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Amaze your friends!

In 1937 the British, or should I say Transatlantic artist, novelist and poet Wyndham Lewis (born reputedly on an ocean liner) wrote in a memoir 'by the end of this century the movement to which, historically, I belong will be as remote as predynastic Egyptian statuary'. He was referring to the first generation of Anglo-American modernists; a generation that for him seemed exclusively male (Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, himself) but which for us would include writers like Mina Loy, Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein. He added:

> We are the first men of a future that has not materialised. We belong to a 'great age' that has not 'come off'. We moved too quickly for the world... And, more and more exhausted by War, Slump and Revolution, the world has fallen back. Its ambition has withered: it has declined into a listless compromise - half 'modern', half 'Cavalcade'. (note 1)

Without wishing to sound overly pessimistic, Lewis's caveats have a familiar ring in the early twenty-first century. I was lucky enough to grow up in a time of great hope in which anything seemed possible. The question on the lips of my friends and myself back in the late 1960s was 'Why not?' We were coming to maturity in what may now be seen as a fracture-point between eras rather than an indicator of future directions. Of course we have moved ahead technologically and this in itself has opened up possibilities. Yet the suspicion of new ideological frameworks has not abated, and in an age of 'wedge' politics it is unlikely that the openness that many sought in earlier years will ever come to be. It becomes harder even to cast oneself back into that period of thirty to forty years ago, but if I carry with me today any sense of what those moments meant it is the end of crude determinisms, the terminal binds of class and education, 'aspirational' perhaps in our current political jargon, but an aspiration to create something new rather than simply climb up another rung of the figurative ladder. I wouldn't, at the same time, wish to present a totally bleak picture of current practises. There are writers now who work in spaces that are not likely to be mentioned in the popular media. I doubt though that they are as blessed with the sense of possibility that I was fortunate enough to grow up with.

I'll begin this discussion of my work with a genealogical digression. My father's family were perhaps of Scottish, perhaps of Irish descent. The family line is untraceable. My grandfather, Michael, was born of no known male parent between two sets of step-siblings. At the age of four, his name, together with that of his older brothers was changed unaccountably from Duncan (the father of the first two) to Duggan (and the father of his younger siblings had a different name again). The family lived around Ensay in East Gippsland, Victoria, and worked as farm labourers. My father, Jim, was one of ten children and had become, before the war, a motor mechanic. His oldest brother George died in France in 1918 and another, Jack, was imprisoned in Changi in the Second World War. An older sister, Myra, was a schoolteacher who played piano for the silent movies. My mother's

family were of comfortably bourgeois origin. The Barrows were English Jews who ran a firm in Preston, Melbourne that manufactured printers' ink for the newspapers. This, I've often thought, is the only family engagement with writing. Isaac Barrow had made my grandmother, Pamelia Hughes, pregnant, resulting in a forced marriage. Later, after three more children and some failed business ventures in Melbourne and in Wellington, New Zealand, Isaac had a breakdown of some sort and was placed in Mont Park Asylum. Eight years later, in 1938, he died as the result of an early use of insulin therapy. My grandmother harboured through the rest of her life a mild though disturbing (and, at the time, unexplained) anti-Semitism. She had kept the family afloat running guest houses in the South Melbourne area, and my mother, the third child and the oldest daughter, took on most of the additional responsibility. Pamelia (for that was her name too) met Jim Duggan when he became a tenant in the guest house at 195 Beaconsfield Parade.

I was born on the 30th May 1949. I was an only child and didn't know any other children until I was about five years old when my parents bought a house out in Clayton. The outer suburb was at that stage mostly market gardens and scrub with large open drains and rickety footbridges. I remember very little about school, either primary (Clayton South) or secondary (Huntingdale High) though I know I didn't enjoy either greatly. A poem I wrote aged eleven shows where my interests lay at the time (the poet John Forbes liked a couple of the lines when I showed it to him many years later). In it the moon has

> ...seen the ancient days for sure,
> The era of the mammoth and dinosaur,
> It's seen the battles of ancient years,
> It's seen superstition and people's fears,
> And yet it's seen the recent battles,
> Bazookas roar, machine guns rattle,
> Aircraft dive and tanks attack,
> The steady firing of ack-ack...

I had absorbed poetry, without reflecting too much about it, from my mother who had read me pieces from *Palgrave's Golden Treasury* before I could even talk. Poems for her were to be read for pleasure and I don't think for a moment that she would have wished her own enjoyment to suggest more than this. When I began to show an interest in actively pursuing painting or writing in my last years of high school I can remember my mother getting upset about something I'd said and saying to me in a fearful tone: 'Don't lead the artist's life!' I'd never had any other adverse pressures from my parents and think now that knowing her own family history (a secret kept from me at that stage) and believing the popular romantic notions about art and madness she was afraid of what might eventuate.

I had to repeat fifth year of high school because I had an aneurism, which left me totally unconscious for two weeks. I was very lucky to survive since it happened when I was going to my school locker. A few minutes later I would have been on my bicycle riding home. I still might not have survived but for the efforts of a teacher (who would later, as chaperone to the under-14 football team, be 'outed' as a paedophile). I spent a couple of months at the Alfred Hospital. This was in late 1965, about a year before I started, self-consciously, to write poems. I wouldn't want to make any rash conclusions about this. Possibly this new beginning might have been due simply to the fact that I had to be less physically active for a year. I wasn't allowed to play sport (though this delighted me because I had always hated school sport). Then again it may have something to do with the loss of a great deal of my memory: writing is an anamnesic process.

I began writing 'seriously' midway through 1966 when I was seventeen. I hadn't been particularly interested in poetry before then and even as I was starting to write poems I was thinking of becoming a painter, a musician, or a novelist. I tried to write a novel but it concluded after only fifteen pages (I can see now that my problem may have been a lack of interest in the fictional devices through which

character creates the story. Poems can make use of narrative without necessarily bothering about psychology and plot). The poems I started writing were either about the gloom of modern life or were addressed to particular girls (who, of course, would never see the poems). None of these things were precocious, except perhaps a satire I wrote and later mentioned in my mock autobiographical poem 'Adventures in Paradise'. This satire was about the Prime Minister Harold Holt's wife Dame Zara and it *did* appear in print in the school magazine *Orbit* (and how 1960s is that title?) the week after Holt disappeared at sea. Huntingdale's headmaster was less than impressed. He was the first of many people I have wrong-footed in my erratic career.

Though my writing was unremarkable I persisted, jumping from style to style and trying to imitate as many different poets as possible. I'd try to write like Keats, like T.S. Eliot, like Louis MacNeice, like the Surrealists. Here's a poem called 'Nonsensonnet' written early in 1968:

> Out of the womb the child assuredly stepped,
> And on the plain the city faced his gaze;
> The landscape seemed to be a dream he'd slept,
> And, as he faced proliferated maze
> On maze of golden calves, he thought, how like
> The people in his dream who grew a land
> The image of themselves were these. The sprawl,
> The sameness, shaped the hedges, squared the trees,
> And formed each mind inside a mould. No breeze,
> No winds of change would dare unfold the fold
> Which use had worn; no warmth replace the cold.
> And so, stillborn, the nameless child had told
> His mother: 'Pardon me for living, Miss.
> For you I'll die, I want no part in this.'

By the time I wrote this piece I had discovered, in the local library, the 1960s reprint of the hoax poet Ern Malley's book *The Darkening Ecliptic*. I like to think of this experience not as an excuse to write nonsense but as a release from the usual sources of adolescent writing: the self and its traumas. In a culture where poets and poetry seemed hopelessly distant it was strangely liberating to come across a poet who had never even existed. I mean by this that if it was possible for somebody to invent a poet then it seemed possible to *invent yourself* as a poet. Malley's example meant that instead of worrying about 'the soul' you could put things you may not have even written together and that act of assembly would be poetry.

My beginnings as a writer were not entirely radical. I taught myself to write by copying styles and following formal requisites like syllable-counting, metre, stanza arrangements etcetera. These are all things that I have made use of whenever necessary (in the writing of satire for example), but for the most part form has become for me something that applies to each individual poem rather than to poetry as a whole. To fall back on 'traditional' forms may be in some cases a sign of laziness just as it may be in others the reflection of 'necessity'.

I had from an early age listened carefully to music. I can still hum a piece of Haydn that I was attracted to around the time I was still being toilet trained. Pop music impinged early too; I vaguely remember the pre-Elvis period, Johnny Ray and mellow doo-wop vocal groups. The King himself, I'm afraid, didn't make much of an impression, I was just a bit too young (and subsequently too old) to pick up on him, though I did enthuse about the Everly Brothers, whose harmonies prepared me for the Beatles. The turn of the 1960s was a goldmine for groups and individuals like the Marcels, Gary 'US' Bonds, Del Shannon and so many more. The first record I bought was a surfing instrumental, 'Pipeline' by the Chantays

(though I came to love its R & B flipside 'Move It' a lot more). The Beatles right from the start were mandatory. They made it easy for my parents to choose birthday and Christmas presents for a few years. Though I continue to listen to new music 1965 and 1966 are engraved in my memory as the greatest years of pop, when Motown, Atlantic soul, Phil Spector, the beat groups, the Byrds and 'folk rock' and a nascent psychedelia coexisted happily in the Top 40 charts.

With the Beatles. The author, 1964

I had never identified as a 'rocker' or even a surfie (though I loved surf music). I tried as far as school regulations would permit to grow a Beatle fringe. But the first style I felt at home with was Mod. When I started at Monash University in 1968 my preferred rig was a pair of tapered stretch black and white houndstooth trousers and a black roll-neck jumper. It would take me two or three years to become the sloppy dresser that I am now. At Monash I studied mainly English and Philosophy though I dropped out of Phil. after two and a half years, bored beyond belief by the English empiricists. Over those years I was a (well-dressed) fellow traveller then, briefly, a member of the Monash Labor Club. I left eventually, disillusioned with the Club's mode of operation ('procedural motions' and debaters' club tactics). Anyway, by 1971, my last year at Monash, the Club's activities had been deflected from world socialism towards purely campus issues.

Prior to arriving at Monash I'd had no personal contact with other poets. Poetry was something that happened in books mostly written by dead people. One of my high school teachers was a poetry enthusiast but for him the line had ended with Dylan Thomas. My first English tutor at Monash was Patrick McCaughey the art critic and subsequent gallery director. He told me that I wrote as though the twentieth century had never existed and loaned me his copy of William Carlos Williams' *Collected Early Poems*.

At Monash I met my first 'live' poets: John Scott and Alan Wearne. Alan organised the Literature Club's readings over 1968 and when he shifted to Latrobe University in 1969 I took on the task. John Scott was meanwhile studying part time and in 1970 when I became a part-timer myself the club folded due to lack of interest. Apart from these two friends the Club (and my social scene at Monash) included other poets, like Rob Smyth (who edited the first issue of *Mirabeau Goat Poems*, our little magazine) as well as critics Colin McDowell and Peter Craven. We used to get a guest reader for our monthly readings - usually someone who

had achieved some kind of prominence or respectability as a writer - but the guests were really only there to attract a slightly larger audience. Some of the readings were riotous and, unfortunately for the guests, unless they impressed us they didn't get much of a go.

With this group of people I learned that poetry was as important as any other activity and that criticism and experiment were vital to the writing. I discovered poets whose work and opinions I could respect and learn from. At our readings 'anything went'. We weren't under the illusion that everything would last, but it seemed clear that if you were to narrow things down too much you'd miss out on possibilities. John Scott and I were particularly interested in other art forms - the work of Kurt Schwitters, Max Ernst, and John Heartfield; performance art; and the artistic avant-gardes generally over the period 1905-1935. The idea of collage was very much in the air. John Scott constructed a three-dimensional work, 'The Sonnet Cube', which made use of photographic images as well as poetry. He also spent a long time on a piece called 'Rudolph and Miranda', part film script, part poem. Our interests weren't exclusively 'modernist' however. Alan Wearne read Browning and various nineteenth century dramatic poets; John was interested in the development of the sonnet; and I read a lot of sixteenth century poetry, particularly liking the work of Thomas Wyatt and Walter Raleigh. Music - classical, rock and jazz - was very much a part of our world where distinctions between 'high' and 'popular' culture were of no great importance. We would listen to Alban Berg's violin concerto, a new album by the Beach Boys, and then some Miles Davis (especially *Kind of Blue* and *In a Silent Way*).

I frequently visited La Mama theatre in Carlton because an old school friend was in Tribe, an 'underground' performance group whose work was entirely improvised. I'd go, even though I was terrified of being drawn into one of their audience-involving events (La Mama was such a tiny space there was no 'back row' to hide in). I saw more conventional dramatic work in this space and at the Pram Factory too. Jack Hibberd's plays have stayed in my mind for their strangeness and intensity though I found the early work of Alex Buzo and David Williamson unexciting. I didn't have much contact with the La Mama poets however. In the late 1960s this little theatre was Melbourne's other centre of experimental writing (writing at a far ideological remove from the mainstream conservative work produced at the adjacent University of Melbourne). At Monash our writing was on the whole denser and assembled from different, perhaps more diverse, sources than the work of most of the La Mama 'underground' poets and on the one occasion when we went in there for an open reading our work was not well received (later, in the seventies I would become friends with La Mama regulars like Kris Hemensley, who would print my work in his little magazine *The Ear in a Wheatfield*, and with Robert Kenny who would publish my first book).

The local poetry world was largely a disappointment ('Ern Malley' really stood out against the Nullarbor of Australian Verse). Instead post-war American poetry and some of the British small-press poets gave us what we needed (I discovered Donald Allen's anthology *The New American Poetry* in my local library in early 1969). I was later to be criticised, along with other writers, for being too influenced by American writing, though it still seems strange that the critics failed generally to note, despite the obvious lack of Australian 'influences' just how culturally specific our poems were. By 1970 we began to feel less like the inhabitants of an isolated lunar module. *Poetry Magazine* (the journal of the Poetry Society, later known as *New Poetry*) made it apparent that like minds were operating in Sydney. That year, 'Relation', a collage poem by John Scott, won the Poetry Society's annual award.

John travelled north for the presentation. It was the last year that there was any official ceremony and also the last year the event was reported in a newspaper. Unfortunately for John, the journalist and editors set out to make him appear as effete as possible. His terry-towel dressing gown was described as 'gold chenille' while he himself the article said 'gestured languidly towards the lace curtains' (the

journalist had woken him up). While in Sydney John met critic Carl Harrison-Ford, and poets Bob Adamson and John Tranter and returned with tales of the vibrant scene. We had to at least visit this hotbed of modernism. Within weeks I went up to Sydney where I spent New Year of 1970-1971. Through my Tribe theatre connection, I was given the address of Diana Fuller, an ex-member of the troupe, and I stayed at her place in Barcom Avenue, Darlinghurst for a whole month (remember this was the hippy era and 'can I crash at your place' was not an out-of-the-question question). Living there was another poet: Pam Brown with whom I've remained in close contact. I met Carl, Bob and John Tranter, and later in the month when John [Scott] and Alan [Wearne] visited briefly, we went to see the much-celebrated Michael Dransfield in his loft in Brown Lane, Paddington. Dransfield showed us some new poems that had the times of writing on them - 10.15 a.m., 10.30 a.m., 11.05 a.m. and so on, at least ten or so per day). He played an album by his friend Pip Proud which I thought was so bad that I had to go to the toilet so the chain-flush would camouflage my laughter. Proud lived downstairs from Dransfield and the pair were living with two sisters. At one point, Dransfield said 'I'm sending a manuscript to Sun Books man... I'm gonna call it *Drug Poems*. I think they'll take it'. They did. At the time none of us liked Dransfield's work, but I think it was largely a resentment that he had been 'taken up' by the established poets. This was not quite jealousy on our part. The only writers we wanted acclaim from were those whose work we respected.

While in residence at Barcom Avenue I wrote a poem called 'Crossroads' that consisted of very loose sections utilising devices like the *I Ching* and tarot readings (more for their aleatory usefulness than any particularly religious or philosophical reasons). The poem also, significantly, embraced conceptualism:

> our private life isolate
> or juxtaposed as letters in a crossword
> fosters no false sense,
> alliterative or assonant,
> yet violence of
> free verse untidy enjambment
> of dead rooftops,
> domes of bright crockery
> to potter in, faltering,
> each word a visitation,
> a species of love aimless &
> inconclusive, fatal to temper with
> string or wood.
> Rather
> let lie as seed in window-box
> love as impermanence,
> a coupling of morpheme,
> the search itself.

After this excitement, going back to Melbourne was a let down. Then, over March and April of 1971, I wrote what was to become the title poem of my first book: 'East'. It brought together a variety of influences: the Ern Malley poems, Charles Olson (the American 'projectivist' who had written a poem called 'West') and the elements of collage as practised at Monash - as well as reflecting my concern with Gippsland. The way that I manipulated the dated sections, ordering them a-chronologically, is probably due to reading William Faulkner's novels. Here's the last section:

> . The new month 7 a.m., before vilification
> a street of houses, its own strange beauty
> holds no alien note the given grid
> accepted, viable
> MELB: Fine. Sunny Periods. Max 75.
> MASSIVE HEARING GIVES VERDICT ON MASSACRE

landscape of words, jerrybuilt ugliness
of place, name discarded as a key
to spurious meaning, squalor of testimony.
M.F. Duggan d. 1962.
a life or symbol death or caesura?
Compare/contrast selected passages
with special reference to poetic qualities
COMMANDOS THRUST DEEP INTO LAOS.

In late May of 1971 I went to the University Arts Festival in Canberra (this was the precursor of the 1973 Nimbin Festival - the defining moment of Australian hippiedom). Here I met a further group of people from Sydney who were reading together: Terry Larsen, Andrew Huntley and Martin Johnston. The three of them read well in totally different but complementary styles. I can remember in particular one late night in the Union bar when Terry was standing up on the table doing jigs and singing Irish drinking songs. Nobody I'd known had been quite so extroverted and this (combined with Andrew's wit and Martin's erudition) heightened the lure of Sydney.

Illicit substance. Petersham, 1972. L to R : Michael Darley, Terry Larsen, the author

I finished my third year of English honours at Monash and decided against a final year, not knowing who or what I wanted to write a thesis about (one possibility had been the prose of Samuel Beckett). I spent a couple of weeks picking strawberries on a friend's farm in the Dandenongs and working on a subsequently abandoned poem called 'Cockatoo Draft'. Then, in late February 1972, I moved to Sydney, discovering shortly after my arrival that 'East' had won the 1971 Poetry Society's award (Terry Sturm and Martin Johnston were the judges). A week later I joined Andrew, Martin and Terry Larsen at a Sydney University Orientation Week poetry reading. Here I met John Forbes. I don't remember what we spoke about at the time but when I visited him later it was with some trepidation since his reputation was even then formidable and he had reputedly called Martin a 'hopeless romantic'.

I stayed with Pam Brown in Crown Street, Surry Hills, before moving out to Petersham where Terry Larsen had a spare room. After a few months of

unemployment I found a job at the City of Sydney Public Library and more or less supported myself with intermittent library work and unemployment benefits for the next few years. In 1974 John Forbes and I had produced the first issue of *Surfers' Paradise*, the magazine he would continue to edit intermittently. Sydney lived up to its promise and I met other writers with whom I'd find common ground. Around 1976 I met Ken Bolton whose little magazine *Magic Sam* was the first publication I really felt 'at home' in. Melbourne remained a source of energy though it had become a place to visit rather than live in.

In one of my high school fantasies I had mapped out a life for myself as a fiction writer. I would write eight novels, each set in a different country. Not only did I have titles for all of these books, I had also imagined the geographical settings of the work and even the number of pages each novel would run to. I wouldn't ever write these novels (for the reason I have already suggested) and, indeed, I didn't travel abroad for another twenty years. But I did create an archive of mostly unusable titles as well as a few ideas for cover designs. At Monash University I came across an appealing image in an American photography journal. It was a nineteenth-century print depicting a bearded musician seated on a tasselled chair simultaneously playing a guitar and an upright elongated tuba (with foot pedals to control its valves). I liked to imagine that this image would appear on the cover of my first book of poems if and when such a thing should ever appear. Soon enough I had a title for my planned book that would work well with this cover illustration: 'Amaze Your Friends', a phrase taken from remembered advertisements in comic books.

Time and circumstance intervened. Geography, history, politics and poetics entered my poems giving them a direction I hadn't anticipated and rendering the hoarded title inappropriate for my now more serious endeavours. As it turned out, my first book, *East* (1976), despite its mundane title, had a strange enough cover image, if a much more local and personal one. It was a photograph from the early 1920s showing my father with another boy, both in Shakespearian costume, standing before a hillside in an East Gippsland paddock (I have used this image again for the cover of my new Selected Poems published in Britain entitled *Compared to What*).

I have never considered myself a 'natural' poet. My earliest work, unlike that of my friends, showed no sign whatever of any potential. I just kept working at it as I worked at other forms of writing. For some people the diversity of my concerns indicated a dilettantish nature (as though I had become the man with the tuba and guitar). But I have never wished to be a narrow specialist and have constantly subscribed to a holistic view where poetry, politics and the atmosphere aren't so easy to separate. Although in practice I distinguish one form from another, in process it is all 'writing'; all of it requires a sense of shape together with whatever solidity of argument that is necessary.

When *Meanjin* published 'Living Poetry', a series of extracts from my journals, some of my friends were taken aback. John Forbes was surprised at the tone of the writing: it seemed to come from a much more earnest person than the one he thought he knew. I was, after all, from Melbourne, the capital of high seriousness (!), even though I had taken aboard (and been taken aboard by) the less than programmatic Sydney poetry scene. Unlike John I had embraced many of the '-isms' (modernism, imagism, vorticism, objectivism, projectivism). This was probably a provincial failing on my part, embracing 'isms' as 'off-the-shelf' aesthetic programs. Frank O'Hara, the subject of John's unfinished university thesis, had sent anthologist Donald Allen a parodic manifesto entitled 'personism' which was really a dig at any such program. 'If you're going to buy a pair of pants,' O'Hara said, 'you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go

to bed with you'. I can hardly argue that either John or myself was a spectacularly successful Casanova although, as some of my poems show, I took aboard O'Hara and other non-programmatic poets. I even had second thoughts about Ezra Pound, whose *dicta* and reading lists I had grown up with, though it was the Poundian world picture as a place to begin from rather than his individual poems that became problematic.

As I've suggested my first few years as a poet coincided with a now largely invisible radical culture. What has survived of 'hippy' philosophy is the aspect of personal gratification, the groundings of what pop sociologists describe as the 'me generation', but the late 1960s and (in Australia) the early 1970s were also years when 'everything seemed possible'. For political radicals of all persuasions it was a time when you could imagine a total societal change. For Gays it was an age of celebration before the onset of AIDS. For feminists it was the age before the 'glass ceiling' became apparent. For me it seemed as though I was living through a period of unprecedented change and even when local (and world) politics began its long swing to the right I felt that this was only an aberration and that openness and possibility would eventually be restored. From my first book on I wrote with a sense of that possibility. The open forms of my second book *Under the Weather* (1978) come from this, as does the use of collage essayed again in a strange poem called 'Crawling from the Wreckage' which appears in my fourth book *The Great Divide* (1985) and reaching its apogee in a book-length history poem *The Ash Range* (1987). This book, picked up much to my surprise by a big publisher, meant that for the first time I was interviewed and 'written up' extensively. It all seemed unreal although a photograph taken by John Tranter around 1982 hints as much.

Fame. The author, c.1982. Photo: John Tranter

I began this paper with family details. Yet I don't see anything particularly special about my own case; family history for many people turns out to be both more and less than the establishment of a clear line of descent. In the words of the Fascist ideologues I might well be considered a 'rootless cosmopolitan'. And I would like to embrace this state of existence even if much of my work addresses notions of place and history since I remain suspicious of national and even statewide impulses. The current craze for genealogy (and one has only to visit a library to become aware of its extent) is perhaps a misplaced desire for self-importance in an age which threatens to reduce us all to ciphers. At the same time government camouflages its dismantling of local initiative with a mythical national (or state) agenda. The documented resurgence of Anzac Day has all the hallmarks of an 'invented tradition'. The 'history wars' of the last few years have proceeded from these concerns.

Even before I left high-school I had developed a mistrust of literature that paraded its Australianness. Do we really have to enact who we are? Well, that's what 'identity' is: a performance. People (some people) feel a deep need for it. The present is always too messy for them, too alive with its popular culture, and not 'ridgy-didge' enough for many of the conservative poets. They feel instead that events like the Battle of the Somme can provide endless resources for poetry and that the present, unless anchored to the past through myth is disposable. I partially addressed this failing in a section of my documentary poem *The Ash Range*:

> There are some who would not
> consider the present as history
> - it is their means of self-defence -
> : the description of the inhabitants of a bar
> on the top of Mt Hotham
> on a particularly cloudy day
> in November 1984, for example.
>
> The road was visible for only 10 metres ahead
> as far down as the hut on Racecourse Plain,
> and at Omeo, the inhabitants of the Hilltop Hotel
> were more concerned with the individual
> who had to be removed from there
> because nobody else would front the bar
> while he was around.
>
> Taking the back road past the hospital
> then turning off the highway
> to swerve down from Tongio Gap
> - the prevalence of rabbits
> greater than on any other part of the route -
> I would reflect on these peculiarities;
> the sham of 'oral history'.

What I mean by all this is that the past is important but it needn't be something that will *always* overshadow what we do now. The past also changes through its relation with the present.

My second book *Under the Weather* had been largely savaged by the critics for its perceived connections to what was already becoming a 'dated' philosophy: it was viewed by many as a last gasp of counter-cultural incoherence. Almost as a result of this for the next decade I produced a good deal of satirical work, especially the poems collected in *Adventures in Paradise* (1982) and *The Epigrams of Martial* (1989). These poems were exercises in a form that is seen to be of its very nature conservative. The Martial translations had been urged on me by Michael Heyward who was then teaching Latin at Melbourne University. He had noticed a satirical note in my earlier work and figured that my tone would fit the work of Martial.

Not having Latin myself I worked from Edwardian prose translations in the Loeb Classical Library edition. I detected that Martial was, like myself a 'provincial', writing from the edge of an empire and that the provincial voice tends to be more vicious than those from the 'centre'. Satire of its nature needs to be immediate so I had to find modern and local equivalents of Martial's targets. They proved thick on the ground. A brief example should suffice:

> Borrowing a poet's name, O'Connor
> you think yourself a poet;
> a set of dentures
> might call itself a smile.

In embracing satire I was essentially 'fighting back' by showing that I could also use 'traditional' poetic forms if I wished to do so. The poems attempted to place on record the state of poetry during these years when the so-called Canberra Poets under the guiding spirit of Les Murray were trying to turn the clock back. One of my satires, 'Peasant Mandarin' has an interesting history.

> The pasture's dry
> and the mare's near foaling;
> no worries! Our Les
> keeps the subsidy rolling.
>
> The Bunyah lad's wrinkled,
> confessed, come clean,
> whose baby eyes twinkled
> like an M-16;
>
> the early target practice,
> the quick translations
> from Weatherboard Cathedral
> to United Nations
>
> furthered through
> editorship and prayer
> falling from lips
> in the Chatswood air:
>
> God bless Doug Anthony,
> the Pope, St Peter,
> the Liberal Party,
> the illusion of metre
>
> in English verse written
> as she is spoke
> by the absolutely
> ordinary bloke.
>
> To all things a season,
> to harvest, to plant,
> to jet Midwest
> on a Guggenheim grant,
>
> to shun international
> modernist glam
> in Merthyr Tydfil
> and Amsterdam.
>
> Nothing really changes:
> the Holy Ghost

supports dairy farmers
on the central coast,

Thomas W. Shapcott's
the new Mackaness,
Red Movie's author's
the new red menace.....

The pastures dry up
and the crows get the sheep;
in the suburbs, a poet
turns in his sleep. (note 2)

After its initial publication in *Adventures in Paradise* this poem was selected by Geoffrey Lehmann for an anthology of Australian light verse called *The Flight of the Emu*. But there was an unaccountable delay in publication. Eventually the book appeared with my poem in it but I was not to know until years later that the entire anthology was almost dropped from Angus & Robertson's publication list because its subject Les Murray had objected to my poem.

Over the next few years I published several more books including *Blue Notes* (1990), *The Home Paddock* (1991), *Memorials*, and a *New and Selected Poems* (both 1996). Occasionally a poem would try to meld the satirical and the more formally and conceptually adventurous kinds of writing. But between 1994 and 2000 I stopped writing poems altogether. My sense of possibility seemed to run aground perhaps for the paradoxical reasons suggested by the following text:

> I was also attempting a philosophical career, and I have the most vivid recollection of seeing my first pop work - it was in the spring of 1962... I stopped one day at the American Center [in Paris]...and I saw Roy Lichtenstein's 'The Kiss'...in *Art News*... And I must say I was stunned. I knew that it was an astonishing and an inevitable moment, and in my own mind I understood immediately that if it were possible to paint something like this...then everything was possible. And though it did not occur to me, if everything was possible, there really was no specific future; if everything was possible, nothing was necessary or inevitable including my own vision of an artistic future. For me, that meant that it was all right, as an artist, to do whatever one wanted. It also meant that I lost interest in doing art and pretty much stopped. (Danto 1997: 122-23)

I came across this passage written by the American art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto in November 1997 by which time I had not written a poem for three years. I copied the passage down because it seemed to explain to me why I had stopped writing. It also indicated that I might not ever resume the practice since its conclusion seemed to block out any such possibility. Perhaps the 'disappearance of rules' caused me (though I had never paid a great deal of attention to formal requisites) to doubt the ontological status of poetry in whatever new world was mapping itself out. It turned out that things weren't quite so clear-cut. Danto, after all, had continued as an art critic, if not a painter (I think here of my own line from an art review written fifteen years ago: 'I don't believe that artists are the "last dinosaurs of the enlightenment", but if this were the case I'd have no doubt that art critics would go on forever, like palaeontologists'). And I continued to believe that things should be possible and that the past should be a suggestive field from which we could rescue poetics rather than a template for endless replication.

The break from poetry happened coincidentally with my return to university to work towards a doctorate (in Fine Arts). This 'career move' reflected the desire to take up a profession, to get the mythical 'real job' that I had avoided for so long. As it turned out, my decision coincided with the slow attrition of arts and humanities departments. I don't know that there was a direct connection between stopping writing and taking on the doctorate, though it has been suggested that my thesis (*Ghost Nation: Imagined Space and Australian Visual Culture 1901-1939*) was a kind of closet poem. What I can say is that ceasing to 'write' wasn't a happy experience.

I had often previously had shorter periods (up to eight or nine months) of inactivity and the idea of not writing is always an uncomfortable one but this break seemed as though it would be permanent. Yet it was not an example of 'writer's block'. There were times over those six years that I could very easily have recommenced writing poems. I did make one 'false start' in 1999 when I actually sent a piece I had written to friends, though I soon realised I should probably not have written it. I stopped myself from writing sensing that what I might produce would in itself exacerbate the problem. So why *did* the break happen?

With all of these partial explanations I'm still not entirely sure, though almost certainly philosophy played a part in it. Up until the early nineties I had operated out of a sense that poetry was necessary and that it had a clear place in the world of things and ideas. I had been cushioned for many years by Ezra Pound's sense of the importance of this kind of writing. Poetry was both the generator and the guarantor of language. 'When the line goes limp, so does the social structure' ran Pound's phallocentric gloss. Poetry was in other words integral and central, even if no-one except some other poets seemed to think so. Why would anyone at the linguistic control panel need 'real work' in the so-called 'real world'?

A gradual erosion of this ideal took some time to have its effect. It was apparent enough that poetry had no *immediate* effect upon the way the world operated. Yet while I had always felt uncomfortable with the 'profession' of poetry (to the extent that being asked what I do has always sent me into a fluster) I nonetheless had an absolute sense of its importance. Gradually this was worn away and poetry now seemed to be a peripheral endeavor, ranking alongside coin collecting and train spotting; certainly not something one could rightly expect any kind of income from (remember this was an ideal, not a reality).

To begin writing again, I had to do it with this knowledge. I had possibly over-reacted in my reassessment of poetry's importance but it was certainly not possible to give it back the impossibly high status which I had once granted it. What was clear was that poetry was important for *me* - a larger part of my being than I had in fact realised. Not writing had given me a 'hollowed out' feeling; a sense that I really was just a peg that could be slotted anywhere. Together with this knowledge it was necessary to take into account the world in which the activity of poetry took place. When I began to write again in late 2000 I did so with the sense that the poems needed to make a place for *themselves* in the world rather than assume they had any right to exist. I had gradually come to this conclusion: that a poem has to make its own world, a place in which it isn't an anomaly...or words to that effect. Being in a new place, Brisbane, certainly helped. I was never the kind of writer who worked best when confined to one particular environment: this is where my 'rootless cosmopolitanism' is an advantage, enabling me to adapt and to compare environments. I started tentatively, essaying a couple of short poems about the view from my window to get my hand in. The long piece 'Louvres' was the next thing I wrote:

> Boredom as self-recognition (Schopenhauer). As a kind of
> authenticity in an age of appropriation. When déjà vu
> incorporates déjà vu. You have to name those boats on the river;
> find words to describe the pattern of water surfaces, the variation
> of clouds, shoppers moving according to plan down the Mall. On

a tape I can hear my own voice, aged five, reciting segments from
a school play. But I am now a different organism: not 'the author'
of those books, a cursor moving slowly down a page.

Painted-over windows. What history there
amid the dust from a site up the road;
the solid structure of early twentieth-century
factories, their sawtooths and rusted ventilators,
the very idea of purpose building
anachronistic? Attach here
a history of nostalgia. As though even the air
could be replicated, that history is not
more than we can be aware of now
afloat on this current, a brahmin kite
viewing the before and after of the river...

I had been silent for six years unaware that to be the same is to be
different. I wanted to read unwritten work, absorb influences
which did not yet exist. Returning to former sources six years
later they are those works, those influences.

Philosophy and poetry, runs the weekend news item, are products
of long walks (where it can be possible to have them). Is it the
movement or the vista? That intently observed, however small
and fragile, or the sweep which may be for the historians. A
hand-held camera juggled, now pointing at the sky now the
sturdy pair of boots. And it ends up being read by the grammar
that holds it together, the sense of a sentence which may be for
life. Writing: the product of sentenced beings, knowing and
known. As the moon in the water.

Under its surface as an essentially 'Brisbane' poem, 'Louvres' contains some buried texts that have accompanied me for years, always threatening to erupt into my own work: William Carlos Williams' prose poem 'Kora in Hell' and Roy Fisher's 'City'. These sources represent a kind of continuity running beneath the discontinuity of the break. The units of the poem, the prose paragraph and the broken-up lines adhering to the left margin, are the most modest of forms. I was not confident of spreading out across the page and using all the space I had used in work like *Memorials* where I felt I was making use, through space, of silence. This time around silence was, for a while anyway, more of a threat than a structural device.

Gradually 'silence', alongside 'background noise', came back into my work. I sensed that I had always been a kind of minimalist, even if I was a minimalist who liked 'content'. I think that this is what makes my work seem 'slight' to journal editors. It seems neither 'experimental' enough (like so-called Language poetry) or decorative enough (like the sofa stuffed with similes and pyrotechnics that most people still regard as 'poetry'). But I've noticed that the same people often feel differently about the work when they see it in bulk in a book like *Mangroves* (2003). I've had some reviewers who start off disliking the poems (and failing to quote examples) who end up more or less in silence themselves quoting entire pieces. I feel happy for the poems that this should be so. They live their own life. In effect their overall movement seems to work as a kind of biography - the biography of someone to whom 'nothing happens'.

In one sense the world really is constructed by language. But, as a poet, it would be fatal to assume that you are the generator of all this. What might be possible is to choreograph the language as it turns on itself, undermining its certitudes (and platitudes). One should do this as a kind of Buster Keaton balancing act, not as some untouchable oracle pronouncing doom from another world. It may be enough to slip gracefully on the banana peel that has been placed in your path, to throw out your arms and legs awkwardly in all directions and then (with a loopy expression) make a perfect soft landing on your kneepads.

Notes

1) Lewis is referring here to a Noel Coward production. return to text

2) The similarity of the last lines to A.A. Milne's Christopher Robin verses should be taken as intentional. return to text

References

Danto, Arthur (1997) *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton. return to text

Laurie Duggan has published twelve books of poems including Memorials *(Little Esther, 1996); and* Mangroves *(UQP, 2003). A new selected poems,* Compared to What *was recently published by Shearsman Books (UK), together with a new edition of his documentary poem* The Ash Range*. Laurie has taught Media at Swinburne University of Technology and the University of Canberra, and Art History at the University of Melbourne and the University of Western Sydney. He is concurrently Senior Lecturer/Writer-in-residence at Griffith University (Nathan) and an Honorary Research Advisor in the Australian Studies Centre at the University of Queensland.*

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