‘**Tell all the truth but tell it slant’: Poetic Truth and Indirectness.**

Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton

1. **Truth and Slant**

In poetry, there is probably no such thing as simple truth. This is because ‘Poetry does not earn its claim to truth by mirroring an external world or by stating discrete, correct, ‘facts’ about it’ (Gibson, 14). When Emily Dickinson wrote, ‘Tell all the truth but tell it slant’—a teasing and ambiguous statement—one should remember that in the same poem she had even more intriguing things to say about poetry and its relationship to truth. For example:

As Lightning to the Children eased  
With explanation kind  
The Truth must dazzle gradually  
Or every man be blind – ()

These lines address the kind of truth to which Dickinson was referring. Rather, like lightning, her truths are terrifying and dangerous. Such truths are the deep and sometimes imponderable existential truths so beloved of many poets and philosophers. While philosophers such as Plato, Nietzsche and Heidegger have a long history debating truth, poets, on the other hand, often claim truth inheres in the fabric of a poem’s utterance and cannot be disentangled from it. In this way, poetry is very different from prose in the way it insists on what Joanne Dobson identifies in Dickinson’s poetry as ‘gradual revelation of abstract truth’ (104).

Keats may have had some such thought in mind when he had the Grecian urn voice the idea that ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know’ (). Indeed, he displayed such thinking in his famous ‘Negative Capability’ letter to his brothers when discussing Benjamin West’s painting ‘Death on the Pale Horse’:

But there is nothing to be intense upon; no women one feels mad to kiss; no face swelling into reality. The excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth. (Rodriguez, 57)

Similarly, Wallace Stevens wrote, ‘The poet speaks the poem as it is/ Not as it was: part of the reverberation/ Of a windy night as it is, when the marble statues/ Are like newspapers blown by the wind’ (). This suggests, among other things, that poetry’s truth resides within being, connected to a deeper and transformative here and now—and speaking out of its moment. As Daniel R. Schwarz argues, ‘The emphasis is on the poem as the primal expression of creative energy as much as on the imagination as a source of insight’ (222).

What is certain is that neither critics nor poets will necessarily agree about the full import of Keats’ and Stevens’ lines. This is because they are, to a degree, opaque. They trouble the mind with the truths that inhere in a true poetic complexity. We should state here that in using the phrase ‘poetic complexity’ we are not in any sense advocating for wilful obscurity in poetry. Rather, we are suggesting that poetry cannot ‘get’ at its particular species of truth without—at least—the complexity that comes with laterality—what Dickinson names as ‘slantness’. In this way, ‘telling it slant’ is far more than advocating for indirectness. As Kenneth Stocks argues:

[T]ruth must be presented not nakedly, but mediated in and through the complex relationships of which it is the essence of organizing principle. Properly mediated in this way, truth becomes not only truth but wisdom. (99)

Therefore, in the examples of Keats, Stevens and Dickinson, poetry has the ability to transform truth into wisdom.

In this paper we argue that poetic truth insists on indirectness as the only possible manner of saying something truthful, deep and compelling. In this way, we flesh out the notion that ‘Poetry transfigures what it touches, so that it is revealed another way’ (Gibson, 154). Importantly, as a way into grasping ideas of ‘truth’ and ‘slant’, this paper prioritises our explorations and reflections on Dickinsonian ‘slant’ in our own poetic practice. In two case studies, we explicate prose poems from our recent sequences: Paul Hetherington’s book *Palace of Memory* and Cassandra Atherton’s sequence ‘Touch’, focusing on intertextuality, humour and subversion to demonstrate our own way of approaching ‘slantedness’ in our prose poems.

1. **Dickinson’s Slant**

If we examine Dickinson’s own utterance, in ‘After great pain, a formal feeling comes’, she writes about the aftermath of great pain:

This is the Hour of Lead –  
Remembered, if outlived,  
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –  
First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go – ()

We cannot truly know ‘great pain’ as it is expressed here, or its shocked aftermath because the truth of such experiences is always both intensely private and beyond our capacity to communicate it—except through poetry. This is because of all forms, poetry with its compression and focus on brevity comes closest to asserting the ineffable. As Mags Webster states:

Poets try to do something impossible: coax the ineffable to speak. The unsaid is implicit in poetry, and every poem is, to a greater or lesser degree, an attempt to write into the unsayable.’ (n.p)

We can name it by a phrase, as Dickinson does—‘After great pain’—but, in order to say something interesting and truthful about the nature of this experience, Dickinson has to delve sideways—‘slantwise’—into metaphors and mixed figurations. Her poem not only mentions snow and chill, but it invokes ideas of leaden hours; ceremonious, tomb-like nerves; mechanical feet; a profoundly slowed sense of time; and a quartz contentment. Furthermore, connections between words are invoked in a slantwise manner to create as Jeanne Kammer argues, ‘pain which emerges from the awkward and syntactic silences of the poem, twisting and gnawing and pressing at the restraints of words and lines’ (156).

Every one of these similes and metaphors and the powerful use of ‘syntactic silences’ are ways of approaching her subject—the aftermath of pain—sideways, crab-like. Each approach, however wonderfully evocative of the experience Dickinson tries to communicate, is so insufficient, that she has to add another figuration, and then another—metaphor upon metaphor, image upon image, slantness upon slantness and silence upon silence to gesture towards the subject-matter. Dickinson states, rather exhaustedly, that this experience is a form of stupor and a letting go—and she manages such directness because of all the slantness that has preceded these lines, and which buttress them. Furthermore, as she is still speaking through a figuration—we are asked to think of ‘Freezing persons’ rather than someone who is suffering the aftermath of the kind of emotional pain she has so surely focalised in this poem. And this is the paradox—her focus is powerful, clear and unrelenting because she keeps glancing away from it.

Poetry, of course, is a mode of language use that is primarily interested not in facts, or pragmatic decision-making, or record-keeping, but in registering what it is like to be alive and aware and feeling-thinking. And, language registers such aliveness and awareness both superbly well and terribly badly. So much of what we know bodily and care about, has no real equivalent in language. Yet we prioritize language in our efforts to communicate such experiences. It these times we often reach for poetry. As Michael Austin argues:

Poems encourage us to notice things that we have missed and to see common things in new ways. They teach us how to name what we have always felt but could never describe, and they show us how to ask questions that we didn't even know were questions. To be successful, a poet must convey impressions and images with the force of revelation. But this is not quite the same thing as conveying facts or transmitting instructions. (127)

In writing or reading poetry, we are trying to goad language into speaking about the obscure, complex and shifting things we know in the body, emotionally, and through trauma and deep thinking. In contemplating these ideas in relationship to our creative practice, we edged into new territories of ‘knowingness’. Our prose poems explore ways of gesturing towards a range of truths by utilizing techniques that prioritize abstraction.

1. **Telling it Slant: Paul Hetherington Reflecting on Elegy**

I was trying to find a way into writing an elegy for my father. It was only when I realised that I didn’t believe I could address the subject directly that I found a way to begin to write the prose poetry sequence, *Palace of Memory: An Elegy* four years after his death. Which is to say, it was only when I realised I couldn’t write the elegy I’d thought I would write, that I began to know or understand how to write the elegy.

In this way, I started to think about it slantwise rather than directly; I stopped trying to decide what this elegy would be. In many ways, it was akin to what D. N. Rodowick argues:

One must live an external discontinuity before past internal continuities become visible, and this is no easy task. The possibility of tracing out the architecture of a thought occurs only by standing on the far side of a fracture or division in which we believe, rightly or wrongly, that our own thought has become different. (201)

I realised that I had already been writing parts of the elegy—in poems I had written about other subjects. My father, who died in 2015, was present in a lot of poems I had written after his death—often laterally, and even in poems that were apparently nothing about him. In this way, as Roger Scruton argues,

Truth is a process which *wins through* to the reality of things. This reality consists in what things show, and what they withhold, when brought into the open. And poetry has a special part to play in this process: it is a ‘bringing forth’ which is also a ‘bestowing’. (149)

I also used another form of slantness or indirection in approaching this topic—I decided to employ *Hamlet* as an intertext. This takes up Paul Williams’ arguments about borrowing:

Writers will continue to take on both the conscious and unconscious task of creating intertextual palimpsests, scraping off and writing on top of the old, innovating, modifying past texts, and allowing readers to play the game of scraping off their words and finding others underneath. Writers are not originators of meaning, but are part of a community in dialogue with the past and the future. (178)

Once I began thinking about fathers, *Hamlet* and intertexts, and the way intertexts could speak about present issues from their already-written perspectives, it soon occurred to me that that Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* was another possible intertext for my work. Not only does Sterne refer to *Hamlet* in his work, but he is much concerned with fathers and children.

After that revelation, I wrote and assembled my manuscript fairly quickly. I produced a work that was fractured and opaque, and which elegised my father by speaking sideways. Let me give a brief example by quoting part 40 of my prose poetry sequence:

Although we loved abstruse thought, academic even to the laces of our shoes, our family was a machine consisting of a few wheels. Yet they were set in motion by many different springs acting upon each other with a variety of impulses and passions. Our machine had all the advantages of complexity, with many odd movements.

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In the family, a remark was soon an extrapolating conversation or took the shape of a debate. And each occasion had its machine simplicities; though every instance brought subtle or brutal differences.

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Further, whatever motion, harangue, dialogue or project was going forwards, there was often another proceeding at the same time … *How finely we argued upon mistaken facts!* ()

This prose poem makes use of paraphrases from Tristram Shandy—in a way not entirely dissimilar to Laurence Sterne’s own paraphrasing of the works of Rabelais, Francis Bacon and Robert Burton in his novel. In *Tristram Shandy*, the following passage appears:

Though in one sense, our family was certainly a simple machine, as it consisted of a few wheels; yet there was thus much to be said for it, that these wheels were set in motion by so many different springs, and acted one upon the other from such a variety of strange principles and impulses—that though it was a simple machine, it had all the honour and advantages of a complex one,—and a number of as odd movements within it, as ever were beheld in the inside of a Dutch silk-mill.

Amongst these there was one, I am going to speak of, in which, perhaps, it was not altogether so singular, as in many others; and it was this, that whatever motion, debate, harangue, dialogue, project, or dissertation, was going forwards in the parlour, there was generally another at the same time, and upon the same subject, running parallel along with it in the kitchen. ()

*Palace of Memory* employs this technique of creative paraphrase and variation sparingly—but it is a wonderfully glancing way to get at truths about family, many of which seemed to me to be almost unfathomable until I was able to achieve a certain distance and consider how like and unlike Tristram Shandy’s or Hamlet’s father my own father might be.

In my case, most of my difficulties in writing about these matters—and in seeing them clearly in the first place—had to do with the problem of being too close to them. I knew my father too well and had difficulty stepping back from him, and this troubled and haunted me. Paraphrasing or quoting a few passages from *Tristram Shandy* and *Hamlet*—not to mention Emily Dickinson[[1]](#footnote-1) and several other writers—and using tropes from these works, allowed me to find the distance I needed.

Following Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*, interpretation, writing of all kinds depends on what has gone before it and depends to some extent on the redeployment of ideas and techniques learnt from one’s predecessors. It also depends on an imaginative engagement with what Stevens calls ‘the reverberation/ Of a windy night as it is, when the marble statues/ Are like newspapers blown by the wind’ (). *Palace of Memory* takes up the challenge of expressing intertextual elegy in an effort to express grief and the complexities of patrimony.

1. **Telling it Slant: Reflecting on Subversion**

I wanted to write an extended prose poetry sequence that self-reflexively wrote back to some of the themes my prose poetry has been identified as exploring. Siobhan Hodge has described in my prose poems ‘the challenges to women’s agency via the bodies of women that are both key features of, and subjected to, other canonical works’ (43). I had already experimented with intertextuality as a ‘slanted’ critique of women’s lack of sexual independence in my book *Exhumed*, therefore, I decided to use subversion and humour in my prose poetry sequence, ‘Touch’ to approach the truth of women’s experience in a slanted way. I took inspiration from the way Dickinson uses humour or what has been identified as her ‘comic power’ (Juhasz, *Comic*, 1). As Suzanne Juhasz argues:

With tease rather than with direct attack, Dickinson questions and negotiates power relationships as they are traditionally structured in terms of hierarchies and dominance. (*Comic*, 27)

I decided to use similar techniques to explore the pro-sex feminist stance. Interviewing public intellectual Camille Paglia was a turning point in my career. Her discussions about sexual freedom for women made an impact not only on my scholarship but also on my creative practice. Paglia’s provocative arguments about women’s equality are often about women’s responsibility to themselves. She recently stated:

[Women] have to govern their own relationships with men or with anyone else. And that is the only way women will ever become totally free and totally equal. (n.p)

My prose poetry sequence prioritises women’s actions and choices. The opening prose poem, ‘Dentist’ sets up the initial conceit of the lover being named after his occupation and the narrator’s movement from one sexual partner to the next. It begins:

It started when I caught you fingering my x-rays, tracing the outline of each tooth with a wet index finger. You asked me to show you my brush stroke, placed your hand over mine as I moved the bristles across my front teeth. Up and down. (5)

And ends:

You left when I chipped my front tooth playing netball. I switched my dental floss for two bags of fairy floss and went to bed without brushing. (5)

In this way, the sequence charts a series of sexual relationships by prioritising the woman’s voice and introducing aspects of dark comedy. This humour is pushed to its limit in the prose poems towards the middle of the sequence, such as ‘Professional Netflix Watcher’ and ‘Freelance Fortune Cookie Writer’ which have satirical titles and end on spots of black humour. These techniques approach women’s sexual oppression slantwise:

On *Netflix* the credits only go for fifteen seconds but you still finished before they ended. (14)

And:

I went back to *Panda Express* and ordered vegetable spring rolls. My fortune cookie said: *You will be hungry again in one hour*. (15)

Perhaps most importantly, the sequence ends by personifying the rhyme ‘Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor, Rich Man, Poor Man, Beggar Man, Thief’ to expose doubles standards and slut-shaming through the slanted techniques of subversion and black comedy:

When you told me you were a cat burglar, I warned you I was an animal activist. You said you didn’t steal cats. But I wanted to know where you stashed your felines and what your intentions were. ‘Pure breeds or tabbies?’ ‘*I’m* the Cat,’ you said, ‘like Cary Grant in *To Catch a Thief*.’

The ‘Touch’ sequence takes the ‘unorthodox, subversive, sometimes volcanic propensities’ (Schuessler, n.p) in Dickinson’s poetry to comment on the truth of women’s sexual experiences in contemporary society.

1. **Conclusion**

Michael Austin argues, ‘…poems are true. But they are almost never true in the same ways that history and science are true. They do not present us with the same kinds of fact claims, nor are they subject to the same kinds of hypothesis-testing and falsification protocols’ (126).

Writers marry the here-and-now with reflection and what we have read in order to produce new works—and, as we do, a conscious intertextuality offers a ‘slant’ way of approaching subjects that may otherwise seem intractable. ‘All’ the truth is probably rarely available to us, despite Dickinson’s statement, but if we are serious about telling as much of the poetic truth as we can, other writers can help us out, through what they have already said—even when this is about subjects apparently personal and private.

We circle the most difficult ideas, approaching them sideways and often tentatively, because if we do not—if we are too direct and reckless—they have the capacity to blast and blind us.

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1. I have discussed intertextuality and my use of Dickinson’s tropes and poetry in ‘An intertextual poiesis: the luminous image and a ‘round loaf of Indian and Rye’,*New Writing: International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, 2019 Vol. 12, No. 2, 169–180, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2015.1036887 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)