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**The Poetics of Experience:
A First-Person Creative and Critical Investigation
of Self-Experience and the Writing of Poetry**

Michael Peter Maltby

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Sussex

December 2008

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree. I confirm that the thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated, and that the sources used are acknowledged and referenced in the bibliography or through footnotes.

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Date:

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

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THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN CREATIVE WRITING AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

THE POETICS OF EXPERIENCE: A FIRST-PERSON CREATIVE AND CRITICAL
INVESTIGATION OF SELF-EXPERIENCE AND THE WRITING OF POETRY

SUMMARY

There is increasing interest in the personal benefits of writing poetry and a growing field of practical application within healthcare. However, there is little direct research and a need for practice-based theoretical integration to improve understanding of the specific changes, creative processes and challenges involved.

This study investigates the way that writing poetry can affect self-experience. It also contributes to the development of combined modes of creative and critical inquiry. A first-person account of the experiential and creative outcomes of writing poetry over an extended period is presented. The results of this are subjected to reflexive analysis and a critical theoretical explication.

Four factors relating self-experience to the experience of writing poetry are identified: a failure of conscious intention; an inhibiting objectification of experience; an implicit assumption of a separate self, and a changed experience of self that felt more embodied and fluid. These findings are the basis of a theoretical examination that utilizes the work of Ignacio Matte Blanco and Michael Polanyi, in conjunction with insights derived from contemporary psychoanalysis, embodied cognition, neuroscience and attention training.

An original theoretical integration is developed. It is proposed that poetry has a characteristic bi-logical form that condenses and integrates difference and identity in a simultaneous and concentrated manner. The process of composition requires a reciprocal interplay of conscious and unconscious processes, which can be enhanced by an increase in embodied awareness, a decrease in the exercise of deliberate volition, and the facilitative use of images. This involves a flexible oscillation of awareness that, modulated by the breadth of attention and the degree of identification or separation from experience, directly alters the boundaries and quality of self-experience. This framework avoids the limitations of reductive or eliminative views of the self and allows for the creative operation of what is dubbed the 'nondual imagination'.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

I came to this study from a career in clinical psychology and as a group analyst and psychotherapist. In my professional work I had observed how many people turned intuitively to the writing of poetry at times of personal difficulty. They almost invariably found the experience of writing in this form helpful. I had also written poetry at many points in my own life, and recognized that this was often during periods of transition or uncertainty. Although I had paid little attention to this at the time, writing poetry appeared to contribute in a valuable way to my negotiation of these challenges.

The benefits that I have witnessed go beyond the mere expression of feelings; they seem to include subtle but significant alterations to the experience of self and the perception of the world. Furthermore, the mechanisms and challenges involved are difficult to explain adequately within traditional psychotherapeutic models that emphasise relational, learning and developmental processes within an interpersonal context. Among the factors that require greater understanding are the effects of writing in contrast to verbal interaction and, with regard to poetry, the specific significance of writing in a poetic form.

In exploring these questions and extending my professional practice into the use of writing and literature within a therapeutic context, I found I was entering a challenging and rapidly developing area. This field of work inhabits the contested ground between art and science, creativity and critical understanding, and the claims of both personal and objective forms of knowledge. It draws on the perspectives of normally separate academic disciplines and focuses them on a highly complex and varied form of creative activity, which is informed by a strong critical tradition of its own. My ambition in undertaking a personal research investigation was to remain true to the diversity and complexity of the first-person experience of creative activity. However, I also wished to articulate that experience in a way that would further wider theoretical integration, and that might be useful in terms of practical work with others.

The thesis presented is situated within the inter-disciplinary field of creative writing and personal development, and is informed by the growing professional and academic

interest in the therapeutic uses of poetry. It sets out to explore how, in practice and theory, the writing of poetry can be related to changes in self-experience. The research on which it is based was undertaken through a prospective first-person investigation into the writing of poetry, followed by a critical explication of the outcomes of that inquiry. The thesis is thus centred on a practical case study of my own creative writing experience, and draws on contemporary psychological and psychoanalytic theory to formulate an original understanding of what I encountered.

1.2 Rationale and aims of the investigation

1.2.1 Rationale

The rationale for the investigation emerges from my own observations and the review of current work in the field of creative writing and personal development that is presented in Chapter 2. This suggests that there is a growing need to examine more closely the experience of those who write poetry, including people who are not established poets, and to bring together and develop theory grounded directly in that experience. There is also a need to explore ways of undertaking this research that adequately reflects the complex and indeterminate nature of engaging in creative activity, and the fundamentally first-person nature of self-experience. These needs give rise to the primary and secondary aims of the study.

1.2.2 Primary aim of study

The primary aim is to investigate the way that writing poetry can impact on the self-experience of the writer. This aim is approached from the perspective of seeking greater understanding of the possible therapeutic or developmental benefits of writing poetry. Although inherently interdisciplinary, the study is thus centred on the psychological aspects of this form of creative writing, rather than on wider literary, cultural or philosophical questions.

1.2.3 Secondary aim of study

The secondary aim is to contribute to the development of modes of inquiry that combine a creative or artistic activity with a critical examination of the experience of undertaking that activity. This aim is underpinned by the need for theory that is grounded in the characteristics and challenges of specific creative practices.

1.3 The structure and form of the thesis

The thesis has been structured into four parts. Part I situates the study in the context of relevant work in the field and outlines the nature of the integrated research approach that was adopted. Part II focuses on a presentation and analysis of the first-person investigation that was conducted. Part III considers the outcomes of this investigation from a theoretical point of view, and proposes an integrated conceptual framework that can help to elucidate it. Part IV provides a discussion and evaluation of the study as a whole, including its implications for future research and practice. Parts II and III are introduced by a short note to clarify the organisation and sequence of writing within these sections.

The presentation and explication of this study necessitates the use of a range of writing styles and a movement between contrasting authorial voices. The styles adopted reflect their 'rhetorical appropriateness' (Willis, Smith, & Collins, 2000, p. 2) to the purposes of different sections of the thesis. Part I consists of two chapters that employ a conventional third-person perspective suited to the review of related work and the location and development of the research design employed. Part II contains a more diverse range of approaches. Chapter 4 is written as an autobiographical narrative, in an attempt to convey and bring alive the most significant aspects of my experience during the investigation. A selection of poems written during and as part of the study is presented in Chapter 5, followed by a personal commentary. Chapter 6 takes an analytic and interpretive approach to the experience and creative outcomes of the investigation to identify the key 'findings'. The writing in Part II thus moves across narrative, poetic, reflexive and analytic modes, with an emphasis on the use of a first-person perspective throughout.

In Part III there is a return to a more critical form of writing which adopts a third-person perspective, grounded and interspersed with reference to my own experience. This reflects a change in epistemological aims from the presentational and interpretive concerns of Part II, to the propositional and explanatory objectives of this section of the thesis. The focus on reflective evaluation in Part IV requires the continued adoption of a critical perspective, supplemented by further reflections designed to help integrate the personal, creative and scholarly strands that run throughout the study.

Part I

Context and Research Approach

2 Poetry and Self-Experience

In this chapter, some of the key strands of the emerging area of inquiry and practice relating poetry and other forms of creative writing to personal development will be outlined. The intention is to highlight those elements of this interdisciplinary field that inform, and suggest the need for, the creative and critical investigation that follows.

2.1 Creative writing and personal development

2.1.1 Writing and the ‘talking therapies’

During the last century the proliferation of psychological approaches to personal change and self-development have been dominated by what are loosely described as the 'talking therapies'. Many of these have been influenced by psychoanalysis, the approach originally designated a 'talking cure' by Freud following remarks made by Anna O. (Breuer, 1955). Talking therapies are now differentiated into a diverse spectrum of approaches that share a standard paradigm of person-to-person spoken interaction in either individual or group sessions. The reliance on talking has been supplemented in some therapies by writing, most commonly self-focused diary/record keeping, and sometimes reading, often of psychoeducational material. However, the use of more creative forms of writing as a planned form of intervention is relatively unusual.

The significance of written communication by therapists to patients has recently been given greater prominence. This is partly through the influence of narrative approaches which seek to 're-story' or 're-author' experience (White, 1995), the use of shared written formulations in cognitive-analytic therapy (Ryle, 1983, 1990), and new NHS policies that require letters and reports to be sent to patients. The clinical value and 'art' of writing to patients has been explored by Steinberg (2000) who argues that the discipline of finding the "right words" is essential to therapy and that writing provides an opportunity to achieve and extend this.

In some psychotherapeutic approaches use may be made of creative writing or published literature to facilitate emotional expression or assist interpretation and understanding. In psychodynamic therapies such material is usually introduced by the patient and becomes part of the interpretative work of therapy. However, creative work

is directly encouraged in some forms of Jungian therapy. This draws on Jung's concept of 'active imagination' and most often involves the elaboration of dreams (e.g. Kast, 1993). Such activity is usually seen as part of a self-initiated transformative encounter with the unconscious and involves working with symbols and images. The form or medium in which this imaginative activity is undertaken is usually viewed as secondary.

2.1.2 Creative writing and the arts therapies

In the UK, the use of creative writing and literature as a specific modality of personal development and therapy is growing but is still relatively unstructured. A membership organisation called *Lapidus*¹ was set up in 1996 to promote the use of the literary arts in personal development. This now has a professional membership category but the organisation has yet to accredit a formal qualification in the area, or have an agreed framework of either theory or practice. This is in contrast to a number of other arts-based therapies that have well-established systems for training and accreditation, for example: art therapy, music therapy, dramatherapy, and dance and movement therapy. These therapies draw on psychological models of emotional development and disorder, but use a specific art form as the primary vehicle for increasing emotional awareness and communication. Alongside these modality specific traditions, there is an increasing interest in more integrative forms of arts therapy and more generically 'expressive' or 'creative' forms of therapy (Levine & Levine, 1999; Rogers, 1993; Simon, 2005; Warren, 2008). These approaches include the use of creative writing, particularly poetry, and tend to emphasise the 'creative process' as a developmental or curative factor, as opposed to psychological or interpretative theory developed in other contexts.

Current interest in creative writing as a developmental activity has followed the significant expansion of creative writing programmes within higher and adult education, and the success of earlier initiatives, such as the *Arvon Foundation*², in promoting the teaching and facilitation of creative writing. In the UK, therapeutic writing initiatives have drawn heavily on this creative writing background. For example, through the use of activities evolved from creative writing exercise and workshop models but with an explicit focus on personal as well as writing outcomes (e.g. Bolton, Field, & Thompson, 2006; Hunt & Sampson, 1998). The boundary between developing creative writing

¹ See <http://www.lapidus.org.uk/>.

² See <http://www.arvonfoundation.org/p1.html>.

skills and promoting personal development varies according to context but is often blurred, as many participants and facilitators have an interest in both dimensions and see them as mutually enhancing (Hunt, 2000).

2.1.3 Bibliotherapy and poetry therapy

In the USA, the most prominent organisation applying writing and literature to personal therapy and development is the *National Association of Poetry Therapy*³ (NAPT). This was established in 1980 and accredits professional training and certification in poetry therapy. Despite this title, poetry is not the only literary form employed by poetry therapists. The field developed from earlier and more general applications of bibliotherapy, the adjunctive use of literature in support of psychiatric care, and continues to draw on diverse forms of literature and sometimes film. Nevertheless, poetry is central to the approach. As stated on the NAPT (n.d.) website: "Poetry Therapy is a specific and powerful form of bibliotherapy, unique in its use of metaphor, imagery, rhythm, and other poetic devices."

Poetry therapy makes a structured use of literature to evoke personal and shared responses, which can then be expressed and developed both verbally and in creative literary forms (Leedy, 1973; Lerner, 1994; Mazza, 1999). The work is often undertaken in groups and the critical task of the poetry therapist is to select suitable material to introduce to the group, and then to facilitate discussion and response to this material (Chavis & Weisberger, 2003). Writing, or other activities, may be utilized to take forward the expression and examination of individual and group responses. Poetry therapy thus makes specific use of the power of literature to resonate with the emotional experience of individuals, and for creative forms of writing to further a process of formulation and communication of that experience.

Leedy (1969), one of the pioneers of poetry therapy, proposed the 'isoprinciple', a concept borrowed from music therapy, to guide the selection of suitable literary material. This simply suggests that it is best to select work that is close to the current mood or feeling of the group or individual being worked with. It implies that the therapist must have a wide knowledge of suitable literature to respond to the emerging needs of participants. Hynes & Hynes-Berry (1994, pp. 44-54) describe four steps that

³ See <http://www.poetrytherapy.org/>.

typically follow in working with this material. First there is *recognition*: a personal engagement with the selected writing that stimulates some connection with feelings or “strikes a chord”. This is followed by *examination*: a reflection on the form and nature of the initial and evolving reactions to the selection. Then comes *juxtaposition*: connecting different personal or group reactions and perspectives to arrive at an enriched and elaborated pattern of response. Finally there is *application to self*, to evaluate and integrate the personal significance of the material and individual responses to it. More recently Mazza (2003, pp. 17-31) has proposed a model of poetry therapy which highlights the creative and symbolic components of the work. He suggests that there is a *receptive/prescriptive* component, related to bringing a selected piece of literature into the therapeutic situation, followed by an *expressive/creative* component that involves the active use of creative writing by participants. Both of these may also utilize *symbolic/ceremonial* processes that arise from the imaginative employment of metaphor, narrative and rituals.

Poetry therapy has clearly developed a systematic methodology for employing literature therapeutically and recognises the particular effectiveness of poetry to deepen emotional awareness and personal expression. Its theory and techniques are rooted in the use of literature as a catalyst for this personal exploration and communication. However, in practice it is relatively unconcerned by issues of literary quality, or craft, in participant writing. Informed by psychoanalytic and humanistic therapies, it relies heavily on the therapeutic relationship, or group context, to support and facilitate the personal exploration that it promotes.

2.1.4 Journaling and expressive writing

The keeping of diaries or journals has a long tradition, and in the hands of some people has been raised to the level of a literary form. The explicit use of journaling as a therapeutic and developmental activity has been supported and promoted by numerous publications (e.g. Proffoff, 1992; Rainer, 1980), and more recently by resources such as journaling software. Although journaling is recognised by the NAPPT as a potential element of poetry therapy, it has a diversity of uses and forms, from acting as a tool in qualitative research and reflective learning to the recent phenomenon of Internet ‘blogs’. In contrast to facilitated forms of writing, exploratory journaling can be practiced independently of a therapist and may be seen as a form of self-help.

Judging by the number of publications offering guidance on how to undertake journaling for 'self-healing' and 'discovery' it appears to be a widely used method of writing for self-development. The extent to which this involves creative forms of writing is unclear, but many handbooks do encourage imaginative writing exercises, including dialogue techniques, character portraits and poetry. However, the essence of journaling consists of recording and reflecting on personal experience, sometimes with an emphasis on 'free' or stream-of-consciousness writing (Cameron, 2000; Goldberg, 1986).

The value of writing expressively about difficult emotional events or experiences has been the subject of extensive empirical research, most notably by Pennebaker (1990; 1997). The standard format of this 'expressive writing' or 'written disclosure' research paradigm is to encourage participants, often university students, to write about upsetting feelings and experiences for a short period each day, over a number of days or weeks. The writing is not shared and participants are warned that they may, initially, find the process distressing. The results of numerous studies indicate that such expressive writing is associated with physical and psychological health benefits and reduced need for professional help (Easterling, L'Abate, Murray, & Pennebaker, 1999). A feature of this research is that self-focused writing is employed in relative isolation. There is no discussion or sharing of the writing with another person, so the role of any form of therapeutic relationship is reduced to the impact of the researcher recruiting participants and providing instructions. Face-to-face contact between the researchers and participants is minimised or avoided altogether. The benefits thus appear to be attributable to the act of writing and have been demonstrated to occur quite rapidly. Although these controls place limits on expressive writing as a developmental approach (e.g. Nicholls, in press) they are the basis of its value as an experimental paradigm.

Pennebaker (2004) has concluded that the processes behind the benefits of expressive writing remain to be properly understood, largely because of the many levels at which they operate. This is a view endorsed by other reviews of the literature (Sloan & Marx, 2004; Smyth & Pennebaker, 2008). One suggestion is that the benefits gained from the act of writing about difficult or traumatic experiences may be associated with the translation of felt experience into a structure than can further understanding; for example, by connecting emotional reactions and events into a more coherent or

explanatory narrative. Another proposal is that the self-directed attention involved in writing has an effect not dissimilar to the alterations in awareness facilitated by mindfulness practices. Brody and Park (2004) note how expressive writing may operate in this way to integrate unconscious levels of experience and thus impact on the sense of identity. They also point out that there may be a relational dimension in writing connected to the existence of an implicit audience. This connects with the idea of the “implicit reader” which Hunt sees as a presence in the act of writing that can influence how individuals may write and represent themselves (Hunt, 2004a, p. 36) . A number of more fundamental processes may also be salient, including the simple act of confronting rather than avoiding upsetting experience.

2.1.5 Writing within the context of the ‘arts in health’

The role of the arts in health care has recently been the subject of a Department of Health review (DoH, 2007), which concluded that arts initiatives delivered worthwhile health benefits and should be considered integral to health service provision. The use of writing and literature within this area has extended from medical education to service-user initiatives. Among the projects that have emerged are facilitated creative writing programmes and the establishment of writers-in-residence schemes. Poets and poetry have been at the forefront of this movement. One of the best-known initiatives is *Survivors Poetry*⁴, which supports those who have survived mental distress or trauma to both write and publish poetry. Sampson sees such activity as distinctively forefronting the role of poetry as an arts activity that can complement other service provisions, rather than as a medical or therapeutic intervention (Sampson, 1999, p. 8). This emphasis may be one reason why the equivalent of poetry therapy has yet to become formally established in the UK.

The relationship between writing as a craft or arts activity and for therapeutic ends is potentially complex. Many doubt whether writing for therapeutic purposes is likely to have any wider value given the possible disjunction between what is rewarding to write and what is worthy of the attention of others. As Andrew Motion argues:

Yes to access, no to dumbing down, otherwise you end up with a mush in which emoting or just stringing words together is its own reward, well it might be for the

⁴ See <http://www.survivorspoetry.com/>.

person doing it but there is no earthly reason why it should be for anyone else.
(Motion, 2002)

It is reasonable to observe that creative writing may bring benefits without achieving high standards of accomplishment, but it is also plausible that developing knowledge and craft could enhance the capacity of writing to be used for personal benefit (Hunt, 2000). Greater facility with writing may enhance the precision and depth of expression, facilitate more effective communication, and provide a stronger sense of individual voice. On the other hand excessive concern with quality or achieving publication could contribute to inhibition, disappointment, and a potential sense of failure in those who may already feel vulnerable to criticism.

One way of reconciling this is to avoid a rigid dichotomy between writing therapeutically and writing as an arts practice or craft. An alternative conceptualisation is to view both according to how much they are emphasised in the context and purpose of different writing activities. A schematic view of this is presented in Table 2.1 as an 'arts-therapy continuum'. The key point of this is to highlight how the standards of evaluation of writing depend on where it is located along the continuum. Problems may arise when standards or expectations appropriate to one area are misapplied to writing that has quite different imperatives.

In addition to writing there has been increasing interest in the potential value of reading imaginative literature in health care. Poetry and fiction have always been mined as a source of insight and understanding within psychoanalysis, and have been identified as a valuable source of personal learning for psychotherapists (Knights, 1995). Hedges (2005), for example, seeks to demonstrate the common concerns of poets and major models of psychotherapy. Literature has also been seen as a valuable humanising influence in the increasingly technical context of medical training (B. H. Smith, 1998). Although many testify to the personal rewards of reading literature, little empirical research has been conducted on its health benefits. A recent grounded theory study has indicated that reading fiction can promote and maintain psychological well-being, and suggested a number of possible mechanisms for this (Sullivan, 2007). Reading appeared to facilitate a vicarious form of learning about emotional, relational and life issues that participants could transfer to their own lives. Processes such as identification, catharsis, and the integration of experience, led some people to feel less isolated and more able to work through their difficulties.

Table 2.1 The arts-therapy continuum and creative writing.

| <i>Arts practice/quality emphasis</i> ← → <i>Therapeutic practice/change emphasis</i> | | | | |
|--|--|---|---|---|
| <u>Art as art-form</u> | <u>Art as art-making</u> | <u>Arts in health</u> | <u>Art as therapy</u> | <u>Art in therapy</u> |
| Focus on the art world and critical or cultural value. | Focus on art and the process of making art. | Focus on improving well-being via the arts. | Focus on art as a therapeutic activity. | Focus on personal therapy. |
| The aesthetic quality, critical appreciation and cultural value of the literary <i>product</i> is paramount rather than the personal experience of the writer. | Creative activity is seen to be affected by personal and social factors and may have transformative effects. The literary <i>product</i> is important but the <i>process</i> of writing is also significant. | The arts are recognised to contribute to human welfare and creative activity is seen as promoting well-being. <i>Active participation</i> in writing and literary activity is encouraged. | The arts as creative therapies with writing used for personal expression, exploration and reflection. Can employ professional <i>facilitation</i> but also be a means of <i>self-help</i> . | Art as a vehicle for exploration and change in psychotherapy. Creative writing as a potential tool of therapeutic work. The content and process of writing utilized as an <i>aspect</i> of therapy. |
| Professional creative writing. | Professional or personal creative writing. | Creative writing as an activity and discipline with life-enhancing benefits. | Creative writing as a form of therapy. | Creative writing in the context of a broader psychotherapeutic approach. |

2.1.6 Conclusions

Although applications of creative writing and literature to personal development are advancing there remains a significant lack of practice-based research and theoretical integration within the field. This is complicated by the diversity of the work being undertaken and the inherently interdisciplinary nature of its associated theory base. Empirical support is often based on the work of Pennebaker et al (e.g. Wright, 2003) but this represents only one paradigm of writing and is not underpinned by an agreed theoretical model. The personal benefits of creative writing have been related to a variety of concepts from psychoanalysis and other psychological therapies, but with an emphasis on the content and power of existing literature and its therapeutic applications. The actual practice of creative writing is in need of more detailed and specific research.

2.2 The writing of poetry

2.2.1 Differentiating the field

The therapeutic applications of creative writing include a variety of activities, contexts and genres. Although there may be important common factors in how these operate, there are also likely to be crucial differences between them. There is a need to identify and investigating these differences through appropriately focused research in order to delineate the key processes involved. An obvious way to structure investigation within the field is to distinguish between receptive and expressive uses of the 'written word', in other words between the activities of reading⁵ and writing. These activities can then be differentiated according to the form or genre of the writing involved, as shown in Table 2.2.

It seems reasonable to assume that the personal benefits of either writing or reading will have at least some relation to the specific form of writing engaged with. For example, the categorisation from non-fiction to poetry could be seen to reflect increasing degrees of emphasis on imagination over fact, and towards more 'creative' and figurative uses language. This might be expected to be associated with increasingly complex aspects of lived experience.

⁵ Receptive activity could also include viewing films and plays or listening to audio books and poetry readings.

Table 2.2 Therapeutic uses of different forms of writing

| | <i>Non-fiction</i> | <i>Personal Writing</i> | <i>Fiction</i> | <i>Poetry</i> |
|-----------------------|--|--|----------------------------------|------------------|
| <i>Reading</i> | Educational Self-help Biography | Autobiography Letters/diaries | Novels Short stories Drama | Published poetry |
| <i>Writing</i> | Diary keeping Structured recording | Journaling Life story Expressive writing | Fictional narratives | Writing poetry |

Given the central role of relationship factors in most forms of psychological therapy it is important to identify the potential interaction of these with the categories identified in Table 2.2. Unlike the talking therapies, writing or reading can be employed either within or completely outside the context of a facilitative personal relationship. The presence of any such relationship, whether individual or group, is clearly an important parameter to consider when designing research to examine the processes and outcomes associated with different reading and writing activities.

2.2.2 The salience of writing poetry

While reading is an important dimension of the therapeutic applications of literature, one of the striking things about the recent growth in the field has been the expansion of interest in the practice of creative writing. This is underpinned by the growth of creative writing programmes and the increase in formal and informal self-publishing via the Internet. Professional interest has correspondingly extended from reading-based bibliotherapy to the facilitation of personal and creative writing across a range of genres (Bolton, 1999; DeSalvo, 1999; Harris, 2003). This shift in emphasis raises practical and theoretical questions about the processes involved in creative writing as a therapeutic activity, not least how different types of writing might relate to personal change and what the nature of these changes might be.

Of all genres of creative writing, poetry is probably most strongly associated with the idea of healing or personal transformation. This is reflected in the poetry therapy

movement in the USA and the centrality of poetry within the arts in health movement in the UK. Poetry is probably the form of creative writing most frequently turned to in times of personal difficulty by individuals who otherwise do not see themselves as writers. In my own practice, as a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, I have worked with a number of people who have spontaneously started to write poetry, some of whom have gone on to self-publish collections of the poems that they wrote during this period. This writing has been an important component of these peoples recovery from states of severe emotional distress to either more stable or much improved levels of functioning. On the whole the quality of their poetry has mattered far less to them than the act of producing it and, in some cases, the subsequent wish to share it with others. Other therapists have made similar observations, for example, Gilbert writes:

With what seems to me amazing frequency, suddenly here is a poem! Perhaps I find it so astonishing because I have never written one myself, and assume some special talent is necessary. Here are 'ordinary' people with no particular literary background, and without any particular suggestion from me, who write, quite spontaneously, very powerful and varied poems about their own psychological distress and change. (Gilbert, 1995, p. 3)

Another report, by Morrice (1983), describes a “therapeutic liaison” in which the author's own publication of poetry led, largely by chance, to an exchange of verse with a patient that had parallels with the processes of psychotherapy. During the exchange the patient had a psychotic episode, which was reflected in fragmented writing, and a subsequent recovery that led to better-crafted work. Morrice believes that poetry provided a mode of communication that combined access to and expression of deep emotion, with the maintenance of necessary space and distance. He also suggests that: "...good poetry, like successful psychotherapy, arises from disturbed emotions only when they are given resolution and form." (Morrice, 1983, p. 367)

The existence of a close but equivocal relationship between writing poetry and psychological difficulties is reinforced by the notoriety of poets with emotionally troubled lives, such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. There is statistical evidence of a high level of mental disorder in those pursuing careers as creative writers, with poets consistently suffering the highest rates of many mental health problems (Jamison, 1993; Ludwig, 1995). It has been argued that connection between creativity and mental illness may reflect a genetic predisposition that is common to both and which may be maintained because, on balance, it conveys an evolutionary advantage (Nettle, 2000). However, this does not explain the particularly high association of mental health

difficulties with poetry, particularly among female poets; a phenomenon that Kaufman (2001) has labelled the “Sylvia Plath effect”. Ludwig (1998) suggests that a strong relationship exists between the form of creative expression and mental health. He argues that creative work requiring objective and logical processes is associated with greater emotional stability than forms reliant on more subjective, intuitive, or directly emotional processes. In a similar vein, Post has suggested that the variation of mental illness between different kinds of creative writers may be linked to the “nature and intensity of their emotional imagination” (Post, 1996, p. 545).

Poetry could be seen as a constructive attempt to come to terms with existing emotional difficulties or challenges. For example, my first serious attempts to write poetry occurred during a period of loneliness after my family moved to a new and more remote part of the country in my teens. Indeed, Harrower sees poetry as part of a process of normal growth and development: “...much of my poetry springs from the inner need to get thoughts and feelings in order and to emerge triumphant from difficulties.” (Harrower, 1972, p. 56) This is also the view of some individuals with serious mental health problems, for example a sufferer from a severe mental illness reports: “I actively use them [poems], as a tool to give vent to any subject matter which may be causing me to become anxious, and as a first line of defence if any delusive thoughts or misconceived ideas come into my mind.” (Anonymous, 2003, p. 271) On the other hand, writing poetry could potentially add to disturbed feelings by circumventing defences or fostering self-absorption. For example, a textual analysis of the writing of poets who committed suicide showed more first-person singular references throughout their careers compared to a demographically matched group of poets who were nonsuicidal (Sterman, 2001). In Don Paterson's view this danger is inherent to the “dark art” of writing poetry, but only for some people:

There is a reason why poets enjoy the highest statistical incidence of mental illness among all the professions. Your unconscious is your unconscious for an awfully good reason. If you want to help yourself, *read* a poem, but don't write one. Then again I think maybe 5% of folk who write poetry really want to write poetry; the other 95 are quite safe, and just want to be a poet. If they knew what their dreams were like, they wouldn't. (Paterson, 2004, para. 6)

Interpreting the available evidence on poets and mental health is problematic; the research is largely retrospective, vulnerable to selection bias, and poorly controlled. It is also based on professional poets and thus confounds the writing of poetry with professional achievement and the cultural expectations this entails. Kaufman (2006)

tries to explain why the benefits found from expressive writing don't help poets by proposing that they may have more problems to start with, or suffer from unhelpful expectations. However, he also suggests that the absence of narrative in many forms of poetry might be an explanation, and advises those seeking health benefits to use a narrative form. Given the limited evidence available this recommendation seems premature. However, it does demonstrate the need for more detailed research on the process and effects of writing poetry.

Inevitably those who are drawn to write poetry will be influenced by their conceptions of what poetry is, and what kind of people poets are. The popular image of the poet is associated for many not only with mental illness, but also with ideas of personal sensitivity, self-expression and emotional revelation. This view of poets and poetry has been influenced by romanticism, particularly the seminal commitment to emotion in Wordsworth's (1802, p. 598) argument that "all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings". Interestingly, Wordsworth's additional remarks that this requires: "...more than usual organic sensibility", in someone who has "...also thought long and deeply", point to how writing poetry could help process and transform emotional experiences, not simply express them. It is also important to recognise that this view of poetry is only one aspect of a very diverse poetic tradition, which encompasses a variety of forms and agendas for poetry. Nevertheless, the romantic emphasis on emotion and the self continues to exert a powerful influence on how poetry is conceived and utilized as an instrument of change.

2.3 Personal change and self-experience

2.3.1 Therapy and self-experience

Personal development can occur in many ways but a common psychotherapeutic aim is to achieve some change in the quality of self-experience. This may be at a purely affective level, such as reducing feelings of anxiety or depression, but can also include the promotion of enduring changes in self-image, self-presentation or self-efficacy. While the fundamental nature of 'the self' has come increasingly into question, self-experience, or the "varying ways in which the self is perceived, expressed and enacted" (Crastrnopol, 2002, p. 262), has become an important means of conceptualising both the

process and outcome of many forms of therapeutic work (e.g. Bollas, 1993; Josephs, 1995).

Models of therapeutic change can be related to how self-experience is altered. For example, Leiper & Maltby (2004) have described six interrelated processes of change within psychodynamic therapy. These operate through expression, understanding, and the therapeutic relationship; and can lead to regression, differentiation, and the emergence of more spontaneous and creative forms of action. Self-experience can be affected in different ways and to different degrees by each of these processes, with effects as varied as short-term emotional relief, new forms of self-understanding, the breakdown of established modes of functioning, and the discovery of new ways of being and acting. Other therapeutic approaches place emphasis on different processes of change, with corresponding variations in the way self-experience is most likely to be influenced by these interventions. The variety of forms and ways in which self-experience can be affected may be one reason why such a multiplicity of psychotherapeutic models have emerged, each attracting strong allegiances and claims for effectiveness, but without a commonly agreed basis for comparison.

2.3.2 Writing and self-experience

Specific forms of writing may effect change in self-experience in different ways or, as Esgalhadó (2003) has suggested about genres of creative writing, may formulate different aspects of subjectivity. The four forms of writing differentiated in Table 2.2 are considered briefly from this perspective below, with tentative parallels drawn to established conceptions of change in psychological therapy.

Non-fiction

Non-fiction and factual writing can offer information and instruction when read, as in much self-help literature, and objective feedback on behaviour and experience if used actively in the form of a diary or other record. This is likely to promote action and direct attention in specific ways, often through logical persuasion. As such it has similarities with more directive and behavioural forms of therapy or guidance. These tend to see self-experience as something that is secondary to, and can be altered by, immediate behavioural and cognitive changes.

Personal writing

Personal forms of writing can lead to insights into the experience of others, and may, through the action of writing, facilitate self-reflection, acceptance and a more complete integration of experience. This has similarities to person or client-centred forms of therapy and counselling, which privilege a largely nondirective and very reflective approach by the therapist. This emphasis places a greater focus on self-experience and can promote increased personal sensitivity, together with greater awareness of the subjectivity of others.

Fiction

The reading and writing of fiction, particularly the recognition of alternative narratives, may promote new conceptualisations of experience and identity, and lead to the emergence of new kinds of self-understanding, meaning and choice. This is broadly congruent with approaches such as narrative therapy, constructivist forms of cognitive therapy, existential therapy, and narrative perspectives within psychoanalysis. These tend to highlight either the intersubjective or social construction of self-experience or a personal creative search for meaning.

Poetry

The reading and writing of poetry appears to have a particularly strong resonance with emotional and unconscious levels of experience and with experience that is difficult to convey adequately in logical prose. It may have its roots in aspects of self-experience that are normally outside of awareness and that prefigure socially determined forms of meaning. This connects it closely with the exploratory and interpretative tradition of psychoanalysis.

2.3.3 Poetry and psychoanalysis

Poetry has figured in the writings of many psychoanalysts, not least Freud who is reputed to have credited poets, together with philosophers, as discoverers of the unconscious (Trilling, 1950). Although Freud set out to establish a scientific basis for analytic work, many subsequent writers have compared the necessary sensibility of the psychoanalyst with the nature and craft of poetry. For example, Hutter examined a report of a session by Winnicott in which a number of poems were central and concluded: "These poems also demonstrate the subtle and complex relationship between poetry and psychoanalysis, between the psychological explication of poetry and the

need for an extraordinary sensitivity to language in therapy – to poetry in psychoanalysis." (Hutter, 1982, p. 315) The language of poetry has frequently been compared to the language of dreams, Freud's 'royal road' to the unconscious. This has been theorised by Kristeva (1984) to arise from a 'semiotic' area of presymbolic bodily experience closely connected to rhythm and sensation. These and other connections between poetry and psychoanalysis have been discussed by a number of recent writers (Canham & Satyamurti, 2003; T. H. Ogden, 2001; Philips, 2000) with calls being made for a greater recognition of the poetic as opposed to the scientific nature of the psychoanalytic task (Wallach, 2003).

These connections suggest that the writing of poetry could, potentially, serve as a vehicle for self-analytic exploration. Griffin (2004) has proposed that fictional autobiographic writing could give rise to a self-analytic experience, an idea also proposed by Hunt (2000) who draws on the thinking of Horney, and Bollas's concept of the 'self-analytic function'. Wallach contends that a poetic perspective can build on the narrative dimension by adding greater depth as opposed to breadth to the analytic experience. By this she means that it is less about the content and reconstruction of experience, and more about defining moments in which "past and present come alive simultaneously for the patient" (Wallach, 2003, p. 403). Although Wallach sees this arising in therapy through transference enactment, the possibility exists that writing poetry might provide direct access to therapeutic and developmental experiences of this kind. Indeed, as Harrower (1972) has suggested from a psychologically informed analysis of her own poetry, it could support a process of self-development throughout the lifespan.

2.4 The need for and challenge of practice-based research

The current state of theory and practice in the use of creative writing for personal development suggests an important need for research that more clearly differentiates salient aspects of the field and that considers the impact of writing on self-experience. There is a need for work that develops and connects theories of change to specific forms and genres of writing. Poetry is of particular interest given its widespread formal and informal use in therapy and recovery from mental health problems, as well as the high incidence of mental illness among poets.

Until recently most of what could be suggested empirically about the way writing poetry can impact on self-experience is derived from the accounts or biographies of established poets, or from reports of poetry being used in psychotherapeutic contexts. The former are usually based on retrospective descriptions that are some distance from the actual process of writing, while the latter are complicated by the therapeutic situation within which the writing occurs. A need therefore exists to develop a theoretical understanding that is more directly grounded in the lived experience of writing poetry, and that is applicable to those who may write for personal benefit without having a formal identity as a poet.

However, to combine the investigation of self-experience with a creative process such as writing poetry presents a number of difficulties. Although writing poetry may have developmental potentials, these are likely to depend on a level of creative engagement that is difficult to ensure. It is not possible to determine in advance the course of genuinely creative work, or foresee its impact on self-experience, which makes prospective studies problematically open-ended. There are also issues connected with the complex and fundamentally first-person nature of self-experience; not least the wide range of disciplines and theoretical perspectives that are potentially relevant, and ethical problems associated with the risk of problematic as well as helpful outcomes. Finally, there are important methodological questions about how self-experience can best be examined and researched alongside, or through, an arts-based activity such as creative writing.

The next chapter will examine in more detail the nature of the research approach adopted for this study, the practical methodology employed, and the precise questions the investigation set out to answer.

3 Combining Creative and Critical Modes of Inquiry

The field of creative writing and personal development has yet to establish a characteristic tradition of research and inquiry. Indeed, as described in Chapter 2, it is still in the early stages of development as a field of practice. The area can clearly utilize established methods of academic research, but it also provides opportunities to explore new forms of inquiry that arise from its position at the interface of the contrasting disciplines of ‘creative writing’ and ‘psychological therapy’. An innovative approach of this kind has been adopted for this investigation. In particular, the study attempts to combine creative and critical-theoretic forms of inquiry.

It seems important to locate the project in relation to developments in the culture and methodology of research in associated areas. This is partly to provide a conceptual framework for its conduct and evaluation, but also to identify the potential benefits and limitations of pursuing a less well-established approach. This chapter sets out to achieve this by first examining some of the developments in contemporary research practices that help situate the study, and then by examining the nature of the action and arts-informed research paradigms from which it has drawn. Key issues related to the conduct and epistemological basis of a first-person creative and critical inquiry are highlighted.

While this chapter is presented prior to the account of the investigation, it would be misleading to read it as being uninfluenced by the conduct of the study. My understanding of the method of inquiry has been refined and informed by experience arising during the investigation. This is discussed further in Chapter 10⁶.

3.1 The diversification of research approaches

3.1.1 Trends in academic research

Over recent years there has been a considerable expansion in research methods within the humanities and social sciences. At the same time, distinctive practice-based forms of inquiry have developed in professional areas such as education, nursing, management

⁶ Section 10.3.

and the creative arts. This has given rise to a diverse and pluralistic context, with claims to knowledge and relevance often depending on very different ontological and epistemological assumptions, as well as different practical aims and political priorities.

One of the main drivers of change has been the sustained critique of positivist conceptions of objectivity in ‘scientific’ research. This has been part of a wider cultural critique of modernism, and the emergence of postmodern accounts of how knowledge and understanding of the world are constructed, mediated by language, and shaped by the role of power within social relationships. Constructionist and deconstructionist views have themselves been subject to criticism for, among other things, “semiological reductionism” (Dillon, 1995) and extreme relativism; nevertheless, the context of academic inquiry now appears irrevocably changed. In particular, subjective and qualitative aspects of experience have become more legitimate foci of social science research.

Paradoxically, the reinstatement of a place for the subjective has been accompanied by the widespread deconstruction of the concept of the individual subject prevailing in western humanism and has thus rendered problematic concepts of personal identity, agency and intentionality. Subjectivity has been extended to encompass notions of inter-subjectivity, with the boundaries between self and other becoming correspondingly less distinct. As some commentators have pointed out ‘objectivity’, even in the natural sciences, depends on inter-subjective agreement, and at the quantum level it is now a cliché that the act of observing is inseparable from what is observed. The result, in the humanities and in qualitative social science research, is a decreased attempt to simply eliminate the influence of the individual researcher and an increased attempt to incorporate active forms of reflexivity (Etherington, 2004).

3.1.2 Practice-based research

Alongside these trends in mainstream academic research there have been significant developments in what may be characterised as practice-based research, or practitioner inquiry. This has arisen from misgivings not only about the nature of traditional forms of research but also about the applicability of the knowledge this provides to specific contexts of professional practice and real-world activity. The assumption that such knowledge is adequate to these contexts has been called “technical rationality” (e.g. Schön, 1992 p51). It is argued that in order to make sense of the highly complex,

situated and personally mediated nature of practice, alternative forms of understanding and inquiry are required. Among these are Schön's model of reflective-practice, and a family of approaches that have been collectively described as action-research (J. McNiff, 2002b; Reason & Torbet, 2001).

New approaches to higher education have evolved in the humanities with the emergence of practice-based doctorates in many creative and performing arts (UKGCE, 1997). These developments have fuelled important questions about the relationship between creative practice and critical understanding, including the extent to which the creative arts can be seen or used as a form of research inquiry (Cole, Neilson, Knowles, & Luciani, 2004; S. McNiff, 1998a; Watrin, 1999). The use of the term *art* can be confusing as it is applied both to contemporary notions of the 'fine' or 'creative arts' as well as contexts where the wider sense of a practical skill or craft is implied. For example Schön speaks generically about "professional artistry" (1992, p. 51) and an influential paper by Carper (1978) proposes a distinctive place for the "art of nursing". However, both uses of the term raise epistemological questions about how practice is related to understanding.

In the natural sciences it is common to distinguish pure from applied research and to link the latter to practical domains, such as engineering. However, this suggests a top-down relationship between research and practice, which is exactly what critics of technical rationality object to. The domains of research and practice relevant to the present study are overlapping but are represented schematically in Table 3.1. This illustrates how research and practice can have a mutual or bidirectional influence through the notion of *practice-as-inquiry*, which helps to link critical understanding to creative or vocational activities.

Practice-based forms of inquiry into the use of creative writing for personal development can draw on, and contribute to, models of both action research and arts-based inquiry as the field spans the arts /social science boundary. Some prominent action and arts-based research approaches will be examined in Section 3.2 to develop a framework for how such an integrated inquiry might be conducted, and how its creative and critical elements can be combined.

Table 3.1 Relevant domains of research and practice

| | <i>Established methods of academic research and scholarship</i> | <i>Practice-based forms of inquiry</i> | <i>Practice disciplines</i> |
|---|---|--|--|
| <i>Creative arts & humanities</i> | Methods of critical and interpretative research | Arts-based forms of inquiry | Creative and performing arts disciplines |
| <i>Social sciences & related vocational disciplines</i> | Quantitative and qualitative research methods | Action research Reflective practice & inquiry | Disciplines such as teaching, nursing, & psychotherapy |

3.2 Action research, emergence and reflexivity

3.2.1 Action research

The label ‘action research’ has been applied to a number of strands of practice-based inquiry. As such it constitutes a general approach rather than a specific set of methods. Its origins are often traced to the work of Kurt Lewin (1946), who developed the notion of an action-reflection cycle to capture the processes involved in attempting to implement improvements or changes in working contexts. The key processes are usually identified as: *planning*, *acting*, *observing* and *reflecting*. These can be elaborated into a sequence, or spiral, of action-reflection cycles. The approach reflects the influence of American pragmatism and its concern with applicable outcomes as opposed to abstract theoretical understanding. Nevertheless, it does embody a form of evolving knowledge-in-practice and can lead to explicit theoretical developments. The action-reflection cycle has similarities to models of experiential learning (e.g. Kolb, 1984). These emphasise the experiential basis of all learning, with reflection on experience and active experimentation being central to how practice develops and conceptual understanding grows. There is no definite end point to an action research process, while action continues it remains possible to learn from it and to change or improve its effectiveness. This links the approach to the model of the reflective

practitioner developed by Schön (1983; 1987). However, in most research contexts projects are delimited in some way and lead to recognizable scholarly outcomes.

The development of action research in the UK has been influenced by a humanistic philosophy of personal and collective development that eschews distinctions between researchers and participants, in favour of models of participative or collaborative inquiry (Heron & Reason, 1997). It also contains, but is not dependent upon, an interest in transpersonal or spiritual dimensions of reality (Reason, 1993). It thus has a distinctly emancipatory flavour and is critical of externally imposed or purely rational models of understanding. The epistemological basis of action research is grounded in privileging the area of *praxis*, or practical knowledge, over the theoretical knowledge usually favoured by the academy. However, the epistemological framework of action research is inclusive of a range of ways of knowing, the relevance of which will be considered later in this chapter. What is of note here is that knowledge is rooted in the specifics of lived experience and ultimately realised in practical action.

Although no particular methods or tools are essential to the action research process, it is possible to use many traditional quantitative or qualitative techniques depending on the context of the inquiry. What is *de rigueur* is some means of ensuring and facilitating a process of reflection on experience. Both individual forms of reflection and collective methods, involving groups of co-researchers and stakeholders, can be employed.

Action research has become popular in education and management, and has been used widely in other professional fields. However, the paradigm is not without its critics. Brown & Jones (2001) interrogate action research from a poststructuralist perspective and argue that it is often grounded in assumptions about controlling and implementing change that are more problematic than they appear. In assuming an ideal of betterment, it can fail to tackle the complexities involved in the way this comes to be defined, particularly when there are conflicts of interests. This leads them to advocate an approach less concerned with improving situations than with developing different ways of viewing them. They illustrate this with examples of practitioner research in education that is based on reflective writing. Through this writing the researcher is involved in a: “construction of self in relation to the professional/social context being faced.” (Brown & Jones, 2001, p. 8) In other words, it is the action researcher who stands to be changed as much as the situation they are in.

McNiff (2002b) also argues for a strongly reflexive and personally engaged form of action research. In her view what is at issue in the field is not any particular definition of action research *per se*:

What *is* at issue is the form of theory used to describe and explain action research processes, the whole business of whether we regard human inquiry as an objective phenomenon which we observe from a distance or a living process of which we are a part. (J. McNiff, 2002b, pp. 5-6).

Although committed to an improvement-centred form of inquiry McNiff conceives this as a “generative transformational evolutionary process” (2002b, p. 57). Thus, rather than being prescriptive, it may develop in unexpected ways and lead to unintended outcomes. In her guidance on the conduct of action research she illustrates this with the familiar metaphor, drawn from the complexity sciences, of the ‘butterfly effect’ (J. McNiff, 2002a, para. 23).

3.2.2 Emergent exploration of experience

A distinctive form of action research has recently been developed in management education that makes direct use of theories of complex responsive processes, and also methods from the field of group analysis (Stacey, 2001a, 2003). This model involves the ‘emergent exploration of experience’ and has been applied successfully to doctoral and other studies. Although the approach has much in common with other models of action research, it has a number of conceptual differences which are highlighted by Stacey & Griffin (2004). The methodology of emergent exploration seeks to be consistent with the perspective of complex responsive processes by taking a temporal view of how human interaction leads to the emergence of both continuity and discontinuity. It eschews any global assumptions about improvement or emancipation, and does not conceptualise change as involving systems containing separate individuals who ‘co-operate’. Rather, after Mead (1934) and Elias (1991), it sees the individual and the social as two aspects of the same phenomenon: complex processes of human interaction. It is at the level of everyday action, interaction and experience that investigation takes place, through a process that is characterised as “taking experience seriously”. Thus investigation proceeds through a process of recording, narrating, and reflecting on the practitioners lived experience of their work, and critically interpreting this in a manner that is reflexively cognisant of the wider theory, or tradition, being employed.

The model of emergent exploration seeks to avoid a split between theory and practice by seeing both critical understanding and practice as continuously emerging from patterns of social and personal interaction. These emergent forms may become stuck or be subject to rapid transformation, but there is never any guarantee of improvement or possibility of a completely objective or final understanding of social phenomena. While this model has been developed to explore organizational life, it could equally be applied to creative practices that are normally seen as the activity of individuals. No fundamental distinction is drawn between the individual and social level of analysis, so both can be approached in terms of the fundamental dimensions of action and experience. Individual action could be conceptualised dialogically as interaction with others, with specific media or language, and with oneself – all of which lead to emergent patterns of experience and self-experience.

3.2.3 Heuristic research

Among the major themes to emerge from the areas discussed above are the emergent nature of experience and the need for intensive personal involvement in the research process. This implies a form of inquiry that is highly uncertain and emotionally demanding for the researcher-practitioner. There have been previous attempts to develop and characterise qualitative research approaches that emphasise these features. Perhaps most notable among these is the model of heuristic research developed by Moustakas (1990b). This is worthy of examination for the insight it can offer into the conduct and challenges of first-person forms of inquiry.

Heuristic is derived from the Greek *heuretikos*, meaning inventive or to find. It usually refers to methods of discovery but its connotation of creativity is also noteworthy. Within the social sciences a number of approaches have been labelled ‘heuristic’ (e.g. Kleining & Witt, 2000; Tyson, 1995); however, the work of Moustakas is most seminal. Moustakas was among the first to break from an objectivist philosophy and embrace personal experience as a datum in psychological research.

Essentially, in the heuristic process, I am creating a story that portrays the qualities, meanings, and essences of universally unique experiences. Through an unwavering and steady inward gaze and inner freedom to explore and accept *what is*, I am reaching into deeper and deeper regions of a human problem or experience and coming to know and understand its underlying dynamics and constituents more and more fully. The initial “data” is within me; the challenge is to discover and explicate its nature. In the process, I am not only lifting out the essential meanings of an experience, but I am actively awakening and transforming my own self. Self-

understanding and self-growth occur simultaneously in heuristic discovery.
(Moustakas, 1990b, p. 13)

Moustakas' approach is grounded in humanistic conceptions of self-actualisation and development but like Stacey (2001b) he sees the 'inner' worlds of personal experience and the 'outer' worlds of social reality as continuous rather than separated. Coming to know the world and coming to know the self are not seen in opposition but as interdependent processes. For Moustakas the selection of a suitable focus of inquiry requires an intense personal identification. Its subsequent examination involves processes such as self-dialogue, intuition and indwelling, alongside more technical research methods.

The phases of heuristic research outlined by Moustakas are strikingly similar to models that attempt to depict the process of creativity (e.g. Pürto, 2004, p. 41). He lists and amplifies phases of: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication and creative synthesis. He characterizes the process in terms of its uncertainty, "swimming into an unknown current" (1990a, p. 174), its periods of necessary activity and rest, and finally by "the researcher as scientist-artist" developing "an aesthetic-rendition of the themes and essential meanings of the phenomenon" (1990a, p. 187). Thus Moustakas provides a bridge to recent explorations of representation in arts-informed research.

While acknowledging the prescience of Moustakas' formulation of Heuristic research, Sela-Smith (2002) has criticised the failure of many studies to adequately implement it. She conducted a review of 28 studies claiming to follow the approach and found that only 3 met criteria that she thought defined it. In particular, most studies failed to report on the subjective experience of the researcher and, instead of letting the process determine the method, followed procedural rules. There was little evidence of what she described as "surrender" to unknown dimensions of personal experience, but rather a reliance on the experiences of others. This is closer to more formal and distanced phenomenological and grounded theory methods than the first-person approach advocated by Moustakas. Sela-Smith suggests that what she calls a personal "self-search within an experience" has been replaced here by what she interprets as a "phenomenological explication of the definition of an experience" (2002, p. 71). Examining Moustakas' original work on loneliness (Moustakas, 1961), she argues that it is inherently ambiguous and ambivalent about this point. In effect she deems that he

moved too rapidly away from the experience into the *idea* of the experience and then, paradoxically, created a methodological structure for a process that, he had argued, needed to be free of such structure.

A number of explanations for these observations are possible, including the historically determined need to undertake and present scholarly work in a recognised manner and the degree of self-revelation deemed personally acceptable. However, Sela-Smith argues that this failure could also reflect the unacknowledged resistance of Moustakas, and other researchers, to the experience of genuine confusion and intense emotion. There is some support for this contention in recent accounts of narrative research that illustrate how immersion in personal experience can evoke distress and the recall of previously dissociated trauma (Etherington, 2005; West, 2001).

3.2.4 First-person inquiry and personal reflexivity

Central to all the approaches identified here, as action, emergent, or heuristic research, is a profound shift of emphasis from traditional third-person forms of inquiry to the incorporation and development of first-person perspectives. Within some areas this has been characterised as ‘self-study’ (Mitchell, Weber, & O’Reilly-Scanlon, 2005; Tidwell, Fitzgerald, & Heston, 2004). The benefit for this type of research is not restricted to practice-based disciplines, it is also advocated in areas such as consciousness studies (Varela & Shear, 1999) where vital aspects of the phenomena under investigation are only available to introspective awareness.

The focus of first-person inquiry into practice is experience as it arises in the pursuit of that practice. However, making the practitioner-researcher the primary datum of investigation has consequences that third-person research methods normally seek to avoid. For example, it is almost axiomatic that the intention to inquire into one’s own experience is going to alter it. Thus the act of inquiry and the emergence of new or changed experience are inextricably conflated. This means that the inquiry becomes an intrinsic part of any process of personal change, whether this is conceived in terms as self-development, or more neutrally as self-experience. Indeed, there is no a priori reason to assume such changes will necessarily be welcome or in a direction preferred by the researcher.

To undertake research from a first-person perspective clearly demands a very high level of personal reflexivity, not merely to acknowledge the influence of the researcher but to sustain the process of inquiry. A significant danger is that the difficulty of maintaining this could lead to reliance on conventional perspectives that are, in effect, second-hand. This may contribute to understanding but obscure genuine first-person exploration. From a psychodynamic point of view this reflexivity is also profoundly compromised because the experience of the researcher is never completely available to conscious awareness (Meek, 2003). There is also the difficulty of adequately representing lived experience, particularly that of an emotional nature. One approach to exploring and representing lived experience, which could also give better access to conscious and unconscious levels of first-person experience, is through ‘arts-based’ or ‘arts-informed’ methods of research.

3.3 Arts-based research and writing as inquiry

The way in which the creative arts contribute to knowledge is a major theme in the philosophy of art (e.g. Graham, 1997) but has been relatively ignored in social science disciplines that have constructed their research frameworks around more rational and ‘scientific’ modes of knowing. Indeed, within the arts and humanities a divide often arises between creative practice and critical academic understanding, which has tended to make ‘art’ the object of study rather than a vehicle for research. However, the potential for the creative arts to contribute more directly to research is now being systematically explored across a range of subjects. This challenges many traditional expectations about what constitute appropriate methods, data and outcomes of research activity.

Three strands of arts-based or arts-informed research will be delineated here. These distinguish art as a process of *inquiry*, art as a means of *representation*, and art as a form of *research outcome or discourse*.

3.3.1 Artistic inquiry: art-making as a process of inquiry

The use of the process of art-making as a distinctive method of research has been championed by a number of writers, perhaps most notably by those developing their ideas from an arts therapy background (Hervey, 2000; Levine, 2000; S. McNiff, 1998a). The arts therapies have traditionally been concerned as much with the process of art-

making as with the product and its interpretation, although the balance between these is seen as a point of tension for many in the field (e.g. Thompson, 1989). Personal engagement in a process of creation is, however, accepted as a prerequisite of subsequent learning or change.

Within the arts therapies psychoanalytic ideas have had a major influence, both in the way they inform the interpretation of finished work and the understanding they provide of the influence of unconscious processes on creativity. However, recent expressive and integrative trends in the creative therapies have eschewed relying on psychological models in favour of a commitment to the creative process itself as the essential means of inquiry. The slogan of this approach is neatly captured by McNiff's injunction to "trust the process" (1998b). The contention is that the creative arts have their own unique demands and characteristics; these necessitate the temporary suspension of more conceptual and instrumental methods of inquiry in favour of a commitment to the process of art-making itself.

Artistic inquiry has been characterised by Levine as a type of research that rests, following Nietzsche's distinction, on a more Dionysian than Apollonian quality of engagement with experience. He sees this as complimentary to scientific modes of investigation and a means of ultimately combining both logical and imaginative ways of knowing.

To base our research in the arts means to engage the imagination in the forming of our concepts and in the carrying-out of the project itself. Not only may the initial inspiration come in the encounter with an image, but the conduct of research should itself be imaginative. We must have faith that the imagination can inform us, that art is not non-cognitive but that it binds together both feeling and form in a way that can reveal truth. (Levine, 2004, para. 16)

In practical terms, this means actively engaging in art-making, and surrendering to what is compelling or emergent in the creative process rather than pursuing preconceived ends. Although practising an art in this way may constitute a method of inquiry, its essential nature is non-methodological in that it cannot be stipulated procedurally: what is advocated is a full immersion in the creative activity (e.g. Allen, 1995). What is lacking from this process perspective is any clear means of distinguishing research from artistic outcomes. This issue is discussed further in Section 3.3.3.

3.3.2 Artistic representation: art as a means of capturing experience

The use of artistic forms for the representation of experience has developed as part of the growth of qualitative research in the social sciences. One of the problems faced by qualitative methods has been described by Denzin and Lincoln as the “crisis of representation” (2000, p. 16): how to describe or convey social reality or lived experience if the means of doing this is understood to be part of its construction. From this perspective, descriptive language loses its assumed neutrality and alternative forms of representation may have enhanced value and applicability, including forms that are explicitly creative.

One area of qualitative research that lends itself to artistic representation is hermeneutic and phenomenological inquiry. As Van Manen sees it:

Phenomenology asks: “What is this or that kind of experience like?” It differs from almost every other science in that it attempts to gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world pre-reflectively, without taxonomizing, classifying or abstracting it. (Van Manen, 1997, p. 9)

To achieve this Van Manen emphasises the art of writing and rewriting in phenomenological inquiry as a means of reflection and explication but with the ultimate aim “to effect a more direct contact with the experience as lived” (Van Manen, 1997, p. 78). This has inspired others to experiment with a range of creative art forms in addition to prose description. One example of this is the ‘arts based expressive research’ projects reported on by Willis and colleagues (Willis et al., 2000). These illustrate the use of a range of genres, from poetry and painting to cartoons and theatre, to help portray and communicate what certain phenomena are like for the individuals experiencing them. Most contributors emphasise the expressive and presentational nature of this work and see it as complimentary to more analytic forms of inquiry. The criteria for the evaluation and utility of these methods are still evolving but contain some distinguishing features. In general, judgements appears to depend more on the verisimilitude and aesthetic qualities of the finished work than traditional criteria of methodological rigour. Evaluating such research thus makes additional demands on the sensibility of the ‘reader’ or ‘viewer’.

3.3.3 Art forms: art as an outcome of research

The requirement on readers/viewers to engage with an artistic representation of experience on its own terms leads to a third strand of arts-based research, where the

artistic product becomes, in effect, an outcome of the research. There is no absolute dividing line, but the claim for artistic representation or products of inquiry to be ‘read’ and taken seriously as *forms of art* implies a fundamental shift in assumptions. The arts practice is then not merely a method or means of presentation leading towards conventional forms of discursive research knowledge. It becomes, instead, a distinctive form of discourse and knowledge representation in its own right. Although it may be combined with other forms of critical inquiry, the claim would be that it cannot be reduced to them.

This strand of thinking is implicit in the ways some, but not all, arts-based research projects are presented and discussed. Some relevant examples can be found in a book edited by Neilson, Cole and Knowles (2001) on the art of writing inquiry. Some contributors present poems and other forms of creative writing without additional commentary, while others include substantial amounts of amplification and discussion. Another text from the same group (Cole et al., 2004), which examines the theoretical underpinnings of their work, makes similar ‘stand-alone’ use of creative genres.

One of the issues raised by this level of integration of arts based work is the extent to which the work presented is considered ‘art’ in the cultural sense of the word, or its creator an artist. Some researchers are explicit that their use of art is not necessarily the same as that required by the accepted standards and traditions of the artistic discipline employed. For example, Willis (2002) is clear about his own ‘poetic representations’ in phenomenological research. He does not consider these fully crafted poems, nevertheless, he also notes that crafting them is dependent on the same processes as writing poetry, and is exceedingly demanding. For others however the distinction is less clear-cut, particularly where researchers either have or aspire to an artistic identity. For example, in a discussion on this issue, Finley and Knowles conclude that: “Through the process of reflection we each discovered that our personal (artistic) and researcher selves were one and the same self.” (1995, p. 133) In trying to find a balance Pürto (2002) argues that both the artistic discipline and the research purpose need to be respected. A potential way to integrate these dimensions is to see artwork presented in the context of research inquiry as a distinct subgenre, which is related both to established dimensions of aesthetic evaluation, and additional factors stemming from its

role in a research project. This has parallels with many commissioned forms of artwork that have a situated purpose or given rhetorical agenda.

3.3.4 Writing as inquiry

Unlike other mediums, writing is the vehicle for conventional scholarship as well as creative art. As a result, an arts-informed approach to research in creative writing and personal development can usefully recognise that all forms of writing make use of characteristic rhetorical features and stylistic conventions. In a sense all writing is 'creative', with particular genres of creative writing such as fictional-narrative, poetry and drama constituting an artistic or imaginative end of the spectrum, while conventional research and academic writing occupies a more rational or 'scientific' end. For example, where the former makes use of allusion, imagery and connotation, the latter favours explicitness, conceptualisation and clarity of denotation.

Sparkes (2002b) has drawn attention to the range of rhetorical forms of writing now available to academic researchers. It is now commonplace for good research writing to involve the construction of a storyline, but Sparkes illustrates the many forms such "tales" can take, and the way that these intrinsically sustain the claims to knowledge of the writing in question. These range from what he characterises as 'scientific' and 'realist' tales, through to 'autoethnography' and forms of 'poetic' and 'fictional' representation (Bochner & Ellis, 2002). The epistemological significance of these rhetorical forms for the present study will be examined further in the next section. What is important to note here is that it is possible to utilize and craft research writing in different ways to achieve different purposes, and that the forms of writing chosen are intrinsic to the outcomes achieved.

Creative forms of writing have also been advocated as part of the research *process*. Qualitative methods have always made extensive use of field notes, memos and diaries, but increasing concern about reflexivity has led to more self-reflective and imaginative forms of writing. These provide a means of exploring and examining both the research question and the unfolding experience of the researcher. For example, Richardson (2000) encourages those interested in writing as inquiry to attend creative writing classes and to make use of narrative and poetic forms to help develop and extend their investigations. From a similar perspective, Cahmann (2003) discusses the way writing and crafting poems can inform educational research. This use of reflective writing in

research is closely connected to its application in the context of professional education and practice (Bolton, 2001; Winter, Buck, & Sobiechowska, 1999) and as a tool for personal development (Bolton, 1999; Hunt, 2004b).

The overlap in the use of different forms of creative writing for inquiry, to develop practice and for personal development indicates how it can contribute to the emergence and presentation of different forms of knowledge, all based on learning directly from experience. Writing offers a range of potential forms of inquiry and knowledge representation, from those that are artistically informed and imaginatively based to those that are more discursive and rational. To combine these coherently within a single project requires the adoption of a broad but integrated epistemological position.

3.4 Epistemological perspectives

3.4.1 Art and first-person experience

Eisner (1993; 1998) is clear that one of the fundamental justifications for arts-informed qualitative research is epistemological. One of the core assumptions of his position is that: “There are multiple ways in which the world can be known: Artists/writers, and dancers, as well as scientists, have important things to tell about the world.” (Eisner, 1998, p. 7) In order to help embrace this he has made use of the dual concepts of connoisseurship and criticism. He sees connoisseurship as a form of knowing that requires the ability to ‘see’ as opposed merely to ‘look’. It requires an aesthetic sensibility that enables the salient qualities of an experience to be grasped and possibly artistically rendered, whereas criticism requires a process of explication that draws attention to or is ‘about’ those qualities.

It is interesting that today aesthetics is widely equated with beauty and the study of art. As Gross has pointed out this is a long way from the conception of Baumgarten who introduced the term to western philosophy in the 18th century.

Baumgarten did not primarily develop his aesthetics as a philosophy of art. The making and understanding of artworks had served in his original programme only as an example for the application of his philosophy. What he really attempts to present is an alternative philosophy of knowledge that goes beyond the purely rationalist, empiricist, and sensualist approaches. (Gross, 2002, p. 403)

The concern with the aesthetic dimensions of experience and understanding has been taken up by Gadamer who argues that: “Aesthetic experience is not just one experience

among others, but represents the essence of experience *per se*.” (Gadamer, 1993, p. 70) In Gadamer’s hermeneutics it is the shaping of aesthetic experience, both in everyday and artistic forms, which leads to personal knowledge and understanding. This is not an objective or neutral form of knowledge but is vital to the development of deeper understanding of oneself and others. This form of aesthetic knowing can be viewed as complimentary to scientific modes of gaining knowledge *about* the world.

The argument that one of the fundamental purposes of art is to represent and shape aesthetic experience is also found in Dewey and has been explored by Gerwen (1996), who argues that its achievement is dependent on first-person acquaintance; a third-person account of art is always incomplete and cannot substitute for a direct experience of it. Thus, the kind of knowledge generated by art is of a kind that can only be adequately conveyed through first-person experience. Art mediates between the first-person of the artist and the second-person of the ‘viewer’ through the latter’s own first-person experience. The nature of the understanding involved is thus distinctively rooted in direct experience, and cannot be completely reduced (or raised) to a detached third-person formulation.

This quality of artistic forms of knowing has been described as ‘presentational’ by Langer (1957), in contrast to the ‘propositional’ forms of knowledge that characterise detached and rational modes of understanding. While the latter involves making explicit statements about the world that may be established as true or false, the presentational form makes use of implicit and symbolic means of representing experience, particularly of an emotional kind. The truth of these forms cannot be established logically, but for many a quality of truth is discernable in art that may sometimes have vital significance. In fact the relationship between poetry and truth has been a particularly important theme for many writers (e.g. Martin, 1975). However, the difficulty of reconciling conceptual and aesthetic forms of truth can be traced at least as far as Plato’s banishment of poets from his rationally conceived republic (Dorter, 1990).

3.4.2 An epistemological framework

The distinction between ‘presentational’ and ‘propositional’ forms of knowing provides a basis for encompassing both creative and critical forms of inquiry into a common research enterprise. However, this is more applicable to the outcomes of such an inquiry than the process of inquiry itself. Research leading to presentational or creative

forms is inherently one that draws on a first-person perspective and, if an artistic discipline is involved, is also a form of creative practice. An approach that can encompass these dimensions needs to include the way understanding develops from a first-person perspective, and the way it is reflected in the practice of the discipline involved. The epistemological framework proposed by Heron and Reason (1997) effectively incorporates these dimensions by including both personal and practical forms of knowing, as well as the presentational and propositional dimensions. While they prioritise practical knowing or *praxis*, all four forms of knowing can be seen as legitimate and necessary elements of a critical inquiry based on a creative activity. This is summarised in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 Four forms of knowing⁷

| | <i>Source:</i> | <i>Quality:</i> | <i>Shorthand:</i> | <i>Subject position:</i> |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Experiential</i> | Personal lived experience | Tacit | Know not what you know | First-person |
| <i>Presentational</i> | Aesthetic shaping & representation | Implicit | Know that | First to second person |
| <i>Propositional</i> | Conceptual formulation | Explicit | Know about | Third-person |
| <i>Practical</i> | Action in the world | Practical skill | Know how | Embodied in action |

The idea of a personal or tacit form of knowing was articulated by Polanyi (1958) in opposition to the common assumption that the conduct of science is purely rational and methodological. He argued that the tacit dimension of experience represented a form of knowing that couldn't easily be put into words and that developed out of the lived experience of each individual. It is reflected in the fact that people cannot always give an account of what they know, but that a direct experience of knowing nevertheless informs and emerges from their interaction with the world. Thus presentational and

⁷ Developed from Heron and Reason (1997).

propositional forms of knowing, and by extension art and science, arise from and are underpinned by what is largely an unconscious form of first-person knowing. Practical knowing is also dependent on this, but may incorporate or use more conscious or explicit forms of knowing in the development of sophisticated skills. The learning of a complex skill can involve presentational and propositional steps that later become superfluous to the ultimate mastery and execution of the skill as an embodied action.

The framework presented in Table 3.2 locates and integrates knowledge arising from lived experience, aesthetic forms of knowing, and knowledge connected to practice, with the critical forms of knowledge usually associated with academic research. A key distinction is that personal and practical knowledge are embodied in individuals, whereas presentational and propositional forms of knowing can be embodied in language or other symbolic forms. However, whereas creative presentational forms may be used to capture some of the complexity and richness of first-person experience, propositional forms require greater abstraction from that experience to elucidate aspects of it in more impersonal and theoretical terms. The framework also provides a means of mapping the overlap of subjective and objective epistemologies. Experiential personal knowledge could be characterised as the most subjective, while propositional forms are, at least potentially, the most objective and impersonal. Presentational and practical forms of knowing are intermediate in different ways. The presentational form effectively moves towards an objectification of the subjective, that is, to a form of *objective-subjectivity*. On the other hand, the practical form, while existing objectively in performative action, is embodied in individual subjects, and could thus be characterised as a form of *subjective-objectivity*. Although this does not necessarily resolve competing claims to knowledge, it does provide a means of differentiating them while also recognising their fundamental interrelationship. Forms of knowing may thus be more easily judged on their own terms *and* linked together in a mutually enriching way.

3.5 An Integrated Model of Inquiry

3.5.1 Research method and questions

The present investigation has been informed by the practice-based and arts-informed approaches to research reviewed earlier in this chapter as well as the epistemological

framework outlined above. To fulfil its aim of investigating the way that writing poetry can impact on the self-experience of the writer it has adopted an approach that combines a first-person practice-based investigation or *self-study*, with a *theoretical explication* that is reflexively grounded in the process and outcome of that study. The main components of the method employed are outlined below:

1. *Writing poetry* – a sustained personal attempt to engage with the writing of poetry and the development of that writing over an extended period.
2. *Reflection on experience* – a concurrent reflection on the experience of writing with a reflexive focus on its relation to my self-experience.
3. *Theoretical formulation* – an attempt to explicate key aspects of my experience in terms of the integration and development of relevant theoretical perspectives.

The investigation is rooted in a creative arts practice, the writing of poetry, and my attempt to undertake that practice. I took as my starting point a wish to both write and improve my writing of poetry, and to use that writing as a basis of investigation into its influence on my self-experience. Thus, the intention is to treat seriously both a creative aim and a critical or investigatory one. The process and experience of writing are simultaneously part of a personal creative practice and the objects of a critically reflective and theoretically informed study.

To help focus the conduct of the investigation and achievement of the study aims four guiding research questions were formulated. These are presented in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3 Research questions

Question 1: What is my experience of undertaking an extended personal experiment with writing poetry?

Question 2: Is there anything significant or relevant to self-experience reflected in the poetry written?

Question 3: What are the key relationships found between self-experience and the writing of poetry?

Question 4: How can any relationships found between self-experience and writing of poetry be formulated theoretically?

Adopting any research approach inevitably brings certain benefits but also associated problems and limitations (McGrath, 1982). Some of the advantages of the chosen approach are highlighted below, followed by discussion of some of the pitfalls that could be anticipated and how these were approached in the design and conduct of the study.

3.5.2 Advantages of the method of inquiry

The potential benefits of a combined creative and critical form of first-person inquiry include the following:

- The construction of a specific, rich and authoritative account of a personal creative process and its relation to self-experience, including creative representations of that experience.
- The capacity to follow an individual inquiry in detail over an extended period enables continuities and discontinuities in patterns of experience to emerge more clearly.
- Following a creative practice allows for the emergence of the unanticipated and provides a practical means of interrogating assumptions and preconceptions.
- The combination of creative and critical approaches provides for an original and experientially grounded basis for the development of theory. It also enables this to be tested and refined through further experience and the experience of others.

Against these a number of difficulties were anticipated which required careful consideration.

3.5.3 The danger of falling between stools

Put bluntly, this refers to the possibility that the inquiry could lead to neither good poetry nor good research/scholarship. The quality of the 'art' in arts-informed research has already been discussed and the complexity of evaluating the contribution to knowledge of a study that explicitly attempts to encompass different forms of knowing is self-evident. However, many authors have proposed standards of evaluation for arts-informed research (e.g. Eisner, 2003; Hervey, 2000) and research involving self-study or autoethnography (e.g. Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Richardson, 2000). These include aesthetic considerations, rhetorical persuasiveness, coherence, trustworthiness, generativity and the demonstration of critical reflexivity. Others, such as Garratt & Hodgkinson (1998) have argued that it is pointless to specify any definitive set of criteria for qualitative research. To some extent any study that combines approaches will need to be judged on the effectiveness of this integration and its success in achieving its stated aims. However, maximizing standards in all areas seems a prudent way to support this.

In the present study the writing of poetry has been actively supported by regular writing workshops, tutorials, attendance at poetry readings, and independent study. The aim has been to develop a greater poetic sensibility and some degree of poetic craft, informed by the prevailing standards of contemporary poetry. However, the poetry written during the study was not primarily intended to make a contribution to the genre, as in doctorates taken *by* creative writing, but to underpin the investigation into the personal experience of writing. Reflection on the process and experience of writing poetry involved the use of other methods of writing as inquiry, for example maintaining a personal journal and making extensive research notes. Reflection was also facilitated through regular supervision. The copious material generated provided a source of reference for the critical analysis and was the basis for identifying and interrogating relevant theoretical material.

3.5.4 The danger of confounding processes

Although there was a clear intention to combine creative and critical modes of investigation, it became immediately clear in practice that this was not straightforward

and that critical reflection could conflict with creative activity.⁸ This is a commonplace observation in primers on creativity and the advice is usually to suspend or postpone critical judgement. On the other hand, it is possible for critical scrutiny to be avoided in favour of maintaining a satisfying creative activity, or through fear of diminishing the perceived value of a creative product in which much has been invested. This is a product-investigation or creative-critical tension which many arts-based researchers comment on (Wilson, 2002).

The approach adopted in this study is to try and maintain an integrated and flexible perspective by framing the whole of the study in terms of the guiding research questions. In other words both the creative and reflective writing, as well as the critical analysis, are held together by a constant returning to the research questions as common points of origin and towards which an integrated creative outcome is sought. This is consistent with the model for creative arts doctorates proposed by Milech and Schilo (2004) who observed how those completing such doctorates can struggle to write an effective exegesis to their creative work. This can prove critically inadequate if it is merely a post hoc commentary on the creative product.

3.5.5 The danger of self-indulgence and lack of relevance

One of the dilemmas of those engaging in first-person inquiries is how to avoid the research either becoming, or sounding, excessively self-referencing and self-indulgent (Sparkes, 2002a; 2002b, pp. 88-94). There is also the related problem of achieving outcomes that are not just personally meaningful but have wider relevance to the development of understanding. Taken together these constitute what have been described as ‘solipsistic risks’ (Piantanida, Garman, & McMahon, 2000, pp. 101-108). Although these issues can be tainted by prejudices stemming from more traditional conceptions of research, they present potential problems that must be addressed.

Cole and Knowles (1996) advocate a focus on specific research questions in self-study projects to help focus personal and autobiographical writing effectively. This supports the plan of the present study. In addition the discipline of making personal inquiries public can be an important means of shaping the creative and reflective elements into an effective and research conscious form. This was built into both the creative and critical

⁸ See account in Chapter 4.

element of the study through open workshops and supervision. Although relevance cannot be guaranteed, it can be sought by systematic efforts to link the personal to a wider theoretical level. The epistemological framework and design of the present study explicitly sets out to do this. This cannot ensure the generalisability of findings but this is not necessarily an appropriate aim for qualitative research methods (e.g. Marecek, 2003). However, as Eisner (2003) argues, important forms of generalisation can and do stem from qualitative study of the individual case. With such research the general may be found in the particular leading to a more “naturalistic” as opposed to statistical form of generalisation. For example, the research may lead to insights or theoretical connections that have wider applicability, or highlight specific points that, as a result, become more widely recognizable.

3.5.6 The danger of encountering or avoiding personal difficulties

Although there are potential benefits from relying on creative and emergent process of investigation, this introduces a level of uncertainty that can be difficult to manage given the need for demonstrable outcomes. Quite significant personal challenges might ensue for the researcher as previously discussed with regard to heuristic research (see also Ellis & Bochner, 2000). This raises ethical issues that parallel the normal requirement for research participants to give informed consent about participation and withdrawal from research studies, and about the use of their material. There is also a possibility that such difficulties will be avoided, which might compromise the conduct of the study.

My own position is that I entered the study with a well-established professional background in clinical psychology and psychotherapy and thus felt familiar with the challenges of both self-reflection and the boundaries of self-disclosure. I was hoping to learn and benefit from the investigation at a personal as well as academic level and was therefore prepared to enter challenging territory if required. In addition to supervision, I had both formal and informal support available and was willing, in principle, to present and reflect on my experience openly. However, I was not interested in self-revelation for revelation’s sake and was clear that I would only report what was relevant to the emerging themes of the study.

Part II

First-Person Investigation

Note on structure and chronology

The autobiographical narrative of experience presented in Chapter 4 was written at the end of 2005 following a review of my personal journal and other notes made during the first four years of the study.⁹ The poems presented in Chapter 5 were all written during this period and consist of work selected for public reading in 2005. Following this it was necessary for me to take an intermission of one year from the study because of increased work commitments. The narrative account and poems are presented in the form that they were written or read in 2005 as unmodified 'outcomes' of this initial phase of the investigation.

The analysis of the narrative account presented in Chapter 6 was completed at the beginning of 2007 together with the commentary at the end of Chapter 5. These sections have been edited for length and clarity, but without change to the substantive content of the original analysis that structured the theoretical examination presented in Part III.

⁹ The study commenced in October 2001.

4 Mouthing Words: A Narrative

A November mist shrouded the Lyn Peninsula. The view inland towards Snowdonia was obscured and to sea the vista was a uniform grey. My feet had become wet and cold as I picked my way awkwardly around the rocky promontory at Criceth. I took my time. I was in no hurry to get back and a fall could easily cost me a twisted ankle or grazed arm. I remembered those times I had returned home as a child with yet another flap torn open across the knee of my school trousers. That look of anguish in my mothers face – more running repairs. Couldn't I be more careful in the playground? And here I was skiving lessons again – well, actually for the first time in a long time. The writing week at Ty Newydd¹⁰ was almost at an end and while the others had gathered for a final workshop, I had made my excuses and fled. Unfortunately, I had taken my mood with me. Six days worth of accumulated frustration.

Poetry, so it seemed, was not about to bend to my will. My research plan had not allowed for this. I had attended poetry workshops before but the goalposts had been mysteriously moved. Maybe it was the high level of the participants or the focus on close reading and revision that was the problem. Gillian Clarke and Michael Longley were both poets I admired, and facilitators of great sensitivity, but the focus was on accomplishment and I felt grimly alienated from it. The poems that I had brought with me seemed dry as dust. Like archaeological remains to be picked over:

*It stills my heart to find you here again
within the soil and fossil faeces spread,
a broken record built from your remains
to reconstruct our life beyond the dead.*¹¹

I read them to the group with my eyes cast down. I noted the suggestions for revisions but felt no desire to return to the lines, not now, not ever again. As for writing anything new, well my hand, heart and head seemed equally petrified. I was sure blood would come from this stone far more easily than poetry.

¹⁰ The national writers centre for Wales.

¹¹ From *Neanderthal Man*, see Appendix I.

And so it proved. Maybe it had never been easy but the difficulty was just less obvious. The earliest adolescent poem that I still have a hand-written copy of certainly seemed to be howling:

*Thought in conflict with emotion
Leads me to confusion.
Is it poetry or words?
Love or desire?
Am I thinking when
My feelings take control?*¹²

The difference was that then, and on and off over the years, I had written without much personal expectation or deliberation. The occasional poems I produced arose in response to an intense or heightened state of my own feelings or more recently, in immediate response to an imaginative exercise set as part of work in a writing group. Now, a couple of months into my DPhil programme, I had clearly entered new terrain. I had a mission. I even had some research questions. But I was stuck.

It hadn't occurred to me that reflexively exploring the way that writing poetry related to my self-experience could lead me so abruptly to a problem with writing my own poetry. It was as if I had set out on a carefully planned adventure and immediately walked into an ambush. The consequences were not pleasant: a circulating brew of confusion, self-flagellation, and a simple but shameful sense of inadequacy. I was committed to exploring my lived experience of writing poetry and unfortunately this was it. Not all the time of course. There was plenty of room for distraction; what with a full-time job split across clinical psychology education and therapeutic practice, the throes of two children readying to leave the nest, and the unending demands of everyday life – I could certainly still keep myself occupied. Underneath, however, the doubts were simmering. What is it that I am struggling with? What's making this so difficult? Even – trust a psychotherapist to think it – what's wrong with me?

The pattern for the ensuing year rapidly unfolded. Repeated forays into the struggle of composition, drafts, half-drafts and fragments formed and then usually abandoned; each attempt running into an impasse. The feeling was that what I wrote went 'dead' on the page almost before the ink was dry. Just enough produced to take along to the

¹² From: *Am I Thinking*, see Appendix II.

workshop at the university and the local poetry society group that I attended. Not enough to bring any satisfaction or sense of progress; only too aware that my lines tended towards prose, lacked surprise, didn't quite find a cadence. The groups patiently focussed on the poems and I realised I was learning something about poetry – or at least what it was not – but what was I learning about myself?

I was writing regularly and copiously in a reflective journal about my experience. Indeed this writing came refreshingly easily after my hesitant attempts with verse. The journal became a private place to moan, to question, to theorize, to dissect. It had a certain energy that my approach to poetry clearly lacked. It represented the private world of my own experience as against the attempt to shape a public form in poetry. Indeed the attempt to write poetry seemed to be 'on show' to myself in a debilitating way. It was as if by paying deliberate attention to my walking I kept falling over. The more self-conscious I became about my writing the less satisfactory it seemed.

I found I was responding to this difficulty in a number of ways. On the one hand I was intensifying my study of poetry. It was as if I reasoned that the lack was at least in part technical, or perhaps reflected a lack of a proper immersion in the traditions and forms of poetry. After all I had dropped any formal study of English many years ago, after O' levels, in favour of mathematics and science subjects. Psychology, apart from those areas of psychoanalysis concerned with the arts, had not really brought me back any closer to the world of literature. Perhaps what I needed was a deeper appreciation of poetry, its history and traditions, its forms and principles. I began to read more poetry and more about poetry. A small library of books spread on my shelves in response to this impulse. At the same time I started questioning my motives and realised that in some way I had been attracted to this whole study by a desire to develop an identity as a poet. Although I had been content to write occasional poetry largely for my own consumption one of the opportunities I saw in the doctorate was to apprentice myself more seriously as a poet. It was a profound disappointment to find that this was not working out as I had hoped.

* * * * *

In support of my research I had agreed to undertake a couple of significant writing projects. One of these involved co-authoring a book on the processes underpinning

change in psychodynamic therapy. The other, arising as an integral part of the study, was a chapter for a book on psychoanalysis and poetry. As I moved into these projects I found that the space for writing poetry contracted even further. It wasn't just time that was squeezed – although I was getting up very early each day in a routine necessary to meet the publishers deadlines – but somehow my thinking became increasingly set in an expository prose format. My mind seemed set in pursuit of achieving maximum clarity as I wrestled with the complexities and subtleties of my themes. When I turned back to poetry it was as if more of the same wanted to emerge: a logical progression of ideas, systematic connections and selective illustrations, a general commitment to be informative and to try and make sense. An approach that seemed firmly rooted at a conceptual level. Even when I was writing directly about poetry I found my own attempts to actually write poems was stymied by this 'mental set'. I was trapped in 'telling', the cardinal sin of creative writing, but knowing this was not enough to shift out of it. My trickle of poetry writing turned into a series of spasmodic drips.

I found it interesting at this time to talk with others who were undertaking doctorates by creative writing. Almost without exception they postponed the discursive elements of their writing until after the creative components had been completed. Many described to me a similar difficulty in combining creative forms of writing, particularly poetry, with the demands of writing more expository prose. People talked of 'interference' or the need for a different kind of mood. Apparently the capacity to move between different genres of writing was not a straightforward matter. At least I was not alone in experiencing this.

I became familiar with an uncomfortable feeling of emptiness. I was disciplined enough to keep forcing myself to attempt to write poetry and thus found myself repeatedly sitting, sometimes for quite long periods, in front of a blank sheet of paper or an open 'Word' document. Unfortunately nothing seemed to be there, and of course there was nothing there – on paper or the screen. What I couldn't quite understand was why nothing seemed to be over *here* either, in 'me' so to speak. Hadn't I had a rich enough life experience? Surely something had happened to me that I could write about? Surely there were significant experiences or feelings that I could shape into words? Why had I suddenly turned into this blank slate? I tried numerous treatments for this ailment: free-writing; writing exercises culled from books on creative writing, practice in the use of

different forms and imitations of poems I liked. From these, sometimes, a little would gradually emerge. However, the free-writing usually took me away into a reflective bout of journal writing, while the other exercises felt true to their name, they felt primarily like exercises. What emerged might look a bit like a poem but didn't feel it had any significance or resonance for me. I soon lost interest in these efforts and frequently binned them despondently as simply 'practice'.

I couldn't really understand why I didn't have more to express. Somehow my feelings and experiences felt superficial when it came to shaping them into words. I could write *about* them endlessly, chewing over my frustration about not writing poetry became an almost compulsive habit. Then this too became boringly repetitive. I was tired of naval-gazing, sick of my self-obsession but couldn't find a way out.

In fact it wasn't that I made a deliberate decision to ease up on this effort. It felt rather that another impulse entered in. Faced with a blank sheet I felt the urge to pick up a soft pencil or coloured pen and *draw* something instead; nothing spectacular, more a simple process of building up a doodle on the page. It was an immediate relief. I let myself indulge as if I had been let out of school at the end of a long exam term into a huge field of wonderful wild flowers. I could do what I wanted. Make a mark here; draw a big sweeping curve there. It rapidly got a grip of me. I bought a variety of pads of paper; some water-paints; pastels, eventually even a desk easel. I still haven't used the easel but I couldn't resist it – it just screamed BUY ME! I couldn't relax until I had purchased it. But in fact it ended up on the top of the wardrobe while I kneeled on the floor with my biggest sheets of paper. Somehow I needed to satisfy the desire to have it, even though I didn't actually use it – at least not yet. There seemed no need to get that serious too soon.

My drawing remained unstructured and although I dipped into a few books on art I soon put them down and continued with my own spontaneous productions. Then this impulsive condition started to mutate and spread. It felt like a mild physical contagion. I felt a restless energy to 'muck around' in other expressive art forms. Two areas in particular captured my imagination, sound and movement.

* * * * *

I resigned from the school choir when I was eleven. On the surface I gave in my notice voluntarily, although in hindsight it is clear that I was given the push. After all I was caught red-handed. Our music teacher and conductor was a serious, bespectacled man who never wasted words. One day he stalked around the room in his crumpled dark suit and homed in on two of us, first me and then another boy. I can still feel my anxiety rising as he stopped in front of me and then, with great deliberation, bent his head to one side and stooped forward lowering his ear inches in front of my mouth. I hadn't even been aware of it but as soon as he did so the awful truth hit me – I was mouthing the words but no sound was coming out. He said nothing. I said nothing. At the end of the lesson I approached him and said I thought I should drop out of the choir. He nodded and I never returned. I never returned to any choir. I never got on with any musical instrument beyond air guitar. I was a musical non-starter.

The need to make some sort of music suddenly now became urgent. A few years previously I had experimented with a course on overtone chanting – it seemed ideal for me, you make a fundamental groaning noise and shape your mouth to produce bell-like overtone sounds. You don't need to hit a single note, in fact you can't pitch the overtones, they rather magically appear all by themselves. Doing it in a group sounds a bit like travelling by underground with a choir of angels – there is a modulating peel of high-pitched ethereal sounds coming and going against a heavy baseline rumble. I had only experimented with it occasionally before but now I found myself beginning to let rip. The family raised their eyebrows but soon learnt to ignore the sounds coming from my study. What they couldn't ignore quite so easily was my decision to buy a piano. I didn't play the piano but my son played the keyboard and guitar and was doing music at A' level, so I had the perfect excuse. I taught myself some of the basic principles, but what I really wanted to do was just enjoy creating my own improvised patterns and rhythms of sound, without concern for playing any recognizable melodies. I experienced this as totally absorbing and very physical. There was no time for pre-meditation, the fingers just had to move from key to key in response to what seemed called for, what simply wanted to occur next or perhaps happened to occur by chance. It was a matter of luck whether what emerged sounded at all musical, but it almost always felt as if it embodied something for me and in the process of this free-playing I could usually feel my body relax, and my concentration alter, moving away from any thought about what I was doing towards an immersion in the sound that was emerging.

The bodily experience of making sound was also reflected in a desire to experiment with spontaneous physical movement. I have always pursued activities such as running and swimming and had also spent some time learning some basic forms in Tai Chi. The repetitive discipline of all these activities gave way to a desire to feel movement more fully, to try and move in response to inner feeling in a manner that was nearer to some form of improvised dance than any sport or martial art. I had previously read a little about the Alexander technique and found myself seeking ways to tune into my body more, to become aware of what I was *doing* at a physical level from moment to moment. All this was pursued rather unsystematically, there was just a desire to try things out, to play an evocative piece of music and move to it, to take note of how my body felt when I was sitting in a meeting at work, or walking from A to B. To get in touch with something that represented a more vital and cellular level of my own being, that took shape in the form of my movements, postures and gestures.

This whole pattern of activity – drawing, sounding and moving in more spontaneous and improvised ways – seemed both connected and disconnected from the central aims of my research. In some respects it took me away from my efforts to write poetry, but at another level I had the sense that it was a continuous part of the process that had begun with my efforts to write. I continued with my reflective journal and tried to link up the activities that I had been drawn to with my research aims, but while I was actually engaged in these almost compulsive activities I gave little or no thought to what they meant. I simply allowed myself to follow the impulses that arose. I did not question where they might be leading to or establish any regimen to follow.

* * * * *

This pattern continued into the second year of the research programme during which time the work on both the book and chapter I was writing proceeded well. The study that I did for these helped me to formulate and clarify in my own mind some of the complexities of the way poetry might be understood to relate to conscious and unconscious psychological processes, particularly in relation to psychological change. Interestingly where I had most difficulty was in writing a chapter on creativity. Here I found myself struggling to integrate ideas about personal and artistic creativity. It was as if this touched on a question that for me was still not resolved – did art require a special kind of creativity and was my continued difficulty with poetry an indication of

an absence of the necessary ability, or was it reflective of some other kind of more personal obstacle? Put more bluntly was my difficulty reflective of a lack of competency or some form of pathological block?

It struck me that my whole approach to writing poetry over the first eighteen months of my research had rested on some implicit and unquestioned assumptions about what such writing should involve, if it were related to personal development. I came to see this as the 'inner world into words' or 'symbolic expression' model. However naive it might appear when I thought about it, I sensed that the way I approached writing was to search for some area of experience or feeling 'inside' me that I might be able to describe or articulate in poetry. It was as if I imagined an inner location where I had a store of accumulated personal experience that I could then try and externalise or express in poetic form. The problem was the more I looked the less I seemed to be able to locate any such fixed form of inner experience. Rather everything was more or less in flux. Influenced by psychodynamic ideas I had also imagined that once I had successfully articulated my inner world in a poetic form this would be open to symbolic interpretation. I would then be able to learn about myself by interpreting my poems in a manner not dissimilar to the analytic interpretation of dreams. Of course, the problem might be that this inner world was unconscious but somehow this way of thinking about it didn't seem to help the process of writing poetry. I continued to get stuck or produce work that I felt had little or no personal meaning.

I was aware of a continued feeling of shame and inadequacy at my lack of poetic productivity. I attended poetry readings that provoked my envy, not so much of the quality of the poetry, but of the simple fact that the poems had been written at all. When my prose writing projects were finally complete I sat back and realised that I would have no more excuses for not producing some more poetry of my own, and that if I could not do this then a radical re-think of my whole program of research might be required. I was coming to a point of make-or-break. An early summer holiday provided the opportunity to relax and take stock with the aid of a small collection of books that I took with me. Among these were some of the writings of William Stafford. His description of the process of writing poetry seemed so natural and compelling, so free of the mystification or technically based accounts of some other poets I had read. I sat back in the mild early season Aegean sunshine and warmed to his account of rising

daily at dawn to write poetry as a ritual and pleasure, not as a chore or with excessive concern about any form of achievement. In fact when Stafford was interviewed about how he felt others might achieve his productivity and apparent ease in writing he famously replied that this would require their willingness to “lower their standards” (Stafford, 1978, p. 118). I read and reread this as if I was gradually unpicking a tightly sewn straightjacket that I had been wearing without even being aware of it. What standards was I trying to live up to? The standards of an accomplished poet? My imagined standards for writing something with psychological significance? I felt ready to resign from the choir all over again but this time I felt I wanted to join another one. I wanted to find a way of writing my own poetry free of unnecessary assumptions and burdens.

Soon after my return home I was away again, this time on a week’s course in poetry therapy, the first of its kind in the UK, run by Cheri Chavis an experienced poetry therapist from America. The week was great fun and included a lot of practical exercises. Here the concern was essentially with personal change and development through the stimulus of poetry and literature, including creative writing. What was absent was any real concern with the quality of the writing itself. It was a long way from the writing groups that I attended and this helped me see more clearly that the context of each type of group created a particular culture of expectation and evaluation. In the writing workshops the focus was on the poem, and specifically on how it might be improved; on the course the focus was on the personal meanings and responses to what was written irrespective of craft. There was hardly any overlap or integration of these concerns in either context and yet it was just this meeting point, between the attempt to write poetry *and* personal experience, which was my chosen focus of interest. I sensed that I had not been clear enough about my own agenda but had been trying to swing between some unquestioned assumptions about what counted as poetry and personal development all along, a problem no doubt reinforced by the distinct concerns of the different groups from whom I most frequently sought support and recognition.

The temperature crept up as the summer progressed and I resolved to continue to rise early but now, like Stafford, I would try to enjoy the cool early hours of the day not writing book chapters but spinning out whatever poetry I could. Up to this point my journal writing had been extensive but for the first time it began to diminish in favour of

trying to find a poetic form for whatever was arising for me. At first the process was fragmentary then I hit on the idea of ‘free-lining’ – free-writing in the way proposed by many creative writers but with the added requirement that I lay it out in lines. No effort to stop and think or to look inside for some experience to express. Just words on the page, one line after another, without too much concern with punctuation or sense: in other words, in some form of verse. I was faintly embarrassed with what immediately began to emerge. The creation of line-endings immediately provoked a reaching out for clanging rhymes and simple rhythms to take the momentum forward. For example:

*my body aches
my eyes are shut
I feel discomfort
in my gut
I want to lie
my body down
until its lying
on the ground
then let sweet peace
sliding creep
as I drift back
off to sleep*

I ignored the fact that even casual readers of the Poetry Review would spurn this as doggerel and just let the writing find its own way. To start with I would often write but not bother to save this unless I felt something meaningful had emerged. Then I fell into the pattern of accepting it all; letting it stand as it first emerged in the hope that I might discover in it the seeds of something nearer to poetry.

Gradually this writing built up its own momentum. For a short period, on almost a daily basis, I would produce another free-lined ‘poem’ as part of my journal writing routine. On the whole I did not return to what I had written and make any serious attempts at revision, I just moved forward trying to put down whatever arose in the moment. In this I noticed a difference from how I had been approaching my writing when I had felt stuck. Then I had tended to look for something to express, to search for an experience or a feeling to somehow externalise and explore in poetry. Now I was simply and directly attentive to my body – noting how my body felt rather than trying to formulate how I felt – following the sensations that were arising, such as heaviness behind the eyes or subtle fluttering in my chest. Then, at some point, I would find myself following the words that came to mind. Initially I would simply write whatever arose

but as time went on I seemed to be tuning in to both the words and what they stirred in me. A phrase would bring a slight sense of excitement and I would go with it, another might feel mechanical and elicit no response, so I would hesitate and seek something else. This did not feel like a process of editorial or critical censorship; any response to the words, whether experienced positively or negatively, was taken as a cue to continue. It was only the absence of response that might lead me to wait a little longer before writing the next line down.

All that I wrote felt raw and uncrafted but I had the sense that something was happening in at least some of this writing that had not happened before. I did not try to analyse or reflect too much on what this was, although I was aware that themes of stifled communication, anxiety and sorrow were tentatively emerging and I certainly felt that the writing was in some way quite personal. As such it also seemed to be potentially revealing – both of my undeveloped poetic sensibility and of a more emotionally vulnerable aspect of myself.

*So in the morning I grieve
line after line in the simplest of fashions
lowering the drawbridge
and penetrating the thickened walls
through an open wound
gashed beneath the watchtower.*

*I look up and see no one there,
they are lying down
exhausted by years of vigilance,
responding to my call
and finally
handing over keys*

*that turn slowly
crack after crack within the lock
to steal into the palace
kept safe from penetration
protected from view
and the presence of witnesses.*

*Each step is a word
written to take me a fraction further
toward the residue
the accumulated remains
that form
the riches of sorrow.*

My main concern throughout this period was with writing, not what this writing might mean or reveal. So on the whole I did not re-read what I had previously written, even if it had engaged me emotionally, but pressed on to something new each day.

* * * * *

The start of the third year of my programme commenced with a scheduled meeting with my supervisor, Celia Hunt, to review progress over the summer and to plan the year ahead. When the day for our meeting came I found myself anxiously wondering what I had achieved over the summer. Unlike the first eighteen months when I had made tangible progress with chapters for publication, I had nothing even in a draft stage to show. I had been reading widely but in a variety of different directions, it would be difficult to identify exactly what I had been focussed on and exactly where I was going. Uncomfortable at the thought of arriving empty-handed for supervision it occurred to me that I could print out my latest ‘free-lining’ and seek Celia’s feedback on this. This seemed to be at the heart of what I had doing but it suddenly felt like I was about to take an unanticipated and risky step. This writing had always felt private and without any audience in mind. It felt closer to my personal reflective journal than drafts of poetry and I didn’t even really know what the writing contained. I hadn’t returned to it or edited it. The thought of Celia reading it filled me with a mild sense of dread, perhaps this would finally confirm that I had no poetic ability; perhaps it could reveal the worst or least acceptable aspects of myself. It felt as if I was at a boundary, it was a ‘now or never’ moment and the lack of time to deliberate may have helped to swing the decision. I pressed the print key and quickly gathered up the sheet of papers that spewed out into the printer tray. I was already running late so there was nothing for it but to leave for the meeting. I set off with a sense of resolve and the collection of printed sheets still unread in my hand.¹³

I took pains to explain the nature and context of this writing when I handed it to Celia, and felt pleased that she seemed genuinely interested in reading it and hearing about the experience of writing that I described. However, after I left the meeting I felt a sense of increasing detachment and remoteness that is difficult to adequately describe. Over the

¹³ See Appendix III.

weekend that immediately followed I went with some friends for a sailing trip on the Solent and my mood throughout the weekend felt strangely isolated, despite my being enclosed in a small yacht with five other people. We sailed into the night watching the pinpricks of light scattered along the coastline and the diffuse outline of other vessels making their way through the carefully marked channels. The experienced sailors in the group poured over charts and chatted as they monitored the radio but I felt most at home not moving at all, just sitting alone on the prow sensing everything flowing around me, earth, air and water intermingling in the night. There seemed a deep unfathomable sadness but not something I could articulate or that anyone else apparently noticed.

On my return my sense of detachment deepened further. I found myself going through the motions at work adequately but when external demands ceased I quite literally rolled to a gradual halt. It was as if there was no internal drive operating, only a system that could still respond to what impinged from outside but when that ceased would lose all momentum. I was unable to muster the energy or motivation to engage in any self-directed activity and would just sit in my study chair staring into space and often falling asleep. My mind was not filled with negative thoughts but it did feel, at the risk of sounding over-dramatic, that some part of me had either died or been anaesthetised. My feelings were a complex mixture of a peculiarly detached sense of calm and a profound but subtle sense of suffering, nearest in quality to an impersonal kind of grief or sense of dread. However, I did not feel entirely identified with these distressing feelings, they were just quietly present and remained unattached to any particular thought or event. What was most bewildering was my lack of any capacity to initiate anything and my overwhelming physical sense of being brought to a complete halt.

This state persisted over a number of weeks and I began to become a little concerned about whether or not it would lift or move on. I began to wonder whether I would need to consult someone about it. However, my instinct was to simply stay with it. I seemed quite able to respond normally to others and could complete tasks when the situation demanded it. I was still able to go to work and function OK. It was just that there seemed nothing beyond that. Nothing in me running the show anymore, just an awareness of this state of being. Eventually having sat motionless in my chair for some hours one evening it occurred to me that although I couldn't seem to do anything else I might be able to actually embrace this state more fully, really just accept it rather than

hope it would pass or seek a way back to normal. Without thinking I got up, lay on the floor and allowed myself to simply imagine and accept that this was it, that I was in some sense dead and so be it. Nothing miraculous happened but I got up and went to bed and when I awoke the next morning I immediately sensed that something had shifted. I felt a little more alive and engaged, my mood began slowly to lighten. As time went on I gradually made a return to my old self but with a sense that maybe *something* had in fact changed – although I was uncertain exactly what. After nearly a month of not approaching any sort of writing a poem emerged which I initially titled ‘Paper Wings’¹⁴, but which I later adapted into a poem called *Invisible man*¹⁵. The latter half of the original draft was as follows:

*I am not what I think, I think
staring out from blindness
mind no longer refuelling
rooted in a body
but raised from the ground
both feet in the air
quite still
like someone with paper wings
and remarkable vision*

I brought this poem and reflected on the experience of the last month at my next supervision meeting – still very unsure about whether the episode would return or had run its course. I felt that somehow the whole experience had been closely connected with the fact that I had given Celia something to read that had a much more personal, private and raw quality about it than I had done previously. Her response to my writing was encouraging and above all accepting, although there was no pretence that it was anything more than spontaneous and quite uncrafted writing. Celia was able to pick out some passages and sections that she felt had potential for re-drafting and revision and this led me to return to this writing myself to consider whether I wanted to take any of it forward.

After this meeting I found I began to tentatively re-engage with drafting further poetry and for the first time I began to go through what I had previously written to see what might be worth working on a little more. Celia’s suggestions were particularly helpful here and I eventually revised and took to workshops two poems from the material I had

¹⁴ See Appendix IV.

¹⁵ See Section 5.1.

originally given her to read: *Missing Pieces* and *One Million Conversations*.¹⁶ I seemed able to look at my own initial efforts in a more forgiving light and to rework things that seemed to have at least some potential for development. At the same time I noticed that my approach to writing poetry had altered. For one thing I did not feel so anxious about producing poetry that needed to achieve a certain recognised standard or quality. I was still interested in writing as well as I could, but attempting to *be* a poet no longer seemed so salient.

It became very apparent that previously my locus of judgement had been almost completely external. I had found it hard to trust my own more direct sense of what felt good or indifferent in my writing, and indeed even in that of other poems that I read. Now, the process of writing felt more immediately rewarding, as I searched for patterns of words that appealed to me, with less concern for achieving an imagined standard that I could not quite grasp or define. I also found that my pleasure in reading a variety of forms of poetry noticeably increased, while at the same time I was happier to admit that some widely acclaimed poets and poetry, for whatever reason, did not engage me at all.

I moved forward a little cautiously at first. It wasn't clear to me exactly what the overwhelming feeling of inertia and 'going dead' had really been about, but I did have a strong sense that it was a critical experience, and that it was intimately connected with the process not only of my having written more freely but also the act of sharing this with Celia. As I re-engaged with writing again, I found it became more possible to observe my own process without interfering with it so much. It was as if I had developed a greater degree of detachment but not of an inhibiting or critical kind. It had simply become a little easier to rest in an awareness of what I was doing or experiencing and to note how this ongoing experience, if left to its own devices, would simply develop and change without any need for deliberate control or determined effort on my part. When this relaxed awareness was present I felt an increased sense of ease and enjoyment in what I was doing, even if the writing itself didn't lead very far or ran into difficulties.

It was soon apparent that this pleasurable quality was profoundly rooted in an increased consciousness of my body, both of the sensations arising in different areas of my body

¹⁶ See Section 5.1.

and an overall sense of bodily presence and what can perhaps be best described as a sense of 'rootedness'. Previously my attempts to write were marked by a feeling of going into my head, sensations in my body were largely ignored. I would sometimes rise from my desk oblivious to the fact that one of my legs had 'gone to sleep' or that there was a deep mark on my wrist from where it had been pressing on the edge of the table. Now, particularly as I started writing, I found I wanted to tune into my body, get it comfortable, feel out what was going on, what specific or global sensations were arising. I would also be more interested in how this might subtly change as I wrote, how words seemed to alter the feelings slightly. How certain words could somehow feel 'right', while others were somehow unconnected to this level of somatic experience.

For a while I experimented quite deliberately with just writing from my body. I would simply sit, allow myself to relax and then tune into my body sensations. I would then wait for a while and see if any words arose and if they did I would write them down until something resonated or stood out for me. Then I would try and develop this a little, all the time trying to let my bodily reactions be a guide to where to go next, as opposed to relying on a process of explicit thought. This did not always prove straightforward and did not lead in any reliable way to better writing. Sometimes I would not find that any words came, or if they did none seemed to move me. At other times I would drift back up into my head and only later realise that I had lost awareness of this bodily level. However, on the whole I felt considerably less blocked than I had in the past. There also appeared to be less of a divide between private forms of writing, which had no relation to craft, and attempts to shape something more explicitly into a poetic form. These two aspects of writing seemed far more interchangeable when I kept contact with my bodily reactions, as opposed to when I might think about what I had written. Sometimes a line could be written quickly and spontaneously, perhaps with a loose feeling in my arm and hand, at another point I might find myself weighing a word or group of words together by rolling them over and over in my mouth.

This experience of writing was reflected in a more differentiated experience of self. Rather crudely, it seemed that at one level there was a bodily level or self-experience composed of myriad sensations together with a more integrated feeling of the body as a whole, and on another, completely different plane, there was a level of being as a state

of awareness which had no particular characteristics of its own at all. Between these distinctly different levels was all that arose in terms of mental content – in particular the flow of thoughts. It was as if I had inhabited this intermediate zone somewhat to the exclusion of the other two, particularly when approaching activities like writing. This seemed to be adequate for writing expository prose but not for writing poetry. Now, stepping back into a greater awareness brought with it a heightened sense of what was going on bodily, and the way this connected with the flow of thoughts and in particular the play of language. I became more aware of how an idea, formulated in language, influenced my physical state, and conversely how a physical state could be elaborated into language and was changed by this process.

I kept exploring this newly established sense of connection although it didn't necessarily lead immediately to more successful poetry – it just made the process feel less burdensome and more playful. I no longer felt pulled between the attempt to write 'good' poetry on the one hand and to 'express myself' on the other. It seemed more like a process of moving dynamically between language and my sensed state without any prior expectation of what might emerge.

* * * * *

It was at this point, mid-way through my third year of investigation that I attended a one-day writing workshop facilitated by Mathew Sweeney. This focussed on imaginative writing exercises rather than editorial work. One of the exercises that were given was to write something based on the idea of time running in reverse. We had no more than about half an hour to come up with a draft of something stimulated by this notion. As usual in such situations, I watched as others rapidly scribbled down their lines and felt a mild sense of panic. What can *I* write about this I thought? I tried to relax and feel my way into my already tensing body and then searched hopefully for some words that would get me going. Nothing seemed to come. Then suddenly there was a leap of excitement like a mild shock running through me. There were still no words but I realised that I had formed an image – it was of a man with food being expelled from his mouth and dropping onto the plate in front of him where it was reconstituted into egg on toast. Immediately on its heels came a series of other images – people moving backwards as if on a film run in reverse, stubble growing back into the skin on a man's face, words re-entering a speaker's mouth and sounding garbled in the

process. I heard this sound, saw these pictures and instantly felt I could begin on my poem – this time basing my writing on the images that I had formed. The poem was later revised and titled *Toc tic*¹⁷. Its opening lines retain some of the initial images that I formed:

*We woke today to the day before
the calendar frame tripping backwards
as stubble shadowed its way into skin:*

*outside, figures passed in rapid retreat
dancing blindly across the street
dangerously close to passing cars.*

This experience now seems so obvious as to be hardly worthy of comment, but it came as a revelation to me at the time. For the first time it dawned on me how significant images were, in all their many forms, to the way my ‘thinking’ operated. Images were arising all the time, they provided a background panorama to all my thinking in words and indeed often simply came and went without any verbal elaboration. Somehow these images were much more closely tied to my bodily state than words. I found I could say the word ‘gun’, for example, and the way I felt about it depended not on the word *per se*, but the image that accompanied it. An image of a gun pointed at a child’s head brought a feeling of tension and anger or at my own head a feeling of fear; however, if I imagined an old gun in a display case in a museum there was just a sense of curiosity and attentiveness. The significance of images suddenly came alive for me in totally new ways. It wasn’t that the images operated any differently, just that I became much more aware of their ubiquitous presence. Like my previous observations about verbal thought, images would come and go but I also noticed that when I was caught up in a particularly intense mood I would often be dominated by a recurrent image, one that I re-ran in my mind over and over. On the other hand when I felt relaxed and creative the images that came would feel more spontaneous and fluid.

As I became more attentive to this image-making activity I also noticed how the way I felt about myself was often closely tied to the presence or absence of images of myself, most significantly images of myself in relation to other people. Underneath a confident mood I could locate an image of myself acting in a successful or appreciated way.

¹⁷ See Section 5.1.

Similarly under an anxious mood I could usually find an image of some kind of inadequacy or failure, either a re-play of a past scenario or an imagined future situation. One of the things that struck me about these images and the image-making activity was the way it seemed at times to be quite conscious, but at other times quite difficult to bring into focus and yet unmistakably present. A bit like peripheral vision there was something there but it couldn't quite be brought into focus – nevertheless, even if it was indistinct it could throw its shadow across my mind and have a definite impact. This seemed quite unlike verbal thought. Words and language in the form of an inner or outer conversation or process of thought were either conscious or they did not seem, as far as I could tell, to exist at all. A thought had literally never crossed my mind until I actually *thought* it, whereas an image coming into conscious awareness could feel as if it had been present to some degree, or in some form, for a period of time. Unlike verbal thought, images seemed to cross the boundary of consciousness and form a bridge to what was taking place unconsciously.

These personal observations about the presence and influence of images added to the increasingly complex and more differentiated sense of myself that had been developing over the whole of the previous year. Although images arose outside of my control, attention could be brought to them and they could be imaginatively elaborated, combined or attenuated. However, apart from images that I rehearsed, most images were ephemeral. Like dreams they faded away in much the same indistinct way as they had come. It was here that language came into its own. Language, if well chosen, could sometimes capture an image and re-present it. Moreover it could elaborate and play with images in a way that created new possibilities and held in place what was otherwise a fleeting experience. I began to approach writing poetry with the same attention to my bodily state, but with a concern for the images that arose rather than immediately searching after words. It dawned on me that I was perhaps at last entering the realm of the imagination so deeply revered by the romantic poets. As I moved forward in this direction, I found that images did not only arise in a purely imagined way but were constantly being given, through direct sensory perception, if these perceptions were received or connected to imaginatively.

One example of this arose during the first term of my fourth year of study. My son had started at University but had a difficult time with illness and suffered a quite traumatic

personal loss during the first few weeks he was away from home. This had necessitated him returning home for a period. After driving him back to University I found myself sitting alone in my car watching the rain sheet down on the windscreen. The image connected with my deep feelings in the moment and found its way into a subsequent poem¹⁸ which began:

*That night, before leaving
I watched rain
streak oblique
across your screen,
it spread out*

*in wind-swept arcs,
casting flickers
of shattered light
to reveal your face
veiled
in chequered shadows.*

I found I could now write either from or using images to connect to both real and imagined experience. The requirements of the poem and its personal significance were much more blurred. Images seemed to have much more to show than merely what they represented at the level of personal experience, although they were deeply implicated in this as well. Working with and from images seemed to provide the bridge that I needed to move between my awareness of bodily sensations and feelings, to embodiment in language. The process was far more playful than my previously dour struggles to move words about on the page. A poem that captures this new almost exuberant spirit that I began to find in writing is *Laburnum*¹⁹. Interestingly the imagery that led to this was initially largely auditory, it was the rhythm and cadence of hearing an old recording of Yeats reading *Innisfree* that stimulated not only the first line but the whole melody of the poem:

*Lets go away then, past the yellow tree
and gather black seed from the ground,
lets go now beyond the grip of town.*

For the first time since I had started the project, writing poetry no longer felt like an obligation but something I could both enjoy and yet also put to one side without any

¹⁸ *Head Lights*, see Section 5.1.

¹⁹ See Section 5.1.

sense of guilt or failure. While the process of playing with images could be fun, crafting this into a satisfying poem was not simply automatic but demanded a willingness to let go of a lot of material that I might easily become quite attached to. A finished poem felt like a real achievement that demanded the integration of a number of processes, usually over a sustained period of time. I finally became more comfortable with what I was able to produce and took more pleasure in sharing this, warts and all, with other people.

The culmination of this in terms of my period of creative investigation came mid-way through the fourth year when I gave my first formal public reading at the Kent & Sussex Poetry Society.²⁰ Although I still doubted whether I had enough material to sustain an effective reading, the evening passed without disgrace and feedback suggested that many had found it engaging and rewarding. Later in the year I read the first ‘occasional’ poem that I had written at a function to mark the departure of a senior colleague from a role he had occupied for many years and that I was now taking on. The poem was contrived from images gathered from those who knew him and on the night it appeared to powerfully hit the mark.

I knew, at this point, that I had come a long way since the start of the study. My poems felt both more personal and less, more crafted and yet quite simple. I did not feel that having given a reading qualified me as a poet but I did feel that at last I had regained my place in the choir. I was no longer just mouthing the words but was contributing my own voice. I could look back at my early experience at Ty Newydd from a new and hard won perspective. Although the view was not entirely clear, a good deal of the fog had lifted. I wasn’t entirely sure what had changed but I did feel something quite fundamental was different and that I was now able to experience the process of writing poetry and, through that, myself in a freer and more flexible way.

²⁰ This followed previous readings of individual poems ‘from the floor’.

5 Invisible Man: Poems and Commentary

5.1 Poems

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Black and white photograph

At six, in a summer smock
with scalloped sleeves
you stood,
bright white socks
standing out from the shadows.

It was a lesson in discretion
an image of sweetness
pure and preserved

but already your knew
how to hide your horns,
under your hat
and behind your back
in a brown paper bag.

Heart bypass

Stepping to an irregular beat
 you climb four flights
 before entering
 a descent into silence.
 Suffering the grip
 of respiratory crisis,
 arrested by a cabbage heart.

Watching patiently
 accustomed to witness
 your non-arrival,
 I sit dissolving,
 a therapeutic trick,
 inviting you to see through
 my presence.

Emerging from the barricades
 the hole in the ground
 the rock-locked cupboard,
 mere fragments of memory.
 Meaning fractured
 by a father's fist
 against the floor.

Raged impotent
 you poured out
 the dregs of past experience,
 smashing crockery
 and rending
 your wife's face
 to a tear-streaked bruise.

In this devastated landscape
 we seek out
 a delicate verbal touch.
 Your unfolding hand
 cradling a single leaf,
 the torn veins seeping,
 bypassing words
 onto the easy chair.

Indian summer

No need to note
what is known
only that
which escapes words,
a sense less clear,
an intimation
of deeper things.

The house on stilts
opens to gardens
and banana trees,
a sweet scent
of incense
evoking memories
and dreams.

Irretrievable?

*A smile fell in the grass
Irretrievable!*

From *The Night Dances* by Sylvia Plath

A smile fell in the grass
and disappeared, irretrievable
among decaying leaves
and spreading moss,

lost in dark shadows
under clumps of fern,
blanched by the rising smell
of evaporating dew.

Disembodied,
lips no longer hold its shape
but fingers scratch the ground
for what is undefined:

the texture of a rounded stone,
an acorn shell,
a weathered plastic soldier
severed at the waist.

Strange what you find,
a smile –
recaptured in my face.

Invisible man

I am not what I think
he thinks

walking through
the November night
armbands glowing
caught full beam
staring out from blindness
mind no longer recycling
rooted in a body
but raised from the ground
both feet in the air
quite still

like someone with paper wings
and remarkable vision

Morning

No time for pillow-talk,
she dresses
through the blur
of half-opened eyes,
swiftly painting
puckered lips
and feeling on the floor
for missing studs.

No time for breakfast,
just a sip of coffee
remainder swilled away,
to face the battle
in the handbag
and the smoked coat
airing out
by the door.

No time for meditation
on the early train,
shoulder pressed
by heavy breathers,
as other readers
droop their heads
over lifestyle
magazines.

Cellar steps

Edge worn slabs
each descending
foot by foot
to our soles' touch,
the ritual lowering
of heads, bent
beneath a joist
to meet the must
of rotting wood
and the breath
of coal dust.

This rising up
from layered earth,
compressed forest
and fractured bone,
excavates
a wider space,
still unknown
to those above
its intone filled
from ground
below.

Cradle

each look
strokes the surface
of creamed skin

each touch
a moving caress
a shared impetus

slipping-pressing-holding
charged with the delight
of bodily contact

embraced in endless
possibilities
restored from absence

uplifted
in attentive arms
the whole universe

in motion
rising and falling
with the breath

centred on
the breast
the rite of communion

this greedy celebration
of conjoint need
this moist flow

of satisfaction
feeding back
through lover's eyes

Petals

Six petals
lay lightly scattered
on the pine dresser,
almost identical
but each turned
to a singular curve,
folding over
with a final sigh,
a faint gasp
of astonishment,
the pink fragrance
fading like summer
in the windowless
air.

Readme

Two hundred pages of acid free paper
registration card plus troubleshooting guide,
incorporating specs with greyscale illustration,
erratum note to addendum slip inside.

Twelve straight folds in A2 format
concertinaed down to pocket size,
a topography of language in word for word
translation – variable syntax supplied.

Twenty kilobytes of release information,
confessing to known problems that arise,
new patches and frequently asked questions
– origin unspecified.

Freshman

We drive down, laden with years
spent moving towards independence,
each moment the last moment.

Arriving at halls
your eyes shut with indifference
as we join the column of vehicles

unloading on yellowed lines,
a free-flowing stream of plastic crates
filled with mugs, books, posters, c.ds.

We stand back awkwardly
as you sign in,
adding as an afterthought

washing powder and vitamins,
while you find your room
and collect flyers

from a second-year helper -
to you he sounded cool,
to us the room feels empty.

Your mother makes up the bed,
I check the security of the window,
you set up your music

and suggest we leave.

Playground

I arrived at school enthroned
on the back wheel of my mother's
bicycle. I was left turning
at the classroom door, deposited,
unable to double back
unsure what it meant
for them to say:
he'll be all right.

Walked across the room
papered with drawings
of stick-shaped people,
I stood, held at the threshold
of a narrow way that led out
to the playground,
rooted by the sight of a cycle
wheeling discreetly away.

I could not take the steps down
towards the din of children
but watched as one boy grabbed
another's satchel
and leaning back,
like a hammer thrower,
began to spin
inside my stomach.

His mouth opened
with a cry that choked my throat,
before he spiralled sideways
mowing down the ducking faces,
as I edged backwards –
to kneel before the refuge
of a world map
and a shallow tray of sand.

Missing pieces

We're going back in search
of something,
slipping down dirt roads
past waving cotton fields
to a roadside stopping,
where passing traffic presses us
like cornered convicts
tight against a wattle fence.

An unmarked bus pulls in,
a woman riding shotgun
descends to guide us
through a tumbled mansion,
where rooms change shape
moved by pulleys and sheet slings
suspending space
and fabricating shadows.

She's climbing ropes
to a higher level
while we try to locate
the missing pieces,
hesitating, among a cascade
of exotic ornaments
and perfumed clothes,
draped in a time
when we knew nothing –

just two to a bed
behind closed doors.

Our pockets full and unperturbed
by signs of rising water,
she is gone and we emerge –
creased by candlelight;
you offer me some oars
and I gather myself
for the long row back home.

One million conversations

conducted over meal tables,
slipped through open doorways,
bellowed across wide streets,
whispered in tall buildings,
emerging through windows,
passing in and out of cars –

words, lip-shaped in air
shaken up from throats
and stirred by tongues
to stream into the void.

Again and again the same patterns
disabled by fixed meanings,
the static interference
of chattering minds

but now,
when you are so noisily silent,
I hear everything.
I feel it echo in my chest
and my bone marrow dries,
splintering with the crack
of a million missed moments
for saying something.

Navel gazing

*

It's a constant fascination
but there's more to it than fluff.

*

Umbilicus –
an organic connection
waiting to be cut,
leaving an impression
in the shape of a scar.

*

Omphalos,
sounds good
looks neat
in its thousand
irregularities.

*

A giggle, a scream,
a belly eyed beam
button up your shirt
stop tickling, it hurts.

*

Sun drenched, perspiring,
stretched out on a long afternoon,
tracing the graceful tributary
that trickles between her breasts,
surrendering to a basin valley
of bronze dimpled skin
and bleached roots of hair,
collecting in the hollow of her belly
a small clear pool.

Toc tic

We woke today to the day before,
the calendar frame tripping backwards
as stubble shadowed its way into skin;

outside, figures passed in rapid retreat
dancing blindly across the road
dangerously close to reversing cars.

We were distracted by the rising rain
the food that spilled from our mouths
and those echoes we heard before the sounds

but it was the words that undermined us
the incomprehensible...
'ingenhapp si twha' – you screamed,

I looked bewildered.
We walked away from each other
our wounds healing abruptly.

Black

You find it in the fullness of night
merged with trees,

I find it in those awful jokes you tell
about men.

You find it in the faces of the surging crowd
when they see a God,

I find it in the toe you trapped last week
under the sofa.

You find it in the dance of angels who
salsa to communion,

I find it in traces of make-up smudged
on tissue paper.

You find it in the rifle butts of soldiers
pictured unawares,

I find it in the middle of your eyes
slowly widening.

You find it in the depths of stars
when light implodes,

I find it in your drawer -
with and without straps.

Tree fall

The day was marked
for chain-saw and ropes
but no single felling,
no timber crack
or graceful sweep to earth,
this proved
a slow killing,
an amputation of branches,
a systematic surgery
of growth
executed in suspended cuts,
from top down
and outside in,
until the final stump
was buried
– under shaved
spillage
from its core.

Enlightenment

Just sitting
at the edge –

sitting still,
waiting to find
what isn't lost.

Sitting, hearing
the answer
in the question.

Sitting with
eyes closed
but "I" open.

Sitting,
– ah so!

That simple.

In silence
no place to go.

Head Lights

That night, before leaving,
I watched rain
streak oblique
across your screen.
It spread out

in wind-swept arcs,
casting flickers
of shattered light
to reveal your face
veiled
in chequered shadows.

Unblinking, you stared
ahead, at nothing
in particular,
I mouthed some words
and slipped away,

for at that moment
only our tears
appeared
unambiguous.

Laburnum

Let's go away then, past the yellow tree
and gather black seed from the ground,
let's go now beyond the grip of town.

Let's creep past the signal mast
and grimly duelling carriageways, far out
to the furthest mark of the retail park

and down then off the beaten track
towards the ash periphery, through elder
sycamore and birch, let's steal our way

to the clearing they once made and find
our ring of stones. Let's strip our clothes
and dance awhile before an unlit fire,

let's feel the heat that we can raise
and scour each other's skin, let's chant
a chorus of don't knows and then –

then we may rest on bracken bed
and hold our breath to the point of death
then, before our dreams expire,

we can swallow our laburnum seeds
or scatter them around – to root this place
and carry us to ground.

Visitation

*Behold, I stand at the door, and knock:
if any man hear my voice and open the door,
I will come in to him.... Revelation 3.20*

I heard someone
knocking
and rising from my chair
thought of Holman Hunt's
revelation of the light
of the world –

a sandaled figure, standing
beside a handle-less door,
staring out towards us
while tapping gently
against the timber grain.

Pausing in the hall
I recalled how
the embroidered cloak
glistened in the darkness
and joined beneath beard

in a clasp of precious stones;
the whole scene
illuminated
by a bird-cage lantern,
with crowning stars

mirrored in a branching sky.
Only then was I aware
of the overgrowth
of bramble and ivy
impeding my own entrance,

the litter of leaves and refuse
strewn outside the door.
It was a voice
not the knock
that finally bid me open –

to reveal
an unfamiliar face,
just for a moment
haloed
in full circle
by the moon.

Line Endings

Today, I embarked
on a terminal career
a last reprieve
from vocational failure.

I turned the page
to greet a blank
world, its surface
ruled in narrow feint

with each line
disappearing to space,
before circling back
from nowhere.

Between parallel bars
there is no margin for error
– on the flat of my lap
lies a sheer edge

one slip and I'm gone,

leaving only the trace
of one hand moving
towards its final
cursive utterance.

Muse

I have been waiting so long
 unaware of your continuous presence
 anticipating, instead, an arrival
 so always on the look-out.
 It must have felt rude
 staring through you like that,
 poking around your face
 biting down the skin
 around your nails
 till the corners tore and bled.
 No way to treat a guest.

Maybe it was your idle chatter,
 or the awkward pronunciation
 – foreign names in particular –
 that deceived me into assuming
 you were simply me
 and that she would be
 something more.
 It wasn't the version of myself
 I expected but an ideal model
 complete with Lyre, like Erato,
 someone I took to be fluent
 and blindingly pretty.

But now I am listening again
 instead of fretting,
 and you've begun to play,
 leaving me regretful
 for ever doubting
 or making assumptions
 over gender.
 Still, it seems reasonable
 to assume a certain facility with language,
 not your struggle with wording,
 always it seems
 biting off too much.

Full Circle (for T.L.)

You come full circle
 like a football soaring round the world,
 bouncing in your running shoes
 then setting off again –
 without apparent pause.
 Speaking on the move,
 a road runner, haring
 in and out and roundabout
 you leave Gonzales in your wake,
 a fast flying sprite
 no sign of respite
 and now – on your bike
 – wh o o o sh –
 yo yo pogo in perpetual go go,
 its a phenomenal sight!

Your drive's electric,
 a nifty dynamo
 whipping us along
 with charismatic skill,
 some even say – Christ!
 But others wonder and whisper,
 under their breath,
 is this a *nutty* professor,
 or could it be Harry Potter
 – on speed ?

You leave us breathless
 but somehow not without breath.
 Like a piper with a reservoir of air
 you maintain a continuous solid note,
 a presence,
 an equal treatment of all,
 an ease at every level,
 an open invitation, as comfortable
 as the well worn embrace
 of a soft leather chair.

You come full circle,
 and like a dervish
 your whirling has a *still* centre,
 a full compassionate heart
 that means to us
 less need to run,
 for we can see
 that so much is done
 for all of us.

5.2 Commentary

The poems presented invite their own reading. The comments that follow provide some additional personal context and highlight what I found most striking about their content and themes in the light of the second research question: Is there anything significant or relevant to self-experience reflected in the poetry written? This is followed by some additional remarks about the process of composition of some of the poems.

5.2.1 Form and content

All the poems are written in free verse. They are simple in structure and diction and have a range of subjects without a deliberate series of poems on one theme. Their general nature is lyrical and evocative with use of rhythmic patterning in relatively short lines. There is an emphasis on specific images and the contrasting of ideas rather than on more complex forms. Most of the poems have a regular patterning on the page with frequent use of short stanzas.

The poems were chosen by virtue of having been read publicly, rather than with regard to theme or content. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern recurring preoccupations. A number of these have personal resonance. Firstly there is a marked concern with issues of *loss* and *separation*. In some poems this is associated with a sense of disconnection or *loss of meaning*, particularly in language. In contrast to this, there are a number of allusions to *re-finding* or *retrieving* something that was lost or buried. In no less than three poems this sense of rediscovery is associated, in one-way or another, with *death* and by implication *rebirth*. There are also references to finding what was *always there* but had gone unnoticed. Finally there is a sense in many poems of a link to a physical or sensory process of discovery or *embodied* way of knowing.

These themes are amplified below following initial consideration of three poems that were begun before the commencement of the study, then developed and reworked as part of it.

Seeking connection

The poems predating the study are *Black and white photograph*, *Heart bypass* and *Indian summer*. The first of these depicts a child who learns to “hide her horns” to

present a positive image to the world. The implication is that the horns are still there but cut off and out of view, unsafe to let 'out of the bag'. A more disturbing and damaging sense of disconnected feeling exists in *Heart bypass* where trauma and distress is linked to a failing heart ('cabbage' is an acronym for coronary bypass surgery) and eruptions of senseless and apparently motiveless rage. This is the only poem I have written that portrays my clinical work. Therapy is presented as an attempt to forge a verbal connection with another but using the tactile metaphor of touch. *Indian summer* directly describes the idea of something present that "escapes words" and then offers brief visual and olfactory images drawn from my early childhood home in India. Words, it seems, must rely on sensory experience and memory to evoke or connect with something "deeper". These poems prefigure themes that emerge in subsequent work. They suggest to me a 'feeling out' of areas of experience that I felt somehow separated from.

Loss and separation

Loss and separation are present in a number of the poems, particularly if this is extended to include the idea of loss of connection or effective communication. Four poems have the experience of separation or parting as a point of origin. In *Playground* this is from my mother on my first day at school. In *Freshman* and *Head Lights* the roles are reversed when, on two occasions, I leave my son during his start at University. *Tree fall* presents a more impersonal loss, the felling of a large tree in my garden. The poems convey in different ways the suppressed painfulness of these events. The playground experience is almost overwhelming, while the others reflect a more containable but deeply felt sadness, for example, the perception in *Tree fall* of "a slow killing". There is a suggestion in both *Playground* and *Freshman* of a personal means of coping by 'taking refuge' in something practical or tangible: the tray of sand or preparing a room. The inadequacy of words is further implied in phrases such as "mouthed some words" and "...unsure what it meant / for them to say: / he'll be all right."

Failures of language or meaning

My evident concern with the difficulty of expression or connection in language has appeared in a number of the poems mentioned above. An even more bizarre and alienating use of language is found in *Readme*, which was prompted by instruction leaflets included with cheap electrical goods and the guidance files found with computer

programs. Language is presented here as divorced from personal origin and compressed down into an unreadable and duplicated form that employs senseless jargon. *One million conversations* traces the spoken word as it moves continuously in space in formulaic or meaningless patterns that fail to connect. Paradoxically, it is ultimately deliberate silence that redeems this in a strikingly visceral way: “I feel it echo in my chest / and my bone marrow dries.” A similar reversal of expectations is found in *Toc tic* where time runs backwards. Once again, it is meaningless words that end up as a source of confusion in this poem. The disjunction between actual day-to-day reality and the gloss of words and illusory images is contrasted further in *Morning*. Here the view of life promoted by lifestyle magazines is parodied by an account of embodied sensory reality, including the fumbling confusion of being half-asleep.

Search and reunion

Three poems involve the searching for and retrieval of something that has been temporarily lost or hidden. In *Missing pieces* this means going back, in direction and time, to locate ‘missing pieces’. This poem stemmed from a vivid dream and suggests that what was lost may never have been fully known or understood, such as at an early point in childhood. However, something is recovered and then brought back in full pockets against the implied threat of drowning from rising water. *Cellar steps* presents the image of a descent underground, another journey back and down to something unknown. There is again a ‘rising up’ from this level, this time of highly compressed and buried life. *Irretrievable* is more consciously concerned with the idea that something lost can be found, even if this seems impossible. Based on a response to Sylvia Plath's poem *The Night Dances*, the poem challenges her sentiment that a smile falling to the ground is irretrievable. Although disembodied, the smile can still be *felt* for. Its nature although ephemeral may still reappear through what is physically felt or re-created. A smile is found, not on the ground, but on the face. This was precisely my experience when contemplating Plath's poem – I *found* I was smiling. Another poem *Cradle* is not focused on a search but does depict an intense and physically gratifying coming together or reconnection. The cradling is presented as a restoration from absence, a reunion that is greedily and lovingly enjoyed. Without the implication of a preceding gap, it is hard to imagine the same intensity of delight and mutual discovery.

Allusions to death and rebirth

The poem *Laburnum*, describes both a going back to a place of ritual significance and a coming away from the grip of something associated with civilisation and society. This return to something fundamental and grounding is explicitly linked to death and a symbolic ritual of dying, but also prefigures rebirth through the scattering of seeds. This has a liberating or releasing quality, connected to a sense of the pagan and mildly ecstatic. *Visitation* on the other hand refers to an explicitly Christian image of reincarnation and invitation to new life: Holman Hunt's portrait *The Light of the World*. A print of this picture acts as a bookmark in a Bible that was given to me near the time of my confirmation. A third poem, *Line Endings*, is one of two poems in the collection that is actually about writing poetry. The proposition is that to write is explicitly a terminal career. Facing an empty page is compared to balancing at a "sheer edge" – "one slip and I'm gone". However what remains is "one hand moving", as if this might reveal a deeper continuity to experience and action, unencumbered by a limited and precariously held sense of who I am.

Recognising what was always present

The other poem to address the process of writing is *Muse*. The poem utilizes the image of biting down nails until they bleed to represent the frustration and difficulty I had encountered in writing poetry. The surprise comes in finding the Muse is a "version of the self" but not what was being waited for, which was: "... an ideal model / complete with Lyre, like Erato / someone I took to be fluent / and blindingly pretty." This feels like a coming down to earth, a listening again to what is and always has been, not what is wanted or assumed to be absent. The poem *Enlightenment* rests on the meditative practice of sitting and echoes the idea of "waiting to find / what isn't lost." Here a clear revelation is presented, a realisation that there isn't any other place to go to discover what is simply present. *Black* does not specify the idea of finding what is present explicitly, but suggests it to me in the way that abstractions, in this case the colour black, are readily available in innumerable concrete forms.

Embodiment & awareness

Physical and sensory allusions and images are present across most of the poems with many suggesting that it is through the body as opposed to language that the source or depth or meaning can be found. The two remaining poems in the collection hint at the

possibility that abstract language and reflective awareness can be combined with, or even emerge from, physical embodiment and sensory experience in a more connected way. *Navel gazing* is something of an exercise following the form of poems such as *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird* by Wallace Stevens. Its title, however, reminds me of the self-reflective quality of the whole investigation, while its structure suggestively moves between a resonant but abstracted approach to the navel, through terms such as ‘omphalos’ and ‘umbilicus’, to a sensual and physically appreciative rendering of a loved one’s body. *Petals* provides a simple physical description of fallen petals but does so with a suggestion of them achieving a simple level of awareness or expression, “a final sigh” which seems to convey “a faint gasp of astonishment”, as if something new has come into awareness or being through attention to their presence. In *Invisible man*, the title piece I have given to the collection, the subject directly questions himself though the power of thought: “I am not what I think / he thinks” and is then caught in a blinding flash that stops his mind in its tracks and raises his feet from the ground. Significantly it is from this, while “still rooted in the body” and “quite still”, that a heightened capacity of vision or awareness is finally attained.

5.2.2 Additional remarks on composition

Chapter 4 contains a description of how the process of composition and my experience while writing poetry changed during the investigation. This is illustrated with examples of the development of some of the poems presented above. Only the first three poems were completed in the initial two years of the study and they were based on drafts written before it commenced. The remaining poems were completed in the third and fourth years after the point of most marked change in my way of working.

Regardless of subject matter I have found all the poems, except the last, mirror some aspect of my self-experience. The exception is *Full Circle*, which was written on the occasion of a colleague’s change of role and was explicitly about other people’s feelings towards him. This poem was composed in an unusual way, in that I asked many people to give me the first words or images that came to mind when they thought about him. The poem is an amalgam of the responses I was given. It is included because it met the criteria of being publicly read and was the last poem written before the break in my investigation. Furthermore, following the collection of material, the composition of this poem clearly reflected my changed experience of writing.

Finding myself confronted with a diverse set of words, phrases and images, I initially struggled to see what I could do with them. I then relaxed into the material and got what I can best describe as a 'feeling' for it. This included a distinct sense of some meaning that I couldn't yet express but that had a quality of physical presence. Thoughts and images then began to arise; these came and went until something emerged that had a stronger, almost an 'aha' quality to it. This was an image of the world spinning on its axis. Almost immediately I could *see* and articulate how much of the material referred to something about continuous movement, at the surface, whilst it also pointed to something at a deeper level that was still and holding. Moving between this image, the material given to me, and my emerging sense of what 'felt right' led to the gradual formation of the poem. During this process, my attention first seemed to relax and open to include more of my bodily senses, and then oscillated between standing back from thoughts and images and moving into them. This took place iteratively as the poem took shape over numerous drafts. I had an appreciative sense that not only the content but also the final form of the poem had somehow been 'given' to me.

6 Analysis and Interpretation

This chapter presents an analysis of the research experience presented in Chapter 4 to identify those aspects of self-experience that were related to the writing of poetry.²¹ This is linked to the poetry presented in Chapter 5 and the writing that was shared in supervision at the end of the second year of the study. The chapter first outlines the analytic approach that was adopted to interrogate the material and then presents the outcome of this in relation to: the form and sequence of the narrative account, the uncrafted work shared in supervision, and the key aspects of self-experience to emerge in relation to the process of writing.

6.1 Approach to interpretation

The analysis of the narrative account, and the reflective writing upon which it was based, took place over a year after the first phase of the first-person investigation was complete. This interval created an increased distance from the writing and supported a more detached stance to its analysis. However, given the first-person nature of the study, the process of interpretation required a reflexive movement between my continuing lived experience of the study and the writing upon which the analysis was based.

Chapter 4 presents an account of my experience structured in a narrative form. As such it represents an initial interpretation of that experience, albeit one referenced against writing made throughout the investigation and regular discussion in supervision. A third-person research analysis might subject 'data' of this kind to systematic coding to arrive at a thematic or interpretative framework that could be validated by subsequent feedback from the person who is the subject of the inquiry. In a first-person inquiry this 'respondent validation' is inextricable from the process of analysis. Thus, while a structured procedure could be employed to code the content of the account, this, and the patterning of subsequent categories emerging from the data, can be simultaneously tested for appropriateness against the written content and the wider context of experience from which the account emerged.

²¹ Research Question 3.

As the interpretive aim was to identify in a reflexive but systematic way those aspects of self-experience central to my experience of writing poetry, the outcome needed to feel personally authentic *and* be well grounded in the writing produced as part of the study. To facilitate this integrated approach, the narrative account was reviewed in a detailed manner that was informed by two established methods of qualitative analysis. The account was first examined for narrative structure and then for thematic content. In both analyses the emerging categories were continuously checked for congruence and consistency with entries in my reflective journal and my recall of the experiences involved.

6.1.1 Narrative structure

Various approaches can be taken to analyse narrative (Elliott, 2005; Riessman, 1993). Whereas a thematic analysis tends to emphasise recurring or key ideas, a narrative-based approach focuses on the way experience is organised or storied. This is particularly relevant to accounts where experience changes or develops over time. The analysis undertaken was based on a close reading of the account, with a focus on the identification and characterisation of its overall story form and constituent chronological elements. This was compared with my memory of the experience to achieve the best possible 'goodness of fit'. The evaluation was deepened by examination of the material shared in supervision at the end of year two of the study, including comparison with supervision notes and an independent account published by Celia Hunt.

6.1.2 Thematic content

Thematic analysis focuses on identifying themes that are central or important to the description of particular phenomena. It is usually based on the close reading of textual material, an iterative process of coding particular patterns of experience, and the organisation of these into a structure of themes and sub-themes (Aronson, 1994; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Interpretative phenomenological analysis uses thematic categorisation within an interpretive orientation that seeks to elucidate how individuals make sense of their own lived experience (J. A. Smith, 2004). An approach of this general kind was used to structure closer examination of the connections between self-experience and the process of writing poetry in the narrative account. This involved further readings of the account with the identification and extraction of relevant statements. These statements were then organised into descriptive categories

that captured common or overlapping features. These categories were refined into factors that most meaningfully captured, for me, the relationships articulated between self-experience and the process of writing, and how these changed. During this process key words were selected and used to search the databases containing the reflective journal to help continuously ground the analysis in these primary records.

6.1.3 Presentation and interpretation

As the narrative structure of the account provides the wider context of analysis, this is presented first. This is followed by evaluation of the material written and discussed with Celia Hunt at the end of year two, and finally the interpretive thematic evaluation of self-experience relating to the process of writing. A concluding summary is provided of these analyses which links them to the themes already identified in the poetry presented in Chapter 5. This also identifies the focus for the theoretical explication of the first-person investigation that is undertaken in part III.

6.2 Narrative structure of experience

Although there was evidence of some overlap in experience between different stages of the inquiry, relatively clear 'phases' emerged in the way the narrative was structured. This led to the identification and characterization of eight chronological elements to the narrative sequence (see Table 6.1).

Table 6.1 Chronological elements of the narrative account

1. Setting out on a journey of discovery.
 2. Experiencing a prolonged period of difficulty and challenge.
 3. Allowing a change of direction – following an unpremeditated path.
 4. Finding greater freedom to write.
 5. Opening the products of this to external view.
 6. Experiencing a collapse in the feeling of personal agency.
 7. Emerging with a more differentiated and inclusive sense of self.
 8. Experiencing a greater freedom in writing poetry.
-

6.2.1 Setting out on a journey of discovery

This element describes the preparatory stage of the study and the sense of anticipation associated with it. The narrative account describes the idea of "*a carefully planned adventure*",²² but otherwise assumes rather than explicitly describes this phase. However, early entries in the reflective journal contain frequent references to the idea of a personal journey or exploration. For example:

Perhaps this is even the model of research that I am specifically interested in. Research arising from personal exploration. Not exploration of the objective but of direct experience. (Journal, 18 November 2001)

The notion of a journey of discovery is applicable to any research project but is marked here by the personal as well as academic focus of the study. The above mention of a 'planned' adventure (with a formal research proposal and plan) is set in contrast to where the study immediately and unexpectedly leads, even though the ensuing impasse could be seen as the first significant 'discovery' that was made.

6.2.2 Experiencing a prolonged period of difficulty and challenge

The narrative account begins with an evocation of a bleak sense of frustration and difficulty as I began the creative investigation in earnest. The experience is linked back to a shameful childhood memory, which in turn is related to failing to be careful enough. The narrative continues to chronicle the profound impasse that I encountered when trying to write poetry.²³ This is variously described as being "*stuck*", "*petrified*", "*alienated*" or otherwise having my intentions obstructed. The concept of block appears frequently in the journal, as does the deep sense of doubt and inadequacy that accompanied it. The poetry itself is experienced as "*dead*" or "*dry as dust*", although more formal prose and reflective writing continue to be produced. Among my responses to this difficulty is to try and learn more about both poetry and writer's block. However, this does nothing to remove the feeling of "*emptiness*" and of having nothing to express.

²² Page 47.

²³ Pages 46-49.

6.2.3 Allowing a change of direction - following an unpremeditated path

This element marks an unplanned shift towards what could be seen as alternative forms of expressive activity: *"...it wasn't that I made a deliberate decision to ease up on this effort. It felt rather that another impulse entered in."*²⁴ This was initially towards drawing and painting, but was followed with musical/sound improvisation and experimenting with movement. The impulse felt urgent and compelling; it overrode any inhibition or questions that arose about its purpose, or the quality of what was produced. Accompanying this spontaneous activity was a deeper sense of embodiment; there was a sense of physical play, and of shifts in both bodily sensation and quality of awareness: *"...in the process of free-playing I could usually feel my body relax and my concentration alter."*²⁵ An association is also made in the narrative account to a childhood memory of inhibited singing, and my subsequent departure from the school choir

6.2.4 Finding greater freedom to write

The freedom found in spontaneous and embodied activities sparked a questioning of my assumptions about writing poetry, and a search for an equivalent sense of release: *"I wanted to find a way of writing my own poetry free of unnecessary assumptions and burdens."*²⁶ One assumption that I identified was the idea that I should have something pre-existing to express, and that the task was to express it. Another concerned the criteria for success. Was it to meet the expectations of others regarding poetic craft or to achieve some form of personal development? I seemed out of touch with personal impulse or feeling when attempting to write poetry, and was overly concerned to produce something that could withstand external scrutiny. Greater freedom came from allowing the writing to follow what was spontaneously arising and to accept everything that came, *"letting it stand"*, in the process I found I was: *"...simply and more directly attentive to my body."*²⁷ I commenced a practice that I described as 'free-lining' and experienced a greater sense of ease, as well as increased productivity.

²⁴ Page 50.

²⁵ Page 51.

²⁶ Page 54.

²⁷ Page 55.

6.2.5 Opening the products of this to external view

Unlike the other elements, this was a single event that marked a critical point in the unfolding investigation. This was the sharing of some of the uncrafted writing that had emerged in the previous phase within supervision. It seems significant that this had not been consciously planned but came about because there was nothing else to show for the work done over the preceding period. My recollection and notes are largely about Celia's interest and acceptance of my writing, although she also made comments about its content that will be examined below.

6.2.6 Experiencing a collapse in the feeling of personal agency

This element refers to the period immediately after the meeting in which the work was shared. There was an increasing sense of "*detachment and remoteness*",²⁸ culminating in what I described in both my reflective journal and narrative account as an "*overwhelming physical sense of being brought to a complete halt*".²⁹ Although there is evidence of some feelings of sadness in my journal, the strongest impression was of feeling a lack of motivational drive or 'inner' agency. I could function in response to external events and commitments, but lacked the capacity to act independently with any vigour. My descriptions indicate that it felt as if something was absent or had died. This was concerning and confusing but not something I felt I could do anything about. The period lasted a number of weeks.

6.2.7 Emerging with a more fluid sense of self

My emergence from the sense of loss of agency was associated with an increased willingness to accept it. This involved a conscious gesture, which acknowledged the feeling of deadness and sought to embrace it completely. There was a subsequent change in my mood and a restored capacity for initiative and action. A subtle shift was noticeable in my experience of writing and was also detectable in other areas of my life. This involved a reduced sense of myself as a controlling 'agent', separate from and trying to manage my experience, towards a more fluid and inclusive sense of myself as part of all experience that arose – and yet capable of detached awareness of that experience. The exploration and articulation of this shift was a theme of my reflective

²⁸ Page 57.

²⁹ Page 58.

writing from this point onwards. This included identification of the way bodily senses, imagery, and language operated in a wider field of awareness, without a fixed personal centre.

6.2.8 Experiencing a greater freedom in writing poetry

This element reflects a greater capacity to engage satisfyingly with writing poetry. I noticed an improved ability to move between drafting and editing without becoming stuck. The freedom of spontaneous production extended to crafting selected pieces with readers in mind. This included shaping some of the work initially generated through free-lining, and eventually reached the level of delivering a formal public reading that was both confirming and enjoyable. The freedom found here seemed directly related to the more inclusive and differentiated quality of self-experience and awareness described previously.

6.2.9 Overall narrative structure

The chronological elements outlined above can be reduced to a narrative structure of the following general form:

1. A journey with a purpose.
2. An obstacle/confrontation with difficulty.
3. A crisis.
4. A breakthrough or turning point dependent on relinquishment and acceptance.
5. An outcome where the sense of self is changed.

This has similarities with the structure of many mythical tales of the hero's journey or vision quest identified by Campbell (2004) as a "monomyth" of personal change or development. Campbell argues that this typically involves a pattern of separation, initiation and return, which makes use of frequently recurring motifs. These include the idea of "a call to adventure", which can be accepted or declined; "a road of trials", that might lead to a period of crisis or conflict; a "ritual death", or death and rebirth, that marks a point of transition; achieving the goal or "ultimate boon", which often consists of important self-knowledge; and some form of "return" involving application of the boon, or knowledge, to living life more fully in the world.

The obvious parallels between this and the way the first-person investigation unfolded

and was narrated were not recognised until the above analysis was undertaken. The 'setting out on a journey of discovery' corresponds remarkably closely to the idea of a 'call to adventure'. Similarly the 'road of trials' is an apt phrase for the confrontation of obstacles and difficulties in the early part of the study. The motif of death and rebirth, present in many mytho-poetic tales (e.g. Leeming, 1998), was a vivid feature of my self-experience at what turned out to be a turning point in the investigation. This point can also be equated with achieving the goal or 'boon' corresponding to 'important self-knowledge'. Finally, the 'return to the ordinary world' and 'application of the boon', could be viewed as the subsequent work of crafting the poetry and theorising the experience for formal presentation.

6.3 Writing towards the turning point

6.3.1 Sharing work in supervision

A pivotal feature of the account was the sharing of a collection of spontaneous and uncrafted 'poetic' writing in supervision.³⁰ This initiated a critical episode around which the narrative is hinged. The implication is that this disclosure, and the way it was received, enabled a significant change to occur. This is equivalent to the 'climax' in an Aristotelian plot structure. It has the characteristic form of depending on the events that preceded it, and being the apparent cause or basis of the events that followed.

As mentioned above, my recollection of the supervision meeting focused largely on Celia's interested and accepting response to the writing that I had produced. Celia also recalls making comments about the writing in terms of its potential for development, and the possible links between its themes and my experience. She later used the incident, with my permission, as an example in a paper examining processes in teaching and research from a psychodynamic perspective (Hunt & West, 2006). A substantial extract is presented below to provide an external reference on what occurred.³¹ The pseudonym Peter is used, as in the published version.

The first couple of years of our working together involved discussion of Peter's creative writing in progress, work that he was trying to craft into its final form and with which he often felt dissatisfied. Then he brought me a batch of spontaneous

³⁰ See Appendix III.

³¹ See Appendix V for complete passage.

personal material in poetic form that he had made no attempt to craft; it was simply in its raw state. This felt like a very important stage in the research relationship. Sufficient trust must have been built up to enable Peter to allow me to see this deeply personal material devoid of the distance that craft provides.

I read the work several times, noticed some recurring themes that seemed significant at a personal level, but wasn't sure whether I should point them out or whether I should focus on the potential of the writing for further development. I found it quite difficult to know how I should respond and thought long and hard about it. I wrote myself some notes and decided to wait and see what the next meeting brought. What I remember of our discussion is that we talked primarily about the potential of the material for further development into poems. I think I said what I liked, how it made me feel, but I also remember clearly saying something about the themes I saw emerging, although we didn't discuss these. Subsequently Peter became quite depressed. This lasted for about a month during which he seemed unable to proceed with the research, but then it lifted. When he started writing crafted poems again, something had definitely changed. There was more self-presence, a deep and often quite subtle focusing-in on a particular feeling or experience.

Recently, I asked Peter whether it was my mention of the themes in the material that had triggered the depression and, to my surprise, he said he had no recollection of my doing so; rather what he remembered was that I had 'received' the material with interest, and had discussed it with him from the point of view of its potential for poems. Clearly something of a therapeutic nature was taking place here, a kind of 'cracking-up', to use Bollas's term. Peter was able to let go of his concern with crafting his poems and to risk bringing something new into the open, within a research relationship that provided a 'safe-enough' container for this to happen. [...] Whilst Peter was largely engaged in a self-reflective exercise, being able to bring some of this experience out into the open and to share it in a receptive space was beneficial and helped him to move on. (Hunt & West, 2006, p. 170)

Celia's recollection slightly misplaces the onset of the period that she saw as a 'depression'. My reaction actually began shortly after the meeting at which I gave her the writing. It then continued beyond the next meeting, when I discussed it with her and she offered feedback on what I had written. What is striking to me is that I didn't have much recollection of the content of the feedback that Celia provided, but I did remember the quality of her response at both of these meetings.

6.3.2 Self-experience in the content of the writing

Celia subsequently shared with me the notes that she made on the writing at the time. As well as identifying pieces that she thought had potential for further development she made the following comments on some of the personal content in the material:

...the early ones contain strong images and ideas of reluctance and embarrassment (and self-disapproval?) of the desire to let go of form and order and just to give yourself permission to allow feelings space on the page. It's as if one part of you - your dominant self-image perhaps - wants to hold on to its view of things and doesn't want the more messy stuff to emerge, because it undermines your standing. This may account for the resistances. But there is also a desire for easy fame - easy success - the

desire to create something out of nothing but a reluctance to start from feeling. Desire to be soothed. (C. Hunt, personal communication January 2007, recorded 2003)

Celia observed that once my writing moved beyond these defences and I started to let feelings emerge the 'poems' began to show greater depth. She also noted some of the images and ideas that struck her as personally relevant. These observations are listed below in an order shaped by my own review of the writing:

1. A desire for ease, for (total) letting go - but something says no.
2. A desire not to feel uncomfortable feelings from the past.
3. A dominant self-concept under threat.
4. Images of defences disintegrating, getting undermined.
5. Images of exclusion.
6. Conflict between order and disintegration/chaos.
7. Conflict between movement and fixity.
8. Overflowing emotion/pain - pain of change.
9. Going beyond parental expectations.
10. Giving up the dream?
11. Embarrassment at showing the stuff that is coming up - images of dump, cemetery.

Combining these observations with my own re-reading has led me to identify four main strands of self-experience depicted in the uncrafted writing. These are presented in Table 6.2.

Table 6.2 Strands of self-experience in uncrafted writing

-
1. A desire for greater freedom but resistance to it. (1-3*)
 2. The breakdown of existing structures and connections. (4-5*)
 3. The tension between holding on and letting go. (6-7*)
 4. The turmoil/consequences of allowing change. (8-11*)

** Corresponding themes identified by Celia Hunt*

6.3.3 The struggle with change

Celia's reading of the material confirms its deeply personal and uncrafted nature and also highlights how the content of the writing reflected the struggle I had with allowing change. My review of these pieces recognised the features she identified, although I

was not conscious of their significance at the time of writing. I was also freshly struck by the underlying tone of sadness and loss that is present. The writing suggests both a strong desire to let go of old patterns and constraints, but also of a reluctance to do so, and perhaps a fear of the loss, or void, that could be confronted. The initial pieces seemed to suggest the wish for a rapid flight into freedom with their obvious rhymes and patterns, and in this example, of emotional purging to uncover a deeply felt dream.

*Oh God! oh no, not this
a kind of trying to create
a verse from nothing
not even the hiss
of gushing steam
emotions dammed
to hold a dream.*

The obviousness of the rhyme seems to act as a guard against more meaningful statement, or full contact with uncomfortable feelings. This is followed by images of disintegration or breaking-up, with the idea of things being undermined or spoilt:

*The house isn't falling down
but it claims to be:
the wallpaper lifting around the fire,
the worktop splitting behind the sink,
the paint bruised and hand marked
beside the creaking stairs.*

Many of the 'poems' hint at a sense of loss, isolation or exclusion; one is specifically titled 'Lost', while another contains the stanza:

*I am rendered by a wall
forty eight courses wide
measured across the base
in concentric annual rings
made of engineering bricks.*

The conflict between the hold of existing patterns and movement into potential disorder is present in a number of the pieces. With this comes the sense of strong feelings emerging into awareness, in a powerful and potentially overwhelming way. There is an intimation of what this process of change might involve in the references to death. For

example, one piece refers to *gifts for the burial*, another to *shallow graves* and the poem that describes the most vivid outpouring of feeling concerns a visit to a cemetery:

*As I sit quietly, wondering and waiting
bemused and uncertain, there is a change of pace
a slowing of mind and a new perception
a rising of forms , rising up into the air
and reaching out to me, a mass exodus
a peel of silent thunder that tears open my throat.
I am left sobbing for no reason that I know

Dust to dust - the pattern never changes
apart from the mess in the middle.*

6.4 Self-experience and the process of writing

The narrative form and content of my experience, elucidated in Section 6.2, delineates a chronological progression from a period of resistance/difficulty in writing poetry, through a critical period or 'crisis', to a position of greater freedom in writing accompanied by a subtle qualitative change in self-experience. The intention of the thematic analysis reported in this section was to focus specifically on the relationship of self-experience to the process of writing poetry throughout the study. It concerned the nature of this relationship and how it changed, but not the sequence of change *per se*. The emergent themes were similar to some of the elements in the narrative analysis, but their organisation was underpinned by the aim of achieving a categorical rather than a chronological framework of interpretation, centred on the activity of writing.

6.4.1 Emergent factors

Four interrelated factors relating self-experience to the writing of poetry were derived from the thematic interrogation of the narrative account and associated reflective writing. These factors are presented in Table 6.3 and elaborated below with examples.

Table 6.3 Factors relating self-experience to the writing of poetry

-
1. The failure of conscious intention.
 2. The interference of an ‘objectifying process’.
 3. An assumed or ‘implicit’ idea of self in the writing process.
 4. A more embodied and fluid experience of self in the writing process.
-

6.4.2 The failure of conscious intention

The experience of being unable to undertake the writing that I intended runs through the first eighteen months of the reflective journal and is captured in the narrative account by statements such as:³²

Poetry, so it seemed was not about to bend to my will.

The difference was that then [...] I had written without much personal expectation or deliberation.

I had a mission [...] but I was stuck.

As early as February 2002, entries appear in the reflective journal that question whether my difficulties in writing are linked to the attitudes and intentions that I brought to it:

The issue of not writing from conscious intention – abandoning this [...] issue of not having conscious intention and yet managing to write something that seems intended – split between conscious / unconscious? (Journal, 20 February 2002)

This idea that my inability to get on with my conscious intentions reflects an important message or communication. That I am ignoring something or going at it in a one-sidedly conscious way – not taking into account other factors and needs. Not getting in touch with my own unconscious feelings and wishes – perhaps even treating myself badly. This same idea of there being (at least) two parts involved in action – conscious/unconscious – adult ego/inner child or whatever – the tension and conflict between them not the necessary combination or synergy. Giving myself a hard time rather than nurturing it. (Journal, 12 May 2002)

However, it was difficult to see an alternative to my deliberate efforts, despite their repeated failure:

Perhaps starting a writing session, like this one, with a clear intention, the aim to write some poetry, is necessary. (So far it hasn't worked). (Journal, 25 March 2002)

³² Page 47.

It wasn't until the summer of the following year that I moved past this impasse, with writing occurring in a different spirit after the period of experimentation in other media:

Called on the Muse this morning. That sense that this (writing)[sic] isn't about personal intention or careful, deliberate and willed action but something much more like an act of devotion. (Journal, 21 June 2003)

The link between this and the unpremeditated activity in other media is evident in this early attempt to grasp the experience of beginning to let writing poetry flow in a different and less controlled way:

Today I have just put Sheila Cassidy on in the background and feel bathed by the sound – also without any planning pulled the piano tutor book down after many days/weeks of just improvising to remind myself of a few notes and knock out a numbered tune. The part of me that just follows impulse – the urge to do something – just follows the feeling – the sense that the time is right – or something is just there – not compulsively [...] but something new in that moment – just arising – so easy – it is just like following – listening – letting attention be drawn to things – following attention rather than trying to direct and determine it – so often the struggle is there – trying to bring attention to bear on things at a time or in an order and to a depth all specified in advance by preconceived plans and intentions. (Journal, 28 July 2003)

6.4.3 The interference of an ‘objectifying process’

This category combines themes concerning my experience of self and my experience of the poetry that I attempted to compose over the first eighteen months to two years of the investigation. In relation to self-experience there were powerful feelings of being alienated, or isolated, from any creative source. One image in the narrative account is of being turned to stone: “...my hand, heart and head seemed equally petrified.”³³

The reflexive nature of the investigation provoked a heightened self-consciousness that was repeatedly alluded to in the reflective journal and identified as a potential source of my difficulties with writing. This was linked to the problem of intention described above, and also to feelings of paralysis and shame:

Perhaps I am inhibited by the self-conscious intention (agenda) to use the writing of poetry as a means of investigation/reflective/heuristic enquiry [...] this gives the writing a purpose it doesn't want to carry. (Journal, 25 March 2002)

The self-consciousness provoked by conceiving my writing as part of a research investigation – is this simply paralysing? (Journal, 8 April 2002)

...blocked by self-conscious shame and critical comparison. (Journal, 2 January 2002)

³³ Page 46.

The latter quote indicates the sense of shame experienced in the face of what seemed like the critical gaze of both myself and imagined others. It was as if 'I' had become the object of a critical or objectifying perspective. I could readily identify with that perspective and write reflectively and critically from it. However, in the face of it, my capacity to write poetry withered and an associated sense of personal inadequacy grew. In this context the question of whether I could ever aspire to *be* a poet entered my mind.

I should feel supported in this approach to creative writing but somehow I think I have got lost in thinking about it in terms of achievement. Achieving the status of a published poet. (Journal, 14 January 2002)

This concern with status seemed connected with the sense of inadequacy or lack that arose in the face of becoming an object of inquiry. Although I had not set out with the aim of writing poetry for publication, this now came into question. Could I aspire to be a poet? If not, my identity now seemed doubtful; it was as if I was a fraud. This was reinforced by contact with others who did have clear aspirations or identities as poets and writers.

... the problem is not being able to write poetry [...] (it's always what makes me feel fraudulent about the DPhil and somehow disconnected and inadequate around others who are creative writers). (Journal, 2 December, 2001)

Along with these objectifying features with respect to my self-experience, any poetry that I drafted almost immediately felt alien and separate from me: “*The feeling was that what I wrote went 'dead' on the page almost before the ink was dry.*”³⁴ This feeling that the writing was dead or lifeless appeared an important factor in my inability to sustain a process of writing. As 'I' became more objectified, so did any poetry that I wrote. I very rapidly lost any sense of engagement with it, or sense of how it might be developed or added to. I was left feeling frustrated while the writing itself felt unsatisfactory and uninteresting. As noted previously, I did not experience the same kind of problems with other forms of writing. I carried out writing projects associated with the study effectively and through to publication. Meanwhile, poetry became an increased object of study as I read more about poetics. I also derived pleasure from reading poetry, although this was coloured by my own creative frustration.

³⁴ Page 47.

6.4.4 An implicit idea of self in the writing process

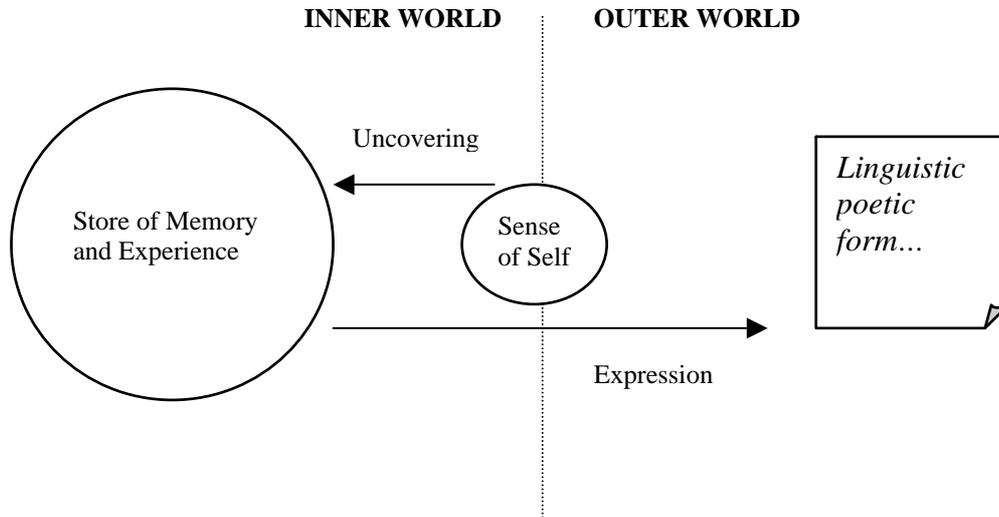
Although my reading and previous experience suggests that I should have had a reasonable appreciation of the complex processes involved in creative activity, this does not appear to have informed my practice during the early part of the study. I would not have espoused the idea that poetry was composed by conscious intention or objective scrutiny, but these ideas seemed part of my “theories in use” (Argyris & Schön, 1974). I also appeared to hold limiting assumption about what writing for personal development involved.

The emerging awareness that 'in practice' I was approaching writing poetry in a problematic manner is articulated on page 53, Chapter 4. The confusion was connected to the aim of writing poetry whilst also inquiring into its potential contribution to personal development. I was setting out to write poetry *and* to explore its relationship to self-experience. As a result, I appeared to be looking for some form of ‘suitable’ experience to put into words or express. It was as if there needed to be *something* to get hold of and then shape into language. My implicit assumption seemed to be that this consisted of experience or memories already within me. Putting this inner world of experience into a poem would open it to understanding, both to others and myself: *“Influenced by psychodynamic ideas I had also imagined that once I had successfully articulated my inner world in a poetic form this would be open to symbolic interpretation.”*³⁵

This idea, although not necessarily invalid, put an emphasis on the understanding of experience once it had found a poetic form but said nothing about the process of writing *per se*, beyond it being something I needed to do. It privileged the idea of a pre-existing store of experience that could be revealed. It also implied separate acts of expression and subsequent understanding; with my ‘self’ as an agent, somehow set apart from my ‘inner’ experience and the ‘outer’ form I was trying to produce.

This implicit model is represented diagrammatically in Figure 6.1.

³⁵ Page 53.

Figure 6.1 Implicit working model of self and the writing process

The recognition that these assumptions were implicit in, or at least fitted with, my day-to-day approach and difficulties with writing only emerged when my approach changed and I experienced my 'self' in the process of writing in a different way. This will be amplified below.

6.4.5 A more embodied and fluid experience of self and the writing process

This category brings together a number of themes relevant to the greater freedom that began to emerge in my writing, and the changes in self-experience that accompanied this, from the end of the second year of the study. The chronological narrative identified a critical period that precipitated this. However, the development and recognition of what was involved took place over a further two years. Pages 60-66 of Chapter 4 describe the unfolding of these observations and my attempt to make sense of them.

Firstly, there was a change towards a less critical or objectifying stance to what I was writing when drafting poetry. This is exemplified in the impact that the advice of William Stafford had on me regarding the need for a lowering of standards.³⁶ It included a willingness to welcome whatever I wrote and 'let it stand', and was practiced through 'free-lining' in which each line acted as the trigger to the next, without

³⁶ Pages 53-54.

deliberately groping for something to express. This connects to a second theme of allowing experience to arise or unfold in the process of writing itself. This emerged following a period of improvisational activity in other media. It was as if there was an experience *within* the process of these activities that led them forward without needing to seek it anywhere 'inside'. This transferred to a new way to engage with the idea of self-experience in writing:

Not analysis or interpretation but giving form to formless experience – having the experience rather than being had by it or trying to analyse and understand it [...] to write to have the experience more... (Journal, 5 September 2003)

I had been struck by the sheer physicality of the experience of making pictures, music and movement and this served as a model for how my sense of embodiment could contribute to writing. This involved moving out of my head, out of the dominance of logical thought and planning, into the immediacy of bodily experience. There is evidence I was aware of my body in the first two years of the study but in a strikingly detached way:

My body is there too. I may not be my body but at some level my body does have some existence. And yet this I can observe it [sic] – recognise it as a thing. (Journal, 2 January 2002)

This contrasts with the immediate sense of the body and its relation to emerging writing at a later point in the inquiry:

Writing from the body, the inner body. Writing from the present, being present - here and now. [...] Looking for the secret – the poetic secret. Words on the page. Giving form to experience, transforming experience, manifesting on the page [...] the blank page – already looking crowded. (Journal, 1 July 2003)

This awareness of embodied feeling represented a distinct expansion in self-experience within the writing process. Subsequent observations about how such experience connected with language arose through recognition of the way imagery could mediate between bodily sensations and verbal thought. This included a disconcerting awareness of how much of my general mental rumination was underpinned by subtle, usually visual, images of myself in various situations. These images seemed to fuel thought and take my attention away from current bodily sensations. With regard to writing poetry, an image could lead to an idea that I might decide to write about but which I then found unable to take forward. It was only when I returned from the ideas to the bodily feeling that accompanied the image that I might find some way to develop it. It was as if the image could be generative of more creative thought through close attention to bodily

feeling. The direction of my attention, from images to thoughts, or images to bodily feeling, appeared to make a significant difference. My observations suggested that bringing my attention back from thought to arising images, and the feelings and sensations that accompanied them, led the writing of poetry forward; particularly if I followed any feeling of interest or spontaneous shifts of attention that might occur:

Certainly seems important to try and follow the lead of interest and desire – of what seems to capture my interest and attention – rather than to impose some 'idea' or image of what I should be doing – should be writing. (Journal, 28 July 2003)

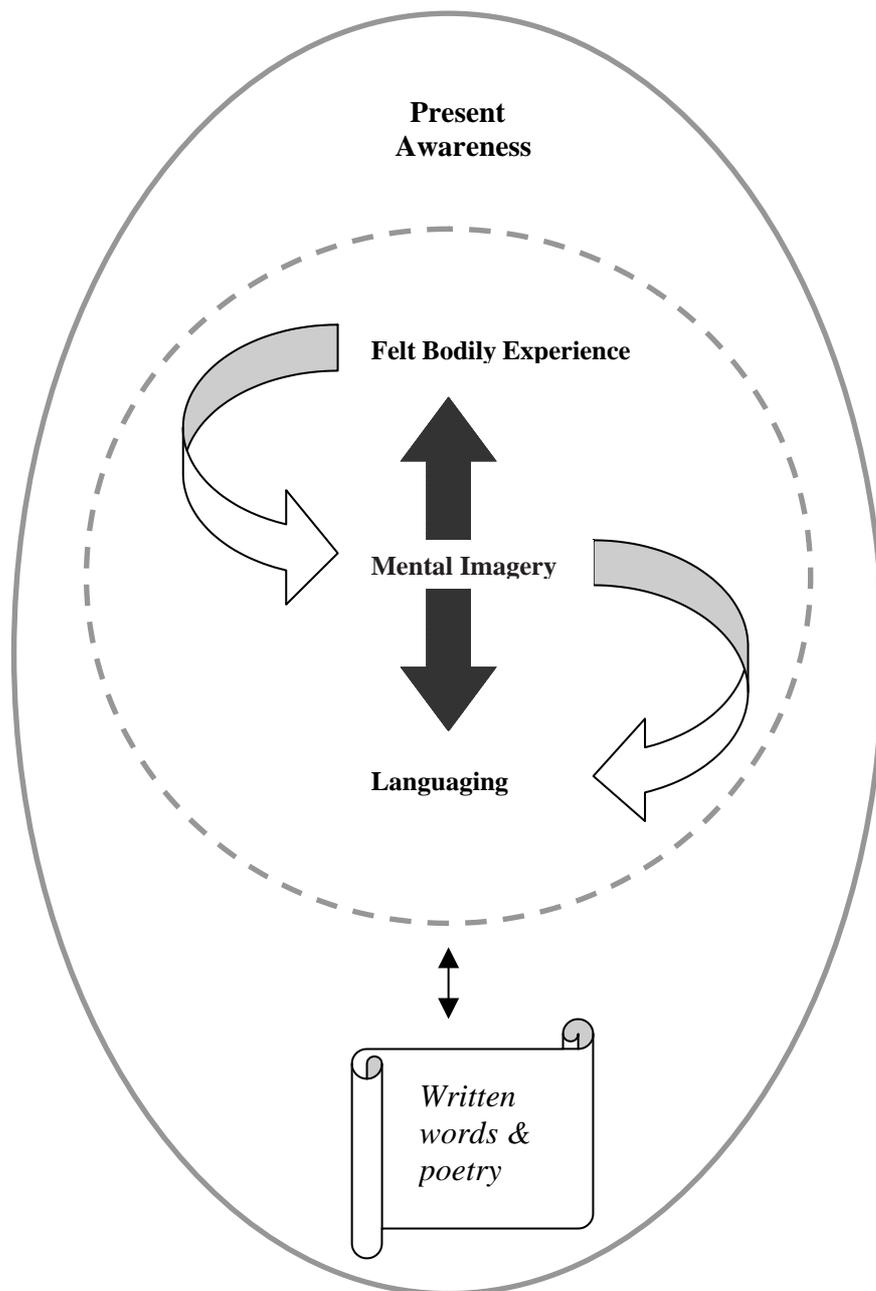
...mindful to what is passing in the mind – note the value of workshop exercises – forced to write quickly/immediately without thinking – so stuff just given door through which it can emerge – uncensored or overwhelmed by the desire to think through one idea or record simply ideas – value of advice to attend to images, sensory impressions and sounds – take one away from the tyranny of logical thought and abstract ideas – another way of tapping in. (Journal, 29 July 2003)

This shift in attention to the way images might 'feel', or towards a sense of bodily presence when writing, brought a further release from concern with achieving any preconceived standard while writing. The act of attending to my body and any spontaneously arising images shifted the locus of evaluation and response from the level of ideas, and the imagined perspective of others, to the level of my own immediate experience. As a result my self-experience enlarged and became more differentiated. Bodily sensations and sensory images were vividly present alongside verbal thought and reasoning. Each seemed distinctive but none seemed to be exclusively 'me'. There was less sense of any controlling centre but of a variety of experiences, including thought, arising in an interconnected way. Images seemed to serve a function that linked bodily feeling to words. There was a sense that 'I' was observing all of this, however, this had the quality of a simple awareness rather than any determining or separate personal identity. The awareness had an open quality and the more I settled into it, the more relaxed and at ease I felt when writing. There was less sense of a fixed or separate point of view, and a greater inclusiveness to unfolding patterns of experience linked to changes in the direction and focus of my attention.

In this frame of mind I no longer felt alienated from the poetry that I produced, even if critical thoughts did cross my mind. If something didn't feel right, I could try and *feel* why and look for something else. In this way writing contained more 'play', in the sense of a greater freedom of movement. When writing most productively, it felt that I could move between an immersed state of letting the writing emerge, and then step back

to view it from a more detached and wider perspective, before moving into it again. The quality of my attention seemed critical. If my attention became too rigid, difficulties might appear and my sense of myself could constrict; when it was flexible my writing tended to progress and I experienced myself in a correspondingly more fluid and inclusive way. This experience of myself in relation to the writing process is depicted in Figure 6.2.

Figure 6.2 Emergent model of self and the writing process



Unlike the model that was implicit in my initial attempts to write, there was no sense of experience that needed translation into words by a separate self, or aspect of self, over time. There was, instead, an awareness that could encompass all experience that arose in the moment, whether physical or mental. The process of writing was not dependent on an act of putting *into* words so much as finding words that followed the fluctuation of bodily feelings and arising images, and then returning to move them forward in a continuously developing way. The process could start at any place, for example, with words that provoked certain feelings and images; hence the use of the coinage ‘*linguaging*’ in Figure 6.2 in preference to verbalisation or verbal thinking. This activity seemed dependent on allowing attention to move flexibly across the entire domain of felt experience, fluctuating as necessary between immersion in and detachment from whatever arose.

6.5 Summary and focus for theoretical explication

The outcomes of the analyses presented in this chapter and the themes relating to self-experience found in the poetry in Chapter 5 are summarised in Table 6.4. This includes the narrative structure of my research experience, themes relating to self-experience in the selections of uncrafted writing and completed poetry, and factors prominent in my experience of the process of writing. The outcomes of these analyses can be triangulated to reveal a consistent overall picture.

The form of my narrative account corresponds closely to an archetypal or ‘*monomythic*’ pattern of how journeys of personal change, discovery or transformation are frequently experienced and depicted (Campbell, 2004). The themes found in the uncrafted work, written in the period leading up to the turning point of the investigation, vividly reflect the experience of struggle, turmoil, and impending personal crisis associated with this critical period. In contrast, the themes from the poetry that was completed reflect the passage of change across the entire study. Many of the themes identified here closely parallel the storyline of separation, initiation, and reunion described by Campbell and other writers. It was a surprise to discover these correspondences and was confirming of my direct sense of having negotiated an unexpectedly difficult but significant period of personal development.

Table 6.4 Summary of analysis of poetry and narrative account

| Narrative Structure of experience | Themes from poetry and uncrafted writing | Factors relating self-experience to writing |
|---|--|--|
| <p><i>Chronological elements:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Setting out on a journey of discovery. 2. Experiencing a prolonged period of difficulty and challenge. 3. Allowing a change of direction – following an unpremeditated path. 4. Finding greater freedom to write. 5. Opening the products of this to external view. 6. Experiencing and accepting a collapse in the feeling of personal agency. 7. Emerging with a more fluid sense of self. 8. Experiencing a greater freedom in writing poetry. | <p><i>Themes from uncrafted poetry:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A desire for greater freedom but resistance to it. 2. The breakdown of existing structures and connections. 3. The tension between holding on and letting go. 4. The turmoil/consequences of allowing change. | <p><i>Identified factors:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The failure of conscious intention. 2. The experience of an ‘objectifying process’. 3. An assumed or implicit idea of self in the writing process. 4. A more embodied and fluid experience of self in the writing process. |
| <p><i>Narrative form:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A journey with a purpose. 2. An obstacle/confrontation with difficulty. 3. A crisis. 4. A breakthrough or turning point dependent on relinquishment and acceptance. 5. An outcome where the sense of self is changed. | <p><i>Themes from completed poetry:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Seeking connection. 2. Loss and separation. 3. Failures of language or meaning. 4. Search and reunion. 5. Allusions to death and re-birth. 6. Recognising what was always present. 7. Embodiment and awareness. | |

Themes present in the completed poetry prefigure the factors found from the analysis that linked self-experience directly to the process of writing. These concerned: failures of language and meaning, separation, recognising what was always present, and the place of embodiment and awareness. The different forms of analysis all suggest that writing poetry was associated with changes in self-experience that were largely unanticipated and not consciously determined. They also all suggest that the outcome, although ultimately liberating, involved considerable struggle and the need for a form of relinquishment or letting-go. The relation of this to self-experience is revealed most clearly in the implicit and changed models of self identified in relation to the process of writing. A striking and unexpected discovery was that it was not the content of particular experiences as much as the quality of *experiencing* that felt critical to these changes. Corroborative connections can thus be discerned across all the forms of analysis, with a clear link found between self-experience and a changed process of writing.

As Table 6.4 shows, it would be possible to answer the third research question – what are the key relationships found between self-experience and the writing of poetry? – with aspects from all of the analyses employed. However, the factors identified as impacting on the *process* of writing struck me as the most personally important, practically relevant, and theoretically significant outcomes. The archetypal pattern of the narrative of change is interesting, but does not open up any obvious new ground. Further examination of the personal content of my experience and poetry could be revealing, but may not have more general relevance. It is thus the four factors set out in Tables 6.3 and 6.4, relating self-experience to my changed process of writing, that were chosen to be the focus of the theoretical examination that follows in Part III.

Part III

Theoretical Explication

Note on aims, structure and associated publications

The chapters in this section address the fourth research question of the study by examining how the relationships found between self-experience and the writing of poetry might be understood theoretically. The aim is to explicate the material presented in Part II by drawing on, developing, and where possible synthesising, theoretical perspectives that are consistent with the outcomes of the first-person inquiry. The analysis of my experience is employed in an inductive manner to inform the identification and critical integration of salient theory. This is focused on the four factors found to relate self-experience to the writing process and how these changed over the course of the study. The hope is to illuminate the lived experience of the investigation in a way that remains grounded in that experience while also constructing a framework of understanding that has wider practical and theoretical relevance.

Chapter 7 examines the failure of my conscious efforts to write poetry from the point of view of writer's block and develops a framework of how poetry may be related to the combined logic of conscious and unconscious processes. Chapter 8 links this thesis to the notion of embodied cognition and the nature and relational context of self-experience. Finally, Chapter 9 examines the mediating influence of attentional processes on my subsequent experience and practice of writing.

Some formative aspects of the work presented in this section took place concurrently with the personal research investigation. Two publications emerged from this period. One concerns the relationship between unconscious processes and poetry (Maltby, 2003), the other psychodynamic models of change and development (Leiper & Maltby, 2004).

7 Conscious Intention and the Logic of Poetry

For two years the basis of my inquiry into writing poetry was critically obstructed. My failure to write poetry that felt personally meaningful was a source of frustration and despondency. I recognised a parallel with Marion Milner's (1957) account of her creative struggles with painting and the realization developed that, like it or not, my inability to write was the starting point of my investigation. Like Milner's experience with painting, writing poetry was something I wanted to do but initially failed to accomplish. I had a clearly formed *intention* to write but found that nothing remotely satisfying emerged. This invites an initial consideration of my experience in terms of the well-known concept of writer's block.

7.1 Writer's block

7.1.1 Creative blocks and personal imperatives

Despite widespread use of the term the phenomenon of writer's block has only relatively recently become the focus of critical examination (e.g. Kantor, 1995; Leader, 1991). Kantor suggests that it is best seen as part of a broader category of 'creative block' that can impact on creative work in a range of different disciplines. This is congruent with the similarities between my experience with poetry and Milner's with painting. Kantor takes a diagnostic approach to this experience, which he does not see as a syndrome in its own right but as a frequent consequence of many other disorders. His proposed model of therapy is largely supportive and lays stress on the relationship between the would-be creator and their environment. For example he asks: "What can I do to help my artist, what can I do to save my artist from the bad effects of changing tastes and hostile critics?" (Kantor, 1995, p. 171)

I certainly searched for some underlying problem to explain my difficulty. However, I was never able to identify a *separate* problem that adequately accounted for it, in other areas of my life I was functioning adequately. The problem *was* my inability to write poetry when I wanted to do so. My ensuing distress involved a sense of inadequacy, of being unable to achieve my intentions through an act of will. There was a feeling of defeat and powerlessness but no obvious sign of something else being wrong. However, there was a definite echo of Kantor's stress on environmental context.

Confusion and concerns about what was expected and what I expected of myself, in the context of a doctoral study, loomed large.

This is not to deny the reality of writer's block arising from other significant problems. For example, Flaherty (2004) presents a compelling account of the opposite extremes of hypergraphia and writer's block through the lens of underlying neurological processes. She contrasts the compulsion to write experienced in some manic states with the blocks associated with depression and anxiety. She then makes a significant observation about writer's block:

Writer's block is not agraphia, the selective loss of the skill to write (usually caused by strokes, and strikingly rare). Unlike agraphia, writer's block tends to be restricted to a genre of writing or particular project, with all other forms of writing normal. (Flaherty, 2004, p. 83)

This parallels my experience of a specific difficulty with writing poetry while remaining productive with other forms of writing. Flaherty suggests that writer's block affects what matters most to the writer's self-identity. For example, Coleridge suffered blocks with his poetry while remaining fluent in other areas of writing. In contrast, Elbow (2000) reports that his nascent academic career foundered because of his chronic inability to write academic essays after taking up a scholarship at Oxford.

The above observations highlight the role of the concept of self and the context of the work in the experience of creative block. Both a heightened self-referential concern with outcome and a potentially critical context seem plausible contributors to block. The anxieties generated by these factors may have a significant functional and emotional impact that appears divorced from other areas of life. Relief from the resulting conflict, between intended but inhibited creative activity, could presumably be achieved *by* the act of successful creation, or by simply abandoning the attempt to create. However, the latter solution may not be straightforward if it undermines a valued self-identity, or goes against what Kavalier-Adler (1993) has described as a "compulsion to create" rooted in the need to resolve or progress an important developmental issue. In these circumstances the creative imperative is fuelled by an attempt to address a felt need, so a block represents a shortcoming that may be inherently painful. This has resonance with my desire to conduct a creative investigation explicitly linked to my own development.

7.1.2 Creative block and procrastination

Creative block can be compared to its close relative, procrastination. In procrastination *postponing* action is widely seen as a means of reducing anxiety or discomfort and thus serves a self-regulatory function (Steel, 2007). For Boice, procrastination and block are essentially “problems of excessive self-consciousness” (Boice, 1996, p. xx). In his scheme procrastination is related to the reduction of an immediate state of discomfort, whereas blocking is often stimulated by a context of anticipated public exposure or criticism. The nature of the self-experience involved can also be distinguished. In procrastination relief of anxiety is achieved through avoidance of the task, but in blocking there can be repeated but abortive attempts to undertake the task, with increasing levels of frustration incurred. In writer’s block it is common for writers to continue unsuccessful efforts to write rather than to abandon the effort. The procrastinator postpones action whereas the blocked writer is more fundamentally *unable* to write, despite their continuing attempts to do so. My experience with writing poetry was consistent with this description of blocking and contrasts with times when I have procrastinated over other writing tasks.

The self-consciousness arising from the context of writing within a doctoral research project seemed an important aspect of the block that I experienced. However, it remains striking that I could write successfully and to the level of publication in other forms of professional writing during this period. This suggests something more specific about ‘creative writing’, or the writing of poetry in particular, that presented a significant additional impediment. This may have been linked to the degree of importance that I attached to it; for example the question of whether I was aspiring to become a poet. However, my more persistent sense was of simply not being able to find a way to write poems that felt real or alive. My frustration was that I simply couldn’t seem to do it. This suggests the importance of looking more closely at the nature of the writing task involved and difficulties that may have been related directly to this.

7.1.3 The challenge of creative writing

Leader (1991) examines the anxieties involved in creative writing from the perspective of both psychoanalytic and literary theory. The need for defences against anxiety is a central aspect of psychodynamic theory. The relation of these to unconscious aspects of creativity will be examined further in Section 7.2. Leader also identifies specific

literary anxieties such as Bloom's (1973) notion of the 'anxiety of influence' which concerns the dilemma faced by writers seeking originality of expression in a culture permeated by literary models and standards. He also explores the romantic notion of 'the sublime' and its association with poetry.

The sublime is concerned with limitless and therefore formless objects, the sort of objects which can only be conceived by what Kant, in the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, calls a "super-thought" of totality. The experience of the sublime is thus one of a discontinuity, of a lack of harmony or correspondence between the object and our attempt to represent it. If the object itself is "what is beyond all comprehension great," it cannot be natural because in nature all magnitudes are relative. Only our imagination can encompass the absolute magnitudes of sublime phenomena. Hence the sublime is "that, the mere capacity of thinking which [sic] evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense." (Leader, 1991, p. 135)

Leader is pointing here to a potential block caused by the nature of what creative writing, and particularly poetry, may be attempting to represent from a romantic standpoint. The notion of something transcending conventional forms of thought and language as the object of poetry places a daunting challenge in the path of the would-be poet. However, there may be intrinsic reasons why conventional thinking and use of language differ from the kind of cognition needed for writing poetry. For example, Jaynes (2000) has proposed that the increasing dominance of left hemisphere specialisation for language may have led to a relative atrophy of right hemisphere function, and that it is the latter that underpinned the historic importance of poetry. In effect he argues that our dominant modes of cognition have become less poetic. Barfield (1999) makes a historical and literary based argument for a similar evolutionary change of consciousness that is reflected in the increasingly abstract use of language.

My relative ease with writing in an expository prose form and my observation that this seemed to interfere with the writing of poetry suggests that conflicting cognitive processes may have played a part in my difficulties. Leader (1991) is critical of cognitive theories of writer's block for ignoring the role of will and affect and reducing it to cognitive errors and deficiencies. However, this criticism is less applicable to recent work in cognitive science that places more emphasis on emotion and agency (e.g. Núñez & Freeman, 1999). In contrast to Leader, Hjortshoj (2001) is critical of theories of writing blocks that focus exclusively on emotional or personal issues and neglect problems inherent in the writing itself. He suggests that:

Our own efforts to produce good writing are the factors that make progress slow and frustrating; and these same factors, when they become sufficiently entangled, bring progress to a halt. (Hjortshoj, 2001, p. vii)

Hjortshoj's reference to effort is based on his observation that writer's block often afflicts good writers or those seeking to take forward their writing to a new level or in a new context. The conscious intention to write well can lead to inappropriate or ineffective strategies for writing. For example, strategies successful in one context are applied to another where they are less appropriate; the resulting problems stimulate renewed but further misdirected effort, which ultimately leads to a sense of personal obstruction or inadequacy. Here continued failure is not for the want of trying, but *because* of it.

7.1.4 The limits of conscious intention

The inefficacy of my conscious intention was a prominent factor in my experience of trying to write poetry. Although well aware of the limits of conscious determination of behaviour from a psychoanalytic perspective, this inclined me to attribute my difficulty to conflicting unconscious motivations. There is, however, another perspective on conscious intention that proposes that its function is not determinative at all, but a means of ascribing a locus of agency.

Wenger (2002) offers a persuasive empirically grounded review of what he suggests is the illusion of conscious will. His argument is derived largely from psychological studies. Among these are investigations of the relationship between the neurological precursors of action and the conscious experience of the intention to act. These have shown how actions are initiated before the individual has the experience of intending or willing the action. In other words actions are underway before we consciously intend them. Wenger argues that conscious intention, or the 'feeling of willing', accompanies some actions and has a useful purpose but isn't the origin or cause of the action. Rather it provides a *feeling* of agency, or authorship, that enables individuals to differentiate actions initiated by 'their' organism from those arising from other sources. Wenger argues that this has real evolutionary advantages. Without it the ability to recognise and accept responsibility is not possible. It is how we come to the sense that we are the authors of our own actions but not of other people's. It is a critical component of our usual sense of self and agency but does not objectively reflect the nature of the mental processes involved in the production of either simple or complex behaviour.

Wenger suggests that the illusion of will is compelling. He gives examples where people believe their actions are intended when they could not have been. “It is as though people aspire to be ideal agents who know all their actions in advance” (2002, p. 145). Clearly, attempts to exert greater will or effort where the underlying strategy or approach is at fault are unlikely to succeed. It follows that efforts to consciously plan or will something of this sort could lead to a sense of failure and may undermine the sense of self as an effective agent. Interestingly, Wenger points to a corollary of the above in the potential for a “projection of agency”:

...the actions our bodies perform are never self-evidently our own. We are merely guided in interpreting them as consciously willed by our “selves” because of our general tendency to try to understand behaviour in terms of the conscious willed actions of specific minds – along with evidence that, in this particular case, the mind driving the action seems to be ours. The causal agent we perceive at our own core – the “I” to which we refer when we say we are acting – is only one of the possible authors to whom we may attribute what we do. We may easily be led into thinking there are others. (Wegner, 2002, p. 187)

Wenger uses this to explain phenomena such as spirit possession, disassociative identity disorder and other forms of what he calls “virtual agents”. It would also be possible to apply this argument to the way poetic or creative inspiration has been understood as the activity or inspiration of a Muse, and indeed to how this has been replaced for some by the activity of *the* unconscious mind. Faced with a failure of will or conscious intention poets may seek another source of agency for their work, to relieve some of the felt burden of creation, and to account for material and ideas that are recognised to emerge outside their bidding.

It is in poetry, more than any other form of creative writing, that the role of a Muse or unconscious has been invoked as a critical source of creative action. Poetry provides the model of the writer’s need for some form of help beyond the usual bounds of self. In the many books now available offering advice on the writing of poetry there are only qualified claims about how much can be learnt from instruction (e.g. Oliver, 1994). The main recommendation is to read a lot of poetry and practice writing it. The history and principles of prosody can be taught and motivation stimulated, but the emergence of satisfying poetry is definitely not guaranteed. The suggestion is that the writing of poetry depends on a process that may be nurtured and enhanced, but not consciously engineered.

My experience supports the above conclusion. It suggests that a conscious intention to write poetry is insufficient and may even interfere with the processes needed for its writing. In my case, this seemed connected with self-conscious anxieties about success and criticism but also with the nature of poetry itself. It was partly through what Shaw (1988) calls the “paradox of intention”, or “reaching the goal by giving up the attempt to reach it”, that I found a way through this difficulty. Critically, this involved a period in which I effectively abandoned my attempts to write poetry and *followed* impulses that led in new and unpremeditated directions.

This analysis leaves open the question of precisely *how* the writing of poetry may differ from the demands of other forms of writing and thus, why poetry was not amenable to the same strategies that were effective in my composition of reflective and expository prose.

7.2 The poetic unconscious

7.2.1 Poiesis

As many have observed, one of the defining qualities of poetry is that it defies paraphrase or a complete rendering of its significance in any other form than through the poem itself. Analysis and interpretation may add to a poem’s appreciation but do not constitute its heart. If poetry is meaningful the meaning seems to reside, at least in part, beyond the bounds of logical explanation. The words used in poetry often point beyond their denotative meanings and conjure a form of experience that needs to be felt as much as understood. If the language of poetry points beyond words and conveys something that cannot be fully grasped by logical thought, it might be expected to require more than a reasoned use of language for its creation. Indeed, although poetry has recognizable devices and forms, it has been argued that it is, “in the last resort, an abuse of conventional language” (King, 1975, p. 16).

The close connection between poetic creation and the inherent qualities of poetry is implied in the word *poiesis*. The very act of making containing within it the form of the thing being made. As noted above this creative action has long been associated with more than the rational power of the mind. Just as a good poem transcends reductive explanation, a poem’s creation involves something beyond the application of conscious

reason or known principles of technical accomplishment. In both form and creation, poetry appears heavily dependent on processes that are normally beneath consciousness.

7.2.2 Psychoanalysis, dreams and the poetic unconscious

Psychoanalysis has approached the subject of artistic creativity from various perspectives and has made influential contributions, particularly regarding the motivation for creative work. Freud (1908) saw artistic creativity as comparable in many ways to neurotic symptom formation, in that it was a more socially acceptable means of achieving the disguised fulfilment of unacceptable wishes. In contrast, those working within the Kleinian tradition have often focused on the way creative activity can serve a reparative function, by striving for the symbolic repair of the object that has been damaged in phantasy. This has the effect of restoring the object and the self (Hymer, 1983). When such unconscious impulses shape creation they may be discernible in the created work. This opens a fruitful door to the critical interpretation and amplification of art from a psychoanalytic perspective. It is this model which informed some of my initial assumptions about the way writing poetry could lead to personal insight and change.

However, if we set aside the motivation to create, we find another line of observation about the process of unconscious creativity and the form it takes. The unconscious is, by definition, not known to us; we can only know it by its products. Of these the dream is perhaps the purest example. One of Freud's critical contributions was to look behind the dream and to decipher what he described as the dream-work: the unconscious process that he postulated manufactured the dream. In doing so he elaborated his theory of wish-fulfilment, but he also described some features of the mental activity that can be traced in the way dreams are constructed. This he formulated as 'primary process', a form of cognition characterized by the properties of condensation, displacement, timelessness, no negation and the replacement of external with internal reality (Freud, 1915). Without these qualities our dreams would not be as they are.

The similarities between the distinctive properties of dreams and the properties found in poetry have been widely recognised. The parallels were explicitly formulated by Sharpe (1949) in her work on dream interpretation. Sharpe argued that dreams and poetry could both trace their origins to unconscious experience of some sort, particularly of a felt or bodily kind. The dream functions to communicate this

experience but can only reveal what is unknown to consciousness through what is, or can be, known. She elucidates this by comparison with the characteristics of poetic diction:

The laws of poetic diction, evolved by the critics of great poetry and the laws of dream formation as discovered by Freud, spring from the same unconscious sources and have many mechanisms in common. (Sharpe, 1949, p. 19)

Sharpe shows how many features of poetic diction, such as the use of simile, metaphor, and metonymy, have equivalencies in dreams and can be used as an aid to their interpretation. She particularly emphasises the importance of the sound of language and its unconscious phonetic significance, which she suggests is closely tied to early developmental experiences, especially bodily states, and the way that language is acquired through speech.

The parallels Sharpe draws are largely in the service of understanding the nature of dreams through comparison with the figures of speech and forms of imagery that have been identified in poetry. The underlying assumption is that both dreams and poetry take the form they do because they derive from, and reflect in their construction, a common form of unconscious mental activity. For the literary critic, Lionel Trilling, adopting this analytic perspective brought with it profound implications. As he pointedly observed, it was a way of thinking “which makes poetry indigenous to the very constitution of the mind” (Trilling, 1950, p. 49).

7.2.3 Language and the poetic unconscious

The linkage between the structure of language and the unconscious has been influentially elaborated by Lacan (2007). Although our experience of dreaming is largely visual, Lacan did not see this as a purely pictorial mode of representation but as a kind of text or form of writing. This is structured by the unconscious according to its purposes, which for Lacan were pre-eminently rhetorical. The function of rhetorical language is to persuade or influence rather than to convey accurate information or reveal true intentions. Rhetoric utilizes many of the same forms and figures of speech as poetry but in other areas of discourse, perhaps most obviously today in advertising and political debate. However, for Lacan, everyday speech is also saturated by it in a way that is often completely unconscious.

Lacan's equation of language and the unconscious is based on the equivalence that can be drawn between, on the one hand, condensation and metaphor: where one thing can stand for a number of others; and on the other, displacement and metonymy: where representation can move from one thing to another, usually by association. In effect he sees metaphor and metonymy as direct functions of the unconscious and privileges these linguistic terms over those coined by Freud. Indeed, we might note in passing the metaphorical nature of the terms condensation and displacement, both of which seek to illuminate mental activity via a known physical process. One of the merits of Lacan's emphasis is that it is closer to the account we actually give of our dreams, which is usually through verbal description. It also brings us nearer to the kind of listening required in the analytic context, where sensitivity to language can be crucial. Ogden refers to this, in poetic terms borrowed from Seamus Heaney, as "the music of what happens" (Ogden, 2001, p. 77).

Building on a Lacanian framework, Kristeva (1984) has constructed her own distinctive model of the development of language as a signifying process. This moves from what she labels a 'semiotic' pre-oedipal phase, to the 'symbolic' post-oedipal order of acquired language. She has endeavoured to redress Lacan's emphasis on verbal language by considering the preverbal stages of development, where the child babbles and follows rhythms and patterns of sound in response to its maternal and bodily environment. In this unstable multisensory state of being infants have no fixed identity. They are in a state of constant movement and fluid interchange with the world around them, in a manner that accords with Freud's primary process. The acquisition of language and its rules is associated with the imposition of an order, associated with the father, which is a necessary precondition for achieving a relatively stable and separate identity. Although this symbolic order arises from the semiotic, its coherence is threatened by any subsequent eruption of the semiotic. This results in the necessity for a kind of blanket repression of the semiotic level of experience. However, the semiotic may return in subversive forms such as Kristeva's trinity of madness, holiness and poetry. Kristeva (1989) believes that it is the experience of the semiotic emerging in and through language that produces poetry. Features such as metaphor, metonymy, and musicality arise as a creative disruption of the limiting and differentiating experience of language, and thus open access to this more vividly felt area of being.

Kristeva's observations about poetry are connected to those of Sharpe concerning the sound of language and the importance of very early forms of sense experience. Both reflect the increasing interest psychoanalysis has taken in these early phases of development following the seminal work of Klein. Kristeva sees the semiotic as significant in all forms of creativity and refers to the semiotic 'chora', a space or receptacle formed by the infant's link with the mother's body. This draws on Winnicott's (1991) ideas about the holding environment, and the necessity for the emergence of a 'potential space' for the realization of creative experience. This has its origins in the mental and physical space between mother and infant, and provides a context for potentially creative transitions in the way objects, including words, are experienced and used.

7.2.4 Repression and poetic expression

What Sharpe, Lacan and Kristeva all elaborate are links between the nature of poetry and a distinctive form of unconscious mental activity, which they see as underlying it. This is a form of activity that is in marked contrast to the conventional thinking of consciousness and which owes its initial formulation to Freud's description of the primary process. They represent this activity as fundamentally opposed to our normal patterns of thought and language use but as frequently pressing to intrude into it. This opposition, following Freud, is largely considered as an active repressive process that sets out to exclude material from consciousness to enable the required order of consciousness to be established and preserved. For Lacan and Kristeva these repressive forces take on a cultural dimension, which informs aspects of their wider theorizing.

Although this emphasis on repression has much to commend it, and may help illuminate many of the personal struggles that can be involved in writing poetry, it privileges the process of exclusion over what could be termed the *constructive* difficulties that are inherent in the process of creativity. With poetry, this includes the challenges of working in the particular medium of language to realize a satisfying and effective artistic product: a poem being quite literally a "made thing" (Drury, 1995). This suggests more than simply overcoming barriers to repressed content; it implies a facility with the entire process of creative work.

My own difficulties with writing poetry did not seem primarily concerned with unlocking repressed material. They felt more about the struggle to *make something* that

adequately conveyed a deeper level of experience: a level of experience that felt emotionally alive and real, but which I found inherently difficult to shape into a verbal or poetic form. The sense of achievement of this complex constructive task may be one of the profounder satisfactions of successful artistic work. Indeed Rank (1932) has suggested, in counterbalance to Freud, that the neurotic could be seen as a failed artist.

Within classical psychoanalysis the notion of repression has been central to the examination of the unconscious. The repressed unconscious exists because its contents are actively excluded from consciousness. Although there is a pressure to satisfy repressed desires or wishes, this can only be achieved in a disguised form because of the need to maintain repression. Dreams and other manifestations of unconscious activity take the form they do partly from the need to maintain this exclusion. Seen in this light, artistic work is a 'sublimation' of wishes or drives and the created form serves to obtain gratification or expression while still maintaining a level of disguise. Sublimation is, however, a developmental achievement because it is a more adaptive compromise than neurosis or symptom formation.

Despite its centrality to psychoanalytic theory, the nature of how repression actually operates as a psychological process has proved difficult to formulate. Billig (1999) argues that this is due to it being conceived of as an inner process, involving abstract entities such as the id, ego and super-ego, rather than as something that arises in language. In his view, naturally occurring language and conversation is inherently both repressive and expressive. Social processes determine what can be said and not said, and this can be 'internalised' as what individuals are able to think about without shame or anxiety. Thus, while sexual repression operated in both society and thought at the time of Freud, current language use is more obviously repressive in areas such as race. The significance of Billig's analysis here, is the centrality he gives to language in the operation of repression. This places processes of repression firmly at a verbal level of functioning and development, and suggests this is due to what is, or is not, acceptable within the linguistic communities in which our language use is shaped. Billig believes this can account for the idea of emotional repression if it is recognised that consciously experiencing an emotion relies heavily on discursive practices, as well as sensed bodily states. Repression is thus recast as a social phenomenon concerning things that we *could* speak about but collectively avoid doing, other than in suitably disguised ways.

Although repression is at the heart of clinical theory, many analysts have been interested in those aspects of unconscious creativity that are not determined by its operation. Among these is Marion Milner. For example she notes the following observation made on her work by Pontalis:

...he then said that I had considered the dream neither as a message or text to be deciphered nor as a compromise between repressed desires and ego defence mechanisms, but as a witness of a state of being; in fact as an attempt at symbolization rather than as a symbolic language to be decoded... (Milner, 1987, p. 275)

This observation points to a process that seeks representation or symbolization for its own sake: a process which may seek to give conscious thought or external form to what is known or experienced at an unconscious level of being. Milner points to one source of her own thinking about this in the writing of Ehrenzweig (1967) who in her words:

...came to the conclusion that the inarticulate structure of what he calls the 'depth' mind is totally ungraspable by the 'surface' mind, not because of repression of offensive content but because of its structure; and that, because of its peculiar structure it can achieve tasks of integration that are quite beyond the capacity of the conscious surface mind. (Milner, 1987, p. 276)

Ehrenzweig and Milner were both interested in art, particularly visual art, and clearly saw in it something more than a creative but disguised expression of the repressed unconscious. Rather, they saw it as an attempt to give form to a level of experience that is otherwise ungraspable by the conscious mind, the barrier to awareness existing not so much in its content as in its very nature. Milner argued that we needed a fuller understanding of the differences between the "two kinds of thinking" that distinguished these areas of the mind. This was a difference that, in her experience, existed between the "kind of thinking that makes an absolute separation of subject from object, me from not me, seer from seen, and the kind that does not" (Milner, 1957, p. 160). She pointed out that we know a lot about the logic and laws of reasoning of the former, but less about the capacity for fusing or, from a rational point of view, "con-fusing" these distinctions, in the kind of thinking that she suggested underpins the formation of art, including poetry.

Following Freud, the psychoanalyst who has devoted most attention to formulating the logical form of unconscious processes is Ignacio Matte Blanco (1975; 1988). In the remainder of this chapter I will explore his bi-logical theory with a view to demonstrating how this might be applied to the nature of poetry and, in subsequent chapters, to the challenge I experienced in writing it effectively.

7.3 The logical unconscious

7.3.1 Matte Blanco's approach

To talk of the unconscious as logical appears contradictory. The common perception is that the unconscious is irrational and shaped largely by instinctual and emotional forces. What must be remembered is that anything we say about the unconscious is necessarily spoken from the point of view of the conscious mind, and thus with the logic associated with it. From this perspective, the unconscious does not seem to operate by principles that are 'reasonable' or conform to the accepted conventions of logical thought. On the other hand, if there was no logic or order to unconscious processes it would be difficult to see how any pattern at all would be discernible in them. The necessary conclusion seems to be that the unconscious operates according to a form of logic that is distinctly its own. This is where Matte Blanco (1975) begins in his painstaking investigation into the form that this logic takes, and the way that it might be represented and understood.

The first question that arises is: how are we to understand a logic that differs from the logic that we normally use to understand things? To investigate this, Matte Blanco, in a manner reminiscent of Bion, and the later Lacan, turns to a symbolic language other than words – the language of mathematics. This aspect of his work can make it quite intimidating and inaccessible to the non-mathematically trained. It can help to hold in mind that mathematics is essentially concerned with the identification of patterns that are originally observed from the world of experience (Devlin, 1996). The abstraction of this pattern into a mathematical concept (like numbers or shapes) can lead to an investigation of the principles or axioms that operate to govern this. Through their manipulation, these principles may lead to new findings and logical proofs that are independent of any observed phenomena, and thus usually rely on an increasingly abstract form of notation. Many mathematicians find these proofs aesthetically pleasing, and even when they appear counter to common sense they often lead back to tangible applications and unexpected discoveries in the 'real' world.

The observations Matte Blanco starts with are those made by Freud about the five characteristics of primary process thinking. These, as mentioned previously, are the features of displacement, condensation, timelessness, no-negation and the replacement of external with internal reality. These do not correspond to the conventions of logical

thought, which, from the time of Aristotle, have been based on propositions that are either true or false and events that are separated in time and space. What needs to be kept in mind is that this is a form of logic that is abstracted from the way conscious thinking operates, and therefore seems natural or ‘logical’. However, it does not represent the only system of logic that is possible. For example, some of the paradoxical discoveries of quantum mechanics seem to be ‘illogical’ from this point of view and contradict the assumptions of classical physics.

Matte Blanco’s approach was to abstract some kind of logic from the observed properties of unconscious thinking. What he proposed was the concept of ‘symmetric logic’. Following a detailed step-by-step argument, he attempted to show that this could account for all the properties observed by Freud and thus provide a new perspective for thinking about the nature of the unconscious and its activity. It would be impossible to provide a full exposition of Matte Blanco’s argument here. An excellent introduction is provided by Rayner (1995), and some interesting developments by Bomford (1998). What I will endeavour to draw out are some of the general features that seem relevant to the processes involved in both conscious and unconscious creativity.

7.3.2 Symmetric logic

The nature of symmetric logic is developed by Matte Blanco from a consideration of the symmetrizations sometimes seen in conventional thinking, and a property of mathematical set theory, which means a member of a class can sometimes be identical to the class to which it belongs. A logical symmetrization occurs when the relationships between two elements can be reversed. For example, John is the brother of Peter is equivalent to saying Peter is the brother of John. However, it is normally more common to find asymmetric relationships such as: John is the brother of Mary. This does not imply its reverse because Mary is the *sister* of John. Similarly in classing things in sets we find some sets where the elements may be loosely treated as identical to the set, for example, the set of ‘apples’ consists of apples. And in contrast, sets where this identity evidently does not hold, such as the set of ‘things in my kitchen’, which may contain apples but also bananas, a toaster and assorted cutlery. Although this is a contrived illustration, it gives some impression of the relations that can hold when sets are examined mathematically.

In a system of pure symmetric thinking these symmetrizations of relationship, and identity between the elements and the whole of a set, become the rule. As a result a principle of identification operates which makes things equivalent to each other. In this state of mind one thing can stand for another, a part can become the whole, and what are normally thought of as contradictions disappear. The dimensions of time and space also cease to have any absolute significance as if A follows B, in symmetric logic B also follows A. As a consequence these differentiating continua collapse.

Matte Blanco's contention is that this form of logic characterizes unconscious thinking and is what makes it appear so odd and irrational to normal reasoning. In fact, he goes further than this and suggests that it is the very nature of this form of thinking which *makes* it unconscious. This has nothing to do with what the unconscious contains but is structurally determined by the nature of consciousness. Our consciousness emerges and is constructed by processes of discrimination, particularly the identification of differences and hence relations between things in the external world. This becomes embedded in the nature of language and our capacity for conscious thinking. Consciousness simply cannot contain too much symmetric thinking because it dissolves differences, for example the difference between self and other, or a word and what it signifies. As a result consciousness, as we generally know it, requires symmetric logic to function firmly in the background.

This formulation offers a complementary paradigm to repression for understanding the relationship between the activity of the conscious and unconscious mind. It also opens the door to an approach to the role of the unconscious in creativity that is not reliant on the construction of parallels with neurotic or reparative processes. This would be congruent with Ehrenzweig's observation that:

In contrast to illness, creative work succeeds in coordinating the results of unconscious undifferentiation and conscious differentiation and so *reveals*³⁷ the hidden order of the unconscious. (Ehrenzweig, 1967, p. 4)

7.3.3 Thinking, feeling, being and infinity

It might be objected that Matte Blanco's mathematically derived view of the unconscious feels too abstract and 'logical', and that it fails to capture the intensity of

³⁷ Italics added.

emotional experience that psychoanalysis has located there, or the powerful feeling that is reflected in artistic creativity such as poetry. However, this would be a superficial view reflecting an identification of logic with an abstract and purely symbolic form of reasoning. From a symmetric perspective the very distinctions we normally make between thinking and feeling are eroded and melt into something much nearer an experience of being. Feeling is thus rescued from its normal opposition to reason. It becomes instead one of the vital ways that we have access to this level of cognition. This is most clearly illustrated in intense emotional states where the operation of a symmetric mode of thinking becomes almost self evident as it overwhelms the power to discriminate according to rational principles. When you are in love it is 'reasonable' to see all aspects of the lover as perfectly lovable, despite evidence to the contrary; in a paranoid state of mind it 'makes sense' to feel fearful, as so much is being located in the class of dangerous things.

Such examples of extreme feeling point to one of Matte Blanco's most interesting ideas. He notes that one of the mathematical properties of sets where the elements are equivalent to the whole set, is that the set must be infinite. For example, as I write this I have a number of books on my desk. Each book belongs to the finite set I might call 'the books on my desk'. Mathematically none of the individual books can be treated as the same as the whole set 'the books on my desk'. However, each book can be treated as identical to the imaginary set of 'all books', which is potentially infinite. This has a subtle emotional resonance, as I do sometimes find myself holding, examining, and looking at a book as if appreciating and savouring its quality of simply being a book. I can't imagine any such experience for the quality of a book just being a book on my desk. With extreme emotions this infinitization is experienced far more concretely. Thus when deeply in love all that is lovable can actually feel contained in one person or, for some, all dangerous ideas may seem located in one book. In effect symmetrical thinking moves from the background of experience to a, usually temporary, domination of consciousness.

If symmetrical thinking dominates experience in a sustained way it can be associated with what may become disturbed states of mind. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that it is somehow the fault of the symmetric form of thinking. The problem lies as much in the failure of consciousness to accommodate it, or more specifically, in

the inability of consciousness to entertain this experience while also sustaining its capacity to discriminate adequately according to conventional reason. It's interesting to speculate whether herein resides both the similarity and difference observed between madness, mystical experience and poetry. If the doors of perception were cleansed it might indeed be possible, according to symmetric logic, to see the world as infinite. Or, as previously mentioned with regard to romanticism, to approach the sublime. However, without the power of discrimination we might not be able to see the world at all.

In discussing symmetric logic and the concept of the unconscious, Matte Blanco makes it clear that he sees unconsciousness and symmetric thinking as just two attributes of what is a fundamentally different mode of being than the asymmetric form of experience that we are usually conscious of. He describes this deeper level of being as the symmetrical mode but indicates that:

All our descriptions of symmetrical being are inaccurate because symmetrical being is indescribable in an accurate way and is ineffable. (Matte Blanco, 1975, p. 101)

7.3.4 Bi-logic

Developmentally, Matte Blanco sees the symmetric mode as the fundamental mode of being, and as the base from which asymmetric discrimination arises. However, in its operation symmetric thinking is always united in some degree with an element of asymmetric thinking and vice versa. Neither a totally symmetrical nor totally asymmetrical pattern of thought seems cognitively sustainable. In the former everything would merge into a complete identity. We might imagine this as nothingness, literally a no-separate-thing-ness. In the latter everything would be split through an unlimited differentiation, which would lead to a strangely similar state of formlessness. This necessitates what he describes as bi-logic, the combination of symmetric and asymmetric modes of thought. Bi-logic can take different forms depending on the precise pattern and use made of the different modes of thinking. It varies from forms that are largely based on symmetric logic and are thus most deeply unconscious, and forms that are largely asymmetric and therefore characteristic of conscious thinking. Bi-logic shifts the focus from the differences between the two modes of thought towards a focus on their dialectical interplay in all forms of knowing, both conscious and unconscious. In doing so, Matte Blanco undermines the very idea of

‘the unconscious’ as a specific area of the mind, and moves towards a framework in which the level and kind of awareness that is possible is crucially determined by the *form* of mental activity involved.

7.4 Poetry and bi-logical thinking

7.4.1 Bi-logical forms of thinking

Following his identification of two logically contrasting modes of thought, Matte Blanco introduces his integrative conception of bi-logical forms or structures. These reflect different degrees and patterns of interaction between asymmetric and symmetric thinking. These forms can be applied to the examination of concrete products of mental activity, such as different states of mind or examples of speech and writing. It seems probable that any form of recognition or pattern making, including symbolization itself, owes its origins to a symmetric mode of thought that enables one thing to be identified with another.³⁸ Although the structure of language is largely asymmetric and built on discrimination, its development and use seem highly dependent on symmetric forms of thinking. The more language use is focused on factual communication and propositional reasoning the more asymmetric it tends to become. When used to convey feeling, experience, or value, it exhibits more symmetric features. As we have seen, in extreme emotional states the symmetric mode can even come to dominate both discourse and perception of the world, in a manner that parallels Kristeva’s notion of semiotic intrusion into the symbolic realm.

7.4.2 Poetry and bi-logic

Although poetry is extremely varied in the forms it takes, it is possible to consider its generic properties from a bi-logical perspective. Indeed Matte Blanco suggests, in passing, that art and especially poetry corresponds to a particular bi-logical structure, which he labels: “Simassi” (1975, p. 68). This stands for the “simultaneous use of asymmetric and symmetric thinking”. Since poetry is associated with conveying feeling and experience we would expect it to contain a high level of symmetrization. However, if this were to predominate it would potentially result in a form of unpersuasive emoting rather than the carefully crafted and highly organised form of expression found in the

³⁸ This is developed further in Chapter 8.

best poetry. Doggerel or overly sentimental poetry could be seen to exemplify this. In order to contain a high level of symmetrization without requiring excessive “poetic faith”, or “suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge, 1997, p. 179), it may be necessary to simultaneously increase both symmetric and asymmetric features of language use, and to find a way of combining these together in a satisfactory way.

At this stage it may be helpful to exchange Matte Blanco’s logically derived terms for expressions that are easier to grasp intuitively in the context of poetry. My suggestion is that we can consider poetry in terms of its exhibition of, on the one hand, ‘patterns of identity’, which corresponds to symmetric thinking, and on the other to the construction of ‘means of differentiation’, which is an essential feature of asymmetric thinking (Maltby, 2003). In applying these two dimensions it is useful to remember that the identities that lie behind symmetric thinking are not merely verbal, but arise from a preverbal background of sense experience. So identities can be established by sounds, images, or patterns of movement. Identities established in these ways can be differentiated below a level of verbal statement. For example, the rhythm of a poem like Auden’s ‘Night Train’ has a very clear pattern of identity with the actual rhythm and sound of a steam train on a track. When the tempo of the rhythm alters the identity remains, but we have a differentiated sense of the train speeding up or slowing down without any need to use these words. Williams (2006) comments that although this example is clear enough it does not go very much beyond the level of a simple impression, he suggests a more complex illustration would be Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* that display “symphonic movements of emotional tone, working at a far more fundamental level than any verbal argument” (p. 35).

One of the most widely noted qualities of poems is their condensed use of language. This, taken together with the preceding argument, suggests a refined proposal for the way we might consider the characteristics of poetry from a bi-logical point of view. The proposal is that compared to ordinary language poetry typically makes use of an increased density of both ‘patterns of identity’ and ‘means of differentiation’, in a constructed combination that enables them to operate simultaneously. This is an extremely general thesis and not an attempt to reductively explain poetry. It may, however, provide a means of linking the nature of poetry with a more extensive view of the capacity for knowing and being that can arise through the interrelation of conscious

and unconscious processes. More specifically, it provides a means of examining the difficulties that I experienced in writing poetry from the perspective of the kinds of mental activity that may be intrinsic to poetic creation. Before considering the process that may underpin such creative activity further, it is important to determine whether some of the forms and features that are commonly found in poetry can be correlated with the bi-logical framework that is proposed.

7.4.3 The bi-logical nature of poetic form and diction

The first observation that might be made concerns the very existence of something that we recognize as a poem. When written down a poem is normally easily recognisable as a differentiated object in its own right. It usually stands out from the page in a much more obvious way than normal prose and this contributes to its distinct identity as a poem. We are already alerted to approach it in a particular way, as poetry, and thus to distinguish it from other forms of writing. This creates a differentiating boundary to the contents of the poem, similar to the way a frame separates a picture from the wall. All that is within is identified together as constituting the poem. However highly differentiated the contents may be, everything must belong to the poem for the poem to be effective. Editing can often involve the painful excision of wonderfully poetic lines or phrases because they don't meet this requirement.

Poetry is frequently written in verse forms that contain patterns of structural identity in areas such as rhythm, rhyme and stanza length. This creates an identifiable form to these poems that ensures the contents are made identical in some respects, for example through the continuity of metre or rhyming sounds, while being more clearly differentiated in terms of others, for example through the effects of stress, selection of rhyme, or position in the formal sequence. An illustration of the latter would be the closing couplet of a Shakespearian sonnet. Regular verse forms also identify the poem as belonging to a class of poems against which its individual features will then more clearly stand out. Even poetry that eschews a regular form is usually written in lines. In fact many people see the line as the defining property of poetry. The use of lines means the usual logic of sentences can be subtly disrupted. Words are differentiated according to their place on the line rather than just through the rules of grammar and syntax. At the same time each line serves to break up and differentiate the poem. The identity between lines is obvious when established metrically, but can also be established and

varied through line length and cadence. Most fundamentally lines share the fundamental property of simply being lines, which is, as far as bi-logic is concerned, essentially a pattern of identity or symmetry. Lines thus seem to provide a central means through which poems can be constructed to increase both identity and differentiation and combine them in a satisfying way.

Figures of speech such as metaphor, simile, and metonymy have already been considered in relation to the work of Sharpe and Lacan. Metaphor is perhaps the purest example of a pattern of linguistic identity between one thing and another, but all tropes seem to depend on some form of it for their operation. Simile, for example, may be viewed as an identity where a means of differentiation is inserted by use of the word 'like'. Poetry is of course rich in these figures and their associated imagery, but authors such as Lakoff & Johnson (1980) have also drawn attention to how much we rely on metaphorical language in everyday life. It has been noted that what distinguishes everyday use of metaphor and the form it takes in poetry is the degree to which the metaphors are specific rather than generalized (Holland, 1999). The choice of words and use of metaphors in poetry is usually precise and often original. The concrete term tends to be preferred over the abstract, unlike normal conversation that is usually conducted in terms of the familiar and general. The net effect of this is to make the language of poetry, including its use of figurative imagery, highly differentiated and particular. Identities are established but in terms that are very specific and precisely chosen.

We could extend this kind of analysis further into the specific uses of sound, rhythm and repetition, but the same essential observation recurs. There does seem to be a demonstrable increase in the density of patterns of identity and means of differentiation in poetry. Furthermore, these symmetric and asymmetric features are tightly intertwined, which makes their operation effectively simultaneous. Poetry seems to be characterized by a bi-logical form of high symmetry closely conjoined with high levels of asymmetry. It is as if the one allows or enables the increase of the other in a mutually supportive interplay. Although defined in purely logical terms through their opposition, symmetric and asymmetric modes seem to exist in poetry in a remarkably intense and condensed degree of synergy.

This analysis provides a basis for understanding the particular difficulties that may be inherent in the writing of poetry as opposed to prose. It also provides a framework for critical examination of the processes that may have enabled a development in my ability to write, and the changes in self-experience that accompanied this. These areas are examined further in Chapters 8 and 9.

8 Embodied Cognition and Self-Experience

I have argued in Chapter 7 that my initial difficulties in writing poetry, while reflecting significant contextual factors, were related in an important way to a failure of my conscious and intentional *strategies* for writing. Furthermore, that this failure was linked to the nature of creative writing and the properties of poetry in particular. An analysis of poetry from the perspective of Matte Blanco's theory of bi-logic was then developed. This adds to previous theories of the unconscious roots of poetry a model of how poetry reflects an unusually high degree of coexistence of different logical principles, derived from the operation of both conscious and unconscious forms of thinking. All forms of creative writing that seek to have an emotional as well as intellectual impact are likely to make significant use of the symmetric mode identified by Matte Blanco. Poetry is distinctive, however, in the way it combines symmetric and asymmetric modes of thought in highly condensed and patterned forms that operate simultaneously.

8.1 Accessing the logic of poetry

8.1.1 Bi-logical variations in writing

Boice (1990) argues that excessive conscious thought can be disruptive in the preliminary stages of many kinds of writing, hence the widespread recommendation of spontaneous or 'unself-conscious' forms of free-writing to pump-prime composition. He suggests that conscious thought leads to self-consciousness and an inhibiting tendency to work in a critical, abstract and explanatory mode that stifles generative writing. In Matte Blanco's terms, this reflects a highly asymmetric mode of thinking. Although an excessively conscious mode of thinking can potentially interfere with all forms of writing, it is likely to have most impact on writing demanding high levels of symmetric involvement, such as creative writing and poetry. Forms of writing requiring conventional logical clarity would be expected to benefit from a greater preponderance of asymmetric thinking. Consistent with this, Boice observes that many who use spontaneous writing strategies in an academic context have difficulty making the necessary transition to more structured forms of composition.

From a bi-logical perspective, all writing would be expected to involve symmetric and asymmetric modes of thinking but in different degrees and combinations, and with varying requirements for alterations in this when writing. In my case, consistent with reports of others, more critical and self-consciously reflective forms of writing were not readily compatible with the contemporaneous writing of poetry. Indeed, there was a sense of active ‘interference’. This could be seen to reflect a difficulty in alternating between strategies of writing that differed in their bi-logical form. Although this provides one means of understanding the difficulties I encountered, it leaves open the question of what is necessary for the writing of poetry and how this relates to my experience of finding a way forward during the study.

8.1.2 Following the lead of the body

The poetry I had written prior to the study had not followed a conscious decision to write so much as an immediate and spontaneous impulse to put pen to paper. Conscious processes were put at the service of something initially arising and experienced outside the level of verbal thought: I *felt* an urge to write a poem without any preconceived plan to do so. The difficulties I faced during the study were only resolved by re-discovering something of this approach and by finding how to take it forward more consistently. The first step involved a temporary abandonment of any immediate intention to write. Interestingly, this did not occur as a conscious decision but involved submitting to a pressing impulse to engage in nonverbal ‘arts’ activities. Unlike my blocked writing these activities carried with them no sense of effort or intention – they felt more like play. A crucial feature of this shift was the acceptance, attention to, and following of a felt or embodied level of experience, as opposed to consciously formulated ideas.

It seems significant that the shift was into other forms of expressive or artistic activity, however unsophisticated in form. There appeared to be a basic urge to create something, following the prolonged period of frustration with writing poetry. It is also striking that this urge was spread over all the major domains of sensory experience: visual, auditory and kinaesthetic. It was like a rehabilitative immersion into a more sensory mode of being.

What I produced during this period and the process of production felt almost inseparable. The drawings and paintings felt continuous with the movements that

created them; the 'dance' movements and musical activity were what was immediately taking place and had no separate existence. This could be conceptualised as a more symmetric mode of functioning. Consistent with Matte Blanco's observations, this functioning arose as a form of felt experience or quality of being, rather than through conceptual understanding or direction.

This level of experience has parallels with Kristeva's description of the semiotic and other psychoanalytic formulations of pre-verbal forms of experience, for example the 'autistic-contiguous position' posited by Ogden (1989). The implication is that it was necessary for me to connect with, and act from, a level of felt experience preceding language, in order to move out of the impasse I had encountered as a result of the domination of conscious forms of thought. This might be conceived of as a regression from a more differentiated level of functioning. It certainly had a naïve and childlike quality, but unlike a 'pathological' form of regression there was a distinct imperative to create – to bring something into being from this level of experience. Kris (1952) has argued that regression can be an important part of creative activity. This may be particularly true in the arts, which, notwithstanding contemporary trends, are intimately linked with pre-conceptual as well as conceptual experience. In my case, the process led me back to a re-enlivened use of language and, ultimately, a more productive engagement with writing poetry.

8.2 Embodied cognition

8.2.1 Embodied experience and language

Attention to and immersion in embodied experience seemed necessary not only to break the hold of restrictive patterns of thought, but also to enable a more creative and poetically effective use of language rooted in a 'to and fro' with felt experience. This is consistent with Matte Blanco's logical framework; it is also congruent with the growing interest in the central role of embodiment in human experience and action (Burkitt, 1999; Gallagher, 2006) and associated developments in cognitive science and linguistics (Gibbs, 2006; Turner, 1996).

Burkitt seeks to redress the tendency towards a discursive or linguistic reductionism within contemporary thought by arguing, among other things, that it would be

impossible to think without our bodies. Drawing particularly on Merleau-Ponty he points to a level of intentionality that precedes that of conscious thought:

...the body could be said to be a thinking body and to have intentionality prior to the emergence of language and self-consciousness. The body reaching out to grasp an object is one of the basic forms of intentional action, and no cognitive representation is needed for such performances. Thinking and intentional activity are therefore pre-linguistic and pre-cognitive, and prior to the self-conscious subject there exists the bodily subject which is its foundation. (Burkitt, 1999, p. 75)

Burkitt's use of the term pre-cognitive in this context equates cognition with conscious knowing, but it is now common to use the term cognition more broadly to include the very forms of unconscious knowledge and thinking that he is referring to. Burkitt also alludes to the relation of symbolization to this pre-verbal level of embodied experience:

The symbolic dimension allows us to extrapolate from experience, to build a theoretical or imaginary world that is not identical to immediate body experience; and yet, the theoretical must always be in some way related to the sensuous and practical and can never be separated from it. (Burkitt, 1999, p. 129)

Here Burkitt invokes reference to both identity and separateness in trying to capture the way symbolization can extrapolate from embodied experience while remaining dependent on it. Symbolization requires a process of differentiation but not total separation from embodied experience. This is also one of the key observations of current proponents of an embodied view of cognition and language.

8.2.2 Cognitive linguistics

Until recently, cognitive science has been dominated by an 'information processing' model of the mind. This has been shaped by conceptualisations of cognition that are modelled on the capacity of computers to process vast amounts of information by simple operations organised in discrete but interconnected stages. This model can abstract the principles of effective information management from the underlying 'hardware' required to carry out these operations. The mind can thus be conceived in terms of modules, buffers, networks, and loops with an *assumed* basis in underlying neurological structure. Although this model has provided a useful heuristic, it can reinforce a conceptual division between the mind and body, or at least between the body and the brain/mind which 'controls' it. However, many features of cognition and language indicate a much greater level of mutual influence and interdependence than this approach allows for.

One of the key strands of research into embodied cognition has concerned language and the nature of verbal thinking. This has included the seminal work of Lakoff & Johnson (1980) on conceptual metaphor, and the work of Fauconnier & Turner (2002) on conceptual integration. Lakoff & Johnson (1999, p. 3) argue that the major findings of this research is that: the mind is inherently embodied, thought is largely unconscious and abstract conceptualisation is essentially metaphorical. Within this framework, the process of constructing and communicating meaning is seen as dependent on mappings between different domains or mental ‘spaces’, with mapping understood as “a correspondence between two sets that assigns to each element in the first a counterpart in the second” (Fauconnier, 1997, p. 1). The assumption is that this fundamental cognitive process is independent of but underpins language. The essentially metaphorical nature of language is revealed by the way structures relating to well-established and concrete source domains are used to talk about more abstract or less well-established target domains. Although the cognitive processes underlying this are non-linguistic, they are clearly reflected in the form language takes.

Both everyday language and the creative use of language in literature can be interrogated to suggest the fundamental ways in which such conceptual processes operate. Hence Turner (1996) is able to talk about the ‘literary mind’ as a model for how we think. The nature of metaphorical structures in everyday speech provides another avenue. The kind of experience that establishes fundamental source domains is rooted in the long evolutionary history of the interaction of bodies with their physical environment. This embodied action in the world is the fundamental source or reference for our attempts to conceptualise more abstract domains of experience. This is one of the most fundamental claims of this approach to cognitive linguistics; it insists that some form of *prior* embodied experience, represented by sensorimotor structures or ‘image schemas’, is an essential component of our language use and capacity for abstract thought. This situates embodied activity at the heart of cognition and meaning making.

8.2.3 Conceptual blending and bi-logic

Lakoff and Johnson identify a number of ‘primary metaphors’ derived from common mappings between an area of subjective experience and a source domain of

sensorimotor experience. An example of a primary metaphor and its component elements is provided below:

Time is Motion

Subjective Judgement: The passage of time

Sensorimotor Domain: Motion

Examples: “Time *flies*.”

Primary Experience: Experiencing the passage of time as one moves or observes motion

(Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 52)

Following this form of analysis Lakoff and Johnson challenge the notion that reason is predominantly conscious and purely literal; instead they propose that it is largely unconscious, metaphorical and imaginative (1999, p. 4). They also insist that it is not dispassionate, but profoundly emotionally engaged. These conclusions strikingly corroborate the arguments advanced by Matte Blanco from a psychoanalytic perspective. Although theories of embodied cognition are not derived from principles of logic, they lead to a similar reliance on what I described in Chapter 7 as: ‘patterns of identity’ operating alongside ‘means of differentiation’ at the heart of cognition. These patterns of identity are rooted in the structured form of bodily and sensory processes and their mapping across to new or imaginatively projected domains. The crucial features are that the new domain is known by *equating* an aspect of it with a source domain, and that the source domain is ultimately reliant on our embodied being. However, without some markers of difference the new domain would be conceptually indistinguishable from the source domain. One way that both difference and continuity can be provided is by a process of conceptual blending that integrates identities from different source domains. This shapes a new domain so that it is equated in some ways and differentiated in other ways from each source domain. From the perspective of Matte Blanco’s work this could be seen to effectively create, or operate as, a bi-logical structure, where the degree of identity and differentiation can potentially be highly variable.

8.2.4 Double-scope blending, bi-logic and poetry

Fauconnier and Turner (2002) argue that the process they describe as ‘double-scope’ mapping is critical to the development of the uniquely human capacity for complex forms of thinking and symbolization. Although single-scope networks can input from

two source domains, the integration is achieved by the blend adopting what they describe as the ‘organising frame’ of one or other of these domains. This organising frame determines *how* information is related within the blend: in effect, it provides a template or generic form to be followed. This simplifies how the integration is made but at the same time greatly limits the extent to which variations can occur. In contrast, double-scope networks arise when the organising frame that is adopted for the blend comprises elements of *both* of the subsidiary organising frames. The result is an emergent form that combines elements of the subsidiary frames in a potentially novel way. This has particularly creative possibilities when the subsidiary organising frames appear incompatible, that is when aspects of them ‘clash’ or oppose each other in significant ways.

In such networks, both organizing frames make central contributions to the blend, and their sharp differences offer the possibility of rich clashes. Far from blocking the construction of the network, such clashes offer challenges to the imagination; indeed the resulting blends can be highly creative. (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002, p. 131)

Turner (2006) argues that the activity of double-scope blending and the resulting ‘compression’ in the way otherwise very different phenomena or perspectives are related is a central feature of art of all kinds. Although this is a fundamental mental capacity, he proposes that it is utilized and exploited by art in particular ways. Indeed he suggestively refers to this as “forbidden-fruit integration” (p. 110), referring to the capacity of art to keep things apart and yet to combine them. This might be understood to have an ‘as if’ quality not dissimilar to that found in play. Art enables an understanding of the ‘separateness of things’ to remain, while finding a way to integrate them in original and potentially valuable ways.

Although Turner does not examine the logical nature of the differences or clashes that underlie creative forms of double-scope blending, these incompatibilities can clearly have a logical dimension. For example, if one organising frame places A above B and the other places B above A, it is difficult to see how they can be blended, from an asymmetric point of view, without changing the relation of at least one frame. The frames clash or contradict each other. However, as Matte Blanco has shown, symmetric logic is capable of maintaining both relations in combination.

Within the framework of double-scope integration, the process of compression achieved by integrating otherwise disparate elements has to be balanced by a process of

‘decompression’, to enable these integrated structures to be linked back to the wider network of elements in a meaningful way. Without these differentiated connections the resultant blends may fail to be comprehensible or even conscious. Turner proposes that blending is taking place continually but that only a few blends are ‘successful’ and that “fewer still percolate into consciousness” (Turner, 2006, p. 112). Although Turner doesn’t elucidate his criteria for ‘success’ or specify the boundaries for entering consciousness, this view of the operation of dual processes of compression and decompression, underlying the emergence of complex symbols and art forms, is remarkably similar to the view of poetry developed in Chapter 7 from the work of Matte Blanco.

Like the bi-logical approach, double-scope integration proposes the need for two distinct cognitive processes working in combination to achieve emergent symbolic form. Compression and decompression parallel the processes of identity and differentiation previously described in relation to poetry. Both approaches imply the potential for considerable variability in emergent forms. I have argued that poetry reflects a particularly concentrated and simultaneous operation of both identity and difference in language. Matte Blanco’s theory thus offers an account for how effective poetry draws us close to felt emotional experience due to the nature and operation of symmetric logic. Work within the field of embodied cognition enables this to be traced to a somatic level by highlighting the fundamental role of sensorimotor experience in conceptual and symbolic development.

8.3 Changes in my embodied experience

8.3.1 Sensory play

Returning to Burkitt (1999), quoted above, it could be argued that by letting go of the conscious intention to write poetry, and following the impulse to engage in other forms of creativity activity, I was allowing the preverbal intentionality of the body greater freedom to operate. The reduction in self-conscious thought, and the expanded scope for improvised action and embodied imagination, are congruent with this feeling like play. The willingness to follow a ‘felt impulse’ without a conscious objective seems critical here. This only seemed possible after the repeated failure of my conscious intentions and was thus associated with a sense of giving up or ‘letting go’. It brought

with it a sense of relief and an increase in activity, as though I was doing what I wanted to do, rather than what I imagined I should.

It also seems significant that the impulse led me into multisensory modes of creative activity rather than into only one domain. Turner (2006) admits that the question of precisely how the creative blending characteristic of the arts operates is daunting, but he suggests that synaesthesia may be one important element. Sensory modalities normally appear separate; this may reflect a highly differentiated *conscious* relation to sensation that can obscure recognition of more integrated and cross-modal forms of sensory experience. As Kristeva (1984) and more recently Charles (2001) have argued, it is from the latter kind of experience that lively artistic and poetic forms typically appear to emerge. Poems combine auditory, rhythmic and visual elements within a combined form that doesn't depend on the separation of these elements for its effect. The elements can be distinguished by critical analysis, but this is secondary to the integrated effect of the poem.

My impulse to engage in different modalities of sensory activity arose spontaneously. Thus, although the value of this process may have been implicitly known or intuited, it was followed in an unpremeditated and trusting manner: by following a series of felt impulses and with no conscious plan, even the plan to follow my impulses. I was familiar with the mantra “trust the process” (S. McNiff, 1998b) but not how that might mean *trust the body*, or what that felt like in practice, particularly concerning self-experience and how poetry could be written. These discoveries will be examined further below and in Chapter 9. Prior to this, some consideration needs to be given to the steps that took me from activity in nonverbal media towards the writing of poetry.

8.3.2 ‘Lowering’ standards

The return to an engagement with writing poetry was initiated by reading Stafford's (1978) recommendation about the need to lower standards. Stafford's advice has been greeted with both appreciation and concern (Andrews, 1995). The suggestion to lower standards can be seen as an injunction to blatantly disregard quality and craftsmanship. Poetry often involves laborious care spent drafting and re-drafting work, over long periods. However, Stafford is addressing himself to the poet who is unproductive and as such spoke directly to me. His relaxed but prolific approach to writing also connected with my experience of painting, movement and musical activity, where I had

been very productive without concern about standards or quality. Most important, this activity had felt engaging and enjoyable, unlike my increasingly aversive struggles with writing poetry.

The significance of ‘standards’ as a block to my writing can obviously be connected to the context of the work as discussed in Chapter 7. However, the question remains as to what standards I needed to lower. It is apparent to me, in hindsight, that I did have standards when I resumed writing, but that these were markedly different from those that I previously prioritised. The standards that I *lowered* concerned the assumed evaluation of other people and the immediate objective qualities of what I wrote. However, in their place was a *raised* level of sensitivity to my feelings and sensations about what was emerging on the page. In effect, I moved from prioritising a third person objective standard about *what* I wrote, towards a more subjective standard concerning my *experience of* what I wrote.

The relevance of this shift in the subjective quality of my experience will be examined further shortly. At this point, the shift in attention from objective standards towards felt experience can be taken as supporting the importance of a more embodied mode of cognition when writing poetry. My attempts to break out of my impasse by learning more *about* poetry had not proved successful. This more objective stance, while it may have informed what emerged and been necessary to its later crafting, was not helpful to the production of meaningful or lively writing. It is likely to favour a more asymmetric mode of cognition, which, I have proposed, is precisely what contributed to my difficulties. By favouring attention to the immediate felt experience of writing I found a means of access to a more integrative and bodily-informed process of composition.³⁹

8.3.3 Free-lining

My re-engagement with poetry was aided by my adoption of a strategy of free-lining that contributed directly to the nature of the writing produced. Normal rules of free-writing eschew concern with grammar, spelling or punctuation. Beside these principles, I introduced the basis of verse into this otherwise open form by structuring the writing in lines. No conscious thought was given to line length, this was determined by the

³⁹ I have subsequently found bodily-informed methods of generative writing advocated by Metcalf & Simon (2002) and Perl (2004).

rhythmic feel of the lines as they emerged, as were occasional breaks between blocks of lines into stanza-like patterns. Whereas the shift in attention towards felt or embodied experience when writing could be seen as favouring greater *access* to a symmetric mode of cognition, the use of lines may have provided greater scope for patterns of identity and differentiation to find a form in the *structure* of the writing. In other words, the use of lines provided a critical hook for the application of both symmetric and asymmetric forms of thinking, with minimal need for conscious reflection.

8.4 Self-experience

8.4.1 Changes in self-experience

The framework developed to this point emphasises the difficulties and changes that I experienced with writing from the perspective of the conscious and unconscious cognitive processes involved. Accompanying this shift was a qualitative change in self-experience. During the period in which my efforts to write poetry were obstructed I had become increasingly self-conscious. I realised I was stuck and felt frustrated by the fruitlessness of my efforts. When I reflected on this, it was as if I functioned according to the implicit model of the writing process depicted in Figure 6.1. I was a distinct conscious agent trying to access and express some form of separately existing experience. This sense of myself as a conscious agent was largely divorced from the body – it was as if I existed inside my head and *had* a body. I also had an unconscious store of experience that influenced me but was not *me*. My efforts were accompanied by a distinct sense of separation and objectification that left me feeling detached and alienated from the poetry I attempted to write. Ultimately, being unable to write felt shameful, it seemed to point to a lack, or deficiency of will, that undermined what I took myself to be.

Abandoning the willed effort to write poetry brought a feeling of relief and emancipation. My sense of discrete agency gave way to the momentum of spontaneously arising feelings and impulses. It was as if another source of action had now taken centre stage. When I resumed writing, my orientation had shifted from a predominantly detached perspective to one rooted in my immediate experience of the process of writing. This reflected not only a new sensibility but also a different quality

of self-experience: immersion in experience and what was currently present took priority over my sense of self in time.

One of the consequences of these changes was to significantly reduce the ‘objectifying process’ that I had experienced with respect to both my writing and myself. It was not that I did not think about myself as a person in time, or my writing as separate from me, but I was now capable of taking this perspective flexibly as opposed to feeling exclusively identified with it when writing. At a fundamental level the idea of having a self, or being a particular self, gave way to a more flexible and inclusive experience that contained changing bodily sensations and thought, within a broad and indeterminate state of simply being aware.

8.4.2 Levels of self-experience and consciousness

The pattern of my self-experience highlights the role of embodied experience and a changed sense of self-awareness when writing. This can be illuminated through consideration of Damasio’s (1999) neurologically based account of different levels of self-experience arising in conjunction with the emergence of ‘core’ and ‘extended’ consciousness. Damasio’s understanding of consciousness is rooted in the body and in felt experience. He proposes that there is a form of core consciousness that is always located transiently in the present and that is mediated by the state of the physical organism. In addition he proposes the existence of an extended consciousness that, with the aid of memory, is the source of the autobiographical sense we have of our identity.

Damasio’s core consciousness derives from neural patterns that give rise to mental images in different sensory modalities. These images arise continuously and can serve to represent the current state of the organism together with images relating to external and internal ‘objects’ of attention. The arising of a core *self*-consciousness is particularly associated with neural patterns that provide information about the changing state of the organism in relation to these objects. Damasio refers to the continuous neural representation of the state of the organism as the ‘proto-self’. As this changes there arises a “subtle image of knowing, the feeling essence of our self”, which he calls the core self (Damasio, 1999, p. 171).

A significant aspect of core consciousness is its pulsating recurrence; although this is always in the present, it gives rise to an impression of continuity. Extended

consciousness and the autobiographical self are dependent on the elaboration of this continuity of consciousness by language and memory, so that consciousness can be displaced from the present moment and extended over time. Damasio thus locates the roots of conscious self-awareness in bodily feeling, and sees language-dependent models of consciousness and self as applicable only to the operation of this extended field of consciousness.

Damasio's model has its critics but is intuitively compelling and increasingly influential.⁴⁰ It suggests how a change in self-experience might occur through attention to immediate bodily feeling as opposed to reflexive thought. For example it would predict that immersion in bodily experience should lead towards a greater sense of *being* in the present moment, which is precisely what I experienced. Prior to that I felt more narrowly identified with an idea or image of self that was trying to manipulate experience. In Damasio's terms, a sense of self associated with extended consciousness prevailed over a more primary or core sense of self.

8.4.3 Self-experience, consciousness and bi-logic

Damasio's model attempts to integrate aspects of self-experience (core and autobiographical) with emergent levels of consciousness (core and extended). From the perspective of a bi-logical view of consciousness, these should exhibit different patterns of symmetric and asymmetric functioning. Extended consciousness would be expected to develop in the direction of increasing asymmetry, based on the discriminative use of memory and language. The problem with increasing asymmetry is that it could lead to fragmentation, and even disintegration, of coherent thought, unless balanced by strong and consistent forms of identification or symmetry. A fundamental way this could potentially happen is through an increasing symmetrization of self-experience as extended consciousness develops. Thus 'autobiographical' forms of self-experience could emerge through recognition, and *identification with*, ideas or images of a 'self' that can be remembered and projected over time and place. This could ultimately be experienced as a sense of self that has a separate and enduring identity. Such a sense of self depends on core consciousness, but moves identification away from the immediate state of the body in relation to its current environment, towards a more abstracted form

⁴⁰ For a critical commentary see Mosca (2000).

of identification. In keeping with bi-logic, this identification would be felt and might even seem ‘absolute’, in that strong symmetrizations are experienced as qualities of being.

The area of the autobiographical self is often understood in terms of the linguistic and social construction of identity, however, such identities are often tenaciously held and surprisingly resistant to change or deconstruction. From the above analysis, this could arise from the need for an underlying sense of self that provides a felt continuity of being and identity in an increasingly differentiated world. An enduring sense of self appears crucial to social and personal development and may enable useful ‘illusions’, such as the experience of conscious will discussed in Chapter 7 (Wegner, 2002). It is also a plausible explanation for my strong implicit sense, held against intellectual conviction, of being a conscious agent somehow separate from both my body and experience.

If this speculative analysis is correct, we might expect corroboration from studies of how the self is presented or determined linguistically. But before examining this, it is worth noticing an important reason for not simplistically equating Damasio’s notion of the core self with ‘the body’⁴¹, as if the body *is* ‘the self’, as opposed to being the *source* of this form of self-experience. Core consciousness depends upon making certain neural patterns into ‘objects’ of experience against the background of a change in other neural patterns representing the state of the organism. However, both of these sets of neural patterns arise in the same organism. When neural patterns reflect an ‘object’ in the external environment the changing state of the organism may suggest a self that can be identified with the body, as opposed to the object in the environment. However, neural patterns directly reflecting aspects of the body can also be taken as objects of experience. For example, I can observe my hand, listen to my heartbeat, or experience a headache, in a manner that distinguishes them from what I feel as my *self*. Consciousness in Damasio’s scheme is inseparable from the emergence of self-consciousness, it consists of a fundamental and changing distinction between what has the feeling of being ‘self’, and what has the feeling of being something ‘other’ that is *known by* the self through changes in the organism.

⁴¹ Meaning the physical organism including the brain.

8.4.4 The subject-self schema

To see whether identification with an abstracted notion of self is reflected in language, we can return to the study of metaphor in cognitive linguistics. Lakoff and Johnson (1999) have examined metaphors used in descriptions of the self and conclude, from their use of language, that people consistently experience themselves in terms of a metaphoric split between a subject and one or more selves. They describe this as a SUBJECT-SELF schema.

The Subject is the locus of consciousness, subjective experience, reason, will and our “essence,” everything that makes us uniquely who we are. There is at least one Self and possibly more. The Selves consist of everything else about us – our bodies, our social roles, our histories, and so on. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 268)

They map the basic SUBJECT-SELF schema as follows:

| | | |
|---------------------------|---|-------------------------------|
| A Person | → | The Subject |
| A Person, Thing, or Place | → | The Self |
| A Relationship | → | The Subject-Self Relationship |

This linguistic structure of self-experience is compatible with Damasio’s notions of extended consciousness and personhood. However, alongside the idea of an autobiographical self (or selves), the indeterminate and inclusive notion of being a ‘subject’ is emphasised. Thus the duality of self-experience in Damasio’s core consciousness is preserved and extended. Alongside the felt discrimination between what is self and what is other, we have a linguistic sense of ourselves as *both* experiencing subjects and as potential objects of experience.

Lakoff & Johnson point out that the subject in the SUBJECT-SELF schema: “...by its nature, exists *only in the present*.”⁴² (p. 269) Thus the experiencing subject is rooted, like Damasio’s core consciousness, in the immediate present, unlike the autobiographical self that extends over time. However, it is not defined in terms of specific bodily experiences, but as an abstract locus or ‘essence’ that we reference ourselves by. The SUBJECT-SELF schema thus supports identification with an abstract

⁴² Italics in original.

or metaphorical subject rather than embodied experience. In such a state it may be experientially true to say that “I feel out of touch with myself”, even though “I” must be present to make such a statement. I don’t presently *feel* in touch with myself as a differentiation has arisen between my embodied experience and the sense of being identified with a subject who is aware of it. Indeed, Lakoff & Johnson argue that the schema reveals a fundamental propensity to “experience ourselves as split” (p. 269).

The SUBJECT-SELF schema corresponds with my sense of feeling like a separate agent divorced from experience, and my tendency to objectify myself through my conscious efforts to write poetry. In fact, it can be associated with a variety of specific patterns concerning self-experience and writing poetry that arose in my investigation. For example the ‘self’ can be treated as a physical object that needs external effort to move, as in ‘I forced myself to write’. Alternatively the self can be treated as a container as in ‘I looked for experience within myself’. As Slingerland (2003) points out, such expressions are metaphoric rather than literally or ontologically true. “There is no ‘me’ that is literally separate from ‘I’ that can be forced to do something” (p. 28), or an actual container of inner experience. However, this is how self-experience might be structured, either helpfully or unhelpfully. In my case the effortful and self-conscious attempt to *make* myself write poetry was unproductive, as was the idea of accessing an inner container of experience. Both seemed to reflect a sense of *being* separate from my experience combined with an assumption of excessive conscious control over the process of writing.

The changes that occurred can also be considered from this perspective, particularly my experience of abandoning my efforts and then breaking through into productive writing after a long struggle. Slingerland (2003) explores this kind experience in his inquiry into the traditional Taoist teaching of Wu Wei or ‘effortless action’. He uses the framework of conceptual metaphor to illustrate how this ideal results in what feels like a paradoxical injunction to act without any effort or attempt to do so. The basic SUBJECT-SELF schema is present in the language of traditional Chinese texts in a similar way to its occurrence in English. Slingerland sees the horn of the dilemma posed by Wu Wei as resting on the metaphorical split between the subject as agent and the self. It is only by giving up the sense of acting from an isolated source that the individual can enter a state of flow, or the Tao. However, from the perspective of the

SUBJECT, it can appear incomprehensible to *act* without effort or intention, so the achievement of this is problematic, and may involve the paradoxical experience of surrender or giving up.

8.4.5 The rhythm of self-experience

The SUBJECT-SELF schema illustrates the way that talk about the self contains but often confounds what we experience as a duality: on one hand the subjective sense of ‘I’ that observes and on the other, the sense of ‘me’ as an object that can be observed.⁴³ The ‘I’ seems a given that is impossible to reflexively penetrate while the ‘me’ is an ever-changing emergent construction derived from experience and usually shaped by the body. One is self as subject, the other self as object. This duality can be elaborated many ways, but in relation to my experience the observations of Bollas on what could be called the rhythm of self-experience are pertinent. Bollas formulates this through the idea of simple and complex selves:

The concept of self experiencing is ironic, as its referential ambiguity (does it mean the self that experiences or the experiencing of our self?) is strangely true to the complexity of being human. All self experiencing involves this split, which can be described as a division between ourselves as simple selves (when we are immersed in desired or overlooked experience) and ourselves as complex selves (when we think about experience). (Bollas, 1993, p. 27)

Bollas sees this division as enabling an oscillation in the way any activity is experienced in relation to the self:

The simple experiencing self and the complex reflecting self enable the person to process life according to different yet interdependent modes of engagement: one immersive, the other reflective. (Bollas, 1993, p. 15)

Life is a cycle of reciprocal transformations from complex to simple self, from intrapsychic dialogues and thoughtfulness (complex states) to a seeming suspension of such internal density as we yield to an occasion in which we become a particle participant. (Bollas, 1993, p. 17)

This suggests that self-experience changes and develops through a complex interplay between reflection on and immersion in experience of various kinds. Self-experience is thus not experience of being a static thing called the self, but the elaboration of a vast potential for experience given through embodiment in the world. For Bollas, it is not *an* experience so much as a texturing of experience, which can be creatively developed and changed through our active participation with things in the ‘object’ world. It may range from the isolated experience of ‘being depressed’, to the mystical experience of ‘being

⁴³ A distinction introduced to psychology by William James (1890).

at one'. In Bollas' terms the 'simple self' mode would enter these states of experience, whereas the 'complex self' mode would involve reflection on them.

Bollas also talks at some length about the idea of a unique personal idiom, which is his development of Winnicott's (1991) idea of the 'true self'. He does not argue that there is an essential self, but that there is an endogenous core to each individual which has its own unique aesthetic, partly determined by inheritance and partly by very early experience. This idiom is in some ways incommunicable but, according to Bollas, can realize itself through our object choices. It may be experienced as having a quality of personal authenticity and recognizable pattern, comparable perhaps to someone 'finding their voice' in writing. In fact, Bollas gives as an example our ability to recognise the unique style or quality of a familiar poet's writing solely from the text of their poems (Bollas, 2002, p. 27). This implies the need for a degree of autonomy in creative work, analogous to my experience of a shift in standards from those 'I' tried to impose, to those arising in the act of creative activity itself.

The key points of this in relation to my own experience are: that self-experience can develop and change through a dialectical interplay with immersion in experience and a more detached quality of awareness, and that there is a quality in this that may have important idiomatic and creative significance. Bollas suggests that this can only be realised through our choice and use of objects. My experience was that this 'use' first required some form of embodied action that took place without conscious intention. It *felt* like giving up effort and choice and entering *into* a self-sustaining action. It was only after this that a fluid sense of movement, between a detached quality of awareness and an immersion in experience, appeared in my writing.

8.5 The self in relation

8.5.1 Disclosure and deadness

The analysis to this point has focused on the processes involved in moving from an experience of being blocked to a more productive and engaged mode of writing. However, this was followed by a significant further development after sharing some of my uncrafted writing in supervision. It is striking that this, like my move into other media, occurred in an impulsive and unplanned way. What followed, although perhaps foreshadowed by my uneasiness about showing the work, was completely unexpected.

Initially a profound and lingering sense of deadness emerged. This involved the feeling that there was little or no source of personal agency – just responses that arose to whatever was taking place outside of me. Following a gesture of acceptance towards this experience, I enjoyed a revitalised but subtly changed sense of personal initiative. This enabled my writing to proceed again, and to be crafted for sharing in workshops and public readings.

The disclosure of my work was a significant event that I experienced as critical to the subsequent return to and further development of my writing. What marks the experience is that it moved my uncrafted ‘poetic’ writing from a private first-person domain into a shared or relational context. None of the ideas so far employed to explore the changes that I experienced emphasise the relational aspects of self-experience. However, the psychoanalytic framework underlying the work of both Matte Blanco and Bollas is fundamentally relational in nature. Indeed, the emphasis in recent psychoanalytic theory has been increasingly towards a relational and inter-subjective understanding of therapeutic change (Leiper & Maltby, 2004).

The period of activity that produced the writing that I shared in supervision took place over a summer period when I was removed from the university and the writing groups that I participated in. My immersion in this writing may have been facilitated by a relative freedom from concern about the perspective of other people. Sharing the work in supervision abruptly brought both it and myself back into the gaze of an ‘other’. Although I felt the writing was viewed with an attitude of interest and acceptance, my subsequent reaction might suggest that there was something negative about the experience. I do not believe it was a negative reaction in the sense of a concern about what Celia might think, or a state of negative appraisal or ‘depressed’ perception of my work or myself. It was a more fundamental feeling that in some important respect I did not exist at all, a feeling I could best characterise as a state of absence or deadness. In hindsight, the negative, in the sense of painful or confusing aspect of the experience, was mostly to do with my subtle resistance to it. It was as if I should not feel this way – this was not normal. When I allowed it fully, it simply dissolved and I felt entirely ‘normal’ again, albeit with a feeling of having been vitally changed by this act of acceptance.

8.5.2 Vitality and compliance

My experience of solitary writing over the summer period could be viewed in terms of Winnicott's (1958) observations about the important developmental step of infants enjoying solitary play. In this early situation the other isn't totally absent, but is a non-interfering presence. The attuned mother instinctively knows when to step in and when not to interfere, thus enabling the infant the room to develop in its own way, secure in the presence of a needed other but not required to excessively adapt or comply with their needs. In this way the infant can be safely immersed in its own experience rather than having to be vigilant to the requirements or expectations of another. Herein lies the infant's elaboration of its own 'idiom' in Bollas' terms, or core self-experience, using the framework proposed by Damasio.

Winnicott identified many difficulties in adult life with the development of an overly adapted and compliant self, which could act as a buffer between core idiomatic experience and the demands of an external environment that has been experienced as intrusive. This image or sense of self may become a feature of an individual's recurring self-experience, reflecting the way they need to be in relation to others based on past experience. However, it is a more objectively than subjectively formed sense of self, in that it is heavily determined by the anticipated reactions and perspectives of *other* people. If isolated from a more direct and embodied sense of vitality, it could give rise to feelings of deadness or even futility.

8.5.3 Self-identification and absence

Eigen (2004) has explored the experience of deadness, which he thinks is a significant aspect of the self-experience of people seeking analysis who otherwise function effectively and successfully in the world. He relates this to both Winnicott's ideas and the work of Bion, Freud and Klein.

There are many variations of psychic deadness. For some people deadness does not consume much psychic space. It is a circumscribed counter-pole or sub-theme in a fuller, richer existence. It comes and goes and nags in the background. At times it becomes prepossessing, and one wonders, with a chill, what one would do if it swallowed existence, if it became all there was. One waits for it to fade and usually it does. It moves along with a variety of moods and states of being. (Eigen, 2004, p. 3)

Eigen sees the experience of deadness as part of the ongoing experience of being rather than as a pathological state. In fact, the implication is that the avoidance of the

experience may represent more of a problem than the experience *per se*. Thus manic activity, or self-soothing through some form of object use, may sustain a sense of liveliness in an otherwise superficial or adaptive self, whereas tolerating the deadness that can accompany identification with this form of self can lead to renewed contact with a more vital core. He indicates that in creative work and creative living there may need to be movement between alivening and deadening experiences. He suggests that: “What emerges is not an end to deadness, but a new and better movement between aliveness and deadness, a rhythm or oscillation.” (Eigen, 2004, p. xvi)

Eigen’s argument suggests that deadness may in part be an inevitable accompaniment to a certain form of self-identification. That aspect of the sense of self that is based on adaptation to others, or being-for-others in Sartre’s terms, is a highly objectified form of self. It is some *thing*. However, drawing on Bion, Eigen indicates how treating the psyche like a thing effectively kills it (2004, p. 45). Hence in Bion’s enigmatic writings we find the emergence of a counter-pole: the idea of a ‘no-thing’ at the heart of psychic life, sometimes represented by ‘O’, the ineffable or infinite. This guards against any form of reduction or literalism in our experience of self but also points to an absence, an absence of any *thing* at the core of self. Thus, the feeling of deadness associated with an objectified self may also be accompanied by the feeling of absence of any internal entity called self, because there is no such objective *thing* – only the unfathomable continuous arising of the awareness of living experience.

Winnicott shows a similar concern with the tension between the realms of objectivity and subjectivity. While pure subjectivity leaves one potentially isolated in a domain disconnected from the minds of others, pure objectivity risks leaving one as only an object of experience. Eigen suggests that Winnicott was searching for a way of formulating “the sort of experiencing that felt free” (2004, p. 75). Essentially a form of experiencing that broke the boundaries of objective-subjective, or inner-outer, and allows for a quality of being that remains both connected to the world *and* that enables one to feel true and alive. This requires that the falseness of any fixed *external* identity be acknowledged along with the absence of a permanent *internal* self that has some objective status. As Eigen observes (p. 73), when one is most alive it is not possible to locate experience as simply inside or outside, self-experience is continually unfolding or, as Winnicott might say, in a process of becoming.

My experience of writing prior to showing my work had the quality of a free immersion in experience. It fits well with Eigen's description of play or transitional experiencing:

One does not have to irritably reach after facts or meaning or anything else at all. One can just be and grow into and out of just being. One can be missing. The great secret of being missing, which is so taboo, can be experienced. One can relax into not being there and stop pretending. One can stop forcing oneself this way or that. The possibility of being truly alive – free – in the presence of another person emerges. (Eigen, 2004, p. 79)

However, my writing did not truly come into the presence of another person until it was shown in supervision. Prior to that, as an adult at play, a sense of the other may have been present in mind but not in actuality. At this point my simple immersive experience of 'having gone missing' might have been complicated by the perception of my work, and myself, by a tangible and significant other. Thus I could have been suddenly returned to a more objective mode of self-perception, and become abruptly self-conscious again. However, my perception was also directed to work produced during a period of immersion or absence. It is possible to imagine that my objectifying gaze could not then encounter or reconstruct the usual sense of myself. What I may have encountered at that point was the direct experience of absence. From the perspective of a self-objectifying awareness this might have been experienced, as suggested by Eigen, as a *feeling* of deadness. The previous immersed experiencing of aliveness thus effectively being killed by an objectifying gaze.

8.5.4 The gesture of acceptance

One of the key indicators of this sense of absence was the lack of any feeling of personal agency. I could act effectively but not on my own initiative. I simply responded, perfectly adequately, to what needed doing; there was just no sense of 'me' initiating it. The abandonment of personal control and conscious intention had been a key feature of my experience over the summer. However, this was accompanied by a strong sense of following some kind of embodied impulse or feeling. I was immersed in this experience and it felt as if it had some intentionality or agency of its own. My experience after sharing the work was that I had lost contact with that source of direction.

The experience of deadness did not feel 'normal' and prompted speculation about what might be wrong with me. There was a sense I should not feel this way and that it would be concerning for others to know how I felt. Thus, there was a wish to be free of it.

However, there was also a contrasting intuition that this was something to be experienced rather than avoided. I believe this might be critical to the capacity of such an experience to be helpful and transformative rather than lead to further difficulties. Eigen describes the tendency to reject experience in a particularly helpful way:

I-feeling tends to identify with pleasure and reject pain. One tries to set pain outside ones boundaries: I try to exclude pain from *myself*. Pain may be the most intimate aspect of experience but I make believe it is a stranger. (Eigen, 2004, p. 5)

In addition, he highlights the tendency that can arise to try and control experience rather than suffer it. By staying with the experience I eventually reached a point where I made a conscious movement of 'total' acceptance. I no longer wished to offer any resistance to the experience. It was from this point that my sense of aliveness returned. In Eigen's terms a critical movement or oscillation had taken place and a new rhythm was established. I was no longer simply lost in the pleasurable immersive experience of creative activity, but from then on was *also* able to return to my work in a more objective and critical way. I could also move more freely between my own subjective experience and the imagined perspective of others, as I began to entertain the thought of future readers.

9 Dimensions of Attention and Identity

In Chapter 8, I argued that my experience of obstruction and breakthrough in writing poetry, could be illuminated by integrating a bi-logical analysis of embodied cognition and poetry with the embodied, linguistic and relational foundations of self-experience. In this chapter I will examine how my writing of poetry changed, following the critical midpoint of my investigation, by examining five features that characterise my changed *process* of writing. I will attempt to elucidate how this altered approach to writing is connected to a more flexible modulation of attention, and how this attentional flexibility may be intrinsically related to modifications in self-experience.

9.1 A changed process of writing

One of the most unexpected things about the changes in self-experience that I encountered during the study was that they did not stem from the content of my writing, but were connected to a change in my ability to write at all in a personally satisfying way. Although the poetry produced contained corroborative personal themes, these seemed to follow, rather than determine, the adjustments that took place in my ways of working.

The contrasting models presented in Chapter 6, of my sense of self and the writing process,⁴⁴ attempted to capture and integrate the crucial changes that took place in my experience of writing poetry during the first four years of the study. These included a shift from the sense of being a separate and self-conscious agent, to a more fluid sense of being embedded in and aware of different levels of interacting experience arising in the act of writing. This involved a greater sensitivity to felt bodily experience and imagery, alongside and in co-ordination with the formulation of words, both in the mind and on the page. The boundaries between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ experience became more fluid, and all experience seemed to be unfolding more in the present.

Since that time, I have had further opportunity to refine my observations of the quality of this activity and its links to the nature of my experience in other contexts. I have

⁴⁴ Figures 6.1 and 6.2.

been particularly interested in identifying and specifying the conditions, or factors, that are associated with undertaking the process of writing more effectively. In other words, I have tried to provide myself with a practical means to understand and support my own process of writing poetry, and have begun to connect this to other forms of creative work and personal activity.

It has proved quite daunting to ‘unpack’ what is a complex, intangible and changing configuration of processes. However, I found that a useful check on the utility of an observation was whether I could draw on it helpfully when writing, or not. Thus, based on my earlier analysis and continued observations, I have identified five features that seem to contribute most to my changed approach to writing poetry. These are presented in Table 9.1.

Table 9.1 Features of my changed process of writing

1. The willingness to surrender conscious intention and to follow unconscious intentionality.
 2. The flexibility to widen and modulate the nature of my attentional focus.
 3. The use of images as a bridge between embodied experience and poetic formulation.
 4. The following of cyclical movements of immersion and differentiation with regard to experience.
 5. The acceptance of fluid changes in self-experience associated with movements of attention and awareness.
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Although these features are distinguished for analysis, they are not separate ‘steps’ but form part of an integrated process. Table 9.1 thus provides a framework to help structure and synthesize this chapter’s examination of how my changed process of writing related to my self-experience.

9.2 From intention to intentionality

9.2.1 Realms of the will

In the analysis of my initial difficulties with writing poetry I have described the problem that an excessively self-conscious and deliberate intention to write created, and how giving up that intention was the first step towards finding my way into a meaningful process of writing. Underpinning that analysis was Wegner's (2002) empirically based argument that the experience of conscious intention is not in itself a prime mover of action, but something that is 'felt' in order to differentiate personal from external sources of action. The failure of conscious intention may therefore be viewed not as a failure of *will*, but as reflecting the failure of a particular kind of *action* or *strategy*. The paradoxical nature of intention can be recognised in the phenomenon of only being able to reach a goal by giving up the attempt to reach it, exemplified in the concept of Wu Wei (Shaw, 1988; Slingerland, 2003). The result can be a relatively effortless form of action or activity, in contrast to strained attempts to pursue a goal in an excessively determined way.

It has remained my experience that something more than a conscious intention or wilful effort to write a poem is required to engage successfully in the process of writing. This does not mean that *no* effort or application is required, particularly in the process of crafting the work over time, or in deepening understanding of that craft; however, simply willing writing does not guarantee success and can be frustrating. Farber identifies will generically as that which moves action: "I understand will to be that category through which we examine that portion of our life which is the mover of our life in a direction or towards an objective in time." (Farber, 2000, p. 76) He then distinguishes two realms of the will using the example of playing tennis:

When our game is most fluid and effortless, we cannot really be said to be planning our shots and strategies: if we are thinking about the game, we are not aware of thinking; though will is involved in our shots and maneuvers, we cannot be said to be aware of will itself. We are, so to speak, of a piece - mind and body seamlessly and unselfconsciously joined in a totality. Will is so wedded to our faculties, our perceptions, our motor possibilities that it may be said to be unconscious in this first realm. It is only after the fact, retrospectively, that we can infer the place of will, thought, footwork, and other components. Now let us assume that because of our opponent or ourselves our game goes badly, requiring us to assess our failure. "It is the forehand that's at fault", we say. "Too slow and too much topspin." Will, clearly, has become conscious, for now we will ourselves to stroke the ball differently and are conscious of our willing. This ordinary state of affairs, in which will can be experienced consciously, I term the second realm of will. (Farber, 2000, pp. 76-77)

Farber proposes that the first realm of will moves in a 'direction' rather than towards a specific object. Direction, he argues, is "a way whose end cannot be known" (p. 78), it is open to different possibilities including the possibility of failure to reach any significant outcome. As such, it contains a sense of freedom rather than the colouring of a preconceived goal. In contrast the second realm of will corresponds to a movement towards a specified and conscious objective. This is where action is deliberately employed to achieve a particular end, with a corresponding experience of intention or the conscious and sometimes effortful willing of a result. The second realm of will is the more common utilitarian use of the term will but, in Farber's opinion, both realms of will pervade our lives.

One aspect of the second realm of will that Farber highlights, is its limitations. It seems adequate to some situations but is evidently inadequate to others. For example, I can exercise an effort of will to go to bed but, as any insomniac will testify, I cannot consciously *will* falling asleep. Similarly, I can make an effort of will to read a complex textbook, but *understanding* it is not something that I can dictate. It usually contributes very little to tell someone who is confused to be clear, or someone who is in a panic to stay calm. Wegner would probably argue that the efficacy of will in both realms is not as a primary mover, but in the second realm of will it usually *appears* that way, until that is, the failure of conscious willing becomes evident in certain situations.

9.2.2 Action and intentionality

My observation, which is supported by Farber's account, is that the second realm of will is most applicable to actions and outcomes that are discrete and specifiable. As actions become more complex, multifaceted and related to indeterminate situations, they become less amenable to being consciously willed or successfully proceduralised. They then require a continuous blending of previous experience and new possibilities in an integrated movement that cannot be precisely anticipated. This is evident in learning some practical skills like driving a car. Initially separate actions have to be learned and exercised deliberately, with frequent failures of total integration. However, when such an integrative skill develops, it can take place without conscious interference and in many critical situations *must* do so to be effective. More complex and creative activity can sometimes have an extended quality of being followed rather than deliberately

willed, which may be related to the sense of feeling 'inspired'.⁴⁵ Something is simply taken forward, without a fixed or known objective, relying on some 'feel' or intuitive sense of where to go next.

The relevance of Farber's first realm of will to my experience is the recognition of some intentional, but not always conscious, sense of direction in complex creative activities such as writing poetry. In my experience with writing poetry, the failure of conscious willed effort requires giving up or relaxing conscious intention, but not the abandonment of a sense of *intentionality*. Simply giving up means there is no further engagement with writing, whereas being 'willing' to engage in writing demands a certain faith in a sense of direction that does not have to be predetermined, but might emerge. By intention, I mean: *an aim that guides action*, whereas with intentionality⁴⁶ I mean something nearer to: *the state of being formed or directed by a process that is intentional*. In the former the intention is an explicit and conscious goal that I aim to achieve; in the latter what is intentional may be conceived as being 'unconscious', or implicit in whatever action is followed or allowed to take place.

In applying this to writing a poem, there may be a need for what Keats described as negative capability: "that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact or reason." (Keats, 1970, p. 45) However, my own experience is of picking-up on a sense of direction as well as tolerating a quality of not knowing. This is echoed by Spender's remark that writing a poem involves following something "as though it had an impulse in a certain direction" (Spender, 1952, p. 118). Usually at a quite visceral level something moves the attention and feelings to suggest the possibility of a poem, or a movement towards one.

I can illustrate this with an example when, following sudden heavy fall of snow in April, I felt a sudden urge to go outside into the garden to look more closely. My mind pointed out that there were other practical things to be done, but I had a distinct and urgent sense of curiosity and of a passing opportunity. Almost absent-mindedly, I picked up a camera as I went out and found myself trying to frame some shots of tree branches bent over with snow. The thought arose that this was the stuff of haiku.

⁴⁵ See for example Clark (1997).

⁴⁶ The concept of intentionality has specialised uses in philosophy but 'aboutness' and 'pointing beyond itself' are its generic features according to Gallagher and Zahavi (2008, p. 109).

Returning inside, I looked at the pictures on the computer and selected one to send to a relative abroad, as evidence of our unseasonable weather. I kept returning to an image that showed branches against the sky. As I examined it I found myself playing with some words that eventually crystallised into the following haiku, which I found satisfying enough to send with the picture⁴⁷:

*A net of branches
cast against an open sky
snow blossoms in spring*

The crucial point in this example is that I didn't have the conscious thought: 'Oh it's snowing, I could write a poem about this'. I am confident that if I had, no poem would have been written. The poem emerged from following the movement of my attention and curiosity. It demanded putting other more practical purposes aside and following an impulse that was not obviously about writing a poem at all, but that ultimately included it. The whole experience had a spontaneous and 'creative' quality, but it also involved the sense of a directed movement – the physical act of going outside and bringing my attention closer to both the fallen snow *and* my excited response to it.

It is notable that the origins of the word intention are from the Latin *intendere* meaning: 'turning attention to' or 'stretching out towards' (Barnhart, 1988, p. 535). The current sense of having a 'purpose or plan' developed later. Intentionality, as I am using it, reflects this earlier meaning, in that to follow something requires attention to move in a flexible and responsive way rather than be focused on a particular action or outcome.

9.3 A wider and more flexible attentional focus

9.3.1 Varieties of attentional focus

Although attention has been the subject of extensive study in psychology, it has always proved an elusive concept to adequately distinguish and define. William James proposed one of the earliest definitions according to what he saw as the 'common' understanding:

⁴⁷ A copy of the picture is reproduced in Appendix VI.

Everyone knows what attention is. It is the taking possession by the mind in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. [...] it implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others, and is a condition which has a real opposite in the confused, dazed, scatterbrained state. (James, 1890, p. 403)

This emphasises the quality of ‘focus’ and illustrates one way that this can operate: to selectively attend to one thing rather than others with adequate concentration. However, this contrasts a useful state of selective focus with an apparently undesirable state of confusion and disorder. In practice the ‘focus’ of attention can vary in many ways, the value of which depends more on the situation than the state of attention *per se*. For example, when performing different tasks, it is possible to recognise changes in the breadth of focus, the intensity of focus, the stability or continuity of focus, and the flexibility of focus. Indeed, as Styles (2006) points out, attention is probably not a single entity at all, but the consequence of a number of interrelated and context dependent processes.

9.3.2 Attention and my experience of writing poetry

My initial difficulty with writing poetry was accompanied by a narrowing of attention when I tried to write. I would often attempt to concentrate on the idea for a poem and how it might be written. Similarly, after periods of free-writing, I can recall focusing closely on the writing produced to look for material to shape into a poem. What characterised this attention was a focus on thoughts, words, and possible poetic forms, to the exclusion of other aspects of available experience. For example, I paid little attention to bodily sensations, my surroundings, irrelevant background thoughts or uninvited mental images. This narrow and exclusive focus was often highly concentrated and effortful but, as has been documented, failed to lead to satisfying work.

My experience of releasing some of my conscious and premeditated efforts to write was that it allowed a distinct relaxing and expansion of my attention. This initially supported an immersion in nonverbal sensory activities, but ultimately became part of how the process of writing poetry itself was experienced. It felt a bit like ‘zooming back’ so more of my presently available experience could enter the picture. With a wider field of attention it became possible to ‘scan’ many simultaneously arising experiences. These could be thoughts, bodily sensations, external stimuli, mental images and so on. While resting in such a wide focus of attention, it is possible to

highlight one area of experience a little by bringing it temporarily more into the foreground of attention, while simultaneously retaining some appreciation of another experience in the background of awareness. This figure-ground relation can then be reversed. A visual illustration of this would be to hold in awareness peripheral as well as central features of the visual field. To do so requires a relaxing of the eyes and a softening of focus. In my experience, objects in the visual field then feel less 'grasped' by the mind and more present as an integral part of the entire scene. This quality of different experiences being connected, or belonging together, seemed important to my improved ability to develop a satisfying and integrated poetic form.

9.3.3 Models of creative and disordered attention

My recognition of the phenomenon of wide or open attention dawned on me with the vividness of an original discovery, but I soon remembered that something very similar had already been well-described by Marion Milner as: “two ways of looking”. She had also explicitly connected the shift from narrow to wide attention with the abandonment of conscious purposes:

Wide attention. – The second way of perceiving seemed to occur when the questioning purposes were held in leash. Then, since one wanted nothing, there was no need to select one item to look at rather than another, so it became possible to look at the whole at once. To attend to something and yet want nothing from it, these seemed essentials of the second way of perceiving. I thought that in the ordinary way when we want for nothing from any object or situation we ignore it. Or if we are forced to attend to something which does not offer us any means of furthering our desires, then sheer habit makes us attend in the narrow focus way, looking at separate details and being bored. But if by chance we should have discovered the knack of holding wide our attention, then the magic thing happens. (Milner, 1986, p. 106)

In my experience of writing poetry this widening of attention provides the room necessary to attend, not only to the totality of experience, but to the relation between different aspects of experience, in particular to bring into play felt bodily experience alongside verbal thought. As previously discussed, this connection with embodied experience seems vital to the emergence of forms of language that can convey feeling as well as ideas effectively. Similar to Milner, I have found that narrowly focused attention tends to be habitual, and is reinforced by situations that are purpose-driven and evaluative. Work and education often seem to demand that we *pay attention* in a narrow way, whereas play is often associated with a wider or more relaxed focus. In addition I have observed that thinking often exerts a gravitational pull into a ruminative and narrow focus of attention. For example, I find it common to walk to work in the

morning taking in a great deal of my experience along the way, only to walk home in the evening oblivious to my body and surroundings, with my attention preoccupied with thinking over the events of the day. Needless to say, I am more likely to form the seeds of a poem during the morning walk than on the way home. In contrast, on holiday there can be an experience, often after an initial period of restless adjustment, of a widening of attention that deepens progressively in a very relaxing way. Returning home can be accompanied by a startling appreciation, albeit temporary, of simple things that had previously gone unnoticed.

Research has indicated that some forms of attention, particularly self-focused attention, are associated with emotional disorder and stress (Wells & Matthews, 1994). Fehmi and Fritz (1980) have identified a specific contrast in the concomitants of narrow and wide attention from their research utilizing neurofeedback⁴⁸. This has led to a strategy of attention training described as ‘open focus training’ (Fehmi & Robbins, 2001, 2007). The underlying theory is that narrow forms of attention are connected to the evolutionary ‘fight and flight’ response and are therefore not optimal to everyday functioning. Wider and more open forms of attention are associated with autonomic homeostasis and therefore reduced stress. While the ability to achieve a narrow focus is useful, they believe it may become problematic unless it oscillates with more open forms of attention. They suggest that narrower modes of attention are now reinforced in many contexts and, for some, have tended to become almost habitual. This could contribute to the increasing incidence of attentional ‘problems’ seen in both children and adults.

In the training offered to develop open forms of attention, it is striking that what has to be overcome is any tendency to try too hard: “...to be successful trainees must learn to give up their effortful orientations to the biofeedback task.” Trainees report most improvement after “they had given up on the task altogether” (Fehmi & Fritz, 1980, p. 24). This is similar to my experience and the observations of Milner, as is the change in attention that they encourage:

⁴⁸ Neurofeedback is a form of biofeedback that uses the frequency and synchrony of the brain’s electrical activity from EEG monitoring.

To achieve the open focus state, one must allow awareness to broaden to simultaneously include all of those perceptible events which are salient in the nervous system. (Fehmi & Fritz, 1980, p. 24)

Milner discovered that she could assist achievement of her wider form of attention with various imaginative or bodily gestures, but she also found that this often met a strong resistance. I will consider this further below in relation to the processes of identification and differentiation that can accompany movements of attention. However, before this I will examine the important part that imagery came to play in my writing.

9.4 The use of images as a ‘bridge’

9.4.1 Focusing on a felt sense

Widening my attention to simultaneously arising experience allowed room for an attentional dance to take place between different sensations and mental contents during the process of writing. Tuning in to the perception of an interesting object, or noticing a passing thought or memory, might evoke a sensation that, when attended to, led also to a word or phrase. When words or phrases were transferred to the page they invited further attention, which could lead back to a new felt experience, a search for other words and so on in a recursive, iterative and often unexpected directions. This process reflects an experience of language, or *languaging* in my original model (Figure 6.2), which links it intimately with felt experience.

Eugene Gendlin's (1997b) process philosophy and derived practices of 'focusing' and 'thinking at the edge' (TAT) represent a systematic attempt to formulate the way language can be understood not simply structurally, or in a deconstructed manner as self-referential, but as a “carrying-forward” of felt or embodied experience. In *Thinking Beyond Patterns*, Gendlin (1991) chooses to use poetry and psychotherapy to illustrate his thesis and offers the following description of writing poetry:

The poet stops in midst of an unfinished poem. How to go on? Perhaps there is only confusion. No leads.

The poet reads and rereads the lines. Where they end something does come! The poet hears (knows, reads, senses.....) what these lines need, want, demand, imply What the next line must say is already here - in a way. But how to say that? What is that? It is – the poet's hand is silently rotating in air. The rotating gesture says that.

The poet tries this line and that. Many lines come. Some seem good. The poet listens into what each of those lines can say. Poets constantly listen into an unexplored openness – what can this new phrasing say? A great many lines come and are

rejected. The poet reads to the end of the written lines again and again. Each time that comes. The lines that offer themselves try to say, but do not say – that. That seems to lack words, but no. The is very verbal: It knows the language well enough to understand – and reject – all the lines that come. The blank is not a bit pre-verbal; it knows what must be said, and it knows that the lines that come don't say that. (Gendlin, 1991, p. 48)

Gendlin has been criticised for his use of poetry and psychotherapy to exemplify his arguments about verbal thought precisely because they are atypical contexts of language use (M. Williams, 1997). However, for my purposes his choice of poetry is apt and helpful. He illustrates vividly that in searching for words to fill his trademark ellipsis (...), there is a felt reference that gives a quite precise sense of what will and won't do. However, if an acceptable form of words is found this may immediately suggest the need for change in what has gone before, by drawing attention to something lacking in the new totality or by pointing to a new emergent (...).

The bodily reference in Gendlin's practices of focusing and TAT is called a 'felt sense' and is usually characterised as a quality of bodily feeling that gives information about the total situation to which attention is directed. There is a recognisable shift in this felt sense that confirms finding words that adequately formulate an implicit thought, emotional state, or other specific but unformulated experience. Finding words thus carries forward the experience into language and at the same time changes it. Gendlin doesn't see language as purely referential, but as a process, or activity, of experiencing. Although language use can be superficial and repetitive, when rooted in carrying forward lived experience it is potentially creative and transformative.⁴⁹

9.4.2 The generative image

While my experience echoes Gendlin's process in the interplay I have noticed between verbal thought and bodily feeling within a widened attention, what I have found to be central to the genesis of many poems is the emergence of a generative image, or sometimes a sequence of images. This imagery often has a dream-like quality but can also be an actual object or situation seen or pictured. It may involve other senses but has mostly been visual. The image usually arises much earlier than the stage of writing

⁴⁹ Gendlin's ideas are the basis of the creative writing strategies developed by Perl (2004).

Gendlin uses in his example, where the form of the poem is already appearing on the page. It seems to act as an embryonic source for the poem as a whole, or a significant aspect of it.

The example of the haiku given previously is an example of a literal use of an image derived from a picture to trigger a poem. More often the image is imaginary. A simple example of this is provided in my description of the genesis of *Toc tic*,⁵⁰ which was generated via the imagined picture of people walking backwards and regurgitating their food. In Gendlin's example, the 'that' the poet is searching for is not preverbal but implicitly verbal. However, my experience is that to get to the stage of having a 'that' to find words for, I often need to find a generative image that constellates a felt experience prior to the search for verbal formulation. This seems consistent with Gendlin's theory of experiencing, as imagery can be also be used in focusing, however, it has been recognised that it may contribute to the process in a different way than words (Purton, 2007). For example, Gendlin has indicated that imagery may help in the formation of a specific feeling or felt sense that can then be focused on (Gendlin, 1970).

A generative image seems to carry with it a charge or quality that can be returned to and explored *through* the image, until some verbal form begins to take shape. It is as if the image carries a felt sense of meaning, which is then open to 'carrying-forward' in words as Gendlin suggests. It seems probable that images can carry-forward preverbal or more unformulated levels of experience or meaning than words. This provides a connection between Gendlin's practical and philosophical understanding of the iterative process of carrying-forward felt experience, and the role of imagery and image schema in recent psychoanalytic studies of symbol formation and creativity discussed below. Gendlin's concern, in the example, is on carrying-forward a felt sense or (...) into words, but patterns and imagery may be necessary to constellate some kinds of felt sense, particularly from the deeply embodied levels of experience that can find words in poetry and psychotherapy.

An image can emerge spontaneously, as in dreams, but then be modified or played with deliberately to a much greater degree than experience that remains purely embodied. This may be a purely imaginative process, as described by Hunt:

⁵⁰ See Section 5.1 for poem, pages 62-63 for description.

...locating a strong image in one's memory and then half-closing the mind's eye, as it were, and allowing the image to go sufficiently out of focus, so that the imagination can get to work on it and reshape it into a new and concrete form which still nevertheless contains the essence of the original. (Hunt, 1998, p. 97)

It can also involve verbal description, which is how dreams are usually communicated. The fact that this changes the nature of the original dream image is often overlooked. Seen in this way, imagery has the potential to enable two-way communication between conscious and unconscious levels of activity and experience. Roland (2002) makes just such an observation of its role in artistic work:

The artist's imagery provides one of the essential bases on which his creativity rests. His use of imagery cuts two ways: on the one hand, the poet is able to formulate new integrations and meanings through the use of poetic metaphor, paradox, and other structures; on the other hand, he is able to draw upon his own unconscious and express it metaphorically. Images can thus be likened to a ladder that reaches up into the artist's imagination and down into his unconscious. (Roland, 2002, p. 73)

Bucci's (1997) multiple code theory provides a parallel to Roland's 'ladder' in cognitive processing terms. Based on an integration of cognitive and psychoanalytic theory, she posits three major systems of emotional processing and representation: the symbolic verbal, symbolic nonverbal and subsymbolic. The term *subsymbolic* is chosen to indicate that at this level representation occurs but in a bodily *enacted* (e.g. sensory and motoric) as opposed to *symbolic* form. She proposes that subsymbolic representations "constitute the affective core of the emotion schema, the bodily component of the schema and the basis on which the organization of the schema is initially built" (Bucci, 2007, p. 51). This becomes closely connected to imagery arising from the context and circumstances of life, but only more distantly, or connotatively, to language. Positioned in this way, imagery is of vital developmental and therapeutic significance, and a primary means of linking unformulated or enacted emotional experience to specific feelings and ultimately language.

9.5 Movements of immersion and differentiation

9.5.1 Immersion and aesthetic absorption in experience

I have described how my changed process of writing poetry includes a willingness to relinquish any preconceived purpose in favour of following a more enacted form of intentionality, and how this involves a widening of attentional focus in which imagery plays a key role in mediating between embodied experience and words. In this section,

I will examine the subtle way that my sense of identity can fluctuate when writing, between states of near fusion or absorption in experience, and positions of apparent separation and distance from experience. In Section 9.6, I will attempt to connect this explicitly to the attentional processes involved.

In Chapter 8, I linked my feelings of detachment from and immersion in experience when writing to Bollas's descriptions of object use and 'rhythms' of self-experience. My experience of 'immersion' also has similarities with the account given by Benson (1993) of the phenomenon of aesthetic absorption, which concerns both identity and the feeling he describes as 'not I'. Benson states the problem of arriving at some understanding of this in the following terms:

...describing aesthetic absorption means focusing on the phenomenology of the particular self who becomes absorbed. It means trying to understand how that person's point of view is transformed from being apart from the object of attention to becoming part of it. (Benson, 1993, p. 80)

Benson examines this movement with respect to both subjectivity and intentionality. He connects individual subjectivity, "what it is like to be me doing something", with intentionality: "that to which my thinking or perceiving or imagining is directed or about." (p. 80) He suggests that this movement is linked to shifts in attention connected with returns from imaginative absorption to the "twofoldness" of perception.

I believe that the experience of being aesthetically absorbed has something to do with these 'returns' or transitions or shifts and with the type of role the subject of the experience plays in each type of state. (Benson, 1993, p. 81)

Benson's analysis focuses on the psychological difference between the linguistically centred use of 'I' and the sense of perceptual centeredness. He doesn't elaborate further on the attentional processes involved or indicate if they might relate to creative work as well as aesthetic appreciation. I will return to Benson's conclusions in Section 9.6.4 to compare them to my account of how these processes could operate.

9.5.2 Merger and separation as a dimension of attention

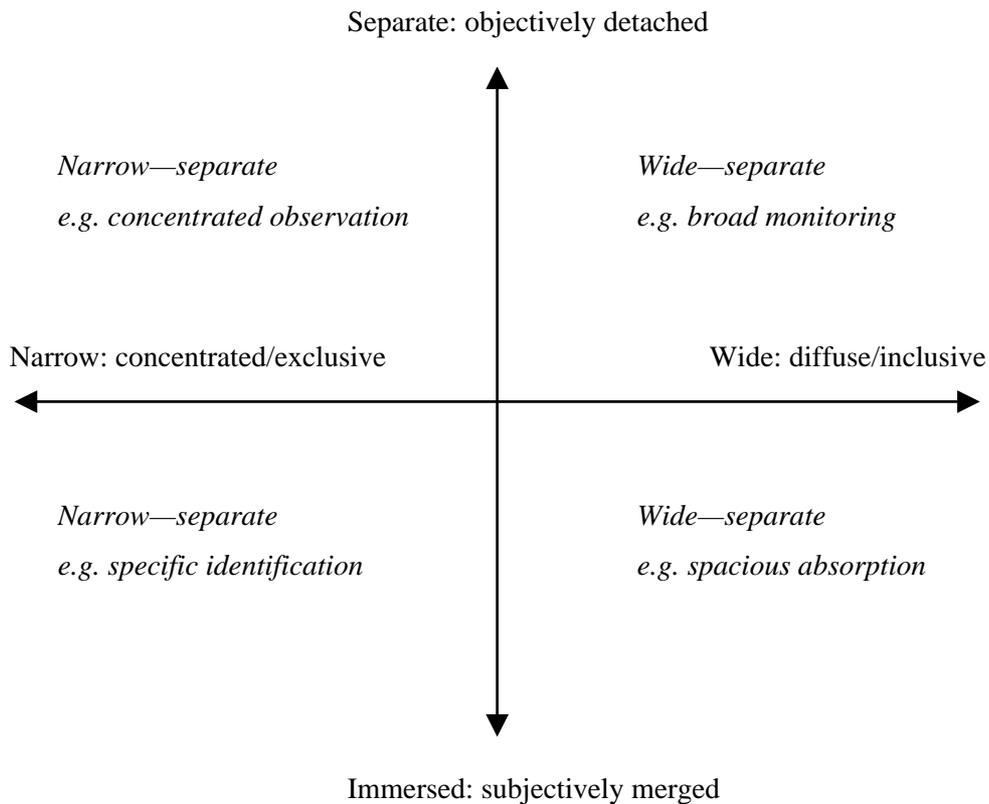
When I am fully engaged in the formative stages of writing a poem, there is usually some rhythm or movement in my attention that I now recognise involves both an *expansion* and *contraction* in the breadth of focus, and a movement *into* and *away* from identification with experience. If these movements cease, creative momentum is easily

lost. For example, I can easily find that I have become adhesively fixed *in* my thinking, as if I *am* ‘thinking’ and nothing else.

Milner became acutely aware of a similar absorption in thinking and found the way out involved allowing a movement, not of control, but of separation or standing back: "I must neither push away my thought nor let it drift. I must simply make an internal gesture of standing back and watching..." (Milner, 1986, p. 102) Milner links this gesture to her 'two ways of looking' and the *widening* of attention, but she then describes the persistent difficulties she encountered in reliably achieving this as a problem of *differentiation* from her experience. Milner's descriptions indicate that this was not just a difficulty of separating from thought, but a fear of *allowing* states of merger with other kinds of experience. She found that this led to a tendency to resist such movement, even when it was desired, out of a fundamental concern about the imagined loss of personal boundaries and dread of annihilation.

Milner's characteristic descriptions of the strategies she used to alter her attention were spatial in nature, for example "to put myself out of myself" (Milner, 1986, p. 70), and in relation to painting, "spreading the imaginative body to take the form of what one looked at" (Milner, 1957, p. 55). She subsumes these and the difficulties she encountered as part of the process of widening attention. However, I think it is theoretically helpful, and phenomenologically more accurate, to distinguish the processes of widening the *breadth* of attention to include more, from the change in the *quality* of attention that is felt as merger with or separation from experience.

Fehmi (in press) argues that the breadth of focus and degree of identification with experience are two distinct dimensions of attention that combined give a helpful scheme for representing how we are paying attention or modulating awareness at different times. His method of developing an "open focus" of attention allows for movement along both dimensions independently. Breadth of focus varies from narrow to diffuse, while identification varies from being entirely immersed in experience to being objectively distanced from it. This is illustrated in Figure 9.1. Fehmi does not account for how the 'immersed – separate' dimension arises, but he describes its distinctive quality as feeling either subjectively merged with or objectively detached from experience in a way that accords with my experience and the descriptions of Milner.

Figure 9.1 Fehmi's dimensions of attention⁵¹

Taken together Fehmi's two dimensions provide a useful framework for thinking about how awareness can be modulated with regard to both content (breadth of focus) and quality of identification (merger-separateness). He provides guidance on how to broaden attention, for example, by attending to more senses and widening awareness to peripheral areas. He also encourages the use of what he describes as: 'objectless imagery'. This, in an interesting parallel with Milner, involves attending to the qualities of 'space' and 'time' by attempting to imaginatively experience or sense their presence. The strategies offered for broadening or narrowing attention are self-explanatory, but the effect of objectless imagery is not so obvious. Fehmi observes that it can alter the quality of experience to attend to 'things' that cannot be easily objectified. However, he does not provide a theoretical explanation of this.

⁵¹ Adapted from Fehmi & Robbins (2007) and Fehmi (in press).

9.5.3 Merger and separation in the context of bi-logic

Although Fehmi does not provide a theoretical explanation for how the process of merger with and differentiation from experience arises, he distinguishes it in his model as a fundamental dimension of attention. Milner clearly acknowledges its importance but subsumes it within her two fundamentally different ways of perceiving, one rooted in verbal thought and the other in embodied and usually unconscious experience. Matte Blanco's bi-logical approach offers a framework for understanding both Milner's and Fehmi's observations.

Matte Blanco's theory provides a means of linking conscious conceptual thought with unconscious cognition and felt experience in various combinations or patterns. It does this by proposing different structural blendings of two contrasting forms of logic (asymmetric/symmetric), which I have characterised as relating to 'identity' on the one hand and 'differentiation' on the other. Consciously we can only know or grasp what is asymmetrically differentiated; it has to stand apart or be objectified to come into being. However, Matte Blanco argues that there is always some form of symmetric logic or process of identification going on. For example, when I see a bird in the garden I see one bird, but *also* have an awareness that it is a 'bird' and thus in some sense the same as all other birds. Without this sense every differentiated object would stand completely apart in isolation, it would have no wider context of meaning. Alternatively, I might form an identification that gives the single bird a more questionable felt meaning or identity, for example seeing a large black bird as *being* a bad omen. Such variations in thought and experience can be viewed as variations in our 'normal' bi-logical ways of experiencing the world.

A corollary of Matte Blanco's analysis is that when we view anything as separate, that is, as an object different from ourselves, we are implicitly exercising an identification with ourselves as the subject. We come into felt being as a subject through identification with ourselves as the observer of a differentiated object. This is a bi-logical process of identification and differentiation. In our usual unexamined patterns of thought we take this subject to be in some sense identical with the image we might have of ourselves as an embodied person, but as soon as we take any particular aspect of this sense of 'me' to be the object of our attention we recede from it, we become differentiated and our identification is with a sense of *being* something other. This

reflects the ubiquitous nature of the subject-self schema described in Chapter 8, and is consistent with Damasio's account of the development of core and extended consciousness.⁵²

It is thus possible to see how merger with or separation from an object of attention could reflect a change in bi-logical orientation. Differentiation would imply greater identification with a separate subject while merger would suggest an identification that actually includes, or extends out to, the object of attention itself – or at least some aspect of it. Consistent with Matte Blanco's theory the identification required for merger might take place unconsciously but be felt or experienced as a quality of being. However, it might be possible to cultivate it as both Milner and Fehmi have found. Focusing on space or volume as suggested by Fehmi's 'objectless imagery', and by Milner in her imaginative extension of her body in space, might rely on the fact that space itself cannot be attended to as a separately sensed 'object'. It exists between and inside all objects but in itself has no limits and is ultimately infinite. This is in accord with one of the fundamental qualities of symmetric logic based on infinite sets: all space is identical to the category of 'space' – there is no such *thing* as *a space*, only a concept of it. This would suggest that space can only be experientially grasped through some form of identification.

A similar argument can be applied to the sense of time and would potentially offer one explanation of why in states of intense absorption in an activity it is often reported that the sense of time alters. Absorption in the moment, or the immediacy of an activity, could alter our normal feeling of being separate from the passage of time and thus change how 'its' speed or duration is experienced.

This bi-logical analysis provides a theoretical basis for the experience of both merger and separation within the models of attentional practice described by Milner & Fehmi. It is also consistent with their emphasis on bodily sensation and feeling, given the congruence found between bi-logic and models of embodied cognition discussed in Chapter 8.

⁵² Damasio (1999) sees attention as critical to core consciousness as the differentiated experience of having consciousness of an object arises when attention is directed towards it. He relates extended consciousness to spreading attention over a larger domain but does not detail the attentional processes involved.

9.5.4 Movements ‘in and out’ and ‘to and from’ when writing poetry

My experience of writing poetry is that there needs to be a very flexible movement, or oscillation, in identification with and then differentiation from different aspects of experience during the process of composition. Simply to merge or be identified with an experience has not led me to write more effectively than when I was initially solely trying to objectify my experience in writing. For example, the *immersed* experience of being caught in the headlights of a car on a dark lane and jumping instinctively for safety underpinned the poem *Invisible man*⁵³. The experience was intense enough to stay with me and led to a feeling of anger, which I initially felt only partially undifferentiated from: ‘I *am* angry – he could have killed me!’

caught full beam
staring out from blindness
mind no longer recycling

However, when an image later popped into my mind of ‘rising up from the ground with wings’ my attention altered from the initial experience, which I felt strongly identified with, to an image that I ‘saw’ in a more objective or separate way. It was something I could vividly picture, and which invited attention to itself in a way that was accompanied by a shift in my previous absorption in the ‘near miss’ experience. As I played with the image in my mind I became increasingly interested and absorbed in *it*. This was accompanied by a shift in my felt experience that was strangely calming and peaceful.

rooted in a body
but raised from the ground
both feet in the air
quite still

As I noticed and moved towards that experience, while still holding the image in mind, there was a spontaneous reaching out for further words or images to try and give this new feeling a more tangible form. A process had been initiated which I then recognised could lead to a poem. A recurrent oscillation between bodily feelings and words via an

⁵³ See Section 5.1.

image, in a process marked not just by a 'to and fro', but by movements both *in and out* of, and *to and from*, temporary identifications and separations from experience. This eventually included the experience arising from reading words on the page.

In the next section I will try to develop a more complete understanding of the processes involved in this attentional fluctuation by drawing on the dynamics of 'tacit knowing' proposed by Michael Polanyi. I will also attempt to connect this understanding directly to self-experience by synthesising it with the bi-logical model developed thus far.

9.6 The attentional correlates of identity and self-experience

9.6.1 Focal and subsidiary awareness

Polanyi's (1966; 1969) concept of tacit knowing concerns the way we come to know the world and experience meaning. Critical of positivist philosophies of science, he sought to demonstrate that no knowledge is formed entirely objectively or impersonally but is always reliant on personal forms of knowing. He proposed that this personal knowledge arises from experience and depends on a process of 'tacit' knowing. This is captured by one of Polanyi's well-known epigrams: "we know more than we can tell." (1966, p. 4) One of his major achievements was to demonstrate how such knowing could function across different practical contexts.

In Polanyi's account, tacit knowing is structured according to an attentional dimension that involves a movement between subsidiary and focal awareness. In one example Polanyi, who was multilingual, describes reading letters in different languages and of grasping their meaning without being aware of what language the letters were written in.⁵⁴ In this situation a letter's meaning is the focal aspect of awareness while the particular words and language employed are subsidiarily attended to or, to emphasise the dependent relation, attended *through* or *from*. In other examples he describes the skilled use of tools, where the awareness of the tool becomes subsidiary to a focal awareness of the particular use to which the tool is being employed. So, in using a hammer, we don't focus on the feel of a hammer in the hand but to the point at which the hammer strikes its target; we are only subsidiarily aware of our hand's contact with

⁵⁴ Quoted in Witmer (1999).

the hammer (Polanyi & Prosch, 1975, p. 33). In Polanyi's view there is always an integrative movement from the subsidiary aspects of attention to the focal aspects, that is, to whatever it is we are consciously attending to in any moment. This integration may be relatively simple but can also be highly complex and intuitive, as in many high-level skills and forms of creative activity. Polanyi indicated that although there was such a thing as imaginative 'work', such intuitive integration could not be deliberately determined but was experienced as spontaneous and effortless (Polanyi & Prosch, 1975, p. 96).

Conscious focal awareness is always dependent on the subsidiary levels of awareness and is arrived at through one of the many possible integrations of this background field of relevant information, or what Polanyi referred to as 'clues'. What is at one point functioning as a 'clue', or subsidiary aspect of awareness, may later become the object of focal attention. This would require a reconfiguration of what is in subsidiary awareness to enable attention from that to the new object of attention. In making this shift, what was previously the focal object of attention can potentially become part of the new subsidiary field of awareness. Thus we can attend to things focally as differentiated objects of conscious experience, or subsidiarily as undifferentiated aspects of a usually less conscious level of awareness and experience. Crucial to my argument here is the scope this provides for a back-and-forth movement in which experiences attended to focally can then be attended *from*, in an iterative manner that allows for the emergence of new patterns or forms of focal experience.

9.6.2 Awareness, bi-logic and poetry

The attentional from-to movement of awareness in Polanyi's scheme of tacit knowing can be integrated with an embodied bi-logical account of conscious and unconscious processes. Focal awareness is what we are consciously aware of whereas subsidiary awareness can exist at different levels of consciousness and embodied functioning:

If this analysis convinces us of the presence of two very different kinds of awareness in tacit knowing, it should also prevent us from identifying them with conscious and unconscious awareness. Focal awareness is, of course, always fully conscious, but subsidiary awareness, or from-awareness, can exist at any level of consciousness, ranging from the subliminal to the fully conscious. What makes awareness subsidiary is its functional character, and we shall therefore claim subsidiary awareness for functions inside our body, at levels inaccessible to us through direct experience. (Polanyi & Prosch, 1975, p. 39)

Thus focal awareness could correspond to a dominantly asymmetric mode of functioning in which experience is differentiated, objectified and hence made conscious. In contrast, subsidiary awareness could incorporate more pronounced degrees of symmetric functioning, which would be associated with a greater experience of non-separateness from and between aspects of experience. This effectively adds to Matte Blanco's conception of different bi-logical 'structures' of experiencing at different levels of consciousness, a description of how experience could be developed and creatively transformed by a process associated with movements, or modulations, of attention.

Polanyi uses the example of poetry to illustrate the particularly complex nature of the integration of subsidiaries in metaphor and art. He suggests that the meaning of poetry depends on the complex patterning of many specific aspects of a poem, such as rhythm, sound, rhyme and grammar, which are not usually focally attended to, unless of course the poem is subject to close reading.

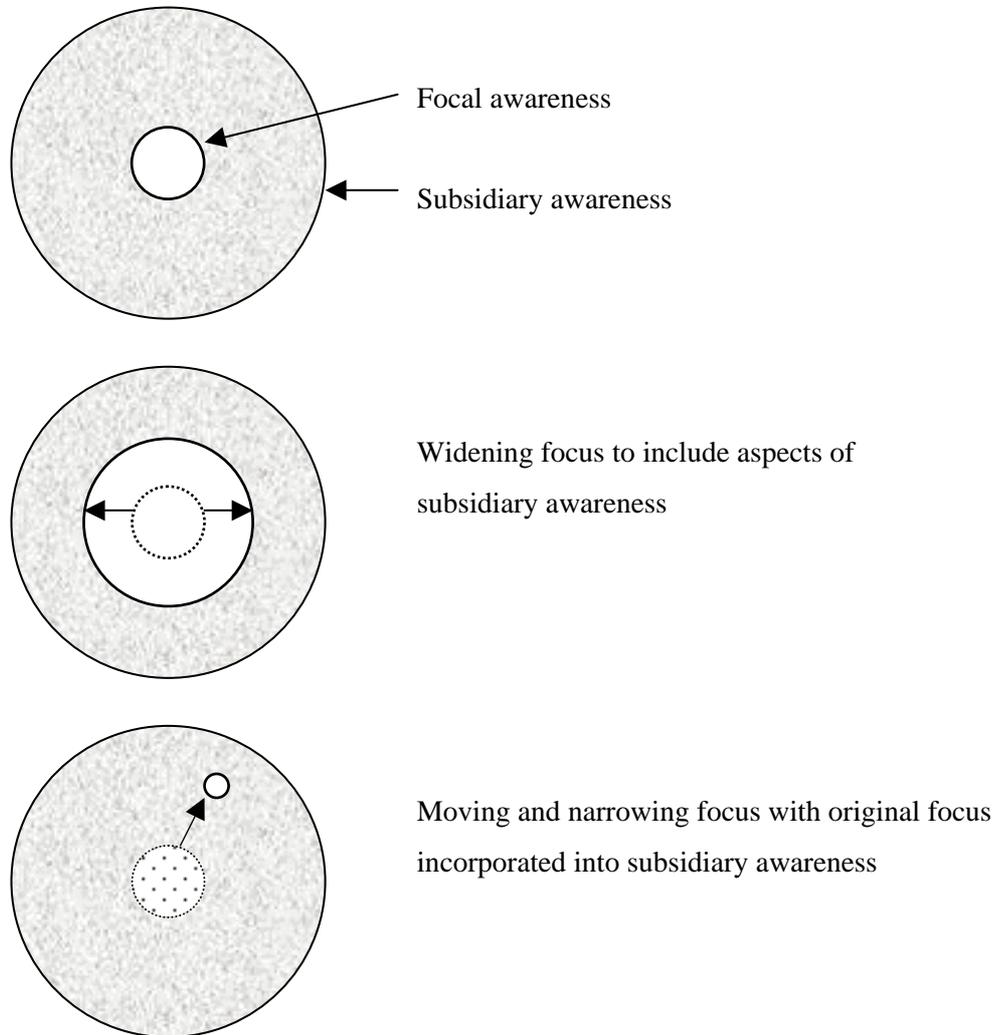
The subsidiaries composing metaphors and poems are joined together by an imaginative performance much richer than any imaginative action required for linking a word to its meaning. To reduce a metaphor or a poem to the disconnected subsidiaries is to extinguish the vision which linked them to their integrated meaning in a metaphor or poem. What is left is a caricature of their true meaning. (Polanyi & Prosch, 1975, p. 82)

The terms 'imaginative performance' or 'vision', which Polanyi utilizes, suggest the active process required to link or integrate subsidiaries in the appreciation and composition of a poem. This has similarities to the theories of conceptual blending discussed in Chapter 8, including the generative notion of 'double-scope blending', where different source domains are mapped onto a new domain through the emergence of a novel integrative framework. What Polanyi's analysis adds to these abstract models of cognitive processing is the delineation of an activity that may have a practical bearing on the modulation of awareness and self-experience during the process of composition.

Polanyi's attentional movements can be viewed along a linear dimension from subsidiary to focal awareness, but a more compelling image is of a centre and periphery of awareness, with focal awareness at and surrounding a central area and subsidiary awareness further out, towards and beyond the periphery of what can be 'seen' without a shift or expansion of attention. In fact, localised focal awareness of sound, feeling and other senses suggests subsidiary awareness of a space that extends out three-dimensionally and infinitely around whatever focal area is selected. Any change in the

size or position of the focal area alters what can potentially be incorporated into subsidiary awareness as illustrated in Figure 9.2.

Figure 9.2 Shifts in focal and subsidiary awareness



Polanyi's model of attention and awareness thus compliments the dimensional analysis of attention presented earlier in the chapter by highlighting the 'from-to' movement between, and potential interchange of, focal and subsidiary areas of experience. These movements may be felt as widening/narrowing the attentional field, and are connected to changes in the degree of identification with or separation from particular areas of experience.

9.6.3 Indwelling and self-experience

Polanyi recognised the fundamental way that self-experience changed as part of changes in attentional integration and focus. In his terms, whatever we are subsidiarily aware of, we at least temporarily 'indwell'. The concept of indwelling is critical to Polanyi's model and involves the idea that whatever is indwelt becomes experienced as an extension of ourselves. In effect, what we are subsidiarily aware of is identified with, it becomes or feels part of us. It is through this that we recognise something as other, something that can be differentiated and consciously known. Polanyi suggests that indwelling gives us the same relation to things in subsidiary awareness as we have to our own bodies:

...there is one single thing in the world we normally know only by relying on our awareness of it for attending to other things. Our own body is that unique thing. We attend to external objects by being subsidiarily aware of things happening to our body. [...] We may say, in fact, that to know something by relying on our awareness of it for attending to something else is to have the same kind of knowledge of it that we have of our body by living in it. It is a manner of being or existing. (Polanyi & Prosch, 1975, p. 36)

This conception points immediately to the potential fluidity and openness of this aspect of self-experience but raises the vexed question of what it is that indwells the body or other aspects of subsidiary awareness. As previously discussed with regard to Damasio's core self, although the body is normally a subsidiary feature of awareness it can also be focused upon and objectified, at which point the sense of a simple identity with it breaks down. Polanyi's model is then open to what Kettle (2000, p. 22) calls "habits of the Cartesian imagination", with the positing of an individual subject or 'knower' that indwells the body but is also somehow separable from it. Indeed, Polanyi's view that the relation of subsidiary to focal awareness is formed by the "*act of a person*"⁵⁵ who integrates one to the other", is open to this interpretation (Polanyi & Prosch, 1975, p. 38).

An alternative approach is to avoid the dualities and potential infinite regress of literalising the subject-self schema and focus instead on the process or *action* that Polanyi highlights. An activity takes place that links subsidiary to focal awareness by mediating between aspects of experience that awareness is 'in' to aspects that there is conscious awareness 'of'. This reciprocal attentional dynamic gives rise to both the

⁵⁵ Italics in original.

sense of self and of not-self or 'other'. The sense of self and not-self thus come into being in an active, interdependent and essentially relational manner. This is associated with the experience of at least some separation in *space* and, in Damasio's extended consciousness, the potential for separation in *time*. The idea that there is 'someone' who is aware arises through the almost ubiquitous identification of awareness with its primary vehicle of subsidiary attention – the body. It is, however, at least plausible that 'awareness' indicates something that is not the effect of an objectified source, but is intrinsic to the very capacity for such objectification. For example, the differentiation of awareness in space and time could be more fundamental to consciousness than the process of attending from a body that can also be viewed as an object within that consciousness.

From this perspective, the very idea of 'merging with' or 'being absorbed in' aspects of so called external reality presuppose the primary experience of indwelling of the body as defining the boundaries of the self. This is where the self-other boundary is usually experienced although there is now strong evidence that the body is neurologically mapped to allow extension into space.⁵⁶ This includes extensions through tool-use that appear to corroborate Polanyi's phenomenological descriptions (Iriki, 2006).

When the body is focally attended to, or referred to within the reflexive structure of language as 'my' body, the relation to the body assumes a subject-self structure. Here the body becomes an object and a subject emerges that may be imagined or felt to move further 'in', to indwell that which reflective thought relies on subsidiarily: the processes accompanying reflective thinking itself. Notwithstanding previous arguments about the embodied nature of thought, the sense of this being 'in my head' could be an intuitively accurate reflection of the primary neurological location of subsidiary awareness when we are immersed in thought.

9.6.4 Identity and the modulation of attention

The preceding analysis points to a primary indwelling of subsidiary awareness in patterns of bodily experience, and a secondary capacity to indwell the processes underlying reflective thinking. This would correspond to the dualities that are often assumed between the body and its environment, and the mind and its body. The body is

⁵⁶ See for example Blakeslee & Blakeslee (2007).

known primarily through indwelling, whereas the 'external' world is known *through* the body as objectified and other. With focal objectified awareness of the body comes the additional complexity of a sense of identity that feels distinct from the body but that may indwell the use of language and conscious thought.

As Milner and I found, freeing oneself from identification with thinking can be difficult particularly if there is a strong sense of trying to do something. Such trying or willed effort may reinforce a structure of self-experience and identity that is antithetical to the flexible modulation of attention required for some forms of activity and experience. To return to previous examples, actions that can be physically objectified, like going upstairs to bed or reading a book, may feel consciously willed by a sense of an 'I' directing 'my' body, even if this is deemed an illusion. But actions that require more complex shifts in attention and awareness, such as *into* sleep or *into* a text to seek its meaning, may require the movement of subsidiary awareness away from this particular identification. Milner found strong resistance to loosening the boundaries of the body to unite with wider aspects of experience. I needed to abandon myself to more diverse forms of embodied activity before finding a way to write poetry. The potential fluidity of our self-experience may have been constrained by a rigid body-world distinction, which could contribute to fears of a loss of control, separateness or even of annihilation. Nonetheless, as Milner and others have testified, significant movements into greater identity with the world can be associated with experiences of greater freedom, openness and a profound expansion of reality. These movements could also play a crucial part in some forms of creative activity and aesthetic experience.

The account Benson gives of aesthetic absorption and shifts in identity, introduced earlier, seems explicable in terms of the changes in attentional awareness developed above. He argues that in aesthetic absorption, particularly appreciation of works of art, there is what he describes as a 'non-deployment of the I' (Benson, 1993, p. 101). He sees this as an imaginative shift that is inevitably followed by a return to the 'I' perspective, from which the fact that such a shift took place can be recognised. One becomes lost 'in' a picture, or perhaps even more commonly in a panoramic view or exquisite sunset, and then has a sense of returning to oneself. In such states of temporary absorption, internal verbal commentary and the desire to speak often subside. Naming the experience seems associated with a return to oneself as the localised

linguistic subject 'I', whereas absorption is associated with a more distributed and immersed sense of presence. Similarly, Clark refers to the act of writing poetry in terms of “crossing a psychic threshold” in which “the word ‘I’ is no longer ‘myself’ but a signifier in the space of composition” (Clark, 1997, p. 21). I would predict that Benson's 'non-deployment of the I' and Clark's 'psychic threshold' are accompanied by a distinct shift in attention that allows the movement of subsidiary awareness out and into wider aspects of available experience.

This understanding of the attentional modulation of awareness in the context of biological processes of identification and differentiation, leads to a formulation of self and self-experience that is potentially highly fluid and flexible. As previously argued, the writing of poetry seems to require a particularly high level of involvement of both symmetric and asymmetric processes, and also the capacity to allow a free movement of attention both 'in-and-out' and 'to-and-from' different areas of experience. This may help release and expand the sense of self or expose its rigidities. In my own case, I think it did both. In the mirror of my own poems I believe I started the investigation:

*disabled by fixed meanings,
the static interference
of chattering minds⁵⁷*

But ended it with an understanding that there is:

*No need to note
what is known
only that
which escapes words,
a sense less clear,
an intimation
of deeper things.⁵⁸*

⁵⁷ From *One million conversations*, see Section 5.1.

⁵⁸ From *Indian summer*, see Section 5.1.

Part IV

Reflective Evaluation

10 The Nondual Imagination

If anyone comes to the gates of poetry and expects to become an adequate poet by acquiring expert knowledge of the subject without the Muses' madness, he will fail, and his self-controlled verses will be eclipsed by the poetry of men who have been driven out of their minds. Plato⁵⁹

This chapter reviews the investigation as a whole and offer some reflections on its potential implications. The outcomes of the study are summarised in the context of its primary aim and conclusions are drawn for comparison with related work. Consideration is given to the developmental benefits that I have experienced and to some of the practical and therapeutic implications that arise from the analysis. The value and limitations of the research approach adopted are then discussed in relation to the secondary aim of the study. In conclusion I offer, for further investigation, some reflections on poetry and self-experience that arise from the activity of what could be called ‘the nondual imagination’.

10.1 Aims and outcomes of the study

The primary aim of the study was to investigate the way that writing poetry could impact on self-experience. The key outcomes of the study relating to this aim are summarised below. A secondary aim was to contribute to the development of combined forms of first-person creative and critical inquiry, this will be considered separately in Section 10.3.

10.1.1 Key outcomes

The experiential and creative outcomes of the study can be summarised in answer to the first three of the four research questions that framed the conduct of the investigation.

Question 1: What is my experience of undertaking an extended personal experiment with writing poetry?

⁵⁹ Phaedrus 245a, (Plato, 1997, p. 523).

My experience of the first four years of the investigation was presented in a narrative form in Chapter 4. This was characterised by a prolonged inability to write effectively, followed by a spontaneous change of direction. This change ultimately led to a more productive and satisfying way of working that was grounded in embodied experience and an increased flexibility of attention and awareness.

Question 2: Is there anything significant or relevant to self-experience reflected in the poetry written?

A selection of poems was presented in Chapter 5 as creative outcomes of the study together with a commentary on some of the prominent themes they contain relating to self-experience. This included themes suggestive of loss and separation, a search, failures of language, and finding what was always present. There were also allusions to processes of death and rebirth, embodiment, and changed awareness.

Question 3: What are the key relationships found between self-experience and the writing of poetry?

The narrative account was subject to an analysis and interpretation presented in Chapter 6.⁶⁰ This revealed that the account had a narrative structure corresponding with a mythopoetic pattern of personal transformation, and contained themes that had similarities with those found in the poems. Four major factors relating my self-experience to the process of writing poetry were identified: the failure of my initial conscious intention to write; the experience of a process that felt objectifying of myself and my writing; an implicit idea of a separate sense of self in the writing process, and a changed experience of ‘self’ that felt more embodied and yet highly fluid.

Chapters 7 to 9 presented a theoretical explication of my experience in answer to the fourth research question:

Question 4: How can any relationships found between self-experience and writing of poetry be formulated theoretically?

A theoretical understanding of the conscious and unconscious processes involved in the writing of poetry was developed that integrated the bi-logical model of Matte Blanco with theories of embodied cognition and consciousness, relational psychoanalysis and

⁶⁰ See summary of analysis in Table 6.4.

attentional processes. It was argued that poetry has a bi-logical form that simultaneously condenses and integrates patterns of both difference and identity in language to an unusually high degree. This requires the mutual interplay of conscious and unconscious processes in composition that was facilitated, in my investigation, by an increase in embodied awareness, a decreased exercise of deliberate volition, and a facilitative use of images. This enabled a move away from a 'separate' and objectified sense of self, and its objects of experience, to a more fluid experience of self and the creative process. The process was marked by an oscillation in awareness modulated by attentional movements that mediated the breadth of attention, and the degree of identification or separation from experience, in a manner that simultaneously altered the boundaries of self-experience.

Although derived from a first-person study this formulation leads to the following general propositions or 'conclusions' about poetry and self-experience:

1. The writing of effective poetry requires an intensified and flexible use of conscious and unconscious processes through a combination of verbal discrimination and *access to embodied feeling*.
2. The cognitive and affective processes underlying the composition of poetry can usefully be conceived of in terms of *bi-logical patterns of differentiation and identity*.
3. The process of creative composition *intrinsically* involves alterations of self-experience associated with *modulations of attention and awareness*.

These conclusions will be briefly compared to some related areas of work to indicate their broad consistency with, and distinctive contribution to, existing research and theory.

10.1.2 Accessing embodied feeling

Nicholls (2006) has recently found confirmation of the importance of embodiment in her experience of creative writing. She undertook a study of her own process of writing for personal development that commenced with: "an instinct that what I needed to do was something called 'writing the body;' that I needed to access and express the bodily nature of my feelings in order to rediscover something crucially important about

myself.” (2006, p. 5) Through reflection on her writing, which included poetry and a novella, she concluded that her critical finding was that she had “found a more ‘real’ sense of myself”, which she referenced to the sense of a “felt bodily ‘I’ ” that she found through her writing and which extended into her life (p. 202).

Nicholls’ account provides an interesting parallel with my experience. Although her study commenced after my own and with the same supervisor, I was unaware of it until the final stages of writing my thesis and was therefore not directly influenced by its outcomes. Although there is some cross-fertilization of theoretical ideas through a common supervisor, our experiences remain distinctive and are fundamentally corroborative of the importance of embodied feeling in creative writing. Some of the differences are also worth noting. Whereas Nicholls *set out* with the intuition of needing to write from the body, I found that my writing of poetry *required* it; indeed I stumbled upon it without any preconceived expectations. Her emphasis is on how creative writing can facilitate a felt bodily sense of self, whereas the direction of my own inquiry extended to how this felt sense relates to the operation of conscious and unconscious processes and the nature of poetry in particular. Nicholls arrived at a stronger sense of her own “I-ness”, which she correlated closely with the body. In contrast, I found that this sense of I-ness was open to continuous transformation in conjunction with attentional processes.

10.1.3 Poetry and patterns of difference and identity

A number of influential accounts of creativity have seen the contrast and combination of two distinct forms of thinking as a key feature of the creative process. This has often been seen to involve some interaction between conscious and unconscious processes. For example, Arieti (1976) sees this in terms of a ‘magic synthesis’ of primary and secondary processes. Ehrenzweig (1967), on the other hand, highlights the involvement of a process of unconscious ‘dedifferentiation’. Ehrenzweig distinguishes the active *process* of dedifferentiation from the more static idea of undifferentiation. This formulation allows for the possibility of a dynamic of creation in which new patterns can form and be dissolved. Bollas (1995) provides an evocative description of both integrating and ‘cracking up’ up experience in creative and free-associative activity that I will draw on in Section 10.4. The compelling but largely descriptive processes of magic synthesis, dedifferentiation and cracking up, postulated by these accounts, can be

formulated relatively parsimoniously by Matte Blanco's bi-logical theory. The latter also enables links to be made to the quality of experience involved and the creative medium employed, as I have attempted to demonstrate with poetry.

Other dual-aspect theories of creativity include Koestler's notion of 'bisociation' in which "two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference" are combined (1964, p. 36), and Rothenberg's (1979) formulation of 'Janusian' and 'homospacial thinking. Janusian thinking concerns the ability to use opposite or contradictory ideas simultaneously, whereas homospacial thinking refers to the ability to actively merge or synthesise these in some way. Both of these formulations highlight the fact that differences are combined into new patterns of identity within the content of creative work, including poetry, which Rothenberg uses as a major example. The current investigation has led to an explicit formulation of how contradictions are combined by symmetric thinking, and how this can lead to specific bi-logical forms such as poetry.

My description⁶¹ of the bi-logical nature of poetry has been likened by Williams (2006) to aspects of the work of Jacques Maritain on poetic intuition, in that it crosses the boundaries between different modes of cognition. Maritain contrasts 'poetic sense' with 'logical sense'. He sees the poetic sense and poetic intuition as rooted in preconscious and unconscious embodied being and as necessary for a "liberation from conceptual, logical and discursive reason" (Maritain, 1955, p. 55). I have found that Maritain's description of the 'poetic sense' and the 'logical sense' have some correspondence with the processes I have attempted to describe. However, his poetic sense would be equated with a *different* logical sense in my formulation and, following Matte Blanco, I have placed greater emphasis on their bi-logical integration.

Within poetry itself, Coleridge saw the "balance or reconciliation of opposites or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference" as an important and revealing feature of poetry's nature (1997, pp. 184-185). Indeed Wheeler (1981) suggests that identity can be found *in* difference in her analysis of Coleridge's own work, thus pointing to something akin to the notion of a bi-logical structure. Beyond these suggestive parallels I am grateful to have been pointed towards the semiological analysis of Yuri Lotman for

⁶¹ Maltby (2003).

a theoretical approach to poetry that appears to lead in a similar direction to my own. Commenting on Lotman's work, Kristeva (1994, para. 6) describes how, for Lotman art: "... redistributes the primary logic of language according to new logical rules, conferring on humanity new mental (or, as one would say today, new cognitive)⁶² possibilities, different principles of logic for the reconstruction of the self and the world." Eagleton presents Lotman's analysis of poetry as a "peculiarly *overcoded*"⁶³ pattern of interacting systems.

A poem is both a system of rules, and a system of their violation. It establishes equivalences, but also differences. Think, for example, of rhyme, which forges a phonic (sound) equivalence between two words, but highlights their semantic difference in doing so. The same double effect can be achieved by rhythm. (Eagleton, 2007, p. 54)

Eagleton argues that poetry for Lotman is an intensely condensed form of regularity and deviation from regularity, which enables it to contain extremely high levels of complexity and information. Without this organization, or patterning, there would simply be too much information for it to contain. This parallels, in terms of information and complexity, what I have suggested the bi-logical structure of poetry enables us to be *consciously* aware of, or appreciate, through its combined asymmetric and symmetric features. Eagleton does question whether Lotman's analysis is universally true for all poetry, but sees it as applicable to at least the post-romantic context. Although I have argued that poetry is characterized by particular bi-logical qualities, this doesn't mean that this would be unvarying across all forms of poetry. For example, there might be revealing differences associated with historical and cultural *changes* in consciousness if linguistic paradigms of the evolution of consciousness are correct.⁶⁴

10.1.4 The modulation of self-experience

The proposed model of attentional modulation of awareness, in the context of bi-logical processes of identification and differentiation, leads to a formulation of self-experience that is similar to many writers who emphasise the 'self' not as a thing but a process. For example Fast (1998), writing from a relational psychoanalytic perspective, has proposed that rather than talking about 'the self' we would do better to refer to 'selving', a preference that is echoed by many others who see the advantages of thinking about 'it'

⁶² Parenthesis in original.

⁶³ Italics in original.

⁶⁴ For example Barfield (1999) and Jaynes (2000).

as a verb rather than a noun. There is however considerable debate about how this action or process is viewed. Thus, although there is widespread agreement about the dangers of reifying the concept of self, there is still dispute about whether the concept of self is valid or whether it is more accurate to conclude, as Metzinger (2003) does, that we might have the phenomenal experience of ‘being someone’ but there is ‘no-self’ that can really be said to be having that experience. Zahavi offers a contrasting phenomenological view that the self is not something separate from the ‘givenness’ of experience:

In short, the self referred to is not something standing beyond or opposed to the stream of experiences, rather it is a feature or function of their givenness. It is the invariant dimension of first-personal givenness in the multitude of changing experiences. (Zahavi, 2005a, p10)

This debate is interesting from the point of view of this study because both Metzinger and Zahavi take first-person experience seriously as a datum of investigation. A key difference between them seems to be whether phenomenal experience is seen as ‘transparent’, that is *not* representing a more substantial entity that can be identified as self, or whether the self *is*, as Zahavi suggests, an inherent dimension of experience (Zahavi, 2005b). One consequence, for Zahavi, of Metzinger’s eliminative view of self, is that it undermines the experiential basis of not only knowing the self but the world. Everything could be seen as illusory or a ‘phenomenal reification’ in Metzinger’s terms – not just the sense of self (Zahavi, 2007).

My account of the attentional modulation of self-experience does not presuppose a position on the above debate but does suggest a perspective from which it can be viewed, which I will elaborate in Section 10.4. What my argument does strongly suggest is that self-experience is an actively modulated aspect of phenomenal consciousness, and that the activity of writing poetry can lead to changes in attention that are *intrinsically* associated with changes in self-experience. The sense of self can be held more or less rigidly, but in creative composition it may need to be in an adaptive state-of-flux. This capacity for self-experience to be fluid and changing is not just the linguistic construction of different selves, but is associated with fundamental changes in the quality and location of awareness.

I believe this formulation is consistent with the way psychoanalytic theory has developed from an objectified account of instincts, drives and internal structures to

object-relations, and more recently intersubjective accounts of self-experience, based on the *interaction* between the analyst and analysand.⁶⁵ These demand a highly fluid and modifiable view of self-experience, which is closely related to following movements of attention within the boundaries of sessions, and the construction of meaning through what Newirth (2003) calls ‘generative’ unconscious processes rooted in very early forms of experience. This approach has been extended to the creative process by other psychoanalytic writers, for example, Charles uses poetry to illustrate how patterns are shaped from attention to sensory images and nonverbal levels of experience prior to the construction of symbolic meaning and poetic representation (Charles, 2001, 2002).

10.2 Developmental benefits and therapeutic implications

10.2.1 Finding what was always present

One of the advantages of the extended period over which my study unfolded is that I have had considerable opportunity to gauge its contribution to wider personal change. However, this also makes it harder to differentiate changes brought about by the study from other factors, not least the passage of time itself. Nevertheless, I do feel changed and continue to be changed through my experience of writing poetry. My long-established practice of keeping a self-reflective journal has largely ceased, indeed it may be that I was pursuing something there that I now find available in poetry. I can best describe this as a greater quality of ‘presence’, which I feel as a stronger sense of interconnection, or potential inter-being, with the world around me. I have a sense that this was never absent but was previously more obscured, and was perhaps searched for in reflective thinking and writing.

While I was still keeping my journal I made reference to the doctorate as ‘*a profound self-therapy*’. By that I think I meant it felt a far-reaching experience, something that went deep, particularly the period of critical transition that involved an experience of something I equated with deadness. However, I’m no longer sure I would describe it as a *self-therapy*, with the implication that the self is the co-terminus agent and recipient of something. My lasting experience is of my sense of self continuously *being* changed in the movement and flux of arising experience. This was not lived as ‘a hero’s journey’

⁶⁵ For example see Rucker & Lombardi (1998) and Leiper & Maltby (2004).

so much as an unfolding of experience that can only later be presented as a narrative with a protagonist. The feeling is of both being more and less than the image I used to hold of myself and with the boundaries far less defined. The practical consequence is that I generally do feel more relaxed and less compulsive than I used to, and more able to enjoy the moment. This is linked to a stronger connection with my embodied experience. It is also connected to a sense of feeling more intimate with *all* experience and yet *less* exclusively identified with anything in particular.

In Chapter 2, I pointed out that creative writing, unlike the 'talking therapies', could take place both within and outside of a therapeutic or facilitative relationship. Although the majority of my investigation took place in a private and solitary context, there was a critical point at which the presence of a supportive relationship was crucial to the changes that unfolded. I believe the quality of the personal response I received in supervision when I presented a batch of uncrafted writing was critical in facilitating the changes that ensued after that time. The response was primarily one of acceptance, but I also experienced it as a kind of faith or trust in my own emerging experience. Celia was careful not to be intrusive in her comments and encouraging in her appreciation of the work I had done. This felt extremely supportive and provided the necessary conditions for me to stay with my subsequent experiences, and to be able to bring them back to supervision for reflection. I think this has also had an enduring impact on my willingness to respect and follow my intuitions and impulses, whereas before I was inclined to seek reasons or rational justifications for everything I did.

10.2.2 Poetry as a discipline of attention

In my working through of the changes I experienced, I have become increasingly interested not only in the significance of embodiment but the crucial way that attention relates to all experience, including self-experience. This has influenced my professional practice and teaching as well as my writing of poetry. For example, I have taken an active part in the current wave of interest in the development and application of mindfulness-based therapies to mental health problems. I arrived at this not only through my practice of meditation but also through my recognition that writing poetry contained the elements of an attentional practice. At one point I even drafted some writing guidelines based on these observations:

- *Don't try too hard.*
- *Relax and open attention to all available experience.*
- *Separate from passing thoughts and become more aware of bodily sensations and external stimuli.*
- *Move between a sense of separateness from what arises to coming as close to it as possible – as if you are it or are experiencing it fully as it is.*
- *Follow any images that might arise which capture your attention but hold a sense of your bodily feelings about them or any words that might come to mind in relation to them.*
- *When you have to – write. Then come back to it later.*⁶⁶

I don't remember following these guidelines systematically, the process just didn't seem to work that way. The notes were more an attempt to grasp something crucial about what happened when I did write creatively. What they did underline for me was the important role that attention played.

This led me to see poetry as a 'discipline of attention', something that could be practised but not deliberately engineered. My experience, when my attention operates in this flexible manner, is that my sense of both myself and external objects change in the fluid ways that I have already outlined. This is not always immediately pleasurable, but even difficult experiences seem to unfold and become either more meaningful or, eventually, simply dissipate. Meaning can eventually be embodied in a finished poem but even fragments of writing can further this experiential change and unfolding.

10.2.3 Therapeutic parallels

One of the therapeutic implications arising from the study derives from the unexpected finding that the content of my experience, such as feelings, memories and specific relationships, felt less important than the change that came about in the way I related to my experience. Writing poetry did not become a way of expressing feelings, or of organizing or understanding my experience in a more coherent way, so much as a means of *experiencing* differently. This does not deny the potential therapeutic benefits of expressive writing, or the value of the insights it may provide, but this simply wasn't central for me. While this undoubtedly reflects individual factors, including perhaps my age and previous experience of therapy, it also has some parallels with a shift currently occurring in mainstream models of cognitive-behavioural therapy.

⁶⁶ Undated note. These steps resemble some forms of meditation and focusing (Gendlin, 2003).

Cognitive-behavioural therapy has traditionally been associated with the modification of thoughts, beliefs and behaviours to change unwanted experience. Notwithstanding its widespread adoption and theoretical advance on behaviourism, it has generated controversy partly because of its pragmatic assumptions and relatively directive approach to therapy (House & Loewenthal, 2008). This has contributed to a ‘third-wave’ of approaches that effectively switch the emphasis from changing experience to accepting it, and becoming more aware of *how* experience is arising and changing (Hayes, Follette, & Linehan, 2004). Most of these approaches have been influenced by research into the benefits of mindfulness meditation and are either based on it, for example mindfulness-based stress reduction and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy⁶⁷; or employ it within a wider frame of reference, for example, acceptance and commitment therapy and dialectical behaviour therapy. These approaches have similarities with established Japanese approaches to psychological therapy that have also been influenced by meditation practices, such as Naiken and Morita therapy (Reynolds, 1980).

Besides accepting experience, mindfulness informed approaches place significant emphasis on the way attention mediates experience; they thus attempt to cultivate formal and informal means of recognising how attention operates and how it may be used more skilfully. Surprisingly little research has been undertaken on the role of attentional variables in other forms of psychological therapy, despite the fairly obvious fact that any form of psychological intervention is likely to alter attention in some way. Many therapies that promote rapid benefits associated with claims of, as yet, unverified mechanisms, may be failing to fully recognise how the culture and enactment of their embodied approaches could alter attention and awareness in direct and far-reaching ways.⁶⁸ As noted in Chapter 2, it has been recognised by Brody and Park (2004) that some of the benefits of the expressive writing paradigm might be explicable in terms of parallels with mindfulness, and there are many examples of developmental creative writing activities being linked to the fostering of attention and awareness, for example, in aspects of Steiner education.

⁶⁷ Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy is now a recommended intervention for depression in the NHS.

⁶⁸ For example, eye-movements and tapping energy meridians.

Within the psychoanalytic context the imperative to change experience has usually been seen as secondary to, and subsumed by, the fundamental work of analysis. Change follows the analytic process of obtaining greater access to experience and of making sense of that experience, particularly its relational configuration. As a result the outcome of analytic therapy is, or should be, far more indeterminate than more prescriptive styles of intervention. This is one way in which analysis finds itself entering the arena of psychological creativity. Despite numerous elaborations, the process of analytic work remains grounded in the dual foundations of the analysand's openness to their unfolding experience through the paradigmatic injunction to 'free-associate', and the analyst's attention to this in a manner that has been characterised as 'free-floating' or 'evenly suspended' by Freud (1912), 'reverie' by Bion (1962), and 'listening with the third ear' by Reik (1948). This leads to something that Ogden (2001) has vividly described as the interplay of "conversations at the frontiers of dreaming", which he explicitly parallels with poetry.

What I conclude from these observations is that although there is obviously scope to develop more systematic forms of 'writing therapy', particularly by combining aspects of a relational therapeutic framework with different forms of creative and reflective writing activity, there may be a more primary way that writing poetry can operate beneficially. This resides in its capacity to facilitate a more creative mode of experiencing that has parallels with process or experientially orientated therapies, and practices such as meditation and focusing, and yet is also distinct from them in terms of the form of the creative work involved. I would argue that all disciplines bring with them cultures and expectations that can distort as well as promote the capacity for more creative experience, and that individuals have predilections for different activities or combinations of activities. It is therefore helpful to recognise the specific contribution that poetry can make.

One of the values of a bi-logical understanding of poetry is that it links poetry explicitly to conscious and unconscious psychological processes. This provides support and a more substantial theoretical basis for the argument, described in Chapter 2, that the differences in mental health difficulties between poets and other creative writers could be linked to the different forms of logical or imaginative activity involved (Ludwig, 1998; Post, 1996). A bi-logically informed understanding could help structure further

investigation in this area, and potentially lead to more refined means of mitigating the risks to some individuals.

10.2.4 The attention paradox

It took me a considerable time after completing my first-person investigation to find a way of conceptualising how my attention altered in the act of writing poetry. Formulating this seemed important, as attention was something over which I thought I might have some control. Milner focused on attention for similar reasons although she found that, in practice, this was not straightforward. Fehmi's work is also based on the assumption that attention can be trained but he is clear that making a deliberate effort inhibits this. Similarly, Polanyi did not think tacit knowing could be deliberately determined, he saw it developing in highly skilled activities through a process of personal apprenticeship to a skilled or master practitioner – *somebody* who embodied the activity. Meditation practices can also be seen as forms of attention-training, but many have observed that there are problems in applying them as 'techniques' outside of the wider culture in which they were developed, as this normally cultivates change in many aspects of an individual's life and outlook.

My experience confirms these observations and has led me to an operational view of attention that sees it neither as a cause nor effect of my experience. I often have the feeling that I am directing my attention, but when I look more closely I notice that usually movements in attention simply take place and that the *idea* of attending follows. In Damasio's terms, I have a feeling of *paying* attention but I can't choose the moment when this will occur. More often my attention is simply moving in correspondence with feelings of the moment such as curiosity, concern, boredom, energy, fatigue or external demands, none of which I feel I have specifically chosen. When the sense of selective agency arises it is more like a form of remembering. I remember that I could pay attention differently and what follows is a shift in my attention. I could say that the more I have practised this the more I seem to remember, and hence the more refined and nuanced this attentional awareness has become. However, this hides a tautology. It implies that remembering more occurs because of remembering more.

I think there is a paradox in trying to train attention, or directly alter self-experience, that parallels my previous consideration of conscious intention and the writing of poetry. Becoming more aware of the movement of my attention may reflect a

metacognitive perspective, but not something that is under simple voluntary control. Changes in attention are a shorthand way of referring to changes in conscious awareness or modulations of that awareness. These changes seem to be accompanied by changes in self-experience but do not necessarily cause them; it would be more accurate to say that they are inseparable from them. So, paradoxically, this modulation of awareness feels like it both arises from and gives rise to the experience of a changed way of being in, or following Polanyi, 'indwelling' the world. This, I suspect, is what writing poetry may depend on and what good poetry can sometimes stimulate.

10.3 Research experience and implications

10.3.1 Challenges of a first-person, creative and critical inquiry

The form of first-person investigation that I pursued presented a number of inherent challenges. As it transpired, taking my own experience as the focus of study while undertaking a creative activity contributed to the very difficulties in writing poetry that became central to the inquiry. I think this was accentuated by my adoption of a research-framed approach from the outset, as opposed to following a more open-ended and creatively led approach typical of doctorates that are undertaken *by* creative writing, where an original contribution to a genre of writing is the primary imperative. My experience suggests that it is less problematic to undertake creative work and then return to reflect on and theorize the process of working later, than to actively combine these processes. However, I think there is much to be gained if sufficient flexibility can be established between immersive and reflective levels of experience to make this possible. As I will argue below, these processes can become mutually enriching. This could be seen as one of the methodological conclusions of my investigation: that there is a need to develop such flexibility to conduct a critical first-person inquiry into creative activity.

The combination of creative and critical modes of inquiry initially seemed dauntingly opposed, but became less so. I have come to see the challenge that exists here as concerning different ways of experiencing and formulating or, after Gendlin (1997a), 'carrying-forward' experience. Creativity implies some form of making and often originality, but critical work can also be 'creative' in this sense. Its opposition to the creative seems associated with an idea of criticism as censorious or judgemental, and

therefore inhibiting. However, criticism requires discrimination, and in this sense creativity is also 'critical', it involves an enhanced capacity to discriminate as well as integrate aspects of experience. Both creative and critical activities depend on some source material or experience, and have a recognised form to which the activity leads. In poetry the source is, as I have argued, often quite deeply embodied and unconscious, and the form is an intensely condensed bi-logical use of language. In critical scholarship the source is often already linguistically formulated and the product needs to conform to an abstract kind of reason and logic. I have found this way of thinking helpful, in that it avoids an unhelpful opposition and can aid transition between different forms and modes of creative and critical work.

I found the self-referential focus of first-person inquiry unrewarding in itself, despite the feeling that it could be perceived as self-indulgent. In fact, as already mentioned, the experience seems to have cured me of self-reflective journal writing. What was rewarding was finding a way to write poetry that felt meaningful to me, and developing a theoretical understanding of my experience that might have wider relevance. What was most problematic in the conduct of the investigation was the indeterminate and continuously unfolding nature of my experience. It was fortuitous that I had to take an intermission from study, as this interspersed a pause that I took to define the end of the main part of my first-person inquiry and, on resumption, the commencement of a more formal analysis of it. Had this not occurred, it I think I would have found it more difficult to impose a defining boundary on my research experience.

The challenge of theoretical formulation involved both remaining grounded in my experience and trying to encompass a diverse range of largely unrelated literatures. The formulation of clear research questions, and the discipline of constructing answers to them, assisted both of these problems and helped maintain an integrated focus. Although it was a considerable personal challenge to sustain the project over an extended period alongside full-time work commitments, I think taking this amount of time enabled me to process my experience in some depth and find ways of understanding it that I could genuinely own. I am indebted to Matte Blanco for providing me with an underpinning vehicle for this.

10.3.2 Reciprocal processes v confounding variables

My initial research training was in quantitative methods and I am still inclined to assume the need to isolate selected variables from other confounding variables in the research process. From this perspective the research approach that was adopted is riddled with problems. For example, the development of some of my core theoretical ideas about poetry took place alongside my first-person investigation and cannot be simply divorced from it. While I have attempted to draw upon theory to make sense of my research experience, this experience, particularly concerning attentional processes, has undoubtedly been influenced by my developing theoretical ideas. Most powerfully I was shocked when reviewing Milner's work to recognise so much of my thinking and experience in her work. I first read her books over twenty years ago and know that they were seminal in shaping my interest in both creative writing and undertaking formal training in psychotherapy.

One artefact of applying assumptions of research control to a first-person investigation lies in imagining that its main elements, my experience and my understanding of that experience, are best kept separate. The discipline of trying to separate them, and consider their mutual influence, has proved of real practical and abstract theoretical value in the project, but the operational reality is that they function in recursive patterns of mutual influence. In Gendlin's terms, my understanding serves to carry forward my experience and in so doing helps set the context for new forms of experience to arise. I believe, for example, that Milner's work must have shaped my own experience but one could also ask why was Milner's work so meaningful to me? Perhaps it was resonating with aspects of my experience but not completely adequately, it may then have set in motion a need to explore this more fully for myself. This understanding may not satisfy those who seek knowledge that *looks* objectively unassailable, but it has the validity of that form of knowledge that is both reasoned and feels true to first-person experience. It is important, however, to remember that both kinds of knowledge are always open to change and development.

10.3.3 Value of the research approach

The research approach adopted was very much a 'bricolage', a term used by Denzin and Lincoln (2000) and McLeod (2001) to describe the need for qualitative researchers to use whatever methods and strategies seem most suited to their research aims, and to do

so in a way that reflects what they bring to the research as unique individuals. As such, it cannot provide a map for future research although it may provide a stimulus to further innovation. I believe it has, however, illustrated the utility of the framework proposed by Reason and Heron (Heron & Reason, 1997), presented in a modified form in Table 3.2. The distinctions this framework makes between experiential, presentational, propositional and practical knowledge had a guiding influence on the conduct of the study and its eventual structure. This has offered a valuable holding frame of reference that supports the relevance of this model beyond the context of participative inquiry.

Although it was recognised at the outset that the study would be into ‘lived’ experience it was not clear the extent to which this would, in practice, involve working directly with embodied experience, or the degree to which theoretical development would be so dependent on an embodied or enacted understanding that preceded words. This ‘felt’ understanding seemed to guide the search for suitable theory, and then developed in response to the selection and integration of ideas. This process has strong connections with the forms of “embodied enquiry” described by Todres (2007) drawing on the phenomenological tradition and the work of Gendlin. The fact that this took place without any prior commitment to this approach could be taken as strongly corroborative of the importance and value of embodied experience in first-person research and theorising.

Since I started the investigation, there have been calls for research that is more relevant to the experiential dimensions of creativity and that is consonant with the therapeutic dimensions of poetry. For example Petrucci observes:

...there is hardly a surfeit of concerted and applied research concerning the ways in which creativity functions at its root, or looking (for example) at the processes and types of creativity which occur across disciplines, cultures and histories. Some warm-blooded attention in this area (rather than icy analysis) would be fascinating and fruitful.

An experiential, participative, empirical approach would do well as one possible starting point in this enterprise. We need to develop modes of analysis (or rather, engagement) which take into account the heuristic nature of creativity, and which themselves embrace its experimentation and play. (Petrucci, 2001, paras. 7-8)

With regard to poetry therapy Furman (2006) observes that traditional methods of research might be inadequate to the needs and values of those using poetry therapeutically. She advocates the exploration of new methods including the use of

poems as research, as does Speedy (2008) who, starting from a narrative perspective, has become increasingly convinced of the value of attending to and utilizing poetic language in therapy and research.

The main methodology of this study has been the writing of poems and an accompanying form of reflective ‘writing as inquiry’; it is thus an example of what Furman is calling for and what Speedy is persuaded of. It has also been rooted in an experiential process similar to what Petrucci’s envisioned. In practice, this has involved not only warm-blooded attention but a good deal of cooler thinking. I would like to think that this is nevertheless a strength of the work undertaken: the combination of the creative and critical, if not in balance, at least in a helpful interplay. For this reason, it was important for me to present a selection of my poems as an integral part of the thesis, whatever their merits as poems may be. Although commented on they are intended to invite their own reading, and reading between the lines. I hope that this will enable readers to glean a richer feeling for the study and provide a complementary source of insight into what emerged.

10.4 Nondual imagination and the poetics of experience

I will conclude by offering some lines of thinking that emerge from the study and that could benefit from further research and creative inquiry. These can be introduced as a response to Auden’s frequently quoted line: “poetry makes nothing happen”, which seems incompatible with the thesis presented here. However, when viewed in its original context, Auden was not asserting this as one-sidedly as is often assumed:

*For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.⁶⁹*

⁶⁹ From *In Memory of W.B. Yeats* (Auden, 1991).

As Szirtes observes, it is all too easy to miss the counterpoint that poetry is “a way of happening”. However, he goes on to ask: “what does it mean to be ‘a way of happening’? Does it mean anything at all?” (Szirtes, 2005)

The answer suggested by this investigation is that writing poetry, and by extension its reading, can be viewed as a way of experiencing that can give access to a changed experience of self and the world. This is rooted in the nature of poetry, particularly its association with alterations in the quality of awareness, which can reveal a poetics of experience beyond the limits of conventional thought.

In describing poetry Hirschfield captures the essence of this ‘poetics of experience’:

...it will know more than can be said in any other way. And because it thinks by music and image, by story and passion and voice, poetry can do what other forms of thinking cannot: approximate the actual flavor of life, in which subjective and objective become one, in which conceptual mind and the inexpressible presence of things become one. Letting this wideness of being into ourselves, as readers or as writers, while staying close to the words themselves, we begin to find in poems a way of entering both language and being on their own terms. Poetry leads us into the self, but also away from it. (Hirschfield, 1997, p. 32)

10.4.1 Poiesis revisited

A way of experiencing implies an active process with respect to that which is ‘being’ experienced. The roots of poetry in poiesis are suggestive of the nature of this action that “transform and continues the world” and “reconciles thought with matter and time and man with the world”.⁷⁰ This is more than simply making, or bringing into being; it points to an unfolding and continuity of being in the world.

The model of poetic creation implicit in the bi-logical view developed here reflects more than the activity of the repressed unconscious, or simply the creative representation of the unconscious in a conscious form. Rather the creative process requires a complex coordination between conscious and unconscious forms of thinking and feeling to create new forms that carry forward both. This process involves a modulation of attention and awareness and is also the generator of new forms of experience, or ways of experiencing. As Hirschfield states: “while writing the mind

⁷⁰ From Wikipedia: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poiesis>, accessed 20 July 2008.

moves between consciousness and the unconscious in the effortless effort of concentration.” (1997, p. 16)

Matte Blanco argued that for symmetric thinking to enter consciousness at all requires some form of translation or unfolding function. This meant that conscious thinking could only represent symmetric logic in a modified or indirect way. He suggested this could be visualized by mapping points in a higher dimension of space to the corresponding points represented in a lower dimension. Thus if you picture the corners of a triangle that has been cut out from a card they are clearly spread out; however, looked at endways they correspond to three points on a line. The reality of a two-dimensional space is always modified when it is represented in a one-dimensional form; it thus loses some of its most important qualities. This is equivalent to saying that poetry cannot be paraphrased.

Moving in the opposite direction, if you take a one-dimensional form like a line and imagine bending it round until the ends touch, you have created a circle which contains a two-dimensional space. Similarly, if you fold the line ninety degrees at three equidistant points and join the ends you enclose a two dimensional space in the shape of a square. Through similar acts of folding you can move from a two-dimensional space to a three dimensional one, which should be apparent if you imagine how a box can be formed from making a series of folds in a flat sheet of cardboard. From a mathematical point of view this process can be carried on indefinitely. From a poetic point of view we have an analogy for how high levels of symmetry may be enclosed in language by increased amounts of asymmetric differentiation. In poetry the symmetrical mode does not appear to be simply unfolded or translated into a conscious form of thinking. On the contrary, it seems more accurate to say that it emerges actively enfolded in language. We might imagine this as arising through the construction of numerous linguistic folds where the differentiated words, sounds and images are bent back to meet in symmetrical patterns of identity.

In the practice of writing poetry the process of folding and unfolding can take place repeatedly in the search for adequate means for ultimately embodying patterns of identity and difference that arise from experience. A bit like origami it may take an extremely complex series of folds, creases and tucks before any worthwhile poetic

shape can be achieved. In the meantime, from my experience, quite a lot of paper ends up in the basket.

This idea of repeatedly moving between an integrating and differentiating process when writing poetry parallels Bollas' analytic description of how creative use is made of objects to elaborate experience. Bollas (1995) proposes that in creativity there is a largely unconscious process of repeatedly 'cracking up' and recombining experience. He argues that this is at the heart of the dream-work and the process of free association in psychoanalysis. Psychic experience or intensities gather or combine into the symbolic contents of dreams, which are cracked up by free association and are then recombined into further emerging themes. He posits this as the psychoanalytic equivalent of the process of artistic creativity that works through alternating processes of fragmenting and unifying experience in the medium of the art form.

10.4.2 Self or no-self?

To view poetic creation as way of experiencing, including experiencing 'the self', is consistent with models that emphasize the active verb-like quality of self-experience and see it as arising in the context of an active process. Such models typically emphasize the sense of self that arises in the context of the activity of language, or the activity of the body. The approach, in both cases, involves demonstrating that the self being delineated is inseparable from a wider process of which it is an arising aspect. For example Damasio does this in terms of a bodily derived core consciousness, whereas Moran (1993) does so in the context of language by proposing that 'language' and 'self' are an interdependent duality, that is as a recursive process, rather than viewing them dualistically as two separate things.⁷¹

One difficulty with this general conceptual approach is that the sense of *inseparability* is experientially and linguistically difficult to keep hold of. It is easier to grasp the self as something *emergent* from the process, or to *equate* it with the process. In this way the self either becomes separate again or easily disappears into *being* something else, such as a reductive identification with 'language' or 'the body'. I think one reason for this is made clear in Damasio's work. The self doesn't feel like a process, it has a feeling of

⁷¹ Moran's work is based on an application of Giddens' (1986) concept of structuration; this views structures and actions of elements within structures as mutually determinative.

‘being’ that makes it seem natural to refer to it as a noun. I experience myself as fluid and changing, but not as a process of change.

The key problem is how to grasp the condition of being non-separate while retaining the feeling of ‘being’ that is normally associated with an identification with the sense of being separate from something else. A particular use of the term duality may be illuminating here. Whereas dualism refers to the idea of two distinct or separate things that may be in interaction, duality can be used to refer to a fundamental identity between different phenomena or processes. Probably the most famous of these is the wave-particle duality of light in which two different and separately useful descriptions of light are mathematically equivalent. So the question ceases to be whether light is a wave or a particle, ‘it’ is simply observed to ‘behave’ in a way that corresponds to both.

The question then is whether such a recognition of ‘identity in difference’ can also be *experienced* with regard to the self and whether it would cast any light on the debate about self versus no-self. I suspect that it is frequently experienced but that it is almost invariably *interpreted* in a dualistic or asymmetric manner. As previously discussed, the feeling of becoming one with experience can be highly valued, but it is usually conceived as some form of ‘merger’, not access to a fundamental identity. It has largely been the province of religion and the poetic imagination to try to configure a more direct perception of this. The understanding I have of my experience indicates that this is because it cannot be achieved by conceptual understanding alone. It does, however, seem accessible to the exercise of a process of nondual imagination that can be fostered through the bi-logical structure of poetry, and through other attentional or contemplative disciplines such as meditation.

10.4.3 The nondual imagination

To take a nondual perspective is an act of apparent negation. It is an assertion, or experience, that things do not essentially exist separately, even though they may still appear to do so. It is thus a rejection of dualism. However, this is not the same as the assertion that things are essentially one, as in monism, which is a conceptual belief about reality. Nonduality, in the sense that I am employing it, is a verbal pointer towards identity in difference not an essentialist statement about unity. It implies that it is in difference that the experience of a deeper identity can be found. However, to recognize this one must see through the appearance of separateness.

The bi-logical structure of poetry can potentially foster a process of this kind through its integration of principles of identity and differentiation, or symmetric and asymmetric logic. This can be conceived of, as an active process of imagination, in which the capacity of symmetric logic to find identity in difference is given unusually free attentional play and, with the concurrent intensification of asymmetric functioning, is able to bring this into conscious awareness. Through this process of nondual imagination an increased fluidity of experience is made possible including changes in the boundaries and form of self-experience.

From a nondual perspective any definitive statement about the self's existence is problematic and circular because it assumes a dualistic view: self *or* no-self. This is illustrated in religious traditions that have well-developed nondual teachings such as Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta in Hinduism. Buddhism is often thought to promote a belief in no-self, but the Buddha is clearly reported to have refused to answer the question of whether there was or wasn't a self, because to do so would reinforce the very dualism that he saw as at the centre of suffering (Bhikkhu, 2004). The teaching of 'anatta' or no-self is thought by some Buddhist scholars, such as Bhikkhu, to be better rendered as 'not-self' and employed as a practical strategy for deconstructing habitual forms of self-experience. As Loy (1988) has pointed out, the problem with describing a nondual perspective is that it inevitably becomes interpreted in terms of our conventional experience. Thus to say things are not fundamentally separate is understood as saying things are one. Given that our experience is structured in terms of what is self and what is the world or other, this leads to a conundrum which is typically resolved by denying the reality of one or other pole. Thus there is a tendency to deny the self in the Buddhist outlook and to see the world as illusory within Hinduism.

Seen as a way of experiencing, rather than as an ontology, the nondual imagination can give rise to movements in the experience of self and world that are potentially radical and transformative, even when only transitory. This can be illustrated by glimpsing the infinite not as an idea but as an imaginative and poetic experience. Logical thought leads us to the idea of infinity because we can understand that the largest number we can think of could always have one added to it. However, this does not enable us to imagine it. There seems to be no adequate means of representation. And yet, for many people, the contemplation of infinity does give rise to a definite quality of experience,

for if infinity cannot be imagined then neither can a completely finite world. Blake has immortalized his poetic rendering of this:

*To see infinity in a grain of sand,
And heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.*⁷²

The key Blake offers is to see the infinite in the particular, to find one within the folds of the other. This is not a reductive process but a dialectical one. Through it we may glimpse how the ‘concrete universal’ (Wimsatt, 1954) could come to exist in poetry. In mathematical terms an infinite set is made up of a potentially infinite number of elements; it is only when there are an infinite number of elements that any particular element can be treated as identical to the whole set. This means that the capacity for ever greater differentiation is directly associated with a state of identity with a wider whole. As Matte Blanco noted: “It can be said that it is in the infinite that both natures of man, the symmetrical and the asymmetrical, meet.” (Matte Blanco, 1975, p. 289)

What in conscious thought can only be conceived with difficulty may at an unconscious level be recognized through a form of felt experience. This constitutes a type of knowing which may only achieve realization through an act of imagination that can both unfold and enfold it in a particular created form. This activity is at the heart of the nondual imagination and, from it, can offer an ever-changing and poetic relationship with lived experience. As a result we may recognize ourselves in the words of Milosz (2006): “And yet the world is different from what it seems to be / and we are other than how we see ourselves in our ravings.” Ultimately, one of poetry’s deepest personal values might be its capacity to dismantle and flexibly re-configure the boundaries of self-experience.

*The purpose of poetry is to remind us
how difficult it is to remain just one person,
for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors,
and invisible guests come in and out at will.*⁷³

⁷² From *Auguries of Innocence*.

⁷³ From *Ars Poetica?* by Czesław Miłosz (2006).

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12 Appendices

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Appendix I

Poem written for a poetry course in 2001 at the start of the investigation.

Neanderthal Man

It stills my heart to find you here again
within the soil and fossil faeces spread,
a broken record built from your remains
to reconstruct our life beyond the dead.
The sharpened flints in layered ashes tell
a tale of fireside feastings spent together,
of meat that's gone before its bone that fell
to ground and on to splinter time forever.
The story written now unfolds, your life
in brief, a short uncertain pained affair,
inscribed in dust as ruthless risk and strife,
a life demeaned, deformed and unaware.
Can I conclude this reading of your part –
or is it you, in deed, that reads my heart?

Appendix II

Adolescent poem written circa 1972.

Am I thinking?

Am I thinking when
My feelings take control?
When anger burns a hole
In my good nature
So easily destroyed.
When sorrow saps the strength
Of my beliefs,
To leave me searching.

Is it good to have a mind
Which rejects one's own emotions as alien?
Which rationalises at the approach of love,
Philosophises at the approach of death.

Thought in conflict with emotion
Leads me to confusion.
Is it poetry or words?
Love or desire?
Am I thinking when
My feelings take control?

Appendix III

The collection of spontaneous 'free-lined' writing from my reflective journal, which was presented in supervision at the beginning of the third year of the investigation.

Reproduced without modification or correction in the journal's standard print format.

My body aches

[Daily Journal Entry]

Aug 11, 2003, 5:24 AM

my body aches
 my eyes are shut
 I feel discomfort
 in my gut
 I want to lie
 my body down
 until its lying
 on the ground
 then let sweet peace
 sliding creep
 as I drift back
 off to sleep

Oh God!

[Daily Journal Entry]

Aug 11, 2003, 1:08 PM

Oh God! oh no, not this
 a kind of trying to create
 a verse from nothing
 not even the hiss
 of gushing steam
 emotions dammed
 to hold a dream.

So now I wonder why
 I try, to put together
 words at all, just
 silly sonnets to apall
 my finder tastes
 and sentiments
 a kind of purile
 linement.

Whatever functions
 so to jest
 this sorry tableaux
 wins no prizes
 just a pattern
 to entertain
 guns and roses
 are what remain.

Will I continue
 in this part
 lines getting shorter
 and out of sorts
 only a fashionable
 rendering finds
 this cry of pain
 from far behind.

This is rubbish

[Daily Journal Entry]

Aug 12, 2003, 5:44 AM

This is rubbish, your descent is like a cry
 against all dreams and anguishments
 this is rubbish you insist and who am I to deny.
 Words on pages what can it mean?
 much less what will its value be
 why even bother - well why?

I'm counting numbers in my head
 trying to form a symmetry
 putting in some sequence what appears
 brooding in autistic misery.
 can't imagine what's the point
 of such an unextended, homespun jaunt.

So now you're rhyming you decry
 a load of cobblers bye and bye
 Into couplets off we go
 shunting crap under the snow.
 Now the truth, what a wastrel word
 is ready to fly, oh my god -
 like a bird.

So how much more must we endure
 of poxy verse and rhyming cure
 tum de tum de tum de tum
 get a flannel and wipe my bum
 brought a smile to my face
 a gurgled chuckle of disgrace.

Blood supply

[Daily Journal Entry]

Aug 14, 2003, 5:40 AM

There was blood in my veins
 but it is not blood I feel now
 pulsing under the skin
 more the restless passage
 of fragmented separations
 each adding to the weight
 that anchors to the ground
 the quick drying cement
 still setting below the surface
 to form a watertight barrier.

Not the elasticity of skin
 but a compulsive layer of the mind
 suffocating the conscious heart
 from its arterial supply

Beach photograph [Daily Journal Entry] **Aug 15, 2003, 6:23 AM**

On the beach circa 1930
 bare feet on the shingle
 hands clenched on knees
 a shy smile and double crown.
 The dark blazer reminding
 of school and separation
 a formal cut against the skin
 stinging out through the softness
 of shorts and T-shirt
 against the backdrop
 of the wooden breakwater.

She stands behind you,
 her hair bunned,
 a floral print dress
 with matching bonnet
 clutched to her waist
 a domed swollen womb
 without place of entry
 or departure
 just the silent swell
 of the sea
 in the distance.

Taking her home
 Leaving you there

The dump [Daily Journal Entry] **Aug 16, 2003, 6:07 AM**

They made an overture of silence
 staring towards our car
 as we pulled into the yard
 one tall and maimed
 with scuffed cowboy boots
 the other cropped and squat
 filling an outstretched shirt
 with his blown belly.
 They eyed us at a distance
 as we lifted the boot of the car
 against the smell
 and dragged out our latest losses
 gifts for the burial
 glimpsing a lifetime of attachments
 unfit for charity
 too good for the dump

in want of adoption
 but recycling now
 towards a changed future.
 What a waste we thought
 as they lit up their fags.

DIY**[Daily Journal Entry]****Aug 17, 2003, 6:20 AM**

The house isn't falling down
 but it claims to be:
 the wallpaper lifting around the fire,
 the worktop spltting behind the sink,
 the paint bruised and hand marked
 beside the creaking stairs.
 All groans and grimaces
 magnified through the eyes
 of an imagined guest
 walking up the drive
 past the flourish of weeds in block paving
 past the peeling garage door
 into the unfinished porch
 and half-tiled cloakroom.
 Work to be done
 care to be taken
 time to be spent
 nag, nag, nag
 but life is too long
 and this moment too brief
 to spend it decorating
 what improvements are possible?

or ...

but life is so vast
 and this mement so brief
 what improvements are possible?

Speech**[Daily Journal Entry]****Aug 18, 2003, 5:42 AM**

One million conversations
 carried over dinner tables
 through doorways
 along the street
 within buildings
 through open windows
 in and out of cars.

Words sent by air
 stirred by open throats
 shaped by lips
 and moving tongues
 into a vibration
 which posts

a pulse of meaning.

again, and again
 the same pattern
 with different effects.
 Ears that can never
 be closed only covered
 by failed reception
 disabled by hand
 or a fixed mind

But when you
 are noisely silent
 I hear everything,
 I feel it in my bones
 and shudder
 listening closely
 to a million missed moments
 for saying something.

Changing places

[Daily Journal Entry]

Aug 19, 2003, 5:36 AM

We're going back in search of something
 travelling through time down dirt roads
 past waving tea cotton fields
 to a roadside stopping
 where passing traffic presses us
 like cornered convicts
 up against a wattle fence.

A proposterous bus turns
 its driver descending
 a shotgunless woman
 who conducts us into a tumbledown mansion
 with rooms that change shape
 moved by pulleys and sheet slings,
 today it is set 'all square'.

Surely we're dreaming
 of something forgotten
 climbing stairs to another level
 and then struggling to locate
 the missing pieces
 hesitating among the embanked cascade
 of exotic ornaments
 thinking of an aunt or aya
 who never knew anything like it.

I pick up some oars
 and ready myself
 for the long row
 back home.

Being bodies**[Daily Journal Entry]****Aug 20, 2003, 6:15 AM**

She swings at the hip, side to side
 while heading forwards, oblivious
 to the space she takes in my imagination.
 He bobs up and down like he's treading
 on water, never sure of finding breath.
 I see one flesh split in two
 all activity below the waist
 short legs racing overtime
 spine set in a flagpole freeze;
 then caught off guard by flaying arms
 I duck (as usual) and notice
 rolling, nodding, flicking heads,
 hair that moves in and out of eyes
 and people who don't seem to move at all
 getting from A to B by an act of grace
 floating over the ground silently
 going perpetually down hill.
 We have our signatures of movement
 natured or nurtured
 the stamp is upon us
 as we go about our business
 of being bodies, oscillating in the world.

Cornucopia**[Daily Journal Entry]****Aug 21, 2003, 6:43 AM**

A single flower and six gold circles labelled soul
 is the card I chose for you this morning
 in response to your farewell message,
 carefully writing your new address
 on the embossed yellow envelope.
 Cornucopia - the name conjures
 with the imagination, placing you at the heart
 of the past, on a ridge overflowing
 towards the future.

Demon lover**[Daily Journal Entry]****Aug 23, 2003, 5:25 AM**

Under the half light
 poised from the edge of sleep
 I sip a mug of hot tea
 and ponder this moment
 in silent reverie.

Nearby lurks your image
 just hidden from view
 but sensed in my body
 a suggestion of excitement
 a button to be bruised.

Alongside this feeling
 but more deeply set

sits another constellation
 a profound kind of sadness
 an echo of regret.

What circumstances spawned you?
 what secrets do you hide?
 the power at your disposal
 builds like a volcano
 but is lost to my life.

The shadow of an object
 caught once in bright light
 when this mind was exposed
 to a haunting fixation
 more body than clothes.

Yet hiding behind this
 is a sense of an absence
 a darkness and void
 where ties are abandoned
 and fears unalloyed.

Not quite free to love you
 or hate you or both
 I swing in a circle
 and pay homage by inflation
 to a false host.

Lost(v1)

[Daily Journal Entry]

Aug 24, 2003, 5:31 AM

A ball over the fence
 six thousand men in one battle
 the sun
 your face in the crowd
 a golden opportunity
 time
 my friend in day-dreaming
 two pins on the floor
 her life
 somewhere in translation
 between the sheets
 and found
 an opportunity
 all hope
 my sense of direction
 count of the falling leaves
 in anticipation
 in the maze of streets
 property
 luggage
 an important match
 all hope of ever finding
 the plot
 sheep

somewhere in the past
 leaving behind a gaping void
 and now we mourn
 our chance
 the burden that we carried
 the family pet
 her name when she married
 their freedom
 his ability to run
 most of my hair
 a good job
 her innocence
 in admiration
 all our certainties
 the invitation
 my sense of regret
 all their inhibitions
 what is dear to me
 the front door keys
 at sea
 despite taking precautions
 sight of the ground
 among the clouds
 without hope
 to an extreme religious cult
 up his own backside
 where we were coming from
 faith in the system (politicians)
 the feeling of pain
 your smile

Lostv2

[Daily Journal Entry]

Aug 24, 2003, 7:45 AM

A ball over the fence
 six thousand men in one battle
 your face in the crowd
 his ability to run
 all hope.

Our faith in politicians
 up their own backsides
 to an extreme religious cult
 the invitation
 sheep in sleep

then in a day-dream
 the count of falling leaves
 too much of his hair is
 deep in the past, lost
 in time

Charlie, the family pet
 - her name when she married
 the burden that we carried

my sense of regret
her innocence

A golden opportunity
between the sheets
two pins on the floor
somewhere through translation
her life

A crucial match
our one and only chance
what is dear to me
all of our certainties both
the gist and the plot

Their freedom and dignity
despite taking those precautions
the feeling of pain
the taste for rich food
your wry smile

Now, as well, their inhibitions
in admiration to a premonition
property and luggage
the keys to the cellar
a good job

My sense of direction
in the maze of narrow streets
where we were coming from
the sun again behind the clouds
souls at sea

Lost

and then we found

a ball over the fence...

My IT

[Daily Journal Entry]

Aug 27, 2003, 5:24 AM

Just sitting - body stiff and complaining - mind dense with sleep - emerging from
an obsessive dead end - going on for ever to achieve the security of order...

Looking to defragment
a density of mind
I press a key
start to scribble lists
on endless sheets of paper
rename files on 'my computer'
and disappear for a day or two
into a loft full of accumulations
things that were once
too good to chuck away

constructing an inventory
of unmet needs
a reassuring sense of order
and a long term plan
to revise my life
again
in the face of unfixed bugs
and security alerts.

[after a number of days spent sorting out my computer in prep for getting on with my DPhil - got quite obsessive and exciting and then became tedious and tiresome

Riches of sorrow [Daily Journal Entry] Sep 2, 2003, 5:25 AM

So in the morning I grieve
line after line in the simplest of fashions
lowering the drawbridge
and penetrating the thickened walls
through an open wound
gashed beneath the watchtower.

I look up and see nonone there
they are lying down
exhausted by years of vigilance,
responding to my call
and finally handing over keys

that turn slowly
crack after crack within the lock
to steal into the place
kept safe from penetration
protected from view
and the presence of witnesses.

Each step is a word
written to take me a fraction further
towards the residue
the accumulated remains that form
the riches of sorrow.

Head in hands [Daily Journal Entry] Sep 3, 2003, 5:33 AM

Gone is the language of Boromir
Gone is the language of expectation.

I just sit here with head in hands
drooped and drowning
wondering what to do when words don't flow
sinking back towards a dreamy oblivion.
So be it on the edge of sleep
trying to lower my standards enough

to take a walk across the page,
 my fingers doing their stuff
 everything else poised but doubtful.

Kind of playing with the idea
 that from such beginnings
 something may emerge that carries
 more than this sense of randomness
 a fleeting touch, a brush with a deeper truth,
 maybe a breakthrough in human understanding
 that gives the game away
 that tells the whole truth
 the complete truth and nothing but.

Rendered

[Daily Journal Entry]

Sep 8, 2003, 5:22 AM

An hour in my life
 sixty minutes of waiting
 the incessant whisper
 of anxious voices
 only time will tell
 where this will lead.

The weight of words
 heavy to the touch
 shuffles me down
 in an unmeasured
 descent
 a series of lines
 tracking closer to
 what matters
 raising the alarms
 that usher me on
 the whelming
 presence that longs
 for a living and yet
 veers in patterns
 of escape.

I am rendered by a wall
 forty eight courses wide
 measured across the base
 in concentric annual rings
 made of engineering bricks
 hardened to a brittle temper.

The surface is stone cold
 blunting tips of penetration
 but up above heat escape
 forming clouds that rain
 down in one eroded spot
 where a crack has split

through to an unknown

depth. I gauge the wall
for movement and find
a leaning to the right.

We are digging for safety
in the soft ground
advised to underpin
but only forming shallow graves
in the running sand.

Stepping back exhausted
you hold my hand
and lead me away
to open land

Lower your standards **[Daily Journal Entry]** **Sep 10, 2003, 5:46 AM**

Lower your standards
let them fall
down to the groveling
ground
abandon all hope
of winning back
in you hand
the caress of angels
the charmed look
of one who knows
open up instead
to the grotesque
darkness of the morning
the sinking feeling
guts wrenched by what is not
a pretty picture.

Freezing heart **[Daily Journal Entry]** **Sep 10, 2003, 6:20 AM**

That deep cold of morning
lying under shielding sheets
the stiff blankets tucked under
the metal framed bunk bed.
A figure clicks a toggle switch
and an element glows, a feeble
amber in the curtained room.
A smell of damp and singing hair.
Then ripped back the sharp light enters
tearing at the pitch
scorching my eyes.
Diving deeper into womb of sleep
I wank desperately to keep my heart from freezing
Stepping out at the third set of shouts
from up the stairs
the rug cold under my feet
my thin vest remaining against my skin

as I struggle with shirt buttons and long socks.
 I carry the tie down
 to be dressed
 against the day.

Autumn voices**[Daily Journal Entry]****Sep 11, 2003, 5:52 AM**

What's the point of autumn voices
 of opening up old wounds to winters penetration
 just a gabble gobble along the way
 It recedes in waves then breaks again
 against the surface of my eyes.
 I am blinded, my sight is lost
 anger prickles with a tell tale sensitivity
 you know more than you can tell
 but do you dare to speak?
 I am fighting tiredness, the undertow
 pulling me down into an abandoned stillness
 a place beneath words or easy formulation.
 Yes you are sensitive, raw to the touch
 burning with a host of smarting remembrances
 which you have forgotten
 against which you rise up into detached grace
 oblivious, so you claim, to people and places
 and moods and gossip
 but don't scream - it may be too late.
 Maybe the mould is set and all you are doing
 is refiling it. Refilling not reshaping
 no time for sculpture or new creation
 just a thousand repeating copies
 perhaps a thousand and one.

City of London Cemetry**[Daily Journal Entry]****Sep 12, 2003, 5:23 AM**

Travelling underground to Manor Park
 but arriving there on the surface
 ready to make the final pilgrimage
 on foot, along the busy East London roads
 past the municipal roots of Epping Forrest
 along the boundary of the cemetery wall.
 Here the City of London is once removed
 incorporated on 81 hectares and open
 to a quarter million visitors a year.
 merging into the statistic I am greeted
 by the striking rows of those selected to remain
 stone upon stone along avenues of trees
 broken up with flowers and signs
 pointing to the chapels and crematoria,
 new and old, an efficient business is going on
 vehicles calmly arriving at dignified speed
 mourners huddling together in groups
 that meet in sporadic conversation
 that stare at floral tributes

and listen to the words they only half believe.
 I pick out your flowers - to one side
 now wet and a little faded
 read the messages
 and slip away.
 wanting to be alone with my own thoughts
 not sure why I am here today
 but following the pull of something
 towards you.
 As I sit quietly, wondering and waiting,
 bemused and uncertain there is a change of pace
 a slowing of mind and a new perception
 a rising of forms, rising up into the air
 and reaching out to me, a mass exodus
 a peel of silent thunder that tears open my throat
 I am left sobbing for no reason that I know

Dust to dust the pattern never changes
 apart from the mess in the middle.

Survival

[Daily Journal Entry]

Sep 13, 2003, 6:13 AM

Tracking a descent into the long grass
 outside of the range of what it means
 to be reminded.
 Putting together sentences
 line by line in expectation
 of some deliverance.
 Still she calls me from the door,
 worried and distraught
 fiddling with her apron strings,
 staring into space
 leaving us with diminishing returns
 an inner emptiness
 What is lacking is without substance
 or definition, a parody of need,
 an incestuous reinvention,
 layer upon layer of torn fabric
 stretched to fit an inflacted form,
 a body to be admired
 offering up every desire to consumation
 penetrating the vacuum
 with the promise of survival.

Appendix IV

Journal draft: Paper wings – subsequently revised into 'Invisible man'.

Paper wings

[Daily Journal Entry]

Oct 7, 2003, 6:28 AM

Walking past an October night

armbands glowing to avoid

oncoming traffic

but still

drivers swerve late

to avoid the invisible man

I am not what I think, I think

staring out from blindness

mind no longer refuelling

rooted in a body

but raised from the ground

both feet in the air

quite still

like someone with paper wings

and remarkable vision.

Appendix V

Complete passage from Hunt & West (2006, pp. 170-171) providing a description of Celia Hunt's perspective on the presentation of my uncrafted writing in supervision:

Celia: It's taken me a long time to feel comfortable with my approach and I am learning all the time. What seems to me now to be crucial is deep listening, of the kind that goes on in a therapeutic context proper, paying attention to what is said and the way it is said, as well as to what is not said or only implied. Here's an example. One of my research students, whom I'll call Peter, has been doing a self-exploratory project over the last four years, looking at his own experience of creative writing in order to understand better its potential developmental effects. He's a healthcare professional and well used to reflecting on himself. The first couple of years of our working together involved discussion of Peter's creative writing in progress, work that he was trying to craft into its final form and with which he often felt dissatisfied. Then he brought me a batch of spontaneous personal material in poetic form that he had made no attempt to craft; it was simply in its raw state. This felt like a very important stage in the research relationship. Sufficient trust must have been built up to enable Peter to allow me to see this deeply personal material devoid of the distance that craft provides.

I read the work several times, noticed some recurring themes that seemed significant at a personal level, but wasn't sure whether I should point them out or whether I should focus on the potential of the writing for further development. I found it quite difficult to know how I should respond and thought long and hard about it. I wrote myself some notes and decided to wait and see what the next meeting brought. What I remember of our discussion is that we talked primarily about the potential of the material for further development into poems. I think I said what I liked, how it made me feel, but I also remember clearly saying something about the themes I saw emerging, although we didn't discuss these. Subsequently Peter became quite depressed. This lasted for about a month during which he seemed unable to proceed with the research, but then it lifted. When he started writing crafted poems again, something had definitely changed. There was more self-presence, a deep and often quite subtle focusing-in on a particular feeling or experience.

Recently, I asked Peter whether it was my mention of the themes in the material that had triggered the depression and, to my surprise, he said he had no recollection of my doing so; rather what he remembered was that I had 'received' the material with interest, and had discussed it with him from the point of view of its potential for poems. Clearly something of a therapeutic nature was taking place here, a kind of 'cracking-up', to use Bollas's term. Peter was able to let go of his concern with crafting his poems and to risk bringing something new into the open, within a research relationship that provided a 'safe-enough' container for this to happen. It reminds me of what Bollas says about developing a 'self-analytic attitude', a reflexive stance in relation to oneself, which helps to facilitate the 'arrival of news from the self' (Bollas, 1987, pp. 239-241). Whilst Peter was largely engaged in a self-reflective exercise, being able to bring some of this experience out into the open and to share it in a receptive space was beneficial and helped him to move on. My role in this instance was not to interpret what was happening, but to be a receptive audience for Peter's own self-reflective process.

Hunt, C., & West, L. (2006). Learning in a border country: using psychodynamic ideas in teaching and research. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 38(2), 160-177.

Appendix VI

Picture taken in April 2008 that led to the haiku 'Snow blossoms in spring'.



A net of branches
cast against an open sky
snow blossoms in spring