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Walking,Writing, Improvising - Conscious-Unconscious, Kellerberring-Busselton

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Walking, Writing, Improvising: Conscious – Unconscious, Kellerberrin – Busselton

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. . . to improvise is to join with the World, or meld with it.
— Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari

. . . the failures of memory are the grounds of improvisation.
— Herbert Blau

In late 2003, I walked from Busselton, to Perth, to Kellerberrin. The route I took, including detours and backtracking, was a journey of *c.*700km.

I carried a pack, a solar panel, a GPS, a handheld computer, and a mobile phone. Twice a day, at noon and one other time chosen by me, I stopped, took a GPS reading and five photographs (NSEW and one other), and wrote about what I heard, touched, saw, smelled, tasted, found, felt, thought, or imagined at those places. I chose *one* photograph for each place and uploaded it with my writing to a website as email messages. For each day there were two photographs and two texts. I wanted this writing to be as raw, as 'unmediated' (acknowledging the difficulties of such an aim), as unedited, as possible. I wanted to catch myself unawares, to get behind the construction that comes with writing with a plan, and with time to edit. Subscribers and visitors to my website read my emails. Some of these people wrote to me as I walked. Intermittently, I read their messages.

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Born white-skinned in Victoria, in an Australia that still had a White Australia policy, I have always felt detached from my country. I have been in turn, and often simultaneously, paranoid, defensive, rage-full, monstrously self-confident, scornful, driven, indifferent to myself, empty, and ashamed for reasons I could not understand. Whatever I have achieved, I often felt I didn't belong on this earth, and certainly not in Australia.

My grandmother was born at Busselton, in 1901. She was the last child of a Wardandi man born on the estate of the 'pioneer', Alfred Bussell. Her mother was a white woman. Subsequently, she moved to Kellerberrin in the wheat-belt, where she raised nine children virtually on her own. My grandfather was often away, like many men during the Depression, looking for work.

Somewhere between Busselton and Kellerberrin, perhaps before then, my grandmother 'lost', disavowed, or 'forgot' her indigenous identity. Perhaps her parents did it for her, I don't know — although a relative told me my great-grandfather was an Elder to the local people, and it seems unlikely. The 1905

Aborigines Act gave the State coercive powers — including the power to remove children — over Aboriginal people, so the reasons my grandmother no longer identified as indigenous are obvious. Many people did the same.

Before she met my grandfather, my grandmother either had a relationship with, or was raped by, another man. She had a daughter in Perth in 1923. This daughter lived with, firstly, my great-grandfather and great-grandmother, and, later, her aunts and uncles. As far as I know, my grandmother concealed her true relationship with this daughter from both her and her other children. Certainly, my mother didn't know she had a half-sister, although she met her, and felt there was something 'strange' about her.

This 'illegitimate' daughter is now dead. I spoke to her husband last year. He knew she had Aboriginal 'blood', and was proud of it. He described her as nervous, edgy, and fearful of authority. She seemed ashamed, and told many different versions, of her childhood. He could have been describing my mother. He had given up trying to work out what was true and false, and accepted his wife as she was.

Finding these stories took me nearly twenty years. I heard none of them from my mother (and my father died before I was born). I couldn't have done it without a helpful third cousin. She had most of the information, and generously shared it. Her family were not ashamed of their indigenous antecedents. They spoke *about their history.*

My mother spoke too, but there was always something of 'the Lady doth protest too much' about her stories, and she often changed them. She emphasised how much better she and her siblings were than others, how smart they were, how they were always outwitting a hostile world. Underneath, there was poverty, shame, anger, and a sense of trying to prove something. She never spoke about her indigenous background, only referring enigmatically to us 'having a touch of the tar-brush'.

Piecing together these stories, I understood the obvious: my story, my paranoia, defensiveness, grandiosity, anger, and shame, are not mine alone. The suppression, repression, of my family's indigenous history is Australia's story. Before I, and this country, can overcome them, we must speak and own them, as we must speak and own the stories that produced them.

My story is only a small one. There are many, more tragic, stories to tell. But I can speak only my story, keeping in mind that when speak for ourselves, 'we always speak in the place of someone who will not be able to speak' (Deleuze & Parnet 1987, 20). I walk. I write.

I don't pretend by walking I 'become' 'Aboriginal'. I don't think I possess an innate knowledge or spirituality because of my indigenous family. I don't claim any of this country as mine. Knowledge, spirituality, and country, must be taught, learnt, and practised. But I believe I have been profoundly affected and, yes, damaged, by the suppression of my indigenous history — as Australia damages itself by suppressing its indigenous history.

I want to be claimed. I want to feel the country with my feet. To have it written on my body, even if it's just through pain in my knees. I want to know this place I might have known already had the history of this country been different. To walk as if *I belong to this place.*[i]

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For more than twenty-five years, I have worked as a performer and performance maker. For more than twenty, I have taught performance. I have a strong interest in improvisation, and during the 1980s worked with the Mill Theatre Company, under the direction of Richard Murphet, where *every* performance was improvised.

I saw Busselton – Kellerberrin journey as an extended improvised performance.

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12:00 Mon, 22 Sep 2003
UTM
50 393864E
6465369N

I am at the East Perth train terminal. Where the buses leave for Busselton. Cheryl the taxi driver has driven me here. She was extremely laid back. I tell her what I am doing, or at least in part. She's amazed. You get paid to do this?, she says. She promises to look at the web site.

My pack looms. It reaches almost as high as the top of my head when I've got it on. It's heavy as hell, and I wonder whether I will be able to carry it all the way — or at all. I console myself by thinking that at least it will get lighter each day as I eat its contents. A couple of bushwalkers look at me strangely. I've obviously gone too far, lost the plot. Their *packs are slim and efficient. I want to tell them I know what I'm doing. Am doing something different than mere bushwalking. Try to get some gear cred. But they're not really interested, and it's just my paranoia.*

Twelve o'clock comes and I get out my GPS and take a reading. I forget to take the latitude and longitude. I will have to keep my wits about me. I stand in the road in front of the bus and take my four pictures. NSEW, or, actually, NESW. The bushwalking couple ignore me as I take a photo of my pack. I try not to feel stupid.

I write this on the bus. The bus drives through the outer suburbs of southern Perth. Careeba Park says a sign on a grocery store. To my knowledge, I have never driven, walked, or bicycled here before. The bus passes through myriad sandstone and pale-brick shopping centres as it crosses and recrosses the freeway. Most of these centres are surrounded by large fences.

Rain and wind burst against the road and bus. Behind and between malls, houses, fences, and acres of cleared land where roads, lights, and plumbing fixtures stand waiting for more houses, I see swamp, or the remnants of swamp.

I remember I meant to read a book called Postmodern Swamplands*, and never got around to it. I also remember the author (name now lost to me) talking about swamplands as paradigms of unmanageable 'filth' and diversity that are inimical to the bounded 'communities' that replace them. I hope I haven't misrepresented him.*

The bus takes me to the beginning of my walk. A walk that has grown more necessary as I have found out more about my history and the history of this country, and how they are not only (obviously) intertwined, but mirror each other. Each time my resolve has faltered, a coincidence, syncronicity, or inexplicable encounter has made me start again. You ignore those signs at your peril.

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Improvisation has always been part of story-telling. Marie Maclean points out, 'narrative performance, even at its most minimal, as in the recounting of short events in everyday life, always involves interaction between teller and hearer' (1988, xii). In such interactions lie the roots of improvisation: the teller always adjusts the tale to the hearer (just as the hearer adjusts the tale heard). Maclean points out, too, that '[t]hrough a narrative text I meet you in a struggle which may be co-operative or may be combative, a struggle for knowledge, for power, for pleasure, for possession' (1988, xii).

Let's look at two ends of what might be a performance continuum:

- *recreative performance* where the performer's behavior is largely foreseen and repeated in performance, and the performance 'is an active refusal of waste, of dispersion, a demonstration of the forces of conservation against the "heat-death" of the narrative'; and
- *improvisational,* or *compositional, performance* where the performer's behavior is unforeseen, the performer striving not to repeat previously learnt routines, and where 'the transgressive power of the performance cracks the rigid framework of ideologies and preconceptions to allow a release of energy which can then be channelled negentropically in renewed creativity' (Maclean 1988 2; 2–3).[ii]

Of course, no performance is entirely improvised, since any performance depends on the performer's knowledge of previous performances, experiences, and possibilities within the form being improvised.

At the improvisational end of the above continuum, we can distinguish a number of important features:

- the importance of *repetition* and *difference*;
- use of a *guiding image* or *referent*;
- *immediacy* between performers, and between performers and audience;
- *difficulty of determining the agent*, or subject, of an improvisation; and
- the frequently *indifferent 'quality'* of improvisation's products.

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6:30pm Mon, 22 Sep 2003
There is no UTM fix for this site. Tired, I made a mistake when reconfiguring my GPS after I had been there, and reset the position so that it was 851km south west, in the Indian Ocean. I try not to take this as an omen …

*

… I stood in a hail storm, deciding if it was worth trying to find the new cemetery. I find out it is 4-5km from town, call a taxi (I've not started walking yet), and go.

It is nearly dusk when I get there. Unlike city cemeteries I've visited, this one is well-ordered, the graves in neat grids around a central avenue of trees. There is plenty of space here for the dead. All the headstones face west.

There are signs pointing to the A, B, C, and so on, sections, with precise divisions between denominations. Catholics, Anglicans, Other Denominations. The graves are even arranged more or less in chronological order of death. Though, regrettably, not in alphabetical order. I wonder what denomination my great grandfather was, and try to remember his date of death.

I decide to look in the Anglicans, only to realise after three quarters of an hour that there is no way, no way! I take photos of empty spaces, just in case. And note that it is amongst the Anglican graves that the kangaroo paws grow thickest.

As the sun sets, I try Other Denominations, moving up and down the aisles, trying to ignore the tragedies of children dying young; the pathos of headstones that read simply 'Mum', 'Dad', or, somehow more poignant still, 'Nanna'; and faded photographs and plastic flowers. All the cliches of graveyards, which are yet true.

And then I find it. A simple plaque, which I think was put there by a cousin of mine. Just his name, date of death and age. And 'Fondly remembered'.

I look at it and wonder what I feel. The sun has set, the air is cold, it is raining lightly, and it feels like there might be more hail coming.

I ring my partner and tell her where I am. She asks me what I feel, and I don't know what to say. Just another bloke looking for family. Do I feel the same at 'home', near my father's grave?

I take photos and walk about in the chill. I come across the grave of my great uncle — my grandmother's brother — and I feel comforted. I see the names of pioneering families, and other people to whom I know now that I am related. I look at them. And then I realise that my great grandmother is not buried with or near to my great grandfather. My mother told me that he lived at the back of his wife's house, and another relative confirmed that. What was their relationship? And did he live there, at the back, because the back of his farm faced on to the lagoon where the tribal people gathered?

In the dark now, I look for great grandmother's grave. I have a light, but it's impossible. I cannot find her.

I see a grave with raised lettering across the horizontal surface of its top. The lettering is uneven, and I wonder how the family felt when they saw it. I reach down to touch the letters, and am astonished when they move under my hand. Time and

moisture have made them moveable. I toy with the idea of writing a haiku with the letters available to me. But not seriously. I give it up, straighten two or three letters, and call my taxi home.

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Repetition

All improvisations are balancing acts between freedom and constraint, repetition and difference. Without repetition and redundancy, an improvisation would be meaningless, not to say impossible. There is always repetition in improvisation — the performers cannot escape the past, their gendering, the personal narratives remembered and enacted in the tics and convulsions of their bodies. But they can re-write those narratives through the failure to repeat exactly. An essential improvisational strategy is the repetition or *reincorporation* — literally, the re-embodiment — of earlier material that both provides a sense of closure and generates new material.

Guiding image

All improvisations use what Pressing called the 'referent', which:

> may be imitative, metaphoric, allegorical, antagonistic, canonic, contrapuntal, variational or independent . . . the time scale for behavioral response may vary from very short to long. In strict improvisation contexts compatibility between referent and behavior is continuous, in freer contexts the expressive continuity of the improvised material may cause [its] temporary abandonment (Pressing 1984, 348).

In other words, a referent's connection to an improvisation is fluid. The inventiveness and liveliness of improvisations depend largely on the choice of referents, which may be 'virtually any coherent image which allows the improviser a sense of engagement and continuity' (1984, 346).

Immediacy

Improvisation leads to a sense of immediacy for performers. Separated from the crutch of the precomposed, performers must contend with *here-and-now* creation:

> One perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception . . . Get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen (Charles Olson in Steinman 1986, 77).[iii]

Indeterminate agency

Some of the most common characteristics of improvisation are a loss of a sense of self, feelings of flow, automaticity, or being 'spoken' or 'moved', rather than being in conscious control, of occupying a space where time is simultaneously sped up and slowed down, where distances between and in things are meaningless, where there is a sensation of infinite depth.

Pressing comments that:

> The . . . feeling of automaticity, about which much metaphysical speculation exists . . . can be simply viewed as a natural result of considerable practice, a stage at which it has become possible to completely dispense with conscious monitoring of motor programmes, so that the hands appear to have a life of their own, driven by the musical constraints of the situation . . . In a sense, the performer is played by the music. The same thing happens with common actions like walking and eating (1988, 139).

Pressing's dismissal of 'metaphysical speculation' should not blind us to the very real problem of *agency* that lies at the root of improvisation — if the improviser has

‘completely dispense[d] with conscious monitoring of motor programs’ then who, or what, is ‘driving’ the improvisation or performance?

Indifferent ‘quality of product’

A common feature of all improvisation is that its products are *frequently* (but not always) of apparently poor quality compared to precomposed and practised work; humans are better able to perform tasks which they can rehearse and practise; previously composed works generally do not contain as many mistakes, redundancies or repetitions as improvised work. Improvisers from many different forms refer to the difference in quality between pre-composed and improvised work. For example, organ improviser Stephen Hick says:

> most of the time … I think an improvisation should be played and then forgotten … It’s either good or bad but if you listen to an improvisation over and over it just gets worse. (in Bailey 1992, 35; first ellipsis in original).

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Noon Thu, 25 Sep, 2003
UTM
50 370181E
6297183N

I have to take the highway into Bunbury. It’s noisy & unpleasant. I switch between the divider & the right-hand edge.

I do enjoy the back draft of the trucks as they go by — a welcome blast of cool air.

Beginning of an incomplete list of things seen at the edge of the road:

- *numerous plastic bags*
- *a dead cat*
- *a radiator*
- *plastic wheel trims*
- *bones*
- *Bundaberg Rum cans*
- *used condoms*
- *various single shoes, sneakers & thongs*
- *crushed glass*
- *many short pieces of blue & yellow rope — sometimes tied in knots*
- *a pornographic magazine covered in tiny white snails*

- *a man pushing an airline trolley full of bags — when we meet we discuss where we're going (Albany for him, but he's hitching) & he tells me to avoid Carnarvon cos it's 'full of drunken, screaming blackfellas'; I look at him and wonder if he's read Germaine Greer's essay for Quarterly Review where she discusses whitefella drinking: 'For whatever reason it remains easier in most places in Australia to get drunk than to find something half-way decent to eat. In towns like Alice Springs, liquor outlets outnumber food stores by a ratio of six or seven to one'. I decide it's unlikely, and hastily leave him.*

- *a coke bottle full of what looks like piss*

- *bits of tyres*

- *a radio aerial*

- *footprints*

- *jumpers*

- *gloves*

- *buckets …*

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I want to underline here that:

- the pleasure of improvised performance lies as much in the attempt to make the thing as in the thing made; and,
- the making of the improvisation can proceed either with *facility* or with *difficulty*.

If, as Maclean argues, listeners have significant power over narratives through their reactions, then tellers can either: achieve fluency and skill in (a) repetition, or in (b) skilfully creating new material. In either case the teller repels the power of the listener. In performance, the performer gains control over the audience by skilfully repeating the known, or fluently creating new material. The improviser relying on facility simply stages the obverse of the recreative performer's repetition.

*

Director Richard Murphet compared *improvisation as a river* to *improvisation as a dam:* facility leading to a flowing improvisation; staying with 'difficulty' working like a dam to slow and deepen the improvisation, sometimes stopping it entirely so that progress is impossible, at other times leading to the river erupting over or through the dam wall. Moments of difficulty depend on a commitment from performers to *resist* the needs:

- to be seen to produce; and
- to resolve the improvisation through a facile exercise of skill.

They are moments of *impasse,* where neither performer nor audience knows what the performer is doing, a moment when the worlds of performer, audience, and performance not so much merge as collide. They entail a giving up of both cognitive and somatic control, a willingness to become disorganised, to exist outside the established patterns of being, The moment of difficulty foregrounds precisely those elements of knowledge, pleasure, power, and possession that Maclean identifies in her discussion of oral story-telling.[iv]

The moment of difficulty has affinities with Richard Schechner's notion of *actuals*, which he opposes to the Western mimetic tradition. According to Schechner, *actuals* — which include tribal rituals, Happenings, street demonstrations, and much avant-garde activity — are grounded on yearnings for wholeness, process and organic growth, concreteness, and transcendental experience (Schechner 1988, 39–40), and have five features:

> 1) *process,* something happens *here and now;* 2) *consequential, irremediable*, and *irrevocable* acts, exchanges, or situations; 3) *contest,* something is *at stake* for the performers and often for the spectators; 4) *initiation, a change in status* for participants; 5) space is used *concretely* and *organically* (Schechner 1988, 51).

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Noon Sun, 28 Sep, 2003
UTM
50 380675E
6330287N

... My grandmother was born in 1901 and died in 1969.

I remember her as a short but large woman with darkish and freckled skin.

I cannot remember the sound of her voice, except that it was soft.

My mother tells me that I was an extremely wakeful and distressed baby. She and her mother would take turns to walk, holding me, through the night. Naturally, I don't remember this.

But I do have a memory of seeing Grandma at Leonora — where she moved sometime after my mother left home to marry my father. She is standing or walking along the edge of a fence in a dusty yard, holding something down by her side in her left arm.

I have another memory of her in the same yard squatting and skinning a kangaroo near or under a shed.

All of this was in 1958. I was only two years old, so I can't be sure if these are memories or re-imaginings of stories.

Two things make me think they are memories.

Firstly, I told my mother about standing on a sort of 'hill' looking down at a town. I was with a large man with white hair and in a blue singlet. He pointed out the house

we lived in, and the hospital. My mother tells me this was almost certainly my grandfather at Leonora in 1958.

Secondly, around 1985 I went to an exhibition of Russell Drysdale's photographs at the NGV in Melbourne. He took most of them on trips to the interior of Australia.

As I entered the exhibition I turned to my left, and nearly fell over with fright.

On the wall was an image from my dreams, a building that I returned to over and over. In my dreams its interior transformed with the tenor of the dream, but its exterior, and my approach to it, was always the same. Drysdale had captured it exactly, including the color that I saw in my sleep.

Holding my breath I walked to it, and read the title. Hotel, Leonora, 1958.

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As I walked in real time from Busselton to Kellerberrin, *processually* something happened *here and now* (of course, it is now a *there and then,* and may have been received as such by people reading the texts on the web). I didn't pretend to walk, or compress my walk to so many hours stage time.

Consequential, irremediable, and *irrevocable* acts occurred: I grazed my legs, got bitten by mosquitoes, and occasionally sprayed by stones from trucks. I spent real money, ate real food, and met 'real' people who treated me as another traveller. Of course, just as in any travel or journal writing, no one but I could no whether or not I 'really' did what I wrote I did.

Something was at stake for me. I publicly announced I would do this walk, and would have felt disappointed and foolish if I didn't complete it. I imagine some spectators/readers were barracking for me to finish it as well.

There was a *change in status.* I felt that through walking and writing I changed my status from someone who knew nothing of the country I walked through, to someone who knew something more than most people. From outsider to insider. And perhaps I imagined I changed from whitefella or *wudjala*, to yellafella, or even blackfella.

Space was used *concretely* and *organically:* I walked from, to, and through 'real', concrete, places, following only the vaguest of plans about how I would get from place to place.

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Noon Tue, 30 Sep 2003
UTM
50 374432E
6360977N

Preston Beach
I have hardly slept — legacy of a large tree that, despite its size, was an unsuitable anchor point for my hammock. I had to get out and make many adjustments before I gave up and moved.

Then, mindful of large NO TRESPASSING signs I had seen, I made sure to stay next to the edge of the lake, which meant walking through thicker and thicker paperbark trees and rushes, until finally I got down on hands & knees in amongst the swamp reed and trees. This is tiger snake territory, and I felt overjoyed to be at their level.

But this went on for only half an hour before I could stand and walk properly — only to run into a dead fox, who looked like she or he had only just stopped moving. We were both circumspect and averted our eyes. I moved on.

This country is superb, but it is sad to see so much of it locked up behind NO TRESPASSING signs.

At Preston Beach, a couple from a BMW stroll to the edge of the lake with a camera, take a picture, and return to their car. I try not to judge them — do I know any more or less about this place for having walked through it?

I make a phone call at Preston Beach to my work. I am frustrated that I can't find the person I want, but also reassured that nothing has changed.

Whenever my feet hurt, I tell myself I have the privilege of being paid to do this, and it beats hell out of sitting in an office.

I now have a 7km walk back out to the highway

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Casting aside Schechner's nostalgia for transcendence, and keeping in mind much writing since he wrote about *actuals* in 1988, we can appropriate the *actual* to the moment of difficulty, and combine it with Maclean's analysis of narrative. As performer and audience aim to establish their positions as, (i) competent tellers, facilitators, (self-) authors, connoisseurs of creative flow, and (ii) equally competent receivers, judges, administrators, authorities, and connoisseurs of creative flow, anxiety is introduced, pleasure delayed, the actor/musician/writer revealed as an incompetent *calqueir* requiring the audience's indulgent gaze, the audience made uncomfortably aware of its necessary complicity.

If, following Greimas' analysis (Maclean 1994), all narrative follows the pattern of *vouloir savoir pouvoir,* then the moment of difficulty is located in the *vouloir* as a state of intensity when performers are crossed by the lines of their own desire, a state when the performance has ceased to be and is yet to come. A state where the desire to do and know is momentarily blocked. For performers to stay in the moment of difficulty is to stage their own powerlessness, to demonstrate the power of the audience while not allowing the audience to remain isolated judges. The moment of difficulty happens here and now; is the prelude to irrevocable action by the performers (who either acknowledge they cannot go on, or go on); the continuance of

the ‘performance’ is at stake; the status of performers and spectators is open to change in that moment; and space is used concretely and organically.

It is difficult to stay in the ‘moment of difficulty’. It would be naive and disingenuous of me to pretend that when walking I was always in moments of difficulty. Allowing yourself to be in difficulty without seeking a way out through a pre-known strategy, is not only hard to understand cognitively but terrifying; it means admitting and allowing failure, a *not-knowing,* which *might* open the way to other ways of understanding and doing.

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Noon Wed, 1 Oct, 2003
UTM
50 380600E
6368112N

… When I have not been so tired that I simply collapse, or so wakeful that I can only fret, I have had vivid dreams which I cannot quite get hold of on waking.

This time I remember.

I am with a friend (he is my friend in the dream, I don’t know who it is in ‘life’) who works in opera. He wears a grey suit and topcoat.

He drives me home through a bleak industrial landscape. He is disdainful.

As we pull up outside my house, he says, Each time I do an Opera, I do it for you.

And I say, But I don’t like Opera.

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[i] The above section is a rewritten version of what appeared on the web site for my project.

[ii] I am appropriating Maclean's 'narrative' to its widest sense of progression and digression structured around desire, knowledge, and power. See Marie Maclean (1994), 'Generic narrative', *Dance and narrative: Greenmill Dance Project 1994*, Melbourne, Australian Dance Council (Ausdance) Inc.

[iii] Steinman is citing Olson from his essay 'Projective verse' in Allen, D M (ed.) (1960) *The new American poetry* New York: Grove Press, 388.

[iv] On knowledge, pleasure, power, and possession in narrative see Maclean 1988 throughout.