It happens when I've been driving
for hours on two-lane roads winding
past orchards just after they've bloomed.

When I ask myself where I was when all
this burst like the bounty of heaven, no
answer comes back from the earth or heaven.

A hint of rain is in the air and the sky
broods above a sudden stand of oak that
rushes by. Between the trees coming
into the new green of their leaves light
breaks for a second and within the light a path
opens through the trees and the fields beyond.

Beyond, unseen, an ancient river runs
high in its banks bringing the Sierras' gift
back down to earth. The moment is so full

I have to close my eyes and slow the car.
Should I go back the long, abandoned roads
that lead me to this place and this moment
to find why I've become who I am
and why that could matter? Slowly now
I pass through a small town of scrubbed houses,

wide lawns, and empty streets. A rain has passed
leaving little pools reflecting the sky
that stares open-eyed at its own image.

If this were Sunday the bells would ring,
if this were sixty years ago I
would be a boy on foot no farther

than I am now with my eyes filled
with so much seeing. I caught a glimpse,
a road through the trees, a door
that opened a moment only to close.

Twelve miles from Stockton. I could go west
until I reached the sea or keep going

farther and farther into this valley
past the truck stops and the ruined towns
while the afternoon closes down around me.

THE EVENING TURNED ITS BACK
UPON HER VOICE

Is she waiting for a knock on the door
or a letter from someone she has never met?
The rain and the night are coming down as one
as she knew they would. Forty years ago,

a gray hotel across from the terminal.
She sits in the wooden chair, my sister,
her hands crossed in her lap, her eyes cast down,
o no longer listening for a voice, yours or mine,

carried on wet winds across the broken years.
Tomorrow it will be 1956
for the first time. The shadows do not know
this, nor does the bare bulb swaying above,

nor does the swollen river with its name
of orange blossoms and silt, nor does the moon
no one sings to. You and I, sitting side
by side, leafing through the great book of days

know it now. You trace a forefinger down
the crowded page and find her name, misspelled
but here, the three curious, foreign names,
er her only life crowded into the slack letters

that say nothing of her hands, pale and strong,
the black nails broken by work, or of her voice,
of how it hung like smoke in that bare room,
of how it calls and calls to us without words.
At dawn my great aunt Tsipie would rise and go to the east windows of the apartment, face the weak October sun and curse God. A deeply spiritual woman, she could roll strudel dough so fine even the blind could see through it. Overweight, 62, worn out from mothering three daughters and one husband—an upholsterer on nights at Dodge Main—she no longer walked on water or raised the recently dead. Instead she convened at noon from her seventh story back porch with heaven’s emissaries, three black crows perched in the top branches of the neighborhood’s one remaining oak. Stuffed with strudel, safely inside the screen door, I heard her speak out in Ukrainian Yiddish addressing the three angels by their names. They would flutter their greasy, savage wings in warning and settle back. “Fuck with me,” they seemed to say, “You fuck with Him on high.” The hardness of eyes, the sureness of claws, the incessant caw-cawing of their voices, the incandescence of feathered wings, of gleaming beaks, all this she faced down. Who brought the sharp wheeze to her grandson’s chest? Who left her youngest simple? Who put Jake, her husband, crooked back and all, on nights? For minutes on end the three crows listened and gave nothing in return. I could say to all those who live in God’s green kingdom, her grandson grew into a tall young man, Jake made it to days, simple Annie, her daughter, learned to sew by hand at last, for in truth all this happened. Even Yenkel, her dearest brother, given up for lost thirty years before, escaped from prison in the pine forest of Siberia to make his way to Michigan. Can you hear the axe buried in a foreign tree, the child floating like ashes above the lost town, can you hear the vanished world? I remember the three crows, especially their silences. I remember Tsipie’s voice, high and sweet,
going out on her breath of milk and tea, asking to be heard. When the crows took off, I remember the high branches quivering before the world stilled. The three birds rose imperiously above the roof tops until they disappeared into a sky long ago gone gray above our lives, only to plummet surely back to earth.
William Logan

UNDER THE PALMS

Behind the broken-knuckled palmetto, face half-hidden, half-lit by razory fronds, lost canvas of a Renaissance master

lost in the subtropics (lacking only the emerald glaze of the parrot’s outspread wing or the dart and stitch of the hummingbird’s needlepoint), there you were, smiling and sexual, skin aglow with new-world salt.

Before you stood the cities of the plain. The sky hung like a backdrop,

a foamy SOS-pad blue, darkening to storm. Warsaw. Krakow. Cities of your ancestors. You looked as if you could hear the scuttle and whimper of undergrowth.

the downward exultation of roots, the coral snake whose Magdalene beauty (crimson sliced with black, like a Chanel suit) could ravage these whispers in the old tongue.

When I found you, face-down in a drawer, fifteen years erased as if by the retoucher’s art, how young you were,

your beauty all in the varnish.

THE BORN LAWYER

It was a tale told by an idiot. The slanting lawns where we played croquet slanted down to the wind-chewed bay speckled with dark islands, like my mother’s beauty spots.
Our town was asleep.
Dying maples crossed the fieldstone walls;
a few clapboards warped on the old town hall,
rugged with age and indisposition.
Late in the day my mother would weep

at nothing, at nothing she could see.
I stared at the mouth of my pet horned toad.
My father’s anger grew as it snowed –
he swore we could fish like bears.
Our “river” was six inches deep.

Down in the sun-marked woods, a shout.
We bent to the icy stream,
and there inside it, raw glimmer of dream,
there, in my father’s bruised raw hands,
the glowing mottled broken trout.

THE TIDE, 1955

"Romanticism ... is dangerously lighted
by those bayonets that Blake and Goethe
observed passing their garden hedges."
- George Steiner

The passion has drained slowly, like the tide.
In the watery haze, a bored girl contemplates
the languor of the anemone’s arms,
the clever crab with its torn claw –

beneath the cliff stands our pink motel,
itself sand-starred stairs, the television
frothy and blood-purple like outward sea,
the noon-light blinded through the gauze curtain,

and on everything the taste of salt.
A freighter perches on the horizon like a finial.
The dead are old news, and each hour
passes the eye in downward flight

The ghosts within us confuse us with our sorrows,
as we confuse them with their memories.
Now the shipping lanes devour the fishermen,
and the last war seethes on the sailor’s forearms.
Rimbaud dying

His room. His room is a burning aquarium.
The moon has set. The click of prayer beads
Soothes someone’s panic downstairs.
Any minute now the sun’s evil eye
Will peer through the packing-crate shutters
To settle on a scale hung from the ceiling.

The indifferent day stretches out on rawhide
And chews its qat. The bandage is sweating,
His leg is sweating, his knee now swollen
To the size of a skull. Angels in his veins
Weep for their empty sabbath and loot his sorrows.
Stalls in the Market of Silence open next door.

The world is happening again without him.
Grit’s blown up onto the trussed sharks.
Two subalterns in topees are arguing.
Dhows at the wharf, gharries at the curb,
Mongrels and hawkers and slops in the shade.
The black boy beside him whispers “Mektoub.”

Where is forgiveness? A hand is stroking
His head, the fingers like albino carp
Gliding aimlessly through his hair,
Brushing sometimes against the fever-weed.
Where is forgiveness? Sleep with your eyes open,
Sleep on the stone you have made of your heart.

Here at the end – Death clumsy as an old priest –
Some words, some oil, a thin broth of memory ...
Lying at night in a waving wheatfield, face to face
With the sky’s black icon. The stars are moving too.
They rustle like a silk in whose pleats are kept
The changes: flesh to flame, ash to air.
Nathaniel Mackey

SONG OF THE ANDOUMBOULOU: 40

Asked his name, he said,
"Stra, short for Stranger."
Sang it. Semisaid, semisung.
"Stronjer?" I asked, semisang,
half in jest. "Stronger,"
he
whatsaid back. Knotted
highness, loquat highness,
rope turned inward, tugged.
Told he’d someday ascend,
he ascended, weather known as
Whatssaid Rung... Climb was
all anyone was, he went
on,
want rode our limbs like
soul, he insisted, Nut’s
unremitting lift...
Pocketed
rock’s millenarian pillow...
Low
throne we lay seated on,
acceded to of late, song of
setting out rescinded, to
the bone was what measure
there was. To the bone meant
birdlike, hollow. Emptiness
kept us
afloat. What we read said
there’d been a shipwreck. We
survived it, adrift at sea...
An awkward spin it all got,
odd
aggregate. Occupied. Some
said possessed... Buoyed
by lack, we floated boatlike,
birdlike, bones emptied out
inside.
We whose bodies, we read, would be
sounded, We lay on our backs’
low-toned insinuance tapped,
siphoned into what of what aroused
us arrested us, tested us
more than we could bear...

Loquats
highness’s goat-headed look’s
unlikely lure... Lore made of
less-than, more than he’d admit,
muse
made of wished-it-so... Ubiquitous
whiff had hold of our noses,
nostrils flared wide as the
sky. Gibbering yes, that must have
been how it was, what there

was
at all a bit of glimpsed inwardness,
buffeted cloth, bones in black
light
underneath... To the bone meant
to the

limit, at a loss even so, eyes,
ears, nostrils, mouths holes in
our heads a stray breeze made flutes
of,
rungs what before had been water,

bamboo atop Abakwa drum... An acerbic
wine dried my tongue, my top lip
quivered. “Perdido...,” I sang,
offkey.

So to lament beforehand what would
happen... Rope what would before have
been

breath
What said sip they lit Eleusis
with it seemed. Barley mold
made them wince... Heartrending
sky, held breath held high
as a cloud,
Hoof-to-the-Head knocked hard,
no bolt from on high but their
lips' convergence came close,

ruing the movement of ships...
The sunken ship they at times
took it they were on no sooner sank
than sailed again. Failed or
soon-to-fail form, sisyphean rock,
rough, andouboulouous roll.

Maria

Serpent wave, serpent wing, hoisted rag
snapped at by wind. Flag she
saw he lay bound up in, insisting
they'd meet again. Lag anthem
suffused every corner, music more
the he she saw, we the escaping
they, calling out names no where
we'd

arrive would answer to, nowhere the louder

we'd shout
Dark wintry room they lay shivering in...
   Late would-be beach they lay under the sun on...
   Sarod strings dispatching the fog from Lone Coast, fallaway shore they lay washed up on...
   Their lank bodies' proffered sancta begun to be let go, Steal-Away Ridge loomed larger than life. Extended or extinguished it, no one could say which, the soon-to-be saints arrayed in rows at cliff's edge, our motley band uncomfortably among them. A school of sorrow seeking sorrow's emollient, albeit seeking may've meant something more, older than seeking, remote coming-to, barely known, of a piece, beginning they broke taking hold
SMITTEN

Before dawn all the first born
died under the anaesthetic.

Paper, ink, pen and all
the poisonous skin is heir to

started to feel utterly strange
I still have the ticket

lights go out and this automatically
puts hope into the hygienist.

They named a clinic in Chicago
I have never walked into

in the dark of the stem
although hidden now is the balance of power

the square root on which life depends
but that’s not the only answer.

The casual tourniquet has ceased to turn
I explain to the children my nightmare

hating the mainland as it slips from view
for the breaking surf has covered it over

with everlasting moisturiser.
THE STOA

i  No republic without hard art
debriefing a holiday romance

the long wormcasts so dear to me
the rate of flow comes back

gender must be saved from drowning.

ii. The memory roots itself in a dialling tone

no lesson in faith
is the ticklish commander of this mission

incensed and pushily unavailable

iii. the flesh delays for
the sound of breathing up stairwells.

iv. Even in youth you cheated
with hinges of hand over fist.

Now it's a pack of lies

they ply to and fro and
bring colour to the floor of the hunting lodge.

v. The teeming brain
comes off the rails

no one has any idea

in the dark passage of our natural life
draw the veil or apply the dimmer

quietly cross it off the list.

vi. A mind laid waste by flying colours
does not belong in these halls and corridors.

vii. Happiness in side-shows
built on sand. Rest in the shade

with a packet of sliced cheese.
It took three men to guide your feet
your pocket money had gone missing.

Thoughts of impeachment keep things straight
like tiny grubs within the pale.

The last request
carries no weight.

The keys to your cell
are pushed through the bars.

Barefoot in the freezing labyrinth
your friend is a late learner
lower your antennae now.
Drew Milne

from PHENOMENAL

'... we can assert that every biological fact implies transcendence, that every function involves a project, something to be done. Let my words be taken to imply no more than that.'

Simone de Beauvoir

i.

melancholy of a style grace
hence the room only when
s/he shines a whole cloud
copy as in no.5 above, sad

and intricate, long to tone
that quiet will to squeaky
bubble wrap or neck shine
of span grey and meal into
circles of his pictured arm
knocking stance till when
it is stranger to tights and
sunk to all affronts so tall

ii.

because it is die a secret
die by she breaks her wings
stills to conversing on the
done thing, come as patient

with morning of glass sky
to accented beating or sails
that ever shed to the event
of dreamy parthenogenesis

and revolting union of this
tracing ways across defiant
stones, abiding in parallel
to bring the point home
iii.

to its application face in a
day's fruition and folly of
jacket on to a sprung floor
not in so many words but
s/he where it gives to open
rending the slick biddable
do as can but needs pluck
and you do as you do spark
terms in the domestic open
where the bright car studies
amid the day fall against the
bark blue of feeble kinds

iv.
sure blinkers of material in
bracketing out monumental
purrs appearing in the sight
and its passing of great mirth

as the plangency of its scalp
bids for inertia and affective
to the point of becoming dry
then lighting for this strange

bridge and making headway
are empty fires almost bright
but genetically fresh produce
for the jostling inch to inch
to be camera high, as pencil scores but a trace in the sun for the found texture to crounover and do away with crews projecting the left over pastry place whose laughing lines to polished glasses the tinkling of each smile gives new parts at least if the moon of chrome turns to hear a way through the usual spokes, hand held to blend in the merging scar

and the louse goes ouch to the mother of all spiders in from its grinding petal, so shrewdly says the v-neck attending to the nigh court of the dim and loopy shake that’s noun high to stat plumes in scart curvature sliding down off the data bone bind and sheer lucre who spools their nerve tints but stroked to fillips of pool
vii.

having a mazy run whose membrane rag glues hooves and all the nelsons for leaf and lifter flowing wild with

just off hundred blue whose cut penny gem always said come charter its glad rink under a guild of glove plate

through the humour and the bulb of what's suddenly the riding harm of darkest saffron noise beside a grave

viii

shoddy in shambles bundled through the corpus snags in loose but sweet bother and can you hold the good frond

that heads the field so spick and preyed upon to fevers of leafy coral, ice and legal balustrades in scarf wounds

whose spearing but sunny can steel all but the urgent places of drafty and ample that does for the ripped aim
Pale water, mountains almost black, clouds
lifting from the lake – an old dock creaks
at loose moorings, and from the summit, mountains
until the horizon goes blind. What thousand
do you count, walking a narrow bridge
or bending as your canoe glides under it?
This is a language we have written from
always, though it bears its own fate – color
of fern in shade, such a green it must tell
the truth; a thatch of grass points to
then obscures underground water; another
tree dead across the path. Compare a sentence
broken as you talk at a table, a gun
in the pocket of a child, the survivor
alone at her desk. She did not teach this –
high heels, gray suit cinched at her waist, red
lipstick, evident jaw. Tell me, how is it
she comes back now? Nor did she teach this –
to hear only one’s own voice in the quiet;
or to think alone, out into the dark
pardon of the night. She had no husband,
her hair curled garishly. I can’t get back
her voice, just her mouth gesticulating,
and blond Peter who killed himself in London
after we grew up. In the darkness, silent
numbers etch themselves in red. I remember
the pale disk traversed by hands, figures
marking place along a circumference
that lay in wait once, like the future.
In the city night, a door closes –
refrigerator, car, you can’t tell which.
What does it mean, she asked us, to be good?
I ask to understand the impulse toward
murder. I ask to be loved. And quiet,
my head between those wide hands, a river
spreads north in autumn light, pale as a lake.
I’ve seen the beginning of that river,
narrow as a brook, nothing built at its edge.
At the end of the path, a woman turns
to look back, wearing white, holding roses.
GIRL WITH A FUR-TRIMMED DRESS

It's not a dress, and he hasn't got the lips right. I'm surprised you sat long enough that he did you from behind - ostensibly prim, wearing that orange coat you lied about losing, which I replaced for you as a gift and which you sent back to me without a note.

He knew you twenty years before I did - Oh how I fell for you, swooning beneath those dizzying fingers, your green eyes wide with something I thought more than haste.

We met at a small supper outside Paris one late August. I wore black, you black and white. By then your gold hair had gone off, but I could feel your body: They never understand that, how a woman's flesh holds a woman lover long past youth.

He never undressed you or your mouth would not be open, and you never looked straight ahead - always your eyes darted, hungering toward the next enthusiasm.

But he got how you sit, those haunches holding you down, and clipped you at the hip to please you, though I suspect those days you found yourself slim enough to welcome mouth or finger, had we some brothel afternoon lain like those whores he's so famous for.
But what you lived long before
put you off any touch or so I now believe –

the darkened stair, footfalls, another woman.
Surely your hair has gone dead gray.

I like to think of you looking out windows.
He's got the blue just right and the walls

like bleached fire, orange coat, and creamy
fur encircling your shoulder like meringue.

I am finally now as I was before you
except when I recall – not how you looked

in high middle age or the graze of your hand
but the pitch of your voice – which I turn from

seeking indifference, or a life
whose passions would not have been futile.
Andrew Motion

ALL WINTER LONG

Ice glistening out of the dark evening has no idea what it might be about: giving dead grass a new beard, swelling in blocked pipes until they are fit to burst, making puddles hard to enter although they look clear.

And on our own selves it forms and fixes softly as rust, so that however cold we are, we never feel frozen over, quite, by anything like ice itself – only by some dull weight which comes from outside the world and ends it, as it must.
Les Murray

TOWARDS 2000

As that monster the Twentieth Century
sheds its leathers and chains, it will cry

*Automatic weapons! I shot at
millions and they died. I kept doing it,*

*but most not ruled by uniforms ate well
in the end. And cool replaced noble.*

Nearly every black-and-white Historic figure
will look compromised by their haircut and cigar-
ette. And the dead will grow remoter
among words like *pillow-sham* and *boater.*

*You’ll admit, the old century will plead
I developed ways to see and hear the dead.*

Only briefly will TV restrain Hitler
and Napoleon from having an affair.

*I changed my mind about the retarded:
I ended great for those not the full quid.*

*You breathers, in your rhythmic inner blush,
you dismiss me, now I’m a busted flush,*

*but I brought cures, mass adventures – no one’s fooled.*

A line called Last Century will be ruled

across all our lives, lightly at first,
even as unwiring bottles cough

their corks out, and posh aerosols burst
and glasses fill and ding, and people quaff.
YOU FIND YOU CAN LEAVE IT ALL

Like a charging man, hit and settling face down in the ringing, his cause and panic obsolete,

you find you can leave it all:
your loved people, pain, achievement dwindling upstream of this raft-fall,

back with the dishes that translated beasts and croplands into the ongoing self portrait your genes had mandated.

Ribbed glass glare-panels flow over you down urgent corridors, dismissing midday outside. Slow,

they’d recall damp spade-widths in a pit; you’ve left grief behind you, for others; your funeral: who’ll know you’d re-planned it?

God, at the end of prose, somehow be our poem –
When forebrainy consciousness goes wordless selves it barely met, inertias of rhythm, the life habit continue the battle for you.

If enough of them hold you may wake up in this world, ache-boned, tear-sponged, dripped into:

_Do you know your name? ‘Yes’ won’t do. It’s Before again, with shadow. No tunnels. You are a trunk of prickling cells._

It’s the evening of some day. But it’s also afterlife from here on, by that consent you found you, to going where you went.
CLOSER LINKS WITH SUNRAYSIA

Hoofed beasts are year-round fires devouring as high as they can reach, hopeless to put out. Pink smoke lifts off their terra cotta

but all fences have been torn out and flocks, herds and horses banished from this apricot country. Here they’ve finished with the pastoral.

Downstream of this sprinkled terrain merged desert rivers stop-go to Ocean but the real Australian river, the one made of hard labour and launched

with a tilt of a Chinese pole-bucket, that one sets out for the human mouth down a thousand asphalt beds in squeaky crates and marshalled vintages.

THE BULB OF THE DARLING LILY

Sitting round in the Grand Hotel at Festival time. Another year that Philip Hodgins can’t be here. Naming the festival after him almost confirms that. But like his fine drypoint poems, it lets him be somewhere.

Sitting around in the Grand with the stained glass in the gaming room an upwelling pattern of vivid cards and the T-shaped lolly-coloured logo of the TAB everywhere, the Tabaret. All Victoria’s become one casino.

Sitting around the Grand Hotel adding antipasto to the impasto of my mortal likeness, writing postcards instead of going on the guided Lake Mungo tour. Too reverential, too sacred. No grinners out there laugh.
So, sitting around in the Grand
yarning with Mario, with Donna and Stefano
and descending to the lower kitchen
to meet Leopardo Leopardi, who isn’t
posing in languor on a thorn-tree limb
though he has the build, but making gnocchi.

Sitting around the Grand Hotel, yarning
about river cod as big as seals
and the de-snagged inland waters
being re-snagged to let them breed,
shovel-mouthed, with the beady gape
and rejecting clamp of a critic.

ASPARAGUS BONES

Thirstland talc light
haunted the bush horizons
all day. As it softened
into blusher we drove out
through gardens that are farms
past steepled sultana frames
to a red-earth dune
flicked all over with water
to keep it tightly knitted
in orange and avocado trees
black-green and silver-green
above trickling dust. My friend
fetched a box of fossil bones
from the unlocked half-million
of the coolroom there: asparagus
for his banquet kitchen,
no-one around, no dog,
then we drove where biceps
of river water swelled
through a culvert, and bulges
of turbulence hunted swirls
just under their moon skin,
and we mentioned again
unsecured farm doors, open
verandahs, separate houses,
emblems of a good society.
OASIS CITY

Rose-red city in the angles of a cut-up
green anthology: grape stanzas, citrus strophes,
I like your dirt cliffs and chimney-broom palm trees,
your pipe dream under dust, in its heads of pressure.
I enjoy your landscape blown from the Pleistocene
and roofed in stick forests of tarmacadam blue.

Your river waltzed round thousands of loops to you
and never guessed. Now it's locked in a Grand Canal,
aerated with paddlewheels, feeder of kicking sprays,
its willows placid as geese outspread over young
or banner-streamed under flood. Hey, rose-red city
of the tragic fountain, of the expensive brink,
of crescent clubs, of flags basil-white-and-tomato,
I love how you were invented and turned on:
the city as equipment, unpacking its intersections.

City dreamed wrongly true in Puglia and Antakya
with your unemployed orange-trunks globalised out of the ground,
I delight in the mountains your flat scrub calls to mind
and how you'd stack up if decanted over steep relief.
I praise your camel-train skies and tanglefoot red-gums
and how you mine water, speed it to chrome lace and slow it
to culture’s ingredients. How you learn your tolerance
on hideous pans far out, by the crystals of land sweat.
Along high-speed vistas, action breaks out of you,
but sweeter are its arrivals back inside
dust-walls of evergreen, air watered with raisins and weddings,
the beer of day pickers, the crash wine of night pickers.
Sean O’Brien

FROM NINETIES

Let’s drift again in these vast solitudes,
The beer-and-tabs Sargasso of the shore,
Anachronistic legal waterholes
Down foggy chares alleged to have two ends –
We’ll make a life’s work of an evening out.
Let booths and gantries frame a ruined court
That grants our bores’ and lone derangers’ pleas
A hearing, though the verdict is the clock’s
Long boxes, six black horses, frosty plumes.
The diggers leaning on their spades to smoke.
Far overhead, a coal train grinds its way
Across the viaduct. A grimy clang
From the cathedral, echoed. Please call home.
Tonight’s the nineteenth century sans crowds,
A boozers’ heaven lit by blue dog-stars
Whose image in the empty river draws
Fanatics to the bridges for dispatch –
Spent gambling men we used to read about,
They seem to wear our faces as they plunge
In sequence from the parapets, as though
To cancel with a gesture thirty years
Drunk dry with infidelity and waste.
They print the water with their leader-dots ...
Their was the truly historical work,
The ground on which we are arraigned tonight –
Since we’ve outlived both usefulness and art –
A failure to imagine properly
Our place in the supporting cast, to move
From rhubarb to the boneyard in a blink ...

As if there might be politics afoot,
The night the southside arsenal went up
The people thronged the quays like citizens.
Blood-lit in the inferno of the towns
They hailed their unimportant misery.
The river boiled red-black past walls of flame
And watermen like local Charons cried
Beneath the stairs for passing trade, their arms
Outspread like angels in the burning rain
Of lath and plaster, flesh and cobblestones
That blinded the cathedral weathercocks
And put the heat on whore and judge alike.

Or so the picture shows, that no one sees,
Crammed in beside a turning of the stairs:
Old Testament confusion, modern dress,
And on his non-existent crag, the bard
Who's too far gone to say he told them so.

ii

Your hundred streets, your twenty names, all gone.
A stink of burning sofas in the rain,
Of pissed-on mattresses, and poverty's
Spilt milk, its tiny airless rooms designed
To illustrate the nature of subjection
To its subjects. They tell me politics
And history are done: here's grease
Extruded from the dripping tar-skinned walls
Of workingmen's hotels; the ropes of hair
Trapped in the sinks; the names perpetually denied
A hearing, waiting in the smoky halls
For their appointments with an age that bred
And killed and then forgot them — names that now
Forget themselves, the air's mere allegations,
Faces that the mirrors do not hold,
Lockers with no contents, neither razors
Nor the Bible nor an envelope of dimps
Preserved against the certainty of worse.
So Billy, Tommy, Jackie — did you live?
Could it be you that Benjamin's
Averted angel is ignoring now
As once again you leave your flooded graves
Like newsreel ghosts to greet the Kaiser's guns?

iii

Blind walls and hidden roadways running down
To water. Black windows wedged with newsprint,
Morning after morning of the afterlife,
Anacoluthon of streets and bars.

The bar as survival, as figment,
Dog on the shelf and women to rights,
The Hole in the Corner where dead men meet,
The dead of emphysema
And of pneumoconiosis,
bickering
Beyond the grave like kids,

There is football, or football. Occasional boxing:
Pale-skinned Jimmy Wildes and Woodcocks
Brave as owt
and carefully done down,
A lesson you have to pretend you’ve forgotten.

Or else there was Hitler, that flag-waving cunt.
Should have been a referee. Should have been hung
By the balls and then shot at. The Jarmans want tellt.

Eternity’s offside, a lockout.
It’s stilted black coal-staithes becoming aesthetics.
It’s the exacerbated calm,
The grey summer nights at the end of the world
Through which an old bloke walks his dog
Across that shitty stretch of no man’s grass
Because it’s his vocation,
Middle distant citizen of patience.

SONGS FROM *THE DROWNED BOOK*

i

In the beginning was all underwater,
The down-there-not-talked-about-time,
Deep North its drowned masonic book
And inaudible bubbles of speech,

Creation a diving-bell seeking its level
Down stone under stone, the slick passages
Fronded by greenery, flashlit by ore
And acetylene candles –

The blind fishes’ luminous ballroom,
The pillars of coal, the salt adits, the lead oubliette of the core
And the doors upon doors, all lost
To the surface long since, with the language. Now
Is there anything there, underneath? Is there more?
See
I can remember when
All this was manuscript:

How
Down the green deep we tipped
Law-clerks schoolmen state and church

And with them kingliness,
The night we sank the crown
Off Holderness.

Adam delved
And Dives swam
And sank, swam
And sank:
So who was then the gentle man?
Ourselves, or them
Whose deaths we drank?

Name me a river.
I'll name you a king.
Then we shall drown him
And his God-given ring.
Drown him in Gaunless,
Drown him in Wear,
Drown him like Clarence,
Except we'll use beer.

Name me a river.
I'll name you a price.
River's not selling –
Take river's advice:
Dead if you cross me,
I'll not tell you twice.

My river's from heaven.
Your river's been sold,
And your salmon have died
Drinking silver and gold.
Your river's a sewer,
A black ditch, a grave,
And heaven won't lend you
The price of a shave.

iv

(Baucis and Philemon in Longbenton)

Hinny, mek wor a stotty cake,
Wor needs it for wor bait.
Hadaway, pet, away and shite:
you'll have to fookin wait.
Or mek yer stotty cake yerself
If yer sae fookin smart.
Aye, ah will, wor divvent need ye,
Ya miserable tart.

v

(From the Dive Bar of the Waterhouse)

I was dreaming underwater
When you swam into my bed:
How like you this? The tail, I mean,
And my long hair, rich and red?
A naiad of the standing pools
Of England's locked back yard,
It is because of you, my dear,
That makars live so hard.

Sherry from Kular's (see beggars; see choose)
Red Biddy, Thunderbird, non-booze booze,
Hair oil, Harpic, shit in your shoes –
It's casual drinking, it's paying your dues.

What would you give to know my name
And speak it in your verse,
And if I tell you, will it be
A blessing or a curse?
You are not the first, my dear,
Nor will you be the last –
Thousands sit for my exam
But no one's ever passed.
Dennis O’Driscoll

NOVEMBER NIGHT

Candy-bright bulbs, strung out along the seafront, mark the spot where the flat earth ends, unstable sea begins.

A few incorrigible cases, grim as night-shift workers, try to gain the upper hand on one-arm bandits.

Other than those out-of-town diehards, ownership reverts to locals, seasoned folk who overhear the sea all year pottering at the other side of a garden wall, hammering and sanding, its blue the rim of a familiar dinner plate.

The bar door of the Ocean View Hotel bursts open with an icy heave of wind, revealing through a weave of smoke and steam the used-car dealer, the remedial teacher, the full-time soak, the man who lives fat off the summer ice-cream trade.

The sea holds its breath before pouring out venom, its roars drowned by card games, sing-song ballads, old emigrant laments.

Tossed on their electric fence, the seaside lights sway. A draught discomforts the surface of the Victorian bandstand.

Pillars supporting the promenade grind their iron teeth, resigned to another storm-force assault; flashing like a lighthouse, amusement arcade neon washes across its spent clientele.
Peter Porter

HERMETICALLY SEALED
or
WHAT THE SHUTTER SAW
(After a photograph of 1911)

The stifling air of Brisbane, cleansed by time,
Shows the family Main Easter-Islanded in sepia,
Slow shutters making them North British as indeed
They were, though stiffly suited as befits Colonials
Steeled for success. Through this the mercantile’s
Made magical; it puts a fearful competence
In frame – behold a portrait truly feierlich
And God-like, humanity a Middle Class ex-voto!

Pater Familias, moustachio’d, dewlapped, forty-four
But seeming sixty, the God Mark Main turns everything
He looks at into Glasgow – surrounded by his family,
His liver undercutting his immortal soul,
He practises theocracy. He is informing us
That through the doors which whisky opens, soon or late,
Comes Death the Factor, a leading trader and therefore
Your family must be properly dressed to welcome him.

His stern and English wife, Mae Simms, uncloned
In whitest lace, a Beatrice of new-built Randwick,
Overlooks the paddocks of her hopes. She has the discipline
Of Start Again, a cure for each indisposition.
Fate washes us to peccant shores, but we must keep
The absolute commandments – sons and daughters are
What’s left of angels in a fallen universe.
The sun shines through us, yet we are the North.

Enthroned in poll position on the left,
Their eldest child, their daughter Marion, sets her face
Into a tuneless cameo: dark-skinned and Pictish,
She gives posterity and photographer no hint
She is an anarch of dejection, a humorist
Of hopelessness. Her bust is tightly fronted, ba1cony
Of soft dictatorship. She is my Mother and will stay
Younger than I forever, her hand enclosing mine.

Behind the seated seniors, two sons, Eric and Neville,
Endorse expectancy and youth, the ichor of their promise
Destined never to dry. Waistcoats, watches fobbing off
The larrikin enticement of their sex, they're blessed
With god-like blindness: they will never see their graves
In France. Perhaps none in the group would know them
On death's wharf. 'Magnificently unprepared', a poet said,
Yet never life's long littleness so frozen.

Dolly and Winnie, indomitable and plastic sisters –
Dolly a headscarfed Carmen extra, Winnie the beauty
With a gaze as basilisk as Passover.
Harder than teenage light, their understanding
Of our fallen natures keeps them well abreast of
War, Depression, Real Estate, Survival –
We have to die, they say, but seaside houses
And golf courses shall be our proper recompense.

Little Roy, who will disgrace them all and as
My Uncle Mick will be a Tattersall's Club bookie
After meningitis makes him Proteus, is just in front
Of Edna, baby of the family, a sweet, buck-toothed
Forensic angel – strange that the chief executive
Of God in this our family Tenebrae should be
The youngest. From infancy she'll know how best
To fend off pain with laughter, work and kindliness.

With seven children who will produce only six
Grandchildren, the parental psychopomps beckon to
Their descendent, a paltry straggler of the age
They were so proud to own. Time's not an integer
Of sure forgiveness, but perhaps they wish
The world were spiked with magic, and that their
Materialistic gods might break from larvae to become
The fattest schoolboy silkworms of their hopes.

REINVENTING THE WHEEL

The age demands that we invent the wheel.
Why not? It wasn't properly done before.
What seemed a wheel undoubtedly proved useful
And ubiquitous – but just because its rim
Was round and, fitted on an axle, could be made
To carry such incriminating weights
As clockwork, prams and gun-carriages,
While offering spokes for saintly martyrdoms,
We should not credit it as a gestalt.
Each age has one key aspiration – ours
Is to look away from our contraption
To find the Platonism of all things.
Or, as Browning must have noticed, when
Chromatic sound is all around us, who can
Collectivise the orthodoxy of
C Major? Does anything exist anterior to
Its root abstraction? Nothing is made
Till everything is sorted. But we are lucky,
The template is reborn in everyone,
Creation starts at each implosive birth,
Anno Domini’s precisest calibration.
We are before The Fall and falling ever,
Ante Bellum of the Corporate Wars,
Faustian with tampered DNA.
Hardy cried ‘Ere nescience be re-
affirmed, How Long, How Long?’ The answer stares
From creatures’ stalking eyes, The Third Way’s
Pigeon-holes, Murder’s Make It New –
Nothingness is lost in history,
Fortuna’s Wheel is never finished turning.

A REAL VISIBLE MATERIAL HAPPINESS

The poetry which we say makes nothing happen
Is being interrupted in my flat
By Sondheim tapes played loudly just above.
If I were Rilke I’d personify Love
As the old Objectivist Geheimrat
To whom all self-admiring hands come cap-in.

That way I’d solve the highly systematic
Problem the modern poet has of how
To fill his poems up with real things
But serve abstraction: so one writes of wings
Alongside sunlight, CDs, a red cow,
The Broadway noises coming from the attic,

You should rely on stuff to keep you happy.
Excitement fades away, you can’t take joy
Morning after morning. Sotheby’s may call,
The cat-scratched sofa look right in the hall,
Dreams be scattered like a lost convoy
And everything improveable stay crappy.
By the light box propped in the window,
bare chested, scars rosy in artificial sun,
he crouches over his workbench.
Dental tools in their holder at hand, silver discs,
his torch, the tiny saw. Light flares, breaks on
his earring as he turns his head,
frowns, dark eyebrows almost meeting.
He takes a watch from his jeans pocket,
rubs it absently over his beard, electricity.
The braid clinks its beads as his head
turns, reading something. Now he rises, goes to
the cupboard, mixes wallpaper paste with water.
The pile of miraculous papers, shot metal
threaded with linen, he sorts to start
the papier mâché hypodermic needle he’s building on the table,
matches it to the real one he used this morning,
adds as a detail to the mask to change the meaning:
a revolution: what he’s about. Out the window the black GTI
beads up rain. He never drives it. An emblem, but of what?
A memory of pain, his slouching walk just home from hospital?
Where is the child whose shoes I bought? Where the bread
we kneaded? Where’s our kitchen? Our dead?
ANNA MARIA IS COMING, OR MAYBE THOMAS BARTON, OR MAX!

New life! Will he toe out like Dolly, like John? Will her eyes be fires? Blue and green, like Papa’s, the ocean at the shore? Will she sing in the bath? Play piano in her diapers? Will his heart leap at large machinery? Will he say, “Dribe, dribe,” to his daddy, entering the tunnel? Will his hair be red? Will her hair curl? Will her little face have the circumflex eyebrows of her mother? The pointed chin?

Her hair be fair, bright blonde? Will she frown at the light by the river? Oh, let her head fill with Greek Owls, her mouth with honey wine. Let his hands cup the keys, the air of the studio filling with sound, the crunch of cornflakes, the sift of raw sugar on the tongue, the great chords.

And let the parents be fierce forever, Lord, as You are, exacting price and penalty for Your gifts, so they grow strong and joyous in their age, blessed by the memory of the black car, open to air and chosen by a child in token of the power they give over, their lives in service to new life, the great melt of petals under snow, the green rising.

EVERY WAY

In agony again in the kitchen again sun fills the clear feeder on the window my chickadee flies to, flies from her old barn siding house made by a poet How can I stand more transformations? Poet myself, transformed by the mind of my child’s will into seeing at the instant of revulsion – O rose thou art sick – the miraculous change Mad no less than Lear raving on the moor without his fool. My flat backyard radiant with sunshine lift up that bird. Lord, help me to it.
INSOMNIA III

He has a tumor in his brain –
that much we know – and he’s the father
of four children, the oldest fourteen.
Therefore this morning of sun so bright
we’re asked to draw the shades,
let us praise the brain in its bone pan.

All night I bow to the boom box,
changing tapes. The electrical cord
between my ears carries a charge
to adjust away from the fleshy thorax,
over the head to rest safely where it belongs,
if it can be said to rest anywhere
naturally, on my skull.

O disordered
self, to require distraction all night,
stories poured in the porch ear –
for example, the man who counts the angel
residue of birds broken on our picture windows –
to obliterate the polite rustle
the possum makes with her babes
through the laundry yard to their home
under the shed. And to miss at five
exactly, this spring season,
first bird song with first light...

O untrustworthy self
filled with appropriate terror of tumor
and broken wing, consider
flight, not the swollen plague tongue
in the sore mouth, but story.

Or the possum herself, laden, twentieth generation
of her family, in residence still in our yard,
how in spite of ghosts and grief
she knows exactly – how? – her path
under the empty clothesline.
TRANS

What do you care, she asked
at last, letting me get the good
from my hundred dollar therapy time.
She's still your daughter. Whoops
she said going red over all the parts
I could see – face under all that permed hair
her neck chicken-wattled, even the top part
of her chest the V between her bowling shirt button
(marked JAKE on the pocket) showing blush.
I sobbed, quiet at first, swallowing salt,
then louder wailing like some beached baby.

Son you mean, you old biddy, I croaked at last
crying a good ten bucks worth of earth time.
Who would have thought that little one
whose cheek turned away from my breast
would grow up HE. He started SHE,
a brilliant daughter.

It's the age, she said
not meaning puberty because he was long past,
three at his last birthday, but the times: everything
possible: hormones, surgery, way beyond unisex
jeans at the Mall, those cute flannel button-down shirts.

What will I do I whispered so deep into misery
I forgot she was listening and I was paying. No wonder
I needed therapy.

Afterwards on the bluffs at the heart
of the weirdest sunset since July 4th
I try to conjure his voice: "Mom,
since sunup the sky's been dark but, now we're talking,
I see the sun come out, perfect
for a walk and when we're through talking
I'm going out. Come with me?"
That voice: the same words and phrases, intonation –
from me with his dad mixed in – "like cake with too much
frosting," as my student said tonight in class. Be honest
here. Love is the word he said in closing. "I love you,
Mom." Transsexual – like life, not easy – in the 90s.
My kid. And me in the same boat with him, mine.
Thomas Reiter

THE OVERLOOK

Elkhard Our Trail Man, they call him at the National Trust. Today he slashes through strangler vines, positions stone against erosion, and brings down deadfall limbs to reach the overlook where the master of a sugar estate and his wife and children are buried under raised marble slabs, the grounds untended for two centuries.

Gathering flower seeds and rootstock for their garden, Elkhard and his wife discovered the tombs. In this plot of Antillean hummingbirds they surprised each other and made love on Willem Leverock, b. 1745 d. 1780, did rubbings of his coat of arms with their bare skin while plumes of the censerbush blessed them.

That night she woke him, gasping from her dream in which a chattel gave birth alone on the master's vault, her womb flowing over the legend.

Elkhard's done his reading.

The slaves who rose against Leverock and fired his estate while the family slept were run to this headland by hounds.

Each rebel killed himself in turn.

The last in the circle broke every weapon but the one he turned on himself.

To reward those trackers, planters castrated the dead then pitched their bodies into the sea and hallowed this place with marble.

He drives home a sign warning not to touch the manchineel tree – lean against it and the sap will raise lash welts – then heads down the path,
stops only to pick some horse-tail, a weed
tbody slaves employed to whisk
their masters and mistresses clean
after bowel movements. The bristles
will lie under glass with cane
cutlasses and talking drums in the new
museum between the duty-free mall
and the Emancipation Memorial.

REEF WORLD

1.
Trevor, the patch above his shirt pocket says,
and he has come down the spiral stairway
from the aquarium to the sea floor,
where he’s alone this early hour.

Through the observatory’s window wall
he views geisha fans moving in the current.
Farther, at the limit of vision,
palisades of coral allow a single gap,
a surge channel in which at any moment
the obscurity might darken
and a shark or manta ray or moray eel
come through. On the far side the bottom

falls away to where he once dived
like his Carib and Arawak ancestors,
a depth intense as the blueing
his mother uses to whiten his Sunday shirt.

2.
He keeps the pumps running at Reef World,
cleans the tanks and carries out the dead
because a year ago, free-diving
the palisades after lobster for Club Med,

he caught his hand in a keyhole crevice,
felt his intestines twist like
a towel wrung out till at last he could only
stare into the depths at blueness
congealing as it rose to take him. Divers freed him from those coral teeth, and the next day he awoke to the man he is now, lame in one leg and unable to speak.

3

Above him in the circular aquarium where placards identify sea life, fourth-graders in brown and white uniforms pause at each tank: polyps build upon their own stony dead—parapet, elkhorn, brain... A sea cucumber vacuums the floor, veering among spiny urchins, extracting nutrition, then passes the sand in a cloud of children’s giggles... Macaroni gliding on splayfeet, anemones uncoil stingers on their heads... Look! Teacherfish frowns as hermit crabs contest a shell...

Closing the circle, parasite fish rise from orange coral to pour over a grouper and for that service live to tell about it in the placard a child reads aloud.

4.

On the sea floor the only movement’s in fronds and whips and fans... but now, sponging handprints off the window, Trevor winces as inchlings flare toward him like sparks from a grinding wheel: as though viewed through a scrim, something appears in the reef gap then withdraws. Soon children will descend the spiral flight to stand at the glass wall and wait.
BRETHREN OF SALT
( Brigands’ Cay, Bahamas )

On the ridge between tidewrack and abandoned salina, the shapes you can spot from open water – pirate lookouts? – are a few spinebushes bulked up with deposits from the trade wind skimming the salt pan turned catarrhal by a rain squall.

In 1700, English deserters from indenture settled this coral outcropping, piped seawater over the ridge with bilge pumps – what salt is here now comes from storm surges flooding the pan – then let the Tropic of Cancer reduce the brine till they could rake it into dunes Dutchmen needed in the holds of herring fleets, so traded arms for.

"Where is the clause in Adam’s will saying the Caribbean is a Spanish lake?"
A galleon’s captain would be greeted with that challenge because beacons atop the ridge had drawn him from the sealane onto a sand bank.
The Brethren of Salt came aboard tricked out in velvets and leather doublets, with hemp fuses lit for the ship’s magazine and dangling from their beards.

They provisioned sailors in the longboats but every officer got salted with blunderbuss chambers of royal coin: "In the sweet trade, no prey, no pay."
The loot found under stone ballast? Pearls, conserves, ingots, silver church plate.
Till 1720, when a Spanish fleet cannonaded the island and left grapeshot mementos you can pry from coral.

On the ridge between breakers and salina, where spinebushes stand like coast watchers, the Brethren were tied to stakes, eviscerated and stuffed with salt and with handbills indicting them of “innumerable insolencies, lamentable incendiums.”
Gig Ryan

PORTRAIT OF A MAN

1.

You should've been admiring the brilliant world,
the pouring dictionaries but instead
I pass the men’s parliament

At the check-out, he repeats the machine’s instructions
which I click, passed to and fro between us
like a precious baby

2.

"You should be more conducive
grateful for my chair
What difference will one make anyway?
I know better than to ask"

Machines dribble over the tables, the floor
to failed enterprise
to composites of paper waiting for alchemy
that stink of all you’ve read

mitre of application, towering reward

3.

As the carving renovations at dawn replace the unified subject
unlegislated birds shine in dim afternoon,
each visit an amendment

You asked if you should marry
and then did
but thinking every jibe’s at you

I miss what you were being supremely
not an edge, now surrounded by humourless nature
razed landscape like a carpet
and people like windows
Tracy Ryan

BEEKEEPER IN WANDLEBURY WOOD

zips in on a cycle like milkman
or butcher's boy

one zealous eye on us
the other on
his boxes sectioned
& severed like the trick
boxes of the magician

he can take out layers
& slide them in again
say there's no harm
done

teach us to watch
violence
without wincing

is it toughness
or indifference

around the hives
he pulls up nests of nettles,
bare-handed.
"Garbo," the place is called, but for some reason, there's an enormous Elvis above the counter; also some bleak photographs of Nantucket taken last summer by a high school senior whose "collage fund" a presumably misspelled note invites you to endow; some bright red gingham placemats suggesting an Italian motif; in a somewhat dusty wicker basket, muffins dense as doorknobs from the adjoining health food store.

Against one wall, tall thermoses line up like gas pumps; apparently, everything's self-service. Nobody's here, so I help myself to the House Blend (awful: where's the sugar?) and open up my paper. A jolly middle-aged man in a down jacket emerges from the kitchen. "Got a bit of a late start this morning," he says. "Will you be perfectly comfy sitting here for three or four minutes while I step out to buy some cream?"

"Sure will," I answer, with that ready joshing Americans fall into, and which shields me from grasping, just for a moment, what we've said. Will I be comfy? Will I mind the store? Will I not be interested in breaking into the cash register? Who am I?

- That last question coming from nowhere, and tilting the room a little. I'm a stranger who walks into a small New Hampshire town with a New York Times under her arm, although
she doesn’t live in the city either; somebody whose idea of reality requires a glance, over morning coffee, at violence. Look at this: before they found her dead, a girl, at her mother’s bidding, mopped the floor with her own head. A twelve-year-old set a homeless man afire. And in the inevitable “positive development,” they’ve boarded up a dozen bodegas that fronted for the drug trade. Will I be perfectly comfy where the crime is coffee without cream?

Elvis is still alive and well on the wall, as the proprietor returns with two half pints of Half and Half. Think big, I want to tell him; have one whole idea and carry it through. But I don’t; instead I say, “You must be proud to live in a town like this, where everything’s run on trust.” Why I should feed him this, in exchange for such coffee, I can’t imagine unless it’s to make me feel less strange.

What to do? I pay up feebly and step out, where overhead the buzz of a jet is drilling in the reminder there’s nowhere to feel whole, nowhere. Not even in the sky, where winking flight attendants are hawking headsets for the movie promised after lunch – this month, “The Last of the Mohicans,” where stealthily, in moccasins or boots, people on little screens hack each other to bits.
She dashed towards him, faster than all
the colours leap towards the light or rush
away at dusk, crying, ‘Angel! Beloved!’
For he was perfect, so she said,
with his twelve tattoos, dairy-free diet,
weekly manicure and mirror-bright shoes.
One tattoo was a road of words
round his body, a spiral from toe
to crown where it set fire to her mouth
when she touched his pate with her tongue.
He even pissed in a golden arc
which lit the night sky. She watched
the fine trail lift on the mild wind
wobbling across her vision fit to blind.

A VISIT FROM JANELY

Janey wants to wreck my bathroom she’s
so out of it. She’s staggering towards
the unexpected wall of glass, waving
her bottle of booze, she’s raiding the cabinet
for pills and screaming at the lime-scale stains
in the bath. The echo suits her voice so she smiles
and sits with a bump on the wooden toilet seat,
then grins up at the overhead cistern,
as she slips her beaded dress over her head.
So here’s her stocky body, her small girl shape
slumped and naked on my toilet.
And now she’s resonating my white tiles,
vibrating my roomy old bath: ‘O Lord,’
she croons to the lime-scale, ‘O Lord,’ to the tap
which drips, ‘O Lord,’ to the overhead cistern,
cold porcelain, on which is gathering
the magic condensation of her breath.
DELECTABLE CREATURES
for Wendy Wheeler

‘But he would have us remember most of all
To be enthusiastic over the night
   Not only for the sense of wonder
   It alone has to offer, but also

Because it needs our love: for with sad eyes
Its delectable creatures look up and beg
   Us dumbly to ask them to follow;’
W. H. Auden, ‘In Memory of Sigmund Freud’

You won’t remember, but it was
October and the street trees
still coloured like rude bouquets.
I had some rare walks by the river,
the weak sun loose on the water
and the light so washed out and lovely
it would make you cry if you weren’t
completely alert. Every step I took
they were uncovering something: people
sleeping under cardboard, a lost riverboat
marooned on a freak low tide, the buried flotsam
which made metal detectors buzz, theatres
with resonant names: the Rose, the Globe.

And I was carrying a torch for someone
to the point of hallucination:
we rolled in flames through seven fields, the burning
so thorough I longed to be shocked by water,
a faceful of anything, even the smelly Thames.

And I remember the press full of doctors,
of inventions; a herringbone fragment
of DNA to fool a virus, a wisp
of vitamin to lock on to inner decay
and knock it dead for good. We were
saving vouchers, too, for air miles.

There was, O yes, the morning I woke up
to see an open book, drying on the drainer.
Dimly reconstructing the night before
I remembered dropping off, head on the desk,
getting up moments later, to select the book
with extra-exquisite care from any old shelf.
I slowly chose a page, spread it with jam
and butter, and tried to stuff it down my mouth.
It was, of course, Freud’s *Jokes and the Unconscious*.
I must have tried to wash it like a tea plate,
stacked it, then put myself into my bed.

I think the explanation could be this:
that in the light, the river was sometimes pink,
and St Paul’s was pink, and even Lloyds
in the distance was pink, as I crossed Waterloo Bridge
with a purchase under my arm, some piece
of frou frou or a novel to bring me back
from the seven fields, back to the river-mist
which must once have been river water, back
to breathing mist so deeply I could feel
each droplet hit my diaphragm like shot.

**TO ROTTERDAM FOR THE ROSIE B. BABES**

Even the children are dancing and in the foyer
of the nightclub the ornamental fish are restless.
I’ve been ten hours getting to Rotterdam
but Rose on tenor sax gives it some throat
as specialist dancers turn out in black and white
for some low-slung, loose-kneed jiving. We drink Grolsch
for free because my sweetie knows the barman.
Rose says, ‘I’ve been singing that song for twenty years
and still don’t know what it means.’ Well I can tell her.
It means lights on in Rotterdam and shine
on the grubby buildings, the ferocious port.
It means Rose, two saxes, trumpet, and trombone,
piano, traps and bass, all peeling back
layers of occupation, layers of blitz;
Rose folding sea walls and reclaimed land,
rolling up canals. It means the North Sea
swallowing the whole damned lot as Rosie
sings again My Funny Valentine.
R.T. Smith

COLM CLEARY ON THE BEAUTY OF IMPERFECTION

"Now, your perfect egg from the factory farm," he said, holding the two poles by blunt thumb and trigger finger before the candle's unsteady light, "has never the sweet blemish of identity. The shell won't hold a shadow, you see, it's so regular, a polished thing some drugged hen sent towards this world on automatic pilot. It's got the necessary gold inside, the proper white, but not the full shilling, you understand,"

Squinting, he turned the egg over, rolled it across his lifeline.

"Me own Da sweated and bent low under the labor of keeping fifty chickens, a milk cow, bedded mushrooms and spuds. I loved when the hens were permitted to sit, till the shy eggtooth
in his wee casket was
a pocket watch ticking –
might live, might not.

Always a flawed thing,
unable to fly, but lovely
just the bloody same.”

He held the shell close
to the shimmery flame.
“The big money poulters
crowded him out.
He never made it
in the city’s sooty light.

A stroke, a slow dying,
but I couldn’t vigil
with him, you know,
being already thick with
the Provies, underground.
I’m glad I worked on
incendiaries, makeshift,
homemade, catch-as-can.”

Here he closed his
scarred fingers to a fist.
“To the corporate eggers!”
almost a salute, then
the sharp click and yolk
slicking along his wrist.
“I loathe their smug money.”

Candlelight reddened
the skin of his clenching
hand. “I hate their life.”
WRITING LESSON

Long after the snow has left, I recall the cardinal's path,

tracks the color of blueberry ink, a Chinese poem to praise all summer
locked in a sunflower seed, each print still singing, across cold silk, its simple name. The bird on the window sill trembles to flame.

SPECTATOR

In Joyce's "The Dead" when the whole Epiphany party agrees that some monks sleep in their coffins to remind them of mortality and do penance for our sins, we all know the revelers are wrong, embellishing hearsay, inviting the grim medieval rumors into dying Ireland, but by the time Mrs. Malins insists that the monks are holy men, I've already become half Trappist, lost in the story, my Gabriel regrets shoveled under with Michael Furey. I'm wishing myself south to Mount
Melleray, anticipating sanctuary,  
the safety of matins and lauds,  
long hours of Good Works  
and Latria. I want to be free as  
the pious brothers are free  
of quarreling over the wishbone,  
of blowing my own horn  
till the ones I love suffer and fall.  
Alone with a worn book, I want  
to be scourged and shriven,  
to lie still in the long house  
of my coffin, while outside,  
snow falls softly on the crooked  
crosses. But then the sweets  
and sherry are served,  
hostesses beaming, Gabriel  
fortified for his annual address,  
and I am back at the table,  
a veteran spectator knowing  
how false he'll ring and already  
thirsty for Gretta's big scene  
after "The Lass of Aughrim". I am  
blind again to candles  
in the monastic chapel. I'm deaf  
to glad Latin and still,  
in spite of the legendary  
beauty of Joyce's story,  
self-tortured beyond the snow's  
tenebrous Ego te absolvo,  
spoken softly to the fallen world.
Pauline Stainer

HERMAN MELVILLE JUMPS SHIP

They say that blue
slows the passage of time –
so what was
the blue reflex
when I jumped ship
at the Marquesas?

How was it I could read
by the blue light
from the *noctilucae*
but not look up at the vanishing ship
or the natives running like grass
before the wind?

FINDING THE RIGHT BLUE FOR THE WATERFALL

Hiroshige knew –

so solid a blue
the Victorian tight-rope walker
could have walked across
in the declining sun
without her white pole gleaming.

It’s a metaphysical act,
intensifying the blue –
swallows in slow-motion,
stars perched on the overfall
without trepidation

as when Orpheus played.
THE STOWAWAYS

They stayed on the ship for years,
ever giving an identity,
thriving on a sense of displacement

for what was time
when they went for months
without seeing land or darkness

swinging in their bleached hammocks
between counterweights
of sun and moon?

But in dream
seal-women gave them molluscs
as they disembarked

and when they woke
the luminescence persisted
on their hands and mouths.

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON
DREAMS OF ORKNEY IN SAMOA

Last night
a wind came over the sea,
keen as a swan’s bone,
particular with the dead.

I saw my father
and grandfather, inspecting
the major lighthouses
as the skerries smoked by.

Here, azure orchids burn,
kingfishers refract
the great white light –
but for a moment

I weigh the examined life,
the necessary exile,
against the way light behaves
between islands.
John Tranter

WHITECAPS

To be a stroller, taking in the city from the street, that clamour and bumping rush with pools of silence in eddies under escalators and so on, that takes lots of money, or the dole – a good cigar, or a rolled cigarette stuck to the lip. Now we see shopgirls in failed department stores embarking on their evening dreams like a silver boulevard, sometimes they lie about it, the dim wishes – if they don’t, poverty gets them – so, a handsome doctor, whimpers by the beach, moonlight tinted to expose a cheat at supper on the lawn by the pool, lots of waiters, so we made love she said, during the afternoon siesta, outside, thunder, a man sweeping the yard – a set of gestures called employment – perhaps a detective hired by my husband, she said, no, it was just motel security – I could hear something like a distant marimba playing through the sonic curtain of the rain. I grabbed the bottle, held it to my chest, brilliant thoughts imprisoned in green glass explicating, in a morning, the follies of philosophy – I didn’t become disillusioned about drink, it had its job to do. She only seemed immune – ash littered the table and the carpet – a snapshot of a room – she explained the gloom, it’s part of how the whole society sinks into the future – once you had hope, now you see what happens. And romance novels sucked in a crowd sobbing and laughing on their way to work, and now a boat tips over on the windy lake, whitecaps materialising and disappearing quickly, bungalows tumbled and floating in the brown flood, as the upturned dinghy drifted past a countryside made up of acres of tawny grass combed by the wind, chilly and quite uninhabited. That lack is awful, the sky just as empty and uncaring. Now we see the whole horrible scene printed on the plate glass of a shop window, now the crowds obscure it, busy, rushing to their individual fates, now
as we turn away to contemplate the fateful mess, now that the meaning of it sinks into my stomach like a crowbar – ash your cigar – I am here, I am still here – printed on my memories, a watermark – I remember we paused now and then to keep our intimacy on the backburner, and most Friday nights were rough, noisy, cattle in the bar, gangs of cowboys – she reached into her past, that silent maelstrom, too late, desperate to find a future she could live in forever.
Defining a Voice: Derek Walcott

At the 1992 ACLALS conference in Jamaica, the distinguished Sri Lankan critic, Jasmine Gooneratne, quoted from Walcott's 'A Far Cry from Africa', which she called one of the most moving poems of the century. The next year, a republished essay by the English Puerto Rican critic, Gerald Guinness, described the 'entire poem as a tissue of insincerities'.

Guinness's adverse judgement was anticipated in 1982 by Helen Vendler in her review of *The Fortunate Traveller*, where she referred to 'A Far Cry from Africa' as 'not ... a poem, but rather an essay in pentameters'.

How can judgements diverge so far? Can the divergence tell us something about Walcott's poetry and, perhaps, 'post-colonial' poetry in general? I shall seek an answer to these questions by examining the foundations for the adverse judgements.

Guinness's is based on Leavisean criteria: 'What makes "A Far Cry from Africa" such an unlikeable poem is the feeling it gives of having been concocted from literature rather than of having issued from lived experience.' This is incautiously simple in its appeal to experience, since he can of course only justify his conclusion by analysing the poem as literature - something Helen Vendler never loses sight of.

Her case is consequently much more subtly and challengingly argued. She reverses Guinness's conclusion, immediately granting that in Walcott's early (and later) poetry 'the emotional attitudes ... were authentic'. This opening concession of the validity of Walcott's subject matter, the truth of his experience, which is that of 'the black colonial predicament' in all its anguish, enables her to acknowledge a great deal of Walcott - his humanity, his social range, the historical representativeness of his experience - all the things that summon a response of recognition. In these respects, her review is a fine and understanding appreciation: 'He will remain for this century one of its most candid narrators of the complicated and even desperate destiny of the man of great sensibility and talent born in a small colonial outpost, educated far beyond the standard of his countrymen, and pitched - by sensibility, talent, and education - into an isolation that deepens with every word he writes.'

For Helen Vendler all that, however, is not enough. It constitutes the social experience that might motivate an essay, or contribute to the realist texture of a novel, but, however moving and significant in itself, such experience does not make a poem. A poem may indeed be made out of historical experience, but it is made into something else which may even be
said, at least in some cases, to transcend the experience from which it is made. Walcott himself accomplishes this feat. After a fine appreciation of 'The Hotel Normandie Pool', Helen Vendler ends her review with an eloquent demonstration that the transcendence of painful historical experience is precisely Walcott's remarkable achievement in the last poem of *The Fortunate Traveller*, 'The Season of Phantasmal Peace'. Here she shows us 'the lyric Walcott who silences commentary'. Has any of Walcott's admirers written better of him? 6

However, the weight of the review lies not on those two achievements, but on the more general failure, and here we return to Gerald Guinness. His analysis of 'A Far Cry from Africa' seeks to show that it is vitiated by overambitious emulation of literary models. In this he concurs with Helen Vendler's main reproach, that the expression is 'shallowly and melodramatically phrased', because the phrasing is not Walcott's but Yeats's. Indeed, she opens her review with the words: 'Derek Walcott is a poet, now over fifty, whose voice was for a long time a derivative one'. Given such a beginning, one reads on expecting a moment when the critic pronounces that now, at last, the true voice has been found. The pronouncement never comes. Rather, the opening charge is reiterated. Even in the patois poems, 'the baleful influence of Yeats suddenly overshadows the patois speaker, and the song ends on an unlikely "literary" note'. That is a comment on a poem from Walcott's 1962 volume *In a Green Night*. The review continues: 'Hart Crane, Dylan Thomas, Pound, Eliot, and Auden followed Yeats in Walcott's ventriloquism.' 7 Walcott is reduced to a dummy sitting on the knees of the canonical masters, mindlessly repeating another's words. The overall judgement is that Walcott is not a great poet, and never will be, because he cannot settle on a voice. As late as the volume under review: 'He is still, even as a fully developed writer, peculiarly at the mercy of influence, this time the influence of Robert Lowell.' 8

Now if this is true, and the argument is formidably searching, then Walcott's case would indeed be peculiar. We would not be dealing with a minor poet who occasionally hits the top of his form and lodges a handful of poems in the canon. We would be looking at someone capable of achieving complete artistry in two poems in a collection and as completely missing it in all the other poems. 9 In the course of acknowledging the social and historical matrix of 'the black colonial predicament', Helen Vendler indicates the factors of emulation, mimicry and over-compensation that might make this happen. She cites Walcott's own awareness of these traps, which one could summarize as putting on the style. And, following her arguments, it could be that the social response of recognition has misled many of us, including Jasmine Gooneratne, into thinking we are responding to a poem when in fact we are merely looking in the mirror; and the same self-deception may be yielded to by the poet. It seems to me, however, that while such social factors might satisfactorily explain a poet who wrote badly, the nature of the case precludes the possibility that such a poet might from time to time write like a master. By
Helen Vendler’s own account, to which I largely subscribe, the gulf fixed between sociology and poetry is absolute and bad poets are simply incapable of deviating into mastery. There must be some other factor at work to explain the extreme divergence of judgements and I suggest that this is the concept of the poet’s voice with which Helen Vendler, like most of us, operates.

One is apt to use the metaphor of voice quite automatically about any contemporary poet as they make themselves heard. The idea perhaps becomes more questionable when the poet under discussion is thought of as finding a voice not just for himself but for a whole people or nation, and that is frequently the case of poets and other writers in the field of Commonwealth or post-colonial literature. Think of Yeats, think of Yeats advising Synge to go to Aran and give an unknown people a voice, think of Raja Rao in India, and so on.

But is this commonplace of critical language trustworthy? It is in fact a concept with a history, and revisiting that history may help to clarify the issues. The idea that a poet has and must have a uniquely individual voice has been a commonplace only since Coleridge formulated it as a principle when arguing against contemporary reviewers for the excellence of Wordsworth. It is therefore worth examining the foundations of the idea as he first deploys it.

Coleridge mounts his argument in Chapter XX of Biographia Literaria. In this chapter he returns to the specific characteristics of Wordsworth’s actual poetic practice, after several chapters in which he has been arguing against Wordsworth’s theory as expressed in the ‘Preface’ to Lyrical Ballads. Against Wordsworth’s unguardedly overstated assertion that poetry should be written in the actual language of men, Coleridge points out that it is precisely the formal conventions of poetry which differentiate it both from speech and written prose. True, there is a common or plain style to which all poets have equal access, which Coleridge traces back to the sixteenth century, but that is not to be confused with actual speech, though it may be related to it. These clarifications are acute and sound. Coleridge then turns to what is unique to Wordsworth. Paradoxically, given Wordsworth’s theoretic espousal of common speech, Coleridge finds his actual diction, ‘next to that of Shakespeare and Milton ... of all others the most individualized and characteristic’. Coleridge pronounces it as a principle that someone already familiar with Shakespeare, confronted by a passage never seen before, will be able to identify it as by the same author.

Let me pause to question this. If the works of Shakespeare a reader knew were only those between, say, The Comedy of Errors and Romeo and Juliet, I wonder whether that reader would be able to identify a passage from Macbeth or Antony and Cleopatra as written by the same hand. The controversies over works or parts of works sometimes attributed to Shakespeare suggests to me that his identity is by no means that certain. Keats in fact singled out lack of identity as Shakespeare’s distinguishing feature, and generalized it for all poets in his theory of negative capability.
Whatever his merits, at least Walcott shares with Shakespeare the feature of being both a poet and a dramatist.

After Coleridge has made this claim for an organic unity in the whole of Shakespeare's oeuvre, he goes on to make the same claim for Wordsworth: 'Who, having been previously acquainted with any considerable portion of Mr Wordsworth's publications, and having studied them with a full feeling of the author's genius, would not at once claim as Wordsworthian the little poem on the rainbow?' A certain style then becomes, as it were, Wordsworth's property, his signature. Consequently, 'From Mr Wordsworth's more elevated compositions ... it would be difficult ... to select instances of a diction ..., of a style which cannot be imitated, without its being at once recognised as originating in Mr Wordsworth.' It follows from this that if the style is the man, then the poem is virtually the author. The act of reading becomes synonymous with listening to someone's personal voice, to a recognizable because stable identity.

This way of reading can thus be historically located as beginning with Romanticism. It would not occur to an Elizabethan commentator that the style of a poem was individualized. He might comment that Mr Shakespeare had a sweet or sugared style, but that merely praised his success in writing in that style, and there would be nothing to prevent him from adopting a rugged or low style in another piece of writing - as Shakespeare in fact does. Coleridge seems aware of the novelty of his idea, for the word 'individualized' is italicized. According to the OED, the earliest use of the word in this sense applied to literature is in 1805: 'The peculiarities which individualize and distinguish the humour of Addison.' Coleridge himself is quoted in 1834 writing that 'Life may be defined as "tendency to individualize"'. The origins of the word are in fact in theology, describing an attribute of God, his indivisibility. Now we find that attribute attached to a human being and manifested in his works, surely an instance of the natural supernaturalism analysed by M.H. Abrams. Interestingly, Helen Vendler objects to one of the poems in *The Fortunate Traveller* because its various features 'taken all together do not resemble a soul in act'.

Now consider what happens to Coleridge's new principle for reading and critical judgement when it is applied to the following:

A fat brown goose lay at one end of the table, and at the other end, on a bed of creased paper strewn with sprigs of parsley, lay a great ham ... Between these two rival ends ran parallel lines of side-dishes: two little minsters of jelly, red and yellow; a shallow dish full of blocks of blancmange and red jam, a large green leaf-shaped dish with a stalk-shaped handle, on which lay bunches of purple raisins and peeled almonds, a companion dish on which lay a solid rectangle of Smyrna figs ... In the centre of the table stood, as sentries to a fruit-stand which upheld a pyramid of oranges and American apples, two squat old-fashioned decanters of cut glass, one containing port and the other dark sherry. On the closed piano a huge yellow dish lay in waiting, and behind it were three squads of bottles of stout and ale and minerals drawn up according to the colours of their uniforms.
Would one not take this for Dickens? In fact it is Joyce, discreetly imitating Dickens in order to create the kind of communal and festive atmosphere he wants for the Misses Corkorans' Christmas party in his masterpiece of a short story, 'The Dead'. Joyce, like Shakespeare, is capable of adopting a variety of styles, and not just in the flamboyant experimentalism of Ulysses.

So either side of Coleridge's critical principle one can talk of two major periods of literature in English, the Renaissance and Modernism, where it seems either not to apply or implicitly to be denied. It would detain me too long to investigate the complex of relations between liberal individualism and patriotic solidarity during the imperial wars against France which I believe lie behind Coleridge's new critical principle. Having mentioned Wordsworth and Joyce, let me turn to Walcott's own autobiographical poem, Another Life. This is where he undertakes his most sustained examination of his own identity, conscious of the great precedents of Wordsworth's Prelude: the Growth of a Poet's Mind and its antitype, Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. What difference does it make to such a project if one is, as Helen Vendler says, of 'mixed blood' and colonial?

Another Life is divided into four books, and the first is titled 'The Divided Child'. The story is a familiar one. It recapitulates as an inner, psychological drama several stages in the broader public history of colonization, decolonization and independence. The symptoms are surveyed in Fanon's classic analysis of the psychology of colonialism, The Wretched of the Earth. For instance, Walcott describes how, as an ambitious child, he scorned Caribbean flora in comparison with the literary flora of England.17 This is what Australians call the "cultural cringe" and the stereotypical text inducing the cringe is Wordsworth's 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' - the daffodils syndrome, repeatedly played out around the colonies. So that is one episode.

But conforming to metropolitan tastes is insufficient camouflage, because Walcott knows his skin betrays him as non-metropolitan, even in the West Indies. V.S. Naipaul has some devastating pages on the nice gradations of colour prejudice in the Caribbean in The Middle Passage.18 The same prejudice in favour of the lightest possible shade of skin is rife in India, not to mention China, Russia, Europe and America - indeed, where not, save Africa? Tormented by this feeling of being trapped by his skin colour in an identity he wants to escape, the child Walcott prays nightly to the moon in his window to make him whiter.19 So that is a second episode, which one might call the cosmetic solution.

That in turn is displaced by a third episode when he happens to hear a reading from the poems of the Jamaican poet, George Campbell, a writer of the 1940s who early asserted the validity of black identity. So here we have the episode of Black is Beautiful or Black Power, associated with the Harlem Renaissance or with Steve Biko in South Africa. It is equivalent to the assertions of national cultural identity in national independence movements, such as that led, culturally, by Yeats.

But even as this apparently liberating perspective opens out before him,
Walcott sees that so consoling a solution cannot be his:

And from a new book,
bound in sea-green linen, whose lines
matched the exhilaration which their reader,
rowing the air around him now, conveyed,
another life it seemed would start again,
while past the droning, tonsured head
the white face
of a dead child stared from its window-frame.20

The dead child is the other half of Walcott’s mixed blood, his father’s half. That pins the problem. To assert any simplistic idea of cultural identity based on blackness would be tantamount to infanticide and self-murder. So here the traumas of racialism impel Walcott beyond the issues of cultural identity that Joyce explores through Stephen Dedalus in Portrait. The issues are similar, but cruelly intensified by colour, its illusion of definition, its tendentious polarization. And there can be no escape by physical exile or emigration to Paris when you carry your skin with you. Thus the social issues of themselves impel Walcott to exhaust the sociological. Helen Vendler’s question is: does he then take the step beyond into poetry?

Her criticism at least concedes Walcott the virtue of testifying honestly to these dilemmas, but the only solution to them she appears to envisage is that of a unified identity with a single voice. It is precisely Walcott’s refusal of this which I see as his great strength, both humanistically and socially speaking, and, most crucially to the present argument, poetically. Walcott’s genius is compounded not only of a tenacious honesty that will not compromise and consensualize the contradictions he experiences, but also of an astonishing and inspiring resourcefulness in turning them to advantage. The poems are where this happens.

On the one hand he has done as much as any poet at the dawn of a national movement to give his people an entrance onto the stage of world literature, most obviously in his dramas. As he says in ‘What the Twilight Says’: ‘What would deliver him from servitude was the forging of a language that went beyond mimicry, a dialect which had the force of revelation as it invented names for things, one which finally settled on its own mode of inflection.’21 This is comparable with the Adamic programme of the young Dedalus, promising to forge the uncreated conscience of his race. It was the mission of American literature in the nineteenth century, notably in Whitman and Melville. Hence, in chapter 8 of Another Life, Walcott too, together with his painter companion, Gregorias, takes the national artist’s patriotic pledge:

But drunkenly, or secretly, we swore
disciples of that astigmatic saint,
that we would never leave the island
until we had put down, in paint, in words,
as palmists learn the network of a hand,
all of its sunken, leaf-choked ravines,
every neglected, self-pitying inlet
muttering in brackish dialect, the ropes of mangroves
from which old soldier crabs slipped
surrendering to slush,
each ochre track seeking some hilltop and
losing itself in an unfinished phrase,
under sand shipyards where the burnt-out palms
inverted the design of unrigged schooners,
entering forests, boiling with life,
goyave, corrosol, bois-canot, sapotille.22

But look what happens to the pledge. Like the ochre tracks seeking the
hilltops, it is part of an unfinished sentence. Things run down as much as
they rise up. The landscape is by no means idealized. When the naming
comes it is in French patois, remaining itself, as it were outside the poem
and the young men’s project.

So for all his frequent and lavish evocations of the St Lucian landscape,
Walcott performs the evocations from outside. The Adamic naming is done
at a certain distance which distinguishes him from the nineteenth-century
Americans. Like Joyce writing about Dublin in Trieste, Paris and Zurich,
Walcott has written about and for St Lucia while actually working with the
theatre company he founded in Trinidad, or, later, lecturing in Boston. And
yet he has also kept the oath never to leave the island until he has recorded
its every feature, for the promise is honoured where it matters, in the
writing. The difference is that it is an identity conferred and seen from
outside, not with the patriotic solidarity of the insider.

Hence he has felt equally free, on the other hand, to give voice to the
impulses of his British inheritance. As a schoolboy he identifies with Gordon
of Khartoum, enlists in the Fighting Fifth, shares in the solidarity of ‘us’
against ‘them’: ‘Tranced at my desk, / groggy with dates, I leant/ across my
musket. Redcoat ruminant’.23 Elsewhere, in ‘Laventille’ for example, he
speaks with the bitterness of a descendant of slaves, one of history’s victims.

In giving voice to such contradictory ideals and feelings he exercises the
franchise and privilege of the dramatist and lyricist. He is true to the feelings
of the situation and moment, uninhibited by considerations of liberal
propriety, political correctness, ethnic solidarity or rational consistency. The
language of his plays ranges from creole to standard English, the parts are
written for blacks and whites, peasants and bourgeois.

It is thus evident from his writing that Walcott precisely does not have a
secure sense of identity, save as poet. How could he? And he’s not the only
one. The population of the Caribbean is founded on genocide and built up
by waves of forced and voluntary immigrations from various parts of the
globe. The islands speak French, Spanish, English and Portuguese. What
place could Coleridge’s notion of an organically unitary identity have in the
Caribbean? When social identity itself becomes problematic, then so must a
literary principle founded upon it. This is not to deny identity to Caribbean
writers but simply to recognize that the nature of identity and its voice will sound differently from that arising on the foundations of historically different societies.

Walcott himself is acutely aware of these issues, meditating on the self in 'Crusoe's Island' (The Castaway, 1965) and on cultural derivativeness in 'Crusoe's Journal' (The Gulf, 1970), where he describes his people as 'good Fridays who recite His praise,/ parroting our master's/ style and voice'. He sees himself and his ambitious contemporaries as 'solemn Afro-Greeks eager for grades' and in Another Life he is a houseboy stealing books from the mansion of his masters. In an interview with Denis Scott in 1968 Walcott made his position clear: 'I will always remain, as long as I write in the West Indies I will always be a visible imitator'; and in the West Indies he has in effect remained.

How does all this bear on the vexed question of literary influence? To address this, let me tum to the particulars of the influence of Robert Lowell, whose voice is alleged to overwhelm Walcott's in The Fortunate Traveller.

Walcott has arranged the volume so as to compose a triptych with a central panel of eighteen poems under the heading SOUTH, with two shorter panels headed NORTH on either side of it, the last composed, like the volume, of three units; the middle one of these is the title poem of the whole collection and it is given an epigraph from Revelation. This allusion picks up and extends more muted allusions in the poem that stands at the threshold of the collection, 'Old New England', a poem Helen Vendler specifically cites as overwhelmed by Lowell. Here it is:

Old New England

A white church spire whistles into space
like a swordfish, a rocket pierces heaven
as the thawed springs in icy chevrons race
down hillsides and Old Glories flail
the crosses of green farm boys back from 'Nam.
Seasons are measured still by the same
span of the veined leaf and the veined body
whenever the spring wind startles an uproar
of marching oaks with memories of a war
that peeled whole counties from the calendar.

The hillside is still wounded by the spire
of the white meetinghouse, the Indian trail
trickles down it like the brown blood of the whale
in rowanberries bubbling like the spoor
on logs burnt black as Bibles by hellfire.
The war whoop is coiled tight in the white owl,
stone-feathered icon of the Indian soul,
and railway lines are arrowing to the far
mountainwide absence of the Iroquois.
Spring lances wood and wound, and a spring runs
down tilted birch floors with their splintered suns
of beads and mirrors – broken promises
that helped make this Republic what it is.

The crest of our conviction grows as loud
as the spring oaks, rooted and reassured
that God is meek but keeps a whistling sword;
His harpoon is the white lance of the church,
His wandering mind a trail folded in birch,
His rage the vats that boiled the melted beast
when the black clippers brought (knotting each shroud
round the crosstrees) our sons back from the East.27

The allusion is to Revelation XIX 19-20, apt to the radical Protestantism of
New England tradition, a tradition that ran strong in the anti-slavery
movement and whose apocalyptic language sustains the Battle Hymn of the
Republic, written during the Civil War. This brings the relation with Lowell
into a particular focus, for he too draws on this language, for example in his
early poem ‘Where the Rainbow Ends’. But Walcott, a descendant of slaves
as well as of the liberators of slaves, hears and deploys the language
differently from Lowell. In this threshold poem he deliberately modulates
into the collective pronoun ‘our’, exercising his dual birthright, but it is an
‘our’ undermined by ambivalences tonally very different from Lowell’s
ironies, even at their most self-lacerating; indeed, it almost conveys the
opposite sense: ‘your’. Compare the way Lowell modulates from ‘Her
farmer/ is first selectman in our village’, at the beginning of ‘Skunk Hour’, to
‘I stand on top / of our back steps’ at the end of the poem, a movement
which maintains, however threatened, a community, and uses it to assert a
shared disgust.28 Or compare the value of a word like ‘old’ in ‘Old New
England’ with the value of ‘old’ in ‘For the Union Dead’:

On a thousand small town New England greens,
the old white churches hold their air
of sparse, sincere rebellion.29

The difference is between someone writing from within a tradition, however
beleaguered, and someone who remains outside even as he enters it, the
difference between the native and the traveller. Consequently, although
Walcott adopts some of Lowell’s actual language and addresses some of his
concerns, there is no ventriloquism, he never speaks with Lowell’s voice.
There is no laconic breaking of register to administer a shock to the
sensibility by understatement, there is no deliberate deployment of
colloquialisms against expected decorum, no calculated staking of the
personal voice in default of a public language that has been betrayed, no
personal protest or authoritative indignation.

This is because Walcott enters on any subject by a process of division,
cleaving its apparent unity by his own double attitude as heir to both agent
and patient, doer and sufferer. He cannot appeal indignantly to tradition, for that would be to continue the action and reaction of history, and his double consciousness is post-historical, as he has abundantly emphasised in his essay 'The Muse of History'.

So, whereas Lowell musters the past in order to throw it into action with present urgency in current history, however warily, Walcott's New England landscape is a mythic one, existing in several times at once. The black clippers that bring home the dead from Vietnam are also Melville's whalers and the landscape to which they return is haunted by 'the mountainwide absence of the Iroquois', whose trail, abruptly cut off in history, continues to be followed in myth. The language on which Lowell drew is prised loose from its Bostonian and New England habitat and is thereby deprived of that particular authority, while at the same time acquiring a new scope. Walcott introduces his kind of space, his kind of time into it, making the Revelation again what it once was, a prophecy of the end of history.

British and American critics may well mistake deliberate strategy for helpless mimicry because they are still not used to seeing this kind of relationship between poets writing in English. British and American critics and indeed poets still write and think from inside, not outside. Ben Jonson can lift passages from the Roman historians, as can Pope, and the fact that they bring their importations across the frontier of a foreign language enables us to accept them as enrichers of the native tradition. The fact that there is no frontier of language to cross in Walcott's case is deceptive. A precedent for what Walcott is doing can be found in modern American literature and, once again, in Anglo-Irish. It was Eliot's Americanness that enabled him to translate Tennyson as well as Dante into a current English, and thereby, incidentally, seem closer to the author of De Volgare Eloquentia than Tennyson could ever be.

Similarly, it was Joyce's Irishness that enabled him to translate the great tradition of English prose style into something else, for which the nearest but misleadingly inadequate term is pastiche. Joyce develops this unpromising line of writing in a supremely creative way, so that it goes well beyond any pejorative notion of the derivative. Stephen Heath explores this way of reading in his essay 'Ambiviolences', originally published in French in Tel Quel, later translated for the volume Postmodern Joyce edited by Derek Attridge. This, combined with Linda Hutcheon's book on parody, may provide a more appropriate critical vocabulary for articulating what is distinctive about Walcott's voice and achievement than one ultimately resting on the identity politics of nationalism and liberal individualism.

Walcott is in the same relationship to both British and American literature as Jonson and Pope were to Latin and as Eliot and Pound were to British: he writes from outside. A schoolboy encountering the British poets in the West Indies encounters them as writers in something resembling a foreign or even dead language, for they bear the imprint of somebody else's history. For that reason, Home, Christ, ale, master will sound differently for him as they did for Stephen Dedalus; so will 'our' and 'old'. Hence Walcott can rework
Lowell in a way that would be impossible for an American poet and only theoretically possible for a British one.

So, in the last poem of the first section, which is itself called ‘North and South’, Walcott takes Lowell’s image of ‘Piles/ of dead leaves that char the air’, which comes in ‘Where the rainbow ends’, and splits it into two to create a third:

Fragments of paper swirl round the bronze general of Sheridan Square, syllables of Nordic tongues (as an Obeah priestess sprinkles flour on the doorstep to ward off evil, so Carthage was sown with salt); the flakes are falling like a common language on my nose and lips, and rime forms on the mouth of a shivering exile from his African province. (p. 12)

This third image is language itself. It is the medium which, by being foregrounded, acquires the power to hold in solution so wide a range of temporal and spatial allusions, dissolving the lyric identity into a compound ghost as Afro-Greek under imperial Rome, or as servant under the British raj, or, later, ‘any child of the Diaspora’. The place of the poem similarly is sufficiently fluid for other places to show through – Fort Charlotte, Carthage and Tobago. Language, however, is a polluted medium, polluted by the history of those who have used it, and the flakes of snow that settle on his lips later darken into the obscene fallout from the chimneys of Treblinka: ‘The mania/ of history veils even the clearest air’ (p. 14).

The consciousness constructed by the poem is a negative one, not in the Keatsian sense of negative capability (although that is included), but in the sense of being like a space held open for the reader to define. The poet sees, listens, remembers, thinks, shivers, is tired, leads a tight life, cannot believe, stands paralyzed, mistrusts, turns back, lies under a blanket, feels flu, cannot help. The horrors of history are registered in a continuum that unites Carthage, Rome, London, Berlin and Washington, and there’s no doubt who are the perpetrators of the horrors, but the poet goes no further than claiming ‘the privilege/ to be yet another of the races they fear and hate/ instead of one of the haters and afraid’. His reflex action is to step aside from the snake-like evil of racism. Only, at the very end, he asserts his sole positive identity, as singer:

I collect my change from a small-town pharmacy, the cashier’s fingertips still wince from my hand as if it would singe hers – well, yes, \textit{je suis un singe}, I am one of that tribe of frenetic or melancholy primates who made your music for many more moons than all the silver quarters in the till. (p. 16)

It is in writing itself, then, that experience can be transformed and perhaps, in a fictive, potential sense, redeemed. This is the promise with which the whole volume ends, ‘The Season of Phantasmal Peace’ (pp. 98-99) – the
poem Helen Vendler so justly admires. The previous poem, 'The Fortunate Traveller', had ended with forebodings of the third horseman of the apocalypse who brings the plague of locusts. The plague is of locusts because the so-called North-South dialogue is about world-famine. Later in Revelation, the angel standing in the sun summons the fowls of the air to a fierce supper on the flesh of God's enemies. 'The Season of Phantasmal Peace' is perhaps a benign variant of this, a millenarian vision in which 'all the nations of birds' take away the shadows from things to weave a net of them, so that, by a sort of reversing out, the shadows become, instead of the inevitable doubles of existence in time and space, merely interstitial to light. This is the apotheosis of the poetics at work in 'North and South', which proceeds by a negativity that opens spaces and potentials rather than by counter-asserting positives. The poem thus produces itself by the same negative principle as did 'North and South', opening a space for the reader to occupy. But whereas in that poem the space had to be cleared, painfully, in heavily contaminated ground, involving the poet in delicate feats of strength and narrow escape, in this poem there is no threatening social occasion, no historical landscape, no difficult linguistic situation from which the poet has to rescue his song. Hence its purity. And the song that is sung throughout this volume is not the Iliad but the Odyssey, the epic of the perpetual traveller, perpetually homecoming, the epic Joyce selected to enable him to marry the figures of the Classical hero, the common man and the Wandering Jew. To these Walcott adds the many voiced figure of the postcolonial, and we are all 'post-colonial' now.

NOTES

2. Helen Vendler, 'Poet of Two Worlds', NYRB, 4 March 1982, pp. 23-7, p. 23. Helen Vendler is not alone in expressing reservations about Walcott, but as her review is the most deeply considered and raises matters of fundamental critical principle it is the most appropriate for the purposes of this discussion.
5. Vendler, p. 26. This location of Walcott in social terms comes perilously close to a set of colonial attitudes more crudely displayed by Lachlan Mackinnon in his review of the same volume, 'Nobody, or a nation', TLS, 24 October 1986, pp. 1185-86, where Walcott is similarly seen as overwhelmed by Robert Lowell: 'The problem is that Walcott's cosmopolitan ambition can lead to rootlessness'. Walcott is implicitly advised that he should be less ambitious, or, if ambitious, not in a cosmopolitan way; he should stick to his native island of St Lucia, where he can cultivate his roots. It's rather like the World Bank, or, earlier, the Imperial and Colonial Office, encouraging Caribbean, African and Asian countries to stick to primary agricultural production for secondary processing by the imperial home industries. Localism and agriculture for them; cosmopolitanism and industry for us. The local crop on St Lucia is bananas.
6. Vendler, p. 26. The poet Mervyn Morris also dwells on this poem in his fine essay on The Fortunate Traveller in The Art of Derek Walcott, ed. by Stewart
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27. Derek Walcott, *The Fortunate Traveller* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p. 4. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
A key text in twentieth-century poetic debate in Ireland is Samuel Beckett’s ‘Recent Irish Poetry’, published in 1934. Beckett was then twenty-eight years old and in the midst of what his poem ‘Gnome’ calls the ‘years of wandering’ before his decision to settle in Paris in 1937. Entirely out of sympathy with Free State Ireland, he used the essay to offer a damning analysis of the complacency and simple-mindedness of the great majority of its poets. Depending on their reaction to ‘the new thing that has happened, namely the breakdown of the object’ in contemporary culture, Irish poets divide for Beckett into two groups, ‘antiquarians and others’. The former greatly outnumber the latter, and are subjected to acid derision. While T.S. Eliot called for the extinction of personality, Beckett demonstrates how Irish poetry was lacking even enough personality to extinguish:

The device common to the poets of the Revival and after, in the use of which even beyond the jewels of language they are at one, is that of flight from self-awareness, and as such might perhaps be described as a convenience. At the centre there is no theme. ... But the circumference is an iridescence of themes – Oisin, Cuchulain, Maeve, Tir-nanog, the Táin Bo Cuailgne, Yoga, the Crone of Beare – segment after segment of cut-and-dried sanctity and loveliness.¹

For Beckett, neo-Revivalist use of Irish mythology is little more than embarrassing fancy dress. In opposition to antiquarian mummers such as F.R. Higgins, James Stephens and Austin Clarke, Beckett holds up the achievement of three poets, Thomas MacGreevy, Brian Coffey and Denis Devlin, the latter two ‘without question the most interesting of the youngest generation of Irish poets’.² This group is often described as Ireland’s poetic modernists, and Beckett notes with approval the influence of Corbière, Rimbaud, Laforgue, Eliot, Pound and the surrealists on their work. Deliverance from the antiquarian plague seemed at hand.

Looking back more than sixty years later, it is difficult to take the youthful Beckett’s Manichean judgements entirely at face value. ‘Recent Irish Poetry’ is certainly revealing of his pugnacity, and his desire to attack what he saw as Irish provincialism and smugness, but as a piece of criticism, I would argue, it is not a little misleading. Were matters really as black and white as Beckett suggests? Many of the poets he insults are talentless Celtic Twilighters, now forgotten, but several are anything but the second-hand
Yeatsians he makes them out to be. The most interesting case of Beckett’s injustice here is Austin Clarke. Clarke is also on the receiving end of an annihilating portrait in Beckett’s 1938 novel *Murphy*, in which he appears as the pitiful homosexual Austin Ticklepenny. The reason for Beckett’s extreme animus against Clarke has never been discovered, but it’s worth remembering that the qualities for which Beckett dismisses Clarke – his interest in mythology, his experiments with traditional Gaelic metres – are by no means incompatible with poetic styles that can be described as modernist. To give only one example, Hugh MacDiarmid’s modernist innovations in Scottish poetry during these years share many aspects of Clarke’s cultural nationalist revivalism.

Beckett’s position becomes all the more unfathomable when we recall that the three poets he hails as moderns, MacGreevy, Coffey and Devlin, were far from anti-nationalist or anti-traditionalist in outlook. Coffey and MacGreevy were fervent Catholics whose work appeared in devotional magazines, and MacGreevy was an ardent nationalist, whose patriotism had been awoken by the execution of the 1916 leaders. Beckett does not allow these considerations to enter the argument of ‘Recent Irish Poetry’, since to do so would complicate his neat polarity of inward-looking Irish traditionalists and cosmopolitan experimenters. In contrast to Coffey and MacGreevy, Clarke was a lifelong anti-clerical satirist, railing against censorship and the sexual prurience of the Free State. This would have made him a natural ally of the iconoclastic Beckett, one would have imagined. But no.

Beckett is also careful not to quote over-extensively from the work of his modernist exemplars, since in reality there wasn’t too much of it in print to quote from – MacGreevy’s one and only book, called simply *Poems*, appeared later that year, while Coffey and Devlin had only a joint-authored pamphlet of gushingly neo-Romantic juvenilia to their name, published in 1930. It is almost as if Beckett is more interested in what these writers aren’t, or what he wants them not to be, than in the reality of their achievement. Having quoted some lines of Devlin’s, perhaps the most talented of the three, he observes: ‘It is no disparagement of Mr Devlin to observe that this is still too much by the grace of Eluard. What matters is that it does not proceed from the Gossoons Wunderhorn of that Irish Romantic Arnim-Brentano combination, Sir Samuel Ferguson and Standish O’Grady, and that it admits – stupendous innovation – the existence of the author.’ It’s hardly the securest rock on which to build the church of Irish poetic modernism.

The careers of MacGreevy, Coffey and Devlin in the years immediately following 1934 did nothing to suggest imminent victory over the forces of antiquarianism. Far from going on to lead Irish poetry into the modernist promised land, they remained on the fringes. MacGreevy abandoned poetry, Coffey endured decades of silence, and only Devlin had anything like a conventionally successful poetic career – in the United States. 1935, the year after ‘Recent Irish Poetry’, saw the publication of first volumes by two writers who place Beckett’s dichotomy of ‘antiquarians and others’ under even more strain: Patrick Kavanagh and Louis MacNeice. Kavanagh too, like
many of the 'antiquarians' wrote on rural themes and dabbled in mythology (more classical than Irish), but was just as ill-disposed as Beckett to pasticheurs of Yeats. MacNeice too was healthily sceptical of Yeats, and wrote with a witty and urbane detachment unheard of among the 'antiquarians', but never described himself as a modernist. Introducing Kavanagh and MacNeice into Beckett's schema helps us to understand why it would be impossible today, even were it desirable, to separate contemporary poets into 'antiquarians and others'. Even in 1934, there were too many strands in Irish poetry for such an argument to do it justice.

Mention of names like Oarke, Kavanagh and MacNeice gives some idea of the direction that Irish poetry has taken since the Thirties. Space is lacking in a short essay like this to give an overview of Irish poetry today, even one as distorted as Beckett's; readers in search of such a guide are directed to Dennis O'Driscoll's 'A Map of Contemporary Irish Poetry', published in an Irish special issue of the Chicago journal *Poetry* (November 1995). What there is room to do, though, is look again at some of Beckett's arguments in the light of contemporary developments. In 1934 Beckett thought 'the first condition' of the average Irish poem was 'an accredited theme' and the convention that 'in self-perception there is no theme, but at best sufficient *vis a tergo* to land the practitioner into the correct scenery, where the self is either most happily obliterated or else so improved and enlarged that it can be mistaken for part of the décor'. How much has changed?

One thing that has not changed since Beckett's manifesto is Irish introspection and provincialism. This is as much a symptom of the environment of Irish publishing and reviewing as it is of any temerity or conservatism on the part of Irish poets themselves. It is also in ironic contrast to the foreign attention which Irish poets have long seen as their birthright, and which continues to keep Irish Studies programmes abroad happily ticking over. For instance, when English critic Sean O'Brien brought out his *Deregulated Muse: Essays on Contemporary British & Irish Poetry* recently, seven of his twenty-five short chapters deal with Irish writers, which led to accusations from some British critics of Hibemocentrism. Whatever the wisdom of the canon according to Sean O'Brien, Anglocentrism, by contrast, has never been a problem among Irish poets or critics. Even the most aggressively marketed New Generation poets, Simon Armitage and Glyn Maxwell, are almost unknown in Ireland. Occasionally an Irish magazine might make the supreme effort to bring out an American special issue, but a British special issue would be quite simply unthinkable. Britain is too close for such treatment to be necessary, the argument might run. But while Irish poets continue to publish with English houses and bask in the approval of Hibemocentric English critics, British poets are doing well to get a few dozen words out of an Irish critic at the end of a round-up review in a weekend paper. And as for poets from further afield, Australians, New Zealanders and Canadians, to restrict myself to Anglophones, just getting hold of their books in Ireland can sometimes seem as difficult as getting a Qantas flight into Knock airport, to paraphrase...
Robert Crawford. As Peter Sirr has written, discussing Ireland’s ‘export-driven’ relationship to the wider world: ‘An international poetry magazine is suddenly, miraculously, available in Dublin bookshops because it is an Irish issue. We will never see the German issue or the Italian issue, not to mention the Scottish, Welsh or English issue. I have a sense that the more we pat ourselves on the back for our newly discovered “Europeanness” the more we are ensnared in our theme park.’

In a recent Verse interview, Eavan Boland confidently proclaimed that ‘there is no real Irish equivalent to language poetry’. This is not strictly accurate, since Ireland does harbour a small number of linguistically experimental poets, but points to a strange anomaly in Irish poetic culture. For all the proliferation of journals, workshops, residencies and readings, there is an almost total disconnection in Ireland today from the great experimental modernist tradition that gave us Joyce and Beckett. With the partial exception of Paul Muldoon and Ciaran Carson, both much given to verbal high jinks, the radical energies of Irish poetry have not translated into a credible avant-garde. Eavan Boland is a useful case in point here. Much influenced by Adrienne Rich, she has polemicized at length against the deeply ingrained gender conservatism of the Irish tradition and the ‘hieratic persona’ of the modernist poet. Her response to this has been a radical attention to subject matter that had previously been off the map of Irish poetry, specifically the experience of motherhood in the Dublin suburb where so many of her poems are set. Useful as this has been, it is curious why she has not felt an accompanying impulse to radicalize her linguistic medium, which is doggedly opposed to modernism and its ‘privileged personae’. Boland seems to consider formalism per se implacably opposed to the truth-telling function of poetry: ‘too often the authority of the life is predicated upon the ability of the poet to give it grace or interest’, she has written disapprovingly of Derek Mahon. Beckett complained about the ubiquity of myth in Irish poetry of the Thirties: has the myth of the self and authentic personal experience become a form of ‘correct scenery’ in its own right, somewhere Irish poets must go to decommission their bad old modernist privilege?

A more productive dialogue with tradition and selfhood can be found in the work of Paul Muldoon, arguably the most linguistically gifted, resourceful and restless Irish poet writing today. Muldoon has drawn extensively on mythology, from the Gaelic ‘Seanchas’ of his first collection, New Weather (1973), to his rewriting of Virgil in his latest book, Hay, but could never be accused of producing ‘segment after segment of cut-and-dried sanctity and loveliness’ on an ‘accredited theme’. Where Boland attempts to move from the distortions of myth into history, Muldoon emphasizes the ways in which myth and history intertwine, refusing to credit either one with unquestioned access to reality. One level on which this is particularly evident is Muldoon’s use of autobiography. Comparisons with Seamus Heaney have typecast Muldoon as a postmodernist trickster beside the earnestly Wordsworthian older poet, but if anything it is Muldoon who
is the more autobiographical writer of the two. The difference is that Muldoon’s writing frequently pursues autobiography to the point of impenetrably private reference, as in the recent long poem ‘Yarrow’. Just as frequently, Muldoon poems use the concept of private experience to explore the limits of communicable experience, as in the title poem of his 1983 collection *Quoof*. ‘Quoof’, he explains, is a family word for a hot water bottle which he has carried with him through adult life and ‘taken ... into so many lovely heads / or laid ... between us like a sword’. In the poem’s second stanza he describes one such occasion:

An hotel room in New York City
with a girl who spoke hardly any English
my hand on her breast
like the smouldering one-off spoor of the yeti
or some other shy beast
that has yet to enter the language.7

As a private word ‘quoof’ would be less than helpful for entering into communication with the woman; the fact that she speaks ‘hardly any English’ anyway only compounds its uselessness. Rather than acting as a tool for the seduction and subjection of the feminine (a metaphor employed time and again by Heaney), the colonizing male’s language is rendered powerless; a true Beckettian ‘rupture of the lines of communication’. As Clair Wills has pointed out, the sestet ends still lacking a verb, ‘the “entering” unaccomplished’.8 Just as the word ‘quoof’ has yet to enter the language, the poet imagines his hand transformed to the spoor of a yeti, underlining the destabilizing effect on his sense of identity of the encounter.

As ever with Muldoon, verbal association is an important influence on the course of the poem, the ‘yet’ of ‘yeti’ clearly influencing the poem’s last line. Another example is the poem ‘Sushi’, which obsessively repeats endwords in -rgn (‘arrogance’, ‘oregano’, ‘orgone’, ‘organs’) without ever mentioning the word which logically underpins them all, ‘origin’. By toying with such arbitrary effects, Muldoon highlights the contingency of all points of origin we would seek to uncover in language. Arbitrariness is not the same thing as sloppiness though, and ‘Sushi’ ends by describing the chef as ‘a man unlikely to confound / Duns Scotus, say, with Scotus Eriugena’.9 Names may whizz by in a point-and-click poem like ‘Sushi’ but remain resistantly themselves in what Beckett called ‘the absolute predicament of particular human identity’. Nowhere are names and identities of more fascination to Muldoon than in his own origins, and it is his obsessive interrogation of them in a volume like *The Annals of Chile* that makes him one of the great contemporary poets of childhood and family life.

It is unfair, of course, to concentrate on Muldoon at the expense of the many other poets writing in Ireland today. But as an example of a poet who has combined the exploration of origins, both personal and national, with a radically innovative technique, he shows himself to be a complete writer in a way that synthesises the terms of Beckett’s 1934 polemic, both antiquarian
and modernist at once. Other writers I could just as easily have concentrated on include Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Michael Hartnett, Paul Durcan, Ciarán Carson, Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, Medbh McGuckian or Harry Clifton – to confine myself to poets coeval with or younger than Seamus Heaney. They make a diverse assembly, writing out of imaginative territories as different as Longley's Belfast and Mayo, Mahon's courtyards in Delft, Hartnett's Gaelic seventeenth century, Durcan's surreal chip shops and midland towns, Carson's labyrinthine Belfast, Ní Dhomhnaill's Kerry Gaeltacht, McGuckian's lushly disguised North Antrim coast, and Harry Clifton's desert routes. Taken as a whole they represent no school or collective front, none of the 'sects, schisms or sectiuncles' on which Beckett gleefully pounced. This is not to suggest that Irish poetry is not a passionately contested territory. The literary historian W.J. Cormack once jokingly suggested little Yeat's line 'great hatred, little room' ('Out of Ireland we have come, / great hatred, little room') as the title for an anthology of Irish book reviews; Irish poets are no less querulous than Irish critics, but these days at least face nothing like the same jostle for space. A recent anthology of Irish writers responding to the bicentenary of Giacomo Leopardi's birth featured no less than 110 poets. There is such a proliferation of Irish poetry journals, in fact, that a shortage of stamps might seem (to the cynical observer) a more serious impediment to getting published than a shortage of talent.

If Ireland's current receptivity to poetry means many writers will fall by the wayside, so be it. Among the massed ranks of Irish poets, sprinters with their eye on the next poetry competition or festival will always outnumber the marathon runners doggedly pursuing a Collected Poems a few decades down the road. And while it would be premature to place the responsibility for the future of Irish poetry on the shoulders of a pair of twenty-somethings, as Beckett does in 'Recent Irish Poetry', there are perhaps four or five younger writers showing signs of eventually matching the achievement of their elders listed above. It's enough to be going on with, or as Seamus Heaney says at the end of 'Tollund' in The Spirit Level: 'Not bad'.

NOTES

2. ibid., p. 75.
3. ibid., p. 76.
4. ibid., p. 71.
Notes only, and from a position I tend to think of as on the margin. But I have been reminded all too often of the fact that my margin is pretty close to many other peoples’ centres and so I can’t even make that claim with any sense of real justification. Let’s say that I write from a site which takes certain kinds of innovation as positive, and which recognizes that many other margins, of class, race or ethnicity, gender, as well as poetic practice, are circling on the peripheries of official culture. I will also admit, right up front, that I cannot possibly do justice to the vast range of writing in Canada today, and that this series of notes can only attempt to give some sense of that range, and of the writers working in various fields within it. In that sense, this is a highly provisional overview, a glimpse from one point on the circumference of some of what lies within. I will mention a number of writers, most of whom will stand as signs of many others unmentioned. This is inherently unfair, and I recognize that fact. My own biases undoubtedly influence the directions many of these quick glancing notes will take. In order to suggest something about poetry in Canada circa 1998, I think it necessary to look at some of the developments of the past decade or so.

Are we past the post yet?

In 1998, is there an audience for poetry beyond the coteries, in Canada? Where does or would such an audience be found? Canadian poetry is taught in the universities and colleges, and poetry readings in such venues probably get the best audiences, and those are not huge. Still, poetry in Canada, as in most other English-speaking countries, is not a major force in the literary arts. Maclean’s, Canada’s weekly newsmagazine, reviewed only one book of poetry in 1998, and, I think, for some years. It was not Canadian; nor was it a major work although it was received as a masterpiece. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s flagship radio program, This Morning, also reviewed only one book of poetry this past year on its ‘Talking Books’ Sunday morning segment, the same book. There two Canadian poets, Lorna Crozier (one of the most popular poets of the past decade and published by the one major press still doing poetry, McClelland & Stewart) and Mark Abley (Book Reviews editor for The Montreal Gazette) and a British media watcher talked about how ‘noble,’
'interesting,' and 'tragic' this volume was. What does it say about Canada's status as a post-colonial nation that it was, in fact, Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*, a work that also made it onto the *Maclean's* national bestseller list for a few weeks? Actually, I would like to know how many Canadian poets bought and read *Birthday Letters*; certainly it's clear that for many 'common readers' its publication was the most telling moment in Canadian poetry this past year (and one which reveals the continuing power of British imperialism, at least in the arts, not to say that this book didn't have the same depressing effect in Britain itself, and in the United States).

**A little bit of canonization**

I'm sorry to report that for more than a decade there have been no new major anthologies of Canadian poetry. The one anthology used in most post-secondary institutions remains *Fifteen Canadian Poets x 2*, the first incarnation of which, *Fifteen Canadian Poets*, appeared in 1970. As we move through the nineties towards the millennium, the basic division between the more or less traditional poetics of mainstream poetry and the radical poetics of 'language' oriented writers continues to widen. Even those poets not given to joining groups nevertheless find themselves partially associated with one or the other of these two major forces. Such simple partitioning occurs in the United States, Britain, Australia, New Zealand, as well as in Canada. Anthologizing tends, by its very nature, to be a conservative act; the anthologist looks backward, and seeks to cement in place an already 'given' sense of the canon (although one might ask just how much the anthologists' conservatism creates that canonizing 'given'). It should come as no surprise, then, that, for some time now, the major anthologies in Canada have tended to weigh in on the side of the traditional (and that they do so even to the extent of almost completely erasing the signs of more innovative poetics in the writings of those poets they choose — say George Bowering, Phyllis Webb, or Robert Kroetsch, to take just three examples from *Fifteen Canadian Poets x 2* — and of tending to include younger poets whose work falls within conventional lyric expectations). This is especially true of *Fifteen Canadian Poets x 2*. The need for a new comprehensive anthology is great, but there is no sign that one will soon appear. Thus a Canuck looks with envy at the recent anthologies of New Zealand and Australian poetry published by Penguin Books in both countries.

**Elders of the tribe, etc.**

The vexed question of influence will always remain vexed, but it is interesting to see how aspects of it are addressed by those who might say they have been influenced. Perhaps I am simply talking about a generous outpouring of respect for certain writers who have made a difference by their examples, but the poets I am going to mention here made deep and personal impressions on many other writers, and that's one good way of defining 'influence.'
BpNichol died ten years ago but his spirit lives on, and he remains one of the most deeply missed writers of his generation. Nichol’s personal impact on his many friends was inestimable, but as well his never-ceasing explorations of the possibilities of writing, and especially his life-long work, the martyrology, continue to galvanize other, and new, writers in their own attempts to push the envelope of poetic discourse and form. Concrete poetry, which had lain fallow for quite awhile, has made a major comeback, with most of its young practitioners demonstrating an allegiance to Nichol’s pioneering work (see, for example, Darren Wershler-Henry’s Nicholodeon: a book of lowerglyphs [1997]). This fall there will be a conference, with international attendance, celebrating the writer and his work (his last notebook is reproduced in West Coast Line 25 [Spring/Summer 1998]).

In the past few years such conferences, as much celebrations as scholarly examinations, have been held to honour Robin Blaser, whose impact on the writing scene on the West Coast cannot be overstated, on the publication of his long awaited collected poems The Holy Forest; and Robert Kroetsch, novelist, critical theorist, and poet of restless formal possibilities, who has profoundly influenced the development of various kinds of writing on the prairies. This practice, of honouring writers before they die and can no longer appreciate that they are appreciated, actually began with a celebration for bpNichol in 1986. In 1992, a similar celebration was held for Phyllis Webb, whose poetry has enchanted and amazed her readers for over four decades, and whose Naked Poems (1966) influenced every long poem to follow. Webb has since stopped writing poetry, turning her eye to visual art, but her work continues to find new readers and to teach various possibilities. Many young women, especially, discover ways to write for themselves in her poetry, a poetry of terrible lyric grace that nevertheless refuses any of the easy outs of lyric. As well, it is always strikingly intelligent while never losing its emotional edge.

In the case of all four of these writers, their work has met with useful and various criticism. In Nichol’s case, there are two collections of essays on the martyrology, as well as a festschrift published for the 1986 celebration, plus two monographs. A similar festschrift appeared more or less in conjunction with the Webb conference. Many of the papers presented at the Blaser conference have been published in journals in the US and Canada, while Kroetsch remains one of the most critically appreciated writers in Canada.

In terms of what might be called the mainstream, another poet of some influence, Robin Skelton, died recently. A festschrift in his honour appeared in the late 80s. Skelton was something of a magister, a master of inherited forms, a teacher who helped found the Creative Writing Department at the University of Victoria, and a deliberate eccentric who took great pleasure in being a warlock. His work could be seen as a bulwark of the New Formalism in Canada, which has attracted many younger poets, as it also has in the US. As well, many fellow poets gathered to celebrate Pat Lane’s 60th birthday a few years ago. Lane is a fine lyricist, of working class background, now well established in the contemporary canon. There have also been celebrations of
the works and lives of two elders of the tribe: Al Purdy, whom many think of as 'the' Canadian poet; and Irving Layton, whose influence is more for the energy and sexual freedom of his early work than for any formal innovation. Now Purdy is formally interesting, yet his poetry is so specifically in his own singular voice that it seems he too has been influential mostly for his defiant insistence on writing about all aspects of Canadian life, although his ability to utilize a purely Canadian vernacular has certainly given other poets direction. Both can be parodied, but to try to imitate them is to court disaster.

Of course, the writers mentioned above are all in their seventies or older (except for Nichol who died far too young, and Lane). Among the generation of the 60s, poets now in their late 50s or early 60s, a number are now seen as mentors and influences, including most obviously Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje. But I would also point to such innovative writers as Daphne Marlatt, who has become more and more important in recent years as a feminist writer, whose interest in a feminist poetics has had a great influence. But there are far too many writers of that generation who continue to publish and whose influence will continue to be felt in the new millennium.

*That huge geography divided*

Another aspect of Canadian poetry that cannot be overlooked is the way the size of the country almost mandates regional sensibilities. Because so many of the major publishers in Canada are to be found in Toronto and environs, those who live outside Ontario often feel they are in a colonial relationship with central Canadian power. Yet there are many regions within Ontario too. Nevertheless, there is a sense, whether fair or not, that Ontario sees the rest of the country as a kind of adjunct, and does not recognize the legitimate concerns of its varied regions. I am sliding into politics here but they certainly do play their part in culture in Canada.

For one thing, it's very hard for someone on the prairies to know what's happening in the Maritimes and vice-versa, not least because distribution of books from one end of the country to the other is so poor, and seems to be filtered through Toronto as a (failing) distribution centre. That there is an active poetry scene in the Maritimes is clear, and at least one of our major literary magazines, *The Fiddlehead*, is published in New Brunswick, and there are a few others, but it's hard to keep up with developments there if, like me, you are on the other side of the continent.

There has long been talk about a 'prairie vernacular' poetic, and it certainly exists. But, due in part to Kroetsch's presence, there are also a number of innovative poetics to be found on the prairies. In Manitoba, where he taught during the 80s, Dennis Cooley, whose ability to mix and match vernacular speech and innovative form has led to a number of wildly comic poems, has also been an energetic mentor. Saskatchewan is perhaps the busiest literary scene in Canada. Anne Szumigalski has long been a moving force there. *Prairie Fire* has published issues dedicated to these two
writers in the past few years. Now that Fred Wah is teaching at the University of Calgary (which recently graduated the first Ph.D. in its Writing Program, Nicole Markotic, whose poetry is definitely in the innovative camp), a number of younger innovative poets have gathered there. Such interesting magazines as *Filling Station* and *absinthe* (the latter continually bringing out special issues of gay or ethnic writing) are now part of that exciting scene.

The West Coast has long been a hotbed of competing poetics, and it continues to be so. There are a number of important small presses in British Columbia, and writers as different as bill bissett and Pat Lane, Daphne Marlatt and Lorna Crozier (a prairie writer now teaching in Victoria), or Phyllis Webb and P.K. Page share that ‘northern Californian’ space (as one witty columnist has dubbed it).

*Writing women*

Although I’ve already alluded to it, the immense importance of feminist poetry and poetics in Canada continues, despite whatever ‘post-feminist’ discourses there may be out there. As Margaret Atwood pointed out some time ago, in her Introduction to *The New Oxford Book of English Verse* (1982), women, for whatever reason, have always had a larger place in Canadian writing than in that of most cultures. But their voices have never been so loud nor so wide-ranging. I’d hazard that at least half the poetry being published in Canada today is by women. As well, some of our most intriguing innovators are women, many with connections to various avant-gardes in other countries, especially the US. Karen Mac Cormack publishes widely in the US, and her *The Tongue Moves Talk* (1997) was co-published by Chax Press in Arizona and West House Books in Hereford, UK. It boasts back cover commendations from both Charles Bernstein and Maggie O’Sullivan. Among other recent books of note by younger writers, I would mention Lisa Robertson’s *Debbie: An Epic* (1997), which wears both its ‘language poetry’ and ‘feminist’ banners proudly. It’s a rich, ripe, and very funny dismantling of various aspects of an inherited patriarchal genre. Nicole Markotic’s *minotaurs and other alphabets* (1998) takes on the prose poem (‘a mythical beast’) to deliver an erotic and exotic swerve from the referential. Among older feminist writers, both Daphne Marlatt and Lola Lemire Tostevin have recently published collections of critical prose (*Readings from the Labyrinth* [1998]; *Subject to Criticism* [1995]) as well as novels, but their poetry continues to be central to many of their readers, even as they take their place with other poet-novelists in a growing Canadian tradition. Marlatt published two collections of earlier work in the 90s, *Salvage* and *Ghost Works*; Tostevin’s latest collection is *Cartouches*, a memorial to her father and bpNichol. Erin Mouré is another important figure, writing deliberately difficult poems undermining the ‘natural’ assumptions of a ‘neutral’ language; she continues to publish a book every two or three years, the most recent of which is *Search Procedures*. 
Another figure has gained a very strong presence outside the country. Anne Carson has published only one book in Canada, while both *Plainwater* (1995) and *Glass, Irony and God* (1995) appeared in the US (as did her groundbreaking study of Sappho, *Eros, the Bittersweet*, a beautiful prose poem in itself), and from major presses to boot. She’s an interesting figure, as her complex, scholarly, and challenging writing is admired equally by members of both the camps alluded to above. Although she does not have a very high profile in Canadian letters as yet, she might very well be remembered as one of the major writers of this period.

Atwood, of course, writes mostly novels now, yet her *Morning in the Burned House* (1995) was seen as one of her finest and most personal collections of poetry. Webb’s last book, *Hanging Fire*, appeared in 1990, but younger writers and readers continue to seek out her work, and *The Vision Tree: Selected Poems* (1982) remains in print. P.K. Page, another venerated writer, whose visionary lyricism has long been admired, published her latest collected poems in 1997, while *The Malahat Review* published a special issue honouring her in 1996. There are many other poets of note who should be mentioned here, but even this short list suggests the continuing vitality of feminine/feminist writing in Canada today.

**Working**

Although it’s not unique to Canada, certainly, under the editorial guidance of Tom Wayman, the ‘work poem’ has become a legitimate and politically important form. Work poetry is often connected with populist poetry (insofar as that can be said to exist in our culture). Every year, the Milton Acorn Prize is awarded to a book of poetry that the judges feel most fulfills the ideals Acorn is said to have stood for as a ‘people’s poet.’ Several of the poets who first appeared in Wayman’s various anthologies of work poetry have gone on to publish books of their own, some of which have won this prize. The definition of work poetry is pretty permeable, actually, ranging from the often disruptive anti-lyric poems of Mouré to some rather intriguing and highly political rhetoric in such poets as Phil Hall and Wayman himself, to what can only be called a poetry of the plainest voice (which I confess I don’t find very interesting, but which many readers seem to like a lot). Certainly, although many writers who begin as work poets soon expand their literary horizons, work poetry has had an undeniable impact on contemporary poetry in Canada.

**Other voices, or whose cult is multicult?**

One of the most important and hotly debated political acts in recent Canadian history is the turn to a policy of official multiculturism, which began with Pierre Trudeau in 1971 and passed into law in 1988. However much this policy can be criticized for its omissions and failures, it has changed the political maps of this country. And even if many of them write from a position of ambivalent animosity to the ways in which the policy has played out in the political arena, there are now a large number of writers...
who are (and here Miki's point about continued 'racialization' hits home) recognized as multicultural, more with each generation. Indeed, the 90s has seen an ever-increasing number of books and anthologies concerned with writing from various multicultural sites. Roy Miki, in his position as editor of *West Coast Line*, has done much to promote such writing, always aligning it with the formal innovations of the writers he first admired—Nichol, the many West Coast poets who emerged in the 60s, Blaser, etc.—with issues devoted to *Colour: An Issue* (1994), *Transporting the Emporium: Hong Kong Art and Writing Through the Ends of Time* (1996-7), *North: New African Canadian Writing* (1997), and an *Asian Heritage Month Sampler* (1997), as well as continual support for new writing from all areas in every issue. *absinthe* has also had special issues, including one on writing by aboriginals and people of colour, and it regularly highlights other forms of minority writing.

Among the many writers who are doing interesting work I can mention only a few. Among the Asian-Canadians (so long as I or anyone continue to use such hyphenated terms there's something wrong, but at the same time, in the writing that dissects, undermines, interrogates, and disassembles such constructions there is much that is right), there are: Miki and Wah, Hiromi Goto (best known as a novelist for her Commonwealth Prize-winning *A Chorus of Mushrooms* but she has also published some intriguing poems deconstructing conventions of 'race'), the late Roy Kiyooka, whose massive and brilliant *Pacific Windows: Collected Poems* appeared in 1998, Gerry Shikatani (who edited the first anthology of Japanese-Canadian poetry, *Paper Doors* [1981]), Yasmin Ladha, and Lakshmi Gill. African-Canadian poets of interest include Dionne Brand (the title of whose *No Language Is Neutral* clearly sets the terms of engagement), George Elliott Clarke (who, as an anthologist and academic, is doing much to promote such writing), Claire Harris, Suzette Mayr, M. Norbese Philip, and Carribean-Canadian Olive Senior. First Nations Canadian poets include Jeanette Armstrong, Joanne Arnott, Marie Annharte Baker, Beth Brant, Marilyn Dumont, Wayne Keon, and Daniel David Moses (who co-edited an anthology of Native writing for the prestigious Oxford University Press). That I am undoubtedly leaving out some important names is a given here.

### Publishing, a short note

Since 1967, a number of small presses and magazines have appeared, with the help of the Canada Council to keep them going. I will list just some of the major magazines and presses here, but their continuing presence, and the recent explosion of new ones run by young writers in the past few years, bodes well for the continuing health of writing, even poetry, in Canada.

Major magazines that have been around for awhile, and which run the gamut from eclectic and essentially mainstream to those mostly interested in formal or political innovation, include: *The Fiddlehead*, *The Antigonish Review* (New Brunswick), *Matrix* (Québec), *Arc, Descant, Quarry* (Ontario), *Prairie Fire* (Manitoba), *Grain, The Wascana Review* (Saskatchewan),
Newer magazines include *Stanzas* (Ontario), *absinthe*, *Filling Station* (Alberta). There are many others, as a whole younger generation is insistently finding ways to get published, and happily ignoring many of the older, and perhaps more conservative venues. Damian Lopes, one of the people behind the recent return of concrete poetry (although he would argue that it never went away, merely underground), publishes *Prose & Contexts* in Toronto; it is not a magazine but a collection of small items available by subscription. And of course, there are already a number of Canadian edited web-sites, but of these I know little.

Small presses carry the main burden in Canada when it comes to publishing poetry. Of the various ‘big’ publishers, only McClelland & Stewart still have any program of publishing poetry, and they publish, at most, four books per year (Oxford has pretty well given up their program, although they still carry their Atwood titles; other big publishers have either never had or dropped their poetry programs). M & S published a new book of Michael Ondaatje’s poetry *Handwriting* in the fall of 1998, and they are still the publishers of Purdy, Layton, Cohen, and some less well known names. Still, and despite the terrible effect of government cuts in recent years, it is the small presses that do the job — such publishers as Goose Lane Editions, Véhicule Press, Brick Books, Coach House Books (the whole terrible story of the destruction of Coach House Publishing in the early 90s may never be fully known, but it was Canada’s leading publisher of innovative writing [all of the martyrology, for example] and the phoenix that arose from its ashes keeps up that tradition but in a much more limited fashion, re-‘printing’ books on the web and making new, and expensive limited editions), House of Anansi Press, ECW Press, The Mercury Press, Oberon Press, The Porcupine’s Quill, Quarry Press, TSAR Books, Wolsak & Wynn, Turnstone Press, Coteau Books, Thistledown Press, rdc press, NeWest Press, Ekstasis Editions, Harbour Publishing, New Star Books, Nightwood Editions, Polestar Press, Pulp Press, Sono Nis Press, Talonbooks. That I have left some out is a given, but even so this list suggests how complex and rich a small press tradition there is in Canada.

Although this article is highly subjective, certainly biased, and no more than a glance at the whole, vast territory, I have tried to suggest something of the range of poetry being written and published in Canada today. The great strength of Canadian poetry is its eclecticism, and the way poets from different fields of endeavour manage to get along. This too brief overview has hinted at the variety of contemporary Canadian poetry but failed to give examples of every kind of work. Whom have I left out? Far too many poets I admire, and had I only made a list of titles that I find exciting, it would have taken all the space available here. Even if poetry is essentially hidden, certainly ignored in the general public cultural forums, it still has a function. It may no longer be clear exactly what that function is, but given the number of young writers willing to sacrifice in order to publish their and their
fellows’ work, given the increased use of the Web for publishing, given the continuing popularity of readings and slams, it seems that poetry, in one form or other, will be a going concern well into the new millennium.

NOTES

1. In the recently published American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators & Outsiders, editor Eliot Weinberger makes the same point about American poetry, and offers an insight into the division: “On one side is a ruling party that insists there is no ruling party, and thus no opposition; that there are only good or bad poets, publishers, literary magazines; that the others are simply those who failed to make the grade. Yet it is a party that clearly exists in the minds of those outside it, who have derided it with adjectives like conventional, establishment, official, academic; and have pitched their own poetics as alternatives to the prevailing humdrum. On the other side is an opposition still intensely aware of its outsider status, yet now increasingly dissatisfied with the banners under which it once rallied: avant-garde, experimental, non-academic, radical.” When he adds that, although “[t]he distinction between the two parties has always been blurred at the edges and, over the decades, the issues of debate have changed,” nevertheless “[t]he channels of recognition, however slight for poets ..., have always been controlled by the ruling party” (p. xi), he is pointing to an aspect of the major anthologies’ canon-making process which Fifteen Canadian Poets x 2 clearly reflects.

2. Throughout this essay I am speaking of English Canada only, of course.

3. I should add here that although many of their younger adherents seem to feel that you have to be ‘for’ either Webb or Page, they appear to admire each other’s work – as they should, for both are exemplary poets.

4. Jeff Derksen’s article, ‘Unrecognizable Texts: From Multicultural to Antisystemic Writing’, West Coast Line, 24 (Winter 1997-98), pp. 59-71), provides a useful overview of the Act’s history and its effects, and then addresses the ways in which various ‘multicultural’ writers have responded to the concept. Fred Wah’s ‘Speak My Language: Racing the Lyric’ (72-84) explores certain formal questions concerning how best to write (against) the givens of the concept, while Roy Miki’s ‘Can I See Your ID? Writing in the “Race” Codes That Bind’ (85-94) picks apart certain ‘liberal’ assumptions to suggest both why and how a writing against the given has arisen. Miki: ‘The Canadian take on “multiculturism” needs to be read as a contradictory zone of vested interests, made more so by the engineering role played by the federal administration. While its more benign public face had supported cultural “diversity” and “pluralism,” the company it keeps with hierarchically structured relations of “differences” exposes a subtext of racialization. In other words, as a top down term “multiculturism” has been deployed strategically by policy makers to project a political and cultural history built on “tolerance” and “inclusiveness.” For those who have internalized the networks of racialization, this narrative remains a fantasy that deflects the colonial history of white supremacist power. Critical theorist and activist Himanin Bannerji has commented that “... there is a state within a state in Canada. The liberal democratic Canadian state enshrines within itself a colonial state.” This condition is concretized both in Canada’s continuing failure to settle its colonial debts to First Nations people and in its “multiculturism” policy which Bannerji describes as “management through racialization”, (p. 90).
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Aboriginal achievement
Is like the dark side of the moon,
For it is there
But so little known. (Ernie Dingo)¹

Before turning to our subject I must make a preliminary point. It is the point made by Kevin Gilbert in his introduction to his anthology of Aboriginal poetry, *Inside Black Australia*:

Aboriginal poets share a universality with all other poets, yet differ somewhat in the traumatic and material experience of other poets, especially those who have wandered through Europe and for that matter, Australia, starving in ghettos or reflecting established constraints.²

All poetry has to do with the play of language. But, as John Frow points out, the objects, conditions and relations of this play, of the structures of its discourse and the conditions of enunciation and reception are also part of the operations of social power³ and at the moment, for a whole set of reasons, psychological as well as political and economic, these operations are particularly uneasy. If identity politics can never be entirely innocent, at the moment in Australia they are particularly complicated, not merely at the public but at the personal level. As a leading figure in the land rights debate, the former director of the National Farmers’ Federation, Rick Farley, observes, there seems to be ‘something in the psyche’ which bedevils relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.⁴

In her poem ‘The Dark Ones’ Judith Wright explores this anxiety, meditating on a group of Aboriginal fringe dwellers come to town on pension day:

On the other side of the road
the dark ones stand.
Something leaks in our blood
like the ooze from a wound.⁵

This anxiety as she wrote earlier, is ‘the mortal wound’ which ‘the blacks had known how to deal in return for their own dispossession ... the deep and festering consciousness of guilt’⁶ for the violent occupation of the
country, officially unacknowledged but privately deeply troubling.

The night ghosts of a land
only by day possessed
Come haunting into the mind
like a shadow cast.

Day has another side.
Night has its time to live,

a depth that rhymes our pride
with its alternative.⁷

This anxiety, intensiﬁed by current debates over Aboriginal land rights, the rise of Pauline Hanson and, on the Aboriginal side, increasing militancy, means that the non-Aboriginal critic must tread warily when discussing Aboriginal writing. This is not to sacriﬁce aesthetics to politics but to suggest that aesthetics should also honour ethical concerns since, pace the more extreme post-modernist position, any text arises out of a world inhabited by human beings and remains a part of it: language is a primary cultural and therefore historical and political fact.

For a non-Aboriginal critic to discuss Aboriginal poetry is therefore not a simple matter since it takes us to the frontier between cultures, a frontier, moreover, which, as we have said, is fraught with anxieties on one side and pain and growing anger on the other. Signiﬁcantly, Aboriginal critics seem more aware of these complexities than most non-Aboriginal ones. Thus, noting that over the last two decades Aboriginal writing has received a remarkable amount of attention and scrutiny from the wider community, Kevin Gilbert points out that this attention has often included cultural misunderstanding, even insensitivity, and has often been Orientalist in its approach:

Many, especially those exercising a critical overview and expecting something different, more exotic perhaps, from a people whose tradition, have not come to terms with this often raw, certainly rugged, and deﬁnitely truthful subjective material drawn from the creative impulse.⁸

The hegemonic assumptions of such criticism are apparent in Andrew Taylor’s review of the second volume of poems by Kath Walker (who later took her Aboriginal name, Oodgeroo Noonuccal).

She is no poet, and her name is not poetry in any true sense. It hasn’t that serious commitment to formal rightness, that concern for making speech time under all circumstances, which distinguishes Buckley and Wright at their best. [Her book] belongs more rightly to that ﬁeld of social protest in which Miss Walker’s statements are most relevant and moving.⁹

Walker is blamed for not measuring up to standards set by contemporary Australian poets belonging to the non-Aboriginal mainstream. By these standards what was they called poetry of ‘propaganda and protest’, was
"forbidden territory". From an Aboriginal point of view, however, this was not so much a literary as a political position: according to Mudrooroo Narogin, for instance, Taylor’s was the ‘voice of Anglo-Celtic dominance’.

Far from being aesthetic, Mudrooroo sees this criticism as essentially political. Walker’s poetry was not acceptable because she was refusing to stay in her place. She was extending the Aboriginal struggle for equal rights and justice into the arena of literature, knocking on the doors of the Anglo-Celtic literary establishment with verse often as simple as a fist.

This controversy occurred in the late 1960s and critics like Andrew Taylor would now take a very different position. In any case, even then some critics, notably Judith Wright, recognized the power of Walker’s poetry – as the general public did: her books ran through numerous editions. Today, of course, Aboriginal writing, like dance, music and the visual arts are fashionable. But fashion can be and sometimes is a form of exploitation and many Aboriginal people continue to suspect this interest, particularly when it is detached from their political struggles. This essay therefore will attempt to make the connection, not from any desire to be polemical but because Aboriginal writing is making clear that hegemonic notions of Australian literature, like hegemonic notions of the meaning of the word ‘Australian’ generally are not intellectually or ethically sustainable, however much they may appeal to popular emotion.

Mudrooroo contends that critics like Taylor refused to recognize Walker as a ‘poet’ because of their belief, unconscious perhaps, that ‘the place of an Indigenous writer ... was on the fringe’. Today, however, definitions of ‘fringe’ and ‘centre’ are becoming increasingly contentious as Australians discover that we all live on a frontier, or better a series of frontiers, in a shifting, dangerous but also creative space in which different cultures, European and non-European, post-colonial, colonial and pre-colonial, encounter one another. This essay is written within this space.

In doing so I will take Judith Wright’s response as my model. When Jacaranda Press sent her the manuscript of Walker’s first collection, We Are Going, Wright recognized that it was different, politically charged and provocative, making a ‘galvanizing set of demands on its readers’. But where other critics dismissed lines like this as ‘mere propaganda’

You dishearten, not defend us.
Circumscribe, who should befriend us.
Give us choice, not cold coercion,
Status, not discrimination,
Human rights, not segregation,

she believed it was genuine poetry and represented a ‘new voice’ and a significant one. In contrast with most poetry of the time which she found ‘largely boring and cliché-ridden’ and in which ‘ideas were few; fire and urgency were nearly non-existent’. With their ‘merciless accusation, their
notes of mourning and challenge', their clarity and incisive quality these poems in her view were functional as poetry should be, breaking open what she saw as the prevailing 'tight-lipped narrowness of response'. For her 'poetry had little value if it didn't work in sparking response; this manuscript was working, as far as I was concerned. It was felt along the blood ... [and was thus a] contribution to Australian poetry in its own right'.

This may seem naive to those used to the sophistications of contemporary theory. But it is the position I also wish to take - the self which felt the poems 'along the blood' was open to difference. As Wright realized, the reason why many critics are sceptical about the worth of Aboriginal poetry are political, their resistance to the other:

[The] ... sharply pointed comment [of Walker's poems] could hurt and startle readers who had never encountered such criticism before ... Such readers reacted with bitter resentment, sometimes translating that resentment into critical dismissal.

Still today much Aboriginal poetry challenges the genteel tradition within which much criticism still exists. As Walker herself realized, the reason her poems were rejected by many was because they were 'somewhat angry and bitter; as though even atrocities were never to be mentioned by nice people'. Where the accepted view was, often still is, that 'poetry makes nothing happen', she and most other Aboriginal poets insist that it does and should.

The first point to be made about Aboriginal poetry, therefore, is that it is 'committed' poetry. As Kevin Gilbert notes: 'Rarely has Aboriginal poetry much to do with [mere] aesthetics or pleasure or ... pastoral views. [In it] there is another reality.' This is the reality, the situation of Aboriginal people, displaced and dispossessed, struggling to hold on to an ancient and complex culture, a people colonized within their own country.

The most significant of these poets whose concerns are directly political are Kath Walker, Jack Davis (also an important playwright), Kevin Gilbert, Colin Johnson (the name under which he wrote initially, but which he changed later to Mudrooroo Narogin), Maureen Watson and Bobbi Sykes. But there are very many others represented in the anthologies, from traditional communities (many of these write first in their own language) and from fringe-dwellers and urban Aboriginal people.

What is notable here is not just the number of people writing poetry, and poetry of some power, but also that it is essentially communal and has little to do with mere 'self-expression' - traditional Aboriginal culture was communal, not individualistic. In this tradition which still exists for most Aboriginal people, even those in the cities, all living things and the earth itself are part of this community. Many poems still express this sense of reality. For them the objects of the external world and even human acts and events are not valuable in and for themselves but to the extent to which they reveal the sacred reality, the life of the universe itself, expressed in the stories, songs, dances and paintings of the Dreaming, the beginning of time...
from which all existence derives, and with which human existence should be in tune.

Some of these traditional songs are still current in remote parts of the country where the culture has not been so badly damaged. Some have been translated into English, in Strehlow’s great collection, for example.21 Parts of others, like the Wonguri-Mandijigai people’s Song Cycle Of The Moon Bone, the Dulngulg Song Cycle of the Mudbara people, poems celebrating the fertility and power of nature and designed to give it increase, have appeared in Les Murray’s Anthology of Australian Poetry.22 But since their purposes are essentially sacred and associated with ceremonies which belong only to initiates, some to men and some to women, they should not concern us here.

The exception is perhaps Mudrooroo Narogin’s Dalwura,23 a long poem based on the traditional form of the manikay which draws on Aboriginal imagery but also makes use of Indian, Thai and even Caribbean myths to tell the story of Dalwura, the black bittern, who flies from the west coast of Australia to India where he spends some time and then to Scotland and England, returning at peace at last with the spirits after an encounter with the sacred prostitutes in Thailand. This story in fact parallels that of Mudrooroo himself, so that Dalwura is an example of the Aboriginal ability to adapt culture to present needs – though whether all traditional people would approve of it is another matter.

More typical are the poems written by people removed from their traditional lands but which still continue the traditional functions of poetry, attempting to establish harmony between its creatures and outward shape and inner spirit of the land, keeping alive what Kevin Gilbert calls the ‘creative continuum’ reflected in these lines, for example:

At night as I sit by my campfire
the Great Serpent Spirit a star
I sing songs of love to the Presence within
as it plays with the sparks on my fire.24

What others may see as a mere ‘sing song’, a ‘yackaing by the Blacks’, or as ‘mere doggerel’ may in fact, as Gilbert says, express a deeply spiritual experience.25

Many, if not most, Aboriginal poems therefore are written for as well as from their own community and thus continue the traditional task of poetry, which is to keep community alive. In ‘The First Born’, for instance, Jack Davis takes up the poet’s responsibility not only to keep alive the voice of the people but also the voice of the land whose life they have always shared and cared for.

Where are my first-born, said the brown land, sighing;
They came out of my womb long, long ago.
They were formed of my dust – why, why are they crying
And the light of their being barely aglow?
I strain my ears for the sound of their laughter,  
Where are the laws and legends I gave?..26

Community, as we have said, is crucial, as Bruce McGuinness and Dennis Walker insist in their essay on 'The Politics of Aboriginal Literature'. 'If we are going to survive, we are going to have to do it as a community, we are going to have to do it as a nation and not as individuals.'27 But 'nation' here is not an abstract term. Eva Johnson, for instance, reminds us of this when she says that she writes 'about some of the special people whom I love, people who are important to us'. It is the fact that many of them are 'victims of an inhumane environment'28 which gives these poems their political quality, not the desire to be polemical.

The energy and urgency of much Aboriginal poetry comes from the realization that, since in Maureen Watson's words, 'black reflections aren't in white mirrors', they are in danger of becoming invisible and are thus threatened with loss of identity:

Aboriginal people might as well be in a foreign country ... Everywhere around us are the reflections of a foreign race; a foreign people and they are making us foreigners in our own country.29

This crisis of identity compounded by the problems of being a woman in a patriarchal society empowers poems like Eva Johnson's 'Right To Be':

Don't stereotype an image of what you want me to be  
I'm a woman and I'm Black and I need to be free.  
I'll give back your sense of values you bestowed upon me  
And regain my pride, my culture, and true identity.30

But Aboriginal men are equally threatened. Kevin Gilbert puts it vividly:

Today a young Aboriginal bloke, he's in between. He's lost. He don't know which way to turn. Yet when he gets (back to his own country) ... he will know that there's some superior part ... where the dingo cries out in the dark.31

Poetry is perhaps one of the most powerful ways of taking Aboriginal people out into that sacred darkness. Sometimes this means rehearsing the grim story of the last two hundred years, writing the sorrowful experience of Aboriginal people back into the history which has largely ignored it. Thus Jack Davis' 'Aboriginal History' is dedicated 'to the Others', that is, to non-Aboriginal Australians, and designed to attack our complacencies:

You once smiled a friendly smile,  
Said we were kin to one another.

But the poem insists on the other side of the story, speaking in the name of the dead –
You murdered me with rope, with gun,
Then massacre my enclave,
You buried me deep on McLarty’s run
Flung into a common grave –

and concludes with the challenge:

Now you primly say, you’re justified
And sing of a nation’s glory,
But I think of a people crucified –
The real Australian story.\(^{32}\)

This kind of poetry speaks the voice of the defeated into the culture of the winners. But it is also true to their tradition in the way in which in its ending it sets past and present in the context of myth – even if in this case it is the Christian myth of the resurrection – and appeals from history to the world of sacred belief. But it also dramatizes the situation of the Aboriginal writer as a ‘Janus type figure with one face turned to the past and the other to the future while still existing in a post-modern multicultural Australia in which he or she must fight for cultural space.’\(^{33}\)

Many poems celebrate this fight – in this sense continuing the tradition of the ‘brag’. Thus Kath Walker in ‘Assimilation – No!’

Change and compel, slash us into shape
But not our roots deep in the soil of old.
We are different in hearts and minds
In a different body. Do not ask of us
To be deserters, to disown our mother.\(^{34}\)

– the mother, of course, being the land itself, the source of their strength, grieving but still sustaining her children and thus, as Davis’ ‘The First Born’ makes clear, the ultimate source of their hope.

Many poems, therefore, particularly those of traditional people who still live in their own country and use their own language, let the land speak through them. Its creatures speak, too, as in Irene James Napurrurla’s ‘The Water’, written originally in her own language which echoes the rhythms of the water:

Water running past the rocks, small rocks and big rocks,
Birds talking in the trees and animals walking – goanna
emu and many other animals.

– Clouds gathering big wind blowing, throwing trees and grass,
so far away.\(^{35}\)

Even when writing about non-native animals, as in ‘The Horse’, also written, originally ‘in language’, there is still the traditional feeling for the interdependence of all life:
Poor horse, sick with sores,
Chasing it without feeling sorry for it.
Day by day, it just goes on,
Poor horse, it makes me feel sad.36

Other poems express anxiety at the influence of Western culture. Jennie Hargreaves Narripijinpa’s ‘Child Leave The Tape Recorder’, written in language, is both a plea and a command in the name of traditional culture:

Leave the White man’s things
Music, grog, cigarettes, video
and those other things as well!

Come to the ceremonies
Come hunting and dancing,
Come, so that you can know your own culture.37

At the same time many Aboriginal people are also using Western technology for their own ends and in their own ways. Many Aboriginal bands like Warumpi, from traditional country, have been successful not only nationally but inter-nationally, adapting Country and Western music to sing their concerns and their culture into popular consciousness and some traditional people, the Tjapukai from Far North Queensland, for example, recorded their songs in their own language for sale throughout the country and the world.38

Poetry continues its traditional function in this way, celebrating and empowering community. Even an urban poet like Bobbi Sykes, for example, highly educated in Western culture – she holds a doctorate from Harvard – can write a poem whose beginning the Spirit at the beginning of a new year upon the sufferings of her people.

Dear Spirit,
Here we are – at the end of a long year of struggle
Against foes of old – oppression, hunger, pain, – And we stand again at the threshold of a New Year.39

Nevertheless it is important not to under-estimate the profound difficulties which face Aboriginal writers in general and poets in particular. In the first place the fact that traditional culture was oral and has no written literature means that the task of transposing traditional feeling is fraught with difficulty. So, too, with the fact that in their culture poetry belongs to everyone, not just the few with the education and taste for it. This means that non-Aboriginal readers often have difficulty with the rhetoric qualities of Aboriginal poetry, with its emphasis on rhyme, for instance, and with its apparent lack of formal and linguistic complexity.

But there is a more profound problem. The English language was an essential tool in the policy of assumption, the attempt to destroy Aboriginal culture. On the reserves and missions Aboriginal people were forbidden to speak their own language and obliged to speak English. Writing in English
Aboriginal poets can therefore feel themselves accomplices to the attempt to destroy their culture, writing as they do in the language of the conquerors — this anxiety is evident in the move by many, most notably Kath Walker and Colin Johnson, to reject the names given them by white society and claim their tribal names, Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Mudrooroo Narogin, later simply Mudrooroo.  

A poem by Eva Johnson ‘Remember’ expresses the anguish of this separation from her own language and its connection with the land and its life — significantly, the poem is called ‘A Letter To My Mother’:

Around fire, night time sitting  
With kin — sharing food  
cooked in hot ashes  
Children laughing  
Mother singing  
baby on breast  
Women telling stories, sharing, giving  
Songs, spirit names, teaching  
IN LANGUAGE.

She hopes to return to traditional ways:

One day your dancing, your dreaming, your song  
Will take me your Spirit back where I belong  
My Mother, the earth, the land — I demand  
Protection from aliens who rule, who command  
For they do not know where their dreaming began.

But for many this is no longer possible. A number of poets, notably Lionel Fogarty, Graeme Dixon, Mudrooroo and Robert Walker, look to a solution within English. Accepting that if they are to speak to Aboriginal people generally and to speak to non-Aboriginal Australians they must write in English, they are working to put their own Aboriginal mark on and find their own distinctive voice within it.

This is not entirely remarkable, of course. Other colonized peoples face a similar problem, and Mudrooroo has drawn on the Rastafarian language developed in the West Indies in poems like ‘Song Seven’ in *The Song Circle of Jacky*, dedicated incidentally to Bob Marley, a Rastafarian singer, and in any case, as Mudrooroo points out, any significant poet must struggle with language to turn it to the ends of his own vision. But Aboriginal poets also face the problem that the Aboriginal English they want to claim is the language of people many of whom have, in Mudrooroo’s words, been reduced to the level of a ‘lumpen-proletariat’ and whose language often reflects their impoverishment.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, by and large, the power of the situation they express often makes up for this. So, too, does the counterpoint effect of setting this language against the expectations of the mainstream. One example is Mudrooroo’s choice of Jacky for the voice which speaks in *The
Veronica Brady

**Song Circle of Jacky:** ‘Jacky Jacky’ is the name given to the racist stereotype of the Aborigine as dirty, drunken and ignorant.

Graeme Dixon and Robert Walker are perhaps less self-conscious in their use of Aboriginal experience, perhaps because it is the language of their own lives – Mudrooroo has spent most of his time in recent years as an academic. The simple authenticity of these lines from Dixon’s ‘Country Girl’, for instance, gives them a peculiar power, a sense of powerful feeling straining against the poverty of the language:

A mob of skinny
Cousins and mates
playing chasey
through the trees ...
... Dark brown wrinkled
Greyhaired oldies
spinning ancient yarns
under shady gums.46

Robert Walker’s ‘Okay Let’s Be Honest’ has a similar power, intensified by the fact that not long afterwards he met his death in prison:

Okay, let’s be honest:
I ain’t no saint,
but then again,
I wasn’t born in heaven.
Okay, Okay!
So let’s be honest;
I’ve been in and out
since the age of eleven.47

But of all Aboriginal poets it is perhaps Lionel Fogarty who has made the most sustained and consistent attempt to reject the language imposed on him and his people, perhaps because, growing up on the infamous Cherbourg Reserve in Queensland, he grew up in the thick of the struggle. There, as Kevin Gilbert described it in his introduction to Fogarty’s poems, education

consisted of counting your money, not reading too well past the ‘Don’t Trespass’ and ‘Keep Off’ signs level, and not being taught to write ‘too well’ in case the pupil learned to write history, or, more alarmingly, make written complaint of the abuse of human rights by the authorities.48

Fogarty’s way of defying this education has not been to storm the citadel of mainstream education but to make his own language, displacing and distorting accepted grammar and syntax, as Mudrooroo writes admiringly, ‘in an effort to create new meaning … [and] to shift white meaning to black meaning’ which most non-Aboriginal readers find almost incomprehensible since, according to Mudrooroo, it reflects an ‘underlying structure of Aboriginality’,49 not only in its language but also in the
experience which generates it.

Mudrooroo's extended discussion of one of Fogarty's poems 'Free Our Dreams', which there is no space to refer at length, makes this clear. One example will have to suffice, the gloss on the lines

So come on down
and freehold us.

As Mudrooroo reminds us, freehold is a white legal term and as such a key term in the Aboriginal struggle for land. Fogarty uses it, however, to assert the Aboriginal sense of land as part of the very life of the people who belong to rather than own it. Thus 'to free the people means to free the land'.

It is time to conclude. The argument has been that for Aboriginal people poetry has always been an essential part of their culture and that it remains so today, preserving the traditions of the past and speaking in the name of those who died and were defeated in the struggles of the last two centuries, claiming their rights, their dignity and their culture in the present and speaking in their own voice. The significance for Aboriginal Australians is obvious. But what of the rest of us?

The usual answer is that it is politically significant and I would certainly not deny this. But it could also be argued that Aboriginal poetry has a wider significance also, reminding us of the importance of the language of poetry as language which does not merely reflect but also creates reality, bringing into play experiences beyond the scope of mere rationality, a language of promise as well as of description. This is language which displaces the centrality of reason on which our present culture relies to the extent that it is the language of experience rather than of abstraction from it, of face-to-face encounter with other human beings and the world, experienced not so much part of objective reality but part of our own subjectivity. In this way ethics becomes primary.

In turn this means attributing a new importance to literature in general and poetry in particular. By and large Western culture has become a closed and self-referential system, a text without context. But Aboriginal writing challenges this system, insisting on texts fraught with context and a context of an adversarial kind which demands a different kind of reading. This reading is open, generating new meanings. Where most texts within our culture tend to abstract from experience, belong, to use Levinas' word, to 'the said', Aboriginal poetry call us to a living interpretive struggle with it, which involves us in an encounter which suffers for and with 'the saying'. It resounds or echoes outside of time and place as we know them in a way that destabilizes the secure position we take up in 'the said', our conceptual truths, knowledge and values.

If this is so, Aboriginal poetry may matter a great deal to an Australian culture and society wrestling with questions of identity.
NOTES

2. ibid., p. xviii.
12. ibid., p. 40.
13. ibid.
15. ibid.
16. ibid., p. 168.
17. ibid., p. 167.
18. ibid., p. 169.
19. ibid., p. 173.
25. ibid.
26. ibid., p. 54.
32. Gilbert, p. 58.
33. Writing From The Fringe, p. 24.
34. Gilbert, p. 95.
35. ibid., p. 16.
36. ibid., p. 18.
37. ibid., p. 22.
38. David Hudson Presents Gudju Gudju, a tape recording produced by Indigenous Australia, PO Box 38, Balmain, NSW 2041.
40. Mudrooroo, p. 136. Ironically, Mudrooroo's claim to call himself Aboriginal has recently been contested by some Aboriginal groups who have found that his father was in fact Afro-American.
41. Gilbert, p. 32.
42. Gilbert, p. 25.
45. ibid.
47. Gilbert, p. 132.
48. ibid., p. 150.
50. ibid., p. 54.
52. ibid., p. 514.
TIM KENDALL

Inhabited by a Cry: The Birth and Rebirth of Ariel

Sylvia Plath joked in her Journals that, of all the books she might take to a desert island, her thesaurus would be the first and most precious choice. Ted Hughes’s characterization of Plath’s working habits during her writing of The Colossus helps explain some of the reasons for her preference:

In her earlier poems, Sylvia Plath composed very slowly, consulting her Thesaurus and Dictionary for almost every word, putting a slow, strong line of ink under each word that attracted her.1

The repetition of ‘slowly’ and ‘slow’ highlights the dominant motif of Hughes’s account. The Ariel poems, he goes on to suggest, mark a sudden release from such painstaking efforts. It is their extraordinary velocity – in their creation as much as in rhythm and imagery – which sets them apart from Plath’s earlier work: ‘these are poems written for the most part at great speed, as she might take dictation’ (WP. p. 161). While avoiding absolute endorsement, Hughes’s chosen simile carries inescapable implications for the nature of Plath’s poetic gift: he intimates that her rational, conscious mind in these later poems is subservient to some deeper dictating force. By contrast the Colossus poems, forced out against immense resistance, are offered as little more than five-finger exercises preparing the ground for the unstoppably mantic inspiration of Plath’s mature work.

Hughes’s formulation of his wife’s creative processes has done much to foster the familiar legend of Ariel. With her marriage disintegrating and two young children to care for, Plath still managed to produce – at top speed – one of the most important poetry collections of the twentieth century. During October 1962 she finished at least twenty-five poems, getting up to write at four o’clock each morning before the children woke. Plath believed these compositional habits influenced the shape of her work, and she even singled out the poems’ early-morning origins, along with the fact they were written to be read aloud, as their most salient characteristics. The Colossus suffered by comparison. During a BBC radio interview of 31 October 1962 Plath admitted that her first collection now bored her: the aural qualities of Ariel made earlier work seem artificial and rhythmically inert.

Not all critics have accepted the value judgements of Plath and Hughes regarding the nature of her achievement. Jacqueline Rose, for example,
objects to the way in which, she claims, Hughes 'presents all Plath's work in terms of a constant teleological reference to *Ariel*, with the result that everything else she ever produced is more or less offered as *waste*.\(^2\) Admittedly, dangers do exist in drawing too sharp a distinction between the genius of *Ariel* and the relative inferiority of Plath's earlier work. Difficulties even arise over the text and chronology of *Ariel* itself. There are, of course, two *Ariels*: the collection selected and arranged by Plath, which she made no effort to publish (and which she may have substantially altered, had she lived); and the volume selected and arranged by Hughes and published two years after her death. In each case the earliest poem is 'You're', written in January or February 1960. Plath's arrangement of *Ariel* includes another six poems, and Hughes's published version five, written before the breakthrough of April 1962 when, as Hughes has argued, 'the *Ariel* voice emerged in full' (*WP.* p. 188).

The question of when — or whether — the *Ariel* voice can be said to end is equally problematic. The latest poem Plath includes in her *Ariel* manuscript is 'Death & Co.', dated 14 November 1962. Hughes tells us that Plath set aside 'Sheep in Fog' (2 December 1962, and revised 28 January 1963), and the other eleven poems written in late January and early February 1963, as the beginnings of a new collection which she considered different in tone, 'cooler' (as she described it) in its inspiration (*WP.* p. 189). But this chronology does not clarify her intentions towards the group of poems written between 'Death & Co.' and 'Sheep in Fog', several of which — 'Mary's Song', for example, or 'Winter Trees' — are among Plath's finest achievements. Although Hughes reports that Plath arranged her manuscript of *Ariel* 'some time around Christmas 1962' (*WP.* p. 172), his approximation may suggest uncertainty. It seems just as feasible that, having written 'Death & Co.', Plath felt satisfied in mid-November she had enough material for a volume. Consequently, poems written just two days after 'Death & Co.' may already have represented a fresh start, or at least a new direction. Because the published volume collects many poems which Plath did not consider to belong in *Ariel*, the transformations and re-inventions her style undoubtedly underwent in the last year of her life have generally remained inconspicuous, receiving considerably less attention than they merit.

These textual complications should undermine criticism which simply identifies the ' *Ariel* voice' with all Plath's later poetry. The poems Plath writes during the last year of her life are too many and varied to be grouped together *en masse*. The stylistic experiments, the diversity, the new directions and preoccupations which readers would expect to find developed through a major poet's body of important work have, in Plath's poetry, been condensed into the space of little more than a year. However, most of the *Ariel* manuscripts do confirm Hughes's emphasis on Plath's speed of composition as a unifying hallmark of her later poetry. Although it is impossible to judge whether earlier drafts have been lost, or how much Plath composed mentally before starting to write, it seems that sometimes a poem would come wholly formed: for example 'Gigolo', almost without
revisions, was written at such speed that rather than begin a clean sheet, Plath squeezed the final stanza up the side of the page, and in her haste went over the edge of the paper in several places.

Yet the *Ariel* drafts indicate a drama of creativity far more complex than is sometimes described by critics. Hughes’s keynote observation that Plath would look up and underline words in her thesaurus and dictionary while composing *The Colossus* may imply that these props became redundant amidst the free-flowing inspiration of her later work. Her Webster’s Dictionary and several of her manuscripts (held in the Plath archive of the Rare Books Room at Smith College)³ challenge this assumption. The words ‘Ariel’ and ‘purdah’, for example, both have their etymologies underlined: Ariel, from the Hebrew for ‘lioness of God’; and purdah, from the Hindu and Persian *pardah*, a veil. Plath writes these etymologies on the first draft of the respective poems, and even notes almost verbatim the dictionary entry for ‘purdah’ as a constant reminder: along the top of the first draft she has written ‘Hind. & Per. pardah – veil curtain or screen India to seclude women’ [*sic*]. Such examples highlight consistencies in Plath’s compositional habits between *The Colossus* and *Ariel*; what seems most extraordinary is Plath’s alchemical transformation, in her later work, of the same unexceptional resources.

This forethought and conscious deliberation in the making of *Ariel* qualifies the common image of Plath as a poet almost possessed, writing as if taking dictation. Nevertheless, her speed of composition is remarkable: the dates on the manuscripts reveal that in the eight days from 28 January to 5 February 1963, for example, Plath finished one poem and wrote eleven others. Hughes has raised doubts about the accuracy of manuscript dates, but only with regard to work before 1957:

In one or two cases [prior to 1957] the dates she left on the manuscripts contradict what seem to me very definite memories. […] From early 1962 she began to save all her handwritten drafts (which up to that time she had systematically destroyed as she went along), and provisional final versions among these are usually dated as well. So throughout this period the calendar sequence is correct, and the only occasional doubt concerns the order of composition among poems written on the same day. (*WP*, p. 175)

There is nothing in the Plath archive to question Hughes’s confidence. However, the apparent authority of Plath’s manuscript dating has encouraged critics to view her writing procedures as less flexible and considered than archival evidence indicates. With the possible exception of Susan Van Dyne in her valuable study *Revising Life*, readers and critics have tended to assume that the poems existed in their final versions on the date quoted. Plath’s reading for BBC Radio on 31 October 1962 offers incontrovertible proof that this trust is misplaced. Almost all the poems she reads differ, in some respect, from their final published versions. Sometimes a line or just a word might be altered. More often, as in ‘Fever 103°’, ‘Stopped Dead’ and ‘Lyonnesse’ (the last of which, interestingly, Plath read
as the first part of ‘Amnesiac’), whole stanzas have been deleted before publication. The most substantial revision occurs in ‘Nick and the Candlestick’, where seven three-line stanzas which end Plath’s reading of the poem have been dropped from the finished version. Yet the draft of this final version is dated, like its lengthier predecessor, 29 October 1962 – two days before the radio reading. When revising days or even several weeks later, Plath seems to have kept using the original date on new drafts unless (as with ‘Eavesdropper’ or ‘Sheep in Fog’) she made major additions. This also raises the possibility that the composition of separate poems overlapped more often than their dates would suggest. ‘Lady Lazarus’ is dated 23-29 October 1962, and as such, it covers a period during which Plath wrote eight other poems. The time it took Plath to produce a working draft for ‘Lady Lazarus’ was uncommonly slow, and therefore worthy of note. Ted Hughes has remarked that there must have been many other times when Plath ‘worked on three or more [poems] without finishing them’ (WP. p. 168). It seems that, in line with her policy for dating revisions, Plath gave a single date to poems taking two or three days to write; clearly a tremendous effort would have been required to produce the 126 lines of ‘Berck-Plage’, and the tortuous drafts from which it eventually emerged, in just one day.

The Ariel manuscripts resist easy generalizations about Plath’s working methods because, like the poems themselves, each series of drafts tells a different story, and in each Plath employs varying techniques – with varying degrees of success – to arrive at a finished version which satisfies her. Despite this essential caveat, shared patterns do occasionally emerge from work written around the same time. Although her publication history has tended to disguise the fact, Plath often wrote poems in batches. Whatever their personal causes, the poetic silences which punctuate her otherwise prolific output during 1962-3 also mark the exhaustion of a particular style or set of preoccupations: one conspicuous example is the hiatus of two months preceding Plath’s ‘cooler’ style which from 28 January 1963 seems to have produced eleven poems in a week. A study of the Ariel manuscripts allows hidden connections within groups of poems to be uncovered.

One such group, pivotal to Plath’s development, consists of the six poems she wrote during April 1962. After a burst of creativity in October the previous year, Plath ‘succumbed to “cowlike” pregnancy and wrote little’.4 This assessment is relative: apart from a short poem ‘New Year of Dartmoor’, over the next five months she took a break from lyric poetry to complete a radio play (‘Three Women’), a short story (‘Mothers’) and ten prose character sketches of her Devon neighbours. Returning to the lyric in early April, she produced in quick succession ‘Little Fugue’ (2 April), ‘An Appearance’ and ‘Crossing the Water’ (4 April), ‘Among the Narcissi’ (5 April), ‘Pheasant’ (7 April), and after almost a fortnight, ‘Elm’ (19 April). At this point, it appears, marital problems intervened: beginning over a month later with ‘The Rabbit Catcher’, several of Plath’s next poems explore a relationship in crisis, and their shift in tone distinguishes them from the April work. Therefore, from a chronological viewpoint, the poems of April
1962 lend themselves naturally to consideration as a discrete group. Plath intended to collect only ‘Elm’ in Ariel, and Hughes’s arrangement also includes ‘Little Fugue’. Nevertheless, despite earlier isolated auguries of her mature achievement, these six poems might justifiably be viewed as the gateway into Ariel.

Unlike her later work, the manuscripts of these poems do not always conform to Hughes’s emphasis on Plath’s speed of composition. Instead they reveal that she struggled desperately to break through to a new style. Plath complained of writer’s block during the early months of 1962, and manuscript evidence suggests that little was easily earned. While the drafts of many Ariel poems are almost pristine, these April drafts are filled with huge, messy excisions. Typically, Plath’s initial drafts of her 1962 poems are hand-written in ink on pink Smith College memorandum paper; when she felt close to a finished version, she would type the poem, revise in ink, then type again, until she was satisfied. The entire process normally used no more than four sheets; by contrast ‘Little Fugue’ took eight, and ‘Elm’, the most convoluted of all the Ariel drafts, twenty-one.

The drafts of the earliest April poem, ‘Little Fugue’, are worth examining in detail. They are fascinating documents, not only for intrinsic reasons, but also because they show Plath beginning to explore — often for the first time — many of the themes and images of her mature poetry. As might be expected after such a long hiatus, these manuscripts initially suggest hesitancy and a lack of direction. The first draft opens with an abandoned fragment, ‘on listening to laura riding’: ‘The lights are humming. How my small room rides’. Plath did not consider this inauspicious material worth pursuing: the title clearly harks back to a style exhibited in poems such as ‘On the Plethora of Dryads’ or ‘On the Decline of Oracles’ (both 1957) and long since outgrown. So she tries again, this time producing a more promising fragment:

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The yew’s black fingers agitate
It is a tree of poems, of dead men;
A churchyard person, always sorry.
There is no truth in this.
How it flings up, like black blood.
This I consider. There is no truth,
Only the
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Here Plath locates her proper subject: the real yew tree which cast its shadow over her house in Devon, just as the symbolic yew casts its shadow over her mature poetry. The yew, as Plath’s copy of Robert Graves’s The White Goddess would have informed her, is ‘the death tree in all European countries’. Plath’s earlier poem ‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’, dated 22 October 1961, had begun to chart this dark territory, and her fragment is overly indebted to it: the yew ‘flings up’ where before it ‘point[ed] up’; its association with blackness recalls the ‘blackness and silence’ which was the yew’s message in the previous poem; and the references to ‘dead men’ and
'A churchyard person' attempt to capture, rather less subtly, the same morbid atmosphere.

These overwhelming similarities in subject, tone and imagery emphasize that 'Little Fugue' and the April 1962 poems represent a natural - albeit major - progression from earlier work. No doubt dissatisfied with the unoriginality of her treatment, Plath draws a line under this fragment and starts again, but this time without abandoning the source of her inspiration: she does after all consider the yew a 'tree of poems', potentially fruitful - though also, of course, deadly poisonous - in creative terms. However, whereas it shared central billing in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', the tree alone now fills Plath's gaze. Fittingly, her interim title is 'Yew Alone', soon replaced by 'Yew Tree in March' (which suggests the poem was begun at least several days before the manuscript date, 2 April). This single-minded focus initiates a psychodrama which animates 'Little Fugue' and the other poems of April 1962, and which 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' had ultimately left unexplored. The yew tree of the earlier poem remains aloof. It has a 'Gothic shape' and points up, but the speaker attends more to what it points at: the moon, which is the speaker's 'mother'. The poem ends with the yew keeping its mystery: 'And the message of the yew tree is blackness - blackness and silence'. By April Plath no longer finds this conclusion satisfactory: the drafts of 'Little Fugue' explore the nature of the 'blackness and silence', regardless of the psychological cost.

Plath's first task is to identify the yew and what it symbolizes. Resuming under the title 'Yew Alone', she preserves only the opening line of her fragment - 'The yew's black fingers agitate' - although now they agitate 'te & fle back & forth'. This movement clearly fascinates Plath, and she expands the image with redundant similes which are soon deleted. Then the clouds appear, as they will in the final version. They pass disconsolately over a deathly landscape where a 'queer light', similar to the 'cold and planetary' light of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', has 'Startle[d] the green out of the grass'. The speaker's response to this desolation conveys a sentiment typical to Ariel, but couched more in the language of Jacobean tragedy: 'O I am of a graveyard mind'. The fragment is clearly too disjointed and too derivative. So Plath begins again, with a new title 'Yew Tree in March', and starts to crystallize a new theme - the tree's struggle for communication:

wag

The yew's black fingers agitate.
In a landscape of twigs, they make a plumpness.
A cartoon balloon rooted in the mouths of the dead.

They are making A fat black statement.

The change from 'agitate' to 'wag' is significant: normally a finger wags in disapproval or prohibition, whereas 'agitate' can be read either as revealing the yew tree's own anxiety, or creating anxiety in the mind of the speaker. Despite its new censoriousness, Plath finds the yew more communicative
than in ‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’. Its ‘statement’ is still ‘black’, but the deleted reference to a ‘cartoon balloon’ growing organically out of ‘the mouths of the dead’ offers the first indication that the yew might act as a go-between, connecting the living with the corpses buried among its roots.

Knowing that her discovery about the yew’s potential as a medium linking living and dead needs to be better prepared, Plath begins afresh once more, this time with a new sense of direction. Almost straight out she writes the poem’s opening stanza, different from the final version only in that the clouds are ‘disconsolate’ rather than ‘cold’:

The yew’s black fingers wag;
Disconsolate clouds go over.
The So the deaf & dumb
Signal the blind, & are ignored.

This portrays an apparently unbridgeable failure of communication. However, unlike the clouds the speaker is not ‘blind’; she ‘like[s] black statements’, and may therefore be equipped to decipher the yew tree’s message. Temporarily, her attention is drawn to the cloud, as it had been drawn to the moon in ‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’. The cloud proves a welcome distraction, emphatically unpatriarchal: ‘It has no beard, no moral sensibility’. It looks ‘White as an eye’, and the combination of eyes, blindness, white and black leads analogically to ‘The eye of the blind pianist’, whom the speaker remembers watching ‘on the ship’.

The poet’s associative skills now take over, as the next three stanzas arrive almost perfectly formed:

He felt for his food.
His fingers had the noses of weasels.
I couldn’t stop looking.
He could hear Beethoven:
The blacks & whites of him, Black yew, white cloud,
The horrific complications.
Finger-traps – the a tumult of keys.
Empty and silly as plates –
So the blind smile.
I, too, laek
I envy the big noises,
The yew hedge of the Grosse Fuge.

Except for one minor change in punctuation, these stanzas remain unaltered in the finished version. They are the first sign of a contrapuntal technique which will eventually prompt Plath to rename the poem ‘Fugue: Yew Tree & Clouds’ and finally ‘Little Fugue’. Hughes’s note in the Collected Poems recalls that ‘Although never until now showing more than a general interest in music, about this time SP became keenly interested in Beethoven’s late quartets, the Grosse Fuge in particular’.7 The evidence of Plath’s journals indicates this is a slightly misleading account: in an unpublished entry for 2 September 1958, she lists Beethoven’s Piano Sonatas 11, 12, 26, 27 and 28,
presumably as works she enjoys or wants to buy; a fortnight later she reports that she and Hughes are ‘both boggled down in black depression – the late nights, listening sporadically to Beethoven piano sonatas’; and an unpublished entry from 28 January 1959 announces, ‘Listened to Beethoven’s 2nd symphony. Maybe I will learn something.’ Beethoven was for Plath the exemplary composer; ‘Little Fugue’ exhibits some of the fruits of her learning.

Plath underlined ‘fugue’ in her Webster’s Dictionary, along with parts of its definition, as follows: ‘A polyphonic composition, developed from a given theme, according to strict contrapuntal rules’. The figure of Beethoven embodies and resolves these contrapuntal voices – ‘The blacks & whites of him, Black yew, white cloud’ – just as the ‘yew hedge’ which the speaker detects in the Grosse Fuge may be capable of uniting living and dead. Having prepared the ground with three effortless stanzas, Plath hesitates before her new understanding:

Deafness is something else.
See how the yew rounds itself, and
A black Its one foot stops
The mouths of the dead
The yew is many-footed.
Each foot stops a mouth.
So the yew is a go-between: it talks for the dead.
A deaf man perceives this.
He hears a black cry.
The dead talk through it.
O the voice of my masters!
Such a dark funnel, my father!
Such a dark funnel, my father!
I see your voice
Black & leafy, as in my childhood.

The first line arrives immediately: ‘Deafness is something else’. This serves as a reminder of the pianist’s blindness, and it also follows on from the allusion to the Grosse Fuge: Beethoven was suffering from deafness when he wrote the late quartets. The blind pianist playing Beethoven is therefore a successful example of communication between the deaf and the blind, reversing the failure of the poem’s opening stanza.

At first Plath tries to close these channels: the yew ‘stops’ the mouths of the dead even while acting as a ‘go-between’. Graves’s The White Goddess reports the legend to which the draft undoubtedly alludes: ‘In Brittany it is said that church-yard yews will spread a root to the mouth of each corpse’ (WG. p. 194). Plath’s use of ‘stops’ instead of ‘spreads’ reflects her underlying ambivalence. Although deleted from a later draft, this reluctance to communicate constitutes a moment of high drama: the speaker draws back before the prospect of beginning to explore the psychological depths which will come to characterize Ariel. The dead person with whom Plath would most like to communicate is also the person she most dreads: her
father. His voice is the voice of the yew hedge, 'black and leafy', and it is also the 'pure German' voice of Beethoven out of whose Grosse Fuge the yew hedge grows. The unjudgemental clouds have temporarily dissolved; there is no refuge from a voice which, Plath admits and then quickly scribbles out, 'dominates me' with its 'orders'. 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' had avoided acknowledging the father's presence, prepared only to identify the moon as 'my mother' to which the 'Gothic' yew points. Bravely exploring what the earlier poem shirks, Plath in 'Little Fugue' recognizes the father's 'Gothic and barbarous' voice. (Gothicism, as she underlines it in her Webster's Dictionary, is a 'combination of sublime and grotesque'.) Against his vocal onslaught she can only plead 'I am guilty of nothing'.

The father - absent from Plath's poetry for the previous two and a half years - has now become inescapable, and he dominates the rest of the poem. Briefly Plath considers the tree again: 'The one legged yew, my Christ, then./ Is it not as tortured?' However, this metaphor only serves to emphasize the father's tyranny. Christ, like the yew, is an intermediary, who sacrifices himself so that the sinful might be spared the wrath of God the Father. Implicitly the yew plays a similar role, protecting the speaker from another kind of patriarchal fury. Although 'Daddy' is still over five months away, the drafts of 'Little Fugue' show Plath pre-empting that poem's mindscape. She imagines her father as a butcher in 'the California delicatessen' during the Great War,

Lopping the sausages!
They color my nightmares, sleep
Red, mottled, like cut throats.
The throats of Jews.

This evokes a different war, but blatantly ties the father into the nexus of future Nazi barbarism. Nevertheless, Plath's revision is fortunate: while she tries to associate the act of cutting (presumably pork) sausages with a later act of genocide, her own phantasmagoric switch from the cut throats of pigs to those of Jews - however sympathetic its intention - is deeply insulting.

From this image of the father as Nazi butcher, the speaker's fugal techniques bring her forward suddenly to a childhood typified by a conspicuous absence of communication: 'There was a silence'. The father's death is viewed as an abandonment, leaving behind a seven-year-old daughter who 'knew nothing'. Plath now runs into difficulties trying to describe the unreality of the aftermath, when 'The world occurred, like-a movie'. Although the syntax breaks down, a deleted line 'Villian and lover' seems to refer to the father figure, again foreshadowing 'Daddy'. This ambivalence remains the key motif: the father is both 'Bad man & good man', his romantic image insidious as 'poison in the rain'. Perhaps realizing that this portrayal spells out what would be more powerful for remaining latent, Plath draws a line across the page, and begins again with a simple description which connects the father through nationality and disability with Beethoven and the 'blind pianist': 'You had one leg, & a Prussian mind'.
The poem’s profound ambivalence in its depiction of the father is reinforced by the title, ‘Little Fugue’. Her Webster’s Dictionary does not list the secondary meaning of ‘fugue’, but Plath seems to have known and exploited its psychiatric connotations. The OED gives the following definition:

**Psychiatry.** A flight from one’s own identity, often involving travel to some unconsciously desired locality. It is a dissociative reaction to shock or emotional stress in a neurotic, during which all awareness of personal identity is lost though the person’s outward behaviour may appear rational. On recovery, memory of events during the state is totally repressed but may become conscious under hypnosis or psycho-analysis. A fugue may also be part of an epileptic or hysterical seizure. Also *attrib. as fugue state.*

This definition is crucial to a proper understanding of the poem’s conclusion: Plath, in the drafts as in the finished version, begins to question whether the tortured past or the outwardly ‘rational’ present constitutes the speaker’s true ‘personal identity’. So having struggled with the father’s posthumous presence, the poem reintroduces the clouds of forgetfulness, which ‘spread their vacuous sheets’ to return her to daily existence. Communication begins to fail: the draft has the deleted line ‘I talk to stones’, and the lack of a question mark after ‘Do you say nothing’ (an Eliotic moment) suggests that nothing else had been expected. Sharing something of her father’s handicap, the speaker announces herself ‘lame in the memory’. Her memory of events may have been repressed – except for tiny, random details like ‘a blue eye, / A briefcase of tangerines’ – but there is still confusion over whether her present life represents real identity, or merely flight from it, into a world nothing more than a movie.

Some deleted lines about communication between ‘this manic black’ and ‘these fool whites’ follow. The return to successful contact now seems belated and out of place, and the poem’s final stanza is less hopeful. Apart from a brief incursion by the same ‘dead bell’ which tolls in ‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’, ‘Berck-Plage’ and ‘Death & Co.’, the conclusion arrives without resistance, as Plath undoubtedly evokes the psychiatric associations of ‘fugue’:

I survive the while,
Arranging my morning,
These are my fingers, this my baby.
The clouds are a marriage dress, of that pallor.

This conclusion settles the ambiguity: it is the present, with its trappings of family life, which constitutes an escape from personal identity. The speaker’s self-conscious deliberation, and her focus on immediate surroundings, represent a desperate struggle to establish a new domestic identity. She is describing a ‘fugue state’, a ‘dissociative reaction’ to the loss of her father, by which she has escaped into the ‘unconsciously desired locality’ of normal family life. This state is highly precarious: the speaker puns on ‘morning’
and ‘mourning’, while the observation ‘I survive the while’, even without the accompaniment of the death bell, suggests a belated and unreal existence which will end imminently. The poem’s final line – ‘The clouds are a marriage dress, of that pallor’ – may indicate some final union between the contrapuntal associations of the clouds and the yew tree; but it also suggests that marriage is merely a ‘vacuous sheet’, a refuge in amnesia and oblivion. Despite her trying to establish a new identity, the implication remains that the speaker cannot avoid eventually being drawn back through the yew towards her real self – a self belonging with the dead father buried among the tree’s roots.

Although excluded by Plath from her arrangement of Ariel, ‘Little Fugue’ appears unmistakably an Ariel poem in theme and treatment. The implications of its drafts and finished version are psychologically devastating; like the title poem of Ariel, it exhibits the drive of a death-wish which is also a fulfilment of identity, overriding the small contentments and — it might even be implied — the dishonesty of continuing existence. This makes ‘Little Fugue’ an important breakthrough, mapping the psychological territory which Plath will now continue to explore until her death. Even so, the poem only represents the first part of a chthonic journey which runs throughout the poems of April 1962, and which later poems play out obsessively in a cycle of death and rebirth.

Ted Hughes’s knowledge of the topography of Plath’s Devon home has allowed him a brilliant insight into Plath’s intentions during April 1962. Hughes has observed that the yew tree stood due west of Plath’s house, in her sunset, and the elm due east. The manuscript date of ‘Little Fugue’, 2 April, fell in the dark phase of the moon, and 19 April, the date of ‘Elm’, fell on the first day of the Full Moon. From this information Hughes detects a larger patterning which links the poems of April 1962:

In other words, between the 2nd and the 19th, she has been travelling underground (‘Crossing the Water’), just like Osiris in his sun-boat being transported from his death in the West to his rebirth as a divine child (himself reborn as his own divine child in the form of a Falcon) in the East.8

There is convincing evidence throughout the April poems that Plath deliberately exploited the Osiris myth. Osiris was the tree-god, and treeworship, according to The White Goddess, ‘was one of the most important elements in Osirianism’ (WG. p. 279). This befits a poetic sequence beginning with the yew of ‘Little Fugue’ and ending with ‘Elm’. Furthermore, although ‘Elm’ makes no mention of a falcon, an unnamed bird of prey (a ‘cry’) does emerge nightly from the tree, ‘Looking, with its hooks, for something to love’. The hesitancy of ‘Little Fugue’ disappears after the poet’s underground rite of passage. As the elm confidently asserts:

I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:
It is what you fear.
I do not fear it: I have been there.
The knowledge provides the foundation for much of Plath's later work, granting it a terrible new authority. The elm's pride is shared by the poet: writing to her mother in October 1962, Plath almost borrows the elm's terminology as she insists that 'What the person out of Belsen – physical or psychological – wants is nobody saying the birdies still go tweet-tweet, but the full knowledge that somebody else has been there and knows the worst, just what it is like'.9 'Little Fugue' marks the beginning, and 'Elm' the end, of a journey which awards Plath this poetic franchise.

Of the four poems framed by 'Little Fugue' and 'Elm', at first glance only 'Crossing the Water' seems to participate in this Osirian journey. However, other connections soon become visible. For example 'An Appearance', dated 4 April, takes up where 'Little Fugue' had ended, with the precarious reality of domestic life. The speaker of the previous poem had struggled to convince herself that 'These are my fingers, this my baby'. In 'An Appearance' the sense of dissociation is even stronger, as the detached speaker observes the outwardly rational, even mechanical behaviour of her own separate self. That self is an icebox, a typewriter producing 'ampersands and percent signs' 'like kisses', a launderer of morals, or a 'Swiss watch, jeweled in the hinges!' The drafts also implicate her children, who appear, appropriately, 'clear and innocent, like icecubes'. The speaker can only marvel at her own efficiency, but still detects an oncoming breakdown:

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O heart, such disorganization!
The stars are flashing like terrible numerals.
ABC, her eyelids say.
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The 'disorganization' refers to inner turmoil, and its juxtaposition with the self's outward calm. Yet this superficial 'appearance' is under threat: the stars 'flashing like terrible numerals' sound not a little like the flourescent light which, in 'Lesbos', 'winc[es] on and off like a terrible migraine'; and although the eyelids continue to type out their perfect alphabets, they do so manically, as if battling to repress an enticing alternative.

'An Appearance' reflects Plath's continuing obsession with doubles and split selves – an obsession already evident from the relationship between Esther and Joan in The Bell Jar, or from the speaker of 'In Plaster' who proclaims that 'There are two of me now'. In a slightly different context Judith Kroll quotes Graves's observation that the Muse must resist 'the temptation to commit suicide in simple domesticity [which] lurks in every maenad's and muse's heart' (CM. p. 48). 'An Appearance' indicates that Plath is no longer unsure which self must die: the clinical sloughing off of the false reality frees the speaker from the mundane domesticity incumbent on her superficial identity, and allows her to undertake a psychical journey unburdened by the pull of the present. It is arguable that this journey is formally signalled by Plath's use of three-line stanzas. Having last adopted the form over a year previously, Plath employs three-line stanzas for 'An
Appearance' and the next four poems of the April group: although, admittedly, not in terza rima, the stanza may well acknowledge the Dantean tradition.

Certainly the imagery of 'Crossing the Water', dated the same day as 'An Appearance', exploits Stygian - as well as Osirian - echoes as Plath continues her chthonic exploration. She has now entered the domain of the yew tree, where everything has been contaminated with the same sinister blackness:

Black lake, black boat, two black, cut-paper people.
Where do the black trees go that drink here?
Their shadows must cover Canada.

This reference to Canada constitutes the only concession to the world inhabited by the poet's domestic self: she and Hughes had toured North America during the summer of 1960, and 'Crossing the Water' may remember their stay at Rock Lake in Canada. Edward Butscher has argued, rather simplistically, that 'Crossing the Water' is a 'token expression of the stock feeling of being lost in vast places'. However, whereas an earlier poem about the Canada trip, 'Two Campers in Cloud Country', does undoubtedly highlight the smallness of the human scale in the presence of such natural grandeur, in 'Crossing the Water' Plath locates this impression of vulnerability, even irrelevance, amidst a much more unearthly and sinister setting. The leaves of water flowers offer 'dark advice' and 'do not wish us to hurry'; 'Cold worlds shake from the oar'; and the 'spirit of blackness' - which 'Little Fugue' had established as the spirit of the yew tree and of death - penetrates the speaker and her silent companion. The poem's conclusion also draws on imagery from previous poems, as if emphasizing that the journey begun with 'Little Fugue' is still ongoing:

Stars open among the lilies.
Are you not blinded by such expressionless sirens?
This is the silence of astounded souls.

The stars, which had been 'flashing like terrible numerals' in 'An Appearance', also possess morbid connotations for Plath. 'Insomniac' from May 1961, for example, describes the night sky as 'a sort of carbon paper', with its 'peepholes' letting in 'A bonewhite light, like death, behind all things'. Now the stars are 'expressionless sirens', tempting the speaker to destroy herself, or to be 'blinded' like the pianist in 'Little Fugue'. The 'silence' of the final line also evokes earlier work: the yew tree's message had consisted of 'blackness and silence'. Without alluding explicitly to the father, these cross-references effectively identify his underworld, the black world under the black yew, where the speaker journeys with a mysterious companion (who may or may not be Charon) past the 'astounded souls' of the dead.

Before returning to the subject in hand, a draft of 'Crossing the Water'
unexpectedly introduces the next poem in Plath’s quest, ‘Among the Narcissi’: the fragment reads, ‘Percy, in his peajacket, walks our back hill, octogenarian/ A bent blue stick among the narcissi’. That Plath should conceive the germ of ‘Among the Narcissi’ while in the midst of another poem which, apart from the three-line stanzas, may otherwise appear very different, indicates an underlying affinity of inspiration which is shared by all her poems of April 1962. ‘Among the Narcissi’ returns to a more recognizable landscape, as it depicts Plath’s Devon neighbour, Percy Key, walking on a nearby hill. Yet this landscape turns out to be hardly less sinister than the Stygian blackness of ‘Crossing the Water’. Percy is sick and vulnerable, ‘recuperating from something on the lung’ and nursing ‘the hardship of his stitches’. His physical handicaps link him with the deaf, dumb, lame and blind in previous poems, and the horrible implication lingers that he too may be a go-between, about to begin his journey underground. Plath charted Percy’s decline with a fascinated precision in a character sketch which has been published in Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams. An entry for 17 April evidently describes the same scene as ‘Among the Narcissi’:

He had been walking in the wind among the narcissi in his peajacket a few days before [his stroke]. He had a double rupture from coughing. The sense his morale, his spirit, had gone. That he had given in with this.\(^{11}\)

The poem may at first seem more hopeful, but reference to ‘the man mending’ fails to convince. Percy is ‘quite blue’, his breathing tried by ‘the terrible wind’. Even the momentarily therapeutic narcissi, ‘vivid as bandages’, are disquieting: the image of the wind ‘ratt[ing] their stars’ recalls the stars opening among the lilies in ‘Crossing the Water’, and suggests that Percy is soon to undertake a similar crossing. The poem’s drafts emphasize this imminent transition – as Percy stands on the shoreline of life – by referring to the narcissi as ‘stars whip[ping] his ankles like a sea, frothing’. The expressionless sirens luring the speaker of ‘Crossing the Water’ to her destruction have now become more directly hostile. Even though Plath deletes this line, the poem’s conclusion – ‘The narcissi look up like children, quickly and whitely’ – still suggests a malevolence only masquerading as innocence.

The hill where Percy crosses between worlds is also what ‘Pheasant’, dated two days later, calls ‘the elm’s hill’ – the setting of ‘Among the Narcissi’, ‘Pheasant’ and ‘Elm’. This shift from the yew in the west and the death of the false identity, through the black underworld of ‘Crossing the Water’, to a re-emergence on the eastern hill, follows a trajectory emphasizing the importance of the death and rebirth ritual in Plath’s work. Yet as ‘Among the Narcissi’ demonstrates, the hill of the new dawn is also a hill of danger and fatality. ‘Pheasant’ embodies this dualism. The bird represents vibrant life: it is ‘red’ and ‘vivid’, a ‘good shape’, a ‘little cornucopia’, it ‘unclaps, brown as a leaf, and loud’, and it suns itself among
the narcissi. However, the previous poem gave the narcissi ominous connotations, and the pheasant's life is in fact at risk: 'You said you would kill it this morning. Do not kill it', the speaker pleads. This bird is not the reborn Osiris - 'it isn't/ As if I thought it had a spirit' - but it has a certain 'kingliness, a right'.

Perhaps the least interesting poem of the April group, 'Pheasant' still performs its larger function of contributing to Plath's spiritual odyssey. The bird finally 'Sets in the elm, and is easy'. Plath's first version of 'Elm', published by Hughes in the notes to the Collected Poems, opens 'She is not easy, she is not peaceful' (CP. p. 292). This deliberate contrast between the pheasant and the elm is unsurprising for compositional as well as thematic reasons. The manuscripts prove that Plath was working on both poems simultaneously: what she has numbered as the second draft of 'Pheasant in the New Year' appears on the same sheet as her ninth draft of 'Elm', and the next sheet contains a further reference to 'Pheasant'. Despite its single date of 19 April (one draft is dated 12 April), 'Elm' constitutes the crystallization of themes and images with which Plath had been struggling for weeks. Her breakthrough seems to have come when she understood how the elm might fit into the mythical schema mapped by the April poems. The White Goddess, from which Plath draws inspiration for her treatment of the yew in 'Little Fugue', dwells far less on the significance of the elm. However, Graves does refer to a curious etymological matrix, apparently prompting Plath to appropriate the elm as the tree of rebirth.

Graves observes that the silver fir, 'a female tree with leaves closely resembling the yew's', is the prime birth-tree of Northern Europe (just as the yew is the death-tree); and that coincidentally its Old Irish form, *ailm*, also stood for the palm, which is the birth-tree and the Tree of Life in Egypt, Phoenicia, Arabia and Babylonia, the tree from which the phoenix is born and reborn. In modern Irish, Graves goes on to note, 'ailm' means elm (WG. p. 190). This confusion of trees may have been enough to sanction Plath's adoption of the elm for her own mythical purposes. Further evidence in the poem also suggests that the elm has become a surrogate for the silver fir and palm, uniting their legendary connotations. The silver fir was sacred to Artemis the Moon-Goddess who presided over childbirth, and accordingly the moon appears in both the earlier fragment and the Ariel version of 'Elm'; and a question the finished poem asks - 'Is it the sea you hear in me, / Its dissatisfactions?' - remembers that the palm only thrives close to the sea, while also alluding to the sea's status as universal mother. An early draft of 'Elm', titled 'The Sea at the Door', does not specifically identify the elm at all, perhaps hoping to evoke an archetypal birth-tree which borrows from several traditions. The references in The White Goddess and elsewhere may appear arcane, but Plath exploits and transforms them to suit her private topography, revitalizing their potency in the process.

The drafts confirm this focus on birth, albeit a birth accompanied by mementoes of death. The first draft of the 'Elm' fragment published in its finished form by Hughes contains a deleted line, 'Skulls winter like bulbs in
the hill', which perfectly encapsulates Plath’s cycle of death and rebirth. Drafts of the version collected in *Ariel* also reveal a preoccupation with rebirth. In a passage from a sheet dated 12 April, the elm announces,

The remembrance of the Creator is very small.  
It runs south, with its cold ideas.  
It runs north, with hot thoughts. But it is not there.  
I vibrate with his love for me: I am a big woman.  
Unlike you, I have a capacity for almost infinite renewal –  
You little white thing, you chrysalis in my boughs!  
His forgetfulness is the beginning of evil.  
He has forgotten the white men that shine like radium,  
Engineering another vision, engineering themselves back.  
He, like a phoenix, shall subside in fire.

Some of this remains obscure, perhaps irretrievably so. However, the elm’s ‘capacity for almost infinite renewal’, the description of the moon as a ‘chrysalis’, and the ‘Creator’ subsiding in fire ‘like a phoenix’ – another allusion to the palm tree’s legendary associations – all clearly point towards the possibility of rebirth. The same draft goes on to speak of the dead ‘break[ing] open like orchids’; while in later manuscripts the elm declares, ‘I renew myself –/ Quietly drinking the dawn hour’, and reports that its image ‘With every day so delicately resurrects itself’ in a nearby window.

Despite frequent references to ‘resurrection’, ‘renewal’, ‘the dawn’ and ‘the dawn hour’ throughout the manuscripts, the final *Ariel* version of ‘Elm’ omits these signs of optimism. The elm which, Ted Hughes confirms, stood in Plath’s dawn sky, has become associated more with sunsets than sunrises:

I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets.  
Scorched to the root  
My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires.

Plath’s focus has shifted from the positive assertion of rebirth to its necessary precursors, destruction and death. Yet even this stanza contains a hidden potential: the elm’s death by fire in the sunset remembers the phoenix’s death, and the ‘red filaments’ which survive after the superficial self has been burned away represent the beginnings of renewal. Plath makes similar use of the Osiris myth, avoiding the expected reference to the sun rising once more, but alluding instead to the god’s destruction: the elm ‘break[s] up in pieces that fly about like clubs’, recalling the tearing to pieces and scattering of Osiris’s body.

In ‘Elm’, as in *Ariel*, rebirth implies death and death rebirth. This cycle necessitates continuous blood-sacrifice and horrific transmutations. The ‘vacuous sheets’ offered by ‘Little Fugue’ as an escape into a false identity of marriage and family life now seem utterly irrelevant. The ‘dark thing’ which nightly ‘look[s], with its hooks, for something to love’ clearly does not hunt the kind of love represented in the clouds:
Clouds pass and disperse.
Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?
Is it for such I agitate my heart?
I am incapable of more knowledge.
What is this, this face
So murderous in its strangle of branches?
Its snaky acids hiss.
It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults
That kill, that kill, that kill.

Plath’s powerful verb ‘agitate’ aligns the elm with the yew whose black fingers were ‘agitat[ing]’ in the opening draft of ‘Little Fugue’: the poems, like the trees, signal each other, to acknowledge that communication between living and dead has been irreversibly established. However, this communication, and its collateral fulfilment of identity, has come at a terrible cost. The medusa-face in its ‘strangle of branches’ must be recognized as part of the speaker, petrifying volition as it destroys both her and others.

Just as the masculine yew allowed the father to communicate in ‘Little Fugue’, so the feminine elm has become a mouthpiece for Plath at the end of her journey through the poems of April 1962. She, like the elm, ‘know[s] the bottom’ – the underworld which is her father’s domain – and the new understanding obsesses her: ‘I am incapable of more knowledge’. The malign ‘cry’, born out of this consuming knowledge, echoes the fate of the Osirian god reborn as a raptor, but it is also the uncontrollable voice articulated throughout Ariel. The poet who had been pulled desiring and resisting down to her dead father re-emerges possessed by a terrifying, murderous voice which, over the coming months, will regularly ‘flap out’ to kill what it loves.

NOTES

3. I am grateful to Karen Kukil and the staff of the Rare Books Room, Neilson Library, Smith College, Massachusetts, for their help with the Plath archive.
Language became a neurosis. I used three of the basic world languages in conversation, in poetry and in my newspaper work. I was never able to decide which of them I preferred. An almost inextricable chaos ensued, and sometimes I sought a facile escape by intermingling all three. I dreamed a new language, a super-tongue for intercontinental expression, but it did not solve my problem. I felt that the great Atlantic community to which I belonged demanded an Atlantic language. Yet I was alone, quite alone, and I found no understanding comrades who might have helped me in my linguistic jungle.

Eugene Jolas, *Man from Babel*  

Language as neurosis or language as ‘super-tongue for intercontinental expression’? For Eugene Jolas, a self-described ‘American in exile in the hybrid world of the Franco-German frontier, in a transitional region where people swayed to and from in cultural and political oscillation, in the twilight zone of the German and French languages’ (*MB.* p. 5), language was clearly both. For his was not just the usual bilingualism (or, more properly, the linguistic divisionism) of the Alsace-Lorraine citizen at the turn of the century; it was compounded by the acquisition of American English (already, so to speak, Jolas’s birthright, born as he was in Union, New Jersey) in the years between 1909 when, as a fifteen-year old, he emigrated to New York, and 1923 when he returned to Europe. What Jolas called ‘the long pilgrimage ... through the empires of three languages’ (*MB.* p. 65) was in many ways a great gift, the entrée to an international (or at least pan-European and North American) aesthetic. But it was also, as we shall see, a problem for a young man who aspired to be a great poet. When, in the early twenties, Jolas sent some of his poems to Frank Harris’s magazine, *Pearson’s*, the latter cautioned Jolas that he ‘came to English too late to become a real poet in [the English] language’. ‘There is, in fact’, Harris remarked, ‘no example in history of a poet who abandoned his native language in adolescence, and later succeeded in penetrating the mysteries of a new one. There are so many grammatical pitfalls that can never be overcome, unless the words have been felt in childhood’ (*MB.* p. 49).

I shall come back to the poetry conundrum later, but, for the moment, let us consider what trilingualism did for Jolas the editor of *transition*, Jolas the
impresario of the avant-garde, and promoter of what he liked to call a ‘Eur­
American philology’ (MB. p. 65). From the first, Jolas’s gift was an
enormous sensitivity to different linguistic registers. Drafted in the U.S.
army in 1917, he concentrated neither on military strategy nor on political
issues but on the ‘new words’ that he heard from his fellow soldiers, most
of them, like himself, recent immigrants: ‘profane words, crude words,
voluptuous words, occult words, concrete words … a scintillating
assemblage of phonetic novelties’ (MB. p. 35). ‘I heard’, he recalls, ‘the
vocabulary of the bunkhouse, the steamer, the construction camp, the
brothel, the machine shop, the steel mill. I heard that lexicon of the
farmhouse and the mountain cabin. … Here was truly a melting-pot, Franco­
Belgian-Serbian-German-Austrian-Bohemian-Americans in our outfit
mingled with native-born Americans with Anglo-Saxon names, and our
conversations were often filled with picturesquely distorted English and
foreign words that quickened my Babel fantasies’ (MB. p. 35).

To put these remarks in context, consider the admonition, made not so
many years earlier, by Henry James in a commencement speech at Bryn
Mawr College. The new immigrants, James warned the graduates, were
destroying the ‘ancestral circle’ of the American language, turning it into ‘a
mere helpless slobber of disconnected vowel noises’, an ‘easy and ignoble
minimum’, barely distinguishable from ‘the grunting, the squealing, the
barking, or the roaring of animals’. ‘The forces of looseness’, James warned,
‘are in possession of the field’, and they ‘dump their mountain of
promiscuous material into the foundations’ of the language itself.2

From James’s perspective, Jolas would be part of the ‘force of looseness …
in possession of the field’. But in the aftermath of the Great War, with the
increasing traffic between Americans and Europeans (Marcel Duchamp,
François Picabia, and Mina Loy in the U.S.; Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes
and a host of American expatriates in Paris), the intactness of American
English was threatened, and the stage set for Jolas’s own linguistic
experiments and for his reception of Joyce’s Work in Progress. When, in late
1926, he heard Joyce read from the opening pages of his new manuscript,
Jolas marveled at the ‘polysynthetic quality’ of Joyce’s language (MB. p. 89),
a language which was to become the touchstone for transition. The
‘repetitiveness of Gertrude Stein’s writings’ (MB. pp. 89-90), on the other
hand, was not really Jolas’s cup of tea, even though, in deference to his co­
editor Elliot Paul and to Stein’s stature as the ‘doyenne among American
writers in Paris’ (MB. p. 116), he was to publish so many of her experimental
pieces,3 and even though he frequently came to her defense in the pages of
transition as well as in the Notes to his Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie
américaine (1928).4 In his autobiography, Jolas was more candid about what
he called Stein’s ‘esoteric stammering’:

Her mental attitude was remote from anything I felt and thought. For not only
did she seem to be quite devoid of metaphysical awareness but I also found her
aesthetic approach both gratuitous and lacking in substance. …
We published a number of her compositions in transition, although I am obliged to say that I saw, and see today, little inventiveness in her writing. The "little household words" so dear to Sherwood Anderson, never impressed me, for my tendency was always in the other direction. I wanted an enrichment of language, new words, millions of words. (MB. p. 116, my emphasis)

More vocabulary rather than less, Joycean 'enrichment' rather than Steinian reduction: this 'other direction' was, of course, Jolas's own. The famous manifesto 'Revolution of the Word', which appeared in the summer double issue of 1929 (t.16-17), declared, 'The literary creator has the right to disintegrate the primal matter of words imposed on him by text-books and dictionaries' (proposition #6), and 'He has the right to use words of his own fashioning and to disregard existing grammatical and syntactical laws' (proposition #7). In what Jolas understood to be the watershed year of the Great Crash, T. S. Eliot, as the February 1929 issue (t.14) had declared, was the enemy, his 'reformatory forces' having been 'constrain[ed]' into the straightjacket of political and religious dogma' (t.14, p. 11). Fascism on the Right, Communism on the Left, a weak 'desiccated humanitarianism' in the U.S.: all these, Jolas felt, conspired against the 'new art' and made revolution 'imperative'. 'The new vocabulary and the new syntax must help destroy the ideology of a rotting civilization' (t.16-17, p. 15).

But how exactly could the 'disregard' of 'existing grammatical and syntactical laws' contribute to the making of revolution? In Jolas's scheme of things, multilingualism was equivalent to racial and ethnic equality. In a piece called 'Logos' (t.16-17), he addresses the issue of language borrowing and deformation: 'In modern history we have the example of the deformations which English, French and Spanish words underwent in America, as in the case of Creole French on Mauritius, Guyana, Martinique, Hayti [sic], Louisiana, and Colonial Spanish' (p. 28). When he returned to New York in 1933, Jolas wandered the streets, recording the 'inter-racial philology', the 'fantasia of many-tongued words' (MB. p. 147), accelerated by the presence of the new refugees from Hitler. He called the 'embryonic language of the future' the 'Atlantic, or Crucible, language, for it was the result of the interracial synthesis that was going on in the United States, Latin America and Canada. It was American English, with an Anglo-Saxon basis, plus many grammatical and lexical additions from more than a hundred tongues. All these, together with the Indian "subsoil" languages, are now being spoken in America' (MB. p. 147). And after World War II, Jolas reconceived 'Atlantica' as a universal language that 'might bridge the continents and neutralize the curse of Babel', not by being an invention like Esperanto or Interglossa' (MB. p. 272), but by absorbing Anglo-Saxon, Greco-Latin, Celtic, Indian, Spanish, French Canadian French, German, Pennsylvania German, Dutch, Hebrew, the Slavic and Slavonic languages' (MB. p. 273).

Ironically enough, this Utopian dream of a common language had as its primary exhibit the most esoteric (and arguably private) of literary compositions: Joyce's Finnegans Wake, each issue of transition presenting...
another installment of *Work in Progress*, as it was then called. Joyce’s ‘excellent knowledge of French, German, Greek and Italian’, wrote Jolas, ‘stood him in good stead, and he was constantly adding to his stock of linguistic information by studying Hebrew, Russian, Japanese, Chinese, Finnish and other tongues. At the basis of his vocabulary was also an immense command of Anglo-Irish words that only seem like neologisms to us today, because they have for the most part become obsolete’ (*MB.* p. 167).

A comparable enthusiasm for Joyce’s linguistic virtuosity was voiced by the young Samuel Beckett, whose essay ‘Dante ... Bruno . Vico ... Joyce’, appeared in the Summer 1929 issue of *transition* along with ‘Revolution of the Word’:

Here form *is* content, content *is* form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read – or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*. ... When the sense is dancing, the words dance. The language is drunk. The very words are tilted and effervescent.

And again:

Mr. Joyce has desophisticated language. ... It is abstracted to death. Take the word ‘doubt’: it gives us hardly any sensuous suggestion of hesitancy, of the necessity for choice, of static irresolution. Whereas the German ‘Zweifel’ does, and, in lesser degree, the Italian ‘dubitare’. Mr. Joyce recognizes how inadequate ‘doubt’ is to express a state of extreme uncertainty, and replaces it by ‘intwosome twiminds’.6

Beckett’s own early poems and stories reflect this interest in polylingualism. In ‘Sedendo et Quiesciendo’, which appeared in the March 1932 issue of *transition* (*t.*21), we read:

Well really you know and in spite of the haricot skull and a tendency to use up any odds and ends of pigment that might possibly be left over she was the living spit he thought of Madonna Lucrezia del Fede. Ne suis-je point pâle? Suis-je belle? Certainly pale and belle my pale belle Braut with a winter skin like an old sail in the wind. ... for many years he polished his glasses (ecstasy of attrition!) or suffered the shakes and gracenote strangulations and enthrottlements of the Winkelmusik of Szopen or Pichon or Chopinek or Chopinetto or whoever it was embraced her heartily as sure my name is Fred, dying all my life (thank you Mr. Auber) on a sickroom talent (thank you Mr Field) and a Kleinmeister’s Leidenschaftsucherei (thank you Mr Beckett) ... (*t.*21, p. 16).

Here Belacqua’s mix of fantasy and memory, prompted by the encounter with the astonishing Smeralda-Rima, gives rise to all sorts of foreign words and grammatical constructions: *haricot skull* (with its play on ‘bean’), *Lucrezia del Fede* (Italian for ‘Faith’), *Ne suis-je point pâle? Suis-je belle?* (French for ‘Am I not pale? Am I beautiful?’), *pale belle Braut* (English + French + German for ‘pale beautiful bride’), *Winkelmusik* (literally ‘cornermusic’, here a spoof on ‘chamber music’ and ‘chamberpot’), the phonetic plays and anagrams on Chopin’s name and the parodic
compounding of Kleinmeister's Leidenschaftsucherei ('Small master', on the analogy of Bürgomeister, Haußmeister, die Meistersinger, etc. combined with the grandiose neologism Leidenschaftsucherei, which translates as 'lust-searching'). Such word-play contradicts Beckett's complaint that English usually cannot capture the sensuous flavor of an image or action: Winkelmusik, for example, nicely captures the 'tinkle' of the chamberpot, and the long open diphthong and voiceless stop in Braut has a very different phonetic aura from bride with its ay glide and soft voiced stop. Braut, after all, rhymes with Kraut and laut.

Still, such contrived shifts from one language to another are ultimately distracting, taking us outside the text rather than further into it. Beckett seems to have sensed this. Writing in 1931 to Charles Prentice at Chatto & Windus, he remarked that 'of course it ['Sedendo et Quiesciendo'] stinks of Joyce in spite of earnest endeavours to endow it with my own odours'. And surely the perceived 'stink of Joyce' had something to do with Beckett's turn, in the fifties, to a 'foreign' language - French - for the writing of Waiting for Godot and the Trilogy. It is interesting to note that in fictions like Malone Dies, he discarded the mannerisms of his early multilingual work in favor of a much sparer, starker, monolingual writing, no longer more than marginally Joycean.

But then, Joyce's own multilingualism had its own very special parameters. Consider the following passage from 'Anna Livia Plurabelle': as published in its first version in transition 8 (November 1927):

Do you tell me that now? I do in troth. Orara por Orbe and poor Las Animas! Ussa, Ulla, we're umbas all! Mezha, didn't you hear it a deluge of times, ufer and ufer, respond to spond? You deed, you deed! I need, I need! It's that irrawaddying I've stoke in my aars. It all but husheth the lethest sound. Oronoko.

Here the opening conversation of the washerwomen begins realistically enough but soon gives way to an allusion to the Spanish prayer orar por Orbe y por Las Animas ('pray for the Earth and the Souls of the Dead'), into which, Joyce has embedded three river names: the Orara in New South Wales, the Orba in Italy, and the Orb in France. Further: por becomes 'poor' so that, comically enough, the women seem to be talking about a friend or neighbour: 'poor Las Animas'. In the next sentence, Ussa and Ulla are both names of Russian rivers, and, at the same time, as Walton Litz points out, the two words can be read as 'us-ça', 'you-là', referring to the near and far banks of the river. In the same sentences, Umbas is a portmanteau word combining umbra ('shade, ghost') and the Umba river of East Africa. Then, in the next sentence, Mezha fuses the Italian stage direction mezza voce with the name of the Indian river Meza and the exclamation 'ha', the latter leading to the shrill cries of the washerwomen: 'you deed, you deed! I need, I need!' These repeated exclamations suggests that in the darkness (umbra), it has become more and more difficult for the women to hear one another. 'A deluge of times' nicely underscores the river-flood motif, and the German
'ufer and ufer' fuses river bank (*Ufer*) and Russian river name ('Ufa') with the sound of 'over and over'. *Ufa* also means 'medium-sized fir pole or spar', so we can read the end of the sentence as saying that spar after spar is spinning down the Liffey destined for the pond in 'spond', with that word's further implication of 'despond'.

Without going any further and probing the complexities of the compound 'irrawaddying' (the Irrawaddy river + 'wadding' + 'ear' + 'irrational') or the final proper name 'Oronoko', (the royal slave who is the hero Aphra Behn's novel + the Orinoco river + a kind of Virginia tobacco), we can see that the linguistic paradigm of the passage in question is essentially absorptive. The language base, that is to say, is so firmly Anglo-Irish ('Do you tell me that now? I do in troth') that the foreign words and morphemes - in this case, Latin, Spanish, German, French, and Italian, not to mention the proper names of rivers in a variety of languages, all within the space of thirty-nine words - are absorbed into the fabric of English syntax and word formation, complicating and deepening meaning, without calling attention to themselves as foreign elements. Whereas a phrase like 'my belle Braut' is additive (English + French + German), the question 'Mezha, didn't you hear it a deluge of times, ufer and ufer, respond to spond', foregrounds the basic structure and rhythm of the English sentence, and inserts coinages and portmanteau words that sound familiar enough, as in the case of 'ufer and ufer' ('over and over'). The result is thus not so much a form of multilingualism as a reinvention of English as magnet language, pulling in those particles like *Ussia* and *Ulla* or deftly transposing a Spanish preposition (*por*) into an English adjective ('poor') so as to produce a dense mosaic of intertextual references.

Jean-Michel Rabaté has observed that the process of denaturalization I have just described, the undoing of the taxonomy of language, whether one's own or another's, was Joyce's way of declaring war against English, 'against a mother tongue used to the limit, mimed, mimicked, exploded, ruined'. Jolas's multilingualism is of a different order. Neither in German nor in French, after all, did this writer have the command Joyce had of English. The official language of his elementary school in Forbach had been German, a language inevitably associated in the boy's mind with the Prussian authoritarianism of his teachers. The French of his youth, on the other hand, was, properly speaking, a dialect 'related to that of Luxembourg and the Flemish countries' (*MB.* p. 9). And further: both French and German lost their hold over Jolas when, as a teenager, he gave up both for what he called the 'linguistic jungle' of America. Thus, despite his expertise at translating one of his three languages into either of the others, an expertise which is everywhere manifest in *transition* as well as in such of his volumes as the superb *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie américaine*, Jolas did not quite have the hard-core language base of a Joyce or a Beckett, the latter being able to write his novels in a 'foreign' language (French), precisely because he was so sure of his native tongue.

For Jolas, in any case, the basic unit seems to have been, not the sentence,
but the word, his compilation of 'Slanguage: 1929' and later 'Transition's Revolution of the Word Dictionary' testifying to his passion for what the Russian Futurists called slovo kak takovoe – 'the word as such'. In the Dictionary, the list of neologisms, begins with six items from Joyce: constatation ('statement of a concrete fact'), couchmare ('nightmare ... cauchemar ...'), mielodorus ('honeyed emphasis of odorous'), Dance McCaper ('An Irish danse macabre'), and Besterfarther Zeuts ('the Proustian divinity ... Cronos ... Saturn ... who bests us all; in other words: Grandfather Time – here Zeuts suggests both Zeus and Zeit, German for “time”). Joyce is thus the presiding deity of the Dictionary, but Jolas includes writers from Leo Frobenius to Bob Brown (readie, 'machine for reading'), from Stuart Gilbert to Jolas's pseudonymous poet Theo Rutra, whose contribution is flir ('to glitter').

What, then, are the poems like? In Man from Babel, Jolas tells us that his 'first poems in the New World were written in German' (MB. p. 180), for example this perfectly conventional Romantic quatrain in iambic pentameter:

Ich steh' auf himmelragendem Gemäuer,
Allein im Schmelz vom letzten Abendschein;
Die wilde Stadt umbraust mich ungeheur –
Mein Herz schlägt traumgebannt
in Stahl und Stein.12

The transfer to English within the next few years made little difference: indeed, the themes of dream, loneliness, and adolescent lyricism remain constant, whether in metrical forms, as in:

I stand desolate before the funeral pyre of my youth.
Ours is the dance and the magic of blessed dreams;
And through the world goes a wind of despair. (MB. p. 25).

Or, in free verse:

My nostalgias seek your moods
In every meditative dusk,
When I am tired with the tedium of machines,
This age is distorted with madness. ...
Fever stalks through the cities of stone. ... (MB. p. 51)

Now compare to these passages one of Jolas’s early ‘Ur-Language’ poems appearing in transition 8 (November 1927):

Oor forest hear thine voice it winks
Ravines fog gleamen and the eyes
When night comes dooze and nabel sinks
Trowm quills unheard and lize. (p. 145)

Here is Jolas working toward the ‘revolution of the word’, with the word itself as dominant: ‘Oor’ for ‘Our’ or Ur, ‘gleamen’, a compound on the model of ‘snowmen’, ‘night comes dooze’, that is, ‘down’, fused with ‘doze’ and
'snooze', 'nabel' (the German näbel for 'fog', and this 'nabel' being one that 'sinks / Trowm' – that is 'down' in the form of traum (German for 'dream') and perhaps over the 'town'. The stanza's final word, 'lize', seems to be an intentional misspelling of leise, German for 'softly', or 'in a low voice'.

The difficulty here is that the Anglo-German compounds and portmanteaus are more awkward than functional. Why is it more graphic, complex, or interesting to say 'nabel sinks / Trowm' than to say 'the fog sinks dreamily down'? Why transform the two-syllable leise (pronounced layzē) into what looks like a reference to lice or lizards, neither word applicable in the context? More successful than these multilingual poems of the late twenties are Jolas's experiments with sound play in the form of alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, metathesis, or echolalia. In Man from Babel, he recalls:

An expansion of language seemed necessary, also, in English and American poetry. Work on my translation of American poets had impressed me with the paucity of vocabulary and the poverty of the lyrical phrase, both of which seemed to me to be meager and often pedestrian. This, I felt, prevented the poet from expressing the deeper emotions which his unconscious might have evoked. I myself invented a poet I called Theo Rutra, in order to project certain of my own neologistic work, and soon this fellow Rutra became my alter ego. I enjoyed playing him up to my friends, to which I described in detail the 'Czech immigrant living in Brooklyn' (MB. p. 109)

Here is Theo Rutra's prose poem 'Faula and Fiona' (e.g., Flora and Fauna):

The lilygushes ring and ting the bilbels in the ivilley. Lilools sart slinslongdang into the clash of sun. The pool dries must. The morrowlei loors in the meaves. The sardinewungs flir flar and meere. A fishflashfling hoohoos and haas. Long shill the mellohoolooloos. The rangomanc clanks jungling flight. The elcgoat mickmecks and crools. A rabotick ringrangs the stam. A plutocrass with throat of steel. Then woor of meadalif's rout. The hedgeking gloos. And matemaids click for dartalays. (t.16-17 [June 1928], p. 34)13

Joyce is the obvious model for words like ivjje ('ivy' + 'valley') and plutocrass, and Stein is also present, the sentence 'The pool dries must' recalling 'Render clean must' in her 'Susie Asado'. But however pleasurable the language games of 'Faula and Fiona', it is doubtful that, either here or in the multilingual poems, Jolas has found a way of 'expressing the deeper emotions which his unconscious might have evoked', or that the ringing lilygushes and bilbels 'expand' the language as we know it. More important: the much touted 'Revolution of the Word', a 'revolution' that seemed so glamorous to Jolas and his friends in the late twenties, found itself increasingly under a cloud as it ran into the very real political revolution that brought the Nazis to power in 1932.

In his autobiography, Jolas recalls a 1933 excursion he and his wife Maria made with the Joyces and the Siegfried Gideons to the Rhinefall of Schaffhausen, on the Swiss-German border. Sitting on the terrace of a little inn, facing the beautiful iridescent waters of the swirling Rhine, 'we
suddenly noticed at nearby tables several grotesquely garbed Nazi youths who had crossed the border for a Sunday excursion. They wore their Hitlerite insignia with ostentation and seemed evidently proud of this affiliation. Soon we heard their raucous voices in a dull Germanic tavern song, and I could not help recalling the days in my childhood, when we used to hear the drunken voices of the Kaiser’s soldiers in the little inn next to our house. Nothing had changed’ (MB. p. 134).

Note that even here, Jolas identifies people by their voices, by the way they sound. And note that the Nazis are aggressively monolingual – for Jolas, a sign of narrow nationalist identity. No wonder, then, that the worse the political situation in Europe became, the more insistently Jolas turned to multilingualism as defense. In the July 1935 issue of transition (now subtitled An International Experiment for Orphic Creation),14 Jolas has a poem called ‘Mots-Frontiere: Polyvocables’, which begins:

malade de peacock-feathers
le sein blue des montagnes and the house strangled by rooks the
tender entétémont des trees
the clouds sybilfly and the neumond bruleglisters ein wunder stuerzt
ins tal with
eruptions of the abendföehren et le torrentbruit qui charrie les
gestes des enfants. ...

Jolas’s ‘Polyvocables’ imply that if only poetry could contain French + German + English in equal additive measure, the treacherous frontiers increasingly separating the nations of Europe might be crossed. So the German neumond (new moon) bruleglisters (‘burns and glistens’) in both French and English, and the German wunder stuerzt / ins tal (‘a wonder rushes into the valley’) with English ‘eruptions’. The ‘tender entétémont’ (‘stubbornness’), moreover, belongs not to des arbres but to ‘des trees’.

This last line reminds me of nothing so much as the refugee English spoken by some of my Austrian relatives and family friends in the United States of the early 1940s: for example, Die bell hatt geringt (‘The bell rang’), with its normative German syntax and retention of the German prefix for the past participle. In his study of transition, Dougal McMillan judges such passages severely, arguing that ‘The circumstances of Jolas’ trilingualism have left Americans, French, and Germans uncertain as to the national category he belongs in’.16 But this is to judge Jolas by the very norms he was attacking; the problem is not national indeterminacy but the somewhat clumsy additive technique Jolas, unlike Joyce, used in bringing his languages together. Indeed, another poem for the July 1935 issue, ‘Logocinema of the Frontiersman’, makes the A + B + C method quite overt: the elegiac meditation on the poet’s words tracks the poet’s life from the German of his Kindesworte (Immer leuchtete der Wunderkontinent) to the French of his stormy adolescence (mes mots chevauchaient une lavefrontière; mes mots sanglotaien dans une bacchanale de blessures) and then the English of the poet’s young manhood in the asphalt jungle of New York:
Following this triad, the 'Logocinéma' continues in the same vein for six more sections of approximately sixteen lines each, now in English, but with occasional German and French intrusions, as in 'My homewords were *heimwehkrank* / my loamwords were full of *sehnsuch*’ (Part IV), and, as the ‘motherwords’ and ‘fatherwords’ of the poet’s Alsace-Lorraine childhood come back, we find lines like ‘*mes mots pleuvaient doucement sur les boulevards*’, with its echo of Blaise Cendrars. As things become more complex (‘my fatherwords luminousshone with sun’ (Part VII), and ‘my delugewords flowed through the heraclitean sluice’ (Part VIII), Jolas tries to bring his linguistic identities together (‘patois words wedded artwords / sunverbs flightrocketed against nightnouns’, Part VIII), and finally the cinematic movement brings all three languages together in Part IX, which begins ‘*Not hatte die welt ergriffen / the day was waiting for erschuetterungen*’ (e.g., ‘Suffering had taken hold of the world / the day was waiting for cataclysms’, although the first word of the stanza can also be construed as the English ‘Not’) and culminates in a Last Judgement (‘the *letzte gericht*’ of ‘*des damnés de la terre*’ (Part IX). The last short stanza reads:

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toutes les nuits étaient squeletteques
die hunde schrien sich tot in den hecken
les forêts de la lune mystère brûlaient
the world was earthquakedarkling (p. 191)

Here each of the four lines — French, German, French, English — is rhythmically independent, but each anticipates the next: the skeleton nights (line 1) contain the dogs barking themselves to death in the hedges (line 2) and the burning forests of the mysterious moon (line 3); thus (line 4) the world’s enveloping darkness signals earthquake, cataclysm. The autobiographical frame, with its emphasis on the coming into being of the ‘delugewords’, provides structure for the poet’s kaleidoscopic ‘logocinéma of the frontiersman’.

But that ‘logocinéma’, found again in such poems as ‘Intrialogue’, ‘Verbairrupta of the Mountainmen’, and ‘Frontier-Poem’, produced by Jolas in the course of the following three years, did not survive the World War II. When, at war’s end, Jolas was stationed in Germany by the U.S. Office of War Information (OWI) and assigned to various deNazification projects as well as to the task of setting up a new free German press, the dream of a common language was over. Post-War Germany, so Jolas tells us in *Man from Babel*, was characterized by a ‘vague-Neo-Romanticism’; ‘a good deal of poetry was being written and published, but the ferment and audacity of
French, British, and American poetic creation was obviously lacking' (MB. p. 252). Indeed, the problems of the post-war years and the coming Cold War left little time for what now seemed like the luxury of polylingual poetry.

Yet this is not the end of the story. For Jolas’s ‘polyvocabables’ of the 1930s, his *mots-frontiere*, look ahead to the intense poetic interest in marginal languages, dialects, creoles, pidgins, and alternate soundings that we have witnessed in recent decades, especially in the U.S.19 In the 1940s, the last decade of Jolas’s own life (he died in 1952), the flow of American writers settling in Paris and other European capitals was reversed, New York becoming the home of Kandinsky and Mondrian, André Breton and Max Ernst, Willem de Kooning and Hans Hofmann, not to mention an entire colony of German exile writers (Thomas Mann, Bertold Brecht) and British expatriates (Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood), who settled in Los Angeles. And in subsequent decades, as the U.S. has been transformed by the immigration of East Asians, Africans from the Caribbean, and especially Latinos from Mexico, Central America and the South American countries, it was inevitable that the language of American poetry would begin to deviate, not only from its nineteenth-century English model (Wordsworth to Eliot) but also from the Emerson-Whitman-Dickinson-Frost-Stevens paradigm that was its more immediate source.

‘We tried’, Jolas remarks sadly in the Epilogue to *Man from Babel*, ‘to give voice to the sufferings of man by applying a liturgical exorcism in a mad verbalism’. But ‘now that the greatest war in history is over, and the nations are trying to construct a troubled peace in an atomic era, we realize that the international migrations which the apocalyptic decade has unleashed bring in their wake a metamorphosis of communication’ (MB. p. 272). The solution, he was quick to add, ‘will not be invented by philologists – we have seen their inventions: Idiom Neutral, Ido, Esperanto, Novial, Interglossa. These were pedantic, unimaginative creations without any life in them’ (MB. pp. 272-73). Rather, one must take one’s own language – and English, Jolas felt, was now the most prominent, used as it was by seven hundred million people around the world – and ‘bring into this medium elements from all the other languages spoken today’. The new language should not number several hundred thousand words, but millions of words. It will not be an artificial language, but one that has its roots in organic life itself’ (MB. p. 272).

The notion of interjecting ‘all the other languages spoken today’ into the fabric of English is still a bit Utopian, but Jolas is on to something important – namely that multilingualism functions, not by mere addition, but by the infusion *into one’s own language* of the cultures that are changing its base. As a young reporter living in New Orleans, Jolas had been enchanted by the ‘Creole French spoken, by both whites and Negroes’, as well by ‘the language of the descendants of transplanted French Canadians from Nova Scotia’ which is Cajun. ‘Their children’, he marvelled, ‘were Ulysse, Téléméque, Olélia, Omen’ (MB. p. 84), And he would no doubt have been intrigued by the following:
(1) From Kamau Brathwaite, *Trench Town Rock*:

Last night about 2:45 well well well before the little black bell of the walk of my electronic clock cd wake me—

**awakened by gunshot**

—the eyes trying to function open too stunned to work out there through the window & into the dark with its various glints & glows: mosquito, very distant cockcrow, sound system drum, the tumbrel of a passing engine, somewhere some/where in that dark. It must have been an ear / ring’s earlier sound that sprawled me to the window. But it was

**TWO SHATTS**

— silence —

not evening the dogs barking or the trees blazing & then a cry we couldn’t see of

*do do do do do do*  
 **nuh kill me**

(2) From Alfred Arteaga, ‘Xronotop Xicano’: 

*Aguila negra, rojo chante.*  
*Tinta y pluma.*  
*Textos vivos,*  
*written people: the vato*  
*with la vida loca on his neck,*  
*the vata with p.v., the ganga with*  
*tears, the shining cross. Varrio*  
*walls: Codices, storefront*  
*placazos: varrio names,*  
*desafíos, people names*  
*Written cars, names etched*  
*in glass, ‘Land of a Thousand*  
*Dances’. Placas*  
*and love etched in schools.*
From Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée*

that. All aside. From then.
Point by point. Up to date. Updated.
The view.
Absent all the same. Hidden. Forbidden.
Either side of the view.
Side upon side. That which indicates the interior
and exterior.
Inside. Outside.
Veil. Voile. Voile de mariée. Voile de religieuse
Shade shelter shield shadow mist covert
screen screen door screen gate smoke screen
concealment eye shade eye shield opaque silk
Gauze filter frost to void to drain to exhaust
to eviscerate to gut glazing stain glass glassy
vitrification
what has one seen, this view
this which is seen housed thus
behind the veil. Behind the veil of secrecy. Under
the rose ala derobee beyond the veil
voce velate veiled voice under breath murmuration
render mute strike dumb voiceless tongueless.

Brathwaite, Arteaga, Cha: all three write as outsider poets – poets for whom English is, in one way or another, a foreign language. Kamau Brathwaite, to take our first example, who was born Lawson Edward Brathwaite in Barbados in 1930 and educated at Pembroke College, Cambridge, came, via a decade spent in Ghana with the Ministry of Education, to a rediscovery of his West Indian identity (the name Kamau was adopted in 1971) and to what he called, in an important book by that title, *nation language*: ‘the submerged area of that dialect which is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean’, a language that combines standard English and Jamaican Creole, ‘to get at the pulse’, as Joan Dayan puts it, ‘of the street talk, gospel, or Rastafari he shared in and listened to in Jamaica’, the ‘riddim’ (rhythm) of popular talk. In the later work, of which *Trench Town Rock* is an example, Brathwaite fused ‘nation language’ with what he called ‘video style’:

the video style comes out of the resources locked within the computer, esp. my Macs Sycorax & Stark (but not peculiar to them or me) in the same way a sculptor like Bob’ob or Kapo wd say that the images they make dream for them from the block of the wood in their chisel

When I discover that the computer cd write in light, as X/Self tells his mother in that first letter he writes on a computer, I discovered a whole new way of SEEING things I was SAYING.

Defined this way, ‘video style’ may be understood as another name for what we usually call visual poetics: the use of typography (size, font, placement)
and page layout to create meaning.

*Trench Town Rock*, whose opening page is reproduced above, is an elaborate collage (or *métissage*, as Edouard Glissant called it) based on poet's traumatic experience of having had his house ransacked on October 24, 1990 by armed robbers while he, gagged, and tied, helplessly waited for the gun to go off. The book juxtaposes interviews, news reports, personal diaries, and social commentary to create a powerful image of violence and victimization within a culture itself a victim of more powerful cultures. In the passage in question, the mix of Standard English and Creole is heightened by the urban rhythms of the Jamaican soundspace, beginning with 'Lass night about 2:45 well well well before the little black bell of the walk of my electronic clock cd wake me' – a dazzling sound orchestration of /l/, /w/, and /k/ phonemes in rhyming words ('well well well' / 'bell'), consonance ('walk' / 'wake'; 'electronic clock'), and alliteration ('little black bell', 'clock cd'). Such double entendres as 'aweakened by gunshatt' heighten the poem's meaning: the narrator is both awakened and weakened by the muggers; 'gunshatt' recalls shit, 'nuh' in 'do / nuh kill me', has the force of an expletive as well as the injunction of 'not'. And Brathwaite's 'video style', recalls Futurist typography in its heightening of the *TWO SHATIS*, its emphasis on the italicized injunction 'do do do nuh kill me', and its use of up-to-date business English shorthand, as in 'cd', 'wd', the ampersands, and the precision of '2:45'. Further: the slashes within words ('some/where', 'ear/ring's') creates a series of emphatic breaking points, designed to represent the violence of the action. Everything is chaotic, dismembered, disabled.

Brathwaite's multilingualism is thus a compounding of English and Jamaican dialect, with visual language playing a central part. Alfred Arteaga's, by contrast, fuses two standard languages, English and Spanish, with a sprinkling of Aztec names and Chicano neologisms. Arteaga is a Mexican-American poet, born in Los Angeles and educated at Columbia University and the University of California at Santa Cruz, where he received his doctorate in Renaissance literature. 'These cantos chicanos', Arteaga says in his preface, 'begin with X and end with X. They are examples of xicano verse, verse marked with a cross, the border cross of alambre y rio, the cross of Jesus X in Native America, the nahua X in méxico, mexican, xicano' (*Cantos* 5). The cross (X) thus becomes the sign of two colliding cultures and languages. The title 'Xronotop Xicano' presents one such crossing: a *chronotope* (Mikhail Bakhtin’s term) literally means 'time-space', and is defined as 'a unit of analysis for studying texts according to the ratio and nature of the temporal and spatial categories represented'. In this case, the modern Western theoretical term *chronotope* is crossed with the adjective 'Xicano', and refers, in the poem itself, to the language of Aztlan (the ancient Aztec empire that included Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and California). Within the poem itself, emblems of the Aztec Mexican past 'cross' the present of Chicano ghetto children etching their names, their curses (*desafios*), their *placas* ('graffiti'), and four-letter words, on walls,
storefronts, billboards, and car windows.

In defining the particular chronotopos in question, Arteaga alternates Spanish and English phrases, the Spanish often made strange by 'Chicano' spellings and adaptations. The opening line *Aguila negra, rojo chante* refers to the black eagle devouring the serpent on the red ground of the Mexican flag. But *chante* may be the imperative of *chantar* ('to plant') or a misspelled rendition of the English noun 'chant' (or French *chanter*, 'to sing'), so that the meaning of the line remains equivocal. And *vato* in line 4 (along with the feminine *vata* in line 5) is largely untranslatable – a term designating a victim or 'lost boy', but etymologically related to the Latin *vates* ('prophet') – hence perhaps the boy as wise fool. The *vato*, in any case, has *la vida loca* ('the crazed life', 'the life of the mad') hanging around his neck, even as the *vata*’s fate is *p. v.* (*por vida*, 'for life'). So the poet must take *tinta y pluma* ('ink and pen') and record the *textos vivos* of his people, caught up in their *ganga* ('bargain') 'with tears', which is their own 'shining cross' to bear, *ganga* also alluding to the gang life of the *varrio* (*barrio*), with its members' 'names etched / in glass' on the schoolhouse walls.

Here language is the signifier of cultural hybridity, the 'cross' between Spanish and English which is the Chicano of the North American cities. To write only in English (or only in Spanish), Arteaga implies, would deny this experience its immediacy, its felt life. Whereas Brathwaite was raised as an English speaker, and hence resorts to dialect but not to other standard languages, Arteaga must include the 'foreign'(Spanish) language base of his childhood.

A third alternative is that of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, a Korean poet whose family immigrated first to Hawaii and then to California when she was eleven. At the Convent of the Sacred Heart all-girls school in San Francisco, she learned French so that, by the time she attended Berkeley and studied film and performance art, her two written languages were a carefully acquired English and French. Accordingly, *Dictée*, the long poem Cha produced shortly before she was tragically murdered by a stranger in New York at the age of 31, is an amalgam of English and French, the latter, so to speak, her memory language. The poem tells the story of several women, united by their suffering: the Korean revolutionary Yu Guan Soon, Joan of Arc, Cha's mother, Demeter and Persephone, Hyung Soon Huo (a Korean born in Manchuria to first-generation Korean exiles) and Cha herself. The poet mixes writing styles (journal entries, allegorical stories, dreams), voices, and kinds of information, evidently as a metaphor of the dislocation of exile, the fragmentation of memory. Throughout her poem, Cha foregrounds the process of writing, its difficulties and revisions, its struggle to make sentences cohere. Hence, the broken sentences and Gertrude Steinian repetitions in the extract I have cited – 'Point by point. Up to date. Updated' – the endless full stops, suggesting extreme cleavage, as in 'Inside. Outside. / Glass. Drape. Lace. Curtain. Blinds. Gauze'. The search for identity, for personhood, is continually subverted. Opaque glass, veil, screen, blind, curtain, shade – these are Cha’s dominant images of oppression and
In this context, French phrases, learned dutifully in school, are presented as welling up from the poet’s subconscious. On the page prior to the extract above, a long passage begins with the lines *Qu’est ce qu’on a vu / Cette vue qu’est ce qu’on a vu / enfin. Vu E. Cette vue. Qu’est ce que c’est enfin.* ('What have we seen? What is the seen that we have finally seen. Seen And. This thing seen. What is it finally?'). The ‘childish’ French takes on a manic air as the sentence is broken apart and repeated for some ten lines. And, as memories of school prayers and lessons intrude on the poet’s fevered thoughts, the ‘veil’ becomes *Voile. Voile de mariée. Voile de religieuse.* The wish to shed the veil is also put in French – *ala derobée* (correctly spelled *à la derobée*) – just as the need to suppress one’s voice introduces the Italian *voce velata* (‘veiled voice’).

But where is Cha’s native language, Korean? The cited passage does not contain a single transliterated Korean word, not a single ideogram or overtly Asian reference. Evidently, the distant past of the poet’s childhood, the difficult movements of her family from place to place during the Korean War, have been blocked out. Korean appears only as an absence in the life of a woman dutifully bound to English with schoolgirl memories of textbook French. It is thus the English language that becomes the problem, the English language that must be fragmented, broken, deconstructed, reconstructed, and so on. The title *Dictée (Dictation)* thus refers to the indoctrination through language the immigrant must undergo. But *Dikte* is also the name of a Cretan goddess ‘whom Minos pursued for nine months until, about to be overtaken, she hurled herself from a cliff into the sea’.28 A victim, it seems, like the young girl who dutifully writes her *dictée*.

So much for Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s overt devices. But surely there is another reason Cha avoids Korean. Polyglossia remains a noble ideal, but who would be able to read the potential Korean words and phrases dotting her long poem? French and Spanish: these still have a recognition quotient, and Brathwaite’s Jamaican dialect can be sounded out and comprehended by any English speaker. But a multilingual poetry that would include Korean? Or, for that matter, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Arabic? Or again, Brazilian Portuguese? Hungarian?

The conundrum posed by *Dictée*, a poem I personally find somewhat self-conscious in its treatment of the ‘language problem’, is a conundrum Jolas could not quite anticipate. For the paradox of the contemporary situation is that the new version of multilingualism – and many poets are now following the example of Brathwaite29 – far from supporting the internationalism that animated Jolas’s poetry as well as the work collected in *transition*, has been prompted by precisely the opposite motive – a motive that is unabashedly nationalist, ethnicist, nativist. When the Brathwaite baptized Lawson Edward became, in middle life, Kamau, he turned to the ‘nation language’ of West Indian culture so as provide a more accurate representation of a people largely erased by history. His interjections of dialect, street slang, folk rhythms, Rastafari, African myth, legend, and geographical markers are
quite openly motivated by the desire to put the Caribbean experience on the map of modern poetry and fiction. In the same vein, Alfred Arteaga uses Spanish and its Chicano dialects to foreground a particular ethnic experience, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha writes from the positionality of the displaced Asian émigré woman who cannot quite locate herself in the U.S. culture of her time. Indeed, Cha’s shifts from English to French have nothing to do with any sort of tribute to the French language or French culture; on the contrary, the French phrases and idioms signal the deadness of a learned language that is not the poet’s own.

Jolas’s polyglossia, designed to bring together diverse peoples, to erase borders between the European nations, to produce a large cosmopolitan and international consciousness – E Pluribus Unum – has thus been radically inverted. Not the melting pot, one of Jolas’s favorite images, but the particular values of a particular underrepresented culture, not the erasure of borders, but the focus on borders, not internationalism but national and ethnic awareness: this is the realm of mots-frontiere that has replaced Jolas’s dream of a ‘new language’ his ‘super-tongue for intercontinental expression’. Indeed, ‘intercontinental’, is now a word used sparingly and when it is, as in the case of those ICBMs with which we threaten weaker enemy nations, the vision is far from Utopian.

NOTES


3. The following Stein pieces were published in transition, hereafter abbreviated in the text to t.: ‘An Elucidation’, t.1 (April 1927), pp. 64-78; ‘As a Wife has a Cow’, t.2 (June 1927); ‘Studies in Conversation’, t.3 (September 1927), pp. 74-78; ‘Made a Mile Away’, t.8 (November 1927), pp. 155-65; ‘A Novel of Desertion’, t.10 (January 1928), pp. 9-13; ‘Dan Raffel, A Nephew’, t.12 (March 1928), pp. 51-52; ‘Descriptions of Literature’, t.13 (Summer 1928), pp. 50-53; ‘An Instant Answer or a Hundred Prominent Men’, t.13 (Summer 1928), pp. 118-30; ‘Four Saints in Three Acts, An Opera to be Sung’, t.16-17 (June 1929), pp. 39-72; ‘She Bowed to her Brother’, t.21 (March 1932), pp. 100-103. And further: t.14 (February 1929) contains a complete Stein bibliography of writings to date: see pp. 47-55.

4. In transition 3 (June 1927), which contained Stein’s ‘As A Wife Has a Cow’ as lead-off piece, as well as Laura Riding’s ‘The New Barbarism and Gertrude Stein’, the editorial praises Stein as ‘abstract artist’, who ‘composes[es] her word patterns without an accompanying text of obvious explanations’ (p. 177). In the December 1927 issue, he defends Stein against the notorious attack by Wyndham Lewis (see p. 172). And in ‘The Revolution of Language and James Joyce’, transition 11 (February 1928), Jolas writes ‘Miss Gertrude Stein attempts to find a mysticism of the word by the process of thought thinking itself. In structurally spontaneous compositions in which words are grouped rhythmically, she
succeeds in giving us her mathematics of the word, clear, primitive and beautiful’, p. 111. The note for the Anthologie, longer than any of the others, declares ‘Tender Buttons, paru il y a quelques années, l’a montrée comme possédant un vrai génie d’innovation dans le style, et ses derniers livres n’ont aucun rapport avec les genres littéraires que nous connaissions’, p. 217.


11. t.21 (March 1932), pp. 323-25.
12. MB. p. 18. The lines read: ‘I stand on the battlements, reaching up to the sky; / Alone in the sunset glow; / The wild city roars violently around me; / My dreambound heart beats in steel and stone’.
13. The version cited in MB. p. 109 is slightly different. ‘villé’ is ‘villevio’, ‘morrolei’ is ‘lorroley’, ‘meaves’ is ‘neaves’, ‘sardinewungs’ becomes ‘sardin-swungs’, ‘flight’ becomes ‘light’, ‘mickmecks’ becomes ‘mickmacks’. It is not clear whether these are transcription errors, misprints, or intentional changes.
14. The subtitle first appears in t.21 (March 1932), when Jolas began to turn increasingly inward, in response to the two great totalitarianisms of the day. This issue contains the roundtable ‘Crisis of Man’, in which Stein, Jung, Benn, and Frobenius, among other, comment on the ‘evolution of individualism and metaphysics under a collectivist regime’, p. 107.
15. t.23 (July 1935), p. 65. The title, ‘Mots-Frontiere’ is odd: the correct grammar and spelling would make it ‘Mots-frontières’. Again, ‘neumond’, ‘wunder’, and ‘tal’ should be capitalized. Throughout this and related poems, Jolas tends to reproduce German nouns without the required initial capital.
18. ‘Intrialogue’ and ‘Verairrupta of the Mountainmen’ appeared in t.22 (February 1933), pp. 21-23, ‘Frontier-Poem’ in the final (tenth anniversary) issue, t.27 (1938).
19. See, on this point, Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris, Poems for the Millenium:


29. While I was completing this essay, I received the most recent issue of Chain, issue 5: ‘Different Languages’ (1998), ed. by Jena Osman and Juliana Spahr. Most of the work in this issue is bilingual (often English and Spanish) or multilingual, in keeping with the aesthetic of Brathwaite and Cha rather than the internationalism of Jolas, although many of the experiments, like Will Lavender’s ‘Glossolalia’, pp. 125-29 and Jessie Jane Lewis and Peter Rose’s ‘Pressures of the Text’, pp. 130-37, interpret multilingualism as the insertion, into the English structure, of technological languages, dialects, pictograms, visual devices, and so on. Multilingualism, in any case, is, as we see in Chain, very much in the air.
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

AI's books include the forthcoming Vice (new and selected poems) and Greed (1993). She has won many prizes, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and two NEA's.

GILLIAN ALLNUTT has published four collections, Spitting the Pips Out (Sheba, 1981), Beginning the Avocado (Virago, 1987), Blackthorn (Bloodaxe, 1994) and Nantucket and the Angel (Bloodaxe, 1997). She is the author of Berthing: A Poetry Workbook (NEC/Virago, 1991) and co-editor of The New British Poetry (Paladin, 1988), and was formerly poetry editor of City Limits. She lives in Co. Durham.

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DOUGLAS BARBOUR teaches Canadian Literature, Creative Writing, and modern poetry in the English Department, University of Alberta. His books include Story for a Saskatchewan Night (1989) and Michael Ondaatje (1993). With Stephen Scobie, in the Sound Poetry duo, Re: Sounding, he has performed in Europe, New Zealand and Australia, and the United States.

VERONICA BRADY is an honorary Senior Research Fellow in the department of English, University of Western Australia, where she taught for many years before her retirement. She has published widely on Australian literature, culture and belief; her latest book is a biography of Judith Wright, South of My Days.

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IMTIAZ DHARKER is a poet, visual artist and award-winning filmmaker who lives in Mumbai, India. Her published collections of poetry include Purdah (OUP, 1989), and Postcards from God (Viking-Penguin, 1994, and Bloodaxe, 1997).

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP was born in Buguma, a town of the Kalabari people, in Rivers State, Nigeria, in 1958. She trained at California College of Arts and the Royal College of Art, London. She has recently exhibited in Tokyo snd the Natural History Museum in New York.

ROBERT GRAY’s Selected Poems has been through six expanded and revised editions. He has won numerous awards and received many fellowships from the Australia Council. His volume Lineations was recently published in the UK by Arc.
DENNIS HASKELL is a poet and critic, and co-editor of *Westerly*. His most recent book is *The Ghost Names Sing* (Fremantle Arts Centre Press).


BRIAN HENRY recently completed a year in Australia on a Fulbright grant. His poems have appeared in numerous magazines, such as *American Poetry Review, Salt, Overland, New American Writing, Metre* and *Harvard Review*. He is a co-editor of *Verse*.

FRIEDA HUGHES is an artist who has published five children's books. Her first book of poetry *Wooroloo* is to be published in Britain by Bloodaxe, in the US by Harper Collins, and in Australia by Fremantle Arts Centre Press in 1999.

MICHAEL HULSE is an award winning poet whose work includes *Eating Strawberries in the Necropolis* (Harvill, 1991). His many translations from German include Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Jakob Wassermann's *Caspar Hauser*, and recently, W.E. Sebald's *The Rings Of Saturn*.

TIM KENDALL is the author of *Paul Muldoon* (Seren), and editor of the literary journal *Thumbscrew*. An Eric Gregory Award winner, his poetry has been collected as part of the volume *Singularities*. His study of Sylvia Plath's poetry is due from Faber in 1999.


ANTHONY LAWRENCE has published six books of poetry. He is currently completing his first novel and a new book of poems. He lives in Tasmania.


WILLIAM LOGAN has published four books of poetry, most recently *Vain Empires* (US: Penguin; UK: Peterloo). *The Night Battle* is forthcoming this year. A new book of his criticism, *Reputations of the Tongue*, will be published in the fall in the US. He was recently called "the most hated man in American poetry" in the *Hudson Review*.


read with musical accompaniment (Spoken Engine Company, 1995). Editor of *Hambone* and coeditor of the anthology *Moment's Notice: Jazz in Poetry and Prose* (Coffee House Press, 1993), author of *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturalities, and Experimental Writing* (Cambridge University Press, 1993). He is Professor of Literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

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HONOR MOORE lives and writes in Connecticut. Her books are *Memoir* (poems) and *The White Blackbird: A Life of the Painter Margarett Sargent by Her Granddaughter* (Penguin 1997).

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LES MURRAY was born in 1938 and grew up at Bunyah, New South Wales, where he now lives. Carcanet recently published his *Collected Poems* and verse novel *Freddy Neptune*. He is the recipient of many prizes and honours.


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PETER PORTER arrived in London from Queensland in 1951. In recent years he has regularly returned to Australia. He has just published a two volume *Collected Poems* (OUP, 1999).

HILDA RAZ's most recent books are *Divine Honors*, published in the Wesleyan Poetry Series, (University Press of New England, 1997) and *Cancer through the Eyes of Ten Women* (Pandora/HarperCollins). She is the editor of the literary

THOMAS REITER has travelled widely in the Caribbean, and has given poetry readings at the University of the Virgin Islands, St. Croix; the Catholic University of Puerto Rico; and the University of the West Indies, Jamaica. He holds the Wayne D. McMurray Endowed Chair in the Humanities at Monmouth University in New Jersey. He has a new poetry collection, entitled *Pearly Everlasting*, forthcoming from Louisiana State University Press.

GIG RYAN lives in Melbourne where she is poetry editor for *The Age*. Her most recent book is *Pure and Applied* (Paperbark, 1998).

TRACY RYAN is an Australian poet and novelist now living in England. Her most recent work is *Slant* (REMPress, 1997), and a new collection of poetry, *The Willing Eye*, will be published in 1999 by Bloodaxe in Britain and by Fremantle Arts Centre Press in Australia. She was Judith E. Wilson Junior Visiting Fellow at Robinson College, Cambridge in 1998.

MARY JO SALTER’s fourth book of poems, *A Kiss In Space*, will be published by Knopf in April 1999. She is a co-editor of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*.

JO SHAPCOTT’s first collection, *Electroplating the Baby*, published in 1988 by Bloodaxe Books, was awarded a Commonwealth Prize. Her second volume of poems, *Phrase Book*, published by OUP in 1992, was a Poetry Book Society Choice. Her recent book, *My Life Asleep*, was short-listed for the TS Eliot prize. She is the first person to have won the National Poetry Competition twice – it was awarded for the second time in 1991 for the widely acclaimed poem, ‘Phrase Book’.

R.T. SMITH’s books include *Split the Lark* (Salmon, 1999), *Trespasser* (LSU, 1996) and *The Cardinal Heart* (Livingston, 1996). *Messenger* is to be published in 1999 by LSU. He is the editor of *Shenandoah* and lives in Rockbridge County, Virginia.

PAULINE STAINER has published four collections with Bloodaxe. *The Honeycomb*, *Sighting the Slave-Ship*, and *The Ice-Pilot Speaks* were all Poetry Book Society Recommendations. Her last collection, *The Wound-dresser’s Dream*, was shortlisted for the Whitbread Prize. She lives on Rousay, one of the smaller Orkney Islands.


DAVID WHEATLEY was awarded the Rooney Prize for literature for his first collection of poetry, *Thirst* (Gallery Press, 1997). He is an editor of *Metre* and has also edited *Stream and Gliding Sun: A Wicklow Anthology*. 
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