

# Creative Manoeuvres



Creative Manoeuvres:  
Writing, Making, Being

Edited by

Shane Strange, Paul Hetherington  
and Jen Webb

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

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# Introduction: Creative manoeuvres

*Shane Strange, Paul Hetherington and Jen Webb*

One of the benefits of the growth over recent decades of creative writing as an internationally significant discipline has been to move the study of creative writing practice beyond subjective accounts of ‘how I write’ towards broader issues of how knowledge is addressed by, or incorporated into, or embodied in art; and towards questions of how being itself is expressed through artistic means. It also encourages consideration of how art might represent and challenge important aspects of the zeitgeist; how it might challenge or subvert the very modes of representation that it adopts; and the extent to which research and art can be understood not merely as bedfellows, but as aspects of the same set of expressions. All writing *tends* to constitute a kind of research into its own condition, and into the human condition, even when it specifically eschews any explicit research agenda or purpose.

The chapters that follow are as interested in the ways that writers make different kinds of meaning, and the contexts in which they work, as they are with the content that writers employ and address. A number of them address the interdisciplinary nature of much contemporary writing, where writing and other artforms intersect, cross-pollinate and sometimes fuse into new forms. They explore, and enact, creative manoeuvres.

But what are these ‘creative manoeuvres’, and how might they be framed or understood? Broadly, they are ways of examining the relationships that always already obtain between creative practice and research: ways of articulating how various forms of creative writing connect to the making of knowledge, or to the creation of written artefacts that aim to understand the world. They are, further, ways of reimagining the known, sometimes approaching it slantwise; and ways of thinking in terms of possibilities rather than of immediate quotidian reality. Where these creative manoeuvres do approach the quotidian, it is often in order to reflect it, reinterpret it, or make it new.

The idea of creative manoeuvres suggests not just movement, but movement that is *deliberate*: that involves foresight, strategy and (at least some degree of) control. It instantiates an attitude to the creation of both knowledge and art, one that acknowledges that, at its best, the making of

both knowledge *and* art emerge as an expression of the deep, sometimes wild, subjectivities at play in complex thinking. It points to ways of navigating this often uncertain, always contingent place of praxis: the ongoing, never finally determined, but always evolving work of making meaning through art, or through scholarship, or through a praxis that incorporates both.

‘Creative manoeuvres’ also highlights the non-linearity of making, researching, remaking, re-researching and adapting; these acts are more often—indeed almost always—processes of moving sideways and backwards, or spiralling around an issue, rather than proceeding logically ahead. Even when writers and artists are conspicuously in control of what they do, they are nonetheless, and simultaneously, not quite in control. They are subject always to the unexpected, to forces beyond their ken, to the moments of surprise or ambush that we experience in the making of a work; and they grapple with these, knowledgeably, producing as they do so something that is both theirs and not-theirs; a *something* both familiar and alien that we call ‘art’. The grappling insistences and niceties of the processes attending to the production of art require endless improvisations and adjustments. We might call them stratagems, tactics, dodges, schemes, operations, subterfuges or artifices. But for the purposes of this volume, we name them as *manoeuvres*.

The chapters in this book explore a range of approaches to creative manoeuvres—predominantly but not exclusively those enacted through writing practices. Ross Gibson’s ‘Self extraction’ opens the book; in this chapter he examines the role that extant texts play in the understanding and formation of new creative practices. Gibson’s focus is on a group of seemingly disparate cultural products: Bob Dylan’s autobiography *Chronicles: Volume One*; T.S. Eliot’s seminal critical essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’; and the philosophy of filmmaker Alexander Kluge. Gibson asks how seemingly unrelated, but resonant texts can work together to ‘trick’ the writer into making something at once engaged and personal, but also aligned with an apparently amorphous ‘tradition’.

Paul Hetherington and Jen Webb’s ‘Circles and intersections’ discusses lyric poetry’s close association with the ineffable and some of the ways in which photographs of a familiar place—the city of Canberra—might be able to suggest reconceptualisations and rewritings of the known and the quotidian. The chapter reports and elaborates on a collaborative exploration that draws analogies between word and world, between the ineffable and the known; and which explores collaborative creative practice as a way of encapsulating and representing new knowledge in its combinations of images and poems.

Problems of representation are central to Glenn Morrison's 'Walking in the footsteps of the Ancestors', an account of his engagement with the ancient narratives of Australian Aboriginal songlines and the oral storytelling culture in remote communities. Morrison explores the costs and benefits of writing down the oral, before arguing that publishing and performing ethically-produced Dreaming stories is crucial to assuring an Aboriginal cultural heritage for future generations. Morrison's chapter reminds us that writing and representation can be a high-stakes game when dealing in cross-cultural preservation and understanding.

Shari Kocher's *Sonqoqui* continues this cross-cultural theme by taking weaving as a central metaphor of invention and materiality. Her chapter seeks to construct the voices and contexts of three Inca children who lived and died five hundred years ago. Here the material artistic process is aligned with the production of embodied knowledge practices (weaving, writing) to describe a complex process that engages with archaeology and historical understanding in the construction of a polyphonic verse novel.

Discussions of materiality and embodiment are continued in the next three chapters, where what may seem ancillary to the everyday understandings of what writers do become central to the interrogation of writing as a physical and material practice. The chapters explore how traditions of knowledge and art practice can be used to foreground writing in a way that exceeds its idealised definition as 'imagination' or 'being creative'. Drawing on the traditional Chinese views that writing is a technical practice perfected through reproduction, Patrick West and Cher Coad argue that the physical act of writing provides insights into the relationship between body and the world. This chapter takes the physicality of writing and reading as a cue to discuss how writing might be a bodily tracing of the world that in turn affects the writing body.

Monica Carroll's 'Write this down: Phenomenology of the page' enlists the materiality of the that thing that writers often take for granted—the page itself—in a critique of the traditional view of writing as a purely cognitive process. Carroll argues that writing is not only movement, but movement through space. Through a reading of Vilém Flusser, she argues for a more phenomenological approach, one that explores the page as a collaborator in writing, and the constitutive *here* of meaning.

In 'Spectral bodies of thought: A materialist feminist approach to Conceptual Writing', Kay Rozynski takes up conceptualism, and the role of writing in that art form, particularly its interplay of dematerialisation and materialisation. Very often, Rozynski argues, writing categorised as conceptual foregrounds the resulting 'thingness' of the written object.

Hence Conceptual Writing could provide a vantage point for understanding and overcoming, through practice, the highly contestable distinction between idea and material engrained by the Enlightenment.

Sonya Voumard's 'The collaborative interview' moves us to the next section, and a focus on nonfiction and life writing. Through a case study—an interview with Australian author Helen Garner—Voumard argues the merits of the collaborative interview process, building on the body of discussion on 'life writing' that explores the ethical territory between writer and subject. Directed toward journalism and creative nonfiction writing, it particularly focuses on ways of engaging vulnerable or wary subjects.

Ethics are also a central concern for Sue Joseph and Carolyn Rickett, in their 'David Shields' way of making'. A critical engagement of American author David Shields' arguments about creativity and plagiarism/appropriation, this chapter interrogates notions of ownership of texts, and whether Shields' model of 'making' might fit current academic protocols for a creative thesis within Australian tertiary settings.

This same tension between the academy and creative practice underlies Shane Strange's 'Situating the creative response'. Strange addresses the issue of creative pedagogy, and in particular the use of the creative response, as an assessment technique in subject areas that are not generally seen as imparting skills for the future creative writing practitioner. This chapter explores the creative response as a site of uncertainty about the role of creativity in the academy, ultimately bringing into question the nature of academic and creative labour.

The final two chapters reflect upon how practice and lived experience inflect both writing and research. Peta Murray's 'Elder-flowering' focuses on playwriting, setting out first thoughts on writing and research as twin acts of resistance. Murray asks how one might remain visible and legible in arts practice across one's life course. It proposes approaches to research whereby public acts, personal archives, and private interactions surrounding the making of new work become a 'theatre of endurance' in and of themselves.

The final chapter is Michele's Leggott's moving 'Small stories from two decades'. Here Leggott traces the progression of her blindness through poetry and narrative, and explores its effect on her practice as a poet. Michele's journey addresses not only the realities of making, but the physical and metaphysical understandings of creative practice. It is a fitting exemplar of a kind of creative manoeuvre we trace throughout this volume.

Overall, this collection of essays constitutes the multi-faceted and interdisciplinary exploration of the significance of creative writing—understood as a species of creative practice—as a generator of important knowledge, and as a way of producing significant research. In the descriptions of praxis offered in these chapters, the collection also posits the idea that the combination of creative practice and more traditional research methods can allow the generation of insights that are less readily available to researchers and/or writers who employ only one or other of these approaches to their work of interpreting the world, and/or generating art. The artist-academic has a significant role in the future academy wherever creativity is valued, and where lateral, unexpected and often highly nuanced research outcomes are desired.



# 1

## Self extraction

*Ross Gibson*

A morning spent browsing the *Paris Review*'s archive of extended conversations with established authors confirms there are almost as many creative manoeuvres as there are writers. In this chapter I will think about one ruse that I have investigated for a couple of decades: concentrating on some highly resonant influence or extant text or object so as to translate the old thing into a new, personal utterance. I will draw on a classic essay by T.S. Eliot, plus some thoughts by the German philosopher and filmmaker, Alexander Kluge, and a stray comment in Bob Dylan's memoir. Finally I will offer examples from my own creative practice to indicate how in the mutative process of translating a set of stimuli into a new expression, various ekphrastic and multimodal manoeuvres might be helpful for cajoling the work out of oneself.

So this essay prods a basic enigma: where do our utterances come from? In Australia we get to pursue this question across a vast expanse, from the epic reach of Indigenous knowledge systems through to the intimate scale of lyrics, lullabies and prayers. But no matter what the context, every writer transmits from a matrix of what-has-gone-before. From a tradition.

In *Chronicles: Volume One*, Bob Dylan reminisces about the months when, barely out of his teens in the early 1960s, he began hustling for gigs in New York City. Dossing in strange apartments stuffed with record collections, letting go of the Zimmerman family name that he never felt described him, listening to the non-stop verbiage of obsessive almanackers like Dave Van Ronk, Dylan discovered his creative self in the hubbub of the reprised songs that comprise the American folk repertoire:

I could make things up on the spot all based on folk music structure ... You could write twenty or more songs off ... one melody by slightly altering it ... I could slip in verses or lines from old spirituals or blues. There was little headwork involved. What I usually did was start out with something, some kind of line written in stone and then turn it with another line—make it add up to something else than it originally did. (Dylan 2005: 228)

Thus Dylan might start exploring a Blind Willie McTell blues on a Monday. By Friday, five hundred renditions later, the song had mutated—in riffs and rhymes—into something as new as it was old, as Dylan kinked a line here, changed a verb there, bent a stray melody around a ‘wrong’ run of similes and lost Willie while being guided by him. This was nothing mystical. It was the output of erudition steeped in tradition and cooked with bold innovation. I was about to call this last aspect ‘self-assertion’, but it is more accurate to say that the componentry of Zimmerman’s culture let him prime an embryonic self where his Dylan-persona was ready to emerge. And as that strange new self emerged so did the new songs, the new takes on his heritage. By the time he was twenty, Dylan had heard more than a decade of nightly radio programs beaming into Hibbing, Minnesota. The radio schooled him in three centuries of the American Song, which in turn derived from further centuries of ancient madrigals and troubadour ditties—Scottish, Irish, German, African, Spanish, Jewish. With Dylan delving into this rag and bone shop of his Midwestern culture and his memory, a startling, fresh song like ‘Highway 61’ could get hot-rodged from the Old Testament, street talk, music hall, carnival barkers’ calls and English murder ballads.

This mode of composition is *rhapsodic*, in the original sense of the expression deriving from the two ancient Greek words *rhaptein* and *oide* denoting ‘a sewn-together ode’. Extant elements get meshed and altered in the reiteration and recombination such that a startling new sonic fabric—stronger and more stimulant than the sum of its old parts—unfurls between the performer and the audience. This is the same kind of the process that A.B. Lord examined in his classic *The Singer of Tales*, although Lord concentrated on the processes whereby cultural memory stayed so strong that the variations of authorial originality were kept to an optimal minimum and song cycles were handed *intact* along generations for centuries (Lord 1961). Dylan operated on the other side of the schism that was made by modernism, where *innovation* was the animus. With modernism, originality trumped tradition because the objective was to make something astonishing and unprecedented. Even so, the process started with tradition. As one of the definitive modernists, T.S. Eliot, explained in his canonical essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, the creative mind is best understood as a ‘receptacle for storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new combination are present together’ (Eliot 1921: 49). These particles can come from each individual’s lived experience, but they are spawned as well in the culture that steeps every citizen’s experience. And culture is nothing without the stored up remembrances



that are structured by tradition. When creating original cultural work, Eliot contends, one dissolves into and rises up from tradition in such a way that the ‘progress of an artist is ... a continual extinction of personality’ as one submits oneself to ‘something which is more valuable’ (Eliot 1921: 47).

This willing self-surrender is the obverse of the ‘anxiety of influence’ that Harold Bloom has controversially contended to be the impetus of the great men who jostled for authority in the canon of twentieth-century English literature (Bloom 1973). For thirty years or more, Bloom’s theory drew disproportionate attention, but now in the age of digital culture Eliot’s theory seems to have returned and grown more compelling as an account of creativity amidst all the mashups, the hip-hop bites and the great, global bursts of poesis that have generally become known as the aesthetics of remediation (Bolter & Grusin 2000). Borrowing from Eliot: the creator is best understood as a ‘medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations’ (Eliot 1921: 48). Whereas Bloom portrayed the great poets as *sui generis* entities struggling, Vulcan-like, to stoke atavistic fire for hammering paradigm-shifting creations out of their non-pareil subjectivities, Eliot’s exemplary poets are not so much makers as melderers who encourage their own disappearance, albeit momentarily, in order for distinctive new creations to get alloyed through themselves.

The new creation comes not from some *urwelt* where ever-originating inspiration burns, but from the everyday world where all that is extant is ready for re-fashioning. About this topic, the sharpest line I’ve read comes from the twentieth-century haiku master, Seishi, expressing his allegiance to the methods of Stéphane Mallarmé: ‘[because] objects are already in existence, it is not necessary to create them ... all we have to do is grasp the relationships among them’ (Yamaguchi et al. 1993: xix). This panoply of pre-existent ‘objects’ includes sentences, poems, artworks and myriad elements of culture that previous generations have generated and worked to preserve. So from all that is extant, the culture makes the new things from the old things, *relationally*, as much as the artist does. Or to quote and endorse Robert Pogue Harrison’s startling claim: ‘[all human cultures] compel the living to serve the interests of the unborn’ such that ‘culture perpetuates itself through the power of the dead’ (Harrison 2003: ix).

So art comes from the transformation of given things, from relics and remembrances. And in that transformation there is usually a kind of *treason*, a *betrayal* of the given thing. By which I mean that in being tricked into a new form, the given thing becomes other to its original state. Treason, betrayal, traducement: these are usually thought to be sinister actions, coming from the wrong side of virtue, from leftfield, evincing

insufficient reverence. But benefits can loom in such treasons. Consider the chance to remake a given thing by infusing it with new elements, by putting it in new relationships with other found and mutable things. Think of Dylan ‘betraying’ but also bowing down to Blind Willie McTell. Etymologically, the French word for ‘translation’ (‘traduction’) lurks close alongside the English word ‘traduce’; and ‘treason’ (or ‘trahison’ in French, which leads to the English word ‘betrayal’) echoes through a translation because of the way the original thing can get betrayed, warped and abducted (as well as ‘traducted’) to a new state as it moves from one language to another or from one medium or aesthetic form to another.

So I am proposing that wherever creativity roils, good can come from carefully traducing a given thing. Dylan’s ‘Like a Rolling Stone’ can come from McTell’s ‘You Was Born To Die’. And the greatness of the original song stands firm even as the new song crashes into being.

The same goes for Christopher Logue’s brazen ‘War Music’, which translates and betrays Homer in the best possible way to make a vivid new evocation of warfare and state-sanctioned violence such that we can end up reading this kind of gory-loud (but also disquieting) war-whoop from Logue:

Drop into it.  
 Noise so clamorous it sucks.  
 You rush your pressed-flower hackles out  
 To the perimeter.  
 And here it comes:  
 That unpremeditated joy as you  
 —The Uzi shuddering against your hip  
 Happy in danger in a dangerous place  
 Yourself another self you found at Troy—  
 Squeeze nickel through that rush of Greekoid scum!

It is more than a translation, of course. Although it starts out as that. Or more exactly, it starts out with Logue consulting reams of extant translations and then it gets wonderfully odder and more heretical. It is something other than Homer. It is a whole new thing, with Logue looking squarely at the catastrophe of modern times. And still, paradoxically, it comes from *The Iliad*. In translating it, Logue gets the original vividly ‘wrong’ but it is in precise accord with the original.

Think too of W.G. Sebald’s investment in translation as a means to generate good strangeness and fresh insight. Sebald’s control of the English language was supreme, yet he deliberately chose to write most of

his works (even those aimed principally at an English-language readership) in German *and then to have them translated to English* through the creative agency of adroit writers (whom he appointed and painstakingly consulted) such as Michael Hulse and Anthea Bell. These relationships were not always smooth, indeed they were frequently acrimonious to the point of betrayal, with much traducing peppering the *traduction*, but from the trouble something valuable usually brewed. The translation phase was one extra flush of creativity forced wilfully upon the drafts.

Thus far I've been extolling 'creative treason' by examining translations from language to language and from influential first author to aspiring next author. But what of the translation from medium to medium? Which is to say, from cognitive mode to cognitive mode, whereby the ideas and feelings that are couched in one medium and are appealing to one system of cerebral-and-affective appreciation are then translated to a different medium which galvanises other systems in one's intellection and sensorium. One of my personal favourites in this multi-modal drift is Dave Hickey's dextrous essay 'A Life in the Arts', in which he analyses the influence of social and natural environments while orchestrating a sinuous, back-cutting line of argument that investigates the languorous melodics in the trumpet playing of Chet Baker. Intuiting that Baker's art is definitively Californian somehow, Hickey delves into the bodily pleasures of the sound, appreciating the way the listener is taken on a ride with the trumpeter's sparse glissandos and ethereal feints. Hickey notes how the flowing patterns of Baker's sound originate in the same lulling world that impels the 'cool economy and intellectual athletics of long-board surfing' (Hickey 1997: 77)! When Californian board-riders translate the ocean swell, they utter a full incorporation with the spirit of their place; commensurately when Baker 'speaks' with his trumpet and his barely-breathed crooning, he utters the easeful sociability of bohemian communities strewn across L.A. and north along the Pacific Coast Highway, communities that take their tempo and mojo from the ocean. The surfers translate the fluid lineaments of the natural elements with their bodies, which are also their means of knowing and their medium of expression; Baker takes all this, adds a wary conviviality brought by his address to an audience, and he translates the full cool flux into sound via the artful movement of air. Hickey notes how in each case—the surfing and the music—'a lost art of living in real time' is fashioned from the loll of experience. From one extant thing or system—ocean, breath, vibrational energy among elements and beings—constitutive factors get relationally realigned and translated so another thing arises. A fresh

creation. Translating the surfers' arcs and scything cutbacks, Baker's trumpet glides out a keening gambit of oozed notes. And *then*, in consideration and translation of these two mellifluous phenomena, Hickey makes his own original prose that is liquid and buoyant while also being dolorous and perspicacious. Consider, for example, this passage where he tells of the moments immediately after a friend has phoned him to say that Baker has died:

I sat there for a long time in that cool, shadowy room, looking out at the California morning. I stared at the blazing white stucco wall of the bungalow across the street. I gazed at the coco palm rising above the bungalow's dark green roof. Three chrome-green, renegade parrots had taken up residence among its dusty fronds. They squawked and flickered in the sunshine. Above the bungalow, the parrots and the palm, the slate-gray pacific rose to the pale line of the horizon, and this vision of ordinary paradise seemed an appropriate, funereal vista for the ruined prince of West Coast cool (Hickey 1997: 73).

We know this is art because of the shift it makes in our understanding, and we know it is high quality. Let's waste no breath debating whether or not it is original or inspired. Hickey's prose in 'A Life in the Arts' comes from phenomena that already exist. It is informed and enriched by Hickey's attentiveness to local practices and environmental conditions that can be translated again and again—from anonymous surfers through Baker to Hickey—into new forms and insights. Hickey's prose resonates in that faculty of the reader which appreciates form as well as disquisition. And it lodges in a zone of consciousness other than the zones that Baker and the longboarders stimulate so slickly. What we have traced across these three expressive media is a run of translations through different cognitive modes, from the originary board-riders, to the tonal innovations of Baker, to the melodic analytics of Hickey. There is tradition here. Plus individual talent which finds and utters itself in the act of losing the original influence in the wash of the new relationships each author establishes among what already exists.

In some primers of aesthetics, this kind of translation would be called 'ekphrasis': the practice of glossing one mode of expression with another mode. Words rendering painting, for example, or music formed in response to dance. For me, the most galvanising version of this 'cognitive-mode translation' comes from the German philosopher, lawyer and filmmaker and avant-garde bureaucrat, Alexander Kluge. (Note all his roles and the constant dodging, mode-shifting and translation that are required to help them make sense together. Vocational ekphrasis!) Kluge has long espoused the power of silent cinema: not necessarily its market

force; rather the imaginative elan in its subjective stimulus and intellectual fecundity. He maintains that the force of silent cinema comes from a definitive trope: viewers encounter a pictorial sequence which is proffered for interpretation as the sequence gathers its duration and complexity; after due consideration, the viewers generate their interpretations of the meaning and system of feelings within the sequence; then an inter-title presents words (appealing to a cognitive mode that is radically different from the pictorial and proprioceptive faculties that the movie sequence has been agitating thus far) which contend with the interpretation that the viewers have just supplied for themselves; AND THEN the viewers are obliged to decide whether to accept the proffered interpretation or to adapt or stay true to the one they invented on their own. And then another sequence runs past. Thus throughout a silent movie viewers are goaded to know their own minds, to use their minds to make versions of sense and to know that every mind in the cinema has several profusely generative modes whirring in it at any one time, even as the filmmaker also contends with the meanings by providing the inter-titles as guidelines for interpretation. With silent cinema an audience is therefore an imaginative, disputatious and discursive assembly. The audience is a skeptical and *politicised* assembly, therefore. And the contentious significance of the film—simultaneously intellectual and emotional—comes from each viewer’s speculative psychology contending in sceptical sociability with every other self in the cinema (including the filmmaker’s self, of course) as images and words roll around each other, offering different, medium-specific grasps on experience (Liebman & Hansen 1988). On the screen and inside each viewer’s sensibility, moving images and words translate the represented experience back and forth across each other. In order to know what is being represented, each viewer has to extract an authoring self from this broil.

The authoring self: we have come back to this figure by examining what occurs when you become a highly participant viewer or reader translating across media and drawing lines of new understanding out of memory and tradition. It might be useful now if I report on my own experience as an ekphrastic author, offering a brief account of the process of translating pictorial qualities into language and back again. I hope it is a modest account of how a portion of individual talent can extract itself and then assert itself in response to the given world, the world of tradition, of extant things.

For twenty years now I have been working with a collection of forensic photographs that were generated by the New South Wales Police in Australia between the late 1890s and the early 1970s. Mostly the pictures

are crime scenes showing the mid-twentieth-century version of Sydney, featuring the cars, trams and electrical implements of the post-WWII years, as well as the guns, cudgels and liquor bottles that have been the props for malfeasance and misadventure here since 1788. Stored in the attic of the Justice & Police Museum on the shoreline of Sydney Cove, the images are filed in thousands of boxes containing manila envelopes. Usually some india-ink code has been daubed on the side to indicate that the box holds a spatter of cases relating to a particular month of a particular year. Each envelope, batching a dozen or so negatives, encompasses a single investigation. On the front of the envelope, a detective who is also a photographer has written his name, the date, a location and a terse summary of what is being documented: 'Break enter steal', 'Loiter in yard', 'Consort with menace'.

And that is all. That is the full extent of the interpretive clues offered by the archive. There is no comprehensive catalogue. No investigators' notebooks, no charge sheets, judgments or appended newspaper clippings. If sets of metadata ever existed, they have all gone missing over the years, most likely when the pictures were rescued from rising floodwaters during the 1980s. Nothing *conclusive* remains. There are no authoritative decrees that put an end to the narratives that each tersely tagged image stimulates in the imagination of its appreciator. Comprising a jumbled almanac of an agitated city, the negatives provoke, thrill and disturb while they educate. But they never resolve with any note of certainty.

For me these images offer something richer than certainty: they prompt endless questions and unsettling accounts concerning real lives and places that have been pressed as luminous energy on to photographic film; they portray the town in a pained and piquant way that contradicts but also complements the shiny promise of pleasure that radiates from Sydney's advertising industry and popular magazines. When I mull over the photographs, I understand the liveliness of the town better because the pictures thrum not only with heat and light and the vitality of the street but also with mendacity and mortality. The pictures help me see some of the social and historical forces that swell sombre beneath the shimmers of my gorgeous town.

And they goad me into language. I find myself always needing to respond to some pictorial quality or some shift of hue by translating it into a phrase which needs to be more evocative and sensuous than descriptive. In other words, I use the photo to startle poetry out of myself and I use the words to simmer the picture in some new way so I can extract another quality of its imagistic self.

For example, consider this picture from a 1954 'Manslaughter' file:



Fig. 1-1 'Manslaughter' (FP09\_080\_008)

Here's what strikes me in the image: the hot light and the cool shade, the smell of the picture, the folded softness of the wreck that warps around the pliant rubber tyre and makes a paradox with the bleak metal in the panels and bumper-bars, the slump, the escaping ooze of oil and gasoline, the silence lurking as a daze after recent horrible clamour. And much else besides, including a terribly tender sense of mortality and surrender. So, I offer sets of three phrases that sit alongside the image, matching the picture's size in a diptych and making an ekphrastic partnership for your linguistic and imagistic systems of cognition. Sets of three phrases like these:

**See how an object can take the shape of a scream.**  
**Understand that vim can ebb in a warm sluice.**  
**Accept that heat is just a brief sigh made by cold.**



Fig 1-2 'Suspicious death' (FP08\_068\_002)

Or try translating this interior scene ('Suspicious Death'), where there's longing and some promise of release as well as a terrible void that makes a picture of gravity. In front of this image, I get almost every sense of that word and that feeling: *gravity*.

How to give language to this image, when it offers so much? Here are three breaths of my written speech, translating the picture:

**Understand the town takes new lovers every night.**

**Lean out past the old thresholds.**

**Feel how the breeze wants you and offers an embrace.**

I have made a few hundred of these diptychs, in a series called 'Accident Music'<sup>1</sup>. They give me a chance to extract an author from



myself by setting my individual, stored experiences in resonance with the traditions—of crime writing, or documentary photography, of elegy and epitaph—that have been made in a larger world cohering through time.

So by way of conclusion, I hope this much is clear now: resonance can be made with the act of translation, by betraying some extant thing while simultaneously revering it too. A new thing gets to emerge in and through the author's self while whatever talent lurks in the author's individuality contends with the cunning of the world and all its media and sensory modes. Think of Bob Dylan translating Blind Willie McTell. Think of Christopher Logue betraying Homer in the most honourable manner. Think of yourself finessing anything that moves you and that makes itself available, through tradition, for the good treason it needs.

## Notes

1. See an account of them here: <http://www.rossgibson.com.au>

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# Circles and intersections: A practice-led exploration into poetry and visual affect

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## Introduction

For writers, words are both *métier* and material. But words do not emerge from a vacuum; they emerge from, and are employed to represent, the world of experience, the world of memory, the world of longing, the world of affect, the world of imagination—and the experiences and encounters that serve to shape such worlds. Words are part of the domain of the ephemeral and the expressive, rather than the concrete, but nonetheless they are intimately intertwined with materiality, with the concrete world that knocks up against us in our day-to-day lives.

The tension between actuality and representation is one that has been explored for many centuries (see Webb 2009), and in this chapter we add to that exploration. Our particular interest is with the ways in which lyric poetry, a form that is particularly closely associated with the ineffable, might contribute to the production of meaning and understandings. To pursue this interest, we embarked on an epistemological exploration in which we attempted to draw analogies between the ineffable and knowledge formation: between word and world.

## Word and world

The relationship between word (or language) and world (or what, for convenience, we will call reality) is much vexed. George Steiner argues that there is a profound disjuncture at the heart of contemporary life, one whose implications have only fairly recently begun to be played out. He locates this disjuncture in the ‘*break of the covenant between word and world*’ (1989: 93; emphasis original) and contends that we are in a historical moment of ‘*epilogue*’ (1989: 94)—the time that is an ‘after-

word', an end that signals a new beginning. That new beginning is one that is marked by absence, loss of assurance, and separation from reality. Following 'Mallarmé's disjunction of language from external reference' and 'Rimbaud's deconstruction of the first person singular' (1989: 94), Steiner indicates, the world is one where contemporary writers are unable to access reality through language because 'the truth of the word is the absence of the world' (1989: 96).

Steiner acknowledges, though, that 'what words refer to are other words' (1989: 97), and grants that there is great richness in making creative use of language because '[t]here is always ... "excess" of the signified beyond the signifier' (1989: 84). We may not any longer have a connection to reality, but in art we have something rich and something that, for Steiner, retains a purposive magic. It 'would instruct us of the inviolate enigma of the otherness of things and in animate presences', he writes; and make 'palpable to us ... the unassuaged, unhoused instability and estrangement of our condition' (1989: 139).

Though we must—having entered into language—have lost our 'real' connection to the world, we can nonetheless find consolation in art: that which alone, Steiner asserts, 'can go some way towards making accessible, towards waking into some measure of communicability, the sheer inhuman otherness of matter' (1989: 140). This is perhaps less comforting than one might hope; but if indeed the world is inaccessible to us in all its fullness, at least art allows us to approach it in its sublime actuality.

In exploring Wallace Stevens' poetry, Simon Critchley has taken a related, but different, approach to the problem of the relationship between language—specifically poetic language—and reality. He claims that poetry in general is 'the experience of failure' because reality 'retreats before the imagination that shapes and orders it' (2005: 6). Like Steiner, then, he confirms that word does not deliver world to us; but for him it is not Steiner's existential loss. Critchley contends that, like all modern poets, 'Stevens can neither reduce reality to the imagination nor extend the imagination into reality' (2005: 87) and that his 'late poems stubbornly show how the mind cannot seize hold of the ultimate nature of the reality that faces it' (2005: 6; for a more extended discussion of these issues, see Hetherington 2013: 1-4).

But for Critchley, though world might escape word, it is still possible for writers and readers to access a degree of material reality: Critchley places Stevens' view of reality in the Kantian lineage, 'where the realm of sensibility is our access to a world that is indeed real for us, but that world is always already shot through with conceptual content' (2005: 23). In

doing so, he identifies a gap that exists between ‘reality’ and any poem; a problem built into the way in which language and cognition operate.

Kant’s own arguments about such matters are complex but in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (originally published in 1791) he makes the key point that with ‘rational cognition *a priori*’ we reach ‘appearances only, leaving the thing in itself as something actual for itself but unrecognised by us’ (1998: 112). In the mid-twentieth century Martin Heidegger takes this point further in suggesting that ‘It is only the word at our disposal that endows the thing with Being’—and he even asks ‘does the word of itself and for itself need poetry, so that only through this need does the poet become who he can be?’ (1982a [1959]: 141). For Kant and Heidegger, whatever their differences, there is no possibility of an uncomplicated and unmediated relationship between language and reality because language is constantly construing and constraining any knowledge of reality.

This notion that material reality is experienced through a combination of affect and concept to some extent mirrors Steiner’s concern that world, in itself, has escaped the human grasp. We cannot know *it*; we can know only how we feel about it; but Critchley observes that this limitation has anyway been the case. We cannot access world in all its fullness; we access only an idea of world that has meaning for us because our words fill it with concept.

But this does not mean either that we have no sense of the material world, or that words emerge merely out of concepts; rather, for Stevens at least, we have words because there is some understanding or awareness of that concrete world that has its own existence, and a being independent of the law of language. As Critchley writes, in his explication of Stevens’ approach: ‘the real is the base, it is the basis from which poetry begins’; it ‘is the necessary but not the sufficient condition for poetry, but it is absolutely necessary’ (2005: 24). What Stevens attempts to do, in Critchley’s analysis, is ‘to put in place a *transfigured* sense of the real, the real mediated through the creative power of the imagination’ (2005: 27; emphasis in original). This is, arguably, also what contemporary poets must do: write about what may be real for them; attempt to convey a transfigured sense of that real; and hope that readers will identify with, appreciate or understand it as they do.

If they are successful, Critchley says, it is because their poetry ‘achieves truth through emotional identification, where actor and audience fuse, becoming two-in-one’ (2005: 37)—but this will only eventuate if the poet successfully achieves ‘sudden rightnesses’ (2005: 39). ‘Sudden rightness’ has as little clarity as ‘world’, for a contemporary reader, but Critchley attempts to explicate it, hypothesising that it ‘can be crystallized

in a word, a name or a sound' (2005: 41), one that 'intensifies experience by suddenly suspending it, withdrawing one from it, and lighting up not some otherworldly obscurities, but what Emerson in "The American Scholar" calls "the near, the low, the common"' (2005: 41). It seems, then, that world can be recovered, to some extent, in word, but only if we first acknowledge that world is conceptual as much as it is concrete.

However, as soon as we attempt to speak the world, we must name it and its components; and, as Critchley goes on to write, the act of naming is an act of mastery and assimilation (2005: 86). The attempt to know reality through language results in our bending that reality to our will, our perspective—translating it from itself into something we enslave and possess. The alternative is simply 'to let things be in their separateness from us ... letting the orange orange, the oyster oyster, the palm palm, and so on' (2005: 86).

But it is rare for any human, and especially any poet, to 'let things be' in this way. Across history, and across cultures, people have translated the concrete world into expressive modes: have explored the space between word and world, as Nelson Goodman writes, using ideas framed by content and form. 'We can have words without a world but no world without words or other symbols' (1978: 6), he states, drawing attention to the fact that it is only through language or other symbols that human beings are able to construct (their understanding of) worlds. He notes that:

[e]xemplification and expression [such as one finds in poetry and other artforms], though running in the opposite direction from denotation—that is, from the symbol to a literal or metaphorical feature of it, instead of to something that the symbol applies to—are no less symbolic referential functions and instruments of worldmaking. (1978: 12)

The world in its concrete reality may not be accessible, but ideas about the world, possible ways of being in the world, and a multiplicity of 'worlds' are. Goodman asserts that the 'many different world-versions are of independent interest and importance, without any requirement or presumption of reducibility to a single base' (1978: 4); and, in a precursor of Critchley's argument, observes that this concept of the world 'depends upon rightness'. Like Critchley, and like Steiner, Goodman's perspective insists on the separation—or at least attenuation—of the connection between language and reality, word and world. All three authors reaffirm that poetry never simply denotes 'reality', but rather creates meaning by stimulating interplay between the various possible meanings, resonances and affects of language. It is not so much that reality does not exist, but