So far – Michele Leggott, codes and multiplicities

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Discussions of the undecidability, indeterminacy and disruptive or subversive tendencies of texts are broadly consistent across a variety of literary theories. Literature itself forces the issue of indeterminacy of meaning, largely because of 'the undecidable nature of figurative language' (Culler 1981, 35-36), and poetry's emphasis on language means that it often exemplifies, or is used to exemplify, literary ideas. These ideas of indeterminacy find their apogee in assemblage theory's resistance to definition, and to the celebration of context. In this paradigm, diversity is paramount, illustrated by the idea that 'there are only multiplicities of multiplicities forming a single *assemblage*, operating in the same *assemblage*: packs in masses and masses in packs' (Deleuze & Guatarri 1988, 34).

Such multiplicities are powerfully present within Michele Leggott's long poem 'so far' (from *Milk & honey*, 2005), and this essay is an application of assemblage ideas to her work. 'So far' is offered to the reader as a single poem (it has but one title), but begs the question whether it is a whole piece or a series of linked short poems, a topic which the essay will revisit in dealing with the problem of how the poem is to be read. At various levels, playfulness forms part of the work's delight in language and its awareness of poetry's semiotic potential. The assemblage idea that 'each of us was several' (Deleuze & Guatarri 1988, 3) finds accord both with Leggott's writing practice, as well as her own theorising on the subject. She suggests that her writing has a 'cast-list' of seven: 'I, you, he, she, we, you (all), and they' (Leggott 1994, 62), a grouping which can generate a sense of heteroglossia without formal collaboration, and with it another form of multiplicity.

Leggott's use of intertext is discussed by Janet Newman in her analysis of 'Blue irises' (from *DIA*, 1994). In a process Leggott calls 'reticulation', she 'creates complex networks of reference, interlacing quotations from diverse sources in new contexts', with the intention of creating an alternative poetic world (Newman 2015, 111). While this strategy is more overt and obvious in 'Blue irises', which uses a great deal of quotation, examples of 'unspecified intertextual borrowing' are also frequent in 'so far', including allusions to her own work, and is in itself a form of coding. The creating of 'an alternative poetic world' is especially relevant.

Semiotic tools of analysis, such as the discussion of codes, have proved useful for a structural unpacking of how a poem achieves its effects. Codes articulate the systems and processes at work. In a general sense, the meaning of the word 'code' encompasses the passing on of laws and instructions, but also of secrecy, which nicely encapsulates reader experiences around such a specialised form as poetry – the French 'paroles', for example, meaning instances of language, can also mean 'password'. Textual codes are most often systems of representation. Concepts such as representation form a starting point which helps us interpret and appreciate how poetry functions. Descriptive systems become codes by permutation of kernel words (Riffaterre 1978, 66), which establish a topic that additional terms confirm; for example, a direct reference to a 'trunk' is followed by a description of bark to describe trees in Wordsworth's poem 'Yew-Trees' (Riffaterre 1973, 234). Codes can function as symbols of hidden meaning (Riffaterre 1978:10); as the means of transferal between references with a conceptual or word-based factor in common (36, 54); or as the generation of idiolect (65). They may allude to the metaphoric code (Riffaterre 1978: 136); intertext as a prefabricated code (159); or to the statement of topic as code (187). These functions can each be detected in Leggott's poetry, with the generation of idiolect being of particular interest to this essay.

Riffaterre argues that because a sign is something which necessarily relates to something else, every component of the network that makes up the poem must relate back to the code which it has established. When the poem achieves this kind of unity, it is as if it constitutes a single sign (1978, 11-12), an idea which is complicated by a long poem like Leggott's, where we might wonder if coherence as a 'single sign' is necessary. Significance is established by the relationships between the different elements of a text which they could not have had separately or outside it (Riffaterre 1973, 253). At the same time, the succession of representations imposed on the reader is continually threatening to push meaning towards a text, 'not present in the linearity' (Riffaterre 1978, 12). The reader tries to bridge the gap of obscurity, partly fed by a sense of the originality of the poem. Because this is not always possible inside the poem, one has to do so '*outside the text*' [my italics] (Riffaterre 1978, 11-12). In this clash of concerns, Riffaterre observes that the mimetic element, however problematised it may be, takes up most of the space in the poem, yet its matrix could be summed up in a word, which could be present, or absent but inferred (1978, 3).

In some poems, it is as if the reader is being tricked, poetic misdirection causing the reader to be sent to a landscape which seems real, but is, 'a stage set for special effects' (Riffaterre 1978, 6-7). The stage implies the presence of some elements, as well as the absence of others. The stage set for Leggott's poem is operatic in scope and excess, though one could say that its scale is chamber sized. But is the frame still too big? And does its operatic scope present reading problems which are insurmountable? I argue that working with the concept of codes as a way of understanding how a poem operates helps illustrate possible frustrations of reading.

Representational theories like Riffaterre's allow for a degree of multiplicity, and the idea that a single word that brings unity to a poem may be absent and merely inferred offsets the limitations of codes. It responds to the poststructuralist understanding of the de-centred text but may not speak fully enough to the wider context, which has seen semiotics absorbed into the field of Cultural Studies (Lucy 2001, 4, 25). Social formations, which could be said to include poems, 'are assemblages of other complex configurations' (Little 2012, 1). The fuller acceptance of poetic indeterminacy in assemblage theory encompasses the idea that the concept of a code is too limited and unstable to comprehend the whole, 'since a code is the condition of possibility for all explanation' (Deleuze & Guatarri 1988, 77).

I will discuss Leggott's poem in terms of the ways in which it builds and disrupts codes and any potential decoding of the text, beginning with the title, 'so far'. This incomplete phrase contains significant ghosts of larger phrases. One might be 'I've come so far,' meaning perhaps 'this is where I am at the moment, the point I have come to'. It recognises, quite humbly, that there is no end point but only a stage along the way. Given that the context of the first few stanzas suggests travel, this is a suggestive reading.

Another phrase relevant to the title is 'so far, so good,' implying contingency but suggesting that it is worth proceeding. The composition date of the poem is 1998, which makes Leggott 42 at the time of writing. Dante was roughly 35 when he began writing the *Inferno*, which opens 'Midway upon the journey of our life'. Leggott would also qualify, in modern terms, to be at such a point. A third ghost phrase, 'so near and yet so far' suggests that one could be in the middle of life and far from the end of it, though death itself, in turn, ghosts such a thought, since we may pass at any time. Another phrase that may be relevant is 'so far away.' In this case, given the later references to stars, it is 'the heavens' that are far away. The title also evokes the sol-fa system of musical notation. A musical salute is apt here for the allusions to music which the poem contains.

so far

on the first day of October
in a city without hot water
the temperature climbs to 31 degrees
and I
    in a room with full-length mirrors
wash like an odalisque *petalled self*
on the tiled floor, diffuse light
as of jalousies or halogen
keeping the frescoes chalky   (Leggott 2005)

The text begins by telling us the date, a simple story-telling strategy. The detail of the city having no hot water evokes either a type or an exception. The temperature is notable, suggesting that the voice of the poem is a visitor. The text uses a slightly old-fashioned form, 'and I', as if Edith Wharton were about to hold forth in Morocco. The room's full-length mirrors, evoking the exotic, suggest 'odalisque'. There is a possible inter-textual link here with D. H. Lawrence's poem 'Snake': 'A snake came to my water-trough / On a hot, hot day, and I in my pyjamas for the heat' (2013 [1923]: 303), written in Taormina, Sicily. Being denied hot water echoes the sense of Lawrence not being able to drink at the well because of the snake's presence. Already the poem suggests the multiple. The reader assumes that 'petalled self' is a quotation or an allusion to a detail from a text or painting; the italics themselves have the effect of adding verisimilitude. This is an example of Leggott's use of intertext as 'reticulation', and the creating of 'an alternative poetic world' (Newman 2015, 111), but can also be understood as a subtle form of coding, prefabricated, Riffaterre might say.

Both 'petalled self' and the tiled floor help confirm what I will call an exotic code of representation. The word 'jalousies' can be read as an archaic spelling of 'jealousies', or as a kind of blind. The word 'halogen' returns the text to a contemporary setting, and disrupts the archaic suggestiveness of the images created before it. Such simultaneous and unintegrated suggestion is part of the multiplicity of the poem. Frescoes are another detail we might associate more readily with earlier times, but the code has shifted now and use of the colloquial 'chalky' confirms this. The poem exploits misdirection for effect in the manner of the Riffaterrean stage set (1978, 6-7). The first stanza gives a strong sense of atmosphere in its scene-setting qualities, whatever we may be able to read into the meaning of its multiple references.

The second, numbered section begins with the word 'spruiking' – a more common term in Australia than New Zealand – whose origin is unknown, but means to advertise in public by speaking.

> 2 spruiking
> for love's boy on a pavement
> covered by fallen blossom
> victorious armour
> washed away in the night
> endless headlights bearing
> one avenue to another
> three thousand solar showers
> have been purchased
> since the explosion

The phrase 'love's boy' is curiously quaint (evoking Romeo or Cupid). The exotic code both initiated and disturbed in the first stanza is now transposed into a chivalric, romantic code (a transferal between references), despite the initial variations of register which 'blossom' and 'victorious armour' give, and the subsequent shift to the modern 'headlights'. The number of solar showers purchased since an explosion explains the earlier description of a city without hot water. We do not know what this explosion was or when it occurred, but, because of the intertextuality, it is coherent.

The writing is both descriptive (of the pavement and the night) and symbolic (of love and chivalry). The competing nature of multiple references indicates deconstruction. The poem is beyond the diversity of interpretations that a structuralist reading might note, with its sense of opposing ideas and interpretations, and it features a number of strong ideas, any one of which the reader might anticipate becoming especially important across the whole poem. It continues:

> 3 the fire-eater juggles
> torches knives an iron ball
> five teeth missing by the river
> his bride sings a cappella
> veils tied to a balcony railing
> *fructus ventris fructus sanctus*
> white laburnum on the river path
> warble on a bike
> who will enter the shadows
> under the bridge at noon?

The juggler is undoubtedly juggling by the river, but he is surely not juggling teeth, and the teeth are probably not missing by the river. The enjambment and lack of punctuation disrupts grammar and the resulting multiplicity frustrates the idea of a unified meaning.

Continuing the romantic code established earlier, but in contrast to what immediately precedes it, the text cites the bride. She may be performing with the artist, but we cannot be sure. The word 'veils' continues the romantic code; it may be a metaphorical visualisation of the style of singing that is *a cappella*, or a literal observation. The Latin which follows could be part of her song, in which case its sequencing from the third line is broken by the fourth; or, it is an association with the romantic code, since the first phrase is from the Ave Maria prayer, meaning 'fruit of the womb', and the second means 'sacred fruit'. The reference to white suggests the purity or innocence of anticipation of marriage (romantic code). But next comes 'warble on a bike', a skilful and whimsical metonym. This expression is in a different tone, which accords with the performance code. The warble is probably a person whistling, humming or singing on a

bicycle, possibly the performer, or a play on the word 'wobble'. Alternatively, it is a bird perched on a set of handlebars. Humour is implicit in this playful doubt over the referent for the metonym.

The reference to shadows under the bridge may suggest a tryst, embellishing romantic associations. The lines elide and leap with joie de vivre and multiplicity. It is possible to identify at least three codes in this stanza: the romantic, the performative and the realistic or contemporary. Some phrases seem designed to pull one back into the immediacy of what is happening, despite distracting allusions to various phenomena that may or may not be present. What emerges is an indication of the tendency of contemporary poetry to maintain a variety of competing codes, rather than the single code which might have pervaded much poetry of the past, including the example from Wordsworth discussed by Riffaterre.

Except for the link between showers and hot water across the first two stanzas, one might almost interpret the first three stanzas as forming three separate poems, unsure of the coherence of the links between them. In the fourth stanza, the comment on tests and services being resumed connects with the idea of an explosion from the second stanza, with an emerging sense that 'so far' is and is not a single poem:

> 4 the tests were successful
> and service may be resumed
> sooner than expected
> I live like Utnapishtim in the distance
> six floors up in a confluence
> where Brunton meets Jolimont
> that is how we got here
> the trains wake me before dawn
> each day is a bird in another place

The juxtaposition of this stanza's opening with the third stanza's romantic allusions jolts the reader back to the present. Also, 'the tests' could now mean something else, as if the romantic has to be tested for soundness, so that a comparison between competing codes occurs, as well as breaking off from one to another. The simile of the self and Utnapishtim (a character in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* who serves a role similar to that of Noah in the Biblical flood story) is nicely unexpected, as is the contrast with the following reference to a sixth floor – both surprises keep a sense of movement going in the poem. The use of 'confluence', which we associate with rivers and which would otherwise accord so well with the Gilgamesh theme, is another unexpected twist, perhaps riffing solely on images of water.

The text returns to the names of streets, which add further, plausible detail. The seventh line is a flashback, a thought tangent, as the text utilises idiosyncrasies of mind, or the code of idiolect. The trains

make an early alarm call, but the voice of the poem relishes the opportunity to encounter the newness of things.

She is awake in time for the dawn chorus, and the statement that each day is 'a bird in another place,' works multi-dimensionally. It could be seen as a pleasing metaphor and example of what is seen – those with an interest in the subject look out for new birds in new places. Or, it is a metonymic choice. Though the poem seemed earlier to evoke a European city, the names Brunton and Jolimont together (along with the reference to the Shrine of Remembrance in the next stanza) indicate Melbourne. It is as if the reader has been tricked, by something like the Riffaterrean 'stage set for special effects' (1978, 6-7). We are not in some exotic, European or Eastern city, but in Australia – not such a distant reality for a New Zealand text. This omission also recalls Riffaterre's idea of a single word which brings unity to the poem being absent from it; in this case, exotic allusions abound, but the name, Melbourne, might very easily evade the reader.

From this reader's point of view, one of the text's strategies is to upset expectations; it manages to do so in ways which are both challenging and aesthetically rich. The sense of unfolding continues unabated:

> 5 Ingres fingers on the sidewalk
> was she done, his shrieking Medusa
> before the rain in the night?
> bookstores stay open coffee is cheap
> light falls in the Shrine of Remembrance
> as if one body lay sleeping
> on the cumulus of another
> champagne sustains the wait
> as urns are sent from kitchen to tub
> elevators groan and whirr

'Ingres fingers' are a metaphor for the figures blurry in the heat. The 'she' now referred to is probably associated with Ingres (rather than the bride of the third stanza). The timing might suggest that the voice is reminiscing on some previous experience, perhaps connected to the 'before dawn' period mentioned at the end of stanza four. In the present, bookstores are open and we see the Shrine of Remembrance. A shifting series of metaphoric appeals follows. Light is compared to a sleeping body, but it is no ordinary one, rather it rests on the 'cumulus' of another, so that the softness and familiarity of a person is implied. What are the protagonists waiting for? Presumably the water brought for a bath, again establishing some interplay with previous stanzas. This bringing of water, necessitated by the explosion, also aids the text in

evoking the romantic code, though it is again juxtaposed with contemporary life in a reference to elevators.

> 6 it was a translation I brought back
> nothing but guesses with expensive names
> at wrist and throat I gained
> two hours of sunlight
> clouds of words
> dispersed at the edge of space
> a kiss disappearing off the page
> I will never print again

The use of the empty subject 'it' beginning the sixth stanza has the effect of universalising what the translations could refer to. Is everything that has passed so far been a translation? Is the voice somehow acknowledging that each transfer between codes and registers is a translation? These questions are like the guesses, which have fancy names linked to wrist and throat, evoking jewellery brought from another exotic location. The enjambment of 'at wrist and throat I gained', allows the concepts to be linked in an illogical but suggestive way, as each component sign or phrase fulfils more than one function. The two hours gained is easier to decipher: the time difference between New Zealand and Melbourne.

We encounter clouds of words as well as the earlier concept of cloud-like people, allowing that people may be like clouds, intangible and unreal. Words disappear on the edge of space, and one makes the comparison with our lives on this planet, on the edge of space, kept in place by gravity, both magnetic and cellular. The extended metaphor of the clouds' activity is transposed to a kiss disappearing off the page. It is almost impossible to read this reference without sensing an allusion to Leggott's lip-shaped poem 'Micromelismata' (from *DIA*). Yet, without it, the metaphor still has significance, and a rich one, when one considers that a kiss, like the spoken word, disappears. One could have another kiss or speak a new word, but the individual, phenomenological occurrence has passed, like the elusive moment.

The image of the kiss is followed by the declaration, 'I will never print again'. As well as the fact that Leggott will not write that particular poem again, we know from her history that, by this stage of writing, her sight was deteriorating, perhaps to the extent that the composition of such innovative post-concrete poems as the 'Tigers' series (from *Swimmers, dancers*, 1991) might no longer be possible. In general, the poetry in this collection – *milk & honey* – is far less visual, less concerned with layout and spatial experiments than previous collections. Yet, it is still deeply imagistic in effect.

> 7 days of purification
>
> signs in the sky
>
> pretty mountain rites
>
> rigmarole of the hours
>
> *you were lucky*
>
> I was very lucky
>
> a feral girl without hands
>
> a green flame
>
> before the invasion
>
> loving till it hurt

The metaphor of days of purification which follows the metaphor of space suggests a connection with the idea of not being able to print again. The struggle that must occur when one is faced with the possibility of losing the sense of sight causes or necessitates a spiritual cleansing. But perhaps knowledge of a poet's circumstances suggests a biographical interpretation where it should not. Biographical interpretation, like the authorial fallacy, may limit us more than any other and prevent us from appreciating the imaginative, generative qualities of a literary work, as various critics have suggested (Bakhtin 1981, 265; Roudiez, in Kristeva 1984, 8; Belsey 1980, 16). Yet it feels natural to think about the poet as well as the text, as part of the assemblage of the reading experience.

In what seems like a waiting time, the voice looks at the sky and the mountains and rests with them; the 'rigmarole' of hours isn't taken too seriously, though a retreat rather than a holiday is suggested by 'purification'. Someone has told the speaker that she was lucky and she re-iterates the fact, perhaps accepting it. We do not know what the voice of the poem was lucky in, but maybe it is the simple suggestion that a situation could always have been worse.

She was a 'feral' girl, so that some accident might have occurred, rather like the explosion, in the backdrop of the poem. But why, exactly, does she have no hands? The poem raises further contextual problems here. Could this be a reference to Lavinia in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, who is raped, her tongue cut out and hands cut off? This voiceless writer eventually writes the names of her attackers with a stick in the sand. Though one possible link, one then wonders what the green flame signifies. A test? Was the purification or the invasion a medical procedure? Does loving till it hurt imply forgiveness of a situation, in order to heal? Or the need to love the individual who was bound to perform a devastating task to save a life, even if to limit it? Such questions are sustained by the ambiguity of the poem.

> 8 I smiled at the poet
>
> and bought lunch in the white cafe

his new book lay on the table

he talked of past and future works

and of the device he would carry

for one other's call

farewell poet

may you never be alone or unhappy

may your archives download safely

into tomorrow

9 John Lennon is 59

IMAGINE – somebody

encountered this week

could become one of the most

important people in your life

over the next two months

don't reject new contacts

just because they don't meet

your normal standards

take that feather off the scale

of expanded light

The line 'loving till it hurt' is the segue to the next stanza's meeting with a poet in a café. There, we ponder the latest link between stanzas and the sense of the poem as a whole and/or as a sequence. The text leaves off the idea of loving till it hurt and begins again with, 'I smiled at the poet'. There is something forced about this action, but it is also gently ironic. The poet's new book lies on the table, suggesting that his main preoccupation is with his own work, rather than the location, the café, or the other (poet) that he meets, i.e. he is not sitting there reading *her* poetry, a fact that is subtly unnoted. The device he refers to is a mystery, but at the same time we hardly question that it refers to something, to a real thing or quality, since significance is not broken simply by an absence of information.

She 'farewells' him, another grand gesture, adhering to the historical-exotic code. The salute, 'may you never be alone or unhappy' is hardly more modern and again suggests a teasing, ironic voice. The text then switches to archives downloading, and not being stored correctly; these are not traditional, tangible archives, but electronic ones. This reference lends a sense of intangibility to the poet's work, that it will be lodged, not in the hearts and minds of readers, but in electronic databases. There is much humour in transposing that modern reference to an archaic one, a kind of phrasal metonymy. We get a sense of the

fragility of the poet's vocation, as well as the voice of the poem teasing the seriousness of poets generally.

Stanza 8 ends with mention of tomorrow and the next begins by referring to John Lennon and the age he would be if still alive. Use of the word 'tomorrow' recalls the Beatles song 'Tomorrow Never Knows', which leads to further associative imaginings, playful, and mindful of semiotic potential. The progress of this part of the poem mirrors thought process, or idiolect. Lines seven to nine of the ninth stanza read like advice from a horoscope (the stars), or 'healyourlifedotcom' – a contemporary register which forms part of the strikingly modern code which informs segments of most stanzas. It's interesting, too, the way the poem takes up the injunction of 'imagine' in this context with 'don't reject', and in an even more imaginative way with 'take that feather'. The constant shifts between codes, or merging of codes to create new ones, creates a multiplicity of referents that challenges the reader. The play between these codes enhances the poem's depth and complexity; there seem to be just enough connecting threads to maintain some sense of the whole, even if coherence is regularly challenged.

> 10 there's been a lot
> in the news and in the movies
> about the threat to Earth
> from asteroids and comets
> the idea that we're at risk
> from a cosmic collision
> was first dreamed up
> by the science fiction writer
> HG Wells   now the astronomers
> have followed suit
> your day is the operatic condition
> of the world

The text jolts us back to earth with something in the news about threats to the planet, a strong contrast from the previous 'expanded light'. The actual threat to earth from comets and asteroids is unexplored. The 'train of thought' changes direction once more, as it links back to the origins of science fiction writing in the work of HG Wells, as the poem again employs idiolect as code. It asserts, tongue-in-cheek, the primal role of writers as heralds and prophets of the future. The speaker's reaction suggests that the news items may represent groundless claims, which should not be taken seriously. The text switches to 'your day', as if the days of the writer and the astronomer have already been, and now it is your turn (dear reader, as it were). The phrase 'the operatic condition / of the world' suggests that the daily life of

the individual is subsumed within larger 'operatic' forces and pressures, as well as writing being linked, artistically, with opera.

> 11 birds wake me
> wind and moonlight
> surf driven high on the beaches
> a church bell later on
> those raptors
> released over upturned
> faces the gloved hand
> jesses strafing the ground
> little mouse *carpe*
> *carpe diem*
> no singing will ever
> bring you back

The 'birds wake me' followed by reference to raptors returns us to the image of birds and their significance to the traveller mentioned in stanza 4. It confirms performance as a code, and the wind, moonlight, surf and bells add their imagery and musicality to the scene. The enjambment of 'over upturned / faces the gloved hand' suggests constriction, and the limitations that people work within and against. The combination of references to a gloved hand, the verb 'jesses' and a mouse suggest falconry. The voice looks up and sees a dead mouse that can no longer 'seize the day', a fact which reminds us of mortality. The idea that no singing can bring us back re-activates the performance code established at various phases of the poem. By the end of the stanza, we have travelled far through a multiplicity of references in a short space of time.

The reference to prayer which begins stanza 12 affirms the (possibly originary) setting of church music.

> 12 *commanded*
> *to pray* between
> two crystal trees
> candelabra of the soul
> darkened, waiting
> not a dream
> but a gallery where I
> unlace the huntsman's
> boots praying

another nature will

survive the skin

The two crystal trees suggest the menorah of Judaism, but the mere sound of 'crystal trees' might also evoke the words 'Christmas trees' from Christian tradition. These trees are 'candelabra of the soul'. This exaggerated metaphor might suggest the implausibility of religious dogmas, and a reaction to the quoted injunction to pray. A more positive vision soon makes itself known. Though the soul may be darkened and waiting, it is really a gallery from which one looks out. In this place, the huntsman's boots are unlaced, suggesting a more naturalistic archetype for spirituality – Lady Chatterley's lover rather than the celibate figure of Jesus. One might pray that some other point of view, or life, will survive. The desires of the flesh are a challenge, and the skin will perish, a further reminder of mortality. The word 'gallery' evokes the idea of art and of one's life and work being somehow preserved by artistic practice. Or, if the gallery is literal, it is a frame from which the voice of the poem sees a new possibility. References to the huntsman and to skin cause a rupture in the religious framework; this is a code deliberately torn apart. At the same time, the sheer diversity of possible references here points in a more general way to the understanding that a code is too limited and unstable to comprehend the whole.

13 let's be clear

I am the huntress

you desired

cleaning a flesh wound

also designated

for you are the hunter

of heaven

am I one of twelve

labours

or is the circle

twenty four?

will you step out

of the trees

when I call you

to the game?

The voice identifies herself with the huntress, linking back to the huntsman and the one desired. But the idea of being clear is ironic, since the poem continues to be playful and indeterminate in its multiplicity. The Artemis/Diana figure and the labours of Hercules form part of its scope, and isolating the word 'labours' suggests childbirth. Given the poem's tropes, hunter and huntress may allude to a romantic or

sexual liaison, real or imagined. Asserting the labours as a game is a powerful shift and recalls Riffaterre's argument that poetry is 'more of a game than anything else' (1978, 14).

The next stanza's transition to 'past midnight' suggests anticipation, as well as the passage of time, since we do not know whether anyone has met the invitation to 'the game':

> 14 past midnight
> lights lighting
> in the high branches
> deep reaches
> far festivals lighting
> lights in the branches
> high overhead

The lights of festivals are distant yet illuminate the near-ground. The repetition, of 'lights' and 'lighting', creates a sense of returning, and an iterative, even incantatory rhythm. Within the context of the sophisticated codes in the poem, the relative simplicity of 'lights lighting' is unexpected, reminding the reader that, after all, this is work employing conventions associated with the lyric.

The festival – with an implied atmosphere of ritual and magic – is the very stuff of the incantatory mode, and of otherness. The centre of this evocation lies outside the text. It functions intra-textually insofar as it alludes to other previous codes and events, such as the juggler and the bride, and may be a response to the game of the previous stanza. This phenomenon bears close resemblance to the incantatory purpose of evoking or summoning a spirit, or stimulus for the ecstatic, which transcends the self. Significance is achieved within the text, but something important to it seems to lie outside its boundaries.

> 15 minutes
> of an ecstatic literature
> in collapse o o o
> experimentation lyricism wit
> all three angels all
> double deleting the record
> setting the circuits ablaze
> checking the alternate settings
> the unreleased versions
> campfires of footsteps leaving
> for the end of time all night

> all night long deadly snakes
>
> in the desert boots and all
>
> leaving no trace

From 'high overhead', we move to the minutes that are passing in stanza 15, as Andy Warhol's 'fifteen minutes of fame' is recycled. Rather than an experience (the festival), the text is now concerned with literature. The attributes of writing, 'experimentation lyricism wit' are angels. They flow together, without punctuation (again keeping the line alive, with what might otherwise be a prosaic sequence of terms). An exotic (think frescoes) or religious code is evoked, but then violently juxtaposed with 'double deleting' a brilliant, contemporary phrasal verb, and one which echoes the concerns of electronic archives mentioned in stanza 8. Here, in this imaginative clash of the ancient and modern, circuits combust as alternatives present themselves.

Threads of content interweave and reinforce each other, in the manner of kernel words. As one term reinforces another, it establishes a code and achieves a sense of heightened significance. The writing interweaves codes and their juxtapositions abruptly. By sustaining this practice, the text creates a larger code for the reading of poetry, or perhaps more specifically for the reading of *this* poetry, where the reader begins to anticipate a sometimes perplexing relationship between codes to reappear: to expect the unexpected; or to create an alternative poetic world, to use Leggott's own theory. One reviewer confesses to being unsure how to read a Leggott poem. Its complexities problematise attempts at classification, leaving the reader/reviewer with many questions and a sense of the reading as only ever begun (Ross 2000, 158-160). Another reviewer noted the 'tonal complexity' of *milk & honey* (Livesey 2005, 17). These are astute reflections and their reality makes for an extremely engaged encounter between poetry and reader, as the text tests the boundaries of association and narrative building.

The metaphor 'campfires of footsteps' is fascinating, implying as it does that the movement of human bodies illuminates; it is a 'festival'. It is continually leaving for the end of time, with ever-present dangers. Death leaves no trace, and perhaps we, too, leave no trace, comprising an archetypal camp fire that will eventually burn out. Our value lies in community, represented by communal ritual, and a reminder of humanity's fundamental needs.

> 16 the platoon hops along
>
> in rubber suits carrying its flippers
>
> and singing endorsements
>
> that was yesterday
>
> now the release forms include
>
> hill work where they return

> for the exhausted one
> *can you run can you run can you*
> keep him in the middle
> wipe away the tears
> pick up the suitcases and
> continue wiring safe to sound
> with the green flame

The transition to stanza 16 harnesses an association between boots and the group as a platoon. They are in rubber suits, carrying flippers, so that we might interpret them as marines or frogmen. They are 'singing endorsements' as if the world of advertising and sponsorship had permeated the military, and as the text's details harness the incongruous and further a clashing of codes. Despite the link between boots and platoon, the poem is making leaps here, and amazing diversity. Each line of this stanza offers the unexpected, framed by the idea of 'yesterday'. The detail about 'release forms' pushes the stanza madly forward, or elsewhere. The subjects 'they' who return from hill work are presumably the strange platoon already mentioned. This emphasises the stanza's effects of disjuncture and incongruity because in the hills they would surely have no need for diving paraphernalia. There's something filmic about this writing, in its use of particular, often dramatic detail and an equivalent of wide, panning shots. The decontextualising of much of the detail and drama radically opens up the field of the poem.

The platoon on the hill may be taken as an intertextual metaphor for poetry which exceeds structuralist tools. A member of the troop is exhausted and is protected by being placed in the middle of the group; an analogy with societal and communal functions suggests itself. The stanza closes with reference to a green flame (mentioned in stanza seven), alongside an invasion. The green flame might signify the flash of an explosion, which, recalling earlier stanzas, recreates in the reader's mind the explosion that has disabled a city's water supply. Recent US invasions of Zaire or Albania may be alluded to here (the poem was written in October 1998 and first published in 2002 in *Trout*). This reference to the green flame unites codes and interpretations from several earlier stanzas, such as the suggestion that a foreign, eastern city was implicated. These ideas return, as the poem throws a loop around various possibilities. We could 'be' in the Middle East, past or present, back in Melbourne, or another city which has faced major upheaval, or in no city at all, a city of the mind, a storyteller's mind, even a reading of Marco Polo's encounter with the Great Khan.

The numerous considerations conjured by the sixteenth stanza are sharply juxtaposed with abrupt reference to Psyche, coupled with the concept of sin:

17 Psyche before her sin

is a dilettante

To read to listen to study

to gaze was all part of being

loved without loving

a pleasure previous to any trial

or pain of seeking the beloved

The light must be tried

Psyche must doubt and seek to know

reading must become life and writing

and all go wrong

There is no way but Psyche's search

the creative work of a union

in knowledge and experience

At the end there is a new Eros

a new Master over Love

Eros, like Osiris

or Lucifer (if He be the Prince

of light whom the Gnostics believe

scattered in sparks throughout

the darkness of what is matter)

is a Lord over us in spirit

who is dispersed everywhere

to our senses

We are drawn to Him, but we must

also gather Him to be

We cannot

in the early stages locate Him

but He finds us out

Seized by His orders *we fall in love*

in order that He be

and in His duration the powers

of Eros are boundless

We are struck by His presence

and in becoming lovers we become

something other than ourselves

<pre>
                    subjects of a daemonic force
                    previous to our humanity
</pre>

The myth of Cupid and Psyche is referenced in tandem with that of Osiris and gnostic beliefs; a contemporary reading of this myth which accommodates the daemonic, possessive nature of sexual love follows. The enjambment across lines three to four fashions the lyrical 'to gaze was all part of being', emphasising the need for wonder. The sense of 'loved without loving' is unclear, depending on how long one pauses at the end of the fourth line. 'I was loved without loving' seems the most likely meaning, but 'I loved without loving' is also possible. In this new personal setting, pleasure precedes trial and there is pain in loving, with the romantic code evoked once more by the archaic 'beloved'. Writing becomes part of life, and, as in real experience, everything must go wrong, just as interpretations run aground. Creativity is a union of knowledge and experience. The God of the erotic, *Eros* wins over, as one finds union with the divine through love. Lucifer is contextualised here according to Gnostic beliefs rather than Christian ones, with the attendant idea of needing to test the light. This lord appeals to the senses, rather than ideas. This is a god we must gather to ourselves, a self-realised object of worship; the divine is 'reticulated'.

Eros, the lover, is a kind of personal god known to the individual. In falling in love we are transformed into something 'other' (by the other). This is something which comes to us, but which, the text suggests, we should have been looking for. It is an external force, transcendent, though the writing anchors itself in an unconventional spirituality. This power is anterior to our life on earth; a life force. The poem may allude to Robert Duncan's 'Poem beginning with a line by Pindar' which reflects on Goya's canvas 'Cupid and Psyche' (1639-40), with its 'deprivations of desiring sight' and where melancholy is 'coild like a serpent' (1960: 62, 65). There is something of Duncan's austere narrative reverberating here, too.

<pre>
                    18 horse on the hillside
                    horse climbing the hunter's belt
                    horse of dust and hot stars
                    embedded in dust
                    horse on a field of heaven
                    almost dawn almost
                    not leaving the ground
                    almost not there at the door
                    leaving the ground
</pre>

The horse climbing the hunter's belt is both an allusion to the constellation of Orion and to rites of passage; and the hunter in turn recalls the huntress from stanza 13. The Oxfordshire horse on the hill

fuses dust and stars. The repetition of the animal's name has a similar effect to the repetition of 'lights' in stanza 14. There is a lyrical preoccupation here, with unexpected twists often emphasised through enjambment, for example, 'almost dawn almost'. The horse not being at the door conveys a fragment of a narrative, the full complement of which lies somewhere beyond the text. But the grammar allows the idea that the horse suddenly is present, and, contradictorily, leaving the ground. This action makes the reader 'look up' – a strongly affective response.

19 sweeps and may queens
sweet beaumes-de-venise
pools deeper than orange groves
now I have to kick away
do it all, the invitations
the chance meetings the
eidolon encountered walking out
buds and fruit I will patiently
reinvent your foment

Stanza 19 alludes to wine, sweeps and may-queens, deep pools, and an eidolon, suggesting a return to spring time and the haunting of memory, perhaps of the wine-growing area of South-Eastern France. The apparent simplicity of this stanza belies the fact that it assembles multiple references. The enjambment of its last two lines creates special emphasis for 'buds and fruit' and the resulting last line has an attractive, syncopated rhythm. The next stanza combines ideas of the constellations with more quotidian concerns:

20 door to door
Captain January's maple sugar
corroborates impurities
of purpose, stitches one side of paradise
to all the others, how to
fly over celebrations with a star map
torn out of the voice recording
heartbreak and joyous guard
She wrote:
She wrote:

The repetition of 'She wrote' sounds like a bird call, especially following the images of flight in preceding stanzas. Some imaginative version of the writer's life is suggested, and the code of the writer's life introduced earlier in the poem is re-established. Ideas, images and lines swirl around each other in

stanza 20 and are difficult to separate, the frequent use of enjambment helping to connect the various concepts. The phrase 'a star map' is unexpected and fresh and 'torn out of the voice' violent, yet balanced by 'recording'. A compound noun 'voice recording' emerges and recalls previous references to archives, as well as encapsulating earlier ones to joy and heartbreak. The poet's eye is separate from (while observing) the celebrations of others, yet it takes pleasure in them.

> 21 on wings, on springs
> on sails, on gales, on this
> *hommage à piazzolla*
> look forward and leave behind
> the sad paper flowers
> a violin in the dark

Images of flight continue into this stanza, and the festival code (stanza 14) is re-affirmed with a response to the work of Argentine composer Piazzolla, as well as the possibility that this stanza constitutes what 'she wrote' from the previous. The injunction to 'look forward and leave behind', suggests that the poem's speaker is in transition and powerfully captures the sense the whole poem yields of being 'in process' and of dealing with the provisional. The 'violin' in the dark metonymically gathers in the poem's various allusions to music; this may be a darkness of understanding. It brings to mind Philip Mead's astute reading of another Leggott text from *DIA* and its 'metonymy about affect, not metaphor about feeling' (1995, 125), since affect is conveyed in a similar way here through that metonym. Leggott then continues to develop tropes associated with travel and transition:

> 22 let's take
> a holiday
> in other places
>
> 23 boldly bodily
> soft ophidian
> I'm counting countries
> every day of my life
> I'm forgetting refractions
> *who was a beloved*

In stanzas 22 and 23, the poem toys with ideas of travel, departure and forgetfulness. Effectively, stanza 22 says, 'let's leave that dark place and go elsewhere'. The beloved is remembered and forgotten at once, perhaps in a faint and fading echo of the Cupid and Psyche story. The beloved described as a refraction of

light is a startling metaphor, suggesting both the primacy of love and the thought that love may be merely a form of deflection. In such an image, the word employed undergoes a number of semiotic transfers, some of them driven by metonymic associations. For example, 'light' recalls the idea of a god, so there are implicit secondary meanings and suggestions such as 'God is love', or, perhaps more fundamentally, 'Love is god' – an idea which connects back to the Cupid and Psyche story. The italicised line is no doubt another 'reticulation' of a quotation. By the end of the stanza, there is a sense of this poem speaking both to and about itself; as it does so, it emphasises how codes and meanings are as much about the act of saying a poem, through idiolect, as they are about what they might represent.

> 24 bathing in the soft water
> rain just gone from the window
> air and water and orangeries
> an ivory lace of the mind
> refusing gifts *go from me*
> *go where I cannot see you*
> rescinding what's left

The stanza moves on, and also moves back to the image of a bath introduced in stanza 5; it is still preoccupied with the beloved. The likening of rain (and the pattern of trees in the orangeries) to the lacework of the mind demonstrates Leggott's deft use of richly layered and interwoven metaphorical language. The sense of an interrupted beat permeates the following stanza, despite the repetition of the word 'drums' as a chanting device:

> 25 drums
> every other morning
> drums
> where the sun lifts
> drums
> against the new green
> drums
> practising immolation
> drums
> of the whirring soul
> drums
> in the flowering tree

The drums resonate through whatever else is happening, from trees flowering to an unspecified immolation, implying the movements of people and their glancing relations. They are part of the festival code, and suggest a broad, almost remorseless sense of the persistence of human music and celebration.

> 26 lunar shadows
>
> crashed on the mountain
>
> errors of judgement
>
> a comedy a love
>
> immaterial wandering
>
> just this
>
> and this

Stanza 26 counterbalances the previous one. The dominant image is of lunar shadows rather than the moon itself; someone seeks consolation. Errors of judgment are conflated with comedy and love, and various other unspecified aspects of life. A travel code is again evoked, all of which confirms the poem's restless evocation of its own wandering through indeterminacies connected to unspecified relationships and a sense of happenstance.

It is then appealing to speculate who the 'he' of the next stanza refers to:

> 27 if he is all heart
>
> coming in to some body
>
> on the other side of the universe
>
> the moon the room the valley
>
> where messages from gods
>
> are pegged on the blue
>
> and every night is an education

Is this the lover of stanza 17 returning, the symbol of love, the one desired as well as problematised? This 'he', this universal love, can occupy a body even on the other side of the universe. Other gods have their messages, too, written on the metonymic blue sky. The preoccupations of love and stars come together and are reinforced in what follows.

> 28 ophis you are
>
> soft in my hand
>
> wild orchids
>
> wouldn't keep me

out of your hair

29 *Ofi-Okos* a man
holding a snake

Ofi-Okos helping
a snake to swim

a serpent of stars
a cinema of narrative

engulfing
the naked eye

The ophis (Greek for snake) evokes the Garden of Eden, sensuality and the phallic. It is wild orchids that would not keep her, rather than the wild horses of the phrase – a subtle and intrinsically poetic metonym. We sense a bodily connection, although the image of the man aiding a snake links the snake with the stars and constellations. Astronomical imagery and images of water interweave, along with theatre and story in a rich multiplicity. In one sense, these are metaphors for the flow and performative nature of the poem itself. The repeated reference to stars suggests another context for the composition of the poem in Taddeo Zuccaro's ceiling fresco, 'The Zodiac and the Constellations' (1574) at the Palazzo Farnese in Rome, which includes the image of a snake, as well as Aquarius the Cup-bearer, the scorpion, dog, horse, etc. Re-reading the poem, one realises that this painting could, in fact, have been referenced as early as stanza twelve's references to a gallery and huntsman.

The semiotic potential of words is rarely more apparent than at the beginning of the 30th stanza.

30 Cup, wake –
tip you out
on me dark
waves
frequent me
sun beyond
visible sun
dark
filaments

We move from the heavens to an injunction directed towards the 'Cup'. It is difficult to read this word without thinking of the cup of suffering of Christian mythology, but Aquarius is also suggested, and the two ideas may even be linked. The word 'wake' suggests a moving on. The minimalist lines, and more particularly their caesurae, are variously suggestive, and the stanza as a whole resists any attempt to pin it down to a single meaning; the cup contains multiplicities. The suffering suggested by the poem may be tipped out over the voice that speaks, while, simultaneously, the succession of images might belong within this cup – which again could form a denotation of the work itself. This stanza may refer intertextually to a poem of Leggott's from the eighties, which describes a period of remission of her retinitis pigmentosa, and includes the lines, 'an Eye-Cup / violet-rimmed eyes looking out / on all the voyagers' (1987, 64).

The voice of 'so far' enjoins the sun to frequent her, a sun which is 'beyond / visible sun', so that some other kind of sun, a metaphorical one for joy, hope or acceptance may be present, even though it is problematic in radiating 'dark filaments'. What we do know is that the poem continues to encompass multiplicities, even as it is about to end:

> 31 here they come
> scorpion horseboy
> seagoat waterbearer
> two fish ram bull
> and heaven's horse
> when I look north
> believing
>
>   *   *   *
>   *   *
>   *
>
> serpent of stars
> cinema of narrative
> theatre of love

Constellations are again referenced, including the horse, recalling stanza 18 and the animal's various manifestations in mythology. There is a hint here that believing may be a dangerous or uncertain thing. The text arranges six purely typographical stars, as if to say that words can do no more, and we leave it to the stars, and space, to speak for themselves, and perhaps even to decide human experience. This

typographical meditation on belief and its significance brings the idea of transcendence back to the reader's attention, as well as reinvigorating the notion of love that runs throughout the poem as a whole. Love's role and mode is more originary than earlier in this work – this is a theatre, rather than a cinema, less darkened, more alive and mediated by human interaction. The last line appears to function, among other things, as a plea for genuine and intimate human interaction.

Our lives may be understood as a fiction, a play or opera, in this case, as suggested above, a chamber opera, and it's appealing to note that the Zuccaro fresco (1574) was painted when opera was emerging. Riffaterre's description of the writing of poetry as a game finds resonance with Leggott's playful approach, and the poetry remains full of meanings. A strong link exists between playfulness in poetry and a poet's awareness of semiotic potential, including the ability to establish and manipulate codes, exemplified in Leggott's work, which harnesses the potential of language to suggest multiple meanings whilst enjoying language for its aesthetic qualities.

As well as the metaphor of the chamber opera for the text's operative scope (see stanza 10), other large-scale metaphors for the text have emerged from within it, such as the closely related flow and performative nature of the poem (discussed in relation to stanza 29); the idea of the provisional (stanza 21); and the image of the cup which contains multitudes (stanza 30). Leggott's metaphorical scope is stunning, at all levels, and is balanced with arresting metonyms. If there are messages, they are written on 'the blue' for us to read, metonymically, and in the metaphors of serpents, cinemas and theatres for stars, narrative and love – this is not easy reading. Juxtapositions build on each other, creating notionally coherent, yet always unstable, wholes. She achieves multiplicity through her employment of a profusion of codes, which frequently collide with and disrupt each other. On other occasions, the use of codes echoes earlier passages, sometimes developing their ideas. Always, the text celebrates language with exuberance. It has been claimed of Leggott's work that 'language is played with and doesn't really play up – the ability of words to become opaque, to resist their intended uses, is not really a concern' (Johnston 1992, 646). But the competing of references and codes means that, at the broader level of the stanza, for instance, this kind of struggle does indeed occur.

Leggott is adept at depicting the world, and therefore concerned with representation (and representational codes). Yet she moves beyond provisional representations with disturbing regularity. Implicit in much of the work discussed is a poetry that exemplifies the use of an inner language, reflecting idiolect as code. Could it be that such a diverse poem might function as a single sign, in the way that Riffaterre described? It seems unlikely, since the poem is not gathered about discrete codes with unified themes, and its significance can only be judged by looking beyond the poem to wider contexts. More promising is that its multiplicity of multiplicities satisfies the assemblage understanding that codes are too limited and unstable to comprehend the whole. Its clusters of ideas and images, metaphors and metonyms are indeed

arranged as 'packs in masses and masses in packs'. At the same time, it may be more generous towards the tradition of the code to see it as, paraphrasing Deleuze and Guatarri, the condition of possibility for *some* explanation.

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