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**Relating Experience: Spiritual Practice and the Poetry of  
Judith Beveridge, Kevin Hart, Robert Gray and Michael Heald**

Natalie Jeane Owen-Jones

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## **Abstract**

My project explores the work of four contemporary Australian poets who have had relatively little critical attention: Judith Beveridge, Kevin Hart, Robert Gray and Michael Heald. In the work of all of these writers, the relationship between poetry and experience is a crucial and generative theme. The bearing of each poet's individual spiritual beliefs and practices on their poetry is a major part of this investigation: if poetry is a matter of experience, the root of the word experience, "trial", suggests that it offers situations for the transformation of the self. This is a quest that motivates their commitment to spirituality and meditative techniques as well as to writing, and in analysing such situations, the most intense of their kind in Australian poetry, I hope to reach a deeper understanding of these important poets than has yet been achieved.

Drawing on the relationships between the testimony of mysticism, the Buddha's teaching as recorded in the Pali Canon, and aspects of phenomenology and pragmatism, this study addresses the spiritual qualities of awareness, equanimity and ethics in contemporary Australian poetry with a particular focus on their non-sectarian nature. The poets of this study are Buddhist, Catholic or committed to Vipassana meditation, yet they share similar concerns about experience and the reading, writing and consequence of poetry, and the status of experience within the spiritual traditions they are affiliated with. More subtly, the importance of experience is implied within their poetics: the subjects, the structures and imagery within their poems and, particularly, their attitudes to metaphor. Ultimately, this study's questioning of the experience of poetry addresses the meetings of knowledge, meaning and being, and the nature of the self within which they meet.

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### **Publications during candidature**

- Owen-Jones, Natalie. "Bruce Beaver, Totemic Space and Poetry's 'You': The Three 'Rilke' Letters." *Southerly* 69.3 2010: (178–98). Print.
- Seger, Natalie (*see also* Owen-Jones, Natalie). "Judith Beveridge's India: The Ethics of Observation and the Idea of a Journey." *Identity, Ethos & Ethnicity: Australia and India* ed. Anurag Sharma and Pradeep Trikha. Ajmer, India: Arawlii Publications, 2010: (45–55). Print.
- . "Meditations on Sensation: Judith Beveridge's 'From the Palace to the Bodhi Tree.'" Literature and Sensation Conference. The University of Western Sydney. 12 July 2007. Conference Paper.
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australian poetry, experience, spirituality, meditation, judith beveridge, kevin hart, robert gray, michael heald

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## INTRODUCTION

*We had the experience but missed the meaning,  
And approach to the meaning restores the experience  
In a different form, beyond any meaning  
We can assign to happiness* – T.S. Eliot, “The Dry Salvages”

*Art’s best is a standing miracle  
at an uncrossable slight distance* – Les Murray, “Satis Passio”

This project began as a series of questions, each responding to my observations of the relationship between daily experience and the experience of poetry. How do our individual experiences of life change how we are able to read a poem? How does the experience of reading change our daily lives? These broad musings point to a space crossed by intersecting questions of ethics, aesthetics and philosophy too enormous to cover in one dissertation. The aspect of this field I do address in the following pages is the capacity of four contemporary Australian poets to speak to and from the complex relationship between poetry and experience, revealing as they do so the importance of spiritual experience and practices to their work. Judith Beveridge and Robert Gray identify as Buddhist, Kevin Hart converted to Catholicism and has a particular interest in the testimony of Christian mysticism, and Michael Heald writes in detail about his commitment to Vipassana meditation. The other aim of this project is an expository one: particularly in the cases of Beveridge and Heald, these poets are contemporary writers whose work, like most Australian poetry, has not had the critical attention it deserves. This topic, with its exploration of the thematic and critical relationships among these poets, has the potential to contribute a great deal to the understanding of their distinctive voices.

The following discussion aims to provide an atmosphere of theory on experience and poetry, and an introduction to the poets and the pertinent criticism of their work. Their own comments about the relationship of experience to their poetry in interviews, essays and reviews reveal that the literary relationships between these four poets, and the commentary they have offered on each other’s work, is important to setting the scene for the close readings of this study. I do not elaborate on these correspondences within the chapters themselves, preferring to remain attentive to each individual’s work. This methodology is a response to the topic: its propositions are tested by the singular experiences of the poems

themselves; and the potentially nebulous character of the questions raised by this project are focused by the specific activity of reading contemporary poems, many of which have not been commented on before.

The topic of experience in literature is not at all new or uncommon. In Hart's essay "Blanchot's 'Trial of Experience'", he recalls a remark made by Jean Pfeiffer in 1950: "For the past thirty years or so, the term 'experience' has enjoyed a singular favour in literature" (*Gaze* 108). Defining it, and its applications, is problematic. In the following paragraph of that essay, Hart lists some of the terms and names Pfeiffer would have been encountering: "Inner experience", "primal experience", "intuition", as well as Dilthey, Bergson, Husserl, and Bataille's understanding of experience as "a voyage to the end of the possible of man" (109). Hart's continuing interest in defining the term "experience" resurfaces in *The Experience of God*, in which he quotes I. A. Richards: "A word like 'experience,'" he says, "is like a pocket-knife. In good hands it will do most things – not very well" (75).

Continuing, Hart remarks that

... speakers of other languages would find it odd to have only the one word to cover the conceptual range of "experience". German distinguishes *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*, experience in the sense of a journey and experience as lived, and in a similar fashion French has both *expérience* and *vécu*. Philosophy develops in different directions depending on which of these is taken as a starting point. One can elect *Erlebnis*, like Edmund Husserl, and ground one's account of phenomena on modifications of consciousness. Or one can choose *Erfahrung*, as Martin Heidegger came to do, and argue that a shared, public world necessarily precedes any and all private experience. The sole English word "experience" takes on varying meanings and functions in different contexts, meaning now *Erlebnis* and now *Erfahrung* and now neither ... (75)

The opportunities arising, then, from this umbrella-like term "experience" within the English language are rich territory for questioning a poem's relationship to its reader and to its writer.

Hart's essay "The Experience of Poetry" is an elaborate testing of the philosophy of experience, and specifically religious experience, against encounters with poetry, his own and that of others, and I will look at that essay in relation to his work in the second chapter. He begins with defining experience in terms of its root "*peri*", or "trial". A description offered by Heidegger in *On the Way to Language* suggests what is at stake here:

To undergo experience with something – be it a thing, a person, or a god – means that this something befalls us, strikes us, comes over us, overwhelms and transforms us. When we talk of “undergoing” an experience, we mean specifically that the experience is not of our own making. (57)

Experience is a meeting with alterity in limitless ways, Heidegger ventures. Becoming subject to something that will “overwhelm” and “transform” is a pertinent way of describing both the reading and the writing experience. In a way that is as multi-faceted as the term experience itself, the experience of poetry is a point from which many different paths of meaning and argument can depart. To the poets of this study, experience is a key concern both in terms of structure and theme. By structure, I mean the understanding of poetry as the expression of an encounter in life, of undergoing an experience, as the trace left by having undergone an experience and undergoing the experience of writing. By theme, I mean the concern all four poets have in different ways with the importance of experience to their spiritual lives, in the form of meditation and applied ethics.

The topic of experience and poetry is one that immediately brings the nature of the subject into question: who or what speaks in a poem? To whom is it speaking? All of the theoretical work I draw upon in this project addresses these questions, directly or obliquely. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s *Poetry as Experience* takes the most radical stance among it, as it seeks to describe a poetry that refuses subjectivity. His readings of two poems by Paul Celan – “Tübingen, January” and “Todtnauberg” – and “The Meridian” address the possibility of poetry after the Shoah, to put it very broadly. In his reading of “Tübingen, January” Lacoue-Labarthe suggests: that if the poem offers any “message” it is a “translation”, and he names what it translates “experience” (19). To do this he calls again on the Latin, “*ex-periri*, a crossing through danger”, wanting to avoid the definition of “what is “lived”, the stuff of anecdotes. *Erfahrung*, then, rather than *Erlebnis*” (18). Further along, a passage comes close to defining what poetry, according to Lacoue-Labarthe, is able to be and do, in terms, necessarily, of what it cannot do anymore:

... there is no “poetic experience” in the sense of a “lived moment” or poetic “state.” If such a thing exists, or thinks it does – for after all it is the power, or impotence, of literature to believe and make others believe this – it cannot give rise to a poem. To a story, yes, or to discourse, whether in verse or prose. To “literature”, perhaps, at least

in the sense we understand it today. But not to a poem. A poem has nothing to recount, nothing to say; what it recounts and says is that from which it wrenches away as a poem. (19–20)

Yet “nothing” is still a “happening” to Lacoue-Labarthe; it is a pure “wanting-to-say”, but “because nothingness is inaccessible to wanting, the poem’s wanting collapses as such ... then *nothing* lets itself be said, the thing itself ...” (20). This event of “nothing”, the momentary irruption of the thing itself, is a definition of lyricism that is approached and analysed in different ways throughout this study; it has correlations in Beveridge’s figuring of absence, Hart’s concept of strangeness and motif of the stranger, the attentive focus on the object or the thing in Gray’s poems and Heald’s endeavours to share “what can be witnessed” while acknowledging the unstable and insubstantial nature of the witness. This nothingness unleashed by the poem, this “thing itself” momentarily released, is a powerful event to both reader and writer. Experience – this “crossing through danger” – is transformative in a very real, though never prescriptive, sense. Blanchot has said that “Literature is an actual experience whose results ... cannot be measured in advance”: it “must be followed to the end to know where it leads its author, in what transformations of the self it culminates” (qtd. in Hart, *The Dark Gaze* 35).

One way in which this nothingness is figured, both within Lacoue-Labarthe’s readings and many moments in the work of the poets in this study, is as “strangeness”. As Michael Brennan says in regard to Jean-Luc Nancy’s essay, “Painting in the Grotto”, “In each making, each act of *poesis*, we are given that first moment of strangeness over and again” (“Intimate” 244). Quoting Celan’s “The Meridian”, Lacoue-Labarthe says “the poem hopes, has always hoped ... to speak ‘in the cause of the strange,’ in the name of the strange and alien” (59). The words “strange” and “strangeness” resonate throughout the chapters of this study, seeming to haunt the very phrase “experience and poetry”; approaching this shared encounter with strangeness has resulted in two related conceptual threads that inform its close readings. One is an investigation of metaphor in the poets’ works, and the other seeks to reveal how much of the poetry in this study is animated by the phenomenological reduction, or *epoché*, a philosophical exercise in the work of Edmund Husserl. In doing this, it also demonstrates the point made by various commentators in the field that the *epoché* is connected to spiritual practices of various traditions that seek to reveal the “thing itself”, or reality “as it is”.

The work of Paul Ricoeur, primarily in *The Rule of Metaphor*, has been fundamental to the investigation into metaphor in this study. In his discussion of Colin Murray Turbayne's *The Myth of Metaphor*, Ricoeur describes the "poetic experience" happening when "something other than the poet speaks even as he speaks, and where, beyond the control of the poet, a reality comes to language" (*Rule* 300). This immediately accords with the concerns of the poets of this study, and the way that Ricoeur's close inspection of metaphor, and its role in the theories of poetry from Aristotle to the present, illuminates metaphor as the device that so often makes possible the experience of poetry as we have come to describe it. Ricoeur's succinct definition of metaphor as "an apprehension of an identity within the difference between two terms" (28) expands in the later chapters, as the book works towards a "theory of metaphor that will conjoin poetics and ontology" (30). Ricoeur redefines metaphor as fundamental not only to the poetic experience, but experience itself, as given to us by and through language; "if metaphor is a statement", he says in an analysis of Roman Jakobson's interpretation of the poetic function in language,

it is possible that this statement would be untranslatable, not only as regards to its connotation, but as regards its very meaning, thus as regards its denotation. It teaches something, and so it contributes to the opening up and the discovery of a field of reality other than that which ordinary language lays bare. (174)

In an article published a few years after *The Rule of Metaphor*, "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling", Ricoeur makes a clearer link between metaphor and the phenomenological reduction. In words that recall the arguments of Lacoue-Labarthe, he says that poetic language "refers" to reality "by the means of a complex strategy which implies, as an essential component, a suspension and seemingly an abolition of the ordinary reference attached to descriptive language" (153). There is another, a "second order reference", which is "built on the ruins of the direct reference" and that this other order "suggests, reveals, unconceals – or whatever you say – the deep structures of reality to which we are related as mortals who are born into this world and who  *dwell* in it for a while" (153). He marks a strong connection, then, between the suspension of literal sense that gives rise to metaphorical sense, and "the suspension of the reference proper to ordinary descriptive language" as "the negative condition for the emergence of a more radical way of looking at things" (154).

The event, or exercise of the phenomenological reduction or *epoché*, is a topic that recurs throughout this study. It is important in Hart's "The Experience of Poetry" and is often implied when the other poets write about the experience of writing poetry and what has to happen in order to write poetry. There is a helpful explanation of the *epoché* in the introduction to *Experience of the Sacred: Readings in the Phenomenology of Religion*. Editors Sumner Twiss and Walter Conser point out that Husserl's "concern to see our experience without the presupposition of theory, interpretation, or assumption imposing upon and shaping what we see" leads to an exercise of "suspending all commonsense beliefs and judgements about the existence, value or truth of the objects encountered in experience" (3). Twiss and Conser continue: "the forest we see from the window of our study, for example, is not an interdependent ecosystem of flora and fauna in competition for survival and threatened by pollution. Rather, it is a vista of variegated colours, shapes, sounds, and scents" (3–4). The following step in the process involves "viewing the experience reflectively, and seeing how in his experience he is conscious of or related to the objects of his experience"; ultimately, "the inquirer becomes the "disinterested spectator" of himself and his conscious experience" (4). Or as Hart says: "When I shift from thinking of the tree as a subjective appearing to me to letting its mode of being light up when I look at the tree, I have grasped its phenomenality" ("Reading Robert Gray" 20).

Ricouer's essay goes on to describe the role of feeling in the metaphorical process, explaining that feeling and the imagination have always been closely connected in classical understandings of metaphor ("Metaphorical Process" 155). He speaks of a category he calls "poetic feelings" which "enjoy a specific kinship with language" (156), and questions how they are linked to meaning. The function of feeling, he says, "is to abolish the distance between knower and known without cancelling the cognitive structure of thought and the intentional distance which it implies. Feeling is not contrary to thought. It is thought made ours. This felt participation is a part of its complete meaning as poem" (156). Further on "we may assume the Heideggerian thesis that it is mainly through feelings that we are attuned to reality" only with the qualification that "poetic feeling" needs to be understood alongside a definition of the cognitive component as "a tension between congruence and incongruence at the level of sense, between *epoché* and commitment at the level of reference" (158–59). An understanding of the role of feeling within experience and the experience of poetry plays a large part in my discussions of Beveridge's and Heald's work in particular, and the concept of feeling is focused, in these, to "sensation", a more precise definition of feeling as it appears in the body. John Holder's work on aesthetics within the Pali Canon is important to

my explorations of the importance of sensation in Beveridge's poems, and in her *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, Susan Stewart makes the apt comment that "poetic form made of language relies on rhythm and musical effects that are known with our entire bodies, carried forward by poets working out of tradition and carried over by listeners receiving the work" (12).

In a way that examines how poetic meaning may be "known with our entire bodies", in his *On Experience*, David Malouf recalls a passage in *David Copperfield* that captures a moment of illuminating knowledge. When going to borrow a knife and fork from Captain Hopkins, the young David understands immediately aspects of the Captain's domestic situation "as surely as the knife and fork were in my hand" (qtd. in Malouf 6). Malouf goes on to speak of David occupying a threshold (as he literally does in the novel) where receptivity can be at once observational and physical, "so that what the eye records (the shock heads of the girls, the dishes and pots on the shelf) and what the observer "sees" (that sudden apprehension) are of the same consistency, and both have the reality and substance of what can be held in the hand" (6-7).

The dailiness that attends this "sudden apprehension", and the physicality of the understanding, is important in Gray's work, and a major theme in John Dewey's pragmatism which he has found very influential (Gray). In *Art as Experience* Dewey proposes that writing about the arts sets a task:

This task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience. Mountain peaks do not float unsupported; they do not even just rest upon they earth. They *are* the earth in one of its manifest operations. (3)

This view of the "continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience" is one which accords with many of the basic tenets of the Pali Canon, which is another body of theory this study draws upon, as do both Heald and Beveridge. The Canon, which represents the entirety of the Buddha's oral discourses, began to be systematised soon after the Buddha's death and its current version dates back to the third century B.C.E., though not all its sections can be dated from the same period (Bodhi *Words* 6-9). As the earliest surviving record of the Buddha's teaching, it has given rise to commentaries both ancient and modern

and, among others, this study draws from the reflections of John Holder in his “Pali Buddhist Aesthetics”, specifically in his linking of the aesthetics and physical sensation.

One of the ways the Canon underpins the aims of this study is by its insistence on the importance of direct experience to spiritual life. In his consideration of the difficulty of choosing between the wide array of religious and spiritual teachings, when they all, by their nature, “make claims upon our allegiance that are absolute and all-encompassing” and “suppose – or pre-suppose – doctrines that we cannot directly validate by personal experience” (81), Bhikkhu Bodhi isolates the important difference of the Buddha’s teaching as contained in the Pali Canon:

For Early Buddhism, all the problems we face in deciding how far we should go in placing faith can be disposed of at a single stroke. That single stroke involves reverting to direct experience as the ultimate basis for judgement. One of the distinctive features of the Buddha’s teaching is the respect it accords to direct experience. The texts of Early Buddhism do not teach a secret doctrine, nor do they leave scope for anything like an esoteric path reserved for an elite of initiates and withheld from others...in sharp contrast to revealed religion, the Buddha does not demand that we *begin* our spiritual quest by placing faith in doctrines that lie beyond the range of our immediate experience. (*Words* 82–83)

In a way that may sit uneasily next to the practice of the Buddha’s teaching of meditation (and be productive in that unease), this study takes Christian mysticism to be another spiritual practice, as well as the written testimony of that practice. Hart quotes Paulhan: “one must return to the mystics. Of all the philosophers, only they openly put their philosophy to the test and *realise* it” (qtd. in “Non-Experience” 192). The relationship between the activity of spiritual practices and the activity of writing underpins the investigations of this study. I leave this section with Hart’s recollection of Blanchot, where he has the act of writing in mind, and its own stake as immediate experience:

We can ask, if literary experience is not a translation of lived or imagined experience, what then is it? On Blanchot’s analysis, in the act of composition, writers are fascinated by what precedes writing. It is reality we want, and when that is taken from us by writing (as Hegel saw), we become drawn to the silent origin of the work in hand that has been posited by the act of writing .... (“Non-Experience” 199)



‘[O]nly in the act of writing does an author brush against a limit of existence’, Hart writes earlier in that essay, “risk peril, and return to ordinary life changed, having undergone an unsettling passage that we call *Erfahrung* or experience” (192).

This understanding of the power of experience and the writing process is latent within the views of Judith Beveridge, the poet with which this study will begin. Beveridge was born in London and immigrated to Australia as a child. She has published four volumes of poetry to date – *The Domesticity of Giraffes*, *Accidental Grace*, *Wolf Notes* and *Storm and Honey* – and three other chapbooks. The first critical essay to be written solely on her work, Martin Duwell’s “Intricate Knots and Vast Cosmologies: The Poetry of Judith Beveridge” argued that her poetry is initially distinguished by what it does not do: satire, parody and city life do not figure largely, nor is her poetry confessional in the same way as is the poetry of one of her mentors, Bruce Beaver (243). Particular aspects of her work that Duwell recognises, and that I take up and explore here, are the metaphorical process in her work, by which the poems “inevitably absorb features of the world into structures of meaning” (248), and her “drive towards portraiture” (252). More recent reviews and criticism tends to focus on her affiliations with Buddhist thought and practice. In an interview with Greg McLaren, Beveridge approaches a question about reality and language, about the “gap between the world and the world of writing”, in terms of experiential knowledge as it has been introduced to her by her interest in Buddhism and meditation. She says:

There’s the Buddhist idea that you can only know things through direct experience of them. Reading about things, or even writing about things is not the same as knowing them through direct experience. Perhaps that’s what that means: that we can’t know things through our own writing; we can only directly experience through our insight, particularly if you’re aware of and attentive to the present moment. No amount of study or learning can give you the kind of knowledge that meditation can give. Words ultimately fail us. (McLaren, “Interview” 58)

Poetry can however, she insists, “give the reader an experience, not just a mental or intellectual construct, but an actual emotional, physical experience” (58). In line with the work of Lacoue-Labarthe, Beveridge’s comments on her work offer another perspective of how poetry happens precisely when words “fail”. Despite her concerns, in my readings of her

poems I seek to demonstrate how she achieves what Beaver called “the operatively spiritual” that infuses her work (Letter 15/8/87. Folder 2).

My study is informed by this concept of experiential knowledge and understanding of the relationship between language and experience. Other critics have approached Beveridge from different angles. Her work forms a part of Greg McLaren’s doctoral thesis on Buddhist concepts and imagery in Australian poetry. Two articles by Heald about the long sequence in *Wolf Notes* – “Putting Words in the Buddha’s Mouth: An Analysis of Judith Beveridge’s ‘Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree’” and “Beyond Imagining: Notions of Transcendence in Judith Beveridge’s ‘Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree’” – look more deeply at the representation of the Buddha and his teaching in terms of meditative experience, and reveal his own departures from Beveridge’s work. Her poetry is often acknowledged as deeply sensory, rich with imaginative detail, “alive with extraordinary sensitivity to smells and sounds as well as sights” (Duwell 253), and this quality forms the basis of Heald’s criticism that her version of Siddhattha Gotama’s story, as he journeys towards becoming the Buddha, “is most strongly the product of a way of knowing usually termed imaginative” and that this “imaginative approach, strongly bound up with the senses and emotions, is actually one which is quite distinct in some ways from the meditative” (“Putting” 44); the meditative “way of knowing”, he ventures, stems from the fact that, as suggested in cognitive science and neuro-science, “modes of consciousness”, and therefore “modes of knowing” and their narratives may be quite different from other modes, such as the imaginary (43–44). What this emphasis on the imaginary results in, he argues, is “the perennial elusiveness and implausibility of transcendence” of Siddhattha, “rather than one who embodies the promise and indeed successful realisation of transcendence” by becoming the Buddha (63).

I take a different view on “From the Palace to the Bodhi Tree”. Looking at Beveridge’s earlier work as well, I argue that drawing upon the senses and the art of imaginative, specifically metaphorical, processes themselves contribute to a portrayal of the developing meditative power that led to Siddhatta’s enlightenment, a possibility Heald does note (62). Her portrait of the Bodhisattva’s journey insists, through its *poetry*, that he achieved enlightenment through personal experience of the interconnecting subtle realities of mind and the physical world, rather than through faith alone or intellectual reasoning. The capacity of her poetry for this sort of representation is intuited in Geoff Page’s reading of another poem from *Wolf Notes*, “Bahadour”, a portrait of an Indian child labourer. He admires the way the “complex free verse rhythms and carefully honed images are at the core of the deep moral and psychological insights her poems develop” (102). He says “Each visual

element of the situation has been seen and transformed so that it has, in itself, something of the same transcendence that the young kite-flyer experiences” (101). This turns the topic of Beveridge’s representation of the Buddha and Bodhisattva towards questions of reception and the role that the experience of poetry has within spiritual practice and everyday life that are taken up again in my analysis of Heald’s work.

The poetry of Kevin Hart is also motivated by a spirituality that is ethical before, perhaps, religious, in the sense that it responds to our relationships with others instead of dogma. He says to Lee Spinks that

The otherness that impinges on me is in principle in all experience, not reserved in a special region of experience described as “religious”. Of course, we can close ourselves off from the possibility of responding to this otherness, we can become hardened and single-minded. That certainly can happen when people cordon off a range of experience and call it “religious”; it quickly becomes codified, protected and private, even when its rhetoric is one of openness and social engagement. We can always deny the possibility of transcendence in experience, even in daily encounters: we can always not be patient, we can not listen to what someone is saying to us, we can not do something to help. (14)

“Poetry is tied up in all of this” (14), he goes on, and the way poetry is related to this otherness leaves traces through the rich territory of Hart’s works of theology, philosophy, criticism and literary theory as well as his poetry. As well as his nine volumes of poetry, Hart has published books on Derrida, Blanchot and other continental philosophical and religious thought as well as Australian poetry. Like Beveridge, Hart was born in England, migrating to Australia as a child. Since 2002 he has lived in America.

Commenting on the way Hart’s poetry is delicately informed by his philosophical work, Lachlan Brown says that “As a result, his poetry is beginning to receive sustained interest from a younger generation of scholars” (“Silence” 193). Himself one of these scholars, Brown analyses these correspondences in two recent articles. He addresses the presence of silence in Hart’s work, particularly in *Wicked Heat* in “The Edges and Voices of Silence in Kevin Hart’s *Wicked Heat*” and offers a sustained, close reading of “Peniel” in “‘A Name I Never Heard Till Now’: Reading Kevin Hart”. Brown’s reading of the title poem of his fourth volume entwines the poem’s Biblical allusions with Hart’s philosophical affiliations in an analysis of the name and naming (revealing, while doing so, the interesting

facts that Hart's mother was Jewish, and so "he held a second identity as a Jew" which was kept hidden from him (104)). The essay traces various encounters between language and divinity, with a closing reminder that "the reader is left with only language, where so much is elided, so much suggested" (115). Brown remarks that Hart's later philosophical studies "demonstrate a sustained interest in those thinkers who consider experience: its demands, limitations, and moments of articulation" ("Listening" 358). The topic of experience plays a large role in Paul Kane's essay on his poetry and John Koethe's, and I draw on this in the chapter. Jacques Khalip says in a review of *Flame Tree* that Hart is a poet of "minimalist design and fierce defamiliarization. Hart's contribution lies in the unflagging spirituality infusing his work" (201), and I take up this characterisation and its attending theme of metaphor, drawing on the pioneering work of David McCooey and Gary Catalano in forming areas of focus, which arose initially from the author's own sustained preoccupations.

Converting to Catholicism from "nominal Anglicanism" in 1980 (McCooey, "Interview" 34), Hart has contributed more to mysticism scholarship than any other Australian poet, as Toby Davidson says in his study *Christian Mysticism in Australian Poetry* (185): "he has become the first Australian poet to significantly influence international philosophy and theology" (187). Unsurprisingly, then, more than any other poet in this study, Hart has his own theory of the experience of poetry, in which spiritual experience is very important, and reading his essay "The Experience of Poetry" forms a large part of my second chapter. In his reading of mysticism in Hart, Davidson offers the "organising categories" of "*accompanying, waiting, and stretching*" in analysing the ways his poetry "attend[s] to God" (193). In a way that Davidson does not specifically address, it is the way Hart's mysticism, and scholarship on mysticism, is attuned to experience and generates theories of poetry and experience that informs my focus in this study. Approaching the mystics has provoked Hart's interest in experience towards a more enigmatic category of "non-experience", a term coined by Blanchot. Hart addresses this term in this essay "The Experience of Non-Experience", partly because it guides Blanchot's work, and partly because it "condenses a number of problems encountered in studies of mysticism" (191). As revealed in that essay, the unraveling of Blanchot's term is as pertinent to experience and literature as it is to mysticism: the difficulty with the word "experience", Blanchot says, is that it "tends to make us think that literature is tied to a particular psychological phenomenon" (qtd. in Hart, "Non-Experience" 198). This "would have a 'lived experience' that would be the 'essence of poetry.' Yet there is a 'literary experience' that flies over experience and that experiences

what cannot be experienced” (198). Hart approaches some of what is suggested here when he answers a question about whether he considers his poems to be autobiographical:

My poems are very seldom reflections on what I have actually done, although they are almost always poems of experience. Two very different accounts of experience ring true for me when I think about my poetic practice. The first model is Husserl’s account of the conversion of the gaze, especially of the phenomenological reduction, through which one becomes aware of how one’s intentional relations with things are already concretely embedded in horizons one never realized, or fully realized, were there... The second model is Blanchot’s idea that writing is itself an experience, for the writer sets out on a path whose end cannot be foreseen and, in traveling along it, learns what he or she did not know beforehand. To think of writing as experience, according to either of these two models, preserves the poet from using a mere facility with words to make decorative cultural artefacts. (qtd. in Trikha 65–66)

Both of these models figure largely in the way I address Hart’s poetry. Beginning with an analysis of how “primal experience” persists in themes and structures of meaning in his work, I engage Paul Eluard’s oft-quoted phrase, “There is another world, but it is in this one”, which Hart uses as an epigraph to *Lines of the Hand*, in an analysis of poetry’s performing of origin and its capacity to approach the spiritual. I look at how the phenomenological reduction comes to bear on his work in close readings of a number of his poems, and how it relates to his love of the Christian mystical tradition and negative theology to suggest that this “conversion of the gaze” is linked to, or even translated as, his notion of “The Calm”, an equanimity with which a poem can turn towards the world carrying, through its stake as experience, the potential of turning its reader and its writer along with it.

Later in that interview with Pradeep Trikha, Hart names Robert Gray as one of his two favourite Australian poets (the other is Robert Adamson) (65). In “‘Only This’: Reading Robert Gray”, Hart’s most comprehensive essay among his commentary on Gray’s poetry, he offers close readings informed by a detailed explanation of Husserl’s phenomenology (and how it differs from empiricism). In that essay, Hart names “Dharma Vehicle” as Gray’s “most substantial philosophical-religious poem” (36). This title should belong to the “The Drift of Things”, I venture, a more recent long poem first appearing in *Afterimages* and one Hart also reads in that essay. “To register the particulars of nature is, for Gray, a spiritual exercise”, Hart observes, “not an appeal to another world behind or above this one but a

meditative discipline to see this world as it is” (41). Gray’s feeling for the “particulars of nature” is crystallised in his focus on the physical thing; as the speaker says in “The Drift of Things”: “They’re the location / of all we know” (260). My reading of “The Drift of Things” runs throughout the chapter, as does the thought of some of the philosophers important to Gray, in particular John Dewey’s *Experience and Nature* and *Art as Experience*.

Gray’s long-acknowledged gift is the visual image, the fresh simile that allows us to “see everything as though for the first time” (Catalano, “Hymns to the Optic Nerve” 52). He grew up on the North Coast of New South Wales, and his descriptions of that landscape and his poetry’s sense of place are themes that feature in much of Gray criticism. Mark Tredinnick has read him with the pastoral tradition in mind, John Hawke with the vitalist, and Alan Gould and Dennis Haskell have both approached the issues of “eye” and “I” that attend his poems’ talent for observation. Haskell speaks with wariness about Gray’s perceived integration of Buddhism, in the concept of “No-Thought” (as found in “Dharma Vehicle”), and the erasure of the observing self from what the poem observes (267). Instead, he argues for Gray’s humanism, expressed particularly “in the empathy of the individual with things” (270). Yet Gray’s approach to Buddhism is subtler than this, and in my readings of his work I look closely at the relationship between observation and ethics which his spirituality, as well as his interest in continental philosophical traditions, informs.

Many of Gray’s own views on the role of poetry and its capacity to express or enact ethics are conveyed in his essay, “Poetry and Living: An Evaluation of the American Poetic Tradition”, which is essentially a defence of poetry. Within it, he acknowledges Shelley and his “best” expression of the “critical attitude”, while hoping to “make something of this tradition new” (117); “both ethics and poetry are the same”, he says, “if they are recognised as not dogma, but as products of responsiveness, of empathy” (118). It is in this sense that Gray’s poems are spiritual. As Hart says, “Gray denies the possibility of God being present in human consciousness or in the world. And yet this poetry is not devoid of reverence; and the contrary, it is itself a series of spiritual exercises, meditations on matter, its ceaseless transformations, and the ways in which we can become entangled in it” (“Only This” 27). As Gray explains in “Poetry and Living”, the forms of this “entanglement”, a feeling for the physicality of the world and the ability to communicate it, marks the poetry of his favourite American poets, Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams, and leaves traces in his own.

It is in this context of the passing, physical moments of life somehow conveyed on the page that Gray experienced the moment he knew he would become a writer. He tells Lyn McCredden that when he was twelve and listening to his teacher read from *Wind in the*

*Willows* there came a scene in which Mole buttered some toast and the butter, “the hot butter on the toast dripped through the toast like honey dripping out of a honeycomb”. There was a moment of epiphany, Gray says:

The hot butter drips out of the toast, through the toast like honey out of a honeycomb. I'd seen that, but I'd never noticed it. And then, when it occurred in the book, I suddenly realised that I'd seen this, but never really seen it, never experienced it. And it was the writing, the writer who made me experience it, gave me the intense experience of life. And I realised what imagery can do, you know, that it gives us life, it makes us aware of life. That all the things that pass us by in life, all the “blooming, buzzing confusion” of life can be saved, things can be saved out of that torrent and preserved and we can be made to experience them much more intensely. Things can be rescued out of time by, by writing. (McCredden, “In Dialogue with Robert Gray” n.p.)

The hope for rescue is ultimately in vain, as Gray's poems, possibly before Gray, know. Yet the hope illuminates a knowledge and a belief about experience and poetry, and experience and the writing process, which is something that must figure large for a poet who has published six selected editions of his work, and eight collections of poetry. Gray's fierce re-writing is often commented upon, but it is the related issue of the epiphany that can be experienced as a reader or writer that I take up in my chapter on Gray. Within it I look closely at the different roles of descriptive imagery and the aphorism in his poetry and analyse the capacity of their relationship to perform the ethics Gray so strongly believes to be at the heart of the experience of poetry, and its purpose. He concludes his prose memoir *The Land I Came Through Last* by speaking of “the revelation one would never have otherwise had, but for writing” (344). In his poems it is aphorism, I suggest, that is very frequently the site of that revelation.

Gray writes the preface to Heald's most recent volume of poems, *The Moving World*, explaining that the poems are “the record of the author's explorations into Vipassana meditation” and Heald's turning of modern poetic techniques towards this exploration is relevant “because they allow so much precision, such suspension of attentiveness, between one word, one nuance, and the next, because of the emphases that rhythm brings, and because of the concrete, vivid communication, beyond words, that the constant use of images allows” (n.p.); *The Moving World* is a “daring and triumphant project”, Gray says, Heald being the

first poet he has known of “who has seen and made use of these possibilities in such a way” (n.p.). I look at the forms this daring takes, in regard to *The Moving World* as well as his previous volumes.

Like Beveridge and Hart, Heald migrated from England to Australia as a child; the speaker in “Remembering the North Sea” recalls arriving “slight, small-footed and pale, / ridiculous until proven worthy” (*Saturn* 34–35). Martin Harrison reviewed Heald’s first volume *Body-flame* favourably and lucidly, but there has been little comment on his next two volumes *Focusing Saturn* and *The Moving World*, other than brief mentions in collected reviews of recent poetry. The relatively scarce critical response to Heald’s work is partly a testimony to what it is within Heald’s poetry that this study specifically seeks to address. In a way that seems paradoxical in the light of his frequent engagement with social and political issues, his poetry is often governed by what is concealed and concealing within lyric poetry. Given this critical background, the chapter on Heald, and his place in this thesis, has largely expository aims.

Already begun in *Body-flame* and *Focusing Saturn*, and developed more in *The Moving World* and his article “Reinhabiting the Body, Decolonising Australia: Poetry, Meditation and Place in *The Moving World*”, Heald is introducing a “meditative way of knowing” into Australian poetry, which is as much a way of reading as a way of writing. In the final chapter I explore the way Heald draws on poetry’s ability to bring into the experience of reading aspects of lived experience that cannot be said or recognised, but for the poem, which is where and how what is unsayable about the experience of meditation emerges. The primary way *The Moving World* is “daring” is in its risk of an intense singleness of focus on the practice of Vipassana meditation. This is a focus on a technique with some reference to the theory which supports it and, importantly, unlike Beveridge’s work, Heald’s does not make the Buddha its focal point. The word “Buddha” is not mentioned in *The Moving World*, which is quite a remarkable omission, given that the entire volume is openly based on a technique of meditation he taught. The omission is deliberate, I am suggesting, and points towards the differences between Heald’s and Beveridge’s representations of that teaching, as Beveridge’s work is primarily concerned with imagining the person of the historical Bodhisattva and Buddha. I have already spoken about Heald’s reading of Beveridge’s “From the Palace to the Bodhi Tree” in this introduction, but it is worth noting again that the poems of the *Moving World*, in their explorations of the role of physical sensation in meditation, provide a way of refocusing on and contextualising the motif of sensation in Beveridge’s poetry. In the more recent article, “Reinhabiting”, Heald



provides a context for this volume, offering comments on his own intentions, his perspective on how his work responding to Vipassana intersects with current themes in literary studies and Australian culture, as well as descriptions of the theory supporting Vipassana meditation, which I look at in detail in the chapter.

After discussing his earlier work, in the first part of the chapter I read poems from *The Moving World* from within the context of the theoretical background of the practice of Vipassana meditation and the “ways of knowing” it animates. Further on, I look at the way the later poems of *The Moving World* represent this theory and practice as interventions in the ethics of daily life. I conclude by placing the volume in the context of the teaching poems of the Pali Canon, arguing that its poems constitute, as many poems of that tradition do, an invitation to the practice of Vipassana, and that this ancient imperative is performed by their “techniques of modern poetry”. Written by the poet who, more than any other in this study, writes most strongly from within this country’s natural and political scenes, Heald’s poems evocatively set this ancient tradition, as well as the questions of this study, within Australian contemporary poetics.

This study sets out with the view that the experience of poetry is continuous with the lives of those who encounter it in various, complex ways. It is Beveridge’s hope that there is a connection between writing poetry and “ways of living and being”; for Hart, writing poetry is “not a part of my life at all; it’s a ‘how’ of the whole thing” (Triakha 66). It is Robert Gray’s belief that poetry can give “words that can be turned into practice” and Heald offers an invitation to practice. All of these views imply that the experience of poetry inspires other experience, and that poetry’s power derives not only from being an experience but from its intimation that experience is the only road to the knowledge that can transform. It is also in this sense that the experience, or trial, of poetry opens onto the conversation of spirituality in the work of these poets. This focus on the spiritual does more than limit the discussion of poetry and experience to one aspect of their writing; it reveals that this relationship and these questions are burning, together, in the generative processes of their work. Moreover, this focus illuminates something about the importance of their individual spiritual lives to their poems: that it is the experience of that life, often distilled to meditative practices, that is of the highest importance, and which requires poetry, over other forms of writing, to share it. And so in a sense this topic also looks back on itself: it is the nature of spirituality’s presence, and process, in their poems that necessitates these questions about experience and poetry.

## CHAPTER ONE

Judith Beveridge: “*I can give each feeling the subtlest form*”

Words and our individual experiences of realities and truths will always be held apart by a space that all writing is nonetheless compelled to cross. This is said often and in various ways, but it is an impasse that any discussion about what poetry might have to do with experience needs to acknowledge. In the case of the role of experience in Judith Beveridge’s poetry, negotiating this impasse suggests many avenues into her work. They trace the paths that this compulsion has created in her poetry, and they are there, asking to be followed, particularly because her writing so often stems from an engagement with practices of meditation and ethics – activities which demand and celebrate direct experience. In a statement of poetics published in *Meanjin* in 1989, Beveridge says:

my main dilemma as a writer [is] to find a balance between the practice required and a certain quality of living that will make the poetry richer...I think there must be ways of living and being that promote the tendency towards poetical experience, as much in the way that certain disciplines give access to the transcendent. In fact, the two for me are interchangeable. (334)

Beveridge’s poems ask that readers explore the peculiar subtleties of a view of poetics that assumes an intimate connection with “ways of living and being”. Such a view inevitably places poetry in a position akin to a revolving door: it engages, directly and indirectly in innumerable ways, with lived experience, and it has status as a living experience. Beveridge also seems to say throughout her poems that if we choose to take up the demand to view poetry as a force within our lives, as we must in order for it to speak to us, then, by that very process, our view of our lives cannot help but be subject to and opened to certain attitudes of poetics. In Beveridge, one significant place of this meeting is in her practice of meditation, which she says is her spiritual as much as her poetic path. She has explained to Greg McLaren:

Poetry writing is similar to meditation in that I am able to notice what occurs in my mind without always getting caught up and attached. I've learnt not to hold on too tightly in the writing process, but simply be a witness and let whatever occurs occur...in a way, poetry has been my path. ("Interview" 51)

In its readings of poems from throughout Beveridge's career, this chapter will begin by looking at how experience takes poetic forms in Beveridge's poems: how it relates to the way absence is figured within her work, to her treatment of sound and physical sensation and, most pervasively, to her approach to metaphor. I then go on to read Beveridge's poems about Siddhattha Gotama, her sequence "From the Palace to the Bodhi Tree" and her earlier sequence "Buddha Cycle", in the light of these relationships, demonstrating that her poems about the Bodhisattva and the Buddha form a major part of her poetics of experience and are not separate, in this, from her wider body of work<sup>1</sup>. Questions about the experience of poetry can be approached by way of these poems, and these presences in Beveridge's writing more generally: what they demonstrate, and what I wish to argue in this chapter, is that Beveridge represents the Buddha's teaching as a poetics, a series of spiritual exercises whose aesthetic nature is deeply tied to their experiential nature; moreover, her work illuminates that they are aesthetic *insofar* as they are experiential, and vice versa, so that we may speak of the poetics of the Buddha's teaching. It is a poetics that is based on the observation of change in the self and the world, and a poetics that stages the various changes and transformations of mind which precede the dissolution of the general categories of "self" and "world". The earlier stages of this chapter develop a context in which this representation of the Buddha's teaching can be understood, and understood as significant to Beveridge's whole body of work; in the later parts it has been necessary to go into some detail in regard to the background of these sequences, following the many ways in which Beveridge has drawn from the Pali Canon – the earliest surviving record of the Buddha's teaching – to show how she has engaged with a tradition of poetics and aesthetics connected not only to the Buddha's teaching, but to this teaching's emphasis on experiential learning.

Beveridge explains that there was once a barrier for her between the arts and spiritual practice, but that this was dissolved in the realisation that "it is the quality of awareness with

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to be able to cite Greg McLaren's discussion of Buddhism in Beveridge's poetry in his doctoral thesis "Translations Under the Trees: Australian Poets' Integration of Buddhist Ideas and Images" as offering a reading of "From the Palace to the Bodhi Tree" and "The Buddha Cycle", and the insight that these poems are intimately connected, through her idea of the aesthetics of Buddhism, to the rest of her work. Although I diverge from his interest in Buddhism, as such, in Beveridge's poetry, I have endeavoured to contribute to this overview a more detailed investigation into some of the sources for the sequences.

which one approaches both that matters” (Beveridge). Her emphasis, not just on awareness, which is inherent in the act of poetry, but on a specific “quality” of awareness that would set apart some activities of mind from others, is itself well-acknowledged by her commentators. Peter Boyle praises this particular skill:

In a way suggestive of what a contemporary Rilke might be, hers is a poetry of spiritual vision marked by a natural affinity for the beautiful rather than the clever. This commitment to the creation of beauty is not in its basis a matter of prettiness or smooth-sounding surfaces but rather a by-product of the quality of attention she gives to things and people. (5)

This notion of attention in the poetic process works in conjunction with what Beveridge calls the “knowledge-giving” potential of poetry to bring a reader closer to the place from which the poet speaks. More suggestively, and enigmatically, she says that “it is the meditative, concentrated mind behind the sound, the word, the metaphor, or even the image, which gives it this transformative power” (Beveridge). This is not the easiest idea to negotiate, but it is one expression, Beveridge’s expression, of an intuition lying at the heart of this study. Although it seems at first to assume that a certain presence lives “behind” the poem, Beveridge’s poems themselves tend to say otherwise. Duwell opens his essay on Beveridge’s poetry by acknowledging its deep interconnectedness, its “sensitiv[ity] to the dense interweavings of reality”; he observes that “pulling one thread involves disturbing so many others” (“Intricate” 243). Between these many threads (some of which will be drawn into this discussion) there lies a persistent sense of what is *not* there, which unsettles any false belief that a “poetics of experience” is about the narration of what *is*, or has been. This is a necessary and telling qualification that needs to be made in regard to Beveridge’s particular poetic. In her work, where the idea of the singular is always shaped by a pervasive belief in the interconnectedness of all phenomena, this absence is often suggested by the sophisticated withdrawal of the speaker itself from the poem<sup>2</sup>. The effect of this withdrawal can be felt in her portraits of animals especially, but at times it is also spoken of more directly. It is one of the bases for Beveridge’s idea of the pure in poetry, an understanding that considers the act of poetry as something quite separate from activities in which the self reacts, as it does almost

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<sup>2</sup> In a recent article, “The Cool Web: Emptiness, Empathy, Prosody & Place”, Mark Tredinnick makes a similar remark, and examines this phenomenon in Beveridge’s work. It has a stronger presence in her *Storm and Honey*, which is the focus of his article, but outside the focus of this study.

continually. This understanding is announced most clearly in an early poem, “For Rilke”. It opens:

You can cup your ear in your hand  
and hear your voice turn all light and clear  
in its depths –  
but we hear nothing, just the noisy world.

And the world loves to be noisy.  
It loves to make a clatter,  
to play itself with our tongues  
its diamond styluses  
loudly  
and for long periods. (Beveridge, *Domesticity* 13)

Beveridge sets up, in terms of sound imagery, a dualism between the resonant levels within the poet’s hearing and the flatness of the “noisy world”. The dash after “depths” suggests the contrast between the two sides well. It is a Rilkean gesture, and in his poems too it tends to suggest that there is an endlessness within the contained shell of the poem, an inner expansiveness which is here compared to the stark “nothing” and limited “just / the noisy world” available to everyone else. The second stanza goes on to speak about the poem’s “us” from another perspective. It places us in the accusative: we are being played, not playing anything ourselves. Our tongues are, ambivalently, the world’s “diamond styluses”. They share with Rilke an inherent capacity for light and clarity, yet are able also to transmit the song of the world with exactly this precision. In the phrase “the world loves to make a clatter / to play itself with our tongues”, the banal sense of “love” and the unskilful suggestion of “clatter” add to the effect of that other overused word “nothing”. “For Rilke” continues:

But you are your own quiet singing.  
The world sets speakers above our heads  
(even when we sleep)  
blaring at tremendous decibels –  
and we can’t hold out against it,  
in the morning

the words of its song  
pummel our lips awake.

Our hearts – they’re like utensils  
taken from their original uses  
and put into the world’s jug-band.  
Listen to us: we are like bottles  
filled to different levels and then struck  
for our various resonances:

not like you, poet –  
your voice pure as a tuning fork  
independent  
of what it’s struck off; the gentle  
absolute humming of steel  
against which we are, to ourselves  
severe grating, unbearable  
dissonance. (Beveridge, *Domesticity* 13)

Rilke is a very important influence in Beveridge’s writing. As Jenny Digby notices while interviewing her, she has Rilke’s portrait in her living room (205). In letters she received from Beaver around the time of *Domesticity*’s publication, Rilke is a major topic; at one time Beaver writes to her: “I think Rilke is in the line of men and women who choose and are chosen to help humankind help itself “to find [its] own perfection,” as you neatly put it”. This “perfection” to which Beveridge senses Rilke is attuned is clearly something that this poem wishes to capture or communicate. Her emphasis on Rilke’s voice as “independent”, and the way she likens it to a “gentle / absolute humming of steel” suggests that it emanates this quality of perfection. But far from containing it, or embodying it (and Rilke is probably one of the few poets who could carry off such a suggestion – as Judith Ryan suggests he is perhaps the modern era’s most iconic, self-fashioned, “pure poet”), the perfection of the poet’s voice is audible only in relation to what it is not. His voice is the emptiness against which we are unbearable “to ourselves”.

In other words, the dualism of “For Rilke” is not created by one autonomous, self-contained and creative figure placed against all others who cannot speak from their own

depths but are instead spoken for. This potential reading is turned around at the poem's close. Rilke is represented not as the one pure presence in a situation where everything relies on something else for its expression but rather, through the play on dependence and relationship throughout the poem, it appears that his is the most pure absence. He is that which cannot, or will not, respond or react. Others take things in: we are "filled" "like bottles" and "struck" or are "utensils" put to use in the "world's jug-band". Unlike the song of the world that "plays us", the poet will not directly take us over, overwhelm us or change our lives. The "absolute" and "independent" voice that she is praising is not presence in this sense, but a magnetic emptiness. And it is next to such an absence that we actually become the "noisy world": the creators, not just the victims, of the "world's song" that is pictured throughout the rest of the poem, dissonant to our own capabilities.

This poem is an early, complicated statement of poetics that seems to be spoken from, if not of, throughout much of her poetry. The poet as absence is a model that continues to shape her work, particularly in the form of egolessness as it is explored in her poems about the Buddha. As with this model of the poet, the closing image of the tuning fork in "For Rilke" is also a generative one in her work. In an early statement about her poetry she writes, "Sometimes, I want the effects of my poetry to be subliminal: as if the poems were tuning forks vibrating at a pitch just out of ear-shot, but which are secretly changing the structure of thought and feeling, cracking them like glass or setting them to vibrate with a new-found music" (Beveridge "Statements" 25). It is this sense of poetry's ability to indirectly transform "thought and feeling" that functions through and because of Beveridge's poems' sense of absence. The "new found music" can be heard only in spaces where a more conscious control is suspended. It also speaks to an interest in music and the musical nature of verse that emerges throughout her work,<sup>3</sup> and suggests that this interest is vital to her sense of how poetry arises, and also to how it engages with its audience. Her comment suggests that music is simultaneously a metaphor for the experience of poetry, as well as being a part of that experience. In "The Courtesan", a poem towards the end of Beveridge's *Wolf Notes*, which is itself a musical term, the speaker's discovery of poetry is described in relation to music:

Poetry, never one of my accomplishments,

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<sup>3</sup> McLaren says that "Musical patterns rarely predominate in Beveridge's poetry, but nonetheless form a diffuse framework of themes, motifs, riffs and formal virtuosity" ("Translations" 240). Chris Wallace-Crabbe sees in Beveridge's work a "sensibility which perceives things vividly [and] can at the same time see them falling into structures, harmonious shapes." He returns to this theme of musical patterning, suggesting that "in this collection [*Accidental Grace*], the relation between the world's parts is a musical matter" (334).

came to me one day in the yard. I can no better  
explain it than I can the wind blowing its bell-like

scales into these chimes. I can't remember what  
I composed, only that my voice seemed to turn  
into a wind-crafted charm ... (116)

Moreover, many of Beveridge's poems, through their use of sound and their thematic references to sound and music and the sensation of hearing, communicate an awareness of the aural experience of poetry. This experience is there even if it is registered only internally in a silent reading. In "At Dusk", the last poem in *Wolf Notes*, the potency of sound in poetry is explored within a poem that itself looks at how we experience the world through sound. It opens:

The lightning gets busy this side  
of silence, and when the moon  
appears from among a few wind-nicked  
clouds, she will hear the crows  
as they fly westwards like the dark  
debris of the fruit bats testing every threshold.  
The earth is not yet a bell ringing  
for the lost, only what's left  
under the boards of the porch that take  
the heavily repeated riffs of a guitar, Janis  
Joplin haemorrhaging through a hi-fi. (121)

In its opening this poem appears to be a study of thresholds, of the liminal and the limits of the senses. The first threshold – dusk – is emphasised by the poem's play with time. These first lines are coloured by anticipation, speaking of "when the moon / appears" and saying that "The earth is not yet a bell ringing". This threshold is soon joined by a suggestion of another: one that divides the two "side[s] / of silence". But stronger than the thresholds the poem creates are the forces that subvert them. In Beveridge's long phrases, images flow into and across one other and this flow seems to be governed by a sense of interdependent



causality that guides many of her poems. Here, the woman “will hear the crows” when she sees the moon appear, and the “boards of the porch” that cover not the “lost” but “what’s left”, absorb the sounds of the “hi-fi”, which, particularly through the metaphor of “haemorrhaging”, represents another permeable threshold. It continues with an image of Joplin:

Smoke from her cigarette  
is coiling close to the faint sheen of her lips.  
Static sizzles, and there’s the sound of a zapper  
short-circuiting the lives of moths  
and midges, though she thinks  
only of the soundless storms of love  
her lips are giving lyrics to. Noise, quiet as  
it is kept, is not what she wants of the dusk,  
but she turns up the sound,  
and plays to the thunder. She rocks  
and hums, and her voice is the shadowy  
foliage where spiders live, suspended  
in time. (Beveridge, *Wolf* 121)

Different worlds meet each other in this poem; there is the natural world outside, the world of the hi-fi and Janis Joplin, and the world of the woman listening to both. Traversing these is the threshold between sound and silence – a threshold that visual images in the poem attempt to cross. The three worlds are brought very close to one another through the visual image as well as through sound: the “coiling” of the woman’s cigarette smoke anticipates the “short-circuiting” of the lives of the insects, and the alliteration throughout those four lines binds the woman and the natural world even closer. More consciously, and bringing in the world of the sound system, she “turns up the sound / and plays to the thunder”, while her voice, miming the lyrics of Joplin’s song, goes out to meet the world of nature, becoming “the shadowy / foliage where spiders live suspended / in time”. Suddenly – in the shape of the spider’s web – we are given an image for the interconnectedness that has been gathering, and keeps gathering, like a crescendo within the poem. The spider’s web is a deeply generative motif for Beveridge. Early poems such as “Orb Spider” and “Catching Webs”

employ it to speak significantly about the poet's feelings on poetry itself, and "Catching Webs", interestingly, also has its genesis in music.<sup>4</sup> "At Dusk" continues:

She thinks how she  
yields each night to the assassin bug's  
blue spit; everything saying she needs Joplin's  
flyblown whine, cicadas holding  
the pedal down. Inside,  
there's nothing but husks, dry leaves  
blowing towards the back of her life, drumfire  
igniting like a headache. Two fence posts  
away, a cat defines with its wail  
one point of speech. Insects are still  
building their head of steam. She can hear  
traffic's burr, feel the tap of her pulse  
like a trapped ghost,  
feel longing string height to her blood,  
an implacable gnat, a bug that never  
lets up. (Beveridge, *Wolf* 122)

As in "For Rilke", the subject of this poem appears occasionally to be a ventriloquist. She relies on the sounds of the outside world – representing, in this climactic section of the poem, the lives, the life, which drives them – to fill or infuse her own sense of hollowness. "Inside" is characterised by the remains of life: "there's nothing but husks, / dry leaves / blowing towards the back of her life". To counter this emptiness the speaker feeds on both the natural world and the world of Joplin, although the poem suggests that she is only really aware of the latter. The natural world to which the poem connects this impassioned singing could be metaphoric for the sense of life which the listening woman draws from it, but I

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<sup>4</sup> The earliest draft of "Catching Webs" is entitled "Song of the Bush Spider"; its closing lines are

I have heard  
in her web strange sounds picked up  
  
like the thin voices of ghosts  
the way a tape left on overnight in a room  
will pick up voices from another world. (Beveridge, Folder 6)

suspect it is more than this. The natural world has its own stake in the poem. If its function is metaphoric, it is metaphoric in the sense that it reveals connections that are already alive. “At Dusk” concludes:

Soon the muddy voices will  
ooze back, guitars that licked  
the air with hottest lightning, wait once  
more. Then she’ll hear the crickets start up  
in the earth, and she’ll sit with herself  
in the dark, listening to the rain  
fall across the path, to mosquitoes etch  
long cries, before a stylus winds its way  
inwards again, and she hangs in its  
tight web, safe with what she hears. (Beveridge, *Wolf* 122)

In this final, inward spiralling section of the poem, the visual images narrow to the two, now brilliantly related, representatives of the natural sound world and the world of created, human song. “Mosquitoes etch / long cries”, suggesting the stylus of the record player, while the stylus itself mimics the movement through a web, as it “winds its way inwards”. Finally, the woman becomes the spider. In the light of this final metaphor, the earlier suggestions of her dependency on both the “assassin bug” and “Joplin’s flyblown whine” become easier to understand; she feeds upon them as spiders will feed upon what is caught in their web.

But this notion of the woman’s control in the poem is illusory. She is still its main representative of silence; we hear her “hum” once, but never hear her speak. We never know her thoughts, other than the vague, painful sense of her inner life suggested by the metaphors of “dried husks” and “dead leaves”. The closest the poem comes, in fact, to recognising the sound of speech is the enigmatic phrase: “Two fence posts / away, a cat defines with its wail / one point of speech”. And here, as it is throughout the poem, the active sounds of this moment in the woman’s life are provided by what is outside herself. It is in this that the metaphor of the web has a new significance. The poem is structured both as a crescendo and diminuendo of sounds, as I suggested earlier, but also as a web of ever widening connections. The crescendo and the diminuendo and the visual image of the web play with movements outward and inward. Underlying these movements is the suggestion that it is when one delves deeply into the singular that the illusory nature of the singular – and by implication, the self,

to draw on Beveridge's engagement with Buddha's teaching – becomes apparent. The illusion of the impermeable, stable self then gives way to an apprehension of the interconnectedness of phenomena. While the implied visual image in "At Dusk" of the small absence at the heart of the web is perhaps the closest it comes to offering a description of the woman's self, as the details of her aural experiences thread their way into the visual through the natural and human sound worlds, this absence might be better understood as a transparency.

These two poems communicate a certain experience of the world in terms of sound and sound metaphors, but the relationship between the two is not simple. In "At Dusk" the image, I have suggested, traverses the threshold of sound and silence, bringing the sensation of sound into the visual sphere. This is not entirely separate from the poem's effective aural texture but neither can the two be conflated. Historically, the division between the dimensions of sound and metaphor in poetry is marked. Susan Stewart in her study *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* proposes that "Whenever a poetic values metaphor, or the supersensible dimension of poetry more generally, sound as the material manifestation of the work will be less emphasized" (71). She draws on a statement of Kant from his "Analytic of the Sublime" to say this. Poetry, according to Kant:

lets the mind feel its ability – free, spontaneous, and independent of natural determination – to contemplate and judge phenomenal nature as having aspects that nature does not on its own offer in experience either to sense or to the understanding, and hence poetry lets the mind feel its ability to use nature on behalf of and, as it were, as a schema of the supersensible. (qtd. in Stewart 71–72)

These two ideas are subtly and genuinely challenged in Beveridge's poetry. The first suggests that the valuing of metaphor displaces an emphasis on aural effect, and the second implies that poetry, as an activity of mind, is somehow free of the order that governs the world outside it and that the mind can therefore use this world as a "schema of the supersensible". Beveridge writes poems that negotiate interconnectedness and interdependence, and the pervasiveness of interconnectedness in her work translates into a forging of connections between the poetic tools she uses and the content of her poems. Her use of sound in her poems is connected to metaphors of sound. The experience witnessed by the poem is communicated by way of a similar experience. "Whisky Grass", a poem in *Wolf Notes*, is a good example of this:

Only this morning I felt anxiety's tufted leaves, and with no scythe or sickle, I put my lips to a common roadside weed, survivor in poorly drained soils, and blew: my tongue feeling for the strange venation, the mid-rib ligule fringed with hairs, until it returned the sting of whisky grass and the taste of brown flowers. Over and over the same note matting itself into the ground. Birds passing seeds back and forth, their mouths, too, my tune of undoing. (Beveridge, *Wolf* 29)

Sensation is a mode of communication in this poem. "The sting of whisky grass and the taste of / brown flowers" are experienced when the speaker searches the leaves of whisky grass with her tongue for the tangibility that those other leaves, anxiety's leaves, evade. The delicacy and difficult pronunciation of "mid-rib ligule fringed with hairs" suggests the intricacy and fumbling nature of the task and, unlike "For Rilke", in which the "pure" note produced has a transcendental quality, the visual imagery here stays close to the physical and to the earth – "Over and over the same note matting itself / into the ground". This suggests something of Beveridge's changing poetic in the time between *Domesticity* and *Wolf Notes*. She says herself that the very idea of the "wolf note" as opposed to the "pure note" was a mark of acceptance of the world and of herself within it (Beveridge). About "Whisky Grass" she says:

The poem grew from the first line after a bout of anxiety had laid me low for awhile. I was looking for a way to describe the experience without becoming too referential, and I ended up drawing on images gleaned from my experience as a Bush Regenerator and thus was able to play off both a sense of degradation and reparation. The challenge with this poem was to use a dense form, yet also to maintain a flexible and resonant rhythm and avoid becoming melodramatic. One of the ways I tried to achieve this was to break lines at unexpected points and to let the tension do its job. (Duwell and Lea, "*Best Australian Poetry*" 99)

The job that this tension has to do becomes more audible in the next lines of "Whisky Grass":

So many reasons to be  
torn, pressed down to the seeping wound, or the salve. So  
many reasons why beauty can't square up all people in this  
world and give them the insouciance of flowers. All morning  
my mind gone to seed in margins, waste places; held back

by understoreys of wire and the milky latex of plants no one  
would give their lapsed acres for. So many reasons raising  
themselves to the repeating power of our mouths. We pull  
all kinds of things out of the ground; we cut off what we can  
and paint it clean. We let birds pull songs through the hedge-work  
whose tidiness we can't attend to, let alone afford. Beauty  
likes its borders green. So many reasons, deeply-lobed,  
bird-dispersed, as to why the pinkest pouch in a wayside  
field turns thorned and thistle-wild; why these whiskered  
shoots claim my mind; and why nothing looks greener  
against the rain. (Beveridge, *Wolf* 29)

The technique of enjambling lines at “unexpected points” is, here, in effect a technique of breaking lines after an expected point. A generative theme in the poem is the relationship between what is wild and what can be contained, and this is as much a rhythmical focus. The presence in the poem of “margins”, of “hedge-work” and “borders” and the continual rupturing of these containing lines is mimicked by the poem’s own long lines and its list-like motion in response to the repeated refrain “So many reasons”. The awareness of borders, and the excess these borders are invoked to control, is alive in the poem’s sound. Its lines push against time, which is one aspect of the poem’s larger impulse to regain a calm centeredness.

“The repeating power of our mouths” can be heard throughout the poem: the birds’ songs are her own “tune of undoing” from the first stanza, the “reasons” that are again “bird-dispersed”. Yet repeating also hopes to facilitate this “undoing”, a releasing that is a major theme of an earlier poem that shares a key motif, “Neighbour Blowing Grassblades”:

And tonight,  
like a diarist, he reworks memory  
and pain.

He puts another note  
into the vast Serengeti of his hands,  
his mouth pressed against  
the edge like a cage. (Beveridge, *Grace* 1)

Within this similar intimation of release, one that follows the occasional presence of grassblades in Beveridge's poems, the close of this poem shares another specific image with "Whisky Grass":

Finally, a heron  
settles on the pale panel of water  
and shakes its tired wings.  
My neighbour opens his hands  
to the night and walks away. (*Grace* 1)

"Whisky Grass" closes with a similarly wan but accepting gesture, "a shiver of exhausted leaves". In the final stanza, the transformation that is achieved from "anxiety's leaves" at the beginning of the poem to "anxiety's notes" is a sort of understated triumph over, or at least acceptance of, the state of mind which inspired the poem. In this transformation of mode, from the visual to the aural, "anxiety" moves from being represented by visual images which are necessarily outside the poet's self – the "tufted leaves" which are then aligned with a space outside the "margins" – to a sound in which she is participating directly. The poem moves towards sensation as if towards a cure. Its representation of the senses of touch, taste and hearing, and more specifically, the sensations that accompany them, achieves a kind of earthing – a way of making the abstract "anxiety" that haunts the speaker physical, and thus able to be observed and calmed. "Whisky Grass" concludes:

Sure, these leaves by nightfall might be  
shredded by birds foraging among dirt dumped over yellow,  
defoliated stems; the sap taken by dreams, as every rhizome  
is raked from the ground. I don't know. I work a tune around  
a crowning blade and let it loosen another runner, testing  
the future. The wild may never give up its gestures. Not while  
beauty poises itself on the edge, trying to name the place it's

native to; a tongue twisting round each bearded stalk, listening from the understorey for a flute-like sound, so many reasons staking their season again. All morning anxiety's notes pour through head-high grass. The sky turns and turns and lets the wind in first, then rain, then light – a shiver of exhausted leaves; perpetuals that always seem to come too soon. (Beveridge, *Wolf* 29–30)

This same visual image, this same act and experience, appears again a little over half-way through Beveridge's sequence "From the Palace to the Bodhi Tree", also in *Wolf Notes*. In "Doubt", the Bodhisattva, Siddhatta Gotama, moves through confused restlessness to eventual resoluteness: he says "Today I hear only wind smuggled in".

All day

I feel fugitive, as if what goes inwards

finds sighs of a shady kind; some felony  
of breath following my unsanctioned mind. (Beveridge, *Wolf* 78)

The poem closes with a determination to begin:

First

I must breathe myself wise from embers  
blown from furious, dry grass; breathe

in the wind's unlicensed truth, and sit  
until the edges that implicated my doubt –  
faultlessly deliver some absolutes. (79)

"Doubt" marks one of the turning points of the Bodhisattva's journey and Beveridge's sequence. The next poems "At Uruvela (1)" and "At Uruvela (2)" suggest moments in his six-year long practice of extreme asceticism in the search for these absolutes, a practice he moved away from in order to discover that enlightenment is found at the end of a middle path of acceptance, rather than through the endurance of extremes. "From the Palace to the Bodhi Tree" is Beveridge's sequence, or poem in thirty-eight parts, which imaginatively retraces,



from his own perspective, the wanderings and transformations of Siddhattha Gotama. The monologue represents moments in Gotama's life from the time he leaves the palace in which he lived for twenty-nine years to the time he meditates beneath the ficus tree, which was to become the Bodhi – or enlightenment – tree because of what he achieved under its leaves. Among the repeated visual images that weave tightly throughout the sequence to build continuity – the changing moon is the most ubiquitous – the appearance, here, of the generative Beveridge motif of blowing grass, although slightly changed, tells the reader something about the status of Beveridge's own voice within the sequence, and also something about the status of the individual.

The voice speaking within the sequence is that of Gotama the Bodhisattva, a voice that moves through regions of loss, doubt, pain and guilt, and not the voice of the Buddha he was to become. Because of the Buddha's perfection, his transcendence of these sufferings, he remains the great magnetic emptiness that closes the poem and which the poem is always moving towards. And yet while always Gotama's, the voice, the "I" of the poem, is a wide, inclusive one. It permits many borrowings: from the poems of Hayden Carruth, Ruth Stone and Novica Tadic, and from the poems of *Dhammapada* in "A Way". This borrowing suggests connectedness and community and the loosening of the ego that such community can facilitate. The "I", however, also represents Beveridge, whose voice is not substituted by, but rather joined with that of her subject.

This status and condition of the poem's "I" has a lot to do with the discoveries about the nature of self that Gotama needed to make to become the Buddha. His three central discoveries are that the self exists in the condition of *dukkha*, *anicca*, and *anatta*. That is, being inherently unsatisfactory, subject to all kinds of pain and suffering, in a constant state of change and decay, and without anything substantial or essential that we can isolate as "mine" (Schumann 64–66). Beveridge explores the implications of all three of these conditions, and they cannot be separated. In the way she uses "I" – it is often prominent and strongly placed – she highlights that the nature of this "I" is at the heart of Gotama's quest, yet the way she uses it also demonstrates the impermanence and the interconnectedness of the family of elements we call self. Throughout the sequence the constructions of "I see", "I hear", "I touch" or "I feel" (relating most often to a direct sensation) are very frequent and placing the "I" in this active situation, a situation of relationship with the world that is mediated by the senses, establishes it, in a way similar to the "transparency" of the self suggested in "At Dusk", not as an immutable entity existing alongside the natural and made worlds, but as a site of experience.

In this way, the representation of physical sensation which is a distinctive aspect of Beveridge's poetic finds a subtle expression in this sequence, and within the sequence, the idea of the poet as absence that shapes poems such as "For Rilke" and "At Dusk" returns with particular conviction. This conviction arises from the correspondence of Beveridge's own poetic to the teachings of the figure she is representing; a correspondence that, as such poems prove, undoubtedly lives throughout her writing, and not just within "From the Palace to the Bodhi Tree" or, as I will explore later, "The Buddha Cycle". It is within these poems, though, that the idea of absence is most clearly shaped as *anatta*, and the idea of the poet as a model for *anatta* is embodied in the Bodhisattva and the Buddha. This correspondence needs to be stated and explored in its various levels, not only to begin to understand poems that often resist other forms of understanding, but to follow, as far as is possible here, something that Beveridge has introduced into Australian poetics with their publication. Noel Rowe says in a review of *Wolf Notes*:

In "Between the Palace and the Bodhi Tree", Beveridge has achieved a level of imaginative embodiment that makes it impossible to talk as if the poem's Buddhism comes from somewhere outside itself. One cannot adequately account for the poem's spiritual power by appealing to doctrines of desire, suffering and emptiness, or by identifying the poet's indebtedness to meditative practices of observation and abandonment... It is the way that Buddhism is forgotten into the poem that makes "From the Palace to the Bodhi Tree" a major contribution to Australian religious poetry. (166)

I would add that the poem's "Buddhism" is so subtly a part of both this poem and Beveridge's poetic project more generally that it ceases to be something we could identify as an organised religion, as Buddhism. It rather arises from within her poetry in a way that asks readers to recognise it as a part of human experience. To follow this towards another suggestion, Beveridge's engagement with the teachings of the Buddha traces a connection between human experience and poetics itself. Given Beveridge's own comments about poetry being her particular form of practicing the teachings of the Buddha, it is not hard to imagine how the conventional model of religious poetry is turned around in this poem: Beveridge does not write a poem about the Bodhisattva as much as sketch a portrait of the Bodhisattva as poet. This possibility is noted in Michael Heald's study of the sequence "Putting Words in the Buddha's Mouth: An Analysis of Judith Beveridge's 'Between the Palace and the Bodhi

Tree” (62), but despite Heald’s questioning of Beveridge’s representation of the Bodhisattva and his meditative developments, I do not believe that in this turn towards poetics Beveridge’s work reflects the Bodhisattva or the Buddha reductively. Such a portrait, rather, offers a way of understanding a well-known history from another angle; indeed, it is the universal potency of his teaching that allows the Buddha to be spoken of as a scientist, as a psychologist, and, in this case, as a poet. Beveridge’s Gotama is based on observations of how the Buddha taught, as much as what he taught and, in this, it is the art of the practice of the Buddha’s teaching that is a crucial key to her poem. For the remainder of this chapter I will explore Beveridge’s representation of the Bodhisattva and the Buddha and demonstrate that in her staging of Gotama’s transformations through metaphor, and imagery of physical sensation and sound, she emphasises the importance of aesthetics to the spiritual exercises and developments attributed to the Buddha, and that this emphasis both affirms and performs the experiential learning and ethical techniques of living central to this teaching, as its emphasis on meditation implies.

As is suggested in “Doubt”, breath plays a crucial role in allowing a meditator to experience and thus develop knowledge of the three conditions of the self spoken of by the Buddha – the conditions of *dukkha*, *anicca*, and *anatta*. Breath is also crucial in Beveridge’s representation of these conditions. Her poems’ technique of focusing on breath is a part of her active aestheticisation of meditation. As Sean Salkin explains in his study of the term *vedana* or “sensation” within the Pali Nikāyas, breathing meditation or *anapanasati* is an activity connected to both body and mind, as the word itself suggests: “Breathing in and breathing out (*anapana*) is clearly a physical function, and the awareness of this (*sati*) is a mental function” (124). Another way in which the experiential nature of Gotama’s developments and discoveries is illuminated as originating in the connection between mind and body, and communicated in Beveridge’s sequence as such, is through her representations of sensation itself. The focus on the senses and sensation throughout the poem is a continuation of one of the distinctive traits of Beveridge’s poems, as poems such as “Dusk” and “Whisky Grass” suggest; it is also a focus of the Buddha’s teaching. Salkin quotes as the impetus of his study the meditation teacher S.N. Goenka’s words, “whatever arises in the mind, the Buddha discovered, will be accompanied by a physical sensation. Hence, whether the meditator is exploring the mental or the physical aspect of the phenomenon of “I”, awareness of sensation is essential” (58). Similarly, John Holder in his paper on aesthetics within the Pali Canon speaks of “aesthetics” in the sense of its etymology *aesthe* “to feel” (5).

“Feeling” (his translation of *vedana*, which, as in Salkin, can also mean physical sensation) is, Holder says, “*the key link* ... in the twelvefold formula of dependent arising”:

Feeling is described as a source of danger because it is the causal condition from which craving and other unwholesome states arise... In the quest to eliminate suffering, a person must understand in detail how feelings arise and cease within experience, seeing for themselves the experiential process whereby a person becomes entangled in the conditions that lead to suffering. (5)

Beveridge’s major source for the sequence was Schumann’s *The Historical Buddha* (Beveridge). In it, he speaks of two types of work that the Buddha gave his students: meditation based on the awareness of breath for achieving calm and concentration, and meditation that “serves to combat delusion and ignorance” which is directed towards an object: one’s body, and one’s mind, among others. Their purpose, he says, is “to come to recognise the things of the world by direct observation, without ego-reference or evaluation, as impermanent, painful and without substance, and to comprehend their interrelation and their conditioned existence” (Schumann 211). The link that Holder makes between feeling, or sensation, and aesthetics provides other links here: not only between Beveridge’s representations of the Bodhisattva’s spiritual development and the shapes and qualities of the poems that represent it, but between the poems and an interpretation of the Buddha’s path itself. The spiritual transformations of Beveridge’s Gotama are necessarily going to be aesthetic transformations, conveyed, as they are, through poems. However, one of the wider implications of Beveridge’s way of approaching Gotama’s journey is that this spiritual transformation is itself an aesthetic one, and that the methods of living that bring about such changes are efficacious for the same reasons that they are aesthetic. As Holder says

Aesthetically developed experience realizes on a conscious level a person’s need for integrative experience and it reveals experience’s capacity to be ideally reconstructed. Only when the past ceases to trouble and future possibilities fund the present is a human being wholly united with his or her environment and therefore fully alive. Such happiness is a fulfillment that reaches to the depths of one’s being; it involves an adjustment of one’s whole being with the dependently arisen conditions of existence – this aesthetically reconstructed existence is the *religious* transformation sought in early Buddhism (“Aesthetics” 19).

In Beveridge's poems about the Bodhisattva and the Buddha, and in the many aspects of her poetic which are inspired by these figures, experience assumes and activates this connection between mind and body, and between practice and aesthetics. A poem that appears earlier in the sequence than "Doubt", "A Vow", says that, from the outset, Gotama's journey is a journey through experience:

I won't lie down until it walks under my skin.

I won't stop until I hear its voice,  
until its tone rings throughout the night.

I will not give up, not until I feel its sun burn me,  
until I feel its god crawl through all my follicles,

until its moon pulls itself from its diet of light  
and feeds upon the circles it has given  
my bereaved sight.

Brahmins – even among  
the cuticles of the dead there is wisdom.  
And I'll find it – no matter  
who says truth can't be scratched open. (Beveridge, *Wolf* 56)

What "it" is remains mysterious for the first three stanzas of this poem, and does not completely lose this mystery at the poem's end. Through a sort of *via negativa* in which discovery is always projected – the subordinating conjunction "until" bears a lot of weight – the reader learns that "it" is only available to the senses. It must "walk under" his "skin", he must "hear its voice", feel its "sun burn" him. These metaphors become more complicated as the poem goes on, but these are not exactly, or only, metaphors. Certainly, "I won't stop until I hear its voice" is a metaphoric construction – whose voice precisely is he going to "hear" if it is not? – but the way these constructions are based on sensory experience resists metaphor. In a quite literal way, the poem says that experience is the only way to get to "it"; and "it", as the series of negatives culminate in the final lines "And I'll find it – no matter / who says the truth can't be scratched open" is not closed off with the answer of "truth", but insists that there is something deeper than the concept of truth. The poem does not assure us of this

“something”, however. What is there must be “scratched open” in another of the poem’s gestures of physicality in an experience of truth, which can only be represented by negatives.

To understand what this “something” is readers need to follow Gotama through the sequence. This is for the sake of more than just narrative consistency, although there is an underlying narrative progression in the poems that is subtly based on Gotama’s transformations. Reading the sequence, one can see the outline of the historical Bodhisattva’s journey: it begins after the renunciation of the palace and his wife and new baby, as one can see by the tones of guilt and longing in the early poems, it moves through his encounters with the prevailing spiritual teachings of the time in “Overhearing an Ascetic on my way from Kosala”, “Brahmins” and “Saddhus”, his experimentation with extreme asceticism in “At Uruvela (1)” and “At Uruvela (2)”<sup>5</sup>, and his discoveries of another way, until, in “Ficus Religiosa” the poem closes with him sitting beneath what was to become the Bodhi tree. However, what the poems suggest at another level is that this progression is based on transformations that are only transformations in that they are experienced. One of the qualities of the Buddha’s Dhamma, as listed in the Dhajagga Sutta of the Pali Canon, is *paccattam veditabbo*, which means – from *paccatta*, singly, or in one’s own heart, and *vedita*, experiences or feelings – that the teaching can be, and must be, directly and physically experienced to be effective. As “A Vow” suggests, Beveridge’s Gotama has a keen understanding that whatever truth he is looking for is one that he will have to experience for himself, and that this experience is located where all experience must ultimately reside, in the body.

Its emphasis on physicality is communicated through representations of sensations on the body, but in what way can this relate to the other poetic constitutive of Gotama’s first “Vow”, and thus his overarching journey, metaphor? Recent work done in the field of metaphor suggests this physicality is a strong part of how the device works, to the point that even the suggestion that it is a “device” must recede. Gibbs, Lima and Francozo, for example, in their empirical study of the psychology of metaphor, suggest that the creation and appreciation of metaphor arises from embodied experience. That hunger is very often a metaphor for the more abstract concept of desire is one of their examples (1198); their focus is not to reduce metaphor to the body, but to show how “the body gives rise to metaphor” (1208). Similarly, in a discussion of the body and metaphor in medieval Hebrew praise poetry, Esperanza Alfonso bases his analyses on work done both in the philosophical and

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<sup>5</sup> Uruvela is the name of the area of northern India in which Gotama practiced his asceticism (Schumann 49-50).

literary fields by I.A. Richards, Black and Ricoeur and on developments in cognitive science from the 1980s which hold that metaphor has a fundamental role in lived experience, that it is one of the bases of human thought. From the perspective of cognitive science “the structure of the body, extended metaphorically, provides the terms to comprehend abstract concepts. In other words, they understand the non-physical as universally grounded in body structures and body-form” (2). This idea is approached in, and provides another angle to look at, lines from the *Nikāyas* which represent the Buddha’s words: “Friend, in this very fathom-long body, along with its perceptions and thoughts, I proclaim the world to be, likewise the origin of the world and the making of the world to end, likewise the practice of going to the end of the world” (qtd. in Salkin 115).

In Beveridge’s “One Sight”, which comes two poems after “A Vow” in the Bodhi Tree sequence, this sense that the nature of the world and the practice of realising its nature resides in the body is suggested in its culminating metaphor. As it works towards this, the poem also offers another way of understanding metaphor itself: it stages metaphor as practice, or a development of mind. “One sight” is the last time in the sequence in which Gotama addresses his wife, Yasodhara (or almost the last time: there is one poem, close to the end of the sequence, “Eight Gathas”, in which she is briefly addressed and farewelled). Resonant with this sense of parting and growing detachment, the poem animates one of the techniques the Buddha taught: the cultivating of a pervasive awareness of death in order to understand impermanence to help calm the mind in the face of all changes and losses in life. The poem does this in a way that calls into question how we see things:

Yasodhara, if you came  
to me now, I’d say I saw death

in the lattice of sunshades,  
death in a sky of soft cottons,

even in the healing gauze of mist  
upon the water and the rushes.

I’d say there’s death too  
in weather fine as your shawl,

in curtains hung by soft hands  
and death in the half-wound turban

of my own smile. (Beveridge, *Wolf* 60)

As in the case of the other poem in the sequence in which he addresses Yasodhara in a sustained way, Gotama surrounds her with visual imagery of domesticity, specifically cloth and weaving. Such weaving imagery is there in both subtle and overt ways throughout Beveridge's volumes (Duwell "Intricate" 246–47), and here it serves at least three functions: the shape of "lattice", of "gauze" and the weave of a "curtain" or "shawl" complements Gotama's growing realisation of interconnectedness and conditioned dependence; it also brings to mind the dangers of entrapment – Gotama needed to unravel his attachment to his life at home in order to leave it, and here he speaks in a way that anticipates this danger, beginning with the pre-emptive gesture, "Yasodhara, if you came to me now, I'd say". More than this, however, it is the fact he is speaking to Yasodhara that colours his language. From a feeling of compassion, and like the Buddha in his speeches to groups of people from various cultural backgrounds, he chooses to speak in a way that offers immediacy. He uses words from her life.<sup>6</sup>

The training of perceiving death all around also has its base in the experiential, in that it is a specific spiritual practice.<sup>7</sup> In a way that appears to be an extension of this particular training, and Gotama's project of training the mind more generally, seeing death "in" the "lattice of sunshades" suggests a way of approaching metaphor rather than constituting one itself. That Gotama says he sees "death in the lattice of sunshades" is different to saying "the lattice of sunshades is death", and different again to "death is a lattice of sunshades". It displays, rather, the step before the metaphor. Death is a reality Gotama is beginning to realise was within every moment of his past, and, as the poem goes on to suggest, can be observed everywhere in his present. And yet "I see death in the lattice of sunshades" is not a statement we can understand literally; it is at one remove from the world and referring instead to a process of mind. This is emphasised in the next lines when other metaphors are built upon this original proposition, when he sees "death in a sky of soft cottons" and in "the

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<sup>6</sup> This technique is called *upaya*, or "skilful means". For a discussion on how this term relates to spiritual instruction more generally, see John Hick's "Religion as "Skilful Means": A Hint from Buddhism".

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, "The Ten Recollections" ("Anguttara Nikaya" 1.287–296), although this is not a practice limited to the Buddha's teaching. In *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Pierre Hadot revisits the notion that the spiritual exercises of the ancient philosophers and, specifically, Epictetus, were a preparation for death and that one method of this preparation was cultivating an awareness of its ubiquity (242).



healing gauze of mist”. In the lines that follow these, Gotama speaks in terms of his own surroundings:

Yasodhara,  
there's no refuge in the retinue  
  
of leaves attending me; and none  
in the swallows stitching wide.  
  
None in the retreat of deer  
to the shadows and none  
in the owl's voice  
low and clear as breath  
  
blown across an earthenware sky.  
None in the arbours and cool  
  
stones. I remember your belly  
round with our child. O, Yasodhara –  
  
each night I dream all of us  
are lying bloated in the lotus pool. (Beveridge, *Wolf* 60–61)

Although it is Gotama's natural surroundings that are prominent in this last half of the poem – his new home furnished with leaves, deer and owls – the poem insists that its ultimate conditions are the same as Yasodhara's. As death and decay is inherent even within cloth, so too will the elements of Gotama's natural environment change and pass and provide no refuge. In this, the two halves of the poem complement each other; they complete the sentence “death is inherent in life, there is no refuge in the world from death or suffering”. The poem's structure also says, however, even before Gotama's arresting final vision, that knowledge of this gives rise to another moment of knowledge: that he and his wife are not separate, despite their distance and different surroundings. He is joined with Yasodhara in a common condition of being subject to death. Gotama's growing awareness culminates with metaphor's sudden shock when the memory of Yasodhara's pregnant belly becomes the

dream image of their bloated bodies. As of much importance to the poem as this connecting of pregnancy and decay is the fact that the dream-vision includes them all.

In “One Sight”, the repetition of “seeing death” is a form of training the mind by observation, and the world looks different because of this training. If the Buddha’s teaching can be thought of as a poetics, then it is a poetics of training, and transforming, the mind to see the world as it really is. In this context, metaphor guides a participant in this poetics – a writer or reader or listener – through levels of understanding until what they are reading or writing or hearing becomes a part of their experience. That metaphor springs from and appeals to our imaginations has a specially inflected role here: the shock of metaphor, the juxtaposition of “seeing death in a sky of soft cottons” makes it easier to see, for example, the more accessible reality of seeing death in leaves falling from trees, seeing death in eroding stone. Metaphor has a permeating quality.

In the poems that immediately follow “One Sight”, Beveridge’s Gotama participates in this quality in a specific way. He becomes more deeply immersed in his surrounding environment through interactions with animals. Animals and insects are very prominent throughout the sequence, and they are particularly so in this group of poems. These engagements have both documentary – Beveridge mentions that she very much wanted to place Gotama in a “real landscape” (Beveridge) – and metaphoric qualities. The first of these poems is “Monkey”. A “vexed visitor”, a “red grivet”, is being harassed and injured by a “gang of brown monkeys”, and is eventually chased to the “forest canopy”:

There, I see it cradle its own head: russet, fibrous,  
leaking like a dropped coconut. It whimpers a long  
calling toward the mountains where its relatives may  
be hooting and waiting. Suddenly, I look there too

for any crude welcoming. Those distant hills lonely,  
dangerous with their herds of ginger-humped camels.

And I wish, I too, had a home I could call to with  
the quick of my mouth, the madness of my tongue. (Beveridge, *Wolf* 62)

Beveridge attributes the last line of this poem to Ruth Stone; it is from her poem “Poems”. In a way that further suggests the inclusiveness of the sequence’s “I”, “Monkey” also draws subtly from a story of the *Jatakas*, or past-life stories of the Buddha, in which the

Bodhisattva, born as a monkey, helps the man who tried to kill him by leading him out of the jungle from the height of the canopy by creating a path from the falling blood of his injured head (“Mahakapi-Jataka No. 516.”). In “Monkey”, in a similar moment of sudden compassion, a quite literal moment of “suffering with”, Gotama shares the monkey’s longing for “home”. The relationship between Beveridge’s poem and Stone’s is more complicated and telling. Stone’s poem is also about a movement “home”, but she is addressing the act of writing, and poems themselves: “When you come back to me / it will be crow time / and flycatcher time”. She, too, expresses the longing for reunion through the figure of an animal:

The crows, their black flapping  
bodies, their long calling  
toward the mountain;  
relatives, like mine,  
ambivalent, eye-hooded;  
hooting and tearing.  
And you will take me in  
to your fractal meaningless  
babble; the quick of my mouth,  
the madness of my tongue.<sup>8</sup> (Stone 54)

That Stone’s poem is essentially about the act of poetry inflects its appearance in Beveridge’s sequence. The crows’ “long calling / towards the mountain” obviously has a strong presence in “Monkey”, but it is the unsaid connection, the metaphoric relationship between the crows’ calling (to relatives, or among relatives, it is difficult to say) and the speaker’s reunion with poems – which are both “coming back” to her, and “tak[ing] her in” – that asks the reader to question the degree to which “Monkey” and the sequence’s animal poems are also about making poetry.

Beveridge slowly erases the divisions between Gotama and the beings around him as a movement towards her portrayal of interconnectedness. The way that this is negotiated within the sequence suggests that not only is representing interconnectedness a vital pursuit of Beveridge’s poems, but that Beveridge implicitly positions this central tenet of the

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<sup>8</sup> The image of the “The crows, their black flapping / bodies, their long calling / toward the mountain” also recalls another poem in Beveridge’s sequence, “The Grove”, which speaks of the “call” of “the darkest crow”: “How often has it tried / to make a syllable out of its / heavy flapping?” (54)

Buddha's teaching as itself a poetic development to allow a better understanding of the nature of this pursuit. One way that this erasure of divisions can be understood, and is presented here, as poetic is in the way connections are revealed or forged by metaphor. In the poems after "Monkey", compassion is heightened, its nature explored and its limits pushed and opened out through metaphor, to the point where the reader is left unsure of where the dividing line between Gotama and the animal subject of the poem lies, and if it exists at all. "Buffalos" is a particularly beautiful example:

At dung-level, in the pungent field,  
each one is sighing, as if drawing  
up laundry like a tired old woman.

Their eyes, the blackest load,  
are silted up into jellied, dirty snow.  
At night they're yoked to poles

that pull me through my own  
heavy slurry. Monsoonal, they bring  
me strings of the grieving rain,  
and bellow to the thunder, to all  
the mud-born souls, to those like me  
who keep falling into their river. (Beveridge, *Wolf* 64)

The poem begins with a simile that equates the buffalo's experience to a human one: they sigh "as if drawing / up laundry like a tired old woman." Yet for the rest of the poem, in an exercise of humility, it is the speaker who moves towards the experience of the buffalos. This sense of movement is significant, as is the role that metaphor plays in communicating it. The deep connection intimated in the phrase "At night they're yoked to poles / that pull me through my own / heavy slurry" is borne of a reciprocity that is effective because of its activity. The connection between the buffalos and Gotama does not rest on comparison or entirely on the visual image: it is the importance given to the verb in these metaphors of engagement that gives this poem its communicative power. The buffalos "pull" Gotama and "bring" him "strings of the grieving rain". In a way that emphasises that the speaker moves towards his subject as much as he invites it towards himself, this leads to a sudden

realisation: Gotama understands how little distance there is between the buffalos and himself, that, in the end, he has been “falling” again and again – whether in terms of past lives, or past experiences within this life – into “their” river, where the river itself is metaphoric of all beings” shared condition of suffering.

The effectiveness of the metaphoric verb in this poem is due to, at its depth, a property of metaphor that has been proposed and explored by Paul Ricoeur. The “most important theme” of *The Rule of Metaphor* is, he says:

metaphor is the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to redescribe reality. By linking fiction and redescription in this way, we restore the full depth of meaning to Aristotle’s discovery in the Poetics, which was that the *poësis* of language arises out of the connection between *muthos* and *mimêsis*...From this conjunction of fiction and redescription I conclude that the “place” of metaphor, its most intimate and ultimate abode, is neither the name, nor the sentence, nor even discourse, but the copula of the verb to be. The metaphorical “is” at once signifies both “is not” and “is like.” If this is really so, we are allowed to speak of metaphorical truth, but in an equally “tensive” sense of the word “truth”.  
(*Rule 7*)

Although Ricoeur is speaking of metaphor here in a far wider way than I am, speaking of its function in rhetoric and philosophy and language itself, what he says about the redescriptive powers of metaphor and the location of these redescriptive powers in the verb also bears upon the trope of metaphor in poetics and upon how metaphor’s status as a poetic trope might comment on its broader functions. In *Moral Creativity: Paul Ricoeur and the Poetics of Possibility*, John Wall discusses Ricoeur’s theory of poetics as a way of understanding how language not only creates meaning in poems and stories, but also in life. More specifically, and daringly, Wall goes on to say:

As the French title of his 1975 *The Rule of Metaphor—La métaphore vive*—suggests, “metaphor is living [*vivant*] not only to the extent that it vivifies a constituted language. Metaphor is living by virtue of the fact that it introduces the spark of imagination into a “thinking more” at the conceptual level” [(*Metaphor* 303)]. Metaphors, like symbols, give rise to thought. The chief difference is that metaphors do so through not just single terms but multiple terms” unexpected comparisons. But

in each case the trajectory of their meaning ends not in themselves but in the transformed world of an interpreting *self*. (33)

These understandings of the term “poetics” and the concept of metaphor that are weighted towards the self and the self’s capacity for transformation resonate strongly in Beveridge’s poetry. In particular, they illuminate her treatment of the Bodhisattva and Buddha in at least two different ways. One of these ways engages lyric address and I will touch on this later, and the other – the understanding of poetics as language’s capacity to create meaning not merely in texts but in life – has run throughout the discussion so far. In the “Bodhi Tree” sequence, Beveridge is representing Gotama’s journey towards understanding the world in a radically different way; as far as it represents the journey of the historical Bodhisattva, this involves understanding that what has seemed apparently true is not also true at subtler levels, that below apparent truth there are levels of reality that have yet to be explored. This context provides exceptionally fruitful territory for a discussion of the effectiveness of metaphor. One of the many potential applications of Ricoeur’s suggestion that the true place of metaphor is the verb “to be” can be witnessed in this sequence in the way the Buddha’s teaching manifests not only thematically, but also as a set of poetic tools. As poems such as “One Sight” show, in her distinctly performative approach to metaphor, Beveridge stages the developments and transformations of the Bodhisattva’s mind. “Buffalos”, which speaks powerfully about the commonality of suffering by employing active, verb-based metaphors, suggests that the interconnectedness it reveals must be experienced, as Gotama experiences it in this poem, in order to spark these transformations of mind.

Metaphor contributes to this experience, in this poem and throughout the sequence, as a technique of compassion – a staging of the bringing together of two worlds, or a vision of similarity within dissimilars, that allows us to liken another’s suffering to our own experiences of suffering. Shelley says in his “Defence” that poetry “awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought” and that within this combining activity, or, specifically, by allowing the mind to receive such previously “unapprehended combinations” lies the moral imagination, the capacity to move “out of our own nature” and towards “an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own” (681). Ricoeur also explores metaphor’s capacity to create relationship from singularity. In his reading of Aristotle, he suggests that metaphor is inherently “discursive”: “in all metaphor one might consider not only the word alone or the name alone, whose meaning is displaced, but the pair

of terms or relationships between which the transposition operates” (*Metaphor* 22). To Beveridge, “it is the moment, the experience of writing, in which these relationships are revealed” (Beveridge). In the poems of the “Bodhi Tree” sequence, metaphor is suggested as a particularly useful tool for Gotama to develop a moral attitude towards the beings that surround him. Whether consciously or otherwise, Beveridge asks her readers to think of Gotama’s relationship to his natural environment as metaphoric in itself. For example, in “Horse” (*Wolf* 63), it is difficult to place the speaker of the poem: all its imagistic and syntactical play seems to be asking the reader to see, for that moment, Gotama as the horse, just as he shared the longing of the monkey, and the suffering of the Buffalos. These metaphoric relationships enact the sense of interconnectedness and the absence of an essential, stable, self that the historical Gotama was to go on to discover. This future discovery of *anatta* irrupts in different places throughout the sequence in the moments when the speaker moves away from himself to return as a different person, with a deeper perspective. Such instances of change and transformation are also properties of metaphor that are alive throughout the sequence from the level of the visual image – the pregnant belly and the bloated corpse – to the transformation of Gotama into the Buddha. The realising of *anatta* is a gradual process mapped onto the sequence through these moments of transformation. In a way that affirms, and performs, Ricoeur’s idea that the meaning of a metaphor is located in the changed world of the listening or reading self, Beveridge’s Gotama is transformed *by* and *through* the shifts and expansions of mind that his metaphors inspire, at the very same time as the meaning of these metaphors are also located within the changing perspectives of Beveridge’s readers.

Beveridge’s earlier sequence about the Buddha, “The Buddha Cycle”, which concludes *Accidental Grace* stages the processes of enlightenment differently. In a way that the “Bodhi Tree” sequence cannot, this sequence touches on the role of the Buddha’s teaching in changing people’s lives. As well as clearly representing the Buddha (the enlightened Buddha, not the Bodhisattva) as a poet, in its focus on a group of people who come into contact with the Buddha, “The Buddha Cycle” speaks of the poetics of the Buddha’s teaching by representing its effects on the transforming selves that surround him; these transformations are often concerned with aesthetics, and have a lot to do with particular uses of language. In “The Buddha Cycle”, unlike “From the Palace to the Bodhi Tree”, Gotama does not speak directly; like that sequence, however, which ends before his enlightenment, in “The Buddha Cycle” the Buddha remains a magnetic absence who does not speak. Its poems are collection of dramatic monologues, or a small drama, spoken by people

who come into contact with him. Most of these people, although this is not intimated within the poems or Beveridge's notes, are actually representations of historical – or literary – figures as recorded in the Pali Canon. The first poem, "Waiting", lists these figures, some of whom go on to deliver a poem of the cycle. "Waiting" figures its sense of anticipation in the tensions created by the structure of the list:

Puddles lie under the trees  
and are bright with the sun.  
Through them he is walking.  
He is walking towards us:  
Citta, the mahout;  
Sati, son of the fisherman;  
Tissa, son of the door-keeper;  
Dhaniya, the potter;  
Arittha, the vulture-trainer;  
Suppiya, the corpse-bearer;  
Sunita, the street sweeper.  
He has walked  
far over the blossoming fields.  
He has come step by step  
under trees heralded by bees. (Beveridge, *Grace* 78)

It seems important that the poem introduces the speakers of the following poems in the sequence before speaking at length about the Buddha: it is in keeping with his absence in the sequence, and, in addition to McLaren's observation that the Buddha is represented by his effect on others as a formal solution to the poem's dealing with this absence ("Translations" 276), it emphasises that the Buddha's presence is only registered by the changes it produces in the lives around him. The lines that anticipate the approaching Buddha do not go on to characterise him as a founder of a religion, but introduce him as a poet:

Soon he will be dressed in the sun  
like a shoulder toga. Soon  
he will offer us words like pollen  
and honey; words to runs us up



wheatsheaves; words to give us  
back to the earth; words to listen to  
like rain in our clay huts. (Beveridge, *Grace* 78)

The speaker of this poem does not anticipate the Buddha's words in terms of their religiosity, but anticipates them as words. This offers a particular way of reading the following poems; it offers a key. This can be seen most clearly in the role that the fifth poem of the cycle plays in crystallising the references to art throughout the cycle, as I will discuss soon.

The five poems that follow "Waiting" sustain its sense of anticipation, and this is heightened if one knows that, historically, all of the figures speaking, or spoken of, in the poems become members of the community of monks and nuns, the Buddha's *sangha*. In the sequence, they are still leading the lives of lay followers, with two of the five poems being spoken from the perspective of their wives. The third poem of the sequence, "Arittha the Vulture-Trainer Speaks" draws on the "Alagaddupama Sutta" *MN* 22 which concerns "Arittha, a monk, formerly of the vulture killers" (Thanissaro n.p.). Although changed to "vulture-trainer", the historical "vulture-killer" has left a mark on the poem:

As a boy I'd go out  
over untrammelled grass  
catch bulbuls  
push them onto sharpened sticks. (Beveridge, *Grace* 81)

Like Suppiya, the speaker of the next poem in the cycle, Arittha suffers from remorse about the way he has led his life. And as in the previous poem, "The Mahout's Wife Speaks", music, embodied here in the "bulbul", is significant. The particular emphasis in Arittha's poem, however, is on renunciation, not merely in the sense of joining the *sangha*, but a renunciation, a letting go and "unravelling" of guilt:

I bring a rag  
dipped in oil  
to clean their heads.

I've heard you say

desire is only a veil.

I taught my birds  
to bring my meals –  
even from the charnel field.

At night I'd keep them  
in the celibacy  
of their hoods, the hallucinations  
of a fast.

Sometimes I wish I'd been  
a sitar-stringer's son  
and worked only music's feast.

As a boy I'd go out  
over untrammelled grass  
catch bulbuls  
push them onto sharpened sticks.

My hands are scarred  
with talon marks.

I hear you offer  
me a meal from  
your hand's hollow.

If I joined the Sangha  
would I unravel  
the string of blood  
to which I'm bound?

Perhaps, one day,  
I'll look into a bowl  
and see

my undressed head. (Beveridge, *Grace* 81–82)

I have quoted this poem in its entirety because its metaphors of veils, desire and guilt are threaded so continuously it is difficult not to do so. In a similar gesture of compassion to those performed in “Monkey” and “Buffalos”, Arritha’s poem speaks of his condition in the same terms as his vultures”. The “veil” of “desire” is his vultures’ hoods – something that he has used to entrap the birds, and that, like his own desire, as the Buddha teaches, is his own responsibility. Desire, not only in the form of passion, but in its more subtle sense of desiring even food, is continuously present in the poem. “Music’s feast” signifies a less painful form of this desire, but not a transcendence of it. This reference to music does, however, give the reference to nightingales more significance, connecting them to his alternative to cruelty and also suggesting that, to Beveridge, this alternative is expressed as art. In a way that recalls the close connection in her work between music and the act of poetry, in the context of this Cycle, and Beveridge’s poems more generally, when Arritha kills the bulbuls, he is also killing skilfulness, an approach to living that itself could be called artful<sup>9</sup>. As a response to this cruelty, the following lines “My hands are scarred / with talon-marks” are a small reference to the results of *kamma*: that, as “The Street Sweeper’s Wife” recalls her husband saying, “each action / sows its seed” (Beveridge, *Grace* 84). When he goes on to characterise the Buddha’s teaching as “a meal from / your hand’s hollow”, it introduces an inverse metaphor for desire, for the releasing of desire, and begins to spin the poem in the opposite direction. From here the poem speaks of “unravel[ing] / the string of blood / to which I’m bound”, of his “undressed head” in that other concave image, the monk’s bowl (84). In this visual image, which foresees his historical destination as a monk, he is connected even more strongly to his vultures as he recalls their bald heads in the opening stanza.

Although Arritha becomes a monk, the sutta that is concerned with him speaks of his wilful misunderstanding of the Buddha’s teaching. Interestingly, the “Alagaddupama Sutta” includes a collection of the “great similes” used by the Buddha as teaching tools (whether these were connected to Arritha in the Buddha’s time or added later in the formation of the Canon is unknown, but in any case, this is most likely the context in which Beveridge would have read of Arritha). The following two poems in the Cycle also express the connection between the Buddha’s teaching and poetry, and aesthetics more generally, and they do so

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<sup>9</sup> In *Devadatta’s Poems*, Beveridge’s most recent volume set to be published in April, 2014, the theme of music continues to attend references to the Buddha. In “Figurines”, “He’d buy conch shells and spend / his time slowly chipping away at the apexes tuning them / into sweet-toned trumpets”. In “A Memory: Snake Charming, Kapilavatthu”, “he always reached perfect notes, perfect pitch”.

particularly in their relationships to their corresponding Pali texts. “Suppiya the Corpse-Bearer Speaks” is also a poem in which the speaker looks to the Buddha for a new perspective on life:

With death in my arms  
I toil

the stone steps.  
But what life is this?

A sky of smoke  
and crows

and no gestures  
of loss.

Yes I have wished  
for infants

just so death  
weighed less.

But now as  
smoke slips into

a cool dusk –  
teach me

to bear each life  
not as a burden

but as a counter-weight;  
help me to find  
the way

to make love

the stretcher

for each small death. (Beveridge, *Grace* 82–83)

The historical Suppiya has a poem in the *Theragatha*, or collection of poems by early monks, recorded in Pali. Beveridge draws on this poem in a subtly transforming way. Unlike the sutta concerning Arritha, the verse says nothing of Suppiya’s former life; it instead contains the central theme, and the dominating image of Beveridge’s poem:

I’ll make a trade:

aging for the Ageless,

burning for the Unbound:

the highest peace,

the unexcelled rest

from the yoke. (Thanissaro, “Suppiya” n.p.)

The “Ageless” and the “Unbound” in this poem are both referring to the state of *nibbana*, or eternal freedom from suffering. The poem figures the transformation of the pain of unenlightened life into this “highest peace” in terms of economy. Beveridge translates what the monk Suppiya “trades” in this exchange into an imaginary former life. “Ageing” to the bearing of corpses, and “burning” to “A sky of smoke”, the smoke of the cremation grounds. Aligned with this release from “burning”, the Buddha is anticipated by a clearing of this smoke, he is called to “teach”, “as / smoke slips into / a cool dusk –”.

While the last poem in the Cycle, “The Street-Sweeper’s Wife Speaks”, draws on the historical figure of Sunita who, in a similar way to Arritha, is recorded in the Pali Canon as a monk who was “formerly a street cleaner”, it is the historical background of “Dhaniya the Potter” that is again suggestively distant from his representation in the Cycle. In her representation of Dhaniya, Beveridge clearly diverges from the corresponding Pali text, but in a way that then returns to it from a different, more aesthetic, angle. “Dhaniya the Potter Speaks” is the poem in the Cycle that speaks about art in the most direct way. “There’s nothing / I haven’t dreamed / of putting / upon my wheel”, it begins, and Dhayina, articulating the question which is at the heart of Beveridge’s Cycle itself, goes on to wonder how, and if, he could represent the Buddha by his art:

But if I saw  
you moving

towards my hands  
out of what

should I make  
the pedestal?

And if I brought  
my moons close

how should I  
phase another

figurine?  
What can I do?

Buddha, teach me  
to throw the pot –

the one  
that will hold

the Dhamma,  
the flow. One

I can shape  
free of the wheel. (Beveridge, *Grace* 83–84)

The punning lines “Buddha, teach me / to throw the pot –” emphasise the difficult balance that Dhaniya and, by extension, all artists are searching for when they attempt to portray the Buddha or his Dhamma. The balance between “throwing away” received images

to make room for what can only be understood as truth within the individual mind, and the need for art to inspire and guide this activity of mind preoccupies Dhaniya as it does Beveridge. The “Dhaniya Sutta SN 1.2” does not attribute these particular thoughts to the historical Dhaniya, however, but they are instead implied in its form. The historical Dhaniya is not a potter at all – he is the farmer, an owner of cattle. But Dhaniya Sutta is itself a verse conversation between Dhaniya and the Buddha. The verse is didactic, and juxtaposes the contentment of Dhaniya which springs from his comfortable home, his good relationship with his wife and family, and his thriving cattle with the Buddha’s contentment which arises from his “released” mind, “nurtured” and “well-tamed”, his freedom from the “bonds” of negativity, existence and future birth and the “grief” that “comes from acquisitions”. By the poem’s end, Dhaniya and his wife have asked the Buddha to be their teacher and desire to follow him in the life of renunciation. It is not so much what this verse is saying, but how it says it, and the way it offers an example of how the Buddha taught, that leaves a trace in Dhaniya’s poem and the Cycle as a whole. The form of Beveridge’s small verse drama recalls this form of the verse conversation, and as Bhikkhu Thanissaro explains in the notes to his translation, there are many instances of word plays throughout the poem. Moreover, in his introduction to the *Atthaka*, a collection of sixteen poems that are in a different subsection, but the same broad collection as the Dhaniya Sutta, the *Sutta Nipata*, Thanissaro Bikkhu says:

the *Atthaka* stands at the long line of Buddhist texts – both Theravada and not – that use word-play with a serious purpose: to teach the reader to think independently, to see through the uncertainties of language and so to help loosen any clinging to the structures that language imposes on the mind. This type of rhetoric also rewards anyone who takes the text seriously enough to re-read and re-think what it has to say... A proper reading of a text like this requires that you question your assumptions about its message and clarify the intention behind your efforts at reaching an understanding. In this way, the act of reading is meant not only to inform but to transform. (n.p.)

I suspect that it is the form of the Dhaniya Sutta poem that has given rise to Dhaniya the potter, and that his representation of the artist in the Cycle suggests that art itself is the pot

that holds the Buddha's Dhamma, or teaching; and that it can hold it because the Dhamma is an art of living itself.<sup>10</sup>

Beveridge's "Buddha Cycle" suggests a background for the various representations of sound within "From the Palace to the Bodhi Tree". Two poems after "Doubt", the poem with which I began reading the sequence, "Kite" marks the end of Gotama's practice of extreme asceticism represented in "At Uruvela (1)" and "At Uruvela (2)" and the beginning of another new start:

Today I watched a boy fly his kite.  
It didn't crackle in the wind – but  
gave out a barely perceptible hum.

At a certain height, I'd swear I heard  
it sing. He could make it climb in  
any wind; could crank those angles up,

make it veer with the precision of  
an insect targeting a sting; then he'd  
let it roil in rapturous finesse, a tiny

bird in mid-air courtship. (Beveridge, *Wolf* 82)

The boy's dancing kite is a metaphor for a new practice that Gotama is about to start. The failure of the extremes to which he had been subjecting himself at Uruvela opened another way. Beveridge has figured the infancy of what was later known as the Buddha's "middle path" in a boy's kite – its complementary actions of climbing and roiling, its "precision" and "rapture" and the boy's complete and effortless control embody a balance that the Bodhisattva would later perfect. The product of this balance is a "hum", whose significance becomes greater as the poem continues:

I asked if it was made of special silk,  
if he'd used some particular string –

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<sup>10</sup> The concept of the Dhamma as being "held" is a familiar one within the Canon: the word for the text of the Buddha's teaching in its entirety is *Tipitika*, or the "three baskets", signifying the three different collections of suttas.



and what he'd heard while holding it.

He looked at me from a distance,  
then asked about my alms bowl,  
my robes, and about that for which

a monk lives. It was then I saw  
I could tell him nothing in the cohort  
wind, that didn't sound illusory. (82–83)

When the boy answers Gotama's questions about the kite – if it was “made of special silk” or “particular string” – with analogous questions about the material practicalities of a monk's life – the alms bowl, the robes – Gotama realises that his achievements so far have not reached the depths necessary to fulfil it. Just as their exchange remains concerned with the surfaces of things, so Gotama's development of the monk's life has not yet penetrated below the illusory. The way in which this ideal of balance and the reality of illusion are communicated by way of hearing and sound constitutes an important key to the rest of the sequence.

Although sound is not the only way that Gotama senses his surroundings – “watching” is carefully honed, particularly in “In the Forest” and “Source” – it is a crucial one. The next poem “Grass” is about Gotama's growing desire for, and achievement of, precision and balance in his practice. He speaks of reed-cutters: “All morning I hear them balancing / among the perfection of those arcs”, “each blade reaches my heart / in regular rhythm”:

Who are these  
men scything grass? All day, the moon

unknown to itself, floats like a bird;  
and there's a sound too in the wind

of many imponderable things.  
This river goes on. And all day,

I've listened, held between earth  
and sky, wishing I too could take

my work into the cold; wishing  
I too could find precision among

unweighable songs (86–87)

The question in the middle of this poem, “Who are these / men scything grass?”, implies the narrowing of Gotama’s attention, the limited nature of the information he is receiving. He is not watching the men, this suggests, he is meditating with his eyes closed. McLaren has spoken in detail about representations of meditation in this sequence, specifically in terms of the poems’ forms and representations of concentration (278–81; 286–89). What Beveridge’s Gotama also does in his developing meditation practice is become more and more aware of the information he receives through his senses. Sound and the sense of hearing are particularly prominent because they indicate the times in which Gotama is sitting in meditation (with his eyes closed). Yet Beveridge also, consciously or intuitively, makes a subtle connection between his awareness of the sense of hearing and the link suggested in “The Buddha Cycle” between sound and music and the aesthetic or artistic nature of the Buddha’s discovery. In “Grass” the sound of the men scything is figured in terms of its rhythm and later, too, as “unweighable songs”. As Gotama’s awareness becomes more skilful, he draws closer towards enlightenment.

As was suggested at the outset of this reading, the work that will take place in Gotama’s mind is also physical work: to experience the processes of mind staged throughout the sequence necessitates a link between mind and body, thought and sensation, and, moreover, a sophisticated approach to feeling and sensation. As Beveridge’s Gotama says in the penultimate poem of the sequence:

Directionless once, but now I can orient  
my mind against what’s waning, absent;

I can give each feeling the subtlest form,  
The night is quiet and the fires are silent,

my feet are slow, but the earth is patient.

I follow the heart like a compass-worm. (*Wolf* 100)

“A Vow” emphasised the experiential, physical nature of Gotama’s journey – the need for a certain awareness of the body’s sensations to precede any illuminations of the nature of human existence. “I can give each feeling the subtlest form” is perhaps a representation of one who has travelled a long way on that particular path. One poem shortly before “Path” expresses what I see as the most potent of all the sequence’s sudden moments of illumination, which is based, it seems, on this skill. Beveridge suggests subtly the epiphany of “Rice” has arisen from a long accumulation of experience, and arises with such suddenness because of immediate experience. The poem’s epigraph, by Adam Zagajewski, points towards its theme: “*Suddenly I find myself asking: ‘Things / do you know suffering?’*” Beveridge continues:

I can hear the farmers up all night  
guarding the ripening rice crop  
from the hungry animals. It must  
be that some elephants have broken  
into the field because the farmers  
are shouting, banging copper pots,  
and the elephants are madly trumpeting.  
But then I realize, it is something

else: those are the cries not only  
of men, not only of bewildered,  
frightened elephants: those are  
the cries of *dukkha*. The animals  
are hungry, the men are hungry –  
and they are all craving the rice. (*Wolf* 94)

The first impression this poem gives is that the speaker has only limited access to the situation: he is far away, or he has his eyes closed. Everything is transmitted through the aural sense, and it is through analysing his aural sense that the Gotama arrives at the poem’s key realisation. “I can hear”, he says, “It must be”, he conjectures, because of the sounds that

come to him. Yet in the next moment, this analysis gives rise to something quite startling – a great synthesizing fact. It is not just the cries, the drums, the trumpeting; it is “something / else” that he is hearing, and the enjambment of these words across stanzas – the only stanza break in the poem – makes the force of this realization clear. *Dukkha* is the first noble truth in the Buddha’s teaching: the truth of suffering, and it is called “noble” because by realising it one has made a great, transformative step on the noble path to enlightenment, observing suffering as suffering, without reference to an “I” who suffers. This is the “something” that was lurking below Gotama’s skin in “A Vow”, a truth that he could not get to but knew was there. Beveridge’s emphasis on what can be observed, discovered, and known through the senses and the sensations which provide a bridge between the body and the mind demonstrates that, as is true of poetic activity as much as the act of meditation, it is the degree of art with which sensation or feeling is approached that determines its effect.

In the same way that in Beveridge’s view it is the particular quality of mind behind awareness that animates a poem, and that it is the capacity of the synthesising mind that lies beneath the shock of metaphor, the senses which are crucial to our experience of art can themselves be treated “skilfully”, with the aesthetics that the Dhamma calls for. As Holder says, the path to liberation within the Pali Canon is “consummated in its aesthetics” (“Aesthetics” 19). Intimately tied to this interpretation of the Buddha as poet is Beveridge’s insistence that Gotama’s work on the nature of himself is not complete until it is offered to others. There is certainly no guarantee that it will be communicated or received, but one of the markers of Beveridge’s portrait of the Buddha as poet is that his words are continually in search of an audience, that his poem is “*en route*” and “intends another... goes towards it, bespeaks it”, to quote Paul Celan (49). In “The Buddha Cycle” the Buddha’s presence is registered only by the changes he inspired in those around him; to a degree, given Beveridge’s clear representation of the Buddha as a poet in the sequence, this technique is itself a staging of lyric address. And Wall’s understanding of Ricoeur’s idea that the trajectory of metaphors” meaning “ends not in themselves but in the transformed world of an interpreting *self*” is both performed in the “Bodhi Tree” sequence by Gotama’s transformations as well being alive, of course, in the relationship between Beveridge’s poems and their readers. Stewart has said in her reading of Vico: “Only when poetic metaphors make available to others the experience of the corporeal senses can the corporeal senses truly appear as integral experiences” (15), and, as I have discussed from various angles, this statement resonates deeply with Beveridge’s own approaches to metaphor. Resting on such poetic scaffolding, though, and what it allows expression, is the compassion with which

Beveridge infuses so much of her writing, not least of all her poems about who is widely known as a symbol of compassion. In all of the poems from “Rice” to the final “Ficus Religiosa” (*Wolf* 101–02), mutuality is a central experience, and this is a quality that guides Gotama’s experience at the same time that it affirms that Gotama’s experience is an essentially human experience. It is one that rests on the cusp of singularity and interdependence, and on the connection between what one knows and how one acts – “I know all earthly life is transient”, he says, “but wherever I tread I’ll never do harm” (100).

## CHAPTER TWO

### Kevin Hart: *From ecstasy to practice.*

Kevin Hart, more than any other poet in this study, has his own complex theories about the relationship between poetry and experience. To enter them is intricate, and reading his poems in their presence even more so. Yet Hart's rich web of thought surrounding this topic is one which, the difficulty of moving within it admitted, has much to offer this study, while, in turn, it hopes to read and begin to understand aspects of a poetry that has not been valued enough, at least publicly, in this country. While Hart's diverse writings on experience coincide with his diverse careers – he is a religious philosopher, literary theorist and critic as well as poet – this is not merely because he also works in prose. Rather, his fascination with the experience of poetry addresses this diversity. His investigations into the nature of human experience are guided not only by his Catholic faith, which both qualifies and inspires the very effort, but by a parallel interest in poetry's claim on us as experience itself. In his important essay "The Experience of Poetry" Hart says that this expression is "a phrase that has haunted me for as long as I have written poems", a theme that "presupposes many encounters with many poems" but seeks to address "something more elusive, perhaps even illusive, namely what poetry encounters" (286). I will return to this essay, in which Hart discusses his thoughts on the relationship of poetry to phenomenology and the sacred. In his philosophical and theoretical work, the question of how people record experience – from the ecstatic experiences of the Christian mystics to our everyday experiences of suffering and love – dominate to the point where it is difficult to find an essay of his that is not in some way touched by it. The special status of the experience of *poetry* in his thought may arise, at least in part, from its particular intimacy with such inner experience, and from the way it calls experience into question. Yet Hart also says, along with Maurice Blanchot, that "In its most general sense, experience is a relation with the Other, whether this exteriority be construed as the outside or another person. Even the solitary act of writing presumes the possibility of contact with another person since, as Blanchot suggests in an early essay, there is something faintly absurd in composing a sentence that declares how lonely one is" (*The Dark Gaze* 20).

In "That Life" Hart names experience as split; as an encounter constituted by the split between being and understanding. From the title poems of the early *Your Shadow* to a later

poem such as “Rain” in *Wicked Heat*, the yet-to-be accounted for in experience is often personified, or given agency in his poems as a “something”. It is the Dark One who broods in his more recent work, the lost loved one or, as in this poem, the possible past or future afforded life and the capacity to interact with the present. I will quote “That Life” in full:

There is a life I’ve barely lived at all  
And, summer afternoons, I feel it brush  
Against me, heading somewhere far away,

Up in the north perhaps where rain comes down  
As if just thrown in vengeance for some wrong  
No one remembers now, though people talk,

And in that life I stroll through open doors  
And take the darkness offered every night  
And am bewildered still by clocks and eyes.

It touches me, that breath, say once a year,  
When rain hits thick and hard against the door,  
When I have let my darkness have its way,

And then I almost know that other world,  
And live in small hard words from years ago  
And cannot be at peace in any life. (Hart, “That Life” 78)

To start anywhere in Hart’s body of work is to be introduced to layer upon layer of motif and scenario which recur insistently throughout his poems and stretch back to an origin that he would say is “ever withdrawing”. Gary Catalano lists what David McCooey goes on to speak about as Hart’s “catalogue of symbols”: “stones, hands, shadows, sunlight, water, mirrors, horizons, moons and clocks” and, appearing more recently, “the sun, the dark, north and heat” (McCooey “Secret” 109 and 119). As McCooey says, this “bank” was formed early (109). The relatively recent “That Life” is marked by these images as many of his important poems are and, moreover, unlike most of them, the poem itself seems to be aware of how and why such a circuit of symbols might come into being.

To begin with, in the poem there is an experience: a slightly extraordinary moment that the speaker undergoes and which brings to mind the word's root *peri*, or "trial". There is a brushing of memory – although it cannot quite be diluted to memory – that radically changes the speaker's present. It is something that happens only "say once a year", an infrequency signalling "an experience", but also, more tenuously, an anniversary, suggesting that the poem also addresses experience in a much more general sense, in the sense of acknowledging a life, a past, and a present to which it cannot quite be reconciled. This relationship between two types of experience is met by another: the relationship between the speaker's present life and the animation of a space – "that other world" – opened in childhood, or so it would seem by the reference to the rain and heat of "up north", the way that Hart often refers to the Brisbane he grew up in. This is not a space of the past, however, but one of continuous life, hence its name and the way it can exist parallel to the speaker's present. This other life does not come to him from the childhood place, but, "heading somewhere far away", goes towards it, taking him with it.

This circularity continues: one "door" leads to this other life, when the rain of a "summer afternoon" knocks and suggests not only the monsoonal rain in Queensland long ago but a "vengeance" from Heaven, while the first "open doors" are markers of the quality of this other life, where he can "take the darkness offered every night" and is "bewildered still" by familiar objects. This pun on "still" suggests the relationship of this life to childhood – where we were "bewildered" once, and more easily – and reasserts that it existed alongside the speaker's past. Yet it also characterises "this life" as one of stillness and peace. Just as a door leads to a place of other, differently symbolic, doors, the "other world" must be entered by experiences similar to the ones he will find within it: when the rain falls particularly insistently, "When I have let my darkness have its way". "Dark" is a potent word in Hart. It belongs to the spiritual, whether a metaphor for the negative theology that engages him or akin to "the dark night of the soul" of his "patron poet" St John of the Cross ("Nineteen Songs", *Flame Tree* 171), but true to its connotations it is difficult to speak of directly or with clarity. In this poem, as in others, it has a curious agency. It can admit entry to "this other world" by being a category of both memory and spirituality. As Paul Eluard, a favourite poet of Hart's, has said, and Hart quotes as an epigraph to *Lines of the Hand*, "there is another world, but it is within this one". The tension between these worlds culminates in the poem's last, compelling, line. The relationship of "that life" to the one from which the poet speaks has been figured in circles of resemblance throughout its stanzas yet it remains elusive. Its trace means that he "cannot be at peace in any life", as he approaches but can only "almost



know” this “other world” that is a representative of peace. The other world is suddenly possible, the consequence of this almost knowing, poetry, if we can read “these small hard words” as poetry itself; that is, the stillness *this* poem and *these* small hard words do reach here, on the page, now.

Folded within this confluence of exteriority and interiority, of memory and spirituality, this poem’s witnessing of both the long experience of life and “an experience” which is itself another world, are many aspects of Hart’s work that belong, at least in part, to his acknowledged fascination with the way experience relates to poetry. This chapter will explore some of them. To begin with I will discuss what I have named (after his own essay on Blanchot) Hart’s “primal scenes” and how they reverberate throughout his poetry by means of these “small hard words” that become a private, highly charged metaphoric vocabulary. How his poems perform this question of origin is connected to another of his great themes, the presence of another world within this one, which is the focus of the second part of this study. This acknowledgement of the spiritual is variously figured, raises questions about metaphor itself, and releases the possibility of suspending our usual attachment to this world, an attitude that corresponds to Husserl’s phenomenology and with Shelley, whom he quotes in “The Experience of Poetry”: “Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar” (qtd. in 286–87). Hart’s creation of this particular sort of strangeness, and its opening of an attitude of detachment or indifference, which Hart names “The Calm”, is my final area of discussion<sup>11</sup>. I suggest that along with the phenomenology and Christian mysticism crucial to it, Hart’s poetry points beyond itself to express that experience is necessary to a paradoxical knowledge, a knowing of the “nothing” that knows, an acknowledgement of what he calls the “anonymity” that is “at the base of the ‘I’” (Adamson 81), and stages, in what is figured as calm or acceptance, an exemplary way of approaching experience, of being in the world.

As I mentioned, Catalano and McCooey have observed that Hart’s poems return frequently to a small number of motifs. Clocks, the rain and the dark are present in “That Life”. Others include sleep, rivers, most often the Brisbane River, angels and as Catalano points out, hands. A more recent collection of poems, *Night Music* (illustrated by Kristin Headlam), a sequence interrupted by drawings, speaks of a father’s “hand, a map of veins / and bones and gristle

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<sup>11</sup> David McCooey’s excellent and, in this country, pioneering work on Hart, in his article “‘Secret Truths’: The poetry of Kevin Hart”, and his review of *Flame Tree* “Opaque Lucidity”, has been important to forming these areas of focus.

guiding me nowhere”. A river, the Brisbane river, is there throughout: in memory “there was a girl I took down by the river: / We let mosquitoes have our arms for free, / We let each other’s hands go where they would”; or the present, where he watches “ the great river brood upon its turn”; or in a meeting of the two: “And when at last I reach the river bend // I tell myself, as though I were a child, / God is the dark before the shadows came”. The complex threading of Hart’s motifs is too rich to continue singling them out like this, however, but it serves to acknowledge that Hart’s preoccupations, his particular metaphors and approach to metaphor, some of which condense to the titles of his earlier collections such as *Lines of the Hand*, *Your Shadow* and *Dark Angel* abide, increasingly so, in his more recent work.

The title poem of *The Lines of the Hand* uses various poetic techniques to represent the divergence between experience and understanding animated in “That Life”:

It is foolish to look at the lines of my hand  
and think they reveal my future  
that older man  
always turning round a corner just ahead.

I have followed him for years  
always trying to glimpse his face, trying to catch  
any word he has to spare, trying  
to judge him by his taste in clothes. (Hart, *Lines 2*)

Joking about palmistry here introduces a personification of the speaker’s future. “That older man” already exists, the poem says, it is ‘foolish to look for the future in the palm’s lines, but is it so? The poem goes on to suggest an alternate meaning of looking at “the lines of the hand”. The speaker, following, draws closer and closer to this “older man” in the next stanzas; he almost becomes him: “There are days I wake / and the room is full of him, mirrors stop me / and I see him”, and then, more ominously, the older man is already inside: “Once I saw an X-ray / showing his hands around my heart.” He continues:

I tell myself I am the sun and he is the moon –  
and when I stand quite still

my body casts two shadows  
yet always I choose the wrong one to follow home  
where I find, as always,  
blank paper, a pen, and the lines of my face. (2)

After a moment of fooling – “I tell myself” – the speaker returns to the self marked by change and time in the guise of lines on an ageing face. The “right” shadow is perhaps a metaphor for that moment of decision, of that different life “just ahead” which, even if followed, will be registered as changes in the old one. Looking at the hand, ultimately, is not so foolish, as it is looking at the self, and the “blank paper” and “pen” are its real windows: the lines written by the hand. As Hart has said, “Writing poetry always involves an exposure to risk. You chance encountering feelings and thoughts that could change you. You chance becoming a slightly different person, precisely the one who will have written the poem in hand. In a sense”, he continues, “writing is experience” (Watson 312).

The preceding poem, the first of the volume, is more mysterious. “I have seen the hand”, it begins, “even now as it slowly winds the clock / leaving its fingerprints I know so well.” This metonymic slide is frequent in Hart: human hands become hands of a clock, its lines become written lines, which later become streets, horizons, borders, while the clock’s face becomes a human face and both are reminders in their separate ways of mortality. In part, this is his particular animation of poetry’s capacity “to make the familiar unfamiliar”, to make us see objects in a new way by breaking their relationships to each other and forging them differently. In “The Hand” the speaker stands at this sort of distance from his own hand, which the poem also tempts me to read as the hand of God. It “slowly winds the clock”, as if time itself:

I have seen it  
opening its palm to me saying Look, see  
soon all this will be yours,

all my life I have seen it  
always offering me its map useless without names  
its five-pronged signpost  
pointing me off to God knows where.

Yet it is my only country  
and I must live here I have no choice  
waking each day  
hearing its tremendous roar, its great rivers  
pouring and pouring into my small cup. (Hart, *Lines* 1)

The speaker conflates God's gift of the Earth with another joke about palmistry, the palm's revelation of the future, that "all this will be yours". The repetition of "I have seen it" seems to increase the speaker's distance from the hand, forcing an otherness upon it, on the body, that is only reluctantly given away with the recognition, "Yet it is my only country". When seeing becomes hearing in the last stanza, this clever play on the hand as being at once divine and human changes as well; the moving phrase "and I must live here I have no choice" speaks of both the body and the world and makes both seem startlingly "other" by implying that perhaps there is another life, an "other world". The "tremendous roar", and "great rivers" suggest a grandeur appropriate to God, but both are eventually of this world and of the body; Hart does not dismiss either, but maintains the difficult tension of the earlier metaphors to suggest not the dissolving of one world into the other, but the presence of the divine within this one. The speaker wakes to the roar of blood in the ears, while the "great rivers" condense to the crevasses and the "small cup" of the hand itself.

Hart's fascination with hands continues in his most recent work. The way the motif first appears in his poems is significant to this future. Hart's first volume, *The Departure*, which was followed by *The Lines of the Hand* three years later, contains two poems introducing motifs that were to remain and intensify throughout his work to date. The hand and the river, most likely the Brisbane River, come into his poetry in what seem to be scenes from the speaker's life, one from childhood. It is a passage that is easy to treat reductively but I hope to avoid this, partly by invoking an essay of Hart's in *The Dark Gaze*, in which he speaks of Blanchot's small *recit*, "(Une scene Primitive?)", or "(A Primal Scene)". This piece, also possibly autobiographical, witnesses an intense experience of the world that reveals it as "not what it is", and this spiritual episode happens to a child. Hart's commentary is partly a testimony to the potential of experience to change a life and a body of work but the way he approaches this is oblique, as it may need to be to avoid the simplifications that could otherwise surround the topic.

"Sickroom" is one of Hart's most raw poems, in the sense of intensity not necessarily lack of craft:

Gets up to wash, and faints. The clatter  
of plates collects outside, an inch away  
from your head. No bruise. (*Lines 7*)

This abrupt style is one that Hart rarely continues to experiment with in later poems. It produces the almost documentary quality of this poem, a technique that leaves on the surface what is more often in his poetry enveloped in layers of play and relationship. It wants to testify to a first experience of “fact”:

I cannot leave. The nurse  
is coming through distances of whiteness.

Taking you away. The corridors loom  
absurdly straight. Your face  
is cardboard white to conform.  
Your hands are made of bones,

I never realised before.  
Now pushed  
through gaping doors that accept you  
like a fact.

Your sickness!  
Your hand  
clamps on mine. The marks it leaves  
are real. (Hart, *Lines 7*)

The whiteness of the hospital is mirrored in the speaker’s new perception of the white bones of the hand and, with the figuring of the pale face as “cardboard to conform”, this is not so much a way of making the hospital environment a familiar, human, one, but of registering the shock that the hand, the human body and the other person are just as impersonal and somehow as alien as an emergency ward. Similarly, it is difficult to guess who the “you” of this poem is, whether family or lover or friend, and yet struggling against this realisation is the more familiar connotation of the hand – the joining of one to another, a symbol of hospitality and care. The bond between speaker and addressee is made by what the speaker is

forced to acknowledge. There is “No bruise” after the fainting, but the “marks” as the hand clamps on the speaker’s “are real”. The poem attempts to register and convey (or is it exorcise?) an initial experience of mortality, the “marks” of which are a new perception of what is real about human existence, but at the same time are marks only made possible because the direct experience is someone else’s. Like the reader of a poem, and again recalling Hart’s evoking the split self, the speaker has had the experience without having the experience.

It is possible, I think, to assume that this poem has a place in Hart’s biography while allowing it to suggest more about poetry’s encounter with experience, and Hart’s own commitment to “the primacy of lived experience” (“Experience of Poetry” 286), than anything in particular about his life. What it stages is an event, and recognition of the reality of mortality, that we could see as colouring the many appearances of the hand in Hart’s poems, if the reader is aware of it. But to see in this way would be to disavow the experience itself, to mistake it for something that can be directly translated to language. Experience, instead, opens onto an abyss that the poem only just conceals, and it is perhaps being truer to it to refrain from reading all other hands as deriving from this particular one, pointing to it as origin, but as alerting us to the impossibility of capturing that origin, an impossibility which generates the motif’s repetition throughout his body of work.

Hart himself speaks about such a staging in Blanchot’s “(A primal scene?)”, and the title, as well the title of Hart’s chapter in “Blanchot’s Primal Scene”, offers a way of thinking about this, and at least one other, generative moment in his poetic. The term “primal scene” recalls Freud’s analysis of a moment of traumatic witnessing in childhood or infancy; though it may not need be an actual event, Freud eventually conceded, it could potentially be a retrospective construction. In Blanchot, as Hart says, the “primal scene can perhaps explain much about life”, “but unlike Freud’s primal scene it does not reduce life to the realm of the possible” (*Dark Gaze* 75). Blanchot’s child sees:

the sky, the *same* sky, suddenly open, absolutely black and absolutely empty, revealing (as though the pane had broken) such an absence that all has since always and forever more been lost therein – so lost that therein is affirmed and dissolved the vertiginous knowledge that nothing is what there is, and first of all nothing beyond. The unexpected aspect of this scene (its interminable feature) is the feeling of happiness that straightaway submerges the child, the ravaging joy to which he can bear witness only by tears, an endless flood of tears. (qtd. in *Dark Gaze* 51–52).

The child “will live henceforth in the secret. He will weep no more” (qtd. in *Dark Gaze* 52). For Blanchot and, perhaps, for Hart, the primal scene is aligned with the spiritual (although both would qualify that term extensively) and only in this way can it offer something to our knowledge about experience. Hart’s essay glances at Freud, but places St Augustine and, to a lesser extent, St John of the Cross, at its heart. His reading of Blanchot throughout *The Dark Gaze* is, openly but without “stag[ing] a debate” (20), a reading that draws this atheist author closer to Hart’s own awareness of the sacred; yet, in this, it reveals an impulse felt in other of Hart’s works, such as “The Experience of God”, and “The Experience of Poetry”, to inquire into how experience contests and illuminates spirituality. Experience is, quite literally, a trial that Hart seems to want religion to pass through. The severe impersonality of human life, the real of mortality, discovered in “The Sickroom” may be an effect of such a trial of belief. Its refractions through the slower mortality staged in “lines of the hand”, the motif’s prominent place in the much later *Night Music* which speaks of his parents’ ageing and death, and the alignment of this knowledge with a belief in something beyond it in “The Hand” look towards what we may want to call “an original experience”, but it is this movement itself that comes closer to constituting experience. In terms of its relationship to poetry, Hart’s reading of Blanchot suggests that the life of a primal scene within a body of work mirrors its existence within the self who experienced it: “Blanchot’s narrations and some of his essays”, he says, “are attempts to uncover a primal scene while indicating that both ‘primal’ and ‘scene’ are themselves to be contested by the movement of discovery. The primal scene withdraws as it attracts...he calls this movement of attraction and withdrawal ‘the original experience’” (*Dark Gaze* 64). This movement of withdrawing and attracting is important in Hart’s work, and a journey that all his important motifs trace. Blanchot’s *récit* offers a way of thinking about this; his child “will live henceforth in the secret”, widening this moment of extraordinary inner experience to a whole life. Hart’s motifs do not necessarily reach back to any one moment of experience, but speak always, though in different ways, from inside it – as an origin that only will have been the origin – and from here to a whole body of work that figures “the inside” as the most precious and dangerous place in our lives.

“Homages” is the final poem in *The Departure* and presents another of Hart’s potent words in the context of a “primal scene”. “River” in Hart, as I have said, often refers to the Brisbane River of his youth, and from here evokes the usual associations of crossings and passages and depth, but more particularly it becomes, as in the enigmatic “Dark Angel”, a place where startling things can happen. In “Homages” an experience of submergence offers another reflection of his theme of interiority and the poem itself places the event in a chain of

repetition which brings to mind the larger movements of “withdrawal and attraction” in much of his work. The second poem of this sequence speaks of the departure of a loved one, whose absence or impending absence structures this volume in subtle ways. The other homages of the poem are to his grandfather and an English past, and to Brisbane; the close of this middle poem is perhaps related to all three. Its situation is predicted in another scene by water, Lake Burley-Griffin in Canberra:

To see oneself in water is  
to learn something: the waves slowly  
break across our faces then suddenly smash  
as she drops a stone and mud is dragged

up from below, and then I cannot see  
myself until the waves have stopped.  
yet when I lift my eyes I see her face  
clearly: unbroken, rebuilt from the sun

that sticks small strips of light all over her face. (Hart, *Departure* 60)

This scene is entangled with another:

Her hair: fluid, and falling brown all down  
her neck, and me often afraid  
of it – a river where I once fell when young  
and saw the world invert, turn brown and vague,  
  
staring at me – unable to reach the surface  
that suddenly cut out all light,  
until a hand reached down and dragged me out –  
the mud still sticking to my trembling skin –



drenched, unharmed, smaller, seeing the world  
in some new, different way,  
like a small fish leapt out of its plain of water  
into an enormous and unbelievable day. (60–61)

The stone prefigures the speaker's fall into the river, or rather remembers it. A way of responding to a world smashed and not yet completely rebuilt, the poem glimpses a loss of self that leads to a strange happiness; it recalls Blanchot's child, although the happiness is more equivocal. The breaking of the waves across the lover's face, the acknowledgement of the continual breaking-up of self that allows a special sort of seeing – the view from a smaller, humbler perspective on the “enormous and unbelievable day” – is a similar figuring of two different traumas. What could have been endings are sudden beginnings. As the child is saved from drowning, the poem catapults the experience of loss towards an awareness of newness. In the river, the relationship between the self and world that exists on land inverts; the world is now staring at him through a surface that “cuts out all light”, which is metaphoric, perhaps, of an acknowledgement that the world is available in all its light, all the time, but it is the self, the “surface here, which acts as a thick veil and prevents us from seeing it. The hand is here again in another situation of mortality, and illumination, and he combines with it the image of a fish leaping out of water. How does what must certainly mean death for the fish release this feeling of hopefulness? It perhaps arises from the simile “its plain of water”, which, with its opposing overtones of an expanse of land, suggests that this fish is jumping into, not out of, life, and by the way it does not at all agree with “day”, which could be, exhilaratingly, anywhere.

The poem's place in the sequence is one of passage; between the move away from England and a youth lived in Brisbane, it touches them both and it is hard not to see something of Australia in that “enormous and unbelievable day”. It may even enact that disorienting moment of landing in a “new world”; a place where, Hart quotes Kafka, “one might die of strangeness” (*Best Essays* 77). In this way, “Homages” suggests two themes that recur in Hart, the intimate realities of love and loss, and shifting locations. While not always entwined as they are in this sequence, both may spring from the same impulse, providing, as they do, situations that necessitate self-questioning. Speaking to Lee Spinks in 2002 about the continuing presence of Brisbane in his work, Hart says “To be sure, self and place are always bound up, but if the self is jolted by experience, if one is drawn to transcend oneself, then one is always caught between a place and a non-place. . . . And yet the sheer strangeness of

Queensland was enough to shake me into asking the question, ‘Who am I?’” (Spinks 6). Relationships offer a similar “shaking” and a different encounter with otherness. Significantly, then, in a more abstract, “impossible” or spiritual sense, as I will speak about soon, it is “by the river” that many of Hart’s most haunting and promising poems about alterity are set.

One needs to have the experience of reading all of Hart’s poems to begin to gauge the effect of his ever-circling motifs. He offers one perspective on this aspect of his poetry when asked about the “development” of his writing:

I think that I write about the same things – death and night, God and love – although I also suspect that I have started to talk about other things by using those same words. Or maybe I’m just feeling around a little more deeply in the same things. It is so hard to tell. One’s experience of an ordinary word like “night” deepens as one grows older, and this influences every line and every poem in which one uses it. (Spinks 13)

For the reader, this deepening can be understood retrospectively, as earlier uses of the word come to take on those meanings that accrete later. The movement suggests one of the ways in which the poem *performs* the question of origin: not as a primordial source now lost, but as precisely what this writing in the here and now, this poem, is always engaged with.

Complementing the deepening of one’s experience of an ordinary word, Hart’s patterning of motifs, the creation of a type of circuit, summons the world into the poem as the poem itself often draws its reader to a particular word, or “the word” in abstract. In “The River”, a poem about a northern hemisphere river, which I will return to, the speaker is

... letting thoughts grow slow and weak

    Before I feed them words, for what

Is told to me this afternoon

Is simply *river*, with each *I* and *it* dissolved,

    A cold truth but a truth indeed (Hart, *Wicked Heat* 45)

In “The Calm” he “become[s] a yes” (48) and the poem “We Must All Die” narrows to a single “no” (32). In “The Word” in *Wicked Heat*, and a later “The Word” collected in *The*

*Best Australian Poems 2006*, the “word” leads to inwardness: “Go far into yourself, / Let quietness gather there, then say the word” (23). Even more recently, it continues:

And there’s a word that has a darker night  
Than any dead man knows: it was first said  
Before tall shadows fondled vines and trees,  
And in rich quiet that word still speaks in you. (Hart, “A Word” *Morning 5*)

But just as there is a “darkness sleeping within the dark” (*Night Music*) and “There is the silence of hills / that lodges tightly inside each hill” (*Lines 38*), Hart’s symbolic word dwells within yet indicates that it is an independent life or energy which exists there. It is both a part and not a part of the self, deeply interior and yet calling always to a shared reality, and which we can inhabit at any moment if words used every day, signifying the life we know every day, are suddenly made new or “returned to their original strangeness” (qtd. in McCooey, “Secret” 111). This is the project of poetry, Hart says, or rather, the project of the self that needs poetry for assistance: to release the unknown world within the known.

Hart’s fourth book *Peniel* opens with one of his most beautiful poems. Its formal precision is a property of the volume as a whole: the book is comprised of three sections, each with nine poems, nine three-line stanzas long. “Gypsophila” speaks from the distance of the *epoché*, performing itself this transcendental reduction from which Hart asserts “everything begins” (“Experience of Poetry” 285). This transcendence of perspective, the heart of Husserl’s phenomenology, opens a space for observation without prejudice and the suspension of our usual patterns of thought. “The reduction is a vigil,” Hart says, “a preparation for seeing the world in all its radiance” (285). It is a preparation for seeing the world as it is, not what we want it or do not want it to be. A meditation on poetry and language, “Gypsophila” retains the sense of wonder with which it characterises a child’s experience of “this strangest world”:

Another day with nothing to say for itself –  
gypsophila on the table, a child’s breath  
when breath is all it has to name the world

and therefore has no world. It must be made:  
her shadow sleeping on the wall, the rain  
that pins fat clouds to earth all afternoon,

a river playing down a piano's scales. (Hart, *Peniel* 1)

The elusiveness, even illusiveness, of an “objective” world in existence before and after the mind's encounter with it is revealed here as a “day” that cannot live or speak “for itself”. The poem unravels from the one word, “Gypsophila”, the botanical name for the small white flower called “Baby's Breath”. (And, incidentally, Hart explains that this volume itself unravelled from this first poem). As in “The Ship”, a poem slightly later in the same volume, in which a metaphor of a sail becomes reality: “the wind / then fills them out into a woman's curves / and leaves a woman running down the beach” (10), the name “gypsophila” “makes” a real child between the first and second stanzas. Her world, then, must also be made, and through metaphors: the “shadow sleeping on the wall”, the “river playing down the piano's scales”. “Gypsophila” continues:

This is the strangest of all possible worlds  
with foam upon the beach, the sea's dead skin,

and lightening quietly resting in each eye.  
Like gypsy camps or love, it must be made,  
undone, then made again, like the chill rain

that falls without hope of climbing back  
content to leave its mark, for what it is,  
upon the window or in the child's mind. (1)

The child's world suddenly becomes ours, becomes *the* world, and the previous lines a preparation for presenting it in this way. “This” world is the “strangest of all possible worlds”, stranger than any individuals may carry within their minds, although it is a sum of all. The process of building this world is, he suggests, akin to naming and metaphor. “Like gypsy camps or love, it must be made, / undone, then made again”, the poem tells us,

breaking its own title into “gypsy” and “*philo*”, or love, to assert that this poem, too, is made and unmade at once. Poetry itself goes on to figure more clearly:

Gypsophila on the table, rain outside,  
the child will tune the world to her desire  
and make another world to keep in mind:

these breaths of air in which we softly wrap  
the rain’s glass stems to let them fall again  
in sunlight, or flower forever in the mind.

A world of things with nothing at all to say,  
a margin that absorbs our silences:  
the child must take the lightning from her eye

and place it in the sky, her shadow must  
be told to fall asleep. This strangest world  
in which we say *Gypsophila, Baby’s Breath* – (2–3)

This world to “keep in mind” is the poem, and, indeed, Hart has said that lyric poetry “insists on making another world” (qtd. in McCooey, “Secret” 118). Poetry and the world itself are figured as the very “breaths of air” that lie behind the title. The “margin that absorbs our silences” is a type of border between the worlds inside and outside the mind. It recalls one way Hart sees his poetry: “I think that my poetry is an experience of limits”, he says, “especially of a limit that passes through everyday life and that makes one aware of the sheer wonder and strangeness of existence” (Spinks 13). This margin may be one incarnation of this “limit that passes through everyday life”. From here, the poem moves from the inner word outward: “the child must take the lightning from her eye / and place it in the sky”. And, perhaps, these italicised names at the poem’s end signal a necessary irruption. Signifying speech, they release this inner world to our one, shared, “strangest world” which is made, in part, by speaking.

Hart’s figure of the other, interior world pervades his work and manifests in many situations. Another memorable poem from this collection, “Facing the Pacific at Night”, is something of a sequel to “Gypsophila” and within it the border between inner and outer is

questioned through metaphors of the ocean and the dark. In its invocation of the bare power of “the thing itself” it offers a portrait of the mind:

Driving east, in the darkness between two stars  
Or between two thoughts, you reach the greatest ocean,  
That cold expanse the rain can never net,

And driving east, you are a child again –  
The web of names is brushed aside from things. (Hart, *Peniel* 18)

Darkness appears here, again, to be almost an entity. It is simultaneously outside this poem’s “you”, “between two stars”, and within, “between two thoughts”. “The greatest ocean” is, then, immediately metaphoric, referring to both the size of the Pacific and the depth of the human psyche. As in “Gypsophila”, the processes and consequences of approaching experience metaphorically are on display in this poem. While the “net” of the rain and the “web of names” seem to suggest the absolute nature of the “thing itself” beneath them, the poem goes on to complicate this:

The ocean’s name is quietly washed away

Revealing the thing itself, an energy,  
An elemental life flashing in starlight.  
No word can shrink it down to fit the mind,

It is already there, between two thoughts,  
The darkness in which you travel and arrive,  
The nameless one, the surname of all things. (18)

Stripping the ocean of its name not only reveals “the thing itself”, “an energy”, but connects its “elemental life” to ours. In a reverse of the pathetic fallacy, Hart releases the ocean from its usual descriptors to say something of the perceiving mind: “It is already there”, it is the “darkness” from the poem’s beginning and, more challengingly, both “The nameless one” and a “surname”. The ocean then becomes a child that “slowly rocks from side to side”, with no “parent there to wake it from a dream / To draw the ancient gods between the stars”. This

other absent web relates again to states of solitude and exposure: “You stand upon the cliff, no longer cold, / And you are weightless”. The poem concludes:

Or outside time, as though you had just died  
To birth and death, no name to hide behind,

No name to splay the world or burn it whole.  
The ocean quietly moves within your ear  
And flashes in your eyes: the silent place

Outside the world we know is here and now,  
Between two thoughts, a child that does not grow,  
A silence undressing words, a nameless love. (19)

This poem begins by suggesting, in its reference to a “surname of all things” and “the thing itself”, the presence of absolute being that grounds all beings (the existence of which Hart’s poems often debate: “Firm Views” from this volume comes immediately to mind). But this suggestion is carefully eroded through the intersections of “the thing itself” and the mind, which points, finally, not to a sense of being that lives beyond the thing and the mind perceiving it, but one that lives within this particular mind. The poem’s “you”, which changes with the “ocean” that “quietly moves” and “flashes” within it, expands in the end to a communal “we”, which recognises that this “silent place” which has been figured as darkness, the ocean and the child is always “here and now” – another acknowledgement that “it is already there” but with a twist towards the present.

This sense of being is not in any way grounding but profoundly and positively unsettling; this “we” is a gesture towards anonymity as much as community. As in “Gypsophila” there is a movement of erasure in this poem that Hart himself associates with a particular understanding of experience. In regard to reading and writing poetry he speaks of a moment “when experience is understood as a risk, an openness which is ungrounded and insufficient to itself” (Adamson 81). This openness is “an exposure of the self, a moment when you give up, when you let yourself as a personality be exposed to an anonymity that is, I would say, within yourself, at the base of the ‘I’”(81). This sense of acceptance and exposure makes possible and is made possible by the apprehension of a different mode of being – an “other life”, or “other world” – already available within the present one. “Facing

the Pacific at Night” explores this understanding of experience by speaking of two themes that recur insistently around it throughout Hart’s work. One is the idea of the space “between”, and the other is personification: the turn towards people, “the nameless one” and the “nameless love”.

Both these themes are approached from various directions in Hart’s essay “The Experience of Poetry”. A central thesis of that essay, and a formulation that resonates with the figure of another world within this one, is Hart’s belief that the problems between words and reality are not caused by a split between experience and language – or “the deep Romantic chasm” between experience and understanding (291) – but by a split *that falls within experience itself*. Hart redraws this map with the help of Husserl’s phenomenology, particularly as sustained by Merleau-Ponty, as well as with the inspiration of Shelley – his first favourite poet – and Yves Bonnefoy, among others. The essay, in essence a defence of poetry, is a meditation on the implications of this split within experience, one of which is Hart’s second strong conviction about the experience of poetry: that poetry does not divulge the meaning of being, but holds meaning and being together, not letting them meet but keeping them close for a while “in an intense and unequal relationship” (291). These two theses require some unravelling. Significantly, the essay begins with an overview of the phenomenological reduction, immediately raising the question of how phenomenology relates to poetry for Hart. If to enact the reduction “is to abstain from a thesis that has come to structure our assumptions about the world, namely that our lived experience is to be explained by the world”, Hart suggests that abstaining from this thesis is an attitude to philosophy and poetry that looks on the world from a distance, with a sense of illuminating detachment (285). He ventures that there is no poetry without it, and no poetry without its failure (285–92). By this I believe he means that while acts of writing and reading poetry demand the intensity of attention and suspension of conditioned approaches to the world that characterise the reduction, poems do not exist alone. They live in a world of poems that are always already impinging upon them. In another essay, speaking of Hopkins and religious poetry generally, Hart says that “All poets, religious or not, perform, to some extent, the phenomenological reduction” (“Revelations” 279). In “The Experience of Poetry”, moreover, he suggests that an antecedent of the reduction existed in the world of poetry before it came to be valued by Husserl as a science of the mind. Hart quotes Shelley: “poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar”, while describing himself the reduction as “a vigil, a preparation for seeing the world in all its radiance” (285). What remains unsaid here, though, is that Shelley is speaking



more generally of metaphor when he makes this statement, and it is Hart's own use of metaphor – particularly, as McCooey has pointed out, in his repeating motifs – that expresses his poetry's desire to “make the world strange”, a topic I will go on to explore.

The structure of Hart's essay suggests that it is the discipline of the reduction, the attentiveness of poetry, that enables us to perceive the split that falls within experience. This split – the space opened between meaning and being – is not at odds with language, but provides it with a continuing impetus. It is what makes the language *act* possible. And poetry is not alone in its intimate relationship to this space. Hart's essay quickly turns to the spiritual, and in its conclusion he explains that “It is no accident that in contemplating the expression ‘the experience of poetry’ I have been led by way of religious experience” (301). “It seems to me”, he continues, “that both poetry and religion begin as quests for the meaning of being, and that a reflection on experience sends the quester on an interminable detour, a meditation on divergence of being and meaning” (301). Yet the idea of the sacredness of poetry is one that Hart, here and elsewhere, quickly refutes; poetry “saves us from nothing,” he warns, “not even from ourselves. A poem may point us to the gap between being and meaning, and in experiencing that void we may seek salvation, opening ourselves to a meaning of being that cannot present itself” (296–97). This notion of a meaning of being that cannot “present itself”, let alone be represented, is one that holds poetry and spirituality in tension. He says that “language, with its uncanny ability to produce *other* meanings at unpredictable times, insists that the experience of poetry is always in part an experience of something inhuman” (301). While this “something inhuman” is not the sacred, as many have hoped it to be, what it offers is perhaps more valuable than this:

Like – and unlike – the sacred, it beckons without appearing. It enables a poem to configure the known and the unknown, the possible and the impossible, and to become an exemplary experience, a worldly adventure (301).

The “exemplary” nature of this experience is something that I will turn to shortly. For now, it is this “inhuman” aspect of art, with its correspondence to “the anonymity at the base of the ‘I’” that Hart associates with the experience of reading and writing poetry, which is fascinating insofar as it is a notion that irrupts in his poems and is transformed there. Through metaphor and personification, it becomes an insistent, *almost* human, presence. Insofar as it is a presence, it makes itself felt through its haunting absence. Hart speaks in “Wimmera Songs”, a sequence evoking the nakedness of the Australian desert, of “the stranger we call

Being”. Throughout his poetry, this metaphor of the stranger gathers around and within it iconic representatives: “Your Shadow” is perhaps one of them. More insistently and recently it is the “Dark One”, “Dark Bird” the “nameless one”, and, in one of Hart’s finest lyrics, the “Dark Angel”:

It was the sound of darkness, mother said,  
But still I heard you calling in the night.  
It was our old poinsettia, straight from hell,  
Its full-moon perfume wafting through the house ...

Or fine mosquitoes, rising from the river  
Just coiling in the dark there, down the road;  
It was that sound, of water and the trees,  
That somehow found a way into my sleep.

At night, between poinsettia and the river,  
Something of me walked round and round and round  
Near that black water with its snags and snakes  
And long low sounds that keep the grass alive,

And you were there as well, a touch away,  
Always about to pull the darkness back,  
And there were always branches rustling hard  
And tall reeds bending. Never any wind. (Hart, *Selected* 167)

Hart’s “Dark Angel” evokes the Brisbane river of his childhood, along with other forces far harder to name. The speaker listens almost obsessively, in a way that we do when a sound is so soft it is difficult to distinguish from the sounds of our own body. He searches for a cause, but the synesthesia of “the sound of darkness” and the poinsettia’s “full moon perfume” suggests its evasive nature. Similarly, the angel “calls” in figures of absence – mosquitoes “Just coiling in the dark there” – and the poem does not separate its call from the sounds of the natural world, “of water and the trees”. The boundaries of body and mind are questioned here: the intrusion of the poinsettia’s perfume into the house, and the sound into his sleep is answered by the poem’s overall intention outward, towards the river. The speaker

mirrors the coiling mosquitoes in his compulsive repetition, “something of me walked round and round and round” and reinforces the feeling that while from the beginning of the poem all attention, all energy is focused on the possible relationship between angel and speaker, agency is weighted towards the angel. The poem’s “you” – the angel is never named within the poem – is a nexus for the charge that builds throughout it, against which the speaker, caught within its force, is passive. In the first stanza and in the second the angel is taken in: it is the angel not the speaker who “calls” and then “somehow found a way into my sleep”; and although in the third he goes to meet it, it is, only the “something” of his self over which he has little control. In the fourth he encounters the angel who is not there. Like two magnets with the same charge they cannot meet; the angel’s effective absence, the trees and grass that move without wind, is matched by the speaker’s passivity.

The poem’s journey towards this arresting conclusion brings to mind Hart’s developments of negative theology,<sup>12</sup> a way of speaking of a God who is not present to consciousness or language, and who can only be represented by what he is not. Although they do not exactly coincide, more specifically this poem recalls one of the most famous inscriptions of the *via negativa*, a technique rather than a theology, and the path of the mystics whom Hart admires. “Dark Night” by St John of the Cross speaks of two different “nights” of unknowing that must be endured in order to experience the “light” of love and truth. Hart’s “Dark Angel” is oriented towards this poem in interesting ways. On one level, it shares its metaphors of flowers, trees and breezes, but more significantly shares its opening images of a searching self venturing into a dark night – “I went out unseen, / my house being now all stilled”. This is a double darkness; the night is already a metaphor for the abandonment of the senses, but that he “went out unseen” suggests an invisibility to the world that is also an important part of “Dark Angel”. As he explains himself, the first night of John’s poem, the “night of the senses”, is the withdrawal of the senses from the world, an attitude of detachment that leads to self-knowledge. John quotes St Augustine, “*Let me know myself, Lord, and I will know you*” (387) and goes on to assert that knowing the self is knowing the self’s suffering, and that this knowledge is a purgative and an eventually calming force. The second night is the deeper one, which “leaves the intellect in darkness, the will in aridity, the memory in emptiness” (399). This poverty is a way of leaving the self and turning from a “poor manner of understanding”, and a “feeble way of loving”, to God’s way of acting and loving. It is a passive process: “God teaches the soul secretly and instructs it in

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<sup>12</sup> Particularly in *The Trespass of the Sign*.

the perfection of love without its doing anything or understanding how this happens” (401). This inner light, available only through the renunciation of all other “light”, that is, the senses and the intellect, the usual ways of comprehending the world, is the only refuge in this atmosphere of deep uncertainty and abandonment:

This guided me  
more surely than the light of noon  
to where he was awaiting me  
– him I knew so well –  
there in a place where no one appeared. (John 359)

The phrase “no one appeared” articulates the paradox outlined in “Dark Angel”. The palpable irruption of “no one” in Hart’s poem is a singular yet somehow timeless phenomenon: the angel is “always about to” pull the darkness back, and there was “never” any wind. It signals an endless “beckoning without appearing”, and cannot be condensed to a religious experience, or an experience of God, the way that John’s poem can, or perhaps John’s reading of his poem allows. It instead corresponds to that “something inhuman” though not necessarily divine that Hart speaks of in the conclusion to “The Experience of Poetry”, as well as a sense that this angel is not a representative of God or truth, but a metaphor of the process of apprehending truth: it is a representative of experience itself. To put this in another way, the poem animates a phrase that Hart associates with poetry, Eberhard Jüngel’s words “*eine Erfahrung mit der Erfahrung*,” an experience with experience. This is an ungrounded experience, without an object and, in this, very close to both the chasm of unknowing of John of the Cross, and the pure gaze of the phenomenal reduction. It recalls the fact that the phrase of Blanchot’s “the experience of non-experience” which Hart repeatedly turns to, arose in relation to his reading of St John’s “Dark Night” (“Non-experience” 197). Experience does not signify anything given, as Hart says, interpreting Jüngel: “Experience, here, is not a cipher for revealability; it is a sign of revelation as interruption”. In terms of the religious poem, Jüngel’s “experience” signals instead a dramatic stripping away, “an exposure to the otherness of God, which characterizes experience at its most radical...” (“Revelations” 275). “Non-experience”, to recall the introduction to this study, is bound to the writing process and marks a further step towards the unconcealing of radical otherness. In speaking of the term “non-experience” within the context of Blanchot’s work, Hart says the “origin marks a ‘dead time’ that does not respect

the flow of past, present, and future; and, like death, it torments us by withdrawing as we come closer to it” (“Non-experience” 199). There is something intriguingly external about the process of experience, then, and the figure of the “Dark Angel” is suggestive here: experience is both most intimately me, yet it arrives from elsewhere, as if an annunciation.

Even in poems that do not fall into the category of “religious” in the same ways as those of Hopkins do, this “exposure to otherness” is nonetheless a valuable conception of the experience of poetry, all the more because it has the power to erase the category of “religious”. The impulse to personify otherness while preserving its strangeness is a characteristic trait of Hart’s poems. As one of the manifestations of the “Stranger we call being”, the Dark Angel occupies a significant place, even a touchstone, within the longer path of this trace. A number of Hart’s most recent poems are haunted by “Dark Angel”. “Mud” speaks to a “Dark One” in a wary yet cajoling tone; again set by the Brisbane river, it describes an industrial stretch as an eerie backwater where the pipes of “the old refinery” match the “squiggly creeks” of the mangroves. It relives the encounter:

(And yet, at night, I think you want to be  
Where water threads those seventeen small rocks:  
We met there, Dark One, all those years ago.  
You smelled of mud). (*Young Rain* 85)

The slightly nauseating sensuousness of this poem, the “thick wild stench of that raw mud, oh yes” that “Dark One” “loves most” exaggerates the importance of the sounds and the perfume in “Dark Angel” – the invisibility of the angel relies upon them. “Dark One” is again addressed in a long poem, “Dark Retreat”, in *Young Rain*, a poem in which a central absence again provokes an emphasis on the senses: “Dark One”, it begins, “it is the summer now: the evenings feel / Beneath my shirt, and it is good”. In this poem, “Dark One” is again not separate from the things of the speaker’s world around but within them and *because* of them:

Those wasps my children fear  
Are tight in their mud house, near lax electric wires,  
And those two girls, dipped in a humid day,  
Are deepening in sleep;

And I am left alone  
With you inside those wild electric wires out there  
And playing with my half-unbuttoned shirt  
And growing in those shady leaves

And in a black and yellow summer sting. (Hart, *Young Rain* 75)

The poem tries to narrow to its “retreat”, the speaker imploring “Dark One” to “hide him” from the day, and from the night, with repeated colons and semi-colons to perpetuate its urgency. It again glances to the past: “There is a secret place / I’ve seldom been / These forty years.” “I went there yesterday” he continues, recalling a pivotal phrase of “Dark Angel, “And you were there, / Dark One, / Not changed a bit.” The poem plays with this figure – accusing it of hiding, and looking for it in the world, “My daughter’s drawing of our cat”, “A flash / Of a sparrow’s outstretched wings” (perhaps recalling an angel’s) – and then invites it inside:

I let myself go still  
and time spurts out  
Of every pore;  
Then, very slowly,  
You enter me

Take me to a dark site,  
O lord, a false light sticks  
To every part of me (81)

The relationship between darkness and light is complicated; this “false light”, perhaps easy enough to understand as the material distractions of the day, he tries to strip away, but it is this effort, the repetition of “wanting” in the poem, that precludes it. When, in the last four stanzas of the poem the voice changes focus, speaking to a third: “Ah, close your eyes / And let him come:” the poem also changes mood. With this new sense of acceptance of “Dark One”, comes the metaphor of a different light that exists beyond the dark. “See, there is fruit / Asleep in a dish”, the speaker says, “There is a loss / That weighs less / Than a smile, more than the sun”:

Dark One  
Can cancel that, oh yes  
My wild one will  
(And apples and oranges will shine  
In your old bowl) (84)

This other light comes from within the things of the world where once the speaker wanted to find “Dark One”. The notion of “cancelling” perhaps gives us the greatest clue to the relationship between darkness and light, inner and outer, meaning and being, to which Hart has been alluding. These dualisms tend to be thought of as forces, or charges, whose generative unbalancing makes strange the familiar by making the strange *known*, experienced. They expose the intrinsic unstableness and unsatisfactory nature of being and create the possibility, the very need for, the momentary pure gaze – of the reduction, or perception purged by the “night” – under which things can become themselves. It makes the familiar, the fruit in the old bowl, miraculous and strange.

Similar to the “Your Shadow” poems, Hart’s “Dark One” generates a group of enigmatic odes to this compelling figure that raise questions about our ways of knowing the world, and knowing being, at their subtler levels. Indeed, the two groups of poems have a lot in common: on one level the presence of a dark, nebulous figure with overtones of death and God, and on another the cautious hope for equilibrium. “My own shadow holds me in check” (*Your Shadow* 78), is one expression of those poems’ ongoing metaphor of balance, where balance may mean erasure just as easily as reconciliation and transcendence. Ultimately, these metaphors of the dark and the dark figure open onto a new way of experiencing. In “Colloquies” (*Morning Knowledge* 12–21), another recent poem very similar in form to “Dark Retreat”, the speaker again addresses “Dark One”, and wraps the experience in metaphors before asking those same metaphors to have a power over reality. Its less urgent nature is created in part by its syllabic structure – four line stanzas of alternating four and six syllables. Its measured rhythm and its half-rhymes add to its slightly hypnotic and other-worldly atmosphere and, as if conscious of poetry’s ability to charge words in this way, “Colloquies” speaks more directly about “the word” than “Dark Retreat”. Yet, like that poem, the reader is left with the sensation of overhearing only one side of an intense conversation, a prayer, that can only make partial sense:

Ah, everything  
Begins with just one word  
From you, Dark One,  
Even if it's not said (Hart, *Morning* 13)

The one word, “the darkest one, that waits / Beneath the rest” recalls “Facing the Pacific at Night” and its invocation of “the surname of all things”. It collects metaphors, things of the world, in its path: “What comes with it” is rain, “Perhaps a chill” or a “thrill”. There is sensation before articulation, complementing the poem’s translation of the external world to an interior life. Its many turns towards the “inside” reconfigure Dark One’s relationship to the speaker, emphasising the metaphoric nature of the distances between the two in “Dark Angel”, and the proper home of these distances inside the self.

“Colloquies” repeats this metaphoric landscape. There is, for example, the doubleness of “vein” as the speaker hears:

... wind in leaves  
That rushes through each vein  
As once it did  
When there were just we two

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Dark is the crack  
Inside the icicle  
The tapeworm void  
Inside the wind’s raw howl

The tree that bends  
Over a threatened house  
The hunger of cats  
Grown wild beneath that house

*To be that crack  
And know the thrill of ice*



*To be the tree  
That strikes and means no harm*

*And so to turn  
The moment's heavy lock  
And know the dark  
And eyes that cut through bone (Hart, Morning 16–17)*

The geography of these stanzas is important not only to this poem, but to the “Dark One” poems generally. They offer a map, perhaps, of the different areas of the mind, and of the path from the complexity of thought to the clarity of being and knowing. In this existential terrain, the “icicle” is another of Hart’s surprise metaphors, though a metamorphosis of the “snow” that appears before and after it; its “crack” recalls his figure of the split within experience, and its shape corresponds to the vertical imagery to follow. The “tapeworm void” within the “howl” of the wind looks towards the cats in the next stanza and is another suggestion of the numinous that lurks within the everyday. “The tree that bends / Over a threatened house” inevitably recalls the house as a symbol of the self in “Dark Angel” and St John’s “Dark Night”. The levels in this stanza – the tree that bends over the house, which shelters the cats – suggests that below this “house of the senses” exists a far less knowable force, “the anonymity at the base of the ‘I’” and what there is in consciousness itself that resists consciousness, that remains unnameable to consciousness and irreducible to “mind”. What follows is a meeting that Hart’s poems rarely allow – “*To be that crack / And know the thrill of ice*”. To eventually “*know the dark*”, is a convergence of meaning and being, although it is suspended in italics, and a moment of knowledge that comes of experience. Radical otherness, personified as Dark One, opened this possibility, and its irruption leads eventually to that gaze “that makes familiar things as if they were not familiar”:

And so we find  
Strange things around our bed  
When we wake up  
Ourselves most strange of all (Hart, Morning 20)

Although Dark One is “The strangest one of all / Who hides in words / and makes things stranger still”, this figure always dwells, in part, within the speaker, connecting the interior

and exterior life and holding the human and the numinous worlds in tension. It answers to “the anonymity at the base of the ‘I’” and, as such, the “I” is always in the process of turning towards it – Hart’s poems never speak about but always search for this figure. In the last stanza of “Colloquies” the speaker repeats: “I wake and look / I wake and look for you”. Its last lines, “(Even the Good / Casts shadows before noon)” (21), are obscure but point towards “Your Shadow” and in doing so suggest that these groups of poems may share some conclusions. For example, this metaphor of an other residing simultaneously within the self and outside it, illuminating both in the way it opens the possibility of the deep and transformative correspondences between the inner life and the outer world, recalls one way in which Ricoeur has characterised metaphor itself. Because of metaphor, he suggests, poetry is a place “where something other than the poet speaks even as he speaks, and where, beyond the control of the poet, a reality comes to language” (*Rule* 300). The relationship between Hart’s concept of strangeness and his frequent use of the word “strange”<sup>13</sup> is enlivened by his quest for “The stranger we call Being”. It is the figure that is important, the metaphoric expression of “the anonymity at the base of the ‘I’” that is a manifestation of the force of metaphor itself. To put this another way, if metaphor “makes the world strange”, it also makes it available in all its strangeness. In the terms of Aristotle it “sets it before our eyes”, and makes it available to sense (Ricoeur, *Rule* 38). This insistent personification in Hart is not only an example of metaphor, but alerts us to what metaphor can teach. The “visibility” of Dark One, Dark Angel, the reappearing stranger, that is, its presence, being absent, to the speaker’s senses, reveals something of the value of otherness: it necessitates exposure. The otherness of the other, personified, and otherness or strangeness in abstract, lead to an exposure of the “anonymity at the base of the ‘I’” that stages something akin to the reduction of phenomenology, the *via negativa* of the mystics, and the holy detachment of St John of the Cross, St Augustine and Meister Eckhart. The personification of abstract otherness relates the beauty of the reduction to real life relations with others. It moves us towards the “exemplary” nature of the experience of poetry.

This relationship between abstract and human otherness is often explored in Hart by the presence of his mother, and his mother’s death, in poems that address a much more nebulous otherness. She is there, briefly, in “Dark Angel”, and more unexpectedly in “Dark Retreat”, where the memory of her irrupts as a companion to Dark One:

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<sup>13</sup> Hart’s fascination with “strange” and “calm” may have something to do with his early, deep admiration of Shelley, in whose work both are significant.

Some nights I smell my mother's neck,  
Her fat, loose breath,  
And know she isn't far away,  
Though when I turn she surely won't be there. (Hart, *Young* 78)

The more recent "Next Year" is a more extended and complicated portrait of his mother's death that subtly evokes "Dark Angel":

Sometime next year my mother will be dead  
And so I plan my trip to Zambia,  
I start my vast display of butterflies,  
I write out all my life in single space

But mother died some 20 years ago  
Her house is vacant, needs a slap of paint.  
I hear her walking round these summer nights,  
I feel her breathing set upon my neck

And know that she has years ahead of her,  
Each fresh one coming in its own sweet way,  
Some quick as glances at the traffic lights  
And some as slow as bitty northern grass (Hart, *Morning* 25)

This poem plays tricks with time, as many of Hart's do, mimicking the way time is often unsteady in memory. The fantastical world, the one in which the speaker plans to journey to Zambia and in which his mother is not yet dead, elides with his temporal reality. Here, his mother is no less present, and this turn emphasises the palpability of his mother's memory, her continuing existence that depends, now, on the speaker. As we have seen, the metaphor of the vacant house is resonant in Hart, and the line "her house is vacant" conflates the symbolism of an empty self, her absence from the world of sense, with the more practical effects of death, that the house "needs a slap of paint". This mixing of the metaphysical and the mundane continues, and the truly resonant lines come next, when his mother leaves the house in a similar way to the speaker of "Dark Angel": "I hear her walking round these summer nights" is a phrase that points towards the last stanzas' rewriting of that encounter:

So I will stay beside the Brisbane River  
With thick, wet summer evenings, with my lamp  
(Its shining wings both pinned against the wall),  
And wait for her to visit when she likes,

And this time round I won't play dead myself,  
This time I will have lived my life before  
With greybush, hatebeest, and galagos,  
And this time, when she dies, she will come home. (Hart, *Morning* 25)

Although they all evoke its banks, the Brisbane River is rarely named in Hart's "Dark" poems. The fact it is here is significant to the poem and its sense of homecoming. The way that he will now "stay" beside the river signals a different state of mind to the hypnotic "wandering round and round and round" in "Dark Angel" and the brief visits to this intensely charged space in the other poems. The lamp, with "Its shining wings both pinned against the wall" recalls the butterflies from the beginning of the poem, but more subtly the Angel, in brightness now and curiously on display, countering its earlier invisibility.<sup>14</sup>

The decision that "this time I won't play dead myself" illuminates the deep connection between the speaker and his mother animated in the poem, with characteristic irony. This connection is built by the mirroring of their situations, first in their "wandering", and in the speaker's journey to Zambia so he too can "come home". This mirroring suggests that this relationship shares something of the connection between Hart and his "dark ones" – she exists within his mind, but is this part of his mind given flesh and form, metaphorically emphasising not only her natural otherness, but now, in death, her access to the other-worldly realm of the "dark ones". Thus his mother's sense of peace can only come when the speaker himself is at peace; this other world is already within the speaker's. The repeated and prominent "I" in this poem implies that its action is being played out in the self, yet the irruption of members of his first, fantastical world, the creatures from Africa (with Hartebeest significantly misspelled), in this last stanza qualify its concluding sense of peace. Although it suspends the speaker's sense of homecoming, their reappearance, and the reciprocity between the "worlds" and the peace it confers, makes Brisbane itself important to the poem.

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<sup>14</sup> This also brings to mind T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": "And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin, / When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall." (*Collected* 5)

“Home”, Hart has said in many interviews, was always a strange concept for him. Arriving in Brisbane from England at age eleven was “too late to think of it as home”, and he owes part of his impulse to write poetry, as well as his poetry’s desire to “make the world strange” to this arrival in an utterly unfamiliar and uncompromising subtropical landscape. The epigraph to the first section of *The Trespass of the Sign*, the words of Nicholas Malebranche – “I will not bring you into a strange country; but I will perhaps teach you that you are a stranger in your own country” – is wonderfully apt to Hart’s own situation and poetic sensibility. “I can be not at home anywhere”, he jokes with Robert Adamson, and one gets the sense that for him, this is a conscious, almost practiced, state of mind (84). Ivor Indyk, guiding that conversation, remarks that homelessness may be a part of his poetry’s turning towards God, and the pervasive exploration of unsettling in his work does bring to mind the homelessness of monks, and the notion that, for those who believe, salvation is the only true home. Yet homelessness in Hart also suggests a way of remaining in the world: abiding in a place as a stranger, not merely arriving as one, is to undertake the task of “making the world unfamiliar” and through this generate a sense of detachment that leads, in his poems, to peace. And, expressive of how homelessness and detachment can be doubly meaningful in this way, a deep sense of peacefulness sometimes manifests in his poems alongside imagery of houses and rooms that invoke, but are never allowed to settle into, the domestic.

The two are held in tension. “The Room” may signify the absent centre for which negative theologies search, and this method of thought is animated in that poem, yet it cannot help but also imply the domestic reality of home: “It is my house, and yet one room is locked. / The dark has taken root on all four walls”. This secret centre is a spring from which the speaker can “let an ancient peace come into me” (Hart, *Selected* 166). This metaphor, encountered before, of a space of peace within the noisier self, or “house of the senses” in the philosophy of St John of the Cross, also reaches to Hart’s fascination with the Brisbane house. In “Brisbane”, one of the many poems in which he remembers childhood in “a house that stood on stilts and creaked at night”, he says, “Convinced it called to me from far within, / I waited for a strangeness I could trust” (*Selected* 142).

This sense of passivity, the waiting, accepting and the “letting in”, is pervasive in *Night Music*, Hart’s collection illustrated by Kristina Headlam with drawings of houses and empty rooms. A meditation on his parent’s ageing and death and his own past in Brisbane, across ten sonnets, this collection is very important to the understanding of these intersections between “home”, radical otherness and the otherness encountered everyday. “Dark Room” is

a more recent elegy, not only to his mother but to the continuing loss of love in time. Addressed to his “Dark Room”, and thanking this “Kind room that doesn’t ask a thing of me”, for its “peace this evening”, the poem collects the miscellany of a writing room: “scribbled paper”, “bent paper clips” and the crickets singing outside. Its recollection of an anniversary is initially similarly flimsy, as the speaker thinks “thinly” that “mother died today / Some twenty years ago a night like this”, yet this interior space, given shape here by small, random observations, is eventually burdened by a heavier knowledge: “Dark room, it hurts that love itself goes gray, / It hurts to know how much of love we miss”. It is a difficult paradox; while the room is a space characterised by its receptiveness – within it the speaker reads, listens and has nothing demanded of him – it prompts an acknowledgement not of how much is let in, but of how much is left out.

Death, in Hart, is an almost overwhelming theme. Alongside the witnessing of friends passing, and the acknowledgement of the fact of passing itself, the desire to recognise the strangeness of the world often appears with insistence and clarity. “Winter Rain”, an elegy in *Peniel* dedicated to the memory of Hart’s mentor Vincent Buckley, is a beautiful example of this:

Two weeks after the funeral, and yet  
I catch myself reaching for the phone,  
About to dial your number. God in heaven,

What will it take for me to realise  
That you aren’t there? Your photograph, perhaps,  
Stuck on the kitchen cupboard, and several years.

I used to think that death was some dark thing  
That followed people round. You taught me this,  
In dying, that it’s human, almost shy.

This fraying collar, that hair upon my sleeve –  
Neither has anything to do with you,  
Yet now I’m strangely tender towards them

As though in death you took me by the hand

And turned me to a larger, calmer world  
Where everything is loved for what it is. (Hart, *Peniel* 42)

Unlike the “dark thing” that “followed people round”, recalling the figure of the shadow in many of Hart’s other poems, death appears here as an illuminating teacher. In this, it touches on Buckley’s place in Hart’s life, but there is something in the fact of loss itself that prompts this new discipline of care towards the world. The poem moves from one, vaguely personifying metaphor of death, to another that reveals a generative impulse of personification itself. Imagining death to be “almost human” brings this radical otherness close, yet invoking death as a benign teacher is not merely a characterisation of death, but an expression of how to live. In a way that enlarges his humanity, the speaker’s “strange tenderness” for humble things of the world – a “fraying collar”, a “hair upon [his] sleeve” – is an example of the love that comes of detachment, a renunciation of possession. Through the experience, deeply understood, of one person’s departure, the poem stages an acknowledgement that the freedom from attachment to one thing offers the opportunity to care for all others. The speaker’s passivity, the way he lets himself, like a child, be taken by the hand to be shown this “other world” is a complementing attitude of quiet observation. While the poem appears to achieve its mourning through this ability to accept loss and translate grief to tenderness, the careful suspension of “as though” and the familiar figure of the “other world” go on to qualify this:

I want to stay here, in this other world,  
A moment longer – caught in a ray of light  
With only dustmotes floating up and down,  
  
I want to be at peace, accepting loss,  
And feel you’re now at home, like winter rain  
That falls all day upon its mountain stream; (43)

As in “Next Year”, a sense of homecoming is invoked rather than realised in this poem and, like that poem, in “Winter Rain” an “other” world is held at a distance and offers a view of things from strange angles. Yet this sense of suspension – the repeated “I want”, and the act of being led to “another world” – which could seem to dilute the sense of peace gained by the experience, instead indicates something crucial to it. The experience involves other people.

The speaker's new appreciation of small things of the world is not only a product of the fact of death, of facing otherness in abstract, but is clearly a gift of one particular person. Nor is it a borrowed experience, from which the speaker would be bound to come away disappointed and unchanged. It is an experience that remains alive because of a relationship. When the speaker's new sense of openness and care lead him to recall the hitherto unappreciated "old poem" in which "Tu Fu writes to his dear friend Li Po" it is not only the friendship, and distance, between two poets that corresponds to Hart's situation, but the perpetual relationship of the two through the continuing gifts of their poetry.

The more recent "Rain" traces a similar moment to "Winter Rain", a moment where forty years of familiarity with the world is suspended. This has, as a cause or consequence, a figuring of self that is reminiscent of the poem with which this chapter began:

Late afternoon: rain brushes past the window  
And I feel less alone. I know that, soon,  
It will stop; but now it breaks the day  
In a procession of days, each shining, whole,

And turns stray minutes into someone's life.  
Not mine: in forty years I've never thought  
How strange to hold a cup and watch the rain,  
The tea gone cold, my finger wandering

Over the rim; and for the first time ever  
I feel thick drops of varnish, and take them  
As kindnesses, not meant for me but loved  
As though they were. The Hassidim will tell

About the life to come, how everything  
Will stay the same. That stain upon my chair,  
It must remain; my cup cannot be smooth. (Hart, *Peniel* 158)

As they invoke the Hassidic belief that God lives continuously in our surroundings, these lines affirm McCooey's idea that "Making the world strange is part of Hart's redemptive project for poetry" ("Secret" 112), and yet they also affirm this in a slightly different, though



related way. Paul Kane says that this poem speaks of “a moment of experience as experience” which either “alters the poet’s relationship to himself and therefore alters him” or “reveals a parallel identity”, in both instances commenting on how we “experience our lives” (“Philosopher-Poets” 98–99). This experience of the strangeness of the instant: the imperfect cup and the rain heard and felt in an utterly new context leads to a similar sense of warmth towards the unknown as that felt in “Winter Rain”. The speaker sits “deep inside this April day, / Half-thanking someone I will never meet” – who is himself in the future or in that “other life”. The capacity for experience, and only experience, to change us is implicit in Hart’s insistent questioning of the experience of poetry. McCooey points out that Hart “wants poetry to change us” (“Secret” 119). To extrapolate slightly on these two comments, it is metaphor’s capacity to change our perception of the world that may be at the heart of his poetry’s efforts to change us.

In this way, the purpose of viewing ourselves and our surroundings from this “other world” is quite clearly exemplary in these poems, in the sense that it provides a model or technique of approaching *this* world. In “Winter Rain”, the speaker experiences the death of a loved one by awaking to a world that is somehow new, unfamiliar, and welcome – a world to which he extends care because of its unfamiliarity. In “Rain”, he steps away from himself to glimpse his immediate world “as it is”. Throughout his work, Hart finds places for a “legitimate strangeness”, as he quotes Rene Char, which, he explains, “includes metaphor but is more than metaphor” (McCooey, “Intersecting” 30). Metaphor’s part in this strangeness is animated when the act of renaming, calling something by another’s name, asks us, as Ricoeur says, to suspend our understanding of literal meaning and be open to the new. The force of the “*Aixo era y no era*”, the “it is and it is not” of metaphor (*Rule* 302) projects the reader or listener to a world without the steady borders that names create. It has a corollary in the experience of the world as “not what it is” in Blanchot’s “A Primal Scene?” and, by extension, the testimony of mysticism. Hart’s porthole to this world is the concept, even the very word, “strange”. What is *more* than metaphor in his notion of strangeness, I would venture, is the attitude it inspires. In “Winter Rain”, the equanimity, the calm, generated by this detachment to the things of this world leads to the possible capacity to love each thing within it “for what it is”. A love that is only possible, perhaps, when “what it is” is understood as transient and thus, at its depth, beyond name and form because “it is and it is not”.

McCooey has said that a “recurring feature of Hart’s poems is the interest in acceptance, often figured as calm” (“Opaque” 49–50), and “Calm” is a great force in Hart’s

poems that, while bespeaking silence and solitude, always keeps within it the possibility of relationship. “Fragrance of High Summer Grass” begins:

After being silent for the best part of a long hot day  
The quiet will sometimes deepen  
And the dog hours will slowly stretch themselves

And something inside relaxes too (Hart, *Wicked* 31)

The poem traces the outline of another experience of a dead friend’s presence. The signal “And so it happens, once or twice” again seems to isolate the moment as extraordinary, but casually, in keeping with the mood of the late afternoon. The palpable memory of a friend, who is perhaps David Campbell as this poem follows another about him, “touches” the “moment it withdraws”,

A fragrance of high summer grass:  
And all I know is a great calm that deepens in his name  
And take it as his gift. (31)

The withdrawing presence in this elegy is mirrored by the gift of calm. The two motions are dependent on one another, the withdrawing and the giving, and they say something about “calm” in Hart more generally, as it is a word, like “strange”, that accrues layers of meaning. As McCooey suggests, it is related, or comes of, a sense of acceptance. This is expressed in this poem as the speaker’s accepting of the “gift” of calm signifies acceptance itself, acceptance of things as they are, and the ability to look on loss without wanting to recover it. This is said differently in the poem “The Calm”:

There is a cancer fiddling with its cell of blood  
A butcher’s knife that’s frisking lamb for fat  
And then there is the Calm

All over the world numbers fall off the clocks  
But still there is the Calm (Hart, *Wicked* 48)

In a way typical in Hart, this state of Calm is described by what it is not (and the word itself is often understood as relative to disquiet or agitation). The article implies a presence, however, a stake in the world. “But still there is the Calm” is different to “But still there is Calm” in the way it implies both agency and defined state that one can dwell in for a time and return to, rather than merely an absence of the intricate evils of “a cancer fiddling” and a “butcher’s knife ... frisking”. The complicated sounds of these lines contrast the clear refrain, “then there is the Calm”, and its repetition lulls the poem to its meditative state that does not lead to unconsciousness, but, perhaps surprisingly, more conscious activity:

All night I feel my old loves rotting in my heart  
But mornings bring the Calm

Or else the afternoon.

Some days I will say yes, and then odd days  
It seems that things say yes to me  
And stranger still, there are those times  
When I become a yes

(And they are moments of the Calm). (48)

The increasing strangeness of the times in which the speaker grows more and more accepting – from saying yes to things, to the admittedly “odd days” when things themselves say yes, to the moment of transformation when he becomes a yes – creates a telling parallel. The accepting “yes” increases in potency at the same time as things become more and more strange, suggesting that the detachment represented by strangeness is important to the capacity for “yes” and the ultimate state of accepting things as they are which constitutes “the Calm”.

Interestingly, this “yes” qualifies the sense of passivity inherent in many of Hart’s “Dark” poems. Acceptance and passivity may be states that overlap, and although Hart’s poetry explores the complex nuances of the two, it subtly affirms that acceptance is the more potent influence in both the experience of poetry and the experience of life. “The River”, a poem speaking, this time, of a northern hemisphere river, reveals that the anonymity at the

base of the “I” is a powerfully active force, one that speaks when all else, to recall St John of the Cross and “Dark Angel”, is silent with unknowing:

There is a radiance inside the winter woods  
That calls each soul by name:  
Wind in young boughs, trees shaking off thick coats of snow,

The rattle of frozen rain on a barn roof: all these  
Will help you lose your way  
And find a silence older than the sky  
That makes our being here a murmur only,  
That makes me walk along the river  
Beyond where it has flooded itself

While freezing over, past these dead firs,  
The great assembly of cedars,  
So that I must say, *I do not know why I am here*,

And move around in those few words  
And feel their many needles  
Upon my lips and warm them on my tongue (Hart, *Wicked* 45)

What must be said in this poem, what the speaker is compelled to say, humbles him. The immediacy of the inner radiance of the woods that “call[s] each soul by name” through the sounds of the woods “will help you lose your way” to a place where, through this disorientation, the effects of the ego are lessened. And so it is this same radiance, not the speaker, that is responsible for his walking by the river, and its corollary is the Calm that dwells inside him and prompts the words that must be said: “*I do not know why I am here*”. The words are less words than things he feels at the level of sensation, and they become spaces that he does not own but in which he can silently “move around”:

Though I say nothing, for it is a calm

Beyond the calm I know  
That wants to talk now, after all these years

Of hearing me say *spruce, wind, cloud* and *face*,  
Not knowing the first thing about them all,  
Not knowing the simplest thing,

That every word said well is praise (45)

Words, this poem says, are not only indications of things of the world, of “*spruce, wind, cloud* and *face*” but are indications of a world transformed by thought. The repetition of “thing” in this stanza emphasises that the thing is not what it appears to be on the surface. At some deep level it is in tune with human, or inhuman, intention. The first and simplest property of these words is not something about the physical existence of the thing, but the capacity of language to praise, which follows the pattern of correspondence between the inner radiance of the woods and calm of the speaker, and the poem’s desire to speak of the life of words before they are words:

And someone deep inside me wants to say  
*I am not lost but there are many paths!*

While someone else will whisper back,  
*So you are on the longest quest of all,*  
*The quest for home,* and not appear

Though I have walked along the river now  
These good five miles  
While letting wind push me a little way

And letting thoughts grow slow and weak  
Before I feed them words, for what  
Is told to me this afternoon

Is simply *river*, with each *I* and *it* dissolved,  
A cold truth but a truth indeed (45–46)

As in “Dark Angel” and many other lyrics set by a river, this poem again invokes, briefly, the other who does not appear; its place in an internal dialogue, set among a more general questioning of language’s negotiation of the inner and outer worlds, adds another layer of meaning to this enduring figure. The speaker’s disorientation that places him “*on the longest quest of all*” is expressed again in terms of language, when what he hears, what the woods offer him, “Is simply *river*, with each *I* and *it* dissolved”, and this dissolution cancels the presence of both the speaker and the other by invoking the “elemental life” of the river that was always alongside them. The poem steps away from this realisation – the dispersion of both the speaker and language’s reference to the world does not suggest many ways forward – to begin again. Calling the radiance of the opening by a different name, the poem speaks of

A strange light all the way  
That falls between the words that I would use  
  
When talking of this strangeness or this light  
So that I speak in small, slow breaths  
Of evening, cedar, cone and ice

In words that stick to skin – (Hart, *Wicked* 46)

The poem is one virtuosic sentence, bringing to mind the continuous flow of the river, although the lineation works, as it must, against the continuity of the single sentence, introducing breaks where there are none in the syntax, and often not reinforcing breaks that are represented by the punctuations, while the concluding dash implies its endlessness. The phrase describing the strange light that comes between the words the speaker *would* use (again, the poem stands at a distance from words) to talk of “this strangeness or this light” does not just repeat, but performs the motifs of the inner radiance and calm in its syntax, and, recalling the earlier list of words with their “many needles”, the speaker responds to this irreducible gap by again invoking the physical nature of speech – the “small, slow breaths” that make up words. The poem enacts two forms of discontinuity, then: the discontinuity

necessary to the articulation of any utterance (individual words linked together syntactically), and superimposed on that, another set of discontinuities, of syntax, phrasing and enjambment, that appear at first to have nothing at all to do with the previous set. In one sense, these two different discontinuities may be what the poem itself is talking about as a “strange light” that “falls between the words” – which are these words, here and now, the ones we read. In another way, the focus on what can be felt, the physicality of words as “small, slow breaths” is extended in the figure “words that stick to skin”, suggesting that the immediacy of sensation lessens this gap, sensation being experience itself. Yet the poem as a whole celebrates the split, the discontinuity. It is what allows the radiance of the opening stanzas and the “anonymity at the base of the ‘I’”, or, as the term radiance suggests, the chance of the spiritual, reside in the space it will not allow to close.

“Home” in this poem may be metaphoric for an eternal home, but it also conjures a more immediate one: the structure of this section of *Wicked Heat* places this poem in a context of spiritual and worldly homecoming. It follows a portrait of migratory birds, and precedes a poem set in transit between America and Australia, entitled “Flying Home”. “The River” in its conjuring of the Brisbane River that is present in many of Hart’s poems, as well as the spectre of the withdrawing Angel, speaks to the innermost manifestations of this dislocation and in this it relates to, or even looks towards “Wimmera Songs”, the poem concluding this section that opens with the same motif: “Late in the night up north, in that hard land past Nhill”...

You see a radiance  
Before the sun begins to climb a wide gray sky  
And spill across the wilderness;  
  
And then the soul rejoices, remembering that light  
Over burnt grass  
That utters nothing you can say  
  
But gives you life to act it out. (Hart, *Wicked* 57)

These songs are set uneasily in the Australian desert – the speaker still speaks of “the wilderness” which recalls the northern hemisphere of the preceding poems – but this uneasiness is, perhaps, a way of being faithful to Australian experience. Their sense of

silence is deeply evocative of their setting, and of the setting's effect on the self. The radiance does not draw reality down to words but offers life itself, with an imperative to act it out. The communicating silence continues in the songs' conclusion:

The stranger we call Being  
makes patterns in wheatfields before dawn,  
And iron tanks, set deep in earth,  
Say the few simple things that must be heard

~

And yet the radiance  
Slips back into the other world, leaving a frail light  
Around young redgums by the river.

Stretch out upon this yellow grass  
And listen to a blue wren  
And learn its lesson:

Think like a cloud

Go where clouds go. (58)

The figure of "The stranger we call Being", who recalls all of Hart's "Dark Ones", is a stranger in its personification of strangeness, a signal that Being is only being insofar as it is a stranger. A stranger in that being is known to us only as something separate from meaning, and through this divergence points towards ways of living in the world that come of a detached acceptance of things as they are: a stranger's gaze. To look at this another way, we could say that "The stranger we call Being" is the ultimate personification, where personification in general answers to this ability of poetry to hold being and meaning together. Taken by itself, this might run the risk of falling perpetually through self-reference, but what it testifies to is a way of apprehending life, and therefore living, that holds care for the self and care of the other in a balance that is only available through a deep attentiveness. This attentiveness is one that characterises both poetry and the ethical life.

The withdrawing radiance in this poem leaves a world touched by the transformative effects of deep, silent attentiveness. What remains is not merely image but instruction. The



“other world” to which the light slips away leaves its mark by demanding a certain attitude towards the present one. The detachment of clouds, with their constant change, dissolution and new shapes, their drifting at a height, is the reader’s lesson. This abiding figure of the “other world” awakens us to the realisation that the world of appearances we encounter every day is only partially true and the way to live with this realisation is with Calm. It is Hart’s personal movement towards the phenomenological reduction, which is the vigil that uncovers the radiance of world.

The reduction, which Hart speaks of in that essay in the same breath as recalling Shelley, “poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world and makes the familiar to be as not familiar” (qtd. in Hart 286–87), characterises, for Hart, the attentiveness and suspension of conditioned perspective necessary to poetry, and, more specifically, to understanding metaphor, and yet, generally and originally, it is a characterisation of the philosophical life. The connections between the writing and reading of poems, the poet’s gift of metaphor and a life lived carefully bind poetry, philosophy and experience at the generative depth of Hart’s work. As Shelley continues to speak of the theme of metaphor in his “Defence”: “The great secret of morals is Love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own” (681). This practice of exposure that relates to the way metaphor “awakens and enlarges the mind itself...by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought” (681) corresponds to Hart’s explanations of the term “experience” that look back to its root *peri*, meaning trial or danger or risk. It is a particular sort of risk that is at the heart of his understanding of experience and what makes this word so crucial to him. As he says to Spinks in regard to moments of transcendence in our lives, transcendence which is real and common, “this movement of unrest is other than us”, “it comes at the crumbling edge of an experience, and challenges us to take a great risk – to love more radically – and as a part of this to entrust ourselves to a mystery we cannot name” (13). Taking this risk of loving more radically is a task embedded in poetry and philosophy and the ways of life which sustain and inspire both. It is a practice, an exposure, that necessitates transformation; as the poem “To Christ Our Lord” concludes, Hart’s poems say continually, and ask readers to repeat, “I cannot remain the way I am” (*The Lines of the Hand* 6). Implicit in the various techniques and motifs this chapter has explored is the conviction that direct experience is the only way of effecting this transformation. Yet a great qualification of the theme of experience in Hart is that it is not in any sense direct or uncomplicated. The various manifestations of indirection in Hart’s poems acknowledge that *not* knowing is necessary to

the *experience* of knowing. As Antonio Porchia, one of Hart's favourite poets, writes: "The mystery brings peace to my eyes, not blindness" (23). The mystery, begun in the poem, is only witnessed in the self. The peace that the mystery brings is a place to begin living.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Robert Gray: “*The preservation of appearances*”

Robert Gray is a close observer of the experience of common life, of the daily appearance of the world; the closest, perhaps, this country has. Speaking of our eventual queuing in the underworld in the poem “The Drift of Things”, his fullest philosophical statement, he says that when arriving at the banks of Lethe we will bring with us “not only faces, but things we have known ... the stance of grass at the foot of palings / one storm-lit afternoon”:

We will see the world as a great forest  
and undergrowth of things that is solemn  
and remote, and as arduous, impassive,  
as the land that rises before us there.  
Things were prophetic of such mystery:  
They were always the flowerings of Hades. (Gray, *Cumulus* 264)

Yet in Gray’s perspective there is no afterlife. Here, the two worlds are compared to emphasise the importance of the present one. The hinge of this comparison is the thing, which, in Gray’s work – much like that of Rilke and William Carlos Williams, poets he deeply admires – represents the particulars of everyday reality that deserve attentiveness and value. They are “the flowering of Hades” because they will pass, and because the love of these things of the physical world is inspired by a desire to preserve them in the face of the decay inherent in existence itself. How to best express this reverence for the ever-changing particular, ordinary present is a continuous question in Gray’s poetry, as his correction in the next stanza suggests:

But this is metaphor. No one endures.  
What strikes us most about things is their strangeness,  
and how to speak of that, but through metaphor?  
In seeing things now, it’s as if they’re lost  
already. They’ve seemed to me a pathos,

whether me calmly or in exultance.

Things pass us along the edge of darkness,  
are glimpsed from highways, changing, as we're changed. (264)

Unlike Hart, Gray does not use metaphor frequently. Yet metaphor is an atmosphere, a type of vision in his work, and this is something I will revisit throughout the chapter. While his poems do return to similar situations and landscapes – train travel, the rain, the New South Wales North Coast – he does not share with Hart an ever circling catalogue of symbols to express the world's strangeness. Gray's intrinsic technique for expressing his similar feeling for this strangeness is simile, which he develops in his poems to the point where we might say simile is its own language, and which, in many ways, some of which this chapter will explore, is one with even more potent capacities for reflecting the changing world that is changing as *we're* changed and the glimpsed, glancing relationship between the two. As Alan Gould has said:

Simile is Gray's most characteristic descriptive instrument, and in using it so frequently he ushers into his poems the ancient aspect of simile, its implication that the world can be experienced intensely both as many and as one simultaneously...we gain a sense in Gray's poems of a world of unlimited correspondences between things ... simile is circuitry. (65)

One of the implications of this circuitry is empathy. In an early essay and defence of poetry, "Poetry and Living: An Evaluation of the American Poetic Tradition", Gray speaks extensively about the ethical properties of the imaginative descriptiveness that drives so much of his work. In a preface to a discussion of his favourite American masters – William Carlos Williams, Walt Whitman and Charles Reznikoff – he quotes the Polish poet Tadeuz Roszewicz: "I want [my poetry] to help...I want to give words that can be turned into practice" (qtd. in "Poetry and Living" 118). Gray believes poetry can have an ethical function without having a didactic or moral one: "both ethics and poetry are the same", he says, "if they are registered as not dogma, but as the products of responsiveness, of empathy" (118). And invoking Heidegger, he believes, or believed then, that the best model for the relationship between poet and audience is one of care (118). The question that this essay immediately raises is how this particular belief in the ethical function of poetry aligns with Gray's own work, in which so much importance is placed on a cool, observing eye (as many

of his commentators have explored), and a picture of a world, given through the often dazzling light of his visual similes, that may or may not be interested in us.

Yet Gray's poetic is subtler than this. He often builds his poems with description, with visual simile, and they end, frequently, with implied or expressed statements that are revelatory, ethical, and often aphoristic. These endings, which he has called "benignly sententious" (Gray), arise from the descriptions of the poem with a quality of release or exhalation. Though the actual paths that poetry takes from its writer to its reader are far more indirect, Gray's aphoristic conclusions are, I am suggesting, "sententiously" infused with the desire, which may or may not have effect, to spark attentiveness. The performative element of ethics in his poetry is largely found here, negotiated subtly through his chosen language of image and simile. His aphoristic statements often reflect his interest in Buddhism, demonstrating a way of life and set of aesthetic and ethical principles that Gray pursues both practically and theoretically. These principles act as a nexus for his focus on the thing, what he has called "the preservation of appearances", and the development, in his work, of attentiveness and equanimity. In this chapter I argue that Gray's project of questioning our ability to respond to daily experience ethically is expressed structurally in his poems, which are oriented towards a particular literary experience through their changing balance of simile and aphorism. Experience, Gray's poetry suggests, is relationship; it is the nexus between the abstract and bodily, the mental and physical, and it is analogous to the thing and the attentiveness it inspires and necessitates.

Gray has a profound but problematic love of nature. We live with nature in varying degrees of separateness and continuity and its cruelty, indifference and our dissatisfaction as well as reverence for it is bound to the above considerations. It is the field from which many conclusions about human beings are drawn, and yet it is already inside the faculty that draws the conclusions. In discussing Gray's focus on nature, I draw on the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey in this chapter, specifically his *Art as Experience* and *Experience and Nature*, the latter being among the works Gray lists that have influenced him most (Gray). In the introduction to *Experience and Nature*, Dewey explains that

commonplaces prove that experience is *of* as well as *in* nature. It is not experience which is experienced, but nature – stones, plants, animals, diseases, health, temperature, electricity, and so on. Things interacting in certain ways *are* experience; they are not what is experienced. Linked in certain other ways with another natural

object – the human organism – they are *how* things are experienced as well. Experience thus reaches down into nature; it has depth. It also has breadth and to an indefinitely elastic extent. It stretches. That stretch constitutes inference. (4a–1)

Dewey illustrates how the interaction, the relationship, inherent in experience unfolds in the contemplation of nature. Nature is both the object and the process, and their dynamic reciprocity is experience. Moreover, he also ventures an understanding of the ethical dimension of this relationship that corresponds closely to Gray’s own feelings:

If experience actually presents esthetic and moral traits, then these traits may also be supposed to reach down into nature, and to testify to something that belongs to nature as truly as does the mechanical structure attributed to it in physical science. (24)

Nature is the primary human experience, Gray’s body of work suggests, and one whose aesthetic expression is almost invariably tied to ethical comment. One of his most recent poems, “Among the Mountains of Guang-xi Province, in Southern China”, bears witness to his equivocal, questioning perspective on nature and the role that simile plays within it.

I had been wading for a long time in the sands of the world  
and was buffeted by its fiery winds,  
then I found myself carried on a bamboo raft (I am speaking literally now)  
poled by a boatman on the Li River.

A guest in Beijing at the Central Academy of Arts,  
brought to the countryside,  
I’d wandered out alone. A sheen on the night and across the ranks of water,  
and close mountains that joined moonlit earth and sky. (Gray, *Cumulus* 288)

This poem is one that plays on the structures of eternity and decay as they manifest in the human, but especially natural worlds. It begins in the vein of what Gary Catalano calls Gray’s “long, discursive” style (“Hymns” 54), as opposed to his more condensed, formally constrained poems that closely observe nature; although this poem, in a way typical of the style that emerges within *Nameless Earth*, in which it first appeared, does not adhere completely to that categorisation, which is more apparent in Grey’s earlier work. “Among the

Mountains of Guang-xi Province” combines the personal experience and the observation of nature, which those poems often keep more separate. The second of the stanzas quoted above subtly suggests this: the speaker’s place in the scene is emphasised in the enjambments of the first sentence, making prominent the phrase “I’d wandered out alone”, and when the next sentence begins by suggesting a similar structure to the first, the fact it turns out to be a purely descriptive statement is effectively disorienting.

“I am speaking literally now” is a slightly tongue-in-cheek way of alerting us to the relationship of simile and observed “fact” within the poem. The speaker goes on, after being “exalted” by the thought that this landscape is the same “as the painter Shi Tao had known it”:

The mountain’s outlines were crowded one behind another  
and seemed a wild loosening of the brush,  
a switchback scrubbing, rounded or angular,  
until the last fibres has been used up, again and again.

Those narrow blue mountains make endless configurations.  
They are by far the main crop the province bears.  
Zhuang Zu said that a twisted tree is not useful  
and so it can survive for a thousand years. (Gray, *Cumulus* 288)

We are given a description of the mountains in painterly terms, which alerts us to the ambiguous nature of the last comment: is this scene the same as Shi Tao had known it, or is it that we have been able to know it because of him? Representation and interpretation remain in the foreground throughout the poem’s commentary on eternity, decay and its causes. The “last fibres” that are “used up, again and again” create a powerful image that extends the painting metaphor to offer a different perspective on the mountains” “endless configurations” and the tree that survives perpetually through indifference. And, after this, a list of similes, an attempt to “convey the strangeness of the region”, can never wholly communicate the speaker’s experience: “I thought of migrating whales that break together, almost upright, out of the sea. / That suggests their power, but not their stillness” (288–89). Other images enlisted are “tall-hatted mushrooms”, “veiled women, among a laden caravan”, “a blackened cathedral” and “the beauty of a carnivore’s jaw-bone” (289).

The speaker describes a very different scene in the stanzas to follow: he visits “the village of Xin Ping”

and found there drabness and squalor, a terrible indifference and listlessness.  
Worst of all, the poverty in people’s faces,  
the smallness of those lives. Everything was the colour of dust and of smoke. (Gray,  
*Cumulus* 289)

Encountering an “indifference” of another sort, the speaker draws a connection between this and the version witnessed in his natural surrounds. “We who’d alighted there, for a few days”, he goes on:

could love nature because of its indifference, and found our freedom in that.  
To do so, one must be secure. The same type of mountains were at Xin Ping  
but I saw in them the sadness of eternal things. (289)

“Thing” is an important word in the final line, and the context of Gray’s work as a whole precludes a casual reading of it. Nothing is “eternal” in his world-view, and so the contradictory combination of “eternal things” hints at the suffering of illusion, specifically the illusion of eternity within a reality of transience, though pointing towards a more general sadness where things themselves are markers of that reality. The human disinterestedness that helps “useless” things to survive, Gray says, also has the potential to tolerate human poverty. The gaze of the observing guest, who temporarily moves outside of their “secure” world, can value the disruption this brings to it as freedom, can look in awe on a scene conjured as reminiscent of the Romantic sublime and rejoices in that freedom from self. But to those whose poverty denies them a similar sense of self to the one the speaker enjoys – suggested in the monotony of colour, the “smallness of those lives” – such indifference, both the indifference of nature and the complacency of humans, is anything but liberating. The ethical statement arises from the connection between these two, and by the similes drawn by the “free” gaze of the poet.

Not all of Gray’s poems move towards topical ethical or socially aware observations and indictments – although this poem is indicative of the style of the part of his work that does. A poem from earlier in *Nameless Earth*, “Voyages”, is one of Gray’s more ecliptic. It corresponds to “Among the Mountains of Guang-xi”, and much of his work, in the way it is



driven by alternating description and statement, although here in a more condensed, more noticeably aphoristic style:

A ketch in the sleet, the night's  
cantilever.

A small city that's seen  
on the coastline

of Canada,  
as dominoes. (Gray, *Nameless* 69)

The first image sets up this poem's interest in balance and counterweight, an interest that soon becomes attuned to a subtler awareness of mental tension and equilibrium. These similes, descriptions of finite moments in the world, are a part of the philosophy expressed in this poem that sees the world and ourselves within it as parts of a continually changing balance – where not only the things but the nature of the thing, the very distinction between what is seen, heard, and felt, is unclear and ultimately arbitrary:

The supposedly “unknown  
origin

of sensations” always differs,  
it's everywhere unique;

so that sensations here,  
nuances,

are qualities there –  
the point is

this must be accurate.  
Which is all we know

or need to. There are in the world  
infinite degrees. (69)

What is even harder to understand than this poem's abstract statements about the nature of mind and matter is the way they correspond to the pointillistic observations of faraway places – Canada is joined by the Amazon later in the poem. The relationship between the two is built on the similar brevity and directness of their expression. Lines from “The Drift of Things” might help explain some of the assumptions guiding these ideas. Through them, it is apparent that Gray shares with most Buddhist thought an idea of consciousness as separate across the senses and particular to each, though interdependent. He says:

Our consciousness if like a fine spotlight  
that's focused on just one place at a time:  
we notice when we hear that we don't see –  
that there's ear-consciousness, eye-consciousness,  
and so on, interchanging very fast.  
Hearing rain, we don't feel the wooden chair,  
and in thinking we close out stimuli.  
What is the “knower” but a passing thought  
that's counted there amongst experience? (Gray, *Cumulus* 262)

This is Gray in his didactic mode. He describes what is a very complex aspect of the human mind both, it seems, from his own experience and from a great deal of research, both practical and theoretical, into the Buddha's teachings. This “interchanging” of one specific sense-consciousness and another has a more palpable and poetic expression in those of Gray's poems, such as “Voyage”, that offer interchanging visual, aural and tactile imagery without the philosophical commentary.

This understanding of the workings of consciousness offers one way of understanding how “sensations” here, can be “nuances” there, and it is an understanding which ultimately corresponds to the poem's own aphoristic statement, which comes a little before the end:

We can find

no way because

outside is unstable, the same

as within us –  
in all the worlds

there is no escape from sorrow. (Gray, *Nameless* 69)

There is no destination to this “voyage”. At least not one within the framework of “all the worlds”. These lines colour the previous ones; we can now read the rain’s “abrasions” and the precariousness of the city as “dominoes” as evincing the same unsettled world where suffering reigns, both within us and without. “There are screens / upon screens”, he goes on, “coils and thorns, / the satin // underwear of orchids” and, finally:

oh the marvellous  
  
anxiety  
of the hummingbirds. (69)

The precision and delicacy of Gray’s description here highlights the subtle yet pervading presence of this suffering and the irony of our “marvellous” ignorance of it. And instead of escape what is embodied in this poem’s carefully structured duality and balance is perhaps a type of equanimity. The poem enacts the subtle correspondence between the thing and our perception of it, of the seeing and what is seen, and of the awareness of the senses and of sensation that are the point of meeting between mind and object. The two-line stanzas suggest this, and within the poem simile itself is revealed as a type of instability, and aphorism as its grounding “counterweight”.

To some extent, the concept of a voyage is a model for Gray’s poetry. As a definitive part of his biography, travel certainly forms the subject matter of many of his poems. The first poem in what Gray now regards as his first collection, *Creekwater Journal*, is entitled “Journey: the North Coast”; “Among the Mountains of Guang-xi” is another example, and there are many others. In a subtler way, and again one expressed in that poem, the poem’s progression from beginning to end, through imagery, observation and aphorism, is often accompanied by a progression through place. It is typical for Gray’s speaker to be travelling,

often on foot or by train and as readers we observe what he observes; the poem's similes are woven through movement. These situations prompt a way of seeing, of experiencing (and occasionally a way of reading, as I will explore later in regard to "Dharma Vehicle"). The particular attentiveness sparked by travel is importantly connected, I think, to Gray's celebration of the thing, and his "preservation of appearances" and is something I will discuss shortly. It also influences and interacts with the way nature is represented in his work.

"The Creek", though revisiting a familiar, and probably local, place, exemplifies the way many of Gray's poems move with the speaker through space:

The slow effervescence of wind-lifted rain  
on knuckle and cheekbone  
a sweet  
occasional prickling  
that is met while I walk above the creek, having come down a lane  
and out to the back  
of the long yards at the edge of town  
a fragile assault  
in the steamy afternoon.

The red earth's compacted in the high creek bank  
baked tight  
and a rope swing is looped  
among the trees rising from below me that incline  
through the element of ointment.  
These tapering swamp oaks are each drawn overhead  
like a splinter that's festered.  
The grass on top of the bank leads back to the plank  
palisades  
above one of which there perches a folded and dove-breasted  
blue smoke  
nested in the triple-ply of summer air. (Gray, *Cumulus* 303)

The speaker's walking is in parenthesis here; descriptions of the rain and heat have precedence and are something "met" as he walks on paths in the outskirts of town. His

movements are given to us with the same sort of precise detail that characterises his description of what he finds as he nears the creek, as if he is bent on capturing as much reality of that moment from its different angles. “The grass on top of the bank leads back to the plank / palisades”, for example, is a line as open and bare (despite its alliteration and rhyme) as the aphoristic instructions in Gray’s more didactic poems. This is not to say there is no poetry here: the sensual and visual detail of these lines communicate so effectively, suggestively influencing each other so that the alternating sense impressions reflect Gray’s understanding of the discrete and changing “eye-consciousness”, “ear-consciousness” and so on.

The contrasts of the first two stanzas herald the deeper contrasts this poem explores. The “steamy afternoon” and the “red earth” “baked tight” are two very different dimensions of the same area – or, rather, an area that is changing with his wandering. The lightness of the “sweet”, “wind-lifted rain” transforms to a far heavier “element / of ointment” as he nears the creek, the swamp oaks “like a splinter that’s festered” are somehow aligned with the alternate reality of the nearby town:

And the green fretwork of a *Monstera deliciosa* plant  
against the palings  
is Matissean  
in this unstylish small town, in the sleeping quarters  
of the hinterland –  
it seems the one reminder of *luxe, calme et volupté*  
when our inheritance  
is an Irish Sunday. (Gray, *Cumulus* 303)

Interestingly, and typically for Gray, the divisions in this poem are not set up clearly along the lines of town and creek – certainly the *Monstera deliciosa* is opposed to an “Irish Sunday”; Matisse’s painting *luxe, calme et volupté* borrows its title from Baudelaire’s “L’Invitation au voyage”, “There, all is order and beauty, / Luxury, peace, and pleasure”. Nature – remembering that nature includes the human, lives inside the human and everything it creates – has its own ambivalence here, although perhaps more mystery: the atmosphere is darker in the next section, which describes the creek, on the first glimpse of water, as “the secret creek in khaki that beats / like a vein at the throat / of someone / who’s lying hidden”. The linear imagery continues as the “vein” comes to life in memory:

Here from an open place I once saw a slick naked black snake  
quick  
switchback swimming  
through all of its two metres  
along the creek, encompassing  
it in swathes – (304)

But the more strongly totemic animal of this poem is the egret the speaker encounters at that moment. It is introduced in a string of similes which emphasise that its fluid lines recall the creek, vein and snake: “shapely and tapering as an amulet”, “compact / as though smoothed between the hands”, and the neck “suggests a loose / length of vine / sharply trimmed off”. Its “seemingly ineffectual, / pensive” appearance prompts the thought:

One can imagine  
as its claim that to pick the excess  
from small life  
is an honourable  
scheme. It steps out of the stillness and stands  
still again  
and blue  
like backyard smoke,  
among the aimless insects of the sunlit rain. (305)

Stuart Cooke, in his essay on approaches to place in Australian literature, “Eventing: Wandering Through the Physiology of Australian Narrative”, makes the interesting remark that “Gray’s landscapes seem to *glow* after the speakers have moved through them” (120). Cooke argues that Gray is among a small group of Australian writers who have a “nomadic” voice, a voice that allows the places his poetry touches to shine as they are, evading the colonising impulse. One of the ways I suggest Gray achieves this is through the independence of the animals in some of his poems. Here, the egret, much like a fox in another recent travelling poem, “In the Mallee” (*Cumulus* 241–44), lives in the poem with an aura of

completeness. The egret is watched by the poem, achieving its own life while also acting as symbol, a harbinger of the poem's concluding comparison. "To pick the excess / from small life / is an honourable / scheme" the speaker imagines as its claim, and the recollection of the earlier part of the poem in its stillness "like backyard smoke" and its place among the "sunlit rain" suggests that there is a comment here about the town itself. Nature's cruelty is as much a part of this poem as its beauty but the more interesting collusion is between the town and the environment of the creek, imagined as alternate worlds, and yet speaking to each other through resonating similes. The poem's focus on precision and aimlessness, brought together here in the egret whose delicate body, and delicate violence, is at odds with the "aimless insects". It brings to mind a phrase in "After Heraclitus": "The human is excess / of consciousness" (Gray, *Cumulus* 230), a paradox of limits and the exceeding of them that seems to suggest a rather sinister perspective of this town, or towns more generally.

The contrasts here are created by a pervasive aspect of Gray's work: his poems encourage, even require, readers to draw pictures in their minds as the poem builds. Gray is an artist and an art critic and his most recent collection *Cumulus* concludes with a number of his drawings as he felt he "could not attempt a definitive book of my work without at least a small selection" (ix). In "The Creek", Gray's usual focus on the visual in his similes and description is emphasised by the poem's strong vertical and horizontal axes, and, moreover, what is interesting about this poem is that this painterly aspect, a painterly technique of reading, corresponds to the speaker's line of walking. Cooke's general thesis aligns writing with ways of moving through country – the potential for Australian writing to speak with a "nomadic" voice which acknowledges our bodies" "lived experiences" in space (119). In quite a different approach to writing this continent's natural spaces, Tredinnick in his essay "Under the Mountains and Beside a Creek: Robert Gray and Shepherding Antipodean Being" suggests that Gray's pastoral sensibility is not as necessarily at odds with nomadism as the term would suggest:

In his poetry, the real word – true humanity, true society, and true poetry – is naturally constructed. We are, in all our folly and poverty and brilliance, set down within a wide, old, long field of truth – it is the world as it was before and will be after us; it is the world as it manifests in us. Nature in that large sense, in all its mystery, ruin, and transcendence. (125)

It is in the way Gray cares for things, Tredinnick is saying here, and repeats later in the article, that he is a pastoral poet (132). This is a liberating rather than constraining way of writing about the world. Above all he is a “poet of things and thingness...Nature is not a retreat, a resort, for him – at least it is that less and less. Nature is just what is. And nature is *everything*” (132). Most interestingly, he alerts us to the impermanent aspect of nature, so significant to Gray. “And just what nature’s nature is goes on changing and eluding him” he says, “and changing him by virtue of his sustained sensuous and mindful attention” (132). This relationship, between his descriptions and feeling for nature and the priority of the thing in his work, reaches down to the depth of Gray’s poetic.

“The Garden Shed” is a poem in which its wide significance can be felt. Another travelling poem of sorts, it is set in memory when, as a ten to thirteen-year-old boy Gray was sent to his widowed grandmother’s property. Sent there for company, the speaker explains, “I kept a watch”:

But after school I used to wander  
in the scrub behind that big-verandahed,  
shabby, dislocated bungalow, beyond her call  
and the other stragglings houses  
at the town’s edge; and I saw how  
  
once in the country the train began  
wildly careering, with its horn  
braying out, again and again. (Gray, *New Selected* 166)

The untamed surroundings of the town, embodied in the “wildly careering” train, are a prelude to the movement toward inwardness the poem goes on to trace. Even as he approaches his late Grandfather’s garden shed itself, having occasionally been “allowed a key”, the speaker needs to move through the minefield of a “long, rubbishy yard” to its door:

I let myself in. There, I’d rediscover  
each chisel, peculiar saws, the claw  
and ballpein hammers, his screwdrivers,  
brace-and-bits, punches, spanners, and  
a regal, African paint brush array (166)



They were things “spiky, knobbed, sharp or frayed / like those raced among, beyond the fence, / out in the heath”, but now inside, and glowing with new significance. Their function is not of any interest to the eyes and hands who are exploring them; “it would have been sacrilege for me / to think them useable”, he says, suggesting the aura that surrounds these objects is as fragile as it is powerful for the young observer. What he gazes on within the shed is the world slowly being transformed into poetry. In being so transformed, these representative things are losing their status as useable garden implements and taking on a life of the mind, a life *in* the mind. This becomes more overt when he describes the differing lengths of the “stacks of bevelled, collected timber / slung overhead” as having meaning, “like poetry-shapes to be read / someday in our maroon leather Milton”. The speaker is also drawn down to an attentiveness to the world outside, the state of awareness attained in the presence of the things of the garden shed expanding now, to everything the mind encounters:

In the quiet

I could hear the neighbour’s hens creak  
just outside, or washing flap,  
or a car somewhere, changing gear.

And I’ve always wanted to live again  
at the level where one lived when  
looking at, or listening to, those things:  
in the immense presence of that wordless  
questioning. (168)

In approaching these things as they are, in the presence of the things as themselves and not expecting anything else of them (to be “useful” in a practical sense, for example, or using them as metaphors) the speaker encounters something greater, something that comes as close as Gray allows himself to metaphor. This “wordless questioning” summons that aspect of his writing that I spoke of before as a type of metaphoric vision. Watching these things, he felt himself “lying alone / out on a hillslope”; he could hear, he goes on, “coming through things cast-up about there / a far roaring, of their endless sea” (169). And in response, he himself was

somehow looking back –

or being looked though, about to be lost –  
to my grandfather and I, who were only  
bubbles of a moment, amid this whirling  
away. (Gray, *New Selected* 169)

In this approach to metaphor, where the poet is “somehow looking back” to allow a vision of the ocean to describe the deep instability of life – a recognition given to him by his attentiveness to things – its power is so immense that it begins to wash away the illusion of the self’s substantiality. This is suggested in his being “about to be lost” and by the transience of their being mere “bubbles of a moment” in a greater “whirling away”, but moreover by the wider apprehensions of nature that are to follow. Of the garden shed, he says

I first noticed the frankness  
of nature’s appropriations there:  
  
that it’s all effectiveness, inter-response;  
all mutuality and possibilities;  
just things happening among themselves.  
Things creating each other. And we  
are only the expressions of circumstance,  
  
of its tensions. (169)

The pervasive transience of life: the illuminating, experienced moment of insight into this profound truth spirals from his awareness of a person’s death – his Grandfather’s – towards an awareness of the momentary deaths that create existence itself. And with this awareness comes another. This constant change is the founder of “possibilities”, and we are all, people as well as things, subject entirely to these laws. Gray places the self in a passive though ultimately freeing position here, as we are, like the things of the shed, nothing more than “expressions of circumstance” and, so unencumbered, allowed a remarkable equanimity:

Nothing belongs to any

separate thing. It was there I began  
to understand: the less we think we are  
the more we bear; and someone who sees  
he is nothing, lightly will bear it all. (169)

This conclusion may be Gray's ultimate expression of the ethical life. The aphorism comes at the end of a poem whose similes draw connections between the poetry of things and poetry itself, that is, between the awareness of things as they are and the translation of this awareness into poetry shapes. In this, Gray argues, through the lens of the thing, that this awareness of the thing as it is, is an awareness that, for him, engenders poetry and encourages a life lived attentively, with equanimity and care.

In a way that recalls the poem of Kevin Hart's I discussed at the beginning of the last chapter, "A Garden Shed" could be read as one of those problematic moments of experience – a coming of age, and the beginning of a world-view and interest in the Buddha and the later manifestations of his teachings. I will discuss later how Dewey constructs the idea of "an experience" as closely aligned with the experience of art. In regard to the specific realisations of "A Garden Shed", its arguments on transience, mutuality, understanding the self as a creation of the "tensions" between this "inter-response" and the ethical beauty that comes of this understanding recall strongly Gray's commitment to Buddhism, or more specifically the Buddhism that began in the teachings' travels to China and later Japan. Such descriptions and even the word "Buddhism" itself are necessary distortions, however, as Gray points out in "To the Master, Dogen Zenji" and more subtly and pervasively throughout his work. "Ideas / from reading, from people, from a personal bias", Dogen says, "toss them all out 'discolourations'" (*Cumulus* 26). The avoidance of this sort of categorisation, even while retaining at times his didactic voice, defines Gray's most comprehensive journey into what the teachings of the "old masters" mean to him, and how they are to be understood within his immediate surroundings.<sup>15</sup> The long poem "Dharma Vehicle" draws fine lines of correspondence between the natural, Australian, world in which the speaker, monk-like, exposes himself by simple, sparse living, to the written words of "those old Chinese / who sought the right way to live" (Gray, *Cumulus* 55), as well as to Western philosophers who

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<sup>15</sup> Gray negotiates the old paradox of the student turning to the "old masters" who would then encourage discarding their advice, by seeking to understanding their teachings by observing them within his present landscape.

sought the same and often came up with similar answers, and to his own questioning, suffering self to which this all needs to be reconciled and tested upon.

Hart has written about this poem recently, comparing it to T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* as an example of a very different kind of religious poem. He concludes:

“Dharma Vehicle” does not propose to revive the feeling needed for someone to be a Buddhist; rather, it seeks to present a pristine feeling for nature. Buddhism as a system of beliefs and practices drops out of consideration—the poet does not seek a startling Enlightenment, like “the bottom falling out / of the washtub” (60), or gain it at the end of the poem—and only what Buddhism points to is accepted. The poem expiates its own apparent concern with “religion”; it is an example of the “religion of no-religion”. (“Fields of Dharma” 282)

“What Buddhism points to” is enacted in the structure of “Dharma Vehicle”, as themes of transience and interconnectedness inform the appearance of this “pristine feeling for nature”. The long poem is divided into small sections in which quotations of various monks and philosophers are interwoven with observations of the natural beauty of his surrounds and his own existential philosophising. The appearances of the natural world around him are glimpsed, for us, almost as a lesson in how to see (to borrow a phrase from Rilke's *Malte Laurids Brigge*), or how to see through the lens of the teachings of “those old Chinese”, and ultimately, as Hart suggests, how to “feel”. Camping in a “fibro shack / fishermen use –”, his surroundings are delicately described:

Like banners raised,  
all these eucalyptus saplings –  
the jostling trees,  
fringed, on poles.

A sea-breeze  
over the grass headland, where fallen, white  
branches swim;  
leaves here  
are shaken all the time,  
shoes that run

on stone.

My bed

a pile of cut fern. (Gray, *Cumulus* 54)

These sparse lines leave much space and stillness behind them. Gray prepares his readers for the lessons of contemplation that are to come, as well as the fruits of that contemplation in his awareness of the transience and insubstantiality of the world around him. His use of enjambment (“where fallen, white / branches swim”) leaves many lines open to possibility, as unfixed and wavering as, the speaker describes later, the paperbarks that “climb / slowly, / and are spreading out, like incense-smoke”. If enjambment leaves lines able to drift for a moment in readers’ minds, what threads these observations together is a subtle use of rhyme. Here, “breeze” and “trees”, the visual recollection in “swim” and “time” and the concluding “stone” and “fern” could be read to suggest the interdependence and causality in Dharma teachings just as his use of enjambment reflects its emphasis on transience. The result is disorienting yet stabilising, as are the often surprising metaphors (“shoes that run / on stone”), and makes the mind receptive to the thoughts to come:

I read beneath the trees all day,  
caught-up  
with those old Chinese  
who sought the right way to live, and found  
one must adapt to nature,  
to what is outside our egotism;  
who loved this earth. (55)

After quoting Lucretius and commenting on Buddhism in India as “insensible” to the world, the speaker turns to “Buddhism’s arrival in China, / by the T’ang, / in the time of Hui-neng”, and it is clearly in its Chinese interpretation that the Buddha’s teaching finally accords with his own love of nature, of “this earth”. Thinking of this tradition, he says, “There is the Other Shore / It is here”.

How to see it is the project of the rest of the poem. Liberating the mind to witness the perfection of exactly what is here, seeing within the present world the Other Shore, necessitates a difficult mental discipline: “to know pleasure as pleasure / and pain as pain /

and to keep the mind free from all attachment” and an ability to see the world as it is – only as it is. “It was the monk / Fa Ch’an-ang, in China, / dying,” the speaker says, going to bed himself, “heard a squirrel screech / out on the moon-wet tile, and who told them / ‘It’s only this” (Gray, *Cumulus* 57). While comprehending that “it’s only this” seems possible in the still contemplation of natural beauty, it is the inner world where it must also be observed and where its contemplation is much more fraught:

How shall one continue  
to confront every morning  
the same face in the mirror? (57)

The opening of the second section begins a pattern of alternating between descriptions of the Buddha and his Chinese interpretations and observations of himself and his surroundings that continues for the duration of the poem. This section constitutes a harsh analysis of the speaker’s self, “Anxiously peering, / demanding – / such intolerable self pity”, with an insistent feeling of wanting to remove himself from it:

I do not want to be this sort of cripple  
in the world any longer;  
not for any of my excuses for being  
  
to remain,  
not for any of my possibilities.  
I do not want to be what I am. (58)

This sense of disgust – and it is a palpable disgust – with his present self, could be understood superficially to be participating in a fantasy of escapism with which Buddhist teachings of the insubstantiality of self possibly collude. Certainly he suggests he wants a life of immediate experience without the filtering self (a sort of Keatsian “life of sensations rather than thoughts”, although more ascetic), but this desire is more than another manifestation of that “intolerable self-pity”. It is aware of others: he says despondently of his face that it “eats up other people”, and he isolates the cause of suffering so clearly in himself, and by implication the self in abstract, that he penetrates a core theme in the Buddha’s teaching. It is the illusion of the ego that creates our deepest despair. Wanting to be free of this suffering, he says, “is

something more basic than / the calculations of thought”, it is more basic than even his own thoughts about the self. In its appeal to the lessons of experience rather than analysis, that it is possible to “elude the mind”, the speaker’s desire widens to address not only his own suffering, but by making this suffering so personal, the suffering inherent in individual existence itself. Thinking of how this realisation pervades religious borders, it is interesting to remember Hart’s almost identical, and identically fraught, exclamation in *The Lines of the Hand*: “I cannot remain the way I am” (6).

At the heart of “Dharma Vehicle” is another homage to the thing, and another, deeper, explanation of its importance to him. The long poem reveals an early layer of this interest and in a way that ties it to “The Drift of Things’: the thing is again a nexus, a key to unlocking the apprehension of the Other Shore within this one. It does this by acting, quite practically, as the site in which the laws of the universe are manifest:

“No God, no soul” –

It is all like a mountain river,

travelling very far, and very swiftly;

not for a moment does it cease to flow.

One thing disappears and determines what is arising,

and there is no unchanging substance

through all of this,

nothing to call permanent,

only Change.

That which is the substance of things

abides as nothing

and has nowhere

a nature of its own.

Its essential nature is Nothingness. (Gray, *Cumulus* 60)

As sites for understanding the enormously difficult concepts of permanent “Change” and “Nothingness”, everyday things offer something smaller to cope with. They are what lie, as the speaker says in the next stanza, “beneath the hand, and before the eye”, and are as ordinary and random as “wattle / lying on the wooden trestle, / pencils, some crockery”, making vast concepts bodily and familiar. When Gray appears to be raising them to a higher status by saying “that these transient things, themselves, are what / is Absolute” (61), it is

partially true that the thing itself is precious to him for the knowledge it inspires, but only insofar as it is also true that it brings this knowledge, and the status of the Absolute, to the level of ordinary lived experience.

The way this poem interweaves this study of the physical particulars of daily life with the study of the natural world surrounding the speaker's fisherman's hut hints at something important to the nature of this focus. The thing for Gray is a thing of the natural world – a sprig of wattle, a sapling, or the “broken palings” in “The Drift of Things” that have through disinterest become a piece of nature – more often than something deliberately crafted. It is the world glimpsed in its transience and interconnectedness that provides the majority of them. Gray suggests this when he tells Barry Spurr that “One of the early Greek philosophers expressed this idea, that there is no limitation on natural change, rather beautifully, when he said that all things shall become all things” (38). His is not exactly, then, a poetry of things in the sense of Rilke's *Dinggedichte*, in which poems revel in the solidity, in the “thingness” and “thereness”, the very palpable existence of the panther, ball, and bowl of roses, seeking to reproduce their unquestionable physicality on the page. Gray, however much he admires Rilke's work, asks something quite different of the things he observes. His poems catch them as they are about to fall away, as light glances off them and moves towards something else. It is in this context, too, that the influence of William Carlos Williams is important. It is the appearance, the fleeting appearance, of the thing that is revered in the brief stanzas in “13 Poems”, and in many earlier poems like it:

On the pond, raindrops  
open, big as lily-pads.  
The barn's shadow. Dusk. (Gray, *Cumulus* 246)

Or, as in the first things in “The Drift of Things”, they are suspended in motion and placed in the context of time; here, of a “long-shadowed afternoon”: “A jetty in reeds, and clouds on water; / the bus that rides the dust like a surfboard; / a lizard trailed out of a mailbox drum” (260). Gray's poetry presents things within nature, within all its changing conditions and restricted viewpoints, not as museum or gallery pieces that can be examined endlessly and from every angle. In this way, he approaches in poetry something of our experience of life, and moreover isolates particular moments of experience to comment on how we might come to understand it. Experience is relationship, he says, in his insistent presentation of things in their natural contexts of change and motion and transformation.



Denis Haskell shares this understanding when he says of Gray's work that "ordinary things provide fit material for poetry because experience, in its simplest form, involves the relation of the self to a perceived object...the separation of the self from objects...is momentarily overcome in the presentation of the image" (265). I read this overcoming of "the separation of the self from objects" as akin to both David Malouf's understanding, as I discussed in the introduction, of the moment of sudden, deep, knowing of David Copperfield as a necessarily *physical* knowing, as physical as the objects in his hands, and the Buddhist lessons to which Gray subscribes that see the self as constituted by the same changing, relational laws as the thing, and teach that our freedom starts by apprehending this. This also relates to the phenomenal reduction as explored in the work of Kevin Hart. Similarly, to recall the passage in Dewey's *Nature and Experience* which I quoted earlier in the chapter, "It is not experience which is experienced, but nature – stones, plants, animals, diseases, health, temperature, electricity, and so on. Things interacting in certain ways *are* experience; they are not what is experienced" (4a–1). The integration of our relationship to the natural world and the world's relationships themselves, the relationships between the things of the world, is one that is made again and again within Gray's poetic.

In an interesting article connecting Dewey's ethical pragmatism with the practices of Zen, specifically with the teachings of Dōgen (an important figure for Gray), Scott Stroud argues a concept of "orientational meliorism". He suggests that in Dewey, "the way one approaches and experiences the world can be usefully modified to yield better experience" (186), or, to go deeper, that it "addresses the use of one's mental orientation towards self and world...to improve the quality of one's lived experience". This is a key way in which his work, often read as supporting a capitalist, progressive attitude, corresponds to Buddhism, whose many traditions emphasise the necessity of improving the way individuals approach the world (186). It is in their shared understanding of the ethical importance of attentiveness to the present moment that lies the strongest connection between the two. "For Dewey", Stroud says, "attention to the meaning and detail of one's present situation is key to one's activity having moral value" (197); Buddhism has a similar emphasis, he says, and, moreover, in its teachings of the cultivation of mindfulness through meditation, actually provides a way to achieve this. He speaks of Dōgen's understanding of *samādhi* (a term I used in my discussion of Beveridge's poetry and will return to in the next chapter), as "the immediate being of things as they are, not as concepts or desires dictate them to be", or, more intriguingly, as "experienced activities alive in a present" (198). "Alive", here, emphasises their transient nature. This ethical orientation, or reorientation, of the self towards the world

must take place in the present, both Dewey and Dōgen agree. “Dharma Vehicle” illustrates Gray’s desire to connect the philosophies of East and West and at its heart is an emphasis on the transient thing as the only absolute.

The awareness of transience informs another of Gray’s poems written with an ancient thinker in mind. In “After Heraclitus”, as in much of *Afterimages* and *Nameless Earth*, the image of light is ubiquitous and suggests the quality of relationship between the self and the thing. Light is, of course, one of the elements that allows this relationship to exist, and which is continually changing and qualifying it. Crucial to Gray’s project of relating Eastern and Western philosophy, Heraclitus, with his theories of ever-present flux and interdependence and the all-consuming fire of existence, is a figure whom many have thought of as occupying, or creating, a gateway between the two. As in “Dharma Vehicle”, and perhaps more subtly here, the poem translates both the experience of reading and of the texts themselves into a contemplation of the speaker’s self in his present world. The elements of fire and water – so important to the aphoristic world of Heraclitus’s *Fragments* – are there from the start of this poem. The speaker’s late-night analyses of his mind and heart, in a house within a “forest of rain”, leave him “drenched in thought”. In a way that recalls Heraclitus’s famous statement, “I have searched myself”, the speaker says

One knows oneself at this hour:  
the range is guilt  
or obsession with loss  
or fearfulness or fear  
for another. (Gray, *Cumulus* 230)

The figure of water returns as “economies are imposed upon the heart” and the speaker conjures the metaphor of a boat, into which he tries to lift the “inert” figures of those he wants to save while “not too unkindly” letting others go. The saturation – of the mind, the human “excess of consciousness”, and, in this image, the heart that must permit overflow when the boat is full – is mirrored in the images and sounds of the “bulrushes under / boughs by the lake”, “soaked full by now, / sopping in the warp / of lightning” (231).

“It is death for the soul / that becomes sodden”. Gray quotes part of the 49th Fragment of Heraclitus and reveals a source for this watery imagery; his metaphor of the boat plays on the idea of “lost souls” at sea. Interestingly, just previous to this in the *Fragments* is an even

more obscure statement that may have inspired the turns the poem goes on to make. Fragment 46 asserts that “A dry soul is wisest and best. The best and wisest soul is a dry beam of light”. While I am not sure what Heraclitus means in his comparison of wet and dry souls, I do not think this matters too much to the poem, which takes these metaphors (if they are indeed metaphors for Heraclitus) as starting points for a meditations on “sodden” heaviness, and later light, as representatives of both the natural world and the delicate balances of mind to which they are related. Another, far more famous, quote heralds this contemplation of light:

“The sleepers dream  
in a world that is each their own,  
but this daylight world  
is ours in common” (Gray, *Cumulus* 232)

It marks the welcome moment of daybreak in the poem, a moment when the speaker, and the poem itself, moves from the closed darkness of introspection to all the interrelations that daylight reveals; not surprisingly, the poem’s expression of this is in its observation of things:

... The wattle  
that’s clothed in spindled  
leaves is thickly starred  
with a shaggy bright water  
as though it were the Milky Way.  
I try to picture  
how this light takes everywhere it rides,  
across the valleys, across the hills –  
those uncounted cells  
of water, which are seeds.  
There is a fruit lit  
in the lap of each leaf, at the tip  
of every black stick. (232)

As he telescopes perspective between the minute and the enormous, the star-flowers of “wattle” and the “Milky Way”, the vast spread of light through “cells of water” he also joins

elemental opposites, recalling Heraclitus's emphasis on the balance enabled by tension. The other particularly famous quote of the poem is treated interestingly: "One steps into the river / as a river" the speaker says, recalling with deft compression the well-known maxim that one cannot step into the same river twice, and explaining why we cannot: because the self is in the same state of flux as the flowing water. This state of flux is what is celebrated in the poem's final lines; "we must think Hail. / "Hail, holy light," (233); in an earlier version, the speaker continued: "all the things we see / are metamorphoses of that first fire" (*Nameless* 18), which is a large statement from a poet who, as we have seen, places a great deal of importance on things in his understanding of how we experience the world. The poem's current ending gestures towards the paradox encountered also in "The Drift of Things", in which things are the tangible proof of death and decay while also being the catalysts of an equanimity – the beauty of being able to observe nature while being a part of nature:

although it's not the offspring  
of Heaven's son – it is the lightning  
from the start of time,  
and our blessedness,  
even as it keeps the nature of flame. (Gray, *Cumulus* 233)

Here, in Gray's perpetual acknowledgement of interconnectedness, or, more specifically, of the "dependent origination" of the Buddha's teachings, just as the transience of the physical thing alerts us to the mystery of nature's beauty, it is the destructive flame that begets something new, and because of these relationships of destruction and creation – "One configuration burns / and becomes another / and will burn" in an earlier version – there is the light, "our blessedness" (*Nameless* 18).

It is rare to find a word with the divine overtones of "blessedness" in Gray, and this rarity, when read within the context of his work, gives this poem a heightened sense of what I think Gray wants to claim for many of the aphoristic endings of his poems. A sense of consummation attends the most successful ones, and here, Gray invokes one of the masters of the aphorism to make one of his own most powerful statements. He asserts our deep relationship to nature: human relationships, he says, are made of the same elemental forces as the physical, transformative, relationships of fire and water. The ensuing light is a marker of the relationship between the self and the things of the world with which it is surrounded. The

ability to have this relationship, to both observe and be a part of the universal flux, is to be understood as our only “blessedness” when all there is, is here.

Gray’s aphoristic conclusions to many of his poems accord with one of Dewey’s interpretations of what constitutes a work of art itself. The second chapter of his *Art as Experience* is entitled “Having an Experience”, and within it he separates the status of “an experience” from our continuous experiences of life by its quality of completeness: it must have a sense of “consummation” that distinguishes from surrounding experience and which allows the mind to recount it with a feeling of finality and achievement. It is the necessary counter to the daily reality of constant change and flux, and is intimately related to it: because of change, Dewey says, “the experience of a living creature is capable of esthetic quality” (*Art* 17). It is not difficult, here, to see the connection between “an experience”, the experience of art and the function of aphorism. To stretch these connections a little further, the two poles of flux and consummation may be suggested by Gray’s representation of the changing particulars of life in his simile-driven descriptions of the things of the world and his aphorisms.

Beverley Coyle, in her study of aphorism in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, ventures that Stevens believed aphorism gave a sense of self-discovery, providing an anchor for the changing self. He describes aphorism as the “momentary balance between reality and the imagination”. She argues that he developed the theory that “aphoristic expression of that balance intensifies experience by helping us discover amidst the multiplicity of our potential selves a self that is momentarily stable in a world of constant change” (207). While Gray would not subscribe to the possibility of even a momentarily stable self, these interpretations of aphorism still reflect its function in his work. To place them in terms more appropriate to his poetry, we could say that where Stevens may have thought that aphorism’s “purpose is to give imaginative man a momentary hold on an aspect of experience through the power of his own expression” (207), in many of Gray’s poems the aphorism represents the human voice and its attendant ethics; voice *intends* another. It is in this context that aphorism is not so much a desire for stability, but a momentary stillness that comes from the difficult task of observing flux from within the flux. And this is a necessarily momentary experience, as reflected in the brevity of the aphorism and the transient illumination.

One of the ways poetry witnesses this moment is through sound. Specifically, here, it is the *sound* of aphorism that helps distinguish it from other forms of expression. The rounded “ring of truth” and completion sets the aphorism apart from the lines surrounding it. Sound is always important in Gray’s poems. His gift for rhyme is used in subtle relationship

with his visual similes to catch meaning in transience. His use of it alerts us to the function of rhythm and rhyme to direct the motion of a poem: the flow of words that are stopped at various points, and words chosen for their ability to resonate with previous ones, which move our attention back as well as forwards, to catch something that has passed and, perhaps, change our understanding of it. It even, particularly in the case of aphorism, gives the poetic line a physical life of its own – it has the potential to turn the thought into the thing.

The beginning of Gray's "A Northern Town" uses sound brilliantly in its more usual mode of representing something in experience:

From a mound in mist, in the midst  
of the town, run down,  
a sound,  
the grey bell on a hill, its dented round  
the pail that they rattle  
in a steeple. (Gray, *Cumulus* 283)

The poem emerges from the greyness and heaviness of long "o" sounds and, through these, drags with it its weighty, uneasy baggage of Gray's suspicion of religion and the knowledge of the violence committed in its name. Out of the church is made a human figure, cold and judgemental:

The rectangle  
of the tower is set diagonal  
on its edifice,  
this sharpened stone corner's the crease  
that creates a face,  
and the eyes  
  
a white stare of two clocks; these hunt  
through the streets,  
they condemn  
all they see, eyes like oaths, and a tongue  
of dismissal that is gravel

in a tin. (283)

The church tower, the “face” that is created by the two visible clocks as eyes divided by the corner, “crease”, of the rectangle suggests all the sadly discriminatory and cruel tendencies, the human faults, that have hidden behind the church’s façade. The conclusion that follows gives rise to one of Gray’s most enigmatic aphorisms:

The evil incline  
into their own nature, the good  
protect what is not their own,  
but do evil too, if danger’s let grow  
or good isn’t done;  
perfection belongs to evil alone. (283)

In the appropriately religious terms of good and evil, the speaker makes a wide observation of the different ways of responding to the reality of nature. Perfection is stasis, the speaker concludes. It is somehow misaligned to the reality of the flow and flux of existence. The “good” protect what they cannot control, which is to say what is governed by these natural laws of transience. The interesting part of this conclusion is that it is a property of the “good” to be left the option of evil: they have the choice to do evil in the face of growing “danger” or the absence of action. Being good is the ability to live in a world of contingency and meeting each situation ethically – with the continually open possibility of behaving cruelly. Perfection, in contrast, is closed. It belongs to evil alone because goodness to Gray is a property of the human, with all its fallibility, not an idealised, static, divine state. The “perfection” of the poem’s rhyme joins the stone church to make a palpable monument to all that is not a part of this view of human goodness. A poem in *Grass Script* speaks of another northern landscape in similarly religious terms of innocence and evil. In “Scotland, Visitation”, the speaker concludes that despite the cruelty done upon it, “the earth is Empty. It is innocent. / As everything, I thought, of that replete ground’s cruel history, / was, in some last consideration, innocent” (Gray, *New Selected* 99). Here and throughout Gray’s work, it is the various and the contingent, the thing as it is, that inspire forgiveness. In *Nameless Earth*’s version of “The Drift of Things” it is the “absence of something that’s intrinsic” that gives things their “inherent purity”: “they all have selflessness as their nature”. And, “As a corollary to its pointlessness / it could be said the world has innocence” (50). It is in his

poetry's offerings of the various things of the natural world, and his project of summoning them to attempt the representation of reality as it is, that his strongest ethical comment lies. His similes do not search for the questionable perfection embodied in "A Northern Town's" church, but instead seek to represent, and preserve, the world in its changing appearances.

This might raise the question of aphorism's place within such a poetic: how does such a definite form, necessarily expressive of certainty or at least opinion, relate to these repeated acknowledgements of transience and transformation? In Gray, they are a necessary counterweight in a delicate balance in which the aphorism, simile and thing relate. The three meet, influence and transform each other to create a poetic in which the expression of the experiences of the world approach the limits of these three impulses. In his similes, experiences seek to take a poetic form that comes close to the manner in which they impress the observing eye and mind. In other words, Gray's precise craft is dedicated to conveying, and thus attempting to preserve, the experience of these appearances to his readers by invoking the processes through which they impressed themselves upon him. If simile is "circuitry", recalling Gould's description of the technique, the interconnectedness that it creates within the poem, in Gray's thought, uncovers the interconnectedness inherent in everyday experience and the connections to the reader that live always already within the poem's design. His celebrations of the thing reveal a medium that occupies a nexus between the mind and the body, but also between the poem and the world surrounding it. And it is because of the aphorism's expressive power that the treasures found because of these other two techniques are given to the reader so strongly. Aphorism's message is grounded in the poetic speaker's voice, and from here draws its deliberate, ethical, energy. The aphorism is unlike simile in its inability to be a disinterested observation of the world; it must have a moral claim, and this ethical intention causes it to reverberate between poet and audience. The relationship between poet and reader that aphorism negotiates recalls how Gray himself understands the communicative power of Carlos Williams' poems: "The poet's exact tone, and hence his feeling, is put into our chests: we enter into, and experience directly, that underlying motive, the poet's nature" ("Poetry and Living" 127–28).

"Williams' other great originality", Gray goes on: "was to be able to accept what was really there, in his world, and to be able to use it" (127–28). We have already seen how much this accords with Gray's work. In "The Drift of Things", his two signature themes collide: the importance of the thing that is "really there, in his world", is introduced by way of an aphorism. This chapter will conclude by continuing to read this poem:



Things, Berkeley said, are the language of God,  
the world we are given is really His thought,  
which Hume remarked brings us no conviction,  
but to me it is almost justified,  
for things are worthy of such existence,  
of ultimate standing. They're the location  
of all we know. Nothing duplicitous  
in that vulnerability, we can sense

they are present entire. It feels these things  
that step through the days with us have the fullness,  
at each occasion, of reality. (Gray, *Cumulus* 260)

In Gray's prose memoir, *The Land I came Through Last*, he recalls the metaphor of this poem's title as well as the imagery of the moving sea at the close of "The Garden Shed" to articulate a quality of his love for the physical particulars of everyday reality. He says "I wanted with my imagination, to pluck the things I valued off the river of time, as it went careering by; to save them, or at least the feeling of them" (202). This preservation is an attitude of care more than possessiveness. The "river of time", which gives momentum to "the drift of things" is that force of change and decay that inspires a sense of protection and reverence. In the opening lines of this poem, the speaker quotes Berkeley to disagree with him in the most profound way – things may be the language of God, but in Gray's world view, it is language that is sacred. Things are so vital in their own right that they are indeed a language representative of "ultimate standing" in a universe where there is no God. To extrapolate, then, we could say that the appearances of physical particulars are a part of a vision that takes in our relationships to the world and all its situations, beings and environments. In Gray, the thing is microcosm for understanding our relationship to all existence, and his attitude, or the attitude he wants poetry to have, as I quoted earlier in the chapter, is expressed in his efforts to reveal these things in their "fullness". In the version of this poem in *Nameless Earth* the speaker says, with slightly different emphasis, "One feels these things", and "It often seems / I am listening to them" (49), bringing other senses to the poem, adding to the long history of his visual similes.

Putting these subtle shifts of awareness into another aphorism, in his memoir Gray says: “Experience is corrected by experience” (349). In his article on Gray’s poetry and phenomenology, ““Only This’: Reading Robert Gray”, Hart says of this comment:

Illusions are amended by a second look or by bringing another sense to bear on the situation, and in poetry one image will correct another in the attempt to define ever more precisely how something appears and how one feels about it. (25)

Hart writes about Gray through the lens of the phenomenology that, as discussed in the last chapter, informs so much of his own poetry. Reading Gray’s prose memoir *The Land I Came Through Last*, Hart believes that while Gray considers David Hume to be a close philosophical forebear, his “phrasings are more often in tune with Husserl than with Hume” (“Only This” 25). While this essay may offer a slightly distorted view of Gray, absorbing his work within a philosophical tradition closer to Hart’s than to his own, it is nonetheless often illuminating. Hart interprets Gray’s dedication to the physical matter of the world, and his ability to portray “only this” world within the poem as a performance of the phenomenological gaze. It is a part of all poetry writing, he says – as soon as one begins to write one “is already departing from the uncritical realism – reductive physicalism, really – that is tacitly assumed when we make everyday judgements about our experience” (27). He even suggests that the “artist is already to some extent a phenomenologist, someone wakeful, a person who has cultivated “eidetic seeing”... and is able to see the structure of a phenomenon”; but most importantly, because, as they are creating the work of art, they have “performed the transcendental reduction and become an onlooker on his or her own life, able to fathom that things and events have concrete meaning because they appear in horizons that he or she projects but that are usually hidden by the natural attitude” (28). By way of explanation, Hart continues:

Art is not attention; it is a change in the quality of attention so that we can see that we have already been in contact with what we see. We see that this being in contact, this intentional rapport with the things of the world, has always and already edged us away from being a self-contained subject. (28)

Important here is the understanding of Gray’s “intentional rapport with the things of the world” – Hart expresses the reduction as including a special relationship to the physical

matter we encounter daily. “A Garden Shed” perhaps gives the most illuminating picture of the importance of this relationship for Gray and, interestingly, what it gives rise to is, as we read earlier, a powerful realisation of the human capacity for equanimity. Moreover, the dissolution of our being “a self-contained subject”, both here, in Hart’s description of the artist’s experience, and in the experience of the poetic speaker of “The Garden Shed” says something not only about our “rapport with the things of the world”, and the necessity of this rapport to the development of equanimity, but the ability of the poet to convey the effect, or affect, of the reduction to the poem’s reader.

This sense of detached, calm observation imbues “The Drift of Things”. Equanimity is less an achievement of the end of the poem, as in “The Garden Shed”, than a place from which the poem begins to speak. It is informed throughout by precisely this dissolution of the self-contained subject, which it approaches within Gray’s characteristic dialogue of Eastern and Western philosophy. We are continuous with things, the poem intimates more clearly in its earlier version:

Everywhere nature’s a responsiveness –  
this nexus the unity of the world.  
We’re able to know things because we are  
continuous with them. We can’t know all  
of their complexity, but what we know  
is as direct as touch. (Gray, *Nameless* 49)

This knowing by immediate “touch” and his emphasis on continuity rather than representation illuminates a quality of simile, and his belief in it, in the sense that simile is based on the response of one image to another while allowing them to retain their individual characteristics. This responsiveness, and this retention of the “absolute” particular, is mirrored in Gray’s figuring of the workings of consciousness, in a passage I quoted earlier while reading “Voyages”: We notice when we hear that we don’t see – / that there’s ear-consciousness, eye-consciousness, / and so on, interchanging very fast” (*Nameless* 57). Human consciousness, Gray says, restating the Buddha, is defined by what it comes in contact with: eye-consciousness arises with a certain sight, smell-consciousness with an odour, and so on, all in discrete and very fast succession. There is no stable essence beneath the changing consciousnesses that quickly supplant one another, and this driving realisation

of the poem applies also to the nature of the things of the world. It finds another expression as the speaker refers to an image from the “Flower Garland Sutra”:

existence is a web of diamonds,  
and within each faceted stone there’s hung  
the rest of the web, as its reflections.  
A thing is caused by all else in the world;  
it hasn’t a fixed nature, self-defined;  
there is just relativity – “emptiness”.  
It’s because each thing is correlative

that each opens for us a hundred gates  
upon the ocean of the world’s meaning. (Gray, *Cumulus* 263)

At every stage of this long poem, it enlarges on its opening juxtaposition of things and God, and its conviction of the honesty of things over the illusion of a stable, essential creator figure. The poem places the absence of God, the truth embodied in the thing, and the inevitable change and decay inherent in existence itself in a densely interweaving conversation which concludes, in the quote with which I began this chapter, with a turn towards poetry itself – and that is also, recalling Hart’s reading, a turn towards the reduction and the experience of equanimity. It is an intriguing shift in a deliberately philosophical poem where lyricism is something that is often, even forcefully, elusive. It is the mention of death that, unsurprisingly, ushers in this new turn. The speaker suddenly conjures Lethe and Hades, and quite consciously so: asking how we are to look upon the entirety of complex relationships of mind and matter, creation, change and decay, if not through metaphor. Which is, in Gray, I have suggested, a word that encompasses the visionary element that is proper to poetry, and which encompasses also the quality of equanimity that lies at the end of all Gray’s philosophical searching. It is how things can be “more than just what is known”. “The Drift of Things” closes by entering this visionary space, in which the speaker draws himself, the poem’s “I”, together with the things on which he has been commenting in a move toward the “dissolution” of the “self contained subject”:

They pass us along the edge of darkness,  
are glimpsed from highways, changing, as we’re changed.

The trees wear peculiar significance  
in their group on a hilltop or a plain;  
these things that are more than just what is found.  
The nature of matter is an Abyss.

Behind a shed, low ridges and great clouds;  
a gravel lane; pale sun on dusty grass;  
the broken palings and the wire netting;  
a gate, towards a dimly-veined forest;  
the canal with swallow. Marvellous phantoms.  
All thought fails before their attendance here. (Gray, *Cumulus* 265)

The poem departs slightly from its empiricism – Eastern and Western – to move into a space of mystery. Only here can the word “Abyss” be uttered, the acknowledgement that “things are more than just what is found”. And it is here, too, that the observer’s involvement is allowed – the *changing* observer’s involvement. “Things pass us along the edge of darkness”, the speaker says earlier in the stanza, “are glimpsed from highways, changing, as we’re changed”. Like the person in Heraclitus’s dictum, we cannot step into the same river twice because not only has the river moved on, but because in every moment we have also changed irrevocably. The mood of this final stanza, down to the certainty of “the”, the definite article, where it is usually the more open “a” or “an” in the final “the canal with swallow”, confers the “ultimate standing” promised to these things in poem’s opening lines. This space of mystery is one in which experience reigns over analysis. At the end of this poem, which is full of intellectual wandering, the speaker acknowledges in a tone of reverence that “all thought fails before” the presence of the things of the earth. The close of the poem opens this space from where things appear as they really are – not as merely physical matter, but tokens of all that is able to be known and how we are to know. It holds the promise that we are able to act as moral beings from within the fullness of the awareness and equanimity that this knowledge bestows.

The various appearances of things in Gray’s work, and his commentary on their transient nature and their revealing relationships to those that look upon them, are related in many instances, I have tried to show, to his language of simile. The knowledge of the world and the self that these similes reveal, and the continually surprising and yet familiar connections that they forge between them, often crystallise in Gray to aphorism. The space

which opens between the aphorism's ethical claim and the practice of reflection embodied in the simile is one that is given many names: Hart draws upon German phenomenology to call it a performance of the transcendental reduction, Gray problematises Eastern and Western philosophical and spiritual traditions to reveal techniques that animate their occasional common ground and suggest it is foremost a space of compassionate disinterest and equanimity. Furthermore, if aphorism's purpose, as Stevens says, "is to give imaginative man a momentary hold on an aspect of experience through the power of his own expression" (Coyle 207), it is also, Gray suggests, the vehicle through which this experience is communicated to the reader.

Gray's poetry reflects a world-view that has a wide sense of inclusion. A poetry that wants to give the reader the world as it is, things as they are, the "only this" of the present moment, will necessarily search for and draw from within itself a deep equanimity, as this is the only state which could steer and sustain such an undertaking. Gray sums up his purpose, I read his work's purpose, in terms of this search:

It is possible to look with detachment on this marvellous and terrible river of things.... The wise are unmoved by things beyond their control. I do not think this an unwarranted belief, just because I will never be able to realise it fully. (*Land* 351)

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Michael Heald: *Poetry and Meditation* – “natives of transience”

The poetry of Michael Heald marks a subtle, new turn in Australian poetics. Within the context of this study, reading Heald’s poems could be likened to placing its recurrent themes and questions under a microscope; his own insistence and rigour in examining how we see others and ourselves, and what lenses and illusions we habitually use, magnifies and clarifies much of what has already been discussed in the preceding chapters. This final chapter, however, does not intend to be a place where they achieve a fulfilling conclusion or ultimate expression. The ongoing paradoxes that this study has encountered – the paradox of self, the existence of a speaking subject that is without substance or stability but nonetheless speaks; the inability to directly communicate experience, and the richness of the poetry arising from its indirect expression; and the relationship of spiritual thought and its practices – lend themselves to quite a different method of conclusion, one that draws upon the qualities of refraction and refocusing found within Heald’s work. The new turn signalled by Heald’s poetry has a lot to do with this level of focus and precision as well as its subject matter, and this chapter will explore the ways in which these are not separate.

In an essay about his most recent volume of poems, “Reinhabiting the Body, Decolonising Australia: Poetry, Meditation and Place in *The Moving World*”, Heald remarks: “In the poems of *The Moving World* I have tried to let my mind-body speak, as it were” (175). The poems speak, most resoundingly, an invitation to the technique of Vipassana meditation. This invitation – a loaded form itself, heavy with intricate cultural burdens – is based on the speaker’s own experience of this technique, and his experience of the limits of poetry to express it. *The Moving World* is Heald’s third full-length volume of poems<sup>16</sup>, preceded by *Body-flame* and *Focusing Saturn*, and while both of these earlier books stand independently with their own concerns, it is possible to see moments of these themes within them. In both previous volumes there is a persistent (and increasingly sophisticated) search for ethics; a poetic-eye testing the world with shifts of perspective and subjects ranging from his intimately personal poems about loved ones to political and ecological poems that are firmly connected to place and the Australian landscape. In this looking, the emphasis is

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<sup>16</sup> He has also published *Shorelines: Three Poets*, with Roland Leach and Barbara Brandt.

always on how to see as much as what is possible to be seen, and this makes the latter all the richer. In *The Moving World* the “mind-body” is called to speak and this brings the nature of the “I” into question; in the term “mind-body” the “I” is already being analysed and disintegrated, and this is the continuing, defining operation of the collection.

A poem from the first section of *The Moving World* asks piercing questions about poetry’s ability to approach experience. “Listening” is a response to “Speaking” (a poem I will return to) and is a commentary on the act of listening, as well as a sort of introductory disclaimer to all the poems that follow:

In listening, then,  
it may be wrong  
to hear these words  
as your own,  
  
as you have listened before  
to the *poems*: the beautiful  
or deranging words, given  
for your soul to repeat (Heald, *Moving* 13)

Immediately, the speaker is telling us we are facing something different here. What makes reading the coming poems unlike reading all the other poems we have encountered? What makes them, perhaps, not “*poems*”? This radical claim is a part of the volume’s invitation. If it “may be wrong” to “hear these words / as your own”, to hear, that is, the coming poems within the context of your own experience, the poet is asking the reader to do something bordering on the impossible. Instead what is asked is something native to the experience of meditation itself, as he goes on to describe it within this collection: to see what is and not what we want or have always already seen. To acknowledge, that is, the possibility of allowing the dissolution of our mind-body enough to perceive a reality not made by our previous experiences. The speaker’s choice of the word “soul” invokes the different attitude evinced by those other “beautiful” or “deranging” words; it speaks of his wariness, perhaps, of poetry’s tendency to be concerned with the self and its reinforcement of the illusion of its stability and immutability. “Deranging” colours those other terms with suspicion. The whole



project of *The Moving World*, as I will explore, attempts to derail this illusion. The speaker tells us that the coming poems are to be read with this in mind:

You form them, yet  
they cannot form you,  
  
these exclamations  
at what has been witnessed.  
  
The stunning serene dis-  
integration of daylight;  
  
emergence, as the mind's  
eye adjusts, of body-dark's  
subtle spectrum. (13)

The first two lines act as a hinge in the poem. “You form them, yet / they cannot form you”, he says of the words to come, the “exclamations / at what has been witnessed”, and also as a correction to the previous definition of “*poems*”. The hanging “yet” emphasises the pivot. A statement crucial to both Heald’s poetic and the technique of Vipassana that the poems are encountering, it suggests that language – even the utterances of someone who has witnessed – cannot replace the experience of witnessing. There is a long discussion in Heald’s article “Reinhabiting” about the Vipassana technique, its implications for poetry about the experience of meditation, and its implications for the expression of experience itself. Unlike the poems of Judith Beveridge that explore the practices of Buddhism in a mode that is much more familiar to the general reader – drawing on words and imagery gleaned from suttas and weaving them into poems through recognisable, though sophisticated, devices – the poems of *The Moving World* attempt something quite different in their response to a personal experience of a meditative technique; though they frequently encounter the same theoretical ground as Beveridge’s poems, Heald’s require knowledge of it. Their mystery, their insistence on experience first, is a part of their invitation to the technique, though the difficulty of approaching the poems without a theoretical context has prompted, I suspect, Heald to speak about it himself. I am going to pause reading “Listening” here, to quote from Heald’s explanation.

“Vipassana” is a Pali word, Heald says, meaning “insight”, a technique of meditation originally taught by Gotama the Buddha some 2,500 years ago and taught to Heald through the lineage of S.N. Goenka and U Ba Khin. In offering a description of the technique, he reminds the reader it is a subtle exercise and his explanation can only be partial.

The meditation technique of Vipassana involves focusing the mind on the sensations, or physical feelings, continually occurring in the body, ordinary sensations such as heat, pressure, tingling, and so on. The aim is to develop one’s concentration to the point where it is so steady and penetrating, that the substancelessness of the sensations, their continual state of arising and passing away, becomes evident and palpable. This involves an effort to keep the mind on the sensations, and bring it back to them whenever it wanders away. It also involves an effort to remain equanimous towards the sensations: if they are pleasant, one tries not to crave them, and if unpleasant, not to hate them. The aim is to observe, to experience, non-judgmentally, in order to get beyond the knee-jerk reactions to and conventional perceptions of sensations, so that their more subtle quality of impermanence can be apprehended. (“Reinhabiting” 165–66)

There are two main reasons, he says, why bodily sensations should be taken as a meditation object:

Firstly, according to observations, attributed to Gotama, about the causal links in the process of perception and cognition, sensations play the role of a kind of “missing link”. That is, whenever our minds encounter an experience, either from within as a thought or memory, or from outside as a sensory perception, a sensation arises somewhere in the body *before* we process the encounter in any other way. We then initially react to this sensation, rather than directly to the event itself. If the sensation is unpleasant, we react with aversion towards it and the event, and vice-versa. But we have probably been unaware of the role the sensation has played in our reaction. The sensations can be very subtle, we are not on the lookout for them, and yet at a deep and early stage our minds have registered them and we have reacted accordingly. (166)

Ultimately, this new appreciation of how to approach bodily sensation (an experience that underpins the whole of *The Moving World*) enables a student of Vipassana to make an end of suffering, an experience of what many people would have already read or heard to be the teaching of the Buddha:

... the realisation of impermanence, experienced via the sensations, is a way to the realization of the impermanence and substancelessness of the self as a whole, and of the entire field of mind and matter. Once the self is experienced in this way, then the suffering to which the self is generally subject begins to be ameliorated. When the self conceives of itself as solid and the only ground, it craves experiences which are pleasant to it, and hates those which are not. This puts it in a constant state of craving and aversion – a constant state of discomfort, unsatisfactoriness, suffering, generally known as *dukkha* in Pali. This situation is radically altered when one is in possession of the realization that both the self, and what it craves or hates, are ephemeral and substanceless. Suffering is addressed at its root. (166–67)

One part of the technique that Heald does not mention here but is explained by S.N. Goenka in *The Discourse Summaries* is the ethical component that supports the development of this awareness (2), though the trace of the undertaking to approach the world ethically can be found throughout Heald’s work. The cultivation of ethical practice is a part of the condition that, as Heald says, “Meditative experience must be had at first hand” (“Reinhabiting” 176), and yet also a part of the way the poems of this volume attest to the desire to convey “what has been witnessed”. Heald negotiates this ancient impasse by conceptualising a practice which is a part of the Vipassana technique as a literary device. This practice is *samādhi*. *Samādhi*, he explains, is meditative concentration, a Pali term meaning “awareness” (164). In “Reinhabiting” and, earlier, his essays on Beveridge’s “From the Palace to the Bodhi Tree”, Heald speaks of the difference between a way of knowing based on *samādhi* and the imaginative one more usually associated with artistic expression. These are not so much a binary, he suggests, but points on a continuum (“Reinhabiting” 169). “To draw upon meditative awareness”, Heald explains, means “that many perspectives dictated by the self, its dualisms and preconceptions, are open to revision, and that new experiential possibilities are opened up” (169).

To return to it now, the poem “Listening” attests to the facility of *samādhi*, revealing one such experiential possibility. As in many poems throughout the volume, there is a

deliberateness that asks the reader to focus and then refocus at the levels of word, line and poem, so that understanding clicks, part by part, arising as momentary illuminations. Enjambment plays a large role in this process. It invokes awareness through its element of surprise; the moment of anticipation between “the mind’s” and “eye” for example, just enough to heighten awareness of what is to come and rethink what has come before. Or, the way the line “these exclamations” may be a completion of the previous ones offers a momentary suspension, adds import and refreshes the meaning of the words, “at what has been witnessed”. Most urgently, enjambment enacts the “dis- / integration of daylight”, a process through which our ordinarily apprehended world is perceived as illusory. The disintegration, not only of light as it is seen with open eyes, but the mental-physical process of sight itself leads to a new realm of knowing and to the body as the site for its investigation. The testimony of these investigations are recorded in the poems that follow, and in the re-phrasing of *poetry* that this one poem offers.

In the volume’s preface, Robert Gray describes *The Moving World* as a “daring and triumphant” project of turning “the techniques of modern poetry” to the task of recording the experience of Vipassana meditation. In this chapter I will argue that as Heald does this, he is perpetuating a much older function of poetry within the same meditative tradition. He invites others to undergo the experience themselves. The fifth quality of the *Dhamma*, as recorded in the Pali Canon on which Heald is drawing, is *ehi-passiko*, literally “come and see” or “come, see!”. Heald reiterates this invitation by emphasising the importance of first-hand experience in meditation and exposing the very limits of poetry itself to provide such experience. At the same time, he reveals that poetry about meditation offers an important insight into the topic of poetry and experience. Meditation is something one must experience oneself, Heald’s poems repeat in various ways, and yet a way must be shown, a practice explicated and a journey inspired. To do this, Heald’s work performs two ways of knowing imperative to Vipassana meditation: one I have already mentioned – *samādhi*, or awareness, a way of knowing Heald writes about himself – the other, *uppekha*, or equanimity, is less explicitly a technique used within the poems as their desired goal. The satellite themes that contribute to a *samādhi*-based poetic are “focusing” and “watching” and their relationship to metaphor, while the speaker’s conception of “moving” is key to the representation of equanimity in his poems. This chapter will look at how these themes are embedded within its invitation to experience Vipassana. After a discussion of his earlier work, in the first part of this chapter I will analyse Heald’s poems about Vipassana meditation from within the context of the technique’s theoretical background. In the second, I look at the way the later poems of *The*

*Moving World* represent the efficacy of this theory and practice in daily life. In conclusion, I seek to place Heald's work within the long tradition of poetry arising from the Buddha's teaching.

One way of defining *The Moving World's* relationship to Heald's earlier work is its profoundly different point of departure. To say it ultimately revisits the same concerns through a different lens misses the point; the poems inspect the lens itself and acknowledge its colours and distortions as well as its gradual, momentary, dissolutions. Many poems in Heald's earlier volumes are deeply analytical. The desire to inspect the world, and himself, closely is a major part of his poetic. It is attended by an almost scientific unthreading of phenomena. What he calls the mind-body in *The Moving World* comes under close scrutiny, even in his earliest work, that meditation necessitates; and his observations of the outside world then benefit from this new keenness of sight. Precision results, as well as an openness to new ways of experiencing the world. "Waking Early," the second poem in his first full-length collection *Body-flame*, demonstrates this introspection. It begins:

Sometimes you wake  
earlier than sensation,  
before memory. It could be  
any day, and who you are  
is so thinned out  
you look through yourself:

and the act of recollection  
can be considered and withheld,  
the vacuum kept intact  
by stillness and a refusal  
to focus circumstance, which would  
be to form a point and burst it;

as if all you are  
is awareness itself, a film  
of receptive tension across time. (Heald, *Body-flame* 12)

There could be little better description of a poetic responding to, and with, *samādhi* than “awareness itself, a film / of receptive tension across time”. It is through such awareness that the poem itself originates: the ability to capture and hold for three stanzas the moment of waking, the mind in only one of its roles. In his review of *Body-flame*, Martin Harrison says that its poems “relate to the mapping of a highly specific type of experience – an awareness both of the temporariness of what we are and do but also of the passing moment’s intensity” (35). The sustained concentration needed to isolate this particular passing moment for a number of lines enacts Heald’s later formulation of a way of knowing based on *samādhi*. This poem speaks of the importance of the poem itself to the presence of this moment. In other words, it asks how much does this moment itself exist through and because of the poem’s existence? The sense of integration between what the poem is and what it is responding to is mirrored by the status of the poem’s “you”, a “you” which seems as much a marker of the insubstantial nature of the poem’s speaker, barely there, as an actual second person being addressed. Heald’s use of the second person is reasonably infrequent. One of its purposes here, as in other poems in which it appears, is to heighten an element of ethics. The poem’s “you” further involves the reader in its experience and its atmosphere of responsibility. This fine state of awareness, and its attending estrangement of the self, the poem says, is not its final achievement but instead a method of generating compassion. What becomes visible when the self is “thinned out” to reception is the plight of the suffering: “You look through yourself” in this state, he says, to others:

And this feeling stays with you  
 all day, the lightness, and the faint  
 panic that you might be lying  
 with the stacked dead of Africa,  
 or slumped on some cell floor  
 up North: you just couldn’t tell  
 you weren’t there. (Heald, *Body-flame* 12)

The poem offers a new perspective on the idea of “selflessness”. Disorientation is the result of the self’s thinning out into awareness; the poem enacts the idea of putting oneself in the place of others and takes it to its limit.

Heald is often a poet of social justice, with a particular focus on the complex situations of Australia’s indigenous culture and the need to protect this continent’s natural

environment. What gives these poems an effectiveness that the genre does not always attain is Heald's other ability to write poems about the experience of a single moment. His uncanny degrees of focus reveal the gifts that come from attending to the present. As in the previous poem, through syntax and enjambment and detailed observation, he can sustain an instant's experience through several stanzas. Among its many other effects, this makes his political poems more convincing, perhaps because within them we see an involvement not only of the emotions that usually surface – for example, anger, resentment, desperation – but also an analysis of them and of the self as they arise.

“Catchment”, from *Focusing Saturn*, is a series of poems about deforestation in Tasmania. Among its wry characterisations of politicians and environmental spokespersons are lines that respond to the tension and loss with a technique of inwardness. In “NVDA” the speaker describes the uneasy and often overlooked relationship between the politics and ethics of conservation. After leaving a meeting of “the *protection group*” the speaker discovers “the unnoticed injury” and proceeds to “inspect its depth, extent.” He explains:

a force is pressing into me:  
unless I can find a way  
to place my body so it  
achieves resistance, it will  
sweep through me, and I will  
fall away, cloven,  
and the green and the fragrant gloom  
and the clinging, floating creatures  
will, in their turn, be swept away. (Heald, *Saturn* 68)

The speaker places the body back into nature with a peculiar intimacy here. The outside injury is found within: the only place the mind can actually perceive it. The only way to protect the natural world, he says, is through acknowledging the deep interrelatedness between it and us. The nebulous world of the “fragrant gloom / and the clinging, floating creatures” is akin to his inner life, and expresses a sophisticated version of the contemporary cliché that changes in society must start within the self. With a vocabulary that is more scientific than mystic, the poem begins to know an integration between ourselves and the environment that the far grosser nature of political rhetoric cannot approach.

The particular quality of attentiveness as opposed to reactivity is more clearly the focus of “Watching”, another poem in the sequence:

As I sat in meditation  
a cool wind arose and pushed:  
the hatred of cold began,  
but as I watched,  
feeling my skin bristle,  
entering the spaciousness  
in the absence of warmth, I saw  
these hills, clothed now  
in a sighing plenitude,  
stripped bare by an impetus  
I could no longer hate  
and only name with the call  
of one creature approached by another  
threatening to tear its flesh. (Heald, *Saturn* 69–70)

The speaker gives a name, here, to how this attentiveness is cultivated. We know he is sitting “in meditation”, and how he practices it and why is slowly given to the reader throughout the poem. His awareness is focused on sensation – of a “cool wind”, the cold and the “skin bristl[ing]” – and the mind’s tendency to react to it. The “hatred of cold”, however, is replaced with a growing equanimity where it becomes instead a mere “absence of warmth” with its own “spacious” quality. The body and environment are once again sharing an experience as the effects of clearing the once forested, “clothed” hills are expressed in human terms of suffering. In a way reminiscent of Beveridge’s poem “Rice” about the stampeding elephant herd and the hungry villagers, Heald reveals here the way an ecosystem of plants, animals and humans perpetuate a shared cycle of suffering through ignorance.

This brings us close to the territory of *The Moving World*. In this next section of the chapter, I will read the poems of its first sections that Heald has written specifically about the experience of Vipassana meditation. I have tried to show in my previous readings that Vipassana is not a new or isolated topic in Heald’s work. It is present and, moreover, generative throughout his oeuvre. Heald describes encountering Vipassana as “An experience



which struck me with extraordinary force”, and *The Moving World* as a response to this experience (“Reinhabiting” 165). His response focuses on two revelations: on the one hand, the opening of a world of physical sensation, the fact the body can be felt without any external touch in a way that lies beneath our ordinary everyday awareness; and on the other, the persistence of change and motion in the world and the self. As discussed earlier in the chapter, *The Moving World* has prompted Heald to offer a lengthy amount of “theory”, and this has a lot to do with its poems’ relationship to experience. What the book may mean to a practitioner of this technique and to someone to whom it is an entirely new concept will be very different. Heald says himself within the essay that in regard to the technique he has “probably provoked more questions than I have answered” (167) and this applies, quite deliberately I am arguing, to the first sections of *The Moving World* itself. Its poems dwell in a space suspended between what the poet knows and what the reader knows, illuminating these questions about how poetry is able to communicate experience. The volume’s structure is pertinent to its role as a “response” to the experience of meditating. It is reminiscent of a journal and yet also didactic, opening layer upon layer of the experience and the technique, before, in the latter sections, moving outwards to view the world in a clearer light of equanimity.

“Presence” is from the second section of the volume (the first contains just three poems, “Listening” and “Speaking”, which I have already mentioned, and the first poem “Setting Out”) and demonstrates the way the poems from the first part speak so thoroughly from within the experience of meditating:

1

The way you can feel your body  
though it is not being touched: like the hand  
of existence resting on you. (Heald, *Moving* 18)

The quite extraordinary realisation that the body can be felt without an external touch is intimated in short statements. The brevity of each section invites concentration. While the poetry of other meditative traditions, for example the Chan Haiku, is known for the similar way its brief utterances invoke contemplation, it is also a quality of the poems of the Pali Canon in which this tradition of the Buddha’s teaching is recorded. Heald’s poem goes on to approach from many angles the experience of becoming aware of sensation:

2

The fabric of myself  
a blurry guess  
beginning to yield.

My body as if held,  
yet not;

so *me*, and yet  
in a pristine strangeness

as if present to myself  
for the first time (18)

Although skeptical of it, Heald does not resist metaphor entirely. “Metaphor Spark”, later in the volume, addresses metaphor with suspicion but here in “Presence” it is sparing, deliberate and effective. This poem, as does “Vedana” and others, attempts to define what is essentially indefinable: an entirely individual, physical experience. The “blurry guess” of the “fabric of myself” comes into clearer and clearer focus throughout the poem, clarifying as it does the “blurry” technique of metaphor. The speaker’s brief statements shift like the small adjustments of a lens turning from an “as if” towards an “and yet”. In the last stanzas of section 2 – “as if I am creation, // yet this still a faintness / of the immense light of being” – the metaphor of “blur” is answered by “faint” – still not accessible, but at least clearer, a recognisable part now of the whole. In the final stanza the focusing is complete and yet the subject altered:

3

Ah,  
there you are  
world! (19)

What arises with a clearer understanding, a gradual unweaving, of the “fabric of myself” is not anything essential to the individual, the speaker says here. It is not a soul or even mind, it is a transparency, an ability to see – to witness the world, momentarily (as the brevity of the stanza suggests) as it is.

The world is contained within the body. I spoke about this concept at some length in regard to Beveridge’s poetry and the presence of *vedana*, bodily sensation, in her work and its place in the Buddha’s teaching. This discussion pointed briefly towards the main tenets of meditative techniques Heald writes from with greater detail and personal experience. Heald asserts that meditation is not a rejection of the senses but a refocusing on them (“Reinhabiting” 167), and while Beveridge writes from within the senses, in poems that experience the world with sensory imagery and metaphor, Heald, characteristically, analyses the role sensation plays in the making of the mind-body and its world. Part of this analysis is done by poems that comment on Pali terms pertaining to the theory of Vipassana. “*Vedana* (Sensations)” is one such major poem in *The Moving World*, spanning four pages with illuminating statements about sensation and its profound, though often unnoticed, importance to the experience of life. Simply, to begin with, it is “The way all things first / touch you” (Heald, *Moving* 28). But then:

The fire in the engine  
of every blind act,

core of every mood.

The patch of ice  
on our road to choosing. (28)

Sensation is a force as strong, basic and ever-present as the elements, the speaker’s metaphors say here. To begin to understand how sensation could be so fundamental the reader must start asking questions about the technique of Vipassana itself: the poem only offers hints and glimpses. We can know, after reading Heald’s own explanations in his essay, how sensations are the bridge between what he refers to as the conscious and unconscious minds, that they are the bodily feelings accompanying states of mind to which one habitually reacts. The “patch of ice” and, later, “The ocean / you have been helplessly / born upon” suggest our cultivated blindness to this part of the mind. As with many poems in the volume

there is a sense of development or quest and an instinctive positivity. Having witnessed the dangerous role of sensations, the poem acknowledges the hope found in recognising this:

Uniform –  
coarse, tight:  
your wretched obedience  
unbearable now,  
having stumbled upon this  
prospect of peace (29)

The speaker shows, in microcosm, how knowledge changes experience. The “prospect of peace” – the moment of understanding that recurs throughout these poems – is enough to begin changing a lifetime of conditioning. What was understood to be pleasant is deeply unpleasant when one understands its function of perpetuating suffering. The poem’s stanzas, past this point, reflect a fresh, slowly emerging, understanding of sensation:

New bright map  
of who you are and  
why.

Wafer of light between  
event and reaction.

Thread of your experiencing  
you may follow  
out of the mindbody’s  
labyrinth of suffering ... (30)

The imagery lightens, in tone and weight – the “stone”, “ocean”, “cliffs” of the earlier stanza give way to this “wafer of light”, “autumn leaves” later on and, at the poem’s end:

The very roots  
of suffering, their hold  
reaction:

without which

they draw free,

wither away

like tendrils of mist. (31)

The pervasive nature of sensations is reflected in its many appearances throughout the volume. This is indicative also of the way *vedana* attends every step on the meditative path, and its “missing-link” function, as Heald explains, within its conception of the four parts of the mind. Expanding on this theory is helpful to understanding this poem and others surrounding it. S.N. Goenka explains that *vedana* takes its place alongside *viññana*, *saññā*, and *saṅkhārā*, in the Buddha’s description of the four major “aggregates” of the mind (20). *Vinañña* is best translated as consciousness, or the merely apprehending part of the mind, which acknowledges stimulus from any of the senses; it is what Gray’s poems refer to as the alternating “ear-consciousness”, “eye-consciousness”, and so on. *Saññā* is the next step, that of recognition, which judges this stimulus to be either good or bad, based on the mind’s past experiences. *Vedana*, bodily sensation, then starts to flow, and can be either pleasant or unpleasant according to *saññā*’s decision. The mind’s reaction to these sensations is called *saṅkhārā*, the habitual response of either craving or aversion to the pleasant or unpleasant sensations (Goenka 20). “*Saṅkhārā* (Reaction)” is a poem in two sections, and two contrasting styles, reflecting upon these workings of the mind:

1

To know yourself

To change yourself,

You must lay hands on mind.

...

Only watching; only a watching

That can hold itself steady

in the moment’s brunt

in the moment’s drag,

can allow  
this taking hold:

stimulus contained  
within its own tumult  
settles. (Heald, *Moving* 36)

Heald characterises the concept of *saṅkhārā*, the “fourth” part of the mind, again in terms of a physical, sensate, experience; “you must lay hands on mind”, the speaker says, emphasising not only the physical nature of this exercise – that is, the necessity of observing sensations in order to stay reaction – but the distinction between “mind” and “you”. “Mind” is something quite outside identification with self, the speaker suggests here, and he touches on a difficult task of meditation. To understand mind objectively one must still work from within it, with all its habitual reactivity providing difficulty at every step. Heald names the only antidote: watching. And the effect, “stimulus contained / within its own tumult / settles”. This first section of the poem lays this process out clearly; an eloquent explanation, and, like many poems in the volume, in Heald’s style of spare poetic analysis. Its words are suspended from the experience; to put this another way, the reader is not drenched in sensory imagery that attempts to bridge a gap between the worlds of speaker and audience. There is a withholding of intense personal experience that provokes questioning.

The following section of the poem is something altogether different, as if, yet again, Heald is experimenting with approaching experience, this time of wrestling with *saṅkhārās*, from different angles:

2

The touch  
of experience, like a creature  
walking on your skin,

harmlessly,  
preoccupied,  
          unless  
you flinch, fluster;

then the sting,

the bite:

yet calmly watched

sensation reaction

separate

like moon from cloud. (Heald, *Moving* 37)

Metaphor, here, creates a different dimension to the speaker's response. "To lay hands on mind" has subtly transformed to a different "touch of experience". The image of a "creature" (suggestively unspecific), brings the explanation closer to the reader's physical reality by triggering an uncomfortable sensation all can identify with. The speaker uses the analogy of the biting insect to animate the roles of *vedana* and *sankhārā*: the habitual "flinch" is the mind's swift reaction of craving or aversion towards sensation. The alternative to this, the act of "watching", is communicated differently in this second poem, given to us through word spacing and the final, archetypal simile – "like moon from cloud".

The act of "only watching" is an important theme throughout this volume and Heald's poems generally. It is key to a *samādhi*-based poetic as, Heald explains, *samādhi* is developed by the act of watching. His poems attend to the practice of "only watching" in image and structure and the act is a thematic companion to the volume's reticence, its withholding, in that it constitutes a deliberate staying of reaction, a stepping aside from the activity of the mind and the craving and aversion that habitually follow thoughts of the past and future. Importantly, it is not suppression that Heald is advocating here or a nihilistic conceit of attaining an underlying "nothingness"; in quite an opposite, and original, way it is a process of animation: "Unclenching", the poem "Detachment" says, "you feel / the strange embrace / of what is" (*Moving* 39). This act of watching is akin to the suspension of judgment or naming, the phenomenological reduction, important in the poetics of Hart and Gray and its primary metaphor here, as it is in Gray, is clarity.

Heald's particular understanding of "only watching" offers another way of understanding the wider processes of metaphor in his work. Metaphor is generally understood in terms of the

visual; in *The Rule of Metaphor*, Ricoeur returns to Aristotle to make this point: “Metaphor, he says, “sets the scene before our eyes”.... In other words, it gives that concrete colouration – imagistic style, figurative style it is called now – to our grasp of genus, of underlying similarity” (38). “To place things before the eyes,” Ricoeur goes on, “is not an accessory function of metaphor, but the proper function of the figure of speech”. It is a matter of “literally: making your hearers *see* things” (38). Heald’s poems approach this quality from another angle, one for which Ricoeur’s work has already laid the foundations: they not only attempt to make their hearers see things, but see things in an entirely new way. “Like those two minute noodles” – the poem “The Self” begins – “hard and clumped, a wad / of brittle entanglements” (*Moving* 26); or as in “Dhamma”, “like the bright clean limbs of the eucalypt / within its smudge of leaves” (26).

In Heald’s own words, metaphor, somewhat counter-intuitively, “can liberate the thing in itself, let it out of the cage of our explanations” (Heald). In this sense, it is a poetic technique analogous to the role of “only watching” sensation, resisting the judgments of “like” and “dislike” and thus short-circuiting the cycle of recognition, craving and reaction. Metaphor, to Ricoeur, “teaches something, and so it contributes to the opening up and the discovery of a field of reality other than that which ordinary language lays bare” (*Rule* 174). In Heald this quality of metaphor takes a further ethical turn: his use of metaphor represents an intervention in the mind’s habitual patterns and, in his most successful poems, is itself that intervention. “Waking” is one such poem:

As when you believe yourself  
to be moving, having vaguely registered  
windows passing, until you realise

it’s the other train in motion,  
yours remains at rest, stillness  
for a few moments an event in itself –

except the opposite: you had believed yourself  
solidly at rest, then know, like waking,  
you are thoroughly in motion:



are thoroughly motion. (Heald, *Moving* 27)

This poem is a touchstone in the volume. It speaks directly about one of its most powerful responses: the new awareness of change and movement that the speaker's experience of Vipassana has brought about. Its language, and the picture created, is so clear there is little to be said: the speaker is explaining something to the reader, using analogy, as many teaching poems of the Buddha do. The poetry, however, lies not only in its elegant choices of words and space, but most strongly in the implication of the final metaphor. There is a play here between the literal and the metaphorical that has a bearing on this study as a whole; what appears to be a metaphor in a poem is a literal reality for the speaker, and anyone else, who has had the experience. "Waking" speaks of the ability to feel oneself as a "cascade of being" ("*Vedana*" *Moving* 30), to be aware of constant movement throughout the mind-body because of its flow of sensations. While an explanation of this is given to the reader plainly, suggesting the ordinariness of this phenomenon that is occurring all the time, there is a visionary aspect animated in that last repeated line. The words "You are thoroughly in motion: / are thoroughly motion" exemplify the power of metaphor to open a new mode of reality. The first of the lines is a simple statement of fact; the second reveals a new world. The skill of the whole volume is present in microcosm here: in some moments, Heald makes the visionary literal; he presents the life and world-altering potential of meditative states as actual, preserving both their necessary otherness and their implications for the self's present moment. This difficult tension is sustained through the balance of poetic technique and clear explanation. These moments are luminous manifestations of the poet's volition to invite others to undergo the experience themselves, due to their openness to the event of experience, the trials of unknowing, risk and otherness.

"The moving world" is the title of the final, and longest, section of the volume. If the poems of the first four sections can be read as a progression through a course of meditation, the poems of this section witness the speaker's reemergence into the outside world. They record an enactment in daily life of the qualities encountered and developed on the path of meditation and how its main themes of *samādhi* and the development of equanimity through observing *vedana* are observed within ordinary life. Awareness, equanimity and compassion inform these poems – and the speaker's voice – with self-effacement rather than sentimentality. "The Level", the opening poem to the section, speaks of a visiting "furry spider":

I could put it out:  
it would be sleepy enough, this time of year,  
to sidle into a jar if nudged.

But this house  
has so many gaps,  
it would be no more  
than a ritual:

nature would simply  
trickle back and find its level  
in my porous home. (Heald, *Moving* 62)

The speaker places a common symbol of fear at the centre of this poem about equanimity. “The Level” is metaphoric for an inner level and its attending quality of compassion. In the opening words – “I could put it out” – “out” could perhaps imply “killed”. The lines that follow, however, tell us the spider would be nudged into a jar and released. Yet the choice is made to accept its presence. The enjambment of “more / than a ritual” emphasises the play between quantity and balance in the poem, commenting on the uselessness of ritual when compared to the more difficult practice in which it is participating. This poem recalls “Dodge” from *Body-flame*, in which a visiting spider (perhaps the same) is anticipated with a habitual duck through the doorway to avoid the web that appears in summer (18). It is the “body’s remembering” that animates this instinct to do no harm; the poem approaches the world, once again, from within the mind-body connection. In “The Level”, the image of the house with gaps, and its owner open to an equilibrium with nature, suggests both a homecoming from the meditation retreat (hence the position of the poem at the start of this section) and an equanimity that is active at an ordinary, daily level within the speaker’s “porous home”, that archetypal metaphor for the self.

This metaphor for equanimity appears again in the poem “Balance”, continuing a theme of attentiveness to sensation and movement: “In the sheltered warmth of the back verandah / my legs feel attenuated.” It begins:

stalks

swaying slightly not in air  
but the internal weather of my balance:  
minute adjustments, molecular steps,  
  
as the earth rolls hugely. (Heald, *Moving* 69)

Awareness of sensation creates interiority here. The speaker's attentiveness to the tiny particulars of physicality, the "minute adjustments" of the body's continual working to maintain balance is contrasted, yet also aligned, with the vast movements of the planet. The comparison offers the reader a slightly altered view of human existence, which is one example of how the realisation in "Waking" leaves a trace throughout the rest of the volume. All the following poems, though they explore different themes and situations, seem to begin from that point where perception was irrevocably altered. In "Life" the speaker steps "so carefully" around a dead bee "on the decking this late autumn":

because my foot-of-many-bones knows,  
as does my self-in-solution,  
  
that integration is precarious  
and only a phase (Heald, *Moving* 63)

A marker of these poems is their tendency to pare matter and life down to their smallest moving parts. It is attended by a compassion for what is so fleeting. The large forces of life: the moving planets, their weather, the realities of decay and change, are represented in precarious relationship with more inward realities. Two poems – "Comet" in this volume and the title poem of *Focusing Saturn* – use planetary imagery to speak about this theme. The recurring concept of "focus" in Heald's work can also be more deeply understood in its relationship to this metaphor. As the speaker waits for signs of "the meteor storm" he looks through a telescope and sees the great planet instead. He "couldn't help exclaiming":

... because  
what I saw it seemed I'd infinitely  
never seen. Saturn had resolved itself  
from the fat, cold spark lodged in my helpless eye,

to the legendary sphere and hoop,  
neither jewel nor radiant machine, that lit  
the actuality of space, imperiously  
showing me how far there was  
to go, how far to fall,  
the abyss of the as-yet-unknown. (Heald, *Saturn* 10)

If the focusing of Saturn is metaphoric for the quest for knowledge or enlightenment, the particularly interesting aspect of the way this process is represented here is the uneasy relationship between the watching, seeking self and the messenger stars. Encountering the abyss of everything unknown is, counter-intuitively, a strange homecoming. The poem ends with a description of the planet: despite “its distance and attendant enormity”, it is “a crucial / molecule of me put in place: / its hieroglyph the dazzling correction / of some stupendous error” (11). The ability of the self to be transformed through experience itself, not by any other means, is communicated here by showing that it is what is *not* there, the compelling absent, which invites change. It is a method in tune with the tenet of the substanceless nature of the mind-body, the awareness of which Heald attributes to Vipassana meditation. The poem participates in a slow correction of the delusion of self, “molecule” by molecule, by revealing what it is not. In *The Moving World*, “Comet” speaks a similar invitation:

The dark road out of Apollo Bay  
aims us at this portent,  
  
slow, and faint, yet a plummet  
of such proportions  
it tears your eyes  
from every form they've clung to  
as a measure of who you are,  
  
from every face of earth-scape  
you were oriented by:  
  
a fall past  
all ground. (Heald, *Moving* 74)

This picture of a comet, “falling” but not falling to earth, a perceived “plummet” that will never reach the ground, again imitates the large gaps between our own known and unknown universes: the unknown future, the misunderstood past. The visceral words “tear” and “clung” suggest these gaps are first of all known physically. Indeed, as in the previous poems, the hinge of this relationship is the speaker’s awareness of *vedana*. Apprehending sensation as a bridge between the unconscious and conscious minds introduces a different understanding of the mind-body connection. Metaphorically, in these poems, the role of sensation in the mind-body is a model for the relationship between mind-body and world. The almost constant presence of physical sensation in these poems subtly reinforces that this is indeed how “all things first touch you” and, moreover, it is how “outside” is defined and self re-adjusted to it, after the experience of meditation.

A number of poems in this volume, and his previous ones, speak from this new understanding of sensation. It is an implied knowledge, a part of the poems’ fibre rather than a theme. It is there in an early poem, “Reminder” from the sequence “Separations” in *Body-flame* (28–29), in which sensation is key to memory and catharsis. Unexpected and uncontrolled, the “body’s language” “provok[es] with its visceral honesty, / this outburst” (29). In “Leeches” the speaker says, “If I find one on my arm my mind / heats up” (*Saturn* 61). The process is analysed, and spoken of more abstractly in “Fire” from *The Moving World*:

An encounter, some way off,  
about which apprehension flared.  
I watched the scalding at my heart.

The encounter’s image grew,  
or shrank, as I let the burning claim me,  
or knew merely *fire*:

sensation  
fear’s substance and dimension! (Heald, *Moving* 24)

The differences between this and earlier poems that intuit the function of sensation in the mind-body relationship parallel the differences between reacting, and perpetuating the cycle

of the mind that leads to suffering, and encountering a technique that enables the opposite motion of observing this cycle and reaching an end of it. The evolution of Heald's poetry allows the reader to look back at the act of recording an observation, such as "If I find one on my arm my mind / heats up", and see particular meaning. The detached stance of the speaker, the observation that physical sensation attends emotion, is a precursor of the equanimity displayed in *The Moving World*.

"You are awake, now, / in the universe of forces" (76). Lines that end the poem "Divorcee" towards the close of *The Moving World* look back at the rest of the poem with neutrality, a disinterest in how difficult this awakening is. The poem compares "The force with which / gravity slams you to the ground" and the force with which "desire flung you at the *beloved*" and leaves the reader with an intimation of the place these forces have within the great, largely unknown, unconscious cycles of human activity. Desire and despair are ultimately the same, the poem says; the more important distinction is between ignorance and awareness. The detached observation throughout the latter parts of *The Moving World* achieves a representation of equanimity, and this in turn forges relationships between poetry, the experience of meditation and individual experience more generally. It is the culmination of Heald's conception of a poetic informed by *samādhi*. Drawing on David Abram's work in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Heald says in his essay on the topic:

Meditative concentration, then, provides an alternate source of poetic experience. In this way, the poetry of *The Moving World* does not exhibit what the critic Stephen Burt has called, in relation to some postmodern poetry, "the pathos of uncertain epistemologies". Whilst not claiming certainty, it tends to celebrate epistemologies found, rather than lament those lost.... However, my own solution to the problem of abstraction, and of language in particular, is also consonant with Abram's view, that "traditional" elements of poetic language can be effective: "We have forgotten the poise," he says, "that comes from living in storied relation and reciprocity with the myriad things, the myriad *beings*, that perceptually surround us." "Only if we can renew that reciprocity" he goes on, "– grounding our newfound capacity for literate abstraction in those older, oral forms of experience – only then will the abstract intellect find its true value." For me, meditation is a crucial one of those "older" forms of experience, which traditional poetic language-use, its musicality and imagery,

turned towards such experience, can evoke, and find some lost ground beyond abstraction (“Reinhabiting” 177).

Not only is meditation “a crucial one of those “older” forms of experience” but is also, I would add, a part of an oral literary tradition supporting its practice and transmission. It is a tradition that not only includes a vast amount of poetry, parable and explication, but theory as to how and when such literary forms are used. In a collection of biographies of the monks closest to the historical Buddha, Gotama, edited by Bhikkhu Bodhi, there are a number of references to the uses of poetry and literary devices with the Buddha’s teaching as recorded in the Pali Canon, as well as descriptions of how some of his students were more adept at their use. For example, within Gotama’s retinue there was a monk with the particular ability to explicate the Buddha’s brief, poetic statements. In his biography of this monk, Mahākaccāna, Bhikkhu Bodhi explains that occasionally, “the Buddha would not teach in detail. Instead he would present the Dhamma briefly (*sankhittena*), offering only a short, sometimes even cryptic, statement charged with a profound but highly concentrated meaning” (*Great Disciples* 213). There is a pattern among the suttas in which at these times, the monk Mahākaccāna would appear: after the Buddha speaks a short poem, he rises and leaves and the listening monks ask Mahākaccāna for an explanation of its meaning; he initially refuses, explaining that they should approach the Buddha first, but then agrees, offering an analysis of the short utterance that is later applauded by the Buddha himself (226).

In another situation, the man who was to become one of the most important monks associated with the Buddha, Sāriputta, came to know of the Buddha’s teaching after many years of wandering asceticism by listening to a recitation of a short poem (Bodhi, *Great Disciples* 6–7). When Sāriputta, then known as Upatissa, came upon a monk whose appearance and demeanour suggested that he had found a path worth following, he approached this monk, Assaji, and asked for a brief explanation of what he practiced. After initially refusing and asking Upatissa to approach the Buddha himself, who was also residing in Rajgir at that time, he uttered a short poem, which has since become central in the Pali Canon:

Of those things that arise from a cause,  
The Tathāgata has told the cause,  
And also what their cessation is:

This is the doctrine of the Great Recluse.<sup>17</sup> (7)

According to the commentary, upon hearing this, Upatissa was instantly changed; due to his past development of spiritual faculties, he attained a high state of meditation, only to be surpassed later by enlightenment after some weeks of practice. Such transformation after hearing even a brief poetic utterance is not uncommon in the records of the monks and nuns contemporary to the Buddha and, while commentators explain that this has to do with individual accumulation of the capacity for awareness and insight (xxv), it cannot help but emphasise the importance of poetic forms within the continuing life of the Pali Canon.

When looking at this role of poetry within the Pali Canon, various questions closer to our own postmodern tradition arise: the monks' differing development in meditation changed their understanding of the texts they encountered, does this have a correlation with how readers' experiences outside poems change their potential meanings? This is a question that has underpinned all of this study, and its particular historical background here, in the teaching poems of the Pali Canon, is a powerful example of a connection "grounding our newfound capacity for literate abstraction in those older, oral forms of experience" (Abrams qtd. in "Reinhabiting" 177). What Gray called the "daring" nature of *The Moving World* can be seen here, in its thorough involvement and extension of very old and very new traditions. With their singular theme and commitment to the details of a very individual experience, the poems of *The Moving World* look back to poetry embedded within a highly specialised tradition of spiritual exercises. They stretch their status as *poems* – to recall "Listening", a poem discussed at the opening of this chapter – to an extreme (*Moving* 13). We could say they are the possibility of poetry which opens after it takes the risk of failing to be poetry; and in this, the poems look towards the outer limit of what poetry is currently achieving in Australia.

Heald's work, I am suggesting, is a part of the modern perpetuation of this much older tradition, yet still very much a part of the Australian scene. "In this Garden", the closing poem of *The Moving World* reflects the enduring and subtle relationship Heald's poems have with Australia, articulated through images of its natural landscape:

In this garden, parrots come

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<sup>17</sup> *Ye dhammā hetuppabhavā  
tesaṃ hetuṃ tathāgato āha  
tesaṃ cay o nirodho  
evaṃvādī mahāsamaṇo*



and strut around the grass  
as if they own the place,  
but when you look again  
are gone.

The slick red at their breast catches up  
A moist burning of my own there:  
anxieties that, likewise,  
come and go,  
natives of transience. (Heald, *Moving* 82)

In a way that exemplifies the most successful qualities of this volume, “In this Garden” weaves the important themes that Heald’s engagement with Vipassana has illuminated in such a way as that they are not themes at all, merely parts of nature that are always at work and always awaiting the right kind of awareness to bring them into dynamic interrelationship. The poem’s overall attitude of *samādhi* is expressed first in the observation of the parrots, and their disappearance, and is then turned towards the speaker’s self. What it reveals is a likeness between the natural, animal and human worlds that touches lightly on the three realities that Vipassana meditation eventually makes known to its practitioners: *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*. That is, the ever-changing nature of life, its unsatisfactory nature and the absence of any eternal, objective self (Goenka 14). The “slick red” of the parrots mirrors the speaker’s own sensation of anxiety, a part of the suffering of life encountered every day, giving it colour and substance. The transience of the parrots represents the way that every aspect of life is ultimately like them: they “come and go”. The detached and compassionate awareness applied equally to the parrots and his own inner life loosens the focus on the speaker’s self and makes his own anxieties seem independent of him. These anxieties are instead portrayed as parts of nature that have as much to do with himself as the parrots that arrive at and depart from the garden. Important to a *samādhi*-based poetic is the transparency with which the speaker conveys these relationships: written by someone else, the image of the parrot may well have been left as a metaphor for the speaker’s own life without further comment. Heald, however, wants the reader to be aware of these processes – both of meditation and poetry’s role in communicating the experience of meditation – and thus the beauty of this poem arises from its honesty.

The closing line – “natives of transience” – inevitably connects all of these concerns to Australia, and in this it touches upon the ongoing importance of place – the Australian landscape and its society – to Heald’s poetry, as well as the place of the meditative tradition within it. As sustained descriptions of a highly personal experience within a universal technique, the poems of *The Moving World* are quite unlike any that have appeared in Australia before. In its invitation and its continuation of an ancient tradition of poetry, spanning centuries and many cultures, the volume has a focus and purpose that stretches beyond contemporary Australian poetics and yet remains an important part of it. Its colours, angles of observation and the constant presence of Australian plant and animal life within Heald’s work intuit “a deep readying” (“Sitting” 21), and the connection forged here is a development that may not be understood for quite some time.

## CONCLUSION

*Experience is never limited and it is never complete, it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider's web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every airborne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind – Henry James, "The Art of Fiction"*

One of the epigraphs with which this study began was from Les Murray's "Satis Passio": "Art's best is a standing miracle / at an uncrossable slight distance". That poem elaborates on the Murray idea that all art (and all religions) are essentially poetry, but to isolate the statement to only poetry for a moment: this distance requires a poem, in its inevitable incursion into a writer's and reader's reality, to orient itself towards this reality in certain ways. The "uncrossable distance", however slight, creates the poem: the swerves beget image, metaphor, rhythm. This study has encountered many related uncrossable distances: between the poetic speaker and its reader, even its writer; between experience and meaning, and experience and language; between the experience of spiritual practices and the expression of that experience, to name only some of them. They are distances that enliven acts of relationship, the anticipation of crossing. Among the poetic techniques animated by this anticipation that these chapters have analysed are metaphor, sound, representations of physical sensation, the relationship between the visual image and the imperative aphorism, and the questioning refusal of them all in the pursuit to inspire experience itself. The other, broader acts of relationship witnessed in the study are between the poets themselves, in their responses to each others' work.

It is through the lens of relationship then, that the investigations of this study may be best summed up. Reading Judith Beveridge's poems about the Bodhisattva and Buddha, I suggested that she reimagines historical sources through the use of various poetic techniques, and argued that it is through its poetry that Beveridge's portraits are able to reveal the centrality of direct experience to the transformation of the Bodhisattva to the Buddha, and therefore to what the Buddha taught. This troubles Michael Heald's assertion that as Beveridge's representations of the Bodhisattva and Buddha are products of an imaginative way of knowing, as opposed to the meditative one more aligned to what the Buddha actually embodied, they are less convincing in their portrayal of the meditative development that led to his enlightenment.

The lingering sense of absence in Beveridge's work, which I come to define as *anatta*, or absence of any stable self as espoused by Buddhist theory, is related to Kevin Hart's own insistent figuring of absence in his poems, which also comes under close scrutiny in his critical, theological and philosophical work. That there is an "anonymity" that lives "at the base of the 'I'", an idea which accords as much with Buddhism as with the traditions of literary theory and the negative theology of Christian mysticism with which Hart is engaged, is a construction that places the category "experience" prior to any sense of self; it is rather what makes the sense of a self possible, and makes it possible for it to inhabit a world of others. My analysis of how Hart's poems relate to "primal scenes" opened on to his figuring of "another world within this one", which is both an engagement with the ever-repeating origin in the present and an approach to the spiritual. His poems are expressions of the spiritual insofar as they invoke and occasionally perform "The Calm", an exemplary way of approaching experience.

The quest for equanimity similarly drives Robert Gray's poetry, whose reflections of Cha'n Buddhism animate a profound respect for the particulars of everyday life, ultimately for the benefit this attitude has for the perceiving mind. In Gray's poetry of things, I ventured, the preservation of appearances is cultivated through attentiveness to the present; the thing stands for all that is able to be known and how we are to know, as his poems observe our responsiveness to things in terms of the discrete, changing parts of the mind. This stance of the poetic speaker as a detached observer contributes to another expression self-contained subject's dissolution and yet in its relationship to Gray's other language of aphorism, the ethical purpose he holds for poetry is performed.

Michael Heald's poetry, which increasingly responds to his experiences of Vipassana meditation, presents a speaker who is also a detached observer, but at one more remove: observing the processes of observation from within itself. His poems problematise the threshold of metaphorical and literal meaning in this project of witnessing. Preserving the necessary otherness of meditative states at the same time as their implications for the speaker's present moment is a difficult tension sustained in his work through the balance of poetic technique and clear explanation. I argued that these moments are manifestations of the poet's volition to invite others to undergo the experience of Vipassana meditation themselves. As opposed to the way Beveridge's sequences reveal the importance of direct experience to realising the Buddha's teaching through techniques of metaphor and rich, sensory detail – which Heald's poetry deflects – Heald insists on the necessity of personal experience in an altogether different way. In his poems' openness to the event of experience itself, the trial of

unknowing, of risk and otherness, Heald's refusal of the imaginative "way of knowing" is a rephrasing of poetry's relationship to spiritual practice.

The conclusions of all the chapters observe poetry's involvement in ethics, in living in the world with others. One of the wider concerns this study touched upon, then, was lyric address. As Hart says, reading Blanchot, "experience is communication with others, not an affirmation of a particular content but an affirmation of affirmation" ("Non-experience" 199), and as I said at the close of the first chapter, a part of Beveridge's interpretation of the Buddha as a poet is her insistence that Gotama's work on the nature of himself is not complete until it is offered to others – in the "intending of another" proper to lyric poetry. Relatedly, in many of Gray's poems the aphorism represents the human voice and its attendant ethics, a voice that intends another. If, when all we can ultimately isolate as "self" is a conglomeration of intentions, actions and reactions, which experience encounters and disturbs to reconstruct and recreate, the acts of reconstruction and recreation are always involving and relying on the presence of others, through whatever method of contact. To recall John Wall's understanding of Ricoeur, the "trajectory" of metaphors' meaning "ends not in themselves but in the transformed world of an interpreting *self*" (*Moral Creativity* 33). The work of these poets suggest that it is metaphor's capacity to change our perception of the world that, if it has any power to do so, would be at the heart of poetry's potential to change its reader.

This work done under the guise of reconstruction touches upon and weaves together important threads in this study. Dewey insists that only in the act of "recreation" – the work of creation by the one perceiving a work of art – can an object actually be perceived as art (*Art* 54), and as I quoted in the first chapter, in regard to the aesthetics of Buddhism's practices as found in the Pali Canon, John Holder says: "this aesthetically *reconstructed* existence is the religious transformation sought in early Buddhism" ("Aesthetics" 19; my emphasis), a statement that recalls Ricoeur's understanding of metaphor's "reconstruction" of reality and one applicable, I would suggest, even to the practitioner who is not concerned with aesthetics. These areas of thought and practice are connected by more than just a shared term. They refer to the idea that there are moveable pieces involved here – the mysterious fluidity not only of the relationship between poet and audience but at work within the individual itself. Ideas of "reconstruction" and "recreation" also refer to the place where the aesthetic nature of spiritual development has a stake in the lives of the writers in this study, as

poets and spiritual practitioners of various traditions.<sup>18</sup> Hart says in his essay “La Poesia e Scala a Dio: On Reading Charles Wright”:

The sheer amount of testimony by mystics should suffice to indicate that they know they have encountered God, but of all people they know what they do not know. Their experience of God remains open to meditation, perhaps all the more so once they have written about it and experienced language. (202)

Having been unsettled by the experience of God, and then again by language, it is ultimately experience, in the form of meditation, to which the mystics return: possibly *because* of this encounter with language. This study has sought to trouble the authority that language currently holds in how we consider the construction and reconstruction of knowledge; it posited rather that experience is the primary condition for knowledge, in a paradoxical “knowing what one does not know” that pertains both to the experience of language and the experientially spiritual life.

There are a number of things this thesis has not done. There are, of course, other poets this study could have included given more space. The poetry of Les Murray, John Shaw Neilson, Francis Webb, Judith Wright, and voices of Indigenous Australia, to name some, would have had much to add to the investigations of representations of spiritual practices in Australian poetry. The study could also have oriented itself to post-colonialism and thereby moved towards another type of understanding of the poets’ encounters with the writing of other cultures, and spiritual practices originating in other cultures. This would have acknowledged also that three of the poets were born in England and migrated to Australia in childhood affording, at least in the case of Hart, a perspective on this country’s comparable strangeness (Adamson 92). However, in a broader sense, the post-colonial project is further along than the more phenomenological one of reading poems in their possible existence prior to these categories and revealing, perhaps as only lyric poetry can, what enables these categories to exist.

Another side to the topic of experience and literature which has not been fully explored in this study weighs towards lived experience and reception; this study has only glanced at the influence a reader’s previous encounters with literature and life can have on

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<sup>18</sup> The potential for understanding spiritual development as related to aesthetics has a complicated history, particularly within the Christian tradition. While the exploration of this would be interesting an exercise, it lies well beyond the scope of this study.

their experience of a particular work. Anecdotally, I am reminded of a colleague's recollection that a notable critic very obviously misread a story by Barbara Baynton because they had no idea how to milk a cow. Though within a very different context, this relates to an attitude within the commentary on the Pali Canon that experience and theory need to go together (Bodhi, *Words* 82–3), so that some texts within the Canon may only give themselves to understanding when a particular stage of meditation is experienced. This has interesting implications not only for the interpretation of the Canon – and by extrapolation, testimony within other spiritual traditions – but for reading generally. It would be interesting to know, for example, if and how the application of a “meditative way of knowing” that has been Heald's recent focus applies to criticism as well as poetry. Or how mystical experience within the Christian tradition can influence the reading of those texts, and what may remain always concealed to those who have not had such trials. The same reasoning can be extended to any variety of everyday experiences.

One of the reasons for embarking on a project that encounters, and necessarily falls short of answering, such questions is that as there is still so much untravelled territory in Australian literary criticism. When academic writing turns to Australian poetry it is often still concerned with the “what” rather than the “how”; I have endeavoured to let one reveal the other through the focus on experience, which presented a number of conceptual threads that condensed to address the generative processes of each poets' work. More explorations into each of these poets are needed. Writers such as Gray and Hart have a breadth and complexity of work necessitating full-length studies, and the work begun by Hart on Gray's poetry, particularly in the context of comparative religions, would be illuminating if turned towards his own writing as well. The poetry of Beveridge and Heald is rich territory for investigating the representation of the Pali Canon in Australian poetry, particularly given their differing approaches. Beveridge's *Devadatta's Poems* again draws upon historical sources of the Buddha's life and times; within it, “The Buddha at Uruvela” recalls the historical figures of her earlier “Buddha Cycle” and reveals the continuing importance of these interests to her work. Investigations into Heald's poetry are long overdue. More study into comparative religion and Australian poetry is called for, particularly the relationship of older poetic traditions – the Pali Canon, the writings of early Chinese Buddhist poets, of Christian mystics and Indigenous songlines – to contemporary poetry; these studies would benefit not only the understanding of individual poets and poetry about spiritual practices, but also the understanding of how poetry works and ultimately how language approaches and relates experience.

In Hart's essay "Religion and Literature?", he encourages a much more thorough understanding of interdisciplinarity within these areas:

What needs to be done? Well, to start with, a great deal more work by everyone in the area. Interdisciplinarity is not looking over the fence and making remarks about the charming view; it is ploughing your field and the one over the fence as well, and seeking to cross-fertilize the crops on both sides. (146)

He suggests that phenomenology should be the lens for such efforts (46); on the one hand, in the context of the concerns of this study, this is a further call for investigating the links between phenomenology and the meditative techniques of Buddhism, in a way similar to Hart's studies of the relationships between phenomenology, deconstruction and Christian mysticism. On the other hand, the idea of using phenomenology in the exercise of interdisciplinarity could be followed in regard to contemporary Australian poetry, by acknowledging that interdisciplinarity needs to be an active, experiential investigation, and in this context this points to the close reading of poetry new and old and an openness to shifting modes of responding to it. One of the implications of this study may be that experience is not only interesting to investigate as a theme, but is more pressingly topical as a technique of teaching and critical writing.

A comment, then, on my own experience. As most critics would most likely note, relationships are revealed by the experience of writing about them. In writing, I could observe that Beveridge's poems welcome and inspire response, and how difficult in comparison it was to respond to the poems of Heald. Hart draws a reader in to his personal metaphoric language, whereas Gray's *visual* language is more resistant to the words attempting to describe it. In short, a critic's experience and knowledge of a poem is deepened when writing about it, further to what can be gleaned by reading alone. The act of writing breaches the inner boundaries of a poem which remain not only closed but invisible, until participation in the medium through which the poem speaks: not the art, which would mean another poem, but the medium, the different art of arranging words and thoughts in prose, in contrast to poetry.

In the conclusion of his prose memoir, Gray reads Cavafy's "Ithaka" as a reflection on the writing process, quoting it in full. Ithaka is what has always to be kept in mind, it is what "gave you the marvellous journey", the exotic destination propelling the traveller through various encounters until ultimately, "Wise as you will have become, full of



experience, / you will have understood what these Ithakas mean” (qtd. in *Land* 345). To follow Gray’s likening of this journey to the process of writing, Ithaka is a destination proposed by the act of writing, recalling, in this, the “secret origin” of a work similarly posited by the act of writing in Hart’s commentary on Blanchot. This study’s questions about how poetry’s responses to spiritual practices intersect with the experience of poetry itself did not ultimately encounter an impasse or confess the existence of an ineffable category of experience. They discovered instead the dynamic relationships of experiences past and present, of the past within the present, that motivate not from below or behind but from inside the words of poems, here and now, engaging with a literary culture that is current, changing, alive and enlivening our experience of this moment, in this country.

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