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*Deakin University*

**Alyson Miller and Ellie Gardner**

*Introduction: Poetry and extremity*

## Introduction: Poetry and extremity

Poetry is often associated with a sense of anxiety or unease, linked to its subversive potential and its powers of persuasion, for example, as well as its ability to capture the ineffable or the unimaginable and make it ‘real’. It is part of the reason why Plato banished poets from the ideal society, contending in *The Republic* (360 BCE) that poetry “has a terrible power to corrupt even the best characters, with very few exceptions” (1955, p. 435). According to Plato, poetry “harms the mind”, as it is disconnected from truth and reality, and presents only enticing “shadows” of the real (pp. 371, 375). It is an argument which continues to be rehearsed in more contemporary settings, associated with formal and informal censorship, with lists of banned texts including a wide range of poetry from Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857) to Shel Silverstein’s *A Light in the Attic* (1981), an immensely popular collection of verse for children accused of glorifying “Satan, suicide, and cannibalism, and also encourage[s] children to be disobedient” (2018). Certainly, poetry seems to thrive in the most difficult spaces of human experience: love, loss, despair, trauma, and tragedy, as it seeks to find recognisable shapes for that which seems to elude expression. Poetry is also a radically galvanising force, as evidenced in its use, for instance, by terrorist organisations such as al-Qaida, whose jihadis “turn to poetry because they have radical visions that can’t be put into plain terms” (Hartley, 2015). While its articulations vary, often drastically, poetry remains deeply connected to the extreme, a sign, perhaps, of the genre’s demand for precise, intensified language, but also of its relationship to the unspeakable.

In proposing a special issue of *TEXT*, we sought to explore what it is that makes poetry so suited to expressions of extremity, particularly in terms of ideas about events and experiences which seem beyond words – not only the unimaginable horrors of human devastation, but also those unsayable aspects of the every day, relating to the body, feeling, and memory, the inextricable mix of the physical and the intangible. In exploring the notion of extremity, it is impossible to avoid questions of trauma, and arguments about the capacity of poetry to offer a kind of language – fragmentary, laden, allusive – which enables a form of meaning-making that might otherwise prove evasive. Following the tragedy of the *Titanic*, *The New York Times* received so many poems from its readers it printed an article titled ‘Only Poets Should Write Verse’, begging for the influx of submissions to stop: “It does seem time to say again that to write about the *Titanic* a poem worth printing requires that the author should have something more than paper, pencil, and a strong feeling that the disaster was a terrible one” (*The New York Times*, 2022). Questions of quality aside, the urge towards expressions of poetic witness continues, observed in the numerous poetry anthologies which emerged following 9/11, for example, the 2020 Black Summer bushfires in Australia, and the snippets of poems – often de-contextualised and deeply sentimentalised – that circulate online following defining moments of violence, catastrophe, and destruction. Warsan Shire’s “What They Did Yesterday Afternoon”, for example, was shared endlessly via social media in the aftermath of the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, while Kitty O’Meara’s pandemic poem, “And The People Stayed At Home”, went viral – somewhat ironically – during the long periods of global lockdown (Nicolau, 2020). It seems in part a reflex to attempt to capture that which threatens dissolution and loss via a form that is also, we would suggest, intrinsically fragmentary and uncertain; as

Mags Webster describes so evocatively in her examination of Paul Celan's radical poetics, poets:

constantly push at the limits of language, seeking access to metaphysical and expressive thresholds around which words crumble and recede. The urge to express something that seems to be beyond words is not, however, the preserve only of poets and poetic writing, but something that touches us all.

In thinking about the relationship between poetry and the extreme, we wanted to examine how poetry functions in a number of ways: how it creates the space – and new forms of language – to articulate events which seem inexpressible; how poets innovate to enact resistance; how poetry helps to break silences and taboos; and how poetry, and the role of the poets, is so often linked to the transgression of boundaries. The submissions we received embraced the notion of extremity in a variety of ways, considering the mathematical complexities of the work of Louis Zukofsky, for instance, and the desire for liberation in the poetry of Alejandra Pizarnik, whose life, Caio Yurgel writes, might be understood as “a long preparation for suicide”. We received work on provocative ideas about nationalism and resistance, politics and disaster, about collaboration through the extremities of climate change and COVID, and how women poets might “disrupt and disturb” patriarchal systems to construct new visions of autobiographical memory, as Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton examine. The poetic responses also echo these themes, often eerily, focussing on abject bodies and the taboo, on autobiographical memories, on places overwhelmed by the devastations of extreme weather events, and on the “phenomena of perception” as a reaction to the alienating nature of pandemic ‘normal’. Importantly, the responses, both scholarly and creative, demonstrate the centrality of poetry to the difficult, wrestling with questions about selfhood and belonging, for example, as well as with language itself, its contortions and transformations in seeking to find new shapes for the ineffable.

It is perhaps unsurprising that a number of papers focus on radical ideological movements, suggesting an inherent link between extreme politics and an extreme poetics. Jayson Althofer, for example, explores the significance of poetry to *The Communist Manifesto*'s representation of working life, and what is described as “living-dead extremity in bourgeois society”. Concentrating on the intertextual poetic connections within the thesis, including Shakespeare, Goethe, and Shelley, Althofer regards the *Manifesto* as a complex form of montage, fed in part by the poetic aspirations of Marx and Engels, and their shared love of poetry. The result is a reading of the tract as a “barricade-poem in prose form”, designed to “call into united being the immense monstrous majority that will define itself against and forcibly overthrow capital's brutalising social reality”. Through the “intense lens of poetry”, Althofer argues, Marx and Engels critique “the extremity of capital – its infinity – which necessitates proletarian revolution for human liberation”, emphasising again the centrality of the genre to radical acts of resistance, but also to revolutionary ways of reimagining existing orders of power.

Following the Marxist line, Mark Markovic attends to the poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky, “a passionate Bolshevik” who drew upon poetry to express “counter-cultural thought” and

challenge the barriers relating to conservative visions of class, sexuality and gender in both Tsarist and then Soviet Russia. Exploring Mayakovsky's "utopian politics of desire", Markovic notes the correlations between heteronormativity and capitalism, and how an "extreme poetics" might not only convey "a confident revolutionary spirit" but also reject "literary anachronism in favour of viscerally optimistic proclamations of love and ideology". In doing so, Markovic fills a lacuna in scholarship, offering an analysis of the poet which goes beyond understandings of political significance – as a voice for the proletariat – to extend discussions to Mayakovsky's transgressive articulations of sexual expression. Shriya Dasgupta also explores the subversive political potential of poetry, in the context of the extremist left-wing Naxalite Movement, originating in 1967 and comprised of combatants aiming to "capture state power through armed insurgency". Examining the poetry of revolutionaries such as Dronacharya Ghosh, Saroj Dutta and Timir Baran Sen, Dasgupta observes how a culture of resistance in Bengal is sustained by artistic representation, stating:

It was Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's lyrical *Vande Mataram* (I Bow to Thee, Mother), an ode to the Nation as Mother, that became the biggest source of inspiration for young, firebrand revolutionaries during the anti-imperial movement in colonial India and also became a nationwide clarion call for the movement (Ghosh A. , 1908, p. 22). Similarly, the *Hungryalist* Poetry Movement in the Bengali language or the "Hungry Generation" played a crucial role in inspiring the middle-class youth to challenge the status quo. (Imtiaz, 2016)

In these terms, poetry remains pivotal to the pursuit of both political and ideological change, and intrinsically connected to the radical shifts occurring to established social orders, understandings of self-expression, and even structures of power. Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton emphasise the importance of these shifts at the level of society and the individual in relation to the precarity of memory, and how for "women, in particular, poetry represents a way of standing at some distance from society's patriarchal norms, and their implications and threats". By representing the self via memory in "fragmentary and lateral" ways, it might be possible "to perform alternative and sometimes subversive realities, even turning patriarchal expectations and assumptions back on themselves". By accepting fluidity and provisionality as key to articulations of women's experiences, new expressions of self emerge which challenge traditional prose narratives, and its arguably masculine associations and norms, as demonstrated by Emily Dickinson, and contemporary women poets, Emma Hyche and Mary A. Koncel.

Similarly, Caio Yurgel considers the Argentine poet Alejandra Pizarnik, focusing on the ways in which her "intellectual sparring with the notion of God" transformed the deity "into a strawman for her own processes of creation". Attending to Pizarnik's diaries, Yurgel analyses the poet in terms of the desire for identity and independence, using God as a metaphor for ideas about self-construction and creativity, and a fervent desire for autonomy that is able to resist social, and particularly gendered, expectations:

what Pizarnik does is corrupt the metaphor further by replacing theology with creative writing: God becomes a metaphor not for creation writ large but for *artistic* creation –

the original negation, the strawman to be rallied against, the revenge that motivates one back into language.

Etienne Garnier also explores the idea of poetic (re)invention in relation to Louis Zukofsky, whose turn to music and mathematics produced a complex form of experimentation known for its structural difficulties. Aspiring “to push poetry toward its limits”, Zukofsky’s work, as Garnier describes, used “mathematics for aesthetic reasons”, with the poet striving “to represent his work as an equation which could be drawn on a graph”. Connected “to the Jewish practice of gematria, a discipline in which letters and numbers are used to produce meaning”, Zukofsky’s praxis articulates a desire to produce poetry as a kind of “transformational geometry”. As Garnier’s analysis makes clear, despite appearances of extreme complexity via various formulae, musical structures and mimicries, and mathematical annotations, Zukofsky actually sought simplicity, wanting to find a “governing poetic principle” that evokes the liminal and the momentary, to capture the instances between extremities, and which might not be understood as entirely one whole thing or another: “Translated into natural language, Zukofsky indicates that his poetry is comparable to an interval situated in the space between speech and music, that at times tends either to music or speech”.

Sérgio das Neves further explores the intersections of poetry, biography and the self in the work of Herberto Helder, a Portuguese writer whose “extreme calligraphy” sought to merge “poem, body, and world”. Considering Helder’s calligraphy as “a metaphor for the power of language, its beauty and complexity, the way of exploring its own limits”, das Neves contends that the poet is able to destabilise the limits of language “in a movement of destruction of reconstruction of poetic matter”, a return to the idea of poetry as fundamentally fragmentary and deconstructive, but also as a powerfully constitutive force. The emphasis on the body is also important, signalling a form of anchoring which attempts to express both the corporeal and more elusive transcendental concerns, a form of alchemy that “results in a literary dark matter”. The attention to the ineffable is also a central interest of Mags Webster’s reading of Paul Celan, a poet whose focus on the unspeakable “achieves a verbal and dynamic dislocation” of language and meaning. As Webster notes, Celan’s work, “in broaching the unspeakable, and bringing that unspeakability into his poems, shaves language to its sheerest extremes”. In finding a vocabulary for the horrors of the Holocaust, Celan performs a kind of “textual manipulation” which “casts language as witness to the abyss”:

Effectively, language underwent its own apophatic experience: this nullification “gave back no words for what happened” (Celan, 2001, p. 395) and yet language did endure, for “it *passed through* this happening” (p. 395; emphasis added). The resilience of language: surviving in order, on the one hand, to give agency back to the writer, and on the other, to exact a toll from that writer because of the terrible narratives that demand, somehow, to be written.

Indeed, Webster observes how in “trying to surmount the difficulty of finding words for the inexpressible”, poets can “either choose to fall silent or find ever more inventive and oblique strategies to land on a description or image”. Such a challenge resonates with disasters which extend beyond those stemming from human conflict, intersecting, for instance, with terrors of

environmental catastrophe and collapse. The desire to find a new language or mode of expression in these terms is present in the work of Shady Cosgrove and Christine Howe, whose “writerly collaboration” in the context of ecological extremity suggests the potential to “engender hope beyond the page”. Writing during “bleak” times, Cosgrove and Howe examine how a shared writing process might involve a way to connect craft with lived experience, and discover “new ways of conceptualising our belonging and our responsibilities in this time and place”. Learning to “think anew” via shared practice also signals a critical need in addressing the climate crisis, which demands new skills and knowledges, and the capacity to grasp the intricate balance between the mundane realities of the everyday, and a widescale, nightmarish vision of disaster and human complicity:

When you’re rerouting the trip to the grocery store because the street is flooding, you are navigating both climate change catastrophe and the banality of changing gears and checking Google maps for travel routes. Christine and I entered this project with the underlying assumption that finding hope and strategies for living through the climate crisis depended on rethinking larger structural issues associated with capitalism, consumption and notions of the humanist individual.

Connor Weightman grapples with similar questions in an exploration of petroculture, and how poets represent humanity’s relationship with oil. According to Weightman, “despite its material and energetic saturation in modern human lives, oil remains under-represented in most forms of creative writing”, an absence which reflects a continued reluctance to address the oil disaster and apocalyptic environmental realities more broadly. Examining disaster cinema and offering a series of “petropoetic” interventions, Weightman highlights the capacity of poetry to function as a form of activism by drawing attention to the prominence of “petroaesthetics and oil’s prominent materiality in popular screen entertainment”. The notion of a banal threat – how the ordinariness of everyday practices and transactions might so easily slide into the disastrous – is also hauntingly evoked in Paul Venzo’s poetic contribution to the special issue; a vision of the Venetian lagoon, imperilled by the extreme weather events which confront a drowning city. Imagined as a series of concrete poems, Venzo positions Venice “as a liminal and literary space”, the slow menace of creeping floodwaters a reminder of human impermanence, and the attempts of language – as image and word – to hold onto what remains.

Karen Le Rossignol grasps the fragmentary, too, albeit via a “rhizomatic presentation of extreme moments of ‘being between’”, imagined as a poetic suite concerned with the experience of lockdown. Evoking the “bleak” times noted by Cosgrove and Howe, Le Rossignol’s poems capture the quotidian moments of crisis, the scale of the pandemic disaster conjured by “emptying supermarkets”, the “home-made mask”, and “virtual coffee catchup”. Through attention to the small, greater horrors are articulated, a reminder of how the inconveniences of the everyday reveal the catastrophe that threatens only to recur: “full-packed trolleys / survival prepping pantry. / Next lockdown: repeat”. The focus on the physical or the concrete is also a feature of Cath Nichols’ creative contribution to the issue, offering a poetry of the gut that enters into the taboo spaces of the body, figured as demanding and abject, hungry and violent in its desires: “my breath stank like witches’ breath, cream / curdled on me, I was

‘sick’, but still remained / the Iron Girl, tough as nails”. In “Vultures”, the description of the bird’s powerfully caustic gut recalls the function of poetry itself, able to whittle down and dissolve the unnecessary, keeping only the vital parts: “Consider / the miracle of their stomachs’ acid: dissolving *bone* / yet not their own flesh”. Similarly, Kristian Patruno, exploring the extremes of drug use, homelessness, and poverty “underlines the power of poetry as testimony/witness to traumas such experiences purvey”, and insists on the importance of speaking the unspeakable, of finding form for the extremities of experience, including loss, disappointment, and death:

Then remember the promise we made |  
peaking over the locked fences of others:

That our hopes would someday  
find a yard to live in.

Drawing on the confessional mode, Patruno emphasises the role of poetry in capturing – and conjuring – that which seems to elide expression yet is nonetheless central to constructions of the self. While both threaten to fall apart, there is an insistence on representation as a way – if not *the* way – to create new meaning, and find form and shape in the difficult, the infeasible, and the surreal. As such, in its connection to and engagement with the extreme, poetry serves as a (re)vitalising and constitutive force; as Webster writes, poetry “that offers a language to engage with language’s disintegration at the extremities of knowing or feeling or – like Celan’s oeuvre shows us, both repels and extends those extremities – is a poetry vital to the world”.

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### **Acknowledgements**

Alyson Miller is a scholar and prose poet. Her research focuses on literature and extremity, particularly in terms of its relationship to scandal and censorship, abjection and the monstrous feminine, the atomic bomb and nuclear disaster, gender, and prose poetry. She is a Senior Lecturer at Deakin University in Literary Studies and Creative Writing.

Ellie Gardner is a scholar and academic. Her research focuses on representations of the antiheroine in contemporary Gothic and crime fiction novels and the relationships these texts have with abjection, liminality, and gender. Ellie's scholarship has been published in international journals such as *Critique* and *Papers on Language and Literature*, and she is currently working on a critical monograph about the literary antiheroine. Ellie is a sessional academic at Deakin University.