The Theory and Practice of Poetry
A Symposium presented by the Writing and Society Research Centre, UWS
Friday 8 November, 10:00am – 5:00pm
Bankstown Campus, 3.G.55

Convened by Gavin Smith

SEMINAR PROGRAMME
10:00 – 10:30am Welcome, registration and morning tea.
10:30 – 12:00noon Keynote address delivered by Dr Jacob Edmond
12:00 – 1:00pm Lunch
1:00 – 2:30pm Conference Panel, papers by Tom Lee, Fiona Burrows, and Kate Middleton
2:30 – 3:00pm Afternoon tea
3:00 – 4:30pm Round Table Panel, featuring Peter Kirkpatrick, Hazel Smith, Chris Andrews, Richard James Allan
4:30 – Final observations and close.
In his famous thought experiment, philosopher John Searle imagined a “Chinese room” in which an English speaker would follow a series of rules to respond correctly to questions in Chinese without ever understanding either the questions or the answers. Searle’s 1980 article twins anxieties about what it means to know and understand and, indeed, to be human in an age of digital reproduction with a new take on the European philosophical tradition’s longstanding association of Chinese with unknowing repetition—an association that in our current era of globalization also hints at anxieties around postcolonial and multicultural challenges to European and Anglophone universalism.

Since Searle wrote his article, a significant number of contemporary poets have taken what I call an iterative turn: a turn towards repetition, rewriting, versioning, performance, and other uses of pre-existing material in poetry. The iterative turn in poetry can be understood not just as a shift in rhetorical form but also as an ethical and political response to the crisis in authority to which Searle also implicitly responds: the crisis engendered by the rise of new technologies of reproduction and the increasing pace of globalization.

One part of this iterative turn in poetry has involved a focus on language, dialect, and translation. Writers and artists like Caroline Bergvall, Kamau Brathwaite, and Jonathan Stalling highlight processes of what Jing Tsu calls “literary governance”: the coercion and power play involved in the use and transmission of language and in the authority claimed for the “native speaker” and the “mother tongue.” These writers stress how literary governance depends on iteration for its authority by repeating and diverging from standardized spelling, script, and sound, and from literary and cultural tradition through rewritings, homophonic translations, shibboleth, and other iterative techniques. Like Searle, they use acts of repetition and translation to address what it means to experience words and knowledge. But they also in different ways question his Orientalism and his accounts of knowledge, language, experience, the body, and the machine. In Bergvall’s, Brathwaite’s, and Stalling’s poetry and poetics, I find new ways to think about poetic knowledge, experience, and authority in our age of digital technology and globalization.

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Jacob Edmond writes on contemporary poetry in Chinese, Russian, and English. He is author of *A Common Strangeness: Contemporary Poetry, Cross-Cultural Encounter, Comparative Literature* (Fordham UP, 2012), co-editor of *Recentring Asia: Histories, Encounters, Identities* (Brill, 2011), and co-editor and co-translator of *Yang Lian’s Unreal City: A Chinese Poet in Auckland* (Auckland UP, 2006). His articles have appeared in journals such as *Comparative Literature, Contemporary Literature, Poetics Today*, and *The China Quarterly*. He teaches at the University of Otago, New Zealand.
Dr Tom Lee – 'Some ideas and affects with which I have had acquaintance during moments of poetic writing'

In this paper I use the rhetorical devices of essayistic writing to tell stories about thought objects (“mental entities”) and affects nourished during moments of poetry writing. One way of theorising this exercise would be to call it an experimental investigation into the relationship between poetics, rhetoric and narrative. It is motivated by an effort to rethink the relationship between these styles of expression and communication. I combine poetry, rhetoric and storytelling in a way that differs from conventional examples. Rather than edit out the exegetical inclinations of a practicing poet I make them an explicit and functioning part of the poetic process. The genres of the thought objects I will be investigating include: affects (such as impotent erotomania), canonical poets (such as Paul Celan), things (such as wire), ancestry (familial, cultural and ecological) and places (such as Central West NSW). This undertaking is prompted in part by the mode quasi-essayistic mode adopted by Gerald Murnane in his two recent works, Barley Patch and A History of Books.

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Tom Lee is a writer who works across the genres of prose fiction, poetry, academic criticism and the essay. He recently received a doctoral qualification with the Writing and Society Centre at UWS, after spending three and a half years writing about the German writer of prose fiction W.G. Sebald. Tom has recently written about feelings of the feet, the social history of burrs and thistles, stiles and paddock architecture and literary lists. He has published work with Environmental Humanities, M/C Journal, Cordite, Rabbit, Overland Magazine, Southerly Journal, Blackbox Manifold, Steamer, Seizure and The Reader.

Dr Fiona Burrows – ‘Synaesthetic Metaphor and the Poetic Impulse

In considering both the ‘philosophy’ of poetry and the neurological underpinnings of the poetic/metaphoric impulse, my research brings the study of poetry and poetics together with the scientific field of synaesthesia research. I suggest that a consideration of the current findings in neurological research, particularly in the area of synaesthesia, can offer a new and valuable interdisciplinary approach for thinking about the role of metaphor in poetic theory and practice.

Synaesthesia is a neurological condition defined by the OED as "the production of a sense impression relating to one sense or part of the body by stimulation of another sense or part of the body". Recent research suggests that humans have an inherent capacity for inter-sensory association which begins in early infancy, when perception is thought to be synaesthetic in nature. The poetic implications of this universal synaesthetic capacity lie in the nexus between sensory experience and its metaphorical representation through language; for poets, whose manipulation of language often relies on metaphoric connections, the implications of this synaesthetic stimulation would be greater.
In this paper I will show how current findings in neurology and scientific synaesthesia research are relevant to the study of poetry, drawing on my doctoral research which establishes the prevalence of synaesthetic ideas in the poetry of the early twentieth century. I will discuss the implications of a universal synaesthetic capacity, including the role that synaesthetic metaphor plays in language, and suggest that it underpins our impulse towards poetic expression and poetic understanding.

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Fiona Burrows currently works full-time as an Academic Skills Adviser at The University of Western Australia. In the past she has taught English Literature, Creative Writing, and Communication Studies at UWA, and was nominated for a teaching award in 2012. She submitted her PhD thesis, entitled “Words of Shape and Shade: Synaesthesia in the Poetry and Poetics of the Early Twentieth Century” at the beginning of the year, and has since been continuing her research in the area of poetry and poetics, as well as considering the applications of synaesthesia research to tertiary education. She is passionate about the importance of interdisciplinary research and establishing links between the arts and sciences.

Kate Middleton – ‘What do we talk about when we talk about poetry? Some false starts’

This paper takes the form of a series of false starts as I consider both the macro view suggested by a proposed "philosophy of poetry" and the micro worlds suggested by individual poems. In taking the propositions laid out by the convener of this conference as my starting point I raise and attempt to answer questions such as "What does a practitioner know?" and "What do we speak about well and less well when we talk about poems?" My paper forms both a personal response as a practitioner and a series of critical readings of poets such as Horace, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Anne Carson and Novica Tadic. Contradictory in spirit, this paper will attempt to mimic the experience of entering into a poem.

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Kate Middleton is a poet and essayist whose first book, Fire Season (Giramondo 2009) won the WA Premier's Award for Poetry and was shortlisted for The Age Poetry Book of the Year. She holds degrees from the University of Melbourne, Georgetown University and the University of Michigan, and is currently completing a DCA at the University of Western Sydney. From 2011-2012 she was the inaugural Sydney City Poet. In September 2013 her second book Ephemeral Waters was published by Giramondo.

ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION

With Prof. Hazel Smith, Dr Peter Kirkpatrick, Dr Chris Andrews and Richard James Allan