

## TEXT Vol 28 No 2 (October 2024)

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# TEXT

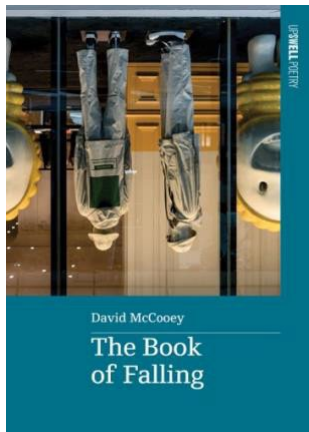
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TEXT review

## “with nothing ever to break its fall”

*review by Gemma Parker*



David McCooley  
The Book of Falling  
Upswell Publishing, Perth WA 2023  
ISBN 9780645536973  
Pb 109 pp AUD24.99

Picking up *The Book of Falling* is to begin falling; the image on the front cover is inverted, pitching us into giddiness, a sense of suspension mid-fall, the vertigo of not-quite-rightness combined with an untethered, floating curiosity. We are immediately detached from our upright and erect worldview. A disoriented wonder sends us headlong from floor to roof into the text below the image, white print on a background of contrasting blue-green, ‘David McCooley’, it says, ‘*The Book of Falling*’, and we nod yes, yes, that’s what this is: *falling*. We turn the page, and continue to fall.

There is (gloriously, invigoratingly, soaringly) no Contents Page. We hurtle directly from the epigraphs (Dostoyevsky from *The Brothers Karamazov* on the experience of falling into the abyss, and Megan Dunn from *Tinderbox* on the ‘only one story’ being the fall from grace) into

‘Lives I’, three opening poems from the perspective of three important twentieth-century artists. First is the poet Elizabeth Bishop packing for Seattle in ‘Questions of Travel’ that begins with an epigraph about liminality attributed to anthropologist Victor Turner, further highlighting the fraying of boundaries between ourselves and the air around us, the porousness of falling. Next we have the iconic Sylvia Plath at an imagined eighty in ‘Fleeting’, followed by ‘Marilyn Monroe Divines the Future’. This triptych of poems begins with a credible biographical moment in Bishop’s life – Bishop moved to Seattle for a teaching post in early 1966, leaving her beloved Brazil and a tempestuous relationship with the architect Lota de Macedo Soares. *Questions of Travel* was Bishop’s third collection of poetry, published in 1965, divided into ‘Brazil’ and ‘Elsewhere’ – Bishop’s poem, ‘Questions of Travel’, organised in the ‘Brazil’ section, interrogates the uncomfortable desire – not universal, but certainly relatable for many – to be immersed in distant lands and foreign cultures and climates. “There are too many waterfalls here,” (p. 91) Bishop’s famous poem begins, then continues through a series of vibrant descriptions of expansive reflections and experiences to end “Should we have stayed at home, / wherever that may be?” (p. 92).

The reader does not need to know Bishop’s poem to appreciate McCooley’s, but knowledge of Bishop’s biography helps to appreciate the poignancy of the moment McCooley depicts: Bishop’s suitcase open on the bed, preparing to embark upon a migratory journey back to America after fifteen years in South America, a reflection not only on leaving and what must be left behind, but what an artist might forge from the movement. McCooley handles the resolve and disorientation of this moment with staggering shifts in scale, describing Bishop’s packing list, what will be sent by sea, and what will be “left to visitors and the foxing elements” (p. 9). McCooley’s Bishop tells us, “There is, after all, nothing too large or too small / that can’t be left to the *mise-en-scène* of Brazil” (p. 9), depicting “carnivorous plants and tidal rivers” (p. 9), the fecundity of the tropical climate, and the ravenousness and unpredictability of social and political instability. McCooley ends this poem with a return to liminality:

All these human thresholds will one day give way  
to a place beyond cities and hills, plains and jungles –  
to a splendid and heartless book,  
where it is neither night nor day,  
neither here nor there, neither me nor you;  
a place where rain endlessly pours,  
with nothing ever to break its fall. (p. 10)

An end that offers, somehow, an attempted response to Bishop’s *Questions of Travel* in acknowledging the desire to create something that lasts beyond our fleeting existence on Earth. In Bishop’s poem, the rain finally stops falling – “two hours of unrelenting oratory / and then a sudden golden silence” (p. 92) – and the traveller takes her notebook to reflect. For McCooley’s Bishop, the book (the poem?) is the place where the rain doesn’t stop – and perhaps all the elements of her life in Brazil remain, and have not been relegated to “the foxing elements”, and memory.

From this credible biographical moment we move to an imagined Plath at eighty, followed by Monroe envisioning the headlines of her own death and beyond into the twenty-first century and the #MeToo movement. ‘Marilyn Monroe Divines the Future’ ends with Monroe’s vision of her sister in old age – an old age we know was denied to both talented artists. These poems are lyrically, technically and biographically satisfying, haunting and compelling imaginings of lives that were not lived.

McCooley’s *Book of Falling* continues to rattle us with shifts in scale and excavation of the grief of what cannot be as we fall through the next sections, ‘Human and non-human’, ‘Three photo poems’, ‘Satires & elegies’ and ‘Lives II’. Each of McCooley’s poems demonstrates his remarkable dexterity, precision and capacity for deep reflection. Warm moments of humour are combined with preoccupations with memory, ability and power that are handled with lightness, and care. McCooley’s ‘Three photo poems’ are particularly affecting. The photos in the photo poem ‘Posing Cards’ were taken by McCooley’s late father, Wyndham, and McCooley acknowledges the text in this poem – which gives a series of instructions guiding an amateur photographer to pose family members for portraits – as found text. Found poetry can often have sly, ironic or satirical elements depending on the seriousness, earnestness, or the social and political intent of the found text. Found poems can often be profoundly affecting, such as Hoa Nguyen’s *A Thousand Times You Lose Your Treasure* (Wave Books 2021), in which found poems from a variety of archival and commercial source texts contribute to the poet’s sophisticated meditation on her mother’s early life as a stunt motorcyclist in an all-female circus troupe in Vietnam. McCooley’s juxtaposition of found text with his late father’s photos is both tender and amusing. The images do not connect with the found text: the directive to “Bring in the youngest child / Try to use them to fill any empty spaces / between older family members” (p. 43) is positioned above a solitary figure on a floral outdoor lounge chair in a gorilla mask. Only two of the six images contain human figures at all, and one in aforementioned mask – the others feature a clock, a dirt road, a cluttered recreational space with a poster featuring the words ‘The Arse End’, and a photo taken at sea. The photos are attentive and droll, opportunistic and alert, offering a charismatic rendering of the photographer’s character that contrasts with the found text’s stilted awkwardness.

McCooley’s *Book of Falling* is not just a rush – it invites the reader to settle into a slow, Alice-like fall, curious observers of each poetic offering. We read each poem and then let it go (paper falls more slowly than the human form). Although each poem stands alone, some seem to reach out to each other and to hold on to each other in satisfying ways, like skydivers in formation. ‘Blue Hour’ holds onto the subsequent ‘Rain Poem’ and also to ‘Questions of Travel’ in its watchful record of the skies and idiosyncratic contemplation of the qualities of rain – “now rain has started to fall, half-heartedly, / as if we were in some other country” (‘Blue Hour’, p. 20) and “it’s not ‘driving rain’; / it’s just sitting outside, // engine idling over the neighbourhood” (‘Rain poem’, p. 21). These poems highlight McCooley’s talent not only for sensory details, but also for visual and cinematic imagery – ‘Blue Hour’ contains “bats in a horror movie” (p. 20) and ‘Rain poem’ has wind that begins “its invisible cover-up job” (p. 21). ‘Elegy’ reads like a time-lapse, and the narrative of ‘Drop Tower’ (p. 92) unfolds as a satire of a horror film, their shock at the fall of the ride (“astounded by gravity”) captured in the on-ride photos for sale:

(“low-res snaps of witnesses to an atrocity”). The eerie prose poem ‘Onset of a Theme’ has a moon looking on, “unmanned spotlight from high up in the gods” (p. 25). ‘Slater’ (p. 24) compares the insect to a *Star Wars* troop carrier, and in ‘The Birds’ (p. 29), the birds attacking the house are “[n]ot like in the old movie, / appearing in their hundreds”. ‘Opening Titles’ (p. 36), ‘Your Life as a Movie’ (p. 72), ‘Television: An Elegy’ (p. 83) and ‘Last Four Lines’ (p. 90) all contain explicit film references, and cinematic intertextuality.

Failing and falling are not far from each other, orthographically and also conceptually, and McCooley’s collection is also overtly about effort, failure and loss. Yet although there are severe, almost sinister, preoccupations with failed and impossible futures (Plath and Monroe’s old age, the grief and solastalgia in ‘Anthropocene’, ‘Elegy’, ‘Black Summer’ and ‘Synaptic Transmissions: An Elegy’), there are also hints of escape routes, possible points of disconnecting our present from past and future, “the facts”, as McCooley offers in ‘After the Argument’, “having loosed / their irrational hold on things” (p. 26). ‘Nocturne’ (p. 27), a standout poem in a deeply impressive collection, gives us nine fragmented vignettes of moments of solitude that offer glimpses of what we carry – mobiles, glasses, memories of our mother – but also documents a conscious “dropping out”, switching off, and tuning into a higher frequency, attentive to not only what items are inside the room, what memories we are inhabiting, but also what is just outside the door, or window.

We can fall into ruin, fall unconscious, fall in love, fall asleep. In ‘RIP’ McCooley tells us “I’m not concerned about the deep state. // I am concerned about all states: / states of undress, states of mind” (p. 93). Dream-state and memory-state as states of mind we may fall into without conscious effort or desire to do so feature throughout the collection. In ‘Dreams’ we are addressed in the second-person and described as struggling to shake off the dreamed memory of an “improper kiss” (p. 23). Here we also encounter the swift shifts in register and demotic and conversational language that McCooley employs throughout *The Book of Falling* and which offers a particularly pleasurable counterpoint to the philosophically darker, bleaker elements of this collection. “Your id doesn’t give a fuck / about cultural appropriation” McCooley opens the poem (p. 23). McCooley also continues on from the opening poems about Bishop, Plath and Monroe to offer us a range of voices, including that of the birds in ‘The Birds’:

*Only your slomo gigantic bodies*

*and unlovely voices  
will scare us away,*

*but only for a while, until we  
return, shitting where we do* (p. 29).

Before we spin right-side-up and land in the Acknowledgements (or perhaps, rather, gazing at the righted version of the cover image on the back cover, attributed to McCooley), we pass through ‘Lives II’, and the universe of our fall expands again exponentially, reminding us of what it is possible to witness, to reflect, and to recount. There are memories here, confessions and interrogations, all structured as enthralling, fragmented prose poems. In ‘Arigato’, written

as eleven fragments (pp. 103-104); ‘Gesang der Jünglinge (Song of the Youths)’ (p. 105) and ‘Inside the Whale’ (p. 106-107) McCooley demonstrates preoccupation with language and his talent for conversational, dexterous and expansive narratives. The collection ends with a sense of renewal, of curiosity and wonder.

David McCooley’s *The Book of Falling* is part carnival ride, part free fall, and part falling asleep at midday during a screening of an old noir film, and dreaming of an impossible future with an imaginary lover. The fall is spacious, and while the poems in the collection demonstrate impressive range and versatility of style, each poem is meticulous, measured and mindful. The playful intertextuality and shifts in linguistic register allow McCooley to remain tethered to his principle of falling whilst exploring a broad range of concerns in carefully crafted poems that remain light, poignant and sharp. We fall slowly, wonderingly, pleasurably.

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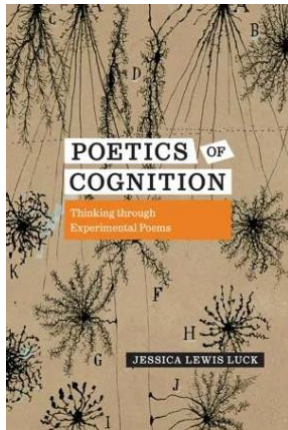
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TEXT review

## Putting “the experiment back in experimentalism”

*review by Hazel Smith*



Jessica Lewis Luck

Poetics of Cognition: Thinking through experimental poems

University of Iowa Press, Iowa City IA 2023

ISBN 9781609389055

Pb 212 pp AUD133.67

Some books are very exciting to read because they carve out distinct and unfamiliar territory. This is the case with Jessica Lewis Luck’s *Poetics of Cognition: Thinking through experimental poems*, which argues persuasively that cognitive psychology can illuminate the strategies of experimental poets and the way their poems are experienced by readers. To do this Luck pairs major figures with particular techniques (for example Lyn Hejinian with the New Sentence, Harryette Mullen with Proceduralism, Larry Eigner with Projected Verse), and shows how some aspects of their work can be elucidated by cognitive psychology and neuroscience. Her examples are mainly North American, but not exclusively, and it was cheering to find the inclusion of an interesting visual poem by the Australian poet, Gareth Jenkins.

Luck's aim is to join literary studies with experimental science, and to marry a cognitive approach with biodiscourse politics. Her object is experimental poetry, which lies at the extremes of linguistic and literary pursuit, and her central question is "how do experimental poems 'think' and how do we think through them?" (p. 6). She is also enthusiastic about the beneficial effect that writing and reading experimental poetry might have and "how these forms work to rematerialize and reshape the activity of the reader's mind, creating new forms of attention, perception and cognition" (p. 8). Her main interests are in embodied and extended cognition. Embodied cognition acknowledges that our minds are rooted in the body's sensorimotor systems. Extended cognition (a term employed by cognitive scientist Andy Clark) is about the way our thinking is connected to, and extended by, the environment and objects in the environment. Luck argues that experimental poems often bend or extend cognition, and therefore that it is particularly fruitful to look at them through the knowledge we have about how the brain works. However, she claims that "no intrepid scientist has yet taken up the question of how readers respond to the most ambiguous texts in the world: experimental poetry" (p. 40). This, then, is the territory she stakes out for herself, though a quick literature search does suggest the presence of at least some related work in this area.

Luck's approach, which she proposes "expands the cognitive poetics toolbox" (p. 15), is mouth-wateringly eclectic. She draws ideas from an impressive array of areas: evolutionary biology, creativity theory, ekphrasis, theories of emergence, physics, race and gender politics, disability studies, neuroscience, phenomenology, and music theory. For example, in discussing Lyn Hejinian and the New Sentence, she weaves together several issues and lines of thinking: intention, perception, improvisation, musical structure and myopia. In her discussion of Harryette Mullen, she utilises theories of emergence, discussions of aurality and performance. Such forays into different arenas create a nourishing brew of ideas. They allow Luck to bring cognition and politics together and to highlight innovative minority writers: she demonstrates how Mullen's linguistic experiments have a deep connection to her "embodied connections to multiple subcommunities – Black, female, consumer, academic...even South Californian" (p. 64). Similarly, investigating the protosemantic in the sound poetry of Tracie Morris, Luck draws on the work of archaeologist Steven Mithen, who believes that music and language evolved from the same precursor, Hmmmm language, which is related to infant directed speech (IDS). She uses this to suggest that Morris's performances mirror IDS, but she also quotes Fred Moten, who speaks of "the radical materiality and syntax that animates black performances" (p. 136), to politicise Morris's extended vocal techniques. She then engages in detailed musical and linguistic analysis of Morris's work suggesting that it dislodges the destructive aesthetic of dada sound poetry to embrace a more positive stance where sound is used to "welcome, engage, and arouse" (p. 142). Luck's emphasis on disability is another striking aspect of her eclectic mix: her investigation of how Eigner's cerebral palsy both constrained and enabled his work is fascinating. This is her response to Michael Davidson's call for a disability poetics that theorizes "the ways that poetry defamiliarizes not only language but the body normalized within language" (p. 71).

Luck aims to use knowledge about cognition to explore both the intentions of poets and the strategies of readers. In this sense her work employs cognitive psychology and neuroscience to



look at both the creative process and the reception of texts. In her introduction Luck raises a fundamental question: what is there in the brain that makes people create avant-garde art and be receptive to it? She refers to the work of neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran and an experiment with baby herring gulls who peck on the red dot on their mother's yellow beak when they want more food. When this was experimentally perturbed (first they were presented with a yellow stick with a red dot on it and then with a stick with three red stripes rather than a dot), the chicks seemed to prefer the subverted sign to the normal one. Ramachandran hypothesises that this might be why human beings are engaged by avant-garde artworks – “they are tapping into the figural primitives of our perceptual grammar and creating ultra-normal stimuli that more powerfully excite certain visual neurons in our brains as opposed to realistic-looking images” (p. 3). Although this analogy is impressionistic and unproven, it sets up a direction for thinking about the avant-garde which is based on brain function. Luck also braids together the possible benefits of reading experimental poetry and cognitive work on nonsense, given that such poetry often does not make sense in the normal way. For example, she refers to the work of cultural psychologists Travis Proulx and Steven J. Heine who claim that nonsense “can prime the brain to sense patterns it would otherwise miss – in mathematical equations, in language, and in the world at large” (p. 5).

Luck engages with cognitive psychology more precisely to illuminate some of the techniques of experimental writing, many of which, such as the New Sentence, work against what the psychologist Daniel Kahneman calls “cognitive ease” (p. 125). To discuss this technique in Hejinian's *My Life*, she focuses on the work of philosopher and psychologist William James and his notion of “the fantastic laws of clinging” (p. 21) also referenced in Hejinian's text. Instead of only highlighting the discontinuity of the sentences, Luck shifts the emphasis to their simultaneous continuity through the idea of James's stream: what he calls a “series of flights and perchings” (p. 23) that are part of the stream of consciousness. In this same chapter on Hejinian, Luck also tackles the central problem of ambiguity through insights into cognitive research. She argues that Hejinian's use of parataxis “reproduces the perceptual poetics of the brain, in which multiple and competing activities and neural projections come together to make a representation of the world” (p. 30). She employs the work of cognitive scientists whose experiments record readers' eye movements “the ambiguities are looked at longer and revisited more frequently than other words in the sentences” (p. 36). Luck does state, however, that cognitive science has much more to say about the ambiguities within sentences than the ambiguities between sentences that characterise the New Sentence as an approach to writing, suggesting fertile ground for further investigation.

In fact, this idea that the experimental text highlights ambiguity or multiplicity of meaning recurs often in the book as one of the main features of experimental poetry that cognitive science might illuminate. Luck draws on many examples to approach this topic and sometimes exploits parallels in the field of visual perception: the Necker cube, a cube which can be alternately perceived in opposite ways, being a prime example. Luck also refers to the work of Stanislas Dehaene, who talks about the different pathways in the brain for processing language (the phonological route and the lexical route) and who argues that “when our nervous system is confronted with ambiguity, its fundamental strategy is to leave all possibilities open –

something that is only feasible in a massively parallel system where multiple interpretations can be simultaneously entertained” (p. 98). Luck uses Dehaene’s work to underpin her discussion of Aram Saroyan’s one-word poem ‘lightht’ which looks like, but is not, a familiar word. In Luck’s discussion, visual perception often casts light on and runs parallel to linguistic ambiguity. An example of this is her reference to the notion of “multistable visual perception” (p. 91) in the work of cognitive scientists David A. Leopold and Nikos K Logothetis. Their insights form part of her discussion of Larry Eigner’s poetry whose “projected verse does seem to create an illusionistic lexical space for the reader in which individual words can be experienced in their multidimensionality” (p. 91). In fact, in her analysis of Eigner’s poems, Luck sees ambiguity in the visual layout itself, since the shape of the poems can sometimes be perceived as either reaching out to the reader or receding.

Luck is very discerning in the way she takes central verities/debates about experimental poetry and broadens them out or shifts their focus. In so doing, her work often acts as a useful corrective to previous critical discussion in this area, and I found myself agreeing wholeheartedly with many of her insights. Previous studies on language poetry have sometimes taken the poets’ own negation of the author at face value and concentrated more on linguistic analysis. Luck counters this and says, “there is value in continuing to think through textual materiality and authorial intentionality alongside one another” (p. 23). She revises the idea of intentionality in the light of William James’s observations – and recent work in neuroscience from Jan Lauwereyns – arguing that some form of intentionality tends to be unavoidable and that “even the most basic acts of attention are suffused with intention” (p. 26). Another pertinent issue she raises which is related to this is: “how do we account for the uniqueness of style and voice that emerges even in a procedural poetics governed by constraint?” (p. 50). Just understanding the poetry linguistically can be reductive as “many experimental poetic projects ...like Mullen’s... reveal not only a discursively constructed subject but also an embodied person or persons at work behind the poem” (p. 51). Consequently, Luck suggests that in Mullen’s *Sleeping with the Dictionary* “the poet’s body and the body of the dictionary are ambiguously mingled” (p. 64). Luck also shifts the concept of projective verse from an emphasis on the breath to a more visual idea of an open field poetics and successfully applies this to the work of Larry Eigner. More generally, she is careful to historicise her material and to distinguish between different movements within an overall area. She argues for the differences between avant-garde poetry and postmodern experimentalism; between mid-20th century concrete poetry and 21st century vispo; and between dada sound poetry and the more recent sonic poetry of Tracie Morris and others.

One of the most enjoyable ‘reads’ in the book is Luck’s chapter on pedagogy and experimental poetry and her account of how, in her own classes, she encouraged students to immerse themselves more fully in experimental poetry. Using McCann’s notion of deformative criticism and Bernstein’s notion of creative wreading, she urged her students to interact with the poems by means other than close reading. They were encouraged to engage in more oblique activities like altering the poem, adding to it or only reading isolated parts of speech, all with refreshing results. Luck argues that pedagogy is lagging behind contemporary literature by about fifty years and behind contemporary literary criticism by about the same amount. Her teaching

strategies seem an excellent way to move pedagogy in literary appreciation of experimental texts forward.

Luck takes experimental poetry and puts a cognitive science grid over it to stimulating effect. But hers is still more of a humanities approach, based on rhetorical argument and examples drawn selectively from a massive body of research, rather than a scientific one based on empirical findings. From a scientific perspective there is no real evaluation and critique of the cognitive psychology literature, though some of its insights are imaginatively and saliently applied. In fact, the examples Luck gives are often picked from a pool of contradictory or strongly contested findings (for example, the idea she puts forward that certain musical features are associated with particular moods has been challenged in recent music cognition research). And although empiricism is at the foundation of cognitive science, and she wishes “to put the experiment back in experimentalism” (p. 6), there is no empirical aspect to Luck’s own study, which is not based on rigorously designed experiments with writers and readers. This is not to downplay at all Luck’s significant contribution. Rather, it is to suggest there is another implicit exciting level of research in Luck’s work on which she and/or others could embark that would be more scientifically orientated and could extend the science/literature nexus. That is, literary critics and writers could collaborate with cognitive scientists and design actual experiments that would test some of the ideas raised here, an approach that Luck comes closest to with her own teaching. One of the most valuable aspects of this book is that out of a huge realm of possibility it sets some possible groundings for such research, and I look forward very much to the further explorations and insights that could result from it.

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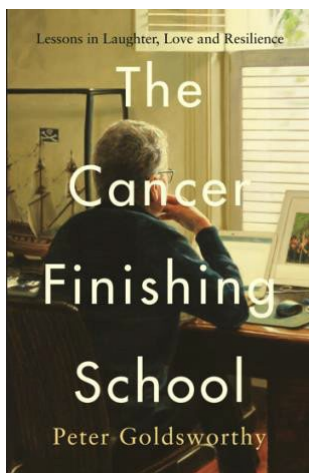
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TEXT review

## Doctor as patient: Some hard lessons from *The Cancer Finishing School*

*review by Andrew Leggett*



Peter Goldsworthy

The Cancer Finishing School: Lessons in laughter, love and resilience

Viking, Sydney NSW 2024

ISBN 9781761340772

Pb 318 pp AUD36.99

Peter Goldsworthy, Adelaide based poet, novelist, storyteller, playwright, librettist and general medical practitioner, offers us this memoir of his lived experience of diagnosis and treatment of his haematological cancer, multiple myeloma. *The Cancer Finishing School* responds to serious questions of mortality, vulnerability and meaning creatively, always with humour, interspersed with sensitive accounts of what he has learned from his engagement with his own patients, with friends and family and with the greats of music and literature.

I respond to this work from my own perspective as a medical doctor who is also a writer, although one somewhat enviously in admiration of Goldsworthy's literary achievements. I also

write from the perspective of a consultation liaison psychiatrist with an interest in psycho-oncology, the practice of which involves an endeavour to understand and support patients, families and their treating clinicians through the vicissitudes of the emotional and psychological experience of the diagnosis and treatment of cancer. In such work we also respond to and experience grief at the actual loss of loved ones, but also the loss of and changes in relationships, capacities, roles and illusions of resilience that come with the unsolicited gift of disabling and often terminal illness. There are also unpleasant surprises that come as the downside of valiant efforts at treatment.

That Goldsworthy considers his cancer diagnosis a gift evidences his capacity to open to a sense of wonder at the full range of human experience, to place himself empathically in the position of his patients and to make good use of his dark sense of humour. This shows especially in his descriptions of his antics in the midst of dexamethasone induced euphoria, which was the only upside of his experience of chemotherapy. The advantages of this state of mind may not have been apparent to those nearest and dearest to him. When his wife Lisa complains of the bumps and bruises that she suffers as a result of his steroid induced restless legs, he quips, “I’ll get you a pair of shin-pads for Christmas” (p. 145).

In the midst of a discussion, with his psychiatrist daughter Alex, of his chemically enhanced irritability and his preoccupation with chronicling his cancer journey, Goldsworthy manages a retaliatory poke at psychoanalysis when he dismisses her suggestion that his steroid induced irritability might constitute an unconscious effort to drive his patients away. This would eliminate the problem of having to sell or close his practice and protect the patients from bearing the brunt of his narcissistic preoccupation with his own illness. Goldsworthy trumps the shrinks with a line that we might deserve when we resort to such tactics: “It’s a shrewd insight, and poetically pleasing enough to be true. But being unconscious, how would I know?” (p. 151).

I was impressed by the compassionate humour with which Goldsworthy punctuates his personal narrative with anecdotes of his experience as a doctor to his own patients, especially with the sensitivity of the way in which he handles the problems of confidentiality, consent and necessary disguise when offering such vignettes. As a psychiatrist, psychotherapist, poet, journal editor, clinical academic and author of fictionalised case histories, the ethics of such efforts have long been central concerns of mine in my various roles. I was glad to find the opportunity for a frank discussion of these issues with Goldsworthy when I contacted him to discuss this. I was relieved to find that, in spite of the limited success of a bone marrow transplant, he has already survived longer than his clinical advisers predicted, remains optimistic and generous in his outlook, has resumed part time clinical practice and continues to write. I enjoyed discussing with him the stories he offers of his friendships with people whom I consider among our literary greats: J.M. Coetzee, Clive James, Les Murray and Gwen Harwood. I was impressed by the stories he offered when I shared with him my own experience of being mentored by Harwood in her last years and her promotion of my work to editors, including Murray.

True to his identity as a poet, Goldsworthy subtly weaves into his narrative the way in which music is vital to his being and to his recovery, again with the humour of self deprecation. Taking up cooking prior to attempting to play piano again in his convalescence, Goldsworthy writes of beginning to “eavesdrop on music while I cook, and overhearing music when I write. For some reason I can listen to nothing but Brahms symphonies and concerti for some weeks” (p. 236). He credits his daughter Anna, an accomplished professional pianist and music academic, with “describing those big wall-of-noise pieces as ‘the great soup of Brahms’” (p. 236). He then admits that he ‘dreamt up the phrase’ and suggests, ‘I’ve been cooking so many soups I’ve got soup on the brain’ and that he is ‘still too unmotivated ... to sit down at the piano, even to heat up a tureen of bad Brahms.’ (p. 236)

Goldsworthy writes of his “journey as metaphor”, referring to the way in which “my cancer journey is beginning to feel like an odyssey” (p. 302). With determination, he asserts, “I don’t intend to reach my personal Ithaka any sooner than Odysseus reached his”. (p. 302) With respect to the role that writing this work has played in that journey, he offers, “Keeping a log of my new journey helped, and at the very least was a good way of talking about it with someone, even if that someone was me” (p. 303). He raises the possibility, in the course of his conversation with his own text, that “a ten-year odyssey is not out of the question for me, with the new treatments” (p. 304). While Goldsworthy finishes his story soon after an account of his seventieth birthday in October 2021, I found, in my telephone conversation with him, that his journey continues, that the wandering king is still in the process of coming home.

If Goldsworthy’s lived experience of his journey with multiple myeloma is a cancer finishing school, I ask, what is the lesson that is to be learned? What meaning could such an arbitrary gift possibly offer, other than the humiliation of having one’s nose rubbed in the excrement of mortality? How can personal suffering of disease be understood, other than as a cruel joke played by a sadistic cosmic comedian? When it comes to addressing such questions, the writing functions for Goldsworthy as the medium by which “both the heart’s soft memory and the brain’s hard blackboard are easily wiped clean by distraction” (p. 313). This leads on to the stark but seemingly kinder response that Goldsworthy offers in his recollection of joking around with Gwen Harwood about such big questions. He quotes her as referring with deference to Wittgenstein: “What answer could possibly satisfy you?” (p. 158).

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# TEXT

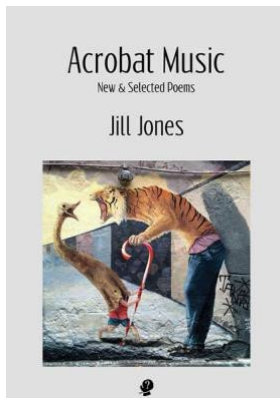
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## TEXT review

### Lucky thirteen

*review by Nathan Shepherdson*



Jill Jones

Acrobat Music – New & Selected Poems

Puncher & Wattman, Waratah NSW 2024

ISBN 9781922571571

Pb 220 pp AUD29.95

*Acrobat Music* – Jill Jones’s *New & Selected Poems* – represents itself as a fixed structure from fluid origins. The subtitle could almost be “New and Re-selected”. The book’s form works. No doubt there was a lot of mulling, slow sips, cruel cuts and collage in its tailoring. From the reader’s perspective, the decisions and scars are not obvious. The feel akin to giving memory a pair of scissors to see what happens. As Jill Jones outlines in the foreword, “There is I hope, a sense of those various frequencies of light and sound and other sensual moments throughout my work, that these moments have their mysteries, those things we can’t know, or at least I can’t”. (p. 16) That approach to this book works just as well for the reader as much as for the poet. For the poet it was a difficult task. Perhaps the conventional chronological roll call would have been easier work. The shuffle-play of introducing poems from different periods to each other ferments curiosity. Knowing the structure is not time-based, you start to guess which ones

were written when in this near thirty-year span of thoughts and lines. For the scholar or poetic nerd, the poems selected are boxed up in the notes section under their original book titles, so the red thread, drawing pin process awaits that reward for those inclined.

Eight lines into the leading poem, ‘Thought had drugged the music’ (p. 19), poetry drugs its self-generating silence. Jones doesn’t shy away from making attractive music. The pace and timbre are bent on floatation. A Holst-echo in the conclusion to ‘When Planets Softly Collide’, “As if rock didn’t survive, / and dust didn’t dance on air.” (p. 109) Flip to the notes section, and you find Kim Gordon and Fanny Mendelsohn sitting in the same sentence: “Raw music stunned us, it hurt more than love” (p. 94). Jones makes it clear that within the confines of form she has no wish to restrict herself. In fact, she quietly laments that pragmatism and length meant exclusion for her more experimental work from this volume. Although the compass in *Acrobat Music* spins freely enough to give directional indicators that extend out or retract in. Many lines hold their shadow or their echo at no extra cost. In the intangible philosophy of *Elsewhere Here*, “– there is nothing that is just one –” (p. 220). A line with the inviting elegance of a tatami mat.

Picking up the elsewhere-here concept, *Acrobat Music* allows the poet to follow and to be followed by her own work through the subconscious tangle in a publication history that cannot be changed. The deft art is in how Jones has unraveled that history both then and now. Question. Speculation. Observation. Fact. A square with the habit and desire to sculpt itself out of shape with thinking. The publisher list itself reads like thirteen post it notes flapping in the uncertain breeze that carries the weird dance of manuscript submission. Chance the only certainty.

Along with music, nature and art are common first cousins to poetic thought. Glovebox companions for the brain. Birds are easy surrogates for the eye. In the staircase form of *Gone In Terrain*, “An eagle looks like time/then flies above it/flight movement and colour lost/within ranges/perpetual light” (p. 213). Or, in *Flight Matter*, “If ghosts are sounding, is it a song for a bird, or for me” (p. 230). That poem is one of a handful throughout the book, which build line by line, in double-spaced form, like shooting quizzical arrows at open-ended targets.

Collectively, there is a small gallery’s worth of art poems. Jones is a willing participant in the visual. The images she translates into words. As she says, “I am not afraid of metaphor – language is a metaphor – but I’m not wedded to metaphorical flourish or excess, ...” (p. 16). Although I hesitate to use the E word. These poems seem more exploratory, more a telepathic conversation with the art works, or a score, than a nailed-down description. *Space is Blue in Being* on her underrated, immigrant compatriot Dušan Marek is translucent, ending, “Lift your grassy tongue into the dark/hear how your feet walk through each space/how blue they become” (p. 237).

As an art parallel, with its format and assemblage, *Acrobat Music* becomes a Jill Jones survey exhibition of a sort. Thematic groupings in quiet spaces, simply waiting for you to stroll onto the page. The poems are gestural, hard pencil lines softened with the fingertip. Some works



you stare into – other works peer out at you. Jones builds perches for words, then waits until they land. The question might be who is asking the question?

The sixth section, the new poems, has a gentle but resilient epigraph, “Not as straight as the wall / but standing, taller” (p. 204). Despite being a fragment from an early poem not included in this collection, it might be that Jill Jones is intimating that this is where she is at. This section is fifty pages, so a small book as contemporary ballast within the larger self/book. With the expanse of time that brackets this collection, the lesson could be that the immediate requires patience. Several of the poems in this section are the ones you should be of a certain age to write. There’s a hint of the unpretentious epic. The sense of resignation, where the poet nonetheless refuses to resign. In *All Shook Up*, written on Kangaroo Island, the quasi-Presley-Eliot refrain, “The past isn’t the present isn’t the future, so if someone foresaw this/they may wake soon.” (p. 215). Or, in *These Truths*, the levelling sigh, “those things in my ear/a truth syrup/not answering/fresh grief” (p.232). In *Fragmenta: Nova: 16 Views of a Day*, the polished meditation that conjures Zbigniew Herbert, “I fall over a chair / I stare at the chair / the chair does nothing / that’s its genius” (p. 250). Snapped back to the contemporary funk of *Fate is a Virus*, the whip-smart, “even dogs speak in bitcoin whack/modern ecstasies sling round the supermarket/from cha-cha palace to bitch slap” (p. 254).

From 13 books comes one more. Jill Jones tells us in the notes that her birthday is on the 13<sup>th</sup>. It’s a significant number, for a significant poet. Lucky for her and us.

*Nathan Shepherdson is the author of ten books of poetry. His most recent works are axolotl waltz (Puncher & Wattmann) and soft meteorites (Upswell). He lives in Meanjin/Brisbane.*



# TEXT

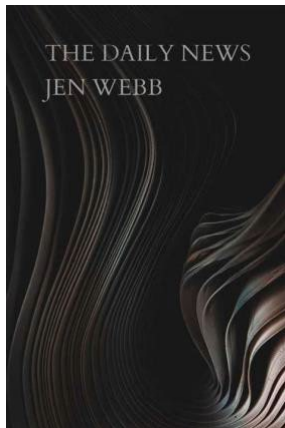
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**TEXT review**

## A bang and a muted howl

*review by Dominique Hecq*



Jen Webb

*The Daily News*

Recent Work Press, Canberra ACT 2024

ISBN 9780645651324

Pb 114 pp AUD19.95

Jen Webb's new collection, *The Daily News*, opens with a bang and a muted howl:

After the Apocalypse we sent in the dogs. They moved  
across the city, sounding the air, finding signs. Below  
them, cell calling silently to cell, lay the living. (p. 3)

There is no apocalyptic nerve gas news analysis here because as fire rages in the outskirts of Canberra, "There may be no news" (p. 13). Later, above the Mariana Trench, soundwaves are full of storm, but "microphones report nothing; and the radio reports nothing" (p. 79). This is "Apocalypse now" (p. 5) and "the Doomsday Clock is set at almost midnight" (p. 92).

We have been there. Are still there. Fire, flood, plague and global warming are still sweeping through the Earth, sometimes with different names: The Anthropocene, climate change, pandemic or Covid.

Reading this book, I felt as though I'd been spun around a galaxy of planets, immersed in deep oceans and rivers bursting their banks, shown the views from silvery moons under the gaze of angels and twisted through fire-time, before landing in a bump, with my face up to the here and now of bigger and smaller catastrophes.

The book's structure is in six parts, threading through six signifiers making a small swarm from S1 to S6: fire, year of the plague, weather, change, therapy and history. The unifying element is the weather. It's benign, yet frightening. Indeed, two books resonated with me throughout, namely, Jonathan Safran Foer's *We are the weather* (2019) and Tim Flannery's *We are the weather makers* (2006), reminding me that we are active participants in the global disaster which is upon us.

Moving boldly between the broad view and its intimate counterparts, the faceted, echoing prose poems observe the world's shifting arrangements while rearranging patterns of the human heart. Consider, for example, the opening of the elegiac sequence so aptly titled 'In the bubble':

You stroke the wall unit until it seems comforted, and I lean  
toward you where you stand, the wall against your breast,  
just a little in love. I remove my mask, and then you do.  
We lean toward one another, trying not to take in the  
other's breath, the other's dread, the other's death. (p. 31)

The last line stayed with me long after turning the page. The finality of it. And yet it instilled in me the desire to write *away* from the task of composing a *review*. Grief is palpable in these prose poems. It made me want to sing, not mourn.

Here news comes from outside the back door where the moon rises as it lifts from the blustering horizon, its face livid with loss.

Here rustling comes from the vacant chambers of the human heart, its tributaries chafing from fear.

Here the body wakes up untimely, ferrying its own rumours and memories.

*The Daily News* is a compacted work of rich complexity, verve, humour and sadness. It reminds us that humans gather marks. Our bodies, histories and stories are made of visible and invisible moments we have little control over. As humans, we mark time and the book translates its maker's obsession with time's short, but especially "long durée" (p. 90) in a world where calamity turns everything into temporal haze.

In its astonishing prose poetry, language often turns on itself as is the case in ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, where an analysand refuses to tell their therapist a story. The piece is tongue in cheek. And to me, hilarious. Power shifts. Things resist description. Images occlude words. Signifieds displace signifiers. Interpretation is beyond the pale: “The doors open, then close; the black behind my eyes is fading; sometimes a door is just a door” (p. 81). So much of the world has been rendered familiar by the industries of interpretation – including the literary and the psychoanalytic where zones of creativity have been obliterated by a culture of compliance, that it takes courage to show that the emperor has no clothes on. So, I laughed. The collection’s dominant mood, however, is far from ebullient. It oscillates between a sense of helplessness and despair occasionally lightened by bitter-sweet humour or wit. Hope is a distant shore:

In six weeks the sun  
will return, the day will stretch out of sleep and open its  
doors to the new warmth. Your arms across my shoulders.  
This endless time, and against it, bashing tiny fists upon  
the pane, my little life. (p. 63)

Again, doors. And Time. But, oh, that lovely image of a helpless child.

‘History for beginners’ offers the most irreverent punch at utter despair (p. 95). Like ‘Automaton’ (p. 87), it operates on a surreal register, but dramatizes the absurd. Time and again, Webb punctures through the surface of things to find something much stranger under the day’s desiccated skin.

Is hope a distant shore? This may be the wrong metaphor, for it is “dished out in coffee spoons” (p. 90) just as Alfred J. Prufrock measured out his life with coffee spoons in a poem adumbrating *The Waste Land*.

Between the sweeping and granular views of things, *The Daily News* takes the reader on a roller coaster of life-wasting systems and ways of escape with style and wit. Each piece is attuned to the ironies and absurdities of contemporary living in seemingly effortless but dazzling leaps that reminds us that language can both unmake and remake the world around us. It’s a feat of steadfastness in the windy mess of news where political outrage hovers in the wings and the social contract withers in disarray.

Leaving love behind, you place the phone back in its  
cradle. Leaving love behind, you close the door. So gently  
it might have been a breath. (p. 99)

Whether tender, furious or close to despair, each piece is a revelation of empathy and understanding.

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*Dominique Hecq is a widely anthologised and award-winning prose poet, fiction writer, essayist and translator. She lives and works on Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung land (Naarm / Melbourne). Her latest bilingual collection, Pistes de rêve has just been released by Transignum. Volte Face (Liquid Amber Press) and Otopos (Beltway Editions) are slated for publication in June 2024.*



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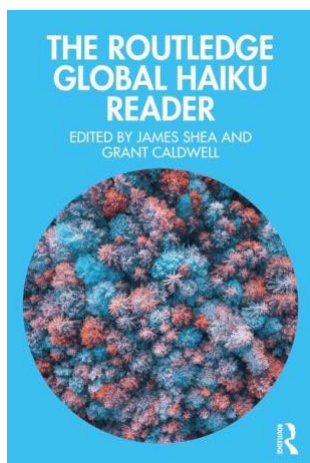
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**TEXT review**

## History, the Present, the Future of Haiku

*review by Owen Bullock*



James Shea and Grant Caldwell (eds)

The Routledge Global Haiku Reader

Routledge, London UK 2023

ISBN: 9781032272658

Pb 357 pp AUD75.99

The first thing one notices about this collection of essays is that they have all been published before and that many of them are quite old. Nine of the sixteen chapters are articles written more than ten years ago; none have been revised for this edition (though two are already revisions of older pieces); only two were written in the last five years. The average age of the articles is 2008.

Much depends on the framing of a book, which sets up expectations in the reader. When I encounter a book that includes the phrase “global haiku reader” in its title I expect it to reflect the traditions of most of the major movements in world haiku. When the publication date is

2023, I expect work that reflects contemporary theory and practice, i.e. from the twenty-first century; this is an era that the present volume barely reaches. But the anthology is useful as an historical overview of the development of haiku both within and outside Japan.

Co-Editor James Shea's Introduction creates some confusion early on by referring to a "typical 5-7-5 syllabic pattern" (p. 3) – typical in what context? I am wary of this glossing of syllable-count discussion, since there is so much misinformation about this aspect of haiku form, though Shea's own chapter later makes some instructive clarifications (co-editor Grant Caldwell's essay consciously avoids the issue). Setting out the aim of the volume, Shea states: "the book attempts to map the contours of haiku's reach, emphasising scholarly treatments of the form and its diverse cultural histories around the world" (p. 3), with a view to increasing understanding of manifestations "from the twentieth century to the present" (p. 4). It's that issue of the present, in the sense of the contemporary that worries me, and, to a lesser extent the scope of cultural reach. The Introduction ably summarises the chapters but seems to sidestep some key issues that a clearer early framing could help establish. Whilst noting differing definitions of haiku (and there are a small of number of these within the volume), a definition from the editors would have been helpful and instructive (perhaps even for them as much as the reader, since creating one's own definitions forces one to think through issues and attitudes). It's a shame that more definitions aren't offered across the book and that there is not more engagement with thorny issues.

The first section is 'Haiku in Transit' and includes two compelling essays about translation. We begin with Haruo Shirane's 'Beyond the Haiku Moment: Bashō, Buson and Modern Haiku Myths', originally published in 2000. I've always appreciated Shirane's warning us against fetishising the moment, and stressing the value of the imagination and metaphor use in haiku, even in early works by Bashō. He reminds us that the focus on the moment of experience in North American haiku comes at least partly from the influence of Shiki, early in the twentieth century, with his emphasis on the *shasei*, or sketch from life, and the moment of experience – a writer who was himself influenced by Western poetic ideals. At the same time Shirane notes that the haikai of Bashō "was rooted in the everyday world" (p. 19) and that, "it is no doubt a good idea for the beginner to avoid overt metaphor or allegory or symbolism, but this should not be the rule for the more advanced poets" (p. 21). Excessive focus on the moment can have the effect that haiku can lack depth, in terms of use of the vertical axis (of historical and cultural allusion), in contradistinction with the horizontal axis (the present, elsewhere described as newness). *Kigo* (season words) trigger the vertical axis but are not requirements in English-Language haiku, which is certainly backed up by contemporary practice and reflected in the fact that the Haiku Society of America's definition of haiku does not include reference to *kigo*. Shirane offers his own definition:

haiku in English is a short poem, usually written in one to three lines, that seeks out new and revealing perspectives on the human and physical condition, focussing on the immediate physical world around us, particularly that of nature, and on the workings of the human imagination, memory, literature, and history. (p. 26)

This is brave and necessary, to process one's own understanding of a form and share that insight with others. One of the things that makes haiku so attractive, he writes, is its democracy and accessibility.

Hiroaki Sato's 'Hearn, Bickerton, Hubbell: Translation and Definition' makes the important assertion early that translation is "influenced by the translator's knowledge and sensibility" (p. 30). Sato quotes the example of translations by Yuasa Nobuyuki, whose outdated understanding of poetry in English combined unfortunately with an anxiety that Japanese haiku, "translated straightforwardly, would be unintelligible to English readers" (30). This doesn't bode well for the transmission of cultural artefacts and is an idea relevant to several articles in the anthology. Sato regards haiku as fundamentally a single-line poem, since they are written in one vertical line in Japanese. Contentious at the time of writing, the practice now seems much more widespread, in English at least, with an increasing number of haiku employing the single line (Jim Kacian has articulated some useful guidelines on the subject; 2010). In fact, the three-line convention was almost certainly established by translation practices, especially into English.

James Shea's 'Reading an Evening Breeze: Buson's Hokku in Translation' makes the important distinction between Japanese *onji* (sounds units; via the associated term *morae*, used by linguists) and English syllables, and gives the example of a word which is one syllable in English but five morae in Japanese, implying, of course that a haiku in seventeen syllables is going to be considerably longer than any Japanese haiku. Shea discusses the development of some haiku aesthetics through Buson's haiku and different translations of them, a kind of historical overview or snapshot, given Buson's era: 1716-1784.

The second section groups four articles under the heading 'Haiku and Social Consciousness'. The first of these, Takeo Kuwabara's 'A Second-Class Art: On Contemporary Haiku' was written in 1946, this translation first appearing in the journal *Simply Haiku* in 2006. Kuwabara claims there is a need to assess "the spirit of *haikai*", a task for which he claims to be unprepared (p. 57). His attitude towards haiku is at times offhand and puzzling, yet some fascinating ideas and challenges are presented. He confesses to understanding little of the aesthetic principles of haiku but rightly challenges the idea that one cannot understand haiku properly until one has attempted to write them (Philip Rowland later makes a similar point in his essay). As an experiment, Kuwabara selects ten haiku by poets regarded as contemporary masters, mixed with five haiku by relatively unknown poets and removes all the names, showing them to a number of educated readers and asking their opinion, ranking them by merit being one aspect of the experiment. He then invites readers of his essay to do the same. Kuwabara says that he himself was bored by the selection and failed to understand what some of the pieces by famous writers meant. The whole experiment is unfortunately marred by the fact that many of the translations are weak, tending towards a 5/7/5 pattern of lines (though not exclusively in that form) and including a lot of padding. The author claims that some more experienced readers would recognise the work of famous poets, not through the aesthetic qualities involved but because of their reputation, but this claim is unclear. The discussion of reputation then turns to the idea that, on assuming a certain level of influence, a poet splits from a school of thought



and starts a new one. Kuwabara seems to lament the fact that there are “now more than thirty different magazines devoted to haiku” (p. 64). He references the June issue of *Studies in Haiku*, presumably from June, 1946.

Whilst I understand that a translation being made available from Japanese might make the work seem desirable, its outdatedness begs contextualisation. I think it would have been much better if an essay had been commissioned which could contextualise the work and suggest how ideas might have changed since its composition. Such an essay might quote substantially from the original, but reproducing it in full seems confusing rather than enlightening as it’s so out of step with other ideas in the book. The writing is quaint and interestingly challenging but if it addresses the issue of social consciousness it does so through a very particular historical moment, rather than a contemporary one.

Hiroaki Sato’s ‘From the 2.26 Incident to the Atomic Bombs: Haiku During the Asia-Pacific War’ is also appealing for its historical value, and Yūki Itō’s ‘New Rising Haiku: The Evolution of Modern Japanese Haiku and the Haiku Persecution Incident’ might be considered essential historical reading for this form, with its illustration of the emergence of Gendai Haiku. It centres on events from the 1940s, but for the purposes of this volume an update reflecting on the influence of movements emerging at this time on contemporary Japanese Haiku might have been more useful. Rounding out this section is Judith Halebsky’s ‘Translations and Migrations of the Poetic Diary: Roy Kiyooka’s *Wheels*’. Kiyooka’s work, written in 1969, was informed by Bashō’s travel journals, some of which Halebsky herself had retraced; again, there is a strongly historical slant to the works included.

The third section, ‘Haiku and Experimentation’ would seem, potentially, to offer more insights into contemporary practice. It begins with Yoshinobu Hakutani’s ‘Ezra Pound, Yone Noguchi and Imagism’. This essay deals astutely with the link between the image and action and Pound’s expended definition of Imagism as he moved towards Vorticism. Comparison between Pound’s work and that of Noguchi further illuminates the ideas, with some fascinating comments on superposition and on the hokku’s concern with time and space. But, again, the focus of the writing is historical, with no direct link made to contemporary practice (the article previously appeared in 1992). Jan Walsh Hokenson’s ‘Haiku as a Western Genre: Fellow Traveller of Modernism’ narrates the development of haiku outside Japan following the First World War, with particular reference to the work of French poet Paul-Louis Couchoud. Karen Jackson Ford’s ‘Marking Time in Native America: Haiku, Elegy, Survival’ describes an intriguing historical snapshot of haiku development in North America through Native American writer Gerald Vizenor and William Oandasan, whose work explores his dual Filipino and Yuki Indian heritage; together, their work spans the 1960s to the 1990s. Whilst these are fascinating reads, they are historically grounded, rather than being concerned with contemporary writing.

Richard Gilbert’s ‘The Disjunctive Butterfly: A Study of Disjunctive Method and Definitions in Contemporary English-Language Haiku’ is the essay that most clearly reflects on the potential of contemporary haiku experiment. Of all the essays in this book, it is, in my opinion, the one that most deserves to be reprinted, since it has often seemed as though the English-

Language haiku writing fraternity has not yet digested Gilbert's ideas. But even this article, originally published in 2004 and updated in 2013, cries out for a re-evaluation, in terms of whether Gilbert's distinctive ideas about disjunction have developed further or had an influence on more recent haiku publications. Such a re-evaluation would have been of enormous value to the haiku community.

Section four is titled, 'The Future of Global Haiku', beginning with editor Grant Caldwell's essay, 'Non-Japanese Haiku Today'. Caldwell's initial point is that the issue of haiku by non-Japanese poets is vexed because of the problem of "migrating" (p. 227) its cultural and linguistic substance beyond its host. For me, this evokes Martin Lucas' assertion that what we write in English is not haiku but something else, which we don't yet have a name for, and I am surprised the author doesn't reference this idea from a very well-known haiku poet, editor and theorist (see Lucas 2007). Caldwell adds that worldwide proliferation of haiku might have meant that we have come to misunderstand its essence; he wants to focus on how non-Japanese haiku poets might have captured the spirit of haiku in their own languages. He goes on to argue, convincingly, that English, like Japanese, has a remarkable malleability that allows for multiple reference points. Engaging with an idea from Hasegawa Kai that Western culture does not allow for the kind of space for contemplation that the haiku does, facilitated by the cut, Caldwell makes the compelling point that the cut could be likened to the caesura of Western writing, which creates a similar space or silence. Caldwell discusses Bashō's idea of working across the two axes of time in a haiku, the past and the newness of the present (mentioned above). Important though this idea may be, it is not contextualised in terms of any modern examples, which, a chapter about non-Japanese haiku should surely do. Similarly, in discussing non-Japanese use of kigo, reference is made to ideas by American poets Robert Hass and Jim Kacian, but no contemporary haiku are analysed in these terms, which might have helped exemplify the ideas more fully. Other than referring back to Bashō again, the writing does not communicate what the spirit of haiku preserved in other languages and cultures might be, though the Conclusion asserts that the spirit of haiku can be maintained even without use of kigo. Here, Caldwell finally offers some examples of contemporary haiku from Australia (from two issues of *Famous Reporter*, 2007 and 2012), acknowledging that this gesture doesn't necessarily sustain the point. Perhaps if they had been discussed more fully in the body of the essay, they might have strengthened his argument. The placing of these haiku in the Conclusion seems entirely the wrong choice. They are lovely examples, but, rather bizarrely, Caldwell lists the various Japanese aesthetics they collectively contain, such as *wabi*, *sabi*, *karumi*, without identifying in which poems these dynamics are found. An Appendix defines the terms, but without them being applied to individual haiku, we are not much the wiser. Whilst it makes sense that an Australian author should use Australian examples, one realises how deficient the book is in reference to contemporary journal publications, the mainstay of practice – where are the references to haiku from *Presence* (UK), *The Heron's Nest* (US); *Chrysanthemum* (Austria), *Triveni* (India); *The Mamba* (Africa), etc? Caldwell's Conclusion ends with yet another quote from Bashō. Quoting others, rather than summarising one's findings and argument, also weakens rather than strengthens a concluding section, especially when one doesn't 'speak back to' the quotation, expecting the quote to do the work, rather than showing why it is important.

Charles Trumbull's excellent article 'One Hundred Bridges, One Hundred Traditions in Haiku' charts the development of Hispanic American, French, Russian and Brazilian haiku. The dates of original composition aren't always clear, since many of the translations are Trumbull's own, but they appear to have been written between the 1940s and 1980s; this is a fascinating but purely historical account. Originally serialised across several issues of *Modern Haiku* in 2011, and updated in 2014, the essay would also benefit, for the purposes of this book, from an update. Cécile Rousselet's article, 'In the Shade of the Cherry Blossom: The Reception of Haiku in Post-Soviet Russia', follows Trumbull's and does at least update the emerging Russian tradition, with particular reference to the *Haikumena* almanac, published 2003-2011. As with other essays, the French influence is acknowledged, and it's noted that the almanac fulfilled a particular kind of response to social concerns and to globalisation. Russian haiku illustrate "the transparency of silence" and through it "the possibility of transmitting the incommunicable" (p. 292). They also invoke post-Soviet identity, as the use of haiku conjures "a mythical Russian space" (p. 296), through the reinvention of a form from another culture and another time, the haikuists "inscribing themselves in an immemorial past" (p. 297), with idyllic images of Russian nature.

Philip Rowland's 'From Haiku to the Short Poem: Bridging the Divide' has some interesting things to say about the transmission of a literary form across cultures, for example, quoting haijin and anthologist Lee Gurga concerning the anxiety that writers in North America living "dangerless lives" might struggle to evince works with the profundity of Bashō or Issa (p. 306). Rowland also wonders whether haiku poets miss development opportunities by being so solely focussed on haiku, which many seem to be, not always learning from other forms of poetry. He gives examples of how "Cross-fertilisation between haiku and other poetry may take place within a larger body of work" (p. 312), such as sequences and poems in sections; these include lines by Jorie Graham, Jesse Glass and Joseph Massey, the latter appearing in Rowland's *NOON: Journal of the Short Poem*. Through this journal, Rowland has been investigating the link between haiku and other short form poetry and so is well placed to comment on the intersection. He quotes further examples from the journal by poets best known as haijin, such as Marlene Mountain, John Kinory and Jim Kacian and references Richard Kostelanetz's fabulous single-word concrete poem, 'SNOW'. But, again, the article is out of date, published in 2008, with the *NOON* examples from 2006 and 2007 issues. *NOON* is still being published, so that it might have been a relatively straightforward task to write an update commenting on where Rowland sees the cross-pollination between haiku and other short forms of poetry manifesting at present.

The fourth section comes to a close with Ban'ya Natsuishi's 'Future of World Haiku'. This is not a terribly rigorous piece of writing. It begins enigmatically and is hard to follow at times. A re-write might have been requested. Natsuishi discusses some antecedents of haiku and key ideas from Bashō, and talks about the influence of Hokusai on nineteenth and twentieth century European painters. He notes that Japanese haiku include what he calls fixed form and free form. He asks the important question, "What is the difference between free-form haiku and a free short poem in three lines?" (p. 325). Though he claims no one can answer the question, he gives

an example which begins to do so, and a little more discussion would see the point home. The essay then ends as abruptly as it began. (A number of other essays also suffer from poor conclusions, for example, both pieces by Sato.) It hardly points the way to the future of world haiku, though it does raise some engaging, general ideas.

The Afterword by Anita Patterson tries to pull these disparate writings together, arguing that the book's chapters have shown how "haiku has fostered transnational dialogue across time and space, playing an important role in the historical emergence of twentieth-century avant-garde poetics" (p. 330). I agree that haiku has achieved these things but am not convinced that the book demonstrates the fact; it certainly touches on these themes, but is not sufficiently transnational. It is remarkable that the book makes no mention of the very vibrant haiku scene in Croatia, which, although a little quieter in the last few years was particularly vibrant in the previous twenty. The lack of recent writings means that the volume makes no mention of burgeoning haiku scenes in India or Africa. It has made some reference to the avant-garde in the twentieth century but without consistency. The Afterword ends with the broad assertion that haiku facilitates cross-fertilisation of ideas and cultures in ways which point to peace in a world of violent viewpoints, which seems like a bit of an add-on.

Most of the essays in this book raise questions that, with a more coherent strategy, might have been answered. They are not so much questions about the future of haiku as questions about its current state, so that, as suggested, many of the articles would have benefitted from being updated; this might have included improvements to structure and style, which would enhance their impact and readability. Whilst it's well taken that differing views will be expressed across a range of essays, in some cases they fuel confusion that might have been dispelled with a more coherent marshalling of resources. For example, several authors conflate Japanese onji and English syllables, which are approximately related but not the same. Both Kuwabara and Sato do this, and even Natsuishi suggests that most 'overseas haiku' is "not imitative of the Japanese fixed form of five, seven and five syllables" (p. 325). Shirane claims that Bashō wrote seventeen-syllable hokku, which of course he didn't, he wrote hokku in 17 onji.

The volume includes rather erratic referencing, with each article having its own mode. The Bibliography contains references to a number of articles published in *Juxtapositions*, the world's only peer-reviewed journal for haiku studies in English (founded in 2015), but no pieces from that journal have been discussed directly, with the result that promising emerging trends towards interdisciplinary studies, such as the link between writing and neuroscience, are notably absent from the book. Many of my criticisms reflect on the kinds of things normally picked up by referee reports; the publishers must take some responsibility for these shortcomings of purpose and framing.

When one tries to interpret who the book is aimed for based on its content, I would say that its target audience is the academic who wants a pretty thorough understanding of the history of the form but isn't particularly interested in contemporary practice or where haiku might go in the future. The most recent approaches to haiku considered in the book are from 2011; one gets some impression as to the state of the art up until that time, but this leaves more than ten years

unaccounted for, and there is really no sense of where it sits in 2023 (or even 2022, allowing for the fact that the publishing process takes time). I have often been advised that research which is more than 10-12 years old is out of date and that one should seek more recent sources. I do feel there's an argument in the humanities for the importance of timeless work which begs regular reconsideration, but such an argument doesn't seem to be made here, and the various expectations set up by the book demand something more recent. The strength of the book is that some of these pieces are essential historical reading. The back cover blurb does assert that the book "provides a historical overview", but this is so much the focus that the title of the book needs to include a phrase like 'An historical reader', to better reflect its contents, as it stands. If the book had included a section of historical pieces, clearly labelled as such; a section of updated articles; and a section of at least 3-4 entirely new articles, then its aims might have been more fully achieved. The Introduction's final claim that "this book lays the groundwork for new ways of seeing haiku" (p. 11) is only partially realised. I would recommend buying this book to anyone interested in haiku, but would also caution them that it doesn't articulate the state of the art in this decade and could better point the way forward.

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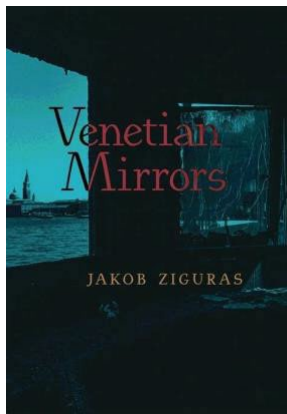
# TEXT

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## ‘No First View’

*review by Stephen McNerney*



Jakob Ziguras  
Venetian Mirrors  
Angelico Press, Brooklyn, NY 2024  
ISBN 9781621389675  
Pb 342 pp AUD40.00

Jakob Ziguras is the most intellectually interesting Australian poet writing today. He is also, along with Stephen Edgar, among the most accomplished formalists. *Venetian Mirrors* is his third collection. It has been endorsed by John Milbank and Kevin Hart and includes a preface by David Bentley Hart – all significant theologians and literary artists of various kinds.

Ziguras is a self-described ‘lapsed philosopher’, and his concerns have become increasingly theological in recent years. The first epigraph in the volume is from Sergius Bulgakov, the Russian Orthodox priest and theologian:

History is a broken mirror, which reflects the image of God in man in a distorted and fragmented manner. The universal ‘apocatastasis’ consists in restoring this integral image, in uniting its fragments for its revelation beyond history. (np)

This is the work undertaken by Christ, the lamb slain from the foundation of the world, who, in David Jones’ famous gloss of the scriptures, gathers up the fragments that remain lest they

be lost. We may see the idea of the restoration of all things in Christ as the theological lens through which the volume's content is ordered. Venice is mentioned in the next two epigraphs, from Régis Debray and Jacopo de' Barbari respectively, and becomes thereafter both metaphor and actualization of the larger theological ordering of themes and images suggested by Bulgakov.

The arrangement of the volume reinforces this. The first two sequences contain 150 poems between them, and each poem is performed in two modes: a formal mode containing four quatrains (Meredithian sonnets, if you will), and a corresponding free-verse mode, which rearranges the essential content of the first mode. This in turn is a performance of another metaphor: the image of the city of Venice in the water, and the city itself (containing and contained by its reflections), in its various aspects. The two modes of each poem also reflect the relationship between writer and reader – the writer presents the form, and the reader, in the act of reading, both reflects and rearranges the original and is reflected and rearranged in turn. The reader may choose to read the free-verse version of the poem first, of course, in which case the formal version becomes the image of that original. And in some ways, the formal mode, perfectly structured and closed as it is, represents the watery surface reflection of an 'original' or 'real' Venice (and larger world) that is far messier, deeper and open than its corresponding reflection, even if, as Ziguras asserts, "There's no first view of Venice" ('First View', p. 210). But you get the point.

As impressive as the book's intellectual and formal structuring is, it would not matter if Ziguras were not first and foremost an outstanding poet, with a finely attuned ear, eye and heart. Here, he is in Proustian mode:

The total archive is the empty page  
scarred by the scraping of a bone-dry pen,  
unable to describe the madeleine  
whose second taste confirms the golden age. (p. 48)

If I have one criticism of the book, it is that (at least after an initial reading), no poem clearly shakes itself free of and rises above the surrounding intellectual, theological, philosophical, historical and poetic forest, to declare: "Anthologise me!". The experience of reading *Venetian Mirrors* reminds me very much of the experience of reading Derek Walcott in every volume after *The Arkansas Testament*. One has the sense of being in the presence of an astonishingly gifted poet, but for some reason no individual poem lodges itself firmly in the memory. Happily, the many pleasures afforded by *Venetian Mirrors* are such that I know I will keep returning to it and suspect I may yet be proved wrong on this point.

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# TEXT

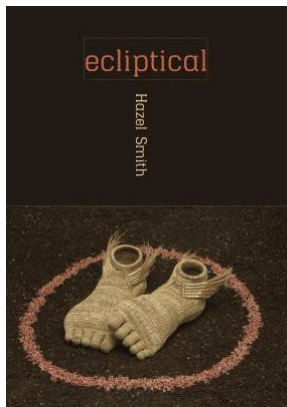
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TEXT review

## Page Soundings: Around About

*review by Jill Jones*



Hazel Smith

Ecliptical

Es-Press (imprint of Spineless Wonders), Strawberry Hills NSW AU 2022

ISBN 978192052855

Pb 138 pp AUD24.99

The first thing to note about Hazel Smith's book is the title, *ecliptical*. Is it a real word? Does it matter? As well as the gesture to elliptical orbit, which is the title of one of the book's sections, the word presumably refers to the ecliptic, which is the projection of earth's orbit around the sun onto the celestial sphere and the plane of the solar system. The word also bounces off words such as eclipse and ellipsis. It possibly even refers back to Ern Malley's *The Darkening Ecliptic*, a work famously generated via a kind of cut-and-paste process, a different version of which Smith also employs at times, as well as being a work that notoriously raised questions about authorship and subjectivity, as well as the experimental.



Smith's book, thus, could be said to orbit through a number of positions in an elliptical sense, or the sense of ellipsis, ie gaps and omissions, on both its own merits and as implicated in other processes and histories.

I was also intrigued by the cover image. Apart from anything else, it shows a representation of two feet made through an old technology, weaving. But the feet are disembodied (and encircled, which could take us back to the elliptical). Thus, technology, old as well as new, and bodies, are part of this work's processing of language. The notes at the back of the book, for instance, direct a reader via urls to performance pieces incorporating some of the book's texts. Yet this digital technology also opens up very old technology, musical instruments (admittedly some of them electronic) and the human voice. Smith, it is worth noting, performs with bands such as Australysis as well as in other configurations. For instance, do watch the short version of the film 'Hem of Memory' which includes Smith's poem, or listen to 'Scaling the Voices', by Roger Dean and Smith that uses the words in the poem 'Fractals'.

All this raises questions about old/new, past/now/future, the entanglements of technologies (for instance, these days there are very few printed materials that are not generated via digital processes, or musical performances that are not in some way enhanced by same) or what might be called intermedia. Yes, all this, and I haven't really opened the book. Of course, the way each of us reads, indeed constructs, our version of a text, is both personal as well as dictated or limited by available technologies and our own body's limitations or preferences. And to acknowledge that access to one technology or another may not be available to everyone, either continually or at all.

Now, to open the book. The contents show that there are six sections that broadly indicate some of the book's preoccupations and certainly, once read, it is clearer that they include the making of poetry itself, the social and political, the variety of human connections, identities and cultural differences, the body, particularly the female body, and time and perspective. The poems themselves are varied in form. There is verse, that is, lineated poems, some of them centred, others range left or arranged variously across the page. There are poems using bullet points or list forms, poems as multiple choice questionnaires, poems in prose blocks of various widths. I am calling them all poems but many also look like, or intersect with, other genres.

The first two lines of the first poem in the book, 'The Collection', made me cheer a little:

she wondered if the poems  
needed to add up (p. 8)

And later the poem continues:

an overarching theme  
with moat-like fencing  
was fashionable (p. 9)

I was most grateful, indeed, to read this in a time when so many poetry volumes seem to, even are required to, have an over-arching theme or topic, to be ‘about’ a definite ‘something’. In part, this is to do with the industry I myself have been a part of (an enabler of, could I say), the creative writing industry at tertiary institutions where the masters or doctoral candidate writes a book of poetry and exegetes said work as a whole. Of course, some of these books are terrific, brilliant even, and have appropriately won awards and acclaim. Yet some others can feel a little too willed, particularly where the writer may sacrifice quality to ensure all the poems somehow fit the topic or theme, or where the theme itself feels forced onto the various poems. The issue of aboutness, or really I mean over-aboutness, also stretches across the requirements of funding bodies, of certain fellowships and residencies, and of publishers. Many of us who are published poets have been there, I’m sure (‘how on earth do I describe what my book is *really* about in 50 words?’). I’m glad that Smith’s speaker in this poem acknowledges that poems, of themselves and in a book, don’t need to fit neatly within some kind of ‘moat-like fencing’ or ‘fashionable’ aboutness. The title of this first poem, ‘The Collection’, seems to be a key word, linked variously to gathering, collectivity, variability, something that goes beyond individual subjectivity. Indeed, even to a line of products made for a season, such as fashion items.

Though the book is not simply a miscellany, those first lines seem to imply that there is nothing wrong necessarily with a miscellany, a medley or mix. Of course, ‘The Collection’ is but one poem, but it is the book’s first poem. I take that as making some kind of statement or claim about how to approach this book, and that’s how I will read it. And you don’t have to look too far into the book to come across these further lines in ‘Fractals’:

*what would you do if you heard sobbing  
and you could not make it belong? (p. 11)*

or in ‘Personhood: A Few Preliminaries’:

Ought does not make an author, does not make autonomy. (p. 12)

The speakers in Smith’s poems also query ideas of ‘authenticity’ in the appropriately titled ‘Faking It’:

many a poem  
struggling to be sincere  
seems false

a robot could do better (p. 20)

That last line may or perhaps may not be Smith’s own belief, though the poem’s speaker appears to believe it. Later in the book, however, there are poems written using ‘deep learning’, ie. a form of AI. My own brief foray into ‘asking’ AI to write a poem resulted in something that was both laughable and dismal, but my grasp on AI is pretty minimal whereas Smith has a long history of working with various digital technologies. As she says in her notes at the end of the book: ‘Machine Learning, and Artificial Intelligence more broadly, raise fascinating

questions about human creativity and human control’ (p. 121). They have been discussed for some time, indeed by Smith herself elsewhere, but this note and this book doesn’t explicitly parse these ‘fascinating’ questions. The book, however, does offer both examples as well as nods to them, such as those noted above. And let’s not forget that fascination has to do with charm, allure, bewitchment and the spell. I am sure Smith does not use her words lightly and, thus, would be aware of what she is gesturing to. Indeed, in her last book, *Word Migrants*, for instance, part of one of her poems ‘The Educator’ reads:

she pulls books at random off the shelves  
and from a witch’s brew of  
cut-ups, misfits, annexations  
conjures up a wicked quilt (Smith, p. 58)

This sense of the playful brew is alive in this book as well and that includes numerous experiments with language including the computer-assisted.

Of course, past experiments throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> with chance operations, found poetry, various forms of search engine poetry, have all challenged in various ways the idea of individual authorship of a poem and moved poetry beyond standard lyric and similar modes. And so now, here are poems derived from machine learning, that, like other iterations of AI, are using algorithms to train computing systems to recognise recurring patterns, make predictions, and learn from data. But Smith also states in her note that in her case here there has been a selection process, conducted by a human (the ‘poet’), to sort through the textual work generated by the machine, to arrange it, to add to and edit it. Harking back to my own AI-generated poem, although that cliché-ridden piece of light (very light) verse had an only a loose kind of sense, it was actually more solid in the way it conformed to a pattern (a rhyming one, this particular AI poem generator had decided, even though I’d asked for ‘free’ verse). It was a boring pattern but it did its work.

Certainly, AI generators are continually being fed large datasets of existing poems, allowing them to generate poems in various ways, so that, if I was more adept in the machine learning or coding fields, I might find it giving me poems that could be more interesting, even maybe ‘good’. That seems to assume collaboration at least, if not human direction in the overall coding. But who is telling the online poem generators one can readily find these days, what a poem is? Is it a piece of writing that rhymes, or conforms to a certain metre, or is it a ‘lyric’ in whatever sense one makes of that, an epic, an ode, etc? Still, is this any more or less original than poems by human poets who are drawing on the traditions and texts of the past and following and breaking with certain forms and themes? Computers are good at patterns (form), but what equivalence does analysing a huge dataset to produce, say, a sonnet, have to the way the human mind operates, even via its most objective focus on problem-solving? I can’t answer that question (though I have feelings about it) but it causes me to consider the ways I, as a very fallible person, employ quite often to make a poem.

Machines don't have experiences, nor do they have emotions. They don't have bad moods, and they aren't silly. They don't, at least yet, have that kind of situatedness nor wet-ware. And the sheer weirdness or even wrongheadedness of many of our own actions, including writing, is presumably not yet mimicked by AI, and if it could be (or even if it has), would that then defeat the purpose of having machines do methodical more-than-human operations? On the other hand, how original is a lot of human-made poetry? Don't so many metaphors and similes that we write or read veer towards cliché, or the obvious, certainly the conventional, century after century? The poems that poets write now are built on ideas, themes, forms from the past, well, many pasts considering the poetry and song-making cultures of this world. Already I am having a few words with myself about my own writing.

I am aware that some work is indeed being carried out by other poets, not just Smith, working in conjunction with machine learning or coding. For instance, African-American poet Lillian-Yvonne Bertram's 2019 book, *Travesty Generator* was produced algorithmically, via coding to explore the experience of African-Americans within the various structures of white supremacy and to critique the supposed neutral codes or scripts under which racism actually operates. In an interview Bertram states that developing the coding was, in a sense, as a creative act: "You're not just using an [AI](#) machine that someone else has made, so in some ways it's akin to making your own tool, or your own paint brush, or making your own pigment; which actually I've found to be a very human process" (Stening, 2024). Her book was longlisted for the 2020 National Book Award for Poetry in the US. And, clearly, this is an approach that is far more sophisticated and rigorous than me idly playing with an AI poem generator.

What of Smith's computer-assisted poems? They maybe aren't poems that will strike an immediate chord in some readers as much as her other ones in this book, though I enjoyed them. While most of Smith's work in *ecliptical* uses language that is, for the most part, clear and often factually based, these few computer-assisted poems require a different reading approach. I suspect they work as well as performance pieces as they do on the page. They are definitely not conventional lyric poems, nor are they documentary poems. They explore language in specific ways, variously, which is why I suspect Smith has chosen to work with computer-assisted writing, to find connections beyond one's own convention-set.

The book's back cover blurb puts it this way: "*ecliptical* also flirts with the posthuman in some collaborative computer-assisted poems". Of course, ever since the first humans made tools, we have been post-human, but this maybe hints at something further. 'Flirts', of course, is suggestive of the playful as well as, obviously, the sexual/romantic. This also suggests a very human involvement with the machine-generated work and possibly hints at a wish for a response from the machine and/or its products, a wink at least, if not a nod, or a bit of a twirl.

One machine-assisted poem, 'Tottering', consists mainly of short, i.e. one to four letter words, that are articles, pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, etc, often repeated. It begins: "and it that to the the and the a a of the to the the the to the then" (p. 89). Occasionally longer words or other words appear amongst these words, in bold type, such as:

...room...glimpse...shy...perhaps...said speechless...tentative...unknown...  
 denial...demise...adult...like...intimidation...voice...sleeve...finger...throat...  
 wail...oblique...numb...forbidden...under...child...shame...indecipherable...  
 she...illusion...exasperation...unanswerable. (p. 89)

I had wondered if there was a poem within a poem here, ie that the bolded words could be read separately as a continuous piece, but I don't believe that works, even in any kind of ambiguous or indeterminate sense that fits this book. Smith notes that the bolded words were added by her after the machine generation process. And they do draw a reader's attention, while around them the repeated short words, such as "the", or "a", perform a kind of anxiety or blockage through stutter (the title 'Tottering' also hints at instability of some kind) which chimes with words such as "shy", "glimpse", "denial", "wail", "numb", "indecipherable", "exasperation", "unknowable". It has an unnerving even uncanny tone, making one wonder what has happened to this "she", what is the "shame" or the "illusion", while "the **finger** of in as the with the of of and the the in the **throat** of i the the the the was i **wail**" (p. 89) hints at some kind of almost inexpressible fright or violence.

The poem 'Cool Shrug' appears to be playing with words, as two-word phrases, primarily modifier+noun, as stand-alone descriptions that also feed off others, repeated in different contexts, for example, 'cool shrug', 'child's shrug', 'cool reminder', 'cool shuddering', 'coolest depletions', 'changing shrug'. This includes variations on the word 'menstruation' and words such as 'incest' and 'homebody' (p. 61). I can imagine various interpretations and I'm wary of proposing a specific meaning but, despite the word 'cool', the poem also seems to be gesturing to something a little more heated, to trouble for women in the home, and outside.

The issue this kind of poem-making raises for writing is also one around collaborative approaches to writing. There is collaboration, in a sense, with a machine in the book, and also collaboration with Smith's creative partner, Roger Dean, in programming the generated words. Some other poems are collaborative in that they have been written as voiceovers or accompaniments for performance projects Smith has been involved in, using film, music, etc. This also raises the question of whether all poems, all writings, are versions. In other words, textual material exists in many forms from draft to proof to various editions, revisions, translations, adaptations and this existence occurs within various cultural and aesthetic frameworks. In other words, poems – spoken, written, printed, digitally produced, performed, machine-assisted etc. – are relational, they are works-in-process. The poem is unfinished, continually. It is heterogeneous, full of possibilities, including those possibilities beyond the single author/artist/maker (an expanding universe?). What input might an editor make? Is the AI generated version of a poem the original rather than when the poet edits it, changes it, given that AI is taking its data from a huge data set it has harvested, whoever or whatever this 'it' is and what data has actually been used. There is no neutral data. The old truism 'garbage in, garbage out' is worth remembering in this context.

On the other hand, could AI be a kind of liberation for a writer? It may open up new pathways or allow a critique of the idea of 'data'. While the computer-assisted poems in the book are

charming, fascinating in their own right, they gain, perhaps even more than the other poems, a suggestion of the uncanny through their inclusion alongside other poems. They make you stop and think more about resonance – personal and cultural reverberations as well as soundings – rather than obvious meanings.

I realise that I have mostly focused on certain ideas in Smith’s book that have interested me for their generative implications. However, a reader of this text will also find and enjoy poems that deal with or are inflected by a particular cultural moment – Brexit, Boris, Trump, Covid. There are a number of poems with biographical bases, reflecting on the lives of particular people such as ‘The Riddle of Fanny Mendelssohn’, or ‘Lee Krasner (not Mrs Pollock)’. There are poems of false and missing identities, of displacement. Many of the poems play with form as noted above. They are mostly not classic lyric poems, poems of introspection, about fraught relationships or intimacies, although there is a personal thread running through many poems set in a broader context. At times some pieces seem like almost affectless statements, however surreal, and at other times complicated with cultural and personal touchstones.

It is the accumulation of the data that gives many of these poems their emotional impact. In some poems, the title sets up the idea or concept and the lines or stanzas riff around the concept in multiple ways, for example: ‘Hen in a Coop’, ‘The Wall’, ‘Plague’, ‘Screenshots’, ‘Time Lapse’. For instance, ‘The Wall’ begins with a scene of visiting the Berlin Wall as it is now, but as well as being presented in a run-on wall-like shape, the poem accumulates reflections on other meanings and situations for ‘wall’: ‘ghettos castles slits for arrows’, ‘wailing wall’, “poetry wars on the defensive writers block if walls could talk” (p. 29). Wall Street gets a mention, and firewalls, as well as the wall between the US and Mexico and returns finally to Berlin. The poem throws a lot at us but in its shifts it gets us to consider how walls and wars are linked, all kinds of wars, hot ones and cold ones, military and religious conflicts, aesthetic and cultural wars as well. It ends back at the Berlin Wall with “JFK thought the wall was a hell of a lot better than a war” (p. 30), which begs a number of questions, intentionally, with its reverberation with current political conflicts, including those that are in train now, after the poem was written. A reader can make much of this as the poem’s slippage due to lack of punctuated stoppage allows connections, echoes and/or reverberations that maybe even Smith couldn’t have been aware of.

In a sense, this book is a series of experiments, opening up the language of the poems through form, such as unexpected syntactical arrangements, structures and dis/connections, or continual rearrangement of fields of reference and forms of address, and modal shifts of propositional statements, patterns of placement that affect and alter meaning making via both sight and sounding. I use this word ‘experiment’ in a similar way that Smith herself uses it, as she explains in a recent interview:

I embrace experimentalism but I have some problems with the term ‘experimental’ as it is sometimes used in the contemporary poetry world. For me ‘experimental’ mainly means work that is negotiating new territory, using new techniques and approaches. But the word ‘experimental’ is often used to describe a specific school of writing that is part

of an alternative tradition of poetry, which started with the dadaists, surrealists and futurists. This kind of work sometimes, though not always, courts discontinuity, non-linearity and collage but it is not necessarily experimental in the first sense I outlined because it is normalised, to a certain extent, as a set of alternative conventions. So for me the word ‘experimental’ is important but it begs a lot of questions. (Brewster and Smith, np)

In other words, for Smith ‘experimental’ is not used in reference to some kind of coterie or aesthetic alignment, but to material process and the work of making poems. I find this refreshing as, yes, the term ‘experimental poet’ can become rather meaningless or it can be used as either an affirmation or a slight, depending on who uses the term and in what context.

This experimentation then offers up a refreshing and sophisticated multilayered series of poems, of texts, that create a verbal playground for a reader. There is humour here as well. Along the way, Smith asks us to consider the printed poetry book as just one node among others for expression and/or performance of texts and their variants, as a form of interdisciplinarity. What Smith also successfully does is show how a book can swerve through various topics or aboutnesses and offer freedom for a reader to construct meaning in expansive and unexpected rather than predictable ways. There *is* a structure, the book being a made thing, composed and published within material limitations, but it is a capacious one. This is true to the way the mind works and also the way the world works, through slippage, swing, oscillation, focus then distraction, detail then horizon shift, first thoughts then second and third. There is no one track, or topic, or thought. There is no one grand linear narrative or theory. This is also an ethical stance, in that a reader has to ask questions about their own thinking about and participation in the world. While the last poem in the book, ‘The knockings’, with its scenario of strange knockings in the speaker’s life increasing until they can no longer be ignored – “Once I open the door to them, I know it is game over” (p. 119) – can be interpreted variously, to me they represent both the mysterious insistence of the creative process and our obligations to listen and act. And for the reader to continually assess what the aboutness might be of the knockings they may hear or feel in and beyond their own life.

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