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‘Solitarily uniting’: crossing creative thresholds with Syd Harrex

Abstract

Writing, so the story goes, relies on inspiration; waiting for it, finding it, and inevitably, losing it—as if ‘it’ was something more than an abstraction; a feeling. Just as Jack London famously declared; ‘You can’t wait for inspiration. You have to go after it with a club’, so too did Toni Morrison opine in 1998, ‘I can’t explain inspiration ... And if I waited for inspiration I wouldn’t really be a writer’ (Morrison 1998). But sometimes inspiration is neither actively nor passively engaged: it just, well, happens. In my paper I meditate on my intense and all too brief creative collaboration of sorts with the Australian poet Associate Professor Syd Harrex during the four-day First Fiji Literary Festival in October 2011. As Harrex becomes ever-more frail and time inevitably passes, this paper seeks to memorialise this encounter. Here, inspiration, from the Latin *inspirare*—‘to breathe into’—transcends breath to emerge as a space, a gap, with Harrex as navigator and I the willing itinerant. By meditating on that experience and intersecting the genres of poetry, confession, and prose, my paper draws attention to inspiration as ‘a human practice’¹ of crossing, transcending, and perhaps even fulfilling a creative gap.

Biographical note:

Dr. Nicole Anae graduated from Charles Sturt University with a B.Ed and Dip.T before earning her PhD through the Faculty of English, Journalism and European Languages at the University of Tasmania. She undertook part of her research at the Shakespeare Institute, Stratford-upon-Avon. Her research interests include the English literatures, Shakespeare, theatre history and the interplay between literature, performance and identity. She is currently senior lecturer in literary and cultural studies at Central Queensland University but has worked also at the University of South Australia, the University of the South Pacific (Fiji), Charles

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He urges me to increase the font. ‘Yes, yes ...’ he murmurs as he squints at the screen of my notebook, his eyes widening in pace with the ever-increasing size of the type-face. He positions his nose a mere inches away from the digital page as he finally determines the lines of our poem. The letters are big—very big—48-point font. ‘Now read it out loud Nicole’, he says, and I begin to read:

I remember slumber
As my dreams do me
Accordingly your
Dreams remember
And we as I do you
Solitarily uniting
Intrinsic as we do wonder
Why we had not met before.²

Satisfied, Syd Harrex relaxes back in his chair in the dimly lit interior of the ‘Rokete’ restaurant, Mercure Hotel, Nadi, Fiji Islands, on the afternoon of 3 October 2011.

How surreal it felt for me then to have just collaborated with the Australian writer Brian Matthews once described as ‘One of this country’s more original and moving lyric poets.’³ How serendipity had proven such a wonderful playmate as under the theme ‘Creativity Across Communities; Imagining and Imaging the Pacific,’ she brought together Harrex and I for the first Fiji Literary Festival in 2011.

I had first met Harrex the day before at the home of Sudesh Mishra, with whom Syd was overnighing before journeying by car to Nadi from Suva for the Festival. We three were each presenting at this event: Mishra as reader of Molly Murn and Melinda Graefe’s paper “‘No Man is an Island’: Sense, Memory, and Illumination in the Recent Poetry of Syd Harrex’; Harrex himself as the voice of his own post-colonial advocacy; and I to recover the Australian exploits of an *i-Taukei* policeman memorialized in early 1870s popular culture as ‘Everama’. With Mishra at the wheel, I sat a passenger in the back seat absorbing the anecdotal exchanges between Harrex the raconteur and Mishra his former student as the Fijian landscape flashed by in a blur of humidity and colourful humanity.



Figure 1 Harrex delivering his address at the First Fiji Literary Festival, FNU campus, 2011.

In Nadi, four long days followed ensconced in reverie at ‘our’ table; conversations between Harrex and me about poetry, sessions of poetry writing, reflections of life, of the past, of loves lost and found, and I at times intoxicated by a profound sense of attachment—and other times by pure literary hedonism—as we sat together there in that liminal, threshold space of creative connectedness. Yet I felt—no, I *knew* through my conversations with him—that my collaborative experiences with Harrex occurred at a time when Harrex’s own sense of vitality, and yes, perhaps even his sense of mortality was foremost. Perhaps this concern prefaces a kind of foreboding which was itself a source of inspiration. ‘When one is inspired, filled with the breath of some other power, many things die’ claims Lewis, ‘The conscious ego dies, or at least falls back, when the inspiring powers speak’ (Hyde 1989, 9).⁴ I am not sure if that death of conscious ego that Lewis speaks of occurred within our encounter, but the mediative quality of Harrex’s poetry—his signature, even in his earliest work—did emerge within our collaborative writing as a kind of negotiating encounter: between the demands of the Freudian id (instinctive

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wants), the superego (internalised social conventions and norms) and the restrictions on indulgence exerted by reality. Perhaps it was this negotiation between competing demands which pushed our collaborative writing ever-forward to reminiscence rather than melancholy—by which I suggest a sensitivity to, and a meditation on, life's transience as ultimately inescapable, counterpointed by a resolute conviction in life, love and beauty:

The lover thinks what it's like to be

Illustrious in the langery

Of how they meet and how they forget⁵

From my experience with him in Nadi, I interpreted that Harrex appeared to challenge the limits of indulgence exerted by reality through a kind of overindulgence itself. If you have ever had occasion to share a creative-cum-social-cum-literary encounter with Harrex you may have had occasion to reflect upon that dictum, 'Write drunk, edit sober' reportedly and spuriously attributed to Hemmingway, which regardless of its origins does imply a somewhat uneasy creative link between alcohol and the writing process. Anyone who knows Syd knows he loves a glass and I confess that I at times was complicit in that undertaking of excess and indeed delighted in the literary process of writing and editing while assuming various positions on the continuum of sobriety. Peter De Vries's protagonist in *Reuben, Reuben* (1964)—reportedly based on Dylan Thomas—in fact proclaims 'Sometimes I write drunk and revise sober, and sometimes I write sober and revise drunk. But you have to have both elements in creation—the Apollonian and the Dionysian, or spontaneity and restraint, emotion and discipline' (Hills & Luce 1966, 7).

I raise this point not to challenge the effect of intoxication on creativity or inspiration, but merely to acknowledge that in my collaboration with Harrex the relationship between collaboration and alcohol also to some degree influenced content as much as form. The word 'langery' in the above poem is a case in point. The term is one coined by Harrex himself. This word, somewhere (in my reckoning) between angry and lingerie, has no definable meaning, but is so poetically fitting as a word of simple invention that it fits the rhythm of the poem as much as offers a linguistic example of a creative crossing; between alcohol and fabrication, between excess and misspeaking. As both surreal and symbolic, 'langery' operates as an example of individual nuance; its appearance symbolic of its own justification even apart from any duty to conventional word-play in imaginative poetry. 'Langery' has no clear or predefined meaning as a

sensible word however the term does imply a sense of intent in and of itself given that it accords with conventional rules of grammar and syntax. ‘The lover thinks what it’s like to be / Illustrious in the langery / Of how they meet and how they forget.’ So although it is unclear what ‘langery’ actually means in linguistic terms, it is possible to imaginatively ‘fill the gap’ between comprehensible meaning and poetic imagery; ‘the sound of which operates independently of sense’ (Cronin 2012, 134).⁶ While within the collaborative writing process it may appear that ‘langery’ materialized as the result of excess (that is, the over-consumption of alcohol), Harrex was ever-always the poet first and foremost. In this, Harrex’s conscious ego never completely retreated in the sense alluded to earlier. Rather, the re-reading, revising, and editing process was nothing if not lucidly self-conscious in the cooperative interpretation and refining of the literary artefact.



Figure 2 Harrex attending an art exhibition on the FNU campus.

While Singh has also noted Harrex’s rapport with alcohol, claiming him as ‘loquacious—and more vitally so after a few good glasses of good wine’ (2013, 168), the point I am making here relates to ‘the unequivocal likeness between the euphoric or ecstatic, transcendental state described by certain poets and mystics as being typical of the timeless moment of illumination and the experiences equally remote from the everyday world that have been recorded by writers

and artists while under the influence’ of intoxicants (Fehrman 1980, 178–179)⁷; whether they be drugs or alcohol.

I am not suggesting that this intoxicated state can be called creative, but rather that whatever can be said about Harrex’s relationship with alcohol, it would not have been possible to create the small body of poetic work which resulted from our collaboration had Harrex been anything other than an accomplished poet. The collaboration seemed to me a kind of inspired poetic intoxication as Nietzsche discusses in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872); the heady collision of twin creative elements—the Apollonian, which Nietzsche determines as the power of dreams (visionary, serene, peaceful)—and the Dionysian, or what Nietzsche calls ‘intoxicated frenzy’ (fervent, ecstatic, high-spirited). Dream and intoxication are therefore essential to artistic inspiration in the Nietzschean sense. With its roots in Arthur Schopenhauer’s discussion of terror (Langford 1986, 108),⁸ the Dionysian element as Nietzsche proposes presents itself ‘as drunken reality, which likewise does not heed the unit man, but even seeks to destroy the individual and redeem him by a mystic feeling of Oneness’ (Levy 1923, 28).⁹

For me then, the creative crossings I experienced with Harrex represented a flirtation, if you will, with Dionysian ecstasy as an emergent theme. This liaison with Dionysian rapture can be observed in the following example of our poetic collaboration which appears to privilege a mystical sense of unity as redeemer of the singularity of the individual:

Don’t enlighten me about roses

Or the music that Mozart composes

I can rest in peace

Drink in hand

Living,

Still living in a voluptuous land.¹⁰

While Singh has also concluded ‘when meeting and talking face-to-face, Harrex has always been shy and reticent when it comes to his poetry’ (2013, 168), I found no such reticence in my encounters with him which were by contrast richly creative. In my experience, Harrex appeared inspired; and for me that word is no less than fitting. I would suggest the corpus of work we managed to craft between us survives as a minor testament to that claim. From the Latin *inspirare*—‘to breathe into’—Harrex transcended breath to carry me toward new creative spaces, he the masterful navigator and I the giddy apprentice.

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A particularly rich trope drawing us together was a shared love of the state of Harrex's birth: Tasmania. We each recounted our connections to *that* place as especially symbolic, and in that sense the medium of poetry facilitated a kind of cross-literary and cross-topographical crossing which resonated within each of us as an experience of loss:

Tassieness

You vibrated into me life

And as I resonated with you

I knew we shared secrets

We never knew we had

We had islands in our minds

Where,

Once in a lifetime

Transfiguring the moon

Even if we misunderstood

The stars in the Antarctic sky.¹¹

Nostalgic? Yes, certainly. But the 'islands in our minds' captures a longing that is symbolic of a kind of geo-metaphorical crossing: a strait which separates a lesser land mass from one greater, as much as a 'state of mind' from a being in time separated from that temporal frame of reference. This *island-ness* is symbolic of the modernist expression of the ambivalence of the single individual; the perplexing incongruity of the alienated self. Yet this creative dialogue between Harrex and me in the form of a poem facilitated an easy overpass: Harrex the master mariner navigating a creative crossing transporting me to a time when through an open door I could see Mount Wellington and in the familiar surrounds of the Morris Miller Library I read the refrains of Gwen Harwood: my ambivalent, perplexing, alienated self. Conjuring such remembrances in the mind's eye chains them to an unspoken and private life-time while simultaneously urging a freedom of thought through creative utterance. These 'islands in our minds' inspired ambivalence: a state of memory as much as a land mass upon which we once staked a claim called *home*. 'From my here-and-now', I later wrote, 'I occasionally believe these were my halcyon days, although at the time these moments appeared as merely everyday life' (Anae 2011).¹²

Harrex has written about navigating rhetorical thresholds before. From ‘The Pleasures of Being an Outsider’ (Harrex 1990)¹³ to ‘The Best is yet to Come (For Jamie)’ (Harrex 2009),¹⁴ these crossings necessitate, to reference one of Harrex’s critical essays, ‘the torture point of song and the logistic of metaphor.’¹⁵ Harrex quoted Yeats’ ‘the young in one another’s arms’ in ‘The Best is yet to Come (For Jamie)’ to proclaim:

This is what I believe for you and us
and where we go from here, luscious with faith
and commitments: love’s get-together of
past and present – like the tides, thresholds,
that embraced in first and last places long
ago, reincarnated in our song. (Harrex 2009 3)¹⁶

As I mediate on the experiences of my creative collaboration with Harrex, it occurs to me that this tribute shows, at least to some degree, ‘how the bonds of friendship and collegiality depend on commonalities which become sources of inspiration’.¹⁷ If I were to try to analyze from our corpus of poems the relationship between ideology and form—between the subtext underpinning these creative expressions and the very mode of composition these expressions took—I would propose that our collaborative verses document a return to memories of these creative encounters themselves while simultaneously celebrating them.

This form of tribute differs from a retrospective, such as Anne Collett’s work which emerged this year (2014) to mark seven years since the publication of Harrex’s *Dougie’s Ton & 99 Other Sonnets*. Seven years between Harrex’s publication and Collett’s retrospective seems an odd marker, but as Collett suggests; ‘With the publication in December 2007 of *Dougie’s Ton & 99 Other Sonnets*, Syd Harrex’s sixth volume of poetry, the time seems right to mount a retrospective. Retrospectives are common in the world of visual arts, but not something “done” in the literary world, except perhaps in the form of a festschrift—a form more generally reserved for retiring scholars.’¹⁸

By extension, if I were to try to analyze the relationship between how I now reflect on this collaborative literary encounter with Harrex, and the forms which I utilize to document and commemorate this encounter it would be as a kind of transformative lesson. In this frenzied engagement characterised by excesses, Harrex was ‘an outside voice’ to coin Tredennick, ‘to which [I as] the writer must be attentive and with which [I as] the writer must grapple before the

writing process can be a disruptive one' (226).¹⁹ So in arguing that our collaborative verses document a return to memorializing these creative encounters while simultaneously celebrating them, what appears to be equally memorialized is a disruptive process of writing as much as a disruptive process of authorial agency. Collaborative poetry thus emerges as a contested site in which competing voices claim, to coin another of Harrex's critical phrases, the poet's 'special hunger sign', as singularized in his poem 'Screen Images':

Every poet's style
has its own special hunger sign, so do we
know we are whom we claim to be?²⁰

If I were to ask myself that question given my creative encounter with Harrex—do I know who I claim to be, or indeed, where Harrex's 'special hunger sign' begins and mine ends—it would be no. And perhaps that is precisely the point. In our small corpus of collaborative work I cannot be certain where my 'special hunger sign' takes up and Harrex's leaves off, but surely that authorial uncertainty is significant, inspirational even? 'Inspiration could be called inhaling the memory of an act never experienced. Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void but out of chaos.'²¹

I have called this paper "'Solitarily uniting": crossing creative thresholds with Syd Harrex' because of the Nietzschean 'Primordial Unity' this experience evoked for me. Though Nietzsche later abandoned the concept ('burdened' as it was with 'all the errors of youth'²²), the creative collaboration with Harrex inspired in me a Dionysian-like uniting between the wholly pleasurable experience of literary creation with a somehow essential, intimate and hedonistic—perhaps even erotic—experience of the private literary self. It is said that 'German Romanticism gave itself over to a Dionysianism that was intoxication without drink or drugs—an internal force, a "soul mood".'²³ Dionysian intoxication remains as a kind of metaphor for inspiration; a metaphor crossing the hedonistic threshold toward the creative literary impulse. It is the creative crossing of opposites, just as Euripides offers in the *Bacchae*: 'not a choice between one side or another, but an experience, an experience that involves doublings, ambiguities, crossings of opposites into one another that form the essence of Dionysus himself.'²⁴



Figure 3 Harrex and me.

My creative encounter with Harrex allowed me to exist not only in two quite opposite worlds—the collaborative literary world with the poet, discovering and nurturing my ‘special hunger sign’, and the world beyond that encounter but that which contextualized the encounter itself. But also within that encounter with co-existence, one grapples with ‘the melting of those worlds into one another in an experience that question[s] the very thought-processes that make reality intelligible and therefore manageable’.²⁵ This collapsing of worlds into an experience, one in which literary voices collapse into a single oratory taking up one poetic utterance where the other leaves off, was to forfeit my grasp on the certainties which demarcate the creative thresholds between literary union and singularity, between a unity with Harrex and an alienation from him:

Love is free of all vulgarities

Untied and unbound ...

Now I come in

To be knotted and detained.

But the miracle remains mysterious,

Just like love, just like love.

For memory recollects

And misgivings disremember.²⁶

Who is this ‘I’ that ‘come[s] in / To be knotted and detained’? Whose hunger sign does this ‘I’ stand-in for—Harrex’s or my own—and, importantly, is there a distinction at all? Within this collaborative writing encounter did this ‘I’ undergo a creative crossing from solitariness to unity?

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Poetic hunger signs intermingled and so perhaps detached the qualities that made these signs distinctive as the poetic utterance of any one particular voice. From another perspective, within that very writing, did the collision of two discrete hunger signs amalgamate a third sign by virtue of the literary crossing and intermingling of those two poetic voices? Collaborative poetry suffers from and 'suggests the complexity of the conflict between public and private discourses in shared poetry: writing together is at once a social and an intimate act, and therefore challenges the habitual tendency to demarcate the two'.²⁷ This third voice then, this third quite liminal 'hunger sign', disturbs the concept of a coherent speaking self as much as challenges the concept of a poem as 'a unique production analogous to the singular sound of a poet's speaking body'.²⁸ Yet the writing of poetry is of itself ego-centric; it is, in essence a Dionysian creation wherein 'the poet's images are images of him[her]self.'²⁹

Here again I return to the Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian 'intoxicated frenzy', for in the collaborative experience with Harrex I was presented with the Dionysian 'drunken reality' which rather than attentive to a single poetic hunger sign instead cancelled out unitary voices into a mystifying sensation of unanimity. Our flirtation with Dionysian ecstasy also emerges as a theme in the following example of our poetic collaboration which again appears to privilege a mystical sense of unity as redeemer of the singularity of the individual:

It's the vulgarities of beauties
Which fail to reconcile my love
Peculiar and indiscrete
On the other side of the deceitful street

But who cares?
Who worries?
Who wants?

We're lovers in the real world
and know what that means
in indescribable dreams

for we are victims of our desires

and we compromise the eternal fires.³⁰

What is the trope of the eternal fires within this poem if not a Dionysian motif in which decadent desire stands for a liminal frenzy through which intoxication speaks its name? ‘Indescribable dreams’ are decidedly counter-Apollonian because what transpires in those dreams is unspeakable, and by extension, Dionysian in nature precisely because these dreams are not visionary, serene or peaceful but rather figurative of a sensual and ultimately hedonistic yearning. It is an epicurean yearning which in and of itself represents the very inferno that both inflames the lovers ‘in the real world’ while supplies their desires with an eternal, symbolic form. Here, the inferno itself both stands for and restores a Dionysian equilibrium by functioning as a mystic redeemer of unity by on the one hand razing the desires of the lovers, and on the other razing those desires into a solitary flame that coalesces the eternal fires. The poem itself is perhaps symbolic of how the Platonic poet is ‘moved to write, [when] he or she is filled with *divine afflatus*, passionate frenzy, the *furor poeticus*—poetic drunkenness. The Dionysian impulse is to express a sense of chaos and irrationality for human existence’.³¹

Poetry is the Platonic means to an end, which in the contemporary world is to realise or articulate an inspired event. The context in which these poems were collaboratively written evokes aspects of excessive behaviour as much as ‘Dionysian intoxication—that divine sense of unity of all things that came when alcohol has dissolved the self’s sense of its own isolation, its difference or separation from the world—an intoxication necessary to fuel [the poet’s] visionary poetry’.³² It was in the excessive, frenzied and quite erotic series of intoxicated creative encounters with Harrex that perhaps I discovered my Dionysian impulse to grow, and as this intensity grew I wonder if we were each enveloped by ‘the growing life of the Dionysian swarm’.³³ For me this envelopment defined experiencing through writing a creative crossing in that there was no longer a real distinction between the intoxication lent by alcohol and the intoxication of the encounter itself—ours was a ‘Solitarily uniting’ in which each excess spoke for precisely the same force.

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¹⁰ .Sitar, Indian Restaurant, Nadi, Fiji Islands, Wednesday 5 October 2011, 9:23pm. I admit that I too had probably had one too many.

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