

A POETICS OF DESIRE

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Declaration

I declare that the capping paper submitted for this PhD is all my own work.

Abstract

This PhD capping paper is an accompaniment to three published books of poetry: *Blood/Sugar*, *White Coins* and *Everything Broken Up Dances*.

Blood/Sugar and *White Coins* (hereafter *B/S* and *WC*) were both published by Arc Publications in the UK, in November 2009 and April 2015. *Everything Broken Up Dances* (*EBUD*) by Tupelo Press in the US, in December 2015.

I situate these books within a poetics of desire, exploring the idea of the self in my work and how this relates to the self as other, or desiring of the other. I also consider the possibilities of fragmentation in relation to form and utterance. Significantly—though among others—I examine key texts by Georg Hegel, Judith Butler, Maurice Blanchot, Edmond Jabès and Jacques Lacan and examine their various theories on desire and the function of the self to evaluate poems from each of my own books, as discussed.

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Because philosophers cannot obliterate desire they must formulate strategies to silence or control it.¹

—Judith Butler

I wore myself out, looking for myself.
No one could have worked harder to break the code.
I lost myself in myself and found a wine cellar. Nectar, I tell you.²

—Lal Ded

¹ Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p.2.

² Lal Ded, *I Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded*, translated by Ranjit Hoskote (Haryana: Penguin Books, India, 2011), p.16.

A Poetics of Desire

Poetics is born of a crisis – the need to change.³
—Robert Sheppard

Is this desire, enough enough—
Enough inside, is this desire?⁴
—PJ Harvey

I write out of a desire to communicate and a desire to obfuscate.

Desire: transitive verb. What I want / long for / crave is in a state of constant change.

Desirous, I do not know precisely what I want and may not want what I know.

I do not write to know myself, or others—including myself othered—any better. At least this is not the essential aim of my writing.

Composition is never solid ground. Stabilised by instability, I am rooted and uprooted, writing on the ledger and on the hoof.

A poetics of infinite instabilities. Of impermanence over permanence. Desire, being fluxive, offers no fixed state. Sometimes I am thinking about Nietzsche, sometimes I am thinking about boiling a kettle. My body is chemically different in the morning than it was in the afternoon.

Because writing involves interminable interrogations of the self, the 'I' is flexible, fissured, polyvocal, cameo, transindividual, occasioned, multifocal, infinitely exchanged. '[A]nd in Melodious Accents, I / Will sit me down & Cry, I, I.'⁵

Cast into the inevitable shattering of the sea. The self served as choice cuts. '[M]orsels of himself, gestures, shadows, garments strewn along the way...'⁶

Desire, abstract noun, is 'self-consciousness in general'.⁷ But this, according to Hegel, is not the essence of desire.

What of the self seen and unseen? Hegel terrified Jung into existence. Desire mediated through dreams.

Desire given necessary space: Jungian techniques of Active Imagination, but also daily notation, ekphrasis, psychogeography, dream diaries, collaboration, observation.

Poetry is a process. Desire is a process (of living and dying).

³ Robert Sheppard, *The Necessity of Poetics* (Liverpool: Ship of Fools, 2002), p.3.

⁴ Polly Jean Harvey, *Is this Desire?* (New York: Island Records, 1998).

⁵ William Blake, 'Public Address' in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, edited by David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor Books, newly revised edition, 1988), p.581.

⁶ Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, p.19.

⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.105.

Desire to speak: infinite requests made against silence.

Because ‘musicalization pluralizes meanings’, I want to make music, even at the expense of meaning, singular.⁸

Hegel believed that desire is something we mediate because the self wishes to better understand what it is.⁹ And yet, if able to mediate desire at all, I would hope to understand myself less.

Perhaps there is no other of the other, only larger and expanded selves. ‘[A]lways desire for something other, which, in turn, is always a desire for a more expanded version of the subject’.¹⁰

Flux: because writing does not give me what I want (the echo: this *is* what I want). ‘Inattention: the intensity of it. The distantness that keeps watch beyond attention...’¹¹

Ultimately, writing involves the repression of desire. Poetry is active (is activism). But not everything desired can (or should) be acted upon. The blood boils and is calm.

Writerly pleasure is never lasting (if it feels this way then it is only the ego echoing after composition). Writing feeds desire, feeds writing, recurring.

Desire veers from the Aristotlean path where ‘that which moves...is a single faculty of appetite’.¹² In writing, what might nourish me is ever-shifting.

Writing is a lifelong apprenticeship.¹³ I am left unfulfilled by it because language does not satisfy. ‘He writes—does he write?—not because the books of others leave him unsatisfied...but because they are books and because by writing one does not get enough.’¹⁴

Hegel sees the desiring self as achieving eventual satisfaction through recognition with the other.¹⁵ But self-satisfaction would mean, for me, the death knell. I want any exchange with the other to be dissatisfying, blurred, incapable of sustaining a fixed self and, therefore, easily broken.

⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. by Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p.116.

⁹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This view is expressed by Hegel variously in the *Phenomenology*, initially in relation to the idea of ‘I’ as self and other (p.104) and later with the expression of life as consisting of ‘reflected unity’ (p.108). I will explore Hegel’s thoughts on mediation later in a section titled ‘*Selvies: Evading the Hegelian Other*’.

¹⁰ Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, p.34.

¹¹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p.55.

¹² Aristotle, ‘De Anima’ in *Introduction to Aristotle*, ed. by Richard McKeon (New York: Modern Library, 1947), p.23.

¹³ The idea of apprenticeship is important to ‘Apprentice Work’, an elegy for the British poet Peter Redgrove (1930-2003), published in *Blood/Sugar*, p.12.

¹⁴ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p.37.

¹⁵ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.112. For Hegel this involves recognition through the acknowledgment of a divided self, where the self and other mutually recognise each other.

Narcissus forever at the water's edge, trying and failing to learn the river's humility. If I were satisfied with my own language, I'd drown in it.

Desire to obfuscate is a privileged position. Is it not also a kind of narcissism? 'The poet is Narcissus to the extent that Narcissus is an anti-Narcissus: he who, turned away from himself—causing the detour of which he is the effect, dying of not recognising himself—leaves the trace of what has not occurred.'¹⁶

Poetry is an affliction that offers no cure, except in death, which is the end of desire.

Desire leaves a mark, is always residual.

Writing must offer at least a residue of lust because language itself is erotic.

Writing writes as it unwrites, familiarises as it others. I write to wrong foot myself, to wake myself up (from myself).

I am the masked burglar who wants to break into himself: Writing is '[a]n interrogative mode of being, a corporeal questioning of identity and place'.¹⁷

Poetry is ecstatic. Out of stasis, moving the self outside of the self.

To write with the volume turned up. To pressurise each syllable. Linguistic innovation over plain sense. Difficult language offends our basic literacy but is permissible, if only because the world itself can be difficult.

I want to offend basic literacy.

I am the carpenter's son trying to rebuild a life. *Poesis*: the maker.

I am the blundering detective who cannot solve his own case. History as *historia*.¹⁸
I demand a fresh enquiry *after* the enquiry.

'Fake it up with the truth'.¹⁹ Invented relatives. Family trapdoors. My poems are all about me and nothing to do with me. The voice that is speaking is always other voices.

Wary of Orpheus singing downriver, the instinct is to edit myself out of the poem rather than into it.

I am a chiseller. Editing is often painfully slow, a kind of self-dentistry. '[I]t's like having a tooth crowned'.²⁰

¹⁶ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p.135.

¹⁷ Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, p.9.

¹⁸ 'Historia' is also the title of a poem in *White Coins*, p.11

¹⁹ Anne Sexton, 'Anne on Anne' in *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World* by Jacqueline Rose (New York: Vintage, 2003), p.100.

²⁰ Vladimir Mayakovsky, 'How Are Verses Made' trans. by G.M. Hyde in *Gossip and Metaphysics: Russian Modernist Poems and Prose*, Farris, Katie, Ilya Kaminsky, Valzhyna Mort eds. (North Adams: Tupelo Press, 2014), p.192.

Editing is a place where the poem (and the self) can be remade, or increasingly fractured (so as to be re-remade).

As if publishing satisfies. Desire cannot be restrained or reproduced.

How to endorse what I have left behind? A good thing that desire mostly moves forwards.

The etymology of 'nostalgia' is pain of return. To recollect takes me back to the boy in the photograph. '[O]ld desire—old passion— / old forgetfulness—old pain'.²¹

Reading heralds a crisis that makes me want to change into something else.

Reading changes me into something else.

Love, sex, death and nature. What else is there to write about? A desire to escape tight confines.

A desire *not* to write poems. (At least this wish will be met).

Narcissus blinded by mirrors, I do not 'beseech You God, to show my full self, to myself'.²²

'Desire is a defence'. It defends our enjoyment, our reliance upon it.²³

Have I ever written exactly what I wanted to say? Poems are failed experiments.

'Fail again, fail better'.²⁴ Often the more spectacular the failure, the worthier the poem.

Writing is collaborative. I want to allow the reader in sufficiently so as to participate in the production of meaning. The possibilities of deduction over the passivity of sense-making.

Even to think about writing brings about a fear of language. A fear of being found inside the language (of not being found). Poetry neuroses. Nervousness of composition. A tightening of skin around hard-bitten nails.

The writer operates as an obsessive neurotic who tries to conceal himself, hoping to appear grounded, even whilst in flight. '[H]e writes by obsessions—consists of continuities and detours.'²⁵

²¹ H.D., 'Fragment 113' from 'Hymen' in *Collected Poems 1912-1944* (eighth edition), ed. by Louis L. Martz (New York: New Directions, 1986), p.131.

²² Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. by R.S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), Book x, p.243.

²³ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), p.322.

²⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Worstword Ho!* (London: John Calder, 1983), p.7.

²⁵ Susan Sontag, 'Writing Itself: On Roland Barthes' in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1982), p.433.

I catch the psychogeographical drift, but what it refuses it also requires (another kind of mapping). Why not geographic *and* psychogeographic all at once? I desire a poetics of rootedness and uprootedness, of placement and displacement.

‘[T]he accumulation of points of view; finally their disburdenment...’²⁶ To collect from a life is to confess something of it. In this sense, all poetry is confessional. However, the writer is never fully disburdened.

All poetry is personal. Someone else is not writing it. Dictation is fanciful. And yet all I admit to is the writing of the writing.

I do not write every day. I prefer a more unsystematic, more sadistic scenario—to be frightened out of or lured back into writing.

Born into a place of violence, my first memory is the sound of broken glass. Desire to place myself back in danger, to reframe the lost child in his (familiar) surroundings, to write from a place of conflict, of violence.

A desire to speak through the other. My brother, acutely agoraphobic, asks me to waltz him around the world.

Desire continues to flow, despite castration. I welcome other mothers, other fathers.

Castration does not deny access. It feeds desire and is able to reactivate or increase creativity.

Freud’s father figure is always the dead father.²⁷ I write the wished-for father, the one who cannot hear me, who denies my desire to reach out and touch him.

Language resurrects, refashions the dead. Freud’s father reimagined, undead. The death of the father allowed me to build a mosaic from his absence.

The dead father stares more starkly, more intently, and so he appears more present than ever before. ‘My father (hard through timidity) / Is dead of a profile most severe.’²⁸

Lacan refers to the ‘law of desire’.²⁹ But are there any strict laws concerning desire?

Desire maintains the writer’s essential freedom, which is that of flight.

Simplicity of the Cartesian way: castration (body) invites imagination (mind). No feeling without thinking. Poetry bloods the cerebral and the physical.

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ I am thinking of Sigmund Freud’s various theories on sexuality and the father, going back to the Oedipus Complex, which was his adopted term to describe the relationship of children to their parents. This theory takes the myth of King Oedipus, who was said to have killed his father and then married his mother. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XI, 1910*, trans. by James Strachey, (New York: Vintage, 2001, first published in 1961, p.47.

²⁸ Jules Laforgue, ‘Avertissement’ [Advertisement] in *Des fleurs de bonne volonté* [Flowers of Good Will], trans. by Peter Dale (London: Anvil Press, 2001, p.265.

²⁹ Lacan, *Ecrits*, p.324.

Desire invites a poetics of error, of permutation and mutation, of self-reflexivity. '[T]he beauty of error, the chains of logic, the possibilities of intuition, and the uncanny delight of chance...'³⁰

Writing poetry involves a series of expertly-timed collisions (or the appearance thereof).

The self as a single being is always shaking hands with the dialectical self, where the personal confesses and conceals, where the self is both hermetic and mimetic.

I resent the idea of perfection—nothing can be born out of it. I prefer a 'structured disequilibrium'.³¹

The poem is an archive. But, like any archive, it does not cohere. Writing is an attempt to bring an otherwise incoherent life together. This is one of its pleasures. Another is to revel inside a lifetime of incoherencies.

Like all arts, poetry is irrational. As if I might reason with desire.

Is the enactment of desire anything more than agitated spasms of the body?

I want to re-appropriate the me-me-me of the lyric. Musicality is *I*.

A poetry of musics. Many notes playable from just one instrument (that of voice). 'The world seen as music.'³²

Amid the boredom of routine, a desire to know myself differently each time. Restlessness, disobedience, dissidence. I tap the same old keys on the same old typewriter. Always the crisis, the need for change.

'Form is content.'³³ Poems are structures of space as much as declarations (of language). Kinetic energy of white space, breath, open field and the eye by way of the ear.³⁴ Confined by language, I look to discover new possibilities of form and structure.

Why does it perpetuate, the revolving nonsense idea that all has been written before? We—if we choose—can meddle in / with several different languages, within English alone. Language changes and subverts language. The 'sentence is not suppressed, it is infinitized.'³⁵

³⁰ Charles Bernstein, 'The Practice of Poetics' in *Attack of the Difficult Poems* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), p.73.

³¹ Sheppard, *The Necessity of Poetics*, p.5.

³² Octavio Paz, 'Recapitulations' in *Alternating Current*, trans. by Helen Lane (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1990), p.65.

³³ This phrase is from Charles Olson in his writing on 'Projective Verse'. Olson declares that he is condensing an earlier remark made by Robert Creeley. Charles Olson, *Selected Writings of Charles Olson* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p.16.

³⁴ Olson, p.19.

³⁵ Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p.109.

The self, in seeking others—including itself othered—moves towards plurality. ‘The world [...] is plurality, flux, relation; just as elements are combinations, the individual is a society.’³⁶

BIG SOCIETY. Materiality of language. A shoplifter’s desire to steal, to shape, to form and reform what already exists. The thief in the community.

To fit in, but only from the outside. Suspicious of elites, cliques and literary clubs. And yet I desire a community of writers.

Opening a book, I will, intuitively, find what I want to write about. ‘[T]o search intuitively desired / uni-identity // of primary / satieties of craving’.³⁷

What nourishes an infinite appetite? Ultimately, desire, unsatiated, ends in failure. I could not thaw the alphabet of its ‘frozen sound’.³⁸

A desire to think the unthinkable whilst knowing that there is ‘a limit to thought, [...] to the expression of thoughts.’³⁹

The pleasure of writing and the displeasure of writing encountered in each sitting.

Never to be missing *entirely* from the poem. Multiple dangers of self-effacement, (even the desire towards it).

Watch the privileged poet—usually white, middle-class, male—endeavour to remove himself from his own history.

Decentralising the self is a privileged position and yet I frequently wish to be ‘displaced from the centrality of my own utterance.’⁴⁰ I want to move myself out of the way so as to move the poem forward.

Desire follows the dust not the straight road.

Desire: ‘let everything be more than everything, and still be all’.⁴¹

³⁶ Paz, *Alternating Current*, p.123.

³⁷ Mina Loy, ‘Hot Cross Bum’ in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker Poems*, ed. by Roger Conover (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1996), p.141.

³⁸ Bernstein, *Attack of the Difficult Poems*, p.122.

³⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge Classics, 2001, first published in 1921), p.3.

⁴⁰ Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (California: Stanford University Press, 2000), p.2.

⁴¹ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p.10

Selvies: Evading the Hegelian Other

As a young boy it was agreed that I would grow up as someone else. My parents divorced when I was two years old and later, at the age of six, I was persuaded by my mother to testify against my own father to a court judge so that paternal access could be taken away. Crucially my surname was also changed, to that of my stepfather. James Byrne became James Currie. This was a landmark ruling in British legal history. Subsequently, and for the next fifteen years, I grew up as Currie and it was only when I began publishing poetry, and was on the brink of a first collection, that I changed my name back via deed poll. My brother, who also testified, still retains the Currie surname and sometimes I write through him when negotiating the subject of family. Throughout my life, and particularly relevant to my writing life, an interest in the permutations of self has been part of an on-going discovery of who I am and how I exist in the world.

In this section, I explore philosophical approaches to the self as presented by Georg Hegel in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. My particular interest in this work is ‘Section B. Self-Consciousness: IV. The Truth of Self-Certainty’. Further books for discussion are Jacques Lacan’s *Ecrits* and Judith Butler’s *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France*. My approach to Hegel will survey the idea of a coherent being versus a pluralised self and examine how desire and the self [co-]exist within the framework of my writing.

Hegel’s consideration of the self appears at once deceptively simple. ‘Life’, he states, consists ‘[in]... the self-developing whole.’⁴² However, achieving this development is initially out of our grasp because the self has been dispersed into two selves: self and self-as-other. Self-consciousness is division. We are incomplete, prevented by our other self from living a full life. Butler argues that we get a clear sense in the *Phenomenology* that ‘the main character has not yet arrived. There is action and deliberation, but no recognizable agent’.⁴³ For Hegel, until the self is unified with its missing other it cannot fully arrive and, until such time, we will be alienated from who we are. Stanley Rosen confirms the Hegelian perspective by adding that ‘[w]e have become alienated from ourselves’ and so ‘[d]esire is thus fundamentally desire for myself, or from my interior essence from which I have become detached.’⁴⁴ Butler claims that, for Hegel, desire is ‘the incessant human effort to overcome external differences, a project to become a self-sufficient subject for whom all things apparently different finally emerge as immanent features of the subject itself’.⁴⁵

As I have alluded to in my Poetics, a division of self and self-consciousness is something I actively explore in my writing. As a writer, what concerns me most of all about the Hegelian self is the idea of becoming a complete or singular being, particularly one that is mediated by *only* one other.⁴⁶ I also wonder how desire might,

⁴² Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.108.

⁴³ Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, p.20.

⁴⁴ Stanley Rosen, *G.W.F. Hegel: An Introduction to the Science of Wisdom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p.41.

⁴⁵ Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, p.6.

⁴⁶ My belief, expanded in the next section of this paper (see ‘The Self as Ever-Fracturing’), is that the self is more than double. Though perhaps it is only verifiable that self is *not* singular. This relates to the simple laws of music, in that you ‘always need at least two notes to produce a harmonious sound.’ Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (Florida, Harcourt & Brace, 1971), p.183.

ultimately, be overcome, or even satiated, by the self. Additionally, I am not sure why the creative self would wish to achieve 'self-sufficiency'. Desire unsatisfied suits my artistic temperament and allows me to be a more flexible writer. Any kind of satisfaction would, I imagine, lead to an ethical crisis emerging from my writing. Furthermore, self-sufficiency suggests a hermetic position, one that dislocates the writer from its community, something which is increasingly important to my writing.

Butler argues that 'Desire forms the experiential basis for the project of the *Phenomenology* at large. Desire and its satisfaction constitute the first and final moments of the philosophical pursuit of self-knowledge.'⁴⁷ However, desire, initially at least, operates for Hegel *as* self-consciousness. As Hegel himself contends: 'Self-consciousness is *Desire* in general.' This generality only changes because '[c]onsciousness [itself] has a double object'.⁴⁸ Ultimately, according to Hegel, something other than the doubling of self-consciousness is the essence of desire. At this point in the *Phenomenology* we begin to understand that an incomplete and desiring self is incapable of living. To desire life is its ultimate objective, but the self, because it is incomplete, exists through a kind of death in life.

Ultimately, at this point in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel's argument begins to disintegrate, in relation to my own writing practice at least. He becomes preoccupied with the immanent possibilities of a whole and unified self rather than the promise of a more flexible being. Hegel's divided subject knows what it wants *before* it arrives. It is naturally displaced, awaiting the immanency of the other to achieve a whole and unified subject. In this section, the *Phenomenology* unravels as something of an obsessive, quasi-religious quest, a feature of Hegelian thought attacked over the years by those including Marx, Sartre and Lacan.⁴⁹ As 'The Truth of Self-Certainty' section wears on we discover Hegel, quite desperately at times, seeking out wholeness of self through mediation. In the final battleground, where self meets other, each 'stake their life' before 'freedom is won'⁵⁰. Such notions to me are not just overly romantic, they are unsupported by the life of the writer who perpetually desires the shattering of *oneself* in order to operate creatively in a world increasingly epitomised by flux and impermanence.

Finally, and perhaps most absurdly, Hegel resolves the divided self through 'two opposed shapes of consciousness; one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or be for another. The former is lord, the other is bondsman'.⁵¹ These hierarchies within the self, one unequally reliant upon the other, exist because of desire's initial failure to determine a higher self-consciousness for the subject. This is, for Hegel, the final scene of our dividedness where consciousness is 'forced back into itself' through a series of negotiations between lord and bondsmen. To achieve this the self and its other must have agreed to become entirely independent of their previous

⁴⁷ Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, p.45.

⁴⁸ Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, pp.105, 109.

⁴⁹ I imagine Marx would have found Hegel's concept of lord and bondsmen as hierarchically imbalanced as that of worker and bourgeois, as outlined in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). Sartre said that, at this point in *Phenomenology*, Hegel sees desire itself as a 'vacuity', a 'pure for-itself'...an 'agent of nothingness.', Butler, p. 37.

⁵⁰ Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, p.114.

⁵¹ Hegel, p.115.

divisions.⁵² Hegel defined this rather hazily as a ‘return from otherness’, a place where desire is bargained off and the self reconceived back into one single unity of advanced consciousness.⁵³ Here we find Hegel sidestepping the more likely fate of the writer who is divided and, in so being, encounters otherness in order to understand the modern world and create from it. I experience division as something lasting, useful to creativity. Because of this, I do not wish for a Hegelian ‘return’ to completeness, even if it were possible to achieve.

Hegel, who deploys a kind of divine superstition in this final treatment of individual self-consciousness, offers himself as something of an easy target.⁵⁴ However, perhaps it should be remembered that any kind of openness towards othering of the self at the beginning of the nineteenth century and across Christian Europe was, in itself, radical. Hegel pioneered a new epistemological shift in philosophy and his acceptance of otherness is admirable almost until the end, where Lacan deems him to be operating with the ‘cunning of reason.’⁵⁵ Hegel offers us attractive solutions of completeness that are ‘cunning’ because a self resolved, coherently singular (so as to be healed?) echoes a ‘personal myth that is very familiar to the obsessional neurotic...’ i.e. the writer, who collects pieces of a life and condenses, refracts further, through language.⁵⁶ The Hegelian allure, in suggesting that the writer might actually overcome such difficulties and complexities of selfhood, may be attractive but it is, finally, irrational. As someone who has had other identities imposed on them since childhood, the offer of inflexibly coherent and fully satisfied self arrives impossibly late. Though my poetry accepts, even depends upon, a self pluralised, earlier in my writing life I somewhat bought into the idea of ‘finding one’s voice’ and somewhat naively sought to resolve issues of self-complexity in my writing.⁵⁷ Rather perversely I think, many poets still attempt coherences of self and voice in their work and, stranger still, it is often rewarded.

In evading Hegel’s convenient resolution of self and other, we might explore the possibilities of desire-as-self over desire-as-need (the need to cohere a divided self). Lacan who, like Hegel, acknowledges otherness as being intrinsic to self, emphatically declares that ‘there is no Other of the Other. And when the Legislator (he who claims to lay down the Law) presents himself to fill the gap, he does so as an imposter.’⁵⁸ This is a thinly veiled attack on Hegel as ‘lawmaker’. Lacan, like Hegel, is interested in how desiring of the other ‘finds form’ and how our behaviorisms adapt within this process, though he—as we might expect of a Freudian psychoanalyst—looks for psychological solutions. In his essay ‘Subversion of the subject and dialectic of desire’, Lacan numerous encounters and confronts Hegelian thought, where it is suggested that: ‘[d]esire begins to take shape in the margin in which demand becomes separated from need...’.⁵⁹ This can manifest itself in forms of behaviour, such as restlessness or anxiety, where the unmediated will of desire might not have been met.

⁵² Hegel, p.117.

⁵³ Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, p.34

⁵⁴ Blanchot, among others, is particularly scathing: ‘One cannot “read” Hegel, expect by not reading him...Hegel makes him invincible, mad with his seriousness; counterfeiter of Truth...’ Blanchot, *The Writing of Disaster*, pp.46-47.

⁵⁵ Lacan, *Ecrits*, p.308.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ A collection of mine, *Passages of Time* (London: Flipped Eye, 2002), a book of juvenilia published in my mid-20s, often represents this approach.

⁵⁸ Lacan, *Ecrits*, p.311.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

Under Hegelian doctrine, anxiety—which I consider to be a deferred trait of desire, important to creative composition—is eventually negated because the self is remade whole and satisfied. Under such stringent conditions, all nervousness around the task of writing would be miraculously smothered (or smoothed over) by a self that is solved, therefore cured of the most natural human behaviour (anxiety is, above all, a natural response to the world).⁶⁰ Any notion that nervousness can somehow be overcome in my writing practice is unthinkable. Anxieties of self, as a broader reflection of my place in the world, provide a tense and ongoing discourse, inherently dialogical and multiplex. Often anxieties over self are essential for me to more fully recognise the *subject* of my work.⁶¹ Indeed, at times in my writing, a self that is tensile and voiced through otherness, is so central to the process of composition that it becomes the subject itself.⁶²

Wear a face to look more like yourself.
Clothes, flesh and voice are all false.
I am the mystery occasioned as myself,
compound volatile, a cat chewing mouse.
Self-absconded, avidly elsewhere,
I sleep silent as ink. Ancestral breath
blows clean the candle. Dreams are
embroidered by people that exist.⁶³

In relating back to Hegel, Lacan looks beyond the possibility of self-reconciliation to consider two ideas that interest me with regard to my own writing: *jouissance* and castration. For Lacan, these two elements are linked. *Jouissance* relates to enjoyment ('Jouer' is French for 'to play', bringing forth ludic possibilities in writing), but it also relates to sexual pleasure ('jouir' is slang for 'to come').⁶⁴ With regard to compositional

⁶⁰ 'Anxiety is hardwired into our brains. It is part of the body's fight-or-flight response, which prepares us to act quickly in the face of danger. It is a normal response to uncertainty, trouble, or feeling unprepared'. <http://cmhc.utexas.edu/anxiety.html> [date accessed: 6/1/2016]. Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) also comes to mind with regard to anxiety and, while it is a book I admire, I do not have the space to discuss it here except to say that although desire relates to influence, I am less anxious about it, believing that the more a writer is influenced by other writers, the more he/she is present in the world (perhaps the self more fully emerges *through* reading others?). Influence, in terms of reading or collaboration, gives me swing-door access to a creative community. I have collaborated with writers and artists around the world and I often write with books on the desk.

⁶¹ As mentioned in my Poetics, I desire not to write as much as to compose poetry and being creative is often anxiety inducing. Anxiety also relates to the nervousness of composition. I relate this to a quotation from Updike who wrote in his memoir that smoking would 'get me through the stress of composition'. John Updike, *Self-Consciousness* (New York: Random House, 2012, p. 225). However, writing for me is not *merely* linked to nervousness. It relates as much to the ecstatic, routed through desire.

⁶² I am thinking here of poems such as 'Days of 1973' in *B/S* and 'Historia' in *WC*. In both poems 'the self moves in and out of focus' (as John Kinsella has written on the cover of *B/S*). In 'Days of 1973' I allow myself to diffuse my own voice by speaking in the voice of my elder brother. In 1973, for example, I was not yet born. Historia, as the etymology of 'history', reflects enquiry. The self is reconstituted and active in the places where it was not present.

⁶³ 'from The Caprices' in *EBUD* (North Adams: Tupelo Press, 2015), p.37.

⁶⁴ As it states in the Translator's note in *Ecrits*: '[t]here is no adequate translation in English of this word. 'Enjoyment' conveys the sense but the sexual connotations, implied in French, are missing [...]. Though *jouissance* is closely related to pleasure, Lacan talks of 'plaisir' [pleasure] somewhat

pleasure, I enjoy writing sufficiently; otherwise I simply would not do it. However, any enjoyment experienced does not satisfy or reconcile my sense of self. Desire is also untamed by the enjoyment of writing—perhaps it is appeased, if at all and only temporarily, in the instance of pleasure itself. In the long haul, though I am open to the ludic enjoyment of poetry, poetry, for me, is not merely a game. Furthermore, despite the pleasure writing might give, there is no aspect of self-healing behind why I write. I do it because I have to, because I cannot stop doing it.⁶⁵ I do not write to feel better (it does not make me feel better). There is only a desire to repeat the process. Pleasure fits into my creative practice, in this respect, because, in the act of writing, I am allowing a space for desire to be occupied. It is not necessarily that I am pleasuring the other as much as immersing myself in the pleasures of language (perhaps this is a way of pleasuring the linguistic other?).⁶⁶ For Lacan, pleasure is considered more elastically as ‘that which binds incoherent life together’.⁶⁷ On first glance this statement appears agreeable. However, pleasure as a consequence of desire negates desire’s constancy (desire is able to feed and enact writing, while pleasure is merely a result of our being desirous in the first place). Ultimately, desire, despite appearing merely rampant (which it also is), has a greater degree of consistency because it *is* constant. Therefore, unlike pleasure, desire, as a producer of pleasure, cannot be reduced to ‘incoherent life’.

Despite these limitations, perhaps pleasure and desire are more flexible within my poetics than, say, self and pleasure. Lacan warns that pleasure ‘sets the limits on *jouissance*’ and that this finally involves castration, according to the Freudian complex.⁶⁸ Castration, according to Lacan, also means that ‘*jouissance* must be refused, so that it can be reached on the inverted ladder... [which is] the Law of desire.’⁶⁹ Whilst it is obvious castration would stilt sexual enjoyment, I would argue that writers have been turning familial castration into something creative for centuries.⁷⁰ If it is true, as I have long considered, that writing emerges from unrecoverable wounds, family might be seen as the wound from which I am perpetually recovering. This view is alluded to in ‘from The Caprices’ from *EBUD*: ‘If family is the world’s first true woe / it is followed by the family corrupted’.⁷¹ As mentioned in my Poetics, being separated from my father (a kind of non-physical castration) has inspired several poems in the collections put forward for this paper.⁷² Finally, with regard to castration and family,

differently. In his Introduction to the work, Alan Sheridan explains that *jouissance* is beyond the laws of Freudian pleasure principle because through pleasure the psyche seeks the ‘lowest possible level of tension’. p.x.

⁶⁵ A phrase of Plath’s remembered and echoing in this context is: ‘The blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it’. Sylvia Plath, ‘Kindness’ in *Ariel* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), p.83.

⁶⁶ I suggest this because the way I write is not how I speak, which suggests disparity. Language, being artificially constructed, invokes otherness. Further ideas around issues of self, otherness and effacement will be explored later in this paper.

⁶⁷ Lacan, *Ecrits*, p.319.

⁶⁸ Freud developed his theory of castration soon after the Oedipus complex. He often relates the Oedipal to castration, and used the terms jointly, first in 1910, in a lecture titled ‘Contributions to the Psychology of Love’ (Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, p.47).

⁶⁹ Lacan, *Ecrits*, p.324.

⁷⁰ I am thinking of examples from the shamanistic to the confessional, to poets in exile (literally castrated from the idea of home) and Baudelaire’s ‘flaneur’; someone able ‘[to] be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home’ (Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863) trans. and ed. by Jonathan Mayne, (London: Phaidon Press, 1995)), p.9.

⁷¹ ‘from The Caprices’ in *EBUD*, p.36.

⁷² These poems include ‘Days of 1973’, ‘Voice Portraits of Uncle Patrick at The Reunion House’ in *B/S* (the uncle in this poem is more a version of my father) and ‘St. Patrick’s’ in *EBUD*.

Lacan suggests that '[t]he true function of the Father...is fundamentally to unite.'⁷³ However, writing often confronts or subverts the possibilities of 'truth' and 'function'. It is not necessarily the function of the writer to resituate the father, or anyone for that matter, according to notions of [re]unification. The poet is able to manipulate experiences, especially their own. In all of my books, the father moves through, is both missing and present, a fractal in mirrors, unified and disembodied. Much like *myself*.

⁷³ Lacan, *Ecrits*, p.322.

Blanchot and Jabès: The Self as Ever-Fracturing

Writers in what they write, how they approach writing and through writing about others, have consistently remarked on a divided and pluralised self as a reflection of the nature and function of the world at large:

Roland Barthes: ‘Everything is plural. I pass lightly through the reactionary darkness.’⁷⁴

Susan Sontag: ‘Who *speaks* is not who *writes*, and who *writes* is not who *is*.’⁷⁵

William Hazlitt: ‘What other self could I find to share that influx of thoughts, of regret, and delight...so much have they been broken and defaced!’⁷⁶

Enrique Lihn: ‘No one is stranger than the self. Which appears as another and comes to haunt us by accepting, finally, one of many invitations.’⁷⁷

Maurice Blanchot: ‘[T]he language of shattering.’⁷⁸

In this section, I will explore plurality as fragmentation of the self. I attempt to discover why it is in my writing that the self (and its utterances) are content with—to the extent that they rely upon—a fracturing of the self. Alongside a discussion of my own writing, the texts I examine include Blanchot’s *The Writing of the Disaster* and Edmond Jabès’ *The Book of Margins*. I explore the idea of a fractured or fragmentary self, whilst looking at notation, laconicism and the instability of the lyric ‘I’ and, in so doing, reflect upon my own writing process. Finally, I ruminate upon potential repercussions or dangers within a poetics of self-effacement.

Fractional, portioned or broken off, a fragment is usually considered as part of something else, belonging to a larger and conceptualised whole. To write the fragmentary involves conceptual as well as linguistic and formal considerations which are, in turn, affected by the physical and psychological. Though the fragment is often relational, it also involves a closing off, a predetermined refusal of the complete utterance.⁷⁹ Blanchot declares that ‘fragmentary writing is risk, it would seem: risk itself’. Perhaps its greatest risk is, when placed in the hands of the scholar, it cannot be conveniently tied to any theoretical approach. ‘Nor does it define a practice one could

⁷⁴ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), p.31.

⁷⁵ Susan Sontag, ‘Writing Itself: On Roland Barthes’ in *A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982), p.443.

⁷⁶ William Hazlitt, ‘On Going on a Journey’, *Selected Essays*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), p.147.

⁷⁷ Enrique Lihn, trans. by Forrest Gander in *Core Samples from the World* (New York: New Directions Press, 2004) (this quote is an epigraph for Gander’s book).

⁷⁸ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p.19.

⁷⁹ This idea of a closing off appears in contrast to the use of fragmentation as constellation, as mentioned later in this paper. I might approach fragmentation either way, depending on the desired form and subject of the poem. The questioning of closure is compellingly discussed by Lyn Hejinian in ‘The Rejection of Closure’, *Language of Inquiry* (California: University of California Press, 2000), pp.40-58.

define as *interruption*. Interrupted, it goes on. Interrogating itself...'⁸⁰ In this sense, fragmentation is always moving, iterative and anti-stasis. To remain still would be to conform to standards of expectation (either one's expectations of oneself or, in the case of the writer, those relating to literary standards).⁸¹ With this in mind, I agree with Charles Bernstein's recommendation that poetry be 'an aversion to conformity'.⁸² Fragmentation is dissident, linguistically, because, as I have discussed, its first rule is to disrupt the complete utterance. However, it is not dissident or radical per se because fragmentation is deeply ingrained into centuries of poetic practice. For example, the traditional haiku relies on fragmentation, wherein a short passage is usually hinged by a *dai*, a *volta*-like turn, that allows two images or statements to be linked. In my own writing, I often compose haiku-like clusters (or constellations) of text within a single poem. Though they might appear closed off, fragments can also be read as part of a wider subject or narrative plan. A poem like 'Fragments for Ali' in *EBUD* operates in this way. Additionally, I am interested in how fragmentation might allow sonic coherence to *determine* form, something which I explored in *WC*, with poems like 'River Nocturnes' and 'Playlist' involving an open field approach and constellated speech. These are poems in which meaning might appear more subjective, driven by sound as much as narrative. I agree with Christopher Middleton who suggested that poetic understandings could be orphic, grounded in 'subterranean torment', therefore subjective. The fragment can reemphasise subjectivity, due to its apparent incompleteness, allowing for 'corkscrew tracks' over straight lines.⁸³

In relation to my earlier discussions about the self and desire, fragmentary writing is polyarticulate and so it demands room (less or more) than the traditional stanzaic form usually offers.⁸⁴ Fragmented, the self is able to appear and disappear. Such disappearances or appearances are physical and spatial (as well as ethical). The disruption of the traditional poetic line also relates to the innate physicality of breath as something affecting a text, as emphasised by Charles Olson.⁸⁵ Ultimately, fragmentation mirrors the way we experience the world, not via a consistent and fluid narrative, but through a series of narratives, interruptions, breathings and fracturings. This may explain, in part, why the modern lyric sequence (a mode that I frequently use) has replaced the sonnet in the twenty first century. A fragmented sequence of short poems corresponding to a larger whole, allows for the permutations of an idea to settle and cascade through a text. Thus, fragmentation allows the poem more social space. It is not to be experienced singularly by a passive reader, instead its basic unit, as Octavio Paz suggests, is 'multiple, contradictory...the archetype is plurality, flux, relation'.⁸⁶ The exchange between reader and writer appears increasingly relational, which appeals to me as a writer who believes in collaboration and artistic community, but also otherness as something relational to the self. Ultimately, readerly participation in a text

⁸⁰ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p.59.

⁸¹ I am thinking of how belonging to a particular aesthetic or movement as a writer is, ultimately, settling. Though, as I say later in this passage, I am interested in artistic communities, being a card-carrying member of any single aesthetic might signal a still point in my writing.

⁸² Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.1.

⁸³ Christopher Middleton, *Palavers & A Nocturnal Journal* (Bristol: Shearsman, 2004), p.146.

⁸⁴ I acknowledge that form itself can represent fragmentation and have utilised this in my own poetics. The poem 'from The Caprices' from *EBUD* is an example of this, a sequence divided into octaves.

⁸⁵ See 'Projective Verse' in *Selected Writings* by Charles Olson (New York: New Directions, 1966).

Though I do not follow Olson's breathing entirely, particularly on where to enjamb the line, he influences how I consider fragmentation a natural response to the body.

⁸⁶ Paz, *Alternating Current*, p.123.

is, I believe, inevitable: a reader wishes to read themselves in the writing as the writer might write themselves into the act of reading. The fragment is a social space where habits and desires towards participation coalesce.⁸⁷

I have already established my belief in a poetics that celebrates multiplicities of self as much as the cultivation of a fluid, singular speaker. In all writing, utterance, upon being uttered, is active because speech itself is set in motion. However, self-utterance exists as something that, once spoken, is othered from the body. As Jabès claims, it is *split apart* from the self.⁸⁸ Language is made, constructed, artificial.⁸⁹ Therefore, all writing (all speaking) is a reflection of a self divided. Blanchot argues that: utterance turns language away from itself, allowing a process of deferral: '[to] converse is to divert language from itself by letting it differ and defer....'.⁹⁰ I am interested in how deferral—as a conscious or unconscious action or inaction—relates to fragmentary writing. Who or what is 'deferred' by fragmentation?⁹¹ Interestingly, and to expand Blanchot's point further, to defer the idea of a coherent self, or even the self in relation to the poem's subject, opens up possibilities for the writer in traversing between subject and speaker, between self and other. Manipulation of self is something that consistently features in my writing. 'Recovery', which opens *Blood/Sugar*, proffers a seemingly stable lyric exchange, one in which the speaker, seemingly adhering to principles of the lyric 'I', appears to converse with another, apparently fixed subject:

Let me imagine you coming home
from the dark, between body and mind,

making evidence of yourself
the way a tree waves up from its shadow.

There are dinner-halls you have silenced
with a single spark of wit,

there are men you have governed
through pure scent, pure posture.⁹²

⁸⁷ My belief in this has been encouraged by the reading and teaching of [post]Language poets in recent years who often arrange the poem as a text which depends on active reader participation. I am thinking specifically of poets and poetics from *Postmodern American Poetry*, ed. by Paul Hoover (New York: Norton, 2013), such as Steve McCaffery, in 'Language Writing: from Productive to Libidinal Economy' (pp.913-921), who reemphasises the Barthesian view of the reader as a 'producer of meaning'. I have also learnt from Juliana Spahr's analysis of connective communities and the breaking down of the hierarchical relationship between reader and writer in *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), pp.51-63.

⁸⁸ This is exemplified by the following: 'Everything [particularly the self] is again set in motion—called into question—by writing...utterance splits apart and is neutralized by its reconciled opposites.' Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Margins*, trans. by Rosmarie Waldrop (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p.44.

⁸⁹ I suggest this whilst acknowledging that language is, of course, paradoxically natural and innate. We are born into it (pulse, the mother's womb). However, I am mainly concerned here with artificiality in relation to refined aspects of poetic language.

⁹⁰ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, pp.34-35. I would also point to Veronica Forrest-Thomson's seminal book *Poetic Artifice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978) for a more comprehensive study of language, artificiality, and how this relates to poetic utterance.

⁹¹ I prefer the word 'distil' to 'defer' in considering the fluidity of self in my writing. 'Defer' implies a time-bound solution, which echoes the Hegelian ideal of a self, in that it may, ultimately, arrive whole and entire.

⁹² Byrne, *B/S* (Todmorden: Arc Publications, 2009). p.9.

more crudely, in relation to process, a filmic process of dispersing the self is also a way of drawing the reader into a tension that the subject can then intrude upon or, as Blanchot would suggest, interrupt. Pluralised, the self interrogates the scene and disappears, only to re-arrive. This process happens often in my work, but not in any strict pattern. ‘Historia’, like ‘Recovery’, is controlled by the use of pronoun where, in this case, an imaginary ‘I’ quickly launches into a series of short statements, before it (and the self) is fragmented, unstable because of its sudden absence, recast in the natural world:

I was six and made of violins
stumped
by metronomic light

I wanted to energise him away
like glucose
globed
into whiteness

[...]

naphtha mirage
over the wheatfield
at sunset

foxfur grinning on a spidersweb ⁹⁷

Most of my poems are written directly onto a laptop computer. I edit sufficiently so that it is commonplace for there to be another secondary text of abandoned material, with lines perhaps useable elsewhere, which is often the case. However, occasionally, and always when travelling, I use a notebook and subsequently transfer some of these notes onto screen.⁹⁸ The distinction is, once again, physical and spatial: my screen-written poems are crafted in an entirely different place (physically and geographically) than those written in the notebook. My notebook, perhaps because it is handwritten, is a more intimate space for writing, mostly used when ambulating, particularly if traveling somewhere I cannot use my laptop. It is a space where I am often more fragmentary in my writing and pages of clipped observations are not unusual. Observation and travel are important to several poems in *EBUD*, a collection that includes work written during (and after) visits to Burma, Libya, Syria, but also documenting two years living in New York City and a subsequent return to England. The various poems written about specific places in *EBUD* are often my most fragmented works in the book. ‘Postcards’, ‘Mallajah’, ‘Wild Desert Thyme’ and ‘Fragments for Ali’ are all written as fractured scenes from Libya and Syria that, in their different ways, depict travel-as-observation. When travelling I keep in mind William Hazlitt as an advocate for the itinerant poet to be open to radical change. Hazlitt’s delight in the journey as experiential and, therefore, affecting the self, is perhaps best summarised: ‘With change of place we change our

‘moving image’ to constellate or embed it within a disembodied narrative. The Pathé job was also an apprenticeship in collecting from the images of history, a process I have transposed into my own poetics.

⁹⁷ Byrne, *WC*, pp.12-13.

⁹⁸ There are several notebooks of poems that have not been published and, at times, it feels as if two streams of my work are being written simultaneously, one onscreen the other by hand. I am interested in this duplicity and have sought further streams (selves?) of my work by, within the space of a year, publishing two distinct books (*EBUD* and *WC*) in separate countries.

ideas; nay, our opinions and feelings.⁹⁹ I want travel to open me up to new possibilities as a human being in the world.

Marilyne Bertonici, in her preface to a series of translations from *EBUD*, remarked that ‘Postcards’—a poem of short, fragmentary scenes, often depicting conflict or violence—appears to be moving along subtly but then arrives at the reader like a series of carefully detonated ‘explosions’.¹⁰⁰ Bertonici, a French-speaking Italian poet, translator and critic, is one of the more astute critics of my work that I have read. However, initially, I was disturbed to think the poem’s diction might be depicting violence *loudly*, which was not my intention. Bertonici’s summation of ‘Postcards’ calls to mind Blanchot’s assessment of the fragmentary as something sudden, interruptive and therefore permanent: ‘beyond fracturing, or bursting, the patience of pure impatience, the little by little suddenly’.¹⁰¹ Blanchot’s essential requirement of ‘patience’ exists, despite (or perhaps because of) its fracturedness and unfinishedness.

In ‘Postcards’, I was interested in developing the concept of the postcard as a dual and, therefore, fractured model of communication. Postcards are a traditional form of writing. Usually what is written on a postcard is ensconced in the laconic nature of the physical space, which ensures fragmentation *is* the mode of communication. This is often meant to cohere (or contrast) with the other side, usually an image paralysed in stasis. In ‘Postcards’, I sought to make the fleetingness of the images active, whilst corresponding somewhat to the laconicism of the postcard (both its text and image) as a form, so as to convey and heighten a mood or tension of place. I also wanted to sequence the tensions inherent within these places, even though there is not one fixed place that threads the poem together. Geographically at least, there is quite a lot of Syria and Libya in ‘Postcards’:

The boys have made a giant playhouse
From the rubble stanchions of the razed compound.
Two kid Generals line up teams
For a game of Guns vs. Swords.
And then the swashbuckle
And then the rat-tat-tat from their mouths
To make the guns seem real
For the onlooking fathers of the Revolution
Who pick sides, shout and cheer.¹⁰²

This section of the poem involves direct observation and was written just after I arrived in Libya to participate in a literary festival, six weeks after Gaddafi was deposed. A mile or so outside Tripoli airport was the former dictator’s compound, destroyed by the dropping of just one bomb. There I saw kids playing with swords made from sticks and their fathers watching on from above. We drove past this scene rather quickly and I

⁹⁹ Hazlitt, ‘On Going on a Journey’ in *Selected Essays*, p.147.

¹⁰⁰ The reference to ‘explosions’ in this article is in its subtitle: ‘Une poésie qui “vous” explose’, Marilyne Bertonici, ‘Un regard sur la poésie anglaise actuelle’ - <http://www.recoursapoeme.fr/essais/un-regard-sur-la-poésie-anglaise-actuelle-3/marilyne-bertoncini> [accessed, 14 January 2016]

¹⁰¹ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p.34. The idea of being ‘beyond fracturing’ also relates to Ilya Kaminsky’s *Preface* to *EBUD* where he relates the ‘fractured’ to empathy, p.ix.

¹⁰² Byrne, *EBUD*, p.4.

remember that I stuck my head out the window to listen to the sounds the children were making (the ‘rat-tat-tat’ of plastic guns). It was the one chance I had to take in as much sensory information as possible in order to re-create what I saw. The actual scene I witnessed was relatively static: children poised with fake weapons in their hands, fathers looking on. I didn’t have time to be sure if the watching fathers were actually picking ‘sides’—the lie in adding this as part of the narrative was mainly to create movement where there was none. Importantly this distortion of what was actually *seen* also allowed me an imaginary resolution of time. This raises issues of authenticity and artifice amid the idea of ‘poetry as witness’.¹⁰³

‘Wild Desert Thyme’ (also in *EBUD*) reflects the process of fragmentation-as-notation. On my visit to Libya, I was taken to Sabratha, a Greco-Roman site (now largely controlled by Daesh) and walked around, making a few cursory notes. In the museum next door there were tapestries and sculptures, which a section of my notebook records:

Concordia’s matted scarf
snake-printed, ushering in
the marching boot and Jupiter’s luck.

House of the tragic actor
pastoralised, the blue-faced
man reclining with a spear.

These lines, though heavily revised in the published version, have retained their sense of brevity. ‘Wild Desert Thyme’, like ‘Postcards’, is a collection of fragmented scenes and phases, each ‘complete in its very incompleteness’.¹⁰⁴ Jabès suggests that this aspect of the text is essential to the importance of discovery (for both writer and reader presumably—he does not distinguish a difference). This makes sense to my poetics and process of notation. What Mina Loy called ‘intermittent...unfinishing’ usefully allows for a Blanchotian deferral of meaning, where the reader can interpret the text or suspend themselves in it.¹⁰⁵ The text as unfinishing also recalls the idea of a pluralised self. The fixed subject fractures because of a series of interruptions. Blanchot determines this as the distinguishing characteristic of fragmentary writing, the ‘interruption of the incessant’.¹⁰⁶ He suggests that interruption and incessantness are similar in that they are both ‘affects of passivity’ (the static being passive in this sense). However, I dispute

¹⁰³ I admire the concept of ‘Poetry as Witness’, as generated by Czesław Miłosz in his essays *The Witness of Poetry* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983) and developed by Carolyn Forché in *Against Forgetting: Poetry of Witness* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994). However, I consider my own poetics to be based more on observation than witness and a belief in the active (and activist) possibilities of writing against injustice. I also have poethical considerations in what constitutes poetry of witness for myself in these poems, as a white, male, privileged and middle class poet. I was in Libya and Syria at crucial moments in their history (2011 and 2009—interestingly Forché herself was also a participant in Tripoli), but the poems in *EBUD* are often those of an empathetic westerner, rather than someone who has directly experienced, or even witnessed, conflict. I have written about this elsewhere, in a piece titled ‘Towards a Poethics of Uprootedness’ in *World Literature Today*: <http://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/blog/notes-toward-poethics-uprootedness>, published on November 30, 2015 [accessed: 2 February, 2015].

¹⁰⁴ Jabès, *The Book of Margins*, p.115.

¹⁰⁵ This excerpt from Mina Loy’s autobiographical prose ‘Islands in the Air’, chapter 1, is republished in *Italian Poetry Review* (vol.1), ed. by Antonella Francini (New York: Columbia University, 2006), pp.221-233.

¹⁰⁶ Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p.21.

this, on a linguistic level at least, because language, like the self (perhaps because of the self) is always active and unstable, propelled by flux and active desires that can, therefore, move the subject. Blanchot, slippery to follow at the best of times, seems to be building on an idea mentioned earlier in his own text (which is naturally a series of fragmentations) about the passivity of the lyric 'I'—presumably passive because it is moved by forces beyond it, namely desire.¹⁰⁷ Flexibility of pronoun is something that Jabès also calls for, hoping that his writing might 'get rid of the burdensome 'I' in favour of the almost anonymous 'We''.¹⁰⁸ As mentioned, while I increasingly admire the reaching toward a non-hierarchical, communal relationship between writer and reader, Jabès' principles here are somewhat idealised and inappropriate for my own writing.¹⁰⁹ I would not ultimately wish to disinherit the 'I' of its potency altogether.¹¹⁰ Despite its cultivation, a singular 'I' is always a weapon or a threat, often implied in my work even when absent. As the poet and activist John Kinsella has written of *B/S*, I am interested in a 'mytho-poetic[s]' where 'the self moves in and out of focus'.¹¹¹ Plural, selved, the 'I' is, in fact, Jabès' unmentioned 'We'. All of my poems are about me and, by the same token, nothing to do with me.

I finish this section by relating back to Hegelian principles of self and the dangers of self-effacement. Blanchot, Jabès and Lacan are, to some extent, unanimous in sharing an anti-Hegelian stance which believes that the self cannot be reconciled (with itself) in life. Instead, self can only be reconciled, if at all, in death.¹¹² Death is, as P. Adams Sitney declares, 'the obsessive mystery of Blanchot's work'.¹¹³ But death has a greater function for Blanchot, Jabès and, to a lesser extent, Lacan. Death is the end of desire. The self can be fractured and remade but, ultimately, it is not reconciled in life. For Blanchot, the diminishing of self is a logical acceptance of death, and the effacing of self is, therefore, natural and organic.¹¹⁴ Death provides a final resolution to the idea of self as passage. Consequently, in preparing to die, according to Blanchot, the self must efface in order to finally disappear. Jabès' position on this is, by contrast, intriguingly impracticable, but worth nothing, if only for its Hegelian levels of superstition. He suggests that effacement is a kind of death in which we can be reborn: '[e]verything—and nothing—is in the face, in the effaced face that is reborn of its effacement, that rises

¹⁰⁷ Slippery to the point of evasion, one might wonder if Blanchot is not in fact a hoax, perhaps conjured by the Situationist spirit of 1968. A reclusive man for whom one boyish picture exists, he was never seen in public, never gave a single lecture or interview.

¹⁰⁸ Jabès, *The Book of Margins*, p.122.

¹⁰⁹ Of the many theoretic approaches to the flexibility of self as pronoun, I would instead turn to Jabès' translator, Rosmarie Waldrop. Her ideas expressed on this are interestingly conveyed in an article in *Conjunctions* called 'Third Person Singular', which begins: 'I says the speaker, the subject. I oppose thumb and index to invite you into discourse, my reality. And yours.' Published in *Conjunctions* 10. <http://www.conjunctions.com/webcon/waldrop10.htm> [accessed: 2 February 2016].

¹¹⁰ As intriguing as Jabès is, I am always suspicious of any advice that begins THOU SHALL NOT. It makes me, as a writer, want to find a way to disprove the theory.

¹¹¹ This is from Kinsella's blurb on the back cover of *B/S*.

¹¹² This is a widely held view, one which predates these men. I particularly admire the work of the British classicist, Jane Ellen Harrison, who states, '[t]he complexity of the individual spells death.' Jane Harrison, *Reminiscences of a Student's Life* (London: Hogarth Press, 1925), p.88.

¹¹³ P. Adams Sitney in the Introduction to Maurice Blanchot's *The Gaze of Orpheus*, Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1981), p. ix.

¹¹⁴ Blanchot even suggests that thinking itself is a kind of effacement. 'To think [is] to be effaced', Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, p.7. Jabès echoes this by stating that 'Man asserts and effaces himself by looking'. Jabès, Edmond, *The Book of Questions, Yaël; Elya; Aely*, trans. by Rosmarie Waldrop (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), p.160.

out of the emptiness of its traits forgotten, lost and restored by death.¹¹⁵ For Jabès then, effacement offers a kind of double-death, an antithesis to Hegel's 'death in life' but the same patterning of process.

Effacement offers a depth of 'receptivity necessary for absorbing or creating art'.¹¹⁶ It allows us a kind of sheltering, which might keep ego-driven proclamations of self at bay. However, self-effacement is also a privileged position, not available to all if we are to consider identity issues such as race or nationality.¹¹⁷ To self-efface is to attempt to forego the possibilities of exploring an identity (whether real or cultivated) in the work. Avant-garde poetries have often called for a removal of identity or self-expression. Conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith recently argued that all poetry in the twenty-first century might be seen as 'post identity'.¹¹⁸ But is the self ever entirely effaceable from a literary work? And why do we have to disappear in life before we *actually* disappear in death? Even conceptualism involves someone to crank the machine and the mere act of writing, particularly if it is then published, suggests some kind of participation, or civic act. Furthermore, and crucially, even if we are able to remove the self from the act of writing, desire itself remains in the way. Blanchot may be right in suggesting that '[t]o think [is] to be effaced'. However, to think is also to desire, which he conveniently refuses to acknowledge. Self-effacement is a privilege that I am wary of as a process of passage *before* death itself. The self may be fracturing towards its inevitable end, but desire—the desire to speak against death—obstructs the way, for now at least, calling me by my names, blocking the EXIT.

¹¹⁵ Jabès, *The Book of Margins*, p.161 (this section of the book is written collaboratively between Jabès and Emmanuel Lévinas under the title 'There is No Trace but in the Desert'. The authors do not declare who wrote which sections of this work).

¹¹⁶ Anna Smaill, 'Faceless Attention': Impersonality in the Poetry of Frank Bidart, Louise Glück, James Tate and Jorie Graham', Unpublished doctoral thesis, UCL, 2009), p.7.

¹¹⁷ This position has been discussed recently with articles about race, citizenship and identity in experimental poetry. I would cite two examples, one literary the other critical: Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014) and Sandeep Parmar's essay on race and poetry in the UK: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/not-a-british-subject-race-and-poetry-in-the-uk> [accessed, 6 January, 2016].

¹¹⁸ Goldsmith's ideas about the denial of self relate to the removal of 'feeling' and 'expression'. This is comprehensively argued in the introductory pages of *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, Northwestern University Press (2011) and forcefully argued against by Cathy Park Hong in an essay titled 'Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant Garde', published by *Lana Turner Journal* www.lanaturnerjournal.com/7/delusions-of-whiteness-in-the-avant-garde [accessed 5 January 2016]. This is an ongoing and historical argument, one that has not always been confined to the 'avant-garde' debates (I'm reminded of T.S. Eliot's essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' published in 1919 which called for '...continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality'), Eliot, T. S., *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1960), p.53.

Notes Towards a Poethics of Listening¹¹⁹

I started writing poetry with intent to publish after moving from Buckinghamshire, where I was raised, to study in London in 1996. Until this point, my interest in writing was limited to imitations of the Romantics, in particular Keats and Shelley. I had also read T.S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, Allen Ginsberg, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath and Paul Celan, who were formative influences. In London, I opted for a degree, which I soon realised was a poor choice (I should have taken English Literature). As the first person in my family to attend university, I was committed to see it through and graduate, but I quickly became distanced from my studies and decided I wanted to write a book of poems instead. I joined the Poetry Library in London, reading anything I could lay my hands on. I also began reading my own work each week to live audiences in London, notably at the Poetry Café in Covent Garden. Naturally competitive and, at that time, presumably craving some kind of attention, I wanted to be seen as the most gifted poet in the room and so found myself writing new material each week so as to improve as quickly as possible. Language became my obsession, and I began to move away from a previous fixation on strict forms and a dependence on the poetic line, preferring instead to let the content of the poem dictate the form. I realised that any skill I had as a writer relied on hearing, which is my sharpest sense.¹²⁰

Awkward yet brash in my early 20s, my presence came to the attention of a few poets, older and more notable. I frequently heard advice to be less ‘purple’, less ‘wild’ in my writing. This was perhaps good instruction at the time and, for a while, I heeded it, wanting to fit in but, ultimately, I grew suspicious of the mainstream coteries to which my advisees belonged. To my mind, the mainstream acted as if it were *the* movement in Britain—one that wished to retain power by *not* moving very far, at least aesthetically. I believe this still to be the case. In 2000, after one particular reading I gave, an editor asked if I would send him some poems, which I did. In 2002, the year my first collection was published, I started a poetry magazine, *The Wolf*. I wanted to be further in touch with writers from around the world, to find out what was happening beyond the frequently tight confines of the London poetry scene. In 2004 I worked briefly for the Poetry Translation Centre at the School of Oriental and African Studies and an interest in translation, harnessed to my editorial work with *The Wolf*, began to have a profound influence on both my writing and reading. Leading up to the publication of *B/S*, I also read much of the modernist and neo-modernist canon with some care, discovering influences such as Ezra Pound, Mina Loy, H.D., Octavio Paz, Geoffrey Hill and Peter Redgrove. The inspiration of these writers operates visibly and invisibly throughout *B/S*, a collection which still feels, to me at least, a transitional one which wears its influences.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ The word ‘poethics’ derives from Joan Rettalack’s *The Poethical Wager* (California: University of California Press, 2004). Rettalack defines poethics as ‘an attempt to note and value traditions in art exemplified by a linking of aesthetic registers to the fluid and rapidly changing experiences of everyday life.’, p.11.

¹²⁰ I played the cello from 9-11 years old, was not particularly good at it, but the teacher took me on because she thought I had ‘perfect pitch’.

¹²¹ This is exemplified by the long pages of ‘Notes’ at the end of *B/S*. My subsequent collections have still required ‘Notes’ but are much more laconic, reduced to a page.

In 2009, with *B/S* imminent, I decided to leave the UK for the US, to take up a place at New York University. This meant two years of scholarship-paid writing time and I began to read postmodern American poets more widely. I sensed a new conversation was beginning in my poetics and further appreciation of Black Mountain poets, like Olson, Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov influenced me at this time, as did readings of New York School and Language Poets (I met John Ashbery and Charles Bernstein in New York, publishing them both in *The Wolf*). New York City is an airport for writers, and I was active in building new connections with poets living in or passing through the city. At NYU, my poetic transition from the local to the international was complete, a process helped by regular contact with a faculty that included Anne Carson, Yusef Komunyakaa and Charles Simic—poets who I was fortunate to publish and learn from a good deal.

Whilst in New York I began writing poems for *WC* and *EBUD*. Work was initially slow—I struggled with the transition. I had never lived outside England before, and the first poems I wrote whilst away were attempts to deal with a loss of place, which symbolised an additional loss of family. I was resisting what John Kinsella calls an inevitable ‘polysituatedness’ of place.¹²² Additionally, during my early New York period, I was unwilling to reshape myself because, within this process, otherness enters in.¹²³ *WC*—perhaps my most intimate book of the three submitted with this paper—includes several poems from that time.¹²⁴ As discussed earlier, my writing never attempts to refuse the confessional. However, I have learnt, and am continuing to learn, strategies to defamiliarise the reader. This is in part because of increasing belief in the properties of a changeable and fluxive self. Also through a growing interest in how otherness operates so centrally to my poetics.

From New York, I was invited to read my work in several countries, across Europe, but also in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. I have no doubt that these increased (though varied) encounters with cultural otherness have had a great impact on my writing. From the books presented alongside this capping paper, it can be seen that I have actively sought international communities in order to develop my poetics. In this paper, I have spoken about the importance of international travel and alluded to the influence of poetry in translation on my creative work. Encountering otherness, through being exposed to different languages and histories, in countries that have—like Burma and Libya—endured long periods of censorship and dictatorship, has led me to better understand the limits (and possibilities) within my own creative practice. Otherness, as Derek Attridge has rightly pointed out, places us outside of our own cultural horizons. The culture from which stems our perceptibility and understanding of the world shapes us, but also limits our perceptions. For Attridge, verbal creation is made possible because of an individual’s cultural field, which then invites the other into it.¹²⁵

Otherness is culturally relational. In my poetics, I am open to otherness improving my limited perceptions of the world. In this respect, translation has sharpened my hearing as a writer exponentially. I discover new poetic structures and forms through a regulated

¹²² John Kinsella, ‘Redefining or Maybe Replacing Place’, *The Wolf* 32, Winter issue (London: December, 2015), p.96.

¹²³ As Derek Attridge suggests, it is ‘the remolding of the self that brings the other into being’. Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.24.

¹²⁴ Such poems in *WC* include ‘Home’, ‘The Boy’ and ‘The Nook’.

¹²⁵ Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, p.21.

experience of perception, but from one that is informed through experiences of other cultures.¹²⁶ The process of translation, like writing itself, involves echoes, correspondences, failures, false turns, goosechases, sometimes just to make one note sing. In this sense, listening for the other entails a poetics of desire encountering a poethics of listening. Particular timbres, sonorities, cadences, resonances: these are the fine tools I work with. It is enough to tune up all the orchestras of the English language. However, I am aware that, ultimately, my narrow cultural experience continues to restrict my field of vision. I listen for the other as a continual apprenticeship in humility. I listen for the other so that I might better understand who I am. The other is part of me.

¹²⁶ For example, when I use anaphora, as in the title poem of *EBUD*, it is because I have been influenced by Burmese poets who have taught me how it can be deployed to counter Ezra Pound's dictum of 'the musical phrase over the metronome' (see 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste', first published in *Poetry*, March 1913, and later in *Pavannes and Divagations* (New York: New Directions, 1958). For examples of this approach, see the poems of Zeyar Lynn, Pandora, Khin Aung Aye and Mauny Yu Py in *Bones Will Crow: 15 Contemporary Burmese Poets*, ed. James Byrne & ko ko thett (Todmorden: Arc Publications, 2012).

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