

# Canonising Queer: From Hal to Dorothy

LEIGH DALE, UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND

*The field of cultural production is the site of struggles in which what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition of the writer and therefore to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the writer.*

(Bourdieu, 'Field of Cultural Production' 323)

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, in western cultures at least, much criticism has been profoundly influenced by a belief in the *autonomy* of art: to be 'art,' cultural objects must somehow be divorced from the political economy of their production. Thus Robert Dessaix, prominent public intellectual and also well known as a writer and reviewer of distinction, asserted at the Toowoomba ASAL conference (July 1998) that the public does not like to hear, in literature or criticism, 'voices that are beholden to set agendas.' The comment makes an automatic linkage between the political and the dogmatic, presuming that to ask political questions is inappropriate for those concerned with 'culture.' But the view taken in this essay is quite the opposite one. I want to argue that writing and criticism are not the products of an individual free will operating in accordance with universal rules of aesthetic quality, nor are they independent of the societies in which they are made. They are shaped in deep and persistent ways by specific cultural and institutional circumstances. And just as (published) texts are shaped by what is possible and what it is not possible to say about one's culture, so too is criticism inflected by assumptions about reputation, about literature, and about the value of art. In this essay I want to consider these debates by looking at the reception of the writing of Dorothy Porter.

At the present time some critics and many reviewers express the opinion that politics and aesthetics are irreconcilable opposites, a view which rests on the assumption that 'art' exists, indeed is defined as existing, beyond the realm of the socio-political. This separation is sometimes emphasised as a marker of distinction: whereas universities have soiled and demeaned literature by obsessive over-reading and excessive politicisation, and produced criticism that is inaccessible to the general reading public, a small and dedicated band of 'lovers of literature' are protecting books and their writers from the absurd excesses of poststructuralist/psychoanalytic/post-colonial/postmodern/feminist/Marxist (the enemies are many) critical analyses. This split is regularly constructed as one between self-serving

professionalism and selfless amateurism, between the gaping abyss of the future and the certainties of the past.

The gap is a wide one. Nick Mansfield, writing from within the academy and representing a position far distant from that of Robert Dessaix, has asserted that 'there is little point in imagining [Dorothy] Porter's "aesthetic space" as a new model of the aesthetic ... we know from Foucault's late work, and from Lyotard, that the aesthetic is no longer an autonomous space' (112). Such an assertion sweeps aside the majority of those responses to Porter's work by newspaper and other reviewers who have wrestled, directly or indirectly, with the challenges to ideas of the aesthetic and literary value that the writing seems to pose. But contrary to Mansfield's assumption, so successful has the dissemination of views about the autonomy of art been that the split between the aesthetically valuable and the popular is common sense. And if we are in the realms of 'common sense,' then Catherine Belsey's primer (of) *Critical Practice* tells us that it is time to reinsert the intellectual history of writing, reading and aesthetics.

The history of the idea of autonomy has been traced by Martha Woodmansee in *The Author, Art, and the Market*, a book which examines the origins of the notions that art should eschew the popular (21), should appeal to the scholarly estate (28), and should be 'disinterested' and eschew the political. Woodmansee grounds the emergence of these beliefs in the particular social, economic, and ideological conditions of later eighteenth-century Romanticism, particularly in Germany, where leading commentators proposed, as Schiller put it, that 'The only possible relationship to the public is war' (qtd in Woodmansee 29). A significant effect of this redefinition of art was the imperative to exclude 'everything that is merely local or idiosyncratic,' 'everything arising from experiences, conclusions, and accomplishments come by in specific and artificial circumstances' (Schiller qtd in Woodmansee 76). The idea is promoted that all those features which make a work of art appealing to the broad mass of the people, or to a specific and distinct interpretive community for whom it may have a particular meaning, come to signal its unworthiness as an artistic object, thereby presenting later critics with the problem of disengaging popular writers (like Shakespeare) from their social and historical context.

Central to these shifts in ways of thinking about art, and specifically literary texts, is the development of a mass market for reading materials. The development of this mass market had meant that existing instrumentalist theories – which conceptualised the production and consumption of art as integral to all other human activities – were 'found to justify the wrong works,' i.e. those which sought to have a 'strong effect,' emotionally, on their audience (Woodmansee 32). Being threatened by the spread of literacy and the reading habit beyond the upper classes, those writers catering almost exclusively to the latter reinvented their hitherto taken-for-granted elitism as the signature of their artistic integrity. Aesthetic value came to be understood as opposite to the popular, and to the useful: great art was by necessity disengaged from the socio-political. This effects what Pierre Bourdieu calls a 'double dehistoricization, of both the work and the gaze at the work' ('Historical Genesis' 285). The work of art itself, and the act of critical judgement, are seen

as existing in a field that is independent of all other fields of culture.

This belief about the disconnection between great art and the circumstances of its production and reception means that debates about the connections between art, interpretive communities, and social history are displaced from the genre 'criticism' into the realm of the 'political.' Still, in Australia in the late twentieth century, those who dispute this view are easily discredited and their arguments disabled by applying the label 'political critic'; they can be dismissed as Marxist or, worse, feminist or postmodernist, terms which by definition remove them from that class of people who 'love literature,' those who are qualified to comment on its aesthetic value. This discursive manoeuvre is enabled by the fact that, at the moment of its institution, the theory of the autonomy of art actually *substitutes* the aesthetic for the political, actually *defines* art as being detached from the socio-economic. The further paradox is that while for many the value of art as a commodity rests on the erasure of its 'use value', if ideas about value were based on the *connectedness* of art to society, and its concomitant power to work as a cultural signature that shaped taste across a range of related cultural products and events, then the promotion of the arts would become far easier in the current climate of economic rationalism. And while public discussion continues to be dominated by a discourse of value that abstracts the aesthetic from the social, then it become very difficult to talk about the politics of art.

In Australia debates about the aesthetic, or more specifically, the inculcation of an *idea* of the aesthetic that also encompassed gentlemanly and later middle class refinement, good taste and moral enhancement, remained central to the study of literature in most tertiary institutions until well after the Second World War. Here, however, the work of cultural education was inflected by a particular and unusual responsibility *vis-à-vis* the national culture – that is, resistance to the myriad vulgarities, cultural and intellectual, vocal and gestural, of the 'ordinary Australian.' Throughout the twentieth century various attempts to formulate a monolithic discourse of a national culture have struggled to reconcile art and the national. Therefore those cultural critics who sought to link art and history, to ground and interpret painting and literature in the specific national conditions of their production, were readily dismissed as 'historians and sociologists': they 'misunderstood' art insofar as they connected it with the local and the historical. Thus the aesthetic and the political have a further source of distance in the cultural spaces of Australia, because 'the national' has so persistently been defined as a culture-free zone. (One resolution to this problem is to displace 'cultural production' itself onto indigenes or those of 'other cultures,' a pattern that connects the most erudite academic commentary to the Australian segment of the closing ceremony of the Atlanta Olympics.)

In these circumstances, in which art is seen as having a deeply suspicious relationship to the social, aesthetic pleasures become difficult to articulate – it's not surprising that 'pleasure' itself should seem such an engaging critical problem. For those who work and speak within discourses of autonomy, so fraught is the relationship between the work of art and pleasure that it may be recoded as *displeasure*, as *distaste*, a deferral which implies a concomitant contempt for those 'common'

pleasures which depend upon instant gratification. It's this way that we can explain the revulsion, common among 'critical' audiences, for Christos Tsiolkas' work *Loaded*. *Loaded* presents a dilemma for those who are eager to embrace sexy 'minority cultures,' the worlds of the 'queer' and 'ethnic,' but who are simultaneously repelled by the casual drug use and anonymous sex that are represented in Tsiolkas' book – although this is also sometimes part of a visceral homophobia. Such critics remain blind to the ethics of these activities that are so clearly emphasised in the novel: Ari is careful in his collection, distribution, and sharing of drugs according to a kind of socio-economically determined need that is pragmatically inflected by the behaviours of (potential) recipients. Similarly, he is implicitly critical of those who do not abide by established codes for sexual encounters. It's perhaps significant that Tsiolkas has commented in interview that rather than [identity] politics or aesthetics, 'the question of ethics is probably the paramount question that I'm working through at the moment, as a writer and as a political person' (Robinson 47), and noted in a review of another writer's work that 'to disengage the poet from the activist from the aesthete strikes me as another mistake' ('Migrant, Defiant, Working-Class' 70).

To negotiate the divide between the political and the aesthetic is difficult, but there are some well-established strategies. One of the ways in which homosexuality as political relation to majority culture is recoded aesthetically is as 'literary style.' For example, the *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* tells us that

The most immediately striking aspect of [Hal] Porter's short fiction is his style, which is markedly different from that of earlier Australian short story writers. A self-conscious stylist, he adopted an intricate, densely woven prose that is studiously extravagant, crammed with spectacular and often idiosyncratic images. Exuberantly witty but controlled and precise in its effects. (Wilde et al 623)

More strikingly, perhaps, the revised edition of the *Companion* (1994) manages a lengthy entry on Patrick White in which we are informed firmly that he 'lived a secluded life in Australia,' thereby erasing his partnership of some 50 years with Manoly Lascaris. Questions of social existence are displaced into those of literary style, the political has become (the) aesthetic: 'extravagant,' 'spectacular,' 'idiosyncratic.'

With her work being situated at the crossroads of the political and the aesthetic, and with the writer herself deliberately and persistently foregrounding questions of sexuality and of pleasure (reading and others), Dorothy Porter is one of Australia's most intriguing authors in terms of debates about literary value. It's a marker of this intrigue, I think, that of the handful of more lengthy essays published on her work, almost all have been about reputation. Lyn McCredden, in a discussion of Porter's celebrity, ended her paper with the comment that 'a whole debate about the political and social possibilities, and about the ideological effects of poetry, needs to commence,' a call taken up implicitly rather than explicitly by Margaret Henderson in

her essay on the collision of feminism and post-modernism in *The Monkey's Mask*. McCredden also suggested that Porter's 'is a case which very sharply reveals contemporary popular opinion regarding poetry, regarding the divisions of high and low art, and which opens up the question of entrepreneurship in the arts' (6).

In her review of *The Monkey's Mask*, Lee Cataldi characterised the 'border-crossings' that characterise Porter's work as paradigmatically queer:

*The Monkey's Mask* is a perverse work. ... the poetry is stripped of almost all that makes it poetic: emotion, metaphor, the hidden. ... Only occasionally does something from those depths reveal itself, those depths into which in order to get on with the job, the detective cannot afford to look. This tension, between these two cross purposes, and the wonderful tightness and symmetry of the narrative's construction, combine to make *The Monkey's Mask* a tour de force, one could even add dazzling. (83)

As this review implies, Porter is generally seen as a 'good' writer, a writer whose work is characterised by technical surety, thematic interest, and a certain 'depth' of human experience and literary complexity that are associated with critical rather than popular success. Her reputation as a writer of distinction has been high for close to a decade and a half – as early as 1984, Judith Rodriguez implied that Porter stood out from the crowd in her review of six new books of poetry, commenting that 'Phrase by phrase [the poems in *Night Parrot* build] a style and atmosphere all of Porter's own, racy, serious, striking, full of ingenious energy' (41). Ten years later Penelope DeBelle summarised Porter's career this way:

At 21, she had her first collection of poems published, the acclaimed *Little Hoodlum*, and her career took off. She was a good performer, able to bring her subjects to life at public readings, and she attracted attention. But her next book, *Bison*, bombed. She recovered and wrote the next, *The Night Parrot* which was well received but did not sell well. In *Driving Too Fast* ... the narrative/dramatic style that has become her forte was starting to emerge. But it was not until 1992 when she published *Akhenaten* that Porter really went out on a limb, openly challenging the notion of poetry as irrelevant and peripheral ... In *The Monkey's Mask* she develops this further, working like a film editor who cuts and edits for dramatic effect.

In many cases, when lumped in with a clutch of other writers in 'job-lot reviews,' it is Porter's work that seems to stand out. As Andrew Wallace puts it in a review of *Driving Too Fast* and five other books, it is Porter's 'book I would wave the chequered flag for (and vigorously too)' (58; see also Shapcott).

Categorisation of Porter's work became an urgent problem with the publication of *The Monkey's Mask*, a 'dyke detective' novel in verse that, eighteen months after publication, had sold over 10 000 copies (Freeman 115). It was a degree of success

that seemed to problematise the assumption that Porter was a 'good poet,' and her tough new protagonist, Jill, seemed a long way from the exotic Mediterranean cultures that were celebrated in *Akhenaten* and would be revisited in Porter's subsequent collection *Crete*. *The Monkey's Mask* was 'risky' in that its writing did not attempt the kinds of subtleties and complexities we expect from those lauded as poets. But in fact there are many ways in which the essential concerns and even techniques of *The Monkey's Mask* were signalled earlier in Porter's writing. One reviewer's description of the contents of *Driving Too Fast*— as dealing 'mainly with extremes: danger, cruelty, madness, self-loathing, obsession, desire'— might also apply to *The Monkey's Mask* (Wallace 58). In a frequently quoted and reiterated point, the interview/review with Penelope DeBelle begins with the assertion that

Real poetry, Dorothy Porter's poetry that is, is about blood and guts, love, death and magic, life *in extremis*. It should not, Porter says, be lush, inaccessible and obscure. At its best it should be intravenous, a rush in the veins of the reader. 'Poetry, at its essence, is about passion,' says Porter. 'This is what I wanted to remind people of, that poetry comes from magic and passion, not morality and obscurity or sentimentality.' (DeBelle 11)

Crossing between the popular and the critical, and at the same time, between the political and the aesthetic, has made it challenging for writers, critics, and even Porter herself, to talk about her writing in a coherent way. Porter's characteristic response is to take the Romantic bypass, as a number of commentators have pointed out, and to insist on the integrity of the individual artist gripped by a sense of mission. But how 'individual'? Her own tastes are clearly governed by a strongly Europeanised notion of the aesthetic, albeit one heavily infused by sexuality that sees a focus on the pleasures of the human body, of sexual and sensual experience. Although her presentation of sensuality and sexuality draw heavily on contemporary cultures, these concerns are reconfigured (and thereby legitimated) by Porter as stemming from the classical rather than her own cultural time and place; it is a mode that may be seen more obviously in the poems in *Crete*.

Porter's valorisation of the individual artist in the promotion of her work anticipates and rejects the usual strategy in which 'the dominated in the artistic and the intellectual fields' and their critics embrace 'that form of radical chic which consists in rehabilitating socially inferior cultures or the minor genres of legitimate culture' (Bourdieu qtd in Guillory 339). Like Robert Dessaix, who launched *The Monkey's Mask* at the Melbourne Writers' Festival, Porter is critical of community writing for its own sake, suggesting that 'many gay detective novels are just badly written excuses for erotica' and that 'a lot of lesbian crime has a whole lot of girls with linked arms working together against child abuse ... They read all the right books together and have very sound relationships' (DeBelle 11). That such sweeping generalisations are not contested, however difficult it may be to substantiate them, is an indication of how readily interviewers and reviewers accept the separation of

'good art' from (the) 'community.' Porter's put-down is allowed to stand as 'evidence' that all writing which explicitly writes from or to largely homosexual/lesbian communities will be characterised by a naïve, simplistic and transparent relationship to that/those communities, thereby casting aside that work which is able to work *within* and *against* realism in the manner of, say, *Loaded*.

Porter's frequently-quoted comment is also one which functions to differentiate her work, on the grounds that it 'rises above' the aesthetic limitations implied by concern with the political. This is in spite of the fact that Porter herself clearly aims to cross precisely those boundaries between the political and the aesthetic, between community and critic, between those who love poetry and those who despise it, which such a statement presumes the existence of. This is evidenced in her own comment on *The Monkey's Mask*: 'I wanted to see what would happen if you put poetry and lesbian crime fiction together. The high and the low so to speak. I felt like an alchemist going into an underground laboratory with a determination to mix and smelt together two very incompatible materials' ('Dorothy Porter' 57). Having laid her cards on the table – this book is about bridging a cultural divide, a divide that is clearly signalled by literary genre – Porter immediately seeks to mystify the process, likening the act of appealing to traditionally separate audiences to the lost and secret art of alchemy. At least one reviewer obediently picked up the metaphor, noting that 'In creating her latest book, *The Monkey's Mask*, Dorothy Porter has played alchemist with poetry and crime fiction' (Miner 150).

But the dominant trope of Porter's most successful book is not alchemy, or boundary-crossing, but masks and disguises. The interest in the mask, the disguise, is something that Porter herself signalled overtly and structurally in her previous work, *Akhenaten*, and it was a concern that was noted in many of the reviews of that book. For example, Penelope Lee commented that

In *Akhenaten* Porter is exploring the use of poetry as a mask for the self. ... As *Akhenaten* was a real person, it is a mask that has its own characteristics. 'There was definitely an individual there, a very powerful ghost and very powerful presence. This idea of adopting a persona is not so much creating a character as adopting a mask. In other words it's a kind of more exploratory form of autobiographical poetry.' (Lee 69)

Even earlier, Heather Cam had ended a review of Porter's *Driving Too Fast* with the speculation that 'Perhaps later poems will show us more of what lies behind Porter's masks' (74), and referred back to this trope when reviewing *The Monkey's Mask*. The idea of the mask implies a need to hide the 'authentic self' of the writer, and is the necessary corollary of Porter's embracing of a Romantic authorial persona, a persona that, however complex, cannot possibly accommodate the range of her literary concerns.

Given this use of the mask, the body becomes the essential authenticating device of the emotions expressed, no matter how outrageously large the cultural and

historical distance that is being covered. Thus Porter claimed in interview that because she wanted 'to be very persuasive' in the poems in *Akhenaten*, 'every poem had to go through my nervous system no matter what it was about' (Digby, 'Dorothy Porter' 8). 'Strained' by the nervous system, every word is felt in order that it can be truthful. But the insistence on disguise also hints at a belief, borne out in this comment, that there is something deeply illegitimate about adopting a voice that is not that of direct personal experience. While reviewers commonly identify and approve of that various juxtapositions of cultures and voices which are seen as a distinctive characteristic of her writing,<sup>1</sup> 'the real' Porter remains a reassuring anchor-point for readers attempting to judge her writing positively.

The *body* of the author, foregrounded as it is by Porter herself and by her reviewers, acts as the signature of quality, much as the signature of the artist on a painting is the sign of its aesthetic (and commodity) value. Thus Heather Cam notes that 'animating each of these disguises' of the characters in *The Monkey's Mask* is

the giveaway of Porter's voice – colloquial and confident, direct and forceful, unswervingly revealing and revelling in the sacred and the profane. In her robust poems, the visionary, romantic, and idealist co-exist with the crassly physical without, amazingly, causing any internal contradictions or damage to the persona's integrity. ('Mask Covers' 11A)

Porter's superb live performances are consistently used to sell her work, and relatively few reviews or stories about her aren't accompanied by photographs. It's entirely logical, then, that a story about Porter's *reputation* should begin by discussing, at some length, her body and physical presence:

People are generally surprised when they see Dorothy Porter stand up. It's her size, you see. Sitting down she is an imposing figure, all broad cheekbones, flashing eyes and stocky strength. (Someone once remarked wryly that Porter does not come from the 'consumptive' school of poets.) But when she stands up, you realise she is *short*. It is the height and breadth of her enthusiasm that make her seem a much larger figure. (Freeman 115)

Porter's insistence, in her writing, on the bodiliness of experience – not just sexual experience, but sensory experience of all kinds, indeed being /alive – foregrounds the body, particularly the female body, in ways that reviewers and readers clearly find seductive, and easy to relate directly to the author herself. But precisely because it is the 'volatile body' which is the site of conjunction for the political – the social self – and the aesthetic – the artist – it seems that Porter's canonical status is always tenuous, always at risk. When the signature is the female body, emblematic of the transience of beauty and the fickleness of desire, can the text really be trusted? For *The Monkey's Mask*, and indeed much of Porter's work, is about the necessary instability of dangerous liaisons, and concomitantly, about the

perils of obsessions – Porter’s poem sequence on smoking in *Crete* published in 1996 bizarrely foreshadows the release of k.d. lang’s album *Drag*, each song of which is concerned with smoking/obsession/addiction, the following year. These mostly narcissistic obsessions reconstitute the writer as a kind of star of their own making; symptomatically, Porter claimed that the figure of Akhenaten was one she had envisaged as having an ‘almost modern aspect of making his own image, of fetishising himself, almost like a David Bowie figure’ (qtd in Digby, ‘Dorothy Porter’ 3). But such strategies leave a reader in search of authenticity, dependent on an aesthetic which eschews the political, vulnerable to uncertainty in the face of Porter’s much more complex agendas.

When readers are confronted with Porter’s flamboyant and ‘risky’ writing – risky because it constantly flirts with the political while grounding itself in aesthetic and sensory appeals, insisting on its status as writing with popular *and* critical appeal, and more, it seems that the impulse is to demand resolution, to ask for the boundary lines between different kinds of pleasure, and between literary audiences, to be redrawn. It’s significant, then, I think, that the major discontent with *The Monkey’s Mask* is with its ending. Jenny Digby is fairly typical when she comments, ‘One little quibble. I felt the end was less than satisfying – I obviously can’t say much without revealing too much – but I felt the need for stronger retribution and justice’ (‘A Daring Venture’ 44). In one sense these criticisms miss the practical point that such ‘justice’ is not feasible in plot terms: there were no witnesses to the murder apart from its perpetrators, and they do not seem like the kind of people to throw their hands in the air and say ‘gosh, well done Jill, yes we did it.’ *The Monkey’s Mask* itself is, thematically, about the triumph and costs of indulging desire, about the persistence and strength of evil. The moral resolution which Digby and other reviewers hanker for is about *restoring* precisely the kinds of cultural orders and balances that the form, the style, and the concerns of *The Monkey’s Mask* all work to upset; one might as well ask *Loaded* to end with Ari ‘getting a job and settling down.’

The desire for resolution sets aside the more difficult questions raised by *The Monkey’s Mask* regarding notions of the literary, and questions about how readers might come to value particular texts and to reject others. Porter’s most overt challenge, in this regard, is her inclusion in *The Monkey’s Mask* of the ‘bad poems’ written by the disappeared student of literature, Mickey. As ‘Jill investigates,’ she lurches between taking the poems at face value – a necessary strategy given the circumstances – and trying to ‘read for depth,’ in the manner of the formalist literary critic. Jill’s first response to Mickey’s poems is the comment, ‘All I read / is a whimpering voice.’

pretend I’m disadvantaged  
 because around you I don’t have to pretend  
 I’m disadvantaged  
 you make me unemployed  
 you make me persecuted

you make me black  
 you make me very blue (108)

There are several targets here: the easy embracing of victimage by academics; the careless idealisation of persecution; the excruciating transparency of bad poetry; the emotional flatness of cliché. Yet that Porter (and this critic) should use and identify these as characteristics of 'bad poetry' tells us much about what we take for granted as qualities of 'good poetry' and the sometimes contradictory views of politics and aesthetics embedded in them.

The relations of reading established by the poems are extraordinarily complex: as Jill reads the poems to Mickey's English tutor Diana, Diana responds with censure of Jill's responses and negative comments on the poems. There is a double danger for Diana: that the poems will be read literally – that a 'bad' (simplistic) reading of a 'bad' (simplistic) poem will point to the murderers – yet in spite of herself she cannot help but point out to Jill that the poems lack the kind of 'depth' to prompt precisely that 'literary' reading that Jill feels at once compelled and yet unable to perform. As Jill, infatuated with Diana, reads Mickey's infatuated account of Diana's 'floating hair,' Diana dismisses the poem as trite and derivative (111). Street-wise, but an ingenue in the literary world, needing the help and guidance of her poet-friend Lou, Jill is the common-sense reader ruthlessly put in her place by the professional critic who is defending the secret of her own lethal pleasures, but risks disclosing it by insisting on the poems' transparency. Almost to the end Jill is blinded also by her desires, her own indulgence in the pleasures that Diana has to offer: 'I help myself to Diana's fags ... I watch my smoke floating / over her messy curls.' The readability of Mickey's poems, contrasted with Jill's baffled responses, plays in advance with reviewers' discomfort over the fact that readability and verbal seductiveness have left Porter *herself* open to charges of superficiality, a charge that is also made elsewhere. Judith Beveridge ended a review of *Driving Too Fast* sounding as though she felt that its author had 'wasted' her talents on poetry that is too transparent: 'there is a skilled immoderateness and vitalism. This is a refreshing quality, but a failing of the book is that too many of the poems fail to achieve a deeper, more considered content of thought and feeling' (156).

It is in relation to the troublesome question of depth (see Dollimore) that we can identify the faultline of queer that runs through the making of Dorothy Porter's reputation, just as it ran through that of Hal Porter before her: where art, artifice and literary dexterity form the basis of the writer's reputation, so too do they hint at a kind of danger for the critic, the danger of being seduced by the insubstantial. Beth Spencer links this problem explicitly to marginality in her review of Christos Tsiolkas' *Loaded*, commenting that 'I hate the problem of "authenticity", as it's often applied to writing by women, gays, blacks and wogs, so that "too much" artifice or brilliance then becomes a fault.' This is a danger signalled, charged and recoded by sexuality. Coupled with this is the too-frequent reader obsession with authenticity, which in a certain kind of arts journalism becomes a transparent fantasy of recognition wherein the 'new' object is recognised as 'true' precisely

because it confirms already determined views.

By making her protagonist someone who doesn't read poetry and who has little time for those who do, Porter has set up not so much a critique of the institutions of poetry as Finola Moorehead has argued, but rather a situation in which the borders between classes, between straight and gay, and specifically between the world of the detective, whose work is mired in the political, and the deeply politicised but relentlessly disdainful world of poetry, are broken down. In fact, poetry *itself* becomes a kind of mask by which the wearer can slip between the political and the aesthetic, experiencing new forms of 'the literary' and 'the political, each colliding against bodies, pleasure and desire, and Porter herself has stressed the usefulness of the mask to the *writer*, in terms of moving between personae, (Digby, 'Dorothy Porter' 3). Again and again Porter and her reviewers emphasise that *The Monkey's Mask* will appeal to those who, like its protagonist, don't like or read poetry. Fairly typical is Kristin Henry, who suggests that

written with all the pace, passion, texture and economy that poetry lovers expect, it will also have people who normally steer clear of poetry finding themselves propelled forward by sheer narrative lust. This book makes you turn pages, and fast. There is enough tension, twist, and terse dialogue here to satisfy the most demanding crime fiction junkie. (Henry 9)

The effect of this border-crossing in Porter's writing is to produce an anxiety about judgement and evaluation, an anxiety that characterises Lyn McCredden's two commentaries on Porter's work (see McCredden, and Lucas and McCredden). McCredden argues that in the case of 'The Amulet,' the last poem in *Driving Too Fast*, the voice of 'the sensuously utopic lover, enmeshed in 'Soul, heart, blood,/ each other/our sapphire world,' co-opt[s] even the perishability of human existence into another kind of erotic otherness; *and* the controlling detached 'I.' There is a rejection of, or at least a discomfort with, the idea that Porter can write about passion and remain detached; that she could intellectualise and, yes, successfully commercialise [i.e. make a living from!] the Romanticism she so overtly embraces in interview. There is therefore a call to 'suspicion' about Porter's work, that critics should, for example, be sceptical 'of the humanist desire for authenticity, which, it may be argued, lurks in the most carnivalesque mask-wearing and magical moments of Porter's work' (Lucas and McCredden 152).

What is ultimately at stake in all criticism, whether it is made explicit or not, is the position of the (necessary?) boundary between the literary and the non-literary, about the value of particular literary texts over and above others (Bourdieu, 'The Field' 324). Claims that art is 'autonomous' are not proof that it is so, but are reflections of the struggles to find ways to value art within capitalist economies. We should take this struggle as an indication not of the necessity of insisting on the autonomy of art, but as yet another demonstration of the inability of those obedient to belief in the autonomy of art to deal analytically with culturally specific values. In terms of literary criticism in Australia at the moment, the danger is that

debates about the 'political' in the literary field which take place in the media are functioning as masking agents for more substantive discussions about literary and cultural value, in part because, as John Guillory points out, contemporary modes of criticism make it difficult to put literary value on the agenda. The first step in addressing this problem, according to Martha Woodmansee, is to reground 'aesthetic ideas in ... their motives in history' so that 'we may begin to understand how a cultural formation that evolved as recently as 'art' could have entrenched itself so thoroughly that we imagine it always to have existed' (8). Not by doing away with, but by *acknowledging*, the historical and cultural specificity of our cultural values, by conceding the necessary imbrication of the political and the aesthetic rather than grounding our criticisms in a sentimentally idealising universalism, we can far more easily, I think, see the connection between poetry and bull-leaping, and laud those who, like Porter, are prepared to take that 'big sexy risk.'

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- 1 Felicity Plunkett, for example, sees 'fictive narratives juxtaposed with the historical, the fantastic and the iconographic' in her review of *Crete*, while Kathy Kitauk sees *Crete* as plunging the reader 'relentlessly into a time warp that oscillates between the Bronze Age and the 20th century until time no longer exists'; Peter Steele, also reviewing *Crete*, notes that Porter's 'own art manages to make the extravagant and the personal neighbours'. An exception was Simon Patton, who complained that *Driving Too Fast* 'jangles, disconcerting in its fluctuating registers. Porter's lyricism clashes with its own darker, anti-lyrical side, at war with itself, sabotaging and seeing-sawing between delicate lyrical bursts and crass imagery.' Patton's concern is commented on by Porter in terms that insist upon maintaining the idea of opposition, but at the same time slide towards queer: 'He seems to be both fascinated and repelled; praising and recoiling in horror at the same time. It was very peculiar.'