University of Melbourne and University of Canberra

Kevin Brophy and Paul Magee

We slowly arrive safely: poetry at home and away

Paul's preface

The following constitutes the text of an interview I conducted with the poet Kevin Brophy at the University of Melbourne in Parkville, Victoria, on 20 April 2007. Kevin will be known to many *TEXT* readers. He has published eleven books, including *Creativity: psychoanalysis, surrealism and creative writing* (1998), a now canonical text in the field of creative arts research, and the more recent *Patterns of creativity: investigations into the sources and methods of creativity* (2009). Kevin coordinates the Creative Writing programme in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne, and in that capacity has trained countless present and future writers. The reason I wanted to interview Kevin, however, was to discuss his poetry. Kevin has published four collections: *Mr Wittgenstein's Lion* (2007), *Portrait in Skin* (2002), *Seeing Things* (1997, reprinted 2001) and *Replies to the Questionnaire on Love* (1992). There is a hardness to the observations in these works that belies their seeming whimsicality. The lines, particularly in Kevin's later work, have an epigraphic quality, giving a sense of both rhythmic and conceptual honing. But stories abound. In short, this is work to last. So I wanted to know where it comes from.

The context of my curiosity was quite specific, and does in fact relate to the field Kevin has helped to found. I interviewed fourteen leading Australian poets over the year 2007 as part of an ongoing research project entitled *Poetry / Knowledge* (Magee 2008 and 2009; Magee and Polain 2009). The interviews were funded by a University of Canberra *Early career researcher grant* and they sought to cast light on 1) the research that went into those poets' work and 2) the epistemological properties of poetry more generally. To this end, I asked the fourteen a series of questions that basically presumed they were researchers. I left it to the poets to work out what in their practice answered to such a presumption and what did not. Did they perform fieldwork? Did they conduct literature reviews prior to approaching a topic? Did they ever have a research question? The most controversial of these questions concerned what kind of knowledge the poets were purveying. Would any of them be happy for a poem of theirs to be read as an academic thesis? If not, why not?

The title of my research project was obviously a pun on Foucault's 'power-knowledge' (1981: 92-102). Actually the Foucauldian connection was not entirely playful. There are very real institutional and even political-economic reasons why the connection between art and knowledge is now on the agenda. At first blush these reasons seem quite trivial: a number of researchers have, for instance, pointed out that the incorporation of arts schools into UK and Australasian universities in the late 1980s, under regulatory regimes requiring reportable research outputs of all academics, necessitated that artists come up with some theory of art's contribution to knowledge simply so as to hold their jobs (Biggs and Büchler 2007; Strand 1998; Harvie 2000). The fact that discussion as to art's links to research and inquiry is also beginning to arise in

the USA, in the absence of such pragmatic imperatives (Cunningham 2004), owes something to the second impetus to the current debate: the intimation that a better understanding of creativity's relation to knowledge will boost our understanding and fostering of what are increasingly being referred to as national innovation systems: the economic, social and cultural networks through which new products and services emerge (Freeman 1995). This is as much big business as institutional accident, and either way one would have to add that we're as much spoken for, as speaking, in conducting work on such questions in the present conjuncture.

Then there's Plato, who repudiated poetry's claim to knowledge on the grounds that a poet is only able to compose while 'mad and possessed' (Plato n.d.). The tendency of my interviewees, as in Kevin's case below, was to reject the Platonic position - though never entirely. How could one? Indeed, it might well be that the upshot of this study is to show that there is something a little 'mad and possessed' about the conduct of any research project.

Interview

Paul: This is Paul Magee. I'm here in Parkville in Melbourne and I'm about to interview Kevin Brophy. Kevin, my first question is a very broad one: what research - taking the word 'research' any way you like - do you do?

Kevin: I guess my main research really is reading other poetry. My poetry has little to do with the kind of facts that you might need to investigate for a historical or scientific project. Very occasionally I might mention historical elements and need to check dates or brand names. So there's that kind of research, which arises out of checking on memory. But mainly my research is reading other poetry, and reading around the poetics of poetry. I've just finished Terry Eagleton's latest book, *How to Read a Poem* (2007), and it goes over lots of questions I've been thinking and writing about and teaching about. That for me is research - both of those activities: reading poetry and reading poetics.

P: Do you ever do fieldwork? As in, do you ever try to place yourself in situations where poems might arise?

K: The funny thing is that when you become a writer, your life becomes fieldwork. And life becomes material. So, for example, I wrote a poem last year about a statue in Dawson Street in Brunswick, a statue of Father Brosnan, the former Pentridge Prison chaplain. It's on the street outside the Brosnan Welfare Centre and that's out in a field, as it were. But I didn't go out into the street in order to look at the statue or in order to write the poem. I was out in the street and kept coming across the statue. It impinged on me so much that I had to write a poem. That's what I'd call fieldwork.

P: I'll ask you another question, to do with the research that goes into your work. This one concerns diction. I'm wondering whether you find words or phrases in other people's speech that eventually make their way into your poetry?

K: Yes I do. I'm not a great picker-upper of other people's idiom because I don't write from personae. More often than not it's an investigation into the various voices of Kevin Brophy, rather than the impersonation or production of others' voices. That said … I've got some interesting neighbours who are - well the kindest way to describe them would be to say that they're nothing like me or my family. I was coming out of my driveway just as the neighbour was getting into his hotted-up car. I'm careful not to have eye contact with him but I did look at his car. And the response I got from him for doing that was, 'What're

yer lookin' at yer fuckin' dog?' And that disturbed me for the whole day until I realised it was the opening line of a piece of writing. It's got beautiful rhythm you just can't get out of your head. I know it's going to grow into a piece of writing because he'd got some kind of rhythm right there. So yes, I'd love to enter into *that* voice, use those rhythms and get that down.

P: So representing another's voice is as much to do with capturing the rhythms of their speech as anything else?

K: For me it is, yes. And partly it has to do with the writing of poetry in lines - I think of that phrase not as a sentence, not as a statement, but as a line. There's a rhythmic whole to it.

P: What you're saying evokes Eagleton's assertion as to the necessary primacy of the line in any definition of poetry.[1]

Let's turn to some questions to do with location, the researcher's location in space and time. The first one is whether you write while you're travelling?

K: I do. I always take a notebook with me. I don't do that much travelling. The travelling I have been doing over the last few years has been conference travelling. What I end up doing in those situations is writing down what other people say; not for the purpose of writing poetry, but because I'm attending conferences. But recently we spent seven weeks in India and I kept a more daily journal during that time. Experiences. A man named Ataf drove us down off the Himalayas from Srinegar to Jammu, smoking all the way, one hand on the wheel, charging through goats and squads of monkeys, passing army vehicles on blind corners while my daughter almost wept with fear in the back seat and I looked away at the roadside signs which said, 'Drive with nerves calm and see the valley's charm' or 'Drive like hell, you'll be there' or 'We slowly arrive safely'. The journal is peppered with the kind of English I heard in the streets of India too, which is English but not English. I'm interested in trying to write some of that kind of English, with English words in it, but you don't quite know what's being said.

P: When you're travelling and you do end up composing poetry, are you conscious of composing in a different way from when you are at your desk here, or in any other more habitual place?

K: Well, the other thing about travelling is that you travel and you stop. That's when the writing happens, when you've stopped. We spent a week in Jamieson last year and I was writing in response to the landscape around me because I hadn't stayed in that spot before. Forest, individual trees, weather, the room I was writing in and eventually the second-hand magazines that I read in the toilet became the subject matter for poetry. There is an offering of material in travel, which is not so easy to recognise or receive in daily life where routine takes over.

P: So are you saying that we stop more when we're travelling?

K: I think we do. When we do stop, perception comes alive. Travelling has a lot to do with sitting still.

P: Let me ask you a cheeky question now. Are you an Australian poet?

K: Ah well ... like most - well I don't know about most people - like most poets, I have a great suspicion of the idea of nation, nationality and nationalism. Maybe that says something about me coming out of the 70s and its hopes for revolution. But one of the experiences that I do have when I travel (we've been

to China, Bali, India and back in the early 70s I went to Europe) is that I become not quite homesick, but culturally dislocated. This happens even though I'm taking notes and writing stuff that I know will be refined back in Australia and will be for an audience that's Australian. So without wanting to be or intending to be, yes, I am an Australian writer.

P: Are you conscious of your diction being Australian? Do you think there's an Australian voice speaking in your poems?

K: Well, that's the other side of nationalism isn't it? I say I'm suspicious of nationalism but the other side of it is I don't want to be blandly global and I don't want to be American. Given those choices, yes I do want to cultivate Australianness. So the situation is paradoxical; but these choices aren't all that deliberate. I say they're not deliberate but that's a bluff as well, because I carefully cultivate in myself the idea that I'm a Coburg boy. I was brought up in Coburg, one of Melbourne's inner northern semi-industrial suburbs and now I live in Brunswick, which is right next to Coburg. The streets around my home are the streets of my childhood. So I do cultivate a form of localism.

P: I find a very clear concern with locale in the poetry. Would you be happy with the designation of 'Brunswick poet'?

K: I'd be more happy with that. I'm comfortable with that. I'm not so comfortable when it gets bigger.

P: Sticking with that suburb, that wonderful suburb (I used to live there too …), do you think that that place in some way is having effects upon the poems you write? Or do you think you'd write in a similar way wherever you lived?

K: I remember trying to work out what kind of poet I am. Part of the purpose and part of the impulse for doing that was having to explain myself to funding bodies when applying for grants. So I went back and had a look at my first two books of poetry and tried to work out what it is I could say about the poetry that might make sense. That's when I realised: you write about your neighbourhood, you write about your family, you write about your street. You write about Brunswick. I felt safe saying that. But then that becomes its own program. Now I know I'm writing about my suburb when I do it - which might become a mannerism if it's too self-conscious. I am someone who wants to belong in a locality. I think if for some reason I'd ended up in Bendigo or Ballarat I would've written about those places. I would've written the same kind of poetry that I always write but with the flavours of Bendigo or Ballarat. I like to write poetry that gets its inspiration from the place where I live. It just happens to have been Brunswick … though of course it was no accident I came back to the streets of my childhood. This is a story for another time.

I suppose every poet also thinks about these sorts of things: how much of a love poet am I? How much of a pastoral poet am I? How much of a nature poet am I? How much of a language poet? When I think about those things, I have to admit I'm an urban poet. Nature doesn't have much to do with it …

P: I wouldn't have said that of your work ...

K: Because you think there is a lot of nature?

P: Yes - the sort that you encounter in places like Brunswick.

K: I'm ashamed of my lack of knowledge of nature. Nature is pretty fuzzy for me. I see things fly in the window or the open door and I look at them and sometimes I squash them. Sometimes I write poems about them. I don't count

myself as a nature poet. I just count myself as good enough at that. But that's not to say I don't have my relationship with nature. Everyone has the sky and the ground. We are in it, and that has to be part of what poetry's about: what we're in. I was reading Ted Hughes' poems about jaguars and panthers yesterday. He wrote that it's a chemical process. He was writing about the jaguar but he was also talking about the poet and the poem. I do try to connect to the world (and connect-up the world) through some kind of physical process - the physical reality of connection, that chemical kick. But I count myself as more knowledgeable about the suburb than about nature.

P: If we say that the suburb is your subject matter, is it possible to summarise it as the set of symbols you attach that chemical process to, and to say that the names of nature could be seen as a different set of symbols? I mean, can we look at it on a quite abstract sort of level?

K: I think we can. I don't see why we can't. When I think urban poetry, I think okay, it is its own landscape; it has its own levels of detail like a farm or a forest might have. Most humans these days are urban. So yes, I think they're equivalents. Landscape is really narrative. The main road down at the end of my street is Sydney Road, and once upon a time, when I was a child, it *was* the road to Sydney. For many years down at the Dawson Street corner there was a metal outline of a boat bolted to the top of a shop roof with neon letters, OM across it. I breathed that word each time I saw it, and thanks to the outboard motor industry for giving me my daily spiritual reminder. The Brunswick Baths just off Sydney Road are the baths where I learned to swim (another central spiritual achievement for Australian children), and I've been told the spine of the pool has broken, any day now it will crack open and the water will flood out. To know a landscape is to know its stories.

P: Kevin, I'll turn to ask you this set of questions about composition. Just to foreground this, what I'm interested in is how poetry functions in relation to knowledge: whether as a vehicle for it, or as an instigator of enquiry, or whatever. The main way I'm doing that is by asking people about their research processes and also about their compositional processes. I can then take what they say about these two things, and how they intertwine, and I can compare it with, say, how people in the hard sciences work.

K: Are you going to interview scientists as well?

P: Not immediately. I'm talking to poets and I'm comparing what people say about their research with what I find in the philosophy of science. That's a bit like talking to scientists I guess. It involves reading people like Charles Saunders Peirce, the essays where Peirce talks about the process of coming up with a scientific research question, something he makes sound remarkably like what a number of poets have told me about the experience of generating poems.[2] I'm reading people like him, Feyerabend, Kuhn …

What I want to ask you about now is the way you actually compose. I might start by just proposing to you a model and seeing if this equates with your practice or not. A lot of people that I've spoken to talk about having an initial moment of composition, where they come up with the basic poem, usually relatively quickly. They tend to treat editing as a separate sort of process, which happens later, and often over years and years. Does that answer to the way you compose? Is there a relatively rapid initial process?

K: Sometimes there is. Not always. Sometimes it's just a line or a phrase rather than a whole poem. Then I need to come back and slowly grow it. When you ask that question, one of the things I'm trying to do is remember the writing of

individual poems. I think the most common way I compose is through a long session where it's a kind of brainstorm with only vague ideas of shape and line. I tend to write initially in lines. Then the process involves going back. I think there are two things - well there are lots of things - that then need to happen. One is that I have to hang on to the initial feeling that I intended to get down in that poem. I try to get back into that each time I come back to re-draft the poem, difficult to do. In the end it's impossible. The other thing is that often I'm not quite sure what it is I'm writing about. When writing about that statue of Father Brosnan, that statue happened to be near the Brunswick Baths; I'm usually on my way to the baths when I encounter it. So the baths went into the poem, and for a long time the baths and the statue were tied up together in the poem. And I would work on it and work on it. Eventually I realised the baths had nothing to do with it. It had to be the statue. So all the time the question hanging over all of this is, what is your poem about, Kevin? Do you know what it's about? And often I don't know what it's about so I have to write my way into what it's about. Eventually the baths and the statue did connect, because I realised how important water is to the Catholic liturgy and to priests. Water is central to the Catholic liturgical life, so that made a nice connection for me: the water at the baths and the water that's a miraculous presence in a priest's life.

P: You'd initially made the association between the statue and the baths. Do you think the final liturgical association between priests and water was a later discovery, as in, something that wasn't actually there in the initial draft? Or do you think that in the initial draft you were actually making that association between priests and water, and not realising it?

K: My feeling is that in the initial draft it was an accidental connection, because they happened to be geographically near each other and I was going from one to the other. So I put them both into the poem. One of the other things that happened in addition to that was that, because I'd connected the two, I began thinking. The energy of that poem went into the baths with me and I began writing a poem about the old men's bodies that I see in the change rooms in the baths each day. So it's almost as if the statue animated itself and went into the change room with me. So that almost violent transfer of energy also happened. I don't know if that answers your question. I don't even know what question I just answered.

P: Well it's very interesting anyway. You just used the metaphor of a brainstorm to describe an initial moment of composition. Usually when we brainstorm we then go and rearrange, and find a different structure from it. In this instance is the actual structure largely arriving in the initial moment, or is it something that comes later?

K: There is a certain amount of structure in the initial draft, but I do find myself rearranging things drastically and throwing a lot out. I address that question of structure later in the process. I don't have a clear idea of structure to begin with. I tend to move by a series of associations, or a sinuous and hopefully complex, but also hopefully easily followed, series of connections. Then I try to retain that, and it does cause me problems, because sometimes the line of thought through the poem isn't clear, the way the poem's developing can get confused. It can gather to itself too many ideas as it goes.

P: So does the main poetic of the piece reside in the initial draft? Or does it come about later?

K: I think the initial impulse - the initial impulse, the excitement, the connections, the vision of something - is poured into that first draft. But through a series of drafts all that energy and expression and thought start to

come out of the poem rather than out of me. There comes a point when, instead of putting myself into the poem, I start to look at the poem and receive it. I listen to it, as it were, and then I get to understand what needs to be in it and what needs to be out of it, how it needs to be structured. If I don't get to that stage ... the poem will end up half-born. It will become one of those poems people read and say, yes, that's beautiful, and then give it back to you. If you ask them what it's about they can't tell you because it's still too private. Both impulses have to happen. Yes, you've got to get all that initial stuff down, but I don't think that that's necessarily the centre of it. That other thing has to happen too, where you begin to listen to it and let it tell you where it needs to be taken. It might want to be taken to a place that's nothing like what the initial idea was, what the initial impulse or vision for it was. A poem might not go where I was thinking of taking it but it goes somewhere, and that's often a pretty interesting place. Now my job, I feel, is to accept that and make the best poem I can out of what I've got.

P: Let me now ask you about composition on the micro-level. When words come to you, do they come as single words that you add together? Do they come as phrases, as lines?

K: I'll just go back a bit to when I was 19. I was in a Jesuit seminary. I spent two years in the seminary and one of the experiences you go through with the Jesuits is the 30-day retreat. It involves thirty days of silence, of meditation, but leads up to the climax of the 30th day when you make a commitment. Now that was a long time for a 19 year old and there were many blank parts in the days. I had discovered a typewriter in an empty room in the seminary; there were some instruction books on how to type, and I thought ... well, I knew then I was a writer. I had all these journals stacked up on my desk that I was filling with writing. Journal after journal. So I thought, if I'm going to be a writer I should learn to touch type. Over those 30 days I taught myself to touch type. So now I compose on the keyboard. It is automatic for me. Since the age of 19 I've been composing on typewriters and later on keyboards. I do some writing by hand but a lot goes straight onto the screen. You can touch type faster than you can handwrite, and you can touch type almost as fast as you can compose in your head. But I don't know where the words come from. I can't isolate that process because I'm reading them as they emerge from the ends of my fingers.

P: You've got the quote from Wittgenstein at the start of *Portrait in Skin*, about the pen knowing much more than the mind. But in this instance, it's the fingers.

K: Yes. When I'm teaching students and we're doing writing exercises in class, I say to them, 'Don't think. Just write. Your hand will know what to do because your hand is another kind of brain.' There was a documentary on the ABC recently that talked about people with heart transplants. After a heart transplant one man who was not at all interested in books, writing, or literature, began to write poetry. It turned out that the person whose heart he took wrote poetry. What does that mean? There are some organs that do work like the brain, or the brain is more extensive than we imagine. You can think with your hand. Your hand can do it. I don't know what the biological, evolutionary or neurological explanation for that is.

P: Even if it is the hands that are doing the writing, do you have a visual sensation when you're describing something? Say, the statue of Father Brosnan?

K: Yes.

P: Your poems are always very descriptive. Is the visual modality quite pronounced in your mind as you're writing?

K: You know, if I closed my eyes now and tried to describe this room I'd do a bad job. I don't have a strong visual memory in that way. But I know that lots of my words are visual words. I have a visual way of connecting with the world. I used to use a thesaurus, but I would nearly always find it frustrating, because I'd open it up at a word and I'd read all this stuff connected with the word. I'd read more and I'd look, but nothing would gel for me. I went to the thesaurus because someone told me it was a good idea to use a thesaurus. It didn't do the job for me. What does the job for me is sitting there and waiting. I know I've got an approximate word, but I haven't got the word that will kick that line into life. The best I can do is wait for it. So I sit at the desk and wait. I try to hold a feeling or a vision of a feeling I want the word to match, and then I wait for the word to come. And sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't.

P: The way you're talking about the conjuring-up of these words from the unknown sounds quite impersonal. Do you ever get the feeling someone else is doing the writing? Or does it seem more like they're just coming from some mysterious space?

K: I do. You know that experience, 'Did I write this?' I've had it in two senses: 'I don't remember writing it'; and in the other sense: 'What a lot of time and effort someone put into writing that. Oh, it was me.'

P: So this is looking at a published poem?

K: Yes.

P: I meant in the moment of composition.

K: You're asking how impersonal it is?

P: Yes.

K: It feels like it's coming from somewhere slightly outside of my self. Maybe it's got something to do with childhood, holding on to childhood, holding on to the newness of things. In the normal course of events, I'm an analytical person. I do diagrams. I believe in breaking ideas, projects, whatever, down into bits. But when it comes to writing the poems, I have to withdraw from all that. The poems have to come from somewhere that doesn't do that. Not at first anyway. It's a Kevin just off to the side and I have to channel him. It is slightly impersonal because it isn't my day-to-day self. Sometimes I think there's something not quite right about the way I am a poet: I write these poems. I spend a long time at the desk. But my family don't recognise me as a poet (maybe I should wear more scarves). For my family I'm a worker, a partner, a father. Or I'm just someone who talks too much, reads the paper a lot, won't let them watch television enough. Being a poet is something that happens over at the desk. Every now and again I say, 'I've got a new book of poetry coming out'. And they say, 'Oh, when did you write that?' I don't even know if they read it. There are poets who are poets at the kitchen table, everywhere they go, unmistakeable. Maybe I don't show myself as the poet easily enough. I sit at the desk and the poems come if I sit there long enough. But no one can say where their words come from.

P: I agree entirely. Words of Auden's to that effect actually sparked much of this inquiry. In fact, they were quotes of Auden's, from *Secondary Worlds*.[3] They weren't even his own words. He was quoting other people. In fact the

quotes weren't even about poetry. But they're very much along the lines of what you've just said.

I'm actually interested in more than poetry in this research. Part of my intention is to fold these ideas about research and composition back into the academic realm. Or into that realm where we're standing in front of a lecture theatre and we find ourselves saying things and thinking, 'Oh is that what I think?'

Now, because time is pressing, I'll just jump to a last set of questions, which have to do with your desires for your poem as a finished piece. I want to ask how you see the poem as an end product, and how you wish the world to receive it. Are there any things you would like people to learn via your verse?

K: Not that I can think of. Well maybe what they could learn is what it was like for someone to be alive at that historical, cultural and personal time when the poem was written. I'm committed to the idea that poetry is about experience. I know that poetry's textual and inter-textual and cerebral and I accept all that. But if it's not an experience, I don't think it's poetry. I think of poetry as a diary of the otherwise inexpressible, of what can only be expressed in this way.

P: That's very interesting because you were just saying that in your household your family don't experience you as a poet; the poetry comes from some other room. But by the same token you're seeing it as a document of that time, that experience.

K: Yes. What I'm describing is Worsdworthian I guess. Experience recollected not quite in tranquillity. One poem from a few years ago was written in response to my son asking for a 'pay rise' - as in pocket money, but he called it a pay rise. Another came from a comment by a woman painting a portrait in oils. She said oil paints on a canvas take 60 years to dry. A life time almost. And so it goes. I take these experiences to the desk and quietly grow them into poems.

P: Like the question about purple in your 'Purple Patches' poem?[4]

K: Yes, 'is there enough purple in the world?' My son's childhood question. Another one was, 'Could you teach a baby every language in the world?' They're terrific questions and I suppose what I do is record them. They have to do with ideas about poetry, aesthetics, and maybe philosophy too. But essentially, if they're not experiences for the reader, I don't think they can work as poetry.

P: But as well as providing experiences, they're also unusual; and you have ears for these phrases in particular because of your task as a poet.

K: Or they're made unusual by being put into poetry.

P: How about the contrary proposition: would you like people to learn through reading your work about certain limits to their knowledge? Would you like your work to stop them short, and make them realise they don't know something?

K: Well that would be a great compliment to the poetry if that happened. There's two people who have that kind of effect on me. One is Wittgenstein, with the sort of questions he asks and the other is Wallace Stevens, with the kind of poetry he writes. I couldn't hope to achieve the kind of - I don't know what to call it - boundary writing that they've achieved. They inspire me and I want to head in those directions. I don't think I ever get quite that far. But then, the other thing about poems is that they aren't going to be any good if the poet

already knows the answers to the questions the poem is asking. The poems I write are asking questions, as I think most poems are. Most of the time I don't know the answers to the questions that I'm posing, even the very simple questions such as, what is it going to be like to get old? Which is what that poem about the men's bodies in the change room is about. I don't know. I can only imagine, guess, propose. It is the limit of my own already limited understanding I press against.

P: Maybe another aspect of it is that not many people want to ask that question, about age and bodies. A final question, to do with gender. Do you want readers to know your gender?

K: I couldn't see any problem with it. I'm not sure what the point of that question might be.

P: Julia Kristeva says that the writing I is empty ... is genderless. She makes that observation and then she says that the gendering of the I is a marketing exercise, which is kind of interesting.

K: Writing is black marks on paper. The thing about writing that I keep coming up against and keep thinking about is that the reader is deaf, dumb and blind. The reader has no idea what it is you're writing about: what the context is, where you are, who you are, what your tone of voice is. The reader knows nothing. Anything the reader's going to know, you're going to have to give them. *This is a room with white walls. I am an old man. My beard is down to my knees.* As you give them the information, the reader becomes capable of building the picture. Outside my room is a desert. So I could say I am a woman. I wrote a novel called *Visions*. It was from the point of view of a woman. When I wrote that novel, I wrote about having periods and about having babies, as if I was having periods and having babies. That's the kind of freedom you have by having a reader who only knows what you tell them is the case. But when I wrote that book I showed it to some women friends who happened to be feminist lesbian separatists. I went to the most extreme of them and said what do you think of this? She got extremely upset and said, 'You've got no right to do this. You're a man. Men can't say these things or write these things.' I had to think my way through that. I haven't written a poem from the point of view of a woman, though. But I don't see why somebody who assumes I am a woman couldn't read the poems and make good sense of them. Most of them. But then again, most of them probably are extremely male because I am a product and recipient of male privileges. What man isn't?

P: Would you say that poetry as opposed to novel writing has less to do with crossing gender? I mean, your lesbian separatist friend would basically be outlawing novels. Do you think there's an actual difference in regard to gender between how one writes poems as opposed to novels?

K: Are novels more playful than poems? Novels don't take themselves as seriously as poetry tends to. One poet used to skite to me back in the 70s that he had poems in women-only anthologies. And those anthologies are still circulating. If you look at *Mother I'm Rooted* carefully enough you'll probably find some of his poems. But there's lots of novelists who in a sense have impersonated or crossed gender. From male to female, and more often female to male. But you don't get poets commonly doing that do you? The poetic voice is too close to the personal voice.

P: In that sense, when you're writing poetry does it feel more akin to writing your academic books than to writing the novels?

K: That's an interesting question. In a strange kind of a way it probably is closer. It's still a long way away from it, but closer, yes. Because a poem is (well I think of it this way) an enquiry, and it can work a bit like an essay or an argument. Whereas a story - the way I write stories - is not quite so much like that.

Paul's postface

This is my second attempt at writing this postface. The first focussed on the discussion you've just finished reading, concerning the similarities and differences between the academic and the lyric I. It ran on to 5,000 words and became a whole separate article. Yet that was just one of the issues broached in the interview. I think the way ideas proliferate from texts like this one has to do with their dialogic form, a form such texts share, if Bakhtin is correct (1986), with art itself. But that brings up another issue that could keep us chatting for hours, over at least another 10,000 words. Instead, I'll focus on a closely related issue, and I'll do so by way of a short discussion of my favourite passage in the interview.

Let me take you back to the middle of the interview. I've just asked Kevin whether the deep structure of a poem arrives in the initial flurry of composition or is produced later, in the process of editing. We're discussing Kevin's poem about Father Brosnan's statue, which is near to the Brunswick Baths. In the published version of the poem that proximity serves to open up a reference to the significance of water in liturgical life. At what point was the link made?

> K: My feeling is that in the initial draft it was an accidental connection, because they happened to be geographically near each other and I was going from one to the other. So I put them both into the poem. One of the other things that happened in addition to that was that, because I'd connected the two, I began thinking. The energy of that poem went into the baths with me and I began writing a poem about the old men's bodies that I see in the change rooms in the baths each day. So it's almost as if the statue animated itself and went into the change room with me. So that almost violent transfer of energy also happened. I don't know if that answers your question. I don't even know what question I just answered.

I had this passage in mind in the preface above, when suggesting that the upshot of this study might be to show that there is something a little 'mad and possessed' not merely about the composition of poetry, but indeed about the conduct of any research project.

Kevin mentions how a seemingly arbitrary association of disparate things can 'through an almost violent transfer of energy' take on deep emotional and intellectual resonance. On the one hand, this is clearly a description of metaphor, the process whereby two seemingly distinct identities are brought into a never entirely complete identity; as when we Australians bring the concepts of 'wearing' and 'nudity; together to say 'I'm just wearing bare feet' (i.e. going without shoes). Kevin is describing how such metaphors are coined, and the description reveals a lot about the suddenness and even ferocity of the experience. The reason, on the other hand, that this description leads me to think that a similar madness pertains to the supposedly more sober practice of academic research is that it too involves bringing disparate phenomena together in sudden and surprising ways.

I'm referring to the moment at which we isolate a problem for study; actually, I suspect that what we do is not so much isolate a problem as rather indicate a counter-intuitive point of convergence between two seemingly disparate phenomena. Take this very project: poetry/knowledge. Insofar as it resonates as worthy of study, it's because it brings together two things that seem to be distinct - and yet it's clear to anyone even just partially acquainted with poetry that there's some deeper connection between the two. That sets up the sort of tension you need to drive an inquiry, which is as much about engaging others in your question as anything else. When Foucault counter-intuitively suggested in the opening pages of the *History of Sexuality* (1991) that Victorian sexuality and garrulousness went hand-in-hand he was performing a similar manoeuvre, and one hardly needs citation data to point to the proliferative nature of that framing of his. Was he crazy at the moment he came up with it?

To describe the framing of research questions in terms of poetic madness and possession immediately raises the question *How can I get that way?* I search in vain in methodology textbooks for an adequate description of the processes by which we arrive at the problems we choose to study, and I can't say the answers are very satisfying. All I find are vague statements of the order of:

> Scientific research, not being a routine process but requiring originality and creative thought, is very sensitive to the psychological state of the scientist (Wilson 1956: 1)

and 'the problem should be important in the larger picture of one's view of the world' (1956: 1). It's vague, but on the other hand Wilson's suggestion that the framing of research questions is where 'originality and creative thought' have a large part to play is certainly suggestive. But what does that convergence of art and science really mean? Is it just a matter of the individual riches of personality, as Wilson seems further to intimate? He's certainly got authority on his side, viz. Aristotle's claim, in chapter 23 of *The Poetics*, that the capacity to produce metaphor is the one poetic capacity that cannot be taught ('This alone cannot be acquired from another and is a sign of natural gifts; because to use metaphor well is to discern similarities' (Aristotle 1995: 115)), a claim he holds strongly enough to reiterate it in the *Rhetoric* as well (1926: 355). But is Aristotle's claim really true? Doesn't art provide just that education? Isn't that part of its contribution to knowledge?

I'll leave Kevin the final words - his suggestion that poetic words never are final:

> The poems I write are asking questions, as I think most poems are. Most of the time I don't know the answers to the questions that I'm posing, even the very simple questions such as, what is it going to be like to get old? Which is what that poem about the men's bodies in the change room is about. I don't know.

Notes

1. In *How to Read a Poem*, Eagleton gives the following admittedly stark definition: 'A poem is a fictional, verbally inventive moral statement in which it is the author, rather than the printer or the word processor, who decides where the lines should end' (2007: 25). This is stark, but it does allow us to put our collective finger on certain specific effects: 'breaking up a text into lines on a page is a cue to take it as fiction. But it is also an instruction to pay particular attention to the language itself - to experience the words as material events, rather than to gaze right through them to the meaning' (2007: 47). Actually, what Kevin has just said leads me to think that Eagleton could take his analysis even further. For the other thing about lineation is the way it facilitates music. Whenever you have lines of roughly the same length you will tend to find, again roughly,

a similar number of syllabic stresses in each. The repetition this builds up is felt keenly, so that the stresses seem far more pronounced than in everyday speech. In this fashion lineation acts to elucidate and even frame the rhythmic beating of the language we all speak. This is so much the case that when we read free verse with wildly jagged lines, and even when we read a line quoted out of its poetic context, we're primed to hear the rhythms within (Attridge 1995). In terms of these inquiries into poetry's function as research, I think these facts licence us to say that lineation grants poetry its capacity to represent the rhythmic quality of everyday speech in a much more thorough manner than prose. Given the way emotional and even semantic codes are so often conveyed through those same rhythms (Leonard 2003), this is as much as to say that poetry offers a more realistic representation of what we actually say. return to text

2. I was referring to Peirce 1955; see further Magee 2009. return to text

3. I was referring to the following passage, from Auden's 1968 TS Eliot Memorial lectures, which were published as *Secondary Worlds* (Auden 1968:105-6):

> When we genuinely speak, we do not have the words ready to do our bidding; we have to find them, and we do not know exactly what we are going to say until we have said it, and we say and hear something new that has never been said or heard before. Here are three statements about speech which deserve to be remembered. The first is by Karl Kraus:
>
> > Speech is the mother, not the handmaiden of thought.
>
> The second is by Licthenberg:
>
> > I have drawn from the well of language many a thought which I did not have and could not put into words.
>
> The last is by Rosenstock-Huessy:
>
> > Living language always overpowers the thinking of the individual man. It is wiser than the thinker who assumes that he thinks whereas he only speaks and in doing so faithfully trusts the material of language; it guides his concepts unconsciously towards an unknown future. return to text

4. I was referring to the poem on p.76 of Kevin's *Seeing Things* (2001). return to text

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