New Writing

Suddenness: On Rapid Knowledge

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How are poetic ideas thought up? This paper is part of a broader project on the relations between poetry and knowledge. I have been interviewing contemporary Australian poets to find out how knowledge processes pertain to their work. In the process I've learnt some surprising things – such as the fact that most of my subjects have described experiences of composing at speeds where it is simply too fast to think. Indeed, a majority have stated that rapid and unpremeditated composition is their dominant mode of producing. In this paper, I contrast my findings, and those of prior writers on the topic of rapid knowledge (Kleist, Wordsworth, Auden, Heidegger), with the recent neurological research of Antonio Damasio. Damasio postulates that human decision-making is in general conducted at speeds that are too fast to be fully conscious. In the process, Damasio offers interesting possibilities for hypothesising the pre-conscious mechanisms that poets draw upon when the words come into their heads.

Part 1: On Poems We Don't Know How to Read

Coins fill the busker's hat;
it's true, a thief will steal from the blind.
Satellites spin delicate journeys
in the woods above. Space

the guestroom we never had.
Malleable, down below,
in the mute neon between streets,
we've touched only the details of maps.

Believing ourselves beamed upon,
we script new mercy themes
and here are the things I carry:
a silver bell, a desk, a lock of hair,

[. . .]

Extract from 'Funambulist', Jennifer Harrison (2006c)

Illiteracy

I think it's always an open question whether we actually know how to read. I doubt anyone would know straight off how to read the opening stanzas of 'Funambulist', the first poem in Jennifer Harrison's 2006 book *Folly and Grief*. To read these lines, to work out what it means to find oneself 'down below,/ in

the mute neon between streets', one must oneself become 'malleable' to their strange contours. Really, to read lines such as these, you need first to experience your own inability to read certain things, which is to say, you need to experience your own illiteracy. That strikes me as a characteristic of most good modern poetry. This is also why I laugh at the title of Terry Eagleton's recent book *How to Read a Poem* (2007). To my mind, the idea that you could pre-establish *how to read* a poem is already a failure to grasp the challenge of the modern form, a challenge repeated at each individual instance. Each successful poem is a reminder of the fact that we still don't know how to read. So Mayakovsky (1972) described the *How to Write* books he encountered in his day: 'The correct title for these books would not be *How to Write*, but *How They Used to Write*'. It has to be invented anew every time: not just the writing of the words, but the way to read them as well.

Is this tantamount to saying that the reading of modern poetry is a scientific process? In some ways, I'm suggesting just that: reading a poem like Harrison's 'Funambulist' engages a scientific process, in that it involves experimenting with different possibilities prior to finding the one that seems to work. This article is part of a broader research project on the links between poetry and knowledge[1], and this certainly strikes me as one of those links. By the same token, I think it's important to highlight the differences between poetry and science. This will take me to the theme of my paper.

I think it's fair to say that you can't really know a scientific fact without understanding how it has been produced. Lotman says just this, in the introduction to his *The Analysis of the Poetic Text* (1976). Lotman is criticising 'popularised books' of scientific knowledge for their focus on 'results and solutions'. By failing to inform readers of the experimental methods by which such – provisional – results are achieved, such books in fact provide 'typical cases of an alliance of the pre- and post-scientific states of knowledge *against* science' (1976: 4). For Lotman, if you don't understand the processes by which we arrive at facts, then you simply don't understand the facts. I doubt many would disagree with him on this point[2]. What I find curious is that the same criterion does not apply to poetry. Who would say that you can't understand a poem unless you understand the processes by which it was composed? Certainly not Lotman, who explicitly brackets such extra-textual considerations out of his analyses of poetic texts. Nor, I think, would many readers regard knowledge of a poem's production processes as at all essential to their reading of the finished artefact. Indeed, the whole idea might sound pretty silly.

The following paper constitutes a thought-experiment. What would a reading that took such factors into account look like? Could we submit modern poetry to this further scientific requirement? If we were to read modern poetry with an eye to how it is produced, as much as to how it appears as a final product, would we have a fundamentally different experience? Could this even constitute a better way of reading?

> *No one will notice what you carry in your driftwood arms*

Extract from 'Folly', Jennifer Harrison (2006b)

How are Poetic Ideas Thought Up?

I raise this possibility because the research project mentioned above, the study of the links between poetry and knowledge, has involved me asking a group of contemporary Australian poets a series of questions about how they produce their poetry. I've been specifically concerned with how knowledge practices come into the act of composition, the act of composing books like Harrison's *Folly and Grief* (2006), Jan Owen's *Timedancing* (2002), or Robert Gray's *Afterimages* (2002). What I've heard about composition in general, however, has led me to wonder about the very way I read poems.

I've been asking the study's participants some very specific questions about the thought processes which go into writing lines like those cited above. One of these questions concerns the act of describing things in verse. Is it that the poet looks upon an internal image, and tries to find the words and sounds most adequate to it? Or does some other process pertain? Here's my question, and how Jennifer Harrison responded:

> **P:** Is it that you're seeing images in your head and finding words to describe them, or is it that the words accompany the images as they arrive?
>
> **J:** When writing in a flurry, there's almost no space between what arrives and what is written, so time seems to go very, very quickly. I can't discern a space between what I'm thinking and what I'm writing. It's almost like they've become one. I guess the point I'm making is that somehow the visual image *seems* to come first and yet other connections are arriving simultaneously, immediately, not coming later. (J. Harrison, interview with P. Magee, April 22, 2007)

There are two things I want to draw your attention to here. The first is the way Harrison characterises the intellectual content of her verse as something that arrives in a bundle with the imagery in which it is couched, and might be thought to comment upon. As she says, of one such instance:

> **J:** There was an immediate intellectual component. I found that quite interesting: that the image, or the visual image, what you might see in the 'mind's eye', arrives concurrently with an intellectual sting, or tail. (J. Harrison, interview with P. Magee, April 22, 2007)

On further questioning she revealed that the rhythms of the verse are also part of this simultaneous package:

> **P:** Does hearing ever seem uppermost in that process of composition?
> **J:** I think that comes later. I'll read aloud to hear the words.
> **P:** The rhythms that you've already imported into them?
> **J:** Yes. (J. Harrison, interview with P. Magee, April 22, 2007)

This latter response makes it even clearer – and this is what has me thoroughly intrigued – that there is something fundamentally pre-conscious[3] about the various aesthetic decisions Harrison is making when coming up with such lines. They come to her, ready-formed.

The second thing I want you to note, which is closely related, is what Harrison says about the speed of composition. This leads me to what has been the most remarkable of my research's preliminary findings. All of the ten poets I have so far interviewed have described experiences of composing at speeds where it is simply too fast to think – or, to put it more precisely, too fast to think through consciously *all* of the different aesthetic decisions that are making their way into the lines in question. This is not entirely surprising. We've known since the early sixties that this is how oral epics are composed. Drawing on the work of his teacher Milman Parry, and their joint fieldwork among Yugoslavian oral poets, Albert Lord established that rapidity of composition is a fundamental feature of epic poetry (2000). The recitation of works like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Lord showed, were less acts of word-for-word memorisation of pre-established texts, than instances of on the spot improvisation, based on the reciter/composer's familiarity with the stories, word patterns and rhythms in which the epics tended to be sung. Homer was simply the last person in this chain, the one with a pen in his hand. Oral epic is made up on the spot, at speeds at which it is simply too fast to think. As I said, this is well established. What I do not believe has yet been established, or even hypothesised, is that literate 20th and 21st century poetry might be produced in a similar fashion. Lord himself suggests just the opposite[4]. Indeed, he bases much of his explanation for the formulaic nature of epic poetry (e.g. the repetitive epithets that pepper Homer's texts: the wine-dark sea, rosy-fingered Dawn, bright-eyed Athena etc) on the grounds that such pre-packaged phrasing potentiated rapid composition in performance. I don't disagree with Lord's explanation of the mechanics of oral poetry. But I think we should open our eyes to the possibility that verse geared around the breaking of formulaic patterns might be composed at a similar pace, which is to say, just as pre-consciously.

There are two ways I need to qualify the material I've just tabled. First, every one of the poets I've interviewed has stressed the importance of post-compositional editing to the production of their work. This definitively separates their practice from that of the oral poets Parry and Lord studied. What's more, such editing is an incredibly slow process. Take the title poem of Harrison's previous book, *Dear B* (1999), a book that was short listed for the Age Book of the Year, the NSW Premier's Prize, and the Judith Wright Prize. Harrison comments:

> I wrote the 'Dear B' sequence sketchily in Boston in 1990, 10 years after the Nepal trip [which it describes]. I then finished the poem in Melbourne five years later. (J. Harrison, interview with P. Magee, April 22, 2007)

The second qualifier I want to add is that Harrison, like many of my subjects, distinguishes between two distinct and main modes of composition: the first, which she describes as 'writing in a flurry', is the process I have just discussed. The second mode, which she refers to as a 'weaving-sewing' practice, involves collecting odd lines and phrases that have been composed at different moments, and 'sewing' them together to produce a poem. Harrison stresses the dialectical nature of this second mode, whereby fragments speak to each

other, and bring about edits and changes towards a final poem. Though it's a complex question, which I plan to address elsewhere, the analytic and diagnostic thought processes that go into such 'weaving' and 'sewing' – indeed, the processes which go into editing, which this second mode of composition resembles – are clearly much more time-consuming and conscious than those I have thus far considered. But that's a whole other essay in itself [5].

At any rate, and to summarise the two points I've just made, it would be wrong to underplay the presence of conscious factors in the productions of the poets I am interviewing.

That said, it's hard to detect any of our typical communication models here, whereby one uses words as instruments to express an intended meaning. I will provide one such typical model in the second part of this paper, and will discuss the difficulties attendant upon it there. But for the moment, I'll just say that I am yet to find a poet who reports an instance of consciously trying to construct a verbal figure to express a given idea. It's true that a number describe setting themselves tasks, such as to write on a certain theme, via a certain incident. But then it's a matter of seeing what happens in the moment of composition. As Jan Owen puts it, 'I write anything that occurs to me', a comment that applies to pre-meditated as much as unthemed compositions (J. Owen, interview with P. Magee, March 12, 2007). That's why I'd hesitate before saying that the poets I've interviewed *express* their ideas in their verse. It's more like they have to read the lines they've just composed to see what their ideas in fact are. Take Claire Gaskin, whose first book, *A Bud*, published in 2006, is the product of some 20 years of writing and editing, and who reports composing largely in the accretive ('weaving-sewing') manner just described. This is how Claire responded to my question about how knowledge appears in her work:

> Even though it's informed by reading, I don't say, I'm going to write about this. Even though I've been thinking about this or reading about this, I don't sit down and say, I'll write about this. It's more like, I'll write and then I'll read it and discover what it's about. (C. Gaskin, interview with P. Magee, January 20, 2007)

Again, what my research is revealing, about the knowing and thinking and even singing that occurs in contemporary Australian poetry, is that it initially, and perhaps even largely, happens somewhere else, beyond the poet's immediate ken.

> *I returned through the frail wall of fable*
> *back to the picture Pacific*
>
> *and further*
> *beyond nonchalance*
>
> *I returned with new rivers*
> *pressed between the heart and its salt*

Extract from 'Folly', Jennifer Harrison (2006b)

With the Aid of a Computer

I've said that these findings, however preliminary, might well lead one to read poetry very differently, and I'll get to that shortly. But firstly, I want to underline just how challenging I think the phenomena I'm uncovering are. To do so, I'll return to Yuri Lotman, whose characterisation of science I cited above. Lotman is, of course, better known as a theorist of poetry than a philosopher of science. As far as his theory of poetry goes, Lotman's method involves a deliberate refusal to address questions concerned with a poem's production. What he does do, however, is demonstrate the complexity of the poems thus produced. I'll sketch his theory, prior to returning to the question of how we might respond to the data I've tabled because I think it makes their challenge even more pointed.

For Lotman, a poem can be defined quite precisely as a text with an informational content way in excess of ordinary prose. The reason for this is that poetry takes dimensions of the language that are usually regarded as unmeaningful and artfully arranges them to convey meaning. Grammar, for instance, is a function of everyday speech, albeit one we rarely notice. A good poet will deploy grammar in such a way as to make it, the grammar itself, convey something about the actual subject of the poem. Take the lines of Harrison's I cited above:

> *Malleable, down below,*
> *in the mute neon between streets,*
> *we've touched only the details of maps.*

Jennifer Harrison (2006c)

The strange separation of 'we', the subject of this sentence, and 'malleable', the adjective that both precedes and qualifies it, requires the reader to hold the word 'malleable' in mind for two whole lines of anticipation before being able to make sense of the construction. As I suggested above, the reader must him or herself become malleable to read these lines and this, simply so as to piece the grammar together[6]. That is to say, the sentence communicates not merely by way of its propositional content, which is already highly complex (what are these 'details of maps' that we've touched, and failed to reach beyond? The things themselves, there in the street, or the mere representations of them on the page? Just what is it that's beyond our grasp?), but also through its artful deployment of grammar. This extra level of information distinguishes it from prose. As with grammar, so too with the text's phonological character, its deployment of rhythm, its utilisation of line endings and so forth. These are all typical aspects of spoken and written prose, which we typically ignore. Here they start to speak, and indeed sing. In Lotman's words, 'any formal element appearing in the language may in poetry acquire a semantic character thereby obtaining supplementary meanings' (1976: 33).

There are certainly problems with this presentation of poetry as a 'striving for maximal informational saturation', as a number of critics have pointed out (Lotman, 1976: 4). Eagleton has, for instance, recently reminded us of the range of poetries such a theory cannot explain: 'Perhaps it works better with Wallace Stevens than with Lucretius or a traditional ballad' (Eagleton, 2007: 52). I think Eagleton's wrong on Lucretius, but as regards the traditional ballads, and even

more pertinently the oral poetry discussed above, he's got a real point. None of this really concerns my subject group, however, whom I'll loosely define as those Australian poets who publish with major publishers and win national prizes, or who should do so. Lotman's criteria, which I'd submit are mimetic[7] as much as informational, apply to work such as Harrison's, Gaskin's, Gray's *et al.*, and provide a decent, if not definitive, sketch of the standards to which these poets write, and by which they judge each other's work. Nor, I think, would Eagleton deny this. What I find most valuable in Eagleton's treatment of Lotman is the following question, a question which conveys his appreciation of the sheer complexity of the aesthetic phenomena Lotman helps us to identify: 'How, we might then ask, does a poet accomplish all this without the aid of a computer' (Eagleton, 2007: 57)?

I submit that the pre-conscious mind must, at least in part, be that very computer. But if so, just what is it that we're reading?

> *When your father lost his words*
> *you wanted to take him to the sea.*
> *You wanted it to speak of his permanence.*
>
> *How could he tell you to leave*
> *but by closing his eyes? That –*
> *and the night in them deepening.*

<div align="right">Extract from 'Galleria', Jennifer Harrison (2006d)</div>

Suddenness

I want to take issue with the way we write about poetry as if it were the product of the poet's conscious thought and decisions. This occurs in the most innocent of contexts. Lotman, for instance, gives the following illustration of his albeit brilliant theory of poetry as a medium of 'maximal informational saturation' (1976: 40). In a good poem:

> . . . the grammatical meanings, thanks to the fact that their elemental unconscious use in language is replaced by the artist's meaningful construction of the text, can assume unaccustomed semantic expressiveness on being incorporated into unusual oppositions. (1976: 72)

I take issue with the implied opposition between everyday unconscious grammatical habits, and the artist's conscious deployment of this same material. I submit that that's a way of not reading it. This returns me to the question I raised at the start of this paper: would we read contemporary poetry differently if we had an eye to how it is actually produced?

Alison Croggon's 1997 book *The Blue Gate* includes a poem simply entitled 'Notes'. Part of it runs:

> *your subtle lips*
> *prick stars out of my skin*
> *voluble as laughter*
> *shivering the darkness*

<div align="right">Extract from 'Notes', Alison Croggon (1997: 39)</div>

Elsewhere in the poem one encounters the phrase 'the voices of books' (1997: 40). Do books have voices? The phrase evokes a set of questions in me. Or rather, it crystallises the questions to which this preliminary research has lead me:

What if we thought of each of the poems we read – say the poems of Jenny Harrison's that I've cited here, or just now Alison Croggon's – what if we thought of them as voices that have issued spontaneously from somewhere way beyond or even without the writer's conscious self?

What if a book of poems were in fact a gathering of spontaneous utterances, a library a place resounding with sudden speech from elsewhere? What if we regarded each and every poem within it as sudden, unpremeditated and alien, even to its author's own self?

Would we hear these poems differently?

Part 2: 'Imaginary Scenarios, Built on Visual and Auditory Patterns'

Literature review

I'll start by saying that these findings are not entirely new. Wordsworth's 1805 Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* features the famous description of poetry as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' (1805: 22). We tend to forget the context for this phrase, which on its own seems to epitomise all things 'romantic', according to our typical misuse of the word[8]. Actually, Wordsworth is discussing the intellectual content of poetry. Here is the fuller context:

> For all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; but, though this be true, poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. For our continued influxes of feeling are also modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representatives of all our past feelings (Wordsworth, 1805: 23).

Wordsworth is describing a form of thinking that involves multiple simultaneous connections. He's saying that we don't think through each exact facet of the poetic phrase, at the moment we invent it. Recall Harrison's words: 'somehow the visual image *seems* to come first and yet other connections are arriving simultaneously, immediately, not coming later' (J. Harrison, interview with P. Magee, April 22, 2007). Of course Wordsworth's focus is on the intellectual and emotive components, rather than the imageric. But both he and Harrison are united in describing a form of compositional thinking that lies beyond the poet's own conscious control at the very moment of composition.

Now it may well be that in this very comment, Wordsworth offers a nuancing of what I've said so far. It may be that one's spontaneous composition conveys the residue of earlier, and presumably conscious, thought processes. That certainly tallies with what my informants, Harrison included, have told me about the surprising amount of research and thinking

they do in fact perform prior (often years prior) to engaging in something like Wordsworth's 'spontaneous overflow'.

This is an important aspect of the question, though it's worth noting that other poets have described experiences of 'spontaneous overflow' that result in ideas one has never had before at all. Here is W.H. Auden, his 1967 lecture on 'Words and the Word':

> When we genuinely speak, we do not have the words at our bidding; we have to find them, and we do not know exactly what we are going to say until we have said it, and we say and hear something new that has never been said or heard before. (Auden, 1968: 105)

For Auden, 'genuine speech' has no need of a prior conscious gestation. Indeed, he says just the opposite to Wordsworth: the register of genuine speech is that during it we come out with things we've never seen or heard before. We don't have to have already known what we will come to know, on reading back through our own poetry. As such, Auden comes close to the position articulated by Heinrich von Kleist, Wordsworth's great contemporary: 'I believe many a great speaker to have been ignorant, when he opened his mouth, of what he was going to say' (1997: 406). Yet Kleist's claims are even more extensive than Auden's. Seeing pre-conscious composition as a function of everyday conversation, political rhetoric and even knowledge itself, Kleist asserted that 'it is not we who know things but pre-eminently a certain *condition* of ours which knows' (1997: 408).

In sum, all three of these authors describe, as do my informants, compositional processes that involve a significantly pre-given dimension. We don't think through all these things consciously, at the moment we come up with them.

Neurology

I've already said something about the consequences such findings might have for our reading of poetry. I now want to suggest that they have implications for how we theorise creative thinking more generally. This to me is the real value of the question to which Lotman's theories lead Eagleton: 'How, we might then ask, does a poet accomplish all this without the aid of a computer?' (2007: 57). The value of this question, and the sort of findings that lead to it, is that they prompt us to hypothesise that parts of the human mind *are* that computer. Arts practice involves tuning into it. This hypothesis is further corroborated when we turn to the fields of neurology and psychoanalysis[9]. There one finds empirically founded theories of decision-making and sign production that suggest that rapid pre-conscious composition is a trait of all human behaviour. Though the links to creative practice haven't quite been made by the scientists or the psychoanalysts yet, they've provided us with the means to point to these connections ourselves.

Antonio Damasio's *Descartes' Error: Emotion*, *Reason and the Human Brain*, written in 1994, is a prime case in point. In it, Damasio shows us just how strange life would be if we really did perform all of our cognitive decisions – from what word to use through to whether to do business with a friend's

enemy – consciously. *That* is the tendency for the patients with pre-frontal lobe damage whom Damasio sees in his practice as a neurologist. He describes a consultation with one such patient. The subject of the discussion was the date of the patient's next visit. Damasio proposed two possible dates:

> The patient pulled out his appointment book and began consulting the calendar. The behaviour that then ensued, which was witnessed by several investigators, was remarkable. For the better part of a half-hour, the patient enumerated reasons for and against each of the two dates: previous engagements, proximity to other engagements, possible meteorological conditions, virtually anything that one could reasonably think about concerning a simple date. (1994: 193)

Clearly we shortcut these processes when making decisions.

But what then of the 'high-reason' model of decision-making, that 'pride and joy of Plato, Descartes and Kant'? Damasio glosses the model as follows:

> Basically, in the high reason view, you take the different scenarios [*of a decision problem*, *e.g.* *when should I make that appointment*] apart and to use current managerial parlance you perform a cost-benefit analysis of each of them. Keeping in mind 'subjective expected utility', which is the thing you want to maximise, you infer logically what is good and what is bad. For instance, you consider the consequences of each option at different points in the projected future and weigh the ensuing losses and gains. [. . .] A substantial part of this calculation will depend on the continued generation of yet more imaginary scenarios, built on visual and auditory patterns, among others, and also on the continued generation of verbal narratives which accompany those scenarios, and which are essential to keep the process of logical inference going. (1994: 171)

As the example of Damasio's patients demonstrates, this model of conscious deliberation cannot possibly reflect how we actually conduct our everyday decisions. It would just take too much time.

Damasio proposes that the real way we do things, when faced with a decision problem of this sort – what date to make an appointment – is as follows.

> The brain of a normal, intelligent and educated adult reacts to the situation by rapidly creating scenarios of possible response options *and* related outcomes. (1994: 170)

We begin, that is, with a brief insight into the plethora of options: 'The key components unfold in our mind instantly, sketchily, and virtually simultaneously, too fast for the details to be clearly defined' (1994: 173). Some of these options elicit an immediate emotional response in us, such as an 'an unpleasant gut feeling' (1994: 173). Far from retarding our thinking, ideologically given bodily feelings like this guide us to make snap judgements among the plethora of options, for they serve to prejudge the material at hand. For Damasio, such habitually acquired emotional triggers of good and bad feeling ('somatic markers', as he calls them), are the keys to our comparative

functionality. Emotions help us think, by allowing us *not* to think about the vast majority of decisions we in fact take.

It is the capacity to emote that gets lost in pre-frontal lobe damage. This, for Damasio, is Descartes' error: Descartes failed to understand that without the body's acculturated emotional input to help us to prejudge options, we'd get lost in a forest of possibilities, just like patients with pre-frontal lobe damage. For in fact, the model of reasoning that forms 'the pride and joy of Plato, Descartes and Kant', with its separation of emotion and intellect, is a model of brain damage and social impairment.

I've just described Damasio's picture (strictly speaking, it's a hypothesis, the 'somatic marker' hypothesis (1994: 165–203)) of the true state of affairs. Let me reiterate that description, this time bringing the question of creative thinking into play. We're describing a decision problem like: which of these two dates should I choose? Recall what Damasio says: the scenarios 'unfold in our mind instantly, sketchily, and virtually simultaneously, too fast for the details to be clearly defined' (1994: 173). At that point our body's store of culturally acquired antipathies helps us to arrive at a rapid choice between them. Damasio describes this process with a filmic metaphor:

> To our consciousness, the scenarios are made of multiple imaginary scenes, not really a smooth film, but rather pictorial flashes of key images in those scenes, jump-cut from one frame to another, in quick juxtapositions. (Damasio, 1994: 170)

The aesthetic colouring of Damasio's language is tantalising. He's saying that a part of our brain is given over to constructing fictive models of possible worlds (with all their attendant ontologies, why not?), that it does this pre-consciously, and at instantaneous speed. We make movies, lots of them, or plays, or poems, however you want to describe these possible worlds. And this, simply so as to reason.

Actually, the 'high-reason view' relies upon a similar presupposition: we reason by way of fiction. Recall how Damasio characterises those options from which we would be choosing, were the 'high reason' view correct: 'imaginary scenarios, built on visual and auditory patterns', couched in 'verbal narratives'. Isn't this just what Harrison reports coming to her in the process of composition? Wordsworth too. What better description of poetic thinking could you find? Actually, and as should be apparent from the paraphrase above, Damasio retains this idea of a human fiction-making apparatus in his 'somatic marker hypothesis'. He does so by replacing a theory as to the conscious making of these scenarios with a theory as to their instantaneous production. The moment the decision problem arrives, they too arrive, pre-given, waiting for our emotions to choose among them.

Could poetry involve the direct transcription of just these scenarios, the most enigmatic, emotive and musical among them?

> *They drink at the crack as though at the fly-line*
> *of some ruined infinity,*
> *the bowl falling, perpetually,*

towards an oiled cypress floor.
They drink the ink
of missed friends, elusive imaginings;

of war-bled palaces, eroded monasteries
and because they drink
at the well of a throat's beauty

at the rounded hip
the everted lip of sipping –
because they drink at the gardener's shovel

and at the axe of cities –
shard-struck by one heron's
drunken blue bone,
the end of the poem is always thirsty.

Extract from 'Chinese Bowl', Jennifer Harrison (2006a)

Philosophy

Could it be that philosophy is produced in a similar fashion? Martin Heidegger located the knowing subject of philosophy thus: 'We never come to thoughts. They come to us' (1971: 6). A study of the speed at which philosophical texts are composed would provide an interesting way to test Heidegger's hypothesis, and might provide some validation of the kinship that has so often been asserted to lie between the fields of poetry and philosophy. Could this too be a mode of composition from which thinking is radically absent?

Psychoanalysis

Damasio's hypothesis is compatible with psychoanalysis. One would have to discuss the function of unconscious desire, and the role of the affects (specifically, the role of anxiety) as signals of its manifesting, to demonstrate this compatibility properly (Lacan, n.d.a). It could then be argued that Damasio's hypothesis that we think via emotive choices among selection sets of possible worlds is also a potential model for the uneasy channelling of unconscious desire in speech. But if that sort of psychoanalytic theory were true, what would be specific about the writing of poetry that would serve to distinguish it from any other utterance?

Jacques Lacan offers an interesting clue, in his 1975–1976 seminar on James Joyce. In that seminar, Lacan describes a clinical encounter, a

> ... case (of madness, certainly) which began with the sinthome *paroles imposées* [imposed speech/words]. This, at least, was the articulation given by the patient himself, and it seems to me the most sensible kind of articulation I could describe as Lacanian. How is it that we do not all feel that the words on which we are dependent are, in a sense, imposed on us? It's true that a so-called 'sick' man sometimes sees more than what we call a normal person. Language [La Parole] is a parasite; it is a veneer;

it is the form of cancer which afflicts the human being. Why does the so called normal man not notice this? There are some who go so far as feeling it, and Joyce gives us a taste of it. (Lacan, n.d.b: 42)

His patient's delusions of telepathic communication are, for Lacan, evidence of a psychotic's insight into the fact the locus of speech is not the conscious ego. Someone is sending these words in from elsewhere. The more one follows Lacan's 'lucubrations' on the topic, the more one is lead to the question: do any of us ever have the slightest idea what's about to be said through us? The hint Lacan gives as to art's specific relation to this plight ('Joyce gives us a taste of it') is interesting, and seems to confirm what I suggested in Part One, above. Poets like Joyce give us a taste of it. It may be that they do this by reminding us what it is like to feel anxiety.

because they drink at the gardener's shovel

and at the axe of cities –

The poets, I'm suggesting, are those who have trained their bodies to choose, from among the possible worlds cast up at any moment of compositional choice, those specific scenarios closest to the point of beauty. For the point of beauty, as psychoanalysis has always held, is only separable from horror by dint of illusion. Hence its relation to anxiety, and the reason why everyone else shies away from speaking as poets do[10]. Whereas the transcriptions of what cause poets anxiety provide models of psychic structure that allow that experience to be approached by others. They give us a taste of it.

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Notes

1. The project has received seed funding from a University of Canberra Early Career Researcher Support Grant.
2. Charles Saunders Peirce argues similarly, in criticising those 'who, having acquired their notions of science from reading, and not from research, have the idea that "science" means knowledge, while the truth is, it is a misnomer applied to the pursuit of those who are devoured by a desire to find things out...' (1955: 3).
3. I use the term 'pre-conscious' simply to mean 'prior to conscious', and in distinction to the Freudian 'preconscious' or 'unconscious'. It's not that I wish to exclude Freud's, or for that matter Lacan's, theories from the write up of these results, to the contrary (see section 2.4 below). But I'm not yet in a position to delineate which of the various elements of the Freudian topography answer to the data at hand, and so would rather leave the question open for future work.
4. Lord claims that 'the literate poet has leisure to compose at any rate he chooses. The oral poet must keep on singing'. Though Lord doesn't directly state it, the implication seems to be that the literate poet composes at a much slower pace (2000: 22).
5. For a pointer in this direction, take the following comment of Kevin Brophy's, in response to my question: '**P:** So does the main poetic of the piece reside in the initial draft? Or does it come about later? **K:** I think the initial impulse – the initial impulse, the excitement, the connections, the vision of something – is poured into that first draft. But I think that what's most important is that through a series of

drafts all that energy and expression and thought starts to come out of the poem rather than out of me. There comes a point when, instead of me putting all this stuff into the poem, I start to look at the poem and to receive it. I start to receive its thoughts and its energy. I listen to it and then I get to understand what needs to be in it and what needs to be out of it, how it needs to be structured'. (K. Brophy, interview with P. Magee, April 20, 2007)

6. An anonymous reviewer has pointed out that my presentation of Lotman's work in this passage is actually quite reminiscent of reader-response theory, which would seem to be the polar opposite to Lotman's project. In Lotman's own words, his mode of analysis 'excludes from scrutiny *all questions* that go beyond the limits of literary analysis, i.e. problems of the social functioning of the text, the psychology of the reader's perception, etc. We do not examine questions of the creation and historical functioning of the text.' (1976: 5). I'm grateful to the reviewer for the close reading, though I have to add that I don't see the combination of structuralism, if we're to call it that, and reader-response as a contradiction, at least as I propose it. That's because the modern poem is a machine that has been specifically designed to elicit a plethora of responses. Take Auden. His enigmatic lines push readers back on their own resources, including the very history of how they got to that point of reading, and so are necessarily divisive of any single authoritative reading. They have no structure in that sense. But that doesn't help us grapple with Auden's own comments as to how he approaches any new poem: 'Speaking for myself, the questions which interest me most when reading a poem are two'. The first is technical: 'Here is a verbal contraption. How does it work' (1962: 50). It's quite possible to take much of the machine apart, the better to see what in it is calculated to generate effects beyond anyone's control or even ken. While I wouldn't go so far as to attribute such a position to Lotman, I find nothing in his text to impede approaching matters this way. On the other hand, Lotman is bizarrely silent on that second question that interests Auden, as poet-reader: 'The second is, in the broadest sense, moral: 'What kind of guy inhabits this poem? What is his notion of the good life or the good place? His notion of the evil one? What does he conceal from the reader? What does he conceal even from himself?' (Auden, 1962: 51). See further the conclusion to part 2.2 of this paper.

7. By mimetic I mean 'concerned with the means a poem uses to mimic its subject matter'. Take Pope's famous motto: 'The sound must seem an echo to the sense.' The line is itself mimetic of its topic: the unstressed beat on 'to' allows the stronger beats on 'echo' and 'sense' actually to echo. Pope thus communicates by way of music what he simultaneously communicates by way of propositional content. You could call this an extra level of 'information', though I'd suggest that what Pope is telling us is that this extra communication must involve a successful act of mimicry for it to have artistic value. Nor do I believe modernism has done much to subvert Pope's mimetic criterion. A book like Robert Pinsky's *The Situation of Poetry, Contemporary Poetry and its Traditions* is, for instance, replete with instances of criticism on mimetic grounds.

8. See Pinsky's corrective comments on 'romantic', (1976: 47–61, especially p. 55). With regard to the passage under consideration, what is not romantic, in that pejorative sense, about Wordsworth's comments is his refusal to attribute a poet's compositions to a realm outside of cognition. In this respect he is much closer to that severe logicist Charles Saunders Peirce ('We have no power of intuition, but every cognition is determined logically by previous cognitions' (Saunders Peirce, 1955b: 230), than Auden, whose comments on 'Words and the Word', discussed below, leave such 'romantic'/intuitionist possibilities open. If, on the other hand, the 'romantic' label is to be attributed to Wordsworth's notion of a form of ideation, in composition, that is inseparable from a form of emotion or feeling, that could just as well be seen as a measure of his integrity as an empiricist. As I shall argue at 2.2 below, in relation to Damasio, a human who does not think in such an emotionally driven fashion has great difficulty thinking at all. We are all 'romantics' in this respect, incurably.

9. And, why not, economics:
    'Let v_c = level of cultural value produced
    v_e = level of economic value produced
    L_{ax} = arts labour time devoted to commercially oriented artistic work (hours)
    L_{ay} = arts labour time devoted to non –commercially oriented artistic work (hours)
    L_n = non-arts labour time (hours)
    H = working time available per time period after allowance for fixed amount of leisure time (hours)
    Y = total income per time period
    Y_u = unearned income per time period
    Y_z = earned income per time period
    Y^* = minimum income level required per time period
      Then the artist's decision problem is

$$\max u = u(wv_c,\ (1-w)v_e) \quad 0 \le w \le 1$$

where

$$v_c = v_c(L_{ax}, L_{ay})$$

$$v_e = v_e(L_{ax}, L_{ay}, L_n)$$

with

$$\partial v_c / \partial L_{ax} < \partial v_c / \partial L_{ay}$$

$$\partial v_e / \partial L_n > \partial v_e / \partial L_{ax} > \partial v_e / \partial L_{ay}$$

The constraint set is

$$L_{ax} + L_{ay} + L_n = H$$

and

$$[\ldots]'$$

I won't cite the formula in full. This is the 'model of artistic production', tabled in the course of David Throsby's *Economics and Culture* (2001: 107). In Throsby's words, the model describes 'a process of constrained optimisation, where the artist is seen as a rational maximiser of individual utility subject to both internally and externally imposed constraints' (p. 96). Before one recoils at the notion that 'that creative activity can be modelled as a rational decision process,' it's worth firstly recalling Eagleton's question, and then secondly realising just how artistic prowess is measured in this econometric context (p. 104). The idea is that 'output of cultural value is expressible as a function of labour time spent by the artist'(p. 97). Artists, Throsby's model suggests, are characterised by the ability to make multiple decisions in a short space of time. *That* is the factor of their work process that can be quantified, and it's a reasonable indice of the cultural value of their output for the following reason: for the mediocre artist large amounts of time spent at these tasks will still yield work judged to be of little cultural value; for the so-called genius, the reverse obtains (p. 97). I think it is interesting to entertain this aspect of Throsby's model, in the light of the material I tabled above, which does indeed describe a pattern of rapid decision-making as a key component of contemporary poetic composition. Throsby's model treats speed of production as a proven factor of creative work in general. 'Such a conceptualisation of creativity', Crosby writes, 'is consistent with theories of the creative process requiring spontaneous thinking and rapid response to intellectual stimuli' (p. 98). The better the artist, the smaller the amount of time they need to produce works of genius, which is to say, in Lotman's words, works of 'maximal informational saturation' (Lotman, 1976: 40). It's worth adding that Crosby's model doesn't work. At least, it doesn't work to explain the economics of poetic value. As I mentioned above, the poets I have interviewed have all stressed the hugely time-consuming nature of

post-compositional editing, a process that might take five, ten or even fifteen years, for just one poem. Generally speaking, the work will not take on a great amount of cultural value without this glacially slow process. His model's dysfunction, in this regard, is not really surprising given that Throsby is clearly not giving us the inductive product of empirical research. What he's really doing here is linking an idea that appeals to him from the literature on creativity – viz. the suggestion that creativity involves rapid decision-making – with a form of microeconomic analysis, whereby 'differences between production functions in input–output space measure differences in technology'. (Throsby, 2001: 98). This is a picture of the artist as supercomputer, drawn in the econometric formulae typically used to quantify the differences in production power of machines of varying technologies. Should we reject Throsby's model on these grounds? Isn't it an article of faith of literary scholarship that humans are not computers? There's certainly a tendency in humanities thinking to reject quantitative models on the grounds that our behaviour can't be squeezed into such categories, Franco Moretti's *Graphs*, *Maps*, *Trees*, *Abstract Models for Literary History* offering one recent and rare exception. Here we can see specific rounds for such a rejection. For what we have here is an example of an economist inventing identities he can't yet prove to exist, by modelling as quantifiable phenomena he has not empirically investigated and found to be so. But that's an overly idealistic view of quantification. The real story is rather more subtle. What Throsby is really doing, as an economist, is trying to create a model that will articulate what he sees to be the most economic-like of the factors he observes in the phenomena of artistic production. He thinks it's speed. Reality may come along to discredit this model. But he's basically map-making predictively. Whether it's true or not, what's interesting is that his experience as an economist, and his acquaintance with the data, lead him to the following hypothesis: this culture is all about speed, which would include: speeds too fast to think.

10. Its very institution as art seems to ameliorate the tensions that would otherwise arise in both the writer who conveys the experience, and the reader who comes to approach his or her own repressed therein.

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