

Article

'The Way of Our Streets': Exploring the Urban Sacred in Three Australian Poems

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Abstract: This article examines three contemporary Australian poems that concern themselves with matters of the sacred within the modern Australian city. Noting that Australian poetry and the sacred have often been studied in terms of the landscape, the article approaches these poems as part of an undercurrent of spiritual or sacred writing that takes up urban Australian spaces as important and resonant sites. Through readings of Kevin Hart's 'Night Music' (2008), Jill Jones's 'Where We Live' (2007) and Benjamin Frater's 'Ourizen' (2011), the article demonstrates the various ways that contemporary Australian spirituality is poetically expressed in cities such as Brisbane, Adelaide and Sydney.

Keywords: Australian literature; poetry; sacred; religion; cities; suburbia

1. Introduction

Since the project of colonisation began, and even before this time, Australian poetic interest in the sacred has often been aligned with the particularities of the country's geography and natural terrain. 'Beyond all arguments there is the land itself', Philip Hodgins wrote in a 1995 poem ([1], p. 46), describing the kind of existential weight afforded to the physical ground, with its a priori and obdurate 'there-ness'. This sense of the land is apparent in many of the iconic Australian poems that deal in what might be called 'sacred' meaning. One thinks of the post-colonial disquiet of Judith Wright's 'At Cooloolah' [2], the mystical agrarian eroticism of David Campbell's 'Night Sowing' [3], or Les Murray's reverential treatment of Bunyah (an inland district around 300 km north of Sydney) across almost his entire oeuvre [4]. Indeed, 'the wide brown land' (as Mackellar famously described it ([5], p. 326)) seems to stretch out beneath and around and across so much of Australian poetry, that it makes other discussions difficult to even countenance. As Dennis Haskell proclaimed (rather hyperbolically) in 2009, 'In Australia, we don't have a church, we have a landscape' ([6], p. 131).

Thus, contemporary scholars who deal with notions of the sacred in Australian literature and poetry have been quick to explore the landscape in sophisticated ways, taking into account developments in postcolonial and eco-critical studies. For example, in *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation*, Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs use Coronation Hill, Uluru and Hindmarsh Island as three case studies in which they explore how 'indigenous claims for sacred sites and sacred objects' are 'crucial in the recasting of Australia's sense of itself' ([7], p. xi). In a similarly ambitious project, Bill Ashcroft, argues that the radical transformation of the notion of the sacred Australia 'originated squarely in the colonial encounter with a new and threatening land' ([8], p. 23). And as Ashcroft outlines what he designates the movement from the vertical sublime to the horizontal sublime in the Australian imagination he is primarily thinking of space and landscape:

For it is in the immensity of Australian space, an immensity that maintains a curious hold on this most urbanised of countries, in which both the sublime and the sacred, the utopian and the dystopian seem to be contained ([8], p. 23).

However, alongside this focus on Australian landscapes and the sacred, there is also an undercurrent that explores the roles that cities and urban spaces might play in Australian poetic interactions with the sacred. For example, Anne Elvey, in a 2013 tour of contemporary Australian poetry ("A Spirituality that is not One: Australian Poetry, Spirit and Country"), notices 'the reclamation of urban space' by contemporary Australian poets. Here, she is able to identify a certain strand of urban 'internationalism' that accompanies works by writers of diverse backgrounds (including Michelle Cahill in her poem 'City of Another Home' and Ouyang Yu in his volume *The Kingsbury Tales*), as well as the presentation of the city as 'multiple and ambiguous' even grace-filled on occasion [9].

Lyn McCredden's 2007 essay, 'Contemporary poetry and the sacred: Vincent Buckley, Les Murray and Samuel Wagan Watson' is another notable example of scholarship that deals with poetic interactions with Australian cities, exploring them as places 'in which sacred and secular jostle each other ambivalently, sometimes tooth and claw' ([10], p. 154). This poetic analysis is ground-breaking in studies of the sacred in Australian literature, not least because Australian cities haven't often been theorised or examined as sites for poetic spiritual reflection. Indeed Haskell (and others) are quick to point out that the first colonial church in Sydney was burned by convicts ([6], p. 120). Cities have also been both implicated in and symptomatic of those very processes of rationalism and modernism that one might consider antithetical to religion and the sacred as such (this is part of what makes Les Murray's 1969 much-anthologised 'An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow' such a thrilling and pointed poem, with its man 'crying in Martin Place' in the centre of Sydney). Furthermore, in the contemporary period, Australian cities seem to be given over to the complex striations of anti-essentialism, global capitalism and postmodernity in ways that may also seem to rule out notions of the sacred in advance. But McCredden characterises the Australian city, in the works of Buckley, as 'the place where an active vision of redemption must be sought or made' ([10], p. 155). In Murray, the city is sometimes posed as an alternative to the 'pastorally real' but it is also the site where 'redemptive immanence' can be glimpsed, somewhere that 'is potentially both closed and open to the sacred' ([10], p. 159). McCredden reads Wagan Watson's Brisbane as a place 'where Aboriginal history simmers beneath the surface of the city: a scar is alive ...' ([10], p. 164). All three poets, she argues are 'prophetic ... crying out for acknowledgement in the interstices of the modern city' ([10], p. 166).

Following this approach, my essay considers three longer contemporary poems set in Australian cities (Brisbane, Adelaide, Sydney), in order to examine what McCredden might describe as their 'luminous moments,' those desires for greater, ultimate or even absolute meaning. As I proceed, I wish to hold in dialectical tension both the notion that cities produce poems (hence the particularities of these Australian interactions with the sacred) but also the notion that poems produce cities (so that these iterations of Brisbane, Adelaide and Sydney are, in Emily Bitto's words 'deeply imagined' ([11], p. 104). The three poets are diverse in their outlook and poetic sensibilities. Kevin Hart (b1954), currently the Edwin B Kyle Professor of Christian Studies at the University of Virginia, is still engaged in what Nicholas Birns has labelled his 'complicated poetic-critical project' ([12], p. 66), which involves committed research in the areas of phenomenology, Derridean deconstruction, negative theology and mysticism. These fields, I think, are vital companions in approaching Hart's poetry. Jill Jones (b1951), currently an Associate Professor in Writing at the University of Adelaide, boasts a prolific poetic output over the past two decades, and is one of Australia's key writers of contemporary cityscapes. According to Jones's own words, her poems 'reflect places which are mainly urban and strewn with emblems and texts' [13]. Benjamin Frater (1979–2007) was a vibrant and talented poet from southwestern Sydney, whose first full volume, *6am in the Universe*, was posthumously published by Grand Parade Poets in 2011 [14]. Frater's idiosyncratically compelling voice, married to his Blakean visionary poetics, will probably remain unmatched for some time in Australian poetry.

Longer poems ('Night Music', 'Where We Live', and 'Ourizen') have been chosen because they demonstrate a sustained engagement with ideas of sacredness across a range of Australian cities (Brisbane, Adelaide, Sydney). The works also stem from remarkably diverse poetic projects: Hart's idiosyncratic and compelling engagement with negative theology and philosophy, Jones's postmodern

flânerie and her ongoing responses to the ‘infinite network[s]’ of cities [15], and Frater’s apocalyptic visionary disruptions with their goal of “prophetic illuminative seizure” [16]. Thus, in their markedly different approaches, these three poets give us a taste of some of the ways that sacredness in general, and Christianity in particular, has manifested itself within contemporary Australian poetry. Indeed, each of these poems demonstrates that cities are places where profound and ‘iconic’ interactions with ‘the sacred’ can take place, yet places where such interactions always exist under threat of erasure.

2. Kevin Hart’s ‘Night Music’

‘Night Music’ from the 2008 book *Young Rain* is one of Kevin Hart’s longer poems about his totemic site, Brisbane [17]. As I have noted elsewhere, ‘Many of [Hart’s] poems seemed compelled to return again and again to Brisbane’s tropical heat and humidity, its sensual fecundity, those combinations of movement and stillness, noise and silence that seem to define the city on the river’ ([18], p. 359). In ‘Night Music’ the poet takes us outward from a particular place along the Brisbane River, often swinging between the proximate and the distant. We see this in the poem’s opening lines where specific locations (Auchenflower, Lima Street) playfully extend all the way to South America:

On summer nights up north rain falls asleep
And falls on Auchenflower: how sweet to slip.

Down Lima Street and feel the river’s pull
Toward Peru and want to stay at home... ([17], p. 63).

The mesmerising pull of the Brisbane River doesn’t just indicate a geographical expansion, but it takes the poet, via quotidian phenomena, into a space of memory and reverie. This world of steaming mud, blackberries, simple notes on some icy keys, folds the present into the past. Thus ‘the thick summer night’ ([17], p. 69) describes both the Brisbane night of the poem’s opening, but also the night on which the poet’s mother died. This is a perfect example of what Emily Bitto refers to as ‘spatial memory,’ in her work on David Malouf:

‘Spatial memory,’ in Malouf’s work, implies more than the recalling of spaces and places of significance to the author. It is, rather, a process by which these spaces come to be ‘revised,’ repeatedly re-inscribed with new meaning and value until they become mythologized spaces ([11], p. 92).

Another way of figuring Hart’s poetic meditative process is to take up Gregory of Nyssa’s term ‘epektasis’ (literally ‘tension towards’ or stretching out). For Gregory, ‘epektasis’ describes the continual upwards striving toward the infinite God. Hart explains it this way in his review of David Bentley Hart’s *The Beauty of the Infinite*:

As Gregory says in his commentary on Psalm 6, the one who always stretches ahead [epekteinomenos] will always ascend in a quest for transcendent reality that never ends ([19], p. 60).

Something of this process can be seen in Hart’s poem. ‘The river’s pull’, its brooding (echoing the spirit of Genesis 1:2), the way simple phenomena like music or hands transport the poem into surreal memories: all these indicate a desire for something greater (the poem is filled with McCredden’s ‘luminous moments’). And the form of the poem too reaches out across seventy couplets of gentle iambic pentameter (in ten groups of seven), unspooling like the Brisbane river or the vast night itself. ‘Night Music’ therefore stretches across time and space, inhabiting and reliving moments from the past (kissing a lover, hearing of a mother’s death, walking by the river as a teenager) whilst intimating a type of timelessness in the same breath.

However, one of the remarkable things about Hart’s poetry is that it is never merely a poetry of simple transcendental longing or visionary ascent. Indeed, if Gregory’s ‘epektasis’ is used here, then it is accompanied by something like the counterspirituality of the atheist philosopher Maurice Blanchot.

For instead of stretching out into upward striving, a beatific vision of the divine face, the poem stretches into darkness and unknowing. 'Add music to the night and there is night,/Or, some nights, only music: deep inside' the poem cryptically warns in one section ([17], p. 64). In another section, the lines on a hand become 'a map of veins/ And bones and gristle guiding me nowhere' ([17], p. 65). 'There is a darkness sleeping with the dark' warns the poet elsewhere, '[it] waits behind each little thing you see' ([17], p. 67). There are hints of mystical theology here. For instance, one is reminded of Dionysius the Areopagite who argues that 'we are brought into contact with things unutterable and unknown, in a manner unutterable and unknown' ([20], Chapter 1, Section 1) or St John of the Cross who notes, 'Thus the shadow of a dark object amounts to another darkness in the measure of the darkness of the object' ([21], p. 152). Hart's exploration of mystical and negative theology are well known and have often been explored [22]. Yet it is the atheist Blanchot who seems to offer a more dangerous darkness that fits in with Hart's poem. In *The Space of Literature* Blanchot describes two kinds of nocturnal space. The space of 'the first night' is the space where representations disperse, where one may come close to touching the abyss of dying, absence and the outside.

In the night, everything has disappeared. This is the first night. Here absence approaches—silence, repose, night. Here death blots out Alexander's picture; here the sleeper does not know he sleeps, and he who dies goes to meet real dying. Here language completes and fulfils itself in the silent profundity which vouches for it as its meaning ([23], p. 163).

Blanchot also speaks of 'the other night.' Described through a double negative (the appearance of disappearance) this absence is granted its own kind of agency:

But when everything has disappeared in the night, 'everything has disappeared' appears. This is the other night. Night is this apparition: 'everything has disappeared.' It is what we sense when dreams replace sleep, when the dead pass into the deep of the night, when night's deep appears in those who have disappeared ([23], p. 163).

Hart's poem seems to find succour in something like Blanchot's versions of the night, situated in the strange space of the Brisbane night, where the dead visit the memories of the living, where 'what I want is never there to see,' and where 'some words fall only in the dark.' Blanchot's attention to absence and death offers a nocturnal context, one connected with atheism. But to think of Hart folding Blanchot into his version of apophatic theology is to sense the depths of the repeated line: 'God is the dark before the shadows came' ([17], p. 70).

Therefore, it is clear that Hart sets up the city of Brisbane as a mythic site, somewhere that offers its own localised phenomena and yet somewhere that provokes vast and important journeys (these aspects are evident in almost all of Hart's Brisbane poems). In this way Hart's Brisbane has certain affinities with David Malouf's version of the city, as outlined in 'A First Place: The Mapping of a World' [24]. Here Malouf emphasises the city's topographical features as correlated to 'the contours of a sensibility' ([24], p. 10). Brisbane's hills and gullies, its 'sudden vistas' ([24], p. 3) allow for 'new and shifting views' ([24], p. 4). For Malouf, the river in Brisbane 'is a disorienting factor. Impossible to know which side of it you are on, north or south, or to use it for settling in your mind how any place or suburb is related to any other ([24], p. 5).' Hart, too, often uses the river's looping path, its constant switching back, as a way of registering changes in perspective, or to cut across time (see section two of his poem 'Membranes' for example [25]).

Of course, this 'Brisbane-view' in the works of both Hart and Malouf isn't just a picture produced by the particularities of the city, but it is also a powerful way of writing Brisbane into existence. As Roger Osborne notes in his work on mapping locations in Malouf's fiction, 'writing arrests the dynamics of a cityscape for moments of solitary contemplation—moments where the imagination "revisions" space under the sway of experience and memory ([26], p. 119).' Hart's poetry, I would argue, is indeed a kind of 're-visioning' with its own apophatic and sacred undercurrent.

3. Jill Jones's 'Where We Live'

'Where we Live: Illuminated texts and Glosses' is a multi-tracked poem and series of street photographs by Jill Jones and Annette Willis, first published by James Stuart in his 2007 ebook *The Material Poem* [27] and later republished in Jones's 2012 book of poetry, *Ash is Here, So are Stars* [28]. As Jones writes in the artist note: 'These poems and photographs reflect our landscapes, which are urban and strewn with emblems and texts, accidental or deliberate' ([27], p. 192). Wall scratchings, shop windows, words like 'betrayal' and 'prayer' spray-painted onto the bitumen, a duck on a towball, stencil art and official signs: all kinds of discarded urban ephemera and often unheeded street details are depicted throughout using various techniques.

Apart from photographs taken by Willis, each page of 'Where we Live' contains four different types of text. (1) A photo caption (usually with an aphoristic or suggestive tone, for example 'they have seen it' ([27], p. 187) or 'Each Scratch a Water History' ([27], p. 186)); (2) A poetic paragraph leading into a poem (usually in columns) containing a series of underlined words; (3) A short haiku-like poem strained from the underlined words in each poetic paragraph; (4) An italicised series of fragmented comments or notebook thoughts, each line beginning with a left hand parenthesis.

The multi-modal presentation is an apt way to consider the many 'voices' of a streetscape and the complex intentionality (to take up a phenomenological term) of any artist (or artists) as they apprehend it. This is a complicated project given the array of evidence (or diversions) on offer, the multivalent and dazzling moments where capitalism's detritus meets plangent calls from graffiti and street signs. Jones admits 'I don't know all these languages' ([27], p. 191) in the final section, and the different forms of written and visual text in the work indicate that such a streetscape has fragmented the artist's perception. Astrid Lorange notes that the collaboration sees 'Jones's poetry arcing through the sky, following birds, and Willis's images tracing the palimpsestic surfaces of the city's streets, walls and window-fronts' [29]. Thus, the poem is about the strange and myriad ways that city streets might contain and disperse meaning. 'We search for different evidence' writes Jones, 'equal to/the same odd beauty/that's more/than distraction' ([27], p. 186).

It is striking that in order to depict the significance of the city streets, 'We Are Here' often takes its cues from aspects one might normally associate with ways of approaching the sacred. This is evident in three areas. Firstly, the work both desires and moves toward Simone Weil-like moments of attention across urban landscapes that seem paradoxically hard-wired to provoke distraction. For when Simone Weil's writes, for example, that 'Attention consists in suspending thought, in leaving it available, empty and subject to penetration by the object' ([30], pp. 111–12), we can see small moments in 'Where we Live' that echo this desire. 'The birds wait./ A feather drifts downward' ([27], p. 187), Jones writes in the second section. 'Light gift' and 'Fibrous coronas' ([27], p. 188) appear in the third. Indeed, when Jones writes that 'Each translation' of the phenomena of the street is 'a form of waiting' ([25], p. 188) she finds herself within the tradition of Australian poetic mystical theology (one which Toby Davidson has patiently tracked [22]). Jones's whole poem, of course, is precisely about being attentive and hearing the urban landscape speak.

Secondly, for all the poem's fragmentation and assemblage, there is something quite liturgical about its tone in places. 'I'm not a Catholic,' Jones said in a 2006 interview, 'but I've been around churches and religion enough to know what music and song liturgy can mean' [31]. The movement toward the statement 'these are the hymns' ([27], p. 191) in the final section is particular striking in this regard. And the italicised 'hymn' Jones includes is reminiscent of a simple prayer:

For what we are
For what we take
For what we have
For what we make ([27], p. 191).

Indeed, the repeated 'fors' offer an almost imperceptible nod toward something like the prayer of general thanksgiving in the Australian Anglican Prayer Book:

Gracious God, we humbly thank you
 for all your gifts so freely bestowed on us,
 for life and health and safety,
 for freedom to work and leisure to rest,
 and for all that is beautiful in creation and in human life [32].

Indeed, there seem to be faint traces of Christian liturgy beneath other lines in the poem too. 'The guano of ages' which has accreted on buildings and must be 'stepped over,' echoes Toplady's hymn, 'Rock of Ages, cleft for me'. Furthermore, Jones's description of various strokes and signs in the urban landscape as 'Not begotten/but made' is an inversion of the Nicene Creed (where Jesus is described as 'begotten, not made'). Here, Jones is working through ideas about the way that cityscapes are filled with manufactured material objects ('Can you just create anything?' is the question that begins section three [27], p. 188).

Thirdly, and perhaps most obviously, it is interesting that the poem's 'street speech' is so often described in religious or sacralising terms. Not only is this journey figured as a kind of pilgrimage ('the way of streets') but the first lines of each poetic paragraph invoke sacred religious language:

Heaven, if you look up, isn't black as it used to be. Our window is a prayer... ([27], p. 184)
 [...]

Baptism, or betrayal, are turning points ([27], p. 185).
 [...]

Can you just create anything ([27], p. 186)?
 [...]

Articles, sometimes, are left behind in the road like a prayer or a gamble, a flutter of rain ([27], p. 187).

My argument is that the deployment of such language (heaven, prayer, baptism, betrayal,) is a way of registering a certain level of significance. The indication here is that the omens of the street may lead one toward the divine. Indeed, to consider the details of streets as akin to spiritual signs is to elevate the practice of street observation to a sententious, revelatory or prophetic role. And yet Jones must do this from within the shifting, anti-essentialist reversals and counter-reversals that characterise the postmodern condition (and that default mode of 'incredulity' of which Lyotard reminds us [33], p. xxiv). After all, the stuff of the streets includes the castoff objects of global capitalism, strange single words sprayed on the ground, writing on a shop window photographed in reverse, a sign which tells people not to ride skateboards, All these things are reminiscent of PiO's riotous non-differentiated street punk poetry, those raucous locations in which there is no position for objective analysis or reflection (and little desire to attempt it) [34]. And Jones, whilst still provisionally attempting attention or reflection, must contend with the real possibility that the streets might not offer any transcendence at all. 'There is no epiphany,' Jones writes in the artist note at the end of the poem ([27], p. 192). Therefore, within this context, the work becomes a series of promises and withdrawals, as abundant meanings threaten to suddenly collapse or recede:

Much is overwritten
 Much disappears in
 telling the hours ([27], p. 186)
 [...]

Each word is a tip-off
 Daily hieroglyphs
 in the pattern's tread.
 A tide of it seems to have
 no purpose
 but to state 'I was here' ([27], p. 188).

[...]
 Signs weave amongst
 the wonderful dust
 and absences assigned by words ([27], p. 191).

These movements are contradictory, and this gives the poem its surprising and poignant energy, simultaneously gesturing toward both a surfeit of meaning and toward no meaning at all. This can perhaps be summed up in the ‘random evidence’ ([27], p. 187) or ‘chance testimony’ ([27], p. 188) that the poem mentions on occasion. Of course, ‘testimony’ and ‘evidence’ have certain juridical meanings, and yet they also have spiritual resonances too (testimony as religious witness, evidence as a component of classical apologetics). And by pairing these terms with ‘random’ and ‘chance’ the poet juxtaposes them with the dumb luck of an atheistic world lacking in any kind of ultimate driving purpose (here, there are shades of Mallarmé’s ‘Un Coup de Dés Jamais N’Abolira Le Hasard’ [35]). Thus, however expressive and suffused with meaning the urban landscape might be, however you are to ‘read’ or ‘uncover’ ‘the archaeology of [its] surfaces’ ([27], p. 188), however many signs, inscriptions, voices, illuminations, patterns, translations, statements, emblems, utterances, voices, conversations may occur, the background hum of a chance universe means that any illuminative gains, any ‘traces of fire,’ ([27], p. 190) any ‘syllable[s] of light’ ([27], p. 191) are potentially meaningless or not sacred at all. This is why the double gesture of the poem is so compelling, as it scrambles for significance in an overdetermined yet possibly a-teleological urban landscape.

4. Benjamin Frater’s ‘Ourizen’

If Jill Jones and Kevin Hart model various kinds of patient attentiveness, Benjamin Frater’s manic visionary poem ‘Ourizen’ ([36]) can be thought of as the opposite. That is, Frater’s poem is always too distracted, leaping from meaning to meaning, site to site, spinning on its heels, spitting and howling with rage, and yet somehow it is also far too attentive (pathologically obsessed would be an apt description). For ‘Ourizen’ compulsively returns to coded messages, particular locations or totemic details. It gleefully forces readers to look upon distasteful material (‘He held the spinal prayer cord/of his grandmother/in a feverish fist’ ([36], p. 75). It paints the world with quasi-blasphemous, seething imagery (e.g., ‘the primeval/trinity of Scorpions’ ([36], p. 94), or the ‘endless/star-spangled/larynx of GOD’, ([36], p. 100).

Frater’s is a poetry that combines something like Blake’s sacred visions with Ginsberg’s guttural cries and Rimbaud’s visceral surprises. In an exposition of his poem ‘Bughouse Meat’ Frater describes ‘The Catholic Yak’ (his poetic persona) in the following terms:

The Catholic Yak is the obscure child of two poet fathers, Artaud and Ginsberg. Like his fathers he exhibits and utilises a system of visionary poetics: a poetics informed by electroshock therapy and visual, auditory and tactile hallucinations. [...] Like Artaud the Yak at times attempts the same intrusive mental insurrection and in an emulation of Ginsberg uses incantation or anaphora. Both techniques are employed to produce the “prophetic illuminative seizure ... ” spoken of earlier [37].

Frater’s own battles with schizophrenia and its related medications provided the stage for this poetico-religious project. As Alise Blayney (Frater’s wife) notes: “Ben’s life was poetry [...] He lived between worlds, and wrote in his notebook how he considered the ‘Poet is Priest; Poetry as confession; Performance of Poetry is exorcism’” [37].

In his review of Frater’s posthumously published book Martin Duwell writes that ‘almost by definition, a visionary poetics is going to be trans-national, tapping in to elements that appear in all the manifestations of poetic creativity’ [38]. And yet, Frater’s poem ‘Ourizen’ (taking its cues Blake’s poem ‘Urizen’) begins in the southwestern Sydney suburbs of Airds (where he went to high school), Guildford (where his father owned a hotel), Campbelltown (where he grew up), and Minto (where he lived as an adolescent) with sudden imaginative swerves out to the Yarra Valley, Coolac, Belfast,

and Tokyo for fleeting moments of anti-illumination. The suburbs in southwest Sydney, 'the parts of town/taxis refuse to enter/beyond the dying of the sun' ([36], p. 75), are the kind of dystopias that give rise to Frater's manic prophetic visions. And they do so precisely because of their underprivileged status, their limited horizons, their propensity for violence, and their problematic existence on the city's outskirts. 'In the ghetto of Minto/We lived next-door to/a murder,/regular wife thrashing,/a dead baby up a jumper/and the Oval is always on fire' ([36], p. 77) Frater writes (with a certain relish, one might imagine, even though the picture is nightmarishly never-ending). Similarly, Airds high school is described as a 'multicultural ganglash,/Barbed wire gate and perimeter/(a school embracing all the office symmetry/and stench of a Prison)' ([36], p. 76). Throughout the opening sections of 'Ourizen,' Campbelltown is repeatedly referred to as 'belltown' (e.g., 'the shit camp/of/a belltown/Campbelltown/my hometown' ([36], p. 87)). This is both an ironically sanctified and vaguely foreboding description, invoking the bells of churches, or Buddhist meditation, or Donne's famous lines in 'No Man is an Island'.

In its dystopian setting and its use of the jeremiad, Frater's work is reminiscent of Coral Hull's 1996 poem 'Liverpool' which figures the south western Sydney suburb as apocalyptic and horrendous, marked by insularity, dysfunction and pathological parochialism where there are 'more car parks than parks,/more sizzlers than books' ([39], p. 26). The refrain of Hull's poem ('where is the city?' ([39], pp. 24, 26)) emphasises Liverpool's distance from the centre. For the poet, Liverpool is the end of the train line, a place where it takes half a day just to get to the beach, and hence it becomes Sydney's version of Gehenna (that rubbish dump burning outside Jerusalem).

liverpool, city of the damned/of
lost dreams, tv screens: the unhealthy unwealthy
& unwise of burke's backyard dreaming & the david
jones show ([39], p. 26).

Within such stifling locations it is extremely difficult for figures like the visionary and creative poet to exist. For Frater, whether it is the prison-like school in Airds, the 'labyrinth of ghettos' ([36], p. 87) in Campbelltown or the 'gunshot/fall-down/Greenacre/Waterloo Rd sunset' ([36], p. 90), each location seems antithetical to the life of imagination. Thus in Frater's 'Ourizen' the poet is often symbolically strung out, executed and exposed (this will later morph into a kind of crucifixion). In one example 'a poet/is bird-less/abandoned, beaten/hung-hacked/and/slowly /butchered/on the Bardo barbs/of/a/Belltown' ([36], pp. 77–78). The allusion to the Tibetan Buddhist word for the space of existence between death and rebirth (bardo) is apt here, especially given how one might conceive of outer Sydney suburbs. For the Oxford English Dictionary offers one definition of 'suburbs' which speaks of 'the outlying parts of a city (either beyond or just within the city boundaries)' [40]. Such a split definition (beyond/within) is telling and has the same purgatorial resonance as the idea of 'Bardo'. It also overlaps with aspects of what Marion Shoard has labelled 'the edgelands' in Britain: 'The apparently unplanned, certainly uncelebrated and largely incomprehensible territory where town and country meet' ([41], p. 118). For Shoard 'the edgelands' are places where 'heterogeneous elements are arranged in an unruly and often apparently chaotic fashion against a background of unkempt wasteland' ([41], p. 117). Shoard is speaking about particular liminal spaces between British towns and rural landscapes, which have affinities with places like Airds and Campbelltown in Southwest Sydney (but also some marked differences too).

In Frater's poetry, these city edges have a similar power even though they are unbearably oppressive (as I have outlined above). This is because the liminal suburbs are both insular spaces of entrapment, and yet also somehow become the very places where immense reversals and inversions can occur (Frater is a poet of inversions, as Duwell notes [38]). Indeed the essence of Frater's blasphemy is linked to a suburban inversion of sacred and profane elements. As Jennifer Maiden puts it, the suburbs are important in the Australian imaginary because 'Nowhere else can the essential, eternal and eternally reversing dialectic between icon and iconoclasm be observed and experienced so well' ([42], p. 125). This is true of Frater's poem, with its 'obscura valleys/of mixed rat/and Rawson

Rd Mysticism' ([36], p. 91) or the 'real Saint Mary' who is a social worker in Campbelltown ('the tiny particle of/heaven/SNAGGED/deep in the fleshy passage of hell' [36], p. 88). Frater's poetic persona, 'The Catholic Yak,' as well as his repeated invocation of the antichrist also contribute to this dialectic.

Alongside these inversions are those moments of blackly humorous semantic slippage, where Frater is able to demonstrate the dark shadows of language which lurk behind settled facades. 'Ya musn't doubleword yaself' ([36], p. 85) he writes playfully at one point, aping some common undergraduate poetry class advice (Frater studied under Alan Wearne at the University of Wollongong). But Frater's varied examples show how the doubling of language might work to produce startling effects. 'Pray dear prey/that night does not acquaint you with Bill' ([36], p. 76, emphasis mine), he writes in one place. 'Airds/now a needlepoint shy of AIDS' ([36], p. 76) is his description of his home suburb. 'Golden parasites of /paradise/and care-less government' ([36], p. 79, emphasis mine) could be his explanation of family life in the housing commission (it's a little unclear). The Pope morphs into Poe on another occasion ([36], pp. 85–86). I take it that for the schizophrenic poet the edges of Sydney are so volatile and fraught that language is always in danger of undoing itself. This is the sardonic breath of Frater's poetry, a language that is febrile and devilishly unstable. Thus, if Yeats points out that 'things fall apart/the centre cannot hold' [43], then Frater notices the uncoiling of urban fringes, the apocalyptic fraying of Sydney's edgelands.

5. Conclusions

Sydney's edges may be a fitting place to end this article. For each of these poets, the liminal spaces or those edges between states and locations, give rise to profound urban experiences that can readily be labelled as sacred. Indeed, one can see in the works of these poets a continuation of McCredde's 2007 observation that it is from 'the interstices of the modern city' ([10], p. 166) that many poetic prophets come. Kevin Hart's 'Night Music' writes Brisbane onto the edge of an apophatic (or atheistic) apprehension via the river's pull on memories and death. Jill Jones's 'Where We Live' finds its poetic valency along that disputed edge between a city's hyper-signification and its a-teleological fragility. Frater howls his invocations from within Sydney's interstitial and neglected suburbs, cutting his tongue on the sharp edges of blasphemy and ironic sacralisation. In each case, then, we are faced with the astonishing range and breadth of Australian poetic cities where, in Jones's words 'realities break into each other' ([27], p. 191).

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