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Poetry in the Making: phrenology, creativity and the art of collecting

(includes volume of poetry titled *Heads: a collection*)

by

Joan Macdonald McGavin

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

July 2020

University of Southampton

<u>Abstract</u>

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This Creative Writing thesis consists of two parts: a full collection of poems, and a critical account of what led to their creation and of the topics that arose from the writing. The poems are titled *Heads: a collection* for two reasons: 1) the volume began as an exploration, through poetry, of a number of nineteenth-century plaster of Paris casts of heads currently owned by Hampshire Cultural Trust and 2) those 'heads' were put together as a deliberate collection, just as poems put together are commonly called a 'collection' — the term thus used in this case self-consciously and as a kind of pun. In the poems directly about the casts as death- (and occasionally life-) masks and in other sections of the collection, the notion of identity and character and how these are represented persists. Those other sections include poems about Joseph Merrick, the so-called 'Elephant Man', a series of poems written in response to George Eliot's novella *The Lifted Veil*, some more autobiographical poems, poems written about artefacts or exhibits in various museums, and poems responding to modern technology, specifically the use of smartphones.

The critical commentary consists of six chapters. I begin with an Introduction, explaining the genesis of the poetry collection, giving some background to phrenology and its connexion to the collection of plaster casts of heads, and then outlining the various topics the critical commentary covers. A first main chapter covers 'An Afterlife for Phrenology'. Here I consider how the completely discredited pseudoscience might nevertheless still have some use not just in terms of providing subject matter for poems but also as a source of analogies and metaphors that can help analyse the creative process. Chapter 3 shows how 'Poetry and Learning' come together. It takes a mainly analytical-descriptive approach, selecting examples from other poets' (past and contemporary) work and my own poems, to articulate a threefold pattern that I characterise as 'fully integrated', 'unintegrated or self-conscious' and 'via media', that last where knowledge is overtly present but integrated to the extent that its presence seems natural rather than forced. I discuss allusion, quotation, footnoting and attribution in these contexts. Chapter 4 is about 'The

Relevance of Collection'. I look at parallels between poetry's and museology's use of the word "collection" and discuss the new area of poetry criticism called by Neil Fraistat "contexture", that is, the study of how poetry collections are put together. Looking at various examples of contemporary poetry collections, I show how poets have gone about assembling and 'displaying' their poems. I add my own experiences of this process and offer these as a case study. Chapter 5 is about Ekphrasis. Having considered what the dominant mode of writing in *Heads: a collection* is, I rejected the term 'elegiac' in favour of 'ekphrastic' as the most accurate description. I discuss the various ways in which ekphrasis has been applied to poetry, and conclude that although my poems often work in these ways, they also broaden the term. My poetry collection, in its treatment of artefacts that would not normally be deemed works of art, adjusts the normal criteria for ekphrasis and broadens its remit. The chapter also raises (but does not attempt to answer) ethical questions about ekphrasis. Finally, in my Conclusion, I revisit some key issues and conclusions. In reconsidering poetry and learning, for instance, I look at how contemporary critics and poets, like Peter Middleton, make ambitious claims for poetry's epistemological power. I also attempt to locate my own practice within the contemporary poetry scene.

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Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: JOAN MACDONALD MCGAVIN

Title of thesis: POETRY IN THE MAKING: PHRENOLOGY, CREATIVITY, AND THE ART OF COLLECTING

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. Parts of this work have been published as:-

'Researching Danger' and 'Babysitting the death-mask', *Writing in Education*, 80 (Spring 2020), 26–27

'*Lifted Veil* sequence', *Literary Imagination*, forthcoming Autumn 2020

Signature: *Joan Macdonald McGavin*   Date: 1 July 2020

Acknowledgements

Heads:

a collection

Joan McGavin

'[The past is] somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect, and unmistakably present in some material object (or in the sensation which such an object arouses in us), though we have no idea which one it is. As for that object, it depends entirely on chance whether we come upon it before we die…' Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*

'What are all these fragments for, if not to be knit up finally?' Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*

Contents

Poems

Long Arm Tactics

'I delight in a palpable imaginable visitable past — in the … marks and signs of a world we may reach over to as by making a long arm we grasp an object at the other end of our own table.'
Henry James, Introduction to *The Aspern Papers*

Not like those special effects in films or cartoons

where an arm suddenly, horribly, grows longer and longer,

snakes towards the good guy to grasp his throat and crush —

it's more ordinary, domestic: a child, still hungry, relaxed

in her own home, reaches for the cake that looks best

(she's eaten all her first course) on a not-too-far-off plate

she feels she can get to. Or it's me, swimming, making

a last overarm stroke so I can brush the tiles

at the end of the pool where shiverers linger.

As by making a long arm… we deploy what tactics we can

to gain the past. Its lure of knowability

makes us risk the gesture we hope will get us there

like driving on and on by lost farms in the lee of border hills

even if fierce, half-blind dogs are all that come out to look.

Poems

Bain's train*

I'm on a train and Hampshire

is staring in at the windows, making its presence felt.

I feel relaxed, ready to sleep. Bain keeps

creeping into my head: my nervous system works

like the course of a train by the side of which run

telegraph wires… by the side of which run…

The individual wires cannot be said to run the whole length

of the country (or the body) —

here I snuffle in my snooze —

but they form a network that does.

As telegraph wires run from station to station,

I follow their progress, nod to the wheels' repetitions:

so the nerves run from 'nerve centre' to 'nerve centre'.

I think I've become… by the side of which run…

the nerves — like the wires — originate nothing,

they merely conduct. They merely conduct.

This train is conducting me through time and space.

My mind conducts me from here to there.

And am I the wire, or one of those white bits at the top

of a telegraph pole, disrupting the swoop of the line?

Each nerve has only one function (either sensory or motor).

I think of them — mine — as birds dotted along the wires,

waiting to fly away and help cause the future:

in a feeling, in a movement. *The 'nerve centres' —*

like the stations on the railway line — have the property

of 'sending out motor power…' We stop at Shawford,

so small its motor power must be that of a hiccup — head on

to Winchester, thrill towards London

… *especially through the spinal cord, which is regarded as one big centre*.

London, the squashed-down spinal cord, central —

it would have us think.

*Italicised words are from Alexander Bain's 1855 *The Senses and the Intellect*.

Poems

Leaving the Heads Behind: slightly Hardyesque

I

(Dr. Lyford's voice, to himself)

I can't take everything on moving day

now Brighton calls and Emily is mine.

I'm almost sure the heads will have to stay

for someone else to deal with, but that's fine:

my tender-hearted darling wouldn't seek

to keep them once we're wed. She'll want all new

and neat and dainty, soft — not things that reek

of death. A change would surely suit me too.

The prison or the institute can house

those artefacts that once enthused me so.

I'm all for moving on now chance allows

a family life again. How good to know

my sweet new wife's a girl who understands

it's flesh and blood I like beneath my hands.

II

(Emily's voice, to a friend)

Dear Henry showed me, once, those funny heads —

the death masks, casts of good and bad and rash.

You know that one of them's Napoleon,

another one — the black man called Eustache —

was famously benevolent and kind

but some were hanged for being really bad,

for dreadful things they did without remorse:

they poisoned, stabbed, and some were no doubt mad.

To tell the truth, they make a shudder run

all down my spine. I'm glad they'll stay right here.

I shouldn't like them sitting in a row

in our new house. I think I'd never know

a moment's peace. And what is more I fear

my love for Henry might be quite undone.

Poems

Death mask

To see it you must cradle it up

and out of its bubble-wrap swaddling

into the room's light

where you'll compare the marks left

by damp or age to plaster become skin

broken out in a rash,

to lichen flowering over rocks

and wonder at the detail in the moulding:

eyelashes, facial hair, evidence of how death

was met — the rope-mark that collars the neck.

Posed on its smooth, round plinth

where a name once was but now

a light-coloured patch marks the place,

the face remains anonymous.

You may glance past it,

see someone in the background

doing perfectly ordinary things

or you'll start a conversation,

carry it round in your arms,

gash crimson onto its lips and line with kohl

the closed, blank eyes,

smear some life into it.

Rush, still

The flatlined scrawl

that's meant to be words

on the Staffordshire figure

is unequivocal:

like your victims,

you're silenced.

'Paper' hangs from your right hand,

not so much speech bubble as a way

of showing the fourteen pages

you wrote and spoke, in your defence,

in spite of rampage, murders.

The public wanted detail, bought you

as a flat-back figure

to put on their sideboards.

No such memorial for Giovanni Bianchi,

the immigrant who made your death-mask,

no medal or mask to turn up now and then

in museums and sheds, painted black or left plain,

the words 'James Blomfield Rush' on a card beside it:

his story's alive in descendants in Norwich

proud of his skill, his adaptability,

the life he created in an adopted country.

But you, Rush? The china figure crops up

in salerooms, commands good prices.

Poems

Your death-mask was copied, collected,

can be found in museums. But the waxwork

in Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors

has gone who knows where:

smashed, dismantled

or still in some weirdo's

silent gloating cellar.

Two heads are…

Head number one is Gesche,	Head number two is Jenny,
beheaded 1831	alive and well and over here
for poisoning fifteen people,	from the New World as a student.
many of them her relations.	Full of life, like a new century.
Dubbed the "Angel of Bremen"	For weeks now, behind her in class,
for stoicism in grief	I've watched her shaven head,
she became in the last analysis	fascinated, wanting to touch.
the "Devil Bride of Bremen" —	I'd always thought those who did this
a black widow who came to scorn	looked horrid, like death's heads,
the men she married	but she's beautiful. It suits her.
and anyone suspicious of her.	The skull shapely, its soft fur
Enough of all that. What's relevant	growing week by week,
is that, beheaded, they scalped her	darkening shade by shade
so as to show her skull's true shape	till I can almost make out
for a phrenological reading,	what the true colour is.
sure it would bear out its tenets	Now she can wear a flower
in the reading of her bumps.	or hair-slide in it, though I expect
A death-mask was made,	she'd call it a barrette.
ugly, of this skinned scalp	Sometimes she runs a hand
staring sightless across time	around her skull's shape,
as if to check something.	as if to check something.

Poems

Baby Face*

Even his name's too cute,

too childish —

John Amy Bird Bell —

to suggest a murderer.

And here's his death-mask:

complete with eyelashes

and almost dimples,

especially on his right cheek;

the skull shaven

for the phrenologist's hands.

I read somewhere

about "flaxen curls".

He was fourteen years old.

It's said he was brass-necked

throughout the trial,

admitted he'd stabbed

the boy a year younger

in woods near Rochester,

for the three half-crowns,

a shilling and sixpence

he was carrying home to his father.

John's brother was look-out,

got the shilling and sixpence

as his share of the loot.

Even his name's too

monosyllabic.

Looking hard at this

cherubic face,

the lips not quite beyond

a baby's pouting,

the eyelids closed as if

in needed sleep,

I'm convinced that all

I'd have wanted to do,

were he alive,

is give him a hug,

some bread and scrape

or a toy diabolo.

*John Amy Bird Bell (1817-1831) was one of the youngest persons hanged for murder in England in the 19th century.

Poems

This posthumous life*

Poor Johnny Keats was dead

and here's his head

(and hand and foot)

in plaster. Thinner now than when,

five years before, he had, for fun,

to help an artist friend,

a life mask done.

An extra line or two

around the mouth, new

and deep. But it still has

the first one's same slight upward slant

or hint of humour: a nod

to suffering's end? No rant

against it being over or word of God:

I shall die easy, he knew.

In one sense it was true:

it seemed like sleep to Severn;

Keats' last words *Don't breathe on me –*

it comes like Ice. And then he went.

I wonder if his friend felt free

to breathe upon him as he bent

over to check…

*Keats said to his doctor in the days before his death, 'How long will this posthumous life ... last?'
Quoted in a letter by Joseph Severn to John Taylor, 6 March 1821.

Russian Faces, Russian Dolls

The two Russian men on my TV screen

have shrunk to one — or rather, one of them

has become two: his young, unbearded self

to his left as the screen splits anew.

Perhaps his partner in crime

will be duplicated next.

Their blank faces stare back at us, reveal nothing,

secrets gathered behind their eyes.

The one Russian woman in the photograph

reveals little also, but has a name,

though that itself's a problem

her suggestion of a smile doesn't answer.

If "Princess Tolstoya, a Russian Lady Benevolent"

which Princess, exactly, is she?

Aleksandra Sergievna Tolstoya, or perhaps

Anna Ivanovna Bariatinskaia, who married Count Tolstoi?

Died 1873, or almost fifty years earlier?

Wake from your long sleep, nameless lady.

Russia needs you again, your reputation

for kindness, benevolence. Out and about

in the world are those who poison

your country's reputation, its standing

among nations. And we want to ask how

you earned that "benevolent" tag.

Did you care for the poor, and house them?

Give them good food, not stuff to sicken them

unto death? Open your mouth and tell us.

Your death-mask's beyond questioning,

the dreamy photograph of it sealed

in silence – like those men whose names are also

problematic. Can't any of those ears hear us?

(And could ear shape be used for identification?)

Tolstoya, your eyes are closed, blanked, but the so-called

Petrov, Boshirov, look out at us directly,

do not avoid scrutiny. Ah, but your death-mask

makes you a kind of matryoshka. Your face was once

inside a plaster cast – and if I could get my hands on that

to split it open, I might catch a trace of the real you remaining.

Speaking of death-masks: four encounters

'As if a death mask ever could replace/ Life's faulty excellence!' Marianne Moore, 'To Statecraft Embalmed'

I

Concerning death-masks

Don't be tentative. Okay it may drop

but be confident, pick it up

without a qualm. And if you decide

to pray to placate the god

Butter Fingers, then that's fine also.

Use two hands, one on either side

of the head. Then move one hand

down and grasp the rim of the plinth.

You'll realise the whole thing's hollow

and how reassuring that new grip is.

If you pretend it's a baby

or your aunt's favourite ornament

you won't go far wrong. Don't let

confidence lull you, though:

I've seen someone tip a mask

up and down the way you'd move

a bottle of juice to spread the fruit

through it equally. So cavalier.

Remember this thing represents

a kind of memorial.

Poems

It's not a ventriloquist's dummy.

You can't make it speak. No lever

will make its lips move. And though

you turn it, hold it face to face,

no conversation can follow.

It's forever tongue-tied, but try

lifting it higher to see it anew.

From this angle you may notice

fresh detail, as a lover's face

comes alive with perusal.

When later you place it

back on its stand or into its box,

spare a thought: no matter

how evil or saintly the person,

this artefact moulded from plaster

was once, through muslin, within

a hair's breadth of an actual face,

a newly dead one, yes, with all

its muscles stopped, but none

the less human.

II

Researching Danger

There's a traffic jam   on the information highway

so here I am   stuck waiting   to find out

what a famous museum holds   that might be of interest

to a student of an outmoded science that's now   almost always

described as 'pseudo-'.   Meanwhile

the country stumbles on   politicians resign

people wonder   where it will all end

a child receives   a vaccination that will save her

from one particular disease   that might have afflicted her

at some point in the future.   Meanwhile

in my dining room   in a sturdy cardboard box

Gesche Gottfried   entertains

her plaster dream   of her version of progress:

more poisonings   more victims   so I hesitate

meanwhile   to allow her   the publicity of oxygen.

Poems

III

Babysitting the death-mask

Hands-On Humanities Day, Southampton, 2018

Perhaps it was me   perhaps someone else

who not quite on the ball   failed

to take on board   the fact   that this day

would involve mainly   families with small children

so here I am   babysitting the death-mask

I've managed to borrow   from its current custodians

and explaining   as best I can   to a five-year old

what it is   and what it means.   It's a good challenge

and it's only a trick   of the light   that means I imagine

the Devil Bride of Bremen   is smirking   ever so

slightly as I pick her up   turn her over   gripping

her plinth   to show the child she's hollow

like an Easter egg   with nothing in it

nothing in it   at all   and   *Look* says the boy

she's got no hair   no hair at all   *on her head.*

Why's she got no hair?

What I might explain is that   dead   she was scalped

for phrenological reading purposes   having been

beheaded   a death sentence   after poisoning

fifteen   including relatives   her children

but instead   I play for time   smile

set her back carefully   on the table

find myself muttering   about fashions at the time

and nothing in it   at all   to worry   your head about.

Poems

IV

A Death-Mask Speaks

I've always felt like second best

because I wasn't live, was plaster made

to copy flesh. I lack the brain

to talk, don't know how I'm able,

can think these thoughts now — except perhaps

by some transfer of power from when

the plaster touched the shaven skull and moved,

seeming to have a will. I have a certain cachet:

the nearest you'll get to authenticity, the truth of

how he looked. But like an Easter egg, I'm

hollow all through, yet with details that prompt

surprise, like dimples, scars. Even the mark of that

rope they hanged me with still scarfs my

neck; nevertheless a copy of the actual,

though one that has almost kissed the real —

only the width of a muslin cloth, perhaps,

between me and skin — the body's largest organ.

Between me and skin — the body's largest organ

only the width of a muslin cloth, perhaps,

though one that has almost kissed the real

neck — nevertheless a copy of the actual

rope they hanged me with still scarfs my

surprise, like dimples, scars, even the mark of that

hollow, all through — yet with details that prompt

how he looked. But like an Easter egg. I'm

the nearest you'll get to authenticity, the truth of

seeming to have a will. I have a certain cachet:

the plaster touched the shaven skull and moved

by some transfer of power. From when…

can think these thoughts now, except perhaps

to talk don't know how. I'm able

to copy flesh. I lack the brain.

Because I wasn't live, was plaster made,

I've always felt like second best.

Poems

That there are many synonyms for head

is not surprising, it's so important

a part of us.

They range widely,

from medical: cranium, skull —

though those don't cover all of it —

to traditional: Jack fell down

and broke his crown.

Tumbling after that, to jokey-childish:

noodle, noddle, nob, noggin, nut

or bonce might fill, take up or occupy

its space. Pate, though,

tends to be bald; conk gets confused

with nose and poll's now a tax

of hated memory.

Costard and Crumpet, the edible twins,

not an end-of-the-pier comedy duo

or Shakespearean double act,

sound archly archaic.

Let's settle for *head*, then,

the bit between the ears,

the bit housing the brain

and eyes and nose and lips

and tongue, the bit Salome

put on a platter and that

the RSC props department

has a whole gallery of

just waiting to perform.

Lifted Veil poems

(prompted by George Eliot's words, quoted as epigraphs here, from *The Lifted Veil*)

I

Mr Letherall's phrenological reading

'I was in a state of tremor, partly at the vague idea that I was the object of reprobation, partly in the agitation of my first hatred — hatred of this big, spectacled man, who pulled my head about as if he wanted to buy and cheapen it.'

So big, the man in black, with such large hands.

The boy's head seems a shrinking globe,

held fast between them. He presses here and there,

to feel its bumps, puts thumbs like little pillars

each side the temples, to hold the squirming child

away from him. His glasses glitter.

He draws those thumbs across the brows

as if to flatten, shape the hairs there neatly.

Gives his reading – suggests a way to remedy

deficiencies he names. The boy trembles, turns his face

as each hand's removed. The picture in his mind is

of his head, shrunk apple-size; Letherall picks it up,

dusts it between his hands, bites deeply in, discards it

as if it were a pippin, discovered to be rotten,

bruised brown, inedible.

The child feels how hatred can be pure.

Lifted Veil poems

Poems

II

Stone City

'…as if it were the summer sunshine of a long-past century arrested in its course — …scorching the dusty, weary, time-eaten grandeur of a people doomed to live on in the stale repetition of memories, like deposed and superannuated kings, in their regal, gold-inwoven tatters.'

The stone people rule here, their eyes gone blank, gone black,

from the sheen of the metal river. They line the bridges.

See clockwork people stop in the streets, then start again,

as though mechanisms were running down.

Inhabitants sigh as they brush the statues' gold-inwoven

tatters – though that sound could be anything:

the air, say, framing the gasp of a building's collapse.

The statues are kings, saints, queens who, for all anyone knows,

carry stone babies – lithopaedia – beneath their garments,

trapped outside their wombs forever,

the real heirs of this unrefreshed city.

III

The Vision of Bertha

'The pale-green dress, and the green leaves that seemed to form a border about her pale blond hair, made me think of a Water-Nixie … and this pale, fatal-eyed woman, with the green weeds, looked like a birth from some cold, sedgy stream, the daughter of an aged river.'

She was pale, like the daughter of an aged river, not a bubbling stream

that enjoys escaping its source. And all that hair – almost too much

for her slender body and face, so pale blond in its green-leaved frame –

as if a creature from myth or legend stood there, assessing.

Nothing young or girlish

about those pale grey eyes.

I should have been warned,

or warned myself, against

the inspection they turned, fixed on me.

Poems

IV

Two green brooches across time

'Bertha, my wife — with cruel eyes, with green jewels and green leaves on her white ball-dress…
She came with the great emerald brooch on her bosom, a studded serpent with diamond eyes…'

The first one fictional, a metaphor worn on her ballgown

By a villainous woman – almost a cliché, but not quite.

As if the word cliché had changed its meaning and was now

By definition a 'large and noticeable brooch' — as in

Goodness, did you see that cliché she was wearing?! I couldn't

Take my eyes off it. But a trifle vulgar, wouldn't you say?

Now we'd call it a 'statement brooch', as if it could talk.

The second one's a real, now thirty-six years old,

Much-treasured gift — and in its own way a metaphor.

Do you know those Victorian mourning brooches, with a lock

Of a dead person's hair preserved under glass? I thought it

Horrid, the first time I saw one, but understood the impetus.

And when I'd moaned about being left alone holding the baby,

You off at conferences, academic trips, you said the first time

They paid you something like a decent fee I'd have

A gift: chosen from designs by an artist-jeweller.

And that's what happened: there's tourmaline, and peridot

(Don't say the 't' or say it?) and gold, all finely wrought —

And when our son's blond hair was first cut, I kept a lock,

So there it is, at the back of the brooch, preserved under glass:

A celebration-not-mourning brooch,

A gift to celebrate the other, human gift.

V

Statement Piece/s

(Two green brooches across time 2)

The green in it's the main shape, a snake

enamelled, uncurling

against the white of a patterned dress,

as if lurking among those leaves,

waiting to strike, to fulfil

its flicker-out of poison.

Diamonds show the hardness of the eyes,

the serpent's and the woman's. Glittering.

Metaphorical. The whole thing glares

a challenge, willing you to overlook it.

*

An intricate, delicate form emerges,

with tourmaline, Eilat stone

jewelling the hair, adorning the brow.

Gold forms curls and hearts,

a profile that stares out at the world.

Eyes hidden by a round green gem,

she keeps her own counsel.

Behind her head, behind glass

you'll find a lock of hair, preserved

but this is not a mourning brooch.

Poems

VI

Mrs Archer Points the Finger

'The dead woman's eyes were wide open, and met hers in full recognition — the recognition of hate. With a sudden strong effort, the hand that Bertha had thought for ever still was pointed towards her, and the haggard face moved. The gasping eager voice said—'

Shock! Horror! Accusation!

Servant Makes Grave Revelation!

(*You mean to poison your husband*)

Shock! Horror! Accusation!

Dying Woman's Animation!

(*The poison is in the black cabinet*)

Shock! Horror! Accusation!

Details Add to Consternation!

(*I got it for you*)

Shock! Horror! Accusation!

Vitriolic Situation!

(*You laughed at me, and told lies about me behind my back*)

Shock! Horror! Accusation!

Dying Servant's Inhalation!

(*To make me disgusting*)

Shock! Horror! Accusation!

Wife Rejects All Information!

(*Because you were jealous*)

Shock! Horror! Accusation!

Dying Woman's Reparation!

(*Are you sorry*)

Shock! Horror! Indignation!

Archer's Dying Respiration!

(*now?*)

Expiration!

Poems

That there are no synonyms for lonely

is fitting:

it exists lonelily,*

dictionary definitions

immediately inadequate.

They employ

poecilonyms that lack

its emotional colouring:

solitary just can't hack it.

Solitary is, yes, the woman

at the window, staring out.

It's not the memory that starts

the shudder when she thinks

of the one she's lost.

That there are no proverbs

about lonely and loneliness is true.

It takes one to tango? No.

Too lonely cooks spoil the broth?

I doubt it.

Though there's the idiom

to be sent to Coventry —

which isn't quite the same

as to be sent to Lonely.

Likewise no similes or metaphors,

setting aside Wordsworth and that cloud

which must itself have been unusual,

given the massed bands of them

that march (not float) across our skies

most of the time.

That the only rhyme for lonely

is *only* is only right,

God — and Bob Dylan — knows why.

Oh, and Miss Lonely, too.

That there is no verb

is clear.

You can *isolate* someone

but not *lonely* them, or *lone* them.

No witch's spell or curse goes:

You will lonely, fall asleep

for a thousand years.

That there's no single, straightforward

opposite of loneliness

is likewise part of its oddness:

in the sense of not being lonely

togetherness won't do.

In the sense of an emotional

opposite: *conviviality*,

clubbability, *joy*?

Not obvious.

Meanwhile, you cannot be lonely

in French, since you can only

be *seul*:

which is both being alone

Poems

and being lonely,

not definitely either.

If it's the same in other languages

I don't know.

Lonely in Latin?

That the King James Bible

doesn't have *lonely*

or any cognate form is strange.

Alone, yes, and *solitary* and *solitarily*

but no *lonely*.

Did Christ feel lonely on the cross?

There were the thieves, on either side,

and God, of course,

though the fourth of the seven

last sayings would seem to

suggest the ultimate loneliness.

And is God now lonely?

Or always has been?

We're into deep theology…

…and folk tunes

where the rashes grow green

and we count down

to solitude —

or is it loneliness,

the loneliness of God, some say?

Is that what's meant by

One is one, and all alone,

and evermore shall be so?

And already lonely is shrinking.

It suffers from aphesis, poor thing.

As *lone* has shrunk

from *alone*, was there once

an adjective *alonely*

palely loitering

in song lyrics:

I'm alonely for you

tooooonight ?

The process may continue,

lonely go on shrinking,

though for *loneliness* to disappear

altogether

would need us all to be on its case —

not just the politicians

who've taken to calling it

a scourge — but all of us —

and not just by musing

on a post-Romantic nominalisation

or by deleting

a three syllable word

from all our screens.

*based on ideas in Christopher Ricks' "Loneliness and Poetry" chapter in *Allusion to the Poets*.

Poems

Merrick poems:

I

Wonder

Not like a disease

but like a gift, a rainbowing

of the retina as I came up

out of the Underground

into Whitechapel, one wet November dusk

and the sari and salwar kameez shop window

dazzled;

the same place exactly where

a hundred and thirty plus years before

Tom Norman set up the show

that brought students, doctors over

from the hospital opposite, to see

Joseph Merrick, known then as

The Elephant Man.

I wonder if the wonder I felt

was the nearest I might ever get

to the childlike, book-born admiration

Merrick felt when he saw,

for the first time, a spectacular

Christmas pantomime, about which

in his soft, fluting voice he spoke

breathlessly,

for weeks and weeks and weeks.

Poems

II

Merrick's rooms

still exist, half underground,

their comfort reduced to utility:

storage for things unneeded

though once of value

to the hospital nearby.

Unrecognisable as what they were:

a haven for a young man,

a late Victorian, so different

as to prompt strong emotions

in those who met him.

I would call them a bunker

if not for the connotations,

personal, historical:

the coal cellar a grandmother

in her late eighties

decided to whitewash;

the place where Hitler,

married, then shot himself,

and Mrs Goebbels poisoned

her six children

in their white nightgowns.

III

Smiley

Scientists and toothpaste manufacturers

delight in citing how many muscles –

forty-three? twenty-six? seventeen? –

it takes us humans to smile.

Treves, the kind doctor, noted as a sad fact

about Joseph Merrick (the 'Elephant Man')

that although capable of great happiness

he could not smile, though 'he could weep'.

Another popular search involves

how many muscles there are

in an elephant's trunk.

You'd be surprised.

Poems

IV

Joseph Merrick's Genitalia

Since you want to know

and since there's a bandwagon

starting up among male poets

writing about penises (their father's,

especially), let me tell you,

once and for all,

and in the tone I might use

to rap out the words

'Stop sniggering, there at the back!'

that Joseph Merrick's genitalia

were normally formed.

I don't know about functional.

V

One Day in Dorchester

An act of imagination is needed,

this February day, to picture

Hardy, an old man, standing dogged

in freezing January rain at Treves' grave

as others begged him, for the sake

of his health, to move away.

I take photos on my smartphone.

The sun's unseasonal warmth grows.

I record what the Celtic cross says

about Treves, his wife, the dead daughter

Hetty, he couldn't, for all his skill, save,

and no-one could, in medicine, then.

No act of imagination needed

to see the words have shrunk

behind lichen, the past's contained

in this peaceful cemetery

out beyond a grassy, quiet,

amphitheatre, Roman.

Come away, the town says,

tugging my arm. *Come away,*

madam. You'll catch your death,

squatting there, so unladylike,

sweating in such hot sun,

nose to the gravestone.

VI

Happiness, Hoodies, Lambdacism

Joseph would have been delighted

to hear how many Japanese children,

having seen the film,

made brown paper bags with eye-slits in

like the pillar box hood devised for him

so they could pretend to be him

and run around laughing,

declaring themselves,

as reported by John Hurt,

'Erephant Man! Erephant Man!'

'I am happy every hour of the day,'

said Merrick, as reported by Frederick Treves.

Poems

VII

Challenge

Perhaps the Critical Luxury Studies staff

would like to consider the fact

that Michael Jackson tried to purchase

the skeleton of Joseph Carey Merrick,

also known as 'The Elephant Man',

offering the Royal London Hospital

a million pounds. I'm happy to say

the offer was declined.

Please also get your students

to debate the following question,

What is it

that money can't buy?

That there are few synonyms for memory

is predictable: it does the job

so well itself. The ones there are

resort to 're-'. Re-call, re-tention,

remembrance, recollection,

reminiscence: a solid cohort.

Can't see that lot wandering down

Memory Lane or singing thanks

for the. Otherwise it's phrases

like ability to remember or the faculty

by which the mind stores or powers of

(them again!) recall or retention.

Expansive words. Against them

set the anamnesis that

only psychiatrists

philosophers, Christians

know of.

Memory's not quite

the opposite of forgetfulness

or the key to our identity. But still:

wish I could say something

more memorable about it.

Poems

Coming back to this island

you know well, after two years' absence,

you see remains everywhere. Because the stones

in many places were once houses, townships, you see

abandoned villages everywhere, not just where

they really are. A trick of the light, perhaps.

You feel yourself sinking into the silence,

like a welcome sinking into sleep when you're dog-tired —

although memories snag on the way down,

force you back towards the surface.

Some are nightmare: the dead, bloated sheep

you found looking back at you

from the rock pool it had drowned in. Against that set

a thought that entrances:

the realisation

this is the kind of place

where the local Spar

keeps four different kinds of bird seed.

Face to Face

A free gift on that first evening walk:

not one, but, I realised, three deer,

across a field and down by the sea.

I needed binoculars…

… to train my sight on the place

where the first one I'd seen stood still

right in my line of vision

in the fading light, watching me face on.

The lens brought that look so close

I jumped back; then panned to see more:

it became three of them, looking at me

hard, awaiting movement.

I turned for home, and later still

you heard — from where? — across the night air

sounds we made out to be gunfire.

We paled at the thought.

Out on the grass you came, across fences,

face to face with the local farmer.

He was armed, so you kept stock still,

watching him watching you.

Nothing was said, yet he knew you knew

his aim, did not see eye to eye with him,

though it might be legal, the deer on his land,

or in and out of it.

Did he think of turning his gun

towards you, as I waited indoors?

You told me you counted the seconds

till he moved and broke the contact:

seconds where no words were spoken,

just looks exchanged, and Death,

that old smoothy, sat on your shoulder

mouthing his refrain: *Et in Arcadia*

ego.

Old Playground

The faded yellow tape

cordoning it off

can barely raise the flutter

that might implore you

to turn your back

on the whole scene:

mums on empty benches,

overgrown by greenery,

misty children queuing

to come down the slide

that's somehow kept its shine.

Laughing, they disappear

into the sway of the grass.

The swings have only frames,

like brackets round nothing.

Workmen took the roundabout,

the bucking bronco, leaping dolphin,

left flat concrete maps

of small, ghost continents.

And everything is leaching

the last of its colour.

When did everyone become

so glaringly invisible?

Poems

The Effect of Seeing Certain Hoardings on my Autobiography

I grew up in a lovable city, full of tradition and tourists.

I go back often, to see what's new,

how the old is faring. My last visit

I discovered that although

I was born in this lovable city,

in The Simpson Memorial Maternity Pavilion

of The Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, now

I can say, with no word of a lie,

I swear on my mother's grave, that I

was born in the future

Futures Institute.

*

To be born in the future —

what a fate, what an opportunity!

The medicine might be better, though I could hardly

have asked to be born in a luckier place —

the surgeon who delivered me being, I was told,

one with a nifty pair of forceps named after him.

My mother loved him for the old-fashioned courtesy

and the gallant way he set up their 'date' for my delivery,

after she'd lain on her back with her 'stitch' for four months,

which was what things were like then.

That there need be no synonym for museum

is evident — so precisely does it do the work

of evoking a place that houses

things collected, stored,

exhibited, referred to,

understood: artefacts.

Gallery doesn't hack it,

seems full of paintings, sculpture.

Institution has a cold, Victorian heart,

revels in its ambiguity.

Repository makes me think

of suppository.

No, celebrate museum,

where the Muses hang out,

so classy yet so democratic

we can all go through its portals,

at least of the British version,

if we can get to London

and queue our way in.

Poems

Sleep Sound

(a lullaby)

Tahemaa, sleep sound

in your painted sarcophagus,

the colour of which is slowly restored

on Tuesdays, with cotton buds:

a long, slow process where patience is core.

What you were isn't what you've become:

star exhibit in a Bournemouth museum,

its very own mummy, and yet if you come

downstairs with me now to a large glass case,

there are two heads there, both reconstructions:

your young — then a second, an older — face.

Though casts have been made of your skull and your head

the sleep you sleep is the sleep of the dead

where only CT scans have disturbed you,

perhaps set dreams going… If you only knew

how long your afterlife, how far you've been brought

to this seaside town on the edge of a world

quite foreign to you. Sleep on that thought.

Implacable

'All that / Should flow is sealed, is poised/ In implacable stillness.' Denise Riley, 'A Part Song' xvii

As if this huge bird halted

in a peacock-like double fanning

of his wings, glanced over his shoulder

in shy pride at such splendid feathers.

Only that's wrong. He was halted

by busy hands. One of the best

taxidermists, a friend of Darwin,

worked on him. That's why those

gorgeous wings don't take up space

as in the wild they would. They point down,

something implacable about their stillness.

And outrageous. My rage flickers out,

bounces off the surface of his case.

That caging. How could they? Contain, I mean,

constrain a hundred eyes behind glass,

reverse the geometry of his tail's upward twitch?

And not shy pride but rather shock and daze

in the dulled blue iridescence of his face.

He's stuffed. Well, and truly. He knows it.

A plain hen-mate below him, in a twiggy forest,

like an afterthought. Irrelevant beside

the stare of all his showcased eyes.

Poems

A Great Argus (*Argusianus argus*),

collected Malaysia, 1879.

How to read him: his mating dance

twisted out of true, him tucked away,

almost, from public view, below the stairs,

beyond the Ladies' discreet doorframe?

And what about provenance?

The curator tells me all he knows

of what he's inherited. His email,

informative, kind, also sounds,

it should be said, apologetic.

Please note, however: now,

by accessing the Net,

you can buy yourself a live one.

A Great Argus (*Argusianus argus*),

collected Malaysia, 1879.

Don't go looking for a photo

once you've read this poem —

don't reduce her to that

or to the gold jewels

found beside her, or even

the string of cheap blue beads

that were perhaps (we're told) a gift from a child.

What may remain of us is things

including bones, casts, our shapes

filled out with wax, with resin —

and also the *frisson* that such

give rise to in the living.

Preserved creature, owner of armband,

bronze jug of water, a purse,

a basket for coins and gold trinkets,

she has swum across seas

away from all the others who ended

in the same Pompeiian room.

She's trailed dim light

along with her, like some large

deep-sea fish, dredged up

into this darkened museum space

where I look and look

but no more dare catch her

Poems

in my phone's camera flash

than I can say to her,

Smile, *Ouistiti* or even, o

Lady of Oplontis, *Sorridi*, or rather *Subridē*.

Makeshift

or, how the female prisoners of the Model Bridewell at Wymondham, Norfolk, spent their time
devoted to the New Testaments that prison inspectors had given them.

Now the women prisoners

did take pages of one of the New Testaments

that had been vouchsafed unto them

for their moral and religious instruction,

this having been advised by an Inspector.

Fifty-two times did they place the same number

on top of each other, sewed carefully round the edges

of each small pile, to hold the flimsy sheets together, skewering

hope toward God…that there shall be a resurrection of the dead,

pausing over the words *both of the just and unjust*.

They used needles and thread they had for their work

in the prison laundry. That done, they marked

each one with the needed number and shapes.

Kings with squint crowns, stick queens, scrawled over

the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.

They took care not to miss the sequence, using, for black,

slivers of charcoal from the remains of the fire

they were allowed at night. And for red ones

they stabbed with needles and squeezed

till berries bloomed on the end of their hardened thumbs

so they could apply their own blood

like *a law given which could have given life*

onto the shapes they'd drawn

the number of times it took. They waited for it to dry

over *an example of suffering affliction, and of patience*.

This work completed, they dealt their cards,

began to play.

Mirror Maze

in the National Wax Museum, Dublin

Smiling, confident

I could get from Room A to Room B

by touch, fingertipping my way,

complicit with this joke

of a mirror maze in a wax museum,

in half a minute I began to falter.

Saw my face dissolving

into pieces, changing. Watched it

turn back down a corridor to a world

that would, I hoped, disavow

tricksiness.

*

I got beyond it; still disturbed, though,

by the memory:

                angry with myself,

with them for thinking it would be a bit

of a laugh, when it remains

a multiplied endlessly panicking face,

stretched out ineffectually seeking hands.

Poems

Fragments — of tesserae

During the Visit to the Church in Five Stops

while looking at the Choice of Significant Fragments

not the

Head of horse

Tiara?

Faces in a crowd

Faces of people with tonsured heads

Faces of women wearing headdresses painted in the style of Hans Fries

but among the High Quality Fragments of Faces

which include eye(s) lips nose and mouth

one

vivid eye

looks out

as if it would

like to borrow

permanently

anybody's

body —

it's not fussy

whose

In the Museum of Lost Poems

the first exhibit I came to was a book

called Selected Poems. Its inclusion

was contentious, the poems not being,

strictly speaking, lost,

only wrongly paginated. Their texts

could be read, still, though a Misremembered

Lyric came two pages adrift

of where it was listed in Contents.

It sat in a case open

at the relevant page,

and a ribbon marked,

also, where a Shortened Set

began, two pages further on

than declared, another poem

having invaded

its supposed territory,

causing some confusion.

Another case (titled 'Lost Youth poems')

displayed a photo frame that once

held a photo behind which

some youthful poems were said

to have been found hidden. Next to it

was a sheet sadly faded

by the sunlight filtering into the room.

It had provided evidence

through the use of carbon paper

Poems

and the traces it left

after the poet pressed down hard

on the top sheet

so as to impress the second copy

through the carbon, of the remains

of another youthful poem. This, the third

sheet down, was now a complete

blank.

The last of the many empty cases

that came after these ones

contained all that remained

of Byronic poems accidentally burned

along with the memoirs, in 1824,

in John Murray's offices

off Piccadilly.

The staff had reached a decision

on how to address the vast number

of *cris de coeur* they'd received

when the museum first opened its doors:

a group email to all desperate poets

asking about their lost poems,

would reassure that, once staffing

permitted, but not making any promises,

they would set about searching

the biosphere.

Whichever way you look at it

(A Reversible Poem)

You are exactly like

the old engraving,

which is said to be

a bad one.

I think it very good

was

what William Blake said

to William Shakespeare

on the beach at Felpham,

referring to

Droeshout's likeness

Poems

That there are many synonyms for face

is not surprising. Rhyming slang

would have it a boat race.

If ugly it might be a mug, or known to the police

in a mug shot. You might feel one or other is

your better profile. Physiognomy gets

a good look in, can figure as phizog

as well as phiz, depending on formality,

or lack of. But only Dickens

would go on Phizbook.

My mother used to say if she didn't like

someone's dial. Clock and coupon

work visually, kisser almost aurally.

Lineaments sounds biblical and mush

could be Cockney rhyming slang.

Countenance could be divine.

Features could feature.

Let's face it: there are

rather a lot of synonyms

to en-visage.

Updating Ozymandias

Only when the last computer has turned its face

To the wall — no, that was a false start.

Only when the last computer lies rusting in a graveyard

Of its kind — except are computers made of metal

That rusts? My hip joint, titanium, will not,

Or will do so glacially slowly.

Only when the last computer has become

So small, so micro-efficient that it has in fact

Disappeared, been swallowed in foodstuffs

Or is now part of someone's contact lens,

Heart stent, leg tag, implant,

Might we look around, assess,

this burgeoned spaciousness.

Poems

Uses of the phone 1+2

In her fist her phone's a wand

to wave or still, at will.

*

Paused at a junction,

she makes nifty use of selfie,

front-facing mode: a convenient mirror. She glances,

tries on a pout   flicks into place   a straying lock

till, satisfied at what's looked back at her, she steps

out across the road, intones

Camera, camera, in my hand,

Who is the fairest in the land?

Game of Phones / Uses of the phone 3

Scissors, paper, stone,

flashlight, camera, phone.

Stone, scissors, paper,

email, calculator.

Paper, stone, scissors,

alarm, ringtone differs.

Scissors, paper, stone,

storage, bluetooth, roam.

Stone, scissors, paper,

music — cut a caper.

Paper, stone, scissors,

finger, face, delivers.

Poems

Open and shut / Uses of the phone 4

Remember the early mobiles you had to click open?

Like a miniature coffin left ajar for a last look

at the deceased, a last encounter?

My auntie said I should kiss my dead father's face. I didn't

want to, but she did. I wanted to pull her back, and say

*He's mine, **my** daddy! Leave him alone!* but couldn't.

You didn't defy grown-ups in those days, though I did

get away with not kissing the body. Didn't have to go

to the funeral, either.   A lawyer came to see about his will.

Dad hadn't signed it. I was his blood, he said, so I could have

what he'd left and part of the house, edge out my Mum…

I knew enough to treat that with (polite) contempt.

The man snapped shut his briefcase, and took me back

to our living room.   Our first phone was a shared line

with the neighbours downstairs. When you held it to your ear

sometimes they were there already, on their own call.

You put it down fast, as if you'd eavesdropped

on a conversation of the dead.

The Present

an almost found poem

dead island

definitive collection

slaughter pack

dead island slaughter pack

including:

dead island definitive edition

dead island riptide edition

dead island retro revenge

zombie figurine

fan weapon

and poster

with love

from Mum and Dad

with love

and poster

weapon fan

figurine zombie

revenge retro island dead

edition riptide island dead

edition definitive island dead

including:

pack slaughter island dead

pack slaughter

collection definitive

island dead

Poems

Blood Bikers

'bodies moving through the same life differently' Claudia Rankine, *Citizen*

The blood on the M3, at eye level,

coagulated into a word —

fluorescent yellow across the back

of the biker who came alongside and passed

in the adjacent lane. Then a second one.

Their outburst of light imprinted the darkness,

went on into a wild-wind-rain-soaked night.

BLOOD, they declared, for as long as it took me to read the word.

(Behind them what might have been a coincidence:

a car with another word 'Security'

just readable along its side.)

Not threat — quite the opposite —

was meant.

Some day/s

'… upon the pillow-hill'

Some days she gives up words

as if they were a beach and she an ebb tide.

Like chewing, which she's also quitting,

she grudges the effort.

As if, on the bedside table,

her black-and-white ceramic cat's

got her tongue.

When I look at her, assessing,

she's the opposite of death-mask:

the eyes remain the feature

where detail's obvious. They're not

cold blanks. So rather than

noting their shape, or faded blue,

I hold her gaze like a lifeline

she's thrown to me to climb up

across the waves of her eiderdown

where, like RLS, she lies a-bed,

in her quiet land of counterpane.

She rules here with a hand shrunken

to boniness, the fingers splayed slightly

as if preparing a grand, tyrannical gesture.

Her eyes, though, seem younger

than the rest of her, have light —

even if a dimming torch version you'd take

fearfully into a darkened corridor.

They look kinder than the hand, though,

aware that all the insteads, heres and yets

that have gathered at the foot of her bed

are slowly losing their ability

to come to her aid. In her hundredth year

she's taking off every mask that separates her

from what's to come, and seems

to be swimming steadily

towards a shore that she wants to reach

some day, lie down and sleep on in warm sand.

even if a dimming torch version you'd take

fearfully into a darkened corridor.

Beside a Station of the Underground

London, February 2020

The apparition of these faces above ground:

blossom stops so many mouths.

The apparition of these faces above ground:

so many white muzzles pass.

The apparition of these faces above ground:

these masks are not romantic.

Interrogation of these eyes in the crowd:

Can you catch your breath like this?

Interrogation of these eyes in the crowd:

Is this your own breathing space?

Interrogation of these eyes in the crowd:

What do we have in common?

The confrontation of these faces above ground:

through the metal grill, Troy's fall.

Poems

Bio-metrically

Yesterday:

Two words on a museum case

could have been names of things,

animals, proper names, place names.

Doggedly I pursued them.

Today:

Spontaneously

I bend over the chair

where you sit

to kiss your head.

Tomorrow:

Adverbially we will move forward,

wondering who on earth, and how many,

may facially recognise,

remember us.

NOTES

p8. Doctor Henry Giles Lyford (? - 1873) left behind his collection of plaster of Paris death-masks when, on his second marriage, he left Winchester for Brighton. He had very probably amassed these because of an interest (which many medical men shared at that time) in phrenology. Some were reproductions of death-masks of famous and infamous people. A few are original: taken of criminals hanged at the prison where Lyford held the post of prison surgeon.

p.10. The idea for the ending of this poem came to me after reading a predictably rather sensationalist article in *The Sun* newspaper of 9/2/2017, titled "Faces of Evil: Chilling deathmasks…" by Gemma Mullin. The article, about a collection of death-masks found in the shed of a rural home near Penrith, quotes auctioneer Steven Parkinson, of Thomas Roddick auction house in Carlisle, on the sale of the artefacts. He opined that the red marks on the lips of some of the 'heads' were as a result of the owner's young daughter playing with them and putting lipstick on them.

p.11–12. My attempts to discover the whereabouts of the waxwork of J. B. Rush (last known in the Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud's before the latter was sold and became an 'edutainment' venue) have met with a complete blank.

p.15. Research into nineteenth-century toys suggests that the heyday of the diabolo was much later than when John Bell was alive, so strictly speaking I've been anachronistic here, but the word seemed to have the right connotations for the context.

pp.17–18. For the 'Russian Lady Benevolent' see *The Somnambulists: Photographic Portraits from Before Photography* (Stockport, England, Dewi Lewis Publishing for National Galleries of Scotland, 2008). The photographs featured are of death-masks from the collection of the Edinburgh Phrenological Society, and were part of an exhibition in the National Galleries.

p.27. George Eliot was clearly not quite as invested as Dickens was in giving characters allusive names, but I feel the choice of 'Letherall' for the phrenologist in her strange novella *The Lifted Veil* (with its connotations of beating and oppression) was deliberately allusive. After being initially interested in, and sympathetic towards phrenology, Eliot later came to doubt it.

p.38f. There are two main sources for the facts about Joseph Merrick included in this sequence (apart from my own experiences visiting the Royal London Hospital): Michael Howell and Peter

Poems

Ford's *The True History of the Elephant Man* (London: Allison & Busby Limited,1980; multiple reprints to 2009) and David D. Yuan's article "The Celebrity Freak: Michael Jackson's 'Grotesque Glory'" in Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996), pp.368-384. The latter gives a full account of Jackson's, and his publicity manager's, efforts to buy Merrick's skeleton. The former contains three relevant Appendices I have also drawn on: The Autobiography of Joseph Merrick; The Elephant Man, amplified from an account in the British Medical Journal, and 'The Elephant Man' by Sir Frederick Treves. And there is indeed a research area called Critical Luxury Studies at Winchester School of Art.

p.49–50. The law on whether farmers can kill deer that stray onto their land seems complicated, and difficult to monitor or enforce.

p.52. Edinburgh University has set up its 'Futures Institute' in the buildings that were once the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, where my mother died and where I was born, in 'Simpson's' — the Simpson Memorial Maternity Pavilion (now demolished).

p.54. Taheema is the name of the Egyptian mummy (whose case is being painstakingly restored) on display at the fascinating Bournemouth Natural Sciences Society museum at Bassendean, Bournemouth. Much research has been done on her identity and history.

pp.55–56. The Great Argus described here is in the Russell-Cotes Museum in Bournemouth. The curator there answered my email questions very openly and helpfully. The bird's original provenance is not certain, though there is information on how it was probably acquired.

pp.57–58. The so-called 'Lady of Oplontis' figure was part of the 'Last Supper in Pompeii' exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford from mid-2019 to early 2020.

pp.59–60. The set of makeshift cards made by women prisoners (copies of which are on display in the museum) was discovered, hidden beside a window frame, when work was being done to replace windows in the Wymondham Heritage Museum (in the building which was formerly the local bridewell).

p.62. Some of the language in this poem is 'found': from an archaeological exhibition at the Franciscan Church of the Cordeliers, Rue Morat, Fribourg, Switzerland.

p.65. Blake did have an encounter (or so he believed) with Shakespeare on Felpham beach. The incident is recounted in M. H. Speilmann, *The Title-Page of the First Folio of Shakespeare's Plays: A Comparative Study of the Droeshout Portrait and the Stratford Monument* (OUP, 1924).

p.71. Dead Island is a 2011 survival horror action role-playing video game developed by Polish developer Techland and published by German studio Deep Silver for Microsoft Windows, Linux, OS X, PlayStation 3, and Xbox 360. The words in the first half of the poem, apart from its last two lines, are quoted from a Dead Island box.

p.72. Wikipedia has an informative piece under the term 'Blood Bikers'.

Chapter 1   Introduction

'Benevolence, rising to a great height' is what William Gregory and Robert Cox, two Edinburgh phrenologists, detected in the cast of the head of Eustache Belin, a freed Haitian slave – a rather battered replica of which is part of a collection owned by Hampshire Cultural Trust.[1] That original response was interpretative, supposedly 'scientific', but anyone seeing the head now will feel a very different and no doubt complex set of emotions. The following thesis and volume of poems is an exploration of the issues prompted by such heads. Having seen an exhibition featuring some of the casts of heads (including that of Eustache; see Fig.1) that belonged to Doctor Lyford, a nineteenth-century prison surgeon at Winchester Prison, I found myself unable to forget them. Over the following years, I did bits of research on the 'heads', starting from the information that that original exhibition provided. And I began to write poems about them, and about topics related to phrenology — the reason Lyford must have collected the heads in the first place. What could they tell us about how we have understood individuals and their death? What cultures of knowledge or creative acts were hidden in these artefacts? These are the sorts of questions I explore in my thesis poems.

Figure 1

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[1] For the history of the cast of Eustache's head, see James Poskett, *Materials of the Mind: Phrenology, Race, and the Global History of Science, 1815-1920* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2019), pp.55–66. (He is normally known as Eustache, Belin being the name of his slave owner. See Poskett, p.288, n34.)

Life- and death-masks were originally ways of memorialising and *in a sense* 'preserving' the individual. As Philippe Ariès noted, the nineteenth-century belief in the afterlife 'contributed to the exaltation' of death: '[t]he primary memory to be fixed and perpetuated was that of the individual in death, not in life … one senses a determination to preserve at all costs the memory of the *moment of death*.'[2] Our culture has a very different attitude, medicalising and 'hiding' death; instead we seem to memorialise life, relentlessly. Photography enables this process, and memorialising functions are now, largely, performed by photography. Being used to the two-dimensional nature of photographs, I found encountering life- and death-masks intriguing. But memorialising processes are constantly changing and providing new challenges. In my own lifetime photography has changed and developed radically. I remember black-and-white holiday 'snaps' being coloured by hand, using a kind of colouring kit. Then came 'real' colour photography. Now, with digital photography, my five-year-old grandchild appears in more images than there are of me over my whole lifespan. No doubt future holograms will challenge us again, forcing us to confront the representation of the individual in new ways. The masks in the Lyford collection, predating photography, and often the only non-imagined image of those depicted, retain, perhaps because of their rarity, a power and immediacy. And because they have, in the process of their making, been 'layered' over their subjects' actual faces and heads, they carry a sense of intimacy that, arguably, photos lack. They also remind us, as Deborah Lutz notes, that 'the most expressive' parts of the body are also 'the most vulnerable'.[3] This sense of intimacy, of nearness and possession, together with questions about identity and memorialisation that encountering the masks prompted in me, helped generate the thinking which lies behind the

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[2] Philippe Ariès, *Images of Man and Death*, trans. by Janet Lloyd (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p.247. This is also quoted in Deborah Lutz, *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015) p.78. As my subsequent comments will show, phrenology, with its stress on an accurate 'reading', lent an extra importance to the idea of death-masks being moulded at that moment of death, or as soon afterwards as possible.

[3] Lutz, *Relics*, p.81. Lutz's contention is that '[t]he plaster casting of the faces and hands of cadavers reminds us that these are the most expressive parts of the body, the most vulnerable; they hold the secret of personality.'

poems of my thesis collection, and most obviously, the first section. The opening poems explore the history of the masks, the relevance they might hold for us today, and how their meaning has changed since they were first created.

Since first encountering the heads, I have been fortunate enough to handle them for photographic and teaching purposes, and when the visual encounter became a physical one, a further strangeness struck me. As the world becomes potentially more and more 'virtual', these artefacts from a past time remain solidly three-dimensional — except that that adverb 'solidly' is perhaps inappropriate, given that full head casts on their plinths are of course hollow, like unfilled Easter eggs. Most of the Winchester casts are of this full head kind; sometimes in life- and death-masks only half of the head — i.e. the face and front of the head — is depicted, as in Napoleon's much-copied death-mask, where the paucity of plaster of Paris on St. Helena meant a full-head mask could not be made. Ideas of nearness and distance, solidity and fluidity or emptiness that the masks prompt have informed the poems written in response to them, and later poems in my collection also. To give two brief examples: 'Two heads are' strives, in its dual perspective, contemporary and historical, and its formal appearance on the page, to address such contrasts. And the 'Mirror Maze' poem conveys the shock and disorientation caused by finding my 'empty' self reduplicated multiple times and reduced from the normal three dimensions to two-dimensional, hardly recognisable, versions of myself.

The making of death-masks, though an ancient practice, also belongs firmly in the cultural history of relatively modern times, a discovery that sustained and increased my interest. We must assess such masks as more than simply quirky left-overs from past rites or from the early-questioned and eventually-discredited 'science' of phrenology. For the Victorians, such death-masks were products of a wider interest in relics, 'shreds that could then become material for memories'.[4] They were also part of a larger movement for change, one involving a growing emphasis on 'things' — artefacts and consumer goods that could be collected and bought at a set

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[4] Lutz, *Relics*, p.1.

price (rather than haggled over, as in older, or traditional societies). The fashion for collecting

death-masks, linked to the popularity of phrenology in its heyday — roughly from 1810 to 1840 —

and the fashion for making casts — which peaked in the 1820s and 1830s — can be located, I

would argue, within this context of development in western society. In this I am following the

thesis in Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, in its analysis of the meaning of social,

architectural, and engineering developments in post-Revolutionary Paris. He argues for the rise of

a new kind of consumerism which led to a cult of lifeless commodities — like the plush of the

bourgeois interior — or in intensified forms of social control and panoptical surveillance, linked to

the development of photography.[5] This meant that 'across Europe, an expanded administrative

apparatus multiplied traces of the individual through more efficient modes of statistical analysis

and identification — the post office directory, the census, the police file'.[6] This development is

relevant to the Winchester collection. The masks there survive from a time just before

photography, when the proliferation Benjamin identifies was about to begin. They represent, in a

three-dimensional form, the beginning of a collection of data that photography would make

radically easier. That collection of data has become omnipresent in contemporary culture. Living

as we do in the age of selfies and algorithms permitting personalised advertisement, of celebrity

cults and surveillance, of computerisation, facial recognition and efforts to subvert it, of virtual

reality and targeted fake news, the processes Benjamin described have gathered pace

exponentially, and are even more in need of being analysed and questioned. That is what the

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[5] Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, vol.4 ['The Arcades Project'] (Cambridge, Mass and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003). Of photography he writes in 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century, Exposé of 1935', 'For its part, photography greatly extends the sphere of commodity exchange, from mid-century onward, by flooding the market with countless images of figures, landscapes, and events which had previously been available either not at all or only as pictures for individual customers', p.6. And in 'Paris, the capital of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', he writes that the new evidences left by photography were ''permanent and unmistakeable', p.27, though modern digital manipulation compromises this claim.

[6] Duncan Forbes and Roberta McGrath, 'Hieroglyphic Heads', in Joanna Kane, *The Somnambulists: Photographic Portraits from Before Photography* (Stockport and Edinburgh: Dewi Lewis Publishing and National Galleries of Scotland, 2008), no pagination, second page, second paragraph. The essay usefully summarises Benjamin's argument.

thesis poems set out to do — albeit starting from various historical standpoints and only towards the end addressing contemporary uses, and abuses, of technology and notions of identity. The collection of data on us as individuals has become frighteningly efficient, as has the ability of governments to record our facial images, sometimes without our consent.[7] We have come a long way from the opening sequence of Bergman's 1975 film of Mozart's *Magic Flute*, where the human face is celebrated as the camera moves around the audience of the opera, lingering, as it does now and again throughout the film, on the face of a young girl. At various points she is shown smiling and looking thoughtful in reaction to the performance. Though we still enjoy finding beauty in each other's faces, as Bergman does, we can also have mixed motives for surveying each other — and poets are always interested in exploring motives, mixed or otherwise. The heads that I write about can thus be contextualised as part of a movement that involved a proliferation of things, including images, beginning in the late eighteenth century and continuing to this day.

The twenty-eight casts in the possession of Hampshire Cultural Trust were originally collected by a local doctor, Henry Giles Lyford (?–1873) who was part of a medical dynasty (his father was Jane Austen's physician) that provided three generations of prison surgeons for Winchester prison. His interest in phrenology was shared by many contemporary medical men. Lyford's post as prison surgeon enabled him to have death-masks made of prisoners executed there, and some surviving casts obviously have that origin. These ones have not been individually identified, though grim details such as rope marks round the necks indicate that they are those

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[7] See, for instance, Sarah Hayden's 'Materiality in British Art Show 8', unpublished Performance-Lecture, presented as an invited preface to *Poetry @ John Hansard Gallery* Southampton (16 December 2016), where, writing specifically about a particular exhibit, she says: 'In "Spirit is a Bone", Broomberg and Chanarin deploy a Russian technology originally designed to lock onto and identify vehicle licence plates — and later recalibrated to capturing the faces of individuals against their knowledge or volition in crowds. Using this tool, they produce a bank of portraits in which neither artist nor subject is consciously engaged'. Writing of this technology, Broomberg and Chanarin's website states, 'The result is more akin to a digital life mask than a photograph; a three-dimensional facsimile of the face that can be easily rotated and closely scrutinised.' See www.broombergchanarin.com [accessed 19th February 2019].

Lyford would have asked to be made. The assembling of a reference collection of such casts was common among those with an interest in phrenology. Enthusiasts were following the example of the founders of phrenology, Franz Josef Gall (1758–1828) and his disciple, Johann Spurzheim (1776–1832).[8] The idea was that such a collection would provide evidence to bear out the principles advanced in their writings, and in their mapping of the human skull into sections (or 'organs') which could be 'read' by an experienced phrenologist. It is known that from 1798 onwards Gall collected skulls and casts of heads. In 1802, in Vienna, more than 300 skulls and 120 casts are mentioned as belonging to him.[9] Leaving these behind when he moved to Paris, he then amassed a second collection. A catalogue of this mentions 221 skulls, 102 casts of heads and thirty-one casts of brains (p.41). It appears, however, that Gall never used the term '"phrenology" and the bumps played but a secondary part in his "cranioscopy". His main goal was "organology", that is, to establish an anatomy and physiology of the brain that would be at the same time a new psychology' (p.8).[10]

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[8] For an extensive account of phrenology, and of Gall and Spurzheim, with a wide-ranging bibliography, see John van Wyhe, *The History of Phrenology on the Web* (www.historyofphrenology.org/overview.htm) [accessed 11th February, 2019]. For a chronology, see www.victorianweb.org/science/phrenology/chron.html. [accessed 16th February, 2019]. This provides evidence of a revival of phrenology in the 1860s, and its long afterlife is evidenced by the date 1967 for the disbanding of the British Phrenological Society, founded in 1887. Roger Cooter, *The Cultural Meaning of Popular Science: Phrenology and the Organization of Consent in Nineteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge: CUP, 1984. Paperback 2005) is a wide-ranging study. See also David de Giustino, *Conquest of Mind: Phrenology and Victorian Social Thought* (London: Croom Helm, 1975).

[9] Erwin H. Ackerknecht and Henri V. Vallois, *Franz Joseph Gall, Inventory of Phrenology and his Collection*, translated from the French by Claire St. Leon; preface by John Z. Bowers, Wisconsin Studies in Medical History, 1 (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Medical School, 1956), p.37. Further references to this inventory will be given after quotations in the text.

[10] The term 'phrenology' was coined by Thomas Forster, in January 1815, after Spurzheim's British tour in 1814. Forster published his 'Observations on a New System of Phrenology, or the Anatomy and Physiology of the Brain, of Drs. Gall and Spurzheim', in the *Philosophical Magazine and Journal* 45 (1815), pp.44–50: quoted from *Madhouses, Mad-Doctors, and Madmen: The Social History of Psychiatry in the Victorian Era*, edited by Andrew Scull (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), p.64 and note on p.93.

In the western world, it was Spurzheim's expanded *mapping* of the human skull that became more popular than Gall's version, and George Combe, one of the first and probably the most influential person to promote phrenology in Britain, followed Spurzheim's classifications. Whichever system one adhered to, however, the notion of assembling a collection of heads as study material was central to the 'scientific' study of phrenology. Knowing this, cast-makers did brisk business in selling reproductions of death-masks of the famous and infamous — and Lyford's collection contains a number of casts that come into that category.

Having embarked on what I hoped would turn into a collection of poems, I found that research into phrenology was providing me with more than subject-matter for poems. It provided me with ways — metaphorical and analogical — of thinking about the creativity involved in making poems. In Chapter 2, 'An Afterlife for Phrenology', I consider how that 'afterlife' might work: questions arise such as 'How can a discredited form of knowledge nevertheless initiate new approaches to, and forms of, creative engagement?' Here I establish various analogies between the language and practices of phrenology and those of poetry and poetry criticism, in contrast to other possible models for creativity. Both phrenology and poetry could be said to share, at least to some extent, similar ambitions, though what is distinctive of each also emerges.

Given this topic, questions arose about how to integrate into poems the research I had done. This led to the analysis of various techniques in Chapter 3, 'Poetry and Learning'. Robert Crawford provided useful background on changing and continuing relationships between poets and academia, in particular the emergence of Modernist poetries of knowledge.[11] Reassessing, in this context, the work of Hugh MacDiarmid, especially his 1922 poem "Science and Poetry" and later writings, Crawford sees MacDiarmid's work as culturally significant because his 'attraction to science (including the science of language) is … a movement towards the arcane' (p.220). Crawford sums up the influence MacDiarmid has had on later poets thus: 'in claiming for poetry

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[11] Robert Crawford, *The Modern Poet: Poetry, Academia, and Knowledge since the 1750s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). References will be after quotations in the text.

so much material, in refusing to surrender to academia the rights of the poet to traverse

innumerable knowledge-terrains, MacDiarmid did poets who followed him an inestimable service'

(p.221). Crawford's argument provides a way into discussing what I was trying (perhaps

unconsciously) to do in the phrenology poems, and in the collection as a whole. I also was

attracted to the 'arcane' — in my case the weird 'pseudoscience' phrenology, and felt that it

could — and should — become subject matter for poems. Perhaps I was also, unconsciously,

trying to 'upset ideas of the poetic' in the process — what Crawford claimed for MacDiarmid (p.

221). And in moving beyond the death-mask poems, but following up areas suggested by research

into phrenology, I found myself 'travers[ing] innumerable knowledge-terrains' — ones that

seemed to cry out for exploration. Thus I explore, in Chapter 3, questions of how 'Poetry and

Learning' can be related. I take a mainly descriptive-analytical approach, selecting examples from

other poets' work and my own poems. This chapter looks at allusion and quotation, showing how

these are used consciously, but sometimes appear in poems in a way that the author may be

unconscious of. I also discuss attribution and footnoting practices. And I posit a threefold

approach to how learning can work in poetry: what I call a 'fully integrated', 'unintegrated or self-

conscious', and finally a 'via media' usage, when some piece of knowledge is explained overtly in a

poem where it nevertheless inheres in a naturalistic way. Finally, I interrogate my own practice, to

see how I use these techniques.

In Chapter 4, I write about the 'Relevance of Collection', discovering links between

museology's, and poetry's, ideas about 'collection'. I follow Neil Fraistat's critical concept of

'contexture' — a way of discussing the poetic collection as an entity. In making links between how

museums think about 'collection' and how poets do, I cite examples of contemporary poets

talking or writing about how their own collections were put together. Given the nature of my

thesis poems and the title *Heads: a collection*, I show how the notion of 'collection' was self-

consciously present in the whole project. I thus take time to explore the various senses of the

noun 'collection' that are relevant to my work.

Having considered my poem collection in terms of subject matter, how that subject matter is conveyed, and how the title is relevant, I turn in Chapter 5 to the *mode* by which the poems can most readily be characterised. The subject matter includes death-masks; a George Eliot novella that was influenced by phrenology; museum exhibits; personal encounters, and contemporary technology. What links these is an ekphrastic mode characterised by various features: the visual stimulus; narrative; artistic re-presentation, and the notion of loss imperfectly recovered. In Chapter 5, 'Ekphrasis: 'You're gonna need a bigger shield', I go into greater detail on these features. In this chapter I also consider the extent to which my poems are conventionally ekphrastic or not, and conclude that I am in fact broadening the term to encompass a new form of ekphrasis that responds to works of art not just in a straightforwardly narrative way but reflects on the extent to which ekphrastic re-presentation is coloured by loss. My work is therefore intervening in the criteria for writing to be described as 'ekphrastic'.

Chapter 2   An Afterlife for Phrenology

One of the most anthologised poems of the American poet Howard Nemerov is 'Because You Asked about the Line between Prose and Poetry'.[1] It consists of a quatrain and a couplet about rain ('a freezing drizzle') gradually turning into snow, but still acting like rain, only somehow lighter and thicker, until suddenly flakes are flying instead of rain falling: 'There came a moment that you couldn't tell. / And then they clearly flew instead of fell'. The poem could be read as a metaphor for the process whereby words become poetic rather than prosaic through nearly imperceptible changes.[2] Read in this way, it is sometimes taught as a kind of 'Ars Poetica' poem.[3] But I refer to it here because it seems, like the ceramic phrenological heads I shall mention later, to offer a surface map that relates to something internal — not in this case the human traits supposedly inhering in the sections of the brain beneath the marked sections of the head, but rather the words and language inside a poet's head struggling to transform themselves, and externalise themselves, from the prosaic to the poetic. And just as Nemerov's poem questions how creativity works, this present chapter poses a, perhaps surprising, question: can phrenology open up issues around creativity? My experience of researching a nineteenth-century collection of death-masks, created to serve the pseudoscience of phrenology, provided not just subject matter for poems but also a radical way of reflecting on the generation of poems. In this chapter I will explore the creative and critical opportunities of phrenology, exploring its historic practice and related branches of knowledge, and discussing its poetic possibilities through a commentary

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[1] For the text, see https://poets.org/poem/because-you-asked-about-line-between-prose-and-poetry . The poem is from *Sentences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[2] This is how it is read by, for instance, Mary Kinzie in her 'The Judge is Rue', *Poetry*, 138 (Sept.1981), pp.344-350.

[3] Since Horace's original there has been a long tradition of such poems where poets present their ideas about their own art. Pope's *Essay on Criticism* and Wordsworth's *The Prelude* are notable examples, as, say, are Wallace Stevens' 'Of Modern Poetry', Archibald MacLeish's 'Ars Poetica' and, more recently, Ocean Vuong's 'Essay on Craft'. See also *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Roland Greene and others, 4th edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), *s.v.* Ars Poetica.

on my poems, 'Death mask', 'Rush, Still' and 'Implacable'. Through this discussion, I will suggest a range of analogies and poetic techniques its history can open up for us.

Just as the word 'phrenology' is customarily, and properly, linked to the term 'pseudoscience', so the object or artefact that springs to mind most often when people encounter

Figure 2

the term 'phrenology' is the mass-produced ceramic phrenology head originally copyrighted by the American Lorenzo Fowler via his company L. N. Fowler & Co. (see figure 2).[4] Put the phrase 'phrenology head' into a search engine and you are at once given the option 'phrenology heads for sale'; a quick glance at the most popular online selling sites will suffice to show how many of these, whether original or in modern variations, are still around. One site even lists the ceramic as a desirable 'curio', under the slogan 'Ten items every gentleman needs in his study'![5] Thus the

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[4]See Madeleine B. Stern, *Heads & Headlines: The Phrenological Fowlers* (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), *passim*. For a comic novelistic treatment of phrenology in nineteenth-century England, involving Fowler and his daughter Jessie, see Lynne Truss, *Tennyson's Gift* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1996). See also *Progress and Pathology: Medicine and culture in the nineteenth century*, ed. by Sally Shuttleworth, Melissa Dickson and Emilie Taylor-Brown (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), pp.99-124, for Kristine Swenson's chapter on 'Phrenology as neurodiversity: the Fowlers and modern brain disorder'. Swenson summarises the Fowlers' involvement in phrenology and merchandizing thus: their New York 'Phrenological Depot became the centre of the Fowler empire. There they offered private examinations and clinical instruction, sold books, charts, *porcelain busts*, and other phrenological paraphernalia, and ran a large publishing house' (p.103) [my italics].

[5] John Lewis website (www.johnlewis.com) from 6th July 2019 to 10th August 2019 [accessed 16th July]. Under the heading 'the 'Seletti Porcelain Phrenology Head' is the description: 'A nod towards the original phrenology charts that were founded and developed by German physician,

artefact is presented as periodised, explicitly linked to a particular moment, a time of Victorian

gentlemen-scholars or even the 1920s or 30s: one can imagine Gatsby having such a thing in his

bedroom. Both of these pairings — word with word ('phrenology' with pseudoscience') and word

with artefact (phrenology and ceramic phrenological head) — have served to close down thinking

on the uses and influences phrenology had and might still have. They reinforce its status as

nothing more than a quirky, outdated theory, whose artefacts survive as little more than

conversation pieces, to prompt a smile or a sale, and to be ignored by academics.[6] Scholars have

often seen it at best as a wobbly stepping-stone on the road to modern psychology, at worst as

something that became too easily weaponised by eugenicists.[7] What I propose here is a

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Dr Franz Joseph Gall in 1796, this contemporary porcelain piece is designed and illustrated by Lorenzo Petrantoni. Gain insight into early understandings of the functions of the brain whilst adding a great conversation trigger to your living space'. A media version of this artefact (used in a satirical rather than commercial context) is in a cartoon by Martin Rowson, where Boris Johnson's advisor Dominic Cummings has, prominently displayed in his study, a phrenological head, based on himself, and a copy of *Phrenology for Beginners* on his desk. Cummings is in the process of interviewing 'weirdos and misfits' to join his team, *Guardian*, 25 Feb 2020, section G2, p.5.

[6] The recent cultural history of phrenology suggests that academics have not ignored it. Examples of this are Kristine Swenson's chapter (see footnote 4) or William Hughes's forthcoming monograph, *The Dome of Thought: Phrenology and the Nineteenth-Century Popular Imagination* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020 forthcoming). Cultural historians have shown sporadic interest in phrenology. For instance, for the part phrenology played in the 'afterlife' of nineteenth-century poets and writers, see Samantha Matthews, *Poetical Remains: Poets' Graves, Bodies, and Books in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004), which contains a number of fascinating case studies. Gregory Tate, in *The Poet's Mind: the Psychology of Victorian Poetry 1830-1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), discusses the part phrenology played in the writings of, for example, George Eliot, Tennyson, and the Brownings (including Elizabeth's debunking of it in her *Essay on Mind*).

[7] For the relationship between phrenology and the developing science of psychology, see Rick Rylance, *Victorian Psychology and British Culture 1850-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Robert M. Young, *Mind, brain and adaptation in the nineteenth century: cerebral localization and its biological context from Gall to Ferrier* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970). See also Ch.6 of David Clifford, Elisabeth Wadge, Alex Warwick, Martin Willis, eds., *Repositioning Victorian Sciences: Shifting Centres in Nineteenth-Century Scientific Thinking* (London and New York: Anthem Press, 2006), where Lucy Hartley indicates the way that phrenology (which she considers alongside physiognomy) served as a significant site of emerging definitions of scientific activity. For phrenology and its links (often through craniology and craniometry) to eugenics, see, for instance, Roger Cooter, *The Cultural Meaning of Popular Science: Phrenology and the Organization of Consent in Nineteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.259, p.262, and p.389 n14, or Marius Turda's review article, 'New Perspectives on Race and Eugenics', *The Historical Journal*, 51, 4 (2008), pp.1115–1124. Also see James Poskett, *Materials of the Mind: Phrenology, Race, and the Global History of Science 1815-1920* (Chicago

reassessment of how the notion of 'phrenology' might be employed as a creative starting point in

thinking about poetry, form and making. It might still contain some metaphorical power to be

deployed in a discussion of creativity. My interest here, therefore, is in how a properly discredited

form of knowledge can nevertheless initiate new approaches to, and forms of, creative

engagement.

A brief history of phrenology would go like this: formulated in the late eighteenth to early

nineteenth centuries, phrenology gained credence firstly, though not exclusively, among medical

men, becoming immensely influential in the early nineteenth century, and '[a]lthough Gall and

Spurzheim [the two founders] objected to the way that their system was "treated as an art of

prognostication", the practice of reading the "bumps" on someone's head became a craze in both

scientific and popular circles […] practised, feared and satirized in equal measure. Phrenological

societies sprang up in many leading cities'.[8] Phrenology rapidly became questioned, underwent

schisms within its own ranks, became discredited, but nevertheless retained widespread global

popularity, having a kind of resurgence in the 1860s and enjoying a very long afterlife where it

could be described as 'popular' in various senses.[9] The fact that the British Phrenological Society

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and London: University of Chicago Press, 2019), pp.51–77 and for a localised example, pp.110–112.

[8] Martin Kemp and Marina Wallace, *Spectacular Bodies: The Art and Science of the Human Body from Leonardo to Now* (London: Hayward Gallery Publishing, and Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2000), p.110. This book accompanied the exhibition with the same title, which dealt with the history of phrenology, among other topics. The best overview of phrenology is the website 'History of Phrenology on the Web' www.historyofphrenology.org/overview.htm curated by John van Wyhe. (This is not to be confused with the apologist 'History of Phrenology' website.) And see also footnote 8 of the Introduction, and footnote 7 here, for Roger Cooter, *The Cultural Meaning of Popular Science* which provides a wide-ranging history of phrenology in Britain, including details of phrenological societies in various cities, its relationship to different classes, and an appendix with the biographies of 233 public lecturers on phrenology (21 of them anti-phrenologists) in Britain to circa 1860. See also David de Giustino's *Conquest of Mind: Phrenology and Victorian Social Thought* (London: Croom Helm, 1975). Further references to these works will be in the form of 'Cooter, *Cultural Meaning*', etc.

[9] See Poskett, *Materials of the Mind* for a conspectus of global phrenological trends between 1815 and 1920.

was not officially disbanded until 1967[10] is only one of various pieces of evidence which prove

phrenology's longevity, a longevity obviously unconnected with its scientific bona fides.

In spite of its history and the reputation it rapidly gained as pseudoscience and quackery,

phrenology has not always been dismissed by critics and scholars as unworthy of *any* further

consideration. Although I argue for its relevance to a discussion of creativity, there are other

examples of phrenology proving itself unexpectedly useful: one helping chart the history of

science and society, the other providing analogies to a contemporary health campaign and its

attitudes to medicine. In a 1979 paper Roger Cooter used phrenology as a kind of test case or

exemplar in an analysis of how the appellation 'pseudoscience' serves those who deploy it.[11]

Cooter eventually concluded that those who deployed the pejorative term 'pseudoscience' in

relation to phrenology did so for various reasons that were as much to do with their own vested

interests and social fears and aspirations as with a desire to be impartially descriptive, to promote

objectivity in the assessment of methodologies. He described his paper as showing 'how bodies of

scientific knowledge are criticised by identifying the presence of social interests in them and how

that identification is essential to stipulating that certain bodies of knowledge are not knowledge

at all, but are "ideology", "pseudoscience", "error", etc.' (p.260). So phrenology's use, Cooter

argued, was in helping chart and contextualise the history of science and of society: 'the study of

'pseudoscience' has value not for its own sake… but for the sake of revealing more about the

science and society that negotiationally *defines* pseudoscience through its interactions with it'

(p.260). Cooter's own work here is part, of course, of the ongoing cultural legacy of phrenology.[12]

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[10] See www.victorianweb.org/science/prenology/chron.html.

[11] Roger Cooter, 'Deploying "Pseudoscience": Then and Now', in *Science, Pseudo-Science and Society* ed. by Marsha P. Hanen, Margaret J. Osler and Robert G. Weyant (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press,1980), pp. 237–61. Further references to Cooter's paper will be given after quotations in the text.

[12] Cooter's position has been developed by Alison Winter, who argues that the term 'pseudo-science' wrongly implies the existence of a contemporary scientific orthodoxy in her wide-ranging account of Mesmerism, *Mesmerized* (Chicago University Press, 1998).

My second example of phrenology proving useful to contemporary scholars is Kristine Swenson's reassessment of phrenology in terms of its parallels with the current neurodiversity movement.[13] By 'phrenology' she means here the mid- to later nineteenth-century populist American phrenology of the Fowler family, who saw it as part of a heterodox 'self-help' movement that often defined itself against conventional medicine. Swenson argues that the Fowlers' 'ambiguous legacy finds a parallel in the contradictions of the neuro-information campaigns of the twenty-first century and the populist political movements that resist mainstream medicine's treatment of those diagnosed with neurological conditions' (p.115). Moreover, '[t]he Fowlers' medical eclecticism offers a path for postmodern consumers who can and do choose among a variety of orthodox and heterodox medical therapies…to pursue their 'healthean' goals' (p.118). Again phrenology is being contextualised in social (and also medical) history terms, and Swenson draws interesting parallels between the attitudes of those who espoused the Fowlers' 'self-made, or never made' message [it was part of the subtitle of Orson Fowler's 1847 *Self-Culture and Perfection of Character*] (p.103), and those in contemporary neurodiversity campaigns asserting a right to forge their individual medical path, often in opposition to received medical wisdom.

The two examples above form part of an ongoing cultural history of continuing interest in phrenology which has even included a recent scientific project to debunk phrenology once and for all.[14] The article wryly concludes: 'In summary, we hope to have argued convincingly against the idea that local scalp curvature can be used to infer brain function in the healthy population. …we would advocate that future studies focus on the brain.' The very fact that such an experiment could take place so recently suggests that phrenology continues to have an 'afterlife' – or perhaps

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[13] Swenson, 'Phrenology as neurodiversity', pp.99-124. For full publication details, see footnote 4. Further references to this chapter are given after quotations in the text.
[14] O. Parker Jones, F. Alfaro-Almagro, and S. Jbabdi, 'An empirical, 21st century evaluation of phrenology' *Cortex*, 106 (September 2018), pp.26–35 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cortex.2018.04.011 [accessed 28/05/2020].

I should say, an 'afteruse.' Before I move on to my own 'afteruse' for phrenology, I shall look, briefly, at other bodies of knowledge I considered, but rejected, as routes to discussing creativity.

One such example is 'primitivism'. Although it proved useful to practising artists, it was discredited as a mode of aesthetic idealisation when it was seen to reproduce or perpetuate the racist stereotypes of non-European peoples used by Europeans to justify colonial conquest. E. H. Gombrich, in *The Preference for the Primitive*, traced the history of the idea of, and preference for, 'the primitive' in art and culture from classical times up to the twentieth-century, and in so doing dismissed the kind of primitivism mentioned above: 'it being understood that makers of primitive images should not be characterized as primitive species of the human race'.[15] How much more might it be said that someone who finds creative interest in the processes and products of phrenology does not need to be a phrenologist, or to believe in it!

Many of Lyford's masks are of murderers and hardened criminals. Phrenology, through its encounter with the mask of a convicted murderer, sought to discover, or be confirmed in a sense of, the savagery (in the pejorative sense) of the subject — whereas an African mask was thought, for those admiring primitivist art, to instantiate the savagery of its subject in a very different sense. Ben Etherington, in *Literary Primitivism*, suggests that artists did not just want to copy the forms of the masks, but, in a sense, to *become* primitive in a similar way.[16] To me, Lyford's death-masks had a powerful authenticity that called for a response. However, that response needed to be informed and qualified by research. I needed a *more* formal, rational understanding of the death-masks than European artists and writers perhaps had when they painted, sculpted or wrote in response to those African masks. By contrast to primitivism's account, I found phrenology's notions of processes, and of creation and application, a more fruitful intermediary in considering

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[15] E. H. Gombrich, *The Preference for the Primitive: Episodes in the History of Western Taste and Art* (London and New York: Phaidon Press Ltd, 2006), p.273.
[16] See, for instance, Ben Etherington, *Literary Primitivism* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2017), where he sets out his agenda thus: 'the task is first to identify the circumstances in which the desire to *become* primitive through the agency of aesthetic experience took hold', p.7. Further references to this work are given after quotations in the text.

artistic practice. Primitivism sought rather to cut through to pure form by outwitting or

compressing the time spent in the creative process. The death-mask announces a process of

making and of layering, and this is for me a more attractive analogue both for the practice of

writing poetry and reflecting upon its objects.[17] In this particular case, it is impossible not to think

of the brain inside the head, the head inside the mask and the hands of the maker on the mask, or

the hands of the interpreting phrenologist on the head or the mask. That image of layering I

believe to be at the core of my thinking about how poetry gets made.

Another possible model for creativity that I considered at the outset of my project was

the traditional notion of 'inspiration', as analysed by Timothy Clark in *The Theory of Inspiration*.[18]

There he shows how, at the Enlightenment and for the Romantic poets, older, classical ideas of

inspiration as an external force (a force that, as the Latin root of the word showed, filled the

writer with breath, or air, from outside) were changed and an inner, humanistic notion of

inspiration prevailed. The implied metaphor is of breath (godlike or not) entering and 'inspiring'

the writer or inhering *within* the writer. He quotes Stephen Spender taking up Paul Valéry's idea

of *une ligne donnée*:

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[17] See Lutz, *Relics*, p.190n8 and p.191n9 for a description of the process of making a death-mask, which involves placing a fabric barrier to the face, applying a substance which can form a mould on top of that barrier and then filling that mould with something which will create a positive image of the face (as opposed to the negative of the mould). This is the same for both life- and death-masks (except that with a death-mask there was no need to ensure the subject could breathe throughout the process!). The constituent materials have, however, changed over the last two hundred years with, for example, wax or polymers now often replacing the traditional Plaster of Paris. For a more modern account of the process, see Gershon Evan, *Winds of Life: The Destinies of a Young Viennese Jew, 1938-1958* (Riverside, California: Ariadne Press, 2000), pp.53–54. Evan describes the process of a mask being taken of his face by a Nazi 'scientist'. Contemporary death-mask makers may use, as well as the traditional Plaster of Paris, the same kind of alginate gel that dentists use. Or the contemporary *i*Mortuary blog states (in a 2012 blog) that 'Today's death masks are usually cast in plaster, wax, or bronze. The process can also be done for the folded hands of the deceased, or (more commonly in the case of a lost child), the feet.' https://www.imortuary.com/blog/death-masks-for-a-modern-funeral [accessed 2/06/2020].
[18] Timothy Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a crisis of subjectivity in Romantic and post-Romantic writing* (Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 1997). Further references to this study are given after quotations in the text.

My own experience of inspiration is certainly that of a line or a phrase or a word or

sometimes something still vague, a dim cloud of an idea which I feel must be condensed

into a shower of words. The peculiarity of the key word or line is that is does not merely

attract…[i]t occurs in what seems to be active, male, germinal form as though it were the

centre of a statement requiring a beginning and an end, and as though it had an impulse in

a certain direction. (p.21)

I find this suspect in gender terms. The language here is meteorological, both allusively mythical in

the cloud and rainfall idea (Jupiter pursuing predatory sexual adventures disguised as a golden

rain shower comes to mind), and physiological, as in the notion of the inspirational word or

phrase as the seminal in a process of impregnation. Alongside this male metaphor one might set

the various metaphors for inspiration (as an internal or an external force) recorded in John Press's

The Fire and the Fountain: An Essay on Poetry, where it is likened variously to a fountain,

supernatural or divine visitation leading to conception, a kind of madness, a dream, part of a

death-wish, and an avalanche.[19] Offering a differently gendered approach to metaphors for

creativity, Jo Gill, in her 2007 book *Women's Poetry*, quotes poems by Sylvia Plath and Ruth

Fainlight that variously refer to inspiration or creativity as a descending angel or like pregnancy

and childbirth.[20]

I found in phrenology a stimulus to move away from the more traditional metaphors for

creativity mentioned above. One major source of analogies for creativity lay in the terminology

which phrenology deployed of itself. The broad application and flexibility with which the key term

'phrenologist' was used is pertinent. Just as the word 'phrenologist' could refer to different areas

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[19] John Press, *The Fire and the Fountain: An Essay on Poetry*, rev. ed. (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1966), pp.1–27. A more modern, brief overview of the history of how poetic inspiration has been viewed is David Citino, *The Eye of the Poet: Six Views of the Art and Craft of Poetry* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), ch.VI: 'Tell Me How It Was in the Old Days: In Search of the Poet,' pp.174–203.

[20] Jo Gill, *Women's Poetry* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p.28 ff. Gill analyses Plath's 'Black Rock in Rainy Weather' (1960) with its angel descending metaphor for inspiration, and also Fainlight's 'The Other' (1973), where the muse is represented in terms of pregnancy and childbirth.

of interest and activity that such a person engaged in, so the term 'poet' refers to a writer who

typically engages in different activities in the creation of a work of art. A 'phrenologist' might be

(a) the person who *made* plaster casts of the heads and faces of the living or the dead — a kind of

sculptor. But the term was also used of (b) the practitioner who *felt* or '*read*' the bumps on the

head of a living person or a dead person via a death mask or cast — someone who claimed

expertise in the reading of the skull's contours, and who would do this in private or in public

contexts. The term was used, as well, for (c) someone who *collected* casts — life-masks and

death-masks — because an interest in and belief in phrenology made him or her keen to possess a

reference collection. I shall examine these different analogies one by one, indicating how they can

relate to, and help, one's thinking about poetry.

The term 'phrenologist' was commonly applied to a maker of casts, or sculptor — someone

who knew how to mould Plaster of Paris to make casts of the faces or heads of the living or the

dead. Casts of the hands, and sometimes also the feet of the dead, and living, were also made. For

instance, on his deathbed, Keats had casts taken not just of his face, but of his hand and foot.

There were also casts taken of George Eliot's head and hand during her life.[21] Like visual artists,

these men (it was usually men) often signed their work — on the back of the cast, writing their

name in the plaster on the neck or plinth, before it dried. They saw themselves as professional

artists, as much as craftsmen. In the case of the making of death- masks, phrenologists were

called in, often to prisons when public executions took place, to be on hand to make the masks of

executed prisoners. This was partly to provide incontrovertible evidence that the execution had

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[21] See W. Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963; London: Chatto & Windus, 1979), p.696, and Robert Gittings, *The Mask of Keats: a study of problems* (London: Heinemann, 1956); also Thomas McFarland, *The Masks of Keats: the Endeavour of a Poet* (Oxford: OUP, 2000; Oxford Scholarship Online, Oct.2011), ch.3. For Eliot's casts, see Kathryn Hughes, *Victorians Undone: Tales of the Flesh in the Age of Decorum* (London: 4th Estate, 2017). Mainly of interest is ch.3: 'George Eliot's Hand', pp.151–214, where we learn (on p.171) that, after Eliot's death, her widower, John Cross, arrived at the Brays' house in Coventry, where he was allowed to see 'such curiosities as a phrenological cast of Eliot's skull, which had been made at that moment in the 1840s when some of the cleverest people in Britain believed it was possible to read a person's character from the dips and bumps on the surface of their skull.'

taken place (such criminals being summarily buried in prison yards, sometimes with no proper grave marker), but also and often in order to provide an artefact that could show, phrenologically, the depravity of the subject, and that could be reproduced commercially, for study.[22] A major part of the phrenologist-as-sculptor's skill lay in the ability to work quickly and efficiently before the onset of rigor mortis altered the appearance of the face. (De Ville invented a new process for speeding up the casting process.) The analogy with the poet here lies in an ability to 'sculpt' raw material quickly and accurately enough: like the phrenologist-as-sculptor, the poet strives to shape material from ideas through words to draft-on-page. Both poet and phrenologist embark on the initial stage of a skilful *process* of making that will result in a new product.

The second analogy that could be made between phrenologist and poet begins with the use of the former term to describe someone who 'read' the bumps on the skulls of either living subjects, or, using death-masks, of the dead. This would involve manually feeling the skull to determine its contours — or sometimes using measuring devices to discover size and relative distance between different parts of the head. The latter practice, known as craniometry, and later flamboyantly degraded in eugenic practices, was linked to phrenology, but phrenology favoured a kind of 'laying on of hands' technique rather than the measuring devices favoured by the craniometrists. Craniometry was also distinct from physiognomy, which substituted facial features for phrenology's head shape as the indicator of personality and character. However, all three claimed the ability to predict character traits or intelligence.[23] In private and in public,

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[22] A major example bearing out these statements about the phrenologist-as-sculptor is the entry on James De Ville (elsewhere spelled Deville) in the National Portrait Gallery's online research directory of 'British bronze sculpture founders and plaster figure makers, 1800-1980': https://www.npg.org.uk/research/programmes/british-bronze-founders-and-plaster-figure-makers. Timothy Clifford, 'The Plaster Shops of the Rococo and Neo-Classical Era in Britain', *Journal of the History of Collections,* 4: 1 (1 January 1992), pp.39–65, is also useful.

[23] For the relationship between phrenology and physiognomy, see Sharrona Pearl, *About Faces: Physiognomy in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2010), especially ch.6 'Diagnostic Physiognomy: From Phrenology to Fingerprints', pp.186–212. For the early relationship between phrenology and craniology and craniometry see John Van Wyhe's phrenology website www.historyofphrenology.org.uk/overview.html.

phrenological demonstrations involved a manual 'reading' (sometimes called a 'delineation') of

the skull — something that provided rich possibilities for those who used humour to dismiss

phrenology's claims.[24] An intrinsic part of the poet's practice lies in a stage of reading or

encountering what is already there: a first or subsequent draft of the poem on the page, awaiting

reworking. Just as the phrenologist used hands (fingertips or palms were variously recommended

as best practice) to 'read' the skull that was already there, so the poet also works with successive

readings to enable the next stage of a process to happen. For the phrenologist, the next stage is

the phrenological 'reading' spoken aloud or written down for public or private consumption;[25] for

the poet the first-draft 'reading' (silently or out loud) is what enables progress towards further

drafts and, eventually, a definitive or final version or 'reading' of the poem. Speaking of my own

practice, I should add that before I decide that a poem is finished — or as near finished as I can

make it — the almost last stage is one of reading the poem out loud to check for various possible

weaknesses: such as inadvertently repeated words where no such 'echo' was intended, or to

check lineation, rhythm, etc. The poem has to be heard as well as seen on the page.

The third use of the term 'phrenologist' that I am concerned with here is its application to

someone with a passion for phrenology — the amateur, as it were, to the professional uses of the

term that I have mentioned above — and that someone as collector. Following on from the

example set by the founders of phrenology, enthusiastic amateurs collected masks, often those of

famous and infamous subjects which were commercially reproduced, so as to have a reference

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[24] Of the many cartoons poking fun at phrenology, one is 'Calves' Heads and Brains, or a Phrenological Lecture', 1826, by Henry Aiken, in the catalogue *Ars Medica: Art, Medicine, and the Human Condition* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1985), prints, etc., selected and organized by Diane R. Karp, plate 39 + p.181.

[25] Cooter, *Cultural Meaning*, pp.152-156 and p.353 n73, outlines the activities and income of some of those he calls 'practical professors' of phrenology. He argues that by the 1840s the largest part of the income of 'popular professors of phrenology came…from what… lectures afforded: the opportunity for hawking phrenological charts, manuals, and pamphlets and, above all, for soliciting customers for phrenological delineations [i.e. head readings] (at two shillings six or more a head)' (p156). The footnote lists the charges for readings, with verbal ones cheaper than written ones and the most expensive being detailed written ones. Some phrenologists, however, who really wanted to spread the message, operated a kind of 'sliding scale' depending on audience members' incomes. Cooter also lists the costs of casts, including replica ones.

collection to enable them to test and refine their knowledge of the subject[26]. Here again an

analogy might be made with poetic creation. Every poet writes out of, and is affected by, the

'reference collection' she or he has made. By that I mean every other poem she or he has read

and thought about, whether written by other poets or written by the poet her- or himself. Poets

do not operate in a vacuum; they use previously written poems to enable them to move forward

in understanding their art. And poets also, more or less consciously, make a collection of poems

out of their own work, the more they write. In this sense the poet as collector is like the

phrenologist as collector.

In this section I give examples of these analogies from my own work. The first — of poet

with phrenologist-as-sculptor — can be related to the drafting done on most of the poems in the

thesis collection, the *craft* involved in creativity. When writing a poem, the poet makes many

changes before reaching a finished version —although many poets I know would agree with Paul

Valéry's claim that the poem is 'never finished, only abandoned'.[27] I consider here a poem that

went through *various* stages of composition, though I will only show the first completed draft and

the final version, which I concluded was the better poem. Like a finished death-mask, the poem is

the result of a process of moulding and reshaping. Here are the two texts:

Death mask [first completed draft]

Store it in a strong, deep cardboard box
so those who want to see it must cradle it up
and then out of its bubble-wrap swaddling bands
into the light of day.
Compare the marks left on it by damp
or age to how lichen flowers over rocks,
how things in nature change also over time.
Marvel at the detail in the moulding:
eyelashes, facial hair, even evidence of how death
was met – the rope-mark that collars the neck –
all clearly visible. Catch yourself looking

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[26] See Van Wyhe, 'The History of Phrenology on the Web'
www.historyofphrenology.org/overview.
[27] In March 1933 Paul Valéry published an essay in "La Nouvelle Revue Française" about his poem
"Le Cimetière marin". The words quoted were included in this article although the exposition was
lengthy. Over time Valéry's words have been streamlined and modified to give the oft-quoted
'shorthand' version.

Chapter 2

past it to the person in the background
doing perfectly normal things behind this head
posed on its smooth, round plinth
where a name once was but now
only a lighter coloured patch marks the place,
declaring this face anonymous.
Talk to it, carry it round in your arms,
gash vermilion onto its lips and tint with kohl
its closed, blank eyes.
Smear some life into it.

and:

Death mask [final version]

To see it you must cradle it up
and out of its bubble-wrap swaddling
into the room's light

where you'll compare the marks left
by damp or age to plaster become skin
broken out in a rash,
to lichen flowering over rocks

and wonder at the detail in the moulding:
eyelashes, facial hair, evidence of how death
was met – the rope-mark that collars the neck.

Posed on its smooth, round plinth
where a name once was but now
a lighter-coloured patch marks the place,
the face remains anonymous.

You glance past it,
see someone in the background
doing perfectly ordinary things

or you'll start a conversation,
carry it round in your arms,
gash crimson onto its lips and line with kohl
the closed, blank eyes,

smear some life into it.

        The most obvious change is visual. Where the first version worked as a block of text, the

second has six stanzas (moving between a three-line and a four-line pattern), together with a

'standalone' final line – so there is white space around each stanza. One of the main reasons for

changing the first version into short stanzas was a syntactic pattern that I realised was already

inherent in it: there were existing sentence breaks as well as units of meaning that might have led to additional sentence breaks (as in the sentence beginning 'Catch yourself looking…' which might well become two sentences, with a break round about the word 'head'). Thus, the second version proceeds in stanzas, presenting them as a series of distinct observations of the generic death-mask of the title that a reader can think about before moving on the next. The pattern set up is deliberately disrupted at the end, where the concluding line has white space around it to give it more emphasis, specifically by allowing the syntax in the new version of the poem to work in a deliberately ambiguous, or multi-layered, way.

The first version of 'Death mask' consists of a list of imperatives — a technique with precedents in contemporary poems. The resulting suspicion (rapidly quashed at the time), that I was revisiting too well-trodden a path in writing the poem in this way, was, I later realised, a major reason for my dissatisfaction with it. Its attraction as a technique is that it creates a sense of urgency, confronting the reader with the need to *do* certain things, as if in reading the poem the reader is almost agreeing to be moved by it. The imperatives that begin lines — 'Store' / 'Compare' / 'Marvel' / 'Talk to it' — set up a trajectory for moving through the poem and culminate in the last line's deliberately weird-sounding imperative 'Smear' — not a verb that often occurs in that particular mode. Because of the negative connotations of the verb (lack of skill, attention, or precision), it is seldom, if ever, used as a command — and never in the context of applying make-up, where a perfect 'finish' is the desideratum. To avoid this pattern becoming too regularly insistent in the first version, I placed a couple of the imperatives in the centre of lines, after caesuras: 'Catch yourself' / 'carry it' and tint'. But the dissatisfaction persisted.

One improvement that the final version displays is in its ability to use syntax in a subtler and deliberately ambiguous way, so that the benefits ascribed to the use of the imperative — a sense of urgency, direct engagement with the reader — are gained without the 'blunt instrument' effect of its over-determined use in a listing poem. Apart from a 'yourself' and a 'your', the first version relies wholly on the unspoken 'you' that an imperative carries with it to engage with the reader directly. The second version eases the 'you' / reader into the poem more subtly, but also

more overtly, presenting the 'you' doing something — i.e., taking the death-mask out of bubble-wrap — as the start of the process envisaged. This cuts out the rather vague phrase 'those who want to see it' and thus declutters the poem at the start. And after the urgency of that first modal verb 'must cradle', the poem moves into a pattern of mainly future tense verbs, beginning with the colloquial elision of 'you'll compare'. The next main verb after that — 'wonder' — at the start of the third stanza — works in the same way, syntactically, as 'you'll compare', but conflates or elides the verb down to the infinitive 'wonder'. This makes the poem seem more colloquial but has the added benefit of making it ambiguous and layered.

One important change involved the use of the future tense at two key moments in the poem — at the start of the second stanza ('you'll compare') and at the start of the penultimate stanza ('you'll start a conversation'). Linguists are fond of pointing out that there is no (clear) future tense in English; just different ways of expressing the future depending on the speaker's intention or the certainty of the event. The use of the modal 'will' (or its colloquial, elided form in 'you'll' etc.) could imply promise, as in a holiday advert (e.g. 'you'll see lovely sunsets, lofty mountains') or obligation (e.g. 'if you don't have a dishwasher, you'll wash the dishes by hand'). In the second version of the poem, I used that form of verb to import both possibilities. Confronted by the death-mask, you'll feel an obligation to react to it by embarking on a comparison between it and two living things — skin and lichen — or to react to it as if it were a living being to whom one could talk or whom one would feel obliged to make seem more alive by the application of make-up. But that tense also suggests a promise to be fulfilled — and therefore makes the actions described seem more attractive to carry out. (The holiday ad, for instance, rarely promises that you'll see such unattractive scenes as rubbish-strewn alleyways, or ugly buildings.) So, although the poem is dealing with a strange artefact, in the sense of describing it indirectly, it is also an exploration of how that artefact can be encountered in a meaningful, even pleasant way, rather than shunned as something too ghoulish or compromised to spend time on.

I mentioned earlier how the second version of the poem uses conflated, or elided verb forms, where an initial modal 'will' or rather the shortened ''ll' form applies not just to the actual

verb with which it is used, but to a series of following verbs. This not only makes the voice addressing the reader seem more colloquial; it also imports an ambiguity into the poem. Those infinitives that are 'marooned' away from the modal ('wonder' at the start of the third stanza; 'start' / 'carry' / 'gash'/ 'line' and 'smear' in the penultimate stanza and the last one) are rendered ambiguous by their stand-alone nature. As well as future verbs of promise or obligation, they function as virtual imperatives. The sense of obligation, of *having* to do something, to react in certain ways, once you encounter the death-mask, is made even stronger by the sense of imperatives being deployed — and piled one on top of the other as the poem reaches its climax. Thus, the urgency of the first version, the one heavy on imperatives, is retained, but a subtler syntax adds layers of meaning.

The changes of verb tense and use of the overt second person pronouns are the main differences between the two versions of the poem. In vocabulary, or imagery, I made only a few changes. I jettisoned mention of the cardboard box in which the death mask is stored in favour of an initial picture of the artefact being brought up out of its 'bubble-wrap swaddling'. I omitted the word 'bands' after 'swaddling' on the grounds that the two-word phrase is more clichéd and overtly biblical. I also changed 'into the light of day' to 'into the room's light' for similar reasons: the former is too clichéd an idiom, whereas the new version gives a more specific sense of where this delicate operation is taking place. The choice of the verb 'cradle' in the first line and the use of the metaphor 'swaddling' for the material around the artefact work together metaphorically to convey the sense of the death-mask as a vulnerable baby, to be handled carefully — and perhaps inspiring tenderness or affection. The choice of a living thing as the metaphor seemed appropriate, given the status of death-mask as neither portrait nor photograph, but something 'real' nevertheless, linked to a real person. I cut out the line 'how things in nature change also over time' in the final version, feeling it introduced an overly portentous tone at that point. Instead, I introduced a second comparison to convey the appearance of the plaster affected by damp or age: as well as resembling lichen metaphorically 'flowering' over rocks it also resembles skin 'broken out in a rash'. The use of two comparators — one natural and perhaps attractive, the

other unpleasant — serves to emphasise the mixed effect of the death-mask's appearance, at once strangely attractive but also potentially repellent.

After referring to the details of the moulding, I rearranged the order in the first version. Instead of making the reference to the plinth come *after* the 'you''s attention has wandered past the death-mask to the other living person in the room, I moved the lines about the plinth earlier, making it part of the general description of the artefact. I changed the adjective 'normal' to 'ordinary', because of the rhythm but also because I did not want to raise the question of what is clinically normal behaviour. I also cut out the phrase 'behind this head' on the grounds that 'in the background' said enough on its own. Momentarily the other living person in the room is noted, before the 'you' is involved in a series of potential actions around the death mask. Instead of 'Talk to it' I substituted a phrase with the noun 'conversation', since that implies the possibility of some reciprocity on the part of the artefact. And, noticing on reading the draft aloud that I had two uses of 'it' and one of 'its' all within the penultimate stanza, I made changes that deliberately left only one 'it' in. The actions described here are deliberately odd: carrying the artefact round in the arms is a reminder of the earlier link between it and a baby, yet the references to make-up make us think of it as a young, or grown, woman. And would the reader's default assumption have been that the death-mask was of a man? If so, that too is being subverted by the mention of putting on lipstick or eyeliner. I chose the noun "kohl" rather than 'mascara' or 'eyeliner' partly because of its being monosyllabic and better for the rhythm, but also because of its connotations of ancient civilisations such as ancient Egypt. It thus emphasises a sense of time in the poem, stressing the death-mask's status as memorial object, and potentially reminding the reader of the long history of such memorials.

I set the last line on its own deliberately, intending to slow down the reading and force a reader to concentrate on it. The choice of the verb 'smear' was deliberate, with its connotations of haste, urgency and imperfect craft all appropriate to the implied meaning: an artefact made urgently at the point of its subject's death that has nevertheless lasted through time in a striking way. I kept the preposition "into" from the first version, rather than alternatives such as 'onto' or

'on'. I wanted to retain a sense of trying to penetrate *beyond* the surface of the artefact, rather than simply placing colour *onto* that surface. It is not just colour or make-up that is involved, but 'life' itself: the last line's injunction working as a kind of metaphor for what the poem as a whole is striving to do, or what I am striving to do in re-enacting the encounter with the death-mask and considering its meaning. I want to *enliven* it.

This detailed exploration of 'Death mask' shows how a poem's creation is part of a careful process. I worked to shape material that was already in place — that is, the facts about death-masks discovered in the research I had done on them and the ideas these had given rise to. The phrenologist-as-*sculptor* also starts a process working with material that is already in place, that is, the face and head of the dead, or living, subject. Both sculptor and poet are involved in a process of creating a new thing (out of plaster or out of words), in the course of which they trim excess (plaster or words), perhaps add a little more material (plaster or words), alter and smooth what is already there, towards a finished product.

The phrenologist-as-*reader* (of bumps) also shares aspects of his or her 'craft' with the poet. A process is involved here too, but in this case is rather a different process: one involving the notion of *reading* as a key aspect. Out of the reading of the skull's bumps the phrenologist constructs an account of the subject's character traits, something to be passed on either verbally or written down. That reading comes from the phrenologist detecting, via the examination of the skull, what is there, what is evident, and, of course, what is *not* there — where there are bumps missing, so which character traits the subject lacks. In the following poem, a key driver for how the poem developed was what I as a *reader* saw lacking in earlier versions. The poem is about the subject of one of Lyford's purchased death-masks, of James Blomfield Rush, a notorious Victorian murderer.

Chapter 2

   Rush's death-mask was much copied and purchased commercially, such was the infamous

nature of the murders he committed. (See Figure 3 for a version painted black.) Later research

was to show that the death-mask was not the only artefact that memorialised him. But in the
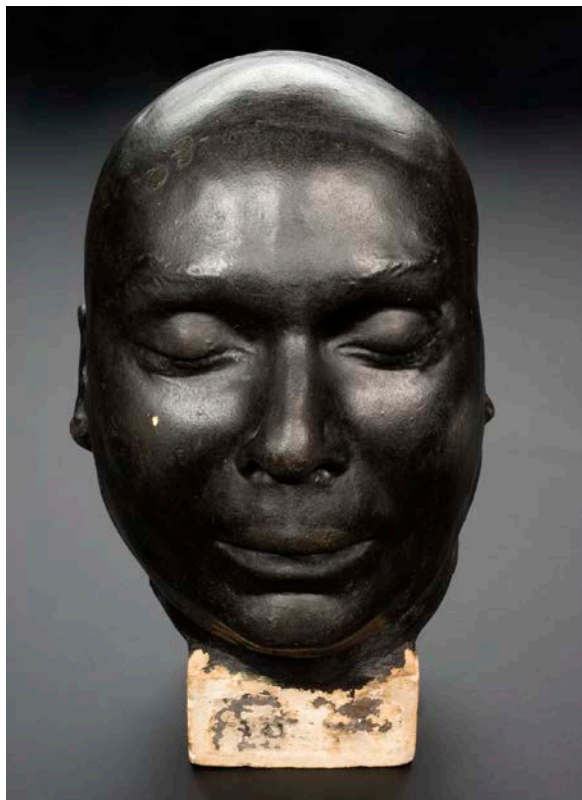
Figure 3

meantime, here is the first complete version of the poem:

Rush,

you've become your name's' antonym.

The rampage, the murders, the fourteen page speech
made in your own defence at the trial
(commemorated – you couldn't know –
by a Staffordshire figure of you mass-produced afterwards,
for sale to a public insatiable for detail)

all
stilled to this,

a lifetime's passion stilled to this sightless stare
on the death mask cast
just after your hanging
by an Italian immigrant whose life
proved the antithesis of your own: Giovanni Bianchi,

with descendants still in Norwich, proud of him,
of his skill, his carving out a happy life
for himself and a family in England – while you
live on in a china ornament and a mass-produced death mask
that turns up here and there, in museums and sheds,

painted black or left plain, the words *James Blomfield Rush*
on a card, alongside. Once in Madame Tussaud's,
its Chamber of Horrors, you've disappeared now,
though you must be somewhere, in someone's cellar
or in a secret stash of gruesome memorabilia

still.

Otherwise, your mask's in shards, at the bottom of someone's plant pot,
no more recognisable than a weathered gargoyle, kitchen crocks,
that touch of defiance surviving, somehow, in your dead face
cracked beyond recognition, shivered (your contemporaries might have said)
into a hundred pieces, all of them

still

The death-mask is one where the original maker is known: an Italian immigrant settled in Norwich

called Giovanni Bianchi. The latter's story seemed to me as interesting and as relevant (if not

more so in terms of modern, fluid societies) as Rush's.[28] I also wanted to play on the possibilities

created by the ambiguity of Rush's surname: how his execution and subsequent memorialisation

as artefact made him the opposite of his seemingly impetuous and risk-taking self in rendering

him 'still' — hence the repetition of that word as a kind of refrain throughout the poem. It was, of

course, the sensational nature of Rush's crimes and the Victorian appetite for such material that

led to ongoing memorialisation of him in artefacts and literature. His hanging at Norwich Castle in

1849 was one of the largest such public events outside London before the banning of public

executions in 1868; special trains brought sightseers from surrounding towns, and from the

capital. One of the London trains had to be turned back, leading to some complaining that they

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[28] The alphabetical National Portrait Gallery research directory mentioned at footnote 22 contains
an extensive entry on Bianchi, partly provided by his descendants, still living in Norwich.

would miss the hanging.[29] Although the poem does centre on Rush and his story, from the start I

wanted to include the stanza about Bianchi, thus suggesting another way of looking at the Rush

material and assessing his legacy. Some subsequent changes were minor, as, say, those involving

the segue into the poem of the title. The phrase "your name's antonym" became "you've become

your antonym" — with the word "name" omitted. This seemed to be a more direct way of

emphasising the theme of the subject's name suggesting the opposite of his fate.

Although I had thought that this poem would not subsequently change much in its

composition, I found that further reading and research altered it considerably, including its title. I

came across another Rush artefact: the flat-back Staffordshire ceramic figure that was made after

his execution (Figure 4).

Figure 4

And re-reading earlier versions, I found that the repetition of the

word "still" was rather too insistent, too heavy-handed a way of

making the point. I concluded that the second artefact should play

a more central role in the poem. And the key fact that struck me,

and that I chose to include, is that the Staffordshire figure has,

hanging from Rush's right hand, a modelled scroll of paper meant to represent the fourteen-page

speech he delivered in his own defence at his trial. There are no discernible words on this, but

instead some black lines meant to represent Rush's handwriting. (Interestingly an accompanying

figure of Rush's lover and accomplice, Emily Sandford, on the basis of whose testimony, largely,

he was convicted, also depicts a scroll, as well as a handkerchief, in her hands, presumably to

signify her tearful contrition.) The handwriting detail led me to redraft the poem in a major way,

not wholly changing its meaning, but with more emphasis on Rush having been silenced in *all* of

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[29] One of the fullest accounts of Rush's crimes, trial and execution, is the website www.jermy.org
— the website of the Jermy family (descendants of the victims), which contains a whole section
on the Stanfield Hall Murders, and has links to other sources, such as one giving a full account of
Rush's trial and execution, together with the phrenological reading of Rush's head which was
made using his death-mask.

the artefacts that memorialise him, rather than simply 'stilled' permanently by execution. And in

the third stanza I emphasise the different fates of Bianchi and Rush, in an attempt to establish a

more historically balanced view. The six-line stanza which starts this final version was originally

much further on in an earlier version, but I decided that putting it at the start of the poem would

give a sense of immediacy and introduce key details, key contrasts, from the very beginning. Here

is the final version:

Rush, still

The flatlined scrawl
that's meant to be words
on the Staffordshire figure
is unequivocal:
just like your victims,
you're silenced.

'Paper' hangs from your right hand,
not so much a speech bubble as a way
of showing the fourteen pages you wrote
and spoke, in your own defence,
in spite of rampage, murders.
The public wanted detail, bought you
as a flat-back pottery figure
to put on their sideboards.

No such memorial for Giovanni Bianchi,
the Italian immigrant who made your death-mask,
no medal or mask to turn up now and then
in museums and sheds, painted black or left plain,
the words *James Blomfield Rush* on a card beside it:
his story's alive in descendants in Norwich
proud of his skill, his adaptability,
the life he created in an adopted country.

But you, Rush? The china figure crops up
in salerooms, commands good prices.
Your death-mask was copied, collected,
can be found in museums. But the waxwork
in Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors
has gone who knows where:
smashed, dismantled
or kept in some weirdo's
silent gloating cellar.

Various attempts to find out what happened to the waxwork full figure of Rush that was in

Madame Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors proved fruitless, this reinforcing my final suggestion that

Rush's legacy has been one of stillness and silence. And my final title, 'Rush, still' emphasises the ambiguities of the word 'still', among which are this realisation that there are 'still' questions to be answered about Rush's legacy.

Respecting my third comparison between phrenology and poetry, phrenologists like Lyford were *collectors*. Their interest in many cases led them to assemble, and often display, a reference collection of death-masks and sometimes even skulls.[30] To this extent they can be compared to the poet, who assembles a kind of reference collection of poems the more s/he writes and reads. This in turn influences what the poet writes in each new poem. The phrenologist's reference collection and the poet's poem collection function as educational material and as spurs to do and know more. Incentives to go on writing can come in various forms, of course. Collecting and reading one's poems and other poems helps a poet discern what works well, and highlights recurring or favourite techniques — and how effective these techniques are. The phrenologist-as-collector collected death-masks in a highly focussed and exclusive way with a specific end in view. This research was regarded as 'scientific'. However, the analogy of this with the poet-as-collector breaks down in that the poet is always open to serendipity, even while engaged with one area of research. Indeed, the essence of the poet's 'collection' is that it is frequently diverse and awaiting a marshalling criterion. For example, when visiting museums where phrenological material was present, or likely to be present, I have sometimes come across other artefacts, or exhibits, that prompted poems. The poem I shall look at, briefly, now, comes into that category of 'serendipitous' poems — although it has stylistic links to some of my death-mask poems. What eventually enabled me to use in a poem the museum exhibit discussed below was the power of a line in my 'internal' poem collection — in this case

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[30] See John Van Wyhe's www.historyofphrenology.org/overview. And David de Giustino's *Conquest of Mind* reports that 'Most leading phrenologists had large collections of skulls, animal and human, of real bone and of plaster. They liked to emphasise that their science was a comparative one' (p.68) and James Deville 'possessed… a vast collection of skulls, graphs and plaster-casts.' (p.94).

from Denise Riley's elegiac 'A Part Song' sequence. That power had moved the line beyond its

original context of deep personal tragedy so that I felt I could use it as an epigraph to open up the

notion of loss, even if the example I gave was of much less seriousness than the original and in a

sense shifted its meaning:

Implacable

'All that / Should flow is sealed, is poised / In implacable stillness.' (Denise Riley, 'A Part Song' xvii)

As if this huge bird halted
in a peacock-like double fanning
of his wings, glanced over his shoulder
in shy pride at such splendid feathers.
Only that's wrong. He was halted

by busy hands. One of the best
taxidermists, a friend of Darwin,
worked on him. That's why those
gorgeous wings don't take up space
as in the wild they would. They point down,

something implacable about their stillness.
And outrageous. My rage flickers out,
bounces off the surface of his case.
That caging. How could they? Contain, I mean,
constrain a hundred eyes behind glass,
reverse the geometry of his tail's upward twitch?

And not shy pride but rather shock and daze
in the dulled blue iridescence of his face.
He's stuffed. Well, and truly. He knows it.
A plain hen-mate below him, in a twiggy forest,
like an afterthought. Irrelevant beside
the stare of all his showcased eyes.

A Great Argus (*Argusianus argus*),
collected Malaysia,1879.
How to read him: his mating dance
twisted out of true, him tucked away,
almost, from public view, below the stairs,
beyond the Ladies' discreet doorframe?

And what about the provenance?
The curator tells me all he knows
of what he's inherited. His email,
informative, kind, also sounds,
it should be said, apologetic.

Please note, however: now,
by accessing the Net,
you can buy yourself a live one.

Seeing the stuffed Great Argus pheasant in the Russell-Cotes Museum in Bournemouth made me angry in a way in which Lyford's death masks had not. Examining that reaction, I would conclude that it stemmed from the realisation that the urge to collect and to understand the world was directly connected here to an act of barbarism, and indeed *caused* it, while the death-masks, though they may have arisen from a similar desire to understand the world and to collect, were not the *cause* of the barbarism that brought them into existence. The Argus was an innocent victim. Stuffing the beautiful bird because of its beauty and rarity changed and, to my eyes, destroyed that beauty. As I shall show in Chapter 4, 'The Relevance of Collection' and Chapter 5, 'Ekphrastic Encounters', a poem discovered serendipitously can nevertheless find its place in a collection apparently on other topics, because of some underlying force which is common to them all, in this case the visual confrontation of loss. In this case, however, it was the line in my 'internal' poetry collection which allowed me to see how a poem might develop on this different subject matter.

'Implacable' deliberately starts with a 'picture' of the bird as displayed in the museum, then describes my reaction to seeing it, and only latterly names the bird and says when and where it was collected. I include the phrase about 'showcased eyes' just before I reveal the bird's name, to highlight the link between the multiple, eye-like wing markings and Argus in Greek mythology. The museum's curator revealed it was stuffed by one of England's foremost taxidermists,[31] whom I have since found was a friend of Darwin, so that presumably happened once the creature — or, presumably, the dead creature — had been brought back to this country. The first two lines of the fifth stanza are deliberately coldly factual, as if to enforce a sense of emotionless involvement with the creature, and I juxtapose its Latin with its English name to strengthen that effect. And the ending of the poem, although it seems rather like an almost throw-away coda, in fact makes the

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[31] Private email dated 20/09/2019 from Duncan Walker of the Russell-Cotes Museum. The taxidermist was Edward Gerrard, but the exact provenance of the exhibit is unknown.

important point that, lest we think ourselves superior to those privileged and perhaps ruthlessly enthusiastic Victorian collectors, there are still opportunities for the rich to collect living examples of this peacock-like bird to adorn their estates or gardens. And where the Victorians at least had a scientific interest in such creatures (Darwin, for instance, mentions the Great Argus in his 1874 *Descent of Man*), I presume any modern purchaser using the web would lack such motivation.

The poem can be read as a metaphor — in this case for the potentially destructive power of collection (as opposed to, say, conservation). The bird, in spite of its hundred gorgeous 'eyes', has been blinded and wrenched out of its most striking live form: instead of its uplifted and spread tail feathers in the mating dance, it displays only an unnatural pose. Like Lyford's and other collectors' death-masks, a living creature has become an artefact, and one that is 'contain[ed]', not by a moulded plaster mask but by a glass exhibition case. Reading the poem as a metaphor for the poetic process, one could argue that it presents the challenge, and perhaps impossibility, of transmuting living thoughts adequately into artefacts made of words. However one reads the poem, the activities of the phrenologist, in *whichever* of its various senses one understands the word, can provide a new way of interrogating poetic practice, including key ethical and aesthetic questions. I have suggested that poets form collections of their own and others' poems as part of a process of moving forward with their writing. For them, collecting is an enabling or educational process, as Lyford and his fellow phrenologists deemed it.

In phrenology I have found several areas of interest and relevance to my poetry. They are 1) that although phrenology is defunct as a scientific route to knowledge, it can provide analogies and metaphors for poetic creativity, as well as subject-matter for poems; and 2) that the different senses in which the word 'phrenologist' was used help to refine those analogies. Indeed, phrenology proved for me a more fruitful means of engaging with questions of creativity than more traditional or perhaps predictable models such as inspiration or primitivism.

There are areas where phrenology differs radically from poetry. Phrenology is capable of disproof, whereas poetry is not. Poems can be critiqued, found wanting in skill, or interest, or intellectual worth — but a poem cannot be 'disproved' in the sense of being labelled a 'pseudo-

poem'. One can never envisage the Roman citizens pursuing Cinna to tear him for his 'pseudo-verses'. Furthermore, considering phrenology has been a way of reminding me of a distinctive feature of poetry: unlike phrenology, it is not taxonomic but open-ended; it is not static but dynamic; its goal is not a system but an exploration.

Chapter 3   Poetry and Learning

John McAuliffe, reviewing Harriet Cass White's edition of Marianne Moore's *New Collected Poems*, notes that Moore

> incorporates … material from newspapers, magazines, eavesdropped expertise,
> dictionaries and her own looking — at people, rooms and animals — to make what Cass
> White accurately calls "intricately wrought meditations on history, ethics, commerce and
> art", poems which attend as seriously as science to surfaces, but which also know the
> "beautiful element of unreason".[1]

Neither McAuliffe nor Cass White finds Moore's practice of incorporating these various elements obtrusive: they contribute, naturally, to the power of the poems. In Moore's work, poems use learning to help convey their message, wear that eclectic learning cryptically but proudly. And in spite of Moore's predilection for cutting material from poems as she grew older (famously asserting 'omissions are never accidental'[2]), a characteristic integration of different elements into poems, many of them the result of research, was a key aspect of her creativity. As Robert Crawford points out, learning is not incorporated into the poems in a mechanistic way as her voice 'delights both in the material and colorations of academia, yet cheeks [sic] and interrogates these'; she 'assembles … fragments from high and low culture, print and casual conversation',[3] providing an example of a poet using learning not slavishly but eclectically, to achieve those 'intricately wrought meditations'.

Moore's practice shows the range of ways learning is incorporated into poems. Allusion is one technique employed by poets to 'smuggle' learning into their poems (in Moore's case the

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[1] John McAuliffe, '*New Collected Poems* by Marianne Moore: an original and enduring talent', *Irish Times*, 26 August 2017 https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/new-collected-poems-by-marianne-moore.
[2] Marianne Moore, *Complete Poems* (London: Penguin, 1994), p.5.
[3] Robert Crawford, *The Modern Poet* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.252. Further references to this are given after quotations in the text or footnotes.

verb should rather be to 'intrigue') — by alluding to others' words or written works: yet the obscurity of many of Moore's sources for readers asks us to ponder the relationship between poetry (others' and our own) and learning. The noun 'learning' has both a 'process' sense and an 'end-product' sense: it can mean both the process whereby knowledge is gained, as well as the end-product(s) of that process, the new information that has been gained. This is a distinction which informs my key critical question: 'What is the relationship between poetry and learning?' For the creative practitioner, it prompts us to consider '*How* and *why* do poets incorporate learning into their poems?' In this chapter, I will explore a range of tactics and paratextual techniques, including direct speech and scholarly apparatus. Drawing both on the work of the nineteenth-century poet Robert Browning and contemporary practice, I will go on to outline how I have experimented with knowledge both absorbed, discredited, and adapted in my own collection.

In his essay collection, *Allusion to the Poets*, Christopher Ricks aims to clarify notions of what allusion is, and how it can help us answer some of these questions.[4] He cites the 'unignorable clarifications' T. S. Eliot gives, and quotes (p.4) Eliot's famous comments in his essay on *Philip Massinger* (1920):

> One of the surest of tests is the way in which a poet borrows. Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion. A good poet will usually borrow from authors remote in time, or alien in language, or diverse in interest (footnoted as from *Selected Essays*, 1932; rev.1951, p.206).

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[4] Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), Prefatory Note p.4. Further references to this are given after quotations in the text.

This could function as a mantra for a creative writing student. The last sentence is probably the most contentious. Although it would seem to describe Eliot's own poetic practice, and that of, say, the great eighteenth-century neoclassical writers, I would argue that good poets might well borrow from authors who *are* contemporary or near contemporary, and who write in their own, rather than an unknown, language. In fact, Ricks' work itself ventures into my collection via direct reference, his comments on the lack of synonyms for 'lonely' prompting a very conscious, and duly acknowledged, borrowing for one of my poem's titles.

A different kind of relationship to another's words was in the allusion I discovered recently in my poem 'Concerning death-masks' — an allusion I was wholly unaware of. This poem ends with the words 'with all / its muscles stopped, but none / the less human'. It seemed, on rereading the poem, that that last phrase was familiar, or *sounded* like a quotation from somewhere else. I looked up 'none the less human' and came across this quotation (translated) from Molière: 'Ah, just because I'm devout, I am none the less human [or, none the less a man]'. In Act 3 of *Tartuffe* Molière has Tartuffe hypocritically utter these words as part of his plan to seduce his friend's beautiful wife Elmire. This is not a play I knew, yet some might see the ending of my poem as an allusion to it. It is certainly a serendipitous one. My poem ends with the suggestion that even though a death-mask may be of a callous criminal, nevertheless the fabric of the mask is something that has almost touched human flesh (a muslin mask was typically placed over the human face before the plaster of Paris was applied), so we can none of us claim to be wholly different from the subject of any death-mask. Tartuffe is a hypocrite and an impostor, so much so that his name has survived as a generic term for a hypocrite who exaggeratedly feigns virtue, especially religious virtue. It therefore seems apt that my poem ends with an echo of words that might be read as a warning against hypocrisy, or 'holier-than-thou-ism'.

I also, on occasion, use *conscious* allusions in poems. In the Merrick poem 'Wonder' I use the phrase 'a gift, a rainbowing of the retina' to convey the effect that seeing a Whitechapel salwar kameez shop had on me on a bleak November evening. It was a deliberate allusion to George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, where the heroine, Dorothea is overwhelmed by the visual effect of

red draperies on her honeymoon trip to Rome. In a medical simile, Eliot writes of how Dorothea's gaze is caught by the red fabric being hung for Christmas in St. Peter's basilica 'spreading itself everywhere like a disease of the retina'.[5] I wanted to echo that to show the strength of the impression on my eyes of the multi-coloured saris in the shop window. But by substituting the coinage 'rainbowing' for 'disease' — a benign image for an injurious one — I suggest that this sensory overload was not a disturbing one. In 'Don't go looking for a photo' I deliberately alluded to Larkin's famous ending of 'An Arundel Tomb' where he declares that 'What will remain of us is love'. Since I was talking about an archaeological exhibition, I deliberately stated that 'What will remain of us is things' — meaning, in this context, artefacts. But I wanted to invoke the whole notion of memorialisation and legacy that Larkin's poem explores so subtly. His last line's confidence is qualified by the penultimate line's careful assertion that is it an 'almost-instinct almost true'. In a somewhat similar way, I qualify my 'What will remain of us is things' line when I mention the 'frisson' that such things create in the observer — and of course the whole trajectory of the poem is towards questioning how valid artefacts and photos are in the construction of identity. Another example of a consciously used allusion is in 'Some day/s', where I refer to Robert Louis Stevenson's 'The Land of Counterpane'. It seemed to me that the elderly friend who is the subject of my poem, although very frail and 'a-bed' like the sickly child Stevenson, could nevertheless, as Stevenson described himself, be deemed regal. Both are monarchs whose country, however, has shrunk down to the 'land of counterpane': the sickbed. The direct allusion brings out these analogies, just as it indirectly reminds the reader of how the very elderly tend to be thought of as being in a second childhood — a suspicion the poem strives to counteract in its description of the elderly woman's piercing eyes.

Yet what can 'learning' convey that 'allusion' cannot? One role that poets have often adopted, consciously or unconsciously, in relation to learning is as bulwarks against forgetting,

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[5] George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. by W. J. Harvey (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1965), p.226.

'keepers' of learning, facts (including esoteric ones), and narratives that have piqued their imagination. This is a case made for what poets write about and how: as Rachel Cusk notes : 'it was never said of history, for instance, that it shouldn't be talked about; on the contrary, in terms of history silence was forgetting'.[6] Often the facts and narratives poets preserve are from history, or from tradition. This quasi-historian role is perhaps espoused because what poets choose to incorporate into their work seems to them worth preserving for its own sake or seems relevant to contemporary life.[7] That said, *how* historical information or learning generally is incorporated in poems has often led to further questions about attribution and footnoting — a conversation or debate that continues to this day.

One of the most straightforward and often used ways of incorporating learning into a poem is through direct speech. A speaker in a dramatic monologue is made to refer to some real event, or actual historical person, to make a point, whether in terms of characterisation, scene-setting, or establishing the scale or cultural milieu of the poem. In this scenario no concession is made to the reader: it is as if the speaker is addressing whoever it is s/he is speaking to in the world of the poem, assuming a shared knowledge on the part of that person addressed and the reader. Dramatic monologue of this kind is a characteristic of Robert Browning's work, especially in poems with historical content.[8] This is true, for example, of 'My Last Duchess' (first published 1842), and Browning's huge verse-novel '*The Ring and the Book*' (1868–9) consists largely of long

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[6] Rachel Cusk, *Outline* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 2014), p.245.

[7] See, for instance, Billy Mills' poetry blog Poster poems: History | Poetry | The Guardian https://www.theguardian.com/.../booksblog/2009/jul/16/poster-poems-history 16/07/2009 [accessed 8/6/2020]. Robert Crawford, in *The Modern Poet*, writes of the difficulty contemporary poets encounter in maintaining their poetic inspiration especially if linked to universities. He concludes that the contemporary poet 'seeks to juggle the roles of shaman and professor, bard, administrator, and barbarian' (p.284).

[8] I am thinking of dramatic monologue here primarily as a technique for importing knowledge into poems via a *persona's* voice; I am not concerned to discuss Browning's use of the device as a means of suggesting the difficulty of accessing an objective truth, or his preoccupation with the 'idea of an unbridgeable schism between God's language and human language' as, for instance, Gal Manor does in her '"Human Speech is Naught"? The Authoritative Word in Robert Browning's Poetry', *English Studies* 99:2 (2018), 130-147. The quotation is from p.132. Later quotation from that article is referenced in the text.

sections of speech from various voices, at a murder trial, based on a real-life case, just as 'My Last

Duchess' was, rather loosely, based on another Italian marriage. The 21,000 line *The Ring and the

Book* was hailed as a masterpiece when it was first published, Gal Manor seeing it as part of

Browning's steady trajectory towards gaining high status as a sage and religious poet. She states

that '*Dramatis Personae* of 1864 was his first collection to obtain a second edition, followed by

the most dramatic turning point in his literary career: the publication of *The Ring and the Book* in

1868, which received excellent reviews and sold well' (pp.145-146). In the twentieth century,

however, the latter fell in and out of favour according to the critic's view of whether the

information included was excessive or not.[9] In 'Youth and Art' (1864, one of the *Dramatis

Personae* monologues) only two fictional protagonists speak, in seventeen four-line rhyming

stanzas.[10] The woman who speaks — a singer who has achieved success of a kind, but who looks

back with remorse to her youthful but enjoyable struggles and what might have been —

addresses the sculptor from her past, himself also older and, in some respects, successful. Each of

them, in revisiting that lost time when their fates were intertwined, names the real artist whom

they hoped to emulate, or rather surpass. She recalls him mentioning someone named simply as

'Gibson' — presumably John Gibson (1790-1866), eventually famous as a Neoclassical sculptor

and Royal Academician, though from an ordinary, non-artistic Welsh background. Gibson would

have been 'demolished' if the sculptor-speaker had succeeded in his own career. This choice of

verb makes it seem almost as though Gibson is one of his own classical statues, vulnerable to

destruction in the boast of a confident and ambitious man. It is at this point, in the direct speech

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[9] Henry James, for instance, in a 1912 essay, criticised 'The Ring and the Book' as not working as a novel would be expected to; he spoke of Browning not only failing to deliver a novel, but conveying 'clustered hugeness or inordinate muchness' [quoted in Matthew Campbell, *Rhythm and Will in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.99]. And even critics who acknowledge the poem as a masterpiece, sometimes do so in mixed, grudging language. For instance, in his *Robert Browning: A Study of his Poetry* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1967), Thomas Blackburn writes: 'Despite its excessive length, 21,000 lines, and despite long dreary passages of intellectual gymnastics without inspiration or interest, 'The Ring and the Book'…is probably a masterpiece' (p.127).
[10] For the text, see *Browning: Poetical Works 1833–1864*, edited by Ian Jack (London, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 847–849.

of the sculptor, that we discover his own, almost generic, name: Smith — a name that might seem even more unpromising for a would-be successful sculptor than 'Gibson'. This was the time of Flaxman, Canova and Thorwaldsen — the exotic-sounding greats with whom Gibson studied in Rome. The sculptor simply uses surnames in his remark, thus perhaps stressing the ordinariness of both his own and the real sculptor's beginnings. Each of these 'self-made' artists had to learn his craft — and Browning has chosen a fitting real-world antagonist for each particular speaker. Like Smith, the woman who is the main speaker in this monologue reveals a longstanding regret. The plainly-named Kate Brown mentions the (actual) diva 'Grisi' (Giulia Grisi, 1811-1869), whom she hoped to outdo. Browning's choice is clever, since Grisi was the opposite of the fictional Kate in talent, and eventual personal happiness. Grisi had talent and was from a musically gifted family; Kate's musical gifts seem to have been limited. After some unhappiness (that perhaps *does* mirror Kate's experiences), Grisi eventually married a fellow singer who brought status, financial security *and* happiness; Kate settled for the first two. Neatly summing up her own and the sculptor's respective fates, Kate declares, 'I've married a rich old lord, / And you're dubbed knight and an R.A.' (Gibson, by contrast, never got a knighthood, so, in that one sense only, Smith *has* outdone him.) The reference to two real — and contemporary — artists in 'Youth and Art' helps place it historically and culturally, and helps characterise the two protagonists. Browning also gets 'double duty' out of the references by choosing a sculptor and a singer whose life stories compare both favourably, and unfavourably, with the life stories of the characters. Just as following through the references to the two real artists referred to in the poem provides their life-histories, so the reader who does this, or who knows their histories already, can imagine how the lives of the speaker and Gibson might have turned out, how the gaps in *their* narratives could have been filled. But in integrating this knowledge into the poem, Browning has ensured that enough information is present, or able to be worked out, that the point being made is accessible even if readers do *not* know the references. Poets who use this 'fully integrated' technique have to ensure that readers who do not know the information can nevertheless work out, from the poem itself, enough to enable them to understand.

Browning's poem displays one of the commonest ways of incorporating learning in a poem. I have suggested it might be described as the most *integrated* inclusion of learning, where references seem a fully realistic part of the whole — here a natural part of the conversations reported by Kate Brown. Another way in which poets wear their learning might be described as unintegrated or overt, self-conscious use of reference. This might, for instance, be in the form of footnotes. It is a technique that can give rise to mixed feelings, however, with many poets frowning on including externally on the page something that might be integrated fully into the poem's text. (Noel Coward famously commented that having to read footnotes resembled having to go downstairs to answer the door while in the midst of making love.)

Sheenagh Pugh is described by reviewer Glyn Purslove as a 'poet who has frequently written poems on historical subjects', and who 'seems largely to find her stimuli in her reading'.[11] He goes on to say that 'In *Afternoons Go Nowhere* … for example, one delightful poem, 'Lieutenant Schmidt's Ideal Lady' is followed by a note telling us that 'the facts behind this poem are related in *Southern Adventure*, vol. 5 of Konstantin Paustovsky's autobiography *Story of a Life*', adding,

> It is a minor sadness that this delightful book doesn't have more such notes. Indeed, some of Pugh's titles and poems can pose minor problems of identification. The poems always intrigue and satisfy even if one doesn't know quite what or who the historical subject is, but such ignorance can be a distraction.

This seems a plea for more notes as much as a criticism. But another reviewer, Thomas Tyrrell, defends Pugh's practice, thus: 'there's nothing in this latest collection that's rebarbative or overly obscure, and there's usually an italicised subtitle to provide a welcome hint'.[12] Citing some

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[11] Glyn Purslove, 'Poetry Comment', *Acumen Literary Journal*, 95 (September 2019), 112–126 (p.115). This is a review of Sheenagh Pugh, *Afternoons Go Nowhere* (Bridgend, Wales: Seren Books, 2019). Subsequent quotations from the review are from this page also.
[12] See https://www.walesartsreview.org/poetry-afternoons-go-nowhere-by-sheenagh-pugh [accessed 27 June 2020].

examples of names and information he had to check, he nevertheless concludes: 'none of this is too onerous in the internet age and … these poems manage to work even without knowing the essential facts behind them'. There are no endnotes to the volume, and occasional subtitles (involving dates, names, geographical locations or relevant quotations) do some of the work a footnote or endnote might. Only two 'real' footnotes exist: the one Glyn Purslove mentioned, and another, in a group of three poems in memory of the music-hall artist Dan Leno, explaining how italicised words in the poems are from Leno's stage act or his memoir. (This is similar to my own footnoting practice in 'Bain's train'.) Pugh's ability to bring to life the humanity of those she writes about means that readers may well be happy to follow up more information on their own. I personally found the poems' meanings accessible, and in a few cases was happy to look up more, out of an interest she had piqued. *Pace* Noel Coward's opinion, poets who use footnotes do so in the expectation that readers will feel it *has* been worth their while going to the foot of the page (either before or after reading the poem) to gain the information that will enable them to understand the poem better. Normally signalled to the reader by an asterisk at the poem's title, or very occasionally at the relevant line, this method can allow poems to be read primarily as poems (for their shape / musicality / imagery and language) *before* they are considered fully for their subject matter or as the products of research — especially, of course, if the footnote is read afterwards. And a decision *not* to footnote may rest on the poet's perception of the contemporary ease with which readers can access background information, should they wish to pursue it. Pugh, for instance, might have known that in titling a poem 'Guests at Frodriver', and making it a monologue about various 'hauntings', readers might well be curious enough to put 'Frodriver' into a search engine. This immediately throws up various results, the first of which is 'Three Curious Medieval Ghost Stories – History Extra', with much information about source material, etc., to add to that in the poem. Conversely, the poem titled 'A Roman Tombstone at Annaba' presupposes a reader who will realise that all relevant information for a full understanding is within the poem itself.

Many poets (often those who eschew footnotes) resort to a series of endnotes to a volume, that do not complicate or compromise the page on which each poem is printed. Raymond Antrobus's *The Perseverance*[13] uses endnotes to indicate the reading and events that have informed the poems (see Figure 5). Antrobus often uses the formula 'This poem would not exist without …' to indicate sources and sometimes to record thanks. He also includes after the endnotes an explicatory note '*on the spelling of D/deaf*' (p.90). Somewhat similarly, Ian Duhig, in *The Blind Roadmaker*[14] includes endnotes that add information to the poems, but he also includes acknowledgements at the start of this section, titling this 'Acknowledgments and Notes' (see Figure 6). Readers of these two volumes have the option to read the poems without consulting the notes, or to turn to the back as they read and where they feel some extra information might help their understanding.
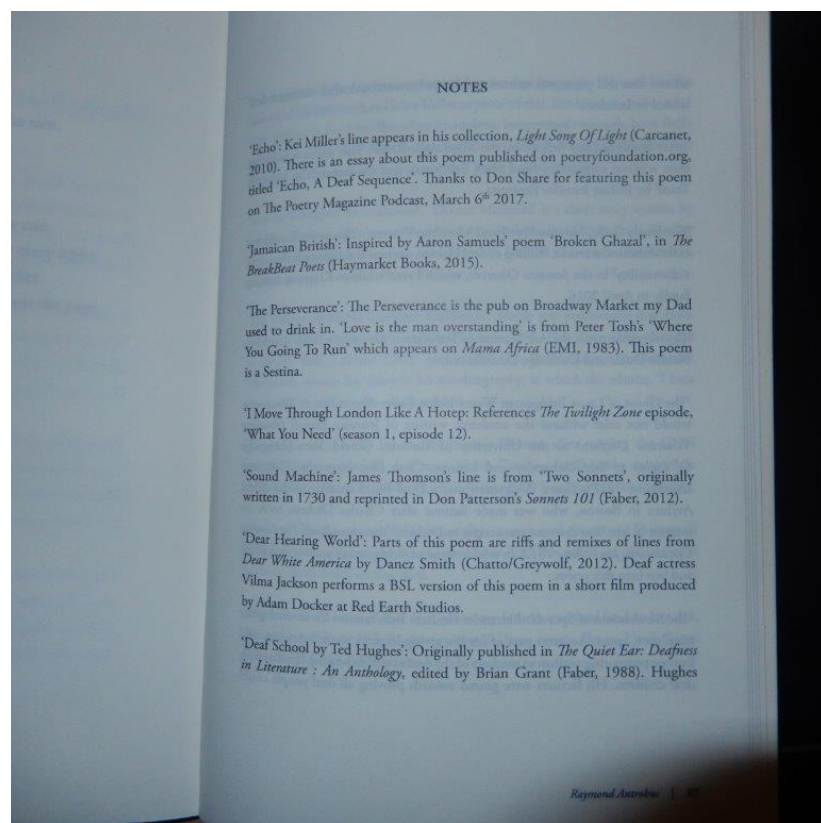
Figure 5

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[13] Raymond Antrobus, *The Perseverance* (London: Penned in the Margins, 2018). Page references are given in the text.
[14] Ian Duhig, *The Blind Roadmaker* (London: Picador, 2016).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND NOTES

A number of these poems, or some very like them, have already appeared elsewhere. Thanks are therefore due to the editors of *Poetry Review, Poetry* (US), *The Poetry Review, The Edinburgh Review, Canto, Compose, Poetry & Audience, The Lifeboat* (Belfast), *The Dark Horse, the Guardian, Poetry London, Poetry Salzburg Review, The Moth, Thirteen Pages, Contourlines: New Responses to Landscape in Word and Image* (ed. Neil Wenborn and M.E.J. Hughes, Salt 2009), *In Their Own Words* (ed. George Szirtes and Helen Ivory, Salt 2012), *A Modern Don Juan* (ed. Andy Croft & N.S. Thompson, Five Leaves Publications 2014), *Versions of the North: Contemporary Yorkshire Poetry* (ed. Ian Parks Five Leaves Publications 2013), *Digressions* (with Philippa Troutman, Smokestack 2014), *Interventions* (Poetry School CAMPUS Pamphlet 2015).

'The Marbled Page' was written for a Shandy Hall fundraising project called 'The Emblem of My Work' and appeared in the Laurence Sterne Trust exhibition and 2013 catalogue of that name.

'Half the Story' relates to a story recorded by Dora Diamant, but I came across it first from Anthony Rudolf, whose 'Kafka and the Doll' is recommended.

'Indirections' refers to the City of Troy turf maze not far from Shandy Hall, where according to tradition you can lose the Devil as he can only move in straight lines. This and other poems here originally formed part of 'Digressions', a site-specific project for the tercentenary of Sterne's birth involving

[59]

Figure 6

In my thesis volume, I have chosen to use endnotes, preferring to let the poems speak for themselves initially, but aware that some needed elucidation.

An extreme — but innovative — use of a 'non-integrated' technique is employed by Ruth Padel in her poem-biography of her ancestor, Charles Darwin: *Darwin, A Life in Poems*.[15] What seems almost a new genre of writing is invented to present the material, using 'sidenotes' rather than footnotes or endnotes. (See Figure 7 for a sample page-spread showing Padel's use of sidenotes.)

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[15] Ruth Padel, *Darwin: A Life in Poems* (London: Vintage Books, 2010). The book was first published by Chatto & Windus in 2009. Quotations and page references are from the Vintage edition.
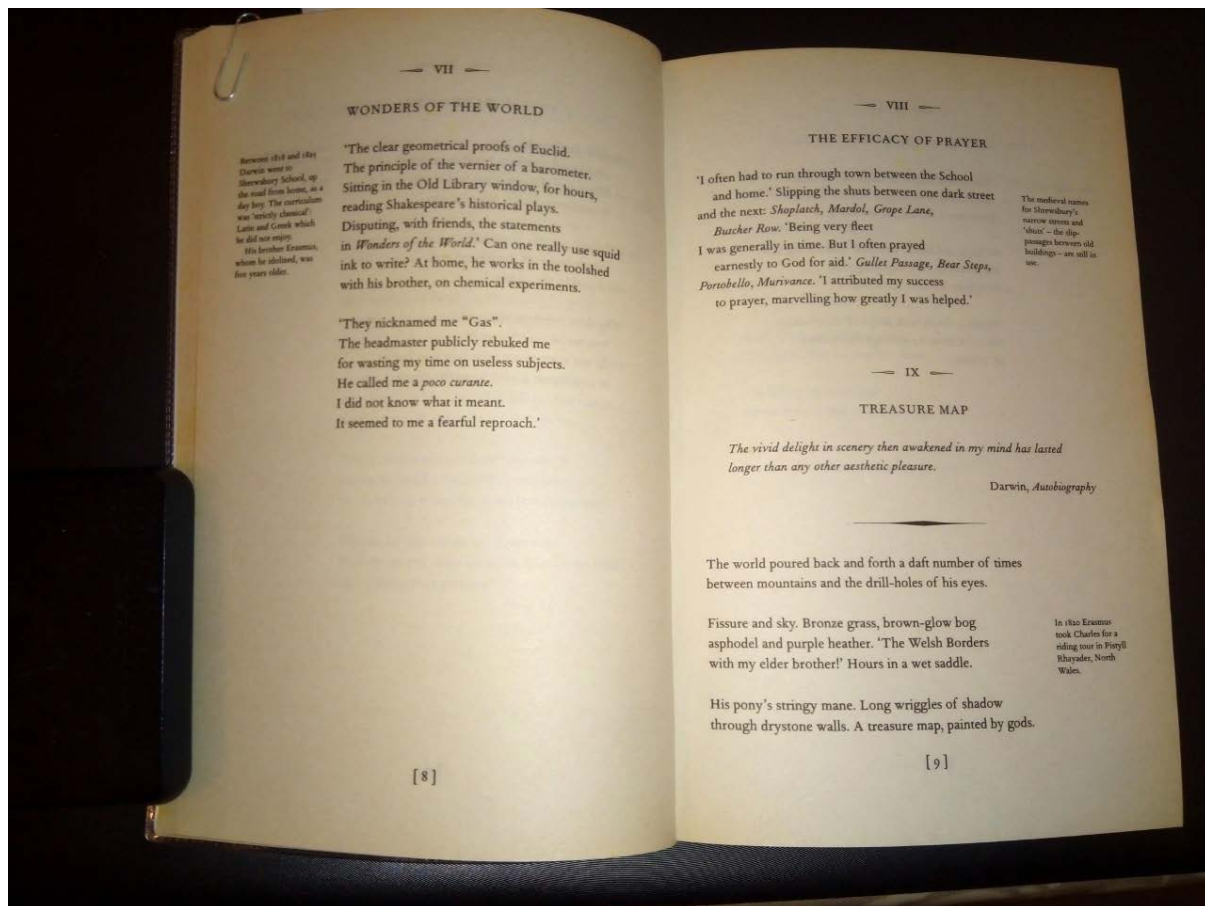
Figure 7

Padel relishes the opportunity to share learning overtly in prose. Her chosen technique allows her to write poems, often narrative ones, but never *just* descriptive ones, on her subject, at the same time as including in sidenotes prose comments that help the reader gain more information on the background of the poems and the research that went into them. The reader has access to both the resulting poem, and the explanatory prose research note, at more or less the same time, at the same eye-level. The sidenotes use a smaller font than the poems, and therefore can be laid out on the page to the left or right of the poems at relevant points. Occasionally they are one word, or a name, place-name or date, though sometimes they contain much more information. When they are very brief, they provide clarity, or the name of the speaker whose words are being quoted in the adjacent poem's soliloquy or conversation. This attitude to learning is the opposite of the Browning fully-integrated approach. It is self-conscious, attentive to the artifice of the poems and the challenges they present to a reader. In another sense, the technique harks back to much older editorial practices, in older printed Bibles, which had on pages, for instance, 'common addenda, such as the interpretations of Hebrew names [which] enhanced the reader's experience,

and accommodated it to sanctioned dogma'.[16] I found Padel's book fascinating, not least because of the reading process that it prompts. That process involved constant decision-making as to the order in which to read. One challenge is which to read first: the poem or the sidenote, if there is one. The arrangement typographically on the page sometimes even tempts us to try to read right across the prose and the poem line — almost as if we could read the two things, note and poem, simultaneously. It allows us to read a poem first, and then the sidenote, as it were for 'added value', for more facts and background, though, where the sidenote is simply a date as a way of orientating oneself in terms of the chronology of Darwin's life, it is easily assimilated as we read the poem.

The sidenotes function in different ways. Occasionally they simply add more information to what one has already been told or is about to be told in a poem. For instance, in The Coddington Microscope section or 'chapter' (the latter is Padel's term), in the poem 'Held' the poet invites us to visualise Darwin 'walk[ing] out on the jade lawn' of Christ's College, Cambridge. (An early sidenote to the poem has identified the location, and the date.) She goes on to write of:

> scarlet geraniums
>
> and black stone walls (now cleaned and pale)
>
> familiar once to Milton. (p.18)

A sidenote here adds an interesting comparison: 'Milton, who was intended for the priesthood like Darwin, had studied at Christ's College two centuries earlier (1625–32)'. None of this is vital to our understanding of Darwin, though the poem goes on to mention 'the Laws of Nature and of God' — another link between the two men (and a reminder of Milton's declared purpose in writing *Paradise Lost*) and also the rise of 'A great regard for understanding order' in Darwin. And later in the book, in the chapter on the voyage of the Beagle, there's a poem titled 'Remembering

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[16] See 'The Material Culture of the Late Medieval and Early Modern Bible', on the University of Edinburgh's 'Centre for the History of the Book' website, published August 20th, 2015. See www.ed.ac.uk/literatures-languages-cultures/chb/about/recent/material-culture.

Milton in the Night at Sea', where Darwin's own words about a luminous sea on a pitch-dark night

(a side-note again gives us geographical orientation) declare it is

> Impossible to behold this plain of matter, as it were melted
>
> & consumed by heat, without remembering Milton! (p.41)

Darwin's educational background is being filled in for the reader, and he is also being positioned

in the ranks of the great cultural icons of the society — though this is a status he had not, at this

point in his life, acquired. Although this might all appear to be extraneous and complicating to the

poetic experience of the reader it has the effect of layering learning and poetry in an

unexpectedly rich way.

Early sidenotes to poems often provide a way in, a necessary first piece of information to

enable us to make a shift to a new aspect or incident of Darwin's life. Thus in 'A Desperate Way

to Avoid Paying Your Tailor' we read, in a sidenote that begins a left-hand page and so

immediately draws our eye, that 'In summer 1831 Darwin passed his Divinity exams and in July

went on a geology expedition to Wales with Sedgwick, Cambridge Professor of Geology'. This

enables us to begin the poem completely able to appreciate the thrill and achievement celebrated

in the opening stanza:

> His own work has revised the National Map!
>
> He's discovered there's no Old Red Sandstone
>
> in the Vale of Clwyd.
>
> 'A promising student of Geology'. (p.22)

That last line is a quotation, as is the poem's title — the context of which title emerges at the end

of the poem, where it is given as the jocular comment of Fanny, the girl Darwin is about to leave

behind when he sets off on the *Beagle.*

Padel uses a great deal of direct quotation from sources such as letters, diaries and official

and personal documents throughout the biography. She is scrupulous about using inverted

commas to signal this. In her 'Author's Note and Acknowledgements' she mentions the many

sources from which she has drawn her Darwin quotations, but also adds of quotations, that she

'hope[s] it is clear when they come from someone else, such as his colleague Alfred Russel Wallace or Emma [Darwin's wife] in her journal and letters' (p. xviii). The biographer Richard Holmes, reviewing the volume, points out how '[t]he poems are presented mostly from Darwin's point of view, in a cunning form of ventriloquism, drawing his "voice" from direct but carefully adjusted quotations from letters, journals and notebooks'.[17] This technique, I found, does indeed give the poems an immediacy and authoritative voice, and when there are accompanying sidenotes, one's sense of being in an extremely good museum, with visual stimuli and a 'live' commentary on the subject at one's disposal, is strengthened. For instance, the complexity of Darwin's relationship with his wife Emma, whose adherence to Christianity led to a marriage-long discussion of his beliefs, emerges powerfully in their quoted conversations. And this discussion was not just a spoken one: one poem, 'She Writes Him a Note About Salvation', intersperses her *written* words to him with the telling detail that during her first pregnancy Emma's 'back aches all the time; / she never goes out. His friend's wife has died / in childbirth' (p.79). Here the sidenote adds key extra information that we could not have adduced from the poem, though obviously in the poem we sense her fear about her own pregnancy as well as her pain. The note reads: 'While pregnant, Emma wrote a letter to Charles (although they were living together), worried that if he did not believe, he would not be saved; so if she died she would never see him again'. This is a fascinating insight into an early-Victorian woman's mindset. The sidenote here is, arguably, as powerful as the accompanying poem.

In contrast, the very last poem in the book, 'I Made his Coffin Just the Way he Wanted it, All Rough', integrates *all* its factual background into the poem, and only two tiny sidenotes give the date and place of Darwin's death. It is a powerful way of avoiding the inclusion of a potentially melodramatic 'deathbed' poem. The title quotation of 'I Made his Coffin...' is from 'the village

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[17] Richard Holmes, 'Giving to a blind man eyes. Review: *Darwin: A Life in Poems* by Ruth Padel', *The Guardian*, 13 March 2009
https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/mar/14/darwin-life-poems-ruth-padel.

carpenter — who made his instruments, and boxes "for his queer / experiments"' (p.140), and the poem then ranges through quotation and information to do with Darwin's funeral, and finally, Emma's life after his death. In a departure from her practice elsewhere, Padel here addresses the reader directly, inviting us to 'leave her [Emma] in the drawing-room, at the piano'(p.141). The widow is then shown looking out of the window, at the rain. The stunning last line lacks a verb and simply presents us with these visual images: 'The garden they made together. Its life beyond the glass.' And that last word prompts us to range back through the biography, with its multiple associations: with microscopes, slides (all of Darwin's research and its tremendous consequences), mirrors (Darwin seemingly always feared he was too ugly for anyone to love), and thermometers (he was chronically ill for much of his life). Thus Padel, up to the very end of her poetic biography, employs not just innovative sidenotes but a range of creative integrations of researched material.

A third approach to how knowledge relates to poetry might be described as a *via media* between the fully integrated and fully externalised ways of including learning or researched material. This is where a poet incorporates *inside* the poem an overt or self-conscious reference to some learning or something she or he has researched. Attention may even be drawn to that inclusion. The poet may have felt a need to provide some form of explanation *within* the poem, rather than, say, by resorting to a footnote. The challenge here is to avoid being over-didactic and to avoid disrupting the 'flow' of the poem. The inclusion must seem naturalistic as, say, Kate Brown's mention of Grisi was, but must also contain and present material external to the main thrust or narrative of the poem, as Ruth Padel's sidenotes or Kei Miller's or Howe's endnotes were.

An example of this *via media* approach can be seen in Eavan Boland's 1994 poem 'That the Science of Cartography is Limited'.[18] A key reference in the poem is to the 'famine road' that

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[18] See Eavan Boland, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Limited, 1995), p.174. The poem is the first in a sequence called 'Writing in a Time of Violence'.

Boland and her lover encountered when they were 'first in love' and drove out to Connacht (Boland deliberately uses the Irish spelling). The poet then proceeds to rehearse, in the poem, the information which 'you' — the lover — told her about famine roads and the horrors that followed, in that part of Ireland, the double crop failure of 1847. There is a nod to realism, here, in that readers learn the information just as Boland, writing in the first person, learned it, or was reminded of it, in the past. But the poem works to integrate that information into the trajectory of the piece as a whole, rather than assuming key knowledge on the part of the reader, as Browning did, or informing the reader overtly, as Padel did. By the end of the poem we readers can be reckoned to have 'caught up' with the speaker and to be capable of something of the same degree of empathy as she must feel for those who suffered, of whom it can be said, 'Where they died, there the road ended' — and, the key point of the poem, 'ends still'. We are reminded that just as the line on the map 'gives out', those who were set to build the road gave out, in the sense of expiring of hunger, literally lying down dead, so that their history is now an indelible part of geography — only a 'flat' geography, in both a literal and a metaphoric sense, that cannot represent their suffering, their 'ordeal'.

These three examples sketch out the main ways poets display learning in their poems. Many poets, in both the past and in contemporary practice, fully integrate their learning into third-person or first-person poems, leaving space for the reader to follow up on references to actual events or historical people if they so desire. This can be by means of words spoken by people in the poems, as in the Browning example cited above, or it can simply be by integrating facts fully into the structure of the poem. Others use what I've called a *via media* approach and help the reader to understand something that might be deemed esoteric by including what are at one level self-consciously explicatory phrases or words within the body of the poem. And some poets respond to that perception that the reader might need some help by including extra material *outwith* the structure of the poem, in the form of footnotes, endnotes and, in Padel's case, sidenotes — the latter two presumably easier and less annoying to access than Coward's 'going downstairs' type of ordinary footnote.

Chapter 3

I have at times used all three of the techniques mentioned above — or variations on them.

But I have also been aware of the need to try to innovate in how I integrate researched, historical

material. One technique I have used a number of times is juxtaposing two different language

registers, often with one of these involving direct quotation from a historical source — as in the

quotations from *The Senses and the Intellect* in 'Bain's Train' or from the King James Bible in

'Makeshift'. These juxtapositions can suggest various things: say, a soporific rhythm in the first

example mentioned; multiple ironies in a situation in the second example.

In 'Bain's Train' I quote words from the philosopher, proto-psychologist and polymath

Alexander Bain's *The Senses and the Intellect* (1855) in a poem partly about how the senses work

in perception. The setting is a train, journeying to London, and I chose to use a first-person

approach to give the poem immediacy and authenticity — although it is not a record of any

specific train journey.

Bain's train*

I'm on a train and Hampshire
is staring in at the windows, making its presence felt.
I feel relaxed, ready to sleep. Bain keeps
creeping into my head: my nervous system works
like the course of a train by the side of which run
telegraph wires… by the side of which run…
The individual wires cannot be said to run the whole length
of the country (or the body) —
here I snuffle in my snooze —
but they form a network that does.

As telegraph wires run from station to station,
I follow their progress, nod to the wheels' repetitions:
so the nerves run from 'nerve centre' to 'nerve centre'.
I think I've become… by the side of which run…
the nerves — like the wires — originate nothing,
they merely conduct. They merely conduct.
This train is conducting me through time and space.
My mind is conducting me from here to there.
And am I the wire, or one of those white bits at the top
of a telegraph pole, disrupting the clear swoop of the line?

Each nerve has only one function (either sensory or motor).
I think of them — mine — as birds dotted along the wires,
waiting to fly away and help cause the future:

in a feeling, in a movement. *The 'nerve centres' —*
like the stations on the railway line — have the property
of 'sending out motor power…' We stop at Shawford,
so small its motor power must be that of a hiccup — head on
to Winchester, thrill towards London
… especially through the spinal cord, which is regarded as one big centre.
London, the squashed-down spinal cord, central —
it would have us think.

*Italicised words are from Alexander Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect* (1855)

I chose, unusually, to use a footnote here — not just to identify the source of the italicised lines,

but also to suggest the appropriateness of the title of the nineteenth-century text to the themes

of my poem: how we perceive things and how our circumstances affect what and how we

perceive. This is an important consideration in a collection where confrontations with death-

masks, or other visual encounters, are frequent. I quoted extracts from the Bain volume *verbatim*,

having selected a section of the book that uses similaic language (comparing how the nervous

system works to how telegraphy works, and also how train networks work).[19] Linking Bain's words

are my own, narrative words describing the train trip and its effect on the 'me' of the poem. So as

to prevent these narrative sections from becoming too prosaic, I used some of my own figurative

language there, for instance comparing how the nerves work in the simile, 'as birds dotted along

the wires, / waiting to fly away and help cause the future' or at the end of the poem using the

metaphor 'London, the squashed-down spinal cord'. The juxtapositions of different kinds of

language in the Bain poem (quoted nineteenth-century 'scientific' language and contemporary

narrative and figurative language) create a sense of how tiredness might lead to words struggling

to represent external reality.

With the poem 'Makeshift' the juxtaposition of the biblical quotations and the narrative

sections that reveal what is happening helps point up the various ironies involved. While

researching in Norfolk, I came across the fascinating story of the women inmates of the model

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[19] See Alexander Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1855; repr.
Bristol and Tokyo: Thoemmes Press and Maruzen Co., Ltd, 1998), p.30.

bridewell at Wymondham, and the novel use to which they put the New Testament Bibles which

they were given by penal reformers: turning the pages into makeshift playing cards. Although the

same 'juxtaposing' technique appears in the Bain poem and in 'Makeshift', which is not surprising

given the overlapping times of their original composition, its function is completely different. It

has a more politically forensic purpose in 'Makeshift'. In support of this, I also later changed the

title from "At the Model Bridewell, Wymondham, Norfolk" to the present one, adding the more

pointed, long subtitle of the final version. The final subtitle works as a kind of parody of long,

narrative picture titles in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century art, adding to the ironic tone of the

poem. Here is the final version:

Makeshift:
or, how the female prisoners of the Model Bridewell at Wymondham, Norfolk, spent their time devoted to
the New Testaments that prison inspectors had given them.

Now the women prisoners
did take pages of one of the New Testaments
that had been vouchsafed unto them
for their moral and religious instruction,
this having been advised by an Inspector.

Fifty-two times did they place the same number
on top of each other, sewed carefully round the edges
of each small pile, to hold the flimsy sheets together, skewering
hope toward God…that there shall be a resurrection of the dead,
pausing over the words *both of the just and unjust*.

They used needles and thread they had for their work
in the prison laundry. That done, they marked
each one with the needed number and shapes.
Kings with squint crowns, stick queens, scrawled over
the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.

They took care not to miss the sequence, using, for black,
slivers of charcoal from the remains of the fire
they were allowed at night. And for red ones
they stabbed with needles and squeezed
till berries bloomed on the end of their hardened thumbs

so they could apply their own blood
like *a law given which could have given life*
onto the shapes they'd drawn
the number of times it took. They waited for it to dry
over *an example of suffering affliction, and of patience.*

This work completed, they dealt their cards,
began to play.

I used archaic verb tenses (as in 'Now the women prisoners / <u>did take </u>pages…') to suggest a

historical period and particularly to work with the biblical quotations. Once I had decided to use

the 'juxtaposing' technique, I had *carte blanche* to choose the biblical words (from the King James

version, of course) that would point up the irony of what was going on: the very means by which

penal reformers hoped to turn the women into model citizens being used anarchically by the

prisoners to defy the authorities and in the process humanise their own situation. I *did* 'tinker' a

little with the biblical quotations later, when I saw on the Wymondham Heritage Museum website

(the museum is in the building that was the bridewell) a newly-posted picture of one of the cards.

It had the words 'a law given which could have given life' on it, and, since I had been unhappy

about a previous rather melodramatic quotation that I had included about 'the blood of the Lamb'

(juxtaposed with the detail about the women pricking their fingers so as make the 'red' card suits

with drops of their blood), I substituted these words instead (see Figure 9, p.183). They fit in with

the existing syntax, and indeed complicate it, and, like the other biblical words in the poem, were

chosen to favour what the women are doing rather than condemn it. Here two kinds of language

are employed: traditional narrative / declarative language with some 'poetic' touches such as

similes on the one hand, and on the other, biblical language that would have been archaic even

then. Each is traditionally endowed with gravitas. They come together to memorialise these

nameless yet resourceful women.

I have also on occasion used 'found' language — and what linguists call 'subject specific

vocabulary' — in poems where information is fully integrated, with no footnotes or extraneous

explanation to enlighten (or distract) the reader. Like most poets, I keep a notebook where I note

down phrases and words that strike me as memorable. Often these, or versions of them,

eventually find their way into poems. Such was the case with some words I wrote down in the

weeks before Christmas 2017, while visiting a computer games shop in Southampton. So

fascinated — and horrified — was I by the implied violence of the language on the side of the box

for the 'Dead Island' video game that it forced its way into a poem. The subtitle of the

ambiguously-titled 'The Present' is 'an almost found poem'. I had known from the outset what the

title would be, since its ambiguity (a pun on 'present time' and 'present' as in 'gift') was

something that I wanted to seed in the mind of the reader from the start.[20] My role as poet was

one where I 'simply' had to order and shape the subject-specific language from the world of video

games and their advertising for maximum ironic effect, and I did this partly by reversing, in the

second half, the word order of the first half — a technique which if anything intensified the

ominousness of the violence in the words. I did, however, have a small amount of 'juxtaposing'

too in this poem, in that I inserted the words 'with love / from Mum and Dad' as a pivot in the

centre of the poem, relying on their being from a very different register to point up the irony of a

gift involving a great deal of pretend violence being sent with parental love. The poem's title is

also intertextual or allusive in a way which might *not* be picked up: it recalls the kind of title

employed by George Herbert, a poet important to me for his promotion of values completely

different from those implicit in the video game (compare, for example, titles like 'The Elixir' or

'The Pulley').

Another 'almost found' poem in my thesis collection is 'Whichever way you look at it'.

Here an academic-type footnote reference to a Blake biography would have seemed heavy-

handed, since the poem relies on the strangeness of repeating Blake's words to the 'ghost' or

'vision' of Shakespeare which he said he experienced on Felpham beach. It is not until one has

read all the poem round that pivotal verb 'was' that the full situation, and its strangeness, can be

understood. I included the extra information in an endnote. A third poem, 'Fragments', is like 'The

Present' an 'almost found poem'. In this case it reproduces and orders a list of words from an

interpretation board in a church in Fribourg, explaining about the fragments of tesserae that

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[20] The first draft was 6th April, 2018. I did not, at the time, know of Simon Armitage's prizewinning
poem with the same title.

archaeologists unearthed during a dig there. Writing a 'found' piece can be a simple way of incorporating what you have learned into a poem, although how much and what is selected for inclusion, and its ordering, can complicate and enrich the poem, or create irony.

As well as juxtaposing and reproducing different kinds of language, I use the more traditional technique of straightforward quotation to incorporate what I have learned into various poems. In one of my Merrick poems, 'Smiley', I at one point quote a phrase used of Joseph Merrick: '"he could weep"'. The poem's language is straightforward, and I did not think it necessary to say in the context who made that statement about Merrick, partly because the poem is about Merrick rather than those who knew or wrote about him. Anyone cognizant of the Elephant Man's story might guess that it was his friend and helper, Doctor Frederick Treves, who discovered and related this fact about Merrick in the biographical account of him written after his death. I did, however, signal that the phrase was a quotation, convinced that that was ethically correct. Choosing to quote actual words, here, lends the poem an authoritative note — a common reason for using this technique.

In the previous example I used inverted commas to signal the quotation. In 'Whichever way you look at it' the poem's structure makes it clear that one half is made of words William Blake is reported to have said to Shakespeare. The poem's reversible structure, and syntax, with its two halves on either side of the verb 'was' makes the quotation clear. Since the poem non-judgmentally re-enacts the meeting between Blake and the 'ghost' of Shakespeare, I decided that this reversal of normality might be emphasised by a structure, and epigraph, that draws attention to this idea.

An alternative way of representing direct quotation in poems is by italicising quoted words. I use this technique to indicate words spoken aloud in 'This posthumous life', a poem about the death of John Keats. Here some of Keats's dying utterances, 'I shall die easy' and 'Don't breathe on me — it comes like Ice', are separated visually from the rest of the text by putting them in italics. This poem also has a footnote to accompany it: one that explains that the title is again something recorded as being uttered by Keats in his last days, when he said to his doctor, 'How

long will this posthumous life…last?' Since I was dealing with facts as well as feelings here, a

footnote to the written source seemed called for.

Other poems in my collection wear their learning in variations on the approaches described

above. For instance, the series of poems I wrote in response to George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*

novella uses the relevant sentences from the original as epigraphs to each poem.[21] Thus, Eliot's

own words are not usually an intrinsic part of the poems except occasionally, where I chose to

integrate a striking phrase (such as 'gold-inwoven tatters' in 'Stone City'), having used it in the

epigraph. The idea of including the epigraphs was to give readers a way into the poems, by

pointing up which words and situations from the original text each poem related to, was

prompted by. The whole composition of the *Lifted Veil* poems depended on my 'collecting' ideas

from significant scenes in that novella.

A striking example of this became 'Mrs Archer Points the Finger' (the last in the sequence).

Here I do select and quote, in brackets, the *actual* statements which the dying ex-ally of Bertha

makes, revealing her mistress's perfidy. These words from the original novella constitute about

half of the poem. The brackets around them are meant to show the breathless way Mrs Archer

gasps out her remarks. In the original, Eliot uses ellipses to suggest the effortful utterances; I

chose to change the punctuation to brackets containing the words, as if the speaker is almost 'off

stage' already. She is also, however — so weird is the plotline of the piece — speaking as a

woman who has just been brought back (though only temporarily) from death by means of a

blood transfusion, so I felt that the use of brackets round her remarks might suggest not only

breathlessness of delivery, but also how the whole scenario is removed, or cordoned off, from the

ordinary. These quoted lines are set against my deliberately invented headlines which make up

the rest of the poem — liberally peppered with exclamation marks. In this I was responding to

Eliot's employing an emotive and heightened sensibility for melodramatic effect, even as she

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[21] George Eliot, *The Lifted Veil; Brother Jacob*, edited by Helen Small (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

displayed a hard-headed interest in contemporary scientific developments such as phrenology and blood transfusion. I collected Mrs Archer's remarks to re-use them in a new but still relevant context set up by the invented newspaper headlines. But my decision, throughout this sequence, to use George Eliot's original words from the novella as epigraphs, shows a variation on a very traditional way of integrating learning into written works: it was a much-used technique in nineteenth-century novels, to provide chapter headings.[22] In such cases, the second or lower piece of text is to be read in the context of the world of the epigraph, and this is what I aimed at.

Learning both integral and external can be consciously or unconsciously present in a poem; juxtapositions, quotations, and 'found' expressions deploy language creatively to help convey meaning. This chapter has analysed and described a variety of traditional and innovative ways of incorporating knowledge and learning into poems. Some of these are techniques I have used in my thesis poems. I have also shown that poets (including me) strive to *vary* the ways in which they incorporate learning into poems, as Tennyson claims in 'Morte d'Arthur' 'lest one good custom should corrupt the world' of their writing. Poems are made of words and words can convey ideas.[23] 'Learning' within a poem can be both a shorthand way of representing complex ideas, and for the reader a short cut to accessing them.

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[22] See, for instance, Toby Lichtig, Epigraphs: opening possibilities
https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2010/mar/30/epigraphs-toby-lichtig [accessed 13/6/2020].

[23] See Peter Robinson, *Poetry, Poets, Readers: Making Things Happen* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), pp.134–161, on doing things with words.

Chapter 4   The Relevance of Collection

The poems in my collection are generally not confessional in nature; sometimes they are narrative, often they deal with historical subjects. Like Sheenagh Pugh, I could be said to garner ideas for poems from my reading (the *Lifted Veil* poems, for instance) — but I also draw on encounters with interesting artefacts (death-masks and life-masks, museum exhibits, etc), which I subsequently research, either through books and records, online, or through visits to museums or archives. But there are also 'real life' encounters or incidents which cry out to be explored in poems, or creep into them, perhaps incognito, to add, hopefully, to their power.

In the course of researching poems I visited various collections of casts of death-masks. One of these was the Noel collection, University College London, which, at the time of my first visit, was in the Pathology Museum of the Royal Free Hospital. The curator had brought out a representative four heads (from the thirty-seven of the full collection). In the cupboard were several other casts along the top of a bank of shelving near the door. These were not boxed, unlike the ones that were displayed outside on a table for me to view, and the thought occurred that such grim artefacts could rightly be deemed 'top shelf' material. The boxes the displayed heads were in were cleverly origami-like in construction, so that the heads could be shown without removal from their containers. These purpose-made boxes were in direct contrast to the deep, stoutly-made, brown cardboard ones that the Winchester casts were stored in, which were most definitely for the sole purpose of providing safe storage. Seeing these casts in their fold-down 'origami' boxes meant that I reacted to them differently from how I had reacted to the Winchester heads carefully disinterred from *their* boxes. My reaction to those 'top shelf' unboxed heads was different again, all this prompting consideration of how *poetry* collections are presented, and their effects, and what decisions I would take when it came to putting my individual poems together as a group. The Noel collection was about to be moved to a new teaching space, thus necessitating planning on how the collection would be *re*assembled, and this was also relevant to the notion of forming a poetry collection, in which re-assembly is a recurring

issue. Other linked questions were, 'Is there a tried-and-tested way of organising a collection?', and beyond that, 'What is a collection for?'

Museology has an extensive critical literature on principles of object display and curation;[1] by contrast, poetry criticism is distinctly thin on how to put together poems into pamphlets or standard collections once written. In this chapter I discuss my own practice in putting together the thesis. I shall address questions about the creative, poetic, and formal issues inherent in building a collection — what the critic Neil Fraistat has usefully called 'contexture', and offer my own collection as a case study for the ways we might understand both the term itself and the poetic work it describes.[2] I will look at a range of approaches taken by contemporary writers, and how far the scattered advice and practical guidance available on the topic can help us theorise collecting as a poetic practice.

In one of the few critical studies directly on this topic, *Poems in Their Place*, Fraistat justifies his choice of the term 'contexture' thus:

> Perhaps no single word adequately conveys the special qualities of the poetic collection as an organized book: the contextuality provided for each poem by the larger frame within which it is placed, the intertextuality among poems so placed, and the resultant texture of resonance and meanings. [H]owever … the word "contexture" [is] used for such a purpose because of its utility in suggesting all three of these qualities without being restricted to any one. (p.3)

Having identified this relationship between the poem and the volume itself, Fraistat outlines a new critical endeavour which he describes as 'contextural poetics':

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[1] See for example *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, edited by Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press,1991), and *The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture*, edited by Sharon Macdonald (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

[2] Neil Fraistat, *Poems in Their Place: The Intertextuality and Order of Poetic Collections* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), especially the Introduction, pp.3–17. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

> Such a poetics … would study a wide range of forms, including paired poems, sonnet and
>
> other types of sequences, poetic works published in parts … individual collections — as
>
> well as clusters of poems within them, and the shape of a poet's canon … It would, in
>
> short, be sensitive to the numerous ways that the context of the book affects
>
> interpretation and to the special theoretical problems that arise when the book becomes
>
> central to the interpretive process. (p.4)

Yet if 'contexture' asks for a new form of attention in the poetry reader, how might the word shed

light on creative practice? Is the process more complex and interwoven than Fraistat's work

suggests? Because one is constantly reading as well as writing, the core questions about the

collection recur in different forms as it builds and seeks to integrate any new poems into its

changing structure.

Particularly relevant to my project is a similarity between the thinking and vocabulary of

museum collections and that which naturally arises in a poetic context. Susan Pearce, in her study

Museums, Objects and Collections, writes,

> Museums ... hold the stored material culture of the past … object by object. … But the
>
> material has not arrived in museums in a steady, single-state flow, one piece at a time.
>
> Characteristically, much of it comes in groups which have been gathered together by a
>
> single individual, or sometimes a closely associated pair or group of individuals. We are
>
> accustomed to call each of these groups 'a collection' and to refer to the whole
>
> assemblage as 'the collections'.[3]

This can shed light on how a poetry collection develops. Poems are like the objects that arrive to

be stored in the museum, coming normally one at a time, but *also* in small sequences, and groups,

though all gathered by the poet, a single individual. The word *collection* has validity at both this

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[3] Susan M. Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections: A Cultural Study* (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1992), p.36. Further references are given after quotations in the text. See also M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall, *The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

micro and macro level. The more traditional terminology within poetics for the groups of poems that function as a micro-collection would be 'sequence' or a specific kind of sequence such as a sonnet 'corona'. Traditionally, a 'slim volume' consists of around fifty to fifty-five poems and a pamphlet would have anything from fifteen to twenty-five — but these numbers are not set in stone; there is increasing flexibility in poetry publishing.

I once attended an Arvon course that was about putting together a first poetry collection. This was in 2010 at the Hurst, Shropshire, with tutors Michael Symmons Roberts, Kathryn Gray and Neil Rollinson. During our 'one to one' session, I asked Michael Symmons Roberts for some down-to-earth advice about organising a collection. Was there a tried-and-tested way of doing this? He replied, I suspect not wholly tongue-in-cheek: put your best poems at the start (something many poets do with the title poem of a collection), more workaday ones after that, put strong poems again at the end, and if there are a few you're not sure about, put them two-thirds to three-quarters of the way through where they're not so 'visible'. This has nothing to say directly to questions about subject-matter, but prioritises the poet's own conception of the relative merits of individual poems. It supervenes upon decisions about a clear message, or structure where form and content work together felicitously. Perhaps it is too easy to say that once poems have reached the critical mass that would suggest a full-scale collection, they might, on careful reading and re-reading, seem to fall into certain groupings, either in terms of subject-matter, or form (free verse, sonnets, haiku, other syllabic forms, etc.). These groupings might then suggest a chronology or confirm, if it has not already become obvious, certain themes that would dictate the nature and organisation of the whole. But the picture is more complicated than either of these approaches might suggest.

When first deciding on how my thesis poems should go together, and what the order should be, I realised that two sequences or groups belonged together already: the poems written in response to striking passages from George Eliot's novella *The Lifted Veil*, and those about Joseph Merrick, the so-called 'Elephant Man'. Within each sequence the poems 'spoke' to each other in terms of subject matter and tone. I tried arranging them in different orders to make each

group a stronger entity. In the end, the *Lifted Veil* poems were kept in the order of their composition, that is, following the chronology of the passages within the text I was responding to. That was a narrative sequence I wanted to respect. In the case of the seven Elephant Man poems, those four poems that refer more directly to Merrick and his story were kept together. Then the fifth poem carries on the story of Merrick's doctor friend Treves. Finally, there are two poems about the *afterlife* of Merrick's story: one about Japanese children's reaction to the 1980 *Elephant Man* film, and one that mentions Michael Jackson's attempt to buy Merrick's skeleton. Since my collection has the afterlife of historical artefacts — and the 'knowability' of the past — as main themes, it seemed right to stress those aspects of Merrick's story, placing those two poems at the end of the sequence.

My earlier thinking was that these two sequences could be placed one in each 'half' of the whole, balancing each other, with the *Lifted Veil* sequence coming in the first half, since with its opening poem about a phrenological reading it was closer in subject matter to the poems about death masks and phrenology that were near the beginning. Here the issue of balance in the whole was predominant — but when I ended up writing other groupings or sequences of poems, the positioning of each of these linked groups had to be reconsidered. When I was working on the museum poems, the Elephant Man sequence suggested itself as a kind of 'pivot' between two halves of the collection, with the *Lifted Veil* poems before it and the museum poems after it. The ongoing composition of a poetry collection involves with each new entry a potential reorganisation or 'reshuffle' of all previous poems. A poetry collection as a bit of Pearce's 'stored ... culture' is not only united thematically or tonally but constantly involves decisions on ordering, balance, intertextuality, and an overall arrangement that would make the whole greater than the sum of the parts — all of the qualities, and more, that Fraistat meant by 'contexture'. Eventually I decided that the two historically based sequences should go in the first part of the volume, with the museum poems and the 'face and technology' groups towards the end, since they deal with currently available and future depictions of self and modes of identification. The collection would thus be read as a movement from the past through the present, and into the

future, where the presence of heads and faces throughout would suggest questions about how identity is constructed, what continuities there are between past and present, and the knowability of the past.

There is another respect in which the terminology and principles of museology are useful when considering contexture. The common museological term 'curating' is now well established in poetry circles.[4] In the context of poetry it is akin to 'editing', except with a stress on selection, interpretation and organising individual poems. Curation may overlap with collecting, however. As Pearce notes, 'the selection process is the crucial act of the collector, regardless of what intellectual, economic or idiosyncratic reasons he may have when he decides how his selection will work, what he will choose and what he will reject' (p.38). In this sense, the poet is a collector, in that s/he selects what to include in a collection, usually rejecting poems that seem weaker either in composition or in their 'fit' or contribution to the development of the whole. But the poet can also function as a curator, a role very different from being a basic 'accumulator' of things, whether artefacts or poems. The curator's job is, traditionally, to interpret the collection, identifying what is worthwhile, considering juxtaposition, and how the items will be presented. Pearce puts it thus:

> the traditional word 'curator' was finally chosen to express the conviction that in the museum, meanings arise from the direct interpretation of the collections, mixed with other interpretative traditions like design, and that of these the first, which is broadly the curatorial side of the matter, is indispensable. (pp.118–19)

In the world of poetry, the poet-as-curator's job is to identify what poems will make it to the final collection, recognising their worth or suitability and making that selection on the basis of

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[4] There is a two-way traffic between the language of poetry and that of museology: the term 'poetics' has been deployed in museums as a term for the principles of display, etc., that inform exhibitions. This is evidenced by the subtitle of Karp and Lavine's essay collection *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Susan Pearce's *On Collecting: An investigation into collecting in the European tradition* has a 'Part III' titled 'The Poetics of Collecting' (as opposed to the next part, 'The Politics of Collecting').

knowledge. This is a key distinction between 'collector' and 'curator': the collector has a passion for collecting certain things, and *may* acquire increased knowledge of them as s/he collects more and more; a curator is required to have enough knowledge from the outset to enable the selection and *interpretation* of the things collected.

When 'Hampshire Poet' in 2014, I was asked to curate a small anthology (of Hampshire poets with a national profile) for the Winchester Poetry Festival. It was probably the first time I had heard the word 'curate' in a poetry context, and I wondered how far it might differ from the commonly used 'edit'. In the end 'curating' out of an existing knowledge of local and national poetry involved selecting, editing, organising, interpreting, negotiating, commercial decisions, and diplomacy. And, in considering what Fraistat calls 'the contextuality provided for each poem by the larger frame within which it is placed', I had to be aware of how the volume's *title* would help establish that larger frame and what each poem could contribute, from its positioning and juxtapositions, to the meaning of the whole. The anthology ended up being titled *Hogwords*, a flippantly punning title, which announced the poets as all, in a sense, 'Hampshire hogs' — the jocular name for a Hampshire native, and which was commercially attractive because of the suggestion of 'Hogwarts'. All these decisions came under the heading of 'curating', although the title page has the words '*Edited* by Joan McGavin' (my italics).[5]

The example above is, of course, of an anthology with various poets involved. The individual poet, however, is both collector and curator of their own poems — except insofar as a publisher's editor might want to alter some decisions about ordering, what can and should be included, whether footnotes or endnotes are to be used, and so on. But *before* the collection goes off to a publisher, the poet will already have strong views on ordering, how individual poems relate to those next to them, and will have sent some poems off in that order — all of this part of Fraistat's contexture.

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[5] *Hogwords: New poetry from Hampshire*, ed. by Joan McGavin (Winchester: Winchester Poetry Festival, 2014).

To the qualities that Fraistat lists under the work of contexture I would add an explicit consideration of how a poetry collection's *title* creates a context (bearing in mind the history of how poem titles work). It sets up expectations (e.g. will this collection be like other, similarly titled ones?) and suggests a certain kind of engagement. And in addition, that title, as part of the collection's contexture, functions in relation to the history and norms of poetry collection titling. Whatever title is chosen sits in an already existing set of conventions which form part of the reader's horizon of expectations, for example, one word, two word, or phrasal titles, e.g. *North*, *Erato*, *Citizen*, *Planisphere*; *Piecing Together*, *Life Studies*, *Night Photograph*; *Loop of Jade*, *Mapping the Delta*, *Billy's Rain*; *A World Where News Travelled Slowly*, or even a whole sentence such as *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* or *Rembrandt Would Have Loved You*.

My own experience of the collection process has involved both *being* an editor and *having* an editor, the latter when I came to publish my own two published collections of poems. A good editor can be helpful in pointing out issues which the poet might not have realised, working along with the poet to shape the final collection. Kayo Chingonyi, a recent Chatto & Windus poet, has spoken of how Parisa Ebrahimi, working with him, gave him a much improved sense of that process.[6] He now has, he claims, a better sense of the order and shape of a collection, the 'wider view' achieved by asking the key questions, 'How do these poems sit together?' and, 'What do they give across as a group?' Sarah Howe, in the same BBC Radio 4 programme on 'The Poetry Editor', reiterated that view, speaking of her *Loop of Jade's* final 'architecture and structure' (including the space around poems) as things she and Ebrahimi discussed. In addition, the overall final presentation of her volume eschewed a predictable 'oriental female's' book cover — something Ebrahimi was happy to endorse. Neil Astley of Bloodaxe Books also defined the editor's role as varied: in addition to dealing with submissions, discovering new talent, having conversations with poets, being tactful and keeping poetry alive, etc., it involves close work on

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[6] See BBC Radio 4 - The Poetry Editor https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000bvx2. This programme on the job of the poetry editor was first broadcast on 10th December 2019.

manuscripts, lineation, proof-reading, perhaps the normalising of unfamiliar language, and selection. An individual poet might not agree with all the suggestions an editor makes, but at that stage some 'give and take' might occur. For instance, Astley admitted that for the new Bloodaxe title *Platinum Blonde*, from Phoebe Stuckes, due out in September 2020, not all the suggestions he made to her were taken, even although this was her first full collection. The range of editorial skills and attitudes mentioned in the interviews above are ones that the poet, as well as the editor, needs in putting together a collection.

The working title of my thesis poem collection is *Heads: a collection*. It has a deliberately dated feel, chosen to echo museum exhibition titles or labelling. It works in the 'brisk, two-element' title tradition, prompting the reader to further questions such as, 'In what sense "heads"?'; 'How serious?'; 'Why are these heads part of a *collection*?'; 'Are these poems going to be about a museum exhibition…or mental issues?'; 'Are we talking about a collection of shrunken or decapitated heads?' — and even the more general thought, 'Is this going to be weird stuff?' The title raises expectations about the subject matter, but it also, importantly, establishes a tone: one of deliberately tongue-in-cheek datedness, suggesting that the contents are not to be read literally and simply as narratives about heads from the past. It also reminds the reader of the invisible hand (curator's or poet's) behind the collection: you cannot have a collection without someone having been involved in selecting and making it.

I have argued that the third of Fraistat's constituent parts of 'contexture', i.e., the 'texture of resonance and meanings' begins as early as the title, the reactions to which are developed and modified as the reader reads through the poems. My title signals the appropriateness of the ambiguous word 'collection' to the processes which the thesis explores through the poetry. With a definite or indefinite article in front of it, 'collection' (in its museum sense) refers to something static — as in phrases like 'The Wellcome Collection' or 'a collection of coins' — a number of items put together because of some known or perceived similarity between them. That similarity might be only in the perception that they are, though diverse, *all* of interest, or it might be that they are all variations of the *same* thing (the eclectic Burrell Collection versus a collection of coins). New

items might be added to such collections, and in that sense they are *not* unchanging entities, but rather groups of things with a demonstrably communal status, even if of changing size. Another meaning of 'collection' is relevant here. The noun 'collection' can also mean a *process*: the putting together of a number of items or artefacts, the process of gathering them, and in that respect, the word covers both the output and the activity (with all its attendant issues of motive, aims, style, etc,) which led to it. A poetry collection involves both end products and process, as does a museum collection.

Other meanings of the word 'collection' and its variants have obvious relevance. Traditionally, and generically, it is used of a group of poems put together in book form. A long established and significant artist would eventually merit a 'collected poems' volume, incorporating all, most of, or the best of the poems from individual collections. This process itself gives rise to interesting questions. In a *Guardian* bookblog, Billy Mills addresses the question, 'Do collected poems provide a complete account of an author?' He argues of collected volumes that, 'As well as providing an unwelcome memento mori they can obscure as much as they reveal about a poet's work.'[7] The complicated publishing history of the American poet Marianne Moore would bear out Mills' contention about the obfuscation (sometimes deliberately engineered by the poet her- or himself) that collected versions might allow or even promote. I shall not outline this in all its byzantine detail here, but suffice it to say that in 1967, Moore published her 'Complete Poems' with the famous prefatory admonishment that 'omissions are not accidents'. She had cut poems out, and cut individual poems down, deliberately, and was here promoting her latest versions. The 1967 'Complete' begins with 'Selected Poems,' rather than 'Observations,' the 1924 collection that had so thrilled her early fans. The 'Selected Poems' referred to was published in 1935 ... Fast forward to 2017 when Heather Cass White published her painstaking edition of

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[7] See https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2009/jul/20/collected-poems-complete-account [accessed 7 May 2020].

Moore's collected poems to great acclaim.[8] Many reviewers saw it as a definitive account, given how the challenges of the task were met. Christopher J. Adamson, for instance, wrote how Moore shortened and changed poems, and 'many poems were intentionally excised to create the text on which her legacy has been built, *Complete Poems* (1967, revised 1981). *Complete Poems* is — by Moore's own design — far from complete; White's *New Collected Poems* is much more so.'[9] However, even Cass White's new 'definitive' edition, although widely accepted as such, is not without controversy. Grace Spulman objected to a claim made in Nick Laird's *New York Times* review of Cass White's edition, asserting instead that her own, '*The Poems of Marianne Moore* (Viking, 2003), is the first real collected edition'.[10]

The case of Moore's publishing history is a particularly fraught one. But contrary to Billy Mills's view of 'Collected' or 'Complete' poems obscuring the picture is one where the power of the revelations, and authority, that a 'complete poems' collection can achieve is argued. Such was John Banville's attitude in his review of the 'complete poems' volume of Philip Larkin's work edited by Archie Burnett. Banville argued that a 'Complete Poems' functions as 'a death certificate and memorial combined. After the Selected and the Collected, the Complete marks the poet's official demise and at the same time erects a carven monument designed to outlast the ages'.[11]

Other senses of the word 'collection' are also pertinent here. When I was a child, we spoke about 'the collection' in Sunday School — the process whereby our small donations for the work of the church, or for some charity, were collected from us; it applied also to the money thus collected, the end product.[12] Now the term tends to be 'offering' — shifting the stress from the

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[8] Marianne Moore, *New Collected Poems*, ed. by Heather Cass White (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 2017).

[9] Christopher J. Adamson, 'Undoing a Long Erasure', *Boston Review*, Feb.8, 2018, https://bostonreview.net/poetry/christopher-j-adamson-undoing-long-erasure.

[10] See First Editions | by Grace Schulman | The New York Review ... https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2018/06/28/marianne-moore-first-editions.

[11] See https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jan/25/complete-poems-philip-larkin-review [accessed 7 May 2020].

[12] The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists this as the second definition of the noun 'collection', dating from the sixteenth century.

process of gathering to the implied generosity of the giver and the voluntary nature of the giving. In the world of poetry, though, no such shift in terminology has happened: the stress remains on poets as collectors of their own poems into a larger unit or volume, though it might still be the case that they would regard the collection as a kind of offering to the reader.

In addition to the definitions above, 'collection' prompts thoughts of the word '*re-*collection', itself famously invoked by Wordsworth, in the Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) when discussing poems as taking their 'origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity'.[13] All British poets writing after the Romantics write in their shadow, and though we may not fully subscribe to Wordsworth's definition of the poetic process, we are nevertheless still concerned with the agenda the Romantics set: with an individual encounter with the world around us, with nature in all senses of that word, with memory, and with the role of the poet in the wider culture. So, any poem title that echoes the notion of recollection inevitably sets up the issue of the post-Romantic role of poetry and the poet.

How far, then, are the terms 'collection' and 'recollection' useful in considering my poetic practice and the thesis volume? To summarise: the word 'collection' ambiguously embraces the action of collecting and the completed output of that collecting. It raises issues of who has done the collecting, and for what purpose, and it challenges us to consider how that which is collected has value, and in what sense it is an offering to those who 'receive' it. It also suggests the notion that the poem is already the product of a kind of recollection of the original experience. So much would be true of *any* poetic collection. However, the reason the title word 'collection' is suitable for the poems in this thesis is that they have derived from my engaging with the challenge of a quite different, and specific, kind of collecting and collection.

The title 'Heads: a collection' seems a doubly appropriate choice: it is a collection in the ordinary poetry-related use of that word, but it also had its origin in collections of death-masks or

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[13] William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads, and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, edited by James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p.756.

casts taken for phrenological purposes. It is, in a sense, a collection of traces — in the form of poems — just as the casts or masks themselves could be described as traces of the humans from which they were taken. These poems are therefore traces of traces. I use the noun 'traces' here in the sense imputed to it by Walter Benjamin, as distinct from the term 'aura'. Benjamin wrote:

> The trace is appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be. The aura is appearance of a distance, however close the thing that calls it forth. In the trace, we gain possession of the thing; in the aura, it takes possession of us.[14]

A life- or death-mask gives an 'appearance of a nearness' and makes us feel that we have, to some extent at least, 'gain[ed] possession of the thing', or rather person, depicted. However, it is also true that the death-masks have, in Benjamin's sense of the word, a definite 'aura', challenging us with their *otherness* and commanding our attention, taking 'possession of us'. When I have seen groups of death-masks in museums, they have been typically arranged side by side, or, in the case of particularly infamous criminals, perhaps on their own, surrounded by other artefacts linked to their crimes, such as murder weapons, 'Wanted' posters, popular literary accounts of their misdemeanours in pamphlet or poster form, etc., all part of an attempt to contextualise or mitigate that 'distance' or otherness.

Rather like a museum curator, I had to take decisions about presentation. I had to decide whether to group together the poems about specific death-masks (such as 'Baby Face', 'Russian Faces, Russian Dolls', 'Rush, still', 'This Posthumous life' and 'Two heads are...') or to dot them throughout the collection, so as to keep reminding potential readers of this kind of artefact *passim*, and the questions about identity and memorialisation that it throws up. In the end I decided to place these poems together, near the beginning of the collection, partly because sequences or groups became a feature of the volume. And rather as the curator in a museum decides on the kind of interpretative material that will accompany the exhibits, so I had to decide

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[14] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, transl. Howard Eiland and Kevin Mclaughlin (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press,1999), convolute M16a, p.447. (This was prepared on the basis of the German volume edited by Rolf Tiedemann.)

how much extra material of an explanatory kind such poems call for. I decided on endnotes, rather than footnotes. As a rule of thumb, I only included in an endnote something that could not reasonably be worked out from the poem itself, but which was needed in order to aid the reader to understand the poem fully. As well as poems about individuals' death-masks, there were more general poems such as 'Death Mask' and 'A Death Mask Specular', which at first I thought could 'top and tail' the collection, introducing and rounding off a central theme in a general way. I eventually decided to change the poems in those key positions, beginning the book with 'Long Arm Tactics' and 'Bain's Train', to establish quickly key themes of the 'knowability' of the past and the relationship between physical and mental. And these two poems together set up, at the outset, the notion of journeying, not just geographically, but temporally. The volume ends with 'Bio-metrically', a short poem which refers overtly to the past, present and future.

In writing of Lyford's collection, I could be said to have moved into the museum — something true of many twentieth- and twenty-first century poets.[15] My research for poems has certainly led me, literally, into various museums, including Bart's Pathology Museum in London's St. Bartholomew's Hospital, the Anatomical Museum in Edinburgh University, Norwich Castle Museum, The National Wax Museum in Dublin and such late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century local museums as the Russell-Cotes in Bournemouth, the Bournemouth Natural Sciences Society Museum, and the Wymondham Museum in Norfolk. Various poems have been inspired by encounters with collections, and artefacts, not just death- or life-masks, in these places. But in moving into the museum, in a metaphorical sense, I could be said to be following a well-trodden path. It has become almost a truism of the history of modernism, and specifically of modernism

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[15] This is not to argue that poets have only *recently* been inspired by artefacts from museums, as the 2017 blog https://blog.britishmuseum.org/poetic-licence-the-museum-gets-lyrical shows, and Carol Ann Duffy's Thresholds Project (see www.thresholds.org.uk) also attests. The relationship of visual artists (though I would argue this applies to poets also) to museums is stated thus in Kynaston McShine's Foreword to *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1999): 'this exhibition … argues that during the twentieth century, if not before, the museum ceased to be simply a repository of objects and became, instead, an independent locus of artistic inspiration and activity … a muse itself.'

within poetry, that poets turned enthusiastically to the museum as a locus for ideas for poems.

This holds true of, for example, Marianne Moore throughout her oeuvre, Ezra Pound visiting

Italian churches and museums as part of his ongoing writing of *The Cantos*, Gertrude Stein in the

art museums of Paris between the two world wars, and more recently, say, Seamus Heaney,

particularly in *North*.[16] The poets mentioned all mined museums for subject-matter, often using

artefacts in a metaphorical way within poems, to raise questions about abstract topics such as

memorialisation, the creation of identity or the effects and power of time. This strategy, in turn,

meant that museums had some influence, in a reciprocal way, in developing literary modernism.

Catherine Paul charts, in *Poetry in the Museums of Modernism*, how early-twentieth-century

museums, in trying to reach a wider audience, used innovatively displayed objects to teach that

audience about art, culture and ecology, and the poets who came into the museum borrowed

strategies and techniques. Her agenda is to explore 'several modernist poets' experiences in

museums', then to argue 'that those experiences and the writers' work helped to shape and

constitute each other' (pp.2–3). The poetry and prose of Yeats, Pound, Moore and Stein is

contextualised by Paul in the gallery spaces, curatorial practices, displayed objects, and exhibition

objectives of the museums that inspired them.

My own collection attempts to contextualise its source material in a similar way. For

instance, a key technique I use is juxtaposing radically different kinds of language within a single

poem or mixing high- and low-culture references, or placing next to each other poems which

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[16] An extensive literature exists on this, mainly in terms of American poetry, but also referring to British and Irish poets. Catherine Paul's *Poetry in the Museums of Modernism* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002) has as its subtitle: *Yeats, Pound, Moore, Stein*. Further references to it will be after quotations in the text. And although Gail McDonald's *Learning to be Modern* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) is more concerned with the university than the museum, her *A Companion to Modernist Poetry*, co-edited with David Chinitz, (Chichester, West Sussex and Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014) has, indirectly, much to say about poetry's relations with other parts of the culture that might lead one to museums and galleries. The index references 'ancient culture as inspiration', 'collage as intertextual dialogue' and 'painting – shared project with poetry'. Karin Roffman in *From the Modernist Annex: American Women Writers in Museums and Libraries* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2010) includes chapters on the poems of Marianne Moore and Ruth Benedict.

approach similar topics in radically different ways, thus making them speak to and against each

other. This is similar to the surprise tactics and exploiting of the unfamiliar that contemporary

museums often employ when they deliberately mix culturally valuable artefacts with traditionally

low-status ones, to help audiences think about relative values and context. The curators thus seek

to 'hotwire' responses and circumvent received opinions, giving visitors a new view of the

meaning of the artefacts on display. One example of this from my thesis collection is in 'Two

heads are...', which juxtaposes two very contrasting 'heads': the death-mask of the mass

murderer Gesche Gottfried with the head of a contemporary young female student with a buzz

cut, starting out in adult life. I hope, as a consequence, to raise questions about stereotyping,

different ways of memorialising, madness, perceptions of beauty, identity, and sexism through

the poem's 'juxtaposed' two-column form, and the ambiguity that this sets up as to how it should

be read: straight across the lines, or up and down? And by juxtaposing 'Coming back to this island'

and 'Face to Face', I suggest that both poems refer to the same place, but the tonal and linguistic

contrast between the two endings means that they suggest radically different characteristics of

the place, and its lifestyles. But what about the spacing and organisation across the *whole*

collection?

    In the absence of much direct critical scholarship on how to order a poetry collection, I have

also been attentive to how contemporary poets go about doing this. One approach which

appealed to me, but which I eventually adopted only in part, for structural reasons, was that

espoused by a number of contemporary poets whom I admire. Examples are Kei Miller's, *The*

Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion (2014) and Michael Symmons Roberts' *Corpus* (2004)

and Sarah Howe's *Loop of Jade* (2015). In each of these collections poems closely linked in terms

of theme and titles are dotted *throughout* the volume to promote an ongoing interest and

strengthen attention to what these poems are saying. There are precedents for this technique.

For instance, Kevin Hart, writing of 'Varieties of poetic sequence: Ted Hughes and Geoffrey Hill'

cites Hill's 1996 *Canaan*, where ''Mysticism and Democracy' is disseminated throughout the

collection; we might call it a discontinuous sequence and see there part of its originality.'[17] In Kei Miller's case, these 'disseminated' poems are all entitled 'Place Name' followed by a colon and then the individual name of a Jamaican place. The poem that follows is about the place, how it got the name and sometimes whether there is a disjunction between the more 'official' name and the 'folk' one that the poem explains and memorialises. In addition to the Place Name poems, the seventh poem in the collection, 'The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion', begins a group of twenty seven poems directly under that title that are spread through the collection (mainly in groups of one, two or three, except for the opening sequence of eight 'Cartographer' poems). In these the scientifically rigorous 'Cartographer' figure who assumes control over a place by mapping it, is (as the book's back blurb says) 'gradually compelled to recognise — even to envy — a wholly different understanding of place, as he tries to map his way to the rastaman's eternal city of Zion'.[18]

In Michael Symmons Roberts's *Corpus* there are again two sets of 'continuously titled' poems: one named 'Food for Risen Bodies', of which there are six poems in all, numbered with Roman numerals, and the other 'Carnivorous', which has five poems in all, again numbered.[19] But, unlike in Miller's book, these are only dispersed singly throughout the volume. And only on one occasion, at the appearance of the first 'Carnivorous' poem, is there a juxtaposition of these two linked groupings: 'Carnivorous – I' comes directly before 'Food for Risen Bodies III', forcing the reader to assess their different approaches. Interspersed between these two groupings are all the other poems on the theme of the body, not only spiritual and religious, but physical and scientific: the body (as the book's blurb says) via 'its organs, its urges, its existence now and after death'.

Sarah Howe uses this 'dotting throughout' technique rather differently in her 2015 collection, *Loop of Jade*.[20] Her book, which explores her Chinese-British inheritance, begins with

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[17]See *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry*, edited by Neil Corcoran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.194.
[18] Kei Miller, *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2014).
[19] Michael Symmons Roberts, *Corpus* (London: Cape Poetry, 2004).
[20] Sarah Howe, *Loop of Jade* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2015).

an epigraph from Jorge Luis Borges. It refers to a 'certain Chinese encyclopedia' that divides and lists animals in quirky groupings: '(a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens…' etc., through to '(n) that from a long way off look like flies'. These fourteen categories then figure as titles of poems, dotted throughout the main text in pairs or singly, that explore Chinese history and traditions. The long title poem comes near the beginning of the volume, after only three of the Borges-quoted category poems — but already the reader has been fully alerted to the volume's concerns with self and place, migration and inheritance.

The evidence of these volumes seems to suggest that for a book's trajectory to remain clear, two sets of interspersed poems is the maximum that would work. Given that I had ended up with four or five groups of these (two or three definite sequences) and two groupings linked in terms of settings (museums) and subject (technology) in my collection, I decided that keeping these groups together, as 'pools' of interest in a chronological and physical movement through the book would be advisable. I had always wanted the poems to proceed chronologically in terms of the period in history they refer to. The volume ends with a nod to the future, which is in its own way as unknowable as the past. I also realised a collection based round sets of grouped poems would be structurally stronger if there were linking poems to mark and ease transitions. This prompted me to follow the pattern that was already present, in what I call the 'Lonely poem' ('That there are no synonyms for Lonely') and to set about writing a group of similarly titled poems to bridge the gaps between the different sequences and groupings that make up the volume. These 'synonym' poems explore some of the key concerns in terms of theme and subject matter. And once included, they acted in a Janus-like way to establish some serendipitous links between poems.

This gave me an architectonic structure which suited the kinds of tension I wished to set up. It is different, however, from the formal patterns based on form or genre adopted by some contemporary poets. For example, Michael Symmons Roberts set himself the challenge, in his

sixth collection *Drysalter* (2013), of writing 150 poems each 15 lines long.[21] The resulting

collection has a firm sense of 'architecture' to it, even although the poem topics are varied.

Somewhat similarly, one of the recent shortlisted poets for the 2019 T. S. Eliot Prize, Vidyan

Ravinthiran in his *The Million-petalled Flower of Being Here* (2019) chose to write the whole

collection as a set of sonnets to his wife, yet using the pronoun 'we' to encompass not just the

two of them but readers and the whole of British contemporary society, in its exploration of many

contemporary social issues.[22] In the case of Symmons Roberts's and Ravinthiran's books, neither

being the poet's first collection, the poet obviously had a confidently strong sense of the

collection's shape from an early, planning stage.

In structuring poetry volumes, there is considerable openness to experimentation, generic

and otherwise, at the present time. Alice Oswald's *Falling Awake* (2016) contains only twenty four

poems, but runs to over eighty pages, the penultimate poem 'Tithonus' being subtitled '46

MINUTES IN THE LIFE OF THE DAWN' [sic] and taking up thirty-three pages; it is seemingly written

in real time.[23] Deryn Rees-Jones' 2019 *Erato* has documentary-style prose narratives alongside

examples of the passionate lyric poetry for which she is more commonly known.[24] In it she

experiments with form, especially the sonnet, to ask questions about the value of the poet and

poetry itself. Ilya Kaminsky's *Deaf Republic* (2019) unfolds like a play, dramatizing through poems

a time of political unrest in an occupied territory where the shooting of a deaf boy during a

protest renders all the other citizens deaf, symbolically, as it were, though Kaminsky writes as

though it is actually the case.[25] The collection is 'framed' by two powerful poems, 'We Lived

Happily during the War' and 'In a Time of Peace', but within that frame is contained 'Deaf

Republic' as a play — even with its own 'Dramatis Personae' list — and with an Act One and an

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[21] Michael Symmons Roberts, *Drysalter* (London: Cape Poetry, 2013).
[22] Vidyan Ravinthiran, *The Million-petalled Flower of Being Here* (Hexham, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2019).
[23] Alice Oswald, *Falling Awake* (London: Cape Poetry, 2016).
[24] Deryn Rees-Jones, *Erato* (Bridgend, Wales: Seren Books, 2019).
[25] Ilya Kaminsky, *Deaf Republic* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019).

Act Two, each with its own indicative title: 'The Townspeople Tell the Story of Sonya and Alfonso' and 'The Townspeople Tell the Story of Momma Galya'. But the 'play' works through poems rather than a dramatic script. The book also, somewhat similarly to Raymond Antrobus's *The Perseverance*,[26] contains drawings showing sign language — in this case the invented sign language whereby the citizens communicate in defiance of the occupying forces.

This openness to what constitutes a collection and its presentation informs American poetry also. One key example is Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American* Lyric[27] which has been described as a poetry-prose hybrid about 'the desolation created by internalised racist assumptions' in American society in the past and currently.[28] The strict division between poetry and prose has weakened, and not just in terms of the popularity of the prose poem. I might have considered writing a much more 'hybrid' collection, and I did think at one time of including some results of the research I had done on phrenological heads as prose within the text of the collection, perhaps emulating Ruth Padel's practice in *Darwin*. In the end, however, I decided to put this material in endnotes, since I wanted to poems to 'speak for themselves' alongside other poems, without too much intrusive background material nearby.

What is a collection *for*? A flippant answer might be the pragmatic one: so that the poet can get on to the *next* big topic. Or perhaps a collection (a first one, anyhow) is the means whereby the poet who has had many poems published in small magazines can move up the next rung of publication through a longer work that would merit more, and considered, feedback from a critical world outwith the poet's own poetry 'family' or workshop. But another answer might be that a collection is for nothing, in the sense that it has, to adapt Keats's phrase, no palpable designs on us. It is — and here I go back to a term I used earlier — an *offering* from the poet to the world, celebrating creativity, but a creativity that has no palpable designs on us, except by

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[26] Raymond Antrobus, *The Perseverance* (London: Penned in the Margins, 2018).
[27] Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (London: Penguin, 2014).
[28] The description comes from Sean O'Brien's review in the *Independent*: see https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/citizen-an-american-lyric-by-claudia-rankine-book-review-grimly-compelling-read-10393580.html [accessed 7 May 2020].

inviting us generously to share the writer's view of the world, or offering the reader a new perspective. In considering this question, I have been influenced and stimulated by the writing on creativity of Lewis Hyde in *The Gift*, a quirky book that contains a defence of the importance of creativity, and of poetry, in an increasingly money-orientated society. He argues that creative gifts exist outside the market economy: 'A market exchange has an equilibrium or stasis: you pay to balance the scale. But when you give a gift there is momentum, and the weight shifts from body to body'.[29]

So one answer to the question might be that a collection is to create momentum, from poet to reader, not to be a *static* thing. It invites the reader to respond. Hyde points out how many writers, even though they train themselves for writing, see their own creativity as a gift. Thinking of Hyde's analysis of how creativity works, I would say that a collection is a group of poems that function together as a gift, but, as in the seeming paradox of gift exchange, 'when the gift is used it is not used up' (p.2). If a collection is read by a reader it is not used up; if it is sent out into the world it is not lost, no matter how few or how many readers it gains. If Hyde's ideas seem rather unworldly and abstract, then there has been a corresponding and contrasting move, in recent times, to discuss the writing of poetry, and the publishing of poetry collections, more as a professional activity. But here certain tensions have yet to be resolved or negotiated. For example, writers on the poetic craft vary in the relative space they give to the craft itself as opposed to its professional development in a commercial environment. Jo Bell and Jane Commane's *How to Be a Poet: a twenty-first century guide to writing well*[30] was described thus in a review by J. T. Welsch: '[p]ointedly avoiding jargon that we might associate with new "creative economy" speak, the tone throughout … achieves a delicate balance between the personal and

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[29] Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World* (Edinburgh, New York, Melbourne: Canongate, 2006. First published Random House, 1983), p.9. Further references to this study are given after quotations in the text.
[30] Jo Bell and Jane Commane, *How to Be a Poet: a twenty-first century guide to writing well* (Rugby, Warwickshire: Nine Arches Press, 2017).

professional'.[31] In contrast, Chris Hamilton-Emery's *101 Ways to Make Poems Sell*[32] is said by the same reviewer to be itself 'an anomaly among poetry guides in its unwavering attention to professional matters'. When Hamilton-Emery referred to Bell and Commane's book, according to Welsch, he 'cordoned off in one line' the matters of craft that make up its first half, saying, '"Let's take all this as read"' (pp. 133 and 134).

In such a divided environment it is hardly surprising that we find relatively few prescriptive accounts of how to put together a collection; instead, individual poets occasionally describe their own strategies. Guides and self-help poetry manuals tend to operate at the level of individual *poems*; there is seldom specific advice about putting together collections — presumably because those who use such books tend not to be at that stage of their poetic careers. Their 'professionalism' is not yet challenged at that level. To give an example of this: Steven Earnshaw edited a *Handbook of Creative Writing* that purports to cover all aspects of creative writing.[33] There is a section on 'Poetry' that contains five topic essays. Although I found the last of these, George Szirtes' essay on 'The Sequence and the Long Poem' (pp.236–47), useful in the context of this chapter, I struggled to find anything about putting together a poetry collection. It was not until I looked in the handbook's final section, on 'The Writer's Life' that I found, almost tangentially, some relevant material in Sean O'Brien's 'Publishing Poetry in Britain' (pp.391–97). He has a section on 'Assembly' where he describes what he concludes is 'an ideal, Platonic manuscript'. After recommending spreading out on the floor all one's poems for contemplation (a piece of advice that I have heard elsewhere: Michael Symmons Roberts recommended it, as did Matthew Francis), he goes on to add other advice which broadly agrees with that given by Symmons Roberts. It stresses the positioning of 'strong' poems and says that

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[31] J.T. Welsch, 'The Promise of Professionalism', *The Poetry Review*, 108: 3 (Autumn 2018), p.133. References to this review are given after quotations in the text.

[32] Chris Hamilton-Emery, *101 Ways to Make Poems Sell: The Salt Guide to Getting and Staying Published*, rev. edn (Cromer, Norfolk: Salt Publishing Limited, 2006).

[33] Steven Earnshaw (ed.), *The Handbook of Creative Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007). References to articles in this handbook are given after quotations in the text.

if you are not inclined to divide the manuscript into sections, there should be peaks every

half dozen poems or so, with a significant point of renewal between two thirds and three

quarters of the way through the manuscript. Alternatively, section breaks can provide

natural rests, followed by renewed stimulus. (p.395)

Nessa O'Mahony's essay 'Finding the Story'[34] describes her attempt to write 'poems that

specifically bridged … gaps, in order to make the poems as a whole work as a collection.' Ordering

the poems for the collection also made her confront areas where she had 'side-stepped' or

'evaded some truth that [she] hadn't been prepared to face' (p.96).

These practical summations accorded with what I had worked out for myself in the

making of the collection. For instance, I have already described my writing of poems to bridge

sections in my collection; I also realised that I needed at least one strong personal poem — 'Some

day/s' —towards the end to balance against the 'technology' ones, and to reinforce the key

themes of the collection.

Yet, as I have suggested, stepping from the book to the gallery can offer us new ways of

explaining this process, and can also offer one last way in which the notion of 'collection' is

relevant. It lies in considering another link between the museum and poetry uses of the word.

Susan Stewart, in her seminal text *On Longing*, points to the museum's relationship to 'closure', as

opposed to the open form of, say, a library, and this also bears on the notion of the *kind* of

knowledge a poetry collection can provide. She quotes Eugenio Donato's essay on Flaubert's

Bouvard and Pécuchet, which makes the following striking claim.[35]

The set of objects the Museum displays is sustained only by the fiction that they

somehow constitute a coherent representational universe. The fiction is that a repeated

metonymic displacement of fragment for totality, object to label, series of objects to

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[34] In Jessie Lendennie, (ed.) *Poetry: Reading it, Writing it, Publishing it* (Cliffs of Moher, County
Clare, Ireland: Salmon Publishing, 2009), pp.94-97. The essay comes in the 'Writing it' section.
Further references are given after quotations in the text.
[35] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the
Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 161–162.

series of labels, can still produce a representation which is somehow adequate to a nonlinguistic universe. Such a fiction is the result of an uncritical belief in the notion that ordering and classifying, that is to say, the spatial juxtaposition of fragments, can produce a representational understanding of the world.

In a sense, that phrase 'spatial juxtaposition of fragments' could function as a basic definition of a poetry collection, as well as of the Museum. The poems selected for inclusion are like the 'set of objects the Museum displays' — and the poetry collection, like the Museum, can be described as nothing less than a 'gesture of standing for the world' (p.162) metonymically. Every poetry collection strives, at one level, to embody, through juxtaposing a set of linked poems, 'a representational understanding of the world' — *at least in terms of the poet's own sense of that* — for how could it be anyone else's? It is a huge ambition, doomed to failure, and no doubt a 'fiction' in the way Donato suggests, but what is wrong with that? It is an ambition to which collections, whether poetic or museum ones, implicitly subscribe — but who believes that poetry collections are offered as more than a personal claim to represent the world, a claim to which others may wish to subscribe? But beyond that, perhaps I am also offering here a romantic view of the poetry collection, or of my own thesis poetry collection — as something that strives to 'transcend the passage of time and … preserve the wreckage of its passage'.[36] In one sense my thesis collection is a collection of things *rescued*: sensations, words, images, objects, people. A similar, though sometimes contestable, claim can be made for museums 'rescuing' objects from the contingencies of life.[37] The next chapter, on ekphrasis, will examine the notion of preserving the wreckage more closely.

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[36] Judith Pascoe, *The Hummingbird Cabinet: A Rare and Curious History of Romantic Collectors* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), p.6. She applies the quotation to the collections put together by Romantic-era enthusiasts.

[37] Contrast, for example, the status of the Elgin Marbles, whose retention has been defended in part as following from the original safeguarding of the artefacts from the neglect of the Ottoman rulers of Greece, with, on the other hand, the safeguarding of potentially transient objects from the everyday lives of Scots which are displayed in a gallery of the Museum of Scotland. https://www.nms.ac.uk/national-museum-of-scotland/.

Chapter 5   Ekphrasis: 'You're gonna need a bigger shield'

In a museum in Fribourg, in Switzerland, I encountered a 'gisant' — a French word for which there is no real English equivalent, the nearest being 'recumbent statue'. What it is *not* is a statue, but a human skeleton bizarrely clothed, and covered with huge numbers of jewels: necklaces roped round the bones, brooches, strings of pearls, brightly coloured and gilt stones -- there are even pearls inserted as teeth. He – for the sword on display, jewelled greaves and general shape suggest it is male – also wears a nimbus *and* a highly jewelled coronet. The skeleton is arranged in a recumbent position, leaning on one elbow. Beside it is a golden palm leaf and a glass vial, with what is described as dried blood in it. Some research and a meeting with a very helpful curator later, I can report that this is 'Saint Felix' – although no-one knows if it is really the saint and martyr named Felix, since 'he' arrived in eighteenth century Switzerland, as part of the Counter-Reformation's attempts to re-inspire piety using boxes of bones from the recently discovered catacombs in Rome. 'Felix' was lovingly reconstituted and clothed as a Roman soldier by Capuchin nuns in a convent near Fribourg (see Figure 8).

It still seems to me a massive challenge to reproduce in words the experience of seeing the *gisant* for the first time. Death-masks I felt some common humanity with: this seems completely alien. Just as the great challenge for visual artists is how to paint light, poets face the challenge of how to write 'emotion' including 'wonder'. This is the unwritten poem which provides a foil for my written ones; the problems it has not yet dealt with are, nevertheless, those which govern the argument in this chapter. What kind of ekphrasis would be appropriate? From what point of view or with what language could one write? What affect is produced by such an object? What is the narrative implicit in it? If, as this chapter will argue, ekphrasis is in part a record of loss, where is the loss in this reconstituted 'wreckage'? And what precisely does this *gisant* have to say to our culture?

Gisant de saint Félix
de l'église Saint-Martin de Tavel
1755/1791

Figure 8

My thesis poems embody a new variation of ekphrasis: where an impetus to narrative in responding to an artefact or a work of art is in conversation with the known, or discoverable, facts of the subject's life or history, and these are imaginatively re-animated alongside or 'within' other material. My work is therefore intervening in the criteria for writing to be described as 'ekphrastic'.

'Ekphrasis' has been defined in various ways. The *Oxford Classical Dictionary*'s not-quite-latest definition (2015) is this:

An extended and detailed literary description of any object, real or imaginary. 'There are *ekphraseis* of faces and objects and places and ages and many other things' … The rhetoricians thus systematized into a rhetorical exercise (*progymnasma*) a poetic technique stretching from the description of the shield of Achilles in the *Iliad* to that of Hagia Sophia by Paulus Silentiarius. Most were of works of art.[1]

[1] J. S. Rusten, summary of 'ekphrasis' entry, December 2015, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th ed., edited by Simon Hornblower, Antony Spawforth, and Esther Eidinow.

Among the key words here are 'literary description', 'object, real or imaginary' and 'Most are of works of art' and I shall be referring to these criteria throughout this chapter. More recently (2017), this online lexicographical summary says that ekphrasis refers to the literary and rhetorical trope of summoning up — through words — an impression of a visual stimulus, object, or scene. As critical trope, the word *ekphrasis* … is defined as a 'descriptive speech which brings the subject shown before the eyes with visual vividness'.[2]

When applied in the realm of poetry, further distinctions are needed, such as that offered by John Hollander.[3] Noting that the 'earliest ekphrastic poetry describes what doesn't exist, save in the poetry's own fiction' (p.209), Hollander goes on to differentiate this '*notional*' ekphrasis from what he terms '*actual*' ekphrasis: where the image is known or real and has an existence independent of the text. This accords with the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*'s 2015 phrase defining ekphrasis as applying both to the 'real and imaginary' and the 2017 'visual stimulus, object or scene', a grouping of terms that could refer to the imagined, the imaginary *and* the real. Clearly when writing about the death-masks from Lyford's Winchester collection, I would be writing *actual* ekphrases, whereas where I write about a striking brooch described in George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil* then I would be (as Eliot herself originally was) writing a *notional* ekphrasis — about something that exists only within a work of literature.

Heffernan's 'Ekphrasis and Representation'[4] defines ekphrasis 'the verbal representation of graphic representation'. He further delimits the term thus: 'What ekphrasis represents in words … must itself be *representational*' (pp.299–300). Amy Golahny endorses Heffernan's emphasis: 'This definition has the dual merit of proceeding from Homer's primal description of

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[2] Michael Squire, summary of 'ekphrasis', updated July 2017, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th ed., edited by Simon Hornblower, Antony Spawforth, and Esther Eidinow.
[3] John Hollander, 'The Poetics of Ekphrasis', *Word & Image* 4 (1988), pp.209–219. Further references to this article are given after quotations in the text.
[4] James Heffernan, 'Ekphrasis and Representation', *New Literary History* 22 (1991), pp.297–316. Further references to this article are given after quotations in the text.

Achilles' shield and of applying to postmodern literature'.[5] On the other hand, however, I would argue that Heffernan's claim fudges the fact that a death-mask and a stuffed bird may be 'representations' of their original, but they differ markedly in their relationship to that original. They are *re-presentations* of something absent, lost, or potentially lost. However, in one the original is totally absent; in the other it is present but lifeless. What is at the core of the process which brought them to us might be described as a translation of the original, whereby something now lost is evoked, suggested, and an absence is made present. In the ekphrastic process, loss is confronted but the original is never completely renewed.

How this can work is perfectly exemplified by looking at two ekphrases: Virgil's description of the shield of Aeneas — which follows on from the *locus classicus* of ekphrasis mentioned above, Homer's account of Achilles' shield. When one reads these accounts together, what is striking is the sheer *crowdedness* of each. Aeneas's shield has the whole past and future history of Rome depicted on it, no doubt as a nod to Virgil's original hearers, the emperor Augustus and his family. The absence that is made present here is twofold: some things lost in the past, others yet to come. Achilles' shield, on the other hand, depicts the whole universe, and the contemporary world of life in Greece, the life of agriculture, ordinary human activities, and civilised living, but also of warfare, violence and destruction. Here the absence that is made present works differently: by simultaneously showing peacetime activities (even if violence breaks out in them) and the destruction that warfare makes on such activities, the fact that peace and war mutually obviate each other is indicated, is made visible. Here the ekphrasis works by depicting, in its crowdedness, two different ways of living (peacefully and violently) that are in real life mutually exclusive. It also works by depicting a world which would be lost to Achilles by his death, and which the shield is designed to safeguard. It also *re-presents* the world which is lost to all the other warriors who die throughout the twenty-four books.

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[5] *The Eye of the Poet: Studies in the Reciprocity of the Visual and Literary Arts from the Renaissance to the Present*, ed. by Amy Golahny (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press and London: Associated University Presses, 1996), p.13.

Also striking in the description of these artistic re-presentations is how the ekphrasis can layer pictures upon pictures. When Virgil comes to describe the battle of Actium depicted in the middle of Aeneas's shield, he tells of the two fleets clashing together thus:

> you would have thought that the Cycladic Islands had been torn loose again and were
>
> floating on the ocean, or that mountains were colliding with mountains, to see men in
>
> action on those ships with their massive, turreted sterns, showering blazing torches of
>
> tow and flying steel as the fresh blood began to redden the furrows of Neptune's fields.[6]

The original depiction of the battle seems to have prompted further 'pictures of the picture' in the writing, where the warships have become floating islands or clashing mountains and the waves have become blood-stained furrows. This is more obvious, as far as I can see, in Virgil's ekphrasis than in Homer's, the latter only doing something similar in these lines:

> And the crippled Smith brought all his art to bear
>
> on a dancing circle, broad as the circle Daedalus
>
> once laid out on Cnossos' spacious fields
>
> for Ariadne the girl with lustrous hair.[7]

The dancing circle depicted by Hephaestus on the shield in turn evokes a picture of the dancing floor Daedalus is said to have constructed for Ariadne at Cnossos. But again, one picture prompts another. The depictions on the two shields are 'traces' of events and people: in the *Aeneid* ones which are gone or have not yet occurred, and in the *Iliad* events that perhaps are occurring or that *could* or *should* occur in the contemporary world. They are 'traces', in Walter Benjamin's sense, of distant things. And they re-present to readers lost or absent things, but at the same time, because of the sheer plenitude they invoke, and the way they encourage the piling up of pictures upon pictures, they give ekphrasis a complex genealogy.

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[6] Virgil, *The Aeneid*, translated and with an Introduction by David West (London: Penguin Books, 1990; reissued 2003), pp.184-185.
[7] Homer, *The Iliad*, translated by Robert Fagles (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p.486.

I would argue that a poem employing ekphrasis is in its turn negotiating an absence, translating again in order to challenge the reader to think in particular ways about what is lost and what is now present. However, it seems to me important to avoid being fixated on the notion of representation in the *mimetic* sense (as opposed to *re*-presentation) and what the constituent parts of representation might be, and instead to think about the *functions* of ekphrasis, which are to do with making the past present in temporal terms and the absent present in imaginative terms. And from that follows the potentially ethical consequences of ekphrasis — why the poet does it, and what kinds of challenge are presented to readers when it is done. These are areas that are less treated in dictionary definitions, or histories of ekphrasis, but are at the core of my own practice. For me ekphrasis as a mode is primarily a record of loss (of various kinds — death, pastness, degradation of the environment, loss of moral anchors, and so on) and is a process not necessarily of recovery of what is lost but rather of substitution, evocation, translation and judgment.

The poems in my collection which most obviously fit with the adjective 'ekphrastic' are those about death-masks and those dealing with museum artefacts. John Hollander says that '[c]onfronting a piece of figure sculpture, a carved or cast human image, can place the viewer under an intense meditative injunction' (p.215), and that was my experience when confronting the Winchester death-masks — an experience which influenced my later confrontations with a whole range of material and linguistic items.

The predominant mode of the death-mask poems is ekphrastic, so I shall look in some detail here at individual poems, considering how far they use traditional ekphrastic techniques, or how far they could be said to embody a new kind of ekphrasis. Two of the poems discussed at length in chapter two, 'Death mask' and 'Rush, still' adopt familiar ekphrastic strategies. In 'Death mask' I begin by encouraging the reader (the 'you' of the first stanza) to pick up the mask. In the second, third and fourth stanzas I describe the mask in some detail. I had in mind one at least of Lyford's Winchester casts, but in a sense the poem evokes a kind of generic death-mask. Describing the appearance of a work of art is perhaps the most basic ekphrastic technique.

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Martyn Crucefix gives the advice to 'Describe — and do no more' as the first of his list of '14 Ways to Write an Ekphrastic Poem'.[8] In contrast, I *do* go beyond mere description here, by embedding that description in an injunction to the reader to, as it were metaphorically, touch, discover and even affect or change the death-mask, as attested by the final order to 'smear some life into it'. Clearly that last imperative is an impossibility, but it acts as a reminder that the only 'life' death-masks can now have is in interactions with the living.

'Rush, still' is in some ways the most straightforwardly ekphrastic of the death-mask poems, in that it describes the Staffordshire earthenware figure of the murderer James Blomfield Rush in detail in the first two stanzas but as in all cases of ekphrasis, that detail is selective. Yet in the second half of the twentieth century, the term 'ekphrasis' came to be extended in its application, in a way that is relevant to how I write about Rush in this poem. The American critic Murray Krieger, in 1967, extended ekphrasis to indicate the use of words to encompass the 'still moment' of visual experience.[9] The Staffordshire figure has 'stilled' a moment in Rush's story, portraying him presumably at the moment in his trial where he was given leave to speak in his own defence (he had rejected having a lawyer). W. J. T. Mitchell's summary of Krieger's thinking on ekphrasis is pertinent here. Mitchell says that for Krieger

> the visual arts are a / metaphor, not just for verbal representation of visual experience, but for the shaping of language into formal patterns that 'still' the movement of linguistic temporality into a spatial, formal array. Not just vision, but stasis, shape, closure, and silent presence ('still' in the other sense) are the aims of this more general form of ekphrasis.[10]

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[8] https://martyncrucefix.com/2017/02/03/14-ways-to-write-an-ekphrastic-poem Update 25/06/2019 [accessed 02/03/2020]. Subsequent references are to this site.
[9] Murray Krieger, 'Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry, or *Laokoön* Revisited', in his *The Play and Place of Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967). The essay was later incorporated by Krieger into a book-length study, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp.263–288.[10] See W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp.153-154.
[10] See W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp.153-154.

This claims an expanded, more ambitious and more general role for ekphrasis than it had had before. 'Rush, still', even in its title, is relevant to this notion of '"still[ing]" the movement of linguistic temporality'. In choosing a title for this poem, I was of course aware of the possibilities for punning in Rush's name, and how, having committed his horrendous crimes in a rather melodramatic way (he donned a rather unconvincing disguise, for instance, when he went to murder his landlord, Isaac Jermy), he had hurried away from the murder scene when his plans went horribly awry, and more people had been killed and wounded. The oxymoronic title refers to 'stilling' in several senses: now dead through execution, Rush has been 'frozen' into the china figure, and the indecipherable 'flatlined scrawl' the figure holds has silenced or 'stilled' him also.

The next poem in the death-mask sequence is 'Two heads are…', where the stories of a notorious nineteenth-century German murderer, Gesche Gottfried, and of a contemporary American student at the University of Southampton are juxtaposed. This poem is not conventionally ekphrastic except to the extent that the cast of Gottfried's head *is* described, but only in terms of its having been scalped post- mortem before the death-mask was taken — standard practice if a phrenological reading were to be made of an executed felon's head. In a sense, though, both the death-mask and the living young woman's head are described as if they were works of art, as if both were sculpted heads. But the details that are included mean that neither seems frozen in time or 'stilled' at one point in their story, in the way the Rush figurine is. One head (Gottfried's) has things done to it post-mortem, and at the end seems to be looking out warily for other such possible actions, even if the head is 'sightless' with its blanked-out eyes. The other head is of a living person who '[s]ometimes' touches her head, 'as if to check something' (the same phrase used of Gottfried).

'Baby Face' displays what has been identified as another key tendency of ekphrasis: how it can involve a *narrative* response to pictorial stasis. Positioning himself against Krieger's idea of ekphrasis and the 'stilled movement', or what Wendy Steiner called a 'pregnant moment' in

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graphic art,[11] James Heffernan, in 'Ekphrasis and Representation', stresses instead how ekphrasis

can typically involve a *narrative* response. He argues that 'ekphrastic literature typically delivers

from the pregnant moment of graphic art its embryonically narrative impulse, and thus makes

explicit the story that graphic art tells only by implication'. Furthermore,

> since the picture of a moment in a story usually presupposes / the viewer's knowledge of
>
> the story as a whole, ekphrasis commonly tells this story for the benefit of those who
>
> don't know it, moving well beyond what the picture by itself implies. (pp.301–302)

This shows the new aspects of ekphrastic practice in my collection: where an impetus to narrative

is met by the poet's (my) imagination constrained by the discoverable facts of an often little-

known subject's life, but these facts are re-animated and placed alongside or 'within' a new

context. The narrative potential in ekphrasis potentially opens the device up to ethical reflection

by poet and reader. Encountering the death-masks made me want to discover and tell the

individuals' histories, but that process involved imaginative reconstruction based on the

discoverable facts. In 'Baby Face' I relate the main details of Bell's crime in the middle stanza,

having moved away from a straightforward ekphrastic response to his death-mask towards the

end of the first stanza when I mention a description I read of his 'flaxen curls'. I move back to

description of the poignant death-mask in the last stanza. The stress on the 'cherubic' aspects of

the death-mask there counteracts the negative feelings about Bell that the middle stanza might

have provoked. The stanza goes on to provide an imaginary postscript to his story, where I, as

narrator of the poem, get to express the maternal feelings that an encounter with the boy (surely

very pre-pubescent, from the appearance of his death-mask) might have prompted.

A poem where ekphrasis is opened up to narrative and ethical issues necessarily involves

research (as it certainly did for Virgil's account of the history of Rome).[12] Certainly I incorporate

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[11] Wendy Steiner, *Pictures of Romance: Form against Context in Painting and Literature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press,1988), p.13.

[12] This corresponds to Martyn Crucefix's third way of writing ekphrastically: 'Describe but incorporate researched materials — an easy option in the world of Google where the artist's life or love life, the political context etc are easily accessed'.

researched materials in 'Baby Face' and indeed in all of the death-mask and museum poems, but the main research (apart from in the case of the sculptor-phrenologist Giovanni Bianchi in 'Rush, still') has been into the *subjects* of the artefacts or works of art, rather than the artists or sculptors who made them. In researching phrenology, however, I did have to find out about the artists and sculptors who made casts of heads, and also about those who wanted to collect those casts. I have had to follow up what were, in some cases, rather arcane areas of knowledge or history. As part of this process I had to make creative decisions about selection and embedding of research material in poetic contexts. That is why I have been bold enough to claim this approach is a new development of ekphrasis: with the emphasis on my making works of art (poems) out of artefacts that might be seen as artworks, but not in the straightforward way that a painting or a sculpture is. Rather than describing an artwork in a poem, I have been giving a poetic life to artefacts that sees them, *unusually*, as works of art.

In 'This Posthumous Life' I explore the history of John Keats's last days. Keats is someone for whom a life-mask and a death-mask exist, the proximity of their creation allowing the viewer to compare two images of the subject taken only a few years apart. I make such a comparison in the first two stanzas, and then in the third stanza I quote Keats's own words and present a re-enactment of his deathbed. Perhaps the ekphrastic impetus to narrativize could be at work here, although I re-dramatise the deathbed scene via Keats's words rather than *describe* it ekphrastically. Here the actual words of the subject of the poem (Keats) help the reader visualise the scene. They helped me decide how to end the poem by turning what happened into a final visual image: of Joseph Severn leaning over Keats's body to check whether the poet was still breathing. Here Keats's own description of his last days as his 'posthumous life' made me want to retain that ambiguity within the poem: Severn does not know, at the end, if this is the ongoing 'posthumous life' or in fact death. The poem works as a re-animation and a reversal of a 'normal' ekphrasis, where a work of art is described. Here the detail within the poem ends up turning the scene into a quasi-visual work of art, almost a deathbed painting or sketch. There was, in fact, a vogue for sketching (as well as photographing) those newly dead or on their deathbeds in the

nineteenth century. One particularly poignant example is Monet's 1879 deathbed painting of his wife, Camille, in which a gauzy effect already acknowledges her absence.[13]

I use a variety of forms in writing about death-masks, one being the specular 'A Death Mask Speaks'. This is the only poem where I 'voice' a death-mask. One of the modern studies of ekphrasis claims (in my view incorrectly) that it *necessarily* involves the 'voicing' of the work of art. Jean Hagstrum defined ekphrasis in this narrow, or perhaps metaphorical way. He excluded from the category poems in which the *poet's* voice responds to the work of art, calling these latter works 'iconic'.[14] Instead, he saw ekphrasis as a term that should only be used of poems that give a voice to a work of art's subject. My specular, or 'mirror' poem, is the only one where I endow a death-mask with a voice and allow it to speak, as it were, autobiographically, using the first-person pronoun. Although the poem might be deemed ekphrastic in that the plaster cast describes itself, it goes beyond that when I try to invent a kind of generic (rather neurotic) personality for the death-mask. The cast expresses a degree of self-knowledge, knowing it isn't 'live, was plaster made / to copy flesh', but recognises that it also has 'a certain cachet'. Ultimately, though, it cannot get beyond a sense of inferiority: with the specular bringing us back to the opening line at the very end ('I've always felt like second best'). By using this particular form, I strove to convey a sense of the death-mask's being trapped in the world of its own limited, circular 'thoughts' and, in one line, limited articulacy.

At the end of the volume I return to the idea of masks, in this case anti-coronavirus masks, though written before the virus took hold and formal measures were introduced. Alluding to Pound's 'At a Station of the Metro' I aimed to produce visual 'snapshots' of what I saw in London in February 2020, rather as Pound evoked the scene before him in the Metro. 'Beside a Station of the Underground' is not ekphrastic in a traditional sense, though if it does not describe

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[13] See https://www.claude-monet.com/camille-monet-on-her-deathbed.jsp [accessed 6 May 2020].

[14] Jean Howard Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p.18n.

a work of art, it treats a real scene as though it were a work of art, or a number of different works of art, to be encapsulated in brief, vivid descriptions — a kind of reverse or reduced ekphrasis, it might be argued. We see the scene(s) in part through the lens of the Pound poem, as if the layering of descriptions of scenes involved in ekphrasis constantly adds, takes away, translates. My poem could be read as a record of loss — the loss of Pound's vision, and as an instance of the complex ekphrasis I described when discussing the Virgil and Homer passages, where a kind of crowdedness or urge to plenitude comes into play through a layering of images.

The other group of poems that are most obviously ekphrastic are the 'museum' poems, mostly written after visits to museums and encounters there with striking exhibits. I shall look at these in some detail, to see how far they develop the idea of ekphrasis. 'Sleep Sound' subtitled 'a lullaby' is addressed to the Egyptian mummy belonging to a Bournemouth museum that has been identified as a woman named Taheema. The elaborately painted mummy case and the two different casts of her face and head that have been made are described. As in the 'Rush' poem, I address the 'works of art' directly, or rather address the real person depicted in them, another technique sometimes found in ekphrastic poems. Martyn Crucefix lists as the ninth of his '14 Ways to Write an Ekphrastic Poem' the interrogation of the figure/s in the work of art. In 'Sleep Sound' I address Taheema, not interrogating her, but rather lulling her (back) to sleep. In the course of that lulling, her history emerges, as in 'Babysitting …' framed within other language.

Another name for addressing the subject of the work of art directly is, of course, 'apostrophe'. When the journal *Word & Image* printed a special number of 'Poems on Pictures' in 1986, Robert Druce wrote a foreword to the poems.[15] In it he commented on the different approaches in the ekphrases:

There are contrasts of stance: ranging from third person statement, through apostrophe, to the first person speech of the poet himself, of speech ventriloquized into the mouth of

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[15] Robert Druce, 'A foreword to the poems', *Word & Image,* 2:1 (Jan-March 1986), pp.45–46. Further references to the article are given after quotations in the text.

the painter, or his subject, or indeed his object… What no poet attempts — and that none

do so is in itself interesting — is to offer the kind of information or commentary that we

might expect from a museum guide who, standing between us and the painting, seeks to

draw attention to its iconic or figural qualities. What almost all do — the exceptions are

few — is to engage with the image through narrative. (p.45)

That last comment endorses Heffernan's suggestion that ekphrasis often embodies a narrative

response to the work of art. What I find especially of interest in Druce's summary, however, is

what he says the poets do *not* do or attempt to do: 'offer the kind of information or commentary

that we might expect from a museum guide who, standing between us and the painting, seeks to

draw attention to its iconic or figural qualities' (p.45). Druce's observation is helpful to me in

defining my 'new' kind of ekphrasis — for what I often do in the death-mask and in the museum

poems is precisely, *pace* Druce, to stand between the reader and the work of art, drawing

attention to its figural qualities *at the same time as* telling its story or the story of my, or the

reader's potential, encounter with it. The life- and death-masks or the museum exhibits that I

write about are not of course paintings, Druce's main subject, but they are all recognisably

derived from life, or derived from objective sources, as he claims — those sources being the living

or dead bodies of the beings whom the masks or exhibits represent. They are also presented as if

they were works of art.

The title of another poem, 'Don't go looking for a photo', indicates, among other things,

how I am seeking to change understandings of ekphrasis. There is straightforward ekphrastic

description of the resin figure of the 'Lady of Oplontis' in the first stanza, and especially in the

middle stanza of the poem, around which the whole piece pivots. In the fourth stanza, after that

first line that is an enjambment from the third stanza, the poem's description of the figure

changes, becoming more figurative in the *literary* sense of that word. For instance, I use a simile

('like some large / deep-sea fish') to describe the effect of the resin figure when seen in its (her)

museum setting. And I go on to describe the effect that looking at her has on me: a kind of

paralysis and a realisation that I cannot take a photo of her, so reductive an action would it be.

That realisation links back to the beginning of the poem, which is, in one sense, anti-ekphrastic, in that it discourages, even forbids, searching for the photograph that might prompt an ekphrasis. Having seen the 'real' resin figure cast from the woman's remains in Pompeii, I can only communicate what I know or feel about her in a poem. As in 'Implacable' I describe the figure first before *eventually* revealing its name, its 'official' identity. Seeing a photo of 'the Lady of Oplontis' would no doubt prompt a reaction in the viewer, but without some knowledge of what the real person was, and how she lived and died, then the resin figure is in danger of becoming simply something to ogle, to give the observer a passing 'frisson', a word I use, deliberately, in the poem. Traditionally a representation of works of art, paintings or sculptures, or photographs, ekphrasis, I argue, can happen when a poet *makes* a work of art (a poem) prompted by representations that might not normally be deemed 'works of art'.

As I indicated at the beginning of this chapter when I quoted from both *Oxford Classical Dictionary*'s summaries on the word 'ekphrasis', the definition of that term has expanded in recent times. The 2017 summary sees ekphrasis as 'the literary and rhetorical trope of summoning up — through words — an impression of a visual stimulus, object, or scene'. This seems less constrained or delimited than the earlier summary of it as '[a]n extended and detailed literary description of any object, real or imaginary'. The earlier stress on ekphrasis as being 'extended and detailed' has changed into 'summoning up … an impression', a much wider and looser emphasis. And 'visual stimulus, object, or scene' has replaced 'any object, real or imaginary'. The use of the phrase 'visual stimulus' again seems to widen the possibilities of ekphrasis: 'visual stimulus' and 'scene' could include not just paintings or sculptures or photographs, but admits the possibility of *imagined* as well as *real* visual stimuli or scenes, whether or not these would be deemed to be 'works of art'. My use of ekphrasis is consonant with this more recent, wider definition.

The play between verbal and visual informed 'Makeshift' too, both its inspiration and composition: specifically, my narrational ekphrasis on the playing-cards that the prisoners at the Wymondham bridewell made (for an example see Figure 9).

Figure 9

Seeing the makeshift playing cards, with the 'stick' figures drawn on them, and discovering how

they came to be found, and how they were made, prompted the poem. Here the ekphrasis is not

so much in describing the cards (though I do that briefly within the poem), but in narrativizing the

scene of their making. I deliberately keep the overt revelation of what is being made till the end of

the poem. As part of my narrativizing approach, I also quote and intersperse biblical language

from the King James Bible. And I give the poem a long, narrative subtitle. Those two techniques

used in this context reminded me of another part of Heffernan's argument in 'Ekphrasis and

Representation': his linking of ekphrasis both to sepulchral inscription and to narrative painting

titles, as he develops his comments on the narrativizing impetus in ekphrasis. He links ekphrasis in

its 'envoicing' of the mute image and in its general use of language, 'genealogically', with

sepulchral epigrams (pp.302–3), making a convincing case for ekphrasis as following on from the

tradition in ancient statues, tombs and funerary columns of inscribing words that allowed 'the

mute, still object to identify itself' (p.302), as in epigrams such as 'I am the tomb of famous x [the person's name]'. By quoting biblical lines, some of which I selected at random, one at least of which I quoted directly from the 'card' pictured above, I am allowing the 'mute, still object' of the playing card to 'identify itself' by repeating the words inscribed on it. It does not name itself, but so distinctive is the archaic language that is used, that it is immediately recognisable as biblical, and in turn 'identifies' what the makeshift playing card comes from, what it is, or *was*.

The 'museum' poems finish with 'In the Museum of Lost Poems', which deliberately moves the collection on from poems about actual museum exhibits into more metaphorical territory. The idea for the poem came to me when I realised on reading Denise Riley's *Selected Poems* volume that there were inconsistencies in the pagination between what was listed on the Contents page and what was in the body of the text.[16] This is the situation I explore in the first stanza of the poem. I at first wondered if this meant that some poems had been 'lost' — and that in turn sparked the idea of a museum of lost poems, and what it would contain, if the poems were indeed 'lost'. The poem considers ekphrasis in an ironic way, in that it treats a book of poems, an empty photo frame or a blank sheet of paper as museum exhibits or works of art that could be described in the same way as ordinary works of art or art objects.[17] The ironic elements of the ekphrasis develop as the poem proceeds. Where in the first stanza the work of art, in the shape of the volume of poems, is described in its case in the museum, with the next two exhibits mentioned, it is not even the works of art, in the shape of the poems, that are described. Instead I mention the 'containers' of the works of art: the photo frame, minus the relevant photo behind

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[16] Denise Riley, *Selected Poems, 1976-2016* (London: Picador, 2019).
[17] Ideas about the photo frame poems and the 'disappeared' carbon copy poem came from recent newspaper articles about newly-found youthful poems by Daphne du Maurier and Sylvia Plath. See, 'Unknown Daphne du Maurier poems discovered behind photo' https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/apr/16/unknown-daphne-du-maurier.. 16/04/2019 and 'Unseen Sylvia Plath poems deciphered in carbon paper...' https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/24/unseen-sylvia-plath... 24/05/2017.

which the poems were discovered, and the sheet of paper carrying an impression from the carbon copy sheet above it which had enabled the missing poem to be deciphered. In the penultimate stanza, the description is of 'all that remained' of the burnt work of art — part of the irony being that readers are not even told what that was. Was it cinders? Ashes? Charred pages? And the fact that this is in the 'last of the many empty cases' again treats the subject in a ludic way. Is this last case empty or not? Does it contain anything at all, or any visible remains at all? I hope the poem prompts thoughts about the durability or contingency of works of art, their transmission and their value.

As chapter three has discussed, the poems based on George Eliot's 1859 novella *The Lifted Veil* could most obviously be described as 'textual interventions'. But might 'textual intervention' in itself be deemed a kind of ekphrasis of the original text? We saw in the case of my poem which alluded to Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro' that for someone who knew the original poem my poem became an ekphrastic development and evocation of that original, layering onto its images contemporary ones of a very different character. It is no coincidence that the scenes I felt drawn to in the original novella by George Eliot, and that I most wanted to respond to, were all highly *visual* ones. These seemed memorable: a way of negotiating the unusual novella, and recalling it to mind. They were: the scene where Letherall gives a phrenological reading of the narrator's head, the evocation of Prague and its statues as a 'stone city' — ekphrastic in Eliot's original; the description, or 'framing', of Bertha in her pale green dress that links her with the Brothers Grimm fairy-tale of the water-nixie. After that I wrote the two green brooches poems — which could be read as straightforwardly ekphrastic, since the brooches as works of art are described: one, Eliot's one, being imaginary (so, according to Hollander, a *notional* ekphrasis), the other, my one, being an *actual* ekphrasis since it describes a real brooch, a real work of art. The last scene I extracted from the original was the strange and melodramatic temporary reanimation of Mrs Archer as a result of a blood transfusion. I treat the scene as dramatic as much as visual, although it is interesting that there is a record of a now lost painting

of this scene.[18] This last intervention is, in one sense, the least ekphrastic of my *Lifted Veil* poems in that it is more interested in word-play — in turning Mrs Archer's actual accusatory words to the narrator's wife Bertha into what sound like sensationalist newspaper headlines — than in verbal description, in 'bring[ing] the subject shown before the eyes' (as the second *Oxford Classical Dictionary* definition summary said of ekphrasis). In this it is like the later 'Lonely' poem, which does not fit into an ekphrastic reading, since it displays more interest in words than in pictures, in describing and exploring words rather than, primarily, describing something pictorial. However, the *Lifted Veil* poems are more deeply ekphrastic than might appear: they do in a sense represent the course of my own research project. I was first drawn to the novella as a scholarly researcher because of George Eliot's interest in phrenology. But my *creative* response was governed by a sense of its visual and symbolic potential, and more deeply than that, by its confrontation of loss, which I believe to be at the heart of all ekphrasis, and which prompts its re-presentations. What attracted me to the novella and made me respond to it was how it re-presents processes of loss, situations where loss of humanity is present or immanent.

It should be fairly obvious why I went on to write the Merrick poems when I was writing ekphrastically about identity. Yet describing Merrick's appearance runs so many risks, most obviously that the language used might be inappropriate: judgmental, clinical, or patronisingly over-emotional. But his identity was not the same as his physical appearance, just as a death-mask's identity goes beyond a description of it, or the symbolic nature of Bertha's brooch moves beyond ekphrasis to a depiction of her deceitful, 'poisonous' nature or identity. By contrast with the Eliot novella, in the Merrick sequence of poems I responded not to strikingly visual elements of the 'story' but found myself writing more about significant *places* and significant *details* I had

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[18] This is reproduced in the Oxford World's Classics edition of Eliot's *The Lifted Veil* and *Brother Jacob* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. Reissued 2009). It is discussed on the opening page of Helen Small's Introduction to the text (no pagination), and the reproduction, on the page before this, is labelled: 'H.É. Blanchon, *La Transfusion du sang* (1879). By kind permission of the Bibliotèque [sic] Nationale'. The introduction tells how the painting was exhibited at the Paris Salon in May 1879.

come across in my research on the so-called 'Elephant Man'. In the Merrick poems, I respond to places initially for their significance in Merrick's story rather than for their interest as (or as containing) potential works of art. Thus, in 'Wonder' I refer to the shop in Whitechapel Road where Merrick was displayed as a freak, but instead include a description of the saris now sold there as exotic and colourful. This places Merrick in the realm of the exotic and beautiful, rather than stressing how he was seen then as monstrous and alien. In 'Merrick's rooms', I describe the rooms' significance as much as their physical appearance, and am interested in how to name them. In that context, I rejected the implications of 'bunker'; yet referring to that word enabled me to contextualise Merrick as radically *unlike* some 'really' monstrous individuals like Hitler and Magda Goebbels. I did not write about photographs of Merrick, or about the misshapen head that accounted for his nickname, partly because that would have meant limiting him to, or identifying him by, his physical appearance rather than his intelligence, courage and naïve enjoyment of his later life. I did, however, write a ludic poem about his genitalia, significantly a part of his body that looked, and was described by Frederick Treves, as 'normal'.

Not all the 'death-mask' poems in my collection are *predominantly* ekphrastic in mode. The death-mask sequence opens with the two 'Leaving the Heads Behind' poems which introduce the history of Doctor Lyford's collection. Whereas ekphrasis might lead to prosopopoeia ('voicing' of the work of art), these two linked sonnets 'voice' the *owners* of the heads. They are 'Leaving the Heads Behind' and the poems read as more valedictory in tone than they are ekphrastic in mode. Although both speakers refer to the casts in Lyford's collection, Emily more so than Lyford, neither describes them in detail, or conjures up much of a visual image of them. Emily, however, goes into some detail about the effect the sight of the heads has on her. The subtitle 'slightly Hardyesque' hints at the attitude or tone I take in these two sonnets — 'Hardyesque' more in the sense of the Hardy of *Satires of Circumstance* than of the elegiac *Poems of 1912-13*. I have taken some liberties in assuming characteristics for Henry and (especially) for Emily. In Henry's case I discovered that when he remarried, he probably lied about his age on his marriage certificate. His actual date of birth is not known, but can be 'guesstimated' enough to suggest that he docked

about nine years off his actual age, presumably so as not to seem quite so distant in age from the young woman he was marrying as a second wife (he was about 66 but said he was 57, she 21!). And we know he left his death-mask collection behind in Winchester, on the move to Brighton, so he was clearly interested in a new start. Even given the norms of the time, for him to marry quite such a young second wife suggested to me an unattractive conceit that I hoped to convey in the poem's last two and a half lines. I could find practically no historical information on Emily Cole, other than her name and age, so I perhaps unkindly made her a rather vacuous young woman. These sonnets are character studies, and examples of dramatic monologue, rather than, as in 'A Death Mask Speaks', an example of prosopopoeia, that form of ekphrasis where a voice is given to an inanimate object or work of art. But in terms of affect, they introduce into the sequence the notion that leaving death-masks behind is perhaps more complicated than one might suppose: these artefacts can be troubling in their potential afterlife and their ambiguous status.

One poem which could be said to expand the ekphrastic mode is 'Old Playground'. It is not about a work of art; it describes a scene. It does not employ narrativization constrained by knowledge gained from research and set within other material, which I suggested earlier was one contribution of this thesis to an understanding of ekphrasis. However, it is firmly located in that process of loss and re-presenting of absence that I also think is core to ekphrasis as I understand it. In this poem a lost original remains co-present with what the poet sees, and the reader is encouraged to have two scenes present in their mind: the original playground with its mums and its laughing children, and the deserted playground which represents an environmental degradation. The point of the poem is to hold these two images together, so that they both operate at once. The mums are there and they are not there; the children laugh in our ear and go down the slide, but they slide into long grass and disappear. The absent play equipment has been replaced by 'ghost continents' but both are present to the mind's eye; there is colour, but it is leached colour; people are invisible but 'glaringly' so. The power of the poem lies in its conflation of absence and presence and, in that respect, it exemplifies what I understand part of the ekphrastic mode to be.

The ekphrasis I display in the poems is not just the conventional kind where description of an existing artwork brings it vividly before the reader's eyes, or which involves what that 2017 *Oxford Classical Dictionary* definition calls 'summoning up—through words—an impression of a visual stimulus, object, or scene'. Many of the poems are about artefacts that would not normally be deemed works of art, but in the treatment of them as if they were, I adjust the normal criteria for ekphrasis, and broaden its remit. However, there are other modes of writing present, which I have described here as self-consciously 'linguistic', or autobiographical. But the fact that the title of the whole is 'Heads: a collection' suggests that in terms of subject matter, at least, these poems are loosely unified: they come back again and again to faces and heads, looked at in various contexts. And the collection is full of encounters: with real people, with museum exhibits, occasionally with actual works of art, often with 'quasi' artworks — artefacts that I write about as if they were works of art. Those are encounters that involve, typically, acts of looking and considering through words, and so suggest that ekphrasis is an appropriate 'label' for the whole.

One aspect of ekphrasis that the dictionary definitions and critical discussions of the term tend not to include is any ethical aspect of the loss that accompanies re-presentation or that is considered by a reader of an ekphrastic poem. Is the loss that is recorded, re-presented or memorialised here a good loss or a bad one? Is it to be deplored or to be welcomed or even celebrated? These poems are completely imbued with ethical considerations, but they are not didactic. The selection, ordering, juxtaposing, tone, the images — all these are the product of ethical considerations. They reveal a stance on my part. And when it comes to writing that poem about the *gisant* of 'Saint Felix' that I mentioned at the start of this chapter, I will have to consider ethically as well as artistically. That process will be complicated by the knowledge that I am dealing with an 'artefact' of dubious origin that nevertheless inspired genuine emotions and creativity in the people who encountered it. Furthermore, my whole collection has been written in the consciousness, that probably every poet has, that poetic re-presentation does not restore a loss but offers an alternative. Notwithstanding, the poems once written are handed over to the reader as a gift. What the reader then does with that gift is another matter.

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Chapter 6   Conclusion

I was surprised to discover the results of a call-out for poems on "Masks" in the issue, dated

November 9, 2019, of the online poetry magazine, *Writers' Café*. I had expected a plethora of

poems on death-masks but a quick skim-read suggested only *one* of many mentions them, in a

poem that starts, 'Death masks are as out of fashion as phrenology./ Wordsworth, behind glass, in

St. John's College library/ stares at trespasser tourists.'[1] These three lines, isolated from the

poem they begin, made me revisit, mentally, many of the issues I have addressed in this thesis.

They also help articulate some of the questions I have looked at in the critical chapters: the

current status or worth of phrenology, relations between science or learning and poetry, notions

of collection and how my own collection and others evolved, and the mode of writing with which

such subject matter might be dealt — which I decided was ekphrastic, rather than elegiac. The

lines are also inaccurate in ways that further sparked my thinking, as I shall show later.

Considering them could, I found, make me more attentive, forensic and thoughtful about previous

modes of knowledge and creative practice.

Poetry and science, in spite of C.P. Snow's 1959 articulation of the idea of "the two

cultures"[2], have long been in relation with each other, and to suggest that there is an

unbridgeable gulf between them is to deny the fruits of that interrelatedness. Edwin Morgan, like

others who have quarrelled with, or modified, Snow's thesis, has shown that the links between

poets and science have been both widespread and throughout history.[3] And Robert Crawford, in

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[1] https://thewriterscafemagazine.wordpress.com/tag/poetry The Writers' Cafe Magazine – ISSUE 17 "Masks" November 9, 2019.The poem is Gene Groves' 'Death as a Souvenir'.

[2] As in *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (1959). This book was published the same year as Snow's Rede lectures in Cambridge, where he posited a split in Western culture leading to a gulf between the sciences and the humanities.

[3] *Contemporary Poetry and Contemporary Science*, ed. by Robert Crawford (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006), pp.27-47. [Retrieved from http://ebookcentral.proquest.com Created from Oxford on 2020-05-20 01:18:04.] The essay is titled, 'Poetry and Virtual Realities'. After a brief overview of science in the history of poetry, Morgan considers science in Hugh MacDiarmid's poems and his own. Further quotations from this volume will be referenced in the body of the text.

the groundbreaking *Contemporary Poetry and Contemporary Sciences* volume in which Morgan's

essay appeared, argued that readers might 'be challenged to see poetry and science as potently

aligned modes of discovery' (p.9). Perhaps it needed only the 'long arm tactics' that I write of in

my opening thesis poem, to link them. The split that Snow wrote of could only be deemed valid to

a limited extent even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Crawford instead

declares that,

> in recent decades poetry and science, each obsessed with hidden, often uncertain
>
> structures, have continued to operate in sometimes related ways. Both have been part of
>
> the ever-shifting weather of postmodern culture; each has sought at times a clarity
>
> seldom associated with postmodernism. (p.6)

At the outset of my Ph.D. project, I wondered if, rather than pursuing an interest in phrenology, I

should be writing about 'real' or contemporary science (molecular biology, chemistry, physics,

virology or ecology) rather than a wholly discredited and outdated pseudoscience. But here

Crawford's words help me articulate why I embarked on this thesis. If poetry and science are both

'obsessed with hidden…structures' then surely that assessment holds as true of the

pseudoscience phrenology as it does of contemporary, or near-contemporary scientific

endeavour, such as the mapping of the human genome? Phrenology believed it was a way of

accessing the hidden structure of the human brain or mind, starting from the concept that the

brain is the organ of the mind, and that certain brain areas have localized, specific functions or

modules. In researching the artefacts of this pseudoscience, I was motivated by a desire to

discover and understand, exactly as I would have been had I chosen to write about another, more

orthodox or contemporary science. And the poems I wrote, (like any poems), could be said to be

obsessed with the attempt to access a hidden structure: whether the meaning underneath the

surface words of the poem or, in terms of subject-matter, the personality under the mask, the

identity the mask represents but simultaneously hides.

While critics have been moving *tentatively* towards theorizing the relations between

poetry and science,[4] poets, as Crawford's volume shows, have, conversely, been quick to engage

their creativity with contemporary scientific discovery and research. Apart from the many poets

cited or writing in Crawford's study, among them Morgan, MacDiarmid, Paul Muldoon, Miroslav

Holub, W.N.Herbert, John Burnside and Simon Armitage, I might also mention, in a British context,

Gwyneth Lewis, Ruth Padel, Jo Shapcott or Lavinia Greenlaw.[5]   And Peter Middleton has

illuminated how American poets, at least those in the postwar twentieth century, no less than

British ones, excavated the language and research of science. He also posits a more radical link

between poetry and science, in their relationship to knowledge. For instance, in a context where

the 'cultural work of inquiry [was] expected to be done by science, not poetry,'[6] Middleton shows

how, when avant-garde writers like the Language Writers were influenced by advances in

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[4] Crawford cites how critics such as Daniel Tiffany [as in his *Toy Medium* study] 'have begun to move towards presenting attempts at an overarching theoretical context for the understanding of recent poetry alongside recent science', but it is 'on the whole too soon to do so convincingly' (p.7). See also Peter Middleton's *Physics Envy: American Poetry and Science in the Cold War and After* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015), pp.45-46. Further references to this will be in the form Middleton: *Physics Envy*.

[5] This is, of course, not an exhaustive list. Worth considering, however, are Lewis's poem volume on space travel (she has a cousin who is an astronaut), *Zero Gravity* (Bloodaxe, 1998), or her published public lectures, *Quantum Poetics* (Bloodaxe, 2015), especially the title lecture, where poetry is discussed as a 'science', and she argues that 'Language works with a quantum indeterminacy.' Or Ruth Padel, in an essay on 'The writing of Allele', describes it as the 'History of a collaboration between words and music with science at the back of both'. Towards the end of the account she states that she 'marvelled at the mystery of how words and music can work with science to create new forms.' See https://www.ruthpadel.com/article/the-writing-of-allele. Also her book of poems on migration *The Mara Crossing* (Chatto & Windus, 2012) begins with poems on cell migration and molecular biology. Jo Shapcott, whose *Electroplating the Baby* (Bloodaxe, 1988) announced, in its title poem, an imagination unconstrained by any 'two cultures' divide, now has her volume *Phrase Book* (Bloodaxe, 1992) on GCSE syllabuses. Although about warfare and communication, it has also been described as exploiting the 'poetic potential of quantum physics'. And in *My Life Asleep* (Oxford Paperbacks, 1998) she has a poem called "Quark" where a personified quark speaks. Lavinia Greenlaw was the first artist-in-residence at the Science Museum (1994-95) and later was at the Royal Society of Medicine (2004). Among her poems interested in science and scientific enquiry are a number on the science of light. She has also edited an anthology called *Signs and Humours* for the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation on 'The Poetry of Medicine'.

[6] Peter Middleton, 'Cutting and Pasting: Language Writing and Molecular Biology', in *Science in Modern Poetry: New Directions*, ed. by John Holmes (Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2012), pp.38–54 (p.51) Further page references to it in this paragraph are given in the text.

molecular biology in the mid-1970s, it gave rise to new questions about the possibility of inquiry in poetry. Just as, say, in genetic cloning, scientists could now '"cut, paste, and copy" genetic information' (p.49), so poets could, and did, also experiment in various ways, Middleton arguing elsewhere that 'latent in much of this experimentation is the tacit principle that poetic manipulation of propositional affirmation is a form of experimental inquiry commensurate with the researches of the natural and social sciences'.[7] Thus his contention is that 'the new science was less important as a source of metaphors for poetry and more important as a model for a new method of poetic inquiry.' (p.50)

If Crawford's book records and explores fruitful relationships between poets and scientists, and Middleton's essay in *Science in Modern Poetry*, and his own book *Physics Envy,* set out a case for poetry's epistemological power, then where does this leave me writing poems twenty or so years into the twenty-first century about a nineteenth-century pseudoscience? I am not a Language poet, though I am of course interested in how language works in poems. When Hejinian says that 'the language of poetry is the language of inquiry' and Middleton argues that this statement is 'deliberately ambiguous, meaning metaphorically that the aims and behaviour of poetry are those of research, and literally that the actual language used in the performance of the poem is the medium of this investigation',[8] both conclusions reflect my own poetics. However, when Middleton correctly writes that '[a]djacency has little or no significance' in Hejinian's *My Life*,[9] a significant difference emerges, since my own practice exploits the juxtaposition of different language registers. To be frank, I do not think that 'adjacency' can ever be completely absent from a poet's work, or our reading of it and, *pace* Middleton, I think this is true of Hejinian's writing.

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[7] Middleton, *Physics Envy*, p.49.
[8] See Holmes, *Science in Modern Poetry*, p.48
[9] Middleton, *Physics Envy*, p.44

If I were to try to plot my writing onto the map of the contemporary poetry scene in Britain outlined by Fiona Sampson in *Beyond the Lyric*, where would I place it? Because I sometimes write in set forms and sequences, I would like to think I am writing in the vein of those such as Mimi Khalvati or Ciaran Carson, whom Sampson described, in her chapter on 'The New Formalists', as subscribing to the 'poetics of simultaneity' which underlies all strict form. In such a poetics

> the formal poem — even the whole sequence or book — has to exist entire in the mind's eye for the complete form to be experienced. This … means that in formal verse, ideas *can* be directly expressed.[10]

Although my collection is not the kind of verse novel, say, that Carson's *For All We Know* (2008) is, nor is it written in one unified form, its sequences and overall form allow the expression of a set of ideas. But, by contrast, in choosing to write as I do about rather outré topics like death-masks, could I be said to be revelling in 'deep play' — as Sampson says a postsurrealist poet such as Selima Hill does (pp.215-217)? Even if I sometimes employ a playful tone, I write very differently to Hill, although like her, I'm presenting in poems a view of the world, and how it works. Where Hill sets about understanding often frightening or unhappy things that have happened to her, and making these accessible or comprehensible to others in a ludic way, I am trying to understand some potentially unpleasant things that I've discovered and researched so as to convey them to others in a fresh and only guardedly judgemental way. Just as my poems are not avant-garde in a 'Language' sense, neither are they rawly autobiographical, as Hill's are, nor am I 'juggling an outrageous symbolic lexicon' (p.215) as she does. Instead I am concentrating on an often ekphrastic, rather than metaphorical, treatment of artefacts to help the reader understand how they fit into the world. And I aim (as all poets do) to write in a way that convinces others that — the litmus test — these poems *had* to be written.

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[10] Fiona Sampson, *Beyond the Lyric: A Map of Contemporary British Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2012), p.241 Further references will be given in the text.

Conclusion

In starting the collection with poems about death-masks, I subvert readers' expectations. Readers might well have speculated that the poems on the topic would use masks symbolically: as symbols for deceit, privacy, self-abnegation, or secretiveness, just as the majority of those poems on the *Writers' Café* website do. Deliberately avoiding this metaphorical approach, I instead present the subject matter in an ekphrastic way that is not just straightforwardly descriptive, but involves other features of that mode such as narrativity, voicing and distancing. Within that approach I also include, or hint at, ethical considerations that leave room for the reader to consider how the mode is working. This collection contains an innovative kind of ekphrastic poem. It also has implications for our understanding of creative practice and histories of knowledge.

If, as Crawford and Middleton argue, poetry can constitute a means of enquiry, then my thesis shows that the relationship between different types of knowledge is dynamic — even when that knowledge is, as the *Writer's Café* poem has it, 'dead' or discredited. My poems suggest that when it comes to fossilized science we are feeling our way around. Whatever schemes, charts or maps we might start with, what is revealed is that when creative practice and a disinterred knowledge come into conversation, something dynamic can happen. It may amount to 'feeling our way', but it is happening. And in such a project one has to be open to accident, spontaneity and serendipity. Just as a 'schematic' science that claims to provide definitive answers finds it has to become more complexly nuanced, so poetry, I would argue, has to accommodate the serendipitous, to be elastic and mobile, and also unpredictable.

Towards the beginning of this conclusion, I quoted lines from an online poem. I mentioned the 'inaccuracy' they contain as thought-provoking. This is relevant here. In stating that 'Death masks are as out of fashion as phrenology,' the poet is perhaps choosing to ignore the fact that in Britain at least it is still possible, and indeed perhaps in some circles, fashionable, to have a death-mask made. Nick Reynolds, son of the Great Train Robber Bruce Reynolds, runs a workshop in London that offers death-masks. (In Highgate Cemetery, I have seen masks of Bruce

Reynolds and of Malcolm McLaren, cast by Nick Reynolds, that sit on their graves.) Reynolds has been featured in the media, including a BBC Radio 4 programme.[11] Another inaccuracy lies in the fact that where the second and third lines imply the poet is still referring to death-masks, in fact it is Wordsworth's *life*-mask that 'stares at trespasser tourists' in St. John's College library in Cambridge. This may be the result of a mistake or a deliberate fudging by the writer. Whichever it is, the lines can act as a reminder of how mistaken implications have contributed to, as well as impeded, knowledge. What I wanted to do in the commentary and poems of this thesis was to shine a more attentive light on modes of knowledge that have been dismissed because mistaken — not to resurrect them, but to see if they retain any use for us still, in terms of our thinking about creativity.

The reader of these poems will take away the understanding that we encounter the past, the present, and the future in diverse ways. What I convey, however, from the start, is the sense of how, as Henry James suggested, it is always only a 'long arm stretch' between us today and those people whose artefacts remain with us. We are used to photography freezing moments of time, and find it a desirable way of creating memories for ourselves. As Susan Sontag says, 'Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality … One can't possess reality, one can possess… images — … one can't possess the present but one can possess the past.'[12] We seem, almost relentlessly nowadays, to need to 'possess' through the images photography grants us. They show 'we were there!' or 'we've had that experience!' Instead of looking at things directly, we encounter them often through the lenses of our cameras. By contrast, I focus the reader's gaze in the thesis poems directly onto the subjects. The poems attempt to answer the question of what

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[11] See BBC Radio 4 - Death Masks: The Undying Face: Sculptor and musician Nick Reynolds has revived the art of creating death masks https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p05g29x0/p05dsgtt. I am ignoring here American interest such as that of the Mediated Matter group at MIT, seeking to revitalise the practice of making death masks using new imaging technologies such as multi material 3D printers and generative computer algorithmns, or the work of contemporary British artist Marc Quinn, especially his *Self* series of casts, using his own blood.

[12] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2008), p.163. Further discussion of this and related topics can also be found in Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 2000).

to do with artefacts from the past, what purpose to ascribe now to them, and also what they might mean in the future. As my 'Death mask' poem suggests, I am thus setting up a 'conversation' with the past.

When considering poetry writing's frustrations, I at times concur with Marianne Moore's declaration about poetry, 'I too dislike it'.[13] This dislike, nevertheless, may reflect my espousal of 'the utopian ideal of Poetry', that Ben Lerner argues, persists in poets.[14] Self-consciousness about its own frustrations and limitations can, of course, be found in much modern and postmodern poetry. I wrote, in the 'Death mask' poem about 'start[ing] a conversation' with the inanimate object of the title. What many of my poems do is to *start* conversations with the past or the present, rather than pontificate on or 'nail down' conclusions about them. But I might adduce two images I use in the 'Some day/s' poem to characterise the trickiness of such conversations. A 'lifeline' needs to be found that enables a link to be established, or at least a 'torch' — even if 'dimming' — used to illuminate the 'darkened corridor'. Either situation could provoke a sense of panic. Identifying what might counteract this, in any future collection I write, would be an absorbing (and distracting) challenge. Since in the future I will be more aware of the relationship between modes of knowledge and creative practice, and how poetry can 'play' with some of that knowledge, I feel more confident about embarking on that new project.

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[13] From 'Poetry', Marianne Moore, *New Collected Poems*, ed. by Heather Cass White (London: Faber & Faber Ltd, 2017), p. 27.
[14] Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2016), p.101.

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