Creative Redemption

Uncertainty in Poetic Creativity

by

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Creative Redemption: Uncertainty in Poetic Creativity

Argument:

Poetic creativity begins with forms that are also points of indeterminacy. Uncertainty is a condition for creativity. The notion that a resolution can be attempted is equally necessary. Uncertainty allows poets to threaten and to promise to redeem the discipline’s and their own capacity for persuasive, poetic expression. It offers opportunities to renew, at the risk of disproving, the power and appeal of the medium and of each poet’s influence. Uncertainty and redemption are concerns addressed in this thesis through original poetry and an exegesis. The poems are united by that which is new in the thesis, the development, through a range of themes and styles, of knowledge regarding relations between uncertainty and redemption in poetic creativity. The exegesis intersects with the poems physically and theoretically. Responses to Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Kevin Hart, and Harold Bloom, support a discussion of relations between language, experience, and poetic expression, relations that reveal dense integration but also ineradicable differences. Coherent, poetic effects compromise the experiences that inform them, marking the arrival of other experiences, and the impossibility of pure translation. Tensions between poets and their precursors are part of what informs the struggle to decide which transmutations might produce a work that is indeed poetry. The perfect poem is never achieved: no creative act redeems absolutely, for doubt is never entirely removed. Redemption reflects a poet’s sense that a surrogate for an impossible promise has been delivered. This surrogate is a poem that allows its author to consider that his or her influence and sensibilities have forged, not certainty itself, but poetic significance. Such significance is subjectively judged, in relation to other poems, and in relation to ideas about what poetry may yet become. Poems afford, accordingly, only a tenuous resolution amid uncertainties that are incessantly available, uncertainties that are unsettling, a source, perhaps, of anxiety, but also, within the medium, enabling. Revelation is always possible, though it may always fall to further creativity.
Introduction:

Language and Experience

Condemned to subjectivity in the grip of an intractable world, we are bound to refer to the authority of convention. Using an inherited language, we attempt to build meaningful representations of ourselves and our surroundings. Convention tells us what kinds of descriptions have been effective in the past. It cannot guarantee, however, that what we think and feel will seem to be satisfactorily expressed. Circumstances change, and we do not rely, accordingly, on convention alone. Spurred by the need, or desire, to voice responses peculiar to our time and to ourselves, we also engage individual creativity. Creative influence can be observed as an element of daily thought and speech, but becomes more concentrated in certain fields of work. One of these fields is poetry. A poet attempts to renew existing capacities for expression in ways that are both conventionally poetic and specific to his or her immediate situation. The task of this thesis is to ask what, in general, allows and drives the process. Relations between language, experience, and poetic expression, the uncertainties these relations invite and the opportunities they offer, are explored in detail. The argument begins with the assumption that these relations are informed by qualities intrinsic to language and language use. The task in this opening chapter is to consider what these qualities are.

We use a language comprised of signs that are, by definition, transferable into any number of expressions and into any number of relations with other signs. Inherently impersonal, these signs embed us in awareness, but also in mediation. Maurice Blanchot, who has written extensively on the relations between language and experience and whose work is significantly influential in this thesis, emphasises the duality: “The word gives me the being.” Blanchot writes, “but it gives it to me deprived of being”. Words are a means of expression, but are also signs that relate primarily to other signs rather than to specific events and feelings. For language to reflect being perfectly, either its signs would need to become so particularised that they would cease to be signs (the language would disappear), or our perceptions of our own being would need to be not partially but wholly conditioned by available terms of expression (nothing could then appear to be new). We live with neither
extreme. This realisation marks a further quality of the language we use. The word gives me the being and gives it to me deprived of being because signs are both flexible and impersonal. We are neither entirely controlling nor entirely controlled. Formal repetition combines with ongoing and subjective revision. Convention and the potential to extend, thwart, and adjust convention turn out to be part of the same arrangement. The word gives me the being because the effects of language can be (and are) repeatedly and subjectively renewed. The explications that follow for these claims are largely poststructural, and, with that, largely Derridean.

What language cannot do is deliver absolute certainty. “Truth, unveiling, illumination are no longer decided in the appropriation of the truth of being,” Jacques Derrida writes, “but are cast into its bottomless abyss as non-truth, veiling and dissimulation”.² He repeats the sentiment in another text: “No one inflection enjoys any absolute privilege, no meaning can be fixed or decided upon. No border is guaranteed, inside or out”.³ Derrida is not suggesting that we are powerless to say anything at all. His work demands, rather, an awareness of the provisionality of interpretative norms, an awareness “that the structure of the machine, or the springs, are not so tight, so that you can just try to dislocate”.⁴ There is a machine, and one we cannot avoid using, but an aporia of interpretative uncertainty resonates within it. Apparent truth, reasonableness, or legitimacy, can always be deconstructed; interpretative choices and ambiguities can always be exposed. The language we inherit, Derrida argues, is always (and already) a participant in an unrelieved and unresolved relay of signification. Jeremy Hawthorn reiterates that meaning “is always relational, never self-present or self-constituted”.⁵ Hence, “pure presence” becomes “chains of differential marks”.⁶ There are no transcendental signifiers, Derrida writes, only the complexity and contingency of

substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the ‘real’ supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc.⁷

Ceaseless movement ripples across infinite points of comparison, waving at a final signified that is never reached. “The sign”, Madan Sarup explains, “must be studied ‘under erasure’, always already inhabited by the trace of another sign which never appears as such”.⁸

Language allows a capacity for expression, but cannot secure the source(s) of
inspiration for any particular utterance. Complex feelings and ideas can appear to be communicated (this is in itself remarkable), histories can appear to be recorded, but the transition from being into language is not smooth. The relay of signs cannot be traced back to the subjects that seem to be its source: there are only other signs. Being-as-it-is and being-as-it-might-be-represented may reflect each other in passing, but cannot intersect. There is always a gap. Ann Smock, in her introduction to Blanchot’s *The Space of Literature*, suggests that a writer seeking complete integrity will find an “inexhaustibly persistent presence of absence”.9 Blanchot offers an analogy: if we stand beside a corpse, there is a sense in which the dead person remains with us while being also, and permanently, not with us.10 To represent a thing in words, Blanchot means, is to keep it with us while also removing it, necessarily, from the immediacy of being. The absence is not an emptiness so much as a fullness of presence that is, while imaginable, not directly accessible. This pure presence is constantly suggested by each signifier’s approach to its signified, but is not delivered. The supplement, as Derrida writes, is a promise of secure reference that escapes into other supplements;11 it facilitates perception, for through it we compare and relate one thing to others, and yet sabotages, infinitely deflecting, ideal realisations. Hence, Derrida writes, “The sign is always a sign of the Fall”.12 Language closets a potential we can conceive but cannot encounter. The poet seeking absolute integrity finds, in Blanchot’s words, “the abyss of the lost god, the infinite trace of absence, a moment to which Rilke comes closest perhaps in these three lines:

O you, lost god! You, infinite trace!  
By dismembering you the hostile forces had to disperse you  
To make of us now hearers and a mouth of Nature.”13

The notion of pure presence is, like Rilke’s “lost god”, a linguistic construction. We cannot know, in words, what it might entail, if it has meaning at all. It is not a state we can recall, nor one we can be sure is waiting to be discovered. Derrida says, “The sign is always a sign of the Fall”, but he is careful to qualify the statement by insisting that the fall from full presence may have *always* already occurred. The gap between being and language, the gap that allows a sign to be a sign, and the gap that implies, without delivering, the possibility of a greater presence, is a condition, Derrida tells us, of textuality. It is a condition, we might conclude, of our particular kind of consciousness. “[I]t is perhaps given to us to ‘live’
by way of a double relation. We live it one time as something we comprehend, grasp, bear, and master (even if we do so painfully and with difficulty) by relating it to some good or to some value, that is to say, finally, by relating it to Unity; we live it another time as something that escapes all employ and all end, and more, as that which escapes our very capacity to undergo it, but whose trial we cannot escape.\textsuperscript{14}

We entertain beliefs and hopes amid a trial that nothing solves. We expend effort to sustain favoured impressions or to justify their alteration, and yet these impressions are formed and expressed through a medium that renders them incessantly questionable. Beside the teasing, distant promise of the perfect representation is the constant, invasive threat of imprecision and irrelevance.

This analysis of language is complicated by the observation that to be translated into words, being must first be perceived as something to which words can be applied. To be recognised as experiences, our feelings, actions, and ideas need \textit{already} to have been partly signed. The sheer noise of each instant of being, of life itself, is delivered to consciousness via the filter of biological, cultural, and personal biases. These perceptual leanings need not all involve language directly, yet language cannot be ignored as a significant, contributing force. Relations between language and experience begin, then, prior to interpretative acts. Where, we might ask, does language end and experience start? There is no simple answer to this question. Yet, the pervasiveness of language does not remove experience from the equation. There are still feelings, events, and ideas that individuals do not find readily communicable. Immediacy and intimacy can seem, still, to be compromised by words. The “double relation” by which we live is not described by considering language and experience separately (since they are not entirely separable), but can be described as the duality of the idealisations we pursue through language and of the continuous sprawl of events and feelings that language influences but cannot seem to contain. Through the latter, we catch glimpses of the “trial we cannot escape”. The blanket of language, we learn, is not woven so closely as to keep comprehension safe from the arrival of uncertainty, regarding both ourselves and the language we use.

The fall from full presence, the “double relation” Blanchot refers to, need not be considered unfortunate. “[N]o fullness,” Blanchot tells us, “no certainty, can ever speak”.\textsuperscript{15} Uncertainty, the presence of absence, is the condition by which new
expression becomes possible. The statement is central to the argument of this thesis and will be returned to in various forms. Here, the concern still lies with language itself. The explication is again Derridean, though the relevance of Derrida’s work is perhaps not immediately obvious. Deconstruction exposes indeterminacies; creativity, on the other hand, requires the construction of significant meaning. The two would seem to be opposed. Stuart Sim suggests that, “Derrida rescues us from the determinism of structure only to land us in the abyss between signifier and signified”. How, Sim asks, is a collapse into “a babble of incommensurable discourses” to be prevented? Richard Kearney is equally suspicious: “If deconstruction prevents us from asserting or stating or identifying anything, then surely one ends up, not with ‘difference’, but with indifference, where nothing is anything, and everything is everything else?” Derrida works to expose, beneath the apparent rationality of existing texts, a language that cannot possibly deliver absolute meaning. He introduces the word “différance”, etymologically divided between “differ”, “differre” (meaning, in Latin, to scatter, or disperse) and “defer”, to emphasise his argument. It is an intentionally confused term, offered both as a necessarily inadequate summary of the sprawl within signification and as an admitted, as-if-visible part of that sprawl, not, accordingly, as an easily determinable concept. Kevin Hart refers to différance as “that groundless condition of possibility and impossibility”. For Derrida, it is the “gift of the remain(s)”; elsewhere, Derrida refers directly to différance as “the possibility of conceptuality”. Why are these terms, gift and possibility, appropriate? The descriptions highlight a concern in Derrida’s work not simply for taking texts apart, but for putting them together. Famously, Derrida espouses “the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation”. The fall from full presence, the comment implies, is the chance for ongoing involvement in perceptual and conceptual renewal. We affirm our own participation in the world in which we find ourselves by taking the opportunity language offers for forging more and other interpretations.

Deconstruction, as Derrida offers it, decentres, fissuring and dislocating an expected rationality. It also insists, however, on a potential for more and other meaning. The boundaries of reason are unforgivingly deregulated but they are not obliterated: the urge for intelligibility is not denied. We cannot resist a transcendental
reading absolutely, Derrida tells us, for this would “purely and simply destroy the trace of the text”. The “play of the world” is offered in opposition to the authority of convention, yet Derrida refuses to choose one or the other. He writes:

But is not the desire for a center, as a function of play itself, the indestructible itself? And in the repetition or return of play, how could the phantom of the center not call to us? It is here that the hesitation between writing as decentring and writing as an affirmation of play is infinite. This hesitation is part of play and links it to death.

The desire for a centre (death) and the desire for the breaking of centredness (play) turn out to be symbiotic. The hesitation that links them delivers the request and the opportunity for interpretative involvement. We do not find the centre – “the entire history of the concept of structure,” Derrida writes, “must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center” – yet nor is there no centre. To create, or simply to perceive, is to insert pauses and summations into the infinite play of signification and to produce “decidables” even though already disseminated and, accordingly, undecidable. We relate each experience “to Unity”, in Blanchot’s terms (quoted above), even as each experience “escapes all employ and all end”. Deconstruction need not be interpreted as celebrating dissemination over truth, or fragmentation over coherence (to this list V. Leitch adds “playfulness and hysteria over care and rationality”), but as describing the presence of the former amid impressions of the latter. We work with both. The threat of greater fragmentation arrives with the teasing promise that there is also a potential for greater coherency. The force of différance lies in the notion that neither the threat nor the tease can be resolved. Even amid the most over-powering of centres there are opportunities for other interpretative and thus expressive possibilities. There is no room for simply any response at all, for the machine of language and the world that informs it must still be negotiated. Yet there is no external authority by which one might judge, incontestably, what can and cannot be attempted.

For Sim, Derrida

sounds like someone on the very threshold of the millennium, but, frustratingly for him, not quite able to break through. All he can do is to ‘designate the crevice through which the unnameable glimmer beyond the closure can be glimpsed’.

There is no need to assume that Derrida wants to “break through” anything. To arrive
at “the unnameable glimmer” would be to lose the impetus for active interpretation, surely an undesirable result for one who celebrates the “gift of the remain(s)”. If there is a threshold, it is one to approach and to draw influence from, and not one to defeat and leave behind. What is relished is not the unnameable glimmer itself but the promise and uncertainty of the new millennium that is always about to arrive. At such a threshold, language reveals what Hart describes as “its uncanny ability to produce other meanings at unpredictable times”.\(^{30}\) It reveals the chance to renew the range and effect of our expressions. The source of uncertainty is in the process undepleted, and expression, ideally, is reinvigorated. Language, for Derrida, is a carrier of both vision and indeterminacy, of coherency and play. The “and” is irreducible. Nietzsche, comparably, and informing Derrida, describes a “Dionysiac flood tide” that can always break through the circular ripples of Apollonian vision, disordering contemplation and illumination.\(^{31}\) Apollo, the god of light and discernment, is a small vessel in stormy and depthless seas, floating in the “superfluity of life out of which the dionysian condition must again proceed”.\(^{32}\) Vision and expression are admitted and repeatedly re-admitted amid endless opportunities for constructing yet more and other intelligible illusions, none of which can boast immunity to revision. We are interpretatively alive, both writers insist, at the threshold between sense and uncertainty. Michael Serres, a writer also engaged by issues of non-finality and conceptual renewal, refers to a “touch of irrationality … a stroke of luck which gives us some breathing space, a loose fit in the machine which makes us alive”.\(^{33}\) For Serres, “non-completion does not mean ruinous residue or failure, but is the primary status of all things”.\(^{34}\) It is also, to borrow Serres’s tone, the breath of vigour, an earth-caught auroral energy discharged again and again in ever-translatable images. Serres’s Genesis offers an alternative metaphor: in Maria Assad’s words,

Genève is Serres’s attempt to unveil what has always been hidden in its starkness and nudity… Venus and the chaotic water, Venus in the ocean, the ocean clinging to Venus, chaos at the core of order and order within chaos. … She is Venus to whom viscidly cling the waters as she emerges and merges, in a thousand births, in multiple bIRTHINGS, possibilities, and disappearances. She is equally the turbulent abyss that harbors limitless multiples and from which boils up, now and then, the exquisite form of one of those possibilities. She is the beautiful manifestation of order that is in chaos and chaos that is beautiful in its innumerable possibilities of phenomenal manifestations.\(^{35}\)

To engage in creativity is to amplify the centre-play, Apollo-Dionysus, order-
chaos simultaneity. The instabilities creators invite need not be extreme. In practice, innumerable standards and assumptions regarding language use are embraced without question. A poet integrated into a particular culture, fluent in a particular language, and practised in the conventions of his or her field, will not revise all or even most of the “centres” he or she refers to. Yet a threshold where perception ceases its subservience to already available conclusions, where meaning and representation are made to some extent insecure, will be somewhere arrived at. Subservience alone denies active (and creative) interpretation. The point to emphasise is that such a threshold is always available: language dictates that where there is coherency, or a potential for coherency, there will also be indeterminacy. What creators might do with the instabilities they admit, how particular decisions are facilitated in the midst of indeterminacy, and why such decision-making is pursued, are questions answered in later sections of this thesis.
Interlude: Language

Language, “Communiqué” argues, can guarantee nothing. A poem, as it appears on the page, is not the poem that is received, but the point at which indeterminacies are unleashed into acts of interpretation. The poem “death” (following “Communiqué”) confirms that the sense we make of ourselves and our surroundings is forged above a relay of indeterminacy that can at any time erupt into a strong presence of absence. Meaning is fragile, the poems imply. The conventions that facilitate its construction cannot wholly hide the uncertainty.

Communiqué

Atomic ink (that says “Communiqué Atomic ink (that says…), and then adds “, red in the poem’s front window”, though the red fades), red in the poem’s front window,

fading through plate glass and becoming particles in atomic blue (the atomic ink, dispersing), says (the ink says, as it rises),

the mind is that blue sky, collecting red (also turquoise, purple, splinters of green, whatever the poet fancies: indigo, rose…)

and at nightfall, what isn’t lost in the starless recondenses: an image of a poem, called (something like) “Communiqué”
**death**

a breach in the language
puncturing into words
a needlepoint of
numb neglect – the crude roar
of rupture
crawling from where the
chilled tongue
no longer speaks,
a chaos that isn’t stanched:
elegies patch a rhythm
in a vacant sky
that softens, but
nothing mends, words
rolling over
in a squirming that
runs behind the page, a
flickering in their black dissolve.
Creative Redemption

The term “creative redemption”, given as the title of this thesis, is introduced to describe a poet’s response, and that of creators generally, to the uncertainties encountered in any act of creating. Elucidation of this term is the task of the thesis as a whole. With Derrida still in mind, an outline of the term is offered here. The idea of redemption is immediately contradictory. Derrida states that “The sign is always a sign of the Fall”, and the claim has been that the uncertainties in language are unable to be resolved. The “Fall”, further, has been portrayed as fortunate, yielding ongoing creative potential. What, then, is to be redeemed? Creative redemption refers not to the restoration of “pure presence”, for absence is never defeated. It refers, rather, to a poet’s arrival at a rewarding substitution. Blanchot describes the presence of absence by comparing it to a corpse. Extending the metaphor, it might be said that a poet responds to this absence not by bringing the corpse to life, but by writing an elegy for what has been lost. Following the writing of the elegy, the corpse will still be both with and not with the poet and the poem’s readers, but the quality of their relations to the corpse will have changed. Ideally, the change revolves around the belief that a reflection of the fullness of presence, (illusory) proof of its teasing proximity, has been produced. The elegy then consoles, as a substitution for what it cannot become, and celebrates, at the same time, its own vitality, demonstrated through the vigour with which it aspires to compensate for the loss of such an exalted life. The more convincing the elegy seems to be, the greater the sense of creative redemption for the poet concerned. Uncertainty may not be able to be eradicated (death is never cured), but a capacity for meaningful expression can still be affirmed, and affirmed with an intensity heightened by the proximity of death. But what counts, for a poet, as a substitution – can the fullness of presence be approached?

In creativity, personalised use of an existing language coincides with a depersonalisation of specific sensibilities. Experiences that seem internal and subjective are translated into something external and publishable within a medium that is consequently extended. A work is constructed that is at once of and outside its creator. Invention is an implied outcome. The resulting work, however, need not be revolutionary. The degree or conspicuousness of a creator’s originality need not define his or her creativity. A sense of authorship is necessary, yet the process of
finding expression for subjective impressions may yield only slight departures from convention and still seem significant to the creator concerned. What matters, with regard to creative redemption, is that renewed meaning or feeling can seem to be arrived at despite and because of encountered uncertainties. The threat of absence, the threat of meaninglessness or irrelevance, can seem to be (temporarily and provisionally) defeated. In poetry, and equivalently in other fields, the resulting poem or poetic effect becomes, for its author, satisfying and persuasive. Rather than mourning the presence of absence, the poem is seen to evidence that not all has been disabled. Not all potency, the poet is able to claim, has passed into the grave. The achievement is not absolute. The fullness of presence is that space, borrowing from Blanchot (writing, in turn, in response to Rilke),

to which the poet doubtless has no access, where he can penetrate only to disappear, which he attains only when he is united with the intimacy of the breach that makes him a mouth unheard, just as it makes him who hears into the weight of silence.\textsuperscript{36}

A poet would enter such a space, the comment implies, only by becoming the corpse itself. The substitution is the ambition to produce a work that is strong enough, or novel enough, to disguise, for a time, the absence that will not dissolve. To renew poetic expression, to deliver, however minimally, an effect or meaning not previously known, is to indeed imply that a gap has been filled, namely the gap the new work occupies. The sense of redemption can be rewarding, though it does not reduce the scope for more and other poems: absence retains its presence and the substitution can be repeated indefinitely.

It is fair to ask how a creator can know when or if a redeeming work has been produced. When, returning to Serres's metaphor, can Venus be said to be sufficiently clear of the water, of which she is in any case a part? Predictably, there can be no sure answer. Poets’ conceptions of what is satisfying in their own poetry will be informed by numerous comparisons with other poems. They will also be informed by personal and social influences outside the field of poetry. Each bias will be unique, but will also be joined to the network of meanings, historical, physical, and social, that describe the practices and cultures of which the poets are a part. We narrate our existence, Alasdair MacIntyre reminds us, using story lines that are neither told entirely for us nor entirely by us.\textsuperscript{37} In the poststructural terms of Jean-François Lyotard, “we have always already been told something, and we have always already
been spoken”. We are not free to tell simply any story at all. We are held by the viscosities of our time. Poets, if they are to perceive themselves as poets, will write themselves into stories about poetry. Before there can be participation in meaningful poetic exchange, sufficient conceptual reference points need to be developed regarding what poetry is and why it tends to be written. The writing of poetry, in other words, is in part contractual. In consequence, the choices arresting play and multiplicity (and releasing it into other regions) may seem like choices and not random fluctuations; impressions of consistency and of valid reasoning become attainable.

Creative redemption is experienced in relation to the historical, social, and conceptual conditions that allow work on a particular poem to seem, to the poet concerned, both possible and worthwhile. The various kinds of contracts these conditions help to shape are the topics of sections II and III of this thesis. It needs to be emphasised, however, that the presence of such contracts, and of the story line to which they contribute, locates but does not itself answer the question of how a poet is to recognise a moment of creative redemption. Even within the most detailed of story lines, nothing, by definition, can entirely determine what a person will create. Contracts can always be to some extent renegotiated and there are consequently no firm means of assessing individual poems. A sonnet that fails to meet the standard set by previous sonnets may be seen, in other eyes, to set a new standard for the sonnets yet to be written. A creator can ultimately rely only on his or her own (informed) judgement. Hence, an extreme personalisation of an existing language, a degree of originality, in other words, that threatens or denies public access to a work, may still seem legitimate to its author. There are examples of creators, Emily Dickinson is one, Gerard Manley Hopkins is another, who continued to create while their works remained largely unseen or misunderstood, sometimes forcefully rejected. These creators’ capacities to carry on communicating to an absent audience highlights a quality of the contracts with which they were involved. Poets participate in a community of ideas. Imagining the presence of a work within such a community may be a poet’s prime means of assessing its impact. The important illusion here is that the community exists “out there”: a poet’s individual influence is to be injected into (an internalised impression of) something outside him- or herself. The translation converts the poet’s bias into an event within a somewhat impersonal, textual reality. The poem is to become, for its author(s), at once intimate and independent. To work within a poetic community is to travel out, conceptually, to a peculiar, poetic
location. Poets conceive of themselves as writers of poetry only by convincing themselves of their arrival at this location. There is, in this sense, discipline in the quest for redemption.

But can a creation be part of a larger, impersonal network of meaning if no one else understands it? A maverick creator might claim that it can. Able to perceive, in his or her work, value that others fail to see, and able to believe the work has a place in the community of ideas to which it is offered, such a creator may find the strength to imagine that somewhere, or somewhen, there is an audience able to share his or her view. Many creators look for more tangible encouragement. Even with such encouragement, however, maverick-style self-assessment cannot be altogether avoided. Creative redemption is sought subjectively and without assurances. Accordingly, a work that is felt to be redeeming in one context and by one individual, need not seem so in other situations or to other creators. The rigour and daring with which particular contracts are explored and responded to will vary with the experiences, capabilities, and psychology of each individual, and with the circumstances of each creative act.

Creators have at various times attempted to bypass or at least to minimise the contractual framing of creativity. In so-called automatic writing (pursued by various writers from the 1920s onwards), the intent, as Blanchot explains, was to “put the hand that writes in contact with something original”. Via the rapid recording of what were termed “free” associations, direct access was to be gained to uncensored, uncompromised expression. A more recent and no less frustrated attempt to escape contractuality is illustrated by the blurred boundaries and “ungoverned” text of what has become known as Language Poetry. At first glance, this poetry seems to demand that internal, subjective play is a sufficient beginning and end for a legitimate creation. Much of Lyn Hejinian’s poetry, for instance, performs a music of associations that seems never to have been intended to mimic the species of authority relied on in the poetic canon. “Some see loud apples falling”, Hejinian writes,

```markdown
with less decision than likeness
It catches the night light
White line
And what of the listener?
That light is intellectually collapsing
There are such individual emotions
    that anyone knows oneself unprepared
with half-hoping adjustment but unsolved
```
Words, here, merge into effects that lose reason to a larger picture of a sprawling mind, a mind before being ordered by conventional logic. Yet logic prevails. Hejinian’s achievement has been to transform personal associations into a publicly available (and somewhat limited) signifier: the work becomes a symbol of subjectivity itself. To redeem one’s subjectivity by convincing oneself (and others) of its inherent worth is to intelligibly identify (an appropriately formalised) “subjectivity”. In this case, it is a “subjectivity” associable with the somewhat political intent of exposing, by swerving from, a subservience to an expected rationality. The work, of course, by being interpretable as such, fails to escape this rationality. It is for Hejinian as it is for deconstruction: “We have”, Derrida explains,

no language – no syntax and no lexicon – which is foreign to this history [of metaphysics]; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest.41

We cannot choose to not relate our words and deeds to the words and deeds around us. We cannot sanely escape into pure irrationality, though impressions of, or allusions to such freedom may be constructed. A creation is always, to some extent, a conventional argument, claiming at the very least that it is itself a legitimate thing for a creator to produce. Terry Eagleton, interpreting Theodor Adorno, offers that art

appears as the process by which rationality criticizes itself without being able to overcome itself. …The more the work of art seeks to liberate itself from external determinations, the more it becomes subject to self-positing principles of organization… [A]rt holds out against domination in its respect for the sensuous particular, but reveals itself again and again as an ideological ally of such oppression.42

Creative redemption consoles amid this entrapment in our own uncertain reasoning. It is the celebration of that degree of freedom that allows us to move from one principle of organisation to another, and to glimpse, between the two, our own capacity for renewal. The sensuous particular is as-if approached, its representation being sharpened by the new substitution our creative powers deliver.
Interlude: Redemption

“Song” began with a chance association between a lute and a ribcage. In mind, at the same time, was an unidentified emotion: grief had seemed likely, and for a while the poem was called “elegy”. Thom Gunn claims to find material for poems by reaching into unexplained areas of the mind, in which the air is too thickly primitive or too fine for us to live continually. From that reaching I bring back loot, and don’t always know at first what that loot is. The materials with which “Song” began were “loot” of the kind Gunn refers to. There was something subjectively appealing about the poem’s initial stages, and something appealing, more so, in attempting to realise significance for what might otherwise have been dismissed as a meaningless juxtaposition. “Song” celebrates this realisation. It consoles, further, by promising itself as the precursor to that poem yet to be written.

Song

love presses

like a lute

on the rib cage,

strung inside the heart.
Focus, Sections I-III

Creativity is a response to uncertainty. It is a response driven, we can now say, by an urge for creative redemption, an urge kept alive by the impossibility of arriving at absolute certainty and by, at once, the possibility of producing a significant surrogate. For poets, linguistic indeterminacies yield endless opportunities for creative expression. They are not the only uncertainties poets encounter, nor are they conducive to poetic creativity in isolation. The contracts, or story lines, poets embrace, the conditions they accept and negotiate in order to perceive themselves as poets, lend direction. They introduce, also, further sources of absence and ambiguity – there are no transcendental story lines. Poetic contracts and the uncertainties that are invited by them are examined in all sections of this exegesis. The relations between language, experience, and poetic expression, as implied by these contracts, remain the central point of focus in an ongoing discussion of uncertainty and redemption in poetic creativity. Section II of this exegesis considers, specifically, the technical contracts poets embrace. Creative redemption, it is argued, is experienced relative, in part, to a poet’s knowledge and perceptions of poetic forms and techniques. By negotiating a particular technical contract, by deciding to write, for example, a Shakespearean sonnet, a limerick, or a Language poem, a poet can set a challenge that both channels and amplifies his or her creative efforts. Ambitions, doubts, rewards, and disappointments can all be intensified. Since contracts can always be revised, a chosen poetic form can also become a site for experimentation. Uncertainty can be drawn from the question of how much and what kind of divergence from convention might be satisfying in a poem, and from the risk that this divergence might yield a contract that the poet concerned cannot fulfil. Redemption may seem all the more urgent.

In section III, attention is given to what are termed the “aesthetic” contracts of poetry and to the multiple psychological pressures and motivations that contribute to experiences of creative redemption. When is creativity perceivable as worthwhile or appealing? What qualities in a poem, or in the act of writing, facilitate such appeal? Which needs and ideals might spur and sustain a poet’s efforts? In considering these questions, the pleasure and pain a creator experiences while creating, and his or her organisations of these feelings (into, for example, hope and
endurance), is given relation to expectations within the field. Pressure issuing from
the need for creators to diverge in their work from the sources of authority they are to
simultaneously consult, by the need, in other words, to produce something
recognisably poetic but also recognisably individual, is especially emphasised. This
tension accents the notion that what is to be created is the very work that is absent
from the field as it stands. The task of the modern poet, it declares, is to reveal what
is missing in poetic expression; it is to renew and modernise our representations of
being, and, by implication (though forever illusively), to draw poetic expression
closer to being itself. The impact of a poet’s personal needs and anxieties on this and
the other aesthetic contracts he or she negotiates is also discussed. Creative
redemption, it is argued, is experienced not simply with the arrival of an end product,
but through satisfying involvement in what can be unforgiving and indeterminate
processes and ideals. A poet cannot know precisely what is needed to effect
compelling, poetic expressions, and cannot be sure, in any particular instance, that
either he or she or the medium has what it takes to produce the desired poem. Amid
such uncertainty, the urge for redemption can carry considerable psychological
weight.

Technical and aesthetic contracts are pursued, in creativity, in conjunction
with efforts to express or make sense of subjective associations. It need not be clear
which comes first – curiosity regarding a technique, or a desire for a certain quality
of expression, may lead to, emerge with, and/or follow a particular thematic interest.
Creative redemption will inevitably involve realisations on all three levels. The urge
to express internal, subjective impressions, and the compromises necessitated by the
translation of these impressions into poetry, are considered in section I. In practice,
the thematic, technical, and aesthetic elements of poetic creativity each inform the
other. The interactions are complex. Poetic forms and ideals become part of what
allows close attention to be given to particular thoughts and experiences, and may
themselves contribute to what those experiences are perceived to be. There is no
division in this process to match that given in this exegesis. The separation is a
convenience, used to simplify the discussion. Section I allows emphasis to be given
to the broad context in which creative redemption is experienced, namely the
formation, from internal associations, of publishable expression. Direct transcriptions
of subjective impressions are intrinsically impossible. We create amid what
Christopher Norris describes, deconstructively, as “the ‘abysmal’ slippages and
detours of all understanding”.

Persuasion, section I argues, becomes the work of the poet.

Informing the exegesis, and augmenting its discussion, are the original poems that appear within it. After each section, large collections of poems are offered, examining poetically the concerns the preceding chapters raise. Where this examination is not direct, it occurs via the writing processes by which the poems were produced. The poems following section I, for example, are presented as attempts to accurately translate specific events and feelings. Uncertainty and its redemption are broadly considered in some of these poems (those on death, for example), but the focus here is on the capacity for poetic expression to yield convincing representations of selected impressions. Uncertainty is revealed not thematically but in the structural distance between the poems’ words and the subjects they describe. Redemption lies in their author’s sense that significant understandings of elements of each subject are still approached. Writing processes are also central to the issues addressed by the poems following section II. While uncertainty, in various forms, occupies many of these poems thematically, their main function is to explore the effects of specific technical contracts. Many test the licence that can be granted by poetic form for staging unconventional effects, and ask how experimentation balances, in this process, with responsibility. Several imported influences, from, for example, the contracts that characterise prose and mathematics, are employed to offer licence, as well as direction, of contrasting kinds. Again, uncertainty and redemption lie at the core of these poems. A technical contract cannot ensure the legitimacy or effectiveness of the work that follows from it. The choice of contract, whether conventional or experimental, needs always to be justified. The technical challenge a poet sets is effectively an invitation to a degree of doubt against which his or her creative powers can then be directed. The doubt sensed, and the degree found to be useful, will be specific to individual poems and poets. The call for redemption, however, cannot be avoided altogether. To use this knowledge, the poems imply, is to find, for each poem, a balance between form and ambiguity that is conducive to creativity.

Following section III, a collection of poems is offered that draws thematically around the more intimate aspects of poetic creativity. Creative processes are considered not in light of their outcomes or of the forms and techniques they involve, but with regard for their impact on and importance to individual creators. The poems
consider, for example, what it means to feel creatively inspired, to feel compelled to
create, to seek redemption, and to sense, in the act of creating, uncertainty’s rise and
(illusive) fall. In creativity, the poems argue, uncertainties are amplified and the urge
for redemption accented not only with respect to the works being created, but also,
and at once, within the thoughts of self that are entertained by the individuals
creating them. The personal involvement, the pleasure and pain induced, drives the
process. These poems, and those of the preceding collections, are discussed in more
detail in the introductions that accompany them.

The first large group of poems in this thesis appears at the end of this chapter.
Its concern, addressed thematically, is with the uncertainty we encounter in our
knowledge of ourselves, of others, and of our surroundings. The gap between
language and experience, the presence of absence, features strongly in many of the
poems. Two poems belonging to this collection, “Communiqué” and “death”, have
already been offered. “Gap”, “Language”, and “Critical Consciousness” are among
those included with the works that follow. There is uncertainty in our use of
language, the poems imply, yet we are dependent on the impressions of order
language nonetheless allows. There is greater uncertainty where language appears to
fail us altogether – this is the claim in “night, no cousin of mine”. We may at times
feel able to access understandings that do not require words (see “Bartering with a
young child”): the sensuous particular, to use Eagleton’s term, does seem to be
somewhere. Yet, this feeling is itself a translation. We do not recognise the sensuous
particular without the references words provide. We commit ourselves, inevitably, to
chains of substitutions. We may perceive ourselves as doing so not only in our
attempts to represent immediate experiences, but also in our attempts to remember
events and to express our ideals. We are uncertain about our pasts, our futures, and
ourselves in ways that relate strongly to the gap between being and meaning already
described. The poems, consequently, do not discuss language alone. “theft”,
“memory”, and “falling into doubt” consider, for example, the uncertainties in our
recall of particular events and uncertainties in our regard for ourselves. As a whole,
the collection argues that there is always something to be redeemed. It both continues
the preceding discussion and begins the work pursued in section I.
Poems: Uncertainty
hieroglyphic

crawling into his ears, the scratchings
of his pen gnaw on the sinews
to his heart;

the loudest of words
spill back into his field of vision
and he strains to hear

what was audible, or so he dreams,
before the pen
was raised;

hieroglyphs
scatter from the vowels he utters,
and his view,

filtered by their lines, shows only glimmers
of its promise; but he writes,
sifting for what remains.
Gap:

to inhabit the wastelands of a room,

where the pull into bounds unravels,
where the edging on the moment’s claim,

like the tying
of untrammelled real,

leaches into margins –

what the nets of language
leave, stretched hands,

behind discourse, tangle,
in the fray of an omitted life.

There’s noise inside the silence,

nerve cells not broken
by the birth of voice, a womb

still bleeding what
syntax doesn’t notice,

in an underland, in the shadows of the eye.
Language

like chewing
with someone else’s saliva;

like inheriting a bag full of everything you need
and never finding the side pockets;

like living in bandages, knees bound to the chest,
and believing in the unravelling;

like a question,
each part of the answer
given to 60 million people
who barely meet;

like a child you’ve raised, older than you are,
who sends messages, but never comes home for dinner;

and like the hues of every leaf from every spring
in dark baskets on a black floor – the stumbling.
final poem

day is night... an answer,
buried out of reach,
and without a question... there's nowhere else to go:
    snowfall stalls incursions
from the summer rain and
    it's the new ice age. We're
crossing out the fear of our own voice,
and saying
**Bartering with a young child**

Words stumble on him, hammering for a place of entry. Some collapse on his mind’s floor and idle, waiting for contact. A few fall onto his rough tongue, and he rolls them past lips enamoured only of textures.

Language in me stoops to hold him, and its slip resounds. The child says I wasn’t born this way. I tell him there’s forgetfulness, but he lends his hand, and on the fringe of silence, ears pressed to our passing, we walk as if time can’t end.

Short legs break small time into fields and we feed the ducks on what tears from my years of reason. Near the river-reeds, there are flowers no-one’s planted, and we carry blooms back from the foreshore.

And it’s true: the colour fades, the sap bleeds: at fence lines, I’m loosened from their fragrance; at the house, the child uncurls his fingers – he’s hurling vowels back the way we came, and words fill the hollows of my skull. The world evicts us.

Yet at nightfall, before he sleeps, this child finds me, pulls me into his arms, and his touch, dark-bright and wordless, tells me in our palms there are wild seeds, and in the distance, the prospering of unwritten hours.
Mountain

As if rock might spread its infection.
Pressing soil into cheekbones
To break the looming of a mountain’s wall.
Outcrops, almost sharp against the skin,
Wielded by a virulent blue.

Coming home, an avalanche of boulders
Leaves the pebbles of stony words.
raison d'être

stretching mouths behind the glass sheets of discourse
into textures of noise and bodily emotion,
that to those still verbal are the half-molten curves
distorting each reflection…

(a presence of silence, despite the uproar,
in the under-mirror face, as if,
behind the membrane, sounds draw
close but refuse to meet)

…we strike a transparency

(an intermittent lie, though,
on the verbal side, counters the problem, welds
the offending murmur)
Naught:

a graceless nothing, so insistent on being
something that it
grows a skin, callused but transparent.
The void, on the inside,
bulges, and light passing through
distorts into life itself.

I’m growing roses in its
delicate pores, awed

by where the rootlets build.
Breath mark
the first note: light untangles from its past,
a gradual spill, a song in the wave of morning, mist, like
words from each life, fog, of ardour, war, each breath’s silence
stirring from the night, memories of hate, and of love, rolling each into
oceans, the song, from past moons, long seasons, lifting from cries of joy and
mourning, the tide
infusing each note
entangles, a gradual
the song’s rise, each
her voice unlooses
silence, a trace of
circling, dew drops
where each breath
sea stealing through
sound deepening as
the tides of vowels,
empires, and love
trysts, vengeance, still dispersing, parley in the breath inside her lungs, her
hymn not of solitude, but of sea tides, light still untangling, and betrayal
leaning into trust, each, as it unravels, passing through her song,
the resonance of dawn awaking, stirring the memory that
the long, slow tide dissembles…
and restores.

Vowels in a clear dawn,
the sounds of concord,
parley,
betrayal, all hung
in the in-breath of her song.


night, no cousin of mine

don’t step forward,
  dark water like a threat, don’t
touch, or breathe, just listen.

the flux, the river’s
stutter, hoes, cutting up the silence,

and what rends:
  the ears still witness
what the eyes, in the gloom,

don’t see: there’s no shore
one might arrive at, no

crest to tie the mind’s
  search, just
the passing of what in

passing never comes, ripples
stripping with their own sound

what illusion in the shell of day
  had said we held.
the river’s uninvolved, leaves

the heart pining
for the glint of inscription, that

indent of engraving thought.
Scholar

She walks in me
and imagines I am here when she is gone.

I am not met. She calls me all truth
and not her truth,

and dissembles glimpses:
I am alpine pools, or myrtle,

or I am stone.
And in me, though she turns away,

are the catacombs of custom,
where the masons build their order.

She would find me
where she does not pass, but joins,

and would call herself the wind,
stretching to dissipation:

“I am here and this is real”, she cries,
“I am here and this is real”.

Yet the masons know
loose words may merely age.
She walks to find her will.
I lend thistledown

in a gaping sky, and she follows,
as it falls, lifting
to see what draws her. And as she nears,
paths fade to rubble.

She’s edging into lost terrain,
and maps, that she might return,

the rhythm of her walking,
clutching what she’s seen,

a quarry
for the masons’ pride.
Aftermath

Words left across empty chairs
mingle with her own. On her face
are the imprints of inflections.

She finds no rest.
Notions burrow into bone,
gestures rub her sides,

as the accounts she’s heard,
the rumours, the revelations,
barrage in her skull.

She wants proof.
Yet each voice speaks
in faint mimicries of her timbre,

fragments of herself
lean into words said,
spinning what she remembers

through the shadows of her need.
Sleep calls, but she won’t answer.
She returns to each chair.

There’s no text, no whisper,
and enmeshed behind the night’s veneer,
she remains alone.
Written on the Tailor’s Door

Reason defeats its own grappling in the end
and still persuades, wrapped around the sprawl of living.

Hope is not the freedom it pretends, but a room
in the halls of utterance where the mind spins,

designing garments for a larger world; in their folds,
an envelope of air no will expels, neither warm nor cold.

You dress not to mimic skin, but to keep
the sharp, unshaded light from falling undeflected,

wanting what you won’t endure, and
trading for import. So we shuffle

through reason’s styles, a loose mosaic meaning
everything; at the joins, the brief chill of exposure.
Referring to the Mind,

a friend says she’d gladly let hers keep yours company, but doesn’t offer to take them both home; eventually she leaves, and thought’s free radicals spin into wilder orbits: you’re redesigning her – out of view, she fades dangerously into nothing and you open the fickle arts of memory, hoping she’ll build: it’s a snowflake phenomenon, each molecule stretching into expressions of weather; you craft imprints, dusting her into the annals, and she hovers in you, she’s snow on a cerebral infold; you dream of knowing all of her, freezing her mind, melting her into clear pools deep enough to swim in; you’d believe in her, uniting into a double ‘I’ …but there’s no room – you’re a blue flame feeding on thought’s air, on an outcrop, in a cave: she’d drown you. So you burn, and her molecules, desiccating, drift into other systems.
Language II

Finding no womb,
we conceive in vitro,
gloved hands

in a dissipating past,
peeling morphemes
from where they suckle.

Splicing, we
plant vowels, we’re
forging our speaking selves,

faking the mien
of one who thinks
from the inside.

Breath
lets the belly swell,
stirring in the tongue

the jolt that
hammers the mouth
into waking,

while the mind,
watching from its vantage its
incubating tubes,

times its first plunge,
taking, on glass probes,
what it can, back
to its undulations, thus
dispersing into cells the tumour
of what it wants to say.

The diaphragm,
grabbing at the intrusion,
bends into air

strings
of embezzled words…

…leaving nothing,
the mind’s work,
squandered by the lips,

and the diffusion
sparkling the tease that
starts us over, a

seduction,
so that we speak,

time

and time

and time

and time again
Fatigue

Disfigured, numbers of us journey
to where the water’s clear
and the pigs feed on marijuana,
hoping to detox from whatever it is
reason slides into our sweaty palms.
We’re giddy at the prospect,
but carry on, till we’re sitting,
cross-legged on the verge,
waiting to unravel.
Nothing happens,
or it does and we can’t tell,
and can’t ask, either,
without the top lip quivering
for what we’ve been on all this time
(reason, still shouting in our veins).
So we stay on the border,
like clouds on the horizon only
without a sky: the pigs
are getting snow blind,
and are too numb to know
it’s not the drugs.

Eventually we move and it feels
like the disinfection we’ve had in mind.
We’re sailing. And though
reason, in a phase-shift, slides
from his sweet tongue
what he knows we crave,
we say we haven’t noticed:
the taste dissolves, and we’re
waking into elevated days.
**Critical Consciousness**

i
loving not words, but in things
the shadow without anchor, crammed
toward combustion,
a fever in the eyes, just reading.

ii
signifieds still falling
in a place consonants
don’t know about,
revealing nothing, but
rounding shadows
into play – the glimpse
of the other author.
Five Ways to Respond to Your Therapist

I tell her hers is an open-minded creed, if you see the contradiction.
She takes it as a compliment.

I tell her I’ve written a handbook:
The Discipline of Calm and How to Cope with It.

I tell her I have no desire
to be wise by her definition. She tells me it’s a sign I’m getting better, and that scares me.

I tell her I don’t believe in… anything, and she says, “Do I believe the disbelief?” But I can’t be sure.

I tell her I have an image of a red BMW.
And I own a wheelbarrow… Where can that take me?
   Cancelling the next session, I paint it blue.
The Stonework of Illusion

In a passage of stone, a mason
smoothes the edges
of a threshold no-one’s passed,

though its view compels. On the verge,
scratch marks: “Pete was here”,
“Mary-Lou 4 ever”, tilted

in the fringe of day. There are no
imprints on the open ground, only
fragments of the words

forever hurled across this border,
that ride into a violent sun, crumbling
as dust to the outside world.

Whole verses smoulder
in the sky beyond the mason’s work,
and each glow, dying,

shadows on the stone’s grains:
“I, too, was here”,
and though it fades,

the hint of credence
lends the mason uncertain grace.
Making Our Minds Up
Part One

Never enough pieces
to build the drawbridge.

Six blocks kicked over by
Pete’s wife Jill: all hell to pay.

We think we know where the linchpins are
that were lost last night at the party: Troy,
tripping on the carpet, sent scads under the sofa.

All care, and still the acoustics
tangle in the echoes of
“mum and dad”.

Tom says Juanita’s always in his mind
playing poker with his house of cards,
and he can’t keep up with the reconstruction.

Conor runs out of glue…

There’s a made-up mind just sitting
on an empty table in the cafeteria.
No-one’s brave enough to take it.

Renae says she’s filling in a jigsaw
with no corners, and an edge
she can’t find.

Jack’s building a wall;
Sue wants to know if it’s as lonely on his side
but she can’t get through.
Remembering:

like painting an entrance
on a faded veneer

and waiting for visitors;
faces on the window,

sketched, looking in, like
teeth in a blue-lipped smile.
Alignment:
muster of the unruly,
all language in the sea it fills
with the peril of drowning,
where the hand tangles
in the pen’s seaweed sprawl;
the narrator so intent,
he’s mapping all coastlines,
but there’s no safe harbour,
and the journeys not affected
by the ocean’s swell
are kept deep, or not at all.
He looks at what he has:
a narrow boat, the black body
of a millipede, searching
for its own tail;
and as he charts, hooked
on its hideous legs, he’s
raising in each fist
the view it loosens.
He’s a fisherman,
hauling trammels,
resistance in the pen’s
thin line distilling phrases
of his own exertion:
he hurls his catch
at the foreshore of his voice.
Making Our Minds Up
Part Two

The body tells Zali, “the mind never knew what it was doing: leave the pieces on the floor and walk away”.

The inventory:
one shelf, 
a missing backboard, 
and way too many screws;

A second shelf, 
but none of the screws fit;

A floor, but no walls.

The cupboard after clearout: having to start all over.

Ria forgets to take her torch when she leaves from Mark’s place and doesn’t get home. She’s in the high street, hoping he’ll come and get her.

Julian wants a reason why he can’t just let the body take over… as far as anyone can tell, he’s it.
At Sea

she dares a bit of bad weather, at night, without a lifeguard, taking photos, snapshots of where she’s been that, on review, churn back into the metabolic seesaw, deciding nothing; she’s lost, she

shuffles what she has, blu-tacks it to the wall, and her face, in each dark square, stares as she stares, searching for a deeper pattern: she can trace, she says, a small shadow in her left eye, an answer waiting for a question; she

draws it to her fingers, listening for her own voice... and what she hears, and what she wants to hear, are fragments in a tune she can’t remember: there’s no hint of arrival and nothing moves; she re-shuffles, she

pushes on absence, she

would pray, but

the sea

rolls through her.
Relapse:
in the reassessment, the last mists
of melody return to doubt.

Assurance:
sand, still stony with belief, the mason’s promise
pressed over crumbling grains to hide the erosion.
theft

When she leaves,
a thread of her
falls into the warmth of mind
and melts:

eyes, like tulips,
the strap leaves missing,
and for a while, pollen
raining from each bloom.

Her words,
like the colours of these
flowers, bleed
through my own thought,

till all I have
is this evidence of her passing:
the deep graze
on my hand, where,

when she sighed,
breath fell.
I brush the turmoil
of my fingerprints

for the dust of vowels.
memory:

in the mirror from a compact,
the flesh-tinted haze, glimpses
of random scenes, the puff
dabbing its recollections
from powdered years.
Split Note

Looking in through my own eyes, I find
other eyes looking out: one of us blinks
and a memory of cohesion wavers. I’m
talking, pushing lips through familiar vowels,
and there’s a reply, a third party: “Yes, and you?
You’re mother’s well?” And she’s fine. I’m

sniffing this woman’s words: we want contact, but
with ourselves, to feel we’ve said something,
been someone, tasted what it takes
to tilt the noise of passing into
musical strains – preludes and fantasias. We play at
tuning-notes. The lip on the oboe quivers.

And the violins go home.
Solo

The headlamp between the halves of the brain, and the small team, whittled down to one, that levers the cogwheels – he panics, flooding the works with what he can find to cool the rising horror, jamming the wheels with the scraps of a mild amnesia,
till he’s ready to carry on.
There’s a row of lights on dead lines that he never gets to, he never has time, and he longs for comrades to turn the beams deeper into the dark. But the lights hang like ghosts on a quiet sea, swaying,
and only in fancies of former, or future lives does the whole parade flare into brilliance, the full company blazing
in a kaleidoscopic mind. He shines, searching for new arrivals.
The Ideal

a bird promising flight, but pinned
always on the ocean;

as I approach, he finds new distance;

once, in storms, I called him mine,
and drove from the sea’s floor, through the
phantasm of his form, the wrath of my desire –
it changed nothing;

the waves I climb to be facing him still fall;

I’d leave, for the dry land, but
when I turn to swim alone, the scent
of drowning tells me

he might yet fly.
Making Our Minds Up
Part Three

Mick gave Sally
what his dad gave him
when things didn’t fit together.
He wants to know if she’s using it
and can he have it back.

Making his mind up, Nathan slips his answer
into safe storage, no-one remembers where.

Rigging up a conveyor belt
that goes nowhere,
Todd loads all day, inverting his stock in the search
for what he thought he’d sorted out last summer.

Moira waits for a commission.

Sebastian’s three tips for
cleaning cobwebs off the insides
of cathedral roofs
don’t help at all.

Bruce
bakes a six-layered,
kirsch gâteau;
everyone’s impressed.

…And after Julia’s wine,
nothing else matters
   (days later, Liam’s stashed bottle
is over the hill and no one
cares).
falling into doubt:

as if grains, layered into years,
have been pressed into a human mould
and not secured, the spine

weathering, like sea cliffs,
and the mud nests of life-paired birds
breaking into a wash of days.

In the erosion, outlines
immune to eternal winds
are sought, but nothing stands;

covenants stage exits into minor
deaths, and hope
deals the figments of resolve.
one-way travel

a skull full of leavings;
    and brown-glass bottles
in racks along the thighs,
tucked against the femur,
    their rattlings, fragments
of silenced voice,
like pills not taken;
    there are tree branches
unravelling, the sawdust
in painted piles, a map
    with a blue line, a stream
that doesn’t move, though
water marks, tear drops
    from unsalted years,
have dug a lake
    of mis-remembrance…
chisels in the thighs’
glass doors trace
no return
self, as it inhabits the body

A blue flame, on the dark side of the sternum,
that M says for him is wholly male,
and for J is neither man nor woman,

neither young nor old, a flickering
in a shell borrowed from someone else’s dilemma.
R, in her male body,
says she’s always been female, burns,
day and night, in her high tower;
and with R in mind, J, probing her own figure,

presses the blue’s tips into breasts and groin
and finds no trespass, just a heat
no image clothes. Each

rummages through inside curves
for the contract none have signed, devising riders
the body holds but never reads.
relativity

all his thought
in a night sky:
a toy constellation;

tendons stretching back
to the vocal cords
melt, leaving

eyes in midnight:
day still arrives
but with no umbilical
**Section I:**

**Translation**

**The Treachery of Language**

Words and experiences fail to fit neatly together. There are no sure ways of describing events and feelings without also re-casting them. What is written will be both more and less than was sensed or imagined. All of language becomes involved, with all of its contrivances, and with all of its attachments to more and other language. Signification, Blanchot observes, bears “a strange impersonal light”. In speech”, he writes, “what dies is what gives life to speech; speech is the life of that death, it is ‘the life that endures death and maintains itself in it’.” To use specifically poetic language is to yield and to inhabit a death of a particular kind – on the corpse, poetry is liberally engraved. Poems are not sincere translations of particular encounters but progressions from those encounters to communicable poetic effects. This is not to suggest that sincerity is necessarily abandoned but that it becomes (perhaps awkwardly) divided: a poet’s commitment is to the subjects he or she entertains and to poetry. While the impressions a poet desires to translate may die for the sake of the poem, they need not decay – almost paradoxically, the life of the poem holds them from this fate. Why inflict the death at all?

The treachery of language is unavoidable. Terry Eagleton details the dilemma: “How can the mind”, he writes,

not betray the object in the very act of possessing it, struggling to register its density and recalcitrance at just the point it impoverishes it to some pallid universal? It would seem that the crude linguistic instruments with which we lift a thing towards us, preserving as much as possible of its unique quality, simply succeed in pushing it further away. In order to do justice to the qualitative moments of the thing, thought must thicken its own texture, grow gnarled and close-grained; but in doing so it becomes a kind of object in its own right, sheering off from the phenomenon it hoped to encircle. As Theodor Adorno remarks: ‘the consistency of its performance, the density of its texture, helps the thought to miss the mark’. Even the pallid universal is not what it seems, its incessant allusion to more and other signs leaving little but the hope (founded on convention) that its reference will be effective. “Gnarled and close-grained thought”, like a Derridean “centre”, keeps us
from drowning in too much margin. Distortive, the gnarling nonetheless facilitates intelligible exchange. It is for these reasons that “The treachery of language,” as Alex Skovron writes in the poem “Quadrilateral”, “leads us back / like shadows to a torch”. A poet’s struggle lies in finding a way to “miss the mark” persuasively. Via a language that cannot “hit the mark”, he or she is to construct, nonetheless, an impression that it has. A poem’s “sheering off” from the phenomena that inspire it, and its emergence as an “object in its own right” (or more often, an event), is a result of this process. Distortion, suppression, and elaboration of selected (and some unselected) materials necessarily takes place.

Blanchot, too, emphasises the inevitability of the betrayal, insisting that it is only by defending against that which inspires that anything can be produced. It is as if, he states,

one couldn’t write except – since one must write – by resisting the pure need to write, by avoiding the approach of what is to be written, that word without beginning or end which we cannot express except by silencing it. This is the magic torment which is linked to the call of inspiration. One necessarily betrays it: and not because books are only the degraded echo of a sublime word, but because one only writes them by silencing what inspires them, by failing the movement they claim to recall, by interrupting ‘the murmur’. Blanchot assumes, romantically, a depth and purity of inspiration that not all poets will or need necessarily recognise. The comment’s exuberance, however, does not destroy its relevance. The act of betrayal, Blanchot confirms, the silencing or muffling of the continuity of our experiences (where the gap between language and experience interrupts, to make both present and absent, the murmur of being), is also the process by which poems are written. Is the act one of exploitation? Might an elegy, for example, be considered less as an honest response to loss than as an attempt to produce an impressive poem by capitalising on a strong emotion? Again, a lack of compassion or of morality need not be implied. Elegists can indeed be expected to strive to produce the best poems they can with the materials that are available. It cannot be assumed that they will not also attempt an honest response to an experience of loss, but this response will be in part withheld, or as Blanchot writes, resisted. More so than for everyday conversation, a poem, since it is produced as a work of art as well as a means of communication, will diverge from that which inspires it. Yet meaningful exchange can take place. What is written can be an expression of events and feelings that others may relate to in ways not facilitated by
everyday language. That which allows exploitation in poetry allows, also, the effects for which poetry is pursued.

Treachery has its advantages. As W.S. Graham describes, language is “obstacle and vehicle at the same time”. This is to say, as has been argued in the introduction, that there is, in language, both uncertainty and the opportunity for redemption, both absence, in other words, and the chance to construct a surrogate for that absence. With regard to the relations between uncertainty and redemption in poetic creativity, the treachery of language has further significance. For a poet, it is as an obstacle that language can be most enabling. Referring to interpretations of texts, Derrida offers that the absence of unequivocal, translatable identities “starts reading and writing and translation moving again. The unreadable is not the opposite of the readable but rather the ridge {arête} that also gives it momentum, movement, sets it in motion". Unreadability, uncontainable and unlocatable, Derrida adds, “gives, presents, permits, yields something to be read”. This is the “gift of the remain(s)” already referred to. For a writer, the absence of any means for direct representation can give momentum to creative involvement; undecidability gives, presents, permits, yields something to be created. “We find ourselves”, Hart explains, losing the origin that once attracted us to a work, and being approached by an irruption in immanence, not a transcendence but an infinite dispersal of indeterminate being. As if trapped, we yield to the fascination this irruption exerts in language, giving ourselves over to the allure of the imaginary.

We ask language to furnish us with secure references, and it presents us with infinitely many possible associations. For a poet, these possibilities (substitutes for an impossibility) are the opportunity to find what it was not known could be said. Deconstruction tells us that nothing that is found can bear any special legitimacy. Amid this play of signification, the task is to redeem, by constructing an appearance of legitimacy, the sense that this indeterminacy can be contained. An appeal to convention is to support a work that is new and poetically convincing. It is not just that uncertainty in language inspires an urge for redemption, but that it can reveal to a poet points of departure at which creative endeavours can begin. Partially liberated from impressions of certainty, the poet is able to give him- or herself over to “the allure of the imaginary”.

Poets create by finding in the machine of language springs they did not know were loose, and can be incited to do so by the difficulties that machine introduces
into their efforts to translate specific impressions. For Adrienne Rich, a poem

engenders new sensations, new awareness in me as it progresses … instead of poems about experiences I am getting poems that are experiences, that contribute to my knowledge and my emotional life even while they reflect and assimilate it.\(^5\)

The treachery of language is a means for exploration, offering the chance to assay associations and effects through which new impressions of significance, sought or unexpected, might emerge. Poetic creativity is impeded if betrayal and indeterminacy are not admitted. There is a sense, consequently, in which non-poetic attachments to particular sources of influence, a poet’s immediate and personal involvement regarding the subjects to be represented, might be expected to stall a poem’s development. It is a notion worthy of some comment.

Perceptions of what has been and might yet be achieved poetically in a poem can be marred by a loss of concentration to the personal importance both of the subjects to be translated and of the poem itself. The allure of the imaginary can be dulled by an insistent commitment to ideas and images that precede a poem. It cannot be considered that a poet ever knows precisely where his or her poetic and non-poetic interests begin and end. Certain assumptions may be so deeply embedded in a poet’s perception that their influence within a work remains hidden or unstated. To some extent this is inevitable. The consequences, though, can be severe and inevitability does not remove the need for vigilance. Stern warnings have been given by a number of poets. W.H. Auden insists that, “unless the poet sacrifices his feelings completely to the poem so that they are no longer his but the poem’s, he fails”.\(^5\) T.S. Eliot calls for “a continual extinction of personality”.\(^5\) James Engell, summarising Keats and borrowing, accordingly, a Romantic turn of phrase, describes the clarity that can be gained when one “merges the self in the world” and loses “the sullied accidents and inevitable restrictions of the ego”.\(^5\) It is easy to imagine, here, a transcendent state of empathic selflessness where one must be in order to write good poetry. In reality, an eradication of personality (were it possible) could only deny the motivations and peculiarities that enable new poems to be written. Yet, if a poem is to seem to enter that community of poetic ideas that exists “outside” any individual poet, as the discipline of redemption requests (the discipline in which experiences that seem internal and subjective are translated into something external and publishable), then non-poetic attachments must seem, at some stage, to lose
priority to a poetic contract. It need not be immediately obvious to an author how a work is not, or how it might become, independent. The process can involve considerable re-writing, over hours, days, months, or even years. It requires, also, detailed knowledge of the poetic community to which access is sought. The latter point is emphasised in section II. In the chapter that follows, an invitation to betrayal and indeterminacy is assumed. The intent is to describe the conditions under which such invitations are made. How impressions of import are then to be reinstated is a question that is deferred until the third chapter of this section.
Interlude: Never Hitting the Mark

Ted Hughes writes that, “In a way, words are continually trying to displace our experience”; experiences themselves, he adds, “embed themselves in us quite a long way from the world of words”.\(^5^9\) Hughes describes, in this quotation, the feeling of the central character in the poem, “Blue Balloon”. The tension is exaggerated for the poem’s character by the uniqueness of his undertaking, one that was, in reality, carried out by the US air force colonel, Joe Kittinger in 1960, though the poem is not based on Kittinger himself. In the accompanying poem, “Upward Fall”, another character responds to a much later report on the event. He, too, struggles to contain the meaning of what he has witnessed. He finds no logical expression for the awe he feels and the experience translates, instead, into irrationally related deeds. These deeds do not “hit the mark”, but are nonetheless satisfying for the character concerned.

Blue Balloon

A man jumps from a helium balloon, thirty thousand metres above the ground, with a parachute, and swallows memories no-one else can apprehend. The Earth’s blue verges into black, he’s in the black, and there’s no ripple in the suit he wears, so is he falling? The balloon slips at supersonic speeds into a backdrop he can’t hold: the sun boils in a night sky, and time pours through his stranded self…

Words would have crushed the enormity.

Where the blue tugged on his ankles
He finds no bruise. Liver, kidneys, heart,
Have noticed nothing: their soft repeat
Spills like a slow unwind. Erosion

Rolls through what he's seen, and he clings
To what remains, folding silence

Into the taste of falling.
There are fissures in his wasted tongue.

We all wanted to go: the lip of the Earth’s blue, sky’s end; no place to attempt any acrobatics – two hundred revs per minute, if your stabiliser fails… But he steps gently: the balloon’s acres of fabric, now just dross above the ozone. Nothing went wrong. He delivers the footage, in silence – he doesn’t want to watch, and maybe he hasn’t come to ground. We tell him it’s beautiful.

Memory: barely audible, never touched;
He probes for its underbelly.

He finds no voice that doesn’t pin,
Beyond muteness, a kind of lie, like moths

Onto corkboard, but: “There were no stars” –
He’s pressing on the crumbling – “I

“Could have stayed.” He wants the embrace,
The four-minute free-fall, the sun,
Blinding, and the Earth: “Re-entry”, he says, “is like the Earth reabsorbing

“What the black digests.”

A tear in his left glove exposed skin to the blue’s edge, causing swelling and severe desiccation. It would have pleased him had it never healed, and he looks, each day, for an imperfection. He keeps a tinge of dark in the life line of his left hand, his fingers curled over the palm to hold the effect. Do we understand? Do we envy him: the step beyond the veil of blue, the test of the abrasion…

Earth’s greens bombard a past
He can’t recapture. He likes this about them:

That the pigments seep deeper
Into his own darkened cells, as if he’s

Seen into their innards; he likes
The sense of organism, mechanism,

Larger than earth and,
In the shadows of his vision,

Coiling into a kind of faith.
**Upward Fall**

Footage of a man jumping from a helium balloon at a height that has him falling through a black sky in daytime, renders the man watching him, forty years later (couch pulled up close to a full-colour screen) slightly unsettled: mild terror spreads across the room, shrinking it to its actual size.

All morning, he’s searching the sky for imprints from where the black’s fingers keep their purchase on the husk of his own life, expecting airmen to appear from nowhere, or the remnants of the man’s balloon, hurtling out of orbit. He fancies faint constellations: claw marks across the blue.

A half-hour drive would cover the measure of the airman’s fall. With this in mind, he’s carving space for a larger window: the sky edges into his living room, he’s drawing it close to him, and he’s pleased – the event, leaning upwards, teleports into his own renaissance, and he gets a view, now, of the whole backyard.
Uncertainty

Poetry is not granted the poet as a truth and a certainty against which he could measure himself. He does not know whether he is a poet, but neither does he know what poetry is, or even whether it is. It depends on him, on his search. And this dependence does not make him master of what he seeks; rather, it makes him uncertain of himself and as if nonexistent. Every work, and each moment of the work, puts everything into question all over again; and thus he who must live only for the word has no way to live.60

Poets distort subjectively interpreted materials in their efforts to satisfy poetic contracts that are themselves negotiable. The negotiations are not definitely contained: there are no absolute boundaries that define what “poetic” may or may not mean. Examples of past poems abound, but perceptions of them vary, and none portray what poetry may yet become. Whether or not a poem is successful will be a question ambivalently answered: “it seems so to me” is the best conclusion its author can offer, and to this she or he might add, “at least, it seems so some of the time”. Blanchot, the author of the quotation given above, offers these uncertainties in their extreme. A poet, the comment implies, is not primarily insightful or skilful, but sceptical, unsure, even, of what it can mean to create. The poet Blanchot depicts is one able to step back from all of the assumptions and contrivances that form poetic and larger communities. It is not suggested here that such acute suspicion is necessary in a poet, or even common, if it is, indeed, possible. Yet, none of our assumptions and contrivances are ever beyond questioning. Blanchot intensifies uncertainties that are always at least imaginable, and that filter through our defences to become sources of creative potential. In the previous chapter, it was suggested that uncertainty in language, in addition to driving a general urge for redemption, can spur specific creative explorations. Under what conditions can uncertainty function in this way?

A poet’s play with indeterminacy need not be visible as such within the poem that is produced. In apparent contradiction to this statement, John Forbes’ “Orange Sonnet” reads,

```plaintext
oranges in my experience not yet ripe
and eaten in our hands or on plates
at more formal, unsticky consumptions
they stain neglected fruitbowls rot
a delicate green the New South Wales
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Traditional poetic logic is not forgotten here but nor is it wholly confirmed. Fleeting and equivocal impressions are privileged at the expense of conventional subjects. Readers may find the poem humorous, they may see in it a reflection of a familiar state of mind, yet there is a sense in which the poem remains unintelligible. Why invite such ambiguity? The poem, importantly, like all poems, was not written in isolation. Forbes’ works are distinctively his own, and yet are also expressions of his cultural (and poststructural) surroundings. The notion that sprawling and entangled associations are as much a part of perception as neatly ordered explications was readily available to Forbes, from multiple poetic and philosophical sources. Does the poem conform, then, to a bias of its time? In part it does. A poet, Hart argues, risks “new feelings and new meanings” by “taking the known in tandem with the unknown”. Hart names John Ashbery, René Char, Roberto Juarroz and Tomas Transtromer, but the comment is more broadly applicable. It describes the gamble that can only be altogether avoided through a denial of creativity. The “known” is that through which the “unknown” can begin to be perceived, and in relation to which the risks creativity necessarily entails can be devised and taken. Uncertainty is not employable as a force in its own right. Nothing can be achieved if what Blanchot terms “the intimacy of the risk”, the risk, that is, that we will be “introduced, utterly without reserve, into a place where nothing retains us at all”, is not glimpsed from within reason. Dionysus can only contribute to creativity if there is also Apollo; indeterminacy can wield no influence if there is not also vision. If “Orange Sonnet” carries evidence of the uncertainties its author responded to, then this evidence lies not in the poem’s overt ambiguities, but in the risks it takes relative to what was, for Forbes, already familiar.

To take the known in tandem with the unknown is to find sufficient uncertainty to engage and challenge without overwhelming one’s will to respond. It is to identify a suitable degree of risk, though what this degree is will depend on the
poem and poet concerned. The broken words, crippled syntax, and distorted
punctuation used by e.e. cummings provide an obvious example of creative daring,
but small details within largely conventional poems can also offer opportunities for
creativity. How is it sensible, though, to speak of finding “sufficient” uncertainty
when Blanchot and Derrida have already told us that there is an infinite supply? In
answer, it is a matter not of finding uncertainty so much as of allowing some fraction
of it to be unveiled. “Reason supervises us, the critical intellect restrains us, we speak
according to customs and conventions”, Blanchot writes.64 There is, returning to
Derrida, a “phantom of the centre”, even amid “a world of signs without fault,
without truth, and without origin”.65 To create is to find, first, an opening in the
existing codes of reason, a foothold in the climb up onto the ridge of indeterminacy.
It is to disrupt, fortuitously or by intent, elements of the relations that form familiar
meanings, allowing the ordinary and the familiar, as Hart writes, quoting Blanchot,
to “appear as ‘an anonymous, distracted, deferred, and dispersed way of being in
relation’, and not, as we expect, comforting, known, and readily mastered”.66
Disruption is always theoretically possible; centres can be infinitely re-centred. Yet
there is much at stake. “To write”, Hart tells us, “is to risk losing one’s relation to
meaning and the world or, equally, to risk finding oneself in relation with what has
no meaning and no world”.67 Uncertainty is to be both valued and feared.

Poets invite uncertainty into contexts that promise some degree of
containment. They invite them, further, only with the promise of some reward. By
definition, a creator is one who approaches uncertainty with the aim, or the dream, of
constructing new relevance or interest. The task is to draw unknowns to where
attention can be given to them and then to resolve them as far as possible, despite the
risk this entails, the risk, namely, that the resulting work will yield only small, or no,
significance. Uncertainty is entertained, dangerously, for the opportunity to test the
force (against uncertainty) of particular actions and ideas. Poetic revelations,
Wallace Stevens writes, “are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of
our own powers”.68 The comment can be appropriated to emphasise the chance poets
have, in creativity, to evidence their influence both over the knowledge they possess
and over the “as yet unnameable”, “formless” and “terrifying” (as Derrida terms it).69
The threat effected by a poet’s willingness to invite uncertainty into his or her work
need not be large. The “as yet unnameable” (what Blanchot refers to as “the
menacing proximity of a vague and vacant outside, a neutral existence, nil and
limitless”) is never tackled outside the frame of convention, and the frame itself may leave only the slightest of openings through which the formless and the terrifying can be glimpsed. Yet, a sense of power remains on offer. The promise of a poem’s realisation waits for the actual poem to be written and for the adequacy of the available means, both personal and poetic, to be proven. Redemption is never assured. The allure in finding and responding to uncertainty in poetic creativity is implied by William Stafford’s assertion that what he looks for, as he writes, is “the suspenseful emergence of satisfying realizations”. Brendan Kennelly, similarly, identifies the chance to resolve unknowns as a motivation for his work. Uncertainties, Kennelly writes, “demand to be uttered in all their challenging, disruptive force”. For Robert Penn Warren, too, poems begin often as a response to materials that induce discomfort, “especially”, Warren writes, “if you are uncomfortable because you don’t quite understand all that it means”. There is reward, the examples reiterate, in redeeming the sense of order that uncertainty threatens.

The quest for redemption is noted, too, by Harold Bloom. Bloom, however, goes on to emphasise that the quest has no end. The creative mind, Bloom observes (in his reading of Stevens), “is never-resting because it knows its own status as fiction, and in knowing that, it knows delight, as untruth and as poetry”; “it knows”, Bloom adds, “the heat of the unfinished and of the unfinishable”. Here, Bloom places uncertainty at the core of a poet’s experiences. In the absence of assurance and completion, delight can be found in the energy and revelation induced by the pursuit of appealing fictions, fictions that redeem expression from the threat of doubt and undecidability impermanently and thus redeliver the opportunity to create. In the heat of the unfinishable, creative redemption is experienced with each fiction’s delightful effect, an effect that is to pass into other fictions. “Poetry does not reveal the meaning of being through the genius of a poet,” Hart tells us, “but holds being and meaning together for a while in an intense and unequal relationship”. The comment supports Bloom’s claim. In a redeeming poem, both writers imply, the relationship between being and meaning is contingent and always already a part of a larger potential for yet more and other meaning. The redemption, to return to an earlier metaphor, is elegiac. It celebrates “the precious portents of our own powers”, but can only console with regard to the absence language inflicts. A poem is a surrogate and not certainty itself. This, too, is a condition under which uncertainty is employed.
Hart continues the argument. “Poets begin romantically,” he writes,

in quest of the meaning of being, and in that moment accept or evade what forces itself upon them: that being and meaning fail to co-incide. In this way a poet may try to write just one poem, the one that seems to call both day and night, only to write hundreds of poems over a lifetime. A poem calls with the force of necessity, yet it gets written and rewritten as the necessarily accidental.  

The romanticism Hart refers to resides in the notion that behind the threat of indeterminacy lies a more profound potential, the potential for an expression in which being and meaning do finally find each other. It is as if “clouds of inauthenticity”, Ann Smock surmises, keep a poem “like a flower just on the sheer verge of blooming”.  

The romantic believes the bloom will arrive and that the presence of absence will dissolve. Jahan Ramazani, quoting from the first poem of “Prologues to What Is Possible”, tells us (romantically) that Stevens feels himself drawn onward by a desirable end – an end that shatters the mirrors of appearance and rejoins him to the One ‘at a point of central arrival, an instant moment.’ Lured by a meaningless ‘syllable’ that nevertheless ‘contained the meaning into which he wanted to enter,’ the poet sails beyond the deferrals of language, attaining at last the completion of his life’s meaning.  

The idea that there can be direct access to things as they essentially are (including ourselves) gains expression in Stevens’ “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction”. There are occasions, the poem promises, when we can glimpse a subject of interest and

...catch from that

Irrational moment its unreasoning,
As when the sun comes rising, when the sea
Clears deeply, when the moon hangs on the wall

Of heaven-haven.  

Yet Stevens recognises that an awareness of such moments necessarily introduces influences that do not belong to them. In the same poem, the desire to depict the pure meaning of being is shown to be fraught with impossibility; expression, the poem argues, is never innocent. A woman is described as being able to glimpse her children as they are, but she cannot translate the experience: “And what she felt,” Stevens writes, “fought off the barest phrase”.  

Another of Stevens’ poems, “The Poems of Our Climate”, claims,
...delight,
Since the imperfect is so hot in us,
Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.\textsuperscript{81}

The poem that shatters the mirrors of appearance does so only by cooling into the shape of another mirror. There are no poems written wholly by necessity. To be drawn towards the ultimate union of being and meaning is not to arrive at a poem that cannot be deconstructed, but is to be inspired to produce works that, illusively, contingently, and always questionably, might \textit{seem} to sail beyond the deferrals of language. This is the delight Stevens relates.

Do \textit{all} poets begin romantically? Do all poets explicitly desire to write a wholly authentic poem? Such intense idealism cannot be assumed. What can be concluded, however, is that there are uncertainties necessarily encountered in creativity that cannot be entirely resolved \textit{and that attempts are made to resolve them}. Redemption is accordingly achieved, where it is achieved, as the fractional and the circumstantial. Poems are written multiply, to use Hart’s words, as “the necessarily accidental”. Pure designs, tripped before they become such, emerge as contingent, partial reflections of what is unrepresentable. Uncertainty is not lessened, but moved into new and less exposed margins, later to be tapped as that threat to significance and signification that also offers scope for expressions not yet entertained. A poet does not choose uncertainty; he or she chooses, rather, to respond to uncertainties that are always already available, becoming in the process (as-if-) responsible for what he or she can never master.
Interlude: Approaching Certainty

The character in “Love on a Shoreline” desires an expression of love that is not available. Romantically, he imagines what it would be like to bypass the ambiguities that surround him and to thus arrive at true love. Were he a poet, he might imagine himself to be writing the ideal poem. The illusion does not last, and he is returned to the uncertainties amid which he will dream again.

Love on a Shoreline

She scatters sand from her palm, though
the beach is miles away; she
doesn’t notice. I let her speak into receding tides, and
her words fall into oceans –
it’s one of those moments: her voice, as if
robbed of its own source,
dies
and lives
without distinction.

I’d catch each grain, as it falls from her,
but nothing moves – time crumbles into
shorelines,
without land or sea.

In another life,
I alchemise each
speck of sand
into gold
coins
that I swap
for a serenading trumpet,
and we choose
between land
and water:
she leads me to where the trees
grow voices rich for troubadours:

we play… and we play…

But tides return: surf
makes its presence felt, and
I haven’t listened, and
she’s never heard of any trumpet.
There’s a pause, waves on
breaking rocks. We say we’ll
meet again, it’s been good, and she leaves
with
salt in ruffled hair.
Persuasion

“How is it possible,” Blanchot asks, “to proceed with a firm step toward that which will not allow itself to be charted?” The artist succeeds, Blanchot concludes, only by deceiving himself about what it is he does. Hence, in poetry, flawed words and stubborn sounds are offered as cogent expressions. Illusions are constructed over rumours of import, with the hope of effecting persuasion. The question addressed here is how such persuasion might be achieved. The task of writing is not one of surrender to unresolvable ambiguities, but one of speaking, arrogantly, if also tenuously, as if surrender were not necessary. “The work draws whoever devotes himself to it,” Blanchot explains, “toward the point where it withstands its impossibility”. A work cannot dissolve its impossibility, but can be made to seem, in certain circumstances, to respond to uncertainty sufficiently. What counts as a sufficient response, and in which circumstances, are questions individual creators attempt to answer for each individual poem. The strategies that tend to be employed are the concern of the discussion that follows.

In sections II and III of this exegesis, the technical and aesthetic contracts poets employ in their efforts to produce persuasive poems are discussed in detail. Methods of persuasion that relate more directly to the subjects discussed in a poem are considered here. A poet’s choice of subject is itself significant. Poets may draw, for example, on thematic sources of power perceived to be granted by cultural and disciplinary bias and by noteworthy events. There are no stated rules regarding the content of a poem, yet perceptions of relevance are inevitably contextual. War, to provide an obvious illustration, can command increased attention among poets and readers during times of conflict. Love and loss, more generally, tend to carry more poetic currency than, for example, scientific research or accounting. Forbes’ “Orange Sonnet” and Hejinian’s The Cell (both quoted earlier) can also be seen to borrow force from (and give force to) the cultural interests that inform them. Both poems respond, in part, to the attention that has been given in this poststructural era to the notion that we are embedded in uncertainty. This can be said, too, for Kate Fagan’s poem, “return to a new physics”, which has us “pointing at nothing / as it empties”. Fagan offers, in the same poem, “i write again, / signifying nothing sharp”. There is hypocrisy, surely, in seeking cogency from notions of uncertainty as if they were
themselves certain. The contradiction is endured where the themes involved are perceived to be in other ways compelling, where their effects, in other words, can be seen to outweigh their internal entanglements. In this case, the internal entanglements also form part of the argument.

Another way to effect persuasion in poetry is to openly lie. Donald Justice, in “The Artist Orpheus”, writes:

He might have sworn that he did not look back,
That there was no one following on his track,
Only the thing was that it made a better story
To say that he had heard a sigh perhaps
And once or twice the sound a twig makes when it snaps.\(^85\)

On the back cover of the collection in which this poem appears, John Irving is quoted as saying:

The complexities of language have always been tempting to fakes; but while using fully the complexities of his language, Donald Justice has always demonstrated that the highest purpose of literature is to illuminate those things which are hard, disturbing, painful, moving, and repeat themselves – not to obscure them.

The comments complement each other well. Justice illuminates his concerns by telling good stories. That he manages to fabricate convincing relations in these stories (such as those between the artist Orpheus and his various loyalties) attests to his skill. It attests, also, to the licence given by the medium. It is not just that a poet may alter or invent materials to be used for a poem. The fabrication can be more overt, the metaphors can be ludicrous, the imagery exaggerated or impossible, and still, or hence, a poem may bear the potential to persuade. Gaston Bachelard, discussing his own view of the sources of power within poetry, suggests that “exaggeration is always at the summit of any living image”.\(^86\) It is incongruity, and not exaggeration alone, that can be enlivening. When Christopher Herold allows that, under a midnight moon, “a strip of eucalyptus bark / peels the silence”,\(^87\) incompatible terms construct a perceptual instability that is at once playful and earnest. The lie is presented as if it should bear meaning, and yet is literally senseless. The tension can be alluring. Raymond Roseliep’s

I tried to bring you
that one cloud
in this cup of water\(^88\)
can effect comparable suspense, as can Forbes’ “I am Cleopatra’s dog / & my head is a balloon / of marsh gas rising from the Nile”.\textsuperscript{89} Countless illustrations are available. The suspense centres on the simultaneous presentation of purport and irrationality, of sincerity and absurdity – the poems flaunt deviance amid their claims of cogency. How is the combination persuasive?

Incongruity in poetry, the trace of a poet’s exposure to a Derridean threshold (where things can be infinitely other), is pursued for the intensity it can deliver. Incongruities stand out both by seeming unusual and by needing to be resolved: each conspicuous slide towards unreadability requests its own rescue. The risk is that the request will pass unanswered. Where rescue is deemed possible, however, the poem concerned can be seen to achieve apparently impossible signification. Relevance can be established \textit{as if in spite of} the work itself. Recklessness can seem to visibly transmute into understanding, and the poet and the poem are shown to have the strength to entertain both. The arrival of meaning can yield, here, feelings of surprise and relief, not necessarily because the meaning is itself surprising or reassuring, but because its availability was in question. This involvement can be increased by the sense that the meaning drawn from incongruity can seem to have a source other than the words through which it is formed. To deliver import through nonsensicality, to effect representation through overt mis-representation, is to emphasise that it is not words themselves that achieve understanding. Words, we are reminded, are in service to something other than language, something, says the romantic, more profound, more pure, and something, says the poet, that cannot be translated into prose. Immediacy and experientiality in poetic expression can be induced via what is effectively a request for imaginative participation. The risks, to repeat, are significant. Herold’s and Roseliep’s haiku (both quoted above) are unsuccessful unless their readers feel able to complete for themselves each abbreviated scene. Incongruity, then, increases the possibility that a poem will seem inaccessible. The risk is taken for the chance that where meaning is gleaned, the intensity and allure given to it by the means of delivery will render it all the more compelling.

Is it fair to refer to the incongruities poets employ as lies? They are not generally called such: “rhetorical device” and “figure of speech” are more common terms. Their appeal resides, potentially, in their violation and renewal of accepted associations. It resides, too, in the entry they can seem to grant into a more immediate, less textual experience of a (nonetheless textual) poem. Such invigoration
is called for in Victor Shklovsky’s notion of defamiliarisation. Here, a “roughened language” is ideally to break our attention from what we believe we know and to induce participation in an intense “noticing” of as-if-newly-encountered subjects. Art exists, Shklovsky writes,

that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.

Incongruity is a tool employable in the broader project of defamiliarisation. It is indeed a means of teasing perception towards renewed awareness. Yet the term “lie” remains appropriate. To the quotation given above, Shklovsky adds, in italics, that “Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important”. It has already been argued here that in creative redemption, poetic contracts are ultimately given priority over the personal experiences that inform them. The objects, feelings, and events that become the subjects of a poem are unquestionably important, for the poem is nothing without them, yet the poem is also nothing if it does not aspire to persuade. It cannot be the objects, feelings, and events themselves. At best, it can induce an effect whereby the gap between itself and its subjects appears to close, or diminish. The effect is necessarily an illusion. To experience the artfulness of an object is to embrace this illusion. This is where the lie resides.

A redeeming poem lifts us from our entrapment in textuality, from our entrapment, that is, in the conditions and absences that allow signs to be signs, by speaking energetically and persuasively (a consoling celebration) within that textuality. Words are distrusted in literature, Blanchot tells us, yet this distrust takes the form not of wordlessness, but of heightened word play and increased ambiguity. The means for redemption, in other words, are based openly, in poetry, on contrivance and textual play. The contradiction is a condition of creative writing. In literature, Blanchot explains, “deceit and mystification not only are inevitable but constitute the writer’s honesty, whatever hope and truth are in him”. Incongruity is an exploitation of the absence of transcendental signifiers performed to yield, ideally, a cogent poem. A poetic lie is here a trick sincerely forged, and is aptly named.
Poetic lies, it needs to be emphasised, are tricks sincerely forged as part of a poetic contract. The construction of incongruity is accordingly an opportunity for poets to affirm their own and the medium’s capacity for creative expression. In the moment of a lie’s effect, uncertainties of various kinds can seem to be quelled.
**Interlude: Provocative Lies**

Poetic lies can themselves *induce* creativity. “Caving” compares an investigation of an underground river system to a conversation. The licence of the lie opened unexpected possibilities – the metaphor imparted new means of signification for both the cave and the exchange. The challenge was to stage a cogent link between the two, and to allow the conceit to work both as a translation of a specific impression and as a poem.

**Caving**

We move ahead in tunnels of unwinding stone,
dark curves sliding time off centre and our veins,
as they chill, roaring over the noise of water. We wedge our feet above churning pools, the weak touch of torchlight loses fingers, torsos, to stony folds, and the black strokes beyond the mask of skin.

In daylight, we talk, attempting throughways in the brighter air, feeling for nerve in vaguer waters, each building paths, but from distant ends, listening for more than echoes. Caves come out, and words,
in their matchstick flare,
tangle into navigation.
Conclusion

A poet experiences creative redemption by transforming subjective impressions into what he or she perceives to be persuasive, poetic expression. His or her personal influence can seem to become part of a community of ideas and artefacts. The process involves recognition of and a response to multiple uncertainties, uncertainties that are never permanently settled. A redeeming work is achieved both because of and in spite of these uncertainties. They are the challenge and scope by which conventions can be revised and augmented, and they are the threat of insignificance that is to be (re)disguised via methods of persuasion. The perceived appeal of a created work can affirm, for a poet, what the invitation to uncertainty effectively threatens, namely his or her and the medium’s capacity for new and significant poetry. Opportunities for such redemption require specific poetic, personal, and social contexts. It is in these contexts, and, more specifically, through the contracts poets negotiate within them, that uncertainties become perceivable and that concerted efforts towards persuasiveness can be made. The technical and aesthetic contracts that support a poet’s creative endeavours with respect to both uncertainty and persuasion are the concerns of sections II and III respectively. Uncertainty is accessed and responded to, these sections argue, via contractual constraints that are at once, by virtue of the creative licence they grant, a form of careful liberation.

Preceding section II, a collection of poems is offered that focuses primarily on the effort, in poetry, to translate specific impressions. What is emphasised is that none of the poems can claim absolute integrity. Rather, what seems vital is expressed, or recast, in terms of what is coherent as poetry. “Night Swim” attempts to capture, both in words and syntax, the fluidity of the experience it narrates, but can do so only by deception: the poem can reflect but cannot be what it depicts. The suite, “Sketching the Moon”, exaggerates the same betrayal by including two concrete poems, each written in the shape of the moon. The poems, like their companions, are elegiac, celebrating a capacity for expression even as they declare themselves as substitutes for what cannot be said. In the poems concerning death, of which there are several, a response is made to the absence induced both by the gap between being and meaning and by a loss of life. The uncertainty to be redeemed
was compounded not only by the doubling of the source of absence but by the weight
the subject of death already carries. The tone of these poems is partly a product of the
increased urgency that was given to the writing processes. “wake” and “war” provide
examples. A large group of poems in the collection that follows embrace the subject
of love. These, too, borrow both uncertainty and persuasion from existing concern
for the topics that are covered. Several of the poems themselves describe the notion
that there can be no pure translation of specific impressions of love. “Not Lovers but
the Paths Between Them”, for example, describes a level of intimacy that is felt but
cannot be expressed. In “flow” and “the other beside me”, the words and actions of
daily exchange cannot quite reflect the love that is imagined. In “flow”, this love is
nonetheless secure. In “the other beside me”, the contradiction is vaguely, though not
unpleasantly, unsettling.

The risk taken in acts of poetic translation is that contradictions that are
merely unsettling will be sensed and not resolved. The distance between the words of
a poem and the subjects it professes to describe can cause that poem to seem simply
false. This risk is taken in the knowledge that the same distance, accented by
incongruity, amplified, that is, by the poetic exploitation of linguistic
indeterminacies, can acquire a potential to persuade.
Poems: Portrayal
Night Swim

a blackwood’s
  shadow
on the water,
  a branch
  leaning
  in moonlight,
ripples
  into hearing…
my own
  limbs
  cobweb
  in tissues
  of the water’s
cold,
and flowers
  in the blackwood’s
  arms
float
  scent
  filled
  with darkness
through the
  pores
  of the night’s
  skin.
Stargaze / Entry Point

Eyes
straining upwards through midnight gums
find fusion in a gaze
stretched across light years; each cell
darkens.

Under ribs, pinpoints of suffocation
tilt their steel
into burstless lungs, and against the ground,
black-pervaded soles.

Love and hate
in the midnight breeze, joy beside sorrow,
dissolving over treetops,
where punctured time floods aeons
through the gap of days.
Aurora

space dust melts into psychedelic juice,
the south sky wobbles off its dome:
a green lake burning

    into bruising flames, ribs

peeling  –  a shadowed cloth we
roll under pillows,
dreaming in the night’s skull.
child,

you are nowhere and everywhere,
a slow-changing dye that doesn’t take,

so that I feel you rolling through me.
I find no edge, though I hold you,

and you are not safe, but you are warm,
shaping me from the inside,

like a sea current, traversing cells,
achieving nothing, but

bringing us together
rain

pad
of the dog’s paws
softly through my own soles
out walking
under the umbrella
frailty

the life left over
loose in one’s own shell,

a memory of oneself
treading air over airless time.


platypus

a pulse from bony hands, silt
from the scent of her movement
still clinging.
Painting, 1810

The promise of more than passing

Gum-tips scribble long librettos
on a glassed-in page,

and the wind’s wild tongue,
slowed by the painter’s brush,

is almost audible, words that,
caught by the moon’s lean,

hold their fleeting strength
against irrelevance. All hope strains

to shape the wind, reaches
for the moon’s edge,

to hear the aria
of its own endurance.
Three poems,  
with death in mind

1. erosion

the quiet tick that takes you on,  
stealing warmth from memory’s shell,  

and letting it fall, like a storm  
still receding.
2. Trace

Blank time sails west with the sun,
seeping into cells, where the Child
feels it melt and calls it hunger.

Its chill trickles deeper into bones,
sifting from the sun’s reach, and the Child,
now grown, sculpts where time congeals:

she’s chiselling from her marrow
ice that, chipped and rechipped,
floods the throughways of her fervour.

And as she ages, she knows all care
won’t still the bleed of warmth.
She carves her image in time’s travel,

naming death the freeze of want,
and stands in the shine of sundown,
desiring all.
3. wake

Like losing speech,
this touch of silence:
where he lay no-one lies

and where he lies,
no-one slumbers;
the room fills with air

brushed out of oceans, salt
thick in our lungs,
and the waves

clawing at his footprints.
In winds
where no borders

rise between the dead,
he’s carried over us;
tides

wash his surface from our souls.

He leaves behind
nothing, and deeper,
the compression

where he stood so long,
this man,
drowning us in his absence,
his voice
crowding in our tongues.
That he dies and won’t depart.

That he was utterance itself
so that we cannot name him.
There’s no warmth in him,

no heat where we stroke at him,
yet our tears are our pains
to keep him whole:

we drink against the salt,
we eat to deceive the hollows of our words…

And we taste that he has gone.

Like losing speech,
dreading the shufflings
of its long return.
storm moth

the hides of drums stretch across the sky,
contorting silence, for the rain,
like a membrane, pressing on the walls,
won’t fall – we’re in the fringes of its mass,

and when it breaks, we steal the effect, we’re
bursting through thick cocoons,
borrowing the transformation.
Eclipse:
morning, raided by an earlier dream,
waiting for the grey men running.

Outback:
where once there was water
time still cascades.

Sunrise:
flyng the sky
on its saffron string: the tug.
the night house: chisel marks along the windows and broken glass from the panels of the door, scattered on the floorboards; the footprints of the figures in balaclavas (are they still around) stretch along the hallway. I spend the day scrubbing mud from the matting in the front room, the blinds pulled down, and the lights still swaying – they’ve taken the shades.

a tape plays in the head, showing a body that once looked like mine just lying,

sinking into cells. The dark, on legs, creeps from behind the ribs, and taking a walk,

I can still hear the scurryings through the bedclothes. The man at the end of the avenue, holding his collar against his ears,

yells, with his eyes, a greeting I can’t mistake: I offer him bonbons, but nothing helps.
insomnia

immersion packed too tightly to ever sweep; shadows in the eggshell light
painted under the eyelids; and sleep’s slipper-footed troops
audible in the house next door.

Temazepam

I cross out the fear of my own voice
and take a pill, packing the soul
into a ten milligram disc
of plastic heaven…
  like a sentence
with the word “time”
dropped from its centre into
Aspro Clear water
no-one remembers drinking.

  Searching back,
there’s no record of any slumber,
  but the tally
of parts out cold
takes all morning to fade away…
  Now it’s just soul,
head tilting, tongue
drowning in the fizz.
**insomnia**

tossed by the mind’s wheel into warped amalgamations,
neither sleeping nor awake, losing night in the day,
time, taking in what comes, and releasing nothing,
stretching space into its corpulence.

**insomnia**

there’s a black and white cow out in the field;
she’s up all night: 27 916 chews
insomnia

a loose tooth in a driven cog, the click in a mindfield,
crease marks on the ear lobes, and shrapnel waiting to happen, the seconds
fraying (it takes years) from the bottom sheet: you don’t move;
the eyes, dry and still draining, recall nothing of closure,
and sleep
passes …like sugar
on someone else’s tongue…

a tape plays…

of a bare globe
swinging

"
Gallery: Stringy-Bark Bowl

Wood curved like leather,
its soft lid leaning
with no steady grain,
the fingerprints
of the stringy-bark burl,
burnished, but not held,
so that the eyes
flow over them,
stretching into an amniotic life,
the cadence still rippling.
Night
robs stitching
from the daylight hours:

shallow pools
deepen, and the eyes

smuggle in
aspects the day doesn’t mention.
“Menses

The stag hand’s da e y off

the same play,

BUT

glimp es of sca ‘oldin s


g

”
Love on a String:
twelve poems

1. intimacy

yielding one where
two might have walked away.
2. the other beside me

facing his back, his sleep leaning between us, I’m in the fields of his mottled skin, and I can see but can’t touch, dissolving from his front-of-body, the rains of his being:

dense heat settles in my fingers, and through the rise and fall of his chest’s circling winds, I hold what I cannot hold – his mute warmth spreads through the gridlock of his spine, and I press with fluid hands…

    nearing

what the morning can’t deliver.
3. Quartet in a Coffee Lounge

The textures of the strings
create notes no-one plays

nor hears, but that strike at midriifs,
as if a pulse might touch the skin,

cause salivation, and belong to no-one.
There are three of us, with a backdrop of

parties at other tables – we join strains,
driving the melody

of a late night café, while underneath,
along the midriff,

a second rhythm rolls. M
and I are on violins. R, on viola,

names a cellist, and says he
hankers for a quartet, but

there are no chairs for late arrivals
and in the texture of our strings,

equivocation.
The under-table silence already sounds,

and for M, it’s the heavy notes of a
woman he once knew

who moved to Munich
with an oboist from another orchestra.
4. One-Way Love

like building two temples
on one column of
narrow stone,
perched above the crumblings,
an arm’s length from
anywhere:
one clings or one
admits to
living alone.
5. pain

the crow of the heart,
onchalant enough to
take his time, sidesteps
but doesn’t leave.

no amount of yelling
moves him, and the attempt
to dig the heart’s
remains into hiding has him
tugging on the carcass.
the temptation is for
revenge, to sink him
in his own decay, but

a piece of aorta
on his dark breast
numbs the hand: pain
behind brittle ribs, cries

for what it is this crow
bears on metallic wings,
love’s
corpse towed

into a living grave. I
let him feed.
6. In Summer Fields

On his inside,
  she’s moonlight, hard through black gums,
  breaking across his shadows,
  stretching above his bones, and he aches

  to sink the verge of her infusion, for he’s sure
  she’s deep in him.

  On his outside,
  the sun’s warmth shines from her, and the day
  becoming dusk changes nothing… Loving her,
  he wonders what it was he called the world.

Weather in his mountains loosens in open fields
  and he is all things with her, swims with her
  in his mind’s pools.

  And then moves away, dreads
  the merging into noise
  of the light that plays between them.

They’re climbing into thicker skins, striding
  in their descent, to their return, and he welcomes
  that the sun still sinks where there’s no moon.

  He doesn’t want to part from her,
  but he wants, more, the moment of finding her,
  and loves, as he looks at her,

  the under-skin candescence
  of summer fields.
7. Notes on experiment 3332-8:

The fingerprint in my left armpit (where no-one else has reached);
The stubborn cross-dressing: myself in his cracked remains;
Skin stripped as a last resort –

Sent to a laundromat, somewhere in New Delhi;
It comes back
Smelling of car fumes, curry, and Australian beer;

There’s an inscription on the left heel:
“Love stain, difficult to remove; may be some reversion”.
8. getting to know each other

lips less my own
a buttoned over-flesh
filled with his pheromones;
my mirrored mien
tilts into squarer cheeks…
kissing him

to stall the invasion.
9. Falling into arms

Love’s cutlery in the thigh muscles
Carving sostenuto notes. Torsion,

Rippling out of hearing, snares
In the press of arms, its own

Spiral. Feathered hands
Raise, into plunging, this

Raptor in the skull. And the grip
At the point of entry… Bursts into

Hipbones, Discord, the Thighs
closing, the Pitch
transMuting… A Glass

Harmonica – Heat,
dRaining

into a
Catastrophic
cOre…

more
than We

Bargained
for, We
Steal time…

…nets
of languor in our

rubato chaconne…

Each catches the other …sleep
welds our warmth,

and silence
rocks the cradle of accruing day;
so the cavities

in cooling thighs
refurnish

their sweet delay.
10. M

you take back your sperm, wrapped up in its window of constraint,
but can’t remove what you’ve tangled through my skin,
the foldings of your hands spawning concertinaed heat, and the half-melt
re-moulding contours so that your arm, pressed on my waist, fits
extraordinarily well. The imprint of your ribs, too, so that when I breathe,
I’m jostled by their rise and fall. And in my pulse, the shudder of
incongruous hearts, the body, rippling into sandlines
in the tunnellings of unguarded love.
11. Not Lovers but the Paths Between Them

The house in his mind is built for his lover,
in a field nestled into hills,
but he cannot bring himself to wall her in.
He builds in stone, but no shingles
clad the roof, no doors swing, nothing hangs
at her windows. He presses on the glass to see inside,
stretches on her empty floor,
staring into his own skies, and trusts, in the end,
that she understands.

She has no house for him. Caught
in her body’s woods, where the walls
of her own warmth tilt her into shade, she
wraps him in open light,
walks with him, not in bush or fields, but
where her skin remains mottled, and where his glance
still holds the sky. She doesn’t stay: returning,
she peers through her own shadows
into fields where she knows he waits.

So she walks, as he builds.
And in the silence of the reach between them,
they throw the ribbons of their vows,
drawing each other on.
12. flow

I arrive home while she sleeps; daylight
peels from where it lingers on my skin

and in the half-warmth of our bed,
I feel her heat steal over me:

like sliding through the outline of my own name,
lifting to where she slumbers.

I let her go, “wife”, “lover”, “woman”,
and we are cheekbones and quiet breath,

the melt of unsleeping ribs. In the morning,
we rescue words

from the innings of night-time’s flow.
cello concerto
(Schumann, cello concerto in A minor)

like voltage, promising escape:
dendrites tensed by the cello’s bow
pulse in the heart’s thermals;
there are burn marks
on the inside of the fingers;

and nothing resolves: recall
plugs into a sworn momentum.
Sketching the Moon

old moon:

t he slo w ic e of its s ton y e
dg e

meniscus:
sucking
the moon’s weight
through the eye
socket of its skull.

new moon:
the melt of its infant journey
in the terrifying blue:
hushed by an ignorant sky.
dawn:

b
re
ath
mar
ko
ft
he

sun

midday:

no vapour
from its white dissolve: lost
in its own china poise:

an immaculate blue.

dusk:

the lean of the Earth’s turn
revealing nothing:

the crease
still buckling in the mind.
third day:
just a baby: the shadowed skin
of its fontanelle.
Swamp Gum

The tree summer leant on
only now bruises, with its still-pink flesh,
the soil its shadow measured

I dust sky from its closing leaves
and climbing back from its fallen reach,
find the wound of earth wrenched vertical,

and of time
    disjointed.
what we know

day tilts madly through its revolution,
rolling sun through the points of passing,

and I’m aware, faintly,
of the breath in my own lungs,

stretched by the whispered spin
and dissipating,

straying into darkness,
where sun and shining moon

curve into black paths, and the reach
into other orbits

rolls the points of passing
to the silence

at conception’s edge.
waking

the sea’s mist
condenses on the slender vine
that coils around the window.
Death and Being,

in four poems

1. a minor key

a finger touching death, expecting
rough light slanting into raging seas
and finding less –

loose intimations of cycling waves,
turquoise in a trace of calm that
sinks the scent of drowning

into passers by.
2. war

seeding the quiet night:

the ruby vindication
under pale faces,

the chilled efflorescence.
3. anniversary

the mangoes we pick for our dead father
rot on the sideboard, and fail to sweeten
the stench from his skinless bones.

his wife swims in oceans; she’s heard that
the rain takes wooden beams out to sandbars
beyond the storms;

she finds nothing, but reeks of him
and says she has dreamed of him,
and that he tells her

he doesn’t choose to come inside.
we are walled in with the living.
we remember him through the dust

stirred from the window panes
of her rice-paper eyes
4. **On turning 21**  

**On aging**

no rag wipes the blackboard of the mind entirely clean,  
the cells still renewing mutate to mark the years, and  

death is your twin, a heartbeat in the weaker palm that  
spreads from the life line, leaving hieroglyphic clues;

you translate

...like the blooming of annual buds,  
carrying in your hand the revolution:  

deadth takes us all
Six

Post at age five:

at 10 pm,

his stammering waltz,

curving into pale.

affectation:

she bears her flesh

on a verge, conceived,

of drowning.

losing melancholy:

there is no dissolve, but the sounds

on the pavement of her own shoes

are less familiar.
lecture 215:
praying words might
crack the shell of silence, but
he rambles on.

portrait of a singer:
there’s a rhythm
in her winding wrist
that sings to her.

disagreement:
he cuts his lip
on the words
that hang in the doorway.
Narcissus

In the water he could glimpse
another life,
himself in another skin –
he called it his own.

People didn’t choose to see, he said,
the figure that swam in the river:

When asked how he was, he would reply,
“Let me show you a ripple”

and he would explain how
sometimes he saw trees

speaking words into starlight; once
he felt a rock shiver against his side.

But no-one responds. No reply
bends through his own reflection.

So he stays by the river, and he stays alone,
gazing into the water.
violin:

in the shadows of minds,
till the first voice rose in unwitting song

and was answered; in back rooms,
Amati’s, Stradivari’s, Guarneri’s,

where intensities consorting
soaked into belly-curves, wound

through standing strings,
in the fire of compounding will;

four play at Ravel,
deserts green into brief dissolve,

and the first moment
blooms.
Translating

the Brain

i) Surgeon’s Muse

The desire
was to work on myself,
to see inside,
To sink the saw into my own skull
and to touch warmth
beyond the hairline,
To slide fingers
through the convolutions
of being.
Even now,
the skin of my right hand
darkens
In the black
between colonising worlds.
ii) Size

lining up the sixth-graders
to put in their hands a brain’s three-kilo mass,
telling them how once, when in the skull
of a surgeon from Newcastle,
it had fallen in love with a sailor
who offered her apricots
on the peak of Mt Kosciusko.
**Ambience, ×3**

1

chilling out:
water declaring gravity
in suave undulations,
the arrival of sound,
jazz bands of molecular bonds
expressing

Time.

2

compression:
fraught mother of a failing son,
swallowing rain, leaving clouds over dry soil:
minutes are lost; molecular bonds
choke into a false humidity,
expressing

War,
still going.

3

expansion:
sailing from the coastline,
stealing what the clock can’t
plan for, the spray like
molecular bonds, breathing,
expressing

Chance,
the sting
on both cheeks.
Ligeti, smiling
(String Quartet No.2)

between his notes, a stretching of ligatures,
such that she’s startled by

influx round a fracture
in the solid workings of common sense.

She wraps resistance
across the wound, remembering

rest and compression make
for a speedier recovery, but she

wonders if it’s safe
enough to be

unsafe… peels back an edge
to see the extent of the injury:

sky shifts from its easy blue
and she looks from where he looks, right

through her.
Section II:
Constraints

The Form of Freedom

Poets gain licence for taking risks in their creative endeavours by agreeing to produce works that, to some extent, look or sound like poems. In this section, and in order to support this claim, focus is given to the effect on creativity of a poet’s commitment to poetic forms and techniques. The suggestion is that opportunities for creativity, and the uncertainties that fuel these opportunities, can be accessed and intensified via constraints relating to technical conventions in poetry. Importantly, while technical contracts are to reflect, in part, a commitment to existing networks of meaning, there is no ultimate authority regarding what a poet’s technical contracts should look like or how they might be satisfied. A poet responds, in other words, to uncertainty within technical contracts as well as through them; there are no transcendental guidelines on how to write poetry. Through their malleability, technical contracts can themselves become the objects of a poet’s creativity. New forms and techniques can be invented and old ones modified. Technical contracts, then, can both focus and become the focus of a poet’s creative attentions. The second chapter of this section examines how technical contracts function in the creation of individual poems. The third chapter considers the effect of importing contractual constraints from other creative fields. Cross-discipline exchange, it is argued, can licence expression in poetry that poetic contracts alone cannot support. The fourth chapter highlights, by drawing on the preceding discussion, the part technical contracts play in creative redemption, and the relation of constraint, accordingly, to uncertainty in poetic creativity. Here, in this opening chapter, the concern is to outline the broad, characterising features of the technical contracts poets employ.

Creativity becomes possible and meaningful relative to specific frames of reference. “Regardless of the period at which we look,” Arthur Koestler writes, “every work of art betrays the prejudiced eye, governed by selective codes which lend coherence to the artist’s vision, and at the same time restrict his freedom”. By adopting selective codes, individuals become able to organise and communicate their thoughts. Codes that describe the prejudices of poetic conventions favour those
organisations of thought known as poetry. The need to learn and to apply these codes has been heavily emphasised by a number of poets. “The spirit of poetry,” writes Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “like all other living powers, must of necessity circumscribe itself by rules”. Frank Kermode is more brutal: “Theoretical contempt for form in the arts,” he exclaims, “is a fraud”. David Lehman states that, “Without the resistance of a chosen medium, there can be no art, for art abhors anarchy”. Art does not wholly abhor anarchy. The uncertainties encountered in creativity can effectively invite its arrival, and the taste or hint of chaos can become alluring both as an escape from established forms and as the chance to construct other kinds of order. There is no allure, however, in chaos alone: pure anarchy would leave no means by which alluring hints might be detected and responded to. It is as Wallace Stevens concludes: “To be at the end of fact is not to be at the beginning of the imagination but it is to be at the end of both”. One needs clarities, as A.R. Ammons suggests, “to know what one is baffled by”. Rules, facts, clarities, and resistances are all a form of bias. They ensure that a range of possibilities pass unnoticed. Yet the alternative is to arrive at a point of what Blanchot calls “extreme poverty” and “infinite idleness”, where

inspiration, this movement outside of tasks, of acquired forms and proven expressions, takes the name aridity and becomes the absence of power, the impossibility which the artist questions in vain...

A technical contract is the discipline a poet accepts as a way of directing and supporting his or her will to create.

But how do forms and resistances contain the threat of anarchy and aridity without inhibiting creativity? Again, it is the comments of creators themselves that offer insight. Igor Stravinsky, referring to creativity in music, is exuberant in his insistence that,

My freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful, the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles. Whatever diminishes constraints, diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one’s self of the chains that shackle the spirit.

John Ashbery, equivalently, explains that his interest in the pantoum rose from “its stricture, even greater than in other hobbling forms such as the sestina or canzone. These restraints seem to have a paradoxically liberating effect, for me at least...
Richard Kenney, too, refers to “the liberating manacles of formal poetry”.

It is not the pantoum, the sestina, or the canzone that can liberate a poet, but the act of tackling and overcoming a particular challenge. Any technical contract to which a poet is committed, including the apparently loose form of (so-called) free verse, will offer constraints of some kind. Different constraints will be found more or less appealing depending on the poet and the poem. They are appealing, primarily, for what it is they expose. By narrowing the context in which creativity happens, the “manacles of poetry” facilitate greater heed. Specific problems in need of specific responses become available, and intense concentration can be achieved, which may itself be invigorating. Constraints in creativity, importantly, are to limit a creator’s field of action, but not action itself. A contract does not remove the need for choice, but rather amplifies that need, rendering it urgent, even, as a response to identified difficulties. Obstacles liberate by giving poets the opportunity to direct their powers to tangible sites of potential influence. This direction may threaten even as it lends possibility to the expression of specific impressions, yet the conflict thus raised is itself part of the challenge that is sought.

The particular nature of the technical contract employed in the creation of a poem will reflect the interests and skills of the poet concerned and the culture of the time and place of writing. The appeal of certain forms and methods, and of the possibility of revising those forms and methods, is partly a function of circumstance. Several relatively stable elements of the technical contracts poets tend to embrace can nonetheless be identified. The logic of poetry, or logics, for there are many kinds of poetry, change as new works and styles are developed, but do so relative to a number of fundamental concerns. Perhaps the most basic concern sustained by poets is that for sound. Koestler observes that, “the poet creates by bisociating sound and sense, metre and meaning”.

The description is a summary of Paul Valéry’s comment (quoted by Koestler, from Valéry’s “The Course in Poetics”) that poets must simultaneously obey perfectly incongruous conditions: musical, rational, significant, and suggestive; conditions which require a continuous and repeated connection between rhythm and syntax, between sound and sense… the coupling of the phonetic variable with the semantic variable creates problems of extension and convergence which poets solve blindfold – but they solve them (and this is the essential thing), from time to time.

Sound is written into poetic contracts as a necessary contributor to the conceptual
and emotional meaning a poem delivers. The poet, says Louis Zukofsky, “looks, so to speak, into his ear as he does at the same time into his heart and intellect”. The concern for sound provides a source of problems that are, in turn, opportunities for creative solutions. They are additional problems, what *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* terms “excess pattern”. The call for rhythm, for example, inserts a contrived complexity that requires numerous potentially creative decisions to be made, decisions regarding line lengths, pace and metre, stanzaic form, and so on. Even in prose poetry, these concerns remain significant: a pseudo or teased lineation effects hesitations and repetitions within sentences that consequently still need to be quoted as they appear in print, with line endings unchanged. Whether a poet commits to iambic pentameter or to free verse, to a syllabic count or to the “breath” in a poem’s lines (where, according to Charles Olson, the energy of one’s breath is to be transformed into language and recorded typographically), apparently unnecessary constraints are introduced. The poem being written is given direction, but it is a direction that adds to, even as it begins to answer, the problem of translating an impression into poetry.

Beside rhythm, there is an expectation, equally fundamental, for rhyme, and if not direct rhyme, then near rhyme, assonance, alliteration, and other aural repetitions. The patterning here can also be kinaesthetic and visual: what the ear detects may be sensed, as well, and amplified, by the mouth, through actual or imagined utterances, and by the eye, through visual resemblances. Such echoes are evident in comparisons between “needle” and “neglect”, “tongue” and “longer”, “sky” and “rhythm”, “crude roar” and “rupture”, and between “chilled”, “stanched”, and “mends”. Contracts in rhyme allow otherwise innocent elements of everyday speech to become sources of friction and possibility. Consonants and vowels are embraced, in poetry, as degrees of freedom that allow additional forms of expression, and as constraints that, since the influence given to their sound cannot consequently be ignored, refuse the option of a “soundless” poem. Form, to repeat, liberates even as it binds. Punctuation, too, can be given heightened and contractual significance, as exemplified in the work of Dickinson and cummings. The use of white space and silence in a poem, via, for example, staggered and broken lines, can also become relevant. None of these variables are given attention in isolation, and the problem of how to meaningfully integrate a poem’s multiple components offers further opportunities for creativity.
Technical contracts draw poets into a discipline through which works that look and sound like poems can be created. Each contract will reflect a poet’s commitment to a range of poetic conventions, and a concern for rhythm and rhyme is likely to be expressed within this commitment. The question of how these contracts operate in the production of specific poems is addressed in the following chapter.
Interlude: Early Drafts

In the early drafts of the poem “Stick Insect”, concern was given primarily to the informing experience and not to what the poem itself might become. Early versions of the poem (see below) read more as an effort to record an impression than as a translation of that impression into poetry. (The style of the earlier poem also reflects a change in aesthetics, as years separate the first and final versions of the work.) Willingness to allow the material to be worked on as an element of a poetic rather than, or as well as, a personal reality, was aided by the emergence of the poem’s form – increased focus on rhythm and rhyme established the poem as a distinct entity.

Stick Insect

Airborne without a licence,
stumbling over a stony evolution,
time tangling with paper wings:

flight drags the eye to the strumming
of disjointed motion, and when it
lands, this twig, the tremor

is the mind’s slipped cog
clicking into memory. There’s no
smooth closure. A rift lingers in the

sky’s seams, and the click still sounds.
Stick Insect, EARLIER VERSION

The brick of an insect
Hangs
On chords of fog-twined sun,
Tied, in turn,
To auburn clouds.
Wings
Carve flight paths
Into stony ground,
And he stumbles,
Working stepwise
Onto boulders, into crevices,
Clambering –
A younger evolution
(Wings not sorted out)
Knots the threads
Of woven air.
He is flying,
Stiff-limbed,
Longer than my open hand,
Wings suspected –
Barely there.
He does move,
Stealing into melted time,
An unmeasured pace
Of thought;
I trace the inchings.
Unnamed.
Till he lands,
Wavering on a narrow gum, 3 metres up,
And unmistakable;
Gears engage,
Sun spills, the gold disperses,
And his wooden limbs
Are labelled:
A phasmid, stick insect,
Wobbles
To its giddy rest…
Two creatures.
A cog slips,
Disintegrates,
And lace wings
Tremor
Over thoughts unclaimed,
In flight, riding awe,
Unaccustomed.
The Act of Writing

A technical contract is not a settled document but, rather, part of an ongoing response by a poet to a selected subject, to the emerging poem, and to the wider poetic community. The effect of a technical contract, even if it alters during the writing process, is to both support and provoke creative decision-making. The question is how. Molly Peacock illustrates how contracts can support poetic creativity by describing the writing process behind her poem, “She Lays”, a sonnet on masturbation. “Facing a blank page,” Peacock explains,

I felt it would be impossible to make up the shape of self-love as I went along. How could this frail subject make its own clumsy masonry? So I chose a ‘form’ as a vehicle to take me to this intimate place. Instead of bewilderment, I chose limitation. The limitations of the lines then became long corridors to freedom… Having everywhere at my disposal, I would not have known where to go.¹¹²

For Peacock, the sonnet leant specificity to an amorphous problem. Containment offered by a specific form may also have licensed daring for John Tranter in his writing of Crying in Early Infancy: 100 Sonnets, though here the daring extends to a teasing of the form itself. The work’s poems move backwards and forwards across a boundary of rational sense, approaching, in places (as sonnet 20 explains), “a catalogue of dreams / just like my life”.¹¹³ Limits of meaning are finely explored, and the familiar poetic structure Tranter employs (and mildly renegotiates) becomes the ground against which this exploration gains coherency. Smaller elements of poetic form can offer equivalent support. For Alan Williamson, secure metre in a poem grants permission: “It draws a kind of magic circle”, Williamson writes, “within which, as in primitive cultures, it is safe to dance out one’s possession by the demon”.¹¹⁴ Williamson and Tranter can be compared here not for the kinds of poems they produce or for the reasons they write them, but for the freedom each finds in particular technical contracts. Robert Creeley, too, recalling Pound’s claim that “Verse consists of a constant and a variant”,¹¹⁵ describes how the quatrain provided, for a time, the stability he felt he needed; the variant, he explains, could then occur in the line. Poetic forms can render a poet safe enough to be unsafe. The direction gained can allow risks to be taken regarding other aspects of the poem being written. Pinned from the slide into aridity (to use Blanchot’s term), a poet may become able
to entertain otherwise unapproachable uncertainties.

Creativity can also be directly provoked by a poet’s technical contracts. Ammons suggests we need “precipitations of forms / to use like tongs against the formless”.\textsuperscript{116} Robert Brown, in \textit{The Handbook of Creativity}, argues that “one needs an observable guide to the unobservable”.\textsuperscript{117} Technical contracts can be observable guides, goads, even, to what has not yet been conceived of or fully realised; they can incite effort in ways that expose new and unexpected opportunities for expression. A poet’s technique, writes Seamus Heaney “involves the discovery of ways to go out of his normal cognitive bounds and raid the inarticulate”.\textsuperscript{118} There are no ultimate answers as to how such “raids” are to be achieved – chance encounters, non-poetic interests, and sustained reflection may all be influential, in conjunction with \textit{or despite} a poet’s technical engagements. Technical contracts, however, do bear the potential to provide a means of approaching and of coaxing into existence things un- and half-imagined. It is a claim many poets reiterate. Anthony Hecht argues that through formal considerations a poet “will be invited to discover meanings or implications he had never considered before. In this way the ‘unforeseen’ emerges from the small germ of the beginning”.\textsuperscript{119} Richard Kenney, too, referring to the pleasures of rhyme, writes:

One, in the hearing, is obvious; the other, in the making, has to do with a kind of random or irrational search, a momentary crippling of the intellect, looking for words according to sound rather than sense. It’s a practical tool for finding what you don’t know you’re looking for, as the expression goes – what sometimes comes to perfect sense.\textsuperscript{120}

A technical contract raises difficulties that need not be associated with a poem’s subjects. They are difficulties responded to, however, with these subjects in mind, and it is this crossing of influences that can release unexpected possibilities. It can be surprisingly beneficial, as Richard Wilbur explains, to “put yourself in a position where you have to pay attention to all sorts of wild suggestions which come to you through the sound contract you have made”.\textsuperscript{121}

A poet’s sources of stability and provocation will change from one poem to another. Different kinds of contracts will, further, suit different kinds of poets. David Lehman, referring to poets as problem solvers, writes that, “By this logic, the tougher the formal problem, the better – the more likely it is to act as a sort of broker between language, chance, and the poet’s instincts”.\textsuperscript{122} Toughness, though, is an inadequate
measure of a contract’s conduciveness to creativity. A constraint one poet finds invigorating may seem too awkward or forced to another. A contract that is sufficiently challenging in one context may appear uninteresting in other situations. Peacock contrasts formal poetic structures, which she describes as “a way of braving an emotion’s universe”, with free verse. The latter, she writes, does not provide the same facilitation, appearing instead as “millions of small decisions in chaos” which “have about them a sense of overwhelming struggle”. The comment reflects Peacock’s particular bias rather than the form itself, as is evidenced by the large number of poets for whom the “overwhelming struggle” is both engaging and generative. Free verse, despite its name, offers potentially supportive and provocative constraints. Sound and sense must still convincingly intersect, and the absence of a strict framing pattern (as provided by sonnets, pantoums, and the like) can expose smaller emerging patterns (in sound, syntax, appearance, and so on). Commitment is given in part to relations that become apparent during the act of writing. William Stafford records his preference for forms that surface as he works: “There is no name for them,” he comments, “but as the poem develops it becomes full of incipient patterns, little places you can pet and bring along”. The patterns a writer of free verse develops will still reflect perceived notions of what constitutes a poem and of what constitutes free verse. As for more formal poetry, these selected codes can seem severe enough to liberate departures from conventional thinking. Stafford writes that,

The areas of experiment, of exploration, of discovery, are those areas that have to do with the language experience that forces you to make leaps that you ordinarily wouldn’t make. All sorts of little enticements show up in the syllables and in the pace of the phrasing, with the way the sequences go in the sentence and the alternatives that begin to occur to you.

Direction and unexpected stimulation can both arise, in free verse, from a commitment to informal rhythms and rhymes.

Technical contracts are only useful by virtue of a poet’s capacity to perceive and respond to the problems and freedoms they offer. At certain times, and for certain poets, the direct use of an existing model of poetry, formal or “free”, may seem more onerous or mundane than liberating. Stimulation can require a radical choice of constraints, a break, that is, from the norm and an insertion of a contract that seems both more modern and challenging. Technical contracts are always in some way specific to individual poems. The point here is that the act of tailoring a
contract to one’s own needs can at times escalate into major innovation. e.e. cummings, once again, provides a clear example. cummings adapted poetic and grammatical norms to produce a self-styled contract to which he remained committed through much of his work. That it was a contract and not anarchic subversion is reflected in the consistency of his distinctive style and in the general acceptance of that style as something poetic. Excess pattern, added to by the importance given by cummings to individual letters, to “misplaced” capitalisation, and to “erroneous” punctuation, allows, in the poems, new ways of drawing attention to and of recasting otherwise ordinary words and meanings. cummings writes, for example,

D-re-A-mi-N-gl-Y

leaves
(sEe)
locked
in
gOLd
after-gLOw
are

t
ReMbLiN
g

The act of negotiating a technical contract can, then, involve as well as induce intense creativity. cummings, importantly, at no stage rejects poetry itself. His poems play earnestly with traditional meaning structures, almost sacrificing coherency, and celebrating, implicitly, the medium that permits them to do so. The works reflect a general property of technical innovation in the field. Dislocation of a poetic norm will have, unless the poet concerned is to cease writing poetry, a subplot of poetic perpetuation. The subplot is that which licenses and locates a poet’s creative effort.

A further example of marked technical innovation is provided by the (loosely grouped) Beat poets of the 1950s and 60s. The Beat poets expressed a desire for liberation from what were perceived to be irrelevant and excessive restrictions, in politics as well as poetry. “Spontaneity” was favoured over tradition. Yet, the shared
urge for greater freedom and individuality was identifiable only through significant agreement regarding what that freedom and individuality might look like. Preferences emerged for a certain kind of pitch, inflection, gesture, and pace, and for “unfinished” or open forms, including improvised performances. Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” provides an example. In effect, the new contracts were no less severe than the traditions that were rejected. Amiri Baraka, a poet associated with the movement, exclaims,

I must be completely free to do just what I want, in the poem. “All is permitted”: Ivan’s crucial concept. There cannot be anything I must fit the poem into. Everything must be made to fit into the poem. There must not be any preconceived notion or design for what the poem ought to be.127

Baraka’s efforts, of course, were designed to satisfy his particular poetic bias and were not “completely free” at all – “must”, “crucial”, “cannot”, and “ought” are not the words of a liberated poet. I must be completely free, Baraka writes, “in the poem” – I want to diverge from the dominant conventions, Baraka means, without ceasing to be a poet. The freedom experienced by the Beat poets did not lie in the forms and ideals they espoused, but in the extent to which they were able to renegotiate existing poetic (and political) conditions without losing the capacity to write poetry. Such freedom can be gained, theoretically, in response to any existing convention. It is unavailable, ironically, to a poet (poetically suicidal) who avoids convention altogether. In any field, revolution requires a platform from which revision can be attempted.

Technical contracts can support and provoke poetic creativity, and can themselves become a site of innovation. They cannot guarantee the creation of a rewarding poem, nor will any particular contract seem appealing to all poets. Language Poets, like other innovators, have sought new problems and obstacles through which to diverge from existing styles of writing. Assumptions that have shaped poetry in the past have been questioned, and distinctive and novel responses have been developed for the uncertainties accordingly unleashed. The legitimacy and appeal both of the techniques and of the poems that follow from them have been variously perceived. Eliot Weinberger is not alone when he rejects what he describes as “an endless succession of depthless images and empty sounds, each cancelling the previous one”.128 Poetries based on chance procedures and on systematic text-generating methods, where constraint construction can become the main concern (if
not the sole creative act), also illustrate the potential for disagreement. Enthusiasm from some (writers of Oulipian poetry and Computer poetry, for example) contrasts with rejection (or indifference) from others. What is liberating for one poet, what stretches expression and breaks habitual thinking, can seem, to another, distasteful or irrelevant. New possibilities for meaning can seem to be tapped or, by the same technique, blocked, depending on the individuals and the circumstances involved.
Interlude: Emerging Patterns, I

“Hush” and “Naught” began as single lines composed without any specific conceptual or emotional interest. From a rapidly created list of such lines, “a lute and no hand” was selected for its pace and suspension. “Hush” grew, firstly, from an extension of these words’ sounds and of the mood they seemed to imply. The poem acquired its theme only after several lines had been written and variously revised. “Naught” (included in the large collection of poems entitled “Uncertainty”) was similarly drawn from “a gruff nothing”. The line’s “uh” sounds, which remained dominant in the poem’s early drafts, provided a strong initial guide as to which subjects would be approached. Couplets emerged as a belated and weak framing pattern for both poems. The writing processes were primarily guided by the smaller and emerging contracts in sound.

Hush

a lute in an empty church, signature
of his breath, would fall

into songs for the buried dead,
but finds no hand, no coloured thread

to repair the silence; without witness, a door
steals half ajar and memory

passes into weather,
   a slow rain that never lands
Emerging Patterns, II

“in no mood” began as a rapid and unexpected response to the words “cut things up”. Free verse was assumed, and significant commitment was given to a sustained, staccato tempo. As additions to the poem were made, the emerging contract in sound and rhythm began to effect a degree of insistence. In the opening of the second stanza, for example, “unattached”, “stand” and “it’s gone beyond that” were, like “life” and “mind”, suggestions made available partly by their capacity to satisfy, even as they continued to build, the poem’s aural and rhythmic design.

in no mood

I’m in no mood to cut (she says to – why?); she says to cut things up – what does she mean, she, the gut reply, the foot’s arch: because she’s tied?
Cut? At the risk of losing … what? A hand? A heart? Cut loose? No mood for loose. Or perhaps a rearrangement. Cut, as if to make, or to re-make, to redeem. So what she doesn’t say – cut things up, a kind of (does she mean) chance for (in a yes mood) putting things together. Is that what it takes? Can’t make first? cut later?
The cut’s made. And the edges, like when hair, pulled to snapping, snaps, jerk back. There’s space. And a struggle: someone’s hand out of reach, unattached. Track marks in a desert start and end where I stand. I’m in no (I’d say mood, but it’s gone beyond that) no state of (cut up, bleeding) mind. But there’s
still life, a sinkhole, thumb-sized, something burrowing under sand. Do I (one-handed) dig? I wait. And night falls. She says to cut, and I’m in no mood, so I (what can I say) make room, and the gap means (doesn’t it?) something builds,

like morning, only slower. Cut? To cut things. To make whole, one way or another. There are mouse bones, come sunrise, in the hollow. She says to pull (to pull *apart*) each bone, but I tell her they’ve scurried into sand dunes with a force of their own, not quite expected. She says to catch them, and in her mood, it’s not what I want to do. I tell her I’m leaving. She’s in the sand, kicked back into the left heel as I stumble. I tell I’m cured.
Cross-discipline Constraints

Poetic contracts can be influenced by materials that are distinctly non-poetic. The hybridity already present in poetry, that between sense and sound, can in this way be extended. Forms and techniques may be imported from any number of fields and cultures, and while there is no promise that the crossover will be invigorating, the possibility exists. Modern dithyrambs, pantoums, haiku, tanka, and the like, each the result of a fusion between poetries of different times and places, have proven stimulating for a number of poets. In the crossbred genre of prose poetry, the intersection is of a different kind, offering, rather than fusion, ongoing opposition. The competing forms co-exist, licensing contracts for a peculiar kind of creativity that settles neither into prose nor into poetry. Lineation, rhythm, and rhyme are as-if-but-not-quite thwarted, as-if-but-not-quite usurpative. To accept the challenge to write neither poetry nor prose, while writing both, is to accept permission to write something “other”. The contract(s) will still need to be in some way satisfied – the liberation the crossover effects is conditional – yet possibilities unique to the form can also be uncovered. Fictocriticism, in which multiple generic threads may merge (poetry among them), facilitates and exploits comparable cross-fertilisation. A creator’s notions of what can be said, and how, are potentially augmented.

Intense exchanges can also take place between poetry and literary theory. Since in one, words are carefully put together to achieve particular effects, while in the other, careful attention is given to how words might achieve particular effects, the intersection is to be expected. Poets who take no direct interest in literary theory’s accounts of the mechanisms of writing are still likely to be influenced by developments in the field. Cultural prevalence can make certain perspectives and approaches difficult to avoid. Coleridge, Eliot, and Hejinian are poets whose interests in how words mean can be clearly related to the times in which each was and is writing. Coleridge’s “organic unity”, Eliot’s concern for cultural memory and embedded symbolism, and Hejinian’s associative play are romantic, modern, and post-modern respectively. Exchanges between poetry and literary theory, though they may be direct and intense, reflect, also, the closeness of these fields within the society generally. Poetry and philosophy are similarly intertwined. Less dense cross-discipline exchanges are also noteworthy. Fred D’Aguiar describes a dialogue between
the fields of poetry and history as being, for him, particularly important. He records finding provocation in historical constraints: “I functioned best,” D’Aguiar explains,

when locked into a particular historical dilemma. My imagination plunged into the history of its environment even as it sought to surface from it and leave it behind for a space not governed by any social or historical predicament. … It is as if history were the parent that the imagination had to acknowledge every time as it fled to a place of its own making. ¹²⁹

Music has also been acknowledged by many poets as a potent hybridising force. Parallel concerns (for tone and rhythm) intensify the exchange. “Music has given me a much greater sense of the possibilities of quantity in poetry”, James Wright notes.¹³⁰ For Laurie Duggan, the merge is almost subliminal: “I’m not technically up there,” Duggan states, “but I would be surprised if certain elements of music which I like, such as the drone or kinds of modality, didn’t infuse the work”.¹³¹ Musical forms and techniques, Duggan implies, can contribute to a poet’s technical contract.

Why are such exchanges attractive? The challenge of solving a new set of problems and the opportunity to create using new materials without leaving one’s chosen field, are reasons enough. Borrowed methods and meanings can also bring with them allusions to any authority or appeal they might possess in their own fields. Imported security can allow experimentation that poetic tradition alone might not support. An extreme example is given by the partnership between poetry and psychoanalysis. Surrealistic and other avant-garde poetries of the 1920s gained many of their characteristics from methods and principles that psychoanalysis was bringing to public attention. New procedures (automatic writing, for instance) were cultivated from notions made not merely available but also pressing by Freud’s hugely influential work. Psychoanalysis provided the Surrealist poets with an unexplored, apparently defensible, and contemporary reference through which to develop fresh approaches to writing. Kevin Brophy, discussing the exchange between creative writing and psychoanalysis, and referring specifically to the poet André Breton, writes that, “the discovery of the unconscious was the discovery of a technique”.¹³² It was a technique both sufficiently supported and sufficiently daring to attract (and to still attract) the attention of creators across many fields.

The potential benefits to creativity arising from cross-discipline exchange prompt the behavioural theorist, Robert Epstein to exclaim: “Learn something entirely different! … The new will interconnect with the old in novel and potentially
fascinating ways”. John Hayes, in *The Handbook of Creativity*, is more explicit:

A unique pattern of knowledge outside of a field, which is acquired perhaps through hobbies or through switching professions, could provide a person with analogies that are not generally available to others in the field. Such analogies could suggest unexpected possibilities or problems in the field.  

Through exchanges between disciplines, cognitive norms can be unsettled and new means of expression can emerge. A creator’s awareness of his or her chosen field may be simultaneously heightened through an exposure of those qualities that distinguish it from each intersecting domain. There is no rule to say which materials might most usefully be imported – apparently obscure connections can add dimensions to a creator’s resources. The composer Morton Feldman illustrates the point by describing the influence of his interest in Near and Middle Eastern rugs: “Rugs have prompted me in my recent music to think of a disproportionate symmetry,” Feldman writes, “in which a symmetrically staggered rhythmic series is used: 4:3, 6:5, 8:7, etc., as the point of departure”.

Is it to be concluded, here, that broad and contrasting interests should be consciously developed by creators? Might the pursuit of multiple projects enhance an individual’s creativity? Colin Martindale, in a study of personality and circumstance in creativity, asserts that “the more diverse and general a person’s store of ideas, the greater is the chance that a creative idea will emerge”. The comment requires the strict proviso that access to specific tools, through which the general store of ideas might be usefully sifted and reassembled, also exists. General information on its own is insufficient for creativity, and if acquiring diverse general knowledge means sacrificing the development of specialist skills, the benefits become questionable. To be in a position to be challenged by alternatives and to encounter provocative crossovers is to have established a commitment to a discipline within which these alternatives and provocations might seem significant. “Clearly,” writes Epstein, “different experiences make a big difference in creative performances, but there’s more to creativity than experience”. Epstein emphasises that what is essential in creativity is the will and the means to unravel, manipulate, and re-amalgamate the knowledge that is available. Non-poetic influences in poetry achieve little without the sense of relevance and direction that is conferred by the will and means to write poems. Poetic contracts reflect the development of such direction.
**Interlude: Jazz**

“The Line” reflects a commitment to the rhythms of the jazz pianist and composer, Thelonious Monk, as interpreted by the trumpeter, Wynton Marsalis. The commitment licensed what was a new style of writing for this author, and shaped, also, the vocabulary that was to be employed.

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**The Line**  
(after Wynton Marsalis)

A player drops notes in a broken field, and I knock them into furrows, to let them sit, but they won’t stop still. He’s got a line going, and it rolls a little, easing friction from its silky sway, hustling for its quiet ride. Notes sink rifts into dogged time, and years slip from the player’s line: dee-li-dee, dee-ahh, a line that binds: dee-li-dee

And he has me, gives a little, takes a little, ploughs a little deeper, and the shake is at the heart’s core – I’m quivering. Notes hurl into hollow limbs: doo-la-doo, la-dee, and he’s rolling: doo-ba-doo di, di… *gives* it to me, holding me, pinning me, from the inside till there’s… no way out: doo-ba doo-ba di-loo

ba-di-da, ba-di-doo, ba-di-day… and all the while, playing, him and me, one field, the same, thinking: dee-li-dee, and working, dee-ahh… ba-di-ahh; *gives* it to me, one more time, and we’re swinging, sliding into midnight, each note, breaking into smooth, and its smoky rise dealing the addiction,

before dawn

steals
Constraints and Redemption

What has been implied in the foregoing discussion is that creativity in poetry demands some use of existing conventions. Established forms and techniques, those of poetry, necessarily, and those imported from other fields, if such exchanges take place, are alluded to, even where these forms are heavily revised. This deference to convention causes the composer Morton Feldman to insist that “everything we use to make art is precisely what kills it”.138 Referring to his development of a distinct musical notation, one that introduces alternative methods of composing and of performing, Feldman writes, “I added another link to the chain, and they called it freedom”.139 Susan Sontag is more explicit with regard to the dilemma Feldman identifies, and extends her focus to literature and to art generally. She writes that,

Practiced in a world furnished with second-hand perceptions, and specifically confronted by the treachery of words, the artist’s activity is cursed with mediacy. Art becomes the enemy of the artist, for it denies him the realization – the transcendence – he desires.140

“[D]o we love Music,” Feldman asks, “and not the systems, the rituals, the symbols – the worldly, greedy gymnastics we substitute for it? That is, do we give *everything* – a total commitment to our own uniqueness?"141 The answer is that we cannot. If we love music, then we love, in some part, the systems, rituals, and symbols through which it exists. A commitment to uniqueness can be perceived as such only via the greedy gymnastics by which our conceptions are organised. There is no transcendence. Poetry, too, is defined in relation to the problems poets fabricate to facilitate its writing; it cannot admit solutions that are not contaminated by its own conventions. Feldman is in fact resigned to this reality: he writes, “to make something is to constrain it. I have found no answer to this dilemma. My whole creative life is simply an attempt to adjust it".142 Creators work within disciplines that allow, at best, renewed impressions of a purity that can never be reached. This is not the end of creativity, but the endless beginning. Contrived and relative renditions lead to more and other acts of persuasion. Creative redemption can be sought again and again. How, this chapter asks, are a poet’s technical contracts involved in the impressions of significance for which redemption is (consolingly) pursued?

Considerable satisfaction can be generated by a poem that seems to fulfil the
contract that informs it. Publication and the consequent physical presence of a poem in a public space might heighten the sense of achievement. Its author might conclude that the work has indeed reached a point where it withstands its impossibility (as Blanchot says it must). His or her experiences and impressions may seem to have been translated into compelling, poetic expression, and the relevance of both may seem to have been affirmed. A technical contract can at no stage guarantee such a result. Nor can it confirm its own fulfilment. Poets’ perceptions of their works remain fundamentally insecure. Technical contracts are observable guides to the unobservable, affording a means of focus and of experimentation; they are also bearers of indeterminacy, being themselves founded essentially on contrivance. There are no right answers to the questions of which forms and techniques, or which rhymes and which rhythms, a poet should use. A devised contract may be substantially revised once a poem has been begun (as things “unobservable” come into play), demonstrating again that constraints and obstacles are such only by design. A poet is one who willingly commits to explicit artifice in order to approach a margin at which creativity can take place. This is the point of all technical contracts. The artifice offers no protection from the margin that is sought other than its own feigned specificity, as shaped by poetic traditions and by the preferences of the poet concerned. This can be enough. (Im)possibility can be particularised, uncertainty localised, and opportunities for creativity forged, as has been argued. The mediation Feldman laments offers a vital setting for creativity, a setting where there is neither absolute constraint nor an absence of constraint, neither automation nor incomprehension; unreadability can be glimpsed but need not overwhelm.

Contracts laced with the tension that is the freedom to conditionally choose, permit and sustain creativity. Such contracts stage an expectation for certain but ultimately unspecifed achievements. The creators employing them thus encounter both promise and uncertainty. Creative redemption arises from a creator’s sense that his or her own influence has allowed the former to outweigh the latter: problems worth solving are ideally identified or constructed, and solutions are offered. Impossibility, to repeat, is to yield a mediated and compelling possibility. Can it be assumed here, and need it be assumed, that uncertainty and redemption are conscious concerns for a poet? Certainly, poems can be written with relative ease: a poet need not be torn apart by angst each time he or she creates and may feel, on the contrary, largely confident with respect to the tools and processes employed. The occasional
arrival of unexpected effects may be the only indication that a poet has approached any kind of Derridean threshold. The notion of creative redemption does not lose relevance. Risks, in creativity, are inevitably taken. Comfortably or uncomfortably, a poet works without access to complete assurance, and his or her technical contracts, though they may offer direction and containment, nonetheless expose this reality. Amid openly concocted constraints and conditions, where expression is to be individual as well as conventional, a technical contract is a challenge to be met, and not a template for a satisfying work. Uncertainty need not be explicitly regarded by a poet, yet its presence will be felt.

In section I it was suggested that a poet does not choose uncertainty, but rather, “responds to uncertainties that are always already available, becoming in the process (as-if-)responsible for what he or she can never master”. The notion provides an opportunity for an alternative description of how uncertainty and redemption can be experienced in poetic creativity. What might it mean, we can ask, for a poet to be responsible? A creator can invite uncertainties by discovering the difference between responsibility and oppression. While the latter centres on law and order, the former admits initiative amid law and chaos. Oppression celebrates determinateness, swallowing uncertainty prior to any creative act; responsibility celebrates meaning amid the threat of disorder, admitting a margin without drowning in its infusive spread. For Derrida, “an increase in responsibility” is implied by the relinquishment of an absolute centre. Technical contracts reflect just such an increase. Care is taken, by a “responsible poet”, to relate an emerging, as-yet-chaotic poem to relatively stable points of reference. These points of reference may change, but will not be abandoned. The poet is thus revealed to be one who wishes both to remain a poet and to sustain the medium, even while he or she contributes works that do not wholly conform to established forms of poetry. The challenge of achieving redemption translates here into the difficulty that lies in deciding how to be responsible. “Frames, borders, constraints, and yet elasticity”, writes John Kinsella; poems, he explains, “work through and against conventions, they are constantly grappling with responsibility and rebellion”. Even where the “rebellion” is not explicit, appearing as a relatively minor innovation within a largely conventional work, the struggle remains. Poets attempt to both perpetuate and renew poetic expression and risk failing one or the other ambition, or both, in doing so. This is the ridge to which their technical contracts ideally deliver them. It is in rescuing both
ambitions, each from the threat of the other, change from preservation \textit{and} preservation from change, that creative redemption is experienced. To accept responsibility in creativity is to lend the “\textit{and}” importance.
Interlude: Irresponsibility

The easy poem, the writing that in writing slides just by saying the cloud in hot pursuit of this lady, shoulders over knees and gusting into the

giraffes that range the treetops,
most unbitten by what
kind of fleeting bone
toiling into mud, is
the word, learning red, each dip
like the horns between
what the mutton wouldn’t notice ++

Where does responsibility end and irresponsibility begin? No careful thought was given to the above “poem”. Proponents of automatic writing might regard this positively. The work does look poetic, and since poems by Hejinian and Forbes came to mind during its writing, it would seem that a minimal contract was employed. A more elaborate contract was established for the writing of the poem “sound”, yet the question of whether sufficient responsibility was taken can still be asked. To be pleased with an achieved effect is not necessarily to experience creative redemption. The question of whether the work is a poem must still be (subjectively) answered. “sound” is offered as the idea of a poem, not quite a poem. “The easy poem” (above) has poetic shape alone.

sound

ti karrajun dis vyderon
mar deres le verifon
swi tka lahbillapor
ka kurrula
     la Shisk;

kenanah shiss tukunanah
takun tahayn.
Conclusion

Mathematics, Motz and Weaver write, “is our intellectual telescope and microscope”. Michael Guillen describes it, equivalently, as “an exceptionally super-sensitive seeing-eye dog”. It is a seeing-eye dog with peculiar habits – there are some places it just will not go – yet this seems to improve its sensitivity within the locations it enjoys. Poetry is a telescope and a microscope for things non-mathematical. It, too, is an exceptionally super-sensitive seeing-eye dog with peculiar habits, and can act as such for poets as well as readers. The numerous, interactive constraints that form poets’ technical contracts serve as tools for perceiving possibilities that would otherwise pass unnoticed. Like all good microscopes, they do not themselves explain what is detected. Multiple possibilities are also obscured by these tools, for the tools are necessarily biased. Creativity can at times be hindered. It is a point worthy of a digression. A commitment to a particular sound contract can “twist your thought,” Richard Wilbur warns, and “take your mind off where you were going”. Wilbur adds:

I think one could start out in a very difficult form, like terza rima, and find that the natural drift of the thoughts and perceptions was being impeded, was being falsified, by the technical difficulties. What you do at that point is to start over, maybe, or eliminate some of your rhymes.

Technical difficulties can inspire a highly useful “drift of thought”, one no less “natural” than that referred to by Wilbur. They can also, however, become a source of unproductive interference. A poet’s liberating manacles can become just manacles, directives that, in the words of James Voss and Mary Means, “prohibit the individual from viewing problems in new ways”. “It is so easy,” writes Miller Mair, “to get a new idea and destroy it by the old methods of approach that change and bend it”. It is difficult to know, of course, when a selected method might destroy an idea and when it might provide just the right support. A modern haiku poet must decide whether to embrace a strict syllable-count or, in accordance with current trends, to diverge from it: either choice might depress or drive his or her efforts. The point is not that certain forms and methods should be avoided, but that compliance for its own sake can smother creativity. A poet can detract from his or her experiences as a creator by directing attention to poetic forms and not, also, through them.
Technical contracts ideally offer form to ongoing processes of influence and exchange, processes creators undertake with both daring and responsibility. Like linguistic indeterminacies, poetic forms and techniques become a source of licence, effecting both freedom and constraint. There is no agreement here with Craig Raine’s conclusion that, “Technique is something you learn in order to reach a point where you’re writing what you want with the minimum of interference”. Rather, technique is what a poet learns in order to utilise and withstand what Blanchot, with characteristic exuberance, calls “the force of the undetermined”. “The poet’s destiny,” Blanchot writes,

is to expose himself to the force of the undetermined and to the pure violence of being from which nothing can be made, to endure this force courageously, but also to contain it by imposing upon it restraint and the perfection of a form. This is a requirement full of risk.\(^\text{152}\)

Write by all means, Blanchot declares, “but only if writing always makes the act of writing more effortful”.\(^\text{153}\) There are no perfect forms, and the pure violence of being is not expressed. Yet technical contracts remain a means by which risks can be taken and new expressions tried. The force of the undetermined is not contained, yet ongoing creativity (and creative redemption) is perhaps in any case the more interesting ambition.

The collection of poems offered at the end of this section argues primarily for the licence technical contracts can lend to poetic creativity. The argument is given largely by illustration, though a few of the poems do directly discuss notions raised or implied within the exegesis. “reading from the text” emphasises, for example, our dependence on available concepts and conventions. “Milling” considers a particular poet’s response to the forms and conventions of poetry. Licence in poetic creativity is encountered in the margin between responsibility and rebellion, and could be discussed with reference to any of the poems in this thesis. The purpose of this collection is to display ways in which the struggle between responsibility and rebellion can be managed. Two of the poems, “duet” and “no-one home”, reflect an intention to diverge responsibly from conventional poetic forms. “Woomera” and “Blue” are included as reminders that a poet may retain such forms and still experiment with poetic effects: the fact that a poem looks poetic can license increased semantic play. In these poems, as elsewhere, the struggle between responsibility and rebellion is managed as a balance between constraint and risk.
Many of the poems that follow illustrate that responsibility and rebellion can both be entertained via the importation of cross-discipline constraints. Many of the effects produced in the collection’s prose poems were provoked by a sense that the licence for creative play had been altered. The feeling was of having been given unlimited space in which to write what would still be a poetic line. A suite of poems written in response to elements of mathematics reveals a different kind of exchange. “Café Mathematica” and “Monnie Hall” began with concerns for specific mathematical concepts. The thematic influence soon became technical, for the crossover, by bringing mathematical and poetic logics into conflict, introduced a rhythmic and tonal awkwardness that proved difficult to resolve. The challenge was at times energising, and while early drafts often seemed insufficiently poetic, many new poems were written. Several of these poems bear thematic as well as illustrative significance. In “4-Cube”, for example, two mathematicians pursue the implications of an existing mathematical idea beyond the bounds of conventional meaning. They create, by doing so, what is in reality a fundamental mathematical tool. A technical contract, the poem claims, can support and provoke creativity in mathematics as well as poetry. A form of cross-discipline exchange not yet mentioned in this exegesis, and not strictly cross-discipline, is that of collaboration. “October View” is a poem written in collaboration with the poet David McCooey. The writing process impacted not only on “October View” but also on several non-collaborative poems written at the same time. New forms and methods were not made available by the exchange, but existing forms and methods were given new meaning. The sense of what could be achieved using given constraints was extended.

To intentionally test the limits of a specific technical constraint, a series of poems were written for this collection with the condition that each would be only two lines in length. No specific metre or syllabic count was set, though a reasonably consistent line length was sought. The commitment given to this constraint acted as a support for creativity that was itself provocative. The discipline of the form yielded a number of new poems and was also employed in the re-writing of some existing works. A comparable contract accompanied the poem “Postcard Revelations”. The framing pattern for this poem, built partly from one discovered in the writing of “Making Our Minds Up”, consisted of a request for multiple, short stanzas of prose poetry. The effect to be achieved was highly specific, and yet, as for the 2-line poems, sufficiently indeterminate to demand ongoing creative effort. Creative
tension issued from a desire to (responsibly) sustain the tone of each previous stanza while still creating something new. The margin for creativity was reduced, and the writing process gained both direction and intensity. Several explicitly formal technical constraints are also represented among the works that follow. “Bard” is written as a series of haiku. Some independent haiku are offered and illustrate, through their juxtaposition with various 2-line poems, the considerable effect a minimal change to a technical contract can have. “Yarn” and “Rain” are examples of larger syllabic poems. “Ego” and “Glimmering” are the thesis’s only sonnets. Again, the technical constraints behind these poems were in each case stringent. Their conduciveness to creativity lay in the fact that they were also ambiguous. It is indefinite stringency that provides the support and provocation necessary for creativity.

Formal poetry is employed infrequently in this thesis. Traditional metres and formal rhyme patterns are not pursued. There are no pantoums, sestinas, rondels, or other such forms, and only two sonnets. The absence is informative. In the second chapter of this section, it was claimed that “a constraint one poet finds invigorating may seem too awkward or forced to another”. While awkwardness can often be overcome by immersion in the history and possibilities of a particular form, a poet may also find that to employ certain forms is to seem to limit rather than to extend the support and provocation that is sought. The general absence of formal poems in this thesis can be translated into the observation that rewarding creativity will not be forced, for all creators, from simply any constraint at all. Constraints conducive to creativity were most often found, for the poems in this thesis, via patterns in rhythm and rhyme that emerged during writing. The starting points for these poems were often specific experiences or ideas for which translation was sought. Several poems, however, began with a specific technical interest. “Hush” and “Naught” have already been given as examples. “loss” began as a desire to use the line “skies patch with other skies”, and with the tonal extension of this line achieved by the words “the world thins into porcelain”. Both lines were constructed indiscriminately and were combined to establish a technical rather than a thematic challenge. As associations with particular experiences and feelings arose, the technical contract became more binding. The poem is printed as part of a suite of poems that were similarly induced. The processes that produced these works are reflected in Blanchot’s suggestion that a writer might let words become “gazes, an empty light, attractive and fascinating”. 
such that “a new contract forms with things’ intimacy, a presentiment of unknown relations”\textsuperscript{154}. In poetry, “gazes” can also be rhymes, rhythms, and tones. In the two “Dear Reader” poems, a tone implied by the title offered an uncertain focus (an empty light), which prompted a translation into poetry of what would otherwise have been left as (personal and unrelated) prose. “Gazes” are a means by which a sufficiently ambiguous form might be found and offered to creativity.
Poems: Form
Dear Reader

The river was damn good!
Dragonflies and a perfect breeze.
Since you were there by proxy (as requested)
I should inform you that you enjoyed yourself
greatly, returning with new life; the gum leaves
showed every edge.

---

Starting point: the tone of the title.
Affection:

– it takes a while to find her:
robber on a highway
drags her into undergrowth,
she escapes, but
lost in rugged outback
she has to wait,
and for a while
she isn’t missed;

dear affection.

– it takes time
to dig her out:
sand dunes roll over her,
she’s immersed
and makes no sound,
and we’re near exhaustion
when our hands
run into her;

dear affection.

– it takes hours, sometimes,
to undress her,
and sometimes
it isn’t her,
but only eyes
or shadows
under wintering trees;

dear affection.
– I’ve taken film, and cameras, 
jewels, and sweet fruits, 
to where she was 
last seen, and pretended 
whole days of innocence 
only to find 
mascara on her eyelashes 
and the soft side of her conduct 
turned away…

– it’s a skydive 
to be with her, 
and she’s 
not the type 
to know beforehand 
how to 
steer: 
it takes heart, 
and I’d give more 
for dear affection.

Starting point: the loosely constructed line, “robber on a highway”, and a desire to repeat “it takes”.
Six Wishes

1. the death of that desire
to have anything at all
while wanting nothing;

2. to feel the rush of what it takes to speak,
and then to not speak: the hover
where the writhing of those six or seven words
trickles into hearing;

3. anything not yet marred
by what the eye might call
the mothering of the tongue

4. and that the mirror
has to bend to see –
the moment of revolution;

5. to voice the doubt in my own voice
but not believe;

6. to feed wheat threshings
to the romantics
in the back paddock –
not quite sacrificial.

Starting point: lines cut from other poems, some since revised, and others no longer present. The commitment given was increased by the notion that these lines might form a single poem.
An ordinary paranoia

An ordinary paranoia puckers its lips at the porthole of an adequate life,
crossing public spaces to wrap its heat round another mind;
its presence distorts the pressure on the inside
where nothing moves quite the way it used to.

The infested soul withers into blind contortions, consumed by the voices
in the memories of its lost morale, reconfiguring its own past choices,
leaving nothing sound: self-doubt exploits
the new cause of fracture, and there's no equilibrium.

A small death sighs into a vacant will, emptiness melts into each exhale,
and the bid to catch the lees of pleasure tilts, as courage fails,
into melancholy: hope itself
ignores the need to reassemble.

Starting point: the relay of vowels in the opening line, the “uh”, “i”, “a” “or”, for example, in “puckers its lips at the porthole”. The contract was external for the second and third stanzas.
**The Lime Tree**

Billy fits the night frocks  
to the cat-walk sylphs,  
palms on their slinky hips,  
pin marks in her fingers,  
lime on her paling lips;  

one of them slips…  
and Billy’s  
very swish in the taffeta  
of her deep concern  
(smiling, all night long).

---

Starting point: “lime across slinky hips”. Opportunities to repeat the “i” sound from “slinky hips”, and to tease this rhyme via the “i” of “night” and “lime”, governed the writing of the poem.
Uncommon

Curled up together on the dark green curvy couch,
Knees, his shoulders, my hands, we’re entangled,
Above fathers, mothers, siblings, in a white room,
His skin, the bed of his grin, prickling through my cells,
The two of us verging on unbounded fields… this was love,
And love was a dream, Saturday the 8th, last October.
What the Body Said:

“This outcrop cracks slowly into powdered shale, fusion ebbs into crumbling. But here I stand, patching by blind will, raising my bony mantle. In the shade of me, voices reach for my exhale; and behind each eye are the movements of the figures warmed by my living. Some speak through me of their encounters, and are at home in me, as hope and pain, as love and hate, as fear, and as desire, arriving like defectors to an unnamed cause.

Erosion ticks through me, and still they come, brandishing my own hands, so that I wither amid impressions of living on.”
Lunch in the City Square

After counting the number of suits that move to the right of us, and the red-shoed women moving left, and having calculated the shift of ties, skirts, and boot buckles from every angle of the city square,

the woman beside me leans over:
“There are creatures,” she says, and perhaps she’s mad, “with just one cell. And they move,” she adds, “by tearing fibres from their own fluid weave – cell-lengths ahead, they reassemble.”

She gazes into the crowd, pen in hand. “In the middle,” she says, “no-one can see the outline”.

---

Starting point: the non-scientific tone of, “‘There are creatures’, she says, and perhaps she’s mad”. This tone served a desire to discuss the movement of single-celled creatures poetically. Commitment was given, however, to the tone itself; the desire to discuss single-celled creatures became incidental.
loss

Skies patch with other skies, the sun travels north,
and the world thins into porcelain;

the dogs of the heart sniff
at mute remains;

on rooftops, no wind dilutes the whimpering
crowding in our throats;

and dust storms
in the strivings for forgetfulness

still remind us of where we’ve been.
There are no books or mirrors

we don’t throw out,
and no relics we wouldn’t burn

were the body not itself
a remnant of its own past.

From the rim of china eyes
we tilt over heavy stone

and we ask, gently, that our grip
on this weightless cloud

recede,
that we might fall.

___________________________________________
Starting point: “skies patch with other skies” and “the world thins into porcelain”. This combination established a rhythm and tone to which emotional as well as technical commitment could be given.
Dear Reader

the noise in you, the rhythm, the rage, and the compassion,
the soul that has brought you to this point and that carries you onward,
the newborn and the child in you,
the light you may yet kindle,
and like snow,

your passage through the world.

Starting point: the tone of the title.
Euphoria:
the architectures of love
distort into choreography.

Dream:
the attempt to darn without a needle,
pulling fibres from
   anywhere at all.

Solitude:
silence, circling into vision,
muffled by the beat of wings.

Framing pattern: a poem in two lines.
Reminiscence:
citrus diffusing
from inside the tongue.

Self-doubt:
bees crawling in the
grains of me, without a queen.

Resignation:
tossed by time’s wheel into
stagnant seas, but sailing on.
Awakening:
the forgotten litheness
of the mind’s internal limbs.

Sleep:
the space time throws over its shoulder,
the frayed threads dangling into jealous days.

6:37 am:
disengaged, the mechanics of night
roll out into vistas.
Want

Trees in the bottom paddock,
hooking toes in the dark ground,
wrestle from unweathered soil,
to hurl through leaftips, the dry
too long unending; and wind,
revelling in the trees’ throws,
looses in the tangling air
incantations of its own,

renders from the roots of mountains
ligatures of black cloud, steeped
still in shadow. The weight of
stone sifts through the sky’s lungs and

leans on the trees’ boughs, and yet
drops refuse to fall: ensnared
in the wind’s yearning, the rain
swells, rolls, and the dry deepens.
Postcard Revelations

Geoff’s decision not to comment is the loudest thing he’s had in his head all day. The whole house echoes.

Eliza gives her body one more chance to can its kaleidoscopic moods; it’s a mock demolition, and she’s not sure who to save.

The atoms in the in-breath make an exchange with electrons straying in the body’s cells; Cass exhales, and bits of her begin the journeys she’s always dreamed about.

Dana wants to know if the electrons coming in might have shed from simply anyone at all; she initiates a national campaign for personal hygiene.

Gilles finds the red carpet so unrolled that he’s sure it can’t have been left for him – and he’s right.

Tom, looking deeply into his mirrored eyes, can see the smear marks round his pupils from the people reaching out.

Eddie dreams of walking in Gillian’s mind – he looks for the sun-dried molecules from her memories of their night together in the roots of her bottle-blonde hair.

John cuts the embroidery in the portrait of his life, staring into stretched beige – he says there are patterns where the threads were, and he’s sure he’s seen, through one of the holes, a distant light.

Tali’s sucking cytoplasm from every second cell – she says she’s starting a collection to forge a twin who’s half the women she is.

Jack’s sinking alchemy into stones even he can’t find – in case he fails.
Tali’s sister Lauren, having checked the calculations, goes only for every third.

    Charlie’s bald spot sings to him in the shower – angels
    stand on the edges, laughing at their own reflection.

Josie’s too giddy with her own being to know anything but … joy, like a life
bursting.

    Gin’s punctuation, from the duct under her tongue, isn’t operational – the technician is
called in but he can’t fix the problem; she’s,,,,,, leaking,,, commas,,,,,,,,,,,,,

Al lickas his a lipas, preparing for his smile.

    Kimberly says it’s a matter of kidding the mind into thinking there’s still some kind of
order. Serge tells her she doesn’t know what she’s talking about, but she says this only
illustrates the point.

    Joe tries to hide his disapproval, but there’s cellophane on his crinkling brow.

Kay, staring at her own navel, decides it’s the sanest thing on offer – it’s a postcard revelation, and it
cures her insomnia.

    Rose wants something else… this time she finds it, but it takes three years
for her to notice, and she still doesn’t know its name.

Laurence agrees – the long days of hedonic bliss just aren’t worth the sunburn…

Ricky says it’s an effort, what with the words rolling over and everything, to keep abreast of his
own thoughts – he’s up to speed, he says, with everything till the last Sunday in April, 1997. He’d
had the 90s sorted, and some of the new century, but a glitch turned up regarding 1969 and he
had to start all over.

* Framing pattern: a repeated unit of prose poetry, consistent in style and tone.
**Ego:**

A figure clad in mirrors bends towards me,
Unstarved by dream’s diversion of my eyes,
Chinks a dissolution, glass on glass,
As his armour traps the image of my mind.
Vision once released is given anchor,
The layers of reflections with which he grips
Jar, as they entrance, choking the reverie
That had flown into hilltop winds.
I feel on each shoulder the figure’s sword,
Its glint burns the fields inside my skull,
And the last memory rippling through each mirror
Is pinned to the edges, jangling, of a dream dispelled.

    Slanting views flaunt whispers of open skies
    In the armour that returns each stretch to Ego’s side.
Zeus appears before you.
Do you mention it?

Caution:
the body’s moths circling
round a candle no-one burns.

Deep wisdom:
impulse felt the anchor fall and flew
to the ship’s height with all its sails.
Love:
fold in a stone wall,
but nothing crumbles.

Secretiveness:
crease marks
in the belly of desire.

As rain:
the hush of unfolding blooms
spills into her dreaming.
Dinner conversation:
four of us, and the taste of common gestures,
the whiff, even, of Roman wine; what a crowd.

Final theory:
only visible from the outside of a skin it can’t have
unless it rubs, like a Russian doll, on the next skin out.

Not quite alone:
the phone on tenterhooks
for the voice that never calls.
Yarn

The story of his life in hemispheres where what gets written and what actually happens can peel apart, the split producing fractures that fill either with nothing or with a kind of mesh no amount of burrowing ever loosens. Things perturbed arise from the tangle, and he’s mesmerised, though he’s not sure which side of the hiatus he stands. He wonders if it really matters, but attempts, while hope survives, to mend the wound, coercing what he can back to its dark hole and stitching to stop the sprawl. The two halves don’t sever, the hinge holds, but there’s no closure: beside the seams, the fabric wears, and as he tugs, new clefts open – the tangle haunts him. So he fibs, pretending ends that would ease the tale he’s in, sketching the firmer lines, yielding, as he writes, an art form pursued with such compulsion that the rending of his words might pale. The story improves. He’s rehearsing each phrase, casting the threaded yarn across the gaps he’s made and praying for a safe crossing.

__________________________
Framing pattern: eleven syllables per line.
Bard

Sleep exhales: 
the spider of his lungs 
begins spinning.

His unlocked eyes 
dust from old stories 
the first tale:

The cobweb, like wings: 
dragonflies 
from his speaking mouth,

On his lips 
the barbed legs 
clinging.

Flight 
filling midday 
with his large-eyed verse:

Chasing dragon-
flies 
to the fringe of dusk,

Where day-thought 
loosens: bat 
wings in the
fray of night,  
bleeding  
into stars.

Sleep,  
air too thin, too flimsy,  
for the thrash of words.

Framing pattern: successive haiku.
the verse of ants

ants climb the hearthstone:
rumours of first-hand accounts
even of pterosaurs.
Poetic prosthesis:
sewing the uncertainty
into empty palms.

Caprice:
a vapour trail
of ragged love.

Lust:
fronds sprout from the seeds
in her porous bones.
A clean slate:
distortions in the light still filtering
through the rumour of who he was.

Mountaineering:
roughing the edges of the seconds
to be sure the piton holds.

Reflection:
rock soaks time from her body,
loosing it in the river.
Daylight reprieve:
to see through the air’s tangle
and not hear how the night still coils.

Shock:
Breath grabs at empty lips,
searching for a pulse.

Life:
a ripple in time and terrain; thought
still searching for the stone.
Glimmering

An underling in the corridors of his own shell,
Clenching against deeds too long endured,
Listens, in the cold of his empty vows,
To the footsteps of his withering.
He’s lost in the cycle of his own words,
And he’s burrowing, over stone, to escape
The glimpses of his cowering. There are windows
He cannot reach: moonlight spreads beneath him,
Spills its pale blaze, like liquid across his floor,
And is the weight of loss remembered:
He doesn’t choose to lift his vision,
And strengthens, in darker halls, his stooping.
    Blank thought closed into hollow sight
    Loves not the remnant of unguarded light.

Framing pattern: sonnet.
Paths not taken:
  hugging the air
  of that life
  across the ocean.

Confession:
  the night’s
  shavings
  in the scaffolding of dawn.

Framing pattern: a single haiku.
October View
(with David McCooey)

Aslant light through the window:  (There’s an avenue of jacarandas)
Dust hangs, like a resolution.    (their purple still in vogue)
Time’s soft implosions       (...The empty, afternoon verandahs)
Dissolve an empty afternoon.
The day and the sky it fills,    (There’s a child waiting on the roadside)
Both unretractable;    (a silent call – he’s shambling in)
And when clouds bank behind the houses,    (Like ghosts in the lamplight)
An almost pleasing chill.

Cross-discipline exchange: collaboration.
1. uncertainty

The sound engineer, through neglect, only turns on microphones for half of the orchestra; there are strings broken on two of the cellos, and each limp coil, like a visual freeze of the preceding twang, sketches its lull into the half-miked air; the music fractures into sub-plots; a stagehand shuffles unrelated cue cards from six different acts of an opera no-one’s heard of; and each musician slides, in their own time, into a lower key: paranoia sets in; the conductor moves, but there’s no rhythm.

The flute player makes a map of the dissolution, and since, she says, the body’s growth rate exceeds its own decay for the first score years, and since no-one she knows is getting any younger, she says the attempt to keep the balance is a struggle of mind. Since there’s little this side of anything the maître’d would call an acceptable degree of order, the flute player predicts no conciliation: her bottom lip swells into an image of Africa and she swears it’s more than age; it’s as if the metabolic breakdown doesn’t want to wait for the normal slope of passing – no-one attends the timeline, and the remnant shreds of lost nights tangle in the break of day…

Cross-discipline exchange: poetry and prose.
2. ‘Trust’ takes its chances

Throw away the husk. As if the kernel might come after. My dad’s a paperbark. My mum’s an oak from the other side of another country. I’m an outline, a hybrid in a breeze, that wraps the whole unravelling, seed right through to trunk, only: Have I landed? Was the moon in the right phase? Was Jupiter aligned, over Venus, under Neptune… Throw it away? Throw it away.

And if the kernel hasn’t formed,

search through the raging grass
3. Angel

going on with the cool business of an adequate way of life, he’s the travel of an image, he’s what all the usual props can cover, his nights never emptied of electric light, and his view, a template he’s stapled to his retina; he travels on, waiving origins for the vanish of a destination.

there’s a call girl he meets in a graveyard beside the sea, and he’s climbing through the salt just to get to her, but she stalls, and it’s not salt: she says it’s him, she can taste him, his whole life, crystallising on his forearms, crusting down his neck; she leaves, travelling anywhere.

and behind her, he’s wondering what he’s done, struggling as he walks, grinding between the tombstones, with his head tilting into its own night sky; there are clouds across his stars, and he can’t pull out; he says he’s waiting for dawn…

stealing over the horizon, there’s promise in a china hue no-one’s seen for thirty yeas; from the dunes, wind pushes sand into streamers, strewn around his knees, like the ribs of change, and he pauses; he’s brushing himself down over a gravestone with no inscription, he alters nothing, and travels on…
a liberation
4. A20

there’s a man in a car park leaning against a convertible to get a better view of what other kind of life he might have led. It’s night. There’s glass on the asphalt that acts like torch beams searching into his soles each time a car passes on the highway. He’s half crouched, facing out, and it’s a corner-of-the-eye peer into the vacant back seat, which breathes, like an old lizard, some couple, he thinks, still warm with fucking, digesting on its insides. He climbs behind the wheel, breaking onto the outside of a township he’s never loved. Ignition whirs through his bones, and he’s free, sliding from the car park. The glass shards light up in his peripheral vision as he turns along the highway. For a moment, choking, he’s everyman, driving home, but there’s fire in his soles, and speeding, he leaves it all behind.
There’s Rhythm in Counting:

poetry and mathematics (x7)

5109  14  +  948

Number Storm

\[ 644.198 + 5x \quad 0.1 \quad + 1 \]
\[ 45,899 \times 2,334 + \pi - 66,778 \cdot 126,775,667 - (27 \times 8.7) + 9 \cdot 762,722 \times \sqrt{(-2)} \times e - 7 + 1 \cdot 628,336,437,638,823 \]
\[ 7336 \approx 66,020 < 34 \times 7,955 + 76 + 2 \quad \text{the bruise } \quad 653,34,776 + i \times (6 + \sin \pi) - 28/9 > 6 - 6688e \]
\[ 77,845,606 + 2^5 - 61 \quad \text{musters in the skull} \quad 7310.7892 + 5i = 7^4 - 9i \times \sin (57x) + 8848 \times x^7 \]
\[ 10^8 + \sqrt{87} \times 0 + 27 > 1.38 - 3610 - 8723 + 70/3.4149 \times ((3 + 8x) + \cos 3x) = (9y + 4) + 78x \]
\[ 68,778 - 8.977 + x/2 + (3x \times 7,949 \times 3^5/5 - 2\pi) - \sqrt{46999 + \sqrt{6 - \sqrt{(39.42 \times (e + \pi i)) + 95343/5}} + 862584} \]
\[ 3847 - 48,110 \times x + \sqrt{5} - 1.45 \div 21 844,634,390 + 2 \quad \text{spreads } \quad 1993.67/\sqrt{3} + (288 \div \pi) + x^{3x^2} - 7 = 9y + 3 \]
\[ \sin (x + 5.4e) \times \exp 0 + 0! + 915.6 + 12 \times 8 + (\sin 3x^3 - 6(y^2 - 2y) \times \sqrt{3x + 9}) - (7 - (23x^2 \times (2 + 6117.3))) \]
\[ 391 \times 6.24 \times 81x \quad \text{& across the eyes} \quad 39,979,418 + 1,234 + (178 \sin (3x + y) \times 761) - 2 - 2^5 \times (73x + 873)^7 \]
\[ 4728 + 917 \times (5 + 6x^5) + \cos 3x + 479,559 + 399 \pi \times (5 + 4 + 77) \times 23 \times 5.266 + \sqrt{5.267 - 3^3} - \sqrt{(54/\pi - 7)} \]
\[ 5 \times 2 = 10x + 98.4 - (45 \sin (7y^6 + 523.87 + (4 - 2y)) + 1) + 6/8 + 3.033 \quad \text{humidity} \quad 7546 + \sqrt{x \div 3} \]
\[ 2.773,874 - 772^x \times 6e \times \sqrt{9/6.7 - (510 - 1288y - (6y^3 - e)))} \div 4 - 2 \times 2.3 \times 745,669,080 + 500 \times 11.38 + 1486 \]
\[ 1 + (29,389 \times 573/3) - 3 \pi + 1007,644 + (22.542 + 36x^4) + \pi \quad \text{rising} \quad 2665 - 3 + \sin \pi x + (2664.779^3 \times 3) \times 9.510 \]
\[ 503\pi \times 89.37 \times 6y + (2 + \sqrt{e - \pi}) \times \sqrt{(7812.803 + 37y^2)/5.01104 - 3} \quad \text{the sweat} \quad 6 \times \sqrt{(-5)} \times 0.8 \div \pi + 2 \]
\[ \sin x + 6861 \times \sqrt{(5x + 12x^4) - 3.1009 + \sqrt{(724 - 8133)} + 9 \times e - (1771.399058 + \pi) + 85 \times 51/918 + (69y^2 \times \sqrt{4})} \]
\[ 6 \div \pi \times (38 \times 2 \pi) + 9 \div \sqrt{118} \quad \text{teasing the question} \quad (1009 - 2^3)^2 + 176^3 \div 164,781,780 + \sin y^2 = 6x + \pi \]
\[ 60 \div (742/4 + 8) \quad \text{will it} \quad \sqrt{(-9 - 2.25x) + 610 \times (71 - (x^{25} + 4/6) - 3) - 900,003,220.01 \times 610y \div 3y^3} \]
\[ 44414.44 \times 3e^2 + (8 \times 4) \times 1 - 461 \div 487\pi + (3y + 8y \times (33x \div 5 + 883)) \div 3 + 2 - (16x + \sin (8x + 9)) \times 5 \]
\[ 4627 \times 32,006,920,446,000,0204 + 7^{3.8} \times 12,197,080,023 + (\sin 7.6x \div 2\pi) + 35,300 \div 69 + 855,555 \times \cos y \]
\[ \sin x \div 968 \times \sqrt{26.7 - \sqrt{(6x - 8}) \quad \text{rain} \quad 4673^6 \times x^2 + 65 \times ((e + 4) \div (\pi - 28.5)) \times 68,340 \div (x - y) \]
\[ 64,048,003 + 774.19 - (5^5 \times 9x^3) \times 2137 \quad \text{will the} \quad 618,19782 + 3.28/7 \quad \text{storm} \quad 517^{10} \div 3 \times \sqrt{(182 \div 7.9)} \]
\[ 4.769 \div i \div x^4 + 92 - 8x/4 + 96,587,143 + (x^{4/4} + 5x - 8) \times 1.9287 \times (4 \div \cos y) \times 0.0081 - 46(10^{58} \div 5x) \]
\[ \sqrt{(89 - 5/12 + (x^4 - 3x^2 + 9)) - \sqrt{\pi + 93 + (37.1976 + 5/35)} - 46/105 + x^2 + 0.065 \times \sqrt{(56 - \pi \div x^{568})} + 49} \]
\[ 60,814 \div 60.83 - (37x + 784/\pi + 43) \quad \text{...eyeing comrades} \quad 561 \times (37\pi + 73x)^3 = 83 \div (\sqrt{8.9 + \sqrt{3 + \pi})} \]
\[ 37 + 3 \times (288.37 \times \sin \pi) + \sqrt{8} \quad \text{in the weather’s hold} \quad 5678 \]

6 1

200 445
4-Cube:
    A Count Beyond Cognition.

The sway of a cube
    in four dimensions
(not really a cube,
    not really real)

Takes the hand that probes it
    into the pockets of the pockets
of a hyper-taxing figure;
    and having felt around,

The hand, which is my hand,
    has no memory –
the bid to track the contours
    of the “4-cube” affair

Fails. But to carry on dreaming,
    I toss a 4D ice-cube
into a 4D whisky – it’s the drop
    of a new religion.

My accomplice, beside me,
    who’s had a swig of the same stuff,
asks, “How many parts
    does a 4-cube have?”

I give her a glance that says
    you can’t catch unicorns
by counting the grooves
    in their pearly teeth.
She glances back: teeth, she says,
    are all we have!
It’s a long shot, but
    we take it.

We start small.
    I count the corners of a normal,
2D square, striding along its edges,
    lurching round its bends.

For the 3D cube,
    in the same way,
I stride north, east,
    south, and west,

Till I’m back where I started,
    having covered, each way,
the same measure.
    And there’s a dimension left,

So I break the 2D ceiling –
    “Up”, I ask, “or down?” And she grins:
we climb, using nothing but air,
    hauling the 2D plane

Into a 3D world, like
    unfurling a paper lantern.
We batten down the edges,
    waltzing airily
through the four-step dance,
nailing north, east, south, and west…
And it works – it’s a cube:
  8 corners, 12 edges, 6 faces…

Can we do it again?
  Can we drag the whole frame
to a higher level?
  I give her a nudge,

She packs an extra bottle, and
  all we need (hope straining)
are some 4D bearings…

  …“THEY’RE ONLY WORDS,” she cries,

And we clap, high fives:
  north, east, west, and south, we have;
up and down, we’ve used; and now we add:
  skewn, I say, and wopfil, and we’re off.

Staying in the skewn district, we do a quick
cube (8 corners). We travel wopfil,
at right angles to each travelled path,
  dragging the skewn-drawn cube

Through the ether of a fourth dimension!
  We batten down the edges,
doing the cube-step, wopfil style,
  on the rocks, and slightly shaken:
16 corners!
  Impossible, but there you are.
And perhaps
  we’ve gone too far!

But we can’t stop.
  We don’t spell it out,
just a quick nod and we’re moving:
  a 5D cube! Two new names…

32 corners!
  And it gets so that
a mere 3 dimensions
  seems too contained.

We’re addicted:
  we push on,
completing the counting,
  moving deeper

Into each dimension’s folds.
  In the 4-cube: 32 edges,
24 faces, the 3-cube’s 6
  like drops before the storm –

And we can’t join them all
  anywhere in our minds’ eyes:
we’re riding numbers,
  blind. How far can we go?
To the pinnacles, she says,
    of a 20D cone, and then… who knows.
We plunge
    (and you must understand,

The obsession grows)
    into the 5-cube’s 80 lines;
and as we tug on the crest
    of our new-found high:

**80** faces!
    80 times the 2-cube’s *one*,
their seams arranged
    over 5 planes, all perpendicular.

We barely pause, we’re
    heading for the 6-cube, when
    a swig of daring
throws our course.

A stifled yawp, and:
    how many 3-cubes in the 4-cube, we ask  –
one *skewn*, one *wopfil*, a cubic duet,
    and through a fringe of 3D vision,

Ghosts of a further 2, 3, maybe 4…
    we’re still travelling.
Don’t expect us back
    till after dark, and
Even then…

there are muffled glimpses
of the 4-cubes in 5-cubes,
the 6-cubes folding into 7-cubes,

Within 8-cubes…

We don’t sleep… we can’t leave,
we’re in the pulse
of worlds we

haven’t imagined.

Postscript: Physicists willingly employ calculations involving multiple dimensions; one theory posits a universe comprised of at least ten, most of which are “folded up” too tightly to be seen.
A Word from Mathematics

“A very common pitfall when using any kind of transform is to forget the presence of the analyzing function in the transformed field, which may lead to severe misinterpretations…” Marie Farge.155

The analyzing function
doesn’t draw attention to itself

to see all
as being part, effectively,
of a thing
we say
the all
You can measure its impact, but for this
lies
you need an analyzing function,
not in the all

which won’t draw attention to itself
but
as being part, effectively,
in the focus
of the eye:
You can measure its impact, but for this
a quiet

you need an analyzing function,
deflection
which won’t draw attention to itself

as being
Algebra

so much depends
upon

a and b,
track marks

through figured
fields,

finding x in the
cool of y.
Café Mathematica:
topology

“A glass differs from a plate by degrees,” she says.
She sees my concern for her and adds:
“You just stretch out the rim – it’s a
trick for learning how not to see

what we think we have to see.
A square is a disk but not a ring.
A vase is a tray, but not a toast rack:
it’s a question of the number of holes.”

She hasn’t finished: “Knots, twists, and
reversals”, she says, “only matter if they
can’t be undone.” I tell her I’ve
heard enough. She says it’s the

new mathematics and I should
at least know it’s around.
Monnie Hall

We knew Monnie Hall was on the hunt,  
That she wanted a virgin  
And that our three boys, my brothers,  
Had caught her eye.

Which was good, the reward was high, but  
Only one of our three (so my mother declares,  
And she swears that a mother knows)  
Could claim the standard.

It was my mother’s pledge  
Not to compromise two sons  
For the one to wed, and so we proclaimed  
That Monnie would take her chances.

Suitors yet to come would accordingly find  
That we offered, in two sons,  
A gamble unchanged: the intrigue  
Of a possible virgin.

Monnie heard the call  
And came,  
Bearing money bags  
And a proposition:

“Frankly”, she said, “the arrangement  
Doesn’t suit me. But what it lacks  
Is small. Grant me a second choice,  
Grant me the grace to change my mind,”
And I will pay the fancied sum
Twice over.” She explained: “With my first choice,
“One, no more, of the rejected two,
A one, you must swear, who is not pure,

Shall be removed. And when I choose again,
To keep what I have, or to exchange,
There’ll by no more questions.”
She laid the dowry on the table.

We weighed the bid: to be paid for two sons
And to perhaps still boast
The virgin Monnie missed,
Hunted and still a prince.

We agreed. A decision rightly made, we thought,
And would yet believe, except
(And we thought it strange)
Monnie cautioned us:

“I do not play lightly”, she divulged.
“Expect the balance to be tipped.”
We baulked, and we double-checked,
But could find no trespass.

On the second choice, there was (surpassing clear)
A two-way split, an even chance.
The warning, we thought,
Was a test of strength.
Monnie held no pause, nodding
At her selection. One
Of the unchosen two, we dutifully removed,
And in the same fated style

Monnie swapped her first choice and
Smiled. It was over.
“Thank you for your virgin”, was all she said,
Our own gaping mouths, the evidence of her win.

We pressed her. “If, of three things”, she revelled,
“Two are unwanted, and I choose blindly,
Odds are, I have a dud. You take the other,
And so I swap. Only if I choose

By some unlucky break,
A virgin son first off
(And the chance is outweighed)
Can I lose.”

Monnie left, her prize in hand,
And by the word from other towns,
The hunt goes on.
She’s searching for other bids,

And each manoeuvre primes
The bloodlines of her choices
For the chance of a likely win.
Cosmology: a philosopher’s mathematics

She wanted to know
which were her borders, borders of mind,
and which were the cooler boundaries
of fact, and were they the same – was she function
and not will? She wanted to reach
to where edge began, and so she believed
there were moments caught in her own face
from times beyond her birth,
times past and yet to come; she believed
there was nothing larger than her own thought,
and she delved, knowing she could stretch
to where borders all dissolved:
function was will, and she traced its evolution.
Creating form / Creating in form
R n e s o i p o l n l s e b i e b l R e : 4 poems

1. no-one home

On the in side,
d i s s o l v e d & q u a r t e r e d, the s c r e a m
    s p l i n t e r i n g, I ’ m i n
canyons
    n o - o n e w a l k s i n, or e v e n s e e s,
    m y
    V O I C E
long, l i k e
l o w c l o u d , t h i n & t o o w e a k
to r i s e,
melting on the
    C A N Y O N W A L L.
The w o r l d’ s a
loose w i r e,
    f r a y i n g i n t o
steel
    w o o l, & c o i l i n g(g)…
There are
    s c r a t c h m a r k s o n t h e i n s i d e, r u s t
behind the e y e b a l l s , & I ’ m
fucked o f f, w i l t i n g…

the pieces of the r i p p e d s i g n,
in my o w n h a n d,
that says ,

“b a c k s o o n”
can’t a l l b e f o u n d.
2. Woomera

dreaming of large zucchini, cucumbers, 
snow peas we don’t sell, the former 
hollowed into creamy rooms, full of ashtrays, 
bright with lack of use, my first lover 
curled on their hard glass, and sleeping; 
the thought occurs: “there’s room enough 
for just that kind of party, tie your shoes”, 
and translated, sleep capsizing, 
it says, slowly, over years, “hand in your laces, 
don’t touch the wire, this is home”
3. duet

swapping instruments, each of us swapping instruments each becomes the other of us becomes and the relief what stolen steals is the possibility into habits of forming habits not yet known, and somewhat exciting. I I play play like she he plays, and we grow we fall in love apart, thinking each thinking each of us has changed knows the other and there’s no swapping back; a kind of grief in the lack of fulfilment.
4. Blue

Easier to pass on by
than to know the apples
have fallen again this year,

the fermenting piles like
fish heads in rose petals,
and Rose, still looking,

insisting she doesn’t mind,
letting the seeds work their points
to the borders of her skin and

feeling nothing. The rest of us:
eyes behind moving glass,
and her on the kerbstones

too drunk with loss
to know what’s missing,
or what she needs, what

no-one else can give her.
And all this time, night falling
under street lights, like drizzle,

grubs from the soft decay
collecting in her
shadow, burrowing
out of footways. Easier
to pass on by
than to know

the apple tree in your mind
carries fruit you
might not get to. She’s

blue for a while longer.
Concerning form:

three final words

turbulence

her in-house noise won’t sieve through
what he gives her for the journey,
and her conversation, like his lust,
he can’t understand: she howls,
casting the life bolts of her being
into the outcrops of her cry; she is
2 o’clock without 3 o’clock, she is spring
without winter, and he is reason,
the lover at her side.
reading from the text

the day, swept into piles,
takes her figure into morning,
leaving imprints on her skin;

and waking before the sun,
she sits on the verge of history,
weaving indents into text;

thus inscribed, she rises
to be the ghost of things past,
till the new night’s impressions

draw the old day to its close;
so she trails, reading the world
in the wake of the dark’s rendition.
Milling

I ground
with my own bones
poems
of the old order

and finding
no
secret
hidden

between the words,
I
still don’t write:
pen

in hand,
I
sink in a
dead Sargasso Sea…

trinkets fall,
loved
ones,
beauty,
hunger,
I find the husk
of
fortitude

in the
shiftless tides,
and

a voice

floats
behind the waves —

“can I

reach”
Section III: Appeal

Aesthetic Constraints

A poet’s task is to draw the personal and the poetic to a significant intersection. Subjective associations and the machine of language, selected subjects and technical contracts, are to be persuasively and poetically amalgamated. In this process, the significance of a newly created poem or of an idea for a poem is always questionable. Failure, in the form of an unsatisfying work, is always a possibility. What motivates poetic creativity amid such uncertainties? Miller Mair, interpreting comments by the scientist Michael Polanyi, writes:

Polanyi suggests that any inquiry not guided by intellectual passions would inevitably fan out and dissipate itself in endless trivia. Our sense of scientific beauty, he implies, helps us towards our vision of reality and also suggests the kinds of questions that may be reasonable and interesting to pursue.156

The mathematician, physicist, and philosopher, Henri Poincaré, too, suggests that creators make choices according to their “aesthetic sensibility”. Arthur Koestler, in response to Poincaré, writes that the “useful combinations are precisely the most beautiful, I mean those best able to charm this special sensibility”157. A creator may be dragged away from where his or her fancy has flourished by a desire to make an idea more accessible: beauty and passion may be compromised for certain practicalities. Yet aesthetic appeal cannot be ignored as a force in creativity, in art no less than science. The concern, in this section, is accordingly for the personal and poetic needs and ideals that can allow poetry to seem worth writing, that can lend enthusiasm to a poet regarding his or her pursuit of a particular kind of poetry, and that can commit a poet to what is in many ways a frustrating endeavour. James Voss and Mary Means conclude that it is “value” and “affect” that “drive the process” of creativity.158 The interest here is in finding support for this assertion in the general practice of poets.

The claim in the chapters that follow is that poets accept aesthetic as well as technical contracts. The two are inseparable: technical contracts are devised and employed according to their perceived potential to yield aesthetically pleasing
poems, and pleasing poems are in part those that satisfy given technical contracts. The circuit, however, is not closed. Aesthetic contracts involve poets in broader and more complex concerns. The argument begins, in the second chapter of this section, with a description of one of the most widely accepted aesthetic constraints poets encounter, namely the need to produce poems that are recognisably individual. The work of Harold Bloom informs the discussion that ensues. The third chapter then considers more generally the ideals poets embrace in their efforts to decide what it is that makes a poem aesthetically persuasive. The contexts that support and/or frustrate these ideals are duly regarded. By their nature, ideals are forms that carry considerable ambiguity, and as expected, there is necessarily considerable uncertainty within poets’ aesthetic contracts. The fourth chapter considers what is peculiar about the way this uncertainty relates to experiences of creative redemption. In the final chapter of section III, the focus shifts from the need for poets to perceive appeal in particular poems to the need for appeal to be perceived with regard to the overall process of creating. The intimate contracts that afford aesthetic appeal to poetry as a vocation become the primary concern. Aesthetic value, it is argued, is not a contract in poetry alone, but in thought and emotion generally. Creative redemption is a weak experience if the act of creating is not psychologically significant.
**Interlude: Idealism**

To accept the sentiment expressed in “To Call Ourselves Modern” is to embrace high regard for intense creative endeavour. A poet’s commitment to writing poems might be sustained by such regard. While the specific idealism outlined in the poem is by no means a prerequisite for poetic creativity, it does touch on issues that tend to concern many poets, issues that the ensuing chapters detail.

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**To call ourselves modern**

Voices from the unforgotten dead uncoil with whispers of what it means to roll the salts of mortal cells
Beyond mere flesh, to where scrawls from vanished hands infect the weather, to where words filtered by the mind
Bear covenants with the weight of rain, while the tongue passes with its speaker to an unheeded grave.

To call ourselves modern, we carve into trodden soils and dream of the onset of the drops we name our own.
We speak of storms of our making rising over moulded fields, and the murmurings of the remembered dead almost,
Almost drown, as if weather might renew, falling as the first snow, the first breeze, loosing light in genesis.

The salts of vital cells breed rage in a force that turns us skyward, and exposed in mid-translation, we aspire.
The hand that writes, still living, stretches through the nets of cloud to fold its chrysalis into downpours,
And the voice speaking, in its unforgotten urge, is seeding whispers in a past transfigured, feeling the transfiguring;

So we bloom, and so we forge, in the hold of reverence, a newer age.
A Unique Repetition

Perhaps the most fundamental obstacle to be overcome in a poet’s aesthetic contract is the double bind that says past poems are to be distinctively emulated. The best available guides as to what might work well in a poem are presented as the unavailable property of other poems. “To conform merely,” T.S. Eliot tells us, “would be for the new work not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art”.¹⁵⁹ That a poem “cannot abstain from imitating other poems”, Hart states, describing essentially the same dilemma, “is its chance of life and its fear of death”.¹⁶⁰ Precise reproduction of an earlier work, without intent, is unlikely. Reproduction itself is not the problem. The difficulty lies, rather, in the intense question of which kinds of relations between new and existing poems might be desirable. Imitation is vital if a work is to be recognised as poetry; it is a condition, too, of the contractual nature of creativity. Yet inappropriate imitation (and it need not be clear to a poet precisely what this entails) can counter any benefits gained. The effect can be to imply deference to other poems and poets, which tends to be seen, in current western contexts at least, as a sign of weakness, if not as unethical. A persuasive poem, says a poet’s aesthetic contract, will read as something unique. History is to be acknowledged but must also be extended, as proof of participation in the present. Is this, though, a matter of aesthetics, or merely a definition of creativity? The point to emphasise, in answer, is that it can be aesthetically displeasing in poetry to produce a poem in which one’s individual, creative influence is not acceptably evident. Morton Feldman exclaims, more generally, “Art is a crucial, dangerous operation we perform on ourselves. Unless we take a chance, we die in art”.¹⁶¹ While it is not suggested here that a poet is required to evidence revolutionary originality, Feldman’s comment does emphasise that there is more at stake than the production of something that is simply new. This chapter argues that there is a widely adopted aesthetic contract that defines good poetry as poetry that can be seen to swerve from, as if in rivalry, or as if to remedy, previous poems.

The tensions evoked by a creator’s need to repeat without repeating are discussed at length by Harold Bloom, who describes the anxiety involved as a “Sublime terror determined to maintain itself”.¹⁶² When poets create, their works
enter a field already spectacularly inhabited. Mentors may inspire new effort. A.S. Ostriker, for example, describes Whitman as, for her, in her own writing, “killer of the censor and clearer of ground”. Bloom acknowledges greater complexity. “There is no unmediated vision,” Bloom writes, “whether in poetry or in any other mode, but only mediated revision, for which another name is anxiety, in the Freudian sense of ‘anxious expectations’”. The young poet, in Bloom’s description, becomes the struggling son of the oppressive poetic father. There is an intense, Oedipal agon, resolved only by the young poet’s displacement or revision of the power of the older poet, who is loved and admired, but also hated and feared. Poetic creativity becomes, for Bloom, a process of mis-taking, mis-interpreting, or creatively correcting what has gone before. The young poet, Terry Eagleton explains, summarising Bloom’s position, must “clear a space for his own imaginative originality”. The act invites a form of guilt, for the works to which the young poet is supposedly loyal are also to be, in the form of a new poem, re- or “mis-” construed. Anxiety, here, arises from the threat of failure, but also from the threat of success, for there is devastating arrogance in a son who displaces the father. What is implied is that the son can in turn be displaced, and that the logic of poetry, on which the poet depends, can be eroded – impressions of the value of poetry might seem to be weakened. Creative redemption, in this context, would reflect a dual resolution: the threats of failure and of success would be contained (tenuously) by a reverently irreverent poem, a poem, that is, that seemed both novel and poetic, embracing, to repeat, both rebellion and responsibility. “‘Be me but not me’ is the paradox of the precursor’s implicit charge”, Bloom explains. Similarly, Blanchot offers that in order to produce a new work, a writer “must destroy language in its present form and create it in another form, denying books as he forms a book out of what other books are not”. Bloom tells us that only the uncommon “strong” poet battles successfully against the anxieties creativity induces. The battles are becoming, Bloom elaborates, increasingly difficult, for the young poet is in contest with an ever-greater number of heroic forebears. It is with these comments that Bloom’s argument and the argument given here diverge. Poetic effects, it can be conceded, are not freely available. The limitation, however, need not be deemed a threat to a poet’s imagination (as Bloom implies it is), but as a constraint that both supports and provokes. Since a constraint is itself a kind of threat, and since the threat Bloom describes can act (for
the strongest of poets) as a spur for creativity, the distinction needs to be clarified. The challenge offered by the “be me but not me” charge is to rob, fragment, and recombine selected materials while still producing works that feel both personal and poetic. The risk of inappropriate imitation becomes a source of specific problems in need of novel solutions. The strong poet, Bloom suggests, is one who can endure the guilt that near-imitation entails. What is argued here is that guilt in creativity exists as one of many sources of uncertainty, and that this uncertainty has the potential to drive an urge for redemption in any poet. Redemption does not require a poet to be judged “strong” by his or her peers, but to be judged sufficiently strong in his or her own mind, “sufficient” being a subjectively negotiated standard. This judgement, further, need not be an urgent and ruling concern. Rivalry persists, yet the context is broader here than that offered by Bloom.

Bloom does acknowledge the operation of uncertainties other than Oedipal anxiety. Opportunities for creativity, his comments imply, are delivered via linguistic indeterminacies: “Power is in the traversing of the black holes of rhetoric,” he writes, “where the interpreter reads his own freedom to read”. But the gesture is restricted. Bloom allows that ambivalence and anxiety can drive the production of poetry, but describes the resulting poems as an ever more enfeebled retaliation against a smothering oppression. For Bloom, Hart reflects, “the sublime moment of creativity is thoroughly negative, a perverse revenge on what enables it”. Bloom almost acknowledges a Derridean threshold. His emphasis, however, is not placed on a capacity to move continually between chaos and order (a capacity that is, for Derrida, joyous), but on Oedipal rivalry in the move from one sense of order to another, a move increasingly disabled by the “blight” of belatedness. Freud teaches us, Bloom insists, “that our most authentic moments tend to be those of negation, contraction and repression”. “To defend poetry,” Bloom adds, “which is to say, to defend trope, in my judgment is to defend defense itself”. Yet creativity is also about delight, affirmation, and exploration, which is not to say that these qualities cannot involve defences of numerous kinds, but that they can also and equally involve acts of discovery and revelation. There is much still on offer, for the domain of poetry is not a closed world but a changing conglomeration of multiple, interactive influences, technical and aesthetic, poetic and non-poetic, institutional and circumstantial. Creative redemption is experienced relative to instabilities of which the “be me but not me” charge is one. The charge, as an aesthetic constraint, is
a resource and an opportunity. At once directive and ambiguous, the charge becomes a tool for approaching new possibilities, an observable guide to the unobservable, operating amid a complex and changing web of such constraints. The threat and difficulty it poses to individual creators can be viewed as part of the challenge of and scope for creative persuasion.
**Interlude: Be Me But Not Me**

“Tenacity” is a tiff fought with its precursor, e.e. cummings. Certain effects seemed, in the poem’s writing, to thieve too much from the earlier poet, constructing, beyond allusion, a displeasing sense of dependence. Comma use and certain line breaks were finally revised *only* because of the unwanted strength of the reference to their precursor. “Tenacity” is offered as a poem in its own right. The swerve is teasingly minimal, but seems sufficient to allow the poem to be seen as a response to the “be me but not me” charge.

**Tenacity:**

a buried

    sea

that when

One dRop

(in darkness)

    imagines

the

    briE(e)fest light,

grips,

tow

ing

each

dam

n (!)
joint

through

the

s T ee l

of

(from t

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t i ts elf )

an

out

flowing

tide.
Contextual Idealism

Aesthetic contracts emerge, broadly, as ideals and aspirations, of which the “be me but not me” charge is a very general example. More specific examples can be given. Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry* describes a preference for poetry that “lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar”. The bias is echoed in Shklovsky’s claim, quoted earlier, that the “technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’”. A further, and widely shared ideal is given voice by Yves Bonnefoy when he claims that, “poetry is an experience of what goes beyond words”. Charles Wright, lending depth to the super-sensitive, seeing-eye-dog theory, offers an analogy: “It’s best to keep unwritten as much as possible. Poetry is just the shadow of the dog. It helps us know the dog is around, but it’s not the dog. The dog is elsewhere, and constantly on the move”. In the famous opening line of Stevens’ “Man Carrying Thing” we are told, also, that “The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully”. It is an ideal illustrated in many of Stevens’ poems: in the lines, “The palm at the end of the mind”, “an insolid billowing of the solid”, and “the ear is glass, in which the noises pelt”, impossible images rub against an offer of import; a sustained contradiction is induced, an amphibian between the unreal and the real, between the insensible and the sensible, that teases the possibility of direct knowledge. In Forbes’ work, effects that “resist the intelligence” are noted by Alan Wearne: “Reading a Forbes poem,” Wearne suggests, “is like whitewatering, or abseiling. You just leap off and hope the poem holds”. The risks these writers take (the risk of incoherency, for example) are shaped and contained by the aesthetic contracts each bears in mind. Theodore Roethke is under no obligation to explain how “pure despair” can be represented as “My shadow pinned against a sweating wall”. Nor need cummings formally resolve his “eyes which are really petals”. The lack of obligation regarding strict elucidation is a mark of freedom, but also of a commitment to a constraining ideal. An aesthetic contract, like its technical counterpart, is a “liberating manacle”.

In what contexts do aesthetic constraints operate? Fred D’Aguiar describes poetry as “that art of the marvellous, of a simultaneous compression of language and an endless expansion of meaning”. The endless expansion, like the moving shadow of an unwritten dog, and like Stevens’ resisted intelligence, serves as the
aesthetic partner to selected technical structures (for D’Aguiar, a “compression of language”). Each lends persuasion to the other, as has been suggested. Partnerships between poetic forms and ideals can be highly distinctive, characterising, for example, a poet’s work, a genre, or an era of poetry. What is appealing with respect to one partnership need not seem so in other settings. The contrasts between haiku and limericks provide an example – what is desirable or daring in one can seem unsatisfying in the other. What is licensed in one era, similarly, may seem unattractive at other times. Referring to the work of James McMichael and Frank Bidart, Alan Williamson observes a tendency “to end lines on words like ‘of’, ‘there’, and ‘or’”. Williamson writes: “For any previous generation, such enjambments would have been a sign of weakness or lack of skill; for this one, they seem the sign of impetus and intensity, of an exacting quest”. Aesthetic contracts are born in response to existing poems, to the available opportunities for writing, and to developments in other domains, as well as to a poet’s particular partialities. “Creativity,” Paul Magnuson concludes (in a discussion of Coleridge’s “Fears in Solitude”), “is often a collaboration in conflict and confusion rather than a tranquil meditation of the individual mind”.

Poets write, further, amid experiences that are not merely perceived by them but through which they perceive. Hence, Ramazani suggests we should turn to the modern elegy,

expecting not so much solace as fractured speech, not so much answers as memorable puzzlings. Anything simpler or easier would betray the moral doubts, metaphysical skepticisms, and emotional tangles that beset the modern experience of mourning and of self-conscious efforts to render it. We need elegies that, while imbued with grief, can hold up to the acid suspicions of our moment.

Marjorie Perloff acknowledges a more specific exchange: conflict and confusion in the relations between poetry and the media, she implies, has amplified various post-modern tendencies in the former. The need to produce something distinctively poetic amid the abundance of the media’s striking visual effects and symbolism has encouraged, Perloff suggests, a “suspicion of ‘imagefull’ language”. Where technological change impacts directly on a poet’s writing tools, measures of appeal can also be altered. Félix Guattari has argued that machines can invite and, via the cultural assemblages in which they appear, even impel, with or without resistance, certain kinds of undertakings. In Old English poetry, the “machine” was a severe
material limitation: poems were written on valuable vellum no part of which was to be left bare. Numerous poetic effects could not afford to seem appealing under such conditions, though others (including the expressive use of colour) took their place.

The external influences through which poets’ aesthetic contracts are inevitably formed can at times induce what seem to be oppressive restrictions. The ideals promoted by strong, political regimes carry this potential. For the Russian poet, Marina Tsvetaeva (1892-1941), opposition to increasing socialist powers prompted self-exile. The German Jewish poet and dramatist, Nelly Sachs (1891-1970), also sought escape from what was for her a threatening regime; the ruling bias in the country of her birth yielded no place either for her work or for herself. A milder oppression, an inversion of Tsvetaeva’s and Sachs’ exiles, is described by Laurie Duggan. There was a time in Australia, Duggan perceives, when getting published was virtually impossible if you happened to be an Australian who had not been accepted elsewhere. Duggan suggests of himself, John Forbes and John Tranter, that, “we were probably the first literary ‘generation’ for whom it wasn’t vital to go overseas (it was interesting and worthwhile even, but not vital)”. A poet can also inflict oppression on him- or herself. Philip Larkin states, for example, that it is “fatal to decide, intellectually, what good poetry is because you are then in honour bound to try to write it, instead of the poems that only you can write”. An aesthetic contract, the comment implies, can become, rather than an observable guide to the unobservable, a self-conscious doctrine upheld for its own sake. Responsibility can be lost to obedience.

Aesthetic contracts are functions of particular times, places, poets, and poetic forms. Each contract will reflect a poet’s understanding of what poetic creativity entails, both in relation to existing poems and in relation to the surrounding culture. Where this understanding exposes strong contradictions (between, for example, what a poet would like to write and what he or she feels (or has been told) should be written), creativity can be impeded. Yet what has been argued is that contradiction is both unavoidable and, in any case, conducive to creativity. The appearance of incontestability, this chapter offers, can restrict the availability of contradiction, and of uncertainty generally, as a site and spur for redemption.
**Interlude: Incontestability**

“Losing the Dream” alludes to a well-established mathematical tool that has long borne an impression of incontestability. From the time of Euclid (third century BC) until the 1800s, Euclidean geometry had been the only and, for most, the true and natural geometry, “exact, eternal, and knowable with certainty by the human mind”.\(^{195}\) The arrival of non-Euclidean geometry was initially resisted.\(^{196}\) Its eventual inclusion, effected partly by Einstein’s use of non-Euclidean mathematics in his general theory of relativity, influenced not only mathematicians and physicists, but also creators in other fields. “For certain artists in the early twentieth century,” L.D. Henderson reports, “non-Euclidean geometry was to be synonymous with the rejection of tradition and even with revolution”.\(^{197}\) Yet Euclidean geometry remains dominant in general thought – in basic schooling, it is the only geometry that is taught. Reuben Hersh insists that physics “gives no license to favor Euclid over non-Euclid”.\(^{198}\) Yet with Davis and Marchisotto, Hersh reports that, “Even now, it seems that most educated people believe in the Euclid myth”.\(^{199}\) The character in “Losing the Dream” laments the presence of this myth.

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**Losing the Dream**

*(or, Riemann’s opus shuffles by)*

We remain at home.

No-one’s surfing into solar winds.

Vision loses sight to memory,

like Pavlov’s dogs, and we

measure spheres in cubic metres,

straight lines on a curving earth.

Across the cosmos, light

swerves on the contours of time’s
involutions: there are no
flat surfaces. Yet we hold
to the common square, pinning
arcs onto level planes. We
stay as we are. There are hints
of a clandestine knowledge
we’re told we cannot reach, the
folk music of a minor tribe.

And so the heretics
work through a shadowed lens,

and the safety of
local minds

reigns: we do not fly.
Redeeming Taste

Aesthetic and technical contracts do not impact on experiences of creative redemption in entirely comparable ways. Both form part of the processes by which creators decide what promising problems look like and when responses to them are satisfying. Both offer a means of engaging concentration, and both can become disruptive. They are both essential, in some form, if opportunities for meaningful creativity are to be pursued. Feldman denies this necessity in his own composing, and raises, by doing so, a point of divergence between aesthetic and technical concerns. Contradicting his own stated and previously quoted sense of entrapment (through mediacy), the composer insists that,

For ten years of my life I worked in an environment committed to neither the past nor the future. We worked, that is to say, not knowing where what we did belonged, or whether it belonged anywhere at all. What we did was not in protest against the past. To rebel against history is still to be part of it. We were simply not concerned with historical processes. We were concerned with sound itself. And sound does not know its history.  

Feldman’s works are recognisable as musical compositions; they were not composed in isolation from the field to which they do undoubtedly belong. What, then, is Feldman attempting to describe? Aesthetic contracts are devised in relation to specific contexts, yet in the subjective negotiations by which creators fashion their own versions or revisions of available ideals, there are indefinitely many degrees of freedom. For a writer facing execution for anti-Establishment sentiments, this is no consolation. His or her predicament does illustrate, however, that even in strong regimes, there is room (with the risk of punishment) for individual choice. This freedom, this scope for individual daring, is the subject of Feldman’s words. What the composer refuses to acknowledge is that such freedom requires a setting: it cannot be discerned, nor can anything seem significant, in an environment where there is no past or future. The differences between the freedoms technical and aesthetic contracts deliver can be used to partly explain Feldman’s position.

Aesthetic contracts are not explicitly devices for creativity. They are infused with creative tensions but in ways more profound than for technical constraints. Considerable continuity with personal and non-poetic values is not unlikely. Feldman’s claim that he was “simply not concerned with historical processes”
reflects this continuity. His own new notation had allowed significant deviation from
dominant musical forms. It is possible that support for the application of this notation
lay in values and ideals that had been internalised to the point of invisibility,
regarding, at least, their connection to the discipline’s history. These ideals would
not, and could not, have been comprehensive or unambiguous: impressions of
uncertainty may have added to the sense that something entirely new was being
accessed. Less radical contracts than those embraced by Feldman also combine belief
and emotional involvement with indeterminacy. Technical and aesthetic constraints
in general can be perceived to bear allure and potential by virtue of the personal input
of individual creators. The sense of promise develops as knowledge of particular
forms and methods merges into experiences with and intimate regard for an idealised
poetic “effect”. The latter, subjectively and perhaps indefinitely conceived, and
reconceived, is a site for active interpretation. The personalised ambitions that evolve
may inspire concentrated creativity. The charge of “be me but not me”, like other
aesthetic constraints, *calls* for personal involvement by refusing to tell a creator how
to repeat without repeating. Commitment is to be given to an ambiguous ideal,
embracement of which combines uncertainty with aspiration. The poet who lends
this aspiration personal importance gains something to be redeemed *and* something
worth redeeming.

Not all of the elements of a poet’s aesthetic contract will *seem* to bear
uncertainty. Certain aesthetic preferences, deeply cultural or psychological, may be
unavailable for interpretation. We are, Miller Mair writes, “inhabited by stories we
know by and do not know about”. A range of creative possibilities may never be
entertained by a creator, not because there is oppression, as such, but because they
exist within unseen assumptions. Any single creative act will, further, affirm many
more biases than it questions, and may be pursued partly for this reason. This is
reflected in the tendency for many poets to develop, wilfully or not, characteristic
interests and styles. It is a tendency particularly visible among highly original poets.
Emily Dickinson’s poetry, for example, like cummings’ poetry, is at once distinctive
and repetitive, as if persuasion requires, and perhaps it does, the insistent claim that
“yes, this effect is intentional” and “yes, I like it enough to do it again, and again, and
again”. “Be me but not me” is evidently a charge poets need not apply with equal
force to themselves as to other poets. These observations reveal a relaxation of
creative potential – unseen assumptions and insistent repetition close rather than
open opportunities for creativity. They also suggest, however, that consistency and repetition are part of what allows specific expressions to seem convincing. Sufficient repetition (judged subjectively, where too much dulls creativity and where too little renders it superficial) can lend a sense of integrity both to a poet’s poems and, for the poet concerned, to the endeavours that produce them.
Interlude: Uncertain Aspirations

The first drafts of “An Autumn Migration” were written with only superficial knowledge of the genre employed. The primary contract was the purely technical notion of a haiku as a poem comprised of three lines, the first and last in five syllables, and the central line in seven. The final version of “An Autumn Migration” was produced following more extensive reading and research, with respect to both traditional and modern haiku. Exposure to other interpretations of the form allowed the development of personal ambitions regarding what might be achieved. The technical contract became less certain, but this greater uncertainty became a means for achieving an aesthetic end. The final versions of the haiku seemed both more personal and more poetic. Selected early drafts are given at the end of the suite.

An Autumn

Migration

She speaks,
turning air
into living muscle;

loose words
swoop, veering
to a destination.
In blue sky, 
takeoff 
bleeds the transparency;

the whole flock 
rises:

a near 
liberation, she 
sucks at her own breath,

the inversion 
leaving 
chest feathers on thin ice.

A poem: 
staining each feather 
she 
stirs the paper’s white:
storms
and abrasion land
transfigured wings,

but she’s pleased –
the new birds’
travel
stuns us all.

Tilt
of the world’s light
from the voice arriving.
DRAFTS FOR “An Autumn Migration”:

Flock of single words
Turns air to living muscle,
The whole, without join.

Grains of an idea
Swoop, convert, amid banter;
The flock swerves, charges.

He shed words, found them
Spoken, unretractable;
Sucked at his own breath.

She slips, and a word
At random slides, splintering;
Deep pools, and thin ice.

(titled “Aerial Choreography”)
flexing, sinuous,
he tilts the light fantastic
from reflecting wings.

internet café (postscript)

no-one flies using feathers any more; each bird thinks of a destination and then waits (birds along the wires,
queuing).
The Vocation of Poetry

Poets presumably, in some sense, \textit{want} to subject themselves to the awkward demands of their discipline. Reward may lie in the end product, a work that is, ideally, technically sound, aesthetically appealing, and thematically compelling. Such rewards, however, are available to readers of poetry as well as to poets. For an individual to feel motivated to write, appeal needs also, and perhaps primarily, to be found in creativity itself. The attraction may reside in the sense of transformation: non-poetic materials become poetic, inklings become working images, constraining problems become unforeseen solutions, and so on. The urge for creative redemption, in other words, can become its own source of energy. The act of writing might also offer the potential for a degree of concentration and absorption that is itself enjoyable. Unrelated tensions or boredom may seem to be escaped. Participation in a recognised community, the chance to test personal abilities and beliefs, feelings of hope for particular poems, and a sense of risk, these, too, can contribute to a poet’s desire to write. Sources of appeal are likely to be accompanied by various sources of discomfort. Failure can be perceived as readily as success, and disheartenment can oscillate with optimism. Perseverance requires that a poet can validate, internally, the pleasure and pain he or she encounters. What kind of pleasure will give what kind of meaning to how much unpleasantness (and vice versa) are questions poets implicitly and sometimes explicitly ask.

The concern of this chapter has been outlined (at the beginning of this section) as “the intimate contracts that afford aesthetic appeal to poetry as a vocation”. In what sense can a poet’s organisations of pleasure and pain be described as contracts, and how do these contracts differ from those relating to the appeal of particular poems? Vocational contracts can be described as those agreements, at once disciplinary and individual, by which poets render poetic creativity attractive and feasible. In practice, vocational appeal is experienced intermittently. Gratification is pursued not freely but where and if each act of writing allows. The implicit promise (always in doubt) is that any sacrifice of pleasure or desire will be balanced by sufficient reward. Hence the notion of a contract. A poet might persist with a frustrating poem for days at a time, and over many months, with little to suggest that creative redemption might be imminent. The contract he or she has embraced will be
one that gives value, perhaps even necessity, to the effort involved. The contract is likely to be complex. What pleasure and pain are is a question individual poets may not themselves be able to fully answer. Eagleton, summarising Freud, writes, “our drives are in contradiction with one another, our faculties in a state of permanent warfare, our fulfilments fleeting and tainted”. Concord may be experienced as well as contradiction, and there may be moments of apparent peace as well as war, but at the very least, there is convolution. Pain can be pleasurable and pleasure painful, and both can be confused by external events and conditions. Multiple variables (from the light in a room to a family argument, from tiredness or illness to a political report or news from a publisher, from a friend’s comment to the weather) can contribute to the sense that something promising (or not) has been undertaken. A creator creates partly because he or she is able to order pleasure and pain in ways conducive to creativity. What these ways are will depend on the individual and the circumstances involved. No attempt is made here to resolve the (irresolvable) complexities that are a poet’s motivation. Much, though, can still be said.

There are certain kinds of experiences that poets need to be able to validate. It needs to seem appealing or endurable, for example, to spend concentrated time in conditions suitable for writing, despite the physical discomfort and isolation this can induce. It needs to seem appealing or endurable, also, to submit selected subjects or whims to a poetic bias. Donald Justice complains that, “the conception of a poem does usually in some respect seem more impressive, grander, than the finished product, which almost always represents a series of compromises between desire and necessity”. These compromises, which may derive from aesthetic as well as technical concerns, can cause a poem to diverge from the events, ideas, and feelings with which it began. Referring to an inceptive idea that could no longer be accommodated, Justice writes,

I regretted its absence severely: a dimension of the poem was gone. But with the mild and familiar despair which accompanied this realization came also the hope that if such ironies had been necessary to the poem I had had in mind, they were probably not necessary to the poem I had very nearly written.

Loss and despair are inflicted, here, by a constraint Justice willingly accepts, that of producing an effective poem. The pain is compensated for not only by the pleasure of a more promising work, but also by its familiarity as an element of creativity (Justice calls it a “familiar despair”). Here, and in the creation of any redeeming poem, the
compromises poetic creativity entails acquire legitimacy in relation to the poetic bias to which commitment has been given. Loss and despair are balanced against notions of the poem’s progress.

Experiences of doubt and uncertainty in poetic creativity also need to be vindicated. Benack, Basseches, and Swan, in their broad study of creative thinking, describe a need to develop epistemological beliefs that, while guiding specific problem-finding and problem-solving efforts, also tell us “how to feel about events in our mental life, such as discovering contradictions to our beliefs, being uncertain, or finding our beliefs changing”. Colin Martindale, in the same publication, writes that, “As the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge long ago noted, creativity requires the ability to ‘exist in ambiguity’ or to tolerate disorder”. It requires, more precisely, the ability not to believe that one will exist in ambiguity indefinitely; disorder is tolerated, and perhaps actively sought, amid the tenuously arrogant belief that one’s own powers will renew a satisfying sense of significance. A poet can be sustained in his or her work by the hope, or the need to show, that he or she is capable of arresting loss. Uncertainty is debilitating if it fails to be interwoven with this ambition. It merely confuses, that is, if no relation can be imagined to opportunities for yielding persuasive poetic expression. The role of uncertainty in creativity has been variously conceived. Keats’s notion of negative capability, for example, broadly identifies uncertainty as a functional element of creativity. Described by Keats as “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”, the notion itself offers a reason for entertaining the imaginative freedoms it refers to. Uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts are given a designated and promising significance. In Blanchot’s *The Space of Literature*, to give a further example, relations between uncertainty and creativity are secured by the word “inspiration”, given optimistically to that which draws writers (impossibly) “into a space where truth lacks, where limits have disappeared, where we are delivered to the immeasurable”. Writers write, Blanchot explains, “by escaping the omnipotence of inspiration”. Creative redemption, of course, is also an idea that attempts to situate uncertainty. All three conceptual structures defend a potentially dangerous dialogue with things chaotic. Indeterminacy is applauded. On a grander scale, Nietzsche offers us Zarathustra, the overman, who could, in Eagleton’s words, “dance without certainties on the brink of the abyss. For him, the very groundlessness of the world
had become a source of aesthetic delight and an opportunity for self-invention”.\textsuperscript{210} It is an extreme and optimistic vision.

The kind and degree of uncertainty perceived as able to be entertained, like the kind and degree of pain perceived as endurable, will be specific to individual poets and to the poems they are writing. Greater uncertainty need not yield greater poetry. Uncertainty is not endured, however, without any measure at all. Voss and Means, referring to creativity in the social sciences, judge that, “One of the most critical components of mental functioning in general and problem solving in particular is prior knowledge”.\textsuperscript{211} As “prior knowledge”, they include not just ideas about the work that tends to be done in a given field but also notions regarding the strategies people employ and the joys and hardships they experience. In poetry, the examples generations of poets provide can suggest the kind of effort or daring it might take to produce a satisfying work. The guidance is double-edged. A poet who accepts, through these examples, that certain experiences of and responses to uncertainty are possible and desirable also accepts the risk that such responses may not be possible for him or her specifically, at least not to the desired degree. Prior knowledge facilitates optimism and ambition, but also potentially threatening comparisons. Answers to the questions “To what might I contribute?” and “How might I do so?” can be followed by the questions “How am I faring?” and “Am I who I hoped I was?”. Personal doubts can in this way intensify the uncertainties creators experience. A sense of self may be added to the list of things to be redeemed. Blanchot is again informative. “Poetry”, he states,

is only an exercise, but this exercise is the mind, the mind’s purity, the pure point at which consciousness – that empty power to exchange itself for everything – becomes a real power, enclosing its infinite number of constructs and the whole range of its manoeuvres within strict limits. Art now has a goal, and this goal is the mind’s mastery.\textsuperscript{212}

A poet learns, in writing, that he or she has a mind with the force to write just the poem that is written. “From the poem the poet is born”, Blanchot offers.\textsuperscript{213} Uncertainty is pursued and responded to in the hope that there will be moments where the mind seems to approach its idealised potential, as conceived in relation to other creators. Amid constraints and absences, and surrounded by celebrated works, poets are to recognise and affirm their own intellect and sensibilities. Creative redemption celebrates a mind’s moment of strength, a moment that need never arrive
to the satisfaction of its author, and which can consequently lend to creativity both desire and dread. The risks are substantial. A vocational contract is that which tells a poet that they are worth taking.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a capacity for creativity has been loosely associated with a tendency to perceive and suffer from uncertainties in everyday life. The list of famous creators described as displaying neurotic or psychotic behaviours is disproportionately long, crossing all fields and times, from Van Gogh to Cantor, Copernicus to Pollock, Elgar to Poe, and Handel to Hemingway. Joyce Vantassel-Baska reports that, “Like Woolf and Bronte, Atwood viewed the art of writing as a triumph over neurosis”. It needs to be acknowledged that poets’ organisations of pleasure and pain may have as much to do with their particular constitutions as with their experiences in poetry. Certain biological and biographical conditions may increase the likelihood that an individual will find allure in creative undertakings. Creative processes may seem, perhaps, to lend meaning and purpose to existing tendencies. A creator need not be mentally ill in order to create, nor need mental illness imply creativity. A creative discipline may seem, however, to offer licence to or a defence of, it may also exaggerate, a certain range of behaviours. No creative undertaking can be cleanly divorced from an individual’s psychological state. The release of personal tensions and the disproof of personal inadequacies (perceived or feared) can be enacted through creativity by any individual, regardless of their mental health. The process is part of the urge for creative redemption. The need for such enactments may be enlarged where existing mental instabilities are significant.

Doubt and uncertainty in everyday life might also provide a creator with subjects conducive to creative work, subjects that, aside from being personal, offer ambiguities or difficulties that seem to demand a response. Nagging inconsistencies can encourage creativity regardless of their source, and may attract greater concentration for being immediate concerns. The successful transferral of personal materials into the domain of an emerging poem may bring with it considerable relief. A sense of escape (from the personal to the poetic) and of, regarding the materials used, compensatory functionality (where unpleasantness becomes a resource) may add to a poet’s commitment to the poem being written. Virginia Woolf writes, of her own experience, “Observe my own despondence. By that means it becomes serviceable. Or so I hope”. Many of Sylvia Plath’s poems also read as examples of
the “serviceability” to which Woolf refers. Poems written in these ways need not be autobiographical. Discomposure can directly contribute to a poem without becoming that poem’s subject, by providing, for example, a starting point, an image, or an association, upon which other ideas and effects are built.* The same can be said, of course, for any marked and immediate feeling. Joy, awe, and revelation may also inspire creativity, and can elicit strong concentration without necessarily rendering the resulting poems diaristic. Trade with despondency, then, is not a prerequisite for creativity. It does not answer the question of “How does a poet write well?”, but only, and partially, that of “Why do some poems get written?”.

Miller Mair, commenting on creativity, writes:

Whatever evidence there is will seldom be enough to justify the steps we have to take beyond the known limits of our world. It is of the essence of this realm that we must sustain ourselves, or be sustained by the trust and relevant care of others, rather than protect ourselves from foolishness by the hard pellets of shared convention, tradable truths.217

It is not clear how Mair might distinguish between “trust and relevant care” and “shared convention, tradable truths”. Each involves the other. Mair’s gesture, however, would seem to be towards an acceptance of risk and uncertainty provided there is a context that lends sufficient meaning and hope to these otherwise unmanageable tensions. In poetry, some trust and some relevant care are broadly implied by the existence of the medium: the writing of poetry is a recognised and, in many ways, a celebrated occupation. A poet’s vocational contract loses significant force without this foundation. Trust and relevant care are then extended by a poet’s own organisations of his or her pleasure and pain, achieved relative to the history of the discipline. Value and purpose are leant to behaviours that ideally lead to creativity. Tensions can be induced, as when immediate pleasure is postponed for the sake of an unknown and potentially inadequate return, but the tension remains part of a larger order. A poet submits his or her impressions and hopes to uncertainties rendered approachable by multiple constraints. The need for redemption is increased, but means are offered, concurrently, for sustaining and directing what the poet hopes will be a rewarded effort. Assurance and predictability in this scenario can never

* “Poetry & Adversity”, “Pain”, and “Blue” (pp. 275, 111, and 223 respectively) each began with a decision to employ personal feelings of doubt as a resource for creativity. “Poetry & Adversity” (then titled “Seed”) arose from a description of the state of mind that had delayed its writing. For these poems, immediacy allowed strong concentration. The starting points were finally lost and the poems ceased to be (simply) private.
hold reign. Were they to, or were they to be seen to, opportunities for creativity would cease to exist – uncertainty would be given no location at which it might seem both interesting and accessible. The trust and relevant care a poet perceives and constructs are (like responsibility) the enabling substitutes for certainty. They are suitable associates for the doubt and risk that are to be entertained.
Interlude: Aesthetic Development

A poet’s sense that his or her skills and tastes in poetry have improved can heighten an experience of redemption. The celebration is mixed, for it can entail, at once, the rejection of previously rewarding works. The possibility that currently pleasing poems will also fall out of favour inserts a new source of uncertainty (the drive then being to produce works that might endure). “Brief Appearance” redeems its own former version, the latter having been rendered unconvincing by changes in the technical and aesthetic knowledge and bias of its author. Both poems are offered below. The poem that redeems “Brief Appearance” is a project for the years to come.

Brief Appearance

A hundred thousand years of human minds,
hosted by the body;

and your own view, nestled in the timeline,
not quite as real, by your own account,

as the rising sun.
Plying your human form, you

strive against the glare, to learn
if ardour prospers.
A Moment Glistening, PRECURSOR TO “BRIEF APPEARANCE”

What he knew, each swirl,
Staged a border, a crest, a curving lip,
That would not be held –
He spoke,
And fed his sense to an older ocean,
Of drift and violent roll,
A hundred thousand years of human minds,
Of awe, and urge, and vision.

What he knew
Lived,
And passed,
Unpinned,
Though with an air, a flow,
Unbroken;
His view, his liquid thread, he thought,
Was long and densely shared,
Engulfed
In a matrix,
Undefined,
Its verge the verge of sight.
He plied the pathways of a human form,
Nestled in a soily Earth,
And was as real (by his own account)
As the rising sun,
Enmeshed, and unsurpassed;
He purled,
Trickling time
Into passing words –
What he knew
Swam, buoyant;
He brushed a fern-leaf,
And unfurled,
Soft tips,
Crest-caught,
Sipped at the current’s turn.
And he knew,
With each swirl,
That ardour prospered.


**Conclusion:**

The task of this conclusion, which reflects on all sections of this thesis rather than on section III alone, is to consider what has been revealed about the relations between language, experience, and poetic expression. In sections II and III, the response to and management of these relations allowed by poetry itself, by the technical and aesthetic contracts the medium facilitates, has been examined. The relations between language, experience, and poetic expression are more explicitly the subjects of section I and of the Introduction. Throughout, the concern has been, and is here again, to highlight the uncertainty that is both exposed and contained by these relations. The concern has at once been, and remains, to describe an urge for creative redemption as a response, an elegiac response, to this uncertainty. The discussion begins, here, with a return to mathematics.

Henri Poincaré writes that, “experience does not prove to us that space has three dimensions; it only proves to us that it is convenient to attribute three to it”.[218] Acceptance of this uncertainty led, in mathematics, to the development of many new geometries, geometries with fractional, multiple, and infinitely many dimensions.[219] An admission of uncertainty, the example reiterates, can promote creativity. At a recognised point of indeterminacy, a creator gains the opportunity to give him- or herself over, as Hart has implied, “to the allure of the imaginary”. [220] The release into notions of what else might be possible is a prerequisite for the creation of any new work. As has been argued, more is required in this process than uncertainty alone. Indeterminacy achieves nothing without a setting and a discipline through which it can be recognised and responded to. In poetic creativity, language and poetic convention are each sources of both order and indeterminacy. In language and in his or her poetic contracts, a poet finds both a centre and an infinite margin, both the support, in other words, and the provocation whereby creativity may seem a possible and a desirable endeavour. Poetic contracts allow poets to give focus and value to that which has not yet been produced, and to sustain a commitment to an emerging poem even when the work involved is difficult or unpleasant. They allow, at once, and encourage, divergence from what has been known in the past. Poetic contracts are negotiable, dynamic documents and cannot stipulate absolutely what it is a poet must do in order to create a new poem. Risks must be taken and the “be me but not
“me” charge insists that certain kinds of risks (though it cannot state which ones) are necessary for the production of a compelling work. A poet, thus equipped, bearing both hope and doubt, may attempt to augment poetic expression, the task being to localise and respond to the indeterminacies that language and poetic conventions yield.

There is no creativity without uncertainty: “the risk of surrendering to the inessential is itself essential”, Blanchot writes. Creators create by approaching a dangerous resource. The argument here is that the effort is made with (and not without) the possibility of redemption in mind. Creative redemption is experienced fundamentally as a feeling of power. To write a redeeming poem is to have the power to respond to the absence uncertainty implies. Thus a poet is one who imagines power (borrowing from Blanchot) “even in the region of the ungraspable”. It is the power to slide towards impossibility and to become a source of movement returning to deliver what has previously been just out of reach. Pure expression is not tapped, language and experience do not meet, but poems are forged. The fullness of presence is not attained, but a poet can occasionally speak with such vigour and persuasion that, while this vigour lingers, the presence of absence pales. In a redeeming poem, fresh means of expression are uncovered and new concepts and experiences can be introduced. It is the capacity to yield such effects, rather than the effects themselves, that most directly redeems the medium and the mind involved. In the writing of poetry, the known can seem to intersect with the unknown, the possible with the impossible. Through the uncertainty that lends scope, always, for something else, what is ordinary can be rendered less familiar and more immediate. The “imaginary body” that a poem restores “to the abstract bones of language” (in the words of Chris Wallace-Crabbe), becomes a body that draws us back to alertness, a body that seems, momentarily, to be not merely the corpse of an earlier age. The process is one of defamiliarisation, but there is much at stake. In his study of the English elegy, Peter Sacks points to “the elegist’s need to draw attention, consolingly, to his own surviving powers”. In all poetry, uncertainty offers the same opportunity. We cannot defeat absence, but we can express, consolingly, and in celebration, impressions of a surviving capacity for delivering meaningful effect. There need be no lament. The presence of absence is at once the possibility of voicing responses peculiar to our time and to ourselves.

Language, experience, and poetic expression are drawn together by a poet’s urge to create a compelling poem. There are no natural relations that allow one to
serve the other. On the contrary, explicit contrivance in poetry, and an indefinite relay of signification in language mean that a pure translation of the subjects a poet selects never becomes available. The experiences that inform a poet’s creative efforts are forever distanced by an infinite chain of signifiers and, in any case, by the desire to produce a work that is recognisably poetic. What is revealed here is that the gap between language and experience, and the playful and deceitful exaggeration of this gap achieved via the forms and ideals of poetry, are what allow, in poetic creativity, the apparent arrival of direct experience. It is from uncertainty, from that which holds being and meaning apart, that the elegiac substitute can be born. The effects a poem produces will not be the same as the experiences that inspired the poem, but this “loss”, or transferral, is ideally compensated for by the persuasiveness of what is delivered. Creative redemption, here, subjectively perceived by a poet in relation to his or her knowledge of and preferences within poetry, is never absolute. The poet who writes again, or who writes next, finds no depletion: uncertainties continue to rage, and the poetic machine continues to lend its ear to their incessant whispers. René Char offers, aptly, that, “The poem is the realized love of desire still desiring”. Literature, says Blanchot, “is a dishonest and confused experience in which one succeeds only by failing”. The perfect and final poem does not arrive. Yet the effort to allow what cannot be said to still be heard continues to be made. The terrible resource Blanchot calls inspiration, the resource of absence, superfluity, and uncertainty, continues to be transformed into yet more and other poems. From between the familiar and the ungraspable are drawn, repeatedly (and without repeat), the relative resolutions that are creativity, each poet proclaiming, in the process, the opportunities and the responsibilities that are contractually his or hers.

The final task of this conclusion is to introduce one further collection of poems, works primarily concerned with the experiences that drive poetic creativity (as described in section III), but works, also, that reflect on the emotional content of creativity generally. In section III it was claimed that creative redemption “is a weak experience if the act of creating is not psychologically significant”. It is psychological significance that is the subject of the poems that follow. The tenuous arrogance in a creator’s desire to evidence personal influence and perceptual vitality is a theme that occupies the middle and largest group of poems in this collection. “Hubris”, “the artist pretends to feel”, and “Midnight” are among these poems. The latter depicts an idealised response to self-doubt. The quiet and impossible
independence the character achieves is also that a poet might (equally impossibly) desire both for and in his or her work, though this comparison is not made within the poem. Other equally emotional ideals and ambitions are similarly depicted – creativity remains the underlying concern, but is not always explicitly discussed. Specific elements of the experiences that contribute to creativity are in this way able to be emphasised.

In the group of poems placed at the end of the following collection, inspiration becomes the primary point of focus. The feeling of being inspired or driven to create, and the experience of responding to that feeling, are central to “Art”, for example, to “infringement”, as well as to “Composer’s Lift” and “Extending the Language”. In the latter, as in many of the poems of this thesis (including a suite in the group of poems discussed above), references are made to oceanic tides and to the ocean’s foreshore. The foreshore, in these poems, lies metaphorically between an apparent certainty and a dangerous uncertainty. It is the site where the known and the unknown intersect, a Derridean threshold, where the risk of drowning is as great as the risk of finding oneself unable or too scared to swim. The land offers relative safety, comfort, and order, but also distance from the immediacy and uncertainty of the sea. To feel inspired is to risk the threat of the ocean, the threat, that is, of an overwhelming uncertainty, of emptiness and of meaninglessness, and to return with something that may yet be perceived as significant. Ultimately, the poems argue, we desire immediacy and meaning, and so the foreshore is a place, if not of residence, then of frequent visitation. “Vocation”, in the collection’s first group of poems, participates in the metaphor. Here, however, with the other poems that belong to this group, the concern is to describe ideals and processes that relate directly to the production of individual poems.

The following collection is larger than each of the previous three and is offered as a culmination of the work already covered. Creativity, the poems argue, is a reply to uncertainty, a reply given such that we might perceive our own and our community’s powers of expression. Reassurance regarding our capacity to respond to and persuasively represent our experiences of ourselves and the world is never fully available. What pervades, instead, both in creativity and in these poems, is a sense of ongoing transformation. Revelation, the poems reiterate, can always be sought, and what is found can always fall to further creativity. We end, then, where we begin.
Poems: Creativity

- Creating a poem......................, pp. 264-281
- A tenuous arrogance...............pp. 282-309
- Inspiration.........................., pp. 310-327
A passing of alchemy

Tracing in his mouth the backroads of common thought
(the struggle for silence – the loudest thing in the room),
he does nothing, sucking the vistas from his mind’s dividing ways
(a crease in the surrounding air),
and pressing them against his cheeks, in the marinade of his saliva
(the jaw mills, sifting what he wants to say).

He’s panning in combed rivers
(spilling gravel from a tin dish into the noise of a blank page),
near, he says, to unlooted seams, neither seen nor named
(his want’s eye tracking).

He steals to sate his need,
(hear the hollow breath drawing over first corruption),
placing gold deep in the rubble, as if to seed the river’s stones
(hope still tumbling in the thoughts he’s turned)
with a density of his own – newly elemental.

(The mind’s sieve tilts in the alchemy of desire)
today it comes, immersing his affections
(relief sheds gloss in the shadows of his skull),
the glimpse of his own powers, shards, not of gold, but
(romance still resounding)
crystalline in the water: his own view. He begins his labour
(the tongue engraving outlines, pathways in the shape of vowels),
framing his revelations, to consign through merchant lips
(the tollgate full of syntax)
postcards from his being.
the original

to find rupture,

cracked light on an image
out of shattered time,

the incendiary,

burning holes: black
on a white page.
Poet:
she tacks, and tacking back to
feel the spray, just misses the harbour.

Nautilus:
on the sandbank of his mind, the spirals
of his thought’s discarded shells.
Poem:

what the need for sleep
closes into surplus words;

    and what guilt
for things unsaid

sifts back
into waking;

    what the black ink
splits into rugged terrain;

and what the hill-top plains
wait for,

still unvoiced.
Words:
the viscosity of the mind.

Vision:
tilting the head sideways at the river’s waves
to see stones slide into cuneiform.
the poetry of snowfall

embroidered ice
lingers,
    and devolves, leaving
chilled air
    above the melt.
Theft

“simple guitars painted in primary colours”, Kevin Brophy.

Old hat
thieved and worn
in all the wrong places:

The palm
moves an inch or two
to the left;

c;um…m!ing
S wAs!(!hope
!blazing):n ever here;:

And perhaps you’ve seen it: all the best minds of the generation sitting up hollow-eyed to avoid
the madness of
whoever it was
who told us all
who the hell Moloch might have been…

We’re
eating the green turtles, backed as apples
in the fresh breeze of motherhood,

And scrubbing
each fingerprint
from every page.
Rebirth

No pebble softly sculpted, but pulverised
into sand,
dunes t-ins-e-lling into ghostly winds:
waiting for rain,
the phoenix with boneless wings
just drifting.

Clouds bank,
drilling eyesight into insight that
no-one holds until
storms drop with the weight
of revelation
and rebirth
edges into pebbles
no-one’s seen.
Redemption

the haiku
alights on a tenderness
you thought had died.
Why

the potential
for apocalyptic insight,
splitting the atom
with just the right code
tapped into
plastic k e y
Poetry & Adversity

Thunder
would sound as hooves, decades
of flat-eared mares, in mobs,
along flattened paths.

Littered
with the husks of sound, force
anchored in her shoulders, she
stabs into trodden ground.

Rain
impales, and she plants,
in broken soil, the words that
must endure.
Revolution:

the door off its hinges:

    an angle of sun

the house has

never seen,

crawls across the carpet.
Inception:
the broken shell reveals
wings but
no feathers.

Development:
birth, still gestating, gets
put on hold for that
other possibility.
Re-write

taking the target (s l o w l y)

to the place where the arrow fell.

Revision:

post-dissection, sewing leg muscle

into lip flesh, without messing up the eye.
Vocation

i
the long hours of the low tide’s arrival
somewhere else.

ii
fractures in the brittle salt.

iii
above the shoreline, stone becomes sand, sand
becomes stone.

iv
flow: spray on the desiccation, so that
each fracture melts.

v
it takes hours,

vi
the waves unravelling, the mind
dubious because nothing’s firm.

vii
at high tide, the new text of the foreshore, just
waiting.

viii
and the unveiling: what nothing preserves.
Find

the day’s static

breaks: bands
of blanket theft

clear into vistas.
Shopping List

rolled oats
rye oats
angst

a small spoon
and a pen
Scope

we begin at springs,  
spilling through streams  
and are lost in final tides;

the river hangs in half  
resolve, soft intimations  
of entangled will,

spring-fed  
and moon-tugged,  
in the present of passing;

and in the sway, held  
by the river’s touch,  
we add to the coilings  
of remembered hours.
**following the sun**

she works to compress the day
into a single line, using the weight
of all her years, leaning
into a promise of amber;

and the dazzle condenses,
but the effort of marshalling
thins, as it always thins,
and the acme of her order

falls into the tease of dusk,
where she stretches

to compress the dark.
Midnight

A woman faces stars, and the words
of her father and of his forebears

slide, like the sunken sun,
till she is no-one’s daughter.

Night’s silence
in her reedy spine

grips nothing.
And as she reaches

round stars, and into black,
she finds no hunger –

a small light,
the candle of her flesh,

gently burns.
Suicide by Drowning:

not coaxed back, no return on the dying tide,
just the vanishing day, and us, huddled in History’s remnants,
our own flesh still feeding air into vital organs, the sea, still pounding…

The beach empties: shells carry the waves of absence,
and the compulsion to pour in their cold palms some promise of amends
cuts through their wash of noise, bleeding it among the living.

We are sand gatherers, caressing what we can into slender glass,
while the faces of the drowning loosen through pallid lips
the long sigh of exemption, a soon and false completion from those
too weighted by walking on. In the burn of molten time, frail distillations,
as our hands, surviving in the rage of loss, edge near to what we cannot touch,
holding above our hours each sculpted curve, to pass light
across the waves of death.
Impact:

we embrace, convinced we’ll remember,
the views the mountain path
held till our arrival, returning to splice

into borrowed gestations, the imprint
of ourselves.
Attaining Wisdom

Birds still dreaming
Will wake with memories of my brother’s stand,
And since beauty, too, sends shockwaves,
A thrush already singing, on the world’s other side,
Will rise into broader song.
Flowers open into foreign blooms.
I watch him speak, but he does not look at me.
He takes “is”, its endless strand, and the scent of “all”,
But nothing else. “Can I learn to see
What you have seen?” The question lingers.

While he sleeps, and while I cannot sleep,
I watch the jagged rolling of our chests,
And I do not love him.
I see the curve of his covered eyes
That are also my eyes, and I see his lips
Still thick with the whispers of his words.
And but for pulse, he is empty.
The thrush recants.
By morning, birds have all forgotten,
And I climb into daylight as an only child,
Lured
by the faint touch of flowers.
Living by the Sea:
      five poems

1. Staking a Claim

Where he was born,  
land stretched on all sides.

And when he crossed the borders  
of what they told him was his country,

the soil remained the same:  
rock on a sprawling hide,

wind on the pipes of an organ  
no-one played.

In his first job,  
he hauled wheat crops across heartlands,

and at the coast, pretending freedom,  
he took to trawling in the deep sea,

learning emptiness  
of another kind, soaked

in salt water – life wasn’t what he’d dreamed:  
nothing curved in his sovereign palm,

there was no distillation  
of the broader land.
Choosing the ocean, where the emptiness
was deep as well as wide, he swam.

And as the imprints of his strokes
dissolved in the ploughing waves,

he narrowed his hope,
closed his horizon round his body’s roll,

and with his will,
meshed his own movement

into sandy shoals.
He clambers, carving

into foothills, and envisions
the first touch of streams

that might voice his claim.
2. Foreshore

The waves’ steel blue
breaks into miniature cliffs,
spilling dusk
on the tide’s rising mirror.

We choose:
   to slide through each crest,
   losing sand to the salt’s lift,

   pressed by the sea’s pulse,
   or to climb, scaling dunes,

   to the views of liquid glass
   gliding through the fall

   of shadowed swells,
   where we see not ourselves

   but a sheer, brilliant surface,
   out of reach. The sea’s light

cants, the waves
speak,

   and the glint of will
   both wants and does

   on the foreshore of the sublime:
   touch brushing the glimmerings

   of divided bliss.
3. Island

From the verge of the dry sand, bracing against the cold,
he steps out, care and impulse in separate hands
as he strides towards the wave-tops.

His glance shoots back
and he’s warmed by the rise of familiar stone,
wraps his island round him like a living shawl,
and with this comfort granting courage
leans into the ocean’s pull.

Though he tries, he cannot gauge the blue horizon,
sky evades water, or water swerves,
and the gap
swallows ground; he
surrenders his foothold,
falls through the tide’s flow, and swims,
stretching into each stroke, rolling
in the salt’s swell, frayed by the jagged water.

And rising breathless,
he turns to judge the measure of his daring,
but nothing’s changed,
the sand beneath his feet is the same sand, and the stone
still looms. He digs for purchase, wraps just the shoreline
round his shoulders, and
plunges into swollen waves. He finds daring, in the fringes
of his faith, and he reaches,

dreading what he might choose.
4. **Ambition:**

to wrest from irrelevance
the past, where it leans still
with its weight against the sand,
swearing credence for what the soles
yet feel, hugged by adjoining grains;

to trace round the figure of being
before the incoming tide hooks
in its fluid grip the footsteps
left behind, before the life
dwelling where we’ve toiled

tugs into the dross of passing;
to steal, as the shore smooths,
stripping us to the present, outlines
of the travels that feet,
too long unmoving, might yet

resume; to feel the past
still arriving, and because we must,
to walk between sea and land,
casting imprints that hope would hold
moments against the tide.
5. Perspective

The sigh of blue sand, where the sky
slips from its height and rolls behind ebbing waves,

where the day dissolves into hushed lines, and in lungs,
dusk air, still brushed by an ocean, leans against the ribs.

Breasting the inhalation,
the mind pulls from the pores of bones

husks of a slender self, casts them into salty winds,
and thus exposed, stripped by the tide’s pounding,

the core of the body’s folds, a small flame,
opens in the failing day, and burns:

a feathering in the sea’s grace
of the mind’s small hunger, this light,

across the foreshore, reaching into a merge of hues,
tilts at the sea’s horizon, and dares to linger.

And as night climbs into stars, breaking into larger fields,
the dispersion deepens:

beyond oceans,
the splintering of the dark’s long gaze.
Hubris

To soothe the uncertainty,
he stands before the buddha’s brow,
reflected in the bronze eyes,
and hears what it is that smooths
the turbulence of undying doubt –
the portents of immortal calm;
and wanting more,

he leans into his faltering tongue,
probing at the flux of his passing,
and he learns to write:
  breath marks on a blank page,
strokes that skew the lines of safe return.
Ink pooled in his mind’s jar stains the silence
and he dreams of the buddha’s eyes
tilting to view his work.
Mind

The mind’s players
loiter in a subway,
instruments in their mouths – there’s
no real orchestra:

the oboist
breaks off in mid
note, crawls ten metres and
starts all over;

there are violinists
moving on and off the carriages.

And what
startles, broken but
still heard,

is the music.

A snare drummer,
seeing the promise,
sets up on the second platform,
waits six bars, but isn’t cued:

the conductor
stands on a
rostrum,
on the
tracks of the
only empty line;
the top flick of the
baton
gives time its
limping order, but
she’s hard to see.

The drummer leaves, returns

on a different train for a

better view.

And when he plays,

shadows

in the mind’s notes trace

outlines of a fuller sound:

the conductor,

muzzling doubt,

insists she nears

the blooming of perfection, dreams

of the ecstatic rise, the almost-

pain.

She conducts,

quivering with a rhythm

no-one plays: she

feels the rumblings,

relayed through the empty line,

of what rides

once, as death. She finds

the auguries

of hope

in air

over dark rocks,

and she names her chance:

to out-sound the roaring

of impending end.
the artist pretends to feel

pushing against the bark, the tip of the penknife
already sticky, resisted by the viscous sap,
she’s not carving her name;

she’s tapping what the thick, dead skin
hides in its covered veins,
and it’s not the amber, clotting as she digs,

but the empty channel, from root to branch,
and the drop, then, of her own blood
to fill the aridity.
Plastic Surgery

The self you’ve never been, subcutaneous, like cellulite, won’t grant forgetfulness, condensing into weight under the self you are, the selves, sentient, but not the cloud-bodied woman soaring through open skies, and not the man whose own shadow fits the contours of his mind. You ask homeopathy when a thing is so dilute as to treat its own infection, and you weaken what you have, the self you’ve shaped, tempering it into grey, watering the voice into remedies. You find words you’ve never spoken, rhythms you’ve never walked, and as you watch, the self just out of reach approaches, stretches beneath the skin, emerges through each pore … and loses credence
as the self you’ve become.
Clouds collect their shadows
and travel on, skies open
and the mind rolls through its
store of selves, finding one
still embryonic that
tenses

*as if to bloom.*
Mithras

the sun receives nothing, its peeled gaze

lies no return; there’s a woman

with outstretched limbs, palms

towards nameless lovers, and she wants

what the sun can’t give her: to be poured

into blue skies, goddess of her own grave,

to cross the narrows of her fears

and still be loved.
To exceed a satisfactory life

Wanting salt grains, undissolved,
from the centre of oceans,

one’s tongue in the swell
coming back shrivelled, tight

with what it sinks, then, into cheek cells:
the struggle to compare

one’s own bones, ground, and dissolved
in fresher water,

to the salty surge. Dunes
of spent delusions,

and where hope still embarks,
the glare of immortality,

the shifting sand.
When doubt persists

1. A silk hat,

carried in a box dented like a sundial for passing time, and never worn,
turned over in both hands, but not brought out into open air, stowed
in the mind, so that the eyes cast its shadow on the world.

A hat given in earnest by a father, not to his son, but
to the ghost of the son he wants, the boy feeding time to a tumour
of internal chill, and the fray of seams tangling into a sense of loss.

Except the father is the boy himself, and what pines to be endured
is held where the two hands turn: long draughts of the creature soul,
silk still liquid in his own cells.
2. Compulsion:

drought’s
recurring dream.

3. Behind a poet in the dole queue:
a hint of faith, losing its nerve, takes 1.72 years
to state its desired occupation.
4. despair

A pit without walls or rim that holds like heat,
as if thought were muscle: the day’s blanket

tucks; there are storms in covered bones;
and the desire is to loose from under skin

what the hands, still buried, can’t deliver.
The will strains, tunnelling to unbind

the sweep of brief translucency.
5.

i) Pool:

*not the promise but the temptation*

the poet staring from a
dark edge, wills

a drop from nowhere, somewhere,
that might touch

the pool

and not drown.
ii) Dry Weather

ground
rising
The

needling
under fingernails,
devouring memories
of rain.

The interment
like

cairns
in one’s own mind,

rifts
over absent waves.
**one chance**

he sifts and tugs at death’s coil  
till there’s fraying under the skin,  
a tangling in the deltas of his veins;

and with this prologue at its end,  
he takes each fibre and begins to spin,  
feeding the unwritten page with

the fury of his own departure.
Full Compass

The sound of his voice, already uttered, returns through his clothing into the bones of both arms, like moths, burrowing, in need of death’s midwifery.

There are no bruises, but the muscles ache, and his hands stiffen by his side, as if his blood, thickened by the dead, carries with the powder of crumbling wings, eggs, into too many cells. He speaks; and decay, too, might clear his veins, but larvae entombed and still alive, their words buried in his marrow, pressing on the silence…

the threat riles, swelling in his throat, and he races with his tongue the spill of hatchlings.

He speaks with such verve, with such will towards the freedom of his hands, that the weight returning, surging through his arms and to his ribs, deep into his spine, compels new gestures: he’s driven to test the compass of himself.
Introspection

There is love on the middle shelf;
want, in its yellow tin, seeps heavy dew,
staining thumbs and forefingers
and can’t be touched,
but there are screw tops from other jars
to collect the overflow; forgotten
angst, so unloosed, sifts between bottles,
infesting seams in the layered dust
stirred by searching hands.

Death in cans on the lower level
lends a weight unbalanced
by its defects – cracked vessels
scatter crumbs that calcify
into limps, blurred vision, torpor:
death, skewed, tugs at the shelf above,
supports, as it fails, leant on, and lived in, while
drops fall from the yellow tin, inspiring hunger,
and love, tangling in the ruin, haunts.

A third shelf drifts in the vapours
of inception: scent dares reach
and loss is the fear of dreaming;
bowls of liquid hope distil their lustre
and from their surface, their deathless savour
needles strength into stretching hips; fingers
feel for skylines, and vistas still unwinding
lend desire the grip of chance: time
butts the verge of reinvention,

and want’s yellow, drinking
from the climb of love, slides
into other shades.
Extending the Language

Not wanting to rise
out of the water’s swell,
in soft scent tumbling

I turn,
face to the ocean floor,
brick-worker, levee-builder,
trespassed
by an in-coming tide,
moon-tug rolling

into seaweed hair.

So that
when I crawl
onto sands,
tide turning,

I’m dragging each limb,
stretched and swollen skin
imbued

with oceans…

On the shoreline,
I sandbag where I can,
with deeper vowels,
refuge from the waves
still reaching,
and stranded

in the day’s glare,
I wait for salt,
drawing shards

from the soak
of my tongue to
voice the sea.
Art

I cellar in stone the promise of unyielding rage;
and love, wrapped in its own layers, cold
on its outside, sits deep in the same cave.

I touch the tremor of unvented strengths, tastes
the mouth remembers, of rage stirring, and of love
dimming sunlight with its fervour,

and I raise what tools I have for paring flesh.
And what unfolds

    burns in the crucible of a cupped hand,
    smouldering into liquid ash: ink
    rubbed into both palms and pressed, leaving

hand prints on a rock wall.
he finds:

what the plunge into ordinary days
had bled from his mind’s cells,
and what the torrent of his own words

had driven underground
into dark terrain;
he finds what the life

he’d always harboured
had buried inside his bones,
and what his rapture

had been feeding on all these years,
tucked into the pleats of time,
unnoticed. He stops.

The sky’s blue breaks through him,
sweps, leaving
nothing intact. He’s found

rain that won’t fall,
untangling in his fingers,
like vapour in the sun’s glare:

cloud hands,
  clean with
  emptiness…
And he speaks,
stalling the dispersion,
hoping the slipped ends

of his alphabetic self might
lever what he’s found
close to the hide of knowing.

His cloud hands write,
and he smooths the pleats of time,
pleased
not to dream too long.
on the lengthening of a mortal spine

there are shells draped across a tombstone
and the dare, in the dead of night, is to place
the rattling strand around one’s neck, pausing

where the dance of the torch has given tongues
to the cold lips, and to press one’s ears, listening:
there are words, half decaying, that only the dying

hear, and that ask, in a weightless rain that tugs
down into underworlds, “how”, in chorus, “how brave?”; and the dare, then, in the dead of night,

is to lift, with free hands, the lips’ blind eyes
back to their empty staring, to drag the dark
world to its block of stone, and to quarry

paths that reach the living.
Reverie

from reverie, from

tangled frays

to wake up

reaching down to

catch the falling

(stretched-second snap

of untied strings)

and to want

not to hold, but

to follow

or to wind

(at least)

a fragment

back into daylight.
Autumn

To witness first hand a fallen leaf swept against the blue,
I lie without moving. Dawn, stretching on my forehead,
melts down my torso into midday and an empty sky.

There is no wind. The sun’s weight deepens, pushing
round my waist and down my thighs, loosening round my ankles.
Not till twilight, cut by the sky’s remnants, can I move.

No outlines divide the day. I stand, and time that has passed
falls into shadowed ground. The light fails; its bleed
drinks from my own eyes. And though I hear

wind in the higher branches, and leaves
loosen behind the dusk, nothing’s held.

Beyond midnight,
I climb into mountains; stone exerts its hold. I fold my arms
around the dawn to feel the spool of night’s chill

break into sunrise. And here, I feel the day clamber from my skin.
The sun’s tilted glare, the snapped lip of earth, wavering
as it mends, stabs beyond remembrance, and the mind, impaled,

thrills in the rupture of its borders. Leaves fall, and I witness
the movement in the slender expanse

that takes me forward.
**streaming**

you say nothing, redeeming the stream of day,
stretching along the spine to feel the brilliance
feed its silk into deep pools –

there’s a Morse code of consonants
in the shadows of the skull, still tapping,
but warmth from the flood of time,

melts the aborted words, and the slope of reason
tilts past the eviction of unbroken light
and slips into vague imaginings.
Faith

Seeds erupt from the air’s pores,
c caught in teasing winds, like hooped skirts

lifting over open fields, sun inside their folds.
I climb from all windows, touching nothing,

floating over charged ground, a small figure
lost in the wind’s arms and carried

in its vast agendas. Sky finds its way
through the limits of my fingers and I am outside

even on the inside. I am the forest still arriving,
small roots burrowing into future soil,

limbs bracing. All storms are endured, for unborn,
no gods can take me – time measures nothing

but the beating of its wings…

Yet there’s tension in the tether of my years,
for I do age – the dispersal thins

and I return, as I must return, the mind’s breath
to its body, like sky re-furled. Windows

admit their close, and walls
restore the margins of a room.
…There are no forests.
But seeds still drift in a backward quarter,

a tree’s limbs are shadowed on my spine,
and through the summer days that follow,

I stumble on the remnants
of an appalling faith.
infringement

it is love that robs from me,
spilling from her lips to mine what I cannot reach alone,
quarried from within me, and distilled, this

unblemished heat
burning around nothing;
she pours liquid from a clear flame

through the tissue of my lungs, and the suffocation
breaks on her visage; there are trace lines
of her figure on my skin, and like dew

curving out of empty skies,
the imprint of her hand, the filter of her mind,
passing through me;

stay
…let the rhythm of dissolve
whisper its own demise and lead us back
to the wounds of my own plunder.
Planting Gerberas By Moonlight

Planting gerberas by moonlight,
Venus in its lucid phase,

All things coming together,
She sang,

And nothing else held voice.
Even I, in bed, half woken,

Stammered.
It was the best time.

She wound through the roots
Of each plant, notes

That when she leaned
On the loose soil, unravelled.

I heard the sigh
Of the dark ground. Water

Murmured as it filtered
Through the roots’ pores.

I watched
As the moon’s white paled

To bring the dawn…
She washed the heavy soil
From her fingers,

And I rose to embrace her,
But found her gone.

My own hands
Are in the water.

I sink
My own lips, my own eyes,

In the dark tailings of our
Dreaming,

As if stain might
Aid the utterance of flowers.
Composer’s Lift

at his window, all fusion appeared defensible:
gums breathed into paling blue, and their leaves
were the sound of water; the river

moved inside his palms, and the silence
of his four walls became the day. He stands
with his summoned lift compounding,

as if he leans through the porous glass,
sifting through the noise of himself
to brush the shadows in his slant of mind,

translating what he finds.
dream

eyes that open as they close
in a night-dance, steps too airy
to leave a mark,

closing as they open, skinned, still,
in their own dark, for that place
you’re sure you reached.
ENDNOTES:

12 Ibid., p. 283.
16 Stuart Sim (1992), Beyond Aesthetics: Confrontations with Poststructuralism and Postmodernism, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, p. 41.
17 Ibid., p. 136.
23 This is not a concern carried by all forms of deconstruction. For many American proponents, Paul de Man and Geoffrey Hartman, for example, the deconstructive act leads only to more deconstruction. A consuming and exclusive appreciation of, or meditation on, the deconstructive act privileges, as Harold Bloom suggests, the trope at the expense of the troper (Bloom (1977), p. 392-3). The implications of play are swallowed by the processes of constructing evidence for its existence; undecidability effectively becomes the new and only centre. The process can lead nowhere but to a (necessarily false) representation of marginality. Barbara Johnson concludes that, “whatever else we may be doing, we are at any rate being ‘done in’ by our own words” (Johnson (1980), p. 66). This would not seem to be Derrida’s line of thought.
29 Sim (1992), p. 49.
32

40 Lyn Hejinian (1992), The Cell, Sun & Moon, Los Angeles, p. 120.
46 Ibid., p. 327.
52 Ibid., p. 117.
64 Ibid., p. 178.
67 Ibid.
332


174 Ibid., p. 120.


181 Alan Wearne (October 14 1999), “Conversations with a Dead Poet”, in Sunday Afternoon, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (television documentary).


When Karl Friedrich Gauss, in the early 1800s, began exploring geometrical ideas that were non-Euclidean, he did not attempt to publish his results. A little later, Nikolai Lobachevsky and Janos Bolyai published independent non-Euclidean findings, but acceptance was not forthcoming. The ideas elicited, writes Michael Monastyrsky, “wild fury from a majority of philosophers” (Monastyrsky (1987), p. 64). Kant had described Euclidean geometry as an unavoidable, innate intuition of the human mind; his followers held that there could be no other (Hersh (1997), p. 263; also Henderson (1983), p. 11; and Burton (1997), p. 542.). Interest and regard for non-Euclidean geometries were finally secured, one hundred years after Gauss, through the work of Einstein, whose application of the non-Euclidean mathematics of Georg Riemann illustrated that the new geometries could yield relevant measurements of the physical universe.


Hersh (1997), p. 70.


Eagleton (1990), p. 263.


Ibid., p. 158.


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Eagleton (1990), p. 255.


Ibid., p. 106.

Chris Wallace-Crabbe (1990), *Poetry and Belief*, University of Tasmania (Occasional Paper, 49), Hobart, p. 13.


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