

University of Canberra

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Making the City Otherwise: Ways of teaching the writing of poetry

Abstract

Because the city is no one thing; because it is at once protean and strange, in rendering cities in language poets often make imagery that speaks of the mysteriousness and incomprehensibility of city life, or of how cities mirror and distort our diverse human preoccupations. Poets also have a long tradition in modernity of attempting to articulate what the city might be, of trying to make sense of it, of embodying within the poetic some kind of acknowledgement, even reconciliation, of the contradictions that are the urban experience.

As teachers of writing, we have made use of our perception of the diversity, strangeness and everyday experience of the city of Canberra to bring a particular slant to teaching poetry. To do this we draw ideas and techniques from particular urban poetic texts and movements—for example, Frank O’Hara’s work and that of the early 20th-century Imagists.

These examples helped us formulate aspects of a project that was an experiment in pedagogy with the aim of encouraging students to reassess, reimage and re-examine a city that they believed they knew. Using as context an undergraduate literary studies unit, ‘Reading the City’, and based on the concepts outlined above, we devised four assessment tasks to engage students with little experience of writing poetry in making new poetic works. This paper presents findings of part of this practice-based teaching and research project.

Biographical notes

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Keywords: City, poetry, modernity, Imagism, Canberra, teaching

1. The city and poetry

Many poets have been and are city dwellers. As a result, it is not surprising that poets have often presented cities as places from which an action has started, which they have gravitated towards, or in which they have set their poems. The earliest extant long poem in human history—*The Epic of Gilgamesh*—begins in, and is to some extent anchored by, its vision of the city of Uruk. This is a place of departure and return, as well as (a somewhat problematised) haven from the outside world. Kovacs (*Gilgamesh* 1989: 3) notes that ‘[i]n the Standard Version the city’s common epithet is literally “Uruk-the-(sheep)Enclosure” or “Uruk-the-Sheepfold” ... In the Old Babylonian Version the city is characterised as “Uruk-of-the-City-Squares”’.

Further, as Homer tells us, a foundation poem of Western civilisation takes as its main subject the story of ‘Priam’s city to be plundered’ (*Iliad* 1951: 59). The *Iliad* and the Standard Version of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* reconstruct and embellish ideas of Troy and Uruk from a time that was long past even when the poems were written. For Homer and the *Gilgamesh* poet—as for us—Troy and Uruk were ideas of cities rather than real places. Burton Pike has written that

Since there has been literature, there have been cities in literature. We unthinkingly consider this phenomenon modern, but it goes back to the early epic and mythic thought. We cannot imagine *Gilgamesh*, the Bible, the *Iliad*, or the *Aeneid*, without their cities...(1981, 3)

No matter how many ruins of different ancient cities archaeologists locate, most people will only ever know Troy or Uruk through versions of the poems that bring them to life. In other words, ancient cities, as poetry presents them to us, are as much literary constructions as they are real places; and they are the kinds of literary constructions that resonate in myriad ways. In many cases they supply us with central ideas about what cities are or have been, and how they may be known.

In contemporary society, cities are not so much places of heroic action as complex—and frequently fairly opaque—sites of human activity. And, like the cities we find in poems such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and the *Iliad*, contemporary literary constructions of cities are frequently about a subjective *idea* of what cities are or may be. Even when cities are being written about by their present inhabitants, there seem to be innumerable

ways of knowing and representing them. Contemporary poets write of living in cities; of travelling through them; and of seeing them. They are interested in many of the different characteristics of the cities they know—what their population does; the different impressions cities make on different people; how cities may be encountered newly every day; and the nature of cities as entities. Charles Molesworth has suggested that poets are engaged in ‘turning [the city’s] perceptual chaos and disorienting simultaneity into a richness and multidimensionality of consciousness’ (Molesworth 1991, 21).

This is echoed by Michel de Certeau’s claims when viewing New York from the 110th floor of the World Trade Centre:

The 1370 foot high tower that serves as a prow for Manhattan continues to construct the fiction that creates readers, makes the complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text.... (1988, 92)

We can see this ‘fiction’ of the ‘city readable’ in Book VII of William Wordsworth’s ‘Prelude’. Here, we find a description of the visual chaos of 19th-century London:

Oh, blank confusion! true epitome
Of what the mighty City is herself,
To thousands upon thousands of her sons,
Living amid the same perpetual whirl
Of trivial objects, melted and reduced
To one identity, by differences
That have no law, no meaning, and no end—
Oppression, under which even highest minds
Must labour, whence the strongest are not free.
But though the picture weary out the eye,
By nature an unmanageable sight,
It is not wholly so to him who looks
In steadiness, who hath among least things
An under-sense of greatest; sees the parts
As parts, but with a feeling of the whole (1888, l. 722–736).

Wordsworth views London as a chaotic and problematic place which threatens to overwhelm and fragment individual identity; even to absorb every individuated experience into a trivial ‘perpetual whirl’. This is not only a form of ‘oppression’ but, for Wordsworth it characterises what must be resisted through an apprehension of ‘enduring Life’. The sheer confusion of the city is an opportunity to assert the importance of nature and beauty and, in doing so, to formulate a vision of the universal that Wordsworth believed lay underneath the city’s messy particularity:

This did I feel, in London’s vast domain.
The Spirit of Nature was upon me there;
The soul of Beauty and enduring Life
Vouchsafed her inspiration, and diffused,
Through meagre lines and colours, and the press
Of self-destroying, transitory things,
Composure, and ennobling Harmony. (1888, l. 765–771)

Yet, despite Wordsworth’s emphasis on large and virtuous abstractions such as ‘Beauty’, ‘Nature’ and ‘Life’, it is his ‘trivial objects’ that arguably have the most poetic power in these lines—partly because every city dweller knows intimately the kinds of proliferating objects he means. Every city is full of them. And, unlike Wordsworth, there are many dwellers in cities who find in such trivial objects an important and even fundamental part of a city’s animating life. Rather than being ‘melted and reduced’ they shine in the imagination as emblems of what cities contain and are.

Inevitably, how one approaches the experience of a city is partly a matter of perspective. According to Certeau, for example, Wordsworth’s rather magisterial vision is at odds with the ‘view from the street’ where:

The ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below,’ below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk—an elementary form of this experience of the city ... The paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude legibility. It is as though the practices organizing a bustling city were characterised by their blindness. (1988, 92–3)

If the poetry here in Certeau is ‘unrecognized’, nevertheless it is continually being made and, since Charles Baudelaire recouped the marginal figure of the flâneur as a template for the 19th-century Parisian poet, the poet of the modern city has partly been understood as someone who both travels through a city and loiters observantly within it. These poets continually find ways to ‘see’ their cities, while also repeatedly registering the limitations of their vision. They have no obvious recourse to Wordsworth’s grand gestures and, to a greater or lesser extent, tend to be aware of the lack of legibility of their work, and even of the condition of blindness that Certeau comments on.

For example, Hazel Smith (2000, 58) makes a related point in discussing the way in which the poems of New Yorker Frank O’Hara ‘vary in the degree to which they dislocate the city ... Poems such as “The Day Lady Died”, marked by road grids, architectural landmarks and time checks, could be said to be the ultimate in mapping it.’ She then quotes the opening of this well-known poem by O’Hara which memorialises the singer Billie Holiday (O’Hara 1995, 325):

It is 12:20 in New York a Friday
three days after Bastille day, yes
it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine
because I will get off the 4:19 in Easthampton
at 7:15 and then go straight to dinner
and I don’t know the people who will feed me

This poem’s conceit is that it follows a journey on foot that O’Hara makes through New York. It is a journey that celebrates the quotidian at the same time as it claims a special significance for the day in which it is set.

O’Hara contrasts the almost casually presented facts of the shoeshine he gets and the dinner he attends (and note that there is a kind of opaqueness suggested by the line ‘I don’t know the people who will feed me’) with the transformative image of Billie Holiday whispering ‘a song along the keyboard / to Mal Waldron’ while ‘everyone and I stopped breathing’. Billie Holiday’s art—and by implication, art in general—not only transforms the poet’s experience of quotidian reality but resonates and reverberates backwards into the poem, emphasising the significance of references to writers and

painters such as Genet, Verlaine and Bonnard. The poem celebrates the power of art and its ineffability and, in doing so, celebrates something of its own gestures, too—its willingness to ‘map’ aspects of humanity as the highly inflected and nuanced culture of a city reveals it to be. The poem also celebrates what it cannot see—not just the hosts of the coming dinner, but the ways in which people live and die. It is only in retrospect that Billie Holiday’s performance while O’Hara leant ‘on the john door in the 5 SPOT’ is invested with the poignancy of her early death at the age of 44.

As this poem celebrates and exemplifies art as well as ordinary life, and as the city is characterised as the purveyor and provider of art as well as of cigarettes, so the quotidian is imagined partly in terms of art’s transformative possibilities. The poem’s linguistic perambulation becomes a celebration of the city’s capacity to unite the two. The large and complex reality of the city cannot be fully comprehended by the poet, but the poet’s ‘practices’ are not entirely characterised by blindness. Aspects of the city are seen clearly through the poet’s vision of his journey, from ‘down below’, even if what he sees is only a partial map of a larger and almost infinitely complex reality. O’Hara is aware of the limitations of what he observes, and in focusing on a journey from particular place to particular place, and through various specific personal considerations and reflections, he makes a virtue of his limitations. His particular journey becomes emblematic of something much grander—nothing less than all of the journeys that New Yorkers everywhere might be making on the same day.

It is these tensions: between totalising and particular visions, between the small and the large, the specific and the emblematic, the quotidian and the ineffable; between legibility and illegibility; between the bird’s eye view and the view ‘down below’; between recognised and unrecognised experiences of the urban, that makes the city of so interesting as the subject of the pedagogical poetic project we conducted.

2. An experiment in pedagogy

In many ways the city we live in—Canberra—is an exemplary place to undertake a project about poetry and the city. Although its status as a fully-fledged ‘city’ is frequently questioned (because it is relatively small, relatively clean, relatively well organised, etc), it is Australia’s capital city. It is a suitable place in which to ask students to reflect upon their preconceptions as to what makes a city; and to consider, as they do so, how they might make poetry out of their experience of an urban environment. Further, Canberra’s status as the ‘nation’s capital’ overlays and competes with the

everyday, mundane experience of life as people know it here: the world of work and commerce; consumption and education; suburbs and automobiles. Canberra's legibility as both national capital and planned city is rarely in question to those outside of its borders. Yet outsiders' assumptions about Canberra sometimes sit awkwardly with, or are tangential to, the lived experience of many of its inhabitants.

Students for our project were drawn from an undergraduate cohort in the Writing Program, Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Canberra. The unit these students were enrolled in is a level 3 undergraduate unit, Reading the City (i.e. ideally taken in the third year of a three-year undergraduate Bachelor of Writing degree). Students in this cohort range across disciplines within the faculty, but most of them study creative writing or media studies. Writing degree students necessarily have an exposure to poetry as part of their coursework, but this is not the case across all of the cohort. For a number of students this project provided an opportunity for them to compose poetry for the first time.

Having taught Reading the City as a unit in varying forms for five years, Shane Strange was concerned that he had not developed a method or mode of teaching poetry that was more-or-less equally effective for apprentice poets and non-poets alike. The results of poetry tasks undertaken by members of the student cohort were often relatively unrewarding. Students who submitted poetry sometimes did so as the 'easy option' (i.e. they were required to produce a work, or works, with a lower word count than notionally equivalent prose fiction works or essays). They did this without necessarily understanding established poetic conventions, techniques or traditions or the kinds of complexities of insight and language use that poetry might open up for them. In many cases, and connected with the aforementioned issues, students appeared to be under the impression that the 'poetic' was somehow abstracted from their daily real world experience. They often produced verses of conventional rhyming couplets; or equally conventional, and often fragmented, free verse.

In many cases these students were trying something beyond their expertise or disciplinary strength. Some of them didn't study writing and, in writing poetry, wanted to do little more than try something new. Given this, while the project we introduced in the Reading the City unit aimed to connect poetry to the city, it also, and more generally, aimed to provide a better pedagogical context for writing poetry at all—and to do so in

a way that would be useful to diverse students attempting to produce work in a difficult form. It was an attempt to instil in them, in a short space of time, the beginnings of an appreciation and understanding of writing poetry that was connected to key 20th-century poetic developments. It was a way of saying to them that poets have been writing about cities for a long time and that they might like to think of their own work as part of that ongoing poetic enterprise.

More generally, in trying to develop ways of connecting poetic technique and the urban environment, we made use of an experiential, practice-led methodology that tried to subvert preconceptions amongst our cohort of undergraduate students as to what constitutes 'poetry', and what constitutes 'the city'—and what the relationship between them might be. We wanted, in other words, to concentrate instead on specific and limited poetic techniques that were closely allied with various poetic practices and traditions; that clearly related to an experience of city life; and which tended to emphasise the quotidian rather than the abstract or generalised.

We constructed a series of four assessment exercises—although we report in detail on only one of these here—that allied an urban-centred concept or experience with a poetic one. Students had to work through a journaling process of 250-500 words describing their thought processes and experiences about a particular set task *before* writing poetry. They were asked to follow this journaling by writing poems with certain particular features that drew on the journaling they had done. While students were not required to produce fully evolved poems, they were required to show a developing understanding of poetic practice. They were asked to record their thoughts on both the process and the outcome of their work. This process aimed to deepen an understanding of the city space through experiential learning, as well as an enhanced understanding of poetry.

A key feature of each of the four assessment items we offered students was that all involved prior reading and discussion of the city and poetry, and all were constrained by the clear limits placed on poems that students might write. By limiting student options we were able to remove any preconceptions that writing poetry was a realm free of formal requirements where there were no rules. We required students to think carefully as to how their specific content, largely identified through their journaling, might be transformed by our imposed restraints on their poetic outputs, asking them to focus on the excision of extraneous language or imagery.

3. Jim Jarmusch poster on an avenue—observation/imagery

The four tasks that we set students involved 1) observation and figurative language; 2) walking and rhythm; 3) re-imagining the city as utopia or dystopia; and 4) driving through the city and experiencing movement. Each required students to use a journaling process and to write poems. The first of these tasks—which is the example we will discuss today—was a way of introducing students to the imagistic nature of much contemporary poetry; and, in particular, to the way that poets use imagery to animate their visions of cities and to transform and gesture at—or symbolise or encapsulate—the brick and concrete and rubble of their cities; their thoroughfares and byways; their buildings and abandoned ground. Typically, we know these familiar features of city living through our senses.

Kenneth Slessor's affectionate image of William Street in Sydney (1994, 48) is one example of a poem that invokes powerful sensory experiences of city life:

The red globes of light, the liquor-green,
The pulsing arrows and the running fire
Spilt on the stones, go deeper than a stream;
You find this ugly, I find it lovely.

Ghosts' trousers, like the dangle of hung men,
In pawnshop-windows, bumping knee by knee,
But none inside to suffer or condemn;
You find this ugly, I find it lovely.

Smells rich and rasping, smoke and fat and fish
And puffs of paraffin that crimp the nose,
Of grease that blesses onions with a hiss;
You find it ugly, I find it lovely.

The dips and molls, with flip and shiny gaze
(Death at their elbows, hunger at their heels)
Ranging the pavements of their pasturage;
You find it ugly, I find it lovely.

Slessor's deft handling of imagery, which combines both the very familiar ('Smells rich and rasping, smoke and fat and fish') with a strange, almost bizarre re-imagining of the familiar ('Ghosts' trousers, like the dangle of hung men') creates a strangely-lit image of William Street, due not only to the explicit lighting effects of the poem (the lurid 'red globes' and 'liquor-green' for example) but to the illumination afforded to William Street by the poem's abundant and complex imagery. This imagery engages strongly with the senses but, more than that, its over-spilling density creates a crowded sense that William Street is defined not just by what travels along it but by what it contains. Perhaps most tellingly the use of value-charged words (such as 'bless', 'molls' and 'Death') invokes potent, occasionally clashing values and ideas. And the poem's refrain, 'You find it ugly, I find it lovely' invokes an ambivalent idea of the city.

In the observation/figurative language assessment task, we asked students to work with such well-observed details and to explore the transformation of such details into sensuous imagery. We were helped not only by the example of Slessor's poem, but by the relatively severe restrictions of form we imposed, drawing on some of the strictures advocated by the Imagist movement that was influential in London not long before the First World War. Imagist tenets—published under F.S Flint's name but largely written by Ezra Pound—included 'Direct treatment of the "thing", whether subjective or objective' (Flint 2013, 199). We gave examples of Imagist works to the students: one was William Carlos Williams' well known 'The Red Wheelbarrow', from 1923—almost entirely a composite verbal image (Williams 1976, 57)—and another was Ezra Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro':

The apparition of these faces in a crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough (Pound 1990, 111).

Students were asked to observe and record a 'view' of Canberra. We anticipated that they may go to one of the city's many high observation points to try to imagine the city as a kind of totality—as Wordsworth did in 'Prelude'—but instead the best work came from the street level, much in the manner suggested by Certeau. Students were asked to write two poems of only 20 words each. Each poem was to contain a metaphor or simile; a geometric shape and a colour. Here are some examples:

Jim Jarmusch Poster on an Avenue

The vampires' eyes
Suck the pale green
From the drugged circles of traffic lights
Like absinthe from a human vein

The Arc Cinema Façade as a Boy on Downers

It is a livid face
Pink light splashed
On the rectangles
Of clammy concrete cheekbones
A hyacinth lancing a bruise

-Alice James

Pale Peach Prisons

Empty roads simply

sober veins, lined by

dank, pale, peach palaces.

Wet tiles prompt

cascading pyramids,

bound by unbowed bars.

-George Gazis

Constitutional Avenue

Beetles floundering
Absconding
Regaining their dens

Like a trapdoor spider,
Crescent fangs exposed,
The glossy-backed parliament
Brews
Beneath bloodwood sky

-Bek Axelby

Parking

Yellow lights
driving
In
circles, reflected
on
every
surface;
A labyrinth with few Broken paths.
-Kaitlyn Smith

One sees in these examples of the poetry produced by students an intensity and stillness of observation aligned with the decisive selection of subject matter and controlled writing that exhibits significant attention to diction and phrasing. The city is depicted in small vistas, bathed in colour, drawn tightly into what is particular and observable, yet also—and simultaneously—it is imaginatively transformed.

Students reflections in their journals are explicit about this point, emphasising their poems' relationship to the everyday and the perceived repetitions of urban life:

[this poem] reflect[s] on the feeling of being weighed down by just do the same old things day in and day out.

...the almost hypnotic task of driving looking for parking spots...weaving through the car park, a repetitive task driving round and round

And, in line with the stated aim of the task, students were cognisant of the power of visual imagery drawn from observation:

I wanted a sense of intense colour and light to appear in the poems

I personally love the rain, and I wanted the first poem to show a certain sense of beauty, how the light reflecting off rain drops can be even more beautiful than the sun in a perfectly clear sky

Vibrant colours attracting their audience, parlour tricks.

And there is also reflection on the act of observation itself (i.e. the task required students to explicitly engage in a process of looking actively at the city, sometimes in new ways:

This represents how I started looking at the rainfall on the streets and how my sight was drawn upwards, all the way to the moon.

When observing a nature strip it is necessary to gaze for an extended period of time.

As well as attending to observed details, most student reflections indicated an attempt to draw out some general aspect of city life based upon lived—and often felt—experience: isolation; repetition; monotony; seclusion. One student offered a critique of consumption and the blandness of shopping malls; others reflected on the encroachment of the edges of city space on the surrounding environment. And another commented on what was not always observable:

...both my poems attempt to engage in the potential invisibility of a person in an urban environment.

A number of students represented Canberra in ways that might also characterise other urban environments. But, as some of the details of the poems quoted above reveal, there are also various particularities about Canberra itself:

There is a massive Currajong tree and a bench next to it...you can see the entire Tuggeranong valley from there, as well as Weston Creek and see it stretch around to Woden at the other side of Mt. Taylor.

And this sense of Canberra's particularity includes markers of Canberra's role as the national capital:

I wanted to describe how architecture expresses power...Parliament House signifies its power to Canberra and the rest of Australia.
...how Canberra functions as a custodian of intellectual and artistic property.
Metaphors liken streets to serpents, the steel flagpole of Parliament House to a mountain and the lights upon it to gems in a tiara.

Perhaps most instructive, in terms of this exercise, were the ways that students operated within the poetic restraints we placed upon them. These provoked more thoughtful students into grappling with their language choices to meet the 20 word count and the requirement for some imagistic precision:

The last line of my poem...would probably be seen as imprecise and therefore frivolous adornment
I could have been more direct by just using the word 'receipt' instead of describing the colour and shape
In the first poem, I dislike the word 'dichotomy'

Overall, these reflections on the act of making poetry in relation to Canberra as a city explore not only the universal aspects of urban life as reflected in the particularities of the Canberran urban environment but also the lived experience of its denizens. Additionally it shows an engagement with both observation as a key technique in both understanding the city and in transforming that vision into poetic language.

4. Conclusion

While writing students make up the bulk of the undergraduate poets represented above, a number of students from varying disciplines tried the poetry assessments. The observation and figurative language exercise demonstrates that by carefully defining and delimiting the task of writing poetry, by focusing it on observations about a city that students lived in and knew, and by associating it with reflective journaling, students with relatively little or no prior experience of writing poetry were able to produce works with real promise. The Imagist techniques that were central to the exercise, and the associated reading, enabled students to focus carefully on their choice of diction, and to make clear connections between observed, quotidian detail and their more figurative poetic gestures.

More generally, this exercise affirms how cities easily generated poems for students, providing a great deal of colourful, suggestive, often sensual imagery. Our students' poems provide no overall map of Canberra, but they reaffirm that although they were unable or unwilling to try to comprehend a whole city in their short poems, they were able to map, and reimagine, key aspects of what they saw and knew.

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We are grateful to the following students for allowing them to use their work in the writing of this article:

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Brett, A., 2014. Journal entry: Reading the City. University of Canberra, Bruce.

Gazis, G., 2014a. Journal entry: Reading the City. University of Canberra, Bruce.

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