

the kind of book that the King's Men were contemplating" (140). But most of the final chapter is modestly concerned with questions, starting with specifics ("are the altered dates written or stamped?") and advancing to larger theoretical issues ("How was this collection understood by readers in the early seventeenth century?"). Lesser's true goal is to persuade readers that "The need for bibliographic reexamination is ongoing", and he urges us all to look "closely enough — and again and again" (141, 146). In this his book sets a splendid example.

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MAGEE, Paul. 2022. *Suddenness and the Composition of Poetic Thought*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield. Pp. 264. ISBN 9781538153529, Hardcover \$115. ISBN 9781538153536, eBook \$45.

What happens when a poet composes a poem? So enigmatic a query is this that it occupies as mysterious a place in Samuel R. Delany's 1974 science-fiction masterpiece *Dhalgren* as the appearance of a second moon or second sun in the skies of Earth (or a place like it). The protagonist (appearing in the text as Kidd and Kid, though neither name appears to be his own)

becomes a poet by happenstance and the composition of his first poems provide some of the most enthralling passages in a novel otherwise marred by a great deal of violence and sex. Word is made flesh in the painstaking efforts of this unexpected savant, or to put it in the words of another visiting poet (Mr. Ernest Newboy): “You have received that holy and spectacular wound which bleeds [. . .] well, poetry” (DELANY 2019, 258).

Delany’s text is over 800 pages long and packed with ventures across the realms of theology, philosophy, and science. *Suddenness and the Composition of Poetic Thought*, though mercifully coming in at a lesser page count, is no less daunting. Like Delany, its author appears resolved to unpack the mysteries of the entire universe — at least a universe wherein one encounters the peculiarities of speech, thought, and poetry.

One must read this scholarly text with a touch of irony, for nothing about its painstaking methods of argumentation, including a diverse and in-depth range of scholarly sources and an impressive archive of first-hand interviews with contemporary poets, touches the “suddenness” of compositional practice as explored by Paul Magee’s central and alluring hypothesis. Of course, Magee repeatedly reminds us that the laborious and prolonged task of prose writing is exactly inverse to the immediacy of poetry’s magical form. The argument at the center of this dense text is about poetic composition and its striking resemblance to the suddenness of thought and speech.

The first two tenets on which the book depends may seem perfectly obvious: first, that poetry and prose are distinct, and second, that a sentence as written differs from a thought as spoken. It is the third tenet, that a line of poetry as written is remarkably similar to a thought as spoken (in the mind or by the mouth), on which the book’s value to poetics depends. It is also exactly this equation between poetic composition and suddenness, however, that Magee fails to satisfyingly prove. But one nearly forgets this crucial absence, for the demonstration of the first two tenets requires so many new diversions (e.g., linguistic analysis of the Homeric epics, second-by-second reconstruction of speech production). And this is exactly the beauty and charm of Magee’s scholarly contribution.

In terms of poetics, Magee asks, “Is writing poetry something like our experience of everyday, conversational suddenness?” (18). To convince us that the answer to this question is in the affirmative, Magee relies somewhat confoundedly on an exhaustive methodology that seems, in fact, to disprove his hypothesis. The contradictory findings support no one thesis, and yet, through some illusion or magic, the reader is somehow convinced by the sweetness of the image: poets such as Homer or W. H. Auden spouting

lines of poetry that are transcribed exactly as they occurred in thought and speech by the ancient reeds of later recorders or pens and typewriters of the modern poet composing in the moment.

An impressive archive of interviews with contemporary poets forms one core body of (contradictory) evidence for Magee's theory, though one-third of the poets interviewed see no reason to characterize their poetic composition as sudden. To say that the other two-thirds of those poets, however, agree with Magee's theory would be too generous. They simply don't take terrible offense to the chosen remark by Auden, quoted below, from which the line of inquiry begins.

A substantial amount of the book plumbs these seventy-five research interviews in which Magee and his colleagues discuss the production of poetry with "major Anglophone poets from Australia, Canada, both Irelands, New Zealand, Singapore, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States over the years 2013–2015" (17). *Suddenness and the Composition of Thought* is, perhaps, most illuminating about poetic composition when it shares the responses of these varied writers and thinkers, who include C. D. Wright, Kenneth Goldsmith, and Rae Armantrout. Unfortunately, the shared responses are often limited to "one specific question" (10) which "contained a quotation from W. H. Auden's 1967 lecture 'Words and the Word'" (10). Here is the quotation, which Magee shares at the beginning of Chapter 1, "We Do Not Know What We Are Going to Say Until We Have Said It": "When we genuinely speak we do not have the words ready to do our bidding, we have to find them. And we do not know exactly what we are going to say until we have said it, and we say and hear something new that has never been said or heard before" (15).

Magee says that Auden's remark "implies a relation between original poetic thinking and not knowing what you have to say, until you have said it" (10). In reading the whole of Auden's lecture, however, one must note that the modern poet is in fact far more concerned with the impoverishment or "idleness" (AUDEN 1968, 127) of twentieth-century conversation and the repercussions of the Word "made Flesh" (AUDEN 1968, 136). That is, in a lecture about the relationship between poetry and the moral teachings of Christianity, Auden concludes that humanity appears to have detrimentally isolated itself from the teachings of both art and religion. As a result, modern society is not well disposed to produce thought or speech about, well, anything. Thus, to say the other two-thirds of the poets interviewed by Magee and his colleagues were "well disposed" (15) to Auden's remark is also to say that they were well disposed to Magee's interpretation of its implied relation to poetic originality.

Magee modifies his interpretation of Auden's remark subtly throughout the text, depending upon which argument the book is plumbing. For instance, in response to Armantrout and Ian Wedde's desire for "a poetry that feels immediate to the moment" (31), Magee insists that what Auden is describing, after all, is "a sense of the present-tense openness to possibility and real-time unfolding that our interviewees would very much like to have in the poetry they write, regardless of how they actually do write it" (32). This phrasing contains a common hedging technique that frequently recurs in Magee's writing; both the interviewees (or many of them) and Magee himself *would very much like* suddenness to be an element of poetic composition *regardless* of what the evidence reports.

Suddenness is a quality that Magee admits "we cannot help reading into the surface of any literary text" (33). While he takes pains to demonstrate that such immediacy is an artificial quality of prose composition, he nonetheless continues to assert that it is a central tenet in the composition of poetry. The innately oral quality of poetic composition, however, never becomes an established fact. In examining "the heightened immediacy poems bear for their readers" (34), for instance, Magee presents convincing evidence for dismissing the possibility that the lines of an Emily Dickinson poem "represent the thoughts of a present-tense speaker" (34). Here, Magee paraphrases the scholar Sharon Cameron, who insists that "such dense, scarcely reconcilable thoughts could only [. . .] visit a real, historical speaker if their genesis were spread over time" (34). Or, put in other words, the resulting composition "can have little do with what anyone might generate in the spoken moment. They could not come about without their composer engaging in 'extensive revision'" (35). To reconcile this damning counterargument to the book's central thesis, Magee relies on something like magic. To permit the possibility of a poet composing such dense lines as those by Dickinson in anything like the suddenness of a moment's utterance, one must also permit that "the poet has counter-intuitively lived an extra dimension within the few seconds it takes to utter any line" (35).

Though Magee does not return to Auden in his discussion of Dickinson, his sudden retreat to mysticism does recall a peculiar moment in "Words and the Word" when Auden defines poetry as that which is opposed to "Black Magic" (AUDEN 1968, 128). This type of magic is a use of words "as a way of securing domination over others" (128). Poetry's "White Magic", on the other hand, cannot "be reduced to an idle word" (AUDEN 1968, 128). This is because "nobody has yet learned to consume a poem. If one can take it at all, then one can only listen to it as its author intended it to be listened to" (AUDEN 1968, 130). Ironically, Auden's remarks suggest that a

scholarly lecture or book on poetics are closer to Black Magic's domination than White Magic's silent potential.

I'm tempted to dismiss the magical thinking of both Magee and Auden, but as any poet or scholar of poetics knows, it's nearly impossible to avoid such mysticism even in an academic discussion of composition. For instance, in teaching introductory college and university courses on poetry, I try to empathize with what is a common inability in my students to define the form. After all, even the most rigorous definitions resort, as Magee and Auden do, to magical thinking: "What makes a poem different from any other kind of composition is a *species of magic*" (CUDDON 2012, 542; my emphasis). In *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, J. A. Cuddon employs the enthralling but ultimately unsatisfying phrase *a species of magic* to distinguish the poem from other forms. Is it necessary that the reader and student of poetry accept that *an extra dimension* or *species of magic* is available to the poet in order to reconcile suddenness and poetic composition?

Returning to the question of how poets actually compose, Magee begins his survey of the interview archive with Maxine Chernoff, who describes her poetic composition as "very much a discovery process, in a way a performance of questions like 'What am I thinking about right now? What's there? Where am I going with this today?' I have no idea when I sit down" (15). Indeed, *Suddenness and the Composition of Thought* is published under the "Performance Philosophy" imprint of Rowman & Littlefield, and in the analogy between composition and performance the interdisciplinary nature of the poetics text becomes clear. Marcella Polain compares poetic composition to performing on stage "as if nobody's watching you" (92), G. C. Waldrep to "tight-rope walking" (92), Don Paterson to "composing music" (93), and Chernoff to the "many quick shots" (95) of cinema. While many of the poets interviewed hold that there is a vast distinction between the composition of a poem and acts of performance, Magee's text nonetheless demonstrates "how important performative and in-the-moment compositional practices" (95) are to the extra dimension from which the original poetic utterance derives.

Unsurprisingly, one of the most vocal opponents to Magee's attempt "to assert a direct relationship between suddenness and the composition of poetic thought" (16) is the poet famous for his "uncreative writing". The conceptual poet Goldsmith, Magee writes, was one of those third of poets who "rejected Auden's words, often vehemently" (16). Both Goldsmith and, perhaps more surprisingly, the lyric poet Wright, take umbrage with Auden's emphasis on originality. Wright suggests: "It sounds like the hubris

of someone painfully young” (16). Moreover, when pressed on the question of suddenness, Wright chides, “For spontaneity, much preparation” (16).

One of the more intriguing aspects of Magee’s scholarship diverges from questions of poetic composition or performance to instead plumb questions of “how we ever manage to speak with fluency” (202). In the book’s recurrent transcriptions of speech, as created by Magee from the interviews and as quoted extensively from external studies, which visually represent “the segmentation of our conscious speaking, thinking, and perceiving” (175), Magee reveals the “staggered fashion” (202) in which *spoken thought* hits the listener’s ear. This is most persuasively presented when Magee returns to the interview archive in the chapter “Writing as ‘Oral Dictated’”. This time the speaker is identified only as Poet A:

Yeah, oh I think so, yeah, the thousand flowers bloom business, I think you’re stuck with the fact that . . . and it would be deadly, and I think that’s what I worry about when any particular school of poetics or something becomes particularly dominant and especially if they have dominant . . . enters the academies and enters especially these creative writing schools and so people start doing this, but neglect the value in other things or just dismiss it. (146; ellipses and underlining in original)

While Magee admits that the above transcription gives one “a sense of linguistic impoverishment” (146), this is nonetheless said to be an interview with a poet whose “ideas on poetry and writing were among the most intellectually compelling of any to emerge in [his] 15 years of interviewing poets” (147). As Auden says elsewhere in “Words and the Word”, “Every dialogue is a feat of translation” (AUDEN 1968, 125). That extra dimension opens up once again to permit a space of intimate understanding between speaker and listener. This interview, like the poem as defined by Auden, is “gratuitous utterance” (AUDEN 1968, 130): a magical and unconsumable property that might, after all, appear and disappear all in a sudden illusory act.

The interview transcription above serves as “practical testimony to the distance spoken discourse bears from the image of it in our books and newspapers, plays and films, and even from our immediate perception of it” (147). This transcription also, somewhat damningly, suggests that “the language which conveys Poet A’s thoughts so immediately does not seem to be the kind that could ever actually appear in poems” (148). To reconcile this notion with the book’s slippery thesis, Magee comes to “a somewhat paradoxical position”: “A writing that would aspire to a spoken

immediacy may well lack many of the most characteristic features of oral utterance. But writing, in all its modes, constitutes a form of speaking, all the same” (148). The following pages of this chapter reassert a version of the argument “[w]riting is speaking” (157) while taking pains to clarify that writing is a specific type of speaking that is actually quite distinct from speech as uttered for a listener. The repetitive technique of Magee’s argumentation, much like the technique of repetition as employed in a poem, may successfully render the illusion that poetic composition occurs with the suddenness of spoken thought, but it rests on the magic trick of vanishing the unavoidable dissimilarities between one distinct category (writing) and another (speaking).

In part, what Magee may seek to reveal is not only the *suddenness* of poetic composition, but the *authenticity* of the poem as a form. In the contrasting studies of prose writing, Magee reflects “on the artificiality of the product we generate through such means — artificial because of the image of fluent, one-time thought it conveys to the reader” (161). If the production of poetry is unanchored from fluency and hinged instead to the suddenness of thought, does it hew to a more *authentic* — or, dare I say, *original* — form of communication? In Auden’s “Words and the Word”, poetic composition is akin to the divine and sudden act by Adam “to give names to all things” (AUDEN 1968, 123).

In “Portrait of the Poet as Landscape”, the Montréal poet A. M. Klein portrays the poet as “the nth Adam taking a green inventory / in world but scarcely uttered, naming, praising” (KLEIN 1997, 103–04). In this way, both Auden and Klein assert that naming is central to poetic composition. As the nth Adam, however, the modern or contemporary poet is not engaged in a purely original task. At this point, it is important to return to originality forming the basis on which many poets, including Goldsmith and Wright, refute Magee’s central claim. In fact, in the penultimate chapter, Magee revisits this component of the Auden quotation, or his interpretation of its affinity with the idea of poetic originality, and allows that “Almost all opposed it” (198).

In support of the Auden remark and its alleged equation of the suddenness of thought with the suddenness of poetic composition, Magee turns to his interview with Rae Armantrout, who says: “I think it is true of pretty much all the poetry that interests me: you can see that the writer is thinking about what he or she just said, and responding to it” (31). Armantrout is describing a desire for “a poetry that feels immediate to the moment” (31). Interestingly, what is revealed here is not the poet’s methods of language production, but the reader’s preference for a poem

that is “fast to change” (214). Whether this immediacy is the product of *original* or *authentic* thought, or is produced through the act of writing, however, remains to be seen.

In Delany’s *Dhalgren*, at a party for the publication of his first book of poetry, Kid or Kidd is so unprepared with a conclusion about poetic composition that he is newly uncertain if he, in fact, composed the poems that appear in the slim collection that bears no name. Magee is rather more certain of his own feats of composition, ending the scholarly text with an alluring record of his own creative writing techniques: “leaping foreignly, without any clear idea of what needs to be said but that it has to be different to the way we usually speak” (224). One imagines the “real toads” of Marianne Moore’s “imaginary gardens” supplying the immediate language for which the poet reaches. The magic act ends without the reader knowing the secret of its success, but that may be a necessary part of the illusion.

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McDONALD, Russell. 2023. *Modernist Literary Collaborations Between Women and Men*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 269. ISBN 9781316512654, Hardcover \$110. ISBN 9781009080583, eBook \$110.

Whatever your area of study, whether modernism or other periods, reading this book by Russell McDonald will prompt you to think of writers who collaborated — an approach to authorship that disrupts the norm. Seeing two names on a title page, instead of one, can shift our attention from the finished product to the process that led to it — as we wonder how they