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**PARTIAL SIGHT, DEPENDENCY AND OPEN POETIC FORMS**

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to characterize the poetics of partial sight. It first places these poetics within a theoretical framework and then enacts them in a collection of poems. The thesis treats partial sight not primarily as a physiological fact but rather as symbolic of the limitations of human vision. It draws inspiration from the Homeric epics, which acknowledge these limits and show the dependency they bring, whether on the Muse or on other factors external to the poet's conscious self, as central to poetic composition. The persistent trope of the blind poet, who loses his sight but gains creative vision, highlights links between partial sight and the partial apprehension that poets experience as they engage with an emerging poem. Both situations highlight the partial nature of human perception in a mysterious world and both necessitate dependency on factors beyond the self for success. Critically and creatively the thesis charts an evolving awareness of the importance of partial sight in poetic composition.

This awareness has gradually inspired perspectival and methodological changes. The project began as a desire to challenge those poetic representations of blindness that cast it less as a valuable creative perspective than as a symbol of anxiety about dependency and consequent lack of agency. Early versions of the thesis sought to challenge this pattern by asserting the selfhood of figures with visual impairment as part of a disability-based identity poetics. This practice encouraged the use of relatively closed forms that stressed a speaker's personal vision. However, as the thesis developed it took more account of the power dynamics that underpin poetic form. It became apparent that an overly closed approach could undermine the project's aims by replicating poetic practices that have facilitated the use of blindness in poetry as an edifying spectacle for sighted readers. Such formal choices can also create a sense of certainty that troubles an aesthetic of partial sight. Moreover, the thesis argues that to confine discussions of partial sight to identity poetics radically restricts our understanding of the poetics of partial sight, dependency and open forms and leaves these poetics insufficiently imagined.

It draws on the work of Alan Grossman, Rae Armantrout and Larry Eigner among others, to reimagine partial sight and dependency as a route to poetic knowledge. The poetry collection moves from exploring partial sight as a source of identity to using the combination of partial sight and dependency as a generative principle. Different poems express this principle through troubled syntax, variable

lineation and the deformation by erasure of pre-existing texts on blindness. The thesis seeks to demonstrate that partial sight and dependency are experiences shared by, and relevant to, all writers and readers of poetry. It returns to an earlier understanding of these factors, which sees them not as sources of social anxiety, but rather as creative catalysts that open the way to new poetic possibilities. In so doing it aims to challenge understandings not only of poetics but also of the meaning of disability.

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## PARTIAL SIGHT, DEPENDENCY AND OPEN POETIC FORMS

& at once it struck me what quality went to form a man of Achievement, especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean *Negative Capability*, that is, when Man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after facts or reason – Coleridge for instance would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetrallium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

John Keats

## INTRODUCTION

My thesis aims to characterize the poetics of partial sight. I understand partial sight in poetry not primarily as a physiological fact but rather as symbolic of the limitations of human vision. As such, the poetics of partial sight are relevant to all poets and readers, not simply those who have an interest in the representation of visual impairment. The thesis draws inspiration from the Homeric epics, which acknowledge the limited nature of human vision and show the dependency these limits bring, whether on the Muse or on other factors external to the poet's self, as central to poetic composition. The creative and critical sections of the thesis chart a developing awareness of the epic scale of partial sight in poetry. This thesis proposes a dialogue between two understandings of poetry – the first sees poetry as arising directly from and being congruent with the poet's experience while the second views poems as experiments in language that are to some degree independent of their author's experience. It was informed by Allen Grossman's theory

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<sup>1</sup> Keats, John. (1817) Letter to George and Tom Keats 21-27 December.

of opposing approaches to representation in poetry; what he calls psychomimesis – the poetic representation of the speaking subject or of the world from the speaking subject’s perspective, that of experience, versus cosmomimesis, the representation of the world beyond the self that tends towards a perspective in fact coming from beyond the concerns of the self. In my judgment most contemporary poetry of disability has tended to be a poetry of experience, or psychomimesis, in what is generally called identity poetics. In what follows I will propose a poetics based more on cosmomimesis.

The thesis takes issue with the branch of identity poetics related to disability. Following the critic James Overboe, the thesis challenges disability poetics’ project of

the validation of one’s own identity and politics based on various disabilities, sensory, psychiatric, developmental, environmental and physical, (or any combination of the aforementioned.)

(Overboe, 2009, 241.)

and, through its understanding of partial sight as a generative force in poetics, implements Overboe’s recommendation that disability poetics ‘adopt a more impersonal register’.

Formally, I have drawn inspiration from Lyn Hejinian’s idea, analogous to that of psycho- and cosmomimesis, of the open or closed text. To make a large generalization, the poetry of identity and psychomimesis has traditionally favoured closed forms, reflecting both the limits to and coherence of the representation of experience by the self. Imagine, instead, poetry that defined a poetics of partial sight, incomplete knowledge, vulnerability to influences outside the self, to the ‘cosmos’ – a poetry of open forms. The formulation of ‘open’ or ‘closed’ texts may appear to form a dichotomy, but while writing the thesis it became clear that all texts have closed and open elements. Yet I will be reporting a poetic practice in my own work that gradually moves from a practice of closure towards one that favours aperture. It is this preference for open form in the poetry of disability that guides some of my own poetry presented here, along with the study of a ‘disability poetics’ that accompanies it.

The thesis owes a debt to poems featuring blindness by John Milton, Charles Baudelaire and Edwin Morgan, among others. These texts’ representation of visual

impairment as a source of overwhelming incapacity and/or a spectacle for mostly sighted readers provoked a desire to reimagine the poetics of partial sight. In contrast to these texts my poems have been strongly influenced by the Homeric epics, which, in my reading of them, treat partial sight and consequent dependency not as incapacities but as formative elements in poetic composition. I ask: to what degree does poetry in general, silently or otherwise, admit to modes of dependency and “partial sight”?

The poetry of any disempowered group and the consequent choices that poets make both in the content and the form of their work have political implications, which Rae Armantrout’s essay ‘Feminist Poetics And The Meaning Of Clarity’ (Armantrout, 1992, Beach 1999 287-296), as a useful parallel to this project, has helped me to articulate. Within the context of feminist poetics Armantrout traces a transfer of power from the poet to the poem as a dynamic linguistic process. This essay heightened my awareness of the power dynamics that choices of poetic form can activate and of the risk that conservative formal choices derail challenging content. Moreover, by showing the similar power dynamics at work in feminist and disability poetics, the essay radically diminished any belief I had in specific identity categories as sources of entirely unique poetry. Armantrout also helped me to distinguish between clarity and mimesis, thus facilitating a more open practice that devalues the controlling ego in favour of the poem as a process.

These theoretical practices informed my poetic practice as it gradually acknowledged the interrelated roles of partial sight and dependency in poetic composition. I was also influenced by the theory and practice of an ‘open-form’ practice, deformation, as encapsulated in Jeffrey Robinson’s essay ‘Ode On A Grecian Urn: Hypercanonicity and Pedagogy: Deforming Keats’ ‘Ode On A Grecian Urn’ (Robinson, 2003) ([www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/grecianurn.contributorsessays/grecianurnrobinson.html](http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/grecianurn.contributorsessays/grecianurnrobinson.html)), Ronald Johnson’s *Radios* (Johnson, (1977) *Radios* Berkeley, Sand Dollar Books) and Janet Holmes’ *The MS of My Kin* (Holmes Janet (2009) Exeter, Shearsman Books.) The theoretical and poetic content of these works enabled me to recognize and implement deformation as an apt expression of the transformative power of partial sight and dependency in poetry.

I argue that partial apprehension is a formative element in poetic composition. ‘Partial sight’ is generally understood as a medical term denoting a degree of

physiological sight loss that means a person has some useful vision, though not necessarily enough to perform everyday tasks that require detailed visual awareness, such as reading or travelling independently. The experience of composing a poem closely resembles that of partial sight. The poet often only partially apprehends the reality to which a poem refers. While there are many different degrees of visual impairment, one could argue that, for the partially sighted person, visual perception mirrors the construction of an open form poem, in which meaning is both fluid and provisional. In order to gain the expanded vision that enables them to function in a physical and social environment largely designed by and for fully sighted people, partially sighted people must depend on factors outside the self, whether that means using assistive technology, or employing fully sighted helpers. Similarly, in order to gain the expanded vision that they need in order to write a poem that stretches or crosses the limits of the known or defamiliarizes experience, which most good poems do, poets must depend on factors outside their direct control. This analogy between experiences of physiological partial sight and the partial apprehension involved in composing a poem is central to the argument of this essay. I maintain that both physiological partial sight and the partial apprehension implicit in poetic creation foster an awareness of the restricted and unreliable nature of human vision. In order to access the world, whether that is the everyday world or the world of the poem, the partially sighted person/poet must embrace dependency on external factors, practical or linguistic. This enables them to move beyond the limitations of the self towards a clearer vision. In both situations, however, total perceptual clarity is impossible. This is both difficult, in that it leaves perception fraught with ontological uncertainty, and liberating, in that it renders perception open-ended. If meaning is fluid and provisional, it can be reimagined. The analogy between these experiences can broaden discussions of partial sight in poetics.

Physiological partial sight can provide subject matter for an identity poetics rooted in disability. However, I am convinced that it is very important to move beyond this use of partial sight, to argue that partial apprehension is a structural element in the creation of poems, and thus has relevance for all poets, whether or not they have an explicit interest in physiological sight loss.

In order to facilitate my argument I will provide working definitions of these three terms; partial sight, dependency and their correlate in the poetry of open forms. Partial sight primarily refers to a degree of visual impairment that stops short of

blindness. It involves both sight and blindness, which occur as simultaneous rather than opposite experiences. The sight/blindness ratio varies with each individual.

I define dependency as a state of reliance on factors outside the self to facilitate activity. Physiological partial sight creates dependency, since it reduces one's ability to perform everyday activities that are predicated on standard vision, such as reading or traveling independently. One is dependent to varying degrees. Similarly, poets composing a text that they can only partially apprehend are dependent on factors external to their conscious selves in order to gain the knowledge they need to complete the poem. These include the otherness of language, the otherness of the unconscious, the limits that one's particular body imposes on perception, and events and subjectivities in the outside world. If the poet happens to be partially sighted, she will find the dependency intrinsic to everyday life mirrored in the process of writing a poem and the poems she constructs will formally express, be open to, that dependency.

Open poetic form tends toward a language-centred poem that avoids the narrative tendencies and fixed viewpoint(s) that are more typically found in 'closed' forms. It can also disrupt standard language use and syntax, besides the visual conventions of poem presentation. Rather than presenting the poem to the reader as a finished object, it concentrates attention upon the process of apprehension, and therefore of composition. In so doing it promotes active reading – the reader and the author become mutually dependent as they collaborate in the creation of meaning. In order to get beyond the self and into the poem, both must rely on factors external to the self. The open text reflects a partially sighted person's experience of visual perception, in which meaning must be actively sought in an unclear world. One of the aims of the creative section of my project is to immerse readers in the ontological uncertainty at the heart of partial sight. In order to find some meaning, the viewer/reader must actively construe the world or poem. In a sense, poet and reader try to make sense of their world, together.

As a branch of identity poetics, disability poetics is more closely associated with the closed text. The poet wishing to construct a 'closed text' arranges the features of his/her poem so as to guide the reader towards a particular vision. The closed text often favours mimesis, not vulnerable to experience. This can create an air of certainty that may be attractive to those wishing to relate experiences from a particular perspective. Such an approach can distort identity, by focusing on a single

strand of a multi-faceted phenomenon. This may give the impression that the subject has a unified – that is fixed or ‘closed’ identity, when identities are fluid, intersectional and open to a number of influences.

It can also give an impression of authorial autonomy. This is partly because of the popularity of first person narratives, and partly because the author is overtly in charge of the poem’s perspective. He/she is dependent on the reader only as an audience for his/her thought. In political terms, this can suggest a hierarchical relationship, in which the author educates the reader. The practice of identity poetics has important social functions, which I will discuss later in the essay. Nevertheless, I am challenging the alignment of disability with identity poetics. I feel this alignment radically restricts our understanding of the role that disability – specifically partial sight – can play in poetic composition. I aim to move poetry of partial sight away from identity poetics. A narrow understanding of identity poetics, as I will show in later sections, by viewing a person in terms of a single identity (in this case partial sight) can encourage the objectification of that person. In place of identity poetics I want to portray disability – specifically partial sight – as a fundamental feature of poetic composition that encourages dependence on and openness to language in preference to the poet’s personal vision.

The feasibility of this statement depends on which conceptual model one employs to understand ‘disability’. There are a number of models of disability, the most prominent being the medical model and the social model. The medical model focuses on impairment. An impairment is a functional deficit located within the body of an individual. Impairments can be physical, sensory, emotional or cognitive, and it is possible for an individual to have several different types of impairment at once. The medical model uses ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’ as synonyms. If one uses the medical model, the statement that ‘all poets are disabled’ is obviously ridiculous. Not all poets have impairments, although it is likely that as they age, most poets will acquire at least one, and probably several, especially if they reach extreme old age.

Rather than the medical model, my thesis uses a sociocultural model based on the social model of disability. The social model sees disability as arising from the way society is designed – i.e. disability occurs when people with non-standard bodies find themselves in a situation that does not take account of their needs. For example disability emerges when someone with a visual impairment is obliged to read print that is too small. Though poets are not necessarily impaired, their creative reach can

be restricted by the fundamental limits of human perception. In addition, if the poet subscribes to that view of poetry that sees it as the expression of a unique and autonomous ego, his/her perception may be further narrowed by unwillingness to depend on the poem as an organic process that is not completely within his/her control.

I argue that the partial apprehension embodied in an open text is closer to experiences of partial sight than the neatly signposted route to epiphanic vision that a closed text can foster. In an early section of the essay I will provide a discussion of 'partial sight' as a medical concept, including the criteria that define someone as 'partially sighted'. Though these criteria must exist for the purpose of allocating disability-related resources such as benefits, they give a false air of certainty to the idea of partial sight. In experiential terms, partial sight combines elements of both sight and blindness to varying degrees. As such it renders visual experience inherently unstable and permanently open to question. It troubles cultural understandings of 'sight' and blindness' as opposite terms, and encourages frequent conscious thought about the nature of vision. It also brings an element of mystery to visual experience, which is never fully definable. Whatever you can see, you are aware that there is a multiplicity of other versions. What can I see? What can X see? What else is there, beyond what I can see? Partial sight is profoundly epistemological. Moreover, paradoxically, it leads one to construe the visual world actively. A permanent awareness that whatever you think you can see may not be reliable and/or may not represent the whole picture leads to frequent conscious thought about your vision and how it relates to the wider visual world. Of course, fully sighted people also think about vision, but as they can be fairly confident that their vision is an accurate representation of their environment, it is possible that this activity is not such a pressing practical and philosophical necessity.

The combination of intellectual activity and uncertainty that partial sight engenders mirrors the experience of construing an open text. Open texts invite the reader into the poem as a participant in the creation of meaning. An open text can disrupt readers' perceptions of what a poem is, just as partial sight disrupts visual perception. In the case of open texts, this is achieved through turbulent syntax, avoidance of a steady viewpoint or linear narrative and a move away from the visual and typographic conventions of poem presentation, such as starting all lines at the left hand margin. Open texts therefore tend to create visual and intellectual surprise. The

stimulation that such texts provide promotes not only a different kind of writerly activity but also active reading. I argue that ‘active reading’ is a useful metaphor for the partially sighted person’s engagement with a visual world that is mysterious, full of both uncertainty and, because of its open nature, possibility.

By promoting active reading, an open text valorizes the collaborative creation of meaning, and therefore creates mutual dependency between author and reader. Open forms also suggest that dependency upon language is a natural and desired condition for poet and reader. Closed forms by contrast can suggest that the author or speaker can easily manipulate language to his/her own ends. In this context, he/she appears dependent on the reader only as an audience for authorial performance, rather than as a collaborator whose contribution can influence the outcome of the poem. This hierarchical model runs counter to the equality between author and reader created by open form. Open forms thus foster a greater degree of dependency, both on language and on others, than closed texts.

My contribution to knowledge in this thesis is to argue for poetry of disability that relies upon open forms, and that relies less on identity poetics. This poetry of disability diminishes the importance of the poet’s personal vision in favour of a greater reliance upon language. By involving the reader in open form poetry that embodies a slow partial process of apprehension, I aim to question who is partially sighted in this context and what disability means. I want to suggest that all poets are partially sighted during the writing process, in that they want to express more than they can initially perceive. Only through dependence on language can poets gain expanded vision.

This essay traces the movement of my practice towards an open form designed to involve readers in the ontological uncertainty that partial sight creates. However it took me a long time to reach this formal stance – in which disability is implicit in poetry. Previously my work was closer in spirit to identity poetics. In this respect I had been mirroring the practice of many contemporary poets who seek, through a primarily mimetic poetry, to represent experiences of disability. When I wrote a poem I attempted to create a closed system of meaning that recorded my personal experiences as a disabled person and guided the reader towards a view of disability that I had reached and that I felt they should share. However, as I began, in accordance with my thesis title, to imagine partial sight as an aesthetic in poetry, the



certainty of vision proposed in my relatively closed texts seemed less and less appropriate.

Partial sight heightens awareness of the mystery inherent in our experience of the visual world. Although a lack of visual clarity can be inconvenient in practical situations – is the blue and red shape a person? – in a poetic context it is a positive value. By reducing certainty, it radically broadens the imaginative, linguistic and syntactic possibilities available to poet and reader. One could say that it encourages subjunctive rather than indicative thought. Closed poems – that is, texts in which the author arranges each feature to guide the reader towards a particular conclusion, are inappropriate, since they tend towards a certainty of vision that is unavailable in partial sight. Sections of this essay will show how my formal awareness developed as I considered partial sight's role within poetics.

There are thirteen sections to the essay, including a conclusion. The following is a description of each section. I will begin by giving a brief outline of the political understanding that drives my project. The second section examines medical definitions of partial sight. The third considers the relevance of this condition to poetic composition. As dependency is often a major element in the experiences of a partially sighted person, sections four and five explore its links to partial sight and its role in poetic composition. In relation to Homeric epic I will discuss the figure of the blind poet and his dependency on the Muse. What does the persistent association of sight loss with epic poetry reveal about the role of partial sight in poetic composition?

The sixth section will consider the closed text – the type of poem I tried to write in order to foreground my personal identity as a disabled person, and the type of poem that is most typically associated with poetry of disability. I will examine the historical development of this poetic model, which emphasizes the poet's personal vision. I will consider its ramifications for the portrayal of blind and partially sighted persons. In this context I will examine poems by Wordsworth and Edwin Morgan. I will conclude the section by looking at one of my own poems and will show why the 'closed text' template is problematic as part of a poetics of partial sight. The seventh section will consider two alternative models of the relationship between poetics and disability. One of these models foregrounds disability as the focus of an identity poetics. The other method submerges disability within the process of poetic composition. The first of these models is more likely to produce a closed text. The second leads to a more open form. To demonstrate the respective effects of these

models I juxtapose work that typifies each approach. To represent the identity poetics model I use a poem by Jillian Weise from a recent anthology *Beauty Is A Verb: The New Poetry of Disability* (Bartlett et al., 2011). To explore the second method, I look at the work of Larry Eigner, together with an essay on the subject by Michael Davidson entitled 'Missing Larry: The Poetics of Disability In Larry Eigner'.

The eighth section includes a detailed discussion of Rae Armantrout's essay 'Feminist Poetics And The Meaning of Clarity' (Armantrout, 1992). I mentioned above the importance of this essay to my project's political and formal development. The essay contrasts 'closed' and 'open' approaches to the representation of women's experiences in poetry, arguing in favour of the latter. Armantrout draws attention to the different ideas of authority – hierarchical or collaborative - implicit in 'closed' or 'open' forms. She compares a 'closed' text by Sharon Olds unfavourably with work by Lyn Hejinian, suggesting that a more closed approach, by aiming at transparency, can in fact distort experience, producing an overdetermined and deceptively simple representation. Such a distinction makes space for the idea that the open form aesthetic that partial sight fosters can both encourage greater imaginative freedom and provide a more compelling picture of a world in which meaning is often open-ended. Thus partial sight is an integral part of perception that is not limited to those who have a visual impairment. The ninth section discusses the open texts and its relevance to the poetics of partial sight.

The following three sections consider the various formal experiments by which I have attempted to embody the role of partial sight in poetics. The tenth will examine five versions of a poem I have written about/addressed to Homer, the archetypal blind poet. The drafts move from an initial interest in biography towards an awareness of the epic nature of partial sight in poetry, suggesting that it represents the limits of all human knowledge. They also move from a closed text model towards a more open aesthetic that establishes a viewpoint outside the parameters of the self. The eleventh section considers the role of the long line in a poetics of partial sight. This section will show how a consideration of the cosmomimetic practice found in Homeric poetry led me to experiment with the long line as a form that creates an awareness of human partial vision and thus encourages dependency on factors external to the self as catalysts for imaginative expansion. This line of argument was also influenced by Allen Grossman's view of the long line as a means of

cosmomimesis,<sup>2</sup> which he propounds in *Summa Lyrica: A Primer of the Commonplaces in Speculative Poetics* published as part of *The Sighted Singer: Two Works On Poetry For Writers And Readers* (Grossman, 1992). The section includes commentaries on two of my poems, written as I came to realize the efficacy of this form for my project. The twelfth section explores how the technique of deformation reveals the creative power implicit in an aesthetic of partial sight, dependency and open forms. The section considers one of a series of deformations I made of pre-existing poems on visual impairment. By means of erasure, elision and reliance on the emerging semantic and formal changes, deformation can open an existing poem on visual impairment to new interpretations and release latent meanings that may radically alter understandings of the poem. These texts depend on the preceding poems. But they also argue with the power dynamics at work in their source texts by demonstrating an alternative poetic approach in which partial sight is not a spectacle but a formative element in the open generative form of the new poems. This new approach is inherently political, as poetic partial sight is no longer an impairment but rather an experience that all poets have. This moves our understanding of partial sight away from narratives of disability towards fresh understandings of creativity. In the next section I will explicitly lay out the political understanding that has powered my project and led to the creative practices that I describe above.

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<sup>2</sup> I provide a more detailed discussion of cosmomimesis later in the essay, in relation to the role of the long line in a poetics of partial sight.

## POLITICAL UNDERSTANDING AND AIMS

This section explores the political dimension and implications of my thesis on the generative role of partial sight in poetic composition. I consider the political understanding that underlies my critical and creative work, especially in relation to the representation of disability. To do this, I draw on current views and models of disability and of its relation to culture and, specifically, poetics. I situate my thesis in relation to these approaches and consider how a poetics that acknowledges the limited nature of human vision and that consequently depends on factors external to the poet's conscious self can express this through aspects of its creative practice, such as line, space subject and perspective. I contend that the poetics of my project is also its politics and that artistic choices can reflect a political perspective with the potential to radically change how we think about partial sight and the wider context of disability.

In the abstract for 'Affirming An Impersonal Life: A Different Register for Disability Studies', James Overboe writes

Drawing from the template of feminism, queer politics and other civil rights movements, a fundamental tenet of Disability Studies continues to be the validation of one's own identity and politics, based on various disabilities: sensory, psychiatric, developmental, environmental or physical, (or any combination of the aforementioned.) Underlying this politics is the self-reflexive individual. Giorgio Agamben has argued that Giles Deleuze moves the discussion to a different register: that of an impersonal life – (without a self.) The article asserts that the field of Disability Studies should embrace this different register, thereby affirming the value of an impersonal life. (Overboe, 2009, 241)

Overboe's call for Disability Studies to move away from identity towards the impersonal parallels the trajectory of my project away from a poetics of partial sight based on identity towards an aesthetic that acknowledges the limitations of human vision and depends on the poem as a dynamic creative process that exists beyond the confines of the self.

The field of disability poetics has been a key site of the validation that Overboe cites. In particular the sub-genre of ‘crip’ poetics often features a speaker who asserts an identity based on disability. In a later section I will consider this type of poem in more detail as I juxtapose differing approaches to the relationship between disability and poetics. Such a poem is often intended to challenge the cultural use of disability as an edifying spectacle for the (often) non-disabled viewer by revealing the self who lives with the unenviable social designation of ‘disabled person’. The poet and academic Petra Kuppers writes

In many ways, I think, poems and their performance of meaning clasp something of crip culture’s force. I, and you, and we want to know what it is like to live, and to live like that, and we want to tell, but the telling is hard, difficult, personal, made difficult by the slip of the knife in a word and the word gabbling on a page. (Kuppers et al., (Bayliss, 2009, 292)

I contend that the key word in this quote is ‘personal’. Disability poetics, as practiced by Kuppers and others in the ‘crip poetics’ movement is about asserting the value of the disabled individual as an autonomous person. This assertion clearly runs counter to cultural narratives that cast disability/impairment as a source of overwhelming incapacity that removes any potential for agency. Phil Bayliss, in whose article the above quote appears, notes the capacity of poetics to engender ‘counter-cultural narrative possibilities’, (Bayliss 2009, 291), presumably including the idea of disabled selves as autonomous agents. I by no means dispute the capacity of poems to create new understanding through alternative linguistic and formal patterning. Bayliss describes some aspects of poetic composition, including the mutual dependency of author and reader that I aspire to in my own creative work. I do however take issue with the idea that crip poetics is, in any significant way, ‘counter-cultural.’

While it is true that disability poetics challenges representations of disability as incapacity, its project of validating disabled selves as agents is entirely typical of a culture that promotes the autonomous individual and denigrates any form of dependency. Disability Studies is, perhaps unsurprisingly, overwhelmingly dominated by relatively able disabled people whose impairments have left them inconvenienced but articulate. The *Disability Studies Reader*, a 653-page book comprising 48 articles

on various subjects, features one article – ‘This Is What We Think’- a title that asserts the value of the self - that has been written jointly by researchers with and without learning disabilities. This imbalance is caused by the fact that those with unimpaired cognition are much more able to approximate to Western culture’s ideal of the autonomous subject. Overboe is in part affirming the value of lives that do not approximate to this ideal – lives that do not follow the accepted cultural pattern of minimizing disability and of claiming autonomy. Without wishing to suggest that learning disabilities diminish the personhood of their bearers, they may reduce their ability to self-represent as a culturally acceptable able disabled person. There are many severely disabled individuals who are grossly underrepresented in Disability Studies, especially its creative facets. The practitioners of crip poetics devalue disability and its consequence dependency, even as they seem to claim it. They soothe mainstream culture’s anxiety about disability by covering it with a noisily autonomous self.

In her essay ‘Feminist Poetics And The Meaning of Clarity’ to which I will refer in more detail later, Rae Armantrout asks ‘How might conventions of legibility enforce social codes?’ (Armantrout, 1992, Beach, 1998, 295)

By presenting an easily recognizable and culturally acceptable self in their poems, poets who use the disability poetics model present themselves as simply one more identity in the cacophony of selves seeking attention in mainstream contemporary poetry. Ironically, they become difficult to distinguish from non-disabled poets working under the rubric of identity poetics. By using such a model, poets run the risk of negating disability’s subversive social and poetic potential. Identity-driven disability poetics is culturally static and does not challenge understandings of disability on a deep level.

This stasis is the reason I wish to suggest a new form of disability poetics, one closely aligned with Overboe’s vision for disability studies as a field. Overboe writes

In effect an impersonal life expressed is something that cannot be reduced to an identity or category...it is a life force that has no need for the concept of the self and is attuned to a different vitalism. (Overboe, 2009, 252)

My project draws on this vitalism, which Overboe claims as a ‘creative force.’ The political aim of the thesis is to create an aesthetic that accepts human limitations and

casts necessary dependency on impersonal forces as a positive feature of creative vision. The aesthetic does not claim that all poets have impairments but rather that limited capacity and dependency are a natural part of the creative process. In this context disability can be seen not as the centre of a particular identity poetics but as a universal creative experience that reaches beyond the personal experiences of those with impairments. Although identity poetics is relevant to all in that the strength of a group's self-representation may suggest new perspectives to those claiming other identities and to society as a whole, its focus on a single group may distort views of people outside that group and thus become divisive. It may also stress a particular aspect of identity – in this case disability – rather than acknowledging the fluid and intersectional nature of all identity.

Arguably identity poetics, whatever its affiliation, can create an oligarchy in which the holders of a particular identity claim creative power. If, as in the case of crip poetics, they do this in order to reassert the power of the autonomous self, their ability to challenge existing power structures may be limited. My contention that disability in poetics is not primarily a personal identity but rather a fundamental feature of creative action leads to an inclusive and democratic political position in which authors and readers experience partial sight as a formative agent in the apprehension of a poem. Partial sight is not merely a condition of being visually impaired but a part of the human condition. Indeed, a poetics founded on partial sight, dependency and open forms has the potential to make the poem a democratic creative space. Formal features of my creative work, such as subject, perspective, narrative, line and space reflect the politics of partial sight, as this essay understands them.

Over the course of my thesis, the subject of my poems has changed from a consideration of my personal vision as a partially sighted person to the process of gradual apprehension that fuels poetic composition. The poems' perspective is 'cosmomimetic' (Grossman, 1992, 334) and dramatizes movement beyond the conscious self. It enacts an awareness of the epic scale of partial sight in poetry. Ongoing intertextuality, expressed most strongly in the deformations, indicates the infinite potential of the poetic process – rather than focusing on one inviolable text, the aesthetic shows our fluid and partial understanding of the reality towards which poems move, but also indicates the myriad expressions of that reality that an acceptance of our limitations and dependency produces. Linear narrative is displaced in favour of a focus on apprehension that immerses readers in the poem's organic

development. Lines dramatize this displacement in part through the abandonment of traditional landmarks such as a dominant right hand margin that marks the beginning of each thought. The increasing length of lines enacts the poems' cosmomimetic perspective, which relates to a universe much bigger than the concerns of the social self. The use of white space as a formative agent in the poems reflects the limited nature of human vision in relation to the larger universe, but also the creative possibilities offered by engagement with factors beyond the self. Collectively these features express a more universalist and collaborative politics than is possible in the context of identity poetics. In later sections I will explicitly show how individual poems formally express this political position.

I argue that poetics and politics are inseparable and aim to show this in my creative work. Charles Olson posited the idea of open form in his essay 'Projective Verse'. He wrote 'FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF THE CONTENT' (sic). (Maude, 2005, 40) Open forms, deformation and radical intertextuality can make the poem a democratic space in which the apprehension of meaning is open to all. This does not always occur, as Pound's *The Cantos*, which increasingly move towards fascist authoritarianism, demonstrate. Nonetheless Pound's use of open form in *The Cantos* does not necessarily negate its democratic tendencies. In Canto CXVI Pound writes:

Tho' my errors and wrecks lie about me  
And I am not a demigod,  
I cannot make it cohere. (Sieburth, 2010, 253)

Pound's failure to create a coherent metanarrative may have arisen in part from the democratic compulsion that powers open form. An open form allows space for multiple perspectives. Moreover turbulent syntax underlines the provisional nature of meaning(s). As such, open form makes it very difficult for the author to choreograph meaning as Pound tries to do. Thus his formal choices militated against his political perspective, making it impossible to create an authoritarian text. The work of poets whom Pound influenced, such as Charles Olson and Louis Zukofsky more clearly demonstrates open form's democratic potential. My project exploits this potential to show the universality of experiences of partial sight in poetic composition.



This section has focused on the political vision of partial sight as a universal human experience, rather than a personal identity, that underpins my project. I have outlined the theoretical sources of my thinking and have gone on to show how my poetics works to reflect these political convictions. I believe that political determination played a large part in my decision to begin the project. A desire to radically change understandings of the role of partial sight in poetry, and to cast it not as a spectacle or as the centre of an identity poetics but as a generative principle is at the heart of this thesis and powers my contribution to knowledge.

However, ‘partial sight’ is an inexact term that can be confusing. In the next section I will examine medical definitions of this term. I will then explore the gap between cultural understandings of sight loss and the lived experiences of people with partial sight. Subsequent sections will explicitly consider the relationship between partial sight and poetics.

## PARTIAL SIGHT

Sight is measured with reference to two factors. One is visual acuity or central vision, used to perform tasks such as reading a book. Visual acuity is measured using a Snellen chart. This is a series of rows of letters that gradually decrease in size. After a test of visual acuity, one is given a score depending on how far down the chart one can read. The score consists of two numbers written like this. 6/36. The first number refers to the patient's distance in metres from the chart. The second number refers to how far away a person with standard vision would need to be in order to read the same line. Someone with standard vision would be able to read all the way down the chart while standing 6 feet away. They would have a score of 6/6. The bigger the second number is, the worse your visual acuity is. Severe sight impairment or blindness is reached at 6/60 i.e. the subject can read at 6 metres what someone with standard vision could read standing 60 metres away.

The other factor is the visual field. To measure the visual field means to assess how much a person can see around them while looking straight ahead. For example, to have no lower visual field means that you cannot see the ground without lowering your head to look at it. To be registered partially sighted in the United Kingdom, you must either have

- (1) Very poor visual acuity (up to 6/60) but a full field of vision.
- (2) Moderate visual acuity (up to 6/24) but a reduced field of vision or blurred/cloudy central vision.
- (3) Relatively good visual acuity (up to 6/18) but a very small field of vision.
- (4) A combination of reduced visual acuity (up to 6/60) and some visual field loss. (NHS Choices, 2013)

As these criteria suggest, 'partial sight' is an inexact term. It means that the subject has less sight than somebody with standard vision, but that statement can encompass a broad range of conditions and experiences. There is a large spectrum stretching

between standard vision and blindness. Further, it is possible to be legally blind without necessarily being completely blind. Stephen Kuusisto, the poet and memoirist, who is legally blind, describes his vision as follows.

...my vision loss is a form of ‘legal blindness’ – a confusing phrase that means that I can see fractionally, though not enough to truly see. Not enough to drive or operate machinery, or read an ordinary book. So I am blind in a bittersweet way; I see like a person who looks through a kaleidoscope; my impressions of the world are at once beautiful and largely useless. (Kuusisto, 1998, 13)

This passage describing the vision of a legally blind person suggests the porousness and interdependency of the terms ‘sight’ and ‘blindness’. Sight is present in blindness and blindness in sight. The quote also suggests the centrality of vision to our society – many everyday activities require it and ‘sight’ or ‘blindness’ is measured in relation to one’s ability to perform these tasks without adaptations, as a fully sighted person would. This implicitly suggests the value placed on independent autonomous action, and the ways in which sight loss complicates this ideal. Sight loss often leads to forms of dependency, whether on fully sighted others or on assistive technology, which ranges from Braille readers and white canes to reading glasses. Total blindness, involving no light perception at all, is relatively rare and affects only 3% of those with visual impairments. (Royal National Institute For The Blind, 2012)

People with standard vision often find the concept of ‘partial sight’ confusing. This is because the large middle of the visual spectrum rarely appears in culture. Sight/blindness is one of the binaries used in Western thought to structure understandings of the body. Either one is sighted or one is blind. This leaves very little conceptual space for those who can see, but in an atypical, limited way, the legally –but not necessarily completely ‘blind’ or even those who say they ‘cannot see without their glasses’ – what does that mean? One of the aims of my project is to trouble this dichotomy, which distorts and oversimplifies many experiences of visual impairment. In my experience sight and blindness are simultaneous rather than opposite states. Furthermore, one’s social status as ‘blind’ or ‘sighted’ can fluctuate, depending on a variety of factors. These include the visual status of those around you, whether or not you have disclosed your impairment and whether or not you use

cultural symbols of blindness such as a cane or a dog. It may also depend on which aspects of your vision you are currently using – I have extremely poor spatial awareness but normal colour vision.

Visual status is likely to change over a lifetime. The most common causes of sight loss are age-related. If you are not currently visually impaired, the likelihood is that, if you live long enough, you will become so. One cultural effect of the sight/blindness dichotomy is to distance sighted and blind people from each other. An aim of my thesis is to posit partial sight not as a unique and isolating social status but as a normal part of human experience.

## WHY IS HOMER BLIND?

Having discussed how partial sight can be defined, I will now go on to talk about the condition's relevance to poetics. There is a long tradition of associating poetry with blindness. Homer, the supposed author of the earliest Western poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, is traditionally seen as blind. Book 8 of the *Odyssey* contains a passage in which Alcinous, King of the Phaiakians, calls for Demodokos, a blind bard, to be brought in to entertain the company.

κηρυξ δ' ἐγγυθεν ἦλθεν ἄγων ἐριηρον αἰιδόν  
τον περὶ μούσας ἐφίλησε, δίδου δ' ἀγαθὸν τε κακὸν τε  
οφθαλμῶν μὲν ἀμερσε, δίδου δ' ἡδεῖαν αἰοιδὴν

Then the herald came in, leading the good minstrel, whom the Muse loved above all other men and gave him both good and evil; of his sight she deprived him but gave him the gift of sweet song. (Murray et al., 1998, 276)

The idea of the blind poet who is compensated for his sight loss by unusual poetic talent and vision is as old as the earliest surviving Western poetry, and probably older than that. It presents a challenge to the visually impaired poet, since physiological sight loss is not necessarily balanced by strong poetic perception. But in another sense it is a useful model for those wishing to construct a poetics of partial sight. It claims status for the perspective by associating it with the traditional starting point of Western literature. More importantly though, there must be features of sight loss that lead to its persistent associations with poetry.

One of these features may be an increased reliance on sound. Partial sight and blindness render the visual world difficult to interpret. The process of listening therefore becomes more important. Hearing can create an identifiable meaning that sight may not provide. This is true on a practical level – bleeping traffic lights tell you it is safe to cross roads whether or not you can see the green man. As a partially sighted person I have found that the best way to assimilate complex information is to repeat it orally. Whereas some people learn through visual cues, I am an aural learner.

This may be related to the relative paucity of neural pathways serving my visual cortex and the consequent unreliability of my vision. My memory appears to be triggered largely by sound – I have always found it easy to learn linguistic structures by rote, whether those structures are declensions or poems. This reliance on aurality also creates an aesthetic attraction to structured sound, and hence to poetry, which is the artistic arrangement of linguistic sound. Thus, partial sight can foster a strong attraction to sound, which over time can become an attraction to the complex sound structures of poetry.

One can argue that partial sight – or at least partial perception – is an intrinsic part of poetic composition. The poet tentatively exploring the shape of a poem, especially in its early drafts, resembles the partially sighted person tentatively interpreting a mysterious visual world. It is rare, at least in my experience, for a poem to appear fully formed in the author's consciousness. More often the poet has a hazy idea of the poem – a few half-heard phrases, perhaps, with a lot of gaps in between. Constructing – or listening for – a poem is a slow, provisional process of apprehension, rather like interpreting the world through partial sight. The poem only emerges during the slow and bitty process of drafting. This process can take a long time and involve many decisions, some of which contradict each other. Even poems written as closed texts – that is, with a definite authorial agenda in mind that all the poem's features corroborate – poems that are deliberately designed to provide closure for author and reader – can take a long time to reach a tentatively 'finished' – i.e. publishable – state and may never be definitively finished. A published poem may look complete, but the process of composition frequently involves not being able to definitively see the poem. In this sense, constructing a poem resembles interpreting the world through partial sight; the world and the text remain open forms in which meaning is provisional. Arguably Homer's blindness represents the limits of human knowledge– the partial vision and consequent dependency that poets experience as they try to grasp the shape of a poem.

## **DEPENDENCY**

To be dependent means to be reliant on someone or something else for a form of support, whether financial, emotional, practical, biochemical or semantic. There are many forms of dependency, and we all experience this state during our lives, most obviously in childhood or old age. Nonetheless the high value which contemporary Western society places on individual autonomy means that dependency is often presented in a negative light. Independence is seen as a sign of moral worth, whereas dependency is associated with helplessness, lack of autonomy and even laziness. The current government – Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition 2010-15 - is exploiting this negative view by claiming that its campaign to shrink the welfare state will ‘reduce welfare dependency’. The implication is that those who find it difficult to work and consequently need help with living costs are morally deficient.

This rhetoric is problematic for people with impairments whose reliance on welfare is necessitated by medical factors that they cannot control. The political association of ‘dependency’ with a lack of moral integrity indicates that a dependent position, such as is often imposed by partial sight, can be deeply uncomfortable and fraught with social anxiety.

## POETRY AND DEPENDENCY

One would expect this negative attitude towards dependency in Western culture to be replicated in that culture's poetry. It is true that post-Romantic poetry often stresses the poet's individual, independent vision. But an exception can be found at the traditional starting point of Western literature. I argue that the Homeric epics provide a different view of dependency. In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, dependency appears as a necessary and positive creative force that facilitates the poet's expanded vision.

The author(s) of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* begin by acknowledging the limits of mortal perception. In both poems the speaker foregrounds his dependency on the Muse. He asks her to tell the story of the poem. Although Homer is traditionally credited with these poems, neither foregrounds a personal vision. The first verb of the *Iliad* is an imperative, asking the Muse to 'sing'. There is no mention of the poet. The first four words of the *Odyssey* are: ἀνδρα μοι ἔνπερ, Μοῦσα – 'Tell me, Muse. of the man....'. (Murray et al., 1998, 12-13) After that request for the Muse – not the poet – to 'tell me' – that is the poet – the story there are no more direct references to 'me'. After all, this is the story of Odysseus rather than of the poet, and the opening lines are a summary of his travels. The Greek is even more focused on Odysseus – it begins with ἀνδρα ᾧ 'man' and squeezes 'me' in, before turning to the Muse and her story. Both epics turn out from the poetic speaker towards events and persons in the world. The poem is a space for listening, not necessarily seeing.

The presence of the Muse in the poem is the poet's acknowledgement of the limits of mortal perception. Without divine help, the poet cannot gain access to all of the knowledge he or she needs for the poem. The physiological blindness that is attributed to epic poets such as Homer or Demodokos suggests these metaphysical limits. Their blindness creates dependency on the Muse. Their dependency on the Muse facilitates expanded vision – with help the poem can be composed.

In contemporary terms, we might gloss 'the Muse' as the 'open' tendencies of a text, those elements of a poem that are outside the author's direct, conscious control. When composing a poem one often finds that there are surprising features, lines, phrases, juxtapositions that one did not imagine before the writing process began. These are often the most interesting elements of the poem. When poetic composition



is less successful, it is frequently because the poet has stuck too closely to a conscious plan. I enjoy reading poetry in traditional forms, and have often tried to reproduce these forms. However, when writing a poem with a fixed rhyme scheme or metrical plan, it is possible for the poet to expend so much conscious energy on creating a 'correct' formal structure, that the less conscious, more open and serendipitous elements of the poem are lost. In the past I have frequently attempted to force a poem into a form rather than letting the form emerge from the poem. I do not wish to suggest that traditional forms always foster such poetic breakdowns or that using non-metrical forms automatically creates a good poem, but breakdown is more likely in a situation where the poet strives to keep total control of the poem. Such difficulties occur because the author thinks of the text as a closed system, all of whose elements she can control. If one attempts to control a poem by confining it within a set structure, and the poem conforms to the pattern you have chosen but fails to thrive, this can highlight the limitations of conscious planning as a means of composition.

By contrast, dependency on 'the Muse,' or in modern terms openness to the unexpected or unconscious features of poetic composition, can create a text that has value as a linguistic and phonic exploration, rather than as a transparent expression of the poet's conscious mind. In this poetic model, the poet's personal vision is secondary to the total vision of the open poem; a dynamic creative process that can create new linguistic patterns and consequently expand our ideas of language, meaning and the world. Engaging with linguistic and phonic factors outside the self-is the only way to access open poetic composition. Dependency on the Muse/the unconscious features of poetic composition is therefore essential.

Furthermore, the poet composing any poem, whether open or closed, is dependent on several factors. These include the otherness of language, the otherness of the unconscious, the limits that the body imposes on perception, and events in the outside world. Although mainstream contemporary poetry tends not to embody its dependency on linguistic factors outside the poet's conscious control as the Muse, that dependency remains central to poetic composition.

This reliance on outside factors mirrors the experience not just of partial sight, but also of any type of disability. Since the social and physical environment is often not designed for those living with non-standard bodies, asking for help is a routine feature of life with impairments. The high value that contemporary Western society places on autonomy can make this a difficult process. This is obvious from my initial

reaction to Homer's description of Demodokos. The passage describes the herald fetching a chair for the singer, bringing him food and wine and showing him how to place his hands on the lyre. Clearly Demodokos is dependent on the nameless herald. My initial response to this passage, even as a disabled person who is routinely dependent on others, was anger and puzzlement as to why Demodokos, who apparently has nothing wrong with his limbs, cannot fetch the lyre himself. Arguably, this reaction demonstrates the importance placed upon independence in contemporary Western society. Even as someone who is often dependent, I have learnt to value autonomy and devalue reliance on others. The value that our society places on individual autonomy is one reason why disability, which brings with it dependence on others, is a source of social anxiety.

The significance of Demodokos' reliance on the herald is not immediately clear. It may be a sign of his status in a society built on slavery. It may be an expression of the host-guest relationship that was an important means of social cohesion in Archaic Greece, and that is a prevalent motif in the *Odyssey*. Demodokos' song is one sign of the hospitality that King Alcinous extends to Odysseus, his unexpected guest. Demodokos is also a guest of the king, and as such entitled to food, wine and any help he requires. In a sense Alcinous and Demodokos are mutually dependent on each other – both must play their respective roles of host and guest. Additionally the poet's explicit reliance on the herald could indicate an alternative moral code in which dependency, rather than creating shame, is a normal and natural part of life. Or, further, it may signal the very poetics of dependency that I am discussing. Demodokos' dependence on the herald prefigures his dependence on the Muse. On a cosmic level it suggests the author's positive dependency on language as a creative force that is outside his complete conscious control. This passage has the power to blow later negative portrayals of dependency in Western culture out of the water. It is amazing to find it at the traditional starting point of that culture. It embodies an opposite view of dependency that can lead us to reconsider how we value reliance on factors outside the self. By reimagining dependency, these lines formed in an archaic dialect of a long-dead language help us reevaluate what disability means and who is included in its discourse.

In marked contrast to modern ideas of dependency as shameful, the Homeric epics posit reliance on the Muse as an essential means of expanded poetic vision. This suggests that the epic poet's partial sight is not a personal physiological deficit,

but a reflection of the limits of all human creative vision. This approach obliges the poet to think about dependence and disability as inevitable features of poetic composition. In a sense, without the openness to poetic serendipity that Homer calls the Muse, all poets are disabled, only able to get so far in linguistic experimentation.

Poets can be incapacitated by their inability to fully express a poem that they can only partially perceive. There is almost always a gap between the poem as imagined and the poem as enacted. Only through dependency on language, which the Homeric epics personify as the Muse, can poets hope to fully express a poem. This necessary dependency mirrors the experience of disability, in which dependence on factors external to the self is essential in order to live a full life.

How does the Homeric view of dependency apply to contemporary poetics? It would be difficult to directly invoke the Muses of Greek mythology in a contemporary poem. But if we think of the Muse in abstract rather than figurative terms, it is possible to use this idea in a modern context. The Muse can be said to embody openness to the unconscious and/or unexpected elements of poetic composition, openness to the independent subjectivities in the world of which the poet speaks and to those features of the poem that evolve during the writing process and which may create a text that diverges from or outstrips the poet's original conception of the poem. Here, the experiences of partial sight and of writing an open form poem blur together. Mystery, though hopefully not mystification, is a central factor in both contexts. Both experiences require one to embrace a degree of uncertainty. But equally, both situations offer acceptance of mystery and reliance on factors external to the self as a route to expanded vision. Just as partial sight produces non-standard and surprising perceptions of the visual world, every poet is reliant on language as a volatile medium that can produce unexpected and original patterns of sound and meaning. Openness to the unpredictability of vision and of poems casts dependency, whether on language or on other people, as a necessary and normal part of poetic composition and of life. It also challenges the high value our society places on autonomy and consequently on personal vision. As will become apparent during this essay, it is sometimes difficult, in post-Romantic Western poetry, to distinguish the poet's personal vision or eye from their ego or 'I'. By contrast I want to propose a poetic model that values reliance on language over the poet's personal vision. I aim for a language-oriented poetics that is open to the power of language to carry the poem in unexpected directions and so expand limited human vision. Language-

oriented poetics challenges more mainstream poetic models, in which the author aims for a 'closed text' that will convey his/her individual vision.

## THE CLOSED TEXT

The previous section suggested that reliance on the Muse symbolizes the poetic importance of depending on language as a volatile creative force that can shape a poem, rather than deploying it as a tool that is exclusively under the poet's control. The poet is reliant on language and she cannot predict exactly how language will behave as a poem forms. It took me a long time to reach these conclusions, because I had absorbed a different idea of poetic vision and of the knowledge that such vision could bring. Reading contemporary mainstream poets, I was strongly influenced by post-Enlightenment ideas that cast the poet's vision as unique, specifically valued for that uniqueness and the knowledge brought by that vision as reliable.

Such a perspective on poetic knowledge tends to produce a 'closed text' – that is a poem in which the poet carefully controls all the elements to guide the reader towards a single conclusion, which is often filtered through a first person singular viewpoint. This is the type of poem I aimed to write, before realizing that closed texts that stress the poet's personal vision are incompatible with a poetics based on partial sight.

I want my work to challenge this tradition of blindness as a spectacle by using poetic techniques to immerse the reader in the experience of partial sight. These techniques include creating a degree of opacity through the use of more than one language, a move away from linear narratives centred on the lyric I, the creation of visual and semantic turbulence by disrupting the visual conventions of poem presentation –e.g. abandoning the left hand margin as the line's natural starting point and deformation of pre-existing texts on visual impairment to create a new poem. The aim is to create a text that simulates the epistemological uncertainty of partial sight and obliges the reader to enter the poem and actively construe it so far as they are able, as a partially sighted person does the world. The resulting texts should challenge the equation of clarity with transparency.

Partial sight makes it difficult to say 'I saw' with any degree of certainty. In the case of partial sight we can recast Merleau Ponty's statement 'My body is my point of view in the world' (Carman, 2008,1) as 'My body destabilizes and makes me

question my point of view on the world'. A poetics of partial sight needs to engage with ontological uncertainty. This essay traces my movement towards this idea.

At this point, it is worth briefly mentioning some of the high points in the development of contemporary Western attitudes to knowledge and their role in the creation of the 'closed text' as a poetic model.

To trace the development of contemporary Western attitudes to knowledge is clearly a large and difficult task. 'The West' and the 'Westerner' are no doubt as difficult to define as any other cultural concept. Furthermore as my project demonstrates 'knowledge' is an epistemological concept influenced by many factors including the body and one's social position. To create a metanarrative on its nature is therefore a risky task. It may help to look at an essay by Lyn Hejinian, a North American poet writing in open form, on *The Quest For Knowledge in the Western Poem*. Hejinian traces 'the moment when the West became 'the West' to Greek culture in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. She goes on to suggest that if one wishes to trace the origins of contemporary notions of what knowledge is, it is just as important to take account of the change in ideas of what knowledge was that occurred at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

But in considering contemporary notions of what and how we know, (i.e. our states of perception and our sensation of knowing,) an attempt to observe the West should be equally attentive to the fundamental redefinition and reevaluation of the rules of knowing that occurred at the beginning of the seventeenth century, with the burgeoning of experimental science, inspired by and accessory to, the voyages of exploration and the sudden increase in what was taken to be knowledge, or at least the raw materials, (data and experiences), out of which knowledge could, and must as they thought, be constructed. It was then that a scientific model for the acquisition of knowledge (along with the very idea of acquisition in relation to knowledge and its value) was established, one that ever since has seemed nearly irrevocable. It is this scientific model for the acquisition of knowledge that produced something of what now seems definitively Western in our culture. (Hejinian, 2001, 214)

Like the European explorers who saw and then laid claim to new lands, the scientist could observe the world around him and lay claim to new knowledge. Hejinian writes that this model was seen

not only as an instrument for obtaining and securing information, but also as a means of achieving a particular style of mind, characterized by perceptual acuity, self-sufficiency, undistractability and objectivity. (Hejinian, 2001, 215)

Arguably this model was instrumental in the creation of a culture that valued individual, self-sufficient vision. The observer, whether a scientist or a poet, could look and acquire reliable knowledge through his eyes, even if what he saw was new or surprising. He could then report back on this new or surprising sight, and expect to be believed. After all he had ‘seen it with his own eyes’.

The idioms of a language can reveal the relative importance of different senses in cultures that use that language. Vision is a dominant sense in contemporary Anglophone usage, closely linked to comprehension. The closeness of this conceptual link is indicated by the use of the phrase ‘I see’ to mean ‘I understand’<sup>3</sup>. The two processes – seeing and understanding – are presented as inseparable. The word ‘acuity’ suggests both vision and intelligence. Coleridge wrote that emancipating the mind from ‘the despotism of the eye’ (Magnusson et al., 2003) was the first step towards elevating natural Man to a spiritual level. Even Hejinian, who is good at interrogating commonplaces surrounding knowledge, subscribes uncritically to the centrality of vision.

The visual dominates our access to knowledge; we are overwhelmingly inclined to look, or, where that’s not possible, to visualize in order to understand, or even to conceive. (Hejinian, 2001, 227)

In the context of an aesthetic of partial sight, this assertion needs to be examined. Although it is true that contemporary Western culture is very visual, I do not think this is true for everyone within it all of the time. Some people, especially those with visual impairments, are more reliant on hearing or touch, and most people

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<sup>3</sup> Not all languages privilege the metaphor of sight to mean understanding. Italian, Spanish and French speakers often exhort their interlocutors to listen in order to understand.

simultaneously use a combination of senses. If people are partially sighted, it is certainly true that living in a strongly visual culture can affect their access to knowledge. It is also true that partial sight can foster an awareness of knowledge as a partial, provisional and situated phenomenon. But it is inaccurate to say that vision choreographs the worldview of every single person. Nonetheless, the cultural importance of sight meaning the understanding of the individual from the Enlightenment on meant that Wordsworth was able to write:

I wandered lonely as a cloud,  
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,  
When all at once I saw a crowd,  
A host of golden daffodils. (Hayden, 1994, 207)

The poet's eye and the poet's ego or 'I' are inseparable. The opening stanza of 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' creates an aesthetic of personal vision and epiphany that is the opposite of historically earlier models in which the poet was reliant on the Muse for his vision. The first word – I' sets up a single personal viewpoint. The reader sees the poet wandering like a cloud. It may be important that clouds are an exclusively visual phenomenon – too far away to hear, touch, taste or smell. The 'I' wanders: 'Till all at once I saw a crowd, /A host of golden daffodils.' (Hayden 1994, 207)

The poet's eye wanders until it sees and fixes upon the daffodils as the object of poetic vision. Sight occurs epiphanically 'all at once' – there is nothing partial or uncertain about this vision. The use of a linear narrative in the past tense with a first person narrator creates a sense of certainty and closure. This happened in the past, just as I am telling you now. Full rhyme and meter increase closure since the narrative is phonically reinforced by similar sounds at regular, predictable intervals dictated by iambic tetrameter. That is, in this stanza, the formal elements of the poem combine to create a closed text that stresses personal epiphany. The speaker's vision powers the stanza. Further the first stanza's integrity and formal self-sufficiency – it contains all the elements necessary to make the speaker's point – reinforce ideas of independence and personal vision.

The first three stanzas of 'I wandered lonely as a cloud' constitute a closed text, in which the poet/speaker remembers and describes his experience of seeing the



daffodils. 'I gazed and gazed, but little thought/What wealth the show to me had brought.' (Hayden, 1994, 207)

I suspect that if "I wandered lonely as a cloud" had ended at 'brought' it would not subsequently have become famous. It would have remained a relatively closed account of an individual's experience. The final stanza, though following the same formal pattern, transforms the poem into a more open text that invites readers to share the speaker's epiphany.

For oft when on my couch I lie,  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude,  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils. (Hayden, 1994, 207)

In this stanza, the poet/speaker, whose perspective has, until now, dominated the poem, relinquishes some control. He is still present, but no longer asserts the primacy of his particular vision. The first line shows him lying down, a relatively passive position. The daffodils are active; he does not see them, they 'flash' 'Upon that inward eye/Which is the bliss of solitude.' (Hayden 1994, 207) That inward eye' does not belong to the poet. As the ego of the poet leaves the forefront of the poem, so his specific sight, and physiological sight in general, become less relevant. Any reader can experience the 'flash' of the daffodils. Moreover the present tense used in this stanza suggests, in marked contrast to the historic past tense used in the other three verses, that the 'inward eye' is available to everyone. Though the final couplet returns to the speaker's perspective, his heart 'dances with', rather than trying to provide a definitive vision of, the daffodils. In the final couplet the poet's heart 'fills with pleasure' and 'dances'. With these verbs it takes over the action of the poem from the poet's ego or 'I'.

I believe that the inclusive, open nature of the last stanza is the reason for the poem's endurance. I do not wish to abandon my point that in the first stanza the poet's eye and his ego merge. Nor do I want to deny that two thirds of this poem is driven by a single controlling vision. I do want to suggest that even the most apparently closed text has open elements, and that those elements of a poem which render it open to the

reader may be a primary reason for that poem's longevity. All poems are dependent on readers for their continued currency – as such it is essential that there should be sufficient aperture to allow the reader to enter the poem as an active participant.

'I wandered lonely as a cloud' creates this aperture by means of a speaker who relinquishes his initial ego-driven vision in favour of reliance on factors external to the self. Thus his 'inward' eye' is reliant upon the daffodils that 'flash' upon it – a very active verb. The next poem I examine – 'Blind' by Edwin Morgan – is less open, both to the reader and to elements extraneous to the author's explicit controlling vision - and is arguably less successful. It conforms to a trend according to which blind figures in poetry appear as the objects of a non-disabled writer's gaze. As such, they often seem to represent not so much a unique embodied perspective as social anxiety about bodily difference. This tendency has the potential to occlude the perspectives of people living with visual impairments. I contend that a similar anxiety is at play in 'Blind', a relatively closed text designed to propagate the speaker's vision of blindness as heroism.

Almost unconscionably sweet  
Is that voice in the city street.  
Her fingers skim the leaves of Braille.  
She sings as if she could not fail  
To activate each sullen mind  
And make the country of the blind  
Unroll among the traffic fumes  
With its white stick and lonely rooms.  
Even if she had had no words,  
Unsentimental as a bird's,  
Her song would rise in spirals through  
The dust and gloom to make it true  
That when we see such fortitude,  
Though she cannot, the day is good. (Morgan, 2002, 52)

Sadly, I don't think this is a parody. The blind figure has no perspective other than that projected on to her by the poet/speaker. Although there is no I in this poem, there is a single viewpoint. This creates closure since the reader is given only one way

of looking at the blind figure. They are not allowed to diverge from the speaker's perspective, but are escorted through the poem, which is designed to guide them towards a specific conclusion. The linear narrative, supported by clear syntax discourages ambiguity, as does the indicative mood – 'she sings', 'Her fingers skim'. The day is good'. The clear picture of blindness the poem presents is phonically reinforced at regular, predictable intervals by iambic tetrameter couplets. In this context the tetrameter can be thought of as an 'enlightenment' metre, in that the immediacy of closure that these couplets provide suggests both certainty associated with knowledge and the speaker's autonomy in relation to knowledge. The regular full rhymes – 'leaves of Braille'/could not fail', 'through/true, 'fortitude/good" embody ringing conclusions. The word 'fortitude' stands out in the last three lines because it is a rare polysyllabic word in a stream of monosyllables designed to phonically reinforce the metre and hence the argument. It is difficult for a reader to come to an independent conclusion about the life of the blind woman or to remain in a state of partial knowing since the whole poem is designed to support the speaker's assertion that she is showing fortitude and that this makes the day good.

I would assert that Morgan's blind figure is a vehicle for his ideas about blindness and that the poem singularly fails to engage with its subject. Its steady viewpoint and high degree of phonic, metrical and syntactic closure run contrary to the ontological uncertainty created by partial sight, which makes both closure and a steady viewpoint difficult to obtain.

An artificially high degree of closure can limit the poem's scope as the poet shuts down the creative process in favour of an overdetermined vision. The epigraph to this essay refers to the harmful effects of a poet's refusal to relinquish control of a poem. Keats' words on Coleridge in relation to negative capability could equally well apply to Morgan.

& at once it struck me what quality went to form a man of Achievement, especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean *Negative Capability*, that is, when Man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after facts or reason – Coleridge for instance would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge. (Gittings, 2002, 41-2)

Keats' preferred route to artistic achievement – through an acceptance of 'half-knowledge' and a relinquishment of personal control in creative contexts – sounds like an articulation of the interplay between limited human vision, dependency on external factors and open forms. The phrase 'negative capability' suggests that to engage with apparent limitations – such as partial sight – may be a source of creative power. Although Keats is clearly not thinking of disability, his phrase is interesting in terms of disability discourse since it troubles the idea of incapacity by showing it as a valuable part of creative processes.

Morgan creates a misleading picture of the blind woman in part because he does not accept 'half-knowledge' but strives to control all elements of his poem. By showing the blind woman as a singer, Morgan attempts to give her a sense of expansiveness in spite of her radically narrowed vision. As earlier sections of this essay have shown, the association of physiological sight loss with expanded poetic vision is as old as Western literature. The woman is a very distant descendant of Demodokos. Semantic and phonic features of the poem partially convey a sense of the freedom implicit in creativity's enhanced vision. The woman's fingers 'skim the leaves of Braille' – that is, they move so fast they hardly touch it. She is clearly confident in her song, acting as though 'she could not fail'. Confidence is not an emotion closely associated with portrayals of blindness, which is often depicted as removing agency from its bearers. On a phonic level the songlike iambic tetrameter and the propulsion provided by metre suggest movement towards a higher plane where mere physiological blindness does not matter.

Even if she had had no words,  
Unsentimental as a bird's,  
Her song would rise in spirals through  
The dust and gloom to make it true (Morgan, 2002, 52)

However, the structure of the poem defeats its own ends. Tetrameter, though songlike, is ultimately too small a phonic space to provide the greater vision that Morgan claims for the blind woman. Although the metre provides some propulsion, the full rhymes tie the poem down, and its forward movement cannot survive the final couplet. – the full rhyme on 'fortitude' and 'good' is so definite as to bring the whole

enterprise to a resounding halt. The poem's structure militates against its semantic content. Though the blind woman is described as liberated by her song, she can never be liberated while she remains within such a small poetic space. Moreover, the noisy phonic certainty of 'fortitude/good' together with the heavy, definite monosyllables in the final line suggest that the speaker's desire to draw a moral trumps the singer's freedom. Having moved briefly towards subjectivity, she becomes an object once more as the poem ends.

Morgan's 'Blind' is the type of poem that infuriated me sufficiently to engender attempts to write differently about blindness. I wanted poems that cast sight loss not as an edifying spectacle but as a facet of a full life. I therefore decided to follow Helene Cixous' dictum in *Le Rire de la meduse*, in which she encourages women to challenge literary objectification by writing about their experiences.

I shall speak about women's writing, about *what it will do*. Woman must write herself, must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies, - for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text, as into the world, and into history, by her own movement.  
(Cohen, 1976, 875)

I felt that people with visual impairments had been subject to the same process of literary objectification as Cixous attaches to women. I was also influenced by Cixous' essay on writing and myopia 'Writing Blind: Conversation With The Donkey', in which Cixous claims her myopia as a generative factor in her writing process.

My nearsightedness is the secret of my clairvoyance...I owe a large part of my writing to my nearsightedness. I am a woman. But before being a woman I am a myope. (Cixous, 2005, 186)

I wanted, like Cixous, to assert my personal identity as a partially sighted person. In fact Cixous integrates this assertion with an awareness of the role of partial sight in the writing process. She thus serves as a role model both for the early, identity-driven stage of this project and for the later stages, during which I have become increasingly aware of the poetic power of partial apprehension as what

Cixous, who claims to write by ‘the other light’ calls ‘the precondition of clairvoyance’. But initially I was more interested in assertions of identity than in partial sight as a central feature of all composition. I wanted to challenge the literary objectification of blindness that Morgan’s poem typifies, just as Cixous exhorts women to challenge how they are represented in literature.

Accordingly, I attempted to write poems about my own experience as a disabled person. However, I did this, at least initially, in a somewhat unreflective way. I tended to produce short mimetic poems that focused heavily on the lyric I, which was, generally speaking, a representation of myself. I wrote report-like poems that attempted to correct what I saw as the misrepresentation of disabled people’s/my experience. Often my way of doing this was to question the inaccurate perspective that I had projected onto a non-disabled figure in the poem. For example, here is a poem about one of many encounters with evangelists.

### **Evangelist**

*Please will you let me pray for your feet?*  
It's her third request this week.  
If I believed, I would demand a warning.  
I would ask God to mark this wet-eyed woman  
a hazard on my route, like icy steps,  
or that North Street blind corner.  
*Yes* I smile. I can make her disappear.  
But she stands gawping at my lace-up shoes.  
I'm late for lunch, lurch past *don't fret*.  
*I'm off to see a friend*, but no one slipped  
my happiness onto her mappa mundi.  
I prowl on her world's edge like a bad dream.  
So now I shut my eyes, letting her shape  
a woman she'd prefer out of the air.

This poem has been through many drafts, but it still leaves me unsatisfied. The drafts all included fairly small changes – the poem was always intended as a transparent account of the speaker’s experience that critiques the evangelist figure by

projecting onto her imagery that suggests she is radically out of touch with the speaker's correct perspective. I suspect that the poem was partially fuelled by frustration at repeated experiences of this type and that one of its aims was to say to readers 'Please do not do this'. I could have used other formats to convey this idea. Moreover, in consciously trying to transmit a specific message I may not have fully acknowledged the limits of my own creative vision or been prepared to depend on factors outside my conscious self. This unwillingness to engage with the uncertainty and dynamism of the creative process may be a key reason why I continue to find the poem somewhat disappointing.

The poem's relative transparency encourages closure and certainty as to the meaning of its content. The first person narrative presents only one viewpoint - that the evangelist is bad and the speaker put upon. As a text with a clear and simple agenda it mostly avoids opacity, whether semantic, syntactic or moral. It is a closed text.

One could argue that the poet/speaker in this poem is just as much of an evangelist as the title figure, armed with the certainty of vision associated with that word. She effectively presents the evangelist as partially sighted in a negative sense, with an inaccurate picture of the world, thereby suggesting that she herself can see clearly. By calling the evangelist's worldview 'her mappa mundi' she distances herself and the reader from the evangelist and discounts her perspective, replacing it with her own assumptions. The evangelist is not an independent figure but a prop to illustrate the speaker's beliefs. The only slight exception to this pattern is the final sentence of the poem. Here the speaker shuts her eyes, renouncing her authoritative vision of the encounter. This creates some conceptual space for an alternative, open-ended vision, as the speaker steps back to allow the evangelist to: 'conjure/a woman she'd prefer out of the air.' The use of an indefinite article - 'a woman' - opens up multiple possibilities. What kind of woman would the evangelist prefer? What kind of woman would the reader prefer? At this point there is a slight aperture in the poem, through which readers can enter to imagine their own 'woman'. Readers are briefly granted imaginative equality. However, since the speaker 'lets' this process occur, the authorial autonomy relinquished is very slight. In spite of this final small opening in the poem, 'Evangelist' remains a mostly closed text. Its reluctance to trust the reader, expressed through its attempt at semantic and syntactic transparency, may be a

central reason for its relative lack of impulsion as a poem. In spite of its many drafts, I feel that it has never quite managed to take off.

Like Morgan's poem 'Blind', in which the author projects his ideas of blindness onto an unknown woman, 'Evangelist' demonstrates how metaphor can close or narrow a text, directing the reader towards a single meaning. I am describing metaphor as a hierarchical process in which the author is able to make statements about figures in a piece of writing, thereby directing how the reader sees them. By saying that the evangelist's worldview *is* a mappa mundi, the author directs and narrows the reader's perception of her as someone whose beliefs are fundamentally incorrect. That is almost all. With the small exception of the last sentence, which suggests other ways of looking at the encounter, the author prioritizes a vision of the evangelist as wrong-headed. The metaphor largely defines her existence in the poem, just as Morgan's title and ideas of blindness define the woman in his poem.

Metaphor, and literary figure in general, has been the subject of critique in modern and contemporary experimental poetics. A metaphor can be seen as a figure that can create a singular view of a person; it can turn the 'subject' into an 'object'. It radically oversimplifies, and therefore distorts, views of a figure in the service of a particular assertion about them. If the evangelist's mind is a mappa mundi, it cannot, within the terms of the metaphor, be anything else. I have frequently complained about the subjection of disabled people to totalizing metaphor and the subsequent distortion of their lives, (see my critique of Morgan above). It is therefore sobering but interesting to find this process in my own work.

Metaphor used in this way contradicts an aesthetic of partial sight, since it suggests that there is a 'correct' perspective to which the speaker has access. My aesthetic of partial sight could not be formed while I was using the perspectival tools that had created the problem I was attacking. By using the same perspective as Morgan and others, (single, certain,) I was undermining my own position. I don't think 'Evangelist' is very convincing as a poem demonstrating an aesthetic of partial sight.

Until recently, I concentrated in my poetry more upon visual impairment than upon aesthetics or poetics. I wanted to make my experiences as a partially sighted person 'knowable.' However I had not fully appreciated the epistemological, aesthetic or political complexities of attempting to do this. By writing in the first person with relatively uncomplicated syntax and often in conventional forms, I tried to claim



authority for my subjectivity. This approach was not as successful as I had hoped because although some of my early poems have open elements, my preference for relatively closed texts with transparent syntax and a clear viewpoint militated against the idea of partial sight. The uncritical use of metaphor – a key means of making the assertions that are central to a closed text, also left me liable to reproduce the literary power structures against which, as a disabled person, I wanted to argue.

I now argue that it is not desirable to write transparent poetry with a single identifiable meaning about partial sight, because, at least in my experience, the world, as experienced by a partially sighted person is rarely transparent. Neither, for most people, is it totally opaque. Perception is often a slow and bitty process of apprehension. What is this surface? Is it flat? Can I fall off it? I need to move carefully here, because I have been told there are glass doors, but I don't know exactly where and I don't want to walk into them. Do I know this person? In poetic terms, the closed text is an unsuitable model for partial sight, because the visual world created by partial sight is like an open text in which it is difficult to reach definitive conclusions. However, the post-Enlightenment idea of the closed poem centred on personal vision has made the closed text a popular choice for those poets who wish to use disability as the lynchpin of an identity poetics.

## DISABILITY POETICS

When one imagines a poetics of partial sight, one must engage with disability, because disability, outside the Christian gospels and some Victorian sentimental fiction, such as *Heidi* and *The Secret Garden*, does not go away. It is an important and unavoidable presence in the lives of people with visual impairments. This renders it an important and unavoidable presence in any discussion of poetry and partial sight.

My thesis uses the social model to think about disability (For an explanation of competing models of disability, see the introduction.) The social model has some drawbacks – it can lead to a denial of the reality of impairments – but its vision of disability as a cultural construct is attractive. The social model allows for a broader understanding of ‘disability’ than is permitted by the medical model’s focus on impairment. It understands disability as the lens through which Western societies see impaired bodies. If disability is a way of seeing and understanding impaired bodies, then all members of a culture are involved in its creation, whether or not they see themselves as disabled. This ties in with my desire to immerse the reader in partial sight through poetic techniques, thus challenging literary traditions of disability as edifying spectacle for the – usually non-disabled – viewer.

The emergence of the social model, together with various legislative acts, (the 1981 Education Act (UK), the Americans With Disabilities Act 1990, the Disability Discrimination Act 2005, (UK) etc., that facilitate the inclusion of disabled people in mainstream society), has contributed towards disability’s transformation from a pathology to an identity. ‘Disability’ covers so many different conditions and experiences that creating a community identity is very difficult, especially as many people with disabilities have very mixed feelings about the label. It is not an enviable social designation. Moreover, all people have complex intersectional identities that may include gender, race, nationality, religion, employment, interests and other factors. If the person has an impairment, these other factors may influence how the person regards that impairment. Disability may or may not be an important part of their self-image, and its importance may fluctuate at different times. To represent a range of complex subjectivities by means of a single label is therefore an awkward

process. Nonetheless disability has become a sociocultural identity, and like other marginalized identities at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is developing its own poetics.

Identity poetics has a number of important social and artistic functions. Firstly, it may help to foster solidarity among members of a group. This may be particularly important for those people whose lives are lived mainly in relation to the group. Secondly, for readers who do not identify with the group in question, identity poetics can facilitate the imaginative empathy that is both a cause and a result of literature by allowing readers to occupy another person's skin. Thirdly, the way a group self-represents, the richness of detail and variety of techniques used, is relevant to every community or individual who is working on their self-reflection. Lastly, since, as mentioned above, all identities are composite creations involving many facets of a person's self-image, identity poetics, if understood in an intersectional context, can reveal a multi-faceted personhood that acknowledges but also reaches beyond labels such as 'disability poetics'. To show people with visual impairments as complex individuals was the notional aim of my early work. As discussed elsewhere in this essay my initial preference for closed texts may have hindered this process by replicating a post-Romantic belief in the primacy of individual poetic vision that contributed to the objectification of figures with visual impairments. I believe that the use of open texts may better suggest the fluid nature of identities that include, but are not limited to, visual impairment, as well as attesting to the interdependency of sight and blindness. Open texts suggest participation in rather than imitation of experience. They question mimetic poetics.

A recent American anthology *Beauty Is A Verb; The New Poetry of Disability* (Bartlett et al., 2011) provides various models of what 'the poetry of disability' might mean, and how it might relate to identity. These questions are implicit in the title. I am disturbed by the tagline 'Poetry of Disability'. Disability already takes up a great deal of social and cultural space within the lives and the literary representations of people with impairments. The social anxiety that disability inspires in non-disabled observers means that such people are often represented purely in terms of how they react to their impairment which appears as an overwhelmingly negative force that can shape their whole lives. Visually impaired people in culture and literature often do not have many distinguishing features beyond their impairments. This is a gross distortion of the lives of real people who happen to be partially sighted, and it can adversely

affect how society perceives them. To use disability to define and advertise an anthology reinforces this partial vision of people with disabilities as having impairments instead of, rather than as well as, lives.

In this section I will look at two contrasting versions of disability poetics and will relate them to my argument. *Beauty Is A Verb* is split into a number of sections, each detailing different approaches to disability poetics. One is called ‘The Disability Poetics Movement’, also referred to in the introduction as ‘crip poetics’. This description makes me deeply uncomfortable. I understand that the practitioners of ‘crip poetics’ want to reclaim the word ‘cripple’ as an empowering label – but as a person with a visible disability, I am not sure that the word can or should be rehabilitated. Some words carry such a weight of historical opprobrium that obsolescence seems the best option. The dictionary definition of ‘cripple’ is ‘someone who is unable to walk or move properly through disability or injury.’ (Concise Oxford English Dictionary, 2006, 339) The dictionary notes that this usage is archaic or offensive. Contemporary Western culture, which places such a high value on independent action, often presents being able to move independently, and therefore organize your own life, as synonymous with moral value. The meaning of ‘cripple’ extends beyond simply being unable to walk to suggest total incapacity, helplessness and a negative dependence on others. (This contrasts sharply with the view of dependency, on language or on other people, as a positive force facilitating expanded vision that this essay propounds.)

Archaic words for people with disabilities such as ‘cripple’ are strongly linked to the metanarrative of impairment, as an overwhelming negative influence on the lives of its owners that I mentioned above in connection with *Beauty Is A Verb*’s tagline. (For me, the words ‘cripple’ or ‘crip’ cannot be used to empower people with impairments because their association with historical views of disability as total incapacity and worthlessness is too strong, though I accept that this is only a personal opinion.) Moreover, the term ‘crip poetics’ specifically weds poetry to an identity (physical disability,) thereby making it more likely that the poem will be interpreted primarily in relation to that identity, which may reduce the conceptual space available for other interpretations of the text, and perhaps also for its aesthetic features.

The poems collected under Disability Poetics are often short plainspoken univocal narratives reporting on everyday experience. According to Jennifer Bartlett’s preface the genre ‘insists on self-definition’. (Bartlett et al., 2011,16) As such, it often

produces closed texts. The apparent authorial agency that shapes the closed text makes it an ideal forum in which to foreground a personal perspective. An example is Jillian Weise's 'The Devotee.'

### **The Devotee**

This man, short, balding, in his forties,  
approached me at a reading and asked if  
I would sign his book. His hands shook.

I thought he had some kind of condition.  
Three days later he sent this email:  
"I was at your reading in Louisville.

I loved the way you limped to the stage.  
Do you know you're beautiful? Do you  
feel beautiful during sex? What's it like?

I bought your book which is about,  
you know, this topic. I deserve a reply."  
I looked out the window for the birds

& the deer other poets are always seeing.  
I want to be another poet I thought.

I want to be any other poet but me. (Bartlett et al., 2011, 147)

I suspect that this poem arose out of the same kind of frustrations as those that created 'Evangelist'. Socially inappropriate questions are an occupational hazard for those with visible disabilities. The closed poem, with its frequent emphasis on personal vision seems to offer an opportunity to show the disabled author's perspective and so prompt readers to behave differently towards them. Although this can feel like a pressing social necessity, it may not be conducive to poetry. Like 'Evangelist' 'The Devotee' could quite easily become a prose paragraph. This seems insufficient – you cannot simply create worthwhile poetry by attaching it to a socially marginalized

group. Arguably poetry needs to embody an experience rather than simply report on it. This may seem unfair, but if Weise wants to be ‘another poet’, a poet who is less defined by her disability, perhaps she could write another type of poetry in which disability is less explicitly present. Indeed, the end of this poem may point the way towards the type I am now writing.

The work of Larry Eigner provides an alternative model of the relationship between disability and poetics. Eigner had severe cerebral palsy, a physiological reality that must have dominated his life. None of Eigner’s poems mention this fact – I only know about it because I read an essay on Eigner by the critic Michael Davidson. The essay is called ‘Missing Larry: The Poetics of Disability in Larry Eigner.’ (Davidson, 2008, 116) The apparent irony is that there are no ‘poetics of disability’ in Larry Eigner, at least not on the surface. However Davidson argues that Eigner’s poetics were shaped by his experience of immobility. Eigner’s poems are often predicated on what Davidson calls ‘acts of attention.’

heat

past sunshine

vibrations of air

spiders, then birds, settle

reflexive

man

bringing what he can

interest

Small, flightless birds

the voice far tinkling bells

museum

of sorts, the rats destroyed

moving ashore, Midway

slow is  
the  
poem

flat wall of the sea  
  
and sky

each island  
rose

farther than any whale

fins

breathing above the waves  
the mirrors

heat

past sunshine

vibrations of air  
spiders, then birds, settle

reflexive  
man

menageries  
from the bottom

bringing what he can

	interest
rock crumbles to earth	
under rain	in
the seas	
	the quickening run-through
clouds mulct the moon	
flats	one thing at a time
the whale is still hunted	tides, a large motion
in certain parts	
	small waves give boats
prodigal	
the deep light	
in	
the quickening run-through	
one thing at a time	
tides, a large motion	
small waves give boats	
rock crumbles to earth	
under rain	
the seas	
clouds mulct the moon	
flats	
the whale is still hunted	
in certain parts	



prodigal  
the deep light

in  
the quickening run through

one thing at a time

tides, a large motion

small waves give boats. (Davidson 2008, 125-7) <sup>4</sup>

Davidson asserts that the poem – or set of three poems - Davidson is unsure - is shaped directly by Eigner's physical circumstances. He comments that he has chosen a poem that

does not thematize disability, in order to suggest how the material limits of the poet's physical act of writing govern the creation of rhythm. If the poem is 'slow' as he says, it is not for lack of interest or attention. Rather that slowness permits a degree of discrimination and attention: the space of the poem is in Eigner's case less a score for the voice than a map of intensities whose subject is 'a large motion' of global, geological forces. (Davidson, 2008, 128)

The subject of this poem is not the author's cerebral palsy, but rather a series of 'acts of attention'. The 'reflexive/man/bringing what he can' may or may not be the poet. Eigner is more interested in the process of attention to what is outside him than in any identifiable narrative, personal or otherwise. Aspects of his embodiment as a man with cerebral palsy may have shaped the poem – its possible slow production – but they are not foregrounded. Davidson reads: 'slow is/the/poem' as a reference to Eigner's typing, a slow and laborious process as he had only one working

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<sup>4</sup> Due to my poor spatial vision I cannot guarantee that the text above is spatially identical to the printed version. I have asked someone with standard vision to type it out for me, but I should still like to acknowledge the uncertainty.

finger. However, while analyzing a poem that valorizes a slow, partial process of apprehension, I feel it is worth noting that: ‘slow is/the/poem’ echoes my earlier analogy between the slow partial apprehension that partial sight creates and the poet’s tentative attempts to apprehend a poem, especially in its early stages. Davidson reads the phrase in terms of the specific physical limitations caused by Eigner’s cerebral palsy. That is a valid reading. Impairment is a constant presence in the lives of people with disabilities. One is aware of it in the same way that one is aware of skin or limbs, as part of oneself. It profoundly influences one’s relationship to the world. For example, due to cerebral palsy my balance is so poor that I regard the physical world as a series of surfaces that I may be able to lean on. It is certainly true that Eigner’s profound impairment would have slowed down the physical production of poems, and would have shaped his poetic practice. If he had not been obliged to sit still, he may have been distracted from ‘acts of attention’ by other activities. So Davidson has a point.

Nonetheless, one can read ‘slow is/ the/poem’ as a comment on the slow partial apprehension that often forms part of poetic composition.<sup>5</sup> In this reading all poets, regardless of their bodily status, become disabled as they only partially apprehend a developing poem. As such the phrase is less about fitting Eigner’s work into disability poetics, and more about revealing the disability inherent in all poetic composition.<sup>6</sup> Later in the essay Davidson comments

Once again these examples do not address cerebral palsy directly but they embody its effects on the poet as he registers the world from a stationary vantage point. So attentive is Eigner to the process of measuring thought and attention that the subject often dissolves into acts of perception and cognition. (Davidson, 2008, 132)

Cerebral palsy is implicitly present in these poems as a formative factor, but it is not the subject. Apprehension is. This echoes the experience of living with impairments –

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<sup>5</sup> In the interests of balance, it is worth noting that some poets subscribe to an aesthetic that involves composing poems very fast, perhaps in order to increase spontaneity and dependence on language in preference to authorial deliberation.

<sup>6</sup> Incidentally I suspect that my partial sight, caused by cerebral palsy, may have affected my first reading of the poem. Because of poor peripheral vision I failed at first to notice ‘slow is/the/poem and had to go back and reread in the light of Davidson’s comment. This is an example of embodied reading, if not embodied writing.

the impairments are always present and formative but they do not take centre stage. Life does. Eigner's work is a useful model for a poetics of partial sight shaped by the experience of visual impairment, but not necessarily foregrounding sight loss. I also admire how Eigner's 'subject dissolves' into perception' thereby mirroring consciousness and, through loosened syntax avoiding any narrative elements, including narrative focused on cerebral palsy. This is the opposite of a 'closed poem' – the open lineation, in which words are dispersed across the page, challenges the conventional closed text – in which all lines begin at the left hand margin. My poor spatial vision means that my reproduction of the poem's lineation may not be completely accurate, but in the version printed in Davidson's essay the left hand side of the page is largely empty, apart from: 'slow is/the/poem,' which is given emphasis by the white space around it. A gap follows on the left. The words are now exclusively on the right, until the left hand text resumes at 'menagerie'. Suddenly the reader, who has been concentrating on the right side of the page, can return to reading left to right across the whole page. The poem can be read both horizontally and vertically. Of course, this is true of all poems, but Eigner foregrounds it. This layout challenges the typical visual presentation of information– in which a linear narrative begins on the left and continues across the page in a horizontal line. A number of Eigner's poems move to the right as they progress, as this one does. Phrases thus begin much further away from the left hand margin than one would expect in a typical written text. This can be seen as a challenge to the visual conventions of written poetry. Eigner's use of space suggests a non-linear presentation of experience and a corresponding move away from linear narratives, including those used to contain narratives of disability. In this poem the white space is not a passive container for the poem's information, but a dynamic element in the reading experience. Together with the loosened syntax, the open lineation foregrounds the process of attention embodied in the poem, as the reader apprehends each new phrase.

Open forms such as this demand attention in a way that more closed forms may not. The closed texts that are associated with identity poetics tend to follow a familiar set of visual and narrative conventions. They tend not to disrupt lineation or linear narrative. They can use a familiar metrical pattern, or, alternatively, a plain free verse that is not very far from prose. Formally and in terms of perspective, these poems run the risk of telling the reader what he/she already knows. The information they give is presented to, rather than deduced by, the reader, which may result in a

lesser degree of readerly engagement. By contrast, in an open aesthetic such as Eigner's attention is always necessary because the reader cannot relax into a predictable narrative. This approach may, as Davidson suggests be a result of Eigner's immobility – he spent much of his time watching passing activity from his parents' porch. If so, the effects of Eigner's disability are embodied in the text, rather than foregrounded in a narrative.

Davidson sets out in this essay to 'crip' Eigner's work – that is to read it through a disability lens. Although his reading is very useful and interesting for my project, I have some ethical doubts about this process. Since Eigner never drew attention to his cerebral palsy in his poems, I wonder whether critics ought to follow his lead. As a severely disabled individual Eigner's body would have been understood by many people primarily as the site of his impairment. His decision not to highlight it in his poems seems a political one designed to focus attention away from disability onto other aspects of existence, and also to challenge ways of viewing impairment, which is too often seen as the dominant narrative of disabled people's lives. Eigner's decision not to mention cerebral palsy may have arisen from an awareness of disability's parasitic relationship to impairment. By not mentioning his significant physiological impairments, Eigner avoids the enfeebling narratives of disability that a disclosure of impairment can bring in its wake. I doubt that Eigner wanted his experiences framed in such restrictive terms. But I suspect that one effect of producing an open text such as Eigner's is that readers can interpret it in any way they want. The poet relinquishes control over how it is understood, becoming dependent on readers to make their own interpretation. And thus, if I produce open texts I will have to relinquish control over how my work on partial sight is read. It is true that Davidson's reading – of cerebral palsy as a formative agent – is convincing – but I find it troubling given Eigner's decision not to mention his condition. I feel it ought to be respected.

The word 'poetry' derives from the Greek ποιέω – 'I make' or 'I do'. (This root can be seen in the Scots word for poet: makar.) It is thus an intensely enabling activity that runs counter to ideas of disability as profound incapacity. 'Poetry of disability' is a paradoxical concept so long as one retains the aforementioned cultural link. It seems like a dichotomy – 'the capacity of incapacity.' By 'making' or 'doing' poetry, Eigner, like early Greek poets, provides an alternative view of 'disability' as a formative part of poetry, which originally meant 'the ability to make or do'. Eigner

subsumes disability within ‘the ability to make or do’, thus changing how we think about it. Tying him to his impairment, and to the narratives invoked by it, seems to negate the meaning of poetry.

In this section I have examined two alternative ways of relating disability to poetics. One produces a ‘closed’ poem – that is a text carefully designed by the author to guide the reader to a specific conclusion – and the other creates an ‘open text’ in which meaning is left open to the reader’s interpretation. Of course, on one level this division is factitious – Eigner made a decision to use open lineation and loose syntax. His decisions foster a particular type of reading experience, in which the reader must actively construe the poem. Authorial agency is not completely absent from the open text, but nor is it foregrounded, as it would be in a closed poem. Instead author and reader collaborate in the creation of meaning, becoming mutually dependent on each other. The result is a reading process in which the reader is actively involved in the poem. This mirrors the experience of partial sight, in which the subject must actively construe a sometimes-confusing visual world as though it were an open text.

As the sociologist Tanya Titchkosky writes in ‘Cultural Maps: Which Way To Disability?’ when describing life with her partner, the blind sociologist Rod Michalko:

In Rod’s terms, seeing is a project, insofar as we always see through a life...The project of seeing for a legally blind person on the outer edges of both blindness and sightedness is one filled with conscious effort, will and desire. For sighted people, the project of vision is usually something to which no attention is paid. (Titchkosky, 2002, Corker and Shakespeare, 106-7)

A poetics of partial sight might allow readers to work and wonder in the poem as the partially sighted person does in the visual world. This would perhaps involve loosening syntax and moving away from a definite lyric eye or I. The aim would not be to make the poem necessarily incomprehensible – I do not want to suggest that visual impairment makes life impossible to interpret – but it does impose varying degrees of ontological uncertainty. Consequently, I feel it is desirable to aim for an open text.

## **FEMINIST POETICS AS ACTS OF ATTENTION: A MODEL?**

In the previous section I discussed the political ramifications of producing open or closed texts in relation to the poetics of disability. I went on to consider these ramifications in terms of partial sight. Since, as cultural artifacts, all poems have a political dimension, similar debates can be found in other areas of poetry, especially poetry that responds to questions of identity. An essay by the American poet Rae Armantrout called 'Feminist Poetics And The Meaning of Clarity' (Armantrout, 1992, Beach, 1998, 287-96) has influenced my thoughts on the representation of disability. I referred to this essay in an earlier section of my thesis on the political dimensions of my project. Armantrout has no explicit interest in partial sight or disability. The issues involved in the representation of disability and the representation of women are not necessarily the same, although it is worth noting that women were historically represented as weaker and less able than men. Nonetheless I feel that Armantrout's thoughts about how to write women's experience have influenced my thoughts on how to relate poetry and disability. I have previously asserted that the tendency of some writers in the disability poetics movement to present noisily autonomous selves who just happen to be disabled conforms to mainstream culture's desire for autonomy and soothes anxiety about disability and dependency by making these factors disappear. In so doing it fails to challenge mainstream culture's largely negative attitude towards disability. It also denies the subversive and creative power of disability and dependency in the writing process. I used a quote from Armantrout's essay to make this point because I believe my assertion echoes her observation that the use by some women poets of univocal epiphanic poetic models that validate the poet's unique and totalizing vision reproduces poetic practices that have historically contributed to the literary objectification of female figures. By failing to challenge these poetic models, writers from any identity category reinforce power structures that have previously worked against them and negate the subversive power of alternative poetic models. Armantrout's call for dependency on more open poetic forms that challenge 'closed' practices and perspectives is a useful model for my project as it proves that the assertion of identity is much less subversive than a search for poetic modes that challenge the centrality of identity to poetic composition.

Armantrout recalls being asked by Charles Bernstein to write an essay considering why so few women wrote language-oriented as opposed to mainstream poetry, roughly speaking open-form as opposed to closed-form poetry. She initially thought this was because women had a more pressing need to record their experience. This idea arguably parallels the popularity of closed, self-assertive texts among practitioners of crip poetics. Later she rejected this after considering the work of experimental female poets. In the essay Armantrout compares two approaches to the representation of gender, as I did in the previous ‘Disability Poetics’ section. Her examples are poems by Sharon Olds and Lyn Hejinian. Armantrout does not use the terms ‘closed or ‘open’ to describe texts. But her description of ‘the conventional or mainstream poem today’ sounds like a closed text. It is:

a univocal, more or less plainspoken narrative often culminating in a sort of epiphany. Such a form must convey an impression of closure and wholeness, no matter what it says. (Armantrout, 1992, Beach 1998, 288)

This is a good description of Sharon Olds’ poem, which Armantrout critiques as an ‘exemplary narrative typical of mainstream verse.’ Here is the poem:

### **The One Girl At The Boys’ Party**

When I take my girl to the swimming party  
I set her down among the boys. They tower and  
bristle, she stands there smooth and sleek,  
her math scores unfolding in the air around her.  
They will strip to their suits, her body hard and  
indivisible as a prime number,  
they’ll plunge in the deep end, she’ll subtract  
her height from ten feet, divide it into  
hundreds of gallons of water, the numbers  
bouncing in her head like molecules of chlorine  
in the bright blue pool. When they climb out  
her ponytail will hang its pencil lead  
down her back; her narrow suit

with hamburgers and French fries printed on it  
will glisten in the brilliant sun and they will  
see her sweet face, solemn  
and sealed, a factor of one, and she will  
see their eyes, two each,  
their legs, two each, and the curves of their sexes,  
one each, and in her head she'll be doing her  
wild multiplying as the drops  
sprinkle and fall to the power of a thousand from her body. (Armantrout,  
1992, 289)

Many of the criticisms that Armantrout makes of this poem could equally be applied to Edwin Morgan's 'Blind' or to my poem 'Evangelist'. Armantrout objects to the use of Olds' daughter as a 'prop,' claiming that the poet appropriates her daughter in order to make a point. She writes that she is repelled by Olds' claim to know what her daughter is thinking.

I experienced similar indignation when reading Morgan's 'Blind'. Such repulsion arises from a sense of appropriation. To use a figure, whether blind woman, daughter or evangelist as a prop in a poetic argument represses their perspective(s) and constitutes a refusal to acknowledge their subjectivity. The strong emotions that apparently aesthetic factors within a poem can provoke demonstrate the links between aesthetics and representational politics. Poetry is a forum within which human beings can reimagine their relationship to one another. An aesthetic decision can therefore have political implications

Reading 'Feminist Poetics And The Meaning of Clarity' also helped me to reevaluate my use of the evangelist figure in the poem mentioned above. In likening the evangelist's mind to a mappa mundi, I made a similar assertion to Olds. I also claimed to have a reliable vision of the evangelist's thought. The daughter, the evangelist and the blind woman are all objects of a particular poet's vision/ego, his/her eye/1. This approach results in a partial and simplistic view of people and gives a false degree of clarity to our experience of the world. As Armantrout points out:



How readable is the world? There is another kind of clarity that doesn't have to do with control but with attention, one in which the sensorium of the world can enter as it presents itself. (Armantrout, 1992, Beach, 1998, 290)

This second type of clarity, with its focus on attention, reminds me of Larry Eigner's work. It is also reminiscent of the experience of partial sight in which one gradually apprehends visual information. Indeed it is closer to sensory perception in general. Who, other than a poet manipulating an extended metaphor within a closed text, has a neatly arranged view of the world that comes to them all at once? I suspect no one does.

Armantrout is more positive about the work of Lyn Hejinian. Hejinian uses metonymy rather than metaphor – juxtaposing things and people on an equal level rather than, as in standard metaphor, placing them in a hierarchy. Here is chapter 171 of Hejinian's work *Oxata*:

The hunt must accomplish necessity  
Then the hunt goes on  
The hunt goes one  
It widens on the frozen streets  
We're made a mother, our influence sweeps we can draft our  
opinions of poverty  
If one doesn't isolate the self one doesn't experience  
brevity.  
Brevity wasn't Gogol's fear  
Nor Dostoevsky's, though his senses in event occurred from  
many interruptions  
Such hunger is more memory than disappointment  
Such is our friendship with events  
We have words and their things must remain in abeyance  
In current  
The shoppers dive – and I follow Zina  
Zina arrives with chickens. (Armantrout, 1992, Beach 1998, 292)

The lack of punctuation in this poem creates a continuous flow of experience. It is closer to consciousness and far from the organized narrative of Olds' poem or of "Evangelist". Armantrout writes:

This poem is a place where the Other is granted autonomy. Here, as in all her poems, Hejinian finds ways (forms), in which the opposites and discordant life experiences can be encompassed without being distorted by resolution.  
(Armantrout, 1992, Beach, 1998, 295)

Armantrout is referring to Coleridge's definition of imagination as 'the reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities'. (Magnusson et al., 2003, 125.)

\*\*\*Armantrout sees Hejinian as allowing opposites to coexist in open form rather than forcing them into resolution as would happen in a 'closed' text.

It is worth noting the double meaning of 'resolution' 'visual clarity' and 'closure'. Neither is available in partial sight, which suggests that more open texts like Hejinian's and Eigner's may be good models in a poetics of partial sight.

In this section I have drawn parallels between feminist poetics and the poetics of partial sight by looking at these poetic strands through the prism of Rae Armantrout's 'Feminist Poetics And The Meaning of Clarity'. I do not want to suggest that feminist poetics and the representation of partial sight raise identical issues. Nevertheless, both movements are keenly aware of the political consequences for real human beings of apparently aesthetic choices. Both seek ways of questioning and expanding poetry's representation of experience, and consequently of leading us to reconsider how we see people. Such concerns about the representation of human beings are broader than a single identity category.

More specifically, Armantrout's remarks on the meaning of clarity have the potential to inform approaches to writing partial sight. Armantrout criticizes Olds' apparently mimetic poem for its distorting appropriation of the little girl's perspective. She distinguishes between mimesis and clarity, arguing that an author's desire for resolution, both mimetic and semantic, can lead to distortion. I would add that a refusal to accept partial sight and dependency is a root cause of such distortion. The world is not as clear as an overly closed text may suggest. Partial sight, whether medical, conceptual or both at once is a realistic description of experience for most people at some time, whether they consider themselves 'disabled' or not.

Paradoxically an open text such as the Hejinian poem that Armantrout cites, by deliberately avoiding resolution, may give a clearer representation of conceptual experience than a closed text that strives towards mimesis. In this reading, both feminist poetics, as practiced by Hejinian and the poetry of partial sight renounce the visual and political certainties of mimesis in favour of broader ideas of clarity. They replace the supposed clarity of identity with clarity of mental processes.

By asserting that partial sight happens to everyone, one can validate multiple perspectives. Making space for many perspectives facilitates the equality that the feminist and disability rights movements are working towards. One of the best places in which to explore multiple perspectives is the open text.

## THE OPEN TEXT

Previous sections of this essay have considered the characteristics of both 'closed' and 'open' texts in terms of their relevance to a poetics of partial sight. What is an open text? Looking at Eigner and Hejinian's work we may conclude that an 'open' text concentrates attention upon the processes of apprehension and therefore of composition. In so doing it promotes active reading. It involves the audience in the creation of a text, rather than presenting it to them as a finished object. As Eigner shows, methods of inviting participation include disrupting narrative expectations by the use of turbulent syntax and an unstable viewpoint. In addition open texts can disrupt the visual conventions of poem presentation through an unusual layout. These practices encourage readers to construe the poem for themselves rather than simply accepting a meaning from the author. This can lead to a number of different interpretations. (It is worth pointing out that readers can and do attach widely differing interpretations to poems that the author may consider as having a very particular and obvious meaning. Independent reading can occur with any poem, not only with those 'open' texts that are specifically designed to encourage it.) I am not certain that the 'closed/'open' binary is useful in all circumstances – perhaps, like the 'sight/blindness's binary it may foster unhelpfully sharp distinctions. As Eigner's practice shows, even the most apparently 'open' text reflects an authorial agenda, even if that agenda is to disown authorial agendas.

Nonetheless, by facilitating a collaborative creation of meaning, the open text promotes mutual dependency between writer and reader. Neither is fully enabled without the other. Moreover collaborative creation implicitly undercuts the power of authors over readers. By doing so it also challenges other forms of power, economic, social or cultural. The deliberate lack of definitive conclusions that is typical of the open text reinforces this challenge by avoiding fixed narratives or descriptions and the reductive views of people or situations that can result from a 'closed' approach to poetry.

The 'open text' is arguably a good model in a poetics of partial sight since it makes both writer and reader 'partially sighted' embodying perception as a provisional process of apprehension and moving away from definitive viewpoints or conclusions.

In making this move, I do not wish to cut all links with more closed forms of poetry. My project is in dialogue with a variety of pre-existing texts on blindness, including those that use traditional forms. A choice of open form makes the use of traditional metrical forms problematic, though not completely impossible. In terms of working with aspects of traditional form in an open text, Ted Berrigan's *The Sonnets* is a useful reference point. (Berrigan, 2000) A sonnet is usually a closed system choreographed by a fixed set of rules about length, metre and rhyme. It usually has a single speaker and viewpoint. Regular metre and rhyme create a sense of closure through repetition. Moreover its typical appearance – fourteen equal lines presented as a block of text - makes it seem self-sufficient, not dependent on outside factors for its meaning. It seems the opposite of an open text. However Berrigan's 'The Sonnets' disrupts this pattern. It is a series of eighty-eight interrelated poems based loosely on the sonnet form. Berrigan frequently repeats lines, to such an extent that although the poems can, of course, be read independently, they function best when read as a whole work. Repetition and rotation of lines undermines the traditional sonnet's tendency towards closure and makes 'The Sonnets' less a sequence than a large circular poem that undercuts the supposed linearity of time and thought. This model is useful to my project on two levels. Firstly, it shows that it is possible to use aspects of traditional forms in an open text. Secondly, it problematizes the notion of closure.

One way of challenging closure is to insert quotes from other poems within a text, using quotation to highlight mutual dependency between texts. I have begun to produce a creative text that questions or even denies closure by quoting or alluding to material from poems that appear discretely elsewhere in the project as with Berrigan's sonnets. Quotation within a new text suggests that poems are not discrete and definitive records of meaning but rather continuously dynamic linguistic processes that can potentially produce a great variety of differing texts. This practice makes the project somewhat porous and reduces tendencies to closure. Highlighting the interdependency of texts through quotation suggests that partial sight is an integral feature of poetic composition, as any text is a partial expression of the poem's potential. The partial nature of poetic texts means that closure is impossible not only

in physiological partial sight but also in poetic composition. Closure is also a problematic concept in a living tradition where one learns from previous poetic texts and models.

The practice of quotation casts dependency – in this case on pre-existing poetic practices and texts, as a positive creative model. I will examine this form of dependency in the next section, which focuses on a sequence of five poems addressed to Homer. These poems gradually move towards a more open text that attempts to embody the relationship between partial sight and poetics as explored in this essay.

Such an approach presents the creative units of my project as not simply dependent but interdependent. Interdependency is a strong theme in my project, whether the relationship between the poet and the Muse/language or the relationship between my work and earlier texts. I aim to situate my work in relation to pre-existing texts associated with sight loss. I first began to do this by engaging – and sometimes arguing with – famous texts associated with sight loss, specifically Milton's sonnet 'On His Blindness' and Baudelaire's 'Les Aveugles'. But 'Homer' and the passage in Book VIII of the *Odyssey* that is concerned with the blind bard Demodokos, together with the deformations, have been the primary site of experimentation in terms of a poetics of partial sight, dependency and open form.

## HOMER: THEME AND VARIATIONS

I will now demonstrate the movement of my practice towards a more open model by looking at a long poem about/addressed to Homer. The sections of this poem dramatize a movement away from a closed text model that values psychomimesis and attempts to locate Homer the person, towards an open poetic model more typical of the deliberate dependency on the Muse and cosmomimetic viewpoint found in Homeric poetry. In the first section, the speaker innocently misidentifies his/her subject as the biological and biographical person. This is a misidentification because it is the vision of partial sight as a central feature of poetic composition that the Homeric poet(s) explore through the invocation of the Muse, rather than biographical detail, that makes the epics relevant to this project. Subsequent drafts form a slow drama of awakening to the epic scale of poetry based round partial sight.

Here is the first version:

### Homer (1)

Invisible poet, your biography's  
a distant coastline. Please give me a sack  
to hold the theories whirling me off course  
as I approach your life. Were you disabled?  
Yes. Sorry. I agree. It's rude to shove  
you back inside that little question  
now you're immortal, a short-tempered god.

This version begins by invoking Homer, the 'invisible poet' – a helpful creative force similar to the Muse. But it quickly gets diverted by the post-Romantic model of poet as possessor and orchestrator of a unique individual vision that I discuss above. This would explain its interest in Homer's 'biography'. It is set up as an encounter between the speaker and Homer, imagined as a person with a putative disability. The imagined 'disability' takes over the poem and shuts it down, just as perceptions of disability have limited the representation of disabled figures in post-Romantic poetry.

Moreover, even if we could make definite statements about Homer's biography, this is less interesting than what the epics reveal, through the idea of the poet's dependency on the Muse, about the nature of poetic vision. This vision combines the quotidian and familiar, (Homer as disabled person), with unknown and mysterious elements, symbolized by dependency on the Muse, or in contemporary terms, on the unexpected and volatile nature of poetic composition. The Homeric poet works on the sociobiological scale, but also on the epic scale. In epic terms he is partially sighted and poetically dependent on the Muse, not because he has a physiological visual impairment but because on a cosmic scale all people are partially sighted. That is, epic poets want to apprehend more than they can see with their eyes. The blindness of epic poets arguably represents not visual problems but the limits of all human knowledge. Concentrating on 'Homer's' biography is therefore a mistake.

This version dramatizes my discovery of the limits of one approach to writing poems and the need to find a different way of doing this. Its stylistic features are arguably inappropriate to a poem about 'Homer'. On a spatial level it is too short, both vertically and horizontally. It seems inappropriate to write a seven-line poem in response to two 24-book epics, when that poem is making an inquiry into the status of multi-layered poetic identity. The first line moves towards a longer 12-syllable pattern, but the poem quickly collapses into iambic pentameter. It thus lacks the metrical and conceptual space provided by a longer line. The "I" is too prominent, given that, as discussed above, the Homeric poet hardly appears as an individual in either epic. Moreover, the regular, predictable pentameter line undercuts what the poem says – it does not seem possible to be 'whirled off course', while using regular metre.

Although my attempt to use traditional metre in this context was less successful, it is worth noting that Keats' sonnet 'To Homer' explores the creative interplay of partial sight dependency and open forms while using a traditional form. The sonnet demonstrates how an apparently 'closed' text often contains open elements.



## **To Homer**

Standing aloof in giant ignorance,  
Of thee I hear and of the Cyclades  
As one who sits ashore and longs perchance  
To visit dolphin-coral in deep seas.  
So thou wast blind – but then the veil was rent,  
For Jove uncurtain'd Heaven to let thee live,  
And Neptune made for thee a spumy tent,  
And Pan made sing for thee his forest-hive;  
Aye on the shores of darkness there is light,  
And precipices show untrodden green,  
There is a budding morrow in midnight  
There is a triple sight in blindness keen;  
Such seeing hadst thou, as it once befell  
Dian, Queen of Earth and Heaven and Hell. (Allot, 1970, 325)

On a surface level 'To Homer' seems like a 'closed' poem. Syntactically it is one sentence with several sub-clauses and visually it is an unbroken block of text. As a sonnet it lays out a main idea in its first eight lines and extends it in the last six, finally confirming this idea in a rhyming couplet. It is a poetic space designed for the linear presentation of an argument. Moreover it uses rhyming iambic pentameter, arranged in three quatrains and a couplet, to phonically reinforce its ideas. There is also a first person narrator.

One would expect these 'closed' features to militate against the poem's engagement with its subject- how dependency on and openness to factors external to the conscious self enable poets to move beyond the fundamental limitations of human vision. However, the poem simultaneously displays a largely 'open' perspective.

The subject of the first line: 'Standing aloof in giant Ignorance' is ambiguous. One first assumes it is Homer. In view of the persistent association of vision with knowledge, 'giant Ignorance' could be a description of blindness. In fact the subject is a first person speaker, who appears only once in the middle of the second line – not a particularly emphatic position. As a biographical person, 'Homer' has an equally small part to play. Line 3 reads: 'So thou wast blind; - but then the veil was rent',

There is a four-word acknowledgement of physiological visual impairment before the poem moves on to its main interest – poetic vision. The caesura indicated by the dash marks a wholesale movement away from biographical detail towards partial sight as a catalyst that encourages engagement with the universe beyond the quotidian scale of perception. ‘The veil is rent by impersonal forces. Homer remains passive as three gods bestow gifts upon him. He reappears briefly in the second last line, but he is secondary to a series of one line aphoristic statements. ‘There is a triple sight in blindness keen’ could be an epigraph to my project. The phrase ‘blindness keen’ seems an oxymoron – it is more typical to think of ‘keen vision’. Blindness is usually thought of as reducing rather than enhancing acuity. However the idea of ‘blindness keen’ ties in with Keats’ description of Negative Capability – whereby artistic achievement occurs because poets are able to accept uncertainty and ‘half-knowledge’ as a valuable part of the creative process. The idea of blindness as a catalyst for negative capability is central to my argument.

Thus although Keats’ poem is nominally addressed to Homer its subject is blindness as that negative capability by means of which artistic achievement can occur. Though ‘To Homer’ has a number of ostensibly ‘closed’ features it faces outward towards the world beyond the concerns of individual human selves, and understands poetic composition as dependency on these external factors. ‘Homer’ is present not primarily as a biographical self but rather as the supreme example of negative capability.

‘To Homer’ proves that it is possible to write a very open poem on this subject while using traditional forms. However, when I began to write my sequence of ‘Homer’ versions, I did not know Keats’ poem and did not fully appreciate that any poem includes interplay of open and closed elements. My first, relatively closed, Homer version did not seem suited to its content. So I rewrote the draft in a style more appropriate to its subject and in the spirit of the turbulence of my epistemological uncertainties.

## **Homer (2)**

Invisible poet, your biography’s  
a distant coastline. Please give me a sack  
to hold the theories whirling me off course

as I approach your life. εθελω σε ακουεμεναι.  
 Teach me son of the Muses, to claim winged words,  
 that carry my many thoughts like a fleet of black ships.  
 οδον μοι ενεπε, ω παι Μουσσων. Now,  
 teach me, διος Ομηρος, to follow your rhythms  
 as infants did in the wide halls before they spoke  
 when η γλωσσα Μουσσων was the sound adults made,  
 lens of a listener, howl of a drunken giant.  
 Whoever you were, fine singer, I loved your voice,  
 followed you κατα θαλασσαν to well-built Troy ,  
 where I got lost among the shape- shifting phrases.  
 η γλωσσα νεκρων made each line a sharp skirmish,  
 though it left me a gift rare as the moly flower –  
 when the descendants of your words guided me well,  
 showed me the best route εν τοις ιατροις οφθαλμων.  
 You who saw blindness not as a way to Hades.  
 but as a source of ηδειαν αιοιδην\*, take me now  
 to learn from Demodokos and his sweet-voiced lyre.  
 τον περι μουσ'εφιλησε, διδου δ' αγαθον τε κακον τε  
 οφθαλμων μεν αμερσε, διδου δ' ηδειαν αιοιδην.  
 I learned την γλωσσαν first as a space for mystery,  
 a listener's cosmos, blindness, no patterned page.  
 I leave my eyes with the Muse for a lovely phrase,  
 its meaning gone hazy as Ithaca's coastline.

This version is, I feel, somewhat more successful. On a basic level it is longer. More importantly it tries to get closer to Homer by using a 12-syllable line and by following some of his style (although it may be the translator Richmond Lattimore's style.) It is a narrative of an attempt to reach a destination, (poetry) and so mirrors the Odyssey in a small way. The English-Greek hybrid adds some opacity, (although less so if the reader knows Greek). The hybrid suggests the primacy of sound for a partially sighted person, but also the opacity created by partial sight, which makes it difficult to reliably identify meaning. The hybrid also acknowledges the subject

position of the poem, between English and Greek, meaning and sound. This liminal position between sound and meaning is where the poem forms.

Nonetheless, the English syntax is too transparent for an open text and the 'I' is overly present, considering the virtual absence of a first person narrator from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. There is still more interest in 'biography' than poetry. This draft can be seen as another dramatic monologue, in which the speaker concentrates on shaping an autobiographical account of his/her experience of learning Greek, thus limiting his/her openness to the unexpected features of a developing poem. However, in the final four lines, there is additional opacity, caused by looser syntax, and a desire to participate in that epistemological uncertainty rather than simply describe it: 'a listener's cosmos, blindness, no patterned page.' There is also a decision to abandon the speaker's 'eyes'. for 'ears' – a greater reliance on sound over meaning. Using the final four lines as a model I decided to redraft the poem again. Here is the third draft:

### **Homer (3)**

Invisible poet, never eyes always words,  
less than a distant coastline please give me  
to Aeolus theories whirling course off me  
as I (gap) σον βιον σε ακουεμεναι  
missing winged words not a surviving sense  
gift to the wind pierced feet were you disabled?

*I once heard a river as a car  
hovered on a kerb to let the breeze pass  
Traffic is each walker's indrawn breath  
Cyclists make the darkness move nonstop  
I walk on my ears  
the road changing shape as I eavesdrop*

my selfsmallvision forcing this limit of thought  
all poets deafened lost at the edge of a phrase  
ears like οι δακτυλοι grope on guessed surface of song

αι Μουσσαι request for route beyond σεαυτον  
 εν τη γλωσση νεκρων I take less than a line  
 τυφος εθελω myth you no space to address  
 silence μοι ενεπε ω παι Μουσσων. Now,  
 Teach me διος Ομηρος to infant your rhythms,  
 γλωσσα before η θαλασσα before τους τας τα  
 lens of a listener howl of a drunken giant  
 Whoever you sound's son are φιλω σην voice  
 ο lost less me πολεμος phrases shapeshifting  
 τυφος εθελω myth space no you to address  
 classroom-dexterous child εν τοις ιατροις οφθαλμων  
 I grasped the descendant sounds like moly flowers  
 Hades or ηδυσ αιιδος two clashing rocks  
 silence οars rowing fast an epic childhood  
 I heckle a place on Demodokos silver chair  
 τον περι μουσς' εφιλησε, διδου δ' αγαθον τε κακον τε  
 οφθαλμων μεν αμερσε, διδου δ' ηδειαν αιιδην.  
 glossed as a day's lost herald's hands sense his move  
 is he curled in his definition? Does song mean slaves?  
 this small eye μικρος μικρος μικρος οινον chair  
 receiving the weight of the lyre beyond εαυτον  
 It would be simple to stand, though he never does  
 The poem releases no noise from his eyes  
 beeswax black ships οιμοι no memory sirens  
 littered with sounds and bones a small social role  
 αι Μουσσαι εις Χαρυβδιν a poem leave swim  
 I learned την γλωσσαν first as a space for mystery  
 a listener's cosmos blindness no patterned page.  
 I leave my eyes with the Muse for a lovely phrase,  
 its meaning gone hazy as Ithaca's coastline

This version is more successful than the previous two as an open text. It drops most explicit references to biography. It is oriented more towards the process of poetic composition than towards the self. The loose syntax is an attempt to mirror the

process of poetic thought, in which the poet half-hears a possible line, but is not completely sure of it. Consequently, the poet must invoke the Muse for help, must display her dependency, expressed in part by the importation of another short poem into the middle of this one. The expression of dependency in this case invites the presence of a quotation, as it were, of a text outside that of the speaker's consciousness. Arguably this quotation, as well as the invocation of the Muse, mirrors the experience of partial sight, in which the subject can only partially see and often has to ask for help in getting around or in gaining a useful picture of the world. Hence:

all poets deafened lost at the edge of a phrase  
ears like οι δακτυλοι grope on guessed surface of song  
αι Μουσαι request for route beyond σεαυτον

οι δακτυλοι means both 'fingers' and 'dactyls' – a metrical unit used in dactylic hexameter. It suggests both touch – a key way of making sense for significantly blind people - and poetry.

The next line posits help from the Muses as a means of moving beyond the limits of the self into language. Invoking the Muse(s) is thus a search for expanded vision. αι Μουσαι are 'the Muses' and σεαυτον means 'yourself' So talking to the Muses involves travelling beyond your personal concerns.

The combination of loosened syntax and hybrid English-Greek lines aims to cast poetic composition as openness to unfamiliar, possibly non-lexical sound, though not non-semantic sound. The poem claims a value for sound as phonic experimentation that may or may not have a lexical meaning. If one gives primacy to sound it is possible to understand and respond to it without necessarily attaching a definite meaning. I would like the piece to work as a sound poem, suggesting the primacy of sound both for the partially sighted person and in the composition of poetry. A process that Jed Rasula calls 'understanding the sound of not understanding' attracts me (Rasula, Bernstein, 1998, 233) <sup>7</sup>. This is especially true as it was the sound, rather than the meaning of Greek that first attracted me. While at

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<sup>7</sup> The year of publication of Rasula's essay of this title is not given in Bernstein's bibliography. (Bernstein, Charles. (1998.) *Close Listening: Poetry And The Performed Word* Oxford, Oxford University Press.

school. I overheard a recitation of Homer. I assumed the sounds were Greek, because they were being spoken in a Classics lesson and I would have recognized Latin. I had no idea what they meant in semantic terms – but that did not matter. I was engrossed in the new noises. I wanted to learn this sound pattern. Thus my first exposure to Greek was phonic rather than semantic – it was sheer enjoyment of sound. I would like the poem to embody the experience of sound and therefore of poetry as an adventure beyond the self.

This third version has a greater degree of opacity, but the left hand margin is still dominant. Although the syntax is looser, the lines all begin in the expected place. Arguably, this creates too much certainty for the poem's subject. I wanted to create a draft in which the lineation really did whirl me off course, thus visually reinforcing the loosened syntax. There should be 'no patterned page' in this draft.

#### **Homer (4)**

Invisible

poet,

never

eyes

always phrase

less

than a distant coastline

please give me a sack

to Aeolus

theories

whirling

course off me

as I (gap)

στον βιον σε ακουεμεναι

missing winged words

not a surviving sense

gift to the wind

pierced feet

were you disabled?

*I once heard a river as a car*

*hovered on a kerb to let the breeze pass*

*Traffic is each walker's indrawn breath*

*Cyclists make the darkness move nonstop*

*I walk on my ears*

*the road changing shape as I eavesdrop.*

my selfsmallvision forcing this limit of thought

all poets deafened

lost at the edge of a phrase

ears like οι δακτυλοι grope on



guessed surface  
of song

αι Μουσσαι request for route beyond σεαυτον

εν τη γλωσση νεκρων I take

less than a line  
τυφος εθελω

myth you  
no space to address

οδον silence μοι ενεπε ω παι Μουσσων. Now,

Teach me διος Ομηρος to infant your rhythms,  
γλωσσα before η θαλασσα before τους τας τα

lens of a listener  
howl of a drunken giant

Whoever  
you sound's son are  
φιλω σην voice  
o lost  
less me  
πολεμος phrases shapeshifting  
τυφος εθελω  
myth space  
no you to address

classroom-dexterous child    εν τοις ιατροις οφθαλμων

I grasped the descendant

sounds like moly flowers

Hades or ηδης αοιδος two clashing rocks

silence

oars rowing fast                      an epic childhood.

to heckle a place on Demodokos' silver chair

τον περι μουσ' εφιλησε, διδου δ' αγαθον τε κακον τε

οφθαλμων μεν αμερσε, διδου δ' ηδειαν αοιδην.

ο κηρυξ leads him across the bustling hall,

glossed as a genius,

glossed as a missing sense

on his well-wrought chair a puzzle.

He sits so still.

is he curled in his definition? Does song mean slaves?

The busy noise of the herald?

Dark wine? Royal bread?

Receiving the weight of the lyre beyond εαυτον,

Letting the hands του κηρυκος guide him to song?

It would be simple to stand, though he never does.

The poem releases no noise from his eyes.

He has to reach the music, not himself.

αι Μουσσαι arrange his thoughts as a seagoing fleet.

beeswax, black ships,

οιμοι no memory

sirens

Here is an island littered with sounds and bones

αι Μουσσαι εις Χαρυβδιν

a poem leave swim

I learned την γλωσσαν

first as a space

for mystery

a listener's cosmos

blindness no patt

erned page.

I leave my eyes with the Muse for a lovely phrase,  
its meaning gone hazy as Ithaca's coastline.

The loosened lineation in this draft makes it visually more difficult to comprehend. It thus mirrors the idea of human knowledge as a limited, partial entity. The large gap between title and first word indicates the invisibility of the poet and the difficulty of constructing meaning in this visually disconcerting poem which is moving away from the typical visual arrangement of lines of verse read horizontally from the left hand margin. I have in places attempted to break the dominance of the left hand margin. Consequently the reader is less certain where sections of meaning begin or in what order they can best be read. Arguably this could make it possible to read the phrases in a variety of orders, thus creating a variety of different meanings.

I have aimed to make the visual presentation of the poem embody the meaning. For example 'less than a distant coastline' began as a single phrase: 'less than a distant coastline.' However the standard font seemed too big and easy to read, and the phrase was too immediate and coherent for the meaning. There was nothing 'less than' or 'distant' about it. I split it so that it now reads:

less

than a distant coastline.

This is an attempt to visually embody the process of squinting at a distant point as one does in partial sight, and also as a lost sailor would do when looking for an actual coastline. In subsequent drafts I am keen to expand this disruption of the visual conventions of poem presentation in order to reinforce the whirling syntax. I would like the reader to be genuinely lost at sea

The final draft disrupts modern visual conventions of poem presentation. Whereas the other drafts use open lineation to achieve this disruption, the final draft mirrors early Greek writing practice. It has no punctuation, no lower case letters and no spaces between words. All conventional aids to understanding have disappeared, creating an unfamiliar visual environment in which the reader must construe the text.

## **Homer (5)**

INVISIBLEPOETNEVEREYESALWAYS PHRASELESSTHANADISTANTCOAS  
TLINEPLEASEGIVEMEASACKTOAEOLUSTHEORIESWHIRLINGCOURSEOF  
FMEASI  
(GAP)ΣONBIONΣEAKOYEMENAIMISSINGWINGEDWORDSNOTASURVIVIN  
GSENSEGIFTTOTHEWINDPIERCEDFEETWERE  
YOUDISABLEDIONCEHEARDARIVERASACARHOVEREDONTHEKERBTOL  
ETTHEBREEZEPASSTRAFFICISEACHWALKERSINDRAWNBREATHCYCLIS  
TSMAKETHEDARKNESSMOVENONSTOPIWALKONMYEARSTHEROADCH  
ANGINGSHAPEASIEAVESDROPMYSELF SMALL VISIONFORCINGTHISLIMI  
TOFTHOUGHTALLPOETSDEAFENEDLOSTATTHEEDGE OFAPHRASEEARS  
SLIKEOIAAKTYΛOIGROPEONGUESSEDSURFACE OFSONGAIMOYΣΣAIREQU  
ESTFORROUTE BEYONDΣEAYTONENTHΓΛΩΣΣΗNEKPΩNITAKELESSTHA  
NALINETYΦOΣEΘEΛΩMYTHYOUNOSPACETOADDRESSOΔONSILENC  
EMOIENEΠEΩΠAIMOYΣΣΩNNOWTEACHMEΔIOΣOMHPOΣTOINFANTYOURR  
HYTHMSΓΛΩΣΣABEFORHHΘAΛAΣΣABEFORETOYΣTAΣTALEN SOFALISTE

NERHOWLOFADRUNKENGIANTWHOEVERYOUSSONAREΦΙΛΩΣΗ  
 NVOICEOLOSTLESSMEΠΟΛΕΜΟΣPHRASESSHAPESHIFTINGΤΥΦΟΣΕΘΕΛ  
 ΩMYTHSPACENOYOUTOADDRESSCLASSROOMDEXTEROUSCHILDENTOI  
 ΣΙΑΤΡΟΙΣΟΦΘΑΛΜΩΝIGRASPEDTHEDESCENDANTSOUNDSLIKEMOLYFL  
 OWERSHADESORΗΔΥΣΑΟΙΔΟΣΤWOCLASHINGROCKSSILENCEOARSROW  
 INGFASTANEPICCHILDHOODHECKLEAPPLACEONDEMODOKOSSILVERCH  
 AIRTONΠΕΡΙΜΟΥΣΣΕΦΙΛΗΣΕΔΙΔΟΥΔΑΓΑΘΟΝΤΕΚΑΚΟΝΤΕΟΦΘΑΛΜΩΝ  
 MENAMHPΣΕΔΙΔΟΥΔΗΔΕΙΑΝΑΟΙΔΗNGLOSSEDASADAYSLOSTHEARALD'  
 SHANDSSENSEHISMOVEISHECURLLEDINHISDEFINITONDOESSONGMEAN  
 SLAVESTHISSMALLEYEMΙΚΡΟΣΜΙΚΡΟΣΜΙΚΡΟΣΟΙΝONCHAIRRECEIVING  
 THEWEIGHTOFTHELYREBEYONDEAYTONITWOULDBESIMPLETOSTAND  
 THOUGHHENEVERDOESTHEPOEMRELESASESNONNOISEFROMHISEYESBE  
 ESWAXBLACKSHIPSOIMOINOMEMORYSIRENSLITTEREDWITHSOUNDSA  
 NDBONESSMALLSOCIALROLEAIMΟΥΣΣΑΙΕΙΣΧΑΡΥΒΑΙΝΑPOEMLEAVES  
 WIMILEARNTTHNΓΛΩΣΣANFIRSTASASPACEFORMYSTERYALISTENERSC  
 OSMOSBLINDNESSNOPATTERNEDPAGEILEAVEMYEYESWITHTHEMUSEF  
 ORALLOVELYPHRASEITSMEANINGGONEHAZYASITHACASCOASTLINE

This text has the same words as the preceding versions. However it is more difficult to read because the aids to understanding one would typically see such as spaces and punctuation are absent. As a result this draft presents the poem as a total visual experience, prioritizing visual over lexical factors. The semantic content of the text is less prominent, overwhelmed by typographical presentation. The draft looks less like a conventional poem, and thereby highlights the visual conventions that help to choreograph meaning in written texts. Without these visual conventions the reader has to work harder to extract meaning from a disordered visual world. This mirrors experiences of visual impairment, in which it is difficult to make sense of the visual world. I value the active reading that a poem without line breaks can bring. Having considered a poem without line breaks I will now examine two poems that aim to encourage similar active reading in the context of very long lines.

## THE LONG LINE IN A POETICS OF PARTIAL SIGHT, WITH COMMENTARIES ON TWO POEMS

The sequence of experimental versions focusing on Homer that I discuss above dramatizes a gradual awakening to the epic scale of partial sight in poetry. It moves towards a poetic practice that acknowledges the limitations of human vision and embraces dependency on factors external to the poet's conscious self in poetic composition. It shows how an acceptance of partial sight can expand poetic vision by replacing the self as poetic catalyst with reliance on the unconscious and on language as a volatile medium. The experimental drafts achieve this through linguistic hybridity, loosened syntax, open lineation and disruption of the visual conventions of poem presentation. The resulting turbulence challenges conventional ways of choreographing poetic meaning, both lexical and visual. Such an approach is intended to frame the poem as a process of partial apprehension similar to experiences of partial sight. It indicates the small scale of human vision, establishing an alternative viewpoint that is outside the control and domain of the self. Following my experiments in 'Homer: Theme And Variations' I was drawn to the long line as a form that also encourages creatively fruitful turbulence, as the lyric "I" becomes one small element in a large poetic space that the poet cannot fully control.

Long lines, like Homeric hexameters, embody a poetic perspective that attempts to reflect the cosmos, (κοσμος is the Greek word for 'world,') rather than asserting a necessarily limited human perspective on that cosmos. This section will show how an engagement with the cosmomimetic practice found in Homeric poetry led me to experiment with the long line as a form that creates an awareness of human partial vision and thus encourages dependency on factors outside the poet's control as catalysts for the expansion of vision. These poems themselves dramatize the unfolding of this awareness.

Of the two poems discussed in this section, the first uses blindness as a catalyst, the second darkness. Both blindness and darkness impair standard vision; both can lead to a poetic practice that values partial sight and dependency.

In *The Sighted Singer*, Allen Grossman writes:

As it is the first structure encountered in the poem that is specific to poetic discourse (syllable and stress being elements of natural language), line is the threshold at which the poem is entered. (Grossman, 1992, 313)

From a partially sighted perspective, it is doubtful whether the first line as a whole, rather than the first words, will always be the natural entry point of the poem. This is especially unlikely if the poem is read, rather than heard. To claim the whole line as liminal presupposes that one can see the whole line at once. But supposing that is true, the line, as the threshold of the poem, must encapsulate some of the poem's meaning and engage a reader with its concerns. This section will consider the use of the long line as part of an aesthetic that values partial sight, dependency and open poetic forms. (I define a long line as any line longer than ten syllables.) It will examine the properties of the long line, and will locate these within a wider discussion of how the use of space in a poem can open out its meaning. It will show how the use of long lines can illuminate the centrality of partial sight, dependency and open forms in poetic composition. It will do this by looking at two poems from my thesis that employ the long line: 'The Relief of Demodokos' and 'Dialogue on the Dark.'

The figure of Demodokos, the blind singer in *Odyssey* VII, who entertains the court of King Alcinous, at which Odysseus is a guest, elucidates the interlocking roles of partial sight and dependency in poetic composition. The fact that Demodokos, like Homer, composes on an epic scale implies that he uses a long line with a corresponding amount of conceptual space. His presence is interesting both because it exemplifies the long-running cultural associations between sight loss and poetry and because Demodokos' explicit dependency, both on the herald who leads him into the hall to perform and on the Muse, shows the importance of reliance on factors external to the self in the creation of a poem:

κηρυξ δ' ἐγγυθεν ἦλθεν ἄγων ἐριηρον αἰδον  
τον περὶ μούσας ἐφίλησε, δίδου δ' ἀγαθὸν τε κακὸν τε  
οφθαλμῶν μὲν ἀμερσε, δίδου δ' ἠδῆϊαν αἰοιδῆν  
τῷ δ' ἄρα Ποντονοοσθῆκε θρόνον ἀργυροῦλον  
μέσσω δαιτυμῶνον, πρὸς κίονα μακρὸν ἐρείσας,  
καδ' δ' ἐκ πασσαλοφί κρεμασέν φορμιγγὰ λιγύειαν  
αὐτοῦ ὑπὲρ κεφαλῆς, καὶ ἐπεφραδε χερσὶν ἐλεσθαι

κηρυξ. παρ δ' εἶθει κανεον καλὴν τε τραπεζάν,  
παρ δὲ δεπας οἰνοιο πίνειν οὔτε θυμὸς ἀνώγει.  
οἱ δ' ἐπ' ονείαθ' ἑτοιμα προκειμένα χεῖρας ἱάλλον.  
αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ ποσειὸς καὶ ἐδητύος ἐξ ἔρον ἐντο,  
μουςζ' ἀπ' αἰδοῦν ἀνῆκεν αἰδεσθῆναι κλέα ἀνδρῶν

Then the herald came in, leading the good minstrel, whom the Muse loved above all other men and gave him both good and evil; of his sight she deprived him, but gave him the gift of sweet song. For him, Pontonous the herald set a silver-studded chair in the midst of the banqueters, leaning it against a tall pillar, and he hung the clear-toned lyre from a peg close above his head, and showed him how to reach it with his hands. And beside him he placed a basket and a beautiful table and a cup of wine to drink when his heart should bid him. So they put forth their hands to the good cheer lying ready before them. But when they had put from them the desire for food and drink, the Muse moved the poet to sing of the glorious deeds of men. (Murray et al., 1998, 276)

Dependency is a strong theme in this passage. Demodokos is the most obviously dependent of the people mentioned. Nonetheless, in spite of his physical reliance on the herald he is treated as an honoured guest, given wine and seated in a silver chair. As visitor and host, Demodokos and King Alcinous depend on each other to perform these complementary roles. Moreover the poet's audience is reliant on Demodokos, on two levels. They depend on him to produce a song that celebrates their history and culture. They also depend on him because his artistic dependency on the Muse enables him to create poetry that moves them beyond everyday concerns and towards the sublime.

When writing the 'Homer: Theme and Variations' sequence of poems I was particularly drawn to Demodokos as his blindness and deliberate dependency seemed to embody the positive combination of these factors as a poetic catalyst that I had found more generally in the Homeric epics. Accordingly, I wrote a separate poem, related to the 'Homer' sequence, which I titled 'The Relief of Demodokos.'



## The Relief Of Demodokos

Eye-silence,

toll of nine sisters,

a few shattered words, ο δούλος, η Μουσσα,

I try to forge nothing, singer,

poet as hole through which a story passes,

makar as shredded papyrus. A hero's tears

before he sails on past the skull-strewn island

where sirens perch.

A living, breathing gap,

in a silver chair. I pester you for a voice.

You move with the muse or the herald,

hirple across the hall like a song-formed beast.

Eight limbs. Two heads.

You borrow the hands of the slave,

lowering your self to the floor for the length of the saga.

The process of composing 'The Relief of Demodokos' encouraged me to think further about which poetic forms are most suitable to a poetics of partial sight and dependency rooted in the open text. Further, I considered how the poem could embody a move away from a poetic practice based on the exposition of a personal vision towards a model that embraced dependency on factors external to the conscious self, echoing Demodokos' deliberate dependency on herald and Muse. 'The Relief of Demodokos' values dependency on the Muse – or on the serendipity of language – as a poetic asset. In doing so it shows us the poem less as an object that the poet has consciously crafted and more as a process of apprehension similar to that experienced in partial sight.

The use of long lines is salient to a poetics of partial sight and dependency. To see why, it is helpful to consider the relative benefits of 'closed' and 'open' visions of the poem. A more 'closed' text' is often designed to propagate a particular view under the control of the ego of the poet. The features of the poem, moreover, can

be arranged so as to guide readers towards a particular conclusion. Poetic features that give an impression of control such as rhyme, metre and end-stopped lines are useful here as they can suggest that the poem has been neatly choreographed. They also give an impression of clarity – rhyme for instance can reinforce ideas through repetitive sound patterns, and the full stop that finishes an end-stop line can help to define the thought. A ‘closed’ approach is very good for asserting a particular perspective, but not that useful in an aesthetic of partial sight, where clarity is a transitory and difficult concept.

Moreover, the dynamic of closed form, which moves the poetry towards a greater and greater degree of clarity of the voice of the lyric subject, can distort experience by providing an over-determined vision that does not take account of the gradual nature of apprehension. Grossman comments

The subject matter predicted by closure as a structure is the exile from the whole, attendant on becoming a discrete self, a self which can become actual only by a world-appropriation, which is identical with world-loss. (Grossman, 1992, 334)

Thus, paradoxically, closed texts, by projecting a strong air of transparency that runs counter to the fragmentary and partial nature of apprehension, can present a distorted vision of the world.

Rather than presenting a neatly pre-arranged vision, the open text can embody the process of apprehension, - not so much understanding as sheer awareness. Long lines are useful in an aesthetic based on partial sight as they delay and dilute any tendency towards epiphany - the reader must move along the line gradually gathering information. There is a sense of mystery similar to that found in partial sight, which arises from uncertainty as to how the line will develop. Long lines immerse the reader, whether fully sighted or not, in the ontological uncertainty that partial sight creates. The longer period of time between each line ending lays less emphasis on the need to reinforce a particular perspective. The assertion of a personal vision can therefore be not so much an explicit priority as it might be in a more ‘closed’ text. This can be a relief, both experientially – the exhaustion caused by living in a society that equates human worth with unimpaired vision - and poetically.

In a poetic context, a move away from the assertion of personal vision may be a relief because it opens the poem to more possibilities. If one imagines the poem as a three-dimensional space, like a building, one could say that a poem that focuses on a personal vision can be somewhat cramped and claustrophobic. The personal vision takes up almost all the available space, to the exclusion of other viewpoints. The reader must stand outside and look in. By contrast, if the poem is constructed through dependency on factors outside conscious control, the resulting text will be more spacious. The poem has the potential to be like a cathedral,<sup>8</sup>\*\*\***Page reference in** which people are small presences within a greater structure, as opposed to resembling a cramped room. In this context, greater conceptual freedom is possible as the text moves outside the confines of the self. The long line visually encapsulates this greater degree of creative possibility. The use of large areas of semantically charged white space can have a similar effect. The creation of more space within the poem, both conceptual and literal, can be a relief for the poet, who, by relinquishing the self in favour of deliberate dependency on external factors, renders the text open to new possibilities, and for the reader, who can enter the poem as an active participant in the creation of its meaning. Reader and author thus become mutually dependent. The double perspective makes the poem a fluid creative process that can move in unexpected directions.

The title of the first poem I will discuss highlights the relief inherent in such an acceptance of dependency on forces outside the self in a poetic context. The two important words in the title are ‘relief’ and ‘Demodokos’. ‘Relief’ comes before ‘Demodokos’ in the title, suggesting that this concept is of more importance in the poem than Demodokos as a person. ‘Relief’ is a feeling of relaxation associated with

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<sup>8</sup> In his Preface to the 1814 edition of ‘The Excursion’, Wordsworth imagines his entire oeuvre as sharing the spacious dimensions of a Gothic cathedral.

‘...the two Works have the same kind of relation to each other, if he may so express himself as the antechamber has to the body of a Gothic church. Continuing this allusion, he may be permitted to add that his minor Pieces, which have been long before the Public, when they have been properly arranged, will be found by the attentive Reader to have such connection to the main Work as may give them the claim to be likened to the little cells, oratories and sepulchral recesses ordinarily included in those edifices.’ (Hayden, 1977, 36.)

This passage portrays Wordsworth’s ‘minor’ poems – – often those that focus on the lyric subject, as part of an overarching aesthetic that, like the space of the cathedral, acknowledges elements of experience that can be partially apprehended but cannot be fully contained within human discourse. Thus even, those poems that may appear ‘closed’ are placed within a framework that values the open text.

the cessation of stress. For this reason, it is used as a military term meaning release from a period of duty, as in ‘The soldier was relieved by the man who would keep the next watch’. This double meaning suggests that Demodokos has been working hard, that this strenuous work is no longer necessary, and that, rather than being a negative sign of personal redundancy, his relief from such deliberate activity is positive.

The juxtaposition of these terms suggests that the idea of ‘relief’ is closely linked to the idea of Demodokos. I argue that it is not primarily an emotion felt by the person Demodokos, but the cessation of Demodokos’ enforced role as the focus of the poem, as the piece moves away from an aesthetic confined to the human social scale towards a positive engagement with the world beyond the concerns of human selves.

With this aesthetic transformation in mind I will now provide a commentary on ‘The Relief of Demodokos’. Like the other pieces on Homeric themes mentioned in this essay, this poem features twelve-syllable lines designed to resemble the dactylic hexameter used in Classical Greek epic poetry. However, there are also lines of varying lengths, including those that are deliberately fragmented and those that at eleven syllables hover between the hexameter and the ten-syllable iambic pentameter that is more often seen in English language poetry. The tension between these two metrical patterns dramatizes the tension played out in the poem between two different understandings of the poet’s role.

The hexameter or six-stress line is longer than the pentameter (five stress) line. Grossman asserts that unrhymed iambic pentameter, or blank verse, encapsulates the viewpoint of the ‘well-formed social person’. (Grossman, 1992, 282) He supports this assertion by referencing Shakespeare’s plays, in which blank verse is the preserve of ‘gentle persons’ – noble characters, whose perspectives are given prominence and depth. The use of blank verse in English Renaissance drama, an art form that explores the relationships between human beings, and which focuses on the human implications of a specific situation, such as Hamlet’s dilemma over how to respond to an encounter with his father’s ghost, suggests that this verse form operates on a human, social scale. Characters speak in blank verse to expound contrasting perspectives on a dramatic situation that affects them all in different ways. There is enough space in the five-stress line for the exposition of ideas arising from a personal perspective. The strong metrical pattern of five stresses reinforces the line’s semantic content and can give a feeling of certainty. But since the line is only moderately long and has clear pre-set boundaries – it cannot have more than five stresses – it also

indicates the limits of human experience on a cosmic scale – the little pentameter, for all its assertiveness, is surrounded on both sides by white space – and the limitations of human knowledge. The pentameter represents a human voice speaking to other humans, but those humans are small presences in a much larger universe. (Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' and 'The Prelude' are more recent instances of the unimpeded voice of the democratic person.)

By contrast, the long line can establish a point of view that is outside the domain and control of an individual consciousness. It attempts to express the universe rather than the self.

The English hexameter used throughout most of 'The Relief of Demodokos' demonstrates a tension between, in Allen Grossman's terms, psychomimesis and the cosmomimesis that is generally associated with the longer line. The anonymous speaker of the poem is using a poetic model centred on the self's experience. As such, s/he seeks to relate to Demodokos as a personality, with a particular perspective arising from his somatic and psychological experience. This relationship proves very difficult to establish. The hexameter, typical of epic poetry in Classical Greek, reflects Demodokos' milieu and his likely poetic practice – he would probably have composed in this meter, or in a similar one. But the hexameter, only slightly longer than the pentameter used for personal expression, represents the speaker's struggle-and failure - to keep the encounter on a personal scale. This effort almost, but not quite, works. The lines are slightly longer than they would be in a piece that used pentameter to express a psychomimetic viewpoint. The poem is too expansive to be controlled by the speaker – it has a momentum that carries it beyond personal concerns.

Gradually the poem shakes off the psychomimetic angle that the speaker is trying to impose, in favour of Demodokos' reliance on factors external to his self. The final, fifteen syllable line, which is both very long and outside the binary pattern, on which many poetic meters are based, represents successful arrival at a cosmomimetic viewpoint, and the relief inherent in moving beyond a poetics narrowly focused on the assertion of the self. This metrical tussle does not represent a dispute between two personalities – Demodokos and the speaker- but rather the movement from a poetic model that looks for a personal vision towards one that facilitates expanded vision through a relinquishment of the self.

In terms of this project, the poem mirrors previous pieces addressed to Homer, in which a speaker tries to locate the biographical poet within the work, before realizing that this is not the most fruitful approach. Looking for Demodokos as a developed character seems equally unproductive.

The poem begins in silence. This is represented by a large white space between the title and the first line. Allen Grossman describes silence as ‘the first representational event of the poem.’ (Grossman, 1992) He writes that the white spaces on the page form the boundary of the poem and ‘constitute a morpheme meaning silence.’ (Grossman, 1992, 251)

Silence is an essential component of the meaning of any poem, a dynamic force that combines with words to shape the poem. The white space that begins ‘The Relief of Demodokos’ embodies the contrasting ideas that animate the poem. These ideas are firstly that of blindness as a liberating creative force, and secondly that of a tension between the speaker’s understanding of what poetry does and the poetic understanding embodied in Demodokos’ practice.

### Eye-silence

Appears to be a short line for a small idea. Placed within a silent vacuum, it forms part of a larger unit of meaning. Together, the white space and the phrase represent Demodokos’ blindness. Although the white space at first appears frustratingly bare of stimuli it represents the creative freedom made possible by a lack of standard vision. The space simultaneously foreshadows the speaker’s frustration at being unable to locate Demodokos’ perspective.

The synaesthetic description of blindness speaks to the condition of visual impairment, in which sound becomes a crucial tool in meaning making. ‘Eye silence’ is thus an exact description of blindness. Meaning is not available from the eyes. On a positive note this can free the blind poet from conventional forms of creative vision.

## The Relief Of Demodokos

Eye-silence,

Toll of nine sisters,

a few shat t        ered words, ο δουλος, η Μουσσα.

All that the speaker can find to characterize Demodokos are eye-silence, (blindness) and two words from an extinct language – Classical Greek - ο δουλος and η Μουσσα mean, respectively, ‘the slave’ and ‘the Muse’. (Morwood et al., (2002) Since both these words belong to a language that is no longer spoken, or even, by many people, understood, they are ‘shattered’. As words, their primary purpose is to communicate meaning, but their meaning, unless it is provided in a footnote, will be unclear to many readers. Additionally, since they are in a different script to the rest of the poem, not only their meaning but also their sounds may be obscure. They are an example of ‘eye-silence’, as the sight of them will probably trigger no recognition of meaning, or even sound. For many people they will be silent shapes, only by inference words. In semantic terms, they are only partially visible. Although they are words, they have been silenced by lack of use. As such they can function as another example of the active silence at work in the poem.

The presence of these silent words demonstrates the futility of the speaker’s attempts to communicate with Demodokos as a personality. They symbolize the failure of the psychomimetic model, in which a poet creates a poem as a crafted object through which they may explicitly express their voice and personal vision by controlling the words and formal devices used in the piece. In the first six lines of ‘The Relief of Demodokos, the most powerful element is silence, even when words appear. The Greek words are part of an effort to symbolize the futility of trying to control meaning fully, as the speaker tries to do. The speaker fails in part because s/he has not acknowledged the formative role of silence in the poem – that is s/he has refused to depend on the factors external to his/her own voice that might help to propel the poem forwards. In his/her attempt to see and understand Demodokos from a biographical perspective, s/he at first refuses to engage with the mystery that forms

part of poetic composition, and which is embodied by Demodokos' deliberate dependency on the Muse, a force that he can neither see nor control.

S/he tries to forge something more substantial but is unsuccessful.

I try to forge                    nothing, singer.

The gap in the line uses the active silence channelled by the white space to represent a failed attempt at connection with Demodokos. Nothing of the singer can be found, but the speaker tries to rectify this by addressing him directly. Nonetheless, the descriptions that follow emphasize the impersonality of poetic composition as exemplified in the *Odyssey* and other epics of the type that Demodokos would sing. The poet is a ‘hole’ through which the poem is transmitted from the Muse to the audience. The effect of the poetry can be seen in the tears that Odysseus sheds as he listens, but the poet is effectively absent: ‘a living, breathing gap/in a silver chair.’ The poem now juxtaposes the activities of the speaker with those of Demodokos. The speaker ‘pesters’ for an individual poetic voice, while the singer depends on factors external to himself to facilitate his activities. He ‘moves with’ either the herald, who guides him physically, or the Muse, who guides him poetically. He becomes effectively indistinguishable from one of the ‘song-formed beasts’ such as Scylla or Polyphemus, that Odysseus describes to King Alcinous’ court – Demodokos’ audience – in Book IX.

Finally, the poet prepares to sing. He relies on the herald to pass him the lyre, and then relinquishes a point of view based in the self, in favour of the material that the Muse gives him.

You borrow the hands of the slave,  
lowering your self to the floor      for the length of the saga.

The final line is longer than any I have previously written. I did not intend to produce such a long line – it happened serendipitously in the course of writing. It embodies the relief inherent in relinquishing the assertion of a personal vision in favour of a vision of dependency on poetic serendipity.

In order for his song to emerge, Demodokos renounces independence and embraces dependency, both practical and poetic. The decision to write ‘your self’



rather than ‘yourself’ is meant to suggest that the self is a crafted entity that can be displayed to other people, and that each individual continuously works on. The extreme length of the poem’s final line shows the relief of jettisoning this work in favour of a new poetic model that rejects the self as the focus of poetic activity. Demodokos is relieved of the need for self-assertion and consequently relieved by the opportunity to embrace dependency on the herald and the Muse. The sound pattern, which repeats ‘o’ and ‘l’ sounds is intended to reinforce the idea of relief.

The ‘Relief of Demodokos’ embodies a movement away from a poetics that trusts the poet’s personal vision as a source of truth towards an aesthetic that values partial vision and dependence on factors external to the self for poetic progression. The use of long ‘open’ lines strengthens such an aesthetic as it reframes each line as part of the process of partial apprehension. Through the experience of composing this poem I have discovered that the use of long lines, which provide a suitable space for gradual apprehension, are likely to be an important tool in the development of an open approach to poetry that reveals the positive role of partial sight and dependency in composition. I will now show how I applied these ideas to my next poem.

### **Dialogue On The Dark**

and could be the freedom of shapes from their cumbersome names.

Allow me my vision at ease.

Eye quietness.

Grievously metaphored sign of a slandered season;

all-purpose hex: assassin; foxes’ time.

I wish I could appoint a lawyer for winter.

Let there be an amnesty. Sit. Watch deep blues approach.

Walk. Loiter in low light as though your family were blackened trees.

The semantic and formal choices I made while writing ‘Dialogue On The Dark’ grew out of my experience of writing ‘The Relief of Demodokos’” This new poem similarly posits the lack of visual and ontological certainty as a positive phenomenon that can facilitate conceptual and poetic expansion. It presents darkness, which makes vision difficult and which is often metaphorically conflated with blindness, as a source of expressive freedom that relieves people of the need to see, name and identify – and thus control – all the phenomena that they encounter. They can move away from the assertion of a personal vision. Freed from the conceptual restrictions that conventional vision can bring- this object is a chair and nothing else - they can experience a more open vision that enables imaginative development. This type of vision may lead to a poetics that engages more fully with the world beyond the confines of the self. The darkness that facilitates this process closely resembles the blindness that leads Demodokos to depend on factors beyond him, both practical and poetic.

My positive feelings towards darkness may arise in part from my own somatic epistemology. Due to premature birth my pupils are stationary and do not contract in bright light. Consequently I am nearly blind in strong sunlight. I am more comfortable, visually, in a dimmer environment, although the relative lack of light means that what I do see is necessarily ill defined. From a more positive angle, this means that the meaning of what I see is open. A degree of darkness facilitates my vision. This physiological fact recalls the concept of blindness as an asset that exposes the poet to factors external to his/her conscious self, thus broadening his/her perception and creative resources. My visual experience drew me towards that literary tradition that sees darkness as a creative catalyst.

I shall now consider two ways of looking at darkness in Western poetry. These trends can be thought of as the ‘darkness as a source of incapacity’ tradition versus the ‘darkness as a source of conceptual freedom’ tradition. The first presents darkness as a negative phenomenon that strips people of the ability to see and therefore of agency. They are no longer able to define, and control the world around them to the same degree. These lines from Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* encapsulate this approach. Samson bewails his blindness, equating it with darkness:

O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,  
Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse  
Without all hope of day!  
O first-created beam, and thou great Word.  
Let there be light, and light was over all.  
Why am I thus bereaved thy prime decree? (Prince, 1957, 24)

The triple repetition of 'dark' in the first line, together with a fourth 'dark' in the second, emphasizes Samson's experience of blindness as overwhelming darkness. Milton describes Samson's state as 'total eclipse'. Literally, this means 'in total darkness,' as in a solar eclipse. However it also suggests a state of being totally cut off from society. To 'go into eclipse' – that is into darkness – means to fail completely. In this interpretation, darkness impairs vision and thus makes it more difficult to act. Blindness leads to darkness, which leads not only to a sense of isolation but also to helplessness. The correlation of blindness with helplessness arises from the common assumption that blindness leaves one 'in the dark,' though in fact only 3% of legally blind people have no light perception at all.

Milton's ostensibly negative vision in *Samson Agonistes* is representative of a strong trend in Western literary approaches to darkness. However, Milton's attitude to darkness may be more nuanced than it first appears. The sustained invocation of darkness – a force that enables a loss of the conscious self in favour of creative forces beyond the author's personal control - resembles invocations of the Muse. Although the lines are on the surface a howl of misery, they implicitly suggest the creative power of darkness.

A similar complexity occurs in Book I of *Paradise Lost*, in which the flames of Hell are described as shedding: 'No light, but rather darkness visible.' (Pullman, 2005, 19) In a culture that equates sight with agency, 'darkness visible' suggests that darkness, rather than being simply the absence of light, is a powerful catalyst, even if in this case it: 'Served only to discover sights of woe.' (Pullman, 2005, 19) In this context darkness expands vision, even if what is seen is appalling. While ostensibly viewing darkness in a negative way, this complex couplet also suggests that it has creative power. Such an implication links the couplet to the second way of looking at darkness that I will discuss: darkness as a source of expanded vision.

The ‘darkness as a source of incapacity’ tradition is not the only approach available to those seeking to explore the poetic potential of darkness, and/or of visual impairment, its approximate physiological equivalent. They can draw on the ‘darkness as source of conceptual freedom’ tradition that the figure of Demodokos typifies. This approach shapes *Hymnen an Die Nacht*, (*Hymns to the Night*), a work by the German Romantic poet and philosopher Novalis, (Georg Philipp Friedrich von Hardenberg). Published in 1800, following the death of the poet’s fiancée, this set of six prose and verse pieces present the night as a positive creative force. In the first section Novalis writes: ‘More heavenly than the flashing stars those endless eyes seem, which the night opens up in us.’ (Higgins, 1988, 40.)

Although the night and darkness are not necessarily synonymous, they are often conflated. Natural darkness can occur during the day, especially in winter, but it is most typical of the night, when one or other hemisphere of the earth rotates away from the sun. Moreover, the ‘heavenly’ ‘endless eyes’ that Novalis sees the night opening within people strongly suggest the enhanced poetic vision that darkness – or blindness – can make possible. These ‘eternal eyes’ are equivalent to the gift of poetic perception that the Muse gives Demodokos in return for his eyesight. In *Hymnen an der Nacht* the dark night takes the role of Muse and enables poetic progress by giving people ‘endless eyes’ – i.e. an awareness that reaches beyond the constraints of ordinary vision.

Poetry, such as that of Novalis, which engages with darkness or the night as a positive poetic phenomenon has features in common with poetry that acknowledges the role of partial sight in poetic composition. Although it is inadvisable to generalize, one could say that views of darkness as a negative and disabling phenomenon arise from an aesthetic that associates poetic impulses with the dawn of perception. The poet wakes up into consciousness and self-definition. S/he then crafts a poem, deliberately arranging lexical and formal factors to transmit a particular vision. Such poems value social discourse. They often use lines of moderate length, such as the iambic pentameter, which help to ground them within the limits of conscious human experience. This model values clarity and conscious activity. Such an approach is often expressed through a relatively closed aesthetic that can give the impression of control. By contrast, poetry that has a positive relationship with darkness or the night often prioritizes less conscious creative processes. These can include dream visions, in which the borders of conscious perception and everyday

logic may be transgressed, allowing for a broader range of creative possibilities. This type of vision mirrors the paradoxical imaginative freedom that the ontological uncertainty fostered by partial sight creates.

The poetry of darkness, and of its embodied equivalent, blindness, sees openness to the loss of the social self as a means of poetic progress. It attempts to extend the poetic representation of experience beyond the self in its everyday incarnation as both subject and object of social discourse. The use of open form, partially embodied in long lines, is an important tool in this project, as it encourages the loss of authorial control. Boundaries between the poet and the poem as formative agents can blur. A positive engagement with darkness/blindness enables movement beyond conscious perception towards broader poetic possibilities.

‘Dialogue On The Dark’ shares many of the features that I attribute to ‘poetry of the night’. It casts the dark as a catalyst for the expansion of poetic vision. Formally, it does this by combining long lines with actively semantic white space that contributes to the progression of the poem. ‘The Relief of Demodokos’ arrives at an awareness of the relief inherent in the relinquishment of the social self, and with it the need to claim authority through the assertion of a personal vision. This conviction is conveyed by means of the final line, the luxuriant length of which suggests the creative freedom possible as a result of such a deliberate loss of self. ‘Dialogue On The Dark’ explores this idea further. Its long lines are intended to suggest the creative expansion made possible by a loss of the self and a positive engagement with the abject – in this case darkness.

The abject can be defined as a negative reaction to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other. Darkness impairs vision, causes a potential breakdown in meaning – what is this object? – and leaves the self open to phenomena that are not easily predicted, defined or controlled. Dislike of the dark is fear that the self will be overwhelmed by the abject.

‘Dialogue On The Dark’ casts engagement with the abject, as embodied by darkness, as positive, since it encourages a perspective broader than the limits of the conscious self and leaves the poem open to unexpected developments. The long line visually evokes a world much bigger than the self. The effect is similar to that of expansive natural darkness unmediated by artificial light. Such darkness often

contains elements that people cannot see, and embodies a world that cannot be tamed by human efforts.

As the poet or reader enters the visual expanse of the long line, conscious attempts to control meaning, and to limit it to a human scale are relinquished in favour of an awareness of and engagement with an element – darkness - that extends beyond the borders of human understanding. The early stages of the poem formally evoke the beginnings of this awareness. The poem dramatizes a discovery of the expansive potential of darkness and the night. The first line considers the positive qualities of darkness in an optative mode – it ‘could be’ a source of freedom. The closing lines assert these positive qualities through a combination of luxuriantly long lines, designed to embody the conceptual freedom that darkness brings, and a series of imperatives that encourage the listener/reader to engage positively with the dark, first watching it and then walking out into it.

The poem begins in an expanse of white space representative of an expanse of darkness. In this it is similar to the opening stages of “The Relief of Demodokos,” in which semantically charged white space represents blindness, often regarded in Western literary culture as sensory darkness.

The white space is also intended to suggest the impossibility of containing the dark within the boundaries of human reasoning. The space attempts to visually represent silence, - aural darkness. Although the poem is called ‘Dialogue On The Dark’, the white space indicates that the dialogue has entered a period of silence as those involved acknowledge the considerable difficulty of holding the dark within the limits of conscious perception. The absence of words, which can define conscious experience, expresses this problem. (In this, the beginning of the poem further resembles the early stages of the preceding piece, in which the failure of the speaker to connect with Demodokos on a personal scale is demonstrated through the use of actively silent white space.) When the dialogue resumes, it does so in mid-thought: ‘and could be the freedom of shapes from their cumbersome names.’ The optative mood – ‘and could be’ suggests that the nature of darkness is open-ended, just as natural darkness may lack spatial boundaries. The ‘freedom of shapes’ idea is a suggestion rather than a designation. The poem does not say that darkness ‘is’ the freedom of shapes, as this would be an attempt to constrain darkness within the terms of a metaphor, thereby denying its existence beyond systems of classification. The idea of ‘freedom’ is embodied in this very long line, which has fourteen syllables and,

in common with most of the lines in the poem, does not conform to a set metrical pattern. The reader has a lot of visual and conceptual space in which they can explore the putative freedom.

The beneficiaries of this freedom are abstract ‘shapes’. They could be freed from their definitions. The phrase ‘cumbersome names’, placed in a powerful position at the end of the line sets up a tension between the two poetic models discussed earlier that will shape the rest of the poem. The ‘cumbersome names’ are typical of the relatively closed poetic approach in which the poet as speaker has the power of naming and defining the objects of his/her creative act. By contrast, the reference to ‘shapes’ emerges from an aesthetic that acknowledges the limits of human perception and in which not only the lineation but also the ideas are open form, with the potential to move beyond everyday perception.

The next semantic unit of the poem reflects this open aesthetic. A moderately large area of white space visually represents the expansive, enabling qualities of darkness. The white space also indicates silence and allows readers space to explore the previous idea without unnecessary authorial comment. Though the white space is not technically a line, it is a large unit of meaning that occupies an amount of space equivalent to a line and has a corresponding amount of semantic weight.

Just as the white space visually represents the ability of darkness to free shapes from their definitions and invite us to look at them in a more open way, so the next line, which sits in the midst of the white space, expresses the relief that darkness can bring as it releases us from a constant stream of visual stimuli, allowing us to access modes of perception other than sight.

Allow me my vision at ease.

This line has white space above and below it. The space is intended to embody the statement – vision is at ease, since there are relatively few visual stimuli in the surrounding area. But the line also indicates a distrust of poetic models that use the assertion of a specific vision as a means of control. In an aesthetic centred on a personal viewpoint, the speaker has the power to describe and define what he/she sees – the objects of his/her vision. Such objects are presented to the reader through the prism of a specific consciousness, with particular experiences and biases. Consequently, the speaker may present people or other phenomena in a specific light

that prioritizes some aspects of their nature at the expense of others. This process removes subjectivity and agency from the person or object described and gives agency to the describer. The assertion of personal vision can thus be an assertion of authority as the speaker confines the objects of his/her gaze to a specific meaning. I discussed this process earlier in the essay in relation to Morgan's poem 'Blind'.

To return to 'Dialogue On The Dark' the phrase 'at ease' avoids the defining power of a single vision. The words mean both 'relaxed' and, in a military sense, not at attention, not expected to work. The military overtones of 'at ease' imply and then reject the power relationship between definer and defined that the assertion of a seeing self can embody. They are intended to suggest that the speaker is asking to move away from a model of vision as a means of defining the world around one, towards a model of vision as a means of gradually apprehending forces beyond the seeing self. In "The Relief of Demodokos" and 'Dialogue On The Dark' two linked ideas, 'relief' and 'at ease', are used to indicate a rejection of poetic vision as an assertion of personal authority. 'My vision at ease', in its expanse of white space is intended to embody the relief inherent in relinquishing the assertion of the seeing self in favour of an engagement with forces more creatively powerful than the conscious self.

There is a slight contradiction in the line, as the imperative end-stopped sentence asserts the value of not seeing everything. 'Allow' is the first of a series of five imperatives – 'allow', let, sit, watch, walk' – that structure the poem's assertion of the dark's positive qualities. The poem claims authority for a poetic model that rejects personal vision.

This rejection is implicit in the next phrase: 'Eye quietness', which appears below and to the right of 'Allow me my vision at ease'. The white space between the phrases is intended to convey the idea of ease, and of a release from the 'visual noise' created by a continuous stream of information coming through the eye. It also echoes the words that begin 'The Relief of Demodokos: 'eye silence'. Within the context of the thesis as a whole, these deliberate verbal and spatial echoes argue for lack of visual stimuli – represented by white space – as a route beyond personal vision towards a broader poetic perspective. There is no audible difference between 'eye silence/quietness' and 'I silence/quietness – the silence of the self that is necessary to if poetry is to move beyond psychomimesis and onto a cosmic scale. A lack of mental noise may be necessary if the poet is to hear the poem – or at least part of the poem.



An engagement with silence, which Grossman compares to darkness, can lead to poetic expansion.

Although the two lines in this section of the poem – especially ‘Eye quietness’, are visually short, they combine with white space to create a much larger semantic unit equivalent to the visually long lines at the beginning and end of the poem.

From a position of positive engagement with darkness as the abject, which has become a source of creative strength, ‘Dialogue on the Dark’ questions the negative cultural understandings of darkness that have developed from the poetic tradition that values the self and fears darkness as the potential extinction of that self. Accordingly the next stanza considers figurative uses of the dark as a symbol of negative experiences or unpleasant aspects of human character or behaviour ‘Grievously metaphored sign of a slandered season’. The next two lines explore the idea of a legal defence for the dark, asserting that to be ‘metaphored’ (i.e. co-opted as the object of a metaphor) can be a harmful process that leads to an overdetermined and narrow view of a phenomenon that distorts reality. The dark, which is deployed as an ‘all-purpose hex’ to represent multifarious negative ideas, has suffered ‘grievous metaphorical harm’. The line that announces this has a deliberately grand, declamatory style, as though it could be part of a speech made by the defence. This line begins a list of ways of looking at the dark, intended to convey the multiple negative metaphors that have been applied to it. It is an ‘all-purpose hex.’ But in fact there is only one true metaphor, ‘assassin’, which is hemmed in by semi-colons to represent the conceptual limitations inherent in traditional ways of looking at the dark. The line lacks the space for conceptual development available in the rest of the piece.

The legal metaphor continues as a speaker wishes to appoint a lawyer for winter. The poem then suggests a more proactive response designed to challenge traditional perceptions of the dark.

The next phrase: “Let there be an amnesty” aims to initiate more positive conceptions of darkness. The suggestion of an amnesty – that is an official pardon for those convicted of political offences – acknowledges previous negative attitudes towards the dark, while indicating that we should perhaps make peace and engage positively with darkness.

The line manages this simultaneous acknowledgement/suggestion by closely echoing God’s words in Genesis 1-4: ‘Let there be light’. The line cites the Biblical

story of creation, also cited by Milton in *Samson Agonistes*, in which God separates light from darkness. Genesis 1.4 reflects the cultural dichotomy between light as a positive phenomenon and darkness as a negative one. Darkness is often used to represent negative experiences or unpleasant aspects of human character or behaviour. By contrast light is seen as largely positive.

And God said 'Let there be light'

And God saw the light: that it was good, and God divided the light from the darkness. (The Bible, Authorized Version, 2005, 1)

Light and darkness are here presented as opposites. In terms of the poetry of partial sight, they can be associated with the two different understandings of the nature of poetic vision that I have discussed in this essay. Light brings visual clarity and the ability to define what one sees. The definer has power over the defined, setting the parameters by which the defined phenomenon, whether person, animal, object or other element, is seen and understood. We see the association between vision and the power to define at Genesis 1.19, which demonstrates a similar power dynamic to that seen in poems that assert the personal vision of a speaker.

At Genesis 1.19 God shows the newly created animals to Adam and as Adam sees each animal by means of the newly created light, he names it. The naming, defining process reflects the fact that God has explicitly given Adam 'dominion' over all creatures. A similar process occurs in poems centred on personal vision. The enlightened poet describes what he/she has seen and thus affects the way in which the reader understands the object of the poet's vision. This vision gives the poet personal, even godlike power to define and control the world he/she describes on terms that privilege his/her particular viewpoint.

At Genesis 1-4 God prioritizes the light over the darkness. Darkness problematizes the process of definition. By removing certainty, darkness opens the viewer to greater imaginative possibility while at the same time suggesting a worldview in which people, animals and objects are not restricted by their names. By subverting the Biblical imperative "Let there be light", 'Let there be an amnesty' claims authority for a more positive engagement with the dark, which can allow viewers and poets to move beyond a conscious self that seeks to define the world through vision towards a deliberate dependency on the dark as a catalyst for broader

vision. The phrase leads into the subject matter of the final long lines, which, both semantically and visually, argue for a more positive engagement. Four of the poem's five imperatives occur in the last two lines. There are a number of very short sentences, including two – 'Walk' and 'Sit.' that are only one word long. The inclusion of very short end-stopped sense units within long lines, rather than on their own, suggest confidence in the long line as a means of representing conceptual expansiveness as well as in the dark's positive qualities. The audience is invited to watch the deep blues that form part of the daily progress towards darkness. To sit and watch the dark is a fairly passive activity that acknowledges the power of elements beyond the active self. They are asked to walk out into it and to see 'blackened trees' which would generally be understood as bare and depressing, as familiar and beautiful. The long vowel sounds in:

Walk. Loiter in low light as though your family were blackened trees.

complete the sense of ease at which the poem aims. The length of the line shows life in 'low light' as full of conceptual possibility, as suggested by the unusual view of winter trees as sources of pleasure and even security. Additionally, the presence of 'family' in this line, together with the large amount of space that the long line takes up, gives visual access to a communal or collective identity: the sense of self expands past that of the individual. 'Dialogue on the Dark' shows how the expansiveness of the long line can provide the conceptual freedom necessary to rethink traditional ways of understanding experience. It also implicitly suggests that darkness, or partial sight can lead to expanded vision.

The long line that 'The Relief of Demodokos' moves towards, and that 'In Defence of The Dark' further exploits, creates a sense of space and conceptual expansiveness not available in a poem that uses shorter lines. The long line has sufficient scope to allow for cosmomimesis - an exploration of the world beyond the parameters of the self- as opposed to the psychomimesis associated with a more personal vision. It places less emphasis on epiphany and more on gradual apprehension. Rather than having information delivered to him/her at short intervals, as in a more 'closed' model, the reader enters the expansive space of the poem and becomes an active participant in the discovery of its meaning. This process mirrors the work that the partially sighted person does to construe the visual world. It also

involves a level of uncertainty – some darkness renders vision more engaging by requiring additional intellectual work. It is not desirable to immediately comprehend everything because this would mean that the poem as process was over very quickly. Moreover the lack of visual clarity that both Demodokos' blindness and natural darkness create can encourage author and reader to relinquish certainty in order to access a wider field of poetic vision. The long line is an important formal means of expressing the cosmomimesis available in a poetics of partial sight. I will now move on to my final set of formal experiments that are designed to express a poetics of partial sight – the deformations of existing texts on blindness. Like the poems I discuss in the previous two sections, the deformations are powered by an acceptance of the limits of human vision and of dependency on factors beyond the poet's conscious control. My project originated with a desire to challenge portrayals of blindness as an edifying spectacle. The deformations bring the project full circle as they show a poetics of partial sight and dependency that I discovered in Homeric texts transforming poems whose portrayals of blindness led me to search for such a poetics.

## **THE TECHNIQUE OF DEFORMATION BY ERASURE IN A POETICS OF PARTIAL SIGHT**

I drew on the poetics of partial sight to deform and transform eight existing texts that portray blindness. I used the technique of deformation by erasure. This technique allows one to discover new meaning(s) in an existing poem by erasing some of the original poem's words and phrases. Performing a number of deformations on the same source text can reveal a wide range of alternative texts within the poem, which can in turn highlight the open-ended and subjective nature of meaning.

I feel that to deform pre-existing texts on blindness is an important expression of my argument for the centrality of partial sight, dependency and open form in poetic composition. It fulfills the aims of my project, allowing me to challenge previous portrayals of visual impairment, which often cast it as an overwhelming tragedy or as a spectacle for a fully sighted audience. When I began the project I did this by presenting my personal vision as a person with a visual impairment. This technique was only partially successful as I often used the closed forms typical of many of the poems I attacked. Although I argued from a different position I subscribed more or less uncritically to the formal and visual conventions of such poems. For example I wrote a poem in response to Milton's 'On His Blindness' that argued for the positive aspects of visual impairment, but I used Milton's metre and rhyme scheme. Moreover in the post-Romantic tradition I set up my personal vision as unique, authentic and totalizing - the centre of the poem. I was claiming for myself the powerful and objectifying gaze that I was attempting to critique. This practice weakened my argument. By contrast, deformation is the ultimate form of critique. Rather than simply arguing about partial sight with different words but on the same poetic premises, my deformations transform the original text. They present a partial vision of the poem, inviting the reader to construe this mysterious text turning partial sight from a spectacle to an experience. Moreover they create a new and different poem through an acceptance of limited human vision and of the open forms and dependency on factors beyond the self that it fosters. I advocate a poetics of partial sight that I find present within the original texts. In so doing I am able to challenge the tradition

of partial sight as a spectacle not simply by presenting a different totalizing vision but by showing partial sight as a generative factor in poetic composition.

Successful deformations include Janet Holmes' 2009 work, *The MS Of My Kin*, (Holmes, 2009) which deforms the already highly compressed Civil War era poems of Emily Dickinson to reveal much of the rhetoric that surrounds current American involvement in Middle East conflicts. Holmes drew inspiration from Ronald Johnson's *Radios* (1977), a response to *Paradise Lost*. Johnson found his title by erasing letters from Milton's original. Johnson's poem is clearly dependent on its source – only Milton's words appear. Johnson does not create any others from Milton's raw materials. However, Johnson's deformation alters the original sufficiently to admit new interpretations. In place of the first thirteen lines of *Paradise Lost*:

Of Man's first disobedience and the fruit  
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste  
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,  
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man  
Restore us and regain the blissful seat,  
Sing heavenly Muse, that, on the secret top  
Of Oreb or of Sinai didst inspire  
That shepherd who first taught the chosen seed  
In the beginning how the heavens and earth  
Rose out of Chaos, or if Sion hill  
Delight thee more, and Siloa's brook that flowed  
Fast by the oracle of God I thence  
Invoke my aid to my adventurous song (Pullman, 2005, 17-18)

Johnson writes:

O                    tree  
                      Into the World,  
                                 Man  
                                 The chosen  
Rose out of Chaos

Song (Johnson, 1977, 1)

In marked contrast to Milton, who bewails the Fall, Johnson seems to be addressing the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, presenting it as the catalyst that facilitates humanity's entry into the world of free will and choice. Whereas the "Man" that Milton refers to is Christ, who returns passive humanity to paradise, Johnson's song seems to promise a celebration of mankind's agency. This is one interpretation – there could be others. The extreme divergence of the two passages demonstrates the infinite potentiality within the original text, and within any poem, that deformation exposes.

A number of the poems I have deformed, including texts by Milton, Shakespeare and Baudelaire, are very well known. As such they have become canonical, and are often interpreted in specific ways at the expense of other possible meanings. If they were people we might say that we look at their phenotypes, but more or less ignore the recessive genes hidden in their genotypes – the alternative meanings that these texts contain. The process of deformation leads us to explore these alternatives. It restarts the poem as a creative process, freeing it from any dominant meaning so that it can once again become 'an innately resilient and active principle of mind'. (Robinson, 2003)

From another angle, deformation can be seen as the desecration of a beautifully crafted work of art. It is related to the verb 'deform', which means to distort the shape of something. Historically, people with disabilities were said to be 'deformed' – their bodies were seen as distorted versions of the perfect (non-disabled) human form. Within the context of a thesis that champions partial sight as a central feature of poetic composition the deliberate choice of deformation as a poetic

technique is a political and creative statement. It suggests that, rather than ruining perfect body/text impairment a deformation can open up new creative possibilities and thus be paradoxically enabling. In this section I will consider the relevance of deformation to an aesthetic that values partial sight, dependency and open forms and will show, by reference to my own deformation sequence based on poems about visual impairment, how partial sight can function in poetry not as the object of a normative poetic discourse but as a creative catalyst in poetic composition.

My project aims to demonstrate the centrality of partial sight, dependency and open forms in poetic practice. As such it is in constant dialogue with pre-existing poems that focus on partial sight. Some of these texts, such as the Homeric poems, with their emphasis on the limits of human perception and the need for dependency on the Muse as a means of creative insight, embody my argument and are a key source for it. Other texts ostensibly present visual impairment as synonymous with a lack of agency and its bearers as the objects of a normative poetic gaze. To respond to such texts is a core activity in my thesis. Deformation is an important form of response as it radically changes a source text, which may be well known and loved. The removal of words and phrases that creates the deformation disrupts a reader's response to the original poem. It is no longer a familiar environment with recognizable landmarks, but rather a space in which certainty is removed and possibilities opened. The 'partial' text plunges the reader into the uncertainty that partial sight brings, but also reveals previously hidden aspects of the poem's meaning. Deformed poems embody the link between partial sight and creative insight.

In the context of this theoretical discussion of the effects of deformation, I will now examine the effects of the technique on creative practice. To do this I will comment on one of my own deformations, written in response to Edwin Morgan's poem 'Blind'.

### **Blind**

Almost unconscionably sweet,  
Is that voice in the city street  
Her fingers skin the leaves of Braille.  
She sings as if she could not fail  
To activate each sullen mind



And make the country of the blind  
 Unroll among the traffic fumes,  
 With its white stick and lonely rooms.  
 Even if she had had no words,  
 Unsentimental as a bird's,  
 Her song would rise in spirals through  
 The dust and gloom to make it true,  
 That when we see such fortitude,  
 Though she cannot, the day is good. (Morgan, 2002, 52)

A        con.  
 is that        city.  
               Leaves  
               as if she  
 tactile  
               Of the  
                          fumes  
               lonely.  
 sentient                    words,  
               Same   old        spirals  
               loom.  
 The day is.

The deformation aims to challenge the original text visually, metrically and semantically. Morgan's poem is a block of text. It is a space in which the poet shows his thoughts to the reader, who stands watching outside the poem. The deformation is a more open text. The reader is invited to move inside the poem and play an active

role in the discovery of its possible meanings. There is literally more space in which to do this. Moreover, this practice alters the power dynamic in the poem. Morgan's text is clearly predicated on the tradition of blindness as an edifying spectacle for a largely sighted audience. By contrast, the deformation creates a text that obliges the reader to perform the partial and painstaking apprehension of meaning that partial sight engenders. In common with experiences of partial sight, reading a deformation necessitates an acceptance of the fluid and provisional nature of meaning and of the reader/writer's inability to fully grasp the implications of the poem. He/she will never definitively know all the poem's meanings. The deformation speaks to two interrelated aims of my project. It simulates experiences of partial sight for the reader, positing partial sight as experience rather than spectacle. In so doing, it casts partial sight as a valued subjectivity. In addition, since partial sight powers the deformation, which is itself a partial text, the resulting poem shows the catalytic nature of partial sight in poetic practice.

The deformation retains traces of the original poem's structure – the words that are used remain in their positions. However this text fundamentally alters the poem's structure by dismantling Morgan's rhyme scheme of iambic tetrameter couplets. The regular, confident metre and phonic certainty that these provide support the original poem's steady movement towards its conclusion that the blind woman is showing fortitude and that this makes the onlookers' day good. To remove this phonic scaffolding produces a jagged aesthetic that reduces certainty and implies the presence of alternative meanings.

Through the use of erasure and elision I have removed some words and created others. As I deformed the poem through a combination of choice and chance, alternative meanings began to emerge. In particular I favour a meaning that attacks the idea of 'the country of the blind'. Morgan deploys this clichéd notion in line 6. It haunts the literature of blindness. With the exception of H.G. Wells' story of that name, in which a sighted man visits a country where all the blind inhabitants are well adjusted to their situation and in which he is the anomaly, 'the country of the blind' is a commonplace that distorts experiences of visual impairment. For a start it doesn't exist – visual impairment involves such a wide variety of conditions and experiences that to suggest that the 'country of the blind' has universal features is somewhat misleading. Furthermore, without wishing to create factitious divisions, the main problem with 'the country of the blind' is that the sighted wrote all the guidebooks.

Thus an argument partly guided by me and partly by chance, emerged in relation to this notion. My open form deformation is more overtly spatial than the original poem. To some degree, the deformation, with its large areas of white space and scattered units of meaning could be said to resemble a country of the blind. The first two lines:

A	con
is that	city

directly attack the idea of a ‘country of the blind’. The next unit of meaning, down to ‘tactile’ is ambiguous. If ‘leaves’ is a verb, it could be interpreted as meaning that Morgan’s poem presents the blind woman in a one-dimensional way, as if her subjectivity were reduced to fingers skimming pages of Braille.

One possible meaning of:

	Of the	
		fumes
	lonely	
sentient		words

could be that ‘the country of the blind’ is an isolating and divisive idea that has harmful effects similar to those of noxious fumes. It may also suggest that this harmful notion has adversely affected discourses of visual impairment, so that ‘sentient’ explorations of this topic are relatively rare. But the syntax of this section is sufficiently loose that this meaning is tenuous. The next section disputes Morgan’s picture of the blind woman:

Even if she had had no words,  
 Unsentimental as a bird’s  
 Her song would rise in spirals through  
 The dust and gloom to make it true  
 That when we see such fortitude  
 Though she cannot, the day is good. (Morgan, 2002, 52)

The deformation suggests that this is not a true or reasonable – ‘sentient’ presentation, but rather a falling back on received ideas.

Same old        spirals  
                 loom.  
The day is.

In these final lines visually impaired people may acquire the subjectivity that Morgan’s poem denies them. The final phrase does not attach any moral value to the day, but rather implies that it simply ‘is’ - an ordinary day. Visual impairment is an ordinary, mundane feature of this day – a feature that coexists with other aspects of the speakers’ experience.

The above reading is one interpretation. I hope that the text is sufficiently open to admit other meanings. In any case the technique of deformation allows several alternative poems to emerge from an original poem. This interpretation shows how dependency on a source text, can, through the use of more open forms – forms that render meaning fluid and mirror experiences of partial sight, release a new poem and a new perspective. It shows how the process of deformation by erasure and elision can reveal latent meanings within the poem – including meanings that may be strongly contradictory of the ostensible content. Moreover it suggests that texts often present a partial vision - that is a vision that favours one interpretation of the poem over another. Deformation is thus a useful tool in maintaining a dialogic relationship with the pre-existing literature of visual impairment and in suggesting the centrality of partial sight, dependency and open forms in poetic composition.

## CONCLUSION

It seems ironic to append a conclusion to an essay on partial sight, in which I have stressed how the ontological uncertainty created by this condition makes closure difficult to obtain. However I will suggest some provisional conclusions.

In this essay I have posited an open form poetics that values partial sight and dependency as creative triggers. I have contrasted two poetic models – closed texts versus open form and have shown how the latter acknowledges the role partial perception plays in poetic composition. I hope I have shown that this is true of all poetic composition – rather than simply of the branch of identity poetics that is explicitly linked to disability. I argue that when they reach the limits of human creative perception all poets become disabled. It is only by becoming dependent on language as a volatile creative force that is outside the poet's direct control that s/he can achieve an expanded poetic vision. 'Homer' calls this creative force *η Μοῦσα* – 'the Muse'. What do we call it?

I argue that an acceptance of partial sight and dependency leads naturally to an open text that in turn embodies the poet's experience of partial perception, whether creative, physiological or both. I suggest that this 'open' approach fosters a fluid and non-egocentric viewpoint that discourages certainty of vision and is cautious with the lyric 'I'. This model posits the poem as a space for apprehension rather than certainty – an open form in which knowledge is provisional.

My project began as a desire to challenge the poetic tradition that cast partial sight as a spectacle for sighted audiences. Over time I became sufficiently theoretically aware to realize that my formal choices undercut my intentions. By writing largely closed, psychomimetic poems I was replicating the post-Enlightenment trope of the all-seeing poet. I turned an objectifying gaze upon non-disabled figures in exactly the way that other poets did to blind figures. Moreover, to claim a reliable vision of the world as my relatively closed texts did contradicted the somatic epistemology of partial sight. My aesthetic of partial sight could not develop while I subscribed to such a perspective.

As I read the work of poets and scholars such as Hejinian, Armantrout and Grossman I became gradually more aware of the power dynamics implicit in relatively closed or relatively open texts. An open text would involve readers in the tension between uncertainty and imaginative possibility that partial sight creates. Immersive texts would simulate visual impairment, making it an experience rather than a spectacle. Moreover I realized that the partial apprehension that occurs during poetic composition closely parallels the efforts of a partially sighted person to construe an unclear but open-ended visual world. Simultaneously I searched for an alternative view of partial sight in poetics and found it in the Homeric epics, especially in relation to the figure of Demodokos. His blindness and explicit dependency on both herald and Muse led me to the conclusion that the blindness of epic poets is a metaphor for the limited nature of all human vision. Once this partial sight has been acknowledged, dependency on factors external to the conscious self can allow the poet access to the knowledge necessary for the poem. This casts partial sight as a fundamental aspect of poetic composition.

Having placed the poetics of partial sight within a theoretical framework, I experimented with various formal means of generating a creative space that acknowledges the partial apprehension and dependency that are involved in writing a poem. In different poems these means included troubled syntax, variable lineation, linguistic hybridity, the use of a long line that echoes the cosmomimetic practice found in Homeric texts and the deformation by erasure of pre-existing texts on blindness. The deformations are an apt point at which to end the thesis as they show the poetics of partial sight and dependency that I discovered in Homeric texts being used to transform those poems whose use of blindness as a spectacle encouraged me to look for a different approach. In the deformations partial sight is not a spectacle. The 'deformed' poems return to an earlier understanding in which it is acknowledged as a generative force.

In a poetics of partial sight and dependency authorial authority is reduced, and the author becomes dependent on the reader's interpretation of the text. Since the open aesthetic is designed to emphasise the fluid and partial nature of vision, does it matter if the author's original vision of the poem is subsumed by the views of readers? The poet who espouses a poetics of partial sight must be prepared to share the power of interpretation with readers so that her vision is complemented or replaced by a multiplicity of necessarily partial views. This aesthetic is, after all,

predicated on the idea that a complete or definitive vision of a poem's meaning is not only undesirable but impossible.

In this scenario the poet has less power than she would in an aesthetic that valued closed texts. How does an open approach to poetics, that acknowledges the role of partial sight and dependency in the writing of poetry, affect how we think about poetry and disability? Who is a disabled poet? The small group of people who claim this label as part of an identity poetics, or everyone who has ever attempted to construct a poem by using half-heard phrases and depending on the uncontrollable medium of language? Might a perception of disability as a normal part of poetic composition, rather than as the preoccupation of a small group of people writing identity poetics, foster a perception of disability not as a unique and isolating circumstance, but as a normal part of life?

**NUALA WATT**  
**DIALOGUE ON THE DARK: POEMS**

These poems chart the ways in which my awareness of the generative role of partial sight in poetic composition has developed over the course of my period of study. My approach has gradually moved from an identity-based practice that stressed my personal experiences of partial sight towards a practice more open to the formative interplay between partial sight, dependency and open forms that leads to the emergence of poems. Accordingly the earlier poems in this submission tend towards a largely closed form that highlights the author's personal vision, whereas later pieces aim for a more open aesthetic that enacts the poem as a gradual process of apprehension.

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## **Charles Baudelaire**

### **Les Aveugles/The Blind**

Contemple-les, mon âme; ils sont vraiment affreux!

Pareils aux mannequins ; vaguement ridicules ;

Terribles, singuliers comme les somnambules ;

Dardant on ne sait où leurs globes ténébreux.

Leurs yeux, d'où la divine étincelle est partie,

Comme s'ils regardaient au loin, restent levés

Au ciel ; on ne les voit jamais vers les pavés

Pencher rêveusement leur tête appesantie.

Ils traversent ainsi le noir illimité,

Ce frère du silence éternel. Ô cité !

Pendant qu'autour de nous tu chantes, ris et beugles,

Éprise du plaisir jusqu'à l'atrocité,

Vois! Je me traîne aussi ! Mais, plus qu'eux hébété,

Je dis : que cherchent-ils au Ciel, tous ces aveugles? <sup>9</sup>

### **The Sighted**

Cover your ears, my soul. That awful noise?

Half horrible and half ridiculous,

Another sighted poet makes a fuss,

perceiving who knows what. The lethal eyes

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<sup>9</sup> With the exception of sonnets by Charles Baudelaire and John Milton, all source texts, where these exist, can be found in the appendix.

would dream us into shape. A sleepwalker,  
he roams inside his head. We never hear  
him pause to ask our names. We disappear.  
Trapped in the same old reverie, the stalker's

mistaken our world for an endless black.  
A visual silence. Paris, please attack  
his views. Around us you sing, laugh and bellow,

in love with pleasure to the final whack,  
Listen – I'm dazed, but want to answer back.  
He stares at us. Why can't he say hello?

**John Milton –  
On His Blindness**

When I consider how my light is spent,  
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,  
And that one talent which is death to hide  
Lodged with me useless, though my mind more bent  
To serve therewith my Maker and present  
My true account, lest He returning chide.  
“Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?”  
I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent  
That murmur, soon replies “God doth not need  
Either man’s work or His own gifts. Who best  
Bear His mild yoke, they serve Him best. His state  
Is kingly. Thousands at His bidding speed  
And post o’er land and ocean without rest.  
They also serve who only stand and wait.”

**On Her Partial Blindness**

When I consider how to represent  
my sixth of working light, my words collide  
with your fear of dark. Your visions hide  
the blindness born with me. You mourned sight sent  
before you into death. Let me invent  
a new account – half- light to place beside  
your grief, the beauty of blind life denied.

I'd rather exploration than lament  
sight as lost paradise. So my poems need  
to make a sense I'm neither banned nor blessed  
but breathing here. I want to have my state  
revealed so thousands at my bidding read  
as I eat, sleep, kiss, swear, get children dressed.  
I feel and write. I do not stand and wait.

## **Untitled**

I once heard a river as a car,  
hovered on a kerb to let the breeze pass.

Traffic is each walker's indrawn breath.  
Cyclists make the darkness move nonstop.

I walk on my ears,  
the road changing shape as I eavesdrop.

## **Evangelist**

*Please will you let me pray for your feet?*

It's her third request this week.

If I believed, I would demand a warning.

I would ask God to mark this wet-eyed woman  
a hazard on my route, like icy steps,  
or that North Street blind corner.

*Yes* I smile. I can make her disappear.

But she stands gawping at my lace-up shoes.

I'm late for lunch, lurch past. *Don't fret.*

*I'm off to see a friend*, but no one slipped  
my happiness onto her mappa mundi.

I prowl on her world's edge like a bad dream.

So now I shut my eyes, letting her shape  
a woman she'd prefer out of the air.

## **Watching Kathak**

One dancer is a swarm of bees.

Another is grey light.

Their speed sickness.

Remembering my body I chair dance.

Beyond the shadows/heads of the front row

the dark's arranged so drummers lose their legs.

Half torso, half music,

each rows a beating boat across the night.

## **The Pictures**

Hear the cinema as a poem

Imagine time shaped by vowels.

Try to gather subtitles – white clues

scattered on a white table. Half a phrase -

a mystery between lovers

their disagreement a shower of sparks.



### **The Ain Sakhri Lovers**

So he made love. He chose that pebble  
then chipped away till he felt their double life  
moaning beneath his talented fingers.

Now they're cherished, kept in a glass boudoir.  
Eleven thousand years of passion  
aroused by this pair. The first lust in art.

A fertility prayer? Or a boast  
to prove how long he could last? Turn the rock.  
Their embrace is the earliest porno.

A stone penis swaggers in your palm.  
Then breasts. A vulva. Is this just a scratch  
scraped at by testosterone in some cave?

Well, place them right way up, and they look rapt,  
stroking each other's pitted pebble skin  
as though it's baby-soft. Their hands get everywhere,

exploring this fresh creature they've become.  
A couple. It hopes it will be stronger with four lungs,  
that through four retinas, life might seem clear.

## Floors

Give her the chance and she'll slither  
through every new house  
till she has by heart the indifference  
of stone to her spine.

A connoisseur, she prefers lying low to swaying.  
She's desperately trying to find again  
the rare benevolence of Cornish slate.

She remembers how she lay on the river-cool floor  
of the Doomsday Book house  
unsettling old women.

She was learning its quirks,  
small waves, swirls of algae,  
for the day when she'd begin swimming  
through its millennia of footfalls.

## **You Can See Light. What's It Like?**

heat

silence

the right response

stays

but the question

glows

between

a small sun

it has disappeared

that face and twisted

this query could

blind

## Out Of Sight

Do we leave the sense?  
Sometimes I am because  
silence, or on a form/chessboard.  
Where is the edge?  
Blue has gone for most  
how do you/ out of  
cross quan/boundary?

Sometimes I am because  
or on a form/ silence  
chessboard SIGHT  
How do you  
out of  
Do we leave the sense?  
B  
Where is cross  
quan/  
boun  
d a r  
y  
THE EDGE  
now blue has gone  
for most?

## A Vision Statement

I see.

Poem.

Over.

No

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g

ht

of

summer

Colours jump.

# T H E E Y E C H A R T

I scowl towards his voice. He says the map  
marks how far vision goes. If I could creep

up close I'd learn the journey. His technique  
restricts me to a chair so he can track

how far I travel down the chart alone  
before I pause. I grope in the third line –

my limit the next shape I recognize –  
then stop. No way. I still believe my eyes

can hold a solar system, catch all lights,  
deliver to the doctor alphabets

as small as atoms. But this world is smudge.  
I'm huddled at the bottom of the page,

trying to hide my dark. Wherever I am,  
I've bypassed every symbol I can name

and stumble at my vision's borders  
where letters are illegible as stars.

## **Faith**

Religion:

a missing visual field.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> The following blank page is necessary to accommodate a PDF, which follows it and which cannot be moved. The PDF is also in a different font from the rest of the thesis.





The View \ The Street  
The View / The Street

We walk on our hands over a deep blue ground.

Those holes will become your face.

The box on stilts will be a cathedral.  
their roots are looking for nutrients in blue earth.  
The trees are black lines

I use sounds to see.  
Before the brain corrects the eye's syntax.  
Vision is still a draft

Vision is still a draft  
Before the brain corrects the eye's syntax.  
I use sounds to see.

The trees are black lines  
their roots are looking for nutrients in blue earth.  
The box on stilts will be a cathedral.

Those holes will become your face.

We walk on our hands over a deep blue ground.

## **The View**

Vision is still a draft.

The brain corrects the eye's syntax.

The trees are black lines, their roots seeking nutrients in blue earth.

The box on stilts will be a cathedral.

Those holes will become your face.

We walk on our hands over a deep blue ground.

## **Homer: Theme And Variations**

### **1**

Invisible poet, your biography's  
a distant coastline. Please give me a sack  
to hold the theories whirling me off course  
as I approach your life. Were you disabled?  
Yes. Sorry. I agree. It's rude to shove  
you back inside that little question  
now you're immortal; a short-tempered god.

## 2

Invisible poet, your biography's  
a distant coastline. Please give me a sack  
to hold the theories whirling me off course  
as I approach your life.. εθελω σε ακουεμεναι.  
Teach me son of the Muses, to claim winged words,  
that carry my many thoughts like a fleet of black ships.  
οδον μοι ενεπε, ω παι Μουσσων. Now,  
Teach me, διος Ομηρος, to follow your rhythms  
as infants did in the wide halls before they spoke  
when η γλωσσα Μουσσων was the sound adults made  
lens of a listener, howl of a drunken giant.  
Whoever you were, fine singer, I loved your voice,  
followed you κατα θαλασσαν to well-built Troy  
where I got lost among the shape- shifting phrases.  
η γλωσσα νεκρων made each line a sharp skirmish,  
though it left me a gift rare as the moly flower –  
when the descendants of your words guided me well,  
showed me the best route εν τοις ιατροις οφθαλμων  
You who saw blindness not as a way to Hades  
but as a source of ηδειαν αιοδην, take me now  
to learn from Demodokos and his sweet-voiced lyre.  
τον περι μουσ'εφιλησε, διδου δ' αγαθον τε κακον τε  
οφθαλμων μεν αμερσε, διδου δ' ηδειαν αιοδην.  
I learned την γλωσσαν first as a space for mystery,  
a listener's cosmos, blindness, no patterned page.  
I leave my eyes with the Muse for a lovely phrase,  
its meaning gone hazy as Ithaca's coastline.

### 3

Invisible poet, never eyes always phrase  
less than a distant coastline please give me a sack  
to Aeolus theories whirling course off me  
as I (gap) σον βιον σε ακουεμεναι  
missing winged words not a surviving sense  
gift to the wind pierced feet were you disabled?

I once heard a river as a car  
hovered on a kerb to let the breeze pass  
Traffic is each walker's indrawn breath  
Cyclists make the darkness move nonstop  
I walk on my ears  
the road changing shape as I eavesdrop

my selfsmallvision forcing this limit of thought  
all poets deafened lost at the edge of a phrase  
ears like οι δακτυλοι grope on guessed surface of song  
αι Μουσσαι request for route beyond σεαυτον  
εν τη γλωσση νεκρων I take less than a line  
τυφος εθελω myth you no space to address οδον silence  
μοι ενεπε ω παι Μουσσων. Now,  
Teach me διος Ομηρος to infant your rhythms,  
γλωσσα before η θαλασσα before τους τας τα  
lens of a listener howl of a drunken giant  
Whoever you sound's son are φιλω σην voice  
ο lost less me πολεμος phrases shapeshifting  
τυφος εθελω myth space no you to address  
classroom-dexterous child εν τοις ιατροις οφθαλμων  
I grasped the descendant sounds like moly flowers  
Hades or ηδους αοιδος two clashing rocks

silence oars rowing fast an epic childhood  
I heckle a place on Demodokos silver chair  
τον περι μουσ'εφίλησε, δίδου δ' αγαθον τε κακον τε  
οφθαλμων μεν αμερσε, δίδου δ' ηδειαν αιοιδην.  
glossed as a day's lost herald's hands sense his move  
is he curled in his definition? Does song mean slaves?  
this small eye μικρος μικρος μικρος οινον chair  
receiving the weight of the lyre beyond εαυτον  
It would be simple to stand, though he never does  
The poem releases no noise from his eyes  
beeswax black ships οιμοι no memory sirens  
littered with sounds and bones a small social role  
αι Μουσσαι εις Χαρυβδιν a poem leave swim  
I learned την γλωσσαν first as a space for mystery  
a listener's cosmos blindness no patterned page.  
I leave my eyes with the Muse for a lovely phrase,  
its meaning gone hazy as Ithaca's coastline.

4

Invisible poet,

never

eyes

always phrase

less

than a distant

coastline

please give me a sack

to Aeolus

theories

whirling

course off me

as I (gap)

σου βιον σε ακουεμεναι

missing winged words

not a surviving sense



gift to the wind  
pierced feet

were you disabled?

I once heard a river as a car  
hovered on a kerb to let the breeze pass  
Traffic is each walker's indrawn breath  
Cyclists make the darkness move nonstop  
I walk on my ears  
the road changing shape as I eavesdrop

my selfsmallvision forcing this limit of thought  
all poets deafened

lost at the edge of a phrase  
ears like οι δακτυλοι grope on  
guessed surface  
of song

αι Μουσσαι request for route beyond σεαυτον

εν τη γλωσση νεκρων I take

less than a line  
τυφος εθελω

myth you  
no space to address

οδον silence μοι ενεπε ω παι Μουσσων. Now,

Teach me διος Ομηρος to infant your rhythms,  
γλωσσα before η θαλασσα before τους τας τα

lens of a listener

howl of a drunken giant

Whoever

you sound's son are

φιλω σην voice

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no you to address

classroom-dexterous child εν τοις ιατροις οφθαλμων

I grasped the descendant

sounds like moly flowers

Hades or ηδυσ αιιδος two clashing rocks

silence

oars rowing fast

an epic childhood.

to heckle a place on Demodokos' silver chair

τον περι μουσ' εφίλησε, διδου δ' αγαθον τε κακον τε

οφθαλμων μεν αμερσε, διδου δ' ηδειαν αιιδην.

ο κηρυξ leads him across the bustling hall,

glossed as a genius, glossed as a missing sense

on his well-wrought chair a puzzle.

He sits so still.

is he curled in his definition? Does song mean slaves?

The busy noise of the herald?

Dark wine? Royal bread?

Receiving the weight of the lyre beyond εαυτον,

Letting the hands του κηρυκος guide him to song?

It would be simple to stand, though he never does.

The poem releases no noise from his eyes

αι Μουσσαι arrange his thoughts as a seagoing fleet.

beeswax, black ships,

οιμοι no memory

sirens

Here is an island littered with sounds and bones

αι Μουσσαι εις Χαρυβδιν

a poem leave swim

I learned την γλωσσαν

first as a space

for mystery

a listener's cosmos

blindness no patt

erned page.

I leave my eyes with the Muse for a lovely phrase,

its meaning gone hazy as Ithaca's coastline

INVISIBLEPOETNEVEREYESALWAYS PHRASELESSTHANADISTANTCOAS  
 TLINEPLEASEGIVEMEASACKTOAEOLUSTHEORIESWHIRLINGCOURSEOF  
 FMEASI(GAP)ΣONBIONΣEAKOYEMENAIMISSINGWINGEDWORDSNOTAS  
 URVIVINGSENSEGIFTTOTHEWINDPIERCEDFEETWERE  
 YOUDISABLEDIONCEHEARDARIVERASACARHOVEREDONTHEKERBTOL  
 ETTHEBREEZEPASSTRAFFICISEACHWALKERSINDRAWNBREATHCYCLIS  
 TSMAKETHEDARKNESSMOVENONSTOPIWALKONMYEARSTHEROADCH  
 ANGINGSHAPEASIEAVESDROPMYSELF SMALLVISIONFORCINGTHISLIMI  
 TOFTHOUGHTALLPOETSDEAFENEDLOSTATTHEEDGEOFAPHRASEEARS  
 LIKEOIAKTYΛOIGROPEONGUESSEDSURFACEOFSONGAIMOYΣΣAIREQU  
 ESTFORROUTE BEYONDΣEAYTONENTHΓΛΩΣΣΗNEKPΩNITAKELESSTHA  
 NALINETYΦΟΣΕΘΕΛΩMYTHYOUNOSPACETOADDRESSOΔONSILENC  
 EM OIENEΠEΩΠΑIMOYΣΣΩNNOWTEACHMEΔΙΟΣΟΜΗΠΟΣΤOINFANTYOURR  
 HYTHMSΓΛΩΣΣΑBEFOREHΘΑΛΑΣΣΑBEFORETOYΣΤΑΣΤALENSOFALISTE  
 NERHOWLOFADRUNKENGIANWHOEVERYOUSOUNDSSONAREΦΙΑΩΣΗ  
 NVOICEOLOSTLESSMEΠΟΛΕΜΟΣPHRASESSHAPESHIFTINGTYΦΟΣΕΘΕΛ  
 ΩMYTHSPACENOYOUTOADDRESSCLASSROOMDEXTEROUSCHILDENTOI  
 ΣΙΑΤΡΟΙΣΟΦΘΑΛΜΩNIGRASPEDTHEDESCENDANTSOUNDSLIKEMOLYFL  
 OWERSHADESORHΔΥΣΑΟΙΔΟΣΤWOCLASHINGROCKSSILENCEOARSROW  
 INGFASTANEPICCHILDHOODHECKLEAPPLACEONDEMODOKOSSILVERCH  
 AIRTONΠEPIMOYΣΣEΦIAHΣEΔIAOYΔAΓAΘONTEKAKONTEOΦΘAΛMΩN  
 MENAMHPΣEΔIAOYΔHΔEIANA OIΔHNGLOSSEDASADAYSLOSTHEARALD'  
 SHANDSSENSEHISMOVEISHECURLDINHISDEFINITONDOESSONGMEAN  
 SLAVESTHISSMALLEYEMIKPOΣMIKPOΣMIKPOΣOINONCHAIRRECEIVING  
 THEWEIGHTOFTHELYREBEYONDEAYTONITWOULDBESIMPLETOSTAND  
 THOUGHHENEVERDOESTHEPOEMRELESASESNONNOISEFROMHISEYESBE  
 ESWAXBLACKSHIPSOIMOINOMEMORYSIRENSLITTEREDWITHSOUNDSA  
 NDBONESSMALLSOCIALROLEAIMOYΣΣAIEIΣXAPYBAINAPOEMLEAVES  
 WIMILEARNTTHTHΓΛΩΣΣANFIRSTASASPACEFORMYSTERYALISTENERSC  
 OSMOSBLINDNESSNOPATTERNEDPAGEILEAVEMYEYESWITHTHEMUSEF  
 ORALOVELYPHRASEITSMEANINGGONEHAZYASITHACASCOASTLINE

**To Homer**

(After John Keats.)

A being in mystery  
no longer caught between dates  
voice moves into song  
ακουεμεναι an I  
effaced by death in Italy  
by ear by choice  
less of my reaching after

## The Relief Of Demodokos

Eye-silence,

toll of nine sisters,

a few shattered words, ο δούλος, η Μουσσα.

I try to forge                      nothing, singer,  
poet as hole through which a story passes,  
makar as shredded papyrus. A hero's tears  
before he sails on past the skull-strewn island  
where sirens perch

A living breathing gap

in a silver chair, I pester for a voice.  
You move with the muse or the herald,  
hirple across the hall like a song-formed beast.  
Eight limbs. Two heads.

You borrow the hands of the slave,  
lowering yourself to the floor              for the length of the saga.

## **Dialogue On The Dark**

and could be the freedom of shapes from their cumbersome names.

Allow me my vision at ease.

Eye quietness.

Grievously metaphored sign of a slandered season;

all-purpose hex: assassin; foxes' time.

I wish I could appoint a lawyer for winter.

Let there be an amnesty. Sit. Watch deep blues approach.

Walk. Loiter in low light as though your family were blackened trees.

## **Deformation Suite: Themes And Variations<sup>11</sup>**

- 1. William Shakespeare: *King Lear* 3.7. 42-101**
- 2. John Milton: *Paradise Lost* 3. 21-40**
- 3. John Milton: *Samson Agonistes* 1-100**
- 4. Charles Baudelaire: 'Les Aveugles/The Blind'.**
- 5. William Wordsworth: *The Prelude* 7 626-644**
- 6. J.G.Saxe: 'The Blind Men And The Elephant'.**
- 7. Stephen Kuusisto: *Letters To Borges***
- 8. Edwin Morgan: 'Blind'.**
- 9. Nuala Watt: 'Untitled'**
- 10. Nuala Watt: 'Watching Kathak'**
- 11. Nuala Watt: 'Birdsong'**

---

<sup>11</sup> For original texts, see appendix.



1

Simple.

Late.

A      guessing

.

since

eyes  
are in the night.

If wolves

overtake      children,

hallow

vengeance

Mischief. out!

Where

Lost.

Dark

kindles

way to

follow.

vital  
 not these eyes.  
 to find and find  
 serene.  
 I cease to  
 wander, Muse  
  
 smiths of sacred song.  
 Maeonides,  
 blind  
 equalled,  
 thoughts  
 harmonious  
  
 and in shadiest hid  
 no  
 seasons  
 Or or  
 or or

3

The Argument.

Guiding  
dark  
relieves.  
In the  
draw.  
Here amends,  
.  
me  
gone,

The poplar.  
Some  
restless

what?  
A birth ?

Ascended  
where  
column  
revealed..

Why was my border  
eyes?

enemies'

Gaze

fetters .

Ask

less

Let

doubt

fulfill.

have

but

high gift of

what?

impotence    mind

strength

double

fall

west

wisdom.

Show

slight ends.

The source

so                      so                      apart.

Light ex

Infer.

See dark in  
power of other.

Scarce.

Dark blaze

Let there be  
dark .

All if

to tender.

quenched.

Feeling

not	exiled
-----	--------

from life.

4

flowing

face

passes

mystery.

so

verse

dreams

a history

of waters.

Conte, Les âmes vrais.

Freux.

Pas mannequins;

Des vagues,

liés comme les sons

dans

les

tenebreux.

La divine étincelle

jamais la tête

pesante

ainsi

le

noir illimité.

du silence

chante et ris

Du plaisir jusqu'a

voir.

Mais

ils cherchent

tous ces

tous ces



Fable.

The true souls. Rook.

Not mannequins;

Some waves,  
bound sounds in the mysterious.

The divine spark

never the heavy head.

Thus the limitless black

of silence

sings and laughs

some pleasure right to the point

But they search for all these.

6

six  
learning  
to see  
though  
each

first approach  
aping  
his road  
to  
bless

feeling  
how  
round  
is

wonder.

hat  
within sands  
boldly

a tree

The

east

is plain

enough

if touch

resembles

marvel.

Sing

Scope

See.

Exceed his own

7

universe

fruit

dreams

quiescent amazement

rises.

\*\*\*\*\*

morning

less

persimmon

river

that took

a reddish reading

resists winter.

\*\*\*\*\*

see beautiful scopes.

\*\*\*\*\*

winter cities.

Then solo mariners  
ask ever deep.

\*\*\*\*\*

Early tap.

River-real,

Alone, make sense of a

\*\*\*\*\*

boy dive

lost whole

same restless

passing.

\*\*\*\*\*

rid of blue

grandfathers,

a common sense,

\*\*\*\*\*

far  
sea  
through everything  
a woman.

\*\*\*\*\*

where the fruit  
not me  
from a dream  
alive with  
blindness

\*\*\*\*\*

I own this blame  
slowly of blue.  
A God – extended wind.  
Awake to see me. Awake me to see.

8

A con.

is that city.

Leaves

as if she could

teach tactile

And of the

fumes

lonely.

sentient

words.

Same old spirals

loom.

The day is.

## **My Deformations**

**9**

Un

once ear arrives

to let

sea breath

take darkness.



as

sickness

dark's arranged.  
music

rose

night.

11

Say  
less.

Draw  
voices

so.

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## **Appendix: (Un)Deformed Texts**

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**William Shakespeare**

**King Lear**

**3.7. 42-101**

REGAN

Be simple-answered, for we know the truth.

CORNWALL

And what confederacy have you with the traitors,  
late footed in the kingdom?

REGAN

To whose hands  
you have sent the lunatic king? Speak.

GLOUCESTER

I have a letter guessingly set down,  
which came from one that's of a neutral heart,  
and not from one opposed.

CORNWALL

Cunning

REGAN

And false.

CORNWALL

Where hast thou sent the king?

GLOUCESTER

To Dover.

REGAN

Wherefore to Dover? Wast thou not charged at peril –

CORNWALL

Wherefore to Dover? Let him first answer that.

GLOUCESTER.

I am tied to the stake and I must stand the course.

REGAN

Wherefore to Dover, sir?

GLOUCESTER

Because I would not see thy cruel nails  
pluck out his poor old eyes; nor thy fierce sister  
in his anointed flesh stick boarish fangs.  
The sea, with such a storm as his bare head  
in hell-black night endured, would have buoyed up  
and quenched the stelled fires.  
Yet, poor old heart, he help the heavens to rain.  
If wolves had at thy gate howled that stern time,  
thou shouldst have said. “Good porter, turn the key,  
all cruels else subscribed”, but I shall see  
the winged vengeance overtake such children.

CORNWALL

See’t shalt thou never. Fellows, hold the chair.  
Upon these eyes of thine I’ll set my foot.

GLOUCESTER

He that will think to live till he be old –  
give me some help! O cruel! O ye gods!

REGAN

One side will mock another, th'other too.

CORNWALL

if you see vengeance –

1 SERVANT

Hold your hand my lord.

I have served you ever since I was a child.

But better service have I never done you  
than now to bid you hold.

REGAN

How now, you dog?

1 SERVANT

If you did wear a beard upon your chin,  
I'd shake it at this quarrel. What do you mean?

CORNWALL

My villein? (They draw and fight.)

1 SERVANT

Nay then, come on and take the chance of anger.  
(He wounds Cornwall.)

REGAN (to another servant)

Give me thy sword. A peasant stand up thus?  
(She takes a sword, runs at him from behind, Kills him.)

1 SERVANT

O, I am slain! My lord you have one eye left  
To see some mischief on him. O! (He dies.)

CORNWALL

Lest it see more, prevent it. Out, vile jelly.  
Where is thy lustre now?

GLOUCESTER

All dark and comfortless. Where's my son Edmund?  
Edmund, enkindle all the sparks of nature  
to quit this horrid act.

REGAN

Out, treacherous villain,  
thou call'st on him that hates thee. It was he  
that made the overture of thy treasons to us,  
who is too good to pity thee.

GLOUCESTER

O, my follies! Then Edgar was abused?  
Kind gods, forgive me that, and prosper him.

REGAN (to a servant.)

Go, thrust him out at gates and let him smell  
his way to Dover. How is't, my lord? How look you?

CORNWALL

I have received a hurt. Follow me, lady.  
(to Servants) Turn out that eyeless villain. Throw this slave  
upon the dunghill.

(Exeunt Servants, with GLOUCESTER and the body.)

Regan, I bleed apace.  
Untimely comes this hurt. Give me your arm.

(Exeunt (CORNWALL and REGAN)

2 SERVANT

I'll never care what wickedness I do,

if this man come to good.

3 SERVANT

If she live long  
and in the end meet the old course of death,  
women shall all turn monsters

**John Milton**  
**Paradise Lost**  
**3 21-40**

Though hard and rare: thee I revisit safe,  
and feel thy sovereign vital lamp, but thou  
revisit'st not these eyes, that roll in vain  
to find thy piercing ray, and find no dawn;  
so thick a drop serene hath quenched their orbs  
or dim suffusion veiled. Yet not the more  
cease I to wander where the muses haunt  
clear spring, or shady grove, or sunny hill,  
smit with the love of sacred song; but chief,  
thee Sion and the flowery brooks beneath  
that wash thy hallowed feet, and warbling flow.  
Nightly I visit: nor sometimes forget  
those other two, equalled with me in fate,  
so were I equalled with them in renown,  
blind Thamyras and blind Maeonides,  
and Tiresias and Phineus, prophets old.  
Then feed on thoughts that voluntary move  
harmonious numbers; as the wakeful bird  
sings darkling, and in shadiest covert hid  
tunes her nocturnal note. Thus with the year

**John Milton**

**Samson Agonistes**

**1-100**

A little onward lend thy guiding hand  
to these dark steps, a little further on;  
for yonder bank hath choice of Sun or shade.  
There I am wont to sit when any chance  
Relieves me from my task of servile toil,  
daily in the prison else enjoined me,  
Where I, a prisoner chain'd, scarce freely draw  
the air imprison'd also, close and damp,  
unwholesome draught, but here I feel amends,  
the breath of Heaven, fresh-blowing, pure and sweet,  
with day-spring born; here leave me to respire.  
This day a solemn feast the people hold  
to Dagon their sea-idol and forbid  
laborious works, unwillingly this rest  
their superstition grants me; hence with leave,  
retiring from the popular noise, I seek  
this unfrequented place, to find some ease,  
ease to the body some, none to the mind  
From restless thoughts, that like a deadly swarm  
of hornets armed, no sooner found alone  
but rush upon me thronging, and present  
times past, what once I was, and what am now.  
O, wherefore was my birth from heaven foretold  
twice by an angel, who at last in sight  
of both my Parents, all in flames ascended  
from off the altar, where an off'ring burned,  
As in a fiery column charioting  
his godlike presence, and of some great act  
or benefit revealed to Abraham's race?  
Why was my breeding ordered and prescribed,



as of a person separate to God,  
designed for great exploits, if I must die  
betrayed, captiv'd and both my eyes put out,  
made of my enemies the scorn and gaze  
to grind in brazen fetters under task  
with this heaven-gifted strength? O glorious strength!  
Put to the labour of a beast debased  
lower than bond-slave! Promise was that I  
should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver!  
Ask for this great Deliverer now and find him  
eyeless in Gaza, at the mill with slaves,  
himself in bonds under Philistian yoke!  
Yet stay, let me not rashly call in doubt  
divine prediction. What if all foretold  
Had been fulfilled but through mine own default?  
Whom have I to complain of but myself,  
who this high gift of strength committed to me,  
in what part lodged, how easily bereft me,  
under the seal of silence could not keep  
but weakly to a woman must reveal it,  
o'ercome with importunity and tears!  
O impotence of mind in body strong!  
But what is strength without a double share  
of wisdom? Vast, unwieldy, burdensome,  
proudly secure, yet liable to fall  
by weakest subtleties; not made to rule  
but to subserve where wisdom bears command.  
God, when he gave me strength, to show withal  
How slight the gift was, hung it in my hair.  
But peace! I must not quarrel with the will  
of highest dispensation, which herein  
haply hath ends above my reach to know.  
Suffices that to me strength is my bane,  
and proves the source of all my miseries,

so many and so huge, that each apart  
would ask a life to wail. But chief of all,  
o loss of sight, of thee I must complain!  
Blind among enemies! O worse than chains,  
dungeon or beggary, or decrepit age!  
Light, the prime work of God, to me is extinct  
and all her various objects of delight  
annulled, which might in part my grief have eased.  
Inferior to the vilest now become  
of man or worm, the vilest here excel me.  
They creep, yet see: I, dark in light exposed  
to daily fraud, contempt, abuse and wrong  
within doors, or without, still as a fool,  
in power of others, never in my own –  
scarce half I seem to live – dead more than half.  
O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon!  
Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse  
Without all hope of day!  
O first-created beam and thou Great Wod,  
“Let there be light”, and light was over all!  
Why am I thus bereaved thy prime decree?  
The sun to me is dark  
and silent as the moon  
when she deserts the night,  
hid in her vacant interlunar cave.  
Since light so necessary is to life  
and almost life itself, if it be true  
that light is in the soul,  
she all in every part, why was the sight  
to such a tender ball as the eye confined,  
so obvious and so easy to be quenched,  
and not, as feeling, through all parts diffused,  
that she might look at will through every pore?  
Then had I not been thus exiled from light,

as in the land of darkness, yet in light  
to live a life half-dead, a living death.

**William Wordsworth**

**The Prelude**

**7 626-644**

How often in the overflowing streets,  
Have I gone forward with the crowd, and said  
Unto myself, 'The face of every one  
That passes by me is a mystery!'  
Thus have I looked, nor ceased to look, oppressed  
By thoughts of what and whither, when and how,  
Until the shapes before my eyes became  
A second-sight procession, such as glides  
Over still mountains, or appears in dreams;  
And all the ballast of familiar life,  
The present, and the past; hope, fear; all stays,  
All laws of acting, thinking, speaking man  
Went from me, neither knowing me, nor known.  
And once, far-travelled in such mood, beyond  
The reach of common indications, lost  
Amid the moving pageant, 'twas my chance  
Abruptly to be smitten with the view  
Of a blind Beggar, who, with upright face,  
Stood propped against a wall, upon his chest  
Wearing a written paper, to explain  
The story of the man, and who he was.  
My mind did at this spectacle turn round  
As with the might of waters

**John Keats**

**To Homer**

Standing aloof in giant ignorance,  
of thee I hear and of the Cyclades,  
as one who sits ashore and longs perchance  
to visit dolphin-coral in deep seas.  
So thou wast blind; - but then the veil was rent,  
for Jove uncurtain'd Heaven to let thee live  
and Neptune made for thee a spumy tent,  
and Pan made sing for thee his forest hive.  
Aye on the shores of darkness there is light  
and precipices show untrodden green.  
There is a budding morrow in midnight.  
There is a triple sight in blindness keen.  
Such seeing hadst thou, as it once befell  
To Dian, Queen of Earth and Heaven and Hell.

**J.G. Saxe**

**The Blind Men And The Elephant**

It was six men of Indostan  
To learning much inclined,  
Who went to see the Elephant  
(Though all of them were blind),  
That each by observation  
Might satisfy his mind.

The *First* approached the Elephant,  
And happening to fall  
Against his broad and sturdy side  
Began at once to bawl:  
“God bless me! But the Elephant  
Is very like a wall!”

The *Second*, feeling of the tusk  
Cried, “Ho, what have we here?  
So very round and smooth and sharp?  
To me ‘tis mighty clear:  
This wonder of an Elephant  
Is very like a spear! “

The *Third* approached the animal,  
And happening to take  
The squirming trunk within his hands,  
Thus boldly up and spake:  
“I see,” quoth he, “the Elephant  
Is very like a snake!”

The *Fourth* stretched out an eager hand  
And felt about the knee.  
“What most this wondrous beast is like

Is mighty plain,” quoth he:  
“’Tis clear enough the Elephant  
Is very like a tree!”

The *Fifth*, who chanced to touch the ear  
Cried “E’en the blindest man  
Can tell what this resembles most:  
Deny the fact who can,  
This marvel of an Elephant  
Is very like a fan!”

The *Sixth*, no sooner had begun  
About the beast to grope,  
Than seizing on the swinging tail  
That fell within his scope –  
“I see”, quoth he, “the Elephant  
Is very like a rope!”

And so these men of Indostan  
Disputed loud and long,  
Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the right,  
And all were in the wrong!

**STEPHEN KUUSISTO**

**Poems**

**Learning Braille At Thirty-Nine**

The dry universe  
gives up its fruit,

Black seeds are raining,  
Pascal dreams of a wristwatch,

and heaven help me  
the metempsychosis of book

is upon me. I hunch over it,  
the boy in the asylum

whose fingers leapt for words.  
(In the dark books are living things,

quiescent as cats.)  
Each time we lift them

we feel again  
the ache of amazement

under summer stars.  
It's a dread thing

to be lonely  
without reason.



My window stays open  
and I study late

as quick, musical laughter  
rises from the street

and I rub grains of the moon  
in my hands.

## **Dante's *Paradiso* Read Poorly In Braille**

Each morning  
I live with less color:  
The lawn turns gray,  
the great laurel is gravid  
with flint – as if it might burn  
in the next life.  
Even the persimmon tree  
is clear as a wineglass stem.

*In Paradiso*  
a river of hosts  
opens to the poet  
who begs and prays  
for an illumined soul.  
*And I saw light*  
*that took a river's form-*  
*light flashing,*  
*reddish-gold*  
*between two banks*  
*painted with wonderful*  
*spring flowerings...*

Finger-reading,  
a tempered exercise,  
I notice how dark  
the window has become,  
though it's noon  
and August  
and daylight still resists winter.  
I bow my head,  
return to the book.

Poor poet,  
he hurries to the river,  
and *into* the river,  
his eyes as wide  
as a man can make them.  
The long sunlight of late summer  
floods the rhododendrons –  
This is the light  
that pulls him  
under the river,  
hands, lips, fingers, opening...

*The river  
and the gems of topaz  
entering and leaving  
and the grasses' laughter.  
These are shadows,  
prefaces of their truth...*

I strain for color,  
the preclusion of sight,  
and put aside the book,  
*Paradiso* in Braille.  
Who the hell is this  
turning again to the window,  
his fingers reaching the sill,  
hands still touching  
a river that no one can see?

## **Letter To Borges From Estonia**

Where I go is of considerable doubt.  
Winter, Tallinn, I climb aboard the wrong trolley.  
Always a singular beam of light leads me astray.

After thousands of cities I am safe when I say “It is always the wrong  
trolley” –  
Didn’t I love you with my whole heart? Athens? Dublin?

Solo gravitational effects: my body is light as a child’s beside the botanical garden’s  
iron fence –  
but turning a corner one feels very old in the shadow of the  
mariners’ church.

I ask strangers to tell me where I am.  
Their voices are lovely, young and old.

Yes, I loved you with my whole heart.  
I never had a map.

Co-ordinated, Platonic movement in deep snow.  
Crooked doors and radios in the bread shops.

## Letter To Borges From Galway

I go out in the early morning rain  
and tap the cobblestones with my stick.  
On my right there is a river.  
On my left a loose window  
makes funereal percussions.  
“Songs of Earth” I think.

I am not unique.  
I stand beneath the shutter and weep.  
I love this world.  
I am alone in a new city.  
If I died here between the river and the window,  
maybe everything I’ve known  
would make sense in the gray of an Irish minute.

“Goodbye to the peregrine falcons” I think.  
Goodbye to the glass of water that contains a single daylily.  
Farewell to Mahler on the radio late at night.  
Don’t get me wrong:  
I get lost in cities every week.

I have learned much by following the whims of architects.

## Letter To Borges From London

When I was a boy I made a beehive  
from old letters – dark scraps from a trunk,  
lost loves; assurances from travelers.  
It was intricate work.  
The blind kid and the worker bee lost whole days.  
I made a library for inchworms.

Now I'm a natural philosopher, but with the same restless hands.  
Some days I put cities together –  
Santiago and Carthage;  
Toronto and Damascus.  
If strangers watch closely, Borges,  
they'll see my fingers working at nothing.

In Hyde Park near the Albert Memorial alone on a bench  
I reconstructed the boroughs of New York –  
Brooklyn was at the center, Kyoto in place of Queens.  
This was a city of bells and gardens, a town for immigrants.  
The old woman passing by saw my hands at work.  
She thought I was a lost blind man, a simpleton,  
said "Poor dearie" and gave me a quid.

## **Letter To Borges From Helsinki**

I will never get tired of this city that's blue as a shinbone, blue as a pair of false teeth, blue as the eyes of a fish, blue as my grandfather's schoolbook. And the children sleep in their prams, bundled against the cold, thin little vapors like smoky needles rising from their unformed faces – one sees them on every street, small, seemingly abandoned bundles, devoting themselves to the subconscious. No sign of their parents: it's a matter of common sense to put your baby out alone in the winter. City as blue as your dead mother's curtains, blue as an old soldier's wrist, blue and blue and blue and blue and blue and blue.

## Letter To Borges From Tampere, Finland

Winnowing and threshing in the far north –  
Sunlight like tea in a glass , (a stranger  
tells me) and local musicians play waltzes  
in a coffe bar. Borges  
I got a bit drunk last night  
and walked into a field and lay down where  
the Caterpillar machines had torn a long seam in the earth  
and the waltzing was, as the Finns say, *nurin kurin*, all topsy-turvy  
in my head,  
and my ruined eyes took the roses and broken shards  
of twilight and built another village – a countervillage  
where the houses stood like wineglass stems.  
You could see through everything –  
even the walls of the church –  
a fact that didn't bother anyone.  
as men and women made of light  
are necessarily long-lived and unconcerned  
about the hour.



## Letter To Borges From Syracuse

Down where the great tenor must have felt it, under my left-side low rib,  
There was a green fruit, a pear of the mind, moonlit, cold and wet.

I felt it early, bending to the paper, just a curve  
from the torso, a twist

that was not me, do you understand? I called to a bird  
in the catalpa, called it bird-wise, soft

but to no effect. I was rich,  
Alive, with nowhere to go, fruit from a dream

hanging where my lungs and diaphragm met.  
I wanted to stay there always,

do you understand? My blindness was just a nuisance.  
The pear, an unworldly thing,

swayed, understand, and grew on nothing.

## **Letter To Borges From Houston. Texas**

I fell down this morning, Borges. I blamed this on the pavement outside  
the hotel.

There is something about falling when you're blind, a kind of synesthesia  
occurs.

I fell slowly into a cold paradise of blue.  
It was like falling into the world in the birth-wind.

Do you remember that?

Falling like this is certainly a kind of nostalgia.  
I had time to think.

"Only God can conceal God",  
That's what I thought.

My arms were extended like wings,  
joyfully falling.

I should ad that no one was awake to see me.  
Borges, did you ever laugh in so much blue?

**Edwin Morgan**

**Blind**

Almost unconscionably sweet  
is that voice in the city street.  
Her fingers skim the leaves of Braille.  
She sings as if she could not fail  
to activate each sullen mind  
and make the country of the blind  
unroll among the traffic fumes  
with its white stick and lonely rooms.  
Even if she had had no words,  
unsentimental as a bird's,  
her song would rise in spirals through  
the dust and gloom to make it true  
that when we see such fortitude,  
though she cannot, the day is good.

**Nuala Watt**

**Untitled**

I once heard a river as a car,  
hovered on a kerb to let the breeze pass.

Traffic is each walker's indrawn breath.  
Cyclists make the darkness move nonstop.

I walk on my ears,  
the road changing shape as I eavesdrop.

**Nuala Watt**

**Watching Kathak**

One dancer is a swarm of bees.

Another is grey light.

Their speed sickness.

Remembering my body I chair dance.

Beyond the shadows/heads of the front row

the dark's arranged so drummers lose their legs.

Half torso, half music,

each rows a beating boat across the night.

**Nuala Watt**  
**Birdsong**

As I was saying  
art lessons  
fit tiny spaces.

The nuthatch's song is  
a thousand drawers  
opening at once

It is so unlike other songs –

Voices spill out of the radio.  
They are Poor Clares from Ireland

Lady on the wall, lady on the wall,  
you are talking to me

As you  
Swing your legs. Your voice is the size  
of a foaling mare

origami fingers the swan's  
neck, under water. Quick quick.

the paper trick to end  
all paper tricks. Lemon peel  
dangles from the end of its tail

and I reach  
out to cut it,

in time for the nuthatch.