

The author was supposed to be dead, but in the age of social media and the rampant commodification of self, has there ever been less of a divide between the author and the text as there is today? Through a close reading of the work of poet Jackson McCarthy, this article returns to Roland Barthes' famous theory of the 'death of the author' to think through the landscape of contemporary poetry in Aotearoa New Zealand. McCarthy's poetry – in its appeal to the poet as poem-maker, whose identity sits just outside the frame of the text – offers a potential turning point in Aotearoa New Zealand literature away from the personal politics of the author, and the author-as-brand more generally, towards the reader and the text itself. In this sense, McCarthy's poetics, and the Barthesian moment it revives, is something of an antidote to scupper or dilute the overarching cultural drivers of our time.

(Never) Reveal Yourself: Killing the Author (Again) in the Age of Personal Poetics

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I was recently asked to take part in a postgraduate seminar to discuss an influential academic text of my choice. The idea was to revisit a work that had been significant during my graduate studies and that might be a productive discussion point for graduate students. I chose Roland Barthes' 'Death of the Author', the seminal text that – ironically – won't die a natural death. For Barthes, in the post-structural moment of this essay, the writer was not to be read into the realm of the text. 'The unity of the text is not in its origin but in its destination,' he claimed, 'but this destination can no longer be personal: the reader is a man without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that someone who holds collected into one and the same field all the traces from which writing constituted'.¹

I was eager to talk about what we can make of this text today. Does it stand up? What do we make of the author's 'death' at a time when the author is consistently called upon to perform or entertain at festivals around the world, have a platform in which to espouse not simply their work, but their life? What would Barthes' essay – and Barthes himself – have to say about authors as self-promoting entrepreneurs, I wondered. It is striking how unabashed Barthes is in asserting

1 Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (University of California Press, 1989), 54.

his own authorship in the text, when he is himself decrying the removal of the writer from any textual interpretation. But it is easy to read Barthes into the text because we know so much about him – his biography precedes the essay itself. I think I knew how he died before I'd even read this essay.² I've never read a biography of Barthes; in fact, anything I know about his life I have likely learnt on the internet.

In the seminar, we circled towards the present moment, falling into agreement that Barthes' treatise is now thoroughly outdated. We wondered: in the age of social media and the commodification of self, has there ever been less of a divide between the author and the text as there is today? As readers, we are never without the biography of a writer; titbits of information are easily garnered from online sources and collaged together to paint a picture of the person who lies behind (or in front of) the text. Further, while tissues of biographical information make up these portraits, there might also be those details that are conscientiously placed within our reach by the writer themselves. More writers have websites than not, and, as far as websites are concerned, our entry point to these writers is not the work but the person behind the work. Could we go so far as to call this the age of the (Re)Birth of the Author?

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It was at about the same time that I was re-reading Barthes that I first encountered Jackson McCarthy's poetry. He submitted some poems for *Landfall*, which I immediately added to my 'yes' pile and subsequently published. I was so struck by these poems that I opened the issue's pages with McCarthy's excellent prose poem, 'Scheherazade' (which the author later told me was an example of some of his 'adolescent' work):

Language is always fail or failing and when I'm with you I
don't want to make words any more, just sounds. Except

2 Barthes was run over by a laundry van on a Paris street on February 25, 1980, and died of his injuries a month later.

possibly for *Scheherazade*, occasionally; the string of it, the full body of it, the even temperament.³

Adolescent? I don't think so. An even temperament? Well, yes! The audacity to open a poem with 'language is always fail or failing'. Who *was* this person? Who *speaks* in this way?⁴

Every cheek is a petal, every flower is a rose and roses and. Enough of the formal, the meter, the iamb. Every foot falls along the shore, every song a verse too long, every humid window flies open and—⁵

And what? And roses and verses? And T.S. Eliot's 'footfalls' and Gertrude Stein's 'rose'? *The text is a fabric of citations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture.*⁶ Where and what and who makes up these citations, I start to wonder as I fall into the post-Barthesian trap. With Google at my fingertips, I go hunting for biographical traces of this McCarthy, in search of meaning beyond that which I can find within those few poems and minimal accompanying bio note.

Maybe owing to McCarthy's age – in his early 20s at the time of writing – there's not much to be found about his writing online. He's been published in *Starling* and *Bad Apple*, and was a recent recipient of a *Starling* micro-residency, which included several readings and performances at the 2023 Young Writers and Readers Festival. I probably could find more, but Barthes rises up from below the desk and starts shouting in my face. *Gros imbécile! Qu'est-ce que tu fous?* No ideas but in the text.

3 Jackson McCarthy, excerpt from 'Scheherazade,' in *Landfall* 243 (May 2022), 10.

4 Barthes, 'Death of the Author,' 49.

5 McCarthy, 'Scheherazade,' 10.

6 Barthes, 'The Death of the Author,' 53.

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Dear Gertrude Stein

I'd like to take a line from your 1913 poem 'Sacred Emily'. I hope you don't mind. I'm going to post-modernise it, chuck a bit of Eliot in there (even though you probably despised him and he you) and call it 'Scheherazade'. John Ashbery also wrote a poem with the same name, but you were already dead. Sorry.

*Ngā mihi,
Jackson McCarthy*

The genre of the prose poem often lends itself to a surrealist tone, and seems to suit McCarthy's poetic tendencies well. There is a slipperiness and opacity – adjectives that would be just as at home in discussing other great Aotearoa New Zealand poets like Louise Wallace, Kate Camp, and Frankie McMillan. McCarthy's prose poems feel intimate while also keeping the reader at arm's reach. The poet is present as playful friend, not as confessional other – we're in a pub, not a therapist's room.

The Truth

When I met the old poet, he was tired and grumpy. I went to his house with the intention of knocking him down a peg or two. *My work is better than yours ever was*, I said. He paused, deep in thought or perhaps dying. The grandfather clock ticked and all the ants in the carpet revealed themselves. *I have never been interested in the truth*, came his eventual reply. My freely associative conversation often opened hollow spaces in people, but this time it was being used against me. The poet had bested me at my own game! And there was nothing left to

do but eat the tea and cookies his nurse had laid out for us. It made me think of my husband before I married him. I knew when I asked him his favourite restaurants, bars, hotels, that his extreme beauty was an accident and really he was very stupid. But I married him anyway, because it's not okay to be a massive cunt.⁷

This poem welcomes me in. I can picture the old poet and the young poet, both adhering to their respective stereotypes: tired and grumpy; arrogant and brazen. We're met with the humour of the line, 'deep in thought or perhaps dying', which is very funny but not outside the realms of the prose poem-container. Then there is a sideways turn: ants 'reveal themselves' from the carpet and we start to slide down the surrealist ramp. But we're not there for long and emerge again with remarks from the poets' tête-à-tête. The 'freely associative conversation' continues in its own self-contained manner, but then we slip off the expected trajectory again with mention of 'the husband'. Who is the author here? All my petty assumptions about the authorial voice here, the picture I had constructed of the young poet visiting a generic old poet are somehow, and quite suddenly, thwarted. Husband? What's he got to do with it? And why would this savvy young poet (of the poem) decide to 'marry him anyway', regardless of his intellectual deficiencies? Why would the poet decide to marry in the first place? He doesn't seem the like marrying type, one might assume. And anyway, why wouldn't it be better just to be a 'massive cunt'?

Barthes gets me by the throat again. Even if the author-poet is a massive cunt (and we attempt to collapse the boundary that lies between author and the 'I' of this poem), what I so appreciate about this poem is the way that McCarthy effectively *kills* the author. We simply can't take a biographical, historical, psychological reading of this poem. It won't hold up. She or he is and isn't a massive cunt, which is kind of how I feel about Barthes too, who hovers like the undead in my imagination.

John Ashbery – that other cunt, as some have argued (too *smart*, too *difficult*) – also hovers in McCarthy's poetry. He's there in spirit, in the hauntology of 'Scheherazade', and he might be the 'old poet' in 'The Truth';

7 McCarthy, unpublished at time of writing.

he may even be ‘the husband’. But he’s also explicitly present in some poems:

It was afternoon and I was standing outside the house thinking about John Ashbery. The sun was setting and everything. Suddenly a boy appeared in front of me. I thought his legs were dirty and was about to scold him for them – *Boy, what are you doing walking around with dirty legs?* – yeah, good, something like that.⁸

You can’t (unless you’re a massive cunt, which I don’t think McCarthy is) mention a poet in a poem and not expect a critic to draw comparisons. Like Ashbery, McCarthy’s poems have a subjectivity, but are not concerned with the self as a subject. McCarthy-the-poet is in there, but only as poem-maker. He’s not interested in exploring or revealing the self, *per se*. These are not confessional poems. They’re slippery and evasive, opaque and enigmatic – qualities that place McCarthy largely outside of the current trend of confessional Aotearoa New Zealand poetry. The regular method of finding out about the writer, the personality that lies behind the work, just doesn’t have the same traction that it would normally – the poet won’t reveal themselves easily. But more than that, the work doesn’t tell us anything about the poet; the usual collapse of author into the authorial voice has been undermined. The lyric ‘I’ in these poems could be McCarthy, but it also could a middle-aged woman from Invercargill. In any case, it doesn’t actually matter.

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‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’, arguably Ashbery’s most famous poem, is a long ekphrastic meditation on the 1524 painting by late Renaissance mannerist painter, Parmigianino, from which the poem takes its title. According to Dinitia Smith, it was ‘the strangeness and perfection of the whole enterprise, and the dreamlike image of the beautiful young man’ in the portrait that so stirred Ashbery to become interested in Parmigianino

8 McCarthy, excerpt from ‘The Father,’ in *Landfall* 245 (May 2023), 137.

and to eventually write the 1974 poem.⁹ For the long poem (along with others in the book of the same name) Ashbery drew inspiration from Cubism's 'simultaneity' and abstract expressionism's motivation for the work to be a record of the piece coming into existence.¹⁰

For Ashbery, the ekphrastic poem is a record of the phenomenological encounter with the painting as the experience (not the painting) unfolds.

The time of day or the density of the light
 Adhering to the face keeps it
 Lively and intact in a recurring wave
 Of arrival. The soul establishes itself.
 But how far can it swim out through the eyes
 And still return safely to its nest?¹¹

Ashbery reads the work at the same volume as he reads his experience of reading the work. He tries to 'swim out through the eyes' in a kind of Steinian 'recurring wave / of arrival'.

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Dear John Ashbery

*I am quite fond of your use of ekphrasis, and I can see that you're
 very inspired by the Cubist moment. I think you'd do well to read
 around some of my thinking regarding the continuous presence.
 For me, this means things play out as they play out in no way as
 the same way as before they are now.*

9 Dinitia Smith, 'Poem Alone,' in *New York* (May 20, 1991), 51.

10 There are connections here to Stein's idea of the continuous presence, which was about 'using everything and beginning again and again' and where there was no such thing as repetition, only insistence. See Gertrude Stein, 'Composition as Explanation,' in *What are Masterpieces* (Pitman Publishing Corporation, 1970), 31.

11 John Ashbery, 'Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror,' in *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (The Viking Press, 1975), 68.

*Over and over and,
Gertrude Stein*

Ashbery's early work, and 'Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror' in particular, was criticised for being difficult, or worse, impossible to understand. His rebuttal to this criticism was that his poetry was only difficult because it was aiming to 'reflect the difficulty of living in passing time'.¹² His is a poetics of encounter, of being made subject to experience, and, in doing so, it seeks to collapse the viewer and the object being viewed. Likewise – almost fifty years later – we encounter McCarthy meeting Ashbery meeting Parmigianino, and where the subject is subsumed into the act of writing.

Ekphrasis

Thank God for wine, boys, the Internet,
and all the other things I've left

my heart in the gutters for.
In ekphrasis I found what I was looking for.

If, by explaining, words expand art,
my poetry's the ekphrasis of my heart.¹³

I don't know if this is, in fact, an 'ekphrastic' poem – there doesn't appear to be a painting that the poet is musing upon, despite the title suggesting as much. Instead, McCarthy is meditating on the creative act of looking to painting and that beautiful transfusion of the visual into the poetic. His poem is less ekphrasis than it is a literary *self-portrait in a convex mirror*, where the poetry itself is 'the ekphrasis of [his] heart'. McCarthy sees himself looking, a reflection of this very post-postmodern or post-

12 Richard Kostelanetz, 'How to be a difficult poet,' in *The New York Times* (May 23, 1976).

13 McCarthy, unpublished at time of writing.

Ashberian moment.

There is a kind of circularity at work here: McCarthy encounters Ashbery encountering Parmigianino's self-portrait. In Parmigianino's portrait we start with the 'dreamlike image of the beautiful young man', which we can trace vis-à-vis Ashbery's own 'recurring wave/of arrival' to McCarthy's 'wine, boys, the Internet' and 'the ekphrasis of [his] heart'. And like Ashbery (and Parmigianino before him), we don't get a sense of the person behind the portrait. The image, if there is one, is intentionally skewed, made convex. 'How far can [our interpretation] swim out through the eyes/And still return safely to its nest?'. We float around in these words, just like we do in McCarthy's, just like we do in Parmigianino's portrait. Ashbery's own words are helpful here: 'Chiefly his reflection, of which the portrait/Is the reflection once removed'. The author is no longer with us. He's not deep in thought or perhaps dying. He's dead.

And then there is music. McCarthy is a musician (but how should I know that about him?), and he seems to approach language with the same contempt for meaning as one might approach music. Music does not mean, but is. Can poetry do the same? Can a poem, like music, be an event? McCarthy appears to consider this question at times. There is an attempt to come at language for language's sake, rather than for what it might signify beyond the word. From 'Music':

For when contemplating your body's variousness
Moving in white t-shirts
I am struck by the words
Not the thing

And I look at you
And think of phrases like
The sudden nudity of clothes
And how it is a joy to watch you sitting in them¹⁴

14 McCarthy, 'Music', in *A Fine Line: New Zealand Poetry Society* (Autumn 2025), 7–8.

There are beautiful echoes of sensuality in here: the body moving inside the t-shirt, the words moving inside the mouth. A sudden nudity of words, perhaps. The way they are stripped back to signifier, like the naked body, so as to make music with the mouth. To disconnect the words from the meaning so the mouth might become instrument, not meaning-maker. And for that to be where true intimacy lies.

Of course, it's a fallacy of sorts. Words cannot help but mean; even words that we don't understand still represent something – we garner an interpretation or affect in hearing a language foreign to our ear, and we draw meaning from the sounds, rather than what they signify. But to pull back somewhat from the representation seems to be what interests McCarthy. To make the rose rosy again, as it were.

That is the tune but there are no words.
 The words are only speculation
 (From the Latin *speculum*, mirror):
 They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music.
Ashbery

I'm still looking
 for that immediacy of expression, the way
 the mouth forms a sentence.
*McCarthy*¹⁵

Perhaps music is to McCarthy what painting is to Ashbery. McCarthy, like Ashbery, is looking to queer the space between mediums, looking for that 'immediacy of expression', that music might achieve. Both poets push up against the limits of poetry and push towards that affective space that lies just *beyond*. Again, there is less of the author himself in here than there is poet-as-poem-maker. Words are only 'speculation' or a 'mirror' on what they cannot seek or find, and so the poet continues to search for the 'mouth

15 McCarthy, 'Lesson (poetry forms),' unpublished at time of writing.

that forms the sentence'. Not Ashbery's mouth, nor McCarthy's. The author is always just outside the frame, deep in thought or, perhaps, for the sake of the poem, dead.

With my brow *furrowed*, I circle back to Barthes and wonder, is McCarthy, *vis-à-vis* Ashbery, a valid representation of the authorial death? If the *zeitgeist* of Aotearoa New Zealand literature is our current preoccupation with the paratextual elements of the poem, fuelled as it is by the visually mediated (online) world – what the author *does* and *says* (as opposed to what the *work* does and says) – I wonder about the possibility of a new wave of poetry that someone like McCarthy might represent. That is, how a poet like this – in his Ashbery-esque slipperiness and where subjectivity slips through our fingers and cannot be grabbed hold of by the Googling-gaze – might mark either a turning point or an alternative strand of an Aotearoa New Zealand poetics. As Barthes says of Stéphane Mallarmé, 'his entire poetics consists in suppressing the author for the sake of the writing (which is, as we shall see, to restore the status of the reader)'.¹⁶ With my brow furrowed, I circle back to Barthes and wonder, is McCarthy's a poetics that might restore the status of the reader; or, come to favour the reader over the viewer?

In 1984, William Gass was troubled by Barthes's claim and what seemed to be the author's ongoing death. He wrote:

The problem is not, I think, whether the author is present in the work in one way or another, or whether the text will ever interest us in her, her circle, her temper and times; but whether the text can take care of itself, can stand on its own, or whether it needs whatever outside help it can get; whether it leads us out and away from itself or regularly returns us to its touch the way we return to a lovely stretch of skin.¹⁷

We might reflexively reach for a new tab to begin that paratextual

16 Barthes, 'Death of the Author,' 2.

17 William H. Gass, 'The Death of the Author,' in *Salmugundi*, no. 65 (Fall 1984), 15.

search for biographical fragments, but inevitably, we return to the text, for that is all there is. McCarthy's is a poetics of a rather lovely stretch of skin. Whatever it is that hovers beyond is not actually helpful, nor is it needed. What is needed is a reader, and for the reading to be the 'destination'. Barthes decried in 1967 as much when he proclaimed that whatever meaning we deduce from a text comes from the text itself, rather than the authorial intent that may lie just behind it, the *immediacy of expression//the way the mouth forms the sentence*, the way the ear curves to meet it. McCarthy's poetics, and the Barthesian moment it revives, is something of the antidote we need to scupper or dilute the overarching drivers of our time: cultural obsession with the personal politics of the author and the cancel culture that thrives off that; platforms, the author-as-brand, and the writer as self-promoting entrepreneur. Call me old fashioned, but more of these small deaths, please.

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Dear Roland Barthes

I've been re-reading your work recently and would like to introduce you to young poet by the name of Jackson McCarthy. I think you will find his work very interesting. He has restored my status as a reader of poetry. I can now swim out through the eyes, as it were. Poetry is poetry is poetry and not the massive cunt I thought it was. The sun is setting and everything.

*See you soon,
John Ashbery*