UNIVERSITY OF READING

SUBLIME LUNGS AND POETS ON BREATH

PhD

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ABSTRACT

This thesis contains two elements: a new collection of poetry entitled *Sublime Lungs* and a critical thesis entitled *Poets on Breath*. The poetry collection comprises new poems on the subject of the author's asthma and other lung diseases, and breath and breathing across a wide variety of geographies, cultures and chronologies. In the context of contemporary health humanities, the thesis looks at the topic of breath in the critical work of Charles Olson and as practised by poets writing in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries, namely the poetry and other writings of two asthmatic poets, Elizabeth Bishop and Elaine Feinstein, and the medical writings in the poetry, plays and novels of chest clinician, Dannie Abse. The thesis opens with an historical survey and consideration of the principles of health humanities. It ends with a chapter on the author's poetry collection and the consolations in its writing.

DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

Katharine Noakes

1 July 2023

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PART A—SUBLIME LUNGS

SUBLIME LUNGS

KATE NOAKES

For Ian,
the one who breathes with me

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Acknowledgements

[Redacted on publication of thesis as this collection will be published in book form at a later date]

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Earlier versions of some of these poems have appeared in print and online in:

Allegro (‘Dead ice: the end of a glacier’), *Atrium* (‘Articles de plage’), *Bounds Green Anthology 2021* (‘Kent Marsh Frogs’), *Fenland Poetry Journal* (‘Notices of impending tree removal,’ ‘The last little things I did for my father,’ and ‘Stellwegan bank and a god’s breath’), *Finished Creatures* (‘Stepping into Blade Runner air’), *Gutter* (‘Reading my father’s Children’s Dictionary of 1932’ and ‘Rage! Blow!’), *Ink, Sweat & Tears* (‘I need some fresh air, apparently’), *London Grip* (‘’The breathing of statues’’ and ‘Man-looking’), *Poems and Covid* (‘What I fear most’ and ‘Glass lungs’), *Poetry Wales* (‘Hair’s Breadth’), *Raceme* (‘Caunes Minervois’), *RiverSide (Two Rivers Press)* (‘Mint tea is no cure’), *Skirting Around* (‘Asthma is a dressed stone rasping’), *South* (‘Once I coughed up blood’ and ‘Ice threatens my breath’), *Tears in the Fence* (‘Walking U Being Bridge, Salbutamol’), *The Alchemy Spoon* (‘Ham House witchcraft’), *The Canvas* (‘Good to know perhaps but nothing to be done’ and ‘Scottish artist brings fresh air to London’), *The High Window* (‘Egyptian breath cures’), and *The Pomegranate* (‘Painting for people with asthma’). ‘The countless times you’ve saved me’ was anthologised by Matt Barnard for the 70th anniversary anthology for the NHS in 2018.

I am grateful to all the kind editors of these magazines and anthologies. Huge thanks also to my editor, Peter Robinson, who helped me refine these poems.

PART B—POETS ON BREATH

POETS ON BREATH—CONTENTS

CHAPTER I—INTRODUCTION

'What *is* the poem if it doesn't sound, act, think, breathe, like a human?'[1]

The genesis of the creative work, a poetry collection entitled *Sublime Lungs,* and this accompanying thesis comes from considerations of my lifelong asthma, and the physical difficulties experienced with breathing. These affect many aspects of daily life, mostly in terms of stopping things like physical exercise, or preventing visits to certain places in order to avoid encountering trigger allergens. Most people and most poets take breathing as a given, forgetting or glossing over the fact that without breath there is no voice. Breathing is necessary for speaking, and poetry is in its essence a spoken word form. Further, rhythm, whether regular or varied, is a quality shared by both language, especially poetry, and the act of breathing. To an expectation of regular rhythm, we must add cadences, pauses, caesuras and so on, which vary it.

The breathing element of poetry Glyn Maxwell points to above is not a topic that I have written about in any detail in any previous poetry collections until now. Given this new focus of interest, the subject of breath, the lungs and their diseases, and those for whom lack of breath is a predicament are considered in two principle ways in the foregoing—as subject matter for poetry and other writing by poets, and breath, in particular, as a poetic compositional principle. This thesis explores how one might go about writing about the breath and breathing in terms of metaphor, images, narratives and styles, and what benefits such writing might give to the writers concerned, and to the readers of such work, principally as a form of consolation.

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[1] Glyn Maxwell, *On Poetry* (London: Oberon Books, 2012) p. 24.
[2] For example, as explained and described by Ad A. Kaptein et al. (eds) 'A breath of fresh air: Images of respiratory illness in novels, poems, films, music, and paintings,'

The whole of this enquiry is sited within a wider context of current academic work and thinking, specifically the multi-disciplinary approaches of Medical or Health Humanities. The poetry collection and this thesis are part of such work. This opening chapter introduces the discipline in general terms. It also provides some examples of critical approaches to writing about breath from the canon of English poetry in technical terms, and then as subject matter. Finally, it sets out the scope and reach of the proceeding chapters of this thesis.

Health Humanities in context—writing as a salve

The creative work and this thesis are part of current practices in Medical or Health Humanities. This is an inter-disciplinary field where art forms such as novels, music, paintings, and in this case predominantly poetry and other writings, are considered capable of and charged with representing a patient's experience of diseases, in this case lung diseases, and asthma in particular.[2] It is proposed that achieving an understanding of the impact of such diseases on the lives of their sufferers is instructive and beneficial for other such sufferers/patients. In other words, it is a reassurance that one is not alone in one's suffering. Someone else knows how it is. As Paul Crawford puts it, health humanities 'champions creative, non-professional, non-expert solutions to health and well-being challenges,'[3] as well as providing 'compassionate environments for health care, health and well-being,' including for health practitioners. Arts based approaches as complements to medical treatment

[2] For example, as explained and described by Ad A. Kaptein et al. (eds) 'A breath of fresh air: Images of respiratory illness in novels, poems, films, music, and paintings,' *Journal of Health Psychology,* 2015 Vol. 20 (3) pp. 246-258.
[3] Paul Crawford, 'Introduction: Global health humanities and the rise of creative public health' in Paul Crawford et al., *The Routledge Guide to Health Humanities* (London: Routledge, 2020) p. 4.

emerged in the United States in the 1960s and have been widely used ever since, and Gail Allsopp gives a number of practical suggestions for such work.[4]

Writing is one such art form and it is proposed that writing about such diseases might assist the writer/patient or writer/practitioner in expressing, explaining and exploring certain aspects of their life and work. Writing might also assist its readers as a kind of consolation or salve, albeit recognising that writing or reading a poem can never actually be a medicine. A memorable and moving example of poetry aiding such expression is recounted by Gillian Clarke in her poem 'Miracle on St David's Day.'[5] Here Clarke tells a true story of her giving a poetry reading in an asylum, the effect of which on one otherwise mute patient is that it releases him from silence: 'He is suddenly standing […]/ the labourer's voice recites 'The Daffodils'/ […] He is hoarse, but word perfect.' And in the penultimate stanza of the poem, she relays that:

> Forty years ago, in a Valleys school,
> the class recited poetry by rote.
> Since the dumbness of misery fell
> he has remembered there was music
> of speech and that once he had something to say.

Such bibliotherapy, poetry therapy and similar ideas are behind the anthologies in the series, *The Poetry Pharmacy*, edited by the founder of the Forward Prize, William Sieghart, which he subtitles 'tried and true prescriptions for the heart mind and soul.'[6] Stephen Fry describes it on the cover of one of the volumes thus: 'There is balm for the soul, fire for the belly, a cooling compress for the fevered brow, solace for the wounded' and so on. Sieghart defines these books as 'self-help…for

[4] Gail Allsopp, 'Medicine within Health Humanities,' Crawford et al. p. 66.
[5] Gillian Clarke, *Letter from a Far Country* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1982) p. 19.
[6] William Sieghart, *The Poetry Pharmacy* (London: Particular Books, 2017).

life'[7] and they are organised under a range of conditions including 'loss of zest for life' and 'social overload' and so on. The genesis of these books is his discovering the psychological power of poetry as an unhappy school boy and later, after witnessing a road accident, where he says he found relief from trauma in Philip Larkin's 'Ambulances.'[8]

The work of Deborah Alma, the Emergency Poet, is also notable here too. She toured festivals, care settings, schools, libraries and the like for eight years in a second-hand ambulance dispensing poetry cures from her mobile pharmacy, poetry being the art form that speaks most intimately to us, as Alma says. Her anthology from this work, *The Emergency Poet: An Anti-Stress Poetry Anthology*, was published in 2015,[9] and a second, *Everyday Poems to Live By*, in 2016.[10] She set up a world's first, The Poetry Pharmacy, in a shop in Bishop's Castle, Shropshire in 2019 offering 'an alternative therapy for your emotional ailments.' Preferring not to give general poetry prescriptions, she continues to match people's needs with suitable healing poems be they for heartbreak, stress, desire or mindfulness from her bookshop/dispensary.[11] As she says:

> We believe that poetry can do so much to match or alter a mood, to assist in so many ways with good mental health. The Poetry Pharmacy is a way for us to park up the ambulance and bring the therapeutic effects of poetry under one roof, with an emphasis on well-being and inclusivity.[12]

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[7] https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20170927-the-words-that-can-make-us-calmer retrieved 8 October 2021.
[8] Philip Larkin, *The Whitsun Weddings* (London: The Marvell Press, 1964) p. 18.
[9] Deborah Alma, *The Emergency Poet: An Anti-Stress Poetry Anthology* (London: Michael O'Mara, 2015).
[10] Deborah Alma, *Everyday Poems to Live By* (London: Michael O'Mara, 2016).
[11] https://www.poetrypharmacy.co.uk
[12] https://poetrypharmacy.co.uk/about/ retrieved 4 January 2022.

Such work is also considered important to well-being, and life enhancing by the Arts Council, a kind of 'shadow health service' as Victoria Tischler[13] describes it, with creative practitioners working in many kinds of clinical settings, as mentioned in various recent Arts Council reports from 2016 and 2018, and evidenced in its funding support of Deborah Alma. And there are regular publications of poetry mood boosters in such places as *The Guardian*.[14]

There is nothing especially new about such poetic efforts. For example, Dannie Abse writes about his reading the anthology, *Beyond Bedlam,* a collection written about or from mental disorders.[15] Its central question is whether poetry can alleviate symptoms of mental distress and he notes that 'one knows patients can be consoled by reading poetry.' He goes on to ask how the act of writing poetry by patients themselves can assist, the 'green placebo' as one of his writing students at Princeton put it, which epithet Abse used widely thereafter.[16]

These projects focus in the area of mental health, rather than on those with physical diseases, but the act of such writing might also be capable of helping the writer with such sicknesses as well. For example, one study looked at the effects of a

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[13] Victoria Tischler, 'Health Humanities and The Creative Disciplines' in Crawford, p. 85 et seq.

[14] For example https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/nov/26/that-orange-it-made-me-so-happy-50-poems-to-boost-your-mood?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other retrieved on 5 December 2022, in which ten poets choose five poems each with the aim of variously inspiring us, moving us, sweeping us along with its emotions, making us laugh as a pick-me-up, consoling us, providing strategies for coping, reminding us to love ourselves and the like.

[15] Ken Smith and Matthew Sweeney (eds), *Beyond Bedlam* (London: Anvil Press, 1997).

[16] Dannie Abse, 'More than a Green Placebo,' *Two Roads Taken* (London: Enitharmon Press, 2003) p. 55.

programme of expressive writing on symptom reduction in asthma patients.[17] I have, however, not experienced such results over my many years of writing. Yet the poetry collection, *Sublime Lungs,* and the process of its writing is very much part of this first strand of health humanities work, as is the survey and analysis in Chapters III and IV of this thesis on the extent to which Elizabeth Bishop and Elaine Feinstein make art from writing about their asthma.

Health Humanities in context—writing to engender empathy

The second strand of health humanities practices operate to help develop empathy in the clinicians and medical students charged with the care of patients, and to otherwise deal with the emotions that arise for them in their medical work.[18] Empathy training is not usual in a medical education that often views the body as a machine presenting a particular malfunction, a disease needing treatment, rather than belonging to a feeling person. A more holistic approach emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century with the idea that medical schools should also have humanities departments. This approach makes itself apparent in many of Dannie Abse's poems as discussed in Chapter V of this thesis, for example where he is critical of colleagues lack of bedside manner in poems like 'The Case.' Writing on the value of exposing medical students to literary texts, Abse observes:

[17] J.S. Smyth et al., 'Effects of writing about stressful experiences on symptom reduction in patients with asthma or rheumatoid arthritis,' *JAMA* 281(14) pp. 1304-1309.

[18] A third recognised strand of health humanities work is to analyse literature through the lens of developments in medical science, for example studies on nineteenth century experiments in Galvanism and Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*. Whilst there has been much progress in the understanding and effective drug development for the treatment of asthma and other pulmonary diseases, even during the last seventy years, such discoveries and therapies are not the means by which the poetry chosen here is examined in this thesis.

> Those who teach literature and medicine claim, with some justification, that by reading poems and stories about people afflicted mentally or lowered by physical illness, the student on occasion is better able to respond to patients. The best healers are those who are sensitive but tough and who can, to a degree, empathise with their patient's predicament. The patient's point of view, ventilated through an anecdote poem or a portrait poem, or through a prose narrative, can lead students to be more aware of parallel real-life situations.[19]

Ventilated is an interesting verb choice by Abse in the present context.

The use of literature in medical training, based on the close reading of texts, without an appreciation of the context in which a literary work was made is a somewhat out-dated notion for health humanities now. Nevertheless, Abse suggests a number of literary texts by doctors that 'because of their authenticity, prove to be especially useful teaching tools.' He suggests those by Anton Chekhov, William Carlos Williams, Richard Selzer and John Stone, Ian Young, and Hjalmar Söderberg. Abse points to his own enjoyment of Rilke and concludes that an appreciation of literature can make for a more rounded education for doctors, but in 'More than a Green Placebo' he does not go as far as to suggest that 'a doctor open to and pleasured by literary texts is likely to be a better doctor than the most blatant philistine with a stethoscope.'

A-historicism is now considered less useful than seeking an understanding of literature in the time and cultural conditions that gave rise to it. Despite this, modern medical training can be, and is still being, enhanced by such studies, as 'sometimes the poet sees more than the scientist, even when the man is playing his own game.'[20] Indeed such ideas are behind the *Poems for New Doctors* initiative. This anthology

[19] Dannie Abse, 'More than a Green Placebo,' pp. 57-58.
[20] Helen MacMurphy, *The Almosts* from 1926 quoted in Alice Hall, *Literature and Disability* (London: Routledge, 2016) p. 30.

has been given to all graduating doctors of St. Andrews University since 2016, and has accompanying recordings. Its foreword includes the following:

> Reflecting on poetry […] can produce a different sort of doctor: one who is richer and deeper as an individual […] who will transform people's lives, but who also has the ability to relate to and communicate with people.[21]

One feels Abse would approve of these sentiments as they are so closely allied to his own thoughts.

Studies by Rita Charon et al,[22] where the coinage 'narrative medicine' is used, show that telling stories is one of the ways we make meaning in our lives, and gives rise to the development of narrative ethics. Charon, a physician herself, notes:

> My job is to pay exquisite attention to stories…to weave multiple, sometimes contradictory, narratives of patient history, symptoms, diagnostic tests into a provisional attempt to build something we can act on.[23]

Similarly work mentioned by Marina Tsaplina and Raymond Barfield[24] adds to more current practice in this area. Taking a well-known quotation from William Osler—'It is much more important to know what sort of patient has the disease than to know which disease a patient has'—they describe how storytelling in hospital is literally a matter of life and death, and the important centre of all clinical encounters. Julia Darling, writing in the 2005 introduction to *The Poetry Cure*[25] considers too that poetry has a particular part to play in medicine, as she says:

> poetry should be part of every modern hospital, not just as something to keep patients amused…We can use this…to communicate what our pain is like to others. For doctors this can be incredibly helpful. So much can be lost or

[21] As mentioned by Heike Bartel and Charley Baker, 'Poetry and Male Eating Disorders' in Crawford et al. p. 249.
[22] Rita Charon et al., *Narrative Medicine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[23] As quote by Alan Bleakley et al in 'Storytelling' in Crawford et al. p. 398.
[24] Marina Tsaplina and Raymond Barfield, 'The Role of the Imagination in the Practices of Health Humanities' in Crawford et al. p. 111 et seq.
[25] Julia Darling and Cynthia Fuller (eds), *The Poetry Cure* (Newcastle, Bloodaxe, 2005).

> misunderstood in the medical consultation and often doctors and patients cannot find a language to communicate effectively with one another.

Dannie Abse's medical poems and his other medical related writings describe and explain his emotions towards his patients and ill members of his family to himself and his readers, as well as exploring his interactions with his patients, listening to their stories. In these ways he demonstrates patient empathy and understanding very clearly in the making of art that goes beyond personal therapy. Similarly, the overarching aim of the collection, *Sublime Lungs*, is to articulate and explain how it is to suffer from asthma for my benefit, for that of my readers and potentially that of clinicians. Ad Kaptein explains that

> one emerging approach to examining medical humanities in patients with respiratory illness involves studying how respiratory illnesses are represented in various art forms.

Respiratory illnesses here are the major ones: asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, cystic fibrosis, lung cancer, pleurisy, pneumonia, sarcoidosis, and tuberculosis. Whilst Kaptein is all too aware that his paper is a 'broad-brush sketch' of such representation across various art forms, for instance, it only looks briefly at four poems, one each for asthma, cystic fibrosis, lung cancer and TB. The collection, *Sublime Lungs,* and this thesis respond to his call for future work 'with finer brushes and pencils.'[26]

Health humanities—breathing on

Arthur Rose's description of health humanities indicates that the current focus of such work 'no longer simply offers a narrative supplement to medical insights' in terms of

[26] Kaptein, 'A breath of fresh air.'

empathy building for doctors.[27] He says that recent work suggests that 'literature […] might intervene more directly,' beyond victim art or misery memoirs, to a greater understanding not simply of a disease, but the way it is experienced by a patient with all its attendant 'historical, cultural and existential meanings.' In the context of breath and breathlessness in particular, he explains that these have not been the subject of much attention in literary studies. Thus the present work and the analysis of the theoretical statements of Charles Olson, and work of Elizabeth Bishop and Elaine Feinstein, both asthma suffers, along with that of Dannie Abse, where the practising doctor-poet speaks, are a contribution to expanding such efforts to 'develop a sense of how breathing and breathlessness comes to be mediated through literature,' as Rose describes it. In Abse's case, his medical poems formed part of the syllabus of the medical humanities course at Imperial College.[28]

> Later in his introduction, Rose seems to contradict himself. He writes:
>
> > Breath still enjoys a privileged place in aesthetic theories of composition and meaning-making, linguistic otherwise. Whether as measure or as rest, breath confers meter, dictates pauses, conditions meanings or points to the limits of semantics…In its absence, it seems to regulate, to pattern the written word, through diacritics, notation or typographical spacing. Breath is foundational.

If this is the case, and I do agree with him, then breath has been the subject of much study. Rose goes on to say that as poetry aspires 'to recreate the elements of the spoken word,' poets have had much attention. He provides examples such as biographical approaches to Keats, as touched on later in this introduction, poets challenging breath with long lines like Whitman, as noted below similarly, or the sprung rhythm of Gerard Manley Hopkins, which was an influence acknowledged by

[27] Arthur Rose, 'Introduction: Reading Breath in Literature,' A. Rose et al., *Reading Breath in Literature* (London, Palgrave MacMillan, 2019).
[28] Letter to Abse from Giskin Day dated 27 July 2005, Dannie Abse archive, National Library of Wales, container letters 2005A.

Elizabeth Bishop, and poets with manifestos like Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. To redress the gender imbalance in Rose's list, this thesis focuses on the work of two women writers, Elizabeth Bishop and Elaine Feinstein in order to explore how breath 'inscribes itself in writing.'[29]

Rebecca Oxley and Andrew Russell have taken further the Wellcome Foundation work referred to below in this introduction to review and introduce texts (not specifically literary texts, but rather those of anthropology) engaging 'with the embodied meanings of breath' from a multi and cross-cultural perspective.[30] This work, as well as considerations of and research on the wider cultural and historical significations of breath, lungs and disease, has provided a number of ideas for topics and subject matter for poems in *Sublime Lungs.* For example, there are poems on magic and breath, winds, yoga, Japanese pearl divers, pollution, tobacco and smoking, all of which are surveyed and listed by these critics, even if much of the collection's composition was in fact undertaken before reading this critical text. The thrust of their work and that of this approach to health humanities is to draw attention to breathing as an essential activity, one which if it goes unnoticed, as it usually does, is taken for granted.

By contrast, for the asthmatic or other sufferer of lung disease, the breath is a crucial part of life, a defining thing that takes up one's waking thoughts and one's daily struggles. If one focuses on it, as Joanne Yoo has, then there are rich metaphors to be had in taking in life with an inhalation, and exhaling or letting go of the

[29] The subject of breath and the consideration of breath in composition is not a gendered topic as far as I am aware. This thesis makes no attempt to make it so.
[30] Rebecca Oxley and Andrew Russell, 'Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Breath, Body and World, *Body & Society* Vol. 26 (2) 2020 pp. 3-29.

unnecessary and unhelpful.[31] She considers that writing with attention to the breath and its gaps and silences does two things—it reveals the essence of the writer's personhood, which is part of the analysis of Bishop and Feinstein in Chapters III and IV of this thesis, and brings the reader close to their own breath. To go further, if one's breath is unreliable, it is very much noticed and to the fore as a source of almost constant concern, the concern of *Sublime Lungs*.

Breath in the composition of poetry

There is nothing new or radical in considering breath in poetry and it has far-reaching antecedents. As Stefanie Heine explains,[32] in ancient rhetoric breathing was important for oral delivery and as a structural element of such speech. This was stressed by Aristotle (384-322 BCE), Cicero (106-42 BCE), and Quintilian (35-100 AD). For example, when structuring writing in sentences, Aristotle mentions that a sentence should be delivered 'in a breath…taken as a whole'[33] and Cicero states that in speeches there should be periods (closes) 'where we may take breaths.'[34] Heine describes how Quintilian wrote a detailed account on oral delivery, articulating how the sense of a unit of speech should be coincident with a breath pause. She quotes from Cicero who argued the same: that 'the breathing pause should be motivated by coherent segments of speech rather than the bodily need to inhale.' This would

[31] Joanne Yoo, 'Learning to Write Through an Awareness of Breath,' *Qualitative Inquiry* Vol. 26 (3-4) 2019 pp. 400-406.
[32] Stefanie Heine, 'Ebb and Flow: Breath-Writing from Ancient Rhetoric to Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg in A. Rose et al., *Reading Breath in Literature* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019).
[33] John Henry Freese (trans), *Aristotle, The Art of Rhetoric,* (London: Heinemann, 1926), p. 389.
[34] Heine, 'Ebb and Flow.'

necessitate training, which she says Quintilian proposed in terms of exercising the breath so as to be able to speak for as long as was necessary for the sense.

These considerations are seemingly at odds with Charles Olson's notions of bodily speaking and breath in his 'Projective Verse,' as discussed in Chapter II of this thesis. Here, for the most part, the actual breath of the poet defines the lineation of verse and this is not necessarily coincident with the sense unit. Whilst Olson's theory was to some extent a distillation of the work of earlier poets like Pound and Williams, as some critics are all too ready to point out, identifying, almost with relish, where he does not follow his own rules, this theoretical essay can be (re)considered today in its historic moment. One such sceptical critic would be Colin Falck who has little time for Olson in what he refers to as 'an eccentric theory of American breathing.' He thoroughly dismisses Olson and Williams for writing 'as if poetry itself only began with the poem they were working on the previous day.'[35]

But Olson was writing and theorising in the context of the development of twentieth century free verse as it liberated itself from what was considered the straight jacket of formal poetry. Set beyond the constraints of metrical poetry, free verse writers were nevertheless in search of some principles or different rules to follow. As Ginsberg proposes in his writings on poetics, the reading of a poem, in this case Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind,' is a transmission of the poet's breath and inspiration to that of the reader:

[35] Colin Falck, *American and British Verse in the Twentieth Century: The Poetry that Matters* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003) p. 57 et seq.

> the poet makes a little machine that you can then insert into the body of the reader hundreds of years later; and if he breathes according to the instructions of the commas…he can reduplicate the very delicate same breath.[36]

To commas here we might add other instructive punctuation. There is much to the idea that the poem contains guidance for its rendition and reading, which I discussed with Mimi Khalvati in Chapter II of this thesis and which forms part of the analysis of Feinstein's work in Chapter IV. Here though, as Heine points out, Ginsberg projects Olson's terminology and his own theory of writing onto Shelley.

The search for codification, for a new system of writing poetry, continues today as contemporary poets often have very fixed notions on, for example, word use (there is a so-called list of banned words in poetry that does the rounds in various workshops and amongst group of poets on social media), and how to lineate (with the sense, against it, all over the page, neatly in stanzas and so on), punctuation (or its absence), and otherwise how to present poetry on the page (wandering, columnar, concrete, redacted and so on). It seems that even free verse needs certain props to hold it up. Thoughts of my own and from conversations with a number of contemporary poets on lineation and notions of scoring the voice/breath, and the current use of the forward slash and long pauses are included in Chapter II of this thesis. These bring Olson's ideas forward into the current moment as part of this enquiry on how to write about the breath and breathing, and the effect such writing has on the writer and reader.

[36] Ginsberg as quoted by Heine in *Poetics of Breathing: Modern Literatures Syncope* (Albany: State of New York University Press, 2021), p. 102.

Wheezing and reading, wheezing and writing—the subject of asthma and other lung diseases

As subject matter for poetry, as compared to the structural elements of the breath in the presenting, speaking and reading of poetry, breathing, asthma and other lung diseases feature surprisingly little in contemporary work writing from, on or about this specific part of the body.[37] However, looking at much canonical poetry in the following brief survey of such earlier work is useful as part of the enquiry on how to write about the breath and breathing.

David Fuller points to a number of such poems in his contribution to the 'Life of Breath' research project.[38] This was a cross-disciplinary collaboration between the Universities of Durham and Bristol with the Wellcome Foundation between 2015 and 2020. In the 'Arts of Breath' part of this project, which Fuller was responsible for curating, he gave a number of lectures/podcasts on breath in poetry.[39] In one such he indicated that, as well as Olson's own way of working, his ideas on poetic form are derived from the poetry of Walt Whitman.[40] For Fuller, the opening of Whitman's 'Song of Myself' uses breathing as a structure and breath as a subject matter, and he says for Whitman the crux of writing from the body is the interaction between respiration and inspiration. For example (my selection):

> Houses and rooms are full of perfumes, the shelves are crowded with perfumes,
> I breathe the fragrance myself and know it and like it,
> The distillation would intoxicate me also, but I shall not let it.

[37] By contemporary here, I am thinking of poetry written after about 1950.
[38] https://www.lifeofbreath.org
[39] https://lifeofbreath.org/podcast/breath-pulse-and-measure/ and https://lifeofbreath.org/event/artsofbreath retrieved 22 November 2020.
[40] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6JsHDG_2HoA retrieved 4 August 2020.

> The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of distillation, it is odorless,
> It is in my mouth forever, I am in love with it,
> I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,
> I am mad for it to be in contact with me.
>
> The smoke of my own breath,
> Echos, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine,
> My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of blood and air through my lungs,
> The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and the shore and dark-color'd sea-rocks, and of hay in the barn,
> The sound of the belch'd words of my voice loos'd to the eddies of the wind,[41]

Here Whitman desires the nourishing qualities of fresh air as essential to his being—the breathing into, inspirare. These are more important than the attractions of artificial scents. Whitman then moves on to explain the significance of his own breath to his life, and for his poetry—the inspiration implying a spiritual element in this case from nature giving rise to creative work. Heine expands this in her description of Whitman's statement.[42] She says that creative inspiration like respiration depends on external influences as in the inhalation of air, and creative output is the result of transformational processes as in the gaseous exchange. For her 'the creation of an aesthetic work is not accomplished by a singular initiation act […] To be is not to breathe but to become.'

Other examples of breath in poetry given by Fuller as part of the 'Life of Breath' project include Coleridge's 'Aeolian Harp.'[43] In this, one of his conversational poems, Coleridge listens to the instrument played by the breath of nature:

> And that simplest Lute,
> Placed length-ways in the clasping casement, hark!

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[41] Walt Whitman, *Complete Poems* (London: Penguin, 1986) p. 63 et seq.
[42] Stefanie Heine, *Poetics of Breathing: Modern Literature's Syncope* p. 30.
[43] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6JsZZ2qj3YM retrieved 4 August 2020.

How by the desultory breeze caressed[44]

From which he goes on to consider human breath 'the one Life within us and abroad,/ Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,' finally asking a heterodox and unanswered question for which his wife upbraids him:

> And what if all animated nature
> Be but organic Harps diversely framed,
> That resemble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
> Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
> At the Soul of each and God of all?

In other words, what would it signify if the animating breeze was to be aligned with the breath of the divine presence? Which question must be unanswered in favour of praising God. Coleridge uses the object of the aeolian harp for his conversational musings in this poem: here it is at once a physical object capable of animation by the wind to produce pleasing sounds, a metaphor for life/breath, and 'evidence' of the workings of God.

The examples Fuller selects are about breathing in its greater sense and are not disease specific per se. Other poems by Coleridge concerning themselves with the breath can be found in Francis O'Gorman's work.[45] He cites 'Frost at Midnight,' where Coleridge is the only person awake in his house. The poet listens to his son breathing in the 'deep calm' of the frosty night, taking such observation as a pause or interlude in his thoughts. O'Gorman observes that this moment in the poem is a 'sign of a living human amid the extreme silence of the frost and its breathless workings.' That is true, and further on in the poem Coleridge expresses his wish that Hartley (his

[44] Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, *Complete Poems* (London, Penguin, 1988).
[45] Francis O'Gorman, 'Coleridge, Keats and the Science of Breathing,' *Essays in Criticism* Vol. 61. No 4. Oxford University Press, 2011.

son) might experience the world 'like a breeze' (another kind of breath) as a means of being closer to God.

O'Gorman describes a sub-genre of Romantic poetry, where poetry investigates 'the place of breath through words, mindful of poetry's intimate and long-enduring association with the air.' He cites, for example, Wordsworth's 'Lines Written Above Tintern Abbey' and the imagined revelations that come from pausing the breath:

> the breath of this corporeal frame,
> And even the motion of our human blood
> Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
> In body, and become a living soul:
> While an eye made quiet by the power
> Of harmony, and the deeper power of joy,
> We see into the life of things.

Wordsworth may not have been aware of it, but this is a very good description of deep meditation, where the body becomes irrelevant and the mind is lifted beyond it. This critical exploration builds on Abrams' 1957 work on the Romantics, to which Andrew Kay makes reference.[46] Abrams is credited with definitive statements on the subject, where breathing belongs to a larger component in Romantic poetry that explores air-in-motion, including breezes, the breath, wind and respiration. These serve variously in poems as such things as events in the poet's mind, or representing psychic renewal, returns to community from isolation, bursts of creativity and so on.

[46] Andrew Kay, 'Conspiring with Keats: Towards a Poetics of Breathing,' *European Romantic Review,* 27:5 (2016) pp. 563-581.

Keats features in Kay and O'Gorman's analyses by virtue of his personal suffering, and his professional involvement in medicine,[47] even though as Dannie Abse puts it we can read Keats without realising he was 'a doctor buffeted by unforgettable, often brutal medical experiences,'[48] at a time when one in five deaths were due to tuberculosis.[49] Abse goes on to say that Keats turned away from his 'fearful experiences at Guy's' and his poetry is 'almost free of medical references, and his letters rarely refer to medical matters.'[50] He summarises: 'Keats was surely one of the few medical students in history who never seemed to luxuriate in comic or tragic medical anecdotes.' Rather when he speaks of medicine it is with seriousness. 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is one of several poems written in the years before he died in Rome from tuberculosis. Here Keats contrasts the permanent state of joy depicted in the scenes on the urn and the urn itself: 'For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd, / For ever panting, and for ever young' with the febrile nature of humanity:

> All breathing human passion far above,
> That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
> A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

He then surprises the reader at the end of the poem with the seeming dead but life-filled art object actually coming alive, inhaling and then exhaling its famous utterance: 'Beauty is truth, and truth beauty.' A biographical reading of this poem is of course possible too. Given the state of Keats' health when this poem was written in

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[47] Keats was apprenticed to a surgeon apothecary in 1811 before studying medicine at Guy's Hospital in 1815, the same year the Apothecaries Act was passed to prevent unqualified medical practice. Biographical information on Keats is taken from John Barnard (ed), *John Keats: The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin, 1988). As an interesting aside, Kay notes that Keats treated asthmatic patients.

[48] Dannie Abse, 'Authorship and Medicine' in *Two Roads Taken* p. 11 and which work included tooth-drawing, blood letting, unwrapping stinking, foul dressings and sordid surgical interventions p. 35.

[49] As noted by Dannie Abse in 'Following in the Footsteps of Dr. Keats' in *Two Roads Taken* p. 28.

[50] Dannie Abse, 'Following in the Footsteps of Dr. Keats' p. 38.

the summer and autumn of 1819, the burning forehead and parched tongue might easily be his own, or if not his, then those of his brother, Tom.

'On first looking into Chapman's Homer' written in 1816, a few years before the Urn, concerns itself with breathing in a new way, as conflated with an appreciation of poetry, and to this end gives primacy to the body. Keats chooses to describe the impressions he takes from reading Chapman's translation of Homer as breathing: 'Yet never did I breathe its pure serene / Till I hear Chapman speak out loud and bold.' Kay goes further than O'Gorman as he considers that this is the sonnet's pivot where the poem is about respiration as inspiration – 'inhaling […] Homer's epic invests Keats with the visionary power to compose his own sonnet'—'a borrowing of bardic breath.'[51]

Although Keats did not finally realise he had tuberculosis until 3 February 1820 with his famous statement to his friend and landlord, Charles Brown, on coughing up blood that evening after he returned home to Hampstead:

> I know the colour of that blood! It is arterial blood. I cannot be deceived in that colour. That drop of blood is my death warrant. I must die,

he had nursed his brother, Tom, through the disease until his death in 1818, and he had seen his mother die of it when he was a teenager. It is hardly a surprise that breathing and the struggle for breath makes its way into these poems. Kay focuses his analysis on the poems Keats wrote in 1818 and 1819 where he notes that particular attention was paid to breathing in this final phase of Keats' work. He says this is because Keats' 'physical condition would never permit him to cease thinking about

[51] Kay, 'Conspiring with Keats.'

respiration for long' and that it was 'natural that Keats should gravitate toward an idealized view of poems as containers of bracing medicinal airs.'

O'Gorman goes on to note that 'Bright Star,' written in 1819 and probably dedicated to Keats' fiancée, Fanny Brawne, 'brings together a set of possible meanings of breath and its relationship to life that has intrigued and bothered the poet throughout his career.' After the volta —'No'—, the sonnet continues:

> …yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,
> Pillowed upon my fair love's ripening breast,
> To feel forever its soft swell and fall,
> Awake forever in a sweet unrest,
> Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
> And so live ever – or else swoon to death.'

Whilst seeming to yearn for the steadfastness of the northern star, the poet, also and by contrast, longs for a woman's erotically breathing body as life giving. Should this cease to be available to him, then Keats will die. This seems relatively straight forward as a conceit. O'Gorman rather inflates the significance of these lines, but they are indeed about breathing as a life force and, as Kay has it 'a mode of sensory engagement,' its absence being clear in the breath/death rhyme Keats deploys in the final two lines.

As to Keats' writing method, Kay provides a helpful analysis of his variations of the end-stopped lines of the Italian/Petrarchan sonnet as the dominant unit of breath. He notes that Keats replaces these 'with a pattern of quickening breath more akin to the actual respiring of a human subject at the moment of aesthetic transport.' This breathlessness, he argues, is 'to replicate the gasping wonder that the poet

experienced in contemplating a visual or verbal artefact.' He illustrates this in relation to the last six lines of 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles':

> Such dim-conceived glories of the brain
> Bring round the heart an undescribable feud:
> So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,
> That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
> Wasting of old time – with a billowy main –
> A sun – a shadow of a magnitude.

Keats, he notes, has embedded breath cues in the piecemeal nature of these lines so that the reader has a breathless encounter with the sculptures. This is clear in the dashes used in the final two lines, and I note that the enjambments of other lines add to the long breath almost breathless effect.

Similarly Kay analyses 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer,' where he notes the enjambments of the paired lines in the first part of the sonnet as long breaths following the reader's exhalations when the poem is voiced. In addition, the use of the hyphen in line twelve signals a breath before the end of the line and is one of the subversions Kay mentions. Thus, despite the use of a traditional poetic form, in this case the sonnet, Keats has signalled points at which the breath is to operate either as deep breath in long enjambed lines, or shorter breath in broken ones. In these ways, any consideration or conclusion that it is only free verse where the breath is an important part of the construction of such poetry is to ignore the variations available and practiced in formal verse. Indeed, and to bring such considerations up to date, Jacqueline Saphra writes on the attractions of the sonnet in the following terms: 'The

pentameter, of five iambs together, felt like a single exhalation blowing along the poetic line.'[52]

Kay concludes his analysis of Keats' method by looking at aspects of 'To Autumn', which at its core he considers to be 'a poem about breathing.' For example, he points to the poem's sibilants ('Seasons of mists and mellow fruitfulness') as generating a susurrus or 'stream of breath.' Further he says that 'the ode is breath-like in its structure: the first stanza 'an inhalation of sorts', and the last, 'a breathing-out,' where its subject matters is expiration of the day, season and so on.

Even earlier than the Romantics, as Rachel White points out as part of her analysis of the work of Fulke Greville, Sir Philip Sidney is concerned with the breath in his rather more canonical *Defence of Poesie* (c.1579).[53] Sidney discusses the caesura or breathing place as one of the structures of English poetry, cutting the line. White describes this as 'a moment of poetic control over form that contributes to the composition as an imitation of life.' She explains more generally that

> Breath is not only the constant rhythm of life, but the way it occurs indicates emotional and physical states: long, languid breathing suggests a relaxed state, boredom, or sleep, whilst short, ragged breathing indicates fear, physical activity, illness or being in a state of upset. Breath embodies emotion, signifying the state of the mind within the body. Breath is also a necessary poetic structure marked by the caesura which can be utilised by the poet to mimic these emotional and psychological states, create a silence or a pause that is full of meaning, and to control the metre of the poem.

This is a helpful summary of the ways in which breath is analysed in this thesis, with the exception of specific consideration of the breath of the asthmatic. For such a poet

[52] Jacqueline Saphra, 'I Will Put Chaos Into Fourteen Lines and Keep Him There: On the Sonnet,' Rishi Dastidar (ed), *The Craft: A Guide to Making Poetry Happen in the Twenty First Century* (Rugby: Nine Arches Press, 2019) p. 27.
[53] Rachel White, 'Aire that was once breath', in Russ Leo et al (ed), *Fulke Greville and the Culture of the English Renaissance* (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2018).

longer lines and enjambment might also signal pushing the breath beyond that which is comfortable, easy and relaxed, and thus making for a breathy or even breathless effect, equal to that of the shorter, struggling lines, broken lines and phrases.

To these ideas on breath in writing one might add critical work on work other than in English. Marcel Proust is one example of a writer where much has been done to describe and analyse his asthma as it affected his life and his ability to write, as well as how his condition found reflection in his work. Kirk McElhearn, for instance, discusses Proust's long sentences. He notes that the longest of these is 847 words, 'as if he [Proust] were afraid that he if stopped, he might never draw another breath.'[54] And he goes on to quote Walter Benjamin's 1929 essay in which he considers Proust's asthma 'became part of his art—if indeed his art did not create it. Proust's syntax rhythmically and step by step reproduces his fear of suffocating.'[55]

Breath theoretics—coming to Olson and moving beyond

Different critics have commented on the origins of Olson's ideas on the breath from other sources. Edward Halsey Foster,[56] for example, points to expressionist writings like Faulkner, Saroyan, Wolfe and Miller. He traces them back to Emerson from 1883: 'the length of lines in songs and poems is determined by the inhalation and exhalation of the lungs.' As for Olson's contemporaries, he cites Muriel Rukeyser from 1948, who explained that the poetic line 'is intimately bound with the poet's

[54] https://folks.pillpack.com/search-lost-breaths/ retrieved 19 January 2022.
[55] Walter, Benjamin, 'The Image of Proust' in Hannah Arendt (ed) *Illuminations Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1969).
[56] Edward Halsey Foster, *Understanding the Black Mountain Poets* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995) p. 50.

breathing.' From a biographical perspective it is worth noting, as Brenda Gillot observes citing the content of Olson's lectures at Black Mountain College, that Olson found in Keats 'a forerunner of projective poetics and a champion of literary indeterminacy and anti-formalism.'[57]

All of which is to say that Olson's ideas are not new in theory or subject matter. As Chapter II explains, he codified them in a way that excited some of his contemporaries, led to their enthusiastic adoption, especially amongst the Beat poets—one might think of Ginsberg's long lines and breathy performances—and his influence spread beyond the USA to Britain and Elaine Feinstein, for example. The fact that 'Projective Verse' is still a key text in the present consideration of poetics, more than seventy years after its first appearance, as critical papers are still being written on it, is testament to its merits. Breath theories may have moved on, but it remains the place to start such work in the contemporary moment.

As to the kinds of caesura or breath pause being considered in this thesis, there are several, which in length order are: the forward slash (/) which Olson used to indicate a light pause or vergule, lighter than a comma, so light that it barely separates the words,[58] the comma, the semi-colon, or colon, the dash, and the space or gap. All of these have specific effects in the silent or voiced reading of a poem in relation the poet's intentions as to how it should be sounded in terms of both the speed and pace of the reading, and the sense and meaning such breath markers can indicate—the 'what' is being said and the 'how' it is being said. Whilst caesuras can fix meaning,

[57] Brendan C. Gillott, 'Charles Olson's 'Projective Verse and the Inscription of Breath,' Humanities 2018 7 p. 14.
[58] This is not to be confused with the forward slash or solidus traditionally used to indicate a line break when quoting from a poem.

they can also, as Jacques Derrida points out, make meanings emerge.[59] Thus a focus on these is important to any consideration of poetry from whatever period.

Taking a clue from Elaine Feinstein's autobiography where she says that 'Poets write best about what they experience in their own flesh,'[60] this thesis enquires into how to write about the breath. In Chapters III and IV it focuses on poets who were themselves asthmatic, and the extent to which the poems they wrote explore, explain or involve their asthma and breathing as both subject matter and part of their poetic method. Firstly, it looks at American poet, Elizabeth Bishop, and then Feinstein herself. The threads that link these three poets, two American and one British, are the correspondence Feinstein entered into with Olson and his influence and that of the Black Mountain poets on her early work. Also there is the closeness of spirit Feinstein felt to Bishop, who, although not part of Olson's sphere of influence, was his exact contemporary, from the same state (Massachusetts) and a friend, as she rented her Key West home to him one season.[61] Thus in asking how to write about the breath and breathing, the thesis looks at two ways in which Feinstein's work is influenced by the American poetics of the mid-twentieth century.

Next the thesis looks at the medical poems of doctor-poet Dannie Abse, who was a friend of Feinstein's and like her, critical of the Movement poetics in Britain in the 1950s. Abse, a consultant chest physician, writes about medical matters as a key

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[59] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2009) p. 87.
[60] Elaine Feinstein, *It Goes with the Territory: Memoirs of a Poet* (London: Alma Books, 2013) p. 79. Feinstein makes this concluding and generalising comment in the context of a brief discussion on the poetry of the Vietnam war, specifically that of Denise Levertov, where she considers that written from the safety of distance from the war lacking the *'grim power'* of the work of the soldier-poets of the two World Wars. Nevertheless, it is apposite in the context of this thesis.
[61] As noted by James Merrill in *The New York Review*, 6 December 1979.

part of his autobiography, to explain things to himself and his readers.[62] He does this by negotiating the territory of detachment from, yet concern for, his patients and family members.

Detailed archival work was undertaken in the UK in relation to both Feinstein and Abse in order to search for material that might shed further light on their poetic intentions, but only to the extent that it is presently available in Manchester and Aberystwyth respectively.[63] For example, a review of draft versions of poems is instructive as to the evolution of thought in that poem's creation. Additionally, archives might contain notes, letters, review notices and so on that can enhance one's understanding of a writer's work. A more limited amount of archival work was undertaken for Olson and Bishop as their archives are located in the USA. However, some material was available to me electronically.

As for my own work, Chapter VI covers the new collection of poetry *Sublime Lungs.* The structure of the book is discussed, along with the subject matter it drew upon and the choices made in the poems' composition. The contents are related to their theoretical antecedents and the work of Bishop, Feinstein and Abse where there are relevant touch points. The book is an illustration of the several strategies one might deploy in order to write about the breath and breathing in autobiographical terms, and exploring other breath related topics from different cultures, geographies

[62] This is not his only subject matter as he is much praised for his lyrics on marriage, amongst others by Elaine Feinstein.
[63] I am told by family members of both Feinstein and Abse that further material will be added to archives in the John Rylands Library and National Library of Wales in the future. As such my review was limited to the material available in 2021 and 2022.

and time periods in order to consider the consolatory nature of such writing for both the writer and her readers.

CHAPTER II—CHARLES OLSON'S ARS POETICA

Introduction

Charles Olson (1910 -1970) published 'Projective Verse' in *Poetry New York* in 1950 as his manifesto or summation of poetic practice. It is the result of extensive thought on the situation of contemporary poetry, in particular the distillation of his correspondence with Robert Creeley and Frances Bolderoff,[64] although as others note, the numerous references to breath in Olson's writings are hard to condense into one consistent theory.[65] Whilst influenced by Modernist approaches, Olson's view was that poetry after the rupture of World War II had to be irrevocably different to that which had gone before.[66] Some critics consider Olson's theorising, despite his vast *oeuvre* of poems, the work for which he is most well known today. [67] Many critics consider it to be 'the most influential text about respiratory poetics to be written in the mid-twentieth century.'[68] In summary the essay considers that a line of verse comes from the heart as well as the diaphragm and is breathed onto the page to the reader, the length of the line being a projectile arc, which is the poem's percussive energy as the poet's prospective eye perceives it. As such, Olson's essay is an appropriate place to start any enquiry on how to write about the breath from the mid-twentieth century onwards.

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[64] As noted by, amongst others, Helen Molesworth in *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College 1933-1957* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art and Yale University Press, 2015).
[65] Heine, *Poetics of Breathing* p. 108 for example.
[66] As explained by David Herd in his editor's introduction to *Contemporary Olson* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015) p. 2 et seq.
[67] Including Ralph Maud in *A Charles Olson Reader* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005) where the text of 'Projective Verse' used here is reproduced in full.
[68] Rose, *Reading Breath in Literature*, although this sounds like damning him with faint praise in its precision.

This chapter looks first at Olson's theories on the breath as articulated in 'Projective Verse.' It then goes on to examine Olson's use of these theories in examples of his own work before turning to the critical reception of 'Projective Verse.' The chapter then moves into the present moment by presenting considerations on the poetic breath in the works of a number of contemporary poets and from discussions with some of these poets.

Projective Verse and the breath

Attempting to unpack each part of Olson's essay is important to understand how he was intending to use breath in his writing and how he proposed it for others' writing. This is necessary too, as it is a dense piece of work—Herd says it 'can be difficult to get a fix on' and Charles Hartman says 'that it is no more comprehensible in technical terms than Williams' notes on prosody has not made it less important as a manifesto.'[69] Brendan Gillott goes further: 'It is a curiously ambivalent, evasive, and contradictory text.'[70] In the foregoing Olson's argument is set out by stripping away the rhetorical flourishes and animated style he uses to articulate it. First the title: as well as using the term projective, also includes three other descriptors for verse, namely 'projectile, percussive, and prospective,' and sets up these terms, without further elaboration at this point, in opposition to 'the non-projective.' This is described as closed verse, which is print-bred and how Olson characterised current verse, save that of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams.

[69] Charles O. Hartman, *Free Verse: An Essay on Prosody* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980) p. 145 et seq.
[70] Brendan C. Gillott, 'Charles Olson's 'Projective Verse and the Inscription of Breath,' Humanities 2018 7 p. 108 et seq.

The introductory two paragraphs argue that in order for verse to be of contemporary use it must be governed by and explore the possibilities 'of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes, as well as his listenings'. Olson states his intention to demonstrate in the essay what he now calls projective or open verse:

> what it involves, in its act of composition, how, in distinction from the non-projective, it is accomplished, and II suggest a few idea ideas about what stance towards reality brings such verse into being, what the stance does to both poet and reader and to his reader.

Olson explains parenthetically that the stance is a change, which may lead to a new poetry, new concepts and 'some sort of drama.'

In Part One of the essay Olson describes open verse as 'composition by field' as opposed to formal poetics. A poem is said to be kinetic: energy transferred by the poet from his source by way of the poem to the reader.[71] The problem Olson identifies is how to convey this energy, which in the absence of a decided form, can only be in the form the poem 'declares for itself,' and which Olson states is the poem's individual music. Moreover, the form of such a poem is 'never more than an extension of content,' and the process of making a poem is to shape its energy to accomplish its form wherein one perception leads to the next.

This stated, Olson moves on to the breath, insisting on its importance as he considers that it has not been 'sufficiently observed or practiced, but which has to be if verse is to advance to its proper force and place', such verse being where the poet registers 'both the acquisitions of his ears *and* the pressures of his breath'. He goes on to examine the syllable: the particle of sound by which words are composed and heard by the ear; the union of mind and ear giving birth to the syllable. It is where for him

[71] I am using 'he' as the pronoun here following Olson and what was typical at the time, whilst noting that Olson has been much upbraided for his sexism.

the ‘dance of the intellect’ lies. And then, he describes the line, which with the syllable makes the poem. Crucially for Olson the line ‘comes from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes.’ In summary he states that poetic composition is comprised of two halves:

> the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE
> the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE

The syllable and the line have to be managed in the field of the poem, and these along with sense, sound and image are its kinetic elements or objects. As for syntax, Olson urges breaking it open to stretch conventional uses without losing the power of communication.

Before moving on to discuss the layout of a poem on the page, Olson makes this rather cryptic and undeveloped remark: ‘For the breath has a double meaning which Latin had not yet lost.’ This comes as a non-sequitur to his discussion of the opening lines of Twelfth Night. One might point to breath being both the act of breathing (spirare) and divine power (spiritus), but quite what this has to do with his argument at this point is unclear and something of a frustration in following Olson’s train of thought. That said, it perhaps follows Whitman’s notions of respiration/inspiration as discussed in Chapter I of this thesis.

Following this is a key paragraph of the text on the availability of the typewriter (or in our case the computer word processor and printer) with which

> a poet [can] indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspension even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends […] For the first time he can, without the convention of rime and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise to voice his work.

Thus, the poem is ‘a script to its vocalization’ and a poem should be read as the poet would have, regardless of the reader’s physiology. Olson’s principles of such a reading are as follows: a space as long as the phrase that it follows should be a held breath for the same length of time as the phrase itself; a suspended syllable or word at the end of a line means the time suspended to start the next line; a light pause that does not merit a comma is indicated by the forward slash.

Olson illustrates this latter from the opening line of his poem The Kingfishers: ‘What does not change/ is the will to change’, and gives an example of juxtaposing lines:

> Sd he:
> to dream takes no effort
> to think is easy
> to act is more difficult
>
> but for a man to act after he has taken thought, this!
> is the most difficult thing of all

which he says illustrates the progression of both meaning and the breathing forward, and then a reversal. For Olson, the key contemporary proponents of such compositional work are Pound and Williams: ‘composing as if verse was to have the reading its writing involved.’ But he doesn’t illustrate or say any more, he assumes his readers will know to which works, or elements of work, he is referring.

In Part two of the essay, Olson looks at the changing reception of a poem as it is read, or ‘reality outside a poem’. He says taking up speech is serious work and sets man up alongside the works of nature—‘sound is a dimension men have taken up’ and language one of our ‘proudest acts.’ This is the area in which the poet works.

After some digressive criticism of Eliot, this passage ends with a summary of the main thrust of his essay, which it is helpful to quote in full:

> a projective poet will, down through the workings of his own throat to that place where the breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings, where drama has to come from, where the coincidence is, all acts spring.

As Ian Brinton and Michael Grant point out

> it is the breath that allows the poem its full kinetic force, a force that is not merely comparable *to* but participant *in* the energy of the relationship between objects in the world.[72]

They go on to say that Olson, by trying to achieve a unity of mind and body, voice and syllable, attempted a return to origins in his mythological and archetypical writings, such as in *Maximus*.[73] This is what Hartman too has in mind when he says:

> the essay is famous for its almost mythical insistence on "the breath" as the fundamental principle of poetry: it is the force behind the voice, something *heard* in the poem and specifically governs the lineation.[74]

And as Hartman goes on, saying Olson:

> clearly meant "the breath" to stand for a complex of voice and spirit…it identifies the poem with the poet's individual voice, and finally with his individual being…By imitating the poet's personal speech, the poem becomes universal…This is how and why in Olson's terms "the breath" mediates between the heart and the line…Everything in the poem then must contribute to the presentation of the poet's voice, and so to his and the poem's authenticity.

The focus here is on the theoretics of the poet's breath and voice, not that of his reader, even though he trailed such considerations in his introduction.

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[72] Ian Brinton and Michael Grant, 'A reading of 'In Cold Hell, in Thicket,'' in Herd, *Contemporary Olson* p. 65.

[73] The inseparability of voice and breath is not universally accepted. As Brinton and Grant point out, this is challenged by Slavoj Zizek and others. Zizek argues that the true voice coming from a body/breath can never be heard and there is always an element of ventriloquism when someone speaks, ibid p. 66.

[74] Hartman, *Free Verse* p. 146.

Projective Verse and the breath in practice

Since Olson gives so very few examples in his essay of the workings of the breath in the setting out of lines of a poem, an illustration of his theory in action by reference to one his most well-known poems, 'The Kingfishers,' will be of use. Olson was working on this poem at approximately the same time as he was writing 'Projective Verse.' The poem was published after 1950 and is pointed to by many critics as the exemplar of his theoretical technique. I have scored Olson's own breath from a recording of him reading this poem on Penn Sound.[75] This is sufficiently clear, for the most part, to hear Olson's in-breaths. A notated version of 'The Kingfishers' can be found in Appendix I to this chapter indicating by means of a double forward slash (//) where his breath falls.

For the most part, this forensic analysis illustrates the coincidence of the in-breath and line ending quite clearly. However, this is not always the case. There are several examples in this poem of a breath being taken at the end of several juxtaposing lines, which is in accordance with Olson's idea on the progression of the breath in pushing the poem forward. There are also examples of breaths very near the beginnings of the line to add emphasis to a particular word, 'gold', for example, as well as several instances of the slight pause indicated by the forward slash (/). Thus, even in his own work, it is simplistic to think of the breath as only ever being coincident with a line ending after the exhalation of the breath in reading the line: things are rather more complicated and sophisticated. It is probably more helpful to consider all of the punctuation in an Olson poem, as well as its lineation, as aids to

[75] writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Olson.php retrieved 28 September 2020

following its intended reading and in this he is no different or special than any other writer of free verse.

To explore the extent to which the coincidence of line-ending and breath is present in other poems or not, it seems fair to undertake the same scoring exercise with another of Olson's well-known shorter works for which there are recordings of him reading it. Again, using Penn Sound, Appendix II looks at 'The Librarian.' This is a poem in four (un-delineated) parts: two sections with long lines and two with very short lines. For the longer-lined sections Olson's breaths mostly come at the end of the lines. In several cases they do not, and again this suggests that this is where Olson wishes to draw attention to certain key elements in the poem, for example in the first part to his father as leader, his wife and son, and the town of Gloucester, which is key in Olson's personal psycho-geography. In the two shorter lined sections Olson's breaths are not after the two or three words of each line, but either coincident with other punctuation or visual indications like full stops or stanza breaks. Still, there are two occasions for breath after 'wharf's' and 'Lufkin's' that would not be obvious to the page reader, but yet the reasons for these breath points seem, in sense terms, logical only to Olson himself perhaps. Again though, we can conclude from this poem that all of Olson's punctuation and lineation needs attention for the pauses, not just his line breaks, and further, that there are inconsistencies in Olson's theorising and his non-compliance with his own rules.

Michael Davidson has undertaken similar acoustic work on Olson. He concludes that:

> Readings given by Olson, however, reveal that he by no means intends a one-to-one correspondence between breath and the line. Instead the printed line

> appears to indicate a general emotional thrust, one to which the written line refers, but does not precisely score. The shape and configuration of the lines on the page map […] the pervasive mood of the poem.[76]

This is a deeply unhelpful conclusion for the reader—if the lineation cannot be followed in the way theorised and marked out on the page as meant to literally represent the poet's syllables and breath, then what are we to do? How are we meant to read an Olson poem in the way he intends? As indicated above, the answer to making sense of one of his poems, as much as any other poet's work, is in attending to other typographical markers—the breathing spaces, as well as the meaning of the words, the poem's subject, its voice and so on. This then surely means that the importance of the breath in the composition and presentation of poetry is already deflated by Olson himself in not practising his own theory. It seems that Olson was focussed on the writer's point of view (and breath) and did not give much detailed thought to the reader's role in poetry, limiting it to following the writer's breathing exercise. This undervalues the reader's role to an extent that is almost dismissive of us as part of the making and appreciation of meaning. We are mere receivers of the writing.

My conclusions are in agreement with David Herd when he notes the problem with Olson's procedures and contradictions is that: 'the manifesto is at odds with itself, or at least does not resolve itself.'[77] His resolution is to say that 'Projective Verse' 'is not a guide […] is a necessary element of the process, a thinking through (and aloud) that is continuous with the poems themselves.' His generosity falls away though as Herd is least impressed by Olson's claim that breath is the determinant of

[76] Michael Davidson, '"By ear, he sd:" Audio-Tapes and Contemporary Criticism,' *Credences* 1:1 1981 pp. 105-120.
[77] David Herd, 'The View from Gloucester: Open Field Poetics and the Poetics of Movement' in Herd (ed), *Contemporary Olson* p. 275.

prosody. He notes 'one can't in any meaningful sense square the spaces on the page with the passage and duration of the poet's breath.' This is only partially the case, as illustrated above in my notational analysis. Where Herd concludes though is to acknowledge that Olson's insistence on the breath means that there is a person writing, 'that the poetry is informed by an acute sense of the finitude of the human form.'

Lisa Siraganian agrees with this additional purposive statement on Olson's writing when she says:

> projective verse aims to produce something other than poetic representation. It also aims to represent, or more accurately, capture—the body's trace condensing the essence of the poet's historical specificity for the reader to read and thus perform—a literal manifestation of the poet's bodily response to the world. [78]

Her pithy summary is that 'The poet breathes first, and the reader performatively follows after him.' Hartman is less convinced in his summation of Olson's 'almost mystical insistence on "the breath" as the fundamental principle of poetry.'[79] He points out additional antecedents in commenting on how Olson seems to have

> revived the old idea of "cadence" which Amy Lowell had defined thirty years earlier as a "rhythmical curve…corresponding roughly to the necessity of breathing." Even earlier, at the end of the First World War, Mary Hall Leonard summarised another foray in the same direction: […] each line of a poem, however many or few its stresses, represents a single breath.

It is this embodied writing that Brendan Gillott explores, beyond the poetic line from the body of a poet with a certain lung capacity or using variable breathing—

[78] Lisa Siraganian, *Modernism's Other Work: The Art Object's Political Life* (Oxford University Press, 2012) p. 141.
[79] Charles Hartman, *Free Verse* p.146.

'relaxed, ragged, meditative'—to the poetic form as the text produced on the page.[80] Quite rightly he points out that there is a problem for potential readers lacking the same embodiment of the poet, who will be unable to read the poem correctly. As David Starkey sarcastically concludes, Ginsberg, Olson and Whitman, amongst others, must have been very long winded, while William Carlos Williams positively asthmatic.[81] Gillott resolves this by reverting to Olson and his invocation to the reader to follow the poet's reading, the reader's limitations notwithstanding.

If that is the most that can be said about Olson's principles—that there is a living, breathing person writing the work, 'a complex of voice and spirit' as Hartman has it,[82] regardless of whether we readers have the same breath, and that the reader becomes aware of this fact, then this will more than suffice. As Hartman goes on:

> the breath […] identifies the poem with the poet's individual voice and finally with his individual being […] By imitating the poet's individual speech the poem becomes universal.

Indeed, beyond notions as to where to place the line breaks in any particular poem, the idea of a whole poem as evidence of breathing will be an additional part of the analysis of the poetry of Bishop and Feinstein undertaken in the succeeding chapters of this thesis. Thus, there is much to be gleaned and appreciated by focusing on all aspects of the breathing poet.

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[80] Gillott, 'Charles Olson's 'Projective Verse and the Inscription of Breath' p.108 et seq.
[81] David Starkey, *Poetry Writing: Themes and Variations* (New York: NTC, 2000) p. 136.
[82] Hartman, *Free Verse* p. 146.

Critics on Projective Verse and the breath

The critical reception of Olson's essay at the time of its publication was enthusiastic from his supporters. William Carlos Williams, for example, apparently 'leaped out of bed' on 16 December 1950 to write to Olson. He sought permission to use 'Projective Verse' in his autobiography as he thought it 'the keystone, the most admirable piece of thinking about a poem that I recently, perhaps ever, encountered.'[83] Others simply failed to acknowledge him, for example, Jack Kerouac even tried to claim credit for his work. In a 1968 *Paris Review* interview, Kerouac says 'I formulated the theory of breath as measure in prose and verse, never mind what Olson, Charles Olson says, I formulated the theory in 1953.'[84] Obviously this is an inordinate cheek, as his 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose'[85] was published three years after 'Projective Verse,' and as Heine explains, there are no archival records for Kerouac saying anything earlier on the subject. In addition, he ignores the classical antecedents, which he was, consciously or unconsciously, following.

In answer to a student enquiry as to who was first to the breath-measure theory, Allen Ginsberg apparently commented in 1971 that Kerouac was drunk when he gave that quote,[86] although he did try to defend Kerouac later as not being influenced by Olson saying he had never read 'Projective Verse.' That said, Kerouac's 'Essentials' enumerated certain common elements with Olson including

[83] Quoted by Maud, *Olson Reader*.
[84] As quoted by Heine, *Poetics of Breathing* p. 97.
[85] Jack Kerouac, 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose' in Ann Charters (ed), The Portable Beat Reader (New York: Viking, 1992).
[86] As recounted by Heine, *Poetics of Breathing* p. 98.

the use of breathing, pauses and innovations with punctuation, and he quoted from Williams as well:

> METHOD No periods separating sentence-structures already arbitrarily riddled by false colons and timid usually needless commas—but the vigorous space dash separating rhetorical breathing (as jazz musician drawing breath between outblown phrases)—"measured pauses which are the essentials of our speech"—"divisions of the sounds we hear"—"time and how to note it down." (William Carlos Williams).

Literary gossip and speculation aside, Marjorie Perloff for example in 1973 acknowledges 'Projective Verse' as 'a cornerstone of avant-garde poetics'[87] and explains that it was taken as a wholly new poetry, one that, as Heine explains, both Ginsberg and Kerouac also later explored in their work using the possibilities of breath in order to break from traditional writing approaches. [88] Heine provides a detailed analysis of their considerations, including Ginsberg's insistence: 'I literally measure each line by the physical breath—each one breath statement.'[89] This is Olson's approach to line breaks expressed in other words and is focussed on the poet's breath. Similarly, with Kerouac's dash/breath notation using analogies from jazz performance as quoted above, and each confirms that the breath stop and the thought division are the same, 'breath separations of the mind,' as Kerouac expresses it. Neither writer proposes Quintilian's breath training to speak for as long as is necessary for the sense of the piece, nor gives any consideration to the differences in people's ability to breathe. Rather for Ginsberg and Kerouac, their breath determines the interval between thoughts, even if, as Ginsberg said, the breath pause is in the

[87] Marjorie Perloff, 'Charles Olson and the "Inferior Predecessors": "Projective Verse" Revisited' *ELH* Summer 1973 Vol. 40 No. 2 (The John Hopkins University Press) pp. 285-306.
[88] Heine, *Poetics of Breathing* pp. 48-115.
[89] Heine quoting from Ginsberg's letter 208, Bill Morgan (ed), *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg* (Philadelphia, Da Capo Press, 2008).

mind and is not necessarily coincident with his actual physical breathing when speaking the piece—'you're gonna stop and take a breath [when] you run out of thought and words.'[90]

Inspiration for the next thought comes then in the pause between breaths. Breath stop-mind break-inspiration as a process is how Ginsberg described his compositional approach to, for example, 'Howl,' where 'ideally every line is a breath unit […] one physical-mental inspiration of thought contained in the elastic of a breath'[91] in a way that differs from Olson, who does not mention an alignment of the breath and sense units. Heine concludes that these inconsistencies of approach, similar to those noted above with Olson, in Kerouac and Ginsberg's 'reflections on breathing and writing are poetic theories rather than descriptions of actual compositional principles.'

Since 1950 much ink has been spilled in criticising Olson. Perloff examines the poet in terms of his antecedents and as to whether his own poetry meets the requirements laid down in his manifesto. She was motivated to do this because Olson and all the Black Mountain poets were by the time of her writing either being adored by enthusiastic disciples, or ignored by the academy. In a detailed analysis she looks at many of the statements in 'Projective Verse' and identifies potential sources for them from Williams and Pound, which she says Olson adapted for his own purposes. She describes it as a scissors and paste job, and that may be, but Olson does acknowledge this in his essay, as she notes. Least convincing in her historical analysis are the sources she finds for Olson's ideas on the line coming from the breath. Not

[90] Quoted in Heine, *Poetics of Breathing* p. 55.
[91] Ibid.

one of the quotes from Pound or Williams she provides as potential sources deal with the breath at all. Thus, we might conclude that this articulation of the embodied poet is Olson's. Creeley seems to confirm this.[92] But this would be to ignore the work of Rukeyser and others, as noted in the introduction to this thesis.

Perloff is dismissive of Olson's ability to play by his own rules, saying that Olson 'hoped no one would notice that in his own poetry, he let the lines fall where they may.' This is something of a generalisation as there are many instances where, for example, the line ending is indeed governed by the breath, but more, surely it would be unreasonable to judge Olson's entire writings by reference to and as limited by the statements in this early essay? Like Gillott, I think it would. Indeed, as Gillott concludes:

> *Projective Verse*'s coupling of the poetic line to the breath is not to be read as a literal or prescriptive instruction for poets; still less to be understood as a normative description of Olson's own writing.[93]

Both of these points have been demonstrated in the analysis in this chapter. If not for these things, then what is the consideration of the breath and line for? Gillott goes on to propose that:

> The breath-line diode is best thought of not as a technical recommendation but rather as an attempt to reconfigure the traditional distinction between 'form' and 'content' by making the former a consequence of the latter.

This lack of formal constraint, then, is perhaps the kind of liberation that Elaine Feinstein was referring to when explaining the influence of Olson on her work, as

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[92] Letter from Robert Creeley to Olson of 24 June 1950 where he praises Olson for his formulation that breath defines line quoted in Rachel Blau Duplessis, *Purple Passages: Pound, Eliot, Zukofsky, Olson, Creeley and the Ends of Patriarchal Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012) p. 139.

[93] Gillott, 'Charles Olson's 'Projective Verse and the Inscription of Breath' p.108 et seq.

discussed in Chapter III. Richard Gray describes it more expansively when he says that the opening of 'Projective Verse:'

> declared war on both the formalists and the confessionals [announcing] the emergence of new and powerful forces in post-war American poetry[94]

and Tomlinson agrees when he says:

> 'Projective Verse' for all its unevenness seems […] a genuine attempt to measure where things stood with verse in the late 1940s […] his [Olson's] intention was not originality, but extending a tradition forward from the two masters he acknowledged (Pound & Williams).[95]

Despite its flaws, Olson's theories in 'Projective Verse' are an exploration of and a reminder to consider the breath in the writing and reading of poetry. The question now is to project these ideas forward in time and consider if such notions are at all relevant in the current moment.

Contemporary breath poetics, some examples

Bringing Olson up to date in contemporary poetics, there do not seem to be any poets currently writing who would advocate strictly for the coincidence of line break and the breath as a compositional and presentational rule, or even agree that the end of every line has a short or longer breath depending on its sense. Even if enjambed it may have no breath at all. Rather, as indeed Olson himself provided, the breath of the poet, and thus the way the poem is meant to be read should be in terms of the pauses for sense and emphasis, and as Gray explains:

> the poet responded to the flow and pressure of things, he registered this in his diaphragm, and he then compelled his readers, by sharing his breathing

[94] Richard Gray, *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century* (London: Longman, 1990) p. 279.
[95] Charles Tomlinson, *American Essays: Making it New* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2001) p. 110.

> rhythms, to feel the same pressures and participate in the flow of the moment.[96]

To this end the actual taking of a breath is indicated by using a mixture of line breaks, punctuation, or its absence, gaps and so on in the context of a wider consideration, as Ian McMillan defined matters in his introduction to the T. S. Eliot Prize readings in 2023 'poetry is the transformation of breath into language.'

These ideas were discussed with Mimi Khalvati in January 2021. Her view is that one would be quickly out of breath if inhaling at every line break. She is more concerned with using such markers as devices for scoring the voice as opposed to just the breath, for example, its tone, speed, pauses, pitch and so on, all of which affect a poem's meaning. The idea here being to lineate or score in such a way as to be able to signal to the reader how to hear the poem in the same way as she heard it in its writing. This approach, she considers, is more focussed on tone and intonation than the breath, although it does not seem that distant in intent from Olson's programme.

Khalvati gives an example from her third book, *Entries on Light* [97] to illustrate the principles she uses in composition. This collection, she says, is the first book in which she tried to do such microscopic listening to and scoring of her own voice. Her offset alternative lines and her lineation method are the ways, she explains, she tried to signal this, although much too depends on having an attentive and intelligent reader. Take this small section from the book length poem:

> It's all very well
> for me you think and I

[96] Gray, *American Poetry* p. 280.
[97] Mimi Khalvati, *Entries on Light* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997) p. 25.

for trees and sky and wind
   blind to the grief
beyond our walls, who can tell
   what shadow falls, or leaf?

The idea in having ‘for me’ at the beginning of the second line is to indicate a fall in the voice’s pitch, and to have ‘and I’ on that line so as to blend the two thoughts of the first three lines, making line three quick and flat. If these three lines had been more conventionally lineated as a couplet:

It’s all very well for me, you think
and I for trees and sky and wind

Khalvati says these would have been more declarative statements, whereas the three-lined lineation is doing something different with the poem’s tone, making it less emphatic and more ironic. The line break then does not always have to be a sense break.

The next three lines similarly. Had they been lineated as a couplet: (blind to the grief beyond our walls/ who can tell what shadow falls, or leaf?) Khalvati says it would have sounded like an aphorism carved in stone, whereas what she intended was something lighter, like thistledown, where the real intent of the lines is the question ‘who can tell’, not the background detail of ‘beyond the walls.’ She explains that her method of working is to say the poem out loud many times in order to work out where the line breaks should come and that in part she is trying to steer the reader away from a different reading/meaning than the one she intends—her instructions are there, if you care to read them. And each poem needs to be read carefully on its own terms as to what is there, there being no particular rules.

Whilst poets can try to indicate this kind of reading of their work, there is no absolutely definitive way to mark the precise degree of stress and pitch that a reader should apply in interpreting a poem. There will inevitably be differences between writer's intention and reader's interpretation. To try to close down other readings/meanings is probably impossible, and might in the end deaden the writing. Nevertheless, paying attention to all the signals in the poem, beyond its words is what is required of the attentive reader.

Fiona Sampson, another contemporary poet, articulated her use of breath in an edition 'The Verb' on Radio 3. She said (my transcription):

> I am very interested in breath because I think that without breath, no language, and without language, no thought, certainly no line, very interested actually in lines as phrase or breath. I think that we can make meaning only as much as we have breath for, which in my case, as I don't have a lot of puff, is certainly not pentameter, meaning I can make meaning in short phrases. I have a rising and falling speaking voice and therefore I have quite short phrases and quite short lines in my poetry, not because I am trying to transcribe my speaking voice, although, of course, the poem on the page is a musical score, it is the score of the sound of the real life of the poem, which is out loud, or out loud in your head, because that's how I think, how I experience the world. I experience it in, I guess, short bursts.[98]

This is of interest to this enquiry by virtue of the way she associates both breath and the cadences of her speaking voice with the line and its length, short in her case, for the reasons she explains. Thus, again, breath remains a central concern in current poetics. Colm Tóibin similarly talks about his poetry writing in terms of 'needing a sense of breath' in poems. He partially develops this, saying he is working to achieve something in a poem that is 'not obvious breathing, but is connected to the breath.'

[98] BBC Radio 3 The Verb, broadcast 8 May 2020.

His guidance to writing a poem includes 'don't hold your breath, but breathe and let the sound of the breath into the thing.'[99]

As for the use of the forward slash in current poetry, I have observed this is featuring more and more. It is hard to pick up a recent volume and not find it being used somewhere at least once. To give an example from a contemporary poet, Ocean Vuong's T.S. Eliot Prize and Forward Prize winning collection, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds,* has a prose poem, 'My Father Writes from Prison,' where there are multiple forward slashes throughout. The poem runs as follows from near its beginning:

> …& there are things/ I can say only in the dark/ how one spring/ I crushed a monarch midflight/ just to know how it felt/ to have something change/ in my hands/ here are those hands/ some nights they waken when touched/ by music or rather the drops of rain/ memory erases into music/ [100]

This is a full-page block of words and it is hard to read in that it is not clear whether the forward slashes are in place of line breaks, or other punctuation, such as the light pause Olson intended, and if or how they signal pauses as they do not appear to be used consistently. Indeed, listening to Vuong reading this poem[101] he pauses at some of the forward slashes, reads over others, and even pauses where there are no forward slashes, such as after 'only' in the first line quoted above. Based on a page only reading, if one were to take these forward slashes as breath markers, then the effect makes for a jerky and disjointed poem.. Perhaps this is the intention given the disturbed and disturbing nature of the subject matter. On its hearing though this does not seem to be the case, the forward slashes appear to function, at least partially, as pauses to emphasise meaning.

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[99] Interview for Poetry East, 14 May 2022 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JX7FgL3ggeQ&list=PLwt81mQ8kjRNU_r5HCAFKVPRFUVlU2Jzp&index=3, retrieved 26 July 2022.
[100] Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds* (London: Cape, 2017) p. 18.
[101] https://vimeo.com/222024659, retrieved 11 November 2023.

Christopher Soto takes the use of forward slashes somewhat further in that he doubles them, for example in this extract from his poem '[Somewhere in Los Angeles] This Poem is Needed:'[102]

> She charges her ankle bracelet // from the kitchen chair
> & Sunflowers in the white wallpaper [begin to wilt].
>
> I wilt with them // before my sister // & her probation
> Officer [who comes over to the house unannounced].
>
> Just as we are // preparing dinner // & what are we supposed to
> Do now. Cook for him?! Invite him to eat with us??

Here they seem to function partly in place of commas, say in the first line of the third couplet before the ampersand, but more often they act as emphatic, often dramatic, pauses, say in the first line of the first couplet to point to the location of the action, or in the first line of the third couplet to create a small tension or moment of suspense between 'Just as we are' and the answer 'preparing dinner'. In other cases they seem to deliberately disrupt the poem, for example in the first line of the second couplet. Hearing Soto read his work, I noticed that, as well as pauses for these effects, sometimes he reads right over the double forward slashes as he might in this line, in which case they then seem superfluous. Thus, their use as punctuation is sometimes not as helpful as it might be in conveying sense and understanding to the reader in the kinds of ways Mimi Khalvati advocates for her lineation.

When asked about their use in this poem specifically Soto says:

> The punctuation that I use in this poem is in common with my poetic practice. I often use a double-forward slash and brackets in my poems, oddly, to alter the way that the poems can be read.[103]

[102] First published in the on-line journal American Poetry Review, January-February 2016, retrieved 3 November 2022.

Thus, he is giving the reader options, reserving an elusiveness of not wanting to pin down his meanings precisely. This is a challenge that makes reading such work potentially problematic. If it is difficult to decipher, these poems go against the grain of clear communication. Elsewhere and earlier Soto says:

> In my newer poems, I have been using forward slashes a lot, instead of commas. I made this choice because I enjoy how forward slashes look visually and because they can function as new punctuation for me. They do not only divide the text according to breath or idea but also poetic impulse. My newer works are filled with forward slashes that continuously flip and chop the image or tone of a poem. The forward slashes serve to create a sense of speed or chaos. For me, they resemble the blast beats made by drummers in punk bands. The forward slashes look like drum sticks, charging energy throughout the poem. The punctuation in my poems mimic the energy of punk shit.[104]

This is a dense statement of intentions where Soto says forward slashes are used for breath or idea or poetic impulse, which is interesting, the first two aims being concordant with Olson's ideas about where to place line breaks, but it is not especially helpful to the reader. Indeed, as he goes on the slashes create speed and chaos. Soto is not interested in one meaning for his work or guiding the reader to that. He is giving the reader options to explore in their reading and demanding quite some attention to his work from them. His slashes are not short breath or pause markers and these ideas of poetic punctuation have developed far beyond those promoted by Olson.

Julia Bird, who likes to work with constraints as a tool to unlock her imagination, undertook a project to write poems to be read on one breath as part of

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[103] See interview of April 2017 with Kyle Dargan https://billmoyers.com/story/somewhere-in-los-angeles-this-poem-is-needed/ retrieved 3 November 2022.
[104] Quoted by Day Sibley https://daysibley.xyz/2016/03/02/forward-slash-in-a-poem/ retrieved 3 November 2022.

her second collection, *Twenty-four Seven Blossom.*[105] These are short prose poems with minimal punctuation and an adjective for the title, and are intended to be read in a hurry. The poet told me in an interview in October 2021 that these poems are meant to be spoken in one breath, their length limited to the lung capacity of the writer.[106] When composing them she does so by reading them out loud in one breath, although she admits that is not always possible in performance when a number of factors can disturb the calm reading. Looking at one such, this is not surprising:

> 'Poem to be Read on One Breath: Blue'
>
> I am bathing my toddler nephew and doing so cautiously as there are so many ways to shop soil someone else's child in a setting such as this such as scalding or drowning or man o' war attack but still we are having a useful chat about plastic seafood tub toys during which I say octopus and he says doctoper and I say octopus and he says octoper and I say octopus and he says octopus and I see the blue flash flash as the relevant neurone wriggles its tentacles into place and locks them down for ever.

Her rules for the one-breath poem include the following: 'the length of the poem has to be no longer than you can read out loud all in one go. By the time you get to the last phrases, you should be running out of puff and delivering your message with breathy urgency. The capacity of your lungs will determine the length of your poem.'[107] As noted above, I'm not able to follow anything close to this with her poem. Lung capacity of both poet and reader are being explored and pushed to their limits in the personal element of this form. The asthmatic reader can only try to emulate the effect, but will necessarily fail her challenge. She goes on 'You don't need to worry about regular line lengths or repeating rhyme patterns—this is a very

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[105] Julia Bird, *Twenty-four Seven Blossom* (Cromer: Salt Publishing, 2017) contains six such poems. Others have been performed. Bird says this is a useful form to write in for poetry performance themed nights.
[106] My interview with Julia Bird on 18 October 2021.
[107] Poetry School worksheet https://poetryschool.com/assets/uploads/2017/06/One-Breath-Poem-The-Poetry-School.pdf retrieved 20 October 2021.

prosy poetic form.' Quite so, as if lineated, pauses and breath points would presumably punctuate the poem and make the project self-defeating. Further she advises to 'keep punctuation to a minimum—you want a headlong rushing effect with no stops and starts.' Where she is unable to perform to the constraints of the poem, Bird looks for sensible places to take a breath in between the phrases. As for the impact of the poem on the reader, she hopes that by the time the physical impact of the form has taken hold, the subject matter should have gripped the reader's attention.

Considerations of breath feature elsewhere in Bird's work, such as the poetry stage shows she has organised over many years,[108] and which she says involve considerations of human bodies breathing and performing in a space. Indeed, breath is of concern in the very first poem in her first book, *Hannah and the Monk,*[109] where she uses the urban myth that our every breath includes one molecule of Julius Caesar's last breath as the organising image in a poem about community and breathing: 'This cloud of breath's a borrowing and lending/ which links everyone, including me and you.' She says her poetry is written to be spoken and must be comfortable to read. With this in mind she layers the text with line breaks, punctuation, parenthesis and breaths as clues to its reading, but breath is not necessarily consciously front of mind to her. Choir singing, another of her interests, is greatly concerned with the breath. This is instructive as her pieces written to be sung have different requirements for both vowels and consonants compared to how these function in poetry. For example, music can be made on long consonants.

[108] http://www.jaybird.org.uk/about retrieved 20 October 2021.
[109] Julia Bird, *Hannah and the Monk* (Cromer: Salt Publishing, 2008).

Andrew McMillan is noted as a contemporary poet using breath spaces. He does this throughout his first three collections.[110] McMillan uses long pauses seemingly in place of other punctuation. They have the effect of slowing down the reading both out loud and in the reader's head, slowing more than the use of a comma or other traditional mark might provide, and these spaces can make for some interesting effects. For example, in the short poem 'Morn' from his Guardian First Book Award winning collection, *physical*:

> the night is clouding
> trees shadow nighttrain
> Manchester is growing out towards us
>
> the night is raining
> fields go unrisen
> act like you're not waiting
>
> the night is only briefly shining
> feralfruit gloves empty house
> the birthdays of the dead become unseemly
>
> the night is not so much clouding as burying itself

Here the pauses form a pattern of attention in the third line of each stanza. In the first and third stanzas theydraw the reader to consider the short list of objects that are the focus of the poet's observations. In the second stanza they act similarly, but the words are not a list, rather a statement to be pondered.

In an interview with me in July 2021, McMillan explained the evolution of his writing. The spaces he uses are indeed breath spaces, not the gaps or pauses other writers might use. He adopted the practice to make his writing sound more like his natural speech. Both eliminating punctuation, because no-one speaks with proper punctuation, and leaving pauses for breath where they naturally occur to him are a

[110] Andrew McMillan, *physical* (London, Cape, 2015), *playtime* (London, Cape, 2018), *pandemonium* (London, Cape, 2021).

way of controlling the writing and part of his personal rhythm, which give his writing an intimacy. He acknowledges an early influence on the presentation of his writing from the 1960s anthology *Children of Albion*.[111] He uses three spaces for a comma, six for a full stop and twelve spaces for longer pauses. Although the reader probably won't notice or be able to decipher precisely these distinctions, McMillan says they are a framework for the reader in order to explain things. He evolved this approach in his early pamphlets first by removing punctuation. He coupled this with using only lower-case text from which punctuation necessarily needs to be removed as otherwise he considers it would look odd. Breath pauses were then added as part of this organic process and they are very much part of his actual writing process now, not something added by writing 'normally' and then removing the punctuation.

Three practical issues arise from his approach. First how to end stop a line. Without a full stop this is not possible and so the solution McMillan developed in conjunction with his editor at Cape, Robin Robertson, is to use the breath pause as an end stop/sense stop in the middle of a line. Hence almost all his lines are enjambed and a stanza will run over into the next. Absent this guidance, meaning becomes difficult for the reader to determine. Thus, there is an element of guiding the reader in this way of writing, as well as McMillan focusing on his breath and voice. For example, in 'Local Train' from *playtime* where the first two and a half stanzas read:

> take for example the boy opposite
> his body like a river which has not yet gathered
> the rain it takes to learn the limits of the self
> are malleable a single unbroken curve
>
> from the underside of his jaw to his spread legs
> the things which age him at late teenage are debris
> caught on him from someone else's life the nose ring

[111] Michael Horovitz (ed), *Children of Albion* (London: Penguin, 1969).

the slight moss of hair on his arms and his stomach

as he takes a gym bag bigger than his torso
from the luggage rack oh to be that young again!

This illustrates the three space in place of a comma and the end stop in the middle of the fourth and tenth lines, as well as the use of punctuation in the form of an exclamation mark, where a breath space cannot indicate this and the enjambment of lines and the first into second and second into third stanzas.

The second issue is how to proceed where breath spaces cannot do everything. Question marks are still needed as a breath space cannot indicate a question. These are an instance where the no punctuation 'rule' needs to be broken. Thirdly, the matter of line length and book size can be a problem if breath spaces mean that run-on lines are needed. These are undesirable and McMillan has sometimes had to redraft poems when considering the look of them on the page in the production of a collection.

Fiona Larkin took on the challenge of writing about the breath, both in subject matter and partially in technique, in her pamphlet, *Vital Capacity*.[112] Her focus is on the story of her Irish parents' meeting in a TB sanatorium. They were unforthcoming on the details as her erasure poem 'My Parents' Admissions' reveals, or rather conceals, in the crossing out of its couplets. What is left in the poem is the less shameful tale they preferred: 'We met at a dance.' There are many poems on the breath and breathing, including a ghazal on the Covid pandemic, 'April Inhalations,' and a longer fragmentary poem, 'Breathalia,' on the different parts of the lungs that is split up and presented at various points through the book, this ordering is a kind of

[112] Fiona Larkin, *Vital Capacity* (Talgarreg: Broken Sleep Books), 2021.

pause for breath in the poem and in the book. In other poems Larkin deploys breath-reflecting techniques in the presentation of her poems including breath gaps, the breathy work of blocked prose poems and a poem without stanza breaks, 'The Voyage Out,' which is intended to be read in one breath. Her work is a small but interesting foray into some of the topics I cover in *Sublime Lungs,* and it is fascinating to see how we handle often similar subjects so differently.[113]

Although not new, Olson's theorising about breath in poetry remains an important place to start the considerations of this thesis, despite the difficulties involved in deciphering his meanings and the frequently inconsistent way he applied his theory to his own work. The ways in which the poet, though not the reader, can be seen breathing onto the page is reflected in both the choice of where to position the line break, as well as in the punctuation used. Attention should be paid to all these markers in the poem, including the new use of the forward slash. Contemporary poets who concern themselves closely with the breath and the manner in which it can be scored on the page of a poem are the inheritors of some aspects of Olson's theories. They focus on noting their own voices and breath, as well as guiding the reader's breath, in order to make or suggest meanings. Not only is Olson the starting poet of this thesis, but he also has links to two other poets of concern: Elizabeth Bishop through their personal relationship as his direct contemporary, and Elaine Feinstein through their famous correspondence and his considerable influence on her early style.

[113] This conversation between us was evident in our joint reading entitled Fragile Filters at the 2022 Bloomsbury Festival.

Chapter II Appendix I

The Kingfishers

The poet's breaths, as far as it has been possible to hear them clearly, are noted from a 1954 studio recording of his reading this poem at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. The recording was made by Robert Creeley and is available at writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Olson.php. The breaths are indicated by a double forward slash (//). Part III of the poem is not so notated as it was not included in this recording.

1

What does not change / is the will to change //

He woke, fully clothed, in his bed. He //
remembered only one thing, the birds, how //
when he came in, he had gone around the rooms //
and got them back in their cage, the green one first, //
she with the bad leg, and then the blue, //
the one they had hoped was a male //

Otherwise? Yes, // Fernand, who had talked lispingly of Albers & Angkor Vat. //
He had left the party without a word. How he got up, got into his coat, //
I do not know. When I saw him, he was at the door, but it did not matter, //
he was already sliding along the wall of the night, losing himself
in some crack of the ruins. That it should have been he who said, "The kingfishers! //
who cares //
for their feathers //
now?" //

His last words had been, "The pool is slime." Suddenly everyone, //
ceasing their talk, sat in a row around him, watched //
they did not so much hear, or pay attention, they //
wondered, looked at each other, smirked, but listened, //
he repeated and repeated, could not go beyond his thought //
"The pool the kingfishers' feathers were wealth why //
did the export stop?" //

It was then he left //

2

I thought of the E on the stone, and of what Mao said //

la lumiere”
but the kingfisher
de l’aurore” //
but the kingfisher flew west
est devant nous! //
he got the color of his breast
from the heat of the setting sun! //

The features are, // the feebleness of the feet (syndactylism of the 3rd & 4th digit) //
the bill, serrated, sometimes a pronounced beak, the wings //
where the color is, short and round, the tail //
inconspicuous. //

But not these things were the factors. Not the birds. //
The legends are
legends. // Dead, hung up indoors, the kingfisher //
will not indicate a favoring wind, //
or avert the thunderbolt. // Nor, by its nesting, //
still the waters, with the new year, for seven days. //
It is true, it does nest with the opening year, but not on the waters. //
It nests at the end of a tunnel bored by itself in a bank. There, //
six or eight white and translucent eggs are laid, on fishbones //
not on bare clay, // on bones thrown up in pellets by the birds. //

On these rejectamenta
(as they accumulate they form a cup-shaped structure) the young are born. //
And, as they are fed and grow, this nest of excrement and decayed fish becomes
a dripping, fetid mass //

Mao concluded:
nous devons
nous lever
et agir! //

3

When the attentions change / the jungle
leaps in //
even the stones are split
they rive //

Or,
Enter //
that other conqueror we more naturally recognize //
he so resembles ourselves //

But the E
cut so rudely on that oldest stone //
sounded otherwise,
was differently heard //

as, in another time, were treasures used: //

(and, later, much later, a fine ear thought
a scarlet coat) //

"of green feathers feet, beaks and eyes
of gold //

"animals likewise,
resembling snails //

"a large wheel, gold, with figures of unknown four-foots, //
and worked with tufts of leaves, weight //
3800 ounces //

"last, two birds, of thread and featherwork, the quills
gold, // the feet
gold, // the two birds perched on two reeds
gold, // the reeds arising from two embroidered mounds,
one yellow, the other //
white.

"And from each reed hung
seven feathered tassels. //

In this instance, the priests
(in dark cotton robes, and dirty, //
their disheveled hair matted with blood, and flowing wildly
over their shoulders) //
rush in among the people, calling on them
to protect their gods //

And all now is war
where so lately there was peace, //
and the sweet brotherhood, the use
of tilled fields. //

4

Not one death but many, //
not accumulation but change, the feed-back proves, the feed-back is //
the law //

Into the same river no man steps twice //

When fire dies air dies //
No one remains, nor is, one //

Around an appearance, one common model, we grow up //
many. Else how is it,
if we remain the same,
we take pleasure now
in what we did not take pleasure before? love //
contrary objects? admire and / or find fault? use //
other words, feel other passions, have //
nor figure, appearance, disposition, tissue //
the same?
To be in different states without a change
is not a possibility //

We can be precise. The factors are //
in the animal and / or the machine the factors are //
communication and / or control, both involve
the message. And what is the message? The message is //
a discrete or continuous sequence of measurable events distributed in time //

is the birth of the air, is //
the birth of water, is //
a state between
the origin and
the end, between
birth and the beginning of //
another fetid nest

is change, presents
no more than itself //

And the too strong grasping of it,
when it is pressed together and condensed,
loses it //

This very thing you are //

II

They buried their dead in a sitting posture
serpent cane razor ray of the sun //

And she sprinkled water on the head of my child, crying //
"Cioa-coatl! Cioa-coatl!"
with her face to the west //

Where the bones are found, in each personal heap
with what each enjoyed, there is always //

the Mongolian louse //

The light is in the east. Yes. And we must rise, act. Yet //
in the west, despite the apparent darkness // (the whiteness
which covers all), if you look, if you can bear, if you can, long enough //

as long as it was necessary for him, my guide
to look into the yellow of that longest-lasting rose //

so you must, and, in that whiteness, into that face, with what candor, look //

and, considering the dryness of the place
the long absence of an adequate race //

(of the two who first came, each a conquistador, one healed, the other //
tore the eastern idols down, toppled //
the temple walls, which, says the excuser
were black from human gore)

hear //
hear, where the dry blood talks
where the old appetite walks //

la piu saporita et migliore
che si possa truovar al mondo //

where it hides, look //
in the eye how it runs
in the flesh / chalk //

but under these petals
in the emptiness
regard the light, contemplate
the flower //

whence it arose

with what violence benevolence is bought //
what cost in gesture justice brings //
what wrongs domestic rights involve //
what stalks
this silence //

what pudor pejorocracy affronts //
how awe, night-rest and neighborhood can rot //
what breeds where dirtiness is law //
what crawls //
below //

III

I am no Greek, hath not th'advantage.
And of course, no Roman:
he can take no risk that matters,
the risk of beauty least of all.

But I have my kin, if for no other reason than
(as he said, next of kin) I commit myself, and,
given my freedom, I'd be a cad
if I didn't. Which is most true.

It works out this way, despite the disadvantage.
I offer, in explanation, a quote:
si j'ai du goût, ce n'est guères
que pour la terre et les pierres.

Despite the discrepancy (an ocean courage age)
this is also true: if I have any taste
it is only because I have interested myself
in what was slain in the sun

I pose you your question:

shall you uncover honey / where maggots are?

I hunt among stones

Chapter II Appendix II

The Librarian

The notation below and the source of the recording are the same as for Appendix I.

The landscape (the landscape!) again: Gloucester, //
the shore one of me is (duplicates), and from which //
(from offshore, I, Maximus) am removed, observe. //

In this night I moved on the territory with combinations //
(new mixtures) of old and known personages: // the leader,
my father, in an old guise, here selling books and manuscripts. //

My thought was, as I looked in the window of his shop, //
there should be materials here for Maximus, // when, then,
I saw he was the young musician // has been there (been before me)

before. // It turned out it wasn't a shop, it was a loft (wharf-
house). // in which, as he walked me around, a year ago //
came back (I had been there before, // with my wife and son,

I didn't remember, // he presented me insinuations // via
himself and his girl) both of whom I had known for years. //
But never in Gloucester. // I had moved them in, to my country.

His previous appearance had been in my parents' bedroom where I //
found him intimate with my former wife: // this boy
was now the Librarian of Gloucester, Massachusetts! //

Black space,
old fish-house.
Motions
of ghosts.
I,
dogging
his steps. //
He
(not my father,
by name himself
with his face
twisted
at birth) //
possessed of knowledge
pretentious
giving me
what in the instant
I knew better of. //

But the somber

place, the flooring
crude like a wharf's //
and a barn's
space //

I was struck by the fact I was in Gloucester, and that my daughter
was there // —that I would see her! She was over the Cut. I
hadn't even connected her with my being there, that she was

here. // That she was there (in the Promised Land—the Cut! //
But there was this business, of poets, that all my Jews //
were in the fish-house too, that the Librarian had made a party

I was to read. // They were. There were many of them, slumped
around. // It was not for me. I was outside. It was the Fort. //
The Fort was in East Gloucester—old Gorton's Wharf, where the Library //

was. It was a region of coal houses, bins. // In one a gang
was beating someone to death, in a corner of the labyrinth //
of fences. I could see their arms and shoulders whacking //

down. But not the victim. I got out of there. But cops //
tailed me along the Fort beach toward the Tavern //

The places still
half-dark, mud,
coal dust. //

There is no light
east
of the Bridge //

Only on the headland
toward the harbor
from Cressy's //

have I seen it (once
when my daughter ran
out on a spit of sand //

isn't even there.) Where
is Bristow? when does I-A
get me home? // I am caught

in Gloucester. (What's buried
behind Lufkin's //
Diner? Who is //

Frank Moore?

CHAPTER III

TERRIBLE OXYGEN: ELIZABETH BISHOP'S ASTHMA

Asthma in Bishop's poems

Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) was a life-long asthma sufferer, and so in the context of this thesis it is essential to consider the extent to which her illness makes its way into her poetry whether by way of subject matter, and/or in her technique. Both of these strands of enquiry are aspects of how she wrote about the breath and how one might think about such writing. The small *oeuvre* of one hundred poems published in her lifetime—a tiny output on which a huge reputation was achieved—indicates that very few, if any of her poems deal with her asthma and even then, not obviously or directly. There are though Bishop poems on breath, and breathing is used as imagery, for example, in the title to this chapter. The phrase 'terrible oxygen' comes from her much anthologised and probably most famous poem, 'The Fish,' where she describes the caught fish drowning in the air.

In Bishop's case one needs to exercise caution with the kind of reading-in of her biography to understanding her work in the way that Marilyn May Lombardi postulates.[114] She considers that it is only in understanding Bishop's asthma and her struggle to control it can the reader appreciate the leanness and restraint of her writings. This is an interesting analysis and is explored below, and which is expanded and developed by looking at various elements of Bishop's poetic technique.

[114] Marilyn May Lombardi, 'The Closet of Breath: Elizabeth Bishop, Her Body and Her Art,' *Twentieth Century Literature* Vol. 38 No.2 Summer 1992 pp. 152-175.

One place to start is with Bishop's poem, 'O Breath'. This is the fourth of four love poems included in her 1955 collection *A Cold Spring*. It is an elusive poem, which merits some close analysis as to its meaning and use of the breath as subject matter. The most obvious things to note about the poem when looking at it on the page are the large (triple) spaces at some point in each of its fifteen lines. They act as large stops or caesuras, as breaks or interruptions in the line. We might see them as illustrative of the breathing chest of the lover celebrated in the poem. They are also indicative of the uncertain nature of the relationship between poet and lover, but that is only apparent from reading on.

The poem begins by seducing the reader into the territory of a conventional love poem, as the opening line is iambic pentameter and in the kind of heightened language that would not be out of place at any time in the last four hundred years: 'Beneath that loved and celebrated breast'. But the poem immediately disrupts such a familiar start with the caesura as noted above, and in the next line with its opening words: 'silent, bored really'. The difficulty the poet has in reading their relationship is shown in the fractured nature of the phrases in the next few lines: there is something there, but it is invisible and unfathomable. There is little in these first seven lines to indicate asthma per se as their organizing principle is the breath. The reference to this poem being about Bishop's asthma seems an oversimplification as well as a misreading, as, for example, in Neil Astley's chronology.[115] My reading is supported by Anne Stevenson who, whilst acknowledging the poem's fineness, says 'spoken by

[115] Linda Anderson and Jo Shapcott (ed), *Elizabeth Bishop: Poet of the Periphery* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2002) p. 196.

an asthmatic, it uses spaces within the lines likes broken breathing to indicate the difficulties of communication between the two lovers.'[116]

Three lines in parentheses follow and present an arresting image of the lover's breath observed as it ruffles the nipple hair.[117] That Bishop ascribes the word 'intolerable' to this motion is hard to understand, as is the use of the imperative 'see' at the beginning of this sentence: to whom is she speaking? The reader, herself, someone else, or all of these? And why use parentheses? Is this a digression, or something else? Interestingly, it is these lines that are often singled out for comment on the erotic nature of the poem,[118] but it seems breath not sex is more of interest to Bishop, hence, of course, the poem's title. The poet's use of parentheses is discussed later in this chapter in the context of other poems. Here it functions as part of her technique of breathing on the page. As to the final five lines, these seem to move away from the breath into ambiguous territory of bargaining and coming to terms with or accepting that elusive something of the relationship or love. They add though to the confounding nature of this poem.

'Varick Street', another of Bishop's poems from the same collection, opens with the image of stench-making factories as hard of breath lungs. It is an unrelenting picture of a location and is reflected in the poet's home where the bed 'shrinks from

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[116] Anne Stevenson, *Five Looks at Elizabeth Bishop* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2006) p. 13.

[117] Whilst Adrienne Rich was one of the first critics to argue for a feminist and lesbian reading of Bishop's work, in her 1983 review of Bishop's *The Complete Poems 1927-1979* (http://bostonreview.net/rich-the-eye-of-the-outsider)—an updated version of which is the text I am using here—for me considerations of the sex/sexuality of the lover in this poem are irrelevant to its emotional description, even if at the time of its composition it was necessary for her own privacy for Bishop to cover her lesbian tracks.

[118] By Rich amongst others.

the soot/ and hapless odors/ hold us close' in the third and final stanza. Deriving from a dream,[119] this is a poem of the difficulties of urban existence, which is not in the slightest bit attractive. Bishop's focus on being able to breathe or not is, of course, what counts in such a life.

Looking at Bishop's uncollected poems, drafts and fragments,[120] there is one poem meriting consideration here. The sea is the main focus of 'Apartment in Leme'. Leme is a well to do suburb of Rio de Janeiro and was Bishop's first address in Brazil, and where she lived with her partner, Lota. It is described in terms of the breath: 'we live at your open mouth […]/ with your cold breath blowing warm, and your warm breath cold'. This is a curiosity of expression that takes some working out. Bishop perhaps means a cold sea breeze warms up when it meets the hotter land, and the opposite in a different season or in different atmospheric conditions. Yet it is important to the organising principles of the poem as it is repeated verbatim in the fourth and final part, with the only exception that the 'fairy tale' the sea represents in the end becomes a 'legend'. Three stanzas on, the sea appears again: 'Breathe in. Breathe out*'.* As this is in the same verse as the poet explaining that the sea can only be clearly heard at night, one might, at a stretch, consider the opening as instructions to herself on the importance of focusing on the breath in order to rest.

[119] Bishop writing to Anne Stevenson mentions this genesis for the poem, as quoted in Bonnie Costello, *Elizabeth Bishop: Questions of Mastery* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991) p. 27.
[120] Alice Quinn (ed), *Elizabeth Bishop: Edgar Allen Poe & The Juke-Box* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).

That Bishop suffered horribly from debilitating asthma[121]—the single most frustrating impediment to her happiness, bouts of which left her physically and mentally exhausted—is not in doubt, as her notebooks, journals and letters make plain.[122] There is also much mention of her state of health in her decades-long correspondence with Robert Lowell,[123] such as on March 3rd 1967 Bishop writes 'I had the most spectacular attack of asthma in years,' self-deprecatingly she goes on to make very light of it in her next breath as she continues 'this was a good idea, it got me so much attention.' Of course, her correspondence with Anny Baumann, her long-term New York general physician and friend, is extensive on this and other aspects of Bishop's health. A review of some of the letters between them from the Bishop archive held by Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, U.S.A. has been undertaken. Relevant extracts of interest from the correspondence are detailed in Appendix I to this chapter and they make fascinating, if upsetting, reading. The following extract is representative:

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[121] As Stevenson, *Five Looks,* pp. 130-131 and 151, details in her chronology, Bishop's asthma started around the age of six, forced her to repeat a year of high school ten years later, and, for example, as an adult in November 1971 saw her hospitalised, pulling through after injections of adrenaline and having been placed in an oxygen tent. Bishop's bouts of asthma are detailed in Megan Marshall's biography, *Elizabeth Bishop: a Miracle for Breakfast* (Boston and New York: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), for example, from childhood when her grandfather feared for her life (p. 17), to early adulthood when she was hospitalised with asthma in 1937 (p. 64), to 1950 where correspondence with her doctor sees Bishop 'begging for *any* remedy… for the asthma that left her choking and gasping most nights, unable to lie down to sleep' (p. 89), to 1966 where Marshall notes she needed to rest (p. 195).
[122] Lombardi, *The Closet of Breath* p. 153.
[123] Travisano, Thomas (ed) with Hamilton, Saskia, *Words in Air: the complete correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), examples include: p. 696-7 January 19th 1972 'after 8 hideous days at Peter Bent Brigham [a hospital in Boston], I began to recover. The Harvard Infirmary was heaven after that – even 3 weeks of it' and which left her feeling 'divided from my entire life somewhat by that month in hospitals – very strange'*;* p. 793-4 having arrived in Boston from Europe in a wheelchair after her asthma became severe on the flight home, she says 'I was in hospital for about two weeks, and then when I finally got out…I was woefully weary for quite a stretch'.

Letter to Baumann from Key West, Florida—30 December 1948

> It makes me very angry to say that I have been having asthma again here—I had comparatively little in New York, but as soon as I get to a place I like best of all its starts again. I can't think of anything in particular that would cause it—I have the good luck to find a wonderful large upstairs apartment, ugly, but I like it very much and everything seems ideal for a winter of good hard work. I am NOT drinking anything at all. But I have asthma every night more or less and even with the theoglycinate pills I have to take one or two shots of adrenalin in the course of the night. I don't think it's quite as bad as last year, though—at least in the day time I have enough wind for bicycling and swimming. But I am awfully sick of it.

The extent to which Bishop used her health for her art though is, as illustrated above, at best, oblique, and not withstanding her dedicating her collection *A Cold Spring* to Anny Baumann. To this reader, at least, the avoidance of asthma as a subject matter in her poetry is something of a surprise. Lombardi agrees with the analysis that she 'cloaks' her feelings, but she goes on to state that Bishop's 'imagination continually pursues the implications of her private battle for breath' by turning asthma into a 'rich cache of metaphors' to make sense of the world.[124] This is taking matters too far. Certainly, there are images of breath and breathing in poems such as 'The Fish', and 'The Riverman', but to suggest these represent such a constant pursuit is something approaching hyperbole. Lombardi goes on to state that:

> whilst asthma is not the central subject of poems like *In the Waiting Room, O Breath*, and *The Riverman*, knowledge of Bishop's condition opens up new ways for the reader to approach crucial images of respiration, suffocation and constriction in each work.

Taking each of these poems in turn, agreed, asthma is not their core concern, but such a breath-centred reading is not really evidenced in the texts.

'In the Waiting Room' is a poem about a child accompanying her aunt to the dentist and becoming enthralled by a copy of the magazine, *National Geographic*,

[124] Lombardi, *The Closet of Breath* p. 153.

who when hearing her aunt scream in pain, finds herself joining such vocalization and even metaphorically becoming her aunt for a brief moment of what one might call magical realism. Lombardi sees this poem as linking 'a traumatic childhood confrontation with […] the onset of intense physical distress'. Although she stops short of stating it is an attempt to describe the psychogenesis of Bishop's asthma, she certainly implies this is the poem's purpose. This seems to be too much speculation, especially as asthma is the body's allergic reaction to various substances and a condition caused by defective genes. Assumptions that it is solely brought on by trauma of one kind or another are just that. Even if during Bishop's lifetime such causal explanations were rife and she even underwent an unsuccessful course of psychoanalysis in the winter of 1946-7[125] for both her asthma and alcoholism, the poet herself attributes her asthma to such allergens.[126] Lombardi goes even further and explains that the poem reflects the dizziness of one of Bishop's asthma attacks. This unnecessary conjecture does not seem true.

This over-identification of Bishop's condition with the speaker of 'In the Waiting Room' seems to have come from a transposition of expression from the ending of Bishop's autobiographical story 'The Country Mouse' into the poem she wrote on the same topic a decade or more later. The story ends with the child accompanying her aunt to the dentist, perusing the same magazine, looking around the waiting room as in the poem, and experiencing the existential crisis in terms that reference her eczema and asthma:

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[125] As noted by Marshall, *Miracle for Breakfast* p. 77 and p. 84.
[126] Bishop states this in her autobiographical story, 'The Country Mouse' (Bishop, Elizabeth, *The Collected Prose* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984): 'Then I became ill. First came eczema, and then asthma…No-one realized that the thick carpets, the weeping birch, the milk toasts, and Beppo (the family dog) were all innocently adding to my disorders.' pp. 29-30.

> A feeling of absolute and utter devastation came over me. I felt…myself. In a few days it would be my seventh birthday. I felt, I, I, I, and I looked at the three strangers in panic. I was one of them too, inside my scabby body and wheezing lungs… It was like coasting downhill this thought, only much worse, and it quickly smashed into a tree. Why was I a human being.

As Colm Tóibin points out,[127] the poem is concerned with Bishop's first realisation that she is solitary, a self that has a single identity. And it is not, I would add, concerned with her illness. Marjorie Perloff makes no reference to Bishop's asthma either in her curt dismissal of this poem. Not a fan of Bishop, she says 'it [the self-realisation] doesn't ring true to me and I don't believe it.'[128]

> Regarding 'O' Breath', Lombardi describes
>
> the poem's gasping, halting rhymes and labored caesuras (as mimicking) the wheezing lungs of a restless asthmatic trying to expel the suffocating air…The poem's structure enables Bishop to catch her breath and give the agonies of asthma visible shape – the cradling and containing rib cage of words.

As described above, this analysis, common though it is,[129] is exaggerated: the poem doesn't gasp, rather it breathes rhythmically with the rising and falling of the lover's chest (and the speaker's breath). A wheezing asthmatic does not struggle to expel air, rather the exact opposite, we struggle to inhale air into our lungs. This poem is not about visual representation of asthma, as it is not really about asthma at all. Lombardi has perhaps misunderstood the way the disease plays on the body, and she has sought to impose rather too much on this poem. Further she says that 'such shallow breathing (of the observed lover) is almost intolerable to the speaker because she herself is

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[127] Colm Tóibin, *On Elizabeth Bishop* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton and Oxford University Presses, 2015) p. 12.
[128] David Jonathan Y. Bayot (ed), *Majorie Perloff Poetics in a New Key: Interviews and Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013) p. 40.
[129] Marshall, *Miracle for Breakfast* p. 114 summarises this poem in one line as capturing 'her battle with asthma.'

forced to gasp for air'. It seems to me that what is intolerable here is the sexual tension of the moving hairs under the lover's breath, not the poet's asthma.

'The Riverman' has nothing about Bishop's asthma. The poem only deals fleetingly with the subject of respiration at its start where the riverman enters the water for the first time and it is noted that 'our breaths didn't make any bubbles'. Indeed, this observation and the ability to smoke underwater are part of the shamanic mystery of the poem, and as Lombardi's analysis is focused on Bishop's earlier dream of a mermaid, she seems to have forgotten how emphatically she stated its importance in the asthma/writing understanding.

Whilst I take issue with some of Lombardi's reading of these poems, the reason she proposes to explain the oblique references to Bishop's asthma in the poet's work, however, seems entirely plausible. Quoting from Bishop in 1967[130] she notes that the poet objected to confessional poetry as shameless and a source of too much poetic self-congratulation:

> There have been diaries that were frank—and generally intended to be read after the poet's death. Now the idea is that we live in a horrible and terrifying world, and the worst moments of horrible and terrifying lives are an allegory of the world…The tendency is to overdo morbidity. You just wish they'd keep some of these things to themselves.

The trouble is we cannot know if Lombardi is right or not, Bishop not being around to ask, and even Lombardi acknowledges the 'irresolvable mystery' in such work. In any event and given the limited number of poems directly available on the topic, it seems fair to conclude that her asthma was not an all-pervading subject in Bishop's

[130] Article by Bishop entitled 'Second Chance' in *Time Magazine* 2 June 1967 p. 69.

poetry. It is, however, too much to suggest, as Elaine Feinstein does, that 'One can make out very little of Miss Bishop's life from her poetry'.[131]

Breath and breathing in Bishop's poems

Asthma as subject matter is only one approach to looking at Bishop's work. Another is to consider breath and the quality of the poet's breathing as evident in the techniques employed in her poetry more generally. Not to suggest these are the only syntactical devices at play, but there seems to be something of relevance in, for example, the length of Bishop's lines, sometimes pushing the line/breath to its limits, her use of repeated words and phrases, and the way she says the same things more than once but differently. These rhetorical choices give the impression of ideas and images being explored and revisited and are what Marianne Moore described as 'tentativeness', which she considered 'can be more positive than positiveness.'[132] Eavan Boland wrote about Bishop's mannerisms of technique—slides, skids and recoveries[133] to which Barbara Page adds stoppages, self-correction and self-repudiation as embodying knowledge and feeling. I would add that such considerations and reconsiderations might be thought of as mimicking the inflow and outflow of breath. To illustrate these thoughts, the following section looks at three well-known poems from Bishop's *oeuvre*.

[131] Elaine Feinstein, 'Elizabeth Bishop: A Tribute', *PN Review* 19 1980 p. 12.
[132] Moore's review of *North & South* is quoted by Barbara Page in (ed) Anderson and Shapcott, *Poet of the Periphery* p. 12.
[133] Eavan Boland, 'An Un-Romantic American', *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 14. No.2, 1988 pp. 73-92 and quoted by Barbara Page.

‘The Man-Moth’ appears in Bishop’s first collection, *North & South,* from 1946. Its opening stanza starts with a two-word line: ‘Here, above’. This is a puzzle, where is ‘here’ and is the poet signalling one place or another, ‘above’? There are three mentions of the word ‘moon’ or ‘moonlight’ in the stanza. The rest is filled with repeating ideas expressed using different images: first the Man’s shadow is ‘only as big as his hat’, it ‘lies at his feet like a circle for a doll to stand on,’ and ‘he makes an inverted pin’, and then the temperature of moonlight is ‘neither warm nor cold’ and ‘impossible to record in thermometers’. Such use of language displays a certain hesitancy perhaps and a searching for images, a kind of poetic push and pull, and is illustrative of Bishop’s struggle for breath.

This patterning is present throughout the poem. The second stanza describes the Man-Moth’s visits as ‘rare, although occasional’ both. The moon appears twice more in this stanza, once as a ‘small hole at the top of the sky’ in opposition to the man’s shadow in the first stanza. The third stanza sees the surreal creature scaling the buildings mentioned in the previous two stanzas, and failing, returning to his subterranean home in the fourth stanza he ‘flits’ and ‘he flutters’ both. The underground trains are ‘fast’, their doors close ‘swiftly’, and one starts ‘at once at its full, terrible speed’. The Man-Moth is seated both ‘facing the wrong way’ and ‘backwards’. In the fourth he ‘dreams recurrent dreams’, ‘ties recur beneath his train, these underlie’ as Bishop’s choice of repeated expression closely matches her subject matter. Finally, his ‘eye’ is the focus at the end of the poem, and a magical tear ‘cool as from underground springs and pure enough to drink’. Bishop might have chosen to say things only once, for example in this last line, the underground spring image surely implying the potability of the water. But she chooses different ways to express

the same or almost the same idea or imagery. In this way she can be seen as breathing and struggling to breathe on the page.

The line length in this poem is noteworthy too. The whole consists of very long lines, not quite long enough to wrap themselves in the presentation on the printed page, but certainly they fill the edges of the available space. Many lines are unbroken, without any punctuation pause, neither commas nor full stops. For example, from the opening stanza: 'cracks in the buildings are filled with battered moonlight' and 'of temperature impossible to record in thermometers'. Such long lines feel like straining breath, an exhalation pushing itself until Bishop's poetic lungs are empty.

'The Bight' appears in *A Cold Spring* from 1955. An occasional poem (for Bishop's birthday), it describes a Key West dockside scene in vivid detail, deploying similar kinds of repetition of imagery and word.[134] Examples here include the description of the water, which is 'sheer' and a few lines on 'the color of a gas flame turned as low as possible'. There are three uses of the word 'dry', 'turning' or 'turned' and 'gas' in the first dozen lines. Further on birds 'open their tails like scissors on the curves/ or tense them like wishbones', both; and small abandoned boats are 'like torn-open unanswered letters' and in the next line 'the bight is littered with old correspondences.'

The end of the poem returns to its beginning with the marl being dredged up from the seabed, in which sense the whole poem might be seen as an exhalation and inhalation. The breath nature of the poem is indicated also, by its long lines pushing

[134] Bishop describes the poem as 'a medium length bit of plain description' in her letter to Lowell of 31 January 1949. This seems to be self-deprecating and carefully evasive considering that the poem will be published in the *New Yorker*. Travisano and Hamilton (ed), *Words in Air* p. 85.

against what is possible. The presentation as one block of verse, not broken into stanzas, similarly creates an impression of both urgency and breathlessness. There are few places in it to pause and the poem lets in very little air. This form of presentation is notable in many of Bishop's poems, for example 'The Weed,' 'Seascape,' 'The Fish,' and 'From Trollope's Journal.'

In other longer poems she uses very long stanzas which give the same impression, such as 'The Monument,' 'Florida,' 'A Cold Spring,' 'Other 2000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance,' 'At the Fishhouses,' 'Questions of Travel,' 'The Riverman,' and so on. 'Florida,' for example, is a poem in two large blocks of long, largely unpausing lines and is a breathy description of the natural landscape of the state from her collection *North & South*. Bishop again deploys repetition of words and imagery. The two opening lines start with 'the state' as does the eighth line; oysters are described in both their living and dead forms; 'green hummocks' are also 'like ancient cannon-balls sprouting grass'; clowning pelicans reappear in a simile for the sound of palm fronds in the wind; 'shells' are mentioned twice, as is the moon, as is the 'Indian Princess', her skirt and throat a metaphor for the Florida coastline.

Tentativeness, slides, skids and recoveries can also be seen in poems where Bishop uses parentheses and repetitions. Such interruptions and corrections are a kind of deliberate stuttering, wheezing or hard-won breathing in the composition perhaps. An analysis of a further four of her well-known poems from later collections, *Questions of Travel* and *Geography III* illustrate these effects. The final stanza of her famous villanelle 'One Art' is:

—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (*Write* it!) like disaster.

This stanza comes at the end of a list of losses such as objects, cities, countries, homes from the insignificant ('door keys, the hour badly spent') to the increasingly important ('my mother's watch') and building to the ending of a relationship. Here the parentheses have two uses: to intensify the aspects of the person that will be missed, and a note-to-self imperative to write about the end of the relationship, which is indeed what this poem is doing. The first reminder is a kind of in breath, the things about the person she wants to retain, the second, an expletive, an exhalation, the writing of the poem putting the relationship, albeit guardedly, out into the public realm. The repetition of 'like' either side of the instruction is not a typographical error. As well as being needed rhythmically, it has the effect of being a stutter or wheeze, again breath related, and illustrates the difficulty the poet has in convincing herself that this final loss can be mastered despite appearing to be a disaster.

'Sandpiper' is usually described as an autobiographical portrait,[135] where Bishop sees herself as the shorebird, notwithstanding that the poem uses a 'he' not a 'she' as its protagonist's pronoun. The unstable nature of the littoral world inhabited by the bird is illustrated by the double repetition of the phrase 'he runs,' and the poem is full of pairs of opposites such as the water that comes and goes, 'The world is a mist' and also 'minute and vast and clear', and the tide 'higher or lower'. These

[135] For example, as mentioned by Alice Quinn in a Woodberry Poetry Room presentation at Harvard University on 13 April 2012 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xunoLTJerr8&list=ULz4wDreZnajM&index=2272 retrieved 18 January 2021 and mentioned in Marshall, *Miracle for Breakfast* p. 163.

repetitions of the skittering bird/Bishop, and the other pairings can be seen as respiration. Bishop's self-corrections are illustrated here too:

> He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes
>
> — Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them,
> where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains

It is as if she breaths one thought, about the bird looking at its feet, to immediately rethink it on the next breath at the beginning of the next stanza with the refinement that he is looking at the sand in between his toes. 'Rather' is a modifying and self-correcting word Bishop uses in other poems such as in 'Santarém' discussed below. In the final stanza, where the 'obsessed' bird is still searching, he is looking for 'something, something, something', a repeated phrase that here sounds breathless.

Bishop ponders a world of hidden things in 'Filling Station', a poem which uses parentheses and a pattern of repetitions. The opening stanza has the repetition 'oil-soaked, oil-permeated' and the father's overalls are again 'oil-soaked' in the second stanza, which concludes where the first began with 'dirty'. For emphasis, as if one hadn't quite understood, she says '(it's a family filling station'), and in describing the doily:

> (Embroidered in daisy stitch
> with marguerites, I think,
> And heavy with gray crochet.)

which gives precision, but only partly, as Bishop modifies her accuracy with 'I think.'[136] The lines in parentheses are something of a distraction and could easily be dispensed with. However, coming as they do in a series of questions about the existence of objects at the filling station with which the first part of the poem

[136] Bishop is teasing the reader here with 'I think' as she knows perfectly well what the doily looked like, hence her description. 'or oils it', is another wry Bishop joke.

concerns itself, including ‘a taboret’ with for emphasis ‘(part of a set)’, the doily is as important as the stool it is draped over and the ‘extraneous plant,’ because, as Bishop goes on, they are evidence of human presence:

> Somebody embroidered the doily.
> Somebody waters the plant,
> or oils it maybe. Somebody
> arranges the rows of cans
> so that they softly say:
> ESSO – so – so – so
> to high strung automobiles.
> Somebody loves us all.

In this final part of the poem, having inhaled the why questions about the objects she notices, Bishop is exhaling statements with their repeated ‘somebody’, as well as the ‘so-so-so’, which she describes as a soft saying. In these ways this part of the poem seems to illustrate breathing by virtue of its pattern.

‘Santarém’ opens with a marvellous piece of self-deprecating correction:

> Of course I may be remembering it all wrong
> after, after—how many years?

The repeated ‘after’ might be Bishop taking a deep breath before the question. Immediately though, she is putting the reader on notice that she might be an unreliable narrator, but also alerting us to look for the patterns she uses in the poem. There are multiple repetitions in it. For example, in keeping with the mention of ‘two great rivers, Tapajós, Amazon’ she has them ‘grandly, silently flowing, flowing east’ using two adjectives, one for each river, and the repeated verb, one river each. A few lines on she describes the sky and clouds as ‘everything gilded […] everything bright’, another repetition that leads to her initial summation: ‘I liked the place; I liked the idea of the place’, which is yet another repetition, and this before she makes her next deviation or self-correction. She asks whether there were two rivers in the

Garden of Eden, but remembers there were four, diverging and so not comparable to the two rivers coming to a confluence at Santarém. The poem then dismisses paired 'literary interpretations/ such as life/death, right/wrong, male/female' and I might add inhalation/exhalation, as these are 'resolved, dissolved' in the watery investigations.

Bishop next describes the city with an immediate self-correction: 'In front of the church, the Cathedral, rather'. This stanza contains certain repetitions also—the colour 'yellow', 'golden sand' and its sound '*shush, shush, shush*.'
Continuing with the rivers, the poem says they are

> …full of crazy shipping – people
> all apparently changing their minds, embarking
> disembarking…

Changing one's mind and stepping on and then off a boat is another pairing of opposites. Next comes a parenthetical deviation of interesting details about Southern families settling the area as they could still own slaves, bring with them blue eyes, English names and oars. The poem then goes back to the details of the scene being recollected, coming back to 'the church, (Cathedral, rather),' another repetition and correction, before moving on to describe elements of the town and the telling of Bishop's acquiring a wasp's nest from the pharmacist and the negative reception of it by one of her fellow river boat passengers. This poem is a good illustration of all of the breathing effects created by Bishop's use of repetition, self-correction and parentheses.

Whilst not wishing to push the analysis of Bishop's techniques too far so as to stretch credibility, the observations made about her line lengths, repetitions, deviations and corrections and so on, do seem to indicate an asthmatic poet as much

breathing on the page as one thinking out her poems. My conclusion is that Bishop did not use her own asthma in her poems as much as Lombardi, for example, proposes. There are indeed poems on this subject or using this imagery, but they are relatively few in number. This is somewhat surprising. However, if, again at the risk of extending matters, one is to consider her correspondence with Lowell, Baumann and others, as part of her writings, then her state of health does take up much of this. She handles such with her usual matter of fact, self-deprecating tone, and elicits from this reader a great deal of sympathy. Bishop is a key poet to this thesis in its consideration of how to write about the breath, and when to choose not to, and also because of her poetic kinship with Feinstein.

Unpublished extracts from some of Bishop's correspondence with Anny Baumann concerning Bishop's asthma (as opposed to her other illnesseslike alcoholism and depression and anxiety)[137]

Bishop Archive, Vassar College.
https://www.vassar.edu/specialcollections/collections/manuscripts/findingaids/bishop_elizabeth.html

This is a sample only of some of the correspondence between Bishop and her doctor, depending on what was available to me from the archive at Vassar College. Only some of Bishop's archive has been made available in electronic form. What it indicates is how very destructive Bishop's asthma was to not only her physical health, but also her mental well-being, and that this continued for decades, despite improvements during her lifetime in available medication as inhaled bronchial dilators and steroids replaced adrenaline in the treatment of asthma. Some of these letters are a heart-breaking read with a very desperate Bishop looking for anything to relieve the asthma, which is interfering with her life in such a debilitating way. Despite the brave face Bishop often presents, she is clearly suffering tremendously. One stark short sentence, 'I really don't know what to do,' says it all. Bishop's fortitude in dealing with chronic asthma is impressive. The surprise though is that she chose not to feature the fact of her severe and existential breathing difficulties very much in her poetry.

[Redacted on publication of thesis]

[137] Unpublished as far as I am aware and to be redacted in the publication of this thesis.

CHAPTER IV

BIRD WITHOUT MEMORY: ELAINE FEINSTEIN'S ASTHMA

Introduction

Elaine Feinstein (1930-2019) first published 'Park Parade, Cambridge (In memory of Elizabeth Bishop)*'* in her 1987 collection, *Badlands.*[138] By chance she and her family had bought 27, Park Parade, a former boarding house for Jesus College undergraduates, which took in other lodgers in the summer months. Feinstein learnt from Anne Stevenson that Bishop once rented such a room in the house.[139] It is this co-incidence of place, the 'odd coincidence' as Feinstein described it,[140] that she explores in her poem, casting Bishop as a 'mild ghost' looking out with Feinstein at the night-time view of the river.

Of all the things she might have mentioned about Bishop's character, personality and poetry, it is her asthma that Feinstein focuses on, in the spirit of claiming cousin:

> Fellow asthmatics, we won't even cough
>
> because for once my lungs are clean,
> and you no longer need to fight for breath.

By the time of this poem's composition, Bishop had been dead for about six years, so clearly her fight for breath was over, and Feinstein imagines a little remission for

[138] Elaine Feinstein, *Badlands* (London: Hutchinson, 1987) p. 17.
[139] Elaine Feinstein, *It Goes with the Territory: Memoirs of a Poet* (London: Alma Books, 2013) p. 121.
[140] As reported to me by Feinstein's son, Adam, in an interview he gave me on 24 August 2021.

them both. These three lines are crucial for their subject matter and their position in the poem and on the page. They come at the end of the penultimate stanza and form the first two lines of the last stanza, and the poem has set up and described the scene leading to them.

The deep commonality of experience between the two poets, deeper than the mere fact of occupying the same room for a time, gives Feinstein 'tenderness and strength' from Bishop's 'friendly toughness'. The line break, stanza break between the first of these lines and the next draws the reader's attention to that line and its last word 'cough'. There is the largest of breaths or pauses here, in which, and thankfully, no cough occurs. Feinstein is testing and tempting fate with this lineation.

The focus on asthma is all the more remarkable when one considers the genesis of this poem. Feinstein's notebook drafts of 'Park Parade, Cambridge,' in their early versions, make no mention of asthma at all.[141] The third and fourth stanzas as published are not included at this point in the poem's writing, although Feinstein notes on these drafts that she needs two more stanzas for the poem. Thus, we might conclude that alighting on the common experience of asthma came about after the poem's first inception. Perhaps Feinstein was casting around for a deeper connection between herself and Bishop beyond the mere coincidence of place in order to make a more successful, or 'better' poem. She used their shared illness to initiate a closer and more telling kinship.

[141] EFP 2/1/2 and 2/1/3 Box 30 Elaine Feinstein archive, John Rylands Library, Manchester. Orange notebook from W.H. Smiths containing drafts of some of the poems for *Badlands.*

As well as her tribute to Elizabeth Bishop in 'Park Parade, Cambridge,' Feinstein wrote several other poems about her own asthma, or concerning breathing issues. It is with these we can extend and amplify the enquiry of this thesis as to how to write about the breath and how to explain the effect of breathing difficulties for a sufferer's life. Much of the technique Feinstein deploys in her early work shows the influence on her of her contemporary and slightly older American poets in relation to the breath. She admired Bishop greatly in terms of musicality, choice of pacing and use of pauses and was seeking the same cadences in her own poetry,[142] and in an interview Feinstein says 'Elizabeth Bishop is a lovely poet, but I don't think she's actually influenced me. I enjoy her.'[143] Understandably perhaps, given the dedication of a poem to her, Tim Dooley notes the influence of Bishop on Feinstein when he describes it as a 'more lasting inheritance [than that of the Black Mountain poets].'[144] The two aspects of Feinstein's poetry, asthma and breathing as subject matter, and breath as poetic technique, are examined in this chapter.

Feinstein's asthma poems

The sufferer in 'The Asthmatic'[145] may or may not have been Feinstein herself as this poem was first published in 1971 before she reports she developed asthma. Either way the poem articulates the elation of not wheezing in comparison to the suffering of an asthma attack. Feinstein explains that she developed asthma after she gave up

[142] As noted by Adam Feinstein in our interview.
[143] Interview in The Centennial Review pp. 485-500 (undated) EFP 11/7 Box 138 Elaine Feinstein archive.
[144] Tim Dooley, 'Misplaced and Magical' review of *Badlands* TLS, 17 July 1987.
[145] Elaine Feinstein, *Some Unease & Angels: Selected Poems* (London: Hutchinson, 1977), originally published in *The Magic Apple Tree* (London: Hutchinson, 1971).

smoking in 1975, and it seems to have plagued her greatly from this time onwards. As she so eloquently says in her autobiography:

> I gave up cigarettes completely, I developed asthma. It was seasonal and probably related to my childhood hay fever, but far more terrifying. It set in early that year. At night, I had to prop myself up on pillows, wheezing, fighting for breath, afraid of sleep. Out GP gave me a Ventolin inhaler, and I puffed. But the relief was short. My face became haggard with fatigue, and my weight dropped below eight stone for the first time since adolescence. During the day I was listless[146]

Elsewhere in her autobiography in relation to, for example, the 1981 Cambridge Poetry Festival she says: 'There were great parties […] I always set off towards them, though I was too short of breath to stay long.' Adam Feinstein reported in an interview with me in August 2021 that Feinstein's asthma was chronic sometimes and she always took an inhaler with her everywhere. Such parties were not the only events that she had to leave early. He recalls his mother having to retreat from one his own poetry readings due to an asthma attack.

In good health, the asthmatic of the poem 'smiles and sings […] is sharp and joyful' and is as a 'bird without memory,' or is without memory for a while at least of the 'gasp,' 'gape', 'mouth', 'blood', 'wheezing' and 'harsh air'[…]'face wrung into/ baby grimace, crying/ please, like a dying creature,' and unable to remember what time of day it was—'morning […] the light strangling /behind trees'—when she was rushed to hospital to be attached to a machine. The line breaks and caesuras in the second and third stanzas of this poem are used to represent the struggle for breath very effectively on the page, for example from the beginning of the second stanza:

> of black gasp
> and gape of broken
> mouth blood
> wheezing for

[146] Feinstein, *It Goes with the Territory* p. 198.

harsh air

Here the spaces in between the phrases signal the poet's breathing difficulties, there not being sufficient air in her lungs to speak coherently—she is gasping in the poem itself and in its reading—and the line break between the second and third lines is another pause for breath between 'broken' and 'mouth.' Similarly, the spaces between 'wheezing' 'for' 'harsh' and 'air' and the line break between 'for' and 'harsh' function to illustrate the suffering poet/asthmatic in these moments of crisis. Such visual devices are in contrast with the longer lines of the concluding couplet, where after the hiatus of the asthma attack, even though the asthmatic still has to use 'her night spray,' she has returned in a neat resolution to eager laughter, where the poem began.

Also, in *Some Unease & Angels,* the collection Feinstein wrote after the development of her asthma, is the short lyric, 'By the Cam.' Less obviously about asthma, this poem concerns itself with the river and the dangers presented by the landscape of the Fens. It opens:

> Tonight I think this landscape could
> easily swallow me: I'm smothering
> in marshland […]

The imagery here is of being overwhelmed by the damp, water and waterlogged earth; being eaten and stopped from breathing by it. Such are the fears of the asthmatic, our particular nightmares. Yet immediately after this poem in the book comes 'Patience,' where water is cleansing, and the prayer of the 'fugitive' is 'to make peace with her own monstrous nature.' It might be a stretch to consider that this monstrousness includes her unruly body, but it is reasonable to assume that it does. Coming to terms

with one's health issues, the limitations of the body and what that means for one's life is necessary for anyone suffering a chronic condition.

In 'Hayfever' another short poem, which is included in Feinstein's 1990 collection, *City Music,*[147] she is harking back to childhood/adolescence and the horror that causes her 'to honk like a goose.' This is another image of birds conflated with health and, as it is the only simile in the poem, it is worth attending. The poem is the briefest of explanations of how the teenage poet coped with hay fever and the distancing effect it had on, especially, her social life, ending in what Paul Driver calls 'the simple blank effectiveness of those last three words:'[148]

> I couldn't bear to stay home in bed.
> I painted my face with beige pancake
>
> put drops in my eyes, and learnt instead
> as my membranes flared and I gasped for air
>
> how to feel out of things
> even when there.

It is a co-incidence then that, as it turns out, Feinstein's husband, Arnold, an eminent immunologist, and his colleagues discovered the structure of Immunoglobulin E antibodies that are found in the blood of those suffering allergic reactions. This subsequently enabled the development of antihistamines to relieve, amongst other things, hay fever and the kind of allergies Feinstein suffered.[149]

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[147] Elaine Feinstein, *City Music* (London: Hutchinson, 1990) p. 19.
[148] Paul Driver, 'Fresh Look at Life' Review of *City Music, Financial Times* 2 February 1991.
[149] I am grateful to Adam Feinstein for this information from our interview.

Feinstein again associates birds with health in the context of asthma and a potential heart issue again in a much later poem, 'Casualty.'[150] Here the poet is in hospital. She opens with a little dark humour about the blood pressure monitor having a name, and her Ibo nurse commenting that 'George' is an unreliable machine. Stuck on a trolley, wired up, exhausted and unable to move, Feinstein's view is as prosaic as it gets in hospital: here are 'cardboard pisspots and an oxygen mask […] and a/ red button to be pushed in asthmatic spasm'. The line break after 'and a' is noteworthy as it is a pause in the reading that draws attention to the next line; the red button, the asthmatic spasm. Carol Rumens admires this poem for its 'lack of rhetoric' and 'understated colloquialism'[151] and she goes on to ask a question pertinent to this enquiry:

> Why then, should […] reports from the body's frontline like "Casualty" extend such appeal? […] The answer is that being fully present to the poet, they have elicited the poet's full presence. Interest is primarily the contract between writer and subject. Whenever that is honoured down to the last fleck of small print, the two apparently disparate entities, interest and the poetic trance, merge and become indistinguishable.

A well-written poem from and of the poet's body has been the focus of much current writing, and my collection, *Sublime Lungs,* and this thesis seeks to extend such work. As Rumen's notes, body awareness is a means by which a poet can figuratively become her writing, her body of work.

Feinstein uses the same delay and attention effect in the poem's second stanza with 'I'm/ knackered' and in its fourth with 'What/ a mistake,' and between the third and fourth stanzas themselves with the universal plea of anyone in hospital: 'I want// my ordinary life back'. I am with the poet. As for the birds, it is their song in the

[150] Elaine Feinstein, *The Clinic, Memory: New and Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2017), originally published in *Gold* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000).
[151] Carol Rumens, Review of 'Gold' *Poetry London* Summer 2000 p. 23.

poem's final line that contains the hope that there might not be anything wrong. The birds function here in the same was as they do in 'The Asthmatic,' as representations of life and positivity and make a much more pleasant sound than the noisy goose of 'Hayfever.'

In *Gold* there are two poems about her childhood where Feinstein uses air and choking imagery. 'Snowdonia' is a poem provoked by looking at a family holiday photograph, where she imagines her father's instruction 'The air, taste the air'. Her physical reaction is telling about their relationship perhaps: 'And my throat/ tightens' emphasised by the position of the line break. 'Boatsong' ruminates on one's choice of occupation. Having survived a childhood incident of being swept out to sea, Feinstein describes herself thus in the final stanza:

> Now in my study I sail along
> trawling for words to feel alive.
> And that is my rush of adrenalin
> with muggy London air in the lungs,
> and oil of wintergreen on my skin.

Writing is then her essential form of excitement, which she contrasts with her physical limitations—the dirty air in her lungs, and her eczema being treated with wintergreen oil.

Asthma in Feinstein's drama

Before proceeding to the second line of this thesis' enquiry on breath as reflected in the poet's technique, it would be remiss to omit from this analysis, albeit not poetry, a

consideration of Feinstein's TV drama, 'Breath.'[152] This was written in 1974 and broadcast by the BBC in its 'Play for Today' series in January 1975.[153] The play is set in Feinstein's childhood home of Leicester and concerns a pregnant, asthmatic woman, Nell Hamer (played by Angela Pleasance), her husband, Rodney (played by Gareth Thomas) and the over-bearing, interfering housekeeper they employ, Mrs Pritchard (played by Liz Smith). Throughout, the scene direction and dialogue focuses, not surprisingly, on Nell's asthma: for example, Sequence One opens with the description 'Her attack has eased.' Sequence Two, in which Rodney is driving his Bentley through Leicester has it that 'The sound track changes to the uneven gasping wheeze of asthmatic breathing…the breathing catches and halts…then, the cars start to move, and the wheeze also begins again and continues as the car shoots ahead…' The scene that continues on his return home includes the following dialogue:

Rodney: And your (HE PATS HER BREASTBONE GENTLY) old bronchioles?

Nell: Well, sometimes asthma gets better. A lot of it's psychological they said. Feelings of –

Rodney: (PICKING HER UP) I know victimisation, general doing down.

Sequence 11 has the following: '…Nell in the kitchen has taken a furtive whiff of her new spray, and is breathing in and out, with her hand on her ribs, as if they hurt.' It is clear then, that Nell suffers greatly from her asthma and is being made to feel guilty about being ill.

[152] The play was first titled 'A Breath of Air' according to Feinstein's notebook A4 green with red bound spine EFP 2/1/2 and 2/1/3 Box 30, Elaine Feinstein archive.
[153] The foregoing relies on the partial shooting script contained in EFP 5/1 Box 113, Elaine Feinstein archive. It is necessary to quote a certain number of sections from this as the script is not published or readily available.

A key early exchange revealing the relationship between a constantly unwell, Nell, at the mercy of the controlling housekeeper is as follows in Sequence 15:

NELL SNEEZES ONCE OR TWICE, AND DRAWS AN UNCOMFORTABLE BREATH, LOOKING AROUND THE ROOM, SHE SEES A VASE OF FLOWERS…

Nell: (HAND TO HER THROAT) No, not in here. I'm sorry. No flowers. It's the pollen you see. I'm allergic to it.

Mrs. Pritchett: (BURYING HER HEAD IN THE FLOWERS) Oh, these doctors. They make you believe anything.

Nell: I'm absolutely serious. I can feel it already. Please.

Mrs. Pritchett: (A BIT HUFFY) I'd better move them to the kitchen then.

Nell: I can't have made it clear. They'll have to go right outside. Why don't <u>you</u> take them home? (FEVERISHLY) it's very important.

Mrs Pritchett: You do look at bit off colour today, Mrs Hamer.

Nell: Yes (PAUSE) But why don't you do what I say?

Mrs Pritchett: (DISAPPROVING) I don't think it does to give way to it. What you need is to sit down quietly, and I'll just make you a nice cup of tea.

Nell: (BEGINNING TO WHEEZE A LITTLE) But I don't like tea. Don't you remember. It's coffee I like.

Mrs Pritchett: All you young people pouring that nasty brown tar in your stomachs. Well, you all think you know best.

(RELUCTANTLY TAKING THE FLOWERS OUT OF WATER) There, there.

Nell's relative helplessness in amplified in the next sequence where she has a severe asthma attack during the night. It begins 'Nell opens the window. She breathes with great difficulty. Her asthma is at its peak and every outgoing breath shrieks. Her face is wet, and her hand holds her diaphragm, as though she can force the air out by their pressure…'[154] When the attack passes, Nell dreams of (or more accurately has a nightmare of) Mrs Pritchett saying 'The weak, Mrs Hamer. People who have to fight for breath, how will they fight for their children.' Other elements of her helplessness are her husband's initial refusal to believe there is something wrong with Mrs. Pritchett, and her doctor disbelieving her. Nell's asthma reaches a crisis after her baby is born in a scene where she collapses and Mrs. Pritchett does nothing to assist her, after which Nell asks Mrs. Pritchett to leave the house once and for all. By the end of the play though, Nell recovers, as does her asthma. The final scene (Sequence 28)[155] with Nell sitting on Rodney's lap runs as follows:

Nell (SUDDENLY): I've forgotten to take my pills. I haven't taken them for hours. And listen, I'm breathing. I'm just breathing.

(THEY BOTH LISTEN)

CUT TO THE BABY IN HIS COT. ON THE SOUND TRACK THE SWEET IN AND OUT FLOW OF NEW BORN HEALTHY LUNGS.

Nell (SNUGGLING DOWN ON HIS CHEST): Perhaps I'm cured.

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[154] It is surprising that Feinstein focuses on the outbreath here. As noted in Chapter III, it is my experience that inhalation is the greater difficulty and site of struggle during an asthma attack. Perhaps this can be forgiven as Feinstein herself had yet to develop asthma at the time she wrote this play. Similarly, Nell's belief in a psychological cause is, though common place, mostly incorrect.

[155] Final script held in the BBC Written Archives, Caversham, Berkshire.

Rodney (PRESSING HER CLOSER): Ssh. Ssh. Nell.

(OVER HER HEAD HE TAKES A CIGARETTE FROM THE BOX AND LIGHTS IT, HER FACE BURROWS, TRANSFRIGURED ONTO HIS WOOLLEN JUMPER. ABOVE HER WE CLOSE ON RODNEY'S FACE. HE DRAWS HIS OWN DEEP BREATH AND RELEASES IT WITHOUT EXPRESSION, THEN EVEN AS HE PATS HER SHOULDERS, WE READ HIS KNOWLEDGE OF WHAT HE MUST NOW CARRY.

Although the last direction is elusive as to whether this means his ill wife, Nell, or some secret he has not revealed in relation to Mrs. Pritchett's history, the play ends with a return to the breath. Here the breathing of three characters is in focus, Nell, the baby and Rodney, which is a neat bookend to re-emphasise Feinstein's theme.

Feinstein received mixed reviews for this play, many of which reflect the negative reviewing culture of the 1970s. Peter Knight[156] said '…Angela Pleasance took on all the traumas of a beaten-up tractor giggly misfiring on all cylinders,' which is harsh for both play and player. He goes on dismissively: 'Anyone desperate enough for an explanation of these weird goings on might suggest the dreaded allergies were at the bottom of it all. But it was still very much a let down.' He concedes a little to Feinstein's writing talent, whilst maintaining his critique: 'Apart from the basic weakness of her play [a paranoid protagonist, which he dislikes] Feinstein […] showed she has a nice line in tense, edgy dialogue and pinpoints relationships with a few deft touches.' So, in the end Feinstein appears to have redeemed herself in Knight's eyes.

[156] Peter Knight, Daily Telegraph reviews section 24 January 1975. EFP 11/1-3 Box 134 & 135, Elaine Feinstein archive.

Clive James on the other hand found it '…very interesting,' [157] even though he found it a mystery that no one would co-operate with Nell's request, despite Mrs Pritchett clearly being 'a nutter.' Even so he couldn't resist putting a rhetorical boot in at the end of his review: 'Miss Feinstein reminds me of American writer, Joan Didion. Both have a fastidiously elegant approach to pain and a natural disinclination to concern themselves with anything else.' This seems rather mean-spirited from Feinstein's neighbour in Park Place.[158] But worst of all was James Thompson who said: 'Pleasance brought a degree of plausibility to an improbable story. For what well-to-do husband would not have kicked out a help who so frightened an ailing wife? […] Miss Feinstein's play had a rather weak theme.' [159] And in a painful dismissal he concludes: 'And in the best traditions of the women's magazine story her [Nell's] asthma disappeared and she could breathe freely again.' This critique sets out to demean Feinstein as a serious writer, and belies some breath-taking assumptions on Thompson's part—that he can't conceive of a husband disbelieving his wife, and that he can't understand that asthma might be recovered from, both of which are plausible, surely. To my mind Feinstein's play suffers from none of these criticisms—there are countless narratives where women's agency is removed from them and they are infantilised, as is the case here from both her husband and father. Rather, it is domineering people who think they know best, perhaps like these critics, and including both Nell's husband and the doctor, as well as Mrs Pritchett, who are in Feinstein's sights here.

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[157] Clive James, Observer reviews section 26 January 1975, EFP 11/1-3 Box 134 & 135, Elaine Feinstein archive.
[158] The Feinsteins lived at number 27 and Clive James at number 9.
[159] James Thompson, Daily Express reviews section 24 January 1975, EFP 11/1-3 Box 134 & 135, Elaine Feinstein archive.

I have some sympathies with the critical reception of this play, but not for the reasons Peter Knight, Clive James, and James Thompson enumerate. Rather, it is the dramatisation of Nell's asthma that is questionable. From the opening screen, where the soundtrack is of wheezing, to every time Nell has an asthma attack that unrealistically quickly stops, either on its own or with the help of miraculously fast acting pills, to her final over-dramatic fainting attack, her asthma is misrepresented—if only a pat on the back or a few puffs of an inhaler did actually work so fast in quelling an attack. This lack of plausibility is as much the fault of the director and actors as that of Feinstein, who as noted above, did give some sensible directions in the script. Nell's asthma does not seem real in its portrayal, especially the idea that it can be so miraculously cured by the play's end, although, given the time constraints of a one-hour drama, suspension of disbelief and a swift resolution is perhaps what was needed.

What does seem accurate, though, from a screening of the play,[160] is the extent to which asthma is misunderstood, often wilfully so, by people who should be more concerned for Nell. That the dangerous Mrs Pritchett has the attitudes she has is less shocking than the reactions of Nell's husband, Rodney, who is initially fed up with Nell, only later realising that she is actually really ill. If he had known better, he would have realised Nell should sleep propped up and not have pulled her down into the bed, for example, and only a husband lacking understanding goes out to a card game with his friends leaving his sick wife at home on her own. Similarly, her father fails her at the end of the play by not taking her collapse seriously. Even the doctor is

[160] A video recording of the play is available at the British Film Institute.

more interested in prescribing a tranquiliser than dealing with the causes of Nell's asthma or her state of mental anguish.

Feinstein makes little mention of this play in her autobiography, there is one passing reference to its existence, her having written it 'sometime in the Seventies.'[161] Thus it is not possible to know more about the background to the writing of the play, or its genesis. Nevertheless, it is a piece of her art that uses the medium of breath and breathlessness very thoroughly as a central theme.

Breath in Feinstein's poetic technique — the influence of the Black Mountain poets

As to the second line of the enquiry of this thesis—Feinstein's poetic technique in relation to the breath, one needs to focus on her early work and the influence of Charles Olson and the Black Mountain poets. She describes in her autobiography how she became acquainted with the work of these American poets via her admiration for Allen Ginsberg, whose own 'breathless unpunctuated paragraphs'[162] she enjoyed. Ginsberg, whom she published in the magazine she edited, *Cambridge Opinion*, put her in touch with, amongst others, Olson to whom she wrote asking a 'few bald questions.' He replied in the form of the now famous 'Letter to Elaine Feinstein.' She says Olson's response was 'rapid and overwhelming;' adding that 'at the time I was mainly puzzled by it. For a while it silenced me.'

[161] Feinstein, *It Goes with the Territory* p. 203.
[162] Ibid p. 69 et seq.

Whilst Feinstein's letter to Olson was thought lost, his reply, mistaking Feinstein for a man, has been preserved.[163] In the Olson archive at the University of Connecticut, though, I have found Feinstein's original letter to Olson of 22 April 1959.[164] She writes accepting his 'Maximus to Gloucester' for her magazine, *Prospect,* and asks for comments from Olson for her editorial on two questions where she is seeking to

> give as informed a picture as possible of American poetry at the moment. Particularly […] to offer an alternative line of development to Prof. Yvor Winters-Thom Gunn new movement use of language.

She asks for orientation as follows: 'what emphasis do you give to the use of the Image (Pound, Supermarket) [and] use of speech rhythms?'

Olson's reply of 27 April 1959, and his additional letter of 28 April 1959, which were merged in May 1959 and are usually published in this latter form, is his next statement on poetics after 'Projective Verse' from 1950. In these (this) he writes, in his usual dense, digressive and expressive style, that for him 'form is never any more than an extension of content.' He emphasises the importance of speech rhythms and where we learn them—from childhood and from the language culture into which we are born. As for the use of images, he says that their basic trio is topos, typos, tropos. In other words, a traditional theme or formula, a mark or impression, and a turn or change. And the final element of Olson's poetry is its landscape, by which he means its narrative (scenes, events, climax, crisis, hero, development etc.). Before he

[163] Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (eds), *Charles Olson: Collected Prose* (Berkley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997) p. 250 et seq.
[164] Letter from Feinstein to Charles Olson dated 22 April 1959, Charles Olson archive, University of Connecticut, Box 154.

signs off the letter, he offers a brief summary: poetry is 'Place (topos, plus one's own bent plus what one can know, makes it possible to name)'. [165]

It is not a surprise that Feinstein thought this all rather dumbfounding. Olson's logic is very hard to follow and his argument's generalising nature is difficult to pin down as he gives few specific examples or makes vague references to writers, assuming Feinstein will know what he means. In the current context though, he says nothing much more here about the breath, unless we conflate this with the statements in the first part of the letter about speech patterns. I consider that there is something to this, speech patterns, of course depending on the breath, but such a mention is not as explicit as Olson's pronouncements in 'Projective Verse.'

Feinstein revised her opinion of the Olson letter many years later in 2015,[166] saying that she no longer found it particularly obscure:

> In my own poems, it is easier to make out what Olson liberated me from than exactly what I learned from him. His attention to syllables I might have drawn from Pound or even the Elizabethans, but his emphasis on *breath* was new and helped me listen to the shape of my own lines.

Whilst Feinstein did not reply directly to Olson at the time, something she regretted, I have found a later letter from her to him in 1963 in the Olson archive.[167] In this she asks a number of questions that evidence her thinking deeply about the ideas behind 'Projective Verse.' In this she says she takes 'the central proposition of Black Mountain and P.V. as the business of 'being' and that 'has to occur in flow,' but not in the sense of song or melody because that 'pulls against speech.' She asks:

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[165] The final punctuation [)] here is mine as Olson omits it.
[166] Elaine Feinstein, 'A fresh look at Olson' in David Herd (ed), *Contemporary Olson* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015) p. 127 et seq.
[167] Letter from Feinstein to Olson dated 28 March 1963, Olson archive, box 154.

> I often wonder what you'd think about that: the patterns of sound as a sort of grasping; I'm drawn to all those lovely cadences which seem almost to cure the pain they figure […] Isn't it that Williams has faith in? [...] And how much I just wonder did you get from the Bauhaus through Albers, not from their functionalism plainly, but from expressionists […]?

and signs off with a request for comments. It does not appear though that Olson replied as there seems to be no further correspondence in the Olson archive, and so we might assume he did not want to continue the discussion.

Feinstein published early passages from Olson's *The Maximus Poems* in her magazine, *Prospect.*[168] She corresponded with him on these poems, although she never met him in person.[169] Writing to Olson even earlier, in September 1958, Feinstein mentions that Ginsberg suggested to her that Olson 'may have some poems of the kind I am looking for…we want young writers with highly personalised responses who know how to use language as though it is still alive.'[170] Of the poems she included in the magazine, she says in her autobiography:

> The bareness, the lean particularity excited me, but also the intoxication induced by the absence of all punctuation—and line endings which suggested the pauses of a man thinking aloud.

Adam Feinstein reports[171] that his mother found her difficulties in breathing and Olson's concern with breath in poetry an 'amusing irony.' She was, though, very

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[168] In Michael Schmidt, *Lives of the Poets*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1998) p. 856-8 Feinstein is quoted saying 'It was partly because I was so influenced by Americans […] I started by own magazine, *Prospect,* not to publish my own poems, but to introduce Olson, Paul Blackburn and others who weren't yet known in this country…'

[169] As noted by Adam Feinstein in our interview and in an interview with Michèle Roberts in *PN Review* 101, Jan-Feb 1995 vol. 21 no. 3 pp. 45-47. Unfortunately, the location of this correspondence, if it still exists, is, at the time of writing, unknown to Adam Feinstein. A very little of it has been found in the Charles Olson archive.

[170] Letter from Feinstein to Charles Olson postmarked 26 September 1958, Olson archive, Box 154.

[171] Adam Feinstein interview with me.

grateful to have received the letter from Olson, as amongst other things, it's publication became good publicity for her as poet.

Chapter II of this thesis describes how Olson was not only thinking aloud, but also breathing on the page. Feinstein acknowledges this when she says that, apart from a recording listened to years later, 'I knew Olson's voice entirely through the notation of it on the printed page'. As to explaining the influence of Olson on her work, Feinstein says she aspired to make poems that were plain statements—'no metaphors to tease out, no clever arguments'—made in a lyrical voice, yet with the same 'gaps and hesitations.' She says that the sound of Olson's *The Maximus Poems* went into her first book, *In a Green Eye,* and into her Russian translation work.[172] Indeed, and perhaps surprisingly, she says elsewhere:

> At eighty-three, I sense a change in my own work after taking a fresh look at Olson. I am glad to return to the poetry I once admired so intently and begin to experience again an urge to sprawl rather than tidy up; to shrug off constraints and boundaries and once again risk listening to the sound of my own voice, so that the lines can take their own musical shape.[173]

Donald Davie recognised and approved of this benign influence on Feinstein's early work saying she learned 'from American models certain devices, certain mannerism, notably an extremely sparse and idiosyncratic punctuation,' as well as

[172] Feinstein in Herd, *Contemporary Olson* p. 127. Here she also says that 'the sound of a powerful voice running across the stanzas, along with his (Olson's) use of typography to notate the natural pauses in a spoken voice, were invaluable to me as I came to translate the poems of the Russian poet Marina Tsvataeva.' Feinstein is well known for this important piece of scholarship. Although it may be considered part of her writings, as it is translation of another poet's work, it is not an area explored in this thesis.
[173] Ibid p. 132.

how to combine colloquialism with elevated language.[174] The American models he has in mind here are Olson and the Black Mountain poets, which Feinstein acknowledged made her writing at this time 'unusual in an England dominated by the Movement poets.'[175] Ruth Padel notes that 'central to her work […] is the effort for lived exactness which drew her to American and Russian examples. From Olson she learned to take risks with space and voice'[176] Elsewhere Feinstein explained the influence of the Black Mountain poets on her writing and its chime with her voice thus:

> I was very influenced by American poetry in general in the fifties when I was very bored with what seemed to me to be the New Movement's caution and tightness, and I felt myself of a very different spirit from that. I looked across to America because of language, of course, which seemed to be the same one that we shared. I was passionately involved with it through Pound and Black Mountain poetry and Olson and Ginsberg and Paul Blackburn, Ed Dorn. People of this kind seemed to be writing with a music that I could pick up with my voice. I have a very odd voice in England, in English terms, because when I began to write, I was from the North. Many people who were involved in the New Movement were also from the North. But they were men and I had a woman's voice […] so it was natural for me to look across the Atlantic to a rich culture, an energetic culture with an immigrant base and that's why American poetry was very influential to me.[177]

Adam Feinstein notes that his mother had an ambivalent relationship with the Black Mountain poets in terms of their influence on her work.[178] Whilst she found the spoken quality of their writing and the use of pauses helpful for her own poetic voice, and which had echoes through her work, he believes she moved away from them and did not want to be stuck with a Black Mountain label. Indeed, she did not want any

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[174] Donald Davie, *Under Briggflats: A History of Poetry in Great Britain, 1960-1988* (Manchester, Carcanet, 1989).
[175] Michèle Roberts' interview, *PN Review*.
[176] Ruth Padel, Review of *City Music, TLS* 16-22 November 1990 p. 1248.
[177] Interview with Elaine Feinstein in *The Centennial Review*, [undated photocopy in the Elaine Feinstein archive, EFP 11/7] pp. 485-500. Interestingly to her differentiating female voice comment here, all the poets she cites are men.
[178] Adam Feinstein interview with me.

labels, not to be thought of as overly English in her work as her awareness of her Russian family background became important to her.[179] This is supported by Peter Conradi,[180] who describes the group of poets, including Ed Dorn, Lee Harwood, and Tom Pickard, at Essex University that Feinstein was part of for a short time (six months) in the 1960s thus:

> The group hoped to become a coterie after the fashion of the Black Mountain poets in America, but disbanded after 1969. Their importance for Feinstein seems to have been, first of all, the assistance they gave her (and one another) in finding a poetic voice; second in the nature of their disagreements with them.

Looking particularly at her early books, *In a Green Eye* from 1966 and *The Magic Apple Tree* from 1971 the following surveys and analyses the Olson effect, as it might be summarised, on Feinstein's poetic technique and the numerous breath devices she deploys. In the following I use the first published versions of the poems being discussed from these books. Later in this chapter I look at the revisions Feinstein made to some of these poems on their subsequent publication in her selected and collected editions of 1994 and 2017 respectively. *In a Green Eye*[181] is a chapbook of eighteen short-lined short poems, only one of which is two pages long. Rose Atfield summarises these poems by contrast not to Olson, but the Movement poets when she says Feinstein wanted

[179] Deborah Mitchell, *Dictionary of Literary Biography Vol. 40: Poets Great Britain and Ireland since 1960 part I: A-l* (Detroit: Gale, 1985) pp. 116-121. All of Feinstein's grandparents came from Odessa.
[180] Peter Conradi, *Contemporary British Novelists*, Elaine Feinstein, DLB p. 292 et seq. photocopy with partial reference EFP 2/2/3, Box 32, Elaine Feinstein archive.
[181] Elaine Feinstein, *In a Green Eye* (London: Goliard, 1966).

> to produce a more ambiguous emotive response to experience than the contemporary Movement poets, whom she found 'were often embarrassed at the idea of expressing emotion.'[182]

Although not the subject of this thesis, in order to understand Feinstein's generalising comment, it is worth bearing in mind the features of the poetry of the Movement poets in the 1950s, as detailed by Martin Dodsworth.[183] He explains (I summarise greatly) that the work of Kingsley Amis, Robert Conquest, Donald Davie, D. J. Enright, Thom Gunn, John Holloway, Elizabeth Jennings, Philip Larkin and John Wain (and others) manifested a cool, scientific, analytical tone along with detachment and poise as a way of coping with the post-War world and Britain's reduced status therein; a plain style and neutral tone as compared to, for example, the rapturous visions and crowded metaphors of Dylan Thomas, who died in 1953; attention to clear diction and syntax as proposed by Donald Davie's quasi-manifesto, *Purity of Diction in English Verse*; and liberalism and anti-aristocratism.

Much criticised in later decades, for example by Ian Hamilton, as tame, awkward and laborious, this is the poetry with which Feinstein is taking issue. Dodsworth explains that to be fair to Larkin, for example, he was acknowledged by Anthony Hartley, a journalist commentator on the Movement, as being less scared of emotion that some of his fellows. This may be why his reputation survived into the Sixties and beyond when the likes of Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney, Sylvia Plath and Feinstein herself were building theirs, often with the use of the first-person lyric so decried by the Movement and its supposedly inclusive, but rather exclusive 'we.'

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[182] Rose Atfield, 'The Pressure of What Has Been Felt: The Poetry of Elaine Feinstein' in Claire M. Tylee (ed), *In the Open: Jewish Women Writers and British Culture* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2016) p. 231.
[183] Martin Dodsworth, 'The Movement: Never and Always' in Peter Robinson (ed) *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British & Irish Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

Elsewhere Feinstein says of the Movement 'It couldn't accommodate me. It was as precise and selfish as that. My voice wasn't suited to those traits.'[184] This is supported by Adam Feinstein.[185] He notes that his mother was trying to turn away from the 'smugly insular' Movement poets who to her lacked emotion, were stuffy, had too much English shame and were unwilling to be embarrassed. From Tsvataeva he says she learned to expose herself in her poetry. Feinstein's guidance to him as a poet and to other young poets, who she generously mentored, was to be unafraid to sound undignified or embarrassed, be willing to reveal oneself, and to open the soul to all the details of everyday life. Her granddaughter, Katriona, notes that Feinstein was 'trying to find the truth of experience, to accurately represent it in all its glory and ugliness without extra flurries.'[186]

Feinstein was praised for this quality in her work by Dannie Abse. In a private letter to her he writes: 'You are unlike so many of our contemporaries, unafraid of emotion.'[187] This and considering poetry as music, it must sing, can use the colloquial but not the clichéd and not be obscure, were her guiding principles.[188] Indeed she explained the importance of music thus:

> I think there is always a tug between song and the speaking voice, and the speaking voice is that effort to get things natural and direct, nothing fancy, nothing that would embarrass my Liverpool forebears […] with their mockery

[184] Peter Lawson, 'Way Out Centre: In conversation with Elaine Feinstein,' *Jewish Quarterly* Spring 2001 pp. 65-69.
[185] Adam Feinstein interview with me.
[186] Comments made by her in an online Poetry School course run by her father, Adam Feinstein in the autumn of 2021.
[187] Letter to Feinstein from Dannie Abse, 4 August 1994, EFP1/1/25, Elaine Feinstein archive.
[188] And Adam Feinstein notes in our interview that Feinstein admired these qualities in the work of Dannie Abse, whom she considered under-rated and under-rewarded as far as poetry prizes were concerned.

> of pretentions. That's the speaking voice, and then at the same time, no poem lasts unless it is memorable as a tune […] the tune comes across the iamb.[189]

Olson and the Black Mountain poets were important then as counters to the Movement and so cannot be ignored as influential on Feinstein's work as she herself noted, even if Atfield chooses to make no mention of them. Writing in her chapter for the Contemporary Authors Autobiography, Feinstein sets up and answers a question:

> What did I want from poetry? First and foremost, I wanted poems that were genuinely trying to make sense of experience. But I wanted something else as well: not tight knotty images, but plain propositions, lines that came singing out of the poem with a perfection of phrasing like a line of music […] I found that in American poets as different from one another as Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens.[190]

The perfect phrasing here we might also claim is part of her considerations of the breath and the way breathing works in the composition of her poetry. She goes on in this chapter to describe *In a Green Eye* as her 'quiet American voice;' a confirmation, if one were needed. Later she notes that:

> My one-time Black Mountain mentors had […] virtues too […] but neither their passion for geography and local history, nor their insistence on […] spontaneity were ever truly mine. And they were often obscure on a close reading.
>
> These days I work most of all for directness and lucidity. I don't want the music of the lyric to drown out what has to be said. There is always a tug between speech and music in poetry. What I am looking for is a music that has the natural force of spoken feeling.[191]

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[189] Interview in *The Centennial Review*.
[190] Elaine Feinstein, *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series, Vol. 1* (USA: Gale, Cengage, 1984) p. 221 et seq.
[191] Elaine Feinstein in *PN Review Calendar of Modern Poets*, Nov-Dec 1994 vol. 21 No.2 pp. 59-60.

Feinstein's notes for a talk or lecture on Olson from a mid 1960s notebook[192] are of interest at this point. Appendix I to this chapter is my transcription of these notes. Here, one can pick out passages where she describes her understanding of Olson as 'when he talks about breath he means the natural pauses of reading.' This is not quite what Olson described in 'Projective Verse' as outlined in Chapter II of this thesis, but it is a practical short hand or a way in which one might apply Olson's theories. She criticises concrete poetry on the grounds that it loses the linear movement of the line and the 'typographical techniques of Olson.'

In terms of the specifics of chiming with Olson, as illustrative of some of the features she highlights in these notes, *In a Green Eye* was praised for its 'economy of the line of discourse.'[193] Adam Feinstein described this non-ironic collection as using short lines and simple sentences and lacking self-deprecation.[194] There is a distinct lack of punctuation in most of the poems. This means that extra care in their reading is required in order to distinguish enjambed from end stopped lines and hence the meanings, for example with the first poem 'Buying a house for now', which is as follows:

> To live here, grace
> fills me like sunshine
> these tall rooms
>
> we walk through
> singing: look
> we have put down

[192] Black notebook, mid 1960s, EFP 2/1/2, EFP 2/1/3, Box 30, Elaine Feinstein archive.
[193] Andrew Crozier's review of *In A Green Eye* in Guerilla, Vol. 1 No 2 Detroit 1 June 1967 p. 9: 'the poems are beautiful writing. Their intelligence and feeling are characters in their structure, released by the economy of the line of discourse.' EFP 11/1-3 Box 134 & 1354, Elaine Feinstein archive.
[194] Poetry School course, 2021.

a piano takes three men
to move, and
now sweeping

the pinewood floor
my mind is light
as blown glass

knowing to love what
can't be carried
is reckless

I testify
to the beauties
of now only

Feinstein choses to dispense with much punctuation here. However, the poem is sufficiently well lineated with clear stanza breaks to make the notion of full punctuation redundant. Its sense and meaning are understood without it, if we focus closely and are prepared to try out the possibilities she had left open for us. Her line breaks and stanza breaks are interestingly disruptive, as in Olson, for example those between stanzas one and two, and three and four where the reader has a delay between completing the phrases: '[…] rooms // we walk through' and '[…] sweeping // the pinewood floor.' Neither of these devices assists the reader in knowing absolutely where to take a sense breath, where the subject or meaning or expression in the poem changes from one thing to another—rather they function to slow down the reading and make us concentrate even in such a short space. Interestingly in preparing the manuscript for publication,[195] Feinstein made one amendment to her original lineation. Instead of the fourth stanza reading:

the pinewood floor
my mind is light
as blown glass

[195] EFP2/2 1 of 5 Box 31, Elaine Feinstein archive.

it previously read:

> the pinewood floor
> my mind is light as
> blown glass

This minor change, moving the 'as' from a line end to the beginning of the next, changes the emphasis of the simile from being clearly a comparison between the state of her mind and the glass, to being more obscure, where 'my mind is light' is a statement on its own before the simile arises. Although, of course, not obvious to the reader of the published poem, this illustrates the care Feinstein took with her lineation. It is a feature of her work that elicited praise much later. John Greening described 'The poems in the first few books [as depending] on the poignant pause and meaningful line-break.'[196]

The benefits of looking at earlier drafts of a poem, as here for Feinstein and in Chapter V for Dannie Abse, are to enable an understanding of the work the poet has done in reaching the its published version. Indeed, that may itself be subject to further revision on subsequent publication in say, selected or collected editions, such that these different versions should best be considered as variant texts. Poem drafts illustrate the sequence of the poet's thoughts, ideas and the like, 'the processes of the text's construction' as Nicola Abram describes it. She goes on to say that tracing the drafts is a 'peculiar time-travelling magic of seeing a poem unfold in the writer's own hand.'[197] One can see how the poet is thinking, considering, weighing and judging on the page. With Feinstein, the interest is primarily to see how the influence of the

[196] John Greening, Review of Collected Poems and Translations (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002), *The London Magazine* June/July 2003 pp. 121-125.
[197] Nicola Abram, 'Bernard Spencer's Compositional Processes' in Peter Robinson (ed), *Bernard Spencer: Essays on his Poetry and Life* (Bristol: Shearsman, 2012) p. 107.

Black Mountain poets reflected itself in her work during its genesis, and whether it waned or survived on subsequent publication. I undertake such analysis subsequently in this chapter.

Another example where the line breaks jar as in Olson is 'Drunken Tuesday.' This is a heavily enjambed poem, which if read with the conventional short pause at the end of each line gives a staccato and out of breath feeling. For example, it opens:

> Old nag I
> hack on burning
> with care with
> hurrying stooped and
> tugged at in
> cold air "money
> money money"
> eating at the
> soft roes of the brain

There is some Olson-like offset text in this collection too, such as in 'The Potter's Party,' where the last two stanzas are offset to the right, beyond the right end of lines of the previous four stanzas. In her manuscript preparation version, Feinstein toyed with left justifying the whole poem, but changed her mind, crossing out the left justified stanza five in both pencil and red crayon. [198] 'Keep this shape please' was her decision.

Feinstein also uses a number of gaps or pauses or deep breaths in the writing of poems like 'Dance for a Dead Aunt' and 'Poor Relations.' With these Judith Kazantis later described Feinstein as being 'skilful with a dancing conversational

[198] Elaine Feinstein archive.

pause.'[199] In the latter these make up a line that otherwise has two words. These are a sophisticated device in this poem to again indicate two meanings, which is some achievement given the limited number of words involved. To illustrate:

> all these years
> after what
> has changed us?

The gap allows two readings: 'all these years after, what has changed us?' if we assume the first line is enjambed, which is possible, there being no punctuation to the contrary, and 'all these years, after what has changed us', the 'after' being part of the question. Similarly, in the next stanza:

> She still lives with
> a shrug, her
> eyes idle
>
> over my long hair […]

In this case the cousin's eyes can be both idle (adjective) and idle (verb). The deep breath allows for and also represents both senses of the word 'idle.'

By contrast to the breath gaps, but performing a similar breath function, are Feinstein's long lines—long in the context of an otherwise short-lined poem. For example, in 'Calliope in the Labour Ward' the line 'pain in the shallows to wave up and over them' is a literal representation of the poem's subject matter: labour and a long contraction/exhalation. Similarly, in 'For a Friend under Sedation,' part of the opening stanza's question is the line 'under your skirt your small knees open brood,' which reads as a forceful expulsion of description. Coming as the second line of the

[199] Judith Kazantis, 'Black Irony: Review of Elaine Feinstein's *Selected Poems*,' *Poetry Review* p. 61 [undated photocopy, but probably 1994] in the Elaine Feinstein archive EFP /1//15 Box 136.

poem it draws the reader's attention to both its sense and positioning on the printed page. The reader immediately wants to know more of the mad girl and her concerns.

'Dance for a Dead Aunt' employs several of these breath devices. It is heavily enjambed in terms of lines and stanzas from its opening:

> Old aunt your
> ginger hair grey
> eyes are ashes
>
> scattered: to
> forget them freely
> I think of you

There is a significant breath pause in the ante-penultimate stanza:

> Now with your Will, I
> read you forgive us
> all give us

and a puzzling offset line in the penultimate stanza:

> and how shall I
> thank you where
> your lost grey sand

The gaps in the ante-penultimate stanza do more than present a neat pattern lining up of the forgive us/give us, as they offer a double reading with the 'all' at the beginning of the line implying all is forgiven, as well as all being given away. The long pause in the penultimate stanza functions differently. Perhaps it is a hesitation in saying thank you, or perhaps more likely gasp of guilt or regret as the aunt is dead and cannot now be thanked other than by means of this poem. The insertion of the double indent here and its effect on the emphasis and meaning of the poem and thus the importance of its emotion was made during the manuscript preparation.[200] All these add up in a poem where life and death, breath and its cessation are the subject matter.

[200] Elaine Feinstein archive.

Donald Davie gave Feinstein a generous review of *In a Green Eye*, generous given her criticism of him as part of the Movement, but perhaps by then these things were forgiven as he appointed her to a lectureship at Essex University in 1967. In this he praised the collection's distinction,[201] describing her tone thus:

> Mrs. Feinstein's tone of voice is not often so public as this ('Politics'). Her tone is private though her range of reference is not private at all, and so her poems are not in the least obscure. (They may seem so, however, to those who fail to realise how her powerful succinctness is attained, in her more ambitious poems, by supressing punctuation so as to have a phrase or clause doing double work – meaning one thing if it is construed backwards into the sentence that it introduces).'

I have observed similarly in the foregoing. Davie goes on to describe

> the most impressive of Mrs. Feinstein's qualities – that succinctness in which, with no impression of breathless hurry (the very sure and solid unmetrical versification sees to that), perception follows perception so closely that not a chink is left between for the defensive detachment of the ironist, nor the self-congratulation of either.'

Feinstein's pacing, then, impressed Davie and it is interesting that he chose to couch this in terms relating to the breath.

Feinstein's next collection is *The Magic Apple Tree.*[202] Again its poems show the influence of Olson and the Black Mountain poets. There is little punctuation and heavy enjambment here. These function in the same way as described above in looking at *In a Green Eye.* In this second collection Feinstein deploys additional breath marks and combinations of these and spaces, again illustrating Olson's

[201] Donald Davie, 'On the State of the Nation: In a Green Eye,' *The Wivenhoe Park Review 2* (Cambridge, 1967) N.P.
[202] Elaine Feinstein, *The Magic Apple Tree* (London: Hutchinson, 1971). The title of this collection comes from a painting by Samuel Palmer from 1830, which Feinstein saw in the collection of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge according to her son, Adam, Poetry School course 2021.

influence. The book opens with ‘Anniversary,’ the final two lines of which use Olson’s breath markers, the forward slash, to indicate pauses within the lines:

> supernatural / every day
> we rise new creatures / cannot be predicted

These are not the forward slashes or solidi we traditionally use to indicate the line endings when quoting from a poem, as in the way they are used in this thesis for example. Olson proposed their use to mark a light pause, but a pause none the less; a pause so light it hardly separates the words, but where the poet does not want a comma. He says these indicate interruptions of meaning rather than the sounding of the line. Here Feinstein is using them in just this way in this poem as there is a contradiction of the supernatural and the every day, and the rising of new creatures (something observable), but yet they cannot be predicted.[203]

Feinstein deploys similar notation in ‘The Magic Apple Tree,’ ‘100% Return Guaranteed (Advt),’‘West,’ ‘Onion,’ ‘Train Shot,’ ‘An Exorcism,’ ‘To Cross,’ ‘Birthday / a Dark Morning,’ ‘Votary,’ ‘Lines Outward’, For Brighton, Old Bawd,’ ‘Some Thoughts on Where,’ ‘New Sadness / Old City,’ and ‘Strings’. In total then fourteen of the fifty-one poems in the collection use this form of punctuation at least or only once.

‘100% Return Guaranteed (Advt)’ is set in a laundrette where a sickly woman is watching her washing. The light pause comes in the last of the three stanzas where Feinstein introduces surreal aspects to the scene: an invisible hand squeezing the woman’s heart, and the blue detergent singing. These are both unusual and surprising

[203] These markers are present in early typescripts of the poem in EFP 2/1/1 Box 29 Elaine Feinstein archive, so we might conclude that they were always intended.

images and the readers' attention is drawn to them and held there for consideration by the use of the forward slash, which is a clear visual flag on the page. In this way it seems to be much more than the comma-lite of Olson's intention.

'Onion' is something of a mystery: from finding an onion under sheets of music—how did it get there?—to considering why it is sprouting out of the soil, to why Feinstein's mission is to prevent it from hiding, to why, despite its aliveness, Feinstein has to dispose of it. The clue to the poem's meaning beyond the prosaic might lie around the line with the light pause:

> and my mission is to remove your
> hiding place / and all places of hiding
>
> so that nothing can come of you

There are more layers to this onion that meet the eye. Feinstein is oblique, certainly, but the onion seems to stand for something or someone who needs to be kept in sight at all times.

In 'Train Shot', which is the slightest of lyric observations from a train journey, the light pause separates two parts of the poem: a consideration of the effects of humanity on the planet, and her thoughts about the River Tyne and the sea:

> the fields and the delicate
> foals he looks to / and
> now turning on iron girders

The pause marks a turn from general humanity to a specific person considering the poem's subject matter, but in this case, it seems rather unnecessary and even overemphatic – the 'and/now' performs the same sense change signal without the punctuation. The opening line of 'Lines Outward' include a slight pause: 'Tell me your gods / to'. The poem has barely begun before it stops itself a little. This is

appropriate to a slowed introduction to the two philosophical questions Feinstein asks in the poem, but one cannot help wondering whether the opening phrase might have been just as effective as the title for the poem and the punctuation dispensed with.

In 'Strings' the pause marks a change of point of view from the husband to the wife in the poem. He opens it by explaining how he forgives his crying wife. We take this at face value until we learn she is crying 'at my doings' (his). Then comes the pause and the phrase 'like a nun' after which the woman becomes the focus of our concerns, stoically smiling at her husband, bearing illness, and then back to working for him 'typing/ the office mail after the dishes.' The revelation of her abuse at her husband's hands makes sense of the poem's opening, which one is drawn back to re-reading. The pause, though, is not slight, but another sense change. It could have been signalled by traditional punctuation, such as a full stop and new sentence being started. As it is, it is rather more dramatic in effect due to the mark being made on the page.[204] An earlier version of 'Strings'[205] has a second light pause mark in place of the colon in the penultimate line. The effect of changing it to a longer pause marker represented by the colon, draws attention to the final line 'as//though vexed by your own endurance.' Placing the 'as' on the penultimate line ensures that the long pause intended in the meaning before this phrase is not run on or lost by a mere line break or a comma at the end of this line.

Poems where there are two such pauses include 'For Brighton, Old Bawd.' The first three stanzas are descriptive of the early morning. The fourth and fifth are

[204] Feinstein was emphatic about this mark as in an early version of the poem, she crossed it out, later to reinstate it. EFP 2/2/3 Box 32, Elaine Feinstein archive.
[205] EFP 2/2/3 Box 32, Elaine Feinstein archive.

the crux of the poem. Her theme is the frivolity of the city and the magic of its forgivable bawdiness:

> which is the magic of all bawdy: fit
> forgiveness / that true measure / for every
> shape of body and each mistaken piece of behaviour

She described the poem in the context of her marriage thus:

> I suppose it was a rather permissive place, and it was a place where we sort of learnt to forgive one another for our peculiarities as much as anything else.[206]

The pauses in the penultimate line bookend and highlight the phrase 'that true measure', which is forgiveness, and which at this point in the poem, rather than frivolity, is its ultimate focus.[207]

Large spaces or pauses appear in many of the poems in this collection as well. 'The Magic Apple Tree', being the collection's title poem, the fact of which means one ought to give it some attention, contains both forward slashes and significant pauses. Here Feinstein is exploring memory, ekphrasis, and existential hope. In the first stanza she uses two very large caesuras in its last three lines and then the next stanza includes a pause mark:

> his unnatural blue because
> together they worked upon me like
> an icon infantine
>
> he called his vision / so it was

The first large pause separates a description of the effect of yellow and blue paint from the impact this has on Feinstein the viewer. The second separates this explanation from how the painter saw his work. These are disruptions, which make

[206] Interview in *The Centennial Review*.
[207] These markers were added late in the compositional process, as the early typescripts of this poem, which were subject to many wording changes, do not show them. EFP 2/1/1 Box 29, Elaine Feinstein archive.

the reader slow down and consider what is being said in the same way that the poet is considering the effect of the painting on her. The pause mark indicates a sense or topic change as the poem moves on to talk about icon painters. In the poem's third and final stanza Feinstein uses a large break between two lines (or put another way, a short line amongst longer lines):

> light, if we sing of
> the red and the blue and the texture of goat hair,
> there is no deceit in our prophecy:

She could have easily lineated this by having 'light' on the earlier line, but by placing it at the beginning of a line in the way she does, she emphasises its importance. The second or sub-phrase in this line that sets up the list of topics to be sung about also has the effect of making the reader pause and wait.

'West' is another poem of pauses, large and small. Again, the poem pauses itself in its opening line, a hesitancy before it gets going, perhaps, or an opening call for silence in the sense of attention from its readers after just three words: 'White and golden.' The next caesura in the line 'because you can always move on' draws attention to what is possible for the free and freedom loving Mae. The same effect is made with the caesura in the line describing the contents of the river 'half-forgotten lost shoes and dead cans.' And again, the delayed gratification at the line breaks 'You make love / of person or place […]' and 'birds on a black tree/ [large indentation] bind me' functions in the same way. The reader must wait and in waiting think about the possibilities of what might follow. The light pause in this poem is, as in other of her poems, a sense change from 'my river' to a generalisation about nothing being mean (ordinary) in the water.

Again in ‘An Exorcism’ the poem pauses itself a little at its opening: ‘Your gods are hostile / when you.’ As with ‘Lines Outward’ the pause comes after the word ‘gods’. This may be significant as this poem too deals with questions of philosophy and religion. Its large caesura in the line ‘But I know them well as you’ serves to emphasis the relationship with the ‘you’ of the poem in terms of a deep knowledge of the other person.

‘To Cross’ again pauses its opening line with a breath mark after its first word; its second line has two caesuras, and the third and fourth lines large spaces:

> Nobler / they wrote on the
> run in holes lonely
> unloved
> what respite

The patterning here is reflective of the content: opening opinion— ‘Nobler’; unbroken up to ‘the run’; pausing to qualify the pauses in the action (‘in holes’) and the nature of the protagonists as ‘lonely and ‘unloved’. The large space in the fourth line indicates a change in the narrative, in this case a honing of the action to a specific morning. The other light pause at ‘love / only’ and the two other caesuras function as sense changes and list pauses, as elsewhere in the poems in this collection.[208]

Similarly, the light pause and caesuras in ‘Birthday / a Dark Morning’ are interesting because this is a poem in which one such occurs before the poem even begins, in its title. The opening line ‘Waking cold a squeeze of fear the’ uses

[208] The marks and spaces in this poem are apparent from an early typescript of this poem in EFP 2/1/1 Box 29, Elaine Feinstein archive, where Feinstein’s editing shows the elimination of a first part to the poem of some eight lines in three stanzas, the poem having been in two parts until this point.

caesuras to emphasise the observations and the slowness of the line asks the reader to pay attention to them. The same is true of the pauses in the following lines:

> courts stooping my love your shirt
> floating the rain parting your
> hair to the skin yesterday
>
> we talked through mistakes
> failures / unswept leaves in
> steps to the bin these days

and the line break stanza break is similarly a pause device, the reader's eye having to pass over some space before hearing the next line, and the change of focus from the relationship to a comment about the unswept leaves is marked by a light pause mark and within it a space.

'New Sadness / Old City'[209] similarly pauses itself slightly in its title[210] and works its way via a number of offset lines, two other light pauses and one small pause to a significant caesura towards its end[211]:

> as we listened like ghosts
> in a parked car here breathless when
> you were taken tasting on
> our teeth uneasily the strange
> illicit salts of elation.

The pause here indicates a sense change from the facts of being a tourist looking at Jerusalem by night and thinking of the victims of the Shoah ('the saints of the Lublin ghetto'), who are unable to marvel at the city, to a visceral experience of guilt at the poet's ability to enjoy what others of her religion cannot. Another element of breath

[209] Originally this poem was titled 'June 6' in typescripts in EFP 2/1/1 Box 29 Elaine Feinstein archive. This date I take to be signifying D-Day.
[210] The poem was titled 'June 6' right up until publication, although no explanation for the change is provided in the publication manuscript. EFP 2/2/3 Box 32, Elaine Feinstein archive.
[211] This was added in the editorial process as Feinstein amended the typescripts and settled on the wording of this stanza. Other notations such as the light pause marks appear to have been included from the start of the poem's composition.

related work in the poem is pointed out by Atfield,[212] where she talks of the 'breathless catalogue' of adjectives used in the poem's opening description of the city:

> hot air the sky shaking:
> white dust and crumbling stone and
> the scent of scrubby hills
>
> waterless
> fort…

Atfield probably overstates the effect of these lines by describing them as breathless: they are relatively short after all; had they run much longer then, perhaps she might be right. However, there is a possible breathlessness here indicated, not in the adjectives, but in the large pause of Feinstein's lineation between 'hills' and 'waterless and 'fort,' which includes a stanza break and a line break. If the poet is out of breath after the first stanza then, with this layout there is pause for her to catch her breath before moving on with the poem.

'Votary' pauses itself twice in its opening line before it gets going into its block of text and enjambed lines: 'Tonight / a November fever / white.' The effect here is to emphasise the word 'tonight' and to also bookend and draw attention to the state of the poet's health, as well as the internal rhyme ('tonight' with 'white'). The poem moves on at something of a clip, only to pause for breath in its last few lines, which is signalled by space breaks, a couple per line.

Many poems in this collection use spaces as pause marks. Interesting among them is 'Happiness', which rarely here uses commas as well. Its last line is 'morning:

[212] Atfield, *The Pressure of what has been felt.*

I am happy now without presumption.' This very large space makes for a long line as summary to an otherwise short lyric poem. It is a way of drawing even more attention than might otherwise be accorded to the poem's conclusion. Similarly, 'Fool Song' though it has a couple of pauses in its opening line, the one large pause comes in its last 'homage/ to: discontinuity,' which is the visual summation of her musings on what to do or how to be on a day free from proscribed activities. 'For the Beatles' is an elegy, the Beatles having disbanded at the time this collection was being written. There is one large pause in one line: 'in that spirit old,' which marks a change in the poem from explaining the effect of their music on the poet to an attempt to represent it on the page:

> in that spirit old
> impersonal rewardless *easy*
> drum drum drum drum drum
> *Love is all you need* [213]

In 'In the Question of Survival' the large pause comes towards the end of the poem. This signals the point where Feinstein moves from metaphor the subject you as a birch tree—to the supernatural—angels in first light moving across the fields, which are described as mysterious and with a mysterious image. The pause functions to alert the reader to some work needing to be done to follow her meaning:

> over the fields mysterious
> as April in the grey
> wood of our garden trees.

although quite what is so mysterious about April is elusive.

[213] In an early typescript of this poem Feinstein marks the space before 'old' with an outward arrow. She also moves the word 'track' from the end of line five to the beginning of line six, which is how it is published, enhancing the enjambment and the effect of a breathless run on. EFP 2/1/1/ Box 29, Elaine Feinstein archive.

‘Offering: for Marina Tsvetayeva’ is a questioning elegy for the Russian poet whose work Feinstein was the first to translate into English.[214] The pause devices in it are introduced in its second half as she questions her subject. They reflect an uncertainty of facts and motivations, appropriate to the interrogation (or form reflecting content as Olson wrote to her), and culminate in the final stark image and its mourning cry:

> even when you hung yourself coldly like
> an unwanted dog? O black icon.

In her translation work too Feinstein continued to reflect an element of Black Mountain influence in the lineation of these poems. Hence the formatting of her Tsvetaeva translations replaces the dashes from the Russian originals with 2 em spaces.[215]

The pauses in ‘A Prayer for My Sons’ indicate the deeps sighs of regret and the poet’s request for forgiveness, as is the poem’s subject matter:

> Forgive me bright sons if I have hobbled
> you, put my fear into you, I will
> suck it out with my lips
>
> spit it out look I will stop hiding,

They function more in terms of checking the pace of the reading than the commas Feinstein also uses here.

The opening of ‘Some Thoughts on Where’ places a light pause as if writing a letter: ‘For lovely Allen / I saw you dancing.’ The Allen here is assumed to be Allen Ginsberg, given the later references to mysticism and Buddhism. Another such pause

[214] An early typescript shows that this poem was first titled ‘For Marina Tsvetaeva’ EFP 2/1/1/ Box 29, Elaine Feinstein archive.
[215] As noted by Adam Feinstein in Poetry School course 2021.

is present in the breathy lines that follow and further on a caesura: ‘we belong and how to take’. This uses the device noted earlier of enabling a doubling up on meaning. The surrounding lines being:

> in our local bother of where
>
> we belong and how to take your
> airy scaling of skies as a sign

which allow for interpretation as run on—‘how to take etc., but also as a pause—‘how to,’ following by an imperative—‘take airy scaling’ etc. The final lines use pauses and one very large one:

> nomad, you live where you are in
> the now the world you recognise is whirled in.

Not only is there a comma, but also a double pause in the penultimate line, both of which acting to contain or bookending the phrase ‘you live where you are’ and thus to give it visual emphasis. The large pause in the final line allows breath and contemplation of the phrase ‘in/ the now’—a reference to Buddhist philosophy, before moving on to the poem’s final statement. It is a literal pause for thought.

The caesuras in ‘The Telephone, Failing Again’ illustrate two of their uses as described above:

> And the harsh buzz in
> my ear carries me
> over some border […]

Here the pause allows the reader to hear the ‘buzz’ before the sense change as to where it takes the poet – ‘over some border.’

> Where are you where
> in what moon
> house do these dry
> noises now release their dust?

There are several questions and two ways of treating the pause here: ‘Where are you,’ ‘where,’ ‘in what moon house’ followed by the final question ‘do these dry noises,’ in other words taking the pause as a sense change between four questions. Another way of reading this is to hold on to and run the third question over the pause: ‘in what moon house do these dry’ as a kind of uncertainty or hesitancy on the part of the questioner. Either reading might be afforded from Feinstein’s use of the pause.[216]

The opening line of ‘A Quiet War in Leicester’ deploys another stop before the poem has really started, which here is more emphatic than the light pause noted in the other poems discussed above. The first line is ‘the shelter, the old washhouse’. Again, this comma and caesura doubles up to indicate a certain flag-waving to the reader. “Hello, pay attention,” it seems to say.

Much of ‘Marriage’ looks on the page like a typical free verse lyric. It is only in its final stanza as the poem’s subject matter deals with the pain and hurt of relationships that pauses appear in several of its nine lines. These mimic the stuttering uncertainties being described. ‘Out of Touch’ is the following poem, another love lyric and again deploying pauses where the subject matter changes from a description of traffic in Cambridge, to the ‘love’ leaving on a solo journey of some kind where the poet asks to be waited for so that they can travel together. The other pauses slow the reading highlight the poet’s desires: ‘don’t be lonely don’t let us,’ and ‘some bleak journey wait for me:’ for example.

[216] These pauses exist in an early typescript of this poem EFP 2/1/1/ Box 29, Elaine Feinstein archive.

The Celebrants [217] is Feinstein's third collection and it too shows some influence of Olson in that there are several poems (excluding the Tsvetaeva translations in this volume) featuring significant pause gaps. These include 'The Celebrants' itself, 'Mas-en-Cruyes' and 'November Songs.' Their uses tend to be infrequent and made for particular emphasis, for example, such as in 'The Celebrants' opening stanza introducing the serpent, Melusine: 'bewitched into a myth by chance.' Here Feinstein wants to make clear the random nature of Melusine's enchantment. At the end of the first part of this lone poem, the final line has an even larger gap: 'some will follow into their own unreason' which visually signals the effect of the women's singing on their listeners.

As to the appreciation of Feinstein's notation, Peter Porter, for example, in reviewing *The Magic Apple Tree* comments on her 'sporadic holes.'[218] He says these are one element by which modernism is brought up to date, but otherwise does not seem to have considered the detailed function of Feinstein's use of such pauses. He can be forgiven, though, as his is a book review not an academic paper. Later, Tim Dooley looks closely at Feinstein's influences in 1987 in relation to *Badlands*:

> one is reminded of the links between her work and modern American poetry. The influence of the Black Mountain group, which was very noticeable in her earlier poems, now seems to be merely a matter of residual eccentricities of punctuation, only some of which have a creative function. [219]

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[217] Elaine Feinstein, *The Celebrants* (London: Hutchinson, 1973).
[218] Peter Porter, *The Guardian*, 20 May 1971, Review entitled *Mild Modernities*: 'There is a sort of Modernism, neither doctrinaire or extreme, which makes all but the most talented contemporary poets resemble each other – it presumes the outline of contemporary prosody and syntax, but brings poems up to date with non-sequiturs, incomplete sentences and sporadic holes in the lines. Both Elaine Feinstein and Libby Houston write like this […] Miss Feinstein is the more careful artist, usually anchoring her poems in one insight (it might be an image, an idea, a phrase) and developing it briefly, but intensely.' EFP 11/1-3 Box 134 & 135, Elaine Feinstein archive.
[219] Tim Dooley, *TLS* review.

It would be interesting to understand Dooley's critique from this latter phrase, but again, his is a book review with its own limitations on space.

The influence of the Black Mountain poets— later poems and revisions

As for Feinstein's resurgence of interest in Olson later in her poetic career, the following is a reading of some of the new poems in her final book, *The Clinic, Memory,* to trace how such revivification manifested itself. Focusing firstly on her notation, there are two poems which use the kind of caesuras I have been considering above, the breath markers. 'The News Channel' has a repeated phrase, which is reminiscent of Samuel Beckett: 'What news. There is no news.' It is both simple and complex on the subject of the conflict in Syria and the personal historical antecedents she chooses to explain. The poem's mantra with its large gap for reader consideration, is also its main message—prosaically, there's nothing new under the sun.

The amusing praise poem 'Ode to My Car' on scrapping an old vehicle has one significant caesura at the end of its first stanza. Here Feinstein notes the car gives her freedom, then pauses to consider that she could always leave, but later in the poem once the car is gone she cannot. One might speculate from whom or what, but that is not something to be indulged, beyond noting the significant pause for thought.

When Feinstein's *Selected Poems* were published by Carcanet in 1994, changes were made to the notation of 'To Cross.'[220] The two light pause marks were removed: the first one being upgraded to a full comma after 'Nobler' and the second one removing the signalled sense change and leaving the reader to untangle to syntax of:

> I speak with love only
> of those who keep their way in
> a mad calm […]

Other poems discussed here have had similar changes made to them in subsequent selected editions of her work.[221] 'Anniversary' has had its light pauses changed to full caesuras, which have the effect of making the poem's final two lines more emphatic than Feinstein perhaps first intended. Similarly, in 'The Magic Apple Tree' the light pause in the first line of the second stanza has been promoted beyond a comma to a caesura. The sense change is not lost. It just has added emphasis. The same applies to 'Onion,' '100% Return Guaranteed (Advt.),' 'Votary,' and 'New Sadness / Old City' (but not, though, in its title).

Feinstein changed the light pause in the opening line of 'An Exorcism' into a full stop: 'Your gods are hostile. When you'. This has the effect of making the poem's opening statement much more emphatic and changing the meaning of the next sentence:

> Your gods are hostile / when you

[220] I noticed this when reading Peter Lawson, 'Otherness and Transcendence: The Poetry of Ruth Fainlight and Elaine Feinstein' in Nadia Valman (ed), *Jewish Women Writers in Britain* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014) where this poem is quoted. I have investigated it further in relation to the poems I discuss from these two early books.

[221] I am thinking here specifically of Elaine Feinstein, *The Clinic, Memory: New and Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2017) and *Selected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1994).

would have them quiet
you point at me and they come buzzing
about me, you think I don't see them.

thus becomes

Your gods are hostile. When you
would have them quiet
you point at me and they come buzzing
about me, you think I don't see them.

which is a subtle shift, but a shift nonetheless.[222] Similarly in 'Strings' the light pause becomes a full stop: 'at my doings. Like a nun', which enables the reader to take a much-needed breath after three and a half lines, and it allows for a greater clarity for the simile.

In 'Lines Outward' the light pause in the opening line after 'gods' disappears so that the meaning of:

Tell me your gods to
what magnetic darkness
you are drawn

becomes slightly harder to fathom. The reader has to mentally insert it for the stanza to make sense.

Only one of the light pauses in 'Birthday / a Dark Morning' is changed into a comma, the one in the final line and the title remain. So, it is not correct to think that

[222] Feinstein had revised this poem even prior to its first publication: a dash at the end of the last stanza was removed in the published version, presumably because it was no longer needed once the fourth and final stanza was excised. Pre-publication it read:

we cannot emulate the structure
of those who are cruelly
complete in their hard edges: therefore
let us listen for whatever
discipline there is we can follow in joy

and she clearly changed her mind about it. Its loss only assists the poem. EFP 2/2/3 Box 32, Elaine Feinstein archive.

every light pause has been eliminated. None are removed, for example, in 'Some Thoughts on Where.' The light pauses in 'For Brighton, Old Bawd' disappear altogether, leaving the emphasis on the true measure of forgiveness less so. 'Onion' is interesting in that in 1971 there is a light pause between 'hiding place / all places of hiding' at the end of the second stanza. In 1994 this has disappeared and the phrase has no breath marker, but in 2017 the pause has been reinstated as a caesura. Feinstein has clearly thought and thought again about the play of breath in her work over a number of years.

Where there were caesuras in the original poems published in 1966, 1971 and 1973 these remain in their subsequent versions. It is reasonable to conclude that Feinstein was content with them and this presentation of her poems on the page given that she undertook substantial revision to the punctuation in many of her poems in 1994 and 2017.

Another way of looking at these notational changes is to consider them in the context of Feinstein's development as a poet. That poets are always revising their work is a given, but perhaps she wanted to free herself from association with Olson's methods; losing the light pause marker, which is visually more of a flag, I think, than Olson intended, or by changing it to a caesura, comma, or full stop might have been one way of doing that. The passage of time might also have given her the opportunity to reconsider the sometimes arbitrary nature of such features, which Dooley identified. From a review of the corrected proofs of her 1994 *Selected Poems* sent to Carcanet by Feinstein on 20 May 1994, a month before publication, it is clear that Feinstein herself made these changes rather than her editor. She comments 'delete

oblique strokes, leave 2 em spaces' on the manuscript and makes deletions and other corrections on the individual poems, as noted above, although this instruction is not sufficiently noteworthy as to be included in her cover letter where she references other changes.[223]

Hearing Feinstein's breath

As to how Feinstein herself read her work, it is worth noting that she said

> 'I listen to the poem as I write. And I know it's finished when it sounds right in my head. But I can never tell which poems are the ones that are going to read well.' [224]

A late recording of one of the poems being considered here, 'Anniversary,' from 2017 illustrates her breaths and pauses where // indicates an audible breath in the recording:[225]

> **Anniversary**
>
> Suppose I took out a slender ketch // from
> under the spokes of Palace pier tonight // to
> catch a sea going fish for you //
>
> or dressed in antique goggles and wings // and
> flew down through the sycamore leaves into the park //
>
> or luminescent through some // planetary strike
> put // one delicate flamingo leg over the sill of your lab //

[223] I am grateful to the archivists at the John Rylands Library at the University of Manchester for granting me access to these papers for review over the internet in March 2021 during the coronavirus pandemic. As an interesting aside the publishers' correspondence to the printer/book designer makes reference to certain 'vagaries of spacing,' which he leaves to their judgment in laying out the book. Luckily, Feinstein's specific spaces and instructions on such were not tampered with. The publisher may have been being a little coy though, as clearly these spacings are very deliberate.

[224] Michael Schmidt, *Lives of the Poets*.

[225] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ngIEuACQe6A retrieved 3 February 2021.

> Could I surprise you? // or would you insist on
> keeping // a pattern to link every transfiguration?
>
> Listen, // I shall have to whisper it
> into your heart directly; // we are all
> supernatural // every day
> we rise new creatures cannot be predicted //

This analysis indicates that the poet's reading, punctuated by these breath pauses, interrupts the lineation on the page and the reading a reader without the benefit of Feinstein's voice might hear internally. To illustrate: in the first stanza she takes a breath between the last words of the first two lines 'ketch' and 'from', and 'tonight' and 'to.' This serves to disrupt the enjambments, changing the effect of one long and breathless opening stanza, and making them redundant—the prepositions might as well have been on the following lines in each case, where one might expect a pause. The same is true for the first line of the following couplet: 'or dressed in antique goggles and wings // and.' In the second couplet, there are no punctuation marks or other indications on the page for the emphatic breath Feinstein takes before 'planetary strike' or 'put.'

This creates a difficulty for the reader as without the clues on the printed page, the intended breaths are inaudible and the poet's intended sense of the poem is elusive. It undermines significantly any notion of either lineation or punctuation as reflecting the poet's voice/breath, but this should not be a surprise if one agrees with Douglas Oliver's contention that:

> no reading of a poem is the same as another in intonation; no stress is ever given an identical weighting from one reading to another; and no syllable is given an exact duration.[226]

[226] Doulas Oliver, *Poetry and Narrative in Performance* (London: MacMillan, 1989) p. vii.

If these are the readings Feinstein intended for this poem, she could have chosen to be more generous to the reader by marking them in some way in the text. Of course, over time and with revisions, what we may be hearing in this recording is the poet's final version of a poem where she speaks her mind with a pointedness and clarity that it may have taken her a while to work out. Such are the conundrums of poetry to which the reader needs to be alert, to explore and experiment with other readings in order to interpret poems fully and/or variably. Not every poem adheres to Michael Donaghy's dictum that the poem should contain everything needed for it to be understood.[227]

The remaining breaths Feinstein takes in reading the final two stanzas of the poem accord with punctuation marks and are thus in this sense the expected ones. She returns to a conventional pattern here, which begs the question about the importance of the third stanza. One might speculate that Feinstein, as supernatural creature, comes her closest in the poem to her husband here in terms of physical space, invading his place of work. Perhaps this sense and meaning needed a shake up in the reading of the poem. The recording also dates from a time, as noted above, when she has said she was reconsidering her voice. Feinstein explains in an interview that the poem's genesis is after the publication of her first book of poems and her first novel, when she had the sense that she 'was doing something real in the world.'[228] It was a poem her husband hated, she says, because it articulates her agency as a writer beyond being a housewife and mother, and this he found threatening.

[227] I am not aware of a published work containing this. It comes to me second hand from attendees of his poetry workshops.
[228] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ngIEuACQe6A retrieved 3 February 2021.

More than Bishop, Feinstein wrote of her own asthma, and used breath and breathing images in many places in her work, including an early television play. From her personal knowledge, she generally handles such topics to elicit sympathy from her readers. Additionally, as a correspondent with and follower of Olson and the Black Mountain poets, she reflects their stylistic approaches in her lineation and punctuation marks in her early work, even returning to these later. Her close attention to the lay out of poems on the page demonstrates her focus on the breath and are instructions on how to read her work. She revised and re-revised such presentation in later volumes, and her drafts and manuscripts evidence her concerns with these issues.

Elaine Feinstein's notes for a talk on Olson

Black notebook, mid 1960s, EFP 2/1/2, EFP 2/1/3, Box 30, Elaine Feinstein archive, John Rylands Library, Manchester.

I want to take an entirely technical interest in Olson's time & tone experiments with measure. Not that I am disinterested in Olson's sonology; but there have been a lucid account of the way his poetry works [illegible word]. Naturally one can no more talk of 'rhythm' in the abstract than 'colour' in a painting: the context as [illegible word] points out is crucially important.

When Olson talks about breath, he means the natural pauses of reading.

How can one in verse which has no expected measure escape what Bridges calls 'the tyranny of speech rhythms.' But there is in Olson a rhythmic tension.

an interesting example of a characteristically American revolt from the isochronous measure. That metre ought to have regular accents according to Palmore, one of the best writers on rhythm, though he recognised the Greeks could tolerate and even delight in that which the ear would confuse and contradict measure.

Of course, we can't really say each syllable has the same value as the single note had to the Elizabethans.

He [Olson] has more to teach poets about the control of pitch and tone than acrostic block makers like the concrete poets who often use typography with queer

effect but have totally surrendered the traditional sensibility of the poet. In sacrificing linear movement they have lost the controlling of the typographical techniques of Olson.

'I want to consider the way his rhythms set up their own tensions.

Young poets are more likely to be interested in Charles Olson's ear for the way his lines move than the [illegible word] history in society. Not that this is uninteresting, but it is not his major contribution.

CHAPTER V

WHITE COAT, PURPLE COAT: DANNIE ABSE

Introduction

Dannie Abse (1923 – 2014) was a long-time friend of Elaine Feinstein. She commissioned work from him,[229] met him in later years for a weekly breakfast in a Primrose Hill café,[230] or walked with him in Golders Hill Park.[231] After Abse's wife, Joan, was killed in a car crash in 2005, Feinstein was much support to Abse over these breakfasts. She was also a great admirer of Abse's work, especially the unashamed way he dealt directly with emotion and how he wrote about love in a marriage with unsentimental tenderness. The latter approach was an influence on her own writings about her husband, such as in her poem 'Wheelchair.'[232] When not at his house at Ogmore-by-Sea in South Wales, Abse lived mostly near Feinstein in North London. He didn't want to be thought of exclusively as a North London Jewish writer though; he was Jewish, indeed, and wrote important poems under that lens, but too much Jewishness irritated him and so he was always bi-located, as after all, he was Welsh.[233] Ogmore was an important place, where, amongst other things related to football and his life-long and fervent dedication to Cardiff City football club, he could

[229] For example, in the acknowledgements in Dannie Abse, *Running Late* (London, Hutchinson, 2004).
[230] I am grateful to Adam Feinstein for this nugget from our interview.
[231] For example, as noted on 4 March 2006 in Dannie Abse, *The Presence* (London: Hutchinson, 2007) p. 122.
[232] Elaine Feinstein, *Talking to the Dead* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007) p. 43.
[233] This information comes from an interview I conducted with Tony Curtis on 20 January 2022.

'breathe out stale London air [and] breathe in limitless Ogmore oxygen,'[234] the 'Tons of air' he describes in his poem 'On the Coast Road.'[235]

Abse against The Movement

Abse was the editor of *Poetry and Poverty,* a magazine that ran to seven issues in the early 1950s. Looking back on that time he writes that he

> did not welcome replacing the fashion of neo-romanticism with a calibre of pallid poems [from The Movement], so temperate they would read at best as a form of exquisite reportage.[236]

In 1957, he edited his second anthology, *Mavericks,*[237] with Howard Sergeant as a conclusion to the editorial thrust of *Poetry and Poverty*. This anthology is considered an alternative to the *New Lines* anthology[238] of the Movement poets (mainly Oxbridge's attempt to dominate the nature and direction of British poetry). Published in July 1956,[239] it occasioned a rivalry that was described by the press as 'literary gang warfare.'[240] As Alan Brownjohn notes, the anthology came out of a conviction

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[234] Dannie Abse, *Goodbye Twentieth Century* (London: Pimlico, 2001) p. 203. Earlier, Abse wrote in 1986 that November and December were the time of year 'one can take an oxygen walk to Southerdown without seeing anyone,' Cary Archard (ed), *Dannie Abse: A Sourcebook* (Bridgend: Seren, 2009) p. 147.
[235] Dannie Abse, *Running Late* p. 51.
[236] Dannie Abse, 'Poetry and Poverty Revisited,' *Two Roads Taken* p. 189.
[237] Howard Sargeant and Dannie Abse (eds), *Mavericks, An Anthology* (London: Editions Poetry and Poverty, 1957).
[238] Robert Conquest (ed), *New Lines, An Anthology* (London: Macmillan, 1956).
[239] Other challenges to the Movement and *New Lines* include A. Alvarez (ed) *The New Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962 and 1966), the latter edition being forced to include the Movement poets as it sought to survey poetry between 1952 and 1962, despite its editors attack on them as writing 'academic-administrative verse, polite, knowledgeable, efficient, polished' as quoted in Robert Sheppard, *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents 1950-2000* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005).
[240] As Abse explains in *Goodbye Twentieth Century* p. 216.

that the Movement 'simply did not represent the bulk, or the best, of the verse being written at the time'.[241]

In terms of the form and subject matter of contemporary poetry, Abse argued against what he described in 'Enter the Movement'[242] as:

> The new choir […]
> Proudly English they sing with sharp, flat voices
> But no-one dances, nobody rejoices.

This poem first appears in *Tenants of the House* in 1957 and originally had the same title as that collection. The stanza quoted above has been revised from the original:

> The new choir that moves in is neat and sane
> And dare not whistle in the dark again
> In bowler hats they sing with sharp, flat voices
> But no one dances, nobody rejoices.

The revisions make his criticism more pointed and more anti-English than implied by the image of the bowler hatted poets. Dylan Thomas was the famous tenant of this poem as Cary Archard explains[243] with the new tenants being the Movement poets, as Archard has it, 'portrayed as paltry, cowardly figures, bloodless, about as passionate as the suited men who work in the city.' Abse's main objection to these poets was their rejection of Modernism, and their nationalistic, parochial Englishness, which had no place for recent history and politics, and their neutral tone and 'distaste for displays of feeling.'[244]

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[241] Alan Brownjohn, 'Encounters with Dannie Abse' in Joseph Cohen (ed), *The Poetry of Dannie Abse: Critical Essays and Reminiscences* (London, Robson Books, 1983).
[242] Dannie Abse, *A Poet in the Family* (London: Hutchinson, 1974) and *Tenants of the House* (London: Hutchinson, 1957) p. 78.
[243] Cary Archard (ed), *Sourcebook* pp. 14-15.
[244] Dannie Abse, 'Following in the Footsteps of Dr. Keats' p. 36.

In his 'Letter of Introduction' to the appropriately named, *Mavericks,* Abse 'characterised the Movement poets as timid, afraid of mystery and what might lie beneath the surface and saw them as specifically anti-Dylan Thomas.'[245] Much later he says he:

> disliked the insular attitude of some of the *New Lines* contributors […] their consciously contrived philistinism, their posture of being tough, cynical and sardonic[246]

and that they 'did not appear to value 'feeling in poetry or any ambitious excitements beyond discipline.' Tony Curtis notes[247] that Abse says he 'preferred the 'Dionysian sin' of Dylan Thomas, the risk-taking of vision and language:

> I did not want to publish civilised, neat poems that ignored the psychotic savagery of twentieth century life. Why, only the previous decade there had been Auschwitz and Belsen, Hiroshima and Nagasaki – so shouldn't poetry be more vital, angry, rough, urgent – in short Dionysian? Should not poets write out of urgent, political predicament than compose neat little clever exercises?[248]

But such ambition in organising a counter-Movement was tempered. As Curtis goes on, Abse came to see that Al Alvarez in 1962 'more effectively exemplified the aspirations he had pursued in the previous decade.' And with the benefit of some hindsight John Lucas characterised the whole *New Lines/Mavericks* rivalry as nothing more than a 'minor spat' and praised Abse's virtues as a poet as having nothing to do with this 'peculiar rant.'[249]

Larkin was excepted from his criticism and Abse published him, along with work from Movement poets, Donald Davie, D. J. Enright and Elizabeth Jennings,

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[245] Archard, *Sourcebook* p. 24.
[246] Abse, 'Poetry and Poverty Revisited' p. 190.
[247] Tony Curtis, 'We keep the bread and wine for show – Consistent Irony and Reluctant Faith in the Poetry of Dannie Abse,' Warton Lecture on English Poetry, *Proceedings of the British Academy 154* (2008) pp. 337-360.
[248] Abse, 'Enter the Movement,' *A Poet in the Family* and as quoted by Curtis p. 344.
[249] John Lucas in Archard, *Sourcebook* p. 216.

when he was editor of *Poetry Dimension,* which ran from 1973 to 1980. As Archard notes, Abse's choice of poems was not influenced by the earlier debate. Writing to Howard Sergeant in 1957 he says: 'Larkin seems to me to be the best of the Movement poets, though what he has in common with the others, or, indeed, what they have in common with each other is difficult to define.'[250] Indeed either way, one thing is certain: Abse and Feinstein, both, and from their different perspectives, were in agreement in their criticism of Movement poetics.

Doctor Abse writing

Abse worked as a consultant in the chest clinic of Middlesex Hospital for most of his medical career. Here his engagement with troubled breath in its various forms was a daily occurrence. His specialisation came after his involvement with Mass Radiography work during and after his National Service, where he rose (for a short time) to the rank of Squadron Leader in the RAF, but where the work was 'repetitive and dull,' yet he felt 'ashamed, when, pleased, I picked up some pathology.'[251] As he reports in one of his memoirs,

> I […] would see the shadows of death-warrants on the X-rays of cigarette smokers; yet I was forty-six years of age before I managed to overcome my tobacco needs. [252]

Telling of his father's health, he notes:

> He had chronic bronchitis and emphysema and had become increasingly short of breath. After the paroxysm of coughing attacks, he would gasp for breath, having squandered all his oxygen, and when I used to say 'For God's sake, Dad, why don't you give up smoking?' he would retort panting, 'You give it up – otherwise one day you'll be like me.'[253]

[250] Archard, *Sourcebook* p. 26.
[251] Abse, *Goodbye Twentieth Century* p. 124.
[252] Abse, *The Presence* p. 104.
[253] Abse, *Goodbye Twentieth Century* p. 111.

On starting the new year and new decade in 1970 Abse writes:

> I would not have to resolve to give up smoking yet again. I had seen its deleterious effects day in, day out at the chest clinic. Besides, I could not forget my father's own X-ray, that oval shadow, Death's small egg, nestling above the left hemi-diaphragm – and how many years coughing out the smoke of Ardath cigarettes, Kensitas, Players, had led him to become, even before his terminal illness, a pulmonary cripple. Anyway, I had managed to give up smoking in 1969 and could now tell patients they must kick the habit without feeling a hypocrite.[254]

Much earlier in his life Abse reports how reading a line from Keats' connected directly to his own experience. 'No hungry generations tread thee down' from 'Ode to a Nightingale' was in young Abse's view

> the greatest line ever written – not that I had read many lines. In…its inference about his brother's and his own pulmonary tuberculosis, the poet had captured my youthful social conscience. After all, I knew of the miners who coughed, the TB that was rife in the valleys, the processions of the unemployed. That line was the embodiment of the sad, bitter soul.[255]

Abse may be stretching things a little here as this line is rather a reiteration of the one preceding it on immortality than one on Keats' auto-biography, which he seems to be reading in to the poem in order to make a connection to his own experiences.

Having trained at Cardiff, and then Westminster Hospital, he qualified as a physician in 1950, during which time he relates that his notebooks'

> front pages consisted of notes taking during lectures on anatomy and physiology. But the back pages, as usual, were noisy with poems,[256]

and his long holidays from medical school were spent in Cardiff Central Library reading poetry,[257] or even 'on a ward round trying to write poetry in [his] head.'[258] White coat clinical work found its way into his purple coat poetry because poetry, he

[254] Ibid p. 185.
[255] Ibid p. 5.
[256] Ibid p. 12.
[257] Archard, *Sourcebook* p. 69.
[258] Dannie Abse, 'A Skull in the Wardrobe,' *Two Roads Taken* p. 24.

argued, should not be 'an escape from reality, but an immersion into reality.'[259] White coat, purple coat is a much-used expression in Abse's work; purple being as he says the metaphorical colour of mystery, the poetical and magic.[260] Abse elides these two things as early as 1951: 'for me to write I must think magically not scientifically. Indeed if I were challenged to define poetry, I should call it a magical way of thinking.'[261]

The poem that has this title is quoted in full below as it clearly articulates the two kinds of work, the duality or 'hybrid style,' in which Abse was engaged and which he later explained by quoting a letter of Chekhov's:

> when I reflect that I have two professions not one. Medicine is my awful wife and literature my mistress. When I get tired of the one, I spend the night with the other. Though it is disorderly, it isn't dull, and besides, neither of them loses anything from my infidelity.[262]

Continuing this double life was a close-run thing, as Abse very nearly abandoned his medical training, only completing it with the support and encouragement of his brother, Wilfred, a noted psychoanalyst.

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[259] Quoted in his obituary in the British Medical Journal https://www.bmj.com/bmj/section-pdf/816196?path=/bmj/349/7987/Obituaries.full.pdf retrieved 8 December 2020, and from *Goodbye Twentieth Century* p.185. The phrase 'Change your white coat for your purple coat' comes from his poem 'Moon object' in *Funland and Other Poems* (London: Hutchinson, 1973). It recurs in his poem 'Carnal Knowledge' from *Remembrance of Crimes Past* (London: Hutchinson, 1990), and is the title of his *Collected Poems 1948-1988* (London: Hutchinson) that preceded it. The poem titled 'White Coat. Purple Coat' comes from *Poems 1973-1976* (London: Hutchinson, 1976).

[260] Abse, *The Presence* p. 194 and *Goodbye Twentieth Century* p. 171.

[261] Dannie Abse, 'From My Note Book,' *The Broadway* (London: Westminster Hospital, March 1951) pp. 40-42.

[262] Abse, *The Presence* p. 195.

White Coat, Purple Coat

White coat and purple coat
  a sleeve from both he sews.
That white is always stained with blood,
  that purple by the rose.

And phantom rose and blood most real
  compose a hybrid style;
white coat and purple coat
  few men can reconcile.

White coat and purple coat
  can each be worn in turn
but in the white a man will freeze
  and in the purple burn.[263]

Over time, as Abse said in an interview, 'the white coat gradually becomes threaded with purple fibres and the purple coast becomes threaded with white ones, so eventually there is a kind of synthesis.'[264] This image clearly sparked not only Abse's imagination, as he used it multiple times for talks and articles, but also that of the students of Imperial College, where a book and film society called the Purple Coat Club was established in 2005.[265]

Further, commenting on the biographical nature of writing poems, Abse says: 'Poems on the page lie there and do not lie: their own progenitor can scrutinise them as if they were spiritual X-rays.'[266] Again he is eliding his writing with his medical work. Unsurprisingly, Abse writes much about medical matters and when he does so

[263] In Abse's eponymous collected poems 1948-1988 this poem is titled 'Song for Pythagoras.' The context here, I think, plays with Pythagoras' theorem (for the right-angled triangle) being that the whole man (hypotenuse squared) is the sum of (the squares of) his two sides: doctor and poet.
[264] D. Heyward Brock, 'An Interview with Dannie Abse,' *Literature and Medicine* vol.3 (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984) pp. 5-18.
[265] Dannie Abse archive, National Library of Wales, container: letters 2005 A.
[266] Archard, *Sourcebook* p.78.

it is with exuberance. In a review of his first collection Alex Comfort, also a doctor, notes:

> Abse, I think, has undoubted promise…Medical students have a peculiar problem, which is always appearing in what they write – they have to reconcile wish with reality at an abnormally early age, and the reality is rubbed in, so they cannot dodge it…Abse seems to be one of those who make successful scientists as well as poets, because he makes no attempt to bolt.[267]

Additionally, Abse and his wife, Joan, who was an art historian, gave literary and poetry performances at many medical conferences around the world. They were a sort of light entertainment.[268] Abse often joked that he considered himself to be a professional writer and an amateur doctor:

> I had remarked on the radio that I felt myself to be 'a dilettante doctor and a professional poet.' Not a very wise remark, certainly not one that would impress patients. Joke though it may have been, and lightly spoken, yet I thought it had truth in it. For medicine has been for me, in some respects, a hobby that has been well paid, whereas poetry has been a central activity paid poorly.[269]

He also undertook commercial writing on medical matters, for example, under the pen name Cedric Carne he wrote a light-hearted weekly column in the Daily Express, 'All in a Doctor's Day,' in the 1970s. In 1967 his survey on the successes and failures of modern medicine was published. *Medicine on Trial* [270] focussed on the treatment of mental illness, medical research, the misuse of drugs and the ethics of drug marketing, amongst other things such as alternative medicine, for the general reader and the medical professional alike. In it he covers many of the issues that he explores in his poems and auto-biographical writing, although from a strictly medical basis. Here, for example, are comments on the ability of medicine to help people

[267] Alex Comfort unlabeled review of *Every Green Thing*, Dannie Abse archive, container 46, dark red notebook of press cuttings from 1946 onwards.
[268] My interview with Tony Curtis.
[269] 'Some Notes on Two Cultures' Note 1, Dannie Abse archive, container 155/2.
[270] Dannie Abse, *Medicine on Trial* (London: Aldus Books, 1967).

reach old age, but its inability to assist much when people are old, and criticism of doctors who break the Hippocratic oath (as in Nazi Germany). Reviewing this book, *The New York Times* called him 'a sober-eyed realist with a fine eye for the limits of medical science.'[271] He was also ghost writer for Robert Edwards and Patrick Steptoe's book on Louise Brown and the story of IVF.[272]

This chapter now focuses on the medical poems of Abse's entire poetry career from his first collection published in 1948[273] to his last in 2014,[274] and in which the doctor rather than the patient-sufferer speaks. It also looks at his plays and novels where such medical topics are a focus in their subject matter and characters. Here then, in terms of health humanities, are the many expressions of the empathetic doctor, to which both his colleagues and their patients might usefully refer as means of both understanding and consolation. Abse neatly summarises his opinion of poetry, as one might expect, in bodily terms: 'Poetry is written in the brain but the brain is bathed in blood'[275] and in his introduction to his selection of medical writings, *Doctors & Patients*, he proposes the effect on the reader thus: that we should be 'sometimes arrested by the drama of facts, amused by the absurdity of the human condition, and sometimes, too, moved by the pity of it all.' [276]

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[271] New York Times, 12 April 1969, Dannie Abse archive, container 46, dark red notebook of press cuttings from 1946 onwards.
[272] Robert Edwards and Patrick Steptoe, *A Matter of Life: The Story of IVF- a Medical Breakthrough* (London: Sphere Books, 1980). I am grateful to Keren Abse for this information on her father's other medical writing. Interview with me on 4 February 2022.
[273] Dannie Abse, *Every Green Thing* (London: Hutchinson, 1948).
[274] Dannie Abse, *Speak, Old Parrot* (London: Hutchinson, 2013).
[275] Abse, *The Presence* (London: Hutchinson, 2007) p. 25.
[276] Dannie Abse, *Doctors & Patients* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) p. iv.

Abse's medical poems

A Small Desperation was published in 1968 and contains the first specifically medical poems Abse wrote.[277] Tony Curtis indicates that the need to write such poems came, amongst other things, after his father's death.[278] Writing in 1985, Curtis notes the fact that Abse's being a doctor is 'central to his work.'[279] The poet himself explains:

> I had, for the first time, been able, in poetry, to confront the traumatic medical experience; and I was happy about this because […] I believed, emphatically, that poetry writing should not be an escape from reality, but an emersion into reality. And that reality had been for me one that included the discords of disease. [280]

Earlier, he explained that he had not written medical poems until 1964, but that his medical experience was a preparation 'to confront material that disturbs, because that may result in poems valuable for [the writer] and other people.'[281] As such, this key development in his poetry defines both threads of discourse in contemporary health humanities and their consoling benefits.

Elsewhere Abse writes of being quizzed in the 1950s about why his poems did not reveal that he was a practising doctor, to which he replied that Keats hardly revealed his medical experience either. Partly as a result of such questioning Abse says he 'became prepared to confront [his] medical experience'[282] and overcome his earlier reticence about wanting to be known as Dannie Abse, the poet, not Dr. Abse. And later in an interview at Princeton University, where he spent a year as a writing

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[277] Dannie Abse, *A Small Desperation* (London: Hutchinson, 1968).
[278] My interview with Tony Curtis.
[279] Tony Curtis, *Dannie Abse* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press: Writers of Wales series, 1985) p. 1.
[280] Dannie Abse, *Goodbye Twentieth Century* p. 185.
[281] Brock, *An Interview with* p. 9.
[282] Dannie Abse, 'In the Footsteps of Dr. Keats,' p. 41.

fellow, Abse concluded that 'as I've become more mature I've been able to accept myself as a doctor,' as well as being a married Welshman and Jew.[283] Norman Kreitman identifies three themes in Abse's medical poems: questions of identity as a doctor, poems that explore the relationship between patient and doctor, and Abse's response to medical specialists.[284]

The critical reception of the white coat element of Abse's work, Tony Curtis excepted, is not a large body of work to survey. This from Fleur Adcock seems a rather pointed summation, where she has in mind 'the instant-impact pieces such as the horror story 'In the Theatre' (discussed below):

> From time to time Dr Abse appears wearing his white coat. Medical subjects – hospitals, illness, pain, death – are a gift to poets; the danger is that they can become an easy option, the mere bleak presentation of facts acting as an alternative to any actual work by the poet, even when the latter is a physician rather than patient or observer. In Dr Abse's case, I find that the scenes from the ward or the consulting room, however dramatic or moving, come across less effectively than more muted poems where there is combination of clinical clear sightedness and anguished compassion is focussed on personal experience.[285]

Whilst a comparison of Abse's non-medical writings, of the kind Adcock makes, is beyond the scope of this thesis, I take issue with her implied dismissal of his medical poems. As we have seen, medical subjects, rather than being a 'gift to poets' are not something that Abse came to easily or quickly. It took him over twenty years of serious writing before he felt able to tackle such topics. These are far from an 'easy option.' Where Adcock sees a 'danger' in 'the mere presentation of facts,' I see quite

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[283] Dannie Abse, 'An Interview with Dannie Abse at Princeton University,' *Two Roads Taken* p. 232.
[284] Norman Kreitman, 'Medical themes in the poetry of Dannie Abse,' *Literature and Medicine*, Volume 3, 1984.
[285] Archard, *Sourcebook*, p. 192 Adcock in 1977 reviewing the Collected Poems 1948-1976.

the opposite as the poems discussed below illustrate. For the most part they are poems based too on personal experience.

'Pathology of colours' is one such medical poem from the post-mortem room,[286] which spares no detail in its visceral, even horrific, description of rose coloured tumours, gangrene, 'the plum-skin face of a suicide' and so on. Its organising conceit is to contrast the colours of sick, decaying or dead bodies with the 'lovely' and beautiful, whether that be a rose, a stained-glass window in a cathedral or a piece of faience: 'for every beauty there is a grim equivalent,' is how Curtis summaries the poem's paradox.[287] The concluding two lines sum up the whole poem in one clinically clear simile that resonates with associations of war:

> I have seen, visible, Death's artefact
> like a soldier's ribbon on a tunic tacked.

This is a poem that unifies the two elements of Abse's work as doctor and poet and it is, as Curtis notes, some twenty years into his poetry career before Abse 'proclaims that agenda in a striking and memorable way.' Indeed using both sides of Abse's work as doctor and poet (and his other divisions as Welsh/Jewish, seeker/sceptic, bourgeois/bohemian) is unquestioningly considered to be the poet's job by Daniel Hoffman.[288]

'In Llandough Hospital' is one of Abse's best-known poems in which the poet as doctor's role is central, even if he 'could never read it out loud at poetry reading to

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[286] As Abse explained in his acceptance speech on becoming a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 2011, *World Literature Today,* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, Volume 85, Issue 1).
[287] Curtis, *Dannie Abse* p. 93.
[288] Daniel Hoffman, 'Way Out Centre', Joseph Cohen (ed), *The Poetry of Dannie Abse: Critical Essays and Reminiscences* (London, Robson Books, 1983).

strangers.'[289] It deals with the heart-breaking matter of watching his father die, opening with an argument for assisted dying:

> 'To hasten night would be humane,'
> I, a doctor, beg a doctor,

He contrasts the law against such with our rather more humane treatment of animals: 'For one maimed bird, we'd do as much.' Though his father is 'thin as auschwitz in that bed.'[290] he is fearless, unlike his son. Abse uses the night sky throughout the poem to describe the end of life as 'darkness,' 'sunset,' 'his first star pain,' 'the night with all its stars/ bright butchers' hooks for man and meat,' and finally 'night with stars, then night without end.' Here is a slow coming to terms, less the rage of Dylan Thomas[291] and more in admiration of his father's 'courage,' and where Abse casts himself as a child once more in the way he holds his father's hand, 'can't comprehend,' and in his questions. John Pikoulis characterises this poem as one where Abse's multiple identities are explored as doctor, son, Jew, Welshman, boy and poet, and where Abse 'questions the meaning of existence overshadowed by—determined by—death.'[292] The facts as they are worked on here are ornamented by similes and the language of darkness.

The published poem is a much tighter piece of writing than the version Abse gathered together in an earlier pamphlet called *Ten Poems* from 1966.[293] Given the significance of this poem in Abse's medical *oeuvre* a comparison of the two versions

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[289] Dannie Abse, *Goodbye Twentieth Century* p. 169.
[290] Note the small 'a' here, used I suggest to wave a flag in the direction of 'the camps of death', but not too large a one, the topic here being Abse's father, not the Shoah. In later editions of his collected poems the 'a' is capitalised, as we might say, correctly, so perhaps this is a typographical error or Abse revising the significance of the simile.
[291] As in Dylan Thomas' villanelle 'Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night.'
[292] John Pikoulis in Archard, *Sourcebook* p. 302.
[293] Dannie Abse archive, container 123/4.

is illuminating as to the editorial choices he made. The pamphlet version is in the left-hand column and the published version to the right.

I	No numbered parts
‘To hasten night would be humane.’ I, a doctor, beg a doctor for still the darkness will not come his sunset slow, his first star pain.	‘To hasten night would be humane.’ I, a doctor, beg a doctor for still the darkness will not come his sunset slow, his first star pain.
I plead, ‘We know another law. For one maimed bird we’d do as much, and if a creature need not suffer must he for etiquette, endure?’	I plead, ‘We know another law. For one maimed bird we’d do as much, and if a creature need not suffer must he for etiquette, endure?’
Then, ‘Go now, son,’ my father said, for my sake commanding me. Since death makes victims of us all, he’s thin as auschwitz in that bed.	Earlier, ‘Go now, son,’ my father said,for my sake commanding me. Since death makes victims of us all, he’s thin as auschwitz in that bed.
	Still his courage startles me. The fears I’d have, he had none. Who’d save Socrates from the hemlock, Or Winkelried from the spears?
We quote or misquote in defeat, In life, and in the camps of death. Here comes the night with all its stars, bright butchers’ hooks for men and meat.	We quote or misquote in defeat, In life, and in the camps of death. Here comes the night with all its stars, bright butchers’ hooks for men and meat.
I grasp his hand so fine, so mild, which still is warm surprisingly; not a handshake either, father, but as I used to when a child.	I grasp his hand so fine, so mild, which still is warm surprisingly; not a handshake either, father, but as I used to when a child.
And as a child can’t comprehend what germinates philosophy, so, like a child, I question why night without stars, night without end.	And as a child can’t comprehend what germinates philosophy, so, like a child, I question why night without stars, night without end.
II	Whole of part II is excluded
I let you hands go, dear father, and where your hands go you must follow. Masaccio, that apothecary of Florence,	

knew the head's slack posture of the almost head, a family like mine at the bedside, their faces dramatic with grief; and, as a doctor would, painted the Crucifixion. Then, later, Adam and Eve howling from paradise, which is this worm-infested earth or nowhere. Father, these two paintings I think of now, (we quote or misquote in defeat) and understand the queer correspondences of both expulsions. It does not matter; you are destroyed, no mere abstraction of art. Besides, such cold quotations seem hardly apt; a man had painted the dead god's head; a God created this dead man's heart.	

As in Chapter IV of this thesis and my researches in the Feinstein archive, this kind of forensic work using a poet's archive material and poem drafts provides information on the process of writing, the focus and choices made in honing the poem into its final form. Here, Abse clearly thought better of part II of the poem, which I see as an unnecessary digression into art and paintings. Instead he wrote a wholly new fourth stanza that reinforces the focus on philosophy by referencing Socrates, and tying this into the poem's final stanza.

The topic of comforting the dying is revisited a few pages on in the collection with 'Give me your hands.' In the chaotic world of quarrelling from petty neighbours

to the Vietnam war, the doctor who cares about these things must also respond when on call:

> So in a room I do not know
> I hold a hand I do not know
> For hours. Again a dry old hand.

Whilst all medical work might be met with thanks, doctors are not always believed, as in the patient in part two of 'The smile was.' Here Abse explains:

> however much I reassured him
> the more he smiled the conspiratorial
> smile of a damned, doomed man.

The smile of the surgeon colleague in part three of this poem 'arrives of its own accord' when he makes the first incision. It is 'the smile of a man/ secretive behind the mask.' These smiles are mentioned by way of contrast as detail to the pre-eminent smile in the poem with which it opens and closes, that of a mother birthing a child. Her smiles are 'tender' and 'satisfied' and something that Abse wrote about as early as 1951:

> the mother smiles, hearing her own child cry, ah smiles the most tender, most beautiful, the most profound smile in the world. When I delivered babies, it was the smile that I waited for, always.[294]

Medical practice here is not the subject of the poem, although it provides several vivid images within it. As Scannell describes it,[295] the poem calls upon Abse's experience as a medical practitioner, while 'facing the inescapable truths of the human predicament, birth and death, hope and fear, suffering and ecstasy,' though unlike me, he finds it excessively emotional.

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[294] Dannie Abse, 'From My Note Book,' *The Broadway* (London: Westminster Hospital, March 1951) p. 41.
[295] Vernon Scannell, 'A Vision in the Street' in Cohen (ed), *The Poetry of Dannie Abse.*

'Interview with a spirit healer' is a companion poem to 'In Llandough Hospital' as is revealed in its ending, referencing his father's death and the effect on him:

> My need,
> being healthy, is not faith; but to curse the day
> I became mortal the night my father died.

Before this denouement, Abse explains the workings of the spirit healer he interviews for a paper: 'the miracles,' 'the incurable cured,' his frequenting old spa towns, and his 'upraised hand;' none of which make any impression on the 'gross sceptic,' Abse. He pulls no punches when he says in anger 'I loathe his trade, /the disease and the sanctimonious lie.' One would expect nothing less from a doctor and this poem is an enjoyable denunciation of charlatans all.

Abse's compassion in his treatment of patients is well illustrated in 'The Case' from *Funland and Other Poems* (1973).[296] He contrasts his behaviour against that of a heart specialist colleague 'who knew the heart but not the man.' In this gentle admonition of a poem, Abse takes the trouble to greet the patient:

> I shook hands
> with a shadow. 'Good morning, John,' I said,
> reading his name on the temperature chart.

Writing about this poem some years later, Abse recalls an old colleague taking issue with him in this poem and justifying the heart specialist's position on the grounds that 'if I saw some of my patients as rounded human beings and not cases, because of the distressful nature of the surgery I have to undertake […] I wouldn't be able to function,' which confession Abse uses to debunk the 'so-called extroverted, tough

[296] Dannie Abse, *Funland and Other Poems* (London: Hutchinson, 1973).

personality of surgeons.'[297] The two other medical poems in this collection are 'Miracles' and 'In the Theatre.' The latter is a simple poem of revelation in which a priest and a terminal cancer patient of Abse's who has seen a rainbow in the night sky explains: 'A doctor must believe/ in miracles but I, a priest, dare not.'

Compassion towards patients is exemplified where Abse reports 'a true incident' from his brother Wilfred, also a doctor, 'In the Theatre' is a disturbing condemnation of the amateur nature of early brain surgery and what happens when the unknown is meddled with. An operation in 1938 to remove a tumour leaves the patient blinking again and again 'because of the fingers of Lambert Rogers,/ rash as a blind man's, inside his soft brain.' The more shocking thing about this operation is the reported cry of the patient as the surgeon rummages around in his head. 'Leave my soul alone' he implores, petrifying the surgical team. The phrase is repeated and fades down like a gramophone losing speed as the poem ends in the silence of the 'something other' that died. This sends a shiver down the reader's spine. It terrified Daniel Weissbort,[298] and according to John Ormond, chilled audiences when Abse read it.[299] John Tripp considers the poem 'extraordinary' and 'of considerable power, describing the criminal mess of the operation.'[300] He continues quoting Abse:

> The couple of times I have read this poem at readings, some of the audience have drawn their breath or tut-tutted in a way which signifies pity or disbelief, gripped by fear and fascination in this terrible account of botched surgery. Everyone feels it could have been him or her, left vulnerable on a table at the mercy of surgical inefficiency, those crude and imprecise probing instruments.

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[297] Dannie Abse, 'A Skull in the Wardrobe,' *Two Roads Taken* pp. 23-24.
[298] Daniel Weissbort in Archard, *Sourcebook* p. 205.
[299] John Ormond, 'An ABC of Dannie Abse', Joseph Cohen (ed), *The Poetry of Dannie Abse*.
[300] John Tripp in Archard, *Sourcebook* p. 234.

This certainly rings true to this reader and as Tony Curtis notes, it was an important poem for Abse, which he read with passion.[301] He also reports one memorable reading when it caused a woman to faint and he was able to switch roles immediately and look after her.[302] These are all responses to the affecting nature of the poem.

Given these reactions, it seems strange that Abse, using the story in his semi-autobiographical novel *O. Jones, O. Jones*, has his protagonist medical student tell it devoid of much of its power, as a mere entertainment for strangers in a café, where 'the story was a real success. They looked quite knocked out.'[303] Perhaps Abse had yet to consider the full potential of the incident for making a significant piece of literature. Alternatively, perhaps he was deliberately playing the incident down in the novel, which is a rather light, although humorous, piece of commercial fiction that Curtis calls 'medical school picaresque,'[304] and which uses much personal experience brought forward twenty years into a late 1960s setting, Abse having trained in the 1940s.

'The Stethoscope' [305] is another of the medical trench poems characterised by Cohen,[306] taking this basic medical instrument of diagnosis and using it to ask a number of philosophical questions. The poem starts by setting out this territory in that Abse says he has held it over a pregnant women's 'tense abdomens' hearing 'the

[301] My interview with Tony Curtis, and Curtis, *Dannie Abse* p. 32.
[302] Article, Hampshire Chronicle 23 October 1987, Dannie Abse archive, container 92.
[303] Dannie Abse, *O. Jones, O. Jones* (London: Hutchinson, 1970) p. 126.
[304] Curtis, *Dannie Abse* p. 27.
[305] Dannie Abse, *Poems 1973-1976* (London: Hutchinson, 1976).
[306] Others being 'Pathology of Colours' and 'In the Theatre' in Joseph Cohen (ed), *The Poetry of Dannie Abse: Critical Essays and Reminiscences* (London: Robson Books, 1983) p. 12.

sound of creation' and over a dead man's chest listening to 'the silence/ before creation began.' These are moments of awe and beyond the enumeration of facts Adcock so dislikes. The poem goes on to ask a series of questions as to just how much awe the stethoscope should be afforded. Again religion finds its way into the poem as the imagery of worship, in several examples of which he says he could mimic. The poem eschews such, preferring to celebrate men becoming philosophers, not priests and rabbis, and to 'praise speech,' 'night cries,' and 'lovers with doves in their throats', in other words sounds that can be listened to, with the instrument or no.

Way Out in the Centre[307] from 1981 contains a group of five medical poems on the role, work and capacity for empathy of doctors. 'The doctor' explores the guilty workings of a doctor's mind and the expectations of his patient and family. The doctor must care, even if he does not always like his patients. The coughing patient expects 'the unjudged lie', 'some small disease', and 'certain cure'. Despite the family's dog mimicking Cerberus, the three-headed dog that guarded the gates of the underworld in Greek myth, and thus embodying the real prognosis, the doctor 'will prescribe'. The ludicrous nature of quack or totally implausible cures listed in the poem's final stanza illustrates not only Abse's sense of futility in the face of an unnamed, and likely to be incurable condition,[308] the 'gigantic unease', but his comic irony in coping with it from what Collins [309] describes as 'the ingredients of some primitive medication' and 'images that suggest the fragile beauty of the material world':

[307] Dannie Abse, *Way Out in the Centre* (London: Hutchinson, 1981).
[308] We can reasonably assume that Abse had tuberculosis in mind here as he worked with many such patients.
[309] Michael Collins, 'Dannie Abse: poet and physician,' *Literature and Medicine,* Vol.3 (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984) pp. 71-74.

the usual dew from a banana leaf; poppies and
honey too; ten snowflakes or something whiter
from the bole of a tree; the clearest water
ever, melting ice from a mountain lake;
sunlight from waterfall's edge, rainbow smoke;
tears from eyelashes of the daughter.

Impossible though most of Abse's inventions here are, the final line reverts from the ludic to the serious, refocusing the poem's intention.

'X-ray' is a tender poem addressed to Abse's mother and the x-ray he is reluctantly examining: 'My eyes look/ but don't want to; I still don't want to know'. Knowledge, as Collins points out, is no comfort to doctor or patient.[310] This nub of wisdom is only reached at the poem's conclusion though, after Abse situating himself within his field. He does not claim the brilliance of his medical forebears like Harvey, Freud, Addison, Parkinson and Hodgkin, all of whom are name-checked. Self-deprecatingly he calls himself 'their slow coach colleague'. Nor does he claim that much curiosity, even as a child. The poem is gently modest, as clearly Abse was a brilliant doctor—you are not promoted to Chief consultant otherwise. Plain in its writing, the flourish beyond mere facts Abse wields here is in the poem's opening where knowledge-seeking men—and it is men in this poem—of science are, amongst other things, those who 'open graves to let that starlight in,' an epithet that is as well suited to describing the work of the poet as the doctor.

In the context of health humanities education, it is interesting to note that this poem has been included in University courses for medical practitioners. Sally Bishop Shigley says that she chose this poem as its speaker is someone with whom the

[310] Ibid p. 73.

students can empathise as to the subject matter becausethey all have mothers, and because it

> introduces essential medical humanities concepts such as physician vulnerability, public versus private roles of healthcare providers, and managing grief in a clinical setting while serving as a primer for neophytes to explore the basics of how to read a literary text.[311]

'Lunch and afterwards' is a two-part poem where Abse has lunch with a pathologist colleague. Predictably practical and factual, the pathologist knows the weight of all the body parts and that the uterus is the last soft tissue to decay. Abse, earning the trite repost of 'peculiar fellow,' responds poetically with a grim and disturbing scene of cannibalism he has 'seen', at least in his imagination: 'silhouettes […] silent as gas […] stripped women bare […] the taboo food […] the uterus'. The second part of the poem confirms the holocaust scenario his response brought to mind. As he says:

> because of some strange ancestor
> because I am Welsh, because I am a Jew […]
> because I shan't forget that ever […]
> I thought of a number and doubled it.

The cold facts of medical work provoke poetry, literally, while Abse's reaction here is to satirise them. Thus this poem embodies both his white and purple coats, as well as exploring the trauma of Abse's Jewish heritage. In *White Coat, Purple Coat: Collected Poems 1948-1988*[312] Abse changes the title of this poem to the first published subtitle, 'Lunch with a Pathologist,' and makes the second section, 'No

[311] Sally Bishop Shigley, 'Poetry for the Uninitiated: Dannie Abse's "X-Ray" in an Undergraduate Medicine and Literature Class.' *Journal of Medical Humanities* 34, 2013 pp. 429–432.
[312] Dannie Abse, *White Coat, Purple Coat: Collected Poems 1948-1988,* (London: Hutchinson, 1988).

reply,' into another poem.[313] He was clearly unhappy with the form of the first published version, which prompted some heavy revisions.

'Orpheus in the surgery' also uses Greek myth as its organising imagery. Abse is moved by a deathbed scene where Orpheus, 'the accompanying god' of a patient cries out 'He has turned'. The wife does not understand and asks 'Who?' The rest of the poem, signalled by the change of form into couplets, is a reimagining of the myth spoken by Orpheus and correcting Abse's interpretation. Orpheus explains that leaving Hades for a modern world full of TV crews and dignitaries, the reason he turned was, not to see if Eurydice was still behind him—that was a lie 'poet's gossip'—but to banish her as a result of sexual jealousy. And it was Orpheus, 'no one spoke, but me', not the patient's wife who asked, 'Who?' Whilst the poem is quite confusing, this effect seems deliberate in the context of its subject matter: working things out takes a while, and doctors, perhaps, do not always interpret matters accurately.

Abse is careful to balance the profound with the light-hearted. Thus 'Pantomime diseases' completes the medical group in this collection. It is a joyful romp showing Abse-as-doctor's sense of the comic and absurd to full effect by way of antidote to the more serious poems that precede it. An inventive and clever list poem, its title explains what follows: Sleeping Beauty's insomnia, Cinderella's alcoholism and so on, ending with the drug addicted Darling children of Peter Pan. Rhyming and rhythmic, the poem's final ironic laugh, is that 'All the rest is fiction.'

[313] Manuscript amendments, Dannie Abse archive, container 129/1.

'Case history' from *Ask the Bloody Horse* from 1986 tests the doctor's patience in what Curtis describes as 'its disarmingly conversational tone.'[314] A bigoted anti-Welsh anti-Semite is treated by Abse. Despite a momentary tongue in cheek lapse in upholding the Hippocratic oath in a reminder that his dispensary contains poison ('black briony/ cowbane, nightshade, deathcap'), Abse says he 'prescribed for him/ as if he were my brother.' The ending of the poem presents something of a puzzle. It's last three lines are:

> Later that night I must have slept
> on my arm: momentarily
> my right hand lost its cunning.

It is unclear as to what the loss of cunning might be.[315] Related to the moral dilemma the poem presents, its precise meaning is unsettling and hints that Abse is still considering a different treatment outcome, in his head and for a moment, Abse the secular Jew, seeking retribution as Curtis has it. Jasmine Donahaye agrees with this analysis of the poem when she considers it 'a platform poem against Neo-Nazism' in which the doctor's profound dilemma is conveyed in 'subtle, resonant language.'[316]

Mixing religion and medicine, 'The sacred disease' dismisses quackery along the way:

> Today the Supernatural's been converted
> (and all its staff) into electrical
> Discharges. Read the encephalograph!

Abse has very little time for alternative treatments, hence his book, *Medicine on Trial*, and his essay 'The Charisma of Quacks.'[317]

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[314] Curtis, *Dannie Abse* p. 55.
[315] Ibid p. 55 Tony Curtis suggests this comes from Psalm 137.
[316] Jasmine Donahaye in Archard, *Sourcebook* pp. 278-9.
[317] Dannie Abse, 'The Charisma of Quacks,' *Two Roads Taken* pp. 46-53.

Gallows humour is one way of dealing with the delivery of bad news to a patient. In the straightforwardly titled 'Tuberculosis,' the poem's first stanza lists all the alternatives and euphemisms doctors might use for the disease before referencing a friend or patient's joke: 'You know what TB signifies?/ Totally buggered.' The poem continues by referencing Keats and his arterial blood and the prescription of diet, exercise, and fresh air. This second stanza is factual, yes, but its pathos comes from the clarity of its statements. The poem concludes with a stanza detailing Abse's diagnostic work with chest X-rays. For the patient in hand there is 'no flaw,' yet Abse still has the need to revisit old case-histories, which he compares to Schiller's rotten apples from an incident reported by Goethe, the smell of decaying fruit being something without which Schiller could not work.

'Millie's date' wrestles with the difficulties doctors have in dealing with patients at the end of life—a theme Abse explores in depth in his work: 'With sedative voices we joke and spar/ as white coats struggle around her bed.' The 102-year-old woman, who cries out to die, silences Abse and his colleagues: 'How should we reply? With unfunny science?' No answer but drugs comes to her and this mournful poem ends with Abse imagining a busker with a violin and a moving final image of death: 'two coins, big as eyes, inside his hat,' moving in its invention.

'Exit' is another moving poem, this time on the death of his mother. Here Abse deploys a repeated 'as my colleague prepares the syringe,' of a kind of mantra or chant for his dying parent. Inevitably perhaps, as he 'uselessly' holds another hand, his thoughts turn to other deaths: 'a botched suicide […] plum-skin eyelids trembling,' a war victim left for dead at the side of a road, both, like his mother, not

quite dead. In this poem, as he does in 'In Llandough Hospital' at his father's death bed, Abse rails against the inability of doctors to do more than administer a painkiller rather than speed the passing of the dying. Again, he uses a Holocaust reference (echoing that used for his dying father):

> but what will spring from this
> unredeemed, needless degradation,
> this concentration camp for one?

There's no gallows humour here, but the pathos that comes from plain and clear statements of how it is in this awful situation.

One hears tell of medical students stealing body parts for comic purposes and in 'The Origin of Music' from *Remembrance of Crimes Past* [318] of 1990, Abse confirms this to be the case, except that they are deployed otherwise. The femurs of a baby are deployed to make music: '[I] play them like castanets,' in place of empty words like 'sorry' and 'condolences.' Distasteful though this might be, the action has a certain honesty in the face of the inconsolable. In 'Anti-Clockwise,' Abse places himself as a consultant psychologist (he never was such) dealing with a woman in a loveless marriage, in whose house he suspects he would 'light up single beds in separate bedrooms.' Unable to hear his patient clearly, this sad poem ends with the image of her turning 'her wedding ring, anti-clockwise' as thus to undo her marriage, which is an inventive image on Abse's part.

In the long poem 'Carnal Knowledge,' Abse takes us to the dissecting room at Kings College where the naked corpses are 'twenty/ amazing sculptures waiting to be vandalized.' In the second stanza the student doctor gets to work against ancient

[318] Dannie Abse, *Remembrance of Crimes Past* (London: Hutchinson, 1990).

religious decrees 'deep into [the] stale formaldehyde.' The reek of the body lasts into the kisses of his girlfriends, yet he wonders about the identity of the 'mister,' 'the dead man,' the 'slowly decreasing Thing.' In the third stanza Abse makes a proof stage revision that changes the line 'it seemed, to someone more shockingly alive' to 'it seemed, to somebody more shockingly alive.' It is a minor but important amendment and makes the subject literally more embodied.[319] Religion finds its way into the poem as the hospital priest invites Abse to a service for the relatives and their deceased. He expresses surprise that there are any relatives to be so served with what he dismisses as 'fake chanting,/ organ solemnity, cobwebbed theatre.' Abse does 'not learn the name of [his] inmate' and now looking back with a considerable degree of hindsight he regrets this—the one name on the gravestone he should know. Addressing the remembered corpse, he says:

> here I am, older by far and nearer,
> perplexed, trying to recall what you looked like
> before I dissected your face – you, threat,
> molesting presence, and I in a white coat
> your enemy, in a purple one, your nuncio,
> writing this while a winter twig, not you,
> scrapes, scrapes the windowpane.

Again, the white coat/purple coat phrase recurs. This coinage is clearly a very useful way for him to characterise his work. The poem has especially been praised for its poignancy and lack of sentimentality, a feature, as we have seen, of all of Abse's medical poems.[320] Here Kate Gramich points out that Abse's use of the second person in a direct address to the corpse has the effect of eliciting from his readers a direct human response and recognition of the mood of the poem, empathy being the watchword.

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[319] Manuscript proofs, Dannie Abse archive, container 130/5.
[320] For example, see Kate Gramich in Archard, *Sourcebook* p. 213.

'A Prescription' is a poem that illustrates the white coat/purple coat phrase in that its first part enumerates the considerations of poetry in terms of form, rhyme scheme and metrical types, while Abse is in his workaday white coat 'in this dull room or urine-/ flask, weighing machine' waiting patiently for poetic inspiration to return. Along the way he mentions an old Welsh myth—not the proverb as he has it —about the mountain Cader Idris in Mid-Wales. As he says in the poem, legend has it that if you spend the night on the mountain, you return in the morning either mad or a great poet. This is a poem on waiting for inspiration, when clearly in its writing, the work of the poet, inspiration has arrived.

Of the four medical related poems in *Arcadia, One Mile* [321] two are tangentially so. 'A Political Prisoner' concerns itself with Miguel Hernandez, imprisoned by Franco and who died of TB coughing and spilling 'bacilli and blood.' 'Useful Knowledge' tells of Colin, the walking encyclopedia, who when told his son has Nieman-Pick disease, cries out the details of this terminal diagnosis without, it seems, any emotion, factual to the end. 'Alzheimer's' is a sad rendition of this cruel disease. Abse deploys a list of sweets in jars as a counting and memory exercise for the suffer, beginning and ending the poem with 'absolutely nothing.'[322] Its central section describes the decay of the brain by a variety of darkening and blanking images ending with a bedroom window being switched off. It is an apt description. Later Abse reworks this poem in *Ask the Moon: New and Collected Poems 1948-2014* deleting the opening and closing phrases 'Absolutely nothing' to start with '8 jars of nothing, and end with a truncated list at '3 jars of.' This has the effect of disrupting

[321] Dannie Abse, *Arcadia, One Mile* (London: Hutchinson, 1998).
[322] Dannie Abse, *Ask the Moon: New and Collected Poems 1948-2014,* (London: Hutchinson, 2014).

and unbalancing the poem further and adds to the accurate reflection and description of Alzheimer's and the memory loss it entails. Again, Abse's work as a poet is to create appropriate imagery and his careful revision and reworkings demonstrates the significant effort he puts into his medical poems.

'Child Drawing on a Hospital Bed' uses another repeated phrase at the end of each of its four stanzas: 'Wasp on a windowpane,' an image of imprisonment of the sick child, trapped both in the hospital and in her disease and which is the poem's principal concern. It explores the proposition posed at its opening that any child can explore the hidden aspects of colour, in other words, any of our children can become ill. In succeeding stanzas, the child 'face white as leukaemia' draws a prince and draws and erases the birds of Rhiannon.[323] Next she draws 'wild astrologies' the sun, moon and maroon sky, and finally 'four eerie malformed horses.' The horses are those of the apocalypse as one lifts its neck 'and turn[s] its death's head round.' This image makes clear the fate of the child and makes for a mournful poem with the trapped wasp worrying away at the glass throughout.

Running Late from 2006, published after Joan Abse's death and dedicated to her memory, includes two medical poems and another employing medical imagery. 'Alzheimer's' appears again in this collection for some reason and is unchanged. On the opposite page there is a new poem, 'Portrait of an Old Doctor,' which is published again, but in the modified form of a sonnet in his final collection, *Speak, Old Parrot*

[323] In the *Mabinogi* the three magical birds of Rhiannon were able, by their singing, to wake the dead and lull the living to sleep, as well as seeming nearby but actually being far away from the observer. Rhiannon was the horse goddess queen of Dyfed. So, the horses in this poem probably also refer to her and this part of Welsh mythology.

and is discussed below. This illustrates once more the time and care Abse takes to reconsider and revise poems, to work on them, even ones that have already been published. 'The Jeweller' is a richly descriptive poem about giving the eponymous person a lift home after a poetry reading. The poem answers a question about topics for poetry using medical imagery blended with jewels as to what the poet does and does not see. It ends:

> Not the terminal jaundice in Freda's eyes, nor the wings
> of rosacea on Goronwys' face, but the gold alloy
> tiara Clytemnestra wore at Delphi
> and the heart-stopping rubies Agamemnon stole from Troy.[324]

Two for Joy: Scenes from Married Life [325] contains 'A Doctor's Love Song,' which uses medical terms and illness as the conceit for a light-hearted exploration of love helped on by its full rhyme scheme:

> Cynics reckon love's an illness.
> Do I need a linctus?

There is no prescription, except death, and the poem enjoys the 'breathless' state of this 'chronic ailment.' It might seem that such a witty poem came easily from Abse's pen, but a review of four draft versions illustrates how diligently he worked to craft the poem, even at this late stage in his career.[326] Appendix I to this chapter compares the published version to the various drafts and illustrates how Abse wrestled with the opening line, which seems to have been 'You are my sun I heliotropic,' then 'My sun, you, I heliotropic,' before finding its final form 'Since I'm heliotropic you must be my sun.' Similarly the antepenultimate line proved difficult to pin down over five drafts.

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[324] Abse, *Running Late* p. 42.
[325] Dannie Abse, *Two for Joy: Scenes from Married Life* (London, Hutchinson, 2010).
[326] Loose paper and in A4 note book, Dannie Abse archive, container Box C 2011.

Abse's final full collection, *Speak, Old Parrot* [327] includes the sonnet 'Portrait of an Old Doctor' in which the white coat work is contrasted with the purple in the form of, not poetry, but music: 'at the final act, he lifted/ his stethoscope to listen as if to Mozart.' Sadly, the answer to the question he poses as to 'What it was all about?' is that the white coat work earns no applause: 'none for Hippocrates' art.' This version of the poem, which was first published in *Running Late* in 2006, shows significant edits were made to form it into a sonnet. For example, the first two original stanzas are unchanged with just the fourth line of the first stanza 'Notes in the margin by the student he was' being put in parentheses. The first three lines of the original third stanza are deleted and the fourth changed from 'but a confidence man for the patient. Tact!' to 'He had been a confidence man for the patient' as the first line of the new third stanza. The first line of the original fourth stanza becomes the second line of the new third stanza and the remainder of that stanza uses reworked lines from the original fourth and fifth stanzas. The new couplet is unchanged from the last two lines of the original fourth stanza.

Even later, Abse was busy considering and reconsidering his work. The final version of this poem in *Ask the Moon* published a year later includes one of two possible new stanzas. His manuscript edits consider the following between stanzas two and three in a move away from the sonnet form of the second published version, and are new compared to the original published version as follows:

> Too often he heard the damn funeral drum
> while staring at the grey glowlight of Xrays
> seeing a gruesome egg-shadow unhatched
> above the right or left hemidiaphragm,
>
> and too often he bungled at the acute bedside

[327] Dannie Abse, *Speak, Old Parrot* (London: Hutchinson, 2013).

> feeling unrehearsed, almost voiceless, before
> performance. Those slow motion wrong notes.
> Yet sometimes secret victory. Then Fool's pride.[328]

The final published version includes only the second of these and that is also heavily amended as follows:

> Too often he arrived at the acute bedside
> feeling unrehearsed and hesitant before
> performance. Those staccatos, those wrong notes,
> yet, sometimes, sweet victory. Then Canute's pride.

In the edits 'voiceless' needs revision if the later notes are to make sense and the 'slow motion' to 'staccato' gives them more urgency. Changing the 'Fool' for 'Canute' gives the doctor/Abse more dignity, even if his action is foolish. This is not an easy poem for Abse to have written.

> Writing about his early retirement from medicine at 58, Abse says:
>
> > Looking back on my medical career I realised that I had much to be grateful for; it had afforded me satisfactions, not merely material; and clinical experiences that have even provided me, intermittently, with dramatic subject matter for my poetry and prose. [329]

Elsewhere as to the effect of the practice of medicine on his writing, Abse considers that because doctors have to learn facts and try 'to make things lucid, which on first appearance seem obscure,' his poetry developed into work that followed this model. He locates himself with other contemporary doctor-poets (William Carlos Williams, Miroslav Holub and others), saying 'their work, generally, is accessible' and quoting Nietzsche, not muddying the water 'so as to appear more deep.'[330] He summarised his neatly when he said:

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[328] Loose printed page from *Speak Old Parrot* edited, Dannie Abse archive, container Box C 2011.
[329] Dannie Abse, *Goodbye Twentieth Century* p. 276.
[330] Ibid p. 277.

> I have known that smug but virtuous sense of well-being after having been medically useful to others. And, best of all, [medicine] has offered me narratives which I have stolen for my poetry.[331]

Medicine in Abse's plays and novels

Beyond his poetry, Abse had more of a canvas on which to explore medical issues and dilemmas in his plays and novels.[332] He noted this early on when interviewed about his second play, *Hands Around the Wall*, saying:

> I feel that a prose work can reach a wider audience that a poetic one. I have therefore tried in this play to achieve the poetic impact in a situation rather than language.[333]

As Curtis points out, if there is a striking incident, character or scene that is so significant for Abse then, 'it serves as the occasion for a poem, the core of a story, or a scene in a play'[334] or several of these, such as another mention in the novel *O. Jones, O. Jones* of the colours in the dissection room being like those in a cathedral's stained glass, which repeats the imagery of the poem ' Pathology of colours.' Two plays are germane here, *The Dogs of Pavlov* [335] from 1969, and *Pythagoras* from 1975,[336] as is the novel, *The Strange Case of Dr. Simmons and Dr. Glas.* It is important to consider these since Curtis suggests that plays contribute 'much to one's understanding of the poetry that forms the central and primary medium for Dannie Abse.'[337]

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[331] Dannie Abse, RSL acceptance speech.
[332] As noted by Keren Abse in our interview.
[333] Clipping from the Hampstead News 23 November 1950, Dannie Abse archive, File 46.
[334] Curtis, *Dannie Abse* p. 34.
[335] Dannie Abse, The Dogs of Pavlov (London: Valentine Mitchell, 1973).
[336] Dannie Abse, *Pythagoras* (London: Hutchinson, 1979).
[337] Curtis, *Dannie Abse* p. 41.

The Dogs of Pavlov was part of Questors Theatre Ealing's New Plays Festival in 1969, and premiered in New York at the Cubiculo Theater in 1974. It was well received, and a part of it was televised by BBC 2. It poses some fundamental questions regarding the Holocaust, and by implication the culpability of the German nation, taking Stanley Milligram's experiments at Yale and other US universities in the 1960s as the dramatic context. The play explores and explodes the relationship between Sally Parsons, an actress employed to play the learner in the experiment, and her half-German boyfriend, Kurt Jennings. The experiment dupes one of the participants into administering progressively stronger electric shocks in order, so they think, to assist doctors in evaluating learning processes. In reality, of course, no such shocks are administered and the point of the experiment is to assess how far people will go in blindly obeying orders, in other words, how strong their morals are in the face of authority and obeying commands, even if these are in conflict with their consciences.

Nazis operating the death camps of World War II and the war in Vietnam are in Abse's frame of reference here as he explains at length in his introduction to the published version of the play, 'The Experiment'—'The willingness of apparently ordinary people to obey evil commands.' Milligram objected to Abse's play in two responses, one written before and one after having read it. Mostly his objections were because he did not consider the subjects victims, whereas Abse considered the experiment to be unethical in its using human guinea pigs who did not freely consent to it, and who could be harmed psychologically by it. For anyone in the audience, the central question of the play is whether you would have obeyed at all, or if you did,

when would you stop. Such thinking, James Davies notes,[338] comes from poems like 'Postmark,' 'Not Beautiful,' and 'No More Mozart,' amongst others as discussed above.

Abse's play demonstrates the experiment by using one of Kurt's co-workers, who is completely taken in. Hartley-Hoare continues to pull the levers as Sally answers incorrectly. When he discovers it is he and not Sally who is the subject of the experiment, he is furious at having been misled, but is placated with a pay rise, Abse making another moral point here as to how easily people can be bought off. To test Kurt's humanity, Sally encourages him to volunteer for the experiment, but he is no fool. Pulling the red (and strongest charge) lever and receiving no reaction from the learner (Sally), he calls out 'this is one goddam bloody hoax.' Kurt upbraids the doctor in charge:

> This experiment is like a practical joke. Indeed, like a practical joker you play tricks on your victims. You reduce them to fools and in so doing assert your own power. [339]

And in a very prescient statement he declares 'it's for the fatherland. The fatherland of Science.' Their relationship ends as Kurt realises that by making him take this test, Sally does not care for him. The play concludes with Sally calling for the black lever and death. In this short summary that ending sounds melodramatic, but the play reveals Sally as a complex character suffering from the confusions of depression and insecurity. She paints walls with political slogans about Enoch Powell, worries at the lack of success in her career, and is non-committal as she doesn't accept Kurt's

[338] James A. Davies, 'Introduction to Dannie Abse: *The View from Row G*,' Archard, *Sourcebook* p. 263 et seq.
[339] Abse used research doctors in the play rather than the research psychologists of Milligram's experiments because he was 'marginally happier writing about doctors,' *Dogs of Pavlov* p. 33.

proposal of marriage. To some extent, she does not yet know who she is and moreover is quite disturbed, as described by her hideous nightmare sequence, which is an impressive and complicated scene in the play, blending strange passages about flowers, racist and sexist slogans, numbers for the counting and shouts of Sieg Heil.

Pythagoras develops the themes of the poem 'Funland,'[340] where the whole world is a mental asylum. The poem originally in six parts was expanded for publication to nine parts and covers a year in an institution. Of all Abse's poems examined here it is the longest, most fragmented, surreal and fluid. Fleur Adcock compared it to a Chagall painting: 'bittersweet, slightly surreal, full of dreamlike displacements and involving such images as magicians, fiddle-players, angels and clouds,' which she said makes it 'pictorially memorable as well as a vehicle for social satire.'[341] Peter Porter noted 'Abse's humanity has never been so well supplied with wit and audacity' and he points to where 'the ghost of T.S. Eliot joins with Prévert in a foolscap dance stopping just short of the abyss.'[342] Abse requires its readers to work hard in puzzling its narrative and meanings'. Indeed, John Tripp says he 'backed-off from this sequence' as he did not want to visit 'the Siberian extremity of our plight,' whilst nonetheless praising Abse for writing about 'certified lunacy.'[343] Abse himself wrote an introduction to the original six parts of the poem for their broadcast by BBC Radio 3. In this he notes that 'Funland' is his longest poem (it became even longer) as he thought of how 'the insane startle us with their metaphors and occasional searing truths' and where 'the earth is no ordinary 'hospital,' but a lunatic asylum whose

[340] Dannie Abse, *Funland and Other Poems* p. 50-71.
[341] Fleur Adcock, *Ambit 70*, 1977 in Archard, *Sourcebook* p. 194-5.
[342] Peter Porter in the New Statesman, 7 May 1971, Dannie Abse archive, container 46, dark red notebook of press cuttings from 1946 onwards.
[343] John Tripp, *Poetry Wales* 13.2, October 1977 in Archard, *Sourcebook* p. 235.

inmates live out suffering lives of black comedy.' He says he has attempted 'to use surrealistic images and effects with humour.'[344]

The world of the mental asylum begins with 'The Superintendent,' who is 'a cautious man usually/ inclined for instance/ to smile in millimetres.' Calm and masterful, as he sits at a polished table all kinds of crazy things representing the 'junk of heaven' fall 'thundering down' outside past the tall window and Abse introduces other characters: the narrator patient's atheist uncle, standing in the corner wrathfully,' Fat Blondie, 'in her pink/ transparent nightdress,' and 'our American guest, Marian' yelling about chewing gum. This opening gives the impression of being stage directions and the introduction of the dramatis personae. It even uses the word 'stagily.'

In the second part another character is introduced, Pythagoras, as the superintendent has nicknamed 'the handsome man,' and he asks Fat Blondie to join his Society. Within two weeks everyone has done so, undertaking to 'abstain from swallowing beans… never eat the heart of animals' and other strange promises. Unhappy with this outcome, Pythagoras looks for someone to ban and settles on the Thracians, their being none present, especially as they have 'blue hair and red eyes,' 'Now all day we loiter bear the gates/ hoping to encounter someone of this description.' Hence the title of this part 'Anybody Here Seen Any Thracians?'

[344] Dannie Abse, Introduction to 'Funland: A Poem in Nine Parts,' (Portland: Portland University Press, 1971), Dannie Abse archive, container 125/2.

Part three, 'The summer conference' opens with priests and scientists conferring daily 'on grassy lawns.' They soon take off, 'freewheeling high over rooftops/ playing guitars' at the sight of 'the old smelly magician' rising out of his coffin. Importantly to Abse's personal and medical mythology he is described in 'his mothy purple cloak,' and in debt to Eliot's *Wasteland*,'[345] as an 'aged peacock' who performs spells with a wand bought in Woolworths and dipped 'in a luminous/ low-grade oil pool,' before he winks and pulls down the coffin lid as it sinks back into the ground. Again this reads as a drama with stage-like directions for the various aspects of movement in the poem, along with small pieces of dialogue, and the rest continues in the same vein. 'The poetry reading' of part four begins with 'coughing and echo of echoes' as so many readings do. Enter the 'underground vatic poet' in his purple coat, which in this case is not moth-eaten, but made from plastic, who proceeds with his avant-garde performance of chanting a single profanity, another of which he utters for the second part of his performance after the interval. The reaction from the other patients is varied: he is appreciated by the atheist uncle for his social protest, Marian takes the 'Fu-er-uck' as an incitement, while Fat Blondie 'thinks his poem nostalgic.' The superintendent asks an impossible question: 'what is a poem?' The poet patient is unable to answer and his whole performance ends with him retiring 'a trifle ill./ We can all see he needs air.' This is an interesting, if ironic, passage in the poem for the over-arching theme of this thesis. The poet needs breath to explain his words and to perform them, but being out of breath he can do neither, and further in attempting to perform, he is winded, a kind of double silencing.

[345] The poem takes something from Eliot's fragmented structure and Abse apparently referred to it as the 'Wasteland' gone mad. See Tripp in Archard, *Sourcebook* p. 235. The slip in the title of Eliot's *The Waste Land* is Abse's.

‘Visiting day’ is part five where the atheist uncle pretends to be blind having painted out his spectacles and adopted a white cane. He says he ‘can’t bear to see/ any more junk dropping down.’ The narrator tells of a rumour they will all be ‘issued/ with black specs. // Maybe yes maybe no.’ This mournful part, which began with a differently disabled poet, ends with the following:

> But now the gates have closed
> now under the huge unleafy trees
> there is nobody.
> Father father there is no-one.
> We are only middle-aged.
> There are too many ghosts already.
> We remain behind like evergreens.

The October of part five leads into ‘Autumn in Funland’ in part six. The mood darkens further in the imagery of destruction with planes overhead ‘leaving theurgic vapour trails…announcing names perhaps/ of those about to die,’ ‘bedroom walls/ a veneer wash of radium,’ atrocities, and polluted air and water. In this environment the superintendent is depressed ‘sullen as a ruined millionaire’ unable to ‘dress a wound even’ or ‘stop a child from crying.’ And all ‘juggle on the edge of the earth/ one foot on earth/ one foot over the abyss. The superintendent dies of a heart attack in part seven, ‘Death of the superintendent,’ whilst sitting at his table: ‘his heart stopped/between two beats.’ At the funeral the patients close their eyes on Pythagoras instructions to see the blackness. They react especially bizarrely: Fat Blondie cries inconsolably whilst standing in the goldfish pool, the American sings, the poet ‘moans like a cello,’ and the atheist uncle now the new leader climbs the flagpole, shouting his immortality.

Winter’s snows arrive in part eight, ‘Lots of snow,’ and the patients’ revolution fails, but not before Pythagoras, executed as a Thracian spy, is beheaded

and spiked on the flagpole. The narrator writes to a nameless person in 'white ink on white paper' and his journey to the Edwardian pillar box that previously fell from the sky results in a terrifying description of mental disturbance: 'I hear its [the pillar box's] slit of darkness screaming.' By this point in the poem all amusement, if there was any, at the bizarre behaviours of the patients fades, as Daniel Hoffman agrees 'what begins as a comic turn, becomes more ominous as it becomes more mad and more extensive…so that by the end…we have a whole world gone mad.'[346] The dramatic denouement is part nine, 'The end of Funland.' Here at midnight the patients gather in a circle around the thorn bush from near which the coffin had risen, waiting for something to happen. Then, the moon, 'frightful insane' and full 'breaks free from a cloud' and 'hoses cold fire over the crowd' in a kind of purification ritual. The poem becomes even more of a drama as all bid each other goodbye before their: 'footsteps in the snow/ resume slowly up the slope.' The final words of the poem are six lines from it repeated and double spaced out down its last page and which one can imagine being spoken off stage as the cast withdraws:

> They gave me chewing gum so I chewed.
>
> Who's next for the icepick?
>
> Tell me are we ice or are we glass?
>
> Ask Abaris who stroked my gold thigh.
>
> Fu-er-uck fu-er-uck.
>
> Do not wake us. We may die.

'Funland' was broadcast on BBC Radio 3 in 1971 during the introduction to which Abse 'referred to what had become an important theme in his work: "the

[346] Daniel Hoffman, *The Poetry of Dannie Abse* in Archard, *Sourcebook* p. 258.

contemporary white coat of Medicine and the old purple cloak of the charismatic Mesmer—their relationship and opposition to each other,"'[347] which dual theme has been explored in the foregoing analysis of Abse's poetry. A dramatized version of the poem was performed by the students of the New College of Speech and Drama, following which Abse made his own dramatisation. *Pythagoras* was first performed at Questors New Plays Festival in 1975. It was performed in Birmingham in 1976 and had numerous other stagings and was generally well received. Abse says it is something he is proud of.[348] In 'Funland' as discussed above, he says he 'attempted to use surrealistic images and effects with humour,' there being the need to find points for laughter in a long poem. In writing the play Abse had to start again, forgetting the lines of the poem, but not its active characters.

The two-act play[349] is set at The Cedars on one day, the day of the patients' annual concert, with the final scene occurring six months later on a snowy winter's day. The characters are largely the same as the poem, with additional parts for other patients and a journalist and the whole becomes more comprehensible. The surrealism and theatre of the absurd in the poem is exchanged for an opening scene of possible hypnotism (we are never sure). Pythagoras seems to control the telephone, his performance in the concert and the doubt we are left with at the end of the play that perhaps he does have some kind of telekinetic powers. Apart from the overall setting being a medical one, Abse uses the story of Pythagoras Smith's illness, treatment, crisis, treatment, recovery and subsequent release to explore and comment on current

[347] James A. Davies in Archard, *Sourcebook* p. 267.
[348] Interview in *Interface, Cultural Hegemony: Theoretic and Creative Perspectives* (1989), Dannie Abse archive, container Additional Box B.
[349] Abse considered it a 'very good play. I'm very proud of it' quoted in Curtis, *Dannie Abse* p. 55.

medical practices as regards the 'insane.' As Curtis notes, Abse was fascinated by 'the intervention of medicine into the psyche and soul of a patient.'[350] Alongside this we might note the white coat, purple coat as Abse's formula for expressing a divided identity,[351] as part of the organising imagery of much of his work. There is more to the play, of course, which Daniel Hoffman points out in his summary:

> The play is a comic, ironical, and memorable fable in which political implications are subsumed in considerations of order vs. freedom, rationalism vs. belief, identity vs. appearance, the claims of science to understand everything vs. the imagination with its mysterious secrets. In short the characteristic complex of themes in Abse's poems.[352]

Deluded former stage illusionist, Pythagoras, who is suffering from a nervous breakdown, believes he can hypnotise people, control the weather, communicate with animals and so on, as he says 'Magic is a primitive form of applied science and like science it gives you power.'[353] The superintendent of the asylum is Dr. Robert Aquillas who, in the morning of the play, makes a demonstration of two patients to students from Abse's alma mater, Westminster Hospital. The patients consider being exhibited in this way to be 'demeaning' and 'humiliating',[354] insisting amongst themselves that they are 'not guinea pigs' (Charlie to Pythagoras),[355] or to be exploited. One cannot help but agree with these sentiments, as these are moments of clarity in scenes of otherwise chaos in the asylum, and which culminate in Charlie's manifesto speech promising 'no more prying medical students' and 'dignity'[356] when he is in charge. During the examination scene that follows Aquillas causes harm to Mr X in scratching his arm with a needle to prove to him he is not dead. This flies in the

[350] Curtis, *Dannie Abse* p. 51.
[351] As noted by Richard Poole in Archard, *Sourcebook* p. 201.
[352] Daniel Hoffman in Archard, *Sourcebook* p. 260.
[353] Dannie Abse, *Pythagoras* p. 17.
[354] Ibid p. 37.
[355] Ibid p. 38.
[356] Ibid p. 41.

face of the Hippocratic oath and its exploitation of the patient is duly shocking. Pythagoras bursts in to offer a demonstration of thunder that he cannot repeat beyond a seeming coincidence, but he does predict Nurse Grey fainting, again leaving his audience in the play and playhouse wondering where the truth lies.

Uncertainties about Pythagoras' talents are revealed again when Green recounts his actually speaking ancient Greek when under the influence of sodium amytal.[357] Even at the play's end the efficacy of psychiatry and medical treatments for the mentally ill are unclear: the doctors discuss Pythagoras' improvements after his collapse at the concert as 'strange,' and 'the ECT helped,'[358] but really they are none the wiser, nor is anyone sure, including him, whether he commanded the phone to ring. The difficulty of diagnosis of mental illness is explored in Aquillas' interactions with Pythagoras who will never tell him anything real and significant about himself, as he always takes flights of fancy about his past lives and magical skills. Pythagoras is as convincing to others as he is to himself. It is no wonder that the journalist, Kennedy, who arrives to cover the patients' concert for the local paper, confuses Pythagoras for Aquillas.

The thoughts on medicine Abse puts into the mouths of his characters are range from the revealing: 'illness takes the mask off people' (Aquillas taking about Charlie),[359] to the half-ludic: 'Anybody could tell you are no ordinary doctor. One can always tell a psychiatrist' (Kennedy mistaking Pythagoras for Aquillas, a worrying trait for a psychiatrist is the inability to tell the sane from the insane, as Kennedy

[357] Ibid p. 66.
[358] Ibid p. 78.
[359] Ibid p. 21.

notes with some irony later on in the play),[360] and 'All psychiatrists are mentally wounded' (Dr. Green quoting Pythagoras' landlady)[361] and

> The Hippocratic Corpus—though nowadays no doctor may read its seventy books—still informs the spirit of modern medicine in so far as its emphasis on the importance of facts and data and the hesitating possibility of generalising from the particular' (Pythagoras to Kennedy)[362]

and 'the doctor-patient relationship is based on the assumption that the doctor has superior knowledge to the patient' (Charlie sarcastically to Green), to the hyperbolic: 'thank God for drugs…I don't know what I'd do without them…I've not killed too many people over the years' (Aquillas to Kennedy).[363]

As to the white coat-purple coat imagery, the play opens with Aquillas' white coat hanging in his office and which Pythagoras puts on later to confuse Kennedy. 'White coat and purple cloak few men can reconcile' is Biddy's chant.[364] In a discussion with other patients at the beginning of Act Two Pythagoras says it is 'Difficult to wear both the white coat of science *and* the magician's purple one. You have to be…*very great.'* And he goes on to recite Abse's poem 'White Coat Purple Coat.' This explicit mention of Abse's other work is a partly self-congratulatory wink to the audience. Indeed, as Abse says when discussing the play: 'Medicine is still fifty per cent magic. Its roots lie in magic and it hasn't totally emerged from those roots. It's the newest science, it's not totally a science' and 'Magic is fully within the scope of the poet.'[365]

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[360] Ibid p. 34.
[361] Ibid p. 66.
[362] Ibid p. 35.
[363] Ibid p. 57.
[364] Ibid p. 63.
[365] Interview in *Interface*, Dannie Abse archive.

Abse's Booker Prize long-listed novel, *The Strange Case of Dr Simmonds and Dr Glas,* is partly-autobiographical, but less so than *O. Jones, O. Jones*, in its North London location and the social milieu of its characters: a doctor, and his group of patients, the middle-class residents of Hampstead and local art lovers, some of the characters being all three things. The tale is told in three distinct parts: the first being the literary agent, Peter Dawson, explaining the story of Dr Simmonds' personal journal from 1950 and how it was brought to his attention by Yvonne Bloomberg, the second is the journal itself, and the third a number of letters between Dawson, Yvonne and the publisher from 2000. The medical elements of the story concern Dr Simmonds' work generally, his views on various medical issues, and in particular his treatment of an asthmatic patient, Bloomberg, with whose wife Simmonds is in love.

Bloomberg had had asthma as a child but Simmonds says he grew out of it. His asthma returns after he heard that his first wife perished in Auschwitz. Simmonds advises 'that he should sleep with his head and shoulders raised on four pillows and that he should do breathing exercises,'[366] both of which are standard recommendations. In short Bloomberg suffers a particularly severe asthma attack, which Simmonds mismanages. The malpractice leaves Bloomberg in a coma from which he eventually recovers somewhat, but with lost faculties as he ends up brain damaged and eating tulips. Bloomberg's fate mirrors that of Gregorius in the earlier novel of the title concerning a Dr Glas, whose lover is Gregorius' wife. Tellingly Yvonne Bloomberg gives Simmonds that novel, and Simmonds can see himself in the

[366] Abse, *Simmonds and Glas* p. 22.

portrait of Glas— 'his views about euthanasia, his self-doubts, his attempt to seek some style in his unhappiness, his bachelorhood, his sense of undefined guilt.'[367]

Bloomberg's asthma is described with frightening, realistic and clinical accuracy, for example his final attack:

> Bloomberg, his whole body heaving as he leant forward before an open window, was attempting desperately to breathe. I could hear the loud gasping wheeze of obstructed respiration. Bloomberg momentarily swivelled his head towards me revealing his sweating brow, the expanse of the white of his eyes, his open mouth, his cheeks cyanosed. Here was a face screaming. He could have been painted by Munch.[368]

Abse has Simmonds trained at his *alma mater*, Westminster Hospital Medical School. He shares Abse's scepticism, as noted from his poetry,[369] for both doctors who don't know what they are doing with drugs, and people who turn to miracle cures: 'No wonder…people failed by the medical profession took cognisance of this or that brand of proprietary pill and engaged in self-diagnosis and self-medication.'[370] This is re-emphasised later in the novel when one of his other patients is taken to a clinic:

> It angered me that people in distress, knowing conventional medicine could do nothing for them, were taken for a financial ride by crazies or charlatans offering alternative medicine therapies.[371]

Later he has Simmonds write of the white coat purple coat changeability:

> However sceptical of medicine some patients consider themselves to be they are less resolute in their views at three o'clock in the morning when a sacred light shines in their bedrooms. Ill, they long for a wizard to relieve them of their symptoms. Perforce, they surrender to his surrogate, the doctor, me, who bears no wand but a stethoscope.[372]

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[367] Ibid p. 52.
[368] Ibid p. 175.
[369] Poems such as 'Interview with a Spirit Healer,' for example.
[370] Abse, *Simmonds and Glas* p. 21.
[371] Ibid p. 89.
[372] Ibid p. 55.

Yet Simmonds is a sympathetic character open to explaining the 'initial trauma of having to deal for the first time with suffering patients'[373] in his training and practice, where he understands the need to deal with people: 'I was taught about diseases, not about patients. How can a doctor function without reverence?'[374]

The novel contains a number of comments of interest to this thesis, which like the above always come in passages of opinion that Simmonds writes in his journal, the journal being a convenient narrative device to contain them. These include much on asthma, and other medical matters, such as the development of experimental drugs, beyond the mere outline of the plot. Bloomberg comes to Simmonds surgery complaining about his night time asthma. Based on his reading of current medical advances, Simmonds prescribes a course of daily injections of Vitamin B12:

> In ten of these cases it was reported that their asthma attacks subsequently decreased or disappeared.[375]

Bloomberg duly attends for his injections, but they are not successful as the denouement shows. Tuberculosis, naturally given Abse's expertise and its prevalence at the time, is the other lung disease made mention of in a couple of places in the novel. Simmonds' mother dies of it before the antibiotic revolution and the availability of streptomycin,[376] and the story of that drug's discovery forms part of another of Simmonds' public lectures.

Similarly, there are germane comments on doctor patient relationships. For example, Simmonds says:

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[373] Ibid p. 36.
[374] Ibid p. 75.
[375] Ibid p. 78.
[376] Ibid p. 159.

> I hear that in the USA some doctors do tell their cancer patients the truth, nothing but the truth, even when they are not pressed to do so. They argue that it is unethical to withhold vital facts. I believe, like most British doctors, that such practice destroys hope. It can be a sadistic gesture and lead such patients to turn their faces to the wall. To be sure, these truth-telling doctors are less likely to be sued later by their patients.[377]

Simmonds' journal covers a period from late 1949 to June 1950, being published in 2000. At such point, Abse's characterisation of the doctor-knows-best and patient-does-not-need-to-know attitudes seem accurate, but it would be wrong, perhaps, to elide them with Abse's own. Again later in his journal in an explication on patient violence towards their doctors, Simmonds is of the opinion that this is due to 'tactless truth-tellers…gaining some sadistic pleasure in imparting bad news' and who have 'forgotten that without hope the heart may break.'[378] Elsewhere Simmonds explains the doctor's dominant position over the patients as a more equal relationship would make the patient less confident and less trustful of his physician.'[379]

Simmonds' views on euthanasia from a talk to a local society and reported by the local paper are summarised as:

> Too many patients at the portal of death are kept alive needlessly because the physician cannot face the religious and ethical problems he would have to confront…We may put an animal out of its misery but the law and the doctor's own training often inhibit him from being truly human at the last.[380]

This chimes in large measure with the opening cry in Abse's poem 'In Llandough Hospital' and the sentiments of 'Millie's Date' and 'Exit.' Later Simmonds starts contemplating 'ethical murder,' musing about how easy it would have been for Hilter's doctor to have bumped him off and how straight forward it was for Glas to

[377] Ibid p. 28.
[378] Ibid p. 101.
[379] Ibid p. 146.
[380] Ibid p. 39.

manage.[381] Again there is an echo here from poems such as 'Case history.' These are the thoughts running through Simmonds' head before his final treatment of Bloomberg when he obeys the 'venomous voice' that encourages the doctor to give his patient morphine.[382]

Simmonds' support of abortion, provoked by his reading a passage in the Glas novel with whom he is in violent agreement, expresses a 'belief in purity of action, however risky.' Again, given the time period of the novel, when abortion was illegal in the UK, this is radical for the character, but not something from which Abse's own views can be drawn, as I am not aware of his having written on the topic in any form.

In many places in Simmonds' journal Abse recycles some of his favourite stories from his medical life, such as the urine test and the lesson in observation,[383] and the cigarette in the cadaver. The latter is one which illustrates how quickly a previously squeamish anatomy student can overcome his fears as 'unthinkingly, he picked up the cigarette, put it back in his mouth, and went on dissecting with no sense of disquiet or disgust.'[384] The commentary in the novel also includes mention of a public lecture on Nazi experiments, the 'human guinea pigs' in relation to whom 'most of the 90,000 doctors in Hilter's Germany…closed their eyes to flagrant medico-ethical abuses.' [385] Abse mentions such experiments too in *Pavlov's Dogs*. And images from the poetry also appear in the novel, such as the description of the

[381] Ibid p. 115.
[382] Ibid p. 176.
[383] Ibid p. 164.
[384] Ibid p. 37.
[385] Ibid pp. 134-136.

church glass,[386] which echoes that in the early poem 'The Pathology of Colours' and a similar passage in *O Jones, O Jones*. The novel overall illustrates many of the themes and opinions Abse has explored in other writings.

Perhaps it is unduly critical to say Abse is recycling stories and images, as why should he not? If they capture something crucial for his *oeuvre*, then reusing them from poetry or autobiography into plays or one novel and then another, has merit. In Abse's case they tend to be rather impressive images that it is a pleasure to read more than once or see them deployed in another context. Good tales bear their retelling. Moreover such repetition re-emphasises Abse's themes: the auto-biographical expression of his two selves, the discussion of empathy needed from doctors towards their patients, the seriousness of the Hippocratic oath, the dilemma of euthanasia, and so on, which form the consolation from reading his work. The breath and breathing make themselves present as a topic in the inclusion of tuberculosis in his poems, and asthma in his later novel. Both are empathetically treated as Abse balances comedy and seriousness in his writings.

[386] Ibid p. 91.

Comparison of Abse's manuscript drafts for 'A Doctor's Love Song'

A Doctor's Love Song	Title always the same
Since I'm heliotropic you must be my sun.	Problematic line
7 times 7 times I fall at you feet.	Line unchanged from draft 1
You sulk, you smile, you're bittersweet.	Line unchanged from draft 1
I'm enthralled. Love, am I a fool of love?	Opening phrase added in draft 1
When you're far away I'm cold	Line inserted in draft 2
when you are near I almost scald.	Line inserted in draft 2
Cynics reckon loves an illness.	Line in stanza 1 in draft 1 'say' changed to 'reckon' in draft 2
Do I need a linctus?	Line inserted in draft 2
Should I swallow bromides or a tonic?	Line in stanza 1 in draft 1
Love's clown rules the world	Line unchanged from draft 1
not least the tides of marriage.	Line unchanged from draft 1 'unruly' deleted in draft 2
Listen to my heartbeat. Mitral-like it murmurs	'it murmurs' inserted in draft 2
and your cogomen is called.	Draft 1 has 'your endearments' name is called' changed in draft 2
I've all the signs and symptoms:	Line unchanged from draft 1
pyrexia of well-known origin,	Line inserted in draft 4
bed-talk intimate and moronic,	Line inserted in draft 3 'intimate' changed from 'barbatively' in draft 2
loss of commonsense and blithely	Lines unchanged but broken differently in draft 1
certain my ailment's chronic.	Lines unchanged but broken differently in draft 1
Phew! Such hormonal alchemy	Line inserted in draft 2, 'Such side effects' deleted in draft 5
I feel so swimmingly alive.	Line inserted in draft 5
'swimmingly' changed from 'convincingly' in	
Such side-effects, why panic?	Line inserted in draft 3 'Such side effects' added in draft 5
I sway, I foam, I fizz,	Line inserted in draft 2
like the top of the wave it is.	Line inserted in draft 2
I breast-stroke and I dive.	Line inserted in draft 4

Happily I'm legless, breathless, helpless, and know no remedy to prescribe	'Happily' added in draft 5 Line in draft 1 is 'and my love for you knows no remedy' changed in draft 2 to 'and best of all knows no remedy' changed in draft 3 to 'and my love for you will have no remedy' and in draft 4 to 'and my love for you has no remedy,' finally changed in draft 5
till Death himself, marble-eyed, comes home again to Arcady.	'marble-eyed' added in draft 5 Line unchanged from draft 1

CHAPTER VI

SUBLIME LUNGS: KATE NOAKES

Introduction

The poetry collection written as the creative part of the submission for this PhD is entitled *Sublime Lungs.* The word 'sublime' is used here in the Romantic sense where the lungs are both beautiful and have the power to scare or strike awe. In this context the beauty proposed is the subject matter, form and way of writing about breath-related topics, and the fear is as a result of the pain of a chronic condition. In early writings on the sublime experience in the eighteenth century, Edmund Burke notes:

> Of *Feeling* little more can be said, than that the idea of bodily pain, in all the modes and degrees of labour, pain, anguish, torment, is productive of the sublime; and nothing else in this sense can produce it. I need not here give any fresh instances, as those in the former sections abundantly illustrate a remark, that in reality only wants an attention to nature, to be made by everybody.[387]

Thus bodily pain is part of notions of the sublime and finds expression in the works of Coleridge, Shelley, and others, as Jeremy Davies' chapters explore. He attaches importance to the Romantic period as one where there were key developments in medical attitudes to pain in terms of its management and the widespread take up of laudanum.

The sublime then is what Bradley Lewis describes more recently as 'an experiential response to overwhelming phenomena in art or nature that puts our

[387] As quoted by Jeremy Davies in *Bodily Pain and Romantic Literature* (London: Routledge, 2014) p. 3.

worldly everyday life into greater perspective and context.'[388] In contemporary health humanities Lewis describes how the sublime is relevant to these new ways of being with our bodies. Suffering, both physical and mental, is transformative in that it overwhelms us, and then through trauma it brings us to 'deeper wisdom, peace and contemplation.' This accords with how my thinking and writing about my asthma has evolved and which is described as consolation in this chapter. Amongst other works of literature, Lewis cites Mark Doty's 'Theory of the Sublime' from 2006. He describes Doty's use in this poem of the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, and seals (the marine mammals) as quite disparate images of a sublime state of mind to explore the wounds of grief and recovery from mourning his partner's death from AIDS. In a health humanities context then, the concepts of the sublime might be harnessed to 'inoculate, treat and palliate…terrified reactions to our human vulnerabilities and finitude.'

This chapter discusses why and how I wrote this collection of poems. The chapter is organised so as to answer some basic questions about the usefulness of poetry and its ability to make things happen, its agency, by making us aware of ourselves and the world around us.[389] For this enquiry, these are: can the writing and reading of poetry have an effect on the illness being experienced by a sufferer? Can they have an effect on the observer of such suffering? If so, how? In short, can it make the writer or reader feel better. To consider this, Wittgenstein is helpful:

> A poet's words can pierce us. And that is of course causally connected with the use they have in one's life. And it is also connected with the way in which

[388] Bradley Lewis, 'A Health Humanities Sublime' in Crawford et al, *Health Humanities* p. 72.
[389] This latter notion is from W.H. Auden, *Prose, and Travel Books in Verse and Prose, Vol 1, 1926-1938* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) p. 817.

> conformably to this use, we let our thoughts roam up and down in the familiar surroundings of the words.[390]

Poetry can make things happen in the reading and contemplation of the words of a poem, the ability of the words to move the reader's thoughts and to move their emotions in that other sense of the word move. The piercing ability of poetry is the multifarious making of connections with its readers inviting them to stop what they are otherwise thinking about and consider the something new that the poem is saying, eliciting responses of recognition, shock, empathy and so on. In these ways, as Peter Robinson points out in his analysis of Auden's much misinterpreted statement that 'poetry makes nothing happen,' poetry can make things happen as a result of us 'using poems to mean something.'[391] As Robinson goes on, 'people wouldn't read poetry if it didn't do something for them,' as it demands their attention and an investment of time, nor, I suggest, would they write it.

Paul Muldoon concurs that 'poetry must make something happen' as he considers that reading or writing a poem enables the reader or writer to look 'at some aspect of the world in a modified way',[392] even if that change is only ever slight. Muldoon goes on:

> The poem can engage for thirty seconds in a little fiction: it has moved me, it will hopefully move you, disturb you, excite you; and having done that we go our separate ways back into the welter.[393]

Similarly, David Constantine considers poetry's 'way of happening':

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[390] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel,* ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans G.E.M Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981) para. 155 p. 27.
[391] Peter Robinson, *Poetry, Poets, Readers: Making Things Happen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) p. 28.
[392] 'Muldoon in America,' interviewed by Christopher Cook, BBC Radio 3, 1994.
[393] Robinson, *Making Things Happen* p. 173.

> We are, when we read poetry, during the reading of the poem and lingeringly for some while after, more wakeful, alert and various in our humanity than in our practical lives we are allowed to be.[394]

Of course, writing or reading a poem is never going to be of direct benefit in the sense of being able to cure or eliminate a chronic condition like asthma. That would be fanciful and put one in the realm of unproven alternative practices and shamanism. Similarly, poetry is unlikely to do much for one's physical well-being in terms of the daily struggle of living and coping with asthma. Regulated breathing and poetry's emphasis on this might be instructive though forcontrolling the breath. It is possible in some cases that the principles of poetry are of use as a means of controlling and dispelling breath distress, but this is in an intellectual sense, and probably of little practical application. Afterall, no doctor is going to seriously prescribe thestudy of poetry for the exclusive management of asthma.

The ways in which poetry might help and make something happen though, as Deborah Alma and others prescribe, are to try to alleviate some of the mental health aspects of such suffering, hopefully for a longer period of time than Muldoon expects. Taking poetry as a serious intellectual pursuit might make its effects last longer, for example in the wiring of the neural pathways in the brain might be altered and in that way poetry might be able to literally change your mind. A chronic condition usually comes with depression and anxiety, as, for example, Elizabeth Bishop's letters attest, and it is these related conditions that might be capable of reduction and management through poetry. In this way the writer or reader of poetry might be able to say they are consoled as a result of writing and/or reading it. Not though that everyone can be

[394] Quoted from David Constantine's three lectures 'A Living language' by Peter Robinson in *The Personal Art: Essays, Reviews and Memoirs* (Bristol: Shearsman, 2021) pp. 282-3.

made to feel better in the same way, as Robinson points out poetry 'is going to do something slightly different to every person that reads it, because of our physiological differences.'[395]

In her essay on the death of her son, Denise Riley takes up notions of poetry as consolation thus:

> At times of great tension, we may well find ourselves hunting for some published resonances in literature of what we've come to feel, I realise that this might quickly be condemned as a sentimental search for 'identification', and for the cosiness of finding one's own situation mirrored in print. Still I think we can save it from that withering assessment. Instead we might reconsider the possibility of a literature of consolation, what that could be or what that might do.[396]

Here the kind of tension we are concerned with is the pain of chronic illness and its effects on the sufferer's mental health. I am less worried than Riley seems to be about appearing sentimental as this is countered in my writing by unabashed and even hard hitting descriptions of how it feels to have asthma. Her reconsidering of a literature of consolation though is very much the aim of my writing in *Sublime Lungs* both for myself and also if its opportunities for consolation are taken up by its readers.

The other part of my project in writing this collection was to seek out and explore topics of breathing more widely and beyond the confines of my own asthma as suitable subject matter for expression and inclusion in poems. In this context I was engaged also in the search for the right metaphor in the writing of the poems, considerations of the tone to be adopted, and the reflection of the breath in the structure of the writing itself. These areas of focus reflect too the work of the four poets studied in the earlier chapters, for example the extent of the subject matter and

[395] Ibid p. 37.
[396] Denise Riley, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2019) p. 67.

imagery of Bishop, Feinstein and Abse, and the theories of Olson, along with the craft practises of Feinstein and Bishop in particular.

Sublime Lungs homage poems

Having a poem to dedicate to each of the poets written about in this thesis was important to me as a means of posthumous thanks to my subjects. In each of these poems I reflect elements of my companion poets' writing and concerns in terms of both subject matter and style and technique. Thus, they are studied *homages* and inform my own explorations of breath in poetry.

'Stellwagen Bank and a god's breath' is dedicated to Charles Olson, who, in nautical miles, lived near the place of a whale-watching trip I took off Cape Cod in Massachusetts. Certain elements of his life and writings are woven into the poem, namely a letter where he reports the complaints of the fishermen of Gloucester about tourists, their 'bellyache,' his critical work on Herman Melville, especially *Moby Dick*, and his own writings about Gloucester in his *Maximus* poems. In these ways he is connected with the blowing whales we are watching. The lineation of the poem deviates from my usual straightforward left justified presentation. This is a deliberate recognition and reflection of Olson's ideas of lines pushing the poem on.

Geographically adjacent to this poem in the collection is 'Boston Public Library,' which is dedicated to Elizabeth Bishop, and in which I speculate about her visiting the library, the construction of which her father oversaw. Allusions to her poem 'The Man-Moth' and her own struggles with writing and breathing are included

in the poem, which makes an attempt to claim kin with her in the same way that Feinstein does in 'Park Parade, Cambridge (In Memory of Elizabeth Bishop).' This is why a poem I am writing 'stutters in my notebook' in imitation of my lack of breath, as well as difficulties in its writing. Bishop's working over ideas in her writing is reflected here in lines such as the opening of the second stanza:

> It may as well be winter, so dark
> and clouded is the day. I may as well
> be in London…

The poem also reflects Bishop's tone in her sense of concern with an unreliable memory, for example in the opening of 'Santarem': 'Of course I may be remembering it all wrong/ after, after – how many years?' Such stuttering of memory is also reflected in the opening stanza of the poem I dedicate to her, where I think I know the city of Boston from one long ago visit, but in reality 'my memories [are] distant and disjointed.'

The poem for Elaine Feinstein is 'Quitting smoking in '75.' It comes from consideration of her striking and rather iconic author photograph, cigarette in hand. This comes from her first collection's flyleaf and was also used on the cover of her last book. Not only is this an odd choice of image as she gave up smoking, but it struck me as strange given that smoking had very much lost its appeal with the passage of time between the appearance of these two volumes. A seemingly simple poem in its construction and description, it is not unlike many of Feinstein's poems in that it aims to make one point with precision.

'Good to know perhaps, but nothing to be done' deals with a situation important to my health. Having a chest X-ray for tuberculosis lead to being told that

adult chicken pox had resulted in my having severely scarred lungs. This frightening discovery is handled with self-deprecation in terms of the poem's title, the conversational stanzas starting 'I don't, of course,' and the description of chicken pox as 'a gift from my daughter.' The poem is dedicated to Dannie Abse, who worked for much of his career examining chest X-rays for signs of TB. Whilst being unable to claim the precise medical knowledge of Abse, and which he deploys in his poems, I do use appropriate terms, for example in these stanzas:

> Some opacities might exist:
> small patches of light
> on the radiograph,
>
> or worse, coalescences,
> or dark cavities
> shadowing death.

Reading Olson, Bishop, Feinstein and Abse as consolation

Naturally we cannot know definitively whether their writings formed any kind of salve for Olson, Bishop, Feinstein or Abse, or indeed whether they felt in need of such. With Bishop, if we consider, not unreasonably, that her letters to Robert Lowell, and her doctor, Anny Baumann, are part of her *oeuvre*, then such writing must surely have been helpful in articulating her condition and feelings. At least at this basic level of expression they probably formed some kind of consolation, even if we cannot reliably conclude the same from her poetry. Feinstein notes the irony of her breathing difficulties and her reading of Olson's concentration on the breath, but says nothing directly about her writings on this topic as personal consolation. Again though and for similar reasons to Bishop, they surely must have been. Abse, although not ill with asthma like Bishop and Feinstein, does hint at the consolation of his writings when he

describes their effect on him in general terms as his being 'sometimes, too, moved by the pity of it all.'[397]

What can more clearly be suggested is the effect of reading the work of Olson, Bishop, Feinstein and Abse has on me or might have on other sufferers of asthma and similar chronic conditions. With Olson, the fact that deep consideration has been given to the breath as one of the key components in the composition of poetry, and thus as an important element of the literary form in his theorising in 'Projective Verse,' is comforting to me as a reader and writer of poetry. The comfort comes from Olson's recognition that something I struggle to do and that is front of mind in my daily life is essential to the writing of poetry. His emphasis makes me feel included in the breath 'club.'

Bishop did not include her asthma in her poems much as a topic, as we have seen, but that is not to say that breathing does not feature at all. Poems such as 'O Breath' and 'Varick Street' evidence this. So too does her use of imagery in poems like "Apartment in Leme,' 'The Fish' and 'The Riverman'. Also, the revolving nature of her writing where it reworks, slips, slides and recovers to mulls things over is part of her breath writing as I have suggested. It is an expression of anxiety related to her breathlessness and the effect of her asthma on her writing choices. Identifying this feature of her work, as well as reading some of her letters, has left me with a profound sense of sympathy for Bishop. Her physical suffering was chronic, lifelong and deeply painful. These writings provide reassurance that I or any other asthmatic reader is not alone in their sufferings, and that is a consolation.

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[397] Dannie Abse, *Doctors & Patients* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) p. iv.

Feinstein, another fellow sufferer, describes her own asthma and other people's breathing issues for the most part convincingly in her poems and play, *Breath.* Poems such as 'The Asthmatic' and 'Hayfever' evidence this, as does the imagery in 'By the Cam,' 'Snowdonia,' and 'Boatsong,' for example. Her work functions for me much in the same way as Bishop's. It is a consolation to know that I am in reliable and sympathetic company in reading poems by someone who understands just how it is to be asthmatic. Additionally, Feinstein's focus on breath-craft in the lineation, pauses and phrasing and so on influenced by Olson and the Black Mountain poets, particularly in her early work, functions for me as another from of comfort. As with Olson, my quotidian issues and concerns are included and given emphasis and focus in this kind of writing.

Reading Abse fills me with confidence in that I trust that the well-qualified, experienced and sympathetic doctor is on the case to provide a thought-cure. His seemingly exceptional empathy is a comfort to read in poems such as 'In Llandough Hospital,' 'Give me your hands' and 'The Case.' He knows and understands keenly the sufferings of patients, for example in 'In the Theatre' and 'The Stethoscope', and even portrays an asthmatic character in one of his novels. All of these works are a consolation to read.

Sublime Lungs **as writer's consolation**

The poems in this collection have been written firstly to address my asthma in various ways, so that they might make me, the poet, feel better. Their writing has provided

some catharsis from the written expression of my emotions in dealing with this chronic condition, and from explaining myself to the world, to my readers. Addressing fellow sufferers and potentially doctors concerned with treating asthmatic patients, such readers may find these poems helpful as descriptions of the effect of asthma on the body and the way it interrupts and otherwise interferes with an asthmatic's life.

Generating empathy for this group of readers, as well as from the general poetry reader, is one of the aims of the collection if they choose 'thinking, reflecting, listening and understanding' as Robinson defines poetry's invitation to act.[398] Unless you are an asthmatic or have one amongst your friends or family, it is difficult to understand just how debilitating a condition it is. It colours everything and is not limited in its effect to the moments of crisis of an asthma attack when its presence is all too obvious and keenly felt.

Secondly the aim of the collection was to engage in a wider exploration of the topic of breath and breath–related subjects, the writing of which functions similarly to elicit sympathy from readers and to provide them and me some catharsis.[399] The most straightforward poems operate under this principle of health humanities, in other words they seek to describe how it is to suffer from asthma in physical and psychological terms, aligning the collection with Alice Hall's notion that every

[398] Robinson, *Making Things Happen* p. 142.
[399] The grouping of poems and distinctions being drawn here are somewhat arbitrary and for illustration, as the individual poems in the collection approach the whole topic by a number of different means and with multiple aims in mind. Additionally, I have not sought to write about every poem in the collection. Again, those included in this chapter are by means of illustration.

disability 'demands a story.' [400] Examples of these kind of poems, albeit that they do not function exclusively in this way, include 'The countless times you've saved me, thankfully.' This describes a crisis visit—one of many—to A&E while suffering from an asthma attack. It was written for an anthology in praise of the NHS edited by Matt Barnard[401] and started my consideration of the potential of this topic for further exploration. It is the collection's genesis poem.

Where Feinstein uses birds, the image of myself as a fish struggling to breathe is used here, hence I am 'gasping as a round mouthed carp' and 'drowning in my own air'. This seemed apposite and an accurate reflection of how it has always felt when straining for air. The poem tries to work out which of many allergies has triggered the attack in question, chastising myself for not paying more attention to this by the use of irony in 'clue' and 'note to self'. Mimicking my mind coming in and out of focus and consciousness, these thoughts are interrupted by the medical staff's instructions to breathe—that simple, but impossible thing. This dis-jointure in the structure of the writing chimes with the disruption that asthma causes to one's breath and wellbeing, and it was pleasing to have that captured on the page.

'Mint tea is no cure' is another poem describing an asthma attack, in this case during what would otherwise be a very pleasant summer's afternoon. It seems always thus—one is ill when anything good is happening. The lungs here are described using the image of an opened squeezebox and the poem explains how sore they are: 'every muscle/ of my ribs pulls. My lungs are more folded back/ on themselves.' The phrase 'bees work for pollen on lavender and valerian' is repeated in each stanza to remind

[400] Alice Hall, *Literature and Disability* (London: Routledge, 2016) p. 8.
[401] Matt Barnard (ed), *Poems for the NHS* (London: The Onslaught Press, 2018).

me, and the reader of difficult breathing and the struggle for breath. The rhythm of this phrase mimics these struggles. The poem functions as cathartic for a painful real-life experience, where the long-lined and long stanzas of seven and eight lines represent visuallythe heavy nature of asthma on my lungs and to my psyche. And even though the mint tea didn't help, writing the poem was of assistance in dispelling the memory of this experience.

A parent's unwise insistence on fresh air, when cold air tends to seize up the lungs, is explored in 'I need some fresh air, apparently.' In this poem yet another Christmas Day is spent ill in bed, when running about on a beach in Wales, even in winter, is preferable. The imagined dream of the beach activity functions as a form of escapism from the reality of illness on a special day, where I am missing out on family activities, hence the rhetorical question: 'How many are these sick holidays?' is at the centre of the poem. It was satisfying to contemplate this situation and its escape. The title has a note of sarcasm, which as a feature of the tone in my writing in this collection, and generally, is discussed below.

The potential for healing forms the subject matter of 'Caunes Minnervois,' as well as functioning as an uplifting poem for me. Here the swifts and flowers of a French summer and luxuriating in its scents and warmth, an all too rare state of being, were important to memorialise and return to often. Ironically here a cut rose acts as medicine, psychologically speaking, when in reality it might represent a pollen trigger. Similarly, although with wholly different emotions, 'The last little things I did for my father' describes the final kindnesses offered to a dying parent, and his struggle for breath at the point when these gestures were all too little too late, as the

repetition of the word 'little' implies. As an act of mourning, the writing of this poem certainly assisted and continues to assist me in the grieving process.

Straying into the territory of other diseases, but nevertheless a poem that made me feel better is 'Heart conditions.' It is a kind of memorial to a previous relationship and the rewriting of history, 'breath-taking' in this case, that goes on in justifying emotions in such circumstances. It is tough and unsympathetic, and its cathartic effect comes from its dark humour.

Sublime Lungs as consolation to others

Next, there are poems in the collection that make me feel better in that they try to invoke what Peter Robinson calls the 'promissory relationship with the reader.'[402] Explanations of how it feels to have asthma, the effects on one's life and so on enable me to pass on this knowledge, from someone who knows about it from their lived experience, to others. Such connection has the potential to console in terms of achieving a degree of understanding from my readers, and by eliciting a sympathetic response from them. Again this is one of the aims of health humanities writing in the training of doctors and other medical practitioners, and in that aimed at patients suffering from similar conditions to those being written about.

From the asthmatic readers' perspective poems ought to provide a chime of recognition for the commonality of suffering, the 'yes, that's how it is' agreement to the poem. This is much the way I react to and gain solace from readings of Olson,

[402] Peter Robinson, *Making Things Happen* p. 3.

Bishop, Feinstein and Abse. Indeed, an audience member in one of my readings commented on how they sympathised with 'Self-fulfilling prophecy, aged 12' as they too had been ill as a child. This poem, although written in the second person, is a narrative of a few months of my life at that age. Bed-bound for weeks recovering from a particularly nasty asthma attack, a great deal of time was spent intermittently reading—hence all those Victorian books about sickly children—and staring at the walls—hence looking for patterns and their associations. The future tense was chosen so that the child (me) in the poem had the possibility to avoid becoming stuck in the manner of its title, even though for the time being 'the sickly child will soon/ turn her face to the wall.' On another occasion a teacher in my audience told me she was pleased to hear these poems as many of her pupils have asthma and the poems provided her with a means of understanding how they feel.

On a practical level, there are two health humanities poems in the collection that might actually help their readers in managing their asthma. 'Not that this stops an asthma attack' is one of two poems about yoga. Instructional and somewhat demonstrative, the poem is in the voice of a yoga teacher explaining the workings of prana, or the breath, and emphasising its importance before attempting any of the asanas, or postures. The reader could follow the poem if they so wished and might benefit from the breath work it proposes. However, it is not a cure or preventative, as the title makes clear, but it might be calming as the poem concludes. Following on from this poem is 'The breath of fire,' a particular kind of yogic breathing that is highly energising. Again, voiced by an imagined yoga teacher, it more or less tells the reader what to do to practise this and promises something wonderful: 'It will flame your whole body,/ little phoenix, and give you life.'

‘Walking U Bein Bridge, Salbutamol’ tells the reader quite directly the sympathetic connection I am trying to make with them in its final lines, the ‘all’ here being captured owls, which are employed as an image of release and relief:

I want to release them all: not for the good deed of life,

but to show you what the blessed drugs can do.

To express how effective asthma medication can be this poem takes the reader to Myanmar and the hundreds of wild birds held in cages for sale. In Buddhist tradition here, and in other parts of South East Asia, it is thought to be a good deed to pay to release the birds. The desire to liberate them is used then as a medical metaphor. It is important to know that Salbutamol is a bronchial dilator used at the onset of an asthma attack to prevent the alveoli, the small sack-like parts of the lungs, from filling with fluid as the body reacts to allergens. But as this is readily researchable by a reader, it is not necessary to point out the workings of the drug so specifically in the poem.

Poems such as ‘Stepping into Blade Runner air’, ‘Particulates’ and ‘Notices of impending tree removal’ operate in the arena of common experience in order to draw out reader sympathy, not only to my asthma per se, but to other related topics of concern. Each of these poems represents what should be familiar events and circumstances, namely the effect of Saharan sand and coal burning on London’s air, and habitat destruction in the Amazon. The first poem takes place in the winter of 2017 when the sand blocked out the daylight in central London turning it orange. This was reminiscent of some of the cinematography in Ridley Scott’s sequel, *Blade Runner 2049*, hence the title of the poem and the exploration in its imagery. All

Londoners experienced this phenomenon, and it has recurred more than once and more recently. This, along with the use of quotes from Tube advertisements in the text ('without using up data' and 'as long as it takes to read this line,' for example) should make the scenario understandable. As such the reader ought to be in a (dis)comfort zone of sorts and then capable of grasping the point of the protest being made in the poem without having to puzzle too hard.

Pollution, an ever-present danger to the asthmatic, is again the topic in 'Particulates'. The poem is dedicated to Ella Kissi-Debrah, the first child in London to have her cause of death recorded as asthma induced by illegal levels of air pollution. In it a link is made from me reading pollution monitors, 'they always show excess,' via my collier grandfather to Ella. The inclusive nature of the subject matter is clear in that all of our lungs have been blackened by various pollutants, mine by 'a life-time's incidents of air' and my grandfather's from coal and its dust. The poem functions as a warning to its readers: 'it's terrible this certain knowledge' in that there is no escaping pollution in the city, and we are all 'lung-sore in a struggle'. The connection being made is one of a subtle rally-cry to clean our air.

Similarly, with 'Notices of impending tree removal,' which moves from a street in London, a kind of any street, via a school geography textbook to the destruction of the Amazon rainforest. The scenario being brought to the readers' attention is another rally-cry and ought to be commonplace until it ends with the challenge: 'You'd think the forests were endless./ You'd think we'd evolved beyond breathing.' The trope of breathing is deployed in the context of protesting against the climate crisis. Again, the poem is intended to function as a type of reassurance that we

are all in the same boat, even though there might be very little that can be done about the issues raised. It might though be capable of making us feel better up and to this point.

Sublime lungs exploring subject matter

As to the second strand of my enquiry, part of the writing of these emotionally healing poems included a search for narratives beyond the quotidian of my own personal life. This produced poems that expanded the geographies and chronologies of breathing and breath related experiences, and produced healing and comfort from the acknowledgement of their universality.

The second part of my work is partially represented in the way the collection is divided into two sections. Living with asthma is the principle thought in a number of poems in Part I of the collection. Part II of the collection represents a move away from the obviously first-person poems of Part I. This shift in voice and point of view was made in order to avoid having an entire collection that was ostensibly about the poet. There is more to the subject matter than its impact on me personally in any event. However, that is not to say that there are no personal poems in this second section, rather they are, for the most part, disguised.

The need to state that we are not the only breathing creatures on the planet informs 'Fresh out of Oxy-gum.' This poem is set in Hawaii, where I am snorkelling with green turtles. It is in couplets to represent the lungs and the two-parts of the breath, and the interactions in the poem between the poet and the man on the beach,

the poet and the ocean, the poet and the turtles, and the poet and the childhood memory. The reverie of the poem and its description of beautiful things is shattered at the end: 'a mouthful of brine reminds me I am alien.' Similarly, in 'Kent marsh frogs' and 'Everyone needs an Uncle Victor' the poems' concern is with other creatures which breath differently to us, but with whom we are all sharing the planet. 'Kent Marsh Frogs' have three ways to breathe, and a hay-fever inducing walk in the Oare marshes in Kent throws up questions about an invasive species and the survival of the fittest where 'the frog breathes on'. Air-breathing fish are the final subject of 'Everyone needs an Uncle Victor.' This is a praise poem from Australia and my childhood for the kind of uncle with whom it is fun to spend time.

Other lung diseases, such as tuberculosis and polio, are explored in a number of poems, along with medicine and scientific experiments, such as: 'Once I coughed up blood', 'The Doctrine of Signatures', 'For ailments of the lungs', 'Ham House witchcraft,' 'Bird in an air pump' and 'The living death, a childhood nightmare.' The narrative thread in 'Once, I coughed up blood' is an ill-fated visit to Rome, specifically to the Keats-Shelley House, when I was 'tight-chested' and my chest had not dried up 'after another winter of colds.' The terrifying prospect of tuberculosis sends a particular shiver through the poem. Imagining only too well what that must have been like to suffer from and to succumb to this particularly horrible disease, gives the poem its title and as it says, and like Keats, I have coughed up blood.

In 'The Doctrine of Signatures,' the mediaeval practise of treating diseases with plants and animals that look like the relevant part of the body is explored with lungwort. It is suggested as a non-serious option for treating asthma, hence the light-

hearted opening of the poem: 'if it looks like a duck…' and the teasing of the lines 'In this case, that turns out/ to be a truth available from the health food shop'. Coltsfoot is another such plant and is puzzled out in 'For ailments of the lungs.' This poem originated from reading Derek Jarman's *Modern Nature* where he mentions it. The poem puts together the colours of the plant with Jarman's cottage at Dungeness, on its way to his TB (granted though that his TB was not pulmonary). 'Ham House witchcraft' too focuses on other medicinal and potentially useful plants, and the portentous presence of corvids while I am 'watching-restful, taking my breather.'

A sinister painting by Joseph Wright forms the basis of 'Bird in an air pump,' where scientific experiments on the nature of vacuums become a gruesome entertainment. The poem imagines a rather more hopeful ending for the bird than the painting implies:

> Let's pretend the showman turned
> the valve in time
> and the precious bird revived,
> flew from its prison and lived.

The absolute terror of ending up in an iron lung was the subject of many of my childhood nightmares. Hence 'The living death, a childhood nightmare' explores this with Snow White as its protagonist suffering from Polio in 'this living-death-iron-lung no handsome prince/ can rouse her from': 'if only she'd eaten the sugar cube, not the apple.'

Art is often a source of inspiration in my work and something I have developed deep appreciation of, hence the genesis of a number of poems comes from the art gallery. These include 'Hair's breadth', '"The Breathing of Statues"', 'Scottish artist brings fresh air to London', 'Painting for people with asthma' and 'Pearl

fishers'. 'Hair's breadth' provides two very different vignettes for hares' breath, with which the correct phrase of the title is often confused. There are actual hares breathing 'like dragons in the ice blue air' in the first part, and a painting of a hare in the second. This hare, based on Dürer's *Young Hare*, is imagined as breathing with 'one frightened breath at a time' as it is captive indoors and destined for the pot. Material for sculpture in the form of stone, wood and metal form the three parts of '"The Breathing of Statues."' The poem takes Rilke's imaginative description of music for a walk around the global art world, alighting on three different types of sculpture as being 'surprising and strange' kinds of breathing.

More obviously ekphrastic, is 'Scottish artist brings fresh air to London.' This takes a newspaper headline about Joan Eardley as its title and weaves three of her paintings into an exploration of the wind, another kind of breath, as discussed in Chapter I in relation to Romantic poetry. Similarly, 'Painting for people with asthma' uses various images depicting asthmatics as descriptions of their bodies and associated triggers to create the poem: 'Somehow scant air needs to be rendered/ as a trail of fine smoke or thin wind.' It opens and closes with an inclusive 'everyone,' as there are relatively few ways in which asthma seems to be depicted visually. A well-known Hokasai print features at the end of 'Pearl fishers,' but in the main this poem is about authenticity. The real pearl fishers' lives are the focus, along with their emersion in a long practised and unique part of Japanese culture, versus the tourist entertainments that can be mistaken for such. Free diving requires a large lung capacity and the single middle line of the poem visually represents this: 'huge breath, and she's gone'.

Different geographies and their history and associated breathing topics are the subject matter of poems such as ‘Pachu Michu’, ‘Bronchospasm, barotrauma embolism’, ‘For Easter try egg blowing’, ‘The stand of the tide’, ‘Calistoga, California’, ‘Delta Variants’, and ‘Rage! Blow!’ With the world at my disposal in these poems, an imagined trip to Peru and the need for oxygen to scale the heights of the Andes to the Inca city of Machu Pichu are the practical necessities of the first of these poems. This focuses initially on the landscape of the Rocky Mountains in North America and then their extension in the Andes, and the physical impossibilities of exploring either mountain range. ‘Bronchospasm, barotrauma embolism’ again plumbs my imagination in its exploration of what is might be like to scuba dive as opposed to snorkel, this being a forbidden activity for asthmatics. The title lists the possible dangerous conditions that might result from attempting such a dive. A memory of a decades-old David Attenborough documentary opens ‘For Easter, try egg blowing’ and is conflated with the story of why there is only one ostrich egg from South Africa in my collection. Breath here is a tangential, but a key part of preparing such eggs. The title refers to the Eastern European tradition of egg painting at Easter time.

Geomorphological features appear in a number of poems, such as in ‘The stand of the tide.’ This uses the running and ebbing of the tidal stretch of the Thames, its breathing in and out, as a conceit to explore a move from Reading to London after my divorce. The stand here being the furthest point upstream that the tide reaches, namely Teddington Weir. Whilst my personal life exits in this poem, it is disguised and the focus is on the river as a breathing phenomenon. This is the way in which this poem presents a different geography. A managed geyser in comparison to a whale’s

spout is the subject of ‘Calistoga, California,’ the home of a well-distributed mineral water.

‘Delta Variants’ is a title puning on the name of a Covid virus mutation. It is set in New Orleans and the Mississippi delta, and its ending makes light of worries for friends caught up in hurricane Ida in 2021. Nonetheless it expresses concern for human life on an unruly planet. Winds too feature in ‘Rage! Blow!’ which takes its title from *King Lear,* and here refers specifically to the Mistral. This is the wind the poem’s protagonist chooses when faced with reincarnation as such. Having explained the features of the wind, the poem focuses on one of these at its end, namely the clear skies that appear in so many Impressionist and later paintings. Art again creeps its way in to the poems in this collection.

Breath and breathing topics are in a number of poems that have a more obviously political focus covering topics as multifarious as Welsh independence and further poems on climate change. ‘The inconvenient village’ tells of Tryweryn, the remote, rural, Welsh-speaking community that was displaced in the 1960s when a reservoir was built on its land to provide what turned out to be unnecessary water for the city of Liverpool. A *cause célèbre* in Westminster as all but one Welsh M.P. voted for it, and that one a Tory, it is an often-forgotten part of Welsh history. This is so much so that poet, Meic Stephens made a famous graffito, *Corfich Drywerynn* (Remember Tryweryn), near Llanrhystyd in Ceredigion to remind us. In recent years the slogan has been repeatedly daubed across Wales in the cause of independence. One of the poem’s purposes then is to act as a reminder of this history in the context of current debates in Wales beyond devolution to independence. Using multiple negatives in the poem as opposition to this infraction, reference is made to the man-

made mid-Wales landscape in terms of it metaphorically taking the breath away from its drowned-out people.

The topics can be more subtly handled in these political poems, such that the poem appears to be about something else. ‘Dead ice: the end of a glacier,’ memorialises the demise of the seven-hundred-year-old Okjokull glacier in Iceland. This is not specifically mentioned, rather the poem is addressed to the children who will never see the living ‘breathing’ ice. ‘Articles de plage’ is a list poem of largely plastic junk and only reveals itself to be about asthma in its middle with a single emphatic line: ‘deep breaths with today’s sore lungs.’ The other subject matter of the poem as described in its second part is climate change, specifically sea level rise, which will overwhelm us all, asthmatic or otherwise.

***Sublime Lungs* finding the language**

Searching for the appropriate imagistic and metaphorical language was important to the writing process. This is a core part of my enquiry as to how to write about asthma, the breath and breathing: what images, patterns, phrases and so on best fit the task. The opening poem to the collection, or scream of alarm at its inception, is ‘What I fear most.’ Thiscomes from Henri Fuseli’s 1781 painting ‘The Nightmare,’ the incubus on a woman’s chest being a suitable metaphor for asthma and the feeling of having one’s lungs crushed. This is a deliberately shocking image and the layout of the poem with its short lines in square-ish stanzas is intended to represent the squatting demon to the reader. It is an ekphrastic piece set free from its moorings though, as the poem does not mention specifically the painting that prompted it.

Hence there is no reference to Fuseli in a note. That said, a number of early readers have mentioned the painting as the possible source, so such reference is probably redundant.

'Asthma is a dressed stone rasping' is a poem with a clear health humanities focus, not that it is so obvious as to signal its intentions. Using the third person and an unnamed character, it takes the metaphor of dresses made of stone to try to explain to the reader the impact of the heavy weight and cumbersome nature of asthma on the body. Indeed, this metaphor drives the whole poem exploringthe idea by presenting different types of stone and the occasional dresses they might make. By the end of the poem it is certain that the dresses might be alterable by geomorphic processes, but they can't be destroyed. In other words, by analogy, asthma might be managed, but cannot be cured.

'Glass lungs' is another poem where the metaphor is to the fore. It is a supplication requesting the lightest and most transparent of lungs. It is somewhat mysterious, blending music with light, and, although it was prompted by a visit to an exhibition by Cerith Wyn Evans at White Cube in 2020. It is only obliquely ekphrastic and deliberately undetectable as much as I did not want to open up speculations about the art work, or have readers interrupting their reading to look at the art work.. Ekphrastic work that is overly reliant on a knowledge of the source artwork, or that does little more than describe it, is best left undone in my view.

Music in the form of a bagpipe is the image explored in 'Ice threatens my breath,' the bagpipe being analogous to the sound of the asthmatic breath.

'Gypsophila' uses a repeating lullaby as its language: 'milk breath baby deep/ milk skin baby sleep' when listening, like a latter-day Coleridge, except in this case with dread, to the children's breath in the hope they have not inherited any asthma.

The exploratory nature of writing these poems also includes considerations of their tone. The anxiety of asthma and other breathing issues, the disturbance to one's self-esteem and mental health, let alone one's physical health is often expressed in a self-deprecating, witty or sarcastic response as 'a means of survival' and 'a mark of the damage inflicted'.[403] Truth-telling and dealing with a serious issue in an entertaining way is another form of catharsis, as often when something is too awful to consider face on, a manageable way of handling it is to use humour and irony. Robinson agrees with this when he says in relation to the ending of Bishop's poem 'The Shampoo' and her voice in 'One Art':

> If this makes for a jokey ending, it doesn't mean that 'The Shampoo' isn't attempting to utter something which is not a joke. 'One Art' uses the joking voice because it provides a way of managing in art and life emotional difficulties.[404]

Paul Muldoon has given a similar analysis of his own tone and witty, mischievous voice: 'It's not callous to find humour in the bleakest situations; it becomes a way of keeping your sanity, really, from day to day, I think it's human.'[405] And the same use of the comic to handle serious matters can be seen in Abse's work as well, as described in Chapter V of this thesis.

[403] Robinson, *Making Things Happen* p. 169.
[404] Robinson, ibid p. 19.
[405] Quoted in Robinson, ibid, p. 169.

Beyond the tongue-in-cheek nature of the titles to many of the poems and some of their lines as noted in the foregoing, 'Your unfurled lungs are the size of a cricket pitch' has a title stating an apparent medical fact. This is nothing of the sort as the opening of the poem explains in circumstances where I am feeling sorry for myself with yet another winter cold and tight chest. It has a kind of prayer in its final lines asking: 'Decant me, so I can do just some of the things/ others consider normal. Like breathing,' but the last line has a distinct note of sarcasm.

'Reading my father's Children's Dictionary of 1932' is a playful game of a poem starting in one place, with the definition of the lungs, and going off to look at the meanings of words found nearby in the dictionary. Each of these is amusing in and of themselves, but the more serious point of the poem is to express how they are inappropriate for children when viewed with eighty-odd years of hindsight. The serious business of meditation is the subject of 'Man-looking.' Here a meditation practitioner is disturbed from her breath by the unnecessary demands of her partner. Its tone is sarcastic and plays on the contemporary commonplace that men don't search for things properly and can never find what they are looking for. It is to that extent a joke, but like all jokes has an important purpose, here in its instruction to the reader.

An extreme example of my tone is the handling of the current fashion for erasure poems in 'Poem in which my breath is taken away.' This is a serious but facetious commentary on the practice that to my mind is not for the most part

particularly impressive, being often little more than a dry intellectual exercise.[406] However for this poem, ironically enough, it is a wholly appropriate technique given the subject matter of the title and my descriptive project.

As a challenge in terms of pushing my work in new directions, 'Inhale, hold, exhale – snatches' and 'Air is not air, a miracle' can be considered more experimental poems. In this they are a-typical of my general style. The first poem is a sample in the musical sense in that it is made up of 'snatches' of earlier poems rejected from the collection, but where there are ideas, phrases or scenarios that I thought worth preserving. These are presented in one multi-part poem, a kind of layering or collage that should give the impression of different ways of coming to a subject. 'Air is not air, a miracle' uses emphatic repetition of a limited number of phrases to explore the scenario of a migrant being the only survivor in a container lorry. It comes from Beat poetics and the performance poetry scene in that it has a strong rhythm for its emphasis.

Sublime Lungs **on the page**

Finally, in the search as to how to write about the breath, the actual structure of the poems and their drafting, as well as that of the collection is particularly relevant. The collection is divided into two parts andpoems it contains often have a two-part

[406] There are exceptions to this, naturally, Raymond Antrobus' 'After Reading 'Deaf School' by the Mississippi River' being one of them. Here Antrobus redacts the whole of Ted Hughes' poem, 'Deaf School' because, as he explains at readings, Hughes was in error in the poem about deafness, and because Faber did not give permission for the poem to be reproduced adjacent to one of Antrobus' own. Thus like my own intentions, Antrobus' are seriously critical (see Raymond Antrobus, *The Perseverance* (London: Penned in the Margins, 2018) p. 39-42.)

structure themselves. This represents both the two lungs, and the two parts of the breath: the inhalation and exhalation. Similarly a number of poems such as 'Machu Pichu' and 'The stand of the tide.' have two distinct parts. So too there are a number of poems which naturally seemed to fall into couplets, such as 'Ice threatens my breath,' 'Dead ice: the end of a glacier,' Common ground,' 'Walking U Bein bridge, Salbutamol,' 'Gypsophila,' and 'The breath of fire.' 'Hair's breadth' is unique in this regard, being a two-part poem also in couplets.

All bar two of the poems are free verse, so it seems reasonable to suggest that Olson's theory on lineation and the breath might have been used in their composition, or at least some consideration may have been given to it. It is true that in writing these poems, the question of where the line breaks needed to be was more front of mind than it often is. Olson has not been followed literally in making the line break and the breath co-incident though. He does not do that himself either, as we have observed. Some poems have long lines suggesting pushing the breath, often to its extreme. 'Dead ice: the end of a glacier' and 'Mint tea is no cure,' for example, are illustrative of this. By contrast a number of shorter-lined poems suggest the struggle for breath, such as 'What I fear most,' 'Good to know though nothing to be done,' and 'Gypsophila.' 'Visiting Britain if Chinese' uses very short lines to break up the poem in to manageable proportions in order, in the first instance to indicate how the long Welsh place name could be tackled. It continues this pattern to mimic Chinese script where characters are written vertically. These are broad considerations about breath/line practices as evident in the collection. A more microscopic analysis of my breath/line patterning is illustrated below in connection with one of its poems.

Having looked at poem drafts from material available in the archives of Feinstein and Abse to see what can be gleaned about their writing processes, it seems appropriate to share something of my own methods. By way of illustration, the following looks at the various draft versions of 'Boston Public Library.' Images of my notebook drafts are included in Appendix I to this chapter and these show the deletions and insertions made in the two or three passes at the handwritten version of the poem. This interim draft from the notebook is a block of text that reads as follows:

Boston Public Library

> A dull afternoon. I've picked the wrong fortnight in May to be here – a city I think I know from one visit a decade ago and which of course I don't, my memories distant and disjointed. It may as well be winter so dark and clouded is the day, I may as well be in London, so I take refuge from the cold and rain in a vast neo-classical space, vaulted ceilings, huge windows and rows of wooden tables with green-shaded desk lamps. A poem stutters from my notebook. Its ideas hard to sort, its imagery harder. I go at it until a bell tells me it's time to leave this comfort and face the evening. Years later I learn Bishop's father oversaw the construction of this fine edifice. I wonder if she spent difficult afternoons here looking for some connection with this missing man, or waiting for the words to come between breaths.

My drafts are usually, and as here, a block of text rather than lines. It is only in typing up the text and re-editing it in this computer process that I start thinking about line length, line and stanza breaks, breaths and pauses, in other words the poem finds its form when I think I have worked out what I want to say, at least initially. Subsequent edits to the electronic document are generally not traceable as I tend to edit only one copy of a poem for version control purposes. This is a technological difference between the drafts of Feinstein and Abse's poems many versions of which

were available in both handwritten and typed form.[407] There might be different versions of a poem if I have edited it in the *Sublime Lungs* manuscript after inserting it in that document from my initial poems by year file, otherwise not. In the case of 'Boston Public Library' there is a first computer draft in my poems 2022 file and a final *Sublime Lungs* manuscript version. For comparison these are as follows:

First computer draft (Poems 2022)	***Sublime Lungs* final version**
Boston Public Library for Elizabeth Bishop	Title and dedication unchanged
I've picked the wrong fortnight in May	I think it's familiar, but is it?
to be here – a city I think I know from one visit	I've picked the wrong fortnight in May
decades ago, and which, of course, I don't,	to be here – a city known from one visit
my memories distant and disjointed.	decades ago, of which my memories
	prove distant and dis-jointed.
It may as well be winter, so dark	It may as well be winter, so dark
and clouded is the day. I may as well	and clouded is the day. I may as well
be in London. So I take refuge from the cold	be in London. So I take refuge from the cold
and rain in a neo-classical space -	and rain in a neo-classical space -
vaulted ceilings, huge windows and rows	vaulted ceilings, huge windows and rows
of wooden tables with green-shaded desk lamps.	of wooden tables with green-shaded desk lamps.
A poem stutters in my notebook,	A poem stutters in my notebook,
its ideas hard to sort, its imagery harder.	its ideas hard to sort, its imagery harder.
I go at it until a bell tells me it's time	I go at it until a bell tells me it's time
to leave this comfort and face the evening.	to leave this comfort and face the evening.
Years later I learn Bishop's father	Years later I learn Bishop's father
oversaw the construction of this fine edifice.	oversaw the construction of this fine edifice.
I wonder if she spent difficult afternoons	Did she spend difficult afternoons
here looking for some connection	here looking for some connection
with this missing man, or waiting	with this missing man, or waiting
for words to come between moth breaths.	for words to come between moth breaths?

[407] Future archive work of this kind is going to require data interrogation software if researchers wish to trace the evolution of poems, assuming, of course, that writers' computers are accessible and still readable after many years.

In the initial typing up to change the block of text into a lineated poem, I started to listen to my breathing as I read aloud. The result is that the lineation follows my breathing pattern in that my breaths are either co-incident with alternate line endings, or mid line and indicated by some form of punctuation. For example, in the first stanza of the first computer draft, I breath after 'here' on the second line, and this is indicated by the dash, after 'ago' on the third line as indicated by the comma and at the end of the stanza after the full stop. In the final *Sublime Lungs* version there is an additional breath required at the end of the new first line with its question mark. It is probably easier to illustrate where my breaths fall, denoted by the double forward slash (//), as follows:

Boston Public Library
for Elizabeth Bishop

I think it's familiar, but is it? //
I've picked the wrong fortnight in May
to be here— // a city known from one visit
decades ago, // of which my memories
prove distant and dis-jointed. //

It may as well be winter, so dark
and clouded is the day. // I may as well
be in London. // So I take refuge from the cold
and rain in a neo-classical space—— //
vaulted ceilings, huge windows and rows
of wooden tables with green-shaded desk lamps. //

A poem stutters in my notebook,
its ideas hard to sort, its imagery harder. //
I go at it until a bell tells me it's time
to leave this comfort and face the evening. //

Years later I learn Bishop's father
oversaw the construction of this edifice. //
Did she spend difficult afternoons
here looking for some connection
with this missing man, // or waiting
for words to come between moth breaths? //

Interestingly in reviewing the poem here, I reinstated a comma in the final stanza after 'man' in the penultimate line. Whilst not strictly grammatically required, it is needed to indicate a breath. The two last lines of the second stanza require a long, hard breath pushing my lungs to their capacity. The more urgent inhalation needed after these lines represents a sense pause in the poem and draws attention to the change (a quasi-volta) from its opening set up, and description of the location and occasion, to the specifics of the action that takes place in the library in the third stanza (writing a poem with difficulty), and the reflections about Bishop in the fourth stanza.

There are relatively few changes between the above versions of this poem. These are in the first and final stanzas only, to tighten the language for redundancies and an overly conversational tone, and to eliminate one of my verbal tics. I tend to use the phrase 'of course' rather too often. Or to replace "I wonder if" with a question, even if it meant that I had to accept one of my prejudices about not ending a poem with a question in the interests of poetic economy. The most significant change is the addition of the opening question. This was to reflect, in homage, something of Bishop's writing technique, for example the opening questions of 'Santarem' and its pose of having an unreliable memory. With its opening and closing questions my poem is somewhat uncertain of itself in a similar way to one of Bishop's. A further Bishop-related change was the insertion of 'moth' in the final line. This makes for 'moth breaths' rather than just 'breaths' as it is in the notebook draft, which references her poem 'The Man-Moth.'

Sublime Lungs ends with 'Taxidermy' a poem about writing using the metaphor of writing the body. Here 'bones are words' and favourite words are

'cranium' and 'metatarsal', but as the poem explains more is needed to embody writing. In some ways this poem is a summary of the whole project with which this PhD has been engaged. As well as exploring the possibilities of words, as one of the elements of writing about the breath for the poet's benefit (arranging the bones), words need to be breathed into. For this to happen one needs a reader who might also derive some pleasure, comfort or other benefit from them: 'It takes two to dance/ her work into life.'

Conclusions

By way of summary, the following sets out the means by which the critical research undertaken in Chapters I-V of Part B of this thesis has informed my creative practice. There are three broad ways to consider this: health humanities as providing a theoretical framework within which my writing can be situated and analysed; seeing my work as part of a continuum of writing on breath related subject matter and with the breath in mind in its composition; and the direct influence of the four poets studied on my writing of *Sublime Lungs*.

Firstly, health humanities as an academic discipline outlined in Chapter I, has provided me with a framework by which to consider the writing of *Sublime Lungs*. For example, it has helped me to focus on the purpose of my writing in terms of the personal expression of having a malfunctioning body. *Sublime Lungs* is in that sense a patient/sufferer narrative where I have had to consider how best to explain my asthma in poetry. In addition, the discipline has led me to think about for whom, beyond myself, I was writing *Sublime Lungs*. Fellow asthmatics might obtain consolation

from reading it. Clinicians and others might gain insights into patients' suffering from it as well. Indeed, I have considered offering the future published book to hospitals, clinics, specialist doctors, asthma research charities, and various medical foundations for their libraries. I can envisage the work being disseminated to doctors in their training and being asked to give readings and presentations to groups of doctors and patients. Without the health humanities framework, this potential to reach a wider audience with my poetry would probably not have occurred to me.

Sublime Lungs can be seen as a continuation of earlier writing concerned with the breath as both subject matter and poetic compositional principle. This dates from Ancient Greek considerations of the breath in rhetoric. As described in Chapters I and II, it also features in aspects of Romantic poetry and the work of contemporary poets like Mimi Khalvati, Andrew McMillan, Julia Bird, and others, and specifically in the work of the four poets I have looked at in detail in this thesis. Without undertaking this study, *Sublime Lungs* would probably have been the poorer. It would not, for example, have a poem dedicated to each of the four poets, nor would it have poems generated from the work of Keats and Coleridge ('Once I coughed up blood' and 'Gypsophila' respectively). Similarly, it is unlikely to have had the more experimental pieces, such as 'Air is not air, a miracle' and 'Inhale, hold, exhale – snatches,' which chime with Charles Olson's poems and those of the contemporary poets I mention.

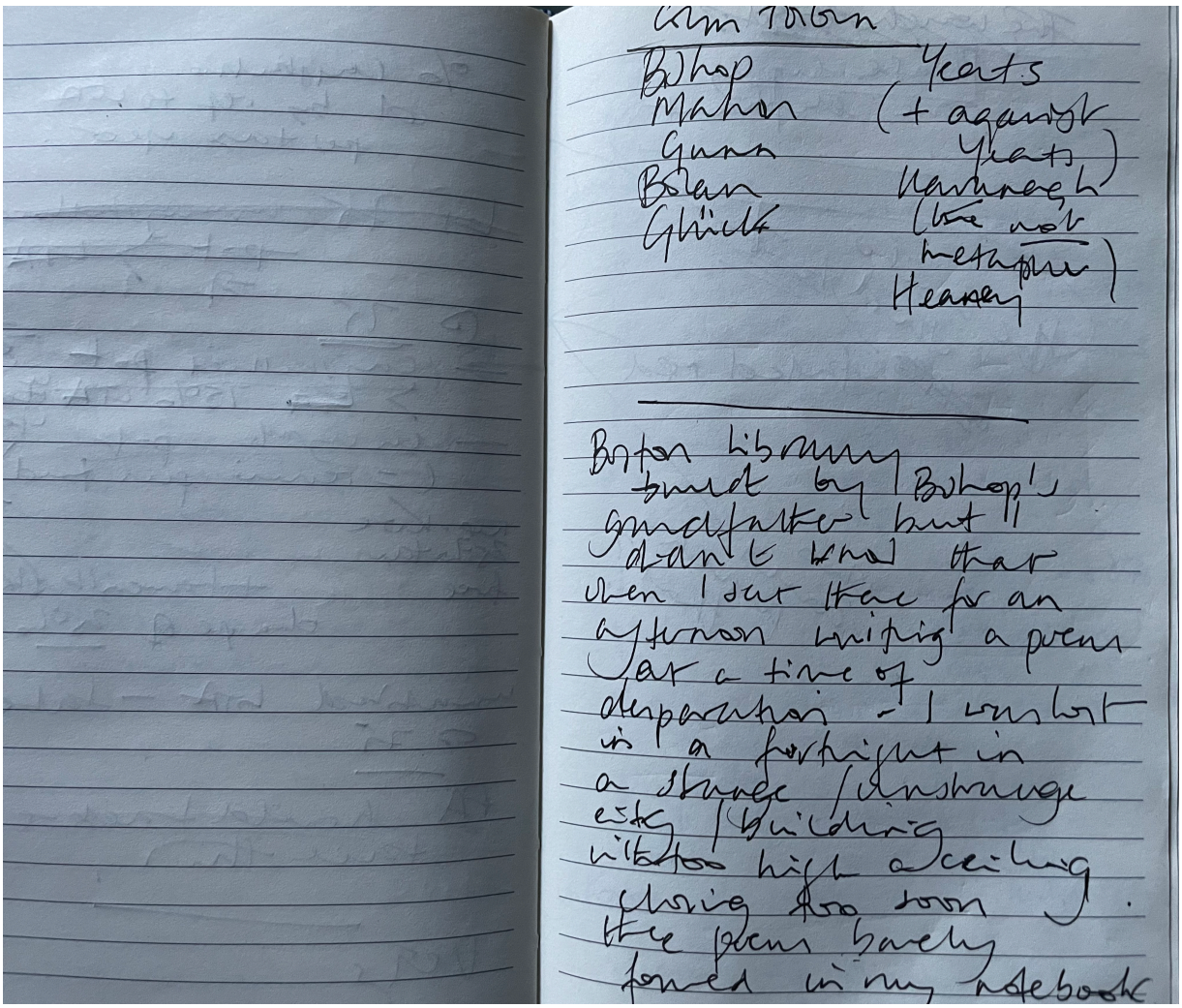
More specifically, the writing of *Sublime Lungs* has been influenced, in various ways, by the four poets studied. Charles Olson was instructive in his focus on the breath as a compositional principle essential to the writing of poetry as outlined in Chapter II. More than any of my other collections, I have been acutely aware of where

my breath falls in my poems and how to go about signalling this to the reader in terms of line breaks and punctuation. Elizabeth Bishop (Chapter III) provided a guide as to how to be confidently unsure, uncertain and hesitant in one's writing. Poems such as 'Boston Public Library' and 'Bronchospasm, barotrauma, embolism**'** benefitted from this.

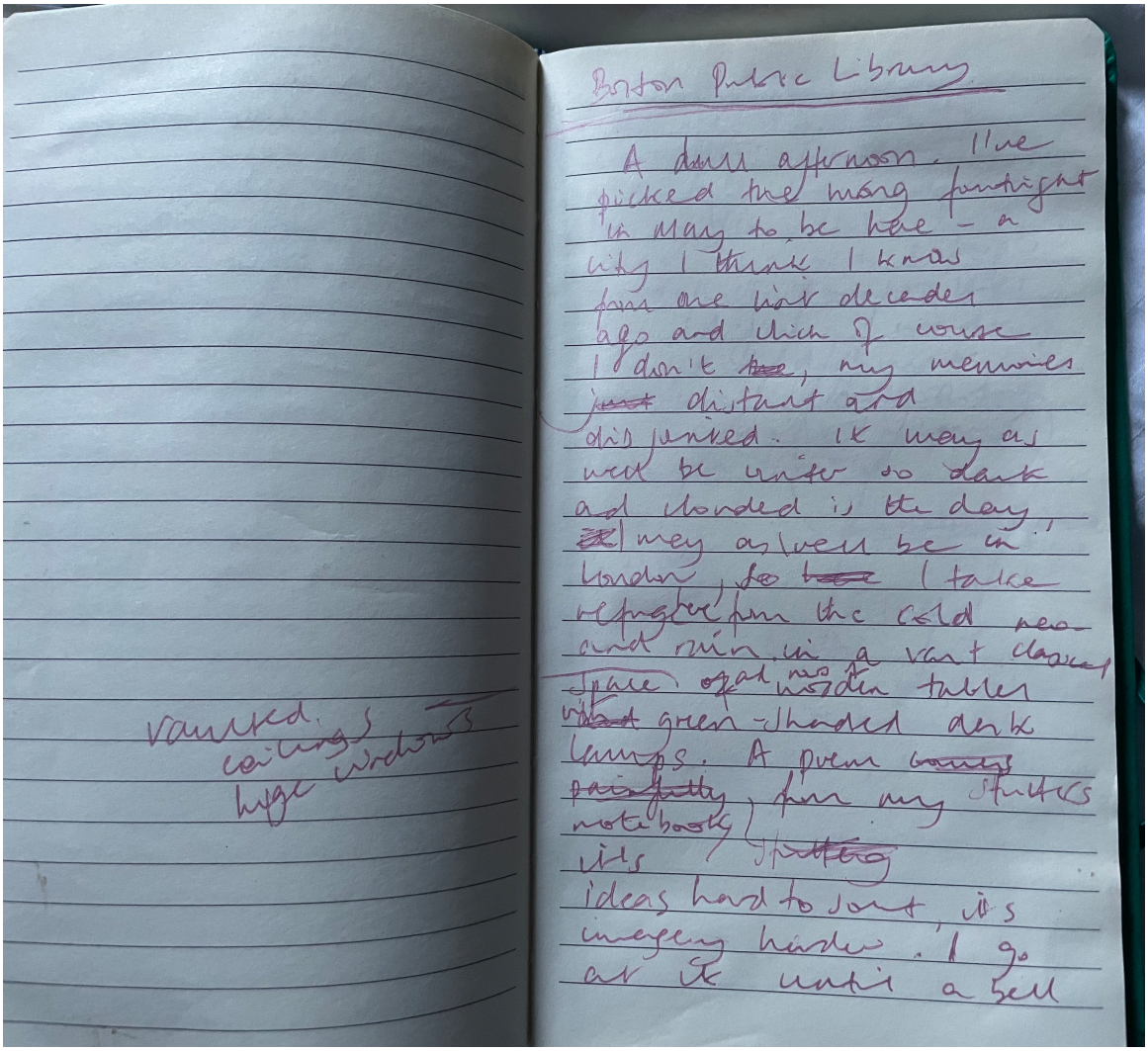
Elaine Feinstein's poems used certain subjects and imagery that I was able to adopt and vary, for example, where she has birds, I tend to use fish, and her focus on signalling the breath by notations on the page, as detailed in Chapter IV, was also instructive. Like her, I have been unafraid to deal with my emotions in poems that explain the impact of asthma on my life, such as my anger in 'I need some fresh air apparently,' my fear in 'The living death a childhood nightmare,' and my search for self-expression in 'Asthma is dressed stone rasping.' Finally, Dannie Abse's medical *oeuvre* has demonstrated that there is a rich seam of material on medical matters. I have exploited this idea boldly, believing that the breath and asthma as subject matter is of interest in making poetry, and by looking at the breath across different geographies, cultures and chronologies in the writing of *Sublime Lungs*. Like Abse, I have enjoyed exploring the right tone, both sarcastic and humorous, to be used in my poems.

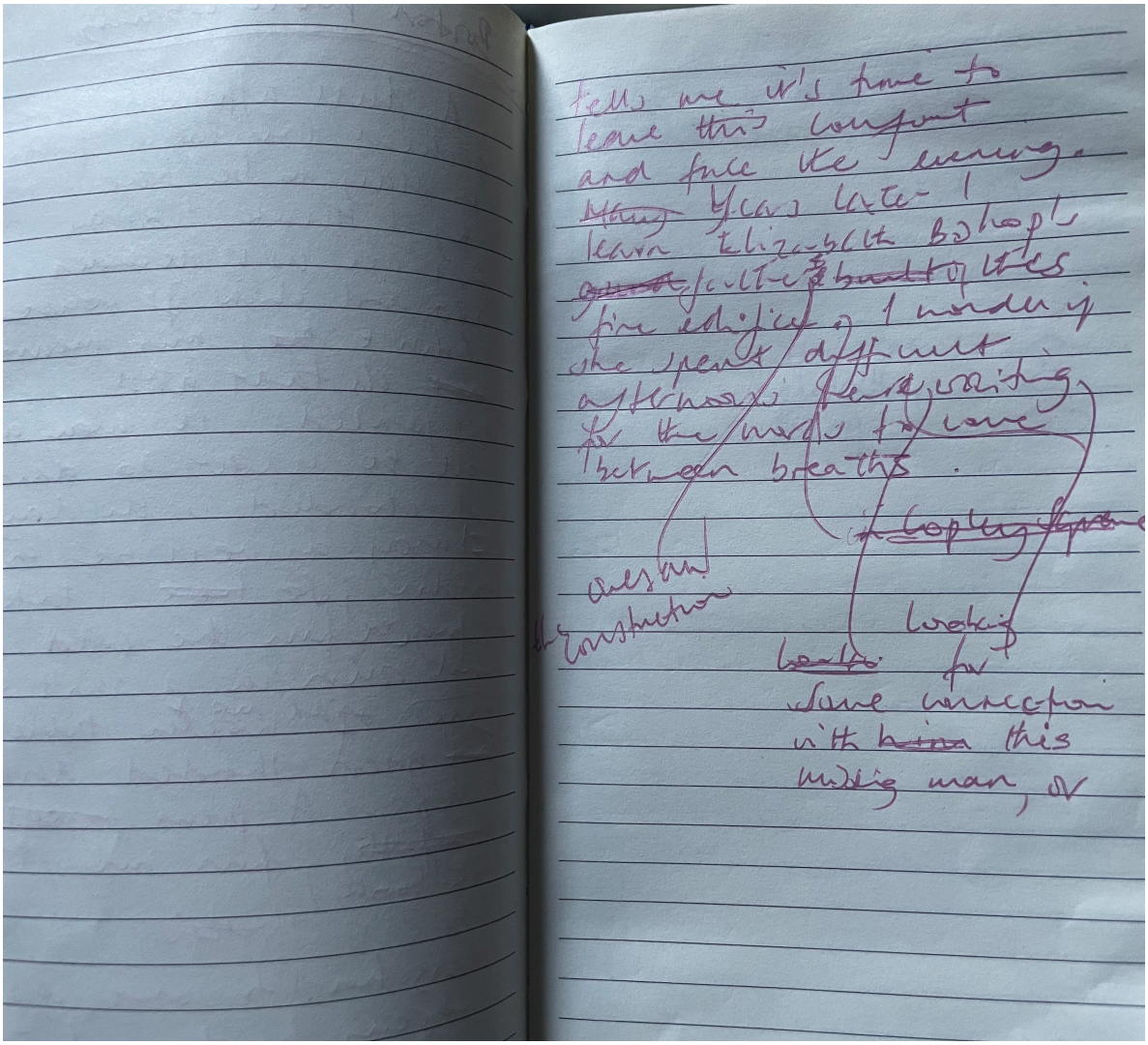
Notebook drafts of 'Boston Public Library'

My initial notes on the genesis of this poem in 2022 were as follows (bottom half of page):



The draft of the poem in my notebook covers two pages as set out below. The edits and insertions represent two or three drafts.




tells me it's time to
leave this comfort
and face the evening.
years later I
leave Elizabeth Bishop's
fine edifice & I wonder if
she spent difficult
afternoons pacing, waiting,
for the words to come
between breaths.
looking
for
some connection
with this
missing man, or

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