

EDITORIAL: UMBRAL POETICS

Years ago I read a story whose genius protagonists created a valley of futurity. Able to manipulate time, they set a remote green valley one second ahead of other planetary life. Outsiders perceived only a vague impenetrable mist, while those inside could see the outer past. The futurity insiders then immersed in a condition of gloriously unleashed ideationalism, encouraging the pursuit of every difficult thought and technique. They created – within their biospheric time border – a life of free-form experiments in sciences and arts.

The Covid pandemic has created related valleys, with people tucked into pods of living, communicating outwards via the digitas – for those with access. Walls of time bend around humans variously bubbled, thriving, suffering, trapped, now vaccinated and unvaccinated. Even as denizens of privileged regions begin to emerge in semi-vaccinated spaces, their bodies exist in different times. Time here stands in for a shunted ontology, such as when we present in digital visuals like media personalities (head shot, shoulders and up, hands on the implements), making our lower bodies – our whole bodies – missing though not absent. The body is phase-interrupted; it's not all there. The multiplication of time differentials is intensified at the level of the body.

For language, which invites us into its ongoing ecologies, this multi-temporality proliferates what I imagine as an umbral poetics, having to do with meaning-position in time. Umbral means “threshold” in Portuguese and Spanish (in Latin, “shadow” or “darkness”); in English, astronomers use it to denote the darkest shadow of an opaque planetary body at the intensest occlusion of its illuminative source. For umbral poetics I'm positing an effect in poetry like an inverse spotlight, casting not light but shadow: a darkbeam, a threshold where meaning quotients position in a temporal latticing, a phase-interruption of verbal identity. The splice-effects make lingual coherence elsewhere but not absent.

An example of umbral poetics comes in *PSR 37*, in two lines of “Misdénomers” by June Wentland: “A knotting of blizzard and breeze.” and “on the linguistic snow line.” The editorial word count prevents me from a lingering positioning of the lines as catachresis in the poem's ecology or of how vowel sounds might co-constitute an umbral reading. Neither line is sensorily resolvable (not *stimmt*) nor a match with the poem's other states. The lines' symbiotic functions are missing but not ab-

sent. Their phase shifts make meaning-time occur in occluded yet sensory-present elsewhere.

We know language always trembles plays and moves. Umbral poetics focuses on how meaning time shifts within the illuminative (denotative, or referenced, or signified) placement of words to a condition in which they perform something that's missing and not absent. Presupposition turns subject to whirl. The time of an umbral poetic line (or phrase, or moment) has a denotation itself occluded: not in spite of darkness with reference to a necessary light, it means instead with the darkness of its possibility. Occluded-meaning sensory-intense phased-time, a moment of umbral poetics.

Similarly our bodies are sensory-intense and not absent. Our loves are not absent, even when we miss them in other times. Here in New Zealand / Aotearoa (Māori for 'cloud' 'white' 'long'), pandemic life can feel like the futurity valley of the story that started this piece. With our once-successful elimination strategy, with lockdowns when the virus escaped quarantine, we often continued with in-person shared events (in 'real time'). This other-time life was made possible by closed borders – which still obtain, as this nation negotiates pandemic moving to endemic – on the other sides of which are missing experiences of bodies, writing, time.

I'm thinking of umbral poetics precisely in this multi-temporal phase-shift elsewhere-body time. Poetry lines at thresholds without doors or buildings, umbral word-bodies unhinged from habitual instrumental causatives. This pandemic is partly a caustic clarifier of our segregations and, for writing, of the lingual paths we build across them – “Words without borders”, to cite, since this editorial is meant to introduce me, the title of one of my early poems. Twenty years ago I imagined what I called a “subjective correlative”. Maybe the subjective correlative is to Veronica Forrest-Thomson's “total image complex” as an umbral poetry moment is to a normatively resolvable descriptive moment. In umbral passages, a poem reads in a darkbeam, a missing but not absent zone of tether. Not only as a query to ocularcentric material constructs but also as a pitch for the positive darks of the living bodies of ongoing words.

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