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A new suite: The process of knowing through poetry

Abstract
This critical/creative work responds to a call from Krauth and Watkins for a more radical form of the scholarly paper. Its hybrid form presents poems written in response to events at the second Poetry on the Move festival at the University of Canberra in 2016. Key ideas about the intersections between poetry and knowledge from David McCooey and William Carlos Williams are considered together with readings and discussions by poets Tusiata Avia and Simon Armitage. The article charts writing experiences, tracking the drafts and the editing process for ways in which my festival-inspired poems reflect on the intersections between poetry and knowledge, knowing and unknowing. Specifically, the poems concern the topics of knowing and observing the world; knowing memory and integrating the past with the present; and knowing the body. They embrace embodiment, imagination and biography, conscious of antagonisms between memory and the present. In this article, I problematise the use of the noun knowledge *as opposed to the verb* knowing *and demonstrate that the former is unnecessarily privileged. I argue that articulating the full scope of poetry composition from inspiration to the final stages of editing demonstrates that artistic knowledge is best defined as a process of knowing. It is my contention that poets do demonstrate the knowledge of how to make things, as identified by Aristotle (1954); and also that we show 'knowing as a process of inquiry' (Johnson 2010). In doing so, we offer readers 'new ways of knowing* and *doing' (Webb 2012, my emphasis). At the same time, our own new work, as I demonstrate here, responds to knowledge as 'a living current' (Williams 1923), an active state characterised by the verb 'to know'.*
Keywords: poetry, inspiration, editing, knowing, process

At the Twentieth Australasian Association of Writing Programs conference at Swinburne University of Technology (2015), *TEXT* editors Ross Watkins and Nigel Krauth gave a paper callingfor a more radical form of the scholarly article addressing the re-appraisal of knowledge in the twenty-first century and the role of creative writing in that movement; a developed article based on that paper was subsequently published in the journal (Watkins & Krauth 2016). This hybrid critical/creative work responds to that call by considering the value of practice-led research as a form of knowing, with an emphasis on the entire process of composition, from inspiration to final edit. This article cites three forms of epistemology: knowledge 'about'; knowing how to do something; and 'unknowing' (and how that is used by a poet).

The blend of critical/creative thinking reflects the mixed-media influences of our times and hybrid forms of writing have become increasingly common in both poetic and philosophical writings – as demonstrated, for example, in the

work of William Carlos Williams (1923), Roland Barthes (1975), Lyn Hejinian (1983), Cixous and Clément (1986), Deleuze and Guatarri (1988), and Jean Baudrillard (2003). Hybrids might be defined in literature as a blending of genres, forms or structures (Bullock 2016). The progression towards hybrid forms is particularly relevant for creative writing as research, since adaptations of form and content are necessary to facilitate continued engagement with contemporary everyday life – examples include renewed interest in prose poetry, the haibun (prose and haiku), and digital and visual poetries.

A precursor for the kind of critical/creative blend I have in mind is the process poem, a sub-genre which allows its own production form part of the content. The form is attributed to the New York School of poets, of whom Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery are the best known, poets who are said to have turned the act of making art into the subject of art (Silverberg 2016 [2010]); Ken Bolton's poetry could be considered an example in Australian writing, as could some of Pam Brown's work. The strategy highlights the use of process above the significance or demonstrative ability of the end product (Kulkosky 1976). A key difference between the 'process poem' and the form of scholarly article I employ here is that the former does not articulate process in a way that is fully accessible or transferable; the points that process poems make are largely subject to artistic, rather than critical, interpretation. The hybrid critical/creative essay differentiates from the process poem by making use of both modes of expression, sometimes with explicit comment on a poem, and at others allowing the poem to speak in its own way about the topic without accompaniment; it allows the kind of three-dimensional writing that has been highlighted as a feature of the creative doctorate (Williams 2016). Like creative research, the hybrid reflects the postmodern era, a moving beyond social relations, that is capable of maintaining a critical subjectivity, rather than a romanticised artistic subjectivity (Strange 2012: 3-4); it helps us maintain a critique of contemporary everyday life and contemporary subjectivities.

I present my own original poems, which reflect on the intersection between poetry and knowing. Each was written in response to readings and discussions during the second Poetry on the Move festival, hosted by the International Poetry Studies Institute at the University of Canberra in September 2016. Many readers will be familiar with the experience of attending a stimulating conference or festival, of making notes, intending to write some new poems and letting them drift to the bottom of a pile of work that allows no time for such indulgence. At the first Poetry on the Move in 2015, where I attended almost every session, I made copious notes and wrote next to nothing afterwards. In 2016, I was determined to write to the inspiration gained from readings and discussions; this article charts those writing experiences and their relationship to forms of knowing.

Discussions around the nature of knowledge in scholarly literature can be intimidating, and unresolvable – philosophers have been arguing about it for thousands of years. I described in one poem being 'beleaguered by episteme' (Bullock 2013). Western thinking privileges the noun 'knowledge' above the verb 'knowing'. The poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson goes some way towards correcting the tendency towards parcelling out abstract roles instead of realising that we are in the process of learning about many things when he writes, 'Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all' (Emerson 1994 [1837]: 1022). One doesn't need a title to be able to do something. The noun 'knowledge' is abstract and tends to be associated with knowledge 'about' something. This can help, of course: knowledge about poetic techniques, of the specifics that improve a poem, is useful if I can employ it in my own writing or convey it to creative writing students in such a way that they can use it to invigorate their poetry. But, to reiterate, the noun

isn't ultimately what enables me to do something; the verb is pre-eminent. And there's a parallel between the abstract noun 'knowledge' and a key concern in my writing which most often emerges in the editing stage.

One of the things I look for in the revision process is to remove unnecessary abstraction. The modernist poet Ezra Pound advised to 'go in fear of abstractions' (Pound 2009 [1918]); and I do. When I notice it in my own work, I revise by bringing in concrete nouns and the particulars which evoke the concept I was trying to communicate. The mind introduces abstraction even in the midst of astute observation. I have a theory about what happens in this case. We observe something and are prompted to describe it, but the mind leaps in, ahead of the particular, and makes a general statement. This often takes the form of an abstraction, and leaves the detail that prompted the observation stranded and missing from the poem, or coming second, as the specific that follows the general remark, when it's so often better to move from the particular to the general – in fact, having made the specific observation we sometimes don't need the general statement at all. But the mind outwits us and gets in there and 'cleverly' sums everything up. The problem is, that doesn't give the reader any kind of experience. It also doesn't capture experience itself except conceptually, and the conceptual rendering almost always assumes some shared understanding that may or may not exist.
In contrast to the use of abstraction, detail helps poetry accentuate its suggestive power. Classically, poetry evokes, it doesn't tell – we're always teaching our creative writing students to show not tell, but whenever we use abstraction, we tell rather than show. Canadian poet Christian Bök [1] even goes so far as to say that any abstract noun can be replaced in a poem by a randomly selected concrete noun and improve the poem; I've found this to be a helpful generative tool.

The abstraction 'knowledge' is still sometimes discussed like a thing you can hand someone and count on it being received – knowledge transfer, rather than knowledge exchange (Reed 2018). I argue that knowledge is more usefully understood as process-oriented. We all know that in order to learn something (to generate and increase our understanding), we undergo a process which in some cases is lifelong, and which is updated as we proceed. Process is part and parcel of anything we come to be able to do, demonstrated in the knowing that is revealed by what we accomplish. It includes knowledge 'about' and knowing the 'how to', which is more central than we often allow.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle described art as the knowledge of how to make things; as a capacity and a 'matter of making' (Aristotle 1954, 3). This is a contextualised understanding of knowledge, which Nietzsche also asserted (Webb & Brien 2008). The distinction between knowing how to do something and knowing about it has been made before, and it has been argued that many of us are more concerned with what we can do than with our supposed 'cognitive repertoires' (Ryle 1969 [1949]: 28), that what we know is demonstrated by what we are able to do, and not merely by what we theorise about. In this regard, Heidegger argued that knowledge must be 'in' rather than 'about' the world; derived from experience (Webb & Brien 2008). In parallel, the poet William Carlos Williams writes that poetry gives importance to the subdivisions of experience and places knowledge 'into a living current' (Williams 1970: 140). One might equate that living current with process.

As arguments for practice-led research have grown, critics have focussed on process as a form of knowing (Johnson 2010). Mark Johnson clarifies a key difference between knowledge and knowing in this regard by saying that we need to get away from the stranglehold of fixed proposition-based 'knowledge' and focus on 'knowing as a process of inquiry' (Johnson 2010: 145). Such

thinkers assert that the creative impulse can guide intellectual inquiry in a purposeful way and that the creative artefact is itself a form of knowing, since it offers a new way of being and doing; knowing is 'an after-effect of understanding' (Gibson 2010: 4). In this regard, the poet expresses knowledge of how to do something in what has been called 'knowledge practice' (Webb 2012: 2).

Our descriptions of knowing how to do things tend to include the idea that we know how to do them well (Ryle 1969 [1949]: 28). It is here that a subjective element inevitably comes into play in the assessment of a poem as a form of knowledge, especially in terms of whether or not the poem functions successfully. This matters less when we focus on knowing as a process of inquiry. The writing of each work, especially where the poet diversifies in terms of technique, has the potential to increase our understanding of the art, so that we can produce (read do) something new [2].

Knowledge is defined and redefined by the processes that give rise to it. At the simplest level, a process is 'a series of actions or steps taken in order to achieve a particular end' (*English Oxford Living Dictionary* 2018), though this generalist definition seems to privilege the end product over the steps taken along the way. Creative process has been defined as 'the process of change, of development, of evolution' (Ghiselin 1952: 2), and can be understood more broadly in creative practice as 'the generation of new ideas' (Kennett 2018: 242), which suggests conscious and deliberate awareness by those engaged.

For a poet writing a new work, the creative process includes generating 'something new in the interplay between knowing and unknowing' (McCooey 2014). In writing a poem, a poet learns how to write a poem: this is embodied knowledge (or knowing), the communication of which is a shared understanding that may begin playfully, as often for the sciences as for the arts (Herrmann-Pillath 2010: 9). Experimental processes embrace the unknown, and the concept of unknowing – the gap between knowing and what is as yet unexplored (Deleuze 1991: 17) – is a rich one for the creative thinker. Poets embrace the place of unknowing – this is Keats' negative capability, the ability to dwell in uncertainty (1817) – which sometimes generates forms of knowing that are not immediately apparent, because the process of thinking and making has not been fully articulated.

Experimentation is necessary to find new pathways for any form of poetry (Yovu 2009: 171-174). Contemporary Australian poet, David McCooey, describes the liminal space of a poem in terms of what he calls 'nocturnal poetics', its otherness contrasting with 'daytime' ways of thinking [3]. He likens the poetic mindset to dream-space and discusses Blanchot's idea of the dream being composed of 'incessant resemblances', which, in turn, McCooey compares with literature. He describes the romantics' resistance to knowledge as rational thought, favouring instead moods and complex emotions [4]. McCooey identifies the function of 'knowledge of the self's existence' (McCooey 2014). These ideas about knowledge and knowing have all influenced my writing and inform my inclination to divide the noun 'knowledge' and the verb 'knowing' more systematically. It is impossible to avoid use of the word 'knowledge' in the literature but some of the examples of ideas about knowledge here do at least help to problematise the use of the noun as opposed to the verb and my claim that the former is unnecessarily privileged. McCooey's idea about knowing the self, and Williams' 'living current' of knowledge (which I equate with the verb), are most relevant to my concerns about the development of poetry and consciousness – around the process of writing, from the inspiration phase through to the editing phase. This is a

consciousness which adds a level of insight, and may be transferable to other forms of art and creative practice.

Before I proceed with the next phase of this article, which presents those poems I wrote in response to events at Poetry on the Move in 2016, and argues for their composition as a form of knowing, I must also make some comment on how the term 'inspiration' is perceived in the literature, since it's an important part of the process I wish to outline. Timothy Clark points out in his seminal work The Theory of Inspiration that the Latin 'inspire' has a similar meaning to the Greek 'enthusiasm', and suggests receipt of divine impetus, or the breath of spirit (Clark 1997: 3). This perspective continued beyond the romantics into a kind of secular inner-inspiration associated with the surrealists, accessing either an 'otherness within' (which we might trace to writing which attempts to access the unconscious), or a quasi-Buddhist sense of nothingness from which might proceed a great flow of writing (Clark 1997: 282). At this point, I realise there are two stages in this part of the process. I would argue that the word 'inspiration' is now even more secularised than in the period to which Clark refers and can mean something more like 'response', 'motivation' or even 'prompt'. The form 'inspiring' perhaps remains more genuinely resonant, and again suggests something which has impelled us to write. The 'inspiration' I take from the festival presenters at Poetry on the Move in 2016 is a relatively pragmatic motivation or intention to write, but it is nonetheless important. When writing a first draft, I tend to be in a state of being closer to that sense of 'otherness within' that Clark describes, characterised by intensity and the perceived need to write quickly.

The discussions of my poem drafts and the completed poems that follow are grouped under three related topic headings: 'knowing the world'; 'knowing memory and integrating the past with the present'; and 'knowing the body'.

Knowing the world

The poet in residence at the Poetry on the Move festival in 2016 was Simon Armitage. During his poetry reading (13 September), Armitage reminded the audience of the importance of observation when he recounted his own practice of periodically gazing at a familiar object and trying to write something new about it in what he called a 'still life poem'. He illustrated his point by reading two appropriately fresh-eyed poems, 'A bed' and 'A chair' (subsequently published in his collection The Unaccompanied, 2017), the latter including descriptions of a dining chair and an armchair, and comparisons to a sofa and settee.

The following three poems form my response to Armitage's point about observation. In the case of the first poem, I'm going to offer two versions so as to demonstrate the process of drafting and the central place of editing in my writing practice. The poem originally read:

that you left for me

pink veins
    like brow and breast
stamens
    life burst
from petals
    smiles

hair, arm, torso
how they serve
the body
flower

When people ask me if I'm writing, I realise that I spend most of my time editing. As creative writing teachers, we often try to communicate to students the importance of editing, which is difficult to convey when someone is new to writing – that one might have to make twenty drafts is somewhat off-putting. I consider editing part of the process of inquiry, and it may well be one of the most important facets of this process. The poem was eventually edited to:

the flower you left for me

pink veins
temple and breast
stamens
and smiles burst
from petals

hair arms to torso
how they serve
the body
bloom

I felt the addition of the word 'flower' could make the context of the poem clearer; 'the flower' rather than 'a flower' might suggest 'flowering' later in the poem. The poem wanted to resist the presence of commas, since they didn't seem especially embodied – ironically, the extras spaces served more effectively to suggest connection between the parts of the body (likened to the flower). There's a sense in which the hair and the arms are the petals of the body (the torso) – this was made clearer by adding the pronoun 'to', and the repetition of vowel and consonant sounds in 'to torso' enhanced the musicality of the poem. In the poems presented here, the use of page space became a way to suggest movement and a sense of knowing the objects.

I deleted the generic and large concept of 'life', since 'smiles' was doing the work much more effectively. Replacing the word 'flower' in the last line and using 'bloom' instead gives a nice alliteration softened by the vowel sounds. The word 'bloom' serves to suggest the way one glows and blossoms in receipt of a gift, and how this confidence can find its way into the body; the word acts as either noun or verb, and has a hint of the injunction about it: that one is being encouraged to bloom by the other.

The other inspiration here came from the act which led to observations of the flower: a gift from my partner. The conflating of flower with human form also prefigures a topic which would re-emerge later in the festival: the body.

The second poem in this group responds more directly to Armitage's chair, and at the same time adopting a slightly different strategy in terms of directness of observation. Initially, this poem ventures into imagined details:

four chairs

the general sat in white wicker
planning the attack
smiling at you over tea
talking about the tractor's engine
a strange bird cry heard in the night

the director relaxed and pushed back
the crucial shot captured
he wanted to surf the place he occupied
with uncertainty as a board

the nursing teacher eased a right turn
as she asked the apprentice
why did you want to be a nurse?

the boy sat for his birthday treat
waited
till the alarm rang
on his childhood
in an empty tin (Bullock 2017)

The first two stanzas attempt to use detail to anchor the reader in the scenarios described. The reference to uncertainty then acts as a pivot back to the memory of a period of life characterised by uncertain career choices. This continues back in time to a memory of a birthday and the premature end of childhood, which experience is then transposed to a brother in the specific detail of an alarm clock placed in a tin to rouse him from slumber. It is as if Armitage's chair poem invited an imaginative retort, and the exploration of some difficult memories. My response to Armitage affirms the importance of uncertainty and unknowing to creativity, and my description of the process of writing illustrates the movement from unknowing to knowing.

shoebox

notebooks
that refused to become anything

birth certificates
letters of thanks
unusable adaptors
a picture of Mozart by a five year-old
a white feather
a rare letter from father
calligraphied lines from Blake
the key for tuning the drum

a guarantee (Bullock 2017)

The important realisation here is that what you possess in a shoe box reflects experience, and therefore what you know. Everyone has something like a shoe box, or John Berger's museum of the notice board (Berger 1977: 30). Some of the items listed are themselves sources of inspiration or motivation, or incomplete efforts. The closing reference to a guarantee kept 'safe' affirms uncertainty. There's a sense of the unfinished and unfinishable about the poem. For me, this echoes Melbourne-based poet Alan Loney's preference for the fragment in poetry over 'perfect individual poems', since the former reflects the 'unfinished and unfinishable business' of writing (Loney 1992: dust jacket).

Knowing memory and integrating the past with the present

Another generative event for me during Poetry on the Move 2016 was the 'Material poetics' reading at ANCA Gallery (6 September), in which artist Nicci Haynes – who uses a good deal of text in her visual work, often fed by

Finnegan's Wake – reminded the audience of James Joyce's idea that if Dublin were destroyed it could be re-built, from his novel *Ulysses* (see Budgen 1972). This aroused in me memories of Greensplat, the hamlet in Cornwall where I grew up. Like other small villages which disappeared during my childhood, it no longer exists, engulfed by an open-cast clay mine. Greensplat was situated at the top of a steep, winding hill, three miles from the town of St Austell in mid-Cornwall, the hub of the china clay industry.

The following poem invites a few notes for the reader. The word 'earts' is Cornish dialect for bilberries, or wild blueberries (elsewhere called whortleberries, even 'shit-heads'). I suspect the Cornish word may come from the French 'heurtz' – it's a low, heather-like plant which grows on hedges and banks. The white peaks are the small mountains of sand that formed the waste product of china clay mining. My grandmother always used a stone hot water bottle and, when I left, they were still available in Cornwall.

returning, I check that things remain

van Gogh's chair
in the National Gallery

earts in the lanes

white peaks as you approach
St Austell

stone hot water bottles
for sale
in the Market House

this time
the Market House
closed (Bullock 2017)

On my first trip back to the UK after eleven years living in New Zealand, I walked the road from St Austell home to Greensplat. I'd tramped those three miles many times, from going to my first movie in town at the age of six (something it's hard to imagine a child being allowed to do today), to teenage years traipsing the seven miles to Carlyon Bay to go to gigs. I wrote a poem about the Greensplat road during that trip to further solidify the place and those memories, but unfortunately I lost it. Hayne's presentation reminded me not only of the lost village, but the lost poem about the lost village, and I desperately wanted to recreate it. A note here: 'burras' are burrows of sand (the 'white peaks' of the previous poem), one of the waste products of china clay mining.

the Greensplat road

beyond the laced shoes of town houses
shops boarded up
past drains and streams below the viaduct

Trenance Hill 1 in 3
mossy walls dense hawthorns
the bend that twists cars

get your breath on the flat
in a swell of dappled light
eerie songs in holes under hedges

higher to open fields
milk crates signs for cabbages
climb the swerve and cluster of hedges
scramble for earts tease a handful

at iron gates span the eyes
each blade and trace the ground under your feet
you feel like you own it

up where a burra
was first to face the town
a trail where houses sulked
on the way home roaming lost at 2 a.m.

looking back the sea seven miles hence
the tiny hamlet's dwellings set like leaves
either side the stem

the blockworks the turning to the new road
that's been there twenty years
Greensplat Pit its conical mound
conveyor belts digger rumble
the chapel and phone box where kids made crank calls

past Wheal Martyn
the track you can no longer circumnavigate
hoses burning after the one o'clock blast
passing places houses
your own a ruin
father dead mother moved on
the apricots he planted
nestle in a thicket below the burra
that towered over us

willows brambles furze
you snag on everything
stumble in the rubble

three-quarters of a mile away
above disused Gunneath Pit
the sign still reads *Greensplat ¾*

The first drafts of this reclaimed poem didn't include internal line breaks. This is a case of 'knowledge' of a technique coming into play in the editing phases. I knew that using space within lines could help enact its content; for example, a sense of footfall with, 'get your breath on the flat'. The facets of a movement are broken yet linked closely enough to show their relation, eg 'scramble for earts tease a handful'. Departures of thought and qualifications of ideas are signalled more easily: 'each blade and trace the ground beneath your thought'. The use of space between 'roaming' and 'lost' confirms the sense of being lost. Across many drafts, I tried to do away with the archaic 'hence' but kept coming back to it, mainly because it was more concise than 'from here', which lost the rhythm.

Placing certain phrases which might have occupied two lines on the same line with spaces between them allows for the conflating of ideas. For example, 'the chapel and phone box' augmented by 'where the kids made crank calls' might mean that the kids made crank calls from the chapel as well as from the phone

box – in a sense this is a form of enjambment (which also, very often, sets up additional meanings).

Space enacts content at ‘stumble in the rubble’ as the stumbling movement is highlighted, in addition to the material one is stumbling in. Originally, the closing ‘Greensplat ¾’ occupied a line on its own. I wondered, would it be more visible with ‘the sign still reads’ being placed immediately before it? That’s what a sign needs to be: visible and prominent. Unexpectedly, the phrase takes up less space on the page by not occupying a line on its own, and the result is a stronger emphasis.

At times I took a more imaginative approach in revision, as in the case of making the very plain ‘beyond town houses’ into ‘beyond the laced shoes of town houses’ – we all had laced shoes in those days, and walking those roads as a very young child (from the age of six), what was happening with your laces was an issue. The lines ‘the bend / where cars twist’ became ‘the bend that twists cars’ – a more literal rendering since accidents were frequent on those tight corners. The line ‘a trail where houses used to be’ became ‘a trail where houses sulked’, because ‘be’ is flat and the personification of ‘sulked’ helps capture the mood of the lonely moors, and represents a prevailing emotional state from my teens.

Knowing is contained in memory, though prey to subjectivity and error. But something about the physicality of that walk made its memory particularly embodied and strangely accurate, in ways that memories of interactions between people seldom attain. The past, via one’s memory, finds ways to loop back to the present, to assert itself and its accuracy. But revisiting a place known well in the past confronts such memories and the fear that one has remembered amiss. The past is re-grounded and knowing the past becomes once more a form of knowing the world.

Knowing the body

The third and final generative session I’m going to reference from the Poetry on the Move 2016 festival is titled ‘Poetry and performance’ (16 September), in which poet in residence Tusiata Avia recited a poem about the body, in an electrifying rendition which enthralled the audience and brought home to me the challenge of writing about the corporeal.

Avia’s poem is titled ‘Apology’ (from *Fale Aitu: Spirit House* 2016), but the text immediately affirms that the body is not an apology; neither is it a hiding place, nor ‘an arranged and artful fortress’. The first three stanzas deal with what the body is not. When it reaches the affirmative, the images are consistently embodied ones:

> it is the celebration running down the faces of the famished
> it is handfuls and handfuls
> it is marrow and jelly and sizzling fat dripping steadily into the bonfire (Avia 2016: 58)

The line ‘my body is a baptism’ affirms the body as ritual, even as ritual is based in bodily actions and allusions. This particular sense of ritual accepts responsibility: ‘my body is the war that scours the earth’ (2016: 58). The concepts associated with the body continue to burgeon, embracing the totality of things, perhaps because the individual body is implicated in, and sometimes forms an exemplar of, each reference, from alofa and aroha, to the land masses of the earth and our ancestors. The poem concludes:

my body catches them all in a net made of skin
my body is the tent of my body
and dwells here on earth among us. (2016: 59)

The image of the net reiterates that the body contains many dimensions and elements. The text reconfigures religious symbology. The metaphor of the tent of the body recalls the first poem in Avia's collection, 'House', with its metaphor 'the house of your chest'. It ends with the repeated line 'here is the place where I will keep you' (2016: 11), as the spirit house of the book's title is evoked.

The importance of emulating such a celebration seemed suddenly inescapable, and a line by Singaporean poet Tania De Rozario that I'd noted earlier in the festival, in which emotion is imaginatively embodied, gave me a specific launching-off point:

vessel
'wearing anger for skin' – Tania De Rozario

lids closed eyes drill
for blobs of light in the patches of dark

not a solar system
body reactions

eyes sink into cheek bones
hide like a homeless man in a doorway
skin covers them
like anger that won't
erupt long enough
to open the mouth
in a child's why why

chin aches with the bone of it
up, down stomping on a neck that would
praise and parley
keep itself stretched in a gesture
collapsed on clavicles
that take the weight
like a bass thump thump
ripping through the chest
shouting at the heart
which chants its own melody
to stay with a rhythm

groin trembles
with fear any
outrage of sensibility
pulls at entrails takes them lower

feet don't think
they scoop up the barrel

totter under its weight for-
wards back-
wards tumbling into chairs
an ankle cracked
that bunch of flowers
does the trick with a ship

back to a primal moment stirred
at the table of family
at the table now of friends
succeeds at last in spreading its smile across
plates and knives

because a companion

This poem attempts an imaginative exploration of the body by personifying parts of it, and one's reactions to the body, including a play on De Rozario's idea of anger as skin. It is an attempt to understand the body apart from the mind: through the body. It's here that Williams' idea of experience placing knowledge 'into a living current' (1970: 140) assumes importance. In figurative language, my response to Avia considers the zones of the body (with some influence from the Hindu chakra system), and how they feel rather than appealing to conventional biology.

The scream of line fourteen evokes the embodied nature of learning and its frustrations, even when coupled with the memory of a child's 'why why why' (which can seem the only question one need ask). Memories are slippages through time, unreal yet present. Poems help resolve memories, to sort out what one felt at the time, or what no longer makes sense about one's choices and actions. But the abstract 'primal moment' still needs unpacking in detail.

In the poem's concluding thought, the mere presence of another tangible body is comforting and meaningful. The mystery of companionship corrects past experience, including family squabbles. The intention to love is personified in the smiles across the table. The poem's positive assertions about the body are supported by the companion of the final line, and this is part of the poem's realisation: how much one's partner matters. In this sense, the suite of poems inspired or generated by the festival comes back full circle to the other.

Knowing how to: know-how

The explorative nature of writing a poem, the fact that one doesn't know when one begins where the poem will lead, implies that poetry is a way of increasing knowing as well as knowledge. The process of poetry writing enables self-awareness, even when a poem is not particularly personal and where its therapeutic value is not obviously to the fore (this is McCooey's 'knowing of the self's existence'). One invariably finds out something. That could be about oneself; one's opinions and, especially, one's limitations of thought and feeling. We find things out about past events by processing them in divergent ways – poets are noted as divergent thinkers (Nettle 2005). We realise our inconsistencies in this most searching form of writing and interrogate them. By taking biographical information into some other, imaginative realm, we often come to understand parallels between disparate situations and experiences, and view the 'real' with fresh insight. This is the principle underlying many poetic techniques, such as metaphor and metonymy.

Poets make poetry out of autobiographical material in various ways. Sylvia Plath's twisting of life events into fantastical scenarios [5] shows that we don't have to be faithful to experience in the literal sense to achieve engagement with a reader, or to create startling, affective reactions. Whether we always create new forms of knowing is an attractive and difficult question. Writing poetry can be seen as a touchstone for the unknown in general. The problems that face poetry are a weird microcosm of the whole. The product we create is another

kind of experience, one which, through language – its 'incessant resemblances' – interacts with previous events, bringing insights or enhanced recognition.

I could claim that I demonstrate knowing how to write poetry when I write. I am demonstrating how to form a poetic narrative. I am increasing knowledge about the relations between parts of language, for myself, and for the reader. I am adding to my own understanding of poetic process, especially when I engage in diverse forms, or consider hitherto unexplored content. I am suggesting new paths to the engaged reader too, some for their own poetic efforts (if the reader is a poet, and potentially to other artists as well [6]), where any form of originality is achieved. I realise and stress the subjective overlay to each of these claims. Jen Webb notes the tendency of a number of poets to identify the contingency of knowledge in relation to poetry, but at the same time she is herself adamant that it offers 'new ways of knowing and doing', based on 'observation, reflection and response' (Webb 2012: 10). It is my contention that poets do demonstrate the knowledge of how to make a work of art that Aristotle describes (1954); and show 'knowing as a process of inquiry' in the way Johnson asserts; as well as offering readers 'new ways of knowing and doing' as Webb suggests.

I cannot consider the writing process without also considering reading, because they are so intimately related. As a reader, how do I know that new ways of knowing and doing are possible through poetry? The answer must be, through those poets whose work has affected me, not just as an influence on the style or techniques of my own writing, but who have changed my way of interacting with the world and with other people. Poets like James K Baxter, Sylvia Plath, Ryōkan, Leslie Scalapino and Emily Dickinson have offered me deep insights into human nature, albeit through a medium which does not proffer ideas didactically, but through inference, evocation, indirectness, symbolism and example – it is done with the subtlety of a comedian leading one, through humour, to the realisation of a profound idea, and by placing knowledge 'into a living current', as Williams suggested, into the active state characterised by the verb 'to know'. In some ways, reading is more life-changing than writing. At the level of technique and form, the poem I read adds to what is possible for me to practise. At Poetry on the Move, I was sparked by works being read by their authors, increasing my potential range in just such a way.

Simon Armitage's poem inspires and recommends me to observe; it demonstrates the value of observation and shows me something about how to observe, by example. Nicci Haynes' ideas riffing off Joyce motivated me to believe that I can recreate something that has been lost, in more than one sense. This gave me an example to follow, one which was flexible enough and that lead me into a new and necessary (for me) avenue of enquiry. Tania De Rozario and Tusiata Avia's writing prompted me to explore the body as subject and to come to know it in a new way through that process. The 'living current' that this kind of knowledge is placed into is the one which concerns itself most with how to do a thing, with approaching a method for knowing how.

But how do I know if a poem has succeeded or failed? The only relatively objective gauge I can offer as to the success of the poems is publication. Three of these six poems have previously appeared in print; the efficacy of the other three, 'the flower you left for me', 'the Greensplat road' and 'vessel', will be judged by future editors. And yet I hesitate even to use the measure of publication because of advice that the poet Leicester Kyle gave me many years ago. He said that publication is not necessarily a measure of good writing. In some ways, I agree since publication and the winning of prizes sometimes seems simply to reward the familiar and recognisable, rather than the original. One has to trust editors. But perhaps one could modify Leicester's advice to

'immediate publication is not necessarily a guide to good writing'. I have often had the experience of submitting poems which have been declined by journals multiple times, only to be celebrated by other editors or winning prizes at some later point – I read these stories from other poets, too. It is as if there is a random element (read subjective) to the selection of poetry. Or perhaps we need posterity in the literary arts more than we realise; that is, we need more time to decide value, if we decide it at all – representation may be more to the point.

I am willing to extend the idea that the creative artefact can be a critical tool and to critique my own poems. For example, whatever other realisations I may have reached through the writing of 'vessel', and despite its attempts to create a sense of embodiment, it still seems as though it is not embodied enough. It struggles to attain the kind of immediacy that Avia's work possesses, and my poem 'the Greensplat road' is perhaps more successful in this regard. This critique is ongoing, even past the point of publication, and can be fruitful in contributing to knowing.

As an individual, I am learning more about what I think and feel through the process of writing. Insights have emerged in responding to poems and ideas about writing from Armitage, Haynes, Avia and De Rozario described here, and I am the richer for the ability to stimulate both critical and creative knowing through poetic practice. If this new suite of poems achieves similar recognition on the part of readers, then the poems will have progressed fully from inspiration to knowing as an active and emergent dynamic in the art of poetry.

In this article I have approached the radical method espoused by Watkins and Krauth by combining critical and creative modes to explore poetry's capacity to embrace three forms of epistemology: knowledge 'about'; knowing 'how to'; and 'unknowing' [7]. My emphasis here has been on knowledge exchange and on contextual knowledge, rather than knowledge transfer, and on the writing of poetry as a form of practice-led research that values and emphasises poetic knowing as a process without end.

Notes

[1] Conversation with the author, Canberra 16/09/18. return to text

[2] Ryle argues against the idea of an intellectualism which expects reasoning about a skill to occur before the action: 'efficient practice precedes the theory of it', he writes (Ryle 1969 [1949]: 30). At the same time, one shouldn't resist theory where it sheds light on practice. return to text

[3] Hélène Cixous asserts that no invention in literature can occur without a sense of otherness, which she links to the unconscious (in Cixous & Clément 1986: 84-85). return to text

[4] For me, it's not so much that poetry is resistant to rational thought as that it's open to non-rational ways of thinking. The claims of rational thinking and logic (usually very male-centred) are sometimes oppressive. I have rarely met anyone for whom one of the fundamentals of logic, that the assertion of one thing is not the denial of another, was able to be lived at a personal level. In practice, we don't use rational thought alone to make decisions in life but a blend of logic and emotional imperatives. return to text

[5] See Bullock 2015; and Sylvia Plath's interview with Peter Orr (1966). return to text

[6] Considering John Dewey's views on the role of art, Webb describes its ability to form bridges between 'fields of experience', in 'generating fresh representations of the world and its people, it is necessarily a mode of knowledge production' (2012: 5, 7). return to text

[7] Though it might seem a common form, it's worth noting that, in the 43 articles published in *TEXT* in the year after Watkins and Krauth's presentation, only four (other than their own contribution with its coffee-ringed emails) moved beyond the self-reflexive mode and discussions of practice-led research into a more substantial use of creative material – works by Craig (2016), Bullock & Fanaiyan (2016), Robert-Foley (2016) and Waters (2016). Others cited their own creative writing briefly – Beasley (2016), Franks (2016) and Redhead (2016). return to text

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