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Copyright: 2014, Axon: creative explorations
This paper engages with biopoetic paradigms for understanding creativity and, especially, poetry. While acknowledging the tensions that have long existed between the sciences and the humanities, this paper argues that the work of the US sociobiologist Ellen Dissanayake provides exciting opportunities for rethinking poetic praxis that extend Romantic paradigms. Dissanayake’s theory of poetry’s origins in ‘motherese’, the emotionally charged and dynamic language through which mothers or caregivers engage their children, is of particular interest. Dissanayake’s conception of poetry’s genesis provides us with a new way of theorising two key features of poetic creativity—emotionalism and inarticulacy—that resonate with a Romantic phenomenology of poetic praxis as well as with this author’s experience of writing poetry.

Keywords: Poetry – Theorising creativity – Sociobiology – Biopoetics – Dissanayake.

Introduction
It was almost 200 years ago that Mary Shelley gave us the famous Romantic creative genius, Victor Frankenstein, and yet this ambiguous character continues to signify a model of creative practice that has considerable traction, particularly when it comes to poetry. Picture Doctor Frankenstein, the poet-academic, engaged in a passionate and arcane act of creativity in his home laboratory; his body of work enlivened by the lightning bolt of inspiration, and productive of a shocking or defamiliarising effect; his genius unappreciated by almost everyone—with the exception of his ‘biographer’, Richard Walton, the sympathetic narrator of Frankenstein’s story.

Such a model of singular poetic praxis provides a particularly useful starting point for this essay, which will revise that enduring vision of emotion-laden Romantic creativity by returning to the proverbial laboratory, associated as it is with the disciplines of science. While it was Frankenstein’s embrace of science that corrupted his creative vision, and while the relationship between the sciences and the humanities continues to be fraught, emerging work in biopoetics—as it has been called—has rich potential to help us theorise the poet’s work, particularly in relation to the emotionalism valorised by Romanticism.

Kevin Brophy’s Patterns of creativity: investigations into the sources and methods of creativity has paved the way for such cross-disciplinary research in Australia. His study explores how the ‘glorious uselessness, excess and creativity’ (2009: 18) of poetic praxis resembles life’s evolutionary improvisations. Brophy also examines the limited function of consciousness when it comes to the human organism’s daily operations and, by extension, poetic activity in provocative ways that invite further attention. However, it is the work of the US sociobiologist Ellen Dissanayake that provides the theoretical framework for this essay. Her
conceptualisation of creativity offers alternatives to Romanticism’s mystificatory scenarios when it comes to understanding how and why it is that we poets do the things we do.

This paper will primarily investigate Dissanayake’s identification of the origins of poetry in ‘motherese’, the emotional, rhythmic, patterned and performative language that mothers or caregivers intuitively employ in communicating with infants. While Dissanayake’s interest lies in the ways in which motherese might demonstrate art’s role as a ‘biological adaptation’ (2007: 2), her theory of poetry’s genesis in the context of an inarticulate but emotion-filled experience of the world is of primary interest to me. This is because Dissanayake’s model of biopoetics highlights the importance of emotional intensity and inarticulacy to poetic practice in ways that resonate with my experience of writing poetry.

Dissanayake’s work, of course, also resonates with Julia Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic (the preverbal state of infantile and creative experience), DW Winnicott’s concept of play (which similarly links mother-infant practices with creativity), and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s investigation of language as embodying feeling—all potential areas for further exploration. Dissanayake’s theory of poetry’s origins in the emotional language of motherese also evokes Romanticism’s celebration of feeling over reason. William Wordsworth characterised poetry as ‘the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling’ in his famous preface to *Lyrical ballads* (1991 [1798]: 246), while John Keats advocated ‘a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts’ (1958: 185). Such connections will be touched on later in this paper, but they also provide another undoubtedly fruitful avenue for elaboration elsewhere. This paper, however, will be content to begin research in this exciting area of biopoetics by carefully contextualising and exploring Dissanayake’s theorisation of poetry in terms of emotion and inarticulacy, before concluding with some phenomenological reflections on poetic praxis, derived from Romanticism as well as from my own experience.

On interdisciplinarity: negotiating the ‘two cultures’

Interdisciplinarity between the sciences and the arts has steadily increased in recent times, with humanities scholars intervening in the ‘objective’ work of the sciences, and the sciences, as this paper argues, offering provocative empirical paradigms for conceptualising the arts. However, the relationship between the sciences and the humanities—as in Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, which depicts a monster deranged by science but given humanity by poetry—has been marked by significant rivalries and tensions.

Daniel Cordle identifies three historical moments in the contemporary quarrel between the so-called ‘two cultures’ (1999). Coinciding with the universalisation of state education in England, there was Matthew Arnold’s and T.H. Huxley’s 1880 dispute over the virtues of a schooling in the humanities versus a scientific education. The poet Arnold famously promoted the humanising influence of cultural learning. In the 1950s and 60s, CP Snow and FR Leavis continued the debate. Snow, a scientist and a writer, published *The two cultures* (1959), in which he elevated science above the humanities, which had traditionally claimed greater prestige and greater access to knowledge about human nature. For Snow, writers and literary intellectuals were egotists and ‘natural Luddites’ (1964: 22), whereas science offered the possibility of genuinely authoritative and progressive thinking.

Then there were the so-called ‘science wars’ of the 1990s in the US, triggered by the interpenetration of the ‘two cultures’, as scholars began to interrogate the authority of scientific knowledge. Donna Haraway’s *Primate visions: gender, race, and nature in the world of modern science* (1989) called attention to the patriarchal bias of primatology, questioning the assumption behind an experiment, for instance, that removed males from a group of rhesus macaques to demonstrate that group’s reliance on males. Haraway asked why the
experiment had not removed the female monkeys. Aggrieved scientists responded to such criticisms with polemical attacks on the ‘postmodern’ relativism of humanities departments. In *Higher superstition: the academic left and its quarrels with science*, Paul Gross and Norman Levitt disparages science critics as a ‘gaggle of post-everything feminists’ (1994: 37), who are irrationally inimical to objectivity and truth. As Sandra Harding suggests, feminist scholars such as Haraway are fundamentally desirous of ‘more objective … not less objective’ science (1996: 19), but their work has been nevertheless perceived as an attack on the disciplinary integrity of science. The hostilities culminated in the 1996 Sokal hoax, in which Alan Sokal wrote a parody of postmodern science criticism, accepted for publication by the peer-reviewed humanities journal *Social Text*. Sokal later explained that he wanted to expose the absurdities of postmodern humanities scholarship, targeting in particular ‘deconstructive literary theory, New Age ecology, so-called “feminist epistemology”, extreme social-constructivist philosophy of science … [and] Lacanian psychoanalysis’ (2000: 16).

As Andrew Ross recognises, the culture wars lay behind the ‘science wars’, as they came to be known (1996). Indeed, even earlier manifestations of the ‘two cultures’ conflict, which were articulated vis-à-vis concerns about public education, demonstrate the ways in which the dispute between science and the humanities has always been implicated in the cultural politics of the public sphere. An argument that seems to be about differing methodologies is actually an argument about how people understand human nature—and, ironically, how that understanding ought to be nurtured.

This becomes starkly apparent in the heightened tensions that have appeared around the discipline of sociobiology, which (as the term suggests) investigates the social behaviours of animals (including human beings) in relation to their biology. Sociobiology, particularly in its focus on the social behaviours and biology of the human animal, has been the site of thinly disguised ideological struggle. It is also an area in which the sciences and humanities, perhaps unsurprisingly given the inherent interdisciplinary focus of sociobiology, appear to be most strongly converging—and most strongly conflicting.

Scientists have taken an aggressive stance, with the evolutionary sociobiologist EO Wilson, in *Consilience: the unity of knowledge*, championing the triumph of the sciences over the humanities. Wilson prophesies an inevitable future in which the humanities ‘will draw closer to the sciences and partly fuse with them’ (1999: 12). Postmodernists, ‘a rebel crew milling beneath the black flag of anarchy’ (40), irrationally holding to the belief that science is ‘contrived mostly by European and American white males’ (42), will die out ‘like sparks from firework explosions … in the Darwinian contest of ideas … because—simply—that is the way the real world works’ (44).

Wilson's vision of sociobiology, which privileges biology as the bedrock of truth and which views contemporary society as a manifestation of our biology, has been vehemently contested from within the ranks of science. In *Not in our genes: biology, ideology, and human nature*, Richard Lewontin, Steven Rose and Leon Kamin argue that such a model of evolutionary sociobiology represents nothing more than ‘a reductionist, biological determinist explanation of human existence’, which claims ‘that human society as we know it is both inevitable and the result of an adaptive process’ (1984: 236). They add: ‘The general appeal of sociobiology is in its legitimisation of the status quo.’

Nevertheless, Wilson's call for ‘consilience’ has received support from disaffected scholars within the humanities—and, particularly, literary studies, which has been frontline in the culture wars. In *Literary Darwinism: evolution, human nature, and literature*, Joseph Carroll hails the inevitable conquest of literary studies
by sociobiology and looks forward to a future in which literary texts will be assessed not for their ideological values but for whether or not they realistically reflect ‘human nature’ (2004). Jonathan Gottschall, the author of *Literature, science, and a new humanities*, confidently declares that moving ‘closer to the sciences in theory, method, and governing ethos’ is ‘the only responsible and attractive correction of course … with the potential to lift the field from its morass’ (2008: 3). Providing a model of the future of literary studies, Gottschall claims to restore ‘dignity’ to *The Iliad* by reading it as ‘a drama of naked apes’ (Gottschall & Sloan Wilson eds 2005: xvii).

As John Adams suggests, such examples of evolutionary sociobiology use literature as a vehicle through which to rehearse the claim ‘that man has a human nature and it is always and everywhere the same’ (2007: 161). Committed to a particular view of human nature, such a methodology for reading texts can slide easily from interpretation to prescription. In *The blank slate: the modern denial of human nature*, for instance, the neo-Darwinian sociobiologist Steven Pinker argues that ‘art should reflect the perennial and universal qualities of the human species’ (2002: 418, my emphasis), with those qualities defined as peculiarly static and enduring, despite the centrality of provisionality and transformation to the evolutionary paradigm he embraces. It is also the case that Carroll and Gottschall, not to mention Pinker, are consistently distracted by their concerns about left-wing postmodern relativists in ways that reveal how their interests lie less in the value of interdisciplinarity than in politics.

In the light of the aggressiveness and reductiveness of the models of ‘consilience’ offered by sociobiologists, other scholars in the humanities have resisted calls for interdisciplinary exchange. In *Darwinian misadventures in the humanities*, Eugene Goodheart objects to sociobiological interventions in the humanities, calling sociobiology ‘scientism rather than science’ (2007: 10). He adds: ‘The prospect of disciplines going off in various directions, unconstrained by the demand for consilience may bring greater rewards than the opposite and illusory prospect of the unity of all knowledge, so tantalizing to neo-Darwinists’ (120). In *Interference patterns: literary study, scientific knowledge, and disciplinary autonomy*, Adams rejects ‘methodological monism’ (2007: 134) in the specific context of literary studies. He argues that science’s methods are ‘inapplicable’ to the study of literature, comparing interdisciplinarity to ‘negative interference’ (15). For Adams, the humanities address ‘meaning’, whereas science addresses ‘mechanism’ (37)—returning us to a polarising *Frankenstein*-like framework.

This paper situates itself in the discipline of creative writing, which investigates the production of literary texts, rather than in its cognate discipline literary studies, which is focused on the reception of literary texts—although such distinctions are slippery, given the ways in which a writer of a text is always also its reader, and the ways in which literary critics also attend to the material conditions around writing. In any case, science’s interest in ‘mechanisms’ rather than ‘meanings’, if we allow that distinction to hold, is not something that I would necessarily want to reject. After all, the ‘mechanisms’ of poetic praxis are of central importance to my research into creative practice. It is also the case that, while I am advocating cross-disciplinarity, I hardly support Wilson’s grand vision of the sciences subsuming the humanities. As my discussion of Dissanayake’s work will conclude by suggesting, the phenomenological testing of her theories of poetry by practitioners of poetry is essential to enriching her hypothesis about creative practice.

I also share concerns about the regressive nature of neo-Darwinian evolutionary sociobiology. However, as Dissanayake’s careful and thoughtful research in biopoetics demonstrates, Wilson *et al.* are not representative of the entire discipline of sociobiology. While some practitioners in the humanities have recommended the wholesale rejection of sociobiological paradigms, I would argue that there is no need—to use a metaphor
that is particularly relevant to Dissanayake’s work—to throw out the baby with the bathwater.

In fact, the naive understanding of evolution espoused by some of the sociobiologists or self-proclaimed ‘literary Darwins’ surveyed has been significantly challenged through the revisionary work of evolutionary scientists such as Susan Oyama (2000), Lyn Margulis and Dorion Sagan. They note that ‘the neo-Darwinist mechanistic, nonautopoietic worldview is entirely consistent with the major myths of our dominant civilization’ (Margulis & Sagan 1997: 276), with traditional evolutionary theory’s emphasis on masculine competition for mating rights betraying ratiocentric, autarchic, patriarchal and capitalist ideologies. Oyama, Margulis and Sagan, by contrast, draw attention to contingency, symbiosis, heterogeneity and struggle as the context for evolution. In addition, there exists strong agreement in sociobiology that humans are, as Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson write, ‘both biological and cultural organisms’ (1985: 281). Richard Dawkins, despite ascribing to traditional Darwinian evolutionary theory in some respects, nevertheless describes human beings as ‘homosymbolicus’ (2006: 34); as ‘defined by a dual inheritance (341). Terence Deacon’s The symbolic species: the co-evolution of language and the brain similarly acknowledges a dialectical relationship between biological and cultural forces when it comes to evolution, going so far as to claim that ‘the physical changes that make us human are the incarnations, so to speak, of the process of using words’ (1997: 322). Language acquisition, he argues, made our brains bigger; it made us who we are. Dissanayake likewise positions herself against reductionist biological visions of human nature; humans, she claims, ‘have evolved to require culture’ (2000: 8). She continues: ‘they cannot exist in a cultureless or culture-free state’ and ‘they are born with common, cross-culturally recognized predispositions (“needs”) to acquire culture.’ Indeed, for Dissanayake, as we shall see, art can ‘fit’ humanity for survival.

There is no doubt that interdisciplinarity remains a challenge, largely as a result of the obvious specialisation of disciplinary knowledge, but the ‘dual inheritance’ of human beings clearly demands interdisciplinary engagement of the kind suggested by the discipline of sociobiology and the emerging area of biopoetics. This notion of humans as both cultural and biological beings is ultimately the premise behind the interdisciplinary methodology that I embrace in this paper, and it is as relevant to the investigation of creative practice as to any other human endeavor. As Roger Hart suggests, our creative work occurs ‘in response to such historically specific factors as prevailing disciplinary paradigms and cultural assumptions, as well as such species-specific factors as the human sensorium and neurophysiology’ (1996: 35). Dissanayake’s research into the origins of poetry in mother-infant interactions, as the below discussion will make clear, provides a way for creative-writing scholars to reconsider their practice with the interdisciplinary scope necessary to understanding the behavior of ‘homosymbolicus’.

Dissanayake’s ‘motherese’: poetry’s origins in emotion and inarticulacy
Dissanayake’s vision of evolution, like that of Oyama, Margulis and Sagan, is a revisionary one that contests the patriarchal and solipsistic slant of traditional Darwinian evolutionary theory. In Art and intimacy: how the arts began, Dissanayake conceptualises human nature in terms of ‘psychological or emotional needs that arise from a primary capacity for mutuality’ rather than ‘competitive behavioral strategies that serve an underlying selfishness’ (2000: 8). She argues: ‘the earliest ability of infants is to…engage in emotional communication with others. Each of us is born with a mind—sense and emotions—that moves us to seek and engage in intimacy with others before we do anything else’ (10).

Dissanayake identifies art as another fundamental ‘need’ alongside the requirement for intimacy. Indeed, she suggests that the need for love and art, which she calls ‘mutuality’ and ‘elaborating’, go hand in glove, with art facilitating bonding (184). That integral connection between love and art is everywhere apparent, most
obviously in religion and romance, but it can be felt even in the experience of being entranced by a TV show or pop music. Love and art, as Dissanayake points out, are commonly and similarly experienced as transformative forces with ‘the power to grasp us utterly and transport us from ordinary sweating, flailing, imperfect “reality” to an indescribable realm where we know and seem known by the sensibility of another, united in a continuing present, our usual isolation momentarily effaced’ (4).

Dissanayake sees the first evidence of the mutual forces of love and art in ‘baby talk’ or ‘motherese’, which she alleges ‘is not the trivial or inane pastime that it might superficially seem but, rather, a cradle in which nascent psychosocial capacities can emerge and be developed’ (2001: 336). She describes motherese as the ‘mutual multimedia ritual performance’ (2000: 29) that emerges in the first months of infancy and motherhood—or between a young infant and any caregiver—and that achieves its effects ‘through fundamentally aesthetic means’: ‘stylization (formalization or simplification), repetition, exaggeration, and elaboration in visual, vocal, and gestural modalities’ (2001: 336). During this multimedia performance, mother (caregiver) and infant collaborate in a routine of sound-making and face-pulling, the mirror neurons in their brains compelling them to imitate one another’s sounds and expressions so that they achieve what Dissanayake describes as an ‘emotional communion’ (2000: 6).

This leads us to an important clarification: for Dissanayake, love and art, like the condition of infancy from which they arise, are ‘intrinsically nonverbal’ (6). Love and art are not about cognitive value or ‘meaning’ in the strict or narrow sense of those terms. Baby talk, Dissanayake writes, ‘has nothing to do with the exchange of verbal information about the world and everything to do with participating in an impromptu expression of accord and a narrative of feelings’ (45). In Dissanayake’s view, while language ‘will eventually become also an instrument of symbolic reasoning and intellectual analysis’, it first and foremost, as motherese shows us, ‘expresses emotional needs of mutuality and belonging’ (45-6). In fact, Dissanayake argues that the emotional role of art remains paramount even in culture’s more mature manifestations, with cultural ‘ceremonies or rituals’—from church services to cinema viewing and concerts—doing for a society’s members ‘what mothers naturally do for babies: engage their interest, involve them in a shared rhythmic pulse, and thereby instill feelings of closeness and communion’ (64).

Dissanayake’s understanding of human nature as intrinsically motivated to seek mutuality through art might seem Pollyannaish. Pinker is certainly critical of what he describes as utopian ‘left-wing innatists’ (2002: 305). However, Dissanayake’s emphasis on empathy and cooperation provides a view of human evolution that seems less naive than traditional accounts privileging masculine competition for breeding rights. Dissanayake’s work ultimately acknowledges how much more there is at stake to human reproductive success and survival—to ‘fitness’—than rivalry between men for mates. Procreation may be of initial importance, but successful reproduction, as Dissanayake’s work highlights, involves something more sustained and significant: parenting. This is where art comes in, facilitating bonding in a virtual, performative space through the triggering and sharing of heightened emotion. It is also the case that, when it comes to understanding that subject dear to Neo-Darwinists, human nature, Dissanayake’s focus on ‘the earliest months of individual infancy and … the pre-Paleolithic infancy of the human species’ (2000: 6) makes more sense than focusing exclusively on the behaviour of grown males.

Nevertheless, cruder models of biopoetics continue to rehearse the argument that, much as male peacocks allegedly produce their elaborate tail feathers to attract plainer females, men produce luxurious art in order to win the attention of fertile women. In *The art instinct: beauty, pleasure, and human evolution*, Denis Dutton argues that it is ‘sexual selection’ that ‘explains the will of human beings to charm and interest each other’.
Art, he argues, is not about sociality (223)—about mothers and children—because 'sexual selection ... undermines the communal spirit as having an intrinsic role in the arts' (226). Pinker, in The *language instinct*, explicitly dismisses the significance of motherese to cultural behaviour, taking exception to the idea that mothers might be responsible for even teaching children language. He argues: ‘children deserve most of the credit for the language they acquire’ (1994: 40).

Dissanayake, though, is not alone in redirecting attention to women and infants (whom Darwin essentially viewed as less evolved and less relevant than men), and in understanding art as a ‘biological adaptation’ (2007: 2) within that social context. In *Mothers and others: the evolutionary origins of mutual understanding* (2009), Sarah Blaffer Hrdy likewise views the relationship between mothers (or other caregivers) and infants as relevant to the evolutionary ‘fitness’ of human beings. Blaffer Hrdy also argues that empathy (emotion) and ‘artistic’ engagement are central to that mother-infant bond. Bryan Boyd, in *On the origins of stories: evolution, cognition, and fiction*, like Dissanayake, recognises art’s origins in the systems of ‘mutual delight’ (2009: 98) generated between mothers and infants, as well as in the ways we are ‘wired for emotional contagion’ (163). However, Boyd’s study of storytelling is ultimately less interested in the emotional value than the cognitive utility of that particular art form. By contrast, as we have seen, the affective dimension of cultural expression is of primary importance to Dissanayake. Motherese, as the first manifestation of art behavior, demonstrates that it is the ‘wish to share emotional experience that motivates early vocalization’ rather than ‘the instrumental need to request or name things’ (45).

While there is, as Gemma Corradi Fiumara reminds us, a Cartesian tradition of viewing emotions as forces that ‘cloud the vision of the intellect’ (2001: 37), emotions have, in both the humanities and the sciences, undergone something of a radical reevaluation in recent times. The so-called ‘affective turn’ has undermined longstanding attempts to separate intellect and feeling, as well as the traditional privileging of the former over the latter. Feelings are now recognised as playing an important—even primordial—role in art appreciation and the construction of knowledge (about danger, for instance). The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio, working from a concept of embodied consciousness, understands feeling as nothing less than ‘the backdrop for the mind, and, more specifically, the foundation for the elusive entity we designate as self’ (1999: 30). The self is ‘a felt core self’ that is ‘renewed again and again thanks to anything that comes from outside the brain into its sensory machinery or anything that comes from the brain’s memory stores towards sensory, motor, or autonomic recall’ (172). It seems that, to revise Descartes’ maxim, ‘*I feel therefore I am*’.

When it comes to the expression of that feeling and felt self, the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty suggested well before Dissanayake that language comes not from some kind of abstract form of cognition but from feeling (1976: 235). Using the word ‘sleet’ as an example, Merleau-Ponty argues that

> the word’s meaning is not compounded of a certain number of physical characteristics belonging to the object; it is first and foremost the aspect taken on by the object in human experience, for example my wonder in the face of these hard, then friable, then melting pellets falling ready-made from the sky (403).

As Corradi Fiumara writes, language is ‘an affective reality in which we live and operate’ (2001: 65). Motherese—and poetry—as Dissanayake suggests, are the art forms that arguably most clearly demonstrate this.
In ‘Aesthetic incunabula’ Dissanyake engages in an explicit and careful comparison of motherese and poetry. Indeed, she provocatively but convincingly analyses a transcript of baby talk in terms of poetic devices such as stanza, tone, theme, hyperbole, parallelism, elaboration, rhyme, and repetition (2001: 339-340). While Dissanyake’s interest is ultimately in the ways in which motherese provides ‘the raw ingredients—the aesthetic incunabula—of adult aesthetic behavior and response’ generally (343), I would like to focus on the ways in which motherese coincides with poetry specifically. Indeed, I would like to use the concluding pages of this paper to explore how Dissanyake’s understanding of the origins of poetry in motherese might inform understanding of emotion and inarticulacy as central to poetry—in ways embraced by the Romantics and as exemplified by my own practice.

**Dissanayake's motherese and poetic praxis: Phenomenological testing**

I do not believe that I am being overly ambitious or presumptuous in asserting that inarticulacy and emotion might be seen as germane, if not central, to poetry and poetic praxis. After all, poetry might be defined as a type of language that generally relies on what might be called ‘feeling effects’, which is to say that poetry is typically associated with connotative or suggestive, rather than denotative or instrumentalist, kinds of expression. Poetry is also attuned to the ‘felt’ dimensions of language apparent in its rhythms and rhymes. Indeed, in its Romantic and post-Romantic lyric form, poetry is understood to be the narcissistic expression of the ‘felt I’ that Damasio evokes as the experience of embodied consciousness—although those allegedly narcissistic attempts at expression nevertheless assume, as Dissanyake would argue, the presence of a ‘Virtual Mother’ (2000: 48), an audience ready to receive, recognise, mirror, and respond. All of this is to say that poetry, as the common complaint of students articulates, is often not primarily about conveying a rational sense of things—although it can, of course, adopt such approaches when it chooses.

Indeed, poetry is a frequent—even formalised—response to experiences of emotional intensity that are difficult to cognitively process and articulate, such as love, pain, trauma or grief. Poetry—with its mobilisation of ‘feeling effects’, suggestion, rhyme, and musicality—becomes an intuitive or self-consciously employed resource for expression during ‘feeling events’ that can compel subjects to inhabit an infant-like state characterised by emotion and languagelessness. In fact, language and movement are connected in scientific theories of language development and deployment, such that rhythm and rhyme in verse become dynamic enablers of expression. If we are to broaden and de-professionalise our understanding of poetry’s practitioners, we can see how poetry provides a useful expressive tool in various contexts, such as the teenager’s angst-ridden use of poetry or the griever’s turn to verse (an outpouring of which was witnessed after the traumatic event of 9/11.) Poetry, in other words, can provide a forum for the unspeakable feelings of the body to be expressed. Poetry allows poets, however that category might be conceived, to ‘feel’ their way into expressing bodily states that do not give themselves easily to expression.

There are, of course, different styles of poetry and various compositional methods when it comes to writing poetry—one of those being to strip language of its emotionality, as we see in the deliberately ‘flat’ cognitive games of some modernist and postmodernist verse. Notably, however, such movements comprise reactions against Romanticism, and it is with Romantic notions of creativity that Dissanyake’s theory of poetry’s origins in motherese resonates most strongly.

The Romantics might be said to have been primarily concerned with conveying a deeply felt, inarticulate experience of embodiment vis-à-vis the natural world. In her study of Keats, Shahidha Bari talks about the preeminence of feeling to Keats’s work—‘the peculiar phenomenality of Keats’s poetry’ (2012: xvii)—where feeling ‘designates something that is non-conceptual, or not “known” … but is “felt” as surely as it were’.
Feeling, she argues, ‘then fastens onto thought’. Keats’s poetry, Bari argues, requires a form of reading that is inspired by the emotional manner of writing. It is a style of reading attentive to

the manner in which poems work upon the senses, the way metricality manipulates one’s breath and the shape that words take in the mouth; it registers, too, other ... felt effects, like the figurative weight that images sometimes place upon us or the fluency with which some syntactical constructions move through our understanding. (2012: xvii)

In other words, the emotional composition of the poem—using the embodied techniques of rhythm and rhythm that assist expression—constructs a ‘Virtual Mother’ or a reader who will perform an empathetic emotion-laden response that mirrors and affirms the poet’s own.

My own experience of writing poetry likewise resembles this process. It involves a state of intense feeling and of being dumbstruck—struck into a language-less state—before my particular subject. This is perhaps where the proverbial fear of the ‘blank page’ might present an obstacle, but that embodied and inarticulate condition is nevertheless infused with the desire to communicate the ‘feeling event’. This emotional and nonverbal state is not necessarily one into which I am haplessly thrust; it is a state that I can self-consciously choose to inhabit, because I know it is valuable for my poetic praxis, allowing me to escape conventional ratiocentric understanding. Indeed, it is the epistemological basis for the defamiliarising acts of my poetry. The construction of the poem from that state of emotion and inarticulacy is painstaking and difficult, but I feel my way into the words—in the sense that Merleau-Ponty has described—and the word choice can be facilitated by strategies such as rhyme and rhythm. The activity of writing poetry might very well have narcissistic elements, but it is also always directed towards Dissanayake’s ‘Virtual Mother’, an ideal reader who I expect will be there, simply because I am a human being constantly attuned to the possibilities of mutuality. Indeed, through the poem I not only perform my emotional experience but call for its intimate recreation and sharing.

In *The midnight disease*, the neurologist Alice Flaherty generalises that ‘creativity has been more closely linked to mood instability than to cognitive traits such as high IQ’ (2005: 33). She continues: ‘even in normal writing, the neurobiology of mood and the limbic drive to write may be equally or more important than the purely cognitive skills taught in most writing courses’ (33). Flaherty’s allusion to the ratiocentric pedagogies of writing courses provides food for further thought. However, her study also highlights poetry’s fundamental reliance on what Wordsworth describes, in ‘Lines, written a few miles above Tintern Abbey’, as ‘the language of the sense’ (1991 [1798]: 116). While Flaherty’s title suggests that moodful writing might be associated with ‘disease’ or pathology, Dissanayake’s approach allows us to theorise poetic creativity in ways that are healthful and helpful. Indeed, if we conceptualse poetry as foundational to emotional expression and empathetic sharing, we begin to see poetry’s role in our culture in a new and vital light.

**Conclusion**

This paper, in embracing a sociobiological paradigm for understanding creativity, does not mean to suggest that scientific knowledge should triumph over poetic experience. As my discussion above hopefully suggests, the phenomenological testing by writers of biopoetic models for understanding creativity is essential to their enrichment—and, indeed, to their relevance for creative writing as a discipline, given that sociobiology is interested in artistic behavior only insofar as it manifests evidence of biological adaptiveness. I do, however, strongly believe that poetry, as a human activity inevitably informed by biological and cultural forces, requires cross-disciplinary attention.
Poetry is also an activity that, like other human behaviors, manifests a great deal of complexity and heterogeneity, and so I do not imagine that poetry can be unilaterally or homogenously ‘explained’ by Dissanayake’s theory or by my particular focus on emotion and inarticulacy. I have adverted to various other avenues for exploration when it comes to the relevance of Dissanayake’s theory—and there is always, of course, the possibility of other equally and indeed simultaneously valuable theories of poetic praxis. Scientists and poets alike, as Gillian Beer warns, have a tendency to ‘discover in the universe the patterns that our minds have put there. The utmost resourcefulness and probity of language are needed, both by scientists and poets, to outwit the tendency of description to stabilize a foreknown world and to curtail discovery’ (1987: 56). Thus, while I might have begun this paper by being critical of the Frankensteinian model of the poet, I would like to conclude by emphasising this paper's spirit of Frankensteinian experimentation.

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