

Pleasure in the Gap:
Kate Lilley's Cross-Pollinated Poetic
and Academic Discourses

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So *it was* I began
to write my sins
in water¹

Under the guise of literal temporality and formal brevity, Kate Lilley's untitled tercet (hereafter '66') bespeaks three recurring interests of the language poetry effort: the poem foregrounds the practices of writing and reading, dissolves the synthesis of form and content, and challenges the notion of generic categorisation. Perhaps a tripartite approach is incongruous to the essence of her work, which like all language poetry, resists such reductionist impositions of intent. Having voiced this scepticism, however, which will become the refrain of this discussion, it is in the interest of the writer and reader—flavoured by pedagogical context—to collectivise and inventorise. As Daniel Chandler posits in favour of transparent models of discussion, creating categories promotes organization instead of chaos.² This poem's reductive categorisation will therefore constitute my formal logic: discursive sanity is assured.

While Lilley's textual products are ultimately Australian, her predispositions and persuasions towards contemporary American culture

¹ Kate Lilley, *Versary* (Cambridge: Salt Publishing 2002) p. 66. Hereafter referred to as '66'.

² Daniel Chandler, *An Introduction to Genre Theory* (23 May 2003 [cited 1 June 2007]); available from <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/intgenre/intgenre.html>.

and literary history are unwavering.³ From her pop-culture imagery⁴ to her pop-ularised theory,⁵ Lilley's poetic and academic substance is intercontinental, a melange of the Australian-American. In her own words, the American language poets (and the respective Australian contingency in figures such as John Tranter) resurrected her poetic impulse.

It was certainly my interest in the language poets which brought me back to writing poetry which I had more or less stopped doing during the years in which I was doing my PhD (on elegy, in London) and after that becoming an academic. It seemed to take a long time for me to work out how to link the 2 up and language poetry was crucial in that (though I had always been a fan of ashbery & new york school - & its Australian resurgence in Tranter, Forbes, Gig Ryan).⁶

Consequently it is interesting to trace the degree to which Lilley's poetic and academic discourses simultaneously employ and resist the tropes of the American language writing tradition, and ultimately to gauge whether she might be labelled 'definitively postmodern' - regardless of whether this expression is oxymoronic.

Mobilised in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, the geographical and epistemological origins of the language writing movement are, like the works themselves, decentered. On the West Coast Robert Greiner and Barrett Watten's *This* magazine was first circulated in 1971. Consisting of twelve editions, the latter nine edited solely by Watten, the magazine celebrated this new poetic phenomenon as the creative materialisation of a new literariness, one focussed on theory and poetry for the sake of themselves. Literary circles such as the modern New York School spawned the similarly oriented L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, the contribution of which to the language enterprise was so pronounced that its

³ It is by happy chance, and worthy of momentary digression, to note that the poem chosen to structure this discussion appears on page 66 of *Versary*, to be read as an undoubtedly unconscious homage to 'highway 66', the great trans-American roadway.

⁴ Lilley, 'Nicky's World' in *Versary*, p.5.

⁵ Lilley, 'As Is' in *Versary*, p.76.

⁶ Electronic interview between author and Kate Lilley held on 3 June 2007.

mathematically balanced title has become synonymous with the name of the movement itself.

To inventorise the thematic and technical interests of language writing is self-defeating. The works within *This* and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, as well as those scribed since, resist generic reductionism. Although numerous attempts to ‘tropeify’ have been made, some more convincing than others, all discussions inevitably hesitate to impose finite rules and meanings. This is not to suggest that scholarship in the field is devoid of practical application, but rather that the reader is contractually obliged to engage in continually contextualised, unendingly qualified, theoretical banter. Michael Delville’s final chapter in his work *The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and the Boundaries of Genre* illustrates how ungrounded poetry can be centred in grounded academic discourse. Similarly, Linda Reinfeld’s *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue* is refreshingly clear and conversationalist in tone. While Delville’s text remains closer to formal and technical manifestations of language writing, Reinfeld’s text is, like its subtitle, more psycho-linguistically aware. The complementary combination of the two will constitute the theoretical spine of this discussion. Lilley’s *Versary* and her essay ‘Tranter’s Plots’ will be read comparatively in light of these and other sources.

*‘Writing’ and ‘reading’ as practice or image: Lilley’s
interest in process as result*

‘66’ self-references its process of production—the verb ‘to write’—which foregrounds Lilley’s interest in process as result. Rather than conventional poetry’s focus on plainspoken lyrical voice, narrative, or affect, language poetry extols the pre-theoretical practices of writing and reading as the only real imperative of language. John Tranter metaphorises writing and poetry as constitutionally inseparable:

The difference between a poet writing a poem and a poet having a lyrical impulse is the difference between...a farmer ploughing a paddock and [the actor] Bryan Brown playing a farmer ploughing a paddock.⁷

⁷ John Tranter, ‘Four Divisions and a Prose-Poem on the Road to Poetics,’ *Meanjin* 47, no. 4 (1988).

Regardless of technological and syntactic evolution, the procedure of writing, as a process of individual cognitive materialisation, is at the heart of poetic discourse. Delville insists that language writing deliberately undermines the phonocentric assumption that poets can spontaneously express themselves and use language as if it were a transparent medium for their innermost thoughts and feelings.⁸ On the contrary, language poetry uses language as a ‘thing-in-itself, providing its own terms of reference, being simultaneously the signifier and the signified’.⁹ Or as Lilley writes critically about the work of John Tranter, words are preserved as ‘potent floating signifiers, continually emptied and replenished: to be written, to be read.’¹⁰ Read as the manifestation of these three sentiments, Lilley’s interest in the materiality of writing is anything but transparent. She posits writing as a mutable image: one that is both her poetic impulse ‘so it was I began / to write...’ and her narrative proper ‘...to write my sins / in water’.

Conventional poetry’s interest in a transparent writing process is a consequence of its oral performative tradition as a literary form addressed to a *listening audience*. On the contrary, language poetry’s definitively *written* and *read* communicative interest presupposes the poetry’s self-consciousness to its practical production and reception. ‘66’ therefore delineates the speaker-listener relationship by referring (by omission) to the practice of readership as the necessary ‘other’ in the dialogic process of text production.

In his work on the relationship between psychology and writing, Douglas Vipond distinguishes the concepts of the addressed-audience, or the ‘hearers’, and the metaphoric-audience that presupposes a passive recipient and authoritative writer. Narrative studies theorists make a similar distinction between the figures of the ‘actual reader’ and the metaphorised ‘narratee’.¹¹ These conceptions of readership have spawned a series of now

⁸Michael Delville, *The American Prose Poem: Poetic Form and Boundaries of Genre* (Gainesville University Press of Florida, 1998), p.194.

⁹John Kinsella, *Introduction to the Australian Poetry Anthology* ([cited 31 May 2007]); available from <http://www.johnkinsella.org/essays/introduction.html>.

¹⁰Kate Lilley, ‘Tranter’s Plots,’ *Australian Literary Studies* 14, no. 1 (1989). Cited 31 May 2007 <http://www.austlit.com/a/lilley-k/1989-tranter-als.html>.

¹¹Jonathon Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.87.

infinitely rejectable claims about the practice and status of writers and readers.

Anthony Paré postulates and desolates three presumptions about audience. First, multiple readers do not constitute one monolithic 'audience', as the collective term might suggest. The dictum of one of Paré's social workers -- 'I work with one pen and twenty hats' -- alludes to the necessarily indeterminate subjectivity of multiple readers. Second, the writer-reader relationship is not temporary or limited to the text. On the contrary, the reader's relationship with the author or text often exists prior to, and continues after, the textual encounter.¹² Finally, the writer-reader relationship is not monologic, in which writers speak and readers listen. Despite the prevailing celebrity of Barthes' 'The Death of the Author', the epistemological heritage of this now *unprofound* postmodern presupposition is ultimately Platonic: 'once a thing is put into writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, falling into the hands of not only those who don't understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it'.¹³ Interestingly, Plato conceives of writing as 'the composition, whatever it may be', pre-emptively dispelling arbitrary generic differences.

In a moment of inter-generational and inter-disciplinary mimesis, contemporary American poet Arielle Greenberg, who is currently developing the aesthetic theory 'gurlisque', resurfaces Plato's dictum. The words of the gurlisque 'luxuriate: they roll around in the sensual while avoiding the sharpness of overt messages, preferring the curve of sly mockery to theory or revelation'. There are two major differences between the sentiments espoused by Plato and Greenberg with respect to their common beliefs in the autonomous mobility of words. Greenberg's words possess an integrity that can resist 'drifting into the hands of those who don't understand them': they are imbued with 'preference'. Furthermore,

¹²Douglas Vipond, *Writing and Psychology: Understanding Writing and Its Teaching from the Perspective of Composition Studies* (Westport: Praeger 1993), p. 25.

¹³ Plato, 'Phaedrus' (Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts-Bobbs, 1956), p.68.

her effort to develop a ‘theory’ of the gurlseque presupposes differentiation: her words are enmeshed in the taxonomy of gender.¹⁴

Returning to Lilley’s approach to audience, the following brief encounter signals her playful recognition of all three of Paré’s criticisms.

I’m Going to *stay* Inside
And read *a* Book
Until I feel like Myself¹⁵

The poem cynically portrays monological reading as a process of self-actualisation, a predictable and mechanistic procedure by which one might unlock the door of selfhood. The singular first-person pronoun is ambiguous, blurring the distinction between writer and narrator and is further confounded by a definitively writer-centred image of ‘the reader’. The poem alludes to the spatiality of reading as normatively ‘indoor’, which juxtaposes the presumption that reading is an act of mental escapism. This reference to interiority insists that reading can only occur under correct contextual conditions. Imposing such contextual parameters is illogical given reading is environmentally *independent*, requiring only reader and text. And finally, Lilley’s desperately submissive reader is parodied by their hyperbolic self-pity: they can only feel like themselves by reading the words of others.

Lilley’s tercet problematises normative conceptions of audience. The disappearance of rhyme and other ‘meaningless’ rhetorical strategies signals her foregrounded interest in semantic rather than physical qualities. Visual clues such as ambiguous capitalisation and italics replace conventionally aural tropes. The oral heritage of the ‘hearer’ is consequently debunked. Robert Greiner’s exclamation ‘I HATE SPEECH!’ resonates with language poetry’s lack of musicality while parodying the speech-based poetics of Charles Olson, whose taste for capitalisation as a grammatical signifier was compulsive. *Versary* satisfies Greiner’s urge towards the unperformative. Lilley’s poems are graphocentric (privileging of the written word) by

¹⁴Pam Brown, ‘Jumbling the Traditions: Review of Kate Lilley’s *Versary*,’ *Literary Journal of the English Association* (2004). Cited 31 May 2007, <http://www.austlit.com/a/lilley-k/versary-r-brown.html>.

¹⁵ Lilley. Untitled tercet in *Versary*, p.60.

appealing to the propinquity of reader and text during private textual encounters - visceral and aestheticised:

Precision-timed explosions create
 acres of visual illusion
 Light up your album of beautiful sights¹⁶

In a similar instance of dissolved writer-reader polarity, this time focussed on the writer, Michael Davidson writes in *The Prose of Fact*:

He wanted a writing that wanted to expose itself. He wrote as if
 not wanting nor imputing wanting. Still this was the only way to
 account for it. He wanted to write and it wrote.¹⁷

As in Lilley's tercets, the reader encounters a linguistic depthlessness in Davidson's excerpt: the Derridean moment of the mirror of a mirror—a self-devouring *mise-en-abyme*.¹⁸ The pronominal ambiguity of the final sentence, what Delville labels the gap between the narrating and narrated 'I', is bleakly reductionist and removes all agency from writing: 'it wrote'. The removal of agency does more than problematise the writer-reader relationship. Indeed, if there is no longer a discernable self the reader is left with Frederic Jameson's 'waning affect': the disappearance of affect based on the absence of a feeling subject. Lilley's poetry is, however, arguably highly affective. But it is so in accordance with Jameson's logic. The affective response to her poetry is inseparable from the foregrounded linguistic interest. We do not respond emotionally to Lilley's poems' plots, but to the literary strategies through which the plots are handled. Lilley achieves this most thoroughly by her playful subversion of the synthesis of form and content.

*Unsystematic and unsynthesised: Lilley's subversion of poetic form
 and content*

Both the narrative proper and formal structure of '66' allude to the dissolving relationship between form and content—the harmonious

¹⁶ Lilley. Untitled sapphic in *Versary*, p.95.

¹⁷ Delville, *The American Prose Poem*, p.222.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p.196.

relationship by which poetry is traditionally distinguished from prose. Percy Bysshe Shelley insists that poetry is the expression of the imagination made possible by its synthesis of form and content.¹⁹ '66' opens with a declaration by the Grand Victorian narrator, 'so it was I began'. The tone and syntax are incongruous to the pictorial space the text inhabits: a page containing only six further words. Lilley questions the value and function of form as a mediator of readers' expectations which she systematically sets up and knocks down:

Preference and orientation
are the same thing aren't they?

It's a puzzle for elocution
and lyric infrastructure²⁰

The temporal 'lyric infrastructure' of '66' is metaphorised by water. Lilley's reference to this transparent and mobile medium constitutes her literal reference to the inadequacy of form. 'To write one's sins in water' is an ironic gesture: the oxymoronic practice of materialising thought *immaterially*, or admitting a fault only for that admittance to be conveniently washed away.²¹ Here Lilley displays her poetic tendency to have her cake and eat it too: the water image referencing a formal structure while denying the functionality of that structure. Water also echoes Lilley's interest in literalising the relationship between content and form. This is not a sign of her adherence to a synthesis between the two, but of her homage to the uncanny, the awkward disjuncture between the familiar and unfamiliar. Writing in water is operationally unfamiliar, yet the two become related by a parodic synthesis of content and form: the fleeting content is reflected in the similarly fleeting form.

¹⁹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *English Essays: From Sir Philip Sidney to Macaulay* (P.F. Collier & Son 1909-1914 [cited 2 June 2007]); available from www.bartleby.com/27/23.html.

²⁰ Lilley, Kate, Untitled sapphic in *Versary*, ll.5-8 p. 91.

²¹ 'To write my sins in water' is reminiscent of the anonymous inscription on the tombstone of John Keats in the Protestant Cemetery, Rome: 'Here Lies One Whose Name was writ in Water'. Both authors reference the temporality of identity through the uncanny act of writing something of themselves in water: for Keats, his name; for Lilley, her sins.

‘Nicky’s World’ is an example of Lilley’s acute scepticism about the relation between form and content in contemporary poetic discourse. Although the poem is *prima facie* formally conventional, linearly narrated and affectively provocative, these three attributes comprise Lilley’s subversive arsenal. The poem parodies the two-dimensionality of soap operas by importing the rhetorical strategies of that pop-culture genre into the verse:

As the plot rocks back and forth on a pinhead
 Counts to fifteen very slowly
 By that time you should be alone again
 Contemplating your evening.

You could go for a ride and take a fall,
 Break your back and welcome an addiction—
 Or ask Miguel to serve drinks by the pool,
 That hunky contractor might stop by.

Finally there’s a knock at the door,
 A lady policeman shows her badge.
 She’s asking if these unusual cufflinks
 Belong to the father of your children.

Opening with a self-reference to its own fictionality, the poem ‘rocks back and forth on a pinhead’, metronomic and predictable. Here Lilley references narrative time as a stylised generic convention. The discursive time it takes us to read the relatively short poem, to engage with its affective content, is completely incongruous to the narrative time in which the events occur. Like a soap opera, it skips between a time and place continuum that is decentered and non-linear. Bob Perelman is similarly interested in time relations stating that ‘attempts to posit an idealised narrative time [for poetry] would only blur perception of the actual time of writing and reading.’²²

The three stanzas of equal length satisfy the Aristotelian principle that a reader is pleased by the rhythm of a text’s ordering. Again, Lilley subverts this reader expectation by filling her ‘body’ stanza with images of

²²Delville, *The American Prose Poem*, p.198.

disparate plot-catalyst worth. ‘Going for a ride, welcoming an addiction and asking Miguel to serves drinks by the pool’ are treated indifferently— simply listed as a string of unrelated plot fillers. The final stanza opens with a visual clue that conclusion approaches: “finally”, in true melodrama, the poem leaves its reader (or viewer) on edge, necessitating a sequel. ‘Nicky’s World’ is subsequently positioned as the first poem in the anthology rendering it a prolepsis to Lilley’s interest in serialisation.

Mirroring the interpellation of the affective and the linguistic in the conclusion of ‘Nicky’s World’, Lilley critically writes of Tranter’s poetry:

The subject of self-censure, lyric pathos and epiphany, are often granted a big moment at the last minute: ...high modernist despair, linked to control closure and cadence as the aesthetic consolation prize.²³

Lilley makes an even more literal reference to the synthesis of form and content in ‘As Is’. But most emphatically, and demanding diversion, this poem evinces her interest in lyricising theory. ‘Letters and figures’, writes Reinfeld, ‘have always been the stuff of poetry: the twisting of literality and the decomposition of figure characterise both the poetry and the critical writing of our time.’²⁴ Reinfeld’s observation refers to the mutability of poetic and academic discourses, and more obtusely, to the redefinition of theory as content: theory turned inwards on itself takes the voice of poetry.²⁵ Lilley’s academic interest in literary theory and history pervades both her scholarly and poetic work, from her preface to *Margaret Cavendish: The Blazing World and other writings* to her essay on John Tranter’s Plots, she popularises theory as a mass-consumable and producible entity.

The relationship between theory (as content) and form is literalised in ‘As Is’. The poem reads, like the wider anthology, as the meeting point between pop-culture imagery and a dictionary of rhetorical terminology. By combining the discordant registers of a ‘raincoat’s floral lining’ and the ‘garment district’ with ‘chiasmus, strophe and antistrophe’, Lilley compels the reader to engage in terminological and epistemological reassessment.

²³Lilley, ‘Tranter’s Plots’, p.4.

²⁴Linda Reinfeld, *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), p.26.

²⁵Ibid. p.21.

Theory is ‘undressed’, taken out of the garment district, and afforded the platonic freedom to drift about all over the place. Strophe and antistrophe are read doubly as both a literal reference to the poem’s unconventional metrical form and a metaphorised reference to the unconventional form of the garment district. As Lilley writes of Tranter:

The strategy of taking an alien word and relocating it in poetry ... or making strange a very familiar word like ‘verandah’, of putting apparently simple words like ‘plot’ and ‘track’ through their paces, or bringing an etymology into focus...create[s] a rippling surface of verbal intemperance and motility, even at the risk of exploding into incoherence.²⁶

The semantic relations between the four stanzas of ‘As Is’ reflect the sentiment of polarity evinced by the term ‘chiasmus’. The opening stanzas are highly accessible. ‘Local girls trying on seconds and samples / no exchange or refund’ are vivid, uncomplicated images. Conversely, ‘chiasmus of symptom and side effect / Flooding chemical debris’ is referentially ambiguous, ‘dressed up’ by discordant registers. The semantic uncertainty necessitates a second visit. Re-read, the opening stanzas are coloured by Lilley’s ensuing theoretical playfulness. Semiotic relations are rendered opaque: the raincoat’s floral lining becomes polysemous, a chiasmus of spring and winter, inside and outside, beauty and functionality.

Defying genre: dissolving the boundaries of categorisation

Arguments that any currently privileged set of stylistic conventions of academic discourse are inherently better—even that any currently privileged set of intellectual practices are better for scholarship or for thinking or for arguing or for rooting out self-deception—such arguments seem problematic now.²⁷

Peter Elbow’s scepticism towards genre espouses the commonplace belief that textual categorisation is arbitrary. But it is not, as Lilley would agree, without its uses. By stating that ‘such arguments seem problematic now’

²⁶Lilley, ‘Tranter’s Plots’, p.7.

²⁷Peter Elbow cited in Reinfeld, *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue*, p.149.

Elbow alludes to his reservation: ‘genres get distressed’²⁸, but they are not entirely defeated. Rather than dismissing genre in one carnival gesture, Elbow reflects the view of Ralph Cohen whose aim is to rescue genre from its usual role as a static taxonomy. For Cohen, genre is dynamic. Boundaries between form and content are unfixed, ‘always blurred, jumbled, mixed, or combinatory.’²⁹ Lilley’s attitude to genre is similarly dismissive of taxonomic incantations and capricious boundaries. Rather than perceiving genre as inherently aesthetic, ritualistic or ideological, Lilley subscribes to rhetorical genre, emphasising the social construction of a text as a product of writer, reader, publisher and context.

Lilley’s critical musings on the title of John Tranter’s first collection of works, ‘Parallax’, is a convenient metaphor for the multitude of ‘gaps’ that occur during the process of generic categorisation. A derivative of the sixteenth century astronomical term ‘parallax error’, the term describes the effect whereby a change in position of the viewer is registered, perceptually, as an apparent change in the position of the object viewed. More generally defined as perceptual illusion, the phenomenon can be read as the distance of displacement between conflicting readings. Consequently, the theory mobilises the subjective agency of the reader as the mediator of what must become an open-ended process of textual classification. The expression is therefore relevant to all three parts of this discussion. It concurrently refers to the gap between writer and reader, the illusions of form and content relatedness, and the shortcomings of our pedagogical tendency to generically inventorise:

It [language poetry] cannot be tracked down as a form apart from time; it inhabits its tenses actively, politically, and without respect for definition, property rights or borderline disputes. The project per se has neither permanence nor identity.³⁰

Lilley’s scepticism about a synthetic relation between form and content is self-evident. As a corollary, if form can be conceived figuratively as the empty container into which the shaping medium of content is poured³¹, then the broken relationship between the two can be read more broadly as the

²⁸ Lilley. ‘Sequel’ in *Versary*, ll.9-10 p.14

²⁹ Vipond, *Writing and Psychology*, p.36.

³⁰Reinfeld, *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue*, p.148.

³¹Vipond, *Writing and Psychology*, p.37.

insufficiency of genre, or perhaps, as Reinfeld would agree, the theoretical impossibility of any definitive categorisation of text. Here '66' supports Derrida in 'The Law of Genre' where he asserts that texts never truly belong to a genre—'not because they are unclassifiable but because a genre sign is never a referent'.³² The subversion of the Grand Victorian Novel in '66' ('so it was I began') is therefore not only formal, but generic. In one parodic breath, Lilley conflates generic convention and redistributes readerly expectation.

Problematising the 'genre' of language poetry is the concept of marginality. Traditionally conceived as that which is different from, opposed to, or excluded from the mainstream, the marginal resists self-certainty: 'the expository logic and speech derived syntax that dominate contemporary writing practice'.³³ If language poetry is, like Reinfeld insists, marginal by nature, then it presupposes a peripheral status to generically mainstream language. But the idea that a text is marginal is not enough for it to elude categorisation. Indeed, marginality presupposes at least one type of categorisation—the collection of texts that inhabit the margin. These texts are consequently imbued with a unique discursive space, one that is popularised seminally by the notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. This intercontinental and inter-generational reference is not as haphazardly imported as first may appear. It is useful in that it recognises the literary tradition of resistance to classical conceptions of genre, a resistance that was by no means first evinced by the American language effort. Like Lilley, Coleridge's notebooks are simultaneously self-referential to their formal structure while dissolving arbitrary divisions in such structure:

And in Life's noisiest hour,
There whispers still the ceaseless Love of Thee,
The heart's self-solace, and soliloquy.

(*The Notebooks*—February 1807 (1))

Genre is most commonly conceptualised on a horizontal scale. I shall refer to this easily traceable distribution of genres as 'generic breadth'. 'Nicky's World' and 'As Is' foreground the fluid mobility of generic depth by blurring modality distinctions. But Lilley does not limit herself to horizontal

³² Jacques Derrida, *The Law of Genre*, ed. W J T Mitchell, *On Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p.68.

³³ Reinfeld, *Language Poetry: Writing as Rescue*, p.151.

conceptualisations of ‘genre’. That would in fact signal an implicit respect for the confining restraints of genre. She is not only interested in dissolving the binaries of the encyclopaedic and the imaginative, or the academic and the poetic, but she also is highly devoted to surfacing what I shall term ‘generic depth’, or the socio-linguistic manifestations of the ‘high’ and ‘low’ brow.

Lilley’s fetishisation of language, a kind of grammatical and syntactic commodification, is evidenced in her lowbrow, irreverent textual play: ‘Transference fucks with your head.’³⁴ Her images are combinatory, a pastiche of 1960’s country music, literary identities and forms of the seventeenth century, and conversationalist dialogue. These ‘genres’ are not only traceable chronologically and formally, but on the public perception of their literary ‘worth’. Lilley’s poetic interest in the origins of the high/low brow polarity is mirrored conveniently in one of the postgraduate courses she has convened over the last decade on the evolution of text production and publication. The course’s recurring interest is the popularisation of text based on technological change. The introduction of the printing press during the enlightenment, for example, brought texts to a much broader audience. Pamphlets and broadsides revolutionised literary accessibility, as did entirely new genres, such as the novel. Suddenly, both high and low culture authors were competing for the same audience. Lilley poetically mimics this socio-historic phenomenon by engaging a similarly diverse readership. The generic depths of her forms are thus oriented towards the generic depth of her audience, signalling a pleasure in the ‘parallax error’.

David McCooey believes contemporary Australian poetry ‘demonstrates how poetry can renew itself in part by writing against the habits and visions of poetry itself while still seeking effects central to the poetic’.³⁵ This uncanny literary self-consciousness is at the heart of Lilley’s work: ‘someone new is crying in the most familiar way’.³⁶ Poetic and anti-poetic, stable and restless, platonic and sexed-up, ‘Nicky’s World’ and ‘As

³⁴ Lilley, Untitled sapphic in *Versary*, p.89.

³⁵ David McCooey, *Surviving Australian Poetry: The New Lyricism* (2007 [cited 1 June 2007]); available from http://australia.poetryinternationalweb.org/piw_cms/cms/cms_module/index.php?obj_id=9031.

³⁶ Lilley. ‘Countryopolitan’ in *Versary*, 1.9 p.16.

Is' are unashamedly self-conscious celebrations of two-dimensionality. O'Hara writes of his own work, with all the pragmatism of an economist,

as for measure and other technical apparatus, that's just common sense: if you're going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you. There's nothing metaphysical about it. And if you're going to write a poem, you don't want it to bore; you want it to be 'sexy' enough so that everyone will want to read it ... it makes economic sense—as a marketing strategy.³⁷

There is nothing metaphysical about Lilley's literary self-conscious act in writing against poetic habits while employing them—she is simply revelling in language's ability to do both at the same time.

Marjorie Perloff's meditations on what she calls 'poe(t)theory' lyricises Lilley's project as both poet and academic. The expression is apt not only because of its combinatory attitude to genre, but because of its grammatical playfulness, aestheticism and phonocentricity. It is, as a phrase, both theoretical and poetic. It captures the essence of the language poem as *not* one that seeks to undermine the generic convention from without but rather shows how it deconstructs itself through the act of writing.³⁸ Here we have returned to the image of writing, which has now become not only central to the language poetry effort in terms of a new 'content', but as a mechanism of generic subversion. An analogy can be drawn here with abstract expressionism's definitive disinterest in reference, focussing alternatively on the patterns that can be taken by its medium.³⁹

And so it *is*, we begin to *read* her words as water, a 'chiasmus of symptom and side effect', a criss-cross of the academic and poetic. Despite language writing's resistance of categorical reductionism, Lilley's attitude to writing, reading, form, content, and genre *can* ultimately be conceived as a string of polarities. For when she renounces a linear writer-reader relationship, she does so by playfully employing a conventional and

³⁷Mutlu Blasing Konuk, *Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry: O' Hara, Bishop, Ashbery & Merrill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.31.

³⁸Delville, *The American Prose Poem*, p.208.

³⁹Edward Larrissy, *Reading Twentieth-Century Poetry: The Language of Gender and Objects* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1990), p.172.

discernable voice. When she refuses the synthesis of form and content, she does so by creating soap-operatically conventional structures and plots. Her diffusion of the boundaries of genre is only possible because of her in-built pedagogical respect for categorisation. Her poems are accordingly anamorphic - differentiated by resemblance - 'you might look like her / she might look like me'.⁴⁰ Lilley's work maps the space between extremes, the material and immaterial, the ability to write one's sins in water. In her own words, she explores the 'direct and indirect, conscious and unconscious'.⁴¹ In true Coleridgean spirit, she satisfies her 'human tendency to run into extremes',⁴² to map out ideas on an antithetical scale so as to fully immerse her reader in the pleasure of the parallax error. And the gap is a large one: [she] 'slides on a plastic glove, enters to the elbow and says it's big'.⁴³

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⁴⁰ Lilley, 'Anamorphosis' in *Versary*, p. 80.

⁴¹ Electronic interview between author and Kate Lilley held on 3 June 2007.

⁴² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, ed. George Watson (J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1960), p.58.

⁴³ Lilley, 'Synecdoche' in *Versary*, ll.9-10, p.84.