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Is poetry research?

Abstract
This paper details results from the author's interviews with 14 contemporary Australian poets, which he conducted as part of a pilot project investigating art's relation to knowledge. The interviews focussed on the research practices, if any, which these 14 poets engaged in the process of composition. Beginning with an account of responses to the question 'What research do you do?' the article proceeds to investigate how that research manifests at the moment of composition. Questions as to the cognitive processes enacted at the precise moment the words / researches hit the page cast light on a number of distinctive factors including the speed of composition, the relative absence of conscious control at that moment, and the relation this process bears to stage acting.

1 A question

> This is Paul Magee in Melbourne, where I'm interviewing Alison Croggon. Alison, the first question I'd like to ask you is quite broad and general. What research - research defined in any way you want - goes into the writing of your poetry? (Croggon, interview 2007)

This sort of questioning has a real academic premium at the present moment. Twenty-eight of Australia's 39 universities now allow forms of higher degree research to be conducted through creative work (AAWP 2009); 15 years ago, only eight did so (Milech and Schilo 2004: fn.2), while one only has to go back 40 years to track the introduction of creative writing undergraduate teaching into Australia (Dawson 2004). The freshness of this field of higher study, both here and abroad, and the lack of any cogent position, both within the discipline and beyond it, as to how an artwork might make a 'substantial contribution to knowledge', renders questions like the one posed above vital to the future of creative arts as a university discipline. It's a matter of working out, in as many fields as possible, how art knows.

I've pointed to the lack of a cogent position on art's contribution to knowledge. This is not to say that we lack positions, including many valuable ones (e.g. Bolt 2004; Carter 2004; Green and Haseman 2006). We may not have found one compelling enough to force the Australian Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research to pay a university the same funding rewards for an academic's book of poetry as for their literary studies monograph - this is what I mean by 'cogent' from the Latin *co-agere*, to compel - but we've certainly arrived at positions. In fact, we've had no choice but to do so. For the desire to get and stay employed in an environment where quantifiable research output is increasingly the measure of one's value has only doubled the imperative on creative arts academics to find ways to link knowledge and art, in all sorts of contexts.

Hence this project, which involved interviews with 14 significant Australian poets, as part of a pilot study investigating the links between poetic composition and formal academic knowledge production.[1] Hence also why it hadn't really crossed my mind, till the interviews began, that poets with little or no academic affiliation might look upon the question 'What research do you do?' with a certain incredulity.[2] Here's Alison Croggon's response:

> That's really hard to answer. One answer is that none goes into it. That's partly because of the way I write poetry. I don't intend, as such, to write a poem. I wait for the poem to intend itself. I think most poets work that way. While I'm actually writing it, I've usually have no idea what it will be and what shape it will have until I get to the end. It's very hard to research for something when you don't know what it's going to be. (Croggon, interview 2007)

If the term 'research' got relatively short shrift over these 14 interviews, 'knowledge' fared even worse. In Aileen Kelly's words, 'What do you mean by knowledge? It's a terrible word' (Kelly, interview 2007), while Mal McKimmie was rather more discursive, but even more blunt:

> I don't really believe in knowing, to be quite honest, so this is a very strange conversation. I actually don't believe in knowing. I really don't. I have problems with knowledge because it assumes too much. Everything is absolutely and completely - everything, everything we do - everything's touched by mortality, and mortality is the void, and the void is doubt. We live in the church of doubt and you can worship nothing but doubt. In the church of doubt worship is just praise anyway and praise is just action and action is just being. So I mean, what the fuck are we doing talking about knowledge? (McKimmie, interview 2007)

Elsewhere in the interview McKimmie indicated that he couldn't stand words like 'express' or 'expression' either.

2 The most common response: reading other poets

These may not seem promising beginnings. On the other hand, these are people who clearly like a challenge. The very obtusity of my approach seemed to inspire my subjects to find ways to expand and stretch words like 'research' to approximate something recognisable in their practice. This led to some quite surprising results.

So Alison Croggon, continuing the comment above, added:

> To take a broader view, and to think in terms of reading, writing, walking round, I'm researching all the time. Only I wouldn't think of it as research. I don't know what I think it is. I read a lot of criticism, I like to see a lot of art if I can and I think about language a lot, consciously as well as unconsciously. All those processes feed into the process of writing poems when it does happen. I think of it more like keeping fit, to be honest. (Croggon, interview 2007)

Further passages in the interview made clear that reading other poets was, for Croggon, one of these 'research / keeping fit' practices. In fact, most of my

interview subjects tackled the question of what research they do by mentioning the reading of other poets. Mal McKimmie, for instance, mentioned his ongoing reading of other poets and added that he would be happy to use the word 'research' to describe that reading, while Jenny Harrison (interview 2007) was quite direct about it: 'I research by reading other poets. I think that's my primary research tool'.

I find this a surprising result. I'll explain why, and then in the sections that follow, I'll rehearse some other surprising results of this queerly-framed study of mine. For the fact of the matter is that by asking all the wrong questions, I got poets to cast light on otherwise unremarked aspects of their practice. What follows will, I believe, open up some future lines of inquiry, and not just in relation to the artform's function as research. Take the issue I have just raised: that the majority of my informants, all highly regarded, published and awarded Australian poets, mentioned the reading of other poets as something as integral, or almost as integral, to their practice as research is to scholars. That's the analogy they spontaneously put forward when I raised the word 'research'.

There are two things I find surprising here. The first is the total absence of the fears of derivativeness encapsulated in phrases like 'the anxiety of influence' (Bloom 1997). Aileen Kelly referred to such fears in her disparaging reference to those 'people who will not read other people's poetry because they're too afraid it will influence their voice', an attitude she saw as fatal to the desire actually to become a poet. Harrison alluded to such attitudes too, to show how irrelevant they were in her case:

> Each book I write, I become immersed in a particular genre of poetry or in the work of a particular poet. I might read all or part of a poet's works during that writing. I don't seem to have problems with the boundary between their work and my work. In my experience, my poetry retains its own style despite my immersion in reading the work of others during the writing process. (Harrison, interview 2007)

Harrison added that when writing her first book, *Michelangelo's Prisoners* (1994) she was reading a lot of Borges. And yet, 'The poems in *Michelangelo's Prisoners* are very different to those of Borges.'

The second thing I find surprising in these equations between research and reading other poets is what it suggests not merely about the sort of research that goes into composition, but also about the very being of modern poetry.[3] I'll approach this via Jan Owen's comments on how the encounter with another poet's work might spark off ideas that would lead directly to an act of writing: it was because the best poetry would put her in a 'ruthless poetry-writing mood' (Owen, interview 2007). Owen glossed this mood elsewhere in the interview as a sudden decision to abandon all everyday concerns and niceties and insistently write instead:

> My basic mood would have to be one of rejecting the mundane, rejecting all mundane values. It's not quite anguish - that would be an exaggeration. It's a ferocious, self-determined, 'I will' mood. (Owen, interview 2007)

Far from being anxious about the influence of such reading, which she too labelled 'research', Owen accesses her desire to create through it. The intimation of Coleridge in these comments (viz. his description of the primary imagination as 'the repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I

AM' [Coleridge 1975: 167]), underlines what they effectively imply: poetry acts to elicit creative desire in its readers.

If true, how little support such an implication would offer to the still-prevalent critical practice of seeking a prior meaning, or even meanings, in poetry (e.g. Eagleton 2006). To the contrary: from the comments I've cited above, one would be tempted to conclude that modern poetry has less to do with conveying the artist's own ideas - whether they be conscious or unconscious, individual, ethnic, class-based, gendered or however - than with generating the production of myriad ideas in others.

3 Another response: reading for 'triggering moments'

I've just raised the possibility that a modern poem is not a knowledge-report, nor even a mode of self-expression, so much as a device for generating creative desire - the desire for meaning, for resolution, for further aesthetic experience, for an infinite number of things - in others. It leaves one dumbstruck, and then in search for words. If this characterisation of modern poetry is true, it will obviously cast a great deal of light on my question as to poetry's contribution to knowledge. I'll return to this possibility in future articles. But for now, I want to maintain my focus on the curious responses elicited by my specific research question, how do poets research? For they are by no means exhausted by the response I've just sketched. For instance, and despite the widespread misgivings I cited at the start of this paper, a number of my interviewees did report practicing something like formal humanities research, in the sense of systematic reading on a given topic. Marcella Polain described reading up on 'the language of astrophysics' for the Jupiter poems in *Each Clear Night* (in Polain 2008). The fact that Harrison's mesmerising *Folly and Grief* is the product of specific research into the Commedia dell'arte tradition is clear not just from her discussion of its composition in the interview, but from the list of references appended to that very volume (Harrison 2006), while Alex Skovron too described reading up on specific subjects when composing some of his prose poems (Skovron, interview 2007).

More commonly, however, what seemed to find its way into the poetry was the sort of unsystematic reading Alison Croggon described:

> AC: Like a lot of poets, I'm an autodidact and that means following your desire for knowledge. So my working life for the last almost 20 years has involved that kind of activity. Again, I don't know whether I'd call it research. I could comfortably call it study.
>
> PM: There's quite a lot of academics who work that way too.
>
> AC: You're looking at something and wanting to know what it is and you want to read around it.
>
> PM: Because you want to.
>
> AC: Just because you want to, yes. There's no other reason. It's just interesting. (Croggon, interview 2007)

As my own response indicated, such autodidacticism can be something of an academic habit too. Continuing that parallel, everyone interviewed gave the impression of being a huge reader, not only of poetry, but much everything else besides: e.g. Jan Owen's references to phenomena in electromagnetics and

quantum physics, Claire Gaskin's quotation from the *Tao de Ching*, Aileen Kelly's paraphrases on tenets in negative theology, Mal McKimmie's references to Vincent van Gogh's letters, Jenny Harrison's reading in phrenology.

But how might such reading, whether systematic or otherwise, work its way into the poet's lines? Marcella Polain's comments on the role of research in the composition of 'when bees see blue' are suggestive. Having described her research as 'broad', and adding that 'it involves reading, not just poetry, but also fiction, narrative-fiction and memoir', Polain went on to describe what she could recall of the genesis of this particular poem, which runs as follows:

> when bees see blue
> they think it is the sky
> rush headlong in
> heavy for paradise
>
> are my eyes a trick of swarming light?
> your pulse drones in my ear
>
> the summer you first come home
> it rains for days
> we turn the house lights on
> we wipe our brows
> all those toweling squares drag on the line
> the whitest things for miles
> ahead roads bow over hills to sea
> behind land slips wide & treeless
> all day here your legs kick from us like questions
>
> in this suburb women say
> babies are born with blue eyes
> light swarms those summer days
> convexed against yours shocked and black
> two planets shifting endless in your head
>
> we search the possibilities of paint
> the neat squared hues that
> multiply like skin grafts
> your origamic fingers shift
> these colour charts for days
> unfold a blue more shocking than the sky
>
> our house looms bright and planetary
> the neighbours pass
> continual and silent
>
> you catch in my throat
> a long blue note that
> plummets from me
> (Polain 2008)

Here are Polain's comments on the reading that went into the making of 'when bees see blue':

> With that poem about the bees, I think someone told me that fact, or I read that and I was really taken with it. It seemed so evocative and it just seemed perfect. It was like I'd been waiting. It's that feeling - when it comes, you just know that it's right and some part of you receives it. In that case, it opened up

> all kinds of possibilities for me imaginatively. At that time, I was thinking about how to write about a particular theme, about a particular experience or feeling and it was something about that image that worked metaphorically in a really tangential way. The same with the reading around Jupiter and astrophysics and mythology. I would be reading and there'd be something, be it a line or a fact or a sentence, something that would feel full of possibility, full of imaginative possibility. I would often be triggered from that. (Polain, interview 2007)

On further questioning she revealed that actual diction of the poem might come to her in that exact moment. She added, however, that often she would have to wait for the right words and rhythms to come. In such instances she would allow the triggering complex to:

> sit in a space, the writing space in me, which I recognise and can almost feel physically ... I also put it in a physical space, like a notebook, but it's more than that, it's kind of a psychic space. I trust, and it just turns over and I can feel it. I can feel it doing some kind of work. (Polain, interview 2007)

The 'line' that emerges from this process 'is in response to whatever it is that's struck me'. I can't help but compare this description of Polain to the material I tabled above, the references so many of my subjects made to reading other poets as a form of research. For it seems quite clear that the very thing Polain is finding in her prose reading, and in her hearing of evocative facts like bees' relation to the colour blue, is poetry itself.

> I'm always looking when I'm reading - I suppose everybody does this - for something that resonates, shocks or triggers some kind of deep response. I don't know what those things will be before I come across them, but I know them when I come across them. It's about being in a state of readiness. (Polain, interview 2007)

This is not a description of how Polain reads poetry, but of how she reads astrophysical literature on Jupiter. Without the context one would probably think the former. What this suggests to me is that the poetic moment is already out there in the world we read, and just waiting for us to realise it. We realise it as the idea for a poem. That said, one wouldn't want to misunderstand the function of the signifier in all this. There's no reason why such an idea - that thing that 'resonates, shocks or triggers some kind of deep response' - might not be signified by a rhythm, for instance. Aileen Kelly's discussion of metaphor in her poetry has some light to cast here: 'My concept of metaphor is very big. It includes rhythm; sometimes it includes grammar.' I think we have to understand 'the idea for a poem' in a similar fashion, to refer to a larger than usual concept of ideation, one that incorporates an idea's 'formal' presentation as much as, if not more than, its purported meanings. That's why I prefer to speak in terms of 'the poetic moment'.

The point, at any rate, is that it can always arrive. Which is why Polain, just like Croggon, sees the main part of her research reading as a process of maintaining preparedness for such moments. In Croggon's words, once more: 'I think of it more like keeping fit, to be honest' (Croggon, interview 2007).

On the other hand, it's clear - from section 2 above, where another's poetry forms the precipitating force, the 'research' toward a poet's own poem, but also from Polain's own comments here - that the transposition from the poetic

moment one encounters elsewhere into one's own creative production is by no means direct, simple or even necessarily immediate. In response to my further questioning, Polain clarified that the diction for a poem like 'when bees see blue' will sometimes come to her immediately, but it will also often take time to germinate, time for the correct words, and correct rhythms to arrive. Questioned on this issue, Polain referred once more to the idea of a 'writing space', the place where these matters are worked 'on a level that I can only intuit [...] It's just the space. When we're casting around for words and we feel that space, it's the same one' (Polain, interview 2007). Often, she'd have to wait for the poem to come to her.

A similar issue - the need to wait for such triggering moments to turn into verse - arose in relation to the first of Mal McKimmie's *Brokenness Sonnets*, which runs as follows:

> My head is atomic with unspoken thought.
> My heart is a river that strains its banks until
> released by seizure. Nothing changes - I wet
> myself, I grow older. And while I pace
> behind my body's bars like Rilke's panther,
> hands soothe me, hold me, wipe from my face
> my failed speech - I am loved. But still,
> like a tree trapped in eternal winter,
> I am time-twisted, rain falling inward,
> with never a spring, not one flowering word.
> Not even love will free a single finger
> for my poems blue as the sky, blue as the rain,
> to spread wings and fly from an alphabet board.
> Under my skin I have a different name.
> (McKimmie 2005)

In his interview McKimmie revealed that the Rilke analogy pacing through lines 4 and 5 was from Oliver Sacks' *Awakenings*, and that it came specifically from the self-description of a sufferer of encephalitis lethargica, the physically but not mentally frozen state otherwise known as sleeping sickness. Having been physically sped up by Sacks' administration of dopamine to the point where he once more had the ability to speak, this encephalitic patient made an analogy between his condition and that of Rilke's 'The panther', an analogy that went on to lodge itself in McKimmie's brain, only much later to form a poem. In McKimmie's words:

> It [the patient's analogy, discovered while reading Sacks] sits in my head for however long and I end up reading Rilke, reading the actual poem, and that also sits in my head. Later on I end up composing the *Brokenness Sonnets*, and it ends up being in a *Brokenness Sonnet*. So it's a convergence of all sorts of different things. And this is (often) how research appears in poetry, for me. There is no necessary linear movement. (McKimmie, interview 2007)

I'm going to return to the theme of temporal delay, for it offers a clue as to just why my informants found my proposed analogy between their practice and academic work so dissatisfactory. But first, I want to round off this discussion by making three points.

i) The first point relates to the fact that both Polain and McKimmie described themselves practicing the sort of reading that plants triggers in them - 'the line is in response to whatever it is that's struck me' (Polain) - triggers that will later

turn into poems. One of the things that is interesting about this is that it suggests a very different way of reading from that social scientists, for instance, practice, with their tendency toward the generalisation of characteristics from large ('statistically significant') samples. This also puts Polain and McKimmie at a divergence from the reading practices of the majority of humanities academics, who need to proffer at least the appearance of inductive reasoning (e.g. one must show that one has read, or in other instances sampled, all the relevant documents) to pass the refereeing process and make it into publication. I write the 'appearance of inductive reasoning' for it is clear, as Charles Saunders Peirce has shown in relation to history writing, that the huge quantity of objects that present in cultural fields generally preclude the possibility of any real induction; for there is no way you can determine the proportionality, and therefore significance, of your sample if it comes from an infinite, or even just uncountable, set. Such humanities 'induction' is really more akin to 'asserting the truth of anything, if it seems to render the world reasonable' (Peirce 1998: 95). Given the curious way the presence of power manages to 'render the world reasonable', it is perhaps not therefore surprising that there is such a concomitant stress in humanities scholarship on having read all the relevant authorities ... However that might be, there is still clearly a vast difference between the way Polain or McKimmie read, compared to social science and humanities academics. Neither of these poets are - at least in the instances cited above - reading an array of phenomena to find their general features. It is rather that they're letting one specific poetic conjunction speak through them.

ii) On the other hand, I have to say that I'm wary of generalising from Polain and McKimmie's accounts, and not just because their discussions of how reading passes into poetry are relatively isolated in my archive. For that's not to say I won't find many more such responses in future interviews, where I will aim questions more directly at this issue. Strands in other of the interviews lead me to suspect I will. My reservation is rather that poetic lines are obviously based on all sorts of inductive readings as well, in the loose sense that Peirce allows us: assertions that seem 'to render the world reasonable'. For the contentions within poems are clearly often the product of the poet's repeated observations of things. As Wordsworth stated, in the clause which qualifies his rather more famous equation of poetry with the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings':

> but though this be true, poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are also modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings. (Wordsworth 1805: 23)

Wordsworth reminds us that poetry often conveys inductions, that is generalisations, arising from the poet's own research into the world.[4] He also reminds us of the existence of a temporal delay between cognition and composition. In fact, there's an enormous amount one can read into the passage beyond the simple idea of a 'spontaneous overflow', but all I'm really trying to do here is qualify what my research is suggesting about research for poetry writing involving the search for and transmission of the sort of triggering moments Polain and McKimmie describe. It's clearly indebted to the more celebrated modes of knowledge production as well.

iii) The third point I want to make is that little of this poetic research leaves a paper trail. My exchange with McKimmie on his Sacks' reference is apposite:

> PM: This is another instance where research has gone into a poem.
>
> MM: Exactly.
>
> PM: It's probably not going to be detected. I think it's very unlikely, unless someone actually happens to remember off the top of their head ...
>
> MM: And happens to have read the book.
>
> PM: ... an analogy in a six hundred page book. It's probably one line.
>
> MM: It is.
>
> PM: Whereas with academic research, there'll generally be a direct link between the reading we do and what appears on the page. Here it's almost invisible ... In bureaucratic terms, no paper trail.
>
> MM: No paper trail, absolutely. No way.
>
> PM: It's unaccountable.
>
> MM: I'm nomadic. There's no trail. There can't be a paper trail. As soon as you leave, I'm closing this flat down and moving somewhere else. (McKimmie, interview 2007)

4 A third response: it's retrospective

The fact that poetry usually arrives without a scholarly apparatus plays a part in obscuring the last main form of research my respondents mentioned. It therefore came as a shock to me to hear so many of the poets asserting that yes, they do indeed do something like academic research; only in their case it comes *after* the act of writing.

The retrospective nature of poetic research was a frequent theme in the interviews. It came up in the first few minutes of Jan Owen's interview:

> I do research when I need to, but not too early in the process. If I get in early, the imagination doesn't have the time to come in to play, and the poem can seem rather after the fact. I'll often begin a poem because I know something and want to know more. So I do some writing and then check the facts afterwards. (Owen, interview 2007)

While Alex Skovron said:

> when that process is happening - that process of becoming, or of coming - it is usually in the first draft or the early part of the writing. So I'm not going to interrupt the flow to do research - assuming I need to do research - unless there's a natural break and I feel I can afford to. If the words are flowing I've got to let them. The research can come later. (Skovron, interview 2007)

McKimmie admitted to similar practices himself. To continue his earlier figure, and invert it, in these instances of retrospective research, it's like the flat has

suddenly appeared from nowhere, and it is the poet's task now to furnish it.

5 Time and speed

I've looked now at three different modes of poetic research, taking the three most popular of my interview responses:

> 1) prospective research of an often haphazard though sometimes systematic nature among the works of other poets, with no clear indication of how such poetic reading might inform the reader's own future poems.
>
> 2) prospective research of an often haphazard though sometimes systematic nature via other genres of writing, predominantly non-fictive. Here there were some suggestive indications as to how 'sources' might transpose into a poem.
>
> 3) retrospective research of a quite clearly goal-oriented nature via other genres of writing, predominantly nonfiction, reference, and often internet, all of which would be intended to correct, improve or expand upon what had already been written. There were various comments as to how such research would play into the poem, though I pass over them here as not germane to my purpose.

Putting these accounts together, it strikes me that what unites these three research practices is the fact that almost no one describes composing with an actual book in front of them. There seems, as I suggested a number of times above, almost always to be a temporal gap between the reading or research, and the writing of the poem.

Harrison provided one exception in her description of composing poems for *Cabramatta/ Cudmirrah* (1996) with a reference book beside her; the book offered her the proper names and also photos of the shells she wanted to describe:

> I'd have a memory of a particular shell; I'd have the visual image and the memory, the emotional memory. And then I'd want to know the name of it. I'd find the name, and then I'd want to bring that into the poetry, so it would fuse the proper name with my memory, my vision of it. (Harrison, interview 2007)

This, and some other instances aside (e.g. Skovron), the overwhelming impression I received from the poets I interviewed was that the knowledge input had either gone on way before composition, or would take place much later.

I quoted Alex Skovron at the end of the previous section offering a clue as to why this temporal disjunction might occur: 'If the words are flowing I've got to let them'. In an earlier paper on these interviews, I tabled the hypothesis that contemporary poets often compose very rapidly (Magee 2008). More precisely, I suggested that poets often compose at too great a speed to think through all the different prosodic, dramatic and intellectual decisions fleshing out the poem in their hands. Take the example of Jan Owen. On receiving a forward copy of my questions in the mail, and seeing that I would be asking her about her speed of composition, Owen actually started timing herself:

> I had thought that I write slowly, but actually the slowness is in the gaps between acts of writing. When I thought about it, I realised that I write fairly quickly. (Owen, interview 2007)

Commenting that 'the last draft of all ('Does that word go in or out?') might take many days,' she added, 'as in, it will involve a few moments here and there, over many days'. There's a term in evolutionary science for this sort of time-relation: *punctuated equilibrium*, which denotes rapid epochal change with long periods of stasis in between (Gould and Eldredge 1993). I heard descriptions of something like this time-relation from many of the poets I interviewed. Now, poets certainly put forward other models for how they composed, including models that involved the accretion of lines composed in painstakingly slow fashion. But generally speaking, high speed emerged as a common factor for all the poets, at least some of the time. I'll offer some more reasons for why this might be below, and I'll flag that offering by suggesting that it has something to do with acting. For now though, the important point is that such speed precludes poets from having mounds of texts all around them and composing by close reference to them.[5]

6 What is composition?

I've just suggested that the acts of reading and composing are mutually exclusive. Only this is not entirely the case. It would be so, were it not that the word 'reading' has other meanings beside that strange - seemingly 'telepathic', as Benjamin pointed out (Benjamin 1978: 190) - process of taking in through our eyes the words on a page. We also speak of reading the world. We often talk of academic writing as providing a reading of events, whether they be contemporary or historical. Indeed, I relied upon this usage in my brief discussion of humanities and social science methods above. Is this idea of reading things other than the words on a page just a flimsy metaphor? I don't think so, and the reason is that I follow Peirce in regarding all our impressions, whether they be visual, auditory or otherwise sensory, as forms of semiotic activity: 'a sensation is a simple predicate taken in place of a complex predicate; in other words, it fulfils the function of a hypothesis' (Peirce 1955: 237). In a way, we never have our heads out of a book. Or rather, like *Finnegan's Wake*, the book has no beginning or end, it is all around us. We are, as Peirce would put it, in a state of 'infinite semiosis'. To put this another way: what I'm getting at through this preamble are the sensory inputs (perceptions, murmurings of ideas in one's head, memories) one experiences at the exact moment of composition. How might one characterise them? What is one observing and turning into verse at the moment one writes? What, in short, is one reading?

Here's my question, as I put it to Mal McKimmie:

> When you're writing, when you come up with an image, for instance, is it a matter of finding words for something you see? Is it something you see in your head that you're then describing as such, or is it more like you're hearing words that are being put in your head from somewhere else? (McKimmie, interview 2007)

This question occasioned all sorts of difficulties in the poets, and perhaps even some anxiety. I am referring to the sort of productive anxiety (the 'poetic moment', perhaps?) that makes dialogue exciting. In most instances, it was apparent that my subjects had to think very hard to work out exactly how to word their responses. Harrison commented on this at the end of her interview:

> JH: I think we covered everything about knowledge practices, as far as I can think them through. It's harder than I imagined ... Trying to break the process down into component parts and sequences is tough - particularly your question about how images come to the mind and the page. I found that a particularly difficult question.
>
> PM: Is it that it doesn't seem to answer to the experience, or that it's just something that one doesn't tend to interrogate too much?
>
> JH: I think it's that latter.
>
> PM: Oh.
>
> JH: And you don't want to interrogate it too much at the time.
>
> PM: Hmmm.
>
> JH: You can interrogate it later and with much more consciousness. But when in that fluid state of writing, you don't want to interrogate what's happening. (Harrison, interview 2007)

Croggon put it this way: 'if I start thinking about what I'm doing, I usually end up stopping. It means the poem has run out. It almost always runs out of invention at that point' (Croggon, interview 2007). The difficulty the question occasioned was clearly related to the difficulty of recalling, and analysing, a process which seemed much more integral at the time, and passed quickly. But there were other factors, including the desire not to echo clichés about inspiration, as in the following exchange with Mal McKimmie:

> MM: I think the problem with that question is the danger of stereotypes about the poet being a sort of shamanic medium, who receives poetry from the other side. As in Yeats' automatic writings. I'm a great sceptic of that.
>
> PM: Don't you have a Ouija board underneath some of your stuff here?
>
> MM: Probably, probably. That's why the stuff's there. (McKimmie, interview 2007)

Alex Skovron referred to a related potential misunderstanding: 'I mean, I'm not suggesting channelling - I don't want to go into those kinds of questions'. This was as a gloss on his initial statement that 'the writing is coming out of the writer, of course - yet in a strange sense it also isn't' (Skovron, interview 2007).

There was much variation in the responses here, the main line of divergence being that most poets stressed the priority of hearing, while only a few prioritised sight. On the other hand, a number who generally heard the words first and foremost also reported occasional instances of describing something, e.g. the Eiffel tower, which they were simultaneously holding in their mind's eye for the sake of the composition (e.g. Skovron). What emerged, however, and with relative clarity, was that the first option the question offered - 'Is it something you see in your head that you're then describing?' - was just generally inadequate, whether the poet described having such 'eidetic' experiences or not. The problem was the separation implicit within that formulation between the thinking and the thing thought. Aileen Kelly's response made this clear. I put the question to her in this fashion: 'When you write do you

actually see what you're writing?' which I then sought to clarify by adding: 'Take a poem that involves an element of description: are you ever actually looking at an image in your head and finding words for it?' Kelly replied, 'Sometimes, but I'm not looking at it and finding words for it' (Kelly, interview 2007). Kelly expanded on this response with references to theatrical improvisation and the subjective immersion that involves, but there's enough in even this brief quote to see that the problem with my question lies in the desire to see composition as a sort of commentary upon an external object. In Harrison's words:

> When writing in a flurry, there's almost no space between what arrives and what is written, so time seems to go very, very quickly. I can't discern a space between what I'm thinking and what I'm writing. It's almost like they've become one. I guess the point I'm making is that somehow the visual image *seems* to come first and yet other connections are arriving simultaneously, immediately, not coming later. (Harrison, interview 2007)

Harrison also described eidetic experiences, though for her these were more characteristic of editing: 'I'm thinking more consciously by then. I've got the image. What do I ... how do I put that into words? So it's not in that rush ... that flurry-kind-of-writing.' Whereas when composing in a rush, 'it's almost as if you can inhabit both the subjective and objective positions at the same time':

> PM: Does hearing ever seem uppermost in that process of composition?
>
> JH: I think that comes later. I'll read aloud to hear the words.
>
> PM: The rhythms that you've already imported into them?
>
> JH: Yes. (Harrison, interview 2007)

This stress on the simultaneity of composing and conceiving of the thing described in the composition provides the link between Harrison, who does not particularly privilege hearing, and a poet like Alison Croggon, who does:

> I'd say that the primary sense, in almost in all the writing I do, would be hearing. What I'm hearing is the language - not necessarily what the language represents. Hearing's an intimate sense. It's not like sight, which is long distance. It's a sense that's deeply related to touch and the body. All those things enter into it. Another reason why I like the theatre is that the physical aspect of language is absolutely foregrounded. (Croggon, interview 2007)

Croggon is a well-known theatre critic and we had discussed the influence of good theatre on her poetry earlier in the interview. That there are other reasons, however, for her to shift so suddenly from composition to theatre, will emerge later in this article when I will turn, as I hinted I would, to the relation between composition and acting.

The point for now is, at least initially, a much stranger one. The poets whose interviews I'm analysing can certainly be described as producing readings of the world in their poetry. Alternatively, and depending on how you decide the issues raised in section 2 above, you might say that they are sketching the outlines of all the sorts of things the world does not know how to read. But the problem with both these metaphors of reading or sketching is that we tend to

assume that person doing the activity is in conscious control of that process at the time they're doing it. The material I tabled in the previous section on the temporal disjunction between book reading and composing should have already cast some doubt on the applicability of such understandings - for they imply conscious rumination. As for the passages I've just cited, they suggest that poets are not so much reading or sketching the world, as participating in a reading or a sketching that's being done *through* them:

> PM: But when you're initially composing, when the first line comes to you, it sounds like you don't have the experience of describing something that you see in your head …
>
> MP: No.
>
> PM: Is it like something speaks to you?
>
> MP: Yes, it's about hearing something and it's about the rhythm of that. Once I've got the rhythm of the first line, then I feel a propulsion into the poem. (Polain, interview 2007)

Polain's words are further reminiscent of Skovron's: 'The writing is coming out of the writer, of course - yet in a strange sense it also isn't' (Skovron, interview 2007). It is indeed decidedly strange, and Croggon's comments on her experience of writing descriptive prose (she is also a fantasy novelist) only add to the enigma:

> AC: These fantasy books I write [*The Books of Pellinor*] appear to be terribly visual. There's lots of descriptions in them of landscapes and characters and objects. Many of the descriptions are very sensual . . . The odd thing is that I have these fans who draw pictures all the time and they write me letters saying, 'What does Maerad look like?' I've thought about it and realised, 'I have no idea.' I know I've done these descriptions. . . .
>
> PM: You've described her appearance?
>
> AC: Apparently. Yes of course. I know she has black hair. But what this made me realise was that when I'm writing apparently descriptive prose, I'm actually not describing something that I'm visualising in my head at all. Not one bit. In the same way, when I've written play text and described things, I haven't visualised the scenario to imagine how it might appear in the theatre. I've just listened to a voice. I think that in the fantasy novels, all I try to do is to make enough of a shape so that a reader can come along, and have their own imagination triggered. I think that's what happens: readers come along and visualise something out of what I've written. It appears that I'm describing things quite precisely. But from my point of view, I'm actually not. I'm trying to write sentences that sensually please me, sentences that evoke things for me. Once a designer asked me, 'What do you think Maerad's lyre looks like?' I suddenly realised I had no idea. (Croggon, interview 2007)

What is one to make of these sorts of comments, which extend our focus from the composition of poetry to prose, and further underline that the conscious agent is not really the one doing the writing? I am reminded of Duras, who claimed:

> When you're writing a kind of instinct comes into play. What you're going to write is already there in the darkness ... It's not a matter of passing from one state to another. It's a matter of deciphering something already there, something you've already done in the sleep of your life, in its organic rumination, unbeknown to you. (Duras 1993: 25)

And later added: 'The making of pictures of books isn't something completely conscious. And you can never, never find words for it' (Duras 1993: 30).

But all of this adds up to the fact that the oddness and mismatch in my questions about the relation between poetry and research was not merely to do with the implication that poetry conveys its author's findings (as opposed to producing new findings in others). It was as much to do with the implication that research implies a conscious researcher. That is why the responses to my next question were so interesting:

> PM: Do you ever feel like someone else is doing the writing?

7 What is academic speech?

> MP: I've never felt that. I know I'm heading in that direction but no, I've never felt that and I don't understand when people say that. I just don't get it. I've always felt that there's nobody there except me. I don't know what the muse is. I don't. I have a real problem with that idea. I don't know what it's like to feel like you're a child or something. I don't know any of that. It's just the space. When we're casting around for words and we feel that space, it's the same one. I know it's there. It's pre-conscious. I'm not saying that what other people say of their own process isn't true. I just have never had that experience. I don't get it. (Polain, interview 2007)

I was surprised by the near totality with which poets rejected the idea that their words were written by another. In part this could be attributed to the desire to shun those same 'channelling' clichés alluded to above. But I think it was also more than that. I'd put it this way: poets know, better than most people, that they are not identical with their conscious selves. But, by the same token, they realise that those foreign sources of speech are as much a part of them as the hand that signs their signature. Actually, those foreign sources of speech are probably much more important to them than the conscious ones: what else in your writing is truly yours?

Now although the question 'Do you ever feel like someone else is doing the writing?' elicited an almost unanimous string of 'No', 'No', 'No' ... the elaborations were utterly fascinating. Take for instance, Polain's reference in the quote above to that internal font of speech, that space we can almost physically feel at those moments 'when we're casting around for words'. Might the physicality of that virtual space have something to do with the poet's ability to cast words in such sensuous form?

Equally intriguing was Alison Croggon's statement that 'It always feels like I'm doing it. But it feels like I'm listening to some other part of me, that's not always available. I almost feel like there's a door in there.' A door to where? Compare Alex Skovron's reference to overhearing himself, which emerged when I asked him whether he ever used phrases he'd heard in other's conversation:

> Yes, and sometimes I write them down in a notebook. Perhaps later, much later, they might find their way into a poem. I've got a notebook that has lots of these little phrases, not just overheard from other people, but overheard in my own mind - things that suddenly come to me and I jot them down. (Skovron, interview 2007)

Croggon and Skovron's comments open up the final line of inquiry I want to pursue here. For even if another person cannot be said to be doing the writing, that does not preclude the poet him or herself from becoming another person - or rather, persons - during the writing.

Polain broached a similar issue. The following exchange followed immediately on from the comment with which I began this section ('I just have never had that experience. I don't get it'):

> PM: So the experience of attributing your words to another subjectivity, or another persona, has never occurred to you?
>
> MP: No, I think there are enough personas in me already. I just think we're all multiple. I'm well aware of that multiplicity in myself. The place that this stuff that I've been writing over the summer has come from is a very dark one, and probably one I don't think I've worked totally from before. But no, it's not another subjectivity. I just think that there's different parts. (Polain, interview 2007)

Jan Owen also said something similar, though in her case it was as a gloss on her 'Our Lady, Notre Dame, Paris', which runs as follows:

> She was sitting one row in front, to my right,
> oddly angular in a bright red dress.
>
> In that ornate half-dark, stained shards
> of lucent rose, azure, emerald, and gold,
>
> melted down through the air
> and over the heads and tiles like angels' blood.
>
> She was weeping silently, eyes fixed on the altar:
> not crying, weeping, that slower, fuller grief
>
> as river is to rain. And rivulets were coursing down
> through her thick and careful make-up
>
> so the close-shaved stubble showed
> like tiny wounds. Or splinters of wood.
>
> One way to bear your cross. If the soul descends
> from truth, it is male and female, turn and turn about,
>
> with all its disguises and dishevelments
> so lightly worn it is the world you had
>
> before your face was born.
> She blew her nose and stood with us and sang:
>
> the organ notes and colours streaming down
> were throw-backs to the muted light,

paths diverging to rejoin. I followed him out
thinking to say *Très chic, Madame*,

(while meaning brave) but lost her in the crowd
and sat down on the low brick wall

fifteen metres from the portico
by a crisp little hedge just in front

of a cobble-stone carved MARGUERITTE.
I've no idea why or who. For whom.
(Owen 2008)

Owen referred to this poem in the course of her response to my question as to whether the genesis of a poem is always linguistic. We had been discussing overheard speech, and how it might spark poetry. I asked her whether something 'visually or emotionally striking' might not have the same effect. Owen responded, just like Harrison above, that she couldn't separate the words that came to her in composition from her perception of the scenes, experiences or incidents those words recounted. She then added that the origin of a poem would often be a sense, whether linguistic, visual or whatever, of mismatch. Owen elaborated that, in such moments, 'I can't see something or don't fully understand something, or something doesn't fit and I need to explore further,' and gave as example the precipitating experience behind 'Our Lady': seeing a fellow churchgoer's 'tears course through thick make-up till you can see the stubble':

> There's a whole life behind that, a conflict and unhappiness that I could never really fully know. But if I can be true to some of the details, and to the feeling, I can suggest something that might be understood: the strangeness of things. Their otherness. And people are never just one, whether male or female. We have sub-personalities. I think we are legion. (Owen, interview 2007)

Owen's shift from a discussion of logical dissonance to an assertion that we all have sub-personalities is intriguing. Her implication is that our attention to logical dissonance ('the poetic moment', as I called it above) is ineluctably linked to our possession of multiple personality.

A similar connection was made later in the interview, following Owen's discussion of 'Through Kersenmacht' (Owen 2008: 287), which was written during the same trip that led to 'Our Lady':

> JO: So: sub-personalities. The hedonist side of me - the child side of me - wrote that poem.
>
> PM: Could you say that writing poetry's a matter of opening oneself up to those sub-personalities?
>
> JO: Yes, but it doesn't happen consciously. I don't say to myself, 'Okay, I must approach this in a moral manner.' Or, 'I must do this as a good sceptic,' or whatever. It changes line by line. Even during a poem it changes. I can look at it and think, 'Oh God, that is a very po-faced poem. It needs jazzing up. It needs some argument. I'll contradict something I've said.' (Owen, interview 2007)

Owen's use of the word 'argument' provides a further point of convergence between the logical and dramatic sides of her compositional practice, both of which are predicated, in her view, upon the fact that 'we are legion'.

As she put it, again while glossing 'Our Lady': 'if I explore other people's viewpoints, I often use one of my sub-personalities to do so. It's a form of method acting.' At another point in the interview, she discussed the many parodies she has published and here too used the same metaphor: 'you are in a sense playing a part. It's like the Stanislavsky method, where you become the person.' Now the connection between acting, and drawing upon another side of oneself is obvious when we are discussing parodying. What's most curious is that Owen uses these same dramatic metaphors not merely in relation to parody, where mimicry is clearly paramount, but also in relation to more seemingly authored poems, such as 'Our Lady', a poem which, as she says, was based on a situation that spoke not so much to her as rather to the 'legion' within her.

The more one delves into Owen's manner of speaking about these things, the more one realises that it amounts to a fully fledged ontology - an ontology with some Jungian borrowings to be sure, but one which can do service in a wide array of situations. As she said elsewhere in the interview, quoting Robert Dessaix, and while speaking on the topic of her own many travels: 'you travel not so much to escape from yourself, as to find other selves that have been suppressed or denied or ignored in your usual situation' (Owen, interview 2007). Does one do the same thing when composing? Is it a matter, as when travelling or acting, of becoming multiple?

Polain's comments on her own sense of multiplicity, cited at the start of this section, corroborate such a theory, at least as far as composition goes. Elsewhere in the interview she added that 'Acting was something I loved and really miss. I regret leaving it, but I once said to somebody that I write because I can play all the parts' (Polain, interview 2007). It's worth noting that most of Polain's poems are written in the 'I'. The implication is that even as an 'I' one has multiple characters to play.

The fact that the poet is simultaneously engaged in an act of make-believe seems integral to their capacity to let go in this fashion. This is how I understand all these references to acting. Acting allows you to abandon yourself, so that you can in turn allow all these other selves to appear. This is how I read Kelly's likening of composition to:

> a role-playing process whereby the actors are generating the script. Acting for writing poetry is more like that - you feel your way through the experience and the words get generated in the process. (Kelly, interview 2007)

Note that Kelly refers to actors in the plural as the agents of this process. Such intimations have further support in Freud, who famously commented in 'Creative Writers and Daydreaming' upon the way make-believe serves to facilitate the modern novelist's tendency:

> to split up his ego, by self-observation, into so many part-egos, and, in consequence, to portray the conflicting currents of his own mental life in several heroes. (Freud 1975: 138)

Keeping in mind that for Freud the ego is an institution with roots down into the unconscious, one can make the further link between these part-egos and the figures of unconscious Oedipal phantasy. The point, of course, about the Oedipus Complex, is that it is dramatic in form, which is to say, it is multiply peopled, with the triad mother-child-father at its core. Only we're not really

talking about a core as rather a constellation of speaking positions, a constellation of speaking positions around a moment of subjective impossibility - 'something' as Owen says, 'doesn't fit.' That the creature on the other side of that door is a multiply personed one is given further, inverse support, by the clear ambivalence most of my respondents evinced toward my attempt to analogise aspects of their practice to academic epistemology. For what is academic speech, really, if not an attempt to rein that contradictory multiple in and pretend it is one?

Notes

1. These 2007 interviews were funded by a University of Canberra Early Career Researcher grant. The pilot study they constitute has since expanded into a 2009 Australian Research Council Discovery application (*Poetry and Knowledge: Research into Creative Practice*), which is based on my work, Jen Webb's pilot study conducted on practice-led researchers, and Kevin Brophy's work on consciousness, creativity and composition. Jen, Kevin and I will seek to expand the archive to incorporate interviews with 50 more poets, across a range of Anglophone countries, and we will also seek to expand the theoretical breadth of the analysis to incorporate psychoanalysis, new developments in neurology and consciousness studies, and theories of embodiment. return to text

2. Of the 14 poets interviewed, two hold academic positions, both as teachers of creative writing. I cite here interviews with eight of the 14, including both of the creative writing academics. The other six interviews are either yet to be transcribed, or are transcribed but yet to be approved for quotation and study. return to text

3. I write 'modern poetry' rather than 'poetry' in general for a very specific reason. The epistemological properties of modern poetry -- or, as I prefer to label it, the sort of poetry capitalist societies produce -- are radically different from those of other poetries. That difference is manifest in the attitudes these respective bodies of poetry display towards the present day world of their authors. In oral epic poetry, 'the represented world of the heroes stands on an utterly different and inaccessible time and value plane' to that of its singer and audience (Bakhtin 1980: 14). Epic is never about the present of its singer; nor are the singer's attitudes or values at all relevant to the story he or she is communicating. There is no way one can imagine Homer interrupting his narrative to present a 60-page essay on contemporary life. Compare *Les Misérable*s, with its famous chapter on the Parisian sewers. When literature starts to portray its author's contemporaries (as it does in Hugo's novels, but also Heine's poetry, not to mention the poetry of Croggon, Harrison, Kelly, McKimmie, Owen, and indeed much of the high art and popular literature of the last few hundred years) this constitutes a 'radical revolution' in literary form (Bakhtin 1980: 14). Bakhtin will describe this shift as a 'novelization' of literature, a phenomenon whereby drama (his example is Ibsen), modern epic poetry (the Byron of *Childe Harold*, but even more the Byron of *Don Juan*), and even lyric poetry itself (e.g. Heine) increasingly rely on representing the multiple and conflicting 'speech genres' of the present. In fact it is the conflict between such ways of seeing that becomes central to this literature, and the end result is that in it the claims of any given monological world are undermined, cracked open to the future: '[a]ll literature is then caught up in the process of "becoming," and in a special type of "generic criticism"' (Bakhtin 1980: 5). What novelisation 'inserts' into these literary forms, precisely by its tendency to collide and so undermine prevailing speech genres, is 'an indeterminacy, a certain semantic open-endedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the open-ended present)' (Bakhtin 1980: 6). As is doubtless apparent, a literature fashioned upon such a searching attitude to present-day speech-genres is far more likely to open up questions for knowledge. Bakhtin's analysis might even lead one to suggest that this is the very function of such literature. On other hand, the fact that we can't work out from the internal evidence of his texts where nor even when Homer wrote is starkly indicative of the fact that the poetry he was writing / reciting had no real interest in addressing the present-day world of its author. It is only in the Renaissance, Bakhtin comments, that Europeans began to feel 'an incomparably closer proximity and kinship to the future than to the past' (Bakhtin 1980: 40). Our literature bears its truest affinity to the future because it focuses so unremittingly on the cracks, gaps and fault-lines of its authors' present-day reality. In short, it bears a thoroughly scientific attitude to time.

This is not the place to delve further into such periodisations, though I will add that Bakhtin's account of an epochal shift in literature's epistemological properties is closely paralleled in Eric

Auerbach (1953), while Jacques Rancière has more recently added force to the corollary idea implicit in Bakhtin's account: that the distinctions between romanticism, modernism and postmodernism - assuming anyone still bothers with the last of these terms - are of little ultimate account (Rancière 2003). We are still very much within the period - 'the Aesthetic Revolution' is Rancière's term for it - theorised by Schiller, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Kant:

> the Aesthetic Revolution is the idea that everything is material for art, so that art is no longer governed by its subject, by what it speaks of: art can show and speak of everything in the same manner. In this sense, the aesthetic revolution is an extension to infinity of the realm of language, of poetry. It is the affirmation that poems are everywhere, that paintings are everywhere. (Rancière 2003: 205)

It is hard to imagine any Classical parallel. The idea of revolution made little or no sense to a writer as seemingly contemporary as Tacitus (Auerbach 1953: 38), while the restriction on representing everyday life in any genre other than comedy was still functional well into Shakespeare's era and indeed writing. In short, no discussion of the relation between art and knowledge can afford to ignore the fact that the artforms produced in capitalist societies bear totally different epistemological properties to those of alternate and / or prior societies. What we do now bears far greater affinity to science, which is also why it is often regarded as dangerous. return to text

4. Indeed, you could regard the whole passage as quite rationalist, which is curious given the contemporary tendency to abuse the Romantics for being all things 'romantic'. What really calls for critique - or at least clarification - in Wordsworth's paragraph is the final clause, which seems to bring all this ideation back to something like the empiricist's *nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu* [Nothing is in the understanding that was not earlier in the senses]. If that's what Wordsworth meant, then yes, you could criticise it as Romantic, though you'd have to label it Lockean as well. return to text

5. It's worth adding that there are other factors precluding a close relation to prior authority among such poets, including generally negative attitudes to prior authority. return to text

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