

**Elizabeth Kirkby-McLeod**

Exegesis: The Use and Evaluation of Narrative, Lyric  
and Constraint in Conceptual Poetry

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Primary supervisor: Siobhan Harvey

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Centre for Creative Writing,  
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# Table of Contents

<b>Elizabeth Kirkby-McLeod</b>	<b>0</b>
Exegesis: The Use and Evaluation of Narrative, Lyric and Constraint in Conceptual Poetry	0
Table of Contents	1
Attestation of Authorship	2
Acknowledgements	3
Intellectual Property Rights	4
Confidential Material	5
Ethics Approval	6
Abstract	8
The Use and Evaluation of Narrative, Lyric and Constraint in Conceptual Poetry	9
Introduction	10
Truth telling in narrative poetry	12
The convergence of the conceptual and the lyrical	21
The constraint of language: telling through unoriginal words	27
Conclusion	31
Bibliography	33
Books & Journals	33
Articles	38
Podcasts/Radio Interviews	40
Other	41

## Attestation of Authorship

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

Candidate's signature:

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to Siobhan Harvey for everything in here, and to Aidan for everything out.

Thank you to Elliot and Jeremy for wanting to write poems, and to my MCW friends for wanting to read poems.

To my Heavenly Father and father in heaven - one whose perfect love often seems imperfect, and the other whose imperfect love felt so perfect - what mysteries you both remain.

---

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## Ethics Approval

This research project did not involve human participants or any other potentially contentious elements, and as such did not require approval from the AUT Ethics Committee (AUTEK).

**For my mother, who endures.**

## Abstract

*Family Instructions Upon Release* tells the story of a loving, close father-daughter relationship disrupted by depression and miscarriage, and ultimately irreparably damaged. During the father's depression, the daughter struggles with the inaccessibility of help, and the failure of words to guide or comfort. After the father makes a terrible decision, the daughter has to struggle with doubt, fear and loss, finding some answers through the birth of her own son and her identity shift from child to parent. The stage play *Twelve Angry Men* weaves through the narrative as the daughter tries to understand who is to blame for all that has occurred.

The manuscript has a strong lyrical and conceptual focus. The poems are individual lyrical pieces which together tell the story, but they also draw solely on the words found in the Penguin Classics (2006) publication of *Twelve Angry Men* (Rose, R.) and from the New Zealand Government's 'Fact Sheet 4 – Suicide and Self-Harm'.

The accompanying exegesis, *The Use and Evaluation of Narrative, Lyric and Constraint in Conceptual Poetry*, examines how conceptual uncreative poetry can be used to create a narrative of experience and what the resulting text looks and sounds like, what it means, and how closely it aligns to the truth. It further discusses the meeting points between conceptual and lyrical poetry and evaluates the success of the constraint.

The Use and Evaluation of Narrative, Lyric  
and Constraint in Conceptual Poetry

(An exegesis)

Author: Elizabeth Kirkby-McLeod

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## Introduction

When my father committed suicide in 2012, people gave words of sympathy, regret and empty hope. People used and formed language to say,

*At least he's at peace...*  
*He's in a better place...*  
*There was nothing you could have done...*

However, instead of bringing comfort, these words struck me as useless, unoriginal, lacking any real meaning. They left me wondering - what's the point of language? The same response occurred when reading most depression, suicide and grief literature. None of it captured what I was experiencing - the reality of someone I deeply love killing someone I deeply love and leaving me to live with the consequences. This soft and hopeless language, surely it can't be all we have to say?

In 2013, I came across Kenneth Goldsmith's theory of Conceptual Uncreative Writing. It's his opinion that the Modernism movement is over and that poetry needs to respond to current language concerns (Wilkinson, 2015, online). Modernist poetry, especially Imagism, was a response to the Romantics (for example, William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 6th Lord Byron, John Keats). Modernists, such as Ezra Pound, argued that Romantic poets used language to create flat, vague poetry which was too tied to the metric beat and not enough to the concrete values of language or its inherent musicality (Bernstein, 2001, online).

Goldsmith, supported by other theorists such as Marjorie Perloff, argues that the situation facing poets today is different. Now we live in an 'environment of

hyperinformation' (Perloff, 2012, pxi) where words assault us everywhere. The Conceptual Uncreative Writing movement (a movement elsewhere called unoriginal, writing through, or found poetry) responded to this - claiming that our notion of the creative has become so 'hackneyed... scripted... sentimental... debased... romanticized' it is itself uncreative (Goldsmith, 2008, p141). Faced with 'an unprecedented amount of available text' (p144) the poet's job is no longer to make more hackneyed, sentimental texts but to interact with and make sense of the vast volumes that surround us (ibid). We must, these poets claim, replace the poetic catch cry of Modernism to 'Make it New!' with the words of Jasper John: 'Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it' (Perloff, 2012, p17).

When approaching my thesis, *Family Instructions Upon Release*, I sought to put these language problems together. Could I document the experience of my father's life, depression and death, in a way that commented on the failure of language? Could I still create a 'fascinating and mysterious work' (Perloff, 2012, p22) when the words come from a place outside my own creative consciousness? Is it not just the words we encounter but how we encounter them that gives them meaning?

These questions led to my research questions, discussed in the three parts of this exegesis. Firstly, how can unoriginal poetry be used to create a narrative of experience? What would this look and sound like, what would it mean, and how closely would it have to align with how events actually unfolded? Secondly, can conceptual work have the emotional and dramatic weight of a lyrical poem? Do conceptual and lyrical poetry need to exist in opposition, as their respective proponents

often claim? (In this context 'conceptual poetry' is defined as poetry where the potential to execute the idea or constraint is as important as the resulting poems (Perloff, 2012, p14)). And thirdly, having chosen and enacted a constraint how can it be viewed to be successful?

## Truth telling in narrative poetry

In the article 'The very act of telling: Sharon Olds and writing narrative poetry' (Smith, 2005, online), poet Aaron Smith asks whether the act of telling a person's story is itself a life-giving act. In my thesis, I am seeking to tell my story - one of having a loving, close father-daughter relationship disrupted and ultimately irreparably damaged by depression and suicide. The telling might allow the relationship to live again.

However, by giving my thesis narrative energy and story, it is opened up to criticism of form - would not a memoir or novel form suit better? In her 2015 thesis, *Biomedical discourse and the discourse of the lifeworld in contemporary New Zealand poetry on a medical theme*, New Zealand poet Johanna Emeneay notes that New Zealand critics have taken precisely this view of other narrative poetry collections, especially when those works give voice to the perspective of someone caring for or loving someone through illness (p13). Poetry critic Peter Bland, for example, criticized Anne Kennedy's 2003 collection, *Sing-song*, for using poetry to push through her narrative (p18), arguing it 'would be better achieved by prose' (p19).

Yet I believe narrative energy can be at the heart of a poetry collection such as *Sing-song* while allowing the work to retain the musicality and imagery of poetry (a

point also noted by Paula Green in her *NZ Poetry Shelf* article, 'An interview: Anne Kennedy "everything was up for question, and so the thing was to keep on searching"', 2013, online). Some, like Maxine Kumin (2002), would go further, arguing that every poem should have a framework of narrative, a 'ghost-tale' (p161). *Sing-song's* narrative has, as Carol Muske would demand of poetry (2002, pp 34-35), both description and imperative. For example, Kennedy catalogues her family's search for a way to ease the eczema-baby's pain and documents 'rites' (which readers understand to be treatments) drawing on the language of religion, medicine and poetry at once:

Each time they had a new miracle  
bath they tried it with such

hopefulness.  
*She descends into the bath  
for the third time.*  
(*'Third rite'*, p62).

*Sing-song* went on to be the 2004 Poetry Winner at the Montana New Zealand Book Awards.

What follows is an investigation of three specific strengths of all poetic forms (not just conceptual or lyrical) in telling a narrative. Firstly, poetry's ability to go beyond words to make meaning. Secondly, it's fidelity to emotional truth over literal truth. And, thirdly, the growing area of poetic intertextual dialogue.

To suggest that a narrative is better told in prose ignores the fact that, until a few hundred years ago most narratives were poetic (for example, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*). It also limits the ability, quality

and significance of how poetry tells a story. As Stephen Dobyns notes in *New Word, Better Word* (2011), 'the subject matter of a poem is not simply its content...[it] is also the manner of its telling - its language and how that language is presented.' (p10).

Poets want to draw readers' attention to all parts of language, to the way we often interact with and use it without really examining it (Burt, 2016, p4). Poets use patterns, constraint, imagery, rhyme, lineation and many other devices to make readers more aware of what is being said.

When coming to the final miscarriage of the daughter and to the suicide of the father in my thesis, I used the presentation of language to challenge the nature of language to make sense, especially in cases of tragedy. To challenge language in this way, through poetry, is not new. In 1953, Oyrind Fahlstrom's *Manifesto for Concrete Poetry* addressed this issue, stating that:

changing the word order is not enough: one must knead the entire clause structure. Because thought processes are dependent on language, every attack on prevailing linguistic forms ultimately enriches worn-out modes of thought. (Marjorie Perloff, 2012, p55).

Rosemarie Waldrop later remarked that 'concrete poetry is first of all a revolt against the transparency of the word.' (p59). The way words are presented in Concrete Poetry is as important as the words used - both must give meaning. Eugen Gomringer, a key figure in the concrete movement, believed that a poem of this kind should be simple and be perceived 'visually as a whole as well as in its parts' (p64).

In my thesis poem 'A Map Of Effort' for example, I use only the words 'tried again' overlaid on a map of North Shore Hospital. Alone, those words (said for example by a character in a prose novel) would not be able to carry the catastrophic weight that they do in this visual poem. The words 'tried again' cover all other words on the map, except for the word 'emergency' and the roadway suffixes (road, street, terrace). Without the use of much coherent language we are aware that all roads lead to the hospital where the reality that the father character has once again attempted suicide awaits. There is no room for other thought, no room to make sense of data (such as the data found on the key of a map), there is only the chaotic reality of this present emergency.

Likewise, in 'Miscarriage Number 2', there is no language change after the miscarriage occurs in month five; however, a crossout is introduced. Anne Carson, studying the crossouts in Virginia Woolf's journals and manuscripts, sees crossouts as enacting a form of death, 'by a simple stroke - all is lost, yet still there,' (Fisher, 2015, p13). Carson has a special interest in how poetry can, if not show the invisible, 'suggest its existence by drawing our attention to the holes in being' (p13). Carson has used poetry in her struggle to find a way of representing, of attempting to understand, absence (ibid).

In his recent collection *Some Things to Place in a Coffin* (2017) Bill Manhire uses crossouts in a similar way at the end of the poem 'Known unto God' (pp41- 56). The poem remembers and eulogises soldiers who died in the Battle of the Somme, bringing it into the future at the end when the text shifts to be about modern day refugees off the

coast of Europe. We understand that all the characters in the poem are speaking after death and this is reinforced through the end three lines which include a crossout:

They called out while they could  
~~They called out while they could.~~  
Then they were gone for good. (p56).

The crossout provides a finality to the voices, striking at the reader the weight of the meaning of the repeated line.

A second strength of poetry in storytelling is that, 'unlike memoir, the subject matter of poetry requires no fidelity to events, but fidelity to ideas and emotions' (Dobyns, 2011, p24). Dobyns maintains that as readers we don't approach a poem because we care to understand the writer's life, but we read in order to better understand our own lives (p22).

Zarah Butcher-McGunnigle deals with truth-telling in her book length poem *Autobiography of a Marguerite* (2014). Butcher-McGunnigle refers to the project as an exercise in writing emotional truth rather than literal truth (Radio New Zealand, 2014). In the work, she writes:

I showed a short story to a friend and she sighed and  
asked if my mother had read it - I said she had, and  
that the story wasn't "true" but some of the feelings were;  
(Butcher-McGunnigle, 2014, p70)

Creative narrative which stays absolutely true to facts has been tried, most famously by Ernest Hemingway in *The Green Hills of Africa*. 'Even in the hands of a skilled writer'

says Carlos Baker in *Hemingway: the writer as artist* (1972) 'the unvarnished truth can rarely equal in emotional intensity a fictional projection of that truth' (p168). This liberty allows, says Baker, for the creation of 'the highest art' (p196).

The greatest example of this in my collection is the fact that though I did have a son after my father died, I also had a daughter while my father was still alive. The poetic narrative tells the mental health struggles of the father and the fertility and miscarriage struggles of the daughter. The daughter eventually falls pregnant after her father has died and this child brings new hope and direction to her life, illuminating the role of a parent in a way which allows her to forgive her father. I did suffer a miscarriage both the year my father first attempted suicide and another the year he died; the events do tie together both as memories and as times of doubt and loss in a way in which I can omit the truth of my daughter's birth without compromising the emotional truth of the narrative.

Highlighting the role of truth in poetry has consequences for the way it is understood and its place in societal discourse. In 'Can poetry change your life?' (Menand, 2017, online), Louis Menand responds to poets and critics who, he claims, represent poetry as being only about language (for example, Matthew Zapruder in *Why Poetry*, 2017) or who state that it is a beautiful but pointless art form (for example, David Orr in *Beautiful and Pointless: A Guide to Modern Poetry*, 2011). Menand wonders whether the way we currently distinguish fiction and nonfiction, placing poetry at the extreme end of fiction, creates an unnecessary hang up for readers, poets and critics alike. If poetry is fiction, we assume it can't have something true to say, at least not in the ordinary

sense. Menand asks whether readers really need such distinctions which, as Butcher-McGunnigle demonstrates, are much blurrier in practice than categorization allows for. In his 2017 article, Menand cites Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, which is still central for national identity in Italy, and Adrienne Rich's *Diving Into the Wreck*, which was 'an inspirational text for the women's movement' (2017, online) as examples of poetry which tells truth more than, or through, fiction, and which cannot be called pointless or interesting only for the language which is used.

The New Zealand author Joy Cowley also believes we need to challenge our categorizations of 'fact' or 'fiction' if what we are actually after is 'truth' (2010). It is Cowley's opinion that, although the stories we structure society on and claim to be history are thought of as true, they come to us through human perception and are therefore incomplete or partly fictional. Fiction, in a similar way, is thought of as not true but is actually a 'rearrangement of experience, actual or vicarious' (p21), rendering it partly true. Poetry can be the form which tells 'truth that is rarely contained in factual writing' (p22).

Billy Collins looks at this aspect of poetry in his 2002 essay 'Poetry, pleasure and the hedonist reader,' citing Keats' poem 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' as an example. In the poem Keats takes us from the decorative frieze on an urn to the imagined town, now empty, where the people on the frieze came from (pp15-16) uniquely mixing the real and the unreal, asking us to look away from the subject of the poem in order to more fully understand the truth of it (p20).

Poetry can also heighten storytelling through the movement of intertextuality, which Marjorie Perloff discusses in her essay for 'The consequence of innovation: twenty-first century poetics' (2008). This intertextual dialogue is with 'earlier texts or texts in other media or writing through or ekphrases' (p257). In her book, *Unoriginal Genius* (2012), Perloff furthers this idea, positing that the current poetic trend is the poetry of 'writing through' (p11), creating poetry which is in dialogue with other texts. Perloff traces this back to T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' – a poem perhaps ahead of its time – which was criticised for too much citation and too many borrowed lines (p2). This technique is seen often in poetry today, for example in Gregory Kan's *This Paper Boat* (2016) and Zarah Butcher-McGunnigle's *Autobiography of a Marguerite* (2014).

The narrative of my thesis is in dialogue with the 2006 Penguin Classics edition of *Twelve Angry Men* by Reginald Rose. All words used in my thesis are drawn exclusively from this copy of *Twelve Angry Men* and from the New Zealand Government's 'Fact Sheet 4 – Suicide and Self-Harm' (that noted, the derivational and inflectional affixes and the tense of words have been changed in some instances).

But the intertextuality between my thesis and *Twelve Angry Men* goes deeper. For example, no character in *Twelve Angry Men* is named, just as the characters in my work are not named. I created my characters to be known through the relationships and interactions we see between them and their reflections on each other when apart, not through what they explicitly reveal about themselves. Price, in his 2017 commentary of *Twelve Angry Men*, discusses this as also being a motivation for Rose (p19).

Rose is quoted as saying that 'almost everything I wrote in the fifties was about McCarthy,' (p22). *Twelve Angry Men*, first broadcast on television in 1954, was therefore a work which dealt with the questions that had grown out of his own experience as a juror and also with the 'larger questions about what was happening . . . within the United States,' (p23). Similarly, I aimed to deal with questions arising from my own experience of my father's depression and suicide and also questions about the growing problem of mental health disorders in New Zealand and the related levels of support.

At times, the constraint makes my thesis feel more like an act of translation, especially if translation is seen as 'companion pieces (rather than representations) of originals,' (Maxwell, 2015, p57), an act of creating a piece to be with rather than be of the original (p62). The themes of certainty and doubt and dealing with the death of a father are translated into my thesis creating a companion work, one that can be read with the original but is not a representation of it. This is further embraced and played with when the event of seeing the play *Twelve Angry Men* creates much of the opening act in the poems from 'Two Tickets Please' to 'Act 2 For The Father'.

This is not to say that *Twelve Angry Men* and my thesis share the same plot or even the same story-telling devices. On a surface level are the differences in form — one is a script, one a poetry collection. Additionally, *Twelve Angry Men* has a 'double plot' (Price, 2017, p31): within the unfolding of the 'discourse' (p32) plot in the jury room - which occurs in real time - is the 'story' (p31) plot where 'jurors jump back and forward

in the timeline, worrying over and often returning to different events referred to in the trial' (ibid). Although the father and daughter characters in my work do reflect on past events and their consequences, my work develops over a linear, unidirectional timeline. Having said that, time slows and speeds up within the series - going to see *Twelve Angry Men* one afternoon spans several poems at the beginning of the collection and then several years speed by in the poem 'After'.

These strengths of poetry, its ability to go beyond words to make meaning, its fidelity to emotional truth over literal truth, and the growing area of poetic intertextual dialogue, show that poetry has a strong claim to narrative storytelling. This established, the question for the poet then becomes whether to create a conceptual work or lyrical story.

### The convergence of the conceptual and the lyrical

Kenneth Goldsmith (2008) quotes Craig Dworkin's definition of conceptual poetry as 'poetry of intellect rather than emotion' (p138). The experience of the poem is found in the way it is achieved, not in what is created. In fact, Goldsmith himself doesn't expect people to read much of his work, saying 'my books are better thought about than read' (Goldsmith & Mandl, 2011, online) and describes them as 'insanely dull and unreadable' (ibid). Goldsmith seems to suggest that you cannot create something that is both intellectually rich and also emotionally moving. This is a division found repeatedly in my reading - an assumption that if something is emotionally accessible it must be conceptually weak. In 'On difficulty in poetry', Reginald Shephard (2008,

online) argues that accessibility is a real threat to poetry, reducing poems to merely annotations to the world instead of additions.

This division comes from both sides, says Alec Wilkinson in a *New Yorker* piece on Kenneth Goldsmith. 'Lyric poets tend to be allergic to conceptual poetry' (Wilkinson, 2015, online). In the article he quotes poet C. K. Williams who dismissed conceptual poetry as 'silliness' and claims it removes expression, feeling and beauty from writing. Matthew Zapruder wrote a piece in *The New York Times* entitled 'Understanding poetry is more straightforward than you think' (2017, online) where, in part, he is critical of poets trying to hide meaning, or making a poem hard for the reader to understand. His piece was published on July 10, 2017, and by July 13, *The Poetry Foundation* had published a reply by Johannes Goransson (2017, online) saying that Zapruder's emphasis on accessibility was a dismissal of the excessive and the strange in poetry. No-one seemed to wait to celebrate the fact that *The New York Times* was giving space to poetry before the divisions fell.

All art is a reflection of its time and place and reflects 'that period's self-definitions and aspirations, its frustrations and failures' (Dobyns, 2011, p187). All poetry, whether conceptual or lyrical, battles with its place in our world of hyperinformation. In practice, walls are not as easy to form as some might like. For example, appropriating text is often associated with conceptual poets and their work; however, one of the traditional goals of lyrical poetry, as discussed by Stephen Burt (2016), seems very similar. Burt states that it is often the goal of lyrical poetry for a reader to adopt - as their own - the poet's distinctive words (p4), allowing the reader to, in the words of Anne Williams,

'assume the perspective of another individual consciousness' (Walpert, 2017, p233).

Lyrical poetry always expects the reader to appropriate the words of the poet as a way of expressing something about their own interior life or consciousness. Appropriative poetry makes this equally the goal of the poet.

Before I started working on my thesis, I unquestionably accepted the divisions between conceptual and lyrical poetry. My conceptual project wasn't going to be lyrical at the start, which on reflection seems quite an oversight. As Scott Brewster notes, 'love, death and nature have remained stable features of lyric poetry' (2009, p4). I had to be repeatedly encouraged by my supervisor (New Zealand poet and academic Siobhan Harvey) to find the lyrical voice within the concept, and I have come to see that conceptual poetry doesn't need to throw away the history of the lyrical poetic mode but instead can add to it. Take this definition of traditional lyrical poetry by Dobyns: 'what is being woven together are thoughts, ideas, memories, emotions and sense data, as well as those elements of sound and rhythm that make up the form.' (2011, p111). In an unoriginal concept work you could add that the source text and its themes and ideas are also being woven in. Adding these concepts does not require removing the other traditional elements of lyrical poetry. You can become an innovator and risk-taker within the forms and rules of poetry (Komunyakaa, 2002, p137).

A lyrical voice and narrative increases the reader's experience of a conceptual work in terms of understanding and pleasure. Concept can also stop lyrical work from being too introspective, especially lyrical work which is based on self-history. Bryan Walpert, in "The zodiac of his own wit': Poetry and history (or how to write a good lyric poem

about history)” (2017), says that lyrical poetry based on historical events (either personal or global) risks a reader reaction of ‘so what?’ (p236). Walpert advocates ensuring that the historical facts are subservient to the imagination of the poet (p232), ensuring the poem awakes the sympathies of the reader (p231). Using a strong poetic concept or constraint also forces the historical facts to be subservient, both to the concept or constraint and to the imaginative solutions of the poet.

Zarah Butcher-McGunnigle’s *Autobiography of a Marguerite* (2014) contains a middle section which represents the joining of the conceptual and lyrical. The section is an unfinished autobiography with many unfinished sentences and an unstable ‘I’ speaker. The lines are grouped at various lengths page by page giving the visual perspective of lyrical poetry. We see a progression of story from birth, the appearance of the illness which plagues the narrator throughout, and the narrator separating from her family by attending university in a different city. The series ends with a sense of hope and respite when the narrator begins reading and writing again.

However, throughout the lines are footnotes of found material, all of which have been sourced from works by other Marguerites (p41), Marguerite Duras and Marguerite Yourcenar. This conceptual element acts as a way for us to see the narrator ‘reinterpreting her life’ (Butcher-McGunnigle, 2014, Radio New Zealand). The footnotes often appear next to pronouns or identifying nouns like ‘father’ giving us further ideas about the characters who inhabit the text. The footnotes are also at times juxtaposed with the emotion or content of the main text showing the narrator’s awareness of self.

For example:

After that I stopped having birthday parties, because  
I didn't have any friends to invite (Butcher-McGunnigle, 2014, p52)

is attached to the footnote:

38: Cheap melodrama (p52).

Butcher-McGunnigle's work weaves in conceptual elements which make the unfolding story in many ways more accessible without weakening it as art or diminishing its beauty. She acknowledges that there are many stories about Marguerites already available to us in our world of hyperinformation, yet she has used them to create a new narrative.

*Autobiography of a Marguerite* dismisses the barriers put up between conceptual and lyrical poetry and poets, choosing instead to meld both the conceptual and lyrical to create art which reflects our times and concerns. It demonstrates that lyrical poetry can be 'viewed as an umbrella term under which a variety of verse forms shelter' (Brewster, 2009, p4), conceptual included.

In my own work I wished to include a poem where the father apologizes. I reached first for a concept inspired by Janet Zweig's sculpture piece *Her Recursive Apology* (1993), which is a list of 4,386,375 printed apologies. I went through *Twelve Angry Men* and cataloged a list of the apologies within it, for example:

I beg pardon, oh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry...  
Take it easy. The whole thing's unimportant...  
Excuse me, look, I was a little excited, well - you know how it is - I didn't mean  
to get nasty or anything...  
All right, take it easy, all right, forget it, come on now, it's all over, I apologize...

The feedback (by my supervisor, Siobhan Harvey) was that the poem lacked weight, meaning, direction and relevance to the thesis collection. I took these same phrases and added lyrical and narrative form:

She finds flimsy slips  
of folded paper  
  
inside a pocket  
*I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.*  
  
on top of the fan  
*I was a little excited, I didn't mean it.*  
  
propped under a chair leg  
*please, please, it doesn't matter now.*  
  
in the outside ashtray  
*forget it, come on now, it's all over...* ('His Little Apologies').

The convergence of the conceptual and the lyrical made this poem alive to meaning and importance – elements that had been lacking when viewing it only as a conceptual exercise.

Kenneth Goldsmith refers to his 'thinkership' rather than readership (Wilkinson, 2015), a subtle suggestion that what his conceptual work lacks in meaning-making it makes up in intellectual richness. This may be so; however, by joining the conceptual and

lyrical it is possible to have both. For example, in *This Paper Boat* (2016), Gregory Kan creates a collection simultaneously examining his life, his family story, and the life of New Zealand poet Robin Hyde (Iris Wilkinson). He does this through lifting and interweaving 'quotations and biographical facts, and adapted images and phrases' (Kan, 2016, p79) from her work. The reader is not explicitly told when this is occurring; sometimes Kan uses the combined letter and punctuation mark 'l.' but much of the time it is up to the reader to decide. This conceptual element makes the work deeply rewarding for the reader who seeks both to read and to think about the text: as reviewer Elizabeth Coleman notes in *takahē* (August 2016), 'his collection contains much academic depth for the student of poetry. However, it is neither weighty nor inaccessible - it is fascinating' (online).

In my thesis the concept of unoriginal poetry is used to create a lyrical collection which tells a narrative. This exegesis will now look at the use and evaluation of constraint in poetry.

## The constraint of language: telling through unoriginal words

In 2009 Jan Baetens and Jean-Jacques Poucel looked at the role of constraint in their essay 'The Challenge of Constraint'. Marjorie Perloff refers to this work in her book *Unoriginal Genius* (2012), quoting:

A constraint is a self-chosen rule (i.e. different from the rules that are imposed by the use of a natural language or those of convention); it is also a rule that is used systematically throughout the work . . . constraints are not ornaments: for the writer, they help generate the text, for the reader they help make sense of it. (p80).

Canadian poet Christian Bök's work, *Eunoia* (2001), is an exceptional example of using constraint in poetic writing. *Eunoia* is made up of five chapters, each using only one of the available vowels (Jaeger, 2009, p46), and this constraint must also be alluded to in the text itself. The opening paragraph of Chapter A demonstrates the effect of this constraint:

Awkward grammar appals a craftsman. A Dada bard as daft as Tzara damns stagnant art and scrawls an alpha (a slapdash arc and a backward zag) that mars all stanzas and jams all ballads (what a scandal). A madcap vandal crafts a small black ankh – a hand-stamp that can stamp a wax pad and at last plant a mark that sparks an ars magna (an abstract art that charts a phrasal anagram). A pagan skald chants a dark saga (a Mahabharata), as a papal cabal blackballs all annals and tracts, all dramas and psalms: Kant and Kafka, Marx and Marat. A law as harsh as a fatwa bans all paragraphs that lack an A as a standard hallmark. (Bök, 2001, p12).

Each chapter has further constraints added; for example, each chapter 'must describe a culinary banquet, a prurient debauch, a pastoral tableau and a nautical voyage' (Jaeger, 2009, p46–47). Not satisfied, Bök required that each sentence is also under constraint, needing to 'accent internal rhyme through the use of syntactical parallelism' (p47).

*Eunoia* follows closely in the footsteps of Oulipo poets (such as Jacques Roubaud and Michel Benabou) and sees the use of constraint as a form of liberation (Jaeger, 2009, p47). However, Bök sets conditions on the use of constraint, including that constraints should be easy to explain but difficult to execute, should be mentioned in the created text, and should exhaust the potential of the constraint (p46). For example, Bök

believes that in *Eunoia* he uses up to 98% of the available vocabulary in each vowel section (p47).

In my thesis the use of constraint is also viewed as liberation. By using unoriginal language I liberated myself from the need to find the language that would be adequate to capture my experience while also making the comment that that language does not exist. Examining my work against Bök's 'constraints on constraints' I reflect as follows:

The constraint should be easy to explain: The constraint is explained in two sentences in the preface of my thesis.

The constraint should be difficult to execute: The words found in the 2006 Penguin Classics copy of *Twelve Angry Men* and the New Zealand Government's 'Fact Sheet 4 – Suicide and Self-Harm', had to, without exception, be the only words used throughout the thesis and needed to help generate the themes and content of poems. This wasn't been easy. For example, I created a narrative thesis centering on a father and daughter relationship when the word 'daughter' doesn't appear in the source material. Similarly, the daughter struggles to conceive and successfully carry a baby to term despite the word 'baby' also not being available.

Kenneth Goldsmith maintains that 'the trick in uncreative writing is airtight accountability' (Goldsmith, 2008, p142). Therefore, I don't think he would approve of my choice to allow the derivational and inflectional suffixes and the tense of words to change from those found in the source text. However, doing so allowed me access to

one of the great flexibilities of English: it has more word endings than other Western languages. This is the result 'of the loss of inflections in the unadorned syllable' says Dobyns (2011, p71). This may be a choice too far for many true conceptualists and could be seen as weakening the difficulty of the constraint.

The constraint should be mentioned in the text: I did not initially do this. I didn't see the need to when the constraint was explained in the preface of the thesis. However, it became clear that even those very close to the work (such as my supervisor Siobhan Harvey) were unclear about the constraint within the poems. After discussion with Siobhan Harvey, the poem 'Exhibit A' was added at the beginning of the collection.

The constraint should be exhaustive: I transcribed all nouns, verbs, adverbs and adjectives from *Twelve Angry Men* (Rose, 1955) (including the introduction and miscellaneous pages) and created an alphabetised list of over 2,000 unique words which I then used as a reference for all of my poetry. To date I have not done the work to see how many of these words were used in my thesis, so am not able to say empirically how exhaustive the constraint was.

It is clear that, on a simple level, my thesis keeps to Bök's ideals for constraint; however, I have not pursued it to his level. Nevertheless, I believe my thesis allows for a similar experience for the reader, enabling them to 'enjoy both the 'artfulness' of its procedural constraint as well as the final object' (Jaeger, 2009, p50). Unlike other conceptual poets, Bök does not throw out any need for meaning-making but provides readers 'with a series of distinct narratives, which are organised not only by formal

procedure, but also by content' (p51). A 'double orientation' (p52) which my work also seeks.

## Conclusion

When I began writing my thesis, *Family Instructions Upon Release*, I aimed to document the experience of my father's life, depression and death, and to comment on the failure of the language we provide, both as a society and within the mental health services, at times of tragedy. As a reader I knew that poetry collections that provide a narrative journey associated with mental illness, such as *Walking to Africa* by Jessica Le Bas (2009) and *Jackself* by Jacob Polley (2016), have the ability to tell a story in ways that draw attention to the language itself. I also wished to use conceptual poetry to respond to our age of hyperinformation by using the constraint of finding all the words for my collection from within the work of another, in this case Penguin Classics (2006) publication of *Twelve Angry Men* and from the New Zealand Government's 'Fact Sheet 4 – Suicide and Self-Harm'.

What I discovered was that the series really began to tell the story of an unnamed father in relationship with an unnamed daughter, and that this was similar to the way Reginald Rose used the interactions and relationships between the twelve unnamed jurors (Price, 2017, p19) to reveal the story and their own hidden natures. It became clear that the source text was not just a repository of words but a work I was in the act of translating (Maxwell, 2015, p57).

During the research I discovered that there are other young New Zealand poets, including Zarah Butcher-McGunnigle and Gregory Kan, exploring the poetry which results from placing your work in dialogue with the work of others. Their works, which are both conceptual and lyrical and carry a narrative, reaffirmed to me that this is an area of language and poetry that can result in intellectually and emotionally rich work. This position is counter to that of many poets and critics (on both sides) who set up barriers between the two forms of poetry. I hope my work can be a further example that there are places of intersection between different poetic practices.

Can this poetry redeem my relationship with my father? Can it influence in any way the language we use in association with suicide, or add to the call for mental health policy change emergent in New Zealand? Louis Menand notes that some will say no, the external ramifications of poetry are minimal (Menand, 2017, online). Menand is more hopeful. He says that people write and read poetry not just for the beautiful language or interesting conceptual and constraint experiments but for encouragement and guidance. The effect of my work may be 'very, very tiny, but most change comes in increments' (ibid).

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