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A poetry "third" way?
Acts of resistance and transitional spaces in four poets from the 1994 New Generation

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Declaration

I, Gian Luca Guerneri, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

This thesis utilises the planning and realisation of the event commonly referred to as the 1994 New Generation Poetry as a focal point to examine a range of discursive practices pertaining to British poetry in the aftermath of World War II. This encompasses several classifications such as mainstream categorisation, interplay with tradition, level of readability, and the process of commercialisation. This study focuses especially on the profiles of four poets who were selected for the event, namely Michael Donaghy, Lavinia Greenlaw, Michael Hofmann, and Don Paterson. The analysis is designed to consider the acts of resistance exhibited by the poets against the discursive practices stated earlier, which may be found both inside the realm of poetic language itself and in external factors.

The poetry of Michael Donaghy is analysed within the framework of Donald Winnicott's ideas, with the aim of exploring its function as a "spell" that seeks to reconcile the gap between the signifier and the referent in linguistic signs. Lavinia Greenlaw's poetic works actively involve Roland Barthes's seminal text *Camera Lucida*, specifically its exploration of the dynamic relationship between the punctum and the studium. Paterson's opposition to what he defines as the phenomenon of postmodern drift is analysed via a psychoanalytic lens, drawing upon the theoretical framework proposed by Jacques Lacan. In relation to Michael Hofmann, his poetry exhibits a juxtaposition with Walter Benjamin's theoretical fragmentation, particularly in terms of the ideas surrounding the reclamation of ruin as a potential act of revolution.

Impact Statement

The thesis explores a comparatively recent era of poetry written in the English language. With the exception of literary history books and English poetry history volumes, which primarily cover the period from World War II to approximately the 2010s, there is a scarcity of comprehensive research dedicated only to the most recent three decades. This gap can be attributed to the ongoing evolution of contemporary poets, most of whom remain active, and for whom both thematic and stylistic criteria are in flux. Consequently, any mapping of this poetic terrain can only be provisional.

The primary objective of this thesis is to provide valuable contributions to the ongoing academic dialogue. From a critical–theoretical standpoint, it extends its scope beyond conventional literary contexts and actively interacts with a wide range of disciplines, encompassing psychoanalysis and philosophy among others. Although there is a wealth of evidence available for comparable endeavours in previous literary periods, the exploration of this approach in the realm of contemporary poetry seems to be rather uncharted territory. The foundational argument of the thesis attempts to read the so-called “mainstream” in its folds of greater resistance to readability and the so-called “pact with the reader”. In doing so, it investigates both transitional aspects and those of deeper obscurity. This focus potentially represents the most innovative aspect of this work.

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This thesis is dedicated to my son, Francesco.

Preface

Poetry "third way":

Resistances and transitional spaces in four poets from the 1994 New Gen

"The reason we go to poetry is not for wisdom, but
for the dismantling of wisdom."
Jacques Lacan

"Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colours?" asks Elizabeth Bishop in her poem "The Map."[1] In her typical exploratory, inquisitive style, she poses the ultimate question about the direct correlation between what cartographers have: an abstract palette of nuances, and what exists out there in reality: the visible areas of land, history, and human actions that have contributed to form over long periods. Mapping the territories of contemporary poetry and deciding their juxtaposition and order (given the absolute disparity of their categories) requires an in-depth investigation as to these controversial relationships. We can represent the countries on a poetical atlas as anthologies, poetry lists, magazines, reviews, while we add colours as prefaces, economically viable choices, editorials, personal tastes, and master narratives or discourses. The Spring 1994 issue of the *Poetry Review*, the official release of the Poetry Society, known as "The New Generation Issue,"[2] has thus become, over time, a new country to be added, a new space to be claimed on that poetical map. Its history, constitution, myths, and the reverberation of discourses generated by the selection of the twenty poets included in that issue, selected by an interestingly diverse group of poets, critics, poetry editors, bookshop managers, and publishers, necessitate a meticulously planned journey of in-depth investigation.

[1] Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2011), 5.
[2] *Poetry Review* 84, no. 1 (Spring 1994).

Arguably, cultural history is a point of intersection where dissimilar "materials" converge or are influenced by the different magnetic fields produced. Culture (in its broadest sense), economic factors, political decisions, and several other aspects exert forces on one another to determine the nature of society at large. It is always highly debatable which is the specific tile in a complex mosaic or the keystone in a vault capable of sustaining or shifting the balance. In *The Last of England*, Randall Stevenson writes:

> By the 1980s, economic imperatives had largely replaced "expansion of consciousness" and earlier commitments to "civilized society" and "the spirit of the nation". These changing fortunes affected literature directly, especially in the genre of drama, for which the Arts Council's support was crucial throughout the period, and poetry, to which it often gave significant help.[3]

I find the following three expressions: "expansion of consciousness," "civilized society," and "the spirit of a nation" a concise but accurate description of the decades following the end of World War II. They seem to generate some of the main "narratives," although I prefer the term "discourses," about poetry which the New Generation poets were to face. I will deal with those discourses at a later stage in this preface.

The initial issue that lies somewhere along the rhizome of the following thesis is a relatively straightforward question:[4] What did it mean to be considered a British "mainstream" poet in the 1990s of the last century? Once established, that question immediately generates others. I selected two: "What is a poetic act of resistance?" and "Is

[3] Randall Stevenson, *The Oxford English Literary History*. Vol 12, *1960–2000: The Last of England?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 34.

[4] The concept of "rhizome" as a process as opposed to the developmental idea of thinking in terms of a "tree" is loosely based on Deleuze and Guattari. This is how the difference is explained in Todd May's *Gilles Deleuze: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 133: "There is another image Deleuze and Guattari use to characterise machinic thinking: rhizomatics. They contrast a rhizome with a tree. A tree has particular roots that embed themselves in the soil at a particular place and give rise to branches and then leaves in a particular way. It is a system of derivation: first the roots, then the trunk, then the leaves. The roots are embedded here and not elsewhere. The branches are bound to the trunk, the leaves to the branches. Rhizomes do not work that way [...] It can shoot out roots from any point, leaves and stems from any point. It has no beginning: no roots. It has no middle: no trunk. And it has no end: no leaves. It is always in the middle, always in process."

that resistance a force that reacts only to external pressure or is it a pressure that intrinsically comes from the medium in which poetry participates?" The following thesis discusses some of the issues activated by these interrogations and it does so by referring to a precise period of time and a specific, although diverse, theoretical framework. The thesis focuses on the Spring 1994 issue of the *Poetry Review* mentioned above and, in particular, on four out of the twenty poets selected for the *Review*, Michael Donaghy, Don Paterson, Michael Hofmann, and Lavinia Greenlaw.

After a cursory examination of the abovementioned "discourses" on poetry and society from the end of the Second World War until the 1994 New Gen event, it will be clearer why choosing that specific event represents the point of intersection and conflation of something that was going to change how literature, and poetry in particular, was perceived. Walter Benjamin's idea of a "constellation" helps to clarify the conflation and generative power of the forces in action.[5]

The theoretical framework is mainly based on the work of some poststructuralist thinkers such as Barthes, Lacan, Foucault, and Kristeva.[6] The element that conjoins all of them is their connection (both in positive and negative terms) with psychoanalysis; the work of Donald Winnicott on transitional objects and spaces, and that of Walter Benjamin on the relationship between history/ruin/image are also referred to.

Each chapter is protected by a presiding spirit: Donald Winnicott for Michael Donaghy, Jacques Lacan for Don Paterson, Walter Benjamin for Michael Hofmann, and Roland Barthes for Lavinia Greenlaw. Julia Kristeva and Michel Foucault represent a background

[5] The notion of a "constellation" as proposed by Walter Benjamin is evident in multiple sections of his oeuvre, with particular emphasis placed on its examination within his seminal work, *Arcades Project* (*Das Passagen-Werk*). According to Benjamin, the term "constellation" refers to an intricate and nonlinear arrangement of historical events or phenomena. Benjamin's perspective diverged from perceiving history as a straightforward chronological advancement, instead conceptualising historical entities, concepts, and events as interconnected within a constellation. This framework allows for resonance and interaction between these elements, transcending temporal and spatial boundaries.

[6] For each of these authors, whose oeuvres are vast and complex, I refer to one or two books in particular. For Roland Barthes, it is *Camera Lucida*; for Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*; for Lacan, some of the essays included in *Écrits*; and for Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* and *Language and Desire*. Benjamin is quoted from his *A Short History of Photography* and *Arcades Project*, and Winnicott from *Reality and Play*.

or, rather, a horizon that might seem less noticeable but is nonetheless always detectable.[7] Therefore, the theoretical framework of the thesis and its associated methodological approach is to be seen as consisting of two strata: a background horizon of references (the concepts that directed my search and are "touching from a distance" its foundational choices[8]) and a more historical approach that continuously moves back and forth from the foreground to the background.

The thesis upholds and investigates the ways through which four poets of the New Gen tried to resist internal and external forces to produce their original and personal work. Some of them tried what I define as a "third way," only partly referring (but the pun is intended) to Anthony Gidden's formulation of New Labour's policy.[9] It is a third way that can be topologically represented as a "third space" in the magnetic field of poetry. It is part of the field with its positive and negative forces but at the same time it necessitates the other/Other (or better, the lack of it) to reach a full creative potentiality. Like a negative of Benjamin's *Angelus Novus*,[10] writing poetry in the nineties, I argue, is like being dragged towards a future with a promise of progress (can it really be trusted?) while at the same time necessarily casting a glance at a past (poetic tradition?) that is part of that very same history and that demands attention and, possibly, vindication. The creation of a space, a transitional space (borrowing Winnicott's definition of transitional object) was a solution adopted by poets writing in that period of time. It succeeded in surviving a wave of commodification masked as readability and at the same time preserving an idea of poetry based on a pact with the reader. Pitfalls and extremities were always on the verge of attacking, especially when the production of some of the authors became abundant or too instantaneous. Nevertheless, and this is another point I make in the thesis, there is a side to the poetic medium— i.e., poetic language—that incessantly requires, albeit unconsciously, that a desire be satisfied.

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[7] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin Books, 1991); *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1994); Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).
[8] Deborah Curtis, *Touching from a Distance* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007).
[9] Robert Hewison, *Cultural Capital: The Rise and Fall of Creative Britain* (London: Verso, 2014), 11.
[10] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), 196–209.

A Lacanian other/Other, with its foundation in lack, reverberates in the unavoidable acts of resistances through poetic language. They are, referring to Kristeva's work, a form of revolution—maybe the only form of revolution available for the poets of that generation. Benjamin's angel of history's face is torn in different directions because she acts and moves inside institutions (and here I am referring Foucault and his work) that commingle power and knowledge—power, as Foucault claimed, that no longer moves top-down but rather from the inside towards several directions of agency.

What, then, were the combined forces directly exerted by some poets, and that at the same time acted on the authors who started publishing books in the eighties and acquired their notoriety and readership especially in the following decade? Was it possible to discuss at least some of them the way William Wootten does in his book *The Alvarez Generation*, where the process that led Alvarez to the selection of what he considered to be the most influential poets of his generation can be coherently defined?[11] Almost sixty years of publications on the authors included in Alvarez's now indispensable anthology *The New Poetry* definitely supported Wootten[12]. So much has been written that the construction, and the scrutiny of the several genealogies at work in the creation, have slowly become clear. Nevertheless, the author does not seem to be so much interested in the historical process, its consequent possible ruptures, and genealogies but rather more in favour of a synchronic approach.[13] According to the author, it is not about the father's anxiety about influence, but rather that of the peers.[14] Are the poets of the eighties and nineties just a part of what J. T. Welsch defines as "the generation game"? Were they only playing their role in "a burst of

[11] William Wootten, *The Alvarez Generation: Thom Gunn, Geoffrey Hill, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath and Peter Porter* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).
[12] Al Alvarez, ed., *The New Poetry* (London: Penguin Books, 1966).
[13] See Foucault in Gary Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 258–288.
[14] Quoting Harold Bloom, Wootten writes: "The poets discussed here are, as one would expect, subject to the influence of earlier writers, influence that could, depending on one's critical credo, be examined in the Oedipal terms favoured by Harold Bloom or as an expression of gratitude after the manner of Christopher Ricks. Nevertheless, poetic influence and anxiety is not always a matter of fathers and sons, and poets are not always gracious. My preoccupation is less with the ways the poems of one poet behave towards those of a poet of another generation than with the ways in which contemporaries' poems behave amongst themselves." Wootten, *The Alvarez Generation*, XV.

generational anthologies in this early 1990s wave"? Before delving into the material and from the material to the imaginary, there is a more personal side to this thesis that needs to be acknowledged.

(A Personal Aside)

The following thesis began long before my PhD studies at University College London. I completed my final academic year at University College Galway (now University of Galway) in 1991. At that time, Bologna, where I earned my degree, had a strong relationship with the academic community of the Republic of Ireland, and the English department played an active role in its development. A portion of my year was devoted to collecting material for my final thesis on Seamus Heaney and conducting an in-depth analysis of contemporary Irish poetry. Although Heaney was the primary focus of my research, I also encountered the work of many other Irish poets such as Patrick Kavanagh, Paul Muldoon, Thomas Kinsella, Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, Ciaran Carson, and numerous others. They all contributed and helped pave the way for what came next. After I graduated, in fact, it did not take long for my interests to cross the Irish Sea, and in a voyage so typical of Irish immigration, I began focusing on what was happening at the English end of the United Kingdom.

A couple of years or so afterwards, during an extended drive across England and Scotland that took me from London to the Orkney Islands and back, I stopped in the Lake District for a few days. As had happened to many Italian students with a degree in English literature before me, that place seemed to be the very center of my own personal imaginary Romanticism. It was in a back street of the idyllic and overvisited Grasmere that I stepped into a small, independent second-hand bookshop. Browsing through the poetry section, I happened to notice a slim volume edited by a Northern publishing company: the book was *Zoom* by Simon Armitage and the publishing company was Bloodaxe Books. The quest had started and soon, as many had told me, I realised that the best way to approach and read a poet in depth was via a translation of their poems into your language. I began to zoom in.

Next came the collaboration with the Centre for Contemporary Poetry of Bologna (linked directly with the University of Bologna), the translations of Heaney (his last three books), a selections by Armitage, another selections by Muldoon for the prestigious Mondadori poetry series called *Collana dello Specchio*, and Jamie McKendrick's poem translated for Donzelli in Rome[15]. McKendrick himself, as a Faber author and a long-time translator of prose and poetry from Italian into English, acted as my "Virgilian" guide and, together with Michael Hofmann and Lavinia Greenlaw, was invited to a series of events I helped to organise in Bologna. Armitage and Muldoon were soon to follow, while on the other side of the Channel an issue of *Modern Poetry in Translation* that included a selection of contemporary Italian poets (edited by me, Roberto Galaverni, and Norma Rinsler) was released.[16] Some of the Italian poets included in that issue where then invited to read in London (at University College London) and at Christchurch College, Oxford, thanks to the excellent work of Emanuela Tandello, former professor of Italian Literature at the Italian Department of University College London. In the meantime, I held a seminar on contemporary British poetry at the Centro di Poesia Contemporanea di Bologna which,[17] together with other essays, resulted in the publication of a volume that included a summary of all those experiences.[18] Although Heaney was already quite well known, he became very

[15] A selection of the work I did during those years is mentioned in Stephen Romer, "European Affinities," in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, ed. Paul Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 547–548. Andrea Sirotti summarises the impact poetry in English in translation had in Italy during the two decades 1995–2015 for Rivista Tradurre here: https://rivistatradurre.it/ventanni-circa-di-traduzioni-di-poesia-inglese-britannica-e-postcoloniale-1995-2015. I edited and translated the following books: Seamus Heaney, *Electric Light* (Milano: Mondadori, 2003); *District and Circle* (Milano: Mondadori, 2009); *Catena Umana* (Milano: Mondadori, 2011); Simon Armitage, *Poesie* (Milano: Mondadori, 2001); Paul Muldoon, *Poesie* (Milano: Mondadori, 2008) with Antonella Anedda; and Jamie McKendrick, *Chiodi di Cielo* (Roma:
Donzelli, 2003). My translations of poems by Lavinia Greenlaw, Don Paterson, Carole Ann Duffy, Michael Hofmann and others appeared in several literary magazines and reviews such as *Panta*, *Nuovi Argomenti, Almanacco dello Specchio*, and *Semicerchio*.

[16] Luca Guerneri and Norma Rinsler, *Modern Poetry in Translation: Contemporary Italian Poets* (London: King's College/MPT, 1999).

[17] The transcript of one of the lessons dedicated to the contemporary British scene can be found here: https://step-five.blogspot.com/2011/05/gli-anni-novanta-della-poesia-inglese.html.

[18] Luca Guerneri, "La poesia inglese contemporanea," in *Stagione di poesia. Almanacco del Centro di poesia contemporanea dell'Università degli studi di Bologna*, ed. Andrea Gibellini (Venezia: Marsilio, 2001).

popular in Italy after the Nobel Prize in 1995, while Paul Muldoon's readers consistently increased after the publication of his poems by Mondadori. Several readings held in Italy, a country where Muldoon's subtle interplay of form and experimentation is still quite rarely explored, attracted the attention of many Italian poets. A real surprise in terms of the small literary world we are discussing (i.e., poetry) was Armitage, whose poetry was a pleasant and successful revelation. Poems of his were selected and translated, from his debut collection *Zoom* (1989) to his "millennium" work *Killing Time* (2000) and received enthusiastic reviews. This was followed by invitations to readings in Italy (twice at the literary festival in Mantova, Festivaletteratura, arguably the biggest literary event in Italy apart from Il Salone del Libro[19]).

Therefore, when taking into consideration the different components of the constellation of reasons that made me focus on the 1994 New Gen and the ensuing issue of *Poetry Review* for my PhD, a very personal one must be contemplated. Despite a slight difference in age (five or six years in most cases), I have always thought that the literary "coming of age" of poets of that generation is strictly related to my "coming of age" as a poetry reader and scholar.

Before: the creation of discourses and discursive practices

The "Dunkirk spirit of the nation" is a picture of Lucienne Day's colourful fabrics, but also a Formica tabletop in new, fashionable fitted kitchens. It is W. H. Auden moving to America and sitting "in one of the dives / On Fifty-second Street," writing about the "low dishonest decade" in "September 1, 1939".[20] It was "another time," indeed. Seemingly, many of the hopes of the thirties for a better "socialist society" were shattered by the enormity of the war; in his 1949 *Cultural Criticism and Society*, T. W. Adorno famously

[19] "Simon Armitage," Festivalettura, last modified September 5, 2002, https://archivio.festivaletteratura.it/occorrenze/1768-simon-armitage-n-2002-09-05-015.
[20] Wystan Hugh Auden, *Another Time* (New York: Random Press, 1940).

penned: “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” That sentence would soon become a refrain, an unavoidable crashing test for all the poets of the 1950s and 1960s. The 1944 Education Act and the birth of the welfare state seemed to add an impulse to what Doris Lessing defined as “the idea of change, breaking up, clearing away, movement.”[21] It was the decade of the Windrush Generation and of the Suez Crisis, a simultaneous injection of different active principles in the same vial.

On the one hand, an opening for new cultural influences in terms of spoken words and music, on the other hand an upsurge of racial tensions and social conflict. Jamaican poet Linton Kwesi Johnson’s departure from his country to move to Brixton in South London in 1963 occurred seven years after Britain had finally come to realise that her status as a world power had definitively evaporated. Britain’s farcical intervention in the Egyptian war that led to the Suez Crisis represented the climax of the slow but irreversible realisation that the times of the Empire were long past. That seven-year divide is approximately the gap during which most of the twenty poets of the New Generation were born.

“Civilized society” is a perfect synonym for “gentility principle.” In *New Lines*, the anthology that started the sequence of anthologies through which we can read and analyse a great deal of contemporary poetry, Robert Conquest defined some of its most relevant features:[22]

> We see a refusal to abandon a rational structure and comprehensible language, even when the verse is most highly charged with sensuous emotion and intent.[23]

While perfectly illustrating Philip Larkin's poetry (the most notable poet in the collection) and the permanent bans imposed by the poet from Coventry on all the American modernist voices (Pound, Eliot, Imagism, mythological method), the Irish, Yeatsian, intoxicating sonorities and the Welsh, Thomasesque, apocalyptic ravings that troubled the

[21] Doris Lessing, as quoted in Stevenson, *The Last of England*, 14.
[22] Robert Conquest ed., *New Lines: An Anthology* (London: Macmillan, 1967).
[23] Conquest 15.

"pure" English tradition, it also gave birth to a tenacious narrative: the readable, accessible, middlebrow poetry. Poetry whose language wants to be “looked through” rather than “looked at”; lines whose orderly syntax (no Freudian, dream-like inconsequentialities or fragmentary tensions), whose diction and form mirror a standard row of semi-detached houses in the suburbs of a decent small town.

“He invented a muse and her name was mediocrity,” as Derek Walcott would define Larkin’s poetry;[24] or, to quote Seamus Heaney, it was the rise of “a nine-to-five man who had seen poetry”;[25] the “unpoetic” poetry that John Powell Ward would designate as a quintessential part of *The English Line*: “the laconic suspicion of the visionary or the extravagant.”[26] In many aspects, it is a thread in English poetry that dates back to Coleridge and Wordsworth’s *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* (1798), and its claim of verses written in a “language used by men.”[27] As slippery and opalescent as a salmon, that poetry swims against the current of American modernist tradition, whilst *en route* evoking Thomas Hardy’ rural Wessex and Edward Thomas’s eco-poetical world, adding just a touch of Georgian flavour.

One is reminded of Terry Eagleton’s analysis in “The Rise of English,” of how ‘English’ as a university subject remodelled itself from a discipline based on *bon ton*, taught by amateurish upper-class professors at Cambridge and Oxford between the fin de siècle and the outbreak of World War I, to ascend towards a more organised, scholarly, scientific discipline.[28] It was the contemporary school defined as New Criticism, according to the literary critic, that was introduced by a different set of professors (mainly middle class and, having witnessed its consequences directly, not as enthused by war as their predecessors) and made poetry the fulcrum of literary criticism analysis. The poem became something “spatial” rather than a “temporal process”:

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[24] Derek Walcott, “The Master of the Ordinary,” in *What the Twilight Says* (New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 1998), 153.
[25] Seamus Heaney, “The Journey Back,” in *Seeing Things* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 7.
[26] Derek Powell, *The English Line: Poetry of the Unpoetic from Wordsworth to Larkin* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), 7.
[27] William Wordsworth and Samuel T. Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads* (London: Penguin Books, 1991).
[28] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 15–46.

> "Coherence" and "integration" were the keynotes; but if the poem was also to induce in the reader a definite ideological attitude to the world—one, roughly, of contemplative acceptances—this emphasis on internal coherence could not be pushed to where the poem was cut off from reality altogether, splendidly revolving in its own autonomous being. It was therefore necessary to combine this stress on the text's internal unity with an insistence that, through such unity, the work "corresponded" in some sense to reality itself. New Criticism stopped short of a full-blooded formalism, awkwardly tempering it with a kind of empiricism—a belief that the poem's discourse somehow "included" reality within itself.[29]

This equipoise and balance of formal and empiric will later be known as "mainstream poetry" and variously defined as democratic, accessible, demotic, sometimes regional. A comfortable "two ups, two downs," easily commodifiable and ready to be sold in one of the many colourful estate agency catalogues also known as anthologies or histories of British poetry from 1945 to now. A significant part of the criticism the New Gen poets would receive was based precisely on most of these assumptions.

With the "expansion of consciousness," the territory becomes significantly more unstable. 1962 was the year in which a second essential anthology was published: Alvarez's *New Poetry*. In the final part of his introduction, Alvarez compares Philip Larkin's "At Grass" and Ted Hughes's "A Dream of Horses"; while the former is "elegant," "unpretentious," and "a nostalgic re-creation of the Platonic idea of the English scene," the latter is "less controlled," the re-creation of "a powerful complex of emotions and sensations." The opposition exemplified by the literary critic is part of a dialectical tension for which, at the very end, he provides a possible, reconciliatory synthesis. By merging the "psychological insight and integrity of D. H. Lawrence" and "the technical skill and formal intelligence of T.S. Eliot," poetry would somehow magically transform into an alchemical fusion of "new depth poetry."[30] D. H. Lawrence was definitely one of the heroes of the sixties. The trial which lifted the ban on *Lady Chatterley's Lover* represents one of those

[29] Eagleton, 4.
[30] Alvarez, *The New Poetry*, 32.

moments in cultural history when everything was no longer as it had been before. Pictures of the queues of people outside bookshops waiting to buy a copy of the newly issued Penguin paperback of the "immoral" novel have become iconic: "between the end of the Chatterley ban / and the Beatles' first LP," as Philip Larkin famously wrote in "Annus Mirabilis."[31] In Lawrence's two essays published in the early twenties, *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* and *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, the "priest of love" had made a very early attempt to synthesise the opposite polarities deeply rooted in the human mind. In his profoundly misdirected tirade against Freud's conception of sex, Jung's idea of *libido* and Bergson's *elan vital* as the unique drives behind every human action, Lawrence affirms the human necessity "to build up out of his own self and his own belief and his own effort something wonderful."[32] The concept of an auto-generative self, capable of creating something wonderful, is the key-concept which deserves to be questioned here. Despite Lawrence's reassuring words, it is exactly the "self" which, in poetry, will come under closer and closer scrutiny in decades following the sixties.

Partly as a channel for the discovery of a "new" expanded self, partly as "a medium adapted since the Romantic period to self-expression," poetry seemed to convey "the potential to appeal more directly than fiction […] to the new trends, fashion, and carnival attitudes emerging during the 1960s."[33] The newly published *Penguin Modern Poets* volumes sold in numbers similar to some rock-and-roll LPs. D. A. Pennebaker's footage of Bob Dylan's English tour in 1966 (the famous tour during which "Judas" was shouted to the singer-songwriter from the audience as an insult for his betrayal switch from more traditional folk instruments to a new electric set and rock-and-roll band), as seen in *Don't Look Back* (1967), was somehow superimposed with black and white images of the first International Poetry Incarnation which took place in London at the Royal Albert Hall in June the previous year. Allen Ginsberg, surrounded by flowers and chanting his lines in front of ecstatic and surprisingly numerous listeners, represented the "word made flesh" of

[31] Philip Larkin, "Annus Mirabilis," in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 167.
[32] D. H. Lawrence, *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (London: Hassel Street Press, 2011), 9.
[33] Stevenson *The Last of England*, 53.

the new poetic instances crossing the Atlantic at that time—not only the free and liberating verses produced and performed by the Beats but also (although involved in a different game) Bishop, O'Hara, Berryman, and Lowell. It is no coincidence that the first part of the Alvarez's introduction was dedicated to "The Americans," namely Berryman, Lowell, Sexton, and Plath. Berryman, Bishop, and the "confessional" Lowell, in particular, would have a decisive influence on many of the poets included in the New Generation Issue of the *Poetry Review*. In an interview published in *Poetry*, Michael Hofmann answers the first question with:

> It's a curious thing. While I was in England, I was forever squinting westward to America. Finals essay at Cambridge on Berryman in 1979, the "American Paper" with the wonderful Tony Tanner on writers who were mainly alive and mainly (then) unobtainable, the intended Ph.D. on Lowell.[34]

Glyn Maxwell, another poet of the New Gen, states that "Bob Dylan, early music of, would have to come before any books" when naming his "three influential twentieth century books."[35]

Assuming, therefore, that another master narrative extensively used almost three decades later to praise or criticise (according to the different points of view) the whole New Gen enterprise put down its roots during the 1960s, seems a rather reasonable supposition. Poetry, narrated the general opinion, was the "new rock-androll." Performances by the Liverpool poets (McGough and Patten in particular) became a regular and a perfectly acceptable way of negotiating poetry and "their 1967 Penguin Modern Poets collection, *The Mersey Sound*, was by far the most successful volume in the series, eventually selling more than a quarter million."[36] Peter Childs's volume *The Twentieth Century in Poetry* features a

[34] Michael Hofmann, "A conversation on British and American Poetry," *Poetry* 184, no. 3 (June–July 2004): 221–220.
[35] Glyn Maxwell, *Poetry Review*, Spring 1994, Volume 84, Number I, 91.
[36] Stevenson, *The Last of England*, 181.

photograph captioned "The Beatles during the making of *Help* 1965."[37] The Fab Four are pictured sitting on the steps outside a country house on a sunny day, engrossed in reading what look like slim green volumes of poetry. While Lennon looks absorbed, Ringo, typically, is not impressed.

Something different was happening beneath the glittery surface of "living under the influence." Technological advances in all the different stages of the printing process led to a major shift in the publishing world. Mechanically, it meant that almost everyone with a minimum investment could afford to print and distribute poetry. The literary establishment was about to come under the attack of an unpredictable guerrilla of pamphlets, small press publications, and homemade literary reviews. Stevenson writes:

> Many of the 600 or so small magazines, devoted wholly or in part to poetry […] appearing between 1966 and 1972, readily took on the aura of an underground and subversive literature.[38]

Eric Falci mentions the most active poets of what was later to be known as "The British Poetry Revival" and defines their main influences:

> Seeking to resist the leanings of the Movement, as well as the institutions and aesthetics of mainstream English poetry, writers such as Eric Mottram, Bob Cobbing, J. H. Prynne, and Tom Raworth incorporated Objectivist and Projectivist practices from the United States; positioned writers like Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, Basil Bunting, and Hugh MacDiarmid as presiding figures; and made allies with Black Mountain, Beat, and New York School poets.[39]

As a matter of fact, there was another side to the American poetic wave that hit Britain in the sixties. The "projectivist practices," and the slant narratives of a poem like

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[37] Peter Childs, *The Twentieth Century in Poetry: A Critical Survey* (London: Routledge, 1999).

[38] Stevenson, *The Last of England*, 180.

[39] Eric Falci, *The Cambridge Introduction to British Poetry 1945–2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 91.

Paterson by William Carlos Williams, mentioned by Falci, led to an avant-garde kind of poetry that declared itself disruptive in terms both of form and meaning. Poetry was all about discontinuity, fragmentation, constantly suspicious when not openly hostile to "interpretation." The interconnectedness of small press ("Benveniste's *Trigram Press*, Stuart Montgomery's *Fulcrum Press*, the *Cape Golliard Press* directed by Raworth and Barry Hall, Crozier's *Ferry Press*, and Hodgkiss's *Galloping Dog*"), scarcely distributed magazines, reviews and some abovementioned poets contested vehemently the general lack of interest from mainstream publishing industry. divide" had been created; a poetical crevice that would originate innumerable pages of criticism. There have been moments in this recent genealogical formation during which poets have felt the need to state openly which side they thought they were on. Despite all this or, apparently, one would think, because of all this, the aforementioned discourses seem to have become one among the many ways of reading what happened during those years. In a thought-provoking essay titled "Two Poetries? A Re-Examination of the 'Poetry Divide' in the 1970s Britain," included in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* edited by Peter Robinson, Helen Bailey argues:

> One problem for poetry in the 1960s and early 1970s was that few underground poets were, ironically, lucky enough to be neglected. The avant-garde was being exposed to the scrutiny of a consumer culture hungry for anything claiming to be breaking the mould. In 1969, for instance, Penguin published Michael Horovitz's anthology, *Children of Albion: Poetry of the Underground in Britain*, which included works by, among others, Roy Fisher, Adrian Mitchell, Edwin Morgan, and Tom Raworth. Buying into such "anti-establishment" poetry, Penguin Books, an important and wholly mainstream publishing company, showed its awareness of a growing market for self-confessed alternative art.[40]

[40] Helen Bailey, "Two Poetries?: A Re-examination of the Poetry Divide in 1970s Britain," in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, ed. Peter Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 132.

There is a sharp irony highlighted by Bailey here in the affirmation "lucky enough to be neglected," as if neglect were a specific brand to be claimed as validation for someone's poetical product. Remarkably so, when almost all *Oxford Handbook[s] of…*, *Cambridge Introduction[s] to…*, and several books variously titled *History of British Poetry after/from…* always include chapters and long, in-depth analyses of the

"experimental, avant-garde, late modernist, post-modernist" kind of poetry, as it is variously called. Thus, the "poetry war" between experimental or innovative poetry and mainstream remains a significant part of the British history of poetry of the last fifty years and needs to be investigated.

As the sixties drew to a close not with a whimper but with a loud bang, the paradigm of literary theory underwent a major shift. All along the watchtowers, the sentinels of structuralism gave the alarm as hordes of post-structuralists armed with extreme suspicion towards any kind of ideology knocked down the doors of Academia. The French 1968 movement was brought up with Lacan's psychoanalysis, Barthes's new "mythologies," and Kristeva's concepts of revolutionary aspects of poetic language. Post-structuralism soon overlapped or sometimes even merged with postmodernism to create a new atmosphere and a new ambiance for literary criticism. According to Steven Connor, this transition from one paradigm to another also implied a change of focus:

> If modernism means the assumption that literature approaches to the condition of poetry, postmodernism means the tendency to assume that literature is intrinsically narrative.[41]

Narrative is another keyword we will deal with later in the chapter when discussing and analysing the poetical production of the New Gen.

[41] Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 41.

In 1982, Penguin published *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* edited by Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion.[42] Almost forty years later, it continues to be one of the most controversial anthologies to emerge from the twentieth century. In a couple of sentences, right at the beginning of their introduction, Motion and Morrison seem to wipe the British poetry slate of the previous twenty years spotlessly clean:

> A stretch, occupying much of the 1960s and 70s, when very little – in England at any rate – seemed to be happening, when achievements in British poetry were overshadowed by those in drama and fiction, and when, despite the presence of strong individual writers, there was a lack of overall shape and direction.[43]

Forget late modernism, American waves, Basil Bunting's *Briggflats* or "Mersey Sound" (to name the two extremities of some poetry expressed in those twenty years during which, apparently, nothing happened). It's the North, broadly speaking, from which anything valuable came in the seventies, and Northern Ireland in particular: Heaney, Mahon, Longley, Paulin, and Muldoon—the latter probably one of the most influential poets for the New Generation—but also a closer and more "English" North, namely Tony Harrison's Newcastle, or even a Scottish North as in the poems of Douglas Dunn. Among the poets selected because, according to the editors of the anthology, their work's purpose was "to extend the imaginative franchise," we find the so-called "Martian" school.[44] Its most well-known representatives, Christopher Reid and Craig Raine, would both become poetry editors at Faber and Faber during the 1980s and 1990s. Their work reminds Motion and Morrison of "Dr Johnson's description of Metaphysical poetry – heterogeneous ideas […] yoked by violence together";[45] the use of similes, an interest in

[42] Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion, eds., *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (London: Penguin Books, 1982).
[43] Morrison and Motion, 11.
[44] Morrison and Motion, 20.
[45] Morrison and Motion, 18.

narrative and, in particular, (referring to Fenton, Paulin and Muldoon's poetry) a new "attention to the problem of perception."

All the aforementioned elements characterise the appearance of a new literary theory paradigm, legitimised by countless volumes dedicated to the latest cultural trend defined as postmodernism. It is only towards the end of Morrison and Motion's introduction (as a valediction to the reader) that the new paradigm of postmodernism is introduced: "But the poets included here do represent a departure, one which may exhibit the spirit of postmodernism."[46] Although the anthology is perceived by many critics as one of the last attempts of "the powers that be" to save what could be saved in terms of power and prestige by an "obscure" lobby of poets/professors (the notorious "Oxbridge connection"), it also represents a crucial key-point as well as a seamless starting point to analyse what will happen in the following decade.

The following decade, in fact, was characterised by a general erosion of political and social consensus. From a political point of view, Thatcher's governments, far from being "the dawning of a new era," left a country in a very difficult economic position. In addition to the grim material condition, other implications, more subtle and hazy, ensued: a constant shift towards concepts such as privatisation and individualism which, although only part of a general *weltanschauung* which had its roots in the decades immediately following the Second World War and the end of Empire, became commonplace in the 1980s. Most poets of the New Gen grew up and became of age during those years. As Alwyn W. Turner writes in *Rejoice!*
Rejoice! Britain in the 1908s:

> Thatcher won three successive general elections, but the sense of […] whole youth passing by under her rule was very common indeed. Because her long period in office coincided with the coming to political maturity of the most numerous generations in British history, a demographic bulge which had peaked in 1964, the only year that the birth-rate exceeded a million. So, while nine million people were born in Britain

[46] Morrison and Motion, 20.

> during her term, somewhere around twelve-and-a-half million others found that, on the first occasion that they were entitled to vote in a general election, she emerged as the victor. For that generation, even more than for the rest of the country, she was the one figure who shaped political perceptions, whether for good or ill, in support or in opposition, well into the next century.[47]

This long quote, despite its necessary generalisation and amount of straining, sums up rather clearly the common feeling of a generation for which the pointless (if not in sheer strategic and political terms) Falklands War in 1982 epitomised the climax. Much closer to home, another internal "war" was going on. In 1981, ten republican prisoners, protesting against the British invasion of Northern Ireland, starved themselves to death after hunger striking in Northern Ireland. Britain was in the middle of the conflict that was later to be identified as the 'Troubles'. The Northern Irish poets included in Motion and Morrison's anthology felt the pressure of the context and reacted accordingly.

Chapter 1 "Voice and Ownership: Ideas of Individual Voice and Dominant Culture from Middle Generation to "New Generation" in David Kennedy's *New Relations: The Refashioning of British Poetry 1980–94* deals specifically, as the title suggests, with the poets of the so-called middle-generation, namely, Heaney, Harrison and Dunn.[48] The main feature they all seem to share is a very acute awareness of the language they use to make poetry and how its practice shapes their "selves" and their identity in relation to a community. Whereas for Heaney, and just a little less so for Dunn (being Irish and Scottish, respectively), English represents a "foreign" language, or at least the language of the conquerors and of the empire, in Harrison it becomes more as the medium of a frustrating process of identification/disidentification with his family and community. It is a system of signs through which textuality and subjectivity seem to lose their boundaries, merging and overlapping in suspicious ways. Therefore, it is at this point of intersection of subjectivity and textuality that language becomes in Derek Walcott's

[47] Alwyn W. Turner, *Rejoice! Rejoice! Britain in the 1908s* (London: Aurum Press, 2013).
[48] David Kennedy, *New Relations: The Refashioning of British Poetry 1980–94* (Bridgend: Seren, 1996).

words "a place of struggle."[49] A struggle that generates part of the process of writing, constraining but at the same time liberating. According to David Kennedy it is exactly the middle-generation which had to internalise and come to terms with a "discourse of cultural hypocrisy" surrounding poetry. Or, as Seamus Heaney (quoted in David Kennedy's same chapter) wrote: "to take the English lyrics and make it eat stuff that it has never eaten before… and make it still an English lyric." Coming from such a well-known poet as Heaney was already at that time, this unusually vehement statement reminds us that "it has been an anti-establishment establishment which has placed the margins at the centre."[50]

In 1993 Hulse, Kennedy and Morley edited a new anthology titled *The New Poetry*[51] and published by Bloodaxe Books. The title - exactly thirty years later – intentionally reiterates the one used by Alvarez for his 1963 anthology. *The New Poetry* opens with a few lines that deserve close attention. There is still a spark of the older anthology's fighting spirit in the first line that goes "every age gets the literature it deserves." This quite ambiguous statement is followed, at the end of the same paragraph, by a sentence that clarifies it:

> In the absence of shared moral or religious ideals, common social or sexual *mores* or political ideologies, or any philosophy on the conduct of life, plurality has flourished.

Plurality seems to have become the new keyword together with "accessibility," "democracy," "responsiveness," "humour," "seriousness," "public utterance." The already timeworn juxtaposition between the "centre" and the "margins" makes its expected appearance while the editors face the struggle, already tackled by the editors of previous anthologies, to find common features, shared characteristics. In other words,

[49] Kennedy, 24.
[50] Ian Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue and Estrangement*, (London: Macmillan,1996), 6.
[51] Michael Hulse, David Kennedy, and David Morley, *The New Poetry* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1993).

once again, Hulse, Kennedy and Morley seem to find themselves trapped in the idea of evoking a group while at the same time denying the necessity of it. The old conundrum of the word "group" with its inescapable ambiguity between totality and sum of its parts references back to a mysterious riddle or, to make it nobler, to a myth which cyclically returns in literary histories. More interestingly, therefore, is when the issues move to a more theoretical level. When it concerns such as "authenticity of self and narrative authority" or "enjoyment of contradictions, discontinuity, randomness and excess" are called into question. Postmodernism is evoked together with its counterpart, modernism, in what appears to be one the most relevant subject at stake:

> Modernism posed Cognitive Questions: "How can I interpret this world of which I am part? And what am I in it?" Postmodernism poses Post cognitive Questions: "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?"[52]

Widening the frame and thinking of the "world" outside literature, even to the naked eye the large pink section of the pre-war cartography mentioned at the beginning, had inexorably shrank to a trace of what it used to be, a fading memory of large swathes of territories swallowed by independence. Society seemed someway caught in the middle between the footage of Rostropovich playing his cello on the collapsed ruins of the Berlin wall and the most significant technological revolution that would change everything and forever: the birth and the evolution of the World Wide Web.

It is precisely the type of society which has brought to its limits the definition of postmodernism explicated by many theorists during the previous decade and in particular for what concerns the art by Fredric Jameson (quoted in B. Lewis 123):

> the writers and the artists of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles and worlds… only a limited number

[52] Hulse, Kennedy, and Morley, *The New Poetry*, 24.

> of combinations are possible; the most unique ones have been thought of already.[53]

There is still that grin of Johnny Rotten's while taunting a perplexed TV presenter on BBC, but also the desperation of a more "physical" disease as seen in the footage of Ian Curtis – Joy Division lead singer - dancing his epileptic moves to the gloomy lyrics of "She's lost control"; the haunting, never seen but constantly conjured, scene of his dead body hanging from the kitchen ceiling in his flat on the outskirts of Manchester where he took his own life.

Following a brief explanation of how the affordability of synthesisers revolutionised the music industry in the 1980s, Graham Stewart writes:

> In 1982, with electronic pop dominating the charts, the Musicians' Union took against Numan, Depeche Mode, et al., fearing their synth sound would put "genuine" instrumentplaying musicians out of a job. With Canute-like effectuality, the union tried to issue guidelines insisting that the use of synthesizers for recording sessions and public performance had to be restricted.[54]

The weird postmodernism of this dispute over the authenticity of music created by machines is exemplary. One is reminded of the stripping of the "aura" of images in Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*[55] published in 1935. Monty Python's irreverence and the glare of the images of the first Gulf War (the first war to be televised live) find a tragic and ambivalent assembly.

Ambivalence seems to be the word that elusively defines it all, a bifrontal Janus, a poisonous mixture of Nietzschean Apollonian and Dionysian, somewhat fixed and unstable at the same time. Temporal disorder, pastiche, fragmentation, looseness of

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[53] Hulse, Kennedy, and Morley, 25.

[54] Graham Stewart, *Bang: A History of Britain in the 1980s* (London: Atlantic Books, 2012), Kindle, Location 6073.

[55] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, 166–194.

association, paranoia and vicious circles are the labels applied by B. Lewis to postmodernist fiction.

In an article published in *The Guardian* on October 5, 1994, the correspondent quotes from the speech by the newly nominated leader Tony Blair during the Labour Conference:

> Working together, solidarity, co-operation, partnership. These are our words. This is my socialism. And we should stop apologising for using the word. It is not the socialism of Marx or state control. It is rooted in a straightforward view of society, in the understanding that the individual does best in a strong and decent community of people with principles and standards, and common aims and values.[56]

In hindsight it is not difficult to read in that post-Marxist socialism (the S-word which could not be worded) the convergence and overturning of traditional ideologies strictly separated until, at least, a decade before. Therefore, behind the glary lights of Tony Blair's New Labour lies the Freudian shadow of a general mistrust for the "self," already mined at the beginning of the century by the "discovery" of the unconscious: "which of my selves" is speaking/writing or constructing a meaning? Which of my selves (is there, at least, one, among them which is "true"?) shall I use to deliver a speech? Those questions interrogate the existence of the author/speaker, the authenticity of their voice, while signalling a lack of trust for all the master narratives discussed earlier, for the oldest and most celebrated centres of cultural institutions yielding positions. Conventional values, traditionally associated with the English establishment, the landscape to name only one, are no longer what they used to be. The prototypically "picturesque," celebrated since Constable and Turner turned into something completely different; a caged, tamed landscape where the balance between the wilderness and the orderliness is in favour of the latter. Trusts and Heritage, the Money of the Lottery, an entire system of managing

[56] Michael White, "Blair defines the New Labour" *The Guardian*, published on Wednesday 5 October, 1994.

culture is changing. The Arts Council, born to support national and local events sees its fund dramatically reduced during the subsequent Tory government. There is a growing lack of *telos*, a shared vanishing point in the polluted atmosphere. Sir Jack, the protagonist of Julian Barnes's novel *England, England*[57] successfully recreates the original England in a more tourist-friendly replica (with all-inclusive holidays) on the Isle of Wight. In a typical Baudrillard's ironic reversal the simulacrum is what survives relegating its original to an unspecified nostalgic past.

Hence, several issues were at stake and many diverse master narratives to confront for all those who, born between the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s started writing and publishing poetry in the 1980s. The decade, as we have seen, in which a former Hollywood actor managed to become president of America, the most influential political and military country of the world. There were battles to be fought on many fronts and old feuds still resisting (see the above-mentioned experimental, avant-garde poetry vs. mainstream). There were issues and negotiations concerning the self, the interrelation of subjectivity and textuality, well-founded suspicions on the possibility of a truly honest, authentic poetic language. The reconstruction of the whole enterprise which led to the publication of the New Generation Issue of the *Poetry Review* is a perfect reflection of all this. Under many aspects, the magazine with its bright yellow and violet cover of the magazine, still glows in its afterlife as an aesthetic object. Only an act of "polytechnic aesthetic engineering" as defined by Walter Benjamin can blast it open and rescue, if present, the necessary "truth" of its constellation.

After: the organisation and the "event"

On Wednesday, 12th January 1994 the promotion for the New Generation Poets was officially launched during an event held at the Poetry Society HQ in Covent Garden,

[57] Julian Barnes, *England, England* (London: Vintage, 2013).

London. The event was organised by PR Agency Colman Getty Publicity (now known as Four Culture). To a specific question, Dotti Irving, still responsible for the agency 25 years later, thus explains the role of her agency in the organisation of the event:

> The scope of our activity ranged from enlisting the support of the book trade; producing point-of-sale material (posters, bookmarks and possibly even a leaflet?); placing coverage in a range of print outlets, from features in long-lead magazines to news stories in the national and regional press; securing broadcast coverage; liaising with the poets and handling all the practicalities of their poets being available for interview, and briefed accordingly. We would also have been involved in the launch event, working with the Poetry Society to pull together the guest list, handling the RSVP process and dealing with the media at the launch.[58]

The language she uses is exact, specific, and remarkably pragmatic. The narrative develops in a flawless line stage after stage, from what is needed in preparation for the event: "enlisting the support of the book trade," "producing point of-sale material" to "securing broadcast coverage," "news stories in the national and regional press"; to what is required during the event itself where the focus is on "guest list," "RSVP," "dealing with the media." Peter Forbes – poetry editor at the time – sounded particularly satisfied by the "scope of the job" and in particular, he observes "the media coverage on January 13th was astonishing."[59] A few pages further, under the title "New Gen Diary," Don Paterson, one of the poets selected gives his account.

The counterpoint to the first and second subject creates an interesting effect:

> 11.30am. Show up at the Poetry Soc for New Generation press briefing. The place is mobbed. The list of books in the New Gen promotion is stuck up on the wall like the papal blacklist. Mass confusion for the next hour. What the hell am I drinking?... Spend the next half hour talking into microphones, notebooks, tape recorders, and trying to be noticed by The Late

[58] Dotti Irving, email message to author, February 20, 2019.
[59] Peter Forbes, "How We Made New Gen," in *Poetry Review* 84, no. 1 (Spring 1994), 59.

> Show, unsuccessfully. Some bossy dickhead of a photographer for the Times suggests that we should all cram into Poetry Society window for a sort of monkey-enclosure shot. On Sarah Maguire's excellent suggestion, we count to three and give him the collective finger, just as the flash goes off. To my knowledge the shots were not used.[60]

The day after in *The Times*[61], under the heading "Hit parade of new poets to stop the music on BBC1" and in *The Guardian* more flamboyantly titled "Birth of the muse: Rock-style stardom beckons as a new generation of poets quits the attic for the limelight"[62] the following pictures appear:

[60] Don Paterson, "New Gen Diary," *Poetry Review* 84, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 58–61.
[61] Alison Roberts, "Hit parade of new poets to stop the music on BBC1," *The Times*, January 13, 1994, 9.
[62] Mike Allison, "Birth of the muse: Rock-style stardom beckons as a new generation of poets quits the attic for the limelight," *The Guardian*, September 13, 1994.

Some of the Top 20 young poets cram into the shop window of the Poetry Society in London yesterday after the Best of Contemporary Poetry list was announced

Mike Ellison
Arts Correspondent

POETRY was reborn yesterday, the latest pretender to comedy's rock'n'roll crown, after years of cowering sensitively in the attic talking quietly to itself.

Today's poet is more likely to be a feisty, comical performer, quite possibly a woman, rattling out verse in a Scottish accent.

"I'm a big fan of Bob Dylan and Tom Waits and I was listening to them more than I was reading poetry when I started," said Glyn Maxwell, one of 20 young or new poets chosen to break through the barricades of unpopularity. "I probably would have written but I wouldn't have taken so many risks without the influence of rock."

Suddenly poetry is said to be on the verge of a boom. For years pop fuelled the imaginations of young people; then Janet Street-Porter announced that comedy was the new rock'n'roll; now poetry is staking its claim.

Stars such as Simon Armitage can expect to sell 5,000 copies of a new collection, far more than the average novel in hardback. Rock music and new fiction are thought to be faltering.

There are more poetry prizes than ever with another, the T.S. Eliot, worth £5,000, starting this year. And Radio 1FM, once dominated by supermarket-spouting disc jockeys, is to broadcast a poem an hour, 24 hours a day, for two weeks.

The list, chosen from 113 collections and dominated by thirtysomethings, includes Don Paterson, who makes part of his living with a guitar, and Michael Donaghy, a folk-rocker.

"It's also part of the new regionalism," said Paterson. Six of the 20 are Scottish and eight are women. "Poetry has become more accessible, it's the working class takeover.

"Hearing it is received standard English was enough to put people off. We're showing that you don't need to have been to Oxbridge to be able to write."

Paterson left school at 16 and never went to university but is now writer in residence at Dundee. "I ram that home at every opportunity," he said.

Poetry accounts for the same share of turnover as hardback fiction at Waterstone's, which sells more of it than anyone else — about £1.75 million.

"Now it feels much less like a slightly apologetic, state-funded minority exercise," said John Mitchinson, the bookshops' marketing director.

"New poetry sales have grown by about 25 per cent in the past five years" he added.

"For a while it was stranded with people like Larkin and Heaney, but now it addresses contemporary life in a fresh and exciting way."

Peter Forbes, editor of Poetry Review, said: "There's never been such a strong batch of young British poets.

"Of course, there is a vacuum elsewhere. Rock music is seen to be in a pretty bad state, people are looking for something else."

But there is still some way to go. Few of the top 20 make enough money from their poetry. Armitage is a probation officer, Ian Duhig works in a drug rehabilitation unit, and others are freelance writers.

"Publishing poetry is not a money making operation," said a spokeswoman for Faber & Faber.

The 20 whose work will be promoted in bookshops in May as New Generation Poets are: Maniza Alvi, The Country at My Shoulder; Simon Armitage, Kid; John Burnside, The Myth of the Twin; Robert Crawford, Talkies; David Dabydeen, Turner; Michael Donaghy, Errata; Carol Ann Duffy, Mean Time; Ian Duhig, The Bradford Cycle; Elizabeth Garrett, The Rule of Three; Lavinia Greenlaw, Night Photograph; W N Herbert, Forked Tongue; Michael Hofmann, Corona, Corona; Mick Imlah, Birthmarks; Kathleen Jamie, The Queen of Sheba; Sarah Maguire, Spilt Milk; Glyn Maxwell, Out of the Rain; Jamie McKendrick, The Kiosk on the Brink; Don Paterson, 50 50; Pauline Stainer, Sighting the Slave Ship; Susan Wicks, Open Diagnosis.

James Wood, G2, page 7

Clinton concedes property deals inquiry

Martin Walker in Washington

PRESIDENT Clinton last night bowed to pressure from White House officials and asked the attorney-general to appoint a special counsel, or prosecutor, to investigate the Whitewater property deal.

Hillary Clinton, who flies to Russia to rejoin her husband

quire being handled by the Justice Department.

But after the growing number of senior Democratic now calling for a special prosecutor and a Republican demand yesterday for a special US Senate committee on Whitewatergate, Mr Clinton and his closest advisers concluded that demand for fuller and more public accounting was unstoppable.

Administration sources said

CBS-TV yesterday. "I'm completely relaxed about this because I didn't do anything wrong except I made a bad business deal."

Mrs Clinton remains to be convicted. As main breadwinner while her husband was earning $35,000 ($22,500) a year as governor of Arkansas, as handler of family finances, and partner in the Rose law firm that represented the Madison

ner in a property development venture for a resort in the Ozark mountains of Arkansas, called Whitewater. Having represented Madison as a lawyer before state banking regulators, Mrs Clinton was far more directly involved in the affair than her husband.

The Clintons claim to have lost $60,000 ($38,000) of their personal savings in the Whitewater deal. But they have

manded by the Resolution Trust Corporation, the federal agency that bailed out the bankrupt savings and loan industry. Other inquiries focus on the payments from Madison to Mr Clinton's campaign in 1984-5.

Mrs Clinton fires acute embarrassment in any inquiry, not only through her role as lawyer, but also because questions would inevitably arise over her relationship with her

McDougal. The files have now been subpoenaed by the Justice Department.

"Some of the stories strike the Clintons as an invasion of their privacy," the presidential counsellor David Gergen said yesterday.

Allegations about Mr Clinton's sexual escapades while he was governor of Arkansas, which appeared in the American Spectator, included claims

Although the quality of the image is far from perfect, Don Paterson can be noted pulling faces on the bottom-left corner of the first picture. The caption of the picture uses

the verb "cram," the same one used by the Scottish poet in his diary. No sign of "collective finger" but a clear sign that shots had been used. There is more than a postmodernist twist to be investigated here. It is a play of signs, a mirroring of signifiers which will deeply influence the perspective on the whole operation, especially of future literary critics. Referring to the New Gen, Stan Smith states: "selffulfilling procedures precisely follow the contours of the hyperreal described by Jean Baudrillard in his influential essay."[63]

The following day it was spread all over the newspapers. *The Independent*[64] ventured into a risky description:

> T-shirted, leather-jacketed new generation gathered together at the society's London headquarters, scowling their disdain for older and wealthier poets.

For the readers in the dark this description could have sounded alluring – a replica of the leather-jacketed Brando as seen in *The Wild One*, defiant attitude and cocky hat included. The "disdain," the "scowling," the implied assumption of a generational gap or a generational conflict, the implicit reference to class clashes in that adjective "wealthier" were like mass-produced tales ready for instant consumption and rapid digestion. It was like being plunged back to the sixties, when poetry and music lyrics went together well, back to a myth of renewal pregnant with dissent, barricades, loud music and drugs. It is really hard to imagine which kind of reader, in 1994, could have swallowed those ingenuous claims. Especially, after reading some of the poets' biographies and realising that Jamie McKendrick, to name one among the "new" *rockers*, was born in 1955 and therefore was 39 by the time the New Gen was launched. Nevertheless, some kind of

[63] Stan Smith, "Between Hype and Hyperreality: The Generation Poets," in *Actas del XVI Congreso de la AEDEAN*, 1996, 35–51.
[64] David Lister, "New generation of writers present poetry in motion", *The Independent,* September 13, 1994.

duplicity was there from the beginning and deserves to be investigated at a less superficial and ruinous level.

For the critics, supposedly less in the dark, this duplicity represented a form of deceitfulness to be publicly exposed. In his introduction to the anthology *Conductors of Chaos* he edited, Iain Sinclair thus describes the second picture:

> The *Guardian*, that game old dowager, ran a works-outing photo of the whole bunch squatting in the window of the Poetry Society, lapel badges in place, like a conference of sales reps ordered to have a good time. Poets were "the latest pretenders to comedy's rock 'n' roll crown, after years of cowering in the attic." Out they bowled, blinking in the sunlight, like Mr. Rochester's first wife, hot to boogie.[65]

The choice of words in the central part of the quote is relevant and refers to a specific semantic area which is not too difficult to detect. "Lapel badges" and "sales rep" point rather openly towards the space where merchandise, before and after a gig, is on sale. However, Sinclair does not seem to be satisfied and continues more or less in the same sarcastic tone. At the end of the same paragraph, he concludes "Poetry will always be that splinter of bone that is left when the rest of the skeleton has been devoured." The metaphorical gothic descent has now been completed. From the attic, down to the exposure of the limelight of a window flooded with sun, to the bones being eaten by worms six feet under. In the following paragraph, the contrast becomes starker and full circle "The work I value is that which seems most remote, alienated, fractured." The master narratives at work evoke Hardy's "Convergence of the Twain" and the two halves of mainstream, rock 'n' roll poetry and the remote, alienated, fractured experimental poetry silently waits for the coming of the consummation that "jars two hemispheres." Peter Barry offers a dual reading of the post 1980s poetry: divergence versus

[65] Iain Sinclair, ed., *Conductors of Chaos* (London: Picador, 1996), XVI-XVII.

convergence. While the divergence option stresses "the polarisation taking place over the period between radical and mainstream poetries," the "convergence model […] would see a mainstream which is tiring of its allegiance to the conventional lyric I […] and the never-ending exploration of individual subjectivity."[66] In this relentless tug-of-war we can perceive an inner dialectics sprinting towards a necessary synthesis, the tonal conclusion of a music sonata which, while sounding perfectly natural to the ear, it is only the consequence and sum of a conventional disposition of notes and centuries old habit. An open form, on the contrary, a disavowal of that internal pull in the direction of unity seems to create a constantly negotiated area, a field of tensions which better represents both mainstream and avant-garde poetries. The story about how the New Gen came to be goes that, following 1993's successful Granta selection of the best British novelists, three editors (two of them also poets) met in a London pub and started chatting about how good the poets in their lists were and that it was about time someone organised something similar to Granta, but for poetry. Apparently, sales were not thriving despite the quality of what, according to the publishers, was released on the literary market. The following two quotes come from interviews to Peter Forbes and Robin Robertson conducted personally by email. Peter Forbes and Robin Robertson were Editor of the Poetry Review and poet and Editor at Cape, respectively:

> It began with the 3 editors: Christopher Reid (Faber), Robin Robertson (Cape) and Bill Swainson (Harvill). They already had either all or some of the judges lined up before they approached the Poetry Society. A committee was formed with the 3 founders and members of the Poetry Society, including me. The then Director of the Poetry Society, Chris Green, was fighting for his life as Director and I don't think he was on the committee. I'm not sure about this now – I certainly don't remember him being involved. I think the Society was directorless for a while and Bill and the staff were running it. The New Gen committee felt that they were plotting the

[66] Peter Barry, "Contemporary poetries in English," in *English Poetry*, ed. Michael O'Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 971.

> revival of the Poetry Society quietly in the background whilst the mudslinging continued.[67]

> My memory is that Bill Swainson was the driver of the enterprise, and that he enlisted me, because we were friends and shared a strong interest in poetry. I was in the process of moving (or had just moved) from Secker & Warburg to Jonathan Cape, and I brought in Michael Longley and Vicki Feaver as judges, and may have helped enlist James Wood and Melvyn Bragg. Bill definitely brought in Margaret Busby. Then, and now, I was involved primarily in publishing literary fiction, but also some literary non-fiction. I moved the Secker poets over to Cape with me.[68]

With the involvement of the Poetry Society first and then Waterstones booksellers, the search for funding the enterprise began. Waterstones printed 5000 copies of the New Gen Issue of *Poetry Review* to be distributed in all their bookshops. Publishers contributed £500 for each of the poets selected from their lists. Nothing of all this is secret and everyone is free to have a look at the "rules of the games," "the judges," the full range of sponsors, both public and private, the basic timeline which marked the different stages of the entire operation on pages 52-53 of the Issue where Peter Forbes explains the procedure. An episode of the popular TV show *The South Bank Show* on ITV presented by Melvyn Bragg ensued, recorded readings on BBC Radio1 (traditionally more focused on rock music) were recorded, and a vast tour of public readings across Britain organised. Much more than the usually penniless world of poetry was used to. The to be heavily criticised – "invented by marketing men" – (Sinclair, again, from the

above-mentioned introduction) or disproportionally praised by the press for the same but obviously opposite reasons.

[67] Peter Forbes, email message to author, January 23, 2019.
[68] Robin Robertson, email message to author, February 29, 2019.

Thirty years on, the tone of the criticism has not changed much. Eric Falci writes that "much of the New Gen phenomenon seems like a blustery marketing campaign"[69] while Natalie Pollard quotes John Redmond adding "they were preoccupied with branding."[70] The issue at stake, here, is that the perceived "inauthenticity" of the entire process leaked through the pages of the magazine and created a negative "aura" around the poets themselves. The obsession with "branding" or the "mere play of signs" – we will come back to this remark made by Stan Smith – turned the poets and much worse than that, their poems into automata, puppets in the hands of industry and establishment men considered by many as impudent profiteers. It was as if the tasteless architecture of the cinema, the uncomfortableness of its seats, the excess of lights or the amateurishness of the projectionist troubled the vision of the film and somehow influenced the critics' opinion.

> At its worst, New Gen poetry cultivates a weak postmodernism, a carefully managed and packaged eclecticism whose seeming innovation is simply a consumable newness, a mere play of style.[71]

It is the "managed" and "packaged," the concept of "consumable newness" the "weak postmodernism" of "a mere play of style" that grind in the mouth of the audience eating plastic pop-corn rich in fat and additives in the above-mentioned cinema. The uneasiness of the poets, in fact, permeates the atmosphere. Taking a closer look at the pictures in the newspaper and counting the people showing in the window frame, it appears that some of them are missing. The "group" doesn't
succeed in being a group even in a picture of a daily paper. Not even when an attempt is made to transform the "generation" into a more fashionable idea of "community." David Wheatley subtly argues that the attempt is mainly a way to avoid "the self-

[69] Falci, *Cambridge Introduction to British Poetry*, 184.
[70] Nathalie Pollard, *Speaking to You: Contemporary Poetry and Public Address* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[71] Falci, *Cambridge Introduction to British Poetry*, 185.

promoting and academic overtones" of "movement" or "school" while "conjuring the close-knit intimacies of village life."[72] The embarrassed answers the poets gave to the journalists during the launch, their awkward choice of being part and not being part of the "event" are just other examples of that postmodernist twist surrounding and intoxicating the entire enterprise.

Regarding the section dedicated to the poets, the structure of the Spring 1994 issue of the *Poetry Review* is relatively simple. For each of the poets the reader finds a brief introduction (generally written by the editor, but there are exceptions), followed by a short personal statement about poetry by the poet, and the list of the three influential twentieth-century poetry books. Finally, we find the poems (usually three) and another piece of writing, either by the poet (a review, a diary, or an essay) or by someone else (usually a review of the poet's work). The concise analysis that follows focuses on 4 of the 20 poets selected for the New Gen *Poetry Review* and deals with both the poems published and included in that specific issue and earlier or later work. The poets included in the thesis are Michael Donaghy, Don Paterson Michael Hofmann, and Lavinia Greenlaw.

The first chapter is dedicated to Michael Donaghy. His untimely death in 2004 at the age of 50 may be considered the coming of age of the New Gen, its rite of passage. Considered by many of the poets selected for the *Poetry Review* as a point of reference (see Don Paterson in particular), he was born in New York to an Irish family and moved to London in the mid 1980s. As well as a writer he was an accomplished musician of traditional Irish music. It was after a traditional Irish *ceilidh* with music and dance that, observing the traces left by the dancers on the floor, "a *pediscript*" as he calls it, he wrote an intriguing essay on the origin and meaning of poetry. Collected under the title *Wallflowers - A lecture on poetry with misplaced notes and additional heckling*[73], it represents the quintessential Donaghy. Packed with footnotes, maps,

[72] David Wheatley, *Contemporary British Poetry* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 10.
[73] Michael Donaghy, *The Shape of the Dance: Essays, Interviews and Digressions* (London: Picador, 2009).

drawings, references to poets from Coleridge to Frost, the Leonardo Fibonacci number sequence, Joseph Cornell's works of art, it is exemplary of Donaghy's eclecticism and vast range of interests. In his personal statement he writes "for those of you who don't know my poems, there's a lot of memory in them." It is a whirlwind of memories, it could be added, of overlapping times and styles. The first stanza of the first poem selected for the *Review* perfectly describes his personal way of approaching poetry. It is titled *Caliban's Books*:

Hair oil, boiled sweets, chalk dust, squid's ink…
Bear with me. I'm trying to conjure my father,
age fourteen, as Caliban – picked by Mr Quinn
for the role he was born to play because
'I was the handsomest boy at school'
He'll say, straight-faced, at fifty.
This isn't easy. I've only half the spell
and I won't be born for twenty years.
I'm trying for rainlight on Belfast Lough
and listening for a small blunt accent barking
over the hiss of a stove getting louder like a surf.
But how can I read when the schoolroom's gone
black as the hold of a ship? Start again.[74]

What is time of this poem? Or better: where is the time in this poem? It is always difficult to pinpoint the flow of time when your attempt is, in Don Paterson's words "to raise and comfort the dead." Donaghy's Irish father, an autodidact, is assigned by his teacher Mr Quinn the role of Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. It is the story of the rebellious oppressed at stake here and the lines themselves seem unable to keep

[74] Michael Donaghy, *Collected Poems* (London: Picador, 2009), 123.

a regular pace, rebelling against the constraints of a systematic apparatus. The always changing repetition of the conjuring formula at the beginning of each stanza, a hint of parallelism in the sound structure (the echo of Caliban in Quinn) seem just capable to retain the lines from collapsing into something different: prose, fiction. Two significant names emerge from the long list of poets and writers mentioned by Donaghy as influences on his poetry: Paul Muldoon and Jorge Borges (surprisingly his prose, not his poetry). Muldoon's nonchalant, postmodernist style seems to combine with Borges's unilinear and labyrinthically complex conception of memory and time. Elements are mixed using parodical references (Shakespeare), pastiche (in the second stanza there is a list of some of the books consulted by Donaghy's father in his homemade education – *30 Days to A More Powerful Vocabulary* – is one of them). The typically postmodernist "vicious circle" – of time in this case – makes its appearance in the denied two-ways transit of past and future. In his introduction to Donaghy's *Collected Poems*, Sean O'Brien writes:

> Vanishing, escaping, illusory, unavailable for consultation, many of the characters in Donaghy's crowded yet often solitary world seem to reflect his own sense of exile.[75]

It is exactly this postmodernist "crowded yet often solitary world" that needs to be investigated in Donaghy's poetry. The signs left on the floor by the dancers, memories of a past performance elicit a shape of the dance which Donaghy is always capable of redeeming from pure play. Thus, his constant negotiations between form and content seem to be constantly kept together by an uncommon sense of the human comedy. Besides, one observes a highly personalised mode of existence within a tradition and the faithful utilisation of recognisable forms and structures. His "voice" served as a direct conduit for the written text (he would commit his poems to memory for public recitation). Consequently, poetry establishes each time a direct encounter with the readership, with

[75] Sean O'Brien, "On Michael Donaghy: Black Ice, Rain and the City of God," in *Collected Poems*, by Michael Donaghy (London: Picador, 2009).

each interaction negotiated anew with the audience. Furthermore, there exists a "magical" dimension, an invocation of the "spell," serving as a bridge between signifier and reality. This magical enchantment endeavours to effect changes solely through the intervention of words. The definition of a "transitional object" and, consequently, that of a "transitional space," as defined by Donald Winnicott shall be subject to examination in the chapter dedicated to Donaghy.

The subsequent part of the thesis delves into an analysis of Don Paterson's poetry. His presence in the New Gen Issue of the *Poetry Review* is pervasive. He is the only poet given eight pages, four of which are taken by a hilarious insider's diary covering all the events from Monday, Jan 10th, 7.30am to the last entry 5.00pm, Thursday 13th January 1994. It represents a humorous counterpoint to the practicality of Peter Forbes's "How we made New Gen" just a few pages further. His personal statement opens "Hi. My name's Don. I'm a Scorpio. I hate doing this."[76] It does not come as a surprise that, asked to provide three influential poets from the twentieth century, he mentions Paul Muldoon and *Why Brownlee Left* in particular. What comes as a surprise, instead, is another name in the list: Elizabeth Bishop's *Collected Poems*. A simple analysis of a few lines from the poems and the prose included, however, ratifies that, rather than a surprise, it is the confirmation of a protean personality whose tremendous talent for writing needs to expand in different contexts. The way he tackles a personal manifesto like "Prologue" is self-explicatory:

A poem is a little church, remember,
You, its congregation, I, its cantor;
So please, no flash, no necking in the pew,
Or snorting just to let your neighbour know

You get the clever stuff, or eyeing the watch,
Or rustling the wee poke of butterscotch

[76] Paterson, "New Gen Diary," 18.

You'd brought to charm the sour edge off the sermon
Be upstanding. Now: let us raise the fucking *tone*.

A reader with just enough amount of poetic discernment can notice the skilful contrast between an apparent surface of laddish pub-like language and the ingenious use of (semi) heroic couplets. The experience resembles the vertigo of the sudden up and down slopes of a roller coaster and it seems to lay itself consciously open to a postmodernist interpretation of sheer signs' dance. The "page" is a "snowy graveyard," the "spiritual transport" is of "the less elevated sort" while the journey will take the congregation to "where language takes its prestigious form." The final couplet:

My little church is neither high nor broad,
so get your heads down. Let us pray. Oh God

ends with no punctuation, its monosyllabic scansion a free fall of possibilities. The prose which follows this poem is titled "From François Aussemain: Pensées" and it is attributed to Paterson's alter-ego, a French philosopher and aphorist while "11:00 Baldovan" brings us back to his native Scotland and to a tale of childhood and displacement. There are different voices at work in these poems, selves' traces which keep appearing and disappearing only to be fugitively held together by a careful attention to structure and form. Sometimes it looks as if the Scottish poet is caught in a vicious circle. Edward Larissy describes this apparent impasse "he floats the idea that is unable to raise the lyric score above zero and is locked into stale mate" but then he adds "at other times, Paterson's work indicates that writing poetry is a selfvalidating play in the face of the void."[77]

However, the surface of Paterson's poetry, which pours nearly everything into the brilliance of the symbolic, nonetheless encounters obscure places and remains invariably fascinated by them. In this chapter, I will draw upon the theories of Jacques Lacan,

[77] Edward Larissy, "No-Score Drawing: Postmodernist Games in Don Paterson," in *Don Paterson: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Natalie Pollard (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 49.

specifically his reflections on the subject's entry into language, or more precisely, subjectivation through language. The unavoidable transition sometimes appears to be arduous, and within the lucidity of the surface just evoked, openings emerge, gaps, interludes through which, using Lacanian terminology, the Real makes an appearance.

In an interview included in the book *Talking Verse*, Lavinia Greenlaw answers a question on the relationship between the "mystical" and the "scientific" element in her poetry:

> … a poet should not be so enchanted with their subject that they can't distance themselves from it enough to have an objective eye to how they're constructing their poem and ordering their matter and I think that's where the scientific analogy arrives, the ordering of matter; just as scientists have learned to trust their imagination to an extent I think artists have had to learn to treat reality and the imagination with equal suspicion and not be seduced by "wild enlightenment."[78]

The key expressions in Greenlaw's statement are "ordering of matter" and "to treat reality and the imagination with equal suspicion." The poet's eye faces the risk to be dazzled by the enchanting power of identification with any matter subject (reality or imagination). Alertness and purity of perception are, from the beginning, Greenlaw's preoccupations with poetry. The last poem in the usual short selection included in the *Review* is titled *Islands* and being rather short, it can be quoted in its entirety:

This passion for iron
their metal from heaven,
the heaviest element
created by the fusion
at the heart of a star
which then collapses,
folding and folding
till the core explodes
to scatter and settle
within the triangle

[78] Robert Crawford et al., *Talking Verse: Interviews with Poets* (St Andrews and Williamsburg: Verse, 1995), 81.

of past, present, future
- All possible worlds.
You dream of islands.
I give you a map
of the Pacific Ocean.
Go there. Come back.

Stan Smith, in a collection of essays in which the New Gen poets are frequently mentioned, puts Greenlaw's poems in direct opposition to most of those by her colleagues. Referencing to the post-structuralist theory postulated by Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*, the literary critic discusses the amount of reality/signified some of the New Gen Poets succeed in accessing through their poetry compared to all those who conversely remain trapped in the concentric and autoreferential play of signifiers. About this particular poem, he writes that "the possible worlds to which the poem refers are material possibilities, not just discursive projections". And then he adds that Greenlaw's poems direct us:

> precisely to that world of the *really there* that Baudrillard abandons. The function of maps, *pace* Baudrillard, is to point us at and guide us through the real. Our sign systems don't substitute for the real world but enable us to interpret and understand it better, in order not only to survive in but also, to be… *interested in* it.[79]

We are back to Bishop's question posed at the beginning and at a decisive point for the whole enterprise. Apparently, it is about collapsing into the void space of a mere postmodernist playfulness or going, having been given a map as in Greenlaw"s poem, to a specific space and time, a "real" island so to speak, a "real' ocean out there. It is extremely fascinating to notice how even postmodernism, as in Stan Smith's discussion, could not escape the limits it detected in many of the twentieth-century master narratives and ideologies. Nevertheless, the issue certainly deserves to be investigated and discussed. Greenlaw's response, as most poets would be likely to give, is not to be

[79] Stan Smith, *Poetry and Displacement* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 208.

enchanted or dazzled by the "explosion" and "fusion" of the star but rather maintain a passion for the iron and its undeniable connection to "a" heaven.

It is necessary to note that the aforementioned map frequently undergoes alterations when juxtaposed with the image. Greenlaw's lyrical focus is directed towards capturing the transitional moment when the signifier, in its search for a shape, merges with the signified. The poet's inclination towards the visual arts and photography has compelled me to re-examine this juncture, employing Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* as a basis for discussion. Greenlaw's poetry endeavours to employ various tactics in order to capture an intermediary realm that exists between the studium and the punctum.

In the fourth chapter of the thesis I discuss Michael Hofmann's poetry. "I like a kind of humour where no one quite dares to laugh" is the last sentence in Michael Hofmann's introductory personal statement about poetry in the *Review*. One is reminded of Buster Keaton's slapstick comedy, the mixture of his unreadable facial non expressions amid the most calamitous events. The following two quotes come from the first and third poem selected for the *Review*, *From A to B and Back Again* and *Conversation*, respectively.

> The Northern Line had come out into the open,
> was leaving tracks like a curving cicatrice.
> There was Barnet, my glottal stop, trying hard
> to live up to its name, colloquial and harmless and trite.

> 'Too drunk to fuck or drive, the baby with its father,
> my doubles brought out in two tot glasses,
> some herby German swill, sweet, I like it, *digestif*, he says.

The first quatrain reveals a sophisticated poet whose urban and "trite" landscape, approached as if from a languid perspective, opens up into a paradoxical catastrophic richness. The line (both the Northern and Hofmann's) leaves its dark recess to show "cicatrice," a stitched residue of some obscure confrontation from the past. And the word itself "cicatrice," infrequent, medical and specialised exhales a sophisticated choice

which betrays the artist behind the passive describer. In the next line the pun on "glottal stop" is even more refined: referencing both to the linguistic definition, the stop in the progress of the train and the compression/decompression sensation every commuter experiences when the train leaves the underground for the open air is again evidence of a very careful conjurer of deceptively simple textures. Referring back to Kristeva's theory on the semiotic as the necessary vivifying element of poetic language we can quote Mark Ford and his essay titled "Michael Hofmann's London":

> As always in Hofmann at his best, what is described […] becomes a fitting and expressive extension of the persona incarnate in the poem, who, for all his seeming passivity and ineptness, gathers reality about him like a centripetal force.[80]

Despite the black and white quality of the image, its smudged coarse grain, an accretion is likely to be gained rather than energy dissipated. Hofmann, born in Germany, son of a novelist and translator from German shows an exceptional sensitivity to words in which visual and auditory perception negotiate meaning and sense. Jamie McKendrick has perfectly captured this interplay "echoic in its ideas, its shapes and its sounds" present in the book from the title *Corona, Corona*. After the Dead Kennedys' song reference in the first line, the echoic/repetitive effect is at work in the rapid slide from swill, sweet and *digestif*. The /i/ sound of "swill" becomes longer /i:/ in sweet before landing on the French *digestif* leaving its trail of energising instability[81]. Quality of perception, sonorous texture and Bakhtinian multiplicity of voices deserve a meticulous scrutiny in most of Hofmann's poetry. It is precisely behind that layer of humour that I seemed to discover some of the theoretical insights expressed by Walter Benjamin in the fragmentary nature of his essayistic production. There is something of the Angelus Novus in Hofmann's poetry (and perhaps in much of the poetry expressed, in general, by the New Gen), there

[80] Mark Ford, "Michael Hofmann's London," in *The Palm Beach Effect: Reflections on Michael Hofmann*, eds. André Saffis-Nahely and Julian Stannard (London: CB editions, 2013), 141.
[81] Jamie McKendrick, "Repetition and Strange Adjacencies," in *The Palm Beach Effect: Reflections on Michael Hofmann*, eds. André Saffis-Nahely and Julian Stannard (London: CB editions, 2013), 41–50.

is a gaze that places it in constant tension and torsion with reality, which, like the debris of progress in Benjamin's text, accumulates as waste at its feet. However, Hofmann's poetry, in my view, knows how to read in those refuse the precipitate of a future, the expression of a possibility. In this regard, it is very close to the Benjamin of the *Arcades Project*.

The relation of subjectivity to textuality, how the self incarnates in a *logos* or how language shapes and informs our being has always been one of the subjects if not *the* subject of poetry. Every generation of poets has tried to find a path reacting to a cultural context and questioning its cumbersome master narratives. The poets who started writing in the 1980s are no exception. Often accused of being too mainstream and, in their perception, of being ignored by academia, they are also criticised for using casual readability as a commodity. Nevertheless, they deserve to be credited with an unwavering trust in poetic language. As I have emphasised in this introduction and will seek to explore in the subsequent chapters, anyone who enters the realm of language can only emerge subjectivated and transformed. The pressure stemming from the revolutionary aspects coursing through it and the formal elements of the socalled tradition operates, much like Foucault's concept of power-knowledge, in multiple directions, no longer just from top to bottom. Be it movement or loss, when capable of truly confronting any form of *doxa* and its conforming speech and diction, poetry represents a linguistic act of "revolutionary" dissent. Any action of honest criticism should be able to identify and discern where this dissent lies.

"On such tenuous connections": tradition, magic and memory as transitional spaces in Michael Donaghy's poetry

Introduction

> For those of you who don't know my poems, there's a lot of memory in them. Memory and history and music and sex and drinking. I hope you find them memorable – or at least memorisable.
> Recently, a hostile reviewer dismissed them like this: "His poems are not confessional, but it helps to think of a Confessional – a little box with a screen separating two parties. Think of that screen as a page. A voice seems to come from behind the screen, but if you read the poems aloud the only voice you hear is your own (Florence Olsen, *Haymarket*). I can live with that.[82]

What is precisely that territory explored behind the confessional screen by Michael Donaghy's poetry? It seems suitable to define it as a negotiated space, sustained, as he writes in one of his poems, on "such tenuous connections."[83] "Negotiated" is the crucial word in this context and, as it will be discussed in the following pages, the adjective marks out a territory where meaning and its poetical expression seem to be in the constant need of creating a spatial third dimension of conflation. It is a space of necessary contrast but also of indispensable reconciliation; a search, that is, for a poetical synthesis that requires an incessant process of redefinition of boundaries. Michael Donaghy's biography itself represented an intriguing anomaly of contrasting elements in the British poetry scene of the 1980s. His upbringing and intellectual background are worth considering to understand the context of his work better.

Born in 1954 in the Bronx (NY) to an Irish family, Donaghy moved to North

[82] Michael Donaghy, "Michael Donaghy writes," *Poetry Review* 84, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 62.
[83] Michael Donaghy, "The Messenger," in *Conjure* (London: Picador, 2000).

London in 1985 "in pursuit of a beautiful and talented woman [I] met in Chicago."[84] In the US he obtained a BA in English Literature from Fordham University and began a never to be completed PhD on Giordano Bruno at the University of Chicago. While still in the United States, he worked as Poetry Editor for the *Chicago Review*, published his first collection of poems *Slivers*[85] - which was mainly ignored by the American literary world - and made a living – among many other different jobs - by playing traditional Irish music (tin whistle/flute and bodhran). His family, while Donaghy was in his teens, made a brief return to Ireland with the promise (for his father) of a more stable and prosperous occupation. Unfortunately, things did not work out as expected, and they had to move back, once again, to South Bronx. Donaghy's childhood was, under many aspects, a multilingual experience where newer and older communities of immigrants partly shared and partly defended, more often in a conflicting way, the same spaces, and their different cultures.

> The South Bronx at that time was a very mixed community of Puerto Ricans, Panamanians, Haitians and AfricanAmericans, together with a dwindling population of Irish and Italians, and the atmosphere was often electric with racial tensions. But in the schools I attended, where the groups *had* to mix, it was language rather than skin colour that divided us, and it took some time for the English and Spanish speakers to trust and befriend one another.[86]

Therefore, if language proved to be as divisive as violence, a community had to turn to something else in order to find a sense of identity and belonging. Music was a part of

[84] Michael Donaghy, "Interview with John Stammers, 2003," in *The Shape of the Dance: Essays, Interviews and Digressions* (London: Picador, 2009), 169. He refers to Maddy Paxman, who became his wife, edited a volume of posthumous poems, a collection of essays and wrote a memoir, *The Great Below*, on her life with Michael Donaghy and the ensuing sense of loss caused by the poet's premature departure.
[85] Michael Donaghy, *Slivers* (Chicago: Thompson Hill Publishing, 1985).
[86] Donaghy, *Collected Poems*, 171–172.

this identity and traditionally it has always been so for Irish people. Answering a question on early influences on his poetry writing Donaghy writes:

> I suppose the relative frequency of literary allusion in my earlier work is a natural effect of writing poetry in an academic environment. It probably doesn't help to introduce the semiotic notion of intertextuality, but my experience of the transmission and the performance of Irish music might be worth mentioning again in this context. In such an aura/aural tradition you don't strain for novelty, and the only "personal expression" you achieve comes as a result of subordinating your personality to the tradition – the tune must play through you. I remember reading Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" at the time and thinking it especially relevant to the Irish folk tradition.[87]

What needs to be stressed in this excerpt is how from the early beginnings of Donaghy's musical and poetic vocation the idea of "personal expression" or "novelty" is subsumed by a subordination to tradition. However, this subordination is not perceived as a cancellation of selfhood in general, but instead of the "individual" self. If there is a possibility of finding a way of really saying something in poetry and music, Donaghy seems to argue, it is only by losing your intruding free will within a vaster area of impersonality.

In the same interview, Donaghy adds:

> My most enduring memories of my childhood are related to the violence of that neighbourhood – horrific street violence – and that I suppose, together with a delirious histrionic experience of Catholicism, tends to crop up in my work in my work in one guise or another.[88]

Religion, at its most theatrical and "unhinged," is called into question. The theatricality and "histrionic" aspects of Catholicism may refer to a certain melodramatic

[87] Donaghy, *Slivers*, 174.
[88] Donaghy, *Slivers*, 172.

approach to the ritual as well as the constant summoning of intermediary presences (saints, angels) to act as intercessors of requests and for a possible granting of favours. Language in itself, during the ritual, tends to become openly under pressure, an intermediary means between the human and the sacred. It usually does so through a constant insistence on repetition, and a staged dialogue between who is in charge of "managing" the "sacred" and his congregation. The power, exercised by and through faith on the language, pushes it to the limits of its merely communicative function. Language (Logos) becomes flesh and the signifier consubstantial with the signified. There is something more "pagan," more belonging to the realm of magic than of religion, in the usage Donaghy makes of language, repetition and all the devices of the ceremonial. Nevertheless, the nature of that centrifugal force requires an in-depth analysis. It is yet again another negotiated – transitional – space which opens up as a rather exciting opportunity of interpretation for Donaghy's poetry.

It was in England that Donaghy's literary career gained momentum. His first two books *Shibboleth*[89] and *Errata*[90], the former including some of the poems from the previous American book *Slivers*, were published in the then prominent poetry list of Oxford University Press and were, in general, well received. While continuing to pursue his musical career, he also started teaching poetry workshops and with his third book *Conjure*[91] he was awarded the Forward Prize.

The title of Donaghy's third and last book *Conjure* leads us back directly to the quote used to open this introductory part. The semantic field charted by the three words "memory," "memorable" and "memorisable" occupies an important part in the poet's oeuvre. Memory, besides, may be considered the intermediary link between the elements underlined in the previous paragraphs. Moving swiftly in time or sometimes even puzzling time, this fundamental function of the mind operates to connect and store all the valuable data which then form tradition. Reading Eliot quoted by Donaghy we learnt that

[89] Michael Donaghy, *Shibboleth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
[90] Michael Donaghy, *Errata* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).
[91] Michael Donaghy, *Conjure* (London: Picador, 2000).

memory – exactly like tradition - does not follow one single path leading from the past to the present but, in a more circular and cyclical conception, helps to continually recreate and adjust the past according to new and different presents.

The idea of memory in all its possible features is essential to read Donaghy's poetry, but the other two elements mentioned cannot be easily dismissed. In fact, information, which cannot rely on a physical support resistant to the wear of time, needs to be made "memorisable" in order to be transmitted. The tools employed by poetry to make itself memorisable cannot but belong to the tradition to which Donaghy makes constant reference. It is not out of pure chance that Giordano Bruno was the subject of his uncompleted PhD. The Nolan theologian, philosopher and poet was also a great master in memory techniques.

> The ancient Greeks and Romans often described magical operations as capturing, binding, or chaining their object – "fascination," the Roman word for the evil eye, was another word for "binding," derived from *fascia*, a strip of cloth. Bruno preferred the image of chains or bonds; one of his magical treatises would eventually be called *On Bonds in General.* The fundamental key to Bruno's natural magic, however, was neither strips nor chains but the art of memory; by storing and manipulating the knowledge within his own mind, he declared, he could gain power over the entire universe.[92]

Bruno's idea, derived from the ancient world, that memorising was a way of capturing the world must have been of extreme interest for Donaghy. The same can be said of Bruno's prose, intermingled as it is often with dialogues, poems, mathematical graphs. In fact, the end of the seventeenth century saw the production of works in which the categorisation of scientific, literary, and philosophical is far from being well established.

Memory also played a decisive role in Donaghy's poetry readings. He used to recite his poems from memory rather than reading them from the printed page. There is a hint of the oral as opposed to the written, another crucial element to be analysed. Donaghy's

[92] Ingrid D. Rowland, *Giordano Bruno: Philosopher/Heretic* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 120.

memory apparently, according to many who knew him, was capable of storing, apart from his own, also an elevated number of other poets' works.

Donaghy's untimely death in 2004 (aged fifty) and the relatively small amount of literary production, three books of poems plus a fourth published posthumously; a collection of essays, reviews and interviews (also published posthumously), created a deep contrast between the admiration by his fellow poets when he was alive and the relatively scarce attention he received in terms of literary analysis of his work.

Criticism

The majority of critics who have tried to pinpoint the nature of his poetical output seem to have got stuck in the first of his several incongruities: a trivial geographical one. How was he to be considered? An American, an Irish or a British poet? A mid-Atlantic one? His inclusion in the so-called "New Gen" operation was not of much help. As for many others who took part in that initiative, he was to inherit, in the best-case scenario, a general label of disapproval, a pre-digested categorisation which fluctuated between the "playful postmodernism" and the "mainstream." In the main general publications dedicated to mapping, in critical terms, the course of British poetry after the second world war or the more contemporary field, his name is rarely included. When it is mentioned, it is only briefly considered for either having been part of the above-mentioned "New Gen" selection or for a general loyalty to the group of the variously defined formalist poets. The term "formalist" here is mainly employed to characterise the use of recognisable prosodic patterns, rhymes and the all the poetical paraphernalia so vehemently ostracised by Modernism. The interesting element concerning this association is that the more profound nature of this supposed formalism is rarely or never questioned. When it happens, it is usually superficially dismissed. Why would a poet writing in the 80s and 90s provocatively and explicitly choose to be part of the formalist rather than the experimentalist side of the battling field? Or vice versa. A few examples taken from diverse sources may help to clarify what I am trying to express.

"And on both sides of the Atlantic, we can see the rise of new formalist poets such as Dana Gioia and Marilyn Hacker (USA) and Glyn Maxwell, Michael Donaghy and Elizabeth Garrett (GB)," writes David Kennedy in a brief paragraph titled "Form" in his *New Relations: The Refashioning of British Poetry 1980-1994*.[93] And it is the only mention Michael Donaghy obtains in the entire book. Somewhat surprisingly, Donaghy is part of the British group of poets together with Maxwell and Garrett caught, once again, in the geographical incompatibility stated above. Michael Faherty in his essay "They Say, They Say, They Say: Some New Voices in the Nineties" uses a quote from Donaghy's entry in the "New Gen" Issue of the Poetry Review before

not mentioning him again for the rest of the chapter.[94] The case of Sean O'Brien and his book *The Deregulated Muse*[95] is also indicative. O'Brien quotes Donaghy only for an interview with Paul Muldoon published in a magazine a few years before. Although Muldoon can be definitely considered a major influence on Donaghy, it is difficult to explain O'Brien's lack of attention to an author who, when *The Deregulated Muse* was published (1998) had already reached the readers with two main collections of poems distributed by a mainstream publishing company. Even more so when it was again Sean O'Brien who took care of writing a lengthy and exhaustive introduction to Donaghy's *Collected Poems*[96] published by Picador after Donaghy's death. A passage from that introduction, though, is of interest regarding some of the points discussed in this chapter; writing about *Conjure* (his last book – *Safest* came posthumously), O'Brien states that "the theme of connection and disconnection, separation and reconciliation" plays a major role in Donaghy's books. Another noteworthy example comes from Fiona Sampson's book titled *Beyond the Lyric*. Resorting to a more common categorisation, she defines Donaghy as a "playful troubadour" to which she adds, much more interestingly and with

[93] Kennedy, *Refashioning of British Poetry*, 6.
[94] Michael Faherty, "They Say, They Say, They Say: Some New Voices of the Nineties," in *British Poetry from the 1950s to the 1990s: Politics and Art*, eds. Gary Day and Brian Docherty (London: MacMillan, 1997), 268-279.
[95] Sean O'Brien, *The Deregulated Muse – Essays on Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1998).
[96] Sean O'Brien, "Black Ice, Rain and the City of God.", IX-XX.

a certain dose of nonchalance the title of "key poet of Nineties' Britain."[97] What follows needs to be considered as an exemplary mode (followed by several critics) when trying to shape Donaghy's general critical perception:

> His light but sure-footed approach to technique, and the extent to which his professional life was spent, typically for the Eighties and Nineties, on the road between readings and workshop, rather than – as might have been the case had he lived – in a university creative writing department, helped him to personify the anti-intellectual, ear-led approach which has been so powerful in recent British poetry. In fact, Donaghy's finely judged metrical verse belongs among the antecedents not of today's free verse but of the new formalists.[98]

The "anti-intellectual" and "ear-led" approach seems to contradict the "surefooted" definition regarding technique. While considering the multiple layers of subtle and complex intertextuality in Donaghy's poems, anti-academic would have seemed more suitable. In addition, the reader would presume that a long and detailed profile of "the key poet of Nineties Britain" will follow rather than only some sparse quotations and mainly based on references to a poem "The Patent,"[99] not by Donaghy but by Simon Armitage in his elegy written after Donaghy's death. Describing the poet in a few lines and with intense clarity as "perfecting light," "like some secretive priest of the ancient past / protecting a flame in the night," Armitage seems to point in a more direct and profound direction while at the same time providing a better insight into his colleague's poetry. There is a hint here of the relationship between, on the one hand, poetry and religion and, on the other, poetry, tradition and magic that I am going to explore in this chapter. In relation to religion and the opposition between religious/secular, another adjective that is frequently employed by critics when writing on Donaghy is

[97] Fiona Sampson, *Beyond the Lyric – A Map of Contemporary British Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2012), 117.
[98] Sampson, 117.
[99] "The Patent," in Simon Armitage, *Tyrannosaurus Rex vs the Corduroy Kid* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006).

"metaphysical." Two quotations from reviews published in literary magazines after Donaghy's death illustrate the point.

> The effect is a bracing interplay between self-conscious formality and something more dryly colloquial, as though the narrator is putting on John Donne's hat with a mock-theatrical flourish.[100]

> Donaghy was often described as being some kind of "modern metaphysical" and John Donne was clearly the model for the comparison. Such literary conceits are usually farfetched, but there was a reason to conjure with Donne's name in relation to Donaghy's. Both poets had that tension between religious diction (if not belief) and secular passion at their core; both were uncommonly worldly yet learned. Both poets chafed eloquently at the bitter tang of sin.[101]

It is exactly in that "tension" between formality/religious diction and the "dryly colloquial" or "secular passion" that most of Donaghy's poetry happens and reveals its transitional and negotiated nature.

One of the most interesting attempts to discuss the "New Gen" phenomenon and its poets came from Stan Smith. His original essay published in *Critical Survey*[102] with the revealing title "The things the words give a name to: The New Generation Poets and the Politics of the Hyperreal," was later revised and included, in an expanded form, in his book *Poetry and Displacement*.[103] Considering Donaghy's first book of poems *Errata*, Smith writes:

> We may have read Donaghy's whole volume as a collection (a comedy) of errors, confirming the Baudrillardian thesis that the real has vanished into the play of images representing only other images […] But an *errata* slip is precisely about the

[100] Oliver Dixon, "Raining Soup," *PN Review* 36, no. 2 (November–December 2002): 190.
[101] Todd Swift, Books in Canada; Toronto Vol. 33, Fasc. 7 (October 2004), 37.
[102] Stan Smith, "The things the words give a name to: The New Generation Poets and the Politics of the Hyperreal," *Critical Survey* 8, no. 3 (January 1996): 306–322.
[103] Stan Smith, *Poetry and Displacement*, 197.

> *correction* of errors. There is a "true" as well as a magnetic north, and the compass which relies nevertheless enables us to find the former. The very idea of correcting an *erratum* insists that there *is* a correct and knowable original, somewhere, if not here.[104]

Analysing a poem titled "Reliquary" included in Donaghy's second collection of poems, Smith argues that the poet, through an extremely subtle use of imagery, manages to elude the pure interplay of signs and all its possible references to a postmodernist theory of literature. What is at stake here, Smith argues, is not only poetry as signifiers caught in a replica and an imitation of the "real" through a mechanism of perpetual refraction that does not allow any type of contact with *reality*. Smith employs and adapt Baudrilliard's ideas included in *Simulacra and Simulation*, a book whose main theory, according to the critic, can be applied to the majority of poets included in the "New Gen" operation.

It is probably only in the many obituaries and personal memories which appeared in newspapers and magazines and, again in the flourishing of reviews dedicated to his collected poems and selected writing published by Picador in 2009, a few years after his passing, that it is possible to fully comprehend how Donaghy's pivotal presence was at the fulcrum of the British poetry scene of the 80s and 90s. Under a picture of Donaghy, Armitage and Maxwell, Don Paterson collected and published in the *Independent on Sunday*[105] some of the eulogies received on the occasion of National Poetry Day. The following are just a few of them: "My generation of poets has always had a big family feel to it, and everyone will feel they have lost a brother" (Carol Ann Duffy); Michael was one of the best poets of his generation (Andrew Motion); "He whose face gives no light shall never become a star – wrote William Blake. It is a statement that measures the rest of us against Michael

[104] Stan Smith, *Poetry and Displacement,* 197.
[105] "Michael Donaghy, writers gather to pay tribute in verse and prose", *The Independent on Sunday*, October 3, 2004, 28–29.

Donaghy, because for sure his face did give light and he was, is, a star" (Jo Shapcott); "Michael Donaghy was one of the three or four best American poets alive, and they hardly know his name" (Glyn Maxwell).

Therefore, Donaghy's work needs to be subjected to more detailed scrutiny aiming at reading his poetry from a new perspective. It will be performed following traces and signs left in his critical writings and mainly through a close reading of his poems. Memory, magic and the relationship with form/technique emerge as a constellation of interrelated elements, each one with its own singularity but at the same time constantly reconfiguring the "shape of the dance." It is exactly at the point of intersection of these three projected positions that, going back to the question at the beginning of this essay and taking into consideration the different perspectives offered by critics and reviewers, I will try to map and interpret Donaghy's poetry.

Technique, form and tradition as "transitional spaces"

> In psychoanalytic terms, the object has an infantile precedent in what D.W. Winnicott calls the "transitional object." Most infants have a bit of old rag, blanket, particular doll, or teddy bear which they cherish for months or years. Winnicott argues that these objects help us mediate, in developmental terms, between the experience of self and non-self. It's our first metaphor, invested with the power of the breast. Furthermore, says Winnicott, "the mental space it occupies for us is neither subjective nor objective but there is the third part of the life" of a human being, a part which we cannot ignore, an intermediate *area* (my italics) of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area which is not challenged because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet inter-related." For Winnicott, all art begins in the transitional phenomena of infancy, the zone between subjectivity and objectivity.[106]

[106] "Wallflowers – A lecture on poetry with misplaced notes and additional heckling," in Michael Donaghy, *The Shape of the Dance: Essays, Interviews and Digressions* (London: Picador, 2009), 28.

This is footnote number thirteen in the most extensive manifesto of poetics compiled by Donaghy during his life. Aptly titled *Wallflowers - A lecture on poetry with misplaced notes and additional heckling*, it is a complex, oblique, and peculiar long essay on the meaning of poetry according to Donaghy. The pages are accompanied by pictures, graphs, Coleridgean observations on the margins and are imbued with references which roam freely among literature, philosophy, psychology, theology, history of arts, mathematics, and several other subjects. In brief, the lecture represents a perfect visualisation of the many interests pursued by Donaghy and partly explains the multiple layers and rich intertextuality which constitutes his poetry. This footnote, in particular, – one suspects that with the word "heckling" part of the title, something very important must be hidden exactly where a superficial reader might tend to overlook as in the case of a footnote – is part of a brief chapter in which Donaghy tries to explain the inner necessity on both the reader's and poet's side of making a poem an "All-One-Thing," or "wresting coherence and integration from the structure of the poem" defined as "an irresistible human instinct." Apparently, it lies in the idea of "enclosure" and in the theory from Aquinas (quoted via Joyce) that three things are necessary for beauty: "integritas, consonantia, claritas," the latter word being translated in the text as "radiance." The next step in the process, after a framing or enclosure of language in a "beautiful" poem, consists in breathing "life into the inanimate," that is to identify an "object" – Donaghy quotes the knife in Bishop's poem "Crusoe in England" and the red wheelbarrow of Williams' homonymous poem. What the reader has found is a "talisman," produced by the poet, "a magician's prop toward which we direct our attention so that the magic can proceed by sleight of hand." This last sentence closes the chapter and leads via footnote thirteen to the quotations mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. In brief, what Donaghy is trying to identify is the substance of that elusive point of intersection between – as the title of the chapter goes – the "In and Out of the frame." Another image conjured in the same pages might help to "see" what he is referring to:

> Windows show us the world outside our rooms, but when night falls and we switch on the lights we see only ourselves reflected in the dark glass, and sometimes, briefly, we mistake our own image for a presence outside.

A good example of one of this type of windows (lights on and then off) is the poem "The Present" from Donaghy's first collection *Shibboleth*.

For the present there is just one moon,
though every level pond gives back another.

But the bright disc shining in the black lagoon,
perceived by astrophysicist and lover,

is milliseconds old. And even that light's
seven minute older than its source.

And the stars we think we see on moonless nights
are long extinguished. And, of course,

this very moment, as you read this line,
is literally gone before you know it.

Forget the here-and-now. We have no time
but this device of wantonness and wit.

Make me this present then: your hand in mine,
And we'll live out our lives in it.

It is a plain and apparently simple love poem. As Don Paterson perfectly illustrates, its arrangement in couplets only briefly deflects the attention of the reader from the fact that it consists of fourteen lines, and that is a sonnet. To be more precise:

> Its form is a "disguised Italian": the ABAB CDCD EFEFEF rhymes indicate the usual octave + sestet arrangement, but it's laid in couplets, possibly as an echo of the romantic union it finally declares as its real subject.[107]

The "claritas" of the moon here shows a deceptive radiance. It questions and divides what is real from what is perceived. It is a window in the sense of the image mentioned above with its "in and out" essence and its switch which, according to the on and off position, can change the perception of both the astrophysicist and the lover. It can multiply in different ponds or become one in the lagoon or even disappear during "moonless nights." The first talisman produced by the poet, therefore, seems to be the moon; our attention is focused on following its mysterious and problematic course. But then we have moved away, inside the poem, reading together with the lover's eyes the very same lines in front of us. The dislocation and the distrust we have learnt from a brief observation of the moon awakens our perception, and we are invited to forget the "here-and-now" and to become fully aware of the elusive interrelation of perception and flowing of things in time. Time is now the new talisman, "this device of wantonness and wit"; Paterson reminds the reader that it is a quote from Walter Raleigh's "Nature that washed her hands in milk" and adds:

> we have no real time but the strange clock of our inner being. *We* are the device of wantonness and wit, of free play and of free intelligence. And all we have to close the gap between

[107] Don Paterson, *Smith: A Reader's Guide to the Poetry of Michael Donaghy* (London: Picador, 2014), 2.

> image and source, between past and present, is each other, in our bodily forms.[108]

The first "present," an abstract concept needs to be embodied in something strictly vital ("live" as verb and "lives" as the plural of life seems to consolidate the passage) and therefore becomes a real "present," a touch of two hands, the incarnation of the only possible here and now. As it has already been noted, this is one of the first poems included in the first collection of poems by Donaghy. The conceit, the metaphysical overtones are all there, and it is difficult to escape the similarities with other seventeenth-century invitations to move from the abstract to the physical and not to be entangled by some deceitful device of time. As it is challenging not to notice how the evolution of this small parable on time and love, the inescapability of the Heraclitan flowing, is so strictly encapsulated in the rigidity of a very recognisable form (a sonnet) and stressed even more by the presence of the recursive practice of a fixed rhyme scheme. It is this tension, exactly in this transitional space between the movement of the "present" as a tense and the "present" as a noun inside the vigilant observance of a formal structure that a large part of Donaghy's poetry happens.

It is time to go back to footnote number thirteen. The quotations included refers to "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena – A Study of the First Non-Me Possession" by D. W. Winnicott. The essay was originally published in 1953 in The Journal of Psycho-Analysis and it is "based on a paper given at a Scientific Meeting of the British Psycho-Analytical Society on 30 May 1951."[109] It was a troubled time for the British Psycho-Analytical Society and Winnicott's theories on the stages of child's development were taking a completely different direction from those of the other analysts who had long worked on the issue in more strictly Freudian terms,
Melanie Klein in particular. Winnicott's human approach to the psychoanalytical setting which involved talking and playing with the children together with his theory that

[108] Paterson, 3.
[109] Donald W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena – A Study of the First Not-Me Possession," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 34, 89-97.

external reality had to be considered when reflecting on children's mental health was not fully understood by other members of the society. As Adam Phillips writes in his book on Winnicott:

> During the 1940s Winnicott had evolved a powerful rival developmental theory to those of both Freud and Klein while including the bits of their work he found useful. He was a pragmatist with an essentialist theory that posited the existence of a True Self that was rooted in the body, of a piece with it, so to speak, but a body without erotic connotation. The drive was not for pleasure but for development.[110]

The most important part of his work was devoted to the transitional phase of the developmental stages during which the infant begins to distinguish between the Me and the Non-Me, between the subjective and external reality, so to speak. It is an intermediate territory in which the infant needs to move carefully if she does not want to lose herself in the complete devouring chaos of the external world. She needs to be creative and find an "object" which is a substitute for the safety she is about to leave behind in her exploratory and developmental drive towards the Non-Me. The "space" of that intermediary subverts the granted notion that "there seemed to be only mutually exclusive options: either subjectivity or objectivity, either unity with the mother or separateness, either invention or discovery."[111] I would argue that a similar function is performed in Donaghy's poetry by his employment of form, technique and, in general, of a recognisable poetic structure. As in the poem analysed above, the production of meaning was performed by the two lovers who needed to expunge the relatively safe and comfortable conception of a unidirectional and paradoxically static conception of time in order to move from one "present" to another present of "touching hands." At the same time, the "disguised" sonnet form, the iteration of the rhyme was present to provide a

[110] Adam Phillips, *Winnicott* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 97.
[111] Phillips, 114.

secure environment in which the subjectivity of the poet's creativity could be fused in the inter-subjectivity of a long-established and benign traditional form.

Winnicott's entire essay is fascinating when read under this line of interpretation.

> By this definition an infant's babbling or the way an older child goes over a repertory of songs and tunes while preparing for sleep comes within the intermediate area as transitional phenomena, along with the use made of objects that are not part of the infant's body yet are not fully recognized as belonging to external reality.[112]

and again, when he makes a "summary of special qualities in the relationship." Number (2) and (3) in particular can be referred to the idea I am trying to develop:

> (2) The object is affectionately cuddled as well as excitedly loved and mutilated
> (3) It must never change, unless changed by the infant.[113]

Form and tradition can and, at some point, must be constantly manipulated, "mutilated" as Winnicott writes, which is what Donaghy and also several other poets of the "New Gen" seem to be constantly doing when writing poems. Using a sonnet displayed as a series of couplets but with the same number of lines is exactly, in my opinion, to occupying a "third part of the life of a human being,"

> A part that we cannot ignore is an intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area which is not challenged because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet inter-related.[114]

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[112] Winnicott, 89.
[113] Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1991), 91.
[114] Winnicott, 90.

Winnicott does not limit this "intermediate area of experiencing" only to infancy but "suggests that there is a continuity between the child's use of this first object and the adult's later use of the cultural tradition as it becomes meaningful to him."[115] In a later essay included in *Playing and Reality* and titled "The location of Cultural Experiences" he states:

> The interplay between originality and the acceptance of tradition as the basis for inventiveness seems to me just one more example, and a very exciting one of the interplay between separateness and union.[116]

What is at stake in that potential location of culture in a third space between subjectivity and objectivity is, in poetical terms, the perpetual division between two models or ideas of poetry. On the one hand, poetry as an autonomous object capable of producing its own rules and its own system and on the other, poetry which naturally depends on and somehow responds to an external agency. Known after different names and labels it goes back to a long tradition quite likely to have been inaugurated with the Romantics or, in Eliot's terms, even earlier with the separation of sense and sensibility. It is the "poetry war," romanticism vs enlightenment, modernism vs Georgian poetry, mainstream vs experimental poetry, continuity vs discontinuity. In the second chapter titled "Inside and Outside of Modernism" of his book *British Poetry in the Age of Modernism*[117], Peter Howarth tries to go back to the blurred origins of this juxtaposition:

> Modernism's arguments to justify its own verse and diminish that of its Georgian rivals were made in the name of denouncing rhetoric, the presence of words and forms externally influencing the poem's heart. There are various names for the remedy – Imagism, Classicism, the Tradition – but all share the Romantic desire for poetry at one with itself, free from exterior determination, "acting creatively under laws

[115] Phillips, *Winnicott,* 115.
[116] Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 134.
[117] Peter Howarth, *British Poetry in the Age of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 15–63.

> of its own origination," as Coleridge put it […] For in the last analysis, the possibility of "rhetoric" is also the possibility of any kind of interaction between collective and individual, outside and inside, a relation without which there would be neither poetry nor politics.[118]

It seems to me that the third area designated by Winnicott as not belonging to the Me nor to the Non-Me might be used as a consistent line of interpretation and possible mediation between these two rival fields. It is a suggestion for which I find confirmation in another poem by Michael Donaghy titled "The Classics" from his second collection *Errata*:

I remember it like it was last night,
Chicago, the back room of Flanagan's malignant with accordions and cigarettes,
Joe Cooley bent above his Paolo Soprani,
its asthmatic bellows pumping as if to revive the half-corpse strapped about it.
It's five a.m. Everyone's packed up.
His brother Seamus grabs Joe's elbow mid-arpeggio.
'Wake up man. We have to catch a train.'
His eyelids fluttering, opening. The astonishment…

I saw that happen. Or heard it told so well
I've staged the whole drunk memory:
What does it matter now? It's ancient history.
Who can name them? Where lie their bones and armour?

It is another sonnet, "a free-ish unrhymed sonnet, each line having roughly four or five strong stresses" as Don Paterson remarks[119]. The unfolding of the story does not

[118] Howarth, 61.
[119] Paterson, *Smith*, 78.

require a fixed, rigorous scheme of stresses and rhymes. Joe Cooley is playing his accordion at five a.m. in the morning while overcome by sleep. The rigidity of the form is gone (as Cooley's wake) to let the plasticity of the gesture emerge. A movement, that of playing, which does not require the actual consciousness of the player. It plays by itself, tradition plays through the musician in a space which eludes the subject and his allegedly required interrelation with the object (the accordion). The turn of the sonnet is not, traditionally, where it is supposed to be. It comes after a spacing and with a new surprising logical contradiction. Has it happened or maybe it is just a trick of a drunk memory? Is there a real difference? Does it matter now?

Donaghy's last two lines are indicative:

> In the final two lines, Donaghy suddenly switches to a classical register, to immensely moving effect. As Patrick Kavanagh said in "Epic": "Homer made the Iliad out of such a local row*"*; Donaghy's point, too, is that it's in such "low" materials that our heroes are found and our epics founded. But what does it matter to us, really? These heroes are as dead to us as Achilles, Hector or the nameless fallen at Troy. Yet we still tell their stories, compulsively.[120]

This is definitely the territory of myth, and Paterson is right to argue that the drive behind our constant retelling of old stories is more based on the importance of their elusive meanings rather than the scale of importance of the events narrated. What is of interest to me, though, is the creation of a space which is independent of consciousness but at the same time is perfectly fully active on the basis of some inner drive to persist in its being. It is the accordion through which the breath of music exhales, defined in terms of its corporality and therefore partly mutilated in the action of the "asthmatic bellows pumping." In a poem where the length of each line mainly delimits a single part of meaning, one of the two enjambments occurs in the sequence of lines between "revive"

[120] Paterson, *Smith*, 78.

and the "half-corpse" strapped to it. It is as if the poet is stressing the idea that there is no interruption in the fluid but paradoxical concept that it is the Soprani accordion which keeps alive the body, a corpse to be more precise, life temporarily occupying the music. The negotiation and dynamics between unconscious and conscious are described by Donaghy in this excerpt:

> Finally, let's consider the unconscious effect of form on the poet. This is the most interesting aspect of traditional technique, and it represents the intervention of that presence poets used to call "The Muse." Any degree of difficulty in a form requires of the poet that he or she negotiate with the medium, and compromise what he or she originally "spontaneously" intended to say (so far so good, since one's instantaneous reaction is always more likely to be full of selfdeception, prejudice and cliché). Perhaps many of us here have experienced the peculiar sensation that the best image or line simply "came to us" as if delivered by an unseen presence as a reward for taking the time to work hard on a poem. It comes from our own unconscious, of course.[121]

The exploration of the Non-Me, as Winnicott would have argued, requires a transitional object and the definition of a safe space of negotiation. The narcissistic self-deception of prejudice and cliché mentioned in Donaghy's quote above is a clear identification of the self which refuses to occupy the third necessary space created by the transitional object. A remainder of friction (medium and compromise) is what needs to be overcome in order to arrive at that "unconscious" creation. "As if delivered by an unseen presence" the poem is the actual "reward for taking the time to work hard." Or, as Donaghy defines it, "that serendipity provided by negotiation with a resistant medium."[122]

[121] Donaghy, *The Shape of the* Dance, 15.
[122] Andy Brown, *Binary Myths, Conversation with Contemporary Poets* (Exeter: Stride Publications, 1998), 40.

"My people were magicians": spells and charms as a linguistic transitional space

> Magic like poetry depends upon a conjunctive semiotics, since magic accords power to signs as efficacious artefacts. The afterlife of magic in a post magical world is a rich and fascinating subject, one that might well be a starting point of a historical semiotics. All transformative rituals, including the Sacraments of the Roman Catholic church, require a magical belief in the power of charged words, gestures and objects.[123]

In the introduction and in the first chapter of his book titled *Poetry, Signs, and Magic*, Thomas Green outlines a brief history of the relation between sign and object, that is, the language we use to denotate things and things in themselves. Magic first and religion immediately after, are called into question. In religious history one of the climaxes of this controversial dispute, a "monumental cleavage" as it is defined in the book, occurred during the controversy initiated by the Reformers against the Roman Catholics and ended with the birth of the Protestant movements. One of the major issues at stake was the divine nature of consubstantiality during the Eucharist ritual:

> To what degree did the words and gestures and substances employed in the sacramental rituals have authentic power to instil grace in the worshipper? Much debate in this controversy centred on the precise working of a single sacrament, the Eucharist and on the question whether the wafer and the wine *recall* Christ's sacrificial body and blood or whether they literally *become* the body and blood. Once again the question is what kind of gap, if any, separates the representation from the things represented.[124]

Philosophy since Plato and linguistics since linguistics has become a discipline, not to mention all the other subjects which have dealt with the issue, have debated the same

[123] Thomas M. Greene, *Poetry, Signs and Magic* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 21. Of particular interest for this chapter are "Language, Signs, and Magic" and "Poetry as Invocation".
[124] Greene, 32.

problems in terms of language. How much "world" (meaning) is actually there in the "word"? The idea of conjunctive semiotics - that is the interrelation of signifier and signified in linguistic signs - has been part of the study of poetry for a long time. Auden's "poetry makes nothing happen," in extending the ability of a linguistic artefact to directly operate any changes in outer reality, is a necessary statement exactly because it implies its opposite conception. Besides, when Yury Lotman states that the poetic language "tends toward the iconic" and by iconic he means that whereas "the relationship between the two aspects of each is arbitrary as in the case in all natural languages," in the "iconic the relationship is based on some sort of resemblance"[125] is putting a lot of pressure on structuralism and post-structuralism at the same time. Opting for a "nominalist" or "realist" position, to use a philosophical terminology, is an indication of how the language of poetry is perceived in a different way by different poets and how it can help to discriminate between the consequent choices in terms of poetics. Donaghy's poetry, as it has been debated in the first part of this chapter, envisages connection and continuity rather than disconnection and disruption. Its natural movement inclines towards and provides for a direct engagement with outer reality. The pact with the reader, the perpetual battle for readability and inclusion, is partly due to a belief in language as essentially based on its communicative function. A communicative function which does not seem to be imposed by some exterior force or system but rather as a constituting element of the language in itself. The surcharge of meaning in poetic language where every single element reinforces the cohesive linguistic system is an essential part not, as happens with some modernist poetry, of a fragmentary experience of signification but rather of a tendency to find any possible means to re-unify those fragments. It is a strong belief and trust (one is tempted to use the term "faith") that, to paraphrase O'Brien's quote mentioned above, connection prevails on disconnection and reconciliation on separation. Nothing is taken for granted, every single element is negotiated while loss and failure may always be the final option.

[125] Yury Lotman, *Analysis of the poetic text* (Michigan: Ardis, 1976). The quotes come from the introduction by D. Barton Johnson, xi.

> Clearly, there's a grey area where the word subject will do as well as object. In becoming art, all objects become subjects, that is, they are mediated – whether represented or merely presented by the consciousness of the poet. The neumes and talismans I see in so many lyric poems, the imaginary moment outside time in which the audience focuses on the poet's hand, and, in that hand, the ring, the cup, feather knife, "bracelet of bright hair about the bone," the moment in which the talisman becomes a living presence… all these have as their precedent the central ritual gesture of European civilization these past two millennia – the elevation of the host in the sacrifice of the Mass.[126]

The power of those talismans and of those gestures of the poet's hand do rely on a concept of possible "tenuous connections." Besides, there is an anxious search for an element of safety maybe never fully accomplished in "European civilization these past two millennia" while the final "ostension" seems to refer to the Irish tradition calling for recognition in Donaghy.

I would like to analyse one of the poems included by Donaghy in the "New Gen" issue of *Poetry Review* titled "Caliban's Books." It is part of *Conjure*, the third and last book published by Donaghy when he was alive:

Hair oil, boiled sweets, chalk dust, squid's ink…
Bear with me. I'm trying to conjure my father,
age fourteen, as Caliban – picked by Mr Quinn
for the role he was born to play because
'I was the handsomest boy at school'
he'll say, straight faced, at fifty.
This isn't easy. I've only half the spell,
and I won't be born for twenty years.

[126] Donaghy, *The Shape of the Dance*, 37.

I'm trying for rainlight on Belfast Lough
and listening for a small, blunt accent
barking over the hiss of a stove getting louder like surf.
But how can I read when the schoolroom's gone
black as the hold of a ship? Start again.

Hair oil, boiled sweets…
But his paperbacks are crumbling in my hands,
seachanged bouquets, each brown page
scribbled on, underlined, memorized,
forgotten like used pornography:
The Pocket Treasury of English Verse,
How to Win Friends and Influence People,
Thirty Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary.

Fish stink, pitch stink, seaspray, cedarwood…
I seem to have brought us to the port of Naples,
midnight, to a shadow below deck
dreaming of distant island.
So many years, so many ports ago!
The moment comes. It slips from the hold
And knucklewalks across the dark piazza
sobbing *maestro! maestro!* But the duke's long dead
and all his magic books drowned.

Don Paterson's reading of this poem is rather straightforward.

> What's the island Donaghy's father-Caliban dreams of? The old homeland, Ireland, the enchanted isle of his early

> confinement and lowered expectations." Naples is New York; the journey there, as it was for most immigrants, was an aspirational one. But his father lost himself somewhere between exile and misplaced ambition, and in the end finds himself terribly led astray, with no teacher, and no home at all.[127]

Donaghy "conjures" his dead father in many poems. He represents tradition, family roots, the Irish homeland, and this is precisely what is also doing in this poem. However, I think this particular poem can be also read as an extended metaphor for the interrelation between language, meaning and the outer reality. The spell is what the reader encounters first at the beginning of the poem. It is a magic formula made of very real, touchable substances. The first recitation fails to conjure the poet's dead father because the poet has "only half" of the magic spell and, with a temporal dislocation typical of Donaghy, his birth is yet to come. The superimposition oftemporal planes is an essential feature of every invocation: past, present, and future collide and what is no more or what is out there is summoned here and now. Time in its relativity insists on requiring a chronological order thus making the enterprise fail. Donaghy's father at fourteen, picked for the role of Caliban, speaks with the voice of Donaghy's father at fifty while Donaghy himself is far from being born. The talisman becomes entangled, and the poet has to try another way out. Being a poet, it is sounds he tries next. It is the "blunt accent," the "hiss of a stove" he pays attention to, it is the Lough echoed in the surf, in the gone (final words of the penultimate two lines of the first stanza). It is in the strong monosyllabic cadence of the last line of the same stanza. The poet's ear moves to the iconic elements of the poetic language, to the surcharge of meaning attributed to what normally does not signify and this because only in them and through them the magic may happen.

The second stanza opens on half of the spell; a spell interruptus as if – contrary to what is commonly known about the enacting of any magical ritual – its repetition does not function. It is the written language that, as a possible replacement, manifests itself. All

[127] Paterson, *Smith*, 21.

the Shakespearian undertones are at work here. Ariel's lines about how the sea transforms and changes the bodies which drowned in it, parallel the crumbling of the books used by the poet's autodidact father to empower himself. The titles of those books are hilarious and there is more of a hint that an Oedipal murder is being committed behind the surface of esteem and recognition. Although being "underlined" and "memorized" these books are also forgotten, like (and the simile here comes with a bit of a shock) "used pornography." The excitement of the passing moment is long gone, dried, "pornography" points directly to the "vocabulary" of the last line of the stanza. All the stanzas, by the way, show an irregular number of lines: the first and the longest is thirteen lines (the ideal length of a sonnet according to Don Paterson), the second and the shortest (the interrupted one) is eight lines long, while the last one is nine lines.

The tone of the spell becomes darker, the stink acrider but the effort, although displaced, is accomplished. Time has become one - midnight, space has become one - the port of Naples - and the pronoun "us" means that also characters in the poem are reunited. The poet's father is no longer playing Caliban, he *is* Caliban, the transformation is fully achieved. It is as if in the metaphor, the vehicle, the boat with its dark hold, has completed its passage. The anti-climactic finale echoes the "used pornography" of the previous stanza. Caliban, set free, searches for his *maestro* but the Duke is "long dead" and "his magic books are drowned." The real exchange, Prospero teaching the language to Caliban happened elsewhere and in another time, behind the screen of the first quote of this chapter. The only voice which can be heard is Caliban's voice, the dead father's Caliban's voice consubstantial with the poet's voice, "the true performer, Donaghy implies, gets lost in the performance."[128] "You taught me language, and my profit on 't / is I know how to curse" says Caliban in Act I of *The Tempest*. To curse is exactly the same as to cast a spell: to use language in order to modify something out there in the world, to find a "tenuous connection" between a well-organised system of signifiers and the signified. The books are lost, the maestro is dead, the spell is only half cast and its effect results in

[128] Robert Archambeau, "His Swords and Armor: Remembering Michael Donaghy," in The Hopkins Review, Volume 10, Number 1, Winter 2017, p.33.

a displacement. However, Caliban is alive and the poem perfectly printed on the page in front of our very eyes. Language, seems to suggest Donaghy, is a curse to cast spells. There is no way out of its "transitive" function and the realm of magic is there to prove it.

> Poetry is associated with a specific – although not exclusive – form of language functioning: one that finds its law in the combining nature of language. It is precisely this sort of breaking lose from what Paul Valéry calls "transitive" language (language use) that allows the "impossible," the "unthinkable" to appear in language.[129]

"It is precisely this sort of breaking loose" from language which Donaghy and many others of the poets of the "New Gen" frantically tried to avoid. It would have meant in the case of Donaghy, as it still means for several of them, to convey the "unthinkable" or the "impossible" in a form as comprehensible as possible.

The second poem I would like to analyse is the last one from *Safest*, the posthumous book edited by Donaghy's wife, Maddy Paxman, in 2005. The book was titled after the "name of the computer file in which Michael had stored the poems towards his next collection… (previous folders were called 'Safe' and 'Safer')."[130] "It's a poem he wrote on commission for a children's poetry exhibition at Southbank, though he always felt it was a bit too strange and disturbing."[131] Despite the "failed" commission, he must have considered it adequate for a future inclusion in a new collection of poems. It is titled "Two Spells for Sleeping":

Eight white stones
in a moonlit garden,

[129] Isava, Luis Miguel, *Wittgenstein, Kraus and Valéry – A Paradigm for Poetic Rhyme and Reason*, New York, Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 2002.
[130] Maddy Paxman, "A note on title and content," in *Safest*, by Michael Donaghy (London: Picador, 2005).
[131] Maddy Paxman, email message to author, November 29, 2019.

to carry her safe
across the bracken
on a gravel path
like a silvery ribbon
seven eels in the urge of water
a necklace in rhyme
to help her remember
a river to carry her
unheard laughter
to light about her
weary mirror
six candles for a king's daughter five sighs for a drooping head
a prayer to be whispered
a book to be read
four ghosts to gentle her bed
three owls in the dusk falling
what is that name
you hear them calling?
In the soft dark welling,
two tales to be telling,
One spell for sleeping,
one for kissing,
For leaving.

"Disturbing" is a rather pertinent adjective to describe it. Its fragmentary sequence of elements helps build up a slant narrative developed as a countdown. Several elements of that sequence, interspersed with imagery referring the world of fairy tales, look ominous, unstable, subject to disquieting interpretations: the "eels" are in "urge of water," the light of the "candles" is fragile in its very essence and it is followed by "sighs" which in their

turn lead to "ghosts" and "owls," threatening presences, heard while calling a name. The sleeping invoked toward the end of the poem has a sinister aspect and the same can be said of the verbs that come immediately after, in rhyming positions, "kissing" and "leaving." The general atmosphere of the poem is perfectly described by Don Paterson in his remark:

> A spell should do its work by invisible means. If you understand it, you ruin the very mystery on which its efficacy depends. This poem was originally commissioned as a poem for children, but personally I wouldn't let any children near it. As beautiful as it is, I'm not convinced its double charm is age-appropriate, or that any child who heard it would necessarily wake up again; its title suggests that things might go either way.[132]

The twenty-six lines that form the poem do not seem to attract a particular attention, unless, as Paterson suggests, they imply the double of thirteen as a possible solution to the peculiarity of the pattern. Donaghy expressed several times his interest in the Fibonacci series (the mathematician, for example, is quoted in *Wallflowers*, his most important essay on personal poetics) and thirteen is a Fibonacci number, expressing in its relation of eight plus five the golden means (1, 61…) used by many architects in the past because it conveyed "perfection" in terms of correlation between its components. It is a fascinating theory still further reinforced by the idea (developed by Paterson and partly confirmed by Donaghy) that thirteen rather than fourteen would be the ideal length of a sonnet. Reading Donaghy in depth and becoming aware of the many tricks he usually employs behind the nonchalant façade of his poems, one is tempted to credit this theory. Besides, eight are the "objects" mentioned in the text and by archeologically scanning even more deeply the texture of "Two Spells for Sleeping," other traces might emerge. However, I find the first part of his remark more relevant. This poem seems to be literally pressed forward by its insistence on parallelism as the main propellent for meaning. It is

[132] Paterson, *Smith*, 204.

more obvious in the repetitive rhymes of the "-er" and "-ing" sounds at the end of the lines (thirteen in total, actually; exactly half the poem) and a bit less evident but clearly present in the repetition of nouns and infinitives of purpose. The reaching out of the meaning to exert its goal on the outside reality of the embodied signified is basically achieved through repetition. It is the mantra principle, the telling of the beads, the pranayama of breath, the body posture of the zen monk in the dojo. The negotiated structure and the area designated by the solid belief in a strict bond between that structure and its supposed effects on the outside reality, represent the "mysterious" solution to this poem. Moreover, its partial untranslatability in terms of pure meaning is an essential "rule" both of the magic and of the silent pact between the trickster and the believer. At its most compressed form, the spell can be retrieved in the single magic formula on which the poem analysed above partly relies.

> The ritual gesture wherein I hold the Jack of diamonds up for your scrutiny before changing it into the very card you picked earlier is hocus-pocus, a corruption of *hoc est corpus*, wherein I elevate a sliver of bread and change nothing of its appearance, though, as Aquinas tells us, the species of the Eucharist has been sanctified. The poetry readings I attend are sometimes like in-house performances at the Magic Circle.[133]

One cursory check of the etymology of the word "hocus-pocus" on the online version of the OED makes the issue more complex, the mystery more profound and the trick of the trickster perfectly accomplished:

> **Etymology:** Appears early in 17th cent., as the appellation of a juggler (and, apparently, as the assumed name of a particular conjuror) derived from the sham Latin formula employed by him: see below, and compare Grimm, *Hokuspokus*.

[133] Clare Brown and Don Paterson, eds., "Michael Donaghy," in *Don't Ask Me What I Mean: Poets in their Own Words* (London: Picador, 2003), 53.

The notion that *hocus pocus* was a parody of the Latin words used in the Eucharist, rests merely on a conjecture thrown out by Tillotson: see below.

1655 T. ADY *Candle in Dark* 29 I will speak of one man… that went about in King James his time…. who called himself, The Kings Majesties most excellent Hocus Pocus, and so was called, because that at the playing of every Trick, he used to say, *Hocus pocus, tontus talontus, vade celeriter*

jubeo, a dark composure of words, to blinde the eyes of the beholders, to make his Trick pass the more currantly without discovery.

*a*1694 J. TILLOTSON *Serm.* (1742) II. xxvi. 237 In all probability those common juggling words of *hocus pocus* are nothing else but a corruption of *hoc est corpus*, by way of ridiculous imitation of the priests of the Church of Rome in their trick of Transubstantiation.[134]

Roman Jakobson, ending his "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics" states: "Similarity superimposed on contiguity imparts to poetry its thoroughgoing symbolic, multiplex, polysemantic essence which is beautifully suggested by Goethe's "Anything transient is but a likeness."[135] We are back in the territory of conjunctive semiotics as well as in Winnicott's transitional space. Winnicott himself, as a matter of fact, makes its reappearance in the introduction to anthology *101 Poems about Childhood*, edited by Donaghy for Faber and Faber.

> When Rilke tells us that a headless statue looks at us, or Elizabeth Bishop tells us that a knife will not look at her, we say we're employing personification, but a substantial school of psychoanalysis traces all such metaphors back to the crib, to that "special" blanket or teddy bear, the "transitional object" by which toddlers negotiate separation from their mothers […]

[134] Oxford English Dictionary consulted online 25th November 2019 https://www-oedcom.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/view/Entry/87520?rskey=FQ5pW4&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid

[135] Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Poetry in Theory: An Anthology 1900–2000*, ed. Jon Cook (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 357–358.

> Some neurologists argue that as infants our consciousness is extraordinarily intense and receptive and that during this period we're terribly vulnerable, requiring longer periods of parenting than any other animal. They argue that language delimits our consciousness to manageable chunks, a powerful evolutionary tool advantage, like an opposable thumb. Only occasionally, they argue, are adults permitted to return to that awe-struck state before we framed the world in words.[136]

In this quote the first part of the chapter on the transitional space of tradition/form and the second part on the connection of word with world through language seem to find an ideal point of intersection. The exploratory stage characterised by exceptionally intense receptivity is juxtaposed to extreme vulnerability. Language, in its intermediary function preserves the magic and at the same time marks the limit of what we can manage. As adults, as Winnicott would argue, we will turn to "cultural spaces" to be able to find that explosive mixture once again.

"Machines" and "chora," Donaghy from a Kristevan perspective

In a chapter of her book *Revolution in Poetic Language* titled "The semiotic *chora*: Ordering the Drives" Julia Kristeva writes:

> We borrow the term *chora* from Plato's Timaeus to denote an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stasis. We differentiate this uncertain and indeterminate *articulation* from a *disposition* that already depends on representation, lends itself to phenomenological, spatial intuition and gives rise to a geometry.[137]

Kristeva's theory about poetic language is complex but it represents a perfect rendition of what I meant in the preface to the thesis by intrinsic pressure applied to whoever chooses poetry as a medium of expression. She divides language (and subjectivity) into

[136] Michael Donaghy, ed. *101 Poems about Childhood* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), XIV.
[137] Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1984, 27.

two fundamental levels or stages, i.e., the semiotic and the symbolic. The semiotic - contrary to what is commonly known as "semiotics," i.e., the study of system of signs - is the part of language that belongs to a preconscious, non- representational state. Based on kinetic, vocal and rhythmic impulses it reflects the stage of complete fusion in which the infant is yet uncapable to distinguish between what she is (as a process of subjectivation) and what her mother/world is. Following Lacan's theory, Kristeva argues that a process of active subjectivation begins only at the level of symbolic order, when the infant enters language and then society at large. The symbolic, like the representational, indicates a necessary "cut" with that early stage of complete fusion. When language makes its appearance, something is forever lost. Something, but not everything, Kristeva adds. A distant echo of non-informative language, a language of drives and fusion, still remains hidden somewhere and it is only through the "unnecessary," uninformative, and disruptive language of poetry that it can make its comeback. The concept of *chora* (from the ancient Greek word for "receptacle") captures the semiotic motility in its first phase. There is more to it:

> We emphasise the regulated aspect of the *chora*: its vocal and gestural organisation is subject to what we shall call an objective *ordering* (*ordonnancement*).[138]

Although, as I said, the receptacle of drives in its kinetic, gestural, and vocal aspects does not follow any representational principle seems nevertheless to be pre-set by and "ordering" predisposition. It is as if the *chora* tends, in its tension, towards a symbolic organisation despite, at the same time, refusing it. As highlighted before, Kristeva asserts that this primary force is partially maintained in all those aspects of the "symbolic" that do not accept the economic status of language as pure communication of a message from the sender to the receiver. This economic standing does not tolerate any type of loss or static during the delivery of a message. The charge accepted in the *chora* survives through

[138] Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 28-29.

all the attempts to be silenced and finds a way in several literary and, in particular, devices of poetic language such as the general principle of
repetition and its corollaries: parallelism through recurring formal aspects, rhyme, assonance, alliteration etc. etc. In the course of an interview Donaghy said:

> As Guillen said, "*Nombres estan sobre la patina de las cosas*" – names are a patina, a film, on the surface of things. But I believe there are particular uses of language that disrupt the patina, that momentarily short-circuit automatization and afford glimpses of the lost infantile consciousness, an experience tant can be ecstatic or nightmarish.[139]

Words employed by Donaghy such as "disrupt," "short-circuit," "infantile consciousness" are of particular interest in the development of the point I am trying to make. They are counterbalanced by those of Clive James:

> To his chief principle he gave the name "negotiation." A sufficiently tense diction, the alchemical pay-off, was, Donaghy argued, most likely to be obtained from a contest between what the poet aimed to say and the form in which he had chosen to say it. If the poet tied the creative process down to his initial commitment, with no formal pressure to force him to the unexpected, there was no contest; and a contest there had to be, no matter how loose the form. Always a great quoter, Donaghy, on this point, quoted Proust to telling effect: "The tyranny of rhyme forces the poet to the discovery of his finest lines."[140]

An "infantile consciousness," according to Donaghy and James, needs to search for an "ordering" guiding principle to activate the creative process. It can all be summed up in the term "negotiation." Negotiation defines, once again, a third space, a Winnicottian "transitional space" between the urge of expression and what is left (partially behind) in the course of interlocking.

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[139] Donaghy, *The Shape of the Dance*, 193.
[140] Clive James, "The Donaghy Negotiation," in https://www.clivejames.com/the-donaghy-negotiation.html on 11th August 2021.

Michael Donaghy's first poem in his first collection published in America is titled Machines and provides, although partly at a level that concerns meaning, some examples:[141]

Dearest, note how these two are alike:
This harpsicord pavanne by Purcell
And the racer's twelve speed bike.

The machinery of grace is always simple.
This chrome trapezoid, one wheel connected
To another of concentric gears,
Which Ptolemy dreamt of and Schwinn perfected,
Is gone. The cyclist, not the cycle, steers.
And in the playing, Purcell's chords are played away.

So this talk, or touch if I was there,
Should work in effortless gadgetry of love,
Like Dante's heaven, and melt into the air.

If it doesn't, of course, I've fallen. So much is chance,
So much agility, desire, and feverish care,
As bicyclists and harpsichordists prove

Who only by moving can balance
Only by balancing move.

[141] Michael Donaghy, 'Machines," in *Slivers*, Chicago: Thompson Hill, Publishing, 1985. It remains in the same position also in *Shibboleth*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988 – the first book published by a British publisher.

In this subtle intricacy of witticism, metaphysical reminiscences, Dantean *terza rima*, Donaghy shows his talent in balancing a loose, colloquial register with a constant and unremitting attention to form. "For Donaghy" - as Joshua Mehigan reminds us – "a poem's conceit might be as much an organizing principle as its formal structure."[142] There are two passages in the poem which I are of particular interest in helping to clarify the point I am trying to make. The line "So this talk, or touch if I was there" intercepts the physical (touch) and the linguistic (talk) both at a conjunctive and disjunctive level. "Talk" and "touch," conjoined by a consonant are at the same time separated by their respective vowel sounds; though the vowel sound of the conjunction that separates them, "or" shares with "talk" the same IPA vowel symbol /ɔ:/. The ephemeral element of the love poem finds its connection in the rhyme there/air – so that the physical presence of the poet or his absence though writing find a common purpose at their vanishing point.

> He saw poetry as an aural art, rooted in the community of performer and audience, and felt that his ability to convene and commune with an audience was proof enough of the power of formal verse. The poet's freedom didn't mean an imperative to innovate as much as it meant the ability to move freely among received forms.[143]

Archambeau's words can be read as an attempt to locate the Winnicottian transitional space mentioned above but also the intersection through the *chora* of an ordering impulse and its full realisation in the symbolic order of social exchange. According to Donaghy, a poet, therefore, feels free to innovate because he possesses
a "transitional object" – his relation to a formal structure – that allows him to experiment and innovate. What cannot and must not be overlooked is the fact that, as Kristeva illustrates, it is the medium itself, poetic language, that, without forgetting its own

[142] Joshua Mehigan, "The interior of a heron's egg: Michael Donaghy, 1954-2004," *The New Criterion*, April 2005, 78.
[143] Robert Archambeau, "His Swords and Armor: Remembering Michael Donaghy." *The Hopkins Review* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2017): 3–40, 36.

motility and energy charge pulsating from the semiotic, dictates and points towards an ordering component. A poet like Donaghy, and others with him among the 1994 New Gen, seemed to be in search of a balance that lies somewhere between the movement of motility charges and the ordering aspect reflected in form. Form constitutes a process, in the act – "a form of knowing, not […] an object of knowledge" – as Angela Leighton suggests.[144]

Conclusion: Time, memory, and conjuring

In the first part of his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent"[145], T.S. Eliot expresses a new idea of tradition. Rather than underlining the diachronic development of tradition in time, he emphasises its synchronous and cyclic nature. What ensues is the sense of collapse between past and present experienced by every poet during the creative process that leads to the actual realisation of a work of art. Besides, time has become cyclical, and it is described as bidirectional in its constant redefinition and reinterpretation that both past and present works exercise on their mutual interpenetration. The space defined by Eliot, therefore, seems a transitional one and, by its very nature, in constant redefinition. The underlying "structure" on which tradition seems to be based in Eliot's terms, appears in its timeless complexity more fluid and interestingly unstable. It opposes that rigidity and unidirectional notion of linearity proposed by literary studies around the times when the essay was published.

In the second part of his 1919 essay, Eliot proceeds to define the impersonal nature of every work of art. The elusive balance between unconscious and conscious aspects actively at work during the creative process are subtly identified. According to Eliot, the most common mistake a poet can make is confusing these two distinct moments and it is

[144] Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 27.
[145] T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and Individual Talent," in *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen and Co. 1920), 42-53.

from this confusion that a work of art might become too "personal" and therefore less valuable.

Haunts

Don't be afraid, old son, it's only me,
though not as I've appeared before,
on the battlements of your signature,
or margin of a book you can't throw out,
or darkened shop front where your face
first shocks itself into a mask of mine,
but here, alive, one Christmas long ago
when you were three, upstairs, asleep,
and haunting *me* because I conjured you
the way that child you were would cry out
waking in the dark, and when you spoke
in no child's voice but out of radio silence,
the hall clock ticking like a radar blip,
a bottle breaking faintly streets away,
you said, as I say now, *Don't be afraid*.

December 27 1999.

This is the concluding poem from *Conjure*, Donaghy's last book and its sense of finality is difficult to avoid. The poet has now relocated in space and time, and he is no longer trying to conjure his father, but, as the father he has become in the meantime, he is evoking his son. The definition of time in this poem, as often happens in Donaghy, is puzzling and illusory; even more so because it is the only poem in the book which is dated. The father's words which apparently seem to come from the future, are actually in the "now" of the last line. The "radio silence" of the son's voice

(or maybe it would be better to say the "static" of the son's voice) instead, which seems to come from the past, actually comes from a future in which the father will be no more. The intermingling, the intersection is revealed in the last line where the "you said" in the past simple magically meets the present simple of "as I say" further reinforced by that adverb of time "now." As Don Paterson states:

> …it's important that it *does* read as though several dimensions have been balled up into a very small space, since that's exactly what the poem seeks to prove: that linear time, which appears to do little but separate us from each other, is just an illusion.[146]

We retain, in ours, not only the graphic autograph of our parents but also their genetic signature. Abstract planes collide, as it has been noted before, with very real ones. The swift movement of the pen signing a letter is only apparently free. Its strokes are, in a way which is difficult to determine, partly structured by the habit of seeing and therefore internalising our parents' gestures in producing their own signature. It is as if Michael Donaghy is trying to say that there is always a "persona" in the "personal." The fleeting reflection returned from a shop window in which we perceive an expression, a compression of the mouth to a fine line, a hardening of the eyes in remembrance, can be "shocking" because we realise that they are not completely and truly ours. Nothing is, seems to add Donaghy.

However, and it is an element already highlighted in the first two parts of this chapter, no matter how "shocking" this realisation can be, it reveals itself to be consolatory. There are two lines, towards the end of the poem "the hall clock ticking like a radar blip / a bottle breaking faintly streets away" during which the reader is suddenly taken out from the one long and single sentence narrative unfolding and pointing to its finale. Sound intrudes in the first simile between the clock ticking and the radar blip. Scanning and punctuating time, the clock and the radar seem to be looking for a presence. The outside

[146] Paterson, *Smith*, 121.

world is the faint noise of a bottle breaking, streets away. The strong consonantal repetition of the labial "b" with the interruption of the air flow on the lips (blip/bottle/breaking) helps to soften the intrusion. A similar function is performed by the adverb "faintly" with its powerful association in Irish literature to the iconic chiasmus "falling faintly" and "faintly falling" of the snow in the ending of Joyce's "The Dead" from *The Dubliners*. The transitional space between the inside and the outside, the persona and the personal, the presence and its embodiment, the sound and its softening prepare the reader for a final meeting. There is only one "present," as in the first poem analysed above, and it is a safe space where nobody needs to be afraid. Commenting on that last sentence, Don Paterson writes:

> Don't be afraid. The old son's words of comfort for his father are simultaneously spoken, quoted and also borrowed by the ghost. The poem has one of the most complex and sophisticated relationships to the concepts of time and tense of any I know, but its apparent illogic is really a proof. In "Burnt Norton" from *Four Quartets*, Eliot writes: *Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future / And time future contained in time past. / If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable*. To which this poem adds: "Yes – but *we* are redeemed by this circumstance."[147]

What Don Paterson does not highlight in this remark, is the movement that led Eliot to his "unredeemable" conception of time and the perspective from which that line was written. The fragmentary structure and the mythical method employed in the *Waste Land* required a cyclical concept of time. The "Shantih Shantih Shantih" and the collapse of quotations at the end of the *Waste Land*, left space for an eternal return of the same typical of Eastern philosophical traditions. The converted Anglican Eliot of the *Four Quartets* wrote from a completely different perspective; time, at least in human terms, is rigorously and biblically denoted by a beginning and an end, a second coming. It is only and rigorously from a divine perspective that time "is eternally present" and therefore, for the

[147] Paterson, *Smith*, 121.

limited human being, "unredeemable." However, at the core of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, lies a desperate research for moments of intersection of timeless and time, reached through a contemplative way of life. As K. P. Kramer writes in *Redeeming Time T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets*:

> Four Quartets […] embodies a meditative alternative to being swallowed up in a race to save time, or spend time, or slow time, or find time. Rather than trying to escape the habit inducing flux of time's enchainment, or locate its secrets from those who predict future, the poet, borrowing from the great classical mystics, accentuates four inter-spiritual practices though which time-bound routinization may be, temporarily at least, overcome.[148]

Yet again, although from different points of view, the objective of poets belonging to diverse "factions" does not look dissimilar. The difference, as Donaghy and, in general, all those who inhabit a more transitional space, divine and human at the same time, seem to suggest, the option remains magically open.

> Development for Winnicott begins with a magical act: the infant's purely imaginative process of conjuring up a mother he needs. At the very beginning fantasy is not a substitute for reality but the first method of finding it.[149]

Adam Phillips is discussing one of the key passages in the complex process of the infant's development according to Winnicott. It is a passage that stresses how, in opposition to Freud, the English psychoanalyst considered the intrusion of reality (the symbolic in Julia Kristeva's terms) not only as frustrating but "potentially enriching." The magical creation of an illusion encouraged by the mother (in Lacanian terms we are moving to the realm of the Imaginary) possesses a specific quantum of creative stimulus

[148] Paul Kenneth Kramer, *Redeeming Time, T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets* (Plymouth: Cowley Publications, 2007). Kindle Edition.
[149] Phillips, *Winnicott*, 84.

and energy. It is through fantasy that the baby finds reality or, better, cope with a frustrating reality. A method she will never forget, albeit unconsciously; a double glance that encapsulates both a backward and forward movement, an interplay occurring on the border as explained in the quotation by Winnicott mentioned above, the border to which transitional phenomena belong.[150]

I would conclude this chapter quoting the work of Lewis A. Kirshner and the book he edited on the relationship between Winnicott and Lacan (the next chapter is dedicated to another interplay, i.e., Lacan and Don Paterson). He writes:

> Subjectivity for Winnicott and Lacan had the paradoxical property of being both a product of external determinants and a unique sort of creative freedom. The infant-mother relationship, for example, facilitates ego identifications and construction of a false self but also the possibility of an emergent transitional space – the space of a "third" – in which the child can create its own meanings.[151]

The "thirdness" of the Winnicottian space is not devoid of ambiguities but, as I have tried to elucidate, it finds a correlative in the poetical practise in the way Michael Donaghy and other poets from the New Gen locate themselves within a language that lives of interplay and borders. In Donaghy, in particular, form/tradition, meanings, innovation and physical performance require that a pact with a reader is signed and respected so that also the reader can be enraptured, allured, and then transported to that space. However, the territory in which poet and reader meet is far from being pacified or consolatory. Referring to Kristeva's theoretical frame on the symbolic/semiotic relationship and the concept of the *chora* she develops, I attempted to clarify the reason why poetic language, even though declared as "readable" by who employ it, is continuously acted upon by other forces, internal in this case. The pressure is not only from the outside of form, tradition, and material circumstances, but, Kristeva affirms, is

[150] See Lavinia Gomez, *An Introduction to Object Relations* (London: Free Associations, 1997), 92–97 for a very clear explanation of 'transitional phenomena."

[151] Lewis A. Kirshner, ed. *Between Winnicott and Lacan: A Clinical Engagement* (London: Routledge), XV.

also from motility charges transferred, often unconsciously, in poetic language itself. They reveal themselves as “revolutions,” whose reach and compass need to be further investigated.

Transitional spaces as opposition and conflict: Don Paterson's poetry

"Somewhere between ellipsis and precision"

Introduction

> My dad found a wee school jotter of mine the other week in the loft; it must've been written when I was six or so, one of those story-and-picture jobs we were obliged to write up every morning. One entry dated December '69 reads, "when I grow up I am going to be a peot, and rite *peoms*."[152]

This quotation comes from an essay published in 1996, two years after the New Gen launch, and three after Don Paterson's first book of poems *Nil Nil* in 1993. The essay itself, part of a series commissioned from poets as diverse as Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Michael Longley and collected under the title of *How Poets Work* is revealing. Rereading himself after twenty-seven years, Paterson must have found different reasons to be fascinated by what otherwise could have been considered a common spelling mistake at that age. It is not surprising that he decides to place it at the beginning of his detailed article, as if it were the first threshold the reader must step across to access his poetic world. The reader herself, on her side, could easily fall into the trap of setting aside the repeated spelling inversion as a minor incident within a bemusing anecdote and then proceed to construct a more straightforward narrative: that is, the instructive story of a poetic vocation that has always been present from a very early age. However, I am in the position (almost half a century after the event occurred) to read Don Paterson reading "his wee school jotter" more than twenty-five years later, and the following literary production of that young "peot" seems to point toward a completely different and less

[152] Tony Curtis, ed., *How Poets Work* (Bridgend: Seren, 1996), 155.

naïve angle of interpretation. Hesitating for a while on that threshold and then accessing it is what I intend to do in this chapter.

The capsized diphthong calls immediate attention to the signifier—to what De Saussure defined in his *Course in General Linguistics* as the *image acoustique*, the "material" part of the word—while at the same time, in that infinitesimal intermission before we capture the "correct" word, so to speak, we too are left hovering in a contradictory, erratic territory where language seems to unveil the nuts and bolts of its independent functioning. The reader, for a brief moment, is stuck in a place where, as Ann Dobie writes,

> language becomes independent of what is external to it, and we cannot go outside it. Nevertheless, we spend our lives trying to stabilize this system, so that meaning and self become possible.[153]

It is precisely the tension between that space of linguistic independence and Paterson's attempt to continually stabilise its system that I would like to investigate in this chapter. As the anecdote reveals, rather than a precocious poetic talent, what is at stake in the "peot" anecdote is the constant balance the Scottish poet has been pursuing during his more than a three-decade-long career as poetry author; from the poetry process defined in the essay mentioned above as a form of "shamanism," a "mystery" to be kept at a "pre- or sub-linguistic level," to the almost "Kantian" great bulk of the 732-page treatise *The Poem* published in 2018, where not a single stone of that very same process of writing poetry is left unturned.[154] This volume's aim, as stated in the preface, is to establish that "the poetic function of language reflexively attempts to
restore it to something capable of telling the truth."[155] This tension and torsion of the language and structures between an energetic and riotous level (unconscious) and the

[153] Ann B. Dobie, *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism* (Stamford: Cengage Learning, 2015), 205.
[154] Don Paterson, *The Poem: Lyric, Sign, Metre* (London: Faber and Faber, 2018).
[155] Paterson, XVIII.

several acts of speech which tend to confine it within a structural system, regularly opens fractures not only at a theoretical level but also in the poetic "subjectivation" of Don Paterson. A thorough investigation of these engagements will be conducted by analysing several poems, mainly from his early collections.

As explained in the introduction to this dissertation, its object of analysis focuses on selecting some so-called "mainstream" poets who played a decisive role in the events represented by the 1994 New Gen launch, and the subsequent publication of the homonymous issue of the *Poetry Review*. Referencing Walter Benjamin's terminology, that series of events can be defined as a constellation: "a complexly interwoven set of historical features that nevertheless form a 'whole' or 'idea'."[156] The poets' constant insistence on some formal structures, and the reference to a specific tradition of making verse which keeps meaning, reader, and accessibility under strict surveillance, is nevertheless captured in subtle specific nuances by each poet. Therefore, as exemplified in the previous chapter on Michael Donaghy, every poet seems to require their own frame of conceptualisation.

While Winnicott and his concept of "transitional space" seemed to perfectly fit the playful and highly inventive language of the self, employed by Donaghy in relation to the idea of structure as mentioned above, a different, somehow more complex conceptual apparatus is required for Paterson's work. The early and middle work of
Lacan, of the so-called "structuralist phase," represents an instrumental and intellectually stimulating approach to language capable, in my view, of putting the tension and torsion I referred to earlier in this chapter inside a pertinent frame of reference. More specifically, I will be using concepts and theory as expressed in four essays included by the French psychoanalyst in his highly idiosyncratic and complex collection of writings called *Écrits*: "Seminar on The Purloined Letter," "The Mirror Stage as Formative of I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," and "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or

[156] Nathan Ross, "Walter Benjamin's First Philosophy: Towards a Constellational Definition of Experience." *Open Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2017).

Reason Since Freud."[157] Moreover, among the three registers, the Imaginary, the Real, and the Symbolic which constitute Lacan's theoretical frame, the movement from the Imaginary to the Symbolic will be explored in connection to Paterson's poetry. In fact, in conjoining Freudian instances on the unconscious and the systematic approach to language by linguists such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson, Lacan posits himself right at the intersection of the "pre- or sub- linguistic level" of a poetic language defined by the early Paterson and what the poet always seems on the verge of attempting, i.e. his wish for an all encompassing Aristotelian system "wherein each part is naturally suited to function in the service of each other part."[158] As Anika Lemaire states,

> Lacan is indeed a structuralist then: the unconscious is the structure hidden beneath an apparently conscious and lucid self-disposition. Lacan will add that the unconscious is structured like a language. The repressed is of the order of the signifier, and the unconscious signifiers are organized in a network governed by various relationships of associations, above all metaphoric and metonymic discourse.[159]

The pressure and the conflict caused by Paterson's conception that "there's just a *rightness* to it" (where "it" stands for the sonnet form) derived "out of evolutionary necessity,"[160] the phono-semantic stabilisation of the sign as a non-arbitrary intersection of signifier and signified, "we hear, somehow, the roundness of the *moon*, the ruminativeness of *memory*, the hiss of the *sea*,"[161] and the Lacanian passage where "the

[157] The four essays are included in the volume by Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006): "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'," 6–48; "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," 75–81; "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," 197–268; "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud," 412–441.
[158] Herman Rapaport, *The Literary Theory Toolkit: A Compendium of Concepts and Method* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 170.
[159] Anika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan* (London: Routledge, 1977).
[160] Don Paterson, ed., *101 Sonnets: From Shakespeare to Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), XIII.
[161] Paterson, *The Poem*, 37.

association of the signifier and signified is left completely open to aleatory possibilities of combination" need to be conflated.[162] Even more so, because they leave traces of an inner conflict on the Scottish poet's verses. They point from the very beginning, as in "The Ferryman's Arms," the first poem of the first collection, to "somewhere unspeakable." Paterson's conflict leads the reader to another third place, where:

> The foaming lips mussiattes endlessly,
> Trying, with a nutter's persistence, to read
> And reread the shoreline

These traces are *Hiding in Full View*, to quote the title of a book produced as a collaboration between Paterson and the painter Alison Watt for an exhibition held in Edinburgh in 2011.[163] "At the spiral's heart, there is a hollow sun / by which we are constructed and undone" reads a line from that volume and it seems to echo Lacan's transitional process of symbolisation which has:

> The creative power to confer identity on the members of a culture, providing modes of living that may be entirely distinct from those of other groups, but it does so only at a huge price, the cost of covering over the fundamental nothingness that forms its foundation.[164]

Concealment and protection from loss overlap in the semantic field created by the verb "covering" in the quotation. They reverberate in the "constructed" and the "undone" of Paterson's poem, above where even the sun hides a hollow in its full view. It is precisely this transition back and forth from the realm of the Imaginary to that of the Symbolic that leaves behind traces of gaps, cracks, and fissures. The Law, in Lacanian terms, the formal structure pursued as "momentary stay against confusion" (to use a quotation from Frost, a member of Paterson's pantheon of poets) opens a necessary void which, although

[162] Joel Dor, *Introduction to the Reading of Lacan (Lacanian Clinical Field)* (New York: Other Press, 1998).
[163] Alison Watt and Don Paterson, *Hiding in Full View*, Edinburgh: Ingleby Gallery, 2011.
[164] Gilbert D. Chaitin, *Rhetoric and Culture in Lacan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 4.

continuously stifled, cannot but open a hollow in language and trigger the mechanism of desire for a lost, irretrievable object. As Lemaire states: "Entry into the Symbolic order is therefore the precondition for singularity."[165]

However, before delving into the interlocking of poems and theory, an analysis of how Paterson's poetry has been described and received, and the effects that it has produced on the British literary context represent a useful introduction to the arguments I am going to develop later in the chapter.

Surfaces and undercurrents: a short history of Don Paterson's reception in contemporary criticism

Don Paterson's first collection *Nil Nil* was published by Faber in 1993. It has been followed by another six collections, two books of translations/versions (from Machado and Rilke), three books of aphorisms, three books of literary criticism (on Michael Donaghy, Shakespeare, plus the aforementioned *The Poem*) and six works as editor (including a controversial anthology of British poets edited with Charles Simic for an American audience).

While most reviewers and essayists point their fingers to the dazzling and sophisticated talent of the young poet from the very beginning of his career, they also tend to pinpoint, albeit retracing it in different aspects, a shadowy pattern and overdetermination of meaning. Exemplary from this point of view is James Wood's review published in 1994, where he writes:

> Paterson has an enormous talent, though he needs to discipline it. He needs to avoid the blokeish bluntness of Simon Armitage […] …above all, he needs to develop his notion of what is permissible within the poem. At present, his poems are too enigmatic, foreshortened; they are a kind of suggestive nuzzling rather than a thread of thought. They hang, in their

[165] Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan*, 8.

> stillness, like the flags of very obscure countries: you recognize some of the colours, some of the stripes and badges dazzle: but you can't quite place them.[166]

According to Wood, the lack of discipline accompanied to a misunderstanding of what is "permissible" in poetry making, is responsible for poems that are "enigmatic" and "foreshortened." The metaphor of the flag deserves some attention. Stuck in their stillness, they are obviously not doing what they are supposed to do, that is, "wave." The image is made even eerier by the fact that again, as in the "peot" anecdote at the beginning of the chapter, their "meaning" remains unstable, calling for a structure but unable to give it a definite shape. Conventionally, flags represent countries, but there they stand, motionless, impenetrable signifiers drawing attention only to themselves. The colours and stripes which adorn them suggest a referent, but no explorer would ever be able to plant them in a newly discovered and conquered country. Unplaceable places will remain a constant pattern in Paterson's poetry. Although in a completely different context, this dual sliding is stressed twenty years later by David Wheatley:

> Paterson's poems display the most classicist surface of any New Generation poet and the most turbulent undercurrents. The sexual politics of his early work will date, if they have not already done so, but their effect on his formal evolution remains very much a work in progress.[167]

The "classicist" surface versus "the most turbulent undercurrents" highlighted by Wheatley seem to hint at the fact that while the formal exuberance of Paterson's early work has found discipline in structure and form, an untamed poetical libido resists confinement and finds a way ("effect" is the word used by the Irish critic) to propagate its energy upwards. "A witty, dandiacal poet with a taste for the erotic and elaborate Borgesian narratives" is Sean O'Brien's concise and lapidary description, which once again places Paterson's oeuvre as caught in a persistent oscillation between the libidinal

[166] James Wood, "Ever so comfy," *London Review of Books* 16, no. 6 (March 1994).
[167] Wheatley, *Contemporary British Poetry*, 96.

forces of the erotic and the enigmatic and cerebral architectural narratives designed by the Argentinian writer.[168]

In Paterson's portrait sketched for the *Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Poetry*, Alan Gillis writes of "pages plagued by pull towards recesses, the subconscious and negation, often figured through a play between darkness and light" and then he adds:

> Paterson's poetry is notable for the intensity with which its poems are clamped to their particulars. The manner in which they play indefinite and disturbing suggestion off detailed but askew imagery is striking, and their absorption in peculiar detail creates an ambivalence through which they evoke deeper significance.[169]

Once again, the oppositional topology of a deeper significance and the "absorption in peculiar detail" draw a conflictual representation between surfaces in full light and profundities plunged into darkness. Peter Howarth seems to prefer a horizontal cleft to a vertical one, but the concept expressed does not diverge that much; he detects, in fact, a "rift between pushy, boastful narrative voice versus anti-humanist sentiment" in an "unstable combination."[170] In a recent review following the latest collection of poems by Paterson, titled *Zonal* (2020), Kate Kellaway catches the poet in the usual territory, "a mix of disclosure and disguise."[171]

Surfaces, in general, have attracted much attention from critics and fellow poets. Jamie McKendrick states that Paterson possesses "a pitch-perfect sense of traditional form" accompanied by an "impressive linguistic range";[172] Sarah Broom is on a similar

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[168] Sean O'Brien, "Contemporary British Poetry," *A Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry*, ed. Neil Robert (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).
[169] Alan Gillis, "Don Paterson," in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Poetry*, eds. Matt McGuire and Colin Nicholson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 177.
[170] Peter Howarth, "Degree of Famousness", in *The London Review of Books*, Vol. 35, N. 6, 21 March 2013
[171] Kate Kellaway, "Zonal by Don Paterson review – rich, masked musings on midlife crisis," *The Guardian*, April 19, 2020.
[172] Jamie McKendrick, "Contemporary Poetries in English, c.1980 to the present," in *The Cambridge History of English Poetry*, ed. Michael O'Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

wavelength: "He employs a linguistic register which is much more 'literary' in its range, and places emphasis on formal patterning."[173] In her volume, *Beyond the Lyric*, a map of contemporary British poetry, Fiona Sampson files Paterson's work under the label "The New Formalists" together with Ciaran Carson and Mimi Khalvati, and she perceives a progressive honing

of forms "in his work since the millennium, where it emerges from the more generalized economy and focus of his first collections."[174]

Another issue is usually in the spotlight when criticism of Paterson's work is involved, namely the question of "class." Comparison with Harrison's poetry (extreme formal dexterity used against the colloquial, slang, and sometimes expletive language) attracts the attention of Sarah Broom, but the equivalence does not seem to be convincing for the critic in the first stance: "we begin to feel that *his* relationship with the previous generation, and indeed with the whole issue of class is much more complex"[175]—an opinion shared by Jamie McKendrick in the essay already quoted. The subject is the issue of class conflict:

> Affecting as its treatment by Harrison can be, it is not the kind of question that will detain Paterson as a poet for long, as the terms of British class conflict are entrenched and static and Paterson's net is cast wider.[176]

Expanding on the net image, one is tempted to say that Paterson's ability consists of slipping through many of the nets cast by whoever tries to pinpoint his art. A similar attempt would find similar issues when debating his belonging to a Scottish school or tradition. His multifaceted talent seems to look in several directions at the same time. Requested to name three influential twentiethcentury books for the New Gen Issue of *Poetry Review*, he lists Louis MacNeice's *Collected Poems*, Elizabeth Bishop's *Collected*

[173] Sarah Broom, *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 95.
[174] Sampson, *Beyond the Lyric*, 227-245.
[175] Broom, *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, 95.
[176] McKendrick, "Contemporary Poetries in English," 1001.

Poems, and Paul Muldoon's *Why Brownlee Left*—Anglo-Irish mainly with a touch of Atlantic coolness. It would certainly be incorrect to state that the Scottish tradition does not play its relevant role in Paterson's poetic education but as Heather O'Donoghue reminds us in her "Historical and Archaeological: The Poetry of Recovery and Memory," Paterson has described himself as "not really a poet of place" while at the same time exploiting the potentialities of displacement "in a postmodernist depiction of the past" to avoid the risk of nostalgia.[177]

I would like to conclude this cursory excursus in the history of Paterson's poetry reception by quoting a rather extensive passage from Sean O'Brien's *The Deregulated Muse* that seems to sum up perfectly some of the points I explored in the introduction, touched on in this section and that I am going to research in the rest of the chapter:

> Paterson could be seen as a perfect pupil of this teaching: the formal accomplishment of his work, where the influence of the mandarin Muldoon is married with a solid-bodied rendering of objects, is emphasized to the point where it becomes an important part of the subject. But what he does *not* write will also exert an effect on his poems. Paterson's position might seem the inevitable result of a certain kind of sophistication.[178]

The enigmatic intrusion of "what he does *not* write will also exert an effect on his poem" among the "formal accomplishment," the "solid rendering of objects," the "sophistication" open a space and a contradiction. What Paterson's reader and critic must manage is, as O'Brien concludes, something that is not "physically" present but "exerts an effect." It is precisely the conflictual nature of that territory that I will explore in the following sections.

[177] Heather O'Donoghue, "Historical and Archaeological: The Poetry of Recovery and Memory," in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, ed. Peter Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 353.
[178] Sean O'Brien, *The Deregulated Muse*, 266.

"In the beginning was the word, not the world": Walking the tightrope of the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real in Lacan's theory of the subject

"The work isn't you. It's supposed to proceed from a more generous instinct than that," states Don Paterson in an interview for *The Guardian*.[179] Ten years earlier, as Ben Wilkinson reminds us in his perceptive reading of "An Elliptical Stylus,"

> the poet has asserted his belief that "poetry is vertical, invocatory, […] things are called down from above by the mere intonation of their names." He goes on to conclude that "for me there's no 'as if' in poetry. In the beginning was the word, not the world, and poetry reminds us of this continually."[180]

"The intonation of names," the word/*logos* as beginning, the "instinct" preceding the subject are all reminders of the primacy attributed by Lacan to language in the formation of subjectivity. Paterson appears to be aware of this process of subject formation and the ensuing necessity to navigate across the Symbolic, but at the same time he does not seem to be ready to wholly remove the signified or even the "referent" as constitutive elements of his poetry. The question solicited by Edward Larissy's comment on this very delicate passage deserves full attention and an attempt to a reply:

> One question this chapter poses is why Paterson would write poetry at all, since this too seems to amount to a mere game: the artist plays with the verbal apparatus of meaning but fails to deliver any. He floats the idea that he is unable to raise the lyric score above zero, and is locked into stalemate.[181]

[179] Nicholas Wroe, "Leading light," *The Guardian*, September 25, 2006.
[180] Ben Wilkinson, "Something axiomatic on the nature of articulacy," 597–609.
[181] Larissy, "No-Score Drawing," 50.

Before analysing the first poem in Paterson's first collection which, in my view, perfectly describes that tension between the imaginary and the symbolic, it is essential to briefly summarise Lacan's theory of the unconscious being structured like a language.

Borrowing heavily from De Saussure's new linguistics theory and Levi Strauss's anthropology discoveries, the French psychoanalyst (and philosopher, even if he despised that definition) inaugurated his "return to Freud" by positioning the process of subjectivation as caught in a triadic intersection of forces that defines its structure. The first register is defined by Lacan as "Imaginary" and it is described in his seminal essay "The Mirror Stage as Formative of I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." (Winnicott himself was attracted by that essay but, coming from a completely different perspective, notoriously misinterpreted it) Let us follow Darian Leader in a concise summary of this first phase:

> Lacan's idea was that, in our infantile situation of incoordination and helplessness, we identify with images that seem to hold the promise of wholeness and completeness: we see ourselves as more powerful or capable than we are in visual images outside ourselves. The image could be our own mirror reflection or the image of another child.[182]

This search for a wholeness and completeness outside us is not without consequences. As Lacan himself writes in the "mirror stage" paper:

> This form would, moreover, have to be called the "Ideal-I" – if we wanted to translate it into a familiar register – in the sense that it will also be the rootstock of secondary identification, this latter term subsuming the libidinal normalization functions. But the important point is that this form situated the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather, that will only asymptomatically approach the subject's becoming, no matter how successful the

[182] Darian Leader, *What is Madness?* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 46.

> dialectal synthesis by which he must resolve, as I, his discordance with his own reality.[183]

What Lacan is describing in this passage is the "fictional direction" taken from the ego/I, and its discordance, from a very early stage within his own reality. It is only the first of a series of ruptures as a consequence of which the "I" or the "ego" never comes to coincide with the "subject."[184] Besides, this primary and pre-social identification posits the prime mover of a never-ending succession of subsequent identifications that will continue to remodel the ego. It is the first and fundamental division between Lacan's idea of the subject as a fractured being and the completeness of the self as the basic element of a fulfilled and successful relation between the "good enough mother" and the child in Winnicott's theory. The lack is there from the very beginning and its necessity will be formally sealed by the next step, through which the child moves from the Imaginary realm to the Symbolic one. It is precisely at this point that language begins to operate in its function:

> After the primary act of self-recognition, in which the baby has identified itself as an Ideal-I in the mirror, the elaboration of the ego comes with the gradual acquisition of language. The baby sees in the mirror the object that is itself, and hears its mother name it: *Tom, Ellie*, etc. It has heard its name before, of course but now, it affixes it to the image in the mirror, and can first formulate that's Tom/Ellie, that's *me*. Me is the objective case of the personal pronoun and very shortly after it has been an object, the child begins to attribute traits and

[183] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, 95.

[184] It must be remembered that Freud never coined the terms "ego," "superego," and "id." He always wrote "das ich," "uber-ich," and "das Es," which would translate simply and straightforwardly as "the I," "super-I" or "over-I" and "the It"; in France, this was translated as "le moi," "le sur-moi," and "le ça." Freud was very anxious about translations of his works, and his fears were well-founded. The first of his books to be translated into English, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, contained his formulation of "das ich" […] Brill's (the translator) substitution of the Latin "ego" for "das Ich" immediately deprived it of the emotional and completely personal force of a simple "I"; Brill and subsequent translators did not see the subjectivity inherent in "Ich" was important, or that his everyday plainness was a defence against the facile affixing to it of corrupting meanings." Lionel Bally, *Lacan* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 32–33.

> characteristics to this "me"; through identification with the image, the individual speaks as an actor would.[185]

The "me" as an object outside the self is the so-called stage of *méconnaissance*, misrecognition, a "word encompassing non-recognition of" and "obliviousness." As Bally adds "the ego is what a person says of him/herself; the Subject is the unrecognized self that is speaking." One recognises himself in the object/image reproduced in the mirror and therefore misrecognises and obviates himself at the same time. The process of setting the apt environment for the full realisation of the linguistic function is now activated and another fracture appears. It is the perfect timing for the symbolic third.

> Lacan conceived of the symbolic order as a totalizing concept in the sense that it marks the limit of the human universe. We are born into language – the language – the language through which the desires of others are articulated and through which we are forced to articulate our own desire. We are locked within what Lacan calls a circuit of discourse.[186]

A second necessary rupture is introduced here. The child gives up her world of certainties and hands herself over to a complex and interrelated system of relationships and differences, structured in a way not too dissimilar to De Saussure's theory of linguistic relations, position, and value or Levi-Strauss's outlines of kinship interactions. Lacan will come to define this symbolic order as the "Name of the Law,"
or "The Name of the Father" in a very original interpretation of Freud's Oedipal complex.

> A defining feature of the symbolic order is the negativity it introduces, this distance from the supposed immediacy of experience. Entering the symbolic means accepting the rules and conventions of society, together with the prohibitions and limits necessary for it to function, which will have effects on the body itself. Freud called the sexual energy of the body

[185] Lionel Bally, *Lacan*, 34.
[186] Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan*, London: Routledge, 2005, 44.

> "libido," and part of growing up involves the draining and restructuring of bodily excitation.[187]

It is as if the symbolic clips the libido and I would like to point out that this process underpins what David Wheatley in his chapter on "Gender, Sexuality and Class" defines as "the sexual politics of his [Paterson's] early work." I will briefly add that the symbolic is constantly challenged by Paterson in his first two books, while as Wheatley concedes, "subsequent collections have reined in the sexual *grand guignol*."[188] This issue will be discussed more in detail during a close reading of "Imperial," a poem from Paterson's second book *God's Gift to Women*. Darian Leader is correct in saying that the symbolic order (Lacan calls it the Big Other) introduces a negative element of separation in exchange for a more reliable role being played in the interaction with the world.[189] However, it is important to stress how that void, that lack or empty space becomes decisive in triggering desire which otherwise would not find space to start its circulation in what Lacan defines as the perpetual chains of signifiers. The location, as Derek Hook explains "entails a *third point of reference*":

> Communication, as such, always entails *a third point of reference*, a "third place in discourse," which is external to both speaker and listener. This "third place in discourse" typically functions implicitly, discreetly, even though it often feels as if there really are only two perspectives involved in any dialogical interchange.[190]

In a short essay on Structuralism (not translated into English), Deleuze describes the "paradox of the empty square in the structure."[191] He then proceeds to explain it: "this is the only place that cannot and must not be filled, not even by a symbolic element. It has to preserve the perfection of its emptiness to be able to move as regards to itself and to

[187] Darrian Leader, *What is Madness?*, 51.
[188] David Wheatley, *Contemporary British Poetry*, 95.
[189] Darian Leader, 52.
[190] Derek Hook, *Six Moments in Lacan*, London: Routledge 2018, 13.
[191] Here, I am referring to the Italian version of Gilles Deleuze, *Lo Strutturalismo*, Milano: Rizzoli, 1976. Translations are mine. The title of the original essay in French is 'À quoi reconnaît-on le structuralism?'.

circulate through the elements and varieties of its own relationships." The necessary "third place in discourse" that Derek Hook mentions requires or, one can say, it is originated by an empty element, a foundational lack. Hook again:

> This is the radical shift in perspective that we tend to adopt if we were to follow Lacan's lead, one in which the agency of the symbolic takes precedence over the agency of the subject.[192]

What is involved in the symbolic is therefore a very major modification in the idea of language.[193] It is through language/the symbolic that the subject (always barred according to Lacan) is constituted. Language speaks, not man. The subject is formed in the process that turns the small animal into a human child and emerges when the child is inserted into the signifying system of the symbolic order as it begins to speak. The subject is an effect of the signifiers that represent it, sliding from one to another along the signifying chain. The subject is dominated by the signifier and always says more than it knows.[194]

In order to complete this cursory and necessarily simplified excursion in Lacan's thought, something must be said of the third register, the Real. It is a very complex and controversial concept. As Lacan states in his first seminar (1953–54): "the real […] is what resists symbolisation absolutely."[195] "The Real is that which is outside the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The Real is that which is excluded, the impossible to bear,"

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[192] Derek Hook, *Six Moments in Lacan*, 34.

[193] The importance of symbols is clearly stated by Lacan in 'The function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis; from *Écrits*, 231: 'Symbols in fact envelop the life of man with a network so total that they join together those who are going to engender him "by bone and flesh" before he comes into the world; so total that they bring to his birth, along with the gifts of the stars, if not with the gift of the fairies, the shape of his destiny; so total that they provide the words that will make him faithful or renegade, the law of the acts that will follow him right to the very place where he is not yet and beyond his death; and so total that through them his end finds its meaning in the last judgment, where the Word absolves his being or condemns it – unless he reaches the subjective realisation of being-toward-death.'

[194] Based on the handouts distributed during the course 'Psychoanalysis After Freud: Jack Lacan' held by Keith Barrett at the Freud Museum London, on 9th July 2019.

[195] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

explains Madan Sarup.[196] As Maria Balaska states in her "The groundlessness of meaning in Lacan's work": "the real is tied up with the symbolic, which means that it emerges always within a process of making sense." It is basically what cannot be grasped by the symbolic but at the same time, in absence, allows its presence. Then Balaska adds:

> The real is what prevents an exhaustive representation of the world, what destabilizes any referential kind of contact between language and world (and this is its post-symbolic aspect) but it is also what sustains the signifying chain itself (and this is its pre-symbolic aspect). Ernesto Laclau describes this paradox in Lacan's work as follows: "Thus we are left with the paradoxical situation that what constitutes the condition of possibility of a signifying system – its limits – is also what constitutes its condition of impossibility – a blockage of the continuous expansion of the process of signification."[197]

As can be easily understood from this series of quotations, the Real attains to the real(m) of the impossible, the absent, the thing that cannot be named. As stated above, it is my view that Paterson's poetry, having to leave the relatively "secure" but frustrating handhold of the imaginary, walks the unstable tightrope of the symbolic all through its swaying and waving. The use of formal sophistication (i.e., the insistence on recognisable poetic devices and repeated reference to meaning as a crucial element), is like the long pole used by tightrope walkers as an instrument to gain balance. In order to complete the extended metaphor, I suppose that one has also to contemplate an impending, risky fall: the void below the feet as a potential realisation of the Real.

From *Nil Nil* to *God's Gift to Women*, Paterson's symbolic coming of age

[196] Madan Sarup, *Jacques Lacan*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992, 104.
[197] Maria Balaska, *Wittgenstein and Lacan at the limit: meaning and astonishment*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019, 83.

"All that moves is ghost," reads one of Paterson's aphorisms in *The Book of Shadows*.[198] It was after reading this typical Patersonian meditation that I started rethinking and challenging the common interpretation of the "The Ferryman's Arms" in Paterson's first book *Nil Nil*. It is, as I have already stated, the Scottish poet's very first poem of his very first book, and its positioning, on the watershed of silence and entering the world of publication via such an important publisher as Faber, must have been chosen carefully. The poem is about a person (the speaker) who waits for a ferry in a pub while drinking beer. Attracted by a light in the back, he begins an uncanny game of pool with his double and doppelganger. Apparently, he wins the game, and, on hearing the boat approaching the dock, he leaves behind his losing adversary to board the ferry. "Doppelganger" and "uncanny" are words that immediately conjure up two of the most fundamental books literary criticism has appropriated from the field of psychoanalysis, i.e. *The Uncanny* by Sigmund Freud and *The Double* by Otto Rank.[199] The latter further developed Freud's ideas of the *Unheimlich* (mainly based on the analysis of E.T.A. Hoffmann's short story *The Sandman*) and expanded them with references to several other works. Don Paterson must have appreciated the philological meticulousness with which Freud follows and develops the evolution of the word *Unheimlich* from its Latin roots to the ambiguities of the German of his times. However, rather than what unconsciously reminds us of our forbidden and repressed urges and repetition of the same thing (as in Freud's idea of the uncanny), I suppose that what is at stake in Paterson's doubling in the poem has more to do with a sense of "splitting" like the image refracted from a mirror—as Otto Rank states, "a likeness which has been detached from the ego and become an individual being
(shadow, reflection, portrait)."[200] He then proceeds to analyse some exemplary figures such as Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, highlighting how the replication of the ego is very likely to cause extreme anxiety, aggressiveness and usually terminate with a

[198] Don Paterson, *The Book of Shadows* (London: Picador, 2004), 4.
[199] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin Books, 2003); Otto Rank, *Double: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1971).
[200] Rank, *Double: a Psychoanalytic Study* 1973, 20.

violent confrontation (for instance, Dorian stabbing the portrait). In Paterson's poem the confrontation is symbolically re-enacted in the game of pool, limited therefore by a specific set of rules that must be acknowledged and respected.

About to sit down with my half pint of Guinness
I was magnetized by a remote phosphorescence
and drawn like a moth, to the darkened back room
where a pool table hummed to itself in the corner.

The atmosphere of the poem is set: the dark/light, black/white oppositions operate from the start and will be extended at different levels throughout the whole poem. One of the key-elements that is distinct from the beginning and will never find a resolution is the lack of Paterson's much-praised use of recognisable forms and structures. The poem's unity mainly relies on the use of half-rhymes (via Paul Muldoon, the *maestro*)—phosphorescence/Guinness being an example—, the recurrent pattern of beats along the lines, and the different number of the lines in every stanza: twenty in the first stanza and ten in the second. The divide between the Imaginary and the Symbolic in the Lacanian terms described above is in the process of being established and the instability of the form seems to acknowledge the lack of a final resolution. Hence the tension in that "drawn" and the recursive, senseless motion of the moth against the lamp in the simile, signalling repetition, a Freudian typical sign of something repressed resurfacing.

With ten minutes to kill and the whole place deserted
I took myself on for the hell of it. Slotting
a coin in the tongue, I looked round for a cue –
while I stood with my back turned, the balls where deposited
with an abrupt intestinal rumble; a striplight
batted awake in its dusty green cowl.

The necessary splitting happens, a double is conjured out of nothing, but the tension is growing in the idiomatic expressions "ten minutes to kill," "for the hell of it," and the ominous noise made by the balls' "abrupt intestinal rumble." Death is evoked in the coin deposited on the tongue as a safeguard to be allowed in the underworld, though my view is that the passage rather than the destination is the authentic dispute here. Religion appears to lend a helping hand, but the "cowl" of the lamp is "batted" and "dusty." Paterson's finesse in describing objects and their motion is in full display in the almost tactile, synesthetic depiction of the balls, their chromatic palette and their sinuous orbits.

When I set down the cue-ball inside the parched D
it clacked on the slate; the nap was so threadbare
I could screw back the globe, given somewhere to stand.
As physics itself becomes something negotiable
a rash of small miracles covers the shortfall.
I went to make an immaculate clearance.
A low punch with a wee dab of side, and the black
did the vanishing trick while the white stopped
before gently rolling back as if nothing had happened,
shouldering its way through the unpotted colours.

The first stanza ends with a poetic firework, a tourbillon of technical ability in manoeuvring the cue capable of questioning "physics itself." The reader is left with no doubt regarding who is the winner here. Alan Gillis perfectly describes the scene and its undercurrents:

> Indeed, it becomes impossible to separate the quotidian from the symbolic. The black and white of the half-pint of Guinness (which would be colloquially termed, at least in parts of Ireland, a half-pint of double) finds its echo in the play of black and white balls on the pool table (the speaker sinks the black on two levels). The manner in which the colours are left

> untouched hints at how the realm of the chromatic – what Paterson calls the realm of "mundane and quotidian diffraction, where all the stories, the details and the difference are" – will frequently be pierced through, in the existential x-ray of his verse, to explore black-and-white binaries.[201]

The intricate and inescapable network of the Symbolic is cast and the threadbare, parched map is the trace left by the many games played before. There is nothing new going on here, just the repetition of a timeworn confrontation. Quoting Borges, Paterson says that we always find ourselves on the "imminence of a revelation that never comes."[202] The "vanishing trick" performed by the black ball once again conjures death, or as Lacan would have rephrased it the "killing":

> Thus, the symbol first manifests itself as the killing of the thing, and this death results in the endless perpetuation of the subject's desire.[203]

By imposing its "insignia," the Symbolic allows us to play the game, to recognise ourselves in its long-established instructions we are requested to comply with. A game, by definition, is a set of rules, a pact you share with someone who is not you and that which has been there before you. Entering into that relationship with only your own self might lead to the entrapment in the perpetual ambivalence of the Imaginary. The binaries or rather, to use linguistic terminology, the relationship between the binaries and their position in terms of value within the linguistic system, requires this passage. A very high cost must be paid for the manifestation of the symbol, thus the evocation of death which underpins the whole poem. The unattainable object (the subject's desire in Lacanian terms), although kept at bay in the intricacies of "precision" and the detailed description

[201] Gillis, "Don Paterson," 173.
[202] Curtis, *How Poets Work*, 15.
[203] Jacques Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

of present objects and their interaction, will continue to demand itself in the emptiness of "ellipsis." The last ten line stanza (precisely half in length compared to the first one) enacts this transition:

> The boat chugged up to the little stone jetty
> without breaking the skin of the water, stretching,
> as black as my stout, from somewhere unspeakable
> to here, where the foaming lips mussitates endlessly,
> trying with a nutter's persistence, to read
> and re-read the shoreline. I got aboard early,
> Remembering the ferry would leave on the hour
> even for only my losing opponent;
> but I left him there stuck in his tent of light, sullenly
> knocking the balls in, for practice, for next time.

Sketching a very brief portrait of Paterson in her *The Bloodaxe Book of 20th Century Poetry*, Edna Longley writes:

> Some poems take up the problematic question of selfhood where MacNeice and Larkin left off. "Bedfellows" revisits the disturbingly paired occupants of Mr. Bleaney's room, while "The Ferryman's Arms" seems in dark dialogue with MacNeice's "Charon."[204]

The boat that glides across the water without breaking its skin, in its complete defiance of gravity, immediately recalls the ferry used by Charon to take the souls of the dead across the river Styx in Hades. Commenting on MacNeice's poem in her book *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study*, Edna Longley quotes an extensive passage taken from *Varieties of Parables*, a book which comprises lectures given by the poet in Cambridge

[204] Edna Longley ed., *The Bloodaxe Book of 20th Century Poetry*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2000.

in 1963. MacNeice writes about the irrational and irrational part at work in some of his poems:

> "The Springboard" which though rational in its working out, begins with two irrational premisses – the dream picture of a naked man standing on a springboard in the middle of the air over London and
>
> the irrational assumption that it is his duty to throw himself down from there as a spirt of ritual sacrifice. This will be lost on those who have non dream logic, as will other poems of mine such as "The Dowser" and "Order to View" which are a blend of rational allegory and dream suggestiveness.[205]

In the unstable but productive balance between the rational working out of the poem and its irrational premises lies part of the complex poetic machinery deployed by Don Paterson. Edna Longley adds that "all MacNeice's parables probably belong to some point on the curve from 'rational allegory' to 'dream suggestiveness'" before including "Charon" in the second category. Along the curvature of "dream suggestiveness" definitely lies one of the most intriguing syntagms of this poem, "from somewhere unspeakable." The route of the ferry describes the trajectory from a place of which it is impossible to speak to another where the "foaming lips" try with "a nutter's persistence" to "read and re-read the shoreline." Both the acoustic and the written element of signs produce no meaning, nothing which can be expanded into a paraphrase or a translation. A gap is definitely opened, and the ferry is caught in this paradoxical back and forth. The winner of the game seems to embrace the paradox and boards the ferry while his opponent is left to a sullen re-enactment, to a doomed training for an unrealistic "next time." The question, at this point, is who the real winner is. The player who boards the ferry and gets caught in an unlikely sense of unity (the back-and-forth movement) or the sad opponent who can only try and try again without any guarantee for a future rematch?

[205] Edna Longley, *Louis MacNeice: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 119.

To put the question in pure Lacanian terms would be to ask: "Who is the Other?" Bruce Fink suggests an answer:

> The Other can be seen as an insidious, uninvited intruder that unceremoniously and unpropitiously transforms our wishes; it is however, at the same time that which enables us to clue each other in to our desires and communicate.[206]

My suggestion is that by winning the game of pool in Paterson's poem the speaker is automatically converted into the Lacanian Other. The insidious but victorious Other, in fact, can board the ferry, heavy in its lightness with literary connotations (Charon, souls, all that is light and invisible) and return to the land of the unspeakable assured that its task has been achieved. The loser is left on land, his feet firmly on the ground of language "condemned" to eternally rehearse a game of words, to "communicate" while lost in the interpretations of signs (the reading and re-reading of the shore). It is through the ambiguous relationship between the speaker and his losing opponent that a space is left open, a square empty so that the poetry can finally hook its chain of signifiers and begin functioning. Once again, it is not by chance that this poem is placed at the very beginning of Paterson's first book. It seems to suggest what Lacan defined as the crossing of the bar between signifier and signified, the acceptance of a loss in exchange for a process of subjectivation which can be processed only through and in language. The resistance to this concept and its partial repression will be from now on an essential part of Paterson's poetic process, his distinguishing mark. Form, structure, and tradition will become this very act of resistance while at the same time constantly expressing a longing for something irretrievably lost.

A few poems later in the book, the reader encounters "An Elliptical Stylus," a poem on the father/son relationship and one of the most famous and anthologised of all Paterson's poems. We immediately sense we are right in the middle of Paterson's territory

[206] Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, 6.

with his typical hybridised diction that mixes the colloquial and an attention to detail with careful nonchalance:

My uncle was beaming: 'Aye, yer elliptical stylus –
fairly brings out a' the wee details.'
Balanced at a fraction of an ounce
the fat cartridge sank down like a feather;
music billowed into three dimensions
as if we could have walked between the players.

Despite the rather cheerful atmosphere, this first six-line stanza establishes an order of things that rests on a very delicate balance. The etymology of "stylus" in the OED reminds the reader that the word comes from the Latin "stilus," the tool used to draw signs on tablets in antiquity, the forefather of the pen. The signifier is already alerting us to something peripheral happening in the realm of meaning. Although defined as "fat," the cartridge sinks down like a "feather" and it immediately creates a magic space which eludes the dual dimensionality (source/receiver) normally associated with listening to music. The space includes a new third dimension (you can actually walk among the players), and the relation moves from a dyadic to triadic one.

My Dad, who could appreciate the difference,
went to Largs to buy an elliptical stylus
for our ancient, beat-up Philips turntable.
We had the guy in stitches: 'You can't…
Er… you'll have to *upgrade the equipment*.'
Still smirking, he sent us from the shop
With a box of needle, thick as carpet-tacks,
The only sort they made to fit our model.

After providing the background in the first stanza, Paterson moves directly towards the epicentre of the drama. The relationship between father and son, as we have noticed, requires the intervention of a third space expressed clearly through the appearance of the uncle, the stylus, the new 3D way of listening to music. The feather/cartridge has now become a "thick" needle like the tacks used to fix the carpet. The reader senses that metaphorically the speaker's Dad, though capable of perceiving the musical nuances produced by technological innovations, naively belongs to another time and another dimension. The symbolic order with its sophisticated and ever-changing rules not only has left the father behind but inflicted a proper humiliation on his lack of *savoir faire*. The suspension dots, the interjections, the use of italics call the attention to the surface of the text, to the formality from which you must disentangle yourself in order to survive the Symbolic. Fundamentally, it is the re-enactment at a later stage in life of the very first occurrence of what Lacan defines as "The-Name-of-The-Father," the first Law responsible for the first detachment from the infant's object of desire.

> Moreover, not only does the mother invoke the Name-of-theFather in her explanations, the father's very existence in their lives implies the functioning of mother and child within a wider social sphere governed by social rules (the existence of kinship groups, peer relations, etc.[207]

The suspension dots give a figurative shape to the shop assistant's mocking words while at the same time telling the story of the separation and void (and consequently anxiety) provoked in the transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic. Brand names (Largs, Philips) signpost the economic status of exchange of words and things. There is an order to be followed and refusing compliance with its rules can lead to exclusion and humiliation. This is precisely where Paterson's realism explodes and it does, indeed, explode quite often.

[207] Bally, *Jacques Lacan*, 78.

(Supposing I'd been *his* son: let's eavesdrop
on 'Fidelities," the poem I'm writing now:
The day my father died, he showed me how
he'd prime the deck for optimum performance:
It's that lesson I recall – how he'd refine
The arm's weight, to leave the stylus balanced

somewhere between ellipsis and precision,
as I gently lower the sharp nip to the line
and wait for it to pick up the vibration
till it moves across the page, like a cardiograph…)

The fluidity of the poem is somehow disturbed. It is not perfectly clear if the "author" usurps the place of the "speaker" or if the speaker takes a step back and exits the text for a while. What is certain is that the time shifts to a hypothetical now (in the present continuous of "The poem I'm writing now") and the reader is invited to take all that textually happened before as a supposition ("Supposing I'd been *his* son"). The possessive adjective is the signal that the acoustic image of the signifier will from now on bend to the typographic italics and the texture become more sophisticated. We are in the field of "Fidelities" (sound and son/father relationship), a poem within a poem, a mise en-abyme which, according to Ben Wilkinson,

> Not only gestures towards which son and father have been denied, but also serves to mock naïve notions of poetry as a means of capturing "true" feeling and meaning through apparently faithful representations of a reified conception of actuality.[208]

[208] Wilkinson, "Something axiomatic on the nature of articulacy," 601.

The turbulence is now in full flow, meaning is clear but at the same time undermined. Ben Wilkinson perfectly captures this operation:

> Paterson is attacking the naïve idea that language, in spite of its being a suspended system that constantly defers any fixed meaning in the free play of its sign, still gestures towards transcendental meanings and truths that exist, independent of language, in the outside world.[209]

It is a rather bold statement to make about a poet who has always declared his faith in the communicative scope of poetic language. In his "notorious" introduction to the anthology of British poetry collated together with Charles Simic for an American audience (a great part of it being a rather ferocious attack on postmodernist poetry), Paterson is adamant:

> The Mainstream poem attempts to hold the known and the unknown in a fine internal balance; with the Post moderns, all we get is a litany of exceptions.[210]

The perimeter of the territory to be explored is clearly defined "somewhere between ellipsis and precision," the known and the unknown, the language that might defer "fixed meaning" but at the same time must be anchored to a shared ground with the reader or face defeat, nonsense, uselessness. The more textured and italicised interpolation of this poem within the poem seems to function as a reassurance toward the reader that nothing or very little, despite mortification and embarrassment, gets lost in the necessary transition. If nothing gets lost, anxiety and aggressiveness are nevertheless destined to increase dramatically.

We drove back slowly, as if we had a puncture;

[209] Wilkinson, "Something axiomatic on the nature of articulacy," 601.
[210] Don Paterson and Charles Simic, eds., *New British Poetry* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press), XXXI.

my Dad trying not to blink, and that man's laugh
stuck in my head, which is where the story sticks
and any attempt to cauterize this fable
with something axiomatic on the nature
of articulacy and inheritance
since he can well afford to make his own
excuses, you your own interpretation.
But if you still insist on resonance –
I'd swing for him, and every other cunt
happy to let my father know his station,
Which probably includes yourself. To be blunt.

The final twelve-line stanza approximates a sonnet and, exactly as the stanza before, the structure seems to operate as a necessary constraint against the tension generated. The rhymes puncture/nature, inheritance/resonance, interpretation/station, blunt/cunt, and the almost completely monosyllabic verse "stuck in my head, which is where the story sticks" with its robust repetition of the hard "st" sound alert the reader that a change of attitude is taking place. A verb like "cauterize," the adjective "axiomatic," nouns such as "articulacy" and "inheritance" signal a tone shifting towards a higher register before the precipitous fall of the deliberately grave insult. Except for the attempt not to "blink" on the father's side (strictly speaking, once again a perception which can be attributed to the speaker) we never directly encounter the father's take on the events and every single hypothesis, fantasising and speculation come from the "speaker." Peter Robinson argues convincingly:

> Reading the last line, "which probably includes yourself. To be blunt," as a muffled or tacit self-address produces a psychological bruise more resonant because not evidently coincident with its authorial thrust. After all, when he swings for "him, and every other cunt / happy to let my father his

> station," he's the one passing on the story that has humiliated his dad.[211]

The indirect exposure of the father, read from this perspective, seems to reinforce the power of the undercurrents of "inheritance" that are ambiguously at work beneath the surface. "Words situate us in the symbolic world," writes Darian Leader and then adds, "children understand very early on that they are not just biological accidents but have a place in family history."[212] In order to avoid a confrontation that, involving only two people, could hypothetically lead to a "dangerous" confrontation, a third element is necessary. It might be "bruising," to use Robinson's definition but everybody has a station/position within language that constantly requires negotiation and resignification in order not to explode in a full conflict. Despite Paterson's anger and his threatening address to the reader/himself, the page of the poem functions as a third space capable of containing further escalations.

To reiterate the idea of a substantial draw in the tensions and torsions of Paterson's poetry in his first book, I would like to conclude the first part of this chapter with a brief analysis of two crucial points in "Nil Nil," the last eponymous poem in the book. It is preceded by a long epigraph attributed to a François Aussemain from his book titled, *Pensées*. Aussemain makes his appearance now and then in Paterson's poetry and, in a very Borgesian way, he is nothing but one of the many poet's alter-egos. The epigraph deserves to be quoted in its entirety:

> *Just as any truly accurate representation of a particular geography can only exist on a scale 1:1 (imagine the vast, rustling map of Burgundy, say, settling over it like a freshly stretched street!) so it is with all our abandoned histories, those ignoble lines of succession that end in neither triumph or disaster, but merely plunge on into deeper and deeper obscurity; only in the infinite ghost-libraries of the*

[211] Peter Robinson, "Punching yourself in the face," in *Don Paterson: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Natalie Pollard (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 132.
[212] Leader, *What is Madness?*, 48.

imagination – their possible analogue – can their ends be pursued, the dull and terrible facts authenticated.[213]

In my view, the key word in this quote is "authenticated." Authentication of "all our abandoned histories" is precisely what, in Lacanian terms, we do by entering the Symbolic order. The "ghost-libraries of the imagination," although Lacan would have probably objected to the term "imagination," are essentially what constitute, strata after strata, our subjectivity and that, despite the more superficial ego talk, keep speaking through us in less controlled speech acts. The chains of signifiers in which we walk into do not necessarily require a fixed meaning but only necessitate that we occupy a space. In his famous "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" based on E. A. Poe's short story and included in the *Écrits*, Lacan illustrates 'how the symbolic order, thus conceived is even constitutive of the subject', by demonstrating in the Poe story 'the decisive orientation which the subject receives from the itinerary of the signifier.' [214] In this story, in fact, the signifier is obviously the letter, and the "subject" in question is the triadic pattern of intersubjective relationships the story deals with.

The Lacanian reading of Poe's story follows the letter (the content of which is never actually disclosed—i.e., the signifier is never determined as signified) and how the main characters revolve around it changing position as the plot unravels. The subjectivity of the characters is defined by their position in the relatively empty space created by the letter. By attempting (to go back to the Paterson/Aussemain quotation) to plunge into deeper and deeper obscurity, the agency of language is activated, and the poet/reader can try to validate "the dull and terrible facts."

The poem is a long description of the long and inescapable decline of Scottish football and gives Paterson the chance for his signature tour de force of brilliance and flair in conjuring images. In the second part, two children are playing football when:

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[213] Don Paterson, *Nil Nil,* 51.

[214] William Muller and John Richardson, eds., "Lacan's Seminar on the "Purloined Letter": Overview," in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1988), 57.

Alastair cheats, and goes with the ball leaving wee Horace to hack up a stone and
dribble it home in the rain;
past the stopped swings, the dead shanty-town
of allotments, the black of Skelly Dry Cleaners
and into his cul-de-sac, where, accidentally,
he neatly back-heels it straight into the gutter
then tries to swank off like he meant it.
Unknown to him it is all that remains
of a lone fighter-pilot, who returning at dawn
to find Leuchars was not where he'd left it,
took time out to watch the Sidlaws unsheathed
from their great black tarpaulin, the haar burn off Tayport
and Venus melt into Carnoustie, igniting
the shoreline; no wind, not a cloud in the sky
and no one around to admire the discretion
of his unscheduled exit: the engine plopped out
and would-not re-engage, sending him silently
twirling away like and ash-key,
his attempt to bail out only only partly successful,
yesterday having been April the 1st –
the ripcord unleashing a a flurry of socks
like a sackful of doves rendered up to heavens
in private irenicon. He caught up with the plane
on the ground, just at the instant the tank blew
and made nothing of him, save for his fillings,
his tackets, his lucky-half-crown and his gallstone,
now anchored between the steel bars of a stank,
that looks to be biting the bullet on this one.

Horace, the young boy with and his magniloquent poetical name, is left with no ball and therefore he walks home kicking a stone through other decaying scenes of a contemporary Scottish town. But in the "cul-de-sac" where he lives, he tries to alter his accidental touch into a classy one. It is at precisely this point that, like so many times before in this first collection of Paterson's, realism explodes. The stone inserted in the signifying chain reveals its instability, the signified slides and, as it happens, anything can become anything else. The trajectory of a fragment of that explosion takes the reader to the astonishing apprehension that the stone is all that remains of a lone-fighter pilot crushed not far while approaching home and his military base near Dundee. The most striking image is the simile of the "flurry of socks" flying away from his parachute and "a sackful of doves rendered up to the heavens" in a "private irenicon." The theological substantive seems to highlight the parodistic encounter mid-air between the man descending to his own "exit" from the troubles of human life and white birds ascending the sky to seal an unidentified kind of peace. In a Heaneyan overflight, places are named, locations depicted while the topography of the outside is reflected in the inside of other remains of the pilot—fillings, tackets, a half-crown, a gallstone—a mixture of biological and artificial traces. The reader is ready for the finale:

In short, this is where you get off reader;
I'll continue alone, on foot, in the failing light,
following the trail as it steadily fades
into road-repairs, birdsong, the weather, nirvana,
the plot thinning down to a point so refined
not even angels could dance on it. Goodbye.

Commenting on this poem and on the stylistic effects produced by this last stanza, Marc O'Neill writes:

> Nothingness has preoccupied Paterson throughout his career. Combining the demotic with the philosophical, a football

> match and a Sartrean hint of *le néant,* the title poem of his first volume concludes with attempted erasure of the self and the reader, who is sent packing: the poet will *continue alone, on foot, in the failing light,* […] / *the plot thinning down to a point so refined /not even the angels could dance on it. Goodbye*. Paterson's control of sound effects is impressively evident. The "in" noises attenuate from "*continue*" through to "*thinning*," capturing the poem's (and the poet's) gradual dissolve into a "*point so refined*," before the robustly monoverbal sentence "*Goodbye*" changes the acoustic feel of the poem by reasserting presence in the act of departure.[215]

What is perfectly captured in this quotation is Paterson's ability from the very start to surround the potential issues arisen by the pressure of the Symbolic into a sophisticated intricacy of sounds. Still in search of a seamless form in which to contain the unstable balance of undercurrents and meaning shared with the reader, this virtuoso dance of sounds, half-rhymes and sudden deviations of reference points seems to be the best solution the poet has achieved so far.

Similar strategies are adopted in Paterson's second book, *God's Gift to Women* published in 1997. The mainly half-rhymed "couplets" of "11:00 Baldovan" tell the tale of two "small boys" who venture out on a bus trip on their own for the first time. They want to buy "comics, sweeties, and magic tricks." The "however" of the sixth two-line stanza signals a change in the rather confident tone expressed.

> However, I am obscurely worried, as usual,
> over matters of procedure, the protocol of travel,
>
> and keep asking Ross the same questions:
> where we should sit, when to pull the bell, even

[215] Marc O'Neill, "Cleaving Nothing from Nothing", in Natalie Pollard ed, *Don Paterson*, 62.

if we have enough money for the fare,
whispering, *Are ye sure? Are sure?*

I cannot know the little good it will do me;
the bus will let us down in another country

with the wrong streets and streets that suddenly forget
their name at crossroads or in building-sites.

The poem can be easily read as the sum of fears which usually accompany the transition from childhood to adolescence. However, those "matters of procedures," that "protocol of travel" whose rules and obligations the two children do not yet seem to have mastered is, once again, the anxiety projected by a third element at work and that governs intersubjectivity and any possible communication. As in the poems analysed from *Nil Nil*, the realism of the anecdote is suddenly shaken by an intruder that manifests itself both in the surreal, sci-fi, and ominous series of metaphors but also in, stylistically, the insistence on repetition of the conjunction "and" and its relative paratactical movement:

and where no one will have heard of the sweets we ask for
and the man will shake the coins from our fists onto the counter

and call for his wife to come through, come through and see this
and if we ever make it home again, the bus

will draw into the charred wreck of itself
and we will enter the land at the point we left off

only our voices sound funny and all the houses are gone and the rain tastes like
Kelly and black waves fold in

very slowly at the foot of Macalpine Road
and our sisters and mothers are fifty years dead.

Unable to exchange "coins" (one of Lacan's favourite images representing the signs, with their two sides becoming illegible and whose value lies only in their interchangeability), the small boys find themselves in a nightmare where the coordinates of space and time are warped. There is more than a hint here of the first black and white episodes of the American TV series *The Twilight*, which Paterson will use as a frame of reference more than twenty-five years later for his 2020 book titled *Zonal*.

Although set in a completely different context, the poem "Imperial" from the same collection, *God's Gift to Women*, tells the story of a rite of passage. In perfectly designed quatrains with a rigorous scheme of alternate rhymes, the poem has something more dangerous to hold and contain.

Is it normal to get this wet? Baby, I'm frightened –
I covered her mouth with my own;
she lay in my arms till the storm-window brightened
and stood at our heads like a stone.

After months of jaw jaw, determined that neither
win ground, or be handed hedge,
we gave ourselves up, one to the other
like prisoners over a bridge

and no trade was ever so fair or so tender;
so were was the flaw in the plan,
the night we lay down on the flag of surrender
and woke on the flag of Japan.

The metaphoric language used by Paterson produces discourses of commerce and warfare: fair trade, prisoners over a bridge, the flag of surrender, the flag of Japan. The sexual exchange does not seem to be an easy one and, as for the small boys on a foray into the unknown, it requires preparation, compliance, a day-to-day negotiation and bargaining which recalls the conceits of the metaphysical poets. There is a funereal echo in the window/stone illuminated by the rising sun. As Darian Leader writes:

> As the symbolic does its work, the elements of reality become transformed into systems of signs, whose value depends on the other parts of the system, rather than on bodily equations. If too much of the body is present, we cannot enter a shared social space. Reality, if the symbolic operates, becomes an out-of-the-body experience.[216]

Once again, it is as if language, having apparently and only momentarily abandoned its ground for the consumption of a pure bodily act, regains its status in the differential interpretation of the trace left behind by that act. The reader leaves the linguistic space created by the poem with the image of the white flag waved by surrendering prisons immediately substituted by the flag of one of the most organised countries in the world.

On finding a form: the "Patersonnet" from *The Poem* to *Landing Light*

> Have a fight with fellow Dundonian W. N. ("Bill") Herbert about prosody, something to do with viability of syllabics in English. Burnside and Maguire mediate […] Bill is sobbing now, and spitefully remarks that this is the only subject I'm capable of getting animated about. I realise, to my utter dismay, he's right. Seriously, though, I'm really proud of us; a random sample of half-a-dozen male and female poets, discussing the nuts and bolts of our trade with an authority and depth of understanding you'd be hard pressed to match in any

[216] Darian Leader, *What is* Madness?, 2011, 52.

> Eng. Dept. in the country. We'd finally reappropriated what was rightfully ours.[217]

This excerpt is from "New Gen Diary," a hilarious account written by Don Paterson of the events that took place during the days of the New Generation launch in 1994. The poet's fascination with "prosody" but, as we shall see further on in the chapter, in the entire field of theory of poetry is present from very early in his poetical life. Unlike other poets included in the New Gen (see Michael Hofmann and Jamie McKendrick, for example) Paterson does not seem to be interested in writing critical essays on other poets but retains a fascination throughout all his career for the complex mechanics behind poetry composition. The stages of this attraction are punctuated by a list of publications which are worth mentioning. In 1999, Faber releases a book of versions from Spanish of Machado titled *The Eyes* whose "Afterword" is both a brief treatise on Paterson's personal translation theory and a first attempt to define the process of poetry writing.[218] Even more revelatory during that same year is the extremely dense "Introduction" to *101 Sonnets: From Shakespeare to Heaney*.[219] In this introduction, as Hugh Haughton writes, "Don Paterson offers a quasi-biological, quasimathematical explanation for the cross-cultural and trans-historical currency of the sonnet form."[220] Haughton's idiosyncratic conglomeration of "biological" and "mathematical" perfectly sums up the poet's theoretical approach to everything regarding poetry writing. Constantly reworked and reframed, it will be the foundation of all the following more developed essays on the issue. In 2006, the Scottish poet publishes *Orpheus*, a rather extraordinary rendition of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*. It represents his second experiment in lyric translation and a further confirmation of his interest in both translation and the sonnet form. The project becomes more ambitious with the publication of two long essays in two consecutive

[217] Paterson, "New Gen Diary," 59.
[218] Don Paterson, *The Eyes* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999).
[219] Dan Paterson, ed., *101 Sonnets from Shakespeare to Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999).
[220] Hugh Haughton, "Golden Means: Music, Translation and the Patersonnet," in *Don Paterson: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. Natalie Pollard (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 38.

issues of *Poetry Review* titled respectively "The Lyric Principle: Part I: The Sense of Sound" and "The Lyric Principle: The Sound of the Sense."[221] They represent a crucial step forward towards a vast and more ambitious project that will find its conclusion in the above-mentioned volume *The Poem*. The latter is preceded by *Reading Shakespeare's Sonnets: A new commentary by Don Paterson*, a highly idiosyncratic and controversial edition of the Bard's sonnets annotated by the Scottish poet. It is another volume in which the sonnet is recognised as a magical form, commingling reason and rhyme.

Before delving into *Sonnets to Orpheus,* a discussion of some of the most relevant theories of Don Paterson on form and, more specifically, on the sonnet must be tackled. In the extensive introduction to his selection of 101 sonnets for Faber he writes about the *turn* or *volta*, the point after eight lines where the sonnet changes the unfolding of its discourse to draw it to a conclusion in the remaining six lines. Paterson perceives all sorts of mathematical essentials in that division: "the golden mean" or golden section, that has its foundations in the Fibonacci sequence of numbers, although he obviously recognises that the Fibonacci sequence goes from five to eight, so he needs an explanation for that as well. He states that "the golden section casts its spell over all the arts" naming examples from architecture and music as supporting evidence. It confers to every work of art (film, operas and dramas included) "an *intrinsic* rightness." The entire introduction, in fact, is permeated by a fundamental concept: form derives from a certain ratio (the golden section, in this particular example) that almost magically lies at the intersection of a specific mathematical calculus and its corporeal equivalent. "The division of our sonnet would have evolved organically, even if it had begun life as a single fourteen-line stanza" and in conclusion:

> So by these various roads we have arrived at a miraculous little form in which our human need for unity and discontinuity, repetition and variation, tension and resolution, symmetry and

[221] Don Paterson, "The Lyric Principle: Part I: The Sense of Sound," *Poetry Review* 97, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 56–72; "The Lyric Principle: The Sound of Sense," *Poetry Review* 97, no. 3 (Autumn 2007): 54–70.

> asymmetry, lyric inspiration and argumentative rigour are all held in near-perfect oppositional balance.[222]

Therefore, the sonnet seems to happen when the human "need" for ordering finds an equivalent in a repeatable formula that acquiesces a human appetite for "oppositional balance." In their anthology titled *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*, editors Mark Strand and Eavan Boland (both distinguished poets) underline the resilience of the form: "On one level, the sonnet suits our world" and "it is one of the copingstones of poetic form. And it endures."[223] Stephen Burt singles out five main characteristics of the sonnet that contribute to make the sonnet especially "memorable," "contemporary […] since the mid-point of the twentieth century": "formal play," "a sense of history," "a commitment to dailiness," "a unit in series," and the possibility it offer to "register the tension." [224] They all seem to be points on which Paterson can straightforwardly agree but, as stated earlier on, he needs to find a deeper root, something that connects form with nature at a profounder level. In *The Poem*, Paterson writes on the sonnet and other poetic forms:[225]

> Such templates draw real words – like those of our prelinguistic chatterers – to the very tips of our tongues again. This method of metrical composition *replicates* the first joy in learning to speak, the sense of words being somehow sprung free from the mind by form and rhythm and structure alone. Metre is anterior to speech, and both generative and predictive of it. The words we could not yet speak were drawn out of us by phonological and prosodic structure: the words we dare not speak are tricked out of us in much the same way.[226]

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[222] Paterson, *101 Sonnets*, XXIV.
[223] Mark Strand and Eavan Boland, eds., *The Making of a Poem: A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms* (London and New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 58.
[224] Stephen Burt, "The contemporary sonnet," in *The Cambridge Companion to The Sonnet*, eds., A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 246.
[225] The sonnet is one of several form structures he is writing about: "the same can be said of Dickinson with the ballad, Burns with the Standard, Bach with the fugue, and Charlie Parker with what jazz musicians call 'rhythm' changes." Paterson*, The Poem*, 661n.
[226] Paterson*, The Poem*, 661.

We seem to be back in Kristeva's territory in this passage, in particular when Paterson writes about the metre as anterior to speech, and the fact that it is both "generative" and "predictive." The rhythmic and kinetic motility encountered earlier in the chapter referred to a pre-linguistic stage of development and Kristeva's theory is more focused on how, through an ordering process, it permeates and disrupts language as communication. However, while Kristeva investigates the revolutionary possibilities implied in those acts of disruption (and her examples are taken from the avant-garde production of nineteenth-century French poetry) Paterson seems more in search of systems of signs that coalesce in assemblies. These coagulations permeate society and become recognisable as a vehicle that makes their standardisation evidence of the tight connection they bear to the rhythms of human existence at its pre-linguistic, natural level. In brief, Kristeva highlights the rite of passage from the informal to the formal, since her theories evidently derive from Lacan through De Saussure, as a necessary consequence of the attempt from the symbolic to completely erase the powerful charge of the semiotic. The attempt, as already underlined, is only partly successful and the semiotic resists despite having gone undercover. Paterson does not really believe in the arbitrary nature of the sign. He thinks that the phonological aspect of a word somehow reflects the thing it refers to. His idea of the "phonesteme" leaves no doubt about this connection. The Scottish poet summarises the key points of the "phonestheme" in the eponymous chapter of *The Poem.* The explanation requires a lengthy quotation:

> 1.Language is a poetic system. When language is subjected to emotional heat and formal pressure (which is to say formal limits placed on time and space in which it can spoken) the natural result is what we call "poetic"
> 2.Language consists of sound-signs, and while their acoustic and semantic aspects maybe separately described, they are not actually separable
> 3.The immediate corollary of their interdependence is that language operates of a principle of iconicity, which is to say

> *words sound like the things they mean*. They do this through a deep rule of synaesthetic representation, one that tends not to be consciously registered. The mechanism of this iconic system is complex.
> 4.Poetry is a mode of speech which, along with other deviations from prose and conversational norms, sees a shift from the denotative towards the connotative. This is mainly driven by its pursuit of brief expression: in a constrained space, connotative speech is far more effective than denotative speech in expressing the complex relations that unify poetry's often disparate and contradictory materials. (It's in the imaginative connection of apparently contrary, unrelated or incompatible thematic elements that poetry often finds its "epiphanies"?
> 5.As a result of this connotative shift, poetry instinctively reaches towards the deliberate manipulation and intensification of language's iconic or phonosemantic aspect, where phonestemes represent shared connotations. As a result, poets are more likely to trust their ears in decisions of wordchoice: ideally, no compromise between sound and sense need be negotiated, as they are understood as aspects of the same thing.
> 6.Within these special rules, unified sound becomes a literal, non-symbolic means of unifying sense. (This has many strange corollaries: for example, a poem that deliberately sought to exhibit *no* lyric patterning would also be engaged in a simultaneous project of dismantling its own sense.)[227]

As Stephen Yenser argues, we seem to be back to the Platonic dialogue *Cratylus* where "things have natural names." The critic adds, "He will not defend to the death that thesis" but he definitely is against the "arbitrariness of the sign" that poets know to be "sheer madness." [228] The process is presented in a quasi-scientific way, a kind of Spinozian *more geometrico*, with axioms and corollaries. Words spoken much earlier, during a public lecture held in 2004, demonstrate how Paterson's ideas on the subject had been in the making for quite an extensive period of time: "I also believe that poetry is a

[227] Paterson*, The Poem*, 46–47.
[228] Stephen Yenser, "Poetry in Review: Don Paterson on poetics," *The Yale Review* 107, no. 1 (January 2019): 146.

science, and that poetic composition can be studied in much the same way as music composition."[229] Reviewing *The Poem* for the *Times Literary Supplement*, William Wooten writes that, "This assault on the arbitrary nature of the sign is built on broad tendencies rather than universal rules" and therefore "it will require far more research and indeed statistical analysis than we have here if it truly to convince."[230] Michael O'Laughlin, although conceding Paterson has "astonishing insights," does not seem to be too impressed by the 780-page feat. "So what is he saying about the poem?" he asks. The answer, according to Paterson, concerns the fatal attraction of poetry for an inflexible metrical frame. The critic does not seem to share Paterson's confidence and replies: "It could be argued that it just as often finds its language without that frame, or rather, outside that frame."[231]

What emerges from this brief analysis is Paterson's faith in the iconic function of poetic language. It is a function that brings together meaning and acoustic image, a bond so strong that, in the highly pressurised language of poetry, it manages to unhinge the arbitrariness of the sign taken for granted by many linguists. Form is a consequence of that concept, and its necessity imposes itself through time, tradition, and memory. It becomes a generative process capable of resisting the drives of the poet, and through that very resistance, it manages to create the unstable balance of words commonly defined as a poem. I suppose that this is a more than reasonable position, especially when applied to lyric poetry and to immediately recognisable forms that with time have become like standards of reference. It certainly reflects a personal journey from a "dark art" still fascinated by the alchemic mysteries of metal/word transformations to a more scientific approach. Paterson explains this process in the *Afterword* to Orpheus:

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[229] Don Paterson, *The Dark Art of Poetry*, a TS Eliot lecture, commissioned by the South Bank Centre, and delivered as part of Poetry International on Saturday 30 October 2004. As consulted online here: https://blogs.warwick.ac.uk/morleyd/entry/don_patersons_the_1/.

[230] William Wootten, "The professor, the poet and the golden mean," *Times Literary Supplement,* August 3, 2018.

[231] Michael O'Loughlin, "*The Poem* by Don Paterson: By turns dotty, unreadable, ingenious," *The Irish Times*, July 28, 2018.

> I've undergone a long and at times painful conversion to scientific materialism. The abolition of God was one matter, but his vast retinue of fairies and pixies (in my own case, this would include everything from ghost, soul and superstition to the seductive appeals of essentialism, humanism, and the Anthropic Principle-end of intelligent design) were considerably more difficult to kill off. Accomplishing this gave me some satisfaction, but it left the room terribly quiet and empty.[232]

In the first part of this chapter, my endeavour has consisted of following Paterson's own "battle" in the passage, using Lacanian terms, from the Imaginary to the Symbolic. I attempted to highlight how that necessary stage involved a certain amount of renunciation and therefore lead to inevitable forms of resistance. It is my opinion that in this quote Paterson seems to be well aware of the "passageway" and its inevitability. Nevertheless, Lacan would have been very suspicious of the *telos* involved in "scientific materialism" considered as a possible final solution, as a demand for truth. The realm of the "Imaginary" never ceases to be part of the fictitious "ego" we identify with, and the confrontation with the Symbolic must be constantly negotiated so as to not capitulate to its requests of compliance. Paradoxically speaking, but also referring back to Benjamin's *Thesis on History* quoted in the preface, an amount of "ghostly" is required to succumb also to the enormous pressure exerted but the third element in Lacanian theory, the unspeakable, the trauma, the Real. It comes as no surprise then, that the room becomes "quiet" and "empty." Lionel Bally describes the Real in these terms:

> The character of the Real, being unsymbolisable, is that of absolute terror or absolute enjoyment – both impossible states. Its existence can be postulated by its manifestations. It appears in hallucination and delusions, when the stitch-point between signifier and signified come apart, when the Borromean ring unravels and the unrepresentable wanders freely in a lake of unattached signifiers.[233]

[232] Paterson, *Orpheus*, 65–66.
[233] Lionel Bally, *Lacan*, 2009, 100.

These are the borders of psychotic paranoia based on foreclosure and the refusal or the impossibility for some "events" to enter the symbolic. According to Lacan, the unchartered and life-threatening territory of "unattached signifiers" cannot be cancelled with a conscious act of will or another trick of the Imaginary.

Landing Light, Paterson's third collection of poems, was published three years before Rilke's sonnets collected in *Orpheus*.[234] As Haughton underlines, although "not darkness but its opposite figures in the title" nevertheless, "that landing light […] presupposes darkness in the house or at some landing place."[235] There is a poem (another sonnet) that clarifies some of the concepts expressed by Paterson and my point on the resistances and impossibilities provoke a potential appearance of the Lacanian Real.

The Thread

Jamie made his landing in the world
so hard he ploughed straight back into the earth.
They caught him by the thread of his one breath
and pulled him up. They don't know how it held.
And so today I thank what higher will
brought us to here, to you and me and Russ,
the great twin-engined swaying wingspan of us
roaring down the back of Kirrie Hill

and your two-year old lungs somehow out-revving
every engine in the universe.
All that trouble just to turn up dead
was all I thought that long week. Now the thread
is holding all of us: look at our tiny house,

[234] Don Paterson, *Landing Light*, London: Faber and Faber, 2003.
[235] Hugh Haughton, 'Golden Means, Music, Translation and the Patersonnet, 41.

son, the white dot of your mother waving.[236]

The poem comes immediately after another sonnet titled "Waking with Russell" and together they represent the poet's homage to the birth and life of his twin sons.[237] While for Russell, fatherly love is celebrated in the immeasurable smile appearing on the baby's face when he wakes up, for Jamie, born amid what look like life-threatening circumstances, everything is pushed to the limits. The first octave covers a long distance, from the "world" to "Kirrie Hill" near the poet's house. Observe the words in rhyme position: "earth" (after world) goes with "breath," "world" with "held," "will" with "Hill" and "Russ" with "us." By only moving on the right-hand side of the poem, where the border runs before falling or ascending into the void of the blank, the reader is caught in a fascinating but perilous journey. "Will" is the keystone placed in the middle of the vault of meaning: breath is what you need to live on earth and find a space in the world. Through "will"—the will to live, Bergsonian élan vital, Spinozian *conatus*, Weil's grace? Through R(*us*)s, the name he has received from his parents—he can be part of his first society/group, i.e., *us*. The intricate texture is an indirect reply to how Russ's breath, figuratively transformed into a thread, held the pull of doctors and nurses and kept him alive. A dreadful option looms large in this poem. What if Russ had not survived? What if the thread had not held?

"*All that trouble just to turn up dead*/was all I thought that long week," where the word "dead" ominously rhymes with "thread" in the next line. That ungraspable, unsayable risk needs to be contained, somehow entrapped and that is where Paterson uses the intricacies of a sonnet, its threads, its recognisable form that allows its sharing. The "thread" (form, sonnet, rhyme scheme) is now "holding all of us." The mother's appearance in the last line, her "white dot" waving is a symbol at distance, a reference point. The appearance of the possibility of a terrifying gap within the everyday negotiations with the symbolic and the imaginary is, as noted before, the specificity of

[236] Don Paterson, *Landing Light*, 6.
[237] Don Paterson, *Landing Light*, 5.

the Real. The Real, as psychoanalysts say, insists. It exerts its always present force on *the matrix* of our lives, or as Lacan would have said on the "Borromean Knot" that constitutes our subjectivity. As Calum Neill explains:

> For Lacan, it is the insistence on the real that offers the possibility of a truly subjective engagement with the world. Without the real, all is pre-set. The real is not, however, something we could occupy. To live, we have to live in the symbolic and imaginary, with the real always imposing. To capture this idea, Lacan make use of a curious configuration of circles called the Borromean knot.[238] A Borromean knot is a little like a Russian wedding ring, with three interlocked bands. The crucial difference is the way in which the bands are locked together. If you were to cut one of the bands in a Russian wedding, the other two would remain connected. In the case of a Borromean knot, each band is interwoven with the others in such a way that severing any one band would cause the other two to separate.[239]

It is my opinion that with the Real's insistence and the interlocking action of the Symbolic and the Imaginary, we approach, although from quite a different perspective, another "third space" similar to the one already described in the chapter on Michael Donaghy. The difference lies on the constant dark undercurrent that permeates Patterson's poems. The Scottish poet's obsessive search for a quasi "scientific" definition of the formal aspects of poetry, which reached its peak in *The Poem*, the return of "form" and the "sonnet" in particular, the poem as based on a shareable amount of meaning at all costs seem to be instances of an attempt to resist exactly that insistence of the Real. However, death returns in the following book, *Rain*, and this time takes the ghostly shape of the dead friend and poet Michael Donaghy.[239]

[238] Calum Neill, *Jacques Lacan*, London: 2023, 48.
[239] Don Paterson, *Rain*, London: Faber and Faber, 2009.

"A hole in the hollow": *Rain* and "Other" resistance to the "Real"

Don Paterson's following book titled *Rain* finishes with the eponymous poem preceded by a sequence of seven poems in different poetic forms: 'Phantom i.m M.D. '[240] It is a long elegy dedicated to Michael Donaghy, a friend and fellow poet who had died five years earlier. I am going to concentrate in particular on two sections of the poem, i.e., sections II and III. The following is section II:

Zurbaran's *St. Francis in Meditation*
is west-lit, hooded, kneeling, tight in his frame;
his hands are joined, both in supplication
and to clasp the old skull to his breast.
This he is at pains to hold along
the knit-line of the parietal bone
the better, I would say, to feel the teeth
of the upper jaw gnaw into his sternum.
His face is tilted upwards, heavenwards,
while the skull, in turn, beholds his upturned face.
I would say that Francis's eyes are closed
but this is guess work, since they are occluded
wholly by the shadow of his cowl,
for which we read the larger dark he claims
beyond the local evening of his cell.
But I would say the fetish-point, the *punctum*,
is not the skull, the white cup of his hands
or the frayed hole in the elbow of his robe

[240] Don Paterson, *Rain*, 51-59.

but the tiny batwing of his open mouth
and its vowel, the *ah* of revelation, grief
or agony, but in this case I would say
there is something in the care of its depiction
to prove that we arrest the saint mid-speech.
I would say something had passed between
the man and his interrogated night.
I would say his words are not his words.
I would say the skull is working him.

Zurbaran's interest in the holy figure of St. Francis resulted in approximately thirty-four paintings in which the saint is represented mostly praying or in meditation. He is part of the so-called school of "tenebrism" and in the chiaroscuro and dramatic light effects on his work it is difficult not to notice the direct influence by Caravaggio. The element that probably attracted Don Paterson in the work of the "Spanish Caravaggio" is the continuous shift the painter manages to cultivate and balance so masterly between surface and depth, mysticism and earth, illusion and reality.

> The angled pose, parted lips, and upturned gaze of this lifesize figure contribute to the impression of encountering a living human being. Although Zurbaran has worked on the flat surface of a canvas, he has depicted the saint with such depth and three-dimensionality that the distinction between image and reality becomes blurred. Ford's comment about Zurbaran's *Carthusians*, who "almost step out of their frames, and do all but move and speak," could similarly be applied to this image of Saint Francis. Only the loosely painted tear on the elbow betrays that this figure is made of oil on canvas, not flesh and bones.[241]

In a book dedicated to the "visionary" in the painters of the Spanish Golden Age, Victor Stoichita stresses how mysticism and its public representation were based on the ability

[241] Edward Payne, "Surface and Depth: Zurbarán's *Saint Francis in Meditation*," *Hispanic Research Journal* 22, no. 5 (2021): 424–425.

to recreate and, on the onlooker's side, to detect "the essence of the art of simulation."[242] An attentive reader, therefore, goes back to Paterson's text with a slightly different attitude. The 27-line poem follows a detailed description of Zurbaran's painting, pausing where the poet's eye is attracted. The first stop occurs where the saint's hands "clasp the old skull to his breast." The figure depicted looks so frail that "he is at pains to hold along" the symbolised *memento mori*. "The knitline of the parietal bone/the better, I would say, to feel the teeth/ of the upper jaw gnaw into his sternum." The text becomes dense, haptic, onomatopoeic in the "gnaw" that replicates the "jaw" in the vowel sound /ɔ:/ to prolong the torment mentioned earlier through the pun on "at pain." The intrusion of that "I would say"—it will appear six times in the poem—reveals the "voice" and the gaze of someone "speaking" in the poem. The reader finds herself in the position of reading a written text where "someone" is describing a picture he/she/it is looking at. I guess we are back to Lacan's "mirror stage" mentioned earlier while the subject, in this case, is both a picture and a "ghost," a "phantom" of the poet to whom the poem is dedicated. Rather than constituting an "ideal" subjectivity, Paterson seems to insist on instability here, on a vacuum that is revolves around reflections of reflections. As no surprise comes the reference to Roland Barthes's *punctum* from *Camera Lucida*, a book on photography I will be dealing with extensively in the chapter on Lavinia Greenlaw. Had we thought that the skull was at the centre of Zurbaran's picture, we would have been wrong: "is not the skull" or "the frayed hole in the elbow of his robe" but the open mouth, the "batwing" and its vowel, the "*ah*" which is "revelation, grief or agony" at the same time. The saint interrogated the night and now he seems to have found an answer even though "his words are not his words" and "the skull is working him." Whose words are they? Do they originate from the skull? Who is the subject of that "him" being worked

[242] Victor Stoichita, *Visionary Experience in the Golden Age of Spanish Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 1995), 163–164. He writes: "At the end of the day, we are confronted by the problem of *representation,* […] the only difference being that the paintings […] acknowledge straightaway their illustrative status, and that any effort on our part cannot be compared therefore to a trial, which aims to establish the 'truth', but rather to a study that aims to define the essence of the 'art of simulation'."

by the skull? While negative theology seems to be an obvious reference for that "interrogated night," instability of the subject prevails.

In chapters seven and eight of his series of lectures titled *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques Lacan considers the concept of "anamorphosis" in *The Ambassadors* by Franz Holbein. The following explanation by S. Levine is worth discussing:

> By means of naming the frontally indeterminate visual blob a skull or death's head, the Symbolic order of religious iconography obliterates the Imaginary illusion of a directly perceived naturalism. This act of naming opens up a radically new space for human meaning, like that of Adam and Eve in the instant of assigning names in the Garden of Eden. The Symbolic act also leaves behind an unsignified residue of the Real that, ever after, haunts the subject with the ghostly being of the nameless Thing.[243]

Holbein's picture is, in fact, characterised by an undefined image, a stain that only through an oblique glance can be perceived by the viewer as a skull. The *vanitas* of the two wealthy and elegant figures represented in the painting with accurate realism is undermined by the "naming" of that frontal blob. Despite being identified, that initial "stain" leaves a residue and refuses to be incorporated into the Symbolic. In the act of glancing sideways and identifying the image, that "unsignified" residue remains unreachable, beyond language, unsayable. There is definitely a quantum of "unsayable" in "his words are not his words" and, in that vowel, "ah" left mid-air in the painting as in the poem. However, as Adam Newey reminds us in a review of *Rain* in *The Guardian*:

> There's something of the shadow puppeteer in Don Paterson - reading his poems, you don't know what's real and what's illusion; they play with the reader's perceptions and sense of perspective, so that you aren't quite sure whether what you're

[243] Steven Levine, *Lacan Reframed* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing), 52–53.

> looking at are the moving figures themselves or the backlit projection screen.[244]

A possible answer to that undecidability might lie in the residue of unsayable that death, making its appearance, leaves to those who remain. It certainly creates a rupture, a distancing that is necessarily left aside and can be considered, as it is for Jan Schreiber, as a lack of involvement of the reader. About this specific poem he writes:

> The necessity of that poem in Paterson's life is absolutely clear; however, its success as a poem, viewed by readers without the author's particular history, is debatable. Reading it, I feel like a therapist privileged to witness the struggles of a patient with painful feelings; I appreciate and understand those feelings, but I do not live them myself.[245]

The remark is really interesting when related to the observer's experience suggested by Lacan when viewing Holbein's *The Ambassadors*.

> In Holbein's picture I showed you at once without hiding any more than usual the singular object floating in the foreground, which is there to be looked at, in order to catch, I would almost say, to catch in its trap, the observer, that is to say, us. It is, in short, an obvious way, no doubt an exceptional one, and one due to some moment of reflection on the part of the painter, of showing us that, as subjects, we are literally called into the picture, and represented here as caught. For the secret of this picture, whose implications I have pointed out to you, the kinships with the vanitas, the way this fascinating picture presents, between the two splendidly dressed and immobile figures, everything that recalls, in the perspective of the period, the vanity of the arts and sciences, the secret of this picture is given at the moment when, moving slightly away, little by little, to the left, then turning around, we see what the magical floating object signifies. It reflects our own nothingness, in the figure of the death's head. It is a use,

[244] Adam Newey, "Rain by Don Paterson," *The Guardian*, September 19, 2009.
[245] Jan Schreiber, "Don Paterson's Improbable Distances," *Contemporary Poetry Review* (June 2021), https://www.cprw.com/don-patersons-improbable-distances.

> therefore, of the geometric dimension of vision in order to capture the subject, an obvious relation with desire which, nevertheless, remains enigmatic.[246]

The therapist's glance, as claimed by Sampson, therefore does not seem to require the involvement of feelings, but, according to Lacan, rather a "geometric dimension of vision in order to capture the subject." Let us follow the illusion a little further, the one that appears in part III:

III

(Or to put it otherwise: consider this
pinwheel or white linen, at its heart
a hollow, in the hollow a small hole.
We cannot say or see whether the hole
passes through the cloth, or if the cloth
darkens itself – by which I mean *gives rises*
to it, the black star at his heart,
and hosts as a mere emergent trait
of its own intricate infolded structure.
Either way, towards the framing edge
Something else is calling into question
the linen's own materiality
and the folds depicted are impossible.
After Alison Watt: 'Breath'

In 2011, Don Paterson published together with Alison Watt a book titled *Hiding in Full View*.[247] The book is a collaboration between the Scottish painter Alison Watt

[246] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, New York: Routledge, 2008, 92.
[247] Watt and Paterson, *Hiding in Full View*.

and Don Paterson. The reproductions of some of the paintings are presented next to single-line poems (with a visible *caesura* in the middle). According to Watt, she painted her works (exhibited for the first time at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence) inspired by photographs of Francesca Woodman and Paterson did the same with his texts. In 2008, the painter and the poet had collaborated on another Watt project titled *Phantom* for the National Gallery in London. It was based on *St. Francis in Meditation* by Zurbarán and the catalogue contained new work by Don Paterson. The intense expansion of carefully selected details from other paintings has become a trademark of Alison Watt's work. In the case of *Hiding in Full* view it results in gigantic folds of vests and robes where the balance between abstraction and detailed realism is constantly challenged. The texture of the paintings is delicate and opulent at the same time, shadows and lights compete in folds and disclosures. The words used by Don Paterson while attempting to capture the "materiality" of the hole in the white linen worn by the saint could be easily transferred to Watt's paintings. At the same time, they also point to that hole/cut that, according to Lacan, separates man from the signified leaving him in an eternal nostalgia for a lost object. It is a desire that, in the French psychoanalyst's words quoted above, remains "enigmatic." "Something else is calling into question" "towards the framing edge" writes Paterson; "the linen's own materiality/and the folds depicted are impossible." At the margins overlooking the blank part of the page and the end of the painting we cannot say whether the hole/ passes through the cloth, or if the cloth darkens itself.

Conclusion

Instability, resistances, explorations of the margins create the space where Don Paterson's poetry mainly occurs. From the cracks that undermine the unsteady construction of a poetic subjectivity I tried to explore in the first part of this chapter to the insistence of the Real and the Other's refusal to be part of the Symbolic. Tensions and

undercurrents, therefore, negotiate the agency of another possible third space. A third space where the almost biological necessity of form (as the one I explored in the sonnet) conflates with a residual, charged (to employ a Kristevan reference) unsayable factor. As Lacan explains, it is the Borromean knot of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real that activate the dialectic of desire, a drive that, although based on "nothingness" or "an object lost forever" triggers a response in the subject, actuates profound research in and within language. Don Paterson's strong reaction to what he defined as "modernist" poetry, so it seems to me, stem from the very same innervation. In Lacanian terms, the so called "modernists" focus on the *corps morcelé* before the Imaginary begins to constitute the Ideal image of the self. Hence, they prefer to chase a fragmentary style, a refusal of the narrative dimension, the insistence on the cut, the glance at the hollowness, the unsayable that is always in search of an alternative language. Don Paterson, on the other hand, year after year, shifts his attention from the "dark art of poetry" as a mysterious interplay of signifiers to a "pseudo-scientific" justification of poetry as a memory device, poetic language as based on "strict" elements reflected in a formal aspect developed through tradition. It is in this commonality (what has been defined as the pact with the reader) that poetry finds its possible meaning. The resistance to the fragments and the rupture which the exposure of the Real causes remain, nevertheless, an essential trait of his work.

Michael Hofmann: redemption of the ruin

Introduction: swinging like hooked fishes

"I started off with sort of anti-literature – no line breaks, no music, no repetition. Just matter, I think, matter," says Michael Hofmann in an interview almost twenty years after the publication of his poetry debut *Nights in the Iron Hotel* for Faber in 1983.[248] In the 1994 *Poetry Review* issue dedicated to the New Generation, he presented himself with the following words:

> I wrote down Poe's phrase, "a frictionless expressive purity," eschewed sound, repetition pleasingness, stanza breaks, wrote poems the size and shape and texture of bricks, but still had a certain cunning.[249]

What he meant by "anti-literature," "poems the size and shape and texture of bricks" is exemplified in "Nights in the Iron Hotel," the eponymous text from his first collection credited by many critics and reviewers to be the quintessential early Hofmann poem. It is worth quoting it in its entirety. A brief analysis of the text will introduce the ideas I will develop in the chapter.

[248] Thomas Harry ed., *Talking with Poets* (New York: Handsel Books, 2002), 98; Michael Hofmann, *Nights in the Iron Hotel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983).
[249] *Poetry Review,* 47.

Nights in the Iron Hotel

Our beds are at a hospital distance.
I push them together. Straw matting
on the walls produces a Palm Beach effect:

long drinks made with rum in tropical bars.
The position of mirror and wardrobe
recalls a room I once lived in happily.

Our feelings are shorter and faster now.
You confess a new infidelity. This time
A trombone player. His tender mercies…

All night, we talk about separating.
The radio wakes us with muzak.
In a sinister way, you call it lulling.

We are fascinated by our own anaesthesia,
our inability to function. Sex is a luxury,
an export of healthy physical economies.

The TV stays switched on all the time.
Dizzying social realism for the drunks.
A gymnast swings like a hooked fish.

Prague

The “hospital distance” of the first line states the positioning of the two (ex?) lovers from the very beginning. The menacing halo of “hospital” hints at infirmity, sickness, and frailty. What seems to be an active stance: “pushing them together” is immediately neutralised by the “Palm Beach effect” dissimulation fabricated by the straw matting. Walls need to be covered, and straw matting looks like one of those temporary solutions that eventually become chronic. The first tercet ends in suspension with a colon protruding mid-air towards the next stanza. There are no evident insignia of sound patterns, repetition, parallelism, no formal construction suggesting some form of hypothetical movement. It is almost pure stasis caged in tercets; a slow para tactical tension slowly builds up, its syntax minimally repeating itself in the subject+verb+object like a configuration of an empty closure. The surprising adverb “happily” at the end of the second stanza is again deactivated by the preceding “once” that phonetically brings us back to the “distance” of the very first line. Cold metaphysical - I am using the term here in a sense attributed in art history to painters such as De Chirico, Alberto Savinio and Carrà - description maps the interior and the essential geography of a distant memory. The room is in itself the super impression of another space, more or less like the tropical bars, the effects of the straw matting and the colon of the previous stanza.

We have now reached the third tercet (there are six of them in the poem), and human feelings make their appearance. The adjectives sound rather odd, slant and almost contradictory. The reader is made to stop and think of how emotion can possibly be “shorter” and “faster” simultaneously. The climax is reached with the confession of infidelity and deflated by the subtle irony of the instrument metonymically recalling the player (also known as a trombonist). The irony is further aggravated by what comes next: the idiomatic expression “his tender mercies” and the first of a long series of aposiopeses (a Hofmann’s trademark directly imported from Robert Lowell). The relationship is on the verge of breaking as sleeping has been almost killed. The music has become “muzak,” a phonetical deterioration of good music, *musique d’aumeblement* as Erik Satie once defined it (another hint at the poem refusing its status of poetry?). Then, we must confront

another contrast between “sinister” and “lulling”; it, too, seems to represent the tension caused by the infidelity.

We are at the “turn” of the poem (it comes after twelve lines as if the poem could have a possible vanishing point in the sonnet form). The tercet has become “iconic” for Hofmann’s poetry. The refusal of a sound pattern seems to give in a little in the not so obvious but still effective phonetic chase of “anaesthesia,” “luxury,” “export,” and “physical.” We are left wondering what kind of relationship it could be when it is based on the economic structure of import/export. The “(ina)ability to function” reminds the machine-like imagery of the Freudian model of the drives working as a steaming engine, its tensions and releases, balances, imbalances, and homeostasis.

It is time to concentrate on the visual as the radio leaves space for the television set. The geographical indication at the poem’s end evokes the iron curtain, the cold war and the entire semantic field of a deeply uneasy relationship. Despite the apparent reference, the focus seems more on exhaustion than violence, a silent exchange of prisoners at dusk with nobody noticing. This is the dizziness of a hangover, the aestheticisation of politics in a socialist-realist monument that has long lost its cutting impact. When the radio buzzes and the TV drones on, we are not expecting what comes next. The metaphor’s shock sounds “sinister,” and it leaves the reader with the last gasping finishing start of a fish/gymnast swinging towards some mortuary ending.

Like in every other chapter of my thesis, I will inspect the “space” occupied by Hofmann’s poetry before and after the 1994 New Gen event. Suppose, in the case of Michael Donaghy, the guiding spirit had been Winnicott and his concept of “transitional object,” which I related to “form.” For Don Paterson, the crucial transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic in Lacanian terms was employed to discuss the tensions his poems partly concealed. In this case, Walter Benjamin will constitute the theoretical reference I directly associate with Michael Hofmann. It is my opinion that the “inert” explored by Hofmann with such depth in his poetry (be it represented by the accumulation of details, adjectives, images of ruin and, or troubled relationships) can be tackled with the essential idea developed by Benjamin (in almost all its possible nuances)

that a sense of loss and its possible future redemption are inextricably linked together. At the same time, my interpretation aims at going against the grain of a general tendency in reading Hofmann's poems in terms of a disconsolate, dark, and irredeemable world of subjective representations. On the contrary, I detect the power and strength of this apparent "melancholy," the turmoil of forces that await to be rescued beneath the surface of Hofmann's poetry. I am not alone in this reading (I will quote diffusely from critics who also perceived this strength), but with the help of several ideas by Walter Benjamin, I will do it from a different point of reference.

Therefore, it does not come as a big surprise that since its first appearance in magazine and literary reviews, the reception of Hofmann's poetry has revolved around the constant identification of a series of stylistic features typically followed by interpretations that revolved around hostile, unsympathetic, and aggressive ambiences. Reviewing the first selection of poems included in the Faber series *Poetry Introduction* (5)[250], Hugh Haughton writes of (poems) as "photographic images" in which "details accumulate," "like *natures mortes* full of symptomatic but inexpressive objects and environments";[251] Michael Hulse defines Hofmann's work as "a function of unease," before adding a more dispassionate "the core rationale of his poetry is to force a high charge upon the seemingly neutral." In the same review, a first element of what was to become another mainstream streak of reading Hofmann's poetry emerges: "He unsettles us and does it in ways that are both ingenious and wit."[252] Cleverness and witticism seem to be proposed here as possible modalities to counterbalance those first reactions of unsettlement. Blake Morrison tunes in to a similar wavelength in the *TLS*, describing Hofmann's first collection in terms of "flat laconic tone," "feeling for dislocation," "fascinated by films/television but creating unlikely correspondences."[253]

Another couple of excerpts from the not so many books focused on the history of contemporary British Poetry (and whose scope thus far exceeds the limited space

[250] Wendy Cope et al., *Poetry Introduction 5* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982).
[251] Hugh Haughton, "An Eye on the Everyday," *Times Literary Supplement*, August 13, 1982.
[252] Michael Hulse, "Dizzying Realism," *PN Review*, (July–August 1984), 54.
[253] Blake Morrison, "Images of Dislocation," *Times Literary Supplement*, January 27, 1984, 76.

conceded to a review) will help clarify the point I am trying to make. Referring to Hofmann's first two books, Sean O'Brien writes in one of the most influential volumes penned on the poetry spanning the period 1945-2000:

> What was striking was that a bookish young man's range of reference was allied to a voice which seemed not simply elderly in the manner of young poets, but in some way, both emotionally short-circuited and urgent – depressed and passive-aggressive, as therapists might say. Hofmann's subjects often involved emotional extremes such as love affairs, broken marriages, infidelity and a vexed relationship with his father.[254]

He then proceeds to quote from another famous book by Alan Robinson – whose view apparently, he shares – there is a chapter dedicated explicitly to Hofmann's poetry:

> The problem for the reader is to decide whether the superficial, detached observations imply any cumulative, underlying significance – such as an evaluative judgement that is selectively drawn to our attention – or whether they remain discrete, relatively arbitrary jottings. With studied impassivity [Hofmann's] omnivorous gaze unreflectingly assimilates objects and people into a common dehumanisation. Intellectually and emotionally, therefore, his poems depend largely on what the reader projects into their absences and elisions.[255]

I will quote several subsequent critical interventions later in the chapter. Suffices here to say that, as stated above, the general tone of Hofmann's reception seems to be settled from the beginning and, with notable exceptions, will trail along the same line over the following forty years. It does not necessarily convey, in most cases, a negative judgment of Hofmann's poetry. In fact, he was soon to be recognised, especially after

[254] Sean O'Brien, *The Deregulated Muse*, 237.
[255] Alan Robinson, *Instabilities in Contemporary British Poetry*, London MacMillan, 1988.

his second book *Acrimony* as one of the most distinct voices of his generation.[256] However, the point I am trying to make is that, generally, reviews, articles and essays fail to recognise the significance of those "detached observations," "studied impassivity," "accumulation of details," and "flat laconic tone." To quote from Robinson above, they are mostly treated as the by-products of an "omnivorous gaze," mirroring surfaces predominantly created per se, with nothing to explore underneath or above or on them.

My argument, as stated above, is that there are other entry points into the dark "arcades" (*passages*, *Passagen*) designed by Hofmann's poetry; there are different points of observation to survey those texts that apparently look like mirroring surfaces. The word "arcades" refers to Walter Benjamin's unfinished project on Paris *passages* in ruin at the time of his writing and in wait to be replaced by new, more dazzling shopping malls. In his ambitious work, Benjamin focused on the origin, development and ruin of those *Passagen* in an attempt (at some points heavily criticised by the other members of the Institute for Social Research – Adorno in particular) to find common ground for historical-materialism, Marxism and aesthetics. Apart from the Arcades project (the two "exposés" he wrote to present his work and the unfinished convolutes he left to Georges Bataille at the Paris National Library when he had to flee France after the Nazis took power in France), several of his concepts and ideas derive mainly from "One-way Street," "The Task of Translator," "The Storyteller," "Naples," "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," "A Short History of Photography," and "Theses on the Philosophy of History."[257] They will help define a theoretical frame for the point I am trying to make.

Hannah Arendt thus concludes her introduction to "Illuminations," the first collection of Walter Benjamin's essays to be published in book form:

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[256] Michael Hofmann, *Acrimony* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986).

[257] All the texts mentioned are included in Hannah Arendt, ed., *Illuminations* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970). For all the references to the "convolutes" of the unfinished *Arcades Project*, see Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938–1940*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).

> Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past—but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallisation, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things "suffer a sea-change" and survive in new crystallised forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living—as "thought fragments," as something "rich and strange," and perhaps even as everlasting *Urphänomene*.[258]

Arendt perfectly describes the direction I am to follow in my reading of Hofmann's poetry. Far from remaining inert, the image of the swinging gymnast "hooked like a fish" in the poem quoted above represents precisely one of the "new crystallised forms" in which Hofmann's gaze transforms what he sees in what he writes. There is something constantly sinking in Hofmann's poetry. Still, it somehow manages to become "rich and strange." It is precisely because it is dipped, low indepth, and suffered a "sea-change" that it tends to develop into an image (a thoughtfragment) able to keep an open dialogue with the present. It hits the bottom, so to speak, in order to escape.

Distance and distant (like the beds in the opening image of the poem, like the two lovers trapped in their hotel room) is another keyword. As Roland Vazquez explains:

> The quality of the distant is such that it can only be recognised in its absence; the moment it is appropriated as an object, it ceases to be distant. And it precisely this absencing, this

[258] Hannah Arendt, "Introduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), 50–51.

> irreducible "negative" experience of the distant, that which mediates the relation of the present with the past.[259]

Against the totalising risk of a system pointing toward a possible explanation, recomposition of fractures, a chronology of facts, and suturing of ruptures which is what, even if not explicitly, most of what has been written on Hofmann points to, the poet proposes suspension (aposiopesis), the undecidedness of personal relationships, a "heap of broken images," details, frustrations, parental relationships gone awry.
Following Benjamin's lesson:

> Benjamin made the fragment a methodological and epistemic answer to the totalising narrative of history. It coincides with his "attempt to capture the portrait of history in the most insignificant representation of reality, its scraps, as it were."[260]

Therefore, when investigating a possible space in some of the 1994 New Gen operation poets, Michael Hofmann can be defined as a poet of *passages*. There are several reasons for exploring this signal/signpost - and what I am particularly interested in is, among other elements, exploring both meanings suggested by the different reading/pronunciation of the word in English and French. German by birth but mainly educated in England, apart from his poetry collections, he has produced three collections of essays on poets, writers, and painters[261] and an astounding number of translations from German (from Kafka to Bernhard and Joseph Roth, to mention only a few). His long-lasting and consistent collaborations with magazines and reviews such as *Poetry* and *The*

[259] Rolando Vazquez, "Commodity Display and the Phantasmagoria of Modernity: Exploring Walter Benjamin's Critique of History," in *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Change*, ed. Anca M. Pusca (London: Palgrave MacMillan), 146.
[260] Vazquez, 146.
[261] Michael Hofmann, *Behind the Lines – Pieces on Writing and Pictures* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001); Michael Hofmann, *Where Have You Been? – Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014); Michael Hofmann, *Messing About in Boats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

London Review of Books make him a perfect representative of the "polytechnical engineer," an expert on the afterlife of works of art mentioned by Benjamin.

Misprision, improbability and discord

> To give every appearance of straight head uncomplicatedness and then have the whole thing full of hooks and barbs, to use misprision, improbability and discord to delay and point and thicken speech. The poem, in hindsight, is the product of an "impossible voice." A common or garden line is actually a mosaic of magnets, charges and repulsions in every word. [262]

What Michael Hofmann writes for the volume *Strong Words – Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* sounds like a poetic manifesto and adds something relevant to what he states in the first quotation in the introduction. The poem's apparent smooth surface hides possibly fatal dangers, landmines ready to blast and kill at the slightest reader's touch.

Looking at You (Caroline)

Having your photograph on my bedside table
is like having a propeller there… My friend
did his project on the Gallipoli Offensive-
with a proud Appendix of family heirlooms:
irrelevant fragments of German aircrafts.
I covered the Russian Revolution (the only
lasting consequence of the Great War,
I argued) but with nothing more tactile
than a picture section – central feeding

[262] W. N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis eds., *Strong Words – Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), 242.

in tsarist times: cabbage soup and black bread,
the Eisenstein-faced peasants with red pupils…
I take your unnaturally serious expression
and coax it into a smile or a glum look-
dotted lines pencilled in for velocity – but
you still won't budge. Then I imagine your
stasis as whir, movement in perfect phase,
just before it starts walking backwards…
All the walks here lead into the autobahn:
they are dual carriageways for pedestrians,
with wire bridges over traffic unusually
quiet in the snow. A blue signpost marks
the distances: Nürnberg 100; Würzburg
(home of the Volkswagen 200; Berlin 500…

The pioneers of aviation were never alone-
they named their machines after their loved ones.

A series of photographs triggers a process of possible correspondences in this poem, one of those movements of back and forth in time (from the present to the past, and, even more necessarily so, from the past to the present) that, according to Walter Benjamin characterises the only hope for real transformation. It is the agency this change represents, in my view, what is at stake in the poem. The photograph on the bedside table suggests an awakening to the image of Caroline; it acts as a propeller, but, with a typical Hofmann's passage (use of suspension dots, aposiopesis), the reader's attention is immediately steered in another direction (the past), and not given more context or explanation on the reasons why she (Caroline) or (it) her photograph is defined that way. It is problematic to uncover a possible connection between those first two lines in abstract poetic elements. The number of syllables (eleven) is the same, the repetition of the words

"having" and "my" might be another clue, and a hint at an iambic cadence in "my bedside table" and "my friend" can be detected. So far, we still are in the realm of "straight head uncomplicatedness."

The abrupt change in the verbal tense after the enjambement in line three signals the moment of recollection. The *trait d'union* between the first two lines, the suspension dots, and the new section seems to be identifiable in the next series of photographs that make their appearance in the "picture section" quoted below. The reader follows Hofmann back to school and the juxtaposition between two presentations: his own project (on the Russian Revolution) and a friend's (on the Gallipoli Offensive). It is not so much the assignment per se that attracts the attention here, but what comes attached to it, its realia. The poet's friend accompanies his presentation with "some family heirlooms": "irrelevant fragments of German aircrafts." At the same time, Hofmann has "nothing more tactile / than a picture section – central feeding / in tsarist times: cabbage soup and black bread, /the Eisenstein-faced peasants with red pupils… I would like to investigate further this juxtaposition and, as stated above in the introduction, the essence of the images we are shown via those lines. What does make the friend's fragments irrelevant? What does that "tactile" refer to? We need to go back to Benjamin:

> The whole of history is present in the fragment that is the object of study. But, in order to gain access to that history, a methodology of arrangement, or what Baudelaire called "correspondences" is required that will allow past and present to recognise one another.[263]

In other words, while the poet's schoolmate's fragments remain inert because they do not seem to be capable of activating, connecting with nothing in the present, Hofmann's "Eisenstein-faced peasants" from the Russian Revolution somehow reconfigure themselves in a new constellation that includes, among several other stars, Caroline's picture, tsarist times, Eisenstein, the following lines in the poem and, well, the poem

[263] Peter Buse, Ken Hirschkop, Scott McCracken, Bertrand Taithe eds., *Benjamin's Arcades – An unguided tour*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2005, p. 34.

itself. The "shock" and "reflection" of this recognition (the past in the "nowtime" in Benjamin's terms) succeeds in transfiguring things. As Walter Benjamin famously noted, "ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars." The "idea" of the poem resolves itself in creating a correspondence between those red pupils, Caroline's "unnaturally serious expression" and the poem. Therefore, the latter needs to be what it is, a reconfiguration in which form perceived by Hofmann as tradition (with its commodity value) must be avoided in favour of the opening up of its use-value, a new consciousness, and "the possibility of politics" with it. "Hooks," "barbs," "misprision" that, according to Hofmann, are placed like landmines all over the surface of the poem to deceive a reader convinced of taking a stroll in a pleasant and flowery garden lies in the tension between inertness and reconfiguration. It is an issue that I have been discussing so far along with the development of the entire thesis. Readable and straightforward texts that can be critically set aside because of their supposed lack of significance (see Robinson above) when entering or instead made to enter the Real (I am using the term here in Lacanian terms, thus the capital letter) and conflated language as poetic language cannot but acquire independence, a series of political tactics that ultimately aim at creating a space where even the subjectivity of the author is at stake. Hofmann is perfectly aware of this process and describes it in a very rational way:

> Otherwise, there is a process called annealment, the heating to a high temperature and slow cooling of glass or metal, to toughen them. Making a poem feels like that, writing as yourself and reading it back as someone else. Distance, perspective, irony, and derision (terribly important!), all come into the picture. The poem acquires independence, the poet, in Montale's comparison, is like the props man who's stumbled upon it, "unaware that he's/the author."[264]

The photograph of Caroline, in fact, points at a distance and an absence. The poet's attempt to change her expression using persuasion "coaxing," even resorting to a smile

[264] Herbert W.N, Matthew Hollis (2000), pg. 243.

made of dotted pencilled lines (which I read as another form of subtle critique to the rhetoric of traditional forms but not, as I have pointed out, of clear readability) fail, "you still won't budge." The image that follows represents once again a conjoining of contrasting elements. It is a blurred image, like a photograph where the exposition has been set on for too long. We see the "stasis" of the pose and the "whir" of something or someone that cannot keep or be kept still. The movement, according to Benjamin, cannot but be "backwards" to move forwards. "All the walks here lead to the autobahn" stresses Hofmann's habit that will continue in his following works of interspersing words from another language in his poems. In this case, it works as an introduction to what comes next: "a blue signpost marks the distances" followed by place names Nürberg, Würburg, and Berlin. The umlaut opens a space in the poem similar to how the exactness of those distances expressed in numbers rather than letters tend to transform the lines into something more material, almost "tactile." But the snow makes the traffic "quiet," and the reader finds herself on a bridge and suspended, once again, on another aposiopesis. It is names we are dealing with here, the magical
act of nomination that brings us back to a mythical past where organic and inorganic exerted some sort of force on one another or, even better, were two aspects of the same reality.

Walter Benjamin's theory of language is highly complex and reflects his interest in Judaism and the Kabbalah. Nevertheless, there is an echo here of his idea that names communicate their relationship to an object but, simultaneously, something else, paradoxically their incommunicability. Reduced to a very unsophisticated view, we could argue – as he does all through his work from the early essays "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" (1916) to the well-known "Task of the Translator" (1923) – that a name constantly alludes to a sacred unity lost forever, irretrievable. As is the case with Benjamin, there is not so much regret for that loss but the opportunity to determine that ensuing absence as something that can be projected into the future as an act of renovation, or, to use Benjamin's theological terminology, redemption. That is the intention of the last couplet of the poem. "The pioneers of aviation were never alone /

they named their machines after their loved ones." It could be rephrased as "they were always alone" during difficult missions or explorations, but at the same time, "they were never alone". It is in the power of names, as it is partly in the photograph, to direct towards a presence (the name in this case) at the appearance of an absence. The poem comes full circle and, phonetically, leaves a trace behind in that "one" of al(one) recaptured by the "ones" of the definitive word.

Fred D'Aguiar has a very subtle way of describing the priority of names and the contradictory tactics it involves in Hofmann's poetry:

> For Michael, to promote nouns meant going somewhat against that grain. It meant he had to put many other supporting features around nouns to make them the things they purport to be while working against the idea of the poem as some selfconscious act. Not easy. The two - one for the poem, the other against any action in favour of making a poem, of forcing it - appear divergent, contradictory and irreconcilable. Those supporting features make all the difference. They include parentheses as a way to subtract from the notion of the main clause as the main subject of the poem and draw attention to the actual subject as somehow hidden and in need of teasing out into the open.[265]

There is another photograph that appears in the book and lends its title to one of the poems: "Gruppenbild Ohne Dame":

1923, gathering Depression. In this interior
In Cologne, it's Laocöon all over again.
This time, Fate has left him his two boys
and taken his wife. – Though it is difficult

[265] Fred D'Aguiar, "Metaphor(s) for England: Michael Hofmann's *Nights in the Iron Hotel*," in *The Palm Beach Effect: Reflections on Michael Hofmann*, eds. André Saffis-Nahely and Julian Stannard (London: CB editions, 2013), 16–17.

to see how a woman could have fitted in, here:
a road winding in an empty landscape on the wall,
the threadbare carpet, and one hard Sunday chair.
… A male Trinity, the father and his two Sons.
The maculate conceptions of his bald head.
Baby watchchains like Papa's, and knickerbockers
aspiring to the condition of his three-piece suit.
Their knotty skulls show a family likeness,
heads shaved for lice and summer – skinny boys
with their mother's big eyes and hurt mouth.

There are several intriguing aspects to point out before tackling an analysis. The poem appears with only the German title in the original edition published in 1983. The subtitle "after August Sander" was added in the *Selected Poems* published by Faber in the UK and by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in the US in 2008. The addition clarifies the poem's reference to the picture taken by the German photographer August Sander in the 30s, an artist whose personal biography and work must have been of particular interest to Hofmann. The second is that the text, although not clearly following any rhyme scheme, consists of fourteen lines, and it can be defined, at least in its "shape" or layout, like a sonnet. These are two elements that need to be considered.

My reading of the poem will be partly based on the opposition stated by Walter Benjamin between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. The opposition runs through almost all of Benjamin's theoretical reflection and finds its climax in his work on Baudelaire and the *Arcades*. The reason to refer to those concepts lies in the possibility those two concepts open for an analysis that does not limit itself to the surface but attempts, in the same way it has been done with "Nights in the Iron Hotel," to reconfigure the images in a new and significant constellation. Several layers intermingle in this poem, and extracting or "wrenching out" some of them is a necessary critical operation. The following quotation

refers to Benjamin's essay *The Storyteller* where distinction makes one of its first striking appearances:

> The German word Benjamin uses confirms this: *Erfahrung*. Unlike another word for experience, *Erlebnis*, which refers to experience as something lived or witnessed, *Erfahrung* emphasises the sense of a wisdom drawn and communicated from experience. An appreciation of the distinction can be gained in English if experience (in the sense of what is handed on from one person to the next) is contrasted with experiences.[266]

The historical background is presented at the very beginning and in a straightforward way: a date, a place and the ambivalence of that "Depression" written with a capital D. The reader has not finished yet reconstructing a German interior mentally in the 30s, that he is pushed further back to the indefinite time of mythology. The leap is interrupted, or at least it has a cyclic twist in that "all over again" with its hint of the Nietzschean return of the self-same. What kind of temporality are we dealing with here in this poem? A photograph from the 30s described in a book written in the 80s refers to a myth (reported in Virgil's *Aeneid*) basically lost in time, and finally, the time of a contemporary reader. The sinister reference to Laocoon, his death caused by gods (Fate, according to some narrations, Minerva/Artemide, according to Virgil) while he was trying to expose the cunning cheat of the horse at the doors of Troy by the Greeks, turns into a black irony when we discover that the only victim is the mother rather than the father. A father stands in the middle of the picture with his two sons. The roundness of the father figure is in sharp contrast with the utter skeletal appearances of the two siblings. One layer of meaning resides here in the semantic field opened by the word "father," a leitmotif that, although already present in his first book, will become dominant in the following one, *Acrimony* (1986).

[266] David S. Ferris, *The Cambridge Introduction to Walter Benjamin*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), Kindle, locations 1688–1690.

Interestingly, it is not the human figures that first attract Hofmann's attention, but "a road winding in an empty landscape on the wall" that, arguing with Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* one would not immediately identify with the *punctum* of the picture. Hofmann seems to be pointing at an "emptiness" to a road that leads nowhere and somehow succeeds in turning the reader's attention to a distance and a void. Two objects are then mentioned before moving to the description of the human figures: "a threadbare carpet" and a "hard Sunday chair." As referred above, we are in the middle of the *Erlebnis* side of the experience. It is the consciousness reacting to the shocks experimented by a lived experience (we can envisage the thousands of times shuffling feet on the carpet made it so worn out. According to Benjamin, this is an empty experience where the shocks as single grains of rice are absorbed but fail to form a continuum, a process, a configuration. The poet, and the reader with him, are still trapped in a stasis of mimetic reflection.

The description continues, and more shocks are to come; the relationship of continuity is reaffirmed by the watchchains ("like Papa's"), the knickerbockers and the father's three-piece suit. It is the "alienated subjectivity of the work bound to routine attendance on a machine or the anaesthesia brought by constant stimulation in the city."[267] The picture seems capable of absorbing that "routine attendance" that needs only to be mimetically reflected. A transition, a passage, is required to transfer the reflection towards the reflective. In Benjamin's writing, this path is usually signalled by a rupture. The trace left by something disappeared or on the verge of disappearing with its forgotten promise of utopia and future. The fracture must be provided by what T. J. Clark translates as "an uprising of the overlooked."[268]

The conflation of temporalities resolves on the last two words of the poem: "hurt mouth" that phonetically reconnect and reconfigure the entire description to something/someone who has never been there, the mother. The three words share the phonemes "h" and "t" as if a trace was left of a sense of family/affection forever lost in

[267] Peter Buse, Ken Hirschkop, 2005, p.48.
[268] T. J. Clark, "Reservations of the Marvellous," *London Review of Books*, June 22, 2001, 3–9.

the experiences of the everyday commodification and stimulation mechanism to which the father is already a devout contributor and the two sons will soon follow. The picture's surface is redefined by precisely what it lacks: a genuinely human presence. It is offered to the reader in a typically "Hoffmannian" and "Benjaminian" way, through an absence, a distance, a trace left in the eyes, and a curvature of the mouth. In his *A Short History of Photography*, Walter Benjamin acknowledges the work by Sander, stating: "[Sander's] work is more than a picture-book, it is an atlas of instructions."[269] By following those instructions, I have found, once again, in Hofmann's poetry, the precise movement by which a simple description, a list of details, refuses to remain inert but forces itself through several kinds of conflations out of a reified world.

Acrimony, an energetic mismatch

With the publication of *Acrimony* (1986), his second collection of poems, the name of Michael Hofmann was officially a point of reference in the poetic map of his generation. However, it can be argued that, despite Blake Morrison substantiated the new position acquired by the poet on the back cover of the book - "Michael Hofmann could justifiably be said to be the outstanding poet under thirty" - a quick browsing of the reviews published at that time did not suggest a significant change in the already established line of interpretation. Only to name a few, Hugh Haughton reviewing the book for the *Times Literary Supplement*, writes that in *Acrimony,* the reader finds a poet who "specialises in the moments and places he doesn't feel at home in," a "connoisseur of the tacky surfaces of modern city lives" and a book that "crackles with inertia and irritation"; he eventually sums us his point in a peremptory classification: "poetry of complaint."[270] Jem Poster's arguments in the *PN Review* sound even harsher: he underlines "patterns of alienation

[269] Walter Benjamin, *A Short History of Photography*, Kindle, locations 334–432.
[270] Hugh Haughton, 'Not at Home in the House', in *Times Literary Supplement* n° 4381 20 March 1987.

distance/dissociation," "a world whose disparate fragments fail to cohere," he praises the poet's "clarity of perception" but immediately corrects it with "Hofmann too often seems uncertain what to do with his clever and meticulous observations"; he eventually identifies the weakness of Hofmann's poetry in an "acute intelligence demanding too little of itself."[271] Even Blake Morrison, despite the praise on the back cover, cannot but notice in the *London Review of Books* how the poet "trusts his bitterness" and is trapped by a sense of "obsessionalism."[272] None of the reviews seems to doubt the quality of Hofmann's poetry utterly but, in my view, mostly fail to perceive two crucial aspects: first, the actual function of the identified general tone of melancholy, and second the full potential. As stated in the introduction to the chapter, some critics reviewing the book at the time of its publication compensated that acrid tonality expressed in those lines by highlighting a certain witticism and a black, deadpan comicality.

Before entering a detailed analysis of some of the poems from *Acrimony*, I would like to state the theme I will not discuss in this chapter. *Acrimony* is divided into two sections. The second one is with poems that very honestly and directly examine the relationship between Michael Hofmann's poetic persona and his father, the German novelist Gert Hofmann. These are the poems that made, in numerous critical contexts, Hofmann's fortune as a poet. There is more than a reason to agree with that perspective. The texts, in fact, succeed in joining two very opposite tendencies, the confessional and an essential impersonality required by poetry in general. Poems that, in brief, survive the late Robert Lowell's influence (openly acknowledged by Hofmann) and indeed manage to make a step further. To employ Burt's words:

[271] Jem Poster, 'Family Ties', in *PN Review*, July-August 1989, p.60.
[272] Blake Morrison, 'Tales of Hofmann' in *The London Review of Books*, Vol. 8 n°20, 20 November 1986.

> For readers who haven't seen how Lowell's late style could prove fertile, or his methods "compliant" or helpful for future poets, Hofmann's own work can show us how.[273]

One could argue that the "space" in which Hofmann and his father Gert jostle their hostile relationship when investigating connections and correspondences should be considered. The problem is that, in my view, Section 2 of *Acrimony* would require such an in-depth analysis that far exceeds the scope of this chapter, focused, as it is on a different type of imagery.

As is often the case with contemporary poetry, it took a while to explore the potential possibilities expressed by Hofmann's poetry entirely. Several critics, though, with the benefit of a thirty-year or so period, could find entry points that better reflected the multi-faceted verses of the Anglo-German poet. The publication, in 2013, of a collection of essays dedicated explicitly to Michael Hofmann titled *The Palm Beach Effect: Reflections on Michael Hofmann,* edited by André Saffis-Nahely and Julian Stannard, offered the reader a genuinely different variety of perspectives. The book includes contributions by fellow poets, critics, and students (Hofmann currently teaches Creative Writing one semester a year at the University of Florida, Gainsville).
In one of the essays from that book, Mark Ford writes:

> "Albion Market" and "From Kensal Rise to Heaven" are placed back-to-back in *Acrimony* and form a kind of diptych: both are in unrhymed four-line stanzas; both use sustained and precise description to characterise mid-80s London, and both attempt to read into the cityscapes they present the spirit of the times underlying them.[274]

[273] Stephen Burt, 'Rebellion That Honors the Liturgies – Robert Lowell and Michael Hofmann' in Steve Clark and Mark Ford, *Something we have that they don't – British and American Poetic Relation since 1925*, Iowa City, Iowa University Press, 2004, p.166.
[274] Mark Ford, "Michael Hofmann's London," in *The Palm Beach Effect: Reflections on Michael Hofmann*, eds. André Saffis-Nahely and Julian Stannard (London: CB editions, 2013), 134.

It is precisely with that *zeitgeist* in mind that I would like to investigate the second poem quoted by Mark Ford, "From Kensal Rise to Heaven":

From Kensal Rise to Heaven

Old Labour slogans, *Venceremos*, dates for demonstrations
like passed deadlines – they must be disappointed
to find they still exist. Halfway down the street,
a sign struggles to its feet and says Brent.

The surfaces are friable, broken and dirty, a skin unsuitable
for chemical treatment. Building, repair and demolition
go on simultaneously, indistinguishably. Change and decay.
- When change is arrested, what do you get?

The Sun, our Chinese takeaway, is being repainted.
I see an orange topcoat calls for a pink undercoat.
A Chinese calendar girl, naked, chaste and varnished,
simpers behind pot plants like a jungle dawn.

Joy, *local*, it says in the phone-booth, with a number
next to it. Or *Petra*. Or *Out of Order*, and an arrow.
This last gives you pause, ten minutes, several weeks…
Delay deters the opportunist as much as doubt.

In an elementary deception, the name of the street
is taken from a country town, and when I get up
I find my education is back to haunt me: Dickens House,
Black Court, Austen House, thirteen-storey giants.

Some Sunday mornings, blood trails down the street
from the night before. Stabbing, punch-up or nosebleed,
it's impossible to guess, but the drops fell thickly and easily
on the paving-stones, too many for the rules of hopscotch.

The roadway itself is reddish, the faded spongy brick
of the terrace is overpowered by the paintwork's
sweet dessert colours. They spoil it, but you understand
they are there as the sugar in tomato soup is there.

Clouds come over from the West, as always in England
the feeling that the sea is just beyond the next horizon:
a thick, Byzantine crucifix on a steep schoolhouse roof,
the slippery, ecclesiastal gleam of wet slate.

Dogs vet the garbage before the refuse collectors.
Brazen starlings and pigeons, 'flying rats', go over
what is left. Rough-necked, microcephalous, they have
too much white on their bodies, like calcium defectives.

The pigeons mate in full view: some preliminary billing
then the male flutters his wings as though to break a fall…
They inhabit a ruined chiropodist's coming and going freely
through broken windows into their cosy excremental hollow.

The old man in the vest in the old people's home
would willingly watch us all day. In their windows,
a kind of alcove, they keep wine bottles and candlesticks,

Torvill and Dean, a special occasion on ice.

The motor-mews has flat roofs of sandpaper or tarpaper.
One is terraced, like three descending trays of gravel.
Their skylights are angled towards the red East,
some are truncated pyramids, other whole glazed shacks.[275]

From the first line of the poem, the reader is confronted with the image of a relic, and "old" is its opening password. The "*Venceremos*" slogan of the Labour Party looks like a "passed deadline." The revolutionary utopia seems long dead, like a choked cry, while a sign, a pure signifier, "struggles" to find its feet (its meaning, its constantly sliding signified) and say what it has to say. But still, it is the compact fourline stanza that keeps repeating itself twelve lines along with the entire poem that holds everything together. We are in the realm of poetic language where antimony can tackle logical stability and continuity. The second stanza is, once again, a kind of poetic manifesto. "The surfaces are friable, broken and dirty" with the three adjectives (another stylistic feature inherited from Robert Lowell that I will discuss later in the chapter) that desperately hold material rapidly turning into debris through the phonetical repetition of the "r" sound. The following three lines seem to come directly from Walter Benjamin's autobiographical writing *Berlin Childhood*. The coming to a standstill of "change" and "decay," the interchangeability of "demolition," "building," and "repair" perfectly picture history reaching a point of disruption where "progress" is only an old slogan pronounced from the victor's perspective.

> The historical image writes Benjamin is opposed to any representation of historical process. We have already seen one reason for this discontinuity: the continuity of history is that of oppression. Revolt and freedom are only instants in a mythical

[275] Michael Hofmann, 'From Kensal Rise to Heaven', in *Acrimony*, London Faber and Faber, 1986, 34-35.

> and catastrophic continuum, immediately stifled and forgotten. Thus, deliverance can intervene, according to Benjamin, only if the historical process comes to a *standstill.*[276]

My suggestion here is that although eschewed by Hofmann in its most formal semblance, poetic language acts in this poem as it does in other ones already investigated, as a driving force towards that necessary *standstill*. It sounds like a perfectly acceptable answer to Hofmann's question, "When change is arrested, what do you get?". The collector cannot help but collect images, details, and phantasmagorias of this disruption in the forms of debris, rubble, and wreckage. In doing so, he is communicating, again in Walter Benjamin's terms, what is communicable, what he can perceive through his glance but also what cannot be communicated, i.e., poetic language, that refuses the stability of signs, the steadiness of the signifying chain alluding, therefore, to a possible utopian redemption.

There are several other passages in this poem that can confirm my hypothesis. Still, I would like to focus briefly on the two female "characters" appearing in the third and fourth stanzas: the "Chinese calendar girl" and the unnamed prostitute who promises "*joy, local*" from a picture on the phone booth. Convolute "I" of *The Arcade Project* collects a series of quotations and reflections on the roles of the gambler and the prostitute.[277] They, according to Benjamin, represent other examples of dialectical images. Jane Rendell perfectly expresses the idea in her in-depth investigation of The Burlington Arcade in London and the people associated with it as a potential English equivalent of the arcades discussed by Benjamin. She writes:

> As a dialectical image, the prostitute, like the arcade itself, was a "wish-image" and a commodity storehouse; she lingered on

[276] Rainer Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art: The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin* (New York London: The Guilford Press, 1996).
[277] Walter Benjamin, "Convolute I [Prostitution, Gambling]," in *The Arcades Project*, (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 489–515.

> the threshold of desire and fulfilment, hovering between dream-world and awakening.[278]

In the prostitute, Benjamin sees an example of how commodification and reification have also seized the human body, transforming sexual exchange into another form of transition. The prostitute, however, never satisfies the role assigned to her by patriarchy as pure "exchange-value" but managing to remain on the threshold of desire, she "hovers," unstable, keeping the possibility of awakening open. In Hofmann's poem, we never encounter the "real" person; only its pale projection replicated ad infinitum in calendars and pictures. What the reader experiences is, once again, the lack of uniqueness, a void, and the emptiness of a lost aura to express it in Benjamin's terms. It is a necessary step that Hofmann's poetry must take to show the replica as a "wish-image," to add a layer to the "elementary deception" of the sign. The images, precisely as the prostitute in Benjamin's *Arcades*, remain unstable, not fixed, "out of order." Gerhard Richter writes, referring to Benjamin, of "concepts that can never be turned into a programme" while the emphasis stays on "fragmentation and montage."[279] Similarly, it is what happened to the sign in the first stanza as signalled by Burt: "The street sign has dissolved into local place names, and corresponding collections of once-important, now-impotent names and debris."[280] Or, as Mark Ford adds: "Hofmann's method in both these poems is to heap up instances of urban dysfunctions that are then leavened with a wry, distinctive wit."[281]

In one of the first interviews[282] published immediately after *Acrimony*, Hofmann already possesses quite a clear idea of how his method/non-method of writing work:

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[278] Jane Rendell, 'Thresholds, Passages and Surfaces: Touching, Passing and Seeing in the Burlington Arcade' in Alex Coles, *The Optic of Walter* Benjamin, (London: Black Dog Publishing Limited, 1999).
[279] Gerhard Richter, *Walter Benjamin and the Corpus of Autobiography*, (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2000), 222.
[280] S. Burt, 62.
[281] M. Ford, 134.
[282] David Sexton 'Interview: David Sexton talks to Michael Hofmann', in *Literary Review*, November 1986, 61.

> A poem will consist of them or four perfectly distinct things which, at the time I write, will coalesce, will associate with others in a completely new way to create a completely new object and the dots…

Coalesce is the keyword in this excerpt, but as a result of "four distinct things." The movement of association and merging creates an entirely new object while the dots somehow reconfigure on another level the tension of the previous different "things." Always in the same interview, he adds:

> Stress on words or syllables is quite a personal thing. I try to manage tension and release of tensions from one phrase to another, from one word to another. When I string adjectives together or contrast between a long grammatical sentence and a short sentence with no verbs – I suppose that's my technique.[283]

The non-attention to form or regular patterns finds something new in accumulating and releasing tension "from one phrase to another." Ellipsis conflated with long sentences is, nonetheless, another "technique." One last quote from the same interview:

> My comparison is with a tear, with peeling or tearing; you start this operation, and it all happens at once, the experience, the subject, line-length, the kind of tension.[284]

This is Hofmann's peculiar "montage" where the "tearing" and "peeling" scratches the surface mostly through an unmusical linguistic tension that somehow still succeeds in making things happen: "the experience," "the subject," the "linelength" (not searched through mechanical scansion). The poet is a Benjaminian *Angelus Novus* capable of

[283] David Sexton 'Interview: David Sexton talks to Michael Hofmann', 61.
[284] David Sexton 'Interview: David Sexton talks to Michael Hofmann' 61.

perceiving the coming together of "one single catastrophe that keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet."[285]

But his glance, as stated above, is never only a condemnation of the *status quo*. His fascinating linguistic skill and his ability to conflate images of desolation maintain, despite the apparent external bleakness, a balance. This constantly threatened equilibrium precisely allows the text to stay oxymoronically steady and in transition. As "historian" and indeed "dialectical materialist," the poet cannot forget hope. As Bernd Widde claims

> The dialectical materialist who lacks hope in and for human beings must put his faith in the eschatological catastrophe, which will restore the world in an instant and which give a first inkling of itself in the saving "attentiveness" of the material historian.[286]

If read according to this interpretation, scrutinised through the materiality and agency of the poetic language employed by Hofmann, the images of "The old man in the vest in the old people's home," "The pigeons mate in full view," and "The motormews" with their "flat roofs of sandpaper or tarpaper" conjure up something different from the pure and simple black and white realism of a documentary on the 80s in London. Tessa Hadley, although mirroring the thematic issue of the father and son relationship, captures the tension of this realism in that "tormenting extra twits":

> These poem-rooms are crowded with furniture and people, they share some of the qualities of novelistic realism - including their clear referentiality and sequential connectedness. And that play between the businesses of prose and poetry is a tormenting extra twist in the relationship between this poet-son and novelist-father.[287]

[285] Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History."
[286] Bernd Widde, *Walter Benjamin – an intellectual biography* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991).
[287] Tessa Hadley, "*Acrimony*: 'My Father's House'," in *The Palm Beach Effect: Reflections on Michael Hofmann*, eds. André Saffis-Nahely and Julian Stannard (London: CB editions, 2013), 36–37.

Before bringing this section of *Acrimony* to a conclusion, I would like to discuss another poem in the book briefly, "Eclogue":

Eclogue

Industry undressing in front of Agriculture –
not a pretty sight. The subject for one of those
allegorical Victorian sculptures.
An energetic mismatch. But Pluto's hellholes
terminate in or around the flower meadows
and orchards of Proserpine. Ceres's poor daughter
is whisked away by the top-hatted manufacturer
on his iron horse… Brick huts in the fields,
barred mine entrances from the last century,
narrow-gauge railways, powdery cement factories.
A quarry is an inverted cathedral: witchcraft,
a steeple of air sharpened and buried in the ground.
- All around these dangerous sites, sheep graze,
Horned and bleating like eminent Victorians.[288]

This poem looks and sounds like a perfect example of a catastrophic "eclogue," which the OED describes as "A short poem of any kind, *esp.* a pastoral dialogue, such as Virgil's *Bucolics*," registering in "any kind" the shift poems such as Hofmann's have brought to the definition of the headword. Leaving all the mythological and historical references aside, the image I would like to highlight here is the "quarry" as an "inverted cathedral," "a steeple of air sharpened and buried in the ground." This overturn represents a perfect correspondence; another image brought to a standstill. The rite of the routine workers

[288] Hofmann, *Acrimony*, 29.

descending in the depts of the quarry is the subversion of another ritual, the churchgoers attending mass. As the eclogue capsized, losing its mythological aura, everything in the auratic repetition of hard work and devotion gestures is transformed into another "dangerous" wreckage. The peaceful sheep grazing in the meadows only partly conceal the irony of the etymological root of the Greek word for "eclogue" referring to "goat"; in fact, they are not "only" sheep but also Victorians, precisely as the quarry is also a capsized church and this fourteen-line poem is and is not at the same time a sonnet form (as "Gruppenbild Ohne Dame," the poem from *Nights in the Iron Hotel* analysed above). This continual dialectical movement makes Hofmann such an intriguing poet at his best.

Corona, Corona, and its "Repetitions and Strange Adjacencies"[289]

In 1993, seven years after *Acrimony* - *Corona, Corona* – Michael Hofmann's third collection of poems was published. At fifty-four pages is more similar in its slimness to *Nights in the Iron Hotel*, forty-eight pages, than *Acrimony*, seventy-nine pages. Considered by several critics as a "minor" book in the Hofmann's canon, it nevertheless deserves attention specifically for a series of slight formal changes that will fully develop in the following collections. As James Lasdun had already noted for the previous books:

> The coup de grace was that for all their avoidance of conventional poetic effect, they were ravishingly beautiful pieces of writing; exploding with caustic wit, phosphorescent description, jags of plangent eroticism, and those squalls of weirdly joyous verbal music the like of which, to my knowledge, no one has produced before or since.[290]

[289] The title of this section comes from Jamie McKendrick's contributions to the book *The Palm Beach Effect*: "Repetitions and Strange Adjacencies," in *The Palm Beach Effect: Reflections on Michael Hofmann*, eds. André Saffis-Nahely and Julian Stannard (London: CB editions, 2013), 41-50.
[290] James Lasdun, "Londoners," in *The Palm Beach Effect: Reflections on Michael Hofmann*, eds. André Saffis-Nahely and Julian Stannard (London: CB editions, 2013), 1, 2.

One of the formal aspects in these poems is the changed approach to "atonality" regarding that "weirdly joyous verbal music." Making a comparison to dodecaphony, one could be tempted to compare that variation in the listening experience between Anton Webern's *Five Movements for String Quartet, Op. 5* (strictly adherent to the principle of atonal dodecaphony) and Alban Berg's *Violin Concerto* (where dodecaphony is interspersed with a more mellow use of diatonicism). Mick Imlah, reviewing the book for *The Independent*, stresses the "skewering precision," the vocabulary that is "phenomenally rich," a "syntax" that "frequently crumbles into list of nouns, into one-line inventories of landscape or interiors," but, above all, he stresses new "diseased lexical harmonies akin to rhyme."[291] In a more slant way, Michael Wood recognises the same aspect: "the book [is] more uneven than the earlier ones but […] getting quite different effects exploring new relations with the unmeasured" and that Hofmann "can make wonderful music out of disarray."[292]

It is Jamie McKendrick, although a few years later and expanding on Imlah's review, that points out this movement in a more specific direction:

> This is certainly a quality that distinguishes the collection from Hofmann's previous work, which for the most part had fastidiously avoided conventional rhyme and metre; although his poems allowed for subtle wordplay, they appeared largely indifferent to "music" - any acoustic effects that might be considered adornment. Here poem after poem admits a complex play on sound, repetition and assonance, and their arguments sometimes seem to advance through phonetics.[293]

In the same essay, he adds that starting from the title *Corona, Corona*, the "book is echoic in its ideas, shapes, and sounds." What does this new feature represent or change

[291] Mick Imlah, "No pop, still fizzy: *Corona, Corona* – Michael Hofmann," *The Independent*, October 2, 1993.
[292] Michael Wood, "Never for Me," *London Review of Books* 15, no. 23 (December 1993).
[293] McKendrick, "Repetition and Strange Adjacencies," 42.

under the perspective I am reading Hofmann's work? It is a question that requires several answers, and I will discuss them in the analyses of two poems, "Kurt Schwitters in Lakeland" and "Pastorale."[294]

Kurt Schwitters in Lakeland

'Like nothing else in Tennessee' – Wallace Stevens

It was between greens (bowling, cricket),
but the graveyard had stayed immune, half-cut, and smelling
the yellow, abandoned smell of hay. A couple were casting
dead flowers into a wire trash-coop

Kurt Schwitters's tombstone was hewn in straight lines,
klipp und klar, in the shape of a hat, brim – crown.
Unseasonable, but undeniably local,
Someone had left a dozen daffodils.

The man had flown: a refugee
then interned on the Isle of Man;
released, dead, exhumed, and returned to Germany,
to vote with his feet for the 1950s.

*

His *merz* was nothing to do with pain or March;
it had been withdrawn from *Kommerz-und Privatbank*.
Each day he caught the early bus to work,

[294] Michael Hofmann, *Corona, Corona* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 11–12.

Climbed up to his barn thorough a jungle of rhododendrons,

and built on his *Merzwall*. – It too was moved,
cased in a steel frame, and keelhauled down the hill.
The one thing still there that his hand had touched
was a stone and sill
of the picture window that had been put in
in place of the wall. It had an air
of having been given a spin,
a duck, a drakkar, a curling-stone.

The reader is already familiar with Hofmann's quatrains, his compact blocks of words launched to stir and shake the quiet surfaces he explores. It does not come as a surprise then, that the opening stanza sets the scene in a graveyard peopled by a couple "casting dead flowers into a wire trash-coop." Finding itself between bowling and cricket courts, the cemetery, although half-cut, has miraculously remained "immune." It must be precisely because of that small-scale miracle that the same place manages to emit a synecdoche: "smelling the yellow, abandoned smell of hay." A synecdoche that comprises the first example of that echoic modulation (smelling/smell) stressed in McKendrick's essay; an almost impressionistic and Van Goghian "yellow smell of hay" is not something the habitual Hofmann's reader would predict to encounter in one of his poems. However, the unexpected conflation of senses is a perfect introduction to the second stanza, where the protagonist of the poem (we knew it from the title) awaits us.

Hofmann's interest in Kurt Schwitters, the German multi-faceted artist, is longstanding. In his 2014 collection of essays published under the title *Where Have You Been?*, one of the essays is dedicated to him. Hofmann's interpretation of Schwitters' work is revealing from the perspective of this chapter. He writes:

> Schwitters – like Quixote – is a maximalist, a Nietzschean "revaluer of all values," who has come down to us as a

> minimalist (we remember scuffles and windmills). As I understand it, *Merz* was born out of the feeling that the world of 1918 was trash but that it might be possible to redeem it by taking those things it said were trash and making art out of them; and meanwhile, and in any case by overturning all its set opinions and priorities on all subjects[295]

Schwitters expressed his artistic talent in many ways; he wrote poems, composed music, made sculptures, and painted but, arguably, the works he is most famous for, are his *collages*, called, as Hofmann explains in the poem*, Merz*. I would like to highlight the expressions used by Hofmann to describe and explain Schwitters's *Merz* and the ability to create art by using "trash," "redeeming" the unused, the debris, the refuse, especially in a post-war turmoiled period of history. The ideas mentioned above are perfectly captured by Hana Leaper in her description of a *Merz* titled *Opened Customs,* acquired by the Tate Gallery in London in the 1950s:

> The complex mesh of language and layers that comprise the work suggests a correspondingly complex web of ideas and emotions. The turmoil of the period (experienced by Schwitters as well as other German émigrés) is conveyed through the conflicting languages, both printed and handwritten, and the fierce red marks added using stamps, cutouts and daubings. The titular German customs label,
> which takes a prominent position at the top left of the work, points to a lack of personal autonomy and compounds the sense that Schwitters is escaping ideological oppression. The lack of cohesion – the texts run in several different directions – may be indicative of the upheaval that both the artist and the continent were undergoing at this time.[296]

[295] Michael Hofmann, *Where Have You Been? – Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014), 239.
[296] Hana Leaper, "Kurt Schwitters: *Opened by Customs* 1937–8," *Tate*, April 2016, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/schwitters-opened-by-customs-t00214.

All the tesserae of the mosaic find their (although chaotic) positioning in the act of reconfiguration Hofmann is interested in. Part of the notorious Exhibition of Degenerate Art, organised by the Nazis to ridicule the several avante-guard movements that had characterised Germany after the turn of the century, Schwitters left Germany, moved to Norway and then landed in England where, due to his nationality, was kept in a prison camp. After his release, he spent the rest of his life in London before moving to Cumbria, where he lived and continued his artistic endeavour until his death. It is Schwitters' (empty) tombstone Hofmann visits and describes commingling while morphing the German artist's talent for putting together disparate objects, English with German in the idiomatic (and echoic) *Klipp un Klaar* (everything is clear). The trajectory of the exile, and the mixture of languages, are aspects that Hofmann cannot but sympathise with and therefore reflect in his style.

We find ourselves, once again, in Benjamin's territory. Several notes left for his project on the Parisian *Arcades* are dedicated to the character of the ragpicker. This figure is constantly walking across the city dressed in rags to collect rags; in his own way, he is also a poet:

> Like the ragpicker, the poet saves the fleeting images, the linguistic scraps, that he or she finds in the city. The leavings of modern society are the stuff of which modern poetry is made. "The poet finds the refuse of society on their street and derive their heroic subject from this very refuse. Benjamin adds: 'ragpicker or poet' – the refuse concerns both."[297]

Like the gambler and the prostitute, the ragpicker represents a dialectical image in the investment he commits to something transient, out of the market, transitory, and that has escaped the process of commodification and exchange-value. Like Schwitters collected used tickets and stamps to make art, the ragpicker (and the poet with him) subtracts the commodity from his final destruction and redeems it; they redefine something already

[297] Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998).

expended, change its temporality and relocated to the use-value world of utopia. In brief, they find the possibility of a new future in what is in ruin. One of my points in the thesis I am developing is that this idea sums up one of the necessary functions of poetic language. There is always a side that escapes communication and, to use Benjamin's words, communicates what cannot be communicated (despite the poet's personal pledge to readability). In my view, the structural and multi-levelled employment Hofmann does of the "echoic" in this context can be interpreted according to this function. What does keep together the following words at the end of the poem - "a spin, /a duck, a drakkar, a curling-stone" - if not the sound pattern? It is the chain of the signifiers in their perpetual movement in search of hooking a meaning.

Hofmann then proceeds to describe Schwitters's routine in Cumbria, the daily bus to the barn he had bought to rebuild his *merzbau* (a conglomeration of different sculptures protruding from a wall); it was a work of art he had spent a long time on in his native Hannover, but that had been destroyed during the war. With a refined extent of irony, Hofmann narrates the story of how, after Schwitters's death, the wall was removed, not without difficulties, from the barn and collocated in a museum in Newcastle. It is the last vanishing act of the king of transience. The final mention Hofmann does to tactility, uniqueness and aura in the "the one thing still there that his hand had touched" would probably deserve a further exploration referencing Benjamin's theoretical frame.

As I did for *Acrimony* with "Eclogue," I would like to conclude this section of the chapter dedicated to *Corona, Corona,* with Hofmann's very personal take on the "pastorale," another classic example from the history of poetic forms.

Pastorale

for Beat Sterchi

Where the cars razored past on the blue highway,
I walked, unreasonably, *contre-sens*,

the slewed census-taker on the green verge,
noting a hedgehog's defensive needle-spill,

the bullet-copper and bullet-steel of pheasants,
henna ferns and a six-pack of Feminax,

indecipherable cans and the cursive snout and tail
of a flattened rat under the floribunda ivy,

the farmer's stockpiled hay rolls and his flocks,
ancillary, bacillary blocks of anthrax.

Debris meets sound patterns or, as Jamie McKendrick states about some of the poems, "their arguments sometimes seem to advance through phonetics." The accumulation of mostly organic remains, the "hedgehog's defensive needle-spill," "the bullet-copper and bullet-steel of pheasants," and the "flattened rat" in all their immobility are reconfigured by a slant rhythm that holds the poem together. While Rosanna Warren perfectly captures the landscape:

> What he observes has already become a kind of writing: "cursive snout" of the crushed rat. In this desolate landscape of agribusiness, where haystacks have been "stockpiled" in plastic wrap as if they were an arsenal of biochemical weapons and where human female fertility means only pain to be controlled by drugs (Feminax), the memory of classical pastoral survives only in the phrase "green verge." But any vestige of Virgilian pastures, Shakespearean greenwood, or Miltonic wild Thyme and the gadding Vine o'ergrown has corrupted into a nightmare. The animals have taken on the metallic quality of the civilisation that has flattened them, the bullet-copper and bullet-steel of pheasants - and the

> vegetation, the floribund ivy not to mention those sinister hay rolls, seems Bosch-like in its excess.[298]

Jamie McKendrick perceives the entire device with the finest poet's listening ability and picks up:

> An alphabetical chiasmus, literally *abba*: "ancillary, bacillary blocks of anthrax." Anthrax rhymes jarringly with that "six-pack of Feminax" – itself an unhappy collision of gender attributes (the brand-name being a now discontinued codeine-based drug for period pains).

The halved quatrains have turned into couplets as if requiring more space between the lines on the page among all those remains. Once again, as stated above, the redemption through the poet's rag picking lies precisely in creating an infected musicality that, despite the apparent lack of hope, never ceases to believe in some *contre-sense*.

To be "Approximately Nowhere"

When Faber released *Approximately Nowhere* in 1999, not much seems to have changed in the reception of Hofmann's poetry six years after the publication of *Corona, Corona*. The tone of the reviews follows the road more taken. Adam Newey, reviewing the book for the *New Statesman*, writes that "sometimes poems are little more than lists, series"; then, in a typical counterbalance movement, he adds, as if to amend, that they are also characterised by "playful harmonies, sly puns, subterranean observation, and acute alliteration."[299] It seems as if the diseased music of Hofmann's poetry had eventually entered the general critical discourse, and critics actively employed it in an anxious search for affirmative elements among the grim. Robert Potts for *The Guardian*

[298] Rosanna Warren, "Michael Hofmann: Information Technology," in *The Palm Beach Effect: Reflections on Michael Hofmann*, eds. André Saffis-Nahely and Julian Stannard (London: CB editions, 2013), 73.
[299] Adam Newey, "Kind of Blue," *New Statesman*, August 9, 1999, 41.

points out "a flat, almost affectless poetry of lists and objects"; "his (Hofmann's) vague presence disaffected, motiveless, nihilistic, insistent"; yet again, the now incontrovertible even if on a slightly less positive note "odd music" (not rhythmic but clotted with assonance and alliteration) before the final lunge on the third section of the volume: "final suite of poems on adultery" marked by "narcissistic artificiality, self-regard, self-pity."[300]

The review written by S. Burt for the *Times Literary Supplement* deserves some attention because, in my view, while highlighting some crucial points, nevertheless fails to detect what lies behind them. He states: "His unmerciful self-investigations are neither a choice nor a performance but a continual arduous, compelled quest" and then he adds that "Hofmann seeks catharsis, or emotional closure, or knowledge of others, enduring love, and finds only things." I think that something more should be claimed regarding those "unmerciful self-investigations"; they very rarely, in fact, seem to lead to a circumscribed umbilical act of self-exploration. They seem to be more akin to the feeling of "melancholy" Walter Benjamin explores in *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*[301]. In a quote reported in Gilloch's book, Benjamin writes:

> Melancholy betrays the world for the sake of knowledge. But in its tenacious self-absorption it embraces dead objects in its contemplations, in order to redeem them.[302]

I think the point is crucial, and I have returned to it several times in the development of this chapter. Hofmann's poetry does not leave surfaces untouched and matter inert. It thrives to employ Frederic Jameson's words on an aesthetic of discontinuity and marginality. Precisely as allegory does, it "lives by gaps and differences rather than identities."[303] In Burt's interpretation (as I have explained above, it seems predominant in most of the critics quoted), there is what sounds like anxiety and longing, despite everything, for a form of meaning, any meaning. As Terry Eagleton notes:

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[300] Robert Potts, "A child of acrimony," *The Guardian*, May 8, 1999, 10.
[301] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 1998).
[302] Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*, 79, as quoted in Benjamin, 157.
[303] Fredric Jameson, *The Benjamin Files* (London: Verso, 2020).

> What Benjamin discovers in the *Trauerspiel*, then, is a profound gulf between materiality and meaning – a gulf across which the contention between the two nevertheless persists. For the allegorical object has undergone a kind of haemorrhage of spirit: drained of all immanent meaning, it lies as a pure facticity under the manipulative hand of the allegorist, awaiting such meaning as he or she may imbue it with.[304]

Burt concludes: "They [the poems] affirm nothing, give us no ways to organise experience." [305] Asking a "method" or a "way" to "organise [the] experience" of Hofmann's poetry sounds like asking the wrong question. As Hofmann's book title suggests, the poet finds himself *Approximately Nowhere*. By briefly analysing one of the poems included in the collection, I will try to clarify the point I am trying to make.

XXXX
For Larry Joseph

'que lo único que hace se componerse
de dias;
que es lóbrego mamífero y se peina…' – Vallejo

I piss in bottles,
collect cigarette ash in the hollow of my hand,
throw the ends out of the window
or douse them in the sink.

I chew longlife food,

[304] Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, Manchester, Verso Editions, 1981, p.6.
[305] S. Burt, 'Roads to Dejection' in *Times Literary Supplement*, n° 5019, 11 June 1999, p.25.

dried fruit, pumpernickel, beef jerky.
I'm forty. I free the jammed light-push with my fingernails
to give the hall a rest.

With one stockinged foot – scrupulous pedantry –
I nudge back the loose stair-carpet on the eleventh step.
Later I might slam some doors
and spend a wet evening under a tree.

I've identified with a yellowish fox beside the railway line,
followed silent firework displays on the Thames,
seen two shooting stars burn out over London
and made wishes on them.

I can't remember when I last wrote a letter
or picked up the telephone. My smile
goes on shopkeepers and bus drivers and young mothers.
It dazzles me.

I think continually about money, and the moths eat my clothes:
The thing about earthly treasures was true.
For half an hour, amid palpitations, I watched
two children I was sure were mine.

Most of the day I'm either lying down
or asleep. I haven't read this many books
this avidly since I was a boy.
Nights are difficult. Sometimes I shout.

I'm quarrelsome, charming, lustful, inconsolable, broken.
I have the radio on as much as ever my father did,
Carrying it with me from room to room.
I like its level talk.

There is something excessive in character described in this poem, almost caricatural. The conflation of pedantry of some details (the "stockinged foot") and nervy negligence ("clothes" eaten by "moths"), the attention to the dirtiness left
behind by use (the "nail" and the "jammed" switch), the emotional instability ("sometimes I shout" and the "smiles for shopkeepers, bus drivers, and young mothers") give this portrait an expressionist twist. It is Max Beckmann's *Self-Portrait in Blue Jacket* (there is an essay on the German painters in Hofmann's collection of essays *Where Have You Been?*) meeting Max Beckmann's *Self-Portrait with Red Scarf*. It is a poem on the verge of inertia and expenditure ("asleep" and "quarrelsome"), where layers accumulate on layers, never moving forward but rather folding into themselves, folds after folds. It is an "assemblage or collage or bric-abrac" as Hofmann himself defines his poetry in an interview dated around the time of the publication of *Approximately Nowhere*.[306] It slowly becomes dangerously like the "level talk" of the radio quoted at the end of the poem. When litany and enumeration take over (the incantatory "I"), it sounds as if the materiality has taken possession of the now indistinguishable things and feelings, its hoards of objects and stances. There is no solution offered. It reminds the "kind of haemorrhage of spirit" stressed by Eagleton in the quote above. In brief, I would argue that there is a baroque element to it.

> There is no longer an artist conceived as winged creator of newness enlightened by some form of "idea," nor a poet in search for a method to organise experience. He resembles more a profane experimenter committed to an "ars inveniendi" who keeps assembling and disassembling the ruins and

[306] Fran Brearton, 'An Interview with Michael Hofmann', in *Thumbscrew*, n° 13 -Spring-Summer 1999.

> fragments of a world that it is *per se* ruinous and fragmentary.[307]

What Hofmann is doing in this poem is relatable to Benjamin's explanation of the difference between a historical time when the symbol (characterised from the Romantics onward as a possible intuitive direct access to unification and completeness) represents a possibility as opposed to a catastrophic time when only allegory, in its baroque frozen openness to a diversity of interpretation, is the only option. Yet again, Benjamin (and arguably Hofmann with him) actively rummage through the debris of personal (Hofmann) and historical (Benjamin) catastrophe in search of a *via negativa,* the only available and whose meaning has to be found only in its deep decay. To quote the mysterious, ineffable, but fascinating words by Benjamin in *The Origin of the German Trauerspiel*:

> Whereas in the symbol, with the sublimation of downfall, the transfigured countenance of nature reveals itself fleetingly in the light of salvation, in allegory there lies before the eyes of the observer the *facies hippocratica* of history as petrified primal landscape. History, in everything untimely, sorrowful, and miscarried that belongs to it from the beginning, is inscribed in a face—no, in a death's head. And though it is true that to such a thing all "symbolic" freedom of expression, all classical harmony of form, and everything human is lacking, nevertheless in this figure, the most fallen in nature, is expressed meaningfully as enigma not only the nature of human existence in general but the biographical historicity of an individual. This is the core of the allegorical vision, of the Baroque profane exposition of history as the Passion of the world—meaningful only in the stations of its decline.[308]

[307] Andrea Pinotti ed., *Costellazioni: le parole di Walter Benjamin*, Torino, Einaudi, 2018 (my translation).
[308] Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*, Harvard University Press, 2019, 174.

The reader should not be deceived by the religious language and references to mysticism. As Frederic Jameson aptly explains:

> It is essential to insist from the outset that theology, in his (Benjamin's) sense, has nothing to do with God and that it is to be considered a language or a code and not a system of beliefs. Theology exists because a void has been left in the areas assigned to philosophy.[309]

There is no space left in Hofmann's poetry for the "relic" as a magical reference to salvation. What the reader holds, in the end, is more like a "souvenir," an instance of experience that has died out. As Bainard Cowen suggests, "paradox must have the last word" precisely because of the lack of a "guaranteed economics of salvation." Then he adds:

> The obscurity, fragmentariness, and arbitrariness of allegory all signify the absence of a fulfilling event; this absence, in turn, serves to invoke that event with greater urgency and a desperate faith.[310]

I cannot find better words to end this section of the chapter.

Conclusion: nineteen years later *One Lark, One Horse*

Nineteen years had to pass before Hofmann published a new collection of poems, *One Lark, One Horse*, in 2018[311]. It was hardly a time of silence for the poet who published two collections of essays, *Behind the Lines – Pieces on Writing and Pictures*[312], the

[309] Fredric Jameson, *Benjamin Files*, 10.
[310] Bainard Cowen, "Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory," *New German Critique* 22, Special Issue on Modernism (Winter, 1981), 119.
[311] Michael Hofmann, *One Lark, One Horse* (London: Faber and Faber, 2018).
[312] Michael Hofmann, *Behind the Lines – Pieces on Writing and Pictures* (London: Faber and Faber

already cited *Where Have You Been – Selected Essays*, edited an anthology of twentieth-century German poetry, a selection (with introduction) of poems by Robert Lowell and John Berryman (two main literary influences). He continued, as stated above, to contribute reviews and essays to several important literary magazines and, above all, turned his work as a translator into a full-time job
(although he still teaches Creative Writing at Gainesville University in Florida). In 2008, Faber and Faber published a *Selected Poems*[313] as if to remind the literary world that Hofmann was firstly a poet and then a translator (as in some literary contexts had become to be the case). It was the perfect good occurrence for some critics to assess Hofmann's poetry from a very different time perspective. The issues, nonetheless, were still the same. It was still "lists," "parentheses," "irregular metre," "dissonant sequences of sounds," and "dreadful indifference" from Alex Broadhead in the *PN Review*;[314] "poems accumulate details with a cool, even cruel tone of rationality," "lines and list-like forms that miraculously skirt prose," and "layering of acute observations" from Martyn Crucefix in *Poetry London*.[315] One of the most interesting contributions came from a fellow poet, George Szirtes, who tried to penetrate the obvious in search of an interpretation and a historical context: He writes:

> […] just a sense that as your eyes are blithely passing over the words suddenly a hole has opened up beneath them and you are falling through the language, into a world of cries.[316]

It is a poetic image that brings back the imagery employed by Benjamin in his reading history as a catastrophe. Szirtes adds:

2001).
[313] Michael Hofmann, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008).
[314] Alex Broadhead, "Dreadful Indifference," *PN Review* 34, no. 6 (July–August, 2008).
[315] Martyn Crucefix, "Travelling without leaving," *Poetry London* 60 (Summer 2008).
[316] George Szirtes, "Said and Done," *The Guardian*, March 22, 2008.

> The 1980s poems were probably the best reflection in poetry of the Thatcher years, all the more so because they beat no drums, went on no marches, brandished no slogans, but simply observed through the lens of nightmare.

We are back to the poet who perceives his art as an "ars inveniendi" with the function to express what Benjamin terms "the passion of the world—meaningful only in the stations of its decline." However, George Szirtes seems to be picking both aspects of Hofmann's poetry in a fully developed historical-materialist perspective Benjamin would have appreciated.

I would like to bring this chapter to a conclusion by restating the importance some ideas and concepts developed by Walter Benjamin have in the interpretation I am offering of some of the stylistic features of Hofmann's poetry. Before summing up some of those primary ideas, I would like to quote the first poem Hofmann read during the presentation of *One Lark, One Horse* at the London Review of Books Bookshop in April 2019:

LV

The luncheon voucher years
(the bus pass and digitised medical record)
always in the inside pocket come later, along with the constant orientation to the nearest hospital).
The years of 'sir' (long past 'mate', much less 'dearie'), of invisibility, of woozy pacifism,
of the pre-emptive smile of the hard-of-hearing,
of stiff joints and small pains
that will do me in. The ninth complement
of fresh – stale – cells, the Late Middle Years (say, 1400 AD – on the geological calendar), the years of the incalculable spreading middle, the years of speculatively counting down
from an unknown terminus,

because the whole long stack –
shale, vertebrae, pancakes, platelets, plates –
won't balance anymore, and doesn't correspond anyway to the thing behind the eyes that says 'I'
and feels uncertain, green and treble
and wants its kilt as it climbs up to the lectern to blush and read 'thou didst not abhor the virgin's womb'.
The years of taking the stairs two at a time
(though not at weekends)
a bizarre debt to Dino Buzzati's *Tartar Steppe*,
the years of a deliberate lightness of tread,
perceived as a nod to Franz Josef
thinking with his knees and rubber-tyred Viennese *Fiaker*.
The years when the dead are starting to stack up.
The years of incuriosity and *novarum rerum* in*cupidissimus*, the years of cheap acquisition and irresponsible postponement, or cheap postponement and irresponsible acquisition,
of listlessness, of miniaturism, of irascibility,
of being soft on myself, of being hard on myself, and neither knowing nor especially caring which.
The years of re-reading (at arm's length).
The fiercely objected-to professional years,
the appalling indulgent years, the years of no challenge and comfort zone and safely within my borders.
The years of no impressions and little memory.
The Years of 'I would prefer not.'
And 'leave me in the cabbage'.

The years of standing in elevators under the elevator lights in the elevator mirror,
feeling and looking like leathered frizz,
an old cheese-topped dish under an infrared hotplate,
before they kindly took out the lights
and took out the mirror, and slipped in screens
for news, weather, and sponsors' handy messages.
The years of one over the thirst
and another one over the hunger, of insomnia
and sleeping in, of creases and pouches and heaviness and the barber offering to trim my eyebrows.
The years of the unbeautiful corpse in preparation.
The years to choose: *sild*, or *flamber*
…?).

Oliver Dixon, after more than three decades, still thinks and writes of "poems" as "logjams of objects and entities in odd juxtaposition," and, more importantly, that the book is characterised by a "build-up of thingness" employed to block off "any sort of lyric impulse" leading "not to revelation but to rueful insight."[317] For Kate Noakes, it's again "details, details, details." Still, she also detects "a welcome amount of contemporary criticism."[318] At the same time, Declan Ryan notices, in direct opposition to Dixon above, "an elegiac note," "an attempt to cohere through memory" and "a newfound modicum of contentment, or at least a promise of contentment."[319]

What I perceive, three decades after the publication of Hofmann's first collection of poems, *Nights in the Iron Hotel*, are the three main aspects Gilloch identifies as essential

[317] Oliver Dixon, "At Odds with Things," *PN Review* (September–October 2020).
[318] Kate Noakes, "A Weatherless World," in *Poetry London* 93 (Summer 2019).
[319] Declan Ryan, "Hermit in Delight," *Times Literary Supplement*, November 2, 2018.

in the mobilisation of Benjamin's dialectical image "the ruination of the object world, the connection with the human body, and the evocation and experience of melancholy."[320] They are present as they have always been in the previous collections, in the elevators in which the mirrors for the unstable eye/I have been substituted by the omnipresent screens "for news, weather, and sponsors' handy messages" (world); "the years of the unbeautiful corpse in preparation" (body); and, finally, "the years when the dead are starting to stack up" (melancholy). Far from remaining an inert catalogue of "tristia," the imagery activates, through a language that from "bricks" has constantly been in search of its "diseased music," a fleeting resurrection of the ephemera, a new configuration, the projection of a possible constellation, a hint at redemption.

[320] Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis*.

Lavinia Greenlaw's poetic oscillations between studium and punctum: A Bathesian way of making sense, taking shape, and their correlation with images

A poetry of perception

In her recent memoir (but also extended poetic manifesto) published by Faber in 2021 and titled *Some Answers Without Questions* Lavinia Greenlaw writes:

> I'm inspired by myopia, migraine, weather, absent-mindedness, light, sea, photography, architecture, film, music, anything about to take shape, including an observation, any pattern about to form.[321]

The idea of investigating "anything about to take shape" had been anticipated ten years earlier in the introduction to *Audio Obscura*, an audio installation I will discuss later in the chapter. At that time, she penned:

> All of my work has, in one form or another, been an exploration of the point at which we start to make sense of things; an attempt to arrest and investigate that moment, to separate components and test their effects.[322]

Making sense, taking shape, seeing, and perceiving defines the margins of another transitional space. As already investigated in the previous chapters, these *loci* are usually spaces in search of or questioning a margin, a border; maps that have not found a final version, and probably never will as they appear to need constant modifications. It seems as if a process has been activated from a deep and sometimes disturbing act

[321] Lavinia Greenlaw, *Some Answers Without Questions* (London: Faber and Faber, 2021), 149.
[322] Lavinia Greenlaw and Julian Abrams, *Audio Obscura*, Framlingham, 2011 (London, Full Circle Edition, 2016), 7.

of perception whose nature is still in the making and, usually, resisted. The process has not yet found a final, solid, or compact shape despite searching for an ideal conjunctive possibility where dichotomies aim at reaching a resolution. It is a territory of subterranean tensions that, as most of the time with the authors already discussed, Greenlaw (a degree in art history) courageously explores. There, she encounters fellow voyagers and perceives her "natural affinity with visual artists"; the reason of this affinity, as she explains, lies in the fact that "we are both creating images."[323] Sometimes the image can take the shape of a photograph, another signpost that needs to be added to the geography of her work. Images in Greenlaw's poetry stand in an ekphrastic transition that necessarily morphs them into words, but, and this is the first point I will make in this chapter, they still seem to maintain the unstable nature and power of the image they originate from, the chemistry of the light emanated from a subject/object that impresses photographic paper. The "photographs"/"poems" intersection I will be discussing is usually characterised by a tension for clarity and acts of resistance to an unavoidable *chiaroscuro*.

According to Greenlaw herself, photography is one of her sources of inspiration. It is no surprise that the title of her first collection of poems published by Faber in 1993 is *Night Photograph.*[324] The detailed description of her landscapes and the attentiveness of her gaze often give Greenlaw's poems the transparent quality of the impressionable photographic paper. In this chapter, I will discuss the variable focus lens of Greenlaw's poetry and its development throughout her five collections: *Night Photograph* (1993), *A World Where News Travelled Slowly* (1997), *Minsk* (2003), *The Casual Perfect* (2011), and *The Built Moment* (2019). During this exploration, I will be guided by the compass of some concepts taken by one of the most studied and debated volumes on photography: *Camera Lucida* by Roland Barthes, and specifically

[323] Susan Mansfield, "Interview with Lavinia Greenlaw: poet and novelist," *The Scotsman*, March 10, 2012.

[324] Lavinia Greenlaw, *Night Photograph* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993).

his concepts of *studium* and *punctum*.[325] Barthes' most personal and almost narrative like volume (the last he wrote before his untimely death by misadventure in 1980) arguably represents the highest degree of separation from his earlier work as a semiologist and from his former structuralist allegiance. *Camera Lucida* is divided into two parts, a more theoretical one, where *studium* and *punctum* are discussed and defined, followed by a second part where an immersion into the depth of the *punctum,* results in the idea of a new, more painful, and personal sense. I will try to argue that Greenlaw's poetry follows a similar path where here first two books correspond to

Part I of Barthes' volume with a definite element of fracture (corresponding to Part Two in Barthes) occurring with the publication of *Minsk*, Greenlaw's third book. The quasi-scientific gaze of the first two volumes is partly deposed by a more personal investigation into "the point at which we start to make sense of things" but, I would add, the point where things refuse to necessarily make sense. Behind the analytical, methodical, and diagnostic observation, something does not yield but rather resists incorporation. Thus, the research encounters resistance, an "obtuse" element (to use another key concept in Barthes' theory[326]) that interposes itself between the "making" and "the sense." We are dealing with a component already present in Greenlaw's poetry from the beginning. In *Minsk,* however, the material seems to show itself in all its defiance to be reduced to something we already know.

In an interview dating around 1995, Lavinia Greenlaw, although in a very general sense, clarifies the above-mentioned dichotomy:

> I mean that a poet should not be so enchanted with their subject that they can't distance themselves from it enough to have an objective eye to how they're constructing their poem and ordering their matter.[327]

[325] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 1993).

[326] Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning," in *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 54-55.

[327] Crawford et al., eds., "Interview with Lavinia Greenlaw" in *Talking Verse: Interviews with Poets* (St Andrews and Williamsburg: Verse, 1995), 78–81.

It sounds like exploring the juxtaposition between a Wittgensteinian enchantment versus a distance sustained by an objective eye, "the ordering of matter." What is the risk a poet runs if he does not abide to the detached, diagnostic eye? Greenlaw seems to have find a possible solution in the same interview, just a few paragraphs ahead:

> In the past, quite naturally, I have used what has been described as the 'controlled," 'detached," scientific voice and I think partly I was concerned about allowing myself too much emotional space within my work. I now believe that there is a way of writing more directly from yourself, of allowing myself to come through it without collapsing into selfindulgence.[328]

The detached, 'controlled' voice is therefore crucial to contain an overflow of emotion and the possibility of collapsing into self-indulgence. It represents a characteristic of Greenlaw's poems that was immediately recognised by the critics who reviewed her early work. Derryn Rees-Jones writing in *London Magazine* as early as 1994 states that the poems resemble 'a series of epistemological enquiries into the relationship between scientific rationalism and a take-it-or-leave it pragmatism'; then he adds that Greenlaw's main concerns lies in 'the replacement of unquestioning faith in religious structures by our new but parallel blind faith in science."[329] The 'collapsing side' is always there, in turmoil, but kept at bay by the controlling force of poetic language and structure. It hides in the 'shining hiddenness' and 'instinct for unsettling details' evoked by James Wood or in the "phenomena which depart unsettlingly from a predicated order of things" and the "trespasses of the technological upon the human body, scientifically controlled or violently random ."[330]

In summary, what is at stake seems to be on the one hand this tension between an element requiring a continuous clarity in perception reflected by Greenlaw in a language that constantly looks for a structure and a lucid component of expression (the already

[328] Crawford et al., 79.
[329] Deryn Rees-Jones, "Ribbons Around a Bomb," *London Magazine*, February 1, 1994, 11.
[330] Wood, "Ever so comfy."; "Soup Nuts," *PN Review* 20 (January 1994), 3.

mentioned in previous chapters 'pact with the reader') and, on the other hand a rumbling undercurrent that claims its destabilising attention. The anecdotal reference to scientist like Galileo or Marie Curie, for instance, is continually counteracted by some unfathomable darkness or non-manageable and dangerous material. It is, as stated above a reflection of the Roland Barthes's juxtaposition of *studium* and *punctum* in Part I of *Camera Lucida* further developed in a new and perilously insightful definition of *punctum* in Part II of the same book. It is my opinion that the ideas developed by the French semiologist very aptly apply to the sense of Lavinia Greenlaw's poetic research while at the same time the interaction of the two authors' ideas that I propose in the following chapter represents a new and not explored before pattern of research.

1. 'What cannot be pictured is the depth': photography, Barthes's studium and punctum in Night Photograph (1993)

'Greenlaw's subject is often the undetermined element within an experience' writes Fiona Sampson in her book *Beyond the Lyric*.[331] A representative example of this statement can be found in the last eponymous poem from the collection titled *Night Photograph*. An in-depth analysis of the text will also function to introduce the above-mentioned concepts of *punctum* and *studium* in Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* and to explain the correlation I am trying to establish in this chapter.

Night Photograph[332]

Crossing the Channel at midnight in winter,
coastline develops as distance grows,
then simplifies to shadow, under-exposed.

Points of light – quayside, harbour wall,

[331] Sampson, *Beyond the Lyric*, 255.
[332] Greenlaw, 1993, 54.

the edge of the city –
 sink as the surface of the night fills in.

Beyond the boat, the only interruption
is the choppy grey-white we leave behind us,
gone almost before it is gone from sight.

What cannot be pictured is the depth
with which the water moves against itself,
in such abstraction the eye can find

no break, direction or point of focus.
Clearer, and more possible than this,
Is the circular horizon.

Sea and sky meet in suspension,
gradual familiar texture of black:
eel-skin, marble, smoke, oil –

made separate and apparent by the light
that pours from the sun onto the moon,
the constant white on which the unfixable

layers of darkness thicken and fade.
We are close to land, filtering through
shipping lanes and marker buoys

towards port and its addition of colour.

There is a slight realignment of the planets.
Days breaks at no particular moment.

It is an elaborate and finely textured poem that conjoins some of the dichotomies Greenlaw will investigate throughout each of her five collections: nearness and distance, darkness and light, shadow, and shape, visible and invisible. The eleven-syllable, fourstress first line with its predominance of a dactylic cadence gives the poem a setting and a timing. We are on a ferry, a perceptible movement, not motionless and this could explain the rushing forward of Greenlaw's first line metric choice before the reader encounters a comma where the poem, unavoidably, slows down. The ferry is now cruising toward the other coast and there is time to contemplate the coastline that 'develops as distance grows' – the necessary adjustment of someone taking a step backward to contemplate a picture of a landscape in its entirety. Greenlaw's lucid and photographic eye begins its observation. Another comma, and the picture in the darkness becomes a distant shadow; the 'under-exposed' that closes the first tercet (there are nine of them in the poem) opens the semantic field of 'photography' and reconnects the reader to the title: it is night time and this is a photograph. The /k/ sound of the word 'crossing' is repeated in 'coastline," both at the beginning of the verse. The sibilant sound in di(s)tance is echoed in grow(s) and suggests a fading, a slow, attenuated emission of air in '(s)implifies," '(sh)adow," 'expo(s)ed."

From the deck of the second tercet some 'points of light' are still perceivable. The Dickinsonian hyphen hints at a smooth, linear journey of modern times and comfortable modern ferries, not too much pitching, no stormy Turner. The anthropomorphic part of the landscape requires attention: the activities on the quay, the lamps signalling the harbour wall. The third line uses the same sibilant consonance of the previous tercet to reproduce a new fading, more sinister this time, because the 'edge of the city' '(s)ink(s) 'a(s) the '(s)surface' of the night fill(s) in. We might be able to read the 'ink' in 'sink' diminishing to a 'in' in the last word of the line. It is the darkness of the night and sea taking over and the same time it is the sinking of phenomenological perception.

The third tercet brings the description introduced in the first line to a close. The gaze, having lost its focus in the distance, needs a nearer target and a synaesthetic veer: 'the choppy grey white we leave behind us' is the 'only interruption' now, the canvas or, better, the photographic paper has lost every point of reference. The nautical adjective 'choppy' fails in completely cancelling the muffled noise of the motor induced washing beyond the boat, although the 'w' in 'white' and 'leave," and the 'v' also in 'leave' indicate a smooth sliding. The 'grey white' effect on the water is 'gone almost before it is gone from sight." Before musing on something more abstract, on a shakier ground of unstable reflexivity, Greenlaw abandons the reader to a strange and hardly explicable image of something 'gone almost before it is gone from sight." The repetition of the past participle cannot but catch the reader's attention and the last word recalls the sense to which the poet has hung so far in the poem sounds as a defensive intimation. It is not the centre that does not hold anymore, it is the invisible eventually making its appearance, or, in Barthes's term the movement from *studium* to *punctum*.

Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* is the last book written by the French semiologist before his accidental death in 1980. It is considered his most personal book, the last of a trilogy that includes *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975), *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1977) and *Camera Lucida* (1980). At a later stage in the chapter, I will deal more in detail with Barthes's progress from being an observant although 'creative' structuralist to the profound questioning of his early ideas as he reconsidered them in his last trilogy. Suffice it to report the remarks with which Michael Moriarty sums up Barthes's late work:

> He works now in a loose and fluid relationship to systems of thought, plundering them for ideas that simply attract, that serve to produce writing.[333]

What is at stake, here, is the frantic attempt by Roland Barthes to single out a new conception of subjectivity. As Grafton writes:

[333] Michael Moriarty, *Roland Barthes* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

> Barthes's later writings undoubtedly explore the possibility opened up by releasing an expressive subject into a realm of discourse normally presided over by a depersonalised subject.[334]

Greenlaw, as stated above, seems to be very sensitive to the conflict between a depersonalised subject vs. an expressive subject.

Barthes's theoretical approach veered from a rather strict notion of finding structures of relations as the universal systems to explore the symbolic and cultural order with its correlative unconscious transition from social construction to the 'natural' discourse of the *doxa*, to positing new negotiations with a subject now reconsidered in its im/possible uniqueness. As Derek Attridge very insightfully remarks:

> Doing justice to a work of art, a family photograph, the performance of a song, an autobiographical essay, a memoir, or a theoretical text involves a response to what is singular and untranslatable in it – the obtuse meaning, the punctum, the grain of the voice, the moment of *jouissance*, the supplementary force. Such response necessarily attempts the impossible: respecting that singularity while generalising it, turning the other into the same without losing its otherness, making the obtuse obvious while retaining its obviousness, and making the punctum studium without ceasing to be punctum.[335]

Before focusing on the general/singular relations, the concepts of untranslatability and obtuse meaning need further clarification. They are essentially acts of resistance from the text, the points at which words no longer hold, and the reader's often unintentional necessity of reducing the unknown and the untranslatable meaning to something known and assimilated grinds to a halt. Therefore, rather than passive interventions of

[334] Johnnie Grafton, "The Subject of Enunciation in Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*," in *Critical Essays on Roland Barthes*, ed. Diana Knight (New York: G. K. Hall and Co., 2000), 266–278.
[335] Derek Attridge, "Roland Barthes's Obtuse, Sharp Meaning and the Responsibilities of Commentary," in *Writing the Image after Roland Barthes*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 89.

disturbance they should be considered as active part of the meaning formation, the crucial tension that a poem requires to function despite or thanks to this imbalance. It is time to go back to Greenlaw's poem and extrapolate a possible instance of those concepts. The following four lines are crucial: 'What cannot be pictured is the depth / with which the water moves against itself, / in such abstraction the eye can find / no break, direction or point of focus."

There is a 'depth' that refuses description and 'cannot be pictured'; more specifically it is the water that 'moves against itself." The reader finds herself confronting or better, she is confronted with what Christopher Ricks once defined as a 'self-infolded imagery'[336], a circular and short-circuited creation of meaning where the 'eye is itself a mirror, and can be the seer, and the seen in." What is left is only an 'abstraction' in which, the 'eye' (whose eye?) is lost because of 'no break, direction or point of focus." To highlight the 'no break," Greenlaw introduces a break in space (after the end of the line) and a new tercet begins with that negation 'no." We are dealing with a 'no' that, rather than being placed in the verb 'find," looks for a word immediately after it to make the negative stronger and echoed in 'direction' and therefore the issue of perception more evident. What is happening here is that after having been able, although in an 'under-exposed' way, to offer a pictorial/photographic description of the coastline slowly becoming distant, the *horror vacui* sets in. Or, as Barthes would have explained, the 'image' slowly slips from the *studium* to the *punctum*. We need Barthes's' words and a direct quotation from *Camera Lucida* to explicate:

> What I feel about these photographs derives from an *average* affect, almost from a certain training. I did not know a French word which might account for this kind of human interest, but I believe this word exists in Latin: it is *studium*, which does not mean, at least not immediately, 'study,' but the application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general commitment, of course, but without special acuity. It is by *studium* that I am interested in so many photographs, whether I receive them as

[336] Christopher Ricks, "Andrew Marvell – Its Own Resemblance," in *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 34–59.

> political testimony or enjoy them as good historical scenes: for it is culturally (this connotation is present in *studium*) that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions.[337]

This is the landscape in which Greenlaw has been moving so far, a well-known territory to which she can fully apply her perception and her ability to modulate texture and rhythms. However, as anyone who has travelled on a ferry at a sufficient distance from the coast to lose its sight, she too seems to experience a sinking feeling provoked by that absolute darkness, the 'unearthly' obscurity that leaves without sense of direction, lost in sensory deprivation. The image has found its punctum. As Roland Barthes writes:

> The second element will break (or punctuate) the *studium*. This time it is not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of studium with my sovereign consciousness), it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots it like an arrow, and pierces me. A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick,
> this mark made a pointed instrument […] This second element which will disturb the *studium* I shall therefore call *punctum*; for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole – and also a cast of the dice. A photographs *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).[338]

Greenlaw's punctum at this stage has not reached the intensity or the sensation that she will explore in later collections. It does not so much 'pierces," it is no 'sting, speck, cut, little hole." It looks rather more like a loss in her sense of direction, a momentary unstableness and misperception. Her reference to 'abstraction' immediately relieves any possible discomfort and the lack of a 'point of focus' straightaway resisted and abandoned. The second line of the fifth tercet begins with two comparative adjectives 'clearer," 'more possible' as if the text is trying to regain its composure from any attempt at destabilisation. What the gaze finds is the 'circular horizon' somehow captured by the sound transliteration of the three final words sound: /ˈfəʊkəs/ /ðɪs, ðəs/ /həˈraɪzn/ - where

[337] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26.
[338] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26–27.

the weak /ə/ schwa sound is repeated twice in 'focus' and once in 'horizon." The abstraction continues in the following tercet where 'sea and sky meet in suspension' and even the black has become familiarised in its 'gradual textures." The four examples that follow and somehow clarify the concept of those 'gradual textures' begin with organic 'eel-skin' (a well-known poetry *topos* explored by many poets from Montale to Heaney) before exploring other mutable materials, the cold hardness of marble, the thin air of smoke, and the viscosity of oil. The hyphenation after 'oil' closes the sixth tercet and seems to provide the reader with an image of that sky/horizon meeting 'in suspension." The swift alternation of separate/apparent in the subsequent line acts as a reminder of the questioning light of the moon (it is a simple reflection of the sun); for a couple of lines the text is confronted once again with something 'unfixable'; it refers to the layers of darkness that on 'the constant white' (the constant/unfixable contrast is yet again highlighted) of the 'layers of darkness' that 'thicken and fade." The cunning use of the enjambement manages to separate the adjective 'unfixable' from its noun 'layers," leaving the eye of the reader wandering in the typographical space between the two tercets.

The night crossing is about to end. Maps, signs, and codes ('shipping lanes' and 'marker buoys') return to their normal readability and colour briefly peeps out in this black and white photograph – it is just a veil of glaze that nevertheless manages to rise the temperature of the imagery. The astronomical regularity fine-tunes the movement of the spheres and *sub specie aeternitatis* 'day breaks at no particular moment." The act of 'breaking' here can be read in all its intense polysemy, as an ending but also as a beginning.

> The punctum is not offered as an object to be found through surgical, mediatextual analysis: go find the punctum! Explain how it brings you to tears! Instead, as an essential concept in the vocabulary of Barthes's semiotic phenomenology, punctum is intended to do the philosophical work of inviting viewers into a position to reflect upon what they may not have

> expected to see. Punctum is a locus (a sign) of possible appearance.[339]

Butchart raises an important issue concerning the methodology that I am employing in this chapter. It is the same question investigated in the above-mentioned essay by Derek Attridge. We are drawn by critical discourse into phrasing the *punctum* that, according to Barthes, is by definition highly subjective and therefore untranslatable. Being aware of this critical incongruity is arguably, the condition (or predicament) in which every reader of poetry sooner or later finds herself, despite the employed reference school of criticism. Even if the intention would be to avoid evaluation, there is an incessant hierarchical and implicit categorised system of inner values that immediately sets itself in motion. It is my opinion that behind every description that aims at transparency, there is a veil of existence, a bodily presence that, as Sartre (to whom *Camera Lucida* is dedicated) famously said, precedes essence.[340] This unrelenting coming and going from perception to words and from words to perception, the implacable tension between universality and singularity (existence) is precisely what Roland Barthes is exploring in his last three books. It is a radical change signalled, for example, by the shift from the third person pronoun in *A Lover's Discourse* to the first person in *Camera Lucida*.

2. A poem of *studium*: Fox Talbot on reconciling myth (the birth of photography), society and the beginning of a new paradigm

The critical response to Greenlaw's second collection of poems, *A World Where News Travelled Slowly* (1997), was not dissimilar from the one received by *Night Photograph*.

[339] Garnet C. Butchart, "The communicology of Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*: Reflections on the sign/body experience of visual communication," *Visual Communication* 15, no. 2 (2016): 199–219.
[340] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism and Humanism," in *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, eds. Richard Kearney and Mara Rainwater (New York: Routledge, 1996), 66.

The label of "poet of science" became a comfortable classification for several critics. Elizabeth Lowry, reviewing the book in the *Times Literary Supplement*, is positively "startled" by a poet who, rather than thinking about herself all the time writes about "artificial insemination, gravitational forces, the discovery of radium" as she had done in *Night Photograph* and keeps doing in her new collection.[341] Ruth Padel analyses *Invention,* one of the poems included in *A World Where News Travelled Slowly* and concludes that Greenlaw's poems "go into their subject through art, or technological discoveries, like the disclosures of photography."[342] However, Lowry detects something else beneath the scientific "surface" and she is not persuaded by the clichés of poems written as celebrations of the modern age. "Are they?" she interrogates and highlights "the dramatic opposition between form and content," where form is admired, since "there is scarcely a line or a stress out of place." "Playfully allusive, supremely self-controlled, technically assured" is how the critic describes and praises Greenlaw's poems.[343] As noted in the previous section of this chapter, there seem to be two directions in this early stage of Greenlaw's poetic development. One points to form, stability, tradition, and presence. It finds an expected manifestation on the surface of the texts, in particular those referencing science, or using science to develop their meaning. The other force contrasts the first one from inside the text where the poet no longer seems to be in full control. I have highlighted a similar dynamic in Donaghy and Paterson's poetry. This is how Greenlaw describes the movement:

> Movement between presence and absence might be a failure of nerve but it is also key to know how I write. I start by being intensely present and works my disappearance which can be achieved even when writing in the first person. The idea is *look at this, not look at me*. I use myself in order to articulate an experience that can be recognised by someone I've never met.

[341] Elizabeth Lowry, "Fractures in a Glass Eye," *Times Literary Supplement*, November 28, 1997, 21.
[342] Ruth Padel, *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2002).
[343] Lowry, "Fractures in a Glass Eye," 21.

> I have to step aside so they can point at the page and say to themselves *look at me*.[344]

The "stepping aside" of the poet and the "pointing at the page" shift the reader's attention from the author to the text. This movement of attention, however, is, as highlighted in several other passages in this thesis, needs a "someone," a reader in this case, with whom the poet shares a common understanding of reality and, more importantly, a common language of tradition. There is an issue that immediately stands out and requires attention, i.e., the space of the poet's agency within the poem, the inevitability of some dark places. The contrasting forces of "singularity" and "universals" are again at stake in the necessity of sharing and communicating an experience through poetic language. For Don Paterson one of tasks of the author is leaving enough clues for the reader to interpret, keys that open doors despite the fact that some might be useless, or disclose spaces overlooking the void, or worse, the abyss. Nevertheless, it is a typical trait that most of the poets selected for the *1994 New Gen Issue* and later epitomised as "mainstream" have in common. Lavinia Greenlaw strategies rely on a well-defined representation of *studium* as indicated by Roland Barthes in his *Camera Lucida*. In one passage from that book, the French scholar suggests that an element that is important for what I am trying to point out.

> The absolute Particular, the sovereign contingency the *this* (this photograph and not Photography).[345]

According to Roland Barthes, the referent of a photograph seems to challenge one of the foundational concepts of the entire Saussurean effort, the arbitrariness of the sign. "The referent adheres,"[346] he adds in the same page. Another quotation will, perhaps, make things clearer. Discussing the peculiar nature of the photograph as sign, he writes:

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[344] Greenlaw, *Some Answers Without Questions*, 6.
[345] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 6.
[346] Barthes, 6.

> It aspires to, perhaps, to become as crude as certain, as noble as a sign, which would afford it access to the dignity of a language: but for there to be a sign there must be a mark; deprived as a principle of marking, photographs are signs which don't *take*, which *turn*, as milk does. Whatever it grants to vision, and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not what we see.[347]

Roland Barthes proceeds to explain the reason for the "invisibility" of a photograph and for the "singularity" of its referent. Photography could not be restricted to art, technical details, historical and sociological explanations. Those aspects belonged to the "an importunate voice, (the voice of knowledge, of *scientia*)."

A few lines further "Yet I persisted […] looking at certain photographs I wanted to be a primitive, without culture." The conclusion is challenging: "I found myself at an impasse and, so to speak, "scientifically" alone and disarmed."[348] There is a photograph for Barthes, *the* Photograph that will not be shown in the book, an image that will open up for him the true essence of the photographic image, the feral nature of the *punctum*: an old picture of Barthes's mother. I am going to deal with it later on the chapter. For now, I would like to investigate how Greenlaw tackles the issue of *studium* and singularity in one of the poems from *A World Where News Travelled Slowly*.

In a Dark Room

Not long after it was thought reasonable
to lower the blind on windows
when passing through the Alps,

Fox Talbot's sketches of Lake Como
from the camera obscura were pitiful.

[347] Barthes, 6.
[348] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 7.

*

Watching a bottle of salts go dark.
Chancing upon the correct, imperfect solution.

Lace, leaves, anything complicated and flat.
Laura was delighted, called them 'shadows',
Wrote for more as they faded.[349]

The poem is about a crucial moment in the history of photography. As Robert Hirsch extensively discusses in his chapter "Advancing Towards Photography: the Rise in Reproduction" from *Seizing the Light: A Social and Aesthetic History of Photography*, "the desire to create a likeness of someone or something that society deemed worth commemorating" dates back to cave paintings.[350] Although, it was from around the beginning to the middle of the nineteenth century that that desire was fully accomplished. It was not only a matter of technical progresses, but something also in the new 'modern' society was happening:

> The new and expanding capitalist economy and its urban labour force demanded more visual information. Daily life was accelerating and changing as never before. Machines, such as the railroad, the steamship, the telegraph, and the iron printing press, were moving people and information at paces once considered impossible. With the advent of statesubsidized education in England and France, literacy was on the rise. The more people learned, the more information they wanted. Newspapers and the penny presses increased circulation, their pages filled with new 'human interest' stories and engraved illustrations.[351]

[349] Lavinia Greenlaw, *A World Where News Travelled Slowly* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 28.
[350] Robert Hirsch, *Seizing the Light: A Social and Aesthetic History of Photography* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1–26.
[351] Hirsch, 7.

The names of Joseph Nicéphore Niépce and Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre are widely known and usually associated with the 'birth' or 'invention' of photography and the production of the first photographs. However, as the quotation from Hirsch's book aptly depicts, photography was just a part of a bigger wave of changes occurring throughout the entire society. New researchers fuelled an 'expanding capitalist economy' were definitely encourages but as the work by Jonathan Cary in *Technique of the Observer* suggests, one should be aware that other changes were on their way.
It is a new 'vision' the modernity is actively trying to define:

> What takes place from around 1810 to 1840 is an uprooting of vision from the stable and fixed relation incarnated in the camera obscura. If the camera obscura, as a concept, subsisted as an objective ground of visual truth, a variety of discourses and practices – in philosophy, science, and in procedures of social normalization – tend to abolish the foundations of that ground in the early nineteenth century. In a sense, what occurs is a new valuation of visual experience: it is given an unprecedented mobility and exchangeability, abstracting from founding site and referent.[352]

The 'mobility' and 'exchangeability' of the new 'visual experience' allowed by photography, therefore, is not only a consequence of the technical process but also an outcome for a 'variety of discourses and practices' as well as 'procedures of social normalisation." The Foucauldian approach adopted by Crary in reading 'social changes' in terms of genealogy and archaeology resonates with some of the elements discussed in the introduction to my thesis. The scientific invention or discovery rather than being discussed as a 'pure' and 'intangible' act of theoretical abstraction and creativity, becomes, a 'rupture' at a convergence of a system of thought that include several

[352] Jonathan Crary, *Modernity and the Problem of the Observer* (New York and London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1990).

discursive practises. I will return to some of the issues raised by Michel Foucault in the conclusion of the thesis.

When revisiting the historical trajectory of photography in a more conventional context, the quest to discover a chemical compound with the ability to capture and preserve light on a plaque or paper is characterised by a non-linear progression and subject to ongoing scholarly debate. A number of scientists, indeed, were engaged in comparable endeavours. One individual included in this group was William Henry Fox Talbot. He was captivated by the possibilities presented by the 'camera obscura' and while trying to depict Lake Como from different viewpoints using traditional tools, he quickly realised that his artistic skills were not good enough to achieve the desired outcome. He aspired to attain a depiction firmly rooted in actuality, impersonal, and with the ability to perpetually preserve the visual image transferring it onto a surface through the interaction of light and a chemical substance. Susan Sontag perfectly sums up the circumstances of Fox Talbot's idea:

> Fox Talbot relates that the idea of photography came to him in 1833, on the Italian Journey that had become obligatory for Englishmen of inherited wealth like himself, while making some sketches of the landscape at Lake Como. Drawing with the help of a camera obscura, a device which projected the image but did not fix it, he was led to reflect, he says, 'on the inimitable beauty of the pictures of nature's painting which the glass lens of the camera throws upon the paper' and to wonder 'if it were possible to cause these natural images to imprint themselves durably.' The camera suggested itself to Fox Talbot as a new form of notation whose allure was precisely that it was impersonal—because it recorded a 'natural' image; that is, an image which comes into being 'by the agency of Light alone, without any aid whatever from the artist's pencil.'[353]

After returning from that journey, he started working on a project that was not very dissimilar from what was experimented at the same time around Europe. Although the

[353] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 2008), 88.

results obtained were not entirely satisfactory, Fox Talbot held it was about time to go public and prepare a report for the Royal Academy of Science. However, in 1839, when the news that Daguerre, with the help of the French government, had 'patented' the invention left him astounded. In a letter quoted by Mary M. Warner in *Photography, a Cultural History* he writes:

> after having devoted much labour and attention to the perfecting of this invention, and having now brought it, as I think, to a point in which it deserved the notice of the scientific world, - that exactly at the moment that I was then engaged in drawing up an account of it, to be presented to the Royal Society, the same invention should be announced in France.[354]

This prompted him to narrate his own personal side to that complex story in a book titled *The Pencil of Nature*. It is an extraordinary volume on photography, one of the first of all times to include photographic reproductions, where examples of his work, technical details, and personal reflections on the potential of the new 'invention' are brilliantly intermingled. The idea of a 'natural' image – as Sontag underlines in the quotation above – in which, contrary to what happens with painting, human intervention is neutralised is arguably the most interesting pursued by Fox Talbot. Other aspects, however, interested him and, specifically, the idea of how 'time' is preserved in a photograph. Describing his photograph of the Entrance Gateway of Queen's College in Oxford, Fox Talbot designates what, a century or so later, Walter Benjamin will name 'the photographic unconscious':

> In examining photographic pictures of a certain degree of perfection, the use of a large lens is recommended, such as elderly persons frequently employ in reading. This magnifies the objects two or three times, and often discloses a multitude of minute details, which were previously unobserved and unsuspected. It frequently happens, moreover—and this is one of the charms of photography—that the operator himself discovers on examination, perhaps long afterwards, that he has

[354] Mary M. Warner, *Photography: A Cultural History* , London: Quercus Editions, 2006), 19.

> depicted many things he had no notion of at the time. Sometimes inscriptions and dates are found upon the buildings, or printed placards most irrelevant, are discovered upon their walls: sometimes a distant dial-plate is seen, and upon it—unconsciously recorded—the hour of the day at which the view was taken.[355]

Time makes its appearance under the guise of an element or small detail in the photograph that needs to be discovered even if it has always been there. It is a fascinating intuition by Fox Talbot, an idea that Roland Barthes himself discovers and explores in depth in Part II of his *Camera Lucida*. All the *studium* I have done so far requires a last addition. Among the many experiments with prototypes of cameras, Fox Talbot worked also with objects left on paper prepared with chemical compounds so that light could be captured and leave a negative imprint of the object. He named them 'shadowgraphs' or simply 'shadows' as Greenlaw calls them in the poem.

The first tercet of the poem *In a Dark Room*, in accordance with the title of the collection, brings the reader back to a time when everything 'travelled slowly." The iambic cadence of the lines harmonises with the regular clatter of the wheels of a carriage on the path ascending towards the Alps. We are in the middle of a *Grand Tour* (the notes for the one Fox Talbot undertook are now available for consultation at the British Library)[356] and intense light requires a 'reasonable' screen. 'Reasonable' introduces the reader to a world where light can be controlled through 'reason," or even better, it is exactly reason that 'enlightens' rather than being enlightened. The screen lowered on the world of nature outside hints at the possibility of fixing the view within the frame of a window, the screen, obviously, recalling the shutter of a camera. The *studium*, or the context I have been trying to summarise is in the four lines that follow, before and after the asterisk. The 'obscura' of the fifth line finds its translation in the 'dark' of the sixth.

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[355] Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature*, Kindle Edition based on H. Fox Talbot (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1844).

[356] Here is a list of the material preserved at the British Library: https://www.bl.uk/collectionguides/talbot-collection.

In the last three lines Greenlaw gives her interpretation of a referent that 'adheres' (in Barthes's words) but at the same time 'fade." The objects placed on a paper prepared with salts to capture the light leave a shadow, their undeniable 'having been there' but do not escape time, its transience: they are 'shadows' and they 'fade."

The slow disappearance of 'laces, leaves, anything complicated and flat' can be read, in Jonathan Crary's perspective as the birth of modernity:

> Modernity […] coincides with the collapse of classical models of vision and their stable space of representations. Instead, observation is increasingly a question of equivalent sensations and stimuli that have no reference to a spatial location. What begins in the 1820s and 1830s is a repositioning of the observer, outside of the fixed relation of interior/exterior presupposed by the camera obscura and into an undemarcated terrain on which the distinction between internal sensation and external signs is irrevocably blurred […] In the absence of the juridical model of the camera obscura, there is a freeing up of vision, a falling away of the rigid structures that had shaped it and constituted its object.[357]

We are reminded of the loss of the aura identified by Walter Benjamin as a one of the consequences of the diffusion and reproducibility of the photographic image (I touched on the issue in the previous chapter on Michael Hofmann). The 'freeing up of vision' the 'falling away of the rigid structures' lie at the heart of Roland Barthes's research on photography. In his *Camera Lucida*, Barthes 'feigns to theorize' and yet 'he refuses the generalizing objective discourse of theory'; 'the principle of his knowledge is to be himself, and even his body."[358] The opposition between the failings of the camera obscura and the apparent, although transient early photographic image seems to recall Greenlaw's own position on poetry writing at this stage of her poetic career. If tradition and 'rigid structures' are undeniably present, something else insists on the nature of transience, corporeal, and more personal. In search of science and scientific references Greenlaw's

[357] Crary, *Modernity and the Problem of the Observer*, 24.
[358] Moriarty, *Roland Barthes*, 198.

poetry finds the words of another poet, Anna Akhmatova. Thus, the poem 'Reading Akhmatova in Midwinter'[359] can be compared to the moment when, in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes finally finds the picture of the mother, and, with it, the true essence of photography. Although I am going to quote the entire poem, it is the images at the beginning and the end of it that are crucial to the point I am trying to make in this chapter:

> The revelations of ice exactly:
> each leaf carries itself in the grass,
> each stem is a fuse in transparent flex,
>
> each blade, for once, truly metallic.
> Trees on the hill explode like fireworks
> for the minute the sun hits.
>
> Fields hover: bleached sheets in the afternoon,
> ghosts as the light goes.
> The landscape shivers but holds.
>
> Ice floes cruise the Delaware,
> force it under in unnatural silence;
> clarification I watch as I watch
>
> the road – nothing but the grind of the plough
> as it banks snow, drops salt and grit.
> By dark these are just settled hills,
>
> grains embedded in the new fall.
> We, too, make little impression

[359] Greenlaw, *World Where News Travelled Slowly*, 4–5.

walking back from town at midnight

on birds' feet – ducks' feet on the ramp
where we inch and scrabble our way to the door,
to numb to mind the slapstick.

How did you cross
those unlit, reinvented streets
with your fear of traffic and your broken shoe?

There are mornings when it drips and cracks.
We pull glass bars from railings,
chip at the car shadow.

In the first part of this lucid, polished, and icy poem everything points in the direction of the *studium*. In the quasi-microscopic dimension of the effect of ice on a leaf, a stem and a blade of grass, the prevailing force of the observer seems to be a revelation of exactness. There is an intimation of mortality only in the verb 'shivers' immediately supported and partly contrasted by the following 'holds." In the 'unnatural silence' Greenlaw finds 'clarification I watch as I watch / the road' where almost nothing moves. The whiteness of the silent landscape finds an equivalent in the ambiguity of the word clarification where the immateriality of the abstract (thought) mixes with the materiality of the act of cleaning performed by the 'plough." Although it is definitely the repetition of the verb 'watch' to catch the reader's attention, it seems as if it points to the word used immediately before that appears and vanish as the direct object of the verb 'watch." It is an indicator that the temperature of the poem is about to change. The 'too numb' persons walking home seem unable to communicate or share the comic quality of their unstable amble. The sudden intermission of a question addressing a 'you' which, had it not been not for the title, the reader would have found it difficult to identify tears the texture of

the white mantle of snow. The 'drips' and 'cracks' of the last tercet, despite their apparent hinting at a possible break, functions as a normalising return to the daily emptiness. Only the 'fear' and even more that 'broken shoe' can open a hole in the poem, a void into a past.

Approaching the *Punctum* in Minsk

The collection of poems by Anna Akhmatova titled *Rosary* in English translation is among the three books chosen by Greenlaw for the "three influential twentieth-century books" section of her presentation in the 1994 New Gen Issue of *The Poetry Review*.[360] It is the only mention the Russian poetess receives from the twenty new gen poets; Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop, for example, represent the usual suspects Greenlaw shares with several others from the group. In the space of the magazine left for a prose review or essay, she decides to include 'Bearing True Witness," which is, as the subtitle explains, an 'edited version of her *Poets on Poets* talk at the Pegasus Theatre, Oxford, 3rd February (1994) admires the eloquence and integrity of Anna Akhmatova.[361] As it often happens when poets talk or write about poets they admire, a personal poetic manifesto can be read between the lines. After a general introduction to Akhmatova in which, among several things, Greenlaw stresses her 'clarity even at the expense of lyrical ease' and the 'accusations of self-absorption' she received from the new soviet pre-social realism intellectuals and critics. Greenlaw discusses this point and argues that 'her self of sense was a sense of her place in the world." What I think she means, and I have already tried to underscore this argument, is that the self introduced and operating from within the centre of the poem does not simply respond to some personal issues. It uses them, in fact, to radically move towards something impersonal, detached, and more objective. This is exactly the self, according to Greenlaw, a reader is expected to encounter in a poem. The

[360] Anna Akhmatova, *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, trans. Judith Hemschemeyer (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2021), 133–167.
[361] Lavinia Greenlaw, "Bearing True Witness," *Poetry Review*, Spring 1994.

happening of a meeting between who writes and who reads is crucial. As a consequence, the surface that acts as a type of first level entry, cannot be disrespectful towards a shared meaning since it represents the first entrance anyone invited encounters and has to pass. When the invitation is accepted (through communal language and structure) what can be found beyond that very first door might result in a series of opaque and unsettling environments that challenge the reader's self.

> We don't want absolute light, after all it blinds us. But absolute dark can be something we crave. Boundless it sensitises us to the present moment. We can neither look back nor see ahead. It is an escape from memory and anticipation, and to that extent an escape from ourselves.[362]

Greenlaw is attracted by this personal/impersonal movement. A signal can be found when the collection *Rosary* (where Akhmatova is at her highest adherence to the principles adopted by the poetic current called Acmeism) is preferred to *Requiem* and *Poem Without a Hero*, collections which, as Greenlaw explains in her talk: 'stand as some of the finest testaments to the unimaginable upheaval that her generation endured." Language becomes involved in the above-mentioned personal/impersonal dynamic. Clarity of diction does not imply poetic self-pity, as Akhmatova demonstrates. Paradoxically, the clearer the diction, the more classical the structure of composition (if compared, for example, to Mayakovsky) the more dangerous language becomes in the risky circumstances in which the Russian poetess had to survive ('for Akhmatova and her contemporary's language was literally dangerous'). 'Why deal with abstracts when there is nothing to burn and nothing to eat?' asks Greenlaw in her talk. A quotation from Heaney – 'the poet's need to get beyond ego in order to become the voice of more than autobiography' - reveals how Greenlaw seems to share the same 'preoccupations' that absorbed the Irish poet when he was living the hard years of the Troubles and was constantly requested to take a position. Heaney found in the voices of poets such as

[362] Lavinia Greenlaw, "The Vast Extent: On seeing and not seeing further," *The White Review*, February 2021.

Miroslav Holub, Vasko Popa, Czeslaw Milosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Joseph Brodsky, and Osip Mandelstam before them, a possible key to accessing poetry that was crystal clear but, at the same time, extremely inflammable. In quoting Heaney, Greenlaw must have thought of the words by the Irish poet written in *The Government of the Tongue*:

> In the course of this book, Mandelstam and other poets from Eastern bloc countries are often invoked. I keep returning to them because there is something in their situation that makes them attractive to a reader whose formative experience has been largely Irish. There is an unsettled aspect to the different worlds they inhabit, and one of the challenges they face is to survive amphibiously, in the realm of 'the times' and the realm of their moral and artistic self-respect, a challenge immediately recognizable to anyone who has lived with the awful and demeaning facts of Northern Ireland's history over the last couple of decades.[363]

An icy, akhmatovian wind blows throughout the poems collected in *Minsk*. As Sarah Fulford remarks in *Poetry Review* 'this is a collection that travels to chilly places: Belarus, Finland, Norway and the Arctic Circle'[364]. John McAuliffe, in *The Poetry Ireland Review* adds:

> The poems are pained, crystalline, deeply felt and consistently interesting and puzzling. They read like concentrations of effort and skill, craft and an imaginative technique which zeroes in on its subject, ordering it and willing it into particular meaning.[365]

Section III of *Minsk* is titled a 'Drink of Glass' and it is introduced by an epigraph from Osip Mandelstam:

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[363] Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue* (London: Farrar, Faber and Faber, 1988), Kindle, location 200.
[364] Sarah Fulford, "A Cold Homecoming," *Poetry Review* 94, no. 1 (Spring 2004), 72–73.
[365] John McAuliffe, "In Search of the Second Life," *The Poetry Ireland Review* 78 (2004), 89.

Petersburg breathed through Finland… One travelled there to think out what one could not think out in Petersburg.

Kaamos

This is the time to live quietly
to build nothing and tell stories…

Here the bedrock is older than life
on earth. It carries no trace of death,
no methane or anthracite, nothing to burn.
Fiery capillaries of copper, cobalt, gold
- how to keep warm?
My cold heart arrests its blood
like the sun taking its colour down.
I breathe ice.
They say my lungs might bloom.

I never quite wake but go slowly
and my thoughts are as careful
and stiff as the tick of my pulse.
I feel patient, honest and kindly
and cannot crack a smile.

Arctic winter has set in my body
like a drink of glass. Blown,
I take place outside my self

where it's almost always almost dark
and black clusters at the northern horizon
like iron filings drawn to the Great Nail
strangers dream they find.

It's the tip of the axis
where the wind blows only to and from t
he south and wherever you go is south,
where nothing will rise or set
and time unspools like a frozen river
- a blank tape measure
on which to write any number of numbers.

I meet long looks in straight faces.
Forrest is their biggest secret.
It grows in their heart.[366]

The word 'Kaamos' requires a bit of *studium*, but geographically it serves the purpose to locate the poem for the reader. In Finnish, in fact, the word means 'polar night'; it is the time of the year when the sun never rises and its rays can only be perceived as tenuous reflections on ice. After a plain start (quietly/stories), the suspension dots seem to signal that we are in front of a 'false' start. Life and death are strategically placed at the end of the third and fourth verse to counterbalance the quasiscientifical description of the bedrock. At first the description is based on a litotic lack of substances (dangerous because of their flammability), then, through the nearly synaesthetic 'fiery capillaries of copper," the corporeal meets the brightness in the darkest days. Capillaries reaches toward 'blood' arrested in the poet's cold heart. 'I breath ice' adds Greenlaw before

[366] Greenlaw*, Minsk*, 57–58.

concluding the second stanza on the quizzical 'They say my lungs might bloom." In the meantime, '- how to keep warm?' remains an unsolved and unanswered question.

It is hard to resist questions of life and death as posed by the lines of this poem. A reading involving the basic drives of the pleasure principle and the death drive as discussed by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*[367], therefore, seems possible. As Freud clearly stated in that book, the death drive is theoretically posed after observing in patients the otherwise impossible to justify experience of repetition of painful experiences. Human life does not develop, Freud finds out, in an incessant balance between a pleasure and a reality principle. Death wish, death drive, or death instinct as it has been called in different translations of the German word *triebe*, is very similar to what Greenlaw is describing in the poem. Not, as it is commonly misunderstood, an active force present in every human being towards taking their life but rather 'its aim is to pull the living back to the inorganic state of timelessness from which we emerge'[368]. As John Forrester explains:

> Freud designates the instincts as 'Trieb' or drive: these drives are 'innate' mechanisms, in that sense biological, and shared with the species. They are human hard-wiring with external triggers. Eros – or sexual passion, desire for a sum of excitation, the propeller of creativity – is joined in 1920 in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* by Thanatos, a competing death instinct born out of Freud's observation of a human compulsion to repeat, to engage in destructive and selfdestructive acts, plus a tendency for all systems to return to a quiescent state.[369]

It is precisely that 'quiescent state' at stake between the lines of the second stanza, a possible explanation for the question about warmth left unanswered. The stiffness and rigidity established in the following stanza seem to confirm the hypothesis as the attempt

[367] Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *The Penguin Freud Reader*, ed. Adam Phillips (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 132–195.
[368] Kelly Noel-Smith, *Freud on Time and Timelessness* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 159.
[369] John Forrester, *Freud and Psychoanalysis: Six Introductory Lessons*, ed. Lisa Appignanesi (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023), 118.

to introduce 'feeling' is once again resisted by the impossibility to support it with physical movement, the human presence of a smile. The *punctum*, in all its unsayability and resistance to meaning comes with the next stanza. 'I take place outside my self' and the reason is because 'The Arctic winter has set in my body / like a drink of glass." Leaving the self behind involves, in the next stanza, 'the tip of the axis' a geographical perennial North, an arrested time that 'unspools like a frozen river." Meaning is a 'blank' writing of any number of numbers, a pure signifier. Greenlaw, once again pushes language to confront itself and she does it by choosing direct, apparently simple words. The last stanza gestures back to the human and seems to suggest a way out through the slow growth of forests in the 'hearts' of local people.

Approaching the end of Part I of his *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes writes:

> A detail overwhelms the entirety of my reading; it is an intense mutation of my interest, a fulguration. By the mark of *something*, the photograph is no longer 'anything whatever." This *something* has triggered me, has provoked a tiny shock, a *satori*, the passage of a void (it is of no importance that its referent is insignificant). A strange thing: the virtuous gesture which seizes upon the 'docile' photographs (those invested by a simple studium) is an idle gesture (to leaf through, to glance quickly and desultory, to linger, then to hurry on); on the contrary, the reading of the *punctum* (of the prickled photography so to speak) is at once brief and active.[370]

The French semiologist in search of the essence of photography is about to conclude his survey of photographs that are more or less well-known because of their artistic, cultural, or social values. Despite having lingered on each one of them for a few paragraphs, he realises that the quantum of 'docility' shown in those images is exceeded only when a 'tiny shock," 'a *satori*," the 'passage of a void' attracts a completely different kind of attention, 'brief and active." 'What I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance'[371] he adds a few pages further.

[370] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 49.
[371] Barthes, 53.

Greenlaw follows a similar path in her poem but rather than finishing it on a ‘blank tape measure,” she brushes against the void left by the absence of the self replaced by glass. She does not seem to bear the infinite emptiness of that void and, therefore, she needs to find the last straw of those human faces, the fusion of a slowly growing forest and the pulsation of a human heart. In brief, a point of anchorage.

A similar question hangs in another poem by Greenlaw titled ‘The Last Postcard’:

The Last Postcard

After Malevich

I want to give you something as complete
as this house without doors and windows.
It swarms in its rectangle
As busy and inward as an ant hill.
It simmers beneath three chimneys
that are themselves just puffs of smoke,
signals, perhaps,
of frails but conclusive activity.

The red house stands on a green line
that could be grass of a thickening pool.
It widens a little to the left
as if growing or going somewhere.
As for the yellow fence or field
we could climb or walk it,
or take the road that passes through
in a sweep of black, oblivious.

This summer, the years are lining up

like the edge of the world.
All the weight is behind us,
behind the house.
Think of this as the long view:
A resettlement of colour into light
without doors or windows
like this house, where I wish you.[372]

I would like to conclude my reading of *Minsk* with a poem directly inspired by a painting. The author is the avant-garde Russian artist, Kazimir Malevich and it is titled *The Red House*.[373] Two octaves and two quatrains reproduce formally the red rectangle at the centre of Malevich's painting. Its completeness offered to a 'you' is immediately destabilised by the absence of doors and windows. The only way out is represented by the three chimneys, which rather than being recognisable, solid elements rely instead on the indeterminacy of metonymic 'puffs of smoke." They are 'perhaps' 'signals," Greenlaw explains for the reader, 'of frails but conclusive activity." Frailty and conclusiveness are balanced at an oxymoronic angle. It is at this intersection that the most interesting poetry written by Greenlaw seems to occur. The house of the painting is a patch of red colour and does not seem to require the addition of 'lines' of interpretation or an explanation of its pure redness. However, the frail completeness requested by Greenlaw involves a primary desire for *studium*, the analytic inspection of an art historian. Therefore, she proceeds to 'read' and 'write' the rest of the painting and find a possible purpose for the 'I' that speaks and the 'you' to which the lines (both belonging to the house and made of words) are an offering. The ghost of the *punctum* is back in the last quatrain. The carefully arranged sound relation between 'view' and 'you' brings us back to the poetry of perception pursued by Greenlaw, the 'taking shape' quoted at the

[372] Greenlaw, *Minsk*, 48.
[373] A reproduction of the painting can be seen here: https://www.wikiart.org/en/kazimir-malevich/redhouse-1932.

beginning of this chapter. The 'you' is invited to think of 'A resettlement of colour into light / without doors or windows. This line seems to be of particular interest. The French critic and semiologist Bertrand Rouby remarks:

> Greenlaw, elle, présente son poème comme l'évocation d'un tableau de Malevitch, et le conclut par une méditation sur les conditions mêmes de la perception ('Think of this as the long view, / a resettlement of colour into light'). 'This' : le poème, l'acte d'écrire, qui réagence la couleur et la convertit en lumière. Ce faisant, pour dérouler le fil sémantique du mot 'settlement," elle donne à la couleur un foyer où s'installer, elle en apaise les tensions, la racine indo-européenne **sed-* convoquant un imaginaire de la sédentarité, voire de la sédimentation. La couleur serait foncièrement mobile, instable, comme en suspens, jusqu'à ce que l'écriture la convertisse en lumière. Grâce à l'écriture, la couleur se fixe en lumière. Cette vision ébranle certaines de nos intuitions : n'aurions-nous pas tendance à croire que c'est la lumière qui est changeante, à force de reflets, de miroitements, et qu'il revient au peintre, à l'aide des pigments, de la fixer en couleur? N'est-ce pas la couleur qui permet de saisir la lumière et de l'arrimer à la toile?[374]

The idea the colour is given 'un foyer où s'installer' by the act of writing is, with a typical Greenlaw's passage, a hazardous abstraction. 'The quiet rhythms and the startling imagery create a sense of reading at high altitude' writes Sarah Fulford.[375] It is in the rarefied atmosphere of this poem that writing not only finds a place for colour

[374] Bertrand Rouby, 'Derrière la maison sans fenêtres : « The Last Postcard » de Lavinia Greenlaw' in Polysème Revue de études intertextuelles et intermédiales, 16, 2016 Online : https://journals.openedition.org/polysemes/1505?lang=en 'Greenlaw, on the other hand, presents her poem as an evocation of a Malevich painting and concludes it with a meditation on the very conditions of perception ("Think of this as the long view, / a resettlement of colour into light"). 'This': the poem, the act of writing, which rearranges color and converts it into light. In doing so, to unravel the semantic thread of the word 'settlement', she provides colour with a dwelling place, soothing its tensions, and the Indo-European root *sed- evokes an imagery of sedentariness, even sedimentation. Colour would be fundamentally mobile, unstable, as if suspended, until writing converts it into light. Thanks to writing, colour solidifies into light. This perspective challenges some of our intuitions: wouldn't we tend to believe that it is light that is everchanging, through reflections and shimmering, and that it is the painter's task, using pigments, to fix it into colour? Isn't it colour that allows us to grasp light and anchor it to the canvas?'.

[375] Fulford, "A Cold Homecoming," 73.

but also converts it back to light. The counterintuitive achievement of the writing act pulverises and at the same time substantiate the ineffable. Roland Barthes says something intrinsic to the point Greenlaw makes:

> a trick of vocabulary: we say 'to develop' a photograph; but the chemical action develops is undevelopable, an essence (of a wound), what cannot be transformed but only repeated under the instances of insistence (of the insistent gaze).[376]

In paraphrasing the sentence mentioned above, it might be posited that the iterative nature of writing does not necessarily generate new significance but has the potential to reshape and adapt existing meaning. The suspension appears to have achieved a state of wholeness through its inherent fragility, which can be considered an abstract yet effective resolution.

'Somewhere between what is heard and what is seen': *The Casual Perfect* and *Audio Obscura*.

Lavinia Greenlaw continues her exploration of the juxtaposition of *studium* and *punctum* as well as of a thinkable balance of the two in a third space, in the following collection of poems. In 2011, she published *The Casual Perfect*[377] and, in collaboration with the photographer Julian Abrams, a book called *Audio Obscura*[378]. The title 'The Casual Perfect' is a reference to 'For Elizabeth Bishop 4'[379] by Robert Lowell and the 'unerring Muse who makes the casual perfect' is, obviously the dedicatee of the poem.

[376] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 49.
[377] Lavinia Greenlaw, *The Casual Perfect* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011).
[378] Greenlaw and Abrams, *Audio Obscura*.
[379] Robert Lowell, *New Selected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2017), 163.

Lowell and Bishop shared a lifelong friendship documented in an uninterrupted exchange of letters that lasted throughout their lives.[380]

Elizabeth Bishop's *Collected Poems* and Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* are the other two books (Akhmatova's *Rosary* being the third one as noted above) included by Greenlaw in the list of three for her presentation in the 1994 New Gen Issue of *Poetry Review*. While the so called 'confessional' element (although in a very oblique and personal way) in Lowell attracted several other poets from the New Gen, the 'visual' element in Bishop must have been a revelatory source of inspiration. Reviewing a book on paintings and drawings by Bishop for *The Independent*, Greenlaw remarks:

> 'Interior with Extension Cord' leads the eye into a corner while the lines of wall, floor, and ceiling flail wildly out. The wobbliness of it all is her argument with what the eye expects, how the eye wants to tidy up what is really seen.[381]

The dynamic signalled in the interaction between 'how the eye wants to tidy up' versus 'what is really seen' is not far, once again, from what I have tried to investigate in terms of *studium* and *punctum*. The compulsion towards form and structure is contrasted by *something* else and both conditions happen within the same act of looking at. It is not only a matter of recognising it, or simply being aware of the duplicity. There is another element of Bishop's poetry that needs to be stressed. Peter Robinson describes it in an essay dedicated to a poem by Bishop titled "The Shampoo":[382]

> The poem's syntax cuts across its drift of metaphysical speculation, to resolve the emotional dilemma, not by a synthesis of seemingly incompatible options, but by

[380] The complete correspondence, rich in mutual advice and creative exploration, can be found in Thomas Travisano, with Saskia Hamilton, eds., *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008).
[381] Lavinia Greenlaw, "Poems made in pen, ink, and water: Exchanging Hats, Paintings by Elizabeth Bishop ed. William Benton, Carcanet," *The Independent*, September 13, 1997.
[382] Elizabeth Bishop, *Collected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2011), 82.

> demonstrating its resolution through a putting of love into action by means of the hair washing offer and request.[383]

Robinson adds that an 'enacted transformation' and a 'pretended act speech' are required to help stabilise the poem and find an emotionally acceptable solution to the dilemma posed at its beginning. It is not the details of Bishop's poem that are of interest here, but the strategies employed by poets to find a solution when the world needs to be transferred into words (if we accept the fact that there is something that happens outside the 'linguistic). Greenlaw tries to describe this 'passage' in these terms:

> Writing and thinking come alive when something snags – I can't make sense or find the words, there's a rupture in the flow of the mind, a pause in the drive to process what it's perceiving and to turn it into what it already knows. I am trying to find and expressive structure that puts in place the experience of being out of place.[384]

It seems that 'something' happens only at a point of 'rupture' where she 'can't make sense' or 'find the words." As a consequence, the process needs an 'expressive structure' to 'put in place' the 'experience." This reminds me of another passage from *Camera Lucida*, where Barthes affirms that 'Photography is subversive not when it frightens, repels, or even stigmatises, but when it is *pensive*, when it thinks'[385]. Thinking, being 'pensive' seems to be the 'act speech' (referring back to Peter Robinson quoted above) Greenlaw finds as a *medium* or third way while oscillating between *studium* and *punctum*. Paradoxically, she finds it by hesitating, withdrawing, remaining almost still. Sean O'Brien discusses 'The catch' (one of the poems from *The Casual Perfect*) in *The Guardian*:

[383] Peter Robinson, "Pretended Acts: The Shampoo," in *Elizabeth Bishop Poet of the Periphery*, eds. Linda Anderson and Jo Shapcott (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2001),106.
[384] Greenlaw, *Some Answers without Questions*, 121.
[385] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 38.

> ‘The Catch,” one of the most memorable pieces in the book, is so economical that it will probably incite some to the very kind of narrative reconstruction that the poem seems designed to prove irrelevant. But meanwhile the final stanza involves a sly recusatio – the device whereby the poet states her inability to deal with a subject, while at the same time dealing with it. It is, she suggests, the very idiosyncrasy that draws her away from ‘theme’ to ‘variation’ that enables the poet to speak of fundamental matters. To be otherwise might involve a cost to the art which enables anything to be grasped at all. ‘One day I’ll learn to listen / to the city beneath the snow, / the agony in the irony, / the lover as I go.”[386]

The Catch

When I left that house I took a key
to a door I never opened.
It’s not the theme that interests me
but the variation.

So much is with me so soon
I lean towards the rest:
the needle’s hesitation,
the song caught in the breath.

One day I’ll learn to listen
to the city beneath the snow,
the agony in the irony,

[386] Sean O’Brien, “The Casual Perfect by Lavinia Greenlaw: A Review,” *The Guardian*, October 14, 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/oct/14/casual-perfect-lavinia-greenlaw-poetry-review.

the lover as I go.[387]

Sean O'Brien's point on "the dealing with without dealing with" is what interests me here. The three tightly textured quatrains seem to be an exercise on "hesitation" where even the "breath" is caught somewhere. "It's not the theme that interests me / but the variation" (leading directly to hesitation through the rhyme) is a poetic manifesto that defines art in terms of subtraction – an echo, maybe, of the Bishopian "art of losing." It is not so much about "going" but more on "learning to listen" how a pun on words ("the agony in the irony") may develop and become the meaning of the poem. Listening carefully to the hesitation between the sense and the sound is another exercise in perception Greenlaw assigns to her work as a poet.

The poem from which the title is taken seems to move in the same direction.

The Casual Perfect

A borrowed tense.
Achievement of the provisional.
Paraphasia.
A gesture made in musical time.
The unarticled world.
A lapsed geography.
Description in action.

Her rooms somehow always at sea.
A childhood home.
The sprawling brightness of the return.
The intimacy of the telescope.

[387] Greenlaw, *Casual Perfect*, 21.

The becoming of quartz and iron.[388]

Many of the elements mentioned in the poem refer both to Bishop and to Greenlaw: "achievement of the provisional" is one of those quasi-oxymoronic elements investigated earlier' "paraphasia," defined in the OED as "disordered speech characterized by unintentional substitution of incorrect words or syllables," occupies the space of an entire line.[389] It seems to me that a dialogue is going where the first line posits a question answered in the second one of the couplet. From this point of view, it is remarkable that an impediment in speech is overcome by "a gesture in musical time." The erroneous sequence of syllables re-becomes physically (gesture) fluid in the lack of a necessary transmittable meaning. Edward Allen remarks that "the lilt of a gesture made in musical time counterpoints the threat of paraphasia."[390] The fact that language has difficulty in adhering to a meaning is indicated by the following two lines where a world set free from constraints develops in a "lapsed" geography. The references to "The Map," Bishop's poem from *North & South* and to the title of another book by Bishop *Geography III* bring the reader back to Bishop's land with its lack of borders and its frail margins. Something similar happens the "becoming of quartz and iron" is matched by "the intimacy of the telescope." The long-term formation of metals, which can be observed and quantified over extended periods of hundreds of thousands of years, manifests as a captivating phenomenon when observed via a telescope, allowing for the exploration of intricate details. In this particular instance, the circumstances present a perplexing scenario. The phenomenon of telescopic vision is determined by the spatial separation between objects, yet it engenders a sense of intimacy and proximity. The phenomenon under consideration involves a reciprocal motion that necessitates the existence of a spatial gap between the individual seeing and the thing being seen. Greenlaw demonstrates a recurring ability to

[388] Greenlaw, *Casual Perfect*, 5.
[389] Oxford English Dictionary, "paraphasia" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), continually updated, https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=paraphasia.
[390] Edward Allen, "A Presiding Spirit: Elizabeth Bishop's Poetic Afterlives," *PN Review* 39 (2012), 22.

navigate the periphery of human perception, thereby evading the existential void described by Barthes and alluded to before. As David Wheatley writes, "Greenlaw's achievement here is to turn the distancing inside out, by way of a sly voyeurism" and then underlines here ability to balance "intimacy and distance."[391]

Prior to embarking on an examination of Greenlaw's most recent anthology of poetry, it is pertinent to undertake an analysis of how the elements of perception explored by Greenlaw transcend the visual domain and encompass the auditory realm as well. Specifically, I am interested in investigating the methodology employed to identify a potential location of convergence. In the project and related installation titled *Audio Obscura*, Greenlaw establishes listening stations equipped with headphones at Manchester Piccadilly and London St. Pancras stations. Some actors perform the recitation of passages authored by Greenlaw, while people passing by are invited to wear the headphones and at the same time observe the erratic and hurried footsteps of passengers as they enter and exit. The textual compositions, characterised by their fragmented structure and the deliberate avoidance of definitive narratives by Greenlaw, create opportunities for interpretation that are left to the discretion of the listeners. The presence of interrupted talks and aural spaces prompts us to critically reconsider the non-places of railway stations, urging us to adopt a novel perspective. As Greenlaw explains in the booklet published with pictures taken by Julian Abrams in the above-mentioned train stations:

> *Audio Obscura* is situated in tension with our compulsion to construct narratives, to impose meaning and to seek symmetry and conclusion. The texts hover between speech and thought.[392]

A brief selection of lines from the words played through headphones in the project adequately captures the aspect in which Greenlaw seeks to refrain from crafting

[391] David Wheatley, "Review," *Poetry London* (Spring 2012), 43.
[392] Greenlaw and Abrams, *Audio Obscura*, 6.

narratives "on behalf of others" and, instead, endeavours to challenge the inclination to identify symmetry even in the viewer and listener.

She's waiting.
Their faces.
She's been waiting for years.[393]

And in the concluding text:

Footsteps. Tannoy. Ringtone. Cough. Wheels. Door. Whisper. Brakes. Laugh. Bell. Swish. Platform five Five. Ringtone. Tannoy. Footsteps. Coins. Water. Steam. Footsteps. Wheels. Shout. Ringtone. Platform five. Barrier. Sigh. Wheels. Footsteps. Shout. Rustle. Step. Platform Five. Sniff. Click. Cough. Wheels. Barrier. Platform five. Clatter. Wheels. Step. Step. Step. Step[394].

It appears that the *punctum* has undergone a transformation in which it now functions as a full stop, serving the purpose of demarcating discrete elements such as micro-actions, sounds, interruptions, disruptions, and interferences.

> The fragile, shifting but acute images of the camera obscura draw you in. In *Audio Obscura* this is translated into "dark listening" with its connotations of depths and shadows, the impalpable and the unreachable. The idea is to discover, somewhere between what is heard and what is seen.[395]

In this particular context, characterised by the necessity of a technical mediator, a dependence on technology, and the transition from a passive reader to an engaged listener and spectator, it becomes apparent that a novel realm emerges for the exploration of

[393] Greenlaw and Abrams, 54.
[394] Greenlaw and Abrams, *Audio Obscura*, 62.
[395] Lavinia Greenlaw, "*Audio Obscura:* A work for a railway station," *The Guardian*, 2, 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/sep/02/lavinia-greenlaw-audio-obscura-installation.

Greenlaw's artistic endeavours. To revisit Barthes, the deliberate exploration of an overlooked aspect in objects necessitates, akin to the writings influenced by Bishop, a heightened level of meticulousness in examining certain elements, almost a telescopic level of detail. The booklet's introduction consistently highlights Greenlaw's focus on identifying and exploring "small words." Despite their size, they contribute to a heightened sense of dramatic impact. In the initial section of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes introduces the concept of absolute contingency, which pertains to the inherent difficulty of capturing the genuine essence of photography. This notion intersects with the ideas presented in *Audio Obscura*. The punctum's intrusion is characterised as an ineffable and untranslatable element that holds significant influence within the image.

> By listening instead of speaking, and orchestrating instead of editing, by doing everything I always do but differently, I prolonged the unsettlement in myself. I thought it was taking me to the edge of what I do as a writer but I can see now that it has taken me to the heart of it.[396]

In point of fact, *Audio Obscura* seems to destabilise Greenlaw, and I agree that it appears to be succeeding in doing so. At the same time, though, it appears to be leading her "to the heart of it." We are getting close to the point where we will make the transition from the understanding of the punctum shown in the first part of *Camera Lucida* to what is presented in the second half.

Facing the Punctum: The Built Moment

It appears that *The Built Moment*, similar to Roland Barthes's experience of rediscovering the photograph of his mother (the Winter Garden photograph), depicts a temporal projection into another time, not too dissimilar from Proust's temporal experience in the *Recherche*.[397] The father's protracted illness, senile dementia, and

[396] Greenlaw, *Audio Obscura*.
[397] Lavinia Greenlaw, *The Built Moment* (London: Faber and Faber, 2019).

eventual demise play an analogous role in Greenlaw's work. Within Greenlaw's perception of the world, she appears to discover "the having been there," as defined by Roland Barthes. This becomes an unavoidable *punctum*, an irreparable fracture and rupture, in the face of which Greenlaw's strategies vacillate and, although bravely put in place, don't seem to be always effective. The event of mourning that begins before the actual death of the father, in its unfolding as an irreversibly past moment, struggles to find translation except perhaps in the distancing provided by poetic language. As Declan Ryan writes of the collection, it represents "an attempt at connection and repair all the more heart-breaking for its inevitable failure."[398] On the contrary, Alison Brackenbury affirms that although "there are black corners in the narrative […] the

[398] Declan Ryan, "Heavy Lifting for the Heat," *Times Literary Supplement*, September 27, 2019, 26.

landscapes of her father's decay are backlit by the loveliness of Greenlaw's sounds."[399] Henry Thorne remarks that "a folding – a collapsing – of time typifies the early stages of Greenlaw's father move toward the ending."[400] It is my opinion that we are not far from what Roland Barthes discovers when face to face with the photograph of the mother.

> Here again is the Winter Garden Photograph. I am alone with it, in front of it. The circle is closed, there is no escape. I suffer, motionless. Cruel, sterile deficiency. I cannot transform my grief. I cannot let my gaze drift; no culture will help me utter this suffering which I experience entirely on the level of the image's finitude (this is why, despite its codes, I cannot read a photograph, the Photograph) – my photograph – is without culture: when it is painful, nothing in it can transform grief into mourning.[401]

The experience described in this passage tears through culture and language, and Roland Barthes finds himself confronted with an insoluble substance, the inability to alchemically "transform grief into mourning." However, when it comes to Greenlaw in *The Built Moment,* although, as I wrote above, her strategies are in constant peril of failure, the composure of the gaze, the calibrated use of words, the weaving of song and melody persist, no matter what, in seeking an exit point, a strategy that, within the symbolic realm, can still capture and somehow resist, at least temporarily, the obscure aspect connected to the experience of loss.

The Built Moment is divided into two parts. The first is titled "The Sea is an Edge and an End," and tells the story of the father's lengthy illness. The second is titled "The Bluebell Horizontal." My intention is to have a dialogue between the first and the last text in the first part with the new concept of punctum identified by Barthes,

and then investigate a text from the second part in which the theme of time returns. This is the first poem:

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[399] Alison Brackenbury, "Review," *Poetry London* 95 (Spring 2020), 54.
[400] Harry Thorne, "Lavinia Greenlaw: the Poetic Art of Reckoning with time," *Frieze*, February 22, 2019, https://www.frieze.com/article/lavinia-greenlaw-poetic-art-reckoning-time.
[401] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 90.

The sea is an edge and an ending

My father has lost his way out of the present.
Something is stopping him leaving, nothing becomes
the immediate past.

The act of forgetting used to take time.
Now it accompanies him through each day
and the world folds itself up behind every step.

What unlocked this happiness?
He knows not to ask. He knows now how small he is,
how small his island, how small his spell.[402]

The temporal dimension that the father experiences is that of an eternal present from which there is no withdrawal. Physically, nothing was accomplished in the past, nor will it be in the future. Memory, a human device associated with language use - a facet also explored by Don Paterson - has ceased to function, and "the world folds itself up behind his every step." The act of forgetting itself has evolved from a line that unwinds into a series of unrelated points, and language can no longer develop a sense of time in which to unfold. The word "fold" appears crucial in this context, not only for its presence but also because it connotes an absence, a type of black hole where time is different and every moment collapses. The subsequent void cannot be questioned, and the father "knows not to inquire." The dimension of timelessness cannot be probed with a direct query, much like Freud's unconscious. The reference to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is present throughout the text. On Prospero's island, everything is diminishing and, as the title

[402] Greenlaw, *The Built Moment*, 3.

suggests, the sea transforms from an edge to a sense of an "ending." Even the spell (in the chapter on Michael Donaghy, I attempted to investigate the function of act speech in the spell, a mode that aims to enable language to fulfil the impossible task of touching the world's referent) does not function anymore. From the formal point of view the use of a twelve-syllable line in each tercet must be noted. The alternation between the twelve-syllable verse and the eight-syllable verse in most of the text creates a compression and release effect that is almost brutally entangled by the appearance of "the immediate past," a handful of syllables thrown like sand into the mechanism that develops a rhythmic recurrence of opening and closing. "Present" and "past" both appear at the end of the first and third line, while the future acts only as an absence, a mechanism of foreclosure. As mentioned, there is no future here.

> He is going to die. This will be and this has been the absolute past-death in the future. What pricks me is the discovery of this equivalence. In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder like Winnicott's psychotic patient, over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.[403]

We are not given information about when Greenlaw composed these poems. However, it is difficult to imagine that they were written during her father's illness, or even if they were, they were not subject to revision after his death. The experience that Barthes describes in the quoted passage is this awareness of a temporal dimension that perhaps unites those who write but certainly those who read. The reader knows the end and experiences the same distressing dimension recounted by Barthes. The temporal dislocation caused by the "having been there" of the photo and the hindsight knowledge it gives the reader brings them closer to the psychotic individual who, when trapped in the eternal present of trauma, confronts the terror of an event that has actually already

[403] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 96.

occurred. Time and death become two aspects that the *punctum*, in the new sense identified by Barthes, can no longer evade.

The following is the last poem in the series about Greenlaw's father's illness and death:

My father leaving

I have found a form for my grief in the memory of a young deer
I glimpsed by the side of the road half destroyed half poised To make a leap.

The snow held in place its shock
at being collapsed back into the earth while yet to know
what it was here for or what needed to be done.

Did you think the earth had taken hold
The day you pulled off the road and walked away from your wife
and four children as if we stopped your breath?

All we could do was line up to watch you disappear.

Do I have to stand there forever while my gives way
as it did in the years in which you could not stop leaving?
Will you stop leaving now?[404]

The pain finds an image to lean on, but the verses, despite the anger and tension that accumulates, gradually become longer and more relaxed. The young deer killed by the roadside remains caught between the randomness of death and the shock of the event. It

[404] Greenlaw, *The Built Moment*, 26.

cannot say "what it was here for or what needed to be done." It is hard not to think of Elizabeth Bishop's "The Moose," where a moose "has come out of / the impenetrable wood / and stands there, looms rather, in the middle of the road."[405] The pain of death adds to the other many deaths that occurred earlier when the father would leave home, leaving behind his wife and children. The verse that breaks away from the usual tercet structure captures the photograph of the still family without the father, waiting for his figure to fade away. The experience, held by the formal structure of a regular cadence that even indulges in some hints of rhyme and half-rhyme, has now reached and enveloped the body. The questions with which Greenlaw leaves the reader are directed at herself. "Will you stop leaving now?" There is no interpretation here, apart from the void of silence that death involves. The blank page that follows with the title of the new section seems to be in search of an answer. Writing his final conclusions on the Winter Garden photograph, Roland Barthes seems to have reached a conclusive point of intersection between the singular and the universal.

> I have found what Calvino calls "the true total photography," it accomplishes the unheard-of identification of reality ("*that has been*") with truth ("there she is!"). It bears the effigy to that crazy point where affect (love, compassion, grief, enthusiasm, desire) is a guarantee of Being. It then approaches, to all intents, madness.[406]

According to Barthes, the encounter between the absence of the object of desire and photographic evidence that it once existed can only result in madness. Therefore, the photograph becomes a new form of hallucination: deceptive on the level of perception, and true on the level of time. It is, as Barthes continues, a temporal hallucination, "a crazed image chafed by reality."[407] These are conclusions that Greenlaw definitely avoids, recognising their extreme danger and threat. The absence of the father dramatically

[405] Bishop, *Collected Poems*, 189.
[406] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*,115.
[407] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 113.

accentuates the image of the four children lined up with their mother. He left, and he will not return this time. In its temporal dislocation, the poem only provides us with this certainty, "He has been." He once existed and is now dead.

I would like to conclude this chapter on Greenlaw with a cursory analysis of a poem from the second section of *The Built Moment*. It is the poem that gives the title to the book:

The Built Moment

We gather great stones and put our years into moving them.
Do we think of them as landmarks or an extension
of vision?
Do they prove the existence of time?
The poor humans. Vigilance to the point of magic:
a hand reaching out to catch something we have yet
to see fall.
Let there be ground and places where ground gives shape
to where it's missing. Think of crossing a room
and finding at its centre a small but infinite ravine:
pressure finding its way through weakness
as in machines or weather or time.
Time is not place. We cannot build on it
but still we think the process good for us and seek it out.[408]

Greenlaw distances herself from the conclusions of Roland Barthes. She rejects his suggestion of an unavoidable descent into madness. However, as the couplet reveals,

[408] Greenlaw, *The Built Moment*, 38.

“Time is not place. We cannot build on it.” Nonetheless, we continue to consider construction, a process that requires years spent in moving great stones”—a necessary activity that we cannot help but “seek out.” The “pensive” (the thinking) heard at the beginning of the chapter reappears, musically merged with complex textures, attempting to halt the invasion, even physical, that Barthes’s acceptance of “madness” would subject us to. It would be, as Greenlaw tells us, like crossing a room to discover oneself at its centre, an “infinite ravine.” This is the abyss of desire, the void upon which, in the words of Jacques Lacan, the Real insists. Because, if it is true, as Lacan himself writes in the epigraph I cited at the outset of this thesis, that we go to poetry for a dismantling of wisdom, a shrouding of the Real is equally necessary for the survival of “poor humans.”

Conclusion

> Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. In like manner, silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance.[409]

In this passage from one of his later works, Foucault suggests the need for a paradigm shift towards the instability of the discontinuous segments of discursive practices. Within these practices, there are opportunities for resistance and not merely the exercise of power. This intricate task, as I aimed to outline in the introduction to this thesis, involves identifying a series of power discourses (which I attempted to reconstruct in the second part of the introduction). These discourses and narratives have led to the categorisation of several poets from the 1994 New Generation as "mainstream." Hence, they became marketable, readable, and presentable within an advertising framework where poetry was expected to morph into the new rock 'n' roll. The undeniable dimension of power within these discursive practices cannot be spoken of from an outside position. However, by emphasising their discontinuities and rupture points, one can uncover mechanisms of resistance. In the introduction, I pinpointed these forms of resistance as an attempt to carve a third poetic path within the language of poetry. This implies integrating a mechanism of discontinuity that

[409] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 1 – The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin Books, 1981), 100–101.

anticipates a third space, a transitional realm that allows for the pursuit of innovative forms from within tradition and the immediately recognisable forms it offers.

Critical discourse in literature traditionally navigates between the three vertices forming its triangulation: the author, the text, and the reader. As elucidated by Terry Eagleton in *Literary Theory*—and similarly reflected in various academic manuals––depending on which of these three components assumes centrality, there is a consequent shift in the dominant critical paradigm.[410]

When emphasis is placed on discerning the author's intent, exploring their historical and literary context, the lens becomes historicist. This often results in an inherent belief in the progressive evolution of literature. Consider the Romantic theory of authorship, which champions the author's intention, propelled by the power of imagination, as the exclusive criterion for evaluating a work.

Conversely, formalist criticism accentuates the text itself. It delves into its structure, linguistic mechanisms, and stylistic techniques, abstracted from historical context or the author's intentions. For instance, New Criticism regarded the literary piece as a self-contained entity, an artifact to be analysed in its own right, relegating external influences to the periphery. In this paradigm, the author's role becomes almost extraneous, and the emphasis is on the text's intrinsic qualities.

The third vertex, the reader, gained prominence especially with the advent of reception theory and cultural studies. Here, the focus transitions from the text and author to the interplay between the work and its audience, investigating how readers

[410] Several manuals have been consulted during the preparation for this thesis. In particular, Patricia
Waugh, *Literary Theory and Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); David Lodge and Nigel Wood, eds., *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2013); Herman Rapaport, *The Literary Theory Toolkit: A Compendium of Concepts and Methods* (Oxford: WileyBlackwell, 2013); Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, eds., *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford:
Wiley-Blackwell, 2017); Michael Ryan, *Literary Theory: A Practical Introduction* (Oxford: WileyBlackwell, 2017). I have found the following particularly useful for my research: Jon Cook, *Poetry in Theory: An Anthology* 1900–2000 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Vincent B. Leitch, ed., *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018).

interpret, engage with, and ascribe meaning to texts. In this paradigm, the literary piece becomes a locus of negotiation between the text and its interpretation, rendering reading as an act as creative as the writing itself.

When all the above-mentioned trends in literary theory are combined with the ideas of Freud and Marx, the landscape of literary theory takes on a significantly more complete appearance. These movements can be identified by the names of the major critics of each movement. Despite the fact that Freud and Marx did the majority of their research outside of the sphere of literature, their frameworks have been coopted within literary discourse to serve as pillars of the so-called "hermeneutics of suspicion." Even while Freud's psychoanalytic lens and Marx's socio-economic critique are not literary in and of themselves, they have been extremely helpful in analysing the subtextual layers that are present in works of literature. The dynamic interaction between the author, the text, and the reader is made more complicated and richer when these figures are positioned beside the theoretical paradigms that were discussed earlier.

To elucidate further, my research, which originated from a more traditional domain and thus within defined literary-critical boundaries, gradually evolved towards a different trajectory. This led to my challenging yet resolute decision to anchor my "frame of reference" around thinkers who, with the exception of perhaps Roland Barthes, engaged with literature only tangentially.

As previously discussed, Foucault prompted a deeper introspection into the self-perpetuating discursive mechanisms often maintained to bolster the survival of particular institutions. Donald Winnicott, with his delineation of transitional objects and spaces, served as a springboard, enabling me to conceptualise a third presence that could dialectically postulate an "alternative" critical space, even amidst a prevalent dichotomy (the one between experimentation and mainstream). Thus, from this viewpoint, an interpretation of Michael Donaghy's work emerges that sees in his staunch defence of tradition and resort to poetry's formal aspects, a protective mechanism that paves the way for innovation and experimentation. This leads us to

the notion of poetry as a "spell," an ultimate endeavour aiming to bridge the void highlighted by Saussure between the signifier and the signified—a rift that has never been linguistically reconciled. Donaghy's poetic sign takes on this challenge, striving to close the gap. Yet, it frequently encounters the same issues of entrapment faced by many of Kafka's characters, those unable to leave the castle and deliver the salvific message to the world. The escape, from that perspective, seems to perpetually recede, manifesting a continuous paradox reminiscent of those postulated by the ancient Greek philosopher Zeno.

Jacques Lacan, with his intricate psychoanalytic discourse and emphasis on poetry as a disruptor to a symbolic universe that wishes to economise language to mere communicative functionality, harked back to Freudian notions (a "return to Freud" as the French psychoanalyst termed his approach). By pinpointing the process of subjectivisation as an inherently castrating shift towards the symbolic realm, I discerned contradictions and an allure to a certain obscurity within Don Paterson's poetic practices. Some of his compositions seemed to be attempts at evading this symbolic imperative, albeit remaining confined to an "Imaginary" realm, dominated by superficiality and reflections. Lacan's third pillar, the Real, the true discourse of the unconscious, the grand Other, what impinges upon the poet/analysand's discourse, subtly surfaces in Paterson's poetry. Moreover, it appeared to me that Paterson's recourse to certain formal structures, like the sonnet, allowed him to temper this pressure, "shrouding" it and caging it within a stringent weave of syllables and imagery.

The German philosopher, critic, and writer Walter Benjamin has provided an invaluable lens through which I approached the critical reading of Michael Hofmann's poetry. Hofmann, born in Germany, stands as a poet, critic, and intellectual, one of the most luminous of his generation. Within the dark, often abandoned landscapes of Hofmann's poetry, where fleeting traces of human figures are sensed and the discard—a utopia now reduced to the intermittent flash of some old advertisement— becomes palpable, I recognised the fragmentary atmospheres of

Benjamin's essays on cities. In his writings on art in the age of mechanical reproduction, the aura of the image fades, but unlike his contemporaries under the banner of the Frankfurt School, such as Adorno, this does not translate into an inevitable loss. The oft-referenced figure depicting Paul Klee's Angelus Novus becomes a cornerstone of my investigation. The angel's gaze is directed at the ruins of the past but, more importantly, it seeks a seed of future utopia, a possible redemption therein. Hofmann's poetry appears to traverse a similar trajectory, frequently overlooked by traditional criticism. For Hofmann, an indefatigable translator from German to English, the obsession with the word allows for an exit into an alternate realm. In this space, while survival may be challenging, there remains an ever-present duty of transmission to be fulfilled.

When I first encountered Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* several years ago, the University of Bologna, which I attended, was in the throes of an intellectual tugof-war between semioticians, led by figures like Umberto Eco, and proponents of deconstructionism. The former camp argued that a text's meaning is derived from mechanisms inherent to the text itself, built to provide a finite range of interpretations. The latter sought to dismantle the structuralist mode of interpretation, asserting that meaning was subject to near-unlimited interpretative drifts.

Barthes himself had undergone a personal evolution, transitioning from a staunch structuralist to a seeker looking to harmonise the individual and the universal. He plunged headfirst into this inquiry, utilising a first-person narrative that simultaneously recounted personal experiences and expounded theoretical concepts, aiming to navigate and address the evident impasse he perceived. *Camera Lucida* delves into this impasse as it quests for the very essence of photography. His oscillation between "stadium" and "punctum," followed by his revisiting of an evolved version of punctum in the second half of the book, struck me as an invaluable tool for interpreting the poetry of Lavinia Greenlaw. Her focus on perceptual facets and her unrelenting exploration of the moment perception materialises, bestowing meaning upon the observed, counterbalances the tenets put forth by the French

semiotician. Deeply engrossed in images, both painted and photographed, Greenlaw crafts texts that are formally exquisite, dominated by an understated yet persistent musicality. It seemed to me that this innate music might be Greenlaw's chosen strategy to ensnare ephemeral voids and unexpected chasms of profundity.

During my research, I was introduced to the work of Julia Kristeva. Reading *Revolution of Poetic Language*, it became evident to me how the pressures exerted on poets emanate not just from external factors, but also from within the very language they choose to employ. Kristeva discerns within poetic language emotional forces and impulses that cannot be directly translated into the purely informative modality of linguistic exchange. While the latter seems governed by a principle of economy, poetic language constantly disrupts the controlled economy of information. It thus imbues language with mechanisms that Foucault might describe as discontinuity and subtraction from the directives of power-knowledge. Kristeva then proceeds to apply her theories on the French avant-garde from Rimbaud onward. However, to me, the real challenge appeared to be the application of these theories in a more "hostile" terrain and to test them even against the wishes or intentions of certain poets.

> The mainstream poets in this book are part of a long evolution, and are engaged in an open, complex and ongoing dialogue with the whole of the English lyric tradition. Despite their claims to do the same, the Postmoderns are unable to configure their relationship with this tradition, because their individual style (or, more accurately, the by-product of what they variously call 'method," 'praxis," and 'research'; though in each case it only amounts to an alterna-*novelty*, since they seem themselves purely in the terms of a progressive vanguard – interestingly, just about the only criticism one ever hear the Postmoderns clearly articulate against the work of other Postmoderns is its failure to innovate.[411]

[411] Don Paterson, "Preface," in *New British Poetry*, eds. Don Paterson and Charles Simic (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2004), XXVII.

In essence, among the myriad readings I have encountered, certain declarations from both the mainstream and experimental fields have compelled me to pay close attention to Kristeva's work. As previously said, the concept put out by the French semiotician and psychoanalyst suggests that several aspects consistently operate inside poetic language, without explicitly stating the specific type or area of these elements. This notion prompted me to endeavour a subversion of the prevailing hierarchy. The primary objective of my inquiry was to investigate the more inconspicuous domains within the field of poetry, specifically focusing on the peripheries, the limits, and the conflicts that undoubtedly pervade this artistic sphere.

The focus does not lie in the unwavering pursuit of novelty, a critique put up by Paterson against the Postmodern tendency to blame "popular" poetry. It also does not simply revolve around establishing a connection with a literary heritage, but to summarise Kristeva's perspective, it is important to acknowledge the existence of numerous revolutions, which are frequently less conspicuous and less remarkable, even within a language that is perceived as direct and easily comprehensible.

From this perspective arises the imperative to contemplate a potential third space, where, it seemed to me, the poets under examination have vested their poetic visions and writing practices. Stemming from the friction between discursive practices that, while rooted in tradition, inevitably demanded a form of representation that could become burdensome, and the intrinsic tendency of the poetic medium to gravitate towards certain trajectories that persistently called for a departure from the communicative dimension, the poet emerges as a "poetizing subject" between the 1980s and 1990s.

> Is a poetry of indeterminacy necessarily oppositional? And, conversely, is a poetry of convention necessarily not?[412]

[412] Linda Kinnahan, "Look for the Doing Words: Carol Ann Duffy and Questions of Convention," in *Contemporary British Poetry: Essays in Theory and Criticism*, eds. James Acheson and Romana Huk (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996).

In scrutinising the event surrounding the New Generation Poets, it is challenging not to perceive it as a calculated endeavour aimed at revitalising the sales of poetry volumes, just as it is difficult to overlook the deployment of marketing techniques and strategies. As mentioned, there was an attempt to market poetry as the new "rock 'n' roll," bestowing upon it a gloss of glamour, evidenced by the photo sessions with the poets later featured in *Vogue* magazine. The failure of the endeavour might be commensurate with the naiveté of those who believed they could bend poetic language to serve such a critically insubstantial agenda. The anticipated significant uptick in sales did not materialise, nor was there a noticeable increase in poetry readership beyond its usual audience. I posit that the unsuccessful outcome of this event—which I am inclined to term a trauma, given subsequent reflections by several participating poets—seems to me to serve as evidence of the soundness of the arguments I have attempted to present in this thesis.

> While Fukuyama professed to divine the end of history, Britain in the 1990s was home to a range of invigorating beginnings. Some developed in ways that transformed the cultural habitat; others more artificial or superficial would fade away. The Poetry Society, for example foregrounded the work the work of twenty poets in 1994 in its journal *The Poetry Review*, labelling them as 'New Generation Poets' […] While the *Vogue* photoshoot the poets endured was indicative of a certain weakness for glamour that characterised the 1990s, the writers themselves were lauded for their demotic language, their regional backgrounds, their concern with ordinary existence, and the fact that most of them had not gone to the traditional academies for aspiring British poets, Oxford and Cambridge.[413]

[413] Peter Marks, *Literature in the 1990s: Endings and Beginnings* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 7.

The aforementioned characterisation aptly encapsulates the paradigm that this study seeks to deconstruct. It presents a readily consumable definition, akin to an instant soup which, upon the mere addition of boiling water, promises a flavourful meal that, I fear, might lack substantive nourishment. While it is incontrovertible that many of the described elements were indeed prevalent, it is equally imperative to assert that a rigorous critical analysis must penetrate beyond mere surface appearances. The phenomena surrounding the New Generation cannot be merely encapsulated by such a cursory gloss. When perceived as a constellation, a more nuanced perspective is necessitated. Nearly three decades after the event, this examination attempted to discern beyond and behind the implications of that particular experience. Drawing parallels to Benjamin's framework, it can be affirmed that the goal was to sift through the showy glamour and uncover the intrinsic aspirations of poetry—which, when positioned from an exploratory standpoint, invariably seeks to embrace discontinuities, exercise scrutiny, and foster engagements with abyssal dimensions, even when it purports to be easily comprehensible and staunchly defends its pact with readers who expect clear meanings and a form of engagement.

> The story is told of an automaton constructed in such a way that it could play a winning game of chess, answering each move of an opponent with a countermove. A puppet in Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent from all sides. Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet's hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called 'historical materialism' is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight.[414]

[414] Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 169.

Following references to Kristeva and Foucault, I wish to conclude by directly invoking another central figure underpinning this thesis. As previously referred to in the chapter on Hofmann's poetry, I wish to cite the first of Benjamin's "Theses on the Concept of History." The mystical materialism of the German scholar marshals the energies derived from theology for the service of history. This aligns with that heretical messianic nihilism, which is both apocalyptic and salvific, intrinsic to Jewish mysticism. Benjamin perceives the apocalyptic nexus, as celebrated by this tradition, between catastrophe (destruction) and salvation (redemption) as the singular lens through which history can be comprehended. From the clutches of narratives and discursive practices (as Foucault reminds us), it is impossible to assume an objective and distant standpoint, given that we are entrenched in their desire to subjectivise through the speakers, and thus the writers, whether of poetry or criticism. Nevertheless, the true effective mechanism of the "automaton" apparatus lies in something that is antiquated and seldom considered in contemporary times. I believe that poetic language is entrusted with the same role that Benjamin assigns to theology. This is a secular theology, perhaps the only remaining vestige of true religious sentiment for our time.

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