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Channels and backchannels: Trauma in Kate Lilley's Tilt and Anders Villani's Totality

Abstract:

Trauma theory has become central to analysing suffering in literature, and works that testify to trauma have grown more numerous and influential in contemporary Australian poetry. Yet the question of how poetry in particular represents trauma remains understudied. This article discusses the representation of trauma in two Australian poetry collections: Kate Lilley's *Tilt*, and my own *Totality*. I analyse how Lilley's collection oscillates between a lucid, narrative recounting of traumatic violence and a depersonalised, formally dense, allusive poetics. In this clash of strategies, trauma constitutes an ongoing negotiation, and the wounded subject wishing to heal relies on an absolute notion, the recovered self, which is both essential and impossible. Critically reflecting on the writing of *Totality*, I consider how trauma inheres as a catastrophic knowledge that the subject must and must not articulate, and how the dialectic of disclosure and concealment influenced my poetic practice at the formal and rhetorical levels.

Biographical note:

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Introduction

In 2021, Stephanie Convery interviewed *Overland* co-editor Evelyn Araluen and Australian Poetry CEO Jacinta Le Plastrier about the growing representation of marginalised identities in the nation's poetry publications and prizes. "Both Le Plastrier and Araluen", Convery writes, "link this shift in Australian poetics to the spaces created by the #MeToo movement, and specifically to the 2018 publication of Kate Lilley's autobiographical collection, *Tilt*". *Tilt*'s "allegations of abuse and sexual exploitation" against Lilley's mother, Dorothy Hewett, and other artistic figures of the 1960s and 1970s led, for Araluen and Le Plastrier, to a reappraisal of the Australian literary canon and the structures of – white, patriarchal, heterosexual – power it scaffolds. Yet despite its seminal impact, *Tilt* remains little-studied in literary criticism. The revelations the book contains risk overshadowing its originality as a poetic testimony to psychological trauma.

How does *Tilt* function as testimony? How does Lilley's poetry voice and reify trauma? I began asking these questions while posing similar ones to my own poetry. I was working on *Totality* (2022), my second collection, an inquiry into childhood sexual abuse and its resonances in adulthood. In drafts, I noticed a torsion between lucid description – a desire to articulate and integrate what happened – and indirection, suggestion and ambiguity. I observed a similar interplay in *Tilt*, notwithstanding its differences from my work. In my 2020 review of Lilley's collection, I quoted Judith Herman (1992) to summarise this phenomenon, which experts have long observed in trauma survivors (Freud, 1974; Lifton, 1983): "the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma" (p. 1). Literary trauma theory, however, has rarely applied the "central dialectic" of disclosure and concealment in frameworks for studying representations of trauma, in poetry or other forms of writing. Critics in the poststructural tradition have instead tended to centre trauma's apophatic, or unspeakable, quality and the aesthetic strategies that evoke it (Davis & Meteroja, 2020; Luckhurst, 2008).

This article has four aims: to examine the trauma testimony in *Tilt*; to critically reflect on my own book, *Totality*; to posit the dialectic of disclosure and concealment as a critical "counter-form ... that would maintain trauma as an object of inquiry" (Rothberg, 2014, p. xiii); and to consider how studying the attempt to represent trauma in poetry can enrich our understanding of poetry itself. I am not concerned with how reading constitutes a witnessing or transmission of trauma, or the therapeutic potential of writing about traumatic experiences (see Pennebaker, 2004). My focus, as a writer and scholar, is how poetic form, rhetoric and ways of knowing can represent traumatised thought and behaviour. More broadly, I believe that attending to the subtlety and complexity with which poetry can voice trauma is one way to resist the conceptual flattening that the field's popularity risks. If, as Dale Tracy (2017) observes, "in the humanities, trauma theory has become the dominant discourse for the consideration of suffering" (p. 10),

we must be alert to the temptation to use trauma as catch-all and erode its status as a particular kind of experience.

My analysis of *Tilt* comprises three sections: confession, trace and allusion. I show that the book transitions from a narrativised, confessional account of childhood sexual abuse in its first section to a fragmentary, impersonal, allusive poetics in its second and third sections, all but removing the autobiographical ‘I’ of the collection’s most confronting poems. This anti-lyric swerve, I argue, heightens our focus on how the book’s early violence – and the subject who experiences it – diffuses into the subsequent text, which in turn accentuates the narrative clarity that establishes *Tilt* as trauma testimony. At the same time, appreciating the full extent of Lilley’s account requires a careful unpacking of formal traces and intertextual allusions such that they function as open secrets, blurring disclosure and concealment. Not only does this torsion express trauma’s central dialectic, but it also exemplifies poetry’s always-unfinished aspiration to mastery of its subject matter. Through the writings of Maurice Blanchot, Joseph Acquisto, Jacques Derrida and others, I argue that the traumatised subject seeking to heal through testimony relies on an absolute ideal – the recovered self – which Lilley’s poetry both scrutinises and retains as an essential goal.

Discussing *Totality*, I consider how my poetry renders trauma as a catastrophic knowledge that the subject must and must not articulate. I also detail how trauma’s destabilising effects paradoxically intensify the subject’s engagement with notions of selfhood and recovery, which lyric subjectivity – as a fraught emblem of personal unity – dramatises. Where *Tilt*’s sections contain contrasting approaches to testimony, *Totality* cultivates an atmosphere of trauma through symbolism, pierced by lucid disclosures that root the account in hyper-awareness, rather than repression. Details related to the traumatic event accrete, linking past and present behaviour and intensifying the effect of trauma’s central dialectic on the subject’s attempts to bear witness. Traumatic symptoms express themselves most perniciously in the subject’s efforts at intimacy, a proximity to the other that doubles as a prerequisite of the testimonial contract and an echo of sexual violence. Against Lilley’s queer poetics, I consider how the subject’s inquiry in *Totality* into his victimisation confronts his power as a white, heterosexual man.

My conclusion foregrounds both collections’ interest in address: the testimony to the other on which recovery depends, and which poetic apostrophe can model. Both books, that is, describe an arc from wounding to healing, using poetry to critique this arc (as linear; as cliché; as unrealistic) while respecting its attraction and value. I borrow from Sybille Krämer and Sigrid Weigel (2017) to argue that poetic representations of trauma can bridge the distinction between “discursive” (p. xi) and “embodied” (p. x) truth that polarises testimony studies.

Literature review

Attempts to discuss how poetry represents trauma must define trauma: posit what trauma is to consider the poetic strategies that could evoke it. Literary trauma theory has flourished since the 1990s (Thiemann, 2017, p. 2), yet scholars have studied the relation between trauma and

poetry since at least Walter Benjamin's 1940 essay 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire'. Benjamin's essay anticipates modern trauma theory in reading the "traumatophile" (p. 174) Frenchman's poetry through Sigmund Freud's (1985) conception of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: as a shocking breach in the mind's "shield against stimuli", which escapes conscious processing and deposits a "memory trace" that the subject attempts to remove via an unconscious "compulsion to repeat" the original experience (p. 301) through nightmares, flashbacks and triggers. Freud's ideas about trauma resemble those which literary trauma theorists have overwhelmingly applied (Davis & Meretoja, 2020, pp. 3–4). They also comport with descriptions of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The idea that a traumatising event escapes conscious processing, that the subject suffers from its after-effects unconsciously, underpins the apophatic paradigm for understanding how poetry represents trauma. If trauma defines the subject *and* exceeds their ability to know or say it except indirectly, poetry is language at its most essential and indirect: "a poem says one thing and means another" (Riffaterre, 1978, p. 1). Poetry in this model, which also traces to Holocaust studies and deconstruction (Toremans, 2018), epitomises the tropes of "absence, indirection, and repetition" that theorists have used to study trauma in texts (Pederson, 2018, p. 101). Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's 1991 book *Testimony*, for example, reads Paul Celan's poetry for "truths that are unspoken – or unspeakable – and ... yet inscribed" (pp. xiii–xiv). Erasure, absence and patterns of enabled and disabled address are among the features of Celan's poetry that, for Felman, testify to "a knowledge they do not possess" (p. 37). Similarly, Geoffrey Hartman's (1995) groundbreaking study suggests that the subject remembers trauma in "the form of a perpetual troping of it"; "[o]n the level of poetics," Hartman argues, "literal and figurative may correspond to these two types of cognition" (p. 537). Trauma, as unconscious menace, inflects form.

Walter Kaladjian's (2006) metacommentary on modernist American testimonial poetry holds that "trauma breaches discursive representation and eclipses thought itself" (p. 3). Such a view leads Kaladjian to consider how poetry's:

figurative language, its reliance on catachresis (mixed and contradictory metaphors), aposiopesis (or invoked interruptions of absence and silence, often through ellipsis), anacoluthon (non sequiturs and shifting patterns of syntax), its grammatological techniques and the spatial arrangement on the page – together form a salutary medium for staging traumatic histories. (p. 11)

For Kaladjian, poetry can interrupt, forestall, delay and silence literal meaning to evoke trauma. Ulrich Baer (2000), in his own study of trauma and modern poetry, expresses a similar sentiment: "because poetry privileges language to convey meaning beyond a given word's semantic range, it creates an experience without necessarily naming it" (p. 30). Formal inscription, beyond mere "communication", characterises poetic representations of trauma for both Baer and Kaladjian. The task is to say the unsayable, if "[t]he question raised by both

trauma and poetry is how to expose ourselves to an experience that is defined by its absolute singularity and inaccessibility” (Baer, 2000, p. 13).

“Lyrical utterance”, writes Susan Gubar (2003) in *Poetry After Auschwitz*, “often announces itself as an involuntary return to intense feelings about an incomprehensible moment” (p. 8). The Freudian compulsion to repeat, that is, characterises trauma and lyric poetry alike. Antony Rowland (2014) agrees, stressing testimonial poetry’s adeptness at “conveying the epiphanic moment, truncated traumatic recollections, silences beyond the black print, and the emotive space that need not be repressed behind the supposed objectivity of ... facts” (pp. 4–5). Moreover, Gubar holds that poetry “resist[s] ... narrative closure” (p. 11), and “thereby marks discontinuity” (p. 7). In lieu of an “explanatory plot”, poetry offers “spurts of vision, moments of truth” (p. 7). Gubar’s study addresses the specific ethical and aesthetic challenges of representing a historical metatext. Still, we can see how poetry’s relation to trauma in this model hinges on its capacity to disrupt linear narrative and resist the totalising closure it offers.

Importantly, Rowland (2014) departs from poststructural trauma theory in acknowledging “a critical need to explore testimonial poetics that do not privilege ellipsis, aporia, and vexed aesthetics” (p. 40). He discusses post-war testimonial poetry, for example, which eschews lyric epiphany in favour of “sparse, prosaic diction” and “anti-aesthetic reportage” (p. 38). Such work makes clear, for Rowland, that poetic testimony need not demand the formal “re-inscription of trauma” (p. 12) that trauma theory’s apophatic paradigm has long espoused. It may tell a clear story, or part of one.

What makes trauma unspeakable? Poststructural theory has answered, following Freud: “the event’s essential incomprehensibility, the force of its *affront to understanding*” (Caruth, 1995, p. 154). But critics have challenged the validity – and usefulness – of this thesis. Richard McNally’s (2003) psychological research concludes that “trauma survivors exhibit an impaired ability to forget disturbing material” (p. 157). Recourse to the unspeakable, for Naomi Mandel (2006), “gestures toward and away from the complex ethical negotiations that representing atrocity entails” (p. 5). Anne Rothe (2016) argues that “trauma theory contradicts the core therapeutic notion that traumatic memories must be integrated via narration” (p. 185). According to Roger Luckhurst (2008), “if trauma is a crisis in representation, then this generates ... a compulsive outpouring of attempts to formulate narrative knowledge” (p. 83).

Yet, as *Tilt* and *Totality* make clear, trauma’s availability to conscious recall does not make it easy to articulate or process. It may remain, as Avital Ronell (1994) observes, “a catastrophic knowledge that one cannot communicate to others” (p. 315). This is because the subject occupies a “social location” (Brown, 2008, p. 26) that impacts how they suffer – and attempt to make meaning of and heal from – traumatic experience. The Australian theorist Meera Atkinson (2017) points out trauma “is gendered, raced, classed, economised, and otherwise shaped by relations of power, privilege, and disadvantage” (p. 3). While Atkinson’s observation may seem obvious, it reflects a broader challenge in trauma theory to the (patriarchal) paradigm that has viewed trauma predominantly in terms of discrete events that affect stable, coherent subjects (Balaev, 2008; Rothberg, 2014; Meteroja, 2020). Beyond neurobiology, socially

mediated approaches ask: for whom might trauma remain “unspeakable”? For whom might recovery feel within, or out of, reach? Vital to such work has been feminist scholarship, including Maria Root’s (1992) influential concept of “insidious trauma”, and Laura S. Brown’s (2008) critique of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* as too narrow to accommodate trauma more commonly suffered by marginalised identities. In literary studies, Atkinson’s research on the poetics of transgenerational trauma (2017) and “trans-species” trauma (2023), Mary Jean-Chan’s examination of racial trauma as a driver of poetics in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* (2018), and Tine Kempenaers’s essay on the traumatic conflict between queer desire and heteronormativity in Richard Siken’s collection *Crush*, represent new critical perspectives that centre the “systems” (Rothberg, 2014, p. xiii) that give rise to and structure the experience of trauma for particular subjects. In ways that differ for every sufferer, trauma evinces what Luckhurst (2008) calls a “fundamental tension between interruption and flow, blockage and movement” (p. 79). How can poetry represent this tension? What can this tell us about how poetry functions?

Trauma in *Tilt*

Confession

Tilt’s titular first section, beginning with a sequence called ‘Etudes’, establishes the book as trauma testimony, if “testimony is the return to the personal experience of a severely traumatizing ... event ... that opens the possibility for an alternative ... psychological outcome” (Laub, 2013, p. 195). What is striking is the section’s clarity of remembrance, and the autobiographical voice that Lilley all but withdraws thereafter. These poems foreground trauma’s status as a catastrophic knowledge, and poetry’s capacity for narrative discourse. An etude is “a piece of music for the practice of a point of technique” (Merriam Webster). The second part begins:

The first man who put his hands on me
was a psychiatric registrar, how about that?
He honed in on me at a party, someone’s backyard.
I’m 12 in a sexy cocktail dress
I’d seen in the window of a shop in town
on the way home from school.
Mum bought it for me... (2018, p. 18)

The poem discloses the origins of interrelated traumas: the speaker’s abuse by powerful men; and the speaker’s mother’s complicity in her abuse. The bulk of the poem’s traumatic weight falls in its final quatrain:

Mum said he and his girlfriend
had sexual intercourse standing up
like it was some sort of miracle.
He’s a specialist now, a professor, like me. (p. 18)

Did “Mum” know the man touched her daughter? It is enough that the speaker’s mother acculturates her to a system of values in which sexual freedom takes precedence and exposes her to a milieu that venerates this system. In the third ‘Etude’, Lilley repeats the phrase “sexual intercourse”, linking it with trauma:

it was always ‘sexual intercourse’
always a heatwave

That’s as close as it gets to a primal scene
the feeling of trying to step up
to join the human race (p. 19)

Lilley uses a similar phrase to “step up” in a later poem, ‘Conversation Pit 1971’: the eleven-year-old speaker, asked “[a]re you having sexual intercourse?”, realises that her mother views her virginity with mockery, and resolves “to speed up / at least get my period” (p. 24). A central notion in the third ‘Etude’ is the primal scene, a Freudian term that “designates the site of a trauma that deposits an alien and disturbing element in the suffering subject” (Fletcher, 2013, p. xiii). Originally, Freud’s primal scene refers to a child’s witnessing their parents having sex, but the concept maps onto the speaker’s constant exposure either to sexual discourse or sexual mistreatment.

The final two ‘Etudes’ affirm the speaker’s estrangement from her mother and father. In the fifth part, the speaker’s mother relays a comment by a man that “he’d taken [the speaker’s] virginity” (2018, p. 21). When the speaker claims not to know the man, her mother doubles down: “He says he went out with you / he’s certain”. The speaker’s mother takes the word of “John somebody” over that of her daughter. At the end, Lilley writes: “I don’t know him I don’t know you either”. Here, a lacerating equivalency arises between unfamiliar, abusive men and the speaker’s mother. Yet the line leaves ambiguous the question whether the speaker is replying to her mother in the scene, or retrospectively. The speaker’s assertion of her power to challenge her mother and impose distance in their relationship is, at the same time, an assertion of what she could not say – of what, at the time, may have been unspeakable.

In part six of ‘Etudes’, the speaker’s queer identity emerges: “I never really came out / just started turning up with lesbians” (p. 22). Her parents’ reaction, and the speaker’s response, complete the poem:

Your father wants to know what lesbians do
he doesn’t get it

So what?
No one gets him either (p. 22)

As in the previous part and stressed by the parallel syntax – “I don’t know you either”; “No one gets him either” – Lilley ends with the speaker’s resistance. ‘Etudes’ pitches the speaker

through a crucible that begins with a violently imposed sexual identity and ends with a sexual identity the subject chooses.

‘Party Favour’ testifies to a brutal assault, flashes forward to a rape, and confirms the speaker’s mother’s complicity: “Pushed up against the metal rim of the shower / his nails rake my back / hard enough to break the skin” (p. 27). The speaker is “locked in the bathroom / with a man twice my age,” another powerful member of the milieu that condones such mistreatment – “his house his rules he’s the producer”. As the assault occurs, four consecutive lines of clipped phrases aggress the syntax: “nymphet pulpfest / corny demeaning / ... / Lattice of pain / blood spatter”. Perhaps the most traumatic aspect of ‘Party Favour’ is how conditioned the speaker has grown to being harmed. The line after “blood spatter” precipitates the thought that “this is what I’ve been raised for”. She has been raised for this assault to function as “a curtain raiser... / for the man who won’t take no / a few months later (the visiting poet)”. To raise a child is to raise the curtain on their adulthood, and to influence who is on stage and the roles they may play. What the speaker’s mother says at the end, when the speaker discloses her rape, completes the betrayal:

I’ll tell my mother and she’ll say
she asked him he said I was into it
from then on I know it’s pointless
she’s not on my side (p. 28)

More than abusive encounters with men, the attempt to grasp and articulate the mother-daughter relationship – specifically to parse the implications of her mother’s being “not on [her] side” – lends the subject’s testimony its urgency and complexity. Confession, and poetry’s capacity for compressed narrative discourse, establishes the context for the traumatised thought and behaviour that the book’s later sections study.

Trace

If autobiographical candour governs *Tilt*’s first section, the book’s subsequent sections jettison this strategy. The lyric “I” all but disappears, which evokes a subjectivity disarticulated by trauma. Yet the earlier testimony grows more resonant, we might say, for how Lilley retracts it. What remains, despite almost no reference to the subject’s mental health, is a phenomenology patterned by mistreatment and the need for redress. Moreover, this surprising formal shift invites an important comparison between trauma and poetry. In *Tilt*, trauma affects the subject as an epistemological moving target, which always reveals new layers of influence, and, therefore, possibilities for – and resistances to – testimony and recovery. For Acquisto (2019), this interplay also characterises poetic knowledge, which is “a knowledge of poetry’s own limits, an appreciation of which should not shut down response but rather enable it” (p. 80). Poetry strives to know and master its subject – which is here the traumatised subject attempting to testify and heal – but this striving always reveals that there is more to know. Acquisto calls this friction between knowledge and ignorance poetry’s “motor” (p. 11); in *Tilt*, it reifies the conflict between the will to disclose trauma and the will to conceal it.

One of Lilley's chief means of inscribing trauma is through puns. Consider the title of the book's second section, 'Harm's Way'. An abuse victim has been placed "in harm's way": exposed to danger. Yet harm also charts a path in the world for the traumatised subject and supplies a mode of engagement with it. Another title pun, 'Civil Wrong', uses the legal term for the infringement of personal rights. The equivalent term in criminal law is "crime," and indeed, the subject testified in the book's first section to being the victim of crimes, not civil wrongs. Another reading of the title emerges: that of a wrong committed civilly, as in the subject's mistreatment at the hands of men, and her mother.

'Civil Wrong' also demonstrates how Lilley uses abstruse diction and double meanings to evoke trauma. The poem is a reel of legal terminology, suggesting a subject dizzied by the attempt to understand why people harm one another. Here is the first stanza:

Coming to the nuisance a house falls
abandonment (of residence)
abandoned intellectual property
know-how and the tort of false light
spreads falsehood freely and without recourse (2018, p. 39)

In tort law, a person comes to the nuisance when they expose themselves to a nuisance that was already occurring (moving to a nightclub district, for instance). The person may therefore find it difficult to lay blame on the cause of the nuisance. What about a child born into an ideological ferment that legitimises abuse, rape? Here, the tort of false light – which pertains to a person's right not to be falsely characterised in public – *increases* the spread of falsehoods. Again, the system favours those with the power to suppress negative publicity. Read against the first section, we detect a trauma survivor doubting her own testimony, fearing its repercussions.

'Realia', *Tilt's* third section, catalogues the personal effects of the actress Greta Garbo. In 'Soft Spot', a title pun and subtle emphases reveal a fixation with damage: "3 pc. White knit suit (spot on skirt) / Trimmed yellow velveteen coat / Decorated white felt mits / Fur trimmed felt galoshes" (p. 70). A soft spot denotes sentimental affection. Here, however, "soft" becomes slang for "weak," and the spot reveals a point at which outside forces have made their mark. This strategy culminates in 'School Set', which describes an antique "Little School Room With Dolls" (p. 72). Among the set are "painted wooden figures": "Angels with trumpets/horns / Boy and Girl each holding a flower / Condition: the Boy is missing his flower". In this absent flower, the reprehensible behaviour of men expresses itself as a trace, observed by a body hyper-attentive to threat.

Lilley's poetics grow most fragmentary when disclosing the prospect of transformation after trauma. 'Austerity' begins: "The person honourable, the crimes austere / In circumstances of woodland decay / well-suited to delinquency" (p. 76). Honour, crime, decay, delinquency: in these four concepts, ending in the notion of offences committed by a minor, Lilley evokes both the complex of the "nymphet" (p. 27) mistreated by men of high standing, and various women

in the book (including Garbo and the subject herself) accused of queer intimacy. The next five lines are crucial:

fortune favours etc
 Fortis non ferox
 The mood's hard driving and it's dirty work
 Paradiastole prevails
 redescribing vices as virtues

Why the “etc”? We assume the elided words are “the brave”. Lilley’s concealment of the full saying, and her substitute of the Latin for “fortitude without cruelty”, leaves the trope of the “brave” trauma victim occupying a hesitant position. The subject, on this reading, receives little commendation for her survival, but neither does the poem forget this survival and the bravery it required. In the final couplet, however, Lilley employs the opposite strategy: a Greek word – *paradiastole* – appears, which Lilley defines. This definition, and Lilley’s decision to include it, feels significant, given it has undergone a reframing throughout the book. Initially, the subject believes that the vice exhibited by her mother and her abusers is virtuous, educational. By ‘Austerity’, the “vice” to be “redescribed” is lesbian intimacy – and, from a trauma perspective, the subject’s sexual identity in general.

For Blanchot (1995), “the search for totality ... is the poetic claim par excellence, a claim in which the impossibility of being accomplished is included as its condition” (p. 104). Poetry’s striving for mastery over its subject matter occurs against a recognition that such striving cannot end, or begins and ends infinitely – that process and telos always contain and succeed each other. That trauma – as a suite of after-effects, including self-judgements – finds delicate formal inscription in *Tilt*, after lucid narrative testimony, distinguishes the capacity to remember the event from the lifelong inquiry it catalyses. As a reclamation of selfhood, recovery remains for Lilley’s subject a crucial goal, or totality; it also entails, as Susan Brison (2002) suggests, “facing the fact that there never was a coherent self (or story) to begin with” (p. 116).

Allusion

Tilt’s near-constant intertextual allusions, which require additional research to parse, are vital to the book’s trauma testimony, particularly when compared to the directness Lilley employs elsewhere. Derrida (2005), discussing the patterns of “encryption and decryption” in Paul Celan’s poetry and borrowing a phrase from Murray Krieger, asks “how ... one [can] manifest a secret as secret” (p. 68). Through allusion, Lilley represents a subject attempting to make sense of what happened, where cognitive urgency operates in tension with conclusions that border on unspeakable.

One of the book’s most consequential allusions is its central pun. In the titular poem, the speaker recounts working at a Sydney leisure centre as a teenager. The second stanza begins:

When Brooke Shields came to town
 for the premier of *Tilt*

(in between Pretty Baby and Blue Lagoon)
we rolled out the red carpet... (2018, 12)

Lilley makes no further mention of Shields or the movie, but this allusion foreshadows events to come. Shields, of course, rose to prominence at a young age and became a symbol of exploitative behaviour by powerful men towards underage girls (Swanson, 2016). In the film, Shields plays ‘Tilt’ Davenport, a fourteen-year-old pinball prodigy, whom a much older man – Neil Gallagher, played by Ken Marshall – persuades to leave home and travel with him so that he can bet on her games. Though Gallagher’s relationship with Tilt is not sexual, they share hotel rooms. More disturbing, however, is the way that Tilt is sexualised by almost every man she meets. What makes this behaviour especially obscene is how young Shields looks – barely pubescent (Durand, 1979). We must assume that these men understand they are propositioning a child. A “nymphet” (Lilley, 2018, p. 27).

Lilley’s critique of male violence and celebration of queer intimacy culminates in ‘Association Copy’. An association copy refers to a book that belonged to its author, or to someone related to its contents. In this description of an old book, presumably a volume in Garbo’s library, we find the following couplet: “bookplate frottage / *pays du tendre*”. The *pays du tendre*, or *Carte de Tendre*, is a French allegorical map-game written by Madeleine de Scudéry in 1653–1654 and included in her novel *Clélie* (Reitinger, 1999, p. 109). *Clélie*, Reitinger explains, “gave an account of women’s emancipation from the servitude of matrimony” (p. 112), and the *Carte de Tendre* aimed to subvert patriarchal structures of male-female courtship by “defining places of encounter in order to exert control over them” (p. 112). According to Anne E. Duggan (1996), the *carte*’s gameplay “reverses ... ’ the male gaze’, for it is the woman who gazes at the male friend ... to test whether ... his appearance corresponds to his ‘being’” (p. 17). Scudéry’s *carte*, for Duggan, amounts to a “utopian model for social and political relations within a salon or state ... that was to challenge those being proposed by proponents of patriarchy” (p. 15).

Given Lilley’s allusion to a proto-feminist text, what is the significance of the word “frottage”? It has two definitions: “the technique of creating a design by rubbing (as with a pencil) over an object placed underneath the paper”; and “the act of obtaining sexual stimulation by rubbing against a person or object” (Merriam Webster). We have returned to the “psychiatric registrar” who “put his hands on me” (Lilley, 2018, p. 18). The book, perhaps *Clélie*, is an association copy in its relation to both Garbo and Lilley, women united by a repudiation of patriarchal structures and the violence they sanction. United, that is, in that each is a ‘Femme Forte’, the title of an ode to Garbo that ends in an autobiographical declaration: “I assent to her butch refusal” (p. 66). The poem next to ‘Femme Forte’ is ‘Sapphic Stanzas’; the female lover in the *Carte de Tendre* is called Sapho (Duggan, 1996, p. 17).

In the second stanza of ‘Lovestore’, Lilley shifts to archaic spelling: “Of things requisite a vehement pang / eyther of bodie or mynde” (p. 77). This “vehement pang” of “things requisite” returns us to ‘Party Favour’ – “his house his rules he’s the producer” (p. 27). Sexual trauma encompasses the sudden and unpredictable recasting of free action as action that takes place

against the survivor's will, a complaisance either thought or felt. Is this not the subject's "lovestore", her traumatic archive? The final stanza is vital:

Thy darling sin which to enjoy thou couldst
resist all others (least thou thinkest so)
frigidity, the proper passion of water,
sometime accidentally hot (p. 77)

The Early Modern English proves to be from The Mothers Legacie to her Vnborn Childe, Elizabeth Joscelyn's 1624 work of spiritual instruction that "established the mother's advice book as a recognizable literary form" (LeDrew Metcalfe, 2000, p. 6). The extended quote reads:

I must exhort thee from a sinne, that I cannot name, thou must search thine owne heart for it. It is thy darling sin, that which to enioy, thou couldst resist all others, at least thou thinkest so. But doe not harbour it, search diligently for it in thine owne nature, and when thou hast found it, cast it head-long from thee. It is thy soules subtill betraier, and all thy other sins depend vpon it. There is not so much danger in all the rest that thou contendest with, as in this one, that thou art loth to call a sinne. Thy other sinnes are like a rebellious multitude in a common wealth, which wanting a head, doe little harme. This is their head, cut it off, and thou shalt see all thy other sins dispersed. (Joscelyn, 2000, p. 91)

Invoking the seminal book in which a mother advises a child how to live, Lilley recalls *Tilt*'s cardinal wrong: the subject's mother's role in her mistreatment. That Lilley juxtaposes these mothers through reference to a "darling sin" captures the paradox of the subject's identity: a survivor of childhood trauma that her mother sanctioned; and a lesbian – a sexual orientation that amounts, for some, to sin. Homosexual stigma notwithstanding, if *Tilt* represents a subject's progression from trauma victim to empowered self, capable of loving intimacy, it does so by "cutting off the head" of the subject's sexual conditioning. In this reading, the "head" atop the "rebellious multitude" of other sins is the subject's mother herself – or the subject's attachment to her (p.91). Above all, the subject's mother has been her "soules subtill betrayer" (p.91). Concealed in this allusion, a mother exhorts her child to reject her instruction, the basis for the book's truly "unnameable" sin (p.91). The impact of this exhortation, as a poetic inversion of what happened, cannot be overemphasised. Yet Lilley forces us beyond the book into arcane allusion to grasp this, as if she cannot say it aloud. She is disclosing and concealing a secret, a resistance made more acute by the confessional openness of *Tilt*'s first section.

Trauma in *Totality*

My collection begins: "Climb the bunk ladder and make me selfish" (2022, p. 1). In these poems, the trauma of childhood sexual abuse drives and sabotages the subject's attempts to love and be loved, forcing him via a shattering of the self into a deeper engagement with notions of selfhood and the ideal of recovery. Poetry's "search for totality" (Blanchot, 1995, p. 104) here is the (necessary, impossible) search for a full accounting of the past, testimony in the present, and removal of trauma's control over the future. Unlike in *Tilt*, despite trauma's omnipresence, *Totality* rarely describes abuse. After the subject addresses his primary abuser

in the first poem, this “all-powerful” figure features tangentially, unnamed. If a poem has to “compromise” itself “in order to be legible” (Baer, 2000, p. 11), and if recovering from trauma depends on “retell[ing]” and thereby “remastering” it (Brison, 2002, p. 58), the poems in my collection oscillate between singularity and legibility – at times saying too much, at times not saying enough. Yet *Totality* wants to say everything. To me, in a sense, it does. For reasons I will not elaborate on here, it does so through patterns of disclosure and concealment that enable and safeguard its testimony.

The book charts a traumatised subjectivity from childhood to adulthood. Details accumulate, linking past and present behavioural patterns and intensifying the effect of trauma’s central dialectic on the subject’s attempts to bear witness. At the youngest age at which we find him, a boy enacts private rituals that suggest a desire to reveal a secret, but also an incipient, aporetic sense of himself as both compassionate and cruel. In ‘Alabaster’, the subject “[k]nows well not to do this” (p. 5), where the pronoun opens onto multiple proscriptions, including “not/to tell”; at the end, the subject, feverish, walks to a park and places bark in a yabby pond, “his voice/in drowned ... missives”. In ‘Marlin’, the primary school-aged subject places a beetle in his ear in the schoolyard to honour what he believes is a new, “shared language” between him and a girl he likes (p. 46). These inscrutable rituals suggest the desire for a control that might substitute for a more fundamental lack thereof. Yet this control is also submission. In ‘Interferer’, watching birds over a cane field, the subject imagines he chains them in flight and asks them riddles they must answer if they are to avoid starving. Thinking of killing the birds makes him cry, but he has “no choice” (p. 9). He must obey this authority, whether it asks him to kill, or to “lift his tongue” to “shelter” an almond under it (p. 10). Read against the book’s more explicit references to violence, such symbolism cultivates an ambient trauma, inflecting the subject’s subtlest framings of himself and the world.

Such complaisance throughout *Totality* remains ambiguous, interpretable as the subject’s reclamation of his own willpower as well as a traumatic return to abuse. ‘Assent’ speculates whether “some wrists that cock to heat the water need ... / its earnest turning”; how does the subject’s “earnest turning” (p. 108), his self-preserving assent to his own victimisation, affect his capacity for authentic relations? More pointedly, in ‘Rules on the Run’, “a squid ... can’t phrase / what threatens it, or what incubates it / or why it relaxes at free thought / and action phrased as fealty” (p. 76). Here, the enjambment after “thought” stresses trauma’s pernicious patterns. Broken at a complete phrase with a long terminal pause, the line relaxes, before what follows inverts it like a traumatic intrusion, compounded by the rhyme of “free” and “fealty”. ‘Phrase’, moreover, repeats to emphasise language’s power to disrupt such patterns – or reaffirm them.

Some poems do make more explicit reference to violence, mostly as irruptions that foreshadow the testimonial rhetoric later in the collection, and which throw into relief the veiled treatment of trauma elsewhere. ‘Gunnamatta’ describes a boy helping his father unload rubbish. Having wandered off, riffling through junk, the boy finds pornography: “All over the covers, stars twinkled / on the naked bodies of ladies and men / posed like he’d been shown / who looked at him” (p. 35). This image of the boy in sexual poses, diffracted through the video covers, carries

the poem's rhetorical weight. The boy takes a video; at the end, the boy's father throws the video into scrub, confused by this portent of his son's sexualisation (p. 36). Elsewhere, the adolescent subject in 'Doctrine' wanders alone around the schoolyard, "past the prettiest girls / ... / who / don't know his lips / last night made trembling / contact with his penis / which was not his penis / which was a memory / ... / which was a banquet table" (p. 24). Still ambiguous, these lines suggest a withdrawal from healthy intimacy rooted in a longing for the familiar tenderness of abuse. The rhetoric's collapse into a catalogue of abstract metaphors, using the anaphoric "which was", suggest that such insights remain concealed even to the subject.

Traumatic symptoms manifest most clearly in the subject's intimate relationships, yet these same relationships make testimonial address possible. No sooner has the subject grown close to a partner than he withdraws, repulsed by the intimacy he had craved. Early in the book, the subject finds solace in anonymous sexual encounters: a hook-up bears "the symbol two strangers' mouths form, unfenced mouths" (p. 15), in a kind of infinite possibility. Anonymity is a mask, a bulwark against vulnerability. Once the subject becomes more deeply intimate with someone, however, trauma's fight-or-flight reflex triggers, and these safe dynamics bear the wound of past threat. This pattern expresses itself most forcefully in 'Love and Withdrawal Postscript (as Preamble)'. Such is the predictability of this traumatic withdrawal that the subject can foretell it. In this hypothetical, lovers holiday at a promontory:

You'll eat Saturn

peaches, fuck in absentia, your representative
careful not to taste the air or name him
or exploit him like you've realised he's taught,

urged, lovingly, the Nullabor having woken
wrung into the Yarra, fingernails having begun to whisper

it isn't right what you're doing. (p. 53)

The Nullabor, symbolic of unbounded intimacy, has been constricted into a space that cannot contain it, lest its boundaries burst, lest it subject its autonomy to mortal compromise. The subject's lover can feel him dissociating from their contact, and absents herself. Tragically, she realises that by forging a loving connection with her, he equipped her with the tools to exploit him. The poem ends: "On the freeway, he'll imagine he's a con artist, conning an old woman. / He won't accept what he's having her give him" (p. 54). Will he not take this bounty from the old woman – an emblem of powerlessness – at all, or will he take it and loathe himself? On either reading, loving someone and receiving love from them become extractive, selfish acts that the subject must reject. What matters here is not empirical accuracy, but phenomenological subtlety – poetry's voicing of trauma's subjective truth at its most resonant, lucid, and contradictory.

If *Tilt* foregrounds the female, and particularly lesbian, experience of sexual violence, in *Totality* my inquiry into my own victimisation confronts my power as a white, heterosexual

man. ‘Map to Mutable Manhood’ features the collection’s most graphic reference: “I didn’t choose for my come to be scooped up / while exit shocks messed the bathwater tide” (p. 86). As the subject recounts misogyny he has either witnessed or perpetrated, he struggles to reconcile his status as an abuse survivor with his power to harm others, especially women. Initially, the subject’s posture is defensive, self-exculpating, because of the trauma he suffered: “Pity / my brand of ciphers – men / hurt by a patriarchy that means they could hurt, / devilled by that potentiality” (p. 86). We see this devilment in ‘Valour’, when the subject reveals to a lover “who touched him” at the same time as he restrains them to prevent them from self-harming, “that it might confer the power / to overpower” (p. 95). Here is a subject terrified of leveraging his own harm to harm those weaker than he is.

The subject’s whiteness also informs his sense of victimhood, and the socially constructed ‘wholeness’ of the recovered self to which he aspires. In “Befana”, the folkloric Italian figure visits a boy and calls him a ghost: “See. Haunt. See through. Opt / to be nothing. This is ghosthood” (p. 52). This poem exhorts the boy to recognise in his whiteness the historical measure of a “full” identity, which carries the freedom to rove between invisibility and hypervisibility. Yet is the subject in *Totality* not fighting for survival, longing to heal? ‘Ars Poetica’ summarises this paradox: “Who gets / a full summit. Whose name is a magic word, turning trauma to trailhead” (p. 122). For the collection’s white, male victim, trauma’s disarticulating effects not only evoke the ideal of recovery; they also mire his recovery in notions of power and privilege – his identity’s status as a “full summit” to which the “trailhead” of trauma might teleologically lead – that he must interrogate.

Rothberg (2014) suggests thinking of trauma in terms of “implicated subjects”, who are “neither simply perpetrator nor victim, though potentially either or both at other moments” (p. xv). Such a view of the subject would require “a system that generates dispersed and uneven experiences of trauma and wellbeing simultaneously” (p. xv). The subject in *Totality* is an implicated subject, alerted by his victimisation to social contexts in which he is the beneficiary, perhaps the aggressor. These ethics create friction in the subject’s processing of trauma, which my poetry leaves unresolved: the speaker in ‘Daylesford Fire Bath’ admits that “I still wonder if being violated / made me a better person. A gentler man” (p. 126). Did the speaker’s abuse dull his propensity, as a white man who grew up in a toxic-masculine milieu, to cause harm? This impossible question tacitly minimises and ennoble the speaker’s trauma. Yet *Totality* does not shame the subject for suffering or invalidate his right to recovery. The collection permits the subject frequent moments of unqualified, sovereign selfhood that evoke Hegel’s classical lyric subject, “com[ing] to consciousness of itself” (1975, p. 1113). In ‘Silences’, the subject swims beneath an inflatable river pontoon. He holds it from below: “The pontoon does not hear its carrier / – discarnate, infinite” (p. 120). In this theatre of control, a subject is liberated, recovered, until he must surface.

The ideal of recovery preoccupies *Totality*, though the collection scrutinises the attempt to integrate trauma into a unified, ‘remade’ self. I explicate the lure of such closure in ‘The Last Poem’, whose epigraph by Blanchot reads: “The first liberty is the liberty to say everything” (p. 100). In the simple premise, lovers sit opposite one another. Their gazes meet. What this

gaze reveals is trauma's absence, a fantastical 'happily ever after' in which the collection's catastrophic secret has been revealed, freeing its keeper. This gaze reveals what *Totality* wants to, but cannot, achieve: "Everything's in the open / that should be". Other stakeholders, too, "have / found disclosure's silhouette / so graceful it's been nothing, / a felix culpa" (p. 100). Here, the Latin phrase meaning "blessed fault" suggests an assimilation of adversity into a more perfect unity. What is more, in 'The Last Poem', "disclosure's silhouette" evokes poetry's quixotic aspirations to mastery, to "graceful" resolution or full testimony. For Brison, the goal of trauma testimony is not to "re-establish ... illusions of coherence of the past, control over the present, and predictability of the future, but [to] mak[e] it possible to carry on without these illusions" (2002, p. 104). As an ironic text, 'The Last Poem' calls for an interrogation of tropes of recovery, but also stresses its fraught, necessary allure.

Conclusion: Address

"Each poem", Baer (2000) argues, "makes an uncompromising claim for its singularity ... yet at the same time and in the same words ... opens itself to iteration, understanding, and address" (p. 11). This poetic tension between an appeal to the other and the desire to remain radically separate resembles, for Baer, "the objective of therapy" – "to undo the trauma's singularity and regain the possibility of address" (p. 10). If to be wounded is to face the dual prospects of ruin and healing, and if the testimony on which recovering from trauma largely depends must be witnessed, validated (Brison, 2002, p. 97), the two collections this article has discussed each represent such a contract, or leave in play this possibility.

In *Totality*, the subject in 'Palm Cove' resolves to break the traumatic patterns that have dogged his relationships. Lovers holiday in North Queensland. Early in the poem, the subject learns that "as a child, his favourite poet / hammered rocks / against rocks in the hinterland / near school, every spark / a vow". Later, the couple "adore one another as they have many times":

As they have many times

they feel a child between them,
tropic-warm, submitting.

She soothes the child. With tenderness
says she's never meant more to him
than an old escape to pull off. (p. 123)

Trauma again cloaks the couple's intimacy in threat. Though his partner cares for him, the final lines betray exasperation; how long can a lover feel like "an old escape to pull off" before they escape? At the end, a "fugue" of bush-stone curlews, whose cry portends death for some First Nations peoples, keeps the couple awake "until whitecaps catch". If one child in the poem considered "every spark" of rock against rock "a vow", the poem's other child, the word "catch" implies, sees sunrise sparking on the ocean. 'Palm Cove' leaves the final vow unprofessed. What the ocean ablaze suggests is that, amidst death and change, with the subject's capacity to love and be loved at stake, the couple speak all night.

Tilt concludes with ‘Coda’, a musical reference that gestures back to ‘Etudes’. The subject has returned to Sydney (and returned as an “I” in the book). Wandering her old haunts, the speaker has an encounter:

I run into an ex-student, an actress
 She tells a story about sexual assault
 I tell one too

I take out a loan like a diet I settle into
 If you need to get in touch
 backchannel me (p. 84)

In ‘Etudes’, the speaker warns her mother: “don’t expect me to act / I hate acting I like tests” (p. 63). Yet, under certain circumstances, the speaker must act, as the book’s preoccupation with film makes clear. If the interlocutors in the above stanza are both actresses, moreover, both are “ex-students” – the subject having undergone her childhood’s traumatising “etudes”. In one reading, the speaker encounters the other who prompts and bears witness to the testimony we have read, but simultaneously the self who could venture this testimony. The “I,” reduced to a “she”, has become an “I” again, and a storyteller. As if to qualify this assertion of personhood, Lilley refrains from using the possessive ‘my story’. What is testified to is “a story”, mobile enough to attach to and detach from the autobiographical subject as it does throughout the book.

In the final stanza, the speaker extends the book’s only invitation to the other to contact her, via “backchannels”. Backchannels are covert routes of communication. *Tilt* itself, I have argued, constitutes a poetics of channels and backchannels for representing trauma. Yet “backchannel” has another meaning: an indication that someone is listening to a person who is speaking. Via backchannels, a speaker receives confirmation that they are being heard, a precondition for speaking further. “Backchannel me”, suggests the speaker, but to whom? This ‘you’ feels general, like a community, or a readership. “In order to construct self-narratives” after trauma, writes Brison (2002), “we need not only the words with which to tell our stories, but also an audience able and willing to hear us” (p. 51). The speaker’s suggestion that others may wish to contact her, then, also issues a challenge that may be poetry’s most essential – and fraught – apostrophic invocation. Show me you are listening.

Krämer and Weigel (2017) identify “a polarity in the field of testimony studies, grouped around the poles of ‘processing of violence’ and ‘attainment of knowledge’” (p. xii). The latter pole focuses on what the authors call “discursive truth”, a testimony’s status as evidential, objective knowledge (p. xi), while the former pole examines the “embodied truth” of “survivors of extreme violence” (p. x), in which what is “at stake is not the truth of a sentence, but the truth of a life, an experience, a person” (p. xii). Using the dialectic of disclosure and concealment, this article has argued that poetry can represent trauma in a way that recognises the indivisibility of discursive and embodied truth: of the attempt to narrativise and thereby recover from traumatic suffering and the formal reification of trauma’s irruptions in mind and body.

In *Tilt* and *Totality*, the desire to proclaim trauma necessitates confronting the desire to deny it, and vice versa. This dialectic, I argued, shapes each book's poetics. It also exemplifies the interplay – including blurring – of disclosure and concealment that is core to poetry's functioning. Where poststructural theory links trauma to poetry via apophasis and a resistance to narrative, I suggested that poetry can also hold the ideals of testimony and recovery as a totalising discourse, where both ineffability and the 'closure' promised by absolute speech become part of a complex, ongoing negotiation. Regarding ongoing negotiations, future studies of *Tilt* might apply feminist and queer theories to examine the patriarchal, heterosexist context through which the subject suffers and attempts to heal. My discussion of trauma, poetry, and white masculinity also demanded more room and rigour than I could give it. What should be clearer is how writers and scholars approaching trauma in poetry can "keep one eye on what trauma does, while keeping another on *how* it does it, and for whom, and with what consequences" (Stevens, 2016, p. 36).

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