

Edith Cowan University

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## A dao of poetry? Non-intentional composition, emergence and intertextuality

### Abstract:

Ten poems are presented, sampling my PhD research and exploring how poetry might harmonise 'Western' scientific and 'Eastern' spiritual worldviews. The poems invite a liminal consciousness where science's epistemic authority may meet on equal—not privileged—terms with the more ancient authorities of body and Earth. My chosen primary foci are modern physics, philosophical Daoism, and the ecosystemic perspective afforded by complexity theory (Capra & Luisi 2014), in which large-scale patterns emerge unpredictably from relatively simple processes. This emergence, as Smith (2006: 172) remarks, is helpful in theorising how an artwork frequently 'develops its own autonomous identity and ... takes the creator in directions quite different from his or her original intentions.' My methodology carries this further by seeking to abandon intention entirely. To achieve this I choose randomly from lists of sources and writing experiments. Influenced by found poetry (Perloff 2012) and by the aleatory processes of conceptual writing and LANGUAGE poetry (Dworkin n.d.; James 2012), I appropriate, combine and re-present ideas and text from creative and non-fictional works. I take words from books or from what Tobin (2004: 126) calls the mind's 'other place' of poetry. A poem may or may not emerge; if one does, I have little idea what it may say or do. I work with eyes and fingers, pointing, highlighting, cutting and shuffling. I select and place text using body and instinct, not the thinking self. This non-intentional composition strives for the Daoist ideal of *wei wuwei*, action without action—egoless, selfless, apparently-effortless action. Moeller (2004) likens *wei wuwei* to Csikszentmihályi's (1990) concept of flow, the focused, effortless mental state also called 'the zone'. Aspiring to become *daojia shiren*, 'poet of Philosophical Daoism', I practise *yun you*, 'wandering like a cloud', 'searching everywhere' for the Way (Chen & Ji 2016: 178, 188).

### Biographical note:

Jackson is a computer science graduate and poet. Her doctoral research at Edith Cowan University explores how poetry might harmonise 'Western' scientific and 'Eastern' spiritual worldviews. Her journal and anthology publications include *Westerly*, *Plumwood Mountain*, the *Australian Poetry Journal* and the forthcoming *Fremantle Press Anthology of Western Australian Poetry*. Jackson has published two books, a chapbook, seven zines and a CD. She won the 2014 Ethel Webb Bundell Poetry Prize. Jackson's many guest appearances include the Queensland and Tasmanian Poetry

Festivals. She is the founding editor of online poetry journal *Uneven Floor*. The National Library archives her collected works website [www.thepoetjackson.com](http://www.thepoetjackson.com)

Key words:

Poetry – non-intentional composition – emergence – Daoism – intertextuality

## Ten poems

Note:

Following current scholarly practice, for Chinese words I use pinyin romanisation (as in *dao* and *Zhuangzi*) except where quoting sources that use the Wade-Giles system or its variants (*tao*, *Chuang-Tse*, *Chuang Tzu*).

**between the bones of my temples**

the silence has no colour no temper  
and yet is as warm as my blood  
according to Husserl<sup>1</sup>, Descartes'  
cogito includes not just thinking  
as red as my reddest meat  
on paper fingers riffle  
but also feelings desires  
I love therefore  
in my throat a clicky gulp  
refrigerator snarles and screams  
I am if you're human love is a thing  
of the flesh we don't speak of  
its discordant gasmetal anthem  
the wide sigh of a car passing  
even platonic  
love is about physical

the silence is the liquid inside  
my eyes like ultrasound gel  
the Enlightenment without love is  
yang without yin anarchy without  
a transmission medium the sounds so cold  
the riffle white the sigh a black swathe  
empathy or land unable to touch

that is the god that  
when my breath goes out of my nostrils  
goes out and becomes all the air  
justifies murder in the name  
drives the father to sell  
the silence between

the stars in space my ears  
into slavery that instructs  
the mother abandon her  
between the bones of my temples  
a crow's voice from a blue  
baby that legislates  
the lovers they cannot  
aeroplane's voice collecting sky  
spitting it everywhere

but the Divine if you actually  
experience for example  
the rails singing green heralding  
a crow's open voice  
by the Headless Way<sup>2</sup>  
is love benevolent

Process notes:

2016-06-07 Edited interleave from original texts  
sounds.txt (cut into 10-syllable lines)  
descartes.txt (cut into 9-syllable lines)

1. Husserl, 1913/2004
2. Shollond Trust, 2005

**A coat of ashes**

*I fell into conversation with an ash-smeared and completely naked sadhu...*

William Dalrymple (2010)

If I leave I will not order boxes  
There will be no packaging tape  
no moving men  
no truck  
I will take none of it

A blanket, a water bottle  
A coat of ashes  
A poem attributed  
to the wrong author  
A corrupt index  
A broken database  
A partial catalogue of songs  
A blanket, a water bottle  
A coat of ashes  
A sky, a sun, a system  
of monosyllables  
The pure tone  
of each electron  
The pure functions  
The math inside the atom  
The muscles connecting  
the trunk to the legs  
The tendons connecting  
the moon to the earth  
The ligaments connecting  
the brain to the bones  
A blanket,  
A coat of ashes

## Spangles

*The Tao that can be trodden is not<sup>1</sup> | The random clicks of a geiger<sup>2</sup>  
All in the world know | Sun flung spangles, dancing coins<sup>3</sup>  
Not to value and employ men | Through very short times of space<sup>3</sup>  
The Tao is the emptiness | Between the bones of my temples*

*Heaven and Earth do not act | Their books do not proceed<sup>4</sup>  
The valley spirit dies | The mountain spirit rises up  
Heaven is long-enduring and earth | Of newly-minted leptons<sup>5</sup>  
The highest excellence | Spun in a synchrotron's shining turn*

*It is better to leave a vessel unfilled | Or leave it out in the rain  
When the intelligent and animal | Meet, the ands are given back  
The thirty spokes unite in the one | For thirty years of protest  
Colour's five hues | Music's  $\infty$ <sup>6</sup> harmonies*

*Favour and disgrace would seem equally | Luminous compared to concrete  
We look at it, and we do | Nothing we don't know how to do  
The skilful masters in old times | Had cunts that curved space  
The vacancy should be brought | To the feet of the blonde-eyed anarchists*

*In the highest antiquity, did not know | The arguments of men  
When the Great Tao | Counting the sounds of an acausal realm<sup>2</sup>  
If we could renounce our sageness | Without going bankrupt  
When we renounce learning | And watch repeats of a reality show*

*The grandest forms of active force | Are all derived from hunger  
The partial becomes complete | For something even more precious<sup>7</sup>  
Abstaining from speech marks him who is | Who truly glarks<sup>8</sup> the light  
He who stands on his tip toes | Still can't reach the bulb*

1. The left-hand half-lines are the opening words of each of the first 24 chapters of the *Daodejing* in Legge's translation (Lao-Tse & Legge 2008), selected according to a metrical pattern.
2. Friedman & Donley 1985: 120.
3. Joyce 1922/2000: 45.
4. Durrell 1952: 31.
5. A certain type of elementary particle, such as an electron; also a small coin. From Greek *leptos*, small. <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/lepton>

6. Infinity.
7. Jackson 2013: 89.
8. Computer hacker jargon: to understand something's meaning from its context.  
<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/glark>



**A failed poem**



it was only when I had scrunched it up  
to stop it trying to say something  
that I felt I had made  
a piece of art

**trace**

This dropped  
as a bird fluttered free  
from a claw. This:  
black waves, soft sines  
gathered and stitched  
along a wand. This

is not an artefact. Between  
its closed hooked ranks  
its flaw, a slit, diffracts  
the light. I long  
to give the smooth folds  
of this to my fingers, take  
its intricate truth, but if

I caress, my adamant  
digits will unrender this,  
unpick, unzip, split, crush,  
scramble its whispered Is.

On the turned face  
of my fist, with the breathy tip  
of this, I tickle the trace  
of a wish.

The title may refer to Derrida's (1968/2004) concept of the trace.

## The thing U2

*how long to sing this song<sup>1</sup>*

rains bass-drum toms lights them with *qi*  
pairs and sets  
them down in the light *my feet*  
*upon a rock*  
on a good night

Larry plays his solo and hands it over

the cymbal-shimmer-rains  
the bass-drum the seeking toms  
underpins and lights them  
showers them with glitter  
sprinkles them with *qi*  
then neatly pairs his sticks and sets them down  
leaves  
them in the light

### Process notes:

2016-06-06 This is one of the two results of  
doing a 5-syllable constraint and remix  
on teaching-without-words-31aug15.txt

1. The quotations are from U2 (1983).

**What is Tao?**

*An erasure from Zhuangzi, as quoted in Reninger (2015). Translator unknown.*

out a hand

down a foot

a knee

like a dance what

is Tao?

when I first began

I would see me

all in one mass

after three years I saw

but now I see

with the eye free to work

space finds its own way

I cut no joint chop no bone

a year I have used this

it has cut

its edge

keen

when this finds space

there is all the room

I feel slow down watch

hold back move

and whump the part falls away

like a clod of earth

then I the blade

stand still

clean and put it away

**The fundamental forces dream**

There are five fundamental forces,  
said my son.

Gravitational, Electromagnetic, the Strong, the Weak,  
and Hunger.

Hunger

is the fundamental force  
from which all the others are derived,

I said.

And there are accordingly five  
fundamental particles.

The one associated with Hunger is called

[ ]

the universe	an opera
composed	of enormous
and microscopic	silences

Process notes:

2015-07-24 edited from original draft

Deleted a line about John Cage

Deleted a line about my own subjectivity

2015-10-01 retyped from edited printout where I deleted unnecessary words, changed symphony to opera, tried two-column layout (aha!) and changed title.

Then had a go with "centred caesura" columns as used by Ron Pretty (2015): but the silences in this are all the same length!

Played further with layout possibilities.

Original version was left aligned + right aligned.

Both columns right aligned seems best. Sense of motion. Starts with a silence. Looks a bit like the Enterprise.

### **The light**

The light has to get somewhere, touch something, to exist  
You take acid as we're sitting in the air  
The old woman pours whitewash over her husband's head  
We're on the left  
There's no box, no comfort zone  
Anything but raw paper is a compromise  
Two girls with acne and stringy bleached hair  
Occupy Wall Street  
A month in the hole  
In solitary  
The way to connect is to work together  
I had a clear vision  
Looming orange clouds, an apocalyptic sunset  
Something that makes you smaller or channels your movement

The light has to get somewhere  
A curve through spacetime  
A function  
A journey, transmission, idea  
In the dream we're on a plane, rows of seats, going somewhere  
We don't know what we want but it isn't this  
People keep pets  
The husband is grey and decrepit  
If your mother couldn't hold you while you cried  
hold yourself now  
Try to hide yourself  
If you throw up the next morning  
does that mean you've poisoned yourself?  
When you look for yourself as a thing  
there is nothing there

The light has to get somewhere, touch something  
Is that the same t-shirt?  
Occupy Breastfeeding  
Howl, keen, be the banshee of yourself, announcing your death  
I take scissors out of your hand  
You're taking acid  
Seeing the nothing inside yourself  
A curve through spacetime  
A function  
A journey, transmission, idea  
In touching something, the light



is not destroyed, but changed  
In the dream  
the husband is grey and decrepit  
The woman pours whitewash  
Anything but raw paper is a compromise  
The noises when I cried and cried frightened me

The light has to get somewhere, touch something, to exist  
People keep pets instead  
Curl into a ball, try to hide yourself  
We don't know what we want but it isn't this  
Fenced in, fenced out  
You in the aisle seat  
I in the middle  
Light is nothing, only  
potential  
When you look for yourself as a thing  
there is nothing  
The way to connect is to work  
against each other  
In touching something, the light  
is not destroyed, but changed  
Reflected, absorbed, refracted  
Tear at your clothes and hair, bite yourself

The light has to get somewhere  
I smile a little  
Acid, you're taking acid  
Light is nothing, only  
potential, just  
an idea  
Occupy Everything  
Looming orange clouds  
The window seat free  
No-one looking out  
This is not conditional  
A month in the hole  
Two months  
Give you time to think  
What if the neighbours come  
and try to cheer me up?  
Not depressed  
Not ill

Don't need anything  
In full control  
of self, life, responses  
An adult  
Tear at your clothes and hair, bite yourself  
I don't know what I want  
If your father couldn't hold you while you cried  
hold yourself now  
In touching something, the light  
is not destroyed, but changed  
Polarised, amplified, focussed  
There's no box  
This is not  
conditional  
You don't have to be  
a good boy, a good girl  
I had a clear vision  
The light  
has to touch something



“The light” under construction

### **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to my principal supervisor, Dr Marcella Polain, for many helpful comments.

The poem “[ ]” was first published in *foam:e*.

“The light” was published first in *Uneven Floor* and later in *Writ Poetry Review*.

## Research statement

### *Research Background*

These poems sample the author's PhD project, which explores how poetry might harmonise 'Western' scientific and 'Eastern' spiritual worldviews, focusing primarily on modern physics, philosophical Daoism, and the ecosystemic perspective afforded by complexity theory. During the past two hundred years relations between poetry and science have been characterised by struggle, but recently, as shown by the critical scholarship of Robert Crawford (2006), Kurt Brown (2001) and others, they have started to become more complementary. This is partly because environmental and political concerns have provided a common enemy, but also because the nature of science has changed to accommodate relativity, quantum theory and the study of complex systems. These poems acknowledge science's authority without privileging it over more ancient investigative modes such as the mystical or meditative.

### *Research contribution*

These poems add significantly to the small corpus of Daoist-influenced English-language poetry, which includes twentieth-century work by Randolph Stow and Judith Wright, and twentieth- and twenty-first-century work by Ursula K. Le Guin. The project innovates thematically by attempting to juxtapose the insights of Daoism with those of physics and complexity theory. It also innovates theoretically, contributing to the scholarly discipline of creative writing by drawing upon both conceptual and orthodox poetics to propose and test a methodology, non-intentional composition, that strives toward the Daoist ideal of *wei wuwei* (action without action). It builds on Hazel Smith's (2006) emergence-based writing model.

### *Research significance*

Some of these poems have been published in well-known literary journals *foam:e*, *Writ Poetry Review*, and *Poetry Matters*. 'A coat of ashes' was shortlisted for the *Poetry Matters* Competition. Another poem from this project is to be published in Australia's leading online poetry journal *Cordite*. To date, the project has resulted in two invited public readings: Perth Poetry Club (24 September 2016) and Smiths Alternative Bookshop, Canberra (4 December 2016). At the 2016 Australian Universities Language and Literature Association Conference the author will speak on 'Poetry meets science'. UK-based literary journal *The High Window* has accepted her proposal for an essay on Daoist influences in Australian and overseas poetry.

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