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Poetry after the epic: Migratory prose/questing poetics

Abstract:

This essay offers an exegetical reflection on research that underpinned poems drafted over a six-month period. For a recent writing residency at the Australia Council BR Whiting Studio in Rome, I devised a prose poetry project critiquing the often negative representational politics of recent global population movements into southern Italy. I researched the Italian political context and undertook field trips in order to evoke the influx of refugees and asylum seekers into Italy's urban centres. The challenge was to portray individual human stories in poetical yet ethically activated ways in relation to depictions of others. This essay therefore explores what 'counter-framing' (Maley 2016: 193) of journeys and experiences of refugees and asylum seekers might be possible through the contemporary 'voice' of the prose poem. How might the prose poem, over and above, or in tandem with, other poetic modes, enact poetic and political counterframing of people movements?

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Prose poetry – Epic stories – Writing displacement – Traumascapes – Prose poem as miniature epic

Arms, and the man I sing, who, forc'd by fate,
And haughty Juno's unrelenting hate,
Expell'd and exil'd, left the Trojan shore.
Virgil, Book I, *The Aeneid*

Franciscan friars installed this unseaworthy six-metre boat inside the public quadrangle of St Francis Basilica in Assisi. The small boat foundered in the Mediterranean Sea off the island of Lampedusa in 2014 with nine people on board, all of whom were rescued. (Photo: Amanda Frances Johnson, 2017)

Introduction

As a key part of a recent six-month writing residency at the Australia Council BR Whiting Studio in Rome, I devised a prose poetry project that aimed to critique the often negative representational politics of recent global population movements into southern Italy. As an Australian writer, I took initial cues from the Australian poetry anthology *Writing to the Wire* (2016), where poets reflect in provocative and moving ways on the politicisation of asylum seeking, 'the pandering and politicking [that] have desensitised and dehumanised the Australian polity at large', as editors Dan Disney and Kit Kelen put it (2016: 1). The immediate challenge was to research the very different Italian political context and evoke the influx of people into Italy's urban centres without recourse to a distanced epic style. That is to say, how can individual human stories be evoked in ways that are poetical yet ethically activated in relation to depictions of others? What 'counter-framing' (Maley 2016: 193) of the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers might be possible through prose poetic means? And finally, what opportunities does the prose poem provide, above other poetic modes, for poetic counterframing?

This essay offers an exegetical reflection on modes of research underpinning poems drafted over a six-month period, with particular consideration given to the relationship of classical quest tales to the modern-day prose poem. Finally, I show how fieldwork as a 'prose poet–journalist' enabled me to draw dynamically and, in the broadest sense, Homerically (rather than voyeuristically and elegiacally) upon images of people moving across Italy from Mediterranean refugee receival centres such as those in Lampedusa and Ragusa, Sicily, into larger cities. Field trips have been supported by opportunities to work as a volunteer and workshop participant alongside Rome-based refugees.

As shown in poetry and prose from the classical period to the era of the 'grand tour' and beyond, the city of Rome and other Italian cities have been subject to continual movement to and from, across, through and away. Aside from contesting negative stereotypes of refugees, I also wanted to explore a poetic counterview of the Italian city (now host to thousands of recently arrived refugees and asylum seekers) as museum, fixed, eternal and immutable. To that end, new poems are underpinned by images of cities and towns that do not conform to touristic or literary purviews. Prose poem sequences currently in progress such as 'One Euro poems' otherwise endeavour to build intertextually on literary and cultural histories of the journey (especially certain features and themes of the Virgilian epic and grabs of contemporary touristic marketing).

Thinking about how ancient poets were ahead of the game in evoking the humility, hopes and terrible anxieties of exile, I began by tentatively revisiting an ancient text I had not seen since long summer afternoons at school and then with only half-attention. Despair, courage, the dislocations of resettlement and the formation of new communities within nations are pertinent themes in Virgil's Aeneid (19BCE). Some aspects of his text have never looked more contemporary, more relevant. And yet, given the limitations of the epic in terms of its more grandiloquent elements and formal conventions (the figure of a hero of extraordinary stature, deeds of superhuman strength and bravery, the presence of supernatural elements, both as donor figures and antagonists, the use of a consistently high style with an omniscient narrator, and vast, expansive settings), I felt contemporary poetic accounts dealing with migrant and asylum-seeker experience would not benefit from literal, faithful re-uses of epic poetic forms. My thinking was that certain themes, images and plot elements from the Virgilian quest story, pared back, inverted, reframed with modern poetic conventions, might forge new poetic evocations of displacement and resettlement. On the thematic side, deeds of quiet heroism and humour might substitute deeds of superhuman strength and bravery characteristic of the epic. The vast setting, already implicit in the migrant's tale, would be retained, as would encounters with donor and antagonist figures. The high omniscient narration and stylised dactylic hexameter typical of the epic might be supplanted by, or grafted to, the 'understated prose style' of the modern prose poem with its almost docu-dramatic 'simple, declarative sentences' (Lehman 2003: 12).

This form, it seemed to me, with its capacity for plays of contemporary vernacular voice and documentary observation (and therefore, as well, for parody of media documentation and governmental policy), might best suit a cycle of poems seeking to evoke and reflect on migration issues.

Ironised observational prose is explored by Simon Armitage to great effect in his collection of poems *Seeing Stars* (2010). In the cautionary environmental poem 'The Last Panda', the animal is anthropomorphised, endowed with a journalistic lyric voice that is both melancholic and parodic:

> Unprecedented economic growth in my native country
> has brought mochaccino and broadband to where there
> was nothing but misery and disease, yet with the loss of
> habitat the inevitable consequence; even the glade I was
> born in is now a thirty-storey apartment block with valet
> parking and a nail salon. They scrape DNA from the
> side of my cheek and freeze it, 'just in case'. To the
> world I'm known by my stage name and am Richard to
> my family and friends, but never Dick. (2010: 57)

Elsewhere, in 'Nativity', Armitage gently plunders the biblical story of new parents Mary and Joseph, transposing them to an English council flat with curtains drawn against the cold and small toys underfoot (2010: 63). Armitage's raid upon an iconic Christian 'set piece' is created with a 'transparency of method' that allows 'distinctions between genres to dissolve without feelings of trespass' (Gallagher 1989: xxi). Armitage also works across storylines and genres in order to convey, through intimate, lyric storytelling, wider emotional, social, environmental and political points.

Interestingly, Raymond Carver, most famous for his beautifully taut prose fiction, sometimes tackled ancient themes in his poems. In a poem such as 'Thermopylae', he brings incidental details of character and ancient culture alive while also fetching histories up dramatically against aspects of contemporary life. It may be argued that this exquisite Carver poem retains subtle forms of lineation; but it also reads as two paragraphs, rather than two stanzas. Its words follow a traditional prose sentence structure and it comes from a writer who was acutely interested in poems that 'blurred the boundaries between poem and story, just as his stories had often taken strength from dramatic and poetic strategies' (Gallagher 1989: xxi). This poem, from the collection *A New Path to the Waterfall* (1989: 5), reveals the narrator – who may or may not be Carver himself – watching his wife comb her russet hair in a hotel, deep in private thought. The figure of the combing woman, an image of domestic intimacy, frames the poem at beginning and end. Watching her, the narrator is reminded of the *Histories of Herodotus* (440BCE), which recounts how Xerxes the Great, during the Battle of Thermopylae, defends his Persian city from the Greek Lacedaemonians. Before the battle, he watches the Greek soldiers sprawl outside the city gates, seemingly without care, 'combing and combing their long hair, as if it were/simply another day in an otherwise remarkable campaign'. In the guise of omnipotent narrator, Carver relates that:

> When Xerxes demanded to know what such a display signified
> he was told, *When these men are about to leave their lives*
> *they first make their heads beautiful.*
>
> She lays down her bone-handle comb and moves closer
> to the window and the mean afternoon light. Something, some

> creaking movement from below, has caught her
> attention. A look, and it lets her go. (1989: 5)

The comber, in the stand-in guise of the soldier, momentarily permits the narrator – as with the reader – to imagine the tension before the ancient battle and to glimpse its aftermath. The modern comber is also a bearer of elegy as she suggests the continuous ordinary vanity of all human beings, past and present, a vanity that culminates in death regardless of old and new human efforts. Thus the reader might imagine that they too may have been caught by 'some creaking moment', by something as simple and complex, as abstract yet familiar, as human history.

Gallagher's introductory words to this Carver collection suggest a simple yet all-encompassing definition of what the prose poem might be. The prose poem, as handed down to western poetry from the nineteenth-century dandy Charles Baudelaire,[1] is therefore a form that retains the 'force of the story itself' (Gallagher 1989: xxi) while being rich in dialogical possibility and formal scope. Or as Geoffrey Lehmann states, 'It [the prose poem] uses the means of prose towards the end of poetry' (2003: 13).

For my purposes also, the prose poem *appears* to be fashioned out of ordinary, if driving prose, while subtly deploying the tactics of poetry. It is these tactics that help intensify the telling, generating an epic undertow beneath the micro-tale, and a heightened sense of character and/or the designated narrator. The prose poem is immensely capable in this regard, as Armitage and Carver brilliantly show. In building up poems on the subject of migration and human displacement, I am also striving for the epic miniature, personalising contemporary individual situations, including my own as chronicler, while evoking the epic scale of the originating events.

References to historical texts and myths, particularly *The Aeneid*, are subtle inclusions in my work in progress, always subsumed to the economies of modern prose style. The verse novels of inspirational Canadian verse novelist and classicist Anne Carson, though not prose poems per se, have nonetheless been instructive. For example, Carson compresses time, social, literary and pop-cultural sources across the genres in her lyrical, multi-genre exploration the myth of Geryon, drawn from surviving papyrus fragments written by neglected poet Stesichorus (630–555BCE). Her acclaimed verse novel *The Autobiography of Red* (1998) boldly adapts the surviving fragments of the *Geryoneis*, re-telling it from the point of view of a young gay man (Geryon) in contemporary America who is tormented by the charismatic Herakles who ultimately breaks his heart. This is a complete re-versioning of the original myth in which the winged red monster Geryon herds red cattle on a remote island until Herakles arrives to best and murder him.

Of note here is that while Carson's vocal polyphonies quote the dactylo-epitrite meter of old, they never do so continuously; the poet punctures the unity of the epic voice with photo-collages, essays, lyric fragments, fictionalised interviews with Stesichorus, translations, and other textual means. Carson therefore abandons the ancient poet's triadic structure for a collage of formal modes in which the hero's subjectivity is split, made mutable and forced over and over to rediscover itself.

Also of note is that Stesichoros' long poem was itself a revision of Homeric epic myth in lyric metre. There are lessons for the prose poet here. Carson clearly admired the

unsung poet's proto-postmodern radicalism and the revisionist methods by which he excavated myth and the identity of the Geryon for his own, then contemporary, purposes. As Shari Kocher notes:

> Carson identifies Stesichoros as the earliest manipulator of genres in Western literature, since his *Geryoneis*, which tells the strange tale of the red winged monster killed by the hero Herakles in his Tenth labour, takes the unprecedented step of speaking from Geryon's own experiences, using a language and a diction that relies neither on epic or lyric conventions, but borrows from, and hence transforms, them both. (2015: 64)

Carson's work on the Geryon myth therefore instructs how poets working across any formal poetic mode may or may not flex their dialogical muscles in relation to quoting classical texts. As with Stesichorus' long poem, her imaginative plundering of the past is always a *knowledgeable infidelity* in relation to the classical text.

Thinking about Carson's bold approaches, where texts are replete with anachronisms, archaic and vernacular voices mixed up into signifier-breaking polyphonies, has given me a certain confidence to proceed, though in a style that is less jump-cut, leaning closer to Carver's and Armitage's prose poem modes. Intertextual elements from Virgil's narrative remain. But when I removed the adjectives 'extraordinary', 'supernatural' and 'superhuman' from descriptions of the traits of the classical epic, then my project, differently conceived to Carson's intertextual raiding of classical story, found its start.

Ancient displacements

The Aeneid was written by the Roman writer Virgil circa 19BCE and was beautifully translated for early modern English readerships by the poet John Dryden in 1697. It describes how the Trojan Prince Aeneas survived the Trojan wars with Greece and joined his people with the Etruscans to form the basis for the later city of Rome. Virgil's text is deeply responsive to two much older quest texts about the Trojan wars and their aftermath, the Greek oral poetry set down in Homer's epic story of the Trojan wars *The Iliad* and its sequel *The Odyssey*.

Though one writer is Roman and the other Greek, both poets' epic stories rely on tropes of war, journeying, survival and redemption. Both these ancient texts explore the troubled questions besetting populations fleeing persecution, poverty and war. As Aeneas and his tattered band of survivors spend time on the island of Scylla off Libya, regrouping after flight and contemplating a dream of repatriation on Italian shores, their prognostications for the future are grim:

> Our hope of Italy not only lost,
> On various seas by various tempests toss'd,
> But shut from ev'ry shore, and barr'd from ev'ry coast.
>
> (Virgil, Book I)

In many ways, the ancient poets were ahead of the game in tabling the humility, hopes and terrible anxieties of exile while, at the same time (and not always uncritically), examining the pros and cons of a fresh start that may even lead to recalibrations of nationhood, as happened with Aeneas' founding of Italy. In Virgil's ancient epic poem

The Aeneid, literature and life diverge in key ways. To summarise, speakers within the poem are each bestowed with a magic-tongued facility that requires the reader/listener to suspend attributions of linguistic difference; each speaker in the epic poem discourses with strangers from far countries at whim, in elegantly hieratic, dactylic hexameter. Everyone understands everyone else, comprehending and expressing the same poetic conventions with ease. If only politicians would take note! No language issues trouble a bedraggled Aeneas and his ragged band of survivors as they move from coast to coast, so the hero is at advantage in prosecuting elegant diplomatic overtures to Dido, Queen of Carthage, and later to King Latinus. In the hieratic-speaking facility of the enclosed world of the epic there is, chronotopically speaking, an 'absence of historical time' (Bemong and Borghart 2010: 9).[2] Aeneas is one of the lucky ones. Nothing, in his world, can be lost in translation. He is a larger-than-life character gifted in the art of supplication and articulations of princely leadership. Consider this short extract from Book I of the *Aeneid*, in which he shows extraordinary insight into his reception on the strange soil of Carthage, a city not far from present-day Libya:

> We wretched Trojans, toss'd on ev'ry shore,
> From sea to sea, thy clemency implore.
> Forbid the fires our shipping to deface!
> Receive th' unhappy fugitives to grace,
> And spare the remnant of a pious race!
> We come not with design of wasteful prey,
> To drive the country, force the swains away:
> Nor such our strength, nor such is our desire;
> The vanquish'd dare not to such thoughts aspire.
>
> (Virgil, Book I)

One might be forgiven for thinking the classics are not only the templates of all modern literary plotlines, even modern politics, but that they also offer profound analogies for the understanding of recent global chaos that has resulted from mass people movements across the world.[3]

Aeneas' lofty entreaties in Book I speak directly to the problems of contemporary resettlement that have seen 'strident demands from the right of the political spectrum for intensified border control and the expropriation of refugees' meagre assets, and depictions of refugees as either not really refugees at all, or as potential fifth columnists disposed to harm the West in the name of religious extremism' (Maley 2016: 1). One might recall here how attacks and robberies on women at Cologne Railway station on New Year's Eve 2015 saw the far right publicly vilify new arrivals but, as Maley shows, it came to light 'that none of the alleged offenders were from Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq, the main countries that supplied the 2015 influx' (2016: 2). One might also observe, as Virgil did so accurately:

> As, when in tumults rise th' ignoble crowd,
> Mad are their motions, and their tongues are loud;
> And stones and brands in rattling volleys fly,
> And all the rustic arms that fury can supply …
>
> (Virgil, Book I)

To such automatic demonisation, to the knowledge that sometimes people are 'rude in peace, and rough in war' (Virgil), the alleged perpetrators in Cologne might vainly have hoped, as Aeneas did:

> If then some grave and pious man appear,
> They hush their noise, and lend a list'ning ear;
> He soothes with sober words their angry mood.
>
> (Virgil, Book I)[4]

Only then might recent arrivals of migrants in Germany be able to soberly reiterate that they come not as sexual predators and thieves 'To drive the country, force the swains away: Nor such our strength, nor such is our desire' (Virgil, Book I).

Aeneas meanwhile goes on, despite the manifest difficulties he encounters, to consolidate a leadership role when he becomes the king of a newly formed Latium:

> The god am I, whose ancient water flows
> Around these fields, and fattens as it goes:
> Tiber my name; among the rolling floods
> Renowned on earth. Esteem'd among the gods.
> This is my certain seat. In times to come,
> My waves shall wash the walls of mighty Rome
>
> (Virgil, Book VIII)

The ascendant imperial tenor of Aeneas' rhetoric at this point cannot be overlooked, as Zaretsky has observed in tracking the final nation-founding triumphalism of *The Aeneid* as ripe for quotation and ideological manipulation by Western colonial regimes (see end note 5). Aeneas' foundation of a new Latium is also attended by terrible violence (sociologist Charles Tilly has mapped the violence inherent in state formation and war-making as a form of organised crime: 'War makes states ... Banditry, piracy, gangland, rivalry, policing, and war making all being on the same continuum' (1985: 170)), but this is leavened to an extent by Virgil's incorporated reflections on his patron Augustus' own story of violent colonisation and brutal shutting down of resistance. Virgil's tale therefore provides cautionary notes.

And yet the early books of *The Aeneid* remind us that Aeneas and his men were fleeing war; their arrival in Sicily is also in large part a migrant's success story:

> The weary Trojans ply their shatter'd oars
> To nearest land, and make the Libyan shores.
> Within a long recess there lies a bay:
> An island shades it from the rolling sea,
> And forms a port secure for ships to ride;
> Broke by the jutting land, on either side,
> In double streams the briny waters glide.
>
> (Virgil, Book I)

These aspects of Virgil's ancient story serve as a positive analogy for the contemporary migrant experience, providing a political literary counter frame to habitual negative framings of refugees.

Modern displacements

In Virgil's story, Carthage, Sicily and Latium provide ports for Aeneas and the weary Trojan refugees. Modern Italy to date has been more generous than any other EU country in supporting and settling displaced arrivals (Wintour 2017). As an Australian, familiar with decades of rhetoric in which journey's end and resettlement for most refugees and asylum seekers has all but been denied, it has been humbling and shaming to witness alternative attitudes and approaches at first hand.

How might an Australian writer answer Aeneas' lament, in the epigraph to this essay, in 2017? Perhaps by singing a verse or two of the rather unappealing national anthem introduced in 1984. First, there are the unreachable high notes to challenge most throaty patriots; then there's the clanging sentiment, which at least harks back to the more caring and sharing multicultural Australia of the 1970s and 1980s and, before that, to the Rabelaisian multiculturalism of the nineteenth-century goldfields, decades before Federation formally ushered in the prospect of Australia as a whiter shade of pale:

> For those who've come across the sea
> We've boundless plains to share
> With courage let us all combine
> To Advance Australia Fair
> (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade / McCormick 1878)[5]

Expulsion and exile are prescient themes for our times, bringing out the surprising best and tribal worst in people, politicians and states. The disjuncture between the above patriotic lyric and government policy remains; for over twenty years, refugees coming to Australia have been summarily incarcerated in detention centres, asylum-seekers bound up in endless red tape. The discourse is as tired as the situation is urgent. Australia has work to do indeed to be 'renowned of all the lands' ('Advance Australia Fair'). Italy and Greece, two of the poorest countries in the European Union (EU), have left the rest of Europe, as well as Australia, for dead in terms of accepting on-shore arrivals of asylum seekers and refugees.

Contemporary expressions of Aeneas' lament, and not just in Australia, increasingly fall on deaf ears. At a glance, the figures are chastening, reminding this poet of the limitations of poetry when basic life needs are not being met for so many. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) figures show that there are now an unprecedented 65.6 million people around the world who have been forced from home. Among them are nearly 22.5 million refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18. There are also 10 million stateless people who have been denied a nationality and access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment and freedom of movement (UNHCR 2017a). The UNHCR had estimated:

> that 1,008,616 refugees and migrants had sought to cross into Europe by sea in 2015, with a further 3771 dead or missing in the attempt. … the initial burden of arrivals fell disproportionately on just two [EU countries], Greece and Italy, which received 851,319 and 153,600 persons respectively. (Maley 2016: 1, discussing UNHCR 2016)

Figures for 2016 show that 362,753 persons crossed the central Mediterranean route by sea to Europe, with estimates of 4,578 dead on that route alone (UNHCR 2017b). So far in 2017 (as of 12 July 2017), 102,578 have crossed the Mediterranean, with 86,101 persons having already come by sea to Italy alone, a further 9,566 landing on Greek shores, and 2,346 persons estimated dead or missing (UNHCR 2017c). But, as the busiest time for Mediterranean crossings is June through September (UNHCR 2017c), the likely numbers for 2017 are as yet unclear. As Patrick Wintour notes, the situation has become so dire, resources in cash-strapped economies so skint, that Italian authorities have recently threatened to close their ports in order to restrict non-government organisation (NGO) boat access in mid-July, perhaps as a way of inviting other EU countries to cut through endless policy iterations and take concerted action (Wintour 2017).

Against this backdrop of social, cultural and economic catastrophe, political inertia and virulent race-based proclamations from an ascendant global political right, arrivals of refugees and migrants on Mediterranean shores continue apace. On the ground, government immigration agencies, NGOs and church-based organisations are working hard yet struggling to accommodate basic survival needs, given the sheer numbers. These agencies, where they are resourced to do so, also confront questions of psychological aftermath or 'traumascapes' (Tumarkin 2005) through various means: workshops, art therapy and forms of psychological counselling. But, as art therapist Helen Creswell of Rome's Joel Nafuma Centre concedes, it is 'hard to get them to come sometimes, when basic needs, food, shelter, jobs, are a first priority. I say to them: I would like to spend some time with you if you can make it. Then they come, usually' (private communication, 2017).

Traumascapes, Tumarkin writes, 'are a distinctive category of places transformed physically and psychically by suffering, part of a scar tissue that stretches across the world' (Tumarkin 2005: 13). Traumascapes, in Tumarkin's view, can be experienced ongoing by those who continue to occupy a war zone or post-war zone, and equally by those who flee it. It is a fact that some young male arrivals choose to burn their fingertips (removing their fingerprints) so that they might settle anywhere in Europe, rather than be locked down to settle their first port of call as specified by the controversial Dublin Regulation of 2013 (requiring migrants and asylum seekers to have their fingerprints tested in their first port of arrival as a forerunner of resettlement in that country).[6]

The journey for many people to reach Europe may be considered in itself as subjecting individuals to *serial* traumascapes, continually reinscribing for the individual and for the circles in which that individual moves. The powerful photographs of Giulio Piscitelli document the movements, survival and deaths of young men traversing the Sahara to Libyan gateways to Europe, and are testament to the fact that so many are forming a mesh of multiple scars that 'stretches across the world' (Tumarkin 2005: 13). And, as Marianne Hirsch has shown, 'memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences' will transfer across generations as forms of 'postmemory' (Hirsch 2012: 22). For Hirsch, writing in relation to children of European Holocaust survivors, postmemories are:

> distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection … Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can neither be understood nor recreated. (Hirsch 2012: 22)

In 'One Euro poems', a work in progress, I allude to the potential intergenerational heritance of trauma by evoking the story of a young *clandestino*, as many refugees rescued from the treacherous waters south of the Italian island of Lampedusa, closest port to Africa, are dubbed by Lampedusan hosts. But in writing as a poet to these lived experiences, I asked myself fundamental ethical questions about what, if anything, could be achieved in emphasising the traumatic inheritance of experience and memory of others. The scant resources that migrants and refugees currently bring with them from troubled Libyan ports to Italian and Greek immigration receival centres are indications of poverty and privation, with many arrivals being economic refugees, seeking food and financial security as well as escape from persecution and war. Nonetheless, as William Maley confirms, refugees are often abstracted as lacking agency when in fact they are courageous, cooperative, even entrepreneurial in planning a dangerous crossing far from home and imagining a better life beyond through jobs and community (2016: 150).

Acknowledgement of suffering and difficulty is crucial, but without a concomitant acknowledgement of refugee agency, resilience and humour, I am mindful that poetic evocations of collective and individual 'scar tissue' run the danger of collapsing into elegiac excess, risking problematic literary extinction discourse. Extinction discourse is seminally defined by Patrick Brantlinger as pertaining to the 'dual ideologies of imperialism and racism' (1983: 1). As a complex, multi-textual discourse, its generically diverse expressions arise and consolidate wherever and whenever there has been a collision or encounter between white European people and indigenous peoples (Brantlinger 1983: 10). Brantlinger's purview applies predominantly to legacies of colonialism, but his thought may equally apply to present displacements and mass migrations. Lamentations by national leaders regarding the drownings of refugees at sea, for example, in Brantlinger's phrase, may only sentimentally or mournfully express, 'even in [their] most humane versions, the confidence of a self-fulfilling prophecy, according to which new, white colonies and nations arise as savagery and wilderness recede' (1983: 4).

Elegaic modes in poetry in relation to depictions of migrants and migration issues must therefore be viewed as problematic in the broad sense, where 'elegiac othering' serves no purpose but to support dominant discourses of nationhood, or the occupation of lands and the concomitant colonial literary idealisation that underpins the assertion of colonial states. Not for nothing does Virgil, on soon-to-be anointed King Aeneas' behalf, describe the turgid pea soup of the Tiber in limpid protean style:

> Propitious Tiber smooth'd his wat'ry way:
> He roll'd his river back, and pois'd he stood,
> A gentle swelling, and a peaceful flood.
>
> (Virgil, Book VIII)

As Jahan Ramazani asserts, 'the twinning of nation and elegy is hardly new' (2015: 134), while Benedict Anderson's seminal work on nationhood has shown how imagined cultural communities are created as expressions of settler nationalism, and that nations themselves always loom 'out of a memorial past' (Anderson 1991: 82).

Newcomers to Italian cities may be weighted down with physical and psychic images that map and remap personal and collective 'traumascapes'. But the stateless stranger, newly disembarked on Italian shores, stumbling to express a halting lingua franca in Italian or English, is less immediately preoccupied with sketching trauma and incipient doom than with fulfilling basic needs (food, shelter, work). But from the outset, exhausted arrivals are keen to find acceptance, to shake off the distancing designation of being a stranger among strangers. Language is key. Renowned linguist Maria Grazia Guido (2008) has written of the particular importance of English as a lingua franca in cross-cultural immigration domains.

In a short video posted on YouTube, a British interviewer undertaking vox populi interviews with people rescued at sea shows one unnamed young man intoning 'I like my mum, I like my mum'. The simple repetition of this one English phrase is a moving signal of loss, mourning and fear. Repetition drives home that, in his limited English, the young man means to use English verbs he cannot yet find, the verb 'to love' and the verb 'to miss' (VICE News 2016).

Faced with the above statistics and facts, any writer would feel concerns about art's capacity to make a difference. But a world without art that fails to tackle urgent issues is an equally bleak prospect. What finally propelled my own creative research was sundry fieldwork as well as personal encounters with refugees themselves.

Encountering worlds

In my time abroad, and in keeping with Guido's observations, I have seen English- and Italian-speaking church centres around Rome daily pack out with newcomers desperate to participate in programs enabling them to learn language – the first tool of social, cultural and economic advancement within the host country. As Maley observes, churches and NGOs are working with refugee communities to compensate for massive failures in the system of states (2016: 12).

Students turn up punctually at 8.30am at the Joel Nafuma Centre in Rome's St Paul's Within the Walls for the free language classes that run five days a week. There is no attrition rate; the windowless, vaulted classrooms below the church are always packed. And there are never enough volunteer teachers to meet the demand.

But this is not to put an overly optimistic gloss on the experience of arrival and transition. Maley nuances the situation:

> To leave one country for another is a traumatic decision to take. It can involve separation from family and other loved ones, the need to learn a completely new language in order to be able to function in a new society, and a loss of social status if one's achievements and qualifications are not recognised in a country of asylum. (Maley 2016: 10)

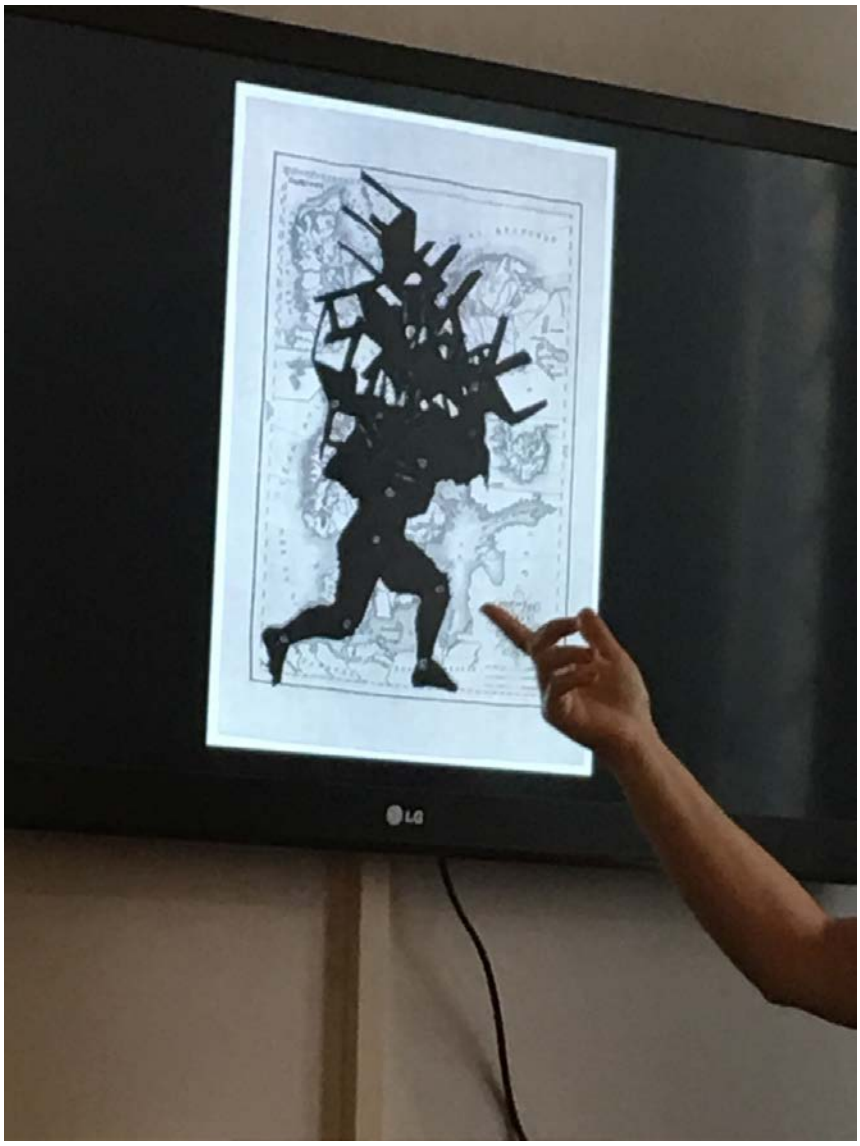
Ali,[7] a highly educated, dynamic twenty-five-year-old man recently settled in Rome from Tanzania, confirms Maley's broader comments. While he asserts that to date 'the Italian government are very friendly to migrants, with friendly policies and laws', he openly laments the daily experience of racism that prevents him, as a black man, from being considered for work as a town planner. 'Boredom is an issue for refugees', he adds; 'boredom and shame' (Hassan, private conversation, 2017). He spends his time on the fringes of Rome working as a part-time chef in a Swahili restaurant. For reasons that he does not disclose – and I do not press him, though I suspect it is because he cannot put his mother or himself at risk – he is unable to write home to his mother. He changes the subject and his mood darkens noticeably, telling me in some detail about an injustice that, he says, imprisoned his doctor uncle for seven years. His uncle had spoken up about rigged Tanzanian elections. It is perhaps easier to talk about his uncle's lot than his mother's, a story on the edge of a familial traumascape.

Outside Rome, I by chance meet Jacob over coffee. Jacob is a smartly dressed Nigerian who has eleven years start on Ali. A father of two children with another baby on the way, he is, by profession, an experienced fabricator of door and window frames in steel and wood. I learn that he has not been able to find factory work in eleven years; he must rely, improbably, on selling cigarette lighters and sundries to tourists. 'It's hard', he says, slightly ashamed, 'so hard, sometimes. I thought it would be better here but it is just the same'. We make our goodbyes, I wonder about crowd sourcing a weekly stipend to support him and his family. I press some money upon him, in that moment confronting my own version of that which Ayelet Shachar describes as the 'Birthright Lottery' (Maley 2016: 193, quoting Shachar 2009: 49).[8] He laughs. 'Bless you. Are you Christian? I will send you a photo when the baby is born', he says.

With volunteers working at the Feast of Ramadan, St Paul's Within the Walls, Joel Nafuma Centre, Rome. (Photo: Amanda Frances Johnson, 2017)

In June 2017 I had the opportunity to participate in a one-day workshop run by the Southern Italian art therapy organisation, Art and Seek, in partnership with the Keats-Shelley House in Rome (15 June 2017, Piazza di Spagna). The two organisations partnered for a workshop for refugees, migrants and artists titled 'Art and Seek'. Volunteers and those working for refugee organisations in Rome were also invited to participate, exploring and discussing the theme of the journey then and now.

Aside from a tour of iconic rooms where poet John Keats and his good and loyal friend, the painter Joseph Severn, lived and worked (and died, in Keats' case, on the wintry night of 23 February 1821; his famously monastic single bed remains in the tiny upper-floor bedroom), workshop participants were invited to create a collaborative artwork based on found, large-scale maps of the world. Workshop leaders used images by contemporary artist William Kentridge to stimulate responses to the map, particularly the image of a silhouetted man on a map struggling to carry all his worldly belongings, including his furniture.



Art and Seek workshop slide, Keats-Shelley House. Image: William Kentridge, 'Boy with Chairs', Maps Tapestry Series, 2011. (Photo: Amanda Frances Johnson, 2017)

We proceeded with modest means (marker pens and black paper, scissors and glue), invited to depict all the journeys we had made in the world thus far upon the maps. Most workshop participants (as one might say of Keats himself in earlier times) were neither tourists nor grand tourists, and had known far more extreme quests than the average tourist, though their journeys, like mine, still required maps, food and water, and engagement with history, culture and ideas from other lands.

Mapmaking exercise, Art and Seek workshop, Keats-Shelley House, 2017. (Photo: Amanda Frances Johnson, 2017)

The process encouraged noisy chatter as we were intrigued to ask each other general questions about our journeys across the world, coming face to face with the ways in which our journeys connect in space and time. Young refugees were also fascinated and moved by the story of Keats' love affair with Fanny Brawne and their painful separation, something they could easily relate to. Leaving his English home for Rome in 1820**,** Keats himself could be thought about, in modern terms, as a health and economic refugee. This was how most refugee participants read Keats' Italian journey, which subsequently invited me to reframe my thinking about the white romantic poet.

All participants took something away from this intercultural, interdisciplinary workshop. That is to say, carefully designed, egalitarian exercises for pair work and larger groups, the tasks of responding to and making art, enabled the productive exchange of complex information: feelings, histories, stories, hopes, joys and anxieties. In other words, the imaginative exercises and conversations that were facilitated enabled each of us to affirm that the 'condition of time' in all its rich dimensions and constructs – past, present and future – 'lies in the relationship between humans, or in history' (Levinas 1987: 79).

Workshops like this one drive home that, in writing to this topic, tension between genres is hardly the only thing at stake. Finding out and affirming what is common and shared

by writer and subject alike is critical if, reprising Gallagher's words, 'the force of the story' is to be conveyed, as miniature prose epic or otherwise. The prose poem in this instance, as with policy settings addressing complexities of migration and resettlement, depends on such intercultural encounters. Poet Robert Hass has described the prose poem as 'a sort of long escape' (quoted in Lehman 2003: 23) from strictures of poetic convention, enabling him to work in an expository mode that feels like 'unknown territory' (Lehman 2003: 23). His term is an apt one for this project where 'the long escape', navigated with no small degree of uncertainty, has become the means by which courageous refugee journeys can be remembered and told.

End notes

1. Baudelaire's first prose poems appeared in *Spleen de Paris* and *Petits Poems en Prose*. Baudelaire famously said: 'Who among us has not, in his ambitious moments, dreamed of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical without meter or rhyme, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of the psyche, the jolts of consciousness' (quoted in Lehman 2003: 16).
2. Bemong and Borghart observe that for Bakhtin 'the western novel … evolved from an initial state characterized by a total absence of historical time (e.g., in the Greek romance), through a number of subsequent stages which steadily displayed a fuller sense of time (e.g., time with embryonic *biographical* significance in the Roman adventure novel of everyday life and in ancient biography), to eventually arrive at the ideal of nineteenth-century realism and the conception of *real historical time* internalized by its attendant chronotope' (2010: 9).
3. That being said, Virgil's text, with its emphasis on the founding of Latium, has been differently exploited to frame various nations' foundation myths. Historian Robert Zaretsky applauds that Virgil was nonetheless compelled in his epic to explore the consequences of the violent campaigns by which his patron Augustus had won peace after one hundred years of bloody civil war. But this reflection did not stop modern Western culture from claiming Aeneas' story for various nationalistic purposes. Zaretsky writes that:

   > Since Virgil's death his epic has bled into the West's image of itself and the rest of the world. From the global ambitions of Old World powers like Catholic Rome and Victorian England to New World usurpers like the United States, Virgil has always been called on to serve as apologist or critic. During the westward expansion to the Pacific, advocates of Manifest Destiny seized upon the Aeneid as justification; during US intervention in Vietnam, critics of the war cited the Aeneid as a warning. (A glance at a US dollar bill reminds us that Virgil was, in fact, called upon to witness the nation's founding: the greenback's three celebrated phrases were all coined by the Roman poet.) (Zaretsky 2011)
4. Here the goddess Diana tells the stranger Aeneas ('long in tempests tossed') that he and his party have arrived in Roman Carthage, ruled by Dido. Though Carthage sprawled across modern-day Tunis and Libya, the Carthaginian empire became Roman Carthage in the Third Punic War of 146 BC and so was romanised by the time of Virgil's writing *The Aeneid.*
5. When 'Advance Australia Fair' replaced 'God Save the Queen' as Australia's national anthem in 1984, some of the original words by PD McCormick were changed to non-sexist language. Of particular note is the change from 'For loyal sons beyond the seas' to the more inclusive 'For those who've come across the seas'.

6. The Dublin Regulation 2013 specifies that migrants and asylum-seekers must register at their country of arrival. As Italy and Greece have captured the majority of refugees moving northwards from Africa, this agreement is controversial as it puts inordinate pressure on the Italian and Greek states to resource and resettle the majority of arrivals. The Dublin IV Regulation has since sought to make the 'Dublin System' more transparent and enhance its effectiveness, while providing a mechanism to deal with situations of disproportionate pressure on EU member states' asylum systems.
7. Real names of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants have been changed.
8. Shachar argues that 'Given that the vast majority of the world's population remain excluded from well-off polities under the current birthright regime, it quickly becomes clear that neglecting their needs and interests simply because extant laws define them as nonmembers is not only morally wrong; it is also politically unwise'. Maley observes that her response to this situation is 'a birthright privilege levy, but another would also be to use the idea of the birthright lottery to reframe debate around the issue of responsibility to refugees' (Maley 2016: 154).

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