

Luke Davies and the Electrified Lyric:

Praise and Lament in Australian Postmodern Romantic Poetry

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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.



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Abstract

Romanticism has always had a vibrant presence in Australia's poetic landscape. In the critical discussion about Australian romantic poetry, the American literary scholar Paul Kane is highly visible. His 1996 book *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity* famously links Australian romanticism with aesthetics and states of 'negativity.' Kane argues that romanticism as an aesthetic movement reached Australia 'belatedly,' and that it came 'in the guise of an absence.' Negativity thus became a 'driving force' for Australian poets, resulting in a 'strain' of romantic poetry that is characterised by a recurrence of themes relating to emptiness and inauthenticity.

This thesis argues that since the emergence of postmodernism in the later 20th century, a new strain of Australian romanticism has appeared: one that is material, relational, embodied, and positive. The distinct aesthetic forces of postmodernism and romanticism combine to produce an energetic charge, similar to an electric current. I refer to this new Australian style of poetic lyricism as 'postmodern romanticism.'

The long love poem 'Totem Poem' (2004) by contemporary Australian poet Luke Davies is at the centre of my analysis as an exemplar of postmodern romanticism. Davies' poetry repeatedly brings together opposites – such as the secular and sacred, the worldly and otherworldly, the ancient and modern, and the sincere and ironic – to create modes of aesthetic plenitude and disorder (or re-ordering). 'Totem Poem' combines the irony of postmodernism with the earnestness of romanticism, creating an effect of amplification: 'Totem Poem' is the 21st-century equivalent of a courtly love poem, written not for a lute or lyre, but for electric guitar.

The interplay of opposites within Davies' poetry extends to a dichotomy between the ebullient joyousness of 'Totem Poem' and the profound sadness of Davies' later work *Interferon Psalms* (2011). 'Totem Poem' can be seen as a highly resonant 'song' of praise for love and life,

while *Interferon Psalms* expresses lamentation for mortality and lost love. The subjective lyricism of the romantic mode facilitates Davies' expression and exploration of emotional dualities. This thesis considers 'Totem Poem' and *Interferon Psalms* as postmodern examples of praise poetry and lamentation. It also studies Robert Adamson as a contemporary Australian praise poet, and reflects upon the history of 'lament' within Australian poetry, arguing that lament recurs historically in Australian literature as a space for marginalised voices to bring public expression to personal suffering.

These ideas are explored creatively in the accompanying poetry collection *Golden Repair*. The collection comprises a titular long poem, followed by a sequence of individual lyrical poems that embrace a postmodern romantic mode to express praise and lament in context of 21st-century urban and suburban Australia.

i. Introduction

In the yellow time of pollen, in the blue time of lilacs,
in the green that would balance on the wide green world,
air filled with flux, world-in-a-belly
in the blue lilac weather, she had written a letter:
You came into my life really fast and I liked it.

‘Totem Poem’ by Luke Davies is a 37-page poem, presented alongside 40 short love poems in his 2004 collection *Totem*. Supercharged and saturated with colour, it pays dutiful respect to the lyrical love poems that have preceded it. The voice is distinctive and the central characters of ‘Totem Poem’ appear to exist inside a universe they have built for themselves. Across its 105 stanzas, the poem contains affectionate nods to its lyrical predecessors from ancient poets through to the modernists in ways that position it firmly within the long tradition of lyric poetry. Davies’ references could also be read as a form of literary gratitude.

Consider, for example, the line ‘In the yellow time of pollen,’ from the first stanza of ‘Totem Poem’ (featured above).² The references to ‘yellow time’ and ‘pollen’ could be read as a respectful homage to the title and first line of the poem ‘in time of daffodils(who know’ by the modern American poet e.e. cummings.³ Both ‘Totem Poem’ and ‘in time of daffodils(who know’ also contain a reference to lilacs: the first line of ‘Totem Poem’ features the phrase ‘in the blue time of lilacs’, an homage to the line ‘in time of lilacs’ from the cummings poem.⁴

‘Totem Poem’ also bears resemblance to the poem ‘You, and Yellow Air’ by the Australian poet John Shaw Neilson (who wrote from the late 1890s through to the late 1930s).⁵ In this poem, Neilson uses similar motifs of colour, flowers, and time. For instance, Neilson’s line ‘Of you, and yellow air’ (which appears in the first and last stanzas of the poem) resonates with the phrase ‘yellow time of pollen’ from ‘Totem Poem.’⁶ In addition, Davies

¹ Davies, *Totem*, 3.

² Davies, 3.

³ cummings, *Selected Poems*, 177.

⁴ Davies, *Totem*, 3; cummings, 177.

⁵ Gray and Lehmann, *Australian Poetry Since 1788*, 169.

⁶ Neilson, ‘You, and Yellow Air,’ 173-74; Davies, *Totem*, 3.

brings together the colours of blue and green by positioning the phrase ‘the blue time of lilacs’ next to the line ‘in the green that would balance on the wide green world,’ in a way that resembles Neilson’s pairing of blue with green in the lines: ‘Of blue flowers for the eye, / And the rustling of green girls.’⁷ Furthermore, the line ‘A time of bells and silver seeds’ from ‘You, and Yellow Air’ features images of bells and seeds, which can also be found in the lines ‘The curtains flared like giant bells’ and ‘I was a shade scattering my shade seed’ from ‘Totem Poem.’⁸ The phrase ‘giant bells’ actually appears twice in ‘Totem Poem,’ which is entirely fitting for a poem that contains so many poetic resonances and reverberations.⁹

Moving backwards through time to the romantic era, the ‘yellow time of pollen’ phrase from Davies’ poem is also an echo of the ‘golden daffodils’ that are shown ‘fluttering and dancing’ in the iconic poem ‘I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud’ by the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth.¹⁰ Still further back, this lyrical thread of joy and flowers can be traced directly to the Bible, as can be seen in this verse from Song of Solomon: ‘Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land.’

With ‘Totem Poem’ Davies demonstrates a hyperawareness of, and gratitude towards, the poets who have come before him, but at the same time he strives to deliver a poem of such intensity that its voice can be heard even within a long, crowded, echoing chamber of voices. It is as if instead of acoustic instruments such as the lyre and the lute, which were used to accompany the early lyric poetry of ancient Greece and the courtly love poems of the English Renaissance, ‘Totem Poem’ was written for the electric guitar: it reads as if it has been *amplified*. It is this quality of amplification within Davies’ poetry which this thesis will explore. More specifically, it will analyse how Davies has utilised the lyric mode to create a

⁷ Davies, *Totem*, 3; Neilson, ‘You, and Yellow Air,’ 173–74.

⁸ Davies, 36; 13.

⁹ Davies, 22; 36.

¹⁰ Wordsworth, ‘I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud.’

¹¹ Song 2:12 NKJV.

poetic voice that is emphatic to the point of ‘sonic boom,’ to use a phrase from ‘Totem Poem’ itself.²

A study of Davies’ poetry shines light on a poetic terrain that is teeming with energy and life. Within the context of Australian poetry, Davies is a contemporary participant in a long line of poets who have embraced the lyrical mode to express intensities of feeling, from ebullient highs, to harrowing lows. This aesthetic mode, typically categorised as ‘romantic,’ has been widely observed within European and American poetry; however Australian romantic poetry has received only limited scholarly attention. The only major published study of Australian romantic poetry is *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity* (1996) by the American literary critic Paul Kane.³ In this work, Kane crucially pairs the concept of negativity – of absence and negation – with Australian romanticism.⁴ This thesis takes Kane’s argument in a new direction by considering ‘Totem Poem’ as an example of an Australian poem that is romantic but also postmodern, and arguing that it represents a style of Australian romanticism that is not ‘grounded in absence or negativity,’ but that is positive and present.⁵ ‘Totem Poem’ provides an ideal counterpoint to Kane’s argument, because it contains the lingering resonance of the lyrical love poems that have preceded it, but it also simultaneously produces and projects its own unique sound, one that is grounded in a long line of materialist Australian romanticism. Alongside Davies, this thesis will also discuss a number of Australian poets – including Robert Adamson, Dorothy Porter, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, and Ali Cobby Eckermann – whose work is similarly vital. By showcasing a range of Australian lyric poetry, from ecstatic poems of praise to sorrowful laments, I will demonstrate that romanticism has always played an integral role within Australian poetry, and that it continues to thrive.

¹² Davies, *Totem*, 5.

¹³ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*.

¹⁴ Kane, 5.

¹⁵ Kane, 5.

ii. Luke Davies: Biography

Luke Davies was born in 1962, and grew up on Sydney's North Shore.⁶ His interest in poetry began at age thirteen when he found the novel *Cannery Row* by Steinbeck on the shelves of his school library, and became 'completely immersed in and obsessed with' poetry and prose.⁷ He went on to earn a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Sydney, and his first poetry collection *Four Plots for Magnets* was published in 1982.⁸ His other poetry collections are *Absolute Event Horizon* (1994), *Running With Light* (1999), *Totem* (2005), and *Interferon Psalms* (2011).⁹ Davies is also an acclaimed author of fiction, and his novels include *Candy* (1997), *Isabelle the Navigator* (2000), and *God of Speed* (2008).²⁰ In 2006 a film version of *Candy* was released, for which Davies shares screenwriting credit with the Australian director Neil Armfield.² He relocated to Los Angeles in 2007 to pursue a career in screenwriting, and in 2016 the film *Lion* earned him an Academy Award nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay.²² Since then Davies has gone on to write the screenplay for the 2019 miniseries *Catch 22*, and the 2019 thriller *Angel of Mine*, among other productions.²³

Although Davies has achieved success as a novelist and screenwriter, he told Sophie Cunningham in an interview for *Meanjin* in 2008, 'If I could get the recognition I felt I deserved for the thing I do that is most important, it's the poetry. Poetry feels like the spine.'²⁴ Davies repeated this sentiment in 2012 when he was interviewed by Susan Wyndham for *The Sydney Morning Herald*: 'From the age of thirteen I have always considered poetry to be my life's

¹⁶ 'Davies, Luke,' Australian Poetry Library.

¹⁷ Cunningham, 'You Did Not Read Faulkner!,' 111.

¹⁸ Cunningham, 110.

¹⁹ 'Davies, Luke,' Australian Poetry Library.

²⁰ Cunningham, 'You Did Not Read Faulkner!,' 110.

²¹ 'Davies, Luke,' Australian Poetry Library.

²² Karl Quinn, 'My life with George: How Luke Davies went from broke to Clooney's *Catch 22*,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, June 2, 2019, 12:01 a.m. EST, <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/tv-and-radio/my-life-with-george-how-luke-davies-went-from-broke-to-clooney-s-catch-22-20190531-p51tal.html>.

²³ Quinn.

²⁴ Cunningham, 'You Did Not Read Faulkner!,' 113.

vocation. Poetry is my work in its purest form.’²⁵ His poetry has received several major awards: *Totem*, for instance, was awarded the Age Poetry Book of the Year as well as the overall Age Book of the Year, and also the Grace Leven Prize for Poetry, the South Australian Premier’s Literary Award for Poetry, and the Philip Hodgins Memorial Medal.²⁶ However although Davies’ poetry has been widely reviewed, awarded and anthologised, his poetry has not yet been the primary focus of a doctoral thesis. I am seeking to amend this gap by recognising Davies as a leading practitioner of Australian romantic poetry, and reflecting upon his engagement with, and contribution to, lyric poetry more generally. I will argue that Davies uses the lyric mode to effectively ‘amplify’ the voice of the poem, enabling praise and lament to be expressed in ways that are reminiscent of song.

Davies’ religious background is relevant to this discussion, since the poetic origins of praise and lament can be traced back to ancient religious texts, including the Book of Psalms and the Book of Lamentations (both from the Old Testament of the Bible).²⁷ Davies was raised Catholic, attending a Catholic school in the Sydney suburb of West Pymble, but later became an atheist.²⁸ As he explained in his interview with Susan Wyndham: ‘I’m 99 per cent sure I’m atheist but at other times I experience the world as God-soaked.’²⁹ This statement provides insight into why Davies, as a poet, repeatedly returns to religious themes, including his decision to structure his 2011 collection *Interferon Psalms* as a sequence of psalms which ‘very deliberately use mock biblical language.’³⁰ Yet the purpose of this device is not solely rooted in parody, as David McCooney points out in his review of *Interferon Psalms*:

²⁵ Susan Wyndham, ‘Biblical Voice Wins Struggling Poet \$80,000 Inaugural Prize,’ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 24, 2012, 3:00 a.m. EST, <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/biblical-voice-wins-struggling-poet-80000-inaugural-prize-20120723-22kom.html>.

²⁶ ‘Luke Davies,’ Poetry Foundation.

²⁷ Ps.; Lam. NKJV.

²⁸ Jason Steger, ‘Love in the Time of Poetry,’ *The Age*, August 21, 2004, 10:00 a.m. EST, <https://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/books/love-in-the-time-of-poetry-20040821-gdyhc6.html>.

²⁹ Susan Wyndham, ‘Biblical Voice Wins Struggling Poet \$80,000 Inaugural Prize,’ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 24, 2012, 3:00 a.m. EST, <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/biblical-voice-wins-struggling-poet-80000-inaugural-prize-20120723-22kom.html>.

³⁰ Wyndham.

It is a quality of modernity that sacred language is seen as merely one discourse among many. One can read Davies's promiscuous intertextuality, tonal instability and parody of sacred scripture (with *Interferon Psalms* mimicking the five-part structure of the Book of Psalms) as evidence of a wholly postmodern sensibility. But what is perhaps more intriguingly postmodern about the work is how it refuses to unambiguously 'ground' representations of divinity and religious vision in purely parodic terms. The 'wholly postmodern' here threatens to become a 'holy postmodern'.³

This thesis will address McCooey's notion of the 'holy postmodern' within Davies' poetry through an analysis of 'Totem Poem' as a postmodern example of a praise poem (Chapter Three).³² A comparison will be made between examples of traditional praise poetry (including verses from the Bible) and 'Totem Poem' to show how Davies has perpetuated this tradition in ways that are both faithful and subversive. Similarly, Chapter Four will consider *Interferon Psalms* as a postmodern lament, one which, to again use McCooey's phrasing, continues the 'synthesising project of poetry generally,' which is to say it 'creates something new by bringing together divergent things.'³³ As previously noted, the concept of electrification is central to this thesis, and I will argue that part of what creates this sense of an electric charge is a tension that is produced by the interaction of opposites. This tension exists even within the title *Interferon Psalms*, where a scientific term ('interferon') is paired with a religious word ('psalms'). Just as Davies himself is an atheist who occasionally feels 'God-soaked,' his poetry expresses a playful attitude towards ideas relating to religion and the divine, while still conveying a genuine sense of wonderment.³⁴ This peculiar tension can be described as 'irreverent reverence,' and it contributes to the uniqueness of Davies' poetic voice. Just as Davies' poetry retains many of the lyrical and thematic traits of romanticism while also subtly making fun of the romantic mode, it also creates the effect of 'singing praises' yet in a tone that is simultaneously wry and self-aware.

³¹ David McCooey, 'Hallelujah Bewildered,' *The Age*, November 12, 2011, NewsBank Newspapers Archive.

³² McCooey.

³³ McCooey.

³⁴ Susan Wyndham, 'Biblical Voice Wins Struggling Poet \$80,000 Inaugural Prize,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 24, 2012, 3:00 a.m. EST, <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/biblical-voice-wins-struggling-poet-80000-inaugural-prize-20120723-22kom.html>.

iii. From ‘absence’ to plenitude: romanticism in Australian poetry

A number of key terms have already been used in this introduction, namely ‘lyric,’ ‘romantic,’ and ‘postmodern.’ These terms are crucial to my discussion of Davies’ poetry, and Chapter One will therefore begin by defining how ‘lyric,’ ‘romantic,’ and ‘postmodern’ will be used within the context of this thesis. Following this, a literature review will consolidate the literary criticism surrounding Davies’ poetry (particularly his collections *Totem* and *Interferon Psalms*) to argue that Davies’ status as a romantic poet has yet to be thoroughly interrogated. Most of what has been written about his poetry appears in book reviews: this thesis seeks address this gap in scholarship by acknowledging the observations made by reviewers and building critically upon these findings to assert that Davies is one of Australia’s most significant romantic poets.

The final section of Chapter One will consider the sublime as a philosophical concept that can be traced back to the treatise *On the Sublime* by the Ancient Greek rhetorician Longinus, and which enjoyed a renewed surge of interest in the 18^h and 19^h centuries following the publication in 1757 of Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. In the 2008 reprint of this work, the scholar James Boulton explains that Burke’s thinking on the sublime had a direct influence on the romantic-era poets, including the English poet William Wordsworth.³⁵ In reading Davies as a postmodern romantic poet, it is worthwhile to look at how conceptions of the sublime have evolved, to determine whether these ideas – Burke’s in particular – could be applied to readings of ‘Totem Poem.’

In *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity* Paul Kane argues that because Australia did not undergo a romantic movement during the 1800s, Australian romantic poetry can only

³⁵ Boulton, ‘Editor’s Introduction,’ in Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, ci.

ever be ‘belated,’ and is therefore condemned to be perpetually reflective of ‘loss or lack.’³⁶ Chapter Two will begin by more thoroughly explaining the reasoning behind Kane’s theory of ‘belated romanticism,’ and outline how, in *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, he applies this theory to the work of particular Australian poets.³⁷ Next, I will argue that Kane’s theory needs to be updated, based on the following challenges: i) the concept of belatedness relies on a linear understanding of time, yet one of the core aspects of romantic poetry is that it seeks to defy the linearity of time; ii) postmodernism, which emerged as an aesthetic trend in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, has reinvigorated Australian romanticism; iii) Kane did not include certain Australian poets in his study because their work resists the link between romanticism and negativity; and iv) the lack of a romantic movement is not the preeminent reason why Australian romantic poetry returns to themes of absence and loss rather, I argue that this ‘strain’ of negativity is more reflective of the cultural, social and aesthetic upheavals caused by colonisation.³⁸ Although I acknowledge Kane has made an invaluable contribution to the study of romanticism in Australian poetry, I nonetheless assert that his theory of negativity is outmoded and needs to be updated. Section 2.2 will establish Davies as an Australian romantic poet who is not belated but out-of-time: a romantic who happens to be writing in the 21st century. Much like the nightingale that sings, impervious to death, in the 1819 poem ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ by John Keats, the speaker in ‘Totem Poem’ sings his praises within a realm where ‘the infinite is now.’³⁹ Further updates to Kane’s theories will appear throughout this thesis as the discussion moves from an exploration of the postmodern aspects of ‘Totem Poem’ in Section 2.3, to the early postmodern romanticism of Dorothy Porter in Section 2.4 and, finally, to the history of the lament in Australian poetry in Chapter Four.

³⁶ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 5.

³⁷ Kane, 5.

³⁸ Kane, 5.

³⁹ Keats, ‘Ode to a Nightingale’; Davies, *Totem*, 10.

In Section 2.3 I will examine the postmodern characteristics of ‘Totem Poem,’ paying particular attention to the ways in which two seemingly disparate aesthetic forces – romanticism and postmodernism – interact within the poem. From an aesthetic standpoint, the pairing of romanticism and postmodernism seems incongruous, since romantic poetry, generally speaking, is usually earnest and sincere, whereas the postmodern mode tends towards self-consciousness and irony. In Section 2.3 I will argue that a defining characteristic of Davies’ poetry is the way that he brings opposites, such as the secular and sacred, the worldly and otherworldly, the ancient and modern, and the sincere and ironic, into relation with each other, in ways that generate friction and produce an ‘electric’ charge. In ‘Totem Poem,’ Davies uses aspects of postmodernism, particularly the mixing of tonal registers, in ways that actually heighten the poem’s romanticism, rather than detract from it. By combining these two seemingly-incompatible aesthetics, Davies – alongside other contemporary romantic poets – is a practitioner of a new, distinct aesthetic, one which I will call ‘postmodern romanticism.’

Using ‘Totem Poem’ as a reference point, Section 2.3 will delineate some of the key stylistic attributes of postmodern romanticism. It begins by looking at the ways in which Davies places snippets of everyday speech alongside formal poetic language, effectively elevating ordinary speech to the same level as high poetics. For instance, the first stanza of ‘Totem Poem’ places the highly lyrical line ‘in the blue lilac weather, she had written a letter’ alongside the starkly conversational: ‘*You came into my life really fast and I liked it.*’⁴⁰ The elevated and the colloquial sit side by side in a way that is harmonious: the poeticism of the ‘blue lilac weather’ creates an atmosphere that appropriately foreshadows the ‘out of the blue’ sentiment implied by ‘*You came into my life really fast.*’⁴¹ Additionally, the inclusion of everyday speech gives the poem a fresh, contemporary timbre, meaning that it does not merely repeat the

⁴⁰ Davies, *Totem*, 3.

⁴¹ Davies, 3.

poetics of the romantic era. Instead, it reinterprets the romantic aesthetic for a contemporary audience.

As a further challenge to Kane's theory of 'belated romanticism,' Section 2.4 will look at a selection of Australian romantic poems from the late 20th century and early 21st century, and argue that these poems, like 'Totem Poem,' do not come from a place of negativity or absence. The first poem to be discussed is 'Paradise Beach' by Dorothy Porter, which first appeared in Porter's 1984 collection *The Night Parrot*.⁴² A comparison will be drawn between 'Paradise Beach' and 'Totem Poem' in order to demonstrate how they both use the generic tropes of love poetry – such as the motif of flowers – alongside references that are entirely personal and specific. For instance, 'Paradise Beach' contains the line 'with bright yellow flowers,' and it also contains direct references to actual places in Sydney such as Haymarket, and to a lover who is variously portrayed as larger than life but also as 'human / flesh, / a bit tired.'⁴³ Through comparing the similarities between 'Paradise Beach' and 'Totem Poem,' I will suggest that a thread of energetic aliveness runs through Australian romanticism, one that contradicts Kane's claim of 'belated romanticism grounded in absence or negativity.'⁴⁴ The most important aspect of this comparison is that 'Paradise Beach' was published in 1986: more than a decade before *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity* was published. An analysis of 'Paradise Beach' shows that Davies is just one of a long line of Australian romantic poets whose work reflects material and aesthetic plenitude in ways that make it difficult, if not impossible, to uphold Kane's claims that Australian romanticism is grounded generically in negativity.

The final section of Chapter Two will examine the poem 'The World' by the contemporary Australian poet Petra White, published in her 2014 collection *A Hunger*.⁴⁵ This

⁴² Porter, *Love Poems*.

⁴³ Porter, 84; 80.

⁴⁴ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 5.

⁴⁵ White, *A Hunger*, 8.

poem will be compared directly with ‘Totem Poem’ and ‘Paradise Beach’ to attest that romanticism has always been, and continues to be, a thriving part of the Australian poetic landscape. Australian poets continue to reinvent the love poem, combining divergent aesthetic aspects in order to reenergise the romantic mode.

In Chapter Three, the lyrical aspects of ‘Totem Poem’ will be closely examined to question whether it can be neatly categorised as a lyric poem. Particular attention will be given to the line ‘I lay great and greatly fallen’ which, as Davies explains, comes from Book 16 of Homer’s epic poem *The Iliad*.⁴⁶ By including a direct line from this well-known ancient poem, Davies is deliberately, if playfully, planting the idea that ‘Totem Poem’ could be read alongside the great epic poems of literary history. One essential difference between the lyric and epic modes is the voice and form of address: the lyric, generally, creates the effect of being personally spoken to in private, whereas the epic is intended to be voiced to more public audiences. Section 3.1 will identify the ways in which Davies brings the personal and the public together in ‘Totem Poem’ in order to elevate the private experience of falling in love to a level of great importance, one that is commensurate with the great epic poems of human history.

Section 3.2 will consider ‘Totem Poem’ in the context of epideictic and devotional poetry. As F. Cornilliat explains in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, epideictic poetry emerged from the Ancient Greek practice of publicly giving a demonstrative speech of praise (or, conversely, blame).⁴⁷ What originally began as a form of public address ultimately laid the foundations for later forms of lyric poetry which extolled the virtues of gods, people, places, and sometimes also objects.⁴⁸ The subset of epideictic poetry which best applies to ‘Totem Poem’ is the encomium, which W. H. Race describes as a form of lyric poetry that

⁴⁶ Davies, *Totem*, 30; 84.

⁴⁷ Cornilliat, ‘Epideictic Poetry,’ 448.

⁴⁸ Cornilliat, 448.

praises a human, rather than a god.⁴⁹ This categorisation is suitable for ‘Totem Poem,’ since it sings the praises of a human beloved. However, ‘Totem Poem’ is not a straightforward encomium since it also, at times, directs its praise towards a divine figure, for example: ‘I said to God *God / how often do I thank you God?*’⁵⁰ This aligns ‘Totem Poem’ more with devotional poetry, which, as K. J. E. Graham explains, is ‘recognisable for its tendency to address a divinity, a sacred thing, or a religious figure.’⁵¹

Taking into account ancient forms of devotional poetry such as The Book of Psalms, Section 3.2 will demonstrate that ‘Totem Poem’ combines aspects of the encomium together with devotional poetry. Included in this discussion will be a reading of an example of a well-known devotional poem, ‘Pied Beauty’ by the English Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins.⁵² ‘Pied Beauty’ and ‘Totem Poem’ are similar, as both are praise poems which celebrate the natural world. Further, they both celebrate the oppositional aspects of the natural world, described by Hopkins as ‘dappled things,’ evoking dark and light colour variances.⁵³ Ultimately, Section 3.2 argues that ‘Pied Beauty’ and ‘Totem Poem’ are related since they both express gratitude for a world charged with oppositions, including the mutability of the world contrasted with the immutability of the divine.

In Section 3.3 attention is given to the significance of the word ‘totem’ which is the title of Davies’ poem, but also features once, as a singular word, in the 66th stanza: roughly in the centre of the poem.⁵⁴ This discussion will begin by reflecting upon totemism as a cultural practice, whereby an animal (or sometimes a plant) is treated as sacred. Through providing protection for the totem, the totem in turn provides protection for a tribe, or the people who invoke it. My argument will consider certain aspects of ‘Totem Poem’ as attempts at speaking with or invoking the divine, and also allowing the divine to speak through the poem. For

⁴⁹ Race, ‘Encomium,’ 409.

⁵⁰ Davies, *Totem*, 18.

⁵¹ Graham, ‘Devotional Poetry,’ 352–353.

⁵² Hopkins, *Selected Poems*, 24.

⁵³ Hopkins, 24.

⁵⁴ Davies, *Totem*, 25.

example, the line ‘I couldn’t / recognise my own voice it was so loud’ creates the impression of speaking in a way that is louder and more powerful than an ordinary human voice.⁵⁵ It is as though, for the speaker within ‘Totem Poem,’ poetry itself is a totem: when treated *as* sacred, it becomes sacred, and thus facilitates an amplified and direct engagement with the divine.

The final part of Chapter Three (Section 3.4) is dedicated to close readings of three poems by the Australian contemporary poet Robert Adamson: ‘Fishing with My Stepson,’ ‘The Details Necessary,’ and ‘The Intervention.’⁵⁶ Adamson, like Davies, has written many lyrical poems of praise. In Adamson’s own words, his love poems and elegies try ‘to make sense of life by offering praise.’⁵⁷ This section will focus on how Adamson has used the lyric mode to create ‘songs’ of praise. Specifically, it will look at how Adamson, like Davies, uses sonic elements such as alliteration and assonance, to place emphasis on particular words and phrases, to create the illusion of time slowing down. Adamson is also a poet who brings the everyday and the extraordinary together in his poetry. For instance, in ‘Fishing with My Stepson,’ the line ‘We drink Coke from a plastic Esky’ is later contrasted with ‘between us, utter wonder.’⁵⁸ Adamson’s sense of playfulness is also similar to Davies’: his poetry displays a literary self-consciousness that is wry yet sincere. Taking these qualities into account, Adamson’s poetry could also be considered as an example of postmodern romanticism, further reinforcing the main argument from Chapter Two: that Australian romantic poetry is alive and singing.

Finally, Chapter Four looks at *Interferon Psalms* by Davies, which is described as the ‘shadow companion’ to *Totem*.⁵⁹ The title *Interferon Psalms* is clearly a direct reference to the Book of Psalms, making its biblical inspiration immediately obvious. This is particularly

⁵⁵ Davies, *Totem*, 18.

⁵⁶ Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 71; 62; 287.

⁵⁷ Adamson, ‘Introduction,’ 15.

⁵⁸ Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 227.

⁵⁹ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, back cover.

significant to this discussion, since the Book of Psalms is as much a work of lament as it is praise. The juxtaposition of praise and lament in Psalms is, in fact, its defining characteristic, as Claus Westermann (a German Old Testament scholar) points out:

In my years of work on the Old Testament, particularly on the Psalms, it has become increasingly clear to me that the literary categories of Psalms of lament and Psalms of praise are not only two distinct categories among others, but that they are the literary forms which characterise the Psalter as a whole, related as they are as polar opposites. Thus juxtaposed, they tend to encompass the whole of human experience, its development from birth and its movement toward death.⁶⁰

Chapter Four argues that *Interferon Psalms* is an extended lamentation, which, to use Westermann's wording, 'gives voice to sorrow.'⁶¹ Just as Westermann argues that 'praise and lament belong together as expressions of human existence before God,' so too do *Totem* and *Interferon Psalms* form two parts of a whole, as 'the language of joy and the language of suffering.'⁶²

To begin, Section 4.1 will look at the history of the lament more broadly, by tracing the poetic language of *Interferon Psalms* back to the Bible, with specific focus on Psalm 22 which begins with 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'⁶³ Just as the speaker of 'Totem Poem' is directly engaged in a dialogue with 'God,' the speaker of *Interferon Psalms* repeatedly addresses a divine figure, for example in this line from the fourth psalm: 'so I praised Yahweh, saying Holy One of Being, I am Yours and my Dreams are Yours.'⁶⁴ As M. Cavitch explains in *The Princeton Encyclopedia*, when traced back to its origins, the lament, like the encomium, was a style of public performance, often accompanied by musical instruments.⁶⁵ Section 4.1 will outline some of the key characteristics of the lament as a poetic form, in particular the

⁶⁰ Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 11.

⁶¹ Westermann, 11.

⁶² Westermann, 11.

⁶³ Ps. 22:1 NKJV.

⁶⁴ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 17.

⁶⁵ Cavitch, 'Lament,' 781.

call-and-response technique, which is also a feature of Psalm 22, where the line ‘You have answered me’ marks a sudden shift from despair to elation.⁶⁶

Section 4.2 will consider the history of the lament within Australian poetry, and briefly return to *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, wherein Kane uses the phrase ‘the lack of an indigenous romanticism’ to describe the failure of the Romantic movement to reach Australia during the 1800s.⁶⁷ He uses the word ‘indigenous’ to suggest that Australia did not originate its own romantic movement, and that it failed ‘to evolve or introduce an indigenous romanticism.’⁶⁸ Kane’s study of Australian poetry begins with white settlement: one of the first examples of Australian poetry he examines is ‘Australasia’ by William Wentworth, which he describes as ‘an epideictic hymn to the beauties of the land, and an encomium to those who discovered it and helped found the settlement.’⁶⁹ In his introduction to the book, Kane states that his definition of ‘Australian poetry’ is ‘part of a larger class of literature termed anglophone’ which means, consequently, his study is limited to ‘poems written in English by Australians.’⁷⁰ While he confesses that this focus ‘of course leaves out poetry written in other languages than English in Australia, from numerous Aboriginal ones to Asian or various European languages,’ he goes on to claim that his study is suited to a narrower frame of ‘well-known poets who could be seen as part of a traditional or indeed canonical grouping.’⁷¹ These poets, argues Kane, ‘are among the strongest and most interesting of Australian poets.’ Kane thus quickly and conveniently relegates the entire oral tradition of Aboriginal song cycles and storytelling to a mere side note, lumped in with ‘various’ Asian and European languages.⁷²

⁶⁶ Ps. 22:21 NKJV.

⁶⁷ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 16.

⁶⁸ Kane, 18.

⁶⁹ Kane, 29.

⁷⁰ Kane, 1 2.

⁷¹ Kane, 2.

⁷² Kane, 2.

Not only does Kane ignore the richness of Aboriginal Australia's extensive poetic history, he also excludes Australia's first Aboriginal poet to publish a book of poetry: Oodgeroo Noonuccal (whose 1964 collection *We Are Going* was published under the name Kath Walker).⁷³ Partly in response to this exclusion, Section 4.2 of this thesis will conduct a study of the history of the lament in Australian poetry, including poems from Oodgeroo, as well as the contemporary Indigenous poet Ali Cobby Eckermann, to show that 'negativity' in Australian poetry could very well be traced to Australia's turbulent colonial past, and to the ongoing consequences of colonialisation.

Eckermann is a Yankunytjatjara woman who was separated from her mother as a child and adopted by a white family, just as Eckermann's own mother was taken away from her family when she was young.⁷⁴ Motifs of voids and distances frequently reoccur in Eckermann's poetry, particularly in the poem 'Lament' which appears in her 2015 collection *Inside My Mother*.⁷⁵ While Kane describes negativity in Australian poetry as reflective of 'the lack of an indigenous romanticism,' this thesis will argue that these gaps and absences are also reflective of the trauma that Indigenous Australians underwent during white settlement: trauma that, as Eckermann's poetry shows, continues to reverberate into the 21st century.⁷⁶

Alongside these Indigenous voices, Section 4.2 will also look at 'An Aboriginal Mother's Lament' by Charles Harpur, which portrays a massacre that occurred in 1842, when a group of white stockmen slaughtered a tribe of unarmed Aboriginal people.⁷⁷ Although Kane includes Charles Harpur in *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, he does not give attention to this particular poem, perhaps because it detracts from the strength of his

⁷³ Gray and Lehmann, *Australian Poetry Since 1788*, 493.

⁷⁴ Eckermann, *Too Afraid to Cry*, 172.

⁷⁵ Eckermann, *Inside My Mother*, 24.

⁷⁶ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 16.

⁷⁷ Harpur, 'An Aboriginal Mother's Lament.'

argument that negativity in Australian poetry came about because ‘there is no indigenous tradition that can be reclaimed or reworked.’⁷⁸

In studying the history of the lament in Australian poetry, Section 4.2 will also look at ‘A Convict’s Lament on the Death of Captain Logan’ by ‘Frank the Poet,’ which is one of Australia’s first recorded laments.⁷⁹ A number of 20th-century Australian laments will also be examined, including ‘Lamentations’ by Michael Dransfield, as well as a selection of work by Australian poets with migrant backgrounds including ‘Lament’ by Antigone Kefala, and ‘Kaddish’ by Fay Zwicky.⁸⁰ Studying Davies’ antecedents strengthens the argument that *Interferon Psalms* is Davies’ contribution to a long and rich Australian poetic tradition, one which predates colonisation by many thousands of years.

Section 4.3 will directly compare ‘Totem Poem’ with *Interferon Psalms* and examine how they are very different, yet utterly related. If the speaker of ‘Totem Poem’ is living inside a universe he and his lover have built for themselves, the speaker of *Interferon Psalms* is lost within a universe that has started to unravel after the departure of his lover. When ‘Totem Poem’ is studied alongside *Interferon Psalms*, it is evident that Davies has used the same poetic techniques to amplify joyousness in the former, and sorrow in the latter. For instance, both ‘Totem Poem’ and *Interferon Psalms* repeat particular motifs multiple times – creating the effect of reverberation – however there are stark differences between these motifs. In ‘Totem Poem,’ the first line (of colourful flowers in bloom) carries with it an atmosphere of springtime, fecundity and prosperity.⁸¹ Conversely, the first psalm in *Interferon Psalms* introduces the recurring motif of a drowned world, as this line shows: ‘A flooded world; I’m sick with shallow corpuscle.’⁸² The ‘flooded world’ is just one of a series of motifs in *Interferon Psalms* which suggest death and destruction, both for the speaker personally (‘I’m sick with

⁷⁸ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 48.

⁷⁹ Gray and Lehmann, *Australian Poetry Since 1788*, 9–10.

⁸⁰ Dransfield, *Collected Poems*, 26–7; Kefala, ‘Lament.’; Zwicky, *Poems 1970-1992*, 63.

⁸¹ Davies, *Totem*, 3.

⁸² Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 3.

shallow corpuscle’) and the planet generally (‘a flooded world’).⁸³ The first part of Chapter Four will look at how *Interferon Psalms* inverts the praise of ‘Totem Poem’ turning its amplified rhetoric towards the project of lament.

The conclusion to this thesis explains the relationship between the theoretical and creative components of this doctorate. The creative component is a collection of poems titled *Golden Repair*. It is comprised of one long poem (of the same title), and a collection of short poems. In reflecting upon the history of romanticism in Australian poetry through the lens of lyrical poems of praise and lament, this thesis makes the case that Australian romanticism is a living force which has always been a part of our literary terrain, and only continues to flourish. *Golden Repair* is another continuation of this poetic tradition, using the romantic mode to voice intensities of joy and sorrow, against a backdrop of contemporary urban and suburban Australia.

⁸³ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 3.

Chapter One

Defining terms, reviewing the literature, and examining 'Totem Poem' through the framework of the sublime

The terms 'lyric,' 'romantic,' and 'postmodern' are central to this thesis. Before moving to my close readings of Luke Davies' work, I will briefly explain how and why these terms will be used, building upon insights from the contemporary American literary scholar Jonathan Culler, and returning to Kane's *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity* to define the term 'romantic.' It is important to note that the critical discourse I have drawn upon to define the key terms of this thesis is predominantly contemporary: for instance, in defining the term 'postmodern' I draw from Fredrick Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* which was published in 1991, and in defining 'romantic' I reference a number of texts which, similarly, date from the late 20th century.² I have also favoured the discourse of contemporary Australian critics, including David McCooey and Ali Alizadeh.³ Since the primary focus of this thesis is Davies' poetry, I am focussing upon the contemporary context in which Davies was writing. While the literary criticism of the early 20th century is an important antecedent, my aim is to map a new field, one which is designed to generate a new line of discussion about Australian romantic poetry in the 21st century.

1.1 Defining 'lyric'

As stated, this thesis draws predominantly upon contemporary Australian applications of critical traditions in lyricism. This was necessary to keep the discussion centred on the poetics of material plenitude in Davies' poetry. One significant exception to this rule was my decision

¹ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*; Kane, *Australian Poetry, Romanticism and Negativity*.

² Jameson, *Postmodernism*.

³ McCooey, 'Surviving Australian Poetry'; Alizadeh, 'The Poetic *Inaesthetic*.'

to include ideas from Culler's *Theory of the Lyric* (2015), as this work synthesises many of the international historical debates about lyric poetry, while providing valuable insight into the shifting perspectives around what lyric poetry is and how it functions. Additionally, Culler's exploration of poetic modes of voicing proved especially useful for considering the speaker of 'Totem Poem' as a singer of a particular type of song. Included in *Theory of the Lyric* is a quote from *Lyric Poetry: The Pain and the Pleasure of Words* (2007) by the American literary scholar Mutlu Konuk Blasing, where lyric poetry is described as 'a cultural institution dedicated to remembering and displaying the emotionally and historically charged materiality of language, on which logical discourse would establish its hold.'⁴ This provides a fertile starting point for considering the 'charged materiality' of Davies' poetry from a critical perspective. According to Blasing, lyric poetry 'operates independently' to the critical discourse that it generates: it is 'the ground on which complex thought processes and logics can play on.'⁵ Earlier in *Theory of the Lyric* Culler draws attention to the American contemporary critic Virginia Jackson's concern that when the term 'lyric' is applied retrospectively to various historical genres of verse, subgenres can become 'lost.'⁶ Culler, however, argues that categorising poems as lyric 'does not prevent scholars from discussing what ever distinctions seem to them significant.'⁷ 'With modern poems too,' he goes on to claim, 'the category of lyric does not prevent us from recognizing an elegy or an epithalamion, or even an aubade.'⁸ In line with Culler's thinking, this thesis considers 'Totem Poem' by Davies as belonging to a lyric tradition while also acknowledging that it shares certain characteristics with encomiastic and devotional poetry. The question of whether these more specific genre categorisations can be appropriately applied to 'Totem Poem' will be explored in Chapter Three.

⁴ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 169.

⁵ Culler, 169.

⁶ Culler, 88.

⁷ Culler, 88.

⁸ Culler, 88.

A succinct definition of ‘lyricism,’ as it is usually used in discussions about contemporary poetry, is provided by the Australian poet and scholar David McCooey in his article ‘Surviving Australian Poetry: the New Lyricism’ (published in 2005).⁹ ‘Lyricism,’ he writes, ‘is what we associate most commonly with poetry: musicality; brevity; intensity; the drive to epiphany or insight; and an emphasis on thought, feeling and subjectivity.’¹⁰ McCooey’s definition reinforces the intrinsic connections between lyricism, music and feeling. In that article, McCooey uses ‘Totem Poem’ as an example of ‘new lyricism’ in contemporary Australian poetry, which he defines as a style of lyricism that is still musical, yet also self-conscious and metatextual, so that it ‘often makes strange and operates in an uncanny way.’ Specifically regarding ‘Totem Poem,’ McCooey observes that it contains ‘lyrical energy,’ as well as ‘plenitude’ and ‘extended intensity.’¹¹ The words ‘energy’ and ‘intensity’ match my assertion that the lyricism in ‘Totem Poem’ is both electrified and amplified. McCooey also points out that although ‘Totem Poem’ overuses the tropes of love poetry – such as flowers and nature – in ways that verge on parody, it still manages to retain the ‘*raison d’être*’ of lyrical love poetry, which McCooey identifies as ‘praise.’¹² The inspiration to consider ‘Totem Poem’ as a contemporary encomium in this thesis arose from this insight.

In *Theory of the Lyric*, Culler declares an intention to use ‘possibilities inherent in the Western lyric tradition’ to provide ‘a more accurate and capacious account of the lyric.’¹³ Of these possibilities, he identifies the ‘ancient conceptions of lyric as a form of epideictic discourse’ as important and useful.¹⁴ Culler seeks to challenge one of the most prominent current theories of the lyric, ‘which treats the poem as a speech act of a fictional persona,’ and suggests that a possible alternative model is one that ‘treats lyric as fundamentally

⁹ McCooey, ‘Surviving Australian Poetry,’ 69.

¹⁰ McCooey, 69.

¹¹ McCooey, 69.

¹² McCooey, 69.

¹³ McCooey, 69.

¹⁴ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 3.

¹⁵ Culler, 3.

nonmimetic, non-fictional, a distinctive linguistic event,' which 'can be drawn from classical conceptions of lyric as encomiastic or epideictic discourse.'⁶ Culler's position is relevant to this thesis, since it treats the lyric as a distinct literary form, one which is rooted in the ancient traditions of musical performance. Also useful is the way Culler distinguishes between the 'voice' of a poem, and the ways that a poem can manipulate sonic elements to create the effect of 'voicing':

Rather than imagine that lyrics embody voices, we do better to say that they create effects of voicing, of aurality. Certainly a theory of the lyric must consider whether effects of voicing rather than voice – as in the echoing of rhyme, assonance, or alliteration, and rhythmic patterning – are not the more fundamental dimension of lyric, on which the impression of the distinctive voice of a speaker is sometimes imposed.⁷

This thesis takes the stance that it is the 'effects of voicing,' as Culler phrases it, which truly characterise the lyric mode.⁸ Applied to a reading of 'Totem Poem,' this approach makes it possible to treat the speaker of this poem not as a fictionalised (or autobiographical) persona, but as an amplified style of voicing. Just as the singer in a band articulates the emotional expression of the music, the voice of Davies' poetry will be treated as an instrument which articulates the music of praise and lament.

1.2 Defining 'romantic'

The term 'romantic' is used across this thesis in the same way as Kane uses it in *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*. This thesis also shares Kane's viewpoint that romanticism exists 'as not only a historical event but a cultural and aesthetic one.'⁹ Which is to say, romanticism was not just a movement which occurred in the late 1700s to mid-1800s but is also a distinctive aesthetic that continues to flourish, especially in poetry. Important to note is

¹⁶ Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 7.

¹⁷ Culler, 35.

¹⁸ Culler, 35.

¹⁹ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 20.

that throughout Kane's discussion, he uses the term 'romantic' (with a lower-case 'r') to refer to both the historical event *and* the aesthetic movement.²⁰ Other scholars, such as Edward Larrissy in his book *Romanticism and Postmodernism* (published in 1999) use the term 'Romantic' (with a capital 'R') to refer to both.²¹ Since much of this thesis is a direct response to *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, I will follow Kane's example, and use the term 'romantic' to refer to the historical era *and* to the aesthetic, except in instances when I include a direct quote from another critic who has used a different convention.

In *Romanticism and Postmodernism*, Larrissy describes a 'persistence of Romanticism in the present, both in thematic and stylistic tendencies.'²² Yet, what are these 'thematic and stylistic tendencies,' precisely? It is virtually impossible to find an unequivocal definition of the romantic aesthetic: as Larrissy admits, 'it has long been recognised that Romanticism is a dubious essence.'²³ Thus it is necessary to establish a working definition for this thesis. The bedrock of this working definition will be built upon what Kane identifies as two of the 'fundamental and constitutive elements of romanticism,' which he lists as the 'transvaluation of nature' and the 'revolutionary impulse.'²⁴

As Kane explains, this 'transvaluation of nature' is a common feature of romantic poetry, whereby the poet mentally interrogates the natural world.²⁵ 'For both the romantics and the pre-romantics,' Kane continues, 'nature functions as a point of coherence, a stable base for a superstructure of cultural (and political) imaginings.'²⁶ Kane's use of the word 'transvaluation' imparts an idea that the romantics used motifs from the natural world in ways that encouraged a revaluation or reimagining of cultural and societal constraints. In 'Totem Poem,' the lines 'When we let go the basket of the good-luck birds / the sky erupted open in

²⁰ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 20.

²¹ Larrissy, *Romanticism and Postmodernism*, 1.

²² Larrissy, 1.

²³ Larrissy, 1.

²⁴ Kane, 10; 14.

²⁵ Kane, 11.

²⁶ Kane, 11.

the hail of its libation' (from the second stanza) use natural motifs such as 'birds' and the 'sky' to convey an idea of breaking free of constraints, and opening a portal to freedom.²⁷ From its outset, 'Totem Poem' equates falling in love with 'libation,' and the natural motifs Davies has used help to augment and amplify this concept.²⁸ In this particular example, for instance, 'birds' i.e. animals that are intrinsically associated with freedom are 'let go' from a 'basket,' and they don't just fly through the sky, they 'may have broken the sky.'²⁹ Although 'Totem Poem' does rely heavily on natural imagery, it does so in ways that amplify the general underlying concept of being set free from constraints.

In *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (9th ed.) Abrams and Harpham identify the romantic poets' ability to describe nature 'with an accuracy and sensuous nuance unprecedented in earlier writers' as one of key points of differentiation between romanticism and neoclassicism.³⁰

Having made this observation, they go on to explain:

It is a mistake, however, to describe the romantic poets as simply 'nature poets.'...While many major poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge – and to a great extent by Shelley and Keats – set out from and return to an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape, the outer scene is not presented for its own sake but as a stimulus for the poet to engage in the most characteristic human activity, that of thinking. Representative Romantic works are in fact poems of feelingful meditation which, although often stimulated by a natural phenomenon, are concerned with central human experiences and problems.³¹

This idea of poetry that is a 'feelingful meditation' that is often stimulated by the natural world, but is ultimately concerned with human experiences, is useful for reading Davies' poetry.³² For although 'Totem Poem' does repeatedly return to the images of 'pollen' and 'lilacs' that are featured in its first line, the central idea of the poem is that of falling in love.³³

²⁷ Davies, *Totem*, 3.

²⁸ Davies, 3.

²⁹ Davies, 3.

³⁰ Abrams and Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 213–14.

³¹ Abrams and Harpham, 214.

³² Abrams and Harpham, 214.

³³ Davies, *Totem*, 3.

The flowers, animals, and landscapes in ‘Totem Poem’ assist with this sense of meditating upon human emotional states.

The second fundamental element of romanticism (according to Kane) is the ‘revolutionary impulse,’ a concept he introduces by explaining that ‘historically and epistemologically, romanticism is understood to be bound up with ideas of revolution and freedom.’³⁴ As Aiden Day explains in *Romanticism* (1996), the French Revolution of the late 1700s played an ‘inspirational role’ in the romantic ideology, which contributed to the ‘progressively rebellious impulse at the heart of that ideology.’³⁵ Here, Day uses the phrase ‘rebellious impulse’ in a similar way to Kane’s ‘revolutionary impulse,’ except that it allows for an interpretation of romanticism that is not necessarily linked to an explicit desire to overthrow political systems.³⁶ Returning to Kane, it is similarly significant that he pairs ‘revolution’ with ‘freedom’ in his discussion of the defining characteristics of romanticism. As he explains: ‘Whether it is the overthrow of the *ancien régime*, or of scientific rationalism, or of the rhymed couplet, romanticism aspires to more expansive modes of being.’³⁷

Arguably, then, at the core of romanticism is a refusal to be constrained. This trait is particularly applicable to ‘Totem Poem,’ which defiantly sprawls far beyond the shorter forms of lyrical love poetry. It also contains motifs of liberation, such as the ‘good luck birds’ that ‘break’ the sky.³⁸ In addition to establishing an idea of being ‘set free’ by love, this image of birds breaking the sky establishes a poetic universe wherein even the laws of physics can be challenged. The lovers in ‘Totem Poem’ appear to defy the constraints of time and physics, which extends the romantic mode literally to the stratosphere.

³⁴ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 14.

³⁵ Day, *Romanticism*, 3.

³⁶ Day, *Romanticism*, 3; Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 14.

³⁷ Kane, 15.

³⁸ Davies, *Totem*, 3.

The other aspect of romanticism relevant to this thesis is the way that it gives ‘a special importance to individual experience,’ to use Day’s phrasing.³⁹ Romantic poets treat personal, subjective experience as particularly meaningful, and as is clearly evident in ‘Totem Poem,’ Davies elevates the personal voice to the point that it appears to speak not just for one person, but for every person who has ever loved. For example, the line ‘*the whole earth tilted and I lost my reason*’ could be read, at a straightforward level, as an excerpt from a personal love letter.⁴⁰ At a deeper level, ‘*the whole earth tilted*’ makes a personal experience suddenly universal: it doesn’t just describe an experience of one person feeling as if they were falling, it tilts the ‘whole earth’ to create the effect of everyone in the entire world falling with them.⁴¹ In this way romanticism could be seen as essentially solipsistic, in the sense that it portrays one person’s worldview as all encompassing.

Further to these points, ‘Totem Poem’ can also be seen as a ‘celebration’ of the imagination, which is another of the characteristics Day identifies as central to the romantic aesthetic, along with ‘a profound sense of spiritual reality.’⁴² The world of ‘Totem Poem’ is almost like a celluloid projection of one person’s imaginings which could be either drug-induced or provoked by the intoxicating experience of falling in love. The poem could also be likened to an ecstatic vision brought about by an encounter with the divine. Together with the transvaluation of nature, rebelliousness against constraint, and elevation of an individual experience, this visionary aspect is central to the way this thesis uses the term ‘romantic.’

As mentioned in my definition of ‘lyric,’ this thesis specifically explores contemporary Australian place-based expressions of romanticism, rather than historical periods. My study is primarily interested in how Australian poets such as Davies have playfully engaged with the aesthetic tropes of romanticism to create a poetics of plenitude, one that is reflective of

³⁹ Day, *Romanticism*, 3.

⁴⁰ Davies, *Totem*, 4.

⁴¹ Davies, 4.

⁴² Day, *Romanticism*, 3.

romanticism as being part of the cultural logic of capitalism, yet which actively resists definitive categorisations. A poem such as ‘Totem Poem’ is inherently slippery: it shifts restlessly between tones and modes. For this reason I have placed the poem at the forefront of my discussion, allowing it to ‘speak’ for itself as much as possible so as not to risk muffling its ‘song’ behind a cacophony of critical debate. In defining the key terms ‘lyric,’ ‘romantic,’ and ‘postmodern,’ I have given preference to Australian literary critics such as David McCooey and Ali Alizadeh because both possess a nuanced understanding of how the themes of ‘self and place’ in contemporary Australian poetry are peculiarly intermingled with ‘the uncanny and a form of lyricism that is simultaneously a reinvigoration of the lyric mode and a critique of it.’⁴³ Like McCooey, my aim is to examine ‘renewal in the Australian context’ to showcase a poetic mode where the ‘habits and visions’ of traditions such as romanticism are being reworked to create a lyricism that is ‘stranger,’ ‘tougher,’ and entirely Australian.⁴⁴

1.3 Defining ‘postmodern’

The specific aesthetic characteristics of postmodernism this thesis will explore include those which Larrissy claims ‘most’ critics agree on, specifically ‘a combination of self-consciousness, the tendency to parody and the tendency to cynicism.’⁴⁵ Applied to ‘Totem Poem,’ the characteristic of self-consciousness is perhaps better described as an ironic self-awareness. For example, ‘Totem Poem’ is at once a love poem in which the narrator ‘speaks’ directly and intimately to his lover, such as in the lines: ‘You saw the great sky turn blacker, you saw the spray of stars / and your hair got tangled in the windscreen wiper.’⁴⁶ However, at later points in the poem, the narrator appears to be aware that he is also speaking to a public audience

⁴³ McCooey, ‘Surviving Australian Poetry,’ 66.

⁴⁴ McCooey, 64; 70.

⁴⁵ Larrissy, *Romanticism and Postmodernism*, 2

⁴⁶ Davies, *Totem*, 5.

from within the artifice of a love poem, as these lines suggest: ‘How / could one not be completely bedraggled by time or compulsion or / duplicity? I was all those things and am.’⁴⁷ This sequence is evocative of a person who is thinking aloud and ‘speaking’ to himself, but it is also declarative: the line ‘I was all those things and am’ has the tone of a public confession.⁴⁸ In Chapter Three, I will go into greater detail about the shifting modes of address within ‘Totem Poem,’ when I examine the way that it blends together aspects of the lyric and epic modes, to create a poem that positions an ordinary love affair as being extraordinary, and almost mythical.

The term ‘intertextuality’ routinely appears in critical discussions about postmodern lyrical poetics. Coined in the late 1960s by the Bulgarian-French philosopher Julia Kristeva, it describes how the meaning of a text can be shaped by other texts.⁴⁹ As the American literary scholar Patrick Cheney explains in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Kristeva’s model of intertextuality grants ‘agency’ to poets who consciously and intentionally incorporate allusions to other texts into their own work.⁵⁰ Cheney states that ‘intertextuality proves invaluable for the study of poetry and poetics because it challenges the simplistic notion of a text’s having a stable origin, instead recognizing poetry’s dialogism.’⁵¹ Intertextuality is a popularly-circulated attribute of the postmodern condition but is not, in itself, definitively postmodern. However, it has relevance to this discussion, since Davies’s poetry is especially interwoven with external references. Cheney explains that for theorists such as Kristeva, ‘*intertextuality* becomes a term for speaking about the *wovenness* of texts, their *interconnectedness*, their participation in a *web* of discourse.’⁵² This understanding of intertextuality is appropriate for exploring a poem such as ‘Totem Poem,’ especially since it contains motifs of webs (‘high-tensile webs’; ‘a cobwebbed car’), vines (‘creepers, vines,

⁴⁷ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 28.

⁴⁸ Davies, 28.

⁴⁹ Cheney, ‘Intertextuality,’ 716.

⁵⁰ Cheney, 716.

⁵¹ Cheney, 718.

⁵² Cheney, 717.

tendrils’), and it describes a world in which ‘everything is connected.’⁵³ Within this thesis I take the stance that the intertextual elements within Davies’ poetry serve to enrich its meaning: Davies borrows from other poets, philosophers and historical figures to weave a tapestry that is unique. In considering Davies’ poetry as a 21st-century extension of the courtly love poem, his use of intertextuality can be also seen as a form of musical sampling: Davies includes sound bites from other sources to create a sonic experience that is entirely his.

McCooey, in his review of *Interferon Psalms*, identifies its ‘promiscuous intertextuality, tonal instability and parody of sacred scripture’ as evidence of a ‘wholly postmodern sensibility.’⁵⁴ Although ‘Totem Poem’ does contain parodic moments, it is *Interferon Psalms* that best satisfies Larrissy’s definition of postmodernism as being characterised by its ‘tendency to parody and the tendency to cynicism.’⁵⁵ Consider, for instance, this stanza from *Interferon Psalms*:

I thought sadness was the route to forgetting, but months
later anger was like a detour, and the smog settled on
the city and made the dusk a glory, so I praised Yahweh,
saying Holy One of Being, I am Yours and my Dreams
are Yours. All that remained was to get to the gym.⁵⁶

In this example, the speaker confesses to a feeling of ‘anger’ that was ‘like a detour,’ and this colours the tone of his praise, making ‘Holy One of Being, I am Yours and my Dreams / are Yours’ sound sarcastic and almost hostile.⁵⁷ It is also a demonstration of the ‘tonal instability’ that McCooey describes: here, since the sacred language of praise (‘I praised Yahweh’) is

⁵³ Davies, *Totem*, 16; 25; 27; 5.

⁵⁴ David McCooey, ‘Hallelujah Bewildered,’ *The Age*, November 12, 2011, NewsBank Newspapers Archive.

⁵⁵ Larrissy, *Romanticism and Postmodernism*, 2.

⁵⁶ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 17.

⁵⁷ Davies, 17.

juxtaposed with the deadpan conversational tone of ‘All that remained was to get to the gym.’⁵⁸ As McCooey explains:

But if *Interferon Psalms* does offer a postmodern theology, it is a materialist one, since God is ultimately shown to be ‘the world’. The improbability of both – God and the world – is a ‘punchline’, so the work ends with laughter and lyricism, two good-enough ways to deal with suffering. That the poet's predicament – suffering like anyone else and trying to find transcendent language to express that suffering – is presented as comic is one of the most attractive features of *Interferon Psalms*.⁵⁹

McCooey makes it clear however that although *Interferon Psalms* is woven through with parodic inflections, it doesn't set out to undermine or ridicule religion. Instead, he observes that ‘the religious and the colloquial continually rub shoulders, often in hilarious ways.’⁶⁰ Ultimately, McCooey attributes the book's ‘comedy’ to ‘an ironic self-undermining of a poetic persona bent on epic hyperbole.’⁶¹ Just as Larrissy describes the postmodern aesthetic in terms of a ‘tendency’ to parody and a ‘tendency’ to cynicism, Davies' poetic style sometimes veers towards absurdity and derision, but it never actually arrives at these destinations.⁶²

There is a murkiness that surrounds the postmodern aesthetic, and that murkiness can be seen in Davies' poetry, which, as I've just shown, tends towards parody while still retaining an underlying earnestness and seriousness. This murkiness can also be observed in the critical discourse that surrounds postmodernism. In the late 20th century, one key area of critical debate around this term remains whether postmodernism might best be interpreted as an extension of modernism. A number of critics have argued that many ‘postmodern’ literary works are really just ‘continuations of the modernist tradition.’⁶³ Larrissy points out that some critics also consider modernism to be a ‘remoulding’ of romanticism, and postmodernism

⁵⁸ David McCooey, ‘Hallelujah Bewildered,’ *The Age*, November 12, 2011, NewsBank Newspapers Archive; Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 17.

⁵⁹ McCooey.

⁶⁰ McCooey.

⁶¹ McCooey.

⁶² Larrissy, *Romanticism and Postmodernism*, 2.

⁶³ Birch, ‘Postmodernism.’

‘another mutation.’⁶⁶ McCooey uses the word ‘synthesis’ to describe how Davies’ poetry accommodates all of these aesthetic influences, stating that ‘it is a quality of modernity that sacred language is seen as merely one discourse among many.’⁶⁷ As McCooey explains, what makes *Interferon Psalms* ‘intriguingly postmodern’ is its refusal to unambiguously ‘ground’ representations of divinity and religious vision in purely parodic terms.⁶⁸ In *Interferon Psalms*, the ‘wholly postmodern’ threatens to become a ‘holy postmodern.’⁶⁹

The other aspects of the postmodern aesthetic in Davies’ poetry that this thesis will explore are as those identified by Dinah Birch in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*: ‘pastiche’ and ‘the mixing of ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural allusions.’⁷⁰ In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* the American literary critic and Marxist political theorist Fredric Jameson describes pastiche as being a ‘neutral practice’ of ‘mimicry,’ which is ‘amputated of the satiric impulse.’⁷¹ In Chapter Two I will draw upon Jameson’s thinking to show how the poetic language of ‘Totem Poem’ borrows directly from the Bible in a way that is playful yet respectful. Chapter Two will also consider the moments of homage in ‘Totem Poem’ as expressions of gratitude; a postmodern method of paying respect to other literary works.

1.4 ‘Postmodern romanticism’ as a distinct genre

The term ‘postmodern romanticism’ aptly describes the interplay between what could be seen as a scepticism in Davies’ work and a wholehearted earnestness. As part of my research, I searched to see if there was a specific moment when the term ‘postmodern romanticism’ was first coined, and whether it is currently being used as a distinct term. The earliest reference I

⁶⁶ Larrissy, *Romanticism and Postmodernism*, 2.

⁶⁷ David McCooey, ‘Hallelujah Bewildered,’ *The Age*, November 12, 2011, NewsBank Newspapers Archive.

⁶⁸ McCooey.

⁶⁹ McCooey.

⁷⁰ Birch, ‘Postmodernism.’

⁷¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 17.

identified was in *Fantastic Modernity: Dialectical Readings in Romanticism and Theory* (1996) by the American literary theorist Orrin Wang, where the term is used to describe a ‘paradoxical’ argument made by certain critics that ‘the Romantics are more modern than the Moderns.’⁷² Wang uses the phrase again within a discussion about modern and postmodern approaches to the study of romanticism.⁷³ Wang doesn’t, however, use the term ‘postmodern romanticism’ to describe a specific aesthetic that began to appear in the poetry of the 1980s. Rather, his use of the phrase appears to have been incidentally generated through his analysis of the intersection of modern and postmodern literary theory.

In *Romanticism and Postmodernism* (edited by Larrissy) the phrase ‘postmodern Romanticism’ appears twice within an essay by Emma Francis about the relationship between gender, power, and romanticism in the poetry of Emily Brontë.⁷⁴ Francis makes the observation that ‘Romanticism has within itself a critique of grand narrative, essence and monolithic accounts of power,’ and henceforth ‘aspects of Postmodernism are already implicit within the projects of Romanticism.’⁷⁵ She then goes on to question whether women writers can be included in this understanding of romanticism, arguing that ‘Romanticism is reinscribed as a repressive grand narrative disciplined by a vigorous sexual division.’⁷⁶ The essay then responds to the question: ‘to what extent can women writers have a postmodern Romanticism?’⁷⁷ Francis brings attention to the way that the romantic conception of nature is that it is ‘feminine,’ but that the ‘writing self which takes nature as its subject’ is ‘masculine,’ leaving Brontë caught in a difficult position where she had to ‘take extraordinary measures to break her identification with silent, objectified nature, to which Romanticism would relegate her, and reach a position from which she can write.’⁷⁸ Because of these factors, Francis

⁷² Wang, *Fantastic Modernity*, 5.

⁷³ Wang, 78.

⁷⁴ Francis, ‘Conquered Good and Conquering Ill,’ 53; 70.

⁷⁵ Francis, 53.

⁷⁶ Francis, 53.

⁷⁷ Francis, 53.

⁷⁸ Francis, 56.

explains that Brontë had to construct ‘a foothold in poetic identity by means of ‘borrowing an identity’.’⁷⁹ This notion of ‘borrowing an identity’ can be seen as a precursor to postmodernism, particularly Jameson’s description of ‘pastiche’ as one where the author wears ‘a linguistic mask.’⁸⁰ Francis goes on to observe:

Brontë is a poet who often interrogates the conditions of being of expressive utterance. She is keenly aware of the way in which language refracts and distorts, making unmediated, innocent expression impossible and, conversely, of the strain which language comes under when urgent political and functional demands are placed upon it. She can also be sceptical of those speakers who themselves lack scepticism and commit themselves to a unitary analysis or coherent politics. It is the central irony of Brontë’s poetry that some of its most expressive cries are disciplined by the most elaborate systems of interrogation.⁸

Francis describes Brontë as a poet who ‘interrogates’ the conditions of giving voice to an ‘expressive utterance,’ and this, again, could be seen as a precursor to the self-consciousness of postmodernism.⁸² Similarly, Francis describes Brontë as ‘sceptical’ of writers who ‘themselves lack scepticism,’ which resonates with McCooey’s observation that *Interferon Psalms* is ‘wholly postmodern’ in the way that it ‘refuses to unambiguously ‘ground’ representations of divinity and religious vision in purely parodic terms.’⁸³ What Francis shows, ultimately, is that traces of the postmodern aesthetic can be found in romanticism and also in Victorian literature, and that what we call ‘postmodernism’ today is, appropriately, a ‘synthesis’ to again use McCooey’s term of all that has come before.⁸⁴ However, it should be noted that Francis uses the term ‘postmodern romanticism’ in the context of the intersection of romantic and postmodern literary theory, rather than the peculiar collision of aesthetics that can be observed in certain examples of romantic poetry that have come out of the postmodern age.⁸⁵

⁷⁹ Francis, ‘Conquered Good and Conquering Ill,’ 56.

⁸⁰ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 17.

⁸¹ Francis, ‘Conquered Good and Conquering Ill,’ 56.

⁸² Francis, 56.

⁸³ David McCooey, ‘Hallelujah Bewildered,’ *The Age*, November 12, 2011, NewsBank Newspapers Archive.

⁸⁴ McCooey.

⁸⁵ Francis, ‘Conquered Good and Conquering Ill,’ 53.

The Australian poet and literary critic Ali Alizadeh in his 2013 paper ‘The Poetic *Inaesthetic*: Theorising the Contemporary Beyond Postmodernism,’ links postmodernism to late capitalism, identifying it as a cultural force that ‘should and can be opposed and resisted.’⁸⁶ Alizadeh claims that postmodernism in Australian poetry reaches as far back as the ‘the so-called Generation of ’68.’⁸⁷ He identifies Michael Dransfield as ‘perhaps the most emblematic poet associated with the postmodernists of Generation of ’68,’ quoting the Australian poet and critic John Kinsella, who locates Dransfield’s postmodernity in his ‘façadist’ fusion of classical influences: ‘with a deft “modern” language-use, its jargonist turns and youthful zeal.’⁸⁸ Alizadeh goes on to claim:

Although Dransfield’s poetics do not display the same levels of irony and self-conscious artificiality as can be found in the work of other Generation of ’68 poets – most notably in John Tranter’s ‘postmodernist noir’ writing and in the work of Pam Brown who has stated ‘we are postmodern whether we like it or not’ – it serves as perhaps the most vivid representative of postmodern romanticism.⁸⁹

Alizadeh’s use of the term ‘romantic’ is inspired by the French philosopher Alain Badiou’s ‘three schemata of aesthetics,’ which appear in his 1998 book *Handbook of Inaesthetics*.⁹⁰ Alizadeh outlines Badiou’s ‘dominant regimes of aesthetics’ which are ‘the didactic, the classical, and the romantic schemata,’ and uses Badiou’s wording to explain how the didactic perspective sees art as ‘incapable of truth,’ whereas the romantic schema believes that ‘art *alone* is capable of truth.’⁹¹ Between these polarised views is the classical schema, which proposes that ‘art is not truth, but it also does not claim to be truth and is therefore innocent.’⁹² Alizadeh goes on to explain that ‘postmodernism can be seen as a romantic aesthetic,’ since, as Badiou states, ‘postmodern products’ pinned to the notion of the

⁸⁶ Alizadeh, ‘The Poetic *Inaesthetic*,’ 157.

⁸⁷ Alizadeh, 160.

⁸⁸ Alizadeh, 161.

⁸⁹ Alizadeh, 162.

⁹⁰ Alizadeh, 160 1.

⁹¹ Alizadeh, 161.

⁹² Alizadeh, 161.

expressive value of the body, for which posture and gesture win over [logical] consistency are the material form of a pure and simple regression to romanticism.⁹³ In applying Badiou's thinking to the poetry of Dransfield, Alizadeh argues that it is the prevalence of 'the expressive value' and 'postures and gestures' which makes him one of Australia's 'most vivid representative of postmodern romanticism.'⁹⁴ Dransfield can also be seen as an antecedent to Davies, in the sense that his poetry – especially his 1972 collection *Drug Poems* – mixes cynicism and optimism.⁹⁵ A good example is this excerpt from Dransfield's poem 'The Pessimist's Travelling Kit':

two friends were hitching south
obscurely

one was a pessimist, the other,
other

an optimist travels with
a telephone number and a

spike he carries for
sentimental reasons

the pessimist's travelling kit
holds all his apparatus
two candles (in case one gets lost)
two spikes (in case one rusts)
two grades of junk, spare needles,
matches, spoons, lighter

his telephone numbers consist
mainly of lawyers

the optimist made it south in
two rides and a day⁹⁶

'The Pessimist's Travelling Kit' depicts a 'pessimist' and an 'optimist' together on a road trip in a way that personifies the coexistence of irony and sincerity in one poem.⁹⁷ It also expresses

⁹³ Alizadeh, 'The Poetic *Inaesthetic*,' 161.

⁹⁴ Alizadeh, 162.

⁹⁵ Dransfield, *Drug Poems*.

⁹⁶ Dransfield, 21.

a dark humour, such as in the lines ‘his telephone numbers consist / mainly of lawyers.’⁹⁸ In this poem Dransfield also depicts the experience of being addicted to heroin as a journey: a metaphor that is made material in this poem with ‘two friends’ who are ‘hitching south,’ which represents the direction of their lives, also going ‘south.’⁹⁹ Dransfield’s *Drug Poems* are a precursor to Davies’ *Interferon Psalms*, which also describes addiction in terms of journeying, as these lines show: ‘I remembered my boon companion, a black-bottomed / spoon. That was a journey and a half! My heart was / grieved. I was pricked in my veins.’¹⁰⁰

‘Postmodern romanticism’ bears some conceptual resemblance to neo-romanticism, which is an aesthetic movement associated with the late 1930s to early 1950s, predominantly practised by British writers and artists.¹⁰¹ In a study of the English writer and artist Wyndham Lewis, which appears in *Legacies of Romanticism: Literature, Culture, Aesthetics* (2012), Paul March-Russell describes neo-romanticism as a ‘revival of Romantic preoccupations within a host of indisputably modern writers and artists.’¹⁰² March-Russell points out that neo-romanticism ‘is often regarded as a tributary of the British surrealist movement of the 1930s,’ and furthermore that neo-romantic artists were seen to operate ‘within a figurative tradition drawn from religious allegory, landscape painting, and the Gothic.’¹⁰³ The use of words like ‘revival’ and ‘tributary’ by March-Russell carries the implication that neo-romanticism is, simply, a resurrection of romanticism. Although the prefix ‘neo’ suggests newness or reinvention – just as the ‘new’ in McCooey’s ‘new lyricism’ effectively represents reinvention – the way ‘neo-romantic’ has been used within critical discussions doesn’t usually convey such a notion.¹⁰⁴ To avoid the connotation of reviving something that has already been established, I decided against using the term ‘neo-romantic’ in this thesis. I am specifically interested in

⁹⁷ Dransfield, *Drug Poems*, 21.

⁹⁸ Dransfield, 21.

⁹⁹ Dransfield, 21.

¹⁰⁰ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 13.

¹⁰¹ Birch, ‘Neo Romanticism.’

¹⁰² March Russell, ‘The Neo Romantic Wyndham Lewis,’ 165.

¹⁰³ March Russell, 169–70.

¹⁰⁴ McCooey, ‘Surviving Australian Poetry,’ 69.

the way that postmodernism in particular interacts with the aesthetics of romanticism; the way this combination is almost like a chemical reaction, one that fizzes and produces heat.

My use of the term ‘postmodern romanticism’ is thus reflective of a unique new aesthetic, one that is not just a nostalgic throwback to a past era, but an energetic force that supercharges the lyric mode for the 21st century. In general, I suggest that some of the characteristic attributes of this poetic mode are: i) a heightened sense of self-awareness; ii) the blending-together of ‘high’ and ‘low’ tonalities and cultural references; iii) a ‘tendency’ towards parody and cynicism that is offset by an underlying sincerity and earnestness; iv) the creation of a pastiche of different voices; and v) making overt reference to other literary and cultural texts as homage – giving thanks and expressing respect. Postmodern romantic poetry gives expression to the evergreen ardour of the romantic mode, and situates it within contemporary urban and suburban settings, such as in these lines from ‘Totem Poem’: ‘On tarmacs and in transit / I saw your lips, your nakedness, the trees, / that dappled light.’⁰⁵ It is also inherently playful, as can be seen in these lines from Davies’ poem: ‘Devotion and adoration / cartwheeled through the yard.’⁰⁶ The postmodern romantic mode is, most crucially, energised. Consider, for instance, these lines from ‘Totem Poem’: ‘the Minotaur kept counsel with the void, singing *Clearly clearly the deep / forces of the universe are hope and electricity.*’⁰⁷ This section incorporates a quote from the 1918 book *The Decline of the West* by Oswald Spengler.⁰⁸ In this stanza of ‘Totem Poem,’ Spengler’s words become a ‘song’ that the ‘Minotaur’ is ‘singing.’⁰⁹ This example demonstrates how the postmodern aesthetic can ‘synthesise’ the ancient and the modern (such as the ‘Minotaur’ from Greek mythology, and Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*); these references ‘rub shoulders,’ to use McCooey’s phrase,

¹⁰⁵ Davies, *Totem*, 13.

¹⁰⁶ Davies, 23.

¹⁰⁷ Davies, 35.

¹⁰⁸ Davies, 84.

¹⁰⁹ Davies, 84; 35.

to produce an energetic tension. ¹⁰ This particular example also directly refers to ‘electricity’ as one of the ‘deep / forces of the universe.’ Not only does ‘Totem Poem’ generate an energetic force by combining the aesthetics of postmodernism and romanticism, it explicitly places ‘hope’ and ‘electricity’ at the centre of the universe it reflects, and creates. ¹²

1.5 Reviewing the existing literature

Most of the critical coverage of Davies’ poetry exists in the form of book reviews. This section will acknowledge the mostly Australian literary critics whose ideas have helped to shape this thesis, especially in regards to the romantic and postmodern aspects of Davies’ poetry and its musicality.

As indicated, David McCooey places ‘Totem Poem’ at the centre of his discussion of the evolution of the lyric in recent contemporary Australian poetry. ¹³ McCooey makes the observation that the lyric mode is ‘a form that survives through both reinvigoration and critique,’ and continues to operate ‘even while it’s being dismantled.’ ¹⁴ In applying these ideas to Davies, McCooey remarks that ‘Totem Poem’ is ‘serio-comic’ and ‘profoundly self-conscious of its lyrical status.’ ¹⁵ He also describes it as a ‘visionary’ love poem, one which ‘relies heavily on images of nature.’ ¹⁶ These observations seem to skirt around the means by which ‘Totem Poem’ brings together the aesthetics of postmodernism and romanticism: McCooey remarks upon the poem’s self-consciousness and its use (or overuse) of natural imagery, but he doesn’t go so far as to classify it either as postmodern or romantic.

Furthermore, although McCooey states that the poem’s purpose is to ‘praise,’ he doesn’t

¹¹⁰ David McCooey, ‘Hallelujah Bewildered,’ *The Age*, November 12, 2011, NewsBank Newspapers Archive.

¹¹¹ Davies, *Totem*, 35.

¹¹² Davies, 35.

¹¹³ McCooey, ‘Surviving Australian Poetry,’ 69.

¹¹⁴ McCooey, 68.

¹¹⁵ McCooey, 69.

¹¹⁶ McCooey, 69.

reflect upon the history of praise poetry and how ‘Totem Poem’ might fit into this long tradition.⁷

The inspiration to examine *Interferon Psalms* as a lament in this thesis was also sparked by McCooey’s observation that: ‘Between *Totem* and *Interferon Psalms* Davies covers the extremities of human experience (love and loss) and its expression (praise and lament).’⁸ McCooey also explains that *Interferon Psalms*, like the Book of Psalms, ‘ranges in tone from praise to lament.’⁹ Davies himself has directly stated that *Interferon Psalms* is both ‘celebration and lamentation.’²⁰ The Australian literary critic Peter Craven also draws a direct link between *Interferon Psalms* and the Bible, stating that ‘*Interferon Psalms* is touched by the shadow of the Book of Job, that darkest and most problematic of Judeo-Christian texts which confronts the brutalism of suffering and ponders to the point of tragic apprehension how it can come from the Love that moves the sun and other stars.’² Craven goes on to describe how the narrator of *Interferon Psalms* ‘began drifting towards death and found some unspeakable love, which is the precondition of this improbable song of praise.’ In describing *Interferon Psalms* as a ‘song,’ Craven’s review further inspired my decision to explore the sonic aspects of this work, and to show that *Interferon Psalms*, like ‘Totem Poem,’ is a contemporary form of epideictic poetry.

In a review of *Totem* for *The Age* newspaper, Cameron Woodhead describes ‘Totem Poem’ as a ‘fusion of the romantic and metaphysical aspects of the poet’s imagination.’²² The same review also makes eloquent reference to the musicality of ‘Totem Poem,’ stating that it ‘swells and subsides in the manner of a Wagnerian overture, picking up its own riffs and

¹¹⁷ McCooey, ‘Surviving Australian Poetry,’ 69.

¹¹⁸ David McCooey, ‘Hallelujah Bewildered,’ *The Age*, November 12, 2011, NewsBank Newspapers Archive.

¹¹⁹ McCooey.

¹²⁰ Lewis Jones, Marjorie, ‘Interferon Psalms.’ *Insights Magazine*, September 12, 2012. <https://www.insights.uca.org.au/interferon-psalms/>.

¹²¹ Peter Craven, ‘Groping Towards the Light,’ *The Australian*, 27 August, 2011, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/books/groping-towards-the-light/newsstory/97cedcdc7f303ab8b2c4e53ce97ae018>.

¹²² Cameron Woodhead, ‘Totem (Book Review),’ *The Age*, May 22, 2004, 10:00 a.m. EST, <https://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/books/totem-20040522-gdxvpt.html>.

amplifying them to mesmerising effect.’²³ The Australian poet and critic Geoff Page also draws attention to the way that ‘Totem Poem’ appears to build its own universe, observing in his review that ‘it’s as if the love between the two characters is so overwhelming that, for them, it’s rearranged the cosmos.’²⁴ Similarly, the Australian poet and critic Magdalena Ball describes ‘Totem Poem’ as ‘the central point at the moment of the big bang,’ arguing that ‘Davies’ love is the union of the most mundane physical attraction with the greatest forces in the universe.’²⁵ Like Woodhead, Ball also draws attention to the musicality of ‘Totem Poem,’ stating that Davies ‘creates metrical music by returning to his themes.’ The Australian literary scholar Bev Braune brings attention to the repetition of refrains within ‘Totem Poem,’ theorising that they pay ‘homage to that poetic inheritance of Latin and English verse-makers and all lyrical song-writers,’ while also observing that they reveal ‘romantic and mythological themes.’²⁶

Reviewers have pointed out that another of Davies’ preoccupations is ‘duality.’²⁷ For instance, Ball brings attention to the way that his poetry frequently brings the ‘minute and expansive’ into relation with each other. Consider, for instance, this stanza from ‘Totem Poem’:

This was the state of the world. Heading backwards we learned
the flea-fish was the smallest animal before the insect kingdom
began. Forwards, there were only the sudden deaths
of galaxies. And yet when we practised love there seemed
on certain days an awful lot of space: and so much sky.²⁸

In the second line, Davies refers to the world’s ‘smallest animal,’ the flea-fish, and then two lines later he presents us with the unfathomable expansiveness of ‘galaxies.’²⁹ The

¹²³ Cameron Woodhead, ‘Totem (Book Review),’ *The Age*, May 22, 2004, 10:00 a.m. EST, https://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/books/totem_20040522_gdxvpt.html.

¹²⁴ Page, ‘Book Review,’ 19.

¹²⁵ Ball, ‘A Review of Totem Poem.’

¹²⁶ Braune, ‘Bev Braune Reviews Luke Davies.’

¹²⁷ Ball, ‘A Review of Totem Poem.’

¹²⁸ Davies, *Totem*, 28.

juxtaposition between very small and immense is intensified by the way Davies evokes not just one galaxy, but a multitude of galaxies. On top of that, the line-break after the word ‘deaths’ places extra emphasis on the deaths of these multitudinous galaxies, in a way that suggests the end of absolutely *everything*.³⁰ From this extreme position, the poem returns again to the worldly; the phrase ‘we practised love’ suggests the physicality of sexual intercourse, while the use of simple words like ‘days’ and ‘sky’ reorients the reader to the realm of the ordinary.³¹ It creates the impression that the ‘awful lot of space’ that the speaker and his beloved experienced on ‘certain days’ was a slowing-down of time itself, one which could even hold off the end of the world.³² This stanza demonstrates that although ‘Totem Poem’ speaks of endings and death – right up to the annihilation of the entire universe – it is nonetheless a work of optimism. As Braune remarks, it is ‘charged with the first throes of love and rendezvous to rekindle first moments.’³³ Reviewer James Stuart similarly observes that within ‘Totem Poem,’ the speaker and his lover exist ‘in the timeless daze and languor of love.’³⁴

Many of these critics have drawn attention to what is distinctive about Davies’ poetry. However, the constraints of the book review format have curtailed opportunities for more sustained analysis. This thesis builds upon critics’ early insights by taking that next analytical step in reading Davies. I argue that by bringing together opposites (such as the tension created by mixing romantic and postmodern aesthetics), Davies’ poetry produces an ‘electric’ charge that augments and amplifies the vitality of his material observations. Using ‘Totem Poem’ to challenge Kane’s theory of ‘belated romanticism,’ I also argue that romanticism is the heartbeat of Australian poetry: rather than reinforcing negativity, it is part of what gives our poetry natality – a positive force that brings things into life.³⁵

¹²⁹ Davies, *Totem*, 28.

¹³⁰ Davies, 28.

¹³¹ Davies, 28.

¹³² Davies, 28.

¹³³ Braune, ‘Bev Braune Reviews Luke Davies.’

¹³⁴ Stuart, ‘James Stuart Reviews Luke Davies.’

¹³⁵ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 5.

1.6 'Totem Poem' and the sublime

One trademark of Davies' poetic technique is the way he confounds scale by bringing together vastness and smallness. For example, in juxtaposing 'the smallest animal before the insect kingdom' with 'the sudden deaths / of galaxies,' 'Totem Poem' reveals a fascination with thresholds: the smallest of the small is contrasted with the largest of the large as a way of exploring the material limitations of the universe.³⁶ In this sense, Davies' poetry could be analysed through the philosophical framework of the sublime, especially since the word 'sublime' is derived from the Latin *sublīmis*, which literally translates as 'up to the threshold.'³⁷

The first philosopher to write about the sublime as a literary aesthetic was the ancient Greek rhetorician Longinus, whose treatise *On the Sublime* (written around the 1st century CE) identifies sublimity as 'an eminence and excellence in language' that carries the hearer 'not to persuasion but to ecstasy'.³⁸ Relevant to this thesis is the section of *On the Sublime* in which Longinus discusses amplification:

Amplification is, they say, language which invests the subject with greatness. Of course this definition may serve in common for sublimity, and passion, and tropes, since they, too, invest the language with greatness of a particular kind. To me it seems that they differ from one another in this, that Sublimity lies in intensity, Amplification also in multitude; consequently sublimity often exists in a single idea, amplification necessarily implies quantity and abundance.³⁹

If Longinus were to critically evaluate 'Totem Poem,' it is possible, considering this statement, that he would label it as 'great,' but not necessarily 'sublime,' in the sense that it contains a

¹³⁶ Davies, *Totem*, 28.

¹³⁷ Shaw, *The Sublime*, 1.

¹³⁸ Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 2.

¹³⁹ Longinus, 27.

‘multitude’ of ideas, and that it displays ‘quantity and abundance.’⁴⁰ The impressive length of ‘Totem Poem,’ with its many repeated images and refrains, creates the impression of amplification. However its abundant profusion of concepts possibly obfuscates the ‘single idea’ that Longinus felt was necessarily to produce sublimity.⁴¹

It is also possible to argue that all of the multitudinous concepts and references in ‘Totem Poem’ actually do relate back to a single idea, which is the notion of an all-encompassing, undying love. Furthermore, the way in which Longinus links sublimity with intensity could also earn ‘Totem Poem’ a categorical inclusion in his sublime schemata, since, to use McCooey’s terminology, it displays ‘lyrical intensity.’⁴² In amid the overabundance of motifs, images, symbols and references in ‘Totem Poem,’ there are also moments of singular intensity, such as in the line: ‘The great bird cawed its majesty, a sonic boom; and even I was barely welcome there.’⁴³ In this example, the figure of the ‘yellow-tailed black cockatoo’ calls out at a volume so loud, it is likened to the deafening sound of a sonic boom.’⁴⁴ In this moment even the speaker of the poem seems to get pushed to the outer edge of this realm, into a soundless oblivion.

As the British literary scholar Philip Shaw points out in *The Sublime* (2006), ‘for Longinus, the discourse of the sublime, whether in political oratory or in epic verse, works to overcome the rational powers of its audience.’⁴⁵ This theme of being overtaken or overcome, which began with Longinus and his claim that the sublime is produced by ‘grandeur in speech and poetry,’ has survived the many permutations of sublime theory throughout the ages.’⁴⁶ It can also be observed in *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* (published in the late 1600s) by the English theologian Thomas Burnet, which, as Shaw phrases it, ‘locates the sublime within

¹⁴⁰ Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 27.

¹⁴¹ Longinus, 27.

¹⁴² McCooey, ‘Surviving Australian Poetry,’ 69.

¹⁴³ Davies, *Totem*, 5.

¹⁴⁴ Davies, 5.

¹⁴⁵ Shaw, *The Sublime*, 4 5.

¹⁴⁶ Shaw, 4.

the context of the biblical apocalypse.’⁴⁷ Shaw brings attention to an important difference between the writings of Longinus and Burnet, which is that while Longinus ‘stresses sublimity as a purely rhetorical phenomenon,’ Burnet paid ‘close attention to the vast and grand in nature.’⁴⁸ Importantly, this sparked an artistic interest in ‘the lofty mountain peak or the swelling ocean,’ which is significant because a fascination with the external world would eventually become one of the defining features of romanticism.⁴⁹

A central work which Shaw describes as having ‘a massive and lasting impact on discussion of the sublime’ is Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (published in 1757).⁵⁰ Burke, who was an Irish political philosopher, essentially produced a ‘secularised version of Burnet’s apocalypse,’ Shaw argues, in which the aesthetic contemplation of ‘the awesome destructive power of nature’ is depicted as capable of strengthening the mind’s ‘powers of conception.’⁵¹ In his preface to the 2008 reprint of this work, James Boulton describes it as ‘among the most important documents of its century,’ pointing out that it had a direct influence on the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who in 1764 published *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*.⁵² Boulton also states that Burke’s thinking on the sublime directly inspired the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth.⁵³ Although Wordsworth ‘was no slavish disciple of any aesthetic theory,’ Burke’s influence on his thinking can nonetheless be seen in his ‘language and habits of observation,’ as Boulton explains:⁵⁴

in the discipline of ‘beauty’ and of ‘fear’ of which Wordsworth makes so much in *The Prelude*, we may have a relic – given, of course, added significance by the poet’s personal

¹⁴⁷ Shaw, *The Sublime*, 5.

¹⁴⁸ Shaw, 5.

¹⁴⁹ Shaw, 5.

¹⁵⁰ Shaw, 48.

¹⁵¹ Shaw, 6.

¹⁵² Boulton, ‘Editor’s Preface,’ in Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, vii.

¹⁵³ Boulton, vii.

¹⁵⁴ Boulton, ‘Editor’s Introduction,’ in Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, ci.

vision – of Burke’s division of aesthetic experience into that which causes ‘love, or some passion similar to it’, and that which ‘operates in a manner analogous to terror’.⁵⁵

The division of aesthetic experience into that which produces feelings of love, and that which produces feelings of terror, is, at a basic level, the key concept of Burke’s *Enquiry*. Boulton credits Burke’s treatise with the rise of popularity of the word ‘sublime’ in the second half of the 18th century, asserting that the *Enquiry* ‘undoubtedly gave to attitudes already prevalent and terms which had been used without systematic reference, a popularity that forwarded the movement known as ‘Romantic.’⁵⁶ But how might Burke’s thinking be applied to ‘Totem Poem,’ when discussing the sublime in relation to Davies as a postmodern romantic poet?

Section VIII of Burke’s *Enquiry* identifies ‘infinity’ as a source of the sublime, since it ‘has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime.’⁵⁷ Looking at ‘Totem Poem,’ there are a number of examples that allude, directly and indirectly, to the notion of infinity in ways that could be said to produce a ‘delightful horror.’ For instance, the line ‘we were dogs who knew the infinite is now’ brings together two concepts, the ‘infinite’ and the ‘now,’ which could be interpreted as two measurements of time.⁵⁸ Again, Davies has brought together two extreme opposites, which in this example is a limitless amount of time, contrasted with the idea of a singular, finite moment. There are other lines in ‘Totem Poem’ that allude to infinity, including ‘atomically, energetically, / everything was wave function. And a wave continues forever into space.’⁵⁹ The concept of a wave of energy continuing ‘forever into space’ also evokes the idea of the infinite, invoking a kind of scientific sublime. Similarly, the lines ‘those birds were all released again. Such buoyancy. / They go on forever like that’ create an image

¹⁵⁵ Boulton, ‘Editor’s Introduction,’ in Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, ci.

¹⁵⁶ Boulton, lv.

¹⁵⁷ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 73.

¹⁵⁸ Davies, *Totem*, 10.

¹⁵⁹ Davies, 10.

of an endless quantity of birds flying freely ‘forever,’ possibly also into space, which is at once beautiful but also potentially overwhelming.⁶⁰

In Section XIV of Burke’s *Enquiry*, which is titled ‘Light,’ Burke uses the concepts of light and darkness to show how an interplay of opposites can produce sublimity.⁶¹ As Burke explains, ‘a quick transition from light to darkness’ can produce the sublime, and a transition across a threshold ‘from darkness to light’ has an even greater effect.⁶² He goes on to state that the interplay of light is only one example wherein ‘opposite extremes operate equally in favour of the sublime, which in all things abhors mediocrity.’⁶³ In this sense, it could again be argued that Davies’ poetry produces the sublime through its intermingling of oppositional aspects, and its interest in threshold moments that hold us between those oppositional experiences or states.

Since Burke, philosophical interest in the sublime has continued, and although sublime theory has significantly evolved, there are still aspects of Burke’s thinking that have persisted. Kant, for instance, partially agreed with Burke’s assertion that the sublime causes a feeling of pleasure that is mixed with astonishment or even terror.⁶⁴ Following on from that, in the late 20th century, the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard published *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, which was written as a direct response to Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*.⁶⁵ As Shaw explains, in Lyotard’s discussions the sublime acts ‘as a signifier for that which exceeds the grasp of reason.’⁶⁶ This might seem far removed from Burke’s *Enquiries*, yet it still contains traces of Burke’s idea that the sublime ‘anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force.’⁶⁷

¹⁶⁰ Davies, *Totem*, 6.

¹⁶¹ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 82.

¹⁶² Burke, 79.

¹⁶³ Burke, 80.

¹⁶⁴ Boulton, ‘Editor’s Introduction,’ in Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, cxxvii.

¹⁶⁵ Shaw, *The Sublime*, 116.

¹⁶⁶ Shaw, 4.

¹⁶⁷ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 57.

In the initial stages of researching this thesis, it seemed logical to apply sublime theory to readings of Davies' poetry. Ultimately however, through the process of researching Davies' work, I made the decision to explore his poetry instead through the framework of romanticism. This came about through a close engagement with Kane's *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, which generated a rich line of discussion not just about Davies' poetry, but about Australian romantic poetry more generally. Romanticism as a category is broad enough to include poets with similar poetic styles to Davies, such as Dorothy Porter and Robert Adamson, while the sublime proved to be more restrictive.

Moreover, in performing close readings of Davies' poetry, the sonic elements stood out in ways that ultimately changed the direction of my research. In analysing a work of poetry as dense as 'Totem Poem,' it was necessary to establish a starting point, a way in. Focussing on the effects of amplification in Davies' poetry ultimately gave rise to the idea of the amplified lyric. Echoes of this idea can be found across all four chapters of this thesis: Chapter Two looks at how 'Totem Poem' uses aspects of postmodernism to effectively intensify and amplify its romanticism, while Chapters Three and Four discuss how Davies has electrified and reenergised the ancient poetic forms of praise and lament.

Australia has been reverberating with songs and stories for tens of thousands of years, and contemporary Australian poets such as Davies continue this tradition from a post-settlement position. Focussing on lyrical amplification (rather than, for example, the poetic sublime) has made it possible to present a broader portrait of Australian poetics, one that, for example, includes the voices of Indigenous poets. Just as Davies' poetry has received very limited scholarly attention, many of the additional Australian poets included in this thesis (with the exception of Robert Adamson) likewise have been overlooked. Broadening my analysis of lyricism to include 'postmodern romanticism' has made it possible to include a

wide range of Australian poets by way of comparison to Davies, and to present Australian poetry as multitudinous and sonorous which it is.

Chapter Two

There was a gap: 'Totem Poem' and postmodern romanticism

This chapter takes inspiration from the line 'there was a gap and we entered it gladly' in the second stanza of 'Totem Poem.' The concept of entering a gap complements my analysis of *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity* by Paul Kane, as his theory is that the 'modus operandi' of Australian romantic poets is to 'fill a gap with another gap.'² As Kane argues, 'a strain of romanticism has established itself in the corpus of Australian poetry – a strain all the more virulent, we might say, because it is responding to an originary lack to begin with.'³ In this chapter I will broaden this understanding of Australian lyricism to include late 20th-century and early 21st-century poets, whose poetry exhibits a new 'strain' of romanticism, one that is grounded in sensuality and materialism. Rather than being reflective of absence and negativity, I will show that Australian postmodern romantic poetry is positive, relational, and intensely present.

2.1 Delineating Kane's 'belated romanticism'

In the first chapter of *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, Kane states that his study is based on two ideas. The first is that 'romanticism has had a profound impact on Australian poetry by way of an absence,' and the second is that 'concepts of negativity are crucial for understanding how Australian poetry has responded to that lack of romanticism.'⁴ In line with these ideas, he argues that 'the full effect of romanticism as a historical matrix never reached Australia,' and, consequently, 'in the absence of a native romanticism, Australian

¹ Davies, *Totem*, 3.

² Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 19–20.

³ Kane, 5.

⁴ Kane, 8.

poets have been forced to come to terms with that gap or negativity in their poetic heritage.⁵ Because of that necessity, argues Kane, absence became ‘an undeniable and inescapable presence’ in all Australian romantic poetry.⁶ To be clear, Kane does not equate ‘negativity’ with ‘nothingness.’ Rather, he draws from Hegel’s *Science of Logic* in calling it a ‘driving force,’ as well as Freud’s theory of negation whereby ‘repressed material is made available, though on the condition that it continues to be denied.’⁷ Kane provides a number of examples of the ‘Thematics of Negativity’ that he has observed within Australian poetry, which can be roughly summarised as a recurrence of themes relating to emptiness and inauthenticity.⁸ These themes manifest variously; one example he provides is the ‘silence’ in the poetry of Judith Wright, which, at times, represents ‘death and darkness and absence.’⁹ Another manifestation of negativity Kane explores is the ‘nihilism’ of Kenneth Slessor, whose career transition from ‘a poet in a late romantic mode’ to, at the end of his career, ‘an ironic modernist’ points to a poet ‘who has undergone a harrowing of the self.’¹⁰

Kane does not argue that romanticism *never* reached Australia – rather that it arrived ‘belatedly,’ and that it came ‘in the guise of an absence.’ As he explains:

The absence of an indigenous romanticism gave Australian poets a belated sense of their own status, and at the same time forced them to try to overcome that absence by inaugurating (through their own work) an Australian romanticism. But to be a poet in Europe or Britain or the United States from the mid-nineteenth century on was already to be an inheritor of a national romantic tradition. In Australia, where there was no such tradition, poets were constrained to reimagine an absence, or a negativity, as a presence in order to construct or achieve a poetic self.¹¹

What Kane is describing, essentially, is an insecurity that stems from a sense of loss or lack, which manifests as a need to try and cover up, or make up for, what is missing (and will

⁵ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 10; 19.

⁶ Kane, 20.

⁷ Kane, 36–38.

⁸ Kane, 43–45.

⁹ Kane, 159.

¹⁰ Kane, 101.

¹¹ Kane, 19–20.

¹² Kane, 35–36.

forever remain missing). It is interesting however to note that in this passage, Kane (again) uses the word ‘indigenous’ to mean ‘original.’³ His use of this term is provocative – if not offensive – given that Australia’s Indigenous peoples had occupied the country, and filled it with language, stories and song, for many thousands of years before British settlement in 1788. While Kane is correct in stating that ‘Australia did not experience romanticism during the romantic period per se,’ his portrayal of Australia’s poetic culture as one that is mired in absence and nothingness is problematic.⁴ The examples of Australian lyric and romantic poetry examined in this thesis provide a counterpoint to this view, and reflect an aesthetic stance that I would argue is the very opposite of insecure or inadequate. My aim is to characterise Australian poetry as dynamic and energetic, and most importantly, as positively distinctive, rather than one that ‘belatedly’ reflects aesthetic movements that originated elsewhere.

2.2 ‘Totem Poem’ as a challenge to Kane’s theory of negativity

In testing the validity of Kane’s assertion that absence is an ‘inescapable presence’ within Australian romantic poetry, Davies’ ‘Totem Poem’ provides an extremely fertile starting point.⁵ Even at a glance, everything about ‘Totem Poem’ is suggestive of abundance: its sheer length, for instance, is evocative of repletion. The audacity of publishing a 37-page love poem is, in itself, a declaration: there is nothing apologetic or uncertain about it. Even the dedication at the beginning makes it clear that ‘Totem Poem’ is ardent and sincere: ‘*for Victoria, with love.*’⁶ That said, it could also be argued that the over-the-top nature of ‘Totem Poem’ is mere overcompensation: a hyperactive attempt to fill, to use Kane’s phrasing, ‘a void

¹³ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 35–36.

¹⁴ Kane, 10.

¹⁵ Kane, 19–20.

¹⁶ Davies, *Totem*, dedication.

with an absence.’⁷ In applying Kane’s theory to ‘Totem Poem,’ it is necessary to return again to the beginning of the poem:

In the yellow time of pollen, in the blue time of lilacs,
in the green that would balance on the wide green world,
air filled with flux, world-in-a-belly
in the blue lilac weather, she had written a letter:
*You came into my life really fast and I liked it.*¹⁸

An enduring trend within Western storytelling is to begin with a phrase which establishes time and place. For instance, fairy tales begin with variations of ‘Once upon a time in a faraway land,’ the *Star Wars* movies all start with the phrase ‘A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away,’ and even the first sentence of the Bible is ‘In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.’⁹ Similarly, the line ‘In the yellow time of pollen,’ signifies that a grand story is about to be told.²⁰ However, the time and place of this narrative are ambiguous and surreal: although ‘pollen’ and ‘lilacs’ are both of the natural, material world, they are presented in a way that disassociates them from a specific geographic location.² Additionally, the repetition of ‘time’ is deliberately unsettling: within the first line Davies has created an unreal setting that is simultaneously ‘yellow time’ and ‘blue time,’ which could be interpreted as two distinct time periods coexisting in the one moment to create ‘the green that would balance on the wide green world.’²² Time is not linear in the narrative of ‘Totem Poem.’ Indeed from the outset it is presented as something that can be disrupted and rearranged. There is a sense that Davies is seeking to create a grand narrative that exists somehow outside the linearity of time.

These allusions to grand narratives in ‘Totem Poem’ might at first appear to be at odds with the romantic ethos, which, as I’ve established, strives to overthrow oppressive

¹⁷ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 5.

¹⁸ Davies, *Totem*, 3.

¹⁹ Grimm, *Once Upon a Time*; Perkins, ‘Star Wars (1977).’; Gen 1:1 NKJV.

²⁰ Davies, *Totem*, 3.

²¹ Davies, 3.

²² Davies, 3.

power structures in pursuit of freedom. In Section 1.4 I brought attention to the observation made by Emma Francis that ‘Romanticism has within itself a critique of grand narrative,’ and because of this, romanticism can be seen as an early precursor to postmodernism, which is concerned with destabilisation and deconstruction.²³ However, although the opening stanza of ‘Totem Poem’ tonally emulates the beginning of a grand narrative (whereby time and place are formally established), the dual existence of ‘yellow time’ and ‘blue time,’ together with the upheaval suggested by the word ‘flux’ work to produce an unsettling effect.²⁴ Similarly, the world of ‘Totem Poem’ is established as at once verdant and expansive (‘wide green world’) yet also internal and tightly contained (world-in-a-belly’).²⁵ From its outset, the poem presents us with an impossible space of limitless possibility, in which the forces of construction and deconstruction are given equal power. The word ‘balance,’ then, emerges as particularly significant: it points to the possibility of seemingly disparate forces (aesthetic, thematic, or otherwise) coexisting in an eerie harmony; humming with charge.

Kane’s theory of ‘belated romanticism’ reflects a narrative of progress, and it operates, arguably, within what Bartels, Eckstein, Waller and Wiemann in *Postcolonial Literatures in English* (2019) describe as ‘colonialism’s temporality.’²⁶ As Bartels et al. explain, this understanding of time ‘hinges on presenting the colonisers as the embodiment and harbingers of linear conceptions of “progress,” “modernity,” and “history” and the colonised as “backward,” “primitive,” or “outside of history.”’²⁷ Drawing upon observations made by Russell West-Pavlov in his 2013 book *Temporalities*, Bartels et al. draw attention to ‘forms of temporality identified as specifically European and imperialist.’²⁸ They explain:

Such ‘imperial’ time is identified as either the notion of time as an arrow, a linear, abstract, and universal factor existing independently of human construction, or the

²³ Francis, ‘Conquered Good and Conquering Ill,’ 53.

²⁴ Davies, *Totem*, 3.

²⁵ Davies, 3.

²⁶ Bartels et al., *Postcolonial Literatures*, 171.

²⁷ Bartels et al., 171.

²⁸ Bartels et al., 172.

notion that even though time is a human construct, it can nevertheless be split into measurable units of comparable length, establishing a universal standard. Writers and scholars have pointed out that such conceptions of time, while being just one model among many, were posited as norm in imperialist endeavours and served to discredit alternatives.²⁹

For this reason, Bartels et al. argue that part of the process of decolonisation is the recovery of ‘alternative conceptions of time.’³⁰

Given that the focus of Kane’s study is Australian poetry, it’s useful and important to reflect upon Indigenous Australian belief systems and conceptions of time. ‘The Dreaming’ (as it is known in English) or *Jukurrpa* (a term used by the Warlpiri people of the Tanami Desert) is commonly misunderstood as being synonymous with the distant past.³¹ In her article “‘Dreamtime’ and ‘The Dreaming’ – an Introduction’ the Australian scholar Christine Judith Nicholls describes *Jukurrpa* as ‘a religion grounded in the land itself,’ one which ‘incorporates creation and other land-based narratives, social processes including kinship regulations, morality and ethics.’³² As Nicholls explains, this concept ‘embraces time past, present and future, a substantively different concept from populist characterisations portraying it as ‘timeless’ or having taken place at the so-called ‘dawn of time.’³³ In an effort to counter this misunderstanding, Nicholls brings attention to the term ‘everywhen,’ which was coined by the Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner in 1956, who wrote ‘one cannot “fix” The Dreaming in time: it was, and is, everywhen.’³⁴

In *Deep Time Dreaming* (2018), the Australian historian Billy Griffiths explains that time is not completely irrelevant to the Dreaming, but rather that it is ‘distinct from a scientific approach to the past.’³⁵ He also states that the Dreaming is a concept ‘so subtle and pervasive

²⁹ Bartels et al., *Postcolonial Literatures*, 172.

³⁰ Bartels et al., 172.

³¹ Christine Judith Nicholls, ‘‘Dreamtime’ and ‘The Dreaming’ – an introduction,’ *The Conversation*, January 23, 2014, 6:36 a.m. EST, <https://theconversation.com/dreamtime-and-the-dreaming-an-introduction-20833>.

³² Nicholls.

³³ Nicholls.

³⁴ Nicholls.

³⁵ Griffiths, *Deep Time Dreaming*, 6 7.

that it eludes Western understandings of “time”, “history” and “religion”.³⁶ The title of Griffiths’ book draws upon the concept of ‘deep time,’ a phrase coined in 1981 by John McPhee to describe ‘the course of geological events,’ such as the formation of glaciers and the movements of tectonic plates.³⁷ He observes that ‘like its twin, ‘deep space’, the phrase demands that we leave behind the world we thought we knew to confront the limits of our understanding.’³⁸

It’s also important to note the roles that the arts play within Aboriginal culture. In *Gadi Mirrabooka: Australian Aboriginal Tales from the Dreaming* (2001), Helen McKay explains that together, these artistic practices form ‘a cultural whole.’³⁹ McKay points out that storytelling through song is particularly meaningful, since it provides ‘a direct link between the Dreamtime and the present.’⁴⁰ As she explains, ‘the songs were passed down from the Beginning and celebrated all aspects of life, bringing the past, present, and future into song.’⁴¹

In *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, Kane describes a ‘preoccupation with origins and originality in Australian poetry.’⁴² He argues that this can be observed, in part, through the ‘many poems which refer to its discovery, its exploration and its founding (all from the standpoint of white settlement).’⁴³ Here he openly admits that he is only considering the viewpoint of the white settlers. He further admits, in discussing his ‘Thematics of Negativity’ within Australian poetry, that ‘the representation of Australia as “other,” as a negation of European or Western matrixes of culture, climate, geography and botany, is at the heart of how (white) Australia has thought of itself, and to a large extent continues to do so.’⁴⁴ To this I am offering a counterpoint, one that acknowledges the presence of Aboriginal

³⁶ Griffiths, *Deep Time Dreaming*, 6.

³⁷ Griffiths, 5.

³⁸ Griffiths, 5.

³⁹ McKay, *Gadi Mirrabooka*, 20.

⁴⁰ McKay, 23.

⁴¹ McKay, 23.

⁴² Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 28.

⁴³ Kane, 29.

⁴⁴ Kane, 43 44.

Australia, and resists the colonial viewpoint that Australia is, to use Kane's words, 'empty' and 'void' both in terms of its landscape and its cultural heritage.⁴⁵ 'Totem Poem' is an ideal case study for this purpose because it explores 'alternative conceptions of time,' which Bartels et al. described as essential to resisting imperialist temporalities.⁴⁶ To use a line from 'Totem Poem' itself: 'we were everywhere at once.'⁴⁷ While Kane's argument is that Australian romantic poetry is 'grounded in absence,' the lovers in 'Totem Poem' are *present*, and not only that, they're present 'everywhere' and 'at once.'⁴⁸ My argument is not that Davies' poetry reflects Aboriginal conceptions of time, but I am however interested in temporal modes that were here forever, and are aesthetically Australian.

The notion of there being a 'gap' within Australia's poetic lineage is central to Kane's argument.⁴⁹ Coincidentally, 'Totem Poem' contains a repeated motif of a gap, which first appears in the second and third stanzas:

When we let go the basket of the good-luck birds
the sky erupted open in the hail of its libation;
there was a gap and we entered it gladly. Indeed the birds
may have broken the sky and we, soaked, squelched
in the mud of our joy, braided with wet-thighed surrender.

In the yellow time of pollen near the blue time of lilacs
there was a gap in things. And here we are.⁵⁰

In Chapter One, I posited that this image of entering the sky is intrinsically romantic, since it appears to represent the pursuit of freedom. I also brought attention to Magdalena Ball's hypothesis that the 'gap' in 'Totem Poem' is an allusion to the Big Bang.⁵¹ Considered in the context of Kane's argument, it should be noted that although gaps do frequently appear in

⁴⁵ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 44.

⁴⁶ Bartels et al., *Postcolonial Literatures*, 172.

⁴⁷ Davies, *Totem*, 31.

⁴⁸ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 8.

⁴⁹ Kane, 5.

⁵⁰ Davies, *Totem*, 3.

⁵¹ Ball, 'A Review of Totem Poem.'

Davies' poem, they are just as frequently filled, and are not positioned as an originating force for the poetry itself. For instance, in the second stanza (featured above), the phrase 'there was a gap' is immediately followed by 'and we entered it gladly.'⁵² When the phrase is repeated in the third stanza, the lovers are already inside the gap: 'there was a gap in things. And here we are.'⁵³ In this stanza, 'yellow time' and 'blue time' coexist, and similarly the lovers exist simultaneously outside *and* inside a gap. The next time the gap appears, in the eighth stanza, it is paired with an image of flowers: 'there was a gap in things; and all the lilacs bloomed.'⁵⁴ The fact that Davies used a semicolon here (instead of a comma) is meaningful, because it signifies that there is a connection between the 'gap in things' and the 'lilacs.'⁵⁵ In this example, the gap is directly linked to an image of fecundity. The 'wet-thighed' lovers themselves could also be seen to symbolise fertility and new beginnings.⁵⁶ There is also an erotic overtone to the idea of repeatedly filling a gap. Although Kane's claim is that Australian poetry up until the end of the 20th century reflects negativity and absence, 'Totem Poem' appears determined to start a new trend as a postmodern romantic poem. It is as if Davies has sent two people back in time, or *through* time, directly into Australia's romantic 'absence,' (a 'gap') to repeatedly and ecstatically make love.⁵⁷ The image of the sky erupting open 'in the hail of its libation' stages catharsis, and the subsequent soaking and squelching in a joyous 'mud' could be seen as a fertile base for Australian romantic poetry to take seed and flourish.⁵⁸

Relevant to this discussion is chapter six of Kane's book, 'Nihilism in Kenneth Slessor.'⁵⁹ Slessor was a modern Australian poet, and, as Kane argues, his poetry 'is invariably

⁵² Davies, *Totem*, 3.

⁵³ Davies, 3.

⁵⁴ Davies, 5.

⁵⁵ Davies, 5.

⁵⁶ Davies, 3.

⁵⁷ Davies, 3.

⁵⁸ Davies, 3.

⁵⁹ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 96

associated with a silence, a truncation or gap that cannot be adequately accounted for.⁶⁰ In describing Slessor's early poems, Kane identifies a 'romantic voice' that can be found 'overtly' in much of his early work.⁶¹ Throughout the course of Slessor's life, his poetic style changed, argues Kane:

What every commentator on Slessor has noticed is the way Slessor eventually refashions his verse and reconstitutes himself as a 'modern' poet. This fact, however, does not negate the romantic underpinnings of his poetry... What it does do is suggest an acute conflict within Slessor that manifests in his poetry as his putative 'nihilism.'⁶²

Kane goes on to describe the 'thematics of the negative' within Slessor's poetry.⁶³ An early example is Slessor's poem 'Stars' (published in 1924), which juxtaposes 'romantic love and black despair.'⁶⁴ Slessor's 'acute conflict' can also be observed in his famous poem 'Five Bells' (published in 1939), which he wrote in response to the sudden death of his friend Joe Lynch. According to Kane, 'Five Bells' is 'the real proof-text in discussions of Slessor's nihilistic or conversely his affirmative vision of life.'⁶⁵

What makes Kane's analysis of 'Five Bells' useful to my discussion about 'Totem Poem' and alternative concepts of time, is the attention Kane gives to the representations of time within Slessor's poem. He begins by quoting an article Slessor wrote for a newspaper in 1967 (which was subsequently published in his 1970 book *Bread and Wine*) in which Slessor describes 'Five Bells' as 'an expression of the relativity of 'time.'⁶⁶ Kane also remarks upon how Slessor compares 'Five Bells' to 'an Arabian fairy tale where a man dips his head in a "basin of magic water" and experiences "an entire existence on another time-scale" in the five

⁶⁰ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 96.

⁶¹ Kane, 100.

⁶² Kane, 100 l.

⁶³ Kane, 101.

⁶⁴ Kane, 101.

⁶⁵ Kane, 104.

⁶⁶ Kane, 104.

seconds of his submersion.⁶⁷ These preoccupations are apparent from the opening stanza of ‘Five Bells,’ which appears entirely in italics:

*Time that is moved by little fidget wheels
Is not my time, the flood that does not flow.
Between the double and the single bell
Of a ship’s hour, between a round of bells
From the dark warship riding there below,
I have lived many lives, and this one life
Of Joe, long dead, who lives between five bells.⁶⁸*

As Kane observes, the poem immediately ‘marks a distinction’ between two notions of time.⁶⁹ The first line uses an image of ‘*little fidget wheels*’ to represent the ordinary progression of time, as measured by clockwork, but this is juxtaposed in the second line with ‘*the flood that does not flow,*’ which Kane describes as ‘an image of stasis.’⁷⁰ The tension between time that moves steadily forward (represented throughout the poem by the mechanical ringing of a ship’s bell) and static time (which is represented twice in the poem as ‘the flood that does not flow’) is a ‘familiar duality’ within Slessor’s poetry, Kane argues.⁷¹ He observes that the immovable flood in Slessor’s poem ‘suggests an intersection with eternity, or a moment out of time.’⁷²

One obvious similarity between ‘Five Bells’ and ‘Totem Poem’ is that the concept of ‘time’ is positioned at the forefront of each poem. Both also begin by describing two different ‘types’ of time: in ‘Totem Poem’ it is the ‘yellow time’ and ‘blue time,’ and in ‘Five Bells’ it is time that moves, and time that stays still.⁷³ ‘Totem Poem’ similarly contains a tension between motion and stillness: for instance, the phrase ‘air filled with flux,’ which appears in the first stanza (and again towards the end of the poem), is juxtaposed with multiple images of

⁶⁷ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 104.

⁶⁸ Slessor, ‘Five Bells,’ 280.

⁶⁹ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 105.

⁷⁰ Kane, 105.

⁷¹ Slessor, ‘Five Bells,’ 282.

⁷² Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 105.

⁷³ Davies, *Totem*, 3.

stillness, such in the line ‘at the Gare de l'Est, if time stood still, if she would come.’⁷⁴ Consider also the way that ‘Five Bells’ inserts multiple lifespans (*‘I have lived many lives’*) into the brief moment of silence between the rings of a bell (*‘between the double and the single bell’*).⁷⁵ There is a resemblance here between ‘Five Bells’ and these lines from ‘Totem Poem’: ‘A practised ear could hear, between two breaths, / deep space wherein the mind collects itself.’⁷⁶ Here, a concept associated with incredible vastness (‘deep space’) is inserted into a brief moment of stillness (‘between two breaths’).⁷⁷ Even Slessor’s use of the phrase ‘relativeness of ‘time’’ in his own reflection upon ‘Five Bells’ chimes with one of Davies’ notes for ‘Totem Poem,’ where he explains that according to Einstein's General Theory of Relativity, as a photon travels at the speed of light through space, ‘space up ahead becomes infinitely slowed, until it effectively ceases to exist.’⁷⁸

Comparing the poetry of Slessor and Davies reveals a shared fascination with dualities. It also suggests both poets are interested in the romantic notion that time can be slowed, or even stopped entirely. As Kane points out, Slessor’s poem ‘Out of Time’ is similar to ‘Five Bells’ since it contains the same tension between moving and immovable time: even its title ‘plays on the double meaning of beyond time and a lack of time.’⁷⁹ ‘Out of Time’ uses images of water to represent time, such as in the first line: ‘I saw Time flowing like the hundred yachts / That fly behind the daylight, foxed with air.’⁸⁰ The third and fourth stanzas of the poem continue this idea of time moving forward in an unstoppable flow:

Vilely, continuously, stupidly,
Time takes me, drills me, drives through blood and vein,
So water bends the seaweeds in the sea,
The tide goes over, but the weeds remain.

⁷⁴ Davies, *Totem*, 3; 31; 9.

⁷⁵ Slessor, ‘Five Bells,’ 280.

⁷⁶ Davies, *Totem*, 11.

⁷⁷ Davies, 11.

⁷⁸ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 104; Davies, *Totem*, 84.

⁷⁹ Kane, 105.

⁸⁰ Slessor, ‘Out of Time,’ 278.

Time, you must cry farewell, take up the track,
And leave this lovely moment at your back!⁸¹

Kane explains that ‘the lovely moment’ in this poem recounts ‘a particular experience’ that is ‘outside or beyond time.’⁸² In the example above, the ‘flow’ of time is represented by a powerful tide that ‘bends the seaweeds in the sea.’ However, as Kane notes, the speaker ‘takes heart and decides that, like a seaweed, he remains firm while time moves on.’⁸³ Section II of ‘Out of Time’ begins with the line: ‘Time leaves the lovely moment at his back,’ which suggests that it is possible for particular moments to somehow exist outside of time.⁸⁴ This section of the poem ends optimistically, in a mood of joy and resilience: ‘I and the moment laugh, and let him go, / Leaning against his golden undertow.’ At this point in the poem, it still seems possible that time can be defied: that small bubbles of experience can be retained forever and spared from the ‘golden undertow.’⁸⁵ The crescendo of ‘Out of Time’ occurs towards the end of the third (and final) section, with the couplet: ‘The moment’s world it was; and I was part, / Fleshless and ageless, changeless and made free.’⁸⁶ As Kane states:

These beautiful and epiphanic lines limn the break-up of linear or flowing time which results in an experience of transcendence. It is the romantic moment *par excellence*, the apparently unmediated access to presence, being, truth, where one is finally ‘Fleshless and ageless, changeless and made free.’ It is the validation or culmination of Slessor’s romantic impulse and heritage; he finds himself in finding himself out of time.⁸⁷

Here, Kane describes a ‘break-up of linear time’ within Slessor’s poem that leads to ‘an experience of transcendence.’⁸⁸ At this moment in the poem, the speaker ‘finds himself outside of the flow of time, and in doing so, discovers his true self, i.e., a self that is

⁸¹ Slessor, ‘Out of Time,’ 279.

⁸² Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 105.

⁸³ Kane, 105.

⁸⁴ Slessor, ‘Out of Time,’ 279.

⁸⁵ Slessor, 279.

⁸⁶ Slessor, ‘Out of Time,’ 279.

⁸⁷ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 106.

⁸⁸ Kane, 106.

‘changeless.’ However, this is not where the poem ends. Instead of leaving readers with this vision of transcendence, the last stanzas of the poem ‘suck’ this romantic persona back into the flow of time:

‘Fool, would you leave this country?’ cried my heart,
But I was taken by the suck of sea.

The gulls go down, the body dies and rots,
And Time flows past them like a hundred yachts.⁸⁹

‘The suck of sea,’ as Kane observes, ‘is precisely that flow of time he had momentarily escaped, but which is evidentially inescapable in the end.’⁹⁰ He continues:

The whole poem now comes into focus as an ironic parable of false hope and terrible knowledge. The one ‘lovely moment’ of seeming permanence is subject to time. For Slessor, if this is so, then no matter what heights one attains, the brute fact of temporarily levels and cancels such moments. In the terms of the paradox of the title, our moments out of time run out of time because they are always made out of the substance of time itself.⁹

‘Out of Time’ thus satisfies Kane’s theory of negativity, since although the poem does rise to an ecstatic peak, it ultimately crashes back down again into a place of absence (‘run out of time’). The moment in which the speaker is freed from time is negated, and the idea that time is an unstoppable force is reinforced by the last line of the poem, which – like the very first line – depicts time flowing ‘like a hundred yachts.’⁹²

Returning to ‘Five Bells,’ although the opening stanza of the poem appears to resist and challenge the notion of ‘*time that is moved by little fidget wheels,*’ it ends with a tone of sombre acceptance: the last stanza expresses the realisation that time is unstoppable, and that the

⁸⁹ Slessor, ‘Out of Time,’ 280.

⁹⁰ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 106.

⁹¹ Kane, 106.

⁹² Slessor, ‘Out of Time,’ 280.

dead are ultimately unrevivable.⁹³ Although the speaker of ‘Five Bells’ yearns to hear the voice of his deceased friend Joe, and calls out for him to ‘cry louder, beat the windows, bawl your name!’, he fails in his attempt to reach him, and instead hears ‘a boat’s whistle, and the scraping squeal / Of seabirds’ voices far away, and bells, / Five bells.’⁹⁴ As Kane argues: ‘Five Bells’ can certainly be interpreted as a statement of nihilism, insofar as it offers no adequate or accessible redemptive vision to counteract the Nothing that pervades the poem.’⁹⁵ Kane continues:

The depiction of a world without ‘immanent meaning’ is what prompts critics such as Judith Wright to say that ‘in Slessor’s poetry the abyss is finally triumphant.’ I would like to suggest, however, that this nihilism can be rendered in terms somewhat different to those we have been using, and that it operates not only thematically but as a dynamic principle in Slessor’s poetry as a whole. As such, it is another instance of how negativity operates structurally in Australian poetry.⁹⁶

While ‘Five Bells’ and ‘Out of Time’ both contain visions of transcendence, these visions are ultimately negated. When applied to Slessor, Kane’s theory of negativity is, therefore, sound. But it is worthwhile to reflect upon how Slessor’s poetry directly attempts to challenge the ‘bumpkin calculus of Time,’ as it is described in ‘Five Bells.’⁹⁷ From a postcolonial perspective, it’s possible to argue that Slessor was ahead of his time, in the sense that his poetry strives to overthrow the oppression of colonialism’s temporality. His poem ‘Out of Time,’ in particular, uses metaphors of violence to represent time as tyrannical, for instance: ‘Time, the bony knife, it runs me through,’ and ‘Time takes me, drills me, drives through blood and vein.’⁹⁸ Slessor was a modern romantic poet with the visionary capacity to imagine and to momentarily evoke conceptions of time that defy temporal narratives that follow straight, unyielding, and upward trajectories. What I am arguing is that Davies, as a

⁹³ Slessor, ‘Five Bells,’ 280.

⁹⁴ Slessor, 283.

⁹⁵ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 113.

⁹⁶ Kane, 113.

⁹⁷ Slessor, ‘Five Bells,’ 280.

⁹⁸ Slessor, ‘Out of Time,’ 279.

postmodern romantic poet, has extended Slessor's vision and, with 'Totem Poem,' broadened his concept of a 'lovely moment' into an endless moment.⁹⁹ While 'Five Bells' ends with 'five bells coldly ringing out,' 'Totem Poem' ends with 'the deep peal of bells and how the heart would hold the day.'¹⁰⁰ In Slessor's poem, the number of rings is specified: it is finite. However, in 'Totem Poem,' the phrase 'deep peal' connotes a sounding of bells that is prolonged, and potentially also infinite.¹⁰¹

Slessor, as a modern Australian romantic poet, is a clear antecedent to Davies. Reflecting upon Kane's analysis of Slessor's 'nihilistic' romanticism has suggested generative ways of contextualising what could be described as Davies' 'positivist' romanticism. Whereas Slessor's poetry contains erasures, negations and silences, 'Totem Poem' revolves around notions of presence, materiality, voicing, and embodiment. Kane describes the speaker of 'Five Bells' as searching for, but failing to find, an 'embodied presence.'¹⁰² In the realm of 'Totem Poem,' conversely, 'there is nothing / lost may not be found if sought.'¹⁰³

In order to provide further context for the Australian postmodern romantic mode, and to trace Kane's argument back to some of its cultural sources, I am now going to discuss the poem 'Ode to a Nightingale' by the English romantic poet John Keats.¹⁰⁴ Originally published in 1819, this poem also gives expression to the idea that the flow of time can be altered by some kind of greater force. In 'Ode to a Nightingale,' Keats depicts a bird as capable of living forever through its song. Consider, for instance, the seventh stanza:

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path

⁹⁹ Slessor, 'Out of Time,' 279.

¹⁰⁰ Slessor, 'Five Bells,' 283; Davies, *Totem*, 39.

¹⁰¹ Davies, *Totem*, 39.

¹⁰² Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 109.

¹⁰³ Davies, *Totem*, 14.

¹⁰⁴ Keats, 'Ode to a Nightingale.'

Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn. ⁰⁵

This excerpt expresses the idea that beauty – which in this instance is the nightingale’s song – can travel through time, which essentially makes it impervious to death. Within the poem, Keats speculates that the ‘voice’ heard in his garden could be heard ‘in ancient days,’ and also by the biblical figure of Ruth. ⁰⁶ Although in the same poem Keats acknowledges that the world is a place ‘where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies,’ still the nightingale’s song transcends the limitations of materiality and time. ⁰⁷ The real-world parallel is that Keats’ own ‘song’ (i.e. his poetry) has continued to resonate beyond his own untimely death. Just as the nightingale gives voice to music in darkness, so too does the voice of the poem sing of summer ‘in full-throated ease.’ ⁰⁸

In the final stanza of ‘Ode to a Nightingale,’ the speaker is jolted out of his reverie, and out of the realm of timelessness, as these lines show: ‘Forlorn! the very word is like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self!’ ⁰⁹ As in Slessor’s ‘Five Bells,’ the motif of a bell is used to signify a return to a world in which time is linear and the lives of birds (and humans) are finite. The phrase ‘sole self’ suggests that his vision of the nightingale singing ‘in ancient days’ took him out of his own body and into some kind of omniscient consciousness: one that is not attached to a physical body and is therefore immortal. ¹⁰ There are resonances here again with Slessor, particularly the lines ‘I was part / Fleshless and ageless, changeless and made free,’ from ‘Out of Time.’ Just as this disembodied vision of agelessness in Slessor’s poem suddenly disappears, so too does the ‘plaintive anthem’ of the nightingale in Keats’

¹⁰⁵ Keats, ‘Ode to a Nightingale.’

¹⁰⁶ Keats.

¹⁰⁷ Keats.

¹⁰⁸ Keats.

¹⁰⁹ Keats.

¹¹⁰ Keats.

¹¹¹ Slessor, ‘Out of Time,’ 279.

poem start to fade, and the speaker is left wondering: ‘Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music: Do I wake or sleep?’²

‘Totem Poem’ differs to ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ and ‘Out of Time’ because although it does make references to dreaming and waking, there is not one clear, definite moment where the speaker returns to a reality that is governed by linear time. The closest he comes is in this stanza, which appears two pages from the end of the poem:

The whoosh of whiskey grass; something had been and gone.
We woke. Ganesh was gone, and every bull and bull-god,
gone. How change became good fortune, how love streamed.
In the yellow time of pollen, and the honeysuckle blooming,
the preciseness of the world came flooding in.³

Much earlier in the poem, in the sixth stanza, the figure of Ganesh tells the lovers that he will enter into their ‘*very dreams*.’⁴ It’s possible to hypothesise that everything that happens between this point and the point where they wake to find Ganesh gone, is merely a dream. However the poem perpetually folds motifs of dreaming and waking into each other, such as in these lines: ‘every dream was a half-stutter / towards waking, every waking a wetness wet with dream,’ and therefore it’s difficult to tell whether the phrase ‘we woke’ in the above stanza genuinely connotes a return to ‘reality.’⁵ The line ‘the preciseness of the world came flooding in,’ would appear to signify a moment of ‘waking up.’ However, this line is repeated three times within the poem, and the effect is one of waking only to find oneself still in a dream.⁶ Having said this, if the above stanza were to be read as a definitive point within ‘Totem Poem’ where the dream or vision ends, it’s fair to say that the ‘reality’ they return to is still replete with ‘good fortune.’⁷ Compared with the end of ‘Out of Time,’ where ‘the body

¹¹² Keats, ‘Ode to a Nightingale.’

¹¹³ Davies, *Totem*, 37.

¹¹⁴ Davies, 4.

¹¹⁵ Davies, *Totem*, 35.

¹¹⁶ Davies, 13; 36; 37.

¹¹⁷ Davies, 37.

dies and rots,' the end of 'Totem Poem' contains 'honeysuckle blooming' and 'honey everywhere.'¹⁸ Although 'Totem Poem' hints at the idea of waking from a dream, the ebullient tone does not change: there is no sudden shift from wonderment to glumness. Instead, it remains sustained within the ecstatic: in a deathless, timeless, eternal present.

When 'Totem Poem' is compared with the modern Australian romanticism of Slessor's poetry and the English romanticism of 'Ode to a Nightingale,' it becomes possible to argue that it represents a new and distinct style of romantic poetry. It is as if the 'revolutionary impulse' that Kane identifies as one of romanticism's core elements operates within 'Totem Poem' as a rebellion against imperial interpretations of time.¹⁹ Within 'Totem Poem,' time jumps backwards and forwards – it slows down and speeds up – and there are also multiple (if not infinite) timelines which all appear to exist at once. Furthermore, the concept of time as circular is subtly reinforced by recurring motifs of circles, such as in these lines: 'every pilgrimage a circle, every flight-path / the tracing of a sphere,' and 'I cried to learn a circle was a curve / of perfect equidistance from a point.'²⁰ Crucially, 'Totem Poem' does not reflect what Kane describes as the nihilistic 'negation and emptiness' of Slessor's poetry.²¹ As Kane argues, Slessor's poems 'work to undo' the visions of timelessness that they fleetingly evoke, whereas 'Totem Poem' reflects an exuberant existentialism that is consistently reinforced.²² This is particularly apparent in the second last stanza of the poem, where the 'gap' motif appears for the final time: 'There is a gap; at every plateau, / praise.'²³ Here, the semicolon connects the 'gap' to an image of a 'plateau,' i.e., a raised area of land with a level surface. In this instance, an image of a void is connected directly to something that is not just material and worldly: it *is* the physical world. Additionally, because a plateau is raised, it provides a vantage point: a plateau makes it possible to see across large distances,

¹¹⁸ Keats, 'Ode to a Nightingale.'; Davies, 37; 38

¹¹⁹ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 14.

¹²⁰ Davies, *Totem*, 7; 18.

¹²¹ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 116.

¹²² Kane, 116.

¹²³ Davies, *Totem*, 38.

linking plateaus to the concept of being able to ‘see’ clearly. The poem also specifies that at ‘every’ plateau, there is ‘praise.’²⁴ This evokes the idea of multiple plateaus of every single raised area of land in the world reverberating with thanksgiving. Instead of filling a void with another void, Davies has again connected the image of a ‘gap’ with an image of the entire Earth expressing gratitude for its existence.

In reflecting upon the metaphoric significance of the ‘gap’ in ‘Totem Poem,’ it is instructive to consider several events in Davies’ own life that appear to have shaped this poem. For although ‘Totem Poem’ does not satisfy Kane’s theory of ‘belated romanticism grounded in absence,’ it does, however, contain an underlying narrative about battling (and surviving) a drug addiction.²⁵ Consider, for instance, this stanza:

The theme just keeps repeating itself, year in year out,
same demon different bodies. A nurse said *When you stay,*
when you leave those wet imprints in our airspace,
*these sheets smell like formaldehyde, like death.*²⁶

In interviews Davies has been candid about his personal history. For instance, in the 2017 ABC documentary ‘Candy Man’ (directed by Greg Hassall), he admitted that much of the material within his first novel *Candy* (1997) was based on his personal experience of being addicted to heroin during his early adulthood.²⁷ In ‘Candy Man,’ Davies describes a conversation he had with his mother during this time, where she told him that whenever he stayed at her house, he left the bed sheets drenched in the smell of formaldehyde, which is ‘the smell of people dying in hospital.’²⁸ This stark image found its way into ‘Totem Poem,’ and it carries not just the gravitas associated with death, but the profound effect addiction can have on the family of an addict: it can leave ‘imprints’ in other people’s lives. Considering

¹²⁴ Davies, *Totem*, 38.

¹²⁵ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 5.

¹²⁶ Davies, *Totem*, 27.

¹²⁷ Hassall, ‘Candy Man Part I.’

¹²⁸ Hassall.

this, the gap within ‘Totem Poem’ could also be interpreted as a straightforward reference to a time in the poet’s life when he was ‘off the air, delirious / with substance.’²⁹ It’s possible also that the length of ‘Totem Poem’ reflects the author’s desire to make up for the ‘lost’ time in which he was not publishing poetry. Davies’ first collection *Four Plots for Magnets* came out in 1982, and his next collection *Absolute Event Horizon* wasn’t published until 1994.³⁰ The line ‘The theme just keeps repeating itself, year in year out’ describes the way that Davies, as an addict, spent entire years of his life essentially doing the same thing.³¹ As much as this is a love poem, it is also a conceptual exploration of ‘too much.’ In this sense ‘Totem Poem’ draws parallels between romantic love and addiction in ways that suggest romantic love is itself a kind of addiction. However the tone of jubilation which the poem sustains implies that excess need not automatically be equated with destruction, and that the ‘addictive’ nature of romantic love can in fact be generative and constructive. The narrative thread of drug addiction provides a dark shadow against which the ‘yellow time of pollen’ glows all the more brightly.³²

Running counter to the addiction storyline through ‘Totem Poem’ is the theme of sensory discovery. For instance, the poem’s repeated mention of colour and light brings a visual intensity to the phrase ‘*I came to my senses,*’ almost like a person who has had a blindfold removed and is suddenly dazzled.³³ Not only does ‘Totem Poem’ portray the sensory thrill of a sexual union, but it tells the story of a person who is rediscovering their physical senses after a prolonged period of numbness, as this stanza shows:

Never had I lain then at Kangaroo Valley so comfortable
in my own body. A virtual flatness and that centrifuge
in the stomach stilled and my spine a spirit-level. The smell
of coffee drifting in brought back to me that lily-white girl and that

¹²⁹ Davies, *Totem*, 27.

¹³⁰ Davies, *Four Plots for Magnets*; Davies, *Absolute Event Horizon*.

¹³¹ Davies, *Totem*, 27.

¹³² Davies, 3.

¹³³ Davies, 3.

sad hour of need. How brittle every bone was back then. ³⁴

This stanza appears roughly midway through the poem, and it is significant because it depicts a moment of stillness ('that centrifuge / in the stomach stilled') and rest ('my spine a spirit level') within a specific setting (Kangaroo Valley). ³⁵ The speaker is aware of his own body and 'comfortable' within it, which to him feels like a completely new experience, as the stanza's first word 'never' indicates. The swirling galaxies and tilting jungles of previous stanzas have been replaced with 'a virtual flatness' which evokes a sense of calmness and respite. Within this ordinary setting, the 'smell / of coffee' reaches the speaker and triggers a memory of a 'lily-white girl' and a 'sad hour of need.' ³⁶ It seems that through rehabilitation and rest the speaker has regained an awareness of his physical senses – including his sense of smell – which in turn has made it possible for him to access his own memories. From this point of stillness it becomes possible for him to reflect back over his life, including painful memories of 'how brittle every bone was back then.' ³⁷ It is interesting to note that here Davies employs a metaphor of brittle bones: he uses a corporeal, mortal image to convey a sense of being totally vulnerable. A similar technique can also be found in an earlier line, where the experience of being an addict is represented as being deeply asleep: 'I slept so still beneath that mass of dreams / like sediment compressed beneath a lake.' ³⁸ Physicality pervades this poem, even while depicting states of physical dissociation.

To read the narrative thread of drug addiction in 'Totem Poem' as evidence of negativity and absence would be to ignore the tone of ebullience which it sustains across its entire duration. Although the speaker alludes to periods of destruction and loss, he also expresses astonishment and gratitude for not only surviving an addiction which could have

¹³⁴ Davies, *Totem*, 28.

¹³⁵ Davies, 28.

¹³⁶ Davies, 28.

¹³⁷ Davies, 28.

¹³⁸ Davies, 26.

killed him, but surviving *and* finding his voice as a poet *and* finding love: ‘To have not only / poetry, grand luck enough, but the long wheat swaying / and the peonies its subject.’³⁹ If anything, the poem’s references to loss work to amplify its joyousness: the image of the speaker and his lover ‘gladly’ entering a gap in the sky is intensified when contrasted with the image of him sleeping ‘like sediment compressed beneath a lake.’⁴⁰ In the next section I will expand upon this concept by looking closely at how Davies has used aesthetic aspects of postmodernism to effectively augment the romanticism of ‘Totem Poem,’ and in doing so I will continue to demonstrate how it resists Kane’s theory of negativity.

2.3 ‘Totem Poem’ and the aesthetics of postmodern romanticism

I want to revisit, in brief, the opening stanza of ‘Totem Poem,’ in which the speaker quotes from a private letter: ‘*you came into my life really fast and I liked it.*’⁴¹ The placement of this line produces a jolt: after four lines of grand (and also impersonal) poeticism, the unembellished starkness of ‘*you came into my life*’ is startlingly intimate because it places a piece of personal correspondence at the centre of what is essentially a public stage. It is important also to note that the phrases ‘yellow time,’ ‘blue time,’ ‘air filled with flux,’ and ‘world-in-a-belly’ are all abstractions, whereas ‘*you came into my life*’ appears to describe an actual, real-life event.⁴² Through this contrast, the first stanza of ‘Totem Poem’ conveys a sense of the fantastic and the mythic converging with the everyday and the real. Davies’ technique, of blending formal poetic language with informal speech, can be observed again in this stanza:

In the yellow time of pollen there were dandelion heads,
transparent, you would weep. I gave it all away, love
come to me now, come to me. Come to me love.

¹³⁹ Davies, *Totem*, 24.

¹⁴⁰ Davies, 3; 26.

¹⁴¹ Davies, 3.

¹⁴² Davies, 3.

Come to me love. What have I learned? *How much*
you're supposed to enjoy every sandwich, he said. ⁴³

In the notes section of *Totem* it is explained that the 'sandwich' quote came from Warren Zevon, who, dying of cancer, provided this as an answer when David Letterman asked him if his condition had taught him 'anything about life and death.' ⁴⁴ This is a perfect example of 'the mixing of "high" and "low" cultural allusions' that characterises postmodernism. ⁴⁵ Like my earlier example, this stanza fuses together things that are abstract and fantastical (the 'yellow time of pollen') with a real quote from a real person in the actual world, which is a place where people fall ill and die. ⁴⁶ Zevon's statement complements the unifying theme of 'Totem Poem,' which could be summed up simply as feeling joyful to be alive. In Zevon's situation, knowledge of impending mortality served to heighten his enjoyment of something as commonplace and everyday as a sandwich. As much as 'Totem Poem' expresses love for a particular person (who is addressed within the poem as 'my most girl of light') it is also a love poem that is dedicated to life itself. ⁴⁷ In the above stanza, for instance, the line 'I gave it all away, love' could be read as a reference to how close the speaker came to 'giving away' his own life when he was an addict, and the lines 'Come to me love. / Come to me love.' could be interpreted as a direct plea: an impassioned request for more life. ⁴⁸ Davies didn't include this quote from *The Late Show with David Letterman* in a way that was wry or ironic: rather, this intertextual inclusion works to amplify the emotional sincerity of the poem. Davies is using a postmodern technique in a way that actually augments the poem's innate romanticism, rather than detracting from it.

The inclusion of a quote from Warren Zevon is only one example of Davies' fondness for bringing intertextual artifacts into his poetry. This piecing together of quotes from

¹⁴³ Davies, *Totem*, 30.

¹⁴⁴ Davies, 84.

¹⁴⁵ Birch, 'Postmodernism.'

¹⁴⁶ Davies, *Totem*, 30.

¹⁴⁷ Davies, 23.

¹⁴⁸ Davies, 30.

interviews, personal correspondence, poems, scientific texts, film dialogue, and various other sources is one of the defining characteristics of the postmodern aesthetic, and in keeping with its general excessiveness, 'Totem Poem' contains a near-absurd quantity of references.

Citation is also a form of homage: a way of expressing gratitude and paying tribute both to the sources themselves, and to the world more generally. In her 2017 article 'Writing in the Shadow of a Masterpiece: On Homage' the Scottish novelist Margot Livesy describes such acts of 'literary borrowing' as the practice of consciously retelling an old story so as to make 'make both art and the world new.'⁴⁹ 'Such retellings,' Livesy explains, are sometimes called 'homage,' which is an 'elegant' French term.⁵⁰ She continues: 'In the best homages the contemporary artist is able to plumb some aspect of her or his own deepest interests, to reach what really matters, while simultaneously agreeing with or repudiating, delighting in or detonating, the original work.' Here, Livesy alludes to the strange alchemy involved in using something old to make something new, whereby quotes or cultural references, when recontextualised within a postmodern text, can appear to vibrate with a renewed energy or allure. The abundant references within 'Totem Poem' showcase Davies' deepest interests, and they also work together to infuse the poem with a collective sense of wonderment and wisdom. It is as if 'Totem Poem' is a jewellery box into which Davies has placed articles of treasure: he has put what he most loves into this love poem as a way of expressing gratitude. Again, this can be seen as postmodernism in the service of romanticism, in the sense that Davies has incorporated multiple references from widely divergent fields and time periods, to create something that isn't just a robotic listing or an absurdist parody, but a gesture of genuine love or care.

¹⁴⁹ Livesy, 'Writing in the Shadow of a Masterpiece.'

¹⁵⁰ Livesy.

Closely related to homage is pastiche, another form of literary imitation. In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Jameson provides a nuanced explanation of the term:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs: it is to parody what that other interesting and historically original modern thing, the practice of a kind of blank irony, is to what Wayne Booth calls the 'stable ironies' of the eighteenth century.⁵

Throughout 'Totem Poem,' Davies frequently adopts a style that resembles biblical language. Jameson's notion of pastiche as 'blank parody' provides insight into how this biblical ventriloquy operates within Davies' poetry, in the sense that it verges on parody, yet somehow retains a neutrality, or perhaps even a cordial reverence. There is the sense that Davies is not simply making reference to the Bible—Song of Solomon, in particular—but that, through striving to express such intensities of joy, his poetry has automatically taken on similar linguistic traits. In this way, 'Totem Poem' can be seen as a postmodern continuation of the Bible's poetics, but instead of looking backwards in time to an ancient text, it is perpetuating a biblical poetic energy and projecting it forwards into the future.

Song of Solomon is a discourse between lovers, and a celebration of sexual love. Alongside repeated references to the sun and moon, Song of Solomon and 'Totem Poem' share a number of images. One of these is the motif of honeycomb, which appears in Song of Solomon as: 'Your lips, O my spouse, / Drip as the honeycomb' and in 'Totem Poem' as: 'ancient light dripping from the honeycomb / of the skies.'⁵² Garden imagery is also shared by both texts. In Song of Solomon, the speaker asks the wind to blow through their garden: 'Awake, O north wind, / And come, O south! / Blow upon my garden, / That its spices may

¹⁵¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 17.

¹⁵² Song 4:11 NKJV.; Davies, *Totem*, 33.

flow out.’⁵³ Similarly, the gardens in ‘Totem Poem’ are also caressed by wind: ‘Sunlight / bloomed into gardens from the thin air it rode in on.’⁵⁴ Vines appear in Song of Solomon: ‘To see whether the vine had budded,’ and they also creep into ‘Totem Poem’: ‘the vines grew not on trellises but breeze and piebald light.’⁵⁵ Gardens, honeycomb and vines are all related to eating, and both Song of Solomon and ‘Totem Poem’ rhapsodise not just about eating, but tasting:

Like an apple tree among the trees
of the woods,
So *is* my beloved among the sons.
I sat down in his shade with great
delight,
And his fruit *was* sweet to my taste.⁵⁶

Compared with this stanza from ‘Totem Poem’:

Open your eyes, love looks back, cipher of every hieroglyph,
bedroom thick with foliage, morning buds enormously
from dream, from flight-paths of the fruit-search, from bed
a ship of flowering abandoned to the pollen winds;
how best to taste the plumbness of today?⁵⁷

It’s significant that the lovers both in Song of Solomon and ‘Totem Poem’ are not just eating but tasting, because it elevates a basic act of survival into an act of sensual pleasure. There is also metaphoric significance behind the notion of eating for enjoyment: it alludes to sex as an act of pleasure, rather than a biological imperative. In addition to these shared motifs of eating and tasting, both Song of Solomon and ‘Totem Poem’ use personified metaphors of plants, trees and flowers, wherein people are not just compared to the natural world, they also *become* the natural world. For instance in the above example from Song of Solomon, the

¹⁵³ Song 4:11 NKJV.

¹⁵⁴ Davies, *Totem*, 24.

¹⁵⁵ Song 6:11 NKJV.; Davies, 22.

¹⁵⁶ Song 2:3 NKJV.

¹⁵⁷ Davies, *Totem*, 37.

speaker's beloved is likened to 'an apple tree among the trees / of the woods' and then the speaker sits 'in his shade' and eats his fruit.⁵⁸ This bears resemblance to the lines 'I was a shade scattering my shade seed / liberally to the winds and weathervanes' from 'Totem Poem.'⁵⁹ Above all, both texts are tonally similar in the sense that they both give voice to 'great delight' with an earnest seriousness.⁶⁰ It is possible to argue that in both Song of Solomon and 'Totem Poem,' physical pleasure is a divine gift, and that eating, sleeping, singing, bathing and making love can all be acts of worship.

The next section will consider two Australian poets whose work similarly contains aesthetic traces of postmodernism and romanticism. First, I will look at the poem 'Paradise Beach' by Dorothy Porter, which was published in 1984, and can be seen as an early example of this hybrid aesthetic.⁶¹ This will be followed with an analysis of Petra White's 2014 poem 'The World' to show how postmodern romanticism in Australian poetry continues to develop into the 21st century.⁶²

2.4 Romanticism in the poetry of Dorothy Porter

Kane's study covers Australian poetry from the colonial era through to the publication of Les Murray's *Selected Poems* in 1986 (poems from this collection are discussed in the final chapter of Kane's book).⁶³ In this last chapter Kane reinforces his theory of negativity by stating: 'Murray shows once again the pre-eminence of romanticism in Australian poetry, and the way in which it forms itself around absences and negativities.'⁶⁴ I would argue that towards the end of the 20th century, however, a new style of postmodern romantic Australian poetry

¹⁵⁸ Song 2:3 NKJV.

¹⁵⁹ Davies, *Totem*, 13.

¹⁶⁰ Song 2:3 NKJV.

¹⁶¹ Porter, *Love Poems*, 79-86.

¹⁶² White, *A Hunger*, 8.

¹⁶³ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 196.

¹⁶⁴ Kane, 196.

began to emerge. The advent of postmodernism brought about an aesthetic shift, and from this point onwards Australian romantic poetry re-emerged as a celebratory presence that is self-assured and deliberately affirmative. Australian postmodern romantic poetry is intensely connected to the physical world, including natural landscapes such as bushland and beaches, but also urban environments and domestic spaces. Most importantly, it sees the human body as facilitating this connection with the physical world, and one of the key aspects of an Australian postmodern romantic style is its focus on all that is bodily and sensual. 'Totem Poem' is a key exemplar of this new style of Australian romanticism. It overflows with imagery from the natural world and lovers who are 'braided with wet-thighed surrender.'⁶⁵ By looking at other examples of Australian romantic postmodernism, I now want to show how 'Totem Poem' is part of a greater movement.

Dorothy Porter's literary career spanned the period of 1975–2004. Best known for her verse novels, Porter was also a prolific writer of love poetry. I want to focus specifically here on Porter's poem 'Paradise Beach,' which was first published in the 1984 collection *The Night Parrot*, and later republished in Porter's 2010 collection *Love Poems* (published posthumously).⁶⁶ There are slight textual differences between the two publications, and so to avoid confusion, in this discussion I will refer only to the 2010 reprint of the poem.

'Paradise Beach' showcases Porter's distinctive style of impassioned lyricism, and contains many of the motifs also used by Davies in 'Totem Poem' such as birds, water, and flowers.⁶⁷ Languidly sprawling across eight pages, 'Paradise Beach' is loosely formatted as a sequence of stanzas with lines intermittently indented to make organic shapes on the page: visually, the poem is suggestive of water. There is a roughness to the poem that could be misinterpreted as inattentiveness: for instance, the poem is written entirely in lower-case (except for the first line, and the names of places), and punctuation is used sparingly.

¹⁶⁵ Davies, *Totem*, 3.

¹⁶⁶ Porter, *Love Poems*, 79–86.

¹⁶⁷ Porter, 79–86.

Furthermore, the poem's imagery jumps haphazardly between night and day, from urban locations to the beach, and between the imaginary and the real. The effect is that of a lucid dream. The poem is similar to 'Totem Poem' in that urban environments are intermingled with environments of contrasting scale such as a 'jungle' and 'galaxies,' switches which give both these poems a surreal quality.⁶⁸ Also shared by both poems is an irrepressible immediacy and ebullience often characterised as typifying an experience of falling in love.

Consider, for instance, the following excerpt from Porter's poem:

if this is love
let's go swimming!!
then it's hot chips
 in greasy paper
killing me with suspense
burning my fingers
 sharp with salt –

miracles at Haymarket
warehouses stinking with cats, fish
 while
the street is hosed
 with lasers
 coloured more violently
 than rainforests
then you're human
 flesh,
 a bit tired
 waving at me
 walking down the street
and you keep turning around –⁶⁹

'Paradise Beach' captures the dreamy looseness of romantic love in a such a way that makes it seem effortless, but there is an intense consideration and precision at work here. Typical of Porter's style is an interest in plain speech and the Australian vernacular. As the Australian poet and critic Fiona Wright points out in her doctoral thesis 'Staging the Suburb: Imagination, Transformation and Suburbia in Australian Poetry' (2016), Porter's strength as a poet is her ability to uncover the lyricism that is 'hidden' within the supposed ordinariness

¹⁶⁸ Davies, *Totem*, 4; 28.

¹⁶⁹ Porter, *Love Poems*, 80.

of everyday speech patterns.⁷⁰ It is fitting that a poem named ‘Paradise Beach’ should radiate ease, and this is reinforced by short lines, simple words, and recognisable imagery (such as eating hot chips and walking around the city). Just as ‘Totem Poem’ contains playfulness and humour, Porter’s own sense of cheekiness can be seen in the way she undercuts the potential for oversentimentality in a line like: ‘if this is love’ by following it with: ‘let’s go swimming!!’⁷¹ There is something almost silly about this line, especially the double exclamation mark, and yet that is its point: it gives voice to the childlike and often absurd joyousness of love. It is as if the intensity of the emotion has broken past the decorousness of poetry itself, bringing with it an emotional directness and vivacity. Like Davies, Porter is not afraid of hyperbole: the line ‘miracles at Haymarket,’ for instance, is simultaneously audacious while managing to remain poignant. Just as ‘Totem Poem’ positions material objects and worldly settings as sites of transcendence, in ‘Paradise Beach,’ Porter presents Haymarket as a place where ‘miracles’ can occur. The line ‘*and you keep turning around*’⁷² creates an image of a person suspended indefinitely within the action of turning: it captures not just an image but a moving image, and in this way the poem brings the beloved to life. This is precisely the ‘miracle’ of romantic poetry; the way that it creates a little pocket of suspended time in which people (and nightingales) can remain perpetually alive.

Although Porter had been publishing poetry for more than a decade before Kane’s *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity* was published in 1996, he does not mention her work. This is possibly because at the time Kane’s book was published, Porter’s writing had only just started to receive significant popular and critical attention, following the publication of her verse novel *The Monkey’s Mask* in 1994 (which won the National Book Council’s Poetry

⁷⁰ Wright, ‘Staging the Suburb,’ 108.

⁷¹ Porter, *Love Poems*, 80.

⁷² Porter, 80.

Prize in 1995 and was shortlisted for several other literary awards).⁷³ In my view, Porter's poetry is similar to Davies', which is to say that her romanticism emanates from a place of abundance rather than negativity or absence. Porter utilises the romantic mode not just to bring her lovers to life, but to keep them alive within the poem, in such a way that disregards the linearity of time. Porter's poetry, like Davies', blends aspects of romanticism and postmodernism together to create a hybrid aesthetic, that sparks with energy and aliveness.

'Totem Poem' and 'Paradise Beach' use similar images and poetic techniques. For instance, this next excerpt (taken from the first two pages of 'Paradise Beach') contains a number of significant parallels to Davies' poetry:

pelicans landing on a lagoon
 the deep water
 is barely disturbed
 likewise
 I adjust
 I lounge in you
 because
 you're a penthouse
 in the Hanging Gardens
 turning themselves
 inside out
 with a blinder
 of green light
 revealing
 lorikeets squabbling
 in the afternoon –⁷⁴

The points of similarity between 'Totem Poem' and 'Paradise Beach' owe much to the fact that both poets are directly (and defiantly) engaging with a romantic aesthetic. Bird motifs are central to both poems: 'Paradise Beach' contains 'squabbling' lorikeets while 'Totem Poem' includes 'good-luck birds,' a 'yellow-tailed black cockatoo,' and a falcon.⁷⁵ Additionally, Porter's poem portrays 'pelicans landing on a lagoon' which bears similarity to the line

¹⁷³ Matthew Buchanan, 'Dorothy Porter dies,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 11, 2008, 3:08 a.m. EST, <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/dorothy-porter-dies-20081211-gdt63x.html>.

¹⁷⁴ Porter, *Love Poems*, 79-80.

¹⁷⁵ Porter, 80; Davies, *Totem*, 3-4.

‘pelicans plumped on tide posts’ in ‘Totem Poem.’⁷⁶ Romanticism relies upon natural imagery, and in these examples it’s interesting to note that both Porter and Davies have included Australian native birds (lorikeets and cockatoos), which gives their romanticism an antipodean twist. It’s fair to say that birds are, in fact, a central motif within both ‘Totem Poem’ and ‘Paradise Beach’: the front cover of *Totem* features a photo of a pelican, while ‘Paradise Beach’ first appeared within a collection called *The Night Parrot*. Birds are symbolic of freedom, and their presence in these poems reinforces the underlying theme of transcendence: of breaking free from constraints. The free-verse structure of ‘Paradise Beach’ resonates with this idea, since it effectively liberates Porter’s verse. Compared with ‘Totem Poem,’ ‘Paradise Beach’ has an airiness that could be compared to the flight of a bird through the sky.

Another key similarity between the poetics of Davies and Porter is the way they juxtapose smallness with largeness; the ordinary with the fantastic. For instance in ‘Paradise Beach’ Porter describes the real, urban location of ‘Haymarket,’ but she also references the ‘Hanging Gardens,’ which were one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.⁷⁷ As Wright observes, Porter’s use of this technique heightens the intensity of her work:

Porter’s poems achieve their intensity by manipulating scale: her characters and personae constantly draw on images, landscapes and perspectives much larger than themselves, or their immediate physical surroundings, to describe their emotions and reactions.⁷⁸

Not only does Porter incorporate a reference to the Hanging Gardens of Babylon into ‘Paradise Beach,’ she describes her lover as ‘a penthouse’ within them.⁷⁹ A penthouse is a modern symbol of extravagant wealth, and in Porter’s poem it appears inside one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, which not only brings the ancient and the modern together,

¹⁷⁶ Porter, *Love Poems*, 79; Davies, *Totem*, 16 17.

¹⁷⁷ Porter, 79 80.

¹⁷⁸ Wright, ‘Staging the Suburb,’ 105.

¹⁷⁹ Porter, *Love Poems*, 79.

but also evokes a sense of being at home within this impossibility. After all, a penthouse is also a domestic space: a private dwelling where its inhabitants can eat, sleep, bathe, and make love. Porter's reference here thus imparts a sense of grandeur but also homeliness, and in doing so she elevates the realm of the private and the domestic to the realm of the exalted. It should also be noted that the Porter's 'green light' which appears 'in the afternoon' bears similarity to the line 'in the green time of sleep, of afternoons' in 'Totem Poem.'⁸⁰ In Porter's poem, the word 'afternoon' is followed with a dash and a line break, which leaves this image of gardens, greenness and afternoons literally 'hanging' in space.⁸¹ Davies achieves a similar effect by using the plural 'afternoons' in a way that suggests a potentially endless quantity of these green afternoons.⁸²

In 'Totem Poem,' Hindu gods such as 'Ganesh' and mythological creatures such as a 'Minotaur' are shown jostling against everyday settings and objects such as a 'windscreen wiper' and a 'newspaper.'⁸³ Davies effectively imbues the ordinary and mundane with exoticism and grandeur. In analysing Porter's poetry, Wright makes a similar observation:

Porter's poems work by directly aligning everyday objects with strange and powerful others, thereby lending these ordinary objects the same dramatic scale as their metaphoric corollaries. Characters imagine themselves as predatory animals, as planetary bodies, or ancient goddesses, or see within their gardens and kitchens, glaciers, deserts, sacked towns and florid jungles. Whole worlds – from Akhenaten's Egypt and Minoan Crete, to mythical cities and ocean floors – are constantly made to coexist with suburban spaces and domestic interiors.⁸⁴

The penthouse in the Hanging Garden is a perfect example of the way Porter's poems force the 'everyday' and the 'strange and powerful' to 'coexist,' to use Wright's terminology. Not only does this elevate the seemingly ordinary experience of being alive to the same level as myths and legends, it also increases the dynamic tension within the work. Earlier in this thesis

¹⁸⁰ Porter, *Love Poems*, 80; Davies, *Totem*, 33.

¹⁸¹ Porter, 80.

¹⁸² Davies, *Totem*, 33.

¹⁸³ Davies, 4; 14; 5; 13.

¹⁸⁴ Wright, 'Staging the Suburb,' 105–106.

I explained how ‘Totem Poem’ brings opposites into relation with each other to create a tension that resembles that of an electric current. This is what I’m calling the ‘electrified lyric,’ and it’s a quality that can also be observed within Porter’s poetry. Suggestive of this idea, both poems literally feature an image of flying sparks. ‘Totem Poem’ features the lines: ‘my head held high I steered / a cracking pace and sparks came off my shoes,’ and in ‘Paradise Beach’ sparks appear in the lines: ‘you strike sparks / from my senses’.⁸⁵ Also running through both poems is a recurring contrast of day and night, which provides a background of light and dark against which other contrasts are made. ‘Totem Poem’ frequently shifts between day and night, at one point even within the same line: ‘we were reduced to this: this day and night.’⁸⁶ In ‘Paradise Beach,’ sea creatures are showing ‘crawling out / at midnight,’ and a few stanzas later this the poem speaks of ‘noon / a still life / shining palm.’⁸⁷ Alongside several mentions of ‘dark’ and ‘light’ Porter’s poem also features an image of a ‘daytime moon’ which hangs above ‘Paradise Beach.’⁸⁸ This is appropriate, since this surreal combination of opposites – a ‘daytime moon’ – shines over and signifies the terrain of the poem, which is at once worldly and otherworldly. It creates a charged atmosphere in which it is possible to move backwards and forwards in time, or to step out of time completely and therefore live forever.

Porter is a more economical poet than Davies: her lines are shorter and her descriptions are stripped of the baroque embellishments that typify ‘Totem Poem.’ Davies tends to combine alliterative rhythmical elements with assonance and rhyme in ways that hark back to traditional rhyming verse, such as in this passage:

In the blue time of lilacs the last colour standing
was the mauve that jacarandas leak when all else

¹⁸⁵ Davies, *Totem*, 29; Porter, *Love Poems*, 84.

¹⁸⁶ Davies, 10.

¹⁸⁷ Porter, *Love Poems*, 82–83.

¹⁸⁸ Porter, 85.

has gone grey: last glow before night,
the brightest that earth ever gave. Far across
the estuary the mangroves rippled in the rain. ⁸⁹

Assonance and rhyme have been used in this stanza with subtlety and sophistication. The words ‘**st**anding,’ ‘jacar**an**das,’ and ‘**man**groves’ share the same ‘**an**’ sound, which creates a sonic thread between them. ⁹⁰ Then there is the counter-chime in the ‘**i**’ sound that is carried through the words ‘**t**ime,’ ‘**l**ilacs,’ ‘**n**ight,’ and ‘**b**rightest,’ and the assonance of the ‘**a**’ sound in ‘**g**rey,’ ‘**g**ave,’ and ‘**r**ain.’ ⁹¹ Additionally, the recurring ‘**s**’ sound in ‘**a**cross,’ ‘**e**stuary,’ and ‘**m**angroves’ is suggestive of the hissing sound rain makes, while the alliteration of ‘**r**ippled’ and ‘**r**ain’ emulates the sound of water droplets hitting leaves. ⁹² It can be seen here that by creating sound patterns within his comparatively wordy stanzas, Davies has added a sonic element to his imagery, which gives ‘Totem Poem’ an additional level of complexity and richness.

Porter’s use of language is no less beautiful, but more for its streamlined directness. The fifth page of ‘Paradise Beach’ begins with a long stanza that meanders through an assortment of reflections, thoughts and images (ranging from beaches and peninsulas to urban environments), and ends with these three lines:

the mauve world
dissolving at dusk
last seen ⁹³

Davies and Porter both appear to be describing a sunset, and both are possibly also making oblique reference to ‘the violet hour’ from T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*. ⁹⁴ Compared with ‘Totem Poem,’ Porter’s poetry has the stark poignancy of a haiku: it has an imagistic quality

¹⁸⁹ Davies, *Totem*, 15.

¹⁹⁰ Davies, 15.

¹⁹¹ Davies, 15.

¹⁹² Davies, 15.

¹⁹³ Porter, *Love Poems*, 84.

¹⁹⁴ Eliot, ‘The Waste Land.’

redolent of Ezra Pound's famous poem 'In a Station of the Metro': 'The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough'.⁹⁵ It's not that her poetry is devoid of musicality – for instance there is alliteration in '**d**usk' and '**d**issolving,' as well the consonance of the '**s**' sound in '**d**usk,' '**d**issolving,' '**l**ast,' and '**s**een.'⁹⁶ But the defining feature of Porter's poetry is the clarity of her observations and the deft brevity of her descriptions.

Although there are stylistic differences between 'Totem Poem' and 'Paradise Beach,' they do however depict very similar atmospheric conditions. Specifically, the poetic landscapes of Davies and Porter are wet, blossoming, filled with animals, and humming with electricity. In amidst these signifiers of fecundity, both poems are awash with images of water. From the first page of 'Totem Poem' the sky erupts open 'in the hail of its libation' and the lovers are shown soaking and squelching in the 'mud' of their joy.⁹⁷ In 'Totem Poem,' water is abundant and powerful: it depicts landscapes that are 'storm-drenched,' an ocean where 'the wetness was opaque' and 'great whales' glisten, and where palaces 'lay drowned.'⁹⁸ Variations of the word 'flood' also appear numerous times, such as in the refrain 'the preciseness of the world came flooding in'.⁹⁹ 'Paradise Beach' is also filled with water imagery, and it begins almost in the same way that 'Totem Poem' begins, with the arrival of a lover, and a dramatic change in the weather:

but you arrive
with the turbulent sky
as if a storm was in a wonderful mood
of tropical give²⁰⁰

The word 'give' in the phrase 'of tropical give' has a double meaning here: it connotes a sense of the storm 'giving in' to its own force, and it also evokes the idea of provision. Within the

¹⁹⁵ Pound, 'In a Station at the Metro.'

¹⁹⁶ Porter, *Love Poems*, 84.

¹⁹⁷ Davies, *Totem*, 3.

¹⁹⁸ Davies, 30; 35.

¹⁹⁹ Davies, 13.

²⁰⁰ Porter, *Love Poems*, 79.

world of this poem the storm is benevolent rather than destructive: it is shown as being ‘in a wonderful mood’ in a way that bears resemblance to the ecstatic ‘libation’ of the sky in ‘Totem Poem.’²⁰ In both ‘Totem Poem’ and ‘Paradise Beach,’ the spectacular release of rain symbolises a release of emotional (and sexual) energy: a feeling that is chaotic but also enjoyable. Considered within the context of my discussion about romanticism in Australian poetry, the water imagery within ‘Totem Poem’ and ‘Paradise Beach’ could be read as symbolic in the sense that these poems both stage a ‘watershed’ moment: signifying the beginning of a new wave.

In the concluding chapter in *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, Kane uses the metaphor of water to describe Australia’s poetic ecologies:

The convergence of romanticism and negativity has been put forward as the means by which a hidden stream has flowed through Australian poetry – now submerged or subterranean, now standing on the surface like a waterhole – for, while this stream is not the only source of plenishment, it is a significant vein that, once sounded out, begins to appear as a primary and crucial feature of Australian poetry – that is, as a literary tradition in itself. We may speak, then, of Australian poetry as an embodiment of a negative romanticism.²⁰²

Kane goes on to state that ‘Australian poetry appears to have entered a new phase wherein the point of reference is shifting from European and American exemplars to an Australian poetic heritage.’²⁰³ He continues: ‘what is most striking today is the way in which Australian poets are becoming the precursors for newer generations of Australian poets.’²⁰⁴ Arguably, this shift in Australian poetry can be witnessed in the poetry of Davies and Porter. Rather than drawing from a ‘stream’ of negativity and absence, ‘Totem Poem’ and ‘Paradise Beach’ flow forth from a wellspring of plenitude, and from these fertile conditions, Australian romantic poetry has continued to prosper. In the final section of this chapter, I will look at

²⁰¹ Davies, *Totem*, 3.

²⁰² Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 204.

²⁰³ Kane, 204.

²⁰⁴ Kane, 204.

another contemporary Australian poet whose work can be seen as representative of this new style of postmodern romantic poetry.

2.5 Contemporary romanticism in the poetry of Petra White

I will now turn my attention to Petra White's 2014 poem 'The World,' which arguably shows that this mode has continued to thrive ten years after 'Totem Poem' was published and is likely to endure well into the 21st century.²⁰⁵

Based in Melbourne, Petra White has been publishing poetry since 2004. 'The World' is one of thirteen love poems that open her 2014 collection *A Hunger*, and it is prefaced with a quote by the English poet Stevie Smith: 'Oh how I enjoy sex oh how I enjoy it.'²⁰⁶ This quote has been taken from one of Smith's works of fiction *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936) and it's provocative because it makes an impassioned declaration in plain speech about enjoying sex (which is doubly astonishing considering it was made by a woman who was living in the 1930s).²⁰⁷ The startling candour of the preface quickly establishes an emotional directness that the opening of White's poem continues:

Most poems need a squeeze of grief to make them go,
but waiting for my lover
to come out of the shower is joy divided
by joy, halved, doubled again –
I lie back and my soul floats up to the ceiling,
devouring all the space,
listening to the water upstairs

rush over his body that in minutes
will rush over mine
with the speed and weight of water.
He comes down from the shower like a flock of goats
coming down from the mountain,

²⁰⁵ White, *A Hunger*, 8.

²⁰⁶ White, 8.

²⁰⁷ Sternlicht, *In Search of Stevie Smith*, 69.

and he is there entire.
Love is made, a convocation.²⁰⁸

The first line is self-conscious and almost confrontational: it declares that ‘most’ poems require ‘a squeeze of grief to make them go.’²⁰⁹ However, the rest of the poem goes on to ardently refute the notion that grief is the only pool from which poets can draw. What follows this first line is an unashamedly romantic poem that centres around an act of lovemaking. It is significant to note that this poem begins with motifs of flowing water: the speaker is waiting for her lover to ‘come out of the shower,’ while ‘listening to the water upstairs.’²¹⁰ Then, in the second stanza, she describes the ‘rush’ of the water over the body of her beloved who will soon ‘rush’ over her own body, ‘with the speed and weight of water.’²¹¹ While ‘The World’ lacks some of the dramatic intensity of the ‘turbulent sky’ in ‘Paradise Beach’ or the ‘hail’ of ‘libation’ in ‘Totem Poem,’ it nonetheless opens with a similar image: of water falling quickly and heavily from above.²¹² The main differentiator is that ‘The World’ takes place inside a domestic setting, in a place of privacy and protection. In this way White’s poem manages to convey the same feeling of catharsis, but in a way that is more intimate.

Stylistically, ‘The World’ sits somewhere in between ‘Paradise Beach’ and ‘Totem Poem.’ Like Porter, White uses plain language to say extraordinary things, such as ‘I lie back and my soul floats up to the ceiling.’²¹³ There is something quasi-comic in this line because it veers dangerously close to cliché: it has the flavour of Porter’s ‘miracles at Haymarket’.²¹⁴ Yet the straightforward phrasing of this line makes it sound matter-of-fact, as if the speaker were simply recounting something ordinary. Apart from the abstract poeticism of ‘joy divided / by joy’ and the depiction of a soul floating to the ceiling, the first two stanzas of this poem

²⁰⁸ White, *A Hunger*, 8.

²⁰⁹ White, 8.

²¹⁰ White, 8.

²¹¹ White, 8.

²¹² Porter, *Love Poems*, 79; Davies, *Totem*, 3.

²¹³ White, *A Hunger*, 8.

²¹⁴ Porter, *Love Poems*, 80.

provide an ordinary narrative of a woman who waits for her lover to finish showering, before he joins her in the bedroom. However, the second half of 'The World' shifts away from concrete details and instead dissolves into a series of abstractions:

In the room made of whiteness,
landed on the moon, the shore, the ledge,
Being expands by laps of air,
love by the kiss.
It has our scent, as my cat sniffs its owner
and a god its children, our bodies tumbling
to speak ahead of us. Just here,

the unquenched souls, their unseemly shouts,
are ravening up through time.
And a seethe of hearts,
wrenched jilted cave women,
dragon-hungry teenaged girls,
love-dishevelled bog men,
is sifting lighter than raindrops on a silk roof.^{2 5}

While the first half of the poem describes sex from an embodied perspective, the second half of 'The World' expands out into an assortment of strange images, including 'cave women' and 'bog men.'^{2 6} It's important to note that in the line 'Being expands by laps of air,' the word 'Being' is capitalised in a way that suggests the entirety of human existence (rather than just the speaker's own) is expanding 'by laps of air,' or perhaps even the existence of *everything* living: plants, animals, and all.^{2 7} It's possible to read this line in such a way because of the poem's title: 'The World.' There's a touch of Davies' grand poetic style here, in which the love of two people becomes the 'heart of the world.'^{2 8} In fact it's worthwhile noting that the phrase 'the world' appears in 'Totem Poem' a staggering 17 times, which forges an inherent connection between these poems.^{2 9} Just as 'Totem Poem' essentially equates sex between two

²¹⁵ White, *A Hunger*, 8.

²¹⁶ White, 8.

²¹⁷ White, 8.

²¹⁸ Davies, *Totem*, 38.

²¹⁹ Davies, 4; 7; 8; 13; 22; 23; 24; 25; 28; 30; 33; 34; 36; 37; 38.

people with the birth of the universe, White's 'The World' begins with two people in bed and expands outwards to include everything in space and time.

The line 'ravening up through time' from White's poem further suggests a disruption to linear time. As time and history unravel, the 'unseemly shouts' of 'wretched jilted cave women,' 'dragon-hungry teenaged girls,' and 'love-dishevelled bog men' can be 'heard.'²²⁰ Given that much of this thesis is dedicated to the sonic aspects of lyric poetry, it's particularly significant that White specifies that these prehistoric human figures are shouting. This 'unseemly' sound could be seen as a precursor, perhaps, to lyric poetry: an impassioned cry that would one day, many thousands of years later, find its way into a poem in 2014.

There is a synesthetic quality to the lines 'In the room made of whiteness, / landed on the moon, the shore, the ledge.'²²¹ It is as if the brightness of the room combined with the ecstasy of sex has triggered a volley of associations that cause the poem to spin out into hyperbole, which further brings it into stylistic alignment with Davies, and with Porter. Consider, for instance, this passage from 'Paradise Beach':

next day
the disconcerting moon
 above me
 above the beach
 in a bright sky

it pinions me
 to night
 to memory
 to your mouth on my breasts²²²

Here, Porter appears to be describing a similar experience except in reverse: the 'disconcerting moon' triggers something that is more visceral than memory, which the word

²²⁰ White, *A Hunger*, 8.

²²¹ White, 8.

²²² Porter, *Love Poems*, 85.

‘pinions’ indicates.²²³ This word is suggestive of machinery or even violence, and it goes beyond memory or daydream into the realm of physical force. Alternatively, ‘pinions’ could be a reference to the act of clipping a bird’s wing, suggesting that the speaker feels her emotional ties to her love are keeping her grounded and captive. Moments later, Porter ends the poem with:

but you and me
 know another Paradise Beach
the secret, exotic fringe
 of white sand
below a sheer drop
 of burnt rock
Paradise Beach
in our eyes
in our marrow
it’s our delight
a pact
our flirt
 with the open, black sea.²²⁴

At this point in the poem ‘Paradise Beach’ becomes a metaphor for a hypothetical space of eternal aliveness. The ‘white sand’ is contrasted with the ‘open, black sea,’ which undoubtedly represents death.²²⁵ It’s possible to read this imaginary beach as a site of liminality between the physical and the metaphysical, and that access to this place becomes possible when in the company of a lover, and through making love. Yet while ‘Paradise Beach’ ends with a foreboding image of a ‘black sea,’ ‘The World’ ends with an image of ‘raindrops on a silk roof.’²²⁶ This phrase carries implications of restfulness, since a silk roof suggests a tent, and tents are places of protection and sleep. So although this image of restfulness suggests that the sex has finished, the poem still does not return to the ordinary reality of the bedroom. The implication is that sex has the power to transport lovers through time and away from

²²³ Porter, *Love Poems*, 85.

²²⁴ Porter, 86.

²²⁵ Porter, 86.

²²⁶ Porter, 86; White, *A Hunger*, 8.

normality, and that this state of timelessness and unreality can continue even after the sex is over.

Via a comparison of 'Totem Poem,' 'Paradise Beach,' and 'The World,' certain patterns have emerged. All three of these poems celebrate the corporeal and the carnal: they all pay heightened attention to the physical senses of looking, touching, smelling, tasting, speaking, and listening. All three poems include an image of the moon, and all express love for a romantic partner. Most significantly, all of these poems meditate upon the nature of time. Not only do they explore the idea that time can be slowed, distorted, or reversed but they also all call attention to specific, real moments in time, and this focus on the present moment facilitates access to states of timelessness. Similarly, all poems pay homage to the physical and natural worlds, and yet also go beyond the worldly into places that are surreal, dream-like, and amazing. This, more than anything, makes these poems romantic. In all of the examples I've looked at in this chapter, including 'Ode to a Nightingale,' poetry provides an access point or a window through which history comes alive, and the boundary point between life and death can be transgressed.

Australian romantic poetry has blossomed in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, even though the postmodern aesthetic often associated with a cultural moment can be characterised primarily as ironic. Through close readings of 'Totem Poem,' 'Paradise Beach,' and 'The World,' I have shown that the aesthetics of postmodernism, when combined with the aesthetics of romanticism, in fact work to amplify the innate romanticism of these poems. The tension that is created when the self-consciousness of postmodernism is paired with the romantic sense of getting 'lost' in rapture actually works to produce an energetic spark, invigorating the poem. There is a sense shared by all these poems of someone who is playing a game, and is aware they're playing a game, and nonetheless becomes deranged with joy while playing it. The romanticism at the heart of these poems effectively bursts through the

ironic smugness of postmodernism and creates a new style of romanticism that is perhaps even more rambunctiously ecstatic. Kane's assertion, that for Australian poets there is no escaping the 'strain' of 'belated romanticism,' is no longer useful for romantic poetry in the postmodern age.²²⁷

In the next chapter I will examine at 'Totem Poem' by Davies as a specific example of praise poetry. I will consider the history of the encomium and devotional poetry, and show how traces of these traditions can be found within Davies' own poetic style. Beyond that I will turn my attention to Robert Adamson, another of Australia's leading lyrical and romantic poets, and consider how praise manifests in his more recent work. I will argue that Australian poets have made a distinct and valuable contribution to the genre of praise poetry, and that their work continues to breathe renewed life into the lyric mode

²²⁷ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 5.

Chapter Three

Praise singing: ‘Totem Poem,’ epic lyricism, encomiastic and devotional poetics, totemism, and the poetry of Robert Adamson

In Chapters One and Two, I considered ‘Totem Poem’ as a lyrical love poem that combines the aesthetics of romanticism and postmodernism. In this chapter I will look more closely at how praise functions within ‘Totem Poem,’ to determine whether it also belongs to a tradition of praise poetry, which might include encomiastic and devotional poetry.

In Section 3.1 I’ll take a closer look at how the mode of address within ‘Totem Poem’ fluctuates between the personal and the public: at times it emulates the soft tones of an intimate exchange, but at other times the speaker of the poem appears to be speaking ‘loudly’ as if he were addressing a large audience, possibly amplified. In examining the poem’s mode of address, I will give particular attention to who (or what) the poem appears to be praising. Section 3.2 will then argue that although ‘Totem Poem’ is, on one level, a love poem for a specific person, it also shares traits with Christian devotional poetry. After all, the poem takes its name from totemism – which is a spiritual practice – and in Section 3.3 I will discuss how the poem’s title is a point of departure for significant layers of meaning. Finally, in Section 3.4 I will compare ‘Totem Poem’ to a selection of poems by contemporary Australian lyrical poet Robert Adamson, to show how Adamson similarly uses the aesthetics of romanticism and postmodernism to create praise poems that are ‘charged’ with energy, and are also distinctly Australian.

¹ Davies, *Totem*, 15.

3.1 The epic lyricism of ‘Totem Poem’

‘Totem Poem’ is not a straightforward example of a lyric poem, even though it is highly musical, and it uses the subjective ‘I’ to ‘speak’ directly to a lover. Firstly, ‘Totem Poem’ is much longer than a typical lyrical love poem. Most definitions of ‘lyric’ list concision as one of its key features; for example, David McCooey’s description of lyricism as being associated with ‘brevity.’² Furthermore, many lyrical love poems in the Western tradition rarely overspill a single page: the Shakespearian sonnet, for example, modelled on the Italian ‘little song,’ is only 14 lines long.³ I’ve already reflected upon the 37-page length of ‘Totem Poem,’ speculating that it is an embodiment of a romantic refusal to be constrained. I’ve also discussed the ways in which ‘Totem Poem’ is an aesthetic embodiment of excess, and that it is a deliberate attempt to create an endless moment, or an indefinite suspension of an ecstatic peak. I now want to examine a few core characteristics of epic poetry alongside ‘Totem Poem’ to see whether it might more suitably be categorised as an epic poem instead of a lyric.

It is possible to read the length and grandeur of ‘Totem Poem’ as a legitimate attempt to elevate a lyrical love poem to the level of an epic, in order to position a personal love story as legendary or mythological. Consider, for instance, this stanza:

I lay great and greatly fallen. But relaxed.
Put the old world behind me. I shall conquer a continent.
What ho what damaged universe is this? The paeon ploughs through
its detritus like a glacier. We calculated and lineated
the flare of wind in the shape of trees.⁴

This stanza contains a direct reference to what is possibly the greatest epic poem in the history of literature: Homer’s the *Iliad*. In the notes section of *Totem*, Davies explains that the

² McCooey, ‘Surviving Australian Poetry,’ 69.

³ Birch, ‘Sonnet.’

⁴ Davies, *Totem*, 30.

line ‘I lay great and greatly fallen’ is a homage to a line from Book 16 of the *Iliad* (which describes the death of Cebriones): ‘He lay great and greatly fallen, forgetful of his horsemanship.’⁵ While Homer used ‘He lay great and greatly fallen’ to describe a soldier who died in battle, the way Davies has used it suggests a moment of profound transition within the speaker’s life. This stanza occurs towards the end of the poem, and it appears to describe the end of a long (and possibly also traumatic) journey. Here, the speaker lies ‘greatly fallen’ as if dead, yet ‘relaxed,’ which is a playful way of describing a state of surrender.⁶ The ‘old world’ could symbolise the speaker’s past, including his entire way of living up until this moment of surrender, and ‘conquer a continent’ appears to describe an ebullient – if somewhat maniacal – intention to actively succeed and thrive within this new chapter of his life.⁷ This buoyant tone shifts in the next line: the universe is ‘damaged,’ however a ‘paean’ – a song of praise – is depicted as forcing its way through cosmic debris. This carries with it the suggestion that poetry – a ‘song’ of praise – is capable of ‘ploughing’ through damage, with the immense and steadfast force of a ‘glacier.’⁸ It could also be seen to symbolise the role that poetry has played within the life of the speaker: helping him to make sense of the damage that he caused for himself and others during his time as an addict.

Davies’ decision to incorporate a reference to the phrase ‘He lay great and greatly fallen’ from the *Iliad* infuses this lyrical love poem with epic overtones: of battle and its aftermath, and of destruction and reparation.⁹ While it could be considered ostentatious that Davies has used a line from a great epic poem within a lyrical poem that, in part, describes his own struggle with addiction, it is actually very meaningful, because this moment of intertextuality works to align the personal and specific with the universal and mythic. It’s a way of showing that an ancient epic like the *Iliad* is not just a piece of literary history, but a

⁵ Davies, *Totem*, 84.

⁶ Davies, 30.

⁷ Davies, 30.

⁸ Davies, 30.

⁹ Davies, 84.

living force that continues to resonate with meaning and wisdom. Similarly, it's a way of showing that our own lives have great importance, and that our own personal journey through life is commensurate with the voyages of epic heroes whose actions translate, in some senses, into codes of everyday values.

The American literary critic Helen Vendler describes lyric poetry as 'the genre of private life: it is what we say to ourselves when we are alone.'¹⁰ Vendler goes on to explain that 'there may be an addressee in lyric (God, or a beloved), but the addressee is always absent.'¹¹ This is one of the major points of difference between the lyric and epic modes: lyric poetry is typified by its intimacy of address, whereas epic poetry is written for a public audience. 'Totem Poem' fuses these modes: it follows in the romantic tradition with its use of the subjective 'I,' yet it incorporates elements that belong to the epic mode. One way of making sense of these disparities is to think of the grand themes of 'Totem Poem' such as the birth of the universe and the history of time itself as providing the context against which a personal and specific experience, that is, falling in love, takes place. The positioning of a personal experience within a (much) broader context can be observed in this stanza:

Time was merely the measure of motion
with respect to before and after. Meanwhile
the universe expands. The pine trees creaked.
The pine cones cracked. On a windless day there was time
to dream of you. The pine cones snapped open in the silence.¹²

The beginning of this stanza draws upon the scientific concept that time is a system of 'measurement.'¹³ It begins with the simple assertion that time is 'merely' a measurement of motion, which calls to mind the mechanism of a clock.¹⁴ Following this, the line 'with respect

¹⁰ Vendler, *Poems, Poets, Poetry*, 42.

¹¹ Vendler, 42.

¹² Davies, *Totem*, 16.

¹³ Davies, 16.

¹⁴ Davies, 16.

to before and after’ provides the suggestion of the linear progression of time.⁵ However the next line shifts away from these ordinary concepts with ‘the universe expands,’ a statement that is abstract and fathomless.⁶ This image of the universe expanding couldn’t be further away from that which is personal and intimate. Yet at this point the poem contracts back from the expansion of the universe to an abstract image of pine trees: ‘The pine trees creaked.’⁷ The poem then zooms in even closer from the ‘trees’ to their cones: ‘The pine cones cracked.’⁸ At this point the poem slips back into the mode of intimate address: ‘On a windless day there was time / to dream of you.’⁹ Tying this all together is a musical thread: there is a recurring chime in the ‘i’ sound of the words ‘time,’ ‘Meanwhile,’ ‘pine’ and ‘silence,’ and there is alliteration in ‘merely the measure of motion.’²⁰ Further to this, the ‘a’ sound in ‘cracked’ and ‘snapped’ creates a counter chime, as does the ‘ea’ sound in ‘creaked’ and ‘dream.’ The use of the word ‘Meanwhile’ at the end of the second line is particularly deft, as it shares the ‘i’ and ‘ea’ chimes, while sustaining the conversational tone I’ve observed elsewhere in the poem. Finally, the last line ‘The pine cones snapped open in the silence’ returns to the theme of fecundity, since pine cones snap open to release their seeds when it is time to germinate. This stanza is remarkable because it combines scientific concepts and abstract images, yet it still, somehow, manages to convey a lasting impression of ardent lovers. The pattering of chimes throughout the stanza surreptitiously work to bring everything together: there is a musical cohesion that reinforces the idea that ‘everything is connected.’²²

Just as Davies has combined the aesthetics of romanticism and postmodernism, he has also combined the personal and public modes of address. The poem continuously expands and contracts: it operates like a camera lens that can zoom out from something small like a

¹⁵ Davies, *Totem*, 16.

¹⁶ Davies, 16.

¹⁷ Davies, 16.

¹⁸ Davies, 16.

¹⁹ Davies, 16.

²⁰ Davies, 16.

²¹ Davies, 5.

pine cone to outer space, and back again. ‘Totem Poem’ contains an incredible wealth of scientific, religious and literary references, yet it places a personal experience – that of falling in love – at its centre. This suggests that our inner lives are of great importance, since they are also a feature of the world, and indeed the universe. Love within this poem operates like a pulsating sentence, a cohesive force that connects everything with everything. This is not ‘just’ a love poem, it is an epiphany so powerful that it strives fervently to speak to as large an audience as possible.

In the next section I will consider ‘Totem Poem’ as a form of praise poetry, and reflect more closely upon the subject of the poem’s praise.

3.2 Reading ‘Totem Poem’ in the context of epideictic and devotional poetry

The word ‘epideictic’ originates from the Greek *epideiktikos*, which derives from *deiknūnai* (to show) and *epideiknūnai* (to display or show off).²² In this sense ‘Totem Poem’ is truly epideictic in nature, since, as I’ve just discussed, it puts a private relationship on a public stage: it’s a heart on display. The concept of ‘showing off’ is built into the meaning of epideictic poetry, because it originated from the Ancient Greek practice of giving a public speech of praise or blame. This practice enabled speakers to extol the virtues of gods, rulers and other human subjects, and sometimes also places and objects.²³ Just as lyric poetry evolved from a public performance of music, epideictic poetry began as public speaking, and has since diversified to include the panegyric (originally used to praise heroes, athletes, armies, and dynasties), elegy (which is a lament for the death of a friend, poet, or public figure), epithalamium (a

²² Oxford English Dictionary Online, ‘Epideictic.’

²³ Cornilliat, ‘Epideictic Poetry,’ 448.

celebration of a wedding), and encomium (which praises a human rather than a god).²⁴ In Ancient Greece, encomiums were performed publicly by a choir to praise a person's achievements, and the term is still used today to describe speeches of praise. At a surface level, this is precisely what 'Totem Poem' appears to be: an encomium for a lover. Yet when considered more closely, it's actually quite difficult to pinpoint a specific recipient for the speaker's praise. Even though the poem does speak directly to a lover (such as in the line 'I secretly admired your underwear, your long / elusive legs'), at other times the speaker directly addresses God.²⁵ Consider, for instance, this stanza:

You made me calm. I said to God *God*
how often do I thank you God? I had had
so many years of beauty intruding on all I did I did
not think it might intrude on others. Others
showed no signs of it. But you said laughing *Taste it Taste it.*²⁶

This stanza is peculiar because it begins by directly addressing 'God,' but then in the last line the speaker reverts back to addressing his lover (presuming that the 'you' in 'But you said laughing' is the beloved figure).²⁷ Here, Davies' Catholic background is apparent, since the line 'I said to God *God / how often do I thank you God?*' appears to emulate a confession.²⁸

Returning to Vendler's statement that the addressee within lyric poetry may be 'God, or a beloved,' this stanza addresses both God *and* a beloved.²⁹ Considering this, it's possible that the repeated words at the end of each line in this stanza ('God *God,*' 'had had,' 'I did I did,' 'others. Others,' and '*Taste it Taste It*') work to reinforce this dual address.³⁰ The repetitions here also effect an echo, and they mimic the sound of speaking into an amplified microphone.

This stanza evokes the hushed tone of a confession, yet it also creates the effect of loudly

²⁴ Cornilliat, 'Epideictic Poetry,' 448-449.

²⁵ Davies, *Totem*, 6.

²⁶ Davies, 18.

²⁷ Davies, 18.

²⁸ Davies, 18.

²⁹ Vendler, *Poems, Poets, Poetry*, 42.

³⁰ Davies, *Totem*, 18.

broadcasting this confession. In this way, it is at once like a private prayer, and a public sermon.

Although the speaker of this poem does occasionally direct praise towards his lover, ‘Totem Poem’ also shares attributes with devotional poetry. In his introduction to the anthology *The Soul in Paraphrase: A Treasury of Classic Devotional Poems* (2018), the American literary scholar Leland Ryken explains that ‘most devotional poetry takes specifically spiritual experience for its subject matter.’³¹ Ryken elaborates on this by explaining that devotional poetry tends to address ‘the person and work of God, conviction and confession of sin, forgiveness, worship of God, and the church calendar with events like Christmas and Easter.’³² However, Ryken then adds that ‘devotional poetry is also definable by its effect on a reader. If a poem prompts us to think about God and a spiritual truth, if it deepens our spiritual insight and experience, and it awakens a greater love of God and desire to be like him, it has served a devotional purpose.’³³ This broader and more subjective definition makes it possible to include a poem such as ‘Totem Poem’ within a discussion about devotional poetry, since it prompts thoughts about ‘God and a spiritual truth.’³⁴ Ryken adds nuance to this more nebulous definition by explaining that devotional poetry works by fixing ‘our thoughts on the spiritual life’ and inspiring ‘us toward excellence in it.’³⁵ Ryken goes on to state:

Two English poets of towering stature have provided an additional helpful way of understanding this. John Milton, who turned from a possible ministerial career to his life’s calling as a poet when his Puritan convictions prevented him from entering the Anglican Church, was so convinced of the worthiness of poetry that he claimed that the poet’s abilities ‘are of power beside [equal to] the office of a pulpit’ to produce good in people and societies. One of these effects, according to Milton, was that poetry can ‘set the affections [the old word for emotions] in right tune.’

³¹ Ryken, *The Soul in Paraphrase*, 13.

³² Ryken, 13 14.

³³ Ryken, 14.

³⁴ Ryken, 14.

³⁵ Ryken, 14.

To this we can add a similar viewpoint expressed by the nineteenth-century poet William Wordsworth. Wordsworth was of the opinion that ‘a great poem ought to...rectify men’s feeling, to give them new compositions of feeling.’ If we extend this principle to a reflective lyric, we can say that poetry can rectify our thinking as well as our feeling.³⁶

Since so much of this thesis has been dedicated to ideas relating to amplification and resonance, the phrase ‘in right tune’ is useful. Ryken identifies the Bible as the ‘prototype’ for a type of poetry that sets ‘our thoughts and feelings in right tune,’ and states that reading devotional poetry should evoke the same feeling as reading the Psalms.³⁷ It is possible to argue therefore that by emulating the poetic language of the Bible, Davies has created a poem that is ‘in tune’ with Ryken’s notion of a ‘spiritual truth.’³⁸ Additionally, Ryken’s inclusion of a quote from Wordsworth provides a bridge between the romantic and devotional modes: it implies that a romantic poem can also be a poem of devotion, and vice versa. (Additionally, three of Wordsworth’s poems are included in *The Soul in Paraphrase*.) Although, as Ryken explains, by Christian standards the romantic poets claimed ‘too much for nature, even viewing it as divine,’ a romantic poem that uses nature as its subject can still be considered as devotional in instances where nature can be seen as ‘a signpost to spiritual reality.’³⁹

Using Wordsworth’s definition of a ‘great poem’ as one that essentially ‘sets right’ or reconfigures a person’s feelings, it could be said that ‘Totem Poem,’ through its focus on and *devotion* to the themes of love, sensual delight and the joy of being alive in the physical world, is a poem that perpetually reinforces a feeling of profound gratitude. In this sense ‘Totem Poem’ does, in fact, emulate the poetics of the Psalms, since it is a public voicing of gratitude, one that goes beyond mere thankfulness to the level of oration. This is the ‘forensic element’ of thankfulness in the Psalms that Westermann describes in *Praise and Lament in the*

³⁶ Ryken, *The Soul in Paraphrase*, 15.

³⁷ Ryken, 15.

³⁸ Ryken, 14.

³⁹ Ryken, 236; 152.

Psalms, whereby gratitude is not just privately felt, but publicly expressed.⁴⁰ As Westermann explains, the worshipper who expresses praise in the Psalms feels ‘gratitude in his heart’ and thanks God in private, but they also tell ‘*in public* what God has done for him.’⁴¹

Although Ryken is primarily concerned with poetry that reflects Christian beliefs, his definition of devotional poetry is broad enough to include what he terms the ‘literature of common experience or the literature of clarification,’ which is a type of literature that deals with, and provides clarity about, the life experience.⁴² As Ryken explains, literature that falls into this ‘neutral category’ does not necessarily ‘signal a specifically Christian identity,’ but it is, nonetheless, ‘congruent with Christianity.’⁴³ Although it wouldn’t be accurate to say that ‘Totem Poem’ is entirely ‘congruent’ with Christianity, I do however think that it could be read alongside the poems in Ryken’s anthology as a valid example of the devotional mode. For instance, even though the first poem featured in *The Soul in Paraphrase* is a Christian poem from the Middle Ages, it nonetheless shares points of resonance with ‘Totem Poem.’ The poem is ‘Caedmon’s Hymn’ by Caedmon, who, as Ryken explains, was a 7^h-century English farmhand.⁴⁴ Originally written in Old English, ‘Caedmon’s Hymn’ is the ‘oldest surviving poem in the English language.’⁴⁵ Ryken’s translation of the poem is as follows:

Now we must praise the Keeper of Heaven’s Kingdom,
The might of the Maker and his wisdom,
The work of the Glory-Father, when he of every
wonder,
The eternal Lord, the beginning established.

He first created for the sons of earth
Heaven as a roof, Holy Creator,
Then middle-earth the Protector of mankind,
Eternal Lord, afterwards made,
The earth for men, the Lord Almighty.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 29–30.

⁴¹ Westermann, 30.

⁴² Ryken, *The Soul in Paraphrase*, 14.

⁴³ Ryken, 14.

⁴⁴ Ryken, 19.

⁴⁵ Ryken, 19.

⁴⁶ Caedmon, ‘Caedmon’s Hymn,’ in Ryken, *The Soul in Paraphrase*, 19.

The legend behind this poem is that whenever the harp was passed around the dining hall during feasts so that abbey residents could take turns singing, Caedmon would make an excuse to leave the meal.⁴⁷ On one of these nights, Caedmon left the dining hall and went to the barn, where he fell asleep. He dreamed that a visitor asked him to sing something, but he replied that he did not know how to sing. The visitor then told him to ‘sing about creation,’ and this prompted Caedmon to sing ‘Caedmon’s Hymn.’ As Ryken remarks, ‘English poetry thus began with a miracle of the word.’⁴⁸ It also began with an expression of praise, as can be seen in the first line: ‘Now we must praise the Keeper of Heaven’s Kingdom.’⁴⁹ Ryken explains that ‘Caedmon’s Hymn’ belongs to the ‘biblical genre known as the psalm of praise’ while drawing attention to the way that the first stanza ‘praises God’s sovereignty in creating the entire cosmos.’⁵⁰

In *The Poetry of Praise* (2008) the British historian John Burrow explains that the Latin versions of the Hebrew Psalter were, for the Anglo-Saxons, the ‘one great example of poetry in praise of their God,’ and that they referred to them as ‘*lof sangas*’ which translates as ‘praise-songs.’⁵¹ ‘Caedmon’s Hymn,’ which Burrow also identifies as the oldest surviving English poem, belongs to this tradition. Burrow’s reading of the poem is as follows:

Opening with a *Laudate*, this little poem ‘amplifies’ a simple praise of God in both senses of that term, both sustaining and heightening it. The method, very evidently, is to designate the Creator by a variety of words and phrases – no less than eight times in nine lines. This method, common to alliterative poetry generally, is now known as ‘variation’. Variation served a technical purpose, inaugurating patterns of alliteration in a first half-line or completing them in a second; but it also contributed to the copiousness and redundancy of a high poetic style. So Caedmon, without even using the plain word ‘God’ itself, can praise him as eternal, holy and almighty, and glorify him as the lord, father, creator and guardian of heaven and earth. The poem is an unusually concentrated

⁴⁷ Ryken, *The Soul in Paraphrase*, 20.

⁴⁸ Ryken, 20.

⁴⁹ Caedmon, ‘Caedmon’s Hymn,’ in Ryken, *The Soul in Paraphrase*, 19.

⁵⁰ Ryken, *The Soul in Paraphrase*, 20.

⁵¹ Burrow, *The Poetry of Praise*, 31.

example of an alliterative manner which provided frequent opportunities for the laudatory treatment of subjects, secular as well as religious.⁵²

This technique of ‘amplification’ of sustaining and heightening particular words and phrases can be seen throughout ‘Totem Poem,’ although not in direct relation to a Christian God. ‘Totem Poem’ does, however, echo several of the nouns that feature in the translated version of ‘Caedmon’s Hymn.’ For instance, the word ‘wisdom’ appears within the phrase ‘the pear tree thick with wisdom’ in ‘Totem Poem,’ and in the second line of Caedmon’s Hymn: ‘The might of the Maker and his wisdom.’⁵³ The word ‘wonder’ is also shared: in ‘Totem Poem’ it appears in the lines ‘It was even disingenuous / to say there were no surprises; but wonder upped its / frequencies,’ and in ‘Caedmon’s Hymn’ it appears in the third line: ‘The work of the Glory-Father, when he of every wonder.’⁵⁴ Both poems also include variations of the exaltation ‘God almighty’: in ‘Totem Poem’ it appears towards the end of the poem in the lines ‘The good-humoured power of one’s / personal bear, and all that honey, God almighty, honey everywhere,’ and in ‘Caedmon’s Hymn’ it can be found in the final line: ‘The earth for men, the Lord Almighty.’⁵⁵

Additionally, both ‘Caedmon’s Hymn’ and ‘Totem Poem’ are also preoccupied with notions of eternity. For instance, the phrase ‘eternal Lord’ appears in the fourth and eighth lines of ‘Caedmon’s Hymn,’ and in ‘Totem Poem’ the words ‘eternal’ and ‘eternity’ appear multiple times, most prominently in this stanza:

Down there nothing but eternity and praise.
To be alive I had to praise, to praise I had to
learn to speak. Speak loudly though to drown
the blood about to burst, to drown eternity
whose howl floods every canyon to nothingness.⁵⁶

⁵² Burrow, *The Poetry of Praise*, 32–33.

⁵³ Davies, *Totem*, 22; Caedmon, ‘Caedmon’s Hymn,’ in Ryken, *The Soul in Paraphrase*, 19.

⁵⁴ Davies, 31; Caedmon, 19.

⁵⁵ Davies, 37; Caedmon, 19.

⁵⁶ Davies, 15.

Throughout ‘Totem Poem,’ abstract imagery is interspersed with references to real people and places. However, the above stanza lacks an anchor point to a specific and tangible reality. The last line of the preceding stanza is ‘I spoke my tongues against your breathlessness,’ which doesn’t provide any clarity into where, exactly, ‘down there’ might be located.⁵⁷ This creates a disorienting effect: stripped of clues and reference points, the phrase ‘down there’ plunges the reader into the darkness of the unknown. It could be seen to represent an altered state of consciousness, such as a dream or a drug experience, or it could also be an allusion, potentially, to a timeless realm that is devoid of physical matter. Since ‘nothing’ is down there except ‘eternity and praise,’ this sense of disembodiment and timelessness of existing outside of the physical universe is reinforced.⁵⁸ ‘To be alive,’ the speaker had to ‘praise,’ and to praise he needed to ‘learn to speak.’⁵⁹ This recalls, albeit tangentially, the legend behind ‘Caedmon’s Hymn,’ in which Caedmon, while dreaming, realised his ‘poetic gift’ by giving voice to a song of praise.⁶⁰ The words ‘Now we must praise’ signalled the spontaneous and miraculous end of Caedmon’s silence, while in ‘Totem Poem’ it is the act of giving praise, through speaking ‘loudly,’ that has the power to counteract an ‘eternity’ of ‘nothingness.’⁶¹ In this sense ‘Totem Poem’ is the manifestation of Davies’ impulse to ‘praise,’ in the same way that the poem ‘Caedmon’s Hymn’ is the manifestation of Caedmon’s song of praise. Just as the second stanza of ‘Caedmon’s Hymn,’ as Ryken describes, ‘gives way to a vocabulary of earth and people,’ ‘Totem Poem’ could be read as a worldly glossary, one that evokes what it describes.⁶²

Another devotional poet whose influence can be detected in Davies’ poetry is Gerard Manley Hopkins, who was born in England in 1844, but spent much of his adult life in

⁵⁷ Davies, *Totem*, 15.

⁵⁸ Davies, 15.

⁵⁹ Davies, 15.

⁶⁰ Ryken, *The Soul in Paraphrase*, 20.

⁶¹ Caedmon, ‘Caedmon’s Hymn,’ in Ryken, *The Soul in Paraphrase*, 19; Davies, *Totem*, 15.

⁶² Ryken, *The Soul in Paraphrase*, 20.

Ireland after he became ordained as a Jesuit priest.⁶³ A number of Hopkins' poems have been included in *The Soul in Paraphrase*, including the iconic and much anthologised 'Pied Beauty,' which was written in 1877, but not published until 1918 (long after Hopkins' death in 1889).⁶⁴ 'Pied Beauty', by Ryken's description, is 'a brief psalm of praise to God, in the mode of the psalms of praise in the Old Testament.'⁶⁵ As the English poet and literary critic James Reeves points out in his introduction to *Selected Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (published in 1953), it is also a sonnet that expresses 'ecstatic wonder at the beauty of nature.'⁶⁶ As Reeves explains, 'Pied Beauty' is 'distinguished by a simple rapture at the loveliness of the world as a manifestation of God, and by a confident, even triumphant, mastery of rhythm, diction and imagery.'⁶⁷ This version of 'Pied Beauty' appears in Reeves' anthology:

Glory be to God for dappled things —
 For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
 For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
 Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
 Landscape plotted and pieced — fold, fallow, and plough;
 And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
 Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
 With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim:
 He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
 Praise him.⁶⁸

From the outset, the phrase 'Glory be to God' establishes this as a poem of praise, and it also echoes the Latin motto of the Jesuit faith '*ad maiorem Dei gloriam*' ('To the greater glory of God').⁶⁹ However, the poem immediately turns its attention to 'things,' which includes aspects of the natural world such as animals and flowers, but also human-made objects such as 'gear

⁶³ Reeves, 'Introduction,' in Hopkins, *Selected Poems*, viii; x.

⁶⁴ Reeves, xiii; xvii; xxi.

⁶⁵ Ryken, *The Soul in Paraphrase*, 207.

⁶⁶ Reeves, 'Introduction,' in Hopkins, *Selected Poems*, xxi.

⁶⁷ Reeves, xxi.

⁶⁸ Hopkins, *Selected Poems*, 24.

⁶⁹ Reeves, 'Introduction,' in Hopkins, *Selected Poems*, xxviii.

and tackle.⁷⁰ Not only is the poem's focus decidedly material, it specifically praises variance and diversity within the material realm. As Ryken observes, the poem 'praises the artistic quality of variety, or being variegated rather than uniform.'⁷¹ This is achieved through sensual observations of visual contrasts, emphasised by the words 'dappled,' 'brinded,' 'stipple,' and 'freckled,' as well as Hopkins' alliterative and assonant fusing together of the words 'couple' and 'colour.'⁷² 'Pied Beauty' celebrates and praises transience: the changing colour of the skies, the flash of shining fish scales through running water, and landscapes perpetually in flux. Ultimately, all that is 'fickle' is praised as serving a divine purpose: these myriad multiplicities point back to their one creator 'whose beauty is past change.'⁷³ As Ryken explains, 'Pied Beauty' sets all that is transient and changeable against the immutability and immortality of God:

The poet's goal is twofold. On the one hand, he wants to awaken us to an artistic quality of everyday life so we can enjoy it. Secondly, he wants us to experience this beauty of nature as a manifestation of God, thereby transmuting artistic enjoyment into spiritual adoration of God. The poem begins and ends as the nature poems in the book of Psalms do – by praising God. The next-to-last line also does this, and in contrast to all of the variety and change that the poem has shown to exist in nature, God is said to be transcendent above such cyclic reality, being past change.⁷⁴

It's particularly appropriate that Ryken described the goal of 'Pied Beauty' as 'twofold,' since it is a poem that, at its very essence, is concerned with duality. 'Pied Beauty' works by bringing oppositional variants into relation with each other, and therefore it could be seen as a precursor to the 'electrified' lyricism of Davies' poetry. Consider, for instance, this stanza from 'Totem Poem':

⁷⁰ Hopkins, *Selected Poems*, 24.

⁷¹ Ryken, *The Soul in Paraphrase*, 207.

⁷² Hopkins, *Selected Poems*, 24.

⁷³ Hopkins, 24.

⁷⁴ Ryken, *The Soul in Paraphrase*, 207–208.

We were reduced to this: this day and night,
primary gold and indigo, the binary profusion
of distances guessed at, heat and cold, colours
logged in the retina and lodged in the spine;
we were dogs who knew the infinite is now,⁷⁵

This stanza contains its own summary: it establishes the world as place that is comprised of a ‘profusion’ of binaries.⁷⁶ From a thematic standpoint this connects with ‘Pied Beauty,’ since the word ‘pied’ (as it is generally used) describes anything that is varicoloured, such as, to use Hopkins’ example, a spotted cow.⁷⁷ Furthermore, the phrase ‘all things counter’ is suggestive of contrast, or, more specifically, of opposition.⁷⁸ In essence, ‘Pied Beauty’ represents oppositions as being definitive of the material realm; of life itself. In the above stanza of ‘Totem Poem,’ Davies also represents the physical world in terms of its many oppositional contrasts, such as ‘day and night’ and ‘heat and cold.’⁷⁹ The phrase ‘primary gold and indigo’ also represents an opposition, since on a colour wheel bright yellow (i.e. ‘primary gold’) and dark blue (‘indigo’) appear on opposite sides. The stanza goes on to describe colour as a sensation that can be seen (‘logged in the retina’) but also felt (‘and lodged in the spine’), before declaring: ‘we were dogs who knew the infinite is now.’⁸⁰ As I have already observed in my discussion about ‘Totem Poem’ and the sublime, the fusion of ‘the infinite’ and ‘now’ in this stanza reduces that which is limitless and fathomless (i.e. an ‘infinite’ quantity of time) right down to a singularity (i.e. the present moment).⁸

The phrase ‘we were dogs’ from the above stanza of ‘Totem Poem’ is worth reflecting on further.⁸² Up until this point in the poem, the lovers observe animals such as birds, monkeys and snakes, and sometimes they also converse with them, but in this stanza they

⁷⁵ Davies, *Totem*, 10.

⁷⁶ Davies, 10.

⁷⁷ Hopkins, *Selected Poems*, 24.

⁷⁸ Hopkins, 24.

⁷⁹ Davies, *Totem*, 10.

⁸⁰ Davies, 10.

⁸¹ Davies, 10.

⁸² Davies, 10.

actually assume the perspective of dogs. This could be likened to the way that ‘Pied Beauty’ similarly blends motifs of human activities into images of animals and landscapes, by positioning the line ‘And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim’ at the end of a stanza dedicated to descriptions of animals and the natural world.⁸³ The way that this line rhymes with the earlier line ‘For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim’ also forges an implicit connection between the trout that ‘swim’ and the fishermen with ‘their gear and tackle and trim.’⁸⁴ The human figures in ‘Pied Beauty’ form part of the variegated world that they share with animals, as do the lovers in ‘Totem Poem.’ Another point of similarity is the way that Hopkins contrasts the variousness and changeability of the world against the divinity of God who is ‘past change,’ and the way that Davies contrasts a world of ‘binary profusion’ against the simplicity of a single monosyllabic word (and what it represents): ‘now.’⁸⁵

‘Pied Beauty’ specifically directs the focus of its praise towards ‘all things’ that are ‘original, spare, strange.’⁸⁶ Hopkins was a literary innovator: he adapted traditional metered verse to create what he termed ‘sprung rhythm,’ which James Reeves defines as ‘a disciplined form of free verse.’⁸⁷ This unique poetic style can be seen as an extension of what Reeves describes as Hopkins’ abiding ‘passion for individuality, for whatever was original.’⁸⁸ The poem ‘Pied Beauty’ itself could easily be defined as ‘original, spare, strange,’ and thus an artefact of God’s creativity. By this I don’t mean to imply that Hopkins saw himself as having God-like powers of creation.⁸⁹ Instead, by writing a poem that sought to reflect ‘God’s presence in all things,’ Hopkins ultimately ended up creating something that was as equally worthy of praise and admiration as the ‘dappled things’ that characterise the physical world.⁹⁰

⁸³ Hopkins, *Selected Poems*, 24.

⁸⁴ Hopkins, 24.

⁸⁵ Hopkins, 24; Davies, *Totem*, 10.

⁸⁶ Hopkins, 24

⁸⁷ Reeves, ‘Introduction,’ in Hopkins, *Selected Poems*, xxi.

⁸⁸ Reeves, xxiii.

⁸⁹ Hopkins, *Selected Poems*, 24.

⁹⁰ Reeves, ‘Introduction,’ in Hopkins, *Selected Poems*, xxiii.

‘Pied Beauty’ is ultimately a poem of great humility: it is entirely dedicated to venerating the smallest details of God’s creation.

Conversely, ‘Totem Poem’ is an expansive poem, large enough to accommodate huge concepts such as ‘deep space’ and ‘accretion zones,’ alongside its more ordinary references to insects and animals such as ‘dragonflies’ and ‘owls.’⁹¹ It also goes beyond a strictly Christian perspective to consider a variety of religious viewpoints. For instance, although ‘Totem Poem’ shares points of resemblance with Christian poems of devotion such as ‘Caedmon’s Hymn’ and ‘Pied Beauty,’ it also makes reference (through its depiction of ‘Ganesh’) to the most sacred of texts in the Hindu religion, the *Rigveda* (a collection of Sanskrit hymns dating back to the 15th century BC.)⁹² It is also possible to argue that ‘Totem Poem’ also makes room for non-religious viewpoints. For although ‘Totem Poem’ does include references to the Bible and other religious texts, it also includes scientific references with equal amounts of care and reverence. For example, the line ‘in the driest season I drew my love from geometry’ demonstrates a sincere respect for mathematic concepts, while lines such as ‘we calculated and lineated / the flare of wind in the shape of trees,’ reveals a fascination with meteorology.⁹³ There is humility here, too: ‘Totem Poem’ exudes appreciation and gratitude for the many different frameworks that can help us to interpret the world and our place within it – including those that are religious, scientific, poetic and otherwise. In this sense ‘Totem Poem’ truly does fit Ryken’s description of the ‘literature of common experience’ and the ‘literature of clarification’ as being part of the devotional mode.⁹⁴ It both speaks to the sensory experience of being alive in the world, as well as providing deeper insights from religion, science, philosophy and literature.

⁹¹ Davies, *Totem*, 11; 21; 20.

⁹² Graham, ‘Devotional Poetry,’ 352–353; Davies, *Totem*, 4.

⁹³ Davies, 18; 30.

⁹⁴ Ryken, *The Soul in Paraphrase*, 14.

There is also humility in the way that ‘Totem Poem’ ends. The final lines of the poem suspend the speaker in a perpetual state of receptive awareness: ‘Stop we will hold each other here. / I am listening, I am listening.’⁹⁵ The repetition of ‘I am listening’ reinforces a general feeling of willingness and openness. On the page, the last line is only half the length of the preceding four lines of the stanza, which leaves a meaningful patch of blank space at the very end of the poem. What follows is the same reflective silence that falls when any poem ends, but in this instance there is a sense that within this silence there is a little extra room for some kind of a response. It could also be said that the silence that follows the last line of ‘Totem Poem’ is the response: a way of gesturing to the silent frame within which all poetry exists, and suggesting that it is just as meaningful as the poem itself.

In the next section I will consider the significance of the title of ‘Totem Poem’ by reflecting upon totemism as a spiritual practice: one that provides protection and facilitates communication with something understood as divine.

3.3 Totemism: kinship, protection, preservation, and divine communication

So far in my analysis of ‘Totem Poem,’ I have not addressed the significance of its title. *Totem* is the title of the collection in which ‘Totem Poem’ appears, and within this book, aside from the title pages, the word ‘totem’ appears only once, in this stanza:

What rang out as lament found consolation
in some lost principle more permanent,
on evenings when the softness of the sky
relaxed the heart. Totem. Aspiration of species, density
and emptiness of matter, animal interloop of memory.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Davies, *Totem*, 39.

⁹⁶ Davies, 25.

The musical elements in this stanza work to create the effect of music, such as the alliteration in ‘**p**inciple more **p**ermanent,’ and ‘**s**oftness of the **s**ky.’⁹⁹ There is assonance in the ‘**o**’ sound of ‘**c**onsolation,’ ‘**l**ost,’ and ‘**s**oftness,’ which provides a comforting aural cushion, and thus subtly reinforces the idea of being consoled.¹⁰⁰ The ‘**a**’ sound in the stanza’s second word ‘**r**ang’ reappears in the words ‘**r**elaxed,’ ‘**A**spiration,’ ‘**m**atter,’ and ‘**a**nimal’ in a way that simulates a sound resonating across distance.¹⁰¹ It is significant that the word ‘totem’ appears as a singular word: an island in amidst a sea of long, flowing lines. The fact that it stands on its own helps to emphasise its two syllables, which could be seen to emulate the sound of a tribal drum. The poem appears to pause here for a brief yet powerful moment, before its relentless momentum picks up again with the phrase ‘aspiration of species.’¹⁰²

From a thematic standpoint, the stanza begins with an allusion to loss, since a ‘lament’ is a lyrical outpouring of sadness. Yet this sadness is ameliorated at the end of the same line by the word ‘consolation.’¹⁰³ The second line shows that this consolation comes from a ‘principle’ that is ‘lost’ and yet somehow also ‘permanent.’¹⁰⁴ The word ‘principle’ can be interpreted in a number of ways. However, in this context it is fair to speculate that it refers to some kind of universal truth, one that governs the workings of the universe. Although this ‘principle’ might have been ‘lost’ from, say, human knowledge, it still exists, and the lines ‘on evenings when the softness of the sky / relaxed the heart’ suggest that it can still be felt.¹⁰⁵ The dual-thump drumbeat of the word ‘totem’ at this point acts as an aural point of linkage between the present and the past, and it also emulates the sound of a heart that is ‘relaxed.’¹⁰⁶ Following this, the phrase ‘aspiration of species’ conjures an idea of a determined striving: for survival, undoubtedly, but also possibly for prosperity and advancement. The final phrases

⁹⁹ Davies, *Totem*, 25.

¹⁰⁰ Davies, 25.

¹⁰¹ Davies, 25.

¹⁰² Davies, 25.

¹⁰³ Davies, 25.

¹⁰⁴ Davies, 25.

¹⁰⁵ Davies, 25.

¹⁰⁶ Davies, 25.

‘density / and emptiness of matter’ and ‘animal interloop of memory’ could be seen to reinforce the concept of a ‘lost principle’ retaining some kind of latent permanency within the very composition of physical matter, and in the ‘interloop’ of animal ‘memory.’⁰⁷

At this point it is necessary to reflect more closely upon the meaning of the word ‘totem.’ Since totemism plays a vital role within various Aboriginal and Indigenous spiritualities, I have drawn from sources that explain the concept from an Indigenous perspective. Specifically, I will primarily refer to *Indigenous Kinship with the Natural World in New South Wales* (2003), edited by Diana James, Deborah Bird Rose, and Christine Watson.⁰⁸ As James et al., point out, the term ‘totemism’ has limited usefulness, since the word originates from the Ojibwa (a Native American tribal group), and many people are now questioning the suitability of using this term ‘in reference to phenomena from all over the world simply because an early generation of scholars decided to class them together.’⁰⁹ Because of this, James et al., explain that some Aboriginal Australians choose to use the term ‘token’ instead of ‘totem.’ Overall, James et al. make it clear that at the forefront of any discussion about Aboriginal ‘totemism’ in relation to the Dreamtime needs to be an understanding that both terms ‘are expressive of a worldview, in which humanity is part of the natural world, has responsibilities to the world, and is born from, lives for, and dies to return to, the living world known as country.’¹⁰

In defining the terms ‘totem’ and ‘totemism,’ James et al. explain that for Indigenous Australians in New South Wales, these words convey three meanings. The first is an ‘identity meaning,’ whereby ‘the ‘totem’ is a non-human species or phenomenon that stands for, or represents, the group.’¹¹ The second is a ‘relationship meaning’ whereby ‘the ‘totem’

¹⁰⁷ Davies, *Totem*, 25.

¹⁰⁸ James et al., *Indigenous Kinship*.

¹⁰⁹ James et al., 2.

¹¹⁰ James et al., 2.

¹¹¹ James et al., 3.

¹¹² James et al., 3.

and the person or group share their physical substance, and share a kin relatedness.’³

Finally, the third is a ‘worldview meaning’ whereby ‘the relationships are embedded in a view of the world in which connectivity is the foundation of all life.’⁴ As Helen McKay points out in *Gadi Mirrabooka*, the totemic system is connected to the Dreamtime. She continues to explain that it provides:

...a method of identification for each tribe, bestowing a sense of identity and belonging on each member, as well as creating a spiritual connection between human beings and the natural world. It is widely believed that these totems – mammals, fish, or birds – were sacred gifts bestowed by the spirits back in the Dreamtime. Each tribe shared a common totem, believed to be the living spirit of an Aboriginal ancestor. These tribal totems were passed down through many generations to all the future generations, usually through the patrilineal line but occasionally, in some tribes, through the matrilineal line. The members of the tribe did not kill or eat the species that was their totem.⁵

McKay’s definition echoes the ‘identity,’ ‘relationship,’ and ‘worldview’ meanings as outlined by James et al., in which the practice of totemism is multifaceted, and ultimately reflective of a worldview where the idea of ‘connectivity’ is foundational.⁶ The cultural practice of identifying a particular animal (or, in certain instances, a particular plant) as sacred, embeds a sense of being innately connected to animals and the land, and it fosters a sense of being tied to the ‘living spirit,’ as McKay phrases it, of ancestors.⁷ It is, as James et al. explain, this idea of ‘kin relatedness’ that underpins the Aboriginal worldview, in which ‘the actual relationships between people and particular parts of the natural world are understood to be relationships of kinship and caring.’⁸

The terms ‘totem’ and ‘totemism’ were appropriated by European social scientists at the beginning of the 20th century, as I shall now discuss briefly. James et al. identify Sir James Frazer's *Totemism and Exogamy* (1910) and Sigmund Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1918) as key texts

¹¹³ James et al., *Indigenous Kinship*, 3.

¹¹⁴ James et al., 3.

¹¹⁵ McKay, *Gadi Mirrabooka*, 19.

¹¹⁶ James et al., *Indigenous Kinship*, 3.

¹¹⁷ McKay, *Gadi Mirrabooka*, 19.

¹¹⁸ James et al., *Indigenous Kinship*, 3; 1.

that interpreted the concept of totemism through a schemata of progress: ‘from simple to complex, or, in human societies, from savagery to civilisation.’¹⁹ As they explain, this procedure of systematisation and categorisation had ‘rules’ that are ‘clear in retrospect, in which ‘everything had to be fitted into a sequence, and Western civilisation always had to come out on top.’²⁰ By the early 20th century, James et al. argue, ‘totemism became a mirror for Western social theories,’ and many of these assumptions have ‘hindered an understanding of the relational and connective aspects of totemism that are at the heart of Australian Aboriginal totemism.’²¹

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud actually bases his definition of totemism on (his interpretation of) Australian Aboriginal totemic systems. This book reflects the prejudice and conceit that Rose mentions, in which Western society was seen as ‘civilised’ and Indigenous societies as ‘savage.’²² Indeed, the entire premise of *Totem and Taboo* is that the ‘psychic life’ of ‘so-called savage and semi-savage races’ can be seen as a ‘well-preserved, early stage’ of the psychic life of ‘civilised man.’²³ I do not agree with this viewpoint, and will not be applying Freud’s theory to my readings of ‘Totem Poem.’ However, I would like to include Freud’s definition of ‘totemism’ here, because it touches upon some of the more supernatural aspects that are generally (and possibly mistakenly) associated with it, especially in pop-cultural uses of the term, and which are (tangentially) alluded to in Davies’ poem:

Among the Australians the system of *Totemism* takes the place of all religious and social institutions. Australian tribes are divided into smaller *septs* or clans, each taking the name of its *totem*. Now what is a totem? As a rule it is an animal, either edible and harmless, or dangerous and feared; more rarely the totem is a plant or a force of nature (rain, water), which stands in a peculiar relation to the whole clan. The totem is first of all the tribal ancestor of the clan, as well as its tutelary spirit and protector; it sends oracles and, though otherwise dangerous, the totem knows and spares its children. The members of a totem are therefore under a sacred obligation not to kill (destroy) their totem, to abstain

¹¹⁹ James et al., *Indigenous Kinship*, 6.

¹²⁰ James et al., 6.

¹²¹ James et al., 6.

¹²² James et al., 6.

¹²³ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 1.

from eating its meat or from any other enjoyment of it. Any violation of these prohibitions is automatically punished. The character of a totem is inherent not only in a single animal or single being but in all the members of the species. ²⁴

By ‘supernatural’ I mean Freud’s claims that a totem can act as a ‘tutelary spirit and protector,’ and send ‘oracles.’ ²⁵ Of course, these aspects are not the chief concern for Freud, who instead dedicates the bulk of his discussion to ‘that peculiarity of the totemic system which attracts the interest of the psychoanalyst,’ which is the phenomena whereby ‘almost everywhere the totem prevails there also exists the law that the members of the same totem are not allowed to enter into sexual relations with each other.’ ²⁶ This isn’t the concern of this thesis. Rather, it is Freud’s intimation that a totem can essentially facilitate a direct interaction with the divine (i.e., sending ‘oracles’). After all, ‘Totem Poem’ begins with that striking image of the sky erupting ‘open’ and the lovers entering it ‘gladly,’ which could be read as a visual metaphor for suddenly gaining direct access to the heavens. ²⁷ This notion of a portal opening up and enabling direct communication with the divine adopts many guises within ‘Totem Poem,’ such as in the sixth stanza when Ganesh looms ‘large’ in a sky that is ‘filled with animals,’ and instructs the lovers to ‘*Change!*’ ²⁸ There are also, as I’ve mentioned, a number of moments within the poem where the speaker directly addresses God, at one point telling him ‘*God I am speechless I am / contented I am very tired I am rather in love.*’ ²⁹ It could also be argued that the entire length of ‘Totem Poem’ is one long engagement with some kind of celestial entity, which could be God, or a muse, or even possibly an ancestral spirit.

¹²⁴ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 2.

¹²⁵ Freud, 2.

¹²⁶ Freud, 3.

¹²⁷ Davies, *Totem*, 3.

¹²⁸ Davies, 4.

¹²⁹ Davies, 19.

‘Totem Poem’ also contains echo of Freud’s claim that one of the functions of a totem is to act as a ‘protector.’³⁰ In the following stanza of ‘Totem Poem,’ it is ‘love’ that is shown as having a protective force:

Something has lifted the lid off the labyrinth. As if
that hot-breathed contact with your lips were a kind of Spring.
The sky takes on its brightness like a skin.
Love protects the twinned and the untwinned, the set-upon,
the cast-adrift, unmoored, unhooked, unleashed, unhinged.³

This stanza is the poem’s third-to-last, and as such it contains indicators such as in the third act of a story or a play that it is nearing its end. One such clue is the above stanza’s first line: ‘Something has lifted the lid off the labyrinth.’³² The figure of a Minotaur (a mythical creature from Ancient Greek mythology with a bull’s head and the body of a man) features multiple times in ‘Totem Poem.’ It first appears in the line ‘The minotaur in the corral,’ which shows the creature as trapped (or captured) within a ‘corral’ (an enclosure).³³ According to the legend, the creature called Minotaur lived in the middle of a labyrinth, i.e., a maze, and this idea is later reflected in these lines from ‘Totem Poem’: ‘At night inside his eyelids in the heart of the maze / the Minotaur kept counsel with the void.’³⁴ Therefore the Minotaur in ‘Totem Poem’ remains trapped inside a ‘corral’ or a ‘maze’ until, in the above stanza, the ‘lid’ of the maze is ‘lifted.’³⁵ This lifting of a lid also resembles the image of the sky breaking open: it’s possible to interpret it as yet another metaphor for suddenly being granted access to the divine. The last time the Minotaur appears in ‘Totem Poem,’ it is shown rounding ‘the final bend, / weeping with fear and elation.’³⁶ Thus the poem begins with an

¹³⁰ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 3.

¹³¹ Freud, 38.

¹³² Davies, *Totem*, 38.

¹³³ Davies, 14.

¹³⁴ Davies, 35.

¹³⁵ Davies, 38.

¹³⁶ Davies, 38.

image of release ('the sky erupted open') and ends with a similarly cathartic image, of the Minotaur weeping as it finally escapes its prison. ³⁷

The image of the lid lifting away from a maze that has kept a Minotaur trapped is a powerful way to begin a stanza, and then later in this same stanza the sky appears again, this time with 'brightness like a skin.' ³⁸ The stanza then ends with the couplet: 'Love protects the twinned and the untwinned, the set-upon, / the cast-adrift, unmoored, unhooked, unleashed, unhinged.' ³⁹ This could be seen to reflect Christian theology: of God sending his only son to Earth, and granting eternal life (and, implicitly, protection) to 'whosoever' believes in him. ⁴⁰ Christians are united by their belief in Christ, and it is through sharing the same beliefs that a sense of connectedness is forged. Similarly, 'Totem Poem' presents love as a unifying force that connects people with each other, and with the divine. Earlier in the poem, the lines 'it was then I knew that love / was the only godhead,' depict 'love' as a supreme being: the original source of all life. ⁴¹ Correspondingly, in the above stanza, 'love' offers protection to those who are 'cast-adrift.' ⁴² This is a comforting concept, and it is significant that this moment occurs towards the end of Davies' poem, where it could be seen as some kind of concluding statement. For all the travails and tribulations that are depicted within the body of 'Totem Poem,' it ends with a lid being lifted from a maze, a Minotaur escaping its enclosure, and some kind of all-powerful yet compassionate divine force offering love and protection to whosoever is lost, troubled, or 'unhinged.' ⁴³

Since this is a discussion about the possible meanings of the title of 'Totem Poem,' it is necessary to reflect upon the role that animals play within the poem. After all, the practice of totemism is largely connected specifically to animals, hence the phrase (that has found its way

¹³⁷ Davies, *Totem*, 3; 38.

¹³⁸ Davies, 38.

¹³⁹ Davies, 38.

¹⁴⁰ John 3:16 NKJV.

¹⁴¹ Davies, *Totem*, 29-30.

¹⁴² Davies, 38.

¹⁴³ Davies, 38.

into general speech): ‘totem animal.’ Regarding animals and totemism, the Australian sociologist Adrian Franklin provides a useful definition in his book *Animal Nation: The True Story of Animals and Australia* (2006):

Totemism can be defined as a special religious and social association between human groups (especially clans and lineages) and natural species (predominantly animals) in which the former claim to descend from animals, derive powers from them and thus still belong to the animal kingdom. In this way a man can state that he is a kangaroo and make perfect sense.’⁴⁴

Franklin goes on to explain that ‘the world according to this view was governed by animal ancestors whose manifestation and power on the earth was multiple, appearing at various times as animals, humans and objects.’⁴⁵ This explanation, of animal ancestors appearing on Earth at ‘various times’ not just as ‘animals’ but as ‘humans and objects’ as well, possibly comes the closest to describing the world of ‘Totem Poem,’ in which there is a ‘python’ who is ‘everywhere, everywhere at once,’ and a ‘monkey’ who announces ‘*I am, hooray, / the monkey of all events, the great gibbon of convergences.*’⁴⁶ Amid the legion of animals that appear in this poem, the two that are mentioned most frequently are birds and dogs. I’ve already discussed the romantic significance that birds play in ‘Totem Poem,’ so I would now like to turn my attention to dogs, which appear most prominently in this stanza:

Ah but the dogs will save us all in the end & even the planet.
Not the superdogs but the household friendlies, always
eager to please, hysterically fond, incessant, carrying in the very
wagging of their tails an unbounded love not even
therapists could imagine; their forgiveness unhinges us.⁴⁷

It is possible to argue that in contemporary Western culture, dogs are treated, effectively, as totemic. They are animals with which we share a special ‘association’ (to borrow Franklin’s

¹⁴⁴ Franklin, *Animal Nation*, 51.

¹⁴⁵ Franklin, 51.

¹⁴⁶ Davies, *Totem*, 8; 3.

¹⁴⁷ Davies, 10.

term): they are treated very differently to the animals that we (at least, the omnivorous among us) eat. In this stanza of ‘Totem Poem,’ the idea of dogs as being ‘special’ has been taken a step further, in that they are portrayed as having the power to ‘save us all,’ and ‘even the planet.’⁴⁸ The stanza goes on to specify that these saviours will not be ‘superdogs,’ but the ‘household friendlies,’ who are ‘eager to please’ and ‘hysterically fond.’⁴⁹ After this, the word ‘tales’ (instead of the expected homonym ‘tails’) in the lines ‘carrying in the very / wagging of their **tales** an unbounded love’ adds another layer of meaning to this picture of eagerness and fondness.⁵⁰ This play on words endows these domestic ‘friendlies’ with a human attribute: that of storytelling. It generates the sense that the ‘unbounded love’ that these dogs express is a kind of message, one that is being passed through them to us: perhaps from our spiritual ancestors. The word ‘unbounded’ speaks of a love that is totally unlimited, and is able to transgress any kind of border, whether it is cultural, spiritual, linguistic, physical or metaphysical; the all-powerful love that is later described as ‘the only godhead.’⁵¹ The phrase ‘not even / therapists could imagine’ is probably not specifically related to history’s most famous therapist, i.e. Sigmund Freud: it is more likely that this reference to a ‘love’ that defies the imagination of therapists is a love that transcends language and can be understood without cognitive thought.⁵² Finally, the stanza ends with ‘their forgiveness unhinges us,’ which ties the concept of forgiveness to the idea that there is an ‘unbounded love’ that will ‘save us all.’⁵³ Again, this could be seen as a reflection of the Christian notion of forgiveness, whereby followers of the Christian faith are encouraged to ‘forgive men their trespasses.’⁵⁴

¹⁴⁸ Davies, *Totem*, 10.

¹⁴⁹ Davies, 10.

¹⁵⁰ Davies, 10.

¹⁵¹ Davies, 30.

¹⁵² Davies, 10.

¹⁵³ Davies, 10.

¹⁵⁴ Matt. 6:14 NKJV.

The line ‘we were dogs who knew the infinite is now’ appears in the next stanza.⁵⁵ After reflecting upon the meaning of the poem’s title, it becomes possible to read this line as a reference to the totemic practice of identifying with an animal as a way of channelling spiritual ancestors. Franklin’s definition of totemism explains that within the context of this cultural practice, ‘a man can state that he is a kangaroo and make perfect sense.’⁵⁶ In the world of ‘Totem Poem’ it is the dogs who will ‘save us’ with their ‘unbounded love,’ and therefore it could be argued that by becoming dogs, they become channels for a ‘salvation’ that is rooted in ‘unbounded love’ and ‘forgiveness.’⁵⁷ In a similar vein, ‘Totem Poem’ itself could also be read as a ‘tale’ that acts as a channel for this divine force.

The word ‘totem’ also has colloquial applications: it can be used to describe an object that is representative of a person. For instance, the American writer Joan Didion uses it in her book *Blue Nights* to describe her habit of holding onto physical objects that belong to people she loves.⁵⁸ She describes a period of her life in which she believed she could ‘keep people fully present’ by ‘preserving their mementoes, their “things,” their totems.’⁵⁹ In this sense ‘Totem Poem’ could also be considered as a ‘thing’ in its own right, created for the purpose of preservation. For, at times, the poem seems to act as a storage facility for Davies’ memories:

Abandoned in a field near Yass a cobwebbed car once kept us warm
and when it rained, though we shivered with sickness,
there came a moment of perfect happiness, faces nestled

in the vinyl, sleep coming on, surrounded by metal
that in upcoming decades would oxidise to flakes.⁶⁰

This stanza mentions Yass (a small Australian town in the Southern Tablelands region of New South Wales) which is a detail so specific as to suggest autobiography. Its inclusion also

¹⁵⁵ Davies, *Totem*, 10.

¹⁵⁶ Franklin, *Animal Nation*, 51.

¹⁵⁷ Davies, *Totem*, 10.

¹⁵⁸ Didion, *Blue Nights*, 44.

¹⁵⁹ Didion, 44.

¹⁶⁰ Davies, *Totem*, 25.

enhances the musicality of the stanza, as the ‘a’ sound in ‘Yass’ chimes meaningfully with the word ‘happiness.’⁶¹ This ‘moment of perfect happiness’ the lovers experience while shivering with ‘sickness’ inside a ‘cobwebbed car’ is preserved inside ‘Totem Poem’ like a butterfly in resin, even though, as the stanza admits, nothing in the physical world lasts forever, as these lines show: ‘surrounded by metal / that in upcoming decades would oxidise to flakes.’⁶² In *Blue Nights* Didion describes the inadequacy of physical mementos – material totems – for keeping memories ‘alive,’ confessing that their only function, on reflection, is to remind her of how she failed to properly appreciate ‘the moment’ when it was happening.⁶³ Yet *Blue Nights* is a memoir: an endeavour to record and preserve. Both ‘Totem Poem’ and *Blue Nights* dwell on the subject of impermanence, which is evoked by ‘Totem Poem’ as ‘the blue time of lilacs,’ and by *Blue Nights* as a period of time around the summer solstice in New York when ‘the twilights turn long and blue.’⁶⁴ Both of these works acknowledge the impossibility of preservation, while simultaneously attempting to preserve. Again, this idea ties into my suggestion that ‘Totem Poem’ in itself could be seen to perform the role of a totem, in the sense that transmutes the ‘spirit energy’ of people and places that have existed in the past, and that continues to exist when the poem is read.

In Section 3.4 I will compare ‘Totem Poem’ with a selection of poems by Robert Adamson, who is a contemporary of Davies’. Specifically, I will argue that Adamson, like Davies, is a practitioner of a contemporary (and postmodern) style of praise poetry. More specifically, I will demonstrate that there are significant points of resonance between the poetry of Adamson and Davies, and that Adamson’s romanticism is also imbued with physicality. In this sense, Adamson’s poetry can be seen as part of a ‘strain’ of Australian postmodern romanticism that is energised, material, and present.

¹⁶¹ Davies, *Totem*, 25.

¹⁶² Davies, 25.

¹⁶³ Didion, *Blue Nights*, 46.

¹⁶⁴ Davies, *Totem*, 3; Didion, 3.

3.4 Praise in the poetry of Robert Adamson

Robert Adamson is an acclaimed Australian poet who has published 16 collections (his first was *Canticles on the Skin*, published in 1970).⁶⁵ His work, as a whole, is difficult to categorise because his style has evolved over the course of his career, although ‘romantic’ is a term that frequently appears within the critical discourse surrounding his poetry. For instance, in his article ‘Opaque Lucidity’ (2003) David McCooey describes a ‘continuity’ of romanticism that runs through Adamson’s career.⁶⁶ Similarly, the literary scholar Angus Nicholls points out that Adamson’s concern with depicting the natural world ‘through an eminently subjective lens’ makes his work fit ‘within the dialectical frame of Romanticism.’⁶⁷ Nicolls describes Adamson as a ‘Late Romantic,’ arguing that his poetry displays ‘a willingness to embrace the sensibilities of modernism and postmodernism.’⁶⁸ Nicolls also claims that Adamson practices a ‘defiant Romanticism,’ one that Nicolls describes as ‘a Romanticism all the more virulent in the face of modern technology and the literary rationalisations of Deconstruction and Post-Structuralism.’⁶⁹ In this sense there are aesthetic parallels between the poetry of Adamson and Davies: they both practice a similar style of postmodern romanticism, one which, especially in the case of Adamson, explores and celebrates aspects of the Australian natural environment. Adamson’s poetry also contains lyrical expressions of praise: a trait that became prominent in Adamson’s 1989 collection *the clean dark*.⁷⁰ This discussion will focus on the poems ‘Fishing with My Stepson’ and ‘The Details Necessary,’ both of which were originally published in *the clean dark*, and were republished (with minor corrections) in Adamson’s 2008

¹⁶⁵ ‘Adamson, Robert,’ Australian Poetry Library.

¹⁶⁶ McCooey, ‘Opaque Lucidity,’ 45.

¹⁶⁷ Nicolls, ‘Robert Gray and Robert Adamson,’ 104.

¹⁶⁸ Nicolls, 110; 108.

¹⁶⁹ Nicolls, 109.

¹⁷⁰ Adamson, *the clean dark*.

anthology *The Golden Bird*.⁷¹ I will also discuss Adamson's poem 'The Intervention,' which was first published in *The Golden Bird*, because this is a poem of praise that brings together aspects of romanticism and postmodernism.

In a statement Adamson wrote for *Landbridge* (an anthology of contemporary Australian poetry that was published in 1999), he declares:

I think from now on I will be writing love poems and elegies, trying to make sense of life by offering praise, looking for grace in the meaning of meaning, pushing my eyes into the light....Crafting poetry from words seems to help deal with wonder and grief. Nothing is easy, there is no meaning except song, and song is not enough to bring the dead back without painful consequences.⁷²

The Australian poet and literary scholar Michael Brennan included this same quote in his doctoral thesis, stating that Adamson's poetry features 'a union of elegy and song, mourning and affirmation.'⁷³ Drawing on ideas generated by David Krell in his book *The Purest of Bastards: Works of Mourning, Art, and Affirmation in the Thought of Jacques Derrida* (2000), Brennan states:

...Adamson's poetry is at once a work of mourning and of praise for poetic experience and the impossible. His 'Symbolic River,' the Hawkesbury, is a space where experience, memory and poetry coalesce to affirm a pure relation to absence which embraces death rather than seeks to master it. Adamson's work of mourning allows for and affirms the contradiction of mourning as 'a keeping in mind or memory and a releasing or letting go' of that which is absent. Poetry becomes a site where this contradiction is sustained and examined.⁷⁴

The Hawkesbury River, located north of Sydney, is Adamson's home, and it features prominently in much of his poetry.⁷⁵ As Brennan observes, the Hawkesbury in Adamson's poetry functions as a site where the 'contradiction' of absence and presence meet and

⁷¹ Adamson, *the clean dark*, 28; 68 9; Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 71; 61 2.

⁷² Adamson, 'Introduction,' 15.

⁷³ Brennan, 'The Impossible Gaze,' 186 187.

⁷⁴ Brennan, 203.

⁷⁵ 'Adamson, Robert,' Australian Poetry Library.

interact. ⁷⁶ Brennan describes Adamson as ‘a spiritual poet though not (as yet) a religious one,’ adding that ‘his spirituality is closely aligned to poetry and to the world he creates through poetry of the Hawkesbury.’ ⁷⁷ Considering this, the poem ‘Fishing with My Stepson’ provides an appropriate starting point for this discussion, since its narrative takes place directly on the Hawkesbury: ⁷⁸

We wake by your watch on my wrist,
its piercing silicon chip
alarm bat-squealing, needling
through our room in the Angler’s Rest.
We drink Coke from a plastic Esky
with ice melting into newspaper
wrapped squid, the only
unfrozen bait in town. In perfect dawn
we set out from Don’s Boats,
the outboard ploughs us through a bay,
at Juno Point we cast our silver
Tobys, our new Swedish lures.
Your pure graphite rod flashes
at first light – a graceful cast
sails out fine as a spiderweb,
the smooth water mirrors the arc.
A year passes in the minute it takes
for you to reel in your first true catch,
the rod-bending, line singing
realising strike and the flash of fish-fire,
the final buck underwater dash
of a school of jewfish, its explosion in air,
and for that split second of communion
between us, utter wonder. ⁷⁹

Like ‘Totem Poem,’ ‘Fishing with My Stepson’ is a highly lyrical poem. It could also be considered as a postmodern ‘song’ of praise. The musical aspects of the poem don’t just give it a pleasing sound, they actually work to emphasise its key concerns. For instance, the first line ends with the word ‘wrist’ and the second line with ‘chip’: the assonance of the ‘i’ sound creates a chime that reoccurs throughout the poem in the words ‘silicon,’ ‘drink,’ ‘squid,’

¹⁷⁶ Brennan, ‘The Impossible Gaze,’ 203.

¹⁷⁷ Brennan, xv.

¹⁷⁸ Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 71.

¹⁷⁹ Adamson, 71.

‘silver,’ ‘mirrors,’ ‘minute,’ ‘singing,’ ‘fish-fire,’ ‘jewfish,’ and ‘split.’⁸⁰ This reoccurring sound provides aural cohesion, and it also highlights the words ‘Fishing’ (in the title) and ‘singing’ (in line 19).⁸¹ This is poetry in action: rather than simply recounting a sequence of events, the poem itself, through sound, rhythm and imagery, works to almost recreate the experience, so as to render the epiphanic moment of ‘utter wonder’ perpetually potent. Further to this, a sequence of alliteration is established in the first line: ‘**W**e **w**ake by your **w**atch on my **w**rist.’⁸² This repetition subtly draws attention to subsequent ‘**w**’ words in the poem, including ‘**w**rapped,’ ‘**w**ater,’ and, crucially, the poem’s last word, ‘**w**onder.’⁸³ Every line of this poem builds towards the word ‘wonder,’ and the silence that follows is reminiscent of the reflective silence that occurs after the line ‘I am listening, I am listening’ at the end of ‘Totem Poem.’⁸⁴ Adamson’s use of the word ‘wonder’ also brings ‘Fishing with My Stepson’ into alignment with the line ‘The work of the Glory-Father, when he of every wonder’ from ‘Caedmon’s Hymn,’ and thus it could also be contextualised within the tradition of devotional poetry.⁸⁵

The ‘wonder’ that is experienced at the end of ‘Fishing with My Stepson’ is a shared wonder, and this adds another layer of significance to the poem’s meaning.⁸⁶ For both stepfather and stepson, this wonderment is experienced as a sense of time slowing down to a point of stillness: a concept that the musical elements of the poem effectively reinforce. For instance, the poem opens with the line: ‘We wake by your watch on my wrist,’ which immediately establishes an awareness of clock time, but the choice of words in this line also introduces a number of musical aspects that will eventually feature in the poem’s final lines.⁸⁷ Significantly, the alliteration of the words ‘**w**atch’ (in the first line) and ‘**w**onder’ (in the final

¹⁸⁰ Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 71.

¹⁸¹ Adamson, 71.

¹⁸² Adamson, 71.

¹⁸³ Adamson, 71.

¹⁸⁴ Adamson, 71; Davies, *Totem*, 39.

¹⁸⁵ Adamson, 71; Caedmon, ‘Caedmon’s Hymn,’ in Ryken, *The Soul in Paraphrase*, 19.

¹⁸⁶ Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 71.

¹⁸⁷ Adamson, 71.

line) connects these two seemingly contradictory concepts, that of a ‘watch’ (a physical object that measures time) and ‘wonder’ (a feeling of amazement and awe).⁸⁸ Similarly, the ‘i’ sound in ‘**wrist**’ chimes with the word ‘**split**’ in ‘**split** second’ (a phrase that appears in the penultimate line), which again juxtaposes an object that measures time (i.e. a wrist watch) with a moment where there is a ‘split’ in the ordinary passing of clock time. There is also a counter-chime that runs through the poem, located in the words ‘**R**est,’ ‘**E**sky,’ ‘**m**elting,’ ‘**s**pider**w**eb,’ ‘**b**ending’ and ‘**s**econd.’⁸⁹ The build-up of words that carry the ‘i’ and ‘e’ chimes in this poem ultimately culminates in the phrase ‘**s**plit **s**econd,’ which signifies the point where both stepfather and stepson experience ‘utter wonder.’⁹⁰

Adamson further creates a sense of distorted time by dedicating the poem’s last eight lines to describing the (in clock time, brief) moment when his stepson reels in a fish, a section that begins with the lines: ‘A year passes in the minute it takes / for you to reel in your first true catch.’⁹¹ In these lines, a ‘minute’ appears to last for an entire ‘year.’⁹² Adamson fills this year-long minute with sonic elements which animate the scene, such as the recurring ‘s’ and ‘sh’ sounds in the lines: ‘line-**s**inging / realis**ing** **s**trike and the **flash** of **fish**-fire,’ as well as the alliteration in ‘**flash** of **fish**-**fire**.’ These descriptions aren’t just visual, they actively create the sound of a fish splashing and pulling at the end of a fishing line. Finally, the fish is pulled from the water and becomes an ‘explosion in air,’ which bears resemblance to ‘the sky erupted open’ from the second stanza of ‘Totem Poem.’⁹³ It is this cathartic moment of breakage and transgression where a fish is pulled up from the water into the sky that facilitates the moment of ‘communion’ between stepfather and stepson.⁹⁴

¹⁸⁸ Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 71.

¹⁸⁹ Adamson, 71.

¹⁹⁰ Adamson, 71.

¹⁹¹ Adamson, 71.

¹⁹² Adamson, 71.

¹⁹³ Adamson, 71; Davies, *Totem*, 3.

¹⁹⁴ Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 71.

Adamson's use of the word 'communion' also carries associations of the Catholic practice of communion, where members of the congregation collectively partake in the consumption of bread and wine. In 'Fishing with My Stepson,' the word 'communion' further emphasises the centrality of the *shared* experience. There are similarities between the 'split second of communion' in Adamson's poem, and the lines 'In the yellow time of pollen near the blue time of lilacs / there was a gap in things. And here we are' from the third stanza of 'Totem Poem.'⁹⁵ In both of these examples, two people share a moment of timelessness or transgression – the 'split second' or the 'gap in things' – that arises directly from the physical world. Central to both 'Fishing with My Stepson' and 'Totem Poem' is the concept of being physically present and experiencing wonderment through an embodied engagement with the material parameters of the world. 'Fishing with My Stepson' could, therefore, be considered alongside 'Totem Poem' as a postmodern romantic poem, one that emanates from a place of positivist materiality.

Adamson's love poetry also shares similarities with 'Totem Poem,' since it often 'sings' the praises of a beloved, and the world. It is also intensely cerebral and aware of itself, yet simultaneously embodied and emotional. 'The Details Necessary' by Adamson is a love poem that ponders the very tension that is produced by attempting to transcribe emotional and sexual passion into words.⁹⁶ It is also a poem of praise, but like 'Totem Poem,' the exact object of its praise is difficult to pinpoint. The poem is structured as one long unbroken stanza, and it appears to chart a stream of thought. As opposed to 'Fishing with My Stepson,' which uses the present tense to describe an experience as it unfolds, 'The Details Necessary' uses the future tense to describe events that the speaker is imagining will happen, as this excerpt shows:

¹⁹⁵ Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 71; Davies, *Totem*, 3.

¹⁹⁶ Adamson, 61–2.

Tonight
 I'll open my lines to love, desire –
 desire for my wife, craving for a chance
 to love her here, under
 Hawkesbury moon, taking her
 into our bedroom, turning out
 the electricity, opening the window,
 holding her until we shine with carnality,
 dropping awhile the weight of poetry, art,
 photography – though maybe using
 them for loving until our bones are
 liquid fire – our bodies given
 to each other in postures
 of alchemy and praise, as if we
 were the gods we have relentlessly
 tried to believe through others.⁹⁷

Although 'The Details Necessary' is written in the first-person, it is not a straightforward declaration of love, since the 'I' of the poem is not speaking directly to a lover.⁹⁸ Rather, the poem creates the impression of rumination; of a person who is thinking aloud. Thus the song-like aspects of the lyric mode work to create the effect not so much of singing, but of a melody playing internally, inside the mind. In the above example, for instance, the 'i' sound in the words 'Tonight,' 'lines,' 'desire' and 'wife' is shared by the words 'shine' and 'fire,' and this chime works to imbue these already powerful words with an added lustre. Although the poem centres around acts of physicality, these take place within the realm of the imagined, the hypothetical. The poem revolves around this tension between the carnal and the cerebral: it is at once passionate yet dispassionate. The poem positions sex as a site of liminality where the imagined becomes real, and where thought and act become one and the same.

This blurred distinction between thinking and doing is evoked in the lines: 'Here we would be new and know it as we / fondled our imaginations / through our bodies.'⁹⁹ At this point in the poem, an imagined act of physicality reflexively becomes a physical act of imagining. This poem, and these lines in particular, expresses reverence both for the cerebral

¹⁹⁷ Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 61 2.

¹⁹⁸ Adamson, 61 2.

¹⁹⁹ Adamson, 62.

and the physical: the poetry makes room for both to exist alongside each other, and it shows how the intellectual can enhance the physical, and vice versa. There are resonances here with the lines ‘To have not only / poetry, grand luck enough, but the long wheat swaying / and the peonies its subject’ from ‘Totem Poem,’ where ‘poetry’ coexists harmoniously with ‘the long wheat swaying.’²⁰⁰ There is reflexivity here as well, whereby ‘peonies’ become the subject of the ‘poetry.’²⁰¹ As I’ve observed, ‘Totem Poem’ blends the boundaries between dream and reality, thought and act, physical and metaphysical, scientific and mystical, and ultimately offers praise to all. ‘The Details Necessary’ is similar: it is at once a love poem for Adamson’s wife, but it is also a poem that directly and indirectly offers praise to who and what Adamson admires, including the ‘Hawkesbury,’ ‘animals / and birds in the ground,’ and ‘Susan Sontag,’ who is imagined as ‘working’ (which, for Sontag, means writing) ‘somewhere in Greece or maybe / New York.’²⁰²

In ‘The Details Necessary,’ praise is physically embodied during sex, as these lines show: ‘our bodies given / to each other in postures / of alchemy and praise.’²⁰³ Here, Adamson takes praise beyond words or thought, and locates it within the corporeal. It can be argued that Davies does this too, by building ‘Totem Poem’ a poem of praise around acts of physical intimacy. For instance, the line ‘And the evening shuddered, since everything is connected’ follows a reference to having sex on the bonnet of a car (‘How the bonnet was warm on your bottom!’) which shows the ‘evening’ (and the entire world) shuddering at the point of climax.²⁰⁴ It is also significant that in ‘The Details Necessary’ Adamson pairs ‘alchemy’ with ‘praise,’ and that he imagines the lovers in his poem as ‘gods.’²⁰⁵ The word ‘alchemy’ suggests some kind of magical transformation, and this concept of becoming animals and plants and gods also runs through ‘Totem Poem.’ By pairing ‘alchemy’ with

²⁰⁰ Davies, *Totem*, 24.

²⁰¹ Davies, 24.

²⁰² Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 61.

²⁰³ Adamson, 62.

²⁰⁴ Davies, *Totem*, 5.

²⁰⁵ Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 62.

‘praise,’ Adamson is also suggesting that praise can facilitate some kind of supernatural transformation; that there is an intrinsic relationship between the two concepts. There is a similarity here between how ‘Totem Poem’ represents the act of giving praise (in the form of a lyrical ‘song’) as one that can unlock the power of transformation. In ‘The Details Necessary,’ the moment of alchemical metamorphosis extends beyond the bedroom, into the remainder of the poem:

our hands following
our hearts until our bodies arched over
the bed in colours our senses
would invent for the rest of our lives,
and live then the hours
in all the details that are necessary,
as complex as the language
Susan Sontag needs to use when
she shares with us her passion
and admiration for Artaud’s mystic poems,
where flesh and thought are one,

where the day becomes the poem looking into
what must be done.²⁰⁶

In this section of the poem, there is an insistent chime created by the ‘e’ sound in these lines:

‘our bodies arched over / the **bed** in colours our **senses** / would **invent** for the **rest** of our lives.’²⁰⁷ This chime sounds again in the key words ‘**necessary**,’ ‘**complex**,’ and ‘**flesh**.’²⁰⁸ This musical thread ties the words associated with physical pleasure (such as ‘**senses**’ and ‘**flesh**’) together with the concept of language (that is ‘**complex**’) and ‘the details that are **necessary**.’²⁰⁹ After the speaker imagines himself and his wife as ‘gods,’ they both appear to gain supernatural powers of creation, such as the ability to ‘invent’ colours.²¹⁰ This power of

²⁰⁶ Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 62.

²⁰⁷ Adamson, 62.

²⁰⁸ Adamson, 62.

²⁰⁹ Adamson, 62.

²¹⁰ Adamson, 62.

creation also extends to artistic skill, commensurate with that of ‘Susan Sontag’ sharing her ‘passion / and admiration for Artaud’s mystic poems / where flesh and thought are one.’²

As the literary scholar Steven Matthews writes in his article ‘The Pull of the River,’ Adamson’s poetry includes whichever details he feels are necessary to ‘render exactly’ incidents, experiences and revelations.^{2 2} Yet ‘The Details Necessary’ does not simply describe a real experience, it uses words to invent an experience, and to give life to something imaginary through an exacting use of language. The mention of Susan Sontag writing passionately about the poetry of Antonin Artaud reflects Adamson’s obvious admiration for both writers: he brings them into the world of his poem to further demonstrate that writing is inextricably entwined with living. The reference to Artaud’s poems where ‘flesh and thought are one’ is particularly fitting, since ‘The Details Necessary’ also strives to enact a union between flesh and thought.^{2 3} There are similarities between the way Adamson has included direct references to what he most loves in ‘The Details Necessary,’ and the way that ‘Totem Poem’ effectively acts as a treasure trove for all that Davies loves and admires.^{2 4}

It is also possible to read ‘The Details Necessary’ as a postmodern form of devotional poetry. The lines ‘Tonight / I’ll open my lines to love’ voices an active willingness to receive inspiration and engage with the forces of love.^{2 5} The speaker opens himself to the ‘lines of love’ in much the same way as a person may engage the practice of meditation, or kneel to pray. Just as ‘Totem Poem’ could be interpreted as a form of divine interaction, ‘The Details Necessary’ can be read as a poem that, to return to the words of Milton, sets the emotions ‘in right tune.’^{2 6} Additionally significant is the fact that although the poem begins in darkness, with the moon moving ‘the far mountain / deeper into distance’ and the speaker ‘turning out

²¹¹ Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 62.

²¹² M. Stevens, ‘The Pull of the River,’ *The Times Literary Supplement*, November 16, 2001, http://www.robertadamson.com/reviews/MulberryLeaves/TLS_161101.htm.

²¹³ Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 62.

²¹⁴ Adamson, 61 2.

²¹⁵ Adamson, 61 2.

²¹⁶ Ryken, *The Soul in Paraphrase*, 15.

/ the electricity,' it ends with daylight: 'where the day becomes the poem looking into / what must be done.'²¹⁷ Although the poem is written as one unbroken stream of thought – there are no stanza breaks to indicate a shift in time – an entire evening passes, and turns to 'day.'²¹⁸ At the beginning of the poem, the speaker admits 'I know words / will trouble my poem tonight / though I can't be bothered / with all that,' whereas at the end, after a night of physical passion, 'the day becomes the poem.'²¹⁹ In these final lines, the poem itself also appears to *become* the day, and its final lines radiate a sense of clarity and capability, of 'looking into / what must be done.'²²⁰ This is not dissimilar to the last stanza of 'Totem Poem,' which features the phrase 'how the heart would hold the day.'²²¹ In 'The Details Necessary,' the 'alchemy and praise' that is conjured in the bedroom ends up manifesting the next day as a poem on the page.²²²

Finally, I will look at Adamson's poem 'The Intervention,' which, out of all the examples that I've used here, is possibly the most straightforward example of a praise poem.²²³ Throughout this thesis I've argued that Australian postmodern romantic poetry has an energetic life force, and that it depicts an embodied physicality. This particular poem of Adamson's depicts this life force as one that 'breathes' and 'sings.'²²⁴ 'The Intervention' could also be considered as an encomium, since it is dedicated to the poet Ali Cobby Eckermann, and it directly praises a poetry reading she gave 'in Castlemaine.'²²⁵ The whole poem is as follows:

When Yeats writes, *Soul clap its hands*
and sing, and louder sing, it feels tangible,

²¹⁷ Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 61–2.

²¹⁸ Adamson, 62.

²¹⁹ Adamson, 61–2.

²²⁰ Adamson, 62.

²²¹ Davies, *Totem*, 39.

²²² Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 62.

²²³ Adamson, 287.

²²⁴ Adamson, 287.

²²⁵ Adamson, 287.

and yet a friend says we can't use
the word 'soul' these days, but
then adds, all the more reason. When
I heard you reading your poetry
in Castlemaine, a long steady song,
I was breathing the air of your soul,
we were both hundreds of miles from
our own countries, your body swayed
as you called up a whole world,
with images and stories woven
through with suffering. Lines
were licks of lightning, some thin
as the chill of your meanings that
we all recognised – all I can compare
this with is the feeling you get
swimming alongside a shark, or
the shot of joy in watching a lyrebird
shaking out its tail in full display,
pouring *all* song into its own singing.²²⁶

The title of 'The Intervention' is a direct reference to the poem 'Intervention Pay Back' by Ali Cobby Eckerman, which was published by *Cordite* in 2015 (and was, presumably, the poem she read 'in Castlemaine').²²⁷ Adamson begins this poem by quoting a line from the well-known poem 'Sailing to Byzantium' by William Butler Yeats.²²⁸ In the poem's opening statement 'When Yeats writes' Adamson deliberately uses the word 'writes' (rather than 'wrote'): his use of the present tense positions Yeats' poem, which was originally published in 1928, as perpetually vital.²²⁹ Through referencing other poets within his own poetry, Adamson demonstrates that poetry is not an historical artifact, but an ongoing conversation that transcends time. As the literary scholar Elizabeth Lhuede observes in her doctoral thesis: 'Through poetry, Adamson attempts to link his mind, his poetic, to those of the poets gone before. In this way, he helps to keep their vision alive, while he develops his own.'²³⁰ McCooey echoes this idea, arguing that Adamson's tendency to import his poetic influences into his own poetry is 'not simply passive husbandry of a great tradition' but rather it is 'a

²²⁶ Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 287.

²²⁷ Eckermann, 'Intervention Pay Back.'

²²⁸ Yeats, 'Sailing to Byzantium.'

²²⁹ Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 287.

²³⁰ Lhuede, 'The "New" Australian Poetry,' 187 188.

dialogue, which is in turn a self-dialogue.²³¹ In ‘The Intervention,’ Adamson inserts a line break into Yeats’ original line after the word ‘hands,’ which places a subtle emphasis on the physical, tactile sense of two hands clapping (rather than just the sound): ‘*Soul clap its hands / and sing, and louder sing.*’²³² Having opened the poem with this nod to Yeats, Adamson then goes on to describe Eckermann’s reading as ‘a long steady song.’²³³ The experience of hearing Eckermann read is represented as a multisensory experience, wherein the speaker not only hears her ‘song,’ but breathes ‘the air’ of her ‘soul,’ sees ‘licks of lightning’ flash from the ‘lines’ of her poem, and feels the ‘chill’ of its ‘meanings.’²³⁴ Just as ‘The Details Necessary’ is imbued with physicality, ‘The Intervention’ revolves entirely around the embodied and almost painfully physical experience of hearing another poet read their work. Once again, Adamson presents poetry as not just something that exists on the page or in the mind, he brings it into the physical world: it has a living and *breathing* presence.

Towards the end of ‘The Intervention’ Adamson then compares the feeling of watching Eckermann’s reading as ‘swimming alongside a shark,’ a description that evokes a feeling of terror and amazement.²³⁵ The final image is of a lyrebird, ‘pouring *all* song into its own singing.’²³⁶ The lyrebird – an Australian bird known for its ability to mimic sounds – is a recurring figure in Adamson’s poetry, and its presence at the end of ‘The Intervention’ anthropomorphises the concept of poetry as a living dialogue.²³⁷ It is possible to say that by including a quote from Yeats at the beginning of the poem, ‘The Intervention’ itself becomes a lyrebird, since it ‘sings’ another poet’s ‘song.’²³⁸ Additionally, although Adamson does not include a direct quote from Eckermann, ‘The Intervention’ does translate her reading into lyrical, song-like descriptions that strive to reproduce the feelings her work evokes. Earlier in

²³¹ McCooey, ‘Opaque Lucidity,’ 45.

²³² Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 287.

²³³ Adamson, 287.

²³⁴ Adamson, 287.

²³⁵ Adamson, 287.

²³⁶ Adamson, 287.

²³⁷ Brennan, ‘The Impossible Gaze,’ 248.

²³⁸ Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 287.

the poem Eckermann calls up ‘a whole world,’ and then in the last line the lyrebird gives voice not just to a song, but to ‘*all* song.’²³⁹ The lyrebird in ‘The Intervention’ ultimately represents the highest form of praise: that of reflecting a poet’s own ‘song’ back to them as an expression of profound admiration. In this sense ‘The Intervention’ can be also compared with ‘Pied Beauty’ by Hopkins as a poem of humility, since its beauty emanates from what it depicts. ‘The Intervention’ is an encomium for Eckermann, but in praising Eckermann, it relies heavily on images drawn from the natural world. Eckermann’s reading is presented as equally wonderful as ‘licks of lightning’ and a lyrebird ‘shaking out its tail in full display,’ and reflexively, the lightning and the lyrebird are shown to be as wonderful as Eckermann’s poetry.²⁴⁰

Through comparing ‘Totem Poem’ with a selection of Adamson’s praise poems, several key similarities have emerged. The first is that the poetry of Davies and Adamson is undeniably physical: it is strikingly visual, it is full of tactile descriptions of temperature and touch, and it also makes inspired use of the lyric mode to recreate the *sound* of the physical world, such as the ‘line-singing / realising strike’ of catching a fish in ‘Fishing with My Stepson,’ and the creaking, cracking and snapping of pine trees bending and pine cones opening in ‘Totem Poem.’²⁴¹ Yet Adamson and Davies are also both very cerebral poets, and as much as their poetry revels within the physical – featuring lovers who are ‘wet-thighed’ and whose ‘bones’ have turned to ‘liquid fire’ – the art of transforming philosophical thought into poetry is treated in their writing with equal amounts of respect and regard.²⁴² Both poets explore the natural world as an entry point to transgression and transcendence: through being physically present and attentive to the splendour of nature, the speakers and beloved in their

²³⁹ Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 287.

²⁴⁰ Adamson, 287.

²⁴¹ Adamson, 71; Davies, *Totem*, 16.

²⁴² Davies, *Totem*, 3; Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 62.

poems experience mystical states of ‘unbounded love’ and ‘utter wonder.’²⁴³ For both poets as well, and perhaps most crucially, there is a deeply-felt, emotional truth at the heart of their poetry: a sincere feeling of love emanates from their work. This love for life, art, people and the world ‘awakens a greater love of God and a desire to be like him,’ to quote Ryken.²⁴⁴ The poetry of Adamson and Davies could, potentially, awaken a ‘greater love’ for the Christian God, but it could also provide anyone with an appreciation for nature and poetry with a ‘shot of joy.’²⁴⁵

Most importantly, praise in the poetry of Adamson and Davies is a living force, one that is, quite literally, breathing. From the ‘hot-breathed contact with your lips’ in ‘Totem Poem, to ‘breathing the air of your soul,’ in ‘The Intervention,’ there is life in these poems that goes all the way back to ancient creation narratives, such as this verse from Psalms: ‘By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, / And all the host of them by the breath of His mouth.’²⁴⁶ In Chapter Four, I will look at how this living, breathing energy has similarly manifested in the contemporary poetics of lament. I will consider the history of the lament as a poetic form, and I will look specifically at the vital role the lament has played within the history of Australian poetry. Finally, I will argue that *Interferon Psalms* by Davies is a postmodern extension of the Australian lament. In doing so, I will create a more complete picture of the continuing vibrancy of Australian lyric poetry into the 21st century.

²⁴³ Davies, *Totem*, 10; Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 71.

²⁴⁴ Ryken, *The Soul in Paraphrase*, 14.

²⁴⁵ Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 287.

²⁴⁶ Davies, *Totem*, 38; Adamson, 287; Ps. 33:6 NKJV.

Chapter Four

The poetics of sorrow, lament in Australian poetry, and bewildered praise in *Interferon Psalms*

In Chapter Three, I reflected upon ‘Totem Poem’ by Davies as a spirited and sustained poetic outpouring of praise. This chapter will explore the lament as a poetic form that is intrinsically related to praise poetry, arguing that praise and lament can be likened to two sides of the same coin. Section 4.1 will discuss the history of the lament, tracing its origins back to the Bible, specifically Psalms, Job, and Lamentations.² In Section 4.2 I will outline the history of the lament in Australian poetry, and perform close readings of a number of key Australian laments. Since Australia was formally colonised in 1788, the poetic form of the lament has facilitated voicings of protest and political dissent. Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century it has remained a vital form for Australians who might be understood as somehow marginalised in mainstream discourse and culture, including Indigenous Australians, migrants, and people from culturally diverse communities. Included in this discussion will be poems by Frank MacNamara, Charles Harpur, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Michael Dransfield, Antigone Kefala, Fay Zwicky, and Ali Cobby Eckermann. Finally, in Section 4.3, I will argue that *Interferon Psalms* by Davies is a postmodern extension of the Australian lament. I will show how *Interferon Psalms*, like ‘Totem Poem,’ reinforces a physical, embodied, and vibrant Australian romanticism, one that springs from a source of perpetual repletion. Although the subject matter of *Interferon Psalms* revolves around loss, illness, and instability, it nonetheless gives voice to a person who is determined to continue ‘singing’ a song of bewildered praise in the midst of pain, loneliness, and uncertainty.

¹ Davies, *Totem*.

² Ps.; Job.; Lam.; NKJV.

4.1 The aesthetics of lament

The introduction to this thesis made reference to Claus Westermann's claim (from *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*) that the literary forms of praise and lament are utterly related, yet totally different.³ Westermann explains that 'Praise of God gives voice to the joy of existence ('The living, the living, he thanks thee, as I do this day,' Isa. 38:19); lamentation gives voice to sorrow.'⁴ Here, Westermann makes it clear that both praise and lament give expression to the extremities of 'existence.'⁵ Westermann uses a quote from Isaiah that begins with the repeated expression 'The living, the living,' which is significant because it reinforces his core premise that praise and lament in the Psalms are expressions of lived experience.⁶ Throughout this thesis I have made the case for Australian romantic poetry as a living force, one that reflects much more than 'loss or lack,' as Kane claims in *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*.⁷ Poetry that expresses sorrow is not, in itself, necessarily reflective of absence. Although the poems I will explore in this section deal with themes of death, violence, dispossession, grief, loneliness, and illness, they still, through voicing the sorrows of existence, belong to a strand of Australian poetics that is undeniably physical, material, affirming, and *present*. It could even be argued that the lament conveys the experience – sometimes painful – of inhabiting a physical body in ways that emphasise the physicality of existence even more intensely than the poetry of praise. These 'moments of rupture,' to use a phrase from *Interferon Psalms* – where the experience of suffering becomes overwhelmingly intense – can prompt a direct address to God, just as Jesus asked on the cross: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"⁸ The laments I will look at in this chapter similarly feature a person (or, sometimes, a group of people) crying out in such a way: sometimes to 'God,' sometimes to a specific person (such as

³ Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 11.

⁴ Westermann, 11.

⁵ Westermann, 11.

⁶ Westermann, 11.

⁷ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 5.

⁸ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 5; Mark 15:34 NKJV.

a lover or a parent), and sometimes to a general audience. The defining characteristic shared by all, is that they are crying out, first and foremost, to be *heard*.

David McCooey describes the title of Davies' *Interferon Psalms* as 'curious,' explaining that it 'fuses the languages of science and religion.'⁹ This fusion of 'divergent tones and registers' is, as I've observed, a trademark characteristic of Davies' poetry, but by placing the word 'Psalms' directly in the title, Davies is making his interest in religion and biblical language one of the defining features of this collection.¹⁰ The titles of Davies' earlier collections were directly inspired by scientific concepts: the title page of *Absolute Event Horizon* features a quote from *Cosmology Now* by Roger Penrose ('it is the absolute event horizon which acts as the boundary surface of the black hole,' and *Running With Light* features a quote from *Catching the Light: the Entwined History of Light and Mind* by Arthur Zajonc ('Think back to Einstein's first thought experiment – running with light'). Similarly, the title *Interferon Psalms* refers to a term used in medical science: interferon relates to 'proteins released by cells in response to pathogens, such as bacteria and viruses, that help trigger the immune system's defences,' to use McCooey's description.¹¹ Yet alongside this scientific term sits 'Psalms,' which McCooey describes as 'a book in the Hebrew and Christian bibles that, like Davies's poetry, ranges in tone from praise to lament.'¹² The positioning of these two words side-by-side establishes a relationship: it suggests that the 'psalms' of the work have been generated by the process of undergoing interferon treatment, and it also implies a connection between the language of science and the language of religion. As McCooey explains:

Of course, Davies's psalms can only act as a kind of emotional 'interferon' in a symbolic way. But we live by symbols and our limits are the limits of our expression. As such, it is comically appropriate that Davies should have his poet say that, 'I needed a word that

⁹ David McCooey, 'Hallelujah Bewildered,' *The Age*, November 12, 2011, NewsBank Newspapers Archive.

¹⁰ McCooey.

¹¹ Davies, *Absolute Event Horizon*, title page; Davies, *Running With Light*, title page.

¹² David McCooey, 'Hallelujah Bewildered,' *The Age*, November 12, 2011, NewsBank Newspapers Archive.

¹³ McCooey.

was the bewildered version of hallelujah, but extensive research suggested it didn't exist.' Perhaps this book could stand in for that word. ⁴

Here, McCooey suggests that within *Interferon Psalms*, the 'Interferon' and the 'Psalms' both perform a similar function, with the interferon working to remove a virus from blood, and the psalms working 'in a symbolic way' to remove emotional pain, or even perhaps also to bring about some kind of spiritual atonement. ⁵ In calling these poems 'psalms,' Davies has directly linked *Interferon Psalms* to the sacred language of the Book of Psalms. Within this association lurks the notion that Davies' psalms are also sacred: that they directly address 'God,' and that 'God' can also 'speak' through them. However, McCooey also brings attention to the concept of 'bewilderment' which is a prominent motif within *Interferon Psalms*, as can be seen in this stanza from the first psalm:

But I am getting ahead of myself. First, bewilderment.
Then the memory packs it in. Then bewilderment, protein-
enriched. Then a long time later, the coast was clear,
and I began to recollect. Which in no way diminished
embarrassment and pain. O How the years passed. ⁶

Although Davies' psalms appear to effect a discourse, of sorts, between humanity and the divine, they do so in a way that is uncertain, as is indicated by the 'bewilderment' of the speaker. ⁷ Giving your own poetry the label 'psalms' is bold; however, this boldness is undercut by the 'bewilderment' that they give expression to. ⁸ I will further expand on this idea in Section 4.3, when I closely examine the relationship between *Interferon Psalms* and the Book of Psalms, and reflect upon the subtitle of Davies' book: '33 psalms on the 99 names of God.' ⁹

¹⁴ David McCooey, 'Hallelujah Bewildered,' *The Age*, November 12, 2011, NewsBank Newspapers Archive.

¹⁵ McCooey.

¹⁶ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 4.

¹⁷ Davies, 4.

¹⁸ Davies, 4.

¹⁹ Davies, title page.

In *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, Westermann observes that in recent times, ‘the lament quite of itself has again appeared in its positive and necessary function.’²⁰ This paints the lament as a useful tool for making sense of, to use Westermann’s phrasing, ‘great catastrophes.’²¹ Westermann makes a distinction in his reading of the Psalms between ‘the lament of the people’ and ‘the lament of the individual.’²² One of the key features of the lament of the people in the Psalms is, as Westermann describes, ‘declarative praise which serves as one of the motifs which should move God to intervene in the present desperate situation.’²³ In a collective lament, the petitioning of God is, in most cases, initiated by an act of ‘referring God to his earlier saving deeds.’²⁴ Additionally, in the individual laments, a petition of God is often followed by a ‘vow of praise,’ and therefore ‘within a Psalm, lamentation is often turned into praise.’²⁵ There are many moments within Davies’ *Interferon Psalms* where Davies deliberately engages these devices, such as in these lines from his 14th psalm: ‘We went through fire and water, O Merciful One, yet you / have brought us forth to a spacious place.’²⁶ Here, Davies employs the mode of the people’s lament, which is striking because the majority of *Interferon Psalms* is narrated from a personal perspective, using a dramatised version of Davies’ own voice. However, in these particular lines, Davies switches from the lament of the individual to the lament of the people (‘we’), which is significant because it shifts the tone from the personal (such as a prayer that is uttered in private) to the public (such as a liturgy given by a priest to a group of people).²⁷ Just as ‘Totem Poem’ blurs the boundaries between personal and public, *Interferon Psalms* similarly shifts between these modes in ways that show that one person’s suffering, and *all* human suffering, are connected.

As Westermann points out, the laments of the individual in the Psalms are, in most

²⁰ Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 12.

²¹ Westermann, 12.

²² Westermann, 52.

²³ Westermann, 55.

²⁴ Westermann, 55.

²⁵ Westermann, 59.

²⁶ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 51.

²⁷ Davies, 51.

cases, constructed by a number of ‘constituent parts,’ those being ‘address, lament, confession of trust, or assurance of being heard, petition, vow of praise.’²⁸ The individual laments in the Psalms also often contain ‘an oracle of salvation’ towards the middle of the psalm, where the mood shifts abruptly ‘from lament to jubilation.’²⁹ Westermann uses the example of Psalm 28:6 (‘He has heard the voice of my supplications’) to illustrate one such moment where the speaker becomes ‘transformed by God’s having heard his supplication.’³⁰ *Interferon Psalms* similarly contains moments where the speaker ‘hears’ another voice, sometimes from ‘God.’³¹ For instance, in the 24^h psalm of *Interferon Psalms*, after a number of prose poems that speak of a ‘death bed’ and ‘loneliness,’ this stanza appears:³²

Then a small clear voice called out:
Cease striving
And know that I am God.³³

Here, Davies borrows directly from Psalm 46:10: ‘Be still, and know that I am God.’³⁴ In Chapter Three I considered the possibility of ‘Totem Poem’ as performing a totemic function, whereby the speaker places his faith in poetry and pours praise into the poem, and in doing so appears to open a channel of communication between himself and God. *Interferon Psalms* continues to echo this concept. However, while ‘Totem Poem’ sings praises for having ‘not only / poetry, grand luck enough, but the long wheat swaying / and the peonies its subject,’ in *Interferon Psalms* the speaker has lost everything in his life, except poetry: ‘Then one day and for long after, words / Were all I had left.’³⁵ The moment in *Interferon Psalms* where the speaker hears ‘a small clear voice’ that instructs him to ‘cease striving’ stages a breakthrough

²⁸ Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 64.

²⁹ Westermann, 65.

³⁰ Westermann, 70.

³¹ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 77.

³² Davies, 76; 77.

³³ Davies, 77.

³⁴ Ps. 46:10 NKJV.

³⁵ Davies, *Totem*, 24; Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 6.

where the speaker receives direct confirmation that God is ‘listening.’³⁶ Yet this moment in *Interferon Psalms* lacks the mood of ‘jubilation’ that Westermann describes.³⁷ Instead, it reads more like an admonishment, such as in the Book of Job, where God responds to Job’s complaints by reminding Job that he is only a man, and therefore does not know the ordinances of the heavens:³⁸

‘Who is this who darkens counsel
By words without knowledge?
Now prepare yourself like a man;
I will question you, and you shall answer Me.

‘Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?
Tell Me, if you have understanding.’³⁹

Peter Craven draws a comparison between *Interferon Psalms* and the Book of Job in his review, stating that Davies’ psalms are ‘a tremendous attempt to wrestle meaning from suffering.’⁴⁰ A number of different biblical references have been woven into *Interferon Psalms*, and therefore it doesn’t strictly emulate the structure or content of the Psalms. While Westermann’s explanation of how lament functions within the Psalms provides important context for reading Davies’ psalms, *Interferon Psalms* does not strictly adhere to the ‘constituent parts’ of the lament of an individual.⁴ Instead, *Interferon Psalms* is a melting pot of references, including many that are directly biblical, but just as many others that reflect Davies’ diverse preoccupations, including astrophysics, philosophy, and literature.

In *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, M. Cavitch explains that the lament can be found in almost all languages, and it reaches back to the very beginnings of recorded

³⁶ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 77.

³⁷ Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 65.

³⁸ Job 38:33 NKJV.

³⁹ Job 38:2 4 NKJV.

⁴⁰ Craven, ‘Groping Towards the Light,’ *The Australian*, 27 August, 2011, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/books/groping-towards-the-light/newsstory/97cededc7f303ab8b2c4e53ce97ae018>.

⁴¹ Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 64.

culture.⁴² As Cavitch observes: ‘lament may give form to impulses of compunction, reconciliation, and forgiveness as well as despair, melancholy, and resentment.’⁴³ Many laments traditionally have been accompanied by instrumental music in the same way that early praise poems – such as ‘Caedmon’s Hymn’ – were originally sung to the accompaniment of acoustic instruments.⁴⁴ In *Lonesome Words: The Vocal Poetics of the Old English Lament and the African American Blues Song* (2006), the American scholar Margaret McGeachy draws a parallel between the Old English lament and the African American blues song, arguing that both ‘speak to us the lonesome words of displacement, desire, suffering, and struggle.’⁴⁵ In comparing the similarities between Old English laments and African American blues songs, McGeachy explains:

Central to the creation of a textual performative space is the internal ‘I’ who directly engages an external ‘you.’ In the process, both poetics exhibit, at a literal level, a paradox within the presentation of an isolated speaker: although the ‘I’ is alone, cut off from society in some ambiguously distant place, he or she not only speaks but does so with the confidence of being heard.⁴⁶

McGeachy identifies ‘call-and-response’ as a recurring feature of the lament and the blues song, observing that ‘both poetics employ the private and personal meditative techniques of the lyric but with the purpose of establishing communal experience with a public audience.’⁴⁷

In the above quote McGeachy identifies the ‘creation of a textual performative space’ as being one of the lament’s distinguishing qualities.⁴⁸ This ties in with her statement that the lament ‘is a highly identifiable expression in that it is stylised to evoke in the listener certain psychological and emotional responses.’⁴⁹ While I won’t address here the subsequent

⁴² Cavitch, ‘Lament,’ 781.

⁴³ Cavitch, 781.

⁴⁴ Cavitch, ‘Lament,’ 781; Caedmon, ‘Caedmon’s Hymn,’ in Ryken, *The Soul in Paraphrase*, 19.

⁴⁵ McGeachy, *Lonesome Words*, 7.

⁴⁶ McGeachy 16.

⁴⁷ McGeachy, 9.

⁴⁸ McGeachy, 16.

⁴⁹ McGeachy, 2–3.

subjective terrain of McGeachy's argument, it is important for my readings of Davies' poetry to consider that lament forms originated from oral traditional and public performances, suggesting that the lament has always carried a trace of being written for a live audience. *Interferon Psalms* can also be seen as a 'textual performative space,' since it contains a number of different 'voices' that enact moments of call-and-response, such as in these lines from the first Psalm: 'In the centre of my life I lost its centre. *Touch his bone and / flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face.*'⁵⁰ In this example, the narrator describes a feeling of emptiness and loss, and of feeling unmoored and unbalanced by losing the 'centre' of his life.⁵¹ The next line contains a 'response' of sorts, which is actually a direct reference to Job 2:5, which can also be translated as 'But stretch out Your hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will surely curse You to Your face!'⁵² This verse is actually a direct quote from Satan, who is predicting that Job will renounce God if he is afflicted with a painful, life-threatening illness. The positioning of this quote from Job in *Interferon Psalms* creates the illusion of dialogue between the speaker and, in this example, Satan. Bible verses have been incorporated into *Interferon Psalms* as an 'active' dialogue between the speaker and the divine. The 'textual performative space' of the lament facilitates this active dialogue, and it gives *Interferon Psalms* the feel of a live performance.⁵³

McGeachy also draws attention to the lament's capacity to bring 'emotive expression' to 'personal and social struggle.'⁵⁴ McGeachy states that Old English laments are preoccupied with 'alienation from social stability' which could be brought about by a 'traumatic event' or 'an experience of displacement.'⁵⁵ These Old English laments 'speak of crisis in emotional and psychological terms in an effort to overcome despair.'⁵⁶ The voicing of a social struggle is

⁵⁰ McGeachy, *Lonesome Words*, 16; Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 4.

⁵¹ Davies, 4.

⁵² Job 2:5 NKJV.

⁵³ McGeachy, *Lonesome Words*, 16.

⁵⁴ McGeachy, 1.

⁵⁵ McGeachy, 5.

⁵⁶ McGeachy, 5.

especially relevant to the Australian laments I will look at in Section 4.2, many of which express sorrow and frustration about social and racial injustice. Even in the Australian laments where the personal voice is used, such as Ali Cobby Eckermann's poem 'Lament,' a collective struggle (in this instance, the ongoing endeavour to keep Aboriginal languages alive) is personalised and personified, as can be seen in these lines: 'I am the last speaker / of my mother tongue.'⁵⁷ This ties in with McGeachy's observation that 'the lament is conveyed as personal experience yet is significantly communal.'⁵⁸

I have drawn from McGeachy's study of Old English laments and American blues songs here because there is an absence of scholarly literature about the history of the lament in Australia. McGeachy's description of the lament as a 'textual performative space' is especially useful for this discussion, because the Australian laments I will explore can all be seen as public, theatrical voicings of common traumas and losses, many of which use an internal, lyrical 'I' to directly engage an external 'you.'⁵⁹

My exploration of the lament form within Australian poetry is not intended to be comprehensive: I have given preference to laments that voice stories from subjects who are marginalised, either by class, gender, race, or cultural background. In this sense I am exploring the Australian 'outsider' lament, and Davies' *Interferon Psalms* extends this space to addicts, and those who are chronically ill. The laments I will discuss in Section 4.2 also provide insight into specific moments in Australia's cultural history: in looking at a selection of Australian laments from the 1800s through to the 21st century, it is possible to see how traumatic events from the past have become lodged in our cultural psyche, and how traces of these traumas continue to appear in our poetry. I will argue that the lament, in addition to giving those who are marginalised an opportunity to be 'heard,' can also generate a sense of solace.

⁵⁷ Eckermann, *Inside My Mother*, 24.

⁵⁸ McGeachy, *Lonesome Words*, 3.

⁵⁹ McGeachy, 16.

Although the laments in this discussion give voice to sorrow and isolation, many also employ theatrical techniques such as call-and-response to create a sense of being in dialogue with a person (or divine entity) who ‘hears’ the speaker, and ‘speaks’ back. *Interferon Psalms*, as I’ve just observed, stages a theatrical dialogue between the narrator and ‘God,’ but also with other poets, philosophers, and even pop cultural figures such as Ace Ventura, whose ‘voice’ can be ‘heard’ in the lines: ‘Pride is an abomination. One must forego the self to obtain / total spiritual creaminess, and avoid the chewy chunks / of degradation.’⁶⁰ Just as Davies utilised the intertextual aesthetics of postmodernism to give praise in ‘Totem Poem,’ he has brought a postmodern sensibility to the textual performance space of the lament. My exploration of the history of the Australian lament will consider the lament as a tool for voicing expressions of sorrow – sometimes as a form of social resistance and protest – and it will also consider the aesthetic evolution of the lament from its emergence during the colonial era, to a flourishing in the 20th and 21st centuries.

4.2 The lament in Australian poetry

Some of Australia’s earliest recorded poems were laments, and since colonisation the lament as a poetic form has provided a performative means of drawing attention to, and rallying against, social injustice.⁶¹ In studying examples of Australian laments from the 1800s onward, it is clear that poetry has provided a site where the disquieting truths of colonisation might be told and remembered. Today, the lament continues to amplify the voices of those who are marginalised and oppressed. Most importantly, an examination of the Australian lament reveals emotional and personal aspects of this country’s larger public histories: as a poetic

⁶⁰ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 106.

⁶¹ Gray and Lehmann, *Australian Poetry Since 1788*, 9–10.

form, lament doesn't just tell of suffering; it conveys how suffering feels, often from highly specific perspectives.

Throughout this section I will draw upon key concepts from Australian postcolonial criticism, and argue that the recurring themes of instability and uncertainty in Australian laments can be linked to Australia's colonial period. For instance, 'The Postcolonial Ghost Story' by Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs (1996) considers how the 'uncanny' operates within Australian ghost stories, and speculates that it could be seen as a 'ghostly' reminder of the past.⁶² Gelder and Jacobs apply the term 'uncanny' to experiences where one's home and one's place are rendered 'somehow and in some sense unfamiliar,' resulting in a feeling of 'being in place and "out of place" *simultaneously*'⁶³ According to Gelder and Jacobs, uncanny experiences happen 'precisely at the moment when one is made aware that one has unfinished business with the past, at the moment when the past returns as an "elemental" force.'⁶⁴ They explain:

We often speak of Australia as a 'settler' nation – but the 'uncanny' can remind us that a condition of unsettled-ness folds into this often taken-for-granted mode of occupation. We often imagine a (future) condition of 'reconciliation', and indeed, a great deal is invested in the packaging of this image as a means of selling it to the nation – but the 'uncanny' can remind us of just how unreconcilable this image is with itself. It is not simply that Aboriginal and white Australians will either be reconciled with each other or they will not; rather, these two possibilities (reconciliation; the impossibility of reconciliation) co-exist and flow through each other in what is often a productively unstable dynamic.⁶⁵

The 'unsettled-ness' that Gelder and Jacobs identify as an intrinsic part of the Australian postcolonial experience – one that our literature also reflects – stems directly from the colonial era, where conditions were far from 'settled.'⁶⁶ A similar notion of 'unsettlement' informs *Writing Australian Unsettlement: Modes of Poetic Invention 1796–1945* (2015) by the

⁶² Gelder and Jacobs, 'The Postcolonial Ghost Story,' 181.

⁶³ Gelder and Jacobs, 181.

⁶⁴ Gelder and Jacobs, 181.

⁶⁵ Gelder and Jacobs, 182.

⁶⁶ Gelder and Jacobs, 182.

Australian poet and critic Michael Farrell.⁶⁷ In the introduction, Farrell quotes Australian poet and critic Martin Harrison, who observes that English and American ‘classifying systems’ are ‘applied to Australian writing, as if genetic accounts and histories of evolution similar to those of British and American writing can be mapped equidistantly across the structures of connection, response and contact which form the local histories of a local art.’⁶⁸ Responding to Harrison, Farrell states: ‘Rather than a system, I propose something that is more intuitive: the antisystem of “unsettlement.”’⁶⁹ Farrell’s ‘antisystem’ is one that seeks to ‘reimagine’ Australia’s cultural history.⁷⁰ He explains:

Terra nullius is known in Australia as the formula that justifies the British takeover of the country, due to the land being ‘empty’: of ‘civilisation,’ which must (in the eighteenth century) be represented by buildings and agriculture. This doctrine was legally discredited, belatedly, in 1992 with the Mabo decision (named after its lead complainant Eddie Mabo). John Kinsella quotes from the court decision: ‘the common law of Australia recognises a form of native title,’ adding that until this decision, and the subsequent passing by the Federal Government of the Native Title Act the following year, ‘Australia had been officially seen as a blank, *terra nullius*, a land open to claim.’ This was a major legal event, yet its effects are still being countered: as Harrison indicates, the term *terra nullius* is still active in erasing, not only Aboriginal history, but the history of that erasure. If we admit that erasure, however, we cannot pretend to know what has been erased.⁷¹

Farrell continues by declaring the ‘explicitly reparative’ intention of *Writing Australian Unsettlement*, which is to seek ‘the pleasures of poetics in Indigenous and settler (and not just white settler) texts.’⁷² As he explains: ‘It is a “shared history” that seeks equivalences and appreciates difference.’⁷³

Throughout this section I will return to Gelder and Jacobs’ notion of the ‘productively unstable dynamic’ produced by the coexistence of Aboriginal and ‘white Australian’ cultures, one that manifests in Australian literature as the ‘uncanny’: an experience where the familiar

⁶⁷ Farrell, *Writing Australian Unsettlement*.

⁶⁸ Farrell, 1.

⁶⁹ Farrell, 1.

⁷⁰ Farrell, 1.

⁷¹ Farrell, 2.

⁷² Farrell, 2.

⁷³ Farrell, 2.

is rendered unfamiliar, when the past returns to ‘haunt’ the present day.⁷⁴ My readings of Australian laments also reflect Farrell’s idea of a ‘shared history,’ where texts by Indigenous poets and ‘settler’ (including migrant) poets can be considered alongside each other as much for ‘the pleasures of poetics’ as for their cultural and political significance.⁷⁵ I will show that the Australian lament has been, and continues to be, a site where struggles can be voiced and political dissent can be expressed, but that it is also a poetic form that lyrically showcases all that is vivid, beautiful, and unique about Australia and its people.

One of Australia’s first recorded laments is ‘A Convict’s Lament on the Death of Captain Logan’ (also known as ‘Moreton Bay’) by ‘Frank the Poet,’ whose full name was Francis MacNamara.⁷⁶ Born in 1810, MacNamara was an Irish convict who reached Sydney in 1832. As the editors of *Australian Poetry Since 1788* explain, ‘A Convict’s Lament on the Death of Captain Logan’ exists in various forms under various titles because it was embellished over time by anonymous singers and reciters.⁷⁷ The version of ‘A Convict’s Lament on the Death of Captain Logan’ that appears in *Australian Poetry Since 1788* has been pieced together from two different sources, and its first stanza is as follows:

Early one morning as I carelessly wandered,
By the Brisbane waters I chanced to stray,
I heard a prisoner sadly bewailing,
Whilst on the sunny river-banks he lay:
‘I am a native of Erin’s island,
But banished now from my native shore,
They tore me from my aged parents,
And from the maiden I adore.’⁷⁸

The ‘Captain Logan’ of the poem’s title was an infamous commandant at Moreton Bay (a penal colony in Queensland), to where the ill-fated speaker of this poem was shipped.⁷⁹ Here,

⁷⁴ Gelder and Jacobs, ‘The Postcolonial Ghost Story,’ 181.

⁷⁵ Farrell, *Writing Australian Unsettlement*, 2.

⁷⁶ Gray and Lehmann, *Australian Poetry Since 1788*, 9–10.

⁷⁷ Gray and Lehmann, 9–10.

⁷⁸ MacNamara, ‘A Convict’s Lament,’ 10.

the convicts experienced ‘excessive tyranny,’ where their flesh was ‘mangled’ and their backs ‘lacerated’ by corporal punishment, to such an extent that they were ‘painted with crimson gore.’⁸⁰ However, the end of the poem depicts a change in fortune, when Captain Logan is slain by an Aboriginal man:

Like the Egyptians and ancient Hebrews,
We were oppressed under Logan’s yoke,
Till kind providence came to our assistance
And gave this tyrant his mortal stroke.

Yes, he was hurried from that place of bondage
Where he thought he would gain renown;
But a native black, who lay in ambush,
Gave this monster his fatal wound.
My fellow prisoners be exhilarated –
That all such monsters such a death may find:
For it’s when from bondage we are extricated
Our former sufferings will fade from mind.⁸¹

The poem was never specifically written for the page. Rather, it was originally spoken or sung, as the use of speech marks (which appear in the line ‘I am a native of Erin’s island’) indicate.⁸² It fits the definition of a ‘popular ballad’ as it is described by Abrams and Harpham in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* as a ‘song, transmitted orally, which tells a story.’⁸³ Abrams and Harpham specifically mention that popular ballads were sung by ‘social protesters’ during the early settlement of America: ‘A Convict’s Lament on the Death of Captain Logan’ shows that these ‘songs’ of protest were also sung during Australia’s settlement period.⁸⁴

The printed versions of ‘A Convict’s Lament on the Death of Captain Logan’ appeared in ‘broadsides’: single sheets dealing with ‘a current event or person or issue’ which

⁷⁹ McNamara, ‘A Convict’s Lament,’ 10.

⁸⁰ McNamara, 10 11.

⁸¹ McNamara, 11.

⁸² McNamara, 10 11.

⁸³ Abrams and Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 21.

⁸⁴ Abrams and Harpham, 22.

were ‘sung to a well-known tune,’ and widely circulated among the working classes.⁸⁵ While serving as an important and popular record of Australian history, it also essentially captures the emotional perspective of a convict, and brings to life the gruesome brutality of this time in a voice that could be considered both marginalised *and* popular, while being outside the ‘official’ historical record. The fifth stanza also aligns the convicts’ plight with the greater history of human oppression, with the lines ‘Like the Egyptians and ancient Hebrews / We were oppressed under Logan’s yoke.’⁸⁶ This is one of Australia’s earliest recorded examples of a lament – in popular ballad form – being used to protest a system that is exploitative and unjust.

The next poem I will look at is by Charles Harpur, who the editors of *Australian Poetry Since 1788* describe as ‘the first important Australian-born poet.’⁸⁷ Harpur was born in 1813 (the third child of emancipated convicts) and grew up at Windsor on the Hawkesbury River.⁸⁸ He was a prolific author of poetry throughout his life, and in *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, Kane identifies him as (Australia’s) ‘first poet to thematise the question of origins’ which means that he self-consciously positioned himself, within his own work, as Australia’s first poet.⁸⁹ As Farrell states, ‘Harpur wrote voluminously, and published regularly, in order to establish himself as Australia’s national poet.’⁹⁰ Alongside McNamara, Harpur can be credited as the author of one of Australia’s first recorded laments: ‘An Aboriginal Mother’s Lament.’⁹¹ This poem first appeared in Harpur’s collection *Poems*, which was published posthumously in 1883 (a digital version now exists on the Australian Poetry Library website).⁹² Accompanying the poem is a note explaining that around the year 1842, a party of white stockmen slaughtered a group of unarmed Aboriginal people, and the only survivors

⁸⁵ Abrams and Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 22.

⁸⁶ McNamara, ‘A Convict’s Lament,’ 11.

⁸⁷ Gray and Lehmann, *Australian Poetry Since 1788*, 11.

⁸⁸ Gray and Lehmann, 11.

⁸⁹ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 48.

⁹⁰ Farrell, *Writing Australian Unsettlement*, 108.

⁹¹ Harpur, ‘An Aboriginal Mother’s Lament.’

⁹² ‘Harpur, Charles,’ Australian Poetry Library.

were a woman and her infant. The poem is written from (Harpur's imagined) perspective of the surviving woman, as the first stanza shows:

Still farther would I fly, my child,
To make thee safer yet,
From the unsparing white man,
With his dread hand murder-wet!
I'll bear thee on as I have borne
With stealthy steps wind-fleet,
But the dark night shrouds the forest,
And thorns are in my feet.⁹³

Similar to 'A Convict's Lament on the Death of Captain Logan,' 'An Aboriginal Mother's Lament' is structured as a ballad, following a pattern that Abrams and Harpham identify as that of the 'ballad stanza,' with 'alternate four and three stress lines,' and rhymes in the 'second and fourth lines.'⁹⁴ The ballad, as I've mentioned, is a suitable form for a lament, as its regular patterns of rhythm and rhyme give it a broad appeal: it brings people together to share the commonality of human suffering. Harpur's poem also includes a repeated refrain that essentially operates as a chorus in a song:

O moan not! I would give this braid –
Thy father's gift to me –
For but a single palmful
Of water now for thee.⁹⁵

This refrain provides moments of respite from the harrowing narrative of each 'verse' by bringing the focus of the poem back to a mother's love for her child. The motif of 'water' subtly reinforces the idea of continued life, and can also be seen to subliminally 'wash' away

⁹³ Harpur, 'An Aboriginal Mother's Lament.'

⁹⁴ Abrams and Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 22.

⁹⁵ Harpur, 'An Aboriginal Mother's Lament.'

the blood that has been spilled in the surrounding stanzas, such as in the lines: ‘On the roaring pyre flung bleeding / I saw thy father die!’⁹⁶

Harpur’s decision to narrate ‘An Aboriginal Mother’s Lament’ from the perspective of the mother enhances the poem’s emotional impact, but whether it was ethical for Harpur to ‘speak’ on behalf of an Indigenous person is uncertain. Although it could be seen as a well-intentioned attempt to translate the suffering of this woman into a linguistic form with which the settler community might be familiar, and thus give ‘popular’ acknowledgement to this story, it nonetheless presents a paternalistic, infantilising view of Aboriginal culture. It frames Aboriginal people as exotic and of needing protection, and it also gives expression to what Gelder and Jacobs describe as an ‘enmeshing of innocence and guilt.’⁹⁷ The innocence and defencelessness of the woman and her child in Harpur’s poem is contrasted with descriptions of the ‘white man’ as ‘unsparing,’ with a ‘dread hand’ that is ‘murder-wet.’⁹⁸ Harpur, by placing himself in the mother’s position, is effectively aligning himself with ‘innocence,’ and distancing himself from the ‘guilt’ of the violent white man.⁹⁹ In ‘An Aboriginal Mother’s Lament,’ Harpur gives expression to what Gelder and Jacobs describe as the ‘uncanny’ experience of being innocent and guilty ‘at the same time.’¹⁰⁰ Harpur’s poem can be seen as an early precursor to ‘postcoloniality as a contemporary condition, whereby one remains within the structures of colonialism (with all its attendant horrors) even as one is temporally located beyond them or “after” them.’¹⁰¹

Earlier I drew attention to Kane’s use of the word ‘indigenous’ to mean ‘original,’ in describing how the ‘absence’ of an Australian romanticism ‘gave Australian poets a belated sense of their own status.’¹⁰² When discussing Harpur, Kane again uses the word ‘indigenous’

⁹⁶ Harpur, ‘An Aboriginal Mother’s Lament.’

⁹⁷ Gelder and Jacobs, ‘The Postcolonial Ghost Story,’ 195.

⁹⁸ Harpur, ‘An Aboriginal Mother’s Lament.’

⁹⁹ Harpur.

¹⁰⁰ Gelder and Jacobs, ‘The Postcolonial Ghost Story,’ 182-3.

¹⁰¹ Gelder and Jacobs, 183.

¹⁰² Kane, *Australian Poetry, Romanticism and Negativity*, 35-36.

to describe Harpur's ambition to establish a poetic tradition that was distinctively Australian, and not just a facsimile of European poetics:

Harpur was an ambitious poet, self-consciously desirous of being the first Australian 'bard.' To be authentically so, he not only had to be native-born, he had to arise poetically out of Australia itself, if he was to be its genuine voice and not a mere echo of English norms and styles. This is a familiar predicament for colonial and post-colonial literatures, but I think it takes on a special emphasis in Australia where the preoccupation with origins is so strong (and where there is no indigenous tradition that can be reclaimed or reworked).⁰³

Kane's statement that there was 'no indigenous tradition that can be reclaimed or reworked' essentially erases continuities between Aboriginal culture before and after 1788.⁰⁴ He dismisses any literary inscriptions and expressions that occurred before settlement as if they were frozen on the other side of the arrival of Western literary theory, the inference being that Indigenous literatures exist outside of the realm of critical appraisal. Ironically, even though Harpur was desperate to break away from European poetic sensibilities and create a poetry of Australia that was unique, his poetry was grounded entirely in poetic conventions that derived from European traditions, especially the romantics – a perversity that is characteristic of much Australian settler-colonial poetry that was striving for 'originality.' As Kane remarks, 'Harpur set out to be a romantic poet in an un-romantic place and time: it was a gamble of sorts, but he saw rightly that romanticism was the only available mode possessed of the kind of originary power he sought.'⁰⁶ Kane does not specifically refer to 'An Aboriginal Mother's Lament'; however, Harpur's iconic poem nonetheless substantiates Kane's theory that Australian romantic poetry originates from, and reflects, negativity and absence. But I would argue that this 'negativity' is different to that which underwrites Kane's primary argument, and that remains unacknowledged by Kane: the negativity of Harpur's

¹⁰³ Kane, *Australian Poetry, Romanticism and Negativity*, 48.

¹⁰⁴ Kane, 48.

¹⁰⁶ Kane, 49.

poem reflects the silencing of Aboriginal voices, and the violent negation of their cultural presence. As Kane states, Harpur's poetry is 'structured by negativity, by a sense of loss, belatedness and instability.'¹⁰⁷ Harpur's poetry reflects the inherent instability of colonial Australia, and the unease that was generated by the sometimes violent coexistence of two completely different cultures. 'An Aboriginal Mother's Lament' also embodies settler guilt and responsibility for genocide. Ultimately, Harpur's poem shows that colonial Australia was inherently *unsettled*.

In his obsession with making a name for himself as Australia's 'first' poet, and in circulating violent colonialist paradigms of Aboriginal 'vulnerability' and disenfranchisement, Harpur has prioritised his own voice and language, rather than the cultural voice and language of the Aboriginal mother at the centre of his poem. Harpur's poem endures as a testimony to colonial violence, replicating processes of colonisation whereby Indigenous people were brutally deprived of opportunities to tell their own stories in their own languages.

As Heiss and Minter explain in their introduction to the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature* (2008), 'the federation of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901 did little to advance the social and political conditions of Aboriginal people.'¹⁰⁸ In the 20th century, Aboriginal people continued to be 'systematically disenfranchised from their traditional lands, their cultural practices and their languages.'¹⁰⁹ Against this backdrop of violent displacement, Aboriginal poet and activist Kath Walker published her first collection *We Are Going* in 1964, which was only the second volume of Aboriginal literature to be published in Australia, and the first by an Aboriginal woman.¹¹⁰ This was a significant moment in Australian literary history, as Heiss and Minter observe: 'Directed to both her own community and to an enthusiastic mainstream audience, *We Are Going* marks the arrival of Aboriginal poetry as one

¹⁰⁷ Kane, *Australian Poetry, Romanticism and Negativity*, 64.

¹⁰⁸ Heiss and Minter, *Macquarie PEN Anthology*, 2.

¹⁰⁹ Heiss and Minter, 3.

¹¹⁰ Heiss and Minter, 4.

of the most important genres in contemporary Aboriginal political and creative literature.’ In 1988, as a gesture of protest against Australia’s Bicentenary, Walker ‘returned her MBE’ and readopted her traditional name: Oodgeroo of the Noonuccal people.² Heiss and Minter describe this as a ‘defining moment in the evolution of contemporary Aboriginal literature, reflecting both an individual and a collective resurgence in the confidence of Aboriginal culture.’³

The Indigenous Australian novelist and critic Alexis Wright, in her article ‘A Weapon of Poetry: Alexis Wright Remembers Oodgeroo Noonuccal’ (2008), describes Oodgeroo’s legacy as ‘huge.’⁴ As Wright explains, ‘Oodgeroo’s poetry spoke for those who could not be heard. She gave voice on paper for those Aboriginal people who had suffered and died from oppression and dispossession without being heard across this land.’⁵ As I’ve stated, the Australian laments I explore in this section all publicly and performatively give voice to sorrow, using the lyric mode to convey an emotional response to loss and trauma. ‘We Are Going,’ the title poem from Oodgeroo’s landmark 1964 collection, utilises the lament’s capacity to not only speak ‘for’ one person (or in this case, a group of people), but to speak ‘to’ others in a way that conveys their loss emotionally. Wright describes ‘We Are Going’ as a ‘lyrical, sad but beautiful poem’ that worked its way ‘into the soul of the nation.’⁶ As Aboriginal Australians persevere in their ‘struggles for acknowledgement of the injustices of the past,’ Oodgeroo’s poetry continues to ‘speak’ on behalf of those who cannot.⁷

As my analysis of ‘We Are Going’ will show, complex patterns of musicality, and deeper layers of meaning sit beneath the surface of Oodgeroo’s poems, heightening their

¹¹¹ Heiss and Minter, *Macquarie PEN Anthology*, 4.

¹¹² Heiss and Minter, 6.

¹¹³ Heiss and Minter, 6.

¹¹⁴ Wright, ‘A Weapon of Poetry,’ 19.

¹¹⁵ Wright, 22.

¹¹⁶ Wright, 21.

¹¹⁷ Wright, 21.

emotional impact, and acting as ‘a challenge and an invitation,’ to borrow Heiss and Minter’s phrasing.⁸

The opening lines of ‘We Are Going’ are:

They came in to the little town
A semi-naked band subdued and silent,
All that remained of their tribe.
They came here to the place of their old bora ground
Where now the many white men hurry about like ants.
Notice of estate agent reads: ‘Rubbish May Be Tipped Here’.
Now it half covers the traces of the old bora ring.
They sit and are confused, they cannot say their thoughts:
‘We are strangers here now, but the white tribe are strangers.’⁹

The beginning of this poem establishes a narrative where the remaining members of an Aboriginal tribe revisit ‘their old bora ground’ to find it desecrated with rubbish.²⁰ Here Oodgeroo uses a third-person perspective to describe the scene: the small group of people are described in a way that is impersonal and almost impassive. In the ninth line, however, the poem switches to the first-person plural ‘we’ to voice a communal perspective. The next section of the poem extends this communal voicing:

We belong here, we are of the old ways.
We are the corroboree and the bora ground,
We are the old ceremonies, the laws of the elders.
We are the wonder tales of Dream Time, the tribal legends told.
We are the past, the hunts and the laughing games, the wandering camp
fires.
We are the lightning-bolt over Gaphembah Hill
Quick and terrible,
And the Thunderer after him, that loud fellow.
We are the quiet daybreak paling the dark lagoon.
We are the shadow-ghosts creeping back as the camp fires burn low.
We are nature and the past, all the old ways
Gone now and scattered.²

¹¹⁸ Heiss and Minter, *Macquarie PEN Anthology*, 8.

¹¹⁹ Oodgeroo Noonuccal, ‘We Are Going,’ 495–496.

¹²⁰ Oodgeroo Noonuccal, 495–496.

¹²¹ Oodgeroo Noonuccal, 496.

This section of 'We Are Going' articulates the thoughts that the surviving members of the tribe 'cannot say,' using the pronoun 'we' to 'speak' on their behalf.²² Unlike 'A Convict's Lament on the Death of Captain Logan' and 'An Aboriginal Mother's Lament,' 'We Are Going' uses a free-verse structure. The result is a form of lamentation that is less obviously ballad-like: instead, it bears more resemblance to plain speech. Although 'We Are Going' does not use a ballad structure, the repetition of 'we are' in this poem creates a steady and insistent rhythm that builds in intensity as the poem progresses. Most importantly, the repetition of 'we are' reinforces the central message of the poem, which is that these Aboriginal people are not just from the land, they *are* the land.

The repetition of the word '**w**e' also creates an alliterative effect with the words '**w**ays,' (which itself appears twice in the poem), '**w**onder' and '**w**andering'; and the '**e**' sound in '**w**e' also chimes with the words '**c**orrobo**re**' (which also appears twice), '**c**eremon**ies**,' '**D**ream' and '**c**reep**ing**.'²³ Additionally, a counter chime is created by the '**a**' sound in the words '**s**tr**an**gers,' '**w**ays,' '**t**ales,' '**g**ames,' '**d**aybreak,' '**p**aling' and '**n**ature.'²⁴ Most significantly, the word '**a**re' chimes with the word '**p**ast,' which creates a tension between the present moment ('we are') and the historical past.²⁵ This same tension exists in the title 'We Are Going,' which locates the process of 'going' in the perpetual present.²⁶ The significance of this title is bolstered by the alliterative and assonant chimes throughout the body of the poem, creating the impression of a timeless song that will forever emanate from the land. Although the people in this poem are 'going,' they will never be gone from this place.²⁷

Heiss and Minter describe Aboriginal literary writing as growing 'directly from a complex and ancient wellspring of oral and visual communication and exchange.'²⁸ As they

¹²² Oodgeroo Noonuccal, 'We Are Going,' 496.

¹²³ Oodgeroo Noonuccal, 496.

¹²⁴ Oodgeroo Noonuccal, 496.

¹²⁵ Oodgeroo Noonuccal, 495-496.

¹²⁶ Oodgeroo Noonuccal, 495.

¹²⁷ Oodgeroo Noonuccal, 495-496.

¹²⁸ Heiss and Minter, *Macquarie PEN Anthology*, 2.

explain, these Aboriginal ‘languages and forms of expression’ had been ‘intact for tens of thousands of years.’²⁹ The line ‘We are the corroboree and the bora ground’ from ‘We Are Going’ makes direct reference to these ancient forms of expression, indicating that gathering together for ceremonies and celebration is central to Aboriginal culture and senses of being in Country.³⁰ ‘We Are Going’ also refers to the ‘wonder tales of the Dream Time’ and ‘tribal legends told,’ suggesting that stories have been passed down from generation to generation.³¹ This further proves that Kane’s claim that Australia had ‘no indigenous tradition’ of poetic language before the arrival of the First Fleet is invalid.³² Additionally, ‘We Are Going’ demonstrates that poetry can be a powerful tool of protest for those who have been marginalised by mainstream society. As Wright states:

Oodgeroo’s achievement was to make a weapon of poetry, in the same way as the great Irish writer James Joyce, whose character Stephen Dedalus spoke of having to use a borrowed canvas and borrowed words. The thoughts belonged to the cultural interior monologue of her people, but their stories in her poetry turned history into a mythmaking of what was believed and was true. She used words as a shield to hold back the full effect of colonialism, and the power of those words have lasted through many decades to remind us, as if they were written yesterday, where we come from and who we are and what we stand for.³³

To use Wright’s words, the lament as a poetic form can act as a ‘weapon’ or a ‘shield’ to empower those who have been disempowered. The laments I am comparing in this chapter come from different time periods, and from poets with very different backgrounds and circumstances. What unites these speakers is their humanity: all can be seen as ‘outsiders’ who are crying out to be heard. Oodgeroo does this by using a plain style of language that emulates spoken Australian English, and her poems strive to create and maintain an emotional rapport with mainstream Australia. This resonates with McGeachy’s claim that the

¹²⁹ Heiss and Minter, *Macquarie PEN Anthology*, 2.

¹³⁰ Oodgeroo Noonuccal, ‘We Are Going,’ 496.

¹³¹ Oodgeroo Noonuccal, 496.

¹³² Kane, *Australian Poetry, Romanticism and Negativity*, 48.

¹³³ Wright, ‘A Weapon of Poetry,’ 21.

'lonely voices' of lament 'call beyond the walls of the text.'³⁴ Even though the speakers in 'We Are Going' conclude their lament by stating 'The bora ring is gone' and 'The corroboree is gone': they themselves are 'going,' but not gone.³⁵ Ultimately 'We Are Going' can be seen as a cry of resilience and survival, since it shows that Aboriginal people are forever in their Country.

The next Australian lament I will consider is 'Lamentations' by the Sydney poet Michael Dransfield, from his first collection *Streets of the Long Voyage* (1970).³⁶ 'Lamentations' is useful to this discussion, since it is another example of a lament being used as a mode of political interrogation and witnessing. Specifically, it stages the 'unfinished business' that Gelder and Jacobs claim Australian has with its past, and it voices an emerging 'postcolonial' viewpoint that bears witness to the 'overflow' of past traumas and injustices 'into the otherwise "homely" realm of modernity.'³⁷ As the Australian poet, novelist, and critic Rodney Hall remarks, Dransfield's poems 'caused a ripple of excitement when they were first published by periodicals in the context of poetry which tended to take pride in tailored understatement and civilised ironic commentaries on society.'³⁸ Dransfield is part of the 'Generation of '68' which John Tranter defines in *The New Australian Poetry* (1979) as a group of 'mainly young writers' who became prominent towards the end of the 1960s.³⁹ As Tranter explains, these poets 'generally expressed antagonism to the established mainstream of poetry at that time, which they saw as too conservative.'⁴⁰ Dransfield's 'Lamentations' extends this antagonism towards Australian culture, as the first stanza shows:

Reduced to nerve-end symbols
in this country of savages,

¹³⁴ McGeachy, *Lonesome Words*, 1.

¹³⁵ Oodgeroo Noonuccal, 'We Are Going,' 496.

¹³⁶ 'Dransfield, Michael,' Australian Poetry Library.

¹³⁷ Gelder and Jacobs, 'The Postcolonial Ghost Story,' 181.

¹³⁸ Hall, 'Introduction,' in Dransfield, *Collected Poems*, xvii.

¹³⁹ Tranter, *The New Australian Poetry*, xv.

¹⁴⁰ Tranter, xv.

I find employment in the vortex
appraising my antagonists
their proficiency with pen and sword
their sameness
their repertoire of bestialities.
Nearby, last century,

convicts were flogged,
blacks shot.⁴

The second stanza opens with the lines ‘They ringbarked the Dreamtime / now they murder / with this slowest torture, indifference.’⁴² The speaker of the poem then states that ‘No separate identity excuses me / from past barbarities, the guilt of blood.’⁴³ As a way of distancing himself from ‘these painful affairs,’ he escapes ‘on voyages, on hallucinogens.’⁴⁴ The perspective that ‘Lamentations’ puts forward is that the colonisers of Australia – those who ‘flogged’ convicts and ‘shot’ blacks – formed the cultural foundation of what was to become a country of savages.⁴⁵ It is a poem about feeling sickened by atrocities of the past, and frustrated by a system that was established by a corrupt ruling class, and that continues, to use the phrasing of Gelder and Jacobs, to ‘haunt the present day.’⁴⁶

The title ‘Lamentations’ automatically, if tenuously, connects the poem back to the Bible’s Book of Lamentations, which is a collection of laments for the destruction of Jerusalem: a city that was abandoned by God.⁴⁷ The last lines of Dransfield’s poem make it clear that this association with the Book of Lamentations is deliberate:

The vastness of indifference
the mocking gulf
belittle even paradise
even that refuge

¹⁴¹ Dransfield, *Collected Poems*, 26–7.

¹⁴² Dransfield, 26–27.

¹⁴³ Dransfield, 26–27.

¹⁴⁴ Dransfield, 26–27.

¹⁴⁵ Dransfield, 26–27.

¹⁴⁶ Gelder and Jacobs, ‘The Postcolonial Ghost Story,’ 111.

¹⁴⁷ Cavitch, ‘Lament,’ 781.

hard-won by Jeremiah. ⁴⁸

As Coogan and Metzger explain in the *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, the prophet Jeremiah is, according to Jewish tradition, the author of the Book of Lamentations (as well as the Book of Jeremiah and the Book of Kings). ⁴⁹ One possible reading of Dransfield's poem is that the speaker sees himself as some kind of a modern-day prophet who believes that Australia, like Jerusalem, has been abandoned by God. However, within the poem there is also an awareness that there is a 'mocking gulf' between the cultural alienation felt by the drug-taking counter-culturalists of the late 60s, and the specific and violent oppression of Australia's Indigenous peoples. ⁵⁰ Although Dransfield's 'Lamentations' positions those members of society with 'proficiency with pen and sword' as 'antagonists,' it also directs some criticism towards those who pursue escapism through drugs, resulting in 'paralysis' and 'inaction.' ⁵¹

As Geoff Page points out in his article 'Michael Dransfield: The Poetry Not the Myth' (1977), Dransfield's protest poems are not consistent, either in their quality or their attitudes. ⁵² Page explains that even Dransfield himself later admitted to 'some discontinuities' in some of his early poems, including 'Lamentations.' ⁵³ Compared with the carefully considered craftsmanship of Oodgeroo's 'We Are Going,' Dransfield's 'Lamentations' falls short of its own title, as Page elaborates:

What weakens Dransfield's lesser poems in this genre is not so much these inconsistencies nor is it, as one reviewer suggested, 'a sense of self-satisfaction and a scorn for others' but more a tendency towards oversimplification and crudity of expression which seems to reflect Dransfield's apparent conviction that merely to speak one's mind in these areas was enough. ⁵⁴

¹⁴⁸ Dransfield, *Collected Poems*, 26-27.

¹⁴⁹ Coogan and Metzger, *Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 419.

¹⁵⁰ Dransfield, *Collected Poems*, 26-27.

¹⁵¹ Dransfield, 26-27.

¹⁵² Page, 'Michael Dransfield,' 66.

¹⁵³ Page, 66.

¹⁵⁴ Page, 66.

In fairness, Dransfield was only 22 when *Streets of the Long Voyage* was published, and this one poem is not representative of his ground-breaking oeuvre. I have included ‘Lamentations’ in this discussion because it offers a window into the mindset of Australia’s counter-culture in the 1970s, demonstrating that there were many who felt a sense of shame about ‘past barbarities’ and ‘the guilt of blood.’⁵⁵ Dransfield’s poem depicts a person who is scornful of Australians who wear ‘the spastic curl of a conformist smile,’ and wants to distance himself from mainstream society.⁵⁶ In this sense ‘Lamentations’ is an early example of a poem in lament form that reflects upon Australian culture from a perspective that is truly postcolonial. While Kane describes an ‘instability’ in Harpur’s poetry that ‘is perhaps partly an anxiety about his place in Australian poetry,’ Dransfield’s ‘Lamentations’ echoes similar anxieties about identity, and finding one’s place within a culture of disparity and division.⁵⁷ The speaker of ‘Lamentations’ is not certain about his own position in Australian society, and feels compelled to ‘run away’ on drug-taking ‘voyages.’⁵⁸ More specifically, the speaker doesn’t want to swallow the neo-colonialist rhetoric of his ‘antagonists,’ but he is aware that he is still implicated.⁵⁹

Interferon Psalms by Davies bears resemblance to ‘Lamentations’ by Dransfield, in the sense that both poems are narrated by Australian ‘outsiders,’ and both make overt reference to the Bible, in ways that can be seen to write the ‘psalms’ and ‘lamentations’ of Australia.⁶⁰ However, ‘Lamentations’ is in the voice of a young man, while *Interferon Psalms* voices the mature perspective of an older man who acknowledges that he has a responsibility to actively make amends for the wrongdoings of the past. As I will discuss in Section 4.3, *Interferon Psalms* uses the motif of a ‘ghost’ to represent the speaker’s past ‘returning’ to his present.⁶¹

¹⁵⁵ Dransfield, *Collected Poems*, 26–27.

¹⁵⁶ Dransfield, 26–27.

¹⁵⁷ Kane, *Australian Poetry, Romanticism and Negativity*, 64.

¹⁵⁸ Dransfield, *Collected Poems*, 26–27.

¹⁵⁹ Dransfield, 26–27.

¹⁶⁰ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, Dransfield, *Collected Poems*, 26–27.

¹⁶¹ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 45.

There are resonances here with what Gelder and Jacobs identify as ‘Australia’s postcolonial condition,’ one that is ‘haunted’ by the past.⁶² As they explain, the ‘paradox’ of postcolonial Australia is that non-mainstream cultures – such as Australian Aboriginal cultures – are seen as ‘lacking,’ but also having ‘too much.’⁶³ This paradoxical way of thinking is reflective of the cultural instability that stems from Australia’s *unsettled* colonial past. It also manifests as a paradoxical condition of feeling both guilty *and* innocent, as Gelder and Jacobs elaborate:

In relation to Aborigines, modern white Australians can either be innocent, in the sense of not actually having participated in the earlier horrors of colonisation, in the traumas of the past; or they can be guilty, in the sense that even to be postcolonial is not to be free from these past horrors, which ceaselessly return to haunt us. How implicated *are* postcolonials in the past? Paradoxically enough, the appeal to innocence casts white Australians as ‘out of place’, uninvolved in those formative colonial processes; while one’s participation in what is sometimes cynically called ‘the guilt industry’ would render white Australians as in fact *too* involved, too embedded *in* place in the sense that every one of them, even the most recent immigrant, automatically inherits the (mis)fortunes of Australia’s colonial history. In postcolonial Australia, however, it may well be that both of these positions are inhabited at the same time: one can be both innocent (‘out of place’) *and* guilty (‘in place’). And this is entirely consistent with postcoloniality as a contemporary condition, whereby one remains within the structures of colonialism (with all its attendant horrors) even as one is temporally located beyond them or ‘after’ them.⁶⁴

A crucial point that Gelder and Jacobs make here is that even immigrants to Australia ‘automatically’ inherit the paradox of Australia’s postcolonial condition: that of existing inside the ‘structures of colonialism’ except at a point in time that has come ‘after’ the colonial period.⁶⁵ The concept that even an immigrant to Australia can experience a sense of being ‘haunted’ is provocative, and it carries the suggestion that there is also something in Australia’s land itself that resonates with ‘past horrors.’⁶⁶ The next poet I will look at is Antigone Kefala, who was born in Romania in 1935 to Greek parents, and migrated to

¹⁶² Gelder and Jacobs, ‘The Postcolonial Ghost Story,’ 179; 187.

¹⁶³ Gelder and Jacobs, 179.

¹⁶⁴ Gelder and Jacobs, 182–3.

¹⁶⁵ Gelder and Jacobs, 112.

¹⁶⁶ Gelder and Jacobs, 112.

Sydney (via New Zealand) in 1959.⁶⁷ Kefala's poem 'Lament' (published in her 1988 collection *European Notebook*) is suitable for this discussion, since it depicts a haunting, of sorts, that manifests as a 'voice' that 'will not cease to cry.'⁶⁸ Kefala, as a migrant poet, can also be seen as an 'outsider' to mainstream Australian culture, and I will show how she has used the lament to voice the suffering of a minority group in a way that speaks to the universal human experience of sorrow and loss.

Kefala's first collection *The Alien* was published in 1973, establishing her as 'an important voice on the migrant experience in modern Australia.'⁶⁹ Michelle Tsokos, in 'Memory and Absence: The Poetry of Antigone Kefala' (1994), explains that although Kefala is a migrant, and although her poetry speaks to the experience of being a migrant in Australia, she doesn't necessarily see herself as 'strictly' a migrant writer:

In her poetry Kefala searches for 'the measure' of a migrant voice in an Australian cultural and literary milieu which tends to marginalise such writers. Kefala, however, does not perceive herself strictly as a migrant - rather as belonging to both her present and her past: 'a migrant writer or an Australian writer? I feel that I am both and that the positions are not mutually exclusive.' In this, Kefala rejects the dichotomy which posits Anglo-Australians against people of non-Anglo-Celtic descent. Adhering to dualities of this kind necessarily imposes limitations on one's identity; in rejecting this mode of thought, Kefala affirms her own identity as multiple and various.⁷⁰

This notion of 'belonging to both her present and her past' echoes Gelder and Jacobs' interest in the past as an 'elemental force' that can emerge within the present day as a kind of haunting.⁷¹ Kefala's work exhibits a shadowy, melancholic aesthetic, as if it were giving expression to unresolved, ancestral grief. These preoccupations can be seen in Kefala's poem 'Lament':

¹⁶⁷ Tsokos, 'Memory and Absence,' 51.

¹⁶⁸ Kefala, 'Lament.'

¹⁶⁹ 'Kefala, Antigone,' Australian Poetry Library.

¹⁷⁰ Tsokos, 'Memory and Absence,' 51.

¹⁷¹ Gelder and Jacobs, 'The Postcolonial Ghost Story,' 111.

This voice in us
still so plaintive
that will not cease to cry.

The night brings them
the eyeless people
thin with large skulls
the odour of the void
on their breath
a parched ground
that eternally thirsts. ⁷²

In light of Kefala's experiences, it is tempting to read the 'us' of the poem as European migrants who came to Australia in the aftermath of World War II. The poem hints at a collective trauma, personified in the first stanza as a 'plaintive' voice that 'will not cease to cry.' ⁷³ The first stanza is aesthetically similar to a Greek chorus, as it appears to emulate a multitude of anonymous speakers. However, the perspective shifts in the second stanza, from 'us' to 'them.' The poem first presents the plaintive 'voice' as emanating from inside the people in the poem, but in the second stanza these shadowy figures are depicted as outsiders. By describing these figures as 'eyeless' and 'thin with large skulls,' Kefala conjures an image of alien creatures, such as from a science-fiction film. While the first line 'This voice in us' represents sorrow as something that can be voiced (and heard), the second stanza is essentially soundless. The 'eyeless people' have 'the odour of the void / on their breath' but they do not speak. Furthermore, these people arrive at 'night' and therefore in darkness. ⁷⁴ It is possible to read this is a metaphor for the subconscious mind: a place of repressed memories (both personal and ancestral), and also the place of dreams and nightmares. These 'eyeless' people do not speak, or if they do it is inaudible: instead, they carry 'the odour of the void / on their breath.' ⁷⁵ This further creates the atmosphere of a nightmare, since the first stanza

¹⁷² Kefala, 'Lament.'

¹⁷³ Kefala.

¹⁷⁴ Kefala.

¹⁷⁵ Kefala.

allows its speakers a ‘voice,’ however in the second stanza there is only the muteness of a ‘void,’ like a person who is trying to speak in a dream, but is not able to.

Kefala’s poem ends by situating these alien figures upon ‘a parched ground / that eternally thirsts.’⁷⁶ This motif of thirsting can also be found in Harpur’s ‘An Aboriginal Mother’s Lament,’ where the narrator yearns to give her child ‘a single palmful’ of ‘water.’⁷⁷ The descriptor ‘parched’ also features in Davies’ *Interferon Psalms*, most prominently in the lines: ‘Parched. The desert parched. The parched lips on the / flower buds.’⁷⁸ These motifs of dryness have origins in the Bible, as expressed in Psalm 63:

O God, You are my God;
Early will I seek You;
My soul thirsts for You;
My flesh longs for You
In a dry and thirsty land
Where there is no water.⁷⁹

Thirst is a recurring theme in Kefala’s poetry: for instance, her second collection (published in 1978) is titled *Thirsty Weather*.⁸⁰ As Tsokos explains, Kefala’s poems frequently ‘search for meaning within the present, thereby attempting to rid the present of the past.’⁸ However, there is nothing that can offer ‘shelter from a “thirsty” reality which is devoid of meaning.’⁸² In her reading of Kefala’s poem ‘Thirsty Weather’, Tsokos observes:

Kefala speaks of an eternal thirst because her conception of time is discordant with the conception of time in mainstream culture. Kefala's vision involves a move ‘towards an absolute present’ and a move away from dominant linear models of time. Kefala envisages a timeless world, one which ‘sheds / constantly the everyday’, an eternal space which secularism assumes closed. In Kefala's thought significant events and human woe

¹⁷⁶ Kefala, ‘Lament.’

¹⁷⁷ Harpur, ‘An Aboriginal Mother’s Lament.’

¹⁷⁸ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 76.

¹⁷⁹ Ps. 63:1 NKJV.

¹⁸⁰ ‘Kefala, Antigone,’ Australian Poetry Library.

¹⁸¹ Tsokos, ‘Memory and Absence,’ 57.

¹⁸² Tsokos, 57.

are not just historically specific but can be propelled across history; meanings transpose themselves with and against linear chronology. ⁸³

Again, the idea that historical events and ‘human woe’ can be ‘propelled across history’ is consistent with Gelder and Jacobs’ theory that immigrants to Australia continue to inherit ‘the (mis)fortunes of Australia’s colonial history.’ ⁸⁴ Tsokos describes an ‘absence of a positive theology’ in Kefala’s poetry, observing that in her poem ‘Thirsty Weather’ there is no religion or belief system that is ‘capable of providing the “thirsty” with a “measure” with which to gauge a present spiritual reality.’ ⁸⁵ As Tsokos explains, the structures of Kefala’s poems subtly reinforce this tension between presence and absence, and of living in the present moment but also living in the past:

The expression of an elusiveness and implied meaninglessness in the poetry is emphasised by its free verse form. The poetry has minimal punctuation, muted stress patterns and lacks strong rhythms; even by free verse standards Kefala's is not strongly accented poetry. The form of the poetry creates a sense of unsure definitions: the lines work through hints and implications, and through sequences of images rather than sustained explorations of related image clusters. ⁸⁶

When Kefala’s lament is stripped down to its bones – when it is whispered, or felt but perhaps not uttered at all – it gestures towards a sorrow that is unconscious, unrealised, repressed, or buried. While Kefala’s poems speak to the experience of being a migrant, they also provide insight into Australia’s ‘postcolonial condition’ as one that is haunted by the past. ⁸⁷ Kefala’s poetry suggests that trauma does not disappear if you refuse to look at it or acknowledge it. The Australian lament, as refracted through Kefala’s lens of displacement and marginality, is one that emanates from a ‘parched ground’ that ‘eternally thirsts.’ ⁸⁸

¹⁸³ Tsokos, ‘Memory and Absence,’ 57.

¹⁸⁴ Tsokos, 57; Gelder and Jacobs, ‘The Postcolonial Ghost Story,’ 112.

¹⁸⁵ Tsokos, ‘Memory and Absence,’ 58.

¹⁸⁶ Tsokos, 58.

¹⁸⁷ Gelder and Jacobs, ‘The Postcolonial Ghost Story,’ 110.

¹⁸⁸ Kefala, ‘Lament.’

Emerging during the same era as Kefala, the writings of poet Fay Zwicky similarly explore notions of alienation and the experience of feeling like an outsider within Australian culture. Born in Melbourne in 1933, Zwicky spent her early adulthood touring as a concert pianist, before eventually settling in Perth with her Dutch husband in 1961.⁸⁹ Zwicky's first collection of poetry *Isaac Babel's Fiddle* was published in 1975, and she continued to publish poetry, short stories, and essays until her death in 2017.⁹⁰ As the Australian poet and critic Martin Duwell observes in his 2017 review of *The Collected Poems of Fay Zwicky*, a recurring concern within Zwicky's poetry is her Jewish ancestry, which provided her with a springboard for self-analysis and reflection upon her identity, and the ways in which different aspects of her identity might collide and rupture.⁹¹ Duwell explains that 'As for many people in the twentieth century who were born into a secular middle-class environment, discovering Jewish roots among forebears was not an exciting adventure into origins but an enquiry into certain aspects of one's intellectual set-up and, simultaneously, an attempt to define how one related to one of the great persecuted ethnicities of that century.'⁹² John Kinsella also points out in his 2017 article 'Poet Fay Zwicky was a Rebellious West Australian Voice' that living in Perth further contributed to Zwicky's feeling of being an outsider within mainstream Australian culture; a place she saw as being representative of 'isolation at the edge of the continent.'⁹³

Published in 1982, Zwicky's lament 'Kaddish' was written to commemorate her father, who died at sea in 1967.⁹⁴ In Jewish culture, the Kaddish is a prayer recited at funerals and memorial services. In writing the poem, Zwicky drew inspiration from Allen

¹⁸⁹ 'Zwicky, Fay,' Australian Poetry Library.

¹⁹⁰ 'Zwicky, Fay.'

¹⁹¹ Duwell, 'Fay Zwicky.'

¹⁹² Duwell.

¹⁹³ Kinsella, 'Poet Fay Zwicky was a Rebellious West Australian Voice,' *The Australian*, July 22, 2017, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/poet-fay-zwicky-was-a-rebellious-west-australian-voice/news-story/e23875b281877121e41ee9095721d635>.

¹⁹⁴ 'Zwicky, Fay,' Australian Poetry Library.

Ginsberg's 1956 poem of the same title, which was dedicated to his late mother.⁹⁵ As Kinsella notes, 'it was Zwicky's "failure" to understand that the Kaddish was traditionally the domain of men that led her to dissent from tradition and make something radical, even rebellious, a trait of which she was sceptical and wary, but which she embodied in so many ways.'⁹⁶ In contrast to Kefala's 'Lament,' Zwicky's 'Kaddish' is lengthy and full of theatrical flourishes, as can be seen in lines such as 'Shaking in the box of bone, laughter fastened in the silent night, laughter' and 'Flames from the roofs / From my father's fiery image.'⁹⁷ The Kaddish prayer is meant to be performed publicly, and the performative aspects of Zwicky's 'Kaddish' hark back to the lament as a traditional form that is performed as 'an element of ritual practices such as funerals.'⁹⁸ Zwicky was highly conscious of her position as an 'outsider' within Australian culture, and 'Kaddish' transmutes her own personal grief into a public performance, using aspects of the lament to 'call out' to an audience, and to align her suffering with the suffering of humanity generally.

'Kaddish' can also be read alongside 'Totem Poem' and *Interferon Psalms* as a postmodern poem that borrows biblical language while voicing a perspective that is highly personal. The drama and grandeur of Zwicky's 'Kaddish' is established in the opening lines:

Lord of the divided, heal!

Father, old ocean's skull making storm calm and the waves
to sleep.
Visits his first-born, humming in dreams, hiding the pearls
that were
Behind *Argus*, defunct Melbourne-rag. The wireless shouts
declarations of

War. 'Father,' says the first-born first time around (and nine
years dead),
Weeping incurable for all his hidden skills. His country's

¹⁹⁵ Kinsella, 'Poet Fay Zwicky was a Rebellious West Australian Voice,' *The Australian*, July 22, 2017, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/poet-fay-zwicky-was-a-rebellious-west-australian-voice/news-story/e23875b281877121e41ee9095721d635>.

¹⁹⁶ Kinsella.

¹⁹⁷ Zwicky, *Poems 1970-1992*, 65; 68.

¹⁹⁸ Cavitch, 'Lament,' 781.

Medical Journal
Laid him out amid Sigmoid Volvulus, Light on Gastric
Problems, Health Services

For Young Children Yesterday Today and Tomorrow
which is now and now and now and
Never spoke his name which is Father a war having
happened between her birth, his

Death: Yisborach, v'yistabach, v'yispoar, v'yisroman,
v'yisnaseh – Hitler is

Dead. ⁹⁹

The poem begins with the epitaph '*Lord of the divided, heal!*' which strikes a tone that is somewhere between a prayer and a command. Duwell's reading of the line brings attention to the word '*divided,*' which establishes this as a poem about struggle and reconciliation.²⁰⁰ As Duwell remarks:

Revisiting 'Kaddish' I'm struck by its epigraph – '*Lord of the divided, heal!*' – which has stayed oddly memorable. This may be because it looks like a slight modification of something completely and uninterestingly conventional – 'Lord of divided Israel, hail!' – but more likely because the idea of dividedness is so important in Zwicky's poetry. Again, in the conventional sense, there are those in exile (productive or paralysed) divided from their homelands but there is also the sense of division within the family (accorded a central status here), division between husband and wife and, especially, division between a daughter and her father who dies, away from her, on a sea voyage, thus preventing the daughter from making final apologies and accommodations.²⁰

Earlier, I made reference to McGeachy's description of the lament as a space of 'textual performance' which paradoxically presents an 'isolated speaker' who is 'alone, cut off from society in some ambiguously distant place,' but who nonetheless speaks 'with the confidence of being heard.'²⁰² In 'Kaddish,' Zwicky employs the call-and-response mechanism in ways that are theatrical, and often also argumentative: the poem is largely comprised of accusations and rebuttals. For although the poem begins with an entreaty to 'heal,' it enacts the sound of

¹⁹⁹ Zwicky, *Poems 1970 1992*, 63.

²⁰⁰ Zwicky, 63.

²⁰¹ Duwell, 'Fay Zwicky.'

²⁰² McGeachy, *Lonesome Words*, 16.

a grieving mind that is struggling to come to terms with bereavement: the lyricism of the poem is repeatedly and abruptly interrupted in ways that suggest an oscillation between denial and acceptance.²⁰³

In his essay 'Fay Zwicky: The Poet as Moralist' (1994), literary critic Ivor Indyk identifies one of the lead protagonists within the poem's interplay of voices as a 'quarrelsome petitioner' who represents 'the child who dared to ask.'²⁰⁴ Throughout the poem, the petulant voice of this child is pitted against the 'booming voice' of an Old Testament God.²⁰⁵ However as Indyk points out, 'this is not God answering, but the child herself, getting her own back as a poet, speaking in God's voice.'²⁰⁶ He goes on to explain:

Written in memory of Zwicky's father, the poem is an act of remembrance, and hence of obligation – yet it is fired with resentment at the imprisoning and deadening effect of obligation. A poem of anger, it is also, on the other hand, a poem of reconciliation and forgiveness. The parents and grandparents who are commemorated in the poem are the agents of ancestral obligation – but they are also its victims. And there is this paradox too, the fact that the daughter who would contest the power of ancestral expectation does so precisely by speaking the language of the ancestors, from positions hallowed by centuries of custom.²⁰⁷

In my analysis of laments by Harpur, Oodgeroo, and Kefala, I drew upon Gelder and Jacobs' notion of the 'uncanny' – an experience where the familiar is rendered *unfamiliar*, and one's sense of home can also feel *unhomely* – to show how Australia's cultural 'unsettled-ness' can be observed in our laments.²⁰⁸ 'Kaddish' is similarly paradoxical, as Indyk points out: the contradictory voices within Zwicky's poem are all ultimately schismatic utterances of Zwicky's own voice. Another paradox in 'Kaddish' that Duwell draws attention to is that of 'guilt,' which appears in the poem as 'a kind of dark counterpoint to the imperative of caring.'²⁰⁹

²⁰³ Zwicky, *Poems 1970–1992*, 63.

²⁰⁴ Indyk, 'Fay Zwicky,' 37.

²⁰⁵ Indyk, 37.

²⁰⁶ Indyk, 37.

²⁰⁷ Indyk, 37.

²⁰⁸ Gelder and Jacobs, 'The Postcolonial Ghost Story,' 111–112.

²⁰⁹ Duwell, 'Fay Zwicky.'

Duwell further observes that ‘Zwicky’s father, an admired and sympathetic doctor, is a carer and his daughter, rebellious in an entirely conventional teenaged way, can only feel that she is ungrateful, a ‘wicked,’ child.’²⁰ Again, the role that guilt plays within ‘Kaddish’ can be likened to the Australian cultural paradox that Gelder and Jacobs identify, whereby a person ‘can either be innocent, in the sense of not actually having participated in the earlier horrors of colonisation, in the traumas of the past; or they can be guilty, in the sense that even to be postcolonial is not to be free from these past horrors, which ceaselessly return to haunt us.’²¹ It can be argued that Zwicky, in voicing a dramatised sense of guilty uncertainty around her own cultural identity, is also giving voice to Australia’s greater sense of cultural ‘unsettledness’ that Gelder and Jacobs describe.²² This concept ties into Indyk’s remarks about the ‘shifting’ place of moral uncertainty from which Zwicky’s poetry arises:

We tend to assume that the moralist will argue from certain ground, towards a formulation of general truths or principles. The theatrical confrontations with obligation which mark Zwicky's engagements with tradition, the keen sense of guilt or isolation or personal limitation which characterises her poems of personal responsibility, the ambiguous authority of her public voice – everything about Zwicky's stance as a moralist testifies to the shifting and uncertain nature of the ground on which she stands.²³

Indyk concludes his discussion about Zwicky’s poetry by stating: ‘The theatrical stance, the talking in voices, the sense of limitation and isolation, the transmutation of guilt and embarrassment into a kind of moral grace, these are the characteristics of an Australian moralist.’²⁴ Two distinct features that Indyk identifies as the components of Zwicky’s moralism – the ‘theatrical stance’ and the thematics of ‘limitation and isolation’ – are features of the lament as a poetic form, as I argued earlier in this chapter.

²¹⁰ Duwell, ‘Fay Zwicky.’

²¹¹ Gelder and Jacobs, ‘The Postcolonial Ghost Story,’ 112.

²¹² Gelder and Jacobs, 112.

²¹³ Indyk, ‘Fay Zwicky,’ 46.

²¹⁴ Indyk, 50.

'Kaddish' joins Australian poems 'An Aboriginal Mother's Lament' by Harpur, 'We Are Going' by Oodgeroo, and 'Lamentations' by Dransfield, as a lament that brings 'emotive expression' to a 'personal and social struggle' to return to McGeachy's definition.^{2 5} All of these poems, to various extents, deal with McGeachy's concept of 'alienation from social stability.'^{2 6} They also provide the 'positive and necessary function' that Westermann describes as the lament's ongoing purpose, which is to wrestle sense from 'catastrophes.'^{2 7} These Australian laments also give form to 'impulses of compunction, reconciliation, and forgiveness,' which the *Princeton Encyclopedia* identifies as integral parts of the lament's function.^{2 8} The concluding moments of 'Kaddish' do gesture towards forgiveness and reconciliation, albeit in a way that can be likened to a storm that has finally subsided, or a screaming child who has exhausted herself:

There is a time to speak
 and a time to be silent
 There is a time to forgive
 and a time in which to be
 Forgiven.
 After forgiveness,

Silence.^{2 9}

For a poem that begins with the epitaph '*Lord of the divided, heal!*' this final sequence does offer a sense of reconciliation: a simmering down of oppositional tensions, or a truce.²²⁰ The 'time to speak' is balanced in the next line with 'a time to be silent,' and then the offering of forgiveness is countered with the notion of *receiving* forgiveness.²² The poem finally ends with 'After forgiveness, / Silence.'²²² The body of 'Kaddish' could be viewed as a vocalised

²¹⁵ McGeachy, *Lonesome Words*, 1.

²¹⁶ McGeachy, 5.

²¹⁷ McGeachy, 5; Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 12.

²¹⁸ Cavitch, 'Lament,' 781.

²¹⁹ Zwicky, *Poems 1970-1992*, 70.

²²⁰ Zwicky, 63.

²²¹ Zwicky, 70.

²²² Zwicky, 70.

offering, one that has been generated by what Indyk describes as Zwicky's 'moral responsibility' to speak.²²³ As Indyk explains, 'The issue of silence is a complex one, for there is a part of Zwicky which resents the obligation to quarrel, and which yearns for the silence of unquestioning acceptance.'²²⁴ The word 'Silence' at the end of 'Kaddish' signifies that the speaker's moral obligation to speak has finished: having fulfilled her duty, her lament ends. The silencing of her own voice at the end of the poem could also signify that she is ready 'to be / Forgiven.'²²⁵ In this sense Zwicky's lament has served its purpose: through the process of voicing the vicissitudes of her guilt, anger, and sorrow, she has found some kind of consolation. Considered in the broader context of postcolonial Australia, 'Kaddish' suggests that being able to speak and to tell stories is an essential part of the process of reconciliation and reparation. For Australia to 'heal' (after Zwicky's epigraph), we must first become 'familiar' with our own past 'ghosts,' in part, by allowing those who have been marginalised and silenced to give voice to their suffering, and listening to lamentation.²²⁶

The last Australian lament I will consider is by the Indigenous writer Ali Cobby Eckermann, who is the author of several award-winning books, including the verse novel *Ruby Moonlight* (2012), her memoir *Too Afraid to Cry* (2012), and the poetry collection *Inside My Mother* (2015).²²⁷ A Yankunytjatjara woman, Eckermann was born in 1963 on Kaurna land in South Australia, and was adopted by the Eckermann family.²²⁸ Eckermann's own mother was taken away from her mother as a child, and Eckermann herself gave her son up for

²²³ Indyk, 'Fay Zwicky,' 40.

²²⁴ Indyk, 40.

²²⁵ Zwicky, *Poems 1970-1992*, 70.

²²⁶ Gelder and Jacobs, 'The Postcolonial Ghost Story,' 116.

²²⁷ 'Ali Cobby Eckermann,' Poetry Foundation.

²²⁸ Ladd, 'Poetry review: Krissy Kneen and Ali Cobby Eckerman and their family influences,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 22, 2015, <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/poetry-review-krissy-kneen-and-ali-cobby-eckerman-and-their-family-influences-20150817-gizffk.html>.

adoption.²²⁹ It wasn't until Eckermann was in her thirties that she was reunited with her birth mother, which Eckermann describes in *Too Afraid to Cry*:

It is hard to accept that my mum also grew up without *her* mother, and that she was separated from her sisters and brother. It is hard to accept that I repeated her history when I adopted out my son. She shares her memories of when she gave me up for adoption, how empty and wrong she felt afterwards, and how she threw herself into her nursing career. I tell her I suffered the same feelings after I gave up my son, although I knew I was taking risks, with heavy drinking and drugs.

...The impact of learning family stories is powerful. Each night I write in my journal, trying to capture my new family history. Poems appear at midnight, and I hasten to scribble them down. My mind seems to evolve from past confusions and doubts, and I feel a sense of healing by writing the words on the page. I understand the notion of forgiveness, and begin to release the guilt I have been holding inside me since walking out on my son.²³⁰

The poems in *Inside my Mother* explore these intergenerational distances, giving voice to the sadness and confusion of separation, as well as the joy of reunion. Eckermann's poem 'Lament' – an economical, striking meditation upon the loss of Indigenous languages and cultures in postcolonial Australia – appears within this collection.²³¹ The entire poem is as follows:

I can not stop
must sing my song

I can not stop
must sing my song

the old man chants
his boomerangs ring

I am the last speaker
of my mother tongue

I can not stop
must sing my song

²²⁹ Eckermann, 'My life as a stolen child, by Ali Cobby Eckermann,' *Daily Telegraph: Sunday Style Magazine*, May 19, 2013, <https://www.news.com.au/lifestyle/relationships/my-life-as-a-stolen-child-by-ali-cobby-eckermann/news-story/a3b88cca842a11f5e94b45b1bbdcd7ed>.

²³⁰ Eckermann, *Too Afraid to Cry*, 172–173.

²³¹ Eckermann, *Inside My Mother*, 24.

my song must not
die before me²³²

Just as the ‘we’ of Oodgeroo’s ‘We Are Going’ speaks both for ‘the tribe’ who ‘cannot say their thoughts,’ and for Aboriginal Australians generally, the ‘I’ of Eckermann’s ‘Lament’ personalises a collective experience.²³³ Although the speaker of this poem is anonymous, and the linguistic details of her ‘song’ are not specified, Eckermann’s use of ‘I’ makes her address personal and direct: it makes the reader a witness. In this way it also facilitates an empathetic experience, giving readers intimate access to the speaker’s position. This is a technique Eckermann uses frequently in her poetry, such as in her poem ‘I Tell You True’ (which also appears in *Inside My Mother*), where modes of direct, lyrical address are used to convey traumatic cultural stories from a personal perspective:

I can’t stop drinking I tell you true
Since I watched my daughter perish
She burnt to death inside a car
I lost what I most cherished²³⁴

‘I Tell You True’ uses a traditional ballad structure: it is more obviously song-like. ‘Lament’ nonetheless exhibits a subtle musicality that is established firstly through the repeated refrains of ‘I can not stop’ and ‘must sing my song.’²³⁵ There is also alliteration in ‘**stop**,’ ‘**song**,’ and ‘**s**peaker,’ as well as ‘**must**,’ ‘**my**,’ ‘**man**,’ and ‘**m**other.’ A chime is created by the ‘**o**’ sound in ‘**not**,’ ‘**stop**,’ and ‘**song**,’ and there is also a chime in the words ‘**m**other’ and ‘**t**ongue’ in the fourth stanza.²³⁶ Significantly, the words ‘**s**ing’ and ‘**r**ing’ rhyme, which subtly suggests a song that is ringing out beyond the parameters of the poem. There is another assonant chime in the words ‘**man**,’ ‘**ch**ants,’ and a slant chime in the word ‘boomer**an**gs’ which also provides

²³² Eckermann, *Inside My Mother*, 24.

²³³ Noonuccal, ‘We Are Going,’ 495–496; Eckermann, *Inside My Mother*, 24.

²³⁴ Eckermann, 53.

²³⁵ Eckermann, 24.

²³⁶ Eckermann, 24.

a visual image of an object spinning out in a way that could be likened to a soundwave.

Although 'Lament' eschews the patterning of end rhymes and the regular metre of 'I Tell You True,' it nonetheless still hums with musical energy.²³⁷ The lines 'I am the last speaker / of my mother tongue' show that the 'song' of the poem also represents the language that this person speaks.²³⁸

The structure of Eckermann's 'Lament' also works to create the impression of disappearance. Although at first glance, the first, second and fifth stanzas appear to be identical, when careful attention is given to the spacing of the words, it becomes clear that each of these stanzas is actually slightly different. This is most easily demonstrated by directly comparing the first stanza:

I can not stop
must sing my song

with the fifth stanza:

I can not stop
must sing my song

Every time the refrain 'I can not stop / must sing my song' is repeated, more space appears between the words.²³⁹ These blank spaces steadily fill out the poem as it progresses, as if were expanding with air, or breath. Visually, this creates the effect of a lung that is drawing in breath to speak or sing. More sorrowfully, it could also represent dispersal: the way that the words slowly move apart from each other on the page suggests that this song (and the speaker's language) are quietly disappearing. Interpreted in this way, the phrase 'mother tongue' stands out as particularly poignant, especially considering Eckermann's personal

²³⁷ Eckermann, *Inside My Mother*, 24; 53.

²³⁸ Eckermann, 24.

²³⁹ Eckermann, 24.

story.²⁴⁰ The lines ‘I am the last speaker / of my mother tongue’ tell of a person who has not had the opportunity to pass on her language to her own child.²⁴¹ Despite the deep sadness of this, the speaker remains strong: in the final stanzas she reiterates her determination to keep her language, and her spirit – her ‘song’ – alive.²⁴²

The different ways these Australian poets have approached the lament suggest that the form often has been deployed historically as a vehicle for courage and resilience. The laments I have analysed in this section have depicted violence, injustice, displacement, and grief. However, the lament as a poetic form has also given voice to the experiences and survival of dispossessed, wronged, and bereaved people. The lament in these contexts makes sense of that which is senseless, and offers possibilities for healing. By publicly voicing stories of displacement, fury and loss, the lament transforms personal suffering and survival into narratives of collective cultural experience.

In Section 4.3, I will discuss *Interferon Psalms* by Davies as another example of an Australian lament that gives expression to personal and cultural uncertainties in the early 21st century. Specifically, I will look at how Davies has incorporated intertextual elements into *Interferon Psalms* as a means of enacting a performative and postmodern call-and-response. I will also consider Davies’ psalms as ‘laments of the individual,’ as Westermann phrases it, which include petitions to God, but also vows of praise.²⁴³ *Interferon Psalms* also contains a narrative thread of being confronted by traumatic events from one’s past, and embarking on a journey of atonement and healing. I will again address Gelder and Jacobs’ concept of being ‘haunted’ by ‘unfinished business with the past’ to my reading of *Interferon Psalms*, and in doing so use it as a metaphor for being made aware of – and beginning to make amends for – the

²⁴⁰ Eckermann, *Inside My Mother*, 24.

²⁴¹ Eckermann, 24.

²⁴² Eckermann, 24.

²⁴³ Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 64.

wrongdoings of the past.²⁴⁴ Finally, I will reflect upon how *Interferon Psalms*, as an extended lament, suggests and generates the possibility of acceptance and a kind of solace or peace.

4.3 Light & shadow: *Interferon Psalms* as postmodern lament

Earlier, I drew attention to Westermann's claim that praise and lament in the Psalms are 'related as they are polar opposites.'²⁴⁵ Westermann's summary of how the juxtaposition of praise and lament operates within the Book of Psalms can also be applied to Davies' *Interferon Psalms*, a work that describes the tribulations of a man who has 'learned all about suffering,' and yet is still 'eager to love.'²⁴⁶ In this concluding section of my chapter, I will argue that the Book of Psalms has provided a tonal template for *Interferon Psalms*: one that oscillates between despair and jubilation. As Westermann explains, 'the vow of praise' is a key component of the 'lament of the individual,' and as much as *Interferon Psalms* expresses sorrow and despair, it is nonetheless the voice of a person who still loves the world, and wants to live.²⁴⁷ Like 'Totem Poem,' *Interferon Psalms* can also be considered as a kind of song, with roots reaching back to the performative 'voicing' associated with lyrical poetics. One key difference between the two works can be described in terms of volume: 'Totem Poem' is full-throated and rhapsodic, with its depictions of people speaking 'loudly' and cockatoos cawing 'a sonic boom,' while *Interferon Psalms* meditates upon concepts of emptiness and stillness, exemplified in Davies' description of a world that 'will be silent for thousands of years.'²⁴⁸ As embodied in the quietness of laments written by Kefala and Eckermann, the lament is arguably a form well suited to exploring and reflecting upon silence and its affective qualities. 'Totem Poem' ends with the phrase 'I am listening,' and *Interferon Psalms* reads almost as a transcription of silence, one that

²⁴⁴ Gelder and Jacobs, 'The Postcolonial Ghost Story,' 181.

²⁴⁵ Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 11.

²⁴⁶ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 3; 23.

²⁴⁷ Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 64.

²⁴⁸ Davies, *Totem*, 15; 5; Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 17.

asks, after its biblical antecedents: 'But how can we sing the world song / In a strange land?'²⁴⁹

Interferon Psalms might be quieter and more subdued than 'Totem Poem,' but it is still a poem that contains theatrical elements, consistent with McGeachy's definition of the lament as 'textual performance.'²⁵⁰ Unlike 'Kaddish' by Zwicky, which does not appear to lack any 'confidence of being heard' (to use McGeachy's phrasing), *Interferon Psalms* begins in a manner that is for Davies, at least almost tentative:²⁵¹

Lift up our hearts.
Lift up our hearts. So then, lift up our hearts.

It is a flooded world: every available flood.
It is a flooded world: such floods of good.
Everything present, as it always was.
A flooded world; I'm sick with shallow corpuscle.²⁵²

The opening line 'Lift up our hearts' echoes a line from the preface to the Eucharistic Prayer ('Lift up your hearts'), which establishes a tone of church-like solemnity.²⁵³ When sounded during the Catholic liturgy, the phrase 'Lift up your hearts' is spoken by the priest, after which the congregation responds with 'We lift them up to the Lord.'²⁵⁴ However, in *Interferon Psalms* the first line 'Lift up our hearts' is followed by silence, which creates the impression of speaking and not being heard, or possibly being overlooked or ignored. To return to McGeachy's argument, 'the church sermon exemplifies another oral performance based on call-and-response,' and this mode appears to be staged in the opening of *Interferon Psalms*.²⁵⁵ Instead of creating an atmosphere of 'vigorous participation,' however, it evokes an image of

²⁴⁹ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 27.

²⁵⁰ McGeachy, *Lonesome Words*, 16.

²⁵¹ McGeachy, 16.

²⁵² Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 3.

²⁵³ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 661.

²⁵⁴ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 661.

²⁵⁵ McGeachy, *Lonesome Words*, 11.

a weary priest who is speaking to a small, disinterested congregation.²⁵⁶ Despite this, the speaker humbly continues (or begins again) with the repetition of ‘Lift up our hearts’ in the second line.²⁵⁷ The phrase is then repeated a third time, creating the impression of someone who has decided to keep speaking, regardless of whether his audience is listening, and regardless of whether he receives a response. In this way, Davies’ opening lines also create the impression of someone who is delivering a sermon to himself.

The line ‘Lift up our hearts’ could also be a deliberate nod to Gerard Manley Hopkins, whose poem ‘Hurrahing in Harvest’ contains the line ‘I walk, I lift up, I lift up heart, eyes.’²⁵⁸ As a Jesuit priest, Hopkins was undoubtedly familiar with the Eucharistic Prayer, and like so many of his poems, ‘Hurrahing in Harvest’ reads like a conversation with the speaker’s sense of God. The second stanza of Hopkins’ poem is as follows:

I walk, I lift up, I lift up heart, eyes,
Down all that glory in the heavens to glean our Saviour;
And, eyes, heart, what looks, what lips yet gave you a
Rapturous love’s greeting of realer, of rounder replies?²⁵⁹

In this stanza, it is particularly significant that the word ‘eyes’ at the end of the first line chimes with ‘replies’ in the final line: it reinforces the sense of ‘looking’ for God, and ‘finding’ Him manifested in the beauty of the natural world.²⁶⁰ The title ‘Hurrahing in Harvest’ signals an exclamation of joy: it is a verbalisation of ecstatic appreciation. In the final stanza, the speaker sees ‘the azurous hung hills’ as the ‘world-wielding shoulder’ of God, and has the realisation that a ‘beholder’ is needed to complete this ecstatic transaction.²⁶¹ Within Hopkins’ poem there is an exchange – a conversation of sorts – between humanity and a

²⁵⁶ McGeachy, *Lonesome Words*, 11.

²⁵⁷ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 3.

²⁵⁸ Hopkins, *Selected Poems*, 25.

²⁵⁹ Hopkins, 25.

²⁶⁰ Hopkins, 25.

²⁶¹ Hopkins, 25.

sense of the divine.²⁶² At the end of the poem, the speaker articulates his epiphany in the lines ‘these things were here but the beholder / Wanting; which two when they once meet,’ and after which his heart ‘rears wings bold and bolder’ and he almost appears to levitate.²⁶³

In contrast to the beginning of *Interferon Psalms*, ‘Hurrahing in Harvest’ is a work of rapturous lyricism, depicting the world as a place where human perception and God ‘meet.’²⁶⁴ While Hopkins’ poem depicts an autumnal world that is ‘barbarous in beauty,’ *Interferon Psalms* opens with a world that is ‘flooded.’²⁶⁵ And while the speaker of ‘Hurrahing in Harvest’ appears to be energetically striding through the countryside, as the word ‘walk’ indicates, the speaker in *Interferon Psalms* is ‘sick with shallow corpuscle.’²⁶⁶ While *Interferon Psalms* contains an echo of ‘I lift up heart’ from ‘Hurrahing in Harvest,’ it does so in a way that actually works to counteract any sense of the ecstatic, since its speaker does not receive ‘rounder replies.’²⁶⁷ Nor does his heart receive ‘wings’ that might lift him off his feet, away from the ‘flooded world.’²⁶⁸

The phrase ‘flooded world’ in the opening of *Interferon Psalms* can also be read as a reference to the flood narrative from the Book of Genesis. In this biblical story, God tells the righteous Noah that he is going to flood the earth: ‘And God said to Noah, “The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth.”’²⁶⁹ Genesis 7:17 specifies that ‘the flood was on the earth forty days,’ and Genesis 7:23 shows that God ‘destroyed all living things which were on the face of the ground,’ and ‘only Noah and those who were with him in the ark remained alive.’²⁷⁰ In *Interferon Psalms*, the phrase ‘such floods of good’ provides further evidence that Davies is

²⁶² Hopkins, *Selected Poems*, 25.

²⁶³ Hopkins, 25.

²⁶⁴ Hopkins, 25.

²⁶⁵ Hopkins, 25; Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 3.

²⁶⁶ Hopkins, 25; Davies, 3.

²⁶⁷ Hopkins, 25; Davies, 3.

²⁶⁸ Hopkins, 25; Davies, 3.

²⁶⁹ Gen. 6:13 NKJV.

²⁷⁰ Gen. 7:17-23 NKJV.

directly referencing the flood narrative from the Bible, since God sent the floods to rid the world of human corruption.²⁷¹ The last line of the second stanza is ‘A flooded world; I’m sick with shallow corpuscle’ which uses a semi-colon to connect the ‘flooded world’ directly to the speaker’s personal predicament of being ‘sick with shallow corpuscle.’²⁷² From the outset, *Interferon Psalms* tells the story of someone who is gravely unwell, so much so that it feels, to him, like the end of the entire world.

The motifs of destruction in *Interferon Psalms* are in many senses poeticised references to the havoc that Davies caused for himself and others during the period of his life when he was addicted to heroin. In the article accompanying the release of a documentary about Davies’ life that appeared on the ABC TV network’s *Australian Story*, journalist Greg Hassall states that ‘during a near-decade of heroin addiction in the 1980s,’ Davies ‘overdosed several times, contracted hepatitis C and left a trail of destruction in his wake.’²⁷³ Davies managed to piece his life together after he ‘staggered into a detox unit’ in 1990, and was eventually able to realise ‘his childhood dream of being a writer.’²⁷⁴ However, he again underwent a period of upheaval when his relationship circumstances changed and he moved in 2007 to Los Angeles in a bid to pursue a career as a screenwriter.²⁷⁵ *Interferon Psalms* was written during a time in Davies’ life when he was undergoing interferon treatment (to try to cure the hepatitis C that was destroying his liver), coming to terms with the end of a relationship, and undergoing a period of instability while trying to establish himself in a new country and career. Perhaps as a metaphorical relay of such upheaval, the image of the ‘flooded world’ which opens *Interferon*

²⁷¹ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 3.

²⁷² Davies, 3.

²⁷³ Hassall, ‘How Lion Screenwriter Luke Davies Overcame Addiction to Become Hollywood Hot Property,’ *ABC News*, May 15, 2017, 3:48 p.m. EST, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-05-15/how-lion-screenwriter-luke-davies-overcame-drug-addiction/8508396>.

²⁷⁴ Hassall.

²⁷⁵ Hassall.

Psalms signifies totalising destruction: a cataclysm that will irrevocably change the world by first destroying it.²⁷⁶

In Chapter Three I discussed the idea of ‘Totem Poem’ serving a totemic purpose of facilitating direct communication with the divine. *Interferon Psalms* similarly explores ideas around divine communication: it can be seen as an extended prayer, in which the speaker calls out to the ‘Holy One of Being’ in his time of need.²⁷⁷ Chapter Three also discussed one of the first recognised English language poems, ‘Caedmon’s Hymn,’ which Burrow describes in *The Poetry of Praise* as a ‘praise song’ that derives from ‘Latin versions of the ancient Hebrew Psalter.’²⁷⁸ As Burrow explains, ‘Caedmon’s Hymn’ effectively ‘amplifies’ a praise of God through a method now known as ‘variation,’ whereby the Creator is designated via repeating words and expressions that are given slight variation as they repeat.²⁷⁹ This technique of ‘sustaining and heightening’ the praise of God can also be observed in *Interferon Psalms*, where the speaker addresses God variously as ‘O Witness, O Word, O Diadem of Beauty,’ ‘O God of Hosts,’ ‘Yahweh,’ ‘O Gasoline of God,’ ‘O Infinite One, O Restorer, O Guide, O Enricher,’ and so on.²⁸⁰ The subtitle of *Interferon Psalms* is ‘33 psalms on the 99 names of God,’ suggesting that Davies directly claims this concept of offering praise to a multitude of divine guises as one of his book’s core premises.²⁸

Returning to Westermann’s notion of the ‘psalm of the individual,’ the speaker in *Interferon Psalms* alternately praises God and voices his laments to God in ways that often appear to seek an ‘assurance of being heard.’²⁸² As Westermann explains:

...as far as the lament of the individual is concerned, we must reckon in every case with the possibility that the content is not only the lament and petition of the one who comes

²⁷⁶ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 3.

²⁷⁷ Davies, 3.

²⁷⁸ Burrow, *The Poetry of Praise*, 31.

²⁷⁹ Burrow, 32.

²⁸⁰ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 5; 16; 17; 24; 25.

²⁸¹ Davies, title page.

²⁸² Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 64.

before God, that is, that he not only 'pours out his heart' before Yahweh, but in some instances it is to be assumed that an oracle of salvation was given in the *midst* of the Psalm and that the Psalm also includes the words that follow the giving of the oracle.²⁸³

As I suggested in Section 4.1, *Interferon Psalms* does contain a number of instances where God appears to speak, such as the example I gave from the 24^h of Davies' psalms, where 'a small clear voice' instructs him to 'Cease striving / And know that I am God.'²⁸⁴ Westermann argues that when an 'oracle of salvation' appears in a midst of a Psalm, the words that follow can be seen, essentially, as coming directly from God.²⁸⁵ Compelling in this context are the unusual formal and lineation choices of *Interferon Psalms*, which feature a margin that runs down the outer edge of each page. This layout bears resemblance to an illuminated prayer book, further deepening the suggestion that *Interferon Psalms* is intended as a direct address to 'God.'

Inside this visual field, floating snippets of sub-text occasionally appear in a smaller font, alongside the main body of the poem. These sub-texts partially create the effect of an echo, since the smaller fragments of text often reflect the same motifs that appear in the main poem. For instance, the body of the 24^h psalm contains the line: 'And yet *Blessed are we who feed at the table of grace,*' while, a little further down the page in the right margin, the sub-text reads: 'The acoustics / of grace.'²⁸⁶ The word 'acoustics' in this instance makes this sub-text appear particularly like an echo, by allowing the word 'grace' to echo into a cavernous space so that it reverberates back, only more softly.²⁸⁷ The sub-texts in *Interferon Psalms* could also be seen as *sotto voce* responses to the speaker's calls. In some instances it is possible to interpret the responder as God. However, Davies' deployment of intertextual modes across the poem also enables the responses to be read as ventriloquising other people (and poets), or perhaps, as voices echoing deep within the speaker's own mind. In Davies' 24^h psalm, the sub-text 'the

²⁸³ Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 65.

²⁸⁴ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 77.

²⁸⁵ Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 65.

²⁸⁶ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 77.

²⁸⁷ Davies, 77.

acoustics / of grace' appears in the right margin slightly below a reference to the 'table of grace,' and directly beside this stanza:

Then a small, clear voice called out:
Cease striving
And know that I am God.²⁸⁸

In this instance the sub-text performs two functions: it echoes the speaker's voice, and it adds another layer of meaning to the 'small, clear voice' calling out and claiming to be 'God,' since the word 'acoustics' is associated with sound, and the word 'grace' is associated with divinity.²⁸⁹ In this sense, 'the acoustics / of grace' can be seen to follow Westermann's phrasing, as 'the words that follow the giving of the oracle.'²⁹⁰ The phrase 'a small clear voice' repeats a number of times throughout *Interferon Psalms*, both in the body of the poem and in the margins.²⁹¹ Although the voice is 'small' (and, in one instance, 'thin'), it is, nonetheless, audible and intelligible.²⁹² These pieces of marginalia, which hover beside the main body of *Interferon Psalms*, provide the poem with a secondary voice that retains a tone of detached tranquillity. Even though the speaker feels alone and isolated, expressed in the line 'I noticed how lonely I'd become,' this secondary voice is ever present throughout the poem.²⁹³ Readers sense a quiet, benign sentience in the background of the noise, pain, and distractions of life, while understanding that the narrator is not completely alone in his suffering. This suggests a key feature of the lament (discussed above) as a poetical performance of personal loss or sorrow that, via public testimonial, becomes part of a shared story.

Interferon Psalms, like 'Totem Poem,' contains a multitude of intertextual insertions and references. In *Interferon Psalms*, Davies often positions these slices of imported text in such a

²⁸⁸ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 77.

²⁸⁹ Davies, 77.

²⁹⁰ Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 65.

²⁹¹ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 26; 31; 33; 77.

²⁹² Davies, 26; 31; 33; 77.

²⁹³ Davies, 20.

way that they appear to ‘speak’ to the speaker, and ‘answer’ his calls. Consistent with McGeachy’s definition of the lament as being a space of ‘textual performance,’ *Interferon Psalms* enacts moments of ‘call-and-response’ between the speaker and various answering voices.²⁹⁴ These moments of ‘verbal disruption, revision, and intertextual communication’ within *Interferon Psalms* create the impression of a chorus of voices that is both part of the audience, but also an intrinsic part of the performance itself.²⁹⁵ Consider this passage from Davies’ fifth psalm:

My peripheral vision began to spin.
Was this to say
That life was opening out, or closing in?

An I has weight, and sinks.

(Donne) *All day the same our postures were
And we said nothing, all the day.*

(She was caught unawares by guilt; it didn’t fit her
saintly self-image of selfless forbearance.)

(School of Basho) *Picking mushrooms on
The misty mountaintop,
No one knows where I am.*

(I was caught unawares by rupture, though I had it
coming, in the sense that everyone does.)

(Saint-Exupéry) *It is always in the midst, in the epicentre of your
troubles that you find serenity.*

(A voice rang out, a small clear voice. I knew nothing.
I gave up everything.)

I decided these would be the last words I would write on
the subject. Even though I didn’t write them.²⁹⁶

This section of the poem interweaves the voice of the speaker (starting with the line ‘My peripheral vision began to spin’) with quotes from other writers (such as the line ‘*All day the*

²⁹⁴ McGeachy, *Lonesome Words*, 16.

²⁹⁵ McGeachy, 10 11.

²⁹⁶ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 26.

same our postures were’ from ‘The Ecstasy’ by the English metaphysical poet John Donne).²⁹⁷

Other fragments appear to be the speaker’s inner voice, represented by bracketed lines such as ‘(She was caught unawares by guilt; it didn’t fit her / saintly self-image of selfless forbearance.)’²⁹⁸ At the opening of this section, the speaker’s peripheral vision begins to ‘spin,’ at which point the focus of the poem effectively ‘spins out’ into a feverish assortment of references and concepts. The ‘I’ in the line ‘An I has weight, and sinks’ can be read perhaps as the speaker’s desire to eschew the ‘weight’ of his egoic self.²⁹⁹ A dialogue with several different voices then commences, and these outside voices appear to ‘hold up’ the speaker, almost in a talismanic or guardian mode. The line ‘*And we said nothing, all the day*’ from Donne’s ‘The Ecstasy’ echoes the ‘nothing’ that first appeared in *Interferon Psalms* within the lines: ‘I would write nothing, from the perfect centre of a / monstrous place, O Holy One of Being. Nothing at all: that / was my plan.’³⁰⁰ After quoting Donne, the poem shifts into a mode of rumination, wherein the speaker thinks about his ex-girlfriend (who is referred to throughout the poem only in the abstract as ‘she,’ such as in the line ‘She said: *I want to talk to you, at roughly four removes*’).³⁰¹ The word ‘saintly’ in this line chimes with the reference to French writer and poet Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, who appears in the margins.³⁰² The inclusion of a whole haiku by the Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō, beginning with the line ‘*No one knows where I am,*’ further reinforces *Interferon Psalms*’ explorations of isolation and aloneness, and the word ‘*serenity*’ from Saint-Exupéry echoes an earlier appearance in the third of Davies’ psalms: ‘Serenity as a / by-product of / prophecy.’³⁰³

²⁹⁷ Davies, 26; Donne, ‘The Ecstasy.’

²⁹⁸ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 26

²⁹⁹ Davies, 26.

³⁰⁰ Davies, 26; 3.

³⁰¹ Davies, 26; 4.

³⁰² Davies, 26.

³⁰³ Davies, 26; 14.

The phrase ‘a small clear voice’ recurs again at this point in the fifth psalm.³⁰⁴ It appears to erupt from within the speaker’s ‘thoughts,’ alongside yet another return to the word ‘nothing.’³⁰⁵ Finally, the speaker announces: ‘I decided these would be the last words I would write on / the subject. Even though I didn’t write them.’³⁰⁶ This somewhat tongue-in-cheek moment, where the narrator admits he ‘didn’t write’ the words that he, at one point, ‘decided’ would be his ‘last words,’ adds a moment of wry humour that helps to alleviate the ‘weightiness’ of this psalm.³⁰⁷ Wanting one’s ‘last words’ to be a piecing-together of words from other writers perhaps expresses a kind of humility in its acknowledgement of the speaker’s own influences and limitations. It thus reflects another major theme of *Interferon Psalms*, as canvassed in my earlier discussions of the poetics of lament: making amends for past selfishness through aspiring towards *selflessness*, which enables a kind of affective restoration or redemption. This concept appears most prominently in this passage from the 14th psalm:

I cried to the world I am yours and my dreams are yours,
but I had no idea, not a clue, what surrender was, prostrate
on the floor of my narcissism. I was still an imbecile. The
extravagant freedom of second-by-second capitulation
eluded me.

I always snapped back up. Upright and hard alee. Lord,
snap me back down again.³⁰⁸

The phrase ‘I am yours and my dreams are yours’ tangentially references the lines ‘*Lord we are ready / to bend*’ and ‘*Then I will enter into your very dreams*’ from ‘Totem Poem,’ where the lovers happily agree to ‘*Change!*’ when Ganesh appears to command them.³⁰⁹ While ‘Totem Poem’ romanticises the notion of ‘surrender,’ as expressed in the line ‘The days held us lightlocked in golden surrender,’ the speaker of *Interferon Psalms* admits that, in retrospect, he had ‘no idea,

³⁰⁴ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 26.

³⁰⁵ Davies, 26.

³⁰⁶ Davies, 26.

³⁰⁷ Davies, 26.

³⁰⁸ Davies, 50.

³⁰⁹ Davies, *Totem*, 4.

not a clue, what surrender was.^{3 0} The line ‘I always snapped back up’ conjures a person who is resistant to change, and the final line ‘Lord, / snap me back down again’ voices a request to be brought forcibly back down to earth.³ Later in the poem, another ‘small clear voice’ instructs the speaker to ‘cease striving’ almost positioned as a direct response to his earlier plea to be brought back to earth, perhaps both physically and in moral attitude.^{3 2}

Throughout my discussion of the lament in Australian poetry I have referred to Gelder and Jacobs’ ‘interest in ghosts,’ touching on ways that postcolonial Australia and its literatures are ‘haunted’ by ‘unfinished business with the past.’^{3 3} Like many of the Australian laments I have looked at, *Interferon Psalms* repeatedly depicts moments ‘when the past returns as an “elemental” force.’^{3 4} A ‘bad history’ of addiction continues to haunt the narrator of *Interferon Psalms*, both physically and emotionally.^{3 5} I’m not suggesting that postcolonial hauntings are commensurate with the speaker’s returning past, here. Rather, I am interested in the affective qualities that are explored by poetical lament, via figures of ‘return.’^{3 6} Frequently throughout *Interferon Psalms*, the speaker expresses a desire to remain ‘neutral’ and to ‘stay blank until further notice,’ as a way of protecting himself from painful memories and emotions.^{3 7} Yet his own ghosts keep returning, shown within this passage from the eleventh psalm:

I lost my balance in the world;
I had so much desire to turn so wrong.

I was a ghost in this place called World.
So much desire to turn, and be, so wrong.^{3 8}

³¹⁰ Davies, *Totem*, 9; Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 50.

³¹¹ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 50.

³¹² Davies, 77; 50.

³¹³ Gelder and Jacobs, ‘The Postcolonial Ghost Story,’ 181.

³¹⁴ Gelder and Jacobs, 111.

³¹⁵ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 42.

³¹⁶ Gelder and Jacobs, ‘The Postcolonial Ghost Story,’ 181.

³¹⁷ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 9; 20.

³¹⁸ Davies, 45.

The ‘ghost’ in this stanza possibly represents the speaker’s former self, a young man who had ‘so much desire to turn so wrong.’³¹⁹ In an earlier psalm, his desire to ‘stay blank’ re-emerges, when he states ‘I gave up the ghost. I was austere, in all my dealings with / the world.’³²⁰

However, the reappearance of the ‘ghost’ motif in the eleventh psalm demonstrates something like the impossibility of trying to repress what can return via uncanny means: these stories are prone, to again use Gelder and Jacobs’ words, to ‘ceaselessly return.’³²¹ Later yet in the poem, in the 24th psalm, the idea of ‘coming back’ to the past is explored in this stanza:

Always the coming back to night
When I wrote so completely untroubled
By the city’s alpha waves,
That low hum of docility at four a.m.,
Infinite Melbourne, or Baffin Island,
I was nearly frozen, nearly dead,
But something came into my blood,
And roiled (may it stop now, Lord) for years.
May I die without a debt to stupidity.³²²

This is just one example in *Interferon Psalms* of the past presenting as a kind of haunting. In this stanza, the speaker keeps mentally returning to ‘night,’ in a way that bears resemblance to the line ‘The night brings them’ from Kefala’s ‘Lament.’³²³ The ‘debt to stupidity’ in the stanza’s last line is certainly readable as a reference to the hepatitis C Davies contracted while he was an addict.³²⁴ One metaphorical significance of interferon treatment – which, essentially, ‘erases’ the hepatitis virus from the blood – is in offering the promise of redeeming past mistakes and wrongdoings.

Throughout *Interferon Psalms*, Davies uses motifs of erasure to describe the effects of the interferon treatment, which also suggests a metaphor for spiritual absolution: of reversing sin,

³¹⁹ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 45.

³²⁰ Davies, 20; 32.

³²¹ Gelder and Jacobs, ‘The Postcolonial Ghost Story,’ 112.

³²² Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 77.

³²³ Davies, 77; Kefala, ‘Lament.’

³²⁴ Davies, 77.

possibly via kinds of admission (admitting both the treatment *and* past errors), or confession.

This metaphor anchors the 16^h psalm:

And yet first the white blood cells, then the red, took leave
of absence. In the end even thoughts are a luxury. There
was what, *plasma* flowing through me?³²⁵

Here, the speaker's blood cells take 'leave / of absence.'³²⁶ One implication is that although the interferon treatment offers a possibility of clearing the speaker's 'debt to stupidity,' it also threatens to take away almost everything else as well, including his sense of self, and possibly even his very life.³²⁷ In this sense, the treatment can be likened to the biblical 'flood' at the poem's opening, which is sent to rid the world of evil (in both the Bible and Davies' poem) by destroying everything.³²⁸ While 'Totem Poem' centres around the idea of what Davies describes in the poem as 'convergences' things coming together *Interferon Psalms* explores the concept of things coming apart, as can be seen in this stanza (from the 24^h psalm):³²⁹

The bells, keeping time. I offered them to you, or you to
me it was all the same, the bells the final sound in space.
I closed my eyes. The molecules dispersed. I felt myself
spreading. I was always coherently me, just a little more
diluted in the end. That was how the universal soul came
into being, because the elasticity of goodness was limitless.
The molecules dispersed. Each part of me kept saying
goodbye to the other, without loss.³³⁰

As I observed in Chapter Two, the final stanza of 'Totem Poem' includes the line 'the deep peal of bells and how the heart would hold the day,' depicting the sounding of bells as joyous and sustained.³³¹ A bell is probably the ultimate symbol of acoustic resonance, and here in

³²⁵ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 58.

³²⁶ Davies, 58.

³²⁷ Davies, 77.

³²⁸ Davies, 77; 3.

³²⁹ Davies, *Totem*, 3.

³³⁰ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 75 6.

³³¹ Davies, *Totem*, 39.

Interferon Psalms, the sound of bells is ‘the final sound in space.’³³² While ‘Totem Poem’ ends with the ‘deep peal of bells’ and two lovers holding each other (where the bells might signify a marriage-like union), in this stanza from *Interferon Psalms*, the lovers almost seem to *become* the sound of bells ringing out through ‘space’ as their ‘molecules’ disperse.³³³ This image of dispersing molecules is repeated twice, perhaps to symbolise the lives of two people, and to pull readers into a sense of the duration of treatment, during which the speaker undergoes transformation. In a more literal sense, we can almost imagine the viral molecules of hepatitis C being exiled – cast out – from a hosting body. While this stanza appears to dramatise the speaker’s own death, its overall tone is one of acceptance: it speaks of the ‘elasticity of goodness’ as being ‘limitless,’ and the last words ‘without loss’ suggest that although the atomic particles that once comprised his body are dispersing, they cannot be destroyed.³³⁴

Towards the end of *Interferon Psalms*, in the 28^h psalm, the phrase ‘the treatment / fails’ reveals that the first round of interferon treatment was unsuccessful.³³⁵ Emerging from a long tunnel of illness and sorrow, the speaker starts to take stock of what has *not* been lost. He still has his love of poetry: ‘I returned to the poem, the one true place, / Whose blood was the syntax, / Whose body was the word.’³³⁶ From this point a lightness enters the poem:

And the white cockatoos came. Down the green valley,
from the opposite hill, a great flock cavorted and tumbled,
as sea-foam tumbles in a winter storm. For afternoon tea
they eat their green laments. I had been beating the night
with sticks for too long.³³⁷

The ‘white cockatoos’ can be read an Australian version of white doves, and their whiteness is made particularly striking by the preceding images of a ‘demon-ridden expanse’ and ‘black

³³² Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 75 6.

³³³ Davies, *Totem*, 39; Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 75 6.

³³⁴ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 75 6.

³³⁵ Davies, 93.

³³⁶ Davies, 93; 79.

³³⁷ Davies, 105.

volcanoes.³³⁸ The image of ‘sea-foam’ is similarly amplified, by being contrasted against the darkness of a ‘winter storm.’³³⁹ These white cockatoos are then shown eating ‘their green laments’ for ‘afternoon tea.’³⁴⁰ The cockatoos are gaining nourishment from ‘laments’ shaded to represent verdancy and vitality.³⁴¹ The lament appears here, as a kind of nature-borne poetic form that brings a kind of spiritual sustenance. While vaguely comical, ‘afternoon tea’ calls to mind the ‘afternoon’ of one’s life, suggesting that to engage in delivering lament might bring peace and a kind of comfort during the approach to life’s end.³⁴²

In my analysis of ‘Lament’ by Ali Cobby Eckermann, I suggested that the poem appears to visually expand outwards on the page, like a lung that is taking in air to sing.³⁴³ Although the speaker knows she is ‘the last speaker’ of her ‘mother tongue,’ she is still determined to sing her ‘song’ until right up until her last days.³⁴⁴ In the 33^d (and last) psalm of *Interferon Psalms*, Davies implements a similar technique:

God has made laughter
–I behaved myself wisely in a perfect way–
 God has made laughter for me
–I walked within my house with a perfect heart–
 God has made laughter for me and all
–I was a mighty prince among us–
 God has made laughter for me and all who hear
–For as long as it could, my blood would be fine–
 God has made laughter for me, and all who hear of it
–My breath for as long as I breathed–
 God has made laughter for me, and all who hear of it
 will laugh
–Oxygen was the fabric of my exultation–
 God has made laughter for me, and all who hear of it
 will laugh for me.
–I grew, and I dwelt in the wilderness–
 God has made laughter for me, and all who hear of it
 will laugh
–I became, at last, an archer, I became an archer–
 God has made laughter for me and all who hear of it

³³⁸ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 105.

³³⁹ Davies, 105.

³⁴⁰ Davies, 105.

³⁴¹ Davies, 105.

³⁴² Davies, 105.

³⁴³ Eckermann, *Inside My Mother*, 24.

³⁴⁴ Eckermann, 24.

–I was transformed into pure reaching–
 God has made laughter for me and all who hear
 –I was the thunder, the hilarity of thunder–
 God has made laughter for me and all
 –I was poured out like water in the dust of death–
 God has made laughter for me
 –Till the very world was flood and overflow–
 God has made laughter
 –Everything present at once, as it always was–³⁴⁵

The refrain ‘God has made laughter for me’ comes from Genesis: ‘And Sarah said, “God has made me laugh, so that all who hear will laugh with me.”’³⁴⁶ Sarah is Abraham’s wife, and these words were recorded as her response to God when giving birth, at age 90 (and Abraham age 100), to their first child Isaac. It is an expression of joy but also incredulity: it captures a moment of disbelief upon receiving good news so unlikely as to seem ludicrous. In the first psalm of *Interferon Psalms*, the line ‘But first I had to allow sheer / bewilderment to flow through me’ conjures an image of a person whose quest will be to reconcile himself to existing in a state of total bafflement and confusion: the intellectual equivalent of ‘surrender.’³⁴⁷ ‘God has made laughter’ as the concluding refrain of *Interferon Psalms* suggests that the speaker has finally arrived at a destination of something like peace, and its repetition here works to further generate a feeling of hilarious absurdity.³⁴⁸ The speaker has ceased ‘striving’ to make sense of the randomness and difficulties of life, and has found a sense of happiness within bewilderment.³⁴⁹

‘God has made laughter’ as a refrain in Davies’ poem expands incrementally, and then contracts, again giving the visual appearance of an expanding lung. Earlier in the poem, the speaker describes states of breathlessness as a side effect of the interferon treatment, such as in ‘I cannot breathe; / I cannot be the lover.’³⁵⁰ At the end of the poem, as the effects of

³⁴⁵ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 107 8.

³⁴⁶ Gen. 21:6 NKJV.

³⁴⁷ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 4; 50.

³⁴⁸ Davies, 107 8.

³⁴⁹ Davies, 77.

³⁵⁰ Davies, 49.

the treatment recede, the speaker regains his breath: ‘ *Oxygen was the fabric of my exultation* .’³⁵¹ The ‘God has made laughter’ sequence also enacts call-and-response aspects of the lament, bringing the poem back to a register that effects, to return to McGeachy’s phrasing, the ‘vigorous participation’ of a congregation inspired by their preacher’s ‘rhythm and energy.’³⁵² Also significant is the fact that the sub-text appearing in the right margin immediately beside the ‘God has made laughter’ sequence contains exactly the same phrase: ‘*God has made / laughter for me, / and all who hear / of it will laugh / for me.*’³⁵³ This is the last piece of sub-text to appear in *Interferon Psalms*. Finally, there is now alignment and balance between the speaker’s world and mind.

Interferon Psalms concludes with a statement in quiet parentheses: ‘(As for me, I abundantly uttered the memory of great / goodness.)’³⁵⁴ The Australian lament does carry the resonance of violence, suffering, and injustice, but it also reinforces a sense of resilience and strength. The Australian laments under study in this chapter have suggested ways of dramatising movement towards common strength, in the face of diverse stories of difficulty that continue to ‘ghost’ (or haunt) personal and collective experience.³⁵⁵ The lament can generate ‘forgiveness,’ as in Zwicky’s ‘Kaddish’; cultural autonomy and survival, as in the poems of Oodgeroo and Eckermann; and ‘goodness,’ as embodied in the final word of *Interferon Psalms*.³⁵⁶ *Interferon Psalms* extends the Australian lament into the 21st century, continuing a tradition of ‘calling out’ to be heard and understood. The lament unites those who might be considered ‘outsiders’ and shows that in sorrow, we are alike.

³⁵¹ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 107 8.

³⁵² McGeachy, *Lonesome Words*, 11.

³⁵³ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 107.

³⁵⁴ Davies, 109.

³⁵⁵ Gelder and Jacobs, ‘The Postcolonial Ghost Story,’ 181.

³⁵⁶ Zwicky, *Poems 1970-1992*, 70; Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 109.

Conclusion

This thesis is a study of poetic resonance: of rumblings, soundings, vibrations, murmurs, calls, cries, chimes, rings, echoes, and reverberations. At the centre of this discussion is the poetry of Luke Davies, which I have characterised as being charged with oppositional forces: it pulses and hums as if ‘electrified.’ ‘Totem Poem,’ in particular, reads as though some kind of mythical being placed a microphone against the ‘heart of the world,’ turned up the amp to eleven, and broadcast its pulsing thump to the entire universe, sending out soundwaves that continue ‘forever / into space.’ People often talk of a work of art ‘resonating’ with them, and this is exactly how I would describe my own experience of discovering Davies’ poetry: the effect it had on me was *physical*. While ‘Totem Poem’ revels in the sensory delights of physical existence in a world of bright colours, dramatic landscapes, lively animals, changeable weather and delicious food, *Interferon Psalms* explores the physical and spiritual discomfort of being gravely ill, from the perspective of a person who nonetheless still yearns ‘for a base in this place called World.’² Davies’ poetry represents of a vibrant new strand of romanticism within Australian poetry, one that is energetic and embodied, and grounded in a kind of muscular materialism which is given presence and vitality in the poems.

Golden Repair, the poetry collection that follows this thesis, is similarly concerned with embodiment and physicality. These are poems about interpreting the world through the physical senses, but most especially through sound. This collection aims to parallel and complement the main argument of my thesis, which is that Australian postmodern romantic poetry is intensely *present*: it expresses states of material realness that don’t just capture the sound or trace of a person speaking, via worldly encounters being voiced in lyricism. Rather, they generate a field in which those materials appear to ‘speak’ or resonate, or amplify.

¹ Davies, *Totem*, 38; 10.

² Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 45.

In *Australian Poetry, Romanticism and Negativity*, Paul Kane describes a ‘strain’ of negativity within the ‘corpus’ of Australian romantic poetry, arguing that the thematics of negativity are generated by ‘an originary lack.’³ Kane’s use of the word ‘corpus’ presents Australian poetry as a ‘body’ of sorts, and the word ‘strain’ in this context suggests this ‘negativity’ has spread through Australian poetry like a virus.⁴ The word ‘strain’ is also reminiscent of hearing: ‘straining’ to hear someone speak, or to hear a piece of music, perhaps.⁵ This thesis has argued that Australian romantic poetry is lively, robust, flexible, and sonorous. Even the narrator of Davies’ *Interferon Psalms*, who is ‘sick with shallow corpuscle,’ ultimately ends up regaining his strength when he somewhat romantically rediscovers his ‘love affair’ with poetry, as this stanza shows:⁶

I returned to the poem, the one true place,
Whose blood was the syntax,
Whose body was the word.⁷

In the process of writing this thesis, I was continually astonished to discover distinct points of resonance among poems by different Australian authors (and often from very different time periods). For instance, ‘Paradise Beach’ by Dorothy Porter features the lines ‘you strike **sparks** / from my senses,’ and ‘Totem Poem’ by Davies features a similar image in the lines ‘my head held high I steered / a cracking pace and **sparks** came off my shoes.’⁸ A recurring motif of lightning appears in the last stanza of ‘Totem Poem’ in the line ‘Static crackles in your hair, **lightning** / in your breast.’⁹ In Chapter Three, lightning appeared again in this line from Adamson’s ‘The Intervention’: ‘Lines /were licks of **lightning**,’ and in Chapter Four it featured in this line from Oodgeroo’s ‘We Are Going’: ‘We are the **lightning**-bolt

³ Kane, *Australian Poetry, Romanticism and Negativity*, 5.

⁴ Kane, 5.

⁵ Kane, 5.

⁶ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 79.

⁷ Davies, 79.

⁸ Davies, *Totem*, 29; Porter, *Love Poems*, 84.

⁹ Davies, 39.

over Gaphembah Hill.’¹⁰ I see these electric moments of resonance as evidence of a living force in Australian lyric poetry that continues to ‘spark.’

In my analysis of Australian postmodern romantic poetry I argue that a tension is created when the earnestness of the romantic aesthetic is combined with the ironic self-consciousness of postmodernism. This aesthetic tension is part of what contributes to the ‘electric’ charge of poems such as ‘Totem Poem’ by Davies and ‘Paradise Beach’ by Porter. This thesis also explores the oppositional forces of praise and lament in Australian poetry. In Chapter Three I considered ‘Totem Poem’ as a devotional poem and compared it to ‘Pied Beauty’ by Gerard Manley Hopkins, arguing that both give praise for a world ‘charged with oppositions,’ such as the impermanence of the physical world, compared with the ‘immutability of the divine.’ I also argued that ‘Totem Poem’ can be seen to serve a totemic purpose, where the poem itself becomes a site of divine communication: a channel that can receive ‘oracles’ and also provide protection. In Section 3.4 I argued that Robert Adamson is a contemporary Australian praise poet who brings the ordinary and extraordinary together in his poetry in the same way that ‘Totem Poem’ positions the physical world as an entry point to that which is ‘otherworldly.’ Adamson’s poetry juxtaposes regular ‘clock time’ with timeless states of wonderment, and it unashamedly ‘sings’ the praises of all that Adamson loves, while still retaining a playful sense of self-awareness.

While praise poetry is, as Westermann describes, ‘the language of joy,’ lament is ‘the language of suffering.’¹² Chapter Four explored the aesthetic characteristics of the lament as identified by M.G. McGeachy, such as call-and-response, and ‘the creation of a textual performative space’ where an internal ‘I’ directly engages an external ‘you.’¹³ In Section 4.2 I looked at the history of the Australian lament with a particular focus on what could be seen as

¹⁰ Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 287; Oodgeroo Noonuccal, ‘We Are Going,’ 496.

¹¹ Davies, *Totem* 3-39; Porter, *Love Poems* 79-86.

¹² Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 11.

¹³ McGeachy, *Lonesome Words*, 16.

‘outsider laments,’ featuring the ‘voices’ of convicts, Indigenous Australians, counter-culturalists, and migrants. Section 4.3 extended this discussion to include *Interferon Psalms* as a 21st-century Australian lament that ‘amplifies’ the ‘voice’ of another speaker who could be considered as an ‘outsider’ to mainstream Australian culture: a recovered addict who is undergoing a physical and spiritual process of healing and reparation.⁴ The Australian lament is a long and rich Australian poetic tradition that converts personal sorrows into narratives of collective cultural experience.

Golden Repair was drafted before I began to write the theoretical component of this doctorate. It was written before I had even become consciously aware that there were recurring motifs of sparks and lightning in Australian poetry. I was happily startled to realise that my long poem ‘Golden Repair’ contains two references to lightning, first in this line from the opening stanza: ‘People speak / of **lightning** when they want to describe a moment of destruction or inspiration,’ and again in this line from a later stanza: ‘I threw **lightning** at him in poetry while he hid behind his leather sofa.’ In the process of formally reflecting upon the resonances between this thesis and *Golden Repair*, what surprised me the most was that my poem ‘Goldsbrough’ also contains a direct reference to bells:

The past is not behind but *beside* us,
an infinite horizon, and when the mind is quiet,
the sound will sometimes drift across like bells
or chimes.

A bell is an inimitable symbol of resonance, and bell motifs appear in many of the poems discussed in this thesis. It’s particularly intriguing that Kane chose to conclude *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity* with an excerpt from the poem ‘Five Days Old’ by Francis Webb, which ends, ‘Bells, bells of ocean.’⁵ In doing so, Kane has embedded a symbol of

¹⁴ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*.

¹⁵ Kane, *Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity*, 208.

resonance into his discussion, that ‘rings’ out like a ship’s bell – signifying, perhaps, a new wave of poetic energy, which I have called ‘postmodern romanticism.’ While Kane may not have grasped the tenor of Australian romanticism on the cusp of postmodern reinvention, his book is alive to the enduring aesthetic impacts of romanticism, and future possibilities for its eruption in different forms.

Like Davies, I attended a Christian primary school in Sydney’s North Shore, where Bible stories were taught, and songs about Noah were sung. At some point during my childhood I was given a small, crimson, leather-bound copy of *The Book of Psalms*, which I treated as treasure. I used to enjoy opening it at a random place and interpreting the Psalm that appeared as God’s advice for me on that particular day. Reading the Psalms as a child would give me an intangible or mystical feeling of wellbeing, and my favourite Psalm, perhaps predictably, was Psalm 23, which begins famously with the lines ‘The Lord is my shepherd; / I shall not want.’⁶ Looking back, I now realise that reading the Psalms so closely as a child probably contributed to my interest in poetry as an adult, and it also helps explain why *Interferon Psalms* by Davies affected me so profoundly.

The long poem ‘Golden Repair’ began as a literal ‘conversation’ with silence. I started writing it while coming to terms with the abrupt end of a relationship. My writing process during this time was to open a blank document and sit in silence until I ‘received’ some kind of propulsive inspiration. Although at first it felt as if I were ‘speaking’ into a void, I gradually became aware that the poem seemed to be ‘speaking back’ to me – or rather, the process of writing began to make sense of a situation that, up until that point, felt totally senseless. The line from *Interferon Psalms* ‘I tried to climb into her but she gave no traction’ exactly described my own situation, and I was inspired to try and use poetry to induce a state of acceptance.⁷

⁶ Ps. 23:1 NKJV.

⁷ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 20.

‘Conversing’ with ‘silence’ also made me feel that poetry is form of prayer, in the sense of facilitating healing by externalising your innermost frailties and desires.

Place-based poetics are also a point of resonance between my own poems and those by Davies, especially in *Totem*. Many of the poems in *Golden Repair* meditate upon specific Australian cities and suburbs, such as Marrickville and Cairns. I believe that writing poetry makes it possible to ‘transcribe’ the sound of a particular place, and I feel that if you listen closely enough, you can almost hear a place ‘speak.’ The poetry of Robert Adamson has had a significant influence on my own work, and I admire his ability to bring ‘to life’ specific Australian locations. In a poem such as ‘The Details Necessary,’ for instance, Adamson’s lyricism works to evoke his touchstone place, the Hawkesbury River north of Sydney, in a way that is visual *and* sonic.⁸ Consider the opening of the poem:

Tar on the dirt drifts to afternoon’s
edges, slopes of winter, animals
and birds in the ground, trees –
the domed sky’s early stars strung
to earth by tails of mist.⁹

The alliteration of ‘**dirt drifts**’ and ‘**sky’s early stars strung**’ creates a sense of cohesion and peace, and the chime that is created by the assonance in ‘**dirt drifts**,’ ‘**winter**,’ and ‘**mist**’ further enhances this feeling of harmony.²⁰ I’m fascinated by lyric poetry’s capacity to translate sight into sound, and Adamson’s influence can be seen most prominently in my poem ‘The Come Down,’ which is set in Bullio (a small riverside village in the Southern Highlands region of NSW) and features descriptions such as ‘olive green blurring to dirt’ and ‘tree branches curled in brace position.’ I’m always listening for an Australian ‘accent,’ Australian slang, and what Australia might sound like as a cultural collective. In my poem

¹⁸ Adamson, *The Golden Bird*, 61.

¹⁹ Adamson, 61.

²⁰ Adamson, 61.

‘Ozzified,’ for instance, the voice of the poem is mash-up collection of voices I’ve heard either on TV, or personally at backyard barbeques. It includes distinctly Australian expressions like ‘fish for tinnies’ and ‘get it into ya.’ After years of feeling a mixture of bemusement and repulsion for my own accent, and for certain aspects of Australian culture, I eventually decided to wholeheartedly embrace those modes of cultural voicing in my poetry. My aim for *Golden Repair* was to create a sonic landscape that is uniquely Australian.

My exegetical study of Luke Davies has been limited to just two of his collections, *Totem* and *Interferon Psalms*.²¹ A study of Davies’ earlier collections *Running With Light*, *Absolute Event Horizon*, and *Four Plots for Magnets* would provide fertile ground for a more extensive discussion about Davies’ interest in materiality and physics. Another recurring concept that appears in Davies’ poetry is that of androgyny of gender as being interchangeable such as in these lines from *Interferon Psalms*: ‘Such great sadness inside her, I mean me,’ and ‘The bells, keeping time. I offered them to you, or you to / me it was all the same.’²² Davies’ poetry is interested in the concept of a ‘universal soul,’ and this could provide a fruitful research direction for future scholars. It would also be rewarding to compare Davies’ poetry with his novels *Candy*, *Isabelle the Navigator*, and *God of Speed*, and to show how his poetic style has informed his other literature.²³ Davies has written screenplays for a number of feature films, including the Bafta-winning screenplay for the 2017 film *Lion*.²⁴ In future scholarship his screenplays might be read as forms of mediated poetics, or different scenes of lyrical and narrative interplay that are still grounded strongly in material relations between things and people.

While my discussion of praise in Australian poetry is limited to Davies and Adamson, there is a wealth of Australian poets whose work displays aesthetic aspects of the devotional

²¹ Davies, *Totem*; *Interferon Psalms*.

²² Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 75.

²³ Davies, *Candy*; Davies, *Isabelle the Navigator*; Davies, *God of Speed*.

²⁴ Quinn, ‘My life with George: How Luke Davies went from broke to Clooney’s Catch 22,’ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, June 2, 2019, 12:01 a.m. EST, <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/tv-and-radio/my-life-with-george-how-luke-davies-went-from-broke-to-clooney-s-catch-22-20190531-p51tal.html>.

mode, especially Bruce Dawe and Kevin Hart. Similarly, the stylistic characteristics of lament can be observed in numerous Australian poets whose oeuvres were beyond the scope of this study, including Les Murray and Emma Lew.

I'd like to close this discussion by reiterating my main idea: that Australian romantic poetry is charged with an energetic force that has the effect of 'amplification.' It has been a particular privilege to study the history of the Australian lament, and to 'hear' the voices of these passionate and remarkable poets echoing through time. My own poetry is primarily inspired by Australia: its people, places, sounds, and colours. My relationship with poetry is, like Davies' 'a love affair.'²⁵ It is an exciting time to be an Australian poet, and I am eager to see how of Australian lyric poetry continues to effloresce into the 21st century.

²⁵ Davies, *Interferon Psalms*, 79.

Golden Repair

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I. These Are the Places

Goldsbrough

*...you could walk around Sydney
on a muggy Spring day and everything falls like lead,
it seems like everyone's gone away and this could be
the edge of the world, and you the world's last person.*

Luke Davies

The past is a multi-storey car park. On weekdays
the city hums with sleepwalking workers, dutifully
constructing society's dream. From a balcony
in Pymont we saw rows of milky headlights
through iron bars – the smoke from our joints
shrouding their windshields. Heaviness set in
the awareness that we're always falling.
Buildings and bodies eventually disappear,
but feelings remain like something you can hear
a refrain. It was autumn: a time when the Earth
turns away from the sun like a face cast downwards
away from love. We sat with each other in silence,
dumb in the day's accusatory whiteness,
immortal because the moment was endless
suspended like static electrons trapped inside
a TV. The past is not behind but *beside* us,
an infinite horizon, and when the mind is quiet,
the sound will sometimes drift across like bells
or chimes. That balcony was part of Goldsbrough:
a warehouse built long ago for the wool trade
but turned into flats in the last twenty years

to store Sydney's surplus of people. The past
once felt exactly like the present you can't go back
but you can treat the here and now with reverence.
Everything will be okay I thought I had heard
the voice of God, but perhaps it was this poem, today.

Cairns

Woolworths was odd. Sunscreen and chicken nuggets
right next to each other everything a tourist could want.
In Cairns, asking for prosciutto is asking to be punched,
so bacon it was too pink, sliced thick. Already on tour,
a premature honeymoon we ate midnight chip butties
with our pants off. For three days we slept too late
and made love too long the sheets and towels
were never washed and the bin filled with condoms.
Whenever we emerged in search of a bottle shop
there was music acoustic duos crooning covers
in beer gardens, and children busking beside the lagoon.
The air smelled of barbecues. Shimmering particles
of mirrored dust made the mountains iridescent
brightest at dusk. The sunsets seemed everlasting
because there was nothing to distract us from watching
the sky passed from tipsy to feisty to black-out drunk.
We collected each other's secrets: an Easter-egg hunt.
Like plastic figurines stuck to the bottom of a snowdome
we were sealed in a bubble, oblivious and buffered
snow could have fluttered down to our beach towels
and we wouldn't have noticed. Shouty headlines
about global warming and Donald Trump were muted
on the other side of a soundproof pane of glass,
and the plotlines of our family dramas were paused.
Bacon crackled in the pan. Like a silent call to prayer,
sacredness vibrated through the air. It changed us.

Tramsheds

Those old trams were like wrecked ships in the swirling murk
of an underwater crypt. We passed through in shoals
some with cameras, some with rope. To enter,
we'd break in through a hole in the fence, ignoring the sign,
rusted and bent: *TRESPASSING IS PROHIBITED*
and pass from sparkling order into shadowy neglect.

Back then, in Glebe, us weirdos could afford the rent.
But much can change in a decade. The only trams now in this locale
are functional, modern, swift – transporting the Great Washed
to respectable jobs – the carriages defaced not with spray paint
but ads. The sheds are unrecognisable
gentrified and desecrated – entry is via escalator.

It's *Sydney's Most Dynamic Food Destination*, but you can't get
a sandwich – the closest thing is a croque monsieur, topped
with a duck egg. The exposed kitchen reveals the chefs
tattoo embellished, ironically bopping to Elton John,
proud of their *ethical lifestyle choices*.
Sixteen bucks – the sandwich is oily, hard to eat and heavy.

Above the fluorescent overheads you can see the original rafters.
Up there, time is still suspended – particles of light in stasis.
Ten years ago, I was a witness – I saw past civilisation's façade
to entropy. It was humbling and strangely comforting.

We fear what these spaces represent
so we make them functional again. The weirdos will go elsewhere.

Arlington

The high-rises were going up and the builders' dust
was blasting sideways every time a truck juddered past
in a flatulent rush. All night, the squeaking of axles
and the hollow thumps of rusted barrels
I was striving for noble silence but could only manage
tinnitus. The mind, like muscle, will eat itself
if not nourished. All highways are charmless
they're for people who work just for the paid leave,
counting down the months and weeks
until Bali or Thailand or Tahiti a highway
gets you to the place you postponed happiness for
as fast as possible. No wonder I was miserable.
So I veered off down a side street in the loveless chill
of a wintry spring and trekked mud through the carpet
on the day I moved in the awning forming a prison
of rainwater. Boxes strewn through the kitchen,
I gazed out at a hulking mobile phone tower
behind the trees: *At least you'll get reception here?*
The nearest tram stop was Arlington orderly
as a model train running through a miniature village.
Whenever I walked towards it, my body would shrink
but so too would my surroundings the only clue
as to why it felt weird was the sound as in dreams,
Arlington was muted; soundless. Trams would appear
in silence and I'd join their cargo of tiny people
to travel, like an epiphany, back to life's loudness.

Marrickville

It's been three weeks since I cleaned the bathroom
and it hasn't been cleaned since. But that's what you get
in a share house – a glorified squat for people
who don't want to pay full rent but dress it up
as 'community mindedness' – a place where conversations
about the fairest division of the gas bill take place
over the compost bin. You could say, hopeful of heart,
that it's a family, which it is – dysfunctional
the air seething with PMT, all of us rolling
out yoga mats to the sound of the kettle boiling,
the fridge stocked with kale and coconut water
but never meat. We're a generation of ideological orphans
building Zion in Marrickville, our dyed hair a symbol
of our kinship – while the other residents, the old-school
Greek immigrants, gaze bewildered from their porches
as hordes of us jog past them of a morning,
farting smugness. I'm so far from home,
from the buzz-cut lawns and yipping dogs, from kitchens
with microwaves and African violets softly dying
beside disinfected sinks. These days I take comfort
in YouTube and weed on nights where the urge
to give up on this poetry caper becomes overwhelming
the fear that there's nothing you can do to avoid
becoming your mother so you might as well swallow
your insolence, move back to the suburbs and give birth
in front of the TV. These days I force my focus

onto whatever the present moment happens to reveal
organic toothpaste, soup bowls caked with chia seeds,
my own face glimpsed in the mirror like seeing
a celebrity in a café the intimate recognition
of a stranger in this, the mediocre immediate.

Beverley Hills, New South Wales

Google Maps reckons it's twenty minutes by car
but we want to get on the piss so we catch the train
from Kirrawee and change at Wolli Creek
where the sunlight refracts and our lips meet
clear easy spacious I've never been here before
Beverley Hills New South Wales might actually
be heaven yellowing diamonds spell the word
'CHEMIST' Chinese restaurants breathy traffic
civic bustle the air puffs and billows the bubble
grows larger we are translucent with kindness
there is time around us like lukewarm bathwater
we toddle softly brimful with wonder lucid
dreamers existing exactly where happiness is

Mount Pleasant Avenue

December turns cross-eyed,
hallucinates purple: a blue rinse
that tints the Sydney skyline
while bees raid dying flowers
like dumpster divers and
storm drains clog.

You drive north across the bridge,
air-con struggling in a dirt-caked car crammed
with cracked CDs. You've been driving
this thing for fifteen years, your friends
are strapping kids into SUVs, and you're still
listening to *Kid A*.

Mount Pleasant Avenue
actually almost lives up to its name. The day
flickers with glossy emerald tongues
and the light solidifies to powdered gold.
Around a gumtree-lined curve
there's street parking offering privacy
for pointless Insta scrolling;
you're stalling.

Yet a pale blue eye
makes contact through the passenger
window, a woman who has met
with time's arrow at exactly her middle,
bent over at a right angle,
a human hinge.

You have been seen.

No one is at reception, there's a bell
with a passive-aggressive tinkle
but little else. Just flower
arrangements and an antiseptic
smell. Down a carpeted hall
you huff, irritation masking
your fear.

A nurse emerges
from a wing, knows where your Nan
is, sends you to a double-door lift.
Inside, more nurses huddle
round an iPhone, gushing over
photos of a newborn.

The door opens.

There's an empty sitting room with a piano
limply draped in tinsel. The only sound
is the tinny burble of televised cricket.
Your Nan's room has an en suite
with inbuilt support rails and a mini bar
stocked with lemonade: it could be the Hilton,
if you really squint.

She's anxious again.

They were meant to bring her pills at 3 p.m.
but it's 3:10. You press the call button and wander
ineffectually down the hall under the pretext
of helping. Finally a nurse appears,
a kind Filipina. *How are you, Mrs Carter?*

She smiles.

You can picture her scooping
up a screaming child, cheerfully soothing
it as it cries, with the compassionate
detachment of a natural. Pills taken,
Nan says she's tired, needs a lie down,
there's no need for you to stay.

She's lying
but you play along, help her take off her shoes,
say goodbye. Gum leaves stream round the sides
of your car as you drive away. She had your dad
at nineteen, back when that's what women did.
Your life path wasn't quite so prescribed:
spoiled, you fritter, drift.

2. Golden Repair

Saturdays can be so ordinary. When I was filling out the forms before I muscled my way out of my mother, nearly killing her, I ticked all the wrong boxes and wound up here. You were a twin: you've always had a touchstone. People speak of lightning when they want to describe a moment of destruction or inspiration: they say *struck* as if touched by the statically charged finger of some divine being. Out in the valley that night you were like an antenna, goading electricity. People also use the phrase *our paths were crossed* to describe a chance encounter. Our paths were crossed like the wires of a bomb. There was nothing chance about it.

You waited for me to turn up and then when I did
we said yes to each other almost immediately
and the roof disappeared from your Lotus Elise
the sky so ecstatically blue
every pop tune a hymn.

What men really want is a classy freak

a guy on Oprah once said as the audience cheered
and it was not foolish to think ourselves invincible
because you are when you look love straight in the eye
and wink. You teased me that time when we kissed
and you felt what I was feeling
and you said *which one of us will say it first?*
before teasing we could say it at the same time
as I flailed and squealed all that joy
bunched up like a painful sneeze.

Blueness a gas flame in that hot summer
and sunlight abundant, abundant
in the blue time of brightness
that stretched upwards and through us forever
a bright blue thread through our hearts and heaven.

Kintsukuroi (金繕い 'golden repair'): *The Japanese art of fixing broken pottery with lacquer dusted or mixed with powdered gold. As a philosophy it treats breakage and repair as part of the history of an object, rather than something to disguise.*

When I'm very drunk I sometimes start imagining
that in a past life I was a gay man who was murdered in the Eighties,
my gin and tonic still cold. A weakness for beauty and pop music,
I was seduced by *The Lexicon of Love* on an expensive stereo
by a gorgeous man who maybe didn't mean to kill me
but who trapped my breath beneath his pressing fingers
in a moment when, in fairness, I was eager to leave.
Here again in female form, delighted by my contours,
I'm weirdly drawn to nightscapes, balconies
the whiff of cigarette smoke in air-conditioned hallways
in peach-coloured concrete apartment buildings.
Imagine my indignation when in the next life, he dumped me.
Not again, he muttered as our shoulders smacked
and our eyes met while he hovered, shaking his head,
dragging behind him the air of a ghost. *Why not this time?*
I yelled. *It's your turn to suffer*. Angry as youth denied immortality,
I threw lightning at him in poetry while he hid behind his leather sofa
until nothing was left but scorched memories
and pages and pages of anguished scribbling.

Of men
my Nan says:
bullies
and wimps.

Meeting my Muse at last, he is a graceful opponent.

Have you eaten all the salt & vinegar, you cunt?

There are powerful personalities interacting here, and there will be a tussle.

Baby, do I look flaccid enough?

Blood in its gums, sinew on its tongue.

Little geek girls, they're everywhere.

Walking around in love; a ball gown made of fishes.

I'm still trashed, so I wouldn't trust my opinion.

Updrafts of warm air; this is a winged descent.

Wanker

he says, unaware that I'm writing spells.

When you visit a nudist retreat, there comes a point
after you've handed over your deposit to a sun-bleached woman
wearing only a singlet, her flat brown breasts visible
where you actually have to take off your clothes.
Mid-afternoon, late summer it all seemed feasible
until I saw the caretaker outside raking leaves,
his wrinkled testicles swinging like a pendulum.
Then panic, hysteria. It was our first fight of many
in the three days we spent there I wanted to ease into it
but you demanded obedience. Walking outside
without clothing produces a cognitive dissonance
so fierce that *like a dream* becomes the only means of description
I saw myself pale and wobbly walking through the bush
dressed only in sneakers, sunlight on my nipples,
trailing after your tan backside, cock ring glinting.
We took photos of each other on a big rock beside the creek
where we'd just seen the disappearing tail of a platypus.
It was a novel alternative to my office job, at least.
That night in our cabin you made me cook burritos
still nude; as dangerous as it was humiliating.
You were baiting me. I was exhausted. You started drinking:
It makes me mean. So I snapped and you pounced
I think? I can't remember clearly. The only way back
is through the flesh it's true that the body never forgets
specifically, the cinch of the rope round my waist
as I entered the survival space where it's not about pleasure
but the strung-out bared teeth sharpness
and grunt and clench of ghosts treating our bodies

like stolen cars in a deserted country town thunder
explosions in the *Blair Witch* tempest that screeched down
around us, rain hurled like rice by dead relatives
at our black wedding these are the places we went
together; these are the places I can't forget.

When will this cycle of suffering end? the mind asks
at 3 a.m., convinced that it can solve any issue
as if life were a Rubik's Cube or a game of Lemmings
All in good time, the voiceless voice
of wisdom says. I've heard it said
the most important lessons are those
you need to learn and relearn and relearn
perpetually which is why I keep falling
for arseholes I guess and although John Lennon
insists that war is over if you want it
I enjoy fighting more than I'm prepared to admit
like that time when you called me fat
and I called you a hypocritical old pig
and your face broke open into sudden bliss:
A girlfriend, a real girlfriend I can fight with!
as I stood with my suitcase half-packed
dinner half-cooked in your kitchen
rage like smoke from a saucepan boiled dry
not knowing whether to punch or kiss you
which is to say I miss you: our time together
like burning magnesium gone in a white flash.

Déjà vu the sense of physically inhabiting
a vision you had in childhood.

At fourteen I made the decision
to change schools; pursue dance.
It was doomed but I had to do it. I had to.

Fifteen years later, incapable
of learning from failure, I ventured
out from safety into danger
and there you were, waiting.

When people talk of hunger as coming
from the bones, they're right we acquiesce to life
by eating. But thirst comes from the blood.
My journal entry from the first time we kissed:
He tasted of water.

My mum listens to AM radio
to mask the sound of her mind thinking
and once we heard a news story of a man
whose wife and children had died in a burning building.
How does a person recover from that? I asked.
They don't, she said ten years before
her own divorce consigned most of her past
to silence.

You only did
what you needed to do and to hold a grudge
would be childish. From the ravaging wildness
of extreme places, I'm crawling towards quietness.
Eternity is not out there on the periphery
of the universe: it's inside us.

Silence, hello. Whatever I throw at you bounces back, so I'm trying to shut up but fuck, fuck — sometimes it's like surgery without anaesthesia and not being able to yell. *Better out than in* my dad would say whenever I wanted to chuck. I told all my lovers to get stuffed in the last month and alone in this room of mirrors there's never enough gin to make that clown with the megaphone drunk enough to pass out. I imagine myself curled against a body I'd turn away from in the flesh. Easy to blame unhappiness on another person or their absence — far trickier to open the door to your gloomy guest and serve him a piece of cake. In the shower at 2 a.m. in an acid haze a voice asked if I was ready to stop hurting myself. Good question. Seems hypocritical to ask for kindness until I'm able to say yes. So I'm trying. I'm trying.

Come on, come and stand with me on this podium
for a minute don't try to tell me you don't like it.
You were a public figure in the Nineties,
before you started hiding. If you're feeling naked,
here are some labels: Maltese, bisexual,
Sagittarius, activist, sadist. Computational,
you pay attention to data patterns.
You joked about how you fuck both genders
but prefer to have relationships with women
because you hate yourself. You tried to tell me
you were a psychopath as if being tied up
and threatened with a knife did not make it
obvious but I was a kind-hearted solipsist
and I didn't really believe in evil.
Now that I've done the reading, I'm choosing
to think you wanted very badly not to have
feelings, and for the most part you succeeded.
Perhaps those with Cluster B personalities
truly don't deserve love. They're empty,
says the literature. But you gave back.
You felt bad. I wasn't the helpless lamb
you initially wanted to kill and eat.
Now there's a hole where a whole life
could have been. It doesn't matter
anymore. I'm just crediting my source.

Perhaps all those melancholy children
have unfinished business from previous
lives they died without finding their grail
only to respawn inside the game with no choice
but to give it another try. Finding you after so long
on the other side was reverse sadness
a lightening. If God is love and you're prone
to taking things literally, a truculent older man
will do the trick you gave and took like a flood
or firestorm, leaving my landscape bare
but fertile. Exponents of cognitive behavioural therapy
say that the path to stability is to learn to love
differently to analyse the patterns that have led
to unhappiness and then consciously supplant
feeling with reason. They claim the rulebook
of life can be grasped by the mind, and to feel
your way forward with hands and not eyes
is a kind of wilful blindness. They're probably
right. In primary school I learned about
a convict who saved his rations for a week
then ate them all in one sitting and died
from a burst stomach. The question
arises: why am I still whining?
I'll drop to my knees and kiss the ground
as long as it takes for you to find whatever,
whomever can bring you to life.
You're not yet done. I wish you life.

Nasi goreng: every bachelor has a dish
to impress the ladies your version
was scrumptious. My tastebuds cling
to the memory, a sensory haunting
and through Sydney still I take myself
on expeditions to Indonesian restaurants
in search of lost rice.

That other version
of myself, the *Sliding Doors* Louise,
is probably gobbling food with you
at this moment, watching the news,
wondering what would have become
of the girl who dared to say *no* on the night
she heard the words: *move in with me*.

What would I
and this other Louise discuss
if we were to meet? *Enjoy the sex*
and the nasi goreng, I'd tell her.
She'd smile. *Enjoy being free*.

Trod in cat poo with bare feet in darkness

May the Lord make me truly thankful

My right hand was broken, so I had to clean up one-handed

May the Lord make me truly thankful

Met the perfect guy on Tinder, who turned out to be a narcissist

May the Lord make me truly thankful

Found a vocation that brings fulfilment but not an income

May the Lord make me truly thankful

Re-typed the 'thankful' refrain instead of copy/pasting

Because the process is important

May the Lord make me truly thankful; in gratitude the heart stays open.

I'm on a forgiveness spree my pen not a sword
but a magical wand, and solemn in my wizardry,
I anoint the heads of all the many men who ever
annoyed me. After all, aren't men just manifestations
of ego absurd and contemptible, yet poignant
in their vulnerability what kind of warrior
would I be to eviscerate such easy targets?
C'mon, Louise, let the poor creatures be,
let your grievances disperse like smoke
in clean country air. The thing I've learned
is you can get your chakras cleared and quit drugs
and smoking and drinking and eat nothing but steamed
organic broccoli but within the rancorous embers,
something still seethes. I recall the look
on your ex-girlfriend's face when we saw her
at that exhibition *wounded pride* I called it,
feeling superior. It's been three years
since you turned me loose. Time can heal
but to speed up time with substance abuse
is cheating. Coming down on your couch
on New Year's Day. The feeling of finding
something you've lost but have forgotten
to search for. A word surfaces: *surrender*.

The percussive urban static of dry leaves and grit,
like the sound of a Texta marking an X through another
calendar day. I'm placing a copy of *A Suitable Boy*
on the shelf trying to create space for its largeness.
The shelves heave with time, with entire lives
spent in blinkered pursuit of the next line
only to end up with their souls trapped inside
a dog-eared paperback with a broken spine
that will someday get culled to make room
for the recent winner of the Booker Prize.
This bookstore is alive with the dead.
I'd close up early but I need the extra dollars
and cents because I've given up on capitalism
but not hedonism which is inconvenient because
man, what a combo! So it's another night of cheap wine
and Pad Thai made with cage eggs which I eat while I think
about my credit debt in between checking my phone
for messages that will never be written, let alone sent.
I'm caught between thinking that loneliness is a mental state
that you need to learn how to transcend; or it's the very thing
that propels us into the discomfort of adventure
the motivator that drives existence onward.
Lying in bed, I'm struck by my polarised approach
to the question. Reading is not the same as meditation
it's a voluntary inhabitation of someone else's head.
I write so others may know what you were so keen to forget.

Before you, the ex with his flag planted at the peak
of my psyche was a dyslexic who dragged me
kicking and screaming into adulthood.

I had thought those highs were unrepeatable,
but then you came along and cauterised
my entire sense of past and future
like ECT leaving me burnt out and shuffling
through a static wasteland of memory.

The thing that's dumb about being hung up
on your silence is that communication
is often thwarted by speech. I've also come
to appreciate that truly knowing someone
is not possible through the Vaseline-smearred lens
of love you need the clarity that distance brings
and you need compassion to realise that no one
is perfect. I know that you wanted us to work,
and I know you have suffered. I'm sorry.

Lovely girl said the man at the servo.
Never even looked at his face I wanted
to go home, to be alone *Have a good night*
I said as I strode past him, fled.

So here I am
on the back porch, smoking cigarettes,
writing poems to my loneliness
on another unfulfilling weekend.

Lovely girl he said.
Saw my mother today from the other side
of a roast chook *I'll have a leg.*

She's a person, of course
not a mythical figure of birth and death,
and cannot answer all the questions
I could ever ask about why
or what next, so we talk about
the deliciousness of the stuffing instead.

You're a person too, of course
not an angel or devil; not the entry point
to eternity that once you were. And all
for the best, except for the thoughts that swing
like doors in and out of parallel worlds
in which we are immortal and breathing love again.

Such moments of pause
feel like hallways a thoroughfare in an airport
watching planes take off and land through windows
as I stumble back and forth between airport bars,
listening for my name on the PA system.

Air-conditioning desiccates
the skin. The toilet paper in these airport bathrooms
is too thin. My mouth has a dryness that bottled water
cannot quench.

Lovely girl he said.

You were my spiritual twin
a wounded healer, and whenever you were able
to disengage your ego, we were for each other
like kidneys, filtering sadness and pain.

I'm famished,
but these airport burritos are overpriced
and tasteless. Perhaps that's why they call it 'missing'
your plane is on the runway but you're stuck
in a food court or toilet, and the air hostess is calling
your name but you're too self-absorbed or lovelorn
to notice.

Are we there yet? I hope so.

I don't want to wear the uniform
of the eternally broken-hearted these words
like birds beneath a woollen coat, fighting
for freedom. I'm so sick of talking
to myself I want to throw this conversation
to somebody else.

I can see the future and it's not perfect
but what is? I'll give this morning
my dirty muddled human blessing I'll give
this mourning my dirty muddled human
blessing I'll give these birds back to the world:
may they sing.

3. A Bright Blue Thread

Pleasure in Elysium

A man with a bundle of balloons in his arms
Small feet that skim the darkened fairground
She'll lift you to heaven if you give her a chance
The tantrum of summer relinquishing heat

Small feet that skim the darkened fairground
Nonchalant as an arcing crow
The tantrum of summer relinquishing heat
Clouds of ink in calm dispersal

Nonchalant as an arcing crow
Diving for coins in a pool in a dream
Clouds of ink in calm dispersal
Come on, get your things, it's time to go home

Diving for coins in a pool in a dream
I will not encourage others to fly
Come on, get your things, it's time to go home
All dancers must follow the direction of grace

I will not encourage others to fly
A man with a bundle of balloons in his arms
All dancers must follow the direction of grace
She'll lift you to heaven if you give her a chance.

Two Beer Pool Day

Tippy-toe sprinting down hot brick steps, yelping
as gumnuts embed themselves the bloody things
always waiting with pointed ends up like thumb tacks
to trip us, no matter how many times mum sweeps.

The obstacle course continues with the pool's Pebblecrete
rim, the enemy of skin, necessitating Dettol containers
nearly as large as the bulk-size chlorine buckets
we're prone to prising open and jabbing with sticks.

You can hear the filter wheezing even from the kitchen
as the *chk chk chk* of the pool cleaner competes with the sound
of cicada tinnitus. *It's a two beer pool day*, dad declares
before dropping his pager in. *Not again, shit!*

Our neighbour's tree with its twitchy pipe cleaner branches
ensures the water's never clear one time,
over winter, a family of ducks took up residency
on its dark green surface, much to my mother's chagrin.

But today it's blue as it'll ever be and dad is wearing
Speedos and easing himself into the Aqua Duck
with his beer, while me and my sister dare each other
to take a running jump and dive straight in.

For hours in the endless light of summer evenings
I would dive down deep as possible and stay there as long
as possible, admiring the world through water.
It was how I preferred to experience life: distorted.

Hot Clouds

Hatching in hutches: the opaline budgies are abundant.
Pen etchings measure progress: your auntie is only five feet.
Funny words turn to fuzzy growls in the plastic heart of a bear.
Margarine sets over boiled potatoes like industrial varnish.

Pets excelling at pro chess: a border collie takes your queen.
The cold bone-white salt shaker fits cleanly in your hand.
Manatees sojourn in archipelagos, muscled and varnished.
Antique yellow like apple juice, whiskey, or sun shards.

The lone wild alligator rips off the tourist's feeding hand.
Car parts and sump oil. Screwdrivers. Specimen jars.
Antivenin is duly injected into the victim's arm.
Sit in soap milk until pink. Hot clouds in the cold green.

Larking galahs fly heavenward in feathered arcs.
Through a tear in a makeshift corrugated roof: the sky.
Milk drips from a goat's chin. Sheep wear crowns of cream.
Competing for the heater: singed ginger, smoky fur.

In the dense tangle of strangulated tree roots: an eye.
Fledging finches in gold light. Eternity. Abundance.
Releasing all of her secrets in serious croaky whispers.
Sunlight blurs. The birdcage is open, the yard bare.

The Rainbow Bird

for Anna-May

Her beauty's a lazy place to start,
it's so easy. How my gaze sinks in
like a cream pie projectile.

A springtime offering:
she is hay bales and peaches.
In a previous life, gingham.

My Dorothy.

Sunshine like meteor fire I'm asleep
in her bed of embers. Leaning down
through waxy bathwater to kiss her
alive. The thunderstorm internalised.

To be coaxed from the obituaries
by a loquacious child. An epileptic fit
of orange curls the feminine
and the guttural.

Afloat

in the same ripple. The birdseed
fall-away of a disintegrating sandbank
my feet scramble for assurance to find
only water, a soda stream
of effervescence and a thrown
torch floating down through darkness.

The lorikeet with its head bent
sideways as if to ask:

where is she?

My Friend's Mum

'I once loved a hobo in the park.'

This was my friend's mum talking, her papery face
suddenly a lantern. I kept prattling

as if she'd said something ordinary, something
not quite so aligned with my own predicament.

A hobo in the park my inner tape recorder
got it, even if my drunk-mind didn't.

Her eyes were blue as a Sydney summer,
the same eyes that once treasured society's trash.

The stupidity of wisdom. I told my lover once:

'You'll end up like one of those guys in the park
you know, the ones who yell at nothing and throw
bottles at people.' We were in my car, driving
across the Harbour Bridge. 'I don't care!' he said,
a fresh burst of spit coating his week-old t-shirt
like air freshener, the cheap kind that's labelled 'Alpine'
in black letters, and smells even worse than shit.

It was 11:30 by the time we made it to his office,
which is either shockingly late or 'Just in time
for lunch!' depending on whether your half-filled glass
contains vodka. At some point I suppose

I'll have to stop finding him hysterical
or I'll end up with the surname 'Jones'
and a bedroom with a leafy vista.

I know. But my friend's mum doesn't judge
because she knows the wilfulness of love,

the hurricane that howls in from nowhere,
from stillness to gale force in a breath.
Transient as we all are: voyeurs in a dream.

We'll Get Stoned on the Couch if it Takes All Night

We stripped him
ran a knife through his belly
shook the treasure out:

gold coins

guitar picks

misshapen cutlery

a bar coaster bearing two names:

Collette / Vickianne

Memories ransacked
we forced his rigid form
through the narrow doorway
in darkness, hushing each other
so the neighbours wouldn't hear.
Ten years of dust in our fingernails
leaving a crumb-trail behind us

of condom wrappers

soy fish

dirt

and more guitar picks

we shunted him down a concrete staircase
and out through the car park
to dump his gutted carcass
in front of someone else's house.

Back upstairs, we were confronted
by his vinyl imposter
still in its bubble-wrapped bondage.
Impassive, it watched
as we argued about screwdrivers
our sweat speckling the carpet

as if

from

a watering

can

But we got it upright
plonked our arses on it
drank wine, smoked weed
in silence; co-conspirators
in a breathless meantime.

Mesmerised:

the word derives from Mesmer,
a German guy who spoke of *animal magnetism*,
of energy transference. Mesmer, with his swirling
pinwheel eyes that paralyse the mind and slow down
time, the swoon on the cusp of an epiphany, a dream
that's neither good nor bad, but enchanting.
Standing in my lover's light I'm caught
like a child in a doorway looking up at a giant
and his meanness dissolves as he carries me
like a tombola prize with my feet dangling
through the sky. But like so many boys he's rough
with his toys, and plastic can only be pushed so far
before it will snap. Yet whenever I crack
he's always the one to come back, waving
his wine-stained peace rag, his voice casting spells
and his eyes like magnets, electrified
and the whole thing starts again.

Amaranthine

There's a tree branch pressed against your window:
leaves flexed up, muscular and persistent.
Roots sunk deep into the marshy clay
sucking fecundity upwards, persisting, *breathe*.

You've still juice: nature's sorcery agrees.
When I see you, cologne boils to steam
and we vibrate in harmony with bliss. Swollen
with major chords, fingers pressed to string.

Enough to make a lugubrious old man giggle.
Swing-dancing into our allocated roles,
eerily synchronous as if we'd already rehearsed
the steps in another life, or in dreams.

Let's treat this like a memory we can walk
around in. The palace doors creak open onto
gilded wings: in every room an instrument.
We can stay forever. We are immortal here.

I am avoiding u

slipping slippery
marble
fast
as a go
kart a
thrown
dart
dive bombing heavy belly
flopping steam rolling
smashing
vases window
panes sneezing
spit mist glass shards
wind
flinging rabbits
cats exercise balls dogs
fry
pans
continents cracking
bedrock
snapping
exposing fossilised
garbage
containing trace

elements
particles
proof
casts
VHS tapes
bottle
caps
lavender-scented
christmas
sticks
pink
pigs
decals
crates
evidence
snippets
trinkets
key rings
jackets
gift cards
headbands
candles
pogo
pot
plants ash
trays
cobwebbed
milk
decaying stacks of
yellow pages
in-line skates

loose
sand leotards tennis
sneakers
ribbons
feathers
boomerang
pillows
caravans
shredded
metal
confetti
glittering
beaches smoke
wisps
horizon
silvering
lavender
stillness
windows
closed

4. Weirdly Drawn

Travels and Travails

The arm of a shirt I paid seventy bucks for
when I didn't have the money is poking out
of the laundry pile as if hitching a ride
out of its slovenly neighbourhood.

In Sydney, the road *less travelled* is characterised
by potholes and speeding traps and brothels
while those on the motorway glide homeward
in BMWs. The cost of a functioning e-TAG
is office work, open-plan: with Arnott's
Assorted and Tim Tams offered
in lieu of a work-life balance.

At my last job, kitchen duties were enforced
by printouts of attack dogs.

The CEO ran nineteen kilometres
before eating her Paleo breakfast each morning
and demanded our attendance
at compulsory yoga workshops.

Whenever a staff member would disappear
their name would be scratched off the cleaning roster.

On the day I was sacked
for not attending an unpaid team-building exercise
on a Saturday, the road on the drive home
seemed narrower. I can't go back.

Limited Time Only

Her arse upon the clock hand like a builder on a steel beam at lunchtime: tin pail filled with sandwiches. The threat of the free-fall can only instil fear for so long eventually the bored worker becomes inclined to tricks such as poetry instead of sales copy: a call-to-action written in metered prose, replete with highfalutin adjectives. Nothing to lose: no mortgage, no kids, not even a cat to feed, she walks the length of hours and minutes like Philippe Petit dancing above Manhattan on a piece of wire unreachable. The shriek of a whistle as one shift ends and another begins. She curtsies in mid-air; disappears.

Honey

A short-term lover who kept bees for their honey
once called me a whore for writing advertising copy:
I disagreed. It's not prostitution, I countered.
Copy and poetry are different things;
I can't make money from art, but hey, I gotta eat.
While not beekeeping he worked full-time
as a middle manager and lived with his parents rent-free.
He asked which one of us I thought was smarter,
and chuckled smugly when I told him: 'me.'
For someone who'd built a career on selling things
I undersold myself for years and for a supposed
sex worker, I was scandalously underpaid.
This guy was allergic to bee stings and every time
he tended his hives he risked dying.
Spend forty hours a week in church with your head bowed,
praying, and you'll start to feel religious
you can only write propaganda for so long
before you start to believe it. I told myself
there was no other way to survive in this money-hungry life
and like a fearful wife, I stayed.
My eventual exit can't even be claimed as brave
I was 'let go' for not being a 'team player.'
There was a time when I thought of my many failed relationships
in terms of waste I gave the best parts of myself away
at bargain basement prices. But what of my gains?

Sustaining a reader's attention is hard,
yet here we are. His honey tasted like love.

Bags of Flavour

What we want to see is *you* on a plate.
It's essential the meat's cooked *perfectly*.
What this dish lacks is a crunchy element.
That sauce has just got *bags* of flavour!
Time goes fast in the MasterChef kitchen.
You've gotta work hard to stay in the competition.

When you first entered this competition
did you ever think that one day you would plate
a dish like this in such a prestigious kitchen
where everything's gotta be cooked *perfectly*?
We're amazed by your ingenious flavour
combinations and the care you've given each element.

She's enjoying this cook, she's in her element
and hasn't she just come so far in this competition?
She always delivers: *flavour, flavour, flavour!*
C'mon you've gotta admit this is a cracking plate
of food that fish is just cooked *perfectly*.
It takes a lot of strength to survive in this kitchen.

But haven't we seen some *disasters* in this kitchen?
I just don't *understand* the vegetable element.
We told him the quail has to be cooked *perfectly*.
Things have really started to heat up in this competition.

The problems in the cook have shown up on the plate:
everything's sadly lacking in finesse and flavour.

Remember, if your dish doesn't deliver on flavour
this could be your last cook in the MasterChef kitchen!
Don't forget, you will need time to plate
and make sure you season every element
because you don't want to leave this competition
on the back of a dish that isn't cooked *perfectly*.

What we want to see is a dish that's cooked *perfectly*
and absolutely jam-packed with flavour
the stakes are higher than ever in this competition
and everyone's fighting for their place in the kitchen.
Make sure you taste each individual element
together with everything else that's on the plate.

You don't want to leave the MasterChef kitchen
because you overcooked your main element!
It's simple: give us *who you are* on a plate.

Ozzified

Iceberg lettuce from a foggy crisper with a spike in the middle where the slightly brown stalk is impaled until the good bits are eaten and you're left with those vampiric foetal inner leaves that will sit there rotting for a week before someone sighing chucks it in the bin put some in a bowl toss it in SAXA salt and instant dressing the one you keep in the fridge door shake it up so it isn't just oil peel your baked potato from the copper-tinted foil top with pre-shredded cheese no need to gunk up your grater and grate off parts of your own fingers not to mention washing the bloody thing chews up sponges faster than the dog chews up those rubber toys that are supposed to be indestructible except your mutt has consumed at least three and pooped out bits of rubber for all the neighbours to see then we've got sauce the red sort you put on pies with gunk at the tip to which flies will stick some say it's too sweet but we have a word for those people and that's *weak* Tip Top sliced thin smeared with Flora or Meadow Lea pale yellow with serrated indentations and churned up crests of crumbs like a choppy swell full of sand and broken shells smear it on thick heat your barbie and sear your meat when it starts to smoke it's nearly done with sausages what you're looking for is a crunch steak should be grey and tough onions nicely charred pile it up with sour cream feel your plastic knife vibrate across slipping past glistening chops into the coleslaw elbow pasta grated carrot white pepper back again for seconds fish for tinnies in the Esky ring pull cracking like a trigger pink skin smokes and rum later on going for a Maccas run hot fries in your thirty cent cone get it into ya nice aye

The poetry reading

was shit. *Let's leave,*
I said, not subtle, causing
a kerfuffle with the awkward seating
and the beery-faced frizzy-haired patrons
sealing us in like mortar.

Worth it for the glee alone,
we fumbled out like truants
into the night, cold and green
as stagnant pool water.

In the park, our doppelgängers:
two skirmishing cats. Embarrassed
like sprung lovers, drained
of colour, they stood motionless,
waiting for us to pass.

Discussing neural pathways,
we left them to their tryst
(no one knows rejection like cat people)
while the reading, presumably, continued

a roomful of over-thinkers
eulogising love. Perhaps that's why
I'll never make it as a poet

I'm too distracted
by the real thing.

Commute

Bursting through the crust of the earth,
the train surfaces after Wynyard
and continues northwards along the bridge.

The sky's that clichéd shade of blue
painted aquamarine as if by crayon.

Sunlight flickers inside the carriage
like a film reel. Of all the commuters,
I'm the only one looking out the window.

I sit there and think about the theory
that says this world is necessarily perfect
and all things are in balance
and the meaning of existence is plainly evident
in the passage of time and the passing of seasons.

Then I realised I'd caught the wrong line
so I got off at Chatswood and waited,
while my thoughts meandered downstream
to the more pertinent question of dinner.

Perspective

Heaviness and heat. There's no way around
the tourists caught in their resinous slipstream,
I slow to an otiose plod. Cigarette butt confetti
adorns the kerbside where we wait for the green man
while the smell of cremation, barbecue-glazed,
wafts up from Hurricanes the ribs place
where patrons eat with bibs. The sun
is a heat lamp, pressed to the roof of our terrarium.
Since October, the bridge across Darling Harbour
has been rigged with speakers so pedestrians can listen
to *Frosty the Snowman* on forty-degree days.
Christmas is inevitable, inexorable, more so
than death no amount of running on a treadmill
can prevent it: the date is set. The conveyor belt
of days and weeks has been getting faster,
but within the day's oppressive slowness
is stillness the sensation of time expanding
like hot glass softly expanding: a wobbling
blister of breath. Skyscrapers have replaced
cathedrals as structures of grandeur and might,
and the hush of ducted air conditioning
is a kind of breathing. My office window frames
peace; I keep the blind open to witness ugliness
receding. With time enough and distance,
suffering transmutes into wisdom. A plane glides
between buildings. All of us are loved.

Funeral

Lost my shit at a taxi that wouldn't let me merge:
callous Sydneysiders dominate the roads
at all times. It's not their problem if you're driving
to a funeral.

A guy in the chapel driveway guides my car
to improvised parking as if it were the Easter Show,
and I end up right in front of the door.

I want to keep a low profile: I didn't know
my Great Aunt Enid very well. These people
could be strangers

yet they seem to know my name.

I'm terrified of small talk, especially
when wisecracking is off the cards.

There's a part of my brain dedicated to sabotage:
I want to laugh.

My sister and I are asked to share
a program. She's thirsty so I grab a bottle of water
branded with the funeral home's logo. We find seats
near the back just as an overly manicured lady
gets things started.

There's no coffin:

this is a 'celebration of life.' I'm relieved,
but Aunt Lyndal is incensed this is death
and we shouldn't try to pretend otherwise.
I'm transfixed by the ruched curtain
above the pulpit I can't figure out if it's fabric

or concrete that's been painted salmon pink.

Eulogies are given.

Enid's parents came from England, she was their first child, born in Penrith. They were farmers. My Pop was her brother – he wanted to study medicine but that wasn't an option for the working class at the time. His ambition was transferred to my father.

I'm fine until the photo slideshow.

Wind Beneath My Wings plays, too quietly, and I can't believe it's making me want to cry. Actually I want to weep but I can't let go even at a funeral: the one event in our culture where crying is acceptable if not required.

I feel so dreadfully sad and tired.

I want to weep, but I'm worried about smearing my makeup and making some kind of scene, so I stare at the ceiling and force it all back in.

We can't drive away immediately because everyone's been parked in by each other so we mill around the car park, tear-streaked but loosened with weird euphoria: the tough bit's over, plus it's a Monday and we're not at work. A teenage cousin twice removed is wearing tight shorts

I ask my sister if that's a funeral faux pas.

She nods. *Of course.*

The wake is at a golf club.

I'm heartened by the prospect of snacks,

and that's where I find my aunt and dad:

huddled round the sandwiches. I'm handed

a large glass of shiraz.

After all, Enid was partial to a tippie.

The sun has come out over the golf course, green

through the windows. It's the closest I've come

to touching bare earth today.

I invite Dad back

for trash TV and Uber Eats.

We share a bottle of red then I send him

to his hotel.

On the laser-printed Order of Service

a young Enid is smiling. I file her with my tax receipts.

Death and taxes. She doesn't mind; finds it amusing.

Dark humour runs in our blood: an epiphany.

Then, peace.

Body Worlds

A travelling show of 'plastinated' human bodies is passing through Sydney. The posters show a skinless man arched like a dancer, with nerves and tendons fanned out where there should be hands. His eyeballs seem to stare right at you no matter where you stand; his expression seems slightly sad, but maybe that's just my impression. I saw one of these exhibits about twelve years ago: on a date. It's hard to be flirtatious around flayed corpses but I was infatuated, and the very strangeness of that day has prevented the memory from fading. There was sadness then too even amid the romance and the contorted displays of human remains were flaking slightly at their edges: the plastic was scuffed in places. That's what my mind captured: gauzy filaments at the end of what were once a person's fingers, flickering in the air conditioning. I picture this image now as I pass a billboard for the new exhibition on my way to work. It's autumn again and the air is perfumed with decomposition. It smells of change a mulchy bouquet that induces the urge to burrow. Walking to work, a gust floods my senses with realness: my body's alive in a living world. The feeling links to my childhood. There was sadness then too.

5. Curled Against

All These Mixed Emotions

a Savage Garden cento

slow motion daylight
feel the presence all
around lift me up
into that privileged
point of view beauty
so unavoidable steel
& granite reminders
you don't have to close
your eyes take up
shelter in the base
of my spine compassion
in the jungle when we
used to live for the night
time you just keep
me contemplating
it's getting so loud
a thousand angels
dance around you
pour my heart to get
you in what a pleasant
dream the snow was
more lonely than cold
if you know what
I mean I believe

in love surviving
death into eternity

Latex

Losing track of condoms, time.
Glancing at our mirrored twins
the bodies we hijacked to be here
in the clownishness of form.
In a bright brisk morning we talk
of sorrow, entering the post office
too intoxicated to feign boredom
the clerk smirks as she turns away.
Forgivable as babies, delirious
and dribbling, a three-legged race
that's somehow found grace.
At the train station, impervious
to timetables, we embrace lateness
before motion separates us.
Prophylactic jammed to heaven
for an entire working day
a disgusting memento of love
conjured, embodied, exchanged.
'Safe sex' it's called. For hearts
there is no precaution.

Four Part Relationship Poem

1.

The globes in the decrepit chandelier
in my room have mostly blown
you keep offering to replace them, however
I'm aware of the situation and have a plan:
wait till they go, then light candles.
I'll admit that lately it's been quite dim
but I can never remember if they're bayonet
or screw-in

 you switch it off to check, and I snap

I'm looking for earrings, dammit!

 The dusty globe you extract
(bayonet; I make a mental note: 'weapon')
is placed on my desk beside a full box
of tealights
 and a pack of matches.

2.

At the Coles self-service checkout
the yoghurt won't scan. To trek back
across the bleak expanse to the dairy aisle
is unthinkable, but so is the thought
of amending our dinner plans.

You look to me in a half-panic:

I raise my eyebrows slightly

and open my hand.

We're both generally law-abiding
but for a shining moment we were
Bonnie & Clyde of the Sutherland Shire:
complicit and synchronous, riding
the rhythm of our secret language
across distance, which in this instance
was from the shopping centre to your kitchen
a couple of loved-up petty thieves
sticking it to the man.

3.

In Singapore, we went out seeking
a poetry reading but got side-tracked
by a record store. I found an original
pressing of *Computer World*
while you made the sales guy go wide-eyed
by recounting the gigs you've seen
in your lifetime.

Months later, you still apologise
that we never made it to the reading
but it was fine those things are like work
for me whereas listening to Kraftwerk
is fun. Your suitcase was packed full
as our stomachs, and the concierge
allowed us to shower in the spa area
before we went to the airport
it gave us a few minutes of relief
before we squeezed into our sweat-damp clothes
and tunnelled home.

We hadn't been gone long
but still, my heart soaked up the sunrise
spanning the horizon as we drove
quietly along the Princes Highway.

4.

You asked my Dad for advice
about stereo equipment
and to your astonishment
he told you analogue is dead
and anyone still using Monster Cables
is a deluded hipster.

For the duration of his trip
from Sydney to Brisbane, Dad made use
of the Qantas in-flight Wi-Fi
(not to mention we suspect the wine)
to text through product recommendations,
many of which were expensive.

Bluetooth? In a turntable?! you asked, aghast
you went to bed vexed.

It was you who said
when a father meets his daughter's boyfriend
it's like a showdown in the Wild West:
sheriff versus cowboy.

Well then, it's High Noon
and even if you could get the remaining members
of Pink Floyd to play *The Dark Side of the Moon*
in its entirety live in your living room
it still wouldn't secure Dad's approval.

Nonetheless:

I think he likes you.

Aubade

My gaze is a question
I can't stop asking
I don't mind waking
with the magpies now
light blazes a ring
round your curtains
you don't want to disturb
me I'm monstrous
but how can I remain
asleep I've reached
my destination at last
and jet-lagged
in this foreign place
that feels familiar
you pull me under
the sheet I'm sealed
inside muscle and flesh
my gaze is a question
your answer is always
yes

History of Sadness

The window frames a pink dusk, dot-matrix
through the fly screen. 'Miraculous' is a bit much

but it's been nearly a season without sky.
Smoke-choked for so long, I'm a child noticing

God for the first time. Bat silhouettes
pass overhead in wobbly trajectories.

I call Steven from his scrubbing to watch
the swirling lilac and silver curlicues of cloud:

a magic trick, or prophecy. Our eyes are still
wet. He's intent on tricking the bats, clapping

to send them off course. The heady stench
of jasmine is aggressively feminine. Petals

stream. I'm not clucky so much as I am tired
of grief. Each month the history of sadness

congregates inside me; virulent. Ants swarm
toilet paper and tissue boxes; I reach for a Kleenex

and smear myself with peppery energy.

Jesus. The dishwasher clicks and shushes.

I could pray, but I'm not sure what to ask for.
They're seeking fig trees and sex. In a café I asked

a Magic 8-Ball if everything would be okay
and it replied: *YES.* There's an old cockatoo

that's been coming around, skeleton-grey
and mangey; the other birds squawk it away.

Maybe it was a cruel person in another life;
this is how I justify my actions when I spray

mosquitoes and wasps. But don't bad people
start as children who've been traumatised?

I wanted to end the cycle. Grief is an addict,
pleading. You'll do anything. I wasn't arguing

with Steven; I saw his side and agreed with it.
There's an inner misalignment, like a car tire

that veers away from the highway. Hot nights
dreaming of still-alive cats and ballet exams.

Sweat: the body crying. Struggling up staircases
on torpid days. Unconquerable laundry hampers.

Then change. Cool air. Relief. Rain.

While sorting underpants, I get a response

of sorts. *Pay attention to whatever isn't pain.*

The room expands with subdued brightness.

The Come Down

Olive green blurring to dirt and the sky white as paper.

Currawongs. Isolation.

Tree branches curled in brace position
and leaves with tips like seismometer needles
in the awestruck eye of morning.

The night before we'd driven up a steep ramp
to oblivion, drawn heavenwards by music.

I'd written down what I could hear.

Waking up behind the wheel
with moon dust on the windshield, caking us in.
We burst out into bushland and saw a bird,
rare as a platypus, with AstroTurf plumage
and a traffic cone beak. Our totem.

It could only be auspicious.

We would marry each other and buy a hut out here,
call it 'Glue.' I'd set up a typewriter
and write poetry nude. We'd have children.

They'd be tan-skinned, like you.

The bird flew into the sky and pierced its glass.

Ice rain peppered the ground; ice shrapnel.

From the deck we watched a wallaby hop
like a soldier who'd wandered into no man's land

as, for minutes and minutes and minutes
the snare drum sound of hailstones
cried war, war. It was a queasy beauty
and we watched, queasily, in silence, for minutes.

The wallaby gave up and huddled by a frail tree,
snout twitching, until the hail stopped.
Then it bounded off across a crystal carpet
bright in the sudden sun.

My notebook lay open from the night before
like a postcard to myself from space
but I didn't write about the bird or the hail;
I didn't have the ability.
I was a sculpture, shaped by your hands,
waiting to be fired in the furnace of our breakup.

You sculpted a bird and I was gratified to learn
the wings worked. They were useful
when you threw me out into the air
of my future.

Notes

Golden Repair: the text for the ‘Kintsukuroi’ passage in ‘Golden Repair’ was taken from the Wikipedia entry for *Kintsugi* (a Japanese term which translates as ‘golden joinery’.)

Goldsbrough: the epigraph is from ‘Sadness and Isolation’ by Luke Davies.

We’ll Get Stoned on the Couch if it Takes All Night: the title of this poem was taken from ‘Wallpaper Codicil’ by Peter Minter.

Travels and Travails: ‘less travelled’ is a reference to ‘The Road Not Taken’ by Robert Frost.

All These Mixed Emotions: this poem is comprised of pieced-together lines from Savage Garden songs: ‘all these mixed emotions’ and ‘pour my heart to get you in’ from ‘Tears of Pearls’; ‘slow motion daylight’ and ‘feel the presence all around’ from ‘You Can Still Be Free’; ‘lift me up into that privileged point of view’ from ‘Gunning Down Romance’; ‘beauty so unavoidable’ from Santa Monica; ‘steel & granite reminders’ from ‘The Lover After Me’; ‘you don't have to close your eyes’ from ‘Truly Madly Deeply’; ‘take up shelter in the base of my spine’ from ‘I Want You’; ‘compassion in the jungle’ from ‘The Animal Song’; ‘when we used to live for the night time’ and ‘it's getting so loud’ from ‘Hold Me’; ‘you just keep me contemplating’ from ‘Break Me Shake Me’; ‘a thousand angels dance around you’ from ‘I Knew I Loved You’; ‘what a pleasant dream’ from ‘To the Moon and Back’; ‘the snow was more lonely than cold if you know what I mean’ from ‘I Don’t Know You Anymore’; ‘I believe in love surviving death into eternity’ from ‘Affirmation’. All songs written by Daniel Jones/Darren Hayes, all rights reserved Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, Warner Chappell Music, Inc.

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