

# A Benign Psychosis?

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Recently I read in the poetry annual *Fulcrum* the poet Fred d'Aguiar's notes on his work with a poet/patient whose ability to articulate the anguish of her inner world was not sufficient to prevent her suicide. He describes this unhappy outcome as "not a failure of her self, or her artistic abilities, but a failure of utterance itself when deployed in difficult psychological terrain?? writing herself back to health held a limited purchase for her and her troubled psyche." He concludes with regret that "had she lived, she would have continued to write and perhaps written some lasting poems, but not a line of it would have mended her mind."

Poetry is a creative art. All creative writing is not poetry. Unmediated utterance is not poetry. Words can release emotion but mere expression cannot mend. However working on the refinement of that utterance does improve the mind's suppleness and self-discipline.

In contrast to the impulse to write, the art of poetry demands skill and a quiet mind to listen to cadence and metre and all the useful combinatory abilities of words. It is work requiring clarity and alertness and balance. For some people this skill may be impossible to attain. Poetry often deals with fleeing words and brilliant images too rapid and exquisite to catch. A mind needs a certain toughness to engage with language.

D'Aguiar suggests a failing of utterance itself. I would say that in this case language could express but not heal his patient's grief.

It seems to me that language works hardest at the limits of utterance. At an extreme, in contact with a chaotic outside world, language shows the strain and can appear to disintegrate entirely. Early twentieth century European literature responded to the psychological damage of world war with Dada, surrealism and the Absurd. The Orator in Eugene Ionesco's play *The Chairs* is reduced to incomprehensible mumbling; a German artist's wartime self-portrait in the Berlin Museum reveals him freaked out, frozen, his brush lifted off the canvas, staring at himself.

When I draw or write I am aware of a superconducted flow from outer to inner; inner to outer world. Line is a direct and fluent language which bypasses words. Colour also is a language, and music. The expressive languages are

naturally interrelated. In this early 1980's poem I'm not expecting anything from the language beyond that it be fluent and pleasant to use, reminding myself of alternative creative languages at my disposal, such as drawing and music. To express the effect of the outer on the inner world always augments my joy in it.

from **Words Fail Me**

Air's so clear it's tinged with black.  
My favourite spot for looking at the  
peninsula is on a headland above the road  
to Aramoana. Here I sit in the sweet buttery  
gorse, a tiny ringing cicada song coming  
from many points in space. From the port  
comes the logsnatchers' angry growling.  
A single black shag on the water which is  
pocked pale and darker blue pointilliste  
and then the hills limbs gracefully collapsed  
relaxing stroked by the shadows of clouds.  
It is all a continually moving  
picture show. I get out my paper  
pencils and ink not to copy nor to  
describe but to put into line what  
the words are not fluid enough for.

A poem is a satisfying end product but not a reason for writing. Sitting on that hill I was practising, in private, my absorbing art of words and ideas, aware of being both a part of, and apart from, my harmonious surroundings.

The theme of the meniscus runs through my work. Poetry operates at a linguistic interface between subjective and objective experience. To find balance between inner and outer is the thing. I wouldn't recommend poetry as do-it-yourself psychotherapy, but having some command of technique I have at times derived artistic satisfaction, in comfort and recompense, from work which has sprung from difficult terrain in my life. Through making sense and shape of utterance to produce a creative work, it became possible for me to come to terms with the event that produced "The Autoclave," namely the loss of most of my possessions in a house fire. It also served the useful function of storing some precious memories in words before they were forgotten, since their material prompts had disappeared.

from **The Autoclave**

The Flounder Inn is full of holes - I wonder,  
can I face another winter here?

The sea laps close to my front window  
and seabirds call. Lulled at my wheel  
by rhythms of tide and wind  
with hand and finger discipline  
I spin and ply the yarn  
into an endless double helix,  
watching the dance of tide and clouds  
and seabirds, wind among seagrass, lupins.

Those black swans there  
are imports, foreign ships  
that empty their ballast on the sand flats  
causing a grassy weed to grow  
that chokes the cockle beds.  
Pale yellow, white, pale green,  
olive, taupe, blue-grey.  
Low tide, flat calm, nine oystercatchers.  
No more than lazy strands of toetoe moving.

A low vibration rattles the windows. I look out -  
the calm high tide is blurred by shoals of tiny fish  
and a container ship is entering the heads,  
tall as an office block and as foreign to the landscape,  
the throb of its engines reaching the soles of my feet  
through billions of grains of sand.

Fresh water's more important than money in this place.  
Rain's always welcome, drumming on the corrugated iron,  
trickling along the gutters, pouring into the concrete tank.  
There's a sheen on the water,  
the tide a stone's throw from the balcony.

Small ripples tickle the shore.  
A pulse runs through my days -  
tide-pulse, throb of ships' engines in the channel,  
my heartbeat, the purring of Lucille,  
wing-beats, light and darkness,  
the pulsing wheel, endless thread spinning

out of white clouds in my hands.  
Beneath the everyday there lie deep happenings,  
hidden, sacred -  
And then the Flounder Inn burns to the ground,  
with everything in it.

The poem goes on to interweave themes of ancestry, polarities, journeys and crossings around the central metaphor of the autoclave and the quarantine station at Point Nepean in Melbourne where the Scottish settlers arrived in the 1850s. An interface of sorts between worlds. Dante provided a useful guide in this poem.

We dream our situations in metaphor so that the waking mind can understand them at a deep level. We tend to put our precepts into poetry, fable, parable, to insert them at a deep level into the psyche.

My idea of the writing process is something like this: The dreams go round like a washing machine in one side of my brain. Through some interface they are drawn across, filter through to the active language side. At the interface sits an entity who deals with the meeting of words and ideas. A grandmother, a Joker, a Janus at the gateway between conscious and

unconscious, looking both out and in, facilitating and shaping the casting of idea in language. In the active language side utterance is made precise, tested and fitted for the outside world. It slides down the arm into the pen and glides out in ink. It has a sense of humour:

### **Via Media**

Deep in the brain between right and left  
the electromagnetic charge around the corpus callosum  
aligns nerve impulses, allowing them to flow  
from one hemisphere to the other.

The motto of my grandmother  
was "Per via media tutissima."

When she died she was as small as a bird,  
but I remember her taller.  
Indeed she was a wise interface,  
the signal box of her family.

This bundle of nerves is at about ear-level.  
 I wiggle my ears, locating the via media,  
 imagining the centre where the impulses align,  
 a grandmother at the interface wisely regulating.

Daily life flows through her fingers  
 and passes into dream.  
 Dream washes out into the daylight  
 and disappears like foam.

I don't see writing as a means of removing the detritus of my psyche. Poetry is useful because it can hold ideas in words, memorably, lest they slip away. Poetry is as good a way of exercising the mind as any mental activity - such as chess, maths, philosophy, physics. Among other things, poetry is metaphor.

My book *Soundings* begins with a couple of riddles, which look as though they're supposed to be love poems, but they're not, unless they're love poems in a wider sense, love of an isolated population for each other and their island life of cliffs and waves - and seabirds. (The answer to the first riddle is in the second).

### Riddles (i)

1  
 my bone  
 takes my flesh  
 to your lips

2  
 my wings  
 sweep earth  
 from the earth

3  
 you walk  
 on my head -  
 my neck, your ankle

4  
 my jaws  
 hold down  
 the roof

5  
dreaming  
I cover you  
like cloud

6  
I burn,  
illuminate your  
feast of me

### **Riddles (ii)**

“No part of the gannet is ever wasted”

Make a spoon of my breastbone  
and of my wings a feather broom.

My head makes a soft shoe laced at the throat,  
my beak a stout peg, to anchor the thatch.

Featherdown is your bed in the storm.  
I give strength to your body

and brightness to your eyes -  
your lamp is my clear oil flame.

Writing poetry can be so intellectually intriguing as to become obsessional. For the poet, creative absorption in poetry is perhaps as intense as a psychotic state. But it isn't channelling the poet's self, it's more of a glass bead game, abstract, of ear and eye, vocabulary and syntax. It seems to produce endorphins.

This poetry is not the psychiatric tool Fred d'Aguiar thought to use. He was encouraging a confessional mode, but the subject pursued his patient into the world and she had no shelter from it. Writing brought no relief. Personal writing can of course be used as a starting point for poetry. When the Flounder Inn burned down, writing an exhaustive list of its contents for the insurance assessor was a gloomy exercise. Then I began writing down memories so that they wouldn't be lost with the objects that evoked them. These enticed me into poetry that went beyond the personal level. When I moved to Bluff, I found poetry a good way

to come to terms with a new house, environment, family, culture, as I looked back as well as forward over my life thus far

Looking back I see the themes of polarity and opposition early in my life, in several crossings of the equator. I was intrigued by the world's hemispheres. Later this awareness of difference increased to include cultural dimensions. At school in England during my father's sabbatical I was made embarrassingly aware of English ignorance about my New Zealand home. At that time, at the age of twelve, I injured my back in a ballet class, and the spinal fusion resulting 26 years later made me very interested in the process of healing, producing the poetry in *Benzina* in 1988.

If poetry's a benign psychosis, do I hear voices? Yes, I hear "voice" suggesting idea or theme and associated words - it's the same as the voice that tells me my PIN number. It's that voice I converse with when I make poetry, the inner voice that articulates ideas and speaks poetic lines. Rarely, it will produce a whole poem. Often the flow of verbal suggestion is so rapid and contradictory that it might be discerned to be many voices. Is this psychotic? I would never be without it. It's the dimension of my mind which speaks in language, in colour, line or music. Following its creative suggestions I draw and paint and have fun with musical scores. It sings, it facilitates synesthesia. I assume it is the voice of intelligence. Poetry is creative writing but all creative writing is not poetry. By poetry I mean the ancient and demanding task of making spoken and written language which is condensed, mellifluous and memorable.

Poetry is an art practised by poets. All patients are not poets, but active participation in creative activity does stimulate healing, as laughter does.

All poets are not patients, but poetry may be akin to psychosis. How else describe the extraordinary lengths to which the mind will go in order to craft an exquisite word-vessel of idiosyncratic tone and form, a thought-experiment, a poem?

Or that intense tenacious worrying among words, obsession with exactitude, with melody, with rhythm, a juggling of possible meanings and short cuts through byways of syntax, that uses to the full the layers of meaning and music arising from elegant verbal combinations.

The poet is both passive channel and active shaper of the flow. I imagine that in real psychosis this balance wouldn't be found. If the shaping side were passive, the active psychosis could predominate. By the "shaping side" I mean the self-engendered disciplines of careful work.

### **Museum Attractions, Gore**

The flipside of the Gold Guitar  
is perhaps the ancient African figures.

Tough glass encloses  
the furious power in their wood bodies.

You may wander in the labyrinth  
and stare at them without reprisal -

they have been tranquillised -  
examine them until they are not strange,

in the manner of the bald soldier  
whose torch probed the mouth of the captured

dictator; ponder your own psyche  
through the glass that blocks the tapu.

### **References**

The poems quoted are from *Markings* (2000), *Axis* (2001), *Soundings* (2002), *Fire-penny* (2005): all published by University of Otago Press, P.O. Box 56, Dunedin.

D'Aguiar's essay "Poetry and Madness" published in *Fulcrum*, Number Three, 2004, annual of poetry and aesthetics, eds. Nikolayev, Kapovich.