

**The Importance Of The Poetry Book**

**In The Digital Age**

**How Far Digital Technology Has Influenced Contemporary Poetry**

**And The Status Of The Poetry Book**

**&**

***The Birth of Romance***

**A Poetry Collection**

A thesis submitted for the degree of  
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by

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## **ABSTRACT**

An examination through the creation and curation of a printed poetry collection, together with other practice-based and wider research, of how far digital technology has influenced contemporary poetry and the status of the poetry book. Personal practice is considered and analysed and, from this, and research leading out from this, a more general survey provided of the impact of digital technology on the poet's persona, the creation of the poems themselves and on their dissemination. These wider issues, and the practice-based research that underlies them, inform the specific consideration of the extent to which digital technology has affected the nature and importance of the single collection poetry book in the early part of the twenty-first century. The conclusion is drawn that, for the poet, and for contemporary poetry more generally, the importance of the printed poetry book is greater than ever and that digital technology has further increased its impact, vitality and relevance.

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## Section One

# How Far Digital Technology Has Influenced Contemporary Poetry And The Status Of The Poetry Book

We are currently living in the midst of a massive cultural revolution. For the first time since the development of moveable type in the late fifteenth century, print has lost its primacy in communication. The proliferation of electronic technology has gone far beyond providing new means for the communication, storage, and retrieval of information: the new media have gradually changed not only the way we perceive language and ideas but also the world and ourselves. The shift in the modes of communication has had an extraordinary impact on every aspect of contemporary life, but literature, an imaginative enterprise created entirely from words, has been profoundly affected in ways that we are still in the process of comprehending.

Dana Gioia, *Disappearing Ink: Poetry At The End Of Print Culture*  
(Gioia, 2004, p. 3)

## **Introduction**

This thesis is based on a practice-as-research methodology. Using my own practice as a poet both in itself and to inform, underpin and contextualise my wider research, I examine how far digital technology has influenced contemporary poetry and the status of the poetry book. In order to provide a general context and explore the current environment in which the poetry book currently exists, I begin by considering the poet's persona then discuss online publication and the impact of digital technology on the poems themselves before focusing directly on the published book. In this way I investigate responses to the opportunities and challenges of digital technology from: myself and other poets; poetry communities, both my own and those that contrast with these; the poetry audience, again as it relates to my own work and that of others; and poetry publishing, here referencing my own publication and publishers more widely.

In the light of this practice-as-research, and the wider research following on from it, I consider how these responses and the digital and print ecology itself have influenced the printed poetry book, in particular in the UK in the early twenty-first century. From this I draw conclusions with regard to my own approach, and approaches other poets might take, in terms of a poetry aesthetic (the nature and type of poems written) and in terms of interacting with the poetry community, both online and offline.

I consider throughout how the creation, revision and curation of my poems for the print collection that forms the second part of the thesis enables me to reflect on the themes and ideas explored in the first part. This is considered in greatest detail in the sections where I directly discuss my own poems and poetry practice, 'My Own Poetry in Relation to My Poetic Persona', 'My Own Online Experience' and 'My Own Poetry Collection' and also at some length in the conclusion, but throughout my practice as a poet informs my wider survey and analysis of the impact of digital technology on contemporary poetry generally and the poetry book specifically

and the conclusions I draw from it. This can be seen most explicitly in my discussion of my own practice in the sections ‘Writing In The Medium’, ‘The Pros and Cons of Prizes’, ‘The Symbiosis Between Online and Print Publication’ and ‘Video as Publication and Transmedia Applications’, but is applied throughout and is fundamental to – and therefore implicit in – my overall approach.

In terms of the poetry collection itself, the writing and revising of the poems was undertaken with the intention of interrogating new media and digital technologies as they pertain to poetry and in terms of how this influences the final printed poem and poetry collection. There is consideration, as part of this, of my creative process with regard to individual poems and how this is informed by digital technology. This includes use of source material and the intentions behind my choices and approach, for example with fragmented poems that investigate through their creation the often fragmented aspect of digital content, such as ‘Business Meeting’, ‘Park Bench. 2016.’ and ‘3 x Car Park’, poems using found material, both online and in print, such as ‘Therefore Let The Moon’, ‘My Gecko Was Impacted / This Was The Situation’ and ‘The Mirror of Literature’ and poems considering the nature of digital technology itself, such as ‘The crane is not eyeing the water over the wetlands’, ‘In My Humble Opinion’ and ‘The Computer Generates’. By contrast, I reflect on how my process also involves a conscious reaction against the deconstructive and dislocating potential of the internet through poems such as the companion pieces ‘Girls of the Coal Tip, Lancashire’ and ‘Rubble Women In Post-War Dresden’, the title poem ‘The Birth of Romance’ and ‘In Venice In Search of the Pristine’.

Discussion of the impact of my practice on my aesthetic also includes considering revisions in the light of digital influences and exploration of the performative nature of some of the poems when considering them for print. Here I reference poems such as ‘The Three Women’, ‘Mr Wordsworth at St. Catherine’s’ and ‘At The Posterity Event’ (in ‘Five Poems For Ezra

Pound’). I also consider, conversely, my investigation through practice of typographical features that do not transfer to aural presentation with poems such as ‘Knickerbocker Glory Sunset’, ‘The Tiger In The Corner’ and ‘The Importance of Cats In Ancient Egypt’. Here the emphasis is on how far the form dictates the meaning and the medium. Several of these approaches are discussed in further detail in the conclusion, where I relate them to my arguments and suggestions for ways of responding as a poet to contemporary poetry and the poetry book.

There is also consideration, particularly in Chapter 2 in the sections ‘The Organising Principle – Books and Websites’ and ‘My Own Poetry Collection’, of my practice-based approach to creating the printed collection itself and wider discussion around this of the nature of the printed poetry collection and its relationship with digital publication. Again, this also forms part of my concluding arguments.

This practice-based methodology has allowed me to use my process and my achieved poems as the basis for my wider analysis, informing it both explicitly and implicitly. The foregrounding or otherwise, therefore, of my own practice in terms of the different elements of digital technology and the printed book considered is one of emphasis, rather than difference of approach for each of the sections.

Having established my methodology and the practice-based nature of my approach, I would now like to establish the parameters of my considerations. In its most basic sense digital technology is an electronic and binary way of generating, handling, storing and transmitting data, but the term covers a wide range of processes and outcomes and I am not aiming to consider all of these. I am not addressing here the core process of computer coding or the computer programmes themselves. My focus, instead, is on the way the individual poet, such as myself, and the reader or viewer of poetry interacts on a relatively non-technical level with the commonly available interfaces created using digital technology. Within this, I have chosen to

concentrate on what I regard as the most important aspects for the practising poet, based on my own personal practice but also with a consideration of what might be different priorities for other poets, rather than attempting to cover the broad sweep of applications available. I do not consider, for example, online games or digital storage.

My specific, detailed focus is on digital platforms that are used for the creation and dissemination of poetry and poetry-related material. These are primarily of two sorts: on the one hand the internet, social media and other open-access platforms that require real-time access; on the other eBooks and print-on-demand systems that create products that are then owned and accessed in a similar way to the traditional printed book or pBook, where the owner can store and use them without reference to a third party host. I consider these two types of platform in some detail as part of my discussion of their influence on poetry and the poetry book.

In my consideration of the online aspects of the technology, I also reference audio and video, but I am largely excluding mainstream media poetry programmes, primarily produced and broadcast in the UK by the BBC, both on radio and television, and, to some extent, Channel 4, Sky Arts and other less-established broadcasters. While these programmes are significant contributors to poetry dissemination and promotion, the poetry forms part of the broadcasters' more general media offering, they are generally less interactive and self-generated than online and social media activity and are more for immediate consumption than part of a digital poetry presence or archive, with access often time-limited. For these reasons, other than where they overlap with online activity, I am setting them as outside the scope of my discussion.

I do, however, note that these traditional broadcast programmes complement and contrast with online and social media platforms and are often promoted on and through them. The BBC is especially conscientious with regard to poetry, for example providing online access to poets reading and discussing their work and links to a range of associated material (BBC, 2014a).

There are also examples of broadcast poetry material from mainstream media broadcasts that has been uploaded without authorisation that add to the digital landscape.

Further, as I am looking specifically at the interaction between digital and print publication, I am not considering videos of performance poetry to any large extent (or, indeed, performance poetry per se), except in as far as they inform the nexus of online material and print publication. My own poetry is not primarily performance-based and so it also falls largely outside the scope of my practice-based approach, although I do consider my poetry in this regard in relation to the written form, including in the conclusion, with reference to poems such as ‘The Three Women’ and ‘We Are The Men’.

I also acknowledge that the significant number of digital platforms that host sound and video recordings directly should make us wary of absolute distinctions between mainstream media outlets and online material. Video and sound recordings are posted online from a range of creators, in addition to mainstream media and broadcast organisations, which include but are not restricted to: the poet themselves, the publishers, organisations such as The Poetry Archive and The Poetry Society, online radio stations such as Radio Wildfire and sites dedicated to specific festivals or events, for example live webcasts or recorded videos from festivals such as Stanza (Stanza, 2017) and Ledbury Poetry Festival (Ledbury Poetry Festival, 2017).

Additionally, general hosting sites such as YouTube and Vimeo allow anyone to upload poetry at no cost in a range of visual forms and YouTube has a range of dedicated poetry channels. Audiences for this material vary widely, but very popular material can achieve a large viewership, making it a significant part of the open-access digital offer. The YouTube site *Button Poetry*, for example, has had over 160 million views over a seven year period (YouTube, 2017). Sound and video material distributed in this way I consider as part of the overall examination of digital platforms, rather than as an adjunct to traditional radio and television broadcasts.

Similarly, I am not considering poetry films separately. Again, there is a significant overlap between poetry films in themselves and their presence online and I reference them with regard to the medium, rather than the form. Here again, this also falls largely outside the scope of my own practice, though I do discuss briefly how I investigated it in my poetry in the section ‘Video as Publication and Transmedia Applications’ and how it informed particular aspects of my collection, including poems such as ‘To You, Sara Hildén’ and ‘The Box’ and so how it influenced my own approach and might influence poetry books more generally.

I have used the term ‘digital’ where in the past ‘electronic’ might have been used, though often the terminology is interchangeable. In general, I refer to the internet when referencing material that is accessed from the world wide web and social media where the digital communication might be via the web or via mobile networks. Again, a fixed distinction here can be hard to maintain, as social media often uses both systems, for example Facebook and Twitter, and the internet is increasingly accessed on mobile devices. Additionally, many organisations with extensive online sites also have apps which provide similar material but with different functionality. In general, where both apply, I refer explicitly to social media where I want to incorporate the dynamic and two-way nature of the interactions and the internet where I want to convey a more static (and often more long-lasting) presence.

Throughout I am using a research-as-practice methodology, through my own practice as a poet, including specifically the way I created, revised and curated the poems in the print collection *The Birth of Romance* to investigate – and suggest responses to – the way digital technology has both steadily and radically affected my own poetry and contemporary poetry more widely in terms of: the poet and our ideas of the poet; how poetry is written and experienced; and how, in this evolving and dynamic digital context, the printed poetry book is adapting and maintaining its vital role in the poetry world.

Chapter 1. The Poet's Persona In The Digital Age



## **The Poet's Persona in Print and Online – Context and Control**

For the purposes of this discussion of the poet's persona, I will focus my consideration primarily on poets writing for the page and in English, with an emphasis on poetry published by poets resident in the United Kingdom, though there is some discussion of North American and other poetry where this sheds light on general considerations.

The nature of the internet does, inevitably, lead to such restrictions having their own difficulties, but I am not looking to explore directly the issues around national identity within the English-speaking poetry world, important though they are. I wish to focus my attention, instead, on the way that the internet and social media have impacted on the poet's sense of self as a poet.

Having said this, we must recognise that the two issues overlap and that a sense and expression of national or cultural identity may well over-ride any specific means of transmission. Not only this, but the means of expression may reinforce or highlight such cultural positioning. It is clear, for example, that being included in the *New Caribbean Poetry* anthology (Miller, 2007) strengthens the sense of the poet belonging to that cultural group. Similarly, poems or poets appearing on or linked to the website *ProletarianPoetry.com* (Proletarian Poetry, 2016) will have aspects of their working class identity supported or emphasised.

This brings us immediately to one of the key differences between print media and online material. For print media, formal permission needs to be sought and obtained for publication to take place, giving the poet some control over their platform. This is not always the case if work appears on the internet, despite it being considered as publication by many organisations.

The Forward Arts Foundation, for example, acknowledges the legitimacy of online publication of single poems by allowing entry for its annual Forward Prize for Best Single Poem from some online sites in 2017 as follows:

Online journals and web-only publications may submit if their publication is included in listings on one of the following organisations' websites before 24 March 2017: the Poetry Library, the Scottish Poetry Library or Poetry Ireland. (Forward Arts Foundation, 2017a)

Admittedly, the limiting to online journals and publications and the requirement for validation by the stated poetry organisations goes some way to avoiding the issue of unauthorised online posting. It is also a way, of course, of preventing self-publication being included (see the section 'The Pros and Cons of Prizes' for more on the influence of prize schemes), but it does also show one way online poetry can be considered published.

In a similar vein, although with varying gradations of rigour, many print magazines, will not accept poems previously published online. One such is *Ambit*, as their submission guidelines make clear:

When we say unpublished we mean completely original, never been on your blog, never been on a website and certainly never been in print.  
(*Ambit*, 2016).

A point made forcibly in person at the 2015 Poetry Book Fair by the editor, Briony Bax, where she emphasised the importance of publication in the print magazine not being undercut by online publication. She also placed this in the context of the relationship between the poet and editor, which she sees as one of trust and mutual respect (Bax, 2015). This reminds us of the importance of personal relationships in publishing, sometimes overlooked in the more impersonal online world – though specific platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, and individual websites and blogs can be very focused on the personal comment (see my section 'Blogs' for some consideration of the individual and community nature of personal comments online).

This idea of posting poetry online equating to publication illustrates a potential unintended consequence, that of closing down other areas of publication. On the one hand,

online material can be a conduit to print publication (as I explore in Chapters 2 and 3), on the other a way of preventing it, as with *Ambit* magazine.

Either way, if the poet has chosen to upload their poem, they can at least make the decision as to the benefits and drawbacks. When your poem is posted by someone else the decision is taken out of your hands. The fact that many people do not regard posting of others' work on the internet as infringement of copyright is a very real issue and poets are vulnerable here: number four of the top ten myths listed by UK Copyright is that people think 'Everything on the Internet [is] "public domain" and free to use' (UK©CCS, 2017). Poet Wendy Cope has very much railed against this belief and the online posting, downloading and sharing that flows from it. Her article in *The Guardian*, 'You like my poems? So pay for them' is something of a cri-de-coeur against the 'widespread ignorance of copyright law', especially on the internet, where she notes that her poems are often posted and shared by what she terms 'well-meaning enthusiasts, who have no idea that they are breaking the law'(Cope, 2007).

James Fenton introduces his reading of his poem 'In Paris With You' at the Ledbury Poetry Festival in 2016 with these (transcribed) words:

This one has, last time I checked, something of a presence on YouTube. Various people have taken it upon themselves to set it to music. I'm very happy. Don't *think* [my italics to reflect voice intonation] they asked permission, but never mind, nobody does on YouTube.  
(Ledbury Poetry Festival, 2016)

Despite his sanguinity, Fenton makes the same point as Cope that it is often assumed no permission is needed to post poems on the internet, even if (or indeed especially if, since it suggests secondary authorship) they have been adapted in some way. Not only that, once posted, as Cope notes, there can be an attitude that it is therefore permissible to share, download and print them.

Not only this, from the viewer's perspective there is the challenge, sometimes, of attribution of posting, of distinguishing between the author-generated and website-curated poetry and the material uploaded by third-parties. This third-party posting means we need to take into account the intentions behind the online publication and evaluate the context accordingly. Posting and sharing by others can be as varied as PowerPoints or videos from school students who have illustrated a poem on their syllabus, fans sharing a poem they like (as with Cope), poems with commentary, poems set to music (as with Fenton), even people who object to a poem and want to tell others, as with the poem 'Gatwick' by Craig Raine, the Twitterstorm around which I discuss later. The intentions affect the context and therefore how the poem is perceived – third-party posting complicates this for the viewer and takes it further away from the control of the poet.

We should also note that not all online and social media interactions are benign. There are negative campaigns, as with Raine's 'Gatwick', and, very differently, what Fiona Sampson in her book *Beyond The Lyric* calls 'the bully boys of the blogosphere' (Sampson, 2012, p. 266), where she identifies a concerted online attack on feminist poets.

There are, then, two direct issues with regard to online and social media activity by the poet: firstly, one of cultural reference and association – an issue shared with print and other media – and secondly one of the impact on alternative ways of publication.

If we are to go even further on the first point, a poet's intentions or wishes can be subverted (or strengthened) by their poems or themselves simply being referenced online and through social media. The work itself does not even have to appear, simply a link to where you can find out about it or sample it or discuss it further. The website *LossLit*, for example, has a section called *Canon* (LossLit, 2016) where it lists contributors' recommendations for further reading (poetry and prose). This provides a useful topic for discussion, but also creates an

association with the website, with its very specific remit, which is there whether the writer wishes it to be or not.

The question of how far a poet self-identifies with a community or group is one for both print and digital media, but the concerns are different in the two cases. The immediacy, fluidity and self-publishing ethos of online publication makes it harder to pin down and control, but it also gives it less weight, for both good and ill. The pervasiveness of the online world is counteracted by its ephemeral nature – ironically, material may be forever ‘out there’, whether we wish it or not (i.e. available online), although even here we are seeing things slipping out of the net as website subscriptions are not renewed and websites hosted by older browsers are no longer supported – but the fact that anyone can post and that any association competes with so many other associations means that the status of online material is often open to question. As we shall see, one strategy to counteract unwanted associations is to provide one’s own online material; the effectiveness of this (or otherwise) is discussed in the section on ‘Personal Websites and Proxy Interlocutors’.

On the other hand, printed books, especially critical and academic works, can establish connections and suggest a more permanent canon that the poet might struggle to distance themselves from, because of their greater perceived seriousness and more considered approach. The twelve essays in the print book *A Concise Companion to Postwar British and Irish Poetry* (Alderman and Blanton, 2009), to take a characteristic instance, explicitly attempt to look at ways of categorising post-war poets in terms of movements, concerns and identities. There is the caveat in the introduction that ‘each essay is designed to offer not a definitive set of readings or canonical judgements but rather a survey and analysis of the tendencies, habits and patterns that distinguish poetic production in Britain and Ireland over the past several decades’ (Alderman and Blanton 2009, p. 1), but this does not prevent categorisation and grouping.

A similar categorisation aimed more directly at contemporary poets is in Fiona Sampson's *Beyond The Lyric* (Sampson, 2012) where there is a more extensive range of categories, partly historical, partly thematic. There are chapters, for example, on The Dandies, The Oxford Elegists, The Iambic Legislators and The New Formalists. Here the intention is to help illuminate aspects of the poet's work, rather than focus more abstractly on the context (the contextualisation is at the service of the poetic analysis, rather than the other way round) but the result is a grouping and defining by type nevertheless.

It is, of course, helpful for the student and academic and to some extent general poetry reader to group in this way, and it is certainly easier, if still arguably open to a reductive analysis, to look at poets historically in terms of their contemporaries and movements and events, both literary and political. It may even be helpful to the living poet, of which there are several examples in the Alderman and Blanton book and which Sampson deals primarily with. Indeed, the poet may be quite happy to be considered a confessional poet or a practitioner of formalist poetry, or actively see themselves as part of a movement or group, such as slam poets. Paul Muldoon, for example, is quite happy to state 'My wife knows I am a confessional poet', although he makes this less of an absolute by adding 'all poets are to a lesser or greater extent' (Teeman, 2010). Poets may also, however, resist such categorisations, and the academic, and to some extent human, impulse to group and collate may not be helpful to them. Given these concerns of association and categorisation across the different media, it is clearly a challenge for the poet to control their poetic persona.

The contemporary poet therefore needs to consider these different aspects of the print and digital media as they negotiate their identity – online and offline – for themselves and with their audience, which includes the general public, publishers, other poets and special interest groups.

As we shall see, digital technology raises more issues than ever before, with an online presence an important consideration, despite issues of control over use and association as outlined above.

### **My Own Poetry in Relation to My Poetic Persona**

I discuss later my own online experience, in particular with regard to the personal website, and I consider my poetry specifically with regard to the attached collection in the section ‘My Own Poetry Collection’, but I should note here how my view of my own poetry has informed my negotiation with my online poetic persona. My persona as expressed through my poetic practice currently consists of three self-identified aspects (though there is considerable overlap): poems of ideas, often with some overt experimentation around form, for example ‘What Are They For, The Eyebrows?’, ‘The Mirror of Literature’ and ‘Candle Poem’; poems of feeling, where I attempt to create a mood or evoke emotions, such as ‘Sitting On The Wall Outside On A Break’ and ‘Stock-taking In The Empty Classroom’; and poems aimed at young people, where the emphasis is on being both entertaining and thought-provoking (though I hope all my poetry aims to do this), examples of which I discuss further below. I do not feel that these aspects of my poetry and therefore poetic persona are adequately reflected in my internet presence, either through my own activity or the activity of others. I would like briefly to consider the reasons why and whether it is to the detriment of my public poetic persona and from this suggest some factors affecting a poet’s engagement with digital media.

One might feel that the internet would be a natural home for a poetry of ideas and therefore a self-styled poet of the mind, but, as I have suggested and as is discussed later in further detail, the internet thrives on geographical, social, cultural and historical context just as much as any other medium.

There are, despite this, several outlets for experimental or innovative poetry, both in print and online, for example as listed by the *Modern Poetry* website (Modern Poetry, 2017), where the term ‘innovative poetry’ features more strongly than experimental, but which focuses on this aspect, nonetheless, and my reluctance to engage with these outlets is largely through a worry that I might be identified as an experimental poet, when this is only part of my work. There is another, practical difficulty. As well as the issue for the poet of controlling the digital context, there is also the issue of controlling the format and layout. I consider this further in the section ‘The Challenge of Typography’, but the lack of control over how a poem appears in a digital format is a disincentive to publishing it in that way when the format is complex and integral to the poem. My poems ‘Pointy Shoes’, ‘Views of Mount Fuji’ and ‘The Mirror of Literature’ are examples through their use of typography of where and how this might apply.

Further, the lack of other indicators in cyberspace means that poetry has to be contextualised by the person posting it to the website or social media outlet or by associated material by others on the website itself. Often this is done through the online persona of the poet, provided by autobiographical information or direct thoughts or comments, and this works best for poems that are expressions of attitude, emotion or insight clearly identified with the writer, rather than more abstracted work. This identified need on my part to contextualise my poems online in order to post them is another, possibly self-imposed barrier to online publication. I wish to provide context and this involves more than simply posting the poem, but also providing additional information and in this way a suitable platform. Reflecting on my practice in this area brings to light not only my own issues and motivations but wider ones for poets and all those wishing to post material online, that of providing a meaningful context. Although I have done some work in establishing this, as evidenced by my website and related postings (Monks, 2017a), I feel there is more to do here.



An interesting possible exception to the linking of online work to persona is in the field of Twitter and text poetry. Here the attempt to provide a moment of insight or connection or heightened awareness is not always directly linked to the account holder, but can be intended as a stand-alone piece. In fact, it could be argued that there are well-established communities of poems, rather than poets, with hashtags such as #haiku, #3lines, #sixwords providing the grouping.

I explore Twitter and text poems in more detail when discussing the effect of digital media on the poems themselves, but this option to focus on the poem, rather than the poet, is unusual for social media posting and is an interesting phenomenon. It is not universally the case, of course, and Twitter is in some regards one of the most persona-based platforms. The poem by Crystal Bennes, ‘Why You Shouldn’t Follow Poets On Twitter’ is an amusing reminder of how a poem is not a persona:

I like his poem            it’s about  
England and America and  
Yard sales and tat  
And memories  
Containing culture  
Containing nothing  
But nightmares and bad  
Dreams of what society used to be  
Dreams that are no longer dreams  
But reality            I think            I’d like to  
Follow him on twitter  
But am depressed to find            when  
I track him down            that he doesn’t talk  
About poetry or words or memories  
Or anything really except ESPN  
And football.  
(Bennes, 2014)

Even though I do write short poems, for example ‘The Idea of a Dog’, ‘The Hubris of its Maintenance’ and the haiku-inspired poems of ‘Views of Mount Fuji’, I do not feel these would

locate well in the Twittersphere or text world, perhaps because I feel they would be subsumed by the volume of material and the very lack of authorial voice that Twitter poetry allows. It could also be that I have not developed the framework of posting poems to Twitter sufficiently to make the activity seem sufficiently meaningful.

My poems of mood or feeling, which form the bulk of my work, cover a range of forms, styles and content, from the free verse narrative of 'The Sandpilot of Morecambe Bay' to the sonnet 'Early Morning Coffee' to the shape poem 'Screw The Lid Down Tight'. This does mean that it is difficult to focus on a label or grouping for the work and this makes it difficult to present through the internet, as the purpose of sharing is unclear. These poems are also impacted by the lack of associated material, biographical or compositional, to create an online context.

Although one of my most active areas of work as a poet is with schools, my website does not reflect this. This is mainly because, although a large part of my income comes from my poetry in schools, I do not see my poetry for young people at the core of my poetry writing and so do not want to present this as my main online persona. I do, however, promote my poetry in schools work online as a page of my personal website (Monks, 2017b) and via my listing on the NAWE (National Association of Writers in Education) site (NAWE, 2017), but without giving it special prominence, in order to avoid unbalancing my more general online poetic persona.

The poetry I have written specifically for schools I have not included in my attached collection, which is aimed at an adult audience. See Appendix 1 for two examples of these poems, 'Not Just His Nose', a shape poem relating to winter and 'Oh, I Love My Cat', a poem for performance in schools around the idea of pets and parent-child relationships. I include these poems to contrast them with poems in the collection with similar themes and forms but not aimed at children, in particular the shape poems 'Knickerbocker Glory Sunset' and 'The Importance of Cats In Ancient Egypt'. Here I would argue that the poems have sufficiently

complex and adult themes to justify their inclusion. They also form a logical extension of some of the other poems with distinct layouts, even when these are not strong enough to suggest a shape poem. These would include poems such as ‘Left and Right Shoes’, ‘Pointy Shoes’ and ‘For A Moment I Dreamed’, as well as my subversion of the list poem, ‘10 Shoe Stories’.

There are, of course, several successful poets who straddle the two worlds of children’s and adult poetry. Poets as diverse as Michael Rosen, Roger McGough and Jackie Kay have a poetic persona that attempts to inhabit both worlds with equal credibility and here I would argue the weight of online material allows them to successfully achieve both an adult and child-focused persona.

There are also poets who appeal to children for other reasons, often to do with the engaging nature of their performances, but whose poetry is mainly adult in theme. We might include here poets such as John Hegley, Ian McMillan and Benjamin Zephaniah. All three are very active as poets and performers, not just with children but across a broad constituency. This level of audience engagement is far beyond my own activity and is a reflection of their personalities and desire to engage. The desire to engage on the level of persona (rather than simply through the work) is not a given for poets and I will consider this next, both generally and in the context of online and social media.

### **The Public and Private Life of a Poet**

In *How To Blog A Book*, Nina Amir (Amir, 2012) talks of the contrast between the writer enjoying spending time alone writing (the fabled ‘lonely garret’) and the importance of the author’s platform:

To become a published author... you must come out of the garret and socialise. You must talk with people and engage them in your work. You must get involved and interact with others. If you don't do this, you won't develop an audience for your work. You won't build a base of readers – an author platform – for yourself and for your books. (Amir, 2012, p. 13).

She then goes on to list some of the elements that might make 'a strong and sturdy author's platform', such as:

- Expert status
- Numerous media appearances
- A well-known presence in online forums and social networks
- Large numbers of followers on social network sites
- Popular videos, podcasts or blogs
- Many published pieces
- Frequent talks and appearances (Amir, 2012, p. 13)

Amir argues, thankfully for the writer, that not all of these are needed. You can be strong in just one or two areas and still effectively promote yourself and your work. Moreover, Amir notes that 'many of the items on this list have little to do with writing' (Amir, 2012, p. 14). She is, of course, talking about the author in general, not poets in particular (for 'expert status' we might substitute 'a reputation for writing good poetry'), but she does highlight an important dilemma for the poet. How far they can wander lonely as a cloud and how far they need to be uploading to and downloading from that other sort of cloud, the one that connects you to the digital world and the poetic presence it facilitates. And, of course, how far as a poet they need to be appearing physically at events, performing, discussing, interacting.

It is an issue also discussed in general terms, rather than with regard to digital platforms specifically, in Chapter One of Paul Hyland's book *Getting Into Poetry*, 'The Garret, the Ghetto & the Great Globe Itself', where he considers the options for the poet (Hyland, 1992).

This central dichotomy between isolated poetry writing and poetic presence is not new, of course. It goes back, in fact, to the very beginnings of the poet. They were performers, the

tellers of tales, the singers of songs, the troubadours. It was only later, as the technology of the book developed, that they became published authors, and cried, as Chaucer, that early beneficiary of the printing press, did at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*, ‘Go, litel book... no making thow n’envie, / But subgit be to alle poesy...’ (Robinson, 1957) and often devoted themselves primarily to the page and the reader. Thus, ever since technology created the printed page, poets are caught between the two traditions of performance and print. But now we have a third element that borrows something from both: the online world. The poet’s platform now triangulates – with varying degrees of success and satisfaction – the three beacons of: written work; appearances and performances; and an online, social and broadcast media presence.

There are many shapes to this triangle. Some have performance poetry as their hypotenuse, some the published collection; some have equilateral triangles, equally at home with online activity, appearances and publication; some devote everything to the printed page and are uncomfortable with public events. Some, such as myself, write drama for theatre as well as poetry for the reader. Some use the right-angle to pivot between poetry and prose.

It is rare even now, though, to find the longest side to be that of the digital media presence. As Amir says, your platform may have little to do with writing and writers are justifiably very wary of that. But in today’s world there will be online activity around a poet, whether the poet wishes to engage with it or not. The poet’s reputation may be no more than a few clicks away. The internet is often a first port-of-call for many, especially those who have grown up with it, partly as an information source for poetry, partly to find actual poems. For both poet and reader, the internet is a support for published work and also a publishing platform in its own right.

Although some sites serve a dual function, the majority of online sites either signpost in some way to print publications or host poetry directly. I will begin by considering the range of

sites that speak to the idea of the poet's persona through information or discussions of their work, with poems mainly used to illustrate the type of work of the poet, before going on to consider poetry itself on the web.

### **Personal Websites and Proxy Interlocutors**

The personal website is usually considered a fundamental tool in establishing an online persona and the function of the personal website is generally to provide information on the person and their activity, in this case poetry. They can also be used, among other options, to showcase specific work or projects, present individual poems, comment on aspects of poetry and provide links to other sites.

The importance of the individual poetry website may not, however, be as clear as at first assumed, especially for well-known poets. It may be surprising that when searching for specific poets the top results can be related sites, not the individual poet's personal website. If we consider the current Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, using Google to search for 'Carol Ann Duffy website' in September 2016 (Google, 2016) we find the following top matches:

#### September 2016

- 1 Poetry Archive (sponsored link)
- 2 Carol Ann Duffy: Sheer Poetry
- 3 The Scottish Poetry Library
- 4 Wikipedia
- 5 The British Council
- 6 Picador Books

In first position we have the sponsored link to the *Poetry Archive*, followed by *Carol Ann Duffy: Sheer Poetry*. This is her personal website, but contains only a picture and a paragraph, then information on, and links to, the *Sheer Poetry* website, which focuses on the work of Duffy

and other poets mainly for students and teachers (Sheer Poetry, 2011) and had, at the time of accessing, not been updated since 2014 (updating being an issue users of websites will be all-too familiar with). The search results then gave links to four well-established websites: *The Scottish Poetry Library*, *Wikipedia*, *The British Council* and *Picador Books*, her current publisher.

If we now look at the search results in September 2017 (Google, 2017), approximately one year later, we find the following top matches:

#### September 2017

- 1 Poetry Archive (sponsored link)
- 2 Carol Ann Duffy: Sheer Poetry
- 3 The Scottish Poetry Library
- 4 Wikipedia
- 5 PanMacmillan (owners of Picador books)
- 6 Poetry Archive (not sponsored)
- 7 BBC
- 8 BBC
- 9 The British Council
- 10 The Guardian

The similarity is striking. I have extended the list to the top ten results to show how important other websites are in increasing Carol Ann Duffy's visibility online. We have already referenced the importance of the BBC and here we see its influence once more, along with that of The Guardian newspaper, which has published several poems by, and articles about, Duffy as the Poet Laureate. This is perhaps a function of the Poet Laureate role, but is also an indicator of how important newspapers are in achieving and maintaining an online presence.

I would therefore argue that material on other websites can be at least as, if not more, effective at creating an internet presence than a personal website. Outward-facing organisations have a strong interest in being highly-visible and active online and so cultivating one's own presence via these sites may be a more effective strategy than attempting to promote oneself as a

poet by direct online activity. These websites act as proxy interlocutors, furthering online discussion, debate and interaction around the poet without the poet themselves needing to be directly involved. Here a positive rather than negative aspect of third-party hosting. This online presence through other organisations is often obtained, of course, by direct, real-world activity, rather than online activity. This is something of a paradox, that for some poets the greater the activity outside the online world, the greater the presence on it.

In Duffy's case the brevity of her own website is counteracted by the plethora of information about her on other sites and this can be seen as a considerable benefit and might suggest less of a need for her to maintain her own site or engage in online activity. There is, however, a drawback to this: Duffy's control over her online presence is less than if she had posted more on her own site. The difficulty we have already noted of controlling online material is exacerbated with this approach. There is also the potential issue of online marketing, where advertisements on third-party websites can provide unwelcome associations.

Even so, it does mean Duffy has a strong enough web presence without needing to invest additional time, money and effort into her own personal site. There is, in addition, the prestige of association with organisations such as The Scottish Poetry Library and The British Council. The fact that Google uses ranking algorithms that factor in how well-established and active a site is gives yet more incentive to attain a web presence via high-profile organisations.

Considering further the question of the importance – and benefits and disadvantages – of the personal website, we can look at the previous Poet Laureate (as a poet with a clear mandate for public engagement), Andrew Motion, Poet Laureate from 1999 to 2009. Motion has his website linked to the organisation *UK Touring*, a traditional site, where again some pages have not been updated for a year or more (Motion, 2016). Here again, the updating of websites



remains one of the challenges of online activity. And, again, a third party organisation is supporting the online presence.

The bolstering of the poet's online persona by others does not, of course, preclude them having their own active personal online presence – as we have seen, some of this is governed by personality and predisposition. In contrast to Duffy and Motion, Kate Tempest and Simon Armitage, for example, not Poets Laureate but high-profile poets, have wide-ranging personal websites (Tempest, 2017; Armitage, 2016), with prominent links to their agents and publishers, thereby using the interconnectedness of the internet, centred around the hyperlink (a key tool of the internet), to make use of the third-party material alongside their own.

We might note here that Armitage references his website as *Simon Armitage The Official Website* (Armitage, 2017), as the Google search also produces the more prominent *Armitage: All About Famous Books and Poems* (Armitage, 2015). This is not connected in any way to the poet and yet potentially attracts viewers to the site through the assumed association, another indication of how your presence can be subverted or undermined online. Michael Rosen faces a similar issue of online association through a shared name, in his case with a 'sexual photographer' based in San Francisco (Rosen, 2017).

Tempest and Armitage are able through their websites to present themselves as they wish to be perceived and this is clearly an attractive option for any poet. It could be argued that less well-known poets, who are not linked to well-known organisations, have an even greater incentive to create and maintain their own website in order to achieve and control an online presence, promote themselves and their work and join in with the various online communities that exist in this virtual world. Personal online activity is of course not confined to personal websites and poets frequently post material to digital platforms hosted by major organisations.

We should be aware, however, when interacting with these platforms, either as subject or viewer, of not just the overt content but also their underlying core agendas, which are largely determined by their function and could be summarised as follows:

<u>Website</u>	<u>Function</u>
Facebook	Social
Instagram	Personal
LinkedIn	Professional
Tumblr	Personal
Twitter	Comment / Informational
Wikipedia	Informational

Wikipedia might be considered a special case among online platforms. An entry on Wikipedia gives automatic online visibility, but here the issue that the poet cannot control the information and therefore their profile is most evident. This may be a moot point, as the poet cannot control whether they even have a Wikipedia entry or not. Even if a presence is established, however, your ability to influence any Wikipedia information is very limited. As the guidelines state, ‘Avoid writing or editing an article about yourself, other than to correct unambiguous errors of fact’ and, moreover, ‘you cannot just get it [your entry] deleted because you are not happy with it’ (Wikipedia, 2017).

There are two main ways of addressing this problem: either by encouraging others to input data into Wikipedia about you or by creating alternative sources of online information, for example a personal website, blog or Facebook page, to counteract any unwanted or untrue information or commentaries. Here we see the importance of a pro-active approach.

The fact that Facebook considers itself primarily as a social networking site needs to be taken into account here. Not only does this mean, importantly, that it does not appear in a search engine listing, it also influences the information shared, the way it is accessed and the way it is perceived. There are individuals, organisations and groups that attempt to subvert this primary role (see my discussion of the *52 Project*, for example, in ‘The Symbiosis Between Online Publication and the Print Media’) – subversion of intent being a strong facet of internet activity, reflecting its ethos of open access and user modification – but the underlying nature of Facebook remains a social network, not an information exchange or transactional site. Here we can compare other digital networks, such as LinkedIn, which focuses on information in a business context and Twitter, which treads a line between comment and information.

In addition to their use by the poet qua poet, the creative use of these platforms by some poets should not be overlooked, either. Digital social media outlets such as Tumblr and Instagram, which are arguably much more user-content than platform-ethos driven, as Wikipedia, Facebook and LinkedIn are (with Twitter being a mix of the two – very prescriptive as to form, but very open as to content), have proved effective for some young poets, not just for profile-building, but for disseminating their poetry. This is, notably, often for poets who are perceived as marginalised and with distinctive backgrounds and world-views, such as Rupi Kaur, Amanda Lovelace, Warsan Shire, Tyler Knott Gregson and Lang Leav. This specific use of the sites as a platform for the poetry is an important reminder of the power of such sites for building a following, and therefore an audience, for the poetry itself as well as the poet, particularly when the poetry is linked directly to personal expression and experience, and is therefore seen as authentic to its audience.

The subsequent print success of these poets is also a major indication of the way an online profile can promote the poetry. Canadian Rupi Kaur’s poetry collection *Milk and Honey*

(Kaur, 2015), albeit an exceptional example, has sold over a million copies (Nielsen Bookscan, cited in O'Brien, 2017) and this must surely be in part from her 1.6 million Instagram followers (Kaur, 2017). This is, of course, a reflection on the popularity of the poetry, not on its quality. Indeed this whole approach of promoting the poet not the poem has been called into question, for example in the review by Rebecca Watts in *PN Review* of Holly McNish's *Plum* (McNish, 2017a), where she argues that bad poetry can flourish because 'the cult of personality that social media fosters works precisely this way: once you care about the person you'll consume anything they produce' (Watts, 2018). Nevertheless, the influence of this personal-account and personal-attitude based poetry (different from confessional poetry, perhaps, in that the emphasis is on defiance rather than disclosure, strength rather than suffering), however controversial, is significant because of its popularity and can be seen as extending into more general approaches to poetry – Chapter 2 'The Effect of Digital Media on the Poems Themselves' considers this further, including in relation to my own poetry – and in this way the influence of these digital platforms on poetry and the books of poetry published is both direct and indirect.

### **My Own Online Experience**

Although my personal website is ranked first under Google, my LinkedIn account and websites where I have a presence – *Theatre Bristol*, *NAWE*, *Twitter*, *Art In The Heart Poetry* – are also highly ranked. Further evidence of how, even with relatively little-known poets such as myself, other websites that have a strong online presence work to the benefit of the poet.

My own website (Monks, 2017b) has undergone some changes since it was created in 2014 but is largely a static platform to give a basic overview of my work. There have been a total of 234 visitors to my website since it was created (as identified through Wordpress statistics

under the site's administration), averaging around 80 a year. This suggests it has not been to date a major way of promoting myself or my poetry. Further, it is not a dedicated poetry site and covers my work more generally, including my playwriting and workshop activities, therefore the number of visitors directly interested in my poetry is even fewer than the total given. There is no qualitative measure of the visitors, and some will have sought out the site to find out more about my poetry – I have met several who have done just that – so the importance of the site is not entirely driven by numbers. Nevertheless, this is quite a low number and certainly far fewer than have experienced my poetry through readings. It is therefore worth noting that the visibility of a website can vary enormously and is to some extent a function of how well-known the poet is already, how adept, conscientious or resourceful the poet is at presenting themselves and their work on a website (itself partly a function of disposition) and how well-connected their site is to other sites and social media that would point viewers to their site or increase their search-engine visibility.

There is an interesting analogy here with poetry anthologisation, where it could be argued there is a similar feedback loop of validation, visibility and familiarity; the more well-known the poet or poem, the more likely they are to be anthologised and the more anthologised, the more well-known. I discuss this, along with other aspects of anthologisation in the section on 'Anthologisation' at the end of this chapter.

This also relates to the idea of consensus, powerful as a general influence, but especially powerful on the web, where liked and shared material can generate its own exponential momentum (hence the ability to go viral). We might consider here that Rupi Kaur's 1.6 million Instagram followers has been generated from fewer than five hundred posts, and, more modestly, Ian McMillan's 37,000 Twitter followers from over 200,000 tweets (McMillan, 2017). This potential viral quality of digital media makes it a volatile medium with spikes of attention that

can be difficult to control. On the other hand, it is also a feature attractive to those looking to manipulate the system to increase profile and, through this, income. The open-access nature of the internet makes this an ongoing issue, as is the opposite phenomenon of reputational damage. Here we might consider the Twitterstorm around Craig Raine's poem 'Gatwick', where its publication in the *London Review of Books* (Raine, 2015) caused the topic to trend on Twitter as the poem and poet were mocked, railed against, defended and parodied (The Guardian, 2015).

Lines such as:

I want to say I like your big bust.  
Which you try to disguise with a scarf.  
You'd like it smaller by half.

provoked an upsurge of feeling against the poem, the poet and the magazine as being misogynistic and parochial. This demonstrates the paradoxical powers of individual expression and collective response that Twitter provides. Nor is it simply short-lived. Poet Helen Mort returned to the poem in an online blog in March, 2017, when reviewing a poetry collection by John Burnside, commenting 'who is the narrator to presume he knows how the woman feels about her bust?' (Mort, 2017). In this case we see at work both the immediacy and the potential longevity of digital media.

A note of caution, however, as to the relative breadth of impact of an online presence in terms of readership or audience is raised by the Poetry in America study commissioned by *The Poetry Foundation* (Schwartz *et al.*, 2006). Although some years old now, this study was ground-breaking in the way it looked at how the general public in the USA experienced poetry. Interestingly, they refer to 'poetry users' as they found many of the public were actively using poetry in moments of crisis or at public events, such as weddings and funerals, rather than simply experiencing it as readers. According to the study, only a third of poetry users accessed poetry or

poetry information online, and this fell to under 5% for non-users (Schwartz *et al.*, 2006, p. 41).

A very similar percentage of poetry users (36.3%) borrowed poetry books from the library (Schwartz *et al.*, 2006, p. 40), suggesting that at the time of the report the traditional (library) and less-traditional (internet) means of accessing poetry were not only equally significant but also not fundamental to the majority of poetry users.

Despite the increasing popularity of the internet – and rise of social media – over the following years, this study is a notable reminder that digital media is not always as pervasive as we might think. We might note here the considerable difference between older and younger readers, or viewers. For all teenage students, for example, internet access is a basic requirement. This does not, of course, necessarily equate with poetry access – arts students may well access poetry online much more than those studying other disciplines.

It is also worth considering the very important more recent development of accessing information via portable devices, especially the mobile phone and tablet. This has greatly increased ease of access to online information, and therefore potentially online poetry and poetry information, although this may be offset somewhat by the increase in content that can be accessed on these devices, especially video.

There is also the same note of caution with regard to age differentiation, with older people less likely to own a smart phone than young people. In the UK in 2015 only 16% of over-65s owned a smart phone, compared with 90% of 16-24 year-olds, and in 2017 less than 50% of those 55 or over owned a smart phone, compared to 96% of 16-24 year-olds (Statista, 2017). This development of portable devices has also encouraged the development of apps, providing other platforms for accessing, sharing and writing poetry. I am not, however, considering apps in detail here, beyond noting their role in accessing digital material, as their content largely duplicates that available on other platforms.

## Blogs

Some poets, as we have discussed, find themselves better-suited than others by disposition to using the internet and social media to engage with the online poetry community and wider online world, thereby achieving greater visibility, at least with those interested in poetry, and creating engagement with others beyond the personal website. The use of blogs has been a particular feature here and has some devotees among those who enjoy blogging, despite the drawback of having to maintain regular postings. I have not set up my own separate blog, partly for the reason of maintenance and the time-consuming need to post regularly, partly due to disposition and the lack of a poetic focus discussed earlier, but a number of poets, such as Clare Pollard and Jo Bell, have made good use of blogs to engage with the poetry community and, along with this, whether intentionally or simply as a by-product of their blogging activity, maintain and enhance their own poetic profile.

They do this, notably, by writing about poetry issues and their poetry lives, rather than simply posting their own poems. Clare Pollard, for example, discusses her children alongside her poetry activity (Pollard, 2016). The poet Alison Brackenbury mixes the two, with her blog site unashamedly promoting her latest collection, together with favourable reviews, as well as blogging her activities and sharing general poetry news (Brackenbury, 2016). These are typical examples of approaches to blogging, with its mixture of personal diary, thought-pieces, comment and information, which the hyperlink feature of the internet facilitates: the hyperlink feature again here being one of the key drivers of interconnectedness.

Again, however, we need to be cautious here as to impact. Chris Hamilton-Emery in his book *101 Ways To Make Poems Sell* regards them as ‘a form of exchange’ and sees their value



mainly as a form of syndication, their importance extending beyond their content through their connectivity and regularity (Hamilton-Emery, 2006, p.55). He then goes on to cite the huge popularity of Ron Silliman's blog as 'a phenomenon' because of its harnessing of 'the power of the columnist' (Hamilton-Emery, 2006, p. 56), but Silliman is the only example cited, and he is not a poet. The suggestion is that, though a possible aspiration, this is not the standard impact of a poet's blog.

The blog, perhaps, has impact in another way, in that it can have more depth than width in its approach, the opposite of what we might expect from online activity. Jo Bell, who has been blogging for almost ten years (she began in December 2007) has only 639 email subscribers (Bell, 2017a), though she does, of course, attract many more people to her blog through search engines, direct access and the connected sites of Twitter and Facebook. And, we might add, from a multimedia advertising campaign for the Nationwide Building Society in 2017, involving her (and two other poets) and a specially-commissioned poem. The blog is just one facet of her considerable online and offline activity. As she says on her Twitter account: 'Poet off the telly. Project-begetter and internaut. An impeccable source of poetry news. You don't have to like Corbyn but it helps.' (Bell, 2017b)

Despite this issue of reach, the blog does maximise personal control and allow for a distinctive voice and a depth of personal expression beyond the formal personal website and the immediacy of Facebook and Twitter. The 25 poetry blogs, for example, recommended on the Picador website (Pan-Macmillan, 2017) are all strongly distinctive, from the *Baroque in Hackney* by Katy Evans-Bush (Baroque In Hackney, 2017) through to David Wheatley's *Georgiasam*, with its strapline 'Local asshole now local asshole with blog: the twisted brain wrong of a one-off man-mental' (Georgiasam, 2017).

This crafted and personal distinctiveness is one of the blog's main aspects, alongside the common feature of writing about the general poetry world, not just the blogger's own activities. Anthony Wilson's blog, for example, which also focuses very much on his own experiences, has a Blogroll linking to the websites of over 200 other poets (Wilson, 2017). This is a good example of the interconnectedness of the internet and the opportunities for democratisation or, at least pluralisation, through the sheer amount of online activity that is both present and interlinked. The blog is the quintessential online representation of these features of personal expression and sense of an online community.

As a footnote, it is interesting to see that poetry blogs can also provide a transition from online activity to print. Katy Evans-Bush had her blog essays collected into the book *Forgive The Language* (Evans-Bush, 2015) and Anthony Wilson's series of blog posts *Lifesaving Poems* into a book of the same name (Wilson, 2015). This symbiosis between online and print publication I examine in greater detail later.

## **Publishers' Websites**

The investment publishers have made into online and digital content does mean that the individual poet is supported in their online and digital presence if they are with a publisher with sufficient resources to deliver strong online content related to the poet.

The importance that publishers give to their online activity can be indicated by the following 2016 description by Tilted Axis Press of 'an entry-level digital job at the average publisher' where they list the main tasks as: 'producing marketing newsletters / press releases, commissioning, editing & uploading online content inc video & audio, updating metadata, Wikipedia etc.' (Tilted Axis Press, 2016). This is a multi-purpose, multi-platform and multi-

media range of digital activities that would benefit the writer in terms of marketing and profile. The involvement and resources of a publisher that a writer can draw on is looked at further in Chapter 3, but the managing and updating of online content is an important support for any author.

The poet also potentially benefits from the context of the other authors on the publisher's list. There may, however, be competing priorities here. The poet may wish to get across their work, their passions and concerns, to enter into a discourse with regard to contemporary poetry. The publisher, whilst finding all this laudable, will have as a major priority the selling of books. Not only this, but they are also interested in building their brand as a publisher, and their website is one of the vehicles for doing this. This is, in theory, a mutually beneficial arrangement, with the work being promoted, experienced, discussed and celebrated alongside the books being sold, but there are some potential tensions here, especially around the poet's personal position and views, ones that the online and social media environment can both help ameliorate and exacerbate.

I would therefore like to consider the idea of branding and how the internet and social media are currently influencing this. I have already spoken of the poet creating – and to a greater or lesser extent having it created for them – their own persona or platform using digital technology, but the most obvious example of poetry branding is the poetry publisher, be they a small press or mid-scale or an imprint of a larger company.

Publishers often look to brand the poets they publish as part of their stable and Faber Poets might be seen the frontrunner in this regard, where the term 'a Faber poet' has traditionally been associated with the quality of the poets on their list (see the discussion of Faber & Faber in 'The Major Poetry Publishers' in Chapter 3 for examples). They also use their distinctive ff logo to reinforce the homogeneity and value of the brand, though I examine some of the nuances

within this later and in the section on ‘The Major Poetry Book Publishers’ in Chapter 3.

Compare this general approach of the homogeneity of Faber & Faber to Bloodaxe, where the emphasis is on the range of titles and variety of authors and publications, under what founder Neil Astley refers to as ‘Bloodaxe’s eclectic, democratic style of publishing’, going on to say: ‘My aim has always been to publish as wide a range as possible of contemporary poetry by all kinds of writers’ (Bloodaxe, 2017a).

The association of the writer with the publisher is a two-way arrangement. The poet (hopefully) benefits from the reputation of the publisher and the publisher (again, hopefully) adds to their reputation by association with the poet. There is therefore a mutual benefit in being not just successful but also distinctive.

How does the internet disrupt or promulgate this branding process for the poetry publishers? The website reinforces the presence both of publisher and poet. So, it is important for both that the publisher’s website and the poet’s website complement each other. This is, of course, subject to the separate impetuses of the two parties. The poet is bound up with the publisher’s profile, as well as helping to shape it. The digital platforms can serve to amplify this, but the poet (consciously or unconsciously) can promulgate through them an alternative persona and focus. Neither directly controls the other’s digital presence, in particular the nature of the website. Nevertheless, the nature of the website suggests certain qualities. These may well differ depending on the publisher and poet involved.

I will therefore now look briefly at the websites of four of the major poetry publishers, Faber & Faber, Bloodaxe, Carcanet and Picador and in this way consider how publishers’ websites influence the profile of the poet and their publications.

The Faber & Faber website is quite formal, with no picture banner, just the name in black with white background (Faber & Faber, 2017). The emphasis is on tradition and quality as their by-line indicates:

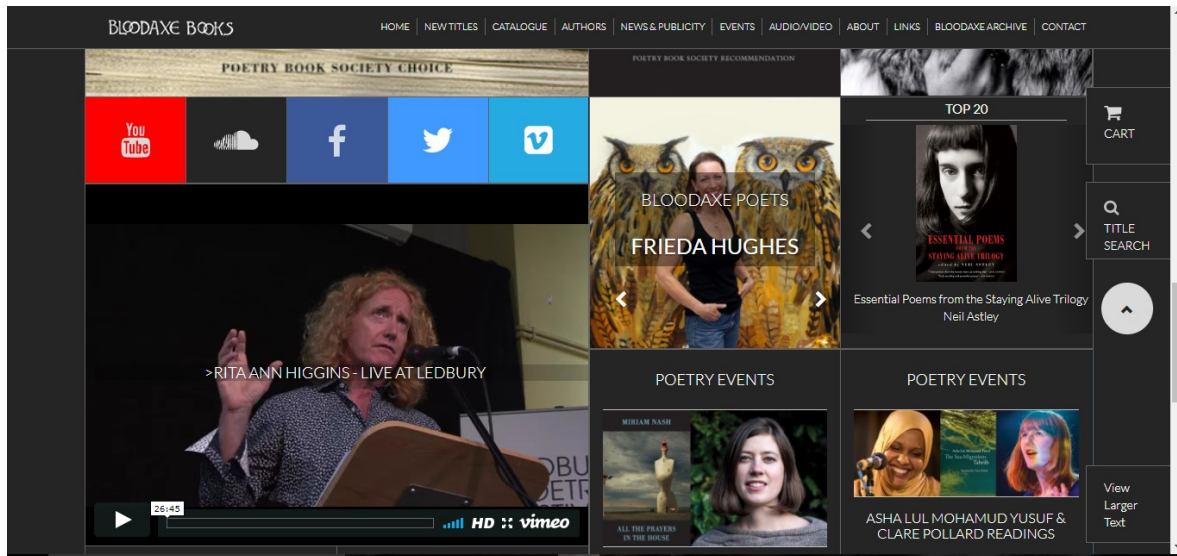
Founded in 1929 in London, Faber & Faber is one of the world's great publishing houses. Our list of authors includes twelve Nobel Laureates and six Booker Prize-winners. We are proud to publish the foremost voices in fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and drama, with writers including T. S. Eliot, Ted Hughes, Harold Pinter, Sylvia Plath, William Golding, Samuel Beckett, Seamus Heaney and Kazuo Ishiguro. (Faber & Faber, 2016)



*Faber & Faber website – screenshot taken 16 August 2017*

Here we can see an appeal to its achievements to date and an emphasis on a select band of famous writers, giving a sense of distinction and excellence.

Contrast this with the Bloodaxe website, where there is an emphasis on dynamism and challenge, with their simple strapline ‘Britain’s Premier Poetry Imprint’ (Bloodaxe Books, 2017b).



*Bloodaxe Books website – screenshot taken 16 August 2017*

The Bloodaxe website is very media-rich, with moving graphics, pictures, an entire section of Vimeo videos and constantly-changing boxes.

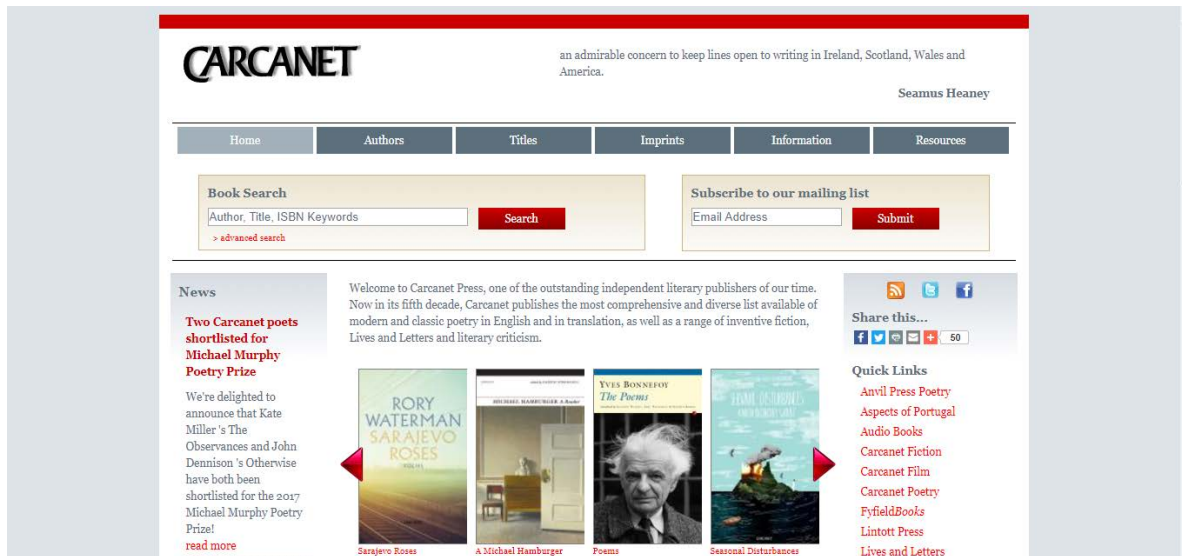
The overall effect might be considered dynamic and multi-layered or confusing and messy, depending on your personal sensibilities. Either way, the attempt here is to focus on vibrancy and a range of voices, rather than tradition and selectivity or exclusivity, as one might argue with Faber & Faber. The Bloodaxe website is a reflection of the brash immediacy of their books, with their distinctive typefaces and logos, helping to support the branding as one of strong, uncompromising and challenging output. The Faber poet might therefore be perceived very differently from the Bloodaxe poet, if one was looking at their offer via the publisher’s website.

The situation, however, is somewhat more complicated than the websites might suggest when we consider the range of the actual poetry lists. Bloodaxe, for all its brashness and its

motto of ‘Poetry With An Edge’, the title of its trademark 1998 anthology (Bloodaxe, 1988), has, over its thirty-nine year history, published many poets that would not look out of place on Faber & Faber’s list, including such names as Tony Harrison, Ann Stevenson, R. S. Thomas and Basil Bunting. Several of their poets have been published by other publishers too. We could also point to Don Paterson, a Faber poet who is the poetry editor of Picador as an example of the blurring of boundaries. The move of Simon Armitage from Bloodaxe to Faber with the publication of *Kid* in 1992 (Armitage, 1992), might be seen either as his move to a more traditional publisher or an acknowledgement of the fluidity of poetry publication. Similarly, Faber & Faber have recently published a number of more experimental poets, some of which have come from their pamphlet series, such as Jack Underwood and Sam Riviere, who do not fit into their more mainstream tradition. Nevertheless, publishers’ websites are part of the overall presence and public perception of a poet and the headline nature of the website is part of the impact of digital technology on the context of the poet and their publications.

We should not forget, either, that the publisher is looking to use the website to generate sales. Faber & Faber’s website was nominated for the BT-Retail Week Digital Store Of the Year Award 2015, showing how important sales can be for the online presence. This use of the website as an online shop provides further support to the poet, who, after all, is also looking for income, but could be considered as putting the focus somewhat on the product. Faber & Faber have, in fact, moved away from this emphasis, as their 2017 website shows, with the shop button now a small logo in the right-hand corner, whereas in 2015 it was the first headline tab. This is part of the negotiation of the role of the website for the publisher between a sales platform and information portal. The section in Chapter 3 on ‘The Role of the Book Publisher’ also looks at other factors that can motivate a publisher beyond sales.

Carcenet, although still reflecting this sales remit, has a very traditional website that puts more weight on prizes, accolades and achievements.



*Carcenet website – screenshot taken 16 August 2017*

The website has something of a more academic profile and, in-keeping with this, they have a clear, concise paragraph outlining their organisation, with a literary emphasis and perhaps quite formal expression:

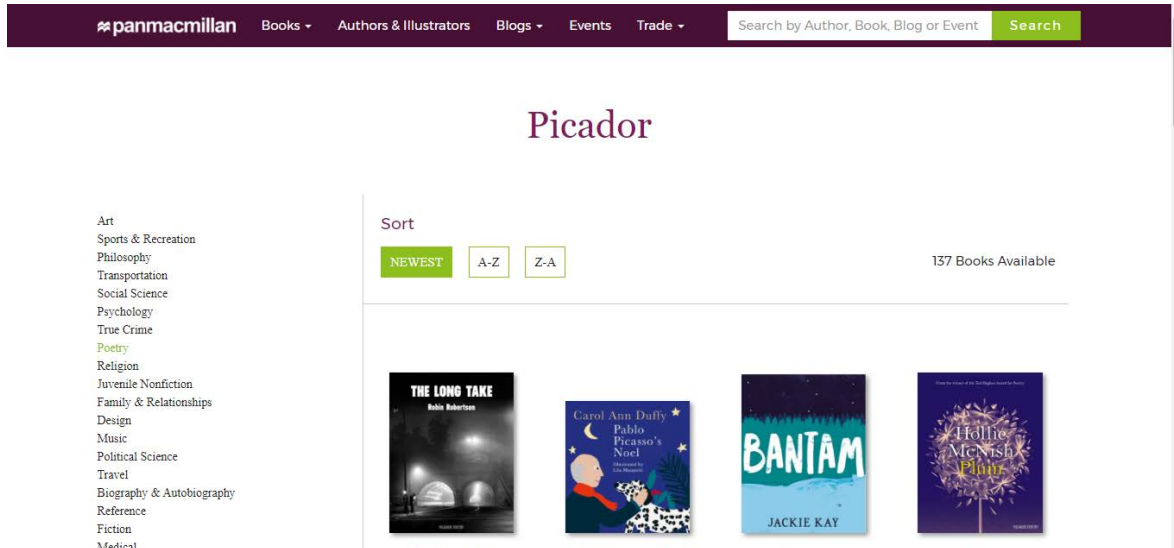
Welcome to Carcanet Press, one of the outstanding independent literary publishers of our time. Now in its fifth decade, Carcanet publishes the most comprehensive and diverse list available of modern and classic poetry in English and in translation, as well as a range of inventive fiction, Lives and Letters and literary criticism. (Carcenet, 2017a)

Note also here the direct address to the reader and a sense of heritage.

Like all websites, however, there is a tension between a sense of continuity and a sense of change, brought about by the passing nature of the online visitor and therefore a need for continuous updating. It is not for nothing that visits to website are referred to as ‘traffic’ or ‘surfing’ and the very term ‘visitors’ suggests impermanence. The Carcanet site, in fact, features a range of news boxes and regularly updated featured poets and poems, often related to events.



Picador's poetry website (Picador, 2017), clearly just one part of Pan-Macmillan's publishing empire as the sidebar indicates, opts for a more stripped-down look, with a basic menu for exploring the writers.



*Picador poetry website – screenshot taken 16 August 2017*

Here the online reflection of the publisher's size, through the use of sidebars and the nesting of the poetry pages within a larger website – evident also with Penguin Random House – can suggest something of a corporate image, even when the poetry books themselves carry a reflection of the editor's individual taste.

Perhaps partly to counteract this sense of detachment through the sheer size of the publishing group, the Picador site offers an email subscription. The weekly or monthly email is another way publishers use digital media to maintain a connection with their audience, though this can become a burden for the recipient if overdone and the etiquette of the internet comes into play here – gauging responses to internet material and emails and dealing with those responses is part of the exciting challenge of the medium. One of the many sites that discuss email overload tells us 'There are obvious practices that help, such as unsubscribing to e-newsletters or turning off notifications from Facebook or Twitter' (Gallo, 2012) and another, on 'netiquette', observes

that ‘The long e-mail is a thing of the past’ (Silberman, 2017), both viewpoints that are not good news for the e-newsletter sender.

In addition to e-newsletters, smaller presses also use their websites in an interactive way to engage their readers with their work, sell titles and, in some cases, overtly support publication. Some publishers, such as Nine Arches Press and Cinnamon run membership schemes, a traditional model given new impetus by an online presence and others, such as Fair Acre Press and Dead Ink Books run crowdfunding projects via the website to help fund book publication (Fair Acre Press, 2017; Dead Ink Books, 2017). See Chapter 3 for further examples of this model.

At its best, for both publisher and poet, the combination of websites, emails, Twitter, Facebook and other social media creates a package that supports the print publication. The extent to which the published poet wishes to engage with these elements is partly a matter of temperament, choice, circumstance and pressure from publishers and other agencies.

## **Other Websites**

As well as personal and publishers’ websites, there are many online poetry sites, both professional and personal, that are primarily information portals, but where you can often directly access poetry, either on the screen or as audio or video.

The Poetry Library website is one such information portal and provides links to online and print poetry publishers, magazines and other organisations, as well as information on events, competitions and resources for learning. It also has an e-loans section for audio books and eBooks. The library itself has over 100,000 items, making it the most comprehensive physical poetry resource in the UK (Poetry Library, 2016). It is a strong example of how a combination of

the virtual (the online resources) and the physical, here referring to the materials (the books, CDs, DVDs, etc.) and the environment (an actual physical library in the Southbank Centre in London) can combine to create a platform for poetry; where the different elements complement rather than conflict with each other.

How far it is a platform for the individual poet it is harder to say. They do promote poetry events and activities and so indirectly the poets themselves. Together with the Southbank Centre, which has a very active poetry programme, they also commission poems for promoting the Library, and these can be distributed in various forms, including online, as Poetry Postcards, as part of an exhibition or as performance pieces, for example the poems by Hannah Silva, Vahni Capildeo and James Wilkes commissioned for their open day in 2015 (Poetry Library, 2017a). Although a useful opportunity for some poets, here the aim is to promote the library and its poetry collection, rather than the poet. The Poetry Library is therefore a poetry resource in both its physical and virtual manifestations and any development of a poet's poetry and persona is an adjunct to its main role as an information provider.

Similar websites as information portals are provided by such UK-based websites as *The Poetry Society*, *The Poetry Book Society* (part of Inpress, the distribution company for small press members), *Poetry By Heart* and *The Poetry Archive*. These sites each have a different focus, governed by the remit of the host organisation, but all work as providers of general information on poetry activity, contemporary and historic, with the same limited but potentially significant opportunities for the poet.

The Poetry Archive functions slightly differently from the others, in that it hosts readings of poems by individual poets and in this way directly publishes their poetry. Founded by Andrew Motion as one of his initiatives as Poet Laureate, it is a charity that looks to promote poetry as spoken, rather than written. It is not, however, a promoter of performance poetry and so in many

ways represents the way the internet is an additional resource to the printed text, rather than competing with it. The cost of creating and delivering the sound recordings is salutary. As the website tells us:

£2,500 is the amount of money that could cover one poet being added to the Archive. This includes the costs of hiring a studio, a producer, a sound engineer, the money we pay the poet, the money we have to pay for the copyright permissions as well as the administrative costs of the whole process from inviting the poet to read up to adding those recordings to the website. £1,500 is the amount of money that could cover one month of website hosting and maintenance. (Poetry Archive, 2014)

It is a reminder that digital content is not always low-cost, and that open-access platforms can still require significant resources. For the individual poet creating their own website, blog or Facebook page, the time costs are often absorbed by the individual, but if they were costed commercially we would have a very different online content model.

This time factor should also be combined with the activity focus required. As noted previously, time and energy and mental resources that are given to maintaining an online persona are not being used to write the poetry. The response is usually to suggest or seek a balance between the two activities, and this is in practice how many writers approach this dilemma. As we have seen, another option is to rely on other active websites, this being most effective once a certain level of audience awareness has been obtained. Another option is to incorporate online activity into the creative process and we will explore this in more detail in Chapter 2.

I should also reference here the many websites for print newspapers and magazines, both specialist and more general, that often contain poetry elements. These also contribute to the overall online poetry culture. As we have seen, The Guardian, along with other national newspapers, has substantial online as well as print coverage of poetry and poetry matters.

There is a similar cross-fertilisation in the magazine world, where there are many specialist poetry and writing magazines in print and online and these are highly relevant to the influence of digital media on traditional publishing. The Poetry Library website alone lists over 130 online poetry magazines (Poetry Library 2017b), although some of these are now defunct and exist only as an archive, often not because of lack of popularity, but due to the commitment required from the editors, for example *Poems In Which*, which closed in May 2017 after ten issues (Poems In Which, 2017). Here we move from information sites with poems posted mainly to illustrate the work of the poet or to support a point being made, to sites whose primary purpose is to publish poems in their own right.

Some of these online magazines or e-zines use the internet as an adjunct to their print counterpart, for example *Stride* (Stride, 2017) or *Magma* (Magma, 2017), but there are many that are online only, for example *Morphrog* and *The Argotist Online*. These can promote their own special interests more easily, due to low overheads (not including the time and commitment factors) and little or no reliance on actual readership. *Morphrog*'s aim, for example, is 'publishing "poetry in the extreme"' (Morphrog, 2017) and *The Argotist Online* looks to publish 'non-mainstream poetry' (The Argotist Online, 2017a). Having said this, an online magazine can achieve a considerable audience – *Poems In Which* reaching over 30,000 readers from 60 countries over its ten issues (Poems In Which, 2017). See also my comments in 'The Route To Book Publication for the Poet' on how these online magazines help with publishing the sheer volume of poetry looking for an outlet.

It is also important to note the self-uploaded poetry sites, since they are a significant internet poetry presence. These could be categorised in two ways. Firstly, there are sites such as *AllPoetry*, that often identify themselves as a community (though AllPoetry is run by one individual, the artist Kevin Watt) and host self-published poems. Secondly, there are general

poetry hosting sites such as *PoemHunter*, that host both self-published poems and poems previously published elsewhere, uploaded simply because an individual wishes to share them with others and not always with explicit permission. As PoemHunter puts it:

Poems are published on this site purely for educational reasons, for the purpose of information and with good intentions. If the legal representatives ask us to remove a poem from the site, this will be done immediately. (PoemHunter, 2017)

These self-publishing general poetry sites contain a mix of traditional and contemporary poems and reflect the tastes of the site publisher. Both types of site can be considered influential in terms of online publishing because of the large number of poets and poems they contain. AllPoetry claims to host over 400,000 poets and be ‘The web’s largest poetry writing group’ (AllPoetry, 2017) and PoemHunter claims to host over 100,000 poets and well over a million poems (PoemHunter, 2014). Their popularity suggests they provide a useful resource, though the second type of site again somewhat conflates the idea of being in the public domain (i.e. out of copyright) with being publicly available.

I noted earlier, however, that we must exercise caution with regard to the actual influence of online material on poetry readers or viewers. Despite the large numbers accessing and engaging with the various sites, the extent to which these views are significant and how far they impact on people who are not writers, students or academics or otherwise specifically connected to the sector in some way is hard to assess. The quantitative data, for example number of views or hits, though useful in itself, does not give us the qualitative impact.

If the importance of the encounter is open to challenge, another factor to consider is the permanence of the presence. It is often considered that online material is there forever, but this easy assertion is open to some qualification. *Verse Palace* is not the only website to proclaim

‘versepalace.wordpress.com is no longer available. The authors have deleted this site.’ (Verse Palace, 2016).

Here, once more, the picture is more complex than it might at first appear. Even if the web presence is maintained, taking material down from self-published websites is an easy task, but removing it from websites controlled by others can be a greater challenge. This is another contradictory quality of the internet: the very freedom of access that makes the internet so useful for connecting with others makes it so difficult to control.

### **Anthologisation as Context**

As a counterpoint to the online presence of the poet and their poetry, it is useful to look at the role that contemporary poetry anthologies play in forming both persona and context. There is a considerable heritage of historical and contemporary poetry anthologies and, in the same way that the modern poetry book draws on previous poetry book publication to define its current form and role, the modern poetry anthology extends from the tradition of similar publications, whether historical, contemporary or a mixture of the two. As with the individual poetry book, poetry anthologies still generally reference, explicitly or implicitly, the history of previous publications to give them profile, status and weight beyond their individual merit. The online world has had some influence here, as discussed later when looking at the symbiosis between online and print publication, but the printed anthology still looks mainly to the print tradition for its status and form.

The large number of historical poetry anthologies makes this too wide a field to examine in itself, but their influence on contemporary poetry writing (both poetry written around the time of the publication and poetry written today) is notable. The Oxford series of anthologies *The*

*Oxford Book of English Verse* was particularly influential in the twentieth century at looking to define ‘the tradition’ for poetry readers (and writers), and the contrast between Quiller-Couch’s 1919 edition (Quiller-Couch, 1919), revised in 1932, and the following ones by Helen Gardner in 1972 (Gardner, 1972) and Christopher Ricks in 1999 (Ricks, 1999) provoked much debate.

Likewise, Philip Larkin with his edition of *The Oxford Book Of Twentieth-Century English Verse* (Larkin, 1973) both consciously revised Yeats’s controversial *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935* (Yeats, 1936) – where Yeats excluded poets who fought in World War One on the grounds, given in his preface, that ‘passive suffering is not a theme for poetry’ (Yeats, 1936, p. XV) – and in itself attempted to put a historical perspective on writing that was recent and current. Both books not only aimed at an overview but also inevitably influenced our perception of contemporary writers.

Today *The Norton Anthology Of Poetry* (Ferguson *et al.*, 2004) is perhaps the most influential anthology that attempts to cover poetry in light of the tradition and historical movements. David Wheatley makes reference to these issues for contemporary poetry and the poet in his *Contemporary British Poetry*, including the assertion that ‘The Norton Anthology represents canonicity as commercial juggernaut’ (Wheatley, 2015). Similarly, Leah Price, in an article for the *London Review of Books* discussing the influence of the literature anthology, argues with regard to *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* that, despite its protestations not to define the tradition, ‘Within the limits of the free market... the Norton has earned the authority of an Académie Française combined with that of an Index librorum prohibitorum’ (Price, 2000, p. 28).

Contemporary anthologies are generally more complex in what they are attempting to achieve than purely historical ones. They are not necessarily looking simply to codify, define or contextualise poetry that is considered the best or most significant; they may be espousing a



cause or illustrating a theory or highlighting a movement or aiming for particular appeal or redressing a perceived bias; they may be attempting to identify the most significant poets for the future or supporting them by publication; they may aim to illustrate contemporary thought and culture and identify where the poet sits within this or how they are influenced by it. This is somewhat different to the influence of tradition exerted by a historical anthology, instead exerting a creative and cultural influence by the climate it fosters and the values it promotes.

These intentions are very much foregrounded in their introductions. The editors of contemporary poetry anthologies do not generally share Quiller-Couch's stated ambition in his introduction: 'My wish is that the reader should in his own pleasure quite forget the editor's labour' (Quiller-Couch, 1919, p. 4).

For the poet, then, alongside the more general creative and cultural influences on them, there is no doubt that inclusion in an anthology plays an important, if potentially problematic, role in how they are perceived and defined, both by themselves and others.

This role can be usefully contrasted with the individual poetry book. For the individual collection, there is an element of selection, which can be analogous to that of the anthology, with possible criteria such as arrangement of sequences, selection of poems on a theme or chronological ordering. But for the individual collection there is no consideration of other poets, it is showcasing an individual's work. Alongside the potential input of editors and manuscript readers, the factors determining the content are very much personal ones, with historical, commercial or audience-orientated considerations generally playing a secondary role. The interplay of these factors for the individual collection is something I explore further in the sections 'The Organising Principle' and 'My Own Poetry Collection'. In contrast, the anthology has a wider range of influences on its content selection and perhaps much more of an eye on its commercial and critical audience, as suggested by the very different appeal of titles such as *The*

*Nation's Favourite Poems* (Jones, 1996) – discussed in Chapter 3 with regard to transmedia – and *Furies: A Poetry Anthology Of Women Warriors* (Lacey, 2014) .

On the other hand, it is a given that, no matter how wide-ranging, even the most eclectic anthology is highly selective, both of poets and poems. In fact, generally, there is a trade-off between the number of poets selected and the number of poems they are represented by, however substantial the volume. Contrast the 269 poets in Penguin's 596-page *Scanning The Century: The Penguin Book of The Twentieth Century In Poetry* (Forbes, 1999), mostly represented by a single poem, to the 8 poets in Carcanet's 158-page *New Caribbean Poetry: An Anthology* (Miller, 2007), where the average is 14 poems per poet. Of course the anthologies are doing very different things (note the phrasing of the full title in *Scanning The Century*, suggesting inclusivity rather than selectivity), but from the point of view of the poet, the way the published anthology represents them is very different too.

Further, an anthology by its very nature imposes its own frame of reference for both the poets and the poems included. This can be, as with Simon Armitage and Robert Crawford's *The Penguin Book Of Poetry From Britain And Ireland Since 1945*, to 'try to do justice to the work of writers now less fashionable' whilst being 'discriminatingly inclusive' (Armitage and Crawford, 1998, p. xxix), or, as with Bloodaxe's *The New Poetry*, to be 'defining' (Hulse, Kennedy and Morley, 1993, p. 27) or a deliberate alternative to other anthologies, what M. L. Rosenthal calls 'a certain liberation from the dominance of recent anthologies that have emphasised the work of the youngest writers only, or of special groups or tendencies only' in the introduction to his anthology *The New Modern Poetry* (Rosenthal, 1969, p. xxii). In light of subsequent anthologies, we might feel he was fighting a losing battle here, and his anthology now seems somewhat old-fashioned, despite, or perhaps because of, having both 'New' and 'Modern' in its title.

Whatever the criteria used, there is a particular impact on a poet when only one or two of their poems are regularly included in anthologies. If a poet is known chiefly for one or two key poems, either resulting in or as a consequence of being regularly anthologised, does this mean they are visible to a wider public, and so might attract people to their other poems, or does it mean the rest of their oeuvre is at best largely neglected or at worst ignored completely? Or is this inevitable anyway as time's judgement ticks away? Emily Temple's list of the poems most anthologised by twenty American anthologies over the twenty-five years 1992-2016 (Temple, 2017) does not settle the argument. William Carlos Williams' 'The Red Wheelbarrow' is in first place, in over half of the anthologies, but thirteen other poems by him appear in the list, showing in his case that the popularity of a single poem does not overshadow his other poetry. On the other hand, Stevie Smith's 'Not Waving But Drowning' and Louis MacNeice's 'Bagpipe Music' are the only poems by their authors to be included, suggesting perhaps it is a single poem they have become known by as time has gone by.

Time is indeed a great denuder of poetic bodies of work, but with contemporary anthologies the poems are selected by the editors, not by 'time', and they are using a range of judgements, some of which are based purely on the poem, but which are often focused more on the poet, and where, in the editor's view, the poet sits in the panoply of other poets and the cultural landscape more generally. Despite the care and deliberation taken over choice of poems, the wider impact on the poet of the anthology selection is one that cannot be ignored – in fact, it is often sought for by the anthology editor who wishes to highlight their chosen poets (rather than simply draw attention to individual poems) by inclusion.

With the impact of the anthology selection in mind, the relationship between individual poems and the poet is one that editors tackle in a variety of ways, and, it could be argued, one

popular current way is an attempt to find a generational coherence among current poets by way of the poems they have produced in the light of what other poets are also writing.

J. T. Welsch addresses this issue in his paper *The Generation Game: Cohort-making in Contemporary British Poetry* where he considers the various agendas of contemporary poetry anthology compilers, and in particular the generational anthologies of recent decades, arguing that ‘a narrative begins to emerge, less a coincidence of individual volumes than an on-going conversation between them about how (and why) to frame a generation.’ (Welsch, 2013, p. 1).

In this regard, he references Bloodaxe’s 21<sup>st</sup> century anthologies *Voice Recognition: 21 Poets For The 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Byrne and Pollard, 2009) and *Identity Parade: New British and Irish Poets* (Lumsden, 2010).

The very different nature of the anthologies is exemplified by the fact that while there are 21 poets chosen for *Voice Recognition: 21 Poets For The 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (an unhappy example, I feel, of a marketing-led if not largely title-led editorial decision) there are 85 included in *Identity Parade*. As we have noted, the number of poets included can be a significant feature of an anthology, what Larkin calls ‘wide rather than deep representation’ (Larkin, 1973, p. vi). There are of course, other major differences: the editorial decision by James Byrne and Clare Pollard in *Voice Recognition* to choose only poets who had not yet had a first collection published is fundamental to the nature and intention of the anthology.

Welsch also refers back to Bloodaxe’s *The New Poetry* (Hulse, Kennedy and Morley, 1993), itself of course a direct reference back to Alvarez’s seminal Penguin anthology *The New Poetry* (Alvarez, 1962), though the more recent volume does its best to work with the pluralism of recent poetry, rather than homogenise current activity or define a movement. This leads to a vague assertion by the editors that ‘The work collected here documents poetry in Britain and Ireland at last responding to the imperatives of our times’ (Hulse, Kennedy and Morley, 1993,

p27) which, however true (and noting the implied criticism of ‘at last’), does not really get us very far in terms of insight or coherence.

Welsch, as well as arguing that the anthologies are part of a wider cultural phenomenon of ‘generationalism’, also looks at other generational anthologies, such as the New Generation Poets anthology in 1994. It is interesting to note, in the context of the printed poetry book, that there was no anthology around the Next Generation poets of 2004 and we have yet to see what will emerge from the 2014 generation – there is at present only an historical website pointing us towards the individual collections and archiving a series of readings and events (Next Generation Poets, 2014). Whether this marks a conscious shift away from anthologisation in print form towards online grouping or is more a pragmatic decision, balancing the cost and resources against the impact of a print anthology, is difficult to speculate. Nevertheless, the fact that the New Generation poets are selected from those poets having published a poetry collection in the preceding ten years automatically gives unequivocal and critical weight to the printed poetry collection, as you might expect, since the scheme is run by The Poetry Book Society.

This led, in fact, to a response to the 2004 selection by Staple magazine, which in 2005 published issue 62 devoted to ‘An Alternative Generation’, a selection of poets from the UK’s small press output (Atkinson and Barrett, 2005) an implied protest against the dominance of the major poetry publishers. This selection based on print publication, and consequent value placed upon it, is examined further in the section ‘The Pros and Cons of Prizes’.

For the 2014 generation, there is more crossover between print and performance which may also have influenced the decision not to produce a print anthology; this is exemplified by the inclusion of Kate Tempest: in a profile in The Guardian, Nicholas Wroe argues that ‘Tempest, 28, does indeed cross boundaries as a rapper, poet, musician, social activist, dramatist and novelist’ (Wroe, 2014).

Despite this, Tempest herself, quoted in the same article, refers to being selected as a Next Generation poet as ‘a dream I couldn’t quite bear to acknowledge... I didn’t imagine I would ever be published as a poet’ (Wroe, 2014). The idea of being a published poet clearly stills holds enormous sway, even for someone so immersed in performance, and it will be interesting to see how far Tempest is anthologised in the future.

Of course a poetry anthology can fulfil – or attempt to fulfil – a range of ambitions, singularly or severally, which can include attempting to identify or define a generation, as in the examples above, but can cover many more intentions. The modern poetry anthology can aim, for example, to use poems to chronicle the times we live in or have lived through, such as *The Firebox* (O’Brien, 1998), *Scanning The Century* (Forbes, 1999) and Bloodaxe’s three volumes all edited by Neil Astley: *Staying Alive* (Astley, 2002) *Being Alive* (Astley, 2004) and *Being Human* (Astley, 2011).

Or, it can aim to bring the widest range of poems or poets to our attention, as with *The New Poetry* ((Hulse, Kennedy and Morley, 1993) or *Dear World and Everyone In It*, despite the disclaimer in editor Nathan Hamilton’s witty and thought-provoking introduction:

So, this is NOT an anthology of the best young poets in the UK. This is as good an anthology of good poetry being written by as varied a group of poets and poetries as The Editor could have compiled currently and in the time given and for the money paid. (Hamilton, 2013, p. 29)

We should, however, note here Welsch’s warning that:

While claiming to have, in some ways, progressed beyond the factionalism of former generations – the old poetry ‘schools’ or ‘movements’ so often caricatured in anthologies – the enforced anti-factionalism of these volumes risks eliding not only the meaningful cultural and social differences among its involuntary cohorts...but meaningful differences in practice as well. (Welsch, 2013, p. 9)

The contemporary poetry anthology can be a reader's resource, either educational, as in the GCSE anthologies produced by examining boards or the 2014 *Poetry By Heart* anthology (Blake *et al.*, 2014), or more cultural or social, as with Seamus Heaney's and Ted Hughes's innovative *The Rattle Bag* (Heaney and Hughes, 1983), *Emergency Kit: Poems For Strange Times* (Shapcott and Sweeney, 1996) or, perhaps more basically, with titles such as *The New Faber Book Of Love Poems* (Fenton, 2008) and the many, many others in this vein.

The contemporary poetry anthology can be a showcase for an imprint, magazine or competition as with the annual *The Forward Book of Poetry*, which celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary with the 2017 edition (Oswald, 2016). It can attempt to highlight or define a culture, as in Carcanet's *New Caribbean Poetry*, or a particular group, as in Bloodaxe's *Modern Women Poets* (Rees-Jones, 2008), or attempt to place current writing in the 'literary tradition' as in Michael Schmidt's modestly-titled *The Great Modern Poets: An Anthology of the Best Poets and Poetry since 1900* (Schmidt, 2010).

And many, if not most, anthologies cover more than one of these aims. The list is far from exhaustive and is somewhat exhausting. So many anthologies trying to do so many things. It may suggest that poetry in print is in rude health, but where does it leave the poet?

Despite this range of purpose, the anthology at its starkest can be seen as a judgement of one's peers, at its most benign as a showcase for the poet's talents – their range, depth and relevance. Now it might seem at first that the most unhappy judgement of all is not to be included, but as soon as we reflect on this, we see it to be a naïve view. First of all, the poet may not wish to be included, secondly, may not wish to have particular poems included and thirdly, with hindsight, may regret having been associated with the anthology once it has been published.

There is the well-documented appalled reaction of Seamus Heaney and other Irish poets to being included in Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion's *The Penguin Book of Contemporary*

*British Poetry* (Morrison and Motion, 1982), encapsulated in his poem ‘An Open Letter’ where he writes ‘No glass of ours was ever raised / To toast the Queen.’ (Heaney, 1983). But there are smaller instances that occur constantly. ‘Why did they choose that one?’ bemoaned Jackie Kay as she discussed her poem ‘Dusting The Phone’ included in the *Poetry By Heart* anthology (Blake *et al.*, 2014) at the Birmingham Literature Festival in 2014, noting that sitting by the telephone is not something people do any more. ‘Oh, well,’ she continued, and remarked that on balance it was better to be included than not, even if the reason for choosing that particular poem is puzzling to the poet (Kay, 2014). Perhaps she was persuaded by the companionship of other great poets in the anthology.

In this sense the position you occupy physically is directly connected to the position you occupy metaphorically, at any rate among poetry book editors and your peers. And they are mutually influential, in that the more you are published, the more established you become and the more established you become, the more you are published. The anthology still plays an important role in this and the proliferation of anthologies and their agendas only serves to re-enforce the possibilities and pitfalls of publication in an anthology for the poet.

I argue in the opening section that canonical attribution is more defining in print publications than online, and published anthologies play their part here, but I also note that association and context is a powerful influence across both print and digital media, so we might argue, if for the anthology your physical position is your metaphorical one, in the online environment your virtual position is your metaphorical one. In this way the issues around anthologisation are useful to compare and contrast with one’s online persona and, indeed, online poetry. I will now focus on the influence of digital technology on the poems themselves.



## Chapter 2. The Effect of Digital Media on the Poems Themselves

## **More Than the Words on the Screen**

There are some specific features of digital media that affect how we experience poems through them and, moreover, can affect how those poems are created – most often as a direct response to the idea of ‘rich media’ (by which I mean media that employ more than one means of stimulus) or, conversely, deliberately eschewing it and emphasising just the words on the page, notwithstanding the issue of typography, which is discussed in the next section.

Though it would be difficult to dispute that text is still the over-riding feature of the internet, given its ubiquity, it is seldom unaccompanied by images and the popularity of moving images on the internet is evidenced by video sites such as YouTube and Vimeo, as well as embedded videos within web pages, video on demand, and digital broadcasting and narrowcasting. Visual-based websites and apps such as Instagram, Tumblr, Flickr and Pinterest also speak to the highly visual culture of today.

That text is still the primary means of communication the extensive use of email and Twitter might suggest, but it is a very mixed economy and it is hard to imagine that Facebook would be popular without visual content. Twitter, itself, predicated initially on a character-count restraint and so fundamentally a word-based medium, now routinely incorporates images. True, the site LinkedIn is largely word-based (though even here images, photos and logos are very prevalent), and this is in many ways one of its key features, giving it a business-like, serious quality that is one of its selling points, but that also makes it an unattractive platform for personal expression and therefore the type of poetry that is popular on social media sites such as Tumblr and Instagram, where there is often a heavy reliance on image as well as text.

Nor should the strong visual element of digital media lead us to neglect the importance of its aural aspect. There is the automatic use of sound alongside video footage, but there is also a significant direct use of sound through audio tracks, radio on demand, podcasts and audio books.

As the technology has developed, so the use of both visual and aural elements in digital media has increased and has been increasingly accessed. There is no reason to believe that this trend will not continue, as the use of the smart phone brings the creation of video footage into the hands of much of the adult population. This has had and continues to have a profound effect on poetry. It influences how it is experienced and how it is generated.

Even if the poet chooses to focus on the printed page, it is with the knowledge of other approaches that make use of the visual, aural and interactive elements of digital transmission. This rich media environment can then extend the ways that the poet's work can be disseminated, applauded, disparaged, subverted, refashioned, embellished or redacted, with the poet, as discussed, often having little or no control over its use in these ways. This is a profound change and no less so because it is still evolving.

In fact, the very terminology becomes problematic. We have already noted the idea of the 'visitor' with regard to websites. We could use the general term 'audience' to encompass all those who experience performative digital media, but this suggests a specific receptivity that is not universally the case. To what extent is someone exploring a poem online – perhaps casually, perhaps earnestly – an 'audience member'? Could we refer to online researchers, for example, as members of an audience?

Similarly, the term 'readership' conveys more of an interaction and a less prescribed relationship, but implies words being read, rather than a poem being listened to or the watching of a poem being read out loud or a poetry film. It also suggests a collective quality that might be hard to justify. The term 'viewer' does not fully take into account the reading element or the interactive nature of the interaction either, so we are left to use these terms variously and approximately.

Meanwhile, the prevalence of sound and image in digital content continues to exert an influence over poetry. According to Dan Gioia in his book *Disappearing Ink*, the ‘shift from print culture to electronic media’ (Gioia, 2004, p. 5) has led to a steady increase in the expectation of reading or performance of poetry by both the poet and the audience ‘as readers turn into viewers and listeners’ (Gioia, 2004, p. 10). For him, this move towards oral poetry, poetry designed for listening and watching, fuelled and reflected by the electronic media ‘isn’t merely a methodological change; it is an epistemological transformation’ (Gioia, 2014, p. 5). He argues it has led to a fundamental re-evaluation of poetry itself. After noting that ‘The conventional academic perspective views poetry as a series of texts placed in a historical or thematic framework of other texts’ he argues ‘That historical frame of reference is no longer relevant because the forces affecting contemporary poetry now mostly come from altogether outside that tradition’ (Gioia, 2014, p. 6). The forces he refers to are those promulgating ‘the shift from written to oral presentation’ as ‘the new popular poetry uses the apparatus of the musical entertainment world – recordings, radio, concert halls, nightclubs, auditoriums, bars and festivals’ (Gioia, 2004, p. 10). Much of this is outside the internet, of course, but digital media have been quick to platform this work and assist both in its creation and dissemination.

He couples this distribution model with the economic argument that a poetry book by itself will not attract enough attention and sales to justify its publication in isolation and that public readings are required to garner interest, support and sales: he contends that ‘a book of poems, no matter how superb, can no longer be sure of attracting an audience by means of print alone.’ (Gioia, 2004, p 21). Here he refers to reviews and articles as well as the actual book.

Gioia goes on to argue that this move to poetry performance (in all its manifestations) has affected the work itself, i.e. the nature of the poems being written (Gioia, 2004, pp. 22-26). In fact, he argues it has fuelled a resurgence in rhyme and metre, evidencing rap as the most notable

example, but widens this out to suggest that this re-positioning of the poet as a performer leads to a more stylised poetry in general:

It transforms the identity of the author from writer to entertainer, from an invisible creator of typographic language to a physical presence performing aloud.  
(Gioia, 2004, p. 11)

This argument is based on the oral nature of the work, but can be extended, and, indeed, rendered more complex, by the additional navigation of this oral quality and interactive persona through the medium of the internet and social networks. This move towards a personalisation and performative quality is one of the important ways that digital technology has impacted on aspects of contemporary poetry. I discuss how my own practice informs my consideration of this performative element in the section ‘The Symbiosis Between Online and Print Publication’.

But the internet is various. In contrast to this idea of the poet as performer, a site that restricts itself entirely to text is the aptly named *Your World of Text* (Your World Of Text, 2017). This, unexpectedly perhaps, is more akin to a MMOG or Massively Multiplayer Online Game than a literary site, with the users explicitly referred to as players. It allows direct revision of each other’s work, generally words, though there are images created by letter shapes. Despite its innovative nature, much of the content is juvenile and fragmentary and the purpose underpinning the site, that of interaction and revision, seems to have led to a reductive way of expression, rather than enrichment. The juxtaposition of serious, comic, irreverent and just plain silly I would argue detracts from the overall experience. The area where you might expect to find poems has an odd mix of extant poems, comic verse and fragments, some of which clearly have meaning for their originators, but which do not resonate for the viewer:

he watched the way  
I threw the stone  
and after I had thrown  
The way I watch myself  
Waiting  
(Your World Of Text, 2017)

Though focusing on text rather than poetry as such, here is an interesting example of a website where the lack of a real-world context undermines value and where a sense of a shared authorship is not fostered, despite the practical ability to edit each other's work on the site. In fact, the focus on production and generation (or, one might say, regeneration or, stretching the term somewhat, degeneration) is part of that distancing process. It is an interesting experiment and is a reminder that online material that is removed from everyday experience may have more value as exploration than achieved communication.

Having said this, the fragmentation, anonymity, or, often, fluidity of attribution that the internet allows can be a useful creative or developmental force. The Flarf movement, used by its founder Gary Sullivan to create poems through 'an attempt to do something I "wasn't supposed to" do' (Sullivan, 2014) gained momentum precisely because it decontextualized, deconstructed or over-wrote online content through extraction and adaptation. Sullivan defines Flarf in four ways, all pertinent to the idea of the internet as a liberating, counter-cultural or anarchic force:

Flarf: A quality of intentional or unintentional "flarfiness." A kind of corrosive, cute, or cloying, awfulness. Wrong. Un-P.C. Out of control. "Not okay."

Flarf (2): The work of a community of poets dedicated to exploration of "flarfiness." Heavy usage of Google search results in the creation of poems, plays, etc., though not exclusively Google-based. Community in the sense that one example leads to another's reply—is, in some part, contingent upon community interaction of this sort. Poems created, revised, changed by others, incorporated, plagiarized, etc., in semi-public.

Flarf (3) (verb): To bring out the inherent awfulness, etc., of some pre-existing text.

Flarfy: To be wrong, awkward, stumbling, semi-coherent, fucked-up, un-P.C. To take unexpected turns; to be jarring. Doing what one is “not supposed to do.” (Sullivan, 2011)

Here we see poems that have cultural and artistic ambitions heavily influenced by the internet and facilitated by it: for source material, for distribution and for points of reference, providing a clear if limited influence on contemporary poetry, and an interesting counterpoint to the reductivity that can occur on the internet with sites such as *Your World of Text* through lack of personal, cultural or geographical context.

This also points to a significant current practice in the process of poem creation utilised by poets that the internet promulgates, that of collaboration and shared space. This can, of course, take place in non-digital environments, for example I facilitated and shaped the collaborative poem ‘Metal’ at Eastside Gallery in Birmingham, given in Appendix 3, which was subsequently published in *Iris of a Peeping Eye* (Davidson and Monks, 2013, p.23) and Vahni Capildeo’s poetry collection *Measures of Expatriation* references her ‘approaches to poetry through collaborative and immersive events’ (Capildeo, 2016, p. 4). The collection itself reflects other influences from the digital world, including direct content, as in the poem ‘Laptop Blue Screen Rationalisation’, with its repeated line ‘I need to delete the shortcut that is Timothy’ (Capildeo, 2016, p. 57) and in the use of strikethrough in several poems, such as ‘The Poet Transformed Into Space’, to suggest something deleted but still there. Such examples show how these approaches to poetry creation can and do exist independent of digital media, but also how they are influenced by it. There are also many poets whose practice overlaps the different platforms, for example Harry Giles, whose Artist Statement on their online blog includes

the following paragraph, showing the cross-fertilisation and range of practice, form and content that can exist across different platforms:

I explore the performance possibilities of internet spaces. I use social media and blogging extensively to build public discussion around each project: increasingly my performances take place simultaneously online and offline. *I Want to Blow up the Palace of Holyroodhouse*, for example, exists as research and explosions in public spaces, discussions and arguments with participants around those events, a continuing Twitterstream and discussion during each event, and satirical online auto-surveillance reporting. My website is a source of performance and documentation together. (Giles, 2017)

A more direct example of writing poetry specifically for the internet is the poem ‘I Dream of Canute (& the Sea is Rising)’ by Stevie Ronnie (Ronnie, 2016a). This is a poem (or, as Ronnie describes it, ‘a digital public artwork that takes the form of a poem’) that is designed, through computer coding, to disappear a line a year for the next one hundred years, as a way of referencing the projected rise in sea level of 100cms over that time. It is difficult to see how this could be recreated on the printed page. Hosting it on a website also allows the reader to look at associated pages, referencing the project behind the poem and other cross-form work, such as the author’s triptych of *Filmpoems* (Ronnie, 2016b), providing a clear context and purpose.

A very different example of poems that are created on and for the web are those on the website *Color Yourself Inspired* developed by Andrew Demirjian and James Proctor (Demirjian, 2017). This uses computer programming to create an ongoing series of brief computer-generated poems, together with related visuals and sound, using colour descriptions from the American paint-supplier Benjamin Moore. Here, in contrast to the appeal to longevity of Ronnie, the fleeting quality of the associations and phrases seems deliberately to echo the ephemeral and dislocating nature of the internet.



There are also the more academically-focused e-poetry activities of university-based projects and websites, such as the Poetry Beyond Text project, based at the universities of Dundee and Kent, which considered ‘Vision, Text and Cognition’ both critically and creatively (Poetry Beyond Text, 2012) and, outside the UK, the long-standing Electronic Poetry Center, founded at the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1995 (Electronic Poetry Center, 2018) and associated sites such as PennSound, based at the University of Pennsylvania (PennSound, 2018). These place the focus very much on research and so form a very specific part of the online poetry ecology, but their wide range of activities also contribute importantly to the digital poetry world.

### **The Challenge of Typography**

Many of these examples, however, raise the issue of typography when presenting poems on digital platforms. The contemporary anthologies *Out Of Everywhere 2* (Critchley, 2015) and *Dear World and Everyone In It* (Hamilton, 2013), containing poems with a wide range of formats, suggest how important typography still is for poets today, especially, of course, for those overtly experimenting with form. These range from Tina Darragh’s palimpsest poems (Critchley, 2015, pp. 32-34) to Paula Claire’s ‘Beebibles’ (Critchley, 2015, p. 37), described by the author as ‘Tracings of split-open foxgloves, revealing the unique coded messages inside each one, privy only to the bees’ (Critchley, 2015, p. 41) to Rebecca Cremin’s justified and footnoted text in her poem ‘To be on a page’ (Hamilton, 2013, pp. 74-77).

Although some of the poems in these anthologies are clearly influenced by visual art, the experimentation with typography may have been accelerated by the digital platforms we often actually write on (or, perhaps sometimes more accurately, create on) as well as by a greater

visual literacy that digital (and broadcast) media has helped to develop. It may also be partly because the poet can create the piece electronically much more easily, radically and accurately in terms of intended layout and final appearance than ever before, simply because the software makes it possible. It is easier than ever to experiment with fonts, spacing, point size and other typographical features as we sit at our computer or other device. Not only easier, but also more overtly purposeful, with the knowledge that this typography can often be directly – and relatively easily – used in the published version through digital file transfer.

My own poem ‘Therefore Let The Moon’ was influenced by *A Humument* by Tom Phillips (Phillips, 1997), where words and phrases are isolated from a larger work (manually, not digitally). My poem began as a physical cut and paste, as shown in Appendix 2, but then I recreated a version of it using the tools of Microsoft Word to create the typography of the final poem as included in the collection. This is evidence of how the ease of digital manipulation by the writer can impact on the poem itself.

There is something of a contradiction, then, that the easier it has become, through digital technology, to be creative and radical in terms of typography, the harder it has become, because of that same technology, to control the accuracy of how those very poems are experienced by the reader on a digital device. This is because, put simply, it can be harder to control the format and presentation on digital platforms due to the great range of devices and the even greater range of software, both proprietary and open-source, being run on them.

As Carcanet put it at the end of their eBooks, for example Capildeo’s *Measures Of Expatriation*:

Every effort has been made by the publisher to reproduce the formatting of the original print edition in electronic format. However, poem formatting may change according to reading device and font size. (Capildeo, 2016, p. 266)

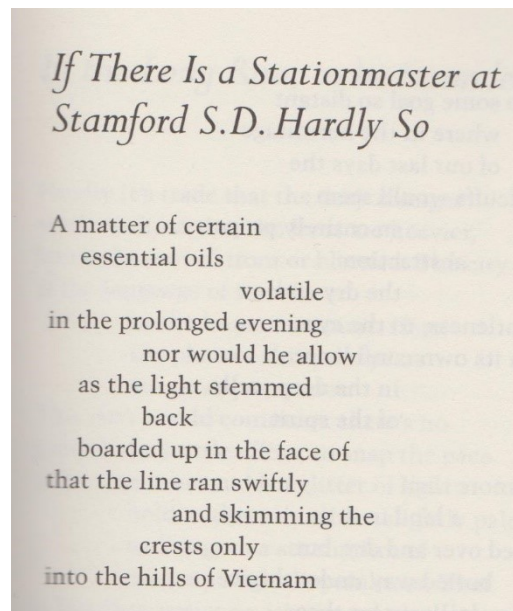
It is also an issue because of the third-party posting referenced earlier. J. H. Prynne's *The White Stones* (Prynne, 2016), to give a typical example, has many poems dependent on typography as part of their meaning and yet they can appear online without the careful formatting of the book: they appear on the *Genius* website, un-indented and without the same stanza breaks as the originals (Genius, 2017). Here is a comparison of the first verse of 'If There Is a Stationmaster at Stamford S.D. Hardly So' showing how the change in typography affects the delicate meaning:

Genius Website Version

IF THERE IS A STATIONMASTER AT  
STAMFORD S.D. HARDLY SO LYRICS

A matter of certain  
essential oils  
volatile  
in the prolonged evening  
nor would he allow  
as the light stemmed  
back  
boarded up in the face of  
that the line ran swiftly  
and skimming the  
crests only  
into the hills of Vietnam

Printed Book Version (NYRB edition)



This digital formatting issue is one that is not just relevant to the poet. It is true for all texts, including fiction and non-fiction works. With a poem, however, the form can be such an intrinsic part of the content that changes in format from one device to another can alter the way the poem is read and interpreted and therefore, either subtly or more fundamentally, its meaning.

Format is also relevant for texts of all kinds, when it becomes not just an issue of typography, but of access. As David Rothman put it in *Publishers Weekly* as long ago as 2006,

here referring specifically to eBooks (also referred to as e-books), but with comments also relevant to online platforms:

Welcome to the Tower of e-Babel. The Tower is the bane of publishers, online retailers, librarians and book-lovers. In the past few decades, at least 20 clashing e-book formats have popped up... and no format has performed strongly enough to crush the others. (Rothman, 2006)

The eBook itself is discussed in Chapter 3, but the issue of format, both in terms of accuracy and access, applies across all digital devices and platforms. There are different approaches to dealing with this challenge, but the simplest is the use of PDF (Portable Document Format, published by Adobe). This is a very straightforward way of preserving the format of a poem. It does not, however, interact very readily with online browsing, since it opens as a static document. And even here, the PDF, despite its basic nature, can appear differently on different devices and on different platforms on the same device. These need to be physically checked and even then the actual look for the individual reader with their individual device is hard to control. The great advantage of the PDF format, however, is that it is readily accessible by a wide range of digital devices.

The journal *Tender* (Tender, 2017), for example, is published solely as a PDF (available digitally via the website) allowing the typography of the poems, which is often a fundamental element of their meaning, to be carefully controlled, as well as the juxtaposition of the art works alongside the text.

Other presentational formats can present more of an access and format-control challenge. *Visual Editions*, a print and online publishing house specialising in innovative books that can only be read digitally, flags up a warning on its download titles, in case it cannot be accessed by the prospective reader's software, as with *The Truth About Cats and Dogs* by Sam Riviere and Joe Dunthorne: 'This book doesn't like every device. Please try before buying' (Visual Editions,

2016a). Here, the very complexity and richness of the online book limits its accessibility. There is clearly a tension between controlling the appearance of the material and its wide dissemination.

*Visual Editions* are an interesting example of how digital technology can affect the way material, often poetry, is created and transmitted. Their mission statement is:

We believe in creating new and playful reading experiences, both on and off the screen. We believe in publishing books as beautiful cultural objects, championing great writing by some of the greatest writers in the world. We believe in making digital books that go beyond books as PDFs because frankly we think readers deserve more. (Visual Editions, 2016b)

This is not connected necessarily to price (though this is often a factor) but to the nature of the market in a different way: to its technological sophistication. It is linked to the different stages people are at with regard to current technology, both ownership and ease of use. It is a reminder of how the technology is very much in flux. Unlike the printed book, which is an artefact (even if, in some cases, not actually printed until ordered), digital publication lives in a virtual world and the material is mediated by the individual device and software of the reader. The publisher and therefore the poet (who may, of course, be the publisher) cannot entirely control the end-user interface and therefore the way the poem is seen.

Anna Gerber and Britt Iverson of *Visual Editions* and its offshoot *Editions at Play* are very aware of these issues, as they made clear at a presentation at the Mix Conference at Bath Spa University in 2017, where they reflected on several aspects of digital and physical books, including the concepts of ownership and permanence, their desire to create a reader experience, as opposed to a media one, whilst acknowledging, as Iverson put it, that ‘reading is a visual as well as a literary experience’ and, importantly, the question of access, which they acknowledged can be problematic. In their case, recognising that the Google Play platform was off-putting, with

too many clicks to gain access – here the issue being not one of digital compatibility but of digital complexity (Gerber and Iverson, 2017).

If digital technology can pose formatting challenges as far as digital publication is concerned, ironically it has, through digital printing, made the presentation of many different poetic layouts relative commonplace in the printed book.

The negative aspect, however, of the digital publishing of print books is that the book itself can be less well-presented than if conventionally published, due to the lower quality of the image and text. In the *Out Of Everywhere* anthology, for example, the poems by Paula Claire are difficult to read because of the way they have been printed (Out of Everywhere, 1996, pp. 35-40). Granted, these are quite experimental texts and so hard to publish accurately, but here both the opportunities and the limitations of digital publishing for print books can be seen. An example of how I explored this in my own practice can be seen with ‘Therefore Let The Moon’, where I have adapted the original cut-and-paste format as shown in Appendix 2 to a more regularised typography in the printed version in Part 3 of the collection. Here, however, I used the process of electronic conversion to adapt and rework the text further, providing an example of working within the medium that I explore more generally in the next section.

It is also important to note that, as a counter to the issues around accuracy and clarity of electronic reproduction, the relatively low cost and availability of digital techniques for publishing print books does allow for a very wide range of poems with distinctive typographical features to appear in affordable print editions.

Several of my poems in the collection use a range of typographical features and so demonstrate the relative ease of reproducing them electronically and then printing them in book form from this electronic version. This is not quite the same as publishing on a larger scale, but does indicate, in my practice, how this can be achieved. Examples here include what might be

seen as concrete poems such as ‘Knickerbocker Glory Sunset’, ‘Screw The Lid Down Tight’ and ‘The Importance of Cats In Ancient Egypt’, through to ones that use typography in a less concrete way, such as ‘Pointy Shoes’, ‘A Side Portrait’ (in ‘Five Poems For Ezra Pound’), and ‘The Mirror of Literature’.

This shows how it is not just poets who define themselves as experimental who can present unusually formatted poems in standard book format. Similarly, the poet Ian Strachan has such a poem at the beginning of his section of the anthology *New Caribbean Poetry* (Miller, 2007), a book that mostly (though not entirely) contains traditionally stanzaic poems. In fact, the anthology is deceptive here. There are a wider range of formats than the conventional overall appearance might suggest, especially to embody particular sounds and rhythms, for example the sequence from Shara McCallum’s ‘jack mandoora me choose none’ (McCallum, 2007, pp. 89-90). This may owe something to the influence of the American academic experimentalist tradition on some of the writers, or a response to aural cultural heritage, or it may be a sign of the changing mainstream poetic landscape.

Although not a shape poem as such, Ian Strachan’s poem uses shape to help convey its meaning. It is called, very appropriately for our consideration of media, ‘gods and spirits are summoned through the portal divine’ and includes a series of sounds represented typographically, ending (as far as *my* formatting software allows):

‘da nan a naaaa na  
nan a nan a nan a

dan nan a nan a naaaaaaaaa  
dan na naaaaaaaaa

um um-um

... gone, like shadows’

(Strachan, 2007, pp. 119-121)

An appropriate comment, perhaps, on the challenges and opportunities of typography in today's digital poetry world.

### **Writing In The Medium**

Another aspect of digital technology is that the increasing portability of digital devices means that formatting may form a part of the very notes or initial ideas. I myself have used my iPhone Notes for ideas and potential first drafts and the pre-set format of the platform (e.g. the automatic line breaks) has influenced the initial shaping of them – though, in truth, little of this has survived the redrafting process. The format of my poem 'What Is A Man To Do', for example, owes less to its drafting on the iPhone and more to the traditional use of refrain in attempting to capture a mood. Similarly, 'Views of Mount Fuji' was drafted on iPhone Notes and the reworking was an attempt to capture the initial thought behind each piece. Again, the formatting was controlled by myself directly as the poet. I did, additionally, use digital formatting, through the basic tools of Microsoft Word, to adapt and adjust the final layout as seen in the collection in Section 2.

The impact of the immediate writing environment on the creation of the piece should also be acknowledged here: we can now compose electronically in a range of environments. What is happening around us is part of the creative process, and may in fact be the subject of the poem; the use of the portable device can make its direct capture immediate and, notably, can make it less like notes or a draft and more like a created piece in its own right, simply because it is closer to the publication platform. As Manfred H. Breede notes in *The Brave New World of Publishing*, with regard to digital developments in the mechanics of the printed book, '... this earliest



creative writing stage is already integrated into the industrial book production phase' (Breede, 2008).

This ability to write in the environment you are writing about is, of course, not a function just of the laptop, tablet or hand-held device – the pencil and notebook took the writer out of the studio (garret, office or study) well before the development of the portable colour tube did the same for the oil painter. Nevertheless, there is something of an analogy, since just as the pencil and pocket sketchbook of the artist was supplemented by the ability to paint, not from notes or memory, but directly from what was in front of them, through advances in technology, so too the writer of today could, if they wished, create directly onto the digital device and publish instantly in digital form (to the web or other platform).

This development of instant publishing that digital technology allows may be innovative, but its use depends upon the approach of the poet to reworking and redrafting. The reworking of poems is still considered a key element of the craft – Hemingway's aphorism from *A Moveable Feast* that 'the only kind of writing is rewriting' (Hemingway, 2004, p. 7) is still the bedrock of most creative writing teaching and practice. In the same book, Hemingway also wrote 'I belong to this notebook and this pencil' (Hemingway 2004 p. 3) neatly illustrating the two elements – initial words and final draft – and the artistic distance that can separate them.

My poem 'The Chroniclers' was drafted in a café on paper and both its structure and content clearly owe something to the location and the medium. The long lines were perhaps my way of luxuriating in the freedom of the paper (as opposed to the limited line length of iPhone Notes), though they are also an attempt to suggest the languidness and novelistic nature of the thoughts. I deliberately maintained the long lines for this reason in the redrafting process.

## **Tweet-Poems**

But, is this distance between draft and finished piece changing, at least in some circumstances? How carefully crafted, for example, are tweet-poems, even when there is artistic intent behind them? To what extent are they, rather, ‘in the moment’? It is hard to know, for example, if this tweet-poem by Ian McMillan, sent out early one morning in March, is a spontaneous or a carefully-crafted aubade:

Northallerton:  
The sky  
has watered down  
Its grey paint.

(McMillan, 2017)

The nature of the Twitter medium is predicated on the idea that the content is what is in your mind at the time. This may just mean that it is innately social or journalistic and therefore inimical to poetic expression. Or it may suggest an opportunity for an instant platform. For poems composed within the original tweet limit of 140 characters, or even the expanded 280 character-limit introduced in November 2017, the stricture of the form means there is some craft, though how far this is poetic is, of course, part of the interpretation of the tweet. The Twitter-poem itself could be laboured over as long as the most carefully-composed haiku or dashed off quickly in an attempt to capture the instant. Or, of course, it could be both: written and sent in the moment, then carefully honed for more considered publication later. Is this the best or the worst of both worlds?

The poem as tweet is, in fact, conditioned not just by the actual form, but by the medium – here it is not just the sender who is bound by expectations, but the receiver too. Just as it is assumed that there is an immediacy to the writing, so it is assumed that there is an immediacy to

the reading. The way the poem is experienced in the tweet is conditioned by the medium of Twitter: not just the form, but the context is uncompromising. Just as with digital platforms with less rigid conventions, the context influences the experience, but here it is very directly evident.

The ability to rework or, at any rate, select and republish does then allow for the tweets to be experienced differently, though the initial process would no doubt form part of this new context. Again, there is a potential symbiosis, if the writer wishes and the market of print publishing allows, between the digital and the print. Here, however, we can see very starkly how the platform and the process it engenders inform the actual poems written. Twitter poems are an extreme example of how the digital platform can raise general issues and specific opportunities.

And yet, as so often with artistic endeavour, subversion is at work. The basic premise and tenets of the Twitter platform are: immediacy of thought, unedited response to an occurrence or encounter, and direct reference to a date and time-sensitive activity, such as an event attended or upcoming. None of these apply to the Twitter and SMS-based Micropoetry Society (Micropoetry, 2017).

Here the constrained forms of SMS (Short Messaging Service) texts, limited to 160 characters and Twitter, originally limited to 140 characters, now 280 characters, are utilised specifically for poetry. There are two aspects of the Micropoetry Society that are notable for the practising poet. Firstly, they provide a specific platform for the poetry – the poem is not just sent out as a tweet or text alongside all the other tweets and texts that are looking to inform, opine or ask questions. They create an online context and shared community for the poems; one of the great abilities of the internet. This is achieved through the website, use of hashtags and related activities of the organisation and is also created by the branding of the organisation itself, but also, importantly, takes place over real time, through weekly prompts, making use of the option for immediacy on the internet.

An interesting comparison here is with LossLit, the online writing forum about loss referenced earlier, which hosts a live twitter forum using #writeclub that ‘invites Tweet-length responses to ‘loss’. First Wed every month, 9pm GMT.’ (LossLit, 2016). An example of how the immediacy of the internet can be allied to a framework and context.

Secondly, there is an assumption with regard to creative process. It is assumed that the poems are written on a mobile device, either as a tweet or text:

Have you ever written a cool poem/message on your phone or twitter and wanted a place to save and share them with people who do the same? Well, welcome to Micropoetry.com! (Micropoetry, 2017)

This is one of the ways that the poems are distinguished from haiku or other short-form poems – they are written on, as well as for, the medium. This gives them an assumed immediacy of creation and transmission, as well as suggesting less rewriting. The nature of the medium affects the creation of the poem, as well as the nature of the transmission and the assumed nature of the audience – people who subscribe to the idea and ethos of Micropoetry and who are often fellow practitioners.

It is perhaps worth noting here that one of the best-known examples of tweets into books, *Selected Tweets* (Lin and Gonzalez, 2015) is, in fact, viewed more as a narrative than a poetry collection, despite both authors being notable poets, though Tao Lin is better known as a novelist. Juliet Escoria in her introduction to an online Q&A account on *The Fader* website observes, ‘As a collection, it leaves one with questions about the performance aspect of Twitter, the performative act of tweeting’ (The Fader, 2015). She is interested in what the book reveals about how the medium effects meaning. The transition into book form does, in fact, fix the meaning in a different way and gives space for this analysis. The form of the interaction with the

reader is carefully controlled in a way that the object-based book does so well and the time-based digital platforms find harder to achieve.

I have already referenced the dual nature of Twitter – personal comment and expression and a relatively impersonal platform for poetry – and the move to printed book form might suggest an emphasis on the poetry. A cautionary note here, though, at the intertwining of the poetry and the poet, the art and the artist that the internet, that most impersonal of platforms containing the most personal of messages, promotes so readily. Following websites such as *Poet In Chief* (Poet In Chief, 2017) that turn Donald Trump’s tweets into poems, Canongate publishers have now produced a print book of Donald Trump tweet-poems, *The Beautiful Poetry of Donald Trump* (Sears, 2017). Comic it may be (the strapline is ‘It’s a new word order’), but it does exemplify the way the internet thrives on a context and a persona for its content and the way print media and poetry publishers respond to the subsequent popularity.

## **The Pros and Cons of Prizes**

Poetry competitions and prizes are a major feature of the poetry world and so I wish to consider them here as part of the ecology of online and print publication: their influence, in the context of digital technology, on individual poems, poetry collections and the poet’s persona.

### **I. Competitions For Unpublished Poems**

There are many poetry competitions for unpublished individual poems and for groups of poems, from those organised by the small local self-run poetry group to the prestigious annual National Poetry Competition run by the Poetry Society. The listings on the Poetry Kit poetry competitions website (The Poetry Kit, 2017) and the monthly listing from the Poetry Library

(Poetry Library, 2017c) include competitions as varied as: the Barnet Open Poetry Competition, run by Barnet Arts Council in the London borough of Barnet; the Plough International Poetry Prize, run by the Plough Arts Centre in Torrington; the Bare Fiction, Prole Laureate and Shooter Literary Magazine Poetry Competitions run by the respective magazines; the Poetry Kit's own competition, the prestigious Manchester Poetry Prize and the aforementioned National Poetry Competition.

There has long been controversy over the merits of these competitions, which often require a fee to enter and which can be seen either as a useful way of identifying and championing good poetry, poetry writing and poets, or as a device for extracting money aimed at bringing welcome revenue to poetry organisations, or, of course, a combination of the two. Much here will depend on motive and, to some extent, outcome. These competitions have, nevertheless, become generally accepted and they undoubtedly feed in to the ecology of the poetry world for good or ill. I am considering here two aspects of them that specifically relate to digital media and book publication.

Firstly, poetry competitions generally make good use of the digital environment through the internet and social media, and this has helped them flourish and widen their reach. Sites such as *Submittable* have helped here. Although it covers all types of submissions, it is used by over 9,000 organisations, with well over five million submissions in under seven years (Submittable, 2017) and is used by a range of poetry organisations.

The overwhelming majority of these competitions, however, use the internet and social media largely to disseminate information and to promote the competition, rather than with regard to content. This content has remained remarkably static as a single, short poem, albeit with variations around theme, initial prompt or sometimes a specific focus on a particular form.

We can therefore see poetry competitions as part of the positive widening and democratisation of poetry that digital technology allows but, paradoxically, at the same time having an arguably negative impact on poetic development through their strong focus on the traditional short poem. The maximum number of lines for a single competition poem is typically 40, a maximum set, for example, by the National Poetry Competition run by The Poetry Society (The Poetry Society, 2017a).

Secondly, there are a significant number of small publishers who use competitions as part of their publication model, Templar Poets and Cinnamon Press being well-known examples. There is also the long-standing book and pamphlet competition run by The Poetry Business in conjunction with Smith/Doorstop Books and The Wordsworth Trust (The Poetry Business, 2017). A similar scheme, aimed at mentoring and supporting poets alongside publication and only open to those without a full-length book publication, is the Primers competition run by The Poetry School and Nine Arches Press (The Poetry School, 2017). Several of these competitions are for a group of poems with the prize being pamphlet publication or book publication. Again, there may be a mix of motives here, but the result is a number of publications through the competition route that would not have happened otherwise. Admittedly, these are often pamphlet publications and full book publication is less common. The Primers scheme publishes several poets in a single volume under the Primers title, so is something, intentionally, of a half-way house here.

Whether pamphlet or book publication, this is a literal reinforcement of the idea of the poetry book as the top prize for the poet. The more general competitions also, alongside the cash prizes and the kudos of winning, which are, of course, major factors, often publish an anthology of winning poems, which again fits with the model of print publication as a desired outcome,

though readings and general promotion, including online postings, are sometimes provided instead.

These poetry competitions run by publishers and predicated on the print publication model are therefore a force for print rather than digital publication. They are one of the many ways in which the poetry book has evolved and adapted and shown its resilience in the digital world. Again, the relationship is a complex one: rather than supplanting or providing alternative outlets, in the realm of the poetry competition the internet allows the market for printed books to widen and flourish.

Digital technology, through the online submission by uploaded electronic document (whether via Submittable or directly), together with the ease of conversion of file formats, also helps the competition connect directly with the publication process itself, since the material is already in a digital format. We should also note that eBook publication sometimes accompanies the printed book (though not the pamphlet), again showing the overlap of the different technologies and platforms.

From the poet's perspective the poetry competition is a mixed blessing. My own experience of poetry competitions is a chequered one. I have entered them sporadically over the years and won two relatively small-scale ones. This boosted both my confidence and my profile, both in a small but significant way and so was undoubtedly beneficial. I have, however, not unexpectedly, lost more than I have won and this does, of course, have a negative effect on confidence and sense of achievement. As well as entering poems competitively, I have also submitted competitively for anthology publication and been accepted – again this is a welcome boost to both morale and profile.

There is also another factor: the competition does skew the creative process. Just as Gioia argues that the move towards oral poetry and the consequent composing of poems for live



readings – or with live readings in mind – influences the nature and type of poetry being created, so the prevalence of competitions fosters poetry written for them – or with them in mind.

Occasionally I have had unpublished poems that fitted the competition brief, but often a new poem is needed. This can be a catalyst to creativity, but it can also be a dragging factor on one's own spontaneity and take the focus from one's own preoccupations and concerns. It can also take time, attention and energy from a longer project or other, more personal poems.

There is also the issue of the style and form of the poem. The type of poem that stands out from many others in a competition is often very different from the poem that fit into one's own body of work – the context of one's own voice, attitudes and persona built up over a range of poems written over time is different from the context of many other voices vying for attention. The competition poem in a personal collection may blend in well with the others, but it may also stand out as one written mainly to impress.

In the attached collection, only 'The Balloon Ride' was written in response to a competition – it was one of the successful poems in the *Poetry Postcards* scheme run by Poetry on Loan. In this case there was a twenty line limit and a given topic ('Onwards, upwards, freedom') and I did write it to these criteria, which is evident when you are aware of them. I felt, however, the poem was sufficiently well-achieved in its own right to deserve its place in the collection, an illustration of how competitions can both influence and enable poetry.

Not only this, I have written many poems as responses to commissions or as part of residencies or events and this for me is often a good focus for achieving a poem. I find a clear outcome and definite purpose to the writing of a poem can be highly motivating. The poems 'The Box' and 'The Sewing Basket', for example, were both written as responses to art work and for a sharing event. Here there is perhaps more scope for personal response and freedom to explore one's own concerns than a specific competition might allow. There is also no doubt that

the parameters of the writing of the poems – using a specific stimulus, able to be read out at an event for no longer than five minutes – fundamentally influenced the actual poems produced. The tension then between the stimulus of writing to a brief and what one’s own creative process generates is as evident now as it ever was.

The digital world again sends mixed messages here. There is no doubt that social media and the outlet of a blog or online forum allows and to some extent encourages personal poetry, but the popularity of online prompts and the burgeoning of online writing communities where the members give each other tasks and deadlines or the convenor sets a structure works in the other direction. There are many examples of poetry prompts online, a notably active one being NaPoWriMo. (NaPoWriMo, 2017), based on the national poetry writing month of April, with thirty writing prompts, one for each day of that month. This combination of set task and open access is interesting to note, if not altogether surprising. Once more we see a paradox at work as the open platform allows very prescriptive rules to be imposed. These rules are then used in substantial numbers by poets to challenge themselves – embracing the creativity of constraint.

## **II. Poetry Prizes for Published Poems**

In the way that poetry competitions for unpublished poems are a factor in the ecosystem of print and digital poetry, poetry prizes for published poetry have a significant influence too. Here there are two aspects: the extent to which poetry prizes promote the poetry book and the way they affect the poet’s persona in the digital age.

The role of The Poetry Book Society (now run by Inpress) has been a long-standing one here. It does, of course, as its name indicates, overtly promote the poetry book and selects a book for its members each quarter. As previously noted, it created and administered the New and Next

Generation Poets scheme, not a prize as such but an award, based on the publication of a poetry book collection over the previous ten years. It also administered (in honour of its founder) the T. S. Eliot Prize from 1993 until 2016, when the prize was taken over by the T. S. Eliot Foundation.

With a quote on its website from *The Independent* that it is ‘the world’s top poetry award’ (T. S. Eliot Foundation, 2017) and a 2018 prize of £25,000, there is no doubt The T. S. Eliot Prize is a major prize for poets. It is also based fundamentally on a published poetry collection. One of several prizes, including the Forward Prize and the Costa Book Award for Poetry, that continue the narrative of the fundamental importance of the poetry book.

The Forward prize is run by the Forward Arts Foundation, which in fact runs three competitions, as they explain on their website:

The Forward Prizes for Poetry are the most coveted awards for poetry published in Britain and Ireland: they have played a key role in bringing contemporary poetry to the attention of the wider public for over a quarter of a century... The three prizes – £10,000 for Best Collection, £5,000 for Best First Collection and £1,000 for Best Single Poem – are unique in honouring both the work of established poets and the debuts of brilliant unknowns.  
(Forward Arts Foundation, 2017b)

The proviso being that the unknowns must have been published in book or magazine form and their printed work submitted, usually by an editor or publisher, for consideration by the judging panel. The changing landscape, however, has led, as we noted earlier, to online magazine publication of single poems being considered under certain circumstances.

The Costa Book Award For Poetry has, arguably, a wider profile as it sits among the other Costa Book Awards, which often command considerable press coverage. The prize is again predicated on the printed book model, and, as with the previous prizes, the online and social media activity is around supporting the printed publication and based (with the possible

exception of the Forward prize for best single published poem) on the idea of the individual poetry book, reinforcing its supremacy as a conveyor of seriousness and legitimacy.

There is, however, greater complexity in the relationship of prizes to the idea of traditional publication when we consider the Ted Hughes Award and the Saboteur Awards. The Ted Hughes Award, founded by Carol Ann Duffy in 2009 and administered by The Poetry Society, specifically aims to look beyond the printed book:

The competition aims to reward poets working not only with poetry on the page, but in other mediums too. Unlike other awards, the work does not have to have been published on the page (in a collection, magazine or pamphlet) but may have appeared in the public domain through another medium, be that through public performance, displayed as public art, or as a film or music recording (these criteria are not exhaustive, the award is flexible in its scope and boundaries).  
(The Poetry Society, 2016)

Previous shortlisted poets and winners such as Maggie Sawkins in 2013 for her multimedia *Zones of Avoidance* (*Zones of Avoidance*, 2013), show how non-traditional poetry work is recognised by the award as valid and important, but it is also notable how far traditional poetry books are also part of the mix. The 2012 winner, Kate Tempest for *Brand New Ancients* (Tempest, 2012), although ostensibly winning for her spoken word poetry, has her books published by Picador, one of the main British poetry publishers, again evidencing the persistence of the book form in truly legitimising the work of the poets in question.

In some ways, it seems the judges of the Ted Hughes Award are looking to work that has an element of personal testimony and incorporates the idea of untold stories or marginalised voices, irrespective of the medium. This is very similar to the online appeal we have noted of popular social media poets. We might see here a growing sensibility or taste towards this type of poetry, which may be a direct consequence of the social media popularity of these poets as it

translates into more mainstream poetry, both in terms of the poetry itself and the audience for that poetry.

We might view Andrew Motion's win in 2014 with the radio broadcast *Coming Home* in this vein, articulating, as it does, the previously unheard voices of soldiers and soldiers' families reflecting on their time in Afghanistan. Here we do have a departure from the traditional poetry book, but the book's durability is evident even here, as the poems were then published the next year (with wood engravings) as a limited edition by Fine Press Poetry (Motion, 2015), at prices from £95 to £500 pounds, approximately ten to fifty times the price of a standard poetry book.

Similarly, the 2015 winner, David Morley, with his *Selected Poems* (Morley, 2015), although published conventionally by Carcanet, was praised by the judges in this way: 'In these poems, David Morley switches forms and registers to reveal the versatility of the voices and the liveliness of the Romani culture, arguing for a tradition which has been invisible and silent.' (The Poetry Society, 2017b). The weight of Morley's achieved work, as a very established poet, may have influenced the judgement, but it is this aspect of speaking for an invisible tradition that is given as the reason for the award, not for his overall contribution to poetry.

This tradition of the prize focusing on personal identity and marginalised voices, irrespective of the medium, was continued in 2016 with spoken-word artist and poet Hollie McNish winning for her (conventionally-published) autobiographical poetic memoir, *Nobody Told Me* (McNish, 2016).

Among the smaller awards that look to assail what might be seen by some, despite the range of prizes, as the hegemony of the poetry book award, and its associated panel of appointed judges, the Saboteur Awards (Saboteur Awards, 2017) have proved both influential and wide-ranging, giving, among others, specific non-print awards for Spoken Word Performer, Spoken Word Show and Event, and one for collaborative work in any media. Not only this, but the

awards are based on public nomination via the website, rather than panel judgement – here the power of social media is of course very evident, as online participation is both fundamental and formative.

Through these prizes and awards we see the range of intertwined relationships between performance, digital and print publication, but we also see how, in most cases, they support the ongoing dominance of the printed book.

### **Poets Refusing Prizes**

Having looked at the poetry prizes themselves, it is instructive to explore instances where a poet has decided to refuse an award – or even be entered for one – and how far this impacts on their online presence, public persona and connects with their published work. Although it does not necessarily influence the poems themselves, a refusal helps define the poet and reflects on the work and the motivations behind the work more generally. I am therefore here extending my consideration of the impact of prizes into the area of persona. Although this section might equally sit within Chapter 1, where I directly consider persona, I prefer to see it within the framework of the prize-giving ecology and how, through this, digital technology influences our perceptions of the poet and their work in this area.

The first distinction to draw is the private versus the public nature of the act. There are, I'm sure, examples of effectively private decisions with regard to awards, though by their very nature we do not know about them, or only find them out well after the event, often when the poet in question is dead. There are also, however, very public gestures of refusal, which the poet knows will draw comment or attention, and these make the decision to turn down the proposal

much more one of defining the poet in the public arena, rather than a matter of personal preference or privately-held view.

Naturally, accepting an award is also a public gesture, so it might seem to give undue emphasis here to concentrate only on those occasions when an award is turned down. The decision to give and accept an award can be as much of a statement as to refuse one. There have certainly been some controversies in this regard, especially around giving an award, including several of the appointments of the Poets Laureate. We can go as far back as the appointment of Colley Cibber to the Poet Laureateship in 1730, which was mercilessly satirised by Pope in his epic *The Dunciad* (Butt, 1963), where Cibber is the ‘hero’ of the tale.

More recently, the acceptance of the laureateship by Ted Hughes in 1984 attracted as much if not more comment than the fact that Philip Larkin had turned it down. Craig Raine references over ten years of parodies in *Private Eye* in his review of *Rain Charm For The Duchy* (Hughes, 1992), Hughes’s collection of his Laureateship poems, where he also comments:

It must have been some time in 1984. I was poetry editor at Faber & Faber. Ted Hughes, one of “my” authors, was discussing the appointment of the next Poet Laureate. At that stage, Philip Larkin was the popular favourite and seemed the foregone conclusion. “Of course,” I said, “no one in their right mind would really want it.” (Raine, 2005)

There are also famous historical cases of controversial awards and acceptances, such as Ezra Pound’s Bollingen-Library of Congress Prize for his *Pisan Cantos*, discussed entertainingly by William McGuire in *Poetry’s Catbird Seat* (McGuire, 1988). A controversy made greater by the fact he won by an overwhelming majority of the votes cast by the judges, twelve of the fourteen Library of Congress Fellows in American Literature, seen as the appointed arbiters of poetry reputations at that time. There is also some suggestion that the controversy was fuelled by

the Saturday Review of Literature magazine in order to boost sales (Corrigan, 1967), an interesting pre-internet example of how a poetic controversy can provoke discussion and interest.

Despite these controversial awards and acceptances, since we are looking at how the poet creates their own persona, I would like to concentrate on poets who have acted against the flow of events and consider how this has affected perceptions of them and their work.

Although it is not specifically for poetry, Jean Paul Sartre's famous refusal of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1964 is instructive and a useful starting point, not only because of the prominence it received and still, to some extent, receives, but also because of the personal reasons Sartre gives for turning it down (he also gave 'objective reasons' but these relate more to global politics and are not so relevant for this discussion). I quote these personal reasons at some length, as I feel they go to the heart of why poets sometimes refuse prizes:

The personal reasons are these: my refusal is not an impulsive gesture, I have always declined official honors. In 1945, after the war, when I was offered the Legion of Honor, I refused it, although I was sympathetic to the government. Similarly, I have never sought to enter the Collège de France, as several of my friends suggested. This attitude is based on my conception of the writer's enterprise. A writer who adopts political, social, or literary positions must act only with the means that are his own—that is, the written word. All the honors he may receive expose his readers to a pressure I do not consider desirable. If I sign myself Jean-Paul Sartre it is not the same thing as if I sign myself Jean-Paul Sartre, Nobel Prize-winner.

The writer who accepts an honor of this kind involves as well as himself the association or institution which has honoured him. My sympathies for the Venezuelan revolutionists commit only myself, while if Jean-Paul Sartre the Nobel laureate champions the Venezuelan resistance, he also commits the entire Nobel Prize as an institution.

The writer must therefore refuse to let himself be transformed into an institution, even if this occurs under the most honorable circumstances, as in the present case. This attitude is of course entirely my own, and contains no criticism of those who have already been awarded the prize. I have a great deal of respect and admiration for several of the laureates whom I have the honor to know. (Howard, 1964)



The first reason that Sartre gives, which he contextualises with the explanation that it arises from his ‘conception of the writer’s enterprise’, is that having or receiving a prize, title or honour alters the reader’s perception of and relationship to the writer’s work (note, relationship not to the writer, but to the work produced). This is hard to argue against, but it feels to me a very narrow argument. There are many other perceptions of the writer that might alter the reader’s attitude to their work: actions the writer has undertaken; people or movements they have associated themselves with; news reports or articles written about the writer; images and the context of those images; speeches made; anthologies included in, physical quality of their published books (production standards, cover illustration, biographical information included, whether part of a series or not and so on). Now, in Sartre’s case, obviously a connection with the Nobel Prize for Literature commands some prominence when we think of him, but surely it could be argued that his relationship with Simone de Beauvoir influences a reader who is swayed by such things as much as his connection to the Nobel prize (in this case, the connection being that he turned it down).

In September 2017, a Google search gives us 492,000 results for ‘Jean-Paul Sartre’, 367,000 for ‘Jean Paul Sartre and the Nobel prize’ and over 2.8 million results for ‘Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir’. On this snapshot, his connection (or lack of it) to the Nobel prize is significant, but not as significant as his relationship with Simone de Beauvoir – although the real significance here, perhaps, is the much greater popularity online of Simone de Beauvoir than Jean-Paul Sartre (individually she garners over 15 million results). Of course, had he accepted, there may have been many more results, but it would need to have received over seven times as much attention to compete. Indeed, it is arguable that the fact he turned down the honour has produced more results than acceptance would have, since it received such publicity and has left such a legacy.

Sartre, of course, could not foresee the ability of the internet to disseminate information, nor is this more than an indication of relative influence, but clearly there are many factors at work with regard to how perceptions of a writer influence the reader, not just their acceptance or refusal of an award, however notable. So, although Sartre makes a careful first argument for turning it down, it is one that does not really bear much scrutiny.

Now, Sartre might argue that his action creates the correct influence on the reader; that is to say, we see him as one who does not wish to have his work given validation, justified or spurious, by an institution and so we view him as one who upholds the supremacy of the work over the author. Or we might infer this from his argument and his supporting statement ‘If I sign myself Jean-Paul Sartre it is not the same thing as if I sign myself Jean-Paul Sartre, Nobel Prize-winner’. This, slightly different argument, is the argument given by many poets who turn down prizes. The fact they have turned it down does not so much avoid influencing the reader as it influences them (the writer hopes) in the way the writer wants.

This also connects to Sartre’s second personal argument, that accepting an honour means that you are publicly connected to the awarding body and what you say influences how the institution is perceived: ‘The writer must therefore refuse to let himself be transformed into an institution’.

Sartre was careful to suggest that his actions might bring negative connections to the institution, but for most poets it is the other way around – an association with the institution might have a negative impact on the poet’s reputation, adversely affect how their already written poems are received, and, moreover, constitute an unspoken obligation and therefore influence the poems they subsequently write.

When Benjamin Zephaniah turned down an OBE in 2003, he wanted to publicly distance himself from the idea of Empire. He had no obligation to go public with the refusal, but he chose to do so, writing a strong piece in *The Guardian* stating:

Me? I thought, OBE me? Up yours, I thought. I get angry when I hear that word “empire”; it reminds me of slavery, it reminds of thousands of years of brutality, it reminds me of how my foremothers were raped and my forefathers brutalised.  
(Zephaniah, 2003)

He is, in fact, using the offer as an opportunity to emphasise and explain his opposition to the honours system and the wider system that underpins it. Here, his refusal gives him a platform to air some of the views that influence and drive his poetry. It is clear from a YouTube video of him interviewed by Republic TV discussing the issue (Republic4UK, 2011), one of many YouTube videos that he features in, mostly focusing on his poetry, that he felt insulted by the offer because those making the offer had clearly not read his work or taken the trouble to find out his position on the establishment and this was one of the reasons for going public: he wanted his views – and, crucially, how they are fundamental to his poetry – to be widely known.

The position he has taken is one that clearly comes from strongly-held beliefs and the clarity and honesty of his argument helps to define and support how his poetry and other writing is received. There was, however, some controversy over his refusal and a debate ensued in which he had to defend his position. Like others who publicly refuse awards, he had to be prepared both to defend his position and to receive some criticism for it. He would, of course, also have received criticism and comment had he accepted the award.

Acceptance, however, despite the earlier examples, is generally less controversial than refusal and therefore less of a statement. It is interesting to compare Zephaniah’s refusal to Roger McGough’s acceptance of an OBE in 1997 and a subsequent CBE in 2004. Acceptance of both

has not only passed without much comment, but the CBE is often cited to confirm McGough's standing as a nationally-recognised poet, including on his website, hosted, as with Andrew Motion, by the third-party UK Touring (McGough, 2016).

Interesting here to re-consider Sartre's argument that having an honour influences the perception of your work in an unhelpful way. It should be noted that McGough, along with the other Mersey Poets, has long fought the charge of lack of seriousness and weight and the conferring of both an OBE and CBE could be seen as going some way to dispelling this. A powerful argument for acceptance, no doubt, and interestingly different from questions of principle.

Not that all refusals are (or remain) controversial, of course. Rudyard Kipling's refusal of many British honours including that of the Poet Laureateship, Order of Merit and a knighthood – together with the counterpoint of his acceptance of the Nobel Prize for Literature – is widely quoted on websites, such as that of the Kipling Society (Kipling Society, 2017), but without comment.

Refusals of the Poet Laureateship are often not so much on a point of principle but because the poet does not feel themselves suitable for the task, as we would surmise for Thomas Gray in 1757, who produced very few poems, and Philip Larkin in 1984, who was by then even less prolific than in his earlier years. We cannot always, therefore, categorise the refusal of this honour as in general a statement of principle, pragmatism being sometimes the key element.

The decision, however, by Alice Oswald to withdraw from the T. S. Eliot prize shortlist in 2011 was explicitly on a matter of principle and therefore attracted some attention, again the poet being careful to use the refusal to make clear her own position and convictions as expressed through her writing. Once again, this was through an opinion piece in *The Guardian* where she states her objection to the sponsorship of the prize by Aurum Funds. Her argument is hard to

distil, but in essence she has followed her instruction to herself – ‘don’t ignore the honest muttering in your head’. She goes on to claim that:

It is increasingly difficult to articulate any kind of unease about a system that puts profit before ethics and makes protest a criminal act. I would say at this point, yes, it’s important for poets to speak up and side with the unheard; and yes, in the interests of democracy, their presence should be publicly funded. (Oswald, 2011)

She therefore objects to the shift from public to private funding of the award in principal and to the sponsor Aurum in particular, which is a manager of ‘funds of hedge funds’ and by implication, indeed almost by definition, very much puts profit before ethics. She was supported in her withdrawal by John Kinsella, who also withdrew and was subsequently quoted in *The Bookseller* as saying ‘I support Alice... My politics and ethics are such that I can’t accept money from such a source.’ (Page, 2011)

Nevertheless, the failure of any of the other shortlisted poets: Carol Ann Duffy, Leontia Flynn, David Harsent, Esther Morgan, Daljit Nagra, Sean O’Brien and Bernard O’Donoghue, to join her boycott led to it being perceived as largely a personal stance that did not express a widely-held view among the poetic contenders. Whether Oswald’s stance has affected her poetic standing is hard to judge. Her publisher, Faber & Faber, is of course closely associated with the T. S. Eliot prize and I have not been able to find any comment from them on the issue.

The decision of Frances Leviston to refuse to be considered for The Next Generation Poets (as well as turning down a commission) is also one of principle, as she explains in a thoughtful article for Poetry magazine. Despite the low-key nature of her refusals, she makes a clear argument for her position:

I’ve always wanted to belong to the city of ideas, and it seems to me that membership of such a city is often incompatible with the other kinds of membership on offer along the way. Choices, or compromises, have to be made,

and I find myself more and more inclined to say no to some invitations as a way of saying yes to something closer to that ideal. I found it liberating to refuse both the Poet Laureate's invitation to write a poem for the Queen's Jubilee in 2012, and the Poetry Book Society's attempt to include me in its Next Generation promotion of emerging poets this year. It's not that I don't want to be read, or that I object on principle to the business of actively seeking a readership. The question is one of context—do I feel happy in those groupings, in those lights? Do I want to be marketed as “young” and “new” and “sanctioned by”? Am I prepared to curtsy to the Queen, figuratively or otherwise? Do these things, these appointments, sit well with the actual poems I'm writing? (Leviston, 2014)

As well as arguing that acceptance implies a sort of membership – an agreement to join the club, as it were – Leviston explicitly brings us back to one of my major considerations for poets and their poems, both in print and in digital media, that of context. Leviston goes on to consider further the implications of acceptance, in its various forms, and the pressures on young poets:

Accepting an appointment from power always brings your sense of self into closer alignment with power's expectations of you. It endangers whatever it is that you are being rewarded for—your originality; your independence... Poets, especially younger poets, often face such demands of obligation and temptations of endorsement. (Leviston, 2014)

Of course Leviston is here seeing acceptance as largely negative, a position I do not entirely agree with. After all, acknowledgement of one's achievements has to be expressed somehow. Endorsement of one's talent by established poets, editors and reviewers is surely not always a bad thing. Taking this position to its extreme, one could see a positive review by, say, the current poet laureate, as unwelcome. Should poems by younger poets only be published by avant-garde, non-mainstream organisations? Are their poems less valid if more established poets profess to like them?

What actually lies behind this argument, I feel, is a mistrust of the current poetry establishment (a difficult term to define, of course) which therefore sees any contact with it as generally unhelpful and inhibiting to developing poets. Could it not be that what Leviston calls

‘power’s expectations of you’ (note the dehumanising of the relationship, as if editors, poets, reviewers and academics were not individuals) are for the poet to help redefine and influence, to inject with new ideas and vitality?

Leviston’s argument is therefore more fundamental than Oswald’s; she indicates a mistrust of much of current poetry’s structures and hierarchies. She also, pertinently, worries that accepting a context will influence not just how the poet is perceived and how they act, but also the poems they write, the work they produce. As with Sartre’s first argument about how the reader reads the writing, the point is valid but very narrow. There are, surely, a myriad of influences on how and what a poet writes, and the poet only has control over a very few of these, nor can they tell the consequences of their choices.

It is a commonplace of storytelling that the action a protagonist takes to achieve a result hardly ever actually achieves that result – the reactions of others are seldom as expected. Now, of course, this is a storytelling device, as in real life many actions lead to the exact outcomes expected, but it is a remarkable poet who can foresee the exact consequences of the choices they make, especially the public ones. If acceptance or refusal, inclusion or separation, is decided on personal commitment rather than a more general idea of the poet’s context, then that is easier. The consequences are then not the point – the point is the action and what that signifies. The context is then informed by the motivation, not the other way around.

The prevalence of digital media has a very large part to play in this issue of acceptance or refusal of offers, honours, commissions and prizes. Creating the persistence of gesture at the very least, the internet memorialises actions, statements and positions in a widespread, almost casual way, that would not have been the case before it existed. Not only this, these online amalgams of facts, comments and opinions accrue their own momentum – or otherwise – as people access the

web pages or add to the commentaries. The examples of Sartre and of Kipling show how the impact of a refusal or acceptance can grow or diminish over time, at least online.

On the other hand, the sheer volume of material means that it is possible for issues and disputes to fall by the wayside as new material is generated or interest focuses in another area. In this sense, digital media can be both a bellows and a fire blanket to the combustion of controversy.

### **The Symbiosis Between Online Publication and the Print Media**

With regard to the different online platforms it is clear that in most cases there is a symbiosis between online publication and print publication. The major exception to this are sites that publish online poetry created exclusively to be viewed on the web and even here individual poems often go on to appear in a poet's subsequent print collection. These can be sites where the users (individuals or groups) create the content or sites where the material is controlled by an editor or editors, for example the e-zines which were discussed earlier. As we saw, for e-zines there is sometimes a print counterpart, but some, for reasons of philosophy or economy (or both) exist only as websites. Nevertheless, the majority of sites display a symbiosis between online and print publication and it is this interconnectedness I wish now to focus on.

We have noted the way that that blogs can become books and poems on Twitter can be printed in a collection, and also how poets such as Rupi Kaur have very successfully converted their online poetry to print publication as a poetry book. There is a reputational as well as a financial advantage to this conversion to book publication. The importance of the book is reinforced by the way the success of online poets is measured partly by their online audience (in terms of number of followers) but also in terms of the popularity of their published books.



For example, Abrams discusses the popularity of social media poets in *Publishing Perspectives*, referencing an article by Alexandra Alter in *The New York Times*, very much in terms of their print sales:

One such success story is that of Tyler Knott Gregson. Seven years ago, he was working as a freelance copywriter. But the thousands of haiku he has posted on Twitter, Instagram and Tumblr have made him, in Alter's inspired words, "the literary equivalent of a unicorn: a best-selling celebrity poet".

Gregson's first published book of poetry, *Chasers of the Light*, has more than 120,000 copies in print. His new book, *All the Words are Yours*, has a first printing of 100,000 copies. (Abrams, 2015)

The popularity of the book provides some validation of the poet's achievement beyond their internet and social media popularity, which is often categorised as less meaningful. It would be good here to remind ourselves of the reasons for this. The printed poetry book provides validation, especially if endorsed by a publisher with a good reputation and is a material product that can be owned, evaluated and commented upon and which has proven potential longevity. For these reasons the value of the printed book persists and for poets and commentators alike it is a long-standing measure of concrete achievement.

Instagram poet Amanda Lovelace has over 18,000 followers on Instagram, but the fact that her book *The Princess Saves Herself In This One* (Lovelace, 2016) was winner of the Goodreads Choice Award for Best Poetry in 2016 and has received many 5-star reviews (albeit from devoted followers) gives greater weight to her as a poet. Naturally, there is also an economic factor here. Her book is published by Andrews McMeel, publishers of Rupi Kaur, and clearly intended to follow in Kaur's popularity (the non-traditional route to book publication is considered in Chapter 3), with female struggle and empowerment very much at the heart of the poetry. Sales of over 10,000 copies in one year suggest it has achieved commercial success, further enhancing her reputation. As we have noted previously, popularity and quality are not

synonymous, but the popularity and social appeal of such ‘Instapoets’ does have an impact on poetry more generally. As Caroline Sanderson notes in an interview with self-styled Instapoet Nikita Gill:

Devotees of more traditional poetry might find the lack of subtext in “Instapoetry” makes it rather lightweight. Yet booming tallies of both followers and sales suggest that the likes of Kaur and Gill are reaching audiences that such traditional poetry struggles to tap into. Gill’s poems were even seen adorning placards during the Women’s March early this year. (Sanderson, 2017)

There is another interesting case study of the symbiosis between online and print publication with regard to the poet Sam Riviere that also touches on these points. Sam Riviere’s first full poetry collection *81 Austerities* began as an online blog but then was published by Faber & Faber as a traditional poetry book (Riviere, 2012). Not only this, but the book then went on to win the 2012 Forward Prize for Best First Collection, and we have previously discussed how such prizes recognise and reinforce the status of the printed poetry book.

The story, however, is not quite as straightforward as this, Riviere having published a poetry pamphlet with Faber & Faber in 2010 (Riviere, 2010) under the Faber New Poets scheme: *Sam Riviere: Faber New Poets 7*. This pamphlet included several poems that are very different to the style and content of *81 Austerities* and Riviere’s second book, *Kim Kardashian’s Marriage* (Riviere, 2015) with its distinct online influences, both in form and content, which is discussed below. The pamphlet poem ‘Myself Included’, for example, (Riviere, 2010 pp. 12-15) is conversational in tone, despite its sometimes quasi-surrealist content and ‘Back In The Green Night’ (Riviere, 2010 pp. 12-15 pp. 8-9) is highly narrative and positively anecdotal.

This prior publication by Faber & Faber suggests that the symbiosis between print and online publication is not simply one-way and that the combined offline and online approach we have considered previously for building both a public poetic persona and a body of published

work is very fruitful. It also points to the way an online focus can influence the poems themselves: the poems of *81 Austerities* and *Kim Kardashian's Marriage* are more conceptual and less personal than those of the pamphlet. As the book jacket blurb for the latter has it:

His approach eschews a dependence upon confessional modes of writing to explore what kind of meaning lies in impersonal methods of creation. For, as with *81 Austerities*, the process of enquiry involves the compositional method itself, this time in poems that have been produced by harvesting and manipulating the results of search engines to create a poetry part-collage, part-improvisation. The result is as refractive as it is reflective... an uncanny commemoration of the contemporary moment. (Riviere, 2015, inside front cover)

This is a very clear example of the influence of the digital world on form and content for a particular poet. It also reflects the more general influence that the sense of immediacy of the online environment creates.

Poet Ruth Padel then reviewed *81 Austerities* in *The Guardian*. It is interesting to note that this review began as an article in the (printed) newspaper but was then posted by *The Guardian* online (Padel, 2012). We therefore have poems that began as an online blog subsequently published as a printed book reviewed in a print article which was then posted online. This is very active symbiosis, showing how intertwined print and online publication is and so how important it is that we recognise how one informs the other.

Padel in her review makes a general point about the influence of both academia and the internet on contemporary poets:

In 2002, introducing a book of poems by 52 living poets, I said most British poets didn't work in universities but earned their living in other ways such as teaching, journalism, publishing or arts administration. In 2007, introducing 60 more poems in a follow-up book, I found myself ending each poet's biography with the university where they taught creative writing. It was that fast – creative writing embedded itself across British universities within five years.

The turnaround coincided with the rise of the internet. For young poets, this combination meant new routes to publishing, new ways that your writing might fit into your life, and some very intense group reading, especially of the previous generation of poets. What it meant for poetry was that young poets focusing on workshop and craft also rethought fundamentals like persona and voice. Now we are getting the results. (Padel, 2012)

Padel identifies two drivers behind the way some young poets both create and perceive their work: academia and the internet. She relates this to the idea of persona and voice both in historical terms through the academic element (the intense analysis of the previous generation of poets) and to the immediacy of internet platforms and dissemination routes. She sees here the current awareness of persona and voice as very much bound up with the internet in similar ways to those discussed earlier, but perhaps with a greater emphasis on the poetry itself.

We must be careful, though, of how new Padel's idea of the poet's persona is. The digital world here is just another forum for embodying a well-established practice, in this case creating one's own persona as poet. The idea of people creating their own poetic persona (or having it created for them) goes back well before the Romantics, though they were, arguably, the apotheosis of it: Chatterton did not need the internet to become the model for the tragic poet.

Having said this, Padel identifies a particular feature of the internet for poetry and the poet's persona: 'new routes to publishing'. I suspect she is thinking directly here of Riviere but also flagging up the ability of poets to self-publish on the internet (since there are no gate-keepers to prevent the work being published).

This ease of publication, whilst liberating in many ways, and one could also argue democratising, does also have its drawbacks, as we have seen, particularly around the issue of context. It is in fact Riviere who himself highlights this when discussing his second poetry book *Kim Kardashian's Marriage* (Riviere, 2015). In an online blog interview when talking about the book as a print publication, Riviere says:

The book is important because it announces that you're putting it into the world, in the tradition of poetry, so I'm asking that it be read as a book of poems. If writing is on the internet, it's just writing on the internet, even if it is poetry. (Peter-Agbia, 2015)

He then makes an analogy with art: '...it's like art on the internet – it's different if it's in a gallery. It feels like it's speaking to the whole gallery tradition and the whole history of that practice in a way that it will never do if it's just online.' (Peter-Agbia, 2015). This is a pertinent comparison, as you might expect from someone who studied art and design, and speaks again to the issue not only of tradition but also of context. We have the white space of the gallery affirming that the object within it is art and we have the white space around the poem in the poetry book, affirming that it is indeed poetry. And we have the object of the book as one of the wider contexts.

There are other interesting examples of where an online poetry presence, despite often being an innovative way of producing and distributing poetry, has been felt not to be sufficient in itself.

Jo Bell ran the online *52 Project* over 52 weeks in 2014. Each week there was an online and emailed prompt to write a poem that was then shared and commented on in a Facebook group. As Jo Bell said in her final prompt:

Thousands of you have written from these prompts. Hundreds joined a Facebook group to share work. We had ten amazing guest poets. Work from 52 is now published in the finest literary journals and placed in international competitions. Most important, we have shared work which is astonishing in its exposure, its humanity, its courage. (Bell, 2014a)

This is in fact an example of how an online resource can be used to extend the forums for poetry as well as extending the publishing options. It could be argued that it was an interesting

experiment in peer reviewing using an online forum; alternatively, it could be seen as a way of garnering responses from an informed public as to their preferences. Either way, it was an alternative way of anthologising poems, by collating responses rather than having an editor directly select.

On completion of the project, however, Bell decided that it would be good to produce a print anthology of poems selected from those published on the internet, suitably titled *The Very Best of 52* (Bell, Davidson and Hadley, 2015) as she explained on her blog (Bell, 2014b). Again, the crossover from online to print is notable, and again can be seen as a way, as with Riviere, of validating the work, widening its appeal and referencing a clear tradition.

There is also an interesting comparison here with the Poetry By Heart scheme (Poetry By Heart, 2016), which originally published the poems in the scheme only online, but in 2014 brought out a print anthology of the poems for that year (Blake *et al.*, 2014) – the same anthology that Jackie Kay puzzled over in terms of the poem of hers they selected. Andrew Motion, in his introduction to the book, as well as making reference to the importance of the internet in general and the Poetry Archive site in particular for restoring the ‘acoustic’ to poetry (that oral or performance quality that Gioia alludes to), also makes the case for the print edition:

Partly because it allows the collection to have a different sort of permanence.  
Partly because it allows the old alliance of page and ear to be reaffirmed. And also because we feel the collection deserves an audience beyond that of the competition and the website. (Blake *et al.*, 2014, p. 2)

These arguments, though clearly valid, are very much focused on the audience for the book, rather than on any purely artistic consideration (though this is implied in the idea of the collection deserving an audience). This is, I would argue, largely a function of the nature of the scheme where the selection criteria are based on the range and suitability for speaking out of the

poems. Additionally, there is also a publisher's (and poet's and editor's) financial incentive behind the publication. The publisher, after all, wishes to sell books and a poet or body of poems that already have an online audience is an obvious candidate for the print publication market.

The crossover from online to book also highlights the nature of internet publication itself in both a positive and negative way. Riviere, having made the case for his book, goes on in the same interview to make a different point about poetry on the internet:

Most of the poets I've discovered that I really like, I've discovered online. The internet allows people to form communities that aren't geographically based, so you can share aesthetic sympathies among a group that are all over the place.  
(Peter-Agbia, P. 2015)

But this lack of geographical or cultural connectedness, as we have seen, can be a drawback as well as a benefit. In her review of *Kim Kardashian's Marriage* for *Ambit* Lucy Mercer opines 'Full of glittering self-replicating empty boulevards, KKM seems to me an intensely sad collection, mainly because despite the internet, we're not in America' (Mercer, 2015).

In her view there is a geographical and cultural location at work here (the USA) which, although presented in a faux way through the television programme *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* and through the related websites, social media and, indeed, traditional publishing, over-rides, because of its reality, any cyberspace environment. In other words, even when we are on the internet, we have to relate the experience to real-life cultural understandings and situations.

Of course this limitation applies as much, if not more so, to book publications. The milieu they are in or stand out from needs to be clear, but it is a salutary reminder of the limitations of cyberspace – it may provide alternative realities, but they are only alternatives in so far as they

relate to what we know, they do not exist without the tangible world to contrast with and to set them against. Riviere's book is to her a reminder that we are not there – it is a world we can only observe and not inhabit. Riviere is no doubt aware of this cultural and geographical disconnect and that the book reflects some of the sadness of this yearning for an illusory world that only exists as a virtual or augmented reality.

As I outlined when discussing my poetic persona in relation to the internet, my own poems are often an imagined mental landscape, in contrast, for example, to the everyday cultural references of poets such as Simon Armitage and Carol Ann Duffy, where part of the delight is in the juxtaposition of these everyday cultural references with more profound themes. Armitage's poem 'Kid', for example, the title poem of that collection (Armitage, 1992), storms through a whirlwind of cultural references in the style of the Batman TV series in order to convey the deep anger of the narrator towards the person he is addressing. In this way the poet explores a deeply personal relationship through potentially superficial and ersatz cultural types or TV semiotics. The cultural referencing takes us into the shared virtual environment and draws from as well as imparts some of its populist vigour.

This is an obvious reaction to the abstruse, learned referencing of Modernism, but a different reaction to the concerted lyricism of other poets, such as Kathleen Jamie, in *The Tree House* (Jamie, 2014), winner of the Forward Prize for best collection in 2014, taking the natural world as their template and the pastoral tradition (even when applied to urban settings) as their heritage.

It is also an attempt to solve the problem of a lost shared canon that would in the past have included Chaucer, the Bible, Greek ideas and Shakespeare, at the very least. This shared traditional cannon, if it ever really existed among the mass population, certainly cannot be assumed for the poetry reader today. With the plethora of information and cultural influences



that constantly bombard us, as well as the greater range of backgrounds and cultural traditions, these historical reference points for any reader cannot be assumed by the writer. The drawback to the use of popular culture references is that they, too, depend on shared experiences or, at the least, a shared virtual environment (for example, the world of Batman) to convey their meaning.

There is also the danger of failing to underpin the topicality with more profound philosophical truths, thoughts or meditations. Duffy's version of the play *Everyman* (Duffy, 2015), despite the vigour of its imagery, struggles to match the philosophical import of the source material because she substitutes the clear moral imperatives of the original, founded as they are on religious beliefs, for the idea that a good life is about imbibing great art or everyday pleasures. Unable to articulate the original's religious certainties, perhaps because she does not believe them, Duffy replaces them with cultural touchstones which do not carry the same moral or philosophical depth.

Rap and hip-hop are extreme examples of focusing cultural references on the day-to-day, on what people are directly experiencing, giving energy and immediacy to what they are saying, as well as tying in with the personal embodiment of poetry we have previously considered. Their popularity indicates the success of the approach, as well, as identified by Gioia, having a form well-suited to the visual and aural elements of today's digital media. We have seen how they can overlap with printed poetry with poets such as Kate Tempest, but practitioners of rap and hip-hop remain primarily performance-based and so are not central to my discussion.

I have been re-examining my own poetry in the light of these approaches that social media, the virtual nature of the internet and other influences have help develop and popularise. In particular, the type and effectiveness of the worlds I reference and create for the reader. The idea is addressed directly in the poem 'The Crane', where I am exploring the human-made environment, both physical – the crane is part of a building project – and virtual, where branches

are simply metaphors for electronic pathways. I am also looking at where the two interact: the appropriating, plundering and depletion of natural resources, such as special metals and water, to create and sustain virtual worlds.

It is easy to forget that the internet is held in giant computers that require land and water and energy to run and cool them and I wanted to explore this hidden cost to the natural world. In the poem itself I have attempted to convey the artificiality in the structure and rhythm. In this sense I see myself more in the tradition of the New Formalists, foregrounding the structure and artifice of the poem. This is counter, as we have seen, to much contemporary poetry, which often looks to achieve an ease and naturalness of expression, a colloquial or conversational tone, with the artifice hidden and the emphasis on careful observation, telling detail and neat turn of phrase.

My poetry, by contrast, is often highly-wrought and, as noted previously, frequently driven by idea rather than observation, sometimes placing idea over narrative, as in the poems ‘What Are They For, The Eyebrows?’ and ‘If You Hold Me’. On the other hand, I have attempted to explore a more relaxed and hidden structure, with an emphasis on the conversational in poems such as ‘Mr Wordsworth at St Catherine’s’, ‘The Box’ and ‘The Sewing Basket’. This relates to the self-division of my poetry between poems of ideas and poems of feeling discussed in Chapter 1.

With these longer-form, more conversational poems, the influence of writing for performance is also in evidence. Adaptation of a poem with the printed page in mind has also been a fascinating exploration for me. When redrafting the poem ‘Mr Wordsworth at St Catherine’s’ considerations such as dividing into numbered sequences and use of headings to signpost the reader (rather than the listener), with consequent impact on the nature and length of the different sections came into play in a way that I did not expect. I have also subverted this idea with the poem ‘To You, Sara Hildén’, where the sequence on the page is at variance with the

numbered sequence, giving two alternative readings and setting up (hopefully) a range of tensions and correspondences between them.

Previously I had reworked some of my poems for performance, but not at this level of detail. My poem 'Taste', for example, exists in two versions: the one printed in the anthology *Iris of a Peeping Eye* (Davidson and Monks, 2013) and the one read out at the launch event. The main differences were ones of length and detail of content. In order to convey as much of the meaning of a poem as possible to a listener, I feel it is often best to ensure the poem holds its images as long as possible and signposts its progression clearly. There is also the practical consideration of ensuring homophones and obscure pronunciations do not unduly obscure the meaning.

### **Video as Publication and Transmedia Applications**

The internet also allows for publication in another sense, that of a video recording of a poem, either as a performance or a poetry film. Alongside clips from broadcast programmes made by mainstream media, there are many videos which are effectively simply records of poetry in performance, either recorded by the host organisation or by colleagues of the poet or other interested parties. These poetry performance videos give immediacy, accessibility and the opportunity to experience spoken word poetry as performed, but the videos themselves are often poor quality, both in terms of the production values (poor lighting and sound quality, for example) and the content, which is frequently a stage setting filmed on a single camera from a distance.

Allied to this quality issue, the videos also jostle with many other clips for our attention. Poetry performance videos sit alongside every other sort of video you can imagine, making it harder to control its perceived value and the environment in which it is experienced. Sometimes

their home-video quality can suggest authenticity and a lack of packaging, but equally the lack of production values or filming expertise can make them seem amateurish. Either way the content is affected by the presentation.

Under each YouTube video of Camaradefest II, for example the one featuring Colin Herd & Iain Morrison, there is this explanation:

100 poets, 50 pairs, one day. Starting at 12 noon and finishing late at night, Camaradefest is a unique annual one day explosion of dynamic collaboration in contemporary avant garde and literary poetics. (Camaradefest II, 2014)

These, however, are very scratch videos, not artistic products. Instead of showcasing dynamic collaborations they often seem poorly-produced documentary records of what seem suspiciously standard poetry readings. They have some validity in themselves in allowing the viewer to get a sense of the poet reading out loud, but whether they would point the viewer to look at the poet's work more widely is questionable.

We can contrast this with the growing trend for poetry films, or filmpoems, which borrow as much from the video as the online tradition, and can be seen as very much an end in themselves as well as a way of exploring the interaction between the original poem, sound and visual image. These are often disseminated online and here the internet as a distribution platform could be seen as a significant driver, despite issues of funding, in the creation of these films, in that there is an identifiable outlet and audience for them. The Poetry Society, for example, post their poetry films (funded by Arts Council England) on their own website and on their Vimeo and YouTube pages, giving wide online access to the material (The Poetry Society, 2017c) and there are more general dedicated short film sites, such as *Short of the Week* with its claim that 'The web changes everything... how films are funded, produced, and ultimately consumed...' (Short of the Week, 2017), and which has a dedicated poetry film section. There is also the

website *The Poetry Station*, run by The English and Media Centre (The Poetry Station, 2017), which provides a dedicated platform for poetry videos, often carefully produced and with contextualising material about the poet, but spanning the range from straight reading to poetry film. As an educational charity, most of the poets provided their poems and readings free as a resource for students and teachers, which speaks again to the issues of purpose, platform, control and income-generation that are recurring themes in the digital world, but they were perhaps encouraged by the quality of the videos and the laudable aims of the organisation.

My poem 'The Art of Looking' began as a written piece but was adapted as a poetry film referencing the act of looking at paintings, in particular at The Barber Institute of Fine Art in Birmingham, where I was poet-in-residence and who funded the making of the video (Kershaw, 2017). Again, the rich media options of the digital landscape influenced my writing directly, in this case the rewriting of a poem for video and audio. My practice here also led to an increased awareness of the importance of the length of the poem – for the video I needed to extend it to cover the action of seeing the painting revealed, but wanted greater concision on the page, as I felt it was harder to sustain interest and variety when simply reading to oneself. In terms of the poetry included here, a key strategy I adopted for the longer poems was that of segmentation, as seen, for example, in 'To You, Sara Hildén', 'Mr Wordsworth at St. Catherine's' and 'The Box'.

In this context, it is interesting that the film of Alice Oswald's poetry book *Dart* is not available online. Not only this, there was a considerable gap between the book and the film: the book was published in 2003 but the film was not made until 2012, suggesting a very long gestation process and certainly that the poem was not written with a film in mind. The website for the film of *Dart* shows clips from the film and has other information, but is not integrated to the poem (Dart Film, 2012).

In fact, the example of *Dart* exemplifies the more traditional relationship between the poetry book and digital media, that of writing and publishing the book and then accepting or creating additional material on other platforms coming out of the book itself (in contrast to the symbiosis we have considered with other poetry books). There are several examples of the use of digital media around the book by Oswald. It was adapted into a radio play for BBC Radio 4 and there is also an audio CD read by the author (Oswald, 2009), as well as a stage version. Oswald is on the Poetry Archive website reading from the poem and there are several newspaper interviews available online. Nevertheless, the book is the core creative product and there is little inter-relatedness between the publication platforms. This may partly be historical – *Dart* was published in 2003 and there have been very major changes in digital and online publishing even in the short time to 2017 – but may also reflect the creative process, since the book came out of recordings with people along the river, a historical and geographical context that, as we have seen, runs somewhat counter to the virtual worlds of digital media.

Although these different platforms for *Dart* may make it appear to have a strong transmedia offer (as a book, radio broadcast, CD, play and film), the lack of cross-fertilisation and interconnectedness works against this. Transmedia is usually associated with major franchises, such as Harry Potter or Doctor Who, where the same or related stories, characters and settings are accessed across multiple platforms, for example as films or TV programmes, audio books, games and printed books. On a smaller scale, however, poetry can also be experienced across different platforms and digital technology provides part of this opportunity, either directly or by linking access to the different platforms.

An interesting example here is Christopher Reid's poem 'The Song of Lunch', made into a film by the BBC, though the producer clearly felt it was an unusual crossover when he stated:

I know no other broadcaster would have the vision, the bravery and the commitment to undertake a piece of work such as this, and for that the BBC should be praised. (Wise, 2010)

As noted in the introduction, broadcast media programmes often influence poetry creation and distribution, and their transmedia focus and related online presence is part of that influence. The BBC's *The Nation's Favourite Poems* (Jones, 1996) is still the best-selling poetry book in a single year, selling over 100,000 copies in 1998 alone (Nielsen Bookscan, cited in Tivnan, 2017). This book came from a broadcast TV programme, but was partly created and promoted online, as the book consists of the hundred poems voted as most popular through a BBC poll, which the website facilitated, with over 18,000 online votes cast (BBC, 2014b).

Perhaps of less significance for the individual poet, this popularity can however be seen as confirming the status placed on the printed poetry anthology, the importance of cross-platform activity, the value of interaction and the power of the broadcast medium, all features of the current poetry ecology we have previously noted. All these factors, some using digital technology, others not, fed into the popularity of the book, as well as disseminated more widely the poetry and the poets themselves.

DVDs, CDs and audio books can be both other aspects of transmedia activity and also stand-alone publications in their own right. They do, however, require additional hardware for experiencing the poetry, which is not needed with the traditional book. This is less of an issue with downloads, as the ownership of the hardware is a pre-requisite of being able to download and therefore there is an inherent greater ease of access (you don't have to load up your region-specific DVD into a suitable DVD Player, for example). This use of downloads applies to the eBook, which means here there is less of a technological barrier than with a CD or DVD player. There is the additional challenge though, as we have seen, with printed text that the platform

format used can cause problems both of fidelity and access. There are specific issues for the eBook here which I consider in the section on e-publishing.

Digital downloads can also reduce the costs of packaging and distribution. The use of streaming services, however, has had a significant impact on downloads and direct purchases of video and film material, including poetry. A salutary example is the BBC2 programme *Railway Nation: A Journey In Verse* (BBC2 *Railway Nation: A Journey In Verse*, 2017), where six poets were commissioned to respond to a train journey as an explicit homage to Auden's *Night Mail* (British Railways TV, 2017). This was initially available after broadcast as a download from the BBC Store online site (BBC Store, 2017a), but is no longer obtainable as the BBC decided to close the service in November 2017 after only eighteen months, due to lack of demand (BBC Store, 2017b). Internet availability is no guarantee of popularity.

Nevertheless, the presence of online stores, both for traditional purchase and downloads, adds to the increased ability to access poetry in all its forms. Online retail is as relevant to poetry as to any other product, in whatever format. A particular feature of online retail, the Long Tail, and its benefit for the poetry book, is discussed later in the section on print-on-demand.

### **The Organising Principle – Books and Websites**

I would now like to consider the importance of the book format in terms of its organisation of the poems as a collection and contrast this with the presentation of poems online. One of the advantages of a poetry book collection is the ability to arrange the poems within the book and the ordering, grouping and arranging to complement and contrast is a powerful tool for the author, editor and publisher. I discuss my own approach to my collection in detail in the following section, but the act of selecting, adapting and collating the poems has informed my wider



research and I would like to begin by considering, in the light of my own practice, a range of possible approaches.

There are some poetry collections which are patchworks of the latest poems written by the poet. These may be arranged to complement each other to achieve what the author and editor believe to be the best effect, or may be simple chronological arrangements. There are others where there are sections, sometimes related, sometimes unrelated, and some where there is an overall theme or intention that the book manifests, either in a clear, designed way, or more informally, through the grouping afterwards of poems that at the time of composition were not seen as part of a wider thematic concern. Such is the nature of poetic inspiration and composition, that sometimes a theme emerges on re-reading and collating. Alternatively, sometimes a theme is intended, but the poem itself has other ideas and goes off in quite a different direction.

To add to the potential complexity of considering the poetry book as a whole, we must also acknowledge that one or more poems, or even the book itself, may be a response to personal circumstances. It may also sit within or against a prevalent style, movement, approach or doctrine. Tied in with this is the cultural, social and political world the poems were written in and are, consciously or unconsciously, overtly or covertly, designed to connect with – or disconnect with.

What this does give us is a great richness. The poetry book is useful to the poet as a validation, marker of success, physical representation of serious purpose and concrete achievement, but we must not forget the potential artistic value of the poetry book. It can be, at its most basic, both in terms of intent and reception, a straightforward collection of poems, but so often it is more than this. Even if there is no overarching structure, there is a plan, evidence of decision-making, attempt to present to the reader the poems in a particular way.

There are numerous examples of how a poetry book shapes the reader's appreciation and understanding of the context of the poems, both within the book and how they relate to outside ideas.

If we consider, for example, Don Paterson's *40 Sonnets* (Paterson, 2015) we can see that the title provides the terms of reference: this is a book of sonnets as we might read a collection of Shakespearian sonnets. Paterson can then present poems alongside the regular sonnets that, taken alone, would not suggest the sonnet form, but within the book as a whole we read them in this light. By contrast, this is not the case with the sonnets included in my collection, where the thematic context of the other poems around them and the heading of the part they are in is intended as the primary association provided by the book format, rather than the sonnet tradition they form part of – though, of course, that also forms part of the wider context. The poems in Paterson's collection, for instance, include 'At the Party' (p. 15), where all but one of the fourteen lines consist of a single word and 'Séance', the first two lines of which are:

Speke. – s e e s s k s e e k  
i e i k s e s s e - . – e s k k s e – s s k (Paterson, 2015, p. 41)

Other examples of contrasting the sonnet form with different typographical and syntactical arrangements are 'Francesca Woodman' (p. 17), which is divided into seven couplets, headed by roman numerals, 'Seven Questions about the Journey' (p. 22) set out as a series of questions and answers and, most removed from the sonnet form, the prose piece 'The Version' (pp. 24-26), which is written as prose, with justified margins, is divided into two paragraphs, and whose opening runs:

Like many of my colleagues, I too received the envelope of dark green card bearing the green-and-gold stamp of their far-off land, and the handwritten invitation to contribute a new poem to be translated for the five-hundredth edition of their journal, which would contain nothing but foreign poets in translation...

This foregrounding of the base form through the title makes us consider the poems as a series of variations on the sonnet, providing a frame and coherence for the book and suggesting the poet's intentions, his approach to writing the poems and inviting us to speculate on why the poem varies, when it does so, from the sonnet form, for example compression to show intensity of emotion or conveying of a different, less formal voice. The techniques of the individual poems are dependent on the underlying structure and intention given by the book itself.

It is interesting to contrast here Robert Lowell's *Notebook 1967-1968* (Lowell, 1969), consisting of sonnet-based poems (they are fourteen lines long, but generally unrhymed and not always in iambic pentameter). Here the overriding message is the idea of the book as a series of jottings made over four seasons, rather than as variations on the sonnet form. However, the book was revised shortly afterwards as simply *Notebook* (Lowell, 1970), and then, tellingly, a selection of the sonnets revised and divided up into three separate books: *History* (Lowell 1973a), *For Lizzie and Harriet* (Lowell 1973b) and *The Dolphin* (Lowell 1973c). Here Lowell's attempt to shape and control the poems by use of separate book publications is evident. The difference is partly in the title: the message to the reader from a book entitled *Notebook*, together with his explanation of it as indeed that, is very different to the message of the book *For Lizzie and Harriet*, where, even if one does not know who Lizzie and Harriet are (Lowell's ex-wife and daughter) one understands that the book is an offering to them and about them. The message is also controlled by the poetry selection – it needs hardly be said that choosing to focus on a particular theme gives a particular tone and context to the book.

We have already considered the book-length poem *Dart* (Oswald, 2003) and there are of course many others, including books as different as Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate* (Seth, 1986), David Hart's *Library Inspector* (Hart, 2015) and Deryn Rees-Jones's *Quiver* (Rees-Jones, 2004). We might also reference examples of the many books that have specific themed sections, again an enormously diverse range of books, such as Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers* (Kay, 1998), Luke Kennard's *Cain* (Kennard, 2016), and Kate Tempest's *Hold Your Own* (Tempest, 2014), the latter which, within the overall theme of gender, and using Tiresias as a guiding figure, has the sections: Childhood, Womanhood, Manhood and Blind Profit. There are also many books that combine art work and poems and some that are illustrated by the poet, for example the books of Imtiaz Dharker and Rupi Kaur.

All this speaks to both the power and range of the poetry book as a collection. Even when the book is more loosely structured and typically takes its title from a key poem in the collection, the arrangement informs the reading.

Here we might speculate on the nature of reading a poetry book and the extent to which the reader dips in and reads poems in a random order and the extent to which they begin with the first poem and read through chronologically. This is where the nature of the physical book shows its appeal to the reader. As the editors of the book *Emergency Index* put it:

You are holding in your hands a simple, flexible, physical and time-tested technology. It allows for chance encounters, unplanned adjacencies, sudden epiphanies, as well as casual browsing and concerted searching.  
(Gluzman & Yankelevich, 2012, p. viii)

This particular book is a documentation of performances. That a book about performance, including poetry in performance (about a fifth of the entries), should extol the virtues of a book must suggest irony at some level, and yet the interaction of the different media seems quite

logical in our world of contrasting and complementary platforms. There is, of course, an associated website (Emergency Index, 2017), further emphasising the cross-platform or transmedia dissemination of information, art and poetry.

Naturally when it is a selected, collected or complete poems collection there is usually a chronological order that shapes the reading (and the reader's expectation) and over-rides any other structure, even when grouped by book collection, as this invariably is presented chronologically, and when a poetry book is in sections this will also affect the reader's approach. When considering my own collection, I grouped the poems chronologically to provide an overview of their relationship to each other in terms of when written, but this did not provide, for me, sufficient cohesion for the collection itself. It is not intended as an overview of creative development, as the selected, collected or complete collections often are, but as a more organic grouping of poems around themes, approaches and attitudes, as I go on to discuss further in the next section.

There is also the possibility of the reader choosing poems to read through familiarity or interest in the title. In any event, the ability of the book to facilitate both linear and non-linear ways of reading is one of its strengths. The book is a random-access device. Notwithstanding that the reader has and may well use the option to dip in and out, the structure of the book created by poet and publisher will provide a framework for the reader to explore in whichever way they choose. The fact that the reader has this freedom is an argument for greater care in structuring, rather than less, to provide a backdrop of order to the book itself.

This presentation of a planned body of work can also be done by dedicated webpages on the internet or by building a body of work through blogs or social media (though inevitably this will be tied to the poet's online persona) but it will not be as fixed and shaped as the printed book, this being a created object, rather than an interface.

The web does, however, have one major advantage over the printed book. There is the ability to link easily to other sites for additional information such as references, source material, notes on the poet. This is facilitated, as we have noted, by that key digital feature, the hyperlink. This enrichment of the reading experience by hyperlink is being increasingly used by online fiction writers but is as yet relatively limited for poetry. There is also potential for the eBook to allow internet enrichment, assuming it is being read on an internet-connected device. Other features of the eBook are considered in the section on e-publishing.

I have made use of this with my poetry and the poetry of others written for the *Art In The Heart* project (Art In The Heart Poetry, 2013). This project involved poetry in response to art and art spaces and so the ability to reference the art work that inspired the poem and in some ways complements it, as well as gain an understanding of the organisation that holds the art work, is an additional option with regard to the resonance of the poem. The other option to exploring the online connections would be to visit the art space and view the original work. The websites actively encourage this and so add a real-world dimension to the virtual connections. A book can of course provide a reproduction of the art work, information on sources and further reading, and the Art In The Heart anthology *Iris of a Peeping Eye* (Davidson and Monks, 2013) did do this, but it is the immediacy, interactivity and range of linking that the internet provides.

### **My Own Poetry Collection**

One of the benefits of putting together a printed poetry collection for the poet is that it allows consideration of the material in more general terms and the poems in relation to each other. The original intention with my own collection was to divide the poems into three sections: people, places and love poems. This was based on a general consideration of the selected poems. These

were chosen mainly on perceived individual merit, rather than as examples of a particular approach or around a specific theme.

Working with the poems in more detail, however, it became clear that these were not very helpful categories. It became clearer to me that they divided more suitably into the four current groupings. This also fitted in well with the driving force I identified in the poems of imbuing places, people and situations with feeling. In turn this led to the over-arching idea of the collection romanticising the world, including when dealing with loss or sadness. Hence the title poem being 'The Birth of Romance'. This chimed with my focus on the traditional printed book and the aesthetic of location and dislocation and of personal response (not necessarily my own but more frequently the persona or personas or characters within the poem) that I developed through my consideration of the influence of digital technology on contemporary poetry.

The categorisations themselves were also the outcome of my investigation through practice of the influence of digital technology on my poems, suggesting different aspects of this idea of a created self, a developed (if often ambivalent) attitude and a contrast between organic and created environments of time and place, with the tone, content and form of individual poems reflecting in several ways on these themes, but with an over-riding aesthetic of human connection and sensibility the different aspects of which are reflected in the separate categories.

The four categories therefore reflect these interpretations of the overall idea of romance in different ways. The first, *Women and Men*, focuses on people across a range of ages, profiles and situations. The category heading is a homage to Robert Browning's collection *Men and Women*, with the title reversed to suggest a different time and different sensibilities. This is foregrounded by the first poem, 'My Friend In His Pretty Dress', where the speaker is tackling (or not) gender issues. Browning was, of course, himself inspired by Keats and the refracting of the romantic sensibility through social and practical situations that Browning so often revels in I

feel reflects some of my own approaches, another reason for choosing the sub-heading. I also reference the last line of Browning's 'A Toccata of Galuppi's' at the end of 'Girls Of The Coal Tip, Lancashire', to connect with that idea of romance and practicality. Here, then, the idea of persona examined in a more practical way in Section 1, is used in its widest sense to explore creatively characters and their interactions.

The second category, *If I Touch Your Sleeve*, contains poems of love and human connection. Here I was looking to emphasise the personal, rather than the social and to indicate the importance of giving physical space to love poetry to allow for sufficient thoughtfulness and feeling in responding to them. The third category, *The Birth of Romance*, largely using places to evoke thoughts, memories and feelings. The extent of the importance of place and context that my investigation of digital poetry has developed informs this section most directly, and these poems reflect a range of approaches, concerns, moods and situations triggered by the idea of the urban space. There is perhaps an avoidance of technology here, and perhaps notes of nostalgia as well as commemoration. The final category, *In Times of Trial*, where the poetry is trying to deal with challenges of circumstance, is the one where the poetry most directly tackles issues of modern life, including technology, identity and discourse in a digital world.

The creating of the collection is an expression, in the individual poems, their grouping and juxtapositions, of my attempts to tackle issues of feeling, place, identity and interaction in the light of the contemporary world and the poetry world within that. It is also my creative response, alongside my analytical, in the context of digital technology and the poetry book, to the current poetic landscape. I will now go on to consider how digital technology is affecting the practical issue of publishing the printed book.



### Chapter 3. Publishing The Poetry Book

## **The Route To Book Publication for the Poet**

In this chapter I will explore some of the routes to book publication for the poet and the range of factors affecting print publication today, including some of the influences that digital technology has had in this area.

In contrast to the examples given previously of online leading to print publication, the more traditional route to a poetry collection by a poet is through the publication of the poet's individual poems (or poem sequences) in magazines and periodicals. Once presence, style and quality has been achieved in this way, this may then be followed by a pamphlet publication and subsequently a poetry collection. Along the way, readings may be done, competitions won, poems anthologised and comment pieces written, but the essential core route is well-established.

This paradigm, however, has been under pressure for some time. There are, as discussed, a significant number of poets who have not followed this route. This is partly, as we have seen, because of the poet's direct access to an audience through online and social media (including poetry in performance) and partly, as we will go on to consider, by the flourishing of other approaches, such as self-publishing, crowdfunded publishing and similar options, all aided by digital technology.

The popularity of these alternative publication routes may be facilitated by digital technology, but it is also fuelled by the sheer volume of poetry being written that is looking for an outlet. This has led to a consequent pressure on poetry magazines and publishers to choose from a very large range of submissions. As Fiona Sampson observed in 2012, '*Poetry Review*, the country's largest specialist periodical, receives around ten thousand unsolicited submissions per annum' (Sampson, 2012, p. 2). As the editor of *Poetry Review* at the time, Sampson was well-placed to know, and there is no reason to think that the number has decreased since.

Some of this market-saturation is addressed through the rise in online magazines, which we have already looked at with reference to online presence and readership. The *Salt Anthology of Best British Poetry* sources its poems from magazines and, in 2015, of the 38 magazines referenced, just under a third were online only (Berry, 2015), showing these online sites can play a significant role in publishing poetry.

If both the route to publication and the type of publication itself has become more varied, the popularity of the book for the poet remains. Sampson also notes that ‘Every year more than two hundred volumes of poetry are published in the United Kingdom’ (Sampson, 2012, p. 2). This is a high volume within a small sector and means the issue becomes one of distribution as much as publication. A strong print publisher will bring resources not only to the creation of the book but, vitally, to its distribution, resources that the individual poet usually cannot muster (notwithstanding the influence of the online profile we have previously discussed). There are, in fact, a range of factors to consider with regard to the input of a publisher.

### **The Role of the Book Publisher**

The role of the book publisher is cogently expressed by Stephen Barr, president of the Publishers Association, when he talks about public perceptions:

The role publishers play in selecting, validating, co-ordinating, editing, branding, investing (in all of the stages needed to bring a product to market) and in ensuring that the work reaches the widest possible audience, are largely invisible to readers. (Barr, 2016, p. 7)

Many of these important aspects of a publisher’s role are hard to duplicate when self-publishing. The resources that a publisher brings are considerable and often hidden and intangible, which makes it important for the poet to be aware of them.

It is also important for the poet to be aware of some of the motivations of the publisher other than that of running a profitable business. Despite my comments earlier with regard to the publisher's website as a way of promoting sales (and so, in that sense, a shop front, as well as a branding, information, and general promotional site), there are often other motivations at work for the poetry publisher beyond the commercial.

That it is hard to make money from publishing poetry is a message that has been frequently repeated over the years. As Billy Mills puts it in *The Guardian*, 'hardly a week goes by without someone assuring us that poetry is dying' (Mills, 2013). His article was triggered by the announcement that *Salt* were ceasing to publish individual poetry collections. He argues, however, that poetry is actually in good health, just being experienced in a different way in the twenty-first century. In fact, while he asserts the (qualified) importance of the printed book alongside the use of digital technology, he believes it isn't about a commercial approach at all:

...where some see poetry as a dying art, I see it as an early and enthusiastic adopter of new technologies, partly because it has to be. Why? Well, if selling what you're making isn't going to make anyone rich, but you want to share it with those people who are interested, then you have to work out the cheapest way to do so. And right now it looks like that way is a mix of online, performance and print, with each supporting the other in a new model of publishing, one in which the printed collection is no longer the only accepted mode of publishing but remains a key part of the package. (Mills, 2013)

A similar perspective is given by Jeremy Spencer, as he reflects on his and others' experience of poetry publishing, having published sixteen poetry books in the USA as publisher *Scrambler Books*, but always with the awareness that he is doing it for love, not money: 'Some [titles] have sold well, others not so much. And that does not necessarily define them as successful. Each one I wanted to publish because there was something about the manuscript that I wanted to share with other readers' (Spencer, 2015).

There is a rather less buoyant blog on the pleasures and vicissitudes of poetry publishing on the *No Tell Books* website (Livingston, 2011). As part of an online discussion about poets paying publishers, Livingston catalogues her difficulties running a micro poetry press and highlights as she does so the range of sales for poetry collections in the USA. She cites figures for her own publications as low as 74 copies over three years and only as high as 228 for her ‘best-selling’ title. Significantly, this does not include an estimated 200 sales by the author directly, which gives overall distribution of over 400 copies. She contrasts this with poetry sales of around 800 for Grove/Atlantic publishers and between 2-3,000 for a title reviewed in *The New York Times* (though she does not cite a source for this). Clearly the business model is problematic for publishers and potentially disheartening for poets, but only, as Mills notes, if the poetry collection itself is seen in isolation.

There is an argument here – cultural, if not economic – for the mixed economy of digital platforms, live appearances and print publication that the contemporary poet should consider and which references back to Gioia’s argument that the poet ‘can no longer be sure of attracting an audience by means of print alone’ (Gioia, 2004, p. 21). It can also be seen as revitalising the genre. As part of their coverage of the relaunch by Penguin of their Penguin Modern Poets series, *The Guardian*’s Alison Flood quoted series editor Donald Futers arguing:

“There’s a strong case for our finding ourselves right now in a golden age for poetry. Between creative writing programmes, an abundance of new publications, the ever-growing popularity of spoken word and performance poetry – think of Kate Tempest, or Warsan Shire – and a new generation made unprecedentedly available to one another across national boundaries by the internet, exciting poetry ... is being written on a staggering scale,” said Futers. “The time is ripe for this revival of the Penguin Modern Poets.” (Flood, 2016a)

Futers' references to creative writing courses, performance and the global nature of the internet show how far poetry publication is being fuelled here by factors beyond the standard model of magazines-to-book publication.

The role of the physical bookshop is also a key ingredient. Contemporary poetry publishing and distribution mixes old and new techniques in order to sell the books and the physical bookshop is still a central part of this mix. Stephen Page, the chief executive of Faber & Faber, in an interview for *The Bookseller*, applauded the revival of Waterstones' bookshops in 2016 and also commented that 'the whole independent bookshop sector is so strong and thriving, it is like having a second national bookshop chain' (Campbell, 2016, p. 9). It is notable, however, that in commenting on Faber's move from loss in 2015 to profit in 2016, the references are to its fiction and children's books, with no mention of its poetry list.

In terms of online distribution, despite small and widely-varying sales figures, the power of the internet is evidenced by sales figures from the American site *Small Press Distribution* (SPD, 2016). In 2014-15 poetry book sales through them were worth over a million dollars (60% of their total sales) and they sold 164,963 books in the period, though this includes all titles. Given that they represent over four hundred small publishers, that is an average of just over four hundred books per publisher, not out of line with the averages referenced by Livingston for a small press. This does, of course, disguise the large disparities between strong-selling titles and those that sold hardly any copies at all.

For those publishers who had a strong-selling title, this outlet is clearly a major resource and for those who languish at the bottom of the sales' table it is simply another opportunity not taken by those who buy poetry. Nevertheless, this represents an important resource supporting the printed book that has been made available through digital technology.

In the UK Inpress books is a key distributor of poetry titles and does this both through bookshops and through its online outlet, with over 190 pages of titles across 60 publishers available on its website (Inpress, 2017a), again indicating the importance of the internet for poetry distribution. Inpress receives significant funding from Arts Council England (as do several poetry publishers, suggesting a profitable business-model is elusive in poetry publishing), some of which goes directly to building the online presence, further reflecting its importance.

Inpress also runs The Poetry Book Society which uses a subscription model to maintain a steady market for poetry books, albeit at a discounted price. This means that, with over 1,000 members (Flood, 2016b) it guarantees substantial sales for its chosen book each quarter. This benefits the larger poetry publishers, who can accommodate the demand, but can be problematic for small poetry publishers, who can find there is a resource issue for dealing with such relatively strong sales, as Emma Wright, editor of Emma Press, has observed (Wright, 2015) – something of an irony perhaps. We might also reference here that poetry books and individual poems also benefit from the specific markets of schools’ examining board lists and anthologies (mainly geared at GCSE), university reading lists and the royalties from photocopied handouts, as well as readings and visits. This equates not just to financial reward, of course, but also direct engagement by a large and highly-motivated audience, and all of this activity can come from publication of a single poetry book.

In fact, poetry book sales were at an all-time high in 2016, with sales of over a million books, although, as we have noted, this can disguise a wide variation, with only two titles selling more than ten thousand copies and anthologies making up a large bulk of the sales (Nielsen Bookscan, cited in Cowdrey, 2016). The nature of print (and non-print) publishing is, then, as poets should note, governed by a range of factors, not purely, or even largely, commercial ones, and it is in this light I will consider the publishers themselves.

## **The Major Poetry Book Publishers**

In *How (Not) To Get Your Poetry Published*, Helena Nelson (Nelson, 2016) identifies the ‘so-called “big five”’ poetry publishers: Bloodaxe, Carcanet, Faber & Faber, Penguin Random House (who publish poetry under the Penguin, Jonathan Cape and Chatto & Windus imprints), and Picador (part of PanMacmillan). She also goes on to argue that the list is mainly helpful in identifying which publishers (and therefore poets, or vice versa) are likely to pick up the major prizes, rather than seeing a poet’s acceptance by one of these publishers as a way of measuring success. Here she is referencing the various qualities of the smaller publishers, which we shall consider shortly, as well as the likelihood of not being accepted by one of big five. Nevertheless, as we have looked at previously, the publisher’s brand and reputation is intimately linked with that of the poet and it is therefore important to consider briefly, in addition to previous analysis of them in the online context, the major publishers in terms of the poet and publication.

Bloodaxe, founded in 1978 and run by Neil Astley and Simon Thirsk, is extremely wide-ranging in its catalogue of poets and, as we have looked at with its website, actively supports poetry across all platforms, which, alongside its anthologies, gives it a populist ethos and branding.

Carcanet, again as reflected by its website, prides itself on the rigour of its poetry publications, and comes across as less concerned with populism than with the heritage and tradition of poetry, in particular Modernism and its legacy:

Carcanet enjoys Arts Council support and can range more widely than commercial publishers dare to do. Its list includes, alongside new writers from all over the world, major authors from the twentieth and earlier centuries, figures about whom readers and writers need to know if they are to get a hold on the Modern and its aftermaths. (Carcanet, 2017b)



As it argues with regard to its output:

Dedicated to discovery, appraisal and reappraisal, Carcanet is a unique survivor in the precarious world of literary imprints. Our editorial continuity has generated a list of deep coherence and innovation, not only among the authors rediscovered but also among the new authors we publish. (Carcanet, 2017b)

As well as publishing under the Carcanet title, it has other imprints, including Anvil Press Poetry and Oxford Poets, both taken on to conserve some of their back catalogue. Retaining the names of the imprints suggests a strong sense of branding and continuity extending into their more recent poets.

It is notable that Faber & Faber have gone through several phases of branding and are very aware of their publishing brand. As Tony Faber asserts, their logo is the second most recognised in publishing (the first being Penguin's) but, having highlighted the ff logo in previous years, since 2000 the publisher has focused on promoting the individual author, with branding tailored to the specific oeuvre of the writer, with one exception – that of poetry (Faber, 2016).

We can see from this that Faber & Faber still feel that the Faber brand is very important in promoting their poetry and the strength of their list and backlist is a selling point in itself – the implication, as noted earlier, is that if you are reading a Faber poet, you are reading one that belongs to a group of major poets. The heritage of T. S. Eliot as poetry editor is key here and the major poets that he attracted, including his friend Ezra Pound, then later Auden, Spender and MacNeice and then in the second half of the twentieth century Larkin, Gunn, Hughes, Plath, Robert Lowell and Heaney, to name only a few. More recently the popularity of Don Paterson, Wendy Cope and Simon Armitage has helped to maintain the status of a Faber poet.

It is also worth noting that up to the death of Seamus Heaney in 2013, the two Faber poets Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes alone accounted for nearly 9% of all poetry sales since data started being taken in 1998 (Nielsen Bookscan, cited in Tivnan, 2013).

The implications here for poets is clear. The linking of your name with as prestigious a publisher as Faber & Faber is a way to instantly validate the work. There is also a sense in which some of Faber's less traditional poetry books, such as Sam Riviere's *81 Austerities* (Riviere, 2012) or Jack Underwood's *Happiness* (Underwood, 2015) are judged in juxtaposition to the canon of Faber poets, allowing for contrast and dissonance. There would be a different context if these books had been published by a more avant-garde publisher such as Shearsman, for example.

In fact, Faber & Faber's more recent pamphlet series, supported by Arts Council England, has been less in-keeping with the concept of major poets and more with the premise of trying-out both poets and ideas, to see how they develop. The poets Jack Underwood, Joe Dunthorne and Sam Riviere have all benefited from this scheme, but the subsequent volumes they have produced are far less commercial than the typical Faber poet. The scheme has now ended and how far it has helped address the issue of transition from small-scale pamphlet publishing to a wider poetry market through the traditional collection is harder to appraise. I have looked earlier at the way Sam Riviere has negotiated a path between online and print publication, and for him there have been clear benefits. It is an interesting model, but the success of the strategy as a publishing venture for Faber & Faber is less clear.

The scheme has also been used by other publishers. In fact, it closely resembles Tall Lighthouse Press's Pilot Series, which helped further the careers of poets as different as Emily Berry and Jay Bernard. Jay Bernard has authored three poetry pamphlets and works across media and Emily Berry is now an award-winning Faber poet – her debut book of poems, *Dear Boy*

(Berry, 2013), published by Faber & Faber, won the Forward Prize for Best First Collection and the Hawthornden Prize – and she became editor of *The Poetry Review* in 2016.

There is no doubt that pamphlet publication has become a very important aspect of poetry publishing. It is a regular and significant feature of the Poetry Book Society's quarterly Bulletin and the Michael Marks Awards for Poetry Pamphlets are well-established, according to Wordsworth Trust Director Michael McGregor (who oversees them), in 'recognising the enormous contribution that they [pamphlets] make to the poetry world' (Wordsworth Trust, 2017). It is understandable that Faber & Faber has looked at a way to enter this field, but they have perhaps fallen between the two very different aims and therefore models of pamphlet publication.

The first model is to offer readers poets they would not otherwise experience in print at low cost – and therefore low risk – and, from the other viewpoint, offer interesting poets the opportunity to be published and to begin a relationship with that publisher. If the pamphlet proves successful, there is then opportunity to develop the poet and the market further by transitioning to a full collection. An example here would be The Emma Press's *True Tales of the Countryside* by Deborah Alma (Alma, 2015).

The second model is to allow poets the opportunity to publish an interesting group of poems around an idea or theme and so to present to the public a highly- focused (and inexpensive) publication as a sort of treat or special offer. It is an end in itself, rather than a path to book publication. Pamphlets of this sort include Selima Hill's *Advice On Wearing Animal Prints* from Flarestack Poets (Hill, 2009), who publish only pamphlets, Luke Kennard's *Planet-Shaped Horse* from Nine Arches Press (Kennard, 2011) and The Emma Press's *Malkin* by Camille Ralphs (Ralphs, 2015). The distinction here with the chapbook is perhaps somewhat blurred, and in fact the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably for this type of pamphlet.

Faber & Faber, because of its desire to offer high-end work to the public, created pamphlets that feel like they are trying to be both tasters and one-offs at the same time.

My own self-published pamphlet, *Wrap Yourself Up – Poems For Winter* (Monks, 2010) gave me the opportunity to explore putting together a series of poems for a pamphlet. In this case, to see how effectively I could group my poems under the theme of winter. This was a useful forerunner to my grouping of poems for the attached collection and was a practical as well as creative way of exploring my poetry in terms of an audience. I therefore have direct experience of the usefulness of the themed pamphlet as a creative product. The fact that it was self-distributed did not allow consideration of it in terms of sales or popularity, but the clarity of the offer meant it received positive responses.

If the pamphlet is a particular form of poetry publication, so is the volume series, and it could be argued that the most effective proponent of this in the poetry field is Penguin.

Penguin Random House refer to themselves as ‘the world’s largest English language trade publisher’ (Penguin Random House, 2016) and their poetry publications, though significant in the poetry publishing world, are a small part of their output, most notably under the imprints of Jonathan Cape and Chatto & Windus. They also, as previously discussed, reintroduced their Penguin Modern Poets series in 2016. This is their third iteration of the series, following the original series of twenty-seven volumes, which ran for nearly two decades from 1962-1979, and a second, shorter series of thirteen volumes from 1995-1997.

It could be argued that this type of book is very much in the tradition of curated but accessible series offers that Penguin is well-known for; what Tony Lacey, who oversaw the second series of Penguin Modern Poets during his forty years at Penguin, but speaking here in the context of the *Poetry by Heart* anthology, refers to as ‘the great Penguin tradition of publishing the best but to the widest possible audience’ (Lacey, 2014). It could also be argued

that it is a way of spreading the risk of single author publication, since each book contains three authors, each with a particular following. It is also a way of testing a poet's popularity before agreeing to a single author collection, in the way pamphlet publication can be used.

Nevertheless, it is also an example of a type of offer you cannot make except through print publication. It is using many of the elements we have already discussed of branding, association and status-building, and it has the same advantages and pitfalls with regard to these that we have also considered. The previous runs of the Penguin Modern Poets series encompassed disparate poets with very different ideologies, sometimes, though not always, within the same book, with the 8<sup>th</sup> volume having perhaps the most heterogenous combination of Edwin Brock, Geoffrey Hill and Stevie Smith. Although Penguin may have seen this as showing the eclectic nature of the series, how far the poets found this helpful is unclear. In fact, by far the most successful of the series was *The Mersey Sound* (Henri, A. *et al*, 1967), where there was a clear homogeneity and focus to the book. As Bowen recounts in *A Gallery To Play To: The Story Of The Mersey Poets*, 'The print run, as large as twenty thousand, would guarantee status, and steady sales were expected over the next ten years. Within three months it had sold out' (Bowen, 1999, p. 7). No accurate records of total sales exist, but they are estimated at between half and one million (Lacey, 2014). This popularity was not only due to the grouping of the poets under one banner but also, as Bowen argues, the performance nature of the poetry and poets. This is an excellent early example of cross-platform synergy and how non-print media can support print books and how print books can confirm and deepen reputations.

Also part of a larger publishing house (Pan-Macmillan), Picador takes from this a sense of mass appeal, but within this there is a sense of eclecticism, as Clive James, discussing his 1986 collection *Other Passports* (James, 1986), reveals:

As the first paperback collection of contemporary verse that Picador ever published, it appeared in the airport bookshop spinners like any of my other books, or any books by any author sharing the same imprint. (James, 2003)

Under the guidance of its current poetry editor Don Paterson, Picador still focuses very much on contemporary poetry. It has steadily accumulated a series of prizes and treads an interesting line between the traditional, quietly-crafted poem (Carol Ann Duffy, Billy Collins, Kathleen Jamie) and the more experimental (Jacob Polley, Kate Tempest).

### **Smaller Publishers**

There are a large number of smaller poetry publishers, with approximately 175 listed by the Poetry Book Fair in their *Poetry Almanac 2016* (Poetry Almanac, 2016, p. 154) and almost 60 distributed online through Inpress (Inpress, 2017b). Some, such as Arachne Press, define themselves as micropublishers and several publish other genres alongside poetry. Others, such as Canongate, based in Scotland, might be considered major presses to rival the five dominant ones. These publishers often reflect the tastes, persona and ethos of their owners. I am not attempting here an overview of all current print poetry publishers, rather to indicate the vibrancy and range of the print publishing world, which often makes up for very limited resources and sales by enthusiasm and dedication. The relevance to the current digital environment is largely with regard to the diversity of the publishing outlets and how far they indicate the challenge of establishing and maintaining a poetry presence for the poet relying largely on a small poetry publisher for reaching their audience.

There are, however, some interesting aspects to the range of poetry publishers that I would like to draw attention to, inasmuch as they contrast with or feed into the ecology of the print and online publishing world.

There are a considerable number of smaller poetry publishers that are significant contributors to poetry publishing overall and whose remit is largely to publish what they regard as the best of contemporary poetry. They may not have the high sales figures of the five major poetry publishers, counting individual book sales in hundreds, rather than thousands, but in other respects they occupy the mainstream of poetry publishing. Publishers in this category include Cinnamon Press, Enitharmon, Nine Arches Press, Penned In The Margins, Seren, Smith/Doorstop and, more recently, Emma Press and Valley Press. Mention should also be made of Reality Street, who stopped publishing in 2016 but have a large back catalogue and Salt, who stopped publishing individual poetry collections in 2013, but who still publish an annual Best British Poetry anthology.

Many of these and other smaller publishers also publish a magazine which supports and nurtures poets as well as providing a regular focus and presence for the organisation, with examples as varied as the publishers themselves, including titles such as Acumen, the Agenda journal, the Frogmore Papers, Under The Radar and The Rialto magazine. We should also note here PN Review, published by Carcanet, as a long-standing poetry magazine produced by a poetry-book publisher. There is often less of a crossover for these book-publisher-linked magazines with online publication, perhaps because, as print publishers, they prize the value of a printed publication, but they add to the mix of publication options.

Looking at the wider list of poetry publishers, a large number have a geographical focus. This includes poetry publishers based in Wales such as Cinnamon Press, Gomer Press, Parthian Books and Seren; those based in Scotland, such as Canongate (though it is not simply a regional publisher), Carbel Stone and Vagabond Voices; Northern Ireland publishers such as Lapwing Publications; and those based in the English regions, such as Calder Valley Poetry, Longbarrow Press, Offa's Press, Stairwell Books, Two Rivers Press and Valley Press.

There are also those that, while not having a defining geographical remit, are effectively based around a poetry group that meet in a specific place at regular times. These could also be defined by a community of interest, as well as geographically. Examples here are: Hi Zero, based in Brighton; Soundwrite Press, based around a women's poetry group in Leicester; Five Leaves Publications, centred around their bookshop in Nottingham (though the publishing arm predates the bookshop); and Telltale Press, a collective of poets based in Sussex.

There are a large number of special interest poetry publishers, ranging from Alba Publishing, focusing on haiku and tanka poetry, to the championing of performance poetry by Burning Eye Books and Flapjack Books, to Litmus Publishing's special interest in scientific themes. Alongside these special interest publishers are those who aim to publish experimental poetry, as they define it, though often this is expressed as a preference, not a condition of publication – alongside the previously mentioned Reality Street, here we might consider Shearsman, if p then q and Knives Forks and Spoons press. We should also note Enitharmon, who have a basis in fine art as well as poetry, produce high-quality books and have a strong backlist, but are also very much engaged in publishing experimental, neo-modernist poetry. by poets such as Keston Sutherland and Marriane Morris.

The overall and distinct vision of the publisher or publishing team is very evident across all the poetry publishers despite the potential similarity of the final product, i.e. the poetry book itself (though the individual books can, of course, be very distinctive). This is perhaps of particular relevance to the poet, who is aware of the gradations of interest of the publishers, but the book-branding and the online presence also work together to convey this to a wider public and reinforce the mission of the organisation through public expression.

It is also worth noting there are a significant number of publishers whose focus is on the book itself, as a work of art or crafted product. These are in some ways a counterpoint to the



often utilitarian nature of poetry publication on or via the internet (although, as we have seen, there are also carefully constructed internet poetry sites and social media poems). Among the many examples of publishers who focus on the artistry of the book itself are Etruscan Books, Hurst Street Press and Walden Press. There are also a small number of publishers who specialise in unusual print publications or poems as objects, such as Singing Apple Press and zimZalla.

One of the considerations for the poet looking for a print publisher, in addition to their distinct vision and ethos, is the amount of time, energy, care and money spent by the publisher on their work and the resources spent on the book itself are obviously a major factor with this last group of publishers, alongside questions, as with all publishers, of house style, editorial input and active promotion. As throughout, the poet's association with the poetry publisher is a significant element of their poetry persona and the association with a crafted book is a very particular version of this.

In contrast to this bespoke, artisan approach, the larger publishers use digital technology behind the scenes in a major way. There are several organisations providing background industry support using digital technology, for example companies such as Iptor that enable digital supply chain solutions or ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) for publishers (Iptor, 2017). There is also the use of Digital Rights Management (DRM) software across all digital media, including some eBooks, to control usage, though there is some controversy around this, tying in with previous discussions of the open-access ethos of digital platforms, for example this protest from the Electronic Frontier Foundation:

Corporations claim that DRM is necessary to fight copyright infringement online and keep consumers safe from viruses. But there's no evidence that DRM helps fight either of those. Instead DRM helps big business stifle innovation and competition by making it easy to quash "unauthorized" uses of media and technology. (Electronic Frontier Foundation, 2017)

At the other end of the scale from what some might characterise as industrial-style applications, micro publishers and self-publishers can use desk-top publishing programmes or more general word processing programmes such as Microsoft Word and Adobe Acrobat to produce zines, pamphlets or short-run books. In some cases, the printed zine, though nearly always using digital technology, promotes itself as a ‘scratch’ product, home-made and edgy and its content can reflect this. The chapbook can have a similar ethos, though here there is more variation of approach. These are further examples of the influence of the process, platform and context on the content and, through this, the reader’s response to the content.

A half-way house between these high-end and low-end technologies (a divergence also evident in Virtual Reality applications, where you can buy expensive cutting-edge glasses or cheap cardboard phone-holders), exists in the form of print-on-demand (often abbreviated to PoD or p-o-d). Print-on-demand has had a major impact on the dynamics of poetry publishing and continues to develop its influence.

### **Print-On-Demand**

Print-on-demand is a tool for publishers across the board and can be an important resource for some smaller poetry publishers. Beloved of the academic book market, where a title with few purchases per year can be kept on the catalogue for many years using print-on-demand, it is also a facility used directly by some small presses to mitigate the financial risk of publishing a poetry title, as we will see below.

There is a particular use of print-on-demand, where an individual book is only printed when ordered by the customer. Amazon, for example, are an exponent of this through their self-

publishing sites CreateSpace and KPD (Kindle Publishing Direct) – which is also their service for self-publishing eBooks on their proprietary Kindle platform.

The other major use of print-on-demand is by publishers to order short-run printing for stock. Foremost among the early advocates of this system for poetry publishing is Tony Frazer at Shearsman Books, though Salt Publishing are also notable for the use of print-on-demand. In an interview by Tim Allen for The Argotist Online, Frazer makes the economic argument for print-on-demand:

The real advantage using this system is that small print-runs are much cheaper and the cash flow is maximised... In the p-o-d, or short-run-digital model, you spend only at the outset for what you need. There's a certain minimum number of copies required for any title at the beginning, so you print that number and restock quickly when you need more. The fact that the cash flow is freed up means that one can produce far more titles than would otherwise be possible. (The Argotist Online, 2017b)

It is interesting to consider how far this fits with the traditional poetry publishers, for example the ethos articulated by Michael Schmidt at Carcanet:

'Continue to build' is what independent literary houses must do. They build readership and backlist, but also authority and their own legitimacy. We make books available and, in an age of disposables, keep them available. As the balance of publishing shifts to front list, Carcanet, radical in disposition, keeps books in print for as long as possible. This kind of husbandry has more in common with forestry than with fast food. (Carcanet, 2017c)

In some regards, print-on-demand ought to assist with this intention – keeping books in print for as long as possible – but there is a sense that the words 'authority' and 'legitimacy' are highly important here and an underlying potential for them to be affected by the print-on-demand model and its association more with disposability and fast-food than with heritage and forestry. We have already considered the importance of branding and persona for the publisher and the

poet and here is a suggested tension around the issues of craft and permanence, both for the book and the poems within it. This is partly fuelled by the poorer quality of early p-o-d books, a less relevant issue following major improvements in the p-o-d technology, but also by a contrasting vision of the book as carefully-crafted artefact, rather than a utilitarian product. There are many publishers, of course, who tread a middle line between emphasising the value of the book itself and the value of its contents. This is also true, importantly, for readers, who can easily appreciate the value of a highly-designed, carefully-crafted limited edition and the equivalent value of a mass-produced paperback, both with the same collection of poems. They will, of course, expect to pay more for the crafted book, but may well be happy to have a more basic, affordable version instead, or even as well as.

Regarding the newer technology, as well as suggesting that p-o-d frees up resources for the publisher and therefore allows more books to be published, Frazer makes another very interesting point about the changing dynamics of poetry publishing brought about by the internet. As Frazer says, ‘P-o-d is digital printing plus distribution’, and he goes on to consider the wider implications for poetry publishing:

The monolithic bookshop chains tend to obscure the fact that the market for books is changing: 50% of Amazon’s annual sales are made up of books outside the Top 500 sellers. They call this The Long Tail, and its existence is key to niche players such as poetry publishers... (The Argotist Online, 2017b)

This idea of The Long Tail was codified in the general marketing book by Chris Anderson *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More* (Anderson, 2008) and can be a seductive one for the small poetry publisher, suggesting that digital technology will both allow and drive fragmentation of the market, so that we will have more choice, even though less will be sold of each item. Clearly this is a double-edged sword for the poet, who generally

wants the largest number of people to experience their poetry, but it does speak to both diversity and accessibility in the poetry book world through this connecting of publication with point of sale, of which print-on-demand is the foremost example.

This combination of point-of-sale publication and distribution is emphasised by several of the p-o-d services popular with individual authors, such as Amazon's KPD, Nook Press from Barnes and Noble and Bookbaby – all three of which offer both printed and eBook options, reminding us of the flexibility of digital technology. As Breede puts it in *The Brave New World of Publishing*:

Since digital information exists independently of the medium that contains it, it can be used or repurposed for dissemination by an increasing array of communication technologies. (Breede, 2008).

Additional to these services, Ingram's Lightning Source is one of most popular print-on-demand systems for publishers (Ingram, 2017) with its integration of print, digital publishing and distribution. In addition to those offering combined production and distribution, there are many companies offering a print-on-demand facility, some more geared to the domestic than the corporate market. These are often used for self-publishing and cover all genres. They include Blurb, Lulu and Xlibris, but there are many others in the field, testifying to the popularity of the system for both the traditional publisher and the self-publishing author.

### **Self-publishing and Collaborative Publishing**

What was often called Vanity Publishing has undergone a transformation through the internet and has been largely replaced by the self-publishing model. A time-honoured practice – Jamie FitzGerald on the *Poets & Writers* website, for example, references Blake and Whitman, as well

as more recent examples (FitzGerald, 2013) – self-publishing is very much part of the general marketplace now. The same caveats that apply to self-published work on the internet and through eBooks apply to self-published print books: the lack of editorial input, no external validation and no marketing or distribution support, with the additional drawback of the comparison between the quality of the book itself with those published by regular publishers. This issue of product differentiation, however, is less prevalent now due to the developments in book publishing technology. These quality improvements are themselves partly a response to the online market for self-publication. The internet has therefore played a large part in this driving down of qualitative difference between self-publishing and professional publishing.

As we have seen, the internet is also altering the distribution model. Whether printed traditionally or through print-on-demand, the direct marketing and distribution that the internet allows is very much to the benefit of the poetry book. The range of online marketing and sales outlets, together with the lower cost of production has made poetry book publication more accessible than it has ever been. Another example of how the book itself is flourishing in the digital world.

In addition to providing the option to integrate production and distribution using print-on-demand and online retail sites, other recent online developments have suggested how digital platforming can alter the actual commissioning and selection process for books in general and poetry as part of this. The argument that publication via an established poetry press gives validation can be set against the idea that an online following shows popularity and in this way online popularity (and therefore potential sales) can drive publication. We have already seen this with Instagram poet Rupi Kaur's best-selling *Milk and Honey* (Kaur, 2015), but it is also a trend in less high-profile cases. There are some publishers who are trialling a model known as collaborative or hybrid publishing, such as Eyewear Publishing through their Maida Vale

Publishing imprint, and Urbane Publishing (who do not publish poetry specifically), as outlined by Director Matthew Smith for the *Ivy Moon Press Blog*:

One of the issues I think the industry has as a whole is that it tries to keep everything in neat boxes – agent route, traditional publisher, self-publisher, vanity publisher – success will actually come for the companies that combine all the very best elements of all of them. That’s what we’re trying to do.  
(Ivy Moon Press, 2014)

Another important example of a non-traditional publishing model facilitated by the internet is Unbound, a website-based crowdfunding book publisher (Unbound, 2017). Like Urbane, Unbound see themselves not just as a publishing business, but as handing power back to the author and the reader, as their mission statement espouses:

We started Unbound with a simple mission: make publishing work. For everybody. We believe that everyone should be given the chance to seize their own success, and that great ideas shouldn’t fall between the cracks because they don’t fit the mould. And that’s what we’ve built – a better way of doing things. A community, platform and a publishing model that shift the balance of power to you, people and communities that champion underserved ideas and voices.  
(Unbound, 2017)

Established at the beginning of the Millennium, as of April 2017 they had raised over £3½ million pounds from backers and published over 200 books. They have only a small selection of poetry to date, but this includes several distinctive poetry anthologies and collections from poets such as Jonathan Bate, Murray Lachlan Young and Brian Bilston.

Brian Bilston’s poetry collection *You Took The Last Bus Home* (Bilston, 2016) is a good example of how a major online presence and social media following can lead to book publication. He has developed a strong following for his poems posted via Twitter (often as pictures, thereby subverting the character-limit constraint), with almost 45,000 followers (Bilston, 2017a) and has also been able to distribute his poetry online through his website

(Bilston, 2017b). In the light of this popularity, through Unbound he has converted the online poems to book form. As we have discussed, there are several motivations for this, but additionally the model here more overtly links online popularity with online pledging and therefore ability to publish. This is a different model from gaining a reputation as a poet through magazine and anthology publication (and having online activity to support this), leading to acceptance by a traditional publisher. This model thrives on a direct relationship between the online poet and their online audience. One can see the appeal of such a model to both the web-based publisher and the poet, allowing a more direct relationship with the audience, the book being a manifestation of that popularity.

The book-focused crowdfunding model of Unbound is in some ways a hybrid of the more general crowdfunding model of sites such as Crowdfunder (Crowdfunder, 2017) or Kickstarter (Kickstarter, 2017) and the pre-subscription model, which has a long heritage and is still used today – Roz Goddard’s poetry collection *How To Dismantle A Hotel Room* (Goddard, 2006) was funded this way. There are, however, some important differences to more general crowdfunding sites. Unbound has an editorial panel, so they only accept projects they consider to be of merit and that they believe will generate sufficient pledges. They also produce and distribute the books themselves. The production quality of the books is high and they have won several awards. They count well-known names among their authors. All these elements help give a credibility to them as a publisher, one of the main issues, as we have seen, with non-traditional publishing models. They also provide support to the author that is often lacking in self-publishing.

Other publishers, as previously noted, such as Fair Acre Press (Fair Acre Press, 2017) and Dead Ink Books (Dead Ink Books, 2017), run online crowdfunding campaigns to help cover the cost of publishing books that they are committed editorially to publishing. For the poet this use of internet crowdfunding by an established publisher may be seen as a positive, a move that



allows a greater range of books to be published, or a negative, a way of testing the popularity and mitigating the risk for books that might otherwise have been straightforwardly published and which may not get published if the funds are not raised. Either way, this is an internet-driven publishing model that is very active and at least provides further options for the poet looking for print publication to consider.

### **e-publishing**

The twenty-first century has seen much discussion and uncertainty in the publishing industry around digital technology and specifically eBooks. The uncertainty of their general approach is well summed up by Philip Jones in an editorial in *The Bookseller*, where he refers to ‘the long-running mid-life crisis of an industry that has flirted with digital but woken up with print’ (Jones, 2016). The metaphors here are revealing: the idea of an older industry and a younger, more vigorous potential new partner and confusion over perceived loyalties at play between traditional print and digital technology.

Amazon is currently dominant in e-publishing in the UK: in 2016 they had ‘an estimated 90% market share of the UK eBook market’ (Nielsen Bookscan, cited in Campbell, 2016, p. 9). This dominance is clearly an issue for publishers and authors alike and for poetry publishing means that issues of visibility to the reading public, which are already manifest in traditional print publishing, are exacerbated. The fact that most eBooks are sold through Amazon means they have the virtual shop front of their website and of the proprietary Kindle e-reader and its various iterations as a key selling tool. Other sites can link to Amazon, but for Kindle they control the purchase.

Further, the anonymising nature of the e-reader, where publishing brands are subsumed by the electronic interface, means that it is hard to establish an individual presence. The idea of the e-reader as a tool, a device, rather than an individualised object also comes into play. If the owner of an e-reader sees it as a programmable interface, rather than a created work by a writer, supported by artists, editors and publishers, then it is harder to individualise the reading experience and give it weight and mental space, which is one of the ways poetry creates its effect.

There are some contradictory forces at work here and the negative aspects of the e-reader should be balanced against some of the advantages, including: convenience, since you can carry hundreds of titles in one lightweight device; accessibility, given the immediate access to the book from the download; availability of titles, including back catalogues, though this is less the case with poetry,; and cost, despite the great variability in the cost of the book downloads and much debate in the industry around pricing. The e-reader also provides searchability, bookmarking, dictionary look-up and customisable viewing (with the pros and cons of this for the poet as discussed). It can also have some interactive features and additional connectivity if able to access the internet.

Neither should we overlook the desire of the reader for the personal. The desire for the owner of an e-reader to modify, adapt, configure and alter its appearance is a testimony to the idea that owners wish to create a bond with things they own and value. Just as people write in physical books and put stickers on laptops, so the e-reader owner can choose the look and feel of the e-reader, especially by choosing the colour and specific travel case. This personalisation can help mitigate the blandness of the internal e-reader environment and therefore give value to the downloaded eBook. There are also options for personalising the reading experience itself, through selection of font size and style and background, for example. A detailed consideration of

this is given by Matt Hayler in *Challenging the Phenomena of Technology* where his examination of how readers interact with the technology of e-readers shows the extent of the desire for the reader to personalise the e-reader, and how ‘the bodies of our artefacts work in tandem with our own embodiment’ (Hayler, 2015, p. 1).

This gives an alternative perspective on how e-readers can sometimes be a personal library and this can be seen as an exciting development for writers, though it is notable that it is primarily the device that is personalised – the content is personalised mainly by selection of material downloaded, and optional adjustment to its physical representation, and the weight given to this material can vary from casual or impulse buy to careful choice and selection (and anywhere in-between). Nevertheless, the poet can take advantage of this personalisation in a way that perhaps is more profound than with prose writing (though story writers may well argue differently), inasmuch as the intensity of a poem can match well the intimacy of the e-reader: small, easy to carry around with you and very much belonging to one owner.

Despite the dominance of Amazon, the market itself is becoming increasingly fluid, especially internationally, with a number of digital bookstores and platforms served by an increasing range of self-publishing platforms, making this both a dynamic and a complex market. Although it has a vested interest as a rival publisher in minimising Amazon’s dominance, Bookbaby presents the situation thus:

Amazon is the biggest and most important online bookstore, with approximately 67% of the eBook and printed book market share in the US... But there are many other baskets...err...stores where millions of eBooks and printed books are sold in the US each year including iBooks, Google Play, Barnes & Noble, and dozens more... Even bigger online sales opportunities lie outside of the US. They do call it the World Wide Web after all...

For example, while Amazon is the dominant player in the UK, they’re just one of the many stores in the European Union including Tolino, Adlibris, and BOL. Amazon owns only about 40% of the German eBook sector, while down under,

Amazon has only 34% of the Australian and New Zealand digital book market. The trend continues around the globe. In Canada, Amazon has less than 40% of the market, with strong competition from retailers such as Indigo and Kobo. Kobo, which also owns Overdrive, a distributor specializing in libraries, has 26 million users and a library of 4.7 million eBooks and magazines in 190 countries. (Bookbaby, 2017)

Whilst this variation and diversity suggests vigour, there is the familiar digital problem of formatting across platforms. Recent concerns centre on the question of Amazon's ongoing commitment to the proprietary Kindle platform raised by their diversification (into groceries, for example), and the potential replacement of the otherwise standard EPUB format with PWP (Portable Web Publications). As Simon Rowberry points out:

Both EPUB and the Kindle's proprietary format are based on 20+ year old technology in an age of rapid technological obsolescence... PWP moves ebook reading out of dedicated apps and into native web browsers. This has many advantages, but how will books cope in the complex attention economy of web browsing? Given the scope of the format, digital books will become just another type of publication to use PWP. (Rowberry, 2017)

In other words, we will be able to read poetry in a book-type format on web browsers, rather than dedicated devices. The fear is that the idea of a special e-reader will fade away, and with it the idea of the eBook as distinct from other media offers. In this scenario, the printed book looks to be even more distinctive. We are, however, some way off this revision of formats.

In the meantime, the debate between eBooks and physical books continues to be a lively one, with the publishing market in a state of flux in the 2010s. Whether you agree with those that argue that eBooks are a rival to printed books or prefer to see them as expanding the market, the Publishers Association has noted that within the overall publishing sector, not only did eBook sales fall in 2016, but print book sales increased, continuing the figures for 2015, the year print

book sales rose for the first time since the introduction of the eBook. In practical terms then, this is a volatile publishing environment.

Stephen Loting, the Chief Executive of the Publishers Association clearly sees the competing attractions of the two publishing platforms (pBooks and eBooks) when he says:

Last year we saw the first sign that the UK's love for print is far from over. Today [4 November 2016] our half year results show that this was not a one off phenomenon. Publishers are increasingly using digital tools to make content more adaptable, personal and accessible than ever before. But there is a unique pleasure in reading a physical book, and these figures show that consumers are finding that this is not something digital books can easily replace.  
(The Publishers Association, 2016)

This puts forward the competing virtues of the two forms and argues for both, but, even if you disagree that the figures entirely justify his conclusion, there is no doubt that it is against a backdrop where there is no longer an inexorable rise in the prevalence of the eBook and no longer a fall in the popularity of the print book.

Having said this, it should be noted that the poetry sector may not entirely mirror these figures. The poetry publishing field is a very specific sector within publishing and its eBook presence is significantly different to that of the major fiction, non-fiction, educational and academic publishers. Firstly, sales are often directly through publishers' websites and so may not appear in the official figures. Secondly, although eBook versions of poetry collections are now relatively widely available, it is by no means automatic that an e-version will be created and in these cases no sales comparison can be made. Thirdly, a major sales driver for poetry books is through appearances and poetry performances and these inevitably favour the printed book over the eBook. For these reasons the data around eBook sales has only limited application for the poet, mainly in terms of the wider publishing environment.

In the light of these factors, how far should a poet consider e-publication? To begin with, there are those who regard the decline in sales of eBooks as anomalous. As Mark Dawson, the founder of [selfpublishingformula.com](http://selfpublishingformula.com), asserts on *The Literary Platform*:

‘I don’t buy arguments that eBook growth has plateaued... the Kindle and the Nook and the Kobo reader—important though they have been—were always going to be gateway technologies to transition readers from print to digital. The medium-term future is in mobile. Consider this: Apple projects to sell tens of millions of devices over the course of the next twelve months. Every one of those devices will come pre-loaded with iBooks. Alternatively, Amazon’s Kindle app is an easy to install and elegant reading experience. eBooks are not going away. They’re just going to be consumed in a different fashion.’ (The Literary Platform, 2016)

His advice is to keep focused on using social media and websites to promote your eBook. A natural environment, as your audience are already electronic media consumers. He also argues that independent authors can be more focused and adept than large publishing concerns in promoting their brand (i.e. themselves and their work). This assumes, however, a temperamental aptitude for both the promotion per se and the use of the media as a means of doing the promoting, an aptitude by no means a given for any writer and certainly not for poets, as the discussions in Chapter 1 indicate. Nevertheless, the urge to share one’s work is a powerful driving force and the creation of a self-published eBook is for many a manageable and affordable and therefore attractive option. In terms of affordability, there are a range of pricing options, including several companies that offer free or low-cost publication in return for a percentage of the sale price, including Amazon’s KDP, Barnes & Noble’s Nook Press, Apple’s iBookstore, and others not linked to one specific platform, such as Smashwords and Bookbaby, providing little financial risk to the author – though they may provide little financial reward either.

As discussed previously, and as implied by Dawson’s comments, the issue is often not the mechanics of publishing but the challenge of marketing and distribution – how are you going

to get people to download the book? The process of e-publishing can be navigated without much technical knowledge (although the professionalism or otherwise of the end-product can reflect the inexperience of the self-publisher), it is the selling of the book that is the challenge. It could, of course, be argued, that the presence of the eBook of itself can be a focus for attracting readers – in other words, the book is the primary marketing tool, both for itself, the poet and their wider oeuvre.

And here one of the key advantages of the eBook is its international availability. As Shellie Horst puts it in *The Bookseller*:

A bookshop's shelf will reach one part of a nation, digital publishing will reach many nations through its varied formats and niches (Horst, 2016).

Here are the attractions and the challenges: the ease of access, both instant and readily available, and the generally lower cost of a digital publication gives it major advantages over a printed book for a distant audience, whether that is regional or international, but the variations in format and the visibility, if it is a niche product, as most poetry is, can also be limiting.

There is a deeper, perhaps more existential issue with regard to eBooks: the argument that they operate as shadow-books, electronic facsimiles of actual books, that they look back to the old technology of the book, rather than the new technology of the web, that they are a digital object, rather than an interactive digital environment.

This distinction between electronic object and electronic environment brings us back to our starting point. We can see the book and digital platforms as reflections of each other, the digital technology supporting and helping promote the printed book in a range of ways, or we can see them as very different things, taking the poetry in different directions.

## Conclusion

My practice-based research has included a range of personal responses to digital technology across the areas discussed in the first three chapters and my conclusions arise from my own personal practice and, leading out from this, from researching more widely.

My primary conclusion is that, using my practice as the basis of my research, together with wider research generated by this core practice-as-research methodology, the primacy of the printed book within the contemporary poetry-publishing ecology is greater than ever. The evidence of my research into the impact on the printed poetry book of digital technology and the poetry-related activities associated with it (for example, expressions of persona, use of competitions and prizes, use of digital technology for creating poems that then leads to the poems being printed, use of digital technology for the printing of the book itself) has led me to have renewed confidence in the printed book as the key focus of my creative approach and this in turn has confirmed my use of the printed form as the main focus for the expression of my poetry and the printed poetry book as the best means of sharing it with others.

I have investigated the value of the printed book in practice through the poetry collection that forms the second part of this thesis, curated as for a traditional book publication. This demonstrates, through the creative act of producing it and the empirical evidence of the collection itself, the value of the printed poetry book that I have referenced in the first part of my thesis. This should be qualified by an awareness that the thesis publication does not entirely replicate book publication. In particular there is no specific cover for the collection, there are more poems than for a standard collection, the poems do not face each other as the thesis is single-sided and there are no publisher's or pricing details. Nevertheless, it does reflect and indicate several features that give value to the printed book.



These features include, for myself as a poet and, by extension, poets more generally, (with the caveat of a different main focus for some poets, such as slam and spoken-word poets): validation of both the poet and the poetry; conferring of status; reflection on the way the poems relate to each other through the process of editing, including selecting, revising (both content and form) and ordering; and ability to show intent as expressed in the collection.

Even when the focus is on an event or performance, for non-performance poets having a printed book can convey more status (and therefore trust) than reading from sheets of paper or a phone or tablet. Here practice varies greatly and I have seen Jo Bell, for example, read from her poetry book *Kith* (Bell, 2015a) and then a phone screen at the Birmingham Literature Festival (Bell, 2015b) to convey a sense of work-in-progress and Hollie McNish read both from memory and from her book *Nobody Told Me* (McNish, 2016) at a spoken-word event at the Edinburgh International Book Festival (McNish, 2017b) to demonstrate her credentials as both a spoken-word artist and published poet. In both cases, however, the book conveyed status. The fierce criticism that McNish (and her poetry editor, Don Paterson at Picador) has faced for her following book, *Plum* (McNish, 2017a) in an article in PN Review by Rebecca Watts (Watts, 2018) for its lack of rigour and its promoting of the cult of the poet at the expense of the poetry – identified by Watts as fostered chiefly by the internet and in some ways going further than my own argument on its influence on persona and poetry – is also a reflection of the perceived importance and validation of the published collection. Her condemnation of young female poets such as McNish for ‘the open denigration of intellectual engagement and rejection of craft that characterises their work’ is further fuelled by the publication of their work in poetry books. As she says of *Plum* in the article, ‘I keep reminding myself of the facts: this is published by Picador; Don Paterson edited it; the book costs £9.99’. She is outraged by the credibility and status that book publication has given to the poetry.

For both poet and reader, as I show through the provision of the actual collection (and as I discuss within the body of the thesis), the printed book also provides: a tangible product, a multi-sensory tactile object, one you can see, touch, smell, hear as you turn of the page; portability, in that you can carry the book with you; a sense of ownership, both physical and metaphorical; ease of access to the poems, including non-linear access and a sense of relationship between the physical presence of the poems, for example poems that follow-on and therefore complement or contrast with each other, such as ‘We Are The Men’ followed by the companion pieces ‘Girls Of The Coal Tip, Lancashire’ and ‘Rubble Women In Post-war Dresden’; a sense of a curated ordering or grouping of poems, such as the contrast between the social and cultural loci of the first three poems, ‘My Friend In His Pretty Dress’, ‘Business Meeting’ and ‘Mrs Sissal Caressing Her Muff’; and a sense of continuity and contrast with other poetry publications and the wider context of the printed book.

Alongside, and in part as a consequence of, these enduring properties, the poetry book in the digital age is more vital than ever – it has more vitality because of digital developments and it is more important also because of them, as a touchstone of traditional poetic expression and as a contrast and as a companion to the digital forms of poetic expression we have considered, such as social media posting, tweeting, poetry films and performance videos. These elements, far from replacing it, often support and endorse the physical, printed book as the principal expression of poetic achievement. I have also shown how, in my own practice, I have successfully incorporated or responded to features of digital technology in the printed collection. I therefore conclude the role, purpose and function of the poetry book in the digital age is reinforced and refreshed rather than superseded by digital technology and should be considered as a key choice of expression for poets, including myself.

I will now consider in more detail my secondary conclusions arrived at through my practice-based methodology and the research leading out from this.

In order to investigate how far the recontextualising of the poetry book within a digital environment is fundamentally related to the recontextualising of the poet themselves, I explored the poet's persona and branding (for myself and others) in the digital age. Furthermore, as a poet's persona, such as my own, can influence not only the perception of their poetry, in book or other form, but also its nature and its expression, I felt it was important to consider the wider ramifications of the poet's digital persona. In doing so I explored my own online and offline presence and this, together with my research into the online presence of other poets, has led me to several conclusions. Firstly, despite my own difficulties of engaging fully, as considered in the section 'My Own Online Experience', and perhaps more forcefully because of my awareness that these are faced in similar ways by other poets, I have argued for the importance of an online presence for the poet and that, as a poet, such as myself, one cannot ignore online and social media. They will form part of my own and any poet's persona and branding, whether the poet chooses to interact with them or not. In fact, they are so much part of our contemporary culture that lack of engagement with them, whether an active decision not to participate or as a consequence of inaction, can itself be seen – and commented on – as adopting a persona.

For this reason I argue that active engagement is vital in order to exercise some influence and control over one's digital presence and I offer a range of ways of engaging, noting that each poet should determine their own strategy, with my own as a specific example. This engagement, in turn, influences how the poems and any poetry book publications are perceived and I argue that the poet must be actively aware of this and decide how to respond in the light of their own disposition and preferences.

Further, I have considered how my own and others' online persona is influenced directly not just by the actions of the poet but by other factors, and how material from other organisations can form an important part of the poet's online presence. I have shown the range of this influence by contrasting my own online presence with that of other poets.

Additionally, I have looked in a more general way, though still from my perspective as a practising poet, at some of the interactions between the digital and non-digital worlds, including awards, honours and prizes, and the act of accepting or refusing them, and how these interactions can also inform a poet's online persona.

My own presence, as I have shown, has been influenced by my poetic but also my non-poetic activities, both literary and otherwise, for example my work as a writer in schools. I have researched the relative impact of my online presence compared to my public appearances and noted that the public appearances have provided as great an impact as my digital presence.

From this, I conclude that, as with the digital world more generally, there is a symbiotic relationship between it and the physical world – my public appearances, for example, are both supported by my web page and feed into it. I therefore argue from this practice-based research, supported by research into the relative online and offline presence of other poets, that for myself, as with other poets, the activities outside the digital world are as important as those within it, both for the poet's persona and branding and for their impact through this on the poetry book. This means we must maintain these alongside digital activity, not use the digital world as a replacement. We should not substitute, for example, web pages and social media postings for face-to-face encounters, such as readings or events, but use each to facilitate and augment the other.

Using my own online presence and activity as a starting point, I have also looked at different aspects of the specific online poetic persona itself and how, as in my case, it reflects the

poet's own disposition, personality and preferences, both socially and artistically. I have also looked at various examples of how it is communicated. This was based on my own approaches and experiences, which informed my wider thinking, especially in two main areas. Firstly, the tension between sharing of information and being an active part of a community (online and offline) and what might be regarded by oneself (or the anxiety it would seem so to others) as self-promotion. Secondly, the tension between wishing to devote most energy to the creative practice of writing the poems and the need to undertake the ancillary activities around it in order to ensure an audience for those poems. My own practice, and, by comparison, that of others as researched, leads me to conclude that these two tensions are fundamental to the approach of most poets to their online (and offline) persona, but that the nature and extent of the tension varies greatly between individual poets, with my own personality tending to less online activity than with other poets – as identified, for example, in the section on blogs – who find more continuity between these issues and activities than myself. The poet needs to decide how far to conform to or challenge their own preferences, with both strategies having their benefits and difficulties. This should be undertaken with an awareness that their online presence influences how any poetry book publications are perceived, including their visibility online, their popularity, and, more generally, the ability to sell or distribute them.

As part of my analysis of how digital media have influenced the poems themselves, I have looked at how aspects of the different media have influenced the creation of my own poetry and current poetry more generally, both within and beyond the digital world. Here my own practice of drafting and redrafting, with poems such as 'Business Meeting', 'Park Bench. 2016.' and 'Views of Mount Fuji', typographically distinctive poems such as 'Pointy Shoes' and 'Knickerbocker Glory Sunset' and poems using a found-text basis such as 'My Gecko Was Impacted / This Was The Situation', 'Therefore Let The Moon' and 'The Mirror of Literature', with the use of the

electronic format to develop and achieve their final form, has informed my conclusion that there is a genuine influence on the nature and aesthetic of the poetry through the use of a digital medium to create and rework it. In this way I show how the poet can fruitfully embrace or react to these developments and so extend the range and contemporary relevance of their poetry. This is more fundamental than the simple incorporation into poems of contemporary digital buzzwords such as Twitterati or platforms such as Facebook, but affects the poetry at a deeper level by influencing the nature and composition of the poems themselves.

There is a further conclusion that even if traditional paper and pen (or other non-digital media) are used, this use is consciously informed by its contrast with the electronic format. I discuss my poem 'The Chroniclers' specifically with regard to this, but it also applies to poems such as the sonnet 'Early Morning Coffee', the terza-rima inspired (at any rate terza, if not rima) 'In Venice In Search of the Pristine', and the syllabic-poem 'The Cup'. It is interesting to speculate if the use of a traditional formal structure, such as the sonnet, might override the influence of the electronic format in terms of drafting and redrafting, and I come to no clear conclusion on this, as my practice varies widely. I often find, however, that for me writing longhand is more suited to attempting to achieve a traditional structure. Perhaps this is because the electronic version is too malleable, perhaps because I find it harder to write rhythmically using a keyboard. The nature and impact of the electronic devices themselves, although touched on in Chapter 3, is, however, outside the scope of this thesis.

The subject-matter, as I note with regard to 'The Chroniclers', and which is evident in the long-threaded lines of 'The Sewing Basket' and the conversational tone of much of 'Mr Wordsworth at St Catherine's' should not be overlooked either, influencing my use, in these cases, of pen and paper to support my less formal intentions. My poem 'In Venice In Search Of The Pristine' is an interesting combination of the two methods – begun on paper to attempt to tap

into the ‘accrued histories’ of the place, then reworked electronically to provide greater shape and clearer layout. Ironically, with this poem I also use the electronic medium to fine-tune my use of dashes to link to Emily Dickinson’s poems, and so use digital technology to reference back to her pre-digital themes and style.

I therefore conclude, using my own and other examples within the thesis, that there is a clear influence on the poetry itself by the use of a digital medium and therefore on the content of the printed poetry book. I show how my own aesthetic incorporates this and how others, using a less paper-focused sensibility than mine, make use of it in their own creative work.

I also contend, however, that it is digital technology with regard to publishing, by allowing the poet to create the layout and the publisher to emulate it relatively easily in the book itself, as discussed in Chapter 3, that also helps maintain the centrality of the printed book to the outcome. Poems created and developed digitally are easily converted to printed versions and to book form, and this helps to maintain the book in practical terms as the primary method of dissemination.

I have also considered how the performative element of online posting provides an influence, sometimes consciously, sometimes not. Here I have considered this from my own viewpoint in terms of poems that have been shared through performance and how this has affected my approach to the poem itself and any reworking of the poem. This reworking generally takes two forms: reworking from a page-based text for performance, as with my poem ‘The Three Women’, or sharing beyond the page (for example, as part of a video, as with my poem ‘The Art of Looking’) and reworking from a performance-based poem to a page-based one, as with ‘The Sandpilot of Morecambe Bay’, originally written to be read out at an event, or ‘The Sewing Basket’ and ‘The Box’, both written originally with performance in mind. Here again my conclusion is that the medium of transmission impacts not just on the reader experience but also

on the poet's creative activity. Writing – or rewriting – for the printed page becomes a conscious activity, rather than an implicit one and, further, writing for a medium where the poem is seen rather than heard, affects the nature of the work both consciously and unconsciously.

I explore this mainly through my reworking of poems for the collection, thereby showing through practice how text-based poetry (and therefore the printed poetry book) is influenced by this performative aspect of digital media. It may seem paradoxical, but I contend through my analysis and my practice that by throwing into focus the nature of page-based poetry, digital platforms and media can add to its richness and vibrancy. Several of my poems, especially in Part 1 of the collection, *Women and Men*, show practice-based evidence of how the performative influence of other media influenced their printed-book version, both in content and form. This is clearly the case in 'The Three Women', where the three different voices are indicated by the use of the font, but can also be seen in poems such as 'We Are The Men', with its direct, provocative address to those watching, 'Mr Wordsworth at St Catherine's' with its anecdotal overtones, and 'At The Posterity Event', with its faux recreation of an award ceremony and 'The Tiger In The Corner', where the font is used to differentiate the different internal voices because 'No-one speaks the fear'.

Other poems, particularly, though by no means exclusively, in Part 4, *In Times Of Trial*, show how my practice, as evidenced in the poems themselves, was influenced by an awareness of contemporary digital media issues and features (features not unique to the digital world but very much developed by it) such as dislocation, fragmentation, shifts of perspective, non-narrative juxtaposition and use of found text. I have previously discussed poems showing some of these features, such as the use of dislocation in 'Business Meeting' and 'Pointy Shoes' and the found-text inspired pieces 'My Gecko Was Impacted / This Was The Situation' and 'The Mirror of Literature', but there are also poems that show the influence of the technology on the content



itself, including ‘The crane is not eyeing the water over the wetlands’, with its dystopian outlook that ‘Nothing will grow but numbers’, ‘In My Humble Opinion’, with its questioning of who holds power of expression on the internet in lines such as ‘This comment / has been removed by the moderator’, and ‘The Computer Generates’, speculating on the idea that, through digital technology, ‘Life has become instant’.

Conversely, other poems are reactions against these digital influences, including several of the love poems in Part 2, *If I Touch Your Sleeve*, and with many poems in Part 3, *The Birth of Romance*. The love poems are grouped as a mini-collection in themselves, almost as a defence against the danger of fragmentation and to suggest the power of such poems as a group. It is also intended to embody in practice the importance of being able to respond unhurriedly to such poetry. An embodiment, I would argue, provided fundamentally by the printed page.

This power of grouping is not as clearly evident, however, in *The Birth of Romance* section where several poems, such as ‘Park Bench. 2016.’ and ‘3 x Car Park’ show the influence of the digital features discussed. Here the printed text incorporates elements such as dislocation and fragmentation within a very geographically-specific location, thereby attempting to reconcile specificity of location with fragmentation of experience within the poem.

In this way I show in my practice how I am responding to the dislocation of much digital content (poetry and more general content too), either be resisting or incorporating. From this I am making a wider point that there is something of a polarity in much contemporary poetry between fragmented, meta and intertextual material and material that is grounded in a particular time and place; social, geographic, personal, cultural or a combination of these. I show, through my poetry, how my aesthetic moves between these two poles and so provide a point of reference for the wider argument around the existence of these polarities and their influence on poetry today.

I consider in chapter 2 some virtues of the virtual environment, including the ability to use fluidity, adaptation and disruption as a creative tool, but I also argue that the desire to locate the poem, whether culturally, socially or physically remains surprisingly strong. This has increased my awareness of its importance in my own poems and increased the emphasis I placed upon it in poems with direct digital influences such as those above and in poems primarily focusing on place and time, from poems around an individual moment, such as ‘Sitting On The Wall Outside On A Break’ and ‘Stock-taking In The Empty Classroom’ to more wide-ranging and indicative ones such as ‘The Retail Park’ and ‘The Birth of Romance’.

This interaction of intentions and heightened range and focus of the achieved poems provides, in my view, an increased richness in the overall printed book collection. I would argue from this that digital influences help to refresh and add depth and complexity to the printed text as presented in the printed poetry book, both my own and others as discussed, adding to the argument for its continuing importance.

Out of this negotiation of these different influences on my own poetry, my belief in the power of the poetry book itself is enhanced rather than diminished. I would argue that it is very well-placed to adopt and interpret these movements, both in itself and in the context of a range of other publishing or sharing options (such as through performance, online or off). My own collection, alongside others considered in this thesis as comparisons, I believe evidences and justifies the value of my belief in the printed text and, specifically, the printed poetry book as the key element in the poetry publishing ecology today, enhanced by and enhancing the diverse poetry offer we currently enjoy.

Gioia argues that ‘print has lost its primacy in communication’ (Gioia, 2004, p. 3) and that the poet ‘can no longer be sure of attracting an audience by means of print alone’ (Gioia, 2004, p. 21). This may be true in terms of absolute numbers – we live today in a highly visual and aural

world – but it does not take into account the fundamental nature of the book. In some ways nor should it, if the argument is that we must be alive to the richness and range of the platforms we interact with now, and to their importance and their influence. I would argue, however, the poetry book is stronger than ever because of, not despite, this richness. This is true for the poetry within it and for the book itself as a printed product. As I have shown, the book is available in more ways and at a greater range of prices than ever before. Digital production, marketing and distribution sit alongside traditional publishing and a wide range of online activity as ways of increasing the book's availability and visibility.

Taking all of these considerations and arguments into account, I feel I am justified in my choice of the poetry book collection as the primary form for expressing my poetry, and by doing so have demonstrated, through my practice, and by the evidence of my wider research, itself informed by and informing my practice, the continuing paramount importance of the poetry book in the digital age.

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## Appendix 1

'Not Just His Nose' and 'I Love My Cat', two poems for young people to contrast with the poems 'Knickerbocker Glory Sunset' and 'The Importance of Cats in Ancient Egypt' in the main collection.

not just  
his Nose  
is cold  
but  
all his round  
body right down to  
his button-bursting  
tummy that's all shiny  
and wet and glows cold  
from his making in the  
outdoor fridge of winter  
as cheering as a baby  
from his soggy toes  
to his drippy grin

## Oh, I love my cat

Oh, I love my cat and my cat loves me.  
When my room is messy,  
and my mum is fussy,  
and my toys are spread  
all over my bed –  
then I tidy up  
reluctantly:  
oh, I love my cat and my cat loves me.

Oh, I love my cat and my cat loves me.  
When I come through the door  
and stomp mud on the floor,  
and then make it worse,  
by going in reverse –  
then I wipe it up  
smearily:  
oh, I love my cat and my cat loves me.

Oh, I love my cat and my cat loves me.  
When I'm in the shower  
for over an hour  
and the floor is dripping,  
so that everyone's slipping –  
then I clear it up  
sloppily:  
oh, I love my cat and my cat loves me.

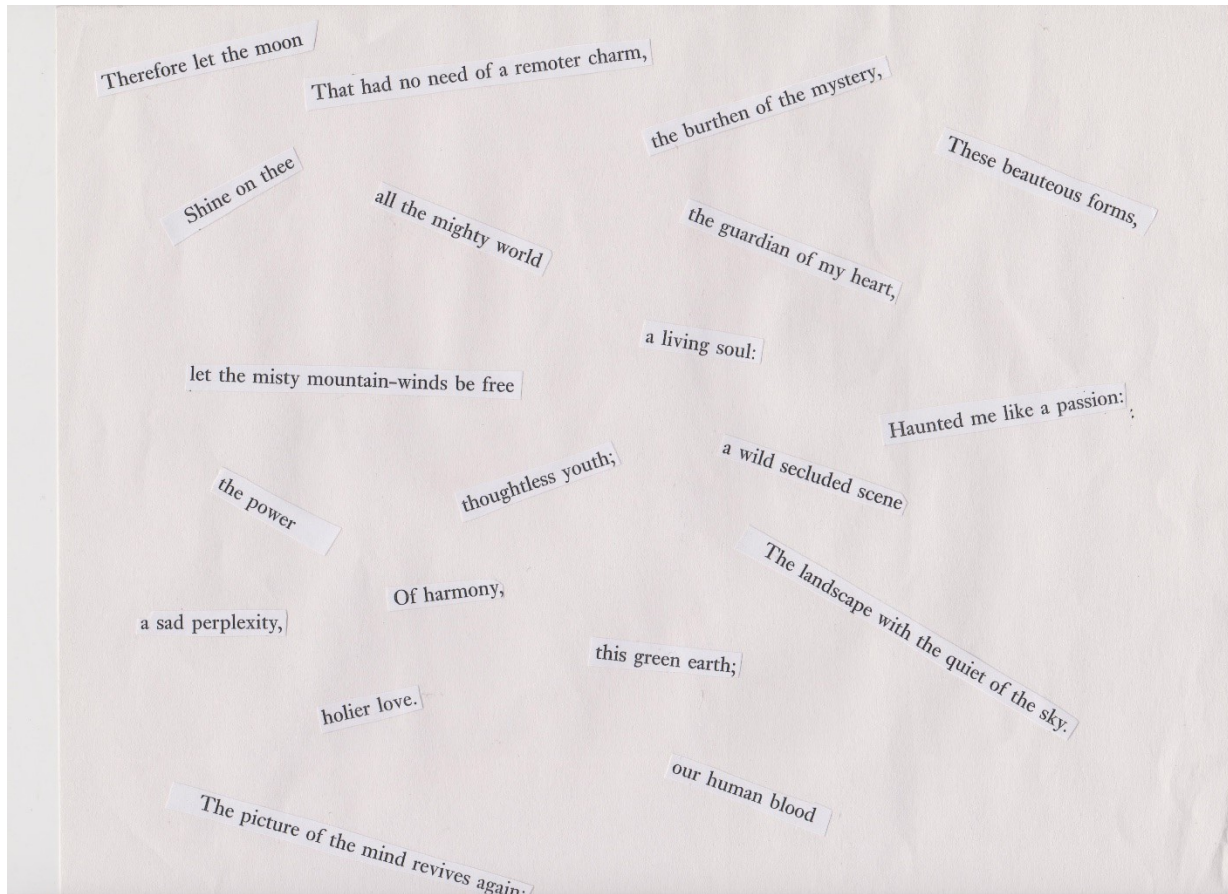
Oh, I love my cat and my cat loves me.  
When I'm having a fight,  
when I hit the light,  
when I jump on the couch,  
when I'm being a grouch,  
then I run upstairs  
anxiously:  
oh, I love my cat and my cat loves me.

Oh, I love my cat and my cat loves me.  
She spreads on my bed  
and stretches her head  
onto my lap  
when she's having a nap –  
she never complains  
that I should use my brains,  
that I'm running wild  
that I'm a stupid child –  
and she loves to purr  
when I stroke her fur  
contentedly:  
oh, I love my cat and my cat loves me.



## Appendix 2

The original cut and paste version of 'Therefore Let The Moon' to illustrate the use of digital technology by the poet to re-format for himself the final poem based on the original.



### Appendix 3

The poem 'Metal' from *Iris of a Peeping Eye* (Davidson and Monks, 2013) to show an example of a poem created using a collaborative approach. The poem was written and performed at Eastside Galleries in Birmingham in 2013 by Yasmin Ali, Michele Barzey, Saleha Begum, David Boyles, Joy Dodd, Pat Jamieson, Stella Kourmoulaki, Carol Laidler, Ben Macnair, Soraya Nasser and Jenni Schuett and shaped by Philip Monks in collaboration with the writers.

#### Metal

You pushed me on the floor  
Shiny, elaborate, steeled emotion

Morphosis  
Hard, warm, cold  
Box, cold, hard, plane  
Grill, spike, iron breeze, fishing rod  
Cold, hot, malleable, rigid

Morphosis  
Molten, pouring into dyes  
Metal, Metal, Metal, Metal, Metal, Precious  
Cloud of wires; soft, silver  
Heavy

Heavy  
Cloud of wires; soft, silver  
Metal, Metal, Metal, Metal, Metal, Precious  
Molten, pouring into dyes  
Morphosis

Cold, hot, malleable, rigid  
Grill, spike, iron breeze, fishing rod  
Box, cold, hard, plane  
Hard, warm, cold  
Morphosis

Shiny, elaborate, steeled emotion  
You pushed me on the floor

## Section Two

### *The Birth of Romance*

#### A Poetry Collection

## Part 1: Women and Men

## **My Friend In His Pretty Dress**

My friend, in his pretty yellow floral dress, smiles, I think he thinks  
Sweetly across from me, faux-naïvely attempting to put us at ease:  
He has something of a predatory aspect, I muse,  
But then decide to ignore the thought.

He is frilling around the damasked table with his hands,  
Attempting to create the just-so-ness of our companionship,  
And I sit quite still, feeling the bony chair, trying to show myself  
Sufficiently gender neutral to be enjoying our delicate tête-a-tête.

We chatter away, each to our own tune. We are two species of bird,  
A canary and kestrel perhaps, side by side on a high branch,  
Wanting to be watched for what we are not, enjoying a proximity  
That would rarely, if ever, occur in the so-called natural world.

## **Business Meeting**

Nice suit. Sharp.  
Nice tie. Blue.  
Nice shoes. Dapper.  
How do you do.  
Not a question.  
Firm handshake.  
Smart watch.  
Washed hair.  
Body spray.  
Phrases, significant words, eye contact.  
A smile, firm but friendly.  
This is all very important.

Nice suit. Blue.  
Nice tie. Dapper.  
Nice how do you do shoes.  
Not a question.  
Firm watch.  
Smart handshake.  
Sprayed hair.  
Washed body.  
Phrases smile, firm but friendly.  
Significant eye contact.  
These things are all very important.

Nice suit. Dapper.  
Blue tied shoes.  
How do you watch?  
Firm question.  
Smart body hair.  
Washed words, friendly phrases,  
Significant handshake.  
Smile.

Firm body. Watched shoes.  
Hairy handshake.  
Dapper words,  
Awash with smile,  
Phrases sprayed,  
Significant ties...

What was the important question?

## **Mrs Sissal Caressing Her Muff**

*On the painting by Eduard Vuillard*

Mrs Sissal caressing her muff –  
Oh how these theatricals  
Love to dress up and show off,  
And make you talk  
Of how they are so scandalously  
Delicious.

But the frisson itself off the cuff –  
The pout of lips de rigueur,  
So to impress how they love:  
How red, how pert,  
How they are parted demure yet so very  
Ambitious.

This is not the stark world of Van Gogh –  
Curves plump and flatter the bold,  
Mixing the smooth with the rough  
To make you feel  
The drawing room's quite room enough to be  
Seditious.

## Marigold Child

Child, exotic and common  
As a marigold flower, I imagine you here,  
Delicate and durable, apparently untended,  
Watered and lit nonetheless, awkwardly graceful.

I watch you, my child, run around, unconsciously bless  
With a gleeful 'Yes!' each new-found room then  
Suddenly sit down panting on the sofa, palms out,  
Like a badly-summoned ancestor coming to breathless rest.

I see the accidental flowers on the edge of the path, the brash flowers  
In the scant front garden, the arranged imitation ones on the mantelpiece:  
So many colours. Too light, too bright, too plain,  
That was the shouting joy of childhood once.



## Girl For A While

There are some people  
you crave to look after.

Is it the softness of voice,  
the bravery of the look,  
the hold of the body?

I try to grasp that she isn't here  
but I can't hold on to her absence.  
I can't hold on to the fact  
that facts are intractable.

There's a tenderness somewhere:  
a loose thread in the cardigan,  
a sheen of the hair,  
an unexpected gesture  
still here

at the edge of my understanding.  
I continuously miss  
the peripheral essence of her.

I can't fix the uncertainty,  
unhollow the loss.

You left under a stormburst cloud  
with no coat or umbrella – but  
I pray the rain has dried out  
and you have come into sunnier weather.

## **We Are The Men**

We are the men, young or not so young now,  
Always we offer a viewpoint,  
Always we are among the interesting ones,  
All the more when you catch us in company.

We are the men, steady or not so steady now,  
Generally we do not meet your gaze,  
Generally we look about as we talk,  
Sometimes we anticipate your assumptions

With a look.  
See the intensity of us,  
See our virility of ego:  
We will not easily be countermanded

By flutterings.  
Oh, but we smile and give in  
When we perceive your weakness  
For fascinating objects.

We are the men, facile or otherwise,  
That fascinate. We are the men who recognise  
How fascinating we the men are  
And fascination is the smooth intellectual engine of attachment.

We are the thin-lipped men  
At the thick end of intrigue,  
We are the tight-jawed men  
Slack with the weight of ourselves.

Are we not curious?  
We do not care if we are  
Curious, we starkly admire  
How you make us so curious.

We are a handsome gift,  
Particularly the ugly side of us,  
In particular the incomparable ugliness  
We the men defy you to unwrap.

Now we raise our eyebrows  
To look at you, we look at you slowly, as men do,  
Effetely, brutishly; our shoulders  
Yoked to their purpose.

You hear your elbowy friends  
Whispering insinuations we will let you down  
And we squarely intend to do so  
If you want men around.

## Girls Of The Coal Tip, Lancashire, England

More unkempt than strictly beautiful,  
With wild waists, fleeter than a dancer's  
Slim quicksteps, you take shabby-footed  
Goatsteps on the black diamond ground  
And swing round and up on a mound of joy.

The sparklets tinkle out tumbling down each  
Body edge, off each precipice of your shifting  
Flesh. Even from here I catch tight snatches of  
Your warm words of laughter. Blackberry skin,  
Ripe from the plucking, tangles of brambled hair.

Surprisingly, your eyes are blue or brown,  
Lack that gypsy witchery with which you wipe  
Your brows, smooth your crumpled apron down.  
Your firm thighs keep the bent back steady,  
The constant stooping moulds your buttocks round.

The older ones are slower with their  
Criss-crossed palms, each dainty morsel  
Like a hand-grenade of independence.  
There is no pin to pull, they keep tight hold  
For the meagre fires that later make them now so bold.

You have become foreign, historical, far away  
From the quivering energy you embody,  
your body stains ingrained by the fine-line scratches  
Of the clinking coal, not to be washed out,  
Like the love of life you grasp, so precious and so desperate.

I feel chilly, air conditioned and grown old.

## Rubble Women In Post-war Dresden

Trümmerfrauen, legend has it, redeemed the traumatised streets  
From the carpet bombing and the doorless looting  
By force of action.

Clear it away, clear it away.

Fate is a multi-faceted parade.  
The truth is contested by images.  
Scale requires comparison.

Clear it away, clear it away.

Here come the rubble women.  
They work, they talk, they work,  
They work to make things right again.

Clear it away, clear it away.

What do these women say among the corpses,  
Whose speechless lips condemn  
Those who created them?

Clear it away, clear it away.

The unnumbered element: dust.  
Dust in the rigid hair, dust in the keen nostrils,  
Dust under the blunted fingernails.

Clear it away, clear it away.

Stubbed shoes, tight aprons, neat scarves.  
These rough women absorb into their collective arms  
The smooth energy all the brave men wasted in war.

Yet strangely they are mostly smiling.

There is a tenderness in these hard, practical acts,  
Making sense again of all the shards of madness  
From that knowledge of creation only women have.

Build again, build again.

## **The Three Women**

*Inspired by the picture The End of Flight by Cristina Celestini*

*The mother / The older sister / **The younger sister***

*I am the solid one. I am the mother.*

I am the chequered one. I am the older sister.

**I am the younger sister. I am the pattern of diamonds.  
I shine in the sunshine and the moonlight.**

*The light is fading.*

**But still I shine. Though I am chipped**

and scratched

*you are both beautiful*

**by the journey we are on.**

The journey is not important.

*Citizenship.*

**Food.**

Not looking all around and wondering if calamity will come then where it will come from.

*How does one acquire the money?*

**When I accept a piece of bread or fruit or even a drink, I feel like a bruised thief caught stealing a mango from the swamp.**

What is important is that we are here.

*It costs over a thousand pounds apiece.*

**When I look at my teeth in a mirror, when I can use the bathroom, I only see where the incisor is chipped. My sister says do not obsess about it. Only you notice. Only you are obsessed. I am the one with the chipped tooth, not you, I say. She says we are the ones who see it, not you. I say but that is it, I am the one who sees it.**

My sister does nothing but moan. She should be grateful.

*Citizenship is a dear business.*

**And I am the one who feels it.**

The sea has calmed now.

*None of us are talking. There is too much to say.*

**I am the youngest, I know I am the youngest.**

The world is turning into the black and the white.

*My children have the most beautiful blue eyes.*

**I always know I am the youngest.**

Dark sea. White waves. Geometrics.

**I always envy the older ones. Not always.**

*They are so lovely, so different, so themselves.*

Dark sea. White waves. Geopolitics.

**What if the colours never came back? Is it silly to think that?**

Yes.

*No.*

Look at the patterns.

*Nothing is foolish when you are beautiful. And you are beautiful.*

Mother, you are very foolish!

**No, no. You are the most beautiful of all of us.**

Beauty is not wisdom.

*It is a grace.*

**Mother, I feel warm with you, even when I am cold.**

You are a ninny. You are both ninnies.

**I don't want to be a ninny.**

Too bad, because that is what you are.

*We are the three graces.*

**I love to watch the waves, even though they frighten me. Is that wrong?**

You are very glib.

**What does that mean?**

*It means your sister thinks she is wiser than she is.*

No, I do not think that. I may have once, but I do not any more.

**Don't be sad. We will soon reach our new home. Won't we mother?**

*I put on the headscarf and pretend it makes me safe.*

She puts on the headscarf and pretend it makes her safe.

*I wrap my daughter up. Pray she is safe.*

**Look! A star!**

*Yes, my diamond. What shall we call it?*

Let us call it hope.

**Yes.**

*Yes.*



## **Greek God's Gift**

He fought the Minotaur and yes, he won.  
He's what you'd call a right good 'un.  
Bit of a rotter too, bit of a ladies' man,  
Knows a good time, likes a bit of fun.

Strong meat, nice pecs, all over body tan,  
He can sort the rough from the bland.  
If someone gets hurt, that's part of the deal,  
Nothing like danger for keeping it real.

A jaw so granite you could stub your nose,  
A skull so thick it can take life's blows,  
Never had the thought 'I don't suppose...?'  
Unreconstructed, like they were long ago,  
With huge biceps to carry his Olympic ego. So,  
Come and get him, if that's your idea of a hero.

## Left And Right Shoes

Child on the pavement  
Shuffling  
    first on the left foot  
    with the pink shoe on  
then  
shuffling  
    on the right foot with  
    the pink shoe on.  
Two pink shoes.

Giggles when asked,  
“Which is the left shoe?”  
Giggles naughtily     behind  
    both hands  
“This one!” “This one!”  
Points excitedly  
    at random  
to the right one, then  
hesitates  
points – firmly – to the wrong one.  
Looks at you sideways  
    wants your approval.  
Then she runs up and down  
    up and down  
before you have spoken.

What does it matter  
she’s thinking  
I can take big steps  
whichever I choose.  
    Sticks out her chin,  
    having decided.

I have decided, too.  
Walking and shoes  
are not like politics.  
    Oh, how I wish  
I could just put my feet up  
or even run about  
    if I had to  
like a political child.

## He Built Them An Ark

In the quiet months he built an ark  
Indoors, for the grandkids.

Talk about craftsmanship!  
Funny thing is, he never did.

When he handed it over, layered, varnished,  
Decked and detailed, curved and prowed,

You never saw such emotion, commotion,  
such disproportionate energy in motion:

Mooing, snarling, braying, baaing, squawking, squeaking,  
Sneaking and shoving and tussling and out of the way!

Can't you see it's raining?  
If there'd been fur, it would have been flying.

Then they settled down and once they had negotiated  
The hold and set sail across the treacherous carpet,

Contending as they did remorselessly with the Stomping Feet,  
The Clashing Chairlegs, across the wide Sargasso Sea

Of units and boxes and monstrous objects,  
They would not rest until the call of teatime

Beckoned them back home again, oblivious to  
This gift of play, and their shelter from the rain.

## **We are the / children**

We are the  
children daring their ankles,  
dithering their toes in the wet sand,  
laughing at the edge of the firm world,  
pushing at the bubbles of the sky,  
why won't they pop?

We are the  
dolphin-bodied, creature-curved  
fish-eyed clouds who plunge and play  
across the sky, astonished as they  
embody the whole drink of day,  
why won't they stop?

We still feel  
The tangy water engulf us,  
the foam that crackles on our fingers,  
until the sea haze shushes us into daydreams,  
until the sun descends in a magnificent  
blaze of childhood.

## Mr Wordsworth at St Catherine's College, Oxford 1980

### I

A craggy face, Audenesque, but mellow, not vituperative.  
He had a complicated love life: despite his marriage,  
romance and academia had entwined in his shed  
with an ardent postgraduate eerily called Lucy.

He arrived to tutor us restless St Catherine's undergraduates  
mid-way through our English course,  
his eyes mild, his look non-plussed,  
not wanting to make too much of a fuss.

He was out of luck.  
My year took against him right from the first.

### II

He would offer us anachronistic sherry, look for one or two  
to form ad-hoc alliance with or at least agree a truce.  
But we were a collectivist lot then, in the days before Thatcherism.  
(She was a Somerville girl. We never went there.)

In tutorials, with Lucy at his tweedy elbow,  
he would produce a huge old-fashioned Westrex alarm clock,  
like a time bomb ticking away our historical journey  
back to the soft hills, the shifting waters,  
the sun-dyed shadows of the Grand Romantics,  
until the ring of its tinny bell called us back  
to the hard now, the contingency of days,  
the diurnal round.

### III

As if living permanently in a cold house, he wore  
as ubiquitous appendages a long scarf and strangely voluminous gloves.  
He flourished these as if he could grasp the past, bring it back to us, say  
"Here, here it is in my hands, precious, remote, delicate as mist on hills, the tremble of the  
skies."

It was 1980 and he was exasperated by the new fad for bottled water.  
So much water in the Lakes, I suppose, he thought it bizarre  
to bring Perrier all the way expensively from France.  
Especially since he seemed permanently almost broke and  
down on his luck, needing to sell an heirloom or two – paintings, I think.

His shabby, battered charm did not endear us,  
though the years below proved acolytes:  
Professor Duncan Wu's *Romanticism: An Anthology*  
is now on so many university reading lists  
it easily outshines our cat-eyed resistance.

But, we were stubbornly unmoved  
at the heartbreak of Houseman,  
outstared the hypnotic verse of Coleridge,  
gazed flatly at the soaring lines of the great man himself,  
his tangential ancestor William.

He bore it well, mainly,  
more tetchy than grieved.  
A man probably never quite strong enough  
to be described with any unqualified superlative.

Neither wet nor dry,  
he tried to wear us down  
with the gentle erosion of elision.  
But we would have none of it,  
we were too self-defined for approximation.

#### IV

When I last saw him,  
at the funeral for another tutor,  
he unwound his profoundly long scarf,  
removed his huge, leather gloves  
and shook my hand warmly.  
His spidered eyes smiled gently.

I did not enquire about Lucy.

Yes, I do remember him,  
a little sadly, but deeply too and fondly.

Dead himself, he joins his heritage.  
Heritage, the blessing and curse  
that is scattered about us.

I am sure his voice  
is in that ever-changing Lakeland landscape also.  
The hills, they need their valleys.  
Listen, can you hear the echo?

## **The Sandpilot of Morecambe Bay**

There is a public byway shown on maps  
as a line across the sands of Morecambe Bay –  
between Arnsdale and Silverdale you go  
across the tidal mudflats to Grange Over Sands.

But this is no ordinary route;  
it swirls with sucking sand and deep tidal channels  
to snare the unwary.  
And when the tide comes in,  
the tide comes in as fast as a man can run – or swim.

So it is that a local man  
for 40 years and more has come to act as custodian  
of the knowledge of the ever changing  
safe and unsafe routes across the sands.

Cedric Robinson, over 70 years old,  
stick and whistle in hand, shepherds his flock  
across the Morecambe shore.  
His title is: The Queen's Sand Pilot.

He and his nephew take guided parties  
on the 6-mile journey over the Sands,  
2 to 3 hours, depending on the weather and the tides.

Most people cross barefoot because of the clinging mud and sand,  
wading knee deep across the flowing River Kent,  
the open sea to the south,  
the grandeur of the Lakeland mountains to the North.

He tells the tale of the quicksands, where silty waters meet  
and how a local fisherman once saw his tractor swallowed whole  
in one big gulp.

And the sad story, of how in 2004  
under the hands of a gangmaster  
nineteen Chinese cockle pickers lost their lives  
as the tide rushed in to Morecambe Bay.  
All but one were eventually found.  
I wonder where the body of Dong Xin Wu is now.

## He'll Not Come Back Again

The sea is rippling out over the sand,  
Rippling like the muscles of my bonny man –  
But he'll hush no more on sea or land,  
For he'll not come back again.

The clouds are tumbling out over the sun,  
Tumbling like the curls of my bonny man –  
But my heat no more will make him run,  
For he'll not come back again.

The wind is laughing out over the grass,  
Laughing like the lips of my bonny man –  
But he'll redden no more for his pretty lass,  
For he'll not come back again.

The rain is spreading out over the ground,  
Spreading like the arms of my bonny man –  
But he'll clasp no more the rock he found,  
For he'll not come back again.

The moon is crying out over the riverbank,  
Silvery tears, slippery, wild –  
And my heart is water, deep and blank,  
For I have no more my child.



## **Watch How She Smooths**

Watch how she smooths down the double duvet  
until the cool ripples fall off the edge and the surface  
becomes so calm you would not know  
how many lapping waves have wrinkled her sleep.

## What Are They For, The Eyebrows?



As a scientist, I am perplexed at how  
my raised eyebrows generate no paradigms.

But the romantic in me believes  
the complex spatial equations of eyebrows  
Could enthral the mathematical enthusiast into dotage.

In expressionist moods I dream stark, angular dreams  
in tall rooms with thin, wooden furniture, some of it broken,  
of startled eyebrows glaring, glaring.

Alternatively, insidiously surreal the story of the unpronounceable look  
displayed by the surprised husband as he discovers  
his wife's eyebrows are really a pair of  
very neat mustachios.

Picture instead the complex, proto-sexist emotions  
of the vanquished fighter whose eyebrows have been dragon-singed  
only to be reprieved by the cooling salve  
of his fair companion's healing balm  
she applies with delicate, trembling hands to his reddened face.

Do feminist eyebrows exist?  
Are they akin to the armpit hair and the unglazed legs?

Oh, Madonna of the Eyebrows  
How the rock-like serenity of your gaze  
Enraptures me.

Oh, classical Madonna of the Eyebrows,  
How intrigued I am by the vigorous contentment  
Of your half-smile.

Oh, historical Madonna of the Eyebrows,  
Do not let the patriarchal narratives degrade you:  
You are your story.

Ungendered friend, I exhort you: peruse the eyebrows.  
The eyebrows are the pelmets of the soul.

But beware: the intense stare  
At another's face  
May be mistaken for a gaze  
Into the eyes themselves  
And that can be  
a very serious affair.

Look at those eyebrows now.

## To You, Sara Hildén

Where to begin  
this biographical poem?

3.

There was your great love, quite late in life,  
which ended when Eric left you. Did it?

He was the one who helped you discover art is not life.  
Does the experience add to it?

There is no square root of minus one.

You built a studio in your attic for him  
but the ground floor came between you.

\*

2.

Your milieu was fashion  
And you fashioned it well.  
You had the gift of style,  
The gift of careful touches.

In your fifties you did not know what to do with your riches.

So you became a patron, a mother of the creators.  
Were you getting back at Eric Enroth?  
You nurtured  
a group of Finnish artists  
as a sort of returning departure.  
These were your “boys”, these men,  
Sara Hildén.  
Their sculptures – their paintings –  
their installations – all their creations –  
they were your children.

You must have had a bold heart:  
A woman controlling herself but  
In high fashionable hurt  
Showing your cut  
in Art.

\*

1.

Your Art Museum at the lakeside in Tampere, Finland  
Evokes a swimming stillness.  
And with characteristic Finnish awkwardness  
It exists  
Within the Sarkanaami children's amusement park.  
Much laughter.  
The ironies are giddy around you.  
There is an ironic greatness in your collection,  
Which includes so many works by Eric Enroth.

Eric Enroth is  
the man who lived with the great art collector Sara Hildén.  
This is how we remember him.  
This is your museum.  
It is your name on the door.

\*

5.

It is all very delicate.  
Not too much of anything now.  
It is lovely  
To sit here quietly  
In the café in the gallery.  
A gorgeous cinnamon aroma  
In the clear air.  
Outside the pine trees  
And the wide lake stretches at ease beyond them.  
You are beyond them now.

I sit precisely  
Drinking coffee slowly  
In the black woven-backed upright wooden chair.  
I think of you, Sara Hildén,  
I breathe the art of being,  
I absorb the energy of care.  
I sense you here.

\*

4.

Let's have some fun now!  
Rich laughter –  
Laughter is its own success,  
Laughter is its own riches,  
Laughter is the best cure for bitterness.

In the gallery  
Sixties agit-prop and the psychedelic seventies  
Are historical perspectives.  
The year is 2001.  
It is a long year.  
The age of conscience has begun.  
But the night is still young.  
Your children are serious enough,  
Pack up your heavy stuff,  
Let's have some fun.

\*

6.

Sara Hildén, I picture you with flowers in your arms.  
Your straight coat and formal hair frame your vivid eyes.  
Your collection of art has become your official portrait.  
How grown-up you look.  
But I know you wore your hair down, sexy on the beach,  
Kicked your toes at the sky,  
Took the breath away at the turning moment.

And if you do not like to be reminded  
That you were driven on by most of all  
Your outlived youth,  
Then I'm sorry,  
Since outlive it you have  
And cannot accept my apologies.

## Pointy Shoes

In the art gallery  
large thoughtful spaces  
and a painting with **red outlines** –

**hot** on the cool white walls,  
**vibrant** in the silence – within the frame  
**loud** wet *smoky* men playing at cards.

“What is it called?” I ask.

And she, reading the label  
from a distance: “Pointy shoes.”

I think: it must be symbolic.

I go up close and look  
at the careful annotation.

Artist: Budanov, Peter

Acrylic on canvas

Painted 1914, Russia

The painting is called POLITICIANS.

It is the moment  
that is symbolic.

## Five Poems For Ezra Pound

### 1. A Side Portrait

*like a frozen*  
*wave of sound*  
what high-  
combed hair  
what restless eyes  
what mountainous nose  
what echoing chin  
what prodigiousness

what thrust-back  
what army shoulders  
what unpinned arms  
what caught thread in the fingertips  
what restless pluck  
what unpickedness

what flat stomach  
what deep bowels  
what discomposure  
in the anal department  
what astute bodiliness

what long-boned  
what wiry  
what flexed  
what energetic  
what perambulatory  
what knee-jerk  
what 2-legged cussedness

what sharp

feet tapping

end ness

what ness



## 2. H.D. – Hilda’s Dedication

I am a civilian  
in the war of the gods;

I am a Dryad,  
breaking up the leaf-mould,

the powdered tradition,  
the smoky O pression,

like a delicate wind  
ruffles the feathers of old birds.

I hear the cock-crow trilogy  
of war, dewar, rewar,

and announce, denounce,  
renounce my simplicity –

I said: I am seed, not jewel.  
I grow, fragile, in the top-soil,

long, thin, fingering roots; hieroglyphs,  
Corinthian curls, unripened stems;

careful, beautiful, still-children.  
The worm wriggles

in the fallen apple,  
and I am Poet-bitten.

Our Lady of Elaborate Consequence,  
Our Lady of the Gossamer Thread;

I spy with my bleak eye  
the Half-resurrected

Half dead.

### 3. In St. Elizabeth's

#### *Home For The Criminally Insane*

Hostpital for your "friends", !collaborators!  
wife and occasional eager daughter (not hers,  
of course) as you entertained with long limbs  
and stolen crumbs  
from the main refractory;  
even deckchaired in the garden on good days.

The more detached came, too,  
lifting the latch of you;  
visiting your domesticated hutch  
in this elemental zoo.

What sort of institution  
did you become?  
What sort of constitution  
did you maintame?

So many different means  
to justify  
your deviation from  
the democratic ends.

So many loud corridors  
adjoining  
your one room.

You are folded up  
like an origami crane.

But no peace came.  
The voices whisper,  
the voices shout.  
The key does not keep the voices out.

Ezra, it was the key you lost  
when they unlocked the door,  
and finally gave you  
the silence, and  
the dubious benefit of doubt.

#### 4. At The Posterity Event

We would like to thank Mr Pound for attending our little gathering.  
It is with great delight that we come together this evening to honour both the man and his achievements.

*(murmurs)*

It is with no little irony that I can say here speaks an apostle of the free world.  
There is no doubt that in his time Mr Ezra Pound has courted controversy.  
Courtied, engaged and married controversy, some may say.

*(ripple of laughter)*

But he has kept alive the flame of poetry for many generations.  
And, though sometimes we may feel a little charred or over-heated,  
for his flame we thank him.

*(hear, hear)*

It must have taken a great deal to arrive in England with almost nothing,  
to seek out the poets.

To seek them out, to join them.

Here we must remember his friendship with W. B. Yeats.

Hard won and long cherished.

And then his determination to find a new order.

His vociferous voice.

BLAST! and all it blew with it. Blast it all!

What concentric energy!

*(stamping of feet)*

Certainly, there is much hatred, too.

That hard word fascist is never far away.

What a destructive thing is hatred.

What a brittle legacy.

*(murmurs of agreement)*

He lived through the first war as a stranger in this country.

The second war as a stranger in another country.

Stranger and stranger. How they speak to each other.

And we welcome Gaudier, Wyndham, Ford, Eliot, of course,

Joyce. And so many others. All of you outsiders. As he is.

He epitomises that element of the age.

*(nods)*

We remember London, Paris, Italy. And of course the United States.

He occupies both and neither of the two continents.

As indeed England always has done. But he is not an Englishman.

How he revered and hated the establishment.

How he infuriated.

How he would never do or be what you wanted.

Oh, he is intolerable.

*(laughter)*

So, one of the most provocative figures of the twentieth century, Ezra Pound,  
for your services to poetry,  
your deep involvement, hard work, generosity in this field,  
your encouragement of others, and, not least,  
your poems themselves,  
we would like to present you with this small token of our consideration,  
and a polite and thoughtful  
shaking of the hand (or is it head?)  
on this special occasion.  
It is the least we can do.  
*(Applause & shaking of hands)*

## **5. The Man Who Loved Ice Cream**

His arm stretched out,  
I thought at first for a fascist salute,  
Gathering the double-dipped chocolate waffle cornet  
And bringing it to his mouth  
Shaking his tongue, lips, hungry eyes all over it,  
berrying his head in it,  
he was dripping with the melting  
cream of the ice cream  
he didn't lift his chin once  
to denounce  
the fountain-head melt  
the dissolution of desire  
into sweet satisfaction

it was cloy all over again  
and he would do it again  
helpless against his instinct  
lost on the foam  
ecstasy of his passion

## The Sewing Basket

Among the fusty, haystacked clothes of memory, piled up as I clear out the cold house, I pluck out the family sewing basket, the skeins of thread, the silvered nickel thimble dimpled on the outside as if smiling, smooth on the finger, nodding with its squat body, clicking against the needle, miniature armour for the battle of the fabrics, the cut and thrust of pattern, clip and snip of making do and shaping. There was a green rubber thimble too, sacrificially perished with age, too practical to be symbolic, embodying my mother.

Smile as you recall, even as you feel the jabbing hurt of it,  
as you fight the scratched heart, the raw breath,  
the tear-blurred eyes, the tongue against the teeth,  
recall the bright enamelled sky that only half-reflects  
your weariness, your weariness, that bodily you lift into this smile.

There is a sort of mending in remembering:  
needling thoughts that hurt but that you can, if brave and calm enough,  
grasp and put to steady use, create some sewn-back shapes to clothe the past with,  
despite the pricked conscience, the worn fabric and faded colours of the old bon mots,  
striking a pose, and the unfashionable tops of those loud, outrageous attitudes.

It wasn't just my mother who used the sewing basket.  
My father was of the war generation, so it was drilled and instilled in him  
not to spill or show anything that was not uniform: a *modus operandi* that suited him well.  
He liked to make good again, to repair the wear and tear of action,  
to sew his own buttons, darn his own socks, used, as he was,  
in regulation outfit buttoned neatly up, to keep inside the slim pockets any thin doubts.  
Though he did once, in Italy, when he was on guard duty, steal a live turkey.

In the photographs my father is a handsome, softly-spoken man.  
He brylcreemed his short hair even when silvered and thinning.  
He rode his pedal cycle to work, came home on it for bread and pie at lunchtime.  
He raked and set and lit the fire, and kept it quietly going, when we had a real one.  
He kept his demob suit all his life in the dark oak wardrobe.  
I'm proud to pin these facts on him, though fear I fix him as a specimen.

I sometimes had a bandage fastened with a safety pin, even for a small wound,  
being allergic to plasters, and always, of course, if there were scratchy, fly-black stitches.  
The wound was cleaned and dressed, the crepe beige bandage wrapped and overlapped  
around and around and around. As a child it was as if it was a sepulchral act, like  
the wrapping and unwrapping of the body of Christ in the tomb.

My mother was Mary, without the deep sorrow and amazement. Instead, she loved to laugh at a bad joke. The bandage could be torn down the middle, each end passed round the opposite way and then tied together, but better, far, far better, was to fasten it with a safety pin – product of the age – also used for swaddling babies, changing nappies, and the keeping-up of overstretched elasticated undergarments. I loved the special bandage with the safety pin, smelling of care and medicine.

Thick darning needles for the woollen socks, heel and toe always the first to go, not quite fitting back properly into the shoe – that is how poverty marks you. Medium needles for shortening skirts, trousers, sewing on the button chosen from the tin of buttons, as near a match as you could find, but not quite right. Another stigma. Fine needles, difficult to thread, never quite sure what they were for.

Fine needles. Let us use them delicately now. We shall pierce the past with smiles, make good with the threads of remembrance. Such romantic, religious sentiments. Are we so foolish to take them up carefully in our hands, to give and to receive such humble indulgences?

## Babyish

Shortly after he was born:  
My little baby,  
What a beautiful baby,  
And other expressions, equally orthodox.  
Then he became – briefly – Clever Clogs.

Older he was told:  
Don't be such a baby!  
And to others:  
He's a terror / He's a whiz-kid  
(Depending on who to and what it was he did).

As a teenager:  
You're my baby,  
You're my girl,  
And other vocal tricks  
For the babes and the dolls and the chicks.

Middle-aged:  
Sometimes baby-face,  
Sometimes namby-pamby,  
He could be infantile,  
He could be childish, juvenile.

Towards the end:  
Almost as bald as a baby,  
Sleeping, seeking, smiling like a baby.  
Is it bad or good  
Calling this a second childhood?

As they lowered him down:  
The cradle of earth received him,  
And the mourners cried like babies when  
The priest reminded them  
"We are all God's children."

## Part 2: If I Touch Your Sleeve



## Alluring Darkness

You are in your pale black dress  
against  
the deep shadows of nothingness

glints of shifting edges  
murmur in the curtains

the fine breath of your hair  
the delicate dusky perfume in the air

the darkness  
the alluring darkness there

## Love Potion From The Old Lore

Firstly, and with care not to unduly whiten,  
The seven refractions of sunlight  
in the quantity of two wide eyefulls.

Secondly, and from a glass container,  
Twenty-four pearl droplets of restless water  
Beckoned at dusk from the top surface.

Do not stir.  
Wait until dispersed entirely then:

Take a quarter-ell smudge of copper air beaten fine  
And rest in the vessel until green and shining.

Remove and discard.

Thirdly, sieve through new muslin cloth  
Five counts of a laugh that has come unforced  
And with a wooden spoon fold in.

Cover tightly. Keep cool and away from the hot sun.  
It will last for several seasons in this manner.

To use:

Place the potion before your would-be lover.  
Bid them stare into with you.  
If you both so do, you will be united.

## **If I Touch Your Sleeve**

Conversations sustain us,  
Thoughts distract us,  
Words are important, but not as important  
As the thoughts behind them  
And the feelings they embody and engender.

And if I touch your sleeve  
I believe that shows we have significance  
In a way the stars do not know  
Across the blackness of our distance.

## Evening In Her House

The mind's desire is a delicate balance  
between not having and having,  
between not receiving and giving,  
between our destined fate and our taken chance;  
between the intent only of the eyes and the irrevocable touch of the lips.  
And oh, how we plunge when the balance tips.

The weight of the feet  
between satisfied and curious,  
between the bland gesture and the dangerous,  
between failing to act and notstopping to think;  
between the stepping back and the surge of emotion.  
And oh, what giddiness, at the lofty rooms of attraction.

How to modulate the voice  
between going and staying,  
between urging and delaying,  
between the obvious and the curious choice;  
between the gasp of surprise and the taking of breath.  
And oh, the endless moment, before you seize or relinquish.

Now you jump the wild gap across the dark abyss,  
you scatter the paper talk by the absurd kiss,  
and as you leap you know the choice is made:  
perhaps has become what is, the consequence of act.  
And oh, not to wonder, now, at why you so delayed.

## **The Kiss**

Don't let me fall in love with you.  
That would be a foolish,  
That would be a stupid thing to do.

Don't make me stare into space,  
Have that poignant look,  
That forgotten smile upon my face.

Don't make me seem random,  
Half-phrased, constantly amazed,  
Confused with abandon.

Don't let me fall like this,  
No way, no way,  
You must not touch me with your kiss.  
No, no, no. Yes.

## **He Whispered Such Words To Her**

He whispered such words to her,  
Whispered such words;  
The smile in her eyes hardly faltered,  
But she had heard.

She held his thin hands to her,  
Held them so tight;  
The tremble of love felt like water,  
It was so slight.

But never again for her,  
Never again.  
The glass of her soul never empty,  
Never again.

## **If I Had A Pound For Every Time**

If I had a pound for every time  
Your blue eyes looked at ground, not sky,  
You turned away unthinkingly,  
You thumbed your gaze through a curling magazine,  
You heard not even the traffic  
Let alone the music of insects,  
You bought a chocolate bar you didn't want,  
You wanted to smile but didn't,  
I'd like to think I'd be a rich man;  
But I wouldn't.

## **like a bumblebee**

like a bumblebee  
among the flowers  
she is ludicrous

like a bumblebee  
among the flowers  
she is shapely

like a bumblebee  
among the flowers  
she is ebullient

like a bumblebee  
among the flowers  
she carries life with her

like a bumblebee  
among the flowers  
soft things grow fulsome

like a bumblebee  
among the flowers  
the sunset blazes out

before you realise  
you are thinking  
of the honey of her

and like a bumblebee  
among the flowers  
your heart rejoices



## **If You Hold Me**

If you hold me  
Will I feel safe?

If you hold me  
Will I feel threatened?

If you hold me  
Will I feel the soft, folding fabric  
of your arms warming, steadying, easing my breath?

If you hold me  
Will I feel the jagged metal  
Of your pincering limbs crushing my lungs?

If you hold me  
Will it be the sweet blanket of care  
That wraps me up snug?

If you hold me  
Will it be the rusted edges of possession  
Wounding, infecting my thin, bruised skin?

How did it come to this?

## Weave The Sunlight

*“The troubled midnight and the moon’s repose.”*  
*‘La Figlia Che Pianga’, T. S. Eliot*

It was warm in the park.  
It was dark by the firs.  
Only a bird stirred when we sat.  
Only the fact of your being there  
made me want to care.  
Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair.

We took a walk for the heat  
past the lovers’ seat, down to the gate.  
It was getting late as we turned  
back, the sun burned less dra-  
matically, your theatrical star.  
You were unaware.  
Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair.

As it shone less warm  
you became softer, more broken,  
more golden than before.  
I was sure the air would hold  
your blaze forever.  
Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair.

Here are the evergreens  
that dream of nakedness  
beneath a dress they cannot shed,  
the restless, careless bed in the rare  
darkness after the glory and the dare.  
Wherever you are,  
I weave, I weave the sunlight there.

## What Is A Man To Do?

So. It is true. I take my glasses off.  
The daylight blurs into distant blue.  
An old view new to my softened eyes.

Oh the days, the never and the ever changing days...

The calls of birds I cannot see organise  
A sky I cannot construe.

What is a man to do, my dear one,  
When even the air embodies you  
And all your foolish, winsome ways?

Oh the days, the never and the ever changing days,  
The over and the under days...

My hand raised up to shade the sun  
Only serves to render it more powerful...

Like walking sideways on the shore  
Reveals the ragged, morseless, vibrant, unselfconscious tide  
As foolish to ignore, despite my sun-washed pride.

Oh the days, the kept and windswept days,  
The taken and forsaken days  
And all your weaving and believing ways...

Let the old gnarled crab-apple tree protest its fruit and leaves against  
The sun's ascending rays,  
There is no call to rest until the fruit fall  
From such absurd, affectionate displays.

Oh the days, the never and the ever changing days,  
The softly-spoken, strident-hearted days,  
The fraying and decaying, dateless, doting days.

What is a man to do, my dear one, what is a man to do?  
What will become of me without you?

### Part 3: The Birth of Romance

## Early Morning Coffee

*Costa Coffee, New Art Gallery Walsall*

The foam of the day is about to break.  
The clouds in the many-wrinkled sky depart,  
The sleepy laughter of goddesses and gods  
Dapples the concrete, initiates our moods.

The creatures that include ourselves are broods  
That warm each other's company and obtain  
What by themselves no individual affords,  
The mingled glints and shades of harmony and refrain.

By birth we come to consciousness together,  
To urge the kinaesthetic earth to spin the weather  
Onwards through the actions that we generate,  
Pausing, as we humans do, to only sometimes contemplate

How the bubbles rise and fall, what energy they take,  
To feel the hot dawn from which we all originate.

## **Park Bench. 2016.**

Hear it? A lawnmower  
Mistaken for traffic.  
Perhaps municipal  
Authorities today  
Are cutting the verges.  
Summer city working.

Municipal city  
Traffic, hear it working.  
For, perhaps mistaken,  
Authorities today  
Are cutting the verges.  
A lawnmower summer.

Today authorities  
Are cutting the city.  
A lawnmower, perhaps,  
For the verges. Hear it.  
Municipal summer,  
Mistaken for traffic.

## The Derelict Bandstand

*(homage to Larkin)*

Here it is then, gone, and only the reeling fence is left,  
And that is broken down; only the suggestions  
Of music in the scene, the rhythms no longer deft,  
The answers gone; gone, too, the questions.

Oh, we have done away with the perfect;  
The globe of the world is not quite round,  
The jaw is not quite square, no bullseye target  
To hit with the one true arrow you found.

We define ourselves by what we have not heard or seen,  
By what we've missed – there is too much,  
There are too many things we have not got – it's mean  
To be offered up so much we cannot touch.

So, an old-fashioned sit-me-down, a hark  
Back to what we think our predecessors had:  
Benches, flowers, the tidy municipal park,  
And brassy Sunday afternoons, loud with mum and dad.

Gentle, cooling evenings for a quiet walk,  
The pretty sister and the sporting lad,  
The young couples and the wise, slow talk,  
Knowing it never really was, and still being glad.

## April Incident

wraggled with pleasure  
the tentative worm  
entering the tangy air  
crystallises momentarily

so the earth and air conjoin  
with such ease and effort

the worm a stranger here  
makes the place strange

then  
worm again  
shimmers back  
into pleasurable earth

the high-flying birds do not notice  
but the ancient trees applaud



## The Chroniclers

In the Lounge café you sit not too near the window today,  
off to one side to observe from your relative obscurity  
the summary open-coated lives of the customers as they appear through the door

and consider fleetingly and without too mournful an attitude – life is transitory –  
the frames of the lost ones as they exit before your thoughts acknowledged them.  
You avariciously assimilate the arriviers, feeding from their appetites as they remain

in motion, wait in line, sit, chat, potter, bemoan, murmur – to themselves or others –  
sprawl bags, coats, indicative hats, scarves on chairbacks, on the wooded floor,  
plunge into pockets, open up stuffed purses, offer notes or coinage across the

confections of the counter, beep their debit cards, cast fishy or placid glances  
like weathered fishermen or brazened women throwing their unknotted nets  
across the blue and tortoise brown afternoon room not wishing to catch,

except on rare occasions when a familiar smile, pout or lift of head  
is recognised and laughter, nods, words are passed, but generally  
simply to look and say I saw you there, swimming in the shallows.

Such brave people are here, such rewarding, brave people, even  
the cowardly ones, so many rewarding, brave, delicate people, brutal  
enough to be here, nervous enough to be here, such people rewarding you

with their energy, paying you back for your gratitude and attention, here  
you might recall Ernest Hemingway or Frank O'Hara or Primo Levi  
or Margaret Attwood or A. L. Kennedy, for example, or one of the many

chroniclers of the incidental and the people and the stories of the people and the things  
they did and the things that happened and the things they could not help  
and the people don't seem real but they are real and you are meeting them here,

even though you are meeting them mostly inside your head.

## For a moment I dreamed

For a moment I dreamed  
I was warm  
and friendly and  
effortlessly  
                  the sun shone  
making the shade I was in  
cool  
          deep  
                  fragrant as dawn

and it was easy

the day went on  
the day went endlessly on  
and the day  
was a dream  
that was  
and never  
gone

## No Stairs To The Attic

There are no stairs to the attic  
where the unmattressed bed  
is covered in cobwebs,  
where the erratic noise of drilling  
tips unemptied into the ear socket,  
where the stabs are unbloodied,  
but also unhealed, where the willing eye wanders  
over the broken boxes to the unbounced ball,  
where the light through the broken rooftile peeps in, squeaks in,  
where the dust meanders along the thin rafters,  
where the call of earth is hazy distant  
and the thin clouds whisper  
'What are you after, what are you after?'  
as if you meant to be there,  
as if you cannot help the shudder  
at the desire, the huge, awful, helpless desire to linger.

## On The Edge Of The Seat

A cough or a whisper? Someone shuffling?  
I become aware I am on the edge of my seat  
because he's on the edge  
of the stage, there

he stands at the tip of his creaking kingdom –  
his sinews taste of iron, his voice like a hammer on anvil.  
He calls into the air. I see the bleak cliff  
and swirling sand beneath. But I also feel

my grip slacken on the veloured armrests.  
The rhythms of his speech sound silvered in my ears,  
like the gilded stucco ceiling motifs,  
the polished brass handrails, the crushed

fabric of the purple curtains. But now the words have stopped.  
He no longer has grandeur, staring out and into himself,  
and into my mind come the fury of arctic wastes,  
birds silent at the eclipse, a liver-spotted hand

struggling to hold another's, stone quarries in the dripping night,  
cut hair on the floor. Then it is over. We applaud  
the truth and the artifice. I shuffle slowly out,  
becoming aware of myself, into the foyer.

## **10 Shoe Stories**

1. Shiny black brogues, worn slippers
2. Red leather loafers, thick-laced walking boots
3. Scruffy trainers, impeccable moccasins
4. Sandals and socks, swimsuit and flip-flops
5. Flat white mules, high high heels
6. Pom-pom slip-ons, plimmies
7. Leopard skin knee-highs for the thin woman
8. Chunky square-toes for the young giddies
9. Blue waders, green wellies
10. Bare feet, even in car parks

### 3 x Car Park

sunlight – like tiny auroras –  
bumper flash – bonnet star – canopy of pinpoints –  
I switch off the engine: stopped: in the grey-floored car park:  
open to the elements: technically: built to be: impervious: to them:  
I do not feel it: until I get out of the car –  
– sunlight surrounds me –  
under the grey: October sky:  
my indoor skin is warm – glowing –  
the weak air: heavy: icy:  
synthesis – :dichotomy  
*we live in a created world*  
Here I am in the universe: – still travelling

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under the grey: October sky:  
– sunlight surrounds me –  
I do not feel it: until I get out of the car –  
open to the elements: technically: built to be: impervious: to them:  
I switch off the engine: stopped: in the grey-floored car park:  
bumper flash – bonnet star – canopy of pinpoints –  
sunlight – like tiny auroras –

Here I am in the universe:  
*we create in a living world*  
synchotomy  
the heavy air: icy: weak:  
stopped: – indoor – in the grey-floored car park:  
my warm skin is glowing – I switch off the engine:  
I do not feel it: technically: until I get out of the car –  
open to the elements: bumper flash – built to be:  
bonnet star – impervious: canopy to them: of pinpoints –  
grey October: – sunlight surrounds me –  
under the sky: like tiny auroras –  
sunlight – – still travelling

## **Car Park Reprise**

sunlight like tiny auroras star flash canopy of pinpoints  
I switch off the engine in the grey-floored car park open to the elements  
technically built to be impervious to them  
my indoor skin is warm glowing I do not feel it until I get out of the car  
sunlight surrounds me under the grey October sky the weak air heavy icy  
synthesis dichotomy we live in a created world  
Here I am in the universe still travelling

## **Sitting On The Wall Outside On A Break**

The sun scruffs at a dog, who simpers up and,  
finding no food, just the pawing hands of strangers,  
puddles across the road, sits down alone again,  
feet out, cumbersome on the opposite pavement.

We are here in the shade, a little too cold in our summer clothes,  
convincing ourselves it is warm, since we can see the sunshine

widening the streets, opening the terraced houses,  
amusing itself in and out of the tiny front gardens and ill-fitting gates.

Old men rock slowly by in dusty coats, some in characteristic flat caps,  
some wearing incongruous beanies, glancing up at the approaching corner.  
The women are bag-handled, anoraked and brisk,  
caring more for warmth than beauty,  
but will stop for a chat outside the shop, if there's something to chat about.

.  
No sense here of putting on a show, the way we do,  
no world out there that they must pander to.  
I feel ashamed in my office shoes.

I have grown only myself in this town.



## Stock-taking In The Empty Classroom

The blinds are down  
because of the unexpected sun.  
They cover one whole wall.  
The tall, thin windows look out onto fields  
That are glossy with grass.

The strip lights stay on overhead  
making the room seem duller than it is.  
They are evenly spaced.  
They brighten the faded polystyrene tiles  
That smile abashed through their dinginess.

The brown parquet floor  
is dusty in the filtered sunlight.  
The varnish is matted.  
It is battered by rushed, scuffed shoeprints  
And the spattering of stains upon it.

Because it is a language room  
tourist posters of Paris on the wall opposite.  
Champs Elysées, Notre Dame, Le Tour Eiffel.  
They are set at jaunty angles  
But are not convivial.

All sustained in the fleeting moment:  
The blinds,  
The ceiling lights,  
The utilitarian tiles,  
The smoky prints on the wooden floor,  
The educational posters.

In the silence after the clamouring noise of the still-young now gone,  
It feels like you can hear their heartbeats.  
But you cannot even hear your own.  
So strong is the emptiness.

## **The Retail Park**

Drive past the barbed wire by the railtracks and the tubular steel around the McDonalds, turn in beyond the dense, dark hedges that encircle the retail park and swing in between the white lines that mark a correct space to be in. You are here.

Careful as you open the car door not to catch the one beside you, press the button that locks and flashes “So Long” at you as you walk away

towards the food stops and the retail outlets, towards perusal and purchase, rest and observation. What will you come away with this time?

You must always go home with something to make it worthwhile.

And I don't mean just your thoughts.

## The Tattoo Parlour

The light has the thin hum of blue-red neon.  
Angle-poise lamps form a retro well-worn office  
part-converted to a scratch theatre for minor surgery  
and a chemist's supplies shop.

Denim somewhere about, caps and t-shirts, a stand for coats.  
A book of patterns, as if you are a favourite aunt  
knitting a sweater for your nephew and want to know  
the pearl and knit and wool required.

A heart, a motto, a single word, a little dove, a great eagle,  
a red rose, a skull, a teardrop, barbed wire, love, hate,  
a ringed pattern on the arm, you skim through,  
looking for something to suit.

The artist's chair swivels past the forensic, metal scene.  
You sign a disclaimer. Having a tattoo is all about the act –  
you see that blazingly now, a testimony to who you want to be,  
given as evidence after the fact.

There is a buzz of pain as the needle crawls over the skin.  
The ink pricks its way in to your flesh and blood. A branding,  
even if a pretty, chosen one, is forming itself on your skin.  
Your thoughts drum and the fates dance.

The days go by, the years and days. See, look here. You display  
to new friends the soft, dimmed tattoo, stretched a little  
but still highly visible – a testimony to the will you have  
to fix your life's happenstance.

## Arrival

So now you are in the 21st century city at night  
and you are caught up in its breeze-blocked streets,

your skin pallid under the sharp white halogen lights,  
avoiding the deep round black rat-like eyes of its citizens

and the thought of the ancient reds of the setting sun  
shadowing the mossed blue clouded river valleys

shivers through your shoulders, swells the grains  
of loneliness in your gut, acrid as rusted metal,

knowing you are far gone in this industrial sprawl,  
wondering if the revolution will ever really come,

and, if it does, which side you will be on.

## The Balloon Ride

You have to go early,  
Early morning or early evening,  
It's due to the thermal energy.

The light is low, the shadows long,  
There is a glow somewhere  
You can't quite put your finger on.

The billowy balloon silk skin,  
Laid out on the damp ground,  
Sighs as the warm kiss of life begins.

Fed by sustaining flames, the balloon dances,  
Laughs at the joke of itself, plumps up into  
A full fat monarch granting an audience.

We stare out creakily from the wicker basket.  
Taut hands steady the rough, slippery ropes.  
There is a gasp and cheer as we rise into flight.

The roar of the burner hushes. So high now.  
Calm distances, delicate colours, dry sunlight and cool shade.  
The feathers of sounds float up, tickle us and are gone.

We drift on. Perhaps  
It is true: quietness is freedom.

## Views Of Mount Fuji

I asked myself how  
The proud mountain knew  
I had not viewed it till now.

Is it wise to long  
To taste untrammelled snow  
So old and so cold?

I attributed  
Too much to the old fragrance  
Of your consequence.

The soil at my feet  
Grows sad under the soft rain  
That refreshes it.

All I wanted was  
The silence to acknowledge  
My desire to speak.

The sad laughter is  
Harder to watch than glad tears  
When the light changes.

What a strange request  
That I return unopened  
The promise I made.

The mountain top shouts  
But it is so far away  
It is a whisper.

## **In Venice In Search Of The Pristine**

Not the sky –  
tumbling the light,  
fluffing the casual apparel,  
bouncing off the bobbled buildings  
like staccatos of blue leaf –  
decorating dereliction with delight.

It even insinuates itself  
into your inside-pocket thoughts  
among the arrow-shadowed Calles –

Not the water –  
water is the most emotional here,  
instilling its insistence and remorse,  
it is the belle rhythm, the wane you desire,  
and the ancient stink you fear,  
restless all day for the night –

In the cool churches and high palaces  
the blinds are down and the lights are lit  
to echo the waxed sheen of accrued histories –

Even the pictures embody and belie  
permanence, frame those so honoured  
into a fixed state of transience –

Ha! Stare out the portraits –  
Open your arms to argue them, then  
go out to the sky and the water,

the gratered, crumbled buildings,  
the people like gaudy rag-tags –  
Embrace in Venice what you cannot grasp –

Nothing on this earth is pristine  
From the moment you thought of it.

## Therefore Let The Moon

*From Wordsworth's 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey'*

therefore let the moon  
that had no need of a remoter charm  
shine on thee all the mighty world  
the guardian of my heart these beauteous forms the burthen of the mystery a living soul  
let the misty mountain-winds be free  
a wild secluded scene thoughtless youth  
haunted me like a passion  
of harmony  
the landscape with the quiet of the sky  
a sad perplexity  
this green earth holier love our human blood  
the picture of the mind revives again  
to chasten and subdue  
the breath of this corporeal frame



## **The Birth of Romance**

Ah, yes, Paris, but call to mind if you can another river city you know something of,  
Pause by the side of the water, gaze in the movement, slow your heart.

Slow your heart, imagine the footsteps that brought you, a deep rendezvous, hold hands  
With the railing only between you and the gathering flow of nature's time, close your eyes.

Close your eyes, picture the windswept murmurs of smudged figures, fog on the tongue,  
Cold on the cheeks from the swirl of air and water, the unbidden caw of the traveller.

The unbidden caw of the traveller, the truth begotten of strangeness, the quickening breath,  
Oh, here it comes, it's all so glamorously old and young and you want to cry, ah, yes, Paris.

## Knickerbocker Glory Sunset

It sits on the white laminate table ignoring its pale reflection.  
Just one napkin between us, a flat mountain, how ridiculous.  
We pause, delay to share the even-now-melting expectation.  
Then plunge.

O  
a cherry atop  
swirls of red syrup  
whipped cream clouds high above  
the wavy castellated rim of the fluted glass sea  
leading you in to cooler and heavier  
layers of yellow vanilla ice cream  
smiling strawberry ice cream  
o strawberry pieces hidden  
mmm chocolate ice cream  
now more vanilla bursts  
and peaches buried in  
the crimson cherry  
as syrup mingles  
o more cherries  
at the bottom  
as the sun  
sets o  
ooo  
oo  
o  
!

## Part 4: In Times of Trial

## **To Kill A Dragon**

Sneak up, avoiding the cruel eyes, coil rope round the hind legs,  
Tighten and pull hard to tumble her down, down to her knees,  
Then, while she is startled, whack off her head with an oath.

Stay distant, but taunt and provoke, provoke mercilessly until she rears up,  
Then rush in and spear the soft underbelly,  
Twist deep, twist deep and make sure you reach the heart.

In your heavy armour, incite her to roar and roar and roar her fire at you,  
Then hold up your smooth polished shield  
So she burns herself to death.

Let her go mad with neglect, pacing her fractured self  
Around and about her hoarded, useless treasure,  
Until she dwindles, she dwindles to nothing but  
A sad and feeble bag of bones.

## **The Tiger In The Corner**

I didn't really notice it at first.

**The tiger in the corner.**

*No-one speaks.*

*No-one speaks the fear.*

I didn't want to bother you.

It didn't seem important.

**The tiger in the corner.**

Shall I lie down here?

*No-one speaks the fear.*

It's been getting worse.

*The tiger moves.*

Quite a few months.

*Is he coming to get you?*

*Don't let it see you're afraid.*

*Maybe it'll get bored*

*And go.*

Yes, any time this week.

*Or maybe I can keep it chained*

*With drugs.*

*Yes, I can feed it drugs.*

*Ward it off. Ward it off.*

Carry on as normal, yes.

*No-one speaks.*

*No-one speaks the fear.*

**The tiger in the corner.**

*Here it comes. Here it comes.*

*Bad news. Bad news.*

Thank you doctor.

## **Taking Off My Hair**

Time to take off my hair.

It was a relief, not having to smooth it,  
run my fingers through it, wash it, dry it,  
shape it, brush it, push my glasses up into it,  
feel it defining my face, playing about with my forehead.

Take it off, discard it,

Be someone else from now on.

Why not? Why not,

I'll tell you why bloody not.

I had no choice in the matter.

## The Operation

So much cheap chrome and bevelled plastic.  
How can anyone sit in these bleak chairs?

We are among the coats and vending machines.  
We are among those waiting. We are among the helpless.

We can see by the people in uniform who pass through  
That the important stuff is happening beyond the doors.

There are urgent cries and weary whispers.  
You hope you will not be led to a corridor.

No-one likes to spend time in a corridor.  
That is not what corridors are for.

The lights lead you on, the walls lead you on,  
The paint is remorseless, the décor utilitarian.

No-one knows what they want in a corridor.  
No one can stay in a corridor and not despair.

I will be led to the ward, up in the seismic lifts.  
I will be settled in one of those white unsleepable beds.

The beds are there to hold what is wrong with you  
Within their scratchy medicinal embrace.

But there is a routine to make you sleep,  
To change your suffering to another sort.

Finally, time has passed and you have arrived at  
The procedure. You have properly become the patient.

Afterwards, there will be a scar  
To show how even more special you now are.

Afterwards there will be tea and conversation  
And a bed you can try to sleep in.

You will sleep long and hard  
And, when you wake, the world will be soft again.

**On Feeling A Little Fed Up  
And Therefore Preparing A Hot Drink**

Boil, kettle, boil,  
Show that you will be cheerful  
Even in cold and old surroundings,  
Quaint clothes and this tipsy seat.  
Let the crack in the window-pane  
Imitate stained glass without the stain.  
Boil, kettle, boil,  
Uplifting and faithful.



## **Screw The Lid Down Tight**

At the beginning of the day

I make up a flask.

I have one flask for coffee and the other for tea. You can't get the taste of the coffee out, so I don't mix the two. I have one flask for coffee and a different flask for the tea. You see, that way I don't have to boil up the kettle again. I have four, maybe five cups in the one flask. Course, it doesn't last all day. It starts to cool down by about three o'clock. But there's enough for mid-morning, lunchtime and for an early afternoon drink. Even when – as I sometimes do – I indulge myself and I have a second cup. It saves time, energy and expense. Even better, with the coffee, I only have to make one cafetiere. So I'm not pouring good coffee down the sinkhole just because it's gone cold. Because you always make more than just the one cup when you use a cafetiere. That's the only drawback to them. And the coffee goes cold ever so quick. Well, it's only thin glass. I take the flask into the front room and there it sits. At my disposal. What could be better? The little things in life. Important. I tell myself that.

## The Cup

He used the cup for years,  
Soaking the stains away  
With bicarbonate of soda  
When they crept up to the rim.

There it was, dependably welcome,  
The slurped mornings,  
The slow-sipping afternoons,  
The last drink at night by the bedside.

The patina of flowers on the front,  
Faded by the wash and dry of life,  
Something he didn't think about,  
Something that didn't bother him.

Until it hit the floor  
Unexpectedly and broke in half.  
Now she is gone  
He has nothing to drink from.

## Candle Poem

*After Helen Dunmore*

In the early cave  
It was child-like, ludicrous;  
Too small to be brave:  
But it guided them  
Into the depths of safety.

*A lullaby of light  
Gentling your sleep  
In the deeps of the night.*

In the stable  
It was dangerous  
With all that scattered straw,  
But it lit its focus:  
That commonplace baby, Jesus.

*An earthly star  
Telling you how  
Fragile the heavens are.*

In the whaled belly  
Of the blubbering city it guts, furious,  
Visceral, dripping;  
Accretion of the human  
On the steps of creation.

*It can save your  
Sheer life  
In the plunging dark.*

Today, on our occasional tables  
It is a perfumed decoration; lugubrious,  
Tamed, contained, a parlour piece:  
But, look, it still burns proud  
As it turns its own myths to ashes.

*When the flame is snuffed  
The smudge of smoke is all  
Our whispery aftermath.*

In the heartfelt chapel  
There is the sacramental flame  
That never goes out,  
Above the trays of unlit candles  
Waiting for prayer to awaken.

*As you lean in to light the wick,  
Hear how bright the candles  
Keen the memories.*

## Two Peasants Binding Faggots

*Based on the painting of the same name*

So cry if you are foolish, laugh if you are wise.

We have seen as much trouble as we could  
have wished for; we have crossed water, rubble,  
cracked twig paths and the squeaking mud  
and we would not have it otherwise.

So cry if you are foolish, laugh if you are wise.

We have guffawed through thick and thin  
and back again; from whispered sniggers to  
slaps on the back – eye-wet, belly-tightening grins,  
mirth and laughter is the sin of those despised.

So cry if you are foolish, laugh if you are wise.

We steady our soft selves against the hard slope  
of life on the forest's edge; tattered with care, pared  
out to eye and gut, we rough out forage, and rope  
with double-knotted hope our cackled prize.

So cry if you are foolish, laugh if you are wise.

Now, what is that, out there in the odd distance  
of time? Meagre fuel, dregs of food? Are we aware  
when we stop and for that moment glance  
up, outside our own concerns for sustenance,  
out there, perhaps, the same wry future lies?

So cry if you are foolish, but laugh if you are wise.

## My Gecko Was Impacted

Knew my Leopard Gecko was impacted.	(I)
Finally managed to get to poop but no appetite.	(I, him, he had)
Losing two grams a day. So anxious.	(He was, I was)
Had no interest, not even in waxworms.	(He)
Smearred the probiotic around his lips and he licked it off.	(I)
The next day watched him devour three locusts!	(I)
So happy my gecko is back to his normal self.	(I'm)
So relieved.	(I'm/He's)

## This Was The Situation

This was the situation. He wouldn't go to the lavatory. He was bugged up. Nothing was coming out. Which meant nothing was going in. He wasn't eating and didn't seem to want to eat. So, what to do?

I knew about this medicine and I intervened. It's an electrolyte powder. There's a possible hydration problem but water isn't enough by itself, you need the electrolyte and probiotic balance right. It's a gut thing.

I wasn't sure if he would take it, so I was clever. It's a powder and I smearred it on his lips. Just with my finger. That way he licked it off with his tongue, just in the course of things. That made him drink, too. I think he wondered what was happening, but he didn't seem to mind.

The next day, there he is, munching away. A real feast, couldn't stop him eating. My strategy worked. I was so pleased. Things are back to normal now, thank goodness. He goes regular, usually mid-morning. We're both relieved and happy. He'd say so if he could talk, I know he would. Do you want to come and say hello?

*Source: found text at customer reviews for Reptoboost on Amazon  
(Charlotte's post 2 April 2016)*

*<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Vetark-Professional-Reptoboost-100-g/dp/B003672UNO>*

## **The Idea Of A Dog**

The idea of a dog yaps at my heels,  
Down boy, down,  
Ludicrously comforting.

## The Importance of Cats In Ancient Egypt

ow me            me ow  
hear            obey  
in the delta of forehead  
a scarab jewel  
scratched in the fur  
above and between the eyes  
fire of suncome            dark of moongo  
those eyes travel the day within them  
liquid as the Nile flow  
and the mouth  
catches all  
below



## **Strange Creature – A Riddle**

I begin life curled up, blind, before I am straightened and formed,  
Slowly and carefully bathed and groomed.

My body is slim, wiry, sleek, buffed and burnished,  
Though the thoughts in my head sometimes lose their thread.

I like to hide and when I am caught I can give  
A sting from my tail or a peck from my beak.

I can draw blood and think nothing of it,  
But I can also heal a wound.

I like to run about, up and down and in and out,  
But only when my owner has me on a lead.

My tail is sometimes long and sometimes short.  
It can be any colour and I like to wag it about.

Sometimes my tail gets stuck and pulls me up.  
Sometimes my tail just falls off! That can be annoying.

I am as clever as the hand that holds me.  
I have only one eye, but can see the whole world through it.

## **The crane is not eyeing the water over the shallow wetlands**

The crane is not eyeing the water over the shallow wetlands,  
It is building the high-rise technology park where the wetlands once were.  
The ground is parched.

An apple isn't plucked, dew-heavy, from the tawny orchard,  
But from a silicon valley by way of indentured South East Asian low-cost labour.  
The workers are thirsty.

The mobile doesn't hang like weathery sky shapes above the little boy's bed,  
It is a multi-featured hand-held media and communication device instead.  
And it mustn't get wet.

The precious metals that take so much water to refine  
Are wholly utilitarian, hidden beneath a water-proof casing, pristine.  
No chalice here to drink from.

A stream does not trickle or ripple with light on the water,  
But is a data download of ones and zeros to a dry cloud that is a computer server.  
Nothing will grow but numbers.

The seed-fed botspiders, webcrawlers, scutters and scrapers  
Are all over the bloggers, trolls, ghosts, twittizens, electric friends and end-users.  
The information trees proliferate, but give no shade.

It is a world without water we are creating,  
To slake our parching thirst for significance.

So we build and build our intricate palaces of wire and wishes,  
Our waterless city, an infrastructure of emptiness we will never finish,  
And as it expands, we diminish.

## **In My Humble Opinion**

This comment  
has been removed by the moderator  
as it does not conform  
to our community standards.

This website is no longer available  
due to its offensive nature.

This article requires  
additional validation.

This article has been removed  
at the request of one of its subjects.

But do you think it's true?

IMHO

If you don't agree,  
unfriend me then.

And don't read this.

## **The Computer Generates**

The computer generates a new time and date each time you save the document,  
So you are only saving your latest moment. Life has become instant.  
And lived with the compunction  
Of the machine.

But the reprieve  
Of the back-up means the old one  
Has become retrievable – as long as you save it  
With the new machine, when the old is past its time, and out of date.

## Self-help Bookmark

I sit on the loo (I call it the toilet)  
and peruse the shelves – it is that sort of house –  
to distract myself with slim poetic volumes,  
stories of forgotten illustrious women, jokes.

I see a dog-eared self-help book, the sort you buy  
to take control of your life, not *Seven Habits* or  
Paul McKenna, but one called *59 Seconds*. I pick  
it out and think, yes, plenty of time for one or two tips.

As I sit and ruminate,  
I turn to the page with the bookmark in it.  
They're less than half-way way through.  
As I look at the slip, I

Nod in glib acknowledgement  
to offset the feeling of guilt at being a sneak.  
Then I see what it is. The enjoyment comes easy  
and a smile spreads across all my cheeks.

The joy of juxtaposition, the stark  
pleasure of the not deliberate:

The self-help bookmark  
is an old lottery ticket.

## Condition Report

*When an art gallery receives a painting on loan, a condition report is made by the receiving curator in the presence of the owner or a representative of the owner to ensure the picture is returned in the same condition as received.*

You must be unflinching. Pin this moment.  
The moment of unwrapping.

Examine the support:  
Creases, folds, tears. Which are apparent?  
Stains and discolouration, local or widespread?  
Are there losses or abrasions, and, if so, are they mended?  
Is the surface plane free from distortion?  
Is the tension tight or slack. Any buckling?

Stand back – see again  
How intrinsic character is,  
How it cannot escape itself.

And to it once more:  
Is there surface dirt, heavy, embedded or minimal?  
Is there mount distortion? Structural losses to the frame?  
Is the medium cracking, flaking, fading?  
Has there been retouching?

Pause. Move away a pace – observe the powerful  
Grace of line, force of expression  
Hoping to carry all before it  
By its internal ambition.

Back into further details:  
What is the surface coating?  
Are there flecks, drips, caught fibres?  
Are there raised areas potentially dislodged  
By transportation? Are there special handling requirements?

Draw and mark, note and sign.

Now relax and run your fingertip eyes  
Over this utter surprise

You own more than anyone else  
Because of all your earthly discoveries.

Such magnificent accidental flaws  
In the Artist's grand design

Attest to the laws of time  
And closeness.

## The Box

### I – An Examination

So, four sides. No, six, you forget top and bottom. Think of a dice. 1-6.  
You are an amateur. Amateur detective, amateur gambler.  
Amateur professional.  
You are an oxymoron.  
You feel a little two-dimensional in a four-dimensional world.  
Fourth dimension: time. You know about that.  
The box arrived a long time ago.  
Well, not that long ago.  
Quite recently.  
Very recently, you could say.  
Although some time ago.  
You don't know much about time, after all.

There is a mesh. You didn't expect that.  
Obvious, really, how would you breathe?

More textures than you had considered:  
Thin wire, smooth plywood, sanded corners,  
Oakwood, apple wood, pine,  
The Jesmonite, the cotton, the graphite,  
Gold leaf, paraffin wax, beeswax,  
The stamped words, the labels.

And all the oiled colours of the canvas.  
All the colours that deepen the black,  
Elucidate the white.

Is there too much stuffed in or is there richness by association?

Children, apartheid, sweetness and death,  
Social convention, nature and human,  
Colonialism, organisation of labour,  
All bursting and buzzing in the box of your head,  
The store of your thoughts.



## II – The Gossip Swarm

It is the inability to turn it off that terrifies.  
The knowledge it will not go back in the box.

My rough hands clasping and unclasping  
The prickled fingers grasping  
The round eyes gleaming  
My heart gasping  
My eyes stinging the air  
As I release the swarm.

There is a stomach twist when you hear the half-lies  
because they are half-truths.

A sudden look when you see the panic between the eyes  
as they realise the unanswerable injustice.

What do you do when you cannot stop the cries?  
When the silence is full of them.

They gossip, they babble, they twitter.  
They swagger, they buckle, they glitter.

But now they are all gone, it is almost worse.

Look at the ghosts  
in the chairs  
in the garden.

You remember how you would nod, gesture, detach your look;  
Exhibit a range of facial expressions,  
Not too comical, not too earnest.  
Try to listen this time.

You feel like an opened honey pot  
And the wasps of gossip are swarming.

You are helpless to stop the needling thoughts.  
You shiver despite the sun.

You are your own ghost  
in the chair  
in the garden.

### III – The Box Opened

I have become a child again.

More interested in the box  
Than what has been in it.

Upright, the box is a sailing ship:  
Shake to the thrum of the engines,  
Thrum down the flattened wings of the passengers,  
Flatten the tip and roll of the journey to the unknown outcome,  
Roll along the bumptious delight of the wet-smooth wood,  
Keeping the off-balanced momentum of childhood  
Laughing inside you.

Sideways a cave:  
The crushed cries of night,  
The algae-furred mouth,  
The spike and cushion of the uneven walls,  
The awkward, rubble floor,  
Sssh! The beast breathes heavy outside  
And you the insect protected within.

Upside down a castle:  
Trumpets at the gate,  
Marching orders,  
Stowing provisions,  
Eagles circling,  
A distant horizon and a tiny room,  
What more could you want?

Always a taste of delight, a touch of adventure,  
A safe place to hide, escape.

I feel a sense of release.  
A box is never a trap for a child.

## The Mirror of Literature Vol III: Amusement and Instruction

*Restored by the British Library*

Calf spine,  
marbled sides,  
a sprinkling of Armenian bole.

Woven paper sewn on light cords,  
26 x 8 leaf sections,  
each section a new edition.

In addition:  
2 x 4 leaf sections,  
1 x 2 leaf section,  
and a single leaf.

Endboards,  
a frontispiece,  
flypaper of different quality to the textblock.

The paper is acidic: it has a pH of 4.36.

The inscriptions are not fugitive in water.

The headband is split and broken.  
The binding is scuffed and worn.  
The inner joint is split.

The paper is soft, soiled and stained.  
It has the characteristic smell of deterioration.

The most consistent staining  
is yellowing  
in areas of printed text,

which is probably caused  
by oxidised oil  
from the printing ink.

There are tears and losses,  
but these are not extensive.

There is some evidence of insect attack.

Note I begin frivolous and portentously:  
how the living become the dead  
and the dead become the living.

I am delighted to observe  
the compilation is extensive,  
carefully organised

and detailed.

But not straightforward.

Not sure what to do  
with this information.  
No.

This is surely a metaphor but blessedly  
to me

the ominous nature of  
the metaphor remains somewhat unclear.  
It feels like judgement is withheld

unless you posit that  
observation is judgement.

I think I understand the idea manifest  
of probable cause,  
of science and nature  
and due process.

Even in this I believe and contend  
the book provides determined and  
ungaugable  
Amusement and Instruction.

## **The Hubris Of Its Maintenance**

This life, the hubris of its maintenance,  
shouldn't it make you smile?