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Knowing Poetically: Notes on a Speculative Poetry Event

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Poetry events have a phenomenal record of getting people to think about controversial issues and profound challenges, of offering a different point of departure for previously tried journeys so that we might try out different paths, of staging and performing what ensnares us in the status quo so that we might change it. Allen Ginsberg's jazz-infused Six Gallery reading of *Howl* exposed the entangled, emotionally and spiritually deeply damaging conventions of the time, proposed a poetic practice beyond hypocrisy and shook the ground that people thought they were standing on, to the point that the publisher was taken to court. Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez' experimentations with poetry and Jazz proposed new ways of thinking and of nurturing the collective and individual sense of Self of African-Americans when their everyday realities were deeply marked and scarred by the legacy of slavery and by systemic racism. Liverpool poets Adrian Henri, Brian Patten and Roger McGough proposed and validated ways of knowing everyday environments poetically. And yet, performances such as these are recognized as formal innovations or as sociopolitical interventions – but rarely for their ability to join the forces of the poetic and the intellectual by conjoining poetic experimentality and speculative thinking.

"Poems in Port Cities" was set up in recognition of this potentiality of the poetry event. It was created as an occasion that allowed us to explore the interplay of poetry and speculative thinking and to experimentally investigate whether, and how, a poetry event could be curated as a platform

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for poets to act as speculative thinkers. It comprised poetry readings by the four participating poets Matthew Geden, Mary Noonan, Greg Quiery and Eleanor Rees, and a closing conversation between them. During the poetry reading the poets presented poems that responded to a prompt: to explore the interaction of the human and the more-than-human in port cities and their surrounding shorelines. The conversation invited the poets to think and reflect collectively on this same topic, while also responding to each others' poems. These different elements were grounded and held together by a curator – myself – who acted as a facilitator of relationality and caretaker of conceptually phrased ideas and constructive constraints. The event was curated so that it could function as a traditional, presentational poetry event; that is, as a recital followed by a Q&A. But beyond that, it was curated so that it could *also* function as an experiment with a new event format, one that placed several poetic voices, and the poetic and intellectual mode, into a dialogue with each other, for the purpose of exploring a theme of social and poetic relevance.

In this essay I analyze *Poems in Port Cities* as a completed event, in hindsight, from my perspective as its curator and in my professional capacity as a cultural analyst. My aim is to contribute, through a scholarly analysis informed by the critical reflection of an implicated person, an inspirational building block towards a new poetry event genre, one that brings together poetry, cultural critique and speculative thinking and in which poets act as "radical epistemologists," as Joan Retallack puts it. To do so, in the first half of this essay I tease out the event's intellectually speculative potential. I introduce pointers from relevant contemporary conceptual and philosophical critiques and debates that emerge from Whiteheadian philosophy, and then identify resonances with Joan Retallack's proposals for the epistemological potential of experimental poetry, put forward in her essay "What is Experimental Poetry & Why Do We Need It?" This conceptual grounding I then situate within a cosmopolitical approach, drawing especially on Marcus Boon's work on the politics of vibrations. Given the event's theme and the initial prompt – to investigate poetically the relationship between human and more-than-human life in port cities and along shorelines – the poets were challenged to take a cosmopolitical approach; that is, "a position in a dispute whose goal is the marginalization or eradication of other modes of being, other practices" (Boon 37). In the second half of the article an analysis of *Poems in Port Cities*.

The Experimental and the Speculative: Poets as Radical Epistemologists

As part of the preparation of the event, the participating poets were invited firstly, to select poems that explored the interaction of the human and the more-than-human – matter, animals, plants – in port cities and on their surrounding shorelines; and secondly, to think about a set of prompts I offered them after having read their selections and before the event. The first of these prompts asked them to think about ports and shorelines as portals or transitional spaces across time, about different materialities, and about the relationship between the human and the more-than-human; the second prompt invited a reflection on the relationship between human activities, and seas and rivers. The third concerned the relationship between sensation and perception and the fourth, the lure of what I called "the non-human irresistible." The final prompt identified a concern that ran through the poems of all of them: a constant and multi-faceted – sometimes ethical – reflection on how to *be*, how to conduct one's own existence in relation to the sea or river. The prompts invited the poets to think in a propositional, speculative mode; but they also provided a sense of direction or of holding, a crucial aspect of experiments that I will return to later on.

Before reading the poets' selection I had not settled on which approach to take to the moderation of the event. I could have easily taken the more conventional, presentational approach.[1] However, given the resonances across the poems the poets had selected for the reading, a propositional approach seemed more responsive to the questions that they themselves seemed to be asking and especially, to their implicit reflections on how to conduct our existence in relation to the river and the sea. Once I reflected on the event, I decided that the most appropriate conceptual grounding for it were Alfred North Whitehead's critique of Western philosophy and epistemology and the work of his student Isabelle Stengers, on cosmopolitics. Whitehead argued that Western philosophy has been plagued by a fallacious attempt to separate the world into those who know and that which is known. This he refers to as the "bifurcation of nature." This foundational bifurcation is implemented through several assumptions, such as the "subject-predicate axis" and the "sensationalist and the subjectivist principle." Michael Halewood sums up the subject-predicate approach as one "that

[1] I took this approach the previous year, in an event on "Poets from Port Cities." This event showcased the work of six poets who had conducted part or most of their poetic career in the context of three poetry projects based in the port cities of A Coruña, Cork, and Liverpool. The presentational showcase event was linked to an equally round table debate between the directors of these three projects, Yolanda Castaño, Paul Casey and Dave Ward.

fundamentally and primarily splits the world in two. On one side there is that which knows or perceives, on the other is that which is known or perceived" (Halewood 2005: 75). Each substance – available in language through naming or description – is severed from its characteristics, which exist only because human beings experience them. The world is divided into the subject of knowledge and experience – a position which humans claim exclusively for themselves – and the object of knowledge, a position which humans assign to all else. As a result, we humans are unable to experience and think of ourselves relationally, as part of the world, and we certainly cannot articulate such an experience. In Whitehead's time, this posed a philosophical problem; in the 21st century, as we have pushed the planet to the brink of collapse, this incapacity traps us in an impasse. This is where Stengers' work comes in; she built on Whitehead's critique and developed cosmopolitics as a practice in speculative thinking and as a model which takes us beyond bifurcations.

To connect the philosophical project of the Whiteheadians with poetry, I turned to the experimental poetic project proposed by Joan Retallack in her essay "What is Experimental Poetry & Why Do We Need It?" Retallack sets out on a "little thought experiment – a schematic essay of linked propositions with several implications" (Retallack, 2). Like the Whiteheadians, she identifies "alterity" as the crux of her proposal:

> a) There is the shock of alterity. Or should be.
>
> b) There is the pleasure of alterity. Or should be.
>
> c) We humans with all our conversational structures have yet to invite enough alterity in.
>
> d) Experiment is conversation with an interrogative dynamic. Its consequential structures turn on paying attention to what happens when well-designed questions are directed to things we sense but don't really know. These things cannot be known by merely examining our minds.
>
> If there is or can be an experimental poetics, where "experimental" means something more interesting than the latest stylistic oddities, it will at least have to be an exploration of a), b), and c) by means of d). (Retallack, 4)

"Alterity" here refers to the more-than-human, so far captured in the concept of "nature" which is opposed to "culture." She invites us to reconsider our attitude to this artificial binary opposition, and to what we now think of as "alterity." Like the Whiteheadians, she considers the opposition between "us" and "them" a major obstacle to, in her case, a worth-while poetic project that responds to the challenges of our times:

> If the aim is life-furthering interest and respect, correctives to "nature" narratives of segregation, dominance and nostalgia – failure to acknowledge "them" as inextricably intertwined with "us" are imperative. (36)

How do we go about constructing these correctives? For the Whiteheadians, who express themselves in the mode of philosophical enquiry,

> There is a need to pay attention to how concepts are constructed, and to not become so immersed in the problems that they appear to produce that it is forgotten that they have a history. A recognition of this history will allow for a recognition of the different routes that could have been taken to avoid such problems. (Halewood, 9)

Retallack, too, calls for an attentive examination – of language. She argues that "What we long for is implanted in our grammatical structures as much as it is in our vocabularies" (Retallack, 12). Consequently, we need to examine language so that we can come to a relational practice. And this is how poetry and epistemology meet: "An examination of the language of relations (probable and improbable) between subject and object is of course squarely (or not so) within the purview of the poet as radical epistemologist" (Retallack, 13). The poetics that would be the outcome of such an operation would be a poetics with the following characteristics:

> A poetics that can operate in the interrogative, with epistemological curiosity and ethical concern, is not so much language as instrument to peer through as instrument of investigative engagement. As such it takes part in the recomposing of contemporary consciousness, contemporary sensibilities. (Retallack, 25)

Such a poetics works through a commitment to precise observation and attentiveness:

> One of the scandals of the history of poetry is the misconception that in structuring our imaginings we can by-pass the hard work of acquiring accurate knowledge. Poetry is not science, after all; though the sciences are regularly raided for ornamental terms like "black hole" and "gravitational field." The very word ecopoetics may be seen as an experimental instrument that creates a new order of attention to the possibility of a poetics of precise observations and conversational interspecies relations with all contributing to the nature of form. (Retallack, 37)

Such precise observation and such a new order of attentiveness requires a letting go; for example, of the assumption that we can bypass the acquisition of accurate knowledge by structuring our imaginings, or that we can accurately describe nature through our emotions and longings, that is, by

separating it into the subjectivist and the sensationalist (Whitehead's terms). Retallack turns to the example of John Cage who,

> … from the fifties on always began with the question: What can we discover when we stop trying to describe nature through our emotions or as if holding up a mirror to reflect her forms? Cage felt that we should not attempt to imitate nature's appearance (always saturated with our desires), but instead adopt her manner of operation. In that way we no longer stand apart from the rest of the world but participate in it as one among many. (Retallack, 38)

The desire to "no longer stand apart from the rest of the world but participate in it as one among many" was shared by Cage and Whitehead. But neither of them tell us how to do it. As Halewood puts it with reference to Whitehead, he "is offering possible escape routes from certain philosophical problems, but these escape routes are for us to develop and investigate; they are not ready-made and do not constitute a better picture of the world (or 'reality'). Whitehad has given us signposts rather than a map" (Halewood 2020, 13). So how do we find out which mode of operation to adopt? How exactly do we practice language as an investigative engagement? How do we get ourselves onto these paths not yet taken? Retallack and Whiteheadians like Isabelle Stengers find a very similar answer to this question, though it occurs in slightly different phrasings and from within different fields: by experimenting. Or, as Stengers put it with reference to Whitehead, by going on an adventure. Stengers, who comes herself from a background in the natural sciences, explains that for Whitehead, thinking philosophically was an adventure. He referred to rationalism as an experimental adventure, to metaphysics, as an adventure of hope, and he considered "all continuity as an 'adventure in change'" (Stengers, 18). However, these adventures are not random, intuitive rambles through the wilderness of philosophical thought or poetic practice. If we want to investigate, we need to develop our experiments within what Whitehead called constraints and what Stengers describes as a "construction that is able to hold" (Stengers, 19). Only then can our experiments "shed light on features that are important for each situation" (Stengers, 19).

Attuning to Vibrational Spaces: An Order of Attentiveness

The "situation," for our purpose, is the – currently fraught – co-existence of the human and the more-than-human in port cities and the shorelines that surround them. It is fraught because humans consider themselves superior to the more-than-human; because they articulate their experience in the terms of bifurcation. As a result, humans act upon the more-than-human,

rather than with it and from within a shared world. In the curation of the event I could have responded to this by focusing on the particularities of each place; however, I noticed before and during the event that all four poets approached the places they were writing about as what I will call "vibrational spaces." This activated a shared "order of attentiveness" (Retallack) and this, in turn, allowed us to approach the various port cities and shorelines as common ground, rather than distinct geographical spaces with different characteristics.

The term "vibrational spaces" draws on Jean Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* and Marcus Boon's *The Politics of Vibrations*. Both scholars have attended to the omnipresence of vibrations in our lives from different perspectives: Bennett, from the perspective of a cultural critic and political theorist; Boon, in an analysis of music and sound. For Boon, sound and music are ways of constellating the vibrations that surround us. Among them are mechanical vibrations, "as are ocean waves or the shaking of a tree in the wind; light is a kind of electromagnetic vibration; there are also gravitation waves" (Boon, 7). There are also other types of vibrations. Boon identifies three: elemental, social, and psychoanalytic.

Elemental vibrations emerge from the matter of the elements. They intensify when several elements interplay with each other at the same time, as do air, water and land on a beach. When we synaesthetically attune to the interplay of elemental vibrations, we feel intensely and pleasurably present in space and time.

Social or relational vibrations refer to the quality of relationships amongst individuals, including to the vibrational force of temporality, manifested through memory or the "ghosts" of places. Vibrations can be communized when different people attune to the same event, like a poetry reading, or when they share an affection for the same space, as we will see in Greg Quiery's poems on people who share an affection for the edgeland of the Garston Nature Reserve.

In psychoanalytic terms, "vibration is the often obscured or forgotten energetic space of subjectivity, of the unconscious in its movements (traversed by drives, by libido, by desire), and the topological arrangement of this nonspace that is contained by or situated within (or not, depending of the model) the limits of the body" (Boon 9). These vibrations can be activated through resonance with exterior spaces and landscapes, such as a body of water. We will see examples of this in the poems contributed by Mary Noonan, where the formation and modulation of subjectivities unfolds in close contact with the river Lee.

When we respond to vibrations, we draw on our capacity for attunement. Attunement is both a neurological response and a critical capacity. Drawing on the work of Lamonte Young, Boon argues that "When something sounds 'in tune,' then there is a feeling of harmony (which is to say, pleasing, even blissful interrelationship), it is because the sounds are connected in a way that obeys the physical laws of sound" (Boon, 46). These laws of sound are in turn connected to the biology of the human body, ie the nervous system, which responds to the incoming vibrations and responds to the feeling of being "in tune" with pleasure and contentment, even ecstasy (Boon, 47).[2] Port cities and shorelines are sensorially rich and diverse. Consequently, many different people can attune to them in different ways, depending on which vibrations they are responsive to and experience as pleasurable. Sometimes, port cities and shorelines constellate, condense and concentrate a variety of social, elemental and psychoanalytic vibrations. An attuned human being can then easily move between and among these different vibrations, and the space acquires the characteristics of a portal.

When we know a space vibrationally, we know it from within and the space forms and changes us as we come to know it. We passionately care about it because our subjectivity and the space are entangled, and if the vibrations of the space are altered in a way that impacts on our being-in-tune – for example, when a runway or a car park is built on it – the contentment we experience is no longer available to us. This shared order of attentiveness to vibrations, and the understanding of port cities as vibrational spaces, is the common ground on which the event unfolded.

The Non-Human Irresistible: Readings

I will now offer an analytical response to *Poems in Port Cities* with a view to teasing out those elements that make this event a "speculative poetry event," as distinct to a presentational poetry reading. These elements include the interplay of precise observation and of relational language, the presentation of poetry and thought in a propositional mode, the integration of poetry with reflective and critical thought, and the exploration of a poetics of being a part of the world, as distinct to being apart from the world.[3] A crucial aspect

[2] The emerging field of neuroaesthetics is exploring how our response to art is related to our nervous system and conversely, how some art forms – including architecture and spatial arrangements – elicit affective responses. However, our response to art and to sociality is never only neurological but also, socially and culturally conditioned. See Starr 2013 and Starr 2023 for the generative interplay of neuroaesthetics and literary analysis.

[3] The phrasing and conceptualizing of the relationship between poet and world is

of this is the poets explicitly grounding their poems in their thought processes and experiential trajectory through concise and precise paratextual interventions. In so doing, they implicitly invited the other poets to relate to them on the basis of these pointers and the audience, to listen and respond to their work through the lens of their poetics. I will weave the paratext into my analysis of the poems without quoting it specifically and point readers to the recording of the event.

Each poet's contribution explored a different aspect of attunement to a port city or its shorelines. Mary Noonan focused on the vibrational interplay of the River Lee and the formation and transformation of subjectivity; Eleanor Rees explored the relationship between vibrational layers and boundaries between them; Greg Quiery proposed appreciative modes of attunement to an edgeland between the Mersey's shore and the built-up city, emphasizing the social dimension of vibrations; Matthew Geden shared the delight and enchantment that comes from attuning to elemental constellations along shorelines.

Mary Noonan was the first to read. She framed her first poem, "Somewhere Else," within the desire to take herself and the audience to a warmer, less rainy place than Cork; in this case, the Languedoc in Southern France. Poetically, the desire to escape is expressed in her evocation of the power of flight – the graceful, attuned gliding on layers of air – and the confluence of water and air embodied by three cormorants:

> It's a cold Spring, three cormorants
> are flying in, maybe, to huddle on a
> rainy weir, but here, at the Wednesday
> market, it's fat strawberries from the garrigue
> and golden onions with wild green hair
> and inky octopus lolling on reefs of scarlet
> bell pepper. (...)

Flight takes the audience to a warmer place. Warmth invites the senses to open up to colors and flavors, as distinct to the cormorants who "huddle" – that is, draw in on their own bodies to preserve body heat – on a rainy weir. Noonan evokes the sensuous delights of sea food and fresh fruits and vegetables, visually garnished with the "dapple-dapple lime- / green freckles flickering on piebald bark." In the town of Sète, located across the lake from Bouzigues, they come across a non-human creature who also enjoys these delights: a gull, "...bamboozled by the oysters / the lake's slinky

indebted to phrasings used by Carolyn Forché in Forché and Gräbner 2024.

contortionists, shimmering / under water on their salty daisy chains." Contrastive association then takes the listeners back from the white gull to the black cormorants:

> Gull cries follow us. Somewhere else,
> three cormorants are raising a black flag
> above an icy river.

Only then does Noonan reveal – with a mischievous twinkle that elicits a burst of laughter from the audience – that the rainy weir on the icy river is situated in the actual "here" of the recital; that is, in Cork: "The cormorants are in Cork."

The theme of transition between places, stages of life and concomitant transformations of awareness and of subjectivity runs through Noonan's recital, always organized around a strong lyric I, identified with Noonan herself, who acts as an agent of conscious reflection. In the paratext she explicitly addresses the circumstances in which the poems were written, thus constructing an outline of her personal life story which, she explains, has unfolded in her birthplace Cork. Cork's vibrational presence finds expression through the River Lee, an unruly force that frequently bursts its banks or is on the verge of doing so. Noonan's attraction to the uncanny, as well as her interest in ghosts that haunt spaces and in psychogeography which she eventually explicates in the conversation, and her mischievous, sometimes dark sense of humor co-exist in a relationship of mutual nurture and transgressive synergy with the river's unruliness.

"Ferryman," the poem that follows upon "Somewhere Else," captures a momentary encounter between Noonan and a drunkenly swaying "hooded figure" on the Shaky Bridge, which crosses the Lee. Thrown by a casual remark of this secretive figure, Noonan is spurred on by the circumstances of her life at the time – her father's terminal illness and impending death – to wonder whether this swaying "passeur" might be the ferryman who carries human souls across the river Styx, "so tired from hauling his cargo / of souls through the filthy fog mugging / the swollen waters of the Lee?"

The Lee breaks its banks in the next two poems, "River, Man" and "Like an Orange." Both poems explore the formation and the loss of subjectivity around the theme of Noonan's father suffering, and eventually dying, from Alzheimer's disease. Both poems were written with reference to specific instances of the river being out of control, flooding – overwhelming – its surroundings, just as Mary's father is overwhelmed by the disease and Mary, by his suffering and then, by loss:

> The great river is watering the dark,
> Irrigating the central plain with black floods.
> The callows are brimming, no channel
> Or lock can stem the seepage. (River, Man)
>
> … The river's rim
> is smashed by angry tides, and signs
> warn that the water wants to suck me
> into the holes that lie beneath. (Like an Orange)

Her father's feats and losses are recounted in relation to water: as a young boy, he runs fast over water-logged football pitches to score goals; as an old man, his body is unable to contain its own fluids which gather in sacks under his eyes and pool in his calves and ankles, seeping through the skin like the river seeps through dams and locks. Eventually, the river symbolically takes him with its "swollen waters," just as it threatens to suck his daughter into holes that lie beneath the riverbed.

The river takes down the entire city – metaphorizing society and civilization – in the next poem, "Elysian" which, Noonan explains, she was commissioned to write as part of a public project on the Elysian Tower, built during the Celtic Tiger years and abandoned after the Global Financial Crash. The poem is set after the apocalypse, with her as the sole survivor. People have different imaginations of how the apocalypse might occur; in Noonan's imagination, it occurs by flooding. The poem's color scheme is green, Ireland's national color; the island is known as the "emerald island." In post-apocalyptic Cork, the emerald has been replaced by the pea, and Noonan observes "algal infinity" from the top of the tower, "high above what used to be the skyline, now / the water line. Pea green from pole to pole." Memories resonate through her; of uprooted trees, cars, subsequent stampedes, murders, and cullings when she is awake, of her childhood in Cork when she sleeps. The harbor that was once her and her sister's playground is now immersed in the floods. Attunement to the actual environment is difficult under these circumstances; only by conjuring up memories can the sole survivor achieve some sense of holding. And yet, even under these circumstances there is a sense of complicity between Noonan and the River Lee. Just as the River Lee transcends the artificial boundaries imposed on it by humans, Noonan's familiarity with the dark and the uncanny transcends the boundaries of the straightforward and the socially acceptable, of the social myths of growth and of success, and enables her to maintain some sense of intellectual and perceptual integrity in the midst of civilizational collapse.

Only away from Cork does Noonan encounter bodies of water that flow gently. Her closing poem "Transportation in a Watery World," was written while Noonan was attending a conference in Florida and during a time when her partner was dying of a progressive neurological disease. Evoking the swamps and rivers of Florida, she imagines a canoe as a protective cocoon:

> And I'll put you in the dug-out canoe,
> like Moses in his basket of reeds,
> sent down-river, out of harm's way, ….
>
> … The glades will cocoon us
> in a lace shawl of light as we slip along, drift
> and sometimes rock gently in our floating
> cradle. The canoe will move slowly, but
> endlessly, through the watery green.

The interplay of light (the two are cocooned "in a lace shawl of light") and water (as they smoothly, effortlessly, slowly make their way "through the watery green") creates peacefulness in elemental vibrations, evokes ways of passage between different stages of life and resonates with the complex emotions attached to these transitions: the desire to protect, the inability to protect (symbolized by placing baby Moses in a basket of reeds), the wish to accompany her husband on his final journey and, in the end of the poem, surrendering to light and water, as those merge into each other in the endless, slow gliding, as the boundary between life and death and between word and world melts away, and words are revealed as *"of* the world and a part of the world," as Michael Halewood put it in his analysis of Whitehead's take on language.

Following upon Noonan, Eleanor Rees reads from one single collection, *Tam Lin of the Winter Park*. She sets up her reading by explaining that the poems were written during lockdown, in and around the park surrounding a stately home – now a museum – in Liverpool, Sudley House. Rees also states explicitly that she always writes *with* a location, not about it, and that this was the poetic challenge she had set herself when creating this set of poems. Her repeated presence in the same space created a profound, intense attunement with it which, in turn, led her to explore the boundaries between Self and surroundings in situations of immersion.

In the paratext, Rees takes the reader on an exploration of Sudley Park and Sudley House, offering descriptions of the various locations featured in the poems. The first poem, "River Mud," picks up on the theme of rivers and estuaries initiated by Mary Noonan. Rees had planned to read it at a

later point but moved it forward to continue the theme initiated by Noonan. The river Mersey is clearly visible from Sudley Park. Like the Lee, it is neither picturesque, nor does it lend itself to the pastoral representation that Retallack argues we urgently need to get away from:

> Slosh and rumple, seaweed bound
> in tide. Gulls scrap in the shallows.
>
> Crows mark your silvery sand now river.
> Do I seep to mud, or dry to stone?
>
> My will is as strong as yours, my heart
> fluid, my blood, your liquid. (…)

In the fourth line, the speaking voice reveals itself as being at one with the river: "Do I seep to mud, or dry to stone?" Boundaries dissolve, only to be reaffirmed as the lyric I addresses the river directly, thus marking relationality as well as boundaries.

The following poem, "Tam Lin of the Winter Park," is set in Sudley Park. It draws on the magical folk tale of Tam Lin who enters a fairy world. The poem explores the promise of a parallel, magical Otherworld that exists in parallel to the park:

> You walk ahead of me, beckoning, disappearing,
> You open the side of a tree, step through bark
> To another park, which is a series of rooms
>
> Laid out on leaf mulch, …

The fairy-You repeatedly taunts the I with the promise of the magical world, asking "Oh how will you get in?", when the fairy-You knows exactly that the I cannot possibly answer that question. The fairy-You keeps beckoning and explicitly inviting them to "'come in" – but the promise remains unfulfilled because no matter how hard humans try, they can never follow the creature from the Otherworld. Door handles push into air, branches block the speaker's way, the world she has just been invited to step into has suddenly disappeared, or has morphed into another one:

> 'Come in,' you say, 'Come in,' but when I
> place my palm on the handle, I push into air,
>
> and you are calling, not unkindly, 'O do come in,'

> As I search in the leaves for a key, to solidify
> walls, to make the barrier more convincing.

From the parkland Rees takes her readers to Sudley House, located in the center of the park. Similar to the park, which promises the possibility of entering different worlds, the "Old House" concentrates layers and vibrations to the point that it becomes a portal into different perceptions across time:

> And the garden blooms with bursts of foamy
> murmuration of rose and wildflower
> which root within the hill like songs
> playing out from a choir of voices
>
> *Blow through this, sea-gust.*
> *Come inside, stay with us.*
>
> and the house is throbbing and can be undone
> with a squint of the eye and the lash of the wind
> or the door is a wolf and is a mouth
> lined with teeth that bite onto time as it falls into the hall
>
> *Blow through this, sea-gust.*
> *Come inside, stay with us.*
>
> amongst the bricks; time as a full breath by a beating chest.
> And the house balloons on the breeze,
> rainbow-threaded and oily-sheened,
> floats over the oak tree and out to sea.
>
> *Blow through this, sea-gust.*
> *Come inside, stay with us.*

As the elements take over the Old House, peregrine falcons take over the belfry of a church adjacent to it in the next poem "Peregrine," and the passage of time takes over Bark Hill House on the IM Marsh Campus in the poem "Mothballed." These take-overs enchant each of the buildings, turning them into portals between different vibrational layers.

Rees ends her recital with the poem "River View," which takes the audience back to the River Mersey. A reflection on the tide and its rhythms, the poem is organized around the refrain "*and the tide comes, the tide goes*." Rees reads it in a rhythmic pace, emulating the regularity and reliability of the tides, conveying a sense of depth and peacefulness, ending her reading with a line that conveys a sense of completion and closure: "timely is the force that paws this shore."

Greg Quiery, in the subsequent reading, explores the interplay of the social and the natural in a post-industrial edgeland on the shores of the Mersey, the Garston Nature Reserve, both under threat from airport expansion. The term edgeland, coined by Marion Shoard (2000), refers to an interfacial space that is neither urban nor rural, that often exists on the edges of cities or within cities, and that is characterized by the entanglement of nature and post-industrial remnants of industry. To locals, an edgeland is often their only green space and a space of encounter and co-existence with non-human life, as nature quickly recovers these spaces. To urban planners, edgelands are valuable only for industrial "development" (ie, destruction) because their characteristics do not correspond to the hegemonic definitions of "nature" that inform policy. When campaigners advocate for the protection of these areas, they clash head-on with a domineering, authoritarian managerial mentality and language. With *Oglet*, Quiery complements the campaign group Save Oglet Shore's advocacy with a poetic work that invites listeners to attune to the interplaying natural and social vibrational layers of this industrial and post-industrial space.

Like Rees, Quiery attunes to the space by walking it. During his reading, he uses the paratext to imaginatively take listeners with him on this walk. He explains that *Oglet* was written during long walks during lockdown in the Garston Nature Reserve and Oglet Shore, adjacent edgelands on the shores of the Mersey. Like Rees, Quiery invites listeners on the trajectory of his walks. He locates the boundaries of the Garston Reserve which, he explains, is "bounded by the Mersey on one side, by an industrial estate on the other, by the airport to the South, and by the Garston suburb of the Liverpool to the South and the airport to the North." To get to it, we must first cross Garston Docks, the subject of the first poem:

> In the poisonous atmosphere of PVC and glue
> playground inflatables balloon to life
> to the hum of clattering fan blades.
> A Hiace camper van is born again
> by fiberglass and filler
> in a baptism of re-spray.
> Darth Vador fabricators
> in great asbestos gloves
> tip back their masks to wipe the sweat
> and catch the grey of dusk along the river.
> Here in left-over land,
> those who know how, burnish up the lived-in
> turn out the exhausted for another lap
> make a living out of sight,

in the grease and grit
to turn the wheels of the leviathan.

The humans who inhabit this space are "those who know how" to recover and recycle what has been discarded by industrialization and consumer culture. They and their materials have been placed "out of sight," "in the grease and grit." They are the people who were discarded by development but do not give up on the materials that have been discarded with them. They are attuned to the temporality of sunrise and sunset in their space, knowing the precise moment when to "tip back their masks to wipe the sweat / and catch the grey of dusk along the river."

In the next poem, "Garston Reserve," nature recovers the land. Each stanza of the first half of the poem proposes a different term that affectively validates the land: "the hidden land", "the half-forgotten place", "the out of sight land", "the fallen on hard times land", "the wild land", "the might have been land", the "back of the allotments land." Quiery then tracks the active "recovery" of the land by plants and animals: "cow parsley springs / amongst the burnt-out ends of abandoned things," and it becomes populated by sparrows, geese, cormorants, hawks, sycamore trees, mice, a fox:

Elder, willow, ash and oak have now sunk their roots
into the wasted ground,
and from their cover,
the land each spring becomes baptised anew
by songs that ring and rinse afresh the air around
the prelude to the blessing of new life.

The poem ends on a shimmer of effervescence, a celebration of nature in a language that emerges from the humble history of the edgeland and Quiery's attunement to, and affection for, the place. As the journey continues, listeners come to share his appreciation and become a part of the poetic emergence of what Tom Bristow calls "affective edgelands" (2016).

This emerging world is under threat from the executioners of so-called development schemes, "Management." Management is not *in* the space and does not know it from within, but has ensnared itself in the self-deceptive conviction of being sufficiently informed to make decisions that are imposed upon it, as the next poem "Car Park" shows:

While they twist and snap the caps
on bottles of spring water,
the management decree,
from around the polished table

> 'Let there be a car park'.
> They open up their folders at Appendix Three,
> to find the vacant lot identified
> as 17b (bordered in red ink)
> a small space on the A4 map.

"Management" enacts and exemplifies the 21st century version of Hannah Arendt's analysis of bureaucracy as "the rule of nobody":

> In a fully developed bureaucracy there is nobody left with whom one could argue, to whom one could present grievances, on whom the pressures of power could be exerted. Bureaucracy is the form of government in which everybody is deprived of political freedom, of the power to act; for the rule by Nobody is not no-rule, and where all are equally powerless we have a tyranny without a tyrant. (Arendt 1970, 56)

Management is indeed nobody; it has dehumanized itself, wilfully, and can thus never be held accountable. As a result, no-one can learn from any mistakes and Management's rule will never genuinely evolve and improve; it can only iterate its own destructive power in different versions. Quiery evokes its tyrannical rule by the absence of references to concrete human beings, and through terms like "management's decree" and by symbolizing Management's detachment and artificial existence through small details such as the twisting and snapping of caps, the fact that "they" consume bottled water instead of tap water (increasing waste and plastics) and by noting that the table is polished (by whom?), as distinct to an ordinary, marked and stained table. Their decisions are implemented by a network of disaggregated executioners:

> Go tell it to the civil engineer
> the accountant and the clerk of works
> hat management has now decreed.
> Descend upon this site
> here black ants have their secret cities
> where mice have burrows under brambles
> where rose bays rise from out of rubble
> and skippers lay their eggs in cock's-foot grass.

They "bring down the mighty bulldozers", "one morning punch the starter button / chug the diesel engine into life", who are "on just another day at work" and "accomplish on one shift / what once would take one hundred men a month / … / that on this land / there will never be another spring." The spring, full of wonders, pulsating, humming and vibrating, so warmly welcomed in the end of the previous poem, and the "uneven and the wild /

the silver ladders of the spider / flights of butterflies" have now been terminated for the sake of a car park.

The direct violence exercised by and through Management culminates in the symbolic violence imposed by the redefinition of terms that designate violent actions:

> And let there be a mighty fence,
> to protect the sports utility vehicles
> and the diesel trucks
> from vandalism and wanton destruction.

Quiery shows, without explicating, how the – now authoritative – worldview of management defines vandalism and wanton destruction not by the quality of the actions, but by the identity of the target. Vandalism and wanton destruction are recognized as violent when they affect the status symbols of managers and corporations' tools for profit and destruction; but not so when they crush the social, the relational and the more-than-human.

The anti-social, planning-powered, machine-generated vibrations of destruction contrast with those of humans who take a relational approach to the space, to each other, and to the more-than-human. In an interview conducted in 2023, Greg emphasized that humans do not in and of themselves harm nature; even small-scale industry in the old industrial sections around the Nature Reserve does not cause irreparable damage, and many humans are perfectly willing and capable of co-existing with nature (Gräbner 2023). These people are the subjects of the next poem "Ted Sees." Ted, Malcolm, Clare, Derek, Margaret and Emma appreciate the Reserve for different, sometimes conflicting reasons, thus expressing the heterogeneous views and experiences of a diverse urban population. The poet turns into the voice-giver of their experiences and as initiator of conversations and relations amongst humans with different histories, different experiences and different viewpoints. Quiery's combination of precise observations and relational language conveys respect, attentiveness and a capacity for discernment appropriate to the time and place of the present. He observes without judgement and sets boundaries where necessary. He signposts the different paths that could have been taken and that are still available to us, if we choose to walk them, opening up a future for and with our edgelands, inhabited relationally.

Matthew Geden constellated poems previously published in his collection *The Cloud Architect* (2022). The poems respond to elemental vibrations and convey the pleasure and enchantment that springs from attunement to different shorelines and the matter he encounters there. Jean Bennett

defines enchantment as "to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday" (Bennett 2001, 4). Geden initiates with the poem "Alexandria," written after he helped the poet Desmond O'Grady, who had lived in that city, gather his recollections for his memoirs. O'Grady passed away before he and Geden could travel to Alexandria together, as they had planned. Instead, Geden wrote a poem imagining the visit, evoking the pleasure of each other's company:

> Here, in this imagined city
> of my heart, we chase Cavafy's
> shadow down blind alleyways
> slip between light and dark
> as the sun appears to leave us.

Personal history is shared through "… a glass / of conversation at the end of the day," which leads the poet into a magical world:

> I drink it all in; the dust, hot
> air blown ashore and the glitter
> of glances as we pass. Here
> we are in your last city,
> walking our way through lifetimes,
> empires falling as we talk,
> making our way to the port.

The next poem, "Night Watch," was written about a specific evening during Geden and his wife Caroline's first trip to Ireland, while camping on the Mayo coast. Geden cross-references Rembrandt's painting "Night Watch" which, he explains, was believed to be set at night until it was discovered that the impression of darkness was a result of the varnish. Geden's poem is set at a physical sunset (in County Mayo) and at a temporal sunset ("the slow sunset of our youth"). He reads the poem in a slow pace, in accordance with the slow transformations evoked in the poem, embedded within the temporality of a sunset: the sky sinks into firelight, thoughts drift into cosmology, a broad canvas of dreams unfurls, and poem and reader move slowly into the central line: "the perception of motion moved / us as we stilled." From the stillness, light emerges: "we shone easily / then, light dispersing the shadows / unaware of the dark varnish that covers us all." As Geden and his partner (and, by way of listening, the audience) merge with the temporality of the sunset over the ocean, stillness becomes the point source of light.

Just as the interplay of water and light becomes a portal between day and night, between light and dark, between sea and sky, the sonic and visual interplay of rocks and water in the following poem "Paradise Beach" becomes a transition space between land and water:

> Stepping out of the air we land
> on perfect sand. Small rocks glitter,
> ground down, shaped and polished,
> packed tightly beneath our feet.

The beach on which this poem is set, Geden explains in the paratext, is a secret beach, and he does not reveal its whereabouts. Hence, each listener is free to imagine such a beach, whatever it may look like for them. The poem is saturated by the elements and their interplay: rocks, sand, water, air, and metaphors of intense presence of the two humans:

> Light spills over us, saturates
> the skin. I lie down by a rock
> pool and lower my head into
> another world, salt water drawn
> in to cleanse and wash away
> the filth. Night does not fall
> here but rises from the ocean,
> reaching towards a believable heaven.

Rock pools are fluid, transitional, liminal, tidal spaces between land and water, constantly transforming. In the conversation after the reading, Geden reflected on the instance of putting his head into the rock pool and of entering an underwater world with different colors, perceptions and sensations and of the enchantment that comes with knowing that this world exists and that one can partake in it, even for a moment.

The remaining poems all take the reader on a shimmering journey to beaches, islands and an estuary. On each of them, the interplay between light, water and matter lures the listener into deep attentiveness and attunement to a rich world where nothing has only one meaning. The corals in the next poem, "Coral Beach," look like sand from afar but turn out to be corals which had partaken in a "surreal reverie / / in last year's tides." Now they are ground down; yet, they acquire "a reddish stain or slight blush / as the afternoon filters into dusk." In "Caliban on the Cape Clear" the we of the poem find themselves in the company of uncanny creatures:

> Here they are, like me, a breed
> apart, tanned leather for skin
> and watchful eyes. (…)

The Unknown and the Uncanny are released in the transformations of the sea at night:

> At night, though, *this thing of darkness*
> rages at the milky sea, seeks
> out the wreckage, the corroding cars.
> Between two worlds the whales pass;
> I cry to dream again, to sleep at last.

The sense of losing and finding oneself in the elemental landscape that emerges around shorelines is the topic of the next two poems "Exile on Ustica" and "Infinity Pool." The former is addressed to Antonio Gramsci and features a quote by the seminal philosopher and organizer, referring to his enforced exile on Ustica: "I felt I was living in a fantastic novel." After crossing "the lapis lazuli ocean," Gramsci finds himself "confined with comrades." The skies are "undiscriminating" and even the thunder – a metaphor for the horrendous times that were to come – becomes "merely a rumour / on a horizon that stretches its way to perfection." Geden's address to Gramsci responds to the sensitivity and attentiveness expressed in the reference to the fantastic novel:

> … Your days spent half
> submerged in pools and turquoise
> caves, who here will blame you
> for doing nothing to change the world?

The planet itself is perfect. The interplay of its elements is irresistible. This world does not need changing or intervening. Yet, political transformation is never thought from within the moment of being fully present in water, turquoise pools, or on the shores of a lapis lazuli ocean. How would notions of political transformation change, if they emerged in a speculative and propositional mode from such a moment, in such a place, from a mind like Gramsci's?

The question resonates with the poem "Infinity Pool," a poem that Geden introduces as not being about any specific place, but a meditation on the universe as the ultimate infinity pool which holds us, indifferent and caring at the same time:

> This is where you disappear;
> an arm, a leg, a shout
> that no-one hears. No-one
> remembers you and the splash
> you make is lost beneath
> the wind, the roll of ocean,
> and the stars that glitter
> shine knowingly on the deep.

Geden ends his contribution with a poem written in memory of Derek Mahon, with whom he travelled to China. As he attunes to the cultural and social environment of the Yangtze River, he is mesmerized by a train journey across a lake. In a last image of an enchanted world, the train seems to be hovering above the water surface. The poem ends, and Geden concludes the reading, on the hopeful line "It will all come right this winter."

Conversation: The Non-Human Irresistible

The event ended with a 20-minute conversation between the poets and myself. To start it, I offered one question, on the presence of light and water, and one prompt, the phrase "the non-human irresistible." The responses to the prompt were more immediate and more fruitful, and held the answer to the question, because light and water are elements of the non-human irresistible. Eleanor Rees re-phrased "the irresistible" explicitly as the agency of the more-than-human:

> I try to see these as communications from the locations, they are participants in the poem, they are forms of language I'm engaging with, and so they are participants in the poem, they are who I'm responding to. I would like to give them an agency for that, and therefore they have to be irresistible, they need to have some kind of quality to them that is non-human and that I can never fully access, but it provokes the desire to communicate, to commune, that generates the poem.

To respond to this agency, we must attune elementally and perceptually. Our reflective, critical, intellectual response must emerge from the state of attunement. This is how we "know poetically" and how we can think in the poetic and the speculative modes at the same time.

This capacity is tethered to subjectivities and socialities that are shaped and conditioned by modernity, industrialization and post-industrialization. The point becomes particularly clear in the conversational interventions by Greg Quiery, and it is emphatically backed up by Eleanor Rees in a reflection on the poetic sensibility created by her growing up in a post-industrial area of Merseyside. They effectively conceive of beauty as constituted

experientially, not aesthetically, and as inextricably linked to enchantment. Quiery's and Rees' emphasis of finding beauty and enchantment in an edgeland therefore suggests that they do not conceive of modernity and industrialization as *per se* alienating. This contrasts with Bennett's conception of re-enchantment, which promises to overcome the alienation caused by modernity. For Query and Rees, there is a need to be critical of modernity, but there is no need to re-enchant the world; there is a need to attune to and protect its enchantments because we are part of the world, and the world is part of us. This echoes Matthew Geden's take on Gramsci on Ustica, is echoed by Geden in a reflection on water as a philosophical trope, and chimes with the self-aware consciousness and subjectivity practiced by Mary Noonan.

In the constellation of the event, language functions as a conduit between different worlds and different modes of being. This contrasts with other recent poems that thematize the relationship between the human and the more-than-human. In an analysis of a poem on the Severn Estuary by Robert Minhinnick, Louise Chamberlain notes that "'Language' is a 'fault,' simultaneously an error – written or otherwise – and a geological separation between tectonic limestone plates, as language forms a boundary between the human and the non-human, a gap which humans are forced to 'live in'" (Chamberlain 2016, 103). The poets involved in *Poems in Port Cities*, in contrast, experimented with a position akin to Whitehead-scholar Michael Halewood's, who describes his starting point in *Language and Process* as "the seemingly innocent (even humble) position that language is itself a part of the world. There is no gap between language and the world" (10). Halewood argues that the practice of language as a part of the world is the source of "speculative boldness":

> The speculative boldness appears when this leads to the realization that words are as much part of the world as things are. Indeed, words are probably another kind of thing. This is not to reduce words or language to some kind of static fact. The world is made up of a vast array of different things, all of which have different roles and potentials, from elephants to emails, quark to quinine, soldiers to soldering irons. Words and language need to be given their rightful place within this array. (10)

Three proposals – the irresistible is the agency of the more-than-human, and we need to follow its lure; the capacity to think relationally and attune to enchantment in our present moment is tethered to modernity; language is a part of the world and a conduit to the many "things" in it – are amongst the outcomes of our experiment. The experiment / poetry event needs

continuous assessment in response to a question in two parts that Stengers puts forward and that, she claims, unites experimenters:

> Did this experimental arrangement provide the phenomenon being questioned with the ability to bear witness in a reliable way, concerning the way what is made observable about this phenomenon must be interpreted? Has it succeeded in conferring upon the phenomenon being questioned the role of "respondent" for the interpretation that is given to it? (20)

Instead of answering them directly, I would like to offer some of the questions that arise from our proposals and that merit further experiments:

> How would we imagine transformation *with* the world, not *of* it?
>
> Who are we on this earth, and what is our place in it and with it? (A question Greg Quiery asked during the conversation.)
>
> How can we understand ourselves both elementally and psychoanalytically? Which words are of this process?
>
> What are the ways in which we can ethically live with and from within our port cities and shorelines?
>
> What would we change about ourselves in the world, if we conceived of change from us being fully present in turquoise pools and on the shore of a lapis lazuli ocean?

Hopefully these questions will help to continue the journey on paths not yet taken. The event took us into the world of Mary Noonan's unruly River Lee with its losses and transitions; into Eleanor Rees' Otherworlds; to Greg Quiery's affective edgeland; and Matthew Geden's poetic-philosophical-perceptual attunement to light, rock and water. It is through the condensation of all of them into one event that we actualized a language that is *with* and *of* the world, with the mud and the corals, peregrines and cormorants, mice and whales, rock pools and rivers, ferrymen and fairies, with Gramsci on Ustica immersed in turquoise and lapis lazuli, and with those who feel grief and indignation at Management's destruction of Spring on the shores of the Mersey; with magnificent beaches and the might-have-been land of Garston Docks, with Alexandria, Cork and Liverpool, with the Lee, the Mersey and the Yangtze, with the delightful immersion in sunsets and the heartbreak and alienation caused by car parks and fences. Words might look like sand from a distance, but they turn out to be corals, and one can find them like treasure, or one is given them by sailors, like exotic foodstuff was given to children in Cork Harbor. They sparkle like light on the water, and

they are not always what they seem, because the world they are a part of might shed a different light on them at any moment.

Conclusion: Notes on the Speculative Poetry Event

Many years ago, scholar of philosophy Patricia Altenbend Johnson concluded in an enquiry into the question of whether poetry is philosophical that some poetry is speculative and *therefore*, philosophical, for two reasons:

> It (1) has a manner of presentation which calls set determinations into question but which does not impose on but rather tries to give expression to its subject matter; and (2) it presents a totality of meaning in all its relations. It focuses on the whole of being in each presentation, is attentive to difference, and recognizes that a presentation of the whole is possible only in continual successive presentation. (Johnson 1987, 20)

What she explored in an essay, we explored in an event, with the hope that the poetry event can be considered not only a presentation but also, an analytical intervention and a speculative proposition. The speculative poetry event unfolds in the intersection of poetic and conceptual language, of philosophy and poetry. It is called a "speculative" poetry event – not experimental – to clarify that the point of departure is a critical or epistemological challenge, as distinct to an experimentation with form. This challenge makes us look differently at poems that have already been written, finding elements in them that might not have been previously noticed or even intended. These elements become obvious when the poems are responded to from a conceptual perspective which accepts that some things we can only know poetically and which welcomes the intellectual force of poetry. Poets are invited to act as radical epistemologists and will be listened and responded to as such.

Speculative poetry events are by definition relational and social. Therefore, they must include a conversational element and bring together several voices that are placed in conversation with each other. Each is itself an experiment or adventure, in the sense outlined by Stengers drawing on Whitehead. To be successful, the experiment has to be placed within constraints. It is meant to investigate a situation through precise observation and relational language. Its mode is propositional, not presentational; however, it being a live event, the propositional will be based on the presentation of poems that establish a common ground. These events need a curator, who is the facilitator of relationality and the guardian of ideas as well as constraints. Hopefully these notes will contribute to the organization of many more speculative poetry events which walk the paths not yet taken.

Patricia Altenbernd Johnson demonstrated that some poetry is philosophical because it is speculative. I would extend this statement to say that some philosophy needs to be poetic; if, that is, we want to think with the world as well as about it. Poets and philosophers are not only complementary, but in need of each other – if, that is, they want to operate in a speculative mode.

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