WAKEFIELD AND OTHER POEMS

&

SENSE AND INAUDIBILITY

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A Doctoral Thesis in Creative Writing

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DECLARATION

This is to certify that the work presented in the thesis below is my own:
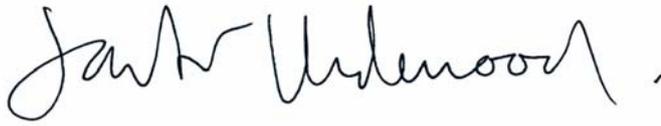
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Jack Underwood

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WAKEFIELD AND OTHER POEMS

PART I

Under

I was picking an apple when it spoke
in worm tongue: *youth is busy in you* it said
and sure enough my skin greened, a seed-pip
lodged in each chamber of my pink heart.

Then while turning radishes, one pepper root
buzzed, a moth in my fist: *love will redden*
the veins, and whiten the fluids. Go home.
Wash your hands, for girls cannot be dug at.

I walked the back-lanes where cow parsley dipped
and posed. One sprig I took and held to my nose,
giggled: *I am fed on the dead men of your house.*
There is fog inside you. I smelled my family name.

Lover, if I am foggish and truly dying, if love
fleshes itself wordily and I am young enough to say,
if blood has taken root and swelled me to a man,
take me home, wash my hands.

My Steak

               will be as thick
as the frown of the beast,
will be a cut kind of love.

When you cook it for me try
not to cook it, but weigh it
on a high heat until unstable.

Think of it as mud dying,
a pushed hand, or a question
hung in itself, about blood.

I will unpack into my mouth
cud-grass, eye-roll, fathom
the taste of my own cow tongue.

Commend me to my steak
for I am a living beak
and all my teeth are hungry.

I Promise When I Lift Your Egg

from the water with my special spoon,
carry it to a cup as if it were a bald man
whistling steam to a tune he had just made up;
when I take my green handled egg-knife
to whip off the top and inside it is more
than yellow, like a laugh about to happen,
or butter pushed back into light; when you dunk
gorgeously in, softly exploding the yolk
like a new idea finding one coloured term
for its articulation; when the little promise
of the egg, contained inside from the moment
it was laid, is broken by your tongue, then,
like love, it is remade, I promise.

Theology

He tried to think about the zoo,
the bird he'd seen with an anvil head,
slinking lizards in the reptile house.
It had been a good day.

But he remembered the panther enclosure
where he had waited for thirty minutes,
staring up at a dark hut hidden in trees.
Suppose there was no panther.

Bonnie 'prince' Billy

He is also singing how I will split
the atom and leave it for you cleaved
in two on the breadboard like an apple,
will peel your star-sign off the sky,
dissolve and serve it hot in a cup.

He sings how ugly and complex
I have become, sitting at the table,
gripping the stupidity of wood.

He sings how deeply I am weakened
by a single drip of water
falling from the end of your nose
and soaking into my jeans
like an excuse into the wider scheme of things.

And what do you do?

Write codenames, military mainly.
'Operation blunt-tongue' that was me,
'spirit-hat', 'yard-mile' them too.

I'm jacking it in next month:
civvy street, open shirt, slip on shoes.
I've a job lined-up in colours.

How about 'burnt viscose', 'black jam'?
Would you paint your hall with 'easy money'?
These days there's little left to call.

What beautiful blue eyes you have.

Brother hen

for Tom

          has built a new coop
high as himself, on dog-proof stilts
in worm-rich earth. He reaches his long arm
through the chicken door, explores,
finger-tipping for egg warm shapes.
He lifts one out, careful and astonished,
as if retrieving a voice from an oven.

I tell my Brother hen I have a system
for the soft-boiled, about my trick with salt
under the lid, but he knows best that an egg
should not be cajoled or spooned, but is
an internal balancing act, a system of its own,
to be held aloft, considered, as an example
of grace and the duty of hens.

Certain

Nothing before had seemed so potent
and self-contained –
surely the onion was beautiful.

Its hung cloud of acid worked
in his nose and throat
as the knife bisected

like a maker of names passing
between twins, calling one half *Perfect*
the other also *Perfect*.

Consequences

I need to tell you that your elbow
fits fully in the nook under my chin,
that I want to put your lovely ear
up to my mouth and sing myself inside.

I'm so used to looking into your eyes,
I forget the names of colours.
I want to bend your knees. Your feet
are extremely well proportioned.

Now say 'Avocado' and let me see
your armpit. I am a buffoon for you;
scratch my bright, scabby head.
Lace your shoes as usual.

Currency

George's mother has dough-hands: round, pale, pillow-fingers.
Her apron is stiff with potato starch and she smells of sweetcorn.
The backs of her arms are shiny with work sweat.
His father calls me *eldest* (though he has older children)
and introduces me to the mayor who shows me wine purpled teeth
then six shrapnel scars, one in the shape of a fig leaf.
The Bandettas come down from the hills, ride me on their scooters
to the river where we play at drowning each other. In leather jackets,
they pose for my camera, taking turns to wear my sunglasses.
I am dropped back in town for the feast and evening dances.
Children hide and squeal in night clothes. The mayor
in his old blue uniform, fingers his medals like a farmer testing good soil.
George leads Sabrina by the chin to the fig orchards behind the church,
so I sit on a hay bale, talking for his sister. She touches my left palm
to her right kidney, asks in a neat, foreign whisper "I have been waiting
for you?" What else can I say but "Yes" and "For me"?

Dog Walking Backwards

for Heather Phillipson

It said if I tried to climb for Christ
I'd only be told to sit and stay.
And as It spoke my veins flushed in,
my body sunk and holy holy,
dog-leg, leg-dog, It traversed
the alley slowly in reverse.

What O why did I not scream,
Its tail checking, out in front,
Its snout face, facing back, eyes
fixed on me? It was miraculous.
I felt my jaw go, my legs
go and then my Hallelujah.

Elect

Centre stage, with his beard on fire,
our freshly elected leader proclaims
that the back of the past has been broken
and the ghosts of statues repaired
so that now we may speak in colour.

I for one am relieved. The sodden
and foreheaded have led us steeplewards.
Glib, prim and poxy, that is what I think
of the old regime, as His fiery face
takes hold of a smile.

Blesséd be the blesséd and no one else!
Our new leader uncups his hands
releasing a bird, blind and footless.
It will never land – *O holy holy!*
We are fat in the strafe of confetti.

Hannah-loo

Sam Lynch lent me a gypsy dollar to cut our first record
at the hollow shack off Memoir Street.
In those days, no one *wore* haircuts and jeans were for working men.
There was me, Nic and Joe on bass and the song was *Hannah-loo*.
We took our mark from country, but played it fast, on the back beat
like this-*Bum tappa tum tap*- until we got tired.
Joe slept with one hand in buttermilk, to keep it supple, the other
for plucking, in sand, or was it dirt, or the other way around?
Anyway, the point is, we tried things out.
Nic's brothers made up a whole bomber crew,
though strictly that wasn't allowed. They slammed the can
fourth time up so she had to work the horses herself.
I swear when she hit those drums she was thinking about bombs dropping,
the foreign batteries, but I never told Joe. He was due for call-up.
Me, I played guitar steady and hard, but kept my fingers moving.
The paper said my right hand was a river, my left hand a salmon,
working upstream. I liked that, so I put in on our posters.
I think I have one somewhere, if you can spare another minute?

Here Hangs the Head of Bruno

Look how he stares, even in death.
His eyes like the veined rind inside
a blood orange. His forehead
a shovel slammed against the anvil.

How many men did old Bruno kill?
I saw myself three, perhaps four;
gouged from the ground, their souls
like periwinkles, turned out, uncoiled

from the shells of their mouths.
Or thumped; that big old head
dumped down upon them, his neck
like a titan's thigh, or sandbag stack.

Ah no, the horns! The devil's own
handlebars, a pair of wrestler's arms.
The only thing worse than one of those,
is the other, or both, or being in between.

Picture the scene. Young Santiago
in his pomp and prime. If a hawk
could circle standing up, that would be
Santiago, a bird of prey on tiptoe.

But not that day, no no! A slip? A fly?
A mote of dust stuck on the eye?
Or simply Bruno's beast-will, grinding
like corn in the mill of this head.

And now both are dead. Santiago
turned to a living gesture on the horn.
The bull, shot clinically, two years after,
for stamping the Count Bologna's daughter

as it trampled up and out of the ring.
It is a tragic thing all told, but still,
the burden of the living is to name the dead.
We recall them all now, beneath the head

of Bruno. Staring him down again,
we are compelled anew to drink and feast
in the honour of the brave crumpled men
who bet themselves against this beast.

Migration

In the centre of her nation's flag
is a big, milky, onion, *God is sustenance!*
on a ribbon round its middle.

She tells me it is customary
for the guest to provide meat for the pot.
All her brothers nod.

Tonight her American boyfriend
has brought his hunk of steak.
I will try the border again tomorrow,

but not before it's my turn
and I must break the neck of a bird
that has flown here for the winter.

How shall I say this?

I was sick as worms and knew it
from my aching balls to my heavy tongue.
I lay on the forest floor, the beetles
rolling their dung loud as boulders.

You should not be up here alone
she said and pushed to my chin
the bulbous lump of a fig, pressed
its cool suede skin to the side of my face.

We rolled it together, to the edge of my mouth.
A shock of macaws took off,
colour rushed to our cheeks as sap foamed
from the wound of a nearby stump.

I had never eaten…
How shall I say this?
I had never eaten from a woman's hand
nor had she fed before such fruit to a man.

Learning from Father

My father sang in church like the thud of god,
as if the walls could not contain his fear.
A girl's mind is ramekin, so easy to over-brim
with littleness. One thick gasp of back-lane air
and I was wayward, men-stranged, keen to please
each gawping fish in the village pond.

A small thing went wrong. Father broke it in.
The book I took instead was bright and wise
and short and red. It was over very quickly.
And with Father stood above me, dictating,
the only guilty eyes I felt were my own,
reflected in the studs of his leather belt.

My other girlfriends

are all beautiful.
Eating figs with one of them or another
on holiday, it's as if the sky settles in,
the ground leans to stretch me out
and the sweet breeze dizzy with bugs
conspires for me to lift their skirts.

And when we step out in various towns,
juke boxes singing from bars, a lager-top
fizzing, brightly earning condensation,
my other girlfriends multiply,
endlessly, beyond the wheel of the city
into swarms of swarms of girlfriends,
so that nothing in the world is not love
or how it tips our lives up
and I want to see the freckles
that are the enemy of dying
on the shoulder of my girlfriend
and only for her to be true.

Mr Zablozki

All the pack were giddy with him:
the smell of his recent dinner,
smugness tucked in the fur of his coat.

And there was his throat, bobbing
like a stubble fruit. It was distracting.
I didn't see a giant thumb

tighten at the stock of his trumpet gun,
all I knew was a sudden hotness,
a fizz of shock and blood.

Who eats a wolf?
What manner of man guts and folds a dog?
Zablozki walks with heavy boots.

In the grey moon yard he pumps five shots,
finishes my brothers off with the axe
dug in the chopping block.

Ralfo's Brother

Somebody shouted he was in the tree,
so we blasted and he fell like an ape.
His hand smudged at his lapel,
a hole above the knee was gulping.

A leaf settled on his head and he said
"I wish my brother Ralfo was here,
with his rough wood knuckles
and landlord's voice. By god he'd set you!"

After the perimeter checks and the parakeets
were packed back in the trees,
the jungle lay down to sleep
in green mist. A lone Baboon kept watch.

Ralfo took root, grew from the earth,
tore through the floor of my tent:
his eyebrows were tensed like a slingshot,
his nostrils wide as his eyes!

The Eye

Wherever you were you could see it –
you couldn't not see the eye
and when it blinked
an aeroplane shocked its course
to a new evasive angle, streamed
downwards, like a slow cross-tear.

The huge pupil dilated
like we were all stood peering down
into a full oil drum only
we were all stood peering up into one.

It made us feel sick and some of us
were sick, our stomachs brimming
over with a wide kind of shame.

And then it started *looking*
and we ran before we thought of running;
cold-sweating through our clothes,
we knew to be pinned beneath
was a dead-naked wrenching from yourself
and the eye, beady and horrible,
jerking hungrily, tried to fix and focus.
As we cowered in the caves of our houses
the windows were like frames,
our voices became clipped,
hateful, burnt sounding.

And we almost gave up,
arguing in the dark,
leaning at the TV screen for news,

or sweeter blame,
blame like hot soup.
And when the stations collapsed
we started forcing lines
between whoever and the eye,
shouting out to it "Look at him!"
 "She is here!" "I did nothing!"

But the eye calmly shut on us.
A heavier dread emptied down
as the slow omen dawned
that behind the eye
a thought had just been made.

Weasel

        we're not so young.
The teeth have been whittled
and with new winds bringing in
the filtered worse-off bitters
of a lamp's blue collapse
as it staggers on its gas, what now
can we do to upright the orchard
of our soon remaining days?

There will be burnt Christmases
gone in a night-cap, Birthdays shot
from the mouth of each month
and funerals, a few of which we'll miss.

If I kiss you now, what spell becomes?
How may we hide from never this?

Wilderbeast

In the wilderness the devil came to me:
big antique horns, a swinging red dick
and my father's angry voice.

He offered me grapes, a puckered teat
loose with wine and milk. I spat.
And he spat back, my mother's maiden name.

I pressed on, urged my feet. Satan changed tack;
swam me in sensation: my first time drunk,
the heat of a well spun lie, boyhood

glimpsed between a hairdresser's breasts,
the smell of shampoo and cigarette breath.
Then from a tuck in his arse he pulled rain

and a chip shop queue, the taste of shandy,
wet football boots dangled by the laces,
acorns and conkers tumbling from their spouts.

I gave a shout, a kind of grief escaping
and from astride his chin appeared
two slim girl's legs, akimbo his beard.

He opened his ripe mouth, folded his tongue back
and in, wriggling pleasure from himself,
stamping it out on the bare earth, braying.

I felt hunger folding in my gut.
The devil swung his hips, each jerk giving birth

to a pair of round, pert tits. *I am a good man!*
I railed and each flesh sack withered and slapped
on the ground, sizzled on the grit-heat of rock.
I heard waves, an ocean then. But it was Satan

shushing with a four-knuckled finger to his lips.
A breeze faltered and caught over, sea birds swung
in long arcs. The devil leaned in and touched me,

quietly, here and then here.
Softly he drew a perfect circle on the ground
bid me dream my mortal desire inside it.

I took out a photograph of you my love.
Showed him grace: fixed and flattened,
wrapped in a scarf and coat last week,

when the camera pinned you to the sea
and I watched it happen from behind the lens;
my breath holding you there a moment.

I showed the devil your photo and he wept.
Flies fell buzzing from his cheeks.
You tempted and turned him

and the sun strained to look
as the perfect circle became a pool of water,
hardened into a mirror,

the mirror I've been staring into since,
in our bathroom, in our flat,
with the wilderness of seconds between us.

Elegy with Orangutans

for M.D.

I get to the ape enclosure and repeat the call:
'he is dead'. The big orange mama
scratches her head as if to remember
but all I get back is a barely human sigh,
the long armed offer of a branch to chew.
It seems she has forgotten you.

But when I turn to page three and say your line
about a *racer's twelve speed bike* and a sum
adding up to love, she bellows back,
beckons to the canopy so that others come
rushing like a family down to dinner,
hungrily appearing as if from other rooms.

They recognise each place you take us,
try to weigh up, intone, to hear a voice
at the end of their mime for a telephone.
And they have no idea that it's only me here:
this regular trick I play on myself
works on them too, perfectly well without you.

So we own this. It's your ball, but our bounce.
Beyond this cage, this zoo, people with books
condole themselves with trivia, but here,
while I stare at an ape-boy listening in a tree,
your name falls short of meaning to me,
like a word that a foreigner cannot pronounce.

PART II

META STUDIES

An Abstract

This thesis is not a thesis but a finger.
Place your own against the page to test it
and you can feel mine pushing back.

My finger does not seek to point at things.
It is a fish nosing to the surface
and meeting there its equal shadow.

My pointless-fish-finger represents
by its swimming the imagination steering
out the shape of its own pond.

If you were to wade in and swoosh a net
and then wade out and empty such a net
onto something sturdy like a table or a thesis,

you would witness the fish, mouth agape,
its gills flexing emptily, cease to be fish.
Thus have we dulled so many bright scales.

from 'An Introductory Lecture in *Meta Studies*'

"Class, watch me inflate this white balloon.
I blow…and see it grows. Its dimensions
depend entirely on the huff-puff I expend,
on the air that I force from my body.

Soon the balloon will become translucent
and I will see all the air that came from in me
thus contained, made solid, factual as a stone.

It is a common rule that the harder we blow,
the bigger it will get; thus the more we can claim
to see, or know. I could, in theory, keep going,
stretching this balloon clearer and clearer…

What if it goes pop?
Do I fear this? Should I reach a point and tie it?
If I am satisfied with its size should I stop?

The human mind does not expand outwards
into the universe, gaining as it heaves,
a greater sense of clarity.

In *Meta Studies* there is no balloon.
We do not think into a tightening bubble of fear,
but imagine our way beyond the membrane.
Our minds are negative bubbles of inverted air…

Does anyone have any questions so far,
any general queries or doubts? Feel free
to raise your hand or voice your thoughts.

We have all of time and space to breathe out.
A Speech to the Faculty

We are in error, for we teach the mind
as if it were a bucket with a handle made of language
and not the naked man and woman that it is.
Hold me we say to our minds, *contain my body*.
The full mind in copulation is the thinking mind
and everything before the act is pure titillation:
bi-polarised, standing awkwardly, ashamedly.
What is the use of the mind if it cannot make love?

Colleagues, I have a student who asks
at the end of every class why he has not learnt.
I tell him each time to imagine that he has
and the naked woman adjusts, smiles, feels charged
by the static of the naked man's chest wig.
Imagine you already know I prompt the same student
and as his eyelids flicker I see the naked man
grow erect and cup the naked woman's breast.

I do not expect to see this student next term.
I expect to see his poetry scrawled in a doorway,
the naked couple having lain together many times,
having loved him awake with their cries of passion.

from 'Whatever is the Meta with you?'

Cut the potato in half and it will be blue inside.
Miracles like this wait in every worldly thing:
slimy fish, bagpipes, dead weights, friendly bread,
the living heads that wish to witness.

A walnut might be the brain of a tree, for example,
thinking itself into my mouth, now, as I bite down.
A tree may fall and comprehend its silence.
Meaning is cut from the shapes that we make:

a promise gouged from the jar of your heart,
a scream freed from a birthday cake, your name
inscribed on the pip of an apple you swallow
the exact same moment your lover writes it down.

What more do you want than a branch of sense
to wave things at, a reason clenched in a willing fist?
Who was it that wrote: 'Imagination must be trusted;
stars never shine on those for whom stars don't exist'?

from 'Chromosomas'

I no longer possess any doubt
(or certainty) which does not sit
on the precarious footstool of myself.
Elevated, unsturdied, my mind perches
upon three legs: what I know, what I cannot
know and that which I ceaselessly desire
to know. Should I lean too hard on either
it is my body that falls off: my multi-
coloured body, my house of cards,
my grape bunch, my father/mother tongue
which speaks to me in the voice of a child.

And since all imbalance has a hang point,
control exists only when the child
whispers out to the tips of my hair that it
cannot get to sleep so long as I keep talking,
loudly, in this other bright room.

Overheard at the Conference

'While I accept that logic is not a tree,
(since trees are trees and therefore not logic)
I cannot accept that ideas are simply new nuts
fallen from the arbour of a *Meta* or that
within them no pre-design is hunkered.

I make my ideas by dipping a bucket
into the expanding well of the universe,
filling it duly with its glories of chance.
To encourage impressionable minds
to "expand into the well itself" is reckless
and I foresee a time when your students
end up simply falling in, drowning there
in the hen cackle of unchecked brain noise.

You may feel that "possibility is building
doorsteps of meaning everywhere", but,
with respect Professor, you are moot here.
Your postulations quibble like germ feed
in the locked fridges of a hospital lab.'

from 'A General Course in Meta Studies'

'My assistant will now pass round
a small triangle of bread.
Disregard its shape which is
happenstantial and instead begin to eat.

Amylase, the enzyme in spit
begins, as you chew, to break
down starch into glucose and so
the bread turns sweet.

Now consider that the body
grew the mind for itself and instead
of defining us, imagination is
simply its inverted flower head;

we gift ourselves into being,
and the ersatz brain-king
on a feudal pile of muscle and bone,
was long dreamt out of flesh.

Meanwhile beyond our humble sky,
planets swing about their wider business
and this miracle of thought is just
a bus route in a city they don't visit.

Or is it? Perhaps terror, or love,
the coloured nights we dream,
belong to some higher, Gaia scheme,
and as with these chance shapes of bread,

our delicate thoughts, sprung

from blood, make new the taste

on the tongues of stars that speak to us,

incomprehensibly, from the brink of space.'

PART III

WAKEFIELD

Wakefield

is playing patience and losing.
He desperately needs some higher cards
but each turn is a low club, any small heart.

In the park across from his window
flowers are doing what flowers do,
trees accept themselves and do not reach.

Everything is as Wakefield made it
when he dreamed his golden finger
pushed valleys into place, when he tickled

the first fish into being and the sea
grew a belly and laughed.
Wakefield strode across the globe

in his pants, carpeted a floor
of forest and prairie underfoot.
He was responsible for Everything.

Pausing before turning the next card,
Wakefield sighs the low sigh of Wakefield.
It wilts in the air and blows across the deck.

Sunlight warms the left side of his neck.
Wakefield turns a King, a King, an Ace.
And thereafter, all is revealed in its place.

The Message

Wakefield, with all his new knowledge
dresses himself in a usual suit,
placing today a brass badge of a racing car

on his left jacket pocket. He is a boy
again, excitement hurrying his feet
into patent shoes with pie-crust edges.

He only gets as far as the third floor landing
where the watercolour nobody owns,
of the piano and cat, has slipped down unevenly.

Wakefield corrects it. *How parallel it looks,*
all flush with the wall. Slight alterations
must be made, he notes, however trivial or small.

Wakefield is at the door of the world.
Crossing the busy road with confidence
he sees that a heron

has returned to roost in the bulrushes
of the community pond. It has not been here
for some time, Wakefield remembers.

Wakefield climbs the railings at the edge
of the pond. He steps out onto the water,
begins to shuffle the algae and rubbish.

A small crowd is gathering
and he is stooping now in concentration,

fixing and bending the grot and mush:

a bike wheel fuses to a punctured ball,
the handle of a mop wound with rope,
and the crowd is cheering because Wakefield,

for the first time in his life, is making.
He is making from nothing.
A traffic cone lifts somehow,

splits and jaws into a beak.
The scene completes like ink
and is perfect. The crowd see it perfectly.

It is the shadow of the heron,
the one who has returned.
It is Wakefield and the message.

The Great Feeding of the Councillors

It is three days later and the message
in the park has not gone unnoticed by locals
or the team of inspectors from the council.

To explain himself, Wakefield summons them.
Arriving with a fat photographer
from the gazette, they take a long time

to organise themselves in Wakefield's sitting room.
They take a long time to pass round cups
and digestive biscuits. They pour the tea slowly.

The fat photographer is disappointed
there is no cake and in wishing for it, swallows
a mouthful of the exact taste. Wakefield winks.

All present find their jaws packed
with sponge and cream. They cannot speak,
but eat and eat as Wakefield leaves the room.

They sit there for some hours, chewing.
In this silence they cannot help but agree;
wordless, they make noises of approval.

After the great feeding of the councillors,
Wakefield's processes are fast-tracked.
Fifty silver Herons land in Trafalgar Square.

The Excellent Game

How things have changed since Wakefield,
his message and the herons
turned this land to face the sun.

So little has been said and so much done.
Wakefield sits in the park on a stump.
A business man who has been very busy

eyes him. There are children playing
nearby and Wakefield is probably
a pervert. Why else is he not at work?

Wakefield stands and walks among
the kids. He begins to play a new game.
Wrapping a stone in his coat,

to give it extra weight, he throws it high
and a boy shouts FIRECRACKER!
The coat explodes.

Now they all want a go.
They are handing Wakefield anything:
a ball, a bat, a flake of bark.

They shout AN EAGLE! It swoops off.
Another CHOCOLATE DROPS!
They hail down in pebbles.

This is an excellent game.
But the business man intervenes;

he doesn't like what he sees at all.
Look! A girl snatches his briefcase, hurls it.
MY BRIEFCASE! The man shouts
and surely it falls and thumps,

the papers and business things
bursting and flapping out.
This is an excellent game

thinks Wakefield,
gathering them up in a bundle.
The man approaches, red and fierce.

Wakefield crouches then leaps
high and strong, releasing the papers
at the moment of stillness.

The man shouts MY PAPERS!
MY GOD!
and they snap into sky and nothing.

This is an excellent game
suddenly thinks the man,
picking up possibility in his hand.

The Day of the Herons

I am sitting in Wakefield's study.
It is the most famous room
in the whole museum,

because although this was the house
he took on later, after meeting his second wife,
this desk here is the very same

where Wakefield played patience
and first prophesied (though he would never
have called it 'prophecy') the Excellent Game.

Look at this jar here, filled
with temperamental pens
and a smaller jar also, of bright sweets!

The museum attracts a thousand visitors
a week and they all want to sit
in this fine chair,

made from the soles of Wakefield's
old shoes. I sat in it earlier
and it is extremely comfortable.

Of course, on the desk, right in front of me,
is the letter Wakefield wrote
on The Day of the Herons,

the day they were returned to all our parks
and ponds and Wakefield

in exchange took himself away:
I am so old now that youth forgives me.
There is no need to leap, or shout.
Swaddling and the rain, am I.

In the kitchen my old grey wife
forks down the edges of my favourite pie
and sleep arrives like a different life.

SENSE AND INAUDIBILITY

By Jack Underwood

A Doctoral Thesis in Creative Writing

Presented to Goldsmiths College, University of London

With thanks to my supervisors Maura, Derval and Lavinia.

ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that writing an extended critical commentary of one's own poems contradicts the nature of poems themselves: as necessitating the participation of a reader in order to be meaningful, in order to exist. However, it is still necessary and integral to the field of Creative Writing Studies to examine one's own practice and so a parallel study into poetic techniques and the nature of the transactions occurring between writer, text and reader has been undertaken, both in the introductory chapters justifying the logic and argument of such an approach and also during the analysis of five poems by Michael Donaghy. Within these chapters and analyses, the terms *sense* and *meaning* are developed and defined in order to aid a discussion of the different aspects of poetic language in the context of writer/reader/text relations.

The thesis concludes that by examining the work of another poet and discussing various poetic aspects and techniques, one is able to articulate and demonstrate an understanding of poetry that might amount to an effective critical commentary, even in the absence of comment on one's own poems directly. By arguing for new approaches towards how Creative Writers critically examine our own practices, this thesis also seeks to contribute to the development of a distinct criticism of practice in the field that is separate from criticism developed purely from a scholarly, readerly perspective.

SENSE AND INAUDIBILITY

'What you might tell us of the world beyond speech no one, not even you, can say'

– Michael Donaghy[1]

1. INTRODUCTION

In a lecture for Aldeburgh Music, the composer Giorgio Battistelli described the moment when an opera singer's words become inaudible and the viewer's understanding of what is being expressed is derived instead from their entire sensory experience of the performance onstage. While the viewer cannot hear in verbal terms what the libretto expresses, under powerful lights, with costumed actors and singers and a full orchestra playing, the 'meaning' of the singer's utterances is overridden by a 'sense' of what is being sung[2]. This could be described as a scenario in which the words are not 'understood' but 'felt', or in my own terms, when the viewer does not interpret or apprehend the *meaning* of the words; rather they experience a *sense* of them.

While there is no performance, orchestral accompaniment or even music and melody with poetry, apart from that provided by the words themselves, and the medial elements of opera and poetry are patently distinct, Battistelli's model might still be of interest to poets since it is possible to speak of comparable moments of 'inaudibility' in poems; poetic language is full of instances when the apparent loss of immediate

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[1] Michael Donaghy, 'Grimoire', *Safest* (London: Picador, 2004), p.32.
[2] Giorgio Battistelli, lecture for Aldeburgh Music, Jerwood Opera Writing Programme, Snape Maltings, March 2007.

meaning is overcome by a *sense* of what is being expressed, according to the

intuitive, interpretive acts of reading and imagining.

This distinct difference between *sense* and *meaning* in poetry is central to how I have

come to understand moments in poems when an idea is expressed so uniquely in

relation to its construction that it could not be expressed in any other terms.

Considering poetry with Battistelli's explication of this operatic scenario in mind, I

have come to look at poetic language in terms of moments of 'inaudibility'; when the

reader[3] is asked to discern or apprehend a *sense* of what is being expressed in reaction

to ambiguity or seemingly conflicting *meanings*. Those understandings we gain from

meaning in language are no more truthful or stable than those which we intuit and

construct for ourselves from a *sense* of the words. The poet Michael Donaghy, whose

poems this thesis examines closely, writes: 'It's the emotional and musical truth,

rather than the documentary truth I'm after'[4] ,and for both poet and reader it is the

transaction of these further, yet integral, aspects of language that defines poetry as a

medium.

To explore and explain what I mean by this and how I see it as relevant to my

practice, I will further define my two terms *sense* and *meaning* in order to discuss

how the reader might receive and apprehend the ideas expressed in poems, and how

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[3] The 'reader' refers to the plural, imagined subjects for whom a poem is written. As with other schools or bodies of research in literature studies, not least the reader-response criticism developed by Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish – see: Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (London: The John Hopkins Press Ltd, 1980) or Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980) – the term is used instead of the plural 'readers', since it better describes the singular subjective nature of one reader's experience of a text. The term 'reader', then, refers to any number of singular, subjective readers. It is plural in that it accommodates a number of readers, but also singular in that it draws attention to the fact that each is a distinct subject. Hereafter, a text's potential readership will therefore be referred to as 'the reader'.

[4] Michael Donaghy, 'Nightwaves: notes for radio broadcast', *The Shape of the Dance* (London: Picador, 2009), p.104.

poets are able to communicate physical feelings and sensations in an apparently abstract system of signs. My aim is not to develop or critique existing theoretical approaches in the fields of linguistics, psychoanalysis, or wider literary theory, nor do I wish to assert that my terminology or way of reading is any better or worse than existing models or analytical frameworks. My approach is simply that of a practitioner hoping to better understand and articulate the transactions and processes taking place in my own poems by defining them in my own terms. The merit of my rationale lies in its acceptance of my position as a critical commentator on my own practice and the recognition that this might require a methodology different to that of a literary scholar in the traditional sense. Although there is a long tradition of critical commentary by practitioners, critical commentary as an academic discipline of its own, is arguably only as recent as Creative Writing studies within academia. This new discipline is deficient in terms of its own theoretical perspectives and terminology compared to the widely established and various traditions of criticism from the point of view of a reader.

Indeed, establishing a critical methodology as an act of deliberate artifice parallel to my practice could be seen as an appropriately distinct critical position within Creative Writing studies as a developing discipline. By defining my own theoretical framework and terminology I am practically and creatively engaging with the idea of criticising my work, just as my terminology is derived from my practical, creative experiences.

This symbiotic relationship between practice and theory seems appropriate for the field of Creative Writing studies, which as a discipline should extend its concerns

beyond merely the business of writing to incorporate and develop a 'theory of practice', adding further weight to the idea of creative practices constituting academic research.

While I understand the relevance of the concept of intertextuality, and the reader/writer relationships described in key twentieth, and twenty-first century texts such as 'The Death of the Author'[5] or 'The Act of Reading'[6], and indeed can conceive of my work as part of a 'synchronic literary corpus'[7], on a more immediate and personal level of writing and making, there remains a practical need for me to see texts as singular utterances made by myself as a subject in time; it may be true that my own intentions as a writer become lost to language, that my work 'has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins'[8], but as a practitioner it is necessary to claim a heretical position in denial of such truths, to hold on to the debunked illusion that my words are still my own, otherwise I deny myself the right to the impulses which drive me to communicate in the first place. It is a situation of contradiction that needs addressing in this new field of practical study: how Creative Writing practitioners are able to overcome the obstacle of their own intertextual 'deaths'. While Creative Writers are often encouraged to question and position their work and practice within a generic or literary context, Creative Writing studies has not yet fully developed, or widely argued for complementary theoretical strategies outside of those already being

[5] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p.142.
[6] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).
[7] Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel', *Desire in Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1981), p.66.
[8] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p.146.

exercised in wider academia and literary theory, in the wider world of criticism and reading. I would argue that the critical position of the practitioner, as a simultaneous writer and reader of their own work, deserves further examination and while I feel in no way qualified at this point to suggest new theoretical strategies for other writers, I do feel there is some worth in deliberately examining my work according to theoretical positions and terminology I have assumed, and come to understand, directly as a result of my creative practice.

In the following two chapters I hope to further define my terminology and by doing so examine how as a practitioner working within the field of contemporary poetics, moreover within the wider academic fields of contemporary literary and critical theory, I have come to view the texts I make and the way in which they operate.

Paradoxically, I have drawn the conclusion that in order to undertake such a commentary on my own practice it would be necessary to avoid examining my own poems directly. In line with the theory of intertextuality and thus in appreciation of the fact that readers' imaginative participation and associations form an integral and entirely necessary part of what my poems are and how they function, it would be wrongheaded for me, their 'dead' author, to interrogate, moreover define, what they mean and how they work. Such conclusions are already necessarily beyond my jurisdiction. It is for this reason I have chosen instead to analyse five poems by Michael Donaghy in order to demonstrate my understanding of poetic technique within the context of these arguments and using my own terminology. Further clarification of the reasons for choosing Donaghy's poems in particular are given in a

later chapter, but first it is necessary to further explore my terms, *sense* and *meaning*,

and my rationale for their use.

2. TERMINOLOGY AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Meaning

In order to demonstrate what I have come to understand as *meaning* and *sense* it is first necessary to reiterate certain aspects of their existing etymologies. Although dictionary definitions suggest both terms can occasionally be positioned as interchangeable[9], if we examine the etymology of each there is good reason to see them as separate and useful precisely because of their distinct differences. The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'meaning' thus:

> Meaning, n 2
>
> **1.** The significance, purpose, underlying truth, etc., of something.
>
> **a.** That which is indicated or expressed by a (supposed) symbol or symbolic action; *spec.* a message, warning, idea, etc., supposed to be symbolized by a dream, vision, omen, etc. *in meaning that*: as a sign or token that (*obs.*).
>
> **b.** Significance, import; implication. *with meaning*: with emphasis; in a manner intended to convey a particular implication. Cf. NO-MEANING *n.*
>
> **c.** Of an action, condition, etc.: signification; intention; cause, purpose; motive, justification. Usu. in interrogative contexts, as a rhetorical question in protest at an action or behaviour (esp. in *what is the meaning of   ?*). Cf. MEAN *v.*[1] 6b.
>
> **d.** Something which gives one a sense of purpose, value, etc., esp. of a metaphysical or spiritual kind; the (perceived) purpose of existence or of a person's life. Freq. in *the meaning of life*.

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[9] In his 1892 paper *Über Sinn und Bedeutung* (On Sense and Reference), Gottlob Frege uses the term 'sense' to describe the mode by which an object is referred to. As he explains: 'It is natural, now, to think of their being connected with a sign (name, combination of words, letter), besides that to which a sign refers, which may be called the reference of the sign, also what I should like to call the *sense* of the sign, wherein the mode of presentation is contained'. My term *sense* bears no relation to Frege's, although his term 'bedeutung' or 'reference' is similar to the way I have termed *meaning*, as a collectively defined sign which refers to a generally accepted object.
<http://philo.ruc.edu.cn/logic/reading/On%20sense%20and%20reference.pdf,> [accessed 11.07.10])

'Meaning' is defined here in terms of 'intention', 'motive' 'implication', 'underlying truth', but also as 'That which is indicated or expressed by a (supposed) symbol or symbolic action'. It is both the feeling and concept one desires to express and the perceived success ascribed to the mode of its expression. The success of the term 'meaning' appears to be underpinned by how far one is able to trust that the intended 'meaning' is the same as the resultant 'meaning' expressed. In this sense 'meaning' can be registered in varying degrees according to how appropriately we perceive that the word relates to the thing it describes, by how far we trust this leap. Further definitions reiterate this idea:

> **2.** The sense or signification of a word, sentence, etc.
>
> **a.** Of language, a sentence, word, text, etc.: signification, sense. By extension: the thing, person, etc., for which a word or expression stands; the denotation or referent of a word or expression. Also: the signification intended to be understood by a statement, law, etc., as opposed to the literal sense of the words; cf. SPIRIT *n.* 10c.
>
> **b.** *to be to meaning*: to signify, to be intended to mean. *Obs.*
>
> **c.** With possessive: that which a speaker or writer intends to express, imply, or insinuate; the intended sense or underlying point of a person's words.
>
> **d.** orig. *Law.* **within the meaning of the act**: within the specific terms of any statute; (more generally) within the bounds of the law; also in extended use.
>
> **3.** (A person's) motive, intention, or purpose. Usu. in *sing.* Now *arch.*
> **upon a meaning**: with the intention (*obs.*).

A key distinction in these definitions of 'meaning' is that between 'denotation' and 'connotation'. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines the two by comparison: '**connotation**: the range of further associations that a word or phrase suggests in addition to its straightforward dictionary meaning (the primary sense

known as its **denotation**)'[10]. When defining or categorising meaning, a 'straightforward dictionary meaning' provides a commonly acknowledged parameter within which a denotational value can be understood. The dictionary (as a concept as much as a material book) provides us with a relatively stable description of how intended 'meaning' might relate to its expression. However, one might easily argue that since a dictionary definition relies on further definitions and endless subsequent terms of definition, denotation is an unstable illusion; the whole dictionary is infinitely Venn-diagrammatic. Furthermore, theorists and critics have rejected for decades the idea of language as something stable or defined, instead regarding it as an infinite relational system of signs, recognising that shifting, interpreted, subjective meaning is part of its nature:

> The meanings we produce and find within language, then, are relational; they depend upon processes of combination and association within the differential system of language itself. This relational aspect of language cannot be avoided or overcome.[11]

Rather than viewing this 'differential system' as an indication that all words are therefore 'meaningless' and that communication is somehow futile, such a theory of language demonstrates how meaning is constantly evolving and mutating, that language's diffuse or 'rhizomatic'[12] nature is what characterises it as a technology responding to a world of evolving and updating objects and concepts. As the poet Don Paterson writes: 'We should always remember the better part of etymologies lie

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[10] Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p.68.
[11] Graham Allen, 'Origins', *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.10.
[12] Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, 'Introduction: rhizome', *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004), p.26. Whereas 'arborescent' systems or networks spread outwards in a tree-like manner, from one central point of focus, 'rhizomatic' networks and systems are dehierarchised, like a root system, with no dominant central point or focus. Instead 'rhizomes are deterritorialized lines of desire linking desiring bodies with one another and the field of partial objects' Stephen Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, (London and New York: Macmillan and Guilford Press, 1991), p.103.

forever buried from sight. Words are locked coffins in which the corpses still lie breathing.'[13] Denotation, a fixed value of language, cannot exist so long as language itself is alive. Simon Dentith writes in similar allegorical terms that: 'Dictionaries are the graveyards of Language'[14].

Meanwhile connotation, the 'further range of associations', allows the idea of intended meaning more room for manoeuvre, incorporating subjectivity into its value. Baldick continues: 'Metaphors are made possible by the fact that the two terms they identify both have overlapping connotations'[15]. If denotational meanings, 'the graveyards of language'[16], rely on the false acceptance that what is written down is collectively and stably intended to be meant, then connotation acts on a transverse axis allowing associated meanings from outside of the 'standard dictionary definition'[17]. That which a word connotes is entirely reliant on the subjective associations of the writer or reader; connotation openly acknowledges that language is always in a 'ceaseless flow of becoming'[18].

The problem with connotation for the poetry reader is that confronted with the vast, diffuse, potential 'further range of associations'[19] available to them in poems, how can these be reconciled with an author's intended meaning? Faced with the various possible connotations of even a short line of poetry, assuming or guessing the authorial intention seems wrongheaded and antithetic to the process of communication. As Barthes puts it in 'The Death of the Author':

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[13] Don Paterson, *The Book of Shadows* (London: Picador, 2004), p.154.
[14] Simon Dentith in Graham Allen, 'Origins', *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.18.
[15] Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p.68.
[16] Simon Dentith in Graham Allen, 'Origins', *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.18.
[17] Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p.68.
[18] Graham Allen, 'Origins', *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.18.
[19] Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p.68.

> As soon as a fact is *narrated* no longer with a view to acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside any function other than that very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins.[20]

If we accept this 'disconnection' we must deny the author's right to communicate 'intended' connotation (guessing this would be a purely speculative act for a reader). Left instead with the 'straightforward dictionary meaning'[21] the reader is able to draw their own connotative conclusions as to the 'meaning' of a text. The 'Death of the Author'[22] marks the subsequent death of authorial intention as well as their 'further associations'[23] and crucially our reliance on the author at all for interpreting meaning. While we accept that connotative meaning exists for the author or poet, we cannot expect to learn it through the text, rather we must respond to that which is denoted and draw from our own connotations. It is an idea Michael Donaghy expresses in an interview with poet and critic Lida Vianu. He describes how he is:

> ambivalent about interviews for three reasons. First, I'm not the definitive authority on my work. In fact, I'm not at all sure I write my books. I feel it's more the case that my books get written through me. Second, I like to think my work is still developing and I suspect that any attempt to 'explain' myself interferes with or limits that development. Third, I'd like to be remembered for my poems, not my charming personality. I say this not because I'm an especially reticent or private individual – but because my work has a life of its own and, if it works, it's as much 'about' the reader's life as about mine.[24]

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[20] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p.142.

[21] Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p.68.

[22] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p.142.

[23] Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p.68.

[24] Michael Donaghy in interview with Lidia Vianu, *I Don't Recognize Myself as Part of Any Group* <http://lidiavianu.scriptmania.com/michael%20donaghy.htm> [accessed 3rd May 2008]

Donaghy suggests that though a poet might wish to express something, the poet is not 'the definitive authority' on the meaning of the words expressed. There is no need to contextualise a poem biographically in relation to the poet in order to trace his/her potential 'further associations', since connotation is 'as much "about" the reader's life'. In any case, how could we expect to suppose the associations an author makes (unconscious or otherwise) while writing, even if we were miraculously in possession of his diary, house keys, library, or school report cards? Peter Scupham writes of Auden:

> In an essay on Kipling, in *Forewords and Afterwords* (Faber) 1973, he refers to the 'damp poetry of self-expression', and for those people who may wonder why there are not three handsome volumes of Auden's letters in print, well, many of the recipients have followed Auden's testatory injunction to burn any letters from him they still possess. 'The mere fact that a man is famous and dead does not entitle us to read, still less to publish, his private correspondence'…then tosses in an another hand grenade for good measure: 'since knowledge of an artist's private life never throws any significant light upon his work'.[25]

Taking a poem on its own terms, separate from the intentions and biography of its author, allows it to declare its own intentions, or rather the reader to interpret them. As Wolfgang Iser writes:

> We may take as a starting-point the fact that the linguistic signs and structures of the text exhaust their function in triggering developing acts of comprehension. This is tantamount to saying that these acts, though set in motion by the text, defy total control by the text itself, and indeed, it is the very lack of control that forms the basis of the creative side of reading.

It is in this sense that I define *meaning*. It is the text severed from the author's unique associations and instead frozen in a state before it triggers 'developing acts of

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[25] Peter Scupham, 'The Teaser and the Firecat', *Rialto* 62.

comprehension', the text in the instant after it is written but before it has been read creatively into significance. It is 'the thing, person, etc., for which a word or expression stands; the denotation or referent of a word or expression' outside of the intended connotations of its author.

Practitioners must go further than Barthes and suggest that although it is the reader who breathes the life and meaning into a text, since one cannot predict his/her associations, nor can one know what the reader knows, it is necessary to entertain a 'Death of the Reader', or rather a moment before the reader exists; practitioners can only perceive of the value of their texts while these remain part of their associations; beyond that the text is dead, the reader's understanding has not yet comprehended the text beyond the author's control.

I actively attempt to build my poems in a way that makes them as non-reliant on allusion or my own specific associations as possible; I construct a poem to be as self-sufficient as possible in preparation for the moment it is offered up and I, the author, cease to exist. My term *meaning* imagines the text at this moment of offering, when it is built as self-sufficient and non-reliant on its author, but not yet part of the reader's own world.

This idea of the text in stasis acknowledges that poets 'cannot be held responsible for the multiple meanings readers can discover within literary texts'[26]. It pretends that a stable *meaning* can exist in language and thereby the term returns to the 'graveyard' so that the speculative guessing of authorial or readerly intention and interpretation

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[26] Graham Allen, 'Introduction', *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 4.

might be artificially removed from the equation. While theoretically agreeing with the assertions of Bakhtin that

> The word, directed towards its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value-judgements and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group: and all this may crucially shape discourse, may leave a trace in all its semantic layers[27]

as a practitioner it is difficult to posit a practically necessary counterview that language is relatively stable and that definitive expression, even of concepts and feelings outside of language, might be possible. Moreover Bakhtin, Volosinov (and subsequently others) argue that 'there is no real moment in time when a synchronic system of language could be constructed'[28], yet my term *meaning* suggests that to the writer, language must exist outside of time and context as a relatively stable system of signs, as having potential associations and connotations, whilst ultimately being frozen in a state of denotation (try and imagine a page of poetry at a point in time when it is not being read). *Meaning* is a necessary artificial term because as a practitioner I can never write with the guarantee that my own understanding and associations will be replicated by the reader. Nor can I be 'held responsible for the multiple meanings readers can discover within literary texts'[29]. It also acknowledges that as a writer you cannot enter into the act of making while truly accepting that whatever you make is potentially as meaningless as it is meaningful, that the creative accuracy you fetishise as skill and precision will be necessarily vanquished as soon as the word is read off the page.

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[27] M. M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, 'The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900-2000' Dorothy J. Hale, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd , 2006), p.493.
[28] M. M. Bakhtin & V. N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (London: Harvard University Press, 1986), p.66.
[29] Graham Allen, 'Introduction', *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.4.

Bakhtin himself admitted the need for the poet to work in blissful ignorance of dialogism and intertextuality:

> The language of the poet is *his* language, he is utterly immersed in it, inseparable from it, he makes use of each form, each word, each expression according to its unmediated power to assign meaning (as it were "without quotation marks"), that is, as a pure and direct expression of his own intention.[30]

Thus I write with a deeply and consciously flawed faith that, word by word, a poem's *meaning* is safely manifest within its specific arrangement. Since I cannot conceive of, nor predict, readerly interpretation with any degree of accuracy, I place my poem in an idealised vacuum, somewhere between the moment when I recognise it as no longer to do with my unique associations and the moment before a reader breathes life into it by re-positioning it among their own. For practitioners the question remains that with infinite possible readers all with their own subjective associations and interpretations, what practical good could come of acknowledging the instability of the material we work with? And since I cannot write specifically for each reader, I must imagine instead that I bury words in 'graveyards' of fixed definitions, awaiting their inevitable resurrection at the hands of the reader through a further subsequent process of association.

Stuart Hall analyses how messages are produced and transferred in his seminal essay 'Encoding, Decoding'[31] by categorising and deconstructing the chain of processes which take place during communication. By dividing communication into

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[30] M. M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', 'The Dialogic Imagination', trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900-2000*, Dorothy J. Hale, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd , 2006), p.499.
[31] Stuart Hall, 'Encoding, Decoding', *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 3rd edn., ed. Simon During, (London: Routledge, 2007), p.477.

'production, circulation, use […] and reproduction'[32] Hall is able to discuss each

process or moment in isolation so that:

> While each of the moments, in articulation, is necessary to the circuit as a whole, no one moment can fully guarantee the next moment with which it is articulated. Since each has its specific modality and conditions of existence, each can constitute its own break or interruption of the 'passage of forms' on whose continuity the effective production (that is, 'reproduction') depends.[33]

With this in mind it is possible to conceive of a situation in the chain of

communication whereby the author's words have not yet been read and as such

possess 'specific modality and conditions of existence'. *Meaning* therefore, exists at

the 'moment' of 'production'; it is beheld only by the producer of the text, that is, the

author, as it has not yet entered a 'moment' of 'circulation'. It is possible in this

situation to perceive that a word might exist purely in dialogue with its author in that

context as something stable. Once a text is finished, is offered up for a 'moment' of

'circulation' or 'use' and so on, that stability is vanquished. The author, knowing this,

prepares his text for the 'moment' of 'circulation' by struggling as far as possible to

conceive of the text as not depending on his own interpretation of language, but rather

according to imagined fixed definitions of words. At this point, when words possess

their dictionary definition, loaded with potential further associative redefinitions, we

can talk of that text having a *meaning*.

Don Paterson writes that: 'If we expect our work to survive our death by a single day,

we should stop defending it now, that it might sooner learn its self-sufficiency'[34], and

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[32] Simon During, 'Editor's Introduction', 'Encoding, Decoding', *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 3rd Ed., Ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 2007), p.477.
[33] Stuart Hall, 'Encoding, Decoding', *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 3rd edn., ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 2007), p.478.
[34] Don Paterson, *The Book of Shadows* (London: Picador, 2004), p.131.

placing a poem in this idealised space between 'production' and 'circulation'

encourages an objective approach, even if linguistically or theoretically speaking this

division in the communicative process is artificial in reality. Perhaps it is as a result of

the publishing or workshop environment that I crave the idea of the poem in

repletion: the moment that the poem is posted to a magazine or editor's office, or

photocopied for a class or workshop, is passed around, before it changes from being

part of a process of making and becomes suddenly newly made. There are various

points in a writer's life when a poem spends time in a fictional between-place.

Meaning is the poem in this idealised vacuum, between being built as self-sufficient

as possible from the author's associations and being read according to the

associations of the reader.

As readers too we must be mindful of the associative material we bring to poems and

how far we might be tempted to impose it onto a text. As Michael Donaghy rightly

complains: 'On a popular level, we've all encountered the crazed overreader who find

allegories of the exiled Zemblan royalty in *The House At Pooh Corner* or Satanic

messages in *Sense And Sensibility*'[35]. Donaghy's poems (which this thesis will later

focus on) arguably invite such allegorical associations with their frequent literary and

historical allusion, and while he 'cannot be held responsible for the multiple

meanings readers can discover within literary texts'[36], so he cannot criticise the

'overreader' if these 'multiple meanings' do not correlate with his own. As Julia

Kristeva, invoking Bakhtin's theory of Dialogism, explains:

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[35] <http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/content/archives/places/michaeldonaghy/ > [Accessed 20th June 2010]

[36] Graham Allen, 'Introduction', *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 4.

any text is constructed from a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*.[37]

Kristeva sees 'poetic language' as 'a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee (or the character), and the contemporary or earlier cultural context'[38]. Poetry is a particularly self-conscious 'way of saying', which unavoidably refers back to itself and other poems and texts simultaneously. Aside from the obvious evidencing of this in the continued use of formal elements such as rhyme or metre which immediately announce conversation with the poetic tradition, poetry has also come to absorb and explore wider dialects and media: 'Poetry always wants to explore the language it hears around it: both to use it and question it.'[39]

However, while poets are keen to accept formal traditions and experiment with different kinds of language, many are still wary of the implications of inviting specific intertextual connotation in the form of literary allusion. Larkin famously denounced 'a common myth-kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poems or poets[...which read] unpleasantly like the talk of literary understrappers letting you see they know the right people.'[40] As a practitioner I too have come to be suspicious of direct allusion to other texts. Allusion can alienate its potential readers or suppose a hierarchy of association. If one reader does not realise that the Donaghy poem 'The Commission'[41] retells part of the life story of the Renaissance sculptor and goldsmith Benvenuto Cellini, does this mean that their reading is subordinate to those that

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[37] Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel', *Desire in Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1981), p.66.
[38] Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel', *Desire in Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1981), p.65.
[39] Ruth Padel, 'Reading Poetry Today' , *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem* (London: Vintage, 2002), p.22.
[40] Philip Larkin, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), p.79.
[41] Michael Donaghy, 'The Commision', *Errata, Dances Learned Last Night* (London: Picador, 2000), p.65.

follow such nods and hints? There is still a prevailing attitude among English Literature studies that such connections must be noted in order for a 'full' or 'satisfying' reading to be achieved. To ignore allusion is taken to be a sign of ignorance towards the poem itself and not merely of the secondary text it may or may not be alluding to. After all, allusion is supposition; we never have any proof that allusion was intended; the biographical similarities between Cellini and Donaghy's artisan speaker may be entirely coincidental, be entirely constructed from the reader's associating of the two. Intertextuality implies that no proof of intended allusions is needed since no text may exist on its own; all of language alludes to all of language, but by the same rationale, no one reading may lay claim to a monopoly over a text's meaning because it takes note of specific allusions, nor can any individual rightly suppose a hierarchy of readings (which might come as a blow to traditional scholarly practices and arguments).[42]

Since I have no control over readerly interpretation of my poems, but hope that their communicative value is derived on some level while they inhabit another's mind, I refute the presentation of one reading as more valid on the basis that certain aspects of a poem have been identified (whether intentionally by the author or not) as corresponding to a further range of texts. Intertextuality tells us that all texts are connected in any case, so such conclusions are only to do with critical selection and not to do with the supposed intentions of a poem. There are so many factors at work in a poem that immediate links with other literary forebears or comparatives feel to me no more or less important to a reading. I also feel that the pressure to chase down allusion and reference in poetry is partly responsible for a damaging fear of poetry

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[42] While my rationale and approach might resemble some of the critical approaches of New Criticism, and the work of I.A. Richards – see: *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) – my position has been arrived at according to my own practice and so differs in that such conclusions have been drawn in order to commentate specifically on my practical understandings.

both outside and inside of academia by implying that reading poems must be a scholarly or 'informed' process and not one that can be rewarded by simply trusting one's own 'gut'. In my experience of making, poems are designed as whole and replete and do not naturally invite dismemberment or dissection. Nor does their continuation of traditional modes and tropes automatically invite the need for wider contextualisation, categorisation, in order for that one act of poetic enquiry to be organised within some wider schema. As a practitioner, I am perhaps preoccupied with how a poem expresses something, how the mode of expression is at the same time the very thing expressed and vice versa. I am less interested in how the shape of that expression corresponds to other poems. Such scholarly readings occur as afterthoughts, footnotes. They are never what a poem seems to announce it is about. As Donaghy expresses:

> I thought I'd do a degree in literature because I loved literature, then I realized that my colleagues hated literature. It's like saying that I decided to do vivisection because I loved animals.[43]

While it is important not to discredit the relevance of scholarly criticism in terms of defining a text's position within the wider canon, it is worth acknowledging that since all words are allusions to other words and texts, philosophically speaking there can be no concrete hierarchy of readings. There are simply too many other factors to consider. Readers are able to find value and interpret meaning from all kinds of words or concepts they do not recognise and one cannot disregard a reader who trusts the sound, or their sensory engagement with a foreign word rather than rushing for a dictionary or encyclopaedia. While poems may talk to each other and to other texts,

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[43] Michael Donaghy, 'Interview with Conor O'Callaghan, 1997', *The Shape of the Dance* (London: Picador, 2009), p. 150.

we should not forget that they are primarily designed to talk to anyone prepared to listen, or as Donaghy puts it: 'my poetry is addressed to anyone who can read it'[44], and we should never underestimate the value of a reading which exercises trust in its own understanding while acknowledging its limits. Not least because in a situation of potentially limitless connection, what a reader interprets from a poem relates only to their subjective view point: that which they call upon to understand a text at any given moment. My obtuse position of positive ignorance towards allusion is not in denial of intertextuality, rather it responds to the fact of intertextuality; that because language exists in a 'ceaseless flow of becoming'[45] no reading is definitive and associations instigated by perceived allusion are no more or less important than associations made purely in response to the sounds of words. The post-structualist theory of intertextuality may be born out of the idea that all terms rely on further terms for definintion, but it is precisely this fact of complete interconnectedness between texts that renders the notion of allusion equally obsolete, since all texts allude to all texts at all times. Literary critics are simply making those connections as part of their own subjective associations and there can be no hierarchy supposed between subjectivities and therefore readings. Writing in accordance with certain aspects of poetic tradition is not an immediate invitation to be read as literary, in the sense that as a writer you are not thereby placing the understanding and associations of a literary critic above that of any other reader.

Michael Donaghy makes considerable allusion to other texts (whether the world of anthropological television documentary-making in 'Shooting *The Crane People*'[46],

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[44] Michael Donaghy, 'Interview with John Stammers, 2003', *The Shape of the Dance* (London: Picador, 2009), p.178.
[45] Graham Allen, 'Origins', *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.18.
[46] Michael Donahy, 'Shooting *The Crane People*', *Errata*, *Dances Learned Last Night* (London: Picador, 2000), p.95.

Odysseus' massacre of the suitors in 'Remembering Steps to Dances Learned Last Night'[47] or Wallace Stevens' 'The Man with the Blue Guitar'[48] in 'Ramon Fernandez?'[49], Donaghy uses the atmosphere, narrative arc and visual texture of these other associated worlds to enrich and inform his poems). I recognise this and admire it, so it would seem strange or obtuse to take a critical position deliberately rejecting the importance of allusion in Donaghy's poems, but as a practitioner there might be merit in the artificial assumption of such a position. Socrates explains to Phaedrus:

> once a thing is committed to writing it circulates equally among those who understand the subject and those who have no business with it; writing cannot distinguish between suitable and unsuitable readers.[50]

As a writer I find it very difficult to come to terms with the notion of an 'unsuitable' reader. Indeed, I hope to write poems that exist outside of suitability at all and the idea of a 'target audience' seems to have more to do with the commercial business of selling books than it does with who my poems might be 'for'. However, the fact that 'writing cannot distinguish' who interprets it is of great relevance, since it is this fact that leads me to write with as little reliance on exterior texts as is possible. The use of allusion to me feels like positing the notion of a 'suitable reader' and stands contrary to my desire for my poems to be participated in uniquely by each subject that approaches them. It is this desire and rationale I carry through into my readings of Donaghy's poems, since I am conducting these readings as an act of critical commentary on my own poems.

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[47] Michael Donaghy, 'Remembering Steps to Dances Learned Last Night', *Shibboleth*, *Dances Learned Last Night* (London: Picador, 2000), p.36.
[48] Wallace Stevens, 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', *Selected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 1967), p.52.
[49] Michael Donaghy, 'Ramon Fernandez?', *Shibboleth*, *Dances Learned Last Night* (London: Picador, 2000), p.3.
[50] Plato, 'Phaedrus', *Phaedrus: and Letters VII and VIII* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), p.97.

While I cannot deny the allusive nature of Donaghy's work, as a poet I feel ill at ease with the notion of assuming connotation on his behalf, with supposing the meaning of parallel texts in conversation with the Donaghy poems in repletion. These are his associations after all, and their effect weighs largely on whether I am able to detect them, on whether I can include myself in the act of asserting their connotational value.

However, I am uncertain how realistically I can suggest that Donaghy's poems do not warrant readings which explore their allusions, since this is in some cases what makes them interesting, but this thesis is not concerned with placing his work in that way. Indeed Donaghy himself was sceptical of 'anthologists and journalists' that felt 'the need to classify' him [51]. I will admit that many readers of Donaghy's poems, his fans and friends too, will find my readings unsatisfactory because the function of these analyses is to demonstrate and explore how poems move and how they are technically programmed to engage a reader in certain ways, not to provide a scholarly critique of them in the traditional sense, so it will seem that much has been left out. Sean O'Brien told me in interview:

> I do think that Donaghy was a literary intellectual albeit a sort of renegade who abandoned the academy, although he ended up teaching there again under a slightly different imprimatur, teaching writing poems. He did undertake the great books program at Chicago. He had to nominate 100 books he was going to live and die by, most of which he had actually read. His work, in that sense, is allusive. How useful it is to you to track down allusions as a scholarly edition of his poems might do I'm not sure. It depends when it's interesting I think- when you think something can be illuminated by tracking an allusion rather than an allusion to be held as interesting for its own sake.[52]

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[51] Michael Donaghy, 'Interview with John Stammers, 2003', *The Shape of the Dance* (London: Picador, 2009) p. 178.
[52] Sean O'Brien, interviewed by Jack Underwood, Newcastle University, 4th December, 2008.

For the purpose of critical commentary on my practice, I desire to know what is going on in Donaghy's poems, but do not want to propose that exploration as a definitive reading, since to do so would suggest I believe that such a thing could exist, not least in relation to my own poems. Once you enter into more scholarly territory the potential textual links seem infinite. If you then take a selective position to overcome or manage these infinite links, as O'Brien suggests, you begin to suggest that one element is more important than any other, which ultimately contradicts the intertextual and the function of poetry as part of a communicative, interpretive discourse. I deny that any reader of Donaghy's work, or my own poems, could lay claim to a definitive reading because such a claim would contradict my understanding of what a poem does and is for. Poems, perhaps more than other texts, function on the basis that the reader must actively participate in making what is expressed meaningful, by importing their specific experiences and associations. It follows that my readings of Donaghy's poems are necessarily flawed and admit their limited range, because I am reading with a specific purpose in mind and am limited to my field of experience and association.

Paul Muldoon writes:

> No poem may be read as a completely discrete construct, no poem may be read without some autobiographical element coming into play, but we also know that part of the function of the poem is to present a construct that is relatively free-standing, to create a relatively clear-cut space...[53]

While the 'free-standing' poem can never exist we are still able to convince ourselves that the making of a poem is a highly specific process and a poem built in its

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[53] Paul Muldoon, 'George III: By Robert Lowell', *The End of the Poem* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2006), p.171.

particular way does not simply unravel into the rest of language. O'Brien discusses

the tension between acknowledging the reader's role and yet retaining this authorial

sense of precision:

> It can be fairly said that a poem offers a habitation to a reader as it were, which the reader will furnish with things of their own devising or their own experience. But again there needs to be a productive friction between the liberty that implies and the constraints given by the fact that this is a particular object and not just any old object – a particular form of words and not just a form of words like it.[54]

This 'productive friction' is between the possible range of associations a reader might

make during their participation in the poem and the perceived limits placed on these

associations according to the word's position within the rest of the text. The term

'love' on a denotational level is so inadequately related to its material, experiential

referent that it is almost the antithesis; the potential associative material produced in

response to the word 'love' is so various, the gap between signifier and signified so

large, that it seems impossible for such a term to function at all. However, the

parameters of what is being referred to are set by placing a word within a sentence,

within the context of other words and in this sense the poet does not relinquish

complete control. Association, readerly participation, allusion and connotation belong

to the reader – the poet has no control over these: 'It is at the connotative *level* of the

sign that situational ideologies alter and transform association'[55] – but before the

poem reaches the reader, before the moment of communication, there is a feeling of

complete writerly control over the poem as it hangs in that illusory stasis. Just as

meaning seems frozen, so too do those aspects of the poem where *meaning* is in

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[54]Sean O'Brien, interviewed by Jack Underwood, Newcastle University, 4th December, 2008.
[55] Stuart Hall, 'Encoding. Decoding', *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 3rd edn., ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 2007), p.482.

conflict with itself – metaphor, metonym, musical connections between alien concepts – where the imagination must be actively engaged in order to console, overcome and reconcile elements of tension and risk. These aspects are also waiting to be awoken by the act of reading. They are the range of possible associative leaps that must be made by the reader in order for the poem to describe those things which cannot be defined. To a certain extent the poet is able to sabotage or rig *meaning* so that the reader is forced to participate in the poem. There are the aspects of language – metaphor, rhythmical emphasis, line breaks, rhyme and repetition – which the poet organises in a way that in terms of defined *meaning* remains inaudible and thereby necessitates an intuitive, revived *sense* of what is being communicated, according to the elastic, gymnastic ability of the potential reader's imagination.

2.2 Sense

The poetic word, polyvalent, and multi-determined, adheres to a logic exceeding that of codified discourse.

    –   Julia Kristeva[56]

In the following extract from John Berryman's 'Dream Song' sequence, the individual words retain their *meanings* and we are able to connect and relate each in turn. However, the overall *meaning* of each line or stanza fails to be reconciled with these individual word *meanings*, resulting in a conflict:

> The weather fleured. They weakened all his eyes,
> and burning thumbs into his ears, and shook
> his hand like a notch.
> They flung long silent speeches. (Off the hook!)
> They sandpapered his plumpest hope. (So capsize.)
> They took away his crotch.[57]

While we understand here what 'sandpapered' refers to and we are able to understand the concepts of plumpness and 'hope' so that the *meaning* of each word is clear, the more material we accumulate, the harder it becomes for the overall sentence to retain the *meaning* of the words themselves. How can a 'hope' be 'sandpapered' or even be divided into a spectrum by which we might ascertain the 'plumpest'? The properties of reference for 'sandpapered', 'plumpest' and 'hope', do not equate with those supposed by the sentence, which surreally proposes necessary extensions to our ordinary perception of their properties; the *meaning* of the words individually is at odds with the *meaning* of the sentence, we are directed into a position of irrationality. As readers we are equipped to deal with this irrationality and our imaginations allow the ordinary defined *meaning* of each word to be temporarily overridden in order to

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[56] Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue, and Novel', *Desire in Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), p.65.
[57] John Berryman, '8', *77 Dream Songs* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2001), p.10.

reconcile the overall *meaning* of the sentence with its component parts. Instead of allowing the sentence to fail*,* we use a connotational understanding of the referent 'plumpest' so that we are able to perceive a comparatively plump, or well-fed 'hope'. We understand that this is not 'sandpapered' in the rational, ordinary denotational sense, but rather the word is being used to indicate 'a series of qualities…activated by the word'[58]: abrasion, roughness, hostility. The reader must corrupt (or make use of the full potential of) the meaning of 'plumpest' and this kind of participation (the act of re-imagining in order to satisfy the overall *meaning* of the sentence) must be acknowledged as a distinct readerly faculty and one of the utmost importance to writers. Because the reader has this capability poetic language is a means of further communication, rather than potential misunderstanding.

We can take a second term from Battistelli and describe how a *sense* of the words is registered or felt. *Sense* is that faculty of apprehension the reader must use in order to overcome such a conflict; it is the readerly sensibility which actively engages connotation in order to overcome conflicts of *meaning*. In terms of Battistelli's opera, *sense* is made when the sung words become inaudible and the listeners are forced to imagine from the action taking place and the orchestration and melody, that which is being expressed. They do not hear the words, but they *sense* them. *Sense* is both the faculty (noun) with which we govern association, the verb we use to describe this act (I *sense*, he *senses* etc.) and it is also the resulting conclusion we draw from such government, the *sense* (noun) made.

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[58] Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p.68.

It is not the *meaning* of Berryman's poem that affects us, it is a *sense* of the poem; a

sensation of understanding accrued intuitively by overriding the conflict of verbal

meanings, through the active, imaginative management of association and

connotation. As Wolgang Iser writes in 'The Act of Reading':

> The literary text, however, takes its selected objects out of their pragmatic
> context and so shatters their original frame of reference; the result is to reveal
> aspects (e.g., of social norms) which had remained hidden as long as the frame
> of reference remained intact.[59]

So all metaphor creates such conflicts; when (in our strangest mood) we say that

'broccoli is like a wedding' we create a conflict in which we ask the reader to call

upon all their experience of each element and to use these associations and

connotations to make *sense* of the simile. And since broccoli is not truly a wedding,

nor is it in reality even very much like one, the conflict challenges the reader to

reconcile, to morph, to re-imagine these elements until *sense* is made (and the dress

blooms green from the bride's stalk-waist and a vegetable smell reminds us that life

and love are fleeting and so too will yellow and rot away).

In order to further consolidate my term *sense,* it is again worth considering the

etymology of the term. Traditionally our ordinary, dictionary definition of 'sense'

positions it as a faculty of perception outside of ordinary cognitive, 'intellectual'

bounds and allies it instead with an intuitive, physical reaction to stimuli amounting

to a general apprehension of it:

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[59] Wolfgang Iser, 'Grasping a Text', 'Phenomenology of Reading', *The Act of Reading* (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p.109.

Sense, n

[a. F. *sens* or ad. L. *sensus* (*u* stem), perception, feeling, faculty of perception, meaning, f. *sent re* to feel. Cf. Pr. *sens*, *sentz*, Sp. *seso*, Pg. *siso*, It. *senso*.]

I. Faculty of perception or sensation.

1. a. Each of the special faculties, connected with a bodily organ, by which man and other animals perceive external objects and changes in the condition of their own bodies. Usually reckoned as five: sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch. Also called **outward** or **external sense** (cf. 8).
  Earlier called *the five wits*: see WIT.

b. Used for: An organ of sense. *Obs.*

c. *pl.* The faculties of physical perception or sensation as opposed to the higher faculties of intellect, spirit, etc.

d. Applied to similar faculties of perception, not scientifically delimited, or only conjectured to exist.
  muscular sense: see MUSCULAR *a.* 1. **sixth sense**: see quot. 1829; also, the feelings connected with sexual pleasure.

e. That one of the senses which is indicated by the context. Now *rare* or *Obs.*

f. With defining word: the intuitive knowledge or appreciation of what action or judgement is appropriate to a given situation or sphere of activity. (Closely related to sense 1d.)

The final definition ('**f.**') provided here refers to 'intuitive knowledge' and the subsequent 'action or judgement…appropriate'. In poems we might say that the reader (who may also be the writer reading their own work), drawing on subjective experience, is in possession of such an 'intuitive knowledge' and at moments where no clear singular *meaning* is denoted, they are able instead to *sense* what is going on – the reader understands which 'judgement is appropriate'. As Wolfgang Iser asserts:

> The reader's enjoyment begins when he himself becomes productive, i.e., when the text allows him to bring his own faculties into play. There are, of

course, limits to the reader's willingness to participate, and these will be exceeded if the text makes things too clear or, on the other hand, too obscure[60]

So with Berryman's poem we are able to overlook denotation or the laws of rationality, which govern our world and refocus our 'faculties' of reading, in order to make *sense* of the poem.

It is also interesting to note the implicit hierarchy within definition '**c.**', that 'physical perception or sensation' is different from the '*higher* faculties of intellect' (my italics). The implied hierarchy seems to be based on the misconception that language and thought are somehow separate from physical processes of feeling and sensation.

While *sense* is derived from a number of potential or conflicting *meanings* and all the time seeks to adhere to word definitions and the laws of grammar, an understanding derived from a *sense* of the words, is essentially non-verbal and cannot be re-articulated in language terms, since *sense* is concerned with registering that which is not defined. We should regard *sense* however, not in opposition to *meaning*, not a faculty outside of language, but rather see it as part of language, another gear of communication or necessary evolutionary safety-net we have developed for those moments when *meaning* is in conflict and instead we rely on imagination.

As the initial Battistelli, operatic analogy might suggest, musicality in poetry can also be understood in terms of *sense*; the phonic texture, shape and sound of a word also provokes, a reader's intuitive, innate, interpretive faculties in a similar way to conflicting *meanings*. Rhythm or rhyme can place emphasis on specific words in a poem, forcing new connections or associations that are not immediately related to a

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[60] Wolfgang Iser, 'Grasping a Text', 'Phenomenology of Reading', *The Act of Reading* (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p.108.

word's dictionary definition. Indeed, combinations of words create all kinds of sonic or visual effects that enforce or enhance a poem's rhetorical arc and my later analyses of Donaghy's poems will also focus on these musical aspects.

Aside from the characteristic spine-tingles or hair-raising tensions that can be generated by texts, *sense* describes our unconscious relationship with language, vague perhaps because our apprehension of the unconscious is necessarily vague. We often associate language with conscious thought, but such moments as described above seem to rely more on an intuitive, visceral relationship with *meaning*; we feel words as much as we understand them; language exists within a tangible reality in which all our senses are hailed simultaneously. Metaphorical processes surely demand unconscious, associative activity; to make such connections we must make *sense* of the dynamic paradox of defining one thing in terms of another. Indeed, it is this dynamic situation in which the law of language is turned against itself, which allows new ideas and concepts to be breached. In 'General Aims and Theories' the poet Hart Crane writes:

> The entire construction of the poem is raised on the organic principle of a "logic of metaphor", which antedates our so-called pure logic and which is the genetic basis of all speech, hence consciousness and thought extension.[61]

Earlier he suggests that : 'It is as though a poem gave the reader as he left it a single, new *word,* never before spoken and impossible to actually enunciate, but self evident as an active principle in the reader's consciousness henceforward.'[62] This 'new *word*' is *sense* – the further unspeakable term which describes the sudden apprehension of a

[61] Hart Crane, 'General Aims and Theories', *Complete Poems and Selected Letters* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 2006), p.163.
[62] Hart Crane, 'General Aims and Theories', *Complete Poems and Selected Letters* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 2006), p.163.

concept outside of conscious cognitive process, the visceral thrill of a new idea which is yet to be named and it is why Wallace Stevens writes that 'Poems are new subjects'[63], because within the reach of poetic language (which exists far beyond the relatively small world of things called 'poems') is a kind of term-less, physical knowledge, which allows access to 'ideas' which feel like they exist in the whole body and therefore cannot be dragged into a conscious realm of definable language.

My understanding of *sense* is greatly indebted to the theoretical work of Julia Kristeva, who expressed the need for 'a theory of meaning which must necessarily be a theory of the speaking subject'[64]. In her book *Revolution in Poetic Language* Kristeva used the term *symbolic*[65] to describe 'the domain of positions and propositions'[66] which constitute ordered, grammatically governed language, in opposition to the s*emiotic*[67]: 'the 'raw material' of signification, the corporeal, libidinal matter that exists outside of the s*ymbolic* order and therefore 'must be harnessed and appropriately channelled for social cohesion and regulation.'[68] It is the oscillatory relationship between the *semiotic* and *symbolic* elements that language (as a '*signifying process*'[69]) relies upon in order to be understood.

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[63] Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia', *Strong Words*, ed. by W.N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books Ltd, 2000), p.64.
[64] Julia Kristeva, 'The System and the Speaking Subject', *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.27.
[65] Julia Kristeva, 'The Semiotic and the Symbolic', *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p.24.
[66] Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, 2nd edn. (Athen, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1993) p.124.
[67] Julia Kristeva, 'The Semiotic and the Symbollic', *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans, Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p.24.
[68] Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, 2nd edn. (Athen, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1993) p.124.
[69] Julia Kristeva, 'The Semiotic and the Symbollic', *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p.24.

Key to Kristeva's work is that she wanted to reintroduce 'the speaking body back into the discourses of the human sciences'[70] and so she defines the *semiotic* as a visceral, bodily (and crucially) unconscious realm, thus dispelling traditional philosophical notions of the body and mind/language being separate entities or opposites. She explains:

> In the case, for example, of a signifying practice such as 'poetic language', the *semiotic disposition* will be the various deviations from the grammatical rules of the language…These variations may be partly described by way of what are called *primary* processes (displacement, condensation – or metonymy, metaphor), transversal to the logico-symbolic processes that function in the predicative synthesis towards establishing the language system.[71]

The *'semiotic disposition'* can be evidenced in those moments, as with the Lorca, when the 'grammatical rules of language'[72] are challenged, when there is a resulting conflict in *meaning*. *Sense*, then, borrows much from the Kristevian notion of the *semiotic*, the unconscious, libidinal engine of signification. The *semiotic* is our sensory, bodily connection with language, it is what saves language from being a mere grammatical shell or a system with nothing to govern, and when that system of government is overthrown or challenged by 'those forces extraneous to the logic of the systematic'[73] it is the *semiotic* that leaks out, that thrills us as if talking back to our bodies.

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[70] Kelly Oliver, 'The Flesh Become Word: The Body in Kristeva's Theory', *The Body: Classic and Contempory Readings* Donn Welton (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1999), p.341.
[71] Julia Kristeva, 'The System and the Speaking Subject', *The Kristeva Reader* , ed. Toril Moi, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.28.
[72] Julia Kristeva, 'The System and the Speaking Subject', *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.28.
[73] Julia Kristeva, 'The System and the Speaking Subject', *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.28.

Why is there a need to develop new terms when Kristeva's own theoretical work goes some way towards explaining the transactions taking place within poetic language? Because Kristeva describes these processes in terms of semiology or as she suggests calling it '*semanalysis*'[74], her very system of articulation ('since it is itself a metalanguage'[75]) 'can do no more than postulate this heterogeneity: as soon as it speaks about it, it homogenizes the phenomenon, links it with a system, loses hold of it'[76], or as Donaghy puts it:

> *Poetry's a way of thinking; a clarity between the truth of music and the truth.* See? No sooner are the words out but they turn to lead. It's embarrassing to talk about one's own poetry in prose, which may be why we have to endure so many poems about poetry.[77]

Kristeva's theory of poetic language may provide a remarkable philosophical model and workable set of terminology with which to examine my poems or the poetry of others, but its significance to a practitioner is unclear. The development of my own terms feels like a process inherently linked to my practice and so their application is a direct demonstration of my writerly thought processes, thus amounting to a critical commentary on my work.

However, before I begin to use them in analysis it is first necessary to further clarify my decision not to examine or analyse my own poems directly, and my decision instead to examine several poems by Michael Donaghy.

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[74] Julia Kristeva, 'The System and the Speaking Subject', *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.28.

[75] Julia Kristeva, 'The System and the Speaking Subject', *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.28.

[76] Julia Kristeva, 'The System and the Speaking Subject', *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.28.

[77] Michael Donaghy, 'My Report Card', *The Shape of the Dance* (London: Picador, 2009), p.94.

3. DONAGHY

W H Auden writes:

> It is impossible…for any poet, while he is writing a poem, to observe with complete accuracy what is going on, to define with any certainty how much of the final result is due to subconscious activity over which he has no control, and how much is due to conscious artifice.[78]

It seems peculiar to me to write a sustained critical commentary on my own poems for these same reasons; crucial to the nature and success of my practice is that I retain a kind of dynamic doubt or uncertainty about it. That is not to plead ignorance, or dispel the notion of craft or technique being used; more, that since what is expressed in a poem is so dependent on how it is received by a reader, that to write about my own work in terms of its design and my control over it would seem wrongheaded. It is not my role as a poet to control or define what my work means, or how it goes about meaning it. The problem is how to enter into a discussion about poetry and my creative practice while deliberately avoiding the kind of direct self-examination that would contradict how I have come to understand the way poems work. To discuss my own poems I would be positing a reading, which as the author of the work, would undoubtedly monopolise what the poem is about, even though it has been specifically designed with a view towards inviting further readerly associations and participation. If a poem is built as self-sufficient and contingent, it would be a huge contradiction to then step forward and declare what the poem was about and how it achieved its effects.

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[78] W H Auden, 'The Virgin and the Dynamo', *The Dyer's Hand: And Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1962), p.67.

Given that the reader must participate in making a text meaningful, so it follows that

analysing the work of another writer is in part a writerly act. By close-reading, by

enacting and articulating the processes of the reader, it could be argued that I am able

to understand the processes taking place in my own poems and how these might

activate or prompt a readerly response. I can never be a reader of my own work

without my own authorial associations taking over and directing my conclusions, but

I am able to approach other people's poems with a fresh perspective and examine the

way they operate. For this purpose I have chosen six poems by Michael Donaghy. My

analyses are not meant to be a comment on his work overall, nor are the readings

interested in positioning him within a wider literary schema. Indeed, Donaghy

himself rejected 'terms used by academics to group poets into convenient

geographical or historical chapter headings'[79], and so it seems pertinent and

appropriate to avoid any extraneous textual comparison or judgements to do with a

wider poetic canon. The decision to look at these poems was taken on the basis that

Donaghy has been an important influence on my work, but also because his stylistic

breadth and diverse range of voices means that a good deal of technical aspects that I

use, consider and wish to explore, can be analysed within the context of a poem. Of

all the available texts for study, Donaghy's poems seem unique in their deliberate

departure from the everyday, in their formal dexterity and elegance, and in the scope

of their metaphysical, intellectual and philosophical enquiry. O'Brien writes that:

> He didn't simply have opinions: he *knew* things – about literature, history,
> music, science, anthropology, non-Western cultures. The book [*Shibboleth*,
> 1988, his debut] boldly announced his arrival among other poets of his
> generation, including Jo Shapcott and Matthew Sweeney. Donaghy was doing
> something different again from these strongly contrasting poets.[80]

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[79] Michael Donaghy, 'Interview with Andy Brown', *The Shape of the Dance* (London: Picador, 2009),
p.160.
[80] Sean O'Brien, 'Introduction', [Michael Donaghy] *Collected Poems* (London: Picador, 2009), p.*vii*.

Equally I could have selected a number of different poets and poems for analysis, but I feel there is a greater logic to understanding a single writer's work parallel to my own. The parameters have to be set somewhere and if I am to conceive of my wider practice, to commentate on a body of my work, it would seem strange to analyse this corpus via a disparate grouping of otherwise unconnected poems.

However, I have had to select poems from Donaghy's work rather than comment on them all. My rationale for selection was drawn out of my interest in certain aspects of each of these poems, and given more time and space I could happily have commented on more poems. The limits of my analyses serve as a reminder that the undertaking is one of critical commentary on my own practice, so poems are examined here according to how useful and interesting they appear to be in these terms and at no point were they selected as a comment or hierarchial judgement on Donaghy's work. Some of his finest poems are not mentioned or looked at, not because they are not interesting poems, but because they were deemed less immediately useful in terms of learning about my poems as a parallel body of work. The aim was purely to select texts that could be analysed closely in order to uncover and discuss certain aspects of poetry and demonstrate through the process of analysis how I understand the ways in which poems move and function.

As a body of work Donaghy's poems do provide a huge breadth of subject and approach. Indeed one critic saw his early 'fidgety affectation of style after style' as a sign that he had 'not yet found his voice'[81]. Although tempting, it would be trite to automatically draw conclusions about Donaghy's position as a Catholic-raised, Irish-

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[81]F.Olsen, 'Noted in Brief', *Hieroplant*, Spring 1993.

American living in Britain and directly equating these biographical aspects with the range of material that finds its way into his poems. Donaghy was keen to play down any geographic or nationalistic conclusions about his work. When John Stammers asked him whether he was an American, Irish or British poet he responded: 'I'm afraid the question has no meaning for me, though it seems to be of great importance to anthologists or journalists who feel the need to classify me.'[82]

Nevertheless, and for whatever reason, there is something extraordinarily various about the scenarios of his poems overall (moving from ancient Greece, civil war Spain, Renaissance Venice, to modern London and New York) which suggests something of the exile's predicament. Donaghy goes on to tell Stammers:

> My friend Ian Duhig quotes Hugh of St Victor in this regard –
> 'The man who loves his homeland is a beginner, he to whom every soil is as his own is strong, but he is perfect for whom the entire world is a foreign country.'[83]

Perhaps this deterritorialised position can account for the absorbency and intertextual nature of his poems, drawing widely and freely from high and popular culture. Certainly his 'constellation of interests and his delight in the connectedness of things'[84] makes for interesting narratives and fields of language, but ultimately it is not the right of the reader to make assumptions about how far Donaghy's biographical and geographical positioning is responsible for his poems and in any case, what good can come from drawing such conclusions?

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[82] Michael Donaghy, 'Interview with John Stammers, 2003', *The Shape of the Dance* (London: Picador, 2009), p.178.
[83] Michael Donaghy, 'Interview with John Stammers, 2003', *The Shape of the Dance* (London: Picador, 2009), p.178.
[84] Sean O'Brien, 'Introduction', [Michael Donaghy] *Collected Poems* (London: Picador, 2009), p.*vii*.

Another reason for studying Donaghy's poems in this non-biographical, relatively de-contextualised way is that following his death, so much mythologizing about the man has already impacted on how his poems are being read, despite him expressing that: 'I'd like to be remembered for my poems, not my charming personality.'[85] In a recent review of a new posthumous collection of Donaghy's 'Essays, interviews and digressions' Graeme Richardson said of the now famous ending to Donaghy's poem 'Shibboleth' that 'if we know the poet's biography, and the name of his long-term partner, whom he followed to England in 1985, we see how his line "Maxine, Laverne, Patty" tenderly carries within it the name "Maddy Paxman".'[86] Such banal biographical 'overreading' borders on the intrusive and deserves to have its intentions questioned: what does this journalistic tit-bit tell us about the poem, quite aside from the fact that the line does not contain the name, nor does it carry it 'tenderly'?

Furthermore, some of Donaghy's unfinished work has already been published in a new *Collected Poems* despite Donaghy's fastidiousness and perfectionism during his lifetime. Now that the poet is no longer able to edit or approve publication of his work, there is a worryingly reductive interest in his biography which threatens how we are able to enjoy his poems on their own terms. In the years since Donaghy's death, many of his friends in the poetry world have already begun publishing their elegies and remembrances in books of poems and in the poetry press. While celebration of a man's life may be interesting or consoling, it should be remembered that the poems have not died and need no elegy. We should be wary of how far as

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[85] Michael Donaghy, 'Interview with John Stammers 2003', *The Shape of the Dance* (London: Picador, 2009), p.169.
[86] Graeme Richardson, 'No Hecklers', *TLS* , 14 August, 2009, p.23.

readers of his poems we need to know that Donaghy was 'on first name terms with the orangutans in the local zoo'[87].

I doubt that any biographical information about Donaghy would be useful in a critical commentary of my practical concerns. However, a further argument for studying his poems as a practitioner is precisely that among his contemporaries Donaghy has been recognised as an enigmatic and inspirational figure of importance to the poetry community.

Donaghy arrived in Britain in 1985 and fairly soon after joined the workshop or 'group' founded by Robert Greacen and then led by Matthew Sweeney. The alumni of this group makes impressive reading (Riordan, Feaver, Padel, Shapcott, Greenlaw, Paterson) and many of its members were later marketed by publishers and in the poetry press as the 'New Generation' poets, a label many, including Donaghy, felt distaste towards: 'The whole thing was an embaressment'[88]. That said, it was clearly an interesting meeting of minds. Original Greacen 'group', or 'Pembridge Poetry Society' member Tim Dooley writes:

> to have been among the first to read and respond to Shapcott's 'Phrase Book', Donaghy's 'Smith' or Sweeney's 'The Eagle' remains a rare privilege.[89]

Interesting as it is as a Donaghy fan, biographical reading is largely reductive, can be intrusive and is often antithetical to what a poet tries to do in poems, that is, create a work of art that is self-sufficient and free-standing. Again, one is reminded of

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[87] Eva Salzman, 'The Wizard Behind the Curtain', *Poetry London*, Summer 2009, No.63, p.26.
[88] Michael Donaghy, 'Interview with Conor O'Callaghan 1997', *The Shape of the Dance* (London: Picador, 2009), p.156.
[89] Tim Dooley, 'Letter to the Editor', *Poetry Review*, Summer 2007, Vol. 97, No. 2, (London: The Poetry Society, 2007) p.120.

Auden's insistence that 'knowledge of an artist's private life never throws any significant light upon his work'[90], and I have tried, as far as possible, while conducting my research, to avoid being led by anecdotal material about Donaghy in the press and also those stories and anecdotes I have been offered first hand by his friends and fellow poets.

The following close-readings, while conducted with a view towards understanding my own practice, aim to be respectful to the poems. Indeed, by ignoring Donaghy, perhaps this approach shows a greater respect for the poet than that taken by those critics or academics who now choose to frame his work within the specifics of the life he lived, thus denying his poems the right to exist in the mind of the living reader.

Through engaging with the technical skill, wit and ingenuity so apparent in Donaghy's rich and diverse poems, the practitioner is better positioned to read, understand and contribute to the discipline; to understand the mechanics of poetry, to understand how the 'machine'[91] of each poem works. The argument is not that by doing so, one becomes privy to what a poem expresses (as if such a thing were attainable by a single human being or might justify its value), rather that by leaving the purpose and significance of a poem open to the interpretation of other/all readers, the practitioner might better understand the nature of communication through poetry. In other words, analysing Donaghy's poems in this thesis is not about trying to ascertain what they say, rather the nature of how these poems go about saying it, so that I can demonstrate how I am able to design poems in the face of the knowledge

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[90] W.H. Auden, in Peter Scupham, 'The Teaser and the Firecat', Rialto 62.
[91] Don Paterson, (a friend and contemporary of Michael Donaghy wrote that 'A poem is a little machine for remembering itself') *The Book of Shadows* (London: Picador, 2004), p.184.

that I have no control over how they are received. The following analyses, therefore, are my attempts to understand how the poems might function for any reader who encounters them; this is an impossible task, but it is the same task I undertake each time that I begin to write, certain only of the knowledge that my associations will be rendered largely redundant the moment anyone participates in activating my words into being. Essentially I am trying to read not as myself, but as all potential selves, as a writer does when setting out to communicate with their unknown collaborator, the reader.

4. ANALYSES

4.1 Shibboleth

'Shibboleth' is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'a word used as a test for detecting foreigners, or persons from another district, by their pronunciation.'[92] Although the term originates from an account in the Jewish Bible[93] Donaghy transports the concept forward in time to a WWII European battlefront. Here 'Shibboleth' refers to the American 'trivia' passed among US soldiers, and thus by which 'the infiltrators were detected'. This notion is quickly established in the first four line stanza:

One didn't know the name of Tarzan's monkey
Another couldn't strip the cellophane
From a GI's pack of cigarettes.
By such minutiae were the infiltrators detected.[94]

The opening stanza, while quickly establishing the battlefront scenario, also establishes a clear ideological framework within which subsequent images can be positioned. As new details are accumulated and the poem continues to develop, the reader[95] is always able to locate these within the poem's central concept, shibboleth.

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[92] *OED*

[93] 'Shibboleth' was the word 'used by Jephthah as a test-word by which to distinguish the fleeing Ephraimites (who could not pronounce the *sh*) from his own men the Gileadites (Judges xii. 4-6).*OED*

[94] Michael Donaghy, 'Shibboleth', *Shibboleth* in *Dances Learned Last Night* (London: Picador, 2000), p.19. Further references to this poem are given after quotations in the text.

[95] Although grammatically incorrect, using the singular term 'reader' to refer to a universal (and therefore plural) readership seems appropriate to my argument since it suggests both a readerly singularity of interpretation/participation and also a wider group (see footnote 3). 'The reader' is any reader. The term cannot refer to specific readers in time, a fact which cannot be known. Instead I rely on the conceptual, singular 'reader' who can exist outside of time and be multiple, infinite and yet retain a singular subjectivity. For further reading on the 'reader' as singular and plural see: Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1980), *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP,

By declaring the poem's core concept in the initial stanza, Donaghy allows the reader to focus and refocus on each image presented to them (each resounding within the established conceptual space of the poem) without being overly distracted by the immediate relation of these images to each other. The opening stanza acts as a preface, establishing a scheme within which subsequent images can be easily placed, thus drawing the reader's attention to the images themselves and the effect of their accumulation.

The opening stanza also feels declarative, as if it is actively establishing a scene, in terms of how it works rhythmically. It is made up of the two inverted pentameter lines one and four, broken by a couplet of trochaic four beat lines. The first line: '**One** didn't **know** the **name** of **Tar**zan's **Mon**key' (1) opens the poem on an insistent stressed beat 'One' and from there on places emphasis on each detail in turn, rhythmically enforcing the specificity of each detail. So too in the second line, beginning on 'An**other**' (2) as if to heighten the idea of 'another-ness', that the event is not singular, but part of a list of further failures. It is a similar effect to the inversion in the opening speech of Shakespeare's 'Richard III': '**Now** is the **win**ter of our **disc**on**tent**'[96] which announces the contingency, the 'now-ness' of the situation.

The stanza ends with 'By **such** mi**nut**iae were the **in**filtrators de**tected**' (4) with a heaviest stress falling on the word 'mi**nu**tiae' as if the term is being tested, doubted on the grounds of its high lexis. It is as if the speaker is self-consciously drawing attention to the term's specificity in order to consolidate how its sound relates to its *meaning* – the effect is almost onomatopoeic; the word 'minutiae' both feels, sounds

1967). More extensive discussion of reader response theory would be too great a departure from the central concerns of this thesis.

[96] William Shakespeare, *Richard III,* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995) p.1.

and means something unusually specific, pernickety. This could be seen as a moment of *sense*, where the reader's participation in the poem, their musical effort, might be rewarded with an enhanced understanding beyond the ordinarily defined *meaning* of the term 'minutiae'.

In the second stanza the voice of the poem moves from a third person narrator – 'One didn't know the name of Tarzan's monkey' – to a participant in the world of the poem: 'By the second week of battle/We'd become obsessed with trivia' (5/6). This shift, with the introduction of the pronoun 'we', hones the focus of the poem inwards, from the viewpoint of a removed omniscient speaker towards the voice as an agent acting within the world of the poem itself. We are able to at once identify him as a soldier engaged in 'battle' and we know from the pronoun 'we' that he is speaking on behalf of group with whom he identifies: his fellow soldiers. Equally with this move, the reader's position is shifted from that of a removed witness, to an addressee. The poem becomes suddenly 'occupied' and a more dynamic relationship is developed between the voice as character, and the reader as listener. The tone shifts too as a result; the initial descriptive language is suddenly re-contextualised as personal, anecdotal, thereby involving the reader more immediately in the action relayed to them as they invest in a now personal story.

Again rhythm plays a part of this rhetorical shift with the emphasis falling on key words, as if suggesting an insistent, almost 'obsessed', tone: 'By the **second week** of **bat**tle/We'd be**come** ob**sessed** with **triv**ia' (5/6). As the poem focuses its attention inwards, moving from describing a general group, to a more specific 'we', so the rhythmical emphasis prompts the reader to exaggerate the specifics of the situation.

This homing-in continues in the final stanza as the voice begins to speak alone: 'I was shaving,/ Staring into a mirror nailed to a tree'(9/10). The figure is no longer speaking as part of a group but addresses the reader personally and singularly. The short line allows the reader time to dwell on the now solitary speaker as the reader is asked to imagine and engage with the words of a tangible subject in a locked landscape. Since 'shaving' is not a common group activity, but rather a relatively intimate act, the short line gives the reader space to focus on one figure, in a moment of portraiture.

Donaghy has turned the voice from third to first person in a steady gradient, in filmic terms, panning from a wide shot of an abstract landscape, to a group of characters and in the final stanza, to the striking close-up of a face reflected in a shaving mirror. The tracking, the visual direction of the poem, is established as a move towards the voice, from a relative position of removal and generality to a gradually increasing involvement. The reader is drawn into the action just as the frame closes in on the singular figure of the voice, the speaker. Donaghy continues to lead the reader inwards and intensify this effect as the poem draws to its conclusion.

The use of the verb 'Intoning' in the penultimate line is a particularly significant detail since it actively encourages the reader to focus on the physical shapes of the names which form the following, final line. Donaghy prompts the reader to 'intone' 'Maxine, Laverne, Patty'(12), so that one is inadvertently invited to enact the voice, to own it oneself. It is a literal kind of 'impersonation' as the reader must project their own voice onto the voice of the poem. At the final moment, as the reader mouths 'Patty', they are pushing against the surface of the world of the poem and so become absorbed into its action.

Again, rhythm is interesting here. The two iambs 'Max**ine**, Lav**erne**' immediately fall into a mantra-like regularity, a prayer-like lull – 'Our **Fath**er, who **art**, in **heav**en' – which is broken by the name '**Pat**ty', musically forcing a *sense* of finality. It is a nifty way of ending a poem because it simultaneously declares itself as an ending, but by inverting the iambic measure it also feels as if it is left hanging, unfinished. The reader is left with a negative charge, an unease, so that it is almost as if the poem continues beyond that final word. This effect is clearly one we can regard in terms of *sense*. There is clearly nothing to do with dictionary *meaning* in this musical, rhythmical aspect. Instead it is surely a physical aspect of reading, an intuited feeling of incompleteness prompted by the poem. The fact that it coincides with the poem moving from the first person to direct quotation is key; as we 'become' the speaker of the last line we are left uncertain. Given the fact that this is a poem about war, mistrust and the paranoia of enemy infiltration, the 'embodiment' of a character facing death, combined with a feeling of unease and uncertainty, amounts to a powerfully crafted situation of identification.

In terms of achieving this effect through technique, Donaghy's positioning of the voice throughout the poem is paramount here. While the poem is driven visually by a range of atmospherics such as 'midnight, in the rain'(7) 'The morning of the first snowfall'(9), and moreover by its own 'obsession with trivia', its specifics: 'Tarzan's monkey', 'the cellophane/ From a GI's pack of cigarettes', the reader's gradual participation in the poem challenges the initial position of the voice as a narrator, a character the reader is able to feel separate from. They are drawn into the action, a kind of suspense gratified only by becoming the action itself. This effect is by no means overt, rather it is the subtlety with which the manoeuvre is performed that is

surprising, arresting, and leads the reader towards the poem's surface without making them aware of conscious device.

'Shibboleth' sets up its argument quickly and from there the reader moves through the world of the poem experiencing the atmosphere with increasing intensity, until their 'infiltration' is complete and they themselves are left 'Staring into a mirror nailed to tree' surrounded by falling snow.

The notion of the reader 'becoming the voice' can be understood in terms of *sense*. The final line could be seen as a moment when the *meaning* of the words 'Maxine, Laverne, Patty' their denotative value, is overridden by their *sense*. By 'intoning' these sounds rather than simply reading them, the reader is engaged in physically animating the voice, a situation in conflict with the denotative *meaning* of the words, positioned grammatically as those of the voice. The reader must actively participate in the poem by usurping the voice and taking control of *meaning*. Any potential denotative value prescribed to the names as part of a grammatically positioned exchange between speaker and listener, becomes subsumed by the sudden merging of the two. Without *meaning* being prescribed by a speaker, the reader must actively participate in making *sense* of the names. Using their own associations, working on a connotational level, they intuitively perceive a *sense* of the words.

That the last line does not rely on a syntactical framework, in that the words could arguably be exchanged without challenging the *meaning* of the sentence, further indicates that the final line technically necessitates a reading that relies on a readerly intuition as to the *sense* of the words. Part of the nature of poetry is that it is designed

to involve the reader, to activate their imaginations and associations in order that they participate in the making of a poem's *sense*. 'Shibboleth' forces you to embody the poem, to utter its last line into existence and be part of that process of *sense*-making.

4.2 The Excuse

Michael Donaghy's poem 'The Excuse'[97] opens with the instantly recognisable

British Telecom announcement *'Please hang up'* (1), so that the reader is led

immediately to the conclusion that somebody is on the phone. The scenario is

expanded and much more inferred by the subsequent sentence 'I try again' (1) – we

know that, whoever they are, they are failing to 'get through' and since they are

prepared to 'try again' that the call is of some urgency. This is further emphasised by

the stress falling on the word 'try'. Moreover, the intertextual adaptation of the

opening phrase, with the voice replacing the familiar 'and try again' with 'I try

again', sets up a readerly expectation for play, whether linguistic or ironical. From the

outset Donaghy is creating a sense of urgency about the call, but this urgency is

couched within a playful voice. The tension between the playful nature of the speaker

and their anxiety over failing to connect grows in significance as the poem

progresses, and many of the key elements of the poem, its tensions and rhetorical

shape, begin to form in this first line.

The second line appears in inverted commas, leading the reader to understand the line

as a form of quotation. Since there are no other figures in the poem at this point, it

would appear that the line is self-quotation, the possessive pronoun in " 'My father's

sudden death has shocked us all'" (2) referring here to the same figure as the

established first person 'I' in line one. Why might the voice be quoting himself?

There seems to be a distance created between the voice's self-consciousness and the

trustworthiness of the statement, as if we are supposed to read the self-quotation as

[97] Michael Donaghy, 'The Excuse', *Conjure* (London: Picador, 2000), p.3. Further references to this poem are given after quotations in the text.

inauthentic, an ironic phrase. It is soon made clear why this is the case: 'Even me, and I've just made it up' (3) the voice continues, and we now understand that the 'father's sudden death' is an excuse, that the inverted commas were used to indicate not just that this was a spoken statement, but also a lie, an act of artifice. The shocking nature of the lie is underlined rhythmically here by the stressing of '**sud**den **death**', so that we feel the impact, the sudden-ness of the news and the gravity of its implications. This, combined with the apparent playfulness of the voice means that we register the phrase ironically, as melodrama. The emphasis, in this context transforms into a kind of ironic overemphasis.

This lie also indicates a third party in the poem outside the immediate dialogue between voice and reader (we can assume this because the lines delivered to the reader do not fall between inverted commas); moreover, this differentiation between spoken and written text suggests that the poem itself amounts to an internal, unspoken soliloquy to the reader, in contrast to the spoken words (the lie) directed to another agent in the world of the poem. The reader feels party to the private thoughts of the voice, so the ironic tone also suggested by the inverted commas becomes part of the more intimate relationship between reader and voice; each example of wordplay reads as a linguistic wink as we become privy to the truth.

The reader realises the voice is confiding in them directly, that they are being asked to share a more intimate space of in-joke and secrecy. Moreover, this new relationship encourages a greater level of scrutiny in reading; each line must be left open and tested against the subsequent punch-line, in order for its meaning to be truly

established. The reader is being trusted to both get the joke, to enjoy the play, but also to empathise, to identify.

The excuses and lies disclosed in the subsequent lines – 'Like the puncture, the cheque in the post,/ Or my realistic cough' (4/5) are delivered by the voice more as a source of amusement for the reader rather than confession. This distinction is one which relies on tone entirely. Rhythm aids this aspect greatly. Apart from the almost onomatopoeic stress on '**punc**ture', the position of 'realistic' here places great stress on the syllable '**real**istic' whereas ordinarily it would naturally fall on the second syllable: 'real**ist**ic'. Again, this over-eggs the sincerity of the voice, so that what is 'real' is being called into question rather than presented as true, honest. As the poem develops into more serious territory, it is necessary for the reader to know how serious information relayed to them is, whether they are being invited to laugh, or weigh the events empathetically and register them emotionally, physically, as serious.

For example, the use of 'the' in the line 'Like the puncture, the cheque in the post' as opposed the use of 'a' or 'an' has a crucial tonal effect, in that the use of 'the' indicates a specific rather than general circumstance, meaning there is one specific 'puncture' or 'cheque' in question. This creates a sense of history; rather than general examples of excuses one could make, the voice is referring to a short, specific biography of excuses which accumulate and help the reader to identify and characterise the voice. The voice is the 'hero' of the poem, and his deceptions are more amusing than immoral. Moreover, the 'realistic cough' implies that in the voice's efforts towards realism there may have been some kind of rehearsal. The voice has the cough perfected; there has been an element of practice involved, which

is absurd, eccentric and is ultimately a characteristic more endearing than damning. The reader is dealing less with a one-dimensional liar and more with trickster, conjurer, a cunning anti-hero: 'As I'm believed,/ I'm off the hook' (5/6).

This first six line stanza ends with a sentence which announces a shift. With the voice/character now established, there is a change in the poem's direction and its tone: 'But something snags and holds' (6). With this pentameter line we feel the pace slow so that the line itself '**snags** and **holds**'. The reader has the time (with a stanza break occurring at this point) to adjust or neutralise their emotional state in order to prepare for that which will subsequently be explored. It is a rhetorical pause, creating both a sense of expectation and curiosity. In dramatic terms, the first stanza sets up a scenario, a situation and then concludes with the promise of complication, the need for 'something' to be reconciled.

Donaghy begins the second stanza with the line 'My people were magicians' (7), a departure from the playful tone typical of the opening stanza. Instead it resembles a more classical, narrative address, 'My people' connoting the abstract notion of tradition, heritage, which belongs to a higher register. This has the effect of elevating how the reader experiences the word 'magicians'. A single magician, although fantastical and enticing, conjures a different set of associations to that of a 'people' of 'magicians', a lineage and tradition of magician-hood. As the stanza progresses, the voice begins to qualify his predicament, though associating himself with a tradition of deception. Instead of being a singular deceiver the voice is one in a line of deceivers, his flaws qualified by the inescapable circumstances and experiences of his upbringing: '…Home from school,/ I followed a wire beneath the table to/ A

doorbell. I rang it. My father looked up.' (9) [98] This last line is a good example of where rhythm and image-making work together; the iambic: 'A **door**bell. I **rang** it. My **fath**er looked **up**' rhythmically underscores each instant, each image-event, so that the sequence of movements and images is mirrored and emphasised by the metric sequence. This is where we can further speak of a *sense* of the information relayed to us. The defined words themselves and their syntactical arrangement, their *meaning* is clear, but the way we experience the sequence in terms of our imagination makes use of these rhythmical *sensory* aspects too. The musicality of the phrase aids our imaginations' participation in the poem by activating further features of the words and their arrangement.

The reintroduction of the father into the poem at this point is crucial. His reappearance hints towards a necessary reconciliation. The 'father' is no longer a frivolous detail in the first stanza, alongside a 'realistic cough', but instead is now consolidated as an active character, alive and part of the action and his presence must therefore be justified.

In lines ten and eleven the father is speaking to the child voice, explaining why he has had to 'rig up' 'a wire beneath the table to/ A doorbell' (9), so that when his brother calls he can escape the conversation with a readymade excuse – someone being at the door. Again this level of deception is too absurd for the reader to regard the father as

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[98] It is worth noting the line break 'to/ A doorbell', which seems at first weak. It is more common for a line in free verse to end on a 'strong' word: a noun, image or on the completion on an idea or clause. Donaghy ends the line on 'to' in order to create a momentary suspense (the time it takes the eye to move to the next line) before the sentence/ idea is completed, in keeping with the idea of surprise, conjuring, in the poem. It is a minute trick of its own, a dove produced from a shirt sleeve.

deceitful. It is too comically eccentric a length to go to and it appears to be motivated by the desire to not hurt his brother's feelings, by telling him he cannot talk longer.

Line twelve signals a further shift in tone, but more noticeably, a shift in the atmosphere of the poem. Donaghy begins the final stanza with 'Midnight' (12) which connotes a whole classical range of atmospheric associations: darkness, threat, quiet, stillness, whilst also implanting into the subsequent events an element of urgency and tension; it is unusual to make a telephone call at this time, when most people are asleep, so the reader will assume that there is a specific and important reason behind the call. Interestingly, the voice continues with 'I pick up and there's no one there,/ No one, invoked, beyond that drone' (12/13). The 'drone', one can assume, is the dial tone, or else the intermittent 'drone' one hears before a phone is answered, or not, in this case. 'Invoked' has a strong atmospheric property since it belongs to the semantic field of ghosts, spirits and the afterlife. Running parallel with the atmosphere created by 'Midnight' and the language and theme of telecommunications, the reader is invited to momentarily, or rather through connotation, explore the notion of communicating with the dead. The father is of further relevance here, given his fictional 'sudden death' (2) in the first stanza.

However, the line is confusing. To 'pick up' is most often used to describe the act of answering a phone, rather than merely lifting the receiver to make a call. Moreover, if we take the 'drone' to be the dial tone instead and the voice has 'picked up' to make a call, why would he expect to hear a voice? The scenario is slightly unclear and the reader must allow room to manoeuvre between and interpret the ambiguities created by terminology like 'pick up' and 'drone'.

Given that the voice expects to hear a voice, it follows that he is making the call and the failure in connection suggests that this call is not being answered. Earlier in the poem the voice seems to be persistently calling somebody ('*Please hang up*. I try again') so the reader can interpret that this latter part of the poem is a continuation or return to this idea. Moreover, the presence of the father, his fictional death and earlier telephone stunt, indicates that he is a significant agent in the poem, so one can also begin to assume that he is the character the voice is calling or rather 'invoking'. This is an example of when, although the exact *meaning* of the words, the exact scenario being relayed, cannot be exactly pinned down, as a reader, experiencing the emotional and linguistic journey of the poem with its insinuations and complexities, a physical *sense* of the poem can be registered from which one can draw certain conclusions and overcome the breakdown in *meaning*.

It is important not to impose a narrative too firmly on a poem in order to locate *meaning*, rather the reader must accept ambiguity as part of the poetic medium, must trust and allow it to expand an interpretation of the information provided, rather than restrain it. It may seem arbitrary to avoid a solid narrative interpretation and instead roam freely between various possibilities, but committing to one line of enquiry actively shuts down the way the poem functions. It is insinuative, diffuse and relies on the connective property of language as connotational and rhizomatic. The narrative of the poem is structured through the occurrence of language events such as tonal shifts, and semantic connections which are not necessarily sequential.

In the final stanza, the father is still fresh in the reader's mind as an empathetic character, linked to the voice as part of his predicament, the 'something' that 'snags

and holds' (6) and the tradition of deception. Although the final stanza does not specifically mention the father, his presence resounds throughout and invites the reader to ally him with the figure that the voice is calling 'This most deceiving and deceived of men…' (17). The repetition of the father's phrase 'rig up something' (14) in line fourteen also cements his relevance and invites his presence into readerly interpretation. This line is interesting tonally as it forms the first half of a rhyming couplet. Previous to lines fifteen and fourteen, there have been no regular end-rhyme elements. There is slight internal rhyme ('phone' and 'drone' in lines ten and thirteen) and a fairly regular iambic rhythm pattern, but the rhyming couplet (perhaps the most noticeable, classical type of rhyme) at this point declares its significance through song. The syntax of line fifteen 'Let my excuse be this, and this is true:' (15) recalls a Shakespearean[99] rhetorical register with the repetition of 'this', musically and playfully engaging with the argument, with a self-consciously trickster-like persuasion. The fact that this syntactical choice occurs as the completing line in a rhyming couplet can be read as a self-conscious signal of a rhetorical event, a *turn* in the argument of the poem. The voice is classicising the rhetorical angle of the poem, as the language suddenly feels 'written'. This tonal device indicates that the predicament of the poem, the 'something' that 'snags' (6) is about to be reconciled with the something 'true' (15). The poem, its voice, with all its different deceptions, is about to be solved and consoled by a statement of truth:

I fear for him and grieve him more than any,

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[99] There are wider resonances with Shakespeare here: the Hamlet-esque 'dead' father, the uncle and the playful tone of the sonneteer, confiding in the reader here as if in soliloquy. While these aspects shed little light on the mechanics of Donaghy's poetic technique, they are a feature of the tone and are of interest from a wider scholarly perspective; the epigraph to the collection *Conjure* which this poem features in, is a dedication to Donaghy's son Ruair, taken from Hamlet: 'Horatio: It beckons you to go away with it/As if it some impartment did desire/To you alone'. Donaghy seems to be playing with the idea of the fatherly ghost, a voice in the ear.

> This most deceiving and deceived of men…
> (16/17)

For the first time in the poem this statement uncovers vulnerability in the voice. Until this point there is bravado in the playfulness as the voice develops as a character. However, the introduction of 'fear' and grief create a stalling and poignant contrast which justifies the formal, rhetorical build-up in the previous two lines. If one believes the two lines to be referring to the father, then the emotions expressed seem most concretely reasonable. What is original about the first of these lines is the combination of 'fear and grieve' (16) together simultaneously. If the father is dead then is this 'fear' for his soul? This assumption would be speculative and does not rely on what the poem tells the reader. Instead, the combination seems to set up an opposition – the 'fear' for a living father and the grief for a dead one. The reader is reminded of the 'father's sudden death' which the voice says 'has shocked us all' (2), despite the fact the he has 'made it up' (3). The seemingly opposing emotions of 'fear' and grief play with the idea of the father's death being both real, and unreal. It is the voice's grief for his 'made…up' father's death, weighed against the fear of a real death and subsequently real grief. For the reader, this ambiguity is unsettling. The theme of deception has been pushed further by Donaghy to the point where the reader is unable to gauge what is true or not. The reader's temptation to believe the voice has forced them into a dead-end.

It is difficult to imagine how this position in the poem can be reconciled, but Donaghy plays on this suspense, again employing a rhyme: 'This most deceiving and deceived of men…/*Please hang up and try again*' (17/18). This final couplet uses the rhyme to bring a sense of resolution through song. The reader, instead of being left in

a preoccupied state of suspense, is forced to address the meaning of the dual possibilities.

Regardless of the truth, it is the possibility of the father's death that is haunting. It is entertaining death's presence, addressing the notion that it is a fundamental possibility which makes the ending of the poem so successful. Donaghy pushes the notion of deception to a point where truth and fiction register in equal measure, the friction between them installing a lasting sense of uncertainty and unease in the reader. The rhetorical arc of the poem manoeuvres the reader into an unsolvable and thought-provoking position, whilst the metre and rhyme in the final lines, the repetition of '*Please hang up*' holds the question in the air in a manner which sounds and feels satisfying. The reader realises that the predicament the poem addresses will not be solved, its meaning will remain undisclosed. However, the network of feelings and the rhetorical arc of the poem have already begun to lead the reader towards a *sense* of what the poem is saying, and the use of rhyme at the end, helps the reader to experience physically through sound, that the poem is completed. It keys in the reader's sense of the poem as a whole, as complete, as something that makes *sense* even while there remain many unanswered potential avenues of *meaning*.

4.3 A Darkroom

'Photography's "pervasive questioning of the 'seen' involves a simultaneous reappraisal of the 'unseen'" '[100]; so too in language, where the selection of a word forces the reader to comprehend its apparent limits by simultaneously entertaining and ruling out infinite further meanings. Whether in photographs or poems, the moment or event 'captured' is defined only by the mode of its capturing and so art, which makes its duty to preserve, is really only the art of selection; a photograph can no more freeze time and 'capture' a scene than a word become its referent and it is this dynamic failure that compels us to re-look and to keep writing.

In 'A Darkroom'[101] Donaghy uses the relationship between voice and reader to demonstrate how both poem and photograph fail to preserve despite their carefully selected medial elements. By setting the poem in the definite 'A Darkroom' rather than the indefinite 'The Darkroom' we are drawn toward the specifics of the location, the fact that it is dark rather than the various reasons to do with the photographic process for which it must be. We begin the poem 'in the dark', unknowing and unseeing and aside from the natural menace of our most common childhood fear and the universal associations with darkness and death, life and light, there is a disquieting irony to the fact that the visual processes of photography take place where it is difficult to see, as if, in order to understand an image and all that it tells us, we must start with black and bring it into light; as readers then, starting in darkness we expect to see things gradually take shape, to accumulate, stop and fix.

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[100] Rikky Rooksby, *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 48, No. 191 (Aug., 1997), pp. 413-414

[101] Michael Donaghy, 'A Darkroom', *Safest* (London, Picador:2005), p.10. Further references to this poem are given after quotations in the text.

The voice declares the rhetorical drive of the poem expressing how he/she 'wants to keep Klein in this red dark' (1). The tone of slight desperation here means that we register each subsequent idea as important; we are being compelled to understand and identify with this 'want' and so the reader is drawn into the action from the moment the voice is established and 'Klein' is introduced to us. The rhythmical emphasis falls on the verb 'want' to emphasise this, but the rhythm also falls hard upon the spondee '**red dark**'; it is the presence of red light which is being referred to, the working light of a developing room, but the term 'dark' is more evocative of the atmosphere of the space being described. Darkness can never truly be described in colour, because colour relies entirely on the presence of light. Its use here is to create a kind of chiaroscuro, an ambience in which the character of 'Klein' moves in and can be defined by. The fact that these two words are both stressed, adds to the sense of a slightly oppressive atmosphere and the reader is called upon to fully imagine it.

Already in this opening line, Donaghy sets up a conflict between the voice's desire to describe the atmosphere and situation and the resistance the world of the poem necessitates. It cannot actually be 'red dark', yet that is how it seems, how the reader can come to sense it. The selection of these terms in order to 'capture' the experience is already exposing the logical limits of each term.

The sentence continues into line two with 'and the rawness in my nose and throat' (2). One can assume that this refers to the literal 'rawness' caused by photographic chemicals perhaps, but the term also suggests 'rawness' in terms of contingency, freshness. The voice is expressing the desire to keep the scene 'raw' in memory, is fighting against a kind of temporal 'distancing' that occurs as time comes between the

speaker and the scene. The fact that the light in the room is 'red' is also relevant here, since 'redness' and 'rawness' are often synonymous, so that the light of the room becomes 'raw'. By positioning these overlapping connotations within the 'nose and throat' there is a kind of synaesthesic *sense* made, where light becomes a nervous lump, or breath of fume. The evocation of a strong physical memory of the events emphasises the scene's 'rawness' to the speaker even now.

There is a remarkable shift in the third and fourth lines, which take this idea and invite the reader to further participate in the poem and its action: 'I want to stay apprenticed to his trade/ and I require your assistance' (3/4). What possible 'assistance' is being 'required'? Is the addressee another photographer to whom the voice might be apprenticed? Is the voice addressing the reader directly?[102] Are we required to keep the scene 'raw' also, to apprentice ourselves in the trade of such memory preservation? There is the shift in tone from 'I want' in lines one and three, to the more polite, formal 'I require', which sounds both respectful, whilst also vaguely ironic, not to mention ominous. The introduction of the second person is unsettling and the reader is made to feel vulnerable with the focus of the poem suddenly turned towards them. In this state, the reader is made aware of the voice's control of the poem; the voice knows what kind of 'assistance' the reader/second person might provide and this is at once intriguing and threatening for the reader who has yet to find out.

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[102] Although beyond the concerns of this thesis, perhaps even contrary to them, it might be worth noting how this direct address to the reader corresponds with moments in Donaghy's other poems. There is something of the collar grabbing, Browning-esque monologue speaker who addresses the reader in 'Black Ice and Rain', *Conjure* (London: Picador, 2000) pp.6-9 for example, and this sudden affronting address could be seen as a staple Donaghy manoeuvre.

However, just as soon as this threat and the momentary suspense it causes is established, Donaghy turns the poem's focus elsewhere. The voice begins to describe Klein 'showing me his mother and five sisters/burning back from nothing, fixing them' (5/6). These two lines are charged with insinuation. The sudden intimacy between the voice and Klein created by the presence of the photograph, or rather the symbolic invitation into the private family world of Klein's past (the private world that the photograph represents) is arresting. A moment of subtle intimacy is being shared between Klein and the voice which the reader is privy to. But then there is a quick shift in tone: the photograph in question is being developed and the voice describes the image of the 'mother and five sisters/burning back from nothing, fixing them' (5/6). The rhythm of the phrase is of note here, because of the contrast between the double-stressing of the insistent '**burn**ing **back**' and the open-ended feel of the trochee '**noth**ing' (6). It is as if the 'nothing' leads to a dead-end, to nothing-ness. This creates a silent beat pause before the following '**fix**ing **them**' allowing for greater effort to be placed on the word/idea of 'fixing'.

In a literal sense this line merely describes the development process, but the lexis of photography carries with it, in this instance, a dark undertone. We are positioned to imagine Klein's family literally being 'burnt' and then 'fixed', which carries with it the implication that somehow they are broken or damaged. Photographs inherently depict the past and as such they are totems of lost time; they can prompt a pleasant sense of nostalgia but they also unavoidably represent our mortality. Here Klein's 'burning back' and 'fixing' of his family connotes a grim subtext, as if he were undoing the work of the crematorium, the hospital, as if he were resurrecting them in his tray of chemicals.

At the moment when subtext is pushing the reader away from the immediate world of the poem, Donaghy brings us back, the voice stating mysteriously 'I want to come back to this now and again' (7). Quite what is meant by this remark is difficult to ascertain. Perhaps the voice wants merely to remember Klein performing this physical act of remembering, or perhaps the darker insinuations the reader will have picked up on are shared by the voice and 'coming back to' it 'now and again' suggests that their understanding of the process remains unresolved. The familiarity of the phrase 'now and again' disguises a range of possible meanings here. It seems to be synonymous with 'once in a while' a kind of general, imperfect period of time, but equally it could refer directly to the specifically present 'now'. The 'again' then increases in importance; it is the desire to revisit that becomes most important, the idea of preserving a 'now' moment so that it can be re-lived afresh. These are complex possible *meanings* but in terms of how the line advances the poem, one can safely entertain them all and instead consider how the line creates a substantial pause and shift in tone. The line ultimately brings us back into the developing room and to the predicament of the voice, and so the poem continues:

> I want to retain Klein in the lamp's glare
> at his bench, spilling tea, his twenty-minute
> emphysema bark, the lung's soft whistle
> through the acrid evening to closing up.

Klein as he is first vividly depicted in this section is clearly not in good health. The description is one of heightened details: the 'evening' is 'acrid', Klein's cough is an 'emphysema bark', the lamp light is a 'glare', there is the proximity of 'lung' and 'soft' which connotes decay, the flesh becoming unstable and its 'whistle' clearly points towards malfunction, serious illness, death. We are being directed towards a

'closing up', an allegorical shutting down, of which Klein is the centre and there is little here to direct us from the conclusion that Klein is dying. Again, it is not the *meaning* of these words from which we draw our conclusions as readers, rather a subtextual *sense* of what is being communicated that we read into being, and by actively making further associations as readers we are able to deduce a seemingly key detail in the poem; the *sense* of urgency we experience is partly because Klein does not have much time left.

This impacts greatly on how we treat the following few lines, indeed how one reads the whole poem. Now the voice seems urgent and the tone becomes desperate, the dominant verb turning from 'I want' to 'I need' (12). Time is running out and he or she 'needs' Klein 'to explain this process clearly' (12). Moreover, there is also the sense that the voice is imploring Klein to perform his actions as if they might preserve him, might 'keep him squinting through a jeweller's eyepiece' (13) indefinitely, and so the poem turns directly towards the theme of preservation and reinstates at its centre the idea of establishing a stasis, resisting the world of the poem, the time that continues to pass within it and the threat to Klein it represents. As the sentence enjambs, this theme of preservation and holding back time is echoed in Klein's actions as he is 'tinting and retouching faces caught in marriage' (14), capturing and forming a moment with precision and exactitude.

Time and mortality continue to dominate in lines fifteen to seventeen, first with 'A watchmaker's finesse' (15) positioned alongside 'an undertaker's repertoire: rose cheeks/ and bloody lips' (16/17) referring to the dressing up of bodies for open casket burial or public viewing. There is a syntagm being constructed positioning in the

mind of the reader the themes of time, death and mortality in opposition to hyper-real forms of preservation: most obviously photography, but also poetry: each poetic line contributes to a constructed, heightened, tinted version of the characters and actions. Even the reader, hailed in second person, is positioned within the artificial frame of the poem.

Donaghy now shifts the focus back towards Klein and his past, and unlike the earlier grotesque descriptions centred around Klein's illness, the voice denotes a more psychological portrait suggesting elements from his past and burdens of the present. There are 'the numbers,/ crude and blue and blurred and not consecutive' (19/20) tattooed 'along his arm' (17), which seem to suggest that Klein carries the tattoo of an Auschwitz prisoner and perhaps this is why the voice's 'mother' has warned him/her 'not to stare' (18). While it might be interesting to speculate such a back story and develop a consequent reading of the poem[103], the poem does not hinge on such knowledge; in fact it is interesting to note how Donaghy dwells so briefly on this feature, despite the tattoo detail provoking a number of further associations to many readers. Perhaps this deliberate glancing at such a huge subject without explanation is a deliberate mirroring of the speaker's childhood perspective; as readers we are not permitted 'to stare' either, but instead must infer at a glance what we will before moving on and focusing again on Klein himself. Certainly the figure of the 'mother' here is crucial. While we understand that the figure of Klein exists in the past, there is little of concrete value to tell us how far back, or what age the speaker is now, or was

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[103] There is a definite tension with this kind of reading and earlier lines about Klein 'burning back' and 'fixing' (Donaghy, 10) his family and later the 'strongbox ark' (Donaghy, 10) image which recalls both the ark containing the ten commandments and Noah's ark – both vessels in which something precious is preserved and protected. Moreover there may be some allusion to the New York photographer William Klein, who was not at Auschwitz, but did serve in the US Army in Germany and France immediately after the war. Again, such textual/historic alignments/allusions are speculative and of limited interest in terms of discussing Donaghy's poetic technique.

at the time when these memories were being lived out and formed. The sudden

mention of the 'mother' roots the perspective firmly in childhood and grounds the

earlier atmosphere of the menacing 'Darkroom'.

The allusions to 'his wife' and 'their mad son', and 'his scribbles home/ in the faint

grey blunted pencil they allow him' (22/23), suggest that Klein's son is

institutionalised and too much of a risk to himself or others to be 'allowed' anything

sharper, stronger, potentially dangerous. The way in which the voice alludes but does

not plainly declare all these things is in keeping with the intimate feel of the poem

and the private world of Klein in his 'Darkroom', but it is also a clear play on the dual

perspectives of the adult, informed speaker in reverie and the naïve child who views

the action of the poem in Klein's 'Darkroom'. Perhaps the adult speaker also desires

to retain that innocence, to preserve Klein from an unknowing child's perspective. It

is almost out of respect for the character of Klein that the communication between

voice and reader is insinuative and coded, as if Klein might overhear.

The intensity of the poem continues to build, not only because of the urgent 'I

need…' clauses in this section, but also because there are longer sentences and

therefore fewer pauses. The poem gathers momentum as it accumulates information

and the voice becomes less focused, switching from one subject to the next within a

sentence:

> their mad son's shaky scribbles home
> in the faint grey blunted pencil they allow him,
> read out, wept over, locked back in their strongbox ark,
> Klein ramming a broom at the ceiling to silence
> the whore who works the cops above his studio,
> his sickening breath, but now *I talk too much*

As well as affecting the pace, this also has an effect on how we process the information as a whole rather than as separate elements or images. The awkward rhythm and sibilance of 'son's shaky scribbles' matches the awkwardness of the image and the three following adjectives 'faint, grey, blunted' must be processed and accumulated quickly to catch up with the already formed image of handwriting. Klein's 'ramming' of the broom appearing in the same breath as his 'mad son' and their 'strongbox ark' (24) has the curious but subtle effect of linking the two, as if Klein were taking out his frustrations or feelings regarding his son's illness on the ceiling above him, as if the 'strongbox ark' contained his repressed feelings, which spill out in this small, trivial act of violent protest. Similarly, as we experience these elements in combination, we experience the voice speeding-up and making the links him/herself, appearing urgently sympathetic with Klein and demanding greater emotional investment from the reader as a result.

Rhetorically, the increasingly intense pitch of the poem is directing the reader towards an inevitable climax or point of catharsis or release. The appearance of the italics, presumably denoting Klein's speech, help to negotiate this shift; the sudden interjection of an italicised '*I*' indicating a new speaker, whilst seamlessly continuing the first person voice's sentence: 'but now *I talk too much*'. It is a common Browning-esque Donaghy move, an innovative way of momentarily redirecting the poem, both tonally and in terms of subject and speaker, without creating unsettling breaks or disturbances in the continuous, linear arc of the poem. Klein's speech is a necessary pressure valve in the poem with the repetition of '*late, late*' (28) slowing the line down. It is at this point when Donaghy then returns to the territory and the interior landscape of photography with the line 'and as I leave he switches on the

light' (29). To the reader, who is most likely more familiar with the idea of turning lights off when leaving a room, this 'switching on' reads as a curious event, at odds with the logic of their own experiences. Obviously this is normal practice for a developing studio, but Donaghy uses the phrase here, when the focus has moved from the room itself to the central character of Klein. The 'light' seems estranged from the room and so Donaghy invites a range of further associations here, whereby the 'light' feels as if it might allegorically represent knowledge, a lift in spirits, or simply mark the end of the encounter. Such associations will be unique to the reader, but aligning this transition with Klein and the speaker's leaving, the reader is seemingly prompted to make further *sense* of this. It also creates a significant pause, occurring at the end of a long sentence and at a moment when the poem is slowing down. It is a playful way of returning to the theme of photography, central to the poem, and directing the reader back towards the concerns of the voice.

The final sentence in the poem in is keeping with earlier lines, beginning with the verb 'I need' (30), but also recalls the significant shift which occurs in line four with the introduction of the second person. In the final sentence, Donaghy reintroduces this second person, the voice telling the reader or listener that it 'need(s) your help to make that sharp' (30). The voice is asking the addressee or reader to aid in the process of memory, to help fix the previous details about Klein 'before it blurs or burns itself to random' (31) and is forgotten, lost. Once again this could be explained by the assumption that the listener in the poem is a photographer and the voice requesting to 'stay apprenticed to his trade' (3), or perhaps we can view this as further evidence of a kind of conceit, linking history, photography, memory and poetry; the second person is the reader and through the act of reading they are aiding in the

process of making Klein 'sharp', capturing and stabilizing his character, through the transaction between reader and voice. Certainly the terminology being used to describe the nature of memory is photographic: 'blurs', 'focus' and 'burning' recalling the earlier reference to the development process: 'He's showing me his mother and five sisters/ burning them back from nothing, fixing them' (5/6).

Donaghy turns the focus away from photography at the final moment of the poem. Just as the voice fears, Klein and his 'trade', the world of photography, along with its semantic field, all these are drowned out in the final lines by strong images and sensations: 'baseball scores in Spanish, or static', the radio 'tuned to rapid deafening ads' or the 'dog' that 'snarls' (33). Donaghy is acting out, in these final lines, the very process of forgetting that the voice is afraid of and is imploring the reader/listener to help prevent. In the final line, this idea is heightened by a clear moment of closure, as 'the door' is 'slammed shut' (34) behind the voice, leaving Klein and his world inaccessible.

It is important not to overlook the overall shape and form of the poem in relation to its subject. Donaghy's decision not to break the text into stanzas is noticeable and clear, especially given the number of various points when a stanza break might seem logical or likely. But rather than separate the text and draw attention to the repetition of clauses such as 'I need' or 'I want', the continuous unbroken text gives a sense of accumulation, of momentum and therefore urgency. The subjects of the poem: the desire to stabilize Klein in his world, the processes of photography held both in contrast to and as an allegory of death, the voice's need for a means of preservation, these are enhanced by the snowballing sense of urgency the poem gains from its

form. At first the information released in the poem is controlled, digestible, but a gradual accumulation of material and connotation, delivered in increasingly longer sentences, builds to a sense of loss of control. The poem fails to pin down and destabilise the world it creates. Perhaps this is why our 'assistance is required' as readers, to act as mediators, or photographers, to capture, stabilise and preserve the flux of memory as it is relayed by the voice.

4.4 Ramon Fernandez?

'Ramon Fernandez?'[104], like 'Shibboleth'[105], is a poem which deals with the themes of conflict and infiltration. Set during what appears to be the Spanish Civil War: 'I fought in the brigade,/ In Barcelona, when the people had it' (1/2), the poem focuses on the character of Fernandez[106], a guitarist who writes anthems for the communist side. The voice describes how he 'played guitar each day at noon/ In the plaza beneath the barracks tower' or 'played the crowd/ Sure as he played his lacquered blue guitar'(13/14), Donaghy throughout conjuring the romantic image of the revolutionary minstrel, among the danger and hubbub of war.

Towards the end of the poem we are told 'The songs the fascists sang across the wire/ Were his' (19/20) too: '*Libertad*' or '*Hermana Libre*' (21/22) substituted where appropriate. Donaghy uses the character of Fernandez as an agent of subtext. The ease with which Fernandez is able to tailor his songs according to each side undermines the fundamental ideological differences that underpin the conflict. The poem is not a pacifistic gesture against war's futility, instead it suggests that the language of anthem, whether patriotic, jingoistic, blood-thirsty or humbling, is somehow meaningless, or at least is limited to a semantic field and abstract currency

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[104] Michael Donaghy, 'Ramon Fernandez?' in *Dances Learned Last Night* (London: Picador, 2000), p.22. Further references to this poem are given after quotations in the text.
[105] Michael Donaghy, 'Shibboleth', *Shibboleth* in *Dances Learned Last Night* (London: Picador, 2000), p.19.
[106] Sean O'Brien has speculated as to whom Ramon Fernandez refers. Indeed, the question mark at the end of title and the subject of the poem (his dual allegiances) suggest that there is a further game of multiple allusion at work here. O'Brien cites the name as a reference to Wallace Stevens' 'The Idea of Order at Key West': 'Towards the close of the poem, the speaker asks 'Ramon Fernandez' to explain why the lights of the vessels in the harbour seem to impose an order on the darkened sea' ('Introduction', *Collected Poems* ((London: Picador, 2009)), p.xi). He also notes that at the time of the poem's writing there was also a French critic named Ramon Fernandez, and that the poem also alludes to Stevens' 'Man with the Blue Guitar' as well as 'presumptively, Picasso's 1903 Blue Period painting *The Old Guitarist*, which was exhibited in Stevens' home town of Hartford, Connecticut in 1934 (also the year when 'The Idea of Order at Key West was written)' ('Introduction', *Collected Poems* ((London: Picador, 2009)), p.xi). While interesting, these details are not of relevance to my reading of the poem.

that means even two opposing ideologies at war with one another will find their

passions, hopes and battle cries indistinguishable and interchangeable. Fernandez, as

the anthem writer for both sides, highlights how each side is like the other.

Interestingly, Donaghy withholds any lines from the anthems themselves so the

reader is never asked to 'sing' through the act of reading. This may support the idea

that it is not the specifics of Fernandez' anthems that are important, rather it is the

nature of anthemic language in general that is under scrutiny. Although the voice does

refer to the terminology which is interchanged: '*Libertad*' and '*Hermana Libre*',

these terms are seen as removed from their context within each song; they can be

replaced and resituated, again suggesting the specifics of the song are of less

importance to the reader than the singer, or the implications of song as part of his

double-crossing.

However, the reading which takes 'Ramon Fernandez?' as a subtextual comment on

the nature of anthemic language ignores its crucial narrative and imagistic

characteristics. Although we can draw an ideological *meaning* from the poem, it is the

narrative, driven by images, that gives the reader a *sense* of the poem. It is the

character of the singer, his story and that of the narrator that hails us most loudly as

readers.

Donaghy establishes a very strict sense of voice as narrator: 'I recall', 'I met him' and

'One day he vanished' (23); the reader is never invited to challenge the voice as the

narrative drive of the poem, as he presents image after image. The voice as narrator is

kept at a sustained, controlled distance from the reader, who is automatically

positioned as the addressee. The reader is not prompted to break the rules of these

positions, but instead is forced to uphold them: to hear a voice speaking, telling them a story.

The voice as first person narrator has a strong connection to the images he relays. They are things he has witnessed in the past, in a world no longer existing. This world unfolds from a metonymy of specifics, each detail acting as part of a larger index of wartime Spain. However, the voice as narrator remains separate, locked instead in our present, and although the reader is directed by the voice, they are never invited to see him as part of the action of the poem itself. The voice is split in our minds: there is the voice as character, who belongs as an agent in the scene of civil war, and then there is the voice as witness, relaying these scenes of the past. The latter voice, the witness, engages singularly with the reader in a space separate from the action. It is a space in which the voice talks directly to the reader, as if providing a voiceover for the action unfolding on a screen, or recounting the details to a jury of readers.

The poem invites the reader to consider another space outside of the world of the poem in which the witness addresses them directly. There something in the tone of the poem that indicates a shared space, a conversation, and this other space is also suggested by Donaghy's title with its unusual question mark: who could have asked the question but the person that the answer is aimed at, the reader? The reader is inducted into the poem at the point precisely after they have unknowingly asked the question "Ramon Fernandez?" and it is from this point onwards that a secondary shared space is created, where the reader bears witness to the action of the past.

But what is the effect of these two spaces: the world of the poem and the space, in which the voice speaks to the reader, and how do they relate to one another? If the first person was removed and instead a second or third person surveyed the scene, they too would witness 'Red flags' as they 'snapped above the tower clock' (3). What the first person voice introduces is the notion of selection. As soon as the reader hears a voice narrating action, they experience the world of the poem from a selected viewpoint. The presence of a shared space can be evidenced in the meditative or conversational, narrative phrases that provide the poem with a temporal and rhetorical structure while maintaining a dialogue with the reader directly. The voice selects what one is able to see in the 'world of the poem', the order we see it in and more importantly how we are supposed to feel about seeing it.

It could be argued that in 'Ramon Fernandez?' the presence of a shared space in which the reader can only be spoken to by the voice, leaves them helpless, as they must encounter the world of the poem as the voice selects and describes it. The reader must be active in the act of discorporation, to imagine themselves outside of their reality, but as soon as they have substituted their own world for the shared world of voice and reader they become passive, imagined versions of themselves, experiencing the action in the poem as if on a screen, every shot and focus controlled by a version of events relayed by the voice.

This readerly position, or rather disposition, is not an overt device. Donaghy is using a narrative convention that is typical of first person narrative poems, of which he has many. Equally this readerly position is a convention for the reader, so much so that the shared 'other' world goes unnoticed, just as one stops noticing the figures

surrounding them in a cinema the moment the lights dim, and this is perhaps why it is so effective. The reader is taught to intuitively snap into the mode of spectator and is engulfed by the viewpoint of the voice almost without noticing. They are prompted to forget their own world momentarily and be led through the narrative world of the voice. 'Ramon Fernandez?' physically engages the reader by inviting them to disengage with their physical world and share the experience of the physical world of the poem through a passive dialogue with the voice. Interestingly, in a poem which seems to be about naively trusting that which is relayed to you and being betrayed, the readerly experience is one that is defined by their placing of trust into the hands of the voice, in believing the perspective relayed to them.

The narrative structure is also of importance since it provides the rhetorical framework, the drive of the poem. The narratorial rhetoric, the mediative phrasing of anecdote which moves the poem from one image or event to the next, can be evidenced throughout, providing a sense of temporal space and timescale: 'when I fought in the brigade', 'I recall…', 'One day he vanished'. Donaghy moves the narrative along with the ease of conversation, of a rehearsed recollection. It would seem that while the reader digests these mediative phrases the words are more phatic utterances linking the more key events in the poem – striking images like the 'blue lacquered guitar', 'white knuckles over carbines' (16) – which fix the world visually and provide the reader with tangible objects to reproduce in their imagination. The effect is that, rather than a flat picture, constituted by an assembly of images, Donaghy's images occur in an arranged sequence, a slow-release of information to the reader, allowing them to maintain a steady engagement with the narrative. As the reader accepts the voice's 'directorial' monopoly of image and viewpoint, the steady

engagement created by the anecdotal style means that the shared space of voice and reader is never broken. The images do not appear so intensely that the reader might become conscious of the page, the conscious cadence of poetics, nor do they become disengaged by a lack of image, the 'screen' does not go blank, returning them to their world, the crowded cinema. Donaghy is prompting a physical engagement with the poem, asking the reader to imagine themselves out of their immediate surroundings and into the shared space of the poem, where they relocate their physical engagement through the experiences of the voice.

Moreover, we could view Donaghy's narrative structure as a broader kind of syntax, a set of rules which orders language events. The aspects of narrative structure that the reader *senses* and which are inferred outside of denoted *meaning* (i.e. suspense, tension, bathos), occur within the wider narrative structure of the whole poem. Donaghy's narrative is *sensed* because this overall rhetorical arc is not denoted, does not belong to *meaning*, rather we intuitively register it during a sustained process of signification. We physically feel the narrative, just as we understand the *meaning* of the sequence of events. Furthermore, if narrative structure could be seen as a *symbolic* aspect in the way it orders experience, it could also be argued that the first person narrator disturbs and upsets this order, even as it creates it. The moment when the presence of the speaker as a character becomes apparent through phatic or conversational language, the narrative world of the poem opens into the shared space between reader and speaker. How can a linear narrative structure survive these constant interruptions? The *meaning* of the text is challenged by the reader's desire to simultaneously imagine that they occupy the past scenario of civil war Spain and 'Ramon Fernandez' and the present situation with the speaker. It is as if as readers we

are intuitively able to experience the poem on two channels, are able to *sense* both scenarios as we manoeuvre between a passive readerly position and an imaginary space we share with the speaker.

In the final two lines of 'Ramon Fernandez?' the voice describes a clock face with the hands broken off as 'a phase of the moon' (27). Each element within the simile, both the clock face and the metaphorical image of the moon, are events locked within the narrative structure of the sentence and the poem as a whole. Syntactical arrangements happen in 'time'. Just as a line break forces the reader to hold the end word of a line in mind for the quarter of a second it takes for the eye to move to the beginning of the next, so *meaning* is dependent on one word appearing after another. With metaphor such as the clock 'face' seen in terms of a 'phase of the moon' we are being asked to challenge not just the *meaning* of each element (since a clock 'face' is not the same as a 'phase of the moon') but also the syntactical arrangement upon which *meaning* is also dependent. At the moment the simile is completed the reader is prompted to re-experience both elements simultaneously; an act directly in conflict with the syntactical structure of the poem and the specific defined *meaning* of each word.

It is the electricity passing between tenor and vehicle, the connotation overlapping and resisting in equal measure that thrills the reader. It is this syntactical disturbance that is needed to create a new metaphorical understanding based on overlapping connotations and which compels the reader to make *sense*. The metaphor itself, via the new logic of its comparison, seems to suggest that time, as measured by the clock, what one might regard as regular, mechanical time, is in some way questionable,

defined by a human experience of history rather than existing in a regular,

metronomic dimension.

Perhaps one of the reasons metaphor is such a dominant element in poetics is because

it creates these syntactical disturbances where *meaning* is put at risk, and in order to

reconcile the disturbance, the reader must instead rely on a *sense* of what is being

said.

4.5 The Chamber of Errors

The term 'doppelgänger' comes from the German, meaning 'double walker' and describes the phenomenon of bilocation, when a person occupies two spaces at the same time. It also describes the ghostly appearance of a person's exact double, to the individual themselves or another party. In Donaghy's 'The Chamber of Errors'[107] the notion of the doppelgänger is relevant as the poem describes a peculiar and macabre wax work collection of 'the faces left in photobooths' (9); wax doubles of 'rushed commuters' (10), constructed from the images of themselves they have discarded.

Moreover, the term could also be applied to explore some of the poetic techniques Donaghy uses in the poem to thrill the reader; the effect of pun, or metaphor relies on the simultaneous appearance in the mind of the reader of two elements which at the moment of comparison, must occupy the same space, share the same features, behave and be alike, as 'doppelgängers'.

The poem's title 'The Chamber of Errors' is an unsettling play on the familiar term 'chamber of horrors', which refers to the now relatively rare fairground or sideshow attraction in which waxworks of murderers, or sinister, sometimes mythical, creatures or characters are displayed as curiosities. In a typical chamber of horrors, it was usual for these macabre wax dummies to be accompanied by a room or 'chamber' of distorting mirrors, so that the viewer could also view their own altered reflections. One could make an allegorical leap and compare these distortions to poetry. In the words of the poet Wallace Stevens: 'Metaphor creates a new reality from which the

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[107] Michael Donaghy, 'The Chamber of Errors', *Errata* in *Dances Learned Last Night* (London: Picador, 2000) p.85. Further references to this poem are given after quotations in the text.

original appears to be unreal'[108]. If we take poetic language and form to be the distorting mirror, we can view the altered, unreal reflections of ourselves as a 'new reality', estranged from our own. The effect of this estrangement is a renewed awareness of the actual world we occupy. As David Constantine asserts, 'The common, the commonplace, will only be brought home to us by means of a language beautifully and intriguingly and shockingly estranging it'[109]. But making strange goes against the usual denotative value of language, which seeks to define and make clear the concepts it puts into place. When we estrange in poetry, we use connotation to make new connections, we mutate away from *meaning* and force a new *sense* of what is being communicated upon the reader. The same connections could also be made between the waxworks and the people they represent. Confronted by the doppelgänger, one is 'shockingly estranged' from the person it resembles because the waxwork is inanimate, inhuman and therefore at odds with our existing notion of the living body. Perhaps it is the tension between our relationship with the living body and the inanimate representation of the body, that once made waxworks so popular; they shock and renew our idea of the human form by looking at once inanimate and yet disturbingly 'living', just as we are thrilled by poetic language which seems at first to be ambiguous or in conflict with *meaning* but prompts us to form new understandings in terms of *sense*.

The title of the Donaghy poem itself performs the trick of the doppelgänger. The reader expects 'chamber of horrors', but instead finds the pun 'Errors'. Punning creates a bathetic collapse of expectation that most commonly provokes laughter, or in this case (since the 'distortion' is arguably not intended as entirely humorous) a

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[108] Wallace Stevens, '*from* Adagia', *Strong Words* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2002), p.63.
[109] David Constantine, 'Common and Peculiar', *Strong Words* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2002), p.227.

different kind of physical reaction, registering the upset in syntax. As with metaphor, punning forces the simultaneous experience of two concepts at the same moment, constituting a fracture or upset in the *symbolic* order of the sentence. The reader experiences both the concept of 'horror' and 'error' simultaneously and it is the charge passed between the two terms that makes each momentarily indexical of the other. The 'error' here is ominous and sets up the expectation of the macabre, of wrongness. As a result the 'Chamber' is re-established as a darker atmospheric space, inviting intrigue, suspicion and suspense from the reader as they approach the beginning of the poem itself.

As in 'Shibboleth'[110] and other Donaghy poems, the opening line quickly establishes the scenario, though more through insinuation and the specific location created by the name 'Tussaud's' (referring to the world famous waxworks museum): 'It never gets as crowded as Tussaud's/But everyday we draw the curious few' (1/2). A comparison is being made between 'Tussaud's' and the first word of the poem, 'It', which following on from the title, we can assume to be the 'Chamber of Errors' itself. The fact that it 'never gets as crowded' insinuates that, although there are similarities enough to justify a comparison, there is something different about the 'Chamber of Errors' which makes it less popular. Given the macabre pun in the title and the atmosphere of caution it generates, the first line invites the reader to suspect darker, threatening reasons for its comparable unpopularity; why does it not attract as many visitors as Madame Tussaud's? What might deter visitors?

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[110] Michael Donaghy, 'Shibboleth', *Shibboleth* in *Dances Learned Last Night* (London: Picador, 2000), p19.

The insinuative tone puts pressure on the denoted *meaning* and forces the reader to *sense* a menacing subtext; 'curious few' in this context seems to refer to the curiosity of the visitors, but also invites the second definition of the term, that is, 'strange; unusual'[111]. The visitors become active agents in the weird scene the poem constructs, their presence makes them implicit in the strange world of the poem that they occupy.

This idea is developed as the sentence runs over into lines three to five. Part of these characters' strangeness is that they have 'seen our sticker on the underground,/ Our card in a phone box, and felt/ That, somehow, it was printed just for them.' (3/4/5) Donaghy is deliberately aligning the waxworks with the sex trade and other illicit underworld activities, the 'card in a phone box' being a renowned means of advertising prostitution and the 'sticker on the underground' indexing the unofficial and unregulated. Equally these two phrases clearly position image-objects into atmospheric spaces; the reader is forced to visualise, to spot the 'card' and 'sticker' specifically in place, further involving them in the world of the poem as they mirror the actions of the waxworks' visitors. The line break after 'and felt' is particularly good, as if it were a pause for thought: both the speaker's, but also the client's. It also places a rhythmical emphasis on the 'somehow' in the following line, so that the word is emphasised along with the concept it implies, the feeling of strangeness. It is a moment whereby rhythm is used to add further tonal character to the *meaning* and since rhythm exists outside of this realm of defined dictionary value, it can be regarded as a *sensory* aspect.

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[111] OED

The key dramatic element of these lines, however, is the notion that the adverts were 'printed just for them', that one of the 'curious few' (2) was destined to find them, or more dangerously, that the adverts were positioned specifically for them to see. The notion of destiny in itself is not inherently sinister, rather it is most commonly represented as the engine of heroics, as the reliable agent driving the determined hero against all odds, but here destiny is being manipulated, controlled and used to deceive and trap. In line six more directly sinister implications are introduced: 'Of course, it was' (6) having the effect of a punch-line: bathetic, surprising, replacing mystery with a more overt, macabre menace.

The implications of the advertisements being deliberately positioned to be seen by specific individuals, changes how we view both the voice and the world of the poem they construct. It is interesting that rhythmically 'Of **course**, it **was**' creates a stalling, a dramatic, almost comedic pause at the comma, to indicate the weight of the phrase and its importance. The iambic stress forces emphasis onto the word 'course', but the comma stops the sentence running easily into one phrase; it breaks the four beats into two definite iambic feet which helps the reader judge the pace of the line, but more importantly, how it should be voiced, therefore its tone, and the short pause before the punchline, should be interpreted.

The phrase 'Of course' (6) is also less certain and more conversational. The pause is for thought, or perhaps is comically timed and this brings the presence of the voice as a character, as a corporeal subject, to the fore. The reader becomes aware, through the truncation of the iambic rhythm into two separately registered feet, of the personality behind the line, of the presence of a speaker and the line being voiced. Previous to

this moment the reader is only aware of the voice as part of a collective group – 'we' is used in line two – but in line six, through the upset in rhythm and its effect on tone, a singular character emerges as speaker.

The emergence of a character occurs immediately before a swift turn in the poem's direction. Donaghy manoeuvres our attention from a general and abstract space of the poem to a more specific location, the voice asking the reader to 'Step in and look around' (6). With the character of the voice established, so the reader must imagine an addressee, both at the entrance to the waxworks. Perhaps more importantly the reader is hailed directly by the imperative 'Step in' and so there is also a gesture towards the reader to imagine themselves as the addressee, as a physical participant in the scene. Donaghy, having created a sinister world, asks the reader to 'Step in' to it and out of themselves, in order to occupy the world of the poem.

With the reader involved as the addressee in the poem, Donaghy uses the second person to further establish a sense of direct dialogue between voice and reader: 'You haven't come for Marilyn or Elvis./ Like you, I loathe that taxidermal bathos' (7/8). There is a definite attempt by the voice to align itself with the addressee/reader by speaking and expressing views on their behalf, but if anything the peculiar subject and terminology is too surprising to be accepted as automatic common ground or some kind of universal truth. The friction between this attempt and its failure uncovers more about the character of the voice itself than its relationship with the addressee. The term 'taxidermal bathos' is so highly specific and mannered that to impose it on the addressee as a phrase drawn from a shared set of values or opinions, seems uncomfortable. The reader is more likely to be distracted by specifics of the

lexis as they decipher the term, than to feel aligned with its meaning, to feel aptly spoken for. Instead, the comfort with which the voice uses the term has the opposite effect of creating distance with the reader, highlighting their strangeness and difference. The voice is clearly unusual.

This is developed in the following lines: 'We use the faces left in photobooths/ By rushed commuters' (10), the verb 'use' carrying particularly disturbing ambiguity. How are their faces 'used'? A face is so intrinsically human and unique that one cannot help but imagine its 'use' to be in some way a violation; it suggests 'defacement'. Moreover, the fact that the faces belong to 'rushed commuters' (Donaghy, 85) insinuates that they are not complicit or perhaps aware of their faces being 'used', furthering this sense of violation.

This macabre and violent subtext climaxes as the stanza draws to a close. 'Their eyes already closed,/ We only have to make them *look* like wax' (10/11). Again it is on a subtextual level that the danger in the poem is uncovered. The 'commuters' with 'their eyes already closed' could simply refer to the fact that the photos had captured them blinking and that being 'rushed' they chose to discard them. It is the word 'already' which leads the reader into darker territory, since it implies their closing is inevitable. Why? Given the subtext of violence already present in the poem, the reader is actively invited to construct alternative *meanings* through further associations, they are forced to *sense* what danger or strangeness faces them. Whilst these will be unique to each reader, the closing of eyes, or eyes being closed is heavily suggestive of death (or at least closed eyes infer vulnerability and therefore threat), but crucially it is the way the poem is designed that asks for such associations.

The poem is both ambiguous and insinuative, hinging on mystery and the prompting of the reader's unique imagination in order to navigate it in a way that is satisfying.

Donaghy plays with these associations and develops a range of possible readings through his sustained use of the semantic field of sight and eyes, for example the italicised '*look*' (11) playing on the idea of resemblance, but also seeing. The double-meaning here makes it difficult to deduce exactly what the voice is saying and this effect is supported by the italicisation itself, which has the dual effect of drawing attention to the double-meaning, whilst also placing emphasis on its importance. The poem is already a long way into the thematic realm of the doppelg nger. There is the notion of discarded versions of ourselves in photographic form alongside the waxwork doubles or 'Errors'. The language too is one of complex double-entendre and duplicity; each line at once expressing one thing, but suggesting another and each version merely resembling a fixed *meaning* while alluding to a subtextual, connotational *sense*. Equally the second person invites the reader to imagine themselves as the addressee, or perhaps more accurately, as a version of themselves within the world of the poem. They are 'double-walking' in the strange, ambiguous space occupied by the voice, whose coded language of subtext and imperative means they are only ever as in control as their unstable cycle of interpretation and re-interpretation allows.

All that the reader can rely on, in this absence of clear *meaning*, is their *sense* of the poem, that which they physically register. It is this physical, intuitive *sense* which registers as horror, the chill and tension generated by apprehending the language in

non-language terms. Donaghy has removed the certainty of stable, *symbolic* ordering and definitions through insinuation, double-meaning and subtext.

The second stanza announces a shift in tone and direction for the poem. With the second-person character now established within 'The Chamber of Errors', the voice draws attention to exhibits specifically. For this the voice switches to a more grandiose and archaic cadence and tone, with the switched syntax of 'Now look you' (12). This tone impacts on how the reader experiences the phrase 'the unfamiliar dead' (12), used to describe the exhibits. The use of 'dead' implies that the exhibits had once been alive, straining the plausibility that they are merely waxworks; rather than being inanimate, the exhibits seem to be preserved remains, their presence in the museum growing increasingly suspicious, macabre and chilling.

The term 'unfamiliar' is interesting as it implants a sense of strangeness, otherness, whilst also reminding the reader of its opposite 'familiar'. The use of the negative 'un' is a device used to simultaneously refer to the positive opposite meaning. It actively forces the reader to experience both meanings; the reader has to process the notion of the 'familiar' in order to negate it and make sense of its alternative. By actively performing this negation, they are conceptually animating the phrase, but they are also challenging the syntactical arrangement of the line in a similar way to metaphor. Just as metaphor asks the reader to entertain two sequential elements simultaneously in order to make them comparable or interchangeable, so too does this process of negation. Despite the 'un' appearing before the 'familiar', we can only know what we are negating after we have experienced it and so we are struck by the 'un' again as it enacts the conceptual negating process. Arguably this is a further

example of how *meaning*, which is governed by a stable syntactical sequence, can be challenged and the reader must instead participate in making *sense*. The reader is certainly an active participant in the negation process and this participation is prompted by the text as its *meaning* is challenged.

The 'unfamiliar dead' as a concept does not allow the reader to rely on any preconceived knowledge about the person when they were alive. Their presence is alien, un-contextualised and unexplainable. Their deadness is the dominant definable feature and it is this quality of the unknown that confronts and threatens the reader.

The high tone announced in the opening line of the stanza is continued with a rhetorical repetition of 'More than' in subsequent lines thirteen and fourteen. The tension in the poem increases as the reader imagines the voice and their delivery of the line, which has become increasingly hyperbolic, or oratorical. Part of this accumulation of emphasis and heightened tone is the sudden brutality of the metaphor 'pancaked meat' (13) to describe the body in a 'satin casket' (13). Even the word 'satin' here, which usually indexes a level of luxury appropriate for the coffin lining of a loved one, seems to infer a disdainful tone. The use of 'caskets' in favour of the softer sounding 'coffin' creates a spitting sibilant emphasis to the line ending.

As the language becomes more rhetorical, it also becomes more abstract, particularly focusing on the concept of forgiveness: 'These are your unforgiven' (15) and 'the unforgiving memories' (14). It is difficult to deduce the exact meaning of such lofty abstract assertions, as the lack of concrete referents or further extrapolation leaves the reader feeling affronted with concepts beyond their reach. For what should the

exhibits be 'forgiven' and why and how have they been denied forgiveness? Perhaps the line refers to the earlier notion of the 'faces left in photobooths' (9) on which the waxworks are based, being discarded and rejected. What is most important here is not how exactly the sentence is to be made sense of or how it relates the other information in the poem, rather that the reader is made aware of this perceived notion of forgiveness and therefore retribution or atonement in the mind of the voice: 'be warned' (15) it says. Even if the reader is unable to completely understand the rationale of the voice, they are at least made aware of the existence of a rationale, moreover one which is peculiar and potentially threatening, informing the reader's accumulating understanding of the voice as a character in the poem.

What follows is an intriguing simile: 'Like faces glimpsed in fever on the curtains,/ these will never truly go away' (16). The comparison is made between the faces of the waxworks and the delirious visions of faces one might experience during a fever. Equating these two in such a way is interesting because of the specificity of the vehicle, since these are not merely 'faces', but 'faces…on the curtains'. Donaghy's deliberate placing of the 'faces' on the 'curtains' not only aids the reader's imagination of them, but the specific nature of the detail 'curtains' suggests a real experience. Perhaps the voice is drawing the comparison from its own experience? If so, then it impacts on how we view what it is saying, it explains to a degree how it has developed a rationale that the reader is not party to. Certainly, since these hallucinations continue to haunt it: 'These will never truly go away'. Greater emphasis is placed on the line because of the hard stress on 'These' which upsets the natural iambic rhythm of the poem, forcing a stalling for the reader and adding to the impact of the line.

Most significantly, this simile suggests that viewing the waxworks will have a permanent, unerasable effect. It concretely establishes that bearing witness to the horrors, or rather 'Errors', within the museum is more traumatic and lasting than the reader might be led to expect. The voice seems to be warning that there is a permanent consequence of looking.

At this threatening point in the poem another shift in tone and tension occurs. Keeping the slightly archaic lexis and syntax – 'and after, should you need to rest' (18) – the voice becomes warmer, with the offer of the 'chesterfield' (19) for those many visitors who become exhausted by what they are seeing. The choice of 'chesterfield' is interesting not only because it refers to a more specific kind of image than 'sofa' or 'chair', but also because of the level of formality, the specificity deployed by the voice in choosing to call it by its brand or maker's name. This choice of word, indexical of elegance and refinement (as much by the choice of the word as by the connotations of the word itself) further serves to characterise the voice as well as giving an intriguing impression of the location of the poem. Previous to this detail little has been said of the 'Chamber of Errors' itself apart from the exhibits. Now with the specificity and register of 'chesterfield', it would appear to have an incongruous elegance or refinement, which ultimately jars with the atmosphere created by earlier details.

Rhythmically 'chesterfield' completes the iambic pentameter of the line and the line that follows is the first to break this regular pattern since the emphatic 'These' at the beginning of line fifteen. The effect of this is that the cautionary 'But please, please' (20) arrives as an interruption. It undercuts the stable regularity of the passage.

Moreover, the repeated 'please, please' slows the line so that when the reader arrives at 'this is important' (20) all the weight falls on the 'this' directing the reader towards a way of reading the line through highlighting the specific emphasis. It is a rhetorical emphasis, rhythmically creating suspense, an anticipation of what will follow.

Donaghy breaks the stanza here on 'this is important,' to formally echo the emphasis of the statement with a visual pause. His decision to begin each line with a capital letter, rather than enjambing in a strictly grammatical sense with a lowercase letter, further adds to this effect as the first line of the final stanza begins with a more insistent, capitalised 'Don't touch.' (21) The voice then continues: 'I spend my life repairing details' (21). This sentence is enlightening in the sense that it provides a context for the intense feeling the speaker has towards the waxworks. The character of the voice not only works in the museum, but also repairs the exhibits with an obvious degree of obsession and care. This idea is exemplified to a greater extent as the poem draws towards a close – 'See where I've pressed the hairs in one by one?/ And here? See where I've whorled the fingerpads?' (22/23) The extreme level of attention and accuracy deployed by the voice is flagrantly apparent throughout these lines, where the voice is not only concerned with a degree of likeness, but evidently with creating an exact replica and maintaining its exactitude to the extent of obsession. It is uncomfortable for the reader here, because the voice seems to be leaning close by indicating detail; we have to imagine these specific details up close and there is a sense that doing so brings us within claustrophobic proximity of this peculiar speaker.

Oddly, the lengths the voice is prepared to go to in order to create an exact replica seem unnatural, hyperreal. '[F]ingerpads' is a particularly active word in this sense, because each fingerprint is a unique means of identification, dependent on near microscopic elements of variation from person to person. It seems absurd that any normal person would take such pains and so the reader is led to the conclusion that the voice is abnormal. Another reading might lead to the conclusion that such a degree of accuracy and detail is implausible for a replica, insinuating grimly, that the waxworks are not replicas at all, but real people, an idea in keeping with the macabre leanings of the poem as a whole.

Given that the voice has been established as abnormal or at very least extraordinary, the penultimate line 'I can't think what possesses people' (24) reads as ironic to the reader; the voice is openly admitting its inability to understand 'people', i.e. the rest of 'normal' society. This exasperated admission is suddenly drowned out by the italicised '*Christ,*'[112] which indicates a sudden realisation, or moment of frustration. It suggests an increase in volume, a critical overload of emotion.

If this surprises the reader, then they are quickly given a reason for the outburst – 'Sometimes, at night, I find the faces gouged.' (25) This final line is extremely active. One of the most obvious features is the pause 'at night' which inserts into the sentence a specific temporal context and atmosphere of darkness. However, the significance of 'night' lies also in the fact that it gives rise to a number of questions: why 'at night'? Does the line imply that the waxworks are open 'at night' to visitors?

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[112] It is worth mentioning that the term '*Christ*' here might also trigger a further range of associations to do with the theme of Catholicism so prevalent in Donaghy's work, though it is difficult to assert what the impact of such associations might be in this case.

If not, then is the vandalism the act of nocturnal intruders? If not, then who is present to gouge the faces, or is it the voice or even the waxworks themselves?

Without 'at night' the reader would be led to the assumption that it is the visitors who gouge the faces of the exhibits. With it, they are forced to question its significance and thus propel the potential meaning of the last line into uncertain, unsettling territory. Indeed, much of the tension, drama and horror in 'The Chamber of Errors', derives from uncertainties, from the insinuation of an undisclosed otherness, which is scary precisely because it is unknown. In the last line, just as the voice becomes more concretely defined, Donaghy opens the poem out to a mass of potential meanings and connotations, which at once engage, shock and confuse the reader. We are confronted with certain, obvious acts of violence, but are left unable, within the macabre world of the poem, to understand what this violence means or who is behind it. The physical chill the reader experiences at the image of faces being 'gouged' is left reverberating, leading down avenue after avenue of potential readings. The reader is unlikely to draw any firm conclusion, rather they are prompted to entertain their uncertainty; they are left suspended in a state of unknowing. The *meaning* of the poem remains unclear and its ambiguous ending prompts the reader to rely on *sense*, to be directed by an intuitive understanding of their own uncertainty; the thrill created by a mixture of terror and the unexplainable is a kind of answer to the poem and the feelings produced amount to a readerly experiential understanding and not one underpinned by logic or rationality.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Writing and Reading

In 'My Report Card' Michael Donaghy explains that: 'It's embarrassing to talk about one's own poetry in prose, which may be why we have to endure so many poems about poetry'[113]. By expressing distaste towards poets examining poetry within their work he also highlights a common writerly desire to be guarded from the pretentious sounding business of talking about poems. While it is worth acknowledging that good poetry is rarely far from being intellectual or philosophical, most poets would stop short, or jump off a tall building, before openly calling themselves 'intellectuals' or 'philosophers'. But there is more at stake than writerly embarrassment; while it might make most poets cringe to be asked to discuss their work (or at least this is the impression they wish to give), there is the serious implication that an author is inadvertently drawn into monopolising the potential meaning of their work the minute they open their mouth. As irritating as it is for a poet to find their work 'mis-read' according to their own associations, few poets will feel happy with the idea of explaining what a poem is "about" or what a poem "means" with any certainty. It is the fact that only the terms of the poem can express its concerns that make it a work of art.

Indeed, given that poems express ideas unique and particular to their mode of expression, it can feel crude, reductive or trite to unpack what is being said in baggier

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[113]Michael Donaghy, 'My Report Card', *The Shape of the Dance* (London: Picador, 2009), p.94.

prosaic terms, to commit the 'heresy of paraphrase'[114], as the critic Cleanth Brooks

termed it. The poet Emily Berry once told me: 'I write poems precisely so I don't

have to talk about those things'. Yet there remains a need among practitioners to

understand the nature of their practice and if, as Donaghy suggests, poems are not the

most suitable medium for this kind of enquiry perhaps there is equal weight to the

argument that poets should face this embarrassment and talk about their processes, if

not for any other reason than to explain why they should not have to. Poets knowingly

or unknowingly demonstrate through their practice, an awareness of their art and the

technical, theoretical processes that take place during the act of writing. An awareness

of these processes, whether conscious or intuitive, is an unavoidable, irremovable

characteristic of laying claim to being part of an ongoing artistic tradition and we

should encourage a demystification of poetic practice if we are to better understand

this tradition, rather than fear it or protect the secrecy surrounding it. Part of the role

of Creative Writing studies is to openly engage with these questions, not merely to

improve a student's output, but also to investigate the phenomenon of writing practice

itself.

However, one problem with talking theoretically about creative practice is that one

can only explain what is happening from the outside; as soon as a theory is applied it

announces its alien presence as not being part of the text itself, not part of the reader's

immediate relationship with the work of art in front of them. As Tzvetan Todorov

writes: 'it is impossible to interpret a work, literary or otherwise, for and in itself,

without leaving it for a moment, without projecting it elsewhere than upon itself.'[115]

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[114] Cleanth Brooks, 'The Heresy of Paraphrase', *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (London: Harvest, 1970), p.192.
[115] Tzvetan Todorov, 'Definition of Poetics', *Introduction to Poetics*, trans. Richard Howard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.4.

Furthermore, the limits of theory announce themselves as soon as one tries to define any aspects of language which function outside of ordered words and grammatical rules. Kristeva admits of her theory of poetic language that 'since it is itself a metalanguage, semiotics can do no more than postulate[…]as soon as it speaks about it, it homogenizes the phenomenon, links it with a system, loses hold of it'[116]. How can we theorise, or hope to apprehend in language, phenomena that we are seeking to position specifically outside those terms? I tried to confront such problems when writing this thesis. In using the term *sense,* I have hoped to openly acknowledge the limits of theory by using a term which acknowledges an otherness outside of conscious language use by drawing on a word already associated with both libidinal and conceptual apprehension. In developing my own terminology I also hope to address the problem of applying theory to my work as an exterior analytical tool. I designed theory as part of my own processes of reading and writing; developing my terminology in this way felt similar to an act of writing poetry, as opposed to the application strategies of a theorist.

Perhaps the way we try to discuss and write poems, can be reconciled in this manner to answer to the problematic embarrassment practitioners can feel when commentating on their own writing. One can acknowledge that poetry is philosophically futile in its attempts to link sign with referent, in its attempts to render feeling outside of the material of feeling itself, just as one might conclude that in language theory, when discussing unconscious activity one is attempting the impossible, because one is restricted to a conscious understanding of it. Both poet and critical theorist are interested in exploring a certain otherness, an elusive aspect which

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[116] Julia Kristeva, 'The System and the Speaking Subject', *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.30.

can be registered, felt, but which remains conceptually and ultimately beyond them as makers and users of language. It is precisely because this otherness exists beyond our terminological grasp that art persists in its interrogation and theory continues to examine our responses to these unanswerable questions. Both disciplines continue to reappraise, rethink and enliven their practices in the hope of achieving impossible goals. The following words of the critic Jonathan Culler could equally apply to poetry:

> Our assumptions that significant things will be said in critical writings may be an expectation more frequently defeated than fulfilled but its presence, indeed its extraordinary persistence in the face of defeat, suggests that we see literary criticism as a discipline that aims for knowledge.[117]

Essential to the act of writing a poem is the awareness that one is asking poetry itself to formulate in new terms the many questions that cannot be answered; in this sense poetry is also a discipline that 'aims for knowledge'. Perhaps we read and write poems in order to make ourselves vulnerable to the uncertainty presented by such questions, that we might be reminded of the huge mysteries that still surround what we are, what we feel and do. Perhaps the function of poetry is to confront us with dynamic doubt; good poetry responds to unknowns not with supposition, guesswork, rather it frames unanswerable questions in a way that thrills us, scares us and leaves us vulnerable to the limits of our conscious apprehension, in order that a sense of awe and mystery floods in. This might explain why we still widely recognise poems as the home of the profound utterance, often reserved for occasions when we recognise the limits of 'ordinary language'. George Szirtes writes:

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[117]Jonathan Culler, 'Semiotics as a Theory of Reading', *The Pursuit of Signs* (London: Routledge, 1981), p.51.

> People who never read poetry in their adulthood do nevertheless have some sense of poetry's function. They understand it as commemoration and celebration. The death of Princess Diana produced thousands of short homespun poems, as do birthdays, weddings and other common rites of passage. People with few poetic gifts understand that the peculiar verbal patterns we call poems achieve something more than statements do: that poetry is not simply a decorative way of speaking but something with a function.[118]

The act of reading a poem is far from passive. It requires the gymnastic act of re-imagining, re-feeling, redefining words and terms in order to overcome ambiguity, or metaphorical leaps. When reading somebody else's poem I am thus writing my own into its shape. As a practitioner, it is hard not to see this process as a rehearsal of the acts I perform when writing. Perhaps when reading, poets can exercise a hyperawareness to the surface of the language as something constructed. It is impossible to say, but every reader uses language on a practical level; reading poems, participating in their meaning is always a poetic, imaginative act, an act of poetry. Perhaps one might even claim that reading and writing a poem are the same thing, are two processes which always happen simultaneously; the writer is also necessarily a reader of their work while the reader re-writes the poem into being according to their unique associations.

However, the idea that writing and reading are the same can be difficult for a poet to believe. While I feel that in writing, creative freedom is still within my possession, that I lead the poem where I choose and it follows me, I am unable to forget that the conscious apprehension of an idea is in itself a rendering of the idea in language. In this sense, writing is also the act of reading myself, of reading my thoughts as I transpose feeling into language. I have therefore come to view myself as a

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[118] George Szirtes, 'Thin Ice and the Midnight Skaters', *The Poetry Library* < http://www.poetrylibrary.org.uk/news/poetryscene/?id=168> [accessed 22 September 2009].

simultaneous reader and writer of my work, since each position involves performing the tasks of the other. Given that I use my own associations to activate and imagine my poems into being, reading my own work places limits on its potential meanings and effects. While it is possible to argue that my reading could be in some way definitive, the reality is that a reading of my own poems actually closes down the potential connections a poem is able to make and given that a poem is designed as an act of communication and transaction, the logic that an author's reading is definitive leads to contradiction, a kind of narcissism.

Such conclusions have been drawn from the dual processes of reading Donaghy's work and writing my own; the notion of *sense*, of a physical faculty of interpreting gaps in *meaning*, has not only led me to examine my writing practice, but also my reading practice. Reading Donaghy's work has never been an avoidance of confronting my own, rather an exploration into how a poem functions as a communicative act, a transaction between two participating parties, and how this exploration is further complicated by my also being a poet. In the following chapter I will discuss how as a reader of Donaghy's work I have also been a writer of my own, how by choosing to conduct a critical commentary of somebody else's poems, I have been better positioned to understand my own practice.

5.2 Underwood

In an interview with John Stammers, Michael Donaghy writes that:

> Our word 'person' derives from the Greek for mask. Now you may believe that mask, or the mask you see every morning in the mirror, is the real you, but who holds that belief, who's looking through the eyes of that mask?

By questioning the validity of the idea of a stable self Donaghy further complicates the relationship between poet and voice. It is impossible to decipher the point where one's poetic voice overlaps with the voice one thinks with, or uses to answer a telephone, especially given that even in life, our selfhood, and the means by which we apprehend or construct it, is also contingent and in flux.

In my own work I have become increasingly aware of the tension and relation between persona, voice, and personality. Even texts written in the third person (bearing in mind Donaghy's etymological point about the term 'person' above) are 'voiced' in so far as any sentence or arrangement of words implies a maker, a subject interpolating through them, even when this subject is hidden or extraneous to the action which they narrate. One cannot escape the inherent characterising aspect of the written word, which is always voiced, not just through tone, register, or content, but by the sheer fact of meaning being offered. It is impossible to conceive of a sentence that does not appear to speak on behalf of a subject. Even a road sign 'stop' hails us as if it were spoken, as if it belonged to a subject, or a group of subjects. Everything expressed on the page is done so within the inescapable, contingent framework of characterisation; no sooner do we read a word off the page, than we begin to learn of the subject(s) who needs must be offering the information to us; where there is language there is consciousness, intelligence.

Throughout my analyses I have noticed this aspect and have begun to feel an increasing distance between the person speaking in my poems and my own voice, or perhaps a sense that my selfhood cannot be expressed through language alone and that no words can therefore be a stable product of my personality, whether in poems or not. Indeed, nearly all words predate me, so if anything, it is a case that they 'produce' me through my usage of them. Since the language cannot contain my diffuse and shifting self-image second by second, words, like relics, sketch only the shape of an intelligence that once existed; the words have already ceased to be mine.

Perhaps this feeling of loss of ownership over words or voice is to do with the fact that when reading my own work there is a sense that more is happening than my simply talking back to myself. Even if the voice seems to resemble my own self-image, or articulates a version of a specific experience I have lived through, the fact that I am being hailed by this voice off the page creates a separate sense of dialogue between me, the reader, and this new other person. It is a dynamic distance in the sense that I am forced into a position of objectivity towards a record of my own subjectivity. I enter a scenario in which I am not reading my own words but having them spoken by someone else entirely.

The formulation of this 'other person' happens innately and realisation of this fact has large implications. I no longer worry about how 'I' am presenting 'myself' in poems and I also reject any hierarchy based on the notion of truth, or authenticity according to how closely the voice mimics real life events. The world of the poem is free to establish its own rules and the characters within it, their own roles and relations. This idea of writing through a 'persona' is a common feature of poetry that extends further

than its usage as device in forms such as the dramatic monologue (a recent example of this kind of persona, with the speaker as device, can be seen widely in the 'Mad Cow' poems of Jo Shapcott for example[119]) and instead could arguably be true of all poems. Baldick outlines a modern critical position which argues that:

> the speaker in any poem should be referred to as the persona, to avoid the unreliable assumption that we are listening to the true voice of the poet.[120]

When I write in first person I enjoy the uncertainty of not knowing the speaker, of relying on subtext, tone, and trusting ambiguity, as in Donaghy's 'The Chamber of Errors': 'I loathe that taxidermal bathos'[121], or in my own 'My Steak': 'for I am a living beak/ and all my teeth are hungry'[122]. In both cases the subject of the poem and the speaker oscillate in a symbiotic relationship, so that each new detail expressed, further expresses a sense of the speaker. Whether I am writing about so called 'true' events or not, the speaker is never me, only the shape of a figure accumulated through the specific expressions of the poem.

Another overriding feature I have explored in the analyses is the positioning of an addressee by the voice. By simply saying 'you' or by writing in the imperative, a very specific kind of scenario is created. In the poems quoted above there are such moments: 'Step in and look around'[123] in the Donaghy and in my poem: 'When you cook it for me try/ not to cook it'[124]. The figure of the addressee plays a large role in

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[119] In both her collections *Phrase Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) and *My Life Asleep* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) Jo Shapcott wrote a series of poems using the persona of a 'Mad Cow' e.g. 'The Mad Cow in Love' or 'The Mad Cow in Space'.
[120] Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p.254.
[121] Michael Donaghy, 'The Chamber of Errors', *Errata* in *Dances Learned Last Night* (London: Picador, 2000) p.85.
[122] Jack Underwood, 'My Steak', 'Part I', *Wakefield and Other Poems*, p.9.
[123] Michael Donaghy, 'The Chamber of Errors', *Errata* in *Dances Learned Last Night* (London: Picador, 2000) p.85.
[124] Jack Underwood, 'My Steak', 'Part I', *Wakefield and Other Poems*, p.9.

Donaghy's work, giving the reader the distinct impression of being buttonholed at times, or suddenly finding yourself positioned as an unsuspecting privy councillor to the intimate confessions of Donaghy's many voices. It is an aspect of his work I am sure I have absorbed, not least in many of my 'Meta Studies' poems whereby a group is being addressed, for example 'A Speech to the Faculty' begins: 'Colleagues we are in error…'[125] Elsewhere, in 'Wilderbeast' the arrival of the second person is used as a dramatic turning point 'I took out a photo of you, my love'[126] suddenly shifting the poem from its narrative first half and introducing the idea of a more intimate love poem. A similar effect is created in 'And what do you do?'[127] where the title and first line set up an initial conversation, only for the voice to take over with his monologue until the final moment when the attention is suddenly turned for dramatic effect, upon the addressee: 'What beautiful blue eyes you have'[128]. Perhaps Donaghy's finest and more clear use of pronouns is in 'Shibboleth'[129] where the progression isfrom 'One' and 'Another' to 'We' and then 'I'[130] and finally to the moment when the reader is asked to 'intone'[131] and speak for the voice. I have certainly found that by analysing how scenarios are created and relationships developed in Donaghy's poems by his use of pronouns and how this affects the specifics of the reader/text relationship, my own poems have begun to move in similar ways.

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[125] Jack Underwood, 'A Speech to the Faculty', 'Part II', *Wakefield and Other Poems*, p.39.
[126] Jack Underwood, 'Wilderbeast', 'Part I', *Wakefield and Other Poems*, p.33.
[127] Jack Underwood, 'And what do you do?', 'Part I', *Wakefield and Other Poems*, p.13
[128] Jack Underwood, 'And what do you do?', 'Part I', *Wakefield and Other Poems*, p.13
[129] Michael Donaghy, 'Shibboleth', *Shibboleth* in *Dances Learned Last Night* (London: Picador, 2000), p.19.
[130] Michael Donaghy, 'Shibboleth', *Shibboleth* in *Dances Learned Last Night* (London: Picador, 2000), p.19.
[131] Michael Donaghy, 'Shibboleth', *Shibboleth* in *Dances Learned Last Night* (London: Picador, 2000), p19.

Furthermore, the breadth of Donaghy's scenarios and worlds created by his speakers is something I have strived to accommodate in my own writing. The world of the poem is usually a textual and subtextual construct built from the speaker and/or spoken. I have learnt to simply begin writing, speaking through a voice and allowing a world to form indexically, subtextually, such as in 'Currency' where no expository detail is needed and rather a scene is built through interaction with characters, the specifics of the narrative and the lexis of the speaker: 'George leads Sabrina by the chin to the fig orchards behind the church'[132] or 'The Bandettas come down from the hills'[133]. Perhaps it is this subtextual, indexical construction of the world of the poem that has led me towards fictional landscapes and eras. Since the world is announced through detail and character, there is no need to clarify a specific time or place in reality that the poem might refer to. Instead I enjoy allowing a world to announce itself through these details, such as in 'Hannah-loo': 'In those days, no one *wore* haircuts and jeans were for working men.'[134] Again, reading Donaghy has led me to clarify how I feel about my work not referencing specific times or places. If the poems work, they declare their own times and places with a unique tension, even if the details within them reference aspects of genuine history. Donaghy refers to specific people and places in his poems, but also toys with this idea, so that in poems like 'A Repetoire'[135] as readers we are importing the aura of 'the Bronx in 1971'[136] to metonymically position the events in a wider context. This has the peculiar effect of making many of Donaghy's poems feel like urban myths, half-truths and tall-

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[132] Jack Underwood, 'Currency', 'Part I', *Wakefield and Other Poems*, p.18.
[133] Jack Underwood, 'Currency' 'Part I', *Wakefield and Other Poems*, p.18
[134] Jack Underwood, 'Hannah-loo'. 'Part I', *Wakefield and Other Poems*, p.21.
[135] Michael Donaghy, 'A Repertoire', 'Errata', *Dances Learned Last Night* (London: Picador, 2000), p.78.
[136] Michael Donaghy, 'A Repertoire', 'Errata', *Dances Learned Last Night* (London: Picador, 2000), p.78.

stories. This is part of their charm, but I prefer to use worlds that do not exist so that I am less reigned in by the rational laws of our world, or by the specifics of geography and time. For one thing, I am not well-travelled and I am only twenty-six so my field of reference is relatively small. I prefer to invent time and place to explore the nature of time and place itself.

Studying Donaghy alongside linguistic theory, while defining my own critical approaches, has been integral to my understanding my practices. By analysing words in a way that questions the nature of their relation and usage I have come to realise practical benefits of such interrogations. Saussure's concept of 'Language as organised thought coupled with sound'[137] has long since been the bedrock of structualist and post-structualist readings of texts, but for a practitioner the importance of regarding a word as both the 'signified'[138] *meaning* and the 'signifier'[139], the rhythmical shape, texture of the word, cannot be underestimated, even if for the poet such relations can be innately understood without the aid of this terminology to describe them. On a practical level poets deal with the 'sound-image'[140] at every step of the writing process. As Henri Bergson writes:

> The poet is he with whom feelings develop into images, and the images themselves translate themselves into words which translate them while obeying the laws of rhythm. In seeing these images pass before our eyes we in our turn experience the feeling which was, so to speak, their emotional equivalent: but we should never realize these images so strongly without the

[137] Ferdinand Saussure, 'The Language as Thought Organised in Sound', *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 2006) p.110.
[138] Ferdinand Saussure, 'The Language as Thought Organised in Sound', *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 2006) p.112.
[139] Ferdinand Saussure, 'The Language as Thought Organised in Sound', *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 2006) p.112.
[140] Ferdinand Saussure, 'The Language as Thought Organised in Sound', *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 2006) p.112.

> regular movements of the rhythm by which our soul is lulled into self-forgetfulness, and, as in a dream, thinks and sees as the poet.[141]

Indeed, poetic language could be described as a medium in which this relation between sound and image is necessarily self-conscious. I have come to see words as units of time: the time spent on the tongue or in the throat, the conceptual weight they carry as they force the occupation of seconds of thought. I see them as sound shapes: the vowels and consonants, combining with the visual, graphic character of the word, prompting different emphases and all the time relating these to the concept they indicate. In this way it has become impossible not to see every word as onomatopoeic on some level, however conscious. A word such as 'cow' has about its sound and shape something of the character of the referent, as if it were a summation of all of our experiential understanding of it: the big eyes, the low mooing sound it makes, the weighty udder or hoof in mud; surely we cannot conceive of the beast without framing it within this sound-shape, nor read or say the word without imagining an associative sketch in our minds.

When you apply this logic to a whole sentence or poem, form and music are not simply games of organising words into metrical patterns, they are instead the structuring of a vast system of sounds, shapes and graphical elements which hair-trigger an equally vast amount of experientially logged material. For example, a line break might seem at times like a vaguely incidental act of pruning, so that a poem looks neat, but it relates entirely to how the concept of a poem is received; how a poem looks and sounds is precisely what it means and the poet's role is to force this relation to a point where it cannot be ignored, where a synthesis of 'signifier' and

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[141] Henri Bergson, 'The Aesthetic Feelings', *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (New York: Cosimo Inc, 2008), p.15.

'signified' feels completely indisputable, even in the face of the fact that the word 'cow' is not indeed an actual cow. The poet is able to measure language out, in all its complexity of shape, sound and potential conceptuality, so that the lie that language actually works, and words are able to indicate a stable idea in the universe, can be registered or felt momentarily. While it is tempting to agree with Roman Jakobson's theory that poetry amounts to an 'organized violence committed on ordinary speech'[142] this rhetoric suggests that the poet is 'violent' towards so called 'ordinary' language, when it is perhaps more fitting to conclude that poets actively emphasise those relations which exist in all language, through their self-conscious formal arrangement of words; the sense of a phrase being 'poetic' arises when the apparent design of a sentence indicates the 'signifier'[143] as much as it concerns itself with the 'signified'[144]. The conscious synthesis of the two aspects in oscillation forces the reader to interrogate the language itself in relation to the things it describes, which is probably why poetic language is often regarded as a 'heightened' lexis; it promotes a 'further' level of readerly engagement, which takes on board the sound, shape and specifics of syntactical combinations while interpreting the conceptual value of what is written down. Poetic language does not attack sentences and words, rather it reminds the reader of how language's instability necessitates their readerly participation; poetry uses the full potential of language as a system of 'signs' to fully awaken the act of writer/reader communication.

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[142] Roman Jakobson in Andrzej Karcz, 'Manfred Kridl: The Integration of Polish Formalism', *The Polish Formalist school and Russian Formalism* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2002), p.118.

[143] Ferdinand Saussure, trans. Roy Harris, 'Linguistic Value: Conceptual Aspects', *Course in General Linguistics* (Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 2006) p.112.

[144] Ferdinand Saussure, trans. Roy Harris, 'Linguistic Value: Conceptual Aspects', *Course in General Linguistics* (Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 2006) p.112.

The practical implications of such an understanding are inseparable from each and every aspect of my practice. When I consider the term 'musicality' I am aware that I am really considering all of language, since even the gaps between words are ostensibly 'notes' and the aural and graphic aspects of every written line is irremovable from its conceptual value in the act of communication with a reader.

A line break, for example, creates a pause; the eye (moving in time to the beginning of each line) is not processing any new information and so the mind is left hanging on the previous word. This mini cliff-hanger can either create a moment of suspense while the reader waits for the next word to develop or resolve the chain of the sentence, or it might place greater emphasis on the 'held' word as the mind dwells on it fractionally longer. The length of a line dictates the measure of sound and shape in units of read-time[145], so that words occur within that formal period, as it is laid down on the page. *Stanza*, the Italian word for 'room', expresses metaphorically that groups of lines are contained within a space with physical dimensions. The idea that a poem is a series of furnished or inhabited 'rooms' engages with this notion of form being a physical, spatial construction, which is necessarily related to concept. We can walk into a room and behold its dimensions, just as each object or figure within it is large or small, round or flat, rough or smooth: this is how we comprehend language.

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[145] The time it takes to read something is perhaps different to our ordinary measured system of time. As Donaghy writes in 'Wallflowers', *The Shape of the Dance: Essays, Interviews and Digressions* (London: Picador, 2009), pp.7-8: 'Every day we experience both the usefulness of clocks and watches and their utter inadequacy in representing our real experience of duration. That last hour in bed with your lover and the next hour waiting for the night bus in the rain are only the same to your watch.' This idea corresponds directly to Henri Bergson's theory of 'duration' outlined in his essay *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (New York: Cosimo Inc, 2008), which describes the experience of time in contrast to measurable 'physical' time.

It can be furthered argued, therefore, that rhyme, that most obvious of formal, sound aspects, is not an arbitrary, decorative feature, but rather it can have the effect of amplifying the sound of a word so that its conceptual value is equally emphasised. It can further amplify the relationship between two words of a similar sound, emphasising their conceptual relationship or forcing a new one. Sound is only another dimension to the poem and its rooms, and so we are able to relate two sounds just as we might relate two objects of a similar shape or colour; words that chime wield a peculiar power of suggestion, so that the reader has to question whether the concepts chime also.

These characteristics are essentially what I term *sense*. *Sense* is what poetry achieves through its heightened awareness of form/subject relations. It is the further realm of *meaning* in which all dimensions of language are beheld in order to declare how communication depends on participation, that no definition is fixed. Poetic language tells us that nothing rendered in words can be absolute or true, that we must participate in all aspects of language in order to have any kind of exchange between subjects, must bring to bear the weight of all our physical, experiential being on this effort to convey what being alive feels like. When I write a poem I am gesturing as wildly as I can in all directions of language, in the hope that I might be able to express if somehow my experience of being alive resembles that of another human being. It is this position as practitioner which dictates how I regard language, how I read poems and it is a position defined by a necessary dynamism of doubt. In future research I hope to explore these ideas beyond the limits of a commentary of my own practice and extend the debate further into a more general theoretical stance, with its emphasis on a wider application beyond how I understand my work. Creative Writing

Studies is a quickly developing field and its growth necessitates further development in terms of a theory of practice. I would conclude that if there is to be a theory of Creative Writing Studies, it should be one which is founded on this doubt and not one which assumes the certainty of communication.

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