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# Maggie O'Sullivan : states of transformation

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## MAGGIE O’SULLIVAN: States of Transformation

Maggie O’Sullivan’s ‘Busk, Pierce’ from *States of Emergency* (1987) is a remarkable poem which is exemplary of the sheer energy and exuberance of her output. It is also especially interesting by virtue of its inclusion of a diagram taken from Claude Lévi-Strauss’ book *Structural Anthropology* (1968). In this essay I offer a detailed reading of the poem, and explore it through the link with Lévi-Strauss, developing an awareness of the metaphor of shamanism in relation to O’Sullivan’s poetics. I then trace this poetics in the different context of O’Sullivan’s collaboration with the North American Language Poet Bruce Andrews, entitled *EXCLA* (1993), drawing comparisons between their approaches and recognising how the shared technique of the book enables both Andrews’ socio-linguistic critique and O’Sullivan’s ‘shamanic’ approach.

O’Sullivan’s poetry strikes the eye and ear first before specific meanings begin to establish themselves. Short lines, often reminiscent of Anglo Saxon alliterative verse: ‘guttural gardenias | screed | sneak’, ‘leaden | belenders | lie & blister’, and multiple margins skew across the page instilling the poem’s figure with kinetic energy. Instead of syntactically normative sentences, the main unit is the phrase, poised and juxtaposed in space and given extra energy by the high frequency of neologisms. Constructing a meaning-paraphrase of the poem necessitates a focus on local intensities – as the poem is structured in an accretive, musical way, rather than by narrative or lyric argument.

The poem opens with the italicised phrase ‘*Injure Tinglit*’ which acts almost as a sub-title. ‘*Tinglit*’ contains within it an unavoidable echo of the Tlingit: the Native American tribe of peoples who inhabit parts of Alaska. To ‘*Injure Tinglit*’ might be an imperative from another voice being confronted in the poem – as if to announce the concerns of the poem as a possible protest against the persecution of indigenous peoples.

The second line ‘fusen deam stroboscope deam skidder’ appears linked to the first in that both are separated from the main body of the text by a long dash. The line illustrates O’Sullivan’s juxtaposing approach to syntax and can be read as enacting an exchange of semantic energy from one end to the other. This arises from the two end words ‘fusen’ and ‘skidder’: ‘fusen’ suggesting a state of fusedness, perhaps coherency or burnt-outness, and ‘skidder’ suggesting one who habitually skids, careers, perhaps out of control. Between these two words and the central word ‘stroboscope’ – an instrument for determining speeds of rotation by flashing intermittently – the repetition of the neologism ‘deam’ is suggestive. One can imagine the line as a small machine with the stroboscope in the centre sending out light flashes (or ‘d-r-eams’) which illuminate the words ‘fusen’ and ‘skidder’ at the ends, both of which may be outcomes of some kind of process – ‘fusen’ denoting the receipt of the charge and ‘skidder’ the physical use of that energy. Placed near the beginning of the poem, and in proximity to ‘*Injure Tinglit*’ this line may be read as enacting the means by which this issue will be explored – through an exploration of the materiality of language, rather than through didactic, rhetorical means.

The neologism ‘TLOKETS’ stands at the opening of the poem proper: a suggestive agglomerate of tokens, lockets, tickets. If these are what the reader needs to gain entry to the poem then it seems we are immediately within a register of mourning and death:

TLOKETS

mourn, leaden

belenders

lie & blister———  
fetched silvers, these  
NECRO  
guttural gardenias———

(O'Sullivan, 1987: unp.)

Nevertheless, it is difficult to read these lines with anything like a stable paraphrase-able content. That the 'TLOKETS' 'mourn, leaden' suggests a possible echo of lead figurines used in ancient mourning practices – whilst 'belenders', also a possible object of 'leaden', evokes both the notion of 'blending', which seems an apt term for how neologisms are formed in this poem, and a new noun evoking something borrowed or lent. 'Belenders' can also be the subject of 'lie & blister' where 'lie' is suggestively ambiguous. The theme of death becomes writ large in the word '*NECRO*', whilst the 'fetched silvers' suggests some kind of salver, as if something is being presented to someone in authority. The 'guttural gardenias' conflate orality with the conventionally mute, in a way which seems in tune with other evocations of death, objects and nature in this poem, underscored by alliteration.

The verbs and potential verbs here: 'mourn', 'belenders', 'lie', 'blister', 'fetched' seem to sketch out an impression of a funerary rite vitiated with exchanges, deceit and injury in the absence of the power of the dead: as if a vacuum has been created which is releasing old hostilities. The subsequent lines 'screed | sneak tintering || Grief Entry' can be read as extending this argument: the screed – an unduly long harangue that takes the form of a list of grievances – seems an appropriate artefact in this provisional semantic context. That it is linked with 'sneak tintering' suggests a divisive cunning taking the form of tinting or tinkering with that list which evokes the 'Grief Entry' of the funeral itself, or tomb.

The 'screed' joins up with other intensities in the poem which seem to figure the position of the maker of the poem within the possible context being described: a 'Jagged Pebble Song' is evoked, as is an 'inadequate coal'; suggestive of the Shelleyan 'fading coal' of the mind in creation. What links these evocations of text together are the different forms of rock: pebble and coal, alongside a possible pun on 'scree' – as a pile of loose rocks on a mountainside. Another sustained section also seems to enact statements about the nature of textuality:

O  
how the filthy  
Keepsakes  
Truckle Back Tripling  
Ash.  
Ink, launjer, red on leash,  
*BLOOD.*  
Crooked Swatch (ish. yellow)———  
Fling Flaunden  
Sheenies  
Quick Poppy Tie of Axe———  
Drumcut strip strung twists  
brooch  
&

pen Funerary tabletter, armistice,  
Drown!

(O'Sullivan, 1987)

In this section more conventional lyric markers such as 'O' and the concluding exclamation give firmer indicators of tone. It is possible that the *tlokets* of earlier are refigured as 'filthy | Keepsakes' – their possible function as grave objects reversed to what one might carry to remember the dead. The attitude towards these objects as 'filthy' suggests rejection and anger and, as the section builds, it becomes possible to place the death that is hinted of as taking place in the context of war. The keepsakes 'Truckle Back Tripling | Ash', where 'Truckle' – with its possible meanings of submitting to authority as well as a pun on 'trickle' (as in to 'trickle back') – results in the 'Tripling' (i.e. a multiplication) of 'Ash', which could bring the crematoria of Auschwitz into the poem's frame. At this point the *tlokets* and the filthy keepsakes might be seen as the plunder extracted by the Nazis from their victims. The next line appears to be refiguring the writer's place in this situation in a complex way – perhaps one informed by an Adornoesque poetics: 'Ink, launjer, red on leash, | BLOOD'. The mention of 'Ink' suggests the writer's activity, although the proximity of *blood* suggests an identification between the two substances. Whilst 'launjer' is hard to resolve semantically, it can be heard as a pun on 'lounger' – almost as if the writer is being taken to task for a relaxed complicity in the face of horror. Like the word *necro* earlier – the word *blood* emphasises the concerns here – that 'red' is 'on leash' suggests that it is controlled but can also be *un-leashed* at any point.

'Crooked Swatch (ish. yellow)' evokes the criminality of the situation, its crookedness, with 'Swatch', read as a sample of cloth qualified in an unusual way as '(ish. yellow)', might suggest a Star of David. The imperative to 'Fling Flaunden | Sheenies' evokes uncomfortably the disposal of corpses – reading 'Sheenies' as a derogatory term for Jew, and 'Flaunden' as a corrupted flaunt. The next line 'Quick Poppy Tie of Axe' also seems to stage a scene of execution, although the word 'Poppy' might be recuperated more straightforwardly in a frame connected to the First World War, as does 'armistice' a few lines later. The 'Drumcut strips strung twists | brooch', with its virtuoso sound play, seems to turn back towards a possible figure of an artist/musician, but the 'pen Funerary tabletter' seems more strongly to evoke a writer who bears witness to events by pen, on the tablet of a gravestone or monument and possibly even by the 'tab' and 'letter' keys of a typewriter. That an armistice is mentioned shortly before the exclamation 'Drown!' creates a pessimistic tone to the close of this section – although one which seems vitiated by a righteous anger that is evoked as much by the sheer energy of sound and rhythm as by its connotative possibilities.

This anger can be felt elsewhere in the poem in lines like 'Dolly Puke, Doily flak, Pinnie Gullet' where, although the intensity of sound play almost boils over into pathos, there seems to be an argument of association implicating a feminist critique of female domestic experience. This is suggested by the metonymic chain of *dolly-doily-pinnie* linked with violent symptoms of rebellious reaction: *puke*, *flak* and *gullet* – where the *gullet* functions as the medium for vomit and invective. This line is immediately followed by 'KISS MY ARSE || rebellion | backwards', where the rebellion so strongly evoked seems rather condemned to failure. The poem ends with a forceful conclusion enacting the 'states of emergency' of the book's title:

*zigzag, plateau, zigzag*

## GRIEVED, GROUND,

knarls move/Expulsions Deal/Galliards

Brung,

*FLAME & WILDERNESS.*

(O'Sullivan, 1987)

The '*zigzag, plateau, figure*' suggests a graph of intensities where a line is measuring some kind of process or activity with peaks and levels. The 'GRIEVED, GROUND' echoes the 'Grief Entry' of the earlier part of the poem, and yet *ground's* association with land appears to historicize the phenomenon of death as, potentially, a consequence of colonial conquest. O'Sullivan's awareness of the history of Ireland (see my 1999 interview with O'Sullivan) may be relevant here as the word 'Expulsions' – alongside the actions of moving, dealing and bringing – suggests processes associated with colonial projects. 'Knarls' functions as a possible reference to wood, whilst 'Galliards' – a Celtic word meaning a dance in triple time (which looks back to the 'tripling' encountered earlier and the threefold processes described here) – is more difficult to resolve. It can also mean 'valiant strength' which could be positive or ironic in this context. At any rate, the poem refuses to resolve any semantic tension and closes with the bleak invocation of '*FLAME & WILDERNESS*' – evoking a past, present or future disaster.

Such paraphrases may or may not convince a reader tackling the interpretive difficulties of this poem. Indeed, it may be inappropriate to attempt to force such a poem to *mean* when it invests so much energy in avoiding easily recuperable patterns of sense. What one experiences instead is an overwhelming sense of immersion in language – in the very interstices of meaning and history. Robert Sheppard has described this poetry as 'the very creation of meaning' (Sheppard, 1999: p. 52), which gets close to explaining why it is hard to paraphrase it. Despite this, one certainly registers strong meaning-impressions on reading the work, due at least in part to its powerful and relentless sound symbolism. As many commentators have pointed out, these impressions are particularly rich when hearing the work read by the author.

There is indeed reason to suggest that O'Sullivan regards her writing as primarily an aural experience which is then notated on the secondary medium of the page. In his essay 'The Contemporary Poetry Reading' (1998), Peter Middleton provides a valuable summary of various commentators' responses to O'Sullivan's work, whilst speculating on the relationship between speech and writing. Pointing to the 'indeterminacy of writing's representation of sound' Middleton suggests that poets may be 'trying to utilize an imperfect set of written signs to indicate aural complexities that then compel new forms of recognition of links between thought and language' (Middleton, 1998: p. 288). This almost suggests that the performance of a poem could be considered as primary, whilst the text exists only as a notation of it, a score for re-performance. O'Sullivan herself has discussed this relationship in a statement she produced in *Word Score Utterance Choreography* (1998):

spoken or performed aloud – a text dances its  
sonic selves in depths different from written or  
marked – different weights vernaculars gestures  
colourings & magnetisms – different mobilities

different errings birth & shimmer

(O'Sullivan, 1998: unp.)

Similarly, she characterises the process of writing as one in which

i allow the musics and airs of the verbal word/sound  
patterns in the ear my work is gestured or danced around  
to suggest their visual & sonic locations within the  
page's ground

(O'Sullivan, 1998)

The latter remark suggests that for O'Sullivan the act of writing is itself a kind of performance. She refers to the 'constructional | performative dynamics & magnetisms of a text's | emerging' and yet when it comes to live performance part of the intention is 'to enact | &/or further improvise/discourse upon the | marks/signs of a text by bodying forth fresh | aural oral torsional terrains' (O'Sullivan, 1998).

There is, however, a part of 'Busk, Pierce' which remains relatively silent on the page, transmitting as it does a primarily visual impression. Whilst suggestive of a scored sound pattern, to sound this figure with the voice would be a challenge:

1	2		4		7	
	2	3	4		6	8
1			4	5	7	8
1	2			5	7	
		3	4		6	8

(O'Sullivan, 1987)

An identical pattern of numbers is also to be found in Claude Lévi-Strauss' book *Structural Anthropology* (1968), suggesting that O'Sullivan is in some way 'quoting' it in her poem. In order to consider what this might mean in the context of the poem so far read, it is necessary to look at this design in its original context.

In Lévi-Strauss' book the pattern functions as a diagram illustrating his thinking about the structure of myths. Using Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*, Lévi-Strauss approaches myths as particular recombinations (*parole*) of a finite number of elements (*langue*). Each element in itself contains a link between a certain function and a given subject (e.g. 'Oedipus kills his father'), which Lévi-Strauss calls a 'relation'. However, the meaning of the myth is generated by the way in which these relations are combined rather than the relations themselves. He calls these recombinations of elements or relations, *bundles*:

The true constituent units of a myth are not the isolated relations but *bundles of such relations*, and it is only as bundles that these relations can be put to use and combined so as to produce a meaning.

(Lévi-Strauss, 1968: p. 211)

Thus behind any individual telling, or *parole*, of the myth one senses the *langue* behind it, and, behind that, a '*super-langue*' which holds the fundamental meaning. As Terence Hawkes notes:

a 'bundle' can best be defined as all the versions of a particular 'relation' that have ever existed, being simultaneously perceived [...] through whichever particular version is being used at any particular time.

(Hawkes, 1992: p. 44)

Lévi-Strauss is therefore seeking to describe the interaction between the synchronic and diachronic, between *langue* and *parole*, that the telling of a myth like the myth of Oedipus will always generate. Thus myth acts on both axes at once like a score which must be read diachronically left to right, page by page and synchronically up and down – the verticality creating a bundle of relations. In a performance we encounter the score only diachronically and infer the significance of each bundle. The diagram that O'Sullivan quotes in 'Busk, Pierce' is used by Lévi-Strauss to illustrate his decoding of the Oedipus myth. He introduces it in the following way:

The myth will be treated as an orchestra score would be if it were unwittingly considered as a unilinear series; our task is to re-establish the correct rearrangement. Say for instance we were confronted with the sequence of the type 1, 2, 4, 7, (8), 2, 3, 4, 6, 8 [...], the assignment being to put all the 1's together, all the 2's, the 3's, etc.; the result is a chart.

(Lévi-Strauss, 1968: p. 213)

After attempting such an arrangement with the elements of the Oedipus myth, Lévi-Strauss asserts:

Were we to *tell* the myth, we would disregard the columns and read the rows from left to right and from top to bottom. But if we want to *understand* the myth, then we will have to disregard one half of the diachronic dimension (top to bottom) and read from left to right, column after column, each column being considered as a unit.

(Lévi-Strauss, 1968: p. 214)

Thus generating the *langue* of the myth, Lévi-Strauss is able to offer a fundamental meaning of it in structural terms. This method also allows him to shift from one variant of the myth to another.

O'Sullivan's use of the diagram in her poem invites several interpretive possibilities. Firstly, she may be using it to represent the processes she sees as extant in her own work. Since the poem might be said to break down into a succession of small clusters or intensities, demarcated by space, sound and punctuation, O'Sullivan may be proposing that these may be read vertically as well as horizontally and treated as bundles that form part of a larger structure. As a poet who is concerned very much with performance and treating the page as a score (indeed Lévi-Strauss uses this metaphor to describe his diagram) this may be a gesture to remind the reader to examine the text in this synchronic way rather than purely diachronically. Having suggested this, all sorts of problems emerge about how distinct these units really are and whether a synchronic combination into a pattern would yield any new readings.

Alternatively, it is possible that O'Sullivan offers the figure as a model of structure to be criticised for its oversimplification and subordination of the materiality of language to larger themes. Furthermore, O'Sullivan might also be placing the diagram in her text as an act of

appropriation: removing it from structural anthropology to poetry, using the technique of collage. We might ask if it is still possible to read this table as if it *were* Lévi-Strauss's diagram. Arguably it has simply become an abstract complex which suggests both horizontal and vertical reading, and a possible sound score.

Yet another possibility is that O'Sullivan is expressing an identification with the function of myth, the diagram as a kind of utilitarian, even 'magic', figure that could be applied in a certain situation. It is at this point that I wish to turn to the chapter in Lévi-Strauss' book that precedes the chapter containing his diagram. This chapter is concerned with shamanism, to which Lévi-Strauss also applies a structural analysis and interpretation, and considers the role of myth in shamanic healing.

Shamanism is a loaded term in considering O'Sullivan's work as it has become an oft-used metaphor by her critics. The shamanic metaphor has to be handled with care as it has accrued so many associations and meanings in Western culture that its usefulness in discussing O'Sullivan's poetics may be obscured. Part of the reason for the use of this metaphor is O'Sullivan's titling of her 1993 book *In the House of the Shaman* after a drawing by Joseph Beuys. Beuys' relationship to the idea of shamanism is well-documented, and O'Sullivan herself underwent a 'transformative' experience in working on a documentary on Beuys in 1988. O'Sullivan's affinities with Beuys are openly declared in her hybrid prose and poetry poetics piece 'riverrunning (realisations)' (1995), dedicated to Language Poet Charles Bernstein. In this text, O'Sullivan links Beuys' influence to that of Kurt Schwitters in encouraging her to 'look away from, beyond the given' at 'THE UNREGARDED, the found, the cast offs, the dismembered materials of culture' (O'Sullivan, 1995: p. 68). She further describes her relationship with Beuys as 'I am tributing his work: fluid, changing, inviting new material, urging new responses. His urge to begin with mistakes, to show frailty' (O'Sullivan, 1995: p. 69). O'Sullivan has explored this influence not only as a writer but also as a painter – some of her assemblage works are described in/as poems in *Palace of Reptiles* (2003), and she has presented several book works as amalgams of the textual and the visual – most strikingly in *Red Shifts* (2001).

The second book of *In the House of the Shaman*, 'Kinship with animals', has an epigraph from Beuys:

To stress the idea of transformation and of substance. This is precisely what the shaman does in order to bring about change and development; his nature is therapeutic.

(O'Sullivan, 1993: p. 28)

In an interview I conducted with O'Sullivan in 1999 she stressed her view of the transformative nature of language as linked to the materiality of language: analogous to Beuys' terms of transformation and substance. I want to consider what transformation in particular might mean within the context of the metaphor of shamanism, and what implications it has for understanding O'Sullivan's poetics.

Lévi-Strauss in *Structural Anthropology* describes shamanic healing as follows:

That the mythology of the shaman does not correspond to an objective reality does not matter. The sick woman believes in the myth and belongs to a society that believes in it. The tutelary spirits and malevolent spirits, the supernatural monsters and magical animals, are all part of a coherent system on which the native conception of the universe is founded. The



sick woman accepts these mythical beings or, more accurately, she has never questioned their existence. What she does not accept are the incoherent and arbitrary pains, which are an alien element in her system but which the shaman, calling upon myth, will re-integrate within a whole where everything is meaningful. Once the sick woman understands, however, she does more than resign herself; she gets well.

(Lévi-Strauss, 1968: p. 197)

He analyses this healing in the following way:

The shaman provides the sick woman with a *language*, by means of which unexpressed, and otherwise inexpressible, psychic states can be immediately expressed. And it is the transition to this verbal expression – at the same time making it possible to undergo in an ordered and intelligible form a real experience that would otherwise be chaotic and inexpressible – which induces the release of the physiological process, that is, the reorganisation, in a favourable direction, of the process to which the sick woman is subjected.

(Lévi-Strauss, 1968: p. 198)

This description seems analogous to the kind of metaphorically shamanic activity that Beuys believed himself to be engaged in, although Beuys in fact redirects the healing process from order to chaos when he describes the transformation process in his art as an attempt

to break off all the residues present in the subconscious and to transfer a chaotically detached orderly procedure into turbulence, the beginning of the new always taking place in chaos

(cited in Kuspit, 1995: p. 38)

Beuys' healing therefore takes place in the context of breaking out of old ordered patterns into a therapeutically 'healthy chaos' (Kuspit, 1995: p. 38). He attempts this in his art by constructing performances which represent psychic states by refiguring various symbols: the cross, the hare, the piano. This seems analogous to the process in O'Sullivan's writing whereby the lack of any framing narrator or orderly described setting faces us with an apparent chaos of language where words are transformed and re-ordered into new patterns.

Most criticisms of the use of the shamanic metaphor in Western art attack the Western idealisation of the shaman as an entranced, wise and benevolent figure as a distraction from recognising his historical implication in societal power structures. Ironically, it was precisely this more historicized view of shamanism that Beuys was criticised for when he was accused of being a showman rather than a shaman. It seems possible, however, to collapse these distinctions one into the other – that shamanism only gains its power by the force of its illusions, its showmanship, the power of its stories. Whilst O'Sullivan disavows any straightforward understanding of her work as therapeutic, it seems possible to read her work as 'shamanic' to the extent that its transformations of normative language amount to the appearance of an urgent re-ordering of marginalized psychological states into something approaching a healthy chaos. In 'riverrunning (realisations)' O'Sullivan makes the statement that her works are

Engaging with the OUT, the UNDER – the UN – the OTHER-THAN, the NON & the LESS

– transgression; trespass; disparity; subversion: Milton's 'UNTWISTING THE CHAINS THAT TIE'

(O'Sullivan, 1995: p. 68)

Therefore she seems to be engaging in a poetics which seeks to articulate areas of experience that are not normally recognised in mainstream culture. Thus O'Sullivan's use of Lévi-Strauss's diagram might ultimately be intended to evoke something of the power of myth as a structure for 'overcoming contradiction' (Lévi Strauss, 1968: p. 229). 'Busk Pierce' atomises meaning whilst, at the same time, appearing to negotiate a history of struggle: of the Tlingit, of European wars, of feminism, of the colonisation of Ireland. Lévi-Strauss's 'contradiction' enters the poem as historical conflict, but the form of poem itself is also vitiated by contradictory impulses. Written in an idiom which looks deeply into the history of words whilst operating associative arguments through sound play, the poem suggests a poetics that seeks to re-enact the struggles it describes – or to register the damage done to language, and people, by such struggles – holding the referential (meaningful) and non-referential (expressive) elements of language in tension. When the poem almost breaks down in the intensity of its anger: 'Dolly puke, Doily flak, Pinnie Gullet', its patterning achieves virtually concrete status; forming a structure that appears to 'capture' the feeling of anger and take power over it. Potentially the Lévi-Strauss diagram acts as a kind of charm for the similar purpose of capturing strong, 'contradictory' (conflict-riven) impulses and ordering them in a way which is empowering.

O'Sullivan's remarkable collaboration with Bruce Andrews, *EXCLA* (1993), continues to develop this 'shamanic', transformative and politicised poetics through a technique invented by Andrews. Andrews' technique itself emerges from a structural analysis of language and society, which bears comparison to Lévi-Strauss' work on myth, but which goes further in determining the political applications of such a theory in the formation of poems. This view is clearly presented in Andrews' essay 'Total Equals What: Poetics & Praxis' (1985).

Andrews' structuring metaphor for society and language consists of three levels that exist as a series of concentric circles. Concerning society, Andrews argues:

You can talk about this surface level or this first level as a social order as a kind of decentred constellation of different practices, of differences, of heterogeneity, of pluralism, a micro-politics of fragments on this inner circle. Second, beyond that, you can talk about those multiple interests or points of activity being organised into a dominant hegemony and a variety of counter-hegemonies trying to challenge that hegemony [...] And then third [...] you can talk about the outer limits of something like a totality, an overall horizon of restriction and constitution [...] A dominant paradigm.

(Andrews, 1985: p.48-49)

By arguing that language is socially constructed, Andrews frames it within the same system:

If you talk about language in terms of these same levels [...] first, on the surface, you would talk about it as a set of differences, the production of meaning (as signification).

Outside that you can talk about the structure of discourses: the way in which those differences get organised into a polyphony – of different voices, different literary traditions – [...] Finally [...] there's this final concentric circle for language in which polyphony is embedded. The polyphony inside [...] [is] limited in certain ways by [...] this outer horizon [...] this overall body of sense that makes language into an archive of social effects.

(Andrews, 1985: p. 49)

By characterising both language and society in this structural way; as sites of plurality which are nevertheless ultimately structured by specific, then general, paradigms of classification and/or possibility, Andrews develops a base on which to found a concept of a 'totalizing' poetics – one which seeks to comprehend the entire social whole and then work inwards: exposing the ultimate framing of social reality constituted by the outermost circle. This is opposed to a practice which might be simply restricted to an oppositional role within the second circle or a private insularity within the first circle. As Andrews elaborates:

To imagine the limits of language [...] is also to imagine the limits of a whole form of social life – in this case of a predatory social order [...] that desperately needs to be changed. [...] Often the horizon goes unrecognised – and unchallenged – so that those limits, and the social world as a whole, are seen as natural, or they're not seen at all. [...] The political dimension of writing isn't just based on the idea of challenging specific problems [...] it's based on the notion of a systemic grasp – not of language described as a fixed system but of language as a kind of agenda or as a system of capabilities and uses.

(Andrews, 1985: p.53-60)

Andrews advocates a writing practice of a broadly-conceived defamiliarization – enacted within a totalising conception of what is the 'familiar': laying bare not just the device but the rules that constitute socio-linguistic reality. For Andrews, writing is a means of running up and down the scale of language from fragments to a totality, and in this way measuring the social dimension of the relationship between *parole* and *langue*. His ambitions for this are nothing short of Utopian:

You're raising the possibility of something entirely new taking shape: constructing a set of common meanings, some common network into which people can move, a way of exchanging different kinds of awarenesses. This would allow desire to register as a kind of community-building and put writing at the forefront of envisioning what a positive social freedom and participation might look like.

(Andrews, 1985: p.59)

Andrews' evocation of a 'set of common meanings' or a 'common network' within which different awarenesses can be exchanged suggests the way in which myths function interpersonally and historically in order to progress, as Lévi-Strauss puts it, from 'the awareness of oppositions towards their resolution' (Lévi-Strauss, 1968: p. 224). The connection with O'Sullivan's poetics as established in relation to 'Busk, Pierce' is partly enabled by the comparison with Lévi-Strauss,

but O'Sullivan's poetics of a re-ordering of states of conflict in the powerful vortex of her poetry seems close to the political agenda evinced by Andrews, which itself goes beyond Lévi-Strauss' work. However, it is also the shared technique used to produce *EXCLA* that unites O'Sullivan's and Andrews' poetics.

Andrews has developed a poetic technique that enables the desired exchange between the outer totality of *langue* and inner fragments of *parole*. In an interview he described how this technique developed from initially facing a particular problem for his writing:

If I want larger constructions, then getting the kind of shifting and open availability of juxtaposition that allows me to explore rhythmic possibilities, those things haven't been made available to me by a process of sitting down and writing a poem. Often, for me, when I did that – too much reliance on brands of continuity given to me without thinking them through, seamless, a more static or regularized rhythmic possibility, a range of references that were often very restrictive, you know – the range of references I might be in the midst of in a given hour would often seem narrow, not by choice but by imposition.

(Andrews, 1996: pp. 103-104)

Andrews' solution to this problem was as follows:

Being able to have a wider range of materials written in different points in time, wildly disparate points in time, out of different contexts, seemed to open up possibilities for composition, for the editing, and I began to work in more and more discrete, modular units to accommodate that. [...] Lately the time gap between the writing of words on small sheets of paper and the editing or final composition process are now far more separated in time, [...] plenty of people do this with notebooks. I found that trying to work off of things I'd written in notebook form just didn't allow the range of editing opportunities I wanted, whether it was just a physical fact of there being writing on the backs of pages that were in one single volume, or whether it was something about the context of the original composition of those words still clinging to them in the notebook, that I couldn't ignore, couldn't get around [...] So it's similar to the way people operate with notebooks, but more discrete, more modular, opening up.

(Andrews, 1996: p. 104)

Although Andrews does not link this technique explicitly to his totalising poetics, the little pieces of paper with words on them are analogous to the 'fragments' on the inner circle of language/society. In his account of the composition of his poem *Lip Service*, Andrews describes a procedure in which very large structures are built on the basis of literally thousands of these little pieces of paper or cards (Andrews, 1996: p. 251). In this way he can effectively avoid being co-opted into the pre-established discourses of the middle-ground between fragments and totality (the 'brands of continuity'), wherein most writing takes place. Andrews' technique is a unique way of working with *parole* in as raw and unmediated a form as possible, and in this way constructing a platform on which to build a larger structure of analysis and social critique.

Both Andrews and O'Sullivan used this technique in *EXCLA*. As O'Sullivan described in the interview I conducted with her in 1999:

**MO:** [Bruce Andrews and I] had corresponded for some time, I'm a great fan of his work, and he came to London to read at Sub-Voicive and we met and it just emerged in the conversation, how about doing a collaborative piece. What we thought we'd do was to read each other's work as a starting point and respond to the thematic, lexical and sonic tints in the language until we each came up with about 3000 handwritten words on tiny pieces of paper. Then each held back half these words and sent the remaining half to the other person. So we each had 3000 words to work with – this number being composed of 1500 of one's own input plus 1500 from the other person – divided into fifteen sections each. We organised the work into thirty sections, in three parts A, B and C, with five texts from each person for each section. A1 was me, which is two pages and then the next A1 is from Bruce and it follows on in sequence. I had the final responsibility for the first A1 and Bruce had final responsibility for the second A1, and so on.

**ST:** Why the small pieces of paper?

**MO:** The suggestion of using the small pieces of paper was Bruce's, because that's his methodology. I'd never worked in that manner before and I found it immensely liberating, because I think it encourages a greater freedom with the language. You have little bits of paper with one word or two words or phrases and the great beauty is that you can have them with you in your pocket and collect words from everywhere.

(O'Sullivan and Thurston, forthcoming)

O'Sullivan here, in a slightly different way, also aligns herself with Andrews' poetics in terms of finding a 'greater freedom with the language' to 'collect words from everywhere'. These points seem to echo Andrews' desire to avoid entering into any pre-determined discourses and to keep open to encountering *parole* in its rawest, most fugitive state.

*EXCLA* is an extraordinary book because of the harmony exhibited by the work of its two authors. Although there is no system in place to indicate the author of a given text, in addition to O'Sullivan's explanation I found that I recognised the writers' respective photocopied typefaces from appearances in little magazines where their work had also simply been photocopied as CRC (camera ready copy), rather than typeset. Both use distinctive electric typewriter faces with equal spacing – creating a visual harmony on the page. As well as this detail, any reader familiar with either poet's work will detect traces of familiar gestural repertoires, in spite of the shared vocabularies, although there are passages where the writers seem to be by turns consciously adopting or resisting the other's words. Andrews' work retains the hard-edged urban wit that characterises works such as his *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up, or Social Romanticism* (1992), whilst O'Sullivan favours a more pastoral set of references. Both poets pun vigorously throughout, appearing also to deform given words to create extra variety.

As with 'Busk, Pierce', there are no managing frames of lyric argument or narrative to organise these poems for the reader. Many lines, phrases and individual words operate as near-autonomous structures, giving the texts a fragmented appearance. Nevertheless, patterns of connection resonate and reverberate throughout the whole and it is these continuities that animate the book. Both poets' work seems to be predicated on direct statements about the world as if behind every line or fragment stands the meaning: 'this is happening'. One of the most striking

recurring features in this book is when words are positioned in a line in such a way as they assume almost equal weight in terms of stress and intonation patterns, as they interact with meaning. The effect of this is not unlike the impact of a newspaper headline. As Adrian Clarke has pointed out of Andrews' and O'Sullivan's work, William Empson's quotation of the headline 'ITALIAN ASSASSIN BOMB PLOT DISASTER' in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1947), as an example of a form of statement which might 'give back something of the Elizabethan energy to what is at present a rather exhausted language', seems an apt description of the effect of this strategy (cited in Clarke, 1998: unp.). I want to examine some examples of this kind of writing as a way of getting closer to the impact of the work as a whole in enacting aspects of both O'Sullivan's and Andrews' poetics. The book is unpaginated although it is organised into sections. I will add the additional symbol 'MO' (Maggie O'Sullivan) or 'BA' (Bruce Andrews) to indicate the author concerned.

The first poem in the book 'A1: MO', begins:

Auriferous  
 crim ribbering m'd minjo quarty  
 Somes Tremor / Song & pal part ate part RAINBOW  
 part LIP  
 EXCLA – SIASMS – BLED –

(Andrews & O'Sullivan, 1993: unp.)

The opening word 'Auriferous' ('yielding gold') evokes a metaphor of alchemy for the creative process – an apt one given the complexity of the procedures of mixing many different elements together in this book. The line 'crim ribbering m'd minjo quarty' however, begins to have the impact of Empson's headline and demands a form of close reading where the dictionary is involved for every word almost as a process of translation. A host of possible associations converge here in these neologisms, although they read like corruptions of standard words, as if O'Sullivan is resisting the given vocabularies that form the book. Thus the line enacts (like the second line of 'Busk, Pierce') a semantic *movement* rather than being 'about' something. Whilst it is possible to hazard approximate associations for most of the words: 'crim' for criminal, 'Ribbering' read as *ribbing* – to poke someone in the ribs to draw their attention good-naturedly, 'Minjo' read as a pun on *mangy* – an amalgam of mean and stingy, and 'Quarty' as punning on *quartation* – a process of combining three parts of silver with one part of gold as a preliminary in purifying gold (linking back to 'Auriferous' as well as punning on qwerty); the word 'm'd' rather resists any such reading, unless taken as a elided form of 'made', which might impart a small degree of grammatical order to the line. One could then read the line as suggesting a situation in which boisterous criminal camaraderie is juxtaposed with a mean practice of alchemy. This could be interpreted as an amusing reflection on the process of collaboration being undertaken by the two writers – as if they are partners in crime good-naturedly ribbing each other about their contributions to the project. But such paraphrase again feels inappropriate when faced with the sheer energy of this work and its resistance to following clear patterns of meaning. To attempt to read the entire book in this way would require almost superhuman interpretive energy and yet, one suspects, would get one no closer to an authoritative reading of the text's meaning. In short, the text is designed to release meaning in only partially reconstituted fragments: 'part ate part RAINBOW | part LIP'. Even the title as presented here in the sequence 'EXCLA – SIASMS –

BLED – ’ reads as a fragment of the word ‘exclamation’ juxtaposed with the fragments ‘siasms’ and ‘bled’, (although the latter is also readable as the past of ‘to bleed’). This affects a reconfiguration of language into a new tripartite word, or a new kind of sentence, where the reader must supply missing contexts to imagine a potential deformation of ‘exclamation enthusiasms tumbled’, which, whilst more approachable as regularised vocabulary, still poses problems of interpretation.

However, it is possible to make provisional readings that seek to explore the way in which the text’s patternings evoke a defamiliarization of a total socio-linguistic horizon. Later in ‘A1: MO’ we are presented with the boxed line:

	True Rampant Allege Repeatedly	
	Arbitage	

(Andrews & O’Sullivan, 1993: unp.)

This is one of the many occasions in the text where both writers draw lines onto the pages of their typescript. Although the use of lines to box-in text or to make small diagrams on the page is more characteristic of Andrews’ work, O’Sullivan is no stranger to combining text and visual elements: indeed her collages, formed from treated fragments of the text, mark the intervals between the parts of the book and are used on the cover. The force of the above line is perhaps even stronger than the earlier example, due to its enclosure and the use of capitalisation – bringing it closer to the format of the newspaper headline. It can be argued that the force of the line in fact derives from its resemblance to the syntax and presentation of a headline in tension with its obscure yet suggestive semantic import. One could suggest a paraphrase along the lines of the ‘True Rampant’ as an upright and powerful citizen who accuses someone or something of repeated arbitration and/or arbitrariness. Whether one finds this convincing or not, the point is that it is only by recourse to some sort of framing discourse that any reading can be attempted at all. Indeed each word in itself may be considered to be a frame. In this way, although the statement could be referring ironically to an imagined critical reception of the book, the word ‘arbitage’ with its overtones of arbitrage, arbiter and arbitrary, might evoke, for a particular reader, the frame of Saussure’s arbitrariness hypothesis – a cornerstone of the poetics of the Language Poetry project and crucial to Lévi-Strauss’s work. This illustrates how such writing provokes a reconnection between defamiliarised fragments of language and the totality of the social horizon from which they derive. One is obliged to confront the fact that these fragments exist in contesting relationships with one another – the verbs ‘ribbering’ and ‘allege’ are suggestive of power relationships that are elsewhere present in the fundamental structure of socio-linguistic reality. We are reminded that making sense of poetry is to confront the everyday violence, coercion and property that defines social existence. The power of this poetry lies in its attempt to evoke this socio-linguistic critique from the smallest units up rather than making statements that would otherwise be neatly absorbed into hegemonic discourses and neutralised. In accordance with the shamanic metaphor, the conflicts are being transformed into new configurations, to expose them and to make them visible in such a way that they may be resisted.

Other examples of the headline-style of writing are deployed to varying effects:

‘CARRION ADMITTED TO THE SHELVES’ (‘A5: MO’) almost reads as a conventional headline – exposing poor food standards – were it not for the slightly quaint tone of *carrion* and *admitted*. However, ‘ROAST ORPHAN BRAIN MONSTROUS FOREVER’ (‘C4: MO’) feels parodic in its unlikely monstrosity. Alternatively, ‘SENSATIONS – PSYCHIC HOTLINE’ (‘B3: BA’) reads like a direct quotation of an advertisement, whether from a newspaper or hoarding signage. Other examples such as: ‘gagged peddle grief | denominating homing delirium’ (‘A2: BA’), ‘Apricot’s Rescind Spat Vocal Astro Drizzle’ (‘B4: MO’), and ‘gland Syllabary Animal Sticker Picture Habitat’ (‘B1: BA’), all share similar characteristics with the ‘True Rampant Allege Repeatedly Arbitage’ example analysed above, in that they evoke complex series of referential contexts without settling for any dominant pattern of sense.

Elsewhere in the book one is offered experiences of vertiginous movement up and down the scales of language. As ‘A2: BA’ opens:

Ida kinder LISTEN-UP mashie stress light  
unleashing riddle ruby homes you  
zig zag doing the act  
Odes / Anthems / O –  
LOBELITHIC rosette surprise  
vomiting objectlike threat process  
jag cliché violet ransom  
gyp taunt – tinsel rupt  
milton opportunity glob

(Andrews & O’Sullivan, 1993: unp.)

The effect of these lines is at once of an exuberant flow of confrontational street-speech, ‘LISTEN-UP’, and the sense that this speech is multiple in its cutting across registers. It presents itself, in other words, as constructed. There are references to high cultural artefacts ‘Odes / Anthems’ and persons ‘milton’; pseudo-scientific terminology ‘LOBELITHIC’ and an awareness of violence and aggression: ‘vomiting objectlike threat process’, ‘violet ransom’, ‘gyp taunt’. There even seems to be an oblique reference to Dorothy’s ruby red slippers in *The Wizard of Oz* in the line ‘unleashing riddle ruby homes you’. The conjunction of ‘milton’, if read as the poet John Milton, with ‘opportunity glob’ is typical of the irreverence of this technique. In this way the reader is faced with a constructed voice (or voices) that appears to be absorbing any materials in its path and putting them to poetic use.

Thematically-speaking, however, it is possible to distinguish a thread of argument in the book which self-consciously reflects on the relationships between language, writing and politics that the book otherwise enacts and critiques by its form. There are many meta-linguistic tags throughout these poems: ‘Metonymical UtterANceD’ (‘A1: MO’), looks forward to ‘Lexical Sirens’ (‘A2: MO’) and ‘SYNTAX a con matters’ (‘A3 BA’) as well as “‘desyntaxed’” (‘C3: BA’). The metonymic movement of the poems is therefore linkable with a view of language as a potential seduction or con to be resisted, but also one that is under deconstruction. As O’Sullivan casts it later: ‘UNASSAILABLE SIRENS | DISHEVELLED SYNTAX UNCHARTABLE SHEEN’ (‘C5: MO’). The ‘unfinished’ question ‘How do sentences?’ (‘A3: BA’) gives another example of the linguistic critique on offer – refiguring the question-fragment as the speech act



‘how do you do?’

*Within this awareness of language as material, is an awareness of what it means for anyone to speak: ‘HE-PLAY / SHE-PLAY | they speak us’ (‘A4: BA’) locates the role of hegemonic discourses speaking for others, whilst ‘Outside of the little hammers, we speak’ (‘B4: MO’) suggests a division between the writer’s expression on the typewriter’s ‘little hammers’, and what the writer says elsewhere. This division may lead to ‘what is really meant – || is as yourself | in little narratives’ (‘B4: MO’), where the identification of meaning and the subject is linked with the idea of little narratives, perhaps those opposed to the hegemonic meta-narratives of modernity. However, to evoke meaning and subjectivity is itself also an appeal to the grand narratives’ dictations about the status of the subject and meaning, which complicates this statement. In a similar way, other seemingly direct remarks emerging in the text become ambivalent. The statement: ‘THERE IS NO NIGHT | WE ARE ALL EQUAL’ (‘B2: BA’), could be read as a politically hopeful disavowing of evil and an evocation of unity, but, because of its suspension out of the frames of discourse, it also offers itself as a problematically absolute statement to be resisted – who is ‘we’? The poems constantly undercut such statements in ways which relativise their meanings within the socio-linguistic field. ‘LEARNING FROM || belligerent margins’ (‘C1: MO’), whilst suggestive of a progressive politics oriented against a central position, is rendered ambivalent by the uncertain tone of ‘belligerent’, and recasts itself as a critique of maintaining minority political positions against the possibilities of total unity: a unity in turn tainted with absolutism. As Andrews writes: ‘stifle raw democracy | cried & tried to’ (‘C2: BA’).*

*The parenthetical lines: ‘(how it was as if the writing, yet to be | written | as we pen & pen again | not that that makes)’ (‘C1: MO’) evoke again the predicament of the writer in the contemporary world – the phrase ‘yet to be written’ recalls Lyotard’s definition of post-modern art as that which is seeking the rules of ‘what will have been done’, yet the syntactical conjunction of ‘how it was’ and ‘as if’ places the writing ‘yet to be written’ in a complex relationship to the past and to the future. The reiteration of ‘pen & pen again’ and the abruptness of ‘not that that makes’ cast writing as an endless activity that has at best inconclusive outcomes: one might complete the latter phrase with ‘a difference’, but one can also hear a possible ‘open’ behind the pens here, which might balance the elided pessimism.*

*Other stagings of the problems of the writer’s position appear present in ‘clot up fiction stratify candy best of | frozen their language’ (‘A5: BA’), where the clotted fiction candy amounts to an immobile language as in ‘an entrapment of words incurably to darkness’ (‘C2: MO’). The energetic phrase ‘wordsmoke crescendo’ (‘B4: BA’) gets refigured in ‘smokescreen [the verb] tract | elope permissible OUTSIDE’ (‘C2: BA’), where, again, the awareness of what is outside the text, here possibly a freedom one can escape to, is contrasted with the text’s own potential word-smoke-screen tract – whether this is the poem itself, or other abuses of language: ‘magnifying deVICES OPPOSITIONALITY you’re poison oak to’ (‘B4: BA’).*

*The concluding poems in the book attempt gestures of open closure to this argument. O’Sullivan’s ‘C5’ poem points to ‘the totality of disadvantage’, refiguring absolutism once again as a resounding negative, situated “‘under a system called”” where it doesn’t matter what the system is called, just the fact that it is a system that one is ‘under’ – the hidden metaphor of oppression exposed. This analysis leads the poem to attend to ‘A SUBTRACTIVE PROCESS’ that causes ‘hunger zones’. Andrews’ ‘C5’ poem offers the hopeful ‘repeace out of scrap world HONING’ which seems evocative of the processes of composition of the book, whilst the deleted phrase ‘complete resiStance’, both resists and evokes its double meaning.*

*The poetry’s commitment to a totalising approach towards socio-linguistic reality is*

tensed against the powerful effects of a relentless immersion in language. Voices within voices suddenly emerge, both funny and frightening, and one feels momentarily addressed before being reabsorbed into the flux and chaos. In this way, the text tries to evoke a sense of a metaphorically 'schizophrenic' encounter with reality as if 'this is happening'. The text allows all the repressed minutiae of everyday language to speak – and evokes the flux of a potentially healthy chaos within which marginalized psychic states might begin to be heard and to discover their own forms, contents and extents.

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