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Poetry Now: Introduction

Across the ages, critics and poets have struggled to define what poetry ‘is’, from arguments about its formal qualities – for example,

as a ‘patterned arrangement of language’ (*OED*, as cited in O’Donoghue, 2019, p. 1);

as ‘a text structured (not merely decorated) by ... repetition’ (Finch, as cited in Faulkner, 2020, p. 12);

as ‘compressed and kinetic’ (Parini, 2008, p. 25);

as that which lives ‘between sound and sense, between the semiotic sphere and the semantic sphere’ (Agamben, 1999, p. 109);

as ‘saturated segmentivities in social-sensuous language’ (DuPlessis, p. 15)

– or about its capabilities for enlivening the imagination – for example,

its ‘slipperiness and ambiguity’ (Faulkner, 2020, p. 12);

its ‘clarification and magnification of being’ (Hirshfield, 1997, p. vii);

its ‘reanimation and reactivation of the language that we recognise and know’ (Zapruder, 2018, p. 9);

its ‘turn[ing] toward the ineffable’ (Metres, 2018, p. 4)

– to suggestions about the ways in which it affects readers. In a moving letter written by Emily Dickinson to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, she aptly alludes to the affective qualities of poetry in her own attempt to describe the art form:

If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is

poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way? (as cited in Higginson, 1891/n.d.)

Variations and contradictions in definitions of what poetry *is* remind us of T. S. Eliot's suggestion that any attempt to define the 'natural laws' of poetry is futile, because 'poetry can recognise no such laws' (1933/1964, pp. 131-132). Nevertheless, it seems uncontroversial to suggest that, across time, poetry has demonstrated its flexibility and mutability, responding to and drawing energy and innovation from the moods, challenges, and technologies of the particular era. In this way, poetry is open to inventiveness as poets, firmly rooted in cultural and social contexts, wrangle language 'adequate to [their] experience' (Parini, 2008, p. 9). 'Poetry', writes Glyn Maxwell, 'is creaturely. ... How it echoes is different in each language, in each culture, in each age' (2012, p. 88). We might think of Wordsworth, penning the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, where he suggests that poets throw off the strict poetic forms, styles, and traditional subject matters of the past, and to instead write poems drawing on everyday life, using everyday language – 'language really used by men' (1802/2001). Or, we might think of the unruliness of Beat poetry, how it responded to and promoted the spiritual liberation of post-war America. Or, of the conceptual poetry of the 21st century, a response to the 'textual abundance' of the post-internet era (Goldsmith, 2011, p. xvii). Each of these moments in poetry's history shows us how our understanding of what a poem might be can shift and change according to social, cultural, and political pressures of the time. Indeed, what we might call a poem now – a list poem, a found poem, a digital poem, for example – would no doubt leave critics scratching their heads or declaring sacrilege in bygone eras. And yet, it is also apposite to note that 'poetry now' is inevitably entangled with the history of poetry; as writers and readers of poetry, we bring to the contemporary poetry field/s our knowledge and understanding of where poetry has been. Charles Bernstein notes that 'Poetry is aversion of conformity in the pursuit of new forms, or can be' (1992, p. 1), an apt summation of how poetry can look in two directions at once, acknowledging the past in order to break from it, to move forward.

Of course, surveying the poem's definitions – or parameters – across time can also arouse questions about the role and function of poetry in the world – that is, what a poem *does* or can do. Plato, in his Socratic dialogues, banished poetry from the ideal society, suspicious of its potential to corrupt youth by inciting unruly passions, and because he saw poets as 'imitators' who are removed from 'truth'. He was, however, open to its value if defenders could prove it (Plato, n.d.). Shift forward two and a half thousand years, and W. H. Auden says that 'poetry makes nothing happen' (n.d./1940), while, much more recently, Alison Whittaker has said that poetry can be a 'great tool for organising and for mobilising people' (2019), and Philip Metres believes that poetry is 'fundamentally a kind of resistance ... A refuge' (Metres, 2018, p. 4). Regardless of any intended or unintended purpose, as an art form that preserves, provokes, and develops our imaginative capabilities, poetry can play a key role in expanding how and what we think about the world (Wilkinson, 2020).

We proposed this special issue of *TEXT*, themed 'Poetry Now', as a way to explore and provoke conversations about and around how poetry might be understood and valued in this

contemporary moment. We released a call for poetry and scholarly articles in late 2020, a year we will remember for its collocation of intensities, protests and disasters. We asked: what purposes does poetry serve, and for whom? How are poets harnessing poetry's power to address urgent contemporary issues? How is poetry experienced and received among different communities of readers and listeners? How does it intersect with other domains, and what are the fruits of these intersections? And what are the new frontiers for poetry?

We received an overwhelming response to this call, from scholars and poets willing to engage with such questions and conversations. This issue features a range of scholarly articles and poems that investigate poetry's evolving place in the contemporary moment. Many of the articles prioritise a process of looking backwards, exploring the Kierkegaardian tenet that 'Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards' (as cited in Jorgensen, 2006, p. xxxvii). In this way, history is never in the past but constantly in our present and future, informing our choices.

The exploration of contemporary poetry through ongoing analysis of poetic styles, approaches, and methods is a major theme of this issue. Christian Bök responds to Darren Wershler's *The Tapeworm Foundry: And or the Dangerous Prevalence of Imagination*. This book comprises a series of imaginary proposals as to-do lists and is a clever piece of conceptual writing, challenging poetic conventions and responding to the Bloomian expression of the anxiety of influence. Bök's article echoes the form and function of *The Tapeworm Foundry*, using extensive citations in its ludic play to explore the idea that nothing is new. Focusing at various junctures on segmentation and emulation, Bök posits that the internet is 'a foundry for manufacturing things and disseminating copies so that both piracy and parody have become more convenient'. In his focus on 'phonemic patterning', David Musgrave also explores poetic influence and prioritises a discussion of the internet in the analysis and making of poetry. He does this by examining the trace of original voice and authorship in creative works. In a practice-led discussion of digital and analogue 'mishearings' and the possibility for poetic transformation, Musgrave investigates 'the role that voice plays in our reception and understanding of poetry'.

Emily Collyer outlines her encounters with non-visual texts as a process of ekphrasis, demonstrating the generative potential of these moments for her as both poet and scholar. Comparing her process to running, Collyer traces what she terms 'poetry as exercise', in the significant fictocritical inheritance that informs her practice. In reflexive, practice-led research, Collyer demonstrates how her writing responds to other texts – primarily theatre memory and art criticism. In her discussion of intertextuality and assemblage, she emphasises the importance of a community of practice across genres and how it informs her practice.

Paul Magee also examines poetic legacy in an article delineating what he observes as enduring Romantic (and to some extent, Modernist) attitudes and practices in contemporary poetry. Magee focuses on spontaneous writing, exploring the ongoing relevance of Wordsworth's expression of 'good poetry [as the] spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'. He discusses the possibility for revision to be read as 'performative', positing that 'a rapid and relatively

unrevised mode might – under certain, historically given conditions – generate extraordinary poetry.’ In interviews with Anglophone poets, Magee argues that returning to poets’ manuscripts provides valuable insight into creative practice and process.

Filling a significant lacuna in scholarship, Stuart Cooke examines ‘neobaroque’ influences in Australian poetry. Tracing the possible influence of leading Mexican poet Coral Bracho’s influence on Martin Harrison’s later work, Cooke extends the discussion to a diverse range of Australian writers, proposing ‘that the neobaroque is a pan-continental poetics of deterritorialisation, in that it can enact processes of radical unsettlement and reformation virtually anywhere.’

Ethical engagement with First Nations poetry and an examination of the settler-colonial landscape are major considerations for many articles in this issue that contribute to, among many other disciplines, the ‘field’ of settler colonial studies. In compelling place-based analyses at both the micro and macro level, Jake Goetz’s article focuses on the spatial eco-poetics that underpin Laurie Duggan’s poems. Explicating Duggan’s use of poetic collage, he demonstrates the ways in which Duggan can be read as an ‘experimental geographer’. Ultimately, Goetz questions if ‘settler poets alone can create an ethical engagement with the history, geography, ecology and more, of a place in which Indigenous sovereignty was never ceded, and in which their presence can quite easily be thought of as untenable’. Providing a neocolonial context for her article, Amanda Johnson examines environmental–activist poetries by both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. In the dialogue she sets up between Western ecocriticism and Aboriginal poetics, Johnson extends Lionel Fogarty’s discussion of ‘how language works culturally’, to explore ‘how it responds to the words of the coloniser in myriad ways’. Christine Howe and Jade Kennedy contribute to an important and exciting new stage in engagements with Indigeneity in Australian tertiary creative writing pedagogy in their article on the collaborative development of a first-year poetry subject that privileges a sustained engagement with the work of First Nations poets. Significantly, Howe and Kennedy discuss their focus on reflecting the principles of Dharawal knowledges through respect and reciprocity in their pedagogical endeavours. In pithy ruminations they posit their rationale for the work as ‘the urgency of the question of how to find our way in these times, to know who we are and who we are becoming’; their first-year poetry subject is ‘underpinned and guided by a relational Aboriginal framework’.

Several articles in this issue focus on the connections between poetry and technology, and in particular, the question of how contemporary poetry connects with and expands its audiences in digital and public spaces, and the way online networks foster communities of readers and poets. Turning to the question of communities of poetic production online, Joshua Ip et al. examine the phenomenon of SingPoWriMo: a collective, month-long writing challenge which engages some 7,000 unique users annually to compose a prompt-based poem a day, hosted on social media platform Facebook. As the authors observe, collective writing activities such as SingPoWriMo run counter to the editorial processes and commercial imperatives of traditional publishing platforms. By focussing on ‘high-volume, high-speed poetic output’ in the more transient medium of social media posts, the authors argue, digital writing challenges ‘create,

and demand, new ways of understanding writing,’ and have significant implications for notions of canonicity, collaboration, and the creation of communities of practice.

The effect of technology and digital performativity on a poet’s representation of their individual subjectivity and embodiment preoccupies Julia Cooper Clark in her article, which analyses the complex intersection between the real and digital in the work of three contemporary Australian poets, Shastra Deo, Marcus Whale, and Holly Isemonger. Drawing on interviews with the poets as well as textual analysis, Clark argues that digital interfaces produce reflexive and mediated forms of poetry which often explore the tensions between questions of identity and anonymity, and embodiment and alienation, and which disrupt the ‘traditional dynamic of poets as natural responders to the world’.

Kate Middleton focusses her attention on the pervasive technology of television, and renderings of televisual culture and genre in contemporary poetry by Susan Stewart, Anne Carson, Claudia Rankine, and Bianca Stone. Arguing that television is both a mythologising and moralising force, as well as a conduit for influence and infection in the viewer, Middleton situates her reading of four poets in an ekphrastic tradition, exploring how poetry can disrupt and interrogate mass culture and explore notions of the television viewer as both passive recipient or active interpreter. Middleton also opens up tensions between the lyric poem – a form typically focussed on an intense and charged moment – and the serialised, endlessly repeating form of television, offering fertile ground for further inquiry.

Michael Leach finds resonances between poetry and scientific technology and innovation in contemporary VisPo (visual poetry), exploring the ways in which poetic forms such as the calligram might translate and engage with scientific concepts. Examining the work of contemporary Canadian poet Christian Bök as well as his own poetic practice, Leach explores the capacious form of the calligram and its potential to enhance scientific communication and serve as a sustaining force for VisPo more generally. Leach advances a perspective which values the synergies between poetry and data, and argues for the value in engaging scientific concepts in a form which draws upon visual syntax as well as verbal.

The question of how poetry can enhance public comprehension and understanding of complex phenomena also animates Sue Joseph, David Drayton, Sarah Attfield, and Craig Batty in an essay exploring the international phenomenon of public transport initiatives that introduce poetry to commuters on trains, busses, and other forms of public transport. Charting the development of a new Sydney-based public transport poetry initiative, Words on Wheels, Words on Water, whose pilot project entailed a pedagogical collaboration between tertiary students and academic researchers, Joseph et al. argue for the disruptive power of poetic language when introduced into spaces which are usually reserved for advertising, and the value of ‘putting poetry on the move’ in fostering community engagement with social justice issues.

The role of social justice in poetry – and poetry’s power as a vehicle of protest and political engagement – are the focus of Alyson Miller’s essay, which situates contemporary poems of resistance against a backdrop of the social media-fuelled #MeToo and Black Lives Matter

movements. Exploring both the elegiac and anti-elegiac dimensions of protest poetry as well as its performative context within social media networks which amplify its expression, Miller suggests that protest poetry offers an open-ended, often transgressive and boundary-breaking form in which poets from marginalised communities can grieve and confront systemic racism and sexism while resisting closure and consolation.

Rebecca Cheers addresses the injustices of history and the legacy of sexism in an essay which reflects on her own practice-led research as a poet-historian operating in the field of feminist poetic biography. Cheers's essay focusses on her feminist reimagining of the life of bohemian figure Anne Brennan – the daughter of Christopher Brennan – whose life narrative has been the subject of misogynistic (mis)representation; Cheers argues that an ethical feminist approach to the archive which prioritises incompleteness and an acceptance that histories are always partial is central to expressing feminist grief and empathy for the biographical subject.

Ann Vickery also focusses on the question of how poetry can serve as a vehicle for empathy in an essay which addresses representations of dementia and cognitive decline in contemporary poetry, and argues for the lyric's capacity for hospitality. Noting the damaging and prejudicial stereotypes and tropes people living with dementia are often subjected to, Vickery argues that ethical representation of dementia is predicated on enabling and recognising the inherent agency and dignity of the individuals being represented, as well as poetry's potential – through its non-narrative and disruptive potential – to accommodate dementia's vagaries and metamorphoses.

Together with these 16 scholarly articles, this special issue also features poems by 19 poets, and each poem, or suite of poems, is accompanied by a research statement articulating the significance and value of that poetic work as extending from a research enquiry. Not unexpectedly, these poems reflect numerous contemporary concerns: about the ecological crisis and living in the Anthropocene; about (social) media discourse and misinformation; about threats that come in various guises (surveillance, violence, virus, apathy). There are also exploratory poems that test and expand the parameters of ekphrasis and biography, and those which revel in the play of and with language as refuse, recycling, resistance.

Jane Hirshfield says that 'the activity of poetry is to tell us we must change our lives' (1997, pp. 52-53). The articles and poems within this special issue testify to poetry's responsiveness to the unfurling 'now' moment; they speak of and to the many ways in which poems can embody our evolving experience of and attunement to the world.

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Sarah Holland-Batt is a poet, critic and Professor at QUT. Her first book, Aria (UQP, 2008), received the Thomas Shapcott Prize for Poetry, the Arts A.C.T. Judith Wright Poetry Prize and the F.A.W. Anne Elder Award. Her second book, The Hazards (UQP, 2015) received the 2016 Prime Minister's Literary Award for Poetry. Most recently she has published a book of essays, Fishing For Lightning: The Spark of Poetry (UQP, 2021). She is also an aged care advocate, commenting for media outlets including 7:30, The Project, Q&A, ABC News and The Australian and The Guardian.

Jessica L. Wilkinson has published three poetic biographies, Marionette: A Biography of Miss Marion Davies (Vagabond 2012), Suite for Percy Grainger (Vagabond 2014) and Music Made Visible: A Biography of George Balanchine (Vagabond, 2019). She is the founding editor of Rabbit: a journal for nonfiction poetry. She co-edited, with Bonny Cassidy, Contemporary Australian Feminist Poetry (Hunter Publishers, 2016) and, with Cassandra Atherton, Memory Book: Portraits of Older Australians in Poetry and Watercolours (Hunter Publishers, 2021). Jessica is Associate Professor of Creative Writing at RMIT University, Melbourne.

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