

**The Duck At The Top Of The Stairs**

**Or, How I Remember Writing Some Of My Books—Why, Even**

**Ken Bolton**

Time I suppose to see  
just what I've been doing  
writing poems—lost, in the  
middle of a dark wood  
or whatever—at any rate fifty,  
and enrolled, for this degree. (*For why?*  
you ask, as in fact I ask myself.) I know  
what I think I've been doing  
but these things will have  
changed, over time. Changes I sometimes  
will have 'noticed' merely,  
other times willed. But sometimes  
I will have noticed nothing  
or stopped, after a time, noticing.

And *I* will have changed—my *ideas*  
(though ideas were not important to me—  
in the sense of themes to 'pursue'—  
only that there should *be* some), my  
*style* and conception of form—as  
one gambit after another  
ruled itself out, through repetition,  
or my *glands and reflexes* grew  
gaining wisdom and sclerosis.

(I'm not sure what I mean here  
or how best to say it:  
the ideas seemed extra-literary:

Those things together  
constituting ‘change’, development  
or something more in the nature  
of contradiction—discrepancies to be  
explained, or shrugged away,  
concerns or habits that like  
a shirt have worked their way  
low in the drawer and you say *Oh,*  
*I don’t wear that anymore—*  
*it’s hard to say why.*

Or it’s obvious.

The process poem, for example, I  
that strikes me as such a seventies thing:  
— *This coffee shop—I won’t eat here again!*  
Though in fact I will, despite the  
fluctuating price, the mathematical  
inadvertance that accompanies  
lunch each day—the sensitivity  
of the teenage girl who administers it  
precluding objection.

Not that she is aware of this.

I have only ever *used* the conventions  
of that sort of poem, not been bound  
by them as rigor: a device  
for changing the subject. Though ‘subjects’,  
like ideas, were not the point exactly—

or *were* the point ... of the self that  
entertained them, were just the *figure* or  
‘theme’ on the other hand  
of the one writing the poem—  
and you were *both* these people, and you  
might not have to decide between them—  
unless the power of one called  
for its being overruled and  
even then it may have been a matter

that is, good ideas  
were better than bad  
and made the poem better—  
but the test of them as ideas was not literary.)

of ceding ground, regrouping  
redefining the goal or conception,  
the ambition or gestalt:

two people  
endlessly moving the goalposts  
to gain advantage.

Or an impossible coalition—  
say, the Labor Caucus.

(Prospective Content  
and Vague Form, aligned  
provisionally.

Though conceptually  
they are of different order:  
more Incommensurable than Opposed  
— incommensurable *and* opposed? —

and, really,  
fictive entities.)

The Labor Caucus.  
(Or something more cooperative.) In  
any case the tension between the two—  
*form* and *content*—being productive,  
and the *poem* side brought off best with no  
one pole too long dominant. Though this

is to offer a generalization, not a memory.  
What poem do I remember this way? Well,  
'A Terrible Attitude, Based on Mourning' might  
be a candidate— *is* one,  
so perhaps there were others.

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Having something that must be satisfied,  
that might even 'drive' the poem—besides 'art'—  
was necessary. An impulse or orientation  
I think of as Protestant or Puritan—though

what thing Catholic—if that is its opposite—  
is it distinguished from, the Baroque?

(Why did I say I wouldn't eat 'here', any more—  
and then admit I would?

The effect is to change the subject  
—but, more interestingly—*since* or *if* or  
*to the degree that* 'subjects  
are not the point'—a level of sincerity  
is introduced, or introduced  
critically:

an 'earnest' of it—  
a marker—introduced  
as, simultaneously,  
it is undermined—  
a promise  
of unreliability

and a foregrounding of artifice  
—or, more correctly, of the form  
of some sort of  
bond with the reader. I *hope* it did all that

—because as illustration of  
a 'worn out form'—the shirt  
*never to be worn again*—  
it backfires: there I am  
using it/wearing it.

The failure  
set up here, maybe 'demonstrates'  
continuity?

Or is this a moved  
goal-post?

In some ways *good* if it is.

The Baroque I have some tolerance for  
and it would mean in this context



the more positively exhilarating pleasures—  
of Thought-that-moved-swiftly and was not ‘poetic’  
that was amusing, that had the formal excitement  
of collage, its disjunctions: Ted Berrigan, O’Hara.

Where I liked, or ‘employed’, conventions  
I wanted them laid bare.

#

There seems so much to say  
about the early poems. I cared  
about them at the time. But what  
they didn’t do  
meant so much more  
than what they did: a series—  
or simple instances of—  
*exemplary avoidances*  
of what I considered then  
to be error  
and which added up  
to a style of subtractions. I guess  
‘cool’ is always a matter of ‘less  
is more’. Maybe I thought the poems  
exciting in their severity? The audience  
whipped—and a little shocked  
but liking it, or lapping it up?  
Maybe I didn’t think this—  
as I read mostly to friends, the  
like-minded or moderately rivalrous ‘peers’  
of similar or different persuasion.

#

***Learn To Stutter — Scenes  
From Damaged Life!***

Is that the true title  
of this apologia?!

A traditional path  
to aesthetic  
seriousness  
has been  
"the pursuit  
of the direct and the difficult" 59  
(Lucy Lippard). As  
writer and art critic  
Gary Catalano once said—

of artist Ken Whisson—

(that) (he) "resists  
all facility".  
"Risible? You bet.  
but all that I'll soon forget 60  
with my man  
ner of working" (Billie Holiday). ('My Man')

Rhetorical facility  
(especially of the  
readily available 'going kinds')  
must be resisted.

At the same time  
"all is rhetoric"  
(Johnny Mercer)— 61

so what to do about that?  
That's the bind,  
"and yet

*the bind is the point"*  
(Bobby 'The Brain' Heenan). (World Wrestling Federation) 62

A purchase on interest—on  
'authenticity'  
even—is gained

through involvement  
with the form  
and the medium,

with tools  
of artlessness and irony,  
parody, resistance and the rest.

"Damaged life"—I've not  
read all of Adorno by a long shot  
and don't know  
where the phrase occurs—

but Bogart/Sam Spade  
utters *his* lines  
in reply to Elisha Cook's  
observation  
that Spade talks easily,  
confidently:

"What should I do—  
learn to stutter?"

(‘Scenes from Damaged Life’

is the subtitle to Adorno's

*Minima Moralia*.) (The Spade character

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In the case of Poetry  
the answer is, maybe,  
Yes. One of the kinds  
of resistance

"utters these lines" in  
*The Maltese Falcon*.)

I want to posit  
—have I posited it already—  
if *not*, maybe, *discuss*—  
is the resistance  
to a too easy rhetoric,  
at least when spoken  
from a subject-position  
that can be construed  
as the poet's.

But I



*will* discuss it! Give me  
one more cup of coffee!

One effect  
of a poet's sensitivity to words  
—even one such as mine—  
will be  
a difficulty  
and self-consciousness  
about utterance—  
and about banality,  
*seeming* importance, por-  
tentousness of tone  
or cloying sincerity—

and a consequent  
deal of difficulty  
about where to begin,  
and a resultant silence.

This  
self-censure will be—  
by means of projection—  
experienced  
as the medium's resistance.

I.

E. — *you*  
*don't know*  
*how hard this is.*

The obvious way  
round it is  
parody or genre,  
where the model chosen  
can be both object  
and vehicle of your  
analysis.

Adorno's sense—

that the luxury required  
to have complex, analytical  
or speculative thought  
is incriminating—  
is another sense of resistance  
in (or *to*) the very  
occasion of writing.  
And you trick yourself  
out of it,  
or around it or plow  
on occasion directly over it  
but accord it a degree  
—*varying degrees*—  
of difficulty, surely.

The equation  
of civilization with barbarism  
is Benjamin's formulation  
originally, but elaborated by Adorno  
in *Minima Moralia* and elsewhere.

Billie Holiday, *here*,  
backs Adorno—  
and Johnny Mercer...  
and even Bobbie 'The Brain'  
Heenan, from International  
World Wrestling! That makes this  
Cultural Studies practically.  
Doesn't it? "We have no culture  
just aerials"? Isn't that  
what the bohemian young  
*eminence grise* said?

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Or as one  
Justin Clemens has it,  
"All Cultural Studies  
Aspires to the Condition  
of bad rock journalism." (a variation on Walter Pater)  
Good to say that somewhere.

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Yes, Poetry must 'defeat'

Cultural Studies. They have  
the same job description:  
'Intellectual-  
Without-Portfolio'.

("(D)efeate"—that is, as in Harold Bloom,  
*The Anxiety Of Influence*.)  
And maybe we *don't*  
have to defeat it.

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Back to the poems!  
Time for a coffee?  
Yoiks—time for *work!*

#

So—  
'Notes For Poems' (early 80s)  
was a deliberate choice  
of a more flowery diction  
and an alternately hysterical and  
rhapsodic discursive manner.  
Capital 'P' poetry. Chosen  
as a way out of the dead-end  
that degree zero and the process poem  
had—temporarily? permanently?  
necessarily?—brought me to.  
US poet Tony Towle  
was probably the main influence,  
though the poem bears little resemblance  
to his productions. (Actually  
'Notes For Poems' took off  
from the opening paragraph of  
some old-fashioned *Guide  
To Classical Music* I had found.  
I think it had the phrase  
"species of fine frenzy  
descend from the sky"—and I was away.)  
The signs of Towle's presence

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are apparent to me though—  
in the deliberate artificiality,  
the persona (to a degree),  
the linked, extended, 'classical' similes, metaphors,  
and rhetorical patterns or schema,  
the great show of their 'deployment'.

At various times I wrote poems as letters  
(*instead* of letters even  
in most cases) and the first published of them  
I think were three from France and Italy  
(appearing in *Untimely Meditations*).  
These allow an intimacy of address and tone  
and make plausible a greater freedom of association.  
I suppose they also involve  
a degree of self-representation and  
representation of the addressee (their  
expectations, background, opinions). A kind of  
negotiated relationship.

Their attraction for me  
as letters or surrogates for letters  
was that they gave me  
access I normally don't have  
when writing letters  
to areas of free association.  
One should have access  
to this in letter writing  
but I don't normally seem to.

Almost none of these poems  
did I conceive of  
in the terms I have used. I conceived of them  
pretty much wordlessly and intuitively.  
Involving a recognition  
perhaps readied by these kinds of thinking.

But it's not really all that difficult a notion. Is it?

#

(As to the 'letter poems' making plausible  
"greater freedom of association")

"Make *more* plausible"? I mean  
that they are  
*conventionally* more plausible—  
or expected—*because* they are poetry  
and have less of the utilitarian tone  
of contemporary, debased, truncated, not-very-well-mannered  
communications. The poems  
signal that they are Poetry  
by convention  
and that their humor  
consists partly of the ill fit  
of their notions (the notions they express  
thereby) with 'Poetry'.

(Not that these poems set up to demolish  
that idea of Poetry—considering it demolished already—  
but invoke it to bounce off,  
an orientating straw man,  
the only fixture standing in the wide, open field  
modernism has laid waste.)

& I should have said (?)  
bounce off *of*.)

What sort of ill-fit? The usual: the everyday, but also  
the more abrasive and, if not shocking, impolite:  
watching a big Frenchman's little dog  
cower under his chair, small, leonine and cowardly;  
watching cars park; remarks on the disappeared  
mosques of the Jewish Quarter; jokes about Australian  
War artists; anti-clerical sentiments;  
quick artistic judgements on the French Baroque's  
taste in Italian art; a drawing of the Siena square  
done as if lying drunk in the middle of it. And so on.

These things fill out the 'letter poems'.

#

On this tour of the various formal gambits,  
or moves, I've made—"formal/attitudinal"  
might have been the more  
circumspect phrasing there—  
their motivations, their characteristics,  
I'm left with a small bunch of poems  
with traditional form: some sestinas  
and a moderately long poem called  
'Traffic Noises, Cups, Voices'.  
*And* with the fact that I've written  
a lot of poems in unrhymed couplets and triplets—  
since the mid 80s I think. I think the latter  
were an attempt  
at a less obtrusively ("ostensively" used to be  
Donald Brook's great phrase—as in  
"look there", "it's obvious")—um,  
less obtrusively apparent Subjectivity—  
through a greater regularity of look,  
but *also* (as it transpired, but not  
of necessity) greater regularity of tone—and argument.

Not really a category, these, as the manner  
is adopted in works already categorized: 'Dazed' for example.

The sestinas were written mostly  
in the 80s when I finally realized  
that some poems I liked *had* that form  
and that it explained part of their mystery  
and appeal. (Ashbery's 'Faust'  
being one. It recalls mostly the Claude Rains  
*Phantom Of The Opera* movie of the 40s.)  
I used them in the spirit  
of the Ou Li Po (of whom  
I knew nothing at the time)—  
as productively *restrictive form*.

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*Tennis Court Oath* 47

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The sestina formula  
was a machine you strapped to your brain  
and the product was something  
you could not have produced  
otherwise. 'Bunny Melody'  
is one I think is successful. My first, 'Funny Ideas',        *Sestina Centre Brain 1*  
I began by choosing the amusingly nutty blurb  
from *The Fontana Dictionary Of*  
*Modern Knowledge* and making it  
the middle stanza of the six  
and plotting the determining end-words  
for the other stanzas  
from that mid-point—and 'writing'.

Limited returns set in, I've found,  
after a time  
and I don't revisit the form very often.

The other poem 'Traffic Noises...'  
—but that is to jump ahead, to poems that are 'current'—  
the destination in a way  
of this whole exercise. We must be nearly there.  
Word Count could tell me  
exactly how far away it is.  
Exciting? And just  
as I've got the hang of this—  
got it, lost it a few times,  
but basically ...

So, *later*.

Finally,  
I've done more in the collage line, too.  
Not so much—and this time not because  
Diminishing Returns threatened,  
but because I feared  
that the more purely 'aesthetic' determination  
—'aestheticist' even—  
would come to govern,  
that I would have to think of myself

producing 'confections',  
the verbal equivalent  
of the Lyrical Abstraction paintings that,  
though I could like them, seemed to trade  
on the *look* of daring abstraction  
(daring accident, risk and etcetera), and which  
controlled that look pretty perfectly,  
orchestrated their colors, their  
randomness, their accident—  
too conveniently, whose daring was in fact  
already and long ago acceptable.

So, to avoid this embarrassment.

As well I had mostly turned this process  
upon a quite large mass of well digested  
and abandoned material, usually a good while  
abandoned. I was producing less of this  
(fewer fragments of unfinished poems)—  
was less of a bower bird of others' fragments—  
or of 'fragments' of my own. The discursive and flat manner  
I had been maintaining  
did not generate these nuggets. So,  
few examples: 'Blazing Shoes',  
'August 6th'. The latter, *because* it is later,  
shows the effects I have been describing.  
It is made up  
much less of small verbal, linguistic  
units. It is itself (consequently?) larger  
and cloudier—whole discursive chains are set up  
and run for a page, or pages.

I like the poem very much—  
but it is commodious, capacious  
and stands at different sorts of angle to  
—different sorts of distance *from*—  
its material. It *is* their voice  
more often: more often close  
to first person Subject-position—



though it is more openly and more quizzically  
ironic about the voices it mimics, voices it quotes and 'affects'.  
But voice and subject  
are a more determining principle  
with it than with 'Terrific Days'—  
which could be regarded  
as having *no* Subject position. So,  
a difference.

There are a few shorter poems  
done this way: 'Italian Drink',  
'Life Your Weight'—and a number of poems  
that begin with the method or incorporate it  
at some stage ('Double Trouble', 'How I'm Feeling')—  
and maybe it is almost a habit of thought  
or attention I now bring to writing. This, though,  
would be less 'collage'  
than free association. ("Free", what a nutty idea.)

#

(I think we're there.)

#

Well here I am,  
in *The Flash Café*, having  
shocked the woman behind the counter  
by ordering tea:  
she likes to guess, long black?  
latté? But my throat is sore—  
coffee would hurt.  
I'm about to embark now  
on the exegesis  
of the new poems  
that have been collecting under the title  
*At The Flash & At The Baci*—  
poems written here, written  
or revised here. Or at the *Baci*

down the street. A few weren't.  
 Or, *if* they were, I associate them  
 with the desk at home: one of  
 the John Forbes poems  
 (the second, 'Hi, John' the title)  
 looks out that window  
 at a plant outside—  
 and another was written  
 late at night  
 ("People Passing Time")  
 and depended on pictures I had  
 taped or blu-tacked to the wall.  
 Similarly the poem for Kurt:  
 ("Catching Up With Kurt Brereton")—  
 I was doing a drawing or *had*  
 just done. A few others—  
 the 'Manet' one—I was with (‘A Picture’ is the title)  
 Anna and Cath, another I was  
 watching television while Anna slept  
 in front of it or—no I wasn't—  
 I wrote it the next night  
 while alone—watching *Mouchette*.

(The poem is 'Amaze Your Friends'  
*Mouchette* is a 60s French film.)

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Because I'm writing this here  
 at *The Flash* in a poem with  
 the waitress in it—looking at  
 poems I wrote here too—will she  
 be able to see them—by some  
 weird sort of *Being John Malkovich* logic? 74

If she could  
 she would like her appearances  
 I hope—though I can imagine  
*Whadya mean 'Gothic'?* 75  
*And who's this stylish bitch*  
*you work with that knows so much?*  
 Would she like the poems—um—

on 'purely aesthetic grounds'?  
No one else does—ha ha ha.

The best poems in the book  
are not necessarily the ones to talk about  
I guess, though it might turn out  
they get covered. The newest poems  
at the back

are to do with Italy, in part,  
where I was last year  
—and the coffee shops

(in the first half of 2000)

*Flash and Baci*

are Italian—the poems  
consider frameworks, locales  
perspectives  
from which experiences can be seen  
or my thinking can.

Nervously relative. In fact my  
trip to Italy *to* another perspective  
was the seemingly longed-for,  
or wondered-at, coming true—  
disconcertingly, as  
might be expected.

Anyway, I am not  
a markedly 'centered' poet  
though I live with that  
happily enough: tethered  
here—but lightly, barely.

The constants might be friends,  
Relationships—and a mix of  
culture, in which I'm at home,  
(though it's partial, not 'adequate',  
in various ways—but then I'd  
'*have all the answers*' if it were,  
which would be boring  
or boring because 'not me'. Who knows?)  
("Who knows?" a recurrent phrase,  
somebody once said,  
in my poems.)

I seem  
To have talked myself  
into a curious mood. Maybe  
I should write a real poem  
instead of 'this' then? (A  
joke I like, which I've made  
a number of times  
not being sure what its import is  
or caring to decide.)

The whole relativism 'thing'  
I would like to bracket out  
—like my ideas—as non literary.  
It's not a conscious theme, or  
—and this *is* literary, I guess—  
is boring for its repetition  
and embarrassing: like  
some other themes—Who wants  
to seem this sook  
who always needs his friends?  
Similarly poems looking out  
a window, or up late at night  
thinking. 'Thinking'?  
"Thinking—but never making up  
his mind!"

though one is  
and does

Not  
that I mind repetition  
in the poets I admire.  
(But I'm not one of them.)

So what's in this putative book then—  
  
apart from the issues above  
which indicate 'more of the same'—  
  
anything good?

The first poem in the book,  
'Home Town', is okay.  
It could be characterized  
as an 'I-do-this, I-do-that' poem  
James Schuyler-style.  
I do this I do that  
is associated with particular  
O'Hara poems. If it's 'James  
Schuylery' it is in being,  
initially, a narrow column  
and in being less jumpy—  
in the ordering and kind  
of events and ideas, than F. O'H.  
Not that this is 'true' exactly  
or that I thought about it  
that way then. But as shorthand.  
The poem breaks up into  
staggered lines after a while  
—as concepts and moods  
begin to dictate its pace  
rather than the more ('telegraphic?')  
actions and events. It begins—

Driving into work while  
Cath reads about driving around London  
& wondering when will I next write a poem  
or whether to just work on *Gwendolyn*  
a poem of John's & mine & maybe I should  
it *is* half mine, I drop Cath off, do a  
U-turn & scoot down to the EAF, park, go inside  
check the mail empty my bag a little  
lock up again & set off for the coffee shop  
where I'll read or write a poem or a  
review—or work on *Gwendolyn*, I suppose, is  
a possibility . . .

and later goes on  
to become a series of thoughts  
about my 'place' in the world  
how it feels etc and the insubstantiality  
evanescence

of the terms  
in which I think these things.  
The poem affects a wistfulness  
that it mocks—though to which  
it resigns itself finally (if  
'formally' only) at the end  
in ruefully examining the lines  
on O'Hara John Forbes communicated  
to me: about timing, grace.

"Frank O'Hara never went skating  
but he liked to dance," Forbes tells me  
in 'Thin Ice', finding O'Hara  
an acceptable link between us.

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Two other poems early in the MS  
would seem comparable—'Walk  
On The Wild Side' and 'poem ("walking  
down from the *Star Grocery*")'.  
Both feature walking, obviously,  
as does much of 'Home Town'  
but actually 'Wild Side' contemplates  
future daily events

—"Tomorrow:

shop, bank, wash hair" —  
and, still more banal, "put prices  
on books arrived at the EAF"  
(my job) "have coffee".  
"An eventful day?" the poem asks.  
The poem then goes on  
to calibrate loyalties  
to various 'heroes'  
Little Walter, Lou Reed  
James Schuyler—then ponders  
further nebulous things  
pleased to be making no  
firm decisions. It is  
a far more measured poem  
than 'Home Town', biting off

almost less than it can chew.  
'Home Town' takes a number  
of big bites. The  
'*Star Grocery*' poem  
has some of the same  
measured quality and is  
in relatively grave  
three-line stanzas.  
But it is midway between,  
or *somewhere* between—or  
    *a provisional plural*—  
    "somewhere(s) between"?  
Is it a literary convention,  
    or realism, that academic jokes are dull?)

between  
the contentedness of 'Wild Side'  
(the contrast with its title  
is *its* joke) and the anxiety  
of 'Home Town'. '*Star Grocery*'  
runs unfavorable or slightly down  
and crestfallen comparisons  
of oneself (me, not you)  
with the major players of  
cosmopolitan centres  
and sort of decides to take them  
on the chin which it 'bravely'  
holds up in its  
last lines—contemplating  
total annihilation. In fact. (!)  
A bit histrionic.

(*'Walking Down from the Star  
Grocery'* is its full title.)

(Just 'Death'.)

Other poems in the book  
treat 'the street'—  
this same street, Hindley Street.

'Mostly Hindley Street' does so—  
but more in the framework  
of the process poem: cursorily  
diaristic, sketching shops and sites

and characters of the street  
and thoughts produced that way.

It happens upon  
a kind of thesis or question—  
Is my 'compass' any broader than  
Thomas Gray's—whom I rather thoughtlessly  
deride. 'Halogen Pam' is a more circumspect  
account of my life in urban Adelaide  
contrasting it with those of friends—  
contrasting their imagined attitudes, too,  
to mine. It is in three-line stanzas  
and does a fair bit of thinking. Is its tone  
too heavy? Unrelieved? Later poems,  
like 'Hindley Street (with  
a prospect of Michael Grimm)' and  
'Amaze Your Friends', seem not similar.  
Their mood is less self-critical.  
'Amaze Your Friends', anyway, is not  
about the street but was simply written  
about the same time. 'Prospect' begins  
in emulation of some lines and the feel  
of Ted Berrigan, his poems like  
'Ann Arbor Elegy' or (particularly) 'Peace'.  
But readers won't notice. And it  
doesn't matter—it got me started—  
and its, or similar—repetitions  
are what 'Prospect' seeks for, overreach  
being its intent though hoping to 'save'  
or 'recoup' it.

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Interesting, I hope, is a satirical poem  
'Giles Auty Furioso' which  
starts sort of scrappily  
—like a comedian at half pace,  
(maybe rehearsing a show,  
it occurs to me now)—then clicks  
into gear: the supposed



voice of mad Giles Auty  
bemoaning the state  
of Australian Art Today, of  
art today generally. It's  
funny, if it is funny,  
because of the extremity  
of its views—but also  
because of their similarity to his.  
In my view, at any rate.  
The notes to the poem  
are amusing in something like  
the same way, if maybe  
more slyly.

A poem called 'A Picture' but which  
I think of usually as  
The 'Manet' poem is I suppose  
'ekphrasis' which, if  
this weren't a process poem  
and I was going to revise even a line,  
is a word I'd drop (usually  
I cannot remember it—it  
seems to mask the ordinariness  
of an ordinary enough  
concept). Describing a picture.  
This poem describes a painting  
by Manet that, it becomes apparent  
quickly enough, is imaginary.  
My partner Cath, her daughter Anna  
and I are in it, sitting in bed  
reading—they *are*, and I am  
or I might almost be  
but I'm writing the poem in question.  
I describe our respective books  
and the appearance of mother and  
daughter. Cath's description is mediated  
through characterizations of  
Monet and Berthe Morisot  
and a bit of pondering

on Manet's likely attitude  
to detail—that is, is the anachronistic  
wrist-watch I'm wearing  
likely to show up in the painting  
recognisably? We all look up  
for the last line of the poem—  
and say 'Hi'—a reason why  
for a long while I used to toy  
with the idea of calling it  
'Polaroid'. The poem is moderately  
columnar, ranged from  
the left margin in one version—  
in another in longer-lined couplets.  
This last gives more control  
but slows the overall poem.  
A nice poem—but with  
very much the air of a set piece.  
A nice poem I don't care about.  
Far more interesting—but  
does it work?—the poem  
'Double Portrait'. Not conceived  
as 'ekphrasis'. It's a kind of  
doubled sestina, linking a second  
to the first—at the 'copula'  
to call it that, of  
the first envoi or  
final three lines (that is,  
the envoi that would end—  
be the final three lines of—  
an ordinary sestina). (That's where  
I make the join.) It's  
the product of fabulous New York:  
the sight of a New York artist—portraitist  
mainly—one whom I've never liked

(Chuck Close: he was  
sometimes included  
under the rubric 'Pop Art' and also  
as a New Photographic Realist,

though *their* subject matter (not his)  
was usually pick-up trucks and  
chrome-and-glass Americana.  
These latter artists  
have now mostly been forgotten.

Close's paintings are enormous.  
He has lately been  
confined to a wheelchair  
and with very little motor control  
of his muscles  
yet has devised a way to continue.)

"... one whom I've never liked"  
or thought much of. He is contrasted  
in all his art-world success (a  
second-stringer's degree of it)  
with the comparative and undeserved obscurity  
of poet Tony Towle—whose  
work I like. I discuss  
a Chuck Close self-portrait  
and a series  
of photographic portraits  
of Towle. My ambivalence  
about Close—who has  
risen above adversity  
in recent years—and about  
my opinion of him, and of  
other artists, is discussed.  
It's all complicated enough  
and I like it as a kind of  
ruminative thinking that  
might belong in an essay  
in some people's view but  
is less usual and stronger too  
in a poem. The form  
might be the fault in the poem, or  
cause of its faults, but  
it also gives the ideas' expression

some strength. It was absorbing fun to write a serious—seriously toned—poem in the sestina form.

Which links it, though at some months' remove, with 'Traffic Noises, Cups, Voices'. This poem, too, and unusually for me, takes a 'tight' form—the stanza pattern of FT Prince's poem 'Memoirs in Oxford'. These few months' removal is not much, 'Double Portrait' being examined two or three times a week most weeks for the next three or four months, given a rest and subjected to it all again—minor revisions being made or visited upon it, the poem gradually obscured, cleared and obscured again but fixed I think finally: over longer and longer periods left in the dark (to be read freshly). I decided it was complete about the time I finished 'Traffic Noises'.

It is a more serious or heavier-toned poem than 'Traffic'. And interesting, *more* interesting—if in fact it retains the reader's attention: it is less comfortable with its own thoughts—their status as reasonable opinion, *mere* opinion capricious opinion, unjust even. As well, I like 'Double Portrait' for the manner of its thinking about art—which is usually done with an eye to History.

i.e., the other sestinas were comic: there is one of these in the book too—'Prospect of the Young KB As A Critic'

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In fact poems usually discuss work whose status is, or seems, decided.

'Portrait' discusses mere taste and fallible judgement—and error's giving some works a special longevity for me.

(That is, a kind of 'critic's guilt' at having got the work wrong: there are subsequently works I remember especially—and disproportionately—having originally underestimated them.)

'Traffic Noises' is much lighter in tone. It anticipates a trip to Rome, bemused to run through its file of information: knowledge of Rome generally, of the studio in which I would be staying etc—the point / points being contrasts of notional Italy and the 'Italian' coffee shop in which I write—and Adelaide. The poem is 'a bit civilized' in my judgement—'polite' in a way I find diminishes any urgency or immediacy... into an entertainment.

But still,  
something to have done.

Maybe  
each poem is calisthenics, training for the next, or 'a' next. The same moves get made in more pressing contexts or avoided, topped. Modified as they approach again. Like philosophy, I think. (Would *like* to think.) Or do I mean

'thinking' rather than philosophy?

The three poems for John Forbes  
are a response to his death  
and explain themselves that way:  
in summary, they recount  
the following: that John  
was a kind of point-of-reference  
a constant in my thinking—  
intermittently invoked for  
purposes of comparison (my writing,  
my life, attitudes ...  
compared to his) and as  
a kind of bench-mark  
I could apply. He had  
stayed with us shortly before  
his death—not in good health  
but maybe prepared  
to 'look after' himself. In  
the second poem I reprise  
much of this.

Both poems begin with,  
and mix in, everyday occurrences  
and return to John. The third  
is less anchored to the everyday—  
partly it is that it is written at night  
in a 'study'—work room—so that  
intrusions are less random, more  
chosen, and partake more of the subjective—  
maybe it is somatic, too (the  
body late at night): the poem  
as it turns out is a bit more  
'about' death as well as being  
—well, mostly—about John.  
It looks at three images—  
on my walls as I wrote—  
a large A3 photocopy photograph  
of 'Muddy Waters playing cards  
between sets', a photo

(photocopy again) of New York migrant kids,  
girls mostly (or all)  
by Weegee from the 40s,  
and a photocopy reproduction  
of a Philip Guston painting  
*Smoking I*.

This last I have had on my walls  
for years—a photocopy actually  
of the picture torn from a page  
of newspaper so it consists  
of the rectangular image, the titling  
underneath and a triangular fragment  
of newspaper type still further below.  
I like it as black and white graphic  
more than as colored painting, I think.  
I can kick on with it all night  
to any accompaniment—Velvet Underground,  
jazz, anything. It is 'about'  
staying up late. Though for Guston—  
I know this—it is  
also about insomnia, its  
worries and bad conscience and hopelessness.  
This is the reason it reminds me  
of John. As the poem/s say or said  
—we had John resting down the back  
exactly like that, a waking, un-  
blinking head contemplating  
the warnings he had received  
about his health. Plainly  
I didn't know what was going on.  
Maybe he did. (Maybe not.)  
He was frightened, surely,  
to a degree.

Anyway,  
the poem considers the images:  
the young girls, shown together  
watching a movie, a crowded  
afternoon matinee session with

other kids—all now, probably, aged  
 or dead; Muddy (in  
 the pic John had liked and  
 wrote about a few years before  
 when he'd stayed another time and seen it on my wall)  
 dead too; Philip Guston, dead.  
 And maybe I was listening to Joe Turner  
 (dead—do I say that, in the poem?)  
 or was it just the repetitions  
 reminded me of him ('On My Way  
 To Denver'—*It's too late—  
 too late, too late, too late:*  
*Too late, too late too late, too late.*  
 Says the woman, whose speech Joe reports in the song:  
 she's *on my way to Denver—tomorrow*  
*It will be too late.*  
 She is dying of TB.

Anyway, for an overdetermined number of  
 reasons, given my aurally spurred  
 memory, I mention Joe Turner.  
 The poem says John's dead  
 and I'm alive, and doesn't know  
 what to say or 'know' further.  
 Some elements—my doing a drawing,  
 friend Micky Allan, just things  
 'on my desk' (pencils, jars, the  
 curtain closing out the window I face)—  
 are allowed in, partly because  
 the curve of the poem is so powerful  
 it will bend anything to its purpose,  
 the concentration on its theme.

Technically—though as O'Hara says,  
 "you just go on your nerve",  
 (*that caveat*)—I guess the poems  
 do the 'I do this / I do that'  
 thing, but also allow themselves  
 or the third poem does



the freedom of the collage style  
(*not* collage, but similar randomness).  
And I think they shift gears  
often enough in terms of  
different registers of ... cultural reference,  
tones and dictions. Not that,  
in *this* circumstance, this was planned.  
Training, you see. Habit.

Is this the place to say:  
John was not—in terms  
of style or technique—  
an influence for me:  
too different temperamentally,  
too big in the front brain department,  
more interested in compression  
than I am.  
But he represented a position  
I spoke to occasionally,  
addressed explicitly, or  
undisclosedly on occasion,  
and he represented a finger-wagging  
critical presence—in my imagination—  
though amusing, a kind of  
comic 'ravishing super-ego'.

Also influences, in  
variations of the same way,  
were Pam Brown and Laurie Duggan.  
—Less comically different  
from me, but different enough.

John's early death  
has made him more central  
to my poems recently. I don't know  
whether permanently or as  
a blip.

A spike? John was  
a friendly acquaintance.  
Laurie & Pam are friends.

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Their styles are—if not  
“more within my reach”, then  
tempting because temperamentally  
compatible or ‘near’ to me.  
Levels of irony (kinds even)  
& pointed, drier intelligence(s)  
separate us: but they are  
influences—it’s a gulf I try to  
bridge or cross often enough.  
Be like Pam!  
Be like Laurie!

The Italian poems—‘Traffic Noises’  
was one in anticipation,  
and we’ve dealt with it (on other grounds—  
not as anticipation, but  
because it was in a somehow  
‘fixed’ form, a  
stanza pattern)—what to say of them?

There were three basically: ‘Rumori’,  
‘Long Distance Information’,  
and ‘Tiepolo’. ‘Tiepolo’ is  
very much, and inevitably, in the shadow  
of John Forbes’s ‘On Tiepolo’s  
*Banquet of Antony & Cleopatra*’—  
which is a better poem—  
though about a painting I  
don’t much like. I’ve liked  
Tiepolo forever—bought prints  
of his drawings from Rowe Street  
Art Shop when I was  
first a student (finding out  
years later that it had once been  
importantly a connection with Europe  
for Sydney artists. By the time  
I happened upon it it was genteel  
and faded). I’ve always preferred

Tiepolo's brushier, less formal compositions.  
I describe one I saw in Venice,  
beginning with a potted history—

In the 14, 15th &  
16th centuries it was  
all happening in Italy  
artistically though by the 17th  
other countries had joined in.  
By the 18th  
Italy was definitely off the pace.  
Still, I happen to think Tiepolo  
was a major artist

and an account of Tiepolo's isolation  
within the Fine Arts course  
at Sydney Uni—too important  
not to be included, not central enough  
to fool the students. Forbes's influence  
I think is in the comparison of  
the begging saint-figure  
with a lonely guy at a disco—  
a comparison John might have made  
and would have liked, might even  
have identified with.  
The poem is something of a 'set piece'  
—like the Manet poem—and  
for that reason I dislike it.  
Maybe poems about pictures  
are not my thing—or *not*  
where 'Art History' has  
already entered its verdict.

'Rumori'

is a long poem about daily life in Rome  
and my preoccupations there  
with 'Australian artistic identity':  
Australians' looking to the Larger World  
—though there are only powerful centres  
that seem to constitute it—this larger world:  
London, Rome. (New York.) The loss of nerve  
and failure of certain Australian art and careers

(that is,  
Tiepolo wouldn't feature  
in the exam)

—Slessor, Crowley—and the pathos  
that attaches—were difficult in the poem  
to verbalize, or prove. It felt true  
—felt true more than it seemed it—  
and seemed and felt hysterical, projection.  
This reduces the poem, I think,  
to reiteration and shrinking from  
conclusion. Rome's *own* independence  
from these pressures (at least  
as a context or working space) is made  
absolve the feeling.

But not logically.

It might as easily be seen  
that Rome (*cf* the Tiepolo poem's  
potted history) was no longer competitive.  
Like Sydney—or Slessor's Sydney.

Well, there are good things in  
It—but propositionally the poem  
is weak and uncertain.

Written

at the same time is a 'letter poem'  
to a friend in Adelaide, 'Long  
Distance Information'. The phrase  
is from Chuck Berry and  
'Long Distance Call', the Muddy Waters song,  
might be hipper as a title (as  
a reference, surely) but there  
you go: it does purport  
to give information—to a friend  
back home. Some of it  
is fanciful and some of it is true  
and most of it is humorous. Good  
fun, but no more—in terms  
of author satisfaction.

No fun

writing poems is it? I enjoyed it  
at the time and I don't hate the poem.

But it was not the big pay-off  
and never was going to be.

Similarly

‘Amaze Your Friends’, ‘Hindley Street  
with Michael Grimm’ and  
‘My Considered Opinion’—all  
likeable. ‘Opinion’ deals notably  
—though was that its point?—  
with Asian students; ‘Amaze’  
with sitting up at night, with rock clips, our  
daughter Anna (have I mentioned this?)—  
and ‘Michael Grimm’ is another  
portrait of Hindley Street  
from *The Flash*—all in stepped,  
scattered lines. I *have*  
talked about this.

Some poems that link with ‘Rumori’—  
its themes of art-making and identity—  
are ‘Horizon’, ‘American Friends’  
and ‘Catching Up With Kurt Brereton’. The last  
fits in perhaps because it was  
of that time—and it celebrates  
a Sydney aesthetic—mostly pretending  
my friends and I are having a reunion  
aged 50—*but 50 years ago*,  
in the Sydney of then.

‘American Friends’ wonders where  
my writer friends *are*. (I’m on  
holiday as I write it myself.)  
The poem expresses ambivalence  
as to the effect of O’Hara *et al*  
on those so far away. (The movie,  
from a Ripley novel, is about  
inadvertent betrayal  
of a German by an American.)

film title: *The American Friend*

But “those so far away”?  
Is this a ‘class action’ I’m proposing—

though I seem, conspicuously, the only victim?

US Imperials

*New York blend*—

it said on the pack

so I knew what I was doing.

'Horizon' summarizes as similar—

but is higher toned and more

poetically obscure: it too begins with

quotes from O'Hara—

chosen almost at random

but to fit my situation

of looking out a country window.

I do this and think of

what my friends are doing—

it is Xmas time—

and wonder at the country / city divide,

the Australian landscape tradition,

Australia—which, I would like, or

*had wanted*, to think of

as modern—in this *post*-modern

'age' is 'post-colonial', is it (?):

how diminishing that is.

The poem

considers Meaghan Morris's contrast

of Les Murray's

"ordinary man with an icecream"

(Les's, or Donald Horne's?)

and John Forbes'

different take on things. I think

the poem addresses John again

near the end. The poem concludes

but is not conclusive.

It's good,

I think—and was different for me

in its manner—of looking for a

new piece of text to push off from

whenever it stalled. I chose

(Morris, 'On The Beach', *Too  
Late Too Soon*)

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fragments from the less well-thumbed  
O'Hara poems—not always signalling this  
with quote marks—and kicking off  
from them. Choosing O'Hara,  
while contemplating the Australian countryside,  
was a deliberate or perverse ploy, a  
self-incrimination, since the poem  
is about cultural imperialism  
to some extent.

The poem affixes my  
usual declarative style  
to a structure jointed at  
or powered from (in part)  
images, passages ... that are  
less 'transparent' than that style—  
but are poetically weighted or resonant.  
These are the O'Hara lines—  
quoted before the poem *and*, italicized,  
at its beginning—  
and again some pages further in, more—  
(italicized: "*not to be / inimitably  
weak & picturesque myself /  
but standing forth a subject  
not a spectacle*");

later, un-marked:

"as the brave must always ascend,  
always the musts" and  
"which strolls now & then  
into a field / & sits down like  
a forgotten rock".

The next O'Hara quote is signalled  
(by quote marks)  
and is from memory and  
meant to be recognized: "I live  
above a / dyke bar & I'm happy".  
"I might too, for all I know. /  
Am I?" the poem asks.

I have  
a more detailed and critical  
view of O'Hara than I did  
in the 70s. I didn't read him  
a lot in the 80s—and use him now  
partly as emblematic—not just  
out of enthusiasm. ("Emblematic":  
'my' America—or  
an early, important  
enthusiasm.) I still  
like his work immensely,  
but see it more clearly. (Does this  
sound like 'knowledge'? Then  
I mean "clear-eyed".) (And it may be  
that I see it  
no more accurately.)

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Not that  
I think the story of my poetry  
is of a relation to O'Hara's poetry  
—is it?! Is Dick Watkins  
*about Picasso*? Or Tuckson  
*about Pollock*? Should they  
not be? Anyway, if it were so  
that it could be seen that way  
it would be news to me.  
A possibility of course.

Or is it *not* news:  
exactly what I expect?

The smart thing for this book  
would be a blurb that directs attention  
this way—since it will be inevitable—  
and seeks to control it. Something along the lines of  
"re-examines the place of O'Hara and others  
in an Australian poetic."

If it does, still, that



is not my point at all.  
Thinking is, then?  
or poetry  
(form, art,  
the aesthetic)?

Poet considers a shirt he used to wear—  
why did he do it? how could he? would  
he do it again? Should this shirt be destroyed  
forever—is it a museum piece, tragic  
—or empowering—handy for someone else? Is this, in fact,  
the *same* shirt?

The Op Shop of the poetic heart:  
*What a lovely shirt. Somebody should wear it!*  
Not me.  
*No, you've got too many like that already.*  
Really?  
*It's very like what you're wearing.*

## Notes

- 1 The phrase means—or I took it to mean—a poem that documents the real time of its writing. Typically such poems refer to passing time, the place of the writing/thinking situation and its self-reflexivity. These poems tend to run to some length.
- 2 The correct title ends ‘Based On Suffering’. (Ken Bolton, ‘A Terrible Attitude, Based On Suffering’. *Selected Poems, 1975 - 1990*. Ringwood: Penguin, 1992. 172).
- 3 Adolf Loos (1870 - 1933) was a Viennese architect at the turn of the century, representing a purist form of early modernism developing out of and ‘against’ Art Nouveau and anticipating De Stijl.
- 4 Reyner Banham is an architectural critic who championed the ‘functionalist’ 1950s/60s English architects who often followed loosely Bauhaus principles but tended to foreground the functional: exposed pipes and ducting and the perfunctorily (sometimes perversely) awkward staircase etc. See his *New Brutalism*. London: Architect Press, 1966.
- 5 Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe (1886 - 1969) and Hans Gropius (1883 - 1969) were German Bauhaus architects, later working in the US. Mies said ‘less is more’ and Gropius said ‘form follows function’—among many other dicta.
- 6 Charles Olson proposed most clearly in his essays on Projective verse a kind of kinetic/organic theory relating the poem’s form to interconnected impulses of thought, breath and emotion. See Olson, ‘Projective Verse’. *Human Universe and Other Essays*. NY: Grove Press, 1967. 51.
- 7 Donald Davie. *The Purity of Diction in English Verse*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1952. Enjoyably prissy and severe.
- 59 Lucy Lippard. ‘The Cult Of The Direct and The Difficult’. *Changing and Other Essays*. NY: E.P. Dutton, 1971. 64 - 75.
- 60 “Tired, you bet. But all that I’ll soon forget / with my man”. Billie Holiday. ‘My Man’. Rec. 1956. *The Essential Billie Holiday: Carnegie Hall Concert Recorded Live*. Verve/HMV, 1961.
- 61 Johnny Mercer was a popular song-writer in the 1930s and 40s.
- 62 Bobby ‘The Brain’ Heenan was a wrestling manager on American TV wrestling in the 1980s.
- 63 T.W. Adorno. *Minima Moralia*. Trans. E.F.N. Jephcott. 1951. London: Verso, 1978.
- 64 McKenzie Wark’s remark was more an objection and joke about the phrase ‘cultural roots (“we don’t have roots we have aerials”’) made at a conference or arts festival, but undoubtedly in print somewhere.

- 65 Justin Clemens. 'A Report to an Academy'. *UTS Review* 4.1 (1998): 107 - 122. The article contains Clemens's variation on Walter Pater's phrase about "all art" and "music".
- 66 Harold Bloom. *The Anxiety of Influence*. New York: Oxford UP, 1973.
- 67 See also Ken Bolton. *Two Poems: A Drawing of the Sky*. Adelaide: Experimental Art Foundation, 1990. The main influence that I am aware of behind this book-length process poem and its debriefing coda is James Schuyler's 'The Morning of the Poem'.
- 68 Tony Towle. '*Autobiography*' and *Other Poems*. NY: Sun/Coach House South, 1977.
- 71 John Ashbery. 'Faust'. *The Tennis Court Oath*. Hanover, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1962. 47.
- 72 Oulipo, short for *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*. To become a member one has to invent a new form with strict rules. Some simple ones are Perec's novel without the letter 'e', *La Disparition*, Harry Mathews' stories written using only the vocabulary of a particular, simple text. 'Restrictive form' is held to be liberating and productive, hence the Ou Li Po's liking for the sestina and forms like it. See *Ou Li Po Compendium*. Eds. Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie. London: Atlas Press, 1998.
- 73 *Mouchette*. Dir. Robert Bresson. With Nadine Nortier. Argos/Parc Film, 1966.
- 74 *Being John Malkovich* is a movie with an amusing logic that allows people to 'be' John Malkovich for a short time by climbing through a hole. Dir. Spike Jonze. Gramercy/Single Cell, 1999.
- 75 These are allusions to remarks mildly critical of the waitress which appear in 'Traffic Noises' and 'Hindley Street with a prospect of Michael Grimm'. Ken Bolton. *At The Flash & At The Baci*. Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2006.
- 76 John Forbes. 'Thin Ice'. *Collected Poems*. Sydney: Brandl & Schlesinger, 2001. 145. *Thin Ice* was the title poem of a pamphlet Forbes printed privately in the late 1980s.
- 77 Ted Berrigan. 'Ann Arbor Elegy', 'Peace'. *So Going Around Cities, New and Selected Poems, 1958 - 79*. Berkeley, CA: Blue Wind, 1980. 219, 223.
- 78 F.T. Prince. 'Memoirs in Oxford'. *Collected Poems*. New York: Sheeps Meadow, 1979. 121.
- 79 Correct title of the photograph is 'Muddy Waters relaxing between gigs' by Val Wilmer. My copy is from an unsourced newspaper. See John Forbes. 'Muddy Waters Relaxing Between Gigs'. *Collected Poems*. 188. The photo is reproduced in *Otis Rush* 12/13, 1996. 96.

- 80 Frank O'Hara. 'Personism'. *Collected Poems*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1971. 498 - 499.
- 81 Pam Brown, Laurie Duggan, and John Forbes are the main local influences in my writing career: they are philosophical or aesthetic or political 'stiffeners' (as I have allowed them to be) as much as, or more than, they have been directly poetic influences.

John Jenkins and I have collaborated on a great deal of work since the mid 1980s. I do not think we have been much influence on each other's solo work: our ideas and interests are antithetical. The poems we write together come mostly out of our amusement at this: many of them are dialogic. Most of them neither of us would work up the volition to write alone.

Laurie Duggan's poetry I find extraordinarily impressive. *Under The Weather*, which has in parts lost some of its charm for me, I was very impressed with at the time of its writing, for its form and its ellipses, its overall musicality, and for being a poem of that kind: where else was there one? (There were many, probably, stemming from Bunting, Pound and maybe Olson, in the US and the UK. I didn't see many though, and liked fewer.) I read *Under The Weather* as it was being written. Laurie's next books were very good (*The Great Divide*—with poems in it like 'The New England Ode'—and *Adventures In Paradise* which I published).

*Blue Notes* was a miscellany, with very good things in it. *The Ash Range* was so much less personable and was different. It was not what I wanted to write though impressive and ambitious. I published Laurie's *Memorials*—which I like immensely. If some of my more scattered, staggered, processual (!) poems approach this I would be very happy. Laurie's work pointed me to Philip Whalen's—if I needed another source and originating personality and temperament for writing like this.

Laurie and Pam are both readers whom I imagine writing my work for. So their respective writings temper my work. Not that they are severe as people, but that what they see as bullshit counts.

I wrote numerous letters to the addresses given in Pam Brown's early books. To no avail for years—she had 'always already' moved on. Her work interested me from the mid 1970s onwards, at first intermittently. It was very different from my own. Since meeting in the late 70s our work has grown closer—what a phrase—and apart again, in various ways (formally). But we share a great many attitudes. I think her influences are less narrow than mine, but we want our poetry to do many of the same things. My work sometimes takes off from lines of hers, often takes off from the imagined attitude 'Pam Brown' would evince.

John Tranter has been for me impressive without his work having any siren pull. I was fascinated by early versions of 'Rimbaud and the Pursuit of the Modernist Heresy', I remember, in the mid 1970s. I read him mostly in

magazines then. His early books, *Parallax* and *Red Movie*, already seemed old compared to his current work.

I suppose I should acknowledge that my influences are mostly male. But then they are also fairly few—amongst contemporary Australians they are three, of whom one, of course, is a woman. I lived with writers, Anna Couani and later Sal Brereton. Both are prose writers and I think for that reason less influential.

The US anthologies and movements we encountered as young writers were pretty exclusively male: One woman (Bernadette Mayer) in the NY School anthology, two or three in Donald Allen's effort (Helen Adam, Denise Levertov, Barbara Guest). Guest seems alternately inert and diaphanous-and-wafty to me. Her critical rehabilitation is being organized but I am not a subscriber. Bernadette Mayer I've read a fair bit of and liked. Anne Waldman; I liked only her first book, *Giant Night*. Adrienne Rich's later, 1980s work I read in the mid and late 80s and liked, but aside from its seriousness, its 'techniques' were those I already used. (I had read her *Diving Into The Wreck* in the 70s.)

I now read Eileen Myles and some Alice Notley, also Susan Schultz. The Howes, Hejinian, I read a little of. I find the former solemn. Lyn Hejinian I'll read with interest.

So, I liked only a small percentage of what was available. Should I explain why I ignored so many *male* writers? Influence is a matter of enthusiasms and compatibilities—and timing and availability. Within the narrowness of my tastes I don't think I was culpably blind to others' talents, male or female. Still, I doubt that my social attitudes were way ahead of their time either.

- 82 Meaghan Morris. 'On The Beach'. *Too Soon Too Late*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998.
- 83 The recurrence of O'Hara references in my poetry of the 1990s is maybe overdetermined: my work has been to some extent in intermittent dialogue with that of (or with the figure of) John Forbes, for whom O'Hara was important. John's death in early 1998 brought him still more to the fore of my thinking—and possibly more present than might have been the case as I began to edit *Homage to John Forbes*, a book of appreciation, memoir and criticism—published by Brandl & Schlesinger in 2002.

I wrote at least a thousand words a day every day from the age of twelve on. For years Poe was looking over one shoulder, while Wells, Burroughs, and just about every writer in Astounding and Weird Tales looked over the other. I loved them, and they smothered me. I hadn't learned how to look away and in the process look not at myself but at what went on behind my face. It was only when I began to discover the treats and tricks that came with word association that I began to find some true way through the minefields of imitation. I finally figured out that if you are going to step on a live min Some nights I might not have time for anything more than an odd, out of the way broom closet. The Uni is actually a pretty large campus, for having a full student body of only twelve or thirteen hundred. It was built as a Methodist college in 1896, and became state-owned in the thirties. There were three main sections. I spent the second week after Finals Week poking through the top floors of Downing Hall. I didn't have a lot of time for exploring every night, as the snow gave me more than usual upkeep chores, but I made steady progress. I mumbled to myself, "How would they even convince students to get down here in the first place?" I remember thinking, at that point, that I must have somehow discovered a back way into the other wing of the V-shaped Downing Hall. Some of the skills I'd picked up along the way had even been in direct conflict with it, such as the pounding of nails into wood. Those poor trees! Now I'd be in charge of saving them. Well, I hoped I would be anyway. I'd done a lot of preparation for this one interview, this one shot at fulfilling my destiny. There was no telling how many other people were vying for this position. The number of CVs that office received must have been in the hundreds. It's tough finding a job these days, let alone the job you want. But we mustn't let things like that stop us from getting what we want out of life. I've resigned myself to believing that if there's something you really want, you have to really focus on getting it, and that means blocking out discouraging thoughts.

“How many days to the coast?” Skelton asked the boy. “Four, five.” Early next morning, to enjoy the cool of the day, Skelton, with his pipe and a book, was sitting on the veranda outside his room. He was still very weak, but felt much better. In a little while Mrs Grange joined him. She held in her hand a large album. “I thought I’d like to show you some of my old photos and memories. You mustn’t think I always looked like what I do now. He’s off on his round and he won’t be back for two or three hours yet.” Mrs Grange, in the same blue dress she had worn the day before, her hair as untidy, appeared strangely excited. “It’s all I have to remind me of the past.”