The poetics of permeation: a commentary on the practice in
Scattering Eva, Dammtor and *The Abandoned Settlements*

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On Vagueness

For almost forty years, I have held a memory of a scene from a novel. The novel is Ray Bradbury's *Farenheit 451*. In my memory of the scene, the setting is domestic, and the book the protagonist is reading aloud is one which he has memorised – a strategy to preserve the loss of such books to the fires of the book-burners. Those book-burners are on their way, however – to break up the meeting and arrest the dissidents. When I remember the scene, I think I remember that the sound of their fire-engines can be heard, getting closer. The image which most stuck in my memory was that the man who reads the text aloud comes to imagine himself as isolated on an expanding patch of sand, as the room around him becomes indistinct. The people listening become ghostly and outside his normal vision. He is both swept away and rendered immobile by the text he reads out, which seems – in my memory of the passage – to curl around him like a whirlwind.

The poem 'On Reading' [Sheard, 2017, p9] is the last poem, chronologically, of the 105 poems which make up the published work under discussion in this Commentary. The opening section of that poem deploys the images of the Farenheit 451 scene, and uses them to speak of the emotional and psychological impact of 'reading' and texts. But many of the details of that remembered scene are, in fact, wrong: the protagonist, Montag, is not yet fully a dissident, although the scene is one in which he is infected with a growing dissent; he reads from a book, not from memory; he is in his own home; he reads a poem briefly to a small group of women; there are no approaching fire engines; he himself burns the book at the end of the scene. Yet there are details which are *almost* right: Montag "felt himself turning in a great circling roar and buzz and hum…" and

> The room was blazing hot, he was all fire, he was all coldness; they sat in the middle of an empty desert with three chairs and him standing, swaying, […] his voice went out across the desert, into the whiteness, and around the three sitting women there in the great hot emptiness."
>
> [Bradbury, 1953, p47]

'On Reading' merges aspects of the novel as a whole with almost-remembered images from the specific moment, in order to create an imagery of "reading the past," couched in a dream-like state which seeks to recall both the uncertainties of memory and the out-of-the-world pleasures of reading. This sense of vagueness also inhabits the second section of the poem, which uncertainly recounts a later memory of browsing in a bookshop:

> the book I hold is one
> I cannot remember. It holds a poem
> I think I know.

[Sheard, 2017, p9]

As was the case with the memory of Bradbury's scene, I am confident of the memory; and yet have no way of checking its accuracy. If asked, I would say that the bookshop was called 'Rare and Racy', on Division Street in Sheffield; that the book was *Ariel* by Sylvia Plath; that the poem was 'Daddy' from that collection. It may well be that these elements have been half-remembered, or reconstructed from different elements of the past. The poem continues with an evocation of the vague in an attempt to capture the moods of remembrance and reading; making precision out of opacity.

It is this aspect of poetry as a text which most intrigues me, and has most informed my practice. We think of poems as essaying a particular form of clarity: they are distillations, economical in size (if not necessarily scale), precise in their capturing of experience, the fewest and best words in a perfect order. And yet opacity, delayed comprehension, mysteriousness – these, too, are part of our experience of poetry. There is an apparent tension between clarity and opacity in poems.

My early reading of poetry as a text (outside the demands of schoolwork) was – with due regard to the slipperiness of memory – largely unstructured. Like the figure in the bookshop in 'On Reading', I see myself browsing the shelves of secondhand bookshops, uncertainly. I remember buying anthologies of poetry, usually of a culture, country, or language: An Anthology of Chinese Verse; of Japanese Verse; of modern German Poetry; of African Poetry. The poems in these collections, were mostly, of course, translations. Poetry in translation seemed exciting and mysterious: the process

of translation seemed to skew certainties of what was an image and what was a metaphor; words sometimes collocated strangely; the text seemed haunted by meaning which was not quite visible. A Chinese poem[1] might list the dressings of a lover and his horse – a blazon of sorts, but clearly containing cultural information which was privileged knowledge, lying outside the poem itself and inaccessible. A German poem[2] contained milk which 'foamed easily' and an Albatross which sang a swan-song. This sense of dissociation, vertigo, of the noises-beyond and the clear-yet-wrong, the sense of an approaching or present disruption – these were not only the stuff of an already-fading memory of Montag's recital in *Farenheit 451*, but also something intrinsic to poetry itself.

Elsewhere, encounters with poetry came about by chance. A friend was practising recitations of two poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins for a grading in Speech and Drama. Reading through the volume from which these poems came, I found a poem – 'Spelt From Sybil's Leaves':

> Earnest, earthless, equal, attuneable, ' vaulty, voluminous, . . . stupendous
> Evening strains to be time's vást, ' womb-of-all, home-of-all, hearse-of-all night.
> Her fond yellow hornlight wound to the west, ' her wild hollow hoarlight hung to the height...

> [Hopkins, 1963, p59]

I learnt it by heart, but found myself uninterested in the meaning of the poem, beyond some vague sense of a wild night-time sky which turned – in common with many other sonnets in the book – to a seeking of clarity and discipline while in the grip of ecstasy. The opacity of the poem was part of its formal magic, and formed part of its pleasure.

In more contemporary reading, and closer to home for a beginner poet living in West Yorkshire, Ted Hughes' *Crow* [1970] offered another sense of vagueness: the language, action, tale-telling was clear, but the universe it described mysterious. In the *Epilogue* to another Hughes collection, *Gaudete* [1977], the set of short poems were explicitly set at a distance - left behind by a former clergyman who has undergone some

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[1] 'The Mulberries by the Path' / Anon. [in Frodsham, 1967]
[2] 'Days in White' / Ingeborg Bachmann [Bachmann, 1973]

combination of trauma and pagan spiritual experience. The prayer-like poetry has imagery of sacrifices, of women both abused and powerful, and of a spiritual universe which is pagan and shamanic:

> She rides the earth
> On an ass, on a lion.
> She rides the heavens
> On a great white bull.
>
> She is an apple.
> Whoever plucks her
> Nails his heart
> To the leafless tree.
>
> [Hughes, 1977, 'Epilogue']

Like the peculiar blazon of the Chinese lover (see above), and *Crow*, these qualities draw on a universe which is – at least at the moment of reading – opaque to the reader. Some elements seem familiar; others seem hermetic. My experience of them was ignorant, yet willing to allow the imagery to define both the world of the poem and what there was to react to and take pleasure in.

Where my reading of Hughes' work uncovered simpler, less apparently-mythological poems, the use of imagery without explanation provided an equal sense of excitement. In 'Public Bar TV', images from a Western, playing without sound on a television, are simply laid out before us:

> On a flaked ridge of the desert
>
> Outriders have found foul water. They say nothing;
> With the cactus and the petrified tree
> Crouch numbed by a wind howling all
> Visible horizons equally empty.
>
> The wind brings dust and nothing
> Of the wives, the children, the grandmothers
> With the ancestral bones, who months ago
> Left the last river,
>
> Coming at the pace of oxen.
>
> [Hughes, 1967, 'Public Bar TV']

The title is the contextualising information, and does its work of both distancing the imagery of the poem – like Lumb's poems in *Gaudete*, its content is 'second hand' – and giving us the foreground setting. Beyond that, though, we have little to go on in

the poem itself. What happens on the film is reused, but simply presented. The poem 'tells' us nothing explicit, but allows the text to interact with the title to allow for a kind of haunting – of desolation, speechlessness and the finding of foul water – which offers us only an ending of temporary despair. There was something here, too, to be learnt and excited by – that the absence of explication was also an imaginative presence of mood. The poem was somehow obscured by its reticence, yet expressive in its evocation.

Variations of opacity in these and other poems excited my sense of how a form of uncertainty was key to these texts. In some, the strategies of poetry – metaphor, allusion, the mechanics of economy – were siting the text in a larger frame of reference, one which might be shadowy. In some, the artefacts of translation skewed the text and introduced some vertiginous, not-quite-seen element to the language. In some, the demands of form or experimentation 'cloaked' the more functional expression of the poem. Elsewhere, elements of myth, mythopoeia, hermetics, either personal or cultural, put the reader in uncertain territory. But while this teasing-apart seemed to offer some different reasons why poems might not yield themselves easily up, it is also true that the differences overlapped, and in doing so were suggestive of something which might be fundamental to poetry-as-text: that clarity and opacity, security and invasion, might be part of the poets' practice, driven by the constraints and, perhaps, the frailty and mutability of the poetic text itself.

Tensions

I often find myself referring, in teaching and talking about poetry, to two moments of literary-critical discomfort. In Michael Hamburger's introduction to his *Poems of Paul Celan* [Hamburger, 1988, p3], the translator narrates a brief spat: Celan is offended by the notion that his work is cryptic or hermetic – "*ganz und gar nicht hermetisch!*"[3] he says. Years later, the 2006 winner of the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem, Sean O'Brien's 'Fantasia on a Theme of James Wright' [O'Brien, 2006], is described by the judge as "as close as it is possible to come to a perfect poem."

The first of these discomforts has been central to much of the critical discussion of Celan's work. The second a moment which, I imagined, raised the eyebrow of other contemporary British poets. Each raises one of the questions about poems as texts – here, difficulty and perfectibility. They also raise questions about the poetics of all involved – Celan's critic allows for hermeticism as a quality of poetry; Celan rejects it as a feature of his own work; the translator (Hamburger, also a poet) grapples with how this dilemma should affect his approach, whether to tease out the difficulties of linguistic wordplay and neologisms, or render them in their full mystery. The Forward judge of O'Brien's poem was John Burnside, himself a poet – is a scale of perfectibility part of his poetics, and if so what does it consist of?

A poem is a very particular type of text, but its particularity is riven with tensions[4]. We might think of a poem in terms of economy, distillation, smallness and some form of 'perfectness', whilst demanding of it a speaking to a larger scale of truth or subject; we might see poems, especially the dominant mode of the Lyric, as 'capturing' something – an experience, a landscape, a realisation – and yet not wholly. Difficulty and clarity might jostle for primacy across poems, or in the same poem – it is not uncommon to think of the text of a poem as being one which delivers a surface accessibility consisting of imagery and musicality while holding back a delayed discovery of what the voice is telling us; indeed, the latter may never come, because the sensory experience of the poem is the point, and little or nothing lies beneath that. Poets, critics, and poet-critics cast around for an understanding of what type of text a poem can be.

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[3] "Absolutely NOT hermetic!"

[4] Such ideas formed a central part of *The New Criticism* (Ransom *inter alia*.)

The poems which make up my first collection, *Scattering Eva*, like many first collections, contains material written and rewritten over many years - more, perhaps, than most. Part of the vagueness of my practice for those years included factors which are both familiar and peculiar to me now: that my reading remained haphazard; that often months would pass without writing, without concern; that – and this is difficult to explain exactly – I saw no 'professional' connection between the poems I read and the poems I wrote. That is, while my practice of poetry was informed by poems I read, the poems I wrote did not exist in the same potential space of books and printing. I had no plans, and no ambitions outside the writing of this poem or that. I was not hermetic, perhaps, but hermit-like. That said, I was thinking, if haphazardly, about what this peculiar type of text should be. The tensions I was aware of were quite binary: the well-wrought whole vs. fracture and fragmentation; clarity vs. opacity; sound vs. meaning; economy vs. expansiveness; imagery vs. abstraction. These are crude divisions. But my poetics, such as they were, had begun to cluster around a set of ideas about the interior of the poem, the nature of its boundary, and its relationship to the 'material' of the world in which it sat.

Scattering Eva consists of 22 single poems which occupy the first half of the book, followed by a long poem, which occupies the second. The single poems could be described as often densely-wrought, image-driven, not especially concerned with clarity of exposition beyond the evocation of the scene or the experience, and often alluding to history. These poems were assembled and re-assembled from a long period of writing, often reusing imagery and material from poems written early on in my practice. Their final forms were often arrived at under the shaping influence of comment and feedback, a process in which I was particularly listening for evidence of economy, distillation, and attention to a concrete, sensory world, and thus are substantially driven by ideas of perfectibility, and interiority in which voice, style and compression of utterance worked together to make something whole and well-crafted - in Yeats' phrase "a poem [which] comes right with a click like a closing box." (Yeats, 1940, Letter 24]. Although I was not aware of it until recently, this way of negotiating the interior quality of the poem, the combination of its linguistic and expressive features, owes much to – or is at least hinted at in - Pound's characteristics of literary/poetic language [Pound, 1922]. Pound lays out three interlocking categories

of *Phanopoeia, Melopoeia* and *Logopoeia*: respectively, such things as imagery, the locating of the reader via sensory information, the connection to the locale, the commonality, the landscape (Phanopoeia); such things as metre, rhyme, formal sonic devices, the 'musical mode' of poetry (Melopoeia); and the sense of the piece, the semantic relationships, the 'dance of intellect', as Pound has it, among words (Logopoeia). It is not hard to imagine the interior of the poem as being typically composed of a combination of these, and that the poet pays attention to all three. Equally, though, one could define a particular voice as prioritising among the three elements – that in the individual poet's particular emphases lies the nature of his/her voice, and therefore a statement about where the driver of the poem (imagery, music or sense) is most at work.

To a large extent, the single poems of *Scattering Eva* are conceived as standalone structures, intended to be the most efficient and economical version of themselves. They are intended, as a priority, to deliver a located, sensory place and scene. Leaving other considerations aside, here is a place of heat in which one cannot think ('At Konstanz'); here are urban fireworks seen from a hillside ('Declassé'); here is the domestic life of an artist and his embittered wife ('Uccello's Dragon'); here is an unkillable exile living off the winter land ('J V Prospero'); and so on. Phanopoeia is the driver of the poems; their musicality perhaps little more than a rhythmic awareness and a sufficient movement of sound-links to make the poem deliverable in performance; the 'idea' of the poem, if not held-back, is there to consider, discover over time, guess at.

Two poems – Paul Celan's 'Einmal' and Seamus Heaney's 'Punishment' offered very different ways in which this idea of interiority worked, and also prompted thinking about the boundaries of the poem. The former is a short, stripped-down piece:

Einmal	**Once**
da hörte ich ihn,	I heard him,
da wusch er die Welt,	he was washing the world,
ungesehn, nachtlang,	unseen, nightlong,
wirklich.	real.
Eins und Unendlich,	One and infinite,
vernichtet,	annihilated,
ichten.	I-ed.

Licht war. Rettung.	Light was. Salvation.
[Celan, 1967, VI]	(*Tr. Hamburger*)

Here, the imagery is slight – one has the sense of a power, perhaps divine, heard once overhead at night, and never since. The abstract language of the poem drives it; the musicality is confined to the in-and-out of line length. The meaning of the poem is almost graspable, but contains a moment of high Logopeian play in the 'vernichtet / ichten' lines - a mystery, about which more shortly.

My first engagement with Celan was wrapped up in Germanness. Newly living in Hamburg, I was fascinated by a twin collection title: *Sprachgitter / Die Niemandsrose* [Celan, 1980]. The collections were both single language versions, on someone else's shelf. I had some limited facility in German, and in these titles there was, in the former, the guttural cliché of German to the anglophone ear, and, in the latter, a different sound, a vocalic and lyrical softness[5]. Also familiar was the compounding of nouns, although I soon discovered that these nouns did not actually exist – 'Speech-Bars' (usually rendered as 'Speech-Grilles' in translation); 'The No-one's-rose'. Reading the poetry itself was a bewildering experience – Celan's difficulty, whether hermetic or not, is often centred around the agonised-sounding liberties he takes in delving around in the possibilities of the language he felt forced to write in. His lines stick on twisted syntax, or the worrying over the conjugation of a verb; those compounds, portmanteau nouns, adjectives and verbs were difficult enough for native speakers. Elsewhere, in *Atemwende* (Celan, 1967] I found such poems as 'Einmal'. I did not know at the time that the 'vernichtet / ichten' line quoted above was a particular problem for both readers and translators, much discussed [Hamburger, 1988, *inter alia*], but I remember quizzing native speakers about the meaning of 'ichten', among many other items of Celan's language. The answer was typically that 'it doesn't exist', followed sometimes by some attempt to say what it *sounded like*, or *hinted at*. Rarely was the problem resolved in these informal discussions. If 'ichten' did exist in German, it would probably be the past tense of a regular verb, formed from

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[5] It is worth listening to Celan's own rendering of the word in recordings of the poem – 'Psalm' - in which he unfurls it slowly, pacing each syllable

the pronoun 'ich' – *I* – hence Hamburger's translation of 'I-ed'. But the word takes on something from its placement, immediately after the existing (and resonant in a post-war Jewish poet writing in German) verb 'vernichtet' which immediately precedes it – *annihilated.* Celan's poetic attention here is intensely focused on some interplay between the idea of annihilation and an invented word meaning its opposite – *ihilated*, in which the noun has lost its negative prefix 'n-', the thing which make it 'nicht' (*not).* That the resulting word also makes a verb of personal existence – to 'I' – seemed to me a breath-taking moment of conjuration.

'Einmal' seems to be a poem in which a glimpse of divine intervention, a brief possibility of light, of the reversal of annihilation, occurs. The linguistic play of the poem serves that sense. Celan's construction of the mechanism of the poem is primarily concerned with making that work in an intellectually-considered linguistic sense. Like many (not all) of his poems, the poem is not particularly rooted in a place, and the evocation of a literal territory is sparse. Celan's poetry contains many objects – almonds, eyes, earth, hair, flowers, shells, gold – but the world of the poem itself is perpetually haunted by places and scenes which lie outside the poem. 'Einmal' particularly affected me in my early writing because the slightness of the poem contrasts so significantly with the darknesses which encroach or have already encroached on the moment Celan conjures up – extermination, a vanished God, a language which cannot provide hope except by subverting syntax itself. Like Eliot's earlier acceptance, in the construction of 'The Waste Land', that a poem must be a fractured thing in order to respond to the fractured reality which it both places itself in and seeks to narrate, Celan's work is no collection of clicked-shut boxes. The boundaries of the poems are open to the elements, and continually invaded by the material which lies outside them.

The relationship between the interior poem, composed of the poet's particular strategies of imagery, music and intellect, and the exterior world in which it sits, is of particular and persistent interest to me. Seamus Heaney's poem 'Punishment' [Heaney, 1975] was a reading experience from the same time as my reading of Celan. Here was a well-wrought, image-driven poem which seemed more familiar, a close and detailed meditation on the visual and the exact:

> I can feel the tug
> of the halter at the nape
> of her neck, the wind
> on her naked front.
>
> It blows her nipples
> to amber beads,
> it shakes the frail rigging
> of her ribs.
>
> I can see her drowned
> body in the bog,
> the weighing stone,
> the floating rods and boughs.
>
> Under which at first
> she was a barked sapling
> that is dug up
> oak-bone, brain-firkin:
>
> her shaved head
> like a stubble of black corn,
> her blindfold a soiled bandage...

Heaney 'sees' both the preserved body, and the territory of her sacrifice. The poem patiently conjures the body and the place for us, pathologically, voyeuristically and poetically. The sense of containment, of focus and form, is strong. But already, things are leaking into the space of the poem – the 'amber' and the 'rigging', in a collection called *North*, is evoking a history of traders and raiders; the violence done to the tenderly-observed body already speaking of the violence done to women; and in the "shaved head / like a stubble of black corn", the vengeance enacted on women perceived as collaborators. These leakings-in foreshadow the turn Heaney takes, late in the poem – very late, in lyric terms, as if prompted by the observation of her "tar-black face" – to the parallel image which has been encroaching on the poem from the outset:

> I who have stood dumb
> when your betraying sisters,
> cauled in tar,
> wept by the railings

And an admission of the uncomfortable nature of his gaze and complicity:

> I almost love you
> but would have cast, I know,
> the stones of silence.

> I am the artful voyeur
>
> [...]
>
> who would connive
> in civilized outrage
> yet understand the exact
> and tribal, intimate revenge.

Unlike Celan, Heaney attempts to patrol the borders of his poem, and in the end decides to manage the full entry of the material which lies outside it. But the permeability itself is inescapable. For all the work given over to the rich and exact observation, the evocation of the specific, there is a more powerful and contemporary observation pushing for entry, another specific demanding to be heard.

Many of the single poems of *Scattering Eva* share this concern with both the management of the poem's interior and the historical material which lies outside the borders of the poem. Here is a tightly-focused poem ('Studying Santiago') which describes a piece of Spanish architecture and a moment of dispute between a couple, but mentions "the crumbling of Kingdoms and Caliphates" and the two 'names' of Saint James – *Santiago Pellegrino* and *Santiago Matamoros*.[6] Here are the voices of failed radicals ('Ulrike in Stammheim', 'The Lost Testimony of R. Catesby') meditating on the personal and human costs of their purposes. The poems call across the boundary of their specific evoked scene and contemplation to historical and contemporary events outside, and allow them in. I cannot speak for other poets, but my own experience of this process is not that the poems are conceived as extended metaphors. I cannot know whether Heaney's 'Punishment' – or the other 'bog body poems' in *North* – were intially conceived as such. In my practice, the poem arises from the initial image and/or experience: 'Studying Santiago' is a travel poem, about a place, and arose from an accretion of imagery – fortified cathedral-citadels; a particular cloister; a statue of Santiago; the depressions in the stone roots at the foot of a statue in the entrance to the cathedral in Santiago, which are, it is claimed, caused by pilgrims' fingertips. The imagery is interwoven with personal themes – a relationship under strain, the realisation that the name *Iago=James*.   That there is, at the moment of writing, an external sense of discomfort - of new Islamism, new

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[6] Saint James the Pilgrim / Saint James The Moor-Slayer

Crusades, a mental fortifying of Europe and the West - did not drive the poem; and the poem is not written towards it. But this material is looming around it, as it does in the poems of failed radicals meditating on their fate – Ulrike Meinhof, Robert Catesby, the fleeing Republicans of 'Heading for Port Bou' – in a time of radical acts which seemed just as alien and self-defeating.

Heaney's poem turns specifically to its historical analogue, but late, in an act that feels like a realisation of why the meditated-upon image of the woman's body haunts him – an allowing-in of the world outside the construction of the poem. These poems eschew that, but share, I think, a desire to manage the interior and exterior material in such a way as to preserve the vessel of the poem. The strategies are somewhat different, but are certainly not the fractured, fragmentary texts of Celan or 'The Waste Land'.

Among the poems in the first half of *Scattering Eva*, however, there are gestures towards the more fragmentary, discontinuous approach of the eventual long title poem 'Scattering Eva'. When confronted with difficulty or mystery in poems, readers, critics (and poets) often deploy a language of hesitancy. I note that in discussing 'Einmal' above, the phrase 'one has a sense of...' appears. We might also talk of the 'seeming' of the poem – 'the poem seems to...', 'the speaker seems to...,' 'there seems to be...'. I am interested in the 'seeming' of poems as both a reader and practitioner. The poem 'The Names of Towns' [Sheard, 2005, p8] was an early experiment in the 'fragment' and the 'seeming'.

> Here we pass the closed cold churches,
> their spaces hung between us.
>
> And there the homes of churning mills,
> the scored stone weights of love.
>
> We make there-there mouths of consolation,
> or gestured, distant kisses.
>
> We eat. We make our sound
> of contempt, or of sorrow.
>
> We pass towns, cross borders,
> occupy one another somehow.

 Here, the formal qualities of the poem – the couplets, the modulated repetitions, the movement from an opening to a closing thought – seem to make a secure text. It seems

– rather minimally – to describe a journey, and a set of interactions between two people. The mood seems sombre. As the writer of the poem, I too, experience a sense of 'seeming'. I know that there are, encoded in the poem, cod-translations of the names of German towns and cities, strung out along a route I often travelled as a car passenger, and that those names generate the images of the poem, as if found, or gifted. *Kaltenkirchen, Mühlheim, Dortmund, Essen, Aachen.* But I had no real sense in the writing of the poem of why these mattered – they *seemed* to, both emotionally and practically (ie they generated the material of a poem). I like the result, and like to imagine that the poem feels haunted by something which is not quite apprehensible. The more I reflect on the poem, the more I think that it seems to touch on other thoughts I have had: my relationship with the German language, the pleasure I take in its sounds; the thought that when one travels along main routes in Western and Eastern Europe, one is often moving along invasion routes; that love is a form of 'occupation'; that emotional borders and boundaries are negotiated and re-negotiated as their physical counterparts once were. But these things seem to be locked-out from the poem; it is a failed experiment – a fragment, but not fractured, not properly open to the elements outside. For the reader, the passing road signs cannot be seen; the language of the country cannot be heard; the history of the route does not invade this seeming musing on love via the briefest mention of borders and occupation. It is, in short, *hermetisch.*

Hauntedness, seemingness, mystery and fracturedness; the management of the border of the poem, interiority and external forces – an attempt to find a way of working these things has been a central concern of my practice. In other early experiments among those single poems of *Scattering Eva*, 'Calls to Prayer', 'Forties', 'The No-Sayer', 'The Winter Singles' all seem to be trying out different paths towards this. In the 'No-Sayer' [*ibid.* p25]*,* for example, a voice seems to narrate some paralysis of communication while images of war, murder, rape flare briefly at the borders of the poem as if seen on a distant screen; 'Calls to Prayer' [*ibid.* p9] is a fragment of a story, and seems to address an ex-lover, or a lost God, who hovers somewhere beyond the poem, the 'who' unresolved; and so on. Whatever is or is not achieved in this regard, the poems are opaque and 'seeming', haunted by spectres.

This dual concern with perfectibility and fragmentation fed into the writing of 'Scattering Eva'. The long form offered a structure in which both could be played with, across the poem. The 'wholeness' of a narrative combined with an approach which was filmic and fragmented; the wider material – War, the bombing of civilian populations past and present, the Holocaust, Germanness, gender and age divides, language – crosses the border of the poem with relative ease, sometimes brought in, sometimes left to darken or illuminate the story. The scraps and sections of the poem are sometimes closely-controlled, almost single poems; are sometimes cryptic and incomplete, left open to the outer world. The interior of the overall structure is a story of a journey and a meditation on an affair, but is permeable to larger thematic material. I will be talking about the poem more in a future section of this Dissertation, but I would note here that in many ways this seemed like a postponement of the 'problem' of what a poem should be and how to develop a poetics, in that it pretends to a wholeness, while being composed of parts which are not very different from single poems.

There are two moments in *Dammtor* [Sheard, 2010] which return to the 'discomforts' with which this section opened. A passage in 'The Strandperle Notebooks' looks directly at the stumbles towards a poetics:

> I came to think that poems were stages
> stripped of sets. Their rotten floors
> should give out an unwary pressure
> to oubliettes of metaphor.
> But, perhaps, a poem's a well-worked tract
> nailed up on greyed oak doors,
> and what we think of is less the scrap of paper –
> more the scutcheoned locks
> the brasswork,
> the grim gargoyled arch,
> the butressed stonework,
> spaces, speech.
> That sense of crypts beneath our feet.

> [Sheard, 2010, p15]

As for O'Brien's poem and its adjudged closeness to perfection, 'The Last Poem' imagines an actually-perfected poem. Listing all the things that that poem is not – all the things with which a poet might struggle – the perfection of the imagined poem is

that its interiority is impenetrable, and its border little more than the outside of a stone:

> It sat fat and leaden in the hand, like that.
> It curled the fingers around it,
>
> just so.
>
> [Sheard, 2010, p48]

The perfected poem would be a dead, inert thing. But O'Brien's is emphatically not. A meditation on political resistance/defeat, the history alive in a chamber beneath the earth, the singing of its miner-avatars "like the friction of great stones, or like the rush / Of water into newly opened darkness." [O'Brien, 2006, p49], the poem is full of the potential of disruption and breaking-through. The miners cannot be persuaded that "matters are otherwise, history done." Nor can poets.

On The Mutated Lyric

The Lyric mode requires a vantage-point, a moment to contemplate, and a voice to speak it. More than speak it; to sing it through, to some version of understanding. When describing the basics of the Lyric poem to apprentice poets, I try to make it simple, almost mechanical, but hopefully vivid: with a dubious nod to the Greek origins of the mode, I ask students to imagine a goatherd, in a high place with some time on his hands. He has an instrument – the lyre – and is watching the way that light falls on the mountain across the valley. This is something which he finds striking, and he is moved to evoke it with the beginnings of a song. He is aware of some part of his response – the beauty, perhaps, of what he sees; the part it plays in the regular round of his life; that he is in a high place, and perhaps lonely, and the bitter-sweetness of the scene and his feelings can be heard in the opening notes of his composition. But something else is nagging at him, something which is *like* the light falling on the mountainside, and this almost-heard thing is what has made him want to make a song on this day, rather than any other. Whatever that intrusion might be, I suggest – that the light recalls the hair of the girl in the village he has been too shy to approach; that it is the colour of the blood drained from one of his goats at the feast; that it reminds him of the gold he will never possess, but which would enable him to go out into the world – it is about to invade his song. As if happening in real time in the composition itself, he will turn to this thing: first to hear it and sing it (the *volta*); and this will, in turn, bring him to an *epiphany* (that life is too short to not declare himself to the girl he loves; that his role in nature and the life of his village is complex and nuanced; that he must negotiate or accept his discontent and sense of dislocation.)

All writing involves the curation of a voice. In addition to the above, the Lyric mode must negotiate the slippery question of how that voice relates to the self of the poem's speaker. Whereas many of the single poems of *Scattering Eva* presented an 'I' which seemed self-consciously concerned with the ways in which a poem might 'sit' upon its material – a persona aware of the historical moment, showing off ways of seeing, an integrated protagonist wandering through a personal-political landscape – *Dammtor* is more wayward and experimental in its curation of a 'self'. Interested in the structure and movement of the Lyric, I was also aware that I distrusted its tendency to offer up

that crafted box. Larkin might kill a hedgehog with his mower, feel helpless, and turn to the facts:

> Next morning I got up and it did not.
> The first day after a death, the new absence
> Is always the same
>
> [Larkin, 2004, 'The Mower']

and come to his conclusions about mutual care.   Hughes' 'Full Moon and Little Frieda' gives us the moment of communion between child and moon. The evocation of a scene is pitch-perfect – "A cool small evening shrunk to a dog bark and the clank of a bucket - / And you listening." – and its ending a joyous moving-on:

> 'Moon!' you cry suddenly, 'Moon! Moon!'
>
> The moon has stepped back like an artist gazing amazed at a work
> That points at him amazed.
>
> [Hughes, 1967, 'Full Moon and Little Frieda']

These lyrics are beautifully-formed, and striking in their evocation of the things which enter and affect a life. But in my thinking about this mode, Sylvia Plath's poem 'Sheep in Fog' offered a stressed version of the Lyric which was much more fragile and susceptible to the pressures of both the material and what mode the poem 'should' do. Like our imagined goatherd, the poet speaks from a high place, where "the hills step off into whiteness." Evoking a landscape which might speak to her, the poet finds it a place of jittery images, each seeming to speak of a psychological territory as much as a literal one:

> The train leaves a line of breath.
> O slow
> Horse the colour of rust,
>
> Hooves, dolorous bells -
> All morning the
> Morning has been blackening,
>
> A flower left out.
>
> [Plath, 1965, 'Sheep in Fog']

The poem both uses and seems to abandon its mode: the elements of the landscape are not quite resolving themselves into coherence; the *volta* is a more a trapped twisting this way and that, the ending no moving-on:

> They threaten
> To let me through to a heaven
> Starless and fatherless, a dark water.

My long poem 'Scattering Eva' had stitched together fragments and scenes to make a narrative of a protagonist taking the ashes of an older lover back to her hometown of Hamburg - a place she had left as a young woman after surviving the firestorm raids of 1942. The poem ranges around issues of place and identity, but its modal qualities are diffuse: there are lyrical moments, dialogues, elegies, arguments, pieces of dramatic verse and experiments with form. The voice of the I is repeatedly interrupted, often mockingly, by the voice of Eva:

> ..sometimes I think of an ocean
> pouring back from all coasts
> into itself.
>
> Of something fallen,
> closed-in,
> crystal.
>
> Of how light might cut it through,
> infinite and unescaping.
>
> *Tchaa. One night under the bombs*
> *would drown you.*
>
> [Sheard, 2005, p32]

Eva persistently counters the narrator's claims – about their relationship, his images of the catastrophe she lived through, his musings on history, Germany, maleness and femaleness – with interjections which will not let him get away with dominating the story. Over the course of the poem, Eva's voice begins to take equal place, her "restless, muttering ashes" speaking between, against, across and independently of the narrator. An image of her rolling her eyes, unbowed and still exasperated, occupies a central space at the very end of the poem, as hymns are sung and the poet reflects at the moment of her scattering.

In the writing of it, I was interested in the fragmentary, as discussed earlier, its vulnerability to historical and political material; but also in the interlocking elements of truth and invention; in the question of *which* voice is driving the poem; in how the letting-in of Eva's own voice becomes an invasion which seems to destabilise the confidence and knowingness of the 'I'; and in how place is a territory of the emotional and psychological.

Many of the poems of *Dammtor* are a development of these concerns. A poem like Plath's 'Sheep in Fog' - or, say, MacNeice's 'Snow' - suggested that the elements of the Lyric were mutable, available to experiment with. It seemed possible to make 'gestures' of varying kinds to the mode of the Lyric – to the material of place, to the forms of the I, to the technical moments of *volta* and epiphany – while variously distorting or destabilising them. 'Was' was an early experiment: the 'I' is entirely absent, but the eye is obsessively focussed:

> It was in the low-slung sun,
> it was in the hum of arousal.
> It was in the leaf pressed up
> to our casement window.
> It was in the way
> that light lay broken.
> It was the blotting-out
> of the world beyond...
>
> [Sheard, 2010, p10]

What 'it' is, we never quite know. But the poem gestures at the Lyric, in its listing of elements, in its movement through things that tell of something else; in its invading sense of a narrative beyond, and in its sort-of realisation, a *diminuendo* – that whatever it was, it was "the mere use of time."

Elsewhere, the speaker evokes a place and its apparent meaning – the title poem 'Dammtor' – but cannot find his way through to any greater moment of closure than a tormented inability to stop seeing:

> Places to watch a welder in the high girders.
> His flaring iris hissing shut.
> Yours stuck open.
>
> [Sheard, 2010, p5]

Again, in this poem, the I is absent – the poem is addressed to that faux-'you' which replaces the first person. The poem is a Lyric, but some part of its support structure is kicked-away.

This technique was semi-conscious. But it strikes me how many of the single poems in *Dammtor* share this sense of being mutilated Lyrics, of how often some element is deliberately missing: the poem ends at the same place as the beginning ('Letters*',* 'Writing Thin'*);* cannot escape the opening landscape ('Beddgelert', 'Business in Helsinki'); cannot find a *volta* ('Others'). One part of this, however, was something I was very conscious of at the time of writing them – that the identity of the speaker of the poems was unreliable.

We are warned, not least by poets, not to conflate the *I* of a poem with the poet. But the lyricist is at the very least speaking as a version of him- or herself, and a curated Self emerges through the work. The *I* of *Scattering Eva* was – in the single poems - a highly constructed one. Intellectual and aware, allusive and cerebral, morally alert. It was, perhaps, how I would *like* to be seen. In the long title poem, I had enjoyed the way in which the semi-invented Eva – a composite of two women who shared Eva's nationality and verbal attitude – challenged this high-minded and pompous narrator, subverting his flights of poetry and moral musings. He fights back from time to time, but loses. To some extent, and influenced by that experience, *Dammtor* was conceived as a meditation on masculinity. The speaker of the poems is sometimes victim, sometimes perpetrator, sometimes rescuer; sometimes violent or complicit in violence; sometimes weak, sometimes regretful; sometimes intelligent, sometimes foolish. In all these identities, though, he is male, with the particular masculine versions of those characteristics. These, then, are Lyrics in which the voice which speaks for me is often not the voice of the man I am, nor would want to be, and yet they narrate a place and experience which is mine. In 'Aubade', for example, I recognise the places and parts of the narrative – a night out in Hamburg, the shifting lights, the woman "coiled around a barstool and abandonment", and a dawn in which the narrator lies down on a concrete block and feels a sense of morning stillness and consolation, like a potted pool ball from the night before:

> as behind me, someone scratches
> the concourse with his brush.

[...]

        for now I slow,
grow almost still, then
drop into this pocket
the morning has made for me.

[Sheard, 2010, p12]

But along the way, the speaker of this poem has, it seems, committed an act of violence, perhaps murder, and not for the first time. His motives and what he has done with 'my' night are not mine. Here, the strut that has been kicked away from the poem is the integrated and known 'I'. Other things remain in place – the landscape of the poem, the movement of it, the finding of peace – but the very voice which organises the poem has invaded it, stolen the material, elbowed out the poet and twisted the tale.

A number of poems in Dammtor share this technique of a changeling speaker who has stolen the imagery and experiences of the poet. The murdered ghost who speaks in 'Taken', for example; the deluded submissive of 'Others'; 'The Translator', whose metaphors for his art seem to spill over into stalking and psychopathy.

In the context of my earlier discussion on forms of vagueness, these are new ways in which the poem is destabilised, with elements pushed to the margins of hearing, or broken by invasion. Mode, like Form, is conceived as a way of securing the boundaries and the internal structures of the poem. Neither can be completely abandoned. But where they are weakened, undermined, left half-built – this is what interested me in the making of *Dammtor* in particular. The insecure structure, the incomplete gesture at mode, and the partly-known, partly-alien Self intensify that sense of the almost-heard.

Yet the evocation and significance of *place* remained a constant across my work. Set in the middle of these poems is a longer sequence, 'The Strandperle Notebooks'. Like 'Scattering Eva', it is a pilgrimage poem, set in Hamburg, and a narrative, composed of scenes. Composed at a late stage in writing the collection, it seems to move towards another mode and sensibility. The Lyric vantage-point is the café table at which the speaker sits – and never moves from, despite his self-exhortations to do so. The territory of the city is at first spread out before him, then just beyond his view, then

composed of memories of the past. The story he tells is both personal and political. His theme is, eventually, defeat. The poem is inspired by Tony Harrison's longer poem, *v.* [Harrison, 1985]: formally, in its relentless iambs and rhymes; thematically in its gathering-in of memory, politics and connection to place and time; and, in my mind, modally, in the way in which it has the viewpoint of a Lyric – on a hillside graveyard overlooking Leeds, trying to find a truth and a moment of settlement – but extended into a much larger form. In Harrison's poem, the 'I' speaks of things seen, unseen, remembered and imagined, and the Lyric becomes not only narrative, but epic – the fixity of the Lyric vantage-point finding an ever-increasing scale through a reading of present and past realities[7]. To achieve this it is the territory (Leeds and Hamburg) and its personal and complex set of meanings to the poet which allow for this complexity of contemplation.

This idea of territories which offer physical and emotional complexity, imperfectly guarded and memorialised, became key to my third full collection, *The Abandoned Settlements*.

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[7] In Harrison's poem, in fact, the narrator eventually leaves Beeston Hill, and travels home. But even there, he is haunted by the voice and view, as if he has remained there.

On Reputation

We are asked to identify in these Commentaries where our work might be placed in our field. The ecology of contemporary British poetry, with its poet-editors and poet-critics, systems of peers and mentors, prizes and endorsements, is perhaps not very dissimilar to the ecology of scholarship and research. I have become interested in ideas of how that ecology works on one's practice, and the development of one's poetics. It is fitting, in the context of my discussion so far, to consider to what extent elements of that ecology form a set of implications and ideas - half-heard voices which seem to act as whispering 'co-producers' - if not of individual poems, then of the perception and direction of one's practice.

Mid-way through the writing of this Commentary, I learnt that *The Abandoned Settlements* had been shortlisted for The T.S Eliot Prize. The T.S. Eliot Prize - like the Forward Prize shortlisting for *Scattering Eva* and the Poetry Book Society's awards to both *Dammtor* and *The Abandoned Settlements* - can be seen as 'reputational markers'. Underlying such markers, there is the question of publication platforms. I note that my publisher, Cape, made up four of the ten shortlisted collections, including the eventual winner[8]. It is reasonable to claim that to be published by Cape implies something: that one is a writer of poetry with a degree of 'literary seriousness', and to be working in a mainstream tradition (in the sense of not being experimental or avant-garde). I see myself as a writer of 'books', rather than an assembler of 'collections', and so part of my career practice is not to submit individual poems for publication or competitions. However, via invitation and commission, my work has appeared in a number of publications and anthologies, and such invitations and commissions can be seen as reputational markers. Of other invitations, I would pick out a set of poems which formed part of *Identity Parade* (Lumsden, 2010), seen as a continuation of the 'generational' anthologies[9], although one which emphasised a plurality in recent 'poets of note'; and the publishing of 'The Strandperle Notebooks' in the *London Review of Books* - a long poem, occupying a healthy amount of space; pleasingly, a publication credit also claimed by Harrison's *v*.

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[8] *Night Sky With Exit Wounds* / Ocean Vuong

[9] *The New Poetry* [1963]; *The Penguin Contemporary Book of British Poetry* [1982]; *The New Poetry* [1993]

When performing poems from *The Abandoned Settlements*, I usually open with 'Cardamom'. Describing it as 'the presiding spirit' of the collection, I tell the audience that I recently was discussing with a group of poets the typical 'territories' from which poems arise. One of these, I say, is "middle aged man looks out of darkened window at night," and that here is my version of that archetypal poem. This is partly a way of clearing the air with a moment of self-deprecation. And yet there is something relevant and telling in the image, especially in the context of the previous discussion of the Lyric and its vantage point. In 'Cardamom', the speaker is "in a place that once mattered / but no longer matters." Conjuring up a woman from his past, he seems to watch her:

> and I figure, since it's late,
> that you're hungering
> for something that is like bread
> but is not bread. That outside,
> there's the open weave of the wind;
> that there's the night
> and its usual practices.
>
> And I imagine
> that you've been reading,
> but it's the sort of reading
> that feels like inhaling rain;
> so you step out, and your shadow
> is lying long on the lawn...
>
> [Sheard, 2017, p3]

As we all know, to look out of a darkened window at night is not to see much beyond the glass. The window is a black screen, and what is seen – also imperfectly – is oneself. To enter the Lyric mode from such a viewing point is both to project and to reflect. The territory is imagined or reconstructed; the imagery is recalled. This, and the persistent use of the second-person, is the dominant practice of the collection. There are risks here – of ideation, voyeurism, and the imposition of narrative on those who cannot answer back. As mentioned at the outset to this Commentary, the speaker of these poems is explicitly vague - he "does not check [his] facts", and is uncertain of his view and his identity. These poems, it is suggested, are a form of 'screen memory'.

> it's the territory of the uncertain, the "more or less", that Sheard explores in this collection. These poems focus on the lingering traces of those immutable facts of human existence – love, desire and loss. Reading Sheard's poetry feels like watching a succession of still frames on a projector screen, bleaching white then burning in the heat of the lamp.

[Gow, 2018]

I am aware, though, that some desire to escape the dense or experimental poems of my first two collections has been influenced by a form of negotiation with the half-heard demands of listening audiences. Despite my long-standing interests in destabilisation of the poem, *The Abandoned Settlements* was to some extent conceived as a move towards a greater clarity - of meaning, structure and emotion. *Scattering Eva* and *Dammtor* had attracted the reputational markers noted above. But reviews spoke of them as difficult and "demanding" [Waterman, 2011] and morbid –

> His favourite travelling companion is not love. It is death [which] tenses Sheard's poems from slackness to urgency, as if, for the first time, the point of the journey is clear.

[Brackenbury, 2005]

But one reviewer [Crowther, 2010] interested me particularly, speaking of the (male) "cool" of the *Dammtor* poems, and their unwillingness to accept complicity in the gaze and the violence they used. The review concluded with an interesting form of praise of the late poems in the book, about new fatherhood - pleased to see "an engaged male poet losing his cool."

The conceit of *The Abandoned Settlements* - that people and places form a territory of ruined and depopulated spaces which a lyricist might sing to, 'haunting back' the spaces themselves - to some extent abandons a stance of cool, and admits complicity. The poems are designed to let emotion, sentiment and intimacy into the space of the poem, and perhaps to reanimate the abandoned places with new confessions and regrets - elegaic and self-critical. The view available to the poet is still further off and more unseen than *v.* and 'The Strandperle Notebooks', in one sense, since the poems are all composed of two forms of projection - the projection of the I back into the places of the past; and the projection of the imagery onto the screen of the darkened window, in which he sees himself. In addressing so many poems to the Other[10] the influence of Rilke's idea of Orpheus-as-Poet, 'singing across the void' [Rilke, 1923] seems strong, and yet:

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[10] ...in fact a 'number of others', imperfectly distinguished.

I am not granted the space and time
to sing you back.

[Sheard, 2016, p10]

- because it is the poet who is travelling into the past, to re-occupy the abandoned places.

Some reviewers feel discomfort at the frequent acts of voyeurism:

all too quickly the reader finds herself in deeply personal territory which, while not exactly uncomfortable, nevertheless evokes a sensation of trespass.

[Gow, 2017]

And she is right: poems like 'White Roses' [p8], 'The Ghost in Your Burning Building' [p12], 'Letters, Light' [p17] and others are voyeuristic. Under the influence of earlier whispers, in the form of reviews of *Dammtor* which made the work seem at times toxically male, it seemed that my attempts to preserve my theme and outlook whilst opening up the poems to vulnerability and greater gentleness had backfired. In fact, *The Abandoned Settlements* had, in its original form, a fifteen-poem sequence in which, as Eva had done in 'Scattering Eva', a woman's voice talked back at the poet, using a voice and phrasing drawn from existing letters. Although I agreed with the editor's recommendation to excise and reabsorb that material into poems which maintained the poet's vantage point and voice, I am also aware of a lost version of the book which might have exculpated me from some of those discomforts.

But *The Abandoned Settlements* is also - and perhaps primarily, in terms of the development of my poetics - a series of negotiations of place and space. As the discussions in previous sections have demonstrated, I have been particularly interested in location and dislocation - both of the space of the poem and the territory it occupies. Christopher Emery finds a strand of this across the collections. Identifying an earlier concern with "dislocation, exile and otherness," he sees in *The Abandoned Settlements* some "new forms of exile", and:

a new sense of emplacement, and a sense of self-accommodation. [...] The bravado of some of the poet's more rumbustious lyrics is itself cleaned out here, unpunctuated, and filled with beauty, candour and vulnerability. The poet is

resurrected, delivered from his preoccupations, his history – both the personal and societal. These abandoned settlements can provide restitution, resolution and reoccupation, for the poet and for the reader. They are rooted in love.

[Emery, 2017]

In the word "emplacement", there is that other concern here - that these poems are exploring the vantage point of a mutable lyric, made into something both blind and far-seeing. The thematic material might well take risks, but the title poem addresses these, amplifying Emery's point about what it is they are rooted in. In a direct address to the reader, the poet opens "Think of it like this…" and lists the ways in which the places of the poem are *like something* that they know, and *like something* in the abandoned places themselves. The poem finally names it:

<div style="text-align:center">Love, that is:</div>

for love exists, and then is ruined, and then persists.

[Sheard, 2017, p3]

I am alert, though, to the particular ways in which these markers also call back to the 'middle aged man looking out of darkened window at night.' The first mainstream media response to the 2017 T. S Eliot Prize shortlist was - as it often is with major literary prizes - a critique of its conservatism in terms of the voices included, and those excluded [Parmar, 2016]. My identity is as far from marginalised as it is possible to be; I am not an inventor of form, but work in traditional form and mode which I hope, in Eliot's sense, to catalyse into something new but unbroken [Eliot, 1920].

Where the innovation of that work lies, however, is a more tentative judgement. The 'difference' of most poets' work lies primarily in the reworking of thematic material, in the 'making it new' (Pound) or 'telling it slant' (Dickinson). My poetry is rooted in places of some difference - "a rarity… a manifestly European poet working in English" [O'Brien, 2005]; or a 'European *noir*' [PBS Selector's Comments, *Dammtor*] – "that makes not the least concession to sentimentality, a hard-edged and unflinching lyricism." I hope that the discussions in the previous sections of this commentary demonstrate an underlying poetics which is fully aware of the traditions of fracturing, translation-as-mode, and the lyric, while attempting development of those ideas into new versions. And this negotiation with uncertainty is picked up on:

This, I think, is what is truly remarkable about Sheard's achievement; not the sensuous imagery in and for itself, impressive though that is, but the precision with which he uses it to evoke states of feeling that are as powerful as they are shifting and difficult to define.

[Prestwich, 2017]

"Let me see what I wrote so I know what I think," says Auden, perhaps not entirely seriously. As with the making of poems themselves, I find it difficult to ignore the noises-off and the permeability of my practice to what is half-heard and potentially invasive, or defining. In my writing after *The Abandoned Settlements*, I am beginning to see new configurations of place, boundary, self and mode, and new ways of making certainty and uncertainty co-exist; and in this developing practice, a sense of what next to foreground and what to efface. On current evidence, I am being drawn to an idea that the book could serve as the integrated voice of the poetry, some form of *I*; and that each poem might permeate the next, both giving it its temporary truth and altering it. But in keeping with the principles of uncertainty outlined in this Commentary, I make no promises.

9989 words

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