



TEXT

Journal of writing and writing courses

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

University of Canberra and Deakin University

Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton

Poetry and precarious memory: Ways of understanding less and less

Abstract:

Poetry as an art form has traditionally registered tropes of feeling and memory, often with astonishing power, especially since the Romantics began to focus on projections of the self. Yet, when poetry invokes memory, anchoring people to their pasts and identities, it frequently reveals that, at best, memory offers a precarious connection to what is certain or secure – and this is particularly the case for women writers. For example, much of Emily Dickinson’s poetry reveals that memory’s recesses are often uncomfortable, and studies in autobiographical memory confirm poetry’s intuition that all may not be what it seems within the “house” of the recollecting self. This paper explores ways in which poetry’s elusive suggestiveness, and memory’s more fraught instances, confirm the provisionality and precarity of what most people are inclined to take for granted – that they know themselves and can speak securely of who they are. This has always been a challenge for women in patriarchal societies as gender inequality and precarious work – often in atypical employment – has informed and affected their expressions of self and identity. We conclude with examples from the work of two contemporary women poets, Emma Hyche and Mary A. Koncel, in order to focus on their particular approaches to precarity in their poetry and prose poetry and to posit that women poets often disrupt and disturb aspects of the patriarchal language system to offer new constructions of autobiographical memory.

Biographical notes:

Paul Hetherington is a distinguished scholar and poet who has published 17 full-length poetry and prose poetry collections, a verse novel and 13 chapbooks, along with many academic chapters and articles. He has won or been nominated for more than 40 national and international awards and competitions, recently winning the 2021 Bruce Dawe National Poetry Prize. He has also edited ten further volumes. Paul is Professor Emeritus of Writing in the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Canberra, head of International Poetry Studies (IPSI) there and joint founding editor of the international online journal *Axon: Creative Explorations*. He founded the International Prose Poetry Group in 2014. With Cassandra Atherton, he co-authored *Prose Poetry*:

An Introduction (Princeton University Press, 2020) and co-edited the *Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry* (Melbourne University Press, 2020).
paul.hetherington@canberra.edu.au

Cassandra Atherton is a widely anthologised and award-winning Australian prose poet. She has published 30 critical and creative books and been invited to edit special editions of leading journals. Cassandra is the successful recipient of many national and international grants including Australia Council, Copyright Agency and VicArts grants and is currently working on a book of prose poetry on the atomic bomb with funding from the Australia Council. Her books of prose poetry include *Exhumed*, (2016) *Trace*, (2016) *Pre-Raphaelite* (2018), *Leftovers* (2020) and the co-authored *Fugitive Letters* (2020). She is a commissioning editor of *Westerly* magazine, series editor for Spineless Wonders Microlit anthologies and associate editor at MadHat Press (USA). She co-authored *Prose Poetry: An Introduction* (Princeton University Press, 2020) and co-edited the *Anthology of Australian Prose Poetry* (Melbourne University Press, 2020). She is a Professor of Writing and Literature at Deakin University, Melbourne Australia.
cassandra.atherton@deakin.edu.au

Keywords:

Poetry, prose poetry, precarity, autobiographical memory, identity, feminism

Romantic and post-Romantic precarity

The construction of identity by contemporary women writers is increasingly read against a literary inheritance of disempowerment, anxiety and vulnerability. As Meena Alexander argues about the Romantic period, “For women writers of the epoch, the evolving mythology of the powerful Romantic self, only laid bare the cultural constraints implicitly barring women from the intensity Romantics celebrated” (1989, p. 18). For women in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was an obvious disjunct between the extreme focus on Romantic ideas of (male) selfhood and disabling ideals of appropriate feminine behaviour – women were generally expected to be chaste until marriage and had very few options for meaningful work. Judith Butler comments more generally that “[p]recarity is ... directly linked with gender norms” (2009, p. ii) and underscores that women’s powerlessness and confinement in patriarchal society is ongoing and influences their self-making. Furthermore, when discussing identity, as Butler observes, the first-person pronoun – the “I” that is the representative of the Romantic and post-Romantic notion of the separate and singular self – “is produced through power” (2009, p. iii). By extension, Butler’s “turn” to ethics is significant in the way it foregrounds gendered vulnerabilities, something especially important to many twenty-first century discussions of precarity that centre on the “material and psychological vulnerability arising from neoliberal economic reforms” (Näsström & Kalm, 2014, p. 556).

In this respect, at least, it may be argued that precariousness is a condition of contemporary Western social and political organisation that deeply affects both men and women – even if women experience considerably more precarity than men. Supporting this view, and in reference to the United States, Philip Cushman argues, “the current configuration of the self is ... characterized by a pervasive sense of personal emptiness” (1995, p. 6). He claims that our era is one of “cultural brokenness,” partly characterised by the “intellectual discourse of self-contained individualism” (1995, p. 10). In Cushman’s view, individuals frequently experience society and the world as inherently precarious. He contends that early in the modern era the failing authority of the church and crown in Europe, at least for the “lower socioeconomic classes,” was replaced by economic and social precarity; and that people were “usually unable to save enough to subsist during the times family members would be out of work” (1995, p. 96). Furthermore, shared moral positions and communal understandings were supplanted by deep uncertainties, and Cushman suggests that modernity remains characterised by the moral confusion that results from having no “mutually agreed upon tradition that guides our daily practices” (1995, p. 8).

This sense of individual precariousness has not been resolved by prevalent notions of increased individual “freedom” or periods of greater economic affluence and, indeed, with the growth in the casualisation of labour, along with other features of 21st century society, Beatrice Appay argues, “[p]recariousness increasingly defines the conditions under which people work in all different sectors of activity,” which also characterises their “living conditions” (2010, p. 34). Many people increasingly feel insecure and unanchored, in some cases able to depend on circles of family and friends, but largely unknitted from the broader social fabric. The atomisation of the individual has led to a more fragmented society. Furthermore, Luce Irigaray

has suggested in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* that society only recognises the masculine subject and she posits the need for refashioning culture:

A revolution in thought and ethics is needed if the work of sexual difference is to take place. We need to reinterpret everything concerning the relations between the subject and discourse, the subject and the world, the subject and the cosmic, the microcosmic and the macrocosmic. Everything, beginning with the way in which the subject has always been written in the masculine form, as man, even when it is claimed to be universal or neutral. (2005, p. 8)

For many women, this means articulating and celebrating difference by finding new forms of expression to undercut and disrupt the language that perpetuates patriarchal power. This paper begins by exploring the rise of autobiographical memory and its connection to memory and precarity. These discussions frame our argument that, in an effort to provide alternative constructions of self-identity and gendered vulnerability, women poets – such as Emily Dickinson and, more recently, Anne Carson, Emma Hyché and Mary A. Koncel – articulate the unreliability of memory and reimagine the quotidian and risky nature of women's work. They do this most successfully by prioritising disruption and emphasising and celebrating various forms of fracture.

Autobiographical memory, personal identity and precariousness

The contemporary focus on self-identity has its origins in the rise of individualism from the late eighteenth century onwards. This led to changes in literary tastes and literary production and, among other developments, saw a concomitant increase in readers' interest in biography and autobiography, as well as in the bourgeois novel. These fields of writing promised to reflect and exemplify readers' sense of themselves as unique individuals, and writers of such works began to explore personal memory with great enthusiasm. For example, individual memory was given great prominence in Wordsworth's long autobiographical poem, "The Prelude" – which is, in the main, a somewhat salutary celebration of his recollections of his early life. Significantly, this work has been used to support ideological positions such as the idealism of Romanticism, the binary of the masculine-sublime and feminine-beautiful, and individualism. Individualism has been classified by Richard Eldridge as "a kind of perfectionist liberalism ... an effort to understand and exemplify our best human possibilities" (1994, p. 69).

Jenny Bourne Taylor has written of the strong general interest in personal memory that developed in the nineteenth century, exemplified by the work of Frances Power Cobbe, who wrote for "popular middle-brow publications" (1999, p. 60) and who asserted in 1866 that "[t]he Present, in our lives, is ever closely bound up with the Past, and the cord which unites them is all woven of strands of memory" (quoted in Taylor, 1999, p. 60). Cobbe also wrote, rather poetically, that memory is "a finger-mark traced on shifting sand, ever exposed to obliteration when yet unrenowned; and if renewed, then modified" (as cited in Taylor, 1999, p. 63). Taylor observes:

it was partly because memory *was* so central to all aspects of mid-[19th] century mental science, and so widely recognised as being the key to a coherent sense of self, that it

was not separated from other aspects of the study of the relationship between the mind and the brain. (1999, p. 61)

Significantly, as people achieved greater, if sometimes ambiguous, freedoms from the social constraints and bonds that had once defined and “narrated” them – often in explicit ways – they increasingly began to depend on autobiographical memory to construct a coherent self-narrative; and, in this way, to articulate who they believed they were. As Anne E. Wilson and Michael Ross state, “Identity construction is not a passive process. Individuals actively seek information that helps to confirm their desired self-views ... [as] the past is ephemeral, there is often little concrete evidence to contradict individuals’ versions of their personal histories” (2003, p. 147). Personal memory is thus important because it acts as trove of narratives that can be mined and moulded.

Human memory and language are inextricably allied. The formation and communication of complex autobiographical memories depends on the capacity to acquire language and manipulate it into phrases and sentences. Katherine Nelson writes:

language opens up possibilities for sharing and retaining memories for both personal and social functions. Among the most important of these functions is the establishment of a self-history that serves as a source for self-understanding and an enduring self-concept. (2002, p. 179)

In this way, memory has a social function. Multiple memory-based narratives are frequently exchanged between people, and such narratives are often modified and interpreted in the telling. C.R. Barclay and T.S. Smith state that “autobiographical memories give us a sense of intellectual and emotional coherence and comfort ... and establish and maintain intimacies through joint reconstructions of the past” (2002, p. 78). This impulse to make sense of experience through shared self-narration is fundamental to the human urge to construct stories and, in doing so, to rehearse, reinforce (and sometimes challenge) personal, social and cultural practices, including gender roles. Indeed, Nelson contends, “the social function of memory underlies all of our storytelling” (2002, p. 177). Poetry is included in Nelson’s schema, but as a kind of aberrant form because, as she states, “linear order helps to keep matters straight” (2002, p. 339). In other words, flights of fancy and tangents are presented as often unhelpful for self-narration because they detract from linear narrative progress. Nevertheless, Nelson recognises that human thought (and memory) may not necessarily be well ordered:

Many linguists and psychologists now recognize that thought may not be organized like language in terms of propositions and hierarchies but in more fluid forms ... Sometimes, as in fantasy, dreams, or poetry it may be advantageous to follow one’s wayward thoughts wherever they may go. (2002, p. 339)

This comment raises issues central to a discussion of the links between poetry and memory, because different kinds of (self-)expression enable different kinds of remembering. Further, the advantages and disadvantages of following one’s “wayward thoughts” may be closely linked to the consideration of certain sorts of precariousness. And, for women poets, these issues are

heightened because they are working within a patriarchal language system that not only uses gendered terms to subjugate women, but also validates linear (and often phallogentric) structures in language and prioritises reason over emotion. To end the perpetuation of their subordination, women poets are often focused on liberating language from its hegemonic structures and experimenting with new and often poetic forms of expression.

Precarious memory and poetry

Helen Williams, Martin Conway and Gillian Cohen discuss the unreliability of many autobiographical memories when they write that some “are not accurate, and, rather than being raw experiences, they sometimes incorporate the interpretations that are made with hindsight”; that they “may be specific or generic”; and that “a personal memory may be representative of a series of similar events”. They also remark that many “‘observer’ memories cannot be copies of the original perception and must have been reconstructed” (2008, p. 23). Memory is, in a profound sense, never whole or wholly reliable; it is instead fractured, partial, sometimes broken and always either shifting or solidifying. Indeed, memory can be described as “adaptive, reshaping itself to accommodate the new situations we find ourselves in” (Eisold, 2010, n.p.) due to the way that some memories remain obdurately the same throughout a life while others alter significantly over time – to the extent that after a few decades the original memory is almost entirely replaced with new material.

As a whole, autobiographical memory often cannot be trusted to provide an account of what actually occurred. Luis Buñuel summarises this problem elegantly. He writes of the wedding of French philosopher and writer, Paul-Yves Nizan:

The Church of St.-Germain-des-Prés, where he was married, is crystal clear in my mind’s eye. I can see the congregation, myself among them, the altar, the priest – even Jean-Paul Sartre, the best man. And then suddenly, one day last year, I said to myself – but that’s impossible! Nizan, a militant Marxist, and his wife, who came from a family of agnostics, would never have been married in a church! (1983, p. 5)

Buñuel’s candid emphasis on memory’s miscellany of affirmations, apparent precisions, hesitations, repetitions, lapses, truths and lies relates to the ephemeral nature of personal experience. Even avid keepers of journals and diaries, while they may have contemporary sources for their “remembered” experiences, are likely to “remember” and be convinced by their own narratives rather than alternative versions of what they encountered. Memory speaks eloquently at times, but it often obscures as much as, or more than, it tells. Memory picks and chooses its instances, aggregates separate events and sometimes misunderstands what it believes to be the case. New memories and interpretations overwrite old memories and interpretations. Overall, memory is inherently friable and precarious, not unlike the post-Romantic subject confronted by uncertainty and what Cushman calls “emptiness”. Memory often rushes in to create meaning even when there is little meaning to be found, and it also frequently fails. As Oliva M. Espin argues, “memory betrays, it mixes events and it leaves holes precisely about the moments you need to remember most” (2015, p. 31). Indeed, without

memory's narratives, people may have little sense of who they are. Oliver Sacks writes of his amnesiac patient, Jimmie:

none of us had ever encountered, even imagined, such a power of amnesia, the possibility of a pit into which everything, every experience, every event, would fathomlessly drop, a bottomless memory-hole that would engulf the whole world. (1998, p. 35)

What the fragility and friability of memory means for self-expression and subjectivity is inherently complex. However, there is no doubt that the traditional and relatively coherent narrative forms associated with biography, autobiography, the novel and the short story do not so much reflect the ways in which life is experienced as make beguiling and sometimes deceptive artefacts out of such experiences. The flow of language through a traditional extended text – whether fiction or non-fiction – can be likened to a series of reconstructed memories, all of them joined and to some extent subdued by the narrator's purposes. Such conventional narrative forms provide the comforting sense that a life, whether fictional or biographical, may be known, even in its privacies, and may be narrated through a mode of storytelling that, in many cases, is chronologically structured, at least in a broad sense. Such narratives represent a facsimile of the common impression that time unwinds more-or-less steadily and systematically through minutes, hours, days, weeks and years. They implicitly confirm for the reader the validity of their sense of self-coherence; and confirm, too, that much of what happens in life may be packaged, as it were, within strings of grammatical phrases and sentences. As Robinson and Hawpe state, “experience does not automatically assume narrative form. Rather, it is in reflecting on experience that we construct stories” (1986, p. 111).

Furthermore, memory has other ways of speaking, and one of them is through poetry's “wayward thoughts” (Nelson, 2002, p. 339). This is important to representations of gendered experience because primarily linear and more conventional forms of narration often serve patriarchal constructs – as Mary M. Dalton attests, “Simply put, stories told in a conventional, masculine form are generally linear, hero-driven tales about conquest, whereas stories told with a more circular and sometimes collective feminine structure are often about overcoming obstacles in order to find connection” (2013, p. 23). Furthermore, as Annette Holodny states, “[t]he power relations inscribed in the form of conventions within our literary inheritance ... reify the encodings of those same power relations in the culture at large” (1997, p. 147). Therefore, the possibility of “waywardness” offers writers alternative forms of expression and some prospect of liberation. What is more, poetry has many of memory's hallmarks. It reflects the poet's choice of specific instances and examples in order to imply more general propositions, refining what Robinson and Hawpe refer to as narrative's “cognitively efficient compromise between uniqueness and generality” (1986, p. 118). It creatively reconstructs the material it uses. And, to a considerable extent it relies, like memory, on figurative and associative language, and on powerful imagery.

In such ways, many poetic works acknowledge that beneath the coherent self-narratives of autobiographical memory, there remain unresolved and, in some cases, unresolvable tropes and

anxieties that reflect the complexities of an individual's sense of precariousness. And the precariousness of memory material does not simply reside in the possibility that something may be forgotten and "fathomlessly drop" out of sight forever; just as importantly, it rests in the unavoidable anxieties that attend on experience, which memory often digests uneasily. Many of these anxieties – whether connected to social status, educational opportunities, income, secure housing, social acceptance or moral and ethical uncertainty – have been significantly exacerbated by modernity's insistence on individual self-reliance. Although people will no doubt continue to harness the more conventional and self-affirming constructions of autobiographical memory in order to make satisfactory stories out of such material, these stories will not always succeed in fully expressing their sense of precariousness. People may need different ways of addressing anxiety, and alternative techniques for expressing themselves. Poetry is one of these alternative ways because of its capacity, already mentioned, to address wayward and unruly thoughts, and also because it may register the sometimes irredeemable nature of the experience of precarity. Poetry does not necessarily seek to smooth, obscure or integrate memory's awkwardness into more conventional narrative modes; rather, it will often attempt to register clearly, and even heighten, the cognisance of memory's most troubling encounters.

Significantly, studies on the gendering of autobiography and memory have found that, typically, men and women do not make use of autobiographical memory in exactly the same way. A. Grysman, R. Fivish, N.A. Merrill and M.E. Graci observe that:

autobiographical reminiscing is, itself, a feminine-typed [sic] activity; females engage in this activity more frequently, value the activity more, and use it to create intimacy more than males. Thus, simply growing up in a gendered world and being female creates an environment in which these skills develop more for females than for males. Yet feminine gender typicality plays a role as well, suggesting that both implicit gendered socialization and more explicit self-definition in gendered ways each contribute to creating more gendered autobiographies. (2016, 866)

More generally, the contemporary emphasis on the self and the mysteries and intricacies of memory are crucial to understanding how a great deal of contemporary poetry works. Peter Middleton and Tim Woods write of the poems contained in a variety of representative poetry anthologies published in the 1980s and 1990s that "[t]hese poems are almost invariably explicit products of personal or autobiographical memory" (2000, p. 187). Further, they connect such poems to personal trauma, and to "literary sites of shared regret and grief" (2000, p. 188). They argue:

even avant-garde poetry, with little apparent interest in confessionalism, still devotes much of its inventive energy to rethinking the relations between poetic form, individual memory, history and temporality. (2000, p. 188)

In such a context, poetry does different things than it did prior to the "shift in self-conceptualization" which we have discussed. Post-Romantic poetry is primarily focused on various "lyric" expressions of individual consciousness, feeling and thought and very often

deals with issues around precariousness. Furthermore, it frequently posits such precariousness as symptomatic of experience in general and, in examining the nature of autobiographical experience and drawing on the resources of autobiographical memory, it tends to open up memory's uncertainties and irresolutions.

Poems by the nineteenth-century American poet Emily Dickinson exemplify this issue, and many of her poems are subversive of the more traditional, active, mostly male-centred narratives of self and identity so prized in that century. They constitute both a rewriting and critique of key Romantic tropes – which Joanne Feit Diehl identifies as Dickinson's "reliance upon and divergence from" "the major Romantics" (1981, p. 11):

To flee from memory
Had we the Wings
Many would fly
Inured to slower things
Birds with dismay
Would scan the mighty Van
Of men escaping
From the mind of man (1998, pp. 1161–62)

Here, autobiographical memory is neither benign nor the basis of consolatory narratives. Instead, Dickinson's poem recognises memory's problematic nature, acknowledging that the human mind contains much that we may not wish to know. Furthermore, in other poems, Dickinson uses the image of a friable "plank" as a component of Reason. She depicts sanity as "a precarious condition" because "the brain can slip its 'groove,' the 'plank' of reason can snap in two" (Collins, 2004, p. xviii). Such brokenness has dire consequences:

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down -
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing - then - (1998, p. 366)

Dickinson was aware of precarity throughout her life and, despite giving versions of the grounded or active self in her poems – for instance, she depicts it as "a Columnar Self" (1998, p. 702) and as "a Loaded Gun" (1998, p. 722) – this sense of precariousness inhabits much of her work:

I stepped from Plank to Plank
A slow and cautious way
The Stars about my Head I felt
About my Feet the Sea –

I knew not but the next
Would be my final inch -
This gave me that precarious Gait

Some call Experience - (1998, p. 853)

Another poem of Dickinson's articulates the troubled, conflicted nature of the post-Romantic idea of the self and precarious attendant moments:

Me from Myself - to banish -
Had I Art -
Impregnable My Fortress
Unto All Heart -

But since Myself - assault Me -
How have I peace
Except by subjugating
Consciousness?

And since We're Mutual Monarch
How this be
Except by Abdication -
Me - of Me - ? (1998, pp. 677–78)

Dickinson was also deeply aware of her precarity as a woman seriously pursuing a vocation as a poet in the mid-19th century when, generally speaking, women had few opportunities to pursue a vocation or explicit forms of self-expression. Charlotte Kupsh argues:

Dickinson's focus on bodily ownership is indicative of the poet's engagement with controversial political issues of her time. For a female poet in Dickinson's time, physical ownership of the body would have been a radical notion. (2018, p. 53)

This is evident in lines such as:

I am afraid to own a Body -
I am afraid to own a Soul -
Profound - precarious Property -
Possession, not optional - (1998, p. 925)

Much of the poetry written since the middle of the 19th century – along with some contemporary literary forms, such as the lyric essay – understands that beneath autobiographical memory's narrative drive towards consolation and coherence a great deal remains conflicted, fragmented and broken. This is especially true for women poets, many of whom find their subjectivity awkwardly placed and, in some respects, disjunctive within patriarchy. Such poetry understands that acknowledging what is conflicted and broken may be a way of addressing – and even be essential to surviving – the precarity of post-Romantic life. Poetry may represent a way of constructing an authentic mode of speaking because it recognises how life's experiences are often ineffable. As a form, it is capable of acknowledging that people often know considerably less about their motives and desires, and are more

vulnerable, than they might imagine or are often permitted to say. Such poetry subverts many of the narrative expectations associated with conventional prose and implicitly proposes that much experience is elusive and perhaps unsayable. It demonstrates that key aspects of existence may only be suggested or intimated, and that precariousness requires careful and complex articulation when rendered in a literary form such as the lyric poem.

Interestingly, the lyric poem is itself to some extent precarious and fragile, and even subversive. Margaret Dickie observes that:

the properties of the lyric ... obstruct readings that are determined by a socially limited understanding of the self or the subject, by a view of character as expressed in a cause and effect logic, by an insistence that the poet can be understood by certain representative attitudes. The lyric poem resists the totalizing ambition of such readings. (2008, p. 55)

Lyric poetry has the capacity to open up and inimitably represent human autobiographical memory and its attendant vulnerabilities and precariousness precisely because it does not seek to direct memory toward the resolutions of so much conventional narrative prose. In many cases, poetry does not attempt to resolve the experiences it represents, or secure those experiences precisely in time and place. Instead, poetry represents an alternative way of imagining the world, and a way of casting memory into a fluid and shifting moulds. Poetry emphasises memory's tendency to speak of many things at once, sometimes in lateral or glancing ways, and to shift the imagining subject toward the precariousness hidden by so many confidently narrated fixed positions. Phil Cohen has written:

If poetry exercises a form of sociological imagination, it may simply consist in this capacity to offer us a glimpse into another, but still possible, world, in which the clichés of common sense, and the media hype of spin doctors and marketers have given way to an idiom of counter-factual truth where so much that otherwise remains on the tip of our tongue is at last put into memorable words. (2005, p. 3)

An instance of this “still possible” world and of “counter-factual truth” occurs in a Dickinson poem that imagines the self as a house, and poetry as possibility. The poem eschews “prose,” opting instead for the creative and the imaginative:

I dwell in Possibility -
A fairer House than Prose -
More numerous of Windows -
Superior - for Doors -

Of Chambers as the Cedars -
Impregnable of eye -
And for an everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky -

Of Visitors - the fairest -

For Occupation - This -
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise - (1998, pp. 483–84)

Similarly, Anne Carson has written:

what is the difference between
poetry and prose you know the old analogies prose
is a house poetry a man in flames running
quite fast through it
or
when it meets the mind waves appear (poetry) or
both are defined by
length of lines *and there are times*
your life gets like that ... (2013, p. 6)

Carson is matter-of-fact, even as she considers poetry's transformative "analogies" while Dickinson allows at least a tentative form of "Paradise" into her maker's hands. Both poets emphasise that the possibilities of poetry are connected to ways of living and being. Poetry offers a way of understanding the provisional and the inconclusive and a way, too, of fashioning utterance that has the potential to transcend the pressures of living and its precariousness. As Carson says with some irony, even when considering poetry, "*there are times / your life gets like that*". In valuing transformative imaginative possibilities these poets recognise that the quotidian – their daily lived experience – informs the "possible". Dickinson's images of house, windows and doors say so, as does Carson's wryness. Yet, in acknowledging that poetry and the possible are themselves precarious, they demonstrate through the quick-moving connections in their work that poetry's re-inflections or reconstructions of memory material may emphasise transformation and speed rather than narrative coherence; that the fragmentary and precarious belong to poetry as surely as they belong to memory's complex articulations. For these poets, what we do not know – possibility – opens up affirmative creative pathways.

Women, poetry and precariousness

The term "lyric poetry" once referred almost exclusively to short, lineated poems and, in its original forms, survives as remnants of poetic practice from archaic Greece (800–480 BCE). Ancient writers understood the lyric poem as musical verse written in metre that often employed the first-person voice or lyric "I," and famous lyric poets such as Archilochus (7th century BCE) and Sappho (7th and 6th centuries BCE) both appear to speak directly of personal matters – for instance, Sappho alludes to family members in her poetry. Although there is considerable debate about whether their poetry is autobiographical in a modern sense, the lyric "I" has become a defining feature of the traditional lyric poem. In the words of S.R. Slings; the "I is the I of the performer, which moves through a continuum, in which the biographical I and the fictional I are the two extremes: most of the time it is neither" (1990, p. 12).

In the 21st century, different forms and varieties of poetry that may or may not be lineated are now regularly referred to as “lyric,” including prose poetry and hybrid works. Slings’s point remains relevant to such works because, while the “personal” and the apparently autobiographical is often invoked and, as it were, performed, the “I” of such poems may not be simply conflated with the voice of the person who writes. These poems’ points of view vary enormously, with the work of the poets Anne Carson, Emma Hyche and Mary A. Koncel exemplifying such issues. In the case of Anne Carson, we have discussed elsewhere (2020, pp. 211–14) how she uses the lyric on her own terms, exploring absence, disjuncture, grief and silence in poems that act as remnants or fragments of what is broken. Her poetry emphasises precariousness and uncertainty by pitching between writing modes and different first-person pronouns and their subjectivities. For example, while her *Autobiography of Red* is subtitled “A Novel in Verse” and uses lineated poetry to reimagine the myth of the monster Geryon, the long lines grasp at the right margin. In “XLIV: Photographs: The Old Days” every second line reaches to the right:

Herakles standing at the window staring out on the dark before dawn.
When they made love
Geryon liked to touch in slow succession each of the bones in Herakles’ back
as it arched away from him into
who knows what dark dream of its own, running both hands all the way down
from the base of the neck
to the end of the spine which he can cause to shiver like a root in the rain. (1998, p. 141)

Even as Carson appeals to the conceit that many of her poems refer ekphrastically to photographs, she emphasises what is unreliable and disjunct in subjective acts of recollection.

Emma Hyche and Mary A. Koncel also give priority to aspects of memory and precarity in their poetry. In Hyche’s case, her lineated poems frequently focus on impermanence and the lack of security for women at work and at home through the employment of fragmented inner monologues, juxtaposed ruminations and expressions of obsessional fear. Her various appeals to terror often foreground breath – or lack of it – as a metaphor for the struggles involved in women’s life experiences. Furthermore, as Chris and Courtney Margolin argue, “Emma Hyche responds to the violent power dynamics that women experience throughout the horrors of both life and film” (2021, n.p.) when any man with a knife – even one chopping vegetables – is a potential threat. In invoking such tropes, Hyche reveals how anxiety creates cracks in experience and fragments memory. She specifically uses the fear-induced unreliability of women’s memories as a way to expose gaslighting and problematise yet-to-be-fully-debunked notions of the madwoman in the attic.

Hyche’s poem “Precarity” tackles women’s experience of impermanence and anxiety head on. She begins by juxtaposing her male friend’s experience of “adjunct teaching” with a woman’s continuing experience of workplace insecurity. Her male friend’s comparison of casual work to a “character from *Apocalypse Now*” demonstrates his lack of understanding of women’s

ongoing battle with precarity. In this way, his film reference appears fatuously Prufrockian – by comparison, women in patriarchal and capitalist societies are born into precarity. Hyche highlights this in her ironic references to performative tropes in the lines, “silver-spangle / and christened with glitter”. Her metaphor that “risk feels like going underwater” highlights how women are, in various ways, drowning – although, as she remarks, not “dying yet”. The use of the word “yet” at the end of the line is sardonic, not only flagging the inevitability of death but alerting the reader to the chastening experiences many women encounter every day:

My precarity

is distinct from his – mine silver-spangled
and christened with glitter. Risk
feels like going underwater
when it doesn’t feel
like dying yet. (2017, n.p.)

Hyche then creates a self-reflexive moment where she imagines poetry as a kind of impenetrable piggy bank. You can turn it “upside down” but the “job” is to get the money “inside it ... out”. This emphasises that if poetry is a “job,” it is a vocation fraught with uncertainty. Hyche’s subsequent metaphor confirms the point. In the cold, the ghostly ideas of warmth and of poetry’s money collapse:

And now
we’re here. I turn the poem
upside down to hear the jangle
of money inside it – your job is
to get it out. When I pull my feet
out of thick wool socks
in lieu of heat their ghosts
remain for one full minute
before collapsing. (2017, n.p.)

Extending this idea of ghosting, Hyche invokes the unreliability of memory and the idea of precarity. This powerfully undercuts the male adjunct teacher’s self-importance. Indeed, the male performance becomes just a mess of “greasepaint / and sweat,” a kind of false labour, emphasised by the poem’s ironic recasting of the film’s ending into cliché. His imagined death in sessional teaching is not the end to precarious life, it is merely a “symbol” of patriarchy’s failure to recognise and understand women’s vulnerability:

Don’t remember
how the movie ends, but I know
it involves greasepaint
and sweat. A symbol walking
into the sunset
on his way to die. (2017, n.p.)

In “Cavity with a little blood in it,” Hyche again tackles issues of women’s safety, which she focalises through the state of mind of a female narrator who is primed to be fearful. The narrator “walk[s] at night alone” for fear that she will go “crazy / in the pejorative sense” if she is left in her bedroom:

I walk at night alone
because I’m beginning
to feel crazy

in the pejorative sense
in bedroom cocoon the room turns
its face to the wall (2021, p. 1)

The speaker’s reclamation of ideas associated with women and craziness is particularly interesting in its assertion that not all craziness is negative; that it can fuel creativity and imagination. In the second part of the poem, the lines become very short and the assertion of self is accompanied by a profound sense of provisionality and impermanence:

I have
stopped
counting

on the future
to receive
me at all

The first
thing to know
about future

is that
it may not
occur

the demon
may never
get up (2021, p. 1)

Mary A. Koncel’s prose poems also work to disrupt convention. She has said that they are “microcosms of our own lives ... remind[ing] us of our tenuous place in a world that is easily turned on its side” (2017, n.p), and this sense of precarity is embedded in her use of language. A sequence of prose poems titled with letters of the alphabet undermines meaning by fracturing expectation. This is never more evident than in her prose poem “P Is for Prayer for the Angry Dog,” where she states: “Let him learn to speak the language of Mary A. Koncel”:

I'm saying a prayer for the angry dog. I traded him for two dead dogs. He has short ears and came from a country with ravenous monkeys and an abundance of mountains.

Let him learn to speak the language of Mary A. Koncel

Let his teeth soften when he bites my wrists, leaving tender blue welts. I vow to turn them into something beautiful. *An agapanthus corsage*, I tell myself, my friends. *I'll add the white orchids later.* (2023, p. 86)

In their *Poetics and Precarity*, scholars Myung Mi Kim and Cristanne Miller argue, "At times, language seems to fail, to have failed. And yet, the thinkers and writers ... grapple with the continuing potential of language to address discord and precarity" (2018, p. xv). Koncel's prose poetry is written in this spirit, celebrating linguistic disjuncture as a way to address and expose precarity.

Her choice of the prose poem form to draw attention to and command this disjunctive use of language is wonderfully subversive. Prose poetry foregrounds the quotidian and may appear to prioritise a sense of the ordinary in its use of sentences, features which Koncel exploits in her fractured and sideways discussions of life. As Jendi Reiter says of Koncel's "Closer to Day," "[t]he prose poem is the perfect form for surreal vignettes that combine the tell-it-slant quality of poetry with the relaxed unfolding of a prose line. As in fables, the first sentences establish mysterious happenings as the new normal" (2015, n.p). Koncel's "new normal" is the expression of resilience through conjuring what is almost a kind of magical realism. When the dog bites the narrator "leaving tender blue welts," flowers may spring from wounds. The image of teeth softening also breaks down the idea of an inclusive and "biting" language that ultimately fails.

In "D Is for Walking the Dead Dog" Koncel's narrator refers to Stephen King's *Pet Sematary* but subverts the narrative so that the dog is "grateful" rather than an evil incarnation of its former self. She uses the repetition of "I wish" to demonstrate both her lack of agency and the power of imagination and "possibility":

I wish I had some sort of magic, so I could say *Stop* to the rain, and it would stop.

I wish I could wave my arms and say *Walk* so the dead dog would jump up and run to the door. He would wag his tail, a little stiff at first but happy to hear the birds and grateful to me for stopping the rain [...] (2023, p. 84)

While Koncel's prose poems have fabulist and neo-surreal elements, in addressing aspects of autobiography in her prose poems, Koncel states this mode is, "almost like putting on a mask, and that mask allows you to say things you might be afraid to say" (Crapo, 2017, n.p.). From

behind the mask, Koncel is fearless in giving priority to alternative kinds of beauty and an accompanying advocacy for the resilience that comes from writing authentically.

Lyric poetry may not be able to solve many of the issues attendant on contemporary precariousness, but in its forms, compressions and disjunctures, it is able to recognise and articulate much of the fragmentary, sometimes disassociated nature of memory's problematics. Poetry itself partakes of a certain precarity, especially in a world where noisy forms of speaking predominate and the more fragile complexities of identity and self-narrativisation are often overwhelmed. For women, in particular, poetry represents a way of standing at some distance from society's patriarchal norms, and their implications and threats. Memory and self, represented in fragmentary and lateral poetic ways, have the capacity to speak of an "I" – indeed, of multifarious first-person pronouns – able to perform alternative and sometimes subversive realities, even turning patriarchal expectations and assumptions back on themselves. Such poetry offers the chance to recognise that there are ways of expressing women's experience that move beyond the conventions of traditional prose narratives into a deep engagement with the fluidity and provisionality associated with truly complex articulations of recollection, self and identity. This poetry suggests that people may often know less about themselves than they usually assume. In recognising this, it provides opportunities for self-expression that connect to more salutary representations of the self than are often envisioned or imagined and that highlight precarity in new constructions of autobiographical memory.

References

- Alexander, M. (1989). *Women in Romanticism: Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Shelley*. Barnes and Noble Books.
- Appay, B. (2010). "Precarization" and flexibility in the labour process: A question of legitimacy and a major challenge for democracy. In C. Thornley, S. Jefferys and B. Appay (Eds.), *Globalization and precarious forms of production and employment: Challenges for workers and unions* (pp. 23-39). Edward Elgar.
- Barclay, C. R. & T. S. Smith. (2002). Autobiographical remembering: Creating personal culture. In M.A. Conway, D. C. Rubin, H. Spinnler and W. A. Wagenaar (Eds.), *Theoretical perspectives on autobiographical memory* (pp. 75–98). Kluwer Academic.
- Buñuel, L. (1983). *My last sigh: The autobiography of Luis Buñuel* (Abigail Israel, Trans.). Alfred A. Knopf.
- Butler, J. (2009). Performativity, precarity and sexual politics. *AIBR. Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana*, 4(3), i–xiii,
<https://www.aibr.org/antropologia/04v03/criticos/040301b.pdf>
- Carson, A. (1999) *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse*. Vintage Contemporaries.
- Carson, A. (2013). *Red doc>*. Alfred A. Knopf.

- Cohen, P. (2005). The occasions of poetry: Some reflections on the “social” in poetry. Presentation at the ESRC seminar Methods in Dialogue. Cambridge, May 2005.
<http://www.keith-barnes.com/docs/poetoccasions-short.docx>.
- Collins, B. (2004). Introduction. In *The selected poems of Emily Dickinson*. Ballantine Books.
- Crapo T. (2017). Pioneer Valley poets: Poet loves to tell stories, create rhythm, music, compression. *Greenfield Recorder*, 22 November 2017,
<https://www.recorder.com/Poet-loves-to-tell-stories-create-rhythm-music-and-compression-13857943>
- Cushman, P. (1995). Constructing the self, constructing America: A cultural history of psychotherapy. Addison-Wesley.
- Dalton, M. M. (2013). Conquer or connect: Power, patterns, and the gendered narrative. *Journal of Film and Video*, 65(1–2), 23–9.
- Dickinson, E. (1998). *The poems of Emily Dickinson* (R.W. Franklin, Ed.). Variorum Edition, 3 vols. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Dickie, M. (2008). Dickinson’s discontinuous lyric self. In H. Bloom (Ed.), *Emily Dickinson* (pp. 55–68). Bloom’s Literary Criticism.
- Diehl, J. F. (1981). *Dickinson and the Romantic imagination*. Princeton University Press.
- Eisold, K. (2012). Unreliable memory: Why memory’s unreliable, and what we can do about it. *Psychology Today*, 12 March.
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/hidden-motives/201203/unreliable-memory>.
- Eldridge, R. (1994). Wordsworth and “A New Condition of Philosophy”. *Philosophy and Literature*, 18(1), 50–71.
- Espin, O. M. (2015). *Gendered journeys: Women, migration and feminist psychology*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Grysmann, A. R. Fivush, N. A. Merrill, et al. (2016). *Memory and cognition*, 44, 856–868.
<https://doi.org/10.3758/s13421-016-0610-2>.
- Hyche, E. (2020). “Precarity” in two poems by Emma Hyche, *Lit Magazine*, 20 April 2020.
<https://www.litmagazine.org/2020/04/20/two-poems-by-emma-hyche/>
- Hyche, E. (2021). Cavity with a little blood in it. *Picnic in the abbatoir*. Dancing Girl Press.
- Irigaray, L. (2004). *An ethics of sexual difference* (C. Burke & G.C. Gill, Trans.). Continuum.
- Kim, M. M. & Miller, C. (Eds.). (2018). Poetics and Precarity, *The University at Buffalo Robert Creeley Lectures in Poetry and Poetics*. SUNY Press.

- Koncel, M. A. (2023). D Is for Walking the Dead Dog, in *Dreaming awake: New contemporary prose poetry from the USA, Australia and the UK*. MadHat Press.
- Koncel, M. A. (2023). P Is for Prayer for the Angry Dog, in *Dreaming awake: New contemporary prose poetry from the USA, Australia and the UK*. MadHat Press.
- Koncel, M. A. (2017). Visiting Poets. Smith College,
<https://www.smith.edu/academics/poetry-center/mary-koncel>
- Kupsh, C. (2018). The uncomfortable self: Emily Dickinson's reflections on consciousness. *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*, 11(1), 49–62.
- Middleton, P. & Woods, T. (2000). *Literatures of memory: History, time, and space in postwar writing*. Manchester University Press.
- Näsström S. & Kalm, S. (2015). A democratic critique of precarity. *Global Discourse*, 5(4), 556–73.
- Nelson, K. (2002). *Language in cognitive development: The emergence of the mediated mind*. Cambridge University Press.
- Margolin, C & Margolin, C. (2021). Review: Picnic in the abbatoir—Emma Hyche (Dancing Girl Press), *the Poetry Question*, 11 May 2021,
<https://thepoetryquestion.com/2021/05/11/review-picnic-in-the-abattoir-emma-hyche-dancing-girl-press/>
- Reiter, J. (2015). Two poems from Mary A. Koncel's "Closer to Day", *Reiter's Block*
<https://www.jendireiter.com/2015/09/05/two-poems-from-mary-a-koncels-closer-to-day/>
- Robinson, J. A. and Hawpe, L. (1986). Narrative thinking as a heuristic process. In T. R. Sarbin (Ed.), *Narrative psychology: The storied nature of human conduct* (pp. 111–25). Praeger.
- Sacks, O. (1998). The lost mariner. In *The man who mistook his wife for a hat: And other clinical tales* (pp. 23–42). Simon & Schuster.
- Slings, S. R. (1990). The I in personal archaic lyric: An introduction. In S.R. Slings (Ed.), *The poet's I in archaic Greek lyric: Proceedings of a symposium held at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam* (pp. 1–30). Vrije Universiteit University Press.
- Taylor, J. B. (1999). Forms and fallacies of memory in 19th-century psychology: Henry Holland, William Power and Frances Power Cobbe. *Endeavour*, 23(2), 60–64.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-9327\(99\)01213-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-9327(99)01213-2).
- Williams, H. L., M. A. Conway & Cohen, G. (2008). Autobiographical memory. In G. Cohen & M. A. Conway (Eds.), *Memory in the real world* (3rd ed., pp. 21–90). Psychology Press.

Wilson, A. E. & Ross, M. (2003). The identity function of autobiographical memory: Time is on our side. *Memory*, 11(2), 137–49.