

The Duck At The Top Of The Stairs

Or, How I Remember Writing Some Of My Books—Why, Even

Ken Bolton

Time I suppose to see
just what I've been doing
writing poems—lost, in the
middle of a dark wood
or whatever—at any rate fifty,
and enrolled, for this degree. (*For why?*
you ask, as in fact I ask myself.) I know
what I think I've been doing
but these things will have
changed, over time. Changes I sometimes
will have 'noticed' merely,
other times willed. But sometimes
I will have noticed nothing
or stopped, after a time, noticing.

And *I* will have changed—my *ideas*
(though ideas were not important to me—
in the sense of themes to 'pursue'—
only that there should *be* some), my
style and conception of form—as
one gambit after another
ruled itself out, through repetition,
or my *glands and reflexes* grew
gaining wisdom and sclerosis.

(I'm not sure what I mean here
or how best to say it:
the ideas seemed extra-literary:

Those things together
constituting ‘change’, development
or something more in the nature
of contradiction—discrepancies to be
explained, or shrugged away,
concerns or habits that like
a shirt have worked their way
low in the drawer and you say *Oh,*
I don’t wear that anymore—
it’s hard to say why.

Or it’s obvious.

The process poem, for example, I
that strikes me as such a seventies thing:
— *This coffee shop—I won’t eat here again!*
Though in fact I will, despite the
fluctuating price, the mathematical
inadvertance that accompanies
lunch each day—the sensitivity
of the teenage girl who administers it
precluding objection.

Not that she is aware of this.

I have only ever *used* the conventions
of that sort of poem, not been bound
by them as rigor: a device
for changing the subject. Though ‘subjects’,
like ideas, were not the point exactly—

or *were* the point ... of the self that
entertained them, were just the *figure* or
‘theme’ on the other hand
of the one writing the poem—
and you were *both* these people, and you
might not have to decide between them—
unless the power of one called
for its being overruled and
even then it may have been a matter

that is, good ideas
were better than bad
and made the poem better—
but the test of them as ideas was not literary.)

of ceding ground, regrouping
redefining the goal or conception,
the ambition or gestalt:

two people
endlessly moving the goalposts
to gain advantage.

Or an impossible coalition—
say, the Labor Caucus.

(Prospective Content
and Vague Form, aligned
provisionally.

Though conceptually
they are of different order:
more Incommensurable than Opposed
— incommensurable *and* opposed? —

and, really,
fictive entities.)

The Labor Caucus.
(Or something more cooperative.) In
any case the tension between the two—
form and *content*—being productive,
and the *poem* side brought off best with no
one pole too long dominant. Though this

is to offer a generalization, not a memory.
What poem do I remember this way? Well,
'A Terrible Attitude, Based on Mourning' might
be a candidate— *is* one,
so perhaps there were others.

Having something that must be satisfied,
that might even 'drive' the poem—besides 'art'—
was necessary. An impulse or orientation
I think of as Protestant or Puritan—though

what thing Catholic—if that is its opposite—
is it distinguished from, the Baroque?

(Why did I say I wouldn't eat 'here', any more—
and then admit I would?

The effect is to change the subject
—but, more interestingly—*since* or *if* or
to the degree that 'subjects
are not the point'—a level of sincerity
is introduced, or introduced
critically:

an 'earnest' of it—
a marker—introduced
as, simultaneously,
it is undermined—
a promise
of unreliability

and a foregrounding of artifice
—or, more correctly, of the form
of some sort of
bond with the reader. *I hope* it did all that

—because as illustration of
a 'worn out form'—the shirt
never to be worn again—
it backfires: there I am
using it/wearing it.

The failure
set up here, maybe 'demonstrates'
continuity?

Or is this a moved
goal-post?

In some ways *good* if it is.

The Baroque I have some tolerance for
and it would mean in this context

the more positively exhilarating pleasures—
of Thought-that-moved-swiftly and was not ‘poetic’
that was amusing, that had the formal excitement
of collage, its disjunctions: Ted Berrigan, O’Hara.

Where I liked, or ‘employed’, conventions
I wanted them laid bare.

#

There seems so much to say
about the early poems. I cared
about them at the time. But what
they didn’t do
meant so much more
than what they did: a series—
or simple instances of—
exemplary avoidances
of what I considered then
to be error
and which added up
to a style of subtractions. I guess
‘cool’ is always a matter of ‘less
is more’. Maybe I thought the poems
exciting in their severity? The audience
whipped—and a little shocked
but liking it, or lapping it up?
Maybe I didn’t think this—
as I read mostly to friends, the
like-minded or moderately rivalrous ‘peers’
of similar or different persuasion.

#

***Learn To Stutter — Scenes
From Damaged Life!***

Is that the true title
of this apologia?!

A traditional path
to aesthetic
seriousness
has been
"the pursuit
of the direct and the difficult" 59
(Lucy Lippard). As
writer and art critic
Gary Catalano once said—

of artist Ken Whisson—

(that) (he) "resists
all facility".
"Risible? You bet.
but all that I'll soon forget 60
with my man
ner of working" (Billie Holiday). ('My Man')

Rhetorical facility
(especially of the
readily available 'going kinds')
must be resisted.

At the same time
"all is rhetoric"
(Johnny Mercer)— 61

so what to do about that?
That's the bind,
"and yet

the bind is the point"
(Bobby 'The Brain' Heenan). (World Wrestling Federation) 62

A purchase on interest—on
'authenticity'
even—is gained

through involvement
with the form
and the medium,

with tools
of artlessness and irony,
parody, resistance and the rest.

"Damaged life"—I've not
read all of Adorno by a long shot
and don't know
where the phrase occurs—

but Bogart/Sam Spade
utters *his* lines
in reply to Elisha Cook's
observation
that Spade talks easily,
confidently:

"What should I do—
learn to stutter?"

(‘Scenes from Damaged Life’

is the subtitle to Adorno's

Minima Moralia.) (The Spade character

63

In the case of Poetry
the answer is, maybe,
Yes. One of the kinds
of resistance

"utters these lines" in
The Maltese Falcon.)

I want to posit
—have I posited it already—
if *not*, maybe, *discuss*—
is the resistance
to a too easy rhetoric,
at least when spoken
from a subject-position
that can be construed
as the poet's.

But I

will discuss it! Give me
one more cup of coffee!

One effect
of a poet's sensitivity to words
—even one such as mine—
will be
a difficulty
and self-consciousness
about utterance—
and about banality,
seeming importance, por-
tentousness of tone
or cloying sincerity—

and a consequent
deal of difficulty
about where to begin,
and a resultant silence.

This
self-censure will be—
by means of projection—
experienced
as the medium's resistance.

I.

E. — *you*
don't know
how hard this is.

The obvious way
round it is
parody or genre,
where the model chosen
can be both object
and vehicle of your
analysis.

Adorno's sense—

that the luxury required
to have complex, analytical
or speculative thought
is incriminating—
is another sense of resistance
in (or *to*) the very
occasion of writing.
And you trick yourself
out of it,
or around it or plow
on occasion directly over it
but accord it a degree
—*varying degrees*—
of difficulty, surely.

The equation
of civilization with barbarism
is Benjamin's formulation
originally, but elaborated by Adorno
in *Minima Moralia* and elsewhere.

Billie Holiday, *here*,
backs Adorno—
and Johnny Mercer...
and even Bobbie 'The Brain'
Heenan, from International
World Wrestling! That makes this
Cultural Studies practically.
Doesn't it? "We have no culture
just aerials"? Isn't that
what the bohemian young
eminence grise said?

64

Or as one
Justin Clemens has it,
"All Cultural Studies
Aspires to the Condition
of bad rock journalism." (a variation on Walter Pater)
Good to say that somewhere.

65

Yes, Poetry must 'defeat'

Cultural Studies. They have
the same job description:
'Intellectual-
Without-Portfolio'.

("(D)efeate"—that is, as in Harold Bloom,
The Anxiety Of Influence.)
And maybe we *don't*
have to defeat it.

66

Back to the poems!
Time for a coffee?
Yoiks—time for *work!*

#

So—
'Notes For Poems' (early 80s)
was a deliberate choice
of a more flowery diction
and an alternately hysterical and
rhapsodic discursive manner.
Capital 'P' poetry. Chosen
as a way out of the dead-end
that degree zero and the process poem
had—temporarily? permanently?
necessarily?—brought me to.
US poet Tony Towle
was probably the main influence,
though the poem bears little resemblance
to his productions. (Actually
'Notes For Poems' took off
from the opening paragraph of
some old-fashioned *Guide*
To Classical Music I had found.
I think it had the phrase
"species of fine frenzy
descend from the sky"—and I was away.)
The signs of Towle's presence

67

68

are apparent to me though—
in the deliberate artificiality,
the persona (to a degree),
the linked, extended, 'classical' similes, metaphors,
and rhetorical patterns or schema,
the great show of their 'deployment'.

At various times I wrote poems as letters
(*instead* of letters even
in most cases) and the first published of them
I think were three from France and Italy
(appearing in *Untimely Meditations*).
These allow an intimacy of address and tone
and make plausible a greater freedom of association.
I suppose they also involve
a degree of self-representation and
representation of the addressee (their
expectations, background, opinions). A kind of
negotiated relationship.

Their attraction for me
as letters or surrogates for letters
was that they gave me
access I normally don't have
when writing letters
to areas of free association.
One should have access
to this in letter writing
but I don't normally seem to.

Almost none of these poems
did I conceive of
in the terms I have used. I conceived of them
pretty much wordlessly and intuitively.
Involving a recognition
perhaps readied by these kinds of thinking.

But it's not really all that difficult a notion. Is it?

#

(As to the 'letter poems' making plausible
"greater freedom of association")

"Make *more* plausible"? I mean
that they are
conventionally more plausible—
or expected—*because* they are poetry
and have less of the utilitarian tone
of contemporary, debased, truncated, not-very-well-mannered
communications. The poems
signal that they are Poetry
by convention
and that their humor
consists partly of the ill fit
of their notions (the notions they express
thereby) with 'Poetry'.

(Not that these poems set up to demolish
that idea of Poetry—considering it demolished already—
but invoke it to bounce off,
an orientating straw man,
the only fixture standing in the wide, open field
modernism has laid waste.)

& I should have said (?)
bounce off *of*.)

What sort of ill-fit? The usual: the everyday, but also
the more abrasive and, if not shocking, impolite:
watching a big Frenchman's little dog
cower under his chair, small, leonine and cowardly;
watching cars park; remarks on the disappeared
mosques of the Jewish Quarter; jokes about Australian
War artists; anti-clerical sentiments;
quick artistic judgements on the French Baroque's
taste in Italian art; a drawing of the Siena square
done as if lying drunk in the middle of it. And so on.

These things fill out the 'letter poems'.

#

On this tour of the various formal gambits,
or moves, I've made—"formal/attitudinal"
might have been the more
circumspect phrasing there—
their motivations, their characteristics,
I'm left with a small bunch of poems
with traditional form: some sestinas
and a moderately long poem called
'Traffic Noises, Cups, Voices'.
And with the fact that I've written
a lot of poems in unrhymed couplets and triplets—
since the mid 80s I think. I think the latter
were an attempt
at a less obtrusively ("ostensively" used to be
Donald Brook's great phrase—as in
"look there", "it's obvious")—um,
less obtrusively apparent Subjectivity—
through a greater regularity of look,
but *also* (as it transpired, but not
of necessity) greater regularity of tone—and argument.

Not really a category, these, as the manner
is adopted in works already categorized: 'Dazed' for example.

The sestinas were written mostly
in the 80s when I finally realized
that some poems I liked *had* that form
and that it explained part of their mystery
and appeal. (Ashbery's 'Faust'
being one. It recalls mostly the Claude Rains
Phantom Of The Opera movie of the 40s.)
I used them in the spirit
of the Ou Li Po (of whom
I knew nothing at the time)—
as productively *restrictive form*.

71
Tennis Court Oath 47

72

The sestina formula
was a machine you strapped to your brain
and the product was something
you could not have produced
otherwise. 'Bunny Melody'
is one I think is successful. My first, 'Funny Ideas', *Sestina Centre Brain 1*
I began by choosing the amusingly nutty blurb
from *The Fontana Dictionary Of*
Modern Knowledge and making it
the middle stanza of the six
and plotting the determining end-words
for the other stanzas
from that mid-point—and 'writing'.

Limited returns set in, I've found,
after a time
and I don't revisit the form very often.

The other poem 'Traffic Noises...'
—but that is to jump ahead, to poems that are 'current'—
the destination in a way
of this whole exercise. We must be nearly there.
Word Count could tell me
exactly how far away it is.
Exciting? And just
as I've got the hang of this—
got it, lost it a few times,
but basically ...

So, *later*.

Finally,
I've done more in the collage line, too.
Not so much—and this time not because
Diminishing Returns threatened,
but because I feared
that the more purely 'aesthetic' determination
—'aestheticist' even—
would come to govern,
that I would have to think of myself

producing 'confections',
the verbal equivalent
of the Lyrical Abstraction paintings that,
though I could like them, seemed to trade
on the *look* of daring abstraction
(daring accident, risk and etcetera), and which
controlled that look pretty perfectly,
orchestrated their colors, their
randomness, their accident—
too conveniently, whose daring was in fact
already and long ago acceptable.

So, to avoid this embarrassment.

As well I had mostly turned this process
upon a quite large mass of well digested
and abandoned material, usually a good while
abandoned. I was producing less of this
(fewer fragments of unfinished poems)—
was less of a bower bird of others' fragments—
or of 'fragments' of my own. The discursive and flat manner
I had been maintaining
did not generate these nuggets. So,
few examples: 'Blazing Shoes',
'August 6th'. The latter, *because* it is later,
shows the effects I have been describing.
It is made up
much less of small verbal, linguistic
units. It is itself (consequently?) larger
and cloudier—whole discursive chains are set up
and run for a page, or pages.

I like the poem very much—
but it is commodious, capacious
and stands at different sorts of angle to
—different sorts of distance *from*—
its material. It *is* their voice
more often: more often close
to first person Subject-position—

though it is more openly and more quizzically
ironic about the voices it mimics, voices it quotes and 'affects'.
But voice and subject
are a more determining principle
with it than with 'Terrific Days'—
which could be regarded
as having *no* Subject position. So,
a difference.

There are a few shorter poems
done this way: 'Italian Drink',
'Life Your Weight'—and a number of poems
that begin with the method or incorporate it
at some stage ('Double Trouble', 'How I'm Feeling')—
and maybe it is almost a habit of thought
or attention I now bring to writing. This, though,
would be less 'collage'
than free association. ("Free", what a nutty idea.)

#

(I think we're there.)

#

Well here I am,
in *The Flash Café*, having
shocked the woman behind the counter
by ordering tea:
she likes to guess, long black?
latté? But my throat is sore—
coffee would hurt.
I'm about to embark now
on the exegesis
of the new poems
that have been collecting under the title
At The Flash & At The Baci—
poems written here, written
or revised here. Or at the *Baci*

down the street. A few weren't.
 Or, *if* they were, I associate them
 with the desk at home: one of
 the John Forbes poems
 (the second, 'Hi, John' the title)
 looks out that window
 at a plant outside—
 and another was written
 late at night
 ("People Passing Time")
 and depended on pictures I had
 taped or blu-tacked to the wall.
 Similarly the poem for Kurt:
 ("Catching Up With Kurt Brereton")—
 I was doing a drawing or *had*
 just done. A few others—
 the 'Manet' one—I was with (‘A Picture’ is the title)
 Anna and Cath, another I was
 watching television while Anna slept
 in front of it or—no I wasn't—
 I wrote it the next night
 while alone—watching *Mouchette*.

(The poem is 'Amaze Your Friends'
Mouchette is a 60s French film.)

73

Because I'm writing this here
 at *The Flash* in a poem with
 the waitress in it—looking at
 poems I wrote here too—will she
 be able to see them—by some
 weird sort of *Being John Malkovich* logic? 74

If she could
 she would like her appearances
 I hope—though I can imagine
Whadya mean 'Gothic'? 75
And who's this stylish bitch
you work with that knows so much?
 Would she like the poems—um—

on 'purely aesthetic grounds'?
No one else does—ha ha ha.

The best poems in the book
are not necessarily the ones to talk about
I guess, though it might turn out
they get covered. The newest poems
at the back

are to do with Italy, in part,
where I was last year
—and the coffee shops

(in the first half of 2000)

Flash and Baci

are Italian—the poems
consider frameworks, locales
perspectives
from which experiences can be seen
or my thinking can.

Nervously relative. In fact my
trip to Italy *to* another perspective
was the seemingly longed-for,
or wondered-at, coming true—
disconcertingly, as
might be expected.

Anyway, I am not
a markedly 'centered' poet
though I live with that
happily enough: tethered
here—but lightly, barely.

The constants might be friends,
Relationships—and a mix of
culture, in which I'm at home,
(though it's partial, not 'adequate',
in various ways—but then I'd
'have all the answers' if it were,
which would be boring
or boring because 'not me'. Who knows?)
("Who knows?" a recurrent phrase,
somebody once said,
in my poems.)

I seem
To have talked myself
into a curious mood. Maybe
I should write a real poem
instead of 'this' then? (A
joke I like, which I've made
a number of times
not being sure what its import is
or caring to decide.)

The whole relativism 'thing'
I would like to bracket out
—like my ideas—as non literary.
It's not a conscious theme, or
—and this *is* literary, I guess—
is boring for its repetition
and embarrassing: like
some other themes—Who wants
to seem this sook
who always needs his friends?
Similarly poems looking out
a window, or up late at night
thinking. 'Thinking'?
"Thinking—but never making up
his mind!"

though one is
and does

Not
that I mind repetition
in the poets I admire.
(But I'm not one of them.)

So what's in this putative book then—

apart from the issues above
which indicate 'more of the same'—

anything good?

The first poem in the book,
'Home Town', is okay.
It could be characterized
as an 'I-do-this, I-do-that' poem
James Schuyler-style.
I do this I do that
is associated with particular
O'Hara poems. If it's 'James
Schuylery' it is in being,
initially, a narrow column
and in being less jumpy—
in the ordering and kind
of events and ideas, than F. O'H.
Not that this is 'true' exactly
or that I thought about it
that way then. But as shorthand.
The poem breaks up into
staggered lines after a while
—as concepts and moods
begin to dictate its pace
rather than the more ('telegraphic?')
actions and events. It begins—

Driving into work while
Cath reads about driving around London
& wondering when will I next write a poem
or whether to just work on *Gwendolyn*
a poem of John's & mine & maybe I should
it *is* half mine, I drop Cath off, do a
U-turn & scoot down to the EAF, park, go inside
check the mail empty my bag a little
lock up again & set off for the coffee shop
where I'll read or write a poem or a
review—or work on *Gwendolyn*, I suppose, is
a possibility . . .

and later goes on
to become a series of thoughts
about my 'place' in the world
how it feels etc and the insubstantiality
evanescence

of the terms
in which I think these things.
The poem affects a wistfulness
that it mocks—though to which
it resigns itself finally (if
'formally' only) at the end
in ruefully examining the lines
on O'Hara John Forbes communicated
to me: about timing, grace.

"Frank O'Hara never went skating
but he liked to dance," Forbes tells me
in 'Thin Ice', finding O'Hara
an acceptable link between us.

76

Two other poems early in the MS
would seem comparable—'Walk
On The Wild Side' and 'poem ("walking
down from the *Star Grocery*")'.
Both feature walking, obviously,
as does much of 'Home Town'
but actually 'Wild Side' contemplates
future daily events

—"Tomorrow:

shop, bank, wash hair" —
and, still more banal, "put prices
on books arrived at the EAF"
(my job) "have coffee".
"An eventful day?" the poem asks.
The poem then goes on
to calibrate loyalties
to various 'heroes'
Little Walter, Lou Reed
James Schuyler—then ponders
further nebulous things
pleased to be making no
firm decisions. It is
a far more measured poem
than 'Home Town', biting off

almost less than it can chew.
'Home Town' takes a number
of big bites. The
'*Star Grocery*' poem
has some of the same
measured quality and is
in relatively grave
three-line stanzas.
But it is midway between,
or *somewhere* between—or
 a provisional plural—
 "somewhere(s) between"?
Is it a literary convention,
 or realism, that academic jokes are dull?)

between
the contentedness of 'Wild Side'
(the contrast with its title
is *its* joke) and the anxiety
of 'Home Town'. '*Star Grocery*'
runs unfavorable or slightly down
and crestfallen comparisons
of oneself (me, not you)
with the major players of
cosmopolitan centres
and sort of decides to take them
on the chin which it 'bravely'
holds up in its
last lines—contemplating
total annihilation. In fact. (!)
A bit histrionic.

(*'Walking Down from the Star
Grocery'* is its full title.)

(Just 'Death'.)

Other poems in the book
treat 'the street'—
this same street, Hindley Street.

'Mostly Hindley Street' does so—
but more in the framework
of the process poem: cursorily
diaristic, sketching shops and sites

and characters of the street
and thoughts produced that way.

It happens upon
a kind of thesis or question—
Is my 'compass' any broader than
Thomas Gray's—whom I rather thoughtlessly
deride. 'Halogen Pam' is a more circumspect
account of my life in urban Adelaide
contrasting it with those of friends—
contrasting their imagined attitudes, too,
to mine. It is in three-line stanzas
and does a fair bit of thinking. Is its tone
too heavy? Unrelieved? Later poems,
like 'Hindley Street (with
a prospect of Michael Grimm)' and
'Amaze Your Friends', seem not similar.
Their mood is less self-critical.
'Amaze Your Friends', anyway, is not
about the street but was simply written
about the same time. 'Prospect' begins
in emulation of some lines and the feel
of Ted Berrigan, his poems like
'Ann Arbor Elegy' or (particularly) 'Peace'.
But readers won't notice. And it
doesn't matter—it got me started—
and its, or similar—repetitions
are what 'Prospect' seeks for, overreach
being its intent though hoping to 'save'
or 'recoup' it.

77

Interesting, I hope, is a satirical poem
'Giles Auty Furioso' which
starts sort of scrappily
—like a comedian at half pace,
(maybe rehearsing a show,
it occurs to me now)—then clicks
into gear: the supposed

voice of mad Giles Auty
bemoaning the state
of Australian Art Today, of
art today generally. It's
funny, if it is funny,
because of the extremity
of its views—but also
because of their similarity to his.
In my view, at any rate.
The notes to the poem
are amusing in something like
the same way, if maybe
more slyly.

A poem called 'A Picture' but which
I think of usually as
The 'Manet' poem is I suppose
'ekphrasis' which, if
this weren't a process poem
and I was going to revise even a line,
is a word I'd drop (usually
I cannot remember it—it
seems to mask the ordinariness
of an ordinary enough
concept). Describing a picture.
This poem describes a painting
by Manet that, it becomes apparent
quickly enough, is imaginary.
My partner Cath, her daughter Anna
and I are in it, sitting in bed
reading—they *are*, and I am
or I might almost be
but I'm writing the poem in question.
I describe our respective books
and the appearance of mother and
daughter. Cath's description is mediated
through characterizations of
Monet and Berthe Morisot
and a bit of pondering

on Manet's likely attitude
to detail—that is, is the anachronistic
wrist-watch I'm wearing
likely to show up in the painting
recognisably? We all look up
for the last line of the poem—
and say 'Hi'—a reason why
for a long while I used to toy
with the idea of calling it
'Polaroid'. The poem is moderately
columnar, ranged from
the left margin in one version—
in another in longer-lined couplets.
This last gives more control
but slows the overall poem.
A nice poem—but with
very much the air of a set piece.
A nice poem I don't care about.
Far more interesting—but
does it work?—the poem
'Double Portrait'. Not conceived
as 'ekphrasis'. It's a kind of
doubled sestina, linking a second
to the first—at the 'copula'
to call it that, of
the first envoi or
final three lines (that is,
the envoi that would end—
be the final three lines of—
an ordinary sestina). (That's where
I make the join.) It's
the product of fabulous New York:
the sight of a New York artist—portraitist
mainly—one whom I've never liked

(Chuck Close: he was
sometimes included
under the rubric 'Pop Art' and also
as a New Photographic Realist,

though *their* subject matter (not his)
was usually pick-up trucks and
chrome-and-glass Americana.
These latter artists
have now mostly been forgotten.

Close's paintings are enormous.
He has lately been
confined to a wheelchair
and with very little motor control
of his muscles
yet has devised a way to continue.)

"... one whom I've never liked"
or thought much of. He is contrasted
in all his art-world success (a
second-stringer's degree of it)
with the comparative and undeserved obscurity
of poet Tony Towle—whose
work I like. I discuss
a Chuck Close self-portrait
and a series
of photographic portraits
of Towle. My ambivalence
about Close—who has
risen above adversity
in recent years—and about
my opinion of him, and of
other artists, is discussed.
It's all complicated enough
and I like it as a kind of
ruminative thinking that
might belong in an essay
in some people's view but
is less usual and stronger too
in a poem. The form
might be the fault in the poem, or
cause of its faults, but
it also gives the ideas' expression

some strength. It was absorbing fun to write a serious—seriously toned—poem in the sestina form.

Which links it, though at some months' remove, with 'Traffic Noises, Cups, Voices'. This poem, too, and unusually for me, takes a 'tight' form—the stanza pattern of FT Prince's poem 'Memoirs in Oxford'. These few months' removal is not much, 'Double Portrait' being examined two or three times a week most weeks for the next three or four months, given a rest and subjected to it all again—minor revisions being made or visited upon it, the poem gradually obscured, cleared and obscured again but fixed I think finally: over longer and longer periods left in the dark (to be read freshly). I decided it was complete about the time I finished 'Traffic Noises'.

It is a more serious or heavier-toned poem than 'Traffic'. And interesting, *more* interesting—if in fact it retains the reader's attention: it is less comfortable with its own thoughts—their status as reasonable opinion, *mere* opinion capricious opinion, unjust even. As well, I like 'Double Portrait' for the manner of its thinking about art—which is usually done with an eye to History.

i.e., the other sestinas were comic: there is one of these in the book too—'Prospect of the Young KB As A Critic'

78

In fact poems usually discuss work whose status is, or seems, decided.

'Portrait' discusses mere taste and fallible judgement—and error's giving some works a special longevity for me.

(That is, a kind of 'critic's guilt' at having got the work wrong: there are subsequently works I remember especially—and disproportionately—having originally underestimated them.)

'Traffic Noises' is much lighter in tone. It anticipates a trip to Rome, bemused to run through its file of information: knowledge of Rome generally, of the studio in which I would be staying etc—the point / points being contrasts of notional Italy and the 'Italian' coffee shop in which I write—and Adelaide. The poem is 'a bit civilized' in my judgement—'polite' in a way I find diminishes any urgency or immediacy... into an entertainment.

But still,
something to have done.

Maybe
each poem is calisthenics, training for the next, or 'a' next. The same moves get made in more pressing contexts or avoided, topped. Modified as they approach again. Like philosophy, I think. (Would *like* to think.) Or do I mean

'thinking' rather than philosophy?

The three poems for John Forbes
are a response to his death
and explain themselves that way:
in summary, they recount
the following: that John
was a kind of point-of-reference
a constant in my thinking—
intermittently invoked for
purposes of comparison (my writing,
my life, attitudes ...
compared to his) and as
a kind of bench-mark
I could apply. He had
stayed with us shortly before
his death—not in good health
but maybe prepared
to 'look after' himself. In
the second poem I reprise
much of this.

Both poems begin with,
and mix in, everyday occurrences
and return to John. The third
is less anchored to the everyday—
partly it is that it is written at night
in a 'study'—work room—so that
intrusions are less random, more
chosen, and partake more of the subjective—
maybe it is somatic, too (the
body late at night): the poem
as it turns out is a bit more
'about' death as well as being
—well, mostly—about John.
It looks at three images—
on my walls as I wrote—
a large A3 photocopy photograph
of 'Muddy Waters playing cards
between sets', a photo

(photocopy again) of New York migrant kids,
girls mostly (or all)
by Weegee from the 40s,
and a photocopy reproduction
of a Philip Guston painting
Smoking I.

This last I have had on my walls
for years—a photocopy actually
of the picture torn from a page
of newspaper so it consists
of the rectangular image, the titling
underneath and a triangular fragment
of newspaper type still further below.
I like it as black and white graphic
more than as colored painting, I think.
I can kick on with it all night
to any accompaniment—Velvet Underground,
jazz, anything. It is 'about'
staying up late. Though for Guston—
I know this—it is
also about insomnia, its
worries and bad conscience and hopelessness.
This is the reason it reminds me
of John. As the poem/s say or said
—we had John resting down the back
exactly like that, a waking, un-
blinking head contemplating
the warnings he had received
about his health. Plainly
I didn't know what was going on.
Maybe he did. (Maybe not.)
He was frightened, surely,
to a degree.

Anyway,
the poem considers the images:
the young girls, shown together
watching a movie, a crowded
afternoon matinee session with

other kids—all now, probably, aged
or dead; Muddy (in
the pic John had liked and
wrote about a few years before
when he'd stayed another time and seen it on my wall)
dead too; Philip Guston, dead.
And maybe I was listening to Joe Turner
(dead—do I say that, in the poem?)
or was it just the repetitions
reminded me of him ('On My Way
To Denver'—*It's too late—
too late, too late, too late:*
Too late, too late too late, too late.
Says the woman, whose speech Joe reports in the song:
she's *on my way to Denver—tomorrow*
It will be too late.
She is dying of TB.

Anyway, for an overdetermined number of
reasons, given my aurally spurred
memory, I mention Joe Turner.
The poem says John's dead
and I'm alive, and doesn't know
what to say or 'know' further.
Some elements—my doing a drawing,
friend Micky Allan, just things
'on my desk' (pencils, jars, the
curtain closing out the window I face)—
are allowed in, partly because
the curve of the poem is so powerful
it will bend anything to its purpose,
the concentration on its theme.

Technically—though as O'Hara says,
"you just go on your nerve",
(*that caveat*)—I guess the poems
do the 'I do this / I do that'
thing, but also allow themselves
or the third poem does

the freedom of the collage style
(*not* collage, but similar randomness).
And I think they shift gears
often enough in terms of
different registers of ... cultural reference,
tones and dictions. Not that,
in *this* circumstance, this was planned.
Training, you see. Habit.

Is this the place to say:
John was not—in terms
of style or technique—
an influence for me:
too different temperamentally,
too big in the front brain department,
more interested in compression
than I am.
But he represented a position
I spoke to occasionally,
addressed explicitly, or
undisclosedly on occasion,
and he represented a finger-wagging
critical presence—in my imagination—
though amusing, a kind of
comic 'ravishing super-ego'.

Also influences, in
variations of the same way,
were Pam Brown and Laurie Duggan.
—Less comically different
from me, but different enough.

John's early death
has made him more central
to my poems recently. I don't know
whether permanently or as
a blip.

A spike? John was
a friendly acquaintance.
Laurie & Pam are friends.

81

Their styles are—if not
“more within my reach”, then
tempting because temperamentally
compatible or ‘near’ to me.
Levels of irony (kinds even)
& pointed, drier intelligence(s)
separate us: but they are
influences—it’s a gulf I try to
bridge or cross often enough.
Be like Pam!
Be like Laurie!

The Italian poems—‘Traffic Noises’
was one in anticipation,
and we’ve dealt with it (on other grounds—
not as anticipation, but
because it was in a somehow
‘fixed’ form, a
stanza pattern)—what to say of them?

There were three basically: ‘Rumori’,
‘Long Distance Information’,
and ‘Tiepolo’. ‘Tiepolo’ is
very much, and inevitably, in the shadow
of John Forbes’s ‘On Tiepolo’s
Banquet of Antony & Cleopatra’—
which is a better poem—
though about a painting I
don’t much like. I’ve liked
Tiepolo forever—bought prints
of his drawings from Rowe Street
Art Shop when I was
first a student (finding out
years later that it had once been
importantly a connection with Europe
for Sydney artists. By the time
I happened upon it it was genteel
and faded). I’ve always preferred

Tiepolo's brushier, less formal compositions.
I describe one I saw in Venice,
beginning with a potted history—

In the 14, 15th &
16th centuries it was
all happening in Italy
artistically though by the 17th
other countries had joined in.
By the 18th
Italy was definitely off the pace.
Still, I happen to think Tiepolo
was a major artist

and an account of Tiepolo's isolation
within the Fine Arts course
at Sydney Uni—too important
not to be included, not central enough
to fool the students. Forbes's influence
I think is in the comparison of
the begging saint-figure
with a lonely guy at a disco—
a comparison John might have made
and would have liked, might even
have identified with.
The poem is something of a 'set piece'
—like the Manet poem—and
for that reason I dislike it.
Maybe poems about pictures
are not my thing—or *not*
where 'Art History' has
already entered its verdict.

'Rumori'

is a long poem about daily life in Rome
and my preoccupations there
with 'Australian artistic identity':
Australians' looking to the Larger World
—though there are only powerful centres
that seem to constitute it—this larger world:
London, Rome. (New York.) The loss of nerve
and failure of certain Australian art and careers

(that is,
Tiepolo wouldn't feature
in the exam)

—Slessor, Crowley—and the pathos
that attaches—were difficult in the poem
to verbalize, or prove. It felt true
—felt true more than it seemed it—
and seemed and felt hysterical, projection.
This reduces the poem, I think,
to reiteration and shrinking from
conclusion. Rome's *own* independence
from these pressures (at least
as a context or working space) is made
absolve the feeling.

But not logically.

It might as easily be seen
that Rome (*cf* the Tiepolo poem's
potted history) was no longer competitive.
Like Sydney—or Slessor's Sydney.

Well, there are good things in
It—but propositionally the poem
is weak and uncertain.

Written

at the same time is a 'letter poem'
to a friend in Adelaide, 'Long
Distance Information'. The phrase
is from Chuck Berry and
'Long Distance Call', the Muddy Waters song,
might be hipper as a title (as
a reference, surely) but there
you go: it does purport
to give information—to a friend
back home. Some of it
is fanciful and some of it is true
and most of it is humorous. Good
fun, but no more—in terms
of author satisfaction.

No fun

writing poems is it? I enjoyed it
at the time and I don't hate the poem.

But it was not the big pay-off
and never was going to be.

Similarly

‘Amaze Your Friends’, ‘Hindley Street
with Michael Grimm’ and
‘My Considered Opinion’—all
likeable. ‘Opinion’ deals notably
—though was that its point?—
with Asian students; ‘Amaze’
with sitting up at night, with rock clips, our
daughter Anna (have I mentioned this?)—
and ‘Michael Grimm’ is another
portrait of Hindley Street
from *The Flash*—all in stepped,
scattered lines. I *have*
talked about this.

Some poems that link with ‘Rumori’—
its themes of art-making and identity—
are ‘Horizon’, ‘American Friends’
and ‘Catching Up With Kurt Brereton’. The last
fits in perhaps because it was
of that time—and it celebrates
a Sydney aesthetic—mostly pretending
my friends and I are having a reunion
aged 50—*but 50 years ago*,
in the Sydney of then.

‘American Friends’ wonders where
my writer friends *are*. (I’m on
holiday as I write it myself.)
The poem expresses ambivalence
as to the effect of O’Hara *et al*
on those so far away. (The movie,
from a Ripley novel, is about
inadvertent betrayal
of a German by an American.)

film title: *The American Friend*

But “those so far away”?
Is this a ‘class action’ I’m proposing—

though I seem, conspicuously, the only victim?

US Imperials

New York blend—

it said on the pack

so I knew what I was doing.

'Horizon' summarizes as similar—

but is higher toned and more

poetically obscure: it too begins with

quotes from O'Hara—

chosen almost at random

but to fit my situation

of looking out a country window.

I do this and think of

what my friends are doing—

it is Xmas time—

and wonder at the country / city divide,

the Australian landscape tradition,

Australia—which, I would like, or

had wanted, to think of

as modern—in this *post*-modern

'age' is 'post-colonial', is it (?):

how diminishing that is.

The poem

considers Meaghan Morris's contrast

of Les Murray's

"ordinary man with an icecream"

(Les's, or Donald Horne's?)

and John Forbes'

different take on things. I think

the poem addresses John again

near the end. The poem concludes

but is not conclusive.

It's good,

I think—and was different for me

in its manner—of looking for a

new piece of text to push off from

whenever it stalled. I chose

(Morris, 'On The Beach', *Too
Late Too Soon*)

82

fragments from the less well-thumbed
O'Hara poems—not always signalling this
with quote marks—and kicking off
from them. Choosing O'Hara,
while contemplating the Australian countryside,
was a deliberate or perverse ploy, a
self-incrimination, since the poem
is about cultural imperialism
to some extent.

The poem affixes my
usual declarative style
to a structure jointed at
or powered from (in part)
images, passages ... that are
less 'transparent' than that style—
but are poetically weighted or resonant.
These are the O'Hara lines—
quoted before the poem *and*, italicized,
at its beginning—
and again some pages further in, more—
(italicized: "*not to be / inimitably
weak & picturesque myself /
but standing forth a subject
not a spectacle*");

later, un-marked:

"as the brave must always ascend,
always the musts" and
"which strolls now & then
into a field / & sits down like
a forgotten rock".

The next O'Hara quote is signalled
(by quote marks)
and is from memory and
meant to be recognized: "I live
above a / dyke bar & I'm happy".
"I might too, for all I know. /
Am I?" the poem asks.

I have
a more detailed and critical
view of O'Hara than I did
in the 70s. I didn't read him
a lot in the 80s—and use him now
partly as emblematic—not just
out of enthusiasm. ("Emblematic":
'my' America—or
an early, important
enthusiasm.) I still
like his work immensely,
but see it more clearly. (Does this
sound like 'knowledge'? Then
I mean "clear-eyed".) (And it may be
that I see it
no more accurately.)

83

Not that
I think the story of my poetry
is of a relation to O'Hara's poetry
—is it?! Is Dick Watkins
about Picasso? Or Tuckson
about Pollock? Should they
not be? Anyway, if it were so
that it could be seen that way
it would be news to me.
A possibility of course.

Or is it *not* news:
exactly what I expect?

The smart thing for this book
would be a blurb that directs attention
this way—since it will be inevitable—
and seeks to control it. Something along the lines of
"re-examines the place of O'Hara and others
in an Australian poetic."

If it does, still, that

is not my point at all.
Thinking is, then?
or poetry
(form, art,
the aesthetic)?

Poet considers a shirt he used to wear—
why did he do it? how could he? would
he do it again? Should this shirt be destroyed
forever—is it a museum piece, tragic
—or empowering—handy for someone else? Is this, in fact,
the *same* shirt?

The Op Shop of the poetic heart:

What a lovely shirt. Somebody should wear it!

Not me.

No, you've got too many like that already.

Really?

It's very like what you're wearing.

Notes

- 1 The phrase means—or I took it to mean—a poem that documents the real time of its writing. Typically such poems refer to passing time, the place of the writing/thinking situation and its self-reflexivity. These poems tend to run to some length.
- 2 The correct title ends ‘Based On Suffering’. (Ken Bolton, ‘A Terrible Attitude, Based On Suffering’. *Selected Poems, 1975 - 1990*. Ringwood: Penguin, 1992. 172).
- 3 Adolf Loos (1870 - 1933) was a Viennese architect at the turn of the century, representing a purist form of early modernism developing out of and ‘against’ Art Nouveau and anticipating De Stijl.
- 4 Reyner Banham is an architectural critic who championed the ‘functionalist’ 1950s/60s English architects who often followed loosely Bauhaus principles but tended to foreground the functional: exposed pipes and ducting and the perfunctorily (sometimes perversely) awkward staircase etc. See his *New Brutalism*. London: Architect Press, 1966.
- 5 Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe (1886 - 1969) and Hans Gropius (1883 - 1969) were German Bauhaus architects, later working in the US. Mies said ‘less is more’ and Gropius said ‘form follows function’—among many other dicta.
- 6 Charles Olson proposed most clearly in his essays on Projective verse a kind of kinetic/organic theory relating the poem’s form to interconnected impulses of thought, breath and emotion. See Olson, ‘Projective Verse’. *Human Universe and Other Essays*. NY: Grove Press, 1967. 51.
- 7 Donald Davie. *The Purity of Diction in English Verse*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1952. Enjoyably prissy and severe.
- 59 Lucy Lippard. ‘The Cult Of The Direct and The Difficult’. *Changing and Other Essays*. NY: E.P. Dutton, 1971. 64 - 75.
- 60 “Tired, you bet. But all that I’ll soon forget / with my man”. Billie Holiday. ‘My Man’. Rec. 1956. *The Essential Billie Holiday: Carnegie Hall Concert Recorded Live*. Verve/HMV, 1961.
- 61 Johnny Mercer was a popular song-writer in the 1930s and 40s.
- 62 Bobby ‘The Brain’ Heenan was a wrestling manager on American TV wrestling in the 1980s.
- 63 T.W. Adorno. *Minima Moralia*. Trans. E.F.N. Jephcott. 1951. London: Verso, 1978.
- 64 McKenzie Wark’s remark was more an objection and joke about the phrase ‘cultural roots (“we don’t have roots we have aerials”’) made at a conference or arts festival, but undoubtedly in print somewhere.

- 65 Justin Clemens. 'A Report to an Academy'. *UTS Review* 4.1 (1998): 107 - 122. The article contains Clemens's variation on Walter Pater's phrase about "all art" and "music".
- 66 Harold Bloom. *The Anxiety of Influence*. New York: Oxford UP, 1973.
- 67 See also Ken Bolton. *Two Poems: A Drawing of the Sky*. Adelaide: Experimental Art Foundation, 1990. The main influence that I am aware of behind this book-length process poem and its debriefing coda is James Schuyler's 'The Morning of the Poem'.
- 68 Tony Towle. 'Autobiography' and Other Poems. NY: Sun/Coach House South, 1977.
- 71 John Ashbery. 'Faust'. *The Tennis Court Oath*. Hanover, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1962. 47.
- 72 Oulipo, short for *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*. To become a member one has to invent a new form with strict rules. Some simple ones are Perec's novel without the letter 'e', *La Disparition*, Harry Mathews' stories written using only the vocabulary of a particular, simple text. 'Restrictive form' is held to be liberating and productive, hence the Ou Li Po's liking for the sestina and forms like it. See *Ou Li Po Compendium*. Eds. Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie. London: Atlas Press, 1998.
- 73 *Mouchette*. Dir. Robert Bresson. With Nadine Nortier. Argos/Parc Film, 1966.
- 74 *Being John Malkovich* is a movie with an amusing logic that allows people to 'be' John Malkovich for a short time by climbing through a hole. Dir. Spike Jonze. Gramercy/Single Cell, 1999.
- 75 These are allusions to remarks mildly critical of the waitress which appear in 'Traffic Noises' and 'Hindley Street with a prospect of Michael Grimm'. Ken Bolton. *At The Flash & At The Baci*. Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2006.
- 76 John Forbes. 'Thin Ice'. *Collected Poems*. Sydney: Brandl & Schlesinger, 2001. 145. *Thin Ice* was the title poem of a pamphlet Forbes printed privately in the late 1980s.
- 77 Ted Berrigan. 'Ann Arbor Elegy', 'Peace'. *So Going Around Cities, New and Selected Poems, 1958 - 79*. Berkeley, CA: Blue Wind, 1980. 219, 223.
- 78 F.T. Prince. 'Memoirs in Oxford'. *Collected Poems*. New York: Sheeps Meadow, 1979. 121.
- 79 Correct title of the photograph is 'Muddy Waters relaxing between gigs' by Val Wilmer. My copy is from an unsourced newspaper. See John Forbes. 'Muddy Waters Relaxing Between Gigs'. *Collected Poems*. 188. The photo is reproduced in *Otis Rush* 12/13, 1996. 96.

- 80 Frank O'Hara. 'Personism'. *Collected Poems*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1971. 498 - 499.
- 81 Pam Brown, Laurie Duggan, and John Forbes are the main local influences in my writing career: they are philosophical or aesthetic or political 'stiffeners' (as I have allowed them to be) as much as, or more than, they have been directly poetic influences.

John Jenkins and I have collaborated on a great deal of work since the mid 1980s. I do not think we have been much influence on each other's solo work: our ideas and interests are antithetical. The poems we write together come mostly out of our amusement at this: many of them are dialogic. Most of them neither of us would work up the volition to write alone.

Laurie Duggan's poetry I find extraordinarily impressive. *Under The Weather*, which has in parts lost some of its charm for me, I was very impressed with at the time of its writing, for its form and its ellipses, its overall musicality, and for being a poem of that kind: where else was there one? (There were many, probably, stemming from Bunting, Pound and maybe Olson, in the US and the UK. I didn't see many though, and liked fewer.) I read *Under The Weather* as it was being written. Laurie's next books were very good (*The Great Divide*—with poems in it like 'The New England Ode'—and *Adventures In Paradise* which I published).

Blue Notes was a miscellany, with very good things in it. *The Ash Range* was so much less personable and was different. It was not what I wanted to write though impressive and ambitious. I published Laurie's *Memorials*—which I like immensely. If some of my more scattered, staggered, processual (!) poems approach this I would be very happy. Laurie's work pointed me to Philip Whalen's—if I needed another source and originating personality and temperament for writing like this.

Laurie and Pam are both readers whom I imagine writing my work for. So their respective writings temper my work. Not that they are severe as people, but that what they see as bullshit counts.

I wrote numerous letters to the addresses given in Pam Brown's early books. To no avail for years—she had 'always already' moved on. Her work interested me from the mid 1970s onwards, at first intermittently. It was very different from my own. Since meeting in the late 70s our work has grown closer—what a phrase—and apart again, in various ways (formally). But we share a great many attitudes. I think her influences are less narrow than mine, but we want our poetry to do many of the same things. My work sometimes takes off from lines of hers, often takes off from the imagined attitude 'Pam Brown' would evince.

John Tranter has been for me impressive without his work having any siren pull. I was fascinated by early versions of 'Rimbaud and the Pursuit of the Modernist Heresy', I remember, in the mid 1970s. I read him mostly in

magazines then. His early books, *Parallax* and *Red Movie*, already seemed old compared to his current work.

I suppose I should acknowledge that my influences are mostly male. But then they are also fairly few—amongst contemporary Australians they are three, of whom one, of course, is a woman. I lived with writers, Anna Couani and later Sal Brereton. Both are prose writers and I think for that reason less influential.

The US anthologies and movements we encountered as young writers were pretty exclusively male: One woman (Bernadette Mayer) in the NY School anthology, two or three in Donald Allen's effort (Helen Adam, Denise Levertov, Barbara Guest). Guest seems alternately inert and diaphanous-and-wafty to me. Her critical rehabilitation is being organized but I am not a subscriber. Bernadette Mayer I've read a fair bit of and liked. Anne Waldman; I liked only her first book, *Giant Night*. Adrienne Rich's later, 1980s work I read in the mid and late 80s and liked, but aside from its seriousness, its 'techniques' were those I already used. (I had read her *Diving Into The Wreck* in the 70s.)

I now read Eileen Myles and some Alice Notley, also Susan Schultz. The Howes, Hejinian, I read a little of. I find the former solemn. Lyn Hejinian I'll read with interest.

So, I liked only a small percentage of what was available. Should I explain why I ignored so many *male* writers? Influence is a matter of enthusiasms and compatibilities—and timing and availability. Within the narrowness of my tastes I don't think I was culpably blind to others' talents, male or female. Still, I doubt that my social attitudes were way ahead of their time either.

- 82 Meaghan Morris. 'On The Beach'. *Too Soon Too Late*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998.
- 83 The recurrence of O'Hara references in my poetry of the 1990s is maybe overdetermined: my work has been to some extent in intermittent dialogue with that of (or with the figure of) John Forbes, for whom O'Hara was important. John's death in early 1998 brought him still more to the fore of my thinking—and possibly more present than might have been the case as I began to edit *Homage to John Forbes*, a book of appreciation, memoir and criticism—published by Brandl & Schlessinger in 2002.