
The Play's the Thing: Word-Play and Poetry

Q: Why are Australian wines so popular?

A: Because everyone loves an Aussie bottler.

The question with which I would *really* like to begin, however, is this: what do awful puns and poetry have in common? The answer, as far as I can make any out, is surprisingly complex. The humble, lamentable pun rides on the back of a cognitive glitch, a mental and linguistic hiccup we experience as we perceive an unexpected phonological resemblance between two otherwise unrelated words. The punster uses such accidental similarities of sound to pull a prince-and-the-pauper switcheroo that forces those two lexical strangers into a temporary *faux-pas-de-deux* exchange of identities. In my own woeful example above, 'Aussie bottler' derives its cognitive kick from its wholly unexpected twins-separated-at-birth resemblance to the cliché of the 'Aussie battler' so beloved, not by oenologists, but by political demagogues after cheap traction with their electorates. While I'm sure the odd politician enjoys his bottle of Shiraz, the sudden juxtaposition of two otherwise unrelated spheres, which both creates a semantic tension and resolves it in one go, gives us a guilty pleasure, like a riddle that wears its solution as obviously as a silly party hat. It's not going to send any sphinxes into paroxysms of suicidal cliff-jumping, but it's as satisfying as an itch that comes with its own built-in backscratcher. Our groans only pretend to express pain; the recovery of *any* unexpected surplus of meaning, however trivial, gives us pleasure.

The urge to do silly things with words can take hold among writers we expect, usually, to behave a bit better. One of the last century's more popular American poets, Robert Frost, slipped into a poem called 'Mending Wall' a wretched pun that has had its readers rolling their eyes ever since:

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.

But its wretchedness is only skin-deep. The correspondence of sound is exact – we would pronounce 'offense' and 'a fence' identically in that sentence. The different meanings joined in the pun don't simply jar – they ring against each other intriguingly, as if you've introduced two of your friends who've never met before and they immediately begin to get on famously with each other. Giving offence provokes the offended party to throw up some hasty mental defences, which involves a neat switch of agency: if you *give* offence, you really compel your victim to *raise* a fence. It takes two to tangle, so to speak. And that's far from the end of the matter, but the point here is that the two terms of a well- (or ill-) wrought pun can set in motion a long chain of associations and resonances, which in turn can gel into new meanings, like a trick-shot on a billiards table involving a succession of caroms and collisions. We laugh at the very unlikelihood of it all.

A close synonym for punning is 'word-play'. We sometimes call a pun a 'play' on words. Frost's pun sets in motion a 'play' of meanings, a semantic dance that is, admittedly, a little hokey, but it is of a piece with the play of words and sound and sense we associate with more aspiring language than that of the lowly pun. Poetry doesn't come any more serious or venerable than John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but that great white whale of the old canon opens with a pun I almost wish I could have landed. Milton announces, in line one (yea verily, in the first *half* of line one, no less) that his primary theme is to be 'man's first disobedience'. That is, he will tell us about Adam and Eve's failure to obey God's command that they not eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which sets in train the world of sin, death, history and bad puns we've been lumbered with to this day. In addition to (dis-)serving as a negative or pejorative prefix in English, *Dis* is also one of the Latin names of Pluto's underworld in classical mythology, which Dante borrowed to name the lower citadel of his *Inferno*, where the most abysmal sins are dealt poetic justice. Milton was a deep scholar of both classical Latin and Greek, as well as biblical Hebrew, so when he tells us his Adam and Eve *disobey* God, he's nudging and winking at us to notice that they also obey *Dis* – that is, they follow impulses that will land them there eventually. Boom-boom. His poem's got a million of 'em, folks.

Or consider Shakespeare's great word-juggler, Hamlet, about to be taken to task by his uncle for his excessive displays of a mourning temper:

KING: How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

HAMLET: Not so, my lord. I am too much in the sun.

(I.2.46-47)

Hamlet's pun on the English homonyms 'sun' and 'son' speaks volumes about his disgust at having been tossed with unseemly haste into the role of son to a new father he detests, while shielding his eyes from the lurid glare of this new dynastic marriage his mother has contracted like some sexually transmitted disease. All my examples here, the high and the low, employ words *playfully*, in even the most serious of circumstances. As I've already said, puns are 'plays' on words, and 'word-play' is a near-perfect synonym for 'pun'. But the word and the notion of 'play' have worn the masks of many meanings and associations over the thousand years and more that English speakers have been using the word. They catch something of the restless flickerings of multiple meanings that can 'play' like St Elmo's fire around the words of strong poems. In the most thorough interpretation you could manage, you would never catch them all, but, like a child tearing gleefully through a field, net in hand, after a swarm of elusive butterflies, the chase after the poem's dancing meanings will afford you more pleasure (and exercise) than any one capture.

The word 'play' itself has a fascinating history, a bit darker than we might guess from its primary modern sense

of carefree recreation most often associated with children and childhood games. We associate its derivations such as 'playful' and 'playground' almost exclusively with a straightforward sense of fun (does the accidental rhyme between 'pun' and 'fun' tickle our ear, perhaps?). A 'play' such as *Hamlet* may be dead serious, fraught with blood and grievous tragedy. But, if it does anything for you, a good performance affords enormous *pleasure*. 'Only playing' means 'only in jest' or 'not seriously intended'. Notice how this last usage implies that something said 'in play' means something *different* from its literal sense. Play multiplies meaning, for better, for worse, or just for fun.

A thousand years ago, among the Anglo-Saxon speakers of Old English, the word that eventually became our 'play' was *pleoh* (pronounced something like *pleh-och* in a Scots or broad Lancashire accent), and its primary meanings were far less cheerful: 'danger', 'risk', or 'harm'. Some of the word's older meanings survive in idiomatic uses of the modern word 'play'. Your car mechanic may warn you there's too much 'play' in your steering column. A criminal or card-sharp can 'play' for big stakes. Some uses suggest an in-between range of meanings to do with uncontrolled or unpredictable behaviour. We speak of the free 'play' of opinion in an open society, for example. And how is 'playing' a piece of music – on an instrument, a gramophone, or an MP3 'player' – different from 'playing' a game of hopscotch? The related Old English adjective *pleolic* means both 'doubtful' and 'perilous'. The Old English compounds *smeordplega* ('sword-play') and *lindplega* ('shield-play') refer to the milling death-chaos of battle. We tend to read 'swordplay' as a kind of cheerful metaphor, in which *our* word 'play' (perhaps as in 'playing a game') refers ironically to a far deadlier sort of contest. In historical fact, however, it named quite literally a doubtful, back-and-forth hacking and slashing that resulted in a corpse. Thus 'play' can carry beneath its sunny modern meanings the cobwebby shadows of older meanings that fall into the semantic fields of doubt, risk, and danger.

So just what sort of 'play' is 'word-play', then? We associate puns with the very slightest sort of levity and frivolity, but they point to the far more sober fact that meaning itself, as embodied in the most ordinary words we use, can be a far trickier matter than we commonly assume. Meanings of words can slip and slide over time, which knowing users of those words can deliberately exploit if they choose, as poets often do. Homonyms wear one another's sonic clothing like identical twins who delight in wrong-footing the rest of us. Then there's the endless question of reference. Does the word 'apple' conjure *exactly* the same fruit in your head and mine? If I envision a Pink Lady and you a Granny Smith, have we *really* heard the same word? In the discourses of law and philosophy, precise and stable referential meaning can be critical – think of the consequences of a sloppily worded contract, for example, or the uselessness of a carelessly phrased syllogism. But in both professions, the efforts of the lawyer and the philosopher to say only what they mean and to mean only what they say can result in a curious sort of non-language (all that 'party of the first part, here and henceforward to be referred to as X' sort of thing) never heard or seen in any but such artificial circumstances. To keep your words to themselves, to deny them the chance to play with their friends, as it were, you need to deep-freeze or kill them.

Most poetry lies at the opposite end of the spectrum of word-use. Creative writers in every sort of genre routinely

exploit the fact that the words they use almost *never* convey a simple, single meaning, even in ordinary use. Ghosts of older meanings hover about them, and a barnacle-like encrustation of allusions, associations and collocations grows ever thicker on every living word's hide. To cite what looks at first a pedestrian example, when we 'endorse' something we validate, guarantee or vouch for it. That sense of 'endorse' is actually the metaphorical extension of an older meaning which originates in banking, where 'endorsing' a cheque involves authorising its payment by signing it on the back. *That* sense of 'endorse', more or less 'to put something on the back of something else', was coined by none other than John Milton, in his sequel to *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, to describe 'elephants endor's'd with towers' (III.329), an ancient practice in which small forts were strapped onto the backs of battle-elephants. He coined his new word from the Latin *dorsum* ('back' – whence we also derive a dolphin's or shark's 'dorsal' fin), and in doing so he has left me, at least, unable to endorse a cheque without thinking of crenellated elephants. Distracting but fun, and some of the raw stuff of poetry. More seriously, whether or not any particular poet is conscious of a word's whole history of meanings, associations and uses, the strongest poets are commonly very sensitive to them, whether by acquired knowledge or by linguistic instinct. The simple fact is, from the most appalling pun to the most magnificent poetic diction, all our living language-use is woven from a dense, humming swarm of interconnected words, their literal and figurative meanings, and their radiating, ramifying networks of associations. Pluck a single English word, and, if your ear is tuned to it, dozens more (plus a few from any number of other languages) can spring immediately to mind, with hundreds or even thousands more waiting farther off for you, should you choose to go exploring.

Language that isn't playful in these ways, that seeks to communicate one and only one meaning, is the equivalent of an acoustically dead space, like an audiologist's testing booth. This is the language of the legal contract, the instruction manual and the directory. Political oratory of the modern kind often strains for a similarly reduced state. The speech of almost any parliamentarian who rises in the course of an ordinary sitting's business commonly bears only its literal content and a single subtext, to the effect that 'the honourable members on the other side of the House are all villainous, low-grade cretins'. But if you unpack the histories of the words 'villain', 'grade' and 'cretin', you'll find a great deal of latent poetry in that subtext. Of all the texts any human culture has ever produced, perhaps the humble telephone directory achieves the most transparent, unresonant, one-to-one relationship with some version of the world it addresses and maps. And yet as unremarkable an entry as 'Smith, Elwin', to the attentive eye and imagination, conjures up the image of a man on familiar terms with the realm of faerie ('Elwin' derives from the Old English name *Ælfwine*, 'elf-friend'), pounding away amid the flying sparks and smoke of his forge. Words, once you begin to take fuller notice of them, simply will not sit still while we try to stick the post-it note of a single meaning onto their noses – they remove them, swap them, fold them into little paper aeroplanes and send them zinging all over the terraces, balconies and basements of the house of language. Maddeningly distracting, if you're not in the mood for such shenanigans, but, if you are, more enthralling than just about any other sort of play humans have ever invented.

Some of the earliest written texts of Western culture, cuneiform tablets unearthed by archaeologists in Mesopotamia, appear to record household inventories and business transactions. The same culture's earliest literary texts, such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, are all poetry of, apparently, purely oral origins that eventually got set down on the same sort of cuneiform tablets, as though a modern Shakespeare or Milton were to transcribe a play or an epic on the back of till-receipts from his local home-hardware superstore. Poetry both precedes and overtakes plain, denotative or expository prose. Stare steadily at any object sitting still in front of you, a pen or a pumpkin or a porcupine, and sooner or later it starts to dance like the 'fretful porpentine' named by the ghost of Hamlet's father as a likeness of hell's hair-raising horrors.

In their efforts to come to terms with all the pleasures, pains, hopes and horrors which life on this planet affords, most cultures have come to conclusions which broadly agree that life wears a sinister clown's mask: the serious and straightforward business of simply not dying gets endlessly complicated in a reality that passes before us in a play of appearances both nurturing and murderous, their purposes, when discernible at all, too often unintelligible or deceptive. Factor into this picture the exponentially rising complexity of human society and civilisation, and the mental outcomes for those caught up in the whirl seem likely to tend either towards catatonia or towards the dance – the play, if you like – of pattern and meaning we call poetry.

It may well be that the endless varieties of play between sound and sense, and the numberless ways in which we create and re-create meaning from the literal facts of our experience, are fundamental to human psychology and consciousness. The raw stuff of anything we would recognise as 'thought' is the same raw stuff from which poets distil their patterns of word and sound. Across the whole run of history, human communities have possessed a bewildering variety of customs, social structures, religions and technologies. All have generated some form of poetry, and it comes well early in the day, long before letters, literacy or literature. It is only relatively recently that we have learned to do without it. Into the Renaissance, nearly all significant European narrative was verse narrative, from Homer to Milton and all points in between. The first significant shift to large-scale prose narrative as a vehicle of big meaning can be seen works such as Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* in the fifteenth century and Cervantes' *Don Quixote* in the sixteenth. Note how both, in their very different ways, mark the passing of an older order whose like is never to be seen again. They traffic in disenchantment and irony¹ – Malory's work cumulatively, Cervantes' from page one. Had either been born a century or so earlier, he'd have been writing poetry: Malory would likely have come up with something like Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*, and Cervantes might have given Ariosto's mock-epic *Orlando Furioso* a run for its money.

With the coming of the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment, poetry begins a long, slow, magnificent decline in popularity, becoming an increasingly learned, high-brow preoccupation and less a common possession. How many poetry readings now get organised in towns without a university within spitting distance? How many major modern poets have *never* held a university post? In

Victorian England every aspiring middle-class household would most likely have owned editions of Milton and Tennyson as necessary adornments, though it would be interesting to know how frequently such works were actually opened. The number of such volumes that still turn up regularly in second-hand bookshops with their morocco-leather bindings perished through sheer old age and the accidents of environment rather than hard use (many, indeed with their pages still uncut) suggests that the reading public, as it represented a greater and greater proportion of the population, may have been seeking its entertainments elsewhere. The so-called 'rise of the novel', in England from Samuel Richardson to Joseph Conrad, represents a massive shift in public taste away from poetry to prose narrative as the preferred vehicle of both simple entertainment and the pursuit of sophisticated speculation about life, the universe and everything. Nineteenth-century readers were picking up more works by Sir Walter Scott than by Wordsworth, I'd be willing to bet, and more of Scott's period-romances in prose such as *Ivanhoe* than of his similarly period-romantic verse narratives such as *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*.

Such a brief and broad-stroke history does no sort of justice to such a complex process, but it suffices to account for the uneasy sense, common in those who've preserved a love of poetry into the present day, that they are living belatedly in a world built almost exclusively of prose. A quick glance at the small sections devoted to poetry in mainstream bookshops, where the general fiction, lifestyle, cooking and travel titles recede in serried ranks into the hazy middle distance in their thousands upon thousands, shows us all we really need to see. This goes deeper than any changes wrought by the digital revolution, profound as these might be in their proper sphere. The world itself has moved on – we can observe the ebbing of a long, long tide, but the complex marine and celestial mechanics that actually drive such change lie beyond our ken. Something in us has changed. It is as if we once possessed a sixth sense which, since the onset of the age of reason, has almost wholly withered away. Most of us scarcely realise our loss, and, given the speed with which the relaying of information has so come to dominate our work and leisure, awareness of that loss may soon pass out of mind altogether. On top of this deep tectonic displacement, the culture of information is at root a *prose* culture, discursive and expository. Its growing domination of the production and reception of text may one day finish the job of reducing poetry to merely a queer assortment of verbal artefacts humans once produced and valued. Like the myths of ancient Mesopotamia, they'll be studied by only specialist scholars and the odd student who will pause to puzzle over them from time to time, when funded by the more hard-headed sorts who preside over research-grant committees. Would any self-respecting literary scholar submit a research-grant application in blank verse? Sestinas? Dante's tercets? 'Abandon all hope, ye who enter here...' For the rest of us, the light will have simply gone out from those old poems: they will have fallen dark like a disused theatre, its last play done, and we will scarcely know anything of what they meant to our forebears.

For better or worse, we live in a linguistic sea of prose. Is that so bad a thing? Are we in any position to pronounce it good or bad? Some moments leave me wondering. When the news radio station I listen to is broadcasting proceedings in the federal parliament, my heart plummets as soon as

1 Ironically, unlike the celebrated Broadway musicals adapted from them in the twentieth century, *Camelot* and *The Man of La Mancha*.

I turn it on. Even allowing for the fact that not everyone can be a natural public speaker, the drone of most rising to speak on everyday matters, often read from papers by the sound of it, has all the affect and tone of a synthesised voice announcing ‘Third floor, going up’. It bulldozes the play of living language to a shopping-mall car-park desolation of flat, dead surface with no depth or resonance. At the other end of the spectrum, all literature worth the name says more than it says, a paradox I’ve resorted to in my teaching again and again, poetry more so than any other genre.

The best prose discourses – in novel, script, story, or essay – can offer delights and dangers that match, in their different ways, the powerful play of poetic language. Our capacity for analysis, argument, and all manner of rational proposition has grown immeasurably as a consequence, often to our great benefit as individuals and societies. The discourses of modern science, once they shed their chrysalis of ancient natural philosophy (preserved in poems such as Lucretius’ celebrated *De rerum natura*), achieved a synthesis of objective analysis and language that has allowed the developed world to wield a dominion over nature that far exceeds anything promised to Adam in Eden before his fall. And yet, from some perspectives, such ‘progress’ has exacted a calamitous toll, from anthropogenic environmental degradation to the psychological burdens of life in depersonalised societies, confronting a physical world of biochemical and mechanical processes largely leached of the kinds of meanings with which human beings used to invest their perceptions of the natural world. Both it and we have stopped ‘playing’: the business of life, at its most fundamental core, has become far too serious for punning frivolities. Or so at least we see it. Though if you could put the question to an electron propelled towards a double slit in the classic quantum-physics experiment, you might be surprised by its answer(s).

We need desperately to ‘lighten up’ (consider the possible meanings of *that* little phrase, for a start), to view our world not as simply the one-way flow of data impinging on our sensorium through the ramified nerve-endings of our five senses. That raw data is susceptible of any number of interpretations that jostle for our consent; most of us arrive at one or two early on and settle down into a world we take as given. Since our choices are always conditioned by the values of the societies into which we are born, it scarcely occurs to anyone to think otherwise. The language we learn as young children encodes and embeds those values in our dawning consciousness. We need a kind of linguistic clowning to open up the closed circle of overdetermined meaning we’ve backed into unawares. Hence our need for the poet, who is our juggler, our linguistic prestidigitator who ‘plays’ with words in just about every sense of the word ‘play’. To ask poets why they do this is like asking anyone else why they insist on breathing all the time. The let-down we commonly feel when we have to engage with the language of the lawyer or the politician results from the way they routinely stifle the play of their own language, doing their best to say one or at most two things only, where the poet does his or her best to say as many things as possible at once.

That said, very few of us – if any – can will ourselves back into a disposition or turn of thought no longer natural to us. In every age poets have achieved a mixed bag of results. In my own time I have attended more than one poetry reading in which the tinder of language proved too damp to take any spark. Stitching wings on a horse will send no Pegasus

aloft. My own sense of the playful vitality of poetry has taken hold in my mind over years of thinking about, teaching and discussing English poetry of every period. It crept up on me in my efforts to help other readers to a sense of what poetry seemed to do. Prose at its strongest can achieve a great deal of poetry’s resonance and depth of meaning. But good prose stylists are mining veins opened by their language’s poetic prospectors. Without their headlamp- and spade-work well down in its otherwise hidden depths, the language of every speaker will in the long run be impoverished. If that makes the poet’s job sound like work rather than play, so be it. Ask any poet how easy her job is. The ‘intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings’, as T.S. Eliot characterised his craft, can demand fearful exertions: wrestling is no sport for the faint of heart or limb. Yet a species of play it remains. G.K. Chesterton once speculated that in heaven all will speak in verse.² Without poetry to reinvigorate our language,³ we will in the end find ourselves in a kind of linguistic hell, very unlike Dante’s, in which we will be left speaking with all the verve, freedom and inspiration of the instructions on the back of a soup-tin.

In a short sequence called ‘The Domestic Sublime’,⁴ Chris Wallace-Crabbe offers a short meditation called ‘Coat Hangers Galore’:

Clubbable and promiscuous,
they hang around
 getting under your feet
 while always intending to be helpful;

wiry and would-be athletic
 they just keep falling into a tangle
 putting a foot
in someone else’s mouth.

Few bits of domestic furnishing could compete with the coat hanger for withdrawn invisibility. On duty, we can hardly see it, like most elements of our world that do no more than what we imagine they’re supposed to. Yet this poem invests the humble coat hanger with a secret life of its own and a wry sense of humour, most often by deploying words which, like the hangers themselves, refuse to sit still and separate. ‘Clubbable’ points literally to the hanger’s propensity for association: how, left to themselves, hangers tend to form fast entanglements no amount of shaking or cursing can easily sunder. Like a men’s ‘club’, the wardrobe where they congregate is a private space where, sheltered from prying eyes, they could be getting up to just about anything. That word ‘club’, moreover, looks back to one of the first useful human inventions. It also hints at the troglodyte rage we may vent on a refractory snarl of hangers. ‘Promiscuous’, however, alludes far more cheerfully to another great obsession of the human imagination. When hangers tangle promiscuously, there seem always to be more of them than there were before. That they ‘hang around’ is a piece of literal observation that doubles as an idiom suggesting that they

2 Thus I recall reading several decades ago in something by C.S. Lewis, though I can’t now trace the quotation.

3 A surprising number of common words and phrases in modern English first saw the light of day in poetry. Chaucer gave us ‘murder will out’, Shakespeare ‘brevity is the soul of wit’, ‘foregone conclusion’ and ‘in my mind’s eye’, and Milton those ‘endors’d’ elephants.

4 In *Telling a Hawk from a Handsaw* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2008).

loiter with intent. 'Wiry' like an athlete poised for the race, they serve their purpose only when still; in motion, they confound one another, 'a foot in someone else's mouth', thus reviving a tired metaphor. Both collectively clumsy and cursed with a domestic version of original sin, they keep 'falling'. With its playful language, 'Coat Hangers Galore' shows us a contrarian wonder lurking within the mundane,

not the tears but the jolly japes in things. As an art-form in these latter days, poetry may speak to a coterie of listeners, yet the hangers in Wallace-Crabbe's 'coater' spill out from a common reality in which all users of language can discover an uncommon delight and vision. Words bunch and tangle to form shapes of meaning both unexpected and pleasing. They play for us, asking only that we join in.

MILES BURROWS

'Come In, Number Seven!' and Other Poems

The Figure in the Tapestry

A woman is doing her embroidery in the converted chapel.
And there is Priam in his seven walled city, look,
That tumbles over the Umbrian hill like golden syrup.
And who is that stumpy figure
Hopping on one leg? Rumpelstiltskin?
Crows punctuate the sky. And as she dozes
The figure opens its mouth as if to cry
Or drink. In his lapel two poppies,
(Remembrance and Oblivion). In her mind
He is saying this, though not in speech.
– Think Dunkirk in reverse
With half the boats and twice the angels
Not all of them guardian. Our mission was
To rescue that young woman for Burne-Jones
And bring with us the first slave-owning democracy
In the Western world. At the time, Empires were collapsing
With the demise of domestic service. When 48%
Of butlers had the equivalent of MSc in sociology
It was time to take the gilt frames off the Voyage to Cythera.
We went out there with attitude. We knew
Helen was being gang-raped by old men twittering like bats.
There could be a run on the drachma. Where was Onassis?
Everyone needs his Dardanelles.
I had a photo of Penny back in Suffolk.
And missed the teenage years of my son
But looking back with hindsight
I'd say we had the balance right, because
The future's in the past and this was now.
We were fighting for Byron, Stowe, the Elgin Marbles,
The survival of the Classics Department,
For Regent's Park Crescent, Euston Arch. Sooner or later
We were all going to be dug up by Schliemann.
His wife would try on our funeral masks.
We were very chilled, very focused, looking forward to it.
When we got back... Dithyrambs were like: Excuse me?
Everyone was dancing *ceroc*. Déjà vu was a coffee bar
People were curious we could pre-date Hotel California.
Steeped in antiquity like old teabags,
We were used by art students to smear over white paper
For a distressed background: They needed us for that.

The Meaning is in the Gaps

1. In the gap between two chairs, there is no third chair.
If there was a third chair, there would be no gap.
2. In the gap between meals, there is the snack.
Between the poem's words, we imagine the snack,
Unable to wait for the next word.
3. Some animals snack all the time. (Planckton, Buffalo).
They are grazers. There is no gap.
Does their life have no meaning?
4. There are gaps in birdsong. Meaningful,
As we may say 'She closed the door pointedly'.
But the birds are still preening, gathering twigs.
They sleep with eyes open, imagining gaps in their dreams
So that gaps still occur, and the gaps in the song have
character,
A relief after chiselling at the dawn.
5. An artist fakes an antique fragment, and buries it under
the lawn.
This is called the Cult of the fragment.
6. Somepoetsaving paperleavenogaps
Their creations are swipecard numbers
And make sense in relation to another secret poem
Known only to the poet or his friends.
The poem is the gap, into which the key is inserted.
8. People are always crying out for meaning
As if it was an amount of small change that was being
withheld.

Come In, Number Seven!

I lost my small poetic craft:
It foundered in the water
With Nero's collapsing wedding boat
And the sea king's daughter.
I did not know my fore from aft
But tried to strike a cheerful note
By reading *Kulturwissenschaft*:
Now seaweed is my overcoat.
My wedding bed is understaffed.
I lost my religion at the Tote,
And couldn't get an overdraft.
Now I'm a cub reporter.
My head's above water, my head's in the air
And yet I'm not Apollinaire.