

*The Lives of Others:*  
**Tactics of Encounter and Wandering  
in Jennifer Maiden's Poetry**

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There is the frustrated insistence that words and how precisely and intentionally we use them matter: [...] that place where two clashing tones in contemporary life – a cartoon bluntness and a complexity that feels too vast to master – meet.

Sarah Kerr, 'In the Terror House of Mirrors' (22)

The trochaic form  
being suited best to war  
does fit here again, I guess:  
the falling metre  
retains its power longest to return.

Jennifer Maiden, 'Scotch Blue' (*Friendly Fire* 12)

**F**or over forty years, Jennifer Maiden has developed and refined a poetics motivated by her belief in 'living out an idea' in poetic form (qtd in Steger 26). Specifically, this sustained project has analysed violence as a condition of language, using the idiom of warfare to compare various scenarios of human conflict: from Vietnam to Iraq, and from the White House to the kitchen sink. Its extended trope of war does not in itself constitute a radical poetics; indeed, it seems to conserve a deep literary tradition beginning with the epic, both Eastern and Western, and continuing in the English language in metaphysical and neoclassical poetry, and beyond. The originality of Maiden's writing lies, rather, in its constructions of encounter-within-language, particularly the tactics of conflict and negotiation. Several years ago, she described her work as a 'tool for tactical and ethical problem-solving, [...] a laboratory for testing out ideas and ethics and theory' (Steger 26). She has carefully shaped her own poetics of tactical agency, which deserve to be more fully explicated

in terms of their formal, ethical and aesthetic ramifications.<sup>1</sup>

One of Maiden's great poetic heroes, Wallace Stevens, famously desired to escape reality through imaginative and linguistic play: a desire that ultimately refutes poetry's broader social and political effects. His considerable influence on her interest in query and questioning is, however, limited as a window on her work's dialogue with real world problems. Maiden resists the notion that the poem allows withdrawal from the pressure of reality:

[...] a poem becomes part of the identity of the reader, as a three-dimensional experience which like any other will associate itself with that reader's past and future in just the same educational or confirmatory way as any other instance of pure life, gathering and creating significance as it breathes. ('Poetry and Experience' 48).

In the simplest sense, Maiden's view of 'living' poetry is realised through her work's literal references to contemporary political conflict. Readers in the mid-1970s would have been in no doubt about her allusions to the Vietnam War in her long poem 'The Problem of Evil'. Since her second and third books of poems, *The Problem of Evil* and *The Occupying Forces*, were published in 1975, her writing's attention to ethical dilemmas in homes, relationships and intimate spaces has resiled from this preoccupation, but worked smoothly toward her renewed focus on current affairs in Western politics. Maiden's first two collections had been difficult to publish, and their critical uptake was similarly hindered. Ideally, one decides to absorb the rhythm between Maiden's dense syntax and loose form; but more often than not this has proven to be too taxing for critical readers. Reviewers and publishers responded to her early poetry by describing it as 'obscure' (Page, 'Poets in Paperback' 41) and, as Maiden recalls, 'baffling'. 'I just don't think the whole critical apparatus was geared for it', she explains of Australian literary criticism and publishing in the 1970s (Telephone interview). The past decade has seen Maiden at last achieving critical and public recognition, for poems addressing the Gulf War, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations, collected in *Friendly Fire* (2005), which won the *Age* Book of the Year, and most recently, in *Pirate Rain* (2010), which won the *Age* Poetry Book of the Year.

Maiden's poems on contemporary America have, ubiquitously and with startling immediacy, appeared in print at just the right moments to consider events and public figures on our TV screens – Condoleezza

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1 For a seminal approach to the ethical significance of Maiden's early work, particularly 'The Problem of Evil', see Martin Duwell, 'Ages of Reason: Ethics, Metaphor and the Work of Jennifer Maiden.'

Rice, Madeleine Albright, Saddam Hussein, Sarah Palin – or at least the refracted versions of them that we receive via the news. At the heart of Maiden's recent work is the long sequence embodied by George Jeffreys – not, as it happens, another public personality, but an everyman from Maiden's first novel – as omnipresent as the poems themselves:

George Jeffreys woke up in Kabul.  
George Bush Junior was on the TV, obsessed  
as usual with Baghdad.

George Jeffreys hummed an old  
border ballad which haunted him  
often now: 'What's that  
that hirples at my side?  
The foe that you must fight, my Lord.  
That rides as fast as I might ride?  
The shadow of your might, my Lord.'  
Was George Bush Junior mad?  
A plausible U S spokesman for one  
of those countless right-wing thinktanks  
argued on the BBC that W  
only pretended to be mad, 'like Nixon',  
to intimidate his foes. But  
Nixon, thought Jeffreys, was mad,  
surely? Is that the price perhaps  
for pretending too long?

. . . . .  
As with Alzheimer's itself,  
there was some self-parody in Reagan.  
None in Nixon. None in either Bush.

George Jeffreys looked out  
at a paved alhambra of pain,  
at the latticed dust of Kabul, which  
looked back and pretended to be sane.  
'George Jeffreys Woke Up in Kabul' (*Friendly Fire* 69–70)

Jeffreys is sparingly characterised: while he initiates dialogue elsewhere in the sequence, he is narrated as cool and toneless; and there is little dramatic irony to speak of as, although he is haunted by the 'border ballad', he follows it with a reflexive question that suggests his collusion with Maiden. We are engaged, instead, with what is happening over Jeffreys's shoulder: not least the dust, which, reminiscent of J.S. Harry, is animated; and by the world Jeffreys brings with him. In this sense, the poem's irony is pure. Jeffreys is neither a large nor appealing enough fiction to obstruct our engagement with the poem's questions, but his presence alone is sufficient to make us think twice about mistaking these poems as

didactic. As Maiden remarks, the real events of a post-9/11 world seem fantastic, so why not see the poem as a corresponding space of imaginative liberty (*Friendly Fire* 61)? ‘George Jeffreys’ has all the hallmarks of satire, but if we attempt to crystallise a single attitude or argument with which it approaches its scenario, the poem comes to ... dust.

Maiden’s references to literal warfare are an entry point to both her more nuanced themes of other modes of encounter and, further, her formal treatment of language as a reality of conflict. Maiden has concentrated on particular formal effects that explore the ethics of language. By crafting what I will define as a transactional quality in her poetry, Maiden makes it part of her reader’s continuum of reality. As David Brooks has pointed out, her poetry resists the metaphysical desire to draw language toward ‘some hypothetical essential’ (75). Rather, she approaches the poetic space as an intensive field of human confrontation and transaction. Maiden’s work heightens our awareness that poems are built of the same medium that also constructs non-aesthetic experiences of life, and that this implicates poet and reader in shared ethical responsibility. In ‘Tactics’ from her first book of the same title (1974) and ‘The Sponge’ from *The Problem of Evil* Maiden relishes the poem’s substance or solidity as the most basic unit of human encounter. Her attention to nouns, pronouns, transitive verbs and spatiality sustains what Maiden calls the ‘physical fleshly’ reality of poetic exchange:

It’s the idea of fleshing out, the embodiment, the incarnation of the idea probably – ultimately in a non-pin-downable, infinite form because once something’s three-dimensional it’s not trapped in one dimension. It’s using the physical fleshly techniques of poetry – the physical nature of language – in order to incarnate an idea and explore it. It’s almost as if you had a human being embodying an idea, and living out an idea and testing it rather than it just being in the abstract. (qtd in Steger 26)

Maiden’s tactic of negotiated identities and truths engages with the ethical turn in twentieth-century poetics, particularly with what Charles Bernstein calls the ‘radically small scale’. He emphasises that poetic expression can do its best work ‘not as an idea but a practice, and not a matter of comrades-through-time or cultural positions, but of words and syntax’:

The cultural project of this poetry of radically small scale is to refuse such absorption by mass culture, so as to keep the attentional focus on the possibilities of language, on what language has to tell. (‘Unrepresentative Verse’, 271–72)

With reference to the influence of American postmodern poetics

on Australia poetry, particularly the general influence of Maiden's contemporary, Denise Levertov, I would like to examine how 'The Sponge' explores open and serial poetic forms to create its 'trochaic' effect.

This essay will navigate the ethical significance of her poetry, through the 'radically small scale' approach to human confrontation that is established in the domestic and suburban context of 'Tactics' and 'The Sponge', and expanded upon in Maiden's later and continuing poetic strategies.

Although Maiden speaks of the poems in *Tactics* as her 'accessible poems', that book sets out all the basic instruments of the poetic laboratory in which she has continued to work (Telephone interview): narratives 'embodied' by dialogic structures; the interruption of pathos and of rhetorical conceits; and the favouring of metonymy over metaphor. The book's final suite underwrites the prevailing concerns of Maiden's poetics, on the threshold of her work to come:

No, the last line rhymes too tightly,  
& time's random spill is strange –  
too anarchic to quite execute  
immaculate revenge...

no consequence is needed: just  
those waters & a wristed watch,  
that world ... (59)

The meta-realms of this poem are richly convoluted. Its speaker is a poet, drafting a work about the scenario in which she is immediately engaged; a work that also (like the dust of Kabul) speaks for itself, through quotation:

'In its unspun knots of water  
the sun in the harbour shows  
leaf-embossed like a sideboard of silver  
an antique's ominous glow.

. . . . .  
irritation's pincers set  
new flesh between her brows,  
& the girl's moist hair clings, bundled  
by her knuckles from her nape.  
he listens as if gentle  
& withdraws to concentrate  
on her tired shrugs of walking  
in the canna-rooted slime,  
then glances down, impatient

at the wristed beat of time.’ (58)

The uncapitalised lines of the meta-poem in ‘Tactics’ reveal an interest in an open form that is not quite achieved in either the meta-poem or ‘Tactics’ itself; as the speaker resolves, ‘no consequence is needed’ in poetry. Rather, as Maiden’s construction of her poem illustrates, what is needed is possibility:

angled in my compact, powder-vague  
& various as peace, you sprawl  
on the tide-auburn shale: a wet  
nun’s coif – my hair – reflects  
the crushed sun-cellophane sea.

‘Don’t hurry for me,’ you lounge  
where mantled finches suck & brawl  
like sparring flames, noon-rapid: tall  
in fitful flashes, echoer  
at ease to disconcert, you yawn. (59)

Meanwhile, the speaker is toying with the reflection of her companion and, ultimately, of herself. As in ‘George Jeffreys’, the poem’s dramatic irony is neutralised. Firstly, the speaker of ‘Tactics’ is aware of the ethics of her writing practice: ‘all histrionics prove / too obviously good there, like / some business man who pensions off / his ghosts above the basic wage, / too desperately good.’ Secondly, the poem turns on the slippery dialectic between Maiden’s control of meaning and her reader’s agency. The semantics of ‘Tactics’ shift with its serial form. Her speaker parallels this process by using the meta-poem to finesse the ‘expertise’ of encounter:

‘I won’t keep you long now,’ I say  
    & though  
I now can’t keep you long,  
    delay  
that working of the world, to gain  
Its expertise, a tactic of return. (60)

Like its meta-poem, the narrative of ‘Tactics’ has an uncontrolled or at least indeterminate element, and it is this thematic openness, which is also an openness of poetic voice and structure, that offers ‘return’. To return is, at once, to re-enter our reality (which the poet simply ‘can’t’ control), and to revisit the site of language (‘delay’). The poem’s speaker anticipates the work that will extend this poetics of exchange – future poems, which will return us to it.

‘The Sponge’ also appears to describe the dysfunctional relationship of a couple, and the presence of their daughter caught in the middle.

However, reflecting 'Tactics', its exploration of conflict goes further, to focus closely on the transactions that take place between a poet and her reader. The poem's formal tactic is to negotiate semiotic power as one manoeuvre – a single space of 'mobility' in which poet and reader share influence over meaning. The poem's serial form is an accumulation of short and fragmented stanzas:

Radiator.  
the warmth stretched her veins,  
etched them puissantly on  
her calves. Their daughter  
under the coffee table,  
                        kicked  
the hem of the rug. Guilty.

The furniture  
criticizes her limbs

His scrutiny maims  
Her concentration forever

She bullies the cat prettily (*The Problem of Evil* 51)

The hyperbolic register suggests a kind of domestic warfare, a state of attrition in which tension is at maximum pitch. The poem's deeper significance, though, is determined by its denotative variety. Setting up a field of confrontation and negotiation between the poem and reader, Maiden's words can generate a sense of random incident ('She munches something') rather than narrative meaning. She plots the poem around pronouns that continue to demarcate new horizons of what I would call *ground*, meaning the solidity of hermeneutic significance. Unable to hold ground for long, a reader of 'The Sponge' must follow personal pronouns as they constantly bob in and out of sight:

  Defensively  
she rides the mop  
& cackles, building  
smokescreens of energy

  He couldn't  
carry her enough  
In her despotic arms the cat  
twitched as if stroked by its sleep

At night he thinned  
the child's wine from  
a carafe of mineral water

Boredom tightened her face  
so close to tears & sleep  
She munches something that is  
splintery and loud

She meanders her crayon  
on a colouring book:  
                                  the page  
cuts her thumb,  
thin & deep, & too neat  
for belief or lamentation

\*           \*           \*

The child rammed the  
pramside with her head

\*           \*           \*

(*The Problem of Evil* 51–52)

The poem is figuratively and formally open-ended; its list-like actions almost naïve in their lack of narrative explanation, and its lacunae suggesting chunks of information that are beyond the sight of both the poet and reader. The poet does not seem to be a privileged witness, but rather a curious bystander. There is the distinct sense of watching a scene through the lit window of a suburban house at dinnertime.

‘The Sponge’ functions as an intermediary between poet and reader, or self and other: between agency and passivity, control and mutability. Maiden’s negotiation of tactical agency is shaped not only by the formative influence of Wallace Stevens, but also by the ‘limitless set of relations’ in later American models of open poetic form:

[...] a generative structure that constrains the poet to encounter and examine that which he or she does not immediately fathom, the uncertainties and incomprehensibilities of an expanding universe in which there can be no singular impositions. (Conte 15–17)

The general impact of such models on Australian poetry has been well documented.<sup>2</sup> In Maiden’s case, however, it has been barely acknowledged – even though her concern with language transactions would seem to be

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2 For overviews of this influence, see Joan Kirkby, ed., *The American Model: Influence and Independence in Australian Poetry* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1982) and John Tranter, ed., *The New Australian Poetry* (Brisbane: Makar, 1979). Examples of more specific investigations can be found in Kate Fagan and Peter Minter, ‘Murdering Alphabets, Disorienting Romance: John Tranter and Postmodern Australian Poetics,’ *Jacket* 27 (2005) and Andrew Taylor, *Reading Australian Poetry* (Brisbane: U of Queensland P, 1987).



closely related to the aleatory structures explored by American postmodern poets including Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov.

In particular, both Maiden and Levertov utilise open forms to position 'language also as a *form of life*' (Levertov's italics, 'Origins' 54). Levertov's feeling for the ethical imperative of poetry endows it with a metonymic relation to everyday human interaction:

The obligation of the poet (and, by extension, of others committed to the love of literature, as critics and teachers or simply as readers) is not necessarily to write 'political' poems [...]. The obligation of the writer is: *to take personal and active responsibility for his words, whatever they are, and to acknowledge their potential influence on the lives of others.* [...] And the obligation of readers is: *not to indulge in the hypocrisy of merely vicarious experience, thereby reducing literature to the concept of 'just words,' ultimately a frivolity, an irrelevance when the chips are down ...* When words penetrate deep into us they change the chemistry of the soul, of the imagination. (Levertov's italics; 'The Poet in the World' 114).

In their statements, both Levertov and Maiden understand that language is an embodied transaction, not least a spatial and temporal experience in which 'the awareness of the world of multiple meanings' is 'an experience or constellation of perceptions' (Levertov, 'Some Notes' 12–13). 'The Sponge' is an example of how Maiden can deliver a series of perceptions to her reader, and yet also how her reader can choose to order or expand them in an original way. This is reiterated in Maiden's poems of the same era, such as 'The Problem of Evil' and 'The Construct'.

Lack of closure, writes Peter Nicholls, is 'a primary instance of poetry's difference from politics, placing the poem within that intermediary space' (252). This argument is contested by Levertov's and Maiden's similar views on the poem as an intermediary between poet and reader, and on the direct impact of poetic form on a reader's consciousness. By highlighting the language transactions that underpin everyday domestic encounters, 'The Sponge' implicates itself in the experience it describes. In doing so, Maiden illustrates Charles Bernstein's argument that, 'the relation of theory to practice is like the relation of strategy to tactics [...]: the best picture of an aesthetic is a work of art, and vice versa' ('Preface' xi).

In his essay 'Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry', Heidegger

refutes the idea that poetry is play, because language captures us at the most fundamental state of humanity. Citing this essay, Levertov agrees with Heidegger, explaining that it is ‘by filling his given space, that a man, and in particular a poet as a representative of an activity peculiarly human, *does* make “traceries sufficient to others’ needs”’.<sup>3</sup> In this contact with the other, the poet performs a profoundly “social” or “political” action’. One could say that it is a profoundly peaceful action, in that it seeks negotiation and compromise over the impasse of conflict. The poet’s function is to cultivate our capability for accessing alterity, thus re-conditioning language.

Maiden once wrote that she was concerned with ‘inviting my reader to wander in [the poem] and explore without having his way barred by any immediate and dismissive simplicity’ (‘Questionnaire’ 149). This could be read as a specific reference to her use of conflict as a subject, but it is also an insight into Maiden’s sense of her poetry’s affects. The liberty to wander is distinct from an escape from reality, into play: Maiden explains this by comparing the rhythm of her poetic spaces with viewing television. In ‘Channel Surf’ the poet is ‘surfing the news on cable, trying / to construct, in my endless quest, / the perfect lyric’ (*Friendly Fire* 96). Echoing Levertov, Maiden suggests that the wandering space is one of ‘compassion’ (‘Alliances’ 149). For Maiden’s reader, her metaphor of surfing is analogous to the tactical manoeuvres that are encouraged by open poetic form. As in the differing serial structures of ‘Tactics’ and ‘The Sponge’, ‘modern 24-hour satellite news coverage can provide a trochaic (fast then slow, hard then soft) news pattern which allows for a reflection and analysis that impede the acceleration of violence’ (‘Alliances’ 149). In poetry at least, this ‘trochaic’ pattern suspends meaning in a state of possibility. As she writes in a 2005 poem, ‘Slave Gold’: ‘You touch it and it jingles in the dark’ (*Friendly Fire* 98).

The affects of Maiden’s poems amount to an immersion in the suspended space of language transactions, however we may view this as somewhat different from Levertov’s sense of the poem as phenomenological or ‘an incarnation’ (‘Origins’ 50). Maiden also refers to the ‘incarnation’ of ideas as a simile for their embodiment as language. In doing so, she reworks a discourse borrowed from Simone Weil. Whereas Weil advocates fully incarnate existence and denounces disincarnate

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3 Geoff Page alludes to Heidegger’s phrase in his review of Maiden’s first book, *Tactics*. For Page, however, it is precisely the nature of Maiden’s ‘beautifully elaborate iron traceries’ that is insufficiently significant; they ‘hint, but obscure, something beyond’ (‘Poets in Paperback’ 40).

experience, Maiden argues for the ethical value of balancing subjective idealism with an ontologically suspended perspective: 'I share [Weil's] ideas of the incarnate and disincarnate, [but] complete incarnation is not a good thing. [...] So, the use of art is one way of dealing with this, it can bring stabilising forces' (Telephone interview). Maiden has favoured the term since as early as 1982. Prior to that, she described poetic effect in alternative but conceptually consistent terms, as 'an unguarded embrace' using 'both hands' ('Questionnaire on Poetry' 149). However, her ethical project is focused less on the state of stability itself, and more on the 'forces' at work. Theoretically speaking, the dislocating effects of war and art can pose the same problem: hence the poet has an obligation to create an aesthetic space in continuity with reality; one that not only refers to it but also actively, flexibly engages with its problems. As she writes in 'Slave Gold', there's 'something about the poem that / differs from contexted art', something to do with its 'going up and down / [...] in society' (*Friendly Fire* 97–98). Maiden suggests here that poetic form inherently embodies the interactive principle underlying Weil's ethics of ontological mobility. As in 'The Sponge', 'this dichotomy comes through hierarchies, and is explored through a constant flux of position' (Maiden, Telephone interview).

The poem's structure and form suggest a three-stranded narrative of identities, while at the same time avoiding a hierarchical, didactic mode of narrative. This is particularly interesting in relation to the poem's approach to gender and to women and children – traditionally the collateral victims of war. Denoting both mother and daughter, the double feminine pronoun in 'The Sponge' blurs the female characters into one another, and yet its very repetition reiterates gender difference. Maiden uses only a few narrative suggestions to distinguish mother and daughter ('Their daughter / under the coffee table', 'the child's wine'), so that the females occupy interchangeable places in the syntax or order of the family. As they are constantly disrupting of and disrupted by the reappearance of 'he', the poem suggests that gender delimits these characters and their changing emotional positions.

As we read more closely, however, we come to realise that 'The Sponge' constructs identity in a more nuanced fashion. Its gendering of action moves into the background of the poem's scenario as other modes of difference come to the fore. For example, the poem's "number" of transitive verbs rivals the "presence" of pronouns. As the poem's characters and objects are perpetually exerting their force upon one another, most of its isolated phrases and sentences repeatedly enact the

violence of subject to predicate. Like pronouns, those phrases tend to propel the sentence toward a ground of mirage, from which a reader's inference of meaning is withdrawn. This is emphasised by an absence of full stops. By choosing verbs that denote physical pain, incision and domination, Maiden underlines the violence that she sees as an inherent condition of human transaction: 'stretched' 'etched', 'kicked', 'criticizes', 'maims', 'bullies', 'rides', 'munches', 'meanders', 'cuts' and 'rammed'. As the pronouns blend with a mass of nouns – radiator, rug, cat, mop, carafe, crayon, and so on – not only people and people, but things and people confront one another. The girl is able to bully the cat, for instance, but the page is able to cut her. With its series of isolated temporal and spatial moments, 'The Sponge' sustains its focused tension but allays the climax of violence by interrupting linearity.

Increasingly, gender comes to represent a more general presence of violent difference. It seems to stand in for speech by establishing multiple moments and positions. In fact, by conflating her female characters into a single pronoun, Maiden reflects the unimportance of conventional gender duality within the poem's many potential directions, and suggests that there are other, more precise ways of identifying voice and action. The duelling capitalisation of the couplet, 'His scrutiny maims / Her concentration forever' indicates parallel identities brought together by the poem's form rather than by the poet's evaluative construction of subjectivities.

As well as moving around its numerous identity positions, we forfeit any expectation of fluid rhythm or privileged perspective. The lacunae that isolate the phrase, 'The child rammed / the pramside with her head', may even act as a red herring, as, toward the poem's conclusion, Maiden reiterates the action: 'The other child rammed / the pramside with her head' (*The Problem of Evil* 54); this suggests that there have been two children present all along. Moreover, while Maiden's reader might feel that they have now established some ground, the children's action is doomed to repeat itself – in the poem and as the poem – over the uncertain ground of their parents' relationship. In 'The Sponge', it's difficult to identify what is known and unknown – ground won and ground lost – only the tactical manoeuvre of the tactic through various positionalities.

There is potential for ground to be touched in 'The Sponge', and this itself is a refusal of total difference. By persistently attempting to construct identities, the poem's tactic is to float an identity politics that is constantly dismantled or reworked throughout the poem. The daughter's 'smokescreens of energy' reflect the elusive nature of this power play, in

which the tactics of survival leave intangible and impermanent traces. The poem's almost imperceptible shifts between present and past tenses signal its delicate sense of defeat: 'he feels / that her listlessness almost / slanders him / he felt that she had ruined him' (*The Problem of Evil* 52). At the same time, they remind us that coercive or fixed identities can perpetuate a state of violence.

The closing stanzas of 'The Sponge' continue to multiply its positions. The daughter's violence is reincarnated in the tormented cat, and her father forever refracted in an imperative mood. On one hand, violence is indefinitely projected forward:

She rounds the dough in her hands.  
I am combining people.

His somnolence filters the words  
to safer proportions

I have crossed the line

The cat punched its head  
softly against the window

Alone,  
he would cook breakfast  
mysterious crisps of meat  
& liquid eggs – proudly,  
demolish

his meal like an argument (*The Problem of Evil* 54)

The image of the cat's masochistic turn reflects the ambiguous statement, 'Guilty', made at the poem's opening and attributed neither to the poet nor characters. This pervasive, communal guilt is evident in the man's demolition of his 'proud' but (like the smokescreen built by his daughter) groundless structure. His argument, which is to say his survival, is not won because it became confrontational; he is 'Alone'.

On the other hand, this implosive family is close to agency. Near the poem's end, for the first and only time, mother and father make a parallel claim for the personal pronoun. The outcome of this is indeterminable; but consider the altered tone of the transitive verbs 'rounds' and 'filters', which are in stark contrast to the harsh and coercive transitions made earlier in the poem, and 'to be' and 'to have', which soften the character's exertions. And, while he is able to reduce his violence 'to safer proportions', she channels hers into an expressive form that, like the poem, combines identities. This interpretation is reinforced by the suggestion that 'I am combining people which' might in fact describe both the woman and

those ‘combining people’ who are a part of her. The characters’ voices (or it may be only one that speaks ‘I’) are of course both confessions of surrender, and defensive attempts to stake out higher ground; both constructions and points of departure. As a result, ‘The Sponge’ pursues a lack of closure, but not at the cost of providing cues to its meanings.

Martin Duwell feels that Maiden’s poetics underlines ‘the incompatibility of ethics and language and its fictions.’ However, the collusion between form and theme in her poems, and their treatment of the ethical and semiotic as a single field, reflect more on the danger of unthinking communication – a world without poetry – than ‘the danger of art’ (258). I see the small-scale warfare of ‘Tactics’ and ‘The Sponge’ as a perspective that has allowed Maiden to continue framing her work in that way. Since 1975, she has described the suburban space as an ethically significant trope in her work:

The privacy made possible by suburban rooms, lawns and gardens is in itself a seedbed for the critical faculty. It gives one a breathing-out pause in which the events of the news or the immediate impositions of society can be considered and then perhaps evaded or met more effectively.  
(‘The Suburban’ 118–19)

Her trochaic poetic space is a suburban space: serial, analytical and ‘an area of increased free will’. According to Maiden, the ‘tendency of suburban living to be challenging in terms of sexuality, imagination and ethical choice’ is ‘described from an urban perspective as being “monotonous” or “boring”’; But she argues, ‘negative reaction to this type of boredom is in general merely a revulsion against free will’ (‘Suburban’ 112): ‘When it happens, suburban violence is more sinister than national violence like war because it is more about individual free will and therefore more likely for the individual observer to suffer or perpetrate’ (‘Suburban’ 118–19).

In the urban space developed and theorised by Baudelaire and Benjamin, the city and the aesthetic experience offer the same distance from cognitive and ethical continuity: disincarnate from shared human reality, and incarnate as the ‘*solitaire*’ (Bauman 178). This kind of poetic space works against Maiden’s ethics. Like the attitude of the modernist *flâneur*, its delineation allows a state of play, in which the player (who might be the author or the audience) can retain full control in the face of otherness:

One plays when knowing that the assumptions are what they are:  
assumptions, which have been freely accepted and may be freely  
dropped. We speak of reality when we do not have such knowledge,

or do not dare to believe it, or suspect it to be untrue. There is nothing gratuitous and not much that is free about reality. (Bauman 171)

In play's encounters with otherness, 'knowing' restricts possibility – of meaning, of identity, of affect. Maiden's trochaic formal effects, and the ethics of wandering with which they affect her reader, avoid setting limitations on meaning. Her poetic strategies do not subscribe to aesthetics of escape, or of play. In the case of poetry, play theory shuts the ethical space outside of the poetic one. On the other hand, as David McCooey observes, the 'voice of suburbia does not require any smuggling in of the poetic' (113). 'Tactics' and 'The Sponge' use the trope of the suburban to signal its analytical engagement with the language of encounter and conflict. Looking to Maiden's recent work, we could see 'the rhythms of suburban morality' as characteristic of its thematic, formal and aesthetic interests in the everyday encounter with warfare.

In particular, dialogic structure within her recent poems provides a structure of 'pause', of evasion or provisional solution. With the rhythm described in 'Slave Gold', the 'up and down' ('Friendly Fire' 97) of various voices penetrates Maiden's oeuvre with a convivial quality of quotation, paraphrasing and asides as well as dialogue: her poetics 'of inverted commas' ('Intimate Geography', *Friendly Fire* 90). This awareness of mediation, rather than documentary, is another point that distinguishes Maiden's treatment of warfare from Levertov's testimonial perspectives. In *Friendly Fire*, references to global politics and warfare are often framed within the television screen or a domestic discussion, usually between Maiden and her daughter. And, rather than in the public acts that are so hard to evaluate, we meet Rice buying jewellery, or Bush in a hotel room television (or, later in the sequence, privately choking on a pretzel). Here, once again, is the poet 'surfing' her medium of choice:

Whilst surfing the news on cable, trying  
to construct, in my endless quest,  
the perfect lyric and involve Abu Ghraib,  
I find on Fox Rupert Murdoch, proudly  
describing his father Keith, the journalist,  
who revealed WW One slaughter, defied  
the military, reconstructed a letter  
an MI had confiscated in France, so that  
it became a cabinet paper, caused  
the recall of a general, changed the course  
of that war. Rupert creased his face,  
an authentic, anxiety-smudged self-portrait. (96)

Gone is the open form of Maiden's 1970s poems; however, the quality of

‘suburban morality’ remains in new forms. She immediately establishes an ironic frame for the poem: mediating her voice and Murdoch through television, and throwing the mundane experience of ‘the news on cable’ against Abu Ghraib and the impressively casual list of Keith Murdoch’s exploits. In her last two volumes, Maiden’s use of ‘fantasy’ and even the fantastic – exaggeration, possibility, distance – has furnished her poetry’s suburban space.

The seemingly confessional mode that Maiden’s writing has increasingly taken could be mistaken for forcefulness – a play for hierarchical, rhetorical power over her reader. In a recent review of *Pirate Rain* for ABC Radio, however, Geoff Page notes Maiden’s ‘exposure of her own vulnerabilities’ (‘Pirate Rain’, np). The voice of ‘Channel Surf’ evidences this: not didactic but open to suggestion: ‘It was hard not to like him, despite / his Fox’s pro-war, pro-Bush stance’ (*Friendly Fire* 96). Similarly, as she writes in ‘Diary Poem: Uses of Anger’, in *Pirate Rain* (79-84): ‘Sometimes George Bush Junior’s almost / an object of pity to me now, / the product of a process in which dumbing-down is senile compulsion, / not a strategy anymore.’ Indeed, it is that very ‘compulsion’ that Maiden rails against, when her poems are criticized as being ‘just diary entries’. She makes a direct response to the charge – in poetic form, of course:

Yes,  
this is my voice to me: if you know me,  
you will think you are talking to me now.  
But you are talking to me, which makes  
this not quite a diary entry. (81)

Maiden strikes back at a misreading of her poetic voice by claiming that its space is one of unmediated dialogue. Not only is the poem ‘my voice’ of vulnerability but, also, we ‘are talking to [her]’. With ‘Diary Poem: Uses of Anger’, Maiden clearly makes the point that poetry is the correct place to undertake critical debate. In doing so, she highlights the philosophy of her early work and the ‘critical apparatus’ that was unprepared for it:

God, when  
I was twenty I was extremely post-  
modernist and the reader wrote the text.  
.....  
Many Frenchmen  
seemed very good at creating my ideas  
shortly after me: but when they did  
no one dismissed them as eccentric,



pretty or obscure.            Still,  
you write this with me now, although  
it's an impertinence to us both, perhaps. (81–82)

The poem, then, should not be “pretty” or polite, and neither should the poet apologise for it. It is impertinent because it is not an escape, but a thing – stitched together, and zapped with the current of reality. Play is determined by an external will; in contrast, Maiden seeks to cultivate a poetic space that, like twenty-four hour broadcast, focuses on the agency of a reader who takes on the role of channel surfer by shaping the material with which they are presented. This tactic always remains on the boundary of alterity, riding the moments of encounter that govern language and, by extension, warfare. In one sense, Maiden's is an apolitical poetics, and certainly that is most evident in her early collections, including *The Problem of Evil*, in which her use of serial form is at its most consistent. Despite the clearly leftist perspective included in her more recent work, she has continued to suspend the poetic space above political partisanship, through ironic approaches to voice and form, such as parataxis, compounded similes, and pastiche of tone and image. This heightened poetics has provided an enlighteningly self-reflexive enactment of her earliest poems. By demanding that her readers make a decision about how they encounter the poetic space, Maiden's poetry possesses a politics without being political, just as it possesses an ethics without morality: ‘One needs the private voice / to balance a public terror, still’ (*Pirate Rain* 85).

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