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# The Words Already Around Us: A Conversation Between Rupert Loydell and H. L. Hix

## Loydell & Hix

### Abstract

In this dialogue H. L. Hix and Rupert Loydell discuss the reasons for “impersonal” methodologies in writing, in response to the overcrowded information age we live in and to fragmentation, appropriation and remixology. Philosophy, creativity, politics and the personal inform this debate, with the authors interrogating one another’s recent and past books of poetry as a springboard to think about the nature of 21st Century writing and current poetics.

### Keywords

poetics, dialogue, creativity, fragmentation, identity, voice, networks, meaning, ekphrasis, (mis)understanding

Rupert Loydell first came across the work of American H.L. Hix when researching and preparing a module about Remixology for validation at the UK university he teaches at. Hix's *God Bless: A Political/Poetic Discourse* (2007) a book length poetic and philosophical dialogue between George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden created from transcripts of their speeches, has proved an important example of satire and repurposing already existing language for students to study.

Since then, email contact has resulted in informal and formal discussion, several written and/or visual collaborations and anthology invitations, along with the sharing of new individual work and publications. Both are interested in the conceptual ideas of sampling, collaging and recontextualising and how they can be applied to the arts, especially the written word; also how creative writing might be renewed and refreshed in the 21st Century, specifically when emotional confession and projected avatars and narrators have blurred, and notions of “the personal” and “confessional” seem both impossible and outdated.

Both authors write in series or sequences (Hix almost exclusively so), both are interested in pedagogy, postmodern theology, poetics and creativity, both work at universities. Hix is a professor of philosophy who writes, Loydell a lecturer in creative writing who also paints. With their cultural differences, own tastes, ideas and understanding, and still only having met online via email, this particular exchange was motivated by the near-simultaneous publication of their recent books: Loydell's *The Age of Destruction and Lies* (2023) and Hix's *Say It Into My Mouth* (2023c).

This dialogue explores how two contemporary, well-published writers, negotiate the over-abundance of information around us to try and reach tentative conclusions and ways of thinking about the world and how we can write about it without shutting down the debate, or impeding future possibilities.

**H. L. Hix (HLH):** I experience *The Age of Destruction and Lies* (Loydell 2023) as high-stakes work, and my urge is to read it as performative. It is as if your book recognizes not only that things are amiss, but also that things are amiss so entirely that all prior strategies of damage control are co-opted, and that absent those strategies I have to do something else. In the age of destruction, poetry can't delight, and in the age of lies it can't teach, so your book isn't describing our circumstances or narrating how we created them or critiquing our having created them. How far off base is such a reading?

**Rupert M Loydell (RML):** Unlike many of my recent books there is no overarching concept or framing device, neither is there a "spine" of themed or similarly titled poems throughout the text. This is mostly a gathering-up of individual (I hesitate to say occasional) poems from the last six or more years which I have woven together into sections. The one exception is "Bomb Damage Maps", a sequence of poems previously published as a chapbook (Loydell 2020) which I described as exploring "West London's elevated A40(M) (Westway) through a mixture of future history, psychogeography and elegy". Although this sounds somewhat removed from myself, Westway is actually a raised roadway into central London near where I grew up and my mother still lives, which passes Grenfell Tower, the site of a huge fire which killed many residents on the back of 1. cost-cutting construction and 2. inept instructions from the emergency services. It's also a road that I regularly drove up and down on my motorbike to see friends and get to concerts; one that passes over Portobello Road, which hosts a street market where I used to go on many Saturdays when it was still a kind of post-hippy place for music, bootleg albums and tapes, exotic food, etc.; and was my route to the skateboard park where I used to skate three or four times a week.

I say that not to foreground the sources, but to point out that even when poems are "constructed" ("Bomb Damage Maps"

makes use of documentation about the physical and social communities the new road destroyed, and also invents a post-apocalyptic future) they are still personal.

And *vice-versa*: even when the poems feel like personal gestures or responses (to use your terminology) they include elements of fiction, collaged material, imagination and what I am listening to, hearing and reading at the time.

I was worried that the book would feel miserable or grouchy, so I am pleased that you haven't read it as such. Part of the process of arranging the book was, of course, to leaven the sections with more optimistic poems, perhaps even funny ones, and give myself the benefit of distance from when the poems were written, something which I found quite difficult, especially as I haven't had to undertake this process since *The Return of the Man Who Has Everything* (Loydell 2015). So the first section, which I see as an introduction to the book, and immediately uses the word "power" (Loydell 2023: 11), is leavened by a poem about the historical sun disk, the arrival of spring in a damp and muddy world and a positive spin on the removal or destruction of racist and imperial statues. Even the last poem in that first section alludes to ideas of resurrection or renewal, as "the whole thing comes back to life". (Loydell 2023: 29)

"The Shape of Paradise" is mostly a cluster of poems about faith and doubt, "Material Form" a cluster of ekphrastic and other poems in response to place and art – be that specific images, artists or movements. Again, both include some tongue-in-cheek allusions and ideas, be that a response to Thomas Merton's "The Only Known Photograph of God" (Loydell 2023: 34), a collaged poem from a news item about a "Click to Pray" electronic rosary, or further poems in my "Not Your Friend" series. The final section, after "Bomb Damage Maps", tries to be more upbeat as it considers, memory, time and "The fickleness of language / refusing to mean what I want to say." (Loydell 2023: 102)

To come back to the actual question, I'm not sure the poems do posit any alternative to those established gestures you mention. I confess that my writing processes and techniques are fairly traditional ones, and the fact that I still get published in traditional book form suggests (rightly) that I do not engage with other media forms beyond online publication in magazines and journals. You are right that these poems don't seek to explain or act as damage control. I'm not adverse to responding to other people's notions of faith, belief or action (c.f. "Quiet Prayer" (Loydell 2023: 40-41)), talking to myself ("Note to Self" (Loydell 2023: 89)) or admitting to defeat ("Mending a Broken" (Loydell 2023: 29)).

That last poem is a somewhat smartarse response to a question by the poet Dean Young in one of his poems, but is part of the same set of poems where I declare that "The poems were configured for maximum twitch". (Loydell 2023: 85) This twitch is about being slippery, multi-faceted, tangential and allusive, which seems to be the only possible response to the world around me if I don't want to simply despair or get depressed. A couple of lines from poems that were originally in the book might help... Here's the opening stanza of "Watching a Train Wreck in the Distance":

smoke and spark *over there*  
impossible to intervene or interfere

and the last two (of five) stanzas of "Shortwave Ruins":

I come from nowhere and only know  
one language, had problems with  
speech  
from the start. I have learnt to mistrust  
what is said then abandoned around  
me  
and to watch what I say when others  
are about. Voicing oblivion is what  
we must do, I need to tell you about  
all the things I have not heard or seen.

There's a sense of resistance there to me,  
and not in a nihilist or captain-going-

down-with-his-ship sense. We need to voice the oblivion that may await us, to articulate possibilities that we have not heard or seen, but not in any declamatory or simplistic way: life is more complicated than that.

Two things occur to me about your work in response to that. In the poem "Luminosities" in *Constellation* (Hix 2023b: 3-32) you perhaps come at similar ideas from other directions? You use phrases like

Addressed to what it cannot address,  
tested against what tests  
but is not tested  
(Hix 2023b: 24)

[...] There are  
things I can't tell you  
because others are involved. And  
things I can't tell you, because.  
I contradict my own principle of non-  
contradiction.  
(Hix 2023b: 25)

and further on offer a stanza comprised of a list of "No"s, which may be part of a sense of self-negation which is part of the conclusion to your poem:

It's now that I am most myself that I  
am not in the least.  
(Hix 2023b: 31)

Your equivalent to my "maximum twitch" might be the "bluster back into brilliance" (Hix 2023b: 32) which comes in the final line of the poem

My other question is more about your assertion in *Say It Into My Mouth* (Hix 2023c) that

Reality never *did* make sense.  
Introspection always *was* a black hole.  
(Hix 2023c: 66)

although you later counter that with the assertion that

Art, however, is more than a mere reflection of social reality. It is at the same time,

and even primarily, a revolutionary agent for the transformation of that reality.

(Hix 2023c: 67)

which means that

Writing reality as it is transforms reality into what it is not.

(Hix 2023c: 67)

You seem to share my sense of incomprehension at the world but be far more optimistic about what poetry, indeed art, can do? And like me (and many others) you only (?) find ways to engage with the world through the language and voices of others, collaged in contrast, comment and argument to make a tentative text which tentatively explores (rather than explains) the / our world(s)?

**HLH:** I take your clause "Voicing oblivion is what / we must do" as a point of sensibility we share. It looks initially like an absurdist shrug, but the clause is more complicated than that, to reflect the fact that, as you note, life is more complicated than that. The force of the "must" in the clause is open. We must voice oblivion because we are ethically obligated to do so? Because it is impossible to do otherwise? Because some ill consequence would attend our failure to do so? As is the "we": you and I must? all humanity collectively must? each human individually must? we poets must?

We're a little more accustomed to something like "voicing my oblivion is what I must do." Each of us is mortal: it's a basic fact (*the* basic fact?) about humans. One might argue that poetry is always voicing *that* oblivion. "That time of year thou may'st in me behold", and so forth. But *our* oblivion, ouch!

The end of present forms of human organization? The end of the human species? The end of life on earth?

Maybe it's the further qualification, "not

in any declamatory or simplistic way", that is the more specific point of consonance. Whatever the reasons for it, public discourse in our time seems increasingly declamatory and simplistic, and I hope in my own voicings to be moving away from rather than toward the declamatory and simplistic.

Which makes your word "tentative" seem to me especially apt. The person whose assertions I want to hear is the person who more often asks questions than makes assertions. The person whose talk I want to hear is the person who does more listening than talking. The person whose word I take with most trust is the person who speaks with the least self-assurance. So I do want my texts, including *Constellation* and *Say It Into My Mouth*, to be tentative, exploratory, provisional.

I'm curious what you make of another point of contact between our works. The last stanza of the title poem of *The Age of Destruction and Lies* reads, "but you don't get to choose who reads you / or who does what with music and words" (Loydell 2023:11). That "you don't get to choose" resonates with the "we don't get to choose" that recurs throughout "Luminosities" in *Constellation*. Coincidence? Trivial? Or opening onto something significant?

**RML:** I think I am inclined toward that absurdist shrug, yes. I certainly feel obliged to face death – for myself, for my children, and possibly the human race, although there's also a part of me that thinks the world is going to survive just fine without us.

Poems have a life of their own, not in any mystical sense but in the simple fact that language itself is open to every readers' interpretation and understanding, which may change at every (re)reading. That's basic Death of the Author stuff, isn't it. I might add I often feel more like a reader of my work than its author: I like creating work, often out of the bits-and-bobs, the detritus, of my own and others' language, which I often do through shaping, ordering and juxtapositioning.

I'd agree wholeheartedly regarding tentative discourse, and indeed tentative understanding. I am not some covid vaccine denier nor a conspiracy theorist but *everything* changes as time moves on: science, theology, philosophy, media studies, ways of writing, ways of thinking and understanding. I'm not very good at change, indeed am prone to resisting it, but it happens, like it or not.

So yes, tentative, of its time, a product of its context, the result of my current state of mind, reading matter and mood. One of my earlier books was called *A Conference of Voices* (Loydell 2004), an attempt to acknowledge not only my use of collage, but dialogues between myself and source material (or their authors), and myself and readers. Your book title *Say It Into My Mouth* suggests to me an idea of echoing or regurgitating what is said to you, with a hint of ventriloquism. I constantly have to remind my students that poems can be as fictional as any other form of writing, that it is primarily about language, which cannot help but mean something, however difficult that something might be. And poetry can be populated by invented characters, be that the narrator or someone within the poem as a third person.

I was discussing the idea of provisional poetry earlier today, online, with one of my tutors from my arts degree. He is someone who revises and revises right up to the last minute of publication, whereas I fidget with and revise my poems for as long as it takes (usually weeks or months) and then it is finished, it goes into the file. I regard them as finished per se, even if they are not good poems and never appear in a magazine or book. But I think you mean provisional in a different way to that?

I see that in "Luminosities", which you highlight, there is a longing "for principle and pattern", and an understanding of "what makes the possible / possible". You suggest that this partly depends on "antecedents" and "precepts", that although you "reason towards wholeness", you have to face up to the facts that "One intimacy compounds another" and "fragments

follow fragmentation, precede integrity". You are very aware of your body within the physical world, of how you are perceived by both others and yourself, but are adamant that "This is not the *story of my life*, but a *figure for it*."

Isn't the "figure for", which you compare to the idea of stars understood through and seen as the shapes of constellations, at least *one* if not *the* story? Certainly the story you want to tell at the moment. How tentative do you want to get? At what point is the author present in the work, like it or not?

**HLH:** You've opened a way of talking about how and why that shaping of bits-and-bobs of language matters. My book on the death of the author was ignored, but I stand by its pointing out a very basic error that theorists of the matter continue to make these decades later, with perverse insistence. Scholars keep right on treating "the author" as a natural kind, as if the term functioned in English the way "the moon" functions, to pick out a single pre-existent object in the world. But in fact we use "the author" to refer in various ways to very many quite divergent phenomena.

This has everything to do with "real life" because such denialistic treatment of "the author" is a form of reductiveness that works like other forms of reductiveness on behalf of violence, as Amartya Sen observes with such clarity in his *Identity and Violence*. A person's identity is "inescapably plural" (Sen 2006: xiii), and reducing identity "to some *singular and overarching* system of partitioning" (Sen 2006: xii) contributes to violence, as in nationalism, racism, and so on. I take the tentativeness we both solicit in our writing processes as staked in this way to concerns of justice.

But not staked in some straightforward way that lets me count my earnestness for justice. From tentativeness I want aid toward inhabiting complexity and inhibiting the impulse to reductiveness. I take it that this relates somehow to your report that "I often feel more like a reader of my work than its author." So for example in your "Not Here" it is and

is not you, Rupert Loydell, venturing that "god must play by our rules" (Loydell 2023: 36); you do and do not allege that as a fact; the voice of the poem is and is not your voice; and so on. Yes? No?

**RML:** The author is someone who constructs a text, the narrator is the person who narrates the text (if it is a simplistic text). I have never understood why people confuse the two in poetry or regard poems as autobiography. No-one ever expected Ray Bradbury to have gone to Mars, so why expect me to have experienced what I have written about? My tentativeness simply reflects the way I construct my poems – using text, often collaged, found or cut-up, and the simple fact that readers will interpret my texts differently, both from me and other readers. That seems to me pretty obvious and also what the idea of death of an author was about... And, of course, the way I write my poems is not avant garde or new, it is a product of Modernism which is well over a century old and has other and previous historical precedents. Charles Bernstein is very good when he talks about an author taking responsibility for what they produce, but also the fact that, say, using chance procedures is no better, no more right or wrong, no more natural, than some confessional, "true" poem (Bernstein 1984: 39-45).

I am sceptical of the idea that "my experience" has something to offer others and should be shared by me, that seems egotistical and self-important. That doesn't mean it is easy to tell my students that we probably don't need any more teenage poems of love and lust unless they can do something radically new with the subject. (As an aside, I wouldn't dream of stopping anyone being creative for themselves, but bringing them in to the public domain – even just a seminar or workshop – is something different.) I am also suspicious of poetry that is too didactic and self-limiting. I want to be puzzled, I want poems to be ambiguous, provocative, questioning (indeed self-questioning) and use language in an interesting way. That doesn't mean

using "big" words or difficult concepts, though I am always interested in what happens when the vocabulary and texture of a specialist or technical language is used within or alongside more vernacular text.

Coming back to your direct question, the poem is of course "mine" (whatever that means) because I put the words together in the order they are in, organised the verses, titled it and put my name to it, as an individual poem and on the front cover and copyright page of the book it is now published in. It is also part of a decades-long dialogue (in poems) with the author David Grubb, but also a text about faith and doubt, touching on the humanist theology of people like Don Cupitt who are happy to not believe in God but regard him as a useful social construct, but also the way people make God in the image of themselves, and reduce him/her/them to a list of rules, a vampiric attention-seeking deity who needs to be sung to, an absent gnostic creator, or some sort of mystical friend who can be plea-bargained with.

Re-reading it today (and the poem is several years old) I can see echoes of *The Psalms* in the second verse and many voices and ideas juxtaposed and compressed into the second half of the poem. I have probably thought or considered many of those positions in my time, I was brought up in a church by my parents and am interested in ideas of negative theology, spirituality and mysticism (not to mention the resulting visual art and writings), but many of the ideas or comments in the poem are not compatible with each other, and the poem is not a didactic statement of belief or disbelief. I hope there is a certain wit evidenced in the relentless rush of ideas, and in many ways the narrator's voice here is clearly a composite. But talking about poems in this way always makes it sound so ordered and dry... Time and time again I come back to the fact that I think in this way, a whirl of associations and asides, informed by current and past reading, conversations, radio programmes etc. That may be the biggest difference between us, the fact that you seem

rooted in ways of philosophy, order and logic, and more interested in a focussed exploration of concepts and ideas in your poetry? (You've previously stated that you don't write occasional poems.) That isn't, of course, to suggest that your poems aren't also able to digress, insinuate or wander.

**HLH:** Definitely I'm rooted in ways of philosophy: my academic degrees are in philosophy, I'm a professor in a university department of philosophy, and so on. That said, in relation to the academic field of philosophy, I am quite marginal. At least over here in the U.S. analytic philosophy is dominant, but analytic philosophy looks to me like a blind alley, and most academic philosophers would pooh-poo what I write and teach.

I might shift the accent a little in the way you've characterized the difference between us. You seem to give relatively more emphasis to the descriptive (the poem as a record of how I in fact think), and I seem to give relatively more emphasis to the prescriptive (the poem as a pursuit of how I might think better than I mostly do). That's one thing I would say I've taken from philosophy: not a methodology (the stubborn and to my mind stupid will to mathematize language and algorithmize reasoning) but a sense that human thinking – and most importantly to me, *my* thinking – can be improved. My philosophical marginality derives from my being less influenced by the mainline philosophical doctrine that thinking is improved by precisifying one's logic than by the sense (that shows up in such figures as Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil) that thinking is improved by honing one's attention. But I suspect that, framed either way, the way you've just given or the way I've just given, much more of our poetic DNA is shared than differs.

A different way of getting at this question would be to pause over your narrator's observation in "Note to Self" (Loydell 2023: 89) that "There are / still colours in the darkness, / but they take some searching for" (which reminds me of the Scalapino/Wittgenstein pairing on

page 70 of *Say It Into My Mouth*). I take it that you and I share a love of the searching.

**RML:** Yes, but the idea of us being unable to describe the colour of evenings, on the page you cite, is anathema to me. I believe we create the world through language, that thought involves language. We don't know anything we can't name or make with words, and we tend to not come up with anything particularly new language-wise (and I am not dismissing your or my own poetry here!) which is why I am drawn towards remixology, and the processes of quotation, collage and juxtaposition. Also in misapplying language and theory, perhaps looking through the wrong or an inappropriate theoretical lens to consider something.

Marjorie Perloff, on the back cover of *Say It Into My Mouth* quotes you, starting her blurb with "It *matters* what we quote and how we quote it." I like that phrase, but there's also part of me thinks "No it doesn't", it's just words. I gave up listing source material for my poems a long time ago, it seemed mostly irrelevant. Unless you make something new when you collage then you have failed anyway. I mean if you go "Oh yes, X has combined Pink Floyd lyrics with a Joe Biden Speech and some headlines from the *New York Times*" then you have failed. It's just raw material, and raw material needs forming, shaping and changing.

I'm assuming your *Say It Into My Mouth* is reciprocal, that you are also saying it back? That's how I read it: hints of ventriloquism, quoting, speaking for somebody, or at the very least voicing something they have said. It is the combinations of what is said to and by you that counts, that produces the poetry? I may be going round in circles here, but I've just finished writing a review of Ian Penman's new book *Fassbinder Thousands of Mirrors* (2023). It's a fascinating, assemblage of commentary, biography, autobiography and quotation that produces a digressionary, pointillistic essay that totally exemplifies the Creative Non-

Fiction genre. One of the sections (#274, p. 102) starts with the question and statement

How do you inscribe a form of self-portrait into your work without seeming to do so. The long-time dream of a deeply personal text made up of other people's words.

The strange thing is the book is exactly that! It is as much about Penman as Fassbinder, about obsession, thought process, sexuality and film theory as anything else. I often feel I am in my poetry despite myself. Not only because I am the author and have constructed the texts but because even in the way they evidence what I have been reading, thinking about, listening to or experiencing, I am present. No-one needs to seek out or construct "a voice", authorial or otherwise, for themselves, we construct temporary networks or webs of language (and thought) to deal with what concerns us at the present moment. Your *Constellation* book seems to evidence this, using what Robert Morgan calls 'an extraordinary combination of memory and meditation', although over in *Say It Into My Mouth* you question whether "thinking about thinking [is] exploratory or evasive?" (p. 87)

Have you come to any conclusion regarding that? Elsewhere in the same poem you suggest not only that "Philosophy is never an interpretation of experience. It is the act of Truth in regard to truths" and suggest that rather than interpreting the world, as philosophers have ("only") done, "the point is to change it." We're in difficult territory here: Truth and truths, and changing the world, yet neither of us write polemical poetry that calls for revolution or political change, not always anyway.

**HLH:** To me, this calls back to your previous Shearsman book *The Return of the Man Who Has Everything* (Loydell 2015), especially the poems in its last section, such as "What Are We Doing the Writing For?" Your first-person speaker

there reports, "I feel like the single red line on a sheet of grey, / a car driving the wrong way on the motorway, // am waiting for a tender stranger to stop / and ask if I'm okay." (Loydell 2015: 102)

That feels much closer than revolution or political change to what I understand myself to be doing by writing (or to be doing in the writing). Not Liberty leading the people: more like Antigone sneaking out at night and scattering a little dust on a corpse. Not a declaration of independence but the dissenting opinion in a legal case. Not a fiery orator leading thousands of followers, but what Sara Ahmed calls an "affect alien" (Ahmed 2010: 41-42).

Your poem, I want to say, is a thinking about thinking. The poem also asks a question about the question that stands as the title. The poem recognizes that framing the question that way begs the question, by assuming that there is only instrumental value, not intrinsic value, that one must write as a means toward some other end. Isn't there an important sense in which polemical poetry that calls for political change is reproducing what it purports to resist, by performing the premise that poetry is *for* something, that poetry's value lies in what it *does* rather than what it *is*? And an important sense in which *not* having an answer to the question "What Are We Doing the Writing For?" is more revolutionary than having an answer?

**RML:** I agree regarding thinking about thinking. It feels similar to writing about doubt rather than faith: people who are sure of things worry me, we don't and can't know everything or always be right. There *isn't* one big explanation, one big truth (or Truth), one answer to it all.

I confess as I get older I have regained the militancy of my teenage years. I've returned to the poetry of Julian Beck, Diane Di Prima and Adrian Mitchell, enjoying their anarchic polemic; and I've also been reading lots of European poets who seem to think very differently to how the English, and possibly Americans, do. But I don't want to write

that kind of politicized poetry, straightforward manifestos or call to arms. As your poem points out, "Rebellion would have to be continual to *be* rebellion." (Hix 2023c: 109) I think the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets were right about politicizing language itself, deconstructing grammar and syntax to make words and poetry work differently, to try and get people to *think*.

That feels like a form of dissent in the 21st Century, where a lot of people simply want yes or no answers, books that follow established conventions (if indeed they read books) and television programmes focused on celebrity and the mundane, or murder, romance and violence. That doesn't mean I don't also read thrillers, detective novels, fiction etc. as well as poems, nor that I totally ignore television (although I do my best), but I am still excited by language, by what we can do with this stuff, the webs and strings and associations we can construct or imply.

What are we doing the writing for? I don't have a complete answer and am aware that "Two Pictures of a Rose" in *Say It Into My Mouth* is your way of exploring that same question, and coming up with some possible *answers*, plural. I'm drawn towards many of your phrases:

What I compose matters less than how I compose.

(Hix 2023c: 59)

Action and poetry fall apart

(Hix 2023c: 94)

They'll have to say something and mean something else

(Hix 2023c: 126)

Syntax is memory trace or conceptual shape.

(Hix 2023c: 128)

We can foresee only what we ourselves construct.

(Hix 2023c: 137)

I disagree, though, with your suggestion that "What can be shown, cannot be said" (Hix 2023c: 123) I have become

drawn to what is perhaps an aside of yours – and I am taking this out of context here – your point that "It will depend on how the question is used" (Hix 2023c: 121). You're writing about dreams there, but isn't it the nub of it all? We can ask as many questions as we like, but some people are content with "yes" or "no" whereas we, and many other poets, often see it as a springboard to *other* questions. You also discuss silence, signs, non-hierarchical structure and posit the idea that "Language disguises thought." (Hix 2023c: 125) Isn't language all we have? (You note that you "make verbal artifacts" (Hix 2023c: 137)) And what about the mysticism that creeps into your work occasionally? (I'm thinking particularly of "It's *because* I don't believe God speaks through others that I listen so intently for God to speak through me" (Hix 2023c: 123)) Is this to do with the fact that "A new world demands a new language"? (Hix 2023c: 139)

**HLH:** This shows up in a great many ways. One example that happens to be on my mind lately is the phenomenon of police militarization in the U.S. over the last few decades. Clear distinction between military and police has always been a defining feature of a democratic society, ideological and operational alliance between military and police has always been a defining feature of repressive governments. Here in the U.S. there has been a pronounced shift away from distinction and toward alliance. (A concrete example: in 1984 the percentage of American towns with a population between 25,000 and 50,000 that had a SWAT team was 25.6. By 2005, the percentage was 80. (Balko 2013: 308)) This change has coincided chronologically with pervasive use of "war" as a term in naming and describing state activity: "the war on drugs", "the war on crime", "the war on terror", and so on.

Toni Morrison makes the point succinctly in her Nobel lecture: "Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge."

(Morrison 2019: 104) It's why I share your sense that a poetry of polemic, "that kind of politicized poetry, straightforward manifestos or call to arms", as you just put it, is not the only kind of poetry that operates in or as resistance to structural violence, political demagoguery, and other societal corruptions. Any alternative use of language resists the status quo, not only polemical uses such as manifestoes and slogans and calls to arms.

But I want to keep after your question "Isn't language all we have?" What, for you, is the force of other art forms than poetry? You're also a visual artist: the (fantastic) cover image of *The Age of Destruction and Lies* is a piece you yourself made. And a number of poems in the book have to do with visual art: there's a poetic "triptych for Francis Bacon" and an "Untitled Abstract" and a poem giving instructions on "How to Dismantle a Sculpture". Where is your practice of and reflection on visual art in relation to your ideas about (and practice of) language?

**RML:** I've always been interested in ekphrasis and writing back to or from visual arts, and I also think we only understand through language, so we actually convert what we are seeing into language when we think about it. "How to Dismantle..." was actually written in response to a crowd pulling down the statue of a colonial hero and throwing it into the harbour in Bristol. It was headline news here and prompted immediate accusations of wokery and mob rule from the right wing government. Of course my poem is a little bit more oblique and framed as an instruction manual. I hope it is amusing but also a subversive commentary.

"Untitled Abstract" is more a painting in words, a description and evocation, whilst "Either a Snarl or a Smile", the triptych poem, is part of an ongoing, fascinated response to the work of Bacon. In this case, it is as much about how his art is perceived as what it looks like: it is part of the art market yet still often talked about in terms of horror and violence, usually seen through the

biographical lens of Bacon's sexual proclivities and lifestyle. Using collage, the poem is overstating the case of voyeuristic and deformed images, that endless fascination with wounds, violence and extremism, whereas actually most Francis Bacon paintings are beautiful, fluid images of bodies and flesh. For me, his portraits are some of the best 20th Century portraits around.

I tend to keep my painting and writing practices separate although I feel they are often both fed by the same books, exhibitions, films and conversations. But I often work in series, sequences or variations, usually answering self-set questions or utilising ideas I have come across and fascinated by. They are both ways to understand things. If you want to understand how landscape can be depicted in paint or responded to then you have to paint it, and understand Land Art, Symbolism, Impressionism, photography and a lot of other art movements and individual artists. If you want to be able to write about it you need to read nature writing, travel writing, adventure stories, psycho geography etc. I'm a big fan of research and information, and my writing and painting are often my way of sieving, re-ordering and assembling ideas.

I'm currently writing a series of poems in response to the work of Anselm Kiefer, initially on the back of seeing his recent *Finnegan's Wake* exhibition/ installation in London, but also an exhibition of his lead books back in the 1980s. I've borrowed some catalogues from the university library and also drawn on my own library of art books, as well as what I already know about German Romanticism, the delusions of Naziism and how Kiefer is trying to use memories, both public and private, repressed and forgotten, to understand not only his nation but also the whole human race. So some of my poems attempt ekphrastic versions of work, others grapple with cultural memory, geographical displacement and society's ruins (physical and mental). Ideas from writers such as Sebald and Hesse seem relevant, as does the catalogue of a site-

specific project by the artist John Newling, whose book had been mis-filed with Kiefer. But his discussion of how we understand a place from different perspectives and how to index it have helped me write the texts, as well as given me the current (perhaps working) title.

Another, longer sequence, which I am struggling to order at the moment, was written in response to the Fluxus movement. So I was able to use chance procedures and formal processes to create some of the work, as well as write about figures such as John Cage and Yoko Ono, who were members of the group. It has some list poems, some instructional poems, some collage poems, some manifestos, some provocative texts and some interventions, too. That is it feels more embedded in what it is about than being (just) a separate commentary about it.

I've been a professional artist and writer now for almost 40 years, and I still don't know if I can articulate how the two are linked for me, or indeed if they even are. Are you any clearer about it? I mean you made flags for one of your covid publications, and you have curated several projects exploring the relationship between visual and lexical arts.

**HLH:** I'm sure I don't have a sense of the relationship between visual and lexical arts that is any more settled or final than yours, but I take that as a point of sensibility we share, rather than a way in which we both have failed. To repeat your words from a little earlier in this dialogue, "people who are sure of things worry me."

Which makes me want to latch onto your observation about research and information. It doesn't have to define the relationship between visual and lexical arts exhaustively to be an important point of connection between the two. (And to be directly related to our thinking earlier about ways, in addition to polemic, in which political vision can do its work.) If we're in "the information age", with access to what in practical

terms is an infinite amount of information, then how one deals with information is central to who one is. And has political ramifications. The prevalent mode of disposition toward information is passive. The transition to social media feeds and search engine results as the primary sources of information is a shift toward diminished activity and increased passivity. It is a ceding of agency to algorithms that (as Safiya Umoja Noble has persuasively argued (Noble 2018)) reinforce existing forms of aggression in society, and that (as Jaron Lanier has succinctly shown (Lanier 2019)) exacerbate confirmation bias.

That combined capitulation to the worst in our collective social dynamics and the worst in our individual thought processes is politically deadly: it furthers tyranny and undercuts democracy. It's an über-Orwellian form of social control, and it makes a practice of research – actively seeking and selecting rather than passively receiving information – and, as you put it, "sieving, re-ordering and assembling ideas" in a self-determined rather than a received way, a form of political resistance.

Is this linked at all to how you would talk about your way(s) of sieving, re-ordering and assembling ideas in, say, "A Windscreen on to the World" (Loydell 2023: 78-79), in which there are moments of apparent critical evaluation ("Westway is a 2.5 mile scar with a horrific history"; "Westway marked the beginning of the end"), but the ideas are assembled not into op-ed or a scholarly paper but into a poem?

**RML:** To be honest, I think it's something I have adopted to survive the information overload I find myself enduring. Some of that is self-inflicted of course: despite not doing social media (apart from showing art and books on Whatsapp) I buy and blag review copies of far too many books, download too much music, am interested in too much. So learning to highlight and extract information is important to me. I also think juxtaposition, collage and remix are critical tools as much as creative ones. Think about how an art work can

look different within various curated exhibitions, perhaps thematically organized or discussing an art movement or gender or race of artist. Simply the different context of my appropriated phrase about Westway, within a sequence of poems, lets the reader think differently about it. The positive and negative reports about how, when and why the motorway was built and how it affected people are still available, my project was to interpret my own memories and association with the road, with actual histories and fictional future possibilities. As we've said before, it challenges the reader.

Is something controlling when it is self-inflicted? Many people choose to streamline their news feed and allow an algorithm to select what is fed to them. Is that different to me throwing the sports or economics section of a physical paper away without reading it, back in the day? I am old and old-fashioned enough to think research is about reading, looking, experiencing and immersion; that doesn't mean other people don't have different ideas of how to experience the world or undertake research, indeed how they live. Surely they actively choose what you call 'diminished activity and increased passivity'? Aren't we being pretentious academics resisting the fact that computers have simply streamlined the search process? Is me finding where books about and by a particular author are in the library any different from reading them online at home? I certainly think there are things to be said about the physicality of books as codexes, and ideas of revisiting them, expectation of them as they wait to be read, etc, and even more about how fine art needs to be seen in the flesh not as a backlist image, but the world has changed. Storytelling has moved, perhaps, to games, film and online television, genres and publishing houses have splintered and regrouped; the problem now is choice, what to read, visit, look at or watch, whereas it used to be where to find out about things and then find them. (Actually those two things still exist: even the big London bookshops have less and less stock, and less and

less small and independent press titles are reviewed.)

I haven't really answered your question have I? "Confirmation bias" is a great phrase, but we are the ones who have confirmed our own biases. We get what we make, feedback loops are us feedbacking what we put in, though I guess there's something to be discussed there about us versus the individual. What do you think?

**HLH:** I take it that our arrival in "the information age" alters the relative importance of poetry's various functions, in particular by foregrounding its curatorial role. There is already plenty of information out there, and plenty of words. Nobody needs another poem to *add to* that abundance; but we *can* use another poem to select from and re-order it. I want to de-emphasize the points of analogy between my writing and a painter's generating another image on another canvas, and add emphasis to the points of analogy between my writing and a curator's finding and selecting and integrating existing works into an exhibition. And principled in another way that is also a shift in emphasis, a re-weighting. Poetry is obviously an act of speaking, but I want my poetry to be also an act of listening.

And so on. But none of this is news to you. You've been engaged in a similarly aslant-to-mainstream poetic practice for a long time. I think back to earlier works of yours, such as *Ballads of the Alone* (Loydell 2013), and there you are, asking *yourself* the same kinds of questions you're posing *me* here.

a fascination with fragmentation  
language and lettering on city walls  
*trumpet weasel electric poise*  
it looks like it says something  
you never know just what it means  
(Loydell 2013: 31)

So let me volley your questions back to you. *Should* we call that authorial voice? What *are* useful terms for thinking about

our own and one another's projects? What vocabulary helps us think well?

**RML:** You articulate very clearly here some ideas I also share: curating and rearranging the words already around us, engaging in dialogue rather than egotistical self-expression, and yes reading as experience, the world seen via and mediated by texts (often books but also film, television, games, magazines etc.).

I think editing and rearranging become authorial voice yes, but I want to move it away from the notion of individual, important and egotistical voice. I mean, I do think I write differently from other people (though I also know people who use similar processes or end up with similar forms on the page), but I feel my writing is in dialogue or conversation with the texts I take words from. I had my first poetry class this year at university a few days ago, and we were having a discussion on the back of me asking students why they would write something they already knew, or make a poem that didn't strive to say something new or at least in a new way. They were slightly gobsmacked by my statement that I felt that I discovered and found meanings and links in my poems during the writing and editing process and then as a reader once the poem was finished. I want to be the author, not have a voice. The voice arises from the material, for me often a different voice from individual poems.

It's making connections between texts, between critical and creative writing, between different vocabularies, genres and modes of writing, it's trying to understand, edit and connect the language we, certainly I, find myself immersed in. As I've already said, it's a way, my way, of working things out. My series of poems from / after Anselm Kiefer are trying to help me understand his sculptures and paintings, his own curating and presentation, his themes of post-war Germany, decay and destruction, as well as why his exhibition in London moved me so much despite also confusing me with its chaotic, dense arrangements. It's not a

review, it's a response; it's not an essay but it certainly refers to and uses the language of critical material, by and about Kiefer but also from other artists who seem pertinent, or perhaps at odds with his work.

What vocabulary helps us think well? I almost want to twist that round and say all vocabularies can be used to help us think, it's all words and language, but that would be me copping out. I think a fairly reductionist vocabulary, that articulates how the words are arranged, the text formed, on the page (or screen or whatever) is a good place to start. All those things that poems use: metaphor, simile, rhymes, near-rhymes, half-rhymes, assonance, etc. (A student introduced me to a new word yesterday in a peer review session but I can't remember it.) So what is actually written down, how has the author chosen to make their poem? I tend to encourage students to think about Form, Process, Content and get them to step away from their emotional response towards a more distanced and informed reaction from their reading.

I think part of "how the poem works" is about what is implied, alluded to, non-explicitly referred to, and how self-aware a poem is, of the poetic techniques it is using, of displaying or perhaps hiding how it was made. Some of this seems very simple to us, but not to students. So my first session was discussing "What Is Poetry?", using their own ideas but also quotations from established authors, and then reading and discussing a wide-ranging number of "Poems about Poetry". Clearly, a poem about eating a poem isn't literal, it's an extended metaphor, but they found it more difficult to respond to something like David Grubb's 'The Discovery', which begins:

This is a poem about how a poem  
often says  
something another way about. The  
piano is not  
actually on fire but the sun dances  
across the surfaces  
of music and changes the ambiance of



words and what we  
did not expect begins to happen.  
(Grubb 2005: 56)

I like its opening statement, the fact it doesn't actually say "the piano is on fire" but that is an implied image which we think of, and the way the fourth line modifies the third: firstly "the sun dances across the surfaces" which we assume is the piano, but then becomes "across the surfaces of music", which is an abstract image. That's probably pretty basic for us, a fairly straightforward lyrical poem, but finding all that in a few lines after a first read is new to them.

Once we have perhaps been disabused of the idea that poetry involves that daffodil gazing you don't indulge in and emotional outpourings we can start establishing new vocabularies in addition to our basic list of poetic effects. Many of those are now long-established: close reading, notions of archetypes, narrative, perhaps ways to grapple with complexity (I remain convinced that it is often what is regarded as "difficult" poetry that keeps being read; think Pound, Eliot etc.), how thought and language works (which might lead us to A.I. and notions of algorithms and biology, and/or to Wittgenstein), and whatever theory or theoretical lens is useful, be that Freud, Feminism, Deleuze & Guattari (whose ideas of networks as opposed to hierarchies I find pertinent), eco-poetics or the a-theological and media studies writing of Mark C. Taylor, whose books I am very fond of, particularly when he crosses boundaries of form and genres.

Theory and critical writing are tools that inform our poetics, which – as Robert Sheppard says (2017) – can't help but be tentative, provisional and nomadic. He also notes that poems may contain, inform or display their own poetics. Despite my own reading material (though of course I also read for pleasure and that includes novels, science fiction and thrillers) I don't want to make poetry too academic and theoretical. I'm grateful that reviewers of my work

continue to note that by writing what appear to be impersonal poems I can articulate the personal better, and that it's meant to be funny as well as thought-provoking. I regard experiment, collage and textual disruption as playful articulations of thought and language, a genuine attempt to reproduce how we, or certainly I, think and make connections, which isn't very often in a straight line.

**HLH:** If I were identifying in what you've just said one pinhole through which our whole conversation so far could be viewed, it would be your gratitude to reviewers for recognizing that "by writing what appear to be impersonal poems I can articulate the personal better." It's an underacknowledged but powerful possibility of poetry, a particular instance of seeing through appearance to reality. We could nickname it "impersonality practice": a kind of getting-used-to the recognition that what *looks* personal and what *is* personal might not consistently match.

I do see the recognition spelled out in arguments on behalf of forms of social justice. For instance, in her critique of misogyny, *Down Girl*, Kate Manne argues that misogyny occurs in the *absence* of that recognition. "To its agents," she writes, misogyny can feel "like a moral crusade, not a witch hunt" (Manne 2018: 20). To the agent of misogyny, the pursuit of justice and righteousness seems personal, the enforcing and policing of women's subordination to male dominance seems impersonal. But that appearance masks a different reality. In her book *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander (2020) makes the analogous point in relation to racism. Her critique is of the practice of mass incarceration here in the U.S., and she points out that its astounding rise in the last few decades was made possible by making opposition to crime seem personal and creation of a racialized underclass of marginalized and dispossessed seem impersonal.

Their point is that how I feel and who I am don't match automatically or

necessarily. I don't have to feel like a misogynist to be one, or feel like a racist to be one. I'm not imputing magical powers or moral purity to your poetic practices, but this does seem like a way of validating the distrust you and I have both professed, of the vision of poetry that pretends a transparent relation between feeling and being, as if by professing what I experience as most personal I manifest who I truly am.

Questions of poetic process (do I sit and sip absinthe and record my inward gaze, or do I collage material I've found in existing texts, or...?), I take as related to Iris Murdoch's insistence that "It is a task to come to see the world as it is" (Murdoch 1985: 91). (I'm persuaded of her point, and often cite her sentence. Predictably, I quote it in *Say It Into My Mouth*.) It is a task also to come to see oneself as one is, and how best to undertake that task is a live question.

**RML:** Yes, equipping yourself as a writer with processes and different ways of writing seems to me not only important as a writer (and to any writer) but also to offer ways to understand the world around us, which is what I feel we are discussing here. It is also outward facing, to readers, because the way we write and the end result, the written, the poem, is evidence of our way of thinking through, in and about our work.

I emailed some excerpts from John Barrell's article about the poetry of Tom Raworth to several writing friends, including you, and several of us have been discussing it. In it he talks about how "even as the poem is attempting to represent the mind as passive and the experience of the mind as an empty succession of events, it is also making a quite contrary attempt to represent the mind as active." (Barrell 1991: 387) It seems to me that even though I've never thought of my writing as passive or inactive, in some ways it is passive simply as a result of being a final version on the page, finished; but what I found even more useful is his discussion later on where he writes:

Sometimes one line leads to or

follows on from another as if unproblematically a part of the same sentence; sometimes there is a sharp disjunction between them, such that no feat of ingenuity on the part of the reader can connect them. Most often, the lines hover between continuity and disjunction, so that it is possible to read one line as carrying its sense and structure over into the next, but not so comfortable to do so: the sense it makes, the structure it makes, is neither wrong nor quite right.

And so we read the sonnets with a continual sense of trying things out, improvising meanings, seeing how far a connection will work, how far it makes sense to junk it in order to make possible some other series of connections. The authority and the security offered by the well-formed sentence is continually present, absent, present again; we find ourselves reading at great speed, to try and force through a particular connection against the resistance offered by other possibilities that present themselves. (Barrell 1991: 402-403)

It's always risky to try and state how everyone reads something, but as someone who tends to grammatically and syntactically smooth the edges out of my collage work, I like the discussion of disjunction within sentences, although Raworth and Loydell poems are not very similar. I also respond to "trying things out, improvising meanings, seeing how far a connection will work", as well as the idea all those might have to be junked. It's that notion of tentative understanding and reading, and also continual re-engagement and re-consideration of language, sentence and meaning.

I may be contradicting myself here, although we seem to be agreeing, that writing is personal however impersonal the writing process is or appears to be. I'm not sure where to go with your

disconnect between feeling misogynist and being misogynist. The end result is still misogyny, and a text may contain misogynist or racist statements or language yet not be either of those things. Your book (Hix 2007) recontextualising President Bush's statements was not constructed in support of his right wing views, it was a satirical and political deconstruction through that remix. Although it may provoke unease and consternation, and be an uncomfortable read, Bob Hicock's poem "Nigger" (1995: 60-61) is one of the best anti-racist poems I know. I use it to show my students that rather than preach to the reader, just re-presenting something – in this case a straightforward narrative about the title word, which only appears as the title, being used as a customer leaves a store, and how others, including the narrator's father, react – allows us to decide things for ourselves. It may be a risky strategy, because the N word is still one of two or three that can shock, but it works for me.

I know I've slightly gone off topic, but yes, I agree about how a deliberately political move towards individualism and self-concern, rather than ideas of community and relationship, has happened, even though lockdown certainly reintroduced some makeshift strategies for neighbourhood and familial engagement. But we seem to have a generation, or society, that now mostly feels self-expression and being "liked" (usually on social media by those they have never met) is really important. Actually, although I in no way want empathetic and emotional readings of my poetry ("I know just how you feel"), I do want people to think about things, be they everyday events/situations or national/global issues), for themselves. Aiming for bigger audiences by turning to, say, performance poetry or end-of-line rhymes and formal structures, doesn't seem the answer. But then as we've already said neither of us know what that is anyway.

### Conclusion

Only an inconclusive conclusion would be appropriate to a dialogue in which

the conversants concur about the value of *not* having answers, and surrender any expectation of arriving at Truth. We *have* attempted, not to arrive at a tidy ending, but to make the conversation itself continuous with the vision of poetry it explores, to make the conversation, like poetry, a form of "impersonality practice", participating in renewal of vocabularies. We have tried to honor poetry's capacity to be outward-facing for the writer and autonomy-enlarging for the reader.

That vision includes replacing the folk theory according to which poetry serves primarily as a medium for "self-expression" and "voice" with a more open and lively relationship between the written and the personal. It includes experiencing poetry's political force more from its ability to host the exploratory and provisional than from its ability to be declamatory and didactic. Both of us actively remix in our work, and we find in that process a way to practice poetry as an art of listening no less than as an art of speaking, to construe it as an art of thinking with, through, and against the contemporary information-saturated media environment. By highlighting shared senses of purpose that inform shared elements of our practice, we have sought in this conversation to articulate a dynamic vision of poetry as a charged and complex medium for writer, reader, and culture.

### BIOGRAPHIES

H. L. Hix's recent books include a novel, *The Death of H. L. Hix*; an edition and translation of *The Gospel* that merges canonical with noncanonical sources in a single narrative, and refers to God and Jesus without assigning them gender; a poetry collection, *Constellation*; an edition, with Julie Kane, of selected poems by contemporary Lithuanian poet Tautvyda Marcinkevičiūtė, called *Terribly In Love*; an essay collection, *Demonstrategy*; and a hybrid work, *Say It Into My Mouth*. He professes philosophy and creative writing at a university in "one of those square states." His website is [www.hlhix.com](http://www.hlhix.com).

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