

**HIX  
EROS**

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**POETRY REVIEW**

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**POETRY REVIEW**

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## PART I

### Fionn

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by Roibéard Csengeri (Contraband, 2014)

*Reviewed by Calum Gardner*

What is *Fionn*? It is a narrative prose work of about fifty pages that was written, as an authorial addendum explains, '[i]n the land of an age-old and yet-to-be fully ousted occupier,' and in a mood of 'bile and frenzy' (p.53). Although *Fionn* is on the short side, we might consider it a novel, in the modernist Irish metafictional tradition. The character of Fionn certainly resembles the solitary intellectuals of Joyce, Beckett, and O'Brien, who wander alienated through a political, philosophical, and linguistic landscape shaped by British occupation. But it's not a throwback, because the metafictional tradition is alive, well, and international; consider Spike Jonze's film *Adaptation* (2002), which Csengeri's Jake thinks of as "a loop with no length" (p.22), self-reflection with little or no content to reflect on, or Quebecois Daniel Canty's *Wigrum* (2011), modelled around a catalogue of items with intersecting, self-reflecting stories.

But *Fionn* puts demands on us that are bigger and more complicated than just metafiction. Being asked to think about the fact that the novel we are reading is indeed a novel is not the limit of its innovation; instead, we are asked to think about why and how this text is *not* a novel, and how it misperforms the novel for our reading mis-pleasure. *Fionn* is not a comfortable book; indeed, it's often blurry with anger. Anger at hegemonic cultural forces – England, capitalism, Catholicism – and the pressures they exert against the full flowering of writing, art, and life in general prompts the text's deformations of the formal elements of the novel, which throughout its history has so often served as a high-capacity conduit for those forces.

But for its programme of sabotage to be effective, we have to at least

try to read *Fionn* as a novel. Indeed, it demands to be read as such: it presents itself in what seems at first like transparent realistic prose, and offers up the comforting elements of a novel: protagonist, love interest, central conflicts, character development. However, our expectations about these are frustrated: the eponymous Fionn is paired with a foil, Jake, the more earthly double to whom he relays his vision. It is Jake who has the love interest, character development and the more conventional conflicts, while Fionn is the visionary who issues from (parodically) mythical origins. *Fionn* isn't bound by the restrictions of the novel as a form, and this goes for the language too; we can also think of *Fionn* as prose poetry in places. When Fionn is waylaid by a charity fundraiser on the street, it is his opportunity to explain:

There's a diamond planet in space. 55 Cancri e. We see it as it was 40 years ago. The space between Hackney and the City is too close for some people's liking; it would be much better for the enemy if the space between the corner-shop, the government buildings, the park-bench where a homeless sleeps, were increased. We want the space to approach a point, we want no space. No diamond, but a pin, a point. This pinpoint is where you must live, if life is a possible thing [...]  
(p.33)

The oration continues for another half-page. The prose in some novels is "nice" enough, significance-thick enough to be read as poetry: you've heard this statement before, even and especially in cases where it is blatantly untrue. Here, however, it is not the lavish over-description that prompts that equivalence, but the strangeness of the juxtapositions and the rarefied quality created by the story form and its division into what we might call 'set-pieces' if they were not so un-set-tled and un-set-ting.

We may also have to think of *Fionn* as a kind of erotica, albeit a disturbing kind. That's not (only) a knee-jerk reaction; an orgiastic encounter between Beatrice, Dante, Jesus, God, and Mary is, quite independent of its participants' identities, violent and scatological. Nevertheless, there is an eroticism here far less innocent than the gentle 'erotics' of linguistically innovative texts, often described with reference to Roland Barthes' notion of the writerly, destabilising kind of reading pleasure he terms *jouissance*. *Fionn* instead participates in a messy, confrontational metafictional project of deforming the love and sex worlds mapped and arranged by the traditional novel. Compare, for instance, Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*, which blends the identities, as if there were no difference, between the protagonist's father and boyfriend. The proliferation of self-reflective devices in Acker's work – including letters, maps, and nude drawings exposing the psychosexual DNA of the characters' relationships – is similar to what is at play in *Fionn*, the Holy Family becoming an Oedipal family, showing how the most transgressive behaviour imaginable is encoded in the heart

of conventions, be they narrative or social. While the text is not exactly a map of these relationships, it does seem capable through its vignettes, which often proceed with a listing quality (books, flatmates, sexual acts), of working towards accounting for them.

Another possibility: *Fionn* as notebook or logbook. There are a number of contemporary texts best thought of in this way: Canty's *Wigrum* comes back to mind, a series of interlocking narratives and philosophical themes that return throughout the stories behind a catalogue of objects. *Fionn* features photocopied register pages as (not quite, but almost) endpapers, prompting the imperfect but tenacious fit of this identity, which is held up by the novel's cataloguing (the half-page list of essential reading that Fionn carries in his unlikely backpack) and self-reflection, from the opening sentence where it considers itself a 'composition,' to the final section where it positions itself as an incantation which will convey magical effects upon the reader or reciter. Not only does this blur the distinction between author and reader, finished work and the writing process, but it functions as a critique of the ways in which that distinction is set up in the first place, the supposed benefits of kneeling readerlily at textual altars.

To counter the initial question: what would be the point of trying to fit *Fionn* into those roles? To assess its contribution to the novel, to the eroticon, to the quest for the erasure of the boundary between notebook and published work? That would be to feed into the notion that each genre is a unified project, working towards a goal or even just a non-contradictory set of goals. Perhaps the way in which *Fionn* most closely resembles a novel is in its scope. This tiny book (50 pp.) may not be as long as a novel, but it has novelistic ambitions. Roland Barthes writes about wanting "to produce not a comedy of the Intellect but its romanesque, its novelistic theory."<sup>1</sup> *Fionn* does this throughout, taking the cute, unthreatening, conventional iterations of Celtic experience and identity served up by so much of the literature of the recent past and deforming it into a writerly fiction of resistance and protest until we get, in the words of the epigraph, "to the very edge of fucky bum boo boo."

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1. Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes* (1977), p.90.

## Arrays

by Ian Heames (Face Press, 2015)

Reviewed by Louis Goddard

*Arrays* collects three short books published by Ian Heames over a period of three years: the aptly named *Array One* (Cambridge: Critical Documents, 2012), *To* (Brighton: Iodine, 2013), and the most recent volume, *A.I. in Daylight* (Cambridge: Materials, 2014). The number three recurs throughout the work as a formal principle: each volume is divided into three sections, each with three subsections containing three poems, for a total of 81 short poems — never more than a page in length, often less than half — in the collected edition.<sup>2</sup> Like many things from Face Press, which is run by Heames on a presumably limited micro-press budget, the book is elegant and functional: pocket-sized and printed on high-quality paper, with subtle chromatic cues to distinguish internally between volumes and attractive endpapers in what seems like a sponge-painted pattern of primary colours. The text proper begins on p.9, more than a numerological accident.

An array is, among other things, a data structure consisting of a set of computer memory locations whose contents may be referred to by indices. In the case of an array called ‘trees’ consisting of the elements ‘oak,’ ‘elm’ and ‘sycamore,’ an identifier of the rough form ‘trees 1’ would refer to ‘oak,’ ‘trees 2’ to ‘elm,’ and so on.<sup>3</sup> Arrays and their variants are extremely flexible and prove useful in performing many common tasks in computer programming; almost all high-level programming languages implement one or more array-like structures as basic data types, along with integers, floating-point (decimal) numbers and so-called ‘strings’ for holding text. That Heames conceives of the structure of *Arrays* in this technical sense is suggested by aspects of the text itself — a reference to “the next element on the list” in 2.2.3.1 (p.54), for example — and by text-external factors: the book’s contents page ([p.5]) lists its three titles between parentheses, a common syntax for defining an array, used in the scripting language Perl and the popular Bash shell. In this context, the repeated tripartite divisions of the book may be thought of as a hierarchical series of nested, three-element arrays: “2.2.3.1” above thus refers to the first element in an array which forms the third element of a larger one, making up the second element of a still larger one, all being contained in the second element of the top-level array formed by the book as a whole. To make matters more confusing, the recto/verso conventions of the printed book constantly encourage the reader to take two rather than three as the unit of division. As I leaf through *Arrays*, the numbering constantly slips in and out of sync with the page layout, until the three-digit designators lose their sequentiality and begin

2. Poems will be referred to in this review by a four-digit number representing volume, section, subsection and poem, followed by the page number in *Arrays*.

3. In reality, many programming languages are “zero-based,” beginning their numbering systems at 0 rather than 1.

to seem more like a score for three-bell method ringing, itself a primitive form of programming, than simple indices.

All this is not to suggest that *Arrays* is a programming poem (or sequence) in quite the same way as something like J.H. Prynne’s *For the Monogram* (1997), which incorporates direct quotation from James F. Korsh’s *Data Structures, Algorithms and Programming Style* (1986) and even deploys its own form of pseudocode. Heames is intimately concerned with technology — and with our intimacy with and through technology — but he does not attempt to replicate the language of our control over it. In *Arrays*, computers are not objects that we subordinate uncomplicatedly to our will through programming; nor are they the hackneyed inverse of this (is it really *we who are being programmed?*). Rather, computers — especially in the contexts of gaming and the internet — are something we live in. Heames shows the sort of loving, un-pathologised attention to digital objects that Daniel Wilson does in *Files I Have Known: Data Reminiscences* (Oakland, CA: Gauss PDF, 2016), a pamphlet which provides a lucid account of Wilson’s suburban British childhood and adolescence through detailed descriptions of his relation to various computer files.

It is in this sense, as something we temporarily inhabit while reading, that *Arrays* displays a sort of algorithmic texture, most obviously through repetition. This occurs at the levels of poem and sequence. Twice, Heames concludes poems with a sort of chant, repeated with minor variations: “crush yellow tulip farm yellow tulip | crush yellow tulip yellow tulip farm” (2.3.3.1, p.63); “blue yellow blue | yellow blue | yellow blue yellow || blue yellow | blue yellow blue | yellow blue | yellow” (3.1.3.2, p.76). In performance, these carefully measured sections carry echoes of Keston Sutherland reading *Hot White Andy* — “Abner John Louima Burge Cheng” — though without the frenzy that they serve to counterpoint in Sutherland’s poem.<sup>4</sup> At the sequence level, repeated phrases straddle gaps of twenty, thirty, forty pages; or in the case of “the streets rise and fall | like metals” (1.3.2.2, p.31), which reappears stripped of its line break in 3.2.1.1 (p.78), two volume divisions. There is a sense in which words and phrases function as variables — consistently named but semantically flexible containers — with all the issues that this entails. To take an obvious example, when we are requested to “let A stand for war | B stand for unprovoked aggression | and C stand for parliament” (2.1.3.1, p.45), the scope of the definitions remains unclear: are these so-called global variables, to be maintained throughout our reading of (the remainder of) the book, or do they apply only to the poem in question, as if it was a function in a computer program?

As well as repetition itself, *Arrays* includes *reference* to repetition, as with 3.3.2.1’s “the sea is mentioned | another time” (p.90), which follows repeated allusions to the sea throughout *A.I. in Daylight*. This is part of a broader

4. Keston Sutherland, “Keston Sutherland - Hot White Andy - Part A - 1/4,” *Meshworks/YouTube*, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWMTted\\_5tA&t=1m39s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWMTted_5tA&t=1m39s)> [accessed 18 May 2016].

self-consciousness in the book, appearing in references to art, aesthetics and especially to poems and poetry, particularly in *Tb*. In the final poem of *Array One*, Heames's speaker declares disarmingly that "the poem is a stunt | double for my feelings," counterposing it to an unnamed, third-person female figure of the sort which appears frequently in his earlier work: "but she is an archangel || with more hits | than "the color of rain"" (1.3.3.3, p.35).<sup>5</sup> The fostering of ambiguity through the line break here is typical of Heames's practice in *Arrays*. The poem is both a stunt double for the speaker's feelings — a subordinate or replacement which can be made to perform manoeuvres too dangerous for the feelings themselves — and an actual stunt, *made* double (i.e. doubly significant) for (by virtue of) its investment with those feelings. This romantic secondary reading is playfully encouraged by the vertiginous position of the word "stunt" itself, which when the poem is read aloud feels temporarily airborne, suspended like Evel Knievel between two chunks of language.

Which of these self-conceptions — the heroic (stunt) or the bathetic (stunt double) — most accurately characterises *Arrays* as a whole? In 1.2.1.1, poetry seems to be accorded the classical monumentality and permanence of the great minerals — "poet as sculptor," as Donald Davie wrote of Ezra Pound — before being smashed back into the digital ephemerality of our daily grind: "poetry, marble, onyx, email" (p.18).<sup>6</sup> Then again, "Onix" is a Pokémon, and email — through mailing lists and private correspondence — the medium in which much contemporary poetry gets written, advertised, bought and sold (including *Arrays* itself, advertised by Heames via a mailout). Poetry seems to be the butt of the joke again in 2.2.2.1, where "the video for this song [...] has a familiar look | like the future of poetry" (p.51), but the exact structure of the joke is unclear. Is the actual future of poetry so grimly predictable that it is as familiar as the aesthetics of MTV (or, more properly, Vevo), or is it merely the tedious round of public discussions on The Future of Poetry which is familiar? A similar equivocation can be found in 2.3.1.3 — "The poets are still | brainstorming and | copying music" (p.59) — which gives a choice between a Paterian "aspir[ation] towards the condition of music" or messing around in a BitTorrent client.<sup>7</sup> By 2.3.2.3, "poet" feels like a character class (medic, support, assault, etc.) in a multiplayer first-person shooter game:

having lost

the animals have retreated from the troll  
and his support for the troubled currency  
to the conference on ambience

at least two of their poets are dead  
(p.62)

Even here, irony is pervasive: is "at least" a numerical delimiter or a form of grim consolation? What are poets and poems *for*, anyway? The speaker of 2.3.1.2, a poem whose capitalised lines set it apart from its neighbours, "meditate[s] on the poem | As a menagerie of control | Of people over each other" (p.58). Perhaps this provides some context for the muscular refusal of poetry which seems to occur in the very last lines of the book: "Left poetry to lift weights | Air between wings again" (3.3.3.3, p.95). Or is this merely an ironic comment on the vacuousness of "left [as in 'left-wing'] poetry" and its useless political weight-lifting?

One sense in which poetry risks extending its author's control over other people is through its documentary function: recording and thereby producing history, particularly in its political form. Capital-H History certainly appears in *Arrays*, most notably in *Array One* — whether this is a characteristic internal to the poem or a function of its composition close to the incendiary (if abortive) period of 2010–11 is unclear. Poem 1.2.1.1 begins: "teens woke from a heavily policed summer | no more an illusion than last spring" (p.18). A later reference to "the rhetoric of the Games" implies that the summer in question is that of 2012, which saw London host the Olympic Games, though the counterposition of "teens" and "police" also invokes the riots across English cities in 2011 and the then-ongoing student protests over increased tuition fees and cuts to Education Maintenance Allowance. "[L]ast spring" is similarly ambiguous, both in the conventional sense — does "last" refer to the most recent instance of a thing, or to the one before that? — and because it is not at all clear where we are looking back from. The general election of May 2010 seems to hover in the background, but the poem blurs the chronology such that identifiable external reference — "ban legal high" (1.3.2.1, p.30) — merges with points which, while identifiable *as* external reference, remain finally indeterminate. Heames refuses to provide a neat poetic history of the early 2010s, even in ironic, Larkinesque mode (*between the start of the mephedrone ban and Tempa T's first LP*). Rather, the poem is studded with shards of history in the same way that the speaker of 1.2.2.3 has "journalists | embedded in [their] shoulder blade" (p.23): uncomfortably.

True to its name, *Arrays* is a linear book. Arranged chronologically, it does not allow itself to be manipulated into a false circular coherence: there is no suturing 3.3.3.3 to 1.1.1.1 in some sort of final, ouroboric consummation. As such, it is able to employ variation as a key structuring principle. Poems

5. David Grundy has written on the sometimes problematic nature of this gendered subject-object relationship, particularly where the object is associated deliberately with fetishised weapons of hi-tech warfare; see 'JEFFERSON TOAL & IAN HEAMES // Cambridge // 27.10.12,' *streams of expression* (2 November 2012), <<http://streamsofexpression.blogspot.co.uk/2012/11/jefferson-toal-ian-heames-cambridge.html>> [accessed 15 June 2016] and "As life is to other themes": Ian Heames' Sonnets,' *streams of expression* (9 September 2015), <<http://streamsofexpression.blogspot.co.uk/2015/09/as-life-is-to-other-themes-ian-heames.html>> [accessed 15 June 2016].

6. Donald Davie, *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

7. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, 3rd edn (London: Macmillan, 1888), p.140.

vary along any number of formal axes, including overall length, stanza length, line length, use of initial capitalisation and even line spacing. As with the numbering of the sequence, these devices vie for prominence with the page layout of the book: is there significance in a sequence of three page-pairs in which the left-hand poem is longer, followed by a shift to the right-hand poem for a further four (pp.14–27), or is this merely an accident of publication? To ask such a question, and to realise that there is no answer forthcoming, is to approach the fundamental structure of *Arrays*. For better or worse, this is a book which makes relatively little concession to reader curiosity; eschewing conventional propositional coherence, it does not offer a series of clever clues and jokes as a consolation prize. Even at the book's seemingly most vulnerable moments, a deliberate gap persists, wider than the familiar gap that exists between any text and its reader. In reading *Arrays*, a feeling of lack — as if the addition of some small piece of extra knowledge could cause the whole thing to make sense — coexists with the certainty that such knowledge does not and could not actually exist; that the reader is structurally rather than incidentally barred from full access, and that no effort of attention, however strenuous, will be enough to overcome this separation.

*Arrays* is not monolithic in its resistance to reading. More Swiss cheese than sculpture, it avoids presenting a single hard surface (“poetry, marble, onyx”), offering instead a maze of interconnected passages, the walls of which remain at an equal distance from the reader at all times. In this sense, its model is not technological but human; and not “human-like a friendly dog,” as Prynne has it, but human in the sense of being both an object of interaction and a thing which is never fully knowable.<sup>8</sup> To venture one more negative, *Arrays* is not nihilistic in its presentation of this world of gaps and absences — love, in particular, is fundamental to the book — but is simply realistic about the way in which meaning is occluded and efforts at interpersonal contact deflected and damaged, both in reading and in the ‘real world’. To accept and adopt this condition is finally to enter the poem’s carefully suspended domain.

## Meat

by Sophie Seita (Little Red Leaves, 2015)

*Reviewed by Sarah Hayden*

There is a magazine called *Beef!*. There are, in fact, a number of periodicals thus titled. However, where the others concern themselves with the (not unrelated) domains of \*bodybuilding\* and \*agribusiness\*, the *Beef!* that induced me to gasp — first in a German airport, and then in France — is dedicated to the manly matter of steak: its adulation, preparation and ingestion. With its byline

8. J.H. Prynne, ‘From a Letter to Douglas Oliver,’ *Grosseteste Review*, 6.1–4 (1973), 152–54 (p.153).

address to “Men who have taste,” oiled cover portraits and gory centrefolds, *Beef!* insinuates itself aesthetically, ethically, even spatially, into that other industry which exists to monetize the (specular) consumption of (mostly) live flesh. The phrase ‘food porn’ has always made me frown, but whilst I’d never dare to call a mag a rag, successive sightings of *Beef!* have induced an exasperated snorting. Most unbecoming in a lady, that. Taurine, even.

The title of Sophie Seita’s *Meat* is similarly frank about what preoccupies her excellent chapbook. Published in Little Red Leaves’ *Textile Series* in 2015, this *Meat*’s wrapping has a hand-sewn hem. Neat running stitches frame in wholesome domestic labour a typeface that is Coca-Cola co-opted. Into its cursive characters is condensed a concentrated flavour of postwar nutrition: faux-homespun, all-American mass-produced and global. Squarely bound in fabric, this book feels soft and pliant. Haptics and optics promise comfort but its name spells carnage.

I cannot address it  
odourless in its vagueness  
(p.3)

*Meat* begins here, with an admission of the incapacity which simultaneously triggers and thwarts its subsequent unfolding. In what follows, considerable efforts are expended not alone on naming this intangibility, but on making it incontrovertibly, unignorably present. In her *Companion Species Manifesto*, Donna Haraway writes that we must first “[meet] the other in all the fleshly detail of a mortal relationship,” before ever we can think to inhabit an inter-subjective relationship. Seita’s book works to prepare the ground for that first meeting; “snow-white in glass” (p.3) is to be extracted from her cryochamber and exposed to the corrupting air. In *Meat*, she and the rest of the “vitrine untouchables” (p.3) we seal behind panes (pains?) of unthinkability are to be slapped out on the table before us: bodies to bodies. As temperatures rise, they might start to smell.

*[I come from where the grass is good; my uncles farmed sheep.]*

Seita’s poem seeks to pull us into engagement with the matter of meat. Its mission is charged — ethically and politically — and it stages its polemic affectively, performatively. Pivoting with uncommon poise between archness, outrage and worldly incomprehension, it compels us to hear, smell, touch and see all that we conspire only to taste. Meat. It wants to make us feel its strangeness in our mouths, and in our minds: tongue it around, defy or defer pharyngeal authority until we have learned its weight. To engineer this unw[o/a]nted encounter, it propels its readers between the remote and the too real.

The vigour of an arm implies a heftiness and might that cannot

surrender  
 the burden of acquisition  
 old songs come back      maybe The right amount of lyric  
 fret shuffle      her hair's become matted  
 things aren't right  
 so crisp and lean.  
 (p.6)

Toggling between material and mental registers, the poem manoeuvres us into a disorienting confrontation with the words that pass through us. As its 'velocity sickens and dies' (p.5) we are always on the wrong foot, and always mis-stepping — its prosody throws us off balance and out of our habitual mental gait. It does much else besides that — more than this slight review can properly encompass — but this will be the basis for the partial, personal reading I will offer.

*[As a child, I had a lamb; its name was Curlycoat.]*

This poem is not the sort to project anthro-interiority into the animal forms it invokes. That easy option is foreclosed. Neither does neotonous clickbait romp across this text (or only once, and then most perplexingly). There are no wise spirit animals, no mythical icons to spur us, D&G-style, into becoming wild. Nor does it cheerlead for a utopia of inter-species sociality. The non-human bodies that matter here *are* matter and that alone: "sinew un-river-dipped and un-poetic" (p.5). That, the poem seems to suggest, should surely be enough to make us recognize their rights to co-existence. For, innards aside, animalian inners can be neither known nor owned. *Meat* does not traffic in animal souls — the notion put doubly under erasure — but in the everyday extraordinary of animal bodies: the variegated, complex, sensate machines with organs which we render, impossibly, into crude fuel:

touching the fragility of tendon, the leg twitches  
 that canvas-tent, that small contour sheet, stretched  
 between little hardnesses  
 with a nail  
 with other sharpnesses like everything  
 (p.5)

When the poem speaks out of these bioforms, it does so campily, knowingly. The pluriform bodies that the poem intermittently possesses articulate not some secret animal essences but the scripts we have assigned them. Seita has the animals speak the words we seem to need to hear. She makes them make explicit the sick fantasy of willed sacrifice that we must first believe in, in order to position some animals on the table and others (those that sport collars and chips) below. Constructs of congealed cognitive dissonance,

animals-becoming-meat affect a nihilist patheticism:

so what if those bruises and zinc-lackages  
 speak for some death-to-come  
 not nutritional value or nominal improvement  
 perhaps death-signs on my legs, signed as exploded blood  
 (I don't want to die)  
 (p.13)

*Beef!*'s cookbook on iTunes promises sixty-seven "recipes for heroes." Its clickable cover bears the usual high-res charred hunk, but this one is overlaid with the distinctly sinister invocation to "Grill mich." Issue 03/2015 features a delicately marbled steak teetering (as though en pointe? / in stilettos?) with the pleading invitation, "Nimm mich" / "Take me." The myth of willing surrender is vital — to this magazine, and its still-sleazier shelf-mates. How else could we sustain "a sacrificial economy fungibly and edibly | in proximity to family dinners" (p.11)? In *Meat*, these carno-normative fictions about women and other animals are spliced into each other in a matrix of consumption.

Through most of the book, the poems' fury resonates at a subterranean level; its vibrations muffled by everything inbetween. When, on occasion, that anger finds egress, then it comes out snarling: "with sweet lip she grins reminiscence as she slurps the juice inside that shell. || those little deaths pleasure the mouth" (p.7).

When the pain of being edible is made manifest, it is often obliquely, or self-directed. An unidentified creature admits, "I hurt, plucking my hair" (p.5), and this, somehow, indicts us all the more directly. No cohort is preferred. Animals of all sorts are made into and for meat but whereas "limited choreography | is learnt by restriction" (p.4) across phyla, certain passages address the conditions endured by specific species. In a neat mirroring of human models, reproductive capacities consign some bodies to particular tortures. *Meat*'s not just about flesh, then, but about everything else extracted from animal bodies: their liquids and their outer coverings too. A dairy cow of whom —

here, the gist, the heart, is: she gets fatter and fatter  
 brawn sense text strength more strength like running a marathon  
 daily  
 in 5 years she's ruined those tits will explode  
 my dear bovine high-duty battery.  
 (p.6)

— reappears in the next chapter/section, hailed, uxoriously as: "O thou living Magazine of Flesh, Milk, Butter and Cheese" (p.11). The latter two byproducts feature in *Beef!* too, most notably on the cover of issue 04/2015 where they feature in a stack of oozing toppings: serving suggestions in a

feature headed (in apparently translingually recognizable English), “Pimp my steak.”

In this book, meat is a threat to the eater as well as the eaten; destruction runs in two directions, albeit unequally. For the human agents in this perverse gastro-economy, the fear of contamination pervades. Cooking comes laden with warnings only because the meat-eating venture was nixed from the outset and sometimes it’s all so ridiculous that wonderment spills into that high, disbelieving laughter that only comes out of tears and always slips back into them:

it’s like selling pig gut for calamari.  
people are not who you think they are  
they eat pig rectum crispy golden rings  
dipped in marinara  
deeply clueless  
it’s amazing  
it’s perfect  
a bunch of big noodles in a box  
maybe it’s all hear-say —  
that’s reassuring  
(p.21)

However — and this is crucial — revulsion in the face of dubious calamari does not send the poem running for any Deep Ecological heartland. In *Meat*, Nature still exerts a certain appeal, sure, but “on looser look it is bogus and studied” (p.3).

Evacuated of its Romantic grandeur, it hovers over the poem — not even a spectral presence that haunts — but a nice idea that hangs around: an apologetic Caspar. And yet, notwithstanding our cynicism, under it all there is something buzzing:

the world one could say is full of tigers and shawls and clouds  
but tigers on stilts that slink as manikin controllers appear  
who can switch and push buttons *that’s* easy but underneath  
there’s a pulse  
of wasps throbbing in secret nests. that always gives hope to the  
visitors  
(p.19).

If our desire for dispassionate surrender is grotesque then so too are the conditions in which we house the bodies that we breed to service ours. Prior to building the massive charnel houses we still call pens, sties and coops, we must first obliterate the specificity of the creatures who will stock them. One cannot conceive of a piggery of 30,000 Babes or Wilburs. One cannot even allow oneself to think of the ramming together of 30,000 individual unnamed pigs.

Instead, the mashing has to start at the level of our thinking: discrete living entities must be imagined, from the outset, as mass, as meat. In Seita’s *Meat*, the discrete borders between living entities are not just threatened by the fear of abjection. In the poem, as in the industrial chicken coop, basic boundedness dissolves altogether in lines indiscrete and unsavoury:

cram me in There are 100 of me We sit on shit Can’t spread wings  
Kiss off my nose with a hot blade  
(p.13)

There is no arguing with the horror of what’s happening here. And no pretending that we don’t know about it already. Protein may have displaced carbs in the food pyramids of the popular consciousness, but arguments based on, “in short: *the conveniences of life*” (p.12), evaporate, stinkingly, under the pressure of so many appallingly ubiquitous images.

Again, such instances of direct engagement are few and, for that, startling. Elsewhere, the poem moves more sinuously. In Part III, something like a dream — in reference, perhaps, to Mayer’s *Studying Hunger* — is reported “without embellishment” (p.17). The atmosphere Seita spins in this passage is hypnagogic and delicious. Marina Abramovic is there, “her eyes are heavy | dark lashes and all fame sincerity” (p.17). But more thrillingly, much more strangely, there are otters too:

otters rubbing walls rubbing cheeks: Marina rubbing cheeks  
cheeked with otter stuff. rapid pat. the role of pure  
transfer. the wear of glamour. the touch of civility  
(p.17)

Otters really do rub their cheeks. I’ve just seen it on YouTube and ... oh just see everyone else’s ∞ comments.

[Cuteness.]

In the context of *Meat*, the apparition of these otters is not just cute; it’s cruel and calculated: “where they come from the nights are cold and I cuddled their fur, it was thick, | I guess they’re ok || as we caress the skim as silver sky-sea the shawls fall gravely around us” (p.18).

I want to cuddle those playful, clever (carnivorous) mammals too. I want to link paws with them as we rock off, floatingly, to sleep. Here is where the poem lures us momentarily into feeling the henceforth sealed-off other side of our impossible relationship with other species. Because *Meat’s* fury is directed less at the catholicity of human tastes than at the fantastic contradictions of our thinking. Otters don’t belong here! Not among the arbitrarily lower-order animals we eat. But maybe that’s the least of our absurdity in a world where even the biggest baddies ruffle fluffy ears at close of

day. Not just Blofeld either, for

I'm stroking Fairy-Tale Putin's she-goat Snow-White & Soft  
while he rides his submarine to shoot some whale  
and those wild gays running after children  
(p.21)

and international diplomacy is still, as one of the poem's driest avatars  
observes, a madcap game of animal exchange:

I mean woah this is 2014  
and you're sending a fucking giant panda?  
(p.21)

Seita's feminism is not a thing apart from her poetry. In *Meat*, as in  
much of the rest of her work, it is interfused with and intensifies other agendas.  
In Part II, the spasming feet of the maidservants Odysseus hanged for the  
crime of being subordinated by his mother's suitor-parasites are recast as  
"little birds in traps | justice makes them twitch" (p.11). So, even though *Meat*  
undoubtedly addresses a 21st century environment of late-capitalist global  
agri-business, it points backwards too — knotting contemporary industrial  
practices into a long history of crimes against other bodies. In the same  
chapter, an extract from Locke's *Second Treatise of Civil Government* is laid out,  
italicized, for our contemplation. It explains how the labour expended on the  
hunt endows the hunter with natural property rights over his prey. Later, some  
lines at the end of Part V —

never noticed these pronouns so acutely,  
*that's* of interest  
(p.30)

— send the reader back to Locke's description of how, having found  
and pursued the hare, the hunter "*has thereby removed her from the state of  
nature, wherein she was common, and hath begun a property*" (p.12). The play  
of pronouns is not inconsequential here either. Meanwhile, looking at the  
ad for *Beef's Dry-Ager Starter Kit*, I think I've caught a promo for a new  
primetime programme: another of those in which every episode opens with  
an establishing shot of a young woman's body mangled / filleted / chopped.  
Against a glossy black backdrop, this neat kit offers 1 x 40cm stainless steel  
bone-saw, 1 x branded knife and a handy pair of gloves, to avoid staining. Or,  
indeed, the hunter's bloody fingerprints.

In its final chapter, the poem announces a return to order of a kind:

now clear now cease metaphoric pander  
I want to say things and feel them

this weak attempt at telling  
not a verdict  
just an expanse of caress  
(n.p.)

Form, as though overwhelmed by its own content, can provide no  
further solace or solution. At its nonpaginated end the poem announces that it  
must let fall its rhetoric, speak plain:

go on and announce on Facebook that your people are  
slaughtering a pig for your wedding or other ceremonious  
happiness or that they stuffed some mint and yoghurt into their  
thankful turkey ass.  
(n.p.)

Declaring "I'm sorry I'm angry" (n.p.), *Meat* pulls suddenly into a  
performatively photoreal present-tense of anguished frustration. Or, at least, it  
seems to — though the diction in this codicil feels borrowed and the intensity  
of the invective threatens to tip it over into an uncomfortable, strained and  
self-conscious parody. Indented as though either to mediate or to augment its  
chastening charge, the effect of this parting parry is further heightened by the  
blank logic of the line that follows: "it's harder until we start calling them also  
civilians" (n.p.).

Haraway, channelling Althusser, writes of how we "'hail' [animals]  
into our constructs of nature and culture, with major consequences of life and  
death, health and illness, longevity and extinction." That's some of what's going  
on in this poem. But not all. The story of the "natureculture" that Haraway  
identifies between humans and animals has always started with the giving  
of names and, as the poem announced in its opening lines, it is specifically  
interested in putting words on the unthinkable. If the naming of the animals  
was Adam's way of making them his own — the preamble to the contract —  
then our refusal to call them by those names is a wretched way to renege on  
our contract.

[*In my house, we ate not lamb but mutton.*]

Or, as the poem has it: "unspoken crimes guarantee the social" (p.12).  
In *Meat*, the inedible and the unsayable fall into each other in recurrent visions  
of what cannot, or should not pass through the mouth. Doublethink demands  
amnesia, which comes trailing guilt. Throughout the poem, figures of aphasia  
are interleaved with wan apologies, admissions of chronic forgetfulness,  
collective "absentmindedness" (p.4). It is, perhaps, the impossibility of  
representation in the context of so much opacity that sends *Meat*, in its middle,  
into an alternative mode — generating its core of compelling abstraction.

As the poem announced at the outset, before we can think differently,

we must speak differently, for “Not the mechanism | of preparing but the substance names, keeps bodies terrestrial” (p.3). It is this very tangibility, this mutual inhabitation of a single earth, that the food industry strives, with its “Soft Sell. No Sweat” (p.5) logic, to efface.

that which we do not name  
communicates a particular holding  
an affordance of sated adjournment  
(p.7)

Shrinkwrapped, readyseal, quickfry: it’s all so *easy*. Just as the butcher’s glass-topped vitrine enables us to make selections without risking getting bloody: “similes are the first step to unreality | as in love-making” (n.p.).

*[Curlycoat was not eaten.]*

Chops, cutlets, steaks, rashers. These new names that we give to the animals we dispossess of themselves enable our continued consumption of them. With a butterfly cut, *Meat* slices through and opens up the linguistic and cognitive processes that make our Meat-making possible. If I make it sound literal, I will have done this poem, and its author, a great disservice. If I do so, it will be because this book pushed me to reflect on being literal, to keep things real and fleshly, not to floss between courses but to feel between teeth what

she’s bitten on  
a turbid bundle  
dainty querulous fodder.  
(p.8)

*[Once, in Pittsburgh, I dined with the poet.  
When the waiter came round, I ordered lamb.]*

## Hula Hooping

by Tammy Ho Lai-Ming  
*Reviewed by Robert Kiely*

Gold-plated R2-D2s are guarded over by immense Rilakkumas, whose faces advance inexorably the argument that cuteness is indifference is beauty is relaxation is wealth is law. Poster-teen for *laissez-faire* capitalism and Asian neoliberalism, Hong Kong is primarily structured to suit the needs of finance capital, luxury hotels, and shops. Expats piss about in geostationary orbit

over Lan Kwai Fong. On Monday the 8<sup>th</sup> February 2016, riot police tried to disperse some unlicensed food stalls in Mong Kok, thereby causing a riot, which they were prepared for, being riot police.<sup>9</sup> In a swirling mess of concerns, possibly including but not limited to (1) the disappearances of five residents of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, some with citizenship in Britain and Sweden, affiliated with the publishing house Mighty Current which publishes gossip books about the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in Beijing, and hence (a) the apparent contempt the CCP has for the Hong Kong Basic Law, (b) the realization that though freedom of the press and of speech is enshrined in Hong Kong, this is irrelevant, in particular for locals,<sup>10</sup> (2) frustration that the predominately middle-class Umbrella movement (which, unlike most other Occupy-like situations, largely made arguments in legal terms) has not resulted in any alterations to the Government’s plans about future elections in Hong Kong,<sup>11</sup> (3) extremely high rent, and (4) the fact that it was Chinese New Year, the year of the irascible folk-hero Monkey, the crowd rejected the police’s monopoly on violence. As I write, then revise, then wrote, the mainstream media and CY Leung’s government were putting the finishing touches on the crackdown and the attendant process of disambiguating the participants of the riot into radical elements (in particular the nativist movement) and civilians who should have known better.<sup>12</sup> Local writers have been registering for some time the unease which appears to have temporarily burst its banks on that Monday, and are now particularly worried about the issue of free speech and freedom of the press, i.e. 1.b. It is hardly the most pressing or urgent question to ask in this context, but what kind of poetry is written in these conditions? I will return to this question below, in an analysis of ‘The Bookseller’ by Tammy Ho Lai-Ming. I have begun with this potted

9. <https://www.hongkongfp.com/the-fishball-revolution/>

10. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, responding to the British Foreign Secretary’s queries about the location of British Passport holder Lee Bo, simply stated that Lee Bo is *first and foremost* a Chinese citizen. <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2016/01/08/the-curious-tale-of-five-missing-publishers-in-hong-kong/>. China’s contempt for the sovereignty of Hong Kong was outlined in the PRC’s State Council’s White Paper, ‘The Practice of the “One Country, Two Systems” Policy in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region,’ published on 10 June 2014.

11. Cf. Sebastian Veg, ‘Legalistic and Utopian: Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement,’ *NLR* 92 (2015), 54-73; Joshua Wong, ‘Scholarism on the March,’ *NLR* 92 (2015), 43-52. The Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress (NPC) ruled in 2007 that universal suffrage would be introduced in the 2017 election of Hong Kong’s Chief Executive, but on 31 August 2014 the NPC Standing Committee pronounced that candidates for that election would be vetted by a Nominating Committee and each of the two or three candidates selected would need the votes of more than half the Committee’s members. This was the immediate cause of the saccharine ‘Occupy Central with Peace and Love’ campaign, called by Benny Tai. The movement in general stuck to peaceful means and legal arguments as often as possible.

12. After the riot the media spun the Hong Kong stock exchange downturn and attendant capital flight as a consequent rather than subsequent event – the Chinese and Hong Kong markets have been in downturn for some time. Slump as pecuniary mechanism. Also, on yet another sidenote, the nativist movement is at once more militant and more racist (against Mainlanders) than many other groups associated with the Umbrella movement.

overview, from the perspective of a monolingual newcomer to Hong Kong, because it seems to me that the poet I am about to discuss composes poems which tend to deflect attention from themselves to the obscure conditions and forces at work in Hong Kong *right now*. To grasp them you would need quadrolingual fingers of air.

Tammy Ho Lai-Ming's *Hula Hooping*, her first collection, is a book of poems which skates the mind's surface tension. This poetry is belting piano keys with a plastic bag, which is a roundabout way of saying it is quiet but highly strung. Although these poems are muted, minor, cautious, they ask to be over-read, to produce unrestrained reactions. They ask that we attend to what is unsaid and *really happening* around them. Her poetics as a whole is laying the groundwork for something like a record or index of Hong Kong's history, and in particular the extra-legal aspirations of the Umbrella Movement, whatever those are becoming.<sup>13</sup>

In the first section, 'Family Affairs,' the poems largely stick to autobiography. Others swirl outwards, trying to index the strangeness of, e.g., a father unknowingly channeling American capitalism and a new culture to his children *via* its common signifier, Coca Cola, wearing T-shirts he cannot read (p.5). The 1959 famine is in more than one poem via conversations and nightmares, in 'A Brief Meal' and 'Envois.' In 'Envois,' Ho says in a stream of autobiographical facts and reconstructions, that a "famine survivor wept before me some years ago" (p.93) while she was a researcher for Frank Dikötter's *Mao's Great Famine* (2010). She brings it up as a topic of conversation in 'A Brief Meal' with her mother. The mother is concerned with her immediate world (finding food and navigating the busy roads), while the famine is distant and doesn't *really* bother her. It is not simply that she is selfish or lacks an awareness about recent Chinese history — she's one of many struggling, tired, upset working-class people in the city. The daughter tries to bring in the famine again ("Could they talk about a starving past?") but more as a thought experiment, and the mother offers a quasi-Malthusian thought on Hong Kong and overpopulation after an apparent feint into another area of discussion, which might be more related than she thinks.

The poem doesn't sacrifice form, doesn't try to break itself by attempting to encompass, embody, or amalgamate something like the famine. Like the mother, the poem completely evades the famine as it is, outside of being a potential discussion-topic. And the poem's implications and some gallows-

13. It is a shame that many of her more directly political poems were left out of this collection. One of the poems left out was 'How the Narratives of Hong Kong are Written With China in Sight,' available online at <http://www.radiuslit.org/2014/10/06/poem-by-tammy-ho-lai-ming-4/>. For an exploration of the schizoid political status of Hong Kong, see Tammy Ho Lai-Ming, 'Hong Kong is a Science Fiction,' *Law Text Culture* 18: *Rule of Law and the Cultural Imaginary in (Post-)colonial East Asia* (2014), 127-8. There is also an assortment of blog posts from Ho on <http://buhk.me/category/t/>. For a discussion of some of the Cantonese songs chanted by protestors and their significance, see Tammy Ho Lai-Ming, 'Who Hasn't Spoken Out?,' <http://aalr.binghamton.edu/tammy-ho-lai-ming-hong-kong/>.

humour (Hong Kong is overpopulated, famine isn't *so* bad, it can be the result of overpopulation as well as badly distributed resources, and maybe I'd get a quicker lunch if even more people had died, or just feel less claustrophobic while I wait for the MTR?) remain subterranean.

History never breaks the back of these poems. It is always at a distance, oddly static. One might even say that the implicit stance some of these poems take is that to even think that they *could* bear the weight of these events would be improper.

Here is 'Official causes of death in a Chinese prison'; note that H is our author, co-editor of the Hong Kong-based online literary journal *CHA*:

A exhausted himself arranging sunflowers.  
 B drank too much hot water.  
 C suffered a heart attack passing a toilet roll to his comrade.  
 D lost his breath while playing hide-and-seek.  
 E was poisoned from the ink in the newspapers.  
 F stared too long at the air.  
 G used high-lead-content hand cream (supplied by his family).  
 H edited a literary journal named after a beverage.  
 [...]
 N lost balance and fell off the bench.  
 O laughed.  
 P died after squeezing pimples on his arms.  
 Q simply failed to wake up.  
 R's tongue was tied.  
 (p.70)

The poem is loosely based on reports on the death of prisoners in China, which are usually quite ridiculous. A crowd, hearing it, guffaws.

But the possibility of incarceration for publishing something which upsets the CCP is very real, as the ostentatious parading of Gui Minhai, one of the five publishers at *Mighty Current*, on Chinese State television makes all too clear.<sup>14</sup> Here is one of Ho's recent poems, 'The Bookseller,' a reaction to the disappearance of Lee Bo:

[...] booksellers seldom make the news.  
 Then one day this all changes when five  
 go missing, one by one.

People care a little, not too much,  
 about the first four: after all, they vanished  
 elsewhere. So long as the fire  
 does not burn too near, it's all right.

14. To name only two, Liu Xiaobo is in prison in China, and his spouse Liu Xia is under house arrest. They are both under X in 'Official causes of death...'

Then the fifth, who once said:  
'I am not worried. I have avoided  
the mainland for years,  
fails to come home to his wife.

The citizens know for sure  
that something is not right.  
The disappearances breed fear,  
anger, even rumours of whores.

Some remove books banned  
across the border or close their doors.  
Others, trepidatious yet defiant,  
continue to sell, print, write.<sup>15</sup>

This poem doesn't strain itself through up-toners nor does it hide itself in down-toners. It doesn't tell you what to do or whether to do anything. It eschews a *we*. In this poem there are simply things happening. People are demonstrating, now that a fifth one has disappeared. And self-censorship seeps into Hong Kong: other booksellers "remove books banned | across the border," to curry favour or avoid punishment. Here is realism as pre-emptive acceptance of the worst. Professionalization as self-censorship. And after this act of self-censorship by other booksellers, the poem takes itself off of its own bookshelf, i.e. the implied list of those who defiantly continue to sell, print, write. It is "[o]thers" *not* "we" who "continue to sell, print, write."<sup>16</sup> Hong Kong has, until this, felt like a place where freedom of the press exists, in the sense that it exists in most territories under neoliberal administration. What are we to make of such pre-emptive redactions? I would suggest that this particular poem is suffering from locked-in syndrome, and so its slightest muscular twitches *demand* to be over-read. Self-censorship, like most other forms of censorship, need not be successful. In these conditions, perhaps we should begin to read *purposively*, in the legal sense of that word.

But let me return to *Hula Hooping*. For the moment, Ho's poems suggest that their minimal notations should be all that is necessary to register the hysterical screams of history's catastrophes. These poems can't help but leave their centre, swirl off in excess for a split second, and for better or worse, for the moment, they always reign themselves back in. A wriggle of the waist might be all it takes, if you give it enough weight. Here is an abdomen swirling, and at any moment the centrifugal force might continue its tendency and outdo the centripetal at every degree of its rotation in an absolute sense,

15. <http://www.radiuslit.org/2016/01/09/poem-by-tammy-ho-lai-ming-5/>

16. Ho discussed self-censorship during her talk 'Now Now: On Writing Political Poems,' 10<sup>th</sup> October 2015, at Art & Culture Outreach in Wan Chai.

and each unit of the abdomen spin off in a straight line for all eternity, never to be reconstituted. But the centripetal force doesn't let out, sometimes outdoes it, warping it all inwards more often than not. Somewhere below, purely inferred knees are bent, all rocks back and forth.

[15/02/16]

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### lo-fi frags in-progress

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by Frances Kruk (Veer, 2015)

Reviewed by Colin Lee Marshall

Few books are titled with simultaneously as much ingenuity and as little hubris as Frances Kruk's first full-length collection, *lo-fi frags in-progress*. Here, not only does generation loss precede a finished product (a precession that is also enacted and augmented by the morphemic elisions of "*lo-fi frags*"), but the title even entails its *own* potential status as fragment, both by eschewing any capitalization, and by hyphenating "*in-progress*" so as to suggest that some kind of truncation has occurred. One implication is that this book – in its defalcation, incompleteness, and excerption – will prove a violently attenuated version of what it should (or at least what it *could*) have been. In a certain way, such a title might be thought a highly accurate assessment of the book's content; and yet it could just as easily – given the quality and inventiveness of the poetry – be considered the ultimate misnomer.

The word *frag* is meta-denotative – i.e. it is itself a fragment of the word *fragment*. But the *OED* provides us with another definition: "*v. U.S. Mil. slang*. To throw a fragmentation grenade at one's superior officer, esp. one who is considered over-zealous in his desire for combat." The relevance of this latter definition will soon become apparent. First, though, it should prove helpful to examine how the former of these 'frags' is instantiated within the pages of Kruk's collection. Upon opening the book, one of the first things that the reader notices (besides the carefully interleaved Xerox collages, themselves strikingly fragmentary) is the preponderance of white space. The poetry itself will make several allusions to this textual albescence: "the white hush of pathological ellipses"; "all is white, It is so blind"; "fuck off with this blanchy room." Elision, blindness, and affront are indeed three things that we might infer from (or feel by) such lacunae; but there is more going on in the sink of this "No Place" than mere artistic apostasy. The fragments that peek out from the whiteness are not simply maquettes, rough-hewn versions of ideal forms towards which we are encouraged to imagine them being (however vaguely) oriented; Kruk's teleology is too maimed for such nicety. Hers is less a poetics of simple incompleteness or defection than it is one of *preradication*, whereby the object is rooted (out) prior to the possibility of its existence – a

temporal legerdemain through which Kruk creates a distinctive and uneasy interplay between negativity and presence. In “flak[ing] off what’s to come,” she paradoxically animates fragments whose very existence her violence precludes. Thus, “there are no villages, kitchens, nights, mice,” even while such phenomena comprise – in some cases quite prominently – parts of the book’s contents.

Opening the first of the book’s five sections – ‘lo-fi frags’ – with a truncated question – “where Am I that I speak so naturally” – Kruk drops an early hint that she has gone so far as to preradicate the ‘I.’ Her question makes a reappearance (of sorts) in the fifth and final section of the book – ‘Dwarf Surge’ – where it is addressed to a second person:

And so where is it you went  
 – nothing.  
 why is it you’re late  
 – nowhere.

The movement from “I” to “you” is an act of adequation, a concomitant of the negative ontology that begins so early on to reveal itself in the collection, and which can result in even more extreme pronominal shifts: “I am the it.” The conflation of self with place (either physical or negative) is an important aspect of this process, and appears again in several other parts of the work. For instance, Kruk opens the fourth section of the book – ‘Down you go, or, Négation de bruit’ (a work “après Danielle Collobert”) – with the epigraph ‘*I leave the room I will never leave*’ (a line attributed to the poet Colin Browne). Again in ‘Dwarf Surge,’ we see a related juxtaposition: “if there’s no one in the room [*we are here made to wait until the next page for the apodosis of this conditional, having first to confront a particularly demonstrative swatch of white space*] | I am the room.” Deictic markers are often nodes of *negative* indication – “here, this Utopia, the No Place.” Physical descriptions are prone to adynaton, exaggeration to the point of impossibility; “You’re blood in my floor | an acoustic sight, noisy zero, a diabolical nothing hole,” suggests that location is somehow essential to the self, and – by unsettling consequence – that the latter is often prefigured by a negative cartography.

However, the frustration can work both ways. Twice in the collection, an “I’m” is allowed to hang unelaborated, suggesting not only an imperfect copula, but also a verb that gestures towards sovereign predication (*I am*). Inevitably, in poetry as macerated, pestilential, and autolytic as this, such gestures are constantly under threat, beleaguered by a text that is host to wild synchyses, irregular cola, miscued capitalizations, and spasmodic repetitions. But resistance to these problems remains to some degree obdurate, given that the poetry never quite allows them to coalesce into recognizable patterns or schemata. A good example of such refusal is the book’s suggesting (yet failing quite to yield up) a discernible trajectory, so that the extent to which its sections are interlinked remains to some degree obscure. On the one hand,

each section has a distinct enough tenor that it could perhaps be read as a stand-alone piece; but this autonomy is threatened by a number of unsettling motifs – rodents, light bulbs, dwarves, hurricanes, bones, lungs, buttons, radii, etc. – which recur throughout the collection via unpredictable metastases (as opposed to – as would be far less subtle – a herpetetic spread across the sections’ porous borders).

The difficulty of truly achieving some kind of global (or even, in many cases, *local*) reconciliation is one to which the book seems at times wryly to allude:

we will open the casing we discover forks, engine oil, pulmonary indications, crushed buttons.  
 offal, ossicle, epidermal crumbs [...] we will open the casing & husks will tumble out, empty things, awed. & we’ll be hungry. & with all this slicing

Skin, lungs, bones, buttons, blades: each of them present in (or entailed by) the above excerpt, each of them also a potentially significant strand in the warp and weft of *lo-fi frags*, and yet each already proleptically determined as a ‘husk,’ an ‘empty thing.’ All of these phenomena help to comprise a history from which they are also shut out. Traditional history – as coagulating discourse – is treated as inherently worthy of our suspicion (“history is no | not even flat”), even while we remain caught in the vortex of its effects (“we inserted a history & now it won’t stop”). This fraught conjunction becomes the horizon of the poetry’s commitment.

Thought maybe those words you  
 Thought were yours but now they eat you  
 now they eat you now they  
 Bring you and they x you in  
 your faces dotted lines every time  
 & no not  
 even the dead are safe.

Walter Benjamin famously encapsulated the danger to which the historical materialist must be alert with the description “*even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins*” (*Theses on the Philosophy of History*, trans. Harry Zorn). According to Benjamin, the necessary interdict to such expropriation and coagulation involves seizure and detonation, a willingness to resuscitate the past and “blast open the continuum of history.” This ‘blasting open’ is certainly appropriate to *lo-fi frags*, whose mode of preradication never quite tips over into the total despair that would belie its undertow of swirling, ballistic politics. Thus the second definition of ‘frags’ becomes important.

In Kruk's own commentary on a nascent version of *lo-fi frags* (which she appended to her doctoral thesis: *Violence and Identity in the Poetry of Danielle Collobert, Maggie O'Sullivan, and Raúl Zurita*) she explains the ballistic and martial vocabularies of her poetry in some detail. We learn, for instance, the significance of the 'confiture' motif:

References to bombs and projectiles come from two places, the first from descriptions of homemade FLN grenades in Alistair Horne's documentation of the French-Algerian war: old jam tins filled with gunpowder, for example. Thus jam tins, and confiture feature several times in *lo-fi frags*, simultaneously suggesting the visceral damage of the explosive.

Elsewhere, Kruk draws attention to a related source: "an Iraqi/Yugoslav Scatterable Dual-Purpose ICM." The two above excerpts are particularly germane in helping to draw attention to the scattering and fragmentation that occur through external violence. War often betokens the unfettered and programmatic assault on national and (by extension) personal identities – effects, in other words, a fragmentation which (at least in the case of the "Scatterable Dual-Purpose ICM") is also latent in the weapon itself. Thence, the disintegration or fragmentation of the 'I' seems inevitable; the 'I' is torqued and "cracked" [Kruk's own term] under the grip of myriad violences: martial, narrative, linguistic.

But there is, perhaps, redemption to be found in our potential to ethically détourn this violence:

I am the room:  
in circles I swam I Drowned  
Them They float in pieces witness  
shattersky ballistic me I  
put them under I put & cause  
& up from ground they burst

Here, the "I" is embroiled in conflict, a belligerent capable of "Drown[ing]" its foes, "put[ting] them under," causing them to "float in pieces." But the "I" is itself compromised by this belligerence, has itself "Drowned" (if we read the verb intransitively), or is situated precariously atop a suppressed "them" that is liable to "burst" from the ground like a landmine and send the I "shattersky." The result of this internecine conflict is that one's "face goes truly everywhere." But as much as it is something to lament, such multi-directionality is also something to which the 'I' must cleave. The congealed 'I' is one whose integrity necessitates denial of the *now*. However oppressed the subject may be, to arrive at perfection qua 'I' would require the embrace of what Benjamin called "homogeneous, empty time." Kruk instead seems to be rooting around in *heterogeneous empty time* – refusing to offer up facile

bromides, stopping short of the claim to have liberated any Benjaminian 'monads,' but nevertheless scattering existing dissimulations, siphoning a polluted metaphysics into new counterfactual vessels. Most of this is indeed highly mendacious; but then, so is most of *that*. The 'I' that is willing to negotiate such mendacity is a deeply political 'I' – at once relentlessly effaced, violently insurrectionary, and socially quaquaversal: "I | am mythic ordinary people | with hearts of plastic, wire & nail."

## The Traveller & The Defence of Heaven / R.T.A. Parker's 99 Sonnets About Evil

by R.T.A. Parker (Veer, 2013 / Canary Woof, 2015)

*Reviewed by Colin Lee Marshall*

Throughout these two Melvillian meditations – written around the same time as each other, but published three years apart – R.T.A. Parker displays a marked predilection for mixed chronotopes. Coldly fluorescent and geometric, the front cover to *The Traveller & The Defence of Heaven* evokes the future (or, perhaps, some bygone sci-fi approximation thereof). One then opens the book and sees a "T" appended to the title, a mysterious *sub rosa* addendum whose significance is perhaps deliberately elusive or deferred. While none of this yet betrays any blatant *passéisme*, the blank page that precedes the main text might as well be an ornate frontispiece, in light of what is to come.

**B** RUSQUELY | Renguer | at the  
Rocket | controls: | 'Our sun  
Is dead, | the sky | once a

Seat for | angels | rains down  
Fires | more like | devils;  
The sun | no more | the crown

Of heav'n, | but loud | evil  
Raining | mete | ors that  
From sky | brook no | cavils:

This brief excerpt is a vitrine of poetic relics. The portentous majuscule prefixes a stuffy *in medias res* adverb – the kind that hasn't been solemnly tenable since Joyce's parodic (if grammatically fissile) 'Stately.' Angels, raining fires, heavenly crowns, and other Lazarus taxa stud the lines. Reciting the stanzas aloud, one finds that the tongue has grown hostile to schwas: "devils" and "cavils" emerge grandiloquently as 'devils' and 'kævils,' while the word "mete | ors" inclines towards rhotacism. Heaven then archaically contracts to

“heav’n,” before sinking to a pervious “sky” that – managing nonetheless still to confound modern syntax – arrives prematurely at the hands of an antiquated poetic hyperbaton. Such heavenly sinking (however compromised) is highly revealing of *The Traveller* as a whole; for Parker’s resuscitations are also pointedly thanatological, his tropes clearly (if not always *technically*) pluperfect. There is, the poem concedes, no longer any seat for angels, or crown of heaven (or, indeed, any heaven itself), and even the antagonistic “devils” have been reduced to nothing more than *mere* [read, simultaneously *overwrought*] simile. Everywhere, the epic embers are offset at the same time as they are rekindled: the prosody confounds easy scansion, even while the trimetric tercets are upheld with unstinting precision; words are chopped into polysemy by the ultra-modern grille of vertical bars, although the semantic gains – limited *a priori* by dysllabic feet that would rather resort to unnatural synalepha (“th’very”; “Th’navi | gator | ”) than break rank – rely on moments of felicity in the metrical yoke; and, perhaps most notably, the apocalyptic presentiments of a newly extinguished sun serve both to fill the evacuated epic space, and to suggest a contemporary eschatology — one that is tied to climate change/the Anthropocene.

We are, then, negotiating terrain whose concerns are both contemporary and antiquated. The velum for these temporal and stylistic palimpsests is a straight-up (and highly enjoyable) ‘story,’ the kind that could easily invite such blurbish clichés as ‘page-turner,’ ‘cautionary tale,’ or ‘dark allegory.’ I refrain here from revealing too much of the ‘plot,’ other than to say that it triangulates around three principal characters – Renguer (the Ahabian captain of the spaceship); Polarin (Renguer’s second-in-command); and “Bear” Peinde (the acquaintance-turned-nemesis of Renguer) – the conflict between whose respective survival strategies precipitates a struggle for control of the ship. [We can, perhaps, take the mysterious narrator to be to be something of an homage to Ishmael]. In lieu of spoilers, then, I will focus mainly on local aspects of the verse, and on the richness made possible by the textual grille.

One could adduce almost any stanza of *Traveller* by which to convey the peculiar richness of the text. That being said, the grille is at its most compelling when its bisections of language affect more than one of the principal characters. Addressing Peinde, Renguer says:

Your men | arrived | unin  
Vited | upon | my ship,  
But still | you are | apart –

Given the salvific context (Peinde and his men would almost certainly have been incinerated had Renguer not admitted them onto – “unin” to – his ship), “unin / Vited” becomes a highly serendipitous cleavage, entailing as it does the newcomers’ deliverance (or *viting*). Granted, one could argue that – given the dysllabic strictness of the feet – Parker couldn’t *but* have cleft the word ‘uninvited’ thus, and that any semantic gain is therefore *only* serendipity.

But it seems more likely that he has worked cleverly within these restraints, created a fictile grammar through a considered use of enjambment.

Of course, for all such moments of serendipity there are at least as many moments in which the grille obstructs or prescinds a word from felicitous cleavage. The words “arrived” and “apart,” for example, almost beg to be riven (a | rived) and parted (a | part), so as better to limn the paranoid undertow of Renguer’s words. But in any case, that these words aren’t riven by punctuation needn’t imply that they can’t be legitimately riven in the act of reading. We might imagine other grilles in Parker’s text, posit certain of the inscribed bars as incidental, while we assert that other, *hidden* bars are essential. Perhaps in some kind of anaphoric reference to the suppressed/felt rift of “arrived,” Parker writes in the next stanza:

Your a | r rival | meant ill,  
& now, | smiling, | it is  
Ill you | bring, ur | sine cur!

But this anaphora (if indeed it *is* that) is only a tiny part of what’s going on. The word “rival” denotes not only *river* (where the definition is ‘one who rives’), but also – if we are willing to read homophonically – *rival*. From here, we can – and *should* – take things too far, read the threatened subject as a toxic bolus, erupting in a rash of first person singulars onto the lexical skin of the other that has swallowed it: “rival”; “meant ill”; “smiling”; “Ill you”; “bring”; “sine cur.” We strain, and see that the second person singular is also cleverly secreted, either alongside its copular verb, or in a lunge towards its possessive form: “bring, **ur**,” “sine **cur**.” The pronouns attack each other at the same time as they provide a promise for future agency, causing the reader to wonder whether there might be an even more brilliant occultation at play, whereby ‘rive’ is nothing more than an integument for its richer synonym, ‘cleave’ (the latter of whose contronymic scope mirrors the textual tension between sundering and reconciliation). That we might see these deciduous and excrescent elements in the text is surely a concomitant of the heightened attentiveness that the grille fosters during our reading. But this attentiveness can go on and on, overstep its bounds, become embarrassing. I might, for example, choose to home in on the promised ‘sinecure,’ or the ‘yours I incur.’ What I read most forcefully, though, is a nested, *Hot White Andy*-esque paranoia – “ur | **sine cur**.” Peinde, the feared and ascendant antagonist, cannot be made dog by Renguer, able as he is to reclaim and inhabit the epithet through the near-chiasmus in which it is couched – “ur | sine **cur**.” Thus we are struck by a doubly rich context for his name: Peinde/panda.

As with Melville’s ‘Clarel,’ one can read a great deal into these names, without ever quite resolving them. ‘Renguer’ seems perfectly to encapsulate both the character’s bellicosity (*guerre*) and his misguidedness (wrong way). Polarin – the Norwegian whose quiet wisdom comes, by the end of the book, to accrue epic dimensions – is at once the antipode (pole) and the cynosure

(Polaris). In this latter capacity, he is also an ursine counterpoint (Ursa Minor) to Peinde, the latter of whom is – according to a parapraxis that Renguer utters upon waking from a millennia-deep sleep – ‘great’ (Ursa Major):

Ah! & | a great | pain in  
My head; | *that* speaks | loud too –

Renguer’s hypnopompic praise, “a great | pain in” (*a great Peinde*), throws up an interesting prepositional doublet, “**pain in**.” Once again, the two characters become fraught constituents of each other, as do Polarin and Peinde in the excerpt below, which contains a similar doublet:

Polar | in in | formed the  
Impass | ive Pein | de, bear

Polarin (the only character who cannot be contained between grille bars) seems especially suited to such coalescence. Without wishing here to go into another proliferating eisegesis, I will merely stress the alacrity with which I might do so (as indeed I might do on almost every page of *Traveller*) during my own private reading. Frequently, the temptation is to read beyond the text, to place so much weight on the given syntagms that they collapse into new, tenuous formations. But such, I contend, is precisely the point; that we are expected to negotiate a structure that is, in places, deliberately unstable, porous, and jerry-built, just as in other places it is sturdy, expansive, and palatial. The reader is leery of errors, malfunctions, spillages. I read “Brute na | val dis | cipline,” and can’t help but see the oleaginous threat ‘*Exxon Valdez*’ leaking from the middle of the line. But while I might be convinced that the oil tanker owes its presence in the text purely to my own readerly invention, lines such as “Smoke & | wreckage | of the / Disas | ter soared | away,” seem to proffer far less dubious gifts, “Disas | ter” striking the reader as entirely deliberate, a brilliant rupture that both foregrounds the word’s etymology, and becomes a kind of explosive ideogram that triggers all sorts of cosmological images and ruminations.

If everything that I have said about this extraordinary book seems too personal or destructive, I can only rejoin (perhaps feebly) that such readerly destruction might not be at odds with the world of *Traveller*, amongst whose infinite (plu)perfections, disaster – from within or without – is certainly one of the most salient:

Until | one day | a part  
Could not | be quite | repaired,  
Or a | distant | stone went  
  
Undect | ed, or | disease  
Struck fast | , bringing | sudden

End.

Here, we can indeed see that the disaster isn’t limited to the reader’s eisegesis, but that it is part of the text itself. The undetected stone almost succeeds in sneaking in its syncope “Undect | ed” — but we can see it if we wish to, read it as the part that cannot be repaired. We can even, if we look hard enough, see the effects of “disease” — an atrophic couplet on page 25, and a hypertrophic quatrain on page 43. Or, we can imagine that there *is* a heaven after all, one that has been consummately defended, and/or that humans

Became | something | we can’t  
Know; race | evolved | beyond  
Body, | self & | thingness.

\*

The specter of Melville becomes more explicit in *R.T.A. Parker’s 99 Sonnets About Evil*, a collection that opens with a tortuous (yet intoxicating) epigraph from *Pierre* (a novel from which Parker draws throughout *Sonnets*):

*He knows it not, but his meditative route is sinuous; as if that moment his thought’s stream was likewise serpentine: laterally obstructed by the insinuated misgivings as to the ultimate utilitarian advisability of the enthusiast resolution that was his.*

This sentence reads like an ekphrasis of the very mind that it is trying to depict. Snake-like in its sinuosities of form and reference, it also seems – through the sibilance of “*insinuated misgivings*” – to approximate the serpent’s hiss, the whole conspiring to evoke those two perennial associations of the serpent motif: evil and temptation. And indeed, *Sonnets* – despite adhering to the same grille structure as that in *Traveller* (although without always necessarily unfolding in the same strict tercets) – is a far more shadowy offering than Parker’s earlier publication, humming evilly throughout. The difference is not strictly one of content, but also of presentation: whereas the evil in *Traveller* has a pantomimic openness and equilibrium to it, in *Sonnets* it is darkly obsessive and cumulative, concentrating in various nodes – both linguistic and thematic – that would be utterly out of place in the former book.

Indeed, at times, the language of *Sonnets* almost seems to gesture towards the creation of its own vernacular. First, we might pick up on a series of peculiar diminutives – “rumpsies”; “*empty | tumpt[ies]*”; “carrot | cakies”; “black / Beadies”; “eyezes”; “Sighses”; Tom “Hankses” – whose incongruity serves to ratchet up the peculiar sense of evil, rather than to mitigate it. Then there are certain locutions that repeatedly pop up, often slightly modified, as in the word ‘blank’ (“BLANK BLANK”; “*Blank*”; “*Blank Blank*”), which appears to function either as a censor, or as an asemic wildcard deployed simply to

fulfill the requirements of the metre. We can also discern an occasional phrasal bleeding between or across the sonnets – “The i | rreso | lution”; “That ir | reso | lution” (note the different points of scission) – the tessellating effect of which suggests that the sonnets in *Sonnets* remain highly interdependent, despite the lack of a clear, *Traveller*-esque narrative.

More than this mottled texturing, however, the language of *Sonnets* is distinguishable from that of *Traveller* by its greater discursive sweep. Sex, science, politics, poetry, and music, all make appearances in the text, allowing for a far richer clash of pop chronotopes:

Legs wav | ing; O | Carole,  
P'mute thy | profile | picture?

Here, Neil Sedaka's vocative is no longer simply a nugget of nostalgia, but a flat-out archaism, apiece with a possessive (“thy”) that attaches anachronistically to a contemporary noun phrase. Below is another striking example:

A thigh | a Higgs, | o let  
Me at | thy dark | matter.

Hardcore contemporary science yields to a different kind of “dark matter,” becomes ripe with medieval venerity; and indeed, *Sonnets* strikes us as an astonishingly lascivious book, all the more so when we compare its content with the surface elisions of anything remotely sexual in *Traveller*. Our astonishment is aroused not simply by the ubiquity of smut, but by the intensity of it. We confront “cum | shots,” “spent | Kleenex,” “clammy | grippings,” “dells thicked | with fuck,” “prune | tight ass[es]” and “Hero | ic cunt | y cunt[s].” But the lasciviousness of this “be | pornoed | isle” where “Places | remain | spunky” shouldn't be taken as something deliberately *épatant* any more than it should be taken as mere impish fun. It is simply one of the major vectors of evil in *Sonnets* — an evil that manifests not in the content *as such*, but in how this content demands or asks or cajoles (and it might do any one of the three) to be read.

Sometimes, the designation is notably more efferent: “Evil | resides | in that / Tom Hanks: | Amer | ican.” George Osborne, Nick Clegg, Paul Muldoon, and Niall Ferguson are also namedropped as likely hosts, although the indictments aren't always unequivocal:

George O | sborne, for | a tie  
A mug | or a | kettle  
Or he | could have | inner

Crock clock | ticking

We might wish to restrain George Osborne, to sling the epithet “mug” in his face, or to imagine him plunged into a “kettle” of the very kind that his fiscal corruption is wont to precipitate. But then we concede that he w(as) (“O | s”) (s)born(e) to be politically accoutered, to look at his own embossed face on a gimcrack mug from which – once the kettle has boiled – he will imbibe his nice, English beverage. However much we might like the idea that he is breaking (‘crooked’), or that he is on borrowed time, the text keeps him ticking over as a potent sham.

If we cannot always settle such scores, we can at least recognize the problem as being reasonably well defined; that is, as being largely a *masculine* problem, and one that – far from being processed into ambiguity – is only intensified by an increasingly phallogocentric grille: “Our man | ifold | blessings”; “Male | volent | power / Of lan | guage”; “Pages | of his | tory”; etc. Deft though these cleavages may be, they leave us in no doubt as to who has been blessed, or as to the sex of malevolence, or as to the gender (or political partisanship) of recorded history. The grille, then, is just as important to *Sonnets* as it is to *Traveller*. But whereas in the latter it typically serves as a thickening agent for an internal diegesis, in *Sonnets* it seems more regularly to open up points of exophoric reference, to gesture towards a morality or a politics that is located outside of itself.

Still, despite the richness of the grille, sometimes what we most need to see is that which remains intact:

To know | the a | pparent  
Links there's | between | things. To  
See our | kind acts | discharged

We can point to “the a | pparent / Links” as being a meta-commentary on what the vertical bars throw into relief, and what they cause to fall away; we can home in on the paradoxical article compound (“the a”), or the engendering grammar (‘parent links’), or the ostensive/denotative preposition (“| between |”), or the secretly cleft preposition (‘be | tween’). Of greatest importance, however, is that we pay attention to the contronym “discharged,” given that it situates us at the tipping point between kindness and its disappearance. This disappearance, of course, betokens the appearance of evil, which is attached to a similar contronym on the following page of the book:

Through all | conscience | evil  
Is your | dispen | sation.

As does the *sous rature* title, these contronyms open up an ethical coordinate from which we might best read *Sonnets*, a site from which to imagine what it really might mean to dispense with evil.

## Collected French Translations

by John Ashbery (Carcenet, 2014)

Reviewed by Peter Manson

The *Prose* volume of John Ashbery's *Collected French Translations* opens with a long mythic story called 'The White Cat,' by Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy (1650-1705), the writer who first thought to call this kind of story a fairy tale. In the context of the rest of the book, which is predominantly twentieth century and mostly made up of writing with at least a root or a branch in Surrealism, the effect is strange. The strangeness is not so much due to Ashbery's way of translating, but has to do with what happens when works from widely-separated periods are translated into the same target language. A seventeenth-century French story placed next to one written three hundred years later retains all of its historical and linguistic distinctness. Translated into appropriate modern English, the old and the new become much more directly comparable things, to the point where the endlessly-fertile baroque imagination of 'The White Cat' ends up sounding very like the work of Raymond Roussel, whose complex and austere narratives were suggested by the output of wholly abstract language-machinery:

[Start with] two phrases, identical except for one word, with a play on the double meanings of other substantives in both phrases. "Once the two phrases had been found," Roussel indicates, "it was a question of writing a story which could begin with the first and end with the second."

Opening with 'The White Cat' is a trick, but a good one. The reader ends up wondering if it, too, might have a Method behind its madness – and if, as the man says, the unconscious is structured like a language, it most certainly does.

The book as a whole is a beautifully select introduction to a wide range of ways of Surrealising narrative, from the absolute verbal efficiency of Roussel's work (which couldn't be summarised in fewer words than it already uses), through the much more playful (and highly engaging) fictions of the painter Giorgio de Chirico, to the compassionate anti-clericalism of Georges Bataille's 'L'Abbé C.' There are essays too: Michel Leiris's 'Conception and Reality in the Work of Raymond Roussel' sheds direct light on Ashbery's very fine translation of the opening chapter of Roussel's *Impressions of Africa*, among much else. Jacques Dupin's 'Texts For an Approach,' a study of Alberto Giacometti, is one of the best essays on visual art I've ever read – a really convincing attempt to enter into the artist's world and imaginatively inhabit the exhausting but virtuous cycle of making, unmaking and remaking that underwrote his greatest work.

(An aside: my Google finger was unable to resist searching for the word

*iemskik*, which occurs in Roussel's 'Documents to Serve as an Outline,' and which Ashbery guesses might be "a kind of steed (a reindeer?) that leads the others." It turns out to be a word meaning 'coachman,' taken from the dramatic adaptation of the novel *Michael Strogoff*, by Roussel's master, Jules Verne).

In the extract from the notes entitled 'To Oneself,' by the Belgian symbolist artist Odilon Redon, we read the following:

What *remains*, and what must be known, of the *great centuries*, are the masterpieces. They are its complete, single, and real expression. At other times, what is essential and characteristic in the works of the human spirit is better written down in the secondary, inferior documents, and nearer to the people, that true artisan of things.

Ashbery's *Translations* are a long way from being a survey of the Great Books of the Western Canon: this is a highly personal selection, and even its more familiar authors are often discovered doing something quite unexpected. The composer Iannis Xenakis, who trained as an architect, contributes an essay on 'The Cosmic City,' a utopian plan for extreme high-rise living, in which the citizens of Paris could be re-housed in an area with one-thousandth of Paris's footprint. It's a fascinating amalgam of precision engineering and psychedelic optimism, but I still don't want to live there:

By definition, the Cosmic City will not fear the devastations of war since disarmament will have been accomplished on Earth, and outlets and other expansions will be sought in cosmic space, the present nations having transformed themselves into provinces of a giant World State.

The poet Stéphane Mallarmé is represented by extracts from the sweetly wacky 'Collected "Nursery Rhymes,"' a pedagogical work consisting of (often slightly unfamiliar versions of) English nursery rhymes, followed by Mallarmé's own small interpretative French prose fantasias on the texts. The first two verses of 'Who killed Cock Robin?' are expounded thus:

Who saw Cock Robin die? — Me. — Who? — The Fly. — How? — With my little eye. — Well, then! Who killed him? — I don't know, I only saw him die, wounded by an arrow. — Then it's you, Sparrow, with your bow? — I tell the truth, answers the Sparrow, I killed your Cock Robin.

The book was accepted by an educational publisher, but remained unpublished until 1964. Ashbery's preface reproduces part of a report from a very unimpressed inspector of schools, revealing that the nursery rhymes were part of Mallarmé's actual practice as a high school teacher of English. The work dates from around 1880, a time when Mallarmé was taking on as much

extracurricular paid work as he could get: his seven-year-old son Anatole died in 1879, after a long illness, and there were doctors' bills to pay. I think the 'Collected "Nursery Rhymes"' should be read as a second 'Tombeau d'Anatole,' to set beside the surviving notes for the poem Mallarmé never quite managed to write in his son's memory. It's all the more heartbreaking for having been made for public consumption, aimed at a tough audience of teenagers and bureaucrats.

The *Poetry* volume (in which the Mallarmé appears) is a more frustrating experience than the *Prose*. The prospective buyer should be aware that *Collected* doesn't mean *Complete*: several of its authors are allowed only quite short extracts from book-length translations which have been published separately. This means that we get all of five pages of Ashbery's recent, and celebrated, version of Rimbaud's *Illuminations*. It's understandable, as the Carcanet edition of the full translation is still in print, but it does make this collected edition feel like something of a stopgap. These are two hefty volumes, close to the limit of what a paperback can comfortably hold, but what we really need is the whole story, condensed in a hardback on bible paper.

There is much here that's extraordinary, and Ashbery varies his approach to suit the occasion. In his startlingly literal evocations of the sonnets of Jean-Baptiste Chassignet (c.1571-1635), the imagery is all you really need:

Sometimes with cramps in the feet, sometimes with gout in the  
hands,  
The muscle, tendon, and the nerve torment you;  
Sometimes a pleurisy battles you,  
And fever tattoos you with his inhuman features;

Sometimes the harsh gravel swollen in your kidneys  
Pinches your bowels with its trenchant tongs:  
Sometimes an abscess attacks your two lungs,  
And Venus' revels dim your serene eyes.

By contrast, the "purposeful doggerel" made after Arthur Cravan's 'Des Paroles,' reads like a lost, gnomic masterpiece by a Middle English poet of the second rank:

The soft enchantments of our years of innocence  
Are harvested by accredited experience  
Our fondest memories soon turn to poison  
And only oblivion remains in season.

A few poets make brief and rather random-seeming appearances (these are often early translations, made during Ashbery's Fulbright scholarship in the mid-1950s), but the book really comes to life when we're given a serious run at a poet's work. My picks would include the gleefully tart absurdist prose-poems

of Max Jacob's 'The Dice-Cup,' and the moving, wise, erotic and – it has to be said – utterly un-Ashberian work of the poet and art critic Serge Fauchereau. 'Displacements' is a series of prose meditations on memory and place, all dating from 1993 and 1994, each section seemingly written in a different city, from Paris and Moscow to Taejon-Kyongju. If Raymond Roussel's obsessive travelling became a means of preventing himself from noticing the world, each station on Fauchereau's itinerary works as a new small access of alienation, a slightly changed vantage-point from which to attempt to understand the world and the self, rejecting neither.

The book's main revelation, for me, is the work of Pierre Martory (a large *Selected Poems* by Martory, translated by Ashbery, is also available from Carcanet). Martory's work is astonishingly varied, and it's hard to find a representative quote, but there's a pervasive black humour, a distinct whiff of cordite, which somehow manages to come across as un-cynical and in the service of real human feeling. Here's the voice of the baby rolling down the Odessa Steps in *Battleship Potemkin*:

I cried, but you couldn't hear me  
Because the film was silent.  
I yelled, "Death to Bakunin! Death  
To the czar and the red fleet! Death  
To the inventor of this baby carriage  
When it's so sweet to be carried,  
Asleep, maybe dying,  
On the bosom of a woman with pink cheeks and yellow braids!..."

At the bottom of the steps they scooped up  
My brains with a silver spoon.

Martory's work brings out the very best in Ashbery as a translator – he's noticeably free and at home with the unpredictable turns of the language ("Flaccid booty stolen from the rubbish bins of History" for "Flasque butin volé aux poubelles de l'Histoire" is lovely). The editors' preface to the volume includes a remarkable poem composed in English by Martory, a rare French poet for whom the English language was as central to his thought as French is to Ashbery's.

The volume of *Poetry* ends with an appendix of translated poems whose French originals have not yet been located. The very last poem in the book is by Pascal Monnier (born 1958, and the youngest poet represented here). Called 'Luck is Now Sent to You...', it takes the form of a pre-internet chain letter:

Arla Addit  
an office worker  
received the letter then forgot it

he lost his job  
later  
he mailed 20 copies  
a few days afterward  
he obtained  
a better job

Allan Fairchild  
received the letter  
and didn't believe in it  
and threw the letter away  
9 days later  
he died

– a translation from a lost original, a broken link in the chain, in which the reader's future prosperity or doom is claimed (falsely, but you never know) to depend upon their willingness to join in with the processes of textual transmission. The book couldn't have ended on a finer or lighter gesture, a testimony both to its thoughtful editors and to the continuing, lithe vitality of Ashbery's craft.

## PART II

### From *Out of Villon*

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by Ian Heames

*Response by Prudence Chamberlain*

François Villon was a poet and a criminal; or a criminal and a poet; banished from Paris, he turned to wandering. *Out of Villon*<sup>1</sup> places the speaker alongside Villon and then collapses them together, with the 'I' departing more than it is ever present. In the action of the poem, where there is love, there is resistance; where each section is a new form of departure, writing itself is a record of trouble.

In section one, the speaker and Villon "wanted to break the very in love prison." There, is the prison a thing in love? Or is it that the prison itself is founded on love that needs to be dismantled with the rapidity of a violence, "in fast maul"? In section two, "I say lover for martyr," while no-one is martyred by the poem. Though the moving and departing might be "hard," it affords a certain kind of freedom: materials are dropped or given to others, ill-chosen maidens are abandoned, and children screaming for their meals are left behind. The 'I,' although expressing regret, is untethered and forceful, made of sounds and violence, and a liquid movement.

But what is it to leave, and the poem asks sometimes, to die? "Orders that endure death" are never asked to depart, but remain, unchanging. For a poem that moves so continually, changing its own conditions, it is the endurance of orders that motivate the slippages and the departures. And then, 'after death there is realism,' which sits amongst the harshness of leaving and the unknowingness of a new place, stretching in dawns, "the veil of excuse in a brave fist."

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1. See <http://www.manifold.group.shef.ac.uk/issue7/IanHeamesTranslations7.html>.

Death is this troubled leaving, where leaving is its own form of small death. The sections create these specific departures: the first two sections gesture towards the novelty of a new place; the third and fourth section in a donating of materials; section five gives 'leave' as a form of allowance; section six abandons both charitably and with pity. Section seven leaves us with an item: "an injured glow worm for the caretaker." The small light of a worm decontextualised and then bestowed on an unknown caretaker, of whom nothing is revealed. Then section eight cannot resist its return to Paris, imbibing by force, and seeing harshness as instrumental to the speaker.

The lyric and the lyre in the poem seem to complement one another, while suggesting different possibilities for the work. There are "stratagems with the lyrical," while "my asperity is a lyre": somewhere between the planning and trickiness of poetic construction, and the instrumental toughness of the poem, is a moving lyric speaker, more often leaving than ever actually there. If the work is a set of stratagems, it is comprised of how best to identify with departure, or identify as one who is forever leaving. And if the lyre itself is asperity, then it's a roughness that speaks back to banishment and the 'T's "molested chanson."

If orders outlast death, then we must keep moving, whether of our volition or because the state wills it. Amongst that displacement, love is both breakable in imprisonment, and an aspiration toward the "meatier," the lyrical is purely a form of planning, and the harshness of the self a singing instrument.

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### 'Federal Census'

by Dorothy Lehané

*Response by James Cummins*

In Dorothy Lehané's 'Federal Census' "the body | does its own talking." It is a poem which takes ownership of the body by calling into being the "trunk of nerves," pieces of "cartilage" and every "globule." Lehané's use of medical language means that the reader never gets comfortably lost in poetic descriptions. Instead, the body is laid bare in all its abject glory. But this is not just how Lehané sees the body – it is how the world sees it, how the state sees it, how society controls it and how history has defined it. This poem is very much a 'Federal Census' on the function of the body, and includes disease, sex, love, hospitalisation, child birth and that disconnect often felt between experience and expectations.

Violence too plays a massive role in this poem and is an integral part of any conversation relating to bodily autonomy. In 'Federal Census' the violence runs deep and is often hidden, as "The dead girls in this village concealed scandals | living on in their mothers' slow walks | It persists." In fact, this level of violence and misogyny is so persistent that it is continually passed from

generation to generation:

Did the boy learn from his father his thrall  
 Did the boy learn from the screen  
 from rank or event  
 The byelaws give rise to implied consent  
 Just come

These poems offer points of resistance, and in an attempt to break the cycle of violence Lehané tries to shield the young by opting out: "I'm not putting my son in the society of men."

As a man in the society of men my body is very much my own. The world does not think or talk or pass judgement on my body. It does not tell me how my body should look, or what I should wear with it, or how I should act in it. I own my body and in turn my body owns the space it is in. If there is something wrong with my body, the world trusts my judgement. My intellectual or emotional response to something has never been attributed to my body. My body will also never be taken over by, or give birth to, another body. My body is of so little interest to almost everyone in the world.

These are just some of the facts of my life. Another fact is that I have no idea what it must feel like not to have this level of bodily anonymity, or to know that "What has happened to you is everywhere on the lips of strangers | tiresomely | & I'm never sure if they are talking about my faith or my body," or for the world to "discuss the nature of | your cellular rights." The poem itself is shouting out to be heard. The poem rolls, with little or no punctuation, from one fragment to another. There is no attempt to convince or coerce. There is no debate here. There is no gradual build up of anger. Instead the poem starts frustrated and bewildered and continues without missing a beat, as if to say: this is the way it is, this is the way it has always been, and I am tired of people not listening.

I signed up blind to write a review, and since receiving and reading this work, I have felt uneasy about writing about it because I do not want to speak over work which is so important and engaging. I want to shut up and listen, shut up and learn, and so I will finish with this:

Who knows where we might turn in negation  
 The war has something to do with this entourage of medics  
 who are past caring  
 Put this in your mouth Use this for your impulse Put this  
 slantwise  
 Sung — You are so sung — The idea of future singing is lilted  
 & the cold & the cold cold  
 done done unto body reckless body  
 Remade in the vision of  
 Vanishing. We know not to ice it

the warmth glides by// the new year is starting  
& the midwife who yanked me from one space  
into another could only take me so far

### 'Counting'

by Eley Williams

*Response by Jessica Johanneson Gaitán*

Dear You in Poems,

Gosh, you must be worn and torn down to your – ever so subjective and relative – core. I can't imagine how tiring it is to be chronically implicit and used up for all kinds of authorial purposes – sometimes the anonymous reader, or an ex with attached strings, and sometimes consumed altogether to be understood as a mirror for the poet herself. I will no doubt be culpable of the same again, shortly. See you then. In the meantime, though, there is this other poem. I think it might, in the way that certain poems do with people outside of them, offer some comfort.

It's called 'Counting' and begins with the sky, a presence just as overlooked (as in looked at too much) and as worshipped as you have been over the years. In the poem's first stanza it's a sky onto which things happen, "count the birds," "blown seeds," but soon there's also this: "the sky was never really grey | but filled with birds' paths and wishful seeds." A multitude of things, that is, make up the sky and as such it is always becoming, never just one thing. Following from this, a confirmation of what we are beginning to believe: "skies as something meddled or bletted." This is the kind of thing that makes a reader feel pleased about themselves, but so far it has very little to do with you, you might think. Bear with me, it's a short letter and an even shorter poem, the latter existing only to bring the former to your attention.

You don't make an entrance until halfway down the poem's second stanza, where some habits of yours crop up as a memory, seemingly belonging to the poem's first-person narrator: the "Latinat difficulties of your sleeping." It's happened many times before: you are snuck in without due introductions, as if you had been present all along, and we (the readers) are supposed to know that you sleep in the first place. It's easy to make assumptions about the history you two might share but, again, bear with me, because this is also where the honesty of the poem takes over. "To wish to find a second draft of you | in the morning, and to love it all the more." It's not something you'd say to someone's face, is it? But it goes beyond any single you, and describes how You are really an accumulation of many you's created, regretted and brought forward again and again to define the present. Every time I like or dislike you I create You anew, and in comparison to every you that's come before.

See, this is what can't really be done, and what is done in Williams's poem: without being about you, it makes explicit the impossibility of You as an individual, at the breakfast table as well as in the poem. "Flocking has no purpose other than | the clotting, the thrilling, the thrumming." It is its own ambition. We know so little about you (you will be brought a "grey network" and you "make the world marvellous and other simple things" aren't exactly descriptors), and as a result everything around you, every "flocking," comes to define you even when you, at first glance, appear to be the only thing that is not a "constellation," a "crowd," a "puff" of something.

"No-one writes about hearts anymore," the poem says, but instead, it seems, they write about you, perhaps one of those "simple things" without which we'd be left with "a hopeless collaboration of birds," and no one to watch them. You, it turns out, are what binds it all together and makes "all my former pauses busy." That's one heavy task. I don't envy you. It is impossible to always admit one's platitudes, but the poem creates a world around that too. It begins its ending with a request: "so say C'mere once more," willing you to attract us, make a unity of it all for a second. I'd be intrigued to hear what you think of it.

Yours truly,

Another I

### From *Tar*

by Florence Uniacke

*Response by Colin Lee Marshall*

According to its author, *Tar* is a "series" of "poems," although the laminar formations of readerly encounter may well (as they did for me) reduce these authorial designations to a delicate shale. The first 'poem' that we encounter – a .jpg file titled 'Bar' – is in fact an asemic monolith of 'prose,' a striated block of 'text' that is intermittently punctuated by tiny breaks between its 'words.' The 'lines' of text undulate to relative degrees of proximity with each other, then cut off jaggedly before reaching the right-hand margin of the page, as though torn off (in violence) or indentured (in agreement), both of which possibilities might be thought, from a certain point of view, to amount to the same thing. There is an invitation to take (or steal) from 'Bar' what we will: weapon; injunction; carceral rod; currency (bullion); judicial authority; social interaction / lubrication / abuse. Regardless of what we *do* take from the 'text,' its inscriptions are as authoritative as they are illegibly graven – just like the inscriptions of the world in which we might occasionally feel ourselves to be living. In this light, my own designation of 'Bar' as "asemic prose" is itself exemplarily friable, crumbling upon the very moment of exegesis. I will return,

then, to Uniacke's own nomenclature.

'Cage,' the final poem of the series (at any rate, the final *file* – the sequence of the poems hasn't been specified by Uniacke), is short enough that it can be quoted in its entirety below:

The thing is about politics  
is whenever I think about politics  
I am depressed and not doing anything.  
I'm angry with words.  
I'll leave it there.

One might observe that the title serves as a carceral echo of 'Bar,' and that the poem's reticence or unwillingness to *weigh in* functions as a kind of taciturn, semantic counterpoint to the more genuine aphasia of the earlier poem. But I'll borrow from Uniacke herself now, and "leave it there," so as to focus my attention on 'Thief,' the extraordinary centerpiece of *Tar*.

By far the longest poem in the series (eleven pages in total), 'Thief' is, we might surmise, deliberately imprisoned between the more enervated (de-humanized) 'Bar' and 'Cage.' It is also the poem in which the aggregate of possible 'bars' comes into play as a rush of interpellations and feints. Handwritten in albescent silver (we need only tilt the monitor slightly for the text to more or less completely fade to white), 'Thief' achieves the remarkable feat of applying sufficient torque to graphemes to elicit from them the kind of ambiguities one would more typically expect to arise from manipulated lexis or syntax. The effect is impossible to convey simply by quoting the material – a singular act of refusal, we might think – and would require copious exegetic flourishes to be brought fully to light. The most obvious change occurs to the chiral grapheme 'd,' which is written, seemingly without exception, as a 'b' in the poem. However, the b/d enantiomorphs are not reciprocal reflectors (i.e. 'b' is never written as 'd' – 'forbids,' for example, is rendered as "forbibs"). It is worth drawing attention, too, to the 'y' grapheme, which has been decapitated into an 'I,' over which a 'v' hovers suggestively. Some of the other mutable graphemes (it would be presumptuous to imagine that one could enumerate all of them) are as follows: 'a' (2); 'b' (6; e); 'c' (r); 'e' (p); 'f' (p); 'g' (9; q); 'n' (^); 'o' (Ω; ; ð; e); 's' (5; z); 'u' (v); 'z' (2). This makes for a text that is brilliantly political at the level of the glyph itself, mutilating the Latin alphabet and Arabic numerals even before they are allowed to congeal into graphemes, let alone into tools for discourse (political or otherwise). As it stands, the text is singularly resistant to fluid recitation, a phonological rough-ride, its words choked by the glyphic violence. This doesn't mean that there is *no* discourse to speak of, or that niceties such as theme are precluded, but rather that the reader is constantly reminded that they are only able to extract the discursive content by dint of contorting the letters into familiarity.

On the back of such violence, the poem clearly becomes 'about' something very specific – namely, Jean Genet's film *Un chant d'amour*. This

provenance (which brings the context for the poem's titles clearly into focus) is immediately hinted at by the opening sentence – "~~Genet~~ I write you in silver" – and is made explicit on the second page:

I want to write out  
your film not to be  
seen but to feel with  
my hanb how it feels  
to slip the fingers, 4  
into those worker jeans

The sexualized content continues throughout, evoking and transmuting images from Genet's film: "like the guarb anb | his pistol bown your | frienbs throat." And yet, despite being thus doubly explicit, the poem is also permeated by an undeniable vagueness, one that is perhaps born from the constraints that Uniacke seems to have placed on herself during its composition: "this new writing | forbibs my hanb | where it wants to go." The poem also seems to generate moments of resistance to its compositional crystallization *as* poem. Uniacke writes:

I just lookeb back  
anb noticeb the  
writing of your name  
gave me away so I  
crasseb you out

The "crasseb" in "so I | crasseb you out" not only reads as a clever, meta-synonymic play ('crossed' / 'erased') on "~~Genet~~," but might also – with recourse to a little of the specular play that Uniacke's poem encourages – be read as a number, "7725596," that is to say, as the most egregious form of appellative erasure, an erasure that is felt all the more keenly in the context of the 'prison' setting.

Much is entailed by Uniacke's "new writing," her decision to revert back to an ordinary mode of inscription, one that is far more manual and auratic than the printed word, and yet one that also, through its "silver"-*screen* ekphrasis, simultaneously negates these auratic gains, both by allowing the poem's hyper-distinctive letters to stand as allographs for a more *general* artistic expression, and by .jpg-ing the poem so that the tactility of its ink not only undergoes the usual *lossy* compression, but can even appear – if the screen be canted at the right angle – to be properly *lost*. In the version in which I have read it, *Tar* – and especially "Thief" – implies all of this, and surely much more. "[C]an you feel it as you reab?," Uniacke asks. I can feel something significant in these words, and hope that – given the chance – others will, too. Uniacke's project needs to be disseminated, needs to be 'screened.'

## 'Kiss Your Own Head Institute [+R's Gloss]'

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by Rosa van Hensbergen  
*Response by Cheena Marie Lo*

An appendix accompanies this sequence of four poems. Or this sequence of appendices is accompanied by four poems. Or these appendices are poems. The sequence feels like a riddle. This sequence is simultaneously dense and playful. The references are expansive and exhaustive, exhausting in their scope and subtlety. The language is both sharp and musical.

The sequence begins with a notation, the appendix defining itself: “\*R’s Gloss: I have thought to gloss the terms I myself discovered and sought, to pattern the shapes that went into reading, to shave off none of the losses and slip in some extra-poetical etiological splurges.” There is an attention to meaning, explanation, relationships, but the sequence also rejects specificity. There is no specific R., R. is not one person, but is rather the name that is shared by “several faces under pressure of adherence.” Another notation further explains “There are many, and indeed the power makes no matter, each R. is interchangeable, while suggested specificities will be given.”

I should probably include my own footnote here about how I stopped at the notion that “power makes no matter.” I immediately went into a long tangent in my head about power and relationality, positionality in relation to power, how one cannot be so simply interchangeable. But then I realized that the power being referenced in this particular notation is the actual superscript of footnotes. R to the nth power. Of course. Power does matter in this sequence. Power and power structures and moves are referenced throughout — “the force,” “the institution,” “the over-structure,” “crowning,” “opening gambit,” etc.

Another footnote tells us that “many of the words, the names, are interchangeable and should be taken as such,” but the notations throughout the sequence seem to elucidate specific moments, thoughts, relationships, representations:

\* Auscultation: the first line of a pamphlet distributed at the door of the Josephinum reads: ‘Today we can go beyond auscultation (listening through a stethoscope, and where the need arises, autopsy to check a diagnosis: there are many new ways of looking inside the human being.’

[...]

\* Germane: an electronic document adding some and scraping some, was going for German and struck up an ‘e’; the key was not annotated.

[...]

\* Poetaster: this can be ascribed to the other R I live with.

[...]

\*Dérive: well I said to myself not to use it. . .

I don’t think I’ve ever seen, or expected to see, Peter Kropotkin mentioned alongside the Outkast song ‘Roses,’ followed by a reference to Japanese choreographer and founder of Butoh, Hijikata Tatsumi. I don’t yet have a firm grasp of all of the people or places or pieces referred to — they are skillfully and spiritedly woven together — and it is particularly satisfying and rewarding work to unravel.

## From *FOAM*

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by Jessica Johanneson Gaitán  
*Response by Nisha Ramayya*

In a series of poems in *FOAM*, Jessica Johanneson Gaitán describes a visit to Copenhagen. Gaitán has a particular interest in Hans Christian Andersen’s ‘The Little Mermaid’ (1837) and Edvard Eriksen’s commemorative sculpture (1913), which she relates to childhood memories of transforming her legs into a tail, wriggling at home in play and pretend. As an adult, a tourist on holiday with her lover, the fantasy of the twists and turns of the mythological body becomes a fascination with the acts of violence (or “accidents”) against the historical body of the sculpture. Explaining her decision to “gather | all her bits in a notebook” – the sculpture’s various heads and limbs, detached and destroyed – Gaitán states: “You should hold onto if not when you healed | then the day you were re-attached.” The poems convey the contradictions of departure: the romance of losing oneself (to fantasy, to love), the trauma of loss (of place, of agency). Following Gaitán’s desire to produce an ‘inventory,’ I structure my response to the poems according to a list of heads and beheadings.

‘First Accident’ floats between images of being headless and being beheaded:

Some people’s heads never ripen enough to fall  
into place, melt into passion.  
1964 was the year when behold,  
she had lost her hold on things  
and been, for the first time, beheaded.

Parsing the first image, to be headless is to be full grown, to be full grown is to belong, to belong is to lose oneself, to lose oneself is to surrender to love. The phrase ‘melt into passion’ recalls Andersen’s fairytale. After falling for the prince, the mermaid agrees to a contract with the sea witch, according to which she capitulates her voice, body, and being (‘she lost her hold on things’),

eventually dissolving into foam.

In 1964, Jørgen Nash, an artist and member of the Situcratic Society (Nash was excluded from the Situationist International in 1962), beheaded the sculpture of the mermaid as an 'anti-authoritative and provocative' act of 'anti-happening.' In 'The Struggle of the Situcratic Society: A Situationist Manifesto' (1962), the Society outline their ideological premises and objectives:

It is based on the principle of social democracy in as much as it excludes all artificial forms of privilege. It is the only existing guarantee which ensures that human life can develop in all its cultural variety and without crushing the special abilities of the individual in an anonymous society designed for the unfit. [...] We want to make it possible for man to be able to gamble his life. This can only happen if everyone is allowed to have individual freedom of action.

However, in 1999, Nash apparently admitted that his act was incited by personal impulses, specifically his anger towards one of his two wives (even more specifically, his anger towards the 'older,' 'terribly jealous' wife). The act of 'anti-happening,' which represents a collective struggle for inclusion, autonomy, and liberation, is the substitution for an act of domestic violence, which represents an individual assertion of prohibition, control, and domination.

In 'Head Count,' the speaker relays: "You ask me where I go when I lose my head." At this point of departure, the speaker may be tourist, mermaid, and sculpture; she is transient, hybrid, displaced and unlocatable. To lose one's head is "to have one's head cut off; to be beheaded (as a form of capital punishment)" as well as "to lose one's presence of mind or self-control; to become irrational" (*OED*). Andersen's mermaid loses her head for love and destroys herself; Eriksen's sculpture loses her head for the sake of destruction itself. Without making claims for recovery and reincorporation, Gaitán attempts to hold together the losses of the mermaid in their overlapping histories: "After all: we can't be but around each other."

## Untitled

by Emilia Weber

Response by Florence Uniacke

Some of my favourite images from the poem:

*Tramontane wind blew || the sun | flecked | histories || etching  
| every chorus | of fuck wittery || to live | awkwardly | in pretty  
community || & I wanted slightly | only sometimes | slightly | to dip  
| your sensitivity || keys in hand hanging off the edge of the bed | this  
might be the way I think about it || a beaded | tongue | pulling | the |  
precipice || & uh oh || you licking my eyeball | listen mate || the final  
image won't have a sound | just us travelling | i'll walk in to find you |  
depressing your feet into every last corner || crackling || expensive make  
up.*

*2<sup>nd</sup> May - first reading*

I am in the hot uneasy wind of holidays, the sick breeze that blows in around dusk. Petals are sticking in my hair and throat. I've taken a relationship with me and it's blistering alongside languor and doubt. I'm heavy with the past tense, this poem is a quick pile of ashes.

*4<sup>th</sup> May*

It's still blowing, that most damn irritating summer wind that makes you feel bananas and grateful and taints your enjoyment with its witnessing sigh ... interruptor!

*5<sup>th</sup> June*

Women too bring those grating real-life issues; the passage of time, the change of the weather.

Gender is annoying, as annoying as the "terrible number of moths in the glove compartment," as annoying as "piles of women in their laps," as the intrusion of ego "depressing its feet into every corner."

There is silent music in this wind. Silence, lots of death, laughter and quick time passing.

*7<sup>th</sup> June*

Still blowing.

This is how I must feel all the time, like still hot wind.

*7<sup>th</sup> June*

Still wind.

This is how I must feel all the time; hot wind.

*7<sup>th</sup> June.*

Still wind.

This is how I must feel all the time, like hot wind.

## *A Series of Un/Natural/Disasters*

by Cheena Marie Lo

Response by Emilia Weber

Cheena Marie Lo's uncompromisingly political collection *A Series of Un/Natural/Disasters* asks us to look beyond the definition of an environmental disaster as an event 'caused by an act of nature' and instead to resituate our understanding in the context of social inequities. It compels us to recognise natural disasters as made up of a nature that is "layered on the manmade," the "manmade" being years of institutional violence, which Lo in turn exposes as a disaster in itself.

Formally the book is striking in that it follows a highly systematic arrangement; the poems are ordered alphabetically and most lines in each poem begin with the same word. There's also a considerable degree of specificity in the work: the poems seem to be made up of found language and data appropriated from official bureaucratic publications, government statistics and news articles, concretely linking the subject matter to the source and never fully separating the events discussed from their context.

However, there's an ever-present tension within the collection: Lo often undermines these formal elements, thereby exposing official attempts to log or know disaster as ultimately futile, often harmful, and divorced from people's lived reality. For instance, we can assume that the lists and charts of numbers and the map-like data included in the collection bear some relation to the sources credited in the acknowledgements, but the exact origin of the data is never directly cited in each case; do they represent numbers of displaced people, or maybe death tolls? In leaving us to wonder Lo has set the figures up to paradoxically fail in their task. The enumeration in the data poems is further destabilised by the language of relative indefinability used in the works surrounding them, in which people are referred to in terms of "busloads" or as unnamed "poor black people | poor Black people | poor Black people | poor and black" or as "thousands and thousands of people there affected, thousands, | ten thousand" a line which crucially ends with a "maybe."

And even when the provenance of the data is made clear as in 'Consider Definition –' which lists the number of deaths attributed to Hurricane Katrina and earthquakes in China and Haiti, the poem concludes with the explicit caution: "can a disaster be qualified by the number of lives lost? | how to quantify absence?" The warning is twofold: this loss of life is beyond comprehension, but also in attempting to compute its magnitude we are in danger of dehumanising those affected, demonstrated most poignantly in the accumulative description of FEMA X-codes painted on the sides of buildings in the haunting 'Successive Water Lines on Door in Lakeview.'

The poem 'Q: What Happened?' (along with 'Connect Policy to Built Environment' and 'We Have Backup Generators to Accommodate') links the tragedies of so-called natural disasters to the prison-industrial complex.

'Q: What Happened?' reads like an amalgam of police interrogations, crime reports and immigration interviews: "Q: Were you born in the United States or some other country?"; "Q: Did the [OFFENSE] occur in [CITY]?" But among these questions the found language of the state is manipulated. Reformed and re-voiced the gut-punching interjections take you by surprise: "Q: Who is to blame?"; "Q: How much money is spent on prisons a year?" And analytic philosophy thought experiments are made heartbreakingly real: "Q: Say there is a massive flood and you have a rowboat with enough room to row yourself and three others to safety, who do you choose?" The poem reminds me of nick-e melville's work 'Tragic Vision' that similarly inhabits the language of the state in order to hoist it with its own petard. Lo's poem continues: "Q: How many schools have been shut down this year?"; "Q: Who is responsible for repair?"; "Q: Who has the longest life expectancy from birth?"; "Q: Who had insurance and access to care?"

Given the collection's preoccupation with revealing attempts at order to be useless when documenting and recording disaster, the use of the alphabet as a framing device seems to turn this western writing system (with its history of tyranny and colonial violence) back on itself and exposes its inadequacy.

But there's also a lot in this collection about community and tentative hope. Two of the extracts I was emailed, 'So What About the Instinct to Survive' and 'Something About Being Maddened by Hunger,' follow the same linguistic reprises as the majority of the book but deliver a break from the landscape of official language in register and tone. And in these poems images of large social colonies, and their relations to home, seem harnessed as compelling metaphors for cooperation and its necessity for survival.

'So What About the Instinct to Survive,' which no doubt relates to another of the source texts, Peter Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid*, talks about "birds and burying beetles" and "ants and bees and termites," animals which live in complex adaptive systems formed in order to adjust to the changing environment and increase survivability. Ants, bees and termites are also related in that they all practice the highest level of organisation of animal sociality – eusociality – the characteristics of which include living in communal nests to provide shelter and access to food resources. The "aquatic birds" of the same poem also nest in colonies, and "burying beetles" are notable in that they're one of the rare insects which too practice care of the brood. By all accounts these behaviours among animals are exceptional, and it is perhaps these animals' ability to "support" and "struggle" that Lo is referring to when they write "so what about the field upon which tender feelings develop | even amidst otherwise most cruel animals," but in the same breath an image of humans and their potential capacity for mutual care is evoked.

On the opposite page, 'Something About Being Maddened by Hunger' (and later in the collection 'Towards the Amalgamation of Larger Divisions') builds on these references. Although the 'somethings' of the poem still point towards an inability to fully know, or name or specify, the images in 'Something About Being Maddened by Hunger' are nevertheless

cautiously hopeful in their imaginings of community, of “exuberant life and bird-mountains and new forms,” of “the family and then the group,” and of the “necessity of communicating” and “simply feeling proximity.” The use of “something” is interesting too. If taken to mean “an amount that is more than a specified number,” “something” might relate to an immeasurable mass. Again Lo’s work disturbs the specificity of the state’s attempts at quantification, and in doing so invites a restructuring of society apart from the violence of the state.

With time I’d like to think more about Lo’s references to light: “nothing out there | no lights | no hope,” “some letting the light in, a few reflecting the light back out, | some missing and letting the light through anyway” and the etymology of disaster – *dis astro* – bad stars, and to think more about ecology and water and living both as and against an element, and Lo’s wonderful poem ‘How There Was so Much Water’ and about Beyoncé’s *Formation* video and Holly Pester’s ‘Katrina Sequence.’ And if this was a different context I’d love to read you the whole collection now, cover to cover, because what I can’t convey here is how brilliantly it builds, how the language snowballs and accumulates, how rich with interconnections each poem is and how profoundly affecting and important it feels as a whole.

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## Untitled

by James Cummins

*Response by Eley Williams*

I was once warned that I should never bake unpeeled bananas in tinfoil as the resulting dish would have hallucinogenic properties. I have no idea whether this is actually the case. We will return to baking presently, and to tinfoil. I read Cummins’ work on a high-speed train in France with a bag of oranges in front of me.

To parse this sequence of prose-poems is to return, presently, and to meet a world at odds with itself. It is also to tilt, to teeter and to pitch alongside the pieces’ central character: “As I make my way to the ‘place’ I hesitate and linger for a moment or two or longer on the solution to a theorem relating to parallelograms.” This sense of pitching forward is not a headlong rush – Cummins’ work is too gracious, too ingenious, fragile and taut to be labelled frenetic – but both the cadence of the sentences and the writer’s network of images certainly contain explicit and coded senses of propulsion: “I too set off – the intrepid traveller – going from one position to the next and then from one room to another, dressing for battle as I go.”

Perhaps I mean surging rather than propulsion. Perhaps I mean impulsion or urgency.

In terms of narrative the work’s central figure encounters urban pixels

flashing and technology-laden landscapes (“Devices beep so as to form relationships with one another”) that collapse – alongside a number of O’Hara Lanas and, yes!, oranges – across their allotted creases (“buildings in the city folded along the seams so as to appear in two dimensions”). Elsewhere the natural world is presented in a similar state of tessellating flux, all obliqueness and obliquity; whether bright or ruined or night-bound and at a remove, the prose-poems present a life filled with the activity of dancing butterflies amongst debris and “crystals found in deep water” that bows in on itself: “The sky is blue, the sea is blue, one reflects the other and vice versa.”

As I read, the oranges escaped their paper bag and rolled off the flipped table that was built into the train seat in front of me. I had to scabble a little with no clear line of sight. Cummins’ work is so controlled, and I am embarrassed by my action and for my fruit.

There are many references to roads or pathways within Cummins’ work, to longings rather than belongings, and a context of alert itinerancy, rather than any discrete sense of a destination, is developed. Again, the voice is peripatetic not lurching; so too the reader must be alert to the connections that Cummins has created between images, latent and ravelling, in order to grasp the fragments’ meaning. Perhaps I mean gestures rather than connections. This is not to say that the work is the site of evasion or evasiveness, however, nor does the work read as a barrage of obtuse abstruseness. The writing is clear when writing about uncertainty, and imagery comes thickly as a series of controlled ricochets rather than as an onslaught. A recurrent theme within the text that enacts this is the balance between endeavour and redress; tides tug, silt washes away, objects and words and figures are flung into orbits, “outer limits of two concentric circles. At each rotation I catch sight of shadows highlighted by re-runs on comedy central” while above “the sky turns tricks.”

Among the prose-poems’ demonstration of pivots and loci there are – I think crucially – the tender preparation of tender meals. Peter Johnson, editor of *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, had a turn of phrase that he found useful when defining an aspect of a prose-poem, that “just as black humo[u]r straddles the fine line between comedy and tragedy, so the prose poem plants one foot in prose, the other in poetry, both heels resting precariously on banana peels.” The foodstuffs cited in Cummins’ work spool and unspool just as the images tangle and unstitch within the prosody: “cotton candy” spins in its taut cobwebbed network, while “[we] cooked fish the old fashioned way wrapped in brown paper, soaked in water and left to the element. Temperature unknown. Date unknown. But we, none the less, know it happened behind the butchered apple trees.”

To read a selection from Cummins’ sequence is to mix metaphors and love the giddiness; it is to chew and to savour at full pelt; reading and writing becomes a process *en papillote*, and parsing the prose-poems becomes the act of foraging, or tickling for trout, or removing the skin from a fish. Here, the hyphen in prose-poem can be either the fine blade of a filleting knife or a small bone caught in the throat with an unignorable, unexpected tricky violence.

To read Cummins' work is to break open an orange with your thumbs and find, just for a moment, the air made difficult with new, familiar acid.

'Does this change. It | shows that dirt is clean when there is a volume | - Gertrude Stein'

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by Prudence Chamberlain

Response by Megan Zword

The poem comes from a sequence. In the sequence every poem is titled by a quotation, and all the quotations are about being dirty. There is a temptation to just say: all that really matters about the title is that it is a quotation from a relatively famous poet that is about dirt. That's why it was picked up. Its connection with everything that comes afterward is loose, gestural, a sort of bonus. The title is too determined by other factors to have been determined by the poem. It's not really part of the poem. Maybe it is even a bit of schmutz that should be wiped off of the poem's surface.

But. There are at least a few implicit decisions in the quotation's appearance. Where to crop it, for instance. The full prose-stanza from which it is taken – from Gertrude Stein's 'A SUBSTANCE IN A CUSHION' in *Tender Buttons* – goes like this:

Callous is something hardening leaves behind what will be soft if there is a genuine interest in there being present as many girls as men. Does this change. It shows that dirt is clean when there is a volume.

(Stein 1914: p.10)

Prose poetry, you may think, is a dirty form.<sup>2</sup> It's what happens when you get poetry all over your prose *and* when you get prose all over your poetry. Chamberlain tidies it up – a bit – by inserting a line break: "Does this change | It."

Now it becomes proper poetry, except of course that it doesn't, because proper titles don't contain line breaks. The manoeuvre is a bit wonderfully slapstick. It asks quite simply, does this line break change the poem? And *of course* it does, because it had to change it just to ask the question in the first place.

Then the poem. The poem is a swift, gnarled, witty, yearning, grimy, evanescent lyric about dirt, love, sex, domestic space, domestic labour, New Year, nature, and ecological catastrophe. Fair play and that is a good bunch of stuff to manage even to be about without just completely just losing it.

2. See Eley Williams quoting Peter Johnson elsewhere in this issue: the prose poem has "both heels resting precariously on banana peels."

Then there is the line that doesn't quite make it into the poem, the line just on the outside. "Callous is something hardening leaves behind what will be soft if there is a genuine interest in there being present as many girls as men." *Callous* means callous but it also suggests *callus*: the surface of the body differentiating into scaly armor and puffy tender flesh below. The "something hardening" as the erection of nervy-tingly tissue into its gendered forms, the tautening and sensitizing which the poem (a bit paradoxically) merges with gendering as the accomplishment of an unfeeling disregard, the kind of numbness of which a callus or a callousness is capable. Gender as insensibility to the experience of other genders, perhaps, or insensibility to the potential fluidity that underlies all genders. Cock and/or clit as corn, maybe. 'If you keep making that face, it will freeze that way.' 'If you keep filling those bits of you with blood, you'll get gendered.' Not really fair.<sup>3</sup>

Kathryn R. Kent reads the Stein line as a line about mischievously resisting gender:

If girls borrow masculine clothing and play up the male role, does anything happen? The last sentence indicates that something indeed occurs: "It shows that dirt is clean where there is a volume" [...] Definitions are turned inside out. [...] Dirt becomes clean, that which is forbidden is redeemed, when there is a volume, an accumulation of differences, a book or poem.

(Kent 2003: p.161)<sup>4</sup>

But maybe there's something that should be added to Kent's reading. In Stein's poem, definitions turn inside-out, dirt becomes clean, but only when *two* conditions are met. First "a genuine interest in there being present as many girls as men" – to do with, as Kent suggests, fluidity of gender and sexual identity; but also perhaps a straightforward, almost first wave-ish insistence on formal equal representation? (Albeit undermined by the asymmetry of "men" and (not women, but) "girls").

And the second condition – the bit that actually appears in Chamberlain's poem – is that there is "a volume." What is this volume? Perhaps the title is saying: dirt can become clean, but only when there is *enough* of it. "As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder" (Mary Douglas 2003 [1966]: p.2). "Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systemic

3. Compare Julia Kristeva, who in her *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980) writes about "purification rites whose function is to separate this or that social, sexual, or age group from another one, by means of prohibiting a filthy, defiling element. It is as if dividing lines were built up between society and a certain nature, as well as within the social aggregate, on the basis of the simple logic of excluding filth, which, promoted to the ritual level of defilement, founded the "self and clean" of each social group if not of each subject."

4. Kathryn R. Kent, *Making Girls Into Women: American Women's Writing and the Rise of Lesbian Identity* (Duke University, 2003).

ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements” (ibid. p.36).

So we can imagine how *woke dirt* – dirt that can order itself, that can systematize itself, that can organize, that can express solidarity, that can harden – may be able to *grow* itself, until there is such a volume of it that it is no longer dirt. But perhaps when dirt stops being dirty, it leaves something behind, something vulnerable and betrayed. “[W]hat will be soft.” A new dirt, perhaps.

Or in other words: I feel the suggestion, in this title, of the tension between radical revolutionary struggle and the struggle for conditions of greater socio-economic mobility. Of the tension between queer resistance to heteronormative capitalist structures and queer assimilationism. And of the tension between the kinky and the problematic. The “It |” (of which the first line of the title tries – without quite managing it, grammatically – to ask ‘does this change’) can be read as domination. When dirt becomes clean, does that change “It |”? Does the assimilation of those who were previously proscribed in any way alter a system by which there is always someone, something, who is scum?

Soon the poem’s puzzle shifts: from readings of Stein to readings of stains. “[I]t is not squalid where we are but infested | language is the problem | with the oil of disposed pizza boxes.” How to decipher those grease sigils? Poets are constantly reading things they’re not supposed to: lichen-starred rock, letters rendered into huge splodges by photocopier zoom, smears of dog poop. The backs of things. Sex-scratched backs. We nuddle in puddles and read bubbles and gravel. Sometimes we read these things by moaning and gibbering, which frankly is rude, but just because we haven’t found anything yet is no reason to stop trying. The same goes for poems by our friends or by Gertrude Stein. We keep trying to read them, and just because we haven’t found anything yet is no reason to stop trying.

“It shows that dirt is clean where there is a volume.” I don’t believe for one second that dirt is clean when there is a volume, having been so badly hurt by Gertrude Stein’s lies so many times.

OK, but just say?

OK then, the *volume* could be a *book* (not a vastness but rather, as Kent suggests, an “accumulation of differences”): and the ‘clean dirt’ could be what happens to handwriting when it is snatched up into an accumulation of differences, snatched up into meaning. It could be the purging of the ink’s thingliness (or ‘materiality’) when it is snatched up into alphabetic form.

Or better yet, what happens to letterpressed letters: all the dirt of minute variants from one impression of a typographical forme to the next: the variant cants and inky diffusions and dots bitten out or metastasized serif nubs of the marks on the page, all rubbed away into the purity of a platonic alphabet.<sup>5</sup>

5. Here’s a real question for poets who can read anything. How do you read a font?

So the poem’s epigraph-title is doubly dirty, or triply: the word *stain* stained above the threshold below which a saccade nudges it spontaneously into its heavenly alphabetic body. Dirt that can’t be brushed off, cropped off, rounded off, or that gets rounded in the wrong direction, changing the meaning. The ‘a’ slots in the printer’s bed topsy-turvy and the word remains filthy, a *Stein*.

Sometimes we read these things by moaning and gibbering. Some of us say that the failure to reproduce decipherable narratives is part of the point. To read dirt as dirt, not to clean it up by discovering meaning in it, and reducing it to that meaning. To read noise as noise. “To read Stein, we must put illegibility (“that noise”) on the table along with interpretation” (Joshua Schuster).<sup>6</sup> Here’s something that might be noise, or might be signal:

In the downstairs to us  
a mouse runs across  
possibility  
it is not squalid where we are but infested  
language is the problem  
with the oil of disposed pizza boxes

You are so filthy  
amongst the mess  
of love  
all my unpaid  
labour is not for nothing  
when I wake up with you under my nails

Mice obviously may be a sign that the mess has got a bit out of hand. But mice are also admired and loved: as pets, as Basil the Great Detective, etc. It’s said you must murder mice anyway, however beloved, or rats will soon come. The logic seems suspect to me, though I’m not sure why. Perhaps because it suggests algorithmic policing, collective responsibility, pre-crime. But algorithms are very smart. Perhaps there are even tinier, even cuter rodents we could murder first, about one centimeter long, so the mice don’t even come in the first place?

Anyway, at the moment there seems to be just one mouse in this poem, and not even in this part of the house. Anybody can probably live in harmony with just *one* mouse, right? Though it was really just a *sound* downstairs, so it may *not* just be one.

And it may not actually be a mouse.

Running “across” possibility suggests to me possibility spaces: and I like the idea of a little maybe misheard midgety something-or-other being the one to map the space of what is possible. And it reminds me of Clement Clarke

6. <http://jacket2.org/article/making-tender-buttons>.

Moore's 1823 poem, which helped to invent Santa, so perhaps that's part of why this poem feels a little like a carol:

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all thro' the house  
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.

But it's not just the "mouse" or the "possibility" that matters in that line. It's also the "us." This is a love poem. "In the downstairs to us." The word *you* in the poem could perhaps be distributed across other objects – the speaker is addressing the Queen, is addressing some dirt, etc. – but I don't *think* so; I think there is a domestic space (which sort of bursts into the open air and deep time toward the end of the poem), occupied by a beloved.

Kent continues her gloss of "[i]t shows that dirt is clean where there is a volume":

Dirt becomes clean, that which is forbidden is redeemed, when there is a volume, an accumulation of differences, a book or poem. Here the poem tries to reform the sexual connotations of what counts as "dirty": it may also allude to as it revalues the anti-Semitic epithet, "dirty Jew." [...] In the echo of "Alice" in "callous" Toklas is also invoked as part of these erotics [...] In particular, her labor is metaphorized through the image of callused hands, hands that both maintain the household and make exuberant love to Gertrude.  
(Kent 2003: p.161)<sup>7</sup>

It is difficult to age the love in this poem. Is it a kind of Stein and Toklas sitch? Something about the "us" suggests to me a kind of maturity, maybe even a settled-ness. Then there's the line "when I wake up with you under my nails." Yes, it *could* be addressed to dirt. But it's the beloved, isn't it? If it's addressed to dirt, then it's addressed to the Steinian clean dirt that constitutes the poem's lambent beloved. This is about the skin raked from the beloved's back. It is difficult to age the sex in this poem. The hot flaying sex could imply a fresh hook-up. Or maybe just some regular old everyday hot flaying sex. Although if you sex-dig enough skin out of a back at some point you'll hit bone. Also, there is some intricate hand-holding going on, "the circumference of your ring | finger when I hold it in my hand," which at first felt to me like new love. It's not sufficient to go hand-in-hand in one of the twenty-four official Loving Couple Grips: *these* hands are squirming with energy, running all over each other like a pair of mice or actually *rats*. But then I wondered if this circumference-grip could be an established practice of a pair of mature hand-holders. 'Oh, this old hand? *This* is how ya do it. Grab the ring finger, right round the circumference.'

7. *Making Girls Into Women: American Women's Writing and the Rise of Lesbian Identity* (Duke University 2003).

It is challenging to age the love in this poem, and the sex, and the hand-holding, and kind of challenging to age *anything*. Even the Queen, who is supposed to be a mechanism for demarcating epochs, may be a drag act. The disjointed time feels important, not least because the systems that determine dirt are partly temporal. In a lot of domestic spaces, there is a rhythm to mess and dirt, as different kinds accumulate, and then get cleaned up, according to different superimposed periodicities. Exactly the same scene may be relatively tidy or relatively dirty depending whether it's Sunday morning or Sunday evening. It's sort of tidal: the little tidies, the big tidies, the spring cleaning. Dirt accumulates. It is the quintessential sorites paradox: grain by grain, and then suddenly one day oh my God it is fucking disgusting in here.

The word *taboo* in the first stanza invokes Mary Douglas's classic 1966 anthropological study *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (which I've already quoted from a little).

In the course of any imposing of order, whether in the mind or in the external world, the attitude to rejected bits and pieces goes through two stages. First they are recognisably out of place, a threat to good order, and so are regarded as objectionable and vigorously brushed away. At this stage they have some identity: they can be seen to be unwanted bits of whatever it was they came from, hair or food or wrappings. This is the stage at which they are dangerous; their half-identity still clings to them and the clarity of the scene in which they obtrude is impaired by their presence. But a long process of pulverizing, dissolving and rotting awaits any physical things that have been recognised as dirt. In the end, all identity is gone. The origin of the various bits and pieces is lost and they have entered the mass of common rubbish. It is unpleasant to poke about in the refuse to try to recover anything, for this revives identity [...]  
(p.161)

I'm interested in the passage of time in that passage. You might add another stage before Douglas's first stage. Out-of-place things may not signal disorder and dirt *right away*. At first they're just guests. Ambassadors from one system to another. The orange peels on the arm of the sofa may not be dirt so long as you're still chewing on orange segments.

Does dirty sex tend to go in the other direction? Transgressive sex is dirty sex. What was transgressive becomes vanilla through repetition, and either boring and disappointing or cute and cozy and snuggly. Either way, what was transgressive can still become more and more alive with more and more nuanced meanings, as lovers learn to close read the sex they make, including its dirtiness; and/or (probably 'and') what was transgressive can become more and more amenable to hollow, companionable, noisy co-existence, to ways of paying attention to each other without really paying attention. And/or

(probably 'or') it can give way to "asexual longing."

The *volume* could also just be vastness: if the dirt is a desert it is scarcely dirt. The *volume* could just be "the earth & its wonder." The final stanza of Chamberlain's poem seems to invoke a (Romantic?) longing and reverence for the natural world, via an admiration of the soil and "the grass | & its wet cut allergies," and bring that longing and reverence to bear on the messiness of a dirty flat, where some people who love and/or fancy each other live. And that too is part of why this love is hard to age. Is this a pair of people who are no longer showing off their nesting skillset? Who are relaxed enough with each other that they sometimes just slob it up? Or is it a pair of people who are so into each other right now that the messiness of their surroundings doesn't feel messy, or if it does, feels messy in a good naughty way? Neither seems quite right.

Mary Douglas writes of slobbering it up that "[w]hen a strict pattern of purity is imposed on our lives it is either highly uncomfortable or it leads into contradiction [or] if closely followed leads to hypocrisy. That which is negated is not thereby removed. The rest of life, which does not tidily fit the accepted categories, is still there and demands attention" (pp.164-165).

"[I]t is not squalid where we are but infested": *squalid* and *infested* are words you would think would go together, but here they are offered as alternatives, as if they tend in different directions; so what gives? Is there a way to construe those two terms as alternatives? Perhaps the voice in the poem has decided to reclaim the word *infested* (but not *squalid*), to *revel* in infesting, to defiantly self-identify as one who infests.

Or perhaps *squalid* here means ignoble, morally wretched, a kind of smallness, a kind of low ebb of life and life's empathies. Whereas *infested* means teeming, swarming, overrun with life. The problem is language: a universe bursting with mute life, indecipherable signification, liable to be brutalized as parasitic, vermin, or insensible. This is also mess as a long moment of political bewilderment: 'I don't know where to begin, the world is too messy, too complicated to work out, everything's a mess, look at this mess we're in.' How can we make this moment speak to us? What on earth is everything trying to say?

Also: what is everything on earth trying to say? Maybe the somewhat fashionable materialists are catching up with the poets, the ones who read things we're not supposed to. Take Runamo. Runamo is a cracked dolerite dike near the the church of Bräkne-Hoby in Sweden. In the 1830s Finnur Magnússon discerned in it a runic poem, probably a Fornýðalag incantation by Harald Wartooth, activating buffs against the Swedish king Sigurd Ring at the Battle of Brávellir. He even managed to translate part of it:

Hildekinn [Harald Wartooth] the riches received.  
Gard hewed,  
Olè gave loyal oath,  
Odin consecrated these runes.

Ring shall  
in war fall.  
Elfs, deities of fidelity,  
Olè abandon.  
Odin and Frey  
and the Aser race,  
vanquish vanquish  
our foes,  
to Harald grant  
great honour.

Actually it was just some cracks though.

But the somewhat fashionable materialists are learning better ways to read cracks, dirt, stone, the riotous crystalline activity played out in deep time. Lithic agency upsets the distinction between living and non-living, and between signifying and non-signifying. Stone "discloses queer vivacity, and a perilous tender of mineral amity" (Jeffrey Jerome Cohen): *fact*. The voice in Chamberlain's poem claims to talk dirt (not quite talking trash, not quite talking dirty), when "feelings won't do." The mind in this poem claims to "think dirt."

language is the problem  
with the oil of disposed pizza boxes

You are so filthy  
amongst the mess  
of love  
all my unpaid  
labour is not for nothing  
when I wake up with you under my nails

The word *disposed* is very interesting here. It may make it seem a little like the space of the poem is littered with pizza boxes, and yet the pizza boxes are already thrown away. And *disposed* also suggests predisposed, inclined, apt, ready, liable.

So what is it the pizza boxes are disposed to do? We're not sure. We see something signified, but we don't speak that language – maybe nobody does. Maybe the pizza boxes are communicating in a language they themselves don't speak. They are flappy, talky, sort of beaky things, pizza boxes. Yet is it a little easier to believe that stone discloses queer vivacity than that cheese grease does?

But above all, the word *disposed* suggests recycling, and the teensy-weensy moralities of recycling *just right*. The question 'Can this go in?' is always just the tip of the trash-berg. How much are we prepared to learn about where 'this' came from and where 'this' might go and become? It is the temporalities

of recycling, in the end, that sweep in to put the time in the poem back into joint.

Pizza boxes are cardboard. Cardboard is often recycled by separating it into different grades, washing it with soap, and then pulping it with water to create a slurry, which can then be treated and dried into fresh paper and card. Cheesy grease is immiscible with cardboard slurry. So perhaps *that* is the kind of time that is operating in this poem, and animating its love: a world that should be perpetual and permanent, only it's contaminated by cheese grease. The problem with the oil of disposed pizza boxes is that it is a kind of dirt which sabotages the immortality of the pizza boxes. The fibres don't bind so well; the new *tabla rasa* cardboard comes out sorta saggy and moth-eaten.

Two ways of parsing those two lines, "language is the problem | with the oil of disposed pizza boxes." Either: 'there is a problem with the oil of disposed pizza boxes, and that problem is language.' Or alternatively: 'what is language? The answer to this question can be suggested by the problem with the oil of disposed pizza boxes.'

What if these pizza boxes were sex? It seems possible. Magazines like *Cosmo* always talk about sex *positions* or sex *moves*, and Adorno always talks about the non-identical. The poem locates the signifying power of a system not in the elements of a system that can be re-used again and again, but in the contaminants that disrupt and degrade the iterative cycle. So it gestures toward a dirty togetherness, whether it is mainly linguistic or mainly sexual (or mainly both), whose enabling impurity is a function of the consistent consciousness of non-identity, rather than of the endless multiplication of transgressive forms.

Also compare "our experiment | with one another" and "a [lab] mouse runs across | possibility," and think about kink and Karl Popper's falsifiability criterion in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1959). As Quentin Meillassoux points out, Popper slightly adjusts David Hume's basically ontological problem of induction to a basically epistemological problem. (See Meillassoux, *Métaphysique et fiction des mondes hors-science* (2013)). Vis-à-vis dirty sex, the epistemological problem of induction is about the reproducibility of results: will the thing that you did that was dirty last time still be dirty? If not what will that teach you about yourself and your lover? The epistemological problem assumes that exactly the same sex would be exactly as dirty, although of course it also knows that nobody can really have exactly the same sex twice.

The ontological problem of induction vis-à-vis dirty sex makes no such assumption. It asks: why should the same inner laws govern the reality of sex from one moment to the next? The notion that every subject of an experiment is necessarily conducting its own experiment ("our experiment | with one another") might be one way to start thinking about such ontological rupture. Perhaps. Or another way might be human extinction. Perhaps. At the very least, what counts as dirty sex will probably be a bit different after humans.

One big rhythm that the poem announces is the year end. Why don't we count bunting as dirt? Or do we? It is clutter, isn't it? That *volume* – in the light of the TV – could even be a volume dial. 'Does this change. It | shows

that dirt is clean when there is a volume. | - Gertrude Stein' could be a kind of festive poem, a kind of carol.

The year is over & I am  
being fucked in the  
arse by a Queen  
where the taboo  
is alive off the screen

Soon a/the Queen is advancing imperially through the screen, presumably during the Queen's Speech. "[W]hen I wake up with you under my nails" could also be the Lord's little look-in to the carol: if you hammer nails into the wall in a certain place, water or ants pour out, and if you hammer nails into the poem in a certain place, Christ comes pouring out. And that line is edged with something else: after sexual assault it is important to preserve DNA evidence by avoiding cleaning your fingernails.

The year is over & I am  
being fucked in the  
arse by a Queen  
where the taboo  
is alive off the screen

topping your lap  
running pictures & sounds simultaneously

In the downstairs to us  
a mouse runs across  
possibility

Religions have a peculiar relationship with dirt: they "often sacralise the very unclean things which have been rejected with abhorrence" (Douglas 1966: p.160).

"[T]alk[ing] dirt" is two puns: talking dirty, and talking trash. Perhaps this poem proposes wit as the mechanism that reconciles, on a small scale, what contemporary social justice language might call 'kink' with 'problematic fave,' producing the do-able taboo.

What is actually taboo here? Ass sex? Violence teasingly implicated in that sex or some other sex? The idea that anybody should be so okay with doing unpaid labour, at least in the context of dirt and domesticity, and therefore in the context of housework? Kink occupies a weird and special place in contemporary social justice discourse. Kink shaming and kink policing are not okay, and by being not okay, they can nudge things beyond the compass of contemporary social justice discourse's okayness evaluator. Kink can adjust the boundaries of what is acceptable, tactical, sensitive, and woke, in unexpected

ways.

Or maybe the taboo is just a little one, about being rude about or around or because of the sovereign – there are all these stupid things you are supposed to do around the Queen – and/or typographically non-standard. Because this is neither ‘a queen’ nor ‘the Queen.’ Where we would expect “I am | being fucked in the | arse by the Queen” instead we get that uppercase Q and that indefinite article, Q&a. The effect is to drag Elizabeth Windsor – likely dead by the time this *Hix* goes to press, God savegame the Queen – into a merger with sticky hot drag theatricality.

By itself, the idea of stepping out of the TV screen feels a bit more lackluster, less transgressive, more *clean*, than I think it used to – maybe somehow because of on-demand streaming content and/or Virtual Reality? – but in Chamberlain’s poem, it is revitalized simply by being re-imagined as a *festive* moment (Christmas being perhaps a time where on-demand devices tend to be put aside a little more, and watching is more synched up (“running pictures & sounds simultaneously”)), and also by being re-imagined as a cumshot: specifically as a queer Elizabeth Windsor (within whose archaic corona the word *ejaculate* may still signify “I say!”) cumming through your TV to murder (“topping,” normally only used reflexively) your genitals while also nicely bewilderingly cumming *from* you, “topping” as in cresting, or better yet, crowning. There is little surprising about “running pictures & sounds simultaneously” if it is coming from a screen; it’s when both modes stream in synch from your lap that you sit up and take notice.

Of course it’s a hot sticky mess, and other parsings are available. A kind of dozy cuddliness creeps into later part of the poem. Messy, pungent, as if there’s nothing to rinse all this stuff in except wood-smoke, or actually okay maybe fresh cigar-smoke, and/or steam from a roast tofurkey.

There is a lot of mess and a lot of love and maybe sentimentality. And before long the poem reflects with sweet slyness on this initial flamboyant, sardonic boldness:

& the Tinder crash of our experiment  
with one another always opens the poem with the boldest line

The poem as Tinder encounter. And not just any Tinder encounter, but a glitch-beset Tinder encounter. “If your Tinder app keeps on crashing, it can be a lot of stress. You may have found someone you like on Tinder when the app crashes on you. You may have lost your chance to meet The One because you cannot search for him or her anymore.”<sup>8</sup>

The shards of the TV screen/fourth wall now look like they might have come from a glass ceiling, and/or be implicated in ecological catastrophe: what’s left of the ozone and/or the ice caps. The earth is dirty, polluted (“the world falls apart”): but by way of the wordplay that *earth* is *dirt*, ‘Nature with

8. <http://www.wikihow.com/Keep-Tinder-from-Crashing>.

a big N’ disappears. So actually, the poem stages a tacit comparison between Montreal Protocol of 1987 that just sorted CFCs and the ozone hole out, and the global warming that has begun mass murder in earnest with the worst to come including *just maybe* human extinction.

And yet this is also all still pent up, in a way, in an apartment, littered with pizza boxes.

Now I love you  
the world falls apart  
& I am filled with the asexual longing  
of carbonators & soft-shell crabbed  
heating under the light  
of a perforated ozone

See how the air even crackles when you come down  
the stairs, how ice-caps melt searching for employment  
& the Tinder crash of our experiment  
with one another always opens the poem with the boldest line  
we have crossed now

let it remain doubled up  
in misdirection  
where I talk dirt when feelings will not do  
but they do/ they rebound off  
the back of their own trash-can fulfilment

when I think dirt  
& mess, I think of the earth & its wonder  
smells of soil that I only know  
from books testifying its pungency, the grass  
& its wet cut allergies  
the circumference of your ring  
finger when I hold it in my hand

So could “all my unpaid | labour is not for nothing” be pretty upsetting? Could this poem be cultivating an unreliable narrator staging internalised misogyny: in a crude reduction, ‘It doesn’t matter that I do more housework than you, because we have great sexual chemistry, and when we don’t, I’m still filled with asexual longing?’ Is the speaker some right wing cishet woman who wants to teach you all about how feminism is just about abusing men?

I don’t think so. Yes, there is so much mess in the poem, it *is* hard to trace culpability, ownership. *Whose* mess *is* this? OK, so dirt is in the eye of the beholder. But talk of poetry still looks suspect when somebody might be cleaning up after somebody else. And yes, you *might* even scrutinize the final stanza and decipher the wheedling voice of someone not pulling their weight

within some sphere of domestic aesthetic solidarity, but – partly because the poem’s own clutter is so artful, partly because somebody who justifies their own unpaid labour on anti-feminist grounds doesn’t usually refer to it as ‘unpaid labour’ – that reading doesn’t feel right to me.

But I think the poem *does* tease with that kind of thing. It is part of how the poem decides to be dirty. And it is dirty in at least three ways. One is the use of (the faintest hint of) reactionary shibboleths as sparks of despair, uncertainty and self-harm. I think that has something to do with the way thinking or speaking a taboo works. The same intrusive thoughts (and/or deliberate mental pinching of myself) that a while ago might have taken the form “you’re worthless!” nowadays could take the form “all lives matter!” or “take back our country!”

And the second has to do with being a love poem. “Unpaid | labour” is rapidly tipped into the singularity oubliette of kink. And “suddenly we find that one of the most abominable or impossible is singled out and put into a very special kind of ritual frame that marks it off from other experience” (Douglas q.v.). And in other ways the poem is filled with suggestions of sentiments that are bent out of their usual function by a virtuoso trueness of heart, and of intense, pure and noble feelings being elaborated in piss-takes, in crap, gross, offensive, whimsical, crushed, wrong, silly, bathetic, and mock heroic signification.

Third, I think it also tries to be dirty because, in a certain way, it tries to be inclusive. It is wary or bored of trying to be its cleanest, freshest, bestest self. It reminds me a bit of William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (this passage also quoted by Douglas). Let’s leave that here, at least for now:

It may indeed be that no religious reconciliation with the absolute totality of things is possible. Some evils, indeed, are ministerial to higher forms of good; but it may be that there are forms of evil so extreme as to enter into no good system whatsoever, and that, in respect of such evil, dumb submission or neglect to notice is the only practical resource. [...] But provisionally, and as a mere matter of program and method, since the evil facts are as genuine parts of nature as the good ones, the philosophic presumption should be that they have some rational significance, and that systematic healthy-mindedness, failing as it does to accord to sorrow, pain, and death any positive and active attention whatever, is formally less complete than systems that try at least to include these elements in their scope.

(James 2002 [1901-1902]: p.164)

## ‘Awkward Bumping in the Theory District’

by Nisha Ramayya

Response by Megan Zword

‘Awkward Bumping in the Theory District’ is a poem published in *Ambit* #224. It reads a little like a list of aphorisms, though if they are aphorisms, they are cryptic ones.

Hovering around inside them, uncertain about where to begin, or what they might be about, or what they and I might have *already* begun, or already be about, and of course uncertain about whether these are actually the best questions to be asking, and about whether questions are actually the best things to be doing . . . a quilt of affects quickly accumulates: sincerity, longing, drunkenness, unkindness, crying, scraping, feeling deep enough to require “sounding,” getting knocked down, feeling funny, feeling honourable, exceeding, being commanded, refusing, eyes, frowning, unnatural ease, tumbling, grace.

A strong theme is “the connection imperative,” or what we could call *compossibility*: the possibility of co-existing, the possibility of fitting together, and especially the possibility of fitting gracefully together. That’s the final line: “[g]race as the ways we might fit.” The “grace” is probably the grace of a moving crowd, elegantly organizing its individual and collective pathways, everyone “stop[ping] before tumbling” over, but “grace” is absolutely also theological grace: an unmerited heavenly gift of mercy, favour, blessings, and salvation. The nearby reference to “[w]orks,” as in good works, confirms the significance of a theological context. The poem invokes the fit (or the awkward bumping) between mortal and divine agency. “And if by grace, then *is it* no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if *it be* of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work” (KJV, *Romans* 11:5). The title suggests *not* quite fitting together in some shared space. And the opening words are “[i]n losing halves,” just maybe evoking Plato’s *Symposium*, and the myth that the original form of the human was torn in two by Zeus: “[l]ove is born into every human being; it calls back the halves of our original nature together.”

I do think there is a much more specific narrative, or argument, or movement, taking place within the theme of the connection imperative, or compossibility, but I don’t think I’ve figured out what it is yet. Divine agency might be a proxy for systemic power, or for something else. Perhaps what the aphorisms eventually invite is meditation, rather than interpretation: their implied reader is finally reconciled to them in a thick tangle of contradictory elucidations, a tangle that is just as incapable of paraphrase as the thing that encouraged it in the first place. “The unnatural ease of disentanglement” could be a good one to meditate on. Some lines of ‘Awkward Bumping in the Theory District’ also do a thing that a lot of my favorite poetry does: provoke me into imagining in as literal and as concrete a way possible what they are referring to.

“The unnatural ease of disentanglement.”

I don't think it is a machine-generated poem, but it has just an edge of the Markov chain or the recurrent neural network about it. For one thing, there is that same sense of trolling intimacy you sometimes get with machinic writing. Or perhaps, the sense that some machine has mistaken you for somebody else, and genuinely assumes certain shared contexts, where really there are none. ‘*There* you are! I've been looking all over! In losing halves, the materiality of the reading experience mediates the sincerity of your voice. Keep it on the DL. See you afterward at the thing, yeah? Text me!’

*How* is that machinic effect accomplished? I'm not sure, but I can speculate. Perhaps writing often conforms to a set of standard rhythms to do with the cognitive load of basic identification and parsing tasks. Whenever a word is deployed outside of its usual context, or in an unusual grammatical function, these rhythms offer an implicit guarantee of a short breather before the next such outlier event. Maybe Ramayya's poem is resisting such rhythms. Take this sentence as an example. “Thinking of ourselves as more than distance corrects the attachment.” Before you even quite know what ‘thinking of ourselves as distance’ might mean, you are being led further, to “[t]hinking of ourselves as more than distance,” and through the verb “corrects,” you are being led to the effect of that, whatever it is – you are being led to a strange new thing that depends on the last strange new thing that you were never quite properly introduced to. ‘Awkward Bumping in the Theory District’ is a carefully convoluted poem, like a tongue-twister operating on the conceptual plane rather than the prosodic.

So perhaps that's how it suggests machine intelligence. But perhaps the machine I am sensing is also a bureaucratic machine. “Works are what you say: stop before tumbling.” Could this be do with visas, and conditions of entry, and the imperative to choose your words very, very carefully, because you won't get a chance to revise or clarify, and if the wrong thing tumbles out, it could ruin everything? *Definitely* don't make a joke. A joke may be “[r]educed to an equality,” for instance, its status as a joke discarded, its supposed kernel of content mined for incriminating evidence. Or Border Control may have a different definition than you of what counts as employment (“[w]orks?”), for instance. There's another line that may support this reading. “In the time it took me to retrieve my cards, the connection imperative became a stylised refusal.” What cards? Well, “retrieve” suggests you had them before; these probably aren't *new* cards. A singular ‘card’ might mean an ATM. But when do you retrieve your cards, plural? A lost wallet or purse, now recovered? Detention and confiscation feels more likely. You were detained at the border; they took your ID cards away from you (while letting you keep whatever you kept them in), and now, just before they refuse you entry, and send you to a place that they probably call your home – whether or not you call it that – they tell you to go retrieve your cards. So might the transformation of “connection imperative” to “stylised refusal” be to do with the genocidal semi-permeability of the state membrane itself? And/or something more fine-grained, to do with

your attempt to humanize yourself in the eyes of a Border Control officer?

At the same time, the difficulty of the poem itself is not exactly confrontational. There are clear ways into the poem (or out of it, if you prefer). One of those is a slightly snarky, gently hankering humour. “The plan believes itself to be special, having been assured of its specialness since birth.” The tone throughout may be one of wry deadpan. “Reduced to an equality, my jokes become funnier.”

The poem also opens up via its scattering of sharp, lucid shorter lines: “I read poetry to maintain my honour.” “I read poetry to drink with imaginary friends.” The poem phases you in and out of difficulty. The parts that remain the most enigmatic always at least lend their tones and associations to the more vividly expressive parts adjacent.

A third way the poem opens up is via its solitary explicit citation: “Make three true “we” statements each.” OK, I duly Google, half-expecting to find something to do with grassroots activism, something to do with building solidarity. It could be to do with that as well. But as it happens, what I find first is an article I've actually read before! It's all about a psychology study “that explores whether intimacy between two strangers can be accelerated by having them ask each other a specific series of personal questions.” Making three true “we” statements is a step (about two-thirds of the way through) in a kind of love philtre.

Here are some of the slightly later steps:

29. Share with your partner an embarrassing moment in your life.
30. When did you last cry in front of another person? By yourself?
31. Tell your partner something that you like about them already.
32. What, if anything, is too serious to be joked about?<sup>9</sup>

So if the imagery of Border Control wasn't just my hermeneutic hallucination, then this fixed list of questions – all about getting to know who someone really is – takes on another significance. It's about interrogative discipline. Not just getting to know who someone really is, not just “run[ning] circles round the subject,” but *changing* the subject. Constructing them as something comprehensible and controllable.

But there is still a faint utopian glimmer about procedurally “getting to know you” and the *n* number of questions that lead to love. Or at least, as thought experiment, it remains tantalizing, in a ‘shag / marry / kill / initiate unstoppable love-generating procedures’ kind of way: if such procedures existed, who would you use them on? Who wouldn't you? Why? And what if you were to pick a pretentiously eclectic ensemble of people to love: what love is compossible with what other love, and how?

It also reminds me of these lines, from another poem by Nisha

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9. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/fashion/no-37-big-wedding-or-small.html>

Ramayya, 'Responses to a Tantric Poetics.' It is awkward bumping into one's own autotomizing privilege at the best of times; but what is super the worst is when your privilege is right in the middle of making spice mistakes and you are doing yoga: "Mistaking cumin for cardamom, my privilege pretends not to know me or my downward-facing dog. | | Walk around the subject, maintaining distance; become knowing and known; practise, perform, and accomplish. | | Complicity: Tantric poetics surrounds itself with abuse, loud drumming, and aborted affects."<sup>10</sup>

A fourth way into 'Awkward Bumping in the Theory District,' or at least along it, is its musicality.

A fifth way that 'Awkward Bumping in the Theory District' opens up is by *acknowledging* its difficulty, especially in its title. The Theory District might suggest the commerce hub where you go to get all your bargain jargon. So perhaps the poem's difficulty itself is partly in jest. But if the academic obscurantism of some philosophy and critical theory *is* being satirized, I think it is with hope rather than contempt. It is certainly the kind of satire that is in love with the practice it is poking fun at, that is even *driven* to poke fun at it. It might be driven by a flirtatious desire. It might be driven by stalkerish dismay that that love is somehow unreciprocated or its promise unfulfilled. It might be driven by a desire to mobilize a critique from a position of sympathy that otherwise might be mobilized from a position of hostility. It might (and this one feels most relevant to Ramayya's poem) be driven out of a sense that the autonomy and legitimacy of the practice is so compromised that it *needs* satire to prop it up, to keep it going.

The Theory District could also suggest tourism and nostalgia: if you are visiting academia, you simply *must* go to the old part of town, see the beautiful concept-architecture left over from 1990s, when it was still okay to build in an uncompromisingly challenging and tangled style, so long as you were saying something really worthwhile.

In another part of the poem, there may also be a suggestion of a classroom: "I tear my way through getting to know you (the half-life reasserts itself wholefully). Not politicised, | not finding my people, frowning to hear the question asked." At least, a question has been asked that is somehow not right – perhaps the question is not politicised, perhaps it is racist in its assumptions, tacitly erasing a history ("not finding my people") – and all the speaker can do is frown.

Alternatively, it is those assumptions that are being questioned, but the question is met immediately with a frown. Perhaps posing awkward political questions is not *nice*. This could even be Anna Leonowens's classroom, as she tears her way through 'getting to know you' in Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical *The King and I*.

Getting to know you.  
Putting it my way, but nicely.  
You are precisely  
My cup of tea.<sup>11</sup>

Lenowens was British governess to the children of King Mongkut of Siam in the early 1860s. In Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical, her explicit anti-slavery, anti-imperialist, pro-modernization, somewhat proto-feminist stance all becomes part and parcel of the 'soft' power of neo-colonial Western domination: "putting it my way, but nicely."

'Awkward Bumping' *could* suggest sex. Awkward bumping uglies. Awkward bump and grind. Awkward clam bumping. Throughout the poem there are subtle quick switches between the muscularity of abstraction and a more bodily, tactile muscularity. "In the time it took me to retrieve my cards, the connection imperative became a stylised refusal."

By now, 'Awkward Bumping' also reminds me pretty strongly of the Earl of Shaftesbury, writing about socialisation as a kind of not-that-awkward bumping – "All Politeness is owing to Liberty [...] We polish one another, and rub off our Corners and rough Sides by a sort of *amicable Collision*" – as well as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten writing about the "new feel in the undercommons": "[s]kin, against epidermalisation, senses touching. Thrown together touching each other we were denied all sentiment, denied all the things that were supposed to produce sentiment, family, nation, language, religion, place, home. Though forced to touch and be touched, to sense and be sensed in that space of no space, though refused sentiment, history and home, we feel (for) each other" (*The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013), p.98).

A closely related 'Awkward Bump' is the fist bump fail, and more generally, the collision of different in-group norms around hello or goodbye or hooray. When I see a fist, I play it safe and air-kiss five thousand times.<sup>12</sup> These glitches in well-intentioned expectant people's practices of bodily contact and personal space could be a way of thinking about the frontiers among the disparate materials that are drawn together to form this poem.

Or there is the accidental and simultaneously creepy / utopian / serendipitous / hilarious moment when a crush of bodies randomly fleshes out some configuration that happens to overlap with what normally occurs only through intimacy. Like when you hear a scrap of conversation, and it's something intense and serious, and you react, and your reaction is spotted. Or when someone mistakes you for their companion and casually does something for you or offers to hold something for you. Or, best of all, when somebody's hand accidentally brushes against yours. Here's Fred Moten in 'hand up to your

11. See e.g. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRpeFRc\\_xM4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRpeFRc_xM4) which I think is a clip of the 1956 film where Anna is played by Deborah Kerr with Marni Nixon singing the songs except that here Julie Andrews's 1992 studio cast version has been dubbed over.

12. Cf. Cruz and Fiorina: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzoC3TJRq2w>.

10. <http://www.datableedzine.com/#!nisharamayyaresponsestantricpoetics/cr78>

ear' from *The Little Edges* (2015): "[e]verybody brush somebody | hand till work is gone to the alternate slam. How long can you sustain the foursquare? This is how to make | little works just walking down the street, collaborating with the hand you brush, as shawls serrate the length | of her arcade." And, in the same piece of shaped prose, "[m]ake a mix in violent rubbing till your work | is gone" (p.25).

But probably the most relevant sense of 'Awkward Bumping' is bumping into somebody you know (or somebody you recognise but can't quite place). And *those* awkwardnesses are myriad, so I won't even begin to list them. The awkwardness of such an encounter often isn't pre-determined by who you both are and your existing relationships with each other. Rather, the awkwardness is often an awkwardness that springs from the void. It is the awkwardness of anomie. That is, it often emerges in the course of a bungled or underwhelming improvised collaborative performance. It was never going to be an easy performance: this is a performance that calls on you both (by the suddenness of the encounter, by its fresh and random dimensions, by one or both being caught in the act) to be slightly new version of yourselves, and to enact a slightly new version of your relationship, to suture yourselves into a slightly new 'we' with slightly new norms and slightly new truths. In Ramayya's poem, the theme of the awkward improvised encounter plays out again in the line "[d]on't take the mutual response personally, a success story."<sup>13</sup> One of the intriguing things about awkward encounters is that many of them *shouldn't* be awkward. So they may do something a bit critical or diagnostic. They let you know that something about your working assumptions isn't quite right. Part of the feeling of awkwardness, perhaps, is the knowledge that serendipitous encounters are never *quite* as chance as they seem, and not because of fate, but because of systemic nudges: certain sorts of people are in certain sorts of spaces oftener than in others. Bumping into someone is a function of interlocking matrices of privilege and oppression. But to activate that knowledge, you have to be prepared not to take what happened "personally": you have to reject some of the blame for the awkwardness, and/or reject the tacit glory of shaping the encounter into non-awkwardness.

"We can do more than run circles around the subject" can be deciphered as a dismissal of the Theory District, and 'Awkward Bumping in the Theory District' might suggest the mutual embarrassment of implied author and implied reader when they run into each other in the context of the Theory District's ambitiously abstract language. Will implied author and implied reader both make excuses for being there – with whoever goes second inevitably sounding the less convincing? Or will a tiny spark of trust, perhaps fanned by a superstitious faith in fate, allow them to form a

13. "Don't take the mutual response personally" also sounds like a mutation of 'please excuse the group e-mail.' If so, what does the shrinkage from 'group' to 'mutual' imply? The notion that when you feel your speech and yourself torn in different directions, you shouldn't be too quick to blame the diversity of your interlocutors – since it would be just as impossible to be 'personal' if you were talking one-on-one? Maybe?

new intimacy on the basis of their shared interest? A shared interest which neither might ever have admitted to, save for this lucky bump? Or will a tacit agreement emerge to quietly respect each other's presence and activities within the Theory District without aspiring to a shared experience or to any real commensurability between their lives within the District and their lives outside of it?

I think about other districts. Financial districts? "Transferring the investment unkind, from mountain to cry." To do with self-valorising value, perhaps: the way financial capital can disregard the details of the material in which it is invested, the way it is unkindly not-in-kind, reproducing and exacerbating social hierarchies by levelling material distinctions. The poetry district, perhaps adjacent to the theory district? Or to the financial district? "I read poetry to maintain my honour." Here again, a concern again with hierarchy, with levels and levelling, and with social distance: although perhaps "[t]hinking of ourselves as more than distance corrects the attachment."

Joshua Clover's 'Metalipsis for Uyen Yua' contains the words "theory district":

[...] In fact I would give  
My left eye to be the beautiful boy who was in Alfie

but I'm not I'm Rihanna. This is my flag  
Of convenience when I am walking  
With headphones on through the theory district.

Those headphones: 'awkward [head] bopping'? Clover's poem doesn't give away big clues about what the theory district could be. Somewhere, apparently, where you might need a "flag of convenience" to mask who really owns you, and to avoid regulations and tax; and somewhere where being Rihanna might suffice for that. Clover's poem does claim that everybody is either Rihanna or Donald Sutherland "or maybe Michael Caine – whichever one was in Alfie" (so either Reshma Malayath or maybe Jude Law). The poem insists that this is true sort of *literally* rather than typologically – i.e. it's *not* that there are 'two kinds of people' exemplified by Riri and the Alfie actor. Its assertion that we are all one or the other may be a context which informs the imagery of halves and wholes that also appears in Ramayya's poem ("the half-life reasserts itself wholly").

Ramayya's poem ends with what just might be one true 'we' statement. Which is below quota (we need three, right? Three's the magic number), but it's a start.

"Grace as the ways we might fit."

### PART III

## Normative Transactions and Emotional Compensation — Elegy within the Freudian Economy

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by Eleanor Perry

*This text was presented at the Work, Performance, Poetry Symposium at Northumbria University in April 2015.*

I want to begin by signposting a tendency in mainstream elegy scholarship, broadly speaking,<sup>1</sup> to adopt the linguistic framework of economics<sup>2</sup> and capitalist structures of value which Freud uses in his 1917 paper *Mourning and Melancholia* to differentiate between a ‘normal’ model of mourning, and a pathological condition of ‘melancholia.’<sup>3</sup> This financial language — present in

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1. Key texts within mainstream elegy scholarship include Peter M. Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987); Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Diana Fuss, *Dying Modern: a meditation on elegy* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2013); W. David Shaw, *Elegy and Paradox: Testing the Conventions* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); David Kennedy, *Elegy* (Abingdon, Oxon and New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, ed. by Karen Weisman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), Eric Smith, *By Mourning Tongues: Studies in English Elegy* (Ipswich: The Boydell Press, 1977), Melissa F. Zeiger in *Beyond Consolation: death, sexuality, and the changing shapes of elegy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), and Celeste M. Schenck, ‘Feminism and Deconstruction: Re-Constructing the Elegy,’ *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 5.1 (Spring 1986), pp.13-27.

2. (*den Schmerz ökonomisch*; the economics of pain), Sigmund Freud, ‘Trauer und Melancholie’ in *Gesammelte Werke* (London: Imago Publishing Co., 1946), p.244.

3. It is worth noting that Freud repeatedly admits the difficulty of attempting to so: “[w]hy this compromise by which the command of reality is carried out piecemeal should be so extraordinarily painful is *not at all easy to explain in terms of economics*,” from Sigmund Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of*

Freud's original German — is translated into English in both the Joan Riviere version, and James Strachey's 'Standard Edition.'<sup>4</sup>

The use of an economic framework in order to understand loss and mourning does not originate with Freud. The idea of mourning *as* economy has been crucial to a Western understanding of the cultural practice since antiquity. Connections can be traced back at least as far as the Solonian laws, which linked mourning with the legal right to inherit by stipulating that an heir could not inherit property unless appropriate mourning rituals had been completed. In her examination of early modern elegy, Andrea Brady highlights how, in the seventeenth century, emotional attachment was understood in financial terms, as “an expression of [...] ‘interest’ in the dead,” while the soul was believed to be “God’s possession, a loan which may be recalled at any time.” She attributes this economic understanding of loss to a “new faith in commerce and its brokers, money and mechanised time.”<sup>5</sup> Freud’s economic model of mourning is most likely influenced by shifts in Victorian social and psychiatric thought. Inspired by the expansion of industrial capitalism, the principle metaphor for describing an individual’s condition became economic, with — according to Clark Lawlor — “much talk of over-spending one’s [...] reserves of energy” and the “potential bankruptcy” that certain lifestyles would cause to these reserves; and in which unproductive labour came to be seen as intolerable.<sup>6</sup> This paper will investigate some of the effects of adopting Freud’s model of mourning and its financial terminology as a way of reading and understanding elegy.<sup>7</sup>

Underpinning Freud’s model is the German term *Besetzung*, a term

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*Sigmund Freud (Volume XIV)*, trans. by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press), p.245 (my emphasis) [online] available from <[http://www.english.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Freud\\_MourningAndMelancholia.pdf](http://www.english.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Freud_MourningAndMelancholia.pdf)> [accessed 17 July 2015].

4. For instance, mourning is carried out “at great expense of time and cathectic energy” (p.245); melancholia is described as displaying “an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale” (p.246); and melancholia is discussed in terms of a “large expenditure of psychical energy [...] at last becom[ing] unnecessary” (p.254); and as “expenditures of energy in repression” (p.254).

5. Andrea Brady, *English Funerary Elegy in the Seventeenth Century: Laws in Mourning* (Basingstoke, England and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.55 and p.61.

6. See *From Melancholia to Prozac: A History of Depression* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), p.106.

7. See, for instance, William Watkin, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p.122 (who refers to mourning as the “dis- and re-investment of love” and refers to the melancholic’s incapability to speak of the affect of loss in such a way as the loss could be “entered into the ledgers of desire [...] by virtue of the economy of the symbolic”); Kennedy, *Elegy*, p.40 (who adheres to the translation of *cathexis* as *investment*, and refers to the “amount of energy invested in any attachment, mental process or mental structure”); Ramazani, *The Poetry of Mourning*, p.255 (who describes how elegists use poetry to “rationalize the loss as the repayment of a sacred loan”); Sacks, *The English Elegy*, p.5, p.8 and p.240 (who refers to the process of elegiac troping as an “aesthetic compensation,” speaks of the “elegists reward,” and of Hardy’s refusal of the “transaction of renunciation and reward,” which features in conventional elegy); Zeiger, *Beyond Consolation*, p.81 (who refers to the “normative transactions of memorial poetry”) and Fuss, *Dying Modern*, p.5 (who speaks of the elegiac “burden of finding and providing emotional compensation”).

describing the subject’s erotic attachment to the other in terms of a quota of expended psychical energy.<sup>8</sup> Both Riviere and Strachey translate this term as *cathexis* — commonly considered synonymous with *investment* — although it is a term Freud deliberately avoided in his own translations.<sup>9</sup> Elegy scholarship’s understanding of *Besetzung* as *investment* presupposes that human attachments can be understood principally in terms of expenditure. According to Freud’s model, if ‘normal’ mourning is to take place, this expenditure must be *reinvested* when the attachment is broken. Withdrawal of attachment is effected via the “[r]eality testing” process — in which “memories and expectations” associated with the deceased are hypercathected — which forces the mourner to confront the reality of their loss. Once withdrawn, they then *reinvest* their attachment in a new object; a substitute.<sup>10</sup> Thus the ‘normal’ model operates as a transaction between ego and love-object, in which emotional attachment operates like a debt which must be recovered in order to be reinvested.

Understandings of loss in terms of debt and repayment are not new. Andrea Brady points out how seventeenth century consolatory poetry often urged that grieving parents consider their living children a form of recompense for those which had passed away. ‘Excessive’ attachment was considered sinful, and Brady highlights how God was thought to “correct [...] surplus attachment” through sacrifice, and subsequent children were to be considered compensation for that loss.<sup>11</sup> Freud’s ‘normal’ model reflects a similar — though secular — idea. Attachments operate as discrete and fixed values which can be measured and exchanged in the event of their loss; they are interchangeable, valuational and “zero sum.”<sup>12</sup> In order for loss to be balanced by a reinvestment in a substitute, each attachment must have an ‘absolute value’ which can be

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8. See Sigmund Freud, *Trauer und Melancholie*. Also see Juliana Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Symbolics of Loss in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), n44 for more on this.

9. The German word can also mean ‘occupation’ in the military sense. See Edwin Erwin, ed., *The Freud Encyclopedia: Theory, Therapy and Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), which asserts that the term has diversely been translated as “‘interest,’ ‘intensity,’ ‘excitation,’ ‘drive energies,’ ‘surges or quanta of energy,’ [and] ‘nervous energy’” (p.71). It is important to note that Freud, when translating his own work into English, used a number of different words for *Besetzung*, deliberately avoiding use of the term *cathexis* and refusing to provide an absolute definition of it. Despite considerable uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding this difficult term, the English translation of *Besetzung* as ‘cathexis’ or ‘investment’ forms the basis of — and is pervasive within — not only elegy studies, but also theoretical approaches to mourning across numerous disciplines: in sociological studies of death and bereavement; in social theory and anthropology; and in aesthetic studies of death in literature and art.

10. Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia,’ pp.244-249.

11. Brady, *English Funerary Elegy*, p.56.

12. Elizabeth Hallam, Jenny Hockey and Glennys Howarth, *Beyond the Body: Death and Social Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999) suggest that there is an assumption in the notion of ‘reinvestment’ that “meaningful relationships are monogamous and zero-sum” (pp.152-153).

measured in order to enable this exchange.<sup>13</sup> As such, the ‘normal’ model understands loss according to the fixed taxonomies and precise measurements of a capitalist social order. It eradicates any notion of particularity — since this would problematize possibilities of exchange. The Freudian model does not accommodate what Louise O. Fradenburg calls “our capacity to particularize — to form partialities” which would “allow [...] objects of desire to become special, unique [and] irreplaceable.”<sup>14</sup>

The ‘normal’ model is based on the liberal construct of the discrete, separate, self-contained, statistically-defined and sovereign individual.<sup>15</sup> ‘Melancholia,’ on the other hand, breaches the bounded self, calling into question the body as a separate and distinct container.<sup>16</sup> In presenting melancholia as an “open wound” — a violation of the skin — Freud indicates anxiety concerning the boundary separating self and world; inside and outside.<sup>17</sup> This recalls Archilochus’s description of loss as a ‘bloody wound’ (*haimatoen ... helkos*), and his differentiation between preferable grief responses — restrained, measured and masculine in nature (which Archilochus calls ‘endurance’ or *tlēmosunē*) — and the feminized, ‘irrational’ outpouring of emotion in the lament (*gunaikeion penthos*).<sup>18</sup> It also recalls Pierre Charron’s gendered description of grief — in *Of Wisdom* — as a wound that “takes away all that is manly and brave” and “gives [...] all the Softnesses and Infirmities of Women.”<sup>19</sup> Through this representation of melancholia, Freud situates

13. See Jean Baudrillard, *Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, trans. by Chris Turner (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE publications, 1998) for more on the absolute value of the individual, “forged by the whole of the Western tradition as the organizing myth of the Subject” (p.88).

14. Louise O. Fradenburg, “Voice Memorial”: Loss and Reparation in Chaucer’s Poetry,’ *Exemplaria*, 2.1 (March 1990) 169–202 (p.183).

15. See Clive Seale, *Constructing Death: The Sociology of Dying and Bereavement* (Cambridge, UK, New York, NY and Oakleigh, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.107, for more on how this relates to the medicalization of grief.

16. See Chad Lavin, *Eating Anxiety: The Perils of Food Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), pp.30–31, for more on the transgression of bodily boundaries and their political implications; and pp.137–139 for more on the significance of the skin in the popular imagination as a border between the sovereign self and the outside world.

17. Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia,’ p.253 (*offene Wunde*) and p.258 (*schmerzhaftes Wunde*). See Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* for her discussion of how a wound signifies an “impairment of the cover that guarantees corporeal integrity” (p.101). I am intentionally avoiding any association between Freud’s depiction of melancholia as an “open wound” and the implied castration anxiety. My intention is to interrogate Freudian frameworks by tracing their roots through transhistorical belief systems, rather than to draw comparisons between one Freudian system and another.

18. See Richard P. Martin, ‘Enigmas of the Lyric Voice’ in *Making Silence Speak: Women’s Voices in Greek Literature and Society*, ed. by André Lardinois and Laura McClure (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.67 for more on this fragment (Archilochus fragment 13).

19. Pierre Charron, *Of Wisdom*, vol. 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., trans. by George Stanhope (1707) p.230 [online] ebook available from <[http://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Of\\_Wisdom](http://books.google.co.uk/books/about/Of_Wisdom).

himself within a Western philosophical tradition which distinguishes between a ‘masculine’ mourning characterized by self-control and composure, and a ‘feminine’ mourning characterized by uninhibited outbursts of emotion.

Freud repeatedly refers to the ‘normal’ model as “work” — or as performing a work (*Trauerarbeit*). It is, he suggests, a “work of severance” which requires an “expenditure of energy” that will have “dissipated” by the time the work is completed.<sup>20</sup> The ‘normal’ model, then, represents grief as something to be psychologically ‘worked through,’ in order for it to be ‘resolved successfully.’ This understanding of mourning as a ‘working through’ of ‘tasks’ can also be traced back to the Solonian laws, which stipulated that “an adopted heir [could not] partake of the property of his adoptive father unless he [undertook] the sacred duties of the house of the deceased.” It was considered “unholy” for an heir to inherit property without having completed the rites due to the dead.<sup>21</sup> Since at least 6<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, then, mourning has been understood as a form of ‘work’ or civic ‘duty’ within an economic framework. In Baudrillard’s terms, it is an understanding in which death is “redeemed’ by an individual labour of mourning.”<sup>22</sup> What is considered ‘normal’ or ‘appropriate’ in mourning is understood as equivalent to the *degree of investment* a mourner had in the deceased. It is a cost to be paid or duty to be performed, the terms of which are dictated according to the nature of the relationship; consistent with familiarity, intimacy and amount of time acquainted.

‘Pathological’ mourning — within this economic framework — is a grief response which exceeds or falls short of the ‘normal’ or ‘appropriate’ equation. For Freud, it is a failure or refusal to perform the ‘normal’ transaction effectively.<sup>23</sup> Rather than reinvesting attachment in a substitute, the melancholic withdraws their attachment into the ego, substituting the deceased with a “narcissistic identification with the [original] object.”<sup>24</sup> Given the model’s economic structure, this refusal to reinvest the libido might be read as a figurative frugality or thrift. Freud, however, understands melancholia in terms of excess.<sup>25</sup> For him it is “something more than normal mourning,”

[http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=dswDAAAAcAAJ&redir\\_esc=y](http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=dswDAAAAcAAJ&redir_esc=y) [accessed 17 July 2015].

20. Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia,’ p.252 and p.255.

21. Margaret Alexiou, *The ritual lament in Greek tradition* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p.21 (the second quote is from a speech by Isaios quoted in Alexiou’s text).

22. Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. by Iain Hamilton Grant (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE publications, 1993): “The unconscious is subject in its entirety to the distortion of the death of a symbolic process (exchange, ritual) into an economic process (redemption, labour, debt, individual)” (pp.134–135). The emphasis in the text is his.

23. Hallam, Hockey and Howarth, *Beyond the Body*, describe it as a “barrier to reinvesting emotional energy in new relationships” (p.152). See also Crewe, ‘Elegy in English Drama’ in *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, who describes it as “inefficacious mourning” (p.519, my emphasis).

24. Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia,’ p.249.

25. For more on melancholia understood as excessive grieving or an excess of feeling, see Erik

in which an attachment — not reinvested — becomes a surplus.<sup>26</sup> Like many other aspects of the Freudian model, this association is not new. It can be traced back to a Hippocratic understanding of melancholia as an excess of black bile. It also reflects Tasso's notion of *soverchia maninconia*: a “surplus of melancholy” characterized by “excessive — or rather infinite — production of its own loss [...] a self forever mourning the loss of its own self.”<sup>27</sup> The Freudian model endorses ideas of melancholia-as-excess inherited from antiquity via the Stoic privileging of reason over emotion.

Reading melancholia as excess follows utilitarian principles in which excess of emotion is not only considered indecorous, but also wasteful. Outlining “profound mourning” as unproductive, Freud situates his model within a tradition that considers excessive grief a threat to social order.<sup>28</sup> This tradition also traces back to the Solonian laws, whose principle purpose was to prevent the social disturbance and civil unrest caused by public lamentation. In the seventeenth century, Pierre Charron expressed similar ideas about grief, which he believed to be “destructive to [...] Quiet and Comfort,” while preventing the “discharging [of] Duties, and looking after [...] Business.”<sup>29</sup> In order to counter its threat to social order, excessive mourning has historically been restricted, if not prohibited. Freud's model enables a cultural policing of this threat to social order; a bio-political form of management in which responses to loss can be judged as ‘appropriate’ or ‘inappropriate’; ‘adequate’ or ‘inadequate’; ‘successful’ or ‘unsuccessful’.<sup>30</sup> It promotes a prescribed set of culturally-constructed mourning protocols which represent a form of institutional control.

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Gray, ‘Victoria Dressed in Black: Poetry in an Elegiac Age’ in *The Oxford Handbook*, who notes the way in which The Times newspaper described Queen Victoria's ‘melancholic’ mourning behaviour as a “luxury of sorrow” (p.275, my emphasis). See also Sandra M. Gilbert, ‘Elegies Upon the Dying’ in *The Oxford Handbook*, who notes how a letter to the *New York Times Book Review* urged that a popular grief memoir “[h]ave the dignity” of expressing grief “in private” (p.373), as if the articulation of grief is extravagant and indulgent, and therefore unseemly.

26. Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia,’ p.256. See also Schiesari, *Gendering of Melancholia*, p.145 for more on this.

27. Schiesari, *Gendering of Melancholia*, pp.201-202. See p.97 for more on melancholia's roots in Hippocratic thought, and p.198, pp.201-202 and p.228 for more on Tasso's *soverchia maninconia*.

28. Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia,’ p.244: it “leaves nothing over for other purposes or other interests.”

29. Charron, *Of Wisdom*, p.223.

30. See Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), p.153, for more on the biopolitical management of bodies. See also R. Clifton Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Elegiac Literature* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), whose investigation of elegy in relation to ‘responsibility’ adheres to a similar framework, using the terms “ethical” and “unethical” mourning, rather than ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ (p.9). He reads elegy in terms of the “cultural work” it *should* be doing (p.11) and the “responsibilities proper to mourning” (p.12). The exchange which in Freud is understood as debt is outlined in Spargo as “moral accountability” (p.33).

This kind of cultural policing is pervasive within clinical understandings of grief and loss. Freud's model of mourning as ‘work’ forms the basis for stage- or phase-models of grief such as Worden's task-oriented stage theory and Kübler-Ross' ‘stages of grief,’ both of which are still broadly considered the normative pattern for ‘healthy’ mourning among medical practitioners, and within medical literature on grieving.<sup>31</sup> These in turn form the basis of an extremely profitable industry of counselling, therapy and self-help which promises recovery from — and resolution to — bereavement.<sup>32</sup> Wortman and Silver have examined the way in which stage models “postulat[e] a final stage of adaptation, which may be called recovery [...], acceptance [...], or

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31. J. W. Worden, *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner* (London: Tavistock, 1982); E. Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1980). See Hallam, Hockey and Howarth, *Beyond the Body*, for more on Worden's stage-theory in which “‘death’ is the product of ‘work,’” something which “comes into being, in a phenomenological sense, only when tasks of ‘grief work’ have been successfully accomplished” (pp.68-69). See also Seale, *Constructing Death*, p.194. Other key texts which conceive of bereavement in this way include: John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss Vol III – Loss: Sadness and Depression* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1980), which hinges on a distinction between ‘healthy’ and ‘pathological’ mourning, and which states: “[a]ll who have discussed *the nature of the processes engaged in healthy mourning* are agreed that amongst other things they effect [...] a withdrawal of emotional investment in the lost person and that they may prepare for making a relationship with a new one” (p.25); Colin Murray Parkes, *Bereavement* (London: Tavistock, 1972), which refers to grief as “the price we pay for love” (p.5) and outlines bereavement in terms of “loss and gain” (p.11) and “grief work” (p.75); Margaret S. Stroebe, Wolfgang Stroebe and Robert O. Hansson, eds., *The Handbook of Bereavement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), which contains 29 chapters based on the ‘normal’/‘pathological’ binary; Joseph H. Smith, ‘On the Work of Mourning’ in *Bereavement – Its Psychological Aspects*, edited by Bernard Schoenberg, Irwin Gerber et. al. (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1975), which takes as its starting point the Freudian notion of grief as ‘work’; and Beverley Raphael, *The Anatomy of Bereavement – a handbook for the caring professions* (Maryland and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), which states that “[o]nce the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and the libido may be invested in new object relationships” (p.66). Key texts which question the framework include: Sheila Payne, Sandra Horn and Marilyn Relf, *Loss and Bereavement* (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), which outlines conventional ideas about grief as ‘work’ but also examines the problematics of these ideas (p.79) and highlights the limitations of the empirical studies upon which such models are based; and John Archer, *The Nature of Grief* (London: Brunner-Routledge, 1999), which points out that a good deal of the “established folklore” surrounding the subject of grief is not adequately empirically supported, and that many of Freud's writings have survived untested, becoming “established dogma” (pp.21-22).

32. See Peter Dawson, ‘Grief is good news for pharmaceutical companies,’ *The Guardian*, 14 August 2012 [online] available from <<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/aug/14/grief-good-news-big-pharma>> [accessed 19 July 2015]. Pharmaceutical companies have a vested financial interest in whether the American Psychiatric Association give the go-ahead for “grief reactions of more than two weeks [to] be diagnosed as depression,” and whether the World Health Organisation classify ‘prolonged grief disorder’ as an illness. See also Sandra M. Gilbert, ‘Elegies Upon the Dying’ in *The Oxford Handbook*, which points out how therapeutic models are “designed to ensure that the bereaved will healthily ‘recover’ and achieve ‘closure’” (p.373).

reorganization” and that failure to reach this stage is routinely “identified as ‘pathological’ mourning in virtually every major treatise on the bereavement process.”<sup>33</sup>

Understood as ‘work,’ Freud’s model of ‘normal’ mourning promotes the idea that loss should be followed by compensation; that grief should be followed by recovery. Its capitalist principles of exchange depend on ancient consolatory (or *compensatory*) mythic narratives of renewal, in which patterns of crisis are followed by a return to order.<sup>34</sup> Freud’s model strives towards a reintegration of ‘invested’ attachment in order to maintain psychological integrity and enable reinvestment elsewhere. Similar patterns are visible in traditional elegy and the mortuary rite, in which disintegration is followed by synthesis; destruction by creation; the part followed by the whole; a fall followed by redemption; and death by resurrection.<sup>35</sup>

What happens, then, when elegy is read according to this economic model? Scholarship which follows Freud tends to read elegy as a performance of the ‘work’ of mourning: either as textual representation of the “reality-

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33. Camille B. Wortman and Roxane Cohen Silver, ‘The Myths of Coping with Loss,’ *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 57.3 (1989) pp.349-357 (p.352). Wortman and Silver also highlight that there is very little evidence to support this notion, and that the limited data available suggest that “a state of resolution may not always be achieved” (p.353). They also point out that normative models may lead to dubious clinical practices which are not adequate for dealing with those who fail to recover, such as encouragement to “control their expressions of grief and to stop ‘dwelling on their problems’” (p.355).

34. Note how the ‘normal’ mourning transaction resembles conventional patterns of consolation and renewal: i.e., movement from initial shock through a number of steps (“reality-testing”) to recognition and acceptance of the loss, which involves a figurative separation (“decathection”) of elegist and lost other. Note also how it follows patterns of elegiac figural substitution (as in the myth of Daphne and Apollo: Daphne is *substituted* by the figure of the laurel wreath, which finally brings Apollo comfort). Rather than applying Freud’s model to Greek myth – as Sacks does – I suggest that Freud’s frameworks are themselves based on traditional mythic patterns of consolation.

35. See Brady, *English Funerary Elegy*, p.51, for more on elegy and mortuary ritual as process. See also Robert Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand*, trans. by Rodney and Claudia Needham (Abingdon, Oxon and New York, NY: Routledge, 2004), whose description of funerary ritual and its effects on society mirrors Freud’s model of ‘normal’ mourning and “reality-testing”: “we have put too much of ourselves into [the lost other], and participation in the same social life creates ties which are not to be severed in one day. The ‘factual evidence’ is assailed by a contrary flood of memories and images, of desires and hopes. The evidence imposes itself only gradually and it is not until the end of this prolonged conflict that we give in and believe in the separation as something real” (pp.81-82). See also Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (London: Souvenir Press, 2011), which highlights how these patterns of death and rebirth are ancient, “present in shamanistic times, in Zen thought, in Stoic thought, in Shakespeare’s King Lear, as well as in Judeo-Christian and modern existential thought” (p.57). Seale, *Constructing Death*, argues that these structures of thought – upon which many forms of ritual are based – “allow individuals to feel that their environment is peopled with majestic and benevolent forces” (p.30). Similarly, Smith, *By Mourning Tongues*, asserts that they signify the human need for “assurance in changelessness” (p.91) and the aim to “make sense and justice of the human predicament” (p.18).

testing” process, or as a “vehicle of a compensatory psychological work” which stands in for the lost other, or for the loss itself.<sup>36</sup> The latter can be framed in Louise O. Fradenburg’s terms as: “in place of the dead lover, the lovely elegy,” or equally, in Anne Carson’s exploration of the epitaphs of Simonides, via the question: “how many lines of elegiac verse are equal to an army of dead Euboeans?”<sup>37</sup> Envisaging elegy in this way risks making the subject into a commodity that can be replaced by the text. It also encourages an uncritical acceptance of the elegiac “I” as the voice of the poet, overlooking ways in which this lyric subject might be problematized.<sup>38</sup> It is reductive at best — and redundant at worst — to assume an elegy should be understood as the *actual* grief response of the poet at its time of writing. Though an elegy might be understood as performing or articulating the experience of grief, it is not analogous to it.<sup>39</sup> Further, to read elegy as synonymous with the Freudian ‘work’ of mourning — whose economic task is to restore order and provide consolation — is to read it as aesthetic compensation.<sup>40</sup> This accounts for the use — in elegy scholarship — of terms like ‘successful’ and ‘healthy’ to describe an elegy which has accomplished its ‘task’ by following patterns of consolation. Equally, this makes permissible the reading of elegies that reject these patterns as ‘unsuccessful,’ ‘ineffective’ or ‘inadequate’ because they do not complete the ‘work’ of mourning efficiently, or at all.<sup>41</sup> These elegies tend to be labelled ‘melancholic’ because they fail or refuse to follow this progression.

R. Clifton Spargo — writing on the ethics of elegy — suggests that, if elegy is understood according to a “cultural economics of value” such as that

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36. Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning*, p.11.

37. Fradenburg, ‘Voice Memorial,’ p.184; Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1999), p.76.

38. See Schiesari, *Gendering of Melancholia*, p.87, for discussion of how Kristeva does this with Nerval’s “El desdichado.”

39. See Kennedy, *Elegy*, p.122 and p.46. Citing Bowlby, Kennedy rightly points out that the psychoanalytic model for normative mourning is too simplistic to encapsulate the vastly differing, manifold and conflicting responses to mourning. On the other hand, in *Pastoral Elegy in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012), Iain Twiddy argues that “[t]here is necessarily a condensation of the mourning process in every elegy” (p.259).

40. See Sacks, *The English Elegy*, p.5.

41. See *Ibid.*: “we may wonder what measure of *success* to accord the poet’s work of mourning” (p.163); “Shelley has *successfully* completed much of the work of mourning” (p.165); and “most *successful* elegists are in fact those least afraid to repeat the traditional procedures of the genre” (p.326). See also Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*: “an elegy that is less *successful* in completing the work of mourning” (p.180); Watkin, *On Mourning*: “ethically speaking, the *successful* elegy makes the mourner into a bad person” (p.72); Shaw, *Elegy and Paradox*: “a bad elegy [...] may perform the work of mourning *more efficiently* than a good elegy” (p.181); and Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning*: “the *healthy* response to death would be characterized by an honest acceptance of our fate” (p.43, my emphasis). Twiddy, *Pastoral Elegy*, acknowledges the problematics of assessing the ‘value’ of an elegy in this way, although his suggestion that “[e]legy represents and performs in part the mourning process” is a way of reading elegy which allows this valuation to take place (p.8).

in Freud's model, "all of mourning's language-acts fail to produce anything *measurably effectual* in the way of action." In his view, in order for an elegy to be 'successful,' it must have a social function or utility for the living. It must provide symbolic compensation for loss in order that social order can be resumed. An elegy which articulates 'excessive' mourning, "accomplishes nothing on behalf of the other." It is a "useless expression of grief" which has no social value or practical benefit. For Spargo, an 'excessive' mourning "jeopardizes the mourner's capacity to gain pleasure from existence and might even lead to [...] decisions contradicting the rules of utilitarianism and thus the good of society." Further, he argues, to dwell on death "contradicts our Western optimism about the progress of culture and life."<sup>42</sup> It prevents the mourner from resuming their place within social order and fulfilling their cultural function. Elegy which 'excessively' mourns, then, is both disruptive and unproductive, since it runs counter to political order and social conformity.<sup>43</sup> Approaching elegy via the Freudian model, then — as a 'work' of mourning which is either 'normal' and 'successful,' or 'pathological' and 'unsuccessful' — limits the way in which it can be read. Promoting 'normal' mourning as a singular grief response against which all others can be measured allows elegy to be read according to frameworks of economy, utility and function. At present, this model is embedded within elegy scholarship's understanding of the genre. It is a framework that requires not simply revisioning and reformulating — which numerous texts have sought to do — but deconstructing and destabilizing.<sup>44</sup> Outside of the model, there is scope to develop new ways

42. Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning*, p.47, p.27, p.19, p.2, p.3, n278 and p.42 (my emphasis).

43. The mourning-as-work structural metaphor corresponds with the time-is-money metaphor because *time* and *work* are both understood as quantifiable resources which should be used productively. Time is a valuable commodity which should not be *wasted*, and melancholia (or mourning which exceeds 'normal' parameters) is considered *excessive*, or *unproductive*. See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p.7 and pp.66-67, for more on this.

44. See Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief & Mourning in Contemporary Britain* (London: The Cresset Press, 1965), which rejects the term *melancholia* in favour of *despair* (p.81) and critiques Freudian binaries (pp.118-119). Ramazani points out that many psychoanalytical and literary perspectives have adopted the abstract notion of 'normal' mourning as a "therapeutic ideal," enforcing upon mourning (and literary works of loss) a linear narrative that follows a "step-by-step program that leads from shock to recovery" (*Poetry of Mourning*, p.28), though he still adopts the Freudian binary of 'normal' mourning vs melancholia in order to characterize contemporary elegy, despite acknowledging the problematic gendering of that binary (p.35, p.268 and p.297) and admitting that it requires modification and revision in order to be applied to his argument (p.266). Watkin — despite insisting that the central aporia of Freud's (and his successors') work is the assumption that mourning and melancholia are different states of being which form part of the same process (*On Mourning*, p.178) and that a distinction between them should be avoided — still subscribes to the idea of mourning as process, which follows the same frameworks as Freud's model of mourning as 'work.' Though Spargo adopts critical readings of Freud, his understanding of mourning and elegy within a framework of ethics is unable to think outside of capitalist models (see, for instance, *The Ethics of Mourning*, p.19 and p.41). Schiesari also undertakes a critical approach to Freud's work, but,

of reading elegy: as plural, complex, diverse, nuanced and subject-specific responses to loss. Outside of the model's economic language, compensatory patterns, and binaries of 'normal' vs 'melancholic' mourning, elegies which are unpredictable and unstructured, directionless and disordered, or continual and assimilable might be read and understood *positively* rather than 'pathologically.'

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in attempting to revise (rather than destructure) the psychoanalytic frameworks upon which a gendered understanding of mourning is based, she ultimately still remains bound within those frameworks (see, for instance, *Gendering of Melancholia*, p.54).

HIX EROS #6 ERRATA

On p.36 - for “voiceless alveolar plosive” read “voiced alveolar plosive,” and for “sundered phenomena” read “sundered phonemes.”

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