Grecian Urns and Tin Watermelons:
Lyric, Truth and Beauty, with reference to Mark Doty, and comparisons with Philip Larkin

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Declaration of Authorship

I Peter Daniels hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: Date: 25 November 2020

Acknowledgements and notes on poems

My Tin Watermelon was published by Salt in August 2019. My thanks are due to Christopher Hamilton-Emery for taking me on as a Salt poet. Poems were previously published by *Compass, Ink Sweat & Tears, London Grip, New Walk, The North,* and *Under the Radar*. 'Pears' was commended in the Hippocrates competition.

I owe this book of poems to Stephen Knight as my Ph.D. poetry supervisor. Jane Desmarais, my supervisor for the critical commentary, has guided me magnificently.

Thanks to James Grant for the title suggestion, and much else.

Essential feedback on poems has also come from a number of workshop groups as well as individual poets, and fifteen poems have come from workshop prompts set by thirteen different people. I do not apologise for being a creature of the poetry workshop culture, but am not acknowledging them all individually with the exception of 'With the Mouth', which developed from a workshop at the Aldeburgh Poetry Festival led by Ellen Dore Watson. Participants were faced with a poem to 'translate' from a language they did not know, with only three words supplied from a published version. I worked on the Irish 'Ceist na Teangan' by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, translated by Paul Muldoon as 'The Language Issue'. My poem that resulted is related but not a version of the Ní Dhomhnaill or the Muldoon (both at <https://wfupress.wfu.edu/poem-of-the-week/the-language-issue-nuala-ni-dhomhnaill-poem-of-the-week/> [accessed 18 November 2020]).

Mr Luczinski is my avatar, my great-grandfather having been Luczinski before changing his name to Daniels. Alan Watts on hurrying and delaying is from *Does it Matter?: Essays on Man's Relation to Materiality* [1970] (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2007), p. 32.

Francis Howgill: see *Quaker Faith & Practice*, §19.08.

Thanks to Sukie de la Croix for the information about Zsa Zsa Gabor's house.

'Riff on a Line of Miłosz' began from staying in the Miłosz room during a Hawthornden Fellowship: the line is from 'Account', translated by Miłosz and Robert Pinsky, in Czesław Miłosz, *The Collected Poems 1931–1987* (New York: Viking, 1988), p. 384.

Abstract

Romantic poets such as Keats established lyric as poetry of the self and its apprehension of truth and beauty. These qualities were later questioned by modernists and postmodernists; they discouraged grand abstractions and complicated the position of the self, and the poetic category of lyric. I argue that despite this, the lyric self – embodied in the poem as performative act – remains an expression of the poet's experiencing self, and together they form a three-way relationship with the reader.

In my commentary, I begin by outlining my development as a queer Quaker poet, and affirm the role and significance of truth and beauty as key factors in my lyric poems. In chapters 2 and 3, I discuss the language and performativity of the lyric self, drawing on the poetry of Mark Doty and Philip Larkin, and works of lyric theory such as those by Jonathan Culler, Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, and Marion Thain. In chapter 4 I discuss how metaphor and metonymy rely on both difference and similarity for performative verbal description, which is rooted in the subjectivity of the lyric self. In chapter 5 I examine the performativity of the lyric and the queer self, and how queerness is a 'making strange' that can renew the power of truth and beauty. The queer angle to the heteronormative combines the irony of camp with the seriousness of fetish; it may also have a spiritual dimension. In chapter 6 I contemplate the truths of time and death, which are the limits of queer questioning. Lives have arbitrary beginnings and ends but aesthetic shaping gives meaning and drives the association of beauty and death. The poem will always have an ending, a paradigm of form giving meaning to time, conveying an experience of truth and beauty.

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Page numbers for poems in this thesis are followed in square brackets by page numbers in the published book of *My Tin Watermelon.*

My Tin Watermelon

Critical Commentary

Grecian Urns and Tin Watermelons: Lyric, Truth and Beauty, with reference to Mark Doty, and comparisons with Philip Larkin

My Tin Watermelon

Peter Daniels

With the Mouth

Whenever you're talking, using
what's in your mouth, you don't need
to grab a scraper to understand
the barnacles under the boat, or
take a pick to the tarmac to find
where the road comes from, because

there's an implement between your throat
and teeth, a gift from your mother
who taught you to shape your world
with its edge, as she was bouncing you
on her lap, bouncing you like Moses
lifted from his basket, little foreigner.

Buggers

Revisited, invisible inside me,
the mile of streets I'd walk home
from primary school, slouching around,
unhappy, not for years admitting I knew why
from what I'd heard my parents tell each other.
Still there, the streets, different in time,
Bournville still making chocolate under new
foreign management amid the benevolent relic,
the garden village of cottage-style houses but
the perfect cottage, the red brick gabled park toilets,
long gone: where at maybe seven years old
I opened a green-painted cubicle door to
an uninterpretable blur before I closed it
– maybe only facing one man's hairy legs, but
there was a meaning nearly understood,
too much a thing I almost knew about myself.
I knew the word 'bugger' before the word
'fuck': and on asking what a bugger was,
'They're men who touch their Mr Williams',
I already knew where this took place.

The Break

For fathering the man, I had to call
the man myself. My throat had found that voice
but I still lingered shrilling up the scale:
a childish treble, highest in the class.
I kept the unexperienced man inside
this whiskered boy, until I'd passed sixteen.

Then it was more embarrassing to hide
the adult than admit him, and sustain
the baritone that years before began
down in the broadening larynx. At eleven
once, I'd dared to summon him, a strange
young grown-up voice, in self-defence. But when
I brought him out at last to act my age
he seemed less deep, though that high boy was gone.

Alexandra Road

I was climbing
that steep hill
up from my
student bedsit
towards the campus
as usual, but
this time I was
exhausted
before the top:
in early March
winter had left me
out of resources,
dizzy. They gave me
an “old fashioned tonic”,
Orovite, sticky
golden yellow
bottled fake sunshine,
but it worked.
I was young
and bounced back,
but afterwards
I’d always notice
that time of year
a low energy
knocked me down
while I was climbing
up the calendar
over again,
climbing the same

hill that started
gentle and rose
steeply to a flatter
top, like the graph
of a normal bell curve,
and the campus
at the summit
of the average.

Every year, I
climb up to summer,
high, easy,
warm and pretty,
for whatever it
ripens and rots.
In my daily climb
I am seeking
the formula
for sun to sparkle
over the fountain
of my average human
metabolism.
When I've found that,
I might be ready
to climb the crooked
stairs to the roof of
the dismal postwar
hall of residence
(since demolished)
to step up
into the waiting

screw-nosed cockpit
        and fly over the town,
above the old campus,
        and off
towards the heights.

The Chime

The chime on the door to his flat in Moseley
had a creaky lever like a knocker to lift,
flicking two notes of metal inside, as in
a musical box. Pretty, like the pretty doormat
not on the inventory, that he snaffled
for the house in King's Heath where we
moved together, and later I took with me alone
to London – where it stayed till it fell apart,
only bald bristles and a bunch of coloured rags.
The doorchime was fixed to the flat door
for visitors to ring, despite the main bell,
as the front door was often unlocked.
The burglar tried the front bell to check
who was in, and then rang the chime.
We were two men in bed unusually early
after sex around nine in the evening,
so we left it, before he jemmied the door
and entered (he didn't wipe his feet).
We could see his silhouette in the hallway,
the iron bar in his hand. I had no
presence of mind but I'm glad only one of us
called from the bed in the dark, 'Who's there?'
and the man said 'It's me,' running off.

Selly Park

Slicing garlic, I notice how it brings into my mind now
one particular street, an unexceptional terrace, where
a young woman in the office was about to be moving
with her husband. The bathroom had been painted
with naked ladies by the current owners, two women.
This was the late nineteen-seventies. Slicing garlic
reminds me because an older woman, not unsophisticated
in an Elizabeth David way, explained to the younger one
the method of chopping it fine with the point of a knife –
not that I do it like that myself – and this would be a way
she could please her husband with food as adventurous
as their lesbian bathroom. I never saw those murals, but
slicing garlic or even onions will recall her street
along with other streets around that part of Birmingham,
and other people I knew living their own lives there:
how I knew them, food they cooked, their bathrooms.

Days of 1985

Three years into my London life, finally
a permanent job and somewhere to live.
Still half a dozen empty houses on the street
in this inconvenient slum, with here and there
bohemian gentry: I was 31, young but not that young,
platonic shared mortgage for the flat, £33,000
(a quick sale for the vendor's messy divorce).
A group of us spent Sunday afternoons
logging and sorting newspaper cuttings
with a mention of 'homosexual' or 'gay'.
Soon the disease overwhelmed it all – 'Vicar Says
I'd Shoot My Son If He Had AIDS' – plus Boy George
got big, the other story keeping us busy.

And that Christmas, painting the living room
lemon yellow, sick of it, I went out, walked to
the Edward in Islington and met a man who wasn't
the answer but whose battered Volvo, left-hand drive,
made up for the festive lack of buses. We lasted
the next six months. He'd spent his postwar childhood
in this neighbourhood, but not-noticeably-orthodox
Jewish families like his were moving out,
the houses kept on crumbling, and the planned
Motorway Box was due to come across this street:
then didn't. By the mid-eighties, people who needed
a place to buy were moving in, and here I was,
painting the living room yellow.

The Universal

Take me for example, a man in the street,
with my cells doing what they do with me,
molecules in the roiling swamp of my existence
like a feeling thinking walking ocean of plankton
pushing its own agenda. How can that matter
more than the single snowflakes matter
that grind against each other in the drift
to become a heap of frozen water?
These five senses, that vibrate
in their loosely grouped organs
housed in skin and bones, will
fall gradually away though I sustain it all
with toast and Marmite, mugs of cocoa
– you too, according to your preferences.

Something makes up an entity,
a human being sharing facts about itself,
its place of birth and mother's maiden name,
its tastes – maybe not its private regrets and lies,
its masturbations and adulteries –
but having things to share because it's
noticing things, what it likes about them,
which café serves the better avocado toast,
what are the satisfying shapes and styles,
why that face in the crowd, what is it
with the moon over the sea, thing of beauty,
moment of truth, excuses for the use
of the word 'universal'.

And that's probably
never exactly a lie, never exactly a fact,
but what seems to matter. And what

seems to matter about our matter is
it notices what makes existence
what it is. Non-existence must be
something else, something that’s
not exactly nothing, something I’m afraid
one day I’m going to have to burst into.

The Cave

I am the room where I work, where I fall asleep in chairs.
I live in everything in it, each thing chosen, forgotten,
and reclaimed. I'm the walls filled with books I bought
and need to read. I'm the toffee tin from Aunty Sheila,
filled with magnetic words. There's a place in me
for the old kitchen table from home, with turned legs
gnawed by our rabbit, and the nursing chair where I sat
in the bathroom when I first achieved ejaculation.
I have become my mother's armchair
(which first belonged to my partner's mother),
and my father's oak swivel chair, the part of me
in which he wrote his mathematical papers
– often I doze in one with my feet on the other,
unless I've sat up properly, up at the desk I inhabit,
rescued from my old place of employment.
My carpet was handed on from an old lover's
old lover. I'm filled with mugs, old friends,
cracked, no handles, crammed with pens and pencils.
I've been made of things I hold genuine
because they hold me. No use pretending
this is a tidy room, but I've cleared the floor,
I've made it ready for work, and at last I can say
I've started. The work will go on in this cave
till I'm done. Then I'll be free to sleep.

Obsolescence

That was my old kitchen. It didn't take long to dirty,
but shouldn't have taken so long to clean.

There's my very first computer, the actual model
in an art installation. I gave mine to an enthusiast.

New Year. The January turnover of new leaves,
being good, from self-disgust or whatever does it.

April also is a new year. September – everything hanging
over it. The world isn't bothered when you start your life.

The outskirts of the future with its new tasks,
new objects with new dirt to clean them of.

Those floppy disks I threw out by mistake held
all I cared about at one time, but they're gone.

Those meals I made in the old kitchen,
now they're my body, my bones and fat.

Old Beast

It’s a quiet rainy morning and I have plenty
of other things to do, but after the hot days
I look at this filthy flat with enough bored energy
to grab the heavy old grey Electrolux
and get down to it.

The near-obsolete animal,
hidden in its corner for ages,
is well adapted to its habitat
as even the dinosaurs were in their time,
pulling their weight across the land,
absorbing the flora and smaller fauna.

I like gliding with that soothing to and fro
motion of the long neck and smooth head,
and I like what I can only call
the heft of it.
It’s been with me thirty years now,
missing one of its tools
but instead I use another
from my mother’s Electrolux
that I grew up with, still
fitting like an ancestral element
in its adaptation to deal with
stairs and awkward corners.

The heft is what James hates about the old thing
and so we bought a little Dyson, cordless,
bagless, nippy like some early mammal
in its superior mode of being:
but that’s all very well, bagless means
the dust needs control at the disposal stage

(that lever and flap could do with evolving)
and who needs cordless – in this small flat,
with an extension, who even has to change
sockets? I'm not against progress, but
the old beast hasn't yet been defeated by the dust.

Geraniums

Benign neglect has not paid off this year.
Cold and snow from the east has hit hardest
at the front window boxes. Geraniums
last year kept themselves alive all winter:
now they've turned to gnarled brown heaps.
On the other side, facing west, it's a mixed picture.
In the more sheltered bedroom window-box
the plants aren't doing badly, but at the bay window
nothing looks healthy, and favourites have gone,
like the ones with sage-green leaves variegated white
and small cherry-red flowers. I could have tidied up
in the mild spells between cold snaps, but
I've left the dead parts hanging. Face it,
the surviving plants had better be sacrificed.

Benign neglect: meaning I mean well but don't
pay attention. Procedures like uprooting
and storing them in boxes would honour
their beauty better, but it takes trouble.
One year I packed each window box with straw
and bubble wrap, but all the plants
got damp and rotted. And winter's hardly ever
as cold as this. With their strange
rusty odour, geraniums (pelargoniums if you
have to be fussy) were one flower I could grow
that didn't affect me with their scent. But one summer
the sensitivity worsened when a spirit-based
paint invaded my nose, since when
even geraniums have turned against me. Still,
I stick beside them, in my stupid neglectful way.

Bay Window

I have no access to the back garden,
but a window like this one gets looked out of.
In winter the view is clearer: leaves in summer
fill the space and hide what will go on,
cats and foxes and squirrels trespassing over
each other's territory. Neighbours also go on,
less visible than animals, except for one
picture window without trees to mask it:
men at breakfast in black teeshirts, or white
bathrobes at weekends, the rest of their lives
open to speculation. Birds are mostly
small balls of fluff shooting through branches
plus blackbirds, magpies, pigeons, occasional jays,
once or twice a woodpecker. This window
picks up information, passing it into
the steady stream of time where I live for now,
time I'm borrowing from everyone who ever lived
or will be living after me. I take it
without refreshing the screen for them, looking
at what goes on, exercising my eyesight.
A white cat with black patches drops down
from a shed. A fox brushes through lavender.
Squirrels play in the fork of a dead tree.
Photons to absorb and interpret, next, next, next.

Garden Incident

Now the woman downstairs with the dog
is no longer resident downstairs with her dog,
there's no longer a dog to own the garden the way dogs do,
and lately I haven't seen the man
who used to tend the garden and mow the lawn.
The garden's getting weedy and very green,
fuzzily green, shaggy with greenery, beginning to look
untidily untidy, not just a little wild.
Now there's no dog, there's no disincentive for
visits by cats, which are plentiful in the neighbourhood,
and visits by foxes, which are also plentiful.
Yesterday I watched one black and white bruiser of a tomcat
I used to see often before the dog,
as it moved slowly but purposefully up
one side of the overgrown lawn, while a scraggy fox,
I'm guessing from the wildest garden two doors down,
moved parallel up the other side of the overgrown lawn,
not in a chase but together comparing each other's progress
at not moving too fast up the garden, until my sense was
the cat was making the running, without any running at all,
claiming this as cat territory now, where foxes
have to move slightly faster than cats
and disappear with whatever grace they can manage
over the fence at the back.

Squirrel Heights

There was a way across at tree level for the squirrels,
before some of the trees were cut – the lime tree is
back to the lollipop stump it was when I moved here,
the old dead pear tree no longer stretches that height
– though the squirrels continue whirling and swimming
round the trees, rummaging for what a squirrel wants,
and can that be nuts in May? But what otherwise
are they after? Now those fine gaps to skip
have gone, they have to engage with fences
and shed roofs in their drive to keep moving.
Once when the trees were high I saw them cross
on twig-ends, while a cat on the grass looked up
with hatred: no creature should be allowed that skill.

The Figs

That fig used to take up the whole garden
with shade from the spread of its broad leaves.
Birds burrowed for insects and nested in the ivy
binding its trunk. From the window, I'd only
imagine its coconut scent, like the scent
by the railway, seeping from the feral fig
with its longer-lobed and gappy foliage,
no decent coverage for Adam and Eve.

But several years ago, the fig in the garden
was chopped down to a stump with one side branch
turned up at ninety degrees by the wall, looking
like a stovepipe – until today: the tidy (not to say
obsessive) gardener downstairs has cut off
that absurdity, the stump now cleanly shaped
but with a couple of neat growth-shoots
on either side. (The ivy had gone long ago.)

And the railway fig's been chainsawed down
with the usual sycamore brushwood along
the embankment by the station, to reduce
the autumn leaf-fall mulch on the track:
and figleaves would be stickier than most.
But I expect that tree to come back, as
they've cut it down before: I'd like to bet
even the fig tree Jesus blasted rose again.

Street Trees

Trees this side of the street, lamp posts the other.
Ten years ago a small public subscription, five pounds,
got them planted, the year after I'd left my job to become
a person again, or a different person, let's not overdramatise,
not using the house for sleep then scuttling out to the train
in the winter dark and back in the dark: regaining a street
in which I was living, rediscovering the need for it in me.
The trees were a mixed bunch, leftovers looking for a street,
three liquidambars, two ornamental cherries, three
Turkish hazels, a liriodendron, a locust. The other side
couldn't take trees (phone cables following the kerb), so
they planted a new row of moderately elegant lamp posts
along the cable duct, plain and urban. The old
lamp post outside our house wasn't removed till the trees
had bedded in, and left a gap through which it's easier
to see the moon rising over the flat fronts
of the sub-Palladian houses. Opposite, they don't have
a little bracket under the sill and they lack
our incised pattern on every lintel, but otherwise
the two sides are matching nineteenth-century terraces,
the only ones round here undamaged in World War Two
(the whole next block came down in nineteen-forty).
On the thirty-first of October two thousand and eight
I planted grape hyacinths under the trees. Now the soil's
impacted, but one or two still push between the roots.
A few trees are up to the height of the houses now, or higher,
the roots are heaving the pavement, slabs awkwardly
angled, and now they're spread with leaves in autumn,
the different shapes falling in stages from each kind of tree
for Mohammed the sweeper to deal with, on our shady side
of the street in which I've found my life living itself.

Daffodil Shield

March of the daffodils planted all along the edges,
flunkeys lining the walk across the Common
that takes me to the bus stop. What prettiness, London's

heaviness made lighter: like the primrose path
to Hell, but whatever goal we walk towards
is up to us. Interpret what you're offered

– the story I tell you, and my problem with daffodils –
but conversation doesn't mean we understand
each other's point of view, each other's flowers.

I make my metaphor my slovenly philosophy, you
make your strict sense your politics. One day,
in each other's way, we could push each other

onto the daffodils, but their weakness makes them
a shield. They guard our honour: hostages to what
keeps us back from killing each other every day.

At the Station

A sharp morning.
On the track
half a fox, its face
and arms open
in supplication.
The back end
nowhere.

What is Mr Luczinski?

'Hurrying and delaying are alike ways of trying to resist the present' –Alan Watts

From his local station,
taking the train in its knotweedy cuttings
to the dusty dark of the tube, this is
your crumpled uncle making his journey
through this inward-opening space,
with the clever way it zips up time.
Loving the open air, yet he is drawn to these tunnels.

Up in the control room they've spotted him
at Seven Sisters, hurrying down the dismal stairs,
his shoes finding the steps two by two by two
to the empty train already
at the platform
holding its doors but bleeping like
a bleeping bleeper echoing in his hearing aid,
so he shoves himself into the space,

the space he can occupy as a licensed Londoner,
space claimed from the crowd who are not yet there
but will be,
and now they congregate, some carefully, some sprawling,
most too big so he accommodates them in his angelic soul,
the space-creating power held in reserve for this
(mostly for his own benefit).
'Please stand clear of the closing doors,'
and they shuffle in resentfully

until they have to shuffle out again.
He must avoid the kryptonite scent, dodge
the perfumed people, and puff their air out quick
before it hits. How he squeezes past

without brushing the others – or brushes the others lightly
to make the point: they needed to be brushed past,
because their time is too long,
they must shorten it.

The control room are observing Mr L.
‘What a curious way of proceeding. Are we suspicious?
Is he suspicious? What’s he like?’ The cameras
keep his image on file, as he dashes by
in his determined way. The files of jpegs of blurred suspects,
the Oyster-card records from each pass of the barrier.
He pictures his picture as he passes, he can be self-regarding.

Mr L incorporates the journey in his physical form,
his anatomy plans the route.
‘I think he thinks he’s the map.’
‘More like the clock, the way he
watches his watch. He’s in a tight relationship with Time.’
‘Tell them to get a room.’

He’s unable to be all forms of transport.
He’s not a tram, though he feels affinity with trams.
He isn’t a moving bus, nor a floating balloon,
though he has known and loved men who were
each of those things.
‘He thinks he knows where he’s going.’
‘Well, if that’s what he thinks…’
He must observe the announced delays to the District,
they may impede his progress.
He has learnt to deny himself the patience of waiting
but he knows not to change plans too often.

Above him, the city keeps moving in its disorganised way.
His own measures are incoherent but generally logical.
He depends on knowing his position, the reading

of his trajectory from Rectory Road to (say) Earls Court,
Elephant, Leytonstone, wherever – Cockfosters –
navigating through the inner surface of the system,
yet he can be happy with the flow:
the escalator is his chosen medium moving down
or upward between states – lifts may be faster
but they're batch-processors you have to wait for.
If he must, he can rise with them through gravity
absorbing the inertia in his body, and so,
as the control room are changing shifts,
they stay to watch him emerge at Russell Square
becoming one with the barrier:
he touches his Oyster out, and it
lets him into the world again.

He continues his journey at street level.

A Moment

A pork pie or a piece of cheese with his cup of tea,
a moment of calm, he can spend it how he pleases.

Absent-mindedly fondling the umbrella, upright
between his legs, while he admires the place.

Taking the moment, its applause or blasphemies:
being a human being, no furbelows or bluster.

The odd effect of light on the ceiling, the high
windows, the notices stating management policy.

Billstickers have made a mosaic of the wall outside,
the radio mutters traffic news, the fridge pulsates.

Everything is here for when anything needs to happen:
the cloudburst of witnesses, the chariots as they blaze.

Almost Christmas

Almost Christmas and we're going home
full of a satisfying dinner and wine, but it's
office party time on the Docklands Light Railway

and at every station groups get on,
not uncontrollably intoxicated, perfumed,
postmorteming the evening with hilarity

especially this bunch braying and screaming,
so I've turned off my hearing aid (fogey's comfort)
and we've moved further up the train to avoid them,

then you get on, three men maybe mid-twenties
and you interrupt each other, each time louder and
louder till if you don't shut up I'm going to

charm you into letting me approach to get
a word in disarmingly, I'll say excuse me and I'll
shove your Santa pompoms down your fucking gobs

to show I'm so much nicer and persuade you
that politeness is the adhesive that connects
our civilisation with itself, its reasons, its passions,

its acts of gestural complexity that complement
each other, build the mirrored ballroom where
treaties can be signed and worlds made into

other worlds that always will turn out to be
the very same one because we can agree on
what we want, if only you would shut your face

because all our faces will be tiny pictures pixelled
somewhere in the billion billion billion moments
history won't ever be bothered to retrieve

when we've all stuffed each other's mouths
with the disturbed earth we stand on, fall on,
go back into after all's been said and done.

Bunhill Fields Quaker Burial Ground

'The Kingdom of Heaven did gather us and catch us all, as in a net, and his heavenly power at one time drew many hundreds to land. We came to know a place to stand in and what to wait in.'
Francis Howgill, 1663

No, not the one with much-visited
Blake, and less-so Defoe and Bunyan.
Behind a block of flats, this is

like the not-too-obvious
place they hid in the *A to Z*
to catch out plagiarists:

as if it only exists to the ones
who make their pilgrimage, or
walk their dog despite the sign

telling them not to. And it isn't
The London Nobody Knows, there's
nothing nobody knows, it's always

somebody's secret, but people
who have discovered places
suppose them entirely their own.

People do own it: the man who
began this is buried with twelve thousand
followers over a couple of centuries,

with their silent truth crammed into
a parcel of land between buildings
until the charm of the place

has grown heavy with mystic pressure.
Those enormous plane trees that
have fed on all the quiet human dirt,

the screams out of the playground bouncing
back from the tall flats, the young men
who drink and smoke on the steps

of the meeting house – all want
to show you it’s theirs, but they
can’t hold you to account

for how you walk, stand, sit
and wait for the light as it emerges
through the city air and the trees.

Bearded

Was it because my chin needed it? Was it who I
wanted to be – or was it who I wanted? Was there
a beard in the perfect world attaching itself to my face?

I shave down my cheeks to shape it vertically,
one razor-width, my trademark. I trim when it's
too fuzzy. 'Your beard's bigger. Have you got
a second piece of beard?' My aunt is
bothered with beards, maybe she's trying
to distract herself. 'I'm frightened. Is this the last day?'

Generations of gents' hairdressers:
Italian barbers, Afro-Caribbean, Turkish,
and now on the High Street it's hipster barbers –
You grow it, we mow it: they might like my beard,
and I did start twirling the moustache,
but grey's not their colour, and I'm not tattooed.

'Have you got a purple hat?' My other trademark
is cheap trilbies: I visit her wearing the purplish plaid
with a gold fleck, bought on the High Street
at one of those shops that sell buckets and brooms.

I like to walk the street on one side, from end to end.
Psychogeography attracted me at first but
while I have my obsessive ways with streets
I don't do their dérives and purposeful driftings.
You might need a certain kind of beard for that, perhaps
tattoos, definitely hats. Oh, fuck that flâneur stuff,
you with your fake Baudelairean persona.

Some beards you can recognise. Yes,

I walk the High Street, give my opinion on cafés,
a man with a beard and a hat, out there
drinking a black americano, eating a pastry.

‘Do I have a long beard?’ asks my aunt. ‘I’m bad.’
‘No, you’re good.’ ‘I wish I were. That’s
the subjunctive, you know. Where am I?’
She’s not yet ready to give herself up,
life being who you are. He’s who I am,
taking in the High Street life, stroking his beard,
placing his selfhood there in the moment.

Zsa Zsa's House

Zsa Zsa Gabor's former Palm Springs retreat
is up for sale. Walls of floor-to-ceiling glass,
exposed beams and flagstone flooring.
A lone bedroom, an updated kitchen,
living room with a stacked-stone fireplace,
a swimming pool, desert landscaping, outdoor fire pit.
Zsa Zsa's well-appointed house is mid-century modern,
perfect for a few of those vintage nineteen-sixties
Danish splay-footed coffee tables that London hipsters
are sourcing in neglected provincial suburbs.
Meanwhile, here we are, nestled away from the hustle
and the bustle, footsteps from Stoke Newington's
eclectic mix of boutique shops, cafes and pubs.
From our mid-Victorian house we can enjoy
the many bus routes, and trains twelve minutes
to the heart of the City of London.
Zsa Zsa's house is in the *Daily Mail*: 'Now fans
have a chance to snap up this piece of Hollywood history
– just two hours from Tinseltown – provided they can stretch
to the nine-hundred-&-sixty-nine-thousand-dollar price tag.'
Set in a third of an acre, but it's not much bigger
than a terraced house in Stoke Newington
which is valued higher! We're rich!
We don't even have to make-believe,
some of us bubble-dwellers of London
sitting here in this impossible metropolis,
floating into nowhere in our money balloon.
The story's wrong but we're ahead in it.
Dickens wouldn't know it, but he'd know how to write it.

More than half my life ago, I came from the Midlands,
London as unreal as my provincial suburb is

unreal to me now. In our living room
we'd watch Zsa Zsa Gabor on 'Juke Box Jury'.
Our nineteen-sixties furniture smelt new from the factory,
then hung around looking out of date and silly
but still with a style to the simple lines.
The future was simple then, before neglect and decay,
and neglect of neglect and decay
left the country with a heart of nothing.
Heart of England, what's your story? Nuneaton's own
George Eliot could have written this. I'm not
the Zsa Zsa Gabor of Stoke Newington,
my fabulous home the star vehicle
for this comedy of gentrification.
Turn the page, reader. Write your own beautiful house,
your own longing, your own anger, what's real to you.
Write a part for you, a part for me,
a part for Zsa Zsa Gabor.

Winchmore Hill

If it was me I'd call the cops,
there's no way out and no way in.
I don't understand what's in the shops
and the luck isn't good and the wind is ill:
can I get back to Winchmore Hill?

Everyone here is queer or worse,
even the vicar is ugly as sin.
Little old ladies will snatch your purse
or make you a deal for an all-night pill:
can I get back to Winchmore Hill?

There's nothing to see and less to admire,
you can play to lose but there's nothing to win.
The rainbow has melted, the clouds are on fire
and the people are coming with buckets to fill:
can I get back to Winchmore Hill?

Thank you for taking me down to the place
where angels have sex with their next of kin
and the saints get high in a state of grace,
I'm a middle-class gentleman out for a thrill:
but can I get back to Winchmore Hill?

A Teasel

Excuse me, there's a teasel
growing out of your grave,
and you don't even know
you've been buried there.
Taller than you, green and alive
with outstretched leaves like angled arms,
it's ready to flower and seed.

And a teasel happens to be
growing out of your grave
because you feed it.
Now it's what you are,
unashamed, the epitaph you deserve,
the burr, the scratch for your itch, a prize
catching the attention you crave.

My Tin Watermelon

Once I bought a watermelon
made of tin, and a bunch of grapes,
a fish, a parrot, a heart, a red
crescent moon, and a shooting star.

I still have the others but after
Christmas, with the tin things
taken off the living room yucca
which they had been decorating,

that watermelon disappeared,
possibly among the old cards
also on the table, but that's only
a theory. This is serious: another

thing disappearing unannounced
into the unknown, like the trowel
from the indoor garden tool set
that belonged to Aunty May, or

the little mustard spoon from the
bakelite cruet that I knocked
off the shelf yesterday – now I
don't know if the spoon had already

gone or did it shoot under the fridge
or into that gap we can blame for
absences, drops, carelessnesses,
disappearances: like others that

have gone from my mind till I
miss the thing one day for some
reason, as I miss the things I've
ruthlessly got rid of because I

hated them, or thought I could
do without; of course, the hatred
and the needless need are
what I miss. Gingerbread tins,

honey pots, books I disliked and
want to revisit for why that was.
A useless thing is still a thing
and has its ornamental reason.

Seven tin ornaments, chosen
as two animal, two vegetable,
two mineral plus the heart
(the abstract shape); I'd wanted

to make the set into a mobile,
one of those intentions never
realised. Now only six, less
magic to hang above my desk.

I don't even like the flavourless
flavour of watermelon but
a tin watermelon hanging
in the house, that's a thing.

Roses

You can’t abolish roses. Their scent means the whole world gets into your nose. They’re a vicious origami, layered, tightly bound, then as they spread they hold you, till the petals flop. They may have to be your mother. Roses can destroy you if you fail to achieve oneness with their all-embracing point of view. You need guts to deal with roses. Where did they come from? Like everything, they floated on the Gulf Stream, or they arrived with the Romans, or the birds flew by one day with rosehips in their shit. That’s not so important. But they’ll find you.

Out of the Box

On the street I grew up in – an old road between villages
strung into a suburb, in rows of clumped nineteenth
and twentieth century styles – our house was the last one.
I'll still be part of that street till it's all we've got time for.

All we've got time for because our veins will narrow,
bodies shrink, houses tumble into nothing until
the spell breaks, and the world is a piece of dust
still rotating, but now time is out of the frame.

Out of the frame now and into sublime abstraction,
more sublime than ever without the somebody there
to think of it, licking a frozen orange juice on the way
home from school, down the street I grew up in.

*

And that's that closed. Every box has an outside
and an inside, and words can make boxes to hold you
in their little contraptions like mine, wanting to order
the way you live: but okay, you'll be the judge of that.

And who's to be the judge of what is the case, of your
factual existence? How could you tell that this world
was lovely, and will it be again, ever, once it's settled
the giants are in charge and the genies out of the bottles?

Out of the bottles, too, our lost breath and the blood
sucked out of us, whether we're embalmed or incinerated,
nobody there to believe that this was our box, our street,
our frame, our time, and the case on it all is truly closed.

Trajectory

If you can trace
a soul's journey,
there it is,
setting out now
from the house
where I was born,
past what we called
the Slippery Ditch,
across the railway
into the unknown region:
to start meandering
from point A
towards the distant view
of point B, over
wooden planks between
the stretches of rushes
and sedge, past winding
pools of sludge
impossible to map.
Occasionally,
small birds flit and tweet.
My soul has no
reason to move
around the map,
but wants to be
left alone with
the local geography,
hoping to find
a bridge across
the slimy water
and a tolerably solid
island to land on.

The wandering bog
        is almost featureless
and that’s its glory, though
        there’s also a cathedral,
built on an island:
        you can’t miss it,
complicated, pointed,
        spectacular.

Haddock Breakfast

The wind pushes
and the water rides along till it falls onto the stones.
Each wave a different thrust, then the pull away.

Wind and foam work at the edge of the sea,
sand and shingle wait at the edge of the land.
Shingle slows down the feet.

Windows face it out along the hotel front
where we sit at breakfast, watching the sun
pop up over the horizon.

Concrete steps of local lime
mixed on the spot with native shingle
hold up the sheds: Fish Smoked Here.

Local haddock with bold poached eggs:
from the sea where haddock are fished,
from the land where eggs are laid.

My heavy tread on the shingle
has trudged along a street once there, no longer.
Nothing can wait forever for the likes of us.

The sea we once came from
spreads around us. The land we come from
shifts and settles.

The shore is as far as
anyone can go on foot,
or come by boat.

The comfortable hotel: in a hundred years
bashed to a hollow cliff of bricks.
The future shared between gulls and sparrows.

Riff on a Line of Miłosz

I was afraid of what was wild and indecent in me.
No beginning to the thread I found through the forest,
the creek full of excrement – I mean, shit – and then
where I emerged squeezing through the crush of bodies
I was unsure which part of the station I was in.

I was afraid of what was wild and indecent because
it was mine, and especially of what I'd seen once
at the toilets in a half-known part of the station.
I could guess where the creek was coming from
and where it would go through the raging forest.

I was afraid of what was wild in me as if it would
kill what I'd found indecent and beautiful, which
was only what the bodies of people, afraid, wild
and indecent, full of shit, piss, blood and semen,
could build out of pieces of wood, bones and dust.

I was afraid of the wild rush of water through the forest
approaching the creek from the high path too dark
to see what I might fall down into. Afraid I had to
reach the gate before nightfall and show my papers
to enter and enjoy the indecent city of toxic lights.

I was afraid of what was wild and indecent in me
yet I could find it when I needed it to hustle me
onto a train through the forest, and give back my self
new and dirty, a small stain on my soul to be kept,
stroked, and made into a badge of my allegiance.

King's Cross

I don't remember their tune, the buskers
who stood at the bottom of the old wooden escalator,
squeak-scratching fiddle and accordion chortling,

but fifteen pence I remember I gave them
for my passage up to the surface,
the morning before the fire.

Answers

I'll tell you what happened, shall I? You lost
your ring at King's Cross, in the canal. A fish
found it and swallowed it, I caught the fish
and now it's time to cook and eat it, but you
won't believe me when I show you the answer.

Man on the train has lost his cherry from off of
his Belgian bun from Gregg's, it's on the floor
and he hasn't even noticed. I'm not going to
tell him, 'Ha ha, you've lost your cherry': what
would be the point, as he can't eat it anyway.

I have nothing to tell you, now you've lost your
way, no special treat, nothing you could swallow:
nothing will come of nothing and why would it,
it's never a good time for truth now the gilt
is off the gingerbread, no one wants to know.

We get to King's Cross another time: I could tell you
where you need to go, but it's all so confusing
and you can't get anywhere without having to
ask all over again, though you'll be too proud
to ask, like most lost men, who won't be told.

Your lost cherries and unvarnished gingerbread might
have been the answer you didn't want to ask for
but you want the answer you want, not to be shown
what's true. You dropped your ring and now
the fish can't even be bothered to swallow it for you.

Lost Property

So I've found this perfectly clean pair
of underpants, though they aren't
new, in the toilets at Cambridge station
– that's the old toilets before refurbishment,
with mirrored walls, four walls of mirror to each
cubicle, a wall of mirror behind the urinals
but not glass mirror, some kind of mirror-surfaced
laminate which makes the entire Gents a strangely
theatrical experience, and so it's unsurprising
to find this pair of underpants, Calvin Klein
though not the classic white, and not boxers,
a kind of shorts with a graffiti pattern
along the elastic: seems inappropriate to
hand them in, no way of tracing
the owner, they're definitely clean,
they fit, I take them home.

Catalogue Man

Look at him in his black silk longjohns and top, what is he,
some superhero? Where are his superhero boots, and panties
over his smooth crotch? What would be his superpower,

undisclosed, locked in till he needs it, like the snug penis
and balls waiting to bounce free? What kind of supergizmo
is kept back before we see him save the world, by virtue

of his black silkiness, that moment he lets the special device
shoot out, his supernaturally extensible plot resolver? Or
is there nothing unusual about this man? Sometimes a penis

is simply a penis? What gives black silk its power to enhance
his own power, what fascination – sheer charm, darkness?
Black silk longjohns man in your underwear catalogue,

what are you really offering? What terror lies hidden? What
delight? Why do I want to taste your unattainable secret?
How would I look myself in a black silk longjohns outfit?

Go West

Each range its own challenge: the badlands
where canyons cut deep across the high plains,
the snowy peaks, the desert, and California
tumbling its gold. The land itself breeds
cowboys like cactuses. They rope and roll,
roostered at the end of the day. We dream of them
back East in our overpaid featherbeds. Farther
out on the fantasy coast, they make it happen
on the hilly backlots of Hollywood – what they can do
with a ropehorse, a gun and a basic plot
with bandits in bandanas. ‘We’ll Westernize you yet!’
said Richard in the thrift store in Hippytown
trying me on with a puffer jerkin over my denim.
This far West the rules change. Get a load of him,
he’s got the attributes to get himself laid
and get seen getting laid, sex for downloading,
body pumped and swollen inside his leather.
What he can do with a cowboy hat and a banana.

Blood

River inside me that
I need to keep
flowing, unspilt:

when risk breaks the barrier,
blood will be where
the infection appears

– which it didn't for me
but could have done.
The thin wall of

rubber kept the blood
of penis and of rectum
separate. His blood

he had already taken it
into, and didn't care
but did care, it was his

way to punish himself.
He knew I wasn't
like that, he didn't

expect my own self-
destruction in his
need for sex, although

the pull was strong
and we wanted to
fuck each other's brains out.

But as ever, my restraint
could save my blood while I
could never save his. We were

in different places on the map
of what the world could
offer us, what we could do

to the world with blood
filling a penis, blood of
the river of being alive.

Find Me

‘Find me like a banknote in the street,
a sudden thought,
find me
in the spare bedroom: now
I’m this butterfly,
red carpet-patterned,

I’m an extra guest where you’ll be sleeping later.
And you don’t yet know
it’s me.
You need to let me go, but not
out into that empty November.

Perhaps at bedtime you must think I’m gone,
the way they say
the dead are “in another room”?

Or you forgot.
You don’t know I’ve been hiding
while you took yourself in hand
– then
I flit down on your open laptop with my
light touch,
my way of turning up,
and you remember how you wanted me.’

Bottom Drawer

The bottom has fallen out of my bottom drawer, the one
stuffed with forgotten trousers, pyjamas, thermal longjohns,
and a few things I'm not ashamed of but won't make public.
The chest of drawers is old and cheap, the wood inside it
rough, and warping under the weight of clothes. One panel
from the base of the bottom drawer is out of its grooves,
and bent. So much in this chest of drawers, too many
sentimental teeshirts I never wear, special underpants I
needn't find occasion for. Now I've cracked the bottom panel
when I tried to fix it, and we're almost out of superglue,
my only resource for mending. Some of the clothes
I've weeded. I imagine some gone but I can't see myself
never owning them. It's an old chest of drawers that
wasn't even new when it stood in the room I was born in.

The Dream Rooms

It’s evidently a common dream, the extra rooms:
looking-glass rooms and rabbit holes for Alice to explore
– but the rooms are exploring us. Inside my head
I have the means to take over the flat downstairs,
finding convenient new ways down there, but also ways
up again into a flat I don’t own at all, like a bridge,
with someone else’s red sofas and chairs painted white.
Or there’s a different house I used to live in, and yet
it’s not where I lived: there’s an upstairs room,
wrecked and abandoned, plaster fallen everywhere
– how do I mend it? The neighbourhood is familiar,
though it isn’t. I go out into the streets, among houses
made to live in differently, made for the dream.
‘Drink me,’ says the dream. I can open the world up,
pioneer every home, every room in my mental
space, like America sliced and diced into states,
the memory and the invention spreading new forms
of Birmingham tinged with Reading, or
Stoke Newington, naturally, but Coventry also,
or through that door now and then it’s Edinburgh.
While I’m absorbed in these spaces,
things come right by being wrong, as
Alice could have told me. I am not to go
into that room, yet I have to, and I will.

Home Truths

Here are the woods, managed by a skilled crew,
and one good straight birch picked out
with a red stripe — is it condemned or chosen?

Here are the characters: the magpies check out
glitter for the nest, the crows fidget in the wind,
jays drop in like big pink toys on a visit.

Here, as if it mattered, the groceries listed
and followed round the dull little supermarket,
every one crossed off, glad to be of service.

And the house in the woods, like a scene of crime
as usual. You have to find things like soap,
and gold, and logs for the stove, but it’s home.

Vegan Rhubarb Pavlova

I take my pleasures gently, like a lotus
opening for the world to enter me,
and share its own sweetness, in its passion
to seek out my desire and gratify it.
What joys am I after? I'm longing for
another spoon of my pudding at Mildred's.

Ruby rhubarb poached slowly, tender
but ridgy still, nestling in real meringue
with no eggwhite – it's built out of the juice
of chickpeas – and they've whipped up coconuts
into a cream to splurge inside my mouth,
filled now with the pudding at Mildred's.

Dinners for occasions, intimate evenings
with ingredients out of vegetable love,
fake but genuine, make the moment perfect:
the facts of the menu tested, spread out
satisfied and asking was that as good
tonight as your pudding at Mildred's?

And so I ask myself, have I satisfied?
What have I done for the world? Yes,
I'm alone in it, we're all alone, we're
grabbing hold of the last stick of rhubarb.
We've paid for that party now, our minds
lingering over that pudding at Mildred's.

The Usual

I love their coffee, though the comestibles aren't
up to much – damp and sticky bought-in cake, pastries
better but no character, so usually I get a bacon bagel:
the paradox that's me, half-Jewish, half not, and really
not at all. But my Jewish father loved his bacon,
and the local grocers knew to slice him smoked back,
at number 5. Every Thursday the usual man asks
'The usual?' – this week I say no, I'll have a croissant:
he seems a little hurt. In fact, last week his stand-in
served me a much juicier bacon in the bagel, but
being asked 'The usual?' is so pleasing. The journey
is part of the ritual: train two stops to Stamford Hill,
a 253 up Camden Road – the 253 I first took
with my sister and Aunty Sheila the other way,
from Manor House to Aunty Fay's, with Aunty May's
collapsible dressmaker's dummy in a woven rush suitcase
that almost tumbled off the open platform of the bus
taking the turn into Amhurst Park entering Stamford Hill,
where men in black wear hats that identify who they are,
and I feel I shouldn't wear my cheap black trilby
with a black polyester raincoat, almost close enough
to be confused from a distance – yet why should I not?
In Stamford Hill the confusion's mainly mine,
awareness of a foreskin that can never belong.
I'll never have the instinct for what Jewish is,
and never give the right answer on Israel:
on which even the unelaborate Radio 3 news
– my news ritual, one more way I'm now my father –
brings news that never sounds good to me,
and seems unlikely now ever to be good again.

Aunty May's Party

With a ballet dancer and a bishop,
the conversation gets lumpy,
but we don't need to communicate,
although our glasses are empty,
and all the time it's a meeting
of scissors, paper and stone:
partying at Aunty May's,
waking up alone,
like waking up on the other side.

The guests are highly erudite,
with all their PhDs
costing a hundred thousand words
and scraping together the fees,
and now they don't want to talk,
but browse in her volumes of Proust,
partying at Aunty May's,
waking up in the past,
waking up on the other side.

Nobody told you the formula,
nobody offered you space,
it doesn't help to get shirty
when what they don't like is your face,
but you've sacrificed your art
along with the horse it rode in on,
partying at Aunty May's,
waking to the wrong decision,
waking up on the other side.

Waking up on the other side
is waking up in a dream,
and every word you've written
was a stake in a pyramid scheme,
when all it takes is a sharp felt tip
and a blunt message on a wall,
partying at Aunty May's,
not waking up at all
and waking up on the other side.
..

Pears

And that stewed pear
vindicates my mother who told me
pears will make you pee,
and they do, yet I keep forgetting.
You don't need to know,
but I was up more than once in the night,
which my prostate medication
is there to prevent, but I'd say
no blame for the prostate,
it's only a spigot, while surely
it's the kidneys – a diuretic makes them
squeeze more out of me. With tea
I've learned to insist on a biscuit
that soaks it up in the stomach
and slows the micturition –
and this works, although I can be
too embarrassed or thirsty
to ask for one when tea is offered.
I told the Urology man, who
was taken aback that coffee, with more
caffeine, was less of a problem.
I didn't mention pears and, as I say,
I often forget about pears.
James (the stewed pear was delicious,
honestly) doesn't find they do it,
and the quantity of tea he drinks
straight, no biscuit, is even more
than my late mother drank, but do pears
and tea contain the same
water-making ingredient? Why was she
not concerned about
the properties of tea? Is there a gene

for pears-make-you-go?

On Google I’ve found almost nothing

except for people

happy that pears are diuretic

for losing them weight.

That’s not the point. But by my time of life

empirical evidence makes me

take care with pears, however delicious,

know myself, listen to my mother.

Vertigo

Everything is moving past me to
the right when I know it's not moving
at all but everything dares me to catch it and
pin it down put it in an album and sit on it keep it
in one place but I can't because it's all in my head
my eyes are telling me it's
moving and when I shut them
the after-images are going round
to the left yet this too will pass although
it could keep passing and the world
become a river in flood ever-rolling
holding branches logs rafts with chickens
goats plastic balls lost dolls dead deer and
everything moving past banks of green willow
gorges of limestone embankments of granite
glass and steel buildings cheesegraters shards
this city of empty reflections past all of it and off
into the wide open water that rolls pitches heaves
out of the world's own spinning its wind and tide
swirling and swilling round the inside of my head

And to Die

'And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier.'
Whitman, Song of Myself

I see he wants us to be glad of the earth.
I shall be surprised, even so, when
I am no longer my self.
I open my heart to another breath where
I know this privilege attends me and
I find the gasp again till the final attempt.
I swallow the last of it.
I find it gone.
I have no place to remain here,
I catch the end
I could not stop for.

A Father's Body

I'd like to claim my father, as I'm his
continuing body: not quite his face,
but more so when I put his
hornrim glasses on. I didn't inherit
his baldness, which I regret: I'd like
to feel my palm on that smooth head.
It's not his brain I think with,
though I was formed by his, and
his education. I don't speak
with his dark Scots L,
last element of his upbringing
still in his mouth. Do I have his
penis? There's no evidence.
I do have a foreskin, which
he only had one week. I'm now
about the age he gave up smoking.
I stopped half my life ago,
but when I see that now rare
maleness, a cigarette held
between lips, I see his: which
I used to see from the back seat
in the driving mirror, and I'd
watch his eyes, the eyes I
watched when I watched him
dying. Not my colour, but
the same prescription.

The Armchairs

Now they're on their own, where
no one is sitting: no one much
has sat in them for years. One,
once rescued from the room
of a dead mathematician, needs
a cushion to mitigate its rigidity
and yet the curve is elegant. The other
came from an uncle's furniture company
ninety-nine years ago, a wedding present,
dumpy and yielding but still buoyant.
No one has decided what to do about
who they are and where they might
find themselves. They never really did
go together, but still, here they are.

Sun in December

That cold glow in the sky slides down while the earth
is rolling back, to leave this place in the dark
and the sun will warm somewhere else, now.

Between my being born a mile away from here
and my mother's dying on the other side of town
there's been so much spinning and orbiting.

This town is like a wheel: its radial spokes are not
the route I need from the inconvenient station,
making me zigzag round it to follow my own way.

A plane makes a slight rip in the sky's empty surface,
lit by the setting sun. It can look down on us from
up over the edge, surveying the earth it came out of,

the earth that people are made from, who have
trundled wheelbarrows of mud and stone, building
selves that have spread into streets and houses.

For this particular place, which I'm so tired of,
and for my mother, so tired of more than location,
December has come because it always will.

Critical Commentary

Grecian Urns and Tin Watermelons: Lyric, Truth and Beauty, with reference to Mark Doty, and comparisons with Philip Larkin

Chapter 1. Introduction

The post-war climate in which I was born was a time of repression of homosexuality – Alan Turing, a colleague of my mathematician father, killed himself a few weeks before my birth in 1954 – but it was also the beginning of the times when, as Philip Larkin exaggeratedly put it, 'Sexual intercourse began | In nineteen sixty-three'.[1] The Wolfenden Report on homosexuality was published in 1957,[2] and the limited legalisation of male homosexual acts came in 1967, when I was 13 and aware of my own sexuality. My family had liberal views, but despite plenty of information about sex, emotional expression was limited. I was brought up to be truthful, and even innocent fictions and white lies still make me uncomfortable. I inherited a sceptical approach from my father, an atheist Jew; my mother was nominally Anglican but becoming disaffected. My parents were not especially compatible, which became explicit one traumatic day (see 'Buggers', p. 11/[2])[3] but the difficulty was smoothed over. Birmingham, where I lived from the age of three, was not 'where my childhood was unspent' as in Larkin's poem 'I Remember, I Remember' about Coventry,[4] but

[1] 'Annus Mirabilis' [composed 1967] in *The Complete Poems of Philip Larkin*, ed. by Archie Burnett (London: Faber, 2012), p. 90.
[2] Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution, *Report* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1957).
[3] Thesis page references are followed by pagination of the published book, in square brackets.
[4] *Complete Poems*, p. 42.

our Midlands seemed unremarkable in a deliberate way, self-defined against showy London (see ‘Zsa Zsa’s House’, p. 43/[34]). I was attracted to Louis MacNeice as he had lived there and written the poem ‘Birmingham’,[5] in the Penguin *Poetry of the Thirties* (set for A Level), and I was aware of Larkin, who influenced me with the safe ambition of being a librarian while being a poet. Stevie Smith was a role model for being less ordinary, indeed decidedly odd, but endorsed by Larkin on her LP recording[6] which I borrowed frequently from Birmingham Central Library. The 1960s revival of Art Nouveau caught my attention, and growing up in Bournville I became aware of the Arts-and-Crafts style around me, which favoured a similar ‘line of beauty’: I wrote a school essay about this when I was thirteen, but did not attempt to define why this was beautiful. The Art Nouveau revival was part of the ‘psychedelic’ rock culture of the 1960s and early 1970s which I absorbed, finding an aesthetic of eccentricity in Captain Beefheart and a sceptical truthfulness in Bob Dylan. I wanted to fit in, but knew I would not. By sixteen I was writing a kind of lyric poetry about my teenage confusion, but unable to be truthful about its biggest cause.

Coming out as gay at twenty-one was partly a struggle against understatement of emotion becoming repression: in achieving this, I was lucky to be a minor participant in the Gay Liberation Front. Birmingham GLF survived longer than some GLF groups in London, but there was less radical gay presence than in the metropolis for flamboyant activism. Among gay literary models I found Christopher Isherwood, whose 1954 novel *The World in the Evening* eventually connected my queerness with

[5] *Poetry of the Thirties*, ed. by Robin Skelton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), pp. 80–81.
[6] ‘Frivolous and Vulnerable’ [1962], in Philip Larkin, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955–1982* (London: Faber, 1983), pp. 153–58. The LP is *Stevie Smith Reads Selected Poems* (Hull: Marvell Press, 1965).

the invisible Quaker element in my upbringing. Bournville was the Quaker George Cadbury's garden village for chocolate factory workers, and an untypically high concentration of Quakers lived there. A non-Quaker, I took them and their outlook for granted until I moved to London in 1982 and began to attend meetings. Isherwood's novel has a Philadelphia background parallel to mine, and in an explicitly Quaker context his characters discuss the concept of camp, ten years before Susan Sontag's influential essay.[7] Sontag describes Isherwood's discussion of camp as 'a lazy two-page sketch', although it is not a treatise but a conversation in fiction, where one homosexual character says he finds in camp everything that Quakers lack. Seventeenth-century Quakers engaged in prophetic behaviour such as 'going naked for a sign' (of unadorned spiritual truth).[8] They have tended since to be unflamboyant and were historically sceptical of expressions of 'beauty' in art or music, while capable of almost unintentionally embodying it. Quaker-built Bournville, like other garden cities, is firmly based on William Morris's statement 'Have nothing in your house which you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful',[9] delivered at a lecture in Birmingham in 1880, the year after Cadbury's moved their factory to the site. In Bournville the Aesthetic movement meets the Quaker principle of (or 'testimony to') simplicity:

> The history of the protest of early Friends against excess and ostentatious superfluity is fascinating. It is easy to ridicule their apparent denial of the Arts; yet it must be admitted that certainly

[7] Christopher Isherwood, *The World in the Evening*, [1954], (London: Vintage, 2012), pp. 125–26; Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp' [1964], *in A Susan Sontag Reader* (London: Penguin, 1983), pp. 105–19.
[8] See Kenneth L. Carroll, 'Early Quakers and "Going Naked as a Sign"', *Quaker History*, 67.2 (1978), 69–87.
[9] William Morris, 'The Beauty of Life', in *Hopes and Fears for Art* [1882], published with *Signs of Change* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994), pp. 51–80 (p. 76).

> visually, out of it there was born an austere, spare, refreshingly simple beauty.[10]

However, the Quaker stand in the cause of truth can be carried off with quiet but intransigent flamboyance, for instance Helen Steven's peace witness against Trident submarines at Faslane in the 1980s and 1990s.[11]

From the mid-1980s Quakerism became part of my identity. I was returning to poetry after having abandoned it while I came to terms with being gay, and I finally had a permanent Quaker job in the library at Friends House on Euston Road, enabling the mortgage on a shared flat in Stoke Newington (see 'Days of 1985', p. 18/[9]). Learning to be a gay poet and a Quaker at the same time may seem awkward as a combination of outrageousness and quiet, but the requirement for truth to one's self applied to both. Poetry could express my gay liberation, as for others: 'The single strongest mandate of Gay Liberation was to Come Out! For many women and men, poetry became the vehicle for self-disclosure'.[12] I have rarely attempted an explicitly Quaker poem, but 'Bunhill Fields Quaker Burial Ground' (p. 30) is an exception, part of attempting to unify my life consistently with Quaker principles of integrity.[13]

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[10] Robin Tanner, extract from 'Life is Art' [1966], in *Quaker Faith & Practice* (London: Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 5th ed., 2013), §21.29. Quakers are not to be confused with the distantly related Shakers whose simple style developed more consciously through elegant solutions to daily problems of communal living.

[11] See Helen Steven, *No Extraordinary Power: Prayer, Stillness and Activism* (London: Quaker Books, 2005).

[12] Michael Bronski, 'Zines from a Revolution', in Poetry (Chicago) 214.3 (June 2019) [unpaginated website] <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/150351/zines-from-a-revolution> [accessed 25 June 2019]

[13] See also Peter Daniels, 'Being a Quaker Poet', *The Friends Quarterly*, 40.3 (August 2013), 48–56.

Workshop Culture

From 1983 I was became friends with an older man, Kenneth King. Ken was passionate about contemporary poetry, introducing me to the work of John Ashbery and Elizabeth Bishop. I was resistant to the evasive quality in Ashbery, but Ken identified some affinity in tone. We attended the workshops of the Performing Oscars, a gay group set up for performance poetry a few months before I joined, mostly centred on weekly Sunday afternoon sessions at the Fallen Angel gay pub not far from Bunhill Fields Meeting which I attended in the morning. At these creative workshops I started using a 'five random words' exercise which I still do. But they were not critically rigorous, and I started going to the Thurlow Road workshops run by Colin Falck, attended by Hugo Williams, Michael Donaghy, Eva Salzman, and Don Paterson. I continued with the Oscars and began publishing their pamphlets and later paperback anthologies, editing a gay anthology in 1990,[14] and in 1994 after a decade of the AIDS crisis an AIDS anthology with Steve Anthony, a gay poet from the Thurlow Road workshop.[15] I found attempting to combine gayness and poetry mostly frustrating for bridging gay and straight audiences, and made less of gay subject matter as I developed my craft, attending a number of other workshops and creative writing classes including Michael Donaghy's at City University.

The workshops emphasised principles like Ezra Pound's discouragement of abstractions (in 'A Few Don'ts', 1913)[16] and William Carlos Williams's dictum 'No ideas but in things' (from 'A Sort of a Song', 1944).[17] Meanwhile, through my

[14] *Take Any Train: A Gay Men's Anthology*, ed. by Peter Daniels (London: Oscars Press, 1990).
[15] *Jugular Defences: An AIDS Anthology*, ed. by Peter Daniels and Steve Anthony (London: Oscars Press, 1994).
[16] Ezra Pound, 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste', *Poetry* (Chicago), 1.6 (March 1913), 200–08 <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?volume=1&issue=6&page=29 > [accessed 25 July 2020].
[17] William Carlos Williams, *The Collected Poems Volume II 1940–1963*, ed. by Christopher MacGowan (Manchester: Carcanet, 2018), p. 55.

involvement with the Hall-Carpenter lesbian and gay archive project I was in a Gay History Group which discussed early queer theory from Judith Butler and others. I took the Modern Literatures in English MA at Birkbeck (1994-1996), studying much postmodern theory which generally confirmed my own preference for ideas in things rather than abstractions. Yet Pound's and Williams's modernist cautions prefigure the postmodern disavowal of legitimation by 'grand narratives' as theorised by Jean-François Lyotard.[18] Hence poetry and theory have both tended to dismiss 'truth' and 'beauty' as grand themes, although the underlying positive ethical and aesthetic virtues have not disappeared despite poetic representation of them through 'things', and other strategies to avoid their explicit celebration as subjects. There are similar strictures against certain overused words, for example, Peter Sansom's creative-writing advice in 1994: 'to use old-hat devices and "poetry words" is to grasp for an easy effect.'[19] Some poets, including Mark Doty, have reacted against such restrictions.

Mark Doty and Beauty

Doty, born in 1953, is an American gay poet one year older than me. His upbringing was very different from my reserved British childhood and adolescence, culminating in his alcoholic mother attempting to shoot him. His experience of AIDS was also very different, as he lived with a dying lover (recounted in the memoir *Heaven's Coast*[20] and in many poems) while my experience was less direct (see 'Blood', p. 61/[52]). *Firebird* is about his obsession with beauty from childhood onwards:

[18] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).
[19] Peter Sansom, *Writing Poems* (Tarset: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), Kindle Edition, location 559.
[20] Mark Doty, *Heaven's Coast: A Memoir* [1996], (London: Vintage, 1997).

> My mother taught me to love the things that would save me, and then when I was sixteen, she taught me that I wasn't worth saving. I learnt the first lesson best – since beauty engaged my deepest interest, and since I was most willing to be instructed by delight – but I would be lying if I said that the second lesson didn't shape me.[21]

In *School of the Arts* (2005) his poem 'The Pink Poppy' tackles beauty directly, offering several 'Theories of Beauty': 'But there – you aren't supposed | to talk about beauty, are you?'[22] He began this deliberate approach against the grain of literary expectations in the earlier *Sweet Machine* (1998), openly responding to accusations of too much surface glitter. This is the first of two poems titled 'Concerning Some Recent Criticism of his Work' (quoted entire):

> — Glaze and shimmer,
> lustre and gleam,
>
> Can't he think of anything
> but all that sheen?
>
> — No such thing,
> The queen said,
> as too many sequins.[23]

I enjoyed his first UK publication *My Alexandria*,[24] but when I reviewed *Sweet Machine* for *Poetry London* I found myself impatient with that element of surface beauty. I was won over eventually:

> His process and his subject matter focus on transience and loss, but he finds our apparently useless and fragile lives redeemed by the useless and fragile in art, a means of survival with, by and through beauty.

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[21] Mark Doty, *Firebird: A Memoir* [1999], (London: Cape, 2000), p. 171.
[22] Mark Doty, *School of the Arts* (London: Cape, 2005) p. 71.
[23] Mark Doty, *Sweet Machine* (London: Cape, 1998), p. 30.
[24] Mark Doty, *My Alexandria* [1993] (London: Cape, 1995)

> […]
>
> This relentless surface lustre can be exasperating to readers out of sympathy with his approach, and even a gay reader may not be always in the mood, but for Doty this is style to be believed in.[25]

Doty's belief in surface beauty is unrespectably camp, an unrepentant queerness which I admire, asserting the validity of a queer aesthetic and affirming beauty as a value.

Doty's affirmation of beauty may be a marker of something wider. From the mid-1990s several books appear on the theme of beauty, including Dave Hickey's *The Invisible Dragon: Essays on Beauty* (1993, revised 2009), Denis Donoghue's *Speaking of Beauty* (2003) and a volume of essays *The New Aestheticism* (2003) edited by John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas, attempting to reconcile a desire for beauty with postmodern theory. Meanwhile, the postmodern idea that there is no objective truth has been challenged by concerns over political untruths in manipulation of the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump's election in 2016. At the time of Trump's inauguration in 2017 the Washington Press Corps issued a statement, including: 'We believe there is an objective truth, and we will hold you to that.'[26] A concern for truth is fundamental to my Quakerism. The political truths include expectation of climate disaster with the inevitable loss of beauty in the world. This underlies my instinct for apocalyptic endings to poems like 'A Moment' (p. 36/[27]) and 'Almost Christmas' (p. 37/[28]), and in chapter 6 I consider the sense of

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[25] Peter Daniels, 'The Art of Survival', *Poetry London*, 33 (1999), 29–30 (p. 29).
[26] 'An Open Letter to Trump from the US Press Corps', *Columbia Journalism Review* (20 January 2017) [unpaginated website] <https://www.cjr.org/covering_trump/trump_white_house_press_corps.php> [accessed 20 January 2017].

an ending which may be seen as enhancing the beauty of what is being lost, including our own lives.

Keats's Urn: Truth and Beauty as a Dyad

The idea of focusing on truth and beauty for a Ph.D. came to me unexpectedly in 2015 at a Quaker meeting. It was confirmed soon after when Mark Doty read at Keats House in Hampstead. The Keatsian atmosphere encouraged me to ask him directly in the Q&A for his thoughts on truth and beauty: he confirmed his obsession with beauty but was sceptical about truth.[27] 'Truth and beauty' as a dyadic concept cannot be extricated from Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1820),[28] an endless source of anglophone critical controversy, about relating the true and the beautiful, and about Keats and his poem. In 1930, John Middleton Murry sets out the responses of critics to date 'to show the astonishing variety of opinion which exists at this day concerning the culmination of a poem whose beauty has been acknowledged for many years.' Robert Bridges believes 'these concluding lines […] redeem a poorish poem', while Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch thinks the conclusion 'vague'.[29] T. S. Eliot finds it 'meaningless' and a 'serious blemish on a beautiful poem'.[30] I. A. Richards considers it an example of 'statements in poetry […] there *as a means* to the manipulation and expression of feelings and attitudes, not as contributions to any body of doctrine' [italics in original].[31] Murry himself suggests love as the connection between truth and beauty.[32] After Murry's survey, twentieth-century

[27] Peter Daniels, notebook entry; not taken down verbatim.
[28] John Keats, *Poetical Works*, ed. by H. W. Garrod (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 209–10.
[29] John Middleton Murry, *Keats*, [1930], (London: Cape, 1955), p. 222; ibid., p. 210; ibid.
[30] Ibid., p. 211; T. S. Eliot, 'Dante' (Note to Section II) [1929], in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015) pp. 700–38 (p. 729) [Project Muse, <https://muse.jhu.edu/chapter/1634747/pdf> [accessed 15 May 2020].
[31] I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* [1929] (London: Routledge, 1964), p. 186.
[32] *Keats*, p. 222.

critics continue unceasingly to analyse the poem's statement, notably Kenneth Burke, Cleanth Brooks, and William Empson.[33] A typical recent discussion is introduced by Adam Fitzgerald in 2010 with the sentence 'One of the most debated poems of the 20th century wasn't written by a modernist',[34] and calls for further contributions to the debate, typifying expectations that poets and critics will have a position on the subject. I find myself in a state of Keatsian 'negative capability',[35] with some openness regarding the relationship between truth and beauty, and what Keats intended. The two concepts cannot be synonymously identical or there would be no surprise in the statement to cause the controversy, but I align with a Quaker position of integrity in the interconnectedness of creation and its manifestations that show degrees of the ethical beauty of truth, or the truth of authentic beauty.

Larkin states as his own response to Keats: 'I have always believed that beauty is beauty, truth truth'.[36] However, this seems mostly an argumentative stance for the sceptical personality that Larkin projects, rather than a useful principle for poetry or a wider philosophical point. In a 1981 interview with John Haffenden, he expands on it: 'every poem starts out as either true or beautiful. Then you try to make the true ones seem beautiful, and the beautiful ones seem true. I could go through my poems marking them as one or the other.'[37] His reticent character keeps his expression of truth and beauty typically to understatement, his own way of avoiding grand

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[33] Kenneth Burke, 'Symbolic Action in a Poem by Keats' [1945], in *John Keats, Odes: A Casebook*, ed. by G. S. Fraser (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1971), pp. 103–22; Cleanth Brooks, 'Keats's Sylvan Historian', in *The Well-Wrought Urn* (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace, 1947), pp. 151–66; William Empson, extract from *The Structure of Complex Words* [1951], in *John Keats, Odes*, ed. by G. S. Fraser, pp. 128–31.
[34] Adam Fitzgerald 'The Ill-Wrought Urn? A Literary Critical Debate in Truth & Beauty', *The The* (13 February 2010), www.thethepoetry.com/2010/02/the-truth-beauty-debate-keats-ode-on-a-grecian-urn-part-1/ [accessed 1 April 2018].
[35] See chapter 2; To George and Tom Keats, 21, 27(?) December 1817, in *Letters of John Keats: A Selection*, ed. by Robert Gittings [1970] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) pp. 41–43 (p. 43).
[36] 'Let the Poet Choose' [1973] in Philip Larkin, *Further Requirements: Interviews, Broadcasts, Statements and Book Reviews*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber, 2001), p. 39.
[37] 'An Interview with John Haffenden' [1981], in *Further Requirements*, p. 49.

narratives even while apparently making a statement like ‘What will survive of us is love’, because this ‘almost-instinct’ is only ‘almost true’.[38] István Racz in his study *Philip Larkin’s Poetics* notes this tentativeness:

> ‘Almost’ is a centrally important word in Larkin’s vocabulary. A later poem, ‘The Trees’, starts with these lines: ‘The trees are coming into leaf | Like something almost being said; …’ The function of ‘almost’ is the same here as in the closure of ‘An Arundel Tomb’: it means that the trees say nothing, but it also suggests that the implied poet wants them to speak.[39]

This blurring of what might be a truth about love, or a beautiful image about trees, is Larkin’s device for blurring the distinction between truth and beauty. But Larkin expects the poem to be always true in the sense of authentic. Racz quotes a letter from Larkin to Michael Hamburger: ‘To me the “tradition of poetry” is, quite simply, emotion and honesty of emotion’.[40] Authenticity implies truth to the poet’s intention, but the poem’s ‘I’ may not be a sincere representation of the poet’s thoughts and feelings, either ‘in character’, e.g., ‘Books are a load of crap’ (‘A Study of Reading Habits’),[41] or from genuine experience but altered in details – ‘The Whitsun Weddings’ is an example: ‘In fact L[arkin] did not travel at Whitsun, and did not go all the way to London.’[42] The lyric self blends into dramatic monologue, or is combined with it. Keats makes his urn a metonym of ancient Classical grace and wisdom: the voice we understand as the poet’s own builds up this metonymic

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[38] ‘An Arundel Tomb’, in *Complete Poems*, p. 72.
[39] István D. Racz, *Philip Larkin’s Poetics: Theory and Practice of an English Post-war Poet* (Leiden: Rodopi, 2016), p. 39. ‘The Trees’ is in *Complete Poems*, pp. 76–77. .
[40] Ibid., p. 30. Cited as Michael Hamburger, *Philip Larkin: A Retrospect* (London: Enitharmon, 2002), p. 14. The unclear syntax of ‘who or how it is written by’ is in Racz’s quote.
[41] *Complete Poems*, p. 62.
[42] Ibid., pp. 56–58, and notes, p. 411.

presence through the poem, while allowing it to speak its wisdom to the reader, through the interpretation of the implied poet.

The Urn as Metonym in Time

Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' continues to provoke responses, not only in criticism and theory but also in poetry, the ode itself becoming a metonym of the weight of cultural history in which it participates. In a 2012 interview, Doty cites Brenda Hillman's 'Styrofoam Cup': 'What can a Styrofoam cup be *but* unravished? And endlessly replicated, and thus pretty much incapable of mattering to us. I wonder if anyone can treasure one of those?'.[43] This is a version of an urn at the lowest level of truth or beauty, which reads in its entirety:

> thou still unravished thou
> thou, thou bride
> thou unstill,
> thou unravished unbride
> unthou unbride[.][44]

Two other recent poems, Tim Turnbull's 'Ode on a Grayson Perry Urn'[45] and Patricia Lockwood's 'The Ode on a Grecian Urn',[46] replace quietness with disruptive behaviour. In Turnbull's poem this is from the young bikers depicted on Perry's urn, and in Lockwood's it is Keats's ode itself acting as a young delinquent, 'the Öde, now spelling itself | with an umlaut' attacking old ladies. The young male Ode is

[43] Andrew David King, 'The Lessons of Objects: An Interview with Mark Doty', *Kenyon Review Blog*, 12 December 2012, <https://www.kenyonreview.org/2012/12/mark-doty-interview/> [accessed 12 May 2017].
[44] Brenda Hillman, 'Styrofoam Cup', in *Fence* (n.d.) <https://www.fenceportal.org/styrofoam-cup/> [accessed 29 June 2019].
[45] Tim Turnbull, 'Ode on a Grayson Perry Urn', in *Forward Book of Poetry 2009* (London: Forward, 2009), p. 67.
[46] Patricia Lockwood, 'The Ode on a Grecian Urn', *Poetry* (Chicago), 210.5 (September 2017), 511–13.

both violent and ingratiating, but Lockwood wishes to remind it of Keats's vulnerability to tuberculosis:

> And the Ode is murmuring almost gently,
> 'But do you like my ending?
> Some people don't like my ending,'
> I don't, I never did, I thought it was
> so overwrought,
> though now that I'm here myself why not
> if it has to be this way
> then better
> put a bright red cough on all that white[.]

These poems take on Keats as representative of something that needs questioning, because they recognise his poem as what might be called a cultural icon. In my own poetry collection I have not attempted a tribute to Keats or a reformulation of the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' directly, but I use a considerable amount of metonymy in poems to represent the truth and beauty I find.

A relationship to Keats's ode is a relationship to the literary tradition: the poem anticipates the urn's utterance resonating in future, but now it resonates for us as a poem as well as an utterance on truth and beauty. Metonyms create 'real world' comparisons unlike metaphors, so any 'eternal' qualities ascribed to them like truth and beauty are set against the timebound nature of the real world. In Doty's prose book *Dog Years*, which is mostly about time, he makes a triple Keatsian allusion, to the 'Ode on Melancholy' ('She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die') and to 'Endymion' ('A thing of beauty is a joy for ever: | Its loveliness increases'),[47] as well as the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn':

[47] Keats, *Poetical Works*, p. 220; p. 55.

> real beauty is always marked by the passage of time; it dwells in time; its loveliness increases as the workings of age and the mysteries of continuing enhance it; even Grecian urns, those brides of quietness, are more beautiful because of their small cracks, the mellowing of their paint, the fine and subtle darkening of the stone.[48]

Poems by Doty and Larkin illustrate these timebound metonyms. Racz considers 'An Arundel Tomb' as a rewriting of Keats's ode:

> The urn and the tomb signify not only the past but also the tension between the past and the present. In Keats this is suggested by the multitude of questions in the first stanza: as they all remain unanswered, no continuity is established between the life in the pictures and the act of perception in the present.[49]

In Larkin's poem the equivalent questions are unasked except 'What will survive of us', the answer, 'love', being 'almost true' – 'that is, not true. We should not believe what the urn said to Keats's admiring spectator (or what the spectator thought the urn said).'[50] Doty's poem 'The Pink Poppy',[51] contains similarly tentative unanswered questioning, the metonymic flower occasioning seven incompatible 'Theories of Beauty' before being bent over by the rain.

Triangulating Doty, Larkin and Myself

I investigate my experience of truth and beauty as conveyed through the lyric form with reference to the influence of Doty and Larkin as contrasting poets, unlikely in most contexts to be considered together but a good pairing to triangulate what I can present as distinctive in my own work. All three of us are significantly metonymic

[48] Mark Doty, *Dog Years: A Memoir* [2007] (London: Cape, 2008), p. 181.
[49] *Philip Larkin's Poetics*, p. 35.
[50] Ibid., pp. 38–39.
[51] *School of the Arts*, pp. 71–74.

(see chapter 4) and are much concerned with time and death (see chapter 6). My discussion of queerness is less relevant to Larkin but fundamental to Doty and myself; I have not found queerness elsewhere treated as a dialectic of camp and fetish, which I would offer as an original contribution to the field (chapter 5).

Doty has been my major focus. I have read extensively in interviews with him at all stages of his career, his memoirs *Heaven's Coast* (1996), *Firebird* (1999), and *Dog Years* (2007), and his critical writing, especially *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (2001), *The Art of Description* (2010), and various articles on Walt Whitman now gathered and edited as *What is the Grass* (2020). Critical work on Doty includes several dissertations. Emma Kimberley's 'Ekphrasis and the Role of Visual Art in Contemporary American Poetry' (University of Leicester, 2007) is substantially about Doty; her thesis takes 'ekphrasis' beyond the limits of usefulness, into discussion of the visual in poems where no picture is involved (e.g. 'A Display of Mackerel' and 'The Vault'), but has stimulated my thinking on truth and beauty in representation. Ekphrasis does not illuminate my own work, but it is significant in Larkin's as well as Doty's. AIDS is an inevitable focus in studies of Doty, as with William Joseph Reichard's 'Mercurial and Rhapsodic: Manifestations of the Gay Male Body in the Poetry of Mark Doty and Wayne Koestenbaum' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1997), and David Fulton's article 'Addressing the Problem: Gunn, Doty and the AIDS Elegy' (*EnterText* 6.3, 2007). John Mackay's 'Towards a Poetics of Overtakelessness: The Work of Contemporary Elegy in the Writing of Five North American Poets' (PhD thesis, Birkbeck, University of London, 2015) contains useful insights on death (but seriously misreads Doty's 9/11 poem 'In their Flight' as being about AIDS). Andrew Blades's 'Retroviral Writings: Reassessing the Postmodern in American AIDS Literature' (Oxford D. Phil. thesis,

2010), starts from an AIDS perspective but goes deeply into the mechanism of tropes: Blades takes the concept of metonymy further than I would myself (see chapter 4 note 208). In 'A Collectivity of Sparks: Nature and Transcendence in the Poetry of Mark Doty' (M. Phil., University of Glamorgan, 2012), Stephen Elves considers how Doty uses description for insights beyond the thing described –also part of what Kimberley discusses. Racz's study of Larkin and David Lodge's *The Modes of Modern Writing* (see chapter 4) have helped me frame my thoughts, as well as Larkin's own writing on poetry. However, I have not researched extensively in the body of Larkin criticism as he is secondary to Doty in the triangulation with my work.

In order to write a critical commentary for *My Tin Watermelon*[52] in relation to Doty and Larkin, it became clear that I needed to consider the poems as lyric, as utterances from a self to an audience, and to understand how that 'self' is placed in terms of reality (either as the 'real me' or a fictionalised persona). I also needed to explore how the lyric self presents the reality of the world with which it interacts, which constitutes the truth of the poem, with the beauty embodied in it rendered as a literary artefact. The next two chapters present my understanding of how lyric works.

[52] Peter Daniels, *My Tin Watermelon* (Cromer: Salt, 2019), and forming part of this thesis, pp. 10–77.

Chapter 2: Writing, Reading, and Theorising Lyric

Lyric since Romanticism

The most extensive recent study of the lyric is Jonathan Culler's book, *Theory of the Lyric* (2015), resulting from continuous reflections on lyric since *Structuralist Poetics* (1975).[53] He claims that 'Western literary theory has neglected the lyric and, until the romantic era, treated it as a miscellaneous collection of minor forms'[54] – the default category for poems that did not happen to be drama or epic. In the romantic era both practice and theory of lyric undergo crucial changes, related to the position of the self, and so I begin this chapter tracing the development of lyric from that time. Considering lyric as genre, Culler notes

> that the historical construction of lyric is carried out by poets as well as critics, so we can study the struggle between William Wordsworth's move to constructing lyrical ballads, attaching lyric to the modest anecdote rather than taking the ode as paradigmatic for lyric, and John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley's exploitation of that latter strain in new and powerful ways.[55]

For Culler, G. W. F. Hegel's influential theory 'compels attention above all as the fullest expression of the romantic theory of the lyric'.[56] Defining 'the romantic in general' in his *Aesthetics*, Hegel maintains that '[f]or romantic art the lyric is as it were the elementary fundamental characteristic',[57] because '[t]he true content of romantic art is absolute inwardness, and its corresponding form is spiritual

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[53] Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* [1975] (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002).
[54] *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 1. Like Culler, I am using lower case for 'romanticism' and 'modernism'.
[55] Jonathan Culler, 'Lyric, History, and Genre', *New Literary History*, 40.4 (2009), 879-899 (pp. 885–86).
[56] *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 92 [Kindle ed.].
[57] G. W. F. Hegel, trans. by T. M. Knox, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* [1835] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 528.

subjectivity with its grasp of its independence and freedom'.[58] Lyric depends on 'inner movement of soul', and Hegel's lyric poet 'depicts himself as a hero […] a man of his own sort as a subjective work of art'.[59] This is the 'egotistical sublime' which Keats identifies in Wordsworth. Keats contrasts it with his own 'Poetical character', 'not itself – it has no self – it is every thing and nothing – It has no character – it enjoys light and shade', which personalises his idea of 'negative capability';[60] yet Keats's negative selfhood also manifests Hegel's idea of 'spiritual subjectivity' in exploiting the ode paradigm of lyric.

The inward lyric self of romanticism is implicated in the relation between truth and beauty. Shelley, in 'A Defence of Poetry' (1821), conflates 'the true and the beautiful' which the poet apprehends as 'in a word, the good which exists in the relation subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression'.[61] Shelley views the truth–beauty relation in terms of time, which 'destroys the beauty and the use of the story of particular facts', but 'augments that of Poetry and forever develops new and wonderful applications of the eternal truth which it contains.'[62] As well as this longitudinal dimension in time, the relation of truth and beauty also has a dimension of profundity or elevation, a greater good being attached in particular to truth, as for Hegel: 'Works of art are all the more excellent in expressing true beauty, the deeper is the inner truth of their content and thought.'[63] However:

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[58] Ibid., p. 519.
[59] Ibid., p. 1119 and p. 1121.
[60] To Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818, *Letters*, ed. by Gittings, p. 157.
[61] Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry' [1821], in *Political Writings including 'A Defence of Poetry'* ed. by Roland A. Duerksen (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970), pp.164–97 (p. 167).
[62] Ibid., pp. 170–71.
[63] *Aesthetics*, p. 74.

> we acquire as the culmination of the romantic in general the contingency of both outer and inner, and the separation of these two sides, whereby art annuls itself and brings home to our minds that we must acquire higher forms for the apprehension of truth than those which art is in a position to supply.[64]

Art is effectively striving to annul its own beauty in favour of higher (or deeper) truth, but philosophical or religious truth attained through art may therefore supply a correspondingly higher or deeper beauty. If we identify art's intentions for beauty with pleasure, this is similar to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's statement that a poem is 'that species of composition which is opposed to works of science by proposing for its *immediate* object pleasure, not truth' [italics in original].[65] The pleasure is immediate but has truth as an ulterior aim. For both Hegel and Coleridge truth and beauty are not equivalent, as for Keats's urn, but cannot be dissociated, and poetry is a site where they come together: in Shelley's terms, apprehended as the good.

In *The Lyric Poem and Aestheticism*, Marion Thain describes how over the nineteenth century there is a move away from Hegel's position that poetry aspires

> to take up a position outside of space, time and individual subjectivity: an escape, however paradoxical and unsustainable, from our everyday world and our own human condition. Models such as this one seemed increasingly untenable as the century progressed.[66]

The romantic ideal is challenged by 'new ways of thinking' influenced by 'urbanisation, industrialisation and commodification' and some diversification from lyric with Browning's and Tennyson's dramatic monologues and narratives. But Thain considers that Aestheticism reclaims the romantic lyric model as 'an ideal

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[64] Ibid., p. 529.
[65] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* [1817], (London: Dent, 1975), p. 172.
[66] Marion Thain, *The Lyric Poem and Aestheticism*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 4.

experimental arena' to 'explore the pull between the personal and the universal' and other tensions that poets experience and express, with lyric introspection as the place of this experiment.[67] A key figure in reclaiming romantic ideas is the Pre-Raphaelite poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti. His enthusiasm for Keats is a major influence on the Aesthetic Movement and Morris's arts-and-crafts ethos, as E. P. Thompson shows in *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955):

> We must look more closely at Keats than at any other forerunner of Morris […]. Within his work may be found the germ of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the deepening influence of medievalism, the first assertion of the theory of 'art for art's sake'. There is no wonder that Morris later recalled that 'our clique was much influenced by Keats.'[68]

The statement of Keats's urn resonates behind Morris's 'Have nothing in your house which you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful',[69] where usefulness represents truthful authenticity. In the next generation, Oscar Wilde's aphoristic style also echoes (with added paradoxical irony) the seductive chiasmus of 'Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty – that is all | Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know'. He truncates the cadence at Keats's penultimate line, to the even more definitive 'That is all', as in 'There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all.'[70] Wilde is 22 when in 1877 he visits Keats's grave in Rome, and writes a sonnet describing him as 'a Priest of Beauty slain before

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[67] Ibid.
[68] E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* [1955] (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2011), p. 10; his citation for Morris is *The Collected Works of William Morris* (London: Longmans, 1910–15), volume XII, p. xxxi.
[69] 'The Beauty of Life', p. 76; see chapter 1, note 9.
[70] Oscar Wilde, Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* [1895], in *The Works of Oscar Wilde* (Leicester: Galley Press, 1987), p. 17.

his time.'[71] His 1882 lecture in America 'The English Renaissance of Art' describes the spirit epitomised by the Pre-Raphaelites, derived from William Blake and Keats: 'in Keats it seemed to have been incarnate, and in his lovely "Ode on a Grecian Urn" it found its most secure and faultless expression'.[72]

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the climate that Thain identifies enables developments among poets including Thomas Hardy who retreats from fiction into lyric, Gerard Manley Hopkins whose reinvented lyric expression is unknown at his death in 1886 but influential in the twentieth century, and D. H. Lawrence who explores his own subjectivity in a free lyric style influenced by Walt Whitman, while also writing prose fiction which rejects the 'old stable ego of the character'.[73] W. B. Yeats best represents the transition through Aestheticism to modernism. Richard Ellmann in *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (1949) outlines his two early styles: 'The one was simple, based more in theory than in fact on Irish peasant dialect; the other was elaborate and resembled that of the English Pre-Raphaelites and Rhymers.'[74] (Ellmann describes Yeats in 1891 as both 'under the influence' of the Rhymers Club, and 'responsible for organizing' it.)[75] In 1917 Yeats characterises the poetic impulse as a challenge, in which the self is to be found anew: 'the world must move my heart but to the heart's discovery of itself', and in working hard on the poem 'for a moment I believe I have found myself and not my anti-self.'[76] The self is in a process of discovery, and is also a site of conflict. In the same

[71] Oscar Wilde, 'The Tomb of Keats' [1877], in *Aristotle at Afternoon Tea: The Rare Oscar Wilde*, ed. by John Wyse Jackson (London: Fourth Estate, 1991), pp. 44–46 (p. 46).
[72] Oscar Wilde, 'The English Renaissance of Art' [1882], in *Aristotle at Afternoon Tea*, ed. by Jackson, pp. 1–28 (p. 13).
[73] D. H. Lawrence, Letter to Edward Garnett, 5 June 1914, in *D. H. Lawrence, 'The Rainbow' and 'Women in Love': A Casebook*, ed. by Colin Clarke (London: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 28–29 (p. 29).
[74] Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* [1949] (London: Faber, 1961), p. 147.
[75] Ibid., p. 143.
[76] W. B. Yeats, 'Anima Hominis' [1918], in *Selected Criticism*, ed. by A. Norman Jeffares (London: Pan Macmillan, 1976), pp. 165–80 (p. 165).

essay he writes famously: ‘We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry.’[77] Yeats’s lyric emerges from the quarrelsome self in his search for the poem’s truth and beauty. The ‘terrible beauty’ of ‘Easter 1916’ is born through the new political truth creating a new personal truth in Yeats’s selfhood.[78] As with the Irish rebellion for Yeats, the First World War changes the ‘War Poets’ whose lyric has to deal with a new reality. The war also affects non-combatant modernist pioneers like T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound who considers the war as for ‘a botched civilization’ – modern poetry should lose ‘the obscure reveries | Of the inward gaze’.[79]

Modernism then becomes a new norm against which there is reaction. David Lodge describes subsequent changes in English literature with alternate emphases on what may be considered ‘truth’ and ‘beauty’:

> 1930s writing was, characteristically, antimodernist, realistic, readerly and metonymic. In the 1940s the pendulum of literary fashion swung back again – not fully, but to a perceptible degree – towards the pole we have designated as modernist, symbolist, writerly and metaphoric.[80]

The modernist sense of brokenness continues heightened by the horrific events of the Second World War and the Holocaust, after which Theodor Adorno famously says that to write poetry is ‘barbaric’.[81] Facing such events, truth could seem simply impossible for a lyric self to express, and beauty seem a lie. Overall, the lyric in

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[77] Ibid., p. 170.
[78] W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 2nd ed., 1950), pp. 202-05.
[79] Ezra Pound, ‘E. P. Ode pour l’élection de son sepulchre’, in *Selected Poems* (London: Faber, 1975), pp. 98–101 (p. 101 and p. 99).
[80] David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (London: Arnold, 1977), p. 212.
[81] Theodor Adorno, ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’ [1949], in *Prisms*, trans. by Samuel and Shierry Weber (London: Neville Spearman, 1967), pp. 17–34 (p. 34).

Britain follows a trajectory from romantic 'egotistical sublime' and alignment of truth and beauty to a retreat from emotion and grand effects among the Movement poets in the 1950s, exemplified in Larkin's denial of the urn's position – 'I have always believed that beauty is beauty, truth truth'.[82] Discussing Larkin, Lodge places him among 1950s British writers 'suspicious of, and often positively hostile to the modernist movement and certainly opposed to any further efforts at "experimental" writing.'[83] Larkin begins under the influence of Yeats and of the Apocalyptic poets of the 1940s, but then in reaction to that influence becomes associated with the sceptical plain style of the 'Movement'. Parallel to Adorno's post-Auschwitz view, this sceptical and unflamboyant approach to poetry can be seen as a British response to the post-war reality.

During the twentieth century American and British poets diverge in many ways. William Carlos Williams is significant in that divergence, and central to American modernism. Breaking with the European romantic legacy, he eschews traditional forms like the pentameter, and puts ideas metonymically into things. Charles Tomlinson describes Williams's work as exploring 'the raw merging of American pastoral and urban squalor'.[84] These merged elements in effect represent beauty and truth, and a traditional concept of beauty remains at the centre of his work while he also depicts everyday reality in metonymic things. His late poem 'Asphodel, that Greeny Flower' is a retrospective on life contemplating the beauty of flowers and love, and the grim fact of death, in the face of which the lyric self looks for truth in 'despised poems':

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[82] Larkin, 'Let the Poet Choose' [1973], *Further Requirements*, p. 39; see chapter 1, note 36.
[83] *Modes of Modern Writing*, p. 213.
[84] Charles Tomlinson, 'Introduction', in William Carlos Williams, *Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 14.

> It is difficult
> to get the news from poems
> yet men die miserably every day
> for lack
> of what is found there.[85]

Various groups of poets establish modernism in America. The Objectivists in the 1930s, 'Americans of a generation later than Pound and Eliot',[86] are led by Ezra Pound's protégé Louis Zukofsky, taking imagistic lyrics towards anti-subjective concern for fact – more modernist, but parallel to the British contemporaries that Lodge characterises as realistic and metonymic. From the 1950s Charles Olson leads the Black Mountain poets: for Olson, lyric is defined by the energy the poet puts into the verse.[87] The New York School are mostly gay, associated with abstract expressionist artists, and avoid 'serious theorising or earnest justifications of their poetic practices.'[88] The comparative freedom of sexual expression in their 1950s New York, although gay life is still 'underground', enables a playful camp tone to reveal lyric selves ranging between the conversationally truthful style of Frank O'Hara's 'I do this, I do that' poems,[89] sharing beauty he finds in daily facts, and the evasive John Ashbery, aspiring more to an artful beauty.

In both America and Britain, different schools have arisen and terms for classifying them become inevitable. O'Hara's casual everyday truths parallel 'confessional' poetry where the lyric self reflects more steadily on what it offers as a

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[85] *Collected Poems Volume II* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987), p. 318.
[86] Andrew McAllister, ed., *The Objectivists* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1996), p. 10.
[87] See Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse' [1950], in *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, ed. by W. N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2000), pp. 92–99.
[88] Mark Ford, ed., *The New York Poets: Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler; An Anthology* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004), p. x.
[89] His own phrase, from 'Getting Up Ahead of Someone (Sun), in *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. by Donald Allen (New York: Knopf, 1971), p. 341.

biographical truth, as in Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959). Confessional becomes an increasingly dominant mode with the rise of workshops and creative writing courses, first in America and later in Britain. However, the often-emphasised precept 'Write what you know' can create dissonance between an assumption that the lyric 'I' is the poet's self and a convention to treat it as a persona – this convention from New Criticism has influenced workshops as well as academic seminars.[90]

Doty's lyric self is close to his biographical self, and he might be categorised as 'confessional' if non-standard sexuality did not carry more weight for literary classifiers, making him a 'gay poet' (and in the 1990s an 'AIDS poet'). He has absorbed much from all strands of American modernism but, in the usual oppositionally categorising terms, confessional poetry like Doty's is decidedly 'mainstream' as opposed to the anti-lyricist 'avant-garde'. The avant-gardist Craig Dworkin considers that two centuries of radical change since romanticism have invalidated the notion of poetry as expressing the emotional truth of the self, and proposes 'a non-expressive poetry'.[91] But lyric expression from selfhood has not ceased, nor seems likely to, while categories and genre boundaries have recently blurred. One result is the 'lyric essay', championed by *Seneca Review*. The editors have written that in 1997 the journal 'began to publish what we've chosen to call the lyric essay',[92] although one could apply this recent term to much earlier works including Williams's *Spring and All* (1923).[93] It is a particularly American phenomenon until Claudia Rankine's illustrated prose *Citizen*, [94] which aroused

[90] 'Write what you know' has been attributed to many writers including Mark Twain, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway.
[91] Craig Dworkin, 'The Ubuweb Anthology of Conceptual Writing', www.ubu.com/concept/index.html [accessed 10 December 2019].
[92] Deborah Tall and John D'Agata, 'The Lyric Essay', in *Seneca Review*, <https://www.hws.edu/senecareview/lyricessay.aspx> [accessed 30 June 2020].
[93] *Collected Poems Volume I: 1909–1939* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987), pp. 175–236.
[94] Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* [2014] (London: Penguin, 2015).

considerable interest in Britain, winning the 2015 Forward Prize for poetry. Such a development raises the kind of questions of definition that critics have discussed over recent decades with an increased interest in what lyric is.

What Lyric Is: Recent Critical Investigations

'We take it for granted that we know what a lyric is', Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins assert at the beginning of *The Lyric Theory Reader* (2014).[95] This major critical anthology collects a range of thought about lyric, mostly recent but dating back to I. A. Richards in 1924, while the introduction summarises earlier consideration of the subject, for example by Hegel and John Stuart Mill. Lyric studies have developed considerably since Culler's 1975 *Structuralist Poetics* and the development of poststructuralism, although anglophone critics may still have been more liable than continental Europeans to treat the nature of lyric as understood: even Anthony Easthope's searching Derridean examination of critical assumptions *Poetry as Discourse* (1983)[96] does not discuss lyric as such. A 1985 symposium in Toronto, *Lyric Poetry: Beyond the New Criticism* is 'designed to serve as an introduction to the varieties of criticism and theory which have transformed literary interpretation in recent years',[97] but also with articles on lyric poems themselves. The 1990s are the height of what Jackson and Prins term 'anti-lyricism'[98] associated with avant-garde Language poetry, which may have inhibited lyric studies: only five articles out of forty-eight in *The Lyric Theory Reader* are from that decade. What Marion Thain

[95] Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins , eds, *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), p. 1.
[96] Anthony Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse* (London: Methuen, 1983).
[97] Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker, eds, *Lyric Poetry: Beyond the New Criticism*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p.7.
[98] 'Avant-garde Anti-lyricism', in *The Lyric Theory Reader*, ed. by Jackson and Prins, pp. 451–59.

calls 'the 2008 *PMLA* issue that put the "New Lyrical Studies" on the map'[99] contains essays responding to the 2006 MLA convention themed on lyric. Published before that convention nonetheless, *Theory into Poetry: New Approaches to the Lyric* (2005)[100] is in English and largely about anglophone poetry, but edited from Vienna with mostly German-speaking contributors. Also outside the standard outlook is Clare Cavanagh's 2009 *Lyric Poetry and Modern Politics: Russia, Poland, and the West*, aiming 'to complicate notions of poetry and politics for non-Slavist scholars by testing modern Anglo-American definitions of lyric poetry against cultures in which the rules of poetic engagement are radically different than those prevailing in the West'.[101] Thain's edited collection of chronological essays *The Lyric Poem* (2013) offers not 'a "definition" of the lyric poem, but something like a loose genealogy […] with a particular awareness of whether it refers to a form, a mode, or a genre',[102] and this is followed in 2016 by her period study *The Lyric Poem and Aestheticism*.[103]

The Lyric Theory Reader is indispensable, but Jackson and Prins are not uncontroversial in promoting 'the New Lyric Studies' and notions of 'lyricization' and 'lyric reading': 'the lyric poetry that we see in the past', they claim, 'is a modern creation; it was not really, wholly, genuinely, or confirmably there.'[104] In an extensive review essay on the book, Stephanie Burt is sceptical of this. Surveying what lyric might mean as a confirmable presence in literature, Burt cites Daniel Albright (from *Lyricality in English Literature*, 1985, not extracted in *The Lyric*

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[99] Marion Thain, ed., *The Lyric Poem: Formations and Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 4.
[100] Eva Müller-Zettelmann and Margarete Rubik, eds, *Theory into Poetry: New Approaches to Lyric*, (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005).
[101] Clare Cavanagh, *Lyric Poetry and Modern Politics: Russia, Poland, and the West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 4.
[102] Thain, ed., *The Lyric Poem*, p. 3.
[103] Marion Thain, *The Lyric Poem and Aestheticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).
[104] Stephen Burt, 'What Is this Thing Called Lyric?', *Modern Philology*, 113.3 (2016), 422–440 <https://doi.org/10.1086/684097> (p. 424).

Theory Reader) that lyric 'resists definition' but is essentially 'incantation', and agrees with Albright that lyric is not a genre but a mode – in Burt's phrasing, 'you can find lyricism in all manner of texts, even in sufficiently evocative realist novels (straining against their realism), although the texts that are most lyrical, most often, are (unsurprisingly) short poems.'[105] Burt allows the reader an empirically personal approach to judgements on lyric poetry:

> We can […] say what succeeds, aesthetically or emotionally, for us, when we read what we have learned to call 'poetry', and what we have tried to call 'lyric', making our evaluations – and then, and therefore, our definitions – explicit.[106]

The poet–reader relationship is crucial to what lyric is, and the position of its 'I', whether or not lyric is created by 'lyric reading'. Easthope's Derridean position in 1983 is that the reader always 'produces' the poem 'just as actors and technicians produce a play from a script. But the act of producing can be disavowed and responsibility for the poem attributed to "The Poet".'[107] David Lindley, in *Lyric* (1985), finds the British poetry audience receptive to such a disavowed responsibility for producing the 'I':

> Despite the efforts of various schools to blot out the 'lyrical ego', the latter part of this century has seen its reintroduction, albeit in very different ways. One reason for the relief with which many readers come to the poetry of Philip Larkin or Seamus Heaney is precisely that their affiliation to Hardy or to Wordsworth seems to permit a relatively unproblematic recuperation of their lyric 'I'.[108]

[105] Ibid., p. 428.
[106] Ibid., p. 429.
[107] *Poetry as Discourse*, p. 47.
[108] David Lindley, *Lyric* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 81.

Twenty years after Lindley, Eva Müller-Zettelmann would agree about this 'unproblematic' lyric: her essay 'Cultural Memory and the English Lyric Tradition' in *Theory into Poetry* takes a scathing view of twentieth-century British poetry and poetry criticism, which can make a European-minded British poet feel defensive about why he writes how he does:

> For the continental poetry lover accustomed to poems which routinely force the linguistic medium beyond its communicative limits, modern British poetry has a distinctly nostalgic ring. Committed to the real, the social, and the easily comprehensible, British poetry since the 1950s has largely ignored the lure of the signifier, and looks back to Wordsworth and Hardy rather than to T. S. Eliot as its source of inspiration. It is this extraordinary continuity of the English lyric tradition – only disrupted by a brief and somewhat unwelcome spell of High Modernist extravagance – that has secured modern British poetry a unique position, despite, or rather because of its unperturbedly conventional character.[109]

British poetic culture surely ignored Pound more than Eliot, whose *The Waste Land* became assimilated as its defining high modernist moment, and subsequently *Four Quartets* established him as another poet of English rural places. While there may have been relief that Eliot had 'done' modernism, there has been influence from outside the Wordsworth-Hardy line. As ever, both difference and crossover from America confuse generalisation. Lindley affirms that '[m]ost twentieth-century lyric poetry […] engages with the problematic nature of the standard definition which sees lyric as the expression of a poet's personal feelings', although 'most twentieth-century poetry, however complex, ultimately permits the reader to construct a single "enunciative posture"'. However, he recognises that poets like Ashbery take the

[109] Eva Müller-Zettelmann, 'Cultural Memory and the English Lyric Tradition', in *Theory into Poetry*, ed. by Müller-Zettelmann and Rubik, pp. 359–71 (p. 359).

engagement with the problematics of personal lyric 'one stage further', quoting Veronica Forrest-Thomson: 'Ashbery tells us nothing about who is writing the poem, or why, or in what world; he makes certain that we won't assume we know by using the disconnected image complex […] and he builds his structure on this.'[110] Lindley offers a cautiously British empirical conclusion: 'Whether this is an exciting road, or a desperate dead-end, only time will tell.'[111] The title of the book *Theory into Poetry* is itself an anti-empiricist statement, if understood literally as making poems from theory, which would apply to conceptual and other avant-garde poets such as Craig Dworkin, whose poetics deny expression of selfhood, or experience of truth or beauty by the self.

Gillian White's book *Lyric Shame* (2014, the same year as *The Lyric Theory Reader*) derives its title from the unfashionable nature of lyric among the critically influential avant-garde. She attempts both to recover lyric as a useful category and assert that it is a product of 'lyric reading', with a 'realization that the "lyric" tradition against which an avant-garde anti-lyricism has posited itself (whether implicitly or explicitly) never existed in the first place'.[112] White applies Jackson's idea of 'lyric reading' to Elizabeth Bishop, Anne Sexton, and others including Robert Hass: 'Hass's and others' confessions of the desire to engage poetic tendencies that they understand to be shamefully "lyric" suggests the pressure that poststructuralism and Language theory's critique of the sovereign subject exerted on poetic practice in the mainstream.'[113] Burt's more critical response to Jackson's concept of 'lyric reading' affirms lyric as a useful category without aiming to appease anti-lyricists.

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[110] Veronica Forrest-Thomson, *Poetic Artifice: A Theory of Twentieth-Century Poetry* [1978] (Bristol: Shearsman, 2016), p. 219.
[111] *Lyric*, p. 82.
[112] Gillian White, *Lyric Shame* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), Kindle edition, location 371.
[113] Ibid., location 4500.

Language and Self-Expression

As with the name ‘Language poetry’, the status of language as a medium beyond expression is crucial to the avant-garde aesthetic. Müller-Zettelmann favours ‘poems which routinely force the linguistic medium beyond its communicative limits’ (see above, note 109), and Easthope is dissatisfied when ‘[c]ommunication, *one* major effect of discourse, is generalized and made into a definition of discourse as a whole’ [italics in original].[114] This aesthetic is not necessarily ‘anti-lyricist’: Ian Patterson’s essay ‘No Man is an I: Recent Developments in the Lyric’ acknowledges lyric as worth discussing, but wishes not to privilege the informative in lyric language. In the same book, Neil Roberts quotes Larkin’s ‘Rather than words comes the thought of high windows’,[115] remarking that ‘“Rather than words” is of course a deceptive rhetorical device – these are words.’[116] But that rhetorical device is inevitable because poetry by its nature uses words standing for thoughts, including wordless mental images like Larkin’s windows, and those words communicate something to readers, if only the inability to communicate. Patterson refers to W. S. Graham’s question ‘What is the language using us for?’ reminding us that language is ‘external to us as well as internal’.[117] Nevertheless, Graham expects the language using him to communicate, even wrongly, and reveal something:

> What are Communication’s

[114] *Poetry as Discourse*, p. 10.
[115] *Complete Poems*, p. 80.
[116] Neil Roberts, ‘The Lyric “I” in Late-Twentieth-Century English Poetry’, in *The Lyric Poem*, ed. by Thain, pp. 195–216 (p. 205).
[117] Ian Patterson, ‘No Man is an I: Recent Developments in the Lyric’, in *The Lyric Poem*, ed. by Thain, pp. 217–36, (p. 218).

> Mistakes in the magic medium doing
> To us? It matters only in
> So far as we want to be telling
>
> Each other alive about each other
> Alive.[118]

Graham's phrase emphasises the performative in language by reversing the performance from the human speaker to the medium of lyric: this compromised medium is greater than any individual user of it, both a gift and a stumbling block for poets to find their truths and present their beauties through sharing their experience of being alive, using words. The avant-garde ideal of language for language's sake prioritises beauty, art for art's sake, but words' capacity for expression does not disappear, at least as a readerly expectation from language being the everyday medium for communicating 'the real, the social, and the easily comprehensible' (Müller-Zettelmann, see above, note 109). The medium carries the burden of presumptions that behind the beauty of language-artifice is truth, and behind the lyric 'I' is sincere expression of experience.

In the poem 'Source', Doty expresses the complicated relationships of lyric whereby the language-artifice dreams of reproducing the unreproducible experience, through which 'we' look, a first-person plural apparently encompassing lyric self, poet, and reader:

> Experience is an intact fruit
> core and flesh and rind of it; cut open,
> entered, it can't be the same, can it?

[118] Graham's phrase is the title and first line of four poems, in W. S. Graham, *New Collected Poems*, ed. by Matthew Francis (London: Faber, 2004), pp. 199–204. (p. 200).

> Though that is the dream of the poem:
> as if we could look out
>
> through that moment's blushed skin.[119]

The poem hopes to reproduce the truth of the moment and the beauty of its experience. Doty again characterises this intention as a dream in *The Art of Description* (2010): 'Perhaps the dream of lyric poetry is not just to represent states of mind, but to actually provoke them in the reader.'[120] Larkin in his 1982 *Paris Review* interview similarly describes his motivation for writing poems as to reproduce an experience:

> If you rationalize it, it seems as if you've seen this sight, felt this feeling, had this vision, and have got to find a combination of words that will preserve it by setting it off in other people. The duty is to the original experience. It doesn't feel like self-expression, though it may look like it.[121]

To me it does feel like self-expression, though others may disagree: the 'lyric I' in my poems embodies the experience of a self facing the world, usually workshopped to test readers' experiences of 'what succeeds, aesthetically or emotionally' (in Burt's phrase, see above, note 106). In *My Tin Watermelon* my concerns for truth and beauty are filtered through the lyric self and its relation to the world, in which beauty is found, and truth interpreted, through the medium of language. My implied self may be Wordsworth's 'egotistical sublime' or an embodiment of Keats's negative capability, while the poem, as Doty puts it, 'dreams' of transmitting my experience,

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[119] Mark Doty, *Source* [2001] (London: Cape, 2002), p. 68.
[120] Mark Doty, *The Art of Description: World into Word* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2010). p. 30.
[121] Philip Larkin, 'An Interview with *Paris Review*' [1982], in *Required Writing* (London: Faber, 1983), pp. 57–76 (p. 58).

and its language uses me for this transmission through what I believe is my own choice of signifiers, in the performance of my lyric self, which is not entirely me.

Chapter 3: The Lyric Self and the Reader

The Lyric 'I'

The lyric 'I' is subject and object – 'subject' in the sense of the subject matter of the poem, but more strictly the subjective self from which the poem's point of view is presented, and to a variable extent the subjectivity of the poet having written it. The object (which is 'subject matter') may be a small thing on which the gaze is focused, but the implication is that this exists more broadly within 'the life of things' (as Wordsworth puts it in 'Tintern Abbey', 1798),[122] – the reality which the poem and its subjectivity participate in, as well as observe, making the 'I' also an object. Here I begin by surveying some ideas of the self in order to understand what lyric makes of the 'I', beginning with Coleridge, the major English romantic theorist of lyric and of the self, although less comprehensive than Hegel. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge puts forward his theory of the 'absolute self, the great eternal I AM':

> which I shall hereafter indiscriminately express by the words spirit, self, and self-consciousness. In this, and in this alone, object and subject, being and knowing, are identical, each involving and supposing the other. […] It may be described therefore as a perpetual self-duplication of one and the same power into object and subject, which presuppose each other, and can exist only as antitheses.[123]

In his recent book *Poetry and Uselessness* Robert Archambeau comments that Coleridge's system is 'being as a consciousness seeing itself as an object, a kind of self-consciousness, always in the process constituting itself as both apprehending

[122] William Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, ed. by Thomas Hutchinson, rev. by Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), pp. 163–65 (p. 164).
[123] *Biographia Literaria*, p. 152.

subject and apprehended object.'[124] This is a performative self, constantly creating the subjective reality in self-consciousness: as Coleridge expresses it,

> the spirit (originally the identity of object and subject) must in some sense dissolve this identity, in order to be conscious of it […] But this implies an act, and it follows therefore that intelligence or self-consciousness is impossible, except by and in a will.[125]

The lyric poem is a means to communicate the performed self to an audience.

Helen Vendler defines the purpose of lyric as 'to represent an inner life in such a manner that it is assumable by others […] engaged in a reflective look at its own processes of thought and feeling.'[126] This disembodied 'inner life' belongs to a self not directly assumable as the poet's: 'the traditional lyric desires a stripping-away of the details associated with a socially specified self in order to reach its desired all-purpose abstraction.' To Vendler, 'selfhood' is multifarious, at home in the novel, while 'the normal home of "soul" is the lyric, where the human being becomes a set of warring passions independent of time and space.'[127] Vendler places these warring passions – Yeats's quarrel with the self – centrally to what lyric does, while social selfhood is reduced in this abstract lyric personality. Her 'stripping-away' in the creation of a lyric self seems to parallel what Foucault describes as 'the effacement of the writing subject's individual characteristics', although he goes beyond any lyric self:

> Using all the contrivances that he sets up between himself and what he writes, the writing subject cancels out the signs of his particular

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[124] Robert Archambeau, *Poetry and Uselessness: From Coleridge to Ashbery* (New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 40.
[125] *Biographia Literaria*, p. 153.
[126] Helen Vendler, *The Given and the Made: Recent American Poets* (London: Faber, 1995), p. xi.
[127] Helen Vendler, *Soul Says: On Recent Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1995), pp. 2–3.

> individuality. As a result, the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence.[128]

Foucault asserts that the author's disappearance 'since Mallarmé, has been a constantly recurring event', although he pays no further attention to lyric poetry here, and mentions only 'the texts that today we call "literary" (narratives, stories, epics, tragedies, comedies)'.[129]

Performative Subjectivity

Foucault wishes the self to become the work of art, a self-creation ruled by aesthetics rather than ethics:

> Sartre refers the work of creation to a certain relation to oneself – the author to himself – which has the form of authenticity or of inauthenticity. I would say exactly the contrary: we should not have to refer the creative activity of somebody to the kind of relation he has to himself, but should relate the kind of relation one has to oneself to a creative activity.[130]

A poet makes the lyric self stand for what Jean-Paul Sartre would consider 'authentic' but Foucault wishes to be 'creative'. These positions imply 'truth' or 'beauty' being more prominent: Keats's urn's statement could be reframed as 'aesthetics can be viewed as ethics, ethics as aesthetics'. Sartre's and Foucault's selves are both defined by acts, but such performativity is not new: Coleridge's self-consciousness 'implies an act'. Unlike Foucault's self-cancelling author, Hegel's lyric poet 'is in himself a subjectively complete world so that he can look for

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[128] Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?' [1969], trans. Josué V. Harari, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by Paul Rabinow [1984] (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 101–20 (pp. 102–03).
[129] Ibid. p. 105; p. 109.
[130] Michel Foucault, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress' [1983], in *The Foucault Reader*, pp. 340–72 (p. 367).

inspiration and a topic within *himself*' [italics in original], but prefiguring Foucault, as hero he 'becomes a work of art himself'. This work of art is the lyric self, while epic is about 'a hero with his deeds and adventures',[131] like Vendler's 'socially specified self' in the novel.

Yeats's quarrel with the self is performative, and the poem as act will create the necessary resolution, or embody its impossibility. This inherently unstable performative subjectivity typifies modernist lyric. In *Lyric* (2009), Scott Brewster states that

> the reflexive, performative modern lyric cannot rely on a stable circuit of communication between speaker and receiver. […] The modern lyric is outside of 'me', and however personal it seems, the persona, the unpredictable movements of language itself.[132]

Despite this instability, the lyric 'I' continues, and has a relationship with the biographically existent poet. In Easthope's application of Derrida, 'subjectivity in poetry – "the Poet" – can never be more than an *effect* of poetry, a god or ghost produced (by the reading) from the machine' [italics in original];[133] and yet both the ghost (lyric self) and the machine (poem) depend on whoever put the words together. In *Theory into Poetry*, Sabine Coelsch-Foisner points out the paradoxical result: 'The debate about the death of the author has had an extremely invigorating effect on studies about the ego, self, or "I", both in and outside literature departments.'[134] Coelsch-Foisner bases her own rationale for the lyric self in the philosophy of Daniel C. Dennett, whose idea of consciousness is continuous narrative, 'concocting and

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[131] *Aesthetics*, p. 1120.
[132] Scott Brewster, *Lyric* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 111.
[133] *Poetry as Discourse*, p. 30.
[134] Sabine Coelsch-Foisner, 'The Mental Context of Poetry: From Philosophical Concepts of Self to a Model of Poetic Consciousness', in *Theory into Poetry*, ed. by Müller-Zettelmann and Rubik pp. 57–79 (p. 60).

controlling the story we tell others – and ourselves – about who we are', and in her interpretation 'the self is not accessible without narrative or in ways other than narrative. There is no non-narrative alternative to poetry.'[135] For Coelsch-Foisner, 'Poetry represents the site where the speaking voice is posited as a self and acquires identity', encouraging its audience, in Dennett's words, 'to posit a centre of narrative gravity'.[136] This narrative is in effect Coleridge's lyric performance of a consciousness seeing itself as an object.

The Lyric Present and the Performative Self

The centre of narrative gravity exists in time; in lyric's version of narrative, time is not absent but tends to be presented as a continuous moment. This is exemplified where Doty describes a change in his poems:

> I didn't write poems of 'landscape' till I came to Provincetown; before that time I was more a narrative poet and concerned with stories unfolding between people. Here I wanted to address the landscape's great power and beauty, but of course there is no narrative line to it; nothing happens. Thus it calls for the lyric present.[137]

His earlier (and later) narrative poems are lyric in the way that Culler identifies Wordsworth 'attaching lyric to the modest anecdote',[138] a centre of narrative gravity observing and relating itself to what happens, and narrating it in the lyric mode, typically in the past tense. The lyric present makes a commentary on the self's experience as if it takes place now. Culler draws attention to this 'especially

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[135] Ibid., p. 70. Coelsch-Foisner is quoting Daniel C. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 418.
[136] Ibid, p. 71.
[137] Mark Doty interviewed in William Joseph Reichard, 'Mercurial and Rhapsodic: Manifestations of the Gay Male Body in the Poetry of Mark Doty and Wayne Koestenbaum' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1997), p. 189.
[138] 'Lyric, History, and Genre', pp. 885; see chapter 2, note 55.

distinctive lyric use of the simple present […] to incorporate events while reducing their fictional, narrative character and increasing their ritualistic feel.' Encountering this otherwise unidiomatic tense, 'we can guess that we are dealing with a foreigner or a poem.'[139] Culler identifies its purposes as gnomic (presenting a truth), performative (creating its truth in the utterance), and joke (the characters 'walk into a bar', a non-truth but obliquely suggesting verity in humour), all of which are feasible in lyric poems, but the crucial lyric element is the relation to time: 'It happens now, in time, but in an iterable now of lyric enunciation, rather than in a now of linear time'. Unlike the plain truths of linear time narratives, these 'ritualistic' lyric truths are like Culler's definition of the joke as 'a quasi-mythic narrative with only slight claim to reality',[140] and they reinforce the sensation that lyric stands for beauty, and narrative for truth. In his example from Keats's 'To Autumn'[141] the phrase 'redbreast whistles', in 'this strange time of the lyric now', represents an eternal present of beauty, unlike the narrative present of 'is whistling' which would imply a single instance of narrated truth.[142] That lyric now is the present of the scenes on Keats's urn, and the endless now which the urn itself inhabits as an object of beauty (or 'a joy for ever').[143] The iterability of the lyric 'now' is 'not timeless but a moment of time that is repeated every time the poem is read',[144] which depends on the reader's participation in the three-way relationship of poet, poem, and reader.

The performance of the lyric self happens in the middle of this triangle, its position varying with the emphases of the poem, including the prominence of

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[139] *Theory of the Lyric*, pp. 287–88 [Kindle ed.].
[140] Ibid.,p. 289 and p. 290; and cf. Burt's citation of Albright on 'incantation', chapter 2 note 104.
[141] *Poetical Works*, pp. 218–19 (p. 219).
[142] *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 294 [Kindle ed.].
[143] *Endymion*, in *Poetical Works*, pp. 53–157 (p. 55).
[144] *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 295 [Kindle ed.]..

narrative relative to lyric. Doty explores these relativities without expecting a clear answer:

> Is our work the representation of experience (say through narrative), the representation of subjectivity (say through lyric) or of making poems that are language-acts themselves, demonstrations of a mind at work moving through words? I am interested in all these possibilities, and in the permutations of them.[145]

Doty is thus taking a Keatsian 'negative capability' approach, keeping options open about what poetry 'is' in terms of these distinctions, and the poems perform the exploration of possibilities. In J. L. Austin's lectures from the 1950s (published posthumously as *How to Do Things with Words*) he invents the term 'performative' for words used to make something happen by their performance (e.g., 'I do' enacting the marriage vow). I argue that the lyric self is performative, in that the poem makes this self, constantly creating a subjective reality, as described at the beginning of this chapter. I therefore consider lyric performative in nature, an idea which Culler is cautious about – 'it is indeed tempting to conceive of literature as fundamentally performative'– and he wishes to limit the term.[146] Discussing Austin's concept of (in)felicitousness,[147] where performatives are only fulfilled by necessary conditions, he prefers to 'save the notion performative language for the special structural efficacy or successful formulation in a work […] where without an explicit performative construction, the poem seems to accomplish what it names'.[148] In Culler's stricter idea of performative lyric, the language-act must be a real-world utterance. He cites Sappho's 'Ode to Aphrodite' in which the goddess being invoked

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[145] Matthew Perrine, 'The Ecotone Interview with Mark Doty', *Ecotone* 1.1 (Winter/Spring 2005), 46–56 (p. 55).
[146] *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 127 [Kindle ed.].
[147] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 14 *et seq.*
[148] *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 129 [Kindle ed.].

is therefore deemed to appear,[149] while a feasible modern instance would be William Shakespeare's sonnets to the young man, poems addressed to an individual aiming to make something happen. The reader is usually a spectator of this performance, but may be involved as in Doty's comic yet poignant address to the reader in 'Oncoming Train', a logically nonsensical language-act:

> I'm not proud of this.
>
> I wouldn't tell anyone, but I will tell you.[150]

In a broader definition than Culler's, Doty's poems also frequently accomplish the performative language-acts of 'a mind at work' (as he describes in the interview above), e.g., in thinking through a lyric–narrative distinction in 'Now You're an Animal', to do with how the self feels itself to be in the world:

> I thought, This is the relation between narrative
> and lyric: one minute you're on 23rd Street
> trying to find an address, and the next
> you're naked under a wet crown of horns.

The self-address of 'you're on 23rd Street' and then 'you're naked' shows the split self that Coleridge, Vendler, and Foucault find in lyric self-consciousness. The street is contingent reality as experienced in time, and the moment of nakedness the epiphany where time appears to stop; near the end of the poem he asks:

> What is lyric?
> I wanted the animal seen
> that I might know him.[151]

[149] Ibid., p. 127.
[150] *School of the Arts*, p. 26.
[151] Ibid., pp. 40–42 (p. 41 and p. 42).

The not-entirely-rhetorical question addresses the reader in a language-act with a not-fully-explanatory answer. The photograph of Doty's performance as an animal creates this non-verbal lyric self, which he communicates verbally as the poem. The lyric self's position is negotiated with the reader in the poem's language-act, where typically the lyric present is performative yet timeless, while the poet's mind explores the experience and makes an iterative representation of it, like my self thinking through amateur urology in 'Pears' (p. 71/[62]), or a more fictionalised self addressing a fictional 'you' in 'Answers' (p. 57/[48]). The reader enables my performance by devoting time to read it. In a 1977 article, 'Apostrophe', later largely incorporated in *Theory of the Lyric*, Culler relates the performance to time:

> Proverbial definition calls the lyric a monument to immediacy, which presumably means a detemporalized immediacy […] This is, of course, the condition which Keats describes in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn': a fictional time in which nothing happens but which is the essence of happening.[152]

The lyric performatively makes the fictional time happen now.

Austin does not envisage poems being performative acts – 'Surely the words must be spoken "seriously" and so as to be taken "seriously"? […] I must not be joking, for example, nor writing a poem'[153] – and Culler wishes to restrict the term's application. But lyric and lyric self depend on the reader's faith in the performance conventions enabling them. Lyric is where selfhood is centre stage, as in Kenneth Burke's idea of the poem as performative, 'the symbolic act of the poet who made it'.[154] Reviewing *The Lyric Reader*, Burt takes a down-to-earth position when

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[152] Jonathan Culler, 'Apostrophe', in *Diacritics*, 7.4 (1977), 59-69 (p. 68), <http://www.jstor.com/stable/464857> [accessed 23 June 2020].
[153] *How to Do Things with Words*, p 9.
[154] 'Symbolic Action in a Poem by Keats', in *John Keats: Odes*, ed. by Fraser, p. 103.

Jackson and Prins call the lyric 'an illusion, a creation of readers who want to believe in it'[155] – 'It is. And so is the value of a dollar; so are punk rock, and the welfare state, and love, and Harvard University.' But for Burt the issues are

> just what you have to believe; whether you believe what I believe; how we can tell; how we came to agree (if, in fact, we agree); and how much we have in common with what readers, at what prior moments, on the basis of what texts, used to believe.[156]

The truth of the lyric representation of the self and its understanding of the world, and the beauty of this representation, depend on sharing this belief (or illusion). As Coelsch-Foisner states, 'Logical enquiry has no tools for exploring questions of identity under conditions of fantasy' such as accounting for a man who believes he has woken as an insect, yet with metaphor and personification 'this is precisely what happens in poetry all the time',[157] and readers endorse the fiction through their belief. Lyric subjectivity, the selfhood of the poet's persona, may be close to the poet's own self or distanced, approach the reader or distance itself. The reader's interpretation is where the poem's final truth resides, and its beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

Poet, Poem and Reader

Charles Olson in 'Projective Verse' (1950) affirms the three-way relationship of poet, poem, and reader in terms of verse energy:

> what is the process by which a poet gets in, at all points, energy at least the equivalent of the energy which propelled him in the first place, yet an energy which is peculiar to verse alone and which will

[155] *The Lyric Theory Reader*, ed. by Jackson and Prins, p. 271.
[156] 'What is this Thing Called Lyric?', p. 437 –38..
[157] 'The Mental Context of Poetry', in *Theory into Poetry*, ed. by Müller-Zettelmann and Rubik, p. 64.

> be, obviously, also different from the energy which the reader, because he is a third term, will take away?[158]

In his throwaway-style manifesto 'Personism' (1961), Frank O'Hara makes the relationship a sexual threesome with the poem in between: 'Personism […] puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style, and the poem is correspondingly gratified. The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages.'[159] Larkin's aim (see chapter 2 note 121) is to convey an experience with 'a combination of words that will preserve it by setting it off in other people' – in Olson's terms reproducing 'the energy which propelled him.' The poem's truth is in the truth of the experience, 'set off' in the audience through the lyric 'I', which 'may look like' self-expression but to Larkin has been distanced in the process of the self experiencing the self, the consciousness lyric always has as its foundation.[160] In a 1994 interview Doty refers to the 'energy of enquiry' – the poem itself as a language-act is the experience to be conveyed, rather than a re-creation of something as with Larkin:

> you're making for the reader an enactment of your own process of discovery. I want to continue to keep that energy of inquiry so that the reader feels like his or her hands are in the gloves, reaching out for something unknown.[161]

The creative writing workshop is partly a test of whether a reader feels this energy from a lyric self, in a way that carries this sense of 'reaching', and is recognisable to the writer as re-enacting their own discovery.

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[158] Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse' [1950], in *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2000), pp. 92–99 (p. 93).
[159] Frank O'Hara, 'Personism: A Manifesto' [1959], in *Strong Words*, pp. 132–134 (p. 134).
[160] *Required Writing*, p. 58; see chapter 2 note 121.
[161] Klein, Michael, 'A Talk with Mark Doty', *PN Review* 21.6 [104] (1995), pp. 22–27 <http://www.pnreview.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?item_id=1879;hilite=mark%20doty> [accessed 29 August 2017].

Coelsch-Foisner sets out a typology of selfhood in lyric of 'ethos' or 'mental dispositions which the recipient or reader infers from one or a range of speech acts', subdivided as

> the ethos of Interiority (the relation of the self to itself), the ethos of the Numinous (the relation between the self and god), the ethos of Fantasy (the relation between the self and that which has no existence and cannot exist), and the ethos of Anonymity (the relation of the self to the existing world). [162]

Without being too literal, her subdivision suits how I would classify my poems in *My Tin Watermelon,* and in the remaining chapters I will consider how they work as lyric in those terms. My 'ethos of Anonymity' would be my relation to the world of things in the house ('The Cave', p. 21/[12]), outside in the garden ('Bay Window', p. 26/[17]), and in the neighbourhood ('Bearded', p. 41/[32]); Doty and Larkin also create lyric from their relationship with things. My 'ethos of Interiority' would be my relation to the world as queer: truth about the self as experiencing non-standard desire ('Buggers', p. 11/[2], 'Riff on a Line of Miłosz', p. 55/[46]), and that desire as an experience of beauty ('Catalogue Man', p. 59/[50], 'Find Me', p. 63/[54]). This is also a general self-observation, but queerness is the most personal element; I have queerness in common with Doty, while Larkin's interiority has different parallels with mine. My ethos of the Numinous would be my relation to the world inside time, subject to death, with movement from childhood to death – my parents' ('A Father's Body', p. 75/[66], 'Sun in December', p. 77/[68]) but also awareness of my own ('And to Die', p. 74/[65]). Time and death are inescapable truths; Doty and Larkin are obsessed with death in different ways, and death is 'mother of beauty' as Wallace

[162] 'The Mental Context of Poetry', in *Theory into Poetry*, ed. by Müller-Zettelmann and Rubik, p. 73.

Stevens phrased it.[163] Coelsch-Foisner's ethos of Fantasy appears in my work, for instance with the fable of the fish in 'Answers' (p. 57/[48]) but at this point I abandon her classification for my own structure. I use these three divisions in the following chapters, to discuss my poems as expressing or manifesting truth and beauty, in relation to poems by Doty and Larkin. While these are not exclusive themes in distinct sections of *My Tin Watermelon*, the emphasis changes broadly along these lines, from things (Anonymity) to queerness (Interiority) and death (Numinous), with different emphases on truth or beauty. The poet's implied self (see the close of chapter 2) presents them to readers as experience to be communicated, and the poem embodies the truth and/or beauty of the experience; whether these qualities have objective existence or confirmation by others, they are perceived subjectively by the individual. A concentrated example is 'At the Station' (p. 32/[23]) where the epiphany of seeing the dead fox is an experience of its beauty – 'supplication' perhaps suggesting the posture of a Renaissance saint – and the animal's own experience of facing the truth of death, bringing that truth to the poet and reader as onlookers. 'Bearded' (p. 41/[32]) is a more expansive poem musing on the beauty of male grooming ('a beard in the perfect world'), while my aunt is a reminder of the truth of death behind all this ('Is this the last day?'). Attempts to discuss truth and beauty directly were mostly dropped from the collection, except for 'The Universal' (p. 19/[10]). Truth and beauty occur while my lyric self is experiencing the world as the self in the world of things, the queer self in the world, and the self in time, looking at the end of its time in death.

[163] Wallace Stevens, 'Sunday Morning' [1923], in *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997, pp. 53–56 (p.55).

Chapter 4. The Lyric Self in the World of Things

Metaphor and Metonymy

There are major differences between Larkin, Doty and myself as poets, but we coincide most in the poetry of objects, physical repositories of beauty and truth (genuineness, or usefulness), typically through metonymy. It is not only in literary art that the understanding typically grasps meaning through the mechanisms of metaphor and metonymy. In *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), George Lakoff and Mark Johnson begin with their 'intuition' that metaphor is 'perhaps the key to giving an adequate account of understanding', which in developing their ideas has 'meant rejecting the possibility of any objective or absolute truth'.[164] Analysing the metaphorical basis of how experience is expressed in words, they conclude that language is not objective, so no objective truth can be stated in it, only 'truths'. Language uses individual subjectivities in sharing experience with relational concepts, such as 'happy is up'.[165] Even if we cannot objectively access an entire reality and express it in language, we have a shared reality, which language can communicate imaginatively within a real world of experience. The lyric 'I' may be egotistical but, against solipsism, expects an audience which shares the language to access the reality of subjective experience.

Unlike metaphors which express an analogical reality through imagination, metonyms acknowledge this shared reality by being themselves part of that reality – where Williams's principle 'no ideas but in things' resides.[166] Lakoff and Johnson

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[164] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. ix–x.
[165] Ibid. p. 15.
[166] *Collected Poems Volume II*, p. 55; see chapter 1, note 17.

consider that 'the grounding of metonymic concepts is in general more obvious than is the case with metaphoric concepts, since it usually involves direct physical or causal associations' heavily embedded in shared reality.[167] Visually observed things are easily metonymic: in Larkin's 'Sunny Prestatyn' for example, the poster uses the model as a metonym for alluring holidays in Wales, and when vandalised it metonymises male violence and sexual obsession (the model as thing).[168] For David Lodge in *The Modes of Modern Writing*, metonymy and synecdoche 'correspond to what we commonly refer to as a novelist's "selection" of details in narrative description.' This leads to analysis of fiction being oriented 'towards content rather than form'.[169] His book is mostly about fiction, but he analyses Larkin's verse 'by regarding him as a "metonymic" poet.'[170] Lodge cites Larkin's list of nightdress styles in 'The Large Cool Store'[171] which 'provides the occasion for a tentative, uncondescending meditation of the mystery of sexual allure',[172] a heterosexual parallel to my poems of allure in male underwear ('Lost Property' p. 58/[49], 'Catalogue Man' p. 59/[50]). Similarly, Doty is a metonymic poet. His *Kenyon Review* interviewer focuses on things in his work: 'More than anything, Mark Doty seems to me an investigator of objects – of the things and beings that clutter the world, the microcosms inside microcosms inside our macrocosm.'[173] The poet, as Hegel says, both 'absorbs into *himself* the entire world of objects and circumstances, and stamps them with his own inner consciousness' and 'discloses his self-

[167] *Metaphors We Live By*, p. 39.
[168] *Complete Poems*, pp. 64–65.
[169] *Modes of Modern Writing*, p. 93.
[170] Ibid., p. 214.
[171] *Complete Poems*, pp. 61–62.
[172] *Modes of Modern Writing*, p. 215.
[173] Andrew David King, 'The Lessons of Objects: An Interview with Mark Doty', *Kenyon Review* (12 December 2012) <https://www.kenyonreview.org/2012/12/mark-doty-interview/> [accessed 4 December 2017]

concentrated heart' [italics in original].[174] The things of the world come to represent the self.

Poems can make universal observations while presenting individual, specific moments from which the audience draw their own universalising conclusions. Adorno considered that experiences 'come to participate in something universal by virtue of the specificity they acquire'.[175] The specific thing reveals the general idea, while the reader's understanding is where the point is made – the 'show don't tell' principle. In 'The Universal' (pp. 19/[10]) I attempt to approach human universality beginning with anatomy and physiology, and employ more metaphor than usual ('roiling swamp', 'ocean of plankton') but settle on the metonymy of Marmite and cocoa, and less precise metonymy in

> why that face in the crowd, what is it
> with the moon over the sea, thing of beauty,
> moment of truth, excuses for the use
> of the word 'universal'.

'The Universal' is a venture into generality anchored by a few metonyms; when ordering my collection, I followed it with 'The Cave' (p. 21/[12]), a poem entirely in the world of specific things. Their metonymy derives from use and history, my life represented through the objects and furniture of childhood and belonging – my selfhood gathered in one place. Doty's 'Horses' focuses on things with a similar significance but very different circumstances. The frequent moves his family made emphasise unreliability and transience of memory, and he identifies a fact that would become significant in his life: the room and its contents are the centre of the self.

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[174] *Aesthetics*, p. 1111.
[175] Theodor Adorno, 'On Lyric Poetry and Society' [1957], trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholson, in *The Lyric Theory Reader*, ed. by Jackson and Prins, pp. 339–350 (p. 339).

> One house
> after another; permanence lay in things,
>
> etched palmettos cut finger-deep
> in a round mirror, a chest of drawers
>
> infinite with handkerchiefs and nightgowns
> to bury my hands in cool sliding.[176]

'The Cave' began from a workshop prompt to write about the self as something non-human. In the first version I was everything in the room, but the poem required focus, so my self became the room where the things have gathered to build that self. 'I've been made of things I hold genuine | because they hold me.' They are in the room because I have found beauty in them, and also genuineness or truth. In Morris's terms, even broken things like cracked mugs I can still believe to be beautiful, and their repurposing makes them useful.[177] As other examples of metonyms in my poems, 'My Tin Watermelon' (p. 47/[38]) is used as title poem partly because it is a striking phrase, but also because of the theme of metonymic objects as talismans against loss, chaos, and exasperation. In 'Old Beast' (p. 23/[14]) the vacuum cleaner is metonymic of housework while metaphorical in its sexual innuendo. Animals, birds, plants and trees in the garden and the street are metonymically representative of life going on outside my own self. Some have further implications as in 'Daffodil Shield' (p. 31/[22]) where the planted daffodils are metonyms of the civilisation that precariously keeps us from killing each other, while the 'shield' puts it metaphorically. Metonyms do not need to be inanimate (e.g., birds are traditional

[176] Mark Doty, *Paragon Park: Turtle, Swan; Bethlehem in Broad Daylight; Early Poems* [1987 and 1991] (Boston: Godine, 2012), p. 35.
[177] Morris, 'The Beauty of Life', p. 76; see chapter 1 note 9.

metonyms of the freedom we experience in nature), but domestic objects and furniture are well suited as metonyms of personal life.

Michael Riffaterre comments on the significance of furniture in Paul Éluard's line 'J'ai conservé de faux trésors dans des armoires vides' – roughly 'I have kept false treasures in empty wardrobes' although 'wardrobe' is an insufficent translation:[178]

> *armoire* is so much more than just another piece of bedroom furniture. The French sociolect makes it the place for hoarding within the privacy of the home. It is the secret glory of the traditional household mistress – linens scented with lavender, lace undies never seen – a metonym for the secrets of the heart.[179]

The common metaphorical phrase 'mental furniture' refers appropriately to personal idiolect because furniture so easily belongs to the individual soul in this way, and carries meaning from whatever beauty it may have, its use in everyday life, and its potential appearance in dreams (see 'The Dream Rooms', p. 65/[56]) and other symbolic occasions. My metonymic poems are representative of my metaphorical mental furniture, embodied in the physical furniture of my life. In 'The Cave' (p. 21/[12]) I have reversed the metonymy so that I effectively become a metonym for the house I inhabit, and the furnishing of a life by things: I am synecdochically the room of which I am a part. In 'Bottom Drawer' (p. 64/[55]), the chest of drawers is like Éluard's *armoire*, but it is overstuffed with treasures, which may or may not be 'false' in a moral or other sense but are 'true' in that they have been treasured, perhaps too much:

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[178] Paul Éluard, 'Comme deux gouttes d'eau' [1933] in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Pléiade, 1968), vol. 1, p. 412.
[179] Michael Riffaterre,'The Poem's Significance' [1978], in *The Lyric Theory Reader*, ed. Jackson and Prins, pp. 249–65 (p. 250).

> The bottom has fallen out of my bottom drawer, the one
> stuffed with forgotten trousers, pyjamas, thermal longjohns,
> and a few things I'm not ashamed of but won't make public.

Like Doty's chest of drawers in 'Horses', it partakes of the secret power of Éluard's *armoire*, with additional significance from childhood: my chest of drawers has participated in my earliest existence, as revealed in the last line. The chairs in 'The Armchairs' (p. 76/[67]) are metonyms of my parents. My first draft began explicitly 'Now they are on their own, father chair | and mother chair', but the family meaning needed to emerge from the poem. The facts about the chairs are true – indeed, 'buoyant' is an unexplained allusion to the Buoyant furniture company of which my mother's Uncle Mac was a director. The chairs' beauty for me is as much in the true facts about them as in their form: the more elegant one lacked the practical beauty of comfort, while the more comfortable one might be considered lacking the beauty of elegant design. I have only later recalled a children's book by Compton Mackenzie, *The Adventures of Two Chairs*, which I enjoyed at primary school.[180] Those are not the chairs in the poem, but the unconscious memory of the book was in my personality, the poem's hinterland.

Metaphor, Metonymy and Language as Medium

Discussing metonymy in Larkin's poems, Lodge states that poetry,

> especially lyric poetry, is an inherently metaphoric mode, and to displace it towards the metonymic pole is (whether Larkin likes it or not) an 'experimental' literary gesture. Such poetry makes its impact by appearing daringly, even shockingly unpoetic, particularly when the accepted poetic mode is elaborately metaphoric.[181]

[180] Compton Mackenzie, *The Adventures of Two Chairs* (Oxford: Blackwell, [1929]).
[181] *Modes of Modern Writing*, p. 214.

However, one poetic mode is not 'accepted' in all times and places. This characterisation of Larkin as an unwitting experimentalist attracts criticism from Neil Roberts: 'Lodge perhaps exaggerated the boldness of a gesture that had been made a generation earlier by William Carlos Williams'.[182] I would not consider my use of metonym in poems as experimental either, because I have absorbed the modernist gesture of Williams and his precept of 'no ideas but in things'.[183] Such gestures of plainness recur in different periods and literary cultures, as Clare Cavanagh outlines in her comparison of Russian and Polish with anglophone poets:

> Modern poetry has a long and distinguished history of aggressively 'unpoetic' writing. […] Poets throughout the last two centuries have periodically imported intentionally banal, 'unlyrical' elements of language and life into their verse as a way to shake up a readership grown accustomed to fancier poetic fare.[184]

Lodge makes a similar point about Larkin's plain style against fancier fare: 'nothing could have been more different from the poetry of Dylan Thomas and other ageing members of the "New Apocalypse".'[185] The things in which Williams's ideas reside are typically from everyday life, famously a wheelbarrow on which 'so much depends', connecting the poem's underlying ideas with the readers' own associations.[186] Roberts characterises Williams's readership as avant-garde – although as the poet of Paterson, New Jersey, Williams celebrates people unlikely to be avant-garde readers – while he calls Larkin's readers 'middlebrow',[187] and Larkin did maintain an audience among people who might like the things exhibited at an

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[182] 'The Lyric "I"', in *The Lyric Poem*, ed. by Thain, p. 203.
[183] See above, note 166, and chapter 1, note 17.
[184] *Lyric Poetry and Modern Politics*, p. 155.
[185] *Modes of Modern Writing*, p. 214.
[186] XXII in *Spring and All* [1923], *Collected Poems Volume I*, p. 224.
[187] 'The Lyric "I"', in *The Lyric Poem*, ed. by Thain, p. 203.

unpretentious ‘Show Saturday’.[188] Some but by no means all of Doty’s characters are likely to be his readers, people with an interest in how things may define beauty, or what is for sale in ‘The Art Auction’.[189] Audience is significant in metonymy because the familiarity and the cultural significance of things contribute to their power – and also bring assumptions about what is normal and universal. I must treat the audience as part of my world, because my poems aim to escape solipsism by sharing a reality.

Roberts is not convinced by Lodge’s linguistic rationale for his theory. ‘Lodge was misled by the Jakobsonian framework of his book *The Modes of Modern Writing* to categorise poetry as “inherently metaphoric”’ – referring to Roman Jakobson’s observations on metonymy and metaphor .[190] Jakobson states his principle:

> The development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity. The metaphoric way would be the most appropriate term for the first case and the metonymic way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively.[191]

But the way of similarity is also a way of difference – the expressiveness and wit of the metaphor is evaluated by how similar yet different the tenor and vehicle are. The metonymic way of ‘contiguity’ selects what is typical, which stays close to the observed reality. On verbal art, Jakobson states: ‘The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination’,[192]

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[188] *Complete Poems*, pp. 92–93.
[189] *School of the Arts*, pp. 67–70.
[190] ‘The Lyric “I”’, in *The Lyric Poem*, ed. by Thain, p. 203.
[191] Roman Jakobson, ‘The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles’ [1956, rev. 1971] in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. by Lodge, pp. 57–61 (pp. 57–58).
[192] Jakobson, ‘Linguistics and Poetics’ [1958] in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. by Lodge, pp. 32–57 (p. 39).

so Lodge following Jakobson considers poetry ‘inherently metaphoric’, but Jakobson is not dogmatic on this. ‘In poetry where similarity is superinduced upon contiguity, any metonymy is slightly metaphorical and any metaphor has a metonymical tint.’[193]

In the poem ‘Difference’ in *My Alexandria,* Doty addresses the verbal mechanism of metaphor in terms of dissimilarity rather than similarity. The poetic mechanism pursues the desire to describe various jellyfish using things inherently different from the subject, a ‘balloon’, a ‘breathing heart’, a ‘pulsing flower’, a ‘rolled condom’, a ‘plastic purse swallowing itself’, a ‘Tiffany shade’ and a ‘troubled parasol’, together forming a ‘submarine opera’.[194] This is ‘difference’ resolving itself into

> nothing but trope,
>
> nothing but something
> forming itself into figures
> then refiguring,
>
> sheer ectoplasm
> recognisable only as the stuff
> of metaphor. What can words do
>
> but link what we know
> to what we don’t,
> and so form a shape?

As this poem proceeds, metaphor itself appears as

> some unlikely
> marine chiffon:
> a gown for Isadora?

[193] Ibid., pp. 49–50.
[194] *My Alexandria*, p. 44.

> Nothing but style.[195]

Like an eyecatching gown, metaphor can be a distracting concept. In *The Art of Description* Doty suggests 'all language is metaphoric, since the word stands for the thing itself, something the word is not'.[196] Despite Lakoff and Johnson's insights on metaphor in meaning, this does not adequately explain language itself, as a sound is not equivalent to a metaphor representing one real-world thing by a different real-world thing. However, word sounds and metaphor are both unlike their meanings: a contrast with the 'natural signs' of visual art, where the pencil can represent its referents by reproducing their shape, and the palette their colours. In *School of the Arts*, Doty explores such signs in paintings and words, as in 'Notebook/To Lucian Freud/On the Veil', where Doty quotes Freud's notes on his paintings: 'Nothing ever stands in for anything. Nobody is representing anything'. The paintings are representational, but as metonyms not metaphors, they 'are' the people they show. As natural signs, visual images can be uncomplicated by words' need to create visualisations without a visual medium. Doty envies the natural-sign relationship of paint and bodies: 'that's what language can't do, curve and heft of it, | that stretch'.[197]

The experience is mediated through language, but language as medium is also part of the experience itself. The texture and meaning depend on combining difference and similarity, as Doty says in *The Art of Description*:

> The first project of simile and metaphor is to describe, to say what something is like. Unless we restrict ourselves to mere measurement, we cannot do so without resorting to comparison.[198]

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[195] Ibid., p. 45.
[196] *The Art of Description*, p. 76.
[197] *School of the Arts*, pp. 16–23 (p. 22).
[198] *The Art of Description*, p. 79.

We can also say, in those terms, that a metonym is what it represents, but is different because it is not the whole identical thing – the worn edge of the scaling knife in Elizabeth Bishop's 'At the Fishhouses' is an analogue measurement of long use, but is not itself the period of time.[199] A metonym may also represent more than one thing: in Doty's 'The House of Beauty', the salon fire, understood to be arson, is metonymic both of transient beauty and of the truth of tough social circumstances in New Jersey.[200]

Metaphors like Doty's for the jellyfish convey the experience in the poem through the reader's understanding of the difference and similarity. They embody the difference identified by Ferdinand de Saussure as the requirement for meaning, and developed by Jacques Derrida as *différance*. In 'Description', Doty suggests this verbal process is a basic human instinct, desire to possess the thing with the understanding:

> Jewellery, tides, language:
>
> things that shine.
> What is description, after all,
> but encoded desire?
>
> And if we *say*
> the marsh, if we forge
> terms for it, then isn't it
>
> contained in us,
> a little,
> the brightness?[201]

[199] Elizabeth Bishop, *The Complete Poems* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1983), p. 65.
[200] Mark Doty, *Theories and Apparitions* (London: Cape, 2008), pp. 14–15.
[201] Mark Doty, *Atlantis* (London: Cape, 1996), p. 3.

This desire encoded in description through differences echoes a thought of Derrida's early in his post-structuralist project: 'as always, coherence in contradiction echoes the force of desire.'[202] The poem is experience shared with an audience: desire is 'contained in us' on both sides, the creator's and the receiver's. In Doty's article 'Souls on Ice' he discusses his poem 'A Display of Mackerel', and the 'compelling image' that sets off the desire to describe an experience:

> if I do my work of study and examination, and if I am lucky, the image which I've been intrigued by will become a metaphor, will yield depth and meaning, will lead me to insight. The goal here is inquiry, the attempt to get at what it is that's so interesting about what's struck me. Because it isn't just beauty; the world is full of lovely things and that in itself wouldn't compel me to write. There's something else, some gravity or charge to this image that makes me need to investigate it.
>
> Exploratory description, then; I'm a scientist trying to measure and record what's seen.[203]

But this investigative need for scientific objectivity is directed at the subjective experience: subjectivity that makes the image 'compelling'. In a 1994 interview, Doty cites Elizabeth Bishop as a supreme case of subjectivity in description:

> She wants to do the most accurate description that she can of what's in front of her, but she pours her personality, her self-ness, her own quality of attention, her soul, so profoundly into her description that it is not just description anymore, it's self portrait.[204]

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[202] Jacques Derrida, 'Structure ,Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' [1978], in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. Lodge. A translator's note glosses this as referring to Freudian theory.
[203] Mark Doty, 'Souls on Ice' in *poets.org* (American Academy of Poets, 2014) <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/souls-ice> [accessed 8 September 2017]; 'A Display of Mackerel', in *Atlantis*, pp. 12–13.
[204] Klein, 'A Talk with Mark Doty'.

The poem aspires to scientific objectivity but is rooted in subjectivity, the way the meaning of Bishop's scaling knife is communicated subjectively from poet to reader. Doty describes how emulating Bishop's ability 'through description to portray the self and to portray feeling' was important in the change from 'narrative line' (see chapter 3, note 137) when he needed to write differently about AIDS after *My Alexandria*. 'There were parts of my experience that I couldn't get at that way, that had to be approached through metaphor or through submerging the self into the landscape.'[205] The seashore in his next book, *Atlantis*, subordinates human subject-matter to sea and sea-creatures. The same process applies to my urban observations of nature: watching the animals and considering the trees in the garden and the street are my own attempts to portray the self and feeling in the way Bishop does, with metonyms of the world 'in which I've found my life living itself' ('Street Trees', p. 30/[21]). The gap between ourselves (poet and audience) and the objects of observation is a space for meaning: where the poem moves towards finding its truth from what is perceived, capturing its beauty in words.

Poem as Metonym

In *Words about Words about Words* (1988), Murray Krieger formulates his idea of 'metonymic metaphor' from discussing Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale':

> Humanity's individual lives are tied together by the bird once it has been turned into the all-unifying metonymic metaphor, so that history across the ages has been turned into the instantaneous vision of myth.[206]

[205] Reichard, 'Mercurial and Rhapsodic', p. 189.
[206] Quoted in Denis Donoghue, *The Practice of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 138; cited as Murray Krieger, *Words about Words about Words* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 286.

Denis Donaghue in his 1998 study *The Practice of Reading* comments: 'Metonymic metaphor is evidently Krieger's name for the metaphor that knows it's a metaphor, or rather for the use of metaphor that accommodates this knowledge.'[207] Keats's self is metonymically submerged in his intoxication by the nightingale; Doty's self is submerged into the seascape of metaphors; my own self is merged into the room I inhabit. In his 2010 doctoral thesis about AIDS writing, Andrew Blades considers that metonym can be applied to the poem itself:

> For Doty, impulsion towards endless reconstruction is the very property of poetry, as in 'Difference' […] Poetry continually turns itself inside out, expands and contracts. Its relationship to the natural world is to be of it, not to replicate or even represent it. Nature is already teeming with re-presentations and refigurations, and so the trick of poetry is to recognise itself already present within the subjects it already 'represents'; to identify its own supposed distortions, […] always already written into the fabric of things. […] If the jellyfish is pure trope, then the poem, as a form, is pure metonymy.[208]

It is an attractive ideal for the poem to be performatively part of its subject, but the 'poem as metonym' concept is more useful for the poem's existence as literature, the way Keats's 'Urn' ode has become a metonym of the weight of cultural history, as I suggest in chapter 1. Like Doty I frequently use re-presentation and reconfiguration of a train of thought, for example in 'Pears' (p. 71/[62]) and 'The Usual' (p. 68/[59]), but these function less as metonyms than as the iterative language acts of lyric (see chapter 3, note 152). In 'The Pink Poppy'[209] the flower is already metonymic of beauty, and while the poem can 'be metonymic of' the poet's quest for understanding

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[207] Ibid.
[208] Andrew Blades, 'Retroviral Writings: Reassessing the Postmodern in American AIDS Literature' (Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 2010), p. 142.
[209] *School of the Arts*, pp.71–74.

beauty, that hardly seems different from the poem 'being' his quest: the metonym is so transparent, it simply is the reality.

Krieger's desire for the poem to be a metonymic natural sign like visual art led to his study of the word–image interface in ekphrasis, searching 'for a theory that would account for all the spatio-temporal possibilities within the poetic medium' in which the verbal object tries to 'force its words […] to take on a substantive configuration – in effect to become an emblem', a metonymic form. 'Ekphrastic ambition gives to the language art the extraordinary assignment of seeking to represent the literally unrepresentable',[210] claims Krieger, and yet such an 'extraordinary assignment' is the everyday challenge for words to communicate anything beyond onomatopoeia: hence the reliance on metaphor which Lakoff and Johnson investigate.

Doty's envious interest in the natural-sign language of paintings in 'Notebook/To Lucian Freud/On the Veil' is elaborated in his long essay *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*. His examination of the word–image interface begins with art but continually returns to the objects represented in it:

> In still life […] these things had a history, a set of personal meanings: they were someone's. […] What could we ever know of this cup or platter, the pearl-handled knife? Their associations are long since dead, though something of the personal seems to glow here still, all its particulars distilled into an aura of intimacy.[211]

This 'aura of intimacy' is what attracts poets like Doty, Larkin and myself to metonymy, and belongs to the universality of the specific (see Adorno, note 174

[210] Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 9.
[211] Mark Doty, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), p. 29.

above). I aim to capture this aura in poems like ‘The Armchairs’ (p. 76/[67]), and it is Larkin’s method, with objects like the ashtray in ‘Mr Bleaney’, and the vase in ‘Home Is So Sad’.[212] Doty illustrates the implications of the aura quoting C. P. Cavafy’s poem ‘The Afternoon Sun’:

> *They must be still around somewhere, those old things.* In a way this is an act of deflection – the memory of lovemaking is so sharp that the speaker must turn away from it to the objects the room used to hold. [Its poignancy is] the adult recognition that the things of the world go on without us, that the meaning with which we invest them may not persist, may be visible to no one else, that even that which seems to us most profoundly saturated in passion and feeling may be swept away.[213]

This meaning is transient and yet things persist – in the physics of conservation of matter, if not the identity of objects. But the whole physical world is transient in human terms. We collect things the way T. S. Eliot collected fragments ‘shored against’ our ‘ruins’.[214] Doty presents an example in ‘Metro North’: a junkyard observed every day from a train, emblematic of New York’s waste, becomes gradually visible as a domestic scene, the home of someone who is

> no emblem,
>
> […]
> but a citizen,
> who’d built a citizen’s
>
> household, even
> on the literal edge[.][215]

[212] *Complete Poems*, p. 50 and p. 55.
[213] *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*, p. 28. Poem in C. P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, trans. by Edmund Keely and Philip Sherrard, rev. ed. (London: Hogarth Press, 1984), p. 69. Italics are Doty’s.
[214] T. S. Eliot, ‘The Waste Land’, in *The Complete Poems and Plays*, pp. 61–80 (p. 75).
[215] *Sweet Machine*, p. 39.

The junk is more than inanimate metonym and forms a deeper truth, once a human life is identified among it. This obsessive bricolage is a down-to-earth version of a way of life followed by the collectors of art and antiques at auctions Doty has frequented, 'a tribe who understood ourselves as curators of objects, some of which would outlast us.'[216] The metonymy of things is proxy for the qualities of the self that has loved them. Doty's 'Thirty Delft Tiles' is a homage to James Merrill as a senior gay poet dying of AIDS, whom Doty wishes to emulate as custodian of beauty.[217] He relinquishes the tiles, unattainable in a shop, but nevertheless attempts the emulation, and claims the discipleship: the tiles are metonymic of this status. The allure of objects is not only in their look, the beauty of materials and craft. Their solidity can seem to offer a stay against transience, as in my own poem 'Bottom Drawer' (p. 64/[55]), although the drawer itself needs mending. Alternatively, they may be things with personal significance amounting to a magical power, like James Merrill's cup used for Ouija in 'Thirty Delft Tiles' – 'There's no voice in the cup now'.[218] There is often considerable elegiac weight to the objects in Doty's poems, as metonyms for loss. Furniture, objects and interiors as metonyms are also part of the 'gay sensibility',[219] of style and camp as a way of life, indicators of queerness. With a less lavish aesthetic this is also true of my use of them, and in the next chapter I consider how the lyric self presents as the queer self.

[216] *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*, p. 33.
[217] *Sweet Machine*, p. 58.
[218] Ibid. p. 63.
[219] On this concept, see two articles in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject; A Reader*, ed. by Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999): Jack Babuscio, 'The Cinema of Camp (AKA Camp and the Gay Sensibility)' [1977], pp. 117–35; and Jonathan Dollimore, 'Post/Modern: On the Gay Sensibility, Or the Pervert's Revenge on Authenticity' [1991], pp. 221–36.

Chapter 5: The Queer Self and Lyric

Queer Theory and the Performative Self

I have argued that lyric is performative, and presents a performative self; queer theory puts everything on a performative basis, the self especially. Like truth and beauty, queer self and lyric self may coincide without being synonymous, queer self being a political performance (a 'truth') and lyric self an art performance (a 'beauty'), which can be the same performance. The recent reclamation of the word 'queer' makes me ponder my own queerness, while still adjust to what it now apparently means – apparently, because its fluidity can become boundless, its application far beyond the sexual. Doty, a homosexual/gay/queer poet, repeatedly uses this wider application, as here:

> In this American moment, it's fundamentally queer to be a poet, queer to be interested in what can't be packaged or sold in the marketplace, queer to enjoy the fundamentally useless, contemplative pleasure of poetry. Queer means that which is not business as usual, not solid identities founded on firm grounds, but a world in question.[220]

The world now seems constantly in question, unlike the firmly-grounded heteronormative world of the 1950s, where Alan Turing commits suicide like many others, and where 'queer' still means both 'odd' in a general sense and, abusively, homosexual – but the power of that specific and otherwise unspeakable meaning of the word leads to it eclipsing the other. In the 1970s Gay Liberation comes out and claims the gay identity; then the 1980s of the AIDS crisis and Clause 28 are when 'queer' begins to be reclaimed as a word to be spoken out loud, while official

[220] *The Art of Description*, p. 115.

silences – not mentioning AIDS and banning education about homosexuality – contradict a truth that queerness is making audible. Queer protest coincides with the postmodern critical theory that nurtures queer theory in the 1990s. But theory can become institutionalised, and already in 1995, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner are cautious:

> Queer commentary takes on varied shapes, risks, ambitions and ambivalences in various contexts. […] The danger of the label queer theory is that it makes its queer and nonqueer audiences forget these differences and imagine a context (theory) in which queer has a stable referential content and pragmatic force.[221]

Hence the tendency for queer theory to destabilise itself as much as possible.

Doty's application of queerness to poetry itself is striking, but his vision of poetry unsettling the usual is fully in the tradition of Shelley, Whitman, Pound and others who have seen that as poetry's function. Queer theory is a recent manifestation of the endless human need for renewal. In Nikki Sullivan's 2003 book *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (still relevant, despite the subject's instability), she helpfully elaborates 'queer' as a verb, her aim being

> to queer – to make strange, to frustrate, to counteract, to delegitimise, to camp up – heteronormative knowledges and institutions, and the subjectivities and socialities that are (in)formed by them and then (in)form them.[222]

But the heteronormative can be conflated with any norm, with an implied contrast of queerness against it, including the norm of a fixed identity. For Sullivan:

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[221] Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, 'What Does Queer Theory Teach Us About X?' *PMLA* 110.3 (1995), 343–49 (p. 344).
[222] Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. vi.

> Identity, one could argue, is always already haunted by the other, by that which is not 'I'. Or, to put it another way, identity is social, unstable, continually in process, and, to some extent, is both necessary and impossible.[223]

The lyric 'I' can distance a poem's utterance while also owning it ('Je est un autre', Arthur Rimbaud announces in 1871).[224] An unstable self offered performatively in a poem separates the poet from the lyric 'I' as persona, a process well ingrained among poets since the mid-twentieth-century New Criticism. In a standard workshop, the poet remains silent during critique while the lyric 'I' is often called 'the speaker' rather than 'the poet'. This lyric 'I' persona is one that the poem itself performs, like the queer identity. Poetry as 'fundamentally queer' suggests the poet as misfit, while all successful artworks have that kind of queerness in the Formalist concept of 'making strange' to which Sullivan alludes: Viktor Shklovsky's *ostranenie,* the device by which art aims 'to create the sensation of seeing, and not merely recognizing, things'.[225] Shklovsky's 1919 formulation is anticipated in 1821 by Shelley: the language of poets 'is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things'. He precisely anticipates one translation of *ostranenie* as 'defamiliarisation': 'Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar'. This metaphorical strangeness is for Shelley fundamental to language, not unlike Lakoff and Johnson's ideas on metaphor: 'In the infancy of the world every author is necessarily a poet; because language itself is poetry, and to be a poet is to apprehend the true and the

[223] Ibid., pp. 149–50.
[224] Arthur Rimbaud, Letter to Georges Izambard, 13 May 1871, in *Œuvres* (Paris: Garnier, 1960), pp. 343–44 (p. 344).
[225] Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art as Device' [1919], in *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, translated and edited by Alexandra Berlina (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 73–96 (p. 80).

beautiful'.[226] The poet, for Doty 'fundamentally queer', apprehends truth and beauty through the strangeness.

Truth and beauty may seem old fashioned and probably heteronormatively fixed ideals, but they have power if they are appreciated freshly – 'Make it new', as Pound urges, in a phrase derived from Confucian scholars.[227] Even the conservative heterosexual Larkin, who expects truth to be truth and beauty beauty, creates his lyric by making experience strange, new, appreciable by the reader: 'High Windows' begins with the shock element (for 1965) of 'he's fucking her', a heterosexually queer destabilising moment, and ends with the strange association of the continuing freedom from restraint with the endless sky behind the windows.[228] So the successful lyric queers the mundane 'business as usual' (Doty's phrase, see note 220) to offer truths and beauties not themselves new but appreciated in new ways. If all poetry is 'fundamentally queer', the subject of queer lyric seems unmanageably broad, but it is worthwhile keeping that broad queerness in mind while I concentrate here on how the sexually queer operates, and how truths and beauties can be conveyed through the queerness in lyric.

Doty, like me, finds the truth and beauty of queerness in an 'angle to the universe', the universe here being the heteronormative world in which queerness is unspeakable. Larkin's position as grumpy heterosexual contrarian also takes a certain angle to the respectable, willing to shock with the word 'fuck', but because homosexuality means living constantly at this angle, the broader notion of queerness has arisen from the meaning of sexual unorthodoxy:

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[226] 'A Defence of Poetry', p. 166; p. 173; p. 177.
[227] Michael North, 'The Making of "Make It New"', *Guernica* 15 August 2013 <https://www.guernicamag.com/the-making-of-making-it-new/> [accessed 7 October 2020]
[228] *Complete Poems*, p. 80. It was first published in 1968.

> But to believe that the world is QUEER, or that oneself is, or both, is a window of doubt through which all creative possibility comes into being. I'll return to Forster's description of Cavafy as 'a Greek gentleman in a straw hat, standing absolutely motionless at a slight angle to the universe.'[229] That 'slight angle' is of course homosexuality, as it was for Forster himself, but that is only one aspect of an oblique position in relation to the real, one that is often enabled by sexual difference but in no way restricted to it. [Capitals in original][230]

E. M. Forster opened Cavafy's work to the world, while not quite opening himself: Forster was in the closet, where in 1914 he had finished his homosexual novel *Maurice*, in which Maurice refers to himself as an 'unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort'.[231] Doty considers the 'unspeakable' in relation to Walt Whitman and Forster's friend Edward Carpenter who had visited him:

> I do not wish to suggest that the contents of the unspeakable, for Whitman, are entirely sexual, for there is more deep down in his pockets than what obviously resides there. Carpenter and his readers were reaching for signposts of a gay identity when such a thing barely existed, but Whitman is ultimately a queer poet in the deepest sense of the word: he destabilizes, he unsettles, he removes the doors from their jambs. There is an uncanniness in 'Song of Myself' and the other great poems of the 1850s that, for all his vaunted certainty, Whitman wishes to underscore.[232]

And yet, Doty concedes:

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[229] E. M. Forster, *Pharos and Pharillon* (New York: Knopf, 1923), p.110.
[230] *The Art of Description*, p. 114.
[231] E. M. Forster, *Maurice* [1971] (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2001), p. 159.
[232] Mark Doty, *What is the Grass: Walt Whitman in My Life* (London: Cape, 2020), p. 117.

> Sex colors everything, shapes every aspect of our perception, and as the erotics of exchange, of faith, of writing itself, it defines the ethos of participation. Is desire itself a lust toward the unsayable?[233]

The unsayable offers itself as a taboo to be broken.

Beauty and Homosexuality

Wilde's being 'unspeakable' affects the cultural position of beauty in the twentieth century. His concern for beauty derives from the Aesthetic Movement's ideals (Morris's 'what you believe to be beautiful') but the earnest Arts-and-Crafts style has a parallel decadent version of beauty in art nouveau, and the transgressiveness of decadence associates it with Wilde's sodomy case. The anti-decadent response of straight society is typified in Rudyard Kipling's poem 'The *Mary Gloster*': 'And your rooms at college was beastly – more like a whore's than a man's'.[234] This climate is behind Denis Donoghue's claim that '[i]n some countries and among certain classes, talk of beauty is regarded as shocking unless the speaker is homosexual'.[235] He discusses at length B. H. Fairchild's poem 'Beauty'. The poet (heterosexual, from Kansas) is in Florence with his wife looking at Donatello's 'David':

> and it occurs to me again
> that no male member of my family has ever used
> this word in my hearing or anyone else's except
> in reference, perhaps, to a new pickup or a dead deer.
> By God, Henry, that's a beauty.[236]

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[233] Ibid., p. 118.
[234] Rudyard Kipling, 'The Mary Gloster' in *Rudyard Kipling's Verse: Definitive Edition* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1940), pp. 129–36 (p. 132).
[235] *Speaking of Beauty*, p. 29.
[236] Ibid. Fairchild citation is *Southern Review* 33. 3 (1997), 434–41.

Donoghue's consideration of the indispensable concept of beauty requires Fairchild's heterosexual example showing it as (with difficulty) not solely available to gay men; meanwhile its especial availability to them is not discussed. Donoghue's axiomatic default, that male interest in beauty is gay, is illustrated in one of Doty's 'Apparition' poems: arranging flowers, he hears his late father say 'Mark is making the house pretty'.[237] His father's attitude to beauty has been that of Fairchild's heterosexual middle-American men, but this utterance 'was in gentleness, a compliment, and not in mockery': posthumously, his father reaches the moment of concession to beauty that Fairchild finds in Florence. Doty's obsession with beauty appears in the fascination with objects metonymic of 'gay sensibility', as in 'Thirty Delft Tiles' (see chapter 4 note 217). In *Sweet Machine*, Doty confronts discomfort with his love of surface beauty in 'Concerning some Recent Criticism of His Work' (for instance by Helen Vendler and Sean O'Brien),[238] defending it by quoting a generic 'queen'. Elsewhere in that collection he resolutely continues describing surface glitter and sheen, e.g., in 'Favrile' and 'Murano'.[239] But he is most directly queer about beauty in his celebration of drag performers, with emphasis on performance as much as beautiful accoutrements, like the 'beautiful black drag queen' in 'Chanteuse', 'who caught us in the glory | of her artifice'.[240] Like Quentin Crisp whose personality was constant queer performance, or the ACT-UP protesters in the 1980s, the drag artiste is engaged in a deed, a doing as much as a being.

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[237] Mark Doty, *Dark Lane*, (London: Cape Poetry, 2015), p. 28.
[238] *Sweet Machine*, pp. 30 and 31, see chapter 1 note 23; Helen Vendler, 'Comic and Elegiac', *New Yorker*, 8 April 1996 http://archives.newyorker.com/?iid=15606&startpage=page0000102#folio=100> [accessed 30 October 2017]; Sean O'Brien, 'Nothing Needs to Be This Lavish', *Times Literary Supplement*, 29 November 1996, p. 27.
[239] *Sweet Machine*, pp. 1–4 and 48–56.
[240] *My Alexandria*, p. 23 and p. 24.

A poem is also performative, a deed which in extreme cases can have serious consequences, as with Osip Mandelshtam's squib about Stalin: 'On hearing the "Stalin Epigram", Boris Pasternak reportedly exclaimed: "This is not a literary fact, but an act of suicide." […] these were not words, but deeds.'[241] In less dangerous times, James Kirkup's poem in *Gay News* was also a fateful deed, although publishing a poem about sex with Jesus was not obviously risky in 1976 until Mary Whitehouse instigated prosecution (of the publisher, not the poet) for blasphemous libel.[242] Defending *Gay News* was not about defending truth or beauty in the poem itself, but the truth of free speech and the beauty of queer desire. It is published on the internet now, apparently still illegally.[243] The religious-erotic mode of Kirkup's poem is an old tradition which Doty refers to, discussing Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl':

> In a strange way, obscene and scandalous as 'Howl' may have been, Ginsberg's complex position makes its sexual frankness acceptable. We have a tradition of sacred erotic literature. Admittedly, it's a ways from the poems of St. John of the Cross to that swordbearing naked blond in the baths, but if you remember the poem where Christ wounds his earthly beloved's throat – well, there is a precedent. Eros has been spiritualized in the West ever since the Song of Songs. And if you can even go on to laugh at that celestial messenger who's about to spear you – well, you're immediately in a far less confrontational position with the reader.[244]

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[241] *Lyric Poetry and Modern Politics*, p. 114.
[242] Rictor Norton, 'The Gay News Blasphemy Trial, 1976', [2002] <http://rictornorton.co.uk/gaynews.pdf> [accessed 25 July 2020].
[243] 'The Gay Poem that Broke Blasphemy Laws', *Pink News* (10 January 2008) pinknews.co.uk/2008/01/10/the-gay-poem-that-broke-blasphemy-laws/ [accessed 20 February 2020].
[244] Mark Doty, 'Human Seraphim: "Howl", Sex and Holiness' [2006], in *poets.org* (Academy of American Poets, 8 October 2010) <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/human-seraphim-howl-sex-and-holiness> [accessed 8/9/2017].

Kirkup's transgressive deed is missing the camp element of self-ironising laughter – one reason why, in my experience, none of us campaigning against the blasphemy trial much enjoyed the poem that triggered it.

Queerness, Camp and Fetish

The instability of queerness is greatly involved with the elusive quality of camp. Philip Core's *Camp: The Lie that Tells the Truth* takes the subtitle from Jean Cocteau, who used it about himself in aphorisms published in *Vanity Fair* in 1922:

> A working definition is essential before we can pinpoint camp retrospectively and contemporarily. Camouflage, bravura, moral anarchy, the hysteria of despair, a celebration of frustration, skittishness, revenge … the possible descriptions are countless. I would opt for one basic requisite however: camp is a lie that tells the truth.[245] [Ellipsis in original]

Camp is not the only 'lie that tells the truth': irony is exactly that, and camp is a particular form. The classic attempt at definition, Susan Sontag's 'Notes on Camp' (1964),[246] represents a vital moment when it becomes publicly visible and discussed, but in the queer era it may seem outdated, as for Honni van Rijswijk:

> Overall, Sontag's approach has been largely left behind: her formulation of camp as an 'apolitical' aesthetic movement only, for instance, over trivializes camp and fails to recognize its subversive potential. While camp can be about 'Tiffany lamps' and 'old Flash Gordon comics', it does serve larger political and theoretical functions, especially in relation to demonstrations of the performativity or contingency of gender and sexuality. An important

[245] Philip Core, *Camp: The Lie that Tells the Truth* (London: Plexus, 1984), p. 9.
[246] *A Susan Sontag Reader*, pp. 105–19; see chapter 1 note 7.

> function of camp is the way that it enables a critical re-seeing or transformation.[247]

Jonathan Dollimore finds camp elusive to define, but considers that it 'undermines the depth model of identity from inside, being a kind of parody and mimicry which hollows out from within, making depth recede into its surfaces.'[248] Queerness uses camp to highlight the angle to the universe at which homosexuality (and other nonconformity) is kept by the straight world, while also keeping itself there: ironic camp needs naïve normality, as does queerness – straightness is the background against which fluidity is possible.

Doty's poetry is frequently described as camp because of the surface beauty and the drag performers, but also in queer terms by Sarah P. Gamble:

> Perhaps, then, working from a model of camp is a better way of reading and understanding Doty's poetry, if one understands camp to mean a notion of queer aesthetics that is relational, diffuse, and a deliberate displacement of truth.[249]

Doty himself uses the word 'camp' noticeably seldom in published work. One instance is in his article on 'Howl', where he contrasts Allen Ginsberg's camp with O'Hara's. He notes of Ginsberg's 'fucked in the ass | by saintly motorcyclists' that it is 'startling to think about that passage being published in 1956'. Its failure to be a 'clarion call' for gay liberation (unlike Kirkup's poem twenty years later)

> may simply have been because it was a poem, a form that tends to be a far advance scout of culture rather than an actual agent of change. Or

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[247] Honni van Rijswijk 'Judy Grahn's Violent Feminist Camp', in *The Body and the Book: Writings on Poetry and Sexuality*, ed. by Glennis Byron and Andrew J. Sneddon (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), pp. 319–30 (p. 320).
[248] 'Post/Modern: On the Gay Sensibility', in in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject; A Reader*, ed. by Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 221-236; (p. 224).
[249] Sarah P. Gamble, 'A Poetics of Erasure: Mark Doty's Queer Coast', in *The Body and the Book*, ed. by Byron and Sneddon, pp. 137–53 (p. 144).

> it might be its oddly camp tone – the saintly bikers, seraphic sailors, and penetrating angel do feel a bit arch, don't they? [250]

Bikers and sailors are classic objects of fetishism, which focuses on their clothes and accoutrements. Both camp and fetishism in homosexual subculture begin to find open expression by the 1950s despite the sexually repressive atmosphere. Both are queer, but Doty's comment on Ginsberg's tone highlights the awkward relationship between them: camp is ironic, while fetishism uses metonymy, which is unironic at least until it becomes 'knowing', when it loses power as fetish. The biker's jacket or the sailor's uniform are sexualised external parts synecdochic of a masculine sexual ideal. Doty's sequence 'The Vault' exemplifies how at the sex club the particular is subsumed: 'We're almost generalised | here, local avatars || of a broader principle'.[251] The biography of mid-twentieth-century leatherman Sam Steward embodies that principle:

> The leather movement had started during World War II, evolving out of uniform fetishism. With his early fixation on sailors and other men in uniform, and his long-standing interest in various forms of punishment and domination, Steward had been caught up in leather long before the movement had a name.[252]

Steward disapproves of the codified 'leather movement', writing in 1964 when it is still only embryonic:

> in essence there is no difference today between a female impersonator or drag-queen and a leather-boy in full leather-drag. Both are dressing up to represent something they are not.
>
> It is difficult to say at what point in such a 'movement' the

[250] 'Human Seraphim'.
[251] *School of the Arts*, p. 49.
[252] Justin Spring, *Secret Historian: The Life and Times of Samuel Steward, Professor, Tattoo Artist, and Sexual Renegade* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), p. 301.

> degeneration sets in, and the elements of parody and caricature make their first appearance. Perhaps the decay began when the first M[asochist] decided that he, too, could wear leather as well as the big butch S[adist] he so much admired. And so he bought himself a leather jacket.[253]

The seriousness of Steward's fetishistic desire is unstable because it contains the converse of Quentin Crisp's problem that a man who desired him would therefore not be the desirable 'great dark man': 'I know that my dream is doomed to disappointment. If I succeed, I fail. If I win the love of a man, he cannot be a real man'.[254] Gregory Woods finds a similar paradox in D. H. Lawrence: 'His most insistent, but necessarily self-contradictory, erotic grail is the passionate, physical union of two heterosexual men'– being queer despite himself.[255] Steward's stand against a codified movement is long lost, and the paradoxes have changed, with men aiming to be each other's 'great dark man' among 'clones' in the 1970s and 'bears' from the late 1980s, but fetishism's need for authenticity remains, even with recognition of its camp potential in parody and caricature. In 'The Vault', Doty's knowingly grandiose tone can nod to this without going too far: 'Reader, I have no adequate term | for what blessed them, no word commensurate.'[256] Because sex implies enjoyment, in the field of the erotic the serious values of truth and beauty are likely to be enhanced rather than undermined by humour, which the destabilising influence of camp in the queer world encourages, against the serious tone of fetishism or political ideals. Kirkup's poem fails artistically on this count.

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[253] Ibid., p. 302.
[254] Quentin Crisp, in the TV film *The Naked Civil Servant*, 1975; quoted by Mark Armstrong, 'The Quentin Kind: Visual Narrative and *The Naked Civil Servant*' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Northumbria, 2012), p. 64.
[255] Gregory Woods, *Articulate Flesh: Male Homo-Eroticism and Modern Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 125.
[256] *School of the Arts*, p. 55.

In his article on 'Howl', Doty compares Ginsberg's position as 'lusty spiritual comedian' with Frank O'Hara's 'A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island', which is

> also very funny, though inflected with a camp sensibility of a very different sort. The pratfalls and swooning exclamations in 'Howl' serve to resist the heightened quality of the holy quest at their core. O'Hara doesn't believe in sacred quests […] He brings the same sensibility, the same open-eyed gaze to an encounter with a heavenly body that he'd bring to anything else. Of course he jokes, but there's a different tenor to his humor, and the irony in his voice gives way, at last, to—or at least coexists with—an unmistakably genuine sense of awe.[257]

Desire has a spiritual dimension of awe, a sincere authenticity that must coexist with its opposite, camp irony, much as for the sake of integrity Quakerism coexists in me with queerness. Quaker simplicity derives from requiring the integrity of unadorned truth. This has led to a naïve style or unintentional beauty, although pursuit of beauty as an end has traditionally been considered frivolous: similar to the mechanism by which desire for sincere, authentic fetishism is desire for the fetish fantasy to be true, and only therefore beautiful. Doty can admire simplicity but loves its opposite: 'ECONOMY is a virtue, albeit an overrated one. […] EXCESS, which is seldom understood to be a virtue, can certainly be a pleasure' [capitals in original].[258] These are not quite truth and beauty, but make them possible in different ways. He continues later in the book:

> Style, as Jean Cocteau said, is a simple way of saying complex things. What is said, by style, is something about a view of the world, and about the work of poetry itself, and about the speaking character of the

[257] 'Human Seraphim'.
[258] *The Art of Description,* p. 74.

> poet, who's introducing us to a personal mode of knowing, a private language as various as human character is.[259]

The style of the 'speaking character', the lyric 'I', might be called its identity, authenticity, or in Quaker terms, integrity. Doty's idea of queer poetry is beyond the poetry of sexual difference, well developed in the work of poets like Thom Gunn by the late 1980s when Doty begins writing openly gay poetry:

> I'm glad that work exists, but once it was done, it didn't seem like there was any-place else to go with it. My being queer has to do with history, with economics, with how I speak and what I wear. It has to do with what happens to me on the street. It has to do with my job. A poetry that didn't admit every aspect of my life would seem to me too limited.

This comprehensive poetry of the self is concordant with my Quaker aim of integrity. I see my broader subject-matter as coloured by my sexual queerness, and my lyric self can present truthful poems of the beauty of queer desire along with any other aspect of my life.

The poem 'Being Queer', in my previous book *A Season in Eden* (2016), was both a sceptical response to queer theory and a recognition of its validity.

> That lovely word I wish they could give back
> to the men of shameless shame swanning around
> the tangy old public conveniences (long gone),
> crimplene trousers in disarray ('Gentlemen
> please adjust your dress before leaving'). That's me
> I suppose, grown up to an over-fifty non-scene
> trouser-fancier. Yes, it's transgressive,
> subverts the dominant mode of discourse, if you like,
> it's no way to behave in this day and age, but

[259] Ibid., pp. 112–113.

> it's not what you mean. Give us back that word
> even as you offer us restyled retro crimplene
> and nylon shirts. The stretchy scratchiness, the itch
> and our own furtive ways of being something else.[260]

A Larkinesque grumpy scepticism ironically mimics the usual straight complaint about the word 'gay', and queer theory's abstract transgressiveness is set against that of the shameless men in the toilet, who can be considered unselfconsciously queer like Steward's leather world before it became a 'movement'. Fetishistic accoutrements like crimplene trousers and underwear are objects of subjective beauty, metonymic tokens for the truth of a performative identity. In 'Lost Property' (p. 58/[49]) and 'Catalogue Man' (p. 59/[50]) underwear is metonymic of sexual opportunity, or longing for it. The cowboy in 'Go West' (p. 60/[51]), metonymic of masculinity, is a historical truth eclipsed by the Hollywood ideal, then by gay fantasy derived from that ideal. The poem's perspective is the settling of America across the physical landscape with its movement from the East Coast, across 'real' cowboy country, to gay San Francisco, or Portland where at the airport I saw a man in a cowboy hat slightly self-consciously eating a banana. The title is borrowed from the Village People song, its faux-naïve lyrics exploiting the camp potential of western fetish gear.[261]

AIDS, Queerness and Death

After the humorous 'Go West', the mood in the book suddenly changes with 'Blood' (p. 61/[52]), about my sexual experience in relation to AIDS. The man in the poem has been the subject of several poems from the time of our intermittent liaison

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[260] Peter Daniels, *A Season in Eden* (Norwich: Gatehouse Press, 2016), p. 43.
[261] Village People, 'Go West', released 26 March 1979: <http://www.officialvillagepeople.com/discography.html> [accessed 27 May 2020].

(1989–1993) and since, because my desire for him has been a close encounter with beauty, the risk factor being an uncomfortable truth. I was aware of his recklessness, a violence towards himself and potentially others with the infection that we kept safely behind the condom. From the mid-1980s I was writing about AIDS, co-edited the AIDS anthology *Jugular Defences* (1994), and then left the subject until I wrote 'Blood'. That was written now that drugs are available to prevent HIV infection, but my retrospect shares the sense of impending danger with recent feelings that civilisation is threatened by politics post-2016 and climate change (and since my writing it the Covid-19 crisis has added its own contribution, with some echoes of AIDS). Yeats's line 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold'[262] has been felt as topical recently. Is queerness a symptom of things falling apart? Is it a postmodern way of courting cataclysm through dissolving old boundaries and associating this performance with sexuality? 'Winchmore Hill' (p. 45/[36]) is in the voice of someone from that posh suburb for whom Stoke Newington is louche, dangerous, and apparently undergoing a riot: queerness is everything unrespectable, but transgression is enticing at least temporarily. 'Riff on a Line of Miłosz' (p. 55/[46]) is a matching lyric 'I' account of being lost and needing to understand danger and queerness in the self, both a dystopian vision and a myth of self-origin (a plain narrative version would be 'Buggers', p. 11/[2]). The Czesław Miłosz line spoke to me because I felt it was time to write about unrespectable parts of my psyche. This is a matter of truth, such as not being euphemistic about shit, but also 'what I'd found indecent and beautiful', the frightening sublime 'wild rush of water through the forest', the indecent joys of the city and of queerness: the fear is the need for it – 'yet I could find it'. The knowledge beyond the fear – finding the 'self | new and dirty' –

[262] *Collected Poems*, p. 211.

fuses truth and beauty in imperfection. The ‘badge of my allegiance’ is my queerness: my gay identity, but also other wildness and indecency I have been born or grown up with, and have tended to hide.

‘Riff’ does not have a clear time frame, which is a further queer aspect. The performativity of the queer self is ‘here and now’, impermanent, subject to the changes of time which creates a perspective of past ‘there and then’ performances, and by implication future ones. In the poems of *My Tin Watermelon* the ‘normal’ is queering itself as I look at the world falling apart. As a man of 64 when these poems were completed, age has stretched my experience beyond my being over 50 in ‘Being Queer’; I look back at the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s and my liaison with the man in ‘Blood’, and also towards future disaster. Queer performativity does not cancel time or death, despite this from Sue-Ellen Case – ‘in no way offered as a general truth or a generative model’,[263] while she enjoys taking a provocative stance:

> queer theory, as I will construct it here, works not at the site of gender, but at the site of ontology, to shift the ground of being itself, thus challenging the Platonic parameters of Being – the borders of life and death.

This queerness ‘revels in the discourse of the loathsome’ and ‘attacks the dominant notion of the natural’,[264] with which I happily concur – it ‘subverts the dominant mode of discourse’ as I concede in ‘Being Queer’. But Case associates heterosexism excessively with attitudes to non-reproductive queer sex and shifts the ground of being beyond the possible:

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[263] Sue-Ellen Case, ‘Tracking the Vampire’ in *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3 (1991) 1–20 (p. 2).
[264] Ibid., p. 3.

> Queer sexual practice […] impels one out of the generational production of what has been called 'life' and history, and ultimately out of the category of the living. […] Striking at its very core, queer desire punctuates the life/death and generative/destructive bipolarities that enclose the heterosexist notion of being.[265]

This trivialises death, including how Doty and many other queer people have had to face death at the time of AIDS. My being queer has made no difference to my existence in time and my expectation of death: they are the limits of queerness, as they are of what Case calls 'life', in quotes. The self, however defined and including the lyric self, is subject to these limits, which I consider in the next chapter.

[265] Ibid., p. 4.

Chapter 6. The Lyric Self under Time and Death

Life and Death: Truth and Time

The 'borders of life and death' are inescapable in human experience, whether or not queerness challenges a 'heterosexist notion of being' as Case insists.[266] Earlier in postmodernity, Roland Barthes's 1967 essay 'The Death of the Author' also challenges a writer's sense of being: 'Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing' so that, once 'the author enters into his own death, writing begins.'[267] However, Barthes affirms that the living author had a body: his 'death' of the author is figurative, not a queer challenge to the accepted notion of being. As the mortal body of an author I can volunteer that in most of my poems the 'I' is close to my self, while exceptions are usually obvious fictions (e.g. 'Answers', p. 57/[48]), as is also the case with Larkin, not always so obviously (e.g. 'Annus Mirabilis'[268] – readers might not know he was sexually experienced before 1963). Doty's poetry persona is close to the actual Mark Doty: this can define him as a 'confessional' poet, but the Mark Doty of the poems and memoirs is created in a Barthesian way by those literary works, the choice of what they reveal and how. Gillian White quotes a letter of Anne Sexton to her psychiatrist in 1963: 'I made up a whole person, a poet, Anne Sexton, who would be worth something to you.… All those people who write to me and believe in me. God! I don't even exist!'[269] Michael Donaghy, not a post-structuralist, writes (around 2001):

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[266] Case, 'Tracking the Vampire', p. 2; p. 4.
[267] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', trans. by Stephen Heath [1977] in *Modern Criticism and Theory*, ed. by David Lodge (Harlow: Longman, 1988), pp. 167–72 (p. 168).
[268] Larkin, *Complete Poems*, p. 90.
[269] White, *Lyric Shame*, Kindle Edition, location 2234. Ellipsis in White's quote from Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 201.

> I really believe a poem has a life of its own and is as much 'about' the reader's life as about mine. […] By relying on the documentary truth, on 'real' situations and relationships, for a poem's emotional authenticity, the poet makes an artifice of honesty. Confessional poems, in other words, lie like truth.[270]

The 'truth' of a confessional poem is an 'artifice' which lets readers assume that a real person embodies the experience conveyed by the poem, and shares their own bodies' physical nature: which is subject to death.

The borders of life and death are experienced in time. As part of the narrative of the world, people's lives begin and end arbitrarily *in medias res* and, as Frank Kermode puts it in *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), 'to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems.'[271] The truth of death creates a basis for aesthetic form in human creations: Wallace Stevens in 'Sunday Morning' proposes that

> Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
> Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams
> And our desires.[272]

What is this fulfilment? At the Ledbury Poetry Festival in July 2018, in a dialogue with Doty about Stevens, the poet Maitreyabandhu mentioned 'Death is the mother of beauty'. Doty was 'desperately hoping not to be asked to discuss this'.[273] The phrase is evidently overloaded for him: he has touched on how death shapes life in many poems and also in prose books, for instance *Heaven's Coast*:

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[270] Michael Donaghy, '*Nightwaves*: notes for a radio broadcast' [undated, 2000 or 2001], in *The Shape of the Dance* (London: Picador, 2009), pp. 104–05.
[271] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 7.
[272] *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 55.
[273] Peter Daniels, notebook entry.

> I think this is what is meant when we speculate that death is what makes love possible. Not that things need to be able to die in order for us to love them, but that things need to die in order for us to know *what they are*. Could we really know anything that wasn't transient, not becoming more itself in the strange, unearthly light of dying? The button pushed, the stones shine, all mystery and beauty, implacable, fierce, austere.[274]

This awareness is like that of the lover in Keats's 'Ode on Melancholy': 'She dwells with beauty – beauty that must die'.[275] As Eliot says of John Webster, Doty sees 'the skull beneath the skin';[276] he writes of precisely that in 'Theory of Beauty (Pompeii)' – one of his most economical poems (quoted entire):

> Tiny girl in line at the café – seven, eight? – holding her book open,
> pointing to the words and saying them half-aloud
> while her mother attends to ordering breakfast;
>
> she's reading *POMPEII … Buried Alive!* with evident delight.
> Pleasure with a little shiver inside it.
>
> And that evening, I thought I was no longer afraid
> of the death's head beneath the face of the man beneath me.[277]

In *Dog Years*, roughly contemporaneous with that poem, he writes:

> It's the other pole of life, the negation that lives beneath the yes; the fierce chilly gust of silence that lies at the core of music, the hard precision of the skull beneath the lover's face. [278]

The skull has always been beneath my own face as well as my lovers', and at over sixty the thought of it becomes more frequent.

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[274] *Heaven's Coast*, p. 5.
[275] *Poetical Works*, pp. 219–20 (p. 220).
[276] 'Whispers of Immortality', in *Complete Poems and Plays*, p. 52.
[277] *Theories and Apparitions*, p. 27.
[278] *Dog Years*, p. 129.

I wrote my poem ‘And to Die’ (p. 74/[65]) imagining myself inside my mother’s self while I watched her dying, prompted by Whitman’s ‘And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier.’[279] But how are they luckier, those who have found this moment of ceasing to live, and is this luck Stevens’s ‘fulfilment’? Doty describes the phrase ‘and luckier’ as ‘breathtaking’:

> This is no mere philosophical proposition on Whitman’s part, not an intellectual understanding but a felt actuality. We are alive forever in the endless circulation of matter. Nothing luckier, stranger, or more beautiful could ever happen. There is no better place.[280]

My immediate reaction is that Whitman is extravagantly speculative about what death means to somebody dying, although he saw death when nursing Civil War troops; Doty too has been close to many dying of AIDS including his own lover. The only deaths I have witnessed were my parents’. Whitman’s megalomaniac self anticipates the circulation of his matter everywhere:

> I bequeathe myself to the dirt, to grow from the grass I love;
> If you want me again, look for me under your boot-soles.[281]

Circulating matter is a lucky fact of existence, when seen from outside the individual consciousness. I attempt to achieve this external vision in Quaker worship, but my self is mostly not in this state of awareness and imagines immortality or annihilation as a coherent self rather than as molecules. Such an awareness is behind my poems’ anticipation of apocalypse or natural destruction: finalities that betoken the mystery of what is in store. In ‘Haddock Breakfast’ (p. 53/[44]), the self anticipates inevitably rising sea level destroying the hotel, while he enjoys breakfast; in ‘A Moment’ (p.

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[279] Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*, 6, in *The Complete Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), pp. 63–124 (p. 69).
[280] Mark Doty, *What is the Grass: Walt Whitman in My Life* (London: Cape, 2020), p. 69.
[281] *Song of Myself*, 52 (p. 124).

36/[27]), a mythic apocalypse with chariots happens behind the here-and-now, during a 'moment of calm'; otherwise, like Whitman, I anticipate a return to the earth while our insignificant selves have been multiplying pixels of information impossible to assemble as history, in 'Almost Christmas' (p. 37/[28]).

Doty is familiar with the apocalyptic:

> I did, after all, grow up with apocalyptic Christians who believed the end was near, and that this phenomenal world was merely a veil soon to be torn away. This is great training for a lyric poet concerned with evanescence. Of course, it's a gift, to know that things have limits; of course, the shadow is what creates three-dimensionality. But I fix on the darker note, and sometimes I think the only kind of beauty I can see is the kind that's right on the verge of collapse. Is that the only kind of loveliness there is?[282]

Kermode suggests that the idea of apocalypse 'can survive in very naïve forms. Probably the most sophisticated of us is capable at times of naïve reactions to the End.'[283] For Kermode in 1962 the obvious danger is nuclear war, while believers in imminent apocalypse are a curiosity; but the post-2016 political world is heavily influenced by American evangelical Christians, like Doty's family, who wish it to be brought about. Kermode allows that we are capable of 'naïve reactions', but the End can seem very close, requiring us to respond. Doty witnesses 9/11 as the End happening here and now, yet outside reality: 'Apocalypse is *narrated*, continuously, seemingly endlessly' by people on cellphones [italics in original].[284] Death relates to time in more than one way: 9/11 is a sudden instance of thousands dying, while the experience of AIDS is now an era, a time measured in repeated individual deaths. In

[282] *Dog Years*, p. 62.
[283] *The Sense of an Ending*, pp. 8–9.
[284] *Dog Years*, p. 157.

three poems close together in *School of the Arts*, Doty encounters death differently. 'In their Flight'[285] imagines the 9/11 dead as a murmuration of birds, affirming their existence as souls:

> Who believes in them?
> It doesn't matter much
> to the souls, newly set free,
> wheeling in the air over the site
>
> of their last engagements.

While 'newly set free', and 'oblivious to the column of smoke roiling behind them', they now inhabit a timeless lyric present, while the poem alights on a definite moment (in contrasting past tense, though in another poem it could be present):

> Anniversary day, evil wind banging the door to the gym
> till the glass shattered, and Mauricio said,
> – in a low voice , as if to say it would somehow protect him –
>
> *Lot of spirits blowing around today*[.] [Italics in original]

'Heaven for Paul'[286] contains an impending plane crash and subsequent tornado: doubly reprieved, Doty tells of the experience inside his possibly dying mind which dejectedly imagines dissolution into 'that undulant fuel haze' above an airport, rather than the 'luckier' dispersal that Whitman proposes. This confrontation by death is contained within the timescale of this narrative, unlike 'In Their Flight' where 9/11 is a permanent calendar date but otherwise outside time. In 'Oncoming Train',[287] self-destructive feelings occur as a train arrives: an instant, but also a regular event. 'Not that I want to be dead, exactly' but 'that moment is the clearest invitation and

[285] *School of the Arts*, p. 34–35.
[286] Ibid., pp. 27–30.
[287] Ibid., p. 26.

opportunity || to strike against time', which he thinks through as perhaps a refusal but revises this, alluding to Andrew Marvell, 'to hurry time, *to make him run* – that is a radical form of submission' [italics in original].[288] The temptation to push time's ending as the train approaches is necessary for Doty: 'The capacity for despair is probably equivalent to the ability to experience joy; such depths in the self are required in order to make possible the mounting of the heights'.[289] As in Keats's 'Ode on Melancholy', the one who knows melancholy can both 'burst joy's grape' and 'taste the sadness of her might'.[290] Perhaps that is the fulfilment Stevens expects from death as mother of beauty, condensed in a moment.

Time and the Soul

Time is made of moments. For Doty, as for many including myself, being in them is difficult:

> Trying to remain in the moment is like living in three dimensions, in sheerly physical space; the mind doesn't seem to be whole unless it also occupies the dimension of time, which grants to things their depth and complexity, the inherent dignity and drama of their histories, the tragedy of their possibilities. What then can it mean to 'be here now'?[291]

My poem 'What is Mr Luczinski?' (p. 33/[24]) considers occupation of space and time, with an epigraph from the Zen Buddhist Alan Watts about 'trying to resist the present' (see p. 3). I have used the time-bending, space-shifting potential of urban transport to explore these dimensions through my alter-ego (Luczinski being my

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[288] Andrew Marvell, 'To His Coy Mistress', in *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Elizabeth Story Donno (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 50–51 (p. 51).
[289] *Dog Years*, p. 155.
[290] *Poetical Works*, p. 220.
[291] *Heaven's Coast*, pp. 7–8.

great-grandfather's name before he changed it to Daniels, therefore mine in an alternative world). In the ever-changing present moment and location, lyric awareness of selfhood is also awareness of the time and the space the self occupies. I do not believe lyric is independent of time or space, unlike Helen Vendler, who associates a timebound 'self' with narrative and a timeless 'soul' with lyric:

> It is generally thought that the lyric is the genre of 'here' and 'now', and it is true that these index words govern the lyric moment. But insofar as the typical lyric exists only in the here and now, it exists nowhere, since life as it is lived is always bracketed with a there and a then. Selves come with a history: souls are independent of time and space.[292]

Life as it is lived is not excluded from lyric. My soul's journey in 'Trajectory' (p. 51/[42]) combines factual lyric elements from my earliest years on the edge of Cambridge with an unreal, directionless quest narrative. The soul is inseparable from the self's history, not independent of time, which for Doty in *Heaven's Coast* 'grants […] the inherent dignity and drama' to create it:

> When I say I hate time, Paul says
>
> how else could we find depth
> of character, or grow souls?[293]

A poem is one way to find that depth, by its handling of time. It inhabits a here and now, a 'lyric moment' but its iterable form can represent a soul's development, by including narrative events forming its history, like the anticipated plane crash in 'Heaven for Paul', or lyric qualities observed outside the temporality of events, as in Doty's Provincetown seashore (see chapter 3 note 137). Crudely, these may be

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[292] *Soul Says* p. 5.
[293] 'Time and the Town', in *School of the Arts*, p. 78.

characterised as ‘narrative truth’ and ‘lyric beauty’, but naturally the boundaries are not strict, as Jakobson found with ‘metonymic’ fiction and ‘metaphorical’ poetry (see chapter 4 note 193). The soul experiences in narrative and reflects in lyric, but as Doty asks in ‘Pipistrelle’, in the landscape of Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey’,

> Does the poem reside in experience
> or in self-consciousness
>
> about experience? Shh,
> says the evening near the Wye.[294]

The quiet landscape is lyric beauty which denies the need to narrate and explain.

In Doty’s ‘Theory of Narrative’ the journey with the garrulous driver metonymises narrative, while the desert remains unspeaking and uneventful like the Wye or the seashore:

> I cannot look at the great lyric desert
> under the new sun because I am hostaged by causality
> and chronology[.][295]

All human beings are variously ‘hostaged’ by causality and chronology. While ‘the storyteller holds all the power’, the reader is held hostage voluntarily by Doty as narrator, luckier than the couple committed to the car journey. Poems as literary artworks have a shape that frames the contents, and controls causality and chronology in the narrative element, to create a lyric moment. ‘This Your Home Now’ is a slowly unfolding lyrical narrative, in which a friend has noticed ‘*In your poems there’s always | a then*’; Doty wonders ‘*Is it a poem without a then?’* [italics in original].[296] He leaves the last line hanging at going to a coffee shop ‘and then I’m

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[294] *Theories and Apparitions*, p. 3.
[295] Ibid., p. 34.
[296] *Deep Lane*, pp. 57–60.

going to write this poem. Then', and the interrupted narrative enters a performative lyric time. Tropes like metaphors and metonyms also achieve this lyric manipulation of time's reality within poems. In 'Street Trees' (p. 30/[21]), the trees, planted and growing, metonymise a period of time (like Bishop's scaling knife, see chapter 4 note 199) using past tense; but they also show cyclical time with autumn leaf fall, in present tense. Larkin's 'Trees' enact time deceivingly through renewal: 'Is it that they are born again | And we grow old? No, they die too'.[297] For Doty in the poem 'Essay: The Love of Old Houses',[298] the soul not only inhabits the house but is the house and its history, like my room in 'The Cave' (p. 21/[12]): 'What I've – we've – made is not | outside myself, not exactly', and the house's planks are also metonyms for time:

> I sanded and Danish-oiled
>
> these floors with a man who's dead,
> and the planks gleam still –
> a visible form of vitality[.]

The house is an inhabitable metonym with a chronology; the poem is an 'essay' in lyric present but accommodates past-tense perspectives. Old houses are where 'it's proved that time requires | a deeper, better verb than *pass*' [italics in original], and Doty claims for it a non-chronological lyric quality, expressed metaphorically: 'pool, and ebb, and double | back again'. This is not time's literal truth but its beauty, or at least the poet makes it so by metaphorically shaping lyric reality. Culler has addressed this manipulative capacity of lyric since his 1977 article 'Apostrophe', where he considers 'the complex play of mystification and demystification at work in

[297] *Complete Poems*, pp. 76–77 (p. 76).
[298] *Source*, pp. 48–50; quotations all p. 49.

the neutralization of time through reference to a temporality of writing'. In 'This Living Hand', Keats, he claims, predicts that

> the reader will seek to overcome his death, will blind himself to his death by an imaginative act. We fulfill this icy prediction, not by seeking actually to sacrifice our lives that Keats might live but by losing our empirical lives: forgetting the temporality which supports them and trying to embrace a purely fictional time in which we can believe that the hand is really present and perpetually held towards us through the poem.[299]

Referring to Culler in an article on Keats, Donaghy considers this

> simply an extreme and provocative version of the reader's position in reading any poem; the resurrection of the poet's voice depends on the reader's suspension of empirical time as he or she realizes its metre.[300]

The reader enables the poem's performance, while the poem as artifice creates its own time and space. notably through metre or free-verse rhythm, derived from the embodied poet.

Time in Metre and Rhythm

Metrical verse is poetry's traditional way of foregrounding artifice, as Derek Attridge describes in *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (1982). Attridge distinguishes semantic and nonsemantic functions of poetic rhythm:

> This distinction corresponds roughly to a distinction that can be drawn between two ways in which verse challenges the arbitrary but indissoluble link between signifier and signified on which the linguistic sign, as envisaged by Saussure, depends: the first by creating the illusion of a peculiarly intimate connection between the

[299] 'Apostrophe', p. 69.
[300] Michael Donaghy 'John Keats: A Fine Excess' [1993?] in *The Shape of the Dance* p. 79-81 (p. 81)

> physical stuff of language and its meanings rather than a conventionally guaranteed coexistence, and the second by insisting on, and taking advantage of, that arbitrariness.[301]

The intimacy of connection may be an illusion, but 'the physical stuff of language' has an ineluctable connection to the embodiedness of the poet and reader. Thain, surveying nineteenth-century thought on lyric and metre, observes:

> For Hegel, as for Wordsworth, metre is what grounds poetry in the body, in the sensual world and in time. As for Wordsworth, metre grounds poetry in diachronic structures. […] Metre becomes constitutive also of something that pulls away from the external and material into something internal and transcendent ('the subjective movement of the poet's own heart').

Thain continues: 'it is only by having the grid of a regular metrical pulse that a rhythmic lifting out of time can be framed and felt. […] Rhythm represents the lyric's aspiration out of diachronic time even as metre marks its passing.'[302] I would characterise this aspiration as a movement towards beauty, while the diachronic metrical movement represents the relentless truth in the tick-tock of time.

Donaghy gives good reasons to be sceptical of metrical and rhyming truths:

> We are hypnotized or spellbound by form because the traditional aural techniques of verse, the mnemonics of rhyme, metre, and rhetorical schemes, are designed to fix the poem in the memory, to burn it in deeper than prose. And because it stays in the memory a split-second longer, because it 'sounds right', it seems to be right.

Taking the example of chiasmus, he cites

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[301] Derek Attridge, *The Rhythms of English Poetry* (London: Longman, 1982), pp. 286 –87.
[302] *The Lyric Poem and Aestheticism*, p. 59. Thain cites Hegel, *Aesthetics*, pp 1011–14 and p. 1136.

> the familiar shape of 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' like a dance step in which two couples change partners – never mind that beauty and truth can only be identical from a viewpoint shared by God, Grecian urns, and mathematicians.
>
> […] The terrifying truth is that form *substitutes* for logic. [Italics in original][303]

Because verse forms can seem to promote beauty against truth, free verse developed as the opposite technique for modernists: Thain describes them as

> often rejecting what was seen as the prettiness and naivety of regular verse forms […]. Crucially, free verse was seen as more authentic: a giving up on what were considered by some the pretensions of the transcendent aspiration central to an earlier conception of lyric poetry.[304]

In *My Tin Watermelon*, the free verse poems are more 'authentic' in saying their truth without working it up into the beauty, or prettiness, of regularity. My freer forms (mostly loose blank verse) offer what might be thought a more 'honest' truth unmediated through the artifice of refrains and rhymes: for instance 'Lost Property' (p. 58/[49]) employs a plain, anecdotal shape to enhance the story's outrageousness. But Thain also points out:

> Whether it is in irregular verse or strict iambic pentameter, the specified line length packages the poem into metrical units, highlighting its metrical structure across the page as well as across time and dictating the poem's reception in and through time.[305]

The poem's form shapes the time it requires from the reader, and the metrical time, as a truth, lends it an inevitability; its formal shape, its rhythmic variations, along

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[303] Michael Donaghy 'Wallflowers: A Lecture on Poetry with Misplaced Notes and Additional Heckling' [1999], in *The Shape of the Dance*, pp. 1–31 (pp. 13–14).
[304] *The Lyric Poem and Aestheticism*, p. 60.
[305] Ibid., p. 64.

with metaphor and other tropes, create its beauty as a literary artwork. My poem 'The Break' (p. 12/[3]) puts a past tense narrative of time (some years of pre- and post-puberty) and space (school) into a sonnet, which perhaps arranges biographical time awkwardly, but the poem is about awkwardness. 'Alexandra Road' (p. 13/[4]) follows a 'progress' narrative from an undergraduate moment, through cyclical time in 'Every summer', before the transcendence of a fantasy flight from an already-demolished building over Reading, as if over existence itself. The ladder verse-form unfortunately can only be presented downwards while the poem's movement is up the steep hill, and beyond. In 'Out of the Box' (p. 50/[41]) the form puts chronological existence into parallel boxes, history and commentary, tightly constrained by tagging each stanza's ending and beginning. This narrative of my soul's past and future ('I'll still be part of that street till it's all we've got time for') becomes overlaid with philosophising about when 'time is out of the frame', expecting apocalypse or annihilation, asking about truth (how do we know we exist?) and beauty (how do we know what is lovely?). The form may not manage the subject matter satisfactorily, but its failure is the poem's own impossible attempt to get 'out of the box' of time. In a simpler circular form with a refrain, 'Vegan Rhubarb Pavlova' (p. 67/[58]) measures my pessimistic view of time and civilisation ending by the transient pleasures of fancy desserts: the apocalypse here questions how much beauty counts against harsh truths. In 'Riff on a Line of Miłosz' (p. 55/[46]) circularity enables development towards finding and accepting such truths.

Endings. Death and Beauty

Lyric uses verse form and verb tense to establish relation to time; but one thing all poems have is an ending, as if lyric time has stopped – their iterability (see chapter 3, note 144) depends on restarting them by re-reading. In the three-way relationship of

poem, lyric self, and reader (cf O'Hara and others, chapter 3) this implicates the reader's own relation to time, and death. Kermode suggests 'a way of speaking in temporal terms of literary form' as

> a duration (rather than a space) organizing the moment in terms of the end, giving meaning to the interval between tick and tock because we humanly do not want it to be an indeterminate interval between the tick of birth and the tock of death.[306]

Culler suggests that Keats's 'This Living Hand' 'challenges time and seems to win'.[307] Keats's urn also seems to transcend time: its pictures have each frozen a moment, and it will outlast Keats's generation; it may 'tease us out of thought | As doth eternity', but that 'as' implicitly means difference – the urn is not eternal, although 'eternity' subtly suggests the opposite. Its authority to transcend time is its survival since antiquity so, unlike Keats's hand reaching out after death, the urn is not supernatural; but being an inanimate object, its statement is as impossible as the hand's movement. It acquires gravitas from its antiquity and Keats's artifice of granting it speech, but the statement has become so significant most of all because, with the magical rightness of its chiasmus, it opens the final cadence. Larkin's poems in regular forms embody Kermode's 'tick and tock' but frequently present life as an 'indeterminate interval' before death. The late poem 'Aubade' (1974–77)[308] begins and ends with work, defining the expected daily dimension of time, which 'Waking at four' interrupts early, bringing thoughts of 'Unresting death, a whole day nearer now'. Pentameters measure the time steadily until each stanza's penultimate trimeter, like a caught breath, mostly with a heavily ringing rhyme that arrives sooner with the

[306] *The Sense of an Ending*, p. 57.
[307] *Theory of the Lyric*, p. 197 [Kindle ed.].
[308] *Complete Poems*, pp. 115–16.

shorter line – dread / dead; think with / link with; brave / grave; sun / done. Dawn makes 'plain as a wardrobe, what we know | […] | Yet can't accept'; this awareness of death merges into the dismal routine of work, as 'Postmen like doctors go from house to house.' Pessimistic endings are not a late development for Larkin: witness the unwieldy sentence beginning 'But if…' leading only to doubt in 'Mr Bleaney' (1955); or 'Home is So Sad' (1958) ending with 'That vase', which represents the 'joyous' past but with a grave cadence. Nevertheless, he could end 'An Arundel Tomb' tentatively but positively (1955–56, see chapter 1 note 38), or close 'The Whitsun Weddings' (1957–58) with the mythic fertility of 'an arrow shower | Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain'.[309] Death for Larkin is characteristically absence, nothingness, time continuing for ever without us. For Doty, death is both closer and more potentially transcendent. 'Theory of Beauty (Pompeii)',[310] without overt logic, works like a syllogism through the implications of what he observes: the young girl gleefully discovering Pompeii (death); Doty thinking of Pompeii (the mass deaths of AIDS and 9/11); and approaching acceptance of the death's head beneath the lover's skin, and the one beneath his own, understood. As a 'theory of beauty', this is a coming-to-terms with death as its mother. 'Theory of Narrative' raises questions of endings: it is possible to miss the final page as laid out in *Theories and Apparitions,* where on the penultimate page a gap equal to four lines seems to mark a satisfying closure with a bodily reaction to the surfeit of storytelling:

> I was too sick to even feel relieved,
>
> and Paul, gone a peculiar shade
> like blanched celery – I do not exaggerate,

[309] *Complete Poems:* p. 50; p. 55; p. 58; p. 72.
[310] *Theories and Apparitions,* p. 27; see note 277 above.

> although I have, for the sake of a good story –
> bent over and vomited onto the sidewalk.[311]

This misleading layout (identical in the American equivalent edition)[312] seems deliberate – a false ending as a joke about narratives ending and beginning again, like the taxi-driver's. The actual ending is another story of the driver's (' – Oh, one more'),[313] in which a man reading, 'moved from moment to moment by | the implacable agency of a narrator' discovers from the book's ending that he is now dead, and disappears through 'a pulsing wall' of butterflies 'into the other side'. The vomit has purged the 'narrative poisoning' in the experience of the poem; then the butterflies make a fictive but lyrical ending to narrative, with disappearance into death as beauty. Lyric creates an iterable moment, but is not outside time. The poem is a temporal artefact, because language requires duration, and in Kermode's words the poem is 'organizing the moment in terms of the end' (above, note 305). Like the ending of a story, the ending of a poem determines the overall shape, and creates meaning for the whole in finishing its manipulation of reality, resolves it, or suggests that no resolution is feasible.

In searching for truth and beauty in an ending, I tend to look for a logical or narrative arc, often with an opening theme returning. The order of *My Tin Waermelon* moves from birth ('With the Mouth', p. 10/[1]) to death ('Sun in December', p. 77/[68]). In that final poem, the wheel shape of Cambridge and the plane above it give a spatial perspective on the earth, from outside the lyric 'I'; meanwhile, the combination of distance in time since my birth and the here-and-now of my mother dying creates a lyric moment with its own temporal perspective.

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[311] Ibid., p. 35.
[312] Mark Doty, *Fire to Fire: New and Selected Poems* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), p. 37.
[313] *Theories and Apparitions,* p. 36.

‘December has come because it always will’: a point on an endless cycle, but not endless for the individual, any more than the cycle of refreshing is endless for Larkin’s trees. Time in my endings may be cyclical and continuing, or final but with an ‘other side’ as in ‘Aunty May’s Party’ (p. 69/[60]), but one reason I am a poet is that I need to write short pieces, limited temporally and spatially. The poem’s limit is the edge of its immediate universe, the ‘death’ that makes beauty happen. Beauty is also found in whatever the poem’s truth has shown about reality, which may be congruent with the reader’s own angle to the universe, or may change that with understanding of the experience conveyed by the poem. A queer angle like Cavafy’s or Doty’s is measured for truth and beauty against the straight universe, but queer poets also live in that universe. A poet’s quarrel with the self, being a clash of different angles, is where doubt can create greater depth. The ending is perhaps no more than an interim position statement: e.g., in ‘Obsolescence’ (p. 22/[13]) do I want the new or the old? I have at least made my bones and fat from what has been. My own quarrel with myself is mainly a quarrel over truthfulness about queerness and sex, partly answered in a few poems, although I have still not blazoned the truth of what I find beautiful in the least respectable or the most troubling of my desires. But I offer the reader the quarrelling halves of me that are my parents, the unresolved discomfort of their marriage, the discontinuity between Englishness and Jewishness which Quakerism cannot resolve but may hold together. While my Gay Liberation Front days have instilled in me the knowledge that the personal is political, this is mostly a quiet ‘quarrel’, resulting in poems like ‘The Usual’ (p. 68/[59]), which has not placed me in a position to find a terrible beauty where personal and public meet, as Yeats did. The lyric poem embodies a self, troubling the world with what it thinks matters. The poet makes it public in a verbal artwork because the struggle seems to

matter. The usefulness or otherwise of this art lies in its beauty, and its truth, however untrustworthy. I hope to have shown this in what drives lyrics by Doty, Larkin and myself, and how they convey our experience of life, its truth and beauty.

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