# Exhuming Mary Lincoln: Found Poetry in Biographical Fiction

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No new datasets were created during this study.

## Abstract

This study investigates the integration of found poetry with prose to create a hybrid work of biographical fiction. More specifically this investigation explores the ways in which found poetry based on historical documents might significantly inform narrative and structure. The novel, *Widow Lincoln,* serves as the field of practice for this examination and forms the basis of the contextualizing thesis, outlined as follows: Chapter One introduces the research, acquaints the reader with the subgenres of found poetry and biographical fiction (biofiction), reviews relevant literature in the field, and briefly introduces methodology. Chapter Two provides definitions of key terms and takes a look at general reservations surrounding the two genres, while in Chapter Three the integration of found poetry is examined through the lens of two unique but complementary works of biofiction. Chapter Four investigates the development of a selection of found poems within *Widow Lincoln* and briefly explores their influence on the layout and structure of the novel. Finally, this study suggests two new contributions to knowledge in the field of creative writing: 1. the categorization of a subgenre within found poetry identified here as exhumed poetry to denote poems drawn specifically from the historical record, and 2. a new approach to biofiction which integrates found poetry as part of a sustained narrative. This investigation suggests a method for incorporating found poetry based on historical documents, including the personal correspondence of historical figures, into a work of biofiction as a means of promoting a more intimate engagement between the writer and the subject, the subject and the story, and ultimately between the story and the reader.

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**[the creative section of the thesis on pages 6-319 has been removed from this digital version at the author's request]**

# Exhuming Mary Lincoln: Found Poetry in Biographical Fiction

## Chapter One—Introduction

It is a metaphor, of course. To the best of my knowledge, no one is planning to exhume Mary Lincoln; her body lies, as it has for the past one hundred forty years, in a crypt inside the Lincoln Tomb in Springfield, Illinois. For the purposes of this investigation, exhumation refers instead to the poeticization of historical documents as an approach to biographical fiction (hereafter referred to as biofiction). This study proposes two primary lines of enquiry: how found poetry, specifically that gleaned from historical documents and personal correspondence, might impact the characterization of a historical figure in a work of biofiction, and how found poems, when paired with prose, might inform the structure of a hybrid prosimetrical novel. The creative component, the novel *Widow Lincoln,* provided the experimental space in which to explore these questions and though prose is a significant feature, *Widow Lincoln* remains first and foremost an exploration of the found poem as narrative device and structural element.

Throughout the investigation, two methodological frameworks served as a means of effectively tracking, analyzing, and reflecting on the research in progress: a practice-based approach and an auto-ethnomethodological praxis. The practice-based approach relied largely on post-textual analysis while the auto-ethnomethodological approach suggested more active reflexive interrogation. Though similar, each called for subtle adjustments to the lens through which the work was regularly reviewed and revised.

Why Mary Lincoln? There is history's version of her as the wife of the martyred 16th President of the United States, and there is the intimate, more personal portrait of Mary as a woman whose fortunes were inextricably enmeshed in the politics of men—a woman whose perceived missteps were often used against her (Baker, 1987/2008, pp. xi–xvii, 196). Mary lived a life of heartbreak. She was only six when

her mother died. She was thirty when she lost her father, and thirty-one when she lost a child just before his fourth birthday. Another son succumbed to typhoid while the Lincolns were living in the White House. During America's Civil War, Mary lost three half-brothers and a brother-in-law, all of whom were killed fighting for the confederacy, a betrayal she felt keenly but one that required her to remain stoic in public while privately she wept (Keckley, 1868/1998, p. 118). At the end of the war, at the beginning of a promising new chapter in her life, Mary's husband was assassinated as he sat by her side in a theatre watching a play. Sadly, even these were not the sum of Mary's losses. Another son died six years later. Despite all this, Mary remained stubbornly Mary, an educated woman whose influence on her husband and his political success is still being assessed, even now, more than one hundred fifty years after Abraham Lincoln's assassination. Historians and novelists alike continue to write about Mary Lincoln, endeavoring to explore gaps in the historical record of her life. [1]

Mary's extant letters are crucial to that exploration. [2] Taken together they reveal a headstrong, educated woman, sometimes spiteful and often seeking validation. But she was also generous and politically astute, a woman who loved opera, the theatre, literature, art, and travel. Mary's letters evidence her independent personality as well as her ambition, two characteristics for which she was widely criticized in her lifetime and after her death. It is a sorrowful thing to read her correspondence and discover that the same traits which helped elevate Mary and her husband to great heights often

[1] See Jean Baker's *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography*, specifically pp. 101, 126, 208-209, 222-223 (1987/2008). More recent books include nonfiction: *Mary Lincoln for the Ages* by Jason Emerson and biofiction: *Courting Mr. Lincoln*, by Louis Bayard, both published in the last four years (2019; 2020).
[2] *Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters* includes more than six hundred transcriptions of Mary's extant letters (Turner & Turner, 1972, p. xxi). Though it is still considered a definitive work, additional letters have come to light since its publication. Scholars Thomas F. Schwartz and Anne V. Shaughnessy note that more recent discoveries are equally important to an understanding of Mary and therefore should be consulted alongside the Turners' collection (1990, p. 35).

undermined her as an individual both during the Lincoln administration and in her final years (Baker, 1987/2008).

Driven perhaps by concerns over President Lincoln's legacy, both Mary and her sole surviving son, Robert, are known to have regularly destroyed correspondence, and it was not unusual for Mary to request that recipients burn her letters after reading them. A woman surrounded by tinder does not leave matches lying about (Turner & Turner, 1972, p. xxiii). Still, those of Mary's letters which have survived paint "an austere verbal portrait," writes American historian Fawn M. Brodie "more authentic than biography," and one that is still evolving nearly a century and a half after Mary's death (1972, p. xiii).[3] This is the Mary who fascinates me: a woman devastated by the loss of her husband in an age when women were judged by the men they married—a woman who willingly embraced all the trappings of widowhood but few of the societal expectations. Though Mary would wear black for the rest of her life, she would not settle down and live quietly for the convenience of others.

How best to tell her story, or rather, a fictionalized, historically influenced version of it? In 2018, I attended a lecture on the use of poetic voice in prose which included an exercise in found poetry. Until that day I don't think I had ever heard the term "found poetry," but the exercise resonated with me immediately, becoming the springboard for a novel with Mary's correspondence at its core.

Found poetry in general is an eclectic genre encompassing everything from the whimsical to the hotly debated. From the most basic erasure poems to the cut-up poetry of William Burroughs, from the complex collage poetry of Susan Howe to the often-

[3] In her introduction to the Turner and Turner collection, Brodie writes of "the emerging evolutionary portrait of Mary Lincoln herself, painted by her own pen" and describes early unsympathetic characterizations that dismissed Mary "as an erratic and tactless shrew and spendthrift, who further desecrated her husband's memory by degenerating into insanity" (1972, p. xiii-xiv). This is how Mary was often portrayed in the Lincoln biographies I borrowed from my local library the early 1970's.

controversial conceptual poetry of Kenneth Goldsmith, found poetry covers a lot of ground. [4] This study is primarily concerned with found poetry that relies either solely or significantly on historical documents, an approach, I submit, which is distinct and unique enough to merit its own classification as a subgenre within found poetry, to wit, exhumed poetry. The exhumed poem, an original label I propose for this particular subgenre, is notable for its genesis in historical texts written by people who are now deceased, as well as for its emphasis on the acknowledgement of sources. In this investigation, the term, exhumed poem, differentiates the very specific type of found poetry at the heart of *Widow Lincoln* from the wide-ranging variety of found poetry in general.

As defined above, exhumed poetry aims for the same implicit goal that critic and essayist Megan O'Grady attaches to biofiction, a desire "to see the human project in a continuum," one "forged at the place at which the archives end and the author's imagination begins" (2019). [5] As English professor, novelist, and non-fiction author Madison Smartt Bell notes "in the act of writing you have to convince yourself, at least, that your tale has reasonable verisimilitude, if it can't have real veracity. And you want to convince your audience of that too" (2014, p. 113). Because it leans so heavily into the historical record, exhumed poetry, like biofiction, may be seen to blur the lines between what is real and what is imagined, and this is where the poetic framework may

[4] For more on found poetry, I recommend starting with Marjorie Perloff's *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* which explores the creation of new work from existing text particularly in light of the digital age (2010). For an example of a classic found poem see Howard Nemerov's "Found Poem" (1987). You can listen to Burroughs talk about cut-up poetry on YouTube (Quedear, 2011). Examples of Howe's collage poetry can be found in *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives* (2014). Goldsmith's poem "The Body of Michael Brown" created from a coroner's autopsy report is discussed in more detail in Chapter Two (Flood, 2015).

[5] Writers interested in scholarly discussions of biographical fiction might begin with two books, *The Historical Novel* and *Writing Historical Fiction: A Writers' & Artists' Companion* (de Groot, 2010; Brayfield & Sprott, 2014). Additionally, the study "Is Biography Fiction?" offers an excellent discussion on "fact" vs. "fiction" (Heilbrun & Weimer, 1993).

intervene. Researcher Glenn Allen Phillips calls this "poetry as truth serum." In his work "Speaking Barbara," Phillips explores poetry as a method for reclaiming forgotten histories, asserting that the "vehicle of poetry naturally delineates from detached reporting and cues the reader to the subjective and improvised nature of the text" (2013, p.458). The use of exhumed poetry in the creative component of this study takes that one step further. Not only is the poetic form a reminder that the historical record has been manipulated but, in the case of a poem left *in situ,* the reader can see exactly how it was done. In this way, exhumed poetry makes the same implicit promises to the reader that historical fiction and biofiction make more broadly: something here is true.

And something here is not. In biofiction, the writer uses creative license to fill in historical gaps with speculative suggestions, while in exhumed poetry the writer basically usurps the words of the original author, with or without regard to original intent, to do the same. Both biofiction and exhumed poetry offer alternative perspectives and in doing so both consider the fallible nature of the historical record. This dichotomy is a good thing, suggests American author and feminist Carolyn Heilbrun. "If we do not insist on the quality of fiction as inherent in biography," she writes, "we are inclined to accept some biographies as 'authentic,' or final, or providing the only possible interpretation of the life in question" (1993, p. 298).

With found poetry, there are myriad interpretations. Poet Annie Dillard describes the form as digging deep "with a shallow tool," an ambitious task that finds poets mining existing texts for words, phrases, and even individual letters of the alphabet which when cobbled together might create poems unique unto themselves (1995, p. x). In found poetry, the poet *works* to *rework* text. Various methods include, but are not limited to erasure, cut-up, and collage, all of which give the poet the

freedom to enhance, embellish, and/or subvert the intent of the original source. Whatever the method, found poetry is an ongoing discussion, "a conversation," writes poet and academic Harriet Tarlo, "between at least three persons, namely, the writer, the composer of the found text, and the reader" (2009, p. 119). The found poem strives to reveal something new, to borrow in order to create, to begin a conversation in which the historical figure is metaphorically resurrected, and the reader is invited to engage.

Employing found poetry, the unique approach to biofiction explored in this study takes its inspiration from the general landscape of the prosimetrical novel. Examples include 10th century Japanese *uta monogatari*, or "poem tales," such as *The Tales of Ise*, William Carlos Williams' *Spring and All,* and more recently Max Porter's *Grief Is the Thing with Feathers* (2016/ca. 980; 1923/2011; 2015). However, while these novels contain both poetry and prose, they do not sit on the shelf with biofiction nor is the poetry contained therein considered found.

Another work, Honorée Fanonne Jeffers' *The Age of Phillis,* takes a biographical and poetic approach to the life and times of poet Phillis Wheatley, but its scope is too limited for this investigation. For instance, though Jeffers employs found elements nominally in her collection of poetry, she does not include prose (2020, pp. 195–203). Meantime, in "Speaking Barbara: Poetry and Historical Ethnographic Fiction," Glen Allen Phillips employs both poetry and prose to tell the story of a civil rights activist, though he does not identify any of his poetry as found. By this I mean that there are no signposts or devices, such as italics or quotation marks, to indicate found elements in Phillips' work. So, while Phillips indicates in his analysis that his poems are rooted in historical documents, he is also clear that the historical record has been "fleshed out" with his "own interpretation of history" including "assumed character interactions, intentions, and reactions" (2013, p. 457). Thus, while the Jeffers

and Phillips examples are both biographical and fictional in nature, neither meets the remit of this investigation for a prosimetrical biofiction.

Two other literary examples, however, one a novel and the other a collection of poetry, come much closer: Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and Ruth Padel's *Darwin: A Life in Poems* (hereafter referred to as *Billy the Kid* and *Darwin*). In *Billy the Kid,* Ondaatje combines prose with original and found poetry to create a historically based fictional sketch of a legendary figure from America's Wild West (2008). Meantime, though she does not include prose outside of very short expository notes, Padel makes extensive use of found elements in her collection which walks the reader through the life of Charles Darwin (2009). Each of these examples, similar but fundamentally different from the inquiry at the core of this examination, provided valuable insights into form, structure and layout and each will be examined in more detail.

This is not to suggest that examples of biofiction which employ found poetry to a significant degree do not exist, only that this study struggled to identify them. Nor does this approach suggest that biofiction containing found poetry must achieve certain benchmarks, for example, a 50/50 split between the found poetry and prose. Rather, the aim of this research is the integration of found poetry into a work of biofiction to the extent that the poems may be said to feature significantly and be considered by the casual reader to be elemental to the narrative. Based on what can fairly be said to be a dearth of examples of this approach, this study proposes two new contributions to knowledge in the field of creative writing: the identification of the exhumed poem as a new subgenre within found poetry, and a second contribution to knowledge suggested by the unique approach to biofiction as evidenced in the companion novel, *Widow Lincoln.*

Given the experimental nature of this investigation, Chapter Two offers working definitions for relevant terms along with brief discussions of found poetry and biofiction in general, including objections to each. In Chapter Three, Ondaatje's *Billy the Kid* and Padel's *Darwin* are explored in more detail and their impact on the creative component of the study explained. Chapter Four includes a more detailed examination of the methodologies involved in this practice, addresses questions related to the structure of the creative component and sets out examples of found poems from the novel *Widow Lincoln* alongside brief discussions as to their genesis and relationship to the narrative. Finally, in the conclusion, I look to failures and successes encountered during this investigation in the hope that the insights gained here will assist other writers looking to employ found and/or exhumed poetry in works of narrative fiction, biographical or otherwise.

And that brings us back to the beginning. I remember so clearly the moment when the idea of combining found poetry with prose struck me with such surety that I imagined a novel about the widow, Mary Lincoln, would write itself. But serendipity, chancing upon the right tool at the right time, does not necessarily promise ease nor assure success. What that introduction to found poetry *did* do was to unlock a door and set me off on a journey of discovery about so much more than creative writing. In an experiment like this one, the facts about a historical character step into the ring with what is surmised. In the case of Mary Lincoln, this stand-off prompted all sorts of conversations about politics, feminism, mental health, familial relationships, fundamental aloneness, resilience, and the nature of history itself. I have been studying Mary Lincoln for nearly fifty years. After reading through her letters, I desired only that she and I might work together, write some poetry in each other's company, that we might conjure scenes from her daily life, and that this collaboration might challenge

some of history's long-held impressions of her. In the wake of this practice, I look forward to more discussions around the role of found poetry in biofiction and its potential to contribute to a wider conversation about the characterization of historical figures, the role of the historical record, and how we as creative writers choose to navigate the two.

## Chapter Two—Definitions and Objections

### *Definitions*

The following are working definitions for key terms referenced throughout this investigation. Unless otherwise noted, the definitions are my own and intended to encompass the subjects broadly.

**Hybrid novel.** A novel composed of two or more genres.

**Prosimetrical novel.** A novel composed of both prose and poetry (a hybrid novel).

**Metatextual and Intertextual.** These terms concern the relationship of one text with another and are used here within the confines of a narrow focus. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), metatext is "a text lying outside another text, esp. one describing or elucidating another" (OED, n.d.). For the purposes of this study, I use metatextual to denote the influence of historical texts on the found poems in *Widow Lincoln* as well as the influence of the found poems on corresponding prose. Intertextuality is defined as "the need for one text to be read in the light of its allusions to and differences from the content or structure of other texts" (OED, n.d.). Intertextuality is used here to describe the physical presence of the historical texts in the pages of the novel, and the physical iteration of the found poems explicit in the historical texts, for example, when a poem is presented *in situ.*

**Biofiction.** For the purposes of this study, this term covers writing which may otherwise be known as biographical fiction, fictional biography, and the biographical novel. Biofiction is a subgenre of historical fiction in which the historical record mingles with subjectively imagined scenes and dialogue.

**Poetic form.** This term refers to both the internal structure and the visual presentation of a poem on the page, the way in which the poet chooses to craft and display a poem. In *Widow Lincoln,* for example, several exhumed poems are

presented *in situ,* remaining within their original context, while other poems make use of line breaks, stanzas, or the prose poem format.

**Found poetry.** A subgenre of poetry, a found poem is any poem that borrows from and/or reworks existing text. Found poetry is an experimental genre by nature, and its practitioners are free to invent and set their own parameters.

**Exhumed poetry.** As defined in the introduction to this study, exhumed poems have their genesis in texts considered historical. That is, the source texts are written by people who are now deceased. Examples include, but are not limited to, official documents, contemporary newspaper reports, diary entries, personal letters, and other correspondence. Exhumed poems meet two additional criteria: 1. the resulting poems are clearly linked to the original texts, and 2. sources are acknowledged. These criteria may be evidenced in various ways including the use of italics, footnotes, in text citations, marginalia, a bibliography, or a notes section. In any case, the reader should be able to reasonably access the source text in order to consider both the poem and the source together. Additionally, it is noted that exhumed poetry in biofiction is reliant on context in its role as part of a larger historical narrative.

Though there are no hard and fast rules, there are basic methods used to write found poetry and their definitions may be said to be somewhat formalized and common among practitioners. These include erasure, cut–up (where the poet literally cuts words and phrases from existing text in order to arrange or rearrange them), and collage (which may include other media). For purposes of my investigation, I chose to work primarily with the erasure and collage–based methods. For clarity and consistency, I offer the following definitions:

> ***Erasure.*** This method describes what many think of as the classic found poem. Erasure deconstructs a source text and employs various exercises to do so. For instance, the poet may present a piece of text where only specific words and/or phrases are highlighted. This can be accomplished by erasing other words, fading them to gray, or redacting them (marking them out or obscuring them with a black pen or painting over them using white correction fluid). Often, an erasure poem remains *in situ*, meaning it is presented within the context of its original source.[6] Alternatively, pieces of text may be excised and used to craft a freestanding poem which, though taken out of its original context, maintains its chosen words in the order in which they were originally found. In erasure poetry, the poet does not contribute new or original material.[7]
>
> ***Collage.*** An amalgamation of words and/or phrases from one or more existing texts. The poem may include, but does not require, original material generated by the poet and may also contain other media such as images or photographs. A collage poem drawn from epistolary sources, for example, may combine words and/or phrases from one or more pieces of correspondence.[8]

As with much of art in general, the inspiration for found poems lies in existing material, in this case, text. Experimentation is encouraged. The poet is free to set his or her own parameters as to the number of successive words that can be selected, whether to keep or change original spelling and punctuation, the imposition of spacing, lines, stanzas, and emphasis. These are merely examples; each poet is responsible for his or her rules.

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[6] The website Poets.org calls this the "pure found poem" (2004).
[7] An example of erasure *in situ*, beginning *Senator Sumner*, can be found on p. 14 of *Widow Lincoln*. An example of erasure in a more traditional poetic form may be found on p. 50 beginning *Never, in my life...*
[8] An example of collage, beginning *Believe me in the deepest sorrow…* may be found on p. 37.

### *Objections—Please Burn the Letters*

Because both biofiction and exhumed poetry deal with real people, some foundational concerns must be addressed including issues of libel, plagiarism, attribution, and appropriation. While libel and plagiarism are touched on briefly, this investigation found that issues of appropriation, attribution, and questions of originality play a larger role in the wider conversation around found poetry, so these will be explored in greater detail.[9] First, libel is defined here as the use of false, malicious, or defamatory statements and it is a fundamental consideration when writing about a living person. As evidenced in the recent defamation case brought by actor Johnny Depp against his former wife, Amber Heard, allegations of libel can have serious legal and financial implications (Associated Press, 2022). Writing about a person who has passed away is not necessarily safer or less problematic. In America, family members and/or descendants of a deceased person can claim libel; however, they may do so only in a case where reputations have the potential to be affected, especially in a negative light (Hiestand, 2019). In terms of this study and its companion novel, the issue of libel is straight forward. Mary Lincoln was a public figure who has been dead for more than 140 years but more to the point, neither Mary, her husband, nor any of their children have living descendants; therefore, the question of libel, in this instance, is not a legal

[9] For consistency, this study refers to the following definitions taken from the online edition of the OED: (a) "Libel: 2. To defame or discredit by the circulation of libellous statements; to accuse falsely and maliciously; *spec.* in *Law*, to publish a libel against." (b) "Plagiarism: 1. The action or practice of taking someone else's work, idea, etc., and passing it off as one's own; literary theft." (c) "Appropriation: 1. The making of a thing private property, whether another's or (as now commonly) one's own; taking as one's own or to one's own use; *concrete* the thing so appropriated or taken possession of." (d) "Cultural Appropriation: The unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of the practices, customs, or aesthetics of one social or ethnic group by members of another (typically dominant) community or society." (e) "Citation: 2.a. The action or an act of quoting or referring to a passage, text, author, legal precedent, etc., esp. as an authority or in support of an argument; quotation" (OED, n.d.). Attribution and acknowledgement are used in this study to mean the formal recognition of the original authors of source texts which may be accomplished in several ways including in the text; in footnotes or endnotes; in the margins; or in a notes section at the back of a book.

consideration. That does not mean it is not a moral one. Ultimately, that is a question individual writers must answer for themselves.

As with libel, an act of plagiarism, or taking the work of another and representing it as your own, is one that can lead to legal challenges. Avoiding it is a basic tenet of good writing, and in my experience, it is not uncommon for high school English classes and popular style guides to introduce the topic and offer basic instruction as to how to avoid it (American Psychological Association, 2020, p. 21). Though it isn't always the case, found poetry generally acknowledges its sources and I argue that citation in some form is inherently called for by the very nature of the genre. What is the point in a poem being "found" if the reader never imagined that the poem was hidden in the first place? If metatextuality is a hallmark of found, and in this case, exhumed poetry, why would the poet choose to ignore it? A found poem without attribution is left to hang from only one hook when it could be, and I argue should be, swinging "between two poles" as Annie Dillard puts it (1995, p. ix). Without attribution, in fact, the writer is not so much mining an existing text as simply pilfering from it, which brings us back to plagiarism.

In his essay "Contemporary and Found," Professor Stephen Matterson offers the example of a writer pushing back against a charge of plagiarism. In 1965, Matterson writes, the Scottish poet Christopher Murray Grieve, writing under the pseudonym Hugh MacDiarmid, published the poem "Perfect," but did not mention that it may have originally appeared in a short story by Glynn Jones. Grieve came under fire for plagiarism (Matterson, 1990, p. 192).[10] In a private letter, Grieve called the oversight "unfortunate" and explained: "We don't invent the information—we get it

[10] Matterson notes that the issue became even more complicated when a writer for the *Times Literary Supplement* pointed out that the words used in the poem were more accurately traced to a writer named Kiedrych Rhys, a revelation that Rhys, according to Matterson's research, confirmed (Matterson, 1990).

somewhere—and retail it without acknowledging sources. It's the use we put things to that counts. If part of a loaf is torn out, beaten up into dough, and baked again as a biscuit, that is not any plagiarism of the loaf" (Bold, 1984, pp. 662-663). Or is it? If the biscuit could only be created from the unique ingredients that made up the original loaf, if in fact the loaf was the sole or primary inspiration for the biscuit, isn't the maker of that loaf still relevant, and shouldn't he or she be recognized as such?

Perhaps, Matterson writes, the question is one of ownership. "To whom," he asks, "do the [reworked or found] poems belong?" To the writer as "mediator" of the source? To the author of the original text? The original authors, it can reasonably be assumed, did not rework their own text in an effort to write poetry, so any idea that the original authors would embrace newly crafted found poems fashioned from their original work is unlikely. Instead, Matterson suggests, the original authors "would probably be appalled at the interpretations the reader is willing to place on them." Perhaps, posits Matterson, what is found belongs to the reader. Just as "each reader is free" to interpret found poetry, "so each reader becomes the owner of the poem thereby made" (1990, pp. 192-193). This attempt to assign ownership doesn't solve MacDiarmid's plagiarism issue, nor does it justify his theory about loaves of bread, but it does provide food for thought when considering attribution in found poetry. In this investigation, poems that fall under the definition of exhumed poetry as expressed in this work have a unique and intimate relationship with their source and, in keeping with the definition of the genre, are required to acknowledge the texts from which they originate.

If we agree that attribution in found poetry is essential, and I argue that it is, then the acknowledgement of an original author's work is fundamental to the allure of found poetry to begin with. Making the reader aware of a poem's source is a task which

can be accomplished with the most basic signposting. Dillard's collection, *Mornings Like This,* is subtitled "Found Poems" while the title of each individual poem in the collection references its source, including the date of publication (1995). However, while readers have access to the titles of the source texts, they are not given the specific pages or chapters which inspired and informed the poems. I admit I found myself somewhat disappointed. While I can appreciate the found poems as they are presented, I wonder what additional information might be considered if I were also privy to the specific sections of text from which the poems were generated.

Poet Tracy K. Smith approaches the issue of acknowledgement from another perspective. In her collection *Wade in the Water,* which includes found poems, Smith lists her sources at the back of the book. Drawing on letters written by slaves, former slaves, and their families during and after America's Civil War, Smith does not provide the complete contents of the original letters, but she points the reader to her resources (2018). Many readers will know enough about the history to understand the context or, even better, perhaps Smith's collection and her nod to its source materials will encourage them to learn more. Alternatively, in *Darwin*, Padel uses expository notes in the margins to reference her sources. This device provides easy access to references while at the same time creatively calling to mind Darwin's annotated journals (2009). In this investigation's creative component, *Widow Lincoln,* sources are acknowledged page by page in the notes section at the end of the novel.

While this study makes a case for exhumed poetry with clear and accessible attribution, up for debate is the amount of information the writer or reader may consider necessary and/or adequate. Opinions vary and are predicated on an agreement as to what constitutes a found poem. As with Grieve, American poet and critic Mary Ruefle has her own unique bias. Ruefle is, among other things, an erasurist, a writer who

redacts text as a method of creation. As of October 2019, Ruefle, by her own count, had created over one hundred literary erasures by reworking bygone or little-known books. One of those erasure books, *A Little White Shadow*, provides an interesting example for discussion (Ruefle, 2006). Essentially, Ruefle took a "forgotten nineteenth-century book" by the same title and proceeded to rework it, painting out words and sentences on each of its 42 pages with white corrective fluid so that each leaf of the spare Victorian novel now appears awash in white with only choice words and phrases available to the reader (Niespodziany, 2019). In every way the individual pages, and indeed the book as a whole, are examples of erasure-based poems as defined in this study. However, and here is the twist, Ruefle does not consider the poems to be found, as she explains:

> A found poem is a text found in the world, taken out of its worldly context, and labeled a poem. I certainly didn't "find" any of these pages, I made them in my head, just as I do my other work. In the erasures I can only choose words out of all the words on a given page, while writing regularly I can choose from all the words in existence. In that sense, the erasures are like a "form"—I am restricted by certain rules. I have resisted formal poetry my whole life, but at last found a form I can't resist. It is like writing [with] my eyes instead of my hands (Ruefle, 2010).

Ruefle's work in *A Little White* Shadow is not found, she insists, and the individual pieces she created from the text are not necessarily, she adds, poems. "I don't consider the pages to be poems," she explains, "but I do think of them as poetry, especially in sequence and taken as a whole" (2010). I find Ruefle's distinction problematic. Ruefle's version is visually and physically anchored in the pages of a novel originally written by Emily Malbone Morgan and published in 1889 (Brown, E. S., 1944).

Morgan's novel was then appropriated by Ruefle, and as the poet herself avers, taken out of its worldly context. Certainly, the original novel has become, via Ruefle, something else. Every page is now a showcase for her irresistible form (Ruefle, 2006). Yet, how can new text created from existing text be anything other than found?

Ruefle's rendition of *A Little White Shadow* also raises questions around the acknowledgment of sources. While the original title is left intact and the new version is published in the same physical format as its source, Ruefle has redacted/obscured the name of the original author and has replaced it with her own (2006). So, while the retention of the title and the formatting are obvious nods to the original Malbone book, are they enough? Perhaps it is a question of purpose. Ruefle, by her own admission, is not necessarily creating for a wider audience of readers, nor does she appear to be overly concerned with whether the poems themselves invite broader engagement. For Ruefle, erasure is a highly personal exercise. "To me," she writes, it is "exactly like art—it is a private journey." In fact, Ruefle admits that she takes little interest in the content of her source texts:

> You see, I don't actually read the books. I don't read the text…. The only way I can describe it is like this: the words rise above the page, by say an eighth of an inch, and hover there in space, singly and unconnected, and they form a kind of field, and from this field I pick my words as if they were flowers (2010).

I find the treated version of *A Little White Shadow* to be lovely, lyrical, and evocative. And I agree in spirit with Ruefle's publisher who described the work as "delicate poetry, artfully rendered, haunted by its former self, yet completely new" (Wave Books, n.d.). It is the "completely new" part that bothers me and this, I suppose, is at the crux of my issue with Ruefle's erasure. Did not the original author, Morgan, set the stage for Ruefle by her initial word choices and syntax? If so, then in obscuring

Morgan's name and replacing it with her own, Ruefle, to my way of thinking, went too far.

Ruefle has created a new book using an old book as a canvas. Is utilizing the title of the original work acknowledgement enough? Does *ars poetica* negate attribution so that an original author's name can be literally erased? Are authors and their works eventually and reasonably relegated to the "forgotten" stack where they may be used as needed, without acknowledgement, to underpin the work of others? These are questions individual writers must answer for themselves, but I can't help wondering what Morgan, were she alive, might say on seeing her name painted out on the title page of *A Little White Shadow* and replaced with that of another writer (Ruefle, 2006). I agree that Ruefle's erasure work is completely her own, but I question the likelihood that left to her own devices Ruefle could have/would have produced exactly the same passages found in her rendition of *A Little White Shadow* if she had been harvesting her art from another text. She could certainly have produced something, but it would not be this. I submit that a page full of words is not just a smaller cut from the bolt of cloth that makes up all existing words, as Ruefle suggests. The syntax, word order, and word choice were intentionally chosen by an original author.

American author Jeannie Vanasco defends a literary erasurist's agency over existing text. Ultimately, she writes, be it "canonical, obscure, wonderful, terrible," what becomes of the old text is "the erasurist's choice." Whether heavily influenced by the style of other writers, or "by resisting them," Vanasco continues, "a writer develops his or her own style. Erasure is simply an exaggerated form of writing…but instead of concealing or denying their influences, erasurists acknowledge that they have come from somewhere, not nowhere, and make clear the chaotic process of creating art" (2012).

What harm, then, in leaving the original author's name in place? Why not clearly acknowledge the original weaver? This larger question around reasonable attribution is beyond the remit of this study yet given a choice between found poetry that clearly acknowledges its sources (such as that contained in Padel's *Darwin* or Smith's *Wade in the Water*) and found poetry which blurs the connection to one degree or another, as in the case of *A Little White Shadow*, I am firmly in the camp of obvious attribution. When it comes to found poetry, more information can only enhance the reader experience. Ironically, Ruefle alludes to as much when she writes about the erasure stylings of Tom Phillips. Phillips' work in A *Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* is the culmination of more than 50 years of artistic endeavor, a monumental literary erasure created from one source, the Victorian novel *A Human Document* by William Hurrell Mallock (Phillips, T., 2016).[11] In *A Humument*, Phillips erases, redacts and obscures to create individual pieces of art and poetry which while disparate and unique to each page nonetheless ring out collectively in Phillips' voice. "And so began the collaboration," Ruefle writes, "of Mr. Phillips and Mr. Mallock, the original author" (2010). This acknowledgment of *A Humument* as a "collaboration" appears at cross purposes with Ruefle's earlier characterizations about the nature of her own process and begs the question: if this work of erasure is a collaboration, why erase Morgan's name completely from the reworked version of *A Little White Shadow*? This is Ruefle's conundrum: a writer who actively embraces methods of mining existing text, such as

[11] The intriguing story of Tom Phillips and his decades of labor on *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* can be found on Phillips' website at https://www.tomphillips.co.uk/humument. In the afterword of Phillips' final iteration of *A Humument* released in 2016, Phillips also uses the word "exhumed" as one way to describe "a sense of something hewn" from existing text. While this was not the inspiration for the term "exhumed poetry" as it is referred to in this thesis, it is interesting to note the common experience between Phillips' literary erasure and the creation of the found "exhumed" poems as proposed in this investigation (Phillips, T., 2016, p. 373).

erasure, while at the same time distancing herself from the idea that she is producing something *found*. How can the former be anything other than the latter?

Attribution, however, may not be the most controversial issue around found poetry. Even with a clear acknowledgement of sources and/or authors, found poetry, like biofiction, may be said to be inherently appropriative. In today's digital age as the number of both public and private documents grows exponentially on a daily basis and when access to these stores of information is difficult to curtail, it is hardly surprising that the term appropriation raises eyebrows or that objections to it are the subject of many a social media thread. Is it reasonable for any document that finds its way into the public realm to become little more than raw material for writers and poets and artists?

When Kenneth Goldsmith, a middle-aged white man, reworked the autopsy report of a young black man killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, and presented it as a found poem in 2015, he was roundly criticized (Guriel, 2015). In "The Body of Michael Brown," Goldsmith transcribed a coroner's detailed notes nearly word for word, transcription being Goldsmith's particular *oeuvre*. Effecting only minor adjustments (simplifying some of the medical jargon and moving a particularly sensitive notation about Brown's body to the end of the work), Goldsmith claimed the poem was no different from the other conceptual poems he had been transcribing from existing documents for years.[12] However, in Goldsmith's hands, a typically dry medical report concerning the death of an 18-year-old-man became a divisive political performance and Goldsmith found himself in the middle of a debate about cultural appropriation (Flood, 2015). "Is it unethical or exploitative," asks Professor Andrew

[12] Goldsmith's *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, for example, is filled with transcriptions of the real-time radio and television reports broadcast during several national tragedies including the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger*, and the death of Michael Jackson. Goldsmith's aims, he writes, are to "create a work of literature using the most minimal amount of intervention possible" (Goldsmith, 2011, p. 118).

Epstein "to borrow and adapt the voices and words of others, particularly the words of those who are marginalized in our society?" (2012, p. 320). In addition to appropriating the details of the autopsy performed on Brown, Goldsmith's performance of the poem included the projection of Brown's photograph in the background, effectively putting the image of Brown center stage. The performance was severely criticized by many and in the subsequent backlash Goldsmith asked the university to keep the recording of the event private (Flood, 2015). "The practice of appropriation," writes Epstein, "raises a whole battery of thorny aesthetic, ethical, and political questions" (2012, p. 320). While appropriation is not the focus of this study, it is important to acknowledge that the creation of found poetry is an essentially appropriative practice, be it cultural or literary. The way in which a poet decides to approach an existing text, whether to enhance, embellish, or subvert it, and whether or not the issue of appropriation is addressed may ultimately speak to the credibility of the output, which only matters, perhaps, if credibility is what the poet is going for.

I confess I began with a casual attitude toward appropriation when I decided to investigate Mary Lincoln's letters through the lens of found poetry. After all, many of the letters, though personal in nature, are available to the public. Further, there does seem to be a general assumption when it comes to historical figures that what remains of them, their personal papers, their images and representations, for example, belongs to everyone just as if the people themselves were every day ordinary items.[13] And it is noteworthy that the appropriation of everyday items, including existing text, is common and has a long history.

As far back as the third and fourth centuries, poets were borrowing from

[13] There are many examples, some more extreme than others. The 2012 movie *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* comes to mind (Bekmambetov, 2012). There are also greeting cards which feature historical figures with messages meant for nearly every occasion (Historical Figures Greeting Cards, 2022).

the work of others. The cento is perhaps the first and oldest surviving example of the practice. These typically long-form poems were assembled using one or multiple sources to produce new work which recollected often well-known existing texts. While the ancient Greek poets often borrowed from Homer, the Romans frequently reworked Vergil. According to Professor Scott McGill, an expert in modern and classical literature, some sixteen centos are known to have survived from antiquity, the oldest being the *Medea* of Hosidius Geta dated to 200 CE, and the most renowned, in McGill's estimation, is a cento written by a woman in the fourth century, the *Cento Probae* of Faltonia Betitia Proba (McGill, 2002, p. 143).[14] This famous cento consists of nearly seven hundred lines and is based, according to historian Hagith Sivan, primarily "on the books of Genesis and Mathew," written with the "intention to sing the praises of Christ in Virgilian [sic] verses" (Sivan, 1993, pp. 140–141).

Though not a cento in common form, over the course of two years, in 1819 and 1820, the former United States President and primary author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, set about creating his own work of found verse or more accurately, literary cut up. At the age of 77, Jefferson decided to right the Bible by rewriting the New Testament. With a sharpened razor, Jefferson cut to pieces six different volumes of the New Testament: one each in Greek and Latin, two in French, and two in English. Arranging and pasting his carefully selected verses, "shorn of any sign of the miraculous or supernatural in order to leave just the life and teachings of Jesus behind," Jefferson created an 86-page book which he bound in red leather and titled *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth: Extracted textually from the Gospels in Greek, Latin, French & English* (Manseau, 2020). The so-called Jefferson Bible is

[14] McGill notes that the word "cento" originates from the Greek word for "a humble cloak placed on the back of a donkey and made out of fragments of cloth" (McGill, 2002, p. 143-144).

further evidence that the appropriation of the work of others is not a new phenomenon, but rather a practice which has long had great appeal.

By the early 20th century, using collage, assemblage, and expanding on the idea of the cento, writers and artists were amplifying the found and the borrowed. Just as Marcel Duchamp's ready-made *Bicycle Wheel* (1951) and repurposed urinal, *Fountain* (1917), made waves, Pablo Picasso was incorporating found items into his iconic collages and sculptures, a process of assemblage that produced such works as *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912) and *Still Life 1914*. In 1920, the poet and performance artist Tristan Tzara, a leader of the Dada movement, wrote "How to Make a Dadaist Poem" outlining his method for cut-up poetry which included the dissection of an article from a newspaper, slicing out each individual word, tumbling them together in a bag, and then copying "conscientiously" each word as it was pulled out from the middle of the jumble. This, Tzara maintained, produced a poem that mirrored the writer, a poem "infinitely original and endowed with a sensibility that is charming though beyond the understanding of the vulgar" (Weidner, 2022).

Salvador Dali had his *Lobster Telephone,* Ezra Pound borrowed lines for *The Cantos*, T.S. Eliot did the same for *The Waste Land,* Marianne Moore used found text in her *Observations*, and Andy Warhol famously appropriated images from popular culture. These artists and writers were drawn to common and uncommon *objet trouvé*, whether in the form of images, objects, or words, and in their creative responses sparked conversations and often debates along the way (Wallace, 2014).[15] Art does

[15] Images for the artwork referenced above can be found at: *Bicycle Wheel* https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81631; *Fountain* https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-fountain-t07573; Pablo Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning* https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/755493; *Still Life 1914* https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/picasso-still-life-t01136; Salvador Dali's *Lobster Telephone* https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/dali-lobster-telephone-t03257. There is some debate around the origin of *Fountain*. See the article in the magazine *Artspace* (Abrams, 2019). There is also an interesting discussion of the use of found elements by Pound, Eliot, and Moore elucidated by Moore's biographer Linda Leavell in the 2016 edition of *Observations* (Moore, 1924/2016, pp. x-xi).

that. Art should. I would not have Goldsmith change his poem or his performance. Art asks questions. Goldsmith was asking his. Would his critics have accepted the poem and the performance differently if Goldsmith were a black man? Or would the debate have simply shifted from cultural appropriation to an appropriation of the dead?

Found poetry takes many forms and often incorporates the element of chance, as with Tzara's newspaper clippings, but the exhumed poem, as discussed in this study, is no *hasard objectif*. Exhumed poems are not the result of objective chance or unpredictability as promoted by surrealist André Breton who admired *hasard objectif* for its intentional disruption of "the harmonious patterns of reason" and its ability to deliver "the mind expanding stimulus of disorder" (Warner, 2008). No, this is not the case for exhumed poetry. Exhumed poems are far from objective. In fact, the exhumed poem requires the writer to engage with historical texts on both an emotional and an intuitive level in order to extract a personal voice, whether enhancing that of the original author or interjecting the tone of the new interloper. This was my experience when writing *Widow Lincoln.* Subjectivity was more or less a requirement in the exhumed poems evidenced here; there was very little of the objective or unpredictable at play. And because of this, because found poetry may be described as intensely personal, it is fair to question whether it crosses a line.

Consider Mary Lincoln in 1871 on a hot and sticky summer's day in Chicago, Illinois. Mary's eighteen-year-old son Tad is dangerously ill, and she is regretting having written a handful of letters to her good friend, Rhoda White. As her son attempts to sleep in the next room between bouts of coughing and struggling to breathe, Mary writes, "Please burn the letters, I have RECENTLY written you. In this *hard*, matter of fact world, such vain delusions must not be cherished" (Turner & Turner,

1972, p. 590).[16] As noted in the introduction to this study, asking that her private correspondence be destroyed by her recipients was not an unusual request from Mary. However, a number of her friends clearly dismissed her so that today we have access to hundreds of her letters. Access, but not permission. Mary's letters were not intended for public consumption and that is an aspect of this practice with which I wrestle. I have appropriated her private thoughts, scoured examples of her handwriting, and picked apart her syntax and punctuation, all in an attempt to read between the lines and find a Mary of my own making. Mary's letters are a fertile field and harvesting exhumed poems from this ground is intrusive work; there is no point in pretending otherwise. Further, I believe there is every chance that the Mary I have come to know through her letters, would not approve.

If appropriation is a given in found, and by association exhumed, poetry as this study suggests, then it is not surprising to find critics broaching the subject of originality as well. "Is the writer who re-uses the words of others simply lazy, unimaginative, or unethical," Epstein asks, "or can re-framing existing language be a deeply creative act?" (2012, p. 320). When Padel interrogated the letters and journals of Charles Darwin, the critic Richard Holmes generously praised the collection calling it a "remarkable tribute" and "a new species of biography by poetic selection."[17] Still, Holmes wrestled with "the fashionable found poem" seeming to grapple with whether or not to embrace it. "Perhaps," Holmes wrote, "we should not mind that on occasion Sappho nods, leaving us with skilful collages and paste-ups rather than true poems" (2009). Here, Holmes seems reductive in his assessment of found poetry, and he is not

[16] Italics and capitalization are taken directly from the Turners' transcription, the emphasis, according to the authors, is Mary's (Turner & Turner, 1972, p. xxiii).

[17] Ruth Padel is Charles Darwin's great-great-grand daughter and as such I am not suggesting the word "appropriation" be applied to Padel's collection of found poetry as I might do with a found poem written using the correspondence of someone unrelated to the author as with my own *Widow Lincoln*. Padel's work is noted here for Holmes questioning of found poetry as a credible form.

alone. Writing for the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1923, critic Edgell Rickword took umbrage with Eliot's practice of borrowing from the works of others for *The Waste Land* (Eliot, 1949). "Here is a poet," Rickword opined, "capable of a style more refined than that of any of his generation parodying without taste or skill … Here is a writer to whom originality is almost an inspiration borrowing the greater number of his best lines, creating hardly any himself." *The Waste Land*, Rickword wrote, had "sent Mr. Eliot's gift awry. When he [Eliot] recovers control," Rickword declared, "we shall expect his poetry to have gained in variety and strength from this ambitious experiment" (1923). Perhaps Rickword, writing in the early twentieth century, may be excused for his traditional expectations of Eliot, and of poetry. Yet by the time Holmes was reviewing Darwin in 2009, found poetry included among its practitioners not only Eliot but other modernists such as William Butler Yeats, Pound, and Moore.[18] In this century, we have Goldsmith who extols the virtues of "uncreative writing" and critic Marjorie Perloff who champions "unoriginal genius," and is particularly supportive of poetry created in the modern digital space (2011; 2012).[19]

The terms "uncreative" and "unoriginal" suggest a playful and rebellious spirit behind found poetry. Dillard describes it as an "urban, youthful, ironic, cruising kind of poetry" where poets "go pawing through popular culture like sculptors on trash heaps"

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[18] In the poem "Mona Lisa" Yeats recontextualized Victorian critic Walter Pater's description of the seminal painting by putting Pater's prose into lines and placing the resulting found poem at the beginning of the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. "Only by printing it in *vers libre*," wrote Yeats, "can one show its revolutionary importance" (1936/1970, p. viii). Eliot and Pound famously employed found elements in *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos* respectively (1949; 1934/1991). Moore did the same in *Observations* published in 1924. But "unlike the quotations in the *Cantos* and *The Waste Land*, those in *Observations*," writes Moore biographer Leavell, "are not allusions to be recognized by the erudite." Moore, writes Leavell, was just as likely to borrow from "Tolstoy or Browning" as she was "to quote a fashion magazine, a newspaper advertisement, or 'a comment overheard at the circus.'" Questioned by an editor as to the source of her quoted material, Moore began to note her sources and "thereafter included citations in all her poetry books" (1924/2016, pp. x-xi).

[19] *Uncreative Writing* is the title of Goldsmith's treatise in which he defends transcription as "an appropriate response to a new condition in writing today: faced with an unprecedented amount of available text, the problem is not in needing to write more of it; instead, we must learn to negotiate the vast quantity that exists" (2011, p. 1).

(1995, p. ix). Originality, writes critic Robert Pierce, is inherent in the process. The "creative act is in locating the poetically interesting found text among all the words by which we are surrounded" (2003, p. 163). Indeed, found poetry spans an immense spectrum filled with examples made up of anything and everything that exists in written form which can be edited, rearranged, copied, cut–up, redacted, erased, torn, scanned, pasted, collaged, and/or cobbled together to create a poem.

In *Bastard Poems*, S.J. Fowler describes his work as "not quite collage, not quite found, not quite archival" and the poet often collaborates with his audience in an energetic, visual performance that culminates in the compilation of a found poem in real time. Fowler likes "to use up paper things that needed binning but must be saved, somehow" (2021). Like Fowler, Harriet Tarlo promotes the eco-conscious aesthetic inherent in found poetry where the poet is "a re-user, a recycler of words," contending that found poetry has a built-in philosophical and practical eco-ethos which foregoes "single perspectives in favour of multiple ones" and builds "on knowledge, rather than constantly relearning it" (2009, p. 121, 125). There is a higher aim here according to Fowler. "Poetry finally has a purpose," he writes, as "the saviour of scraps" (2021).

While Fowler is cutting, tearing, and pasting those scraps, one of the more controversial figures in found poetry is simply, or not so simply, transcribing. I have mentioned Goldsmith before, yet on this question of originality he surfaces again, notable for his practice of copying, verbatim or nearly so, extant texts. In *Uncreative Writing*, Goldsmith argues that the very "act of choosing and reframing" existing text serves to unleash an individual's true creativity (2011, p. 1, 9). Ultimately, regardless of the form it takes, the act of creating new work from existing text likely means that questions of originality will linger.

As evidenced, found poetry has its challengers and its critics, but to those, like Holmes, who question whether found poems are true poems, I offer a brief note on the role of the found poet as I see it. Especially in those cases where no new or original material is contributed to a found poem, it is easy perhaps to see the found poet as an editor or merely an intermediary. This negates the value that may come from unique perspectives, alternate interpretations, and the lived experience a found poet brings to his or her work. I submit that writing found poetry is not the same as editing. It is an individual poet standing between a vast catalogue of material and a blank page. As when an artist begins a fresh canvas, there are a plethora of possibilities. In the case of exhumed poetry specifically, this work is no mere mediation of text. Exhumed poetry, like biofiction, seeks to illuminate lives to which the historical record in general has arguably limited access. Both invite a collaboration with the historical figure in question. Though the pen is held by one, it is propelled by the other.

## Chapter Three—Found Poetry in Biofiction: *Darwin* and *Billy the Kid*

If historical fiction, and therefore biofiction, is "not 'history'" as author and professor Jerome de Groot suggests, but rather a way "of knowing the past," then found poetry may be an ideal companion (2016, p. 3). By integrating exhumed poems with biofiction, the creative writer has another tool which serves to augment a notion of historicity in a work of fiction where the aim is a sense of realism.

Not everyone subscribes to this concept, however. Some view fiction as an interloper in the more serious field of historical studies. Writing for the Encyclopedia Britannica, American academic and historian Paul Murray Kendall defined fictional biography as a genre that "often depends almost entirely upon secondary sources and cursory research," one in which "materials are freely invented, scenes and conversations are imagined." In fact, Kendall wrote, fictionalized biography appears in the encyclopedia under the heading of biographical literature "only by courtesy." Its authors, who he notes are "well represented on the paperback shelves, have created a hybrid form designed to mate the appeal of the novel with a vague claim to authenticity" (2019).[20] Are Kendall's references to "paperback shelves" and "a vague claim to authenticity" dismissive? Perhaps. However, according to de Groot, there is a contract between historical fiction and the reader which acknowledges a "fictive quality while, at some level, 'believing' in the realism and authenticity of the text" (2016, p. 13). Is that contract with the reader enough to satisfy critics? "This blur between fact and fiction is troubling," says Tudor historian John Guy. "When you are in a world of the novel, a world of theatre, you tell a lie to tell the truth…. Let us get this straight,"

[20] Kendall passed away in 1973. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica's website, the entry for "Biography" was last revised in 2019 and before that in 2007 by J.E. Luebering with no indication that Kendall's original statements regarding fictionalized biography had been updated (Luebering, 2007).

Guy insists, “the genius of [Hilary] Mantel is that she is aiming to summon up ghosts” (Guy as quoted in Brown, M., 2017).

And that is the point. Conjuring ghosts is at the very heart of biofiction. The same may be said for exhumed poetry. The first attempts to expand our perception of a historical figure using prose, while the other works to do the same by looking through a magnifying glass and applying poetic technique. What Kendall and Guy seem most concerned with is the potential to confuse the reader as to what is real and what is imagined. “To be fair,” author Hilary Mantel told an interviewer, “I think historians worry about the prospect of the public being misled,” when the novelist writing historical fiction “must know as much about them [the historical figures] as a biographer would” (Attar, 2017). Having said that, Mantel questioned the inclusion of bibliographies in works of historical fiction whose writers, she explained, do not need outside validation of their process or their research simply to appease. “You have the authority of the imagination,” Mantel is quoted as saying, “you have legitimacy. Take it. Do not spend your life in apologetic cringeing because you think you are some inferior form of historian” (Brown, M., 2017).

I agree with Mantel’s defense of historical fiction writers who choose not to cite their sources still, as a reader, I find myself more engaged with biofiction or a collection of historically based found poetry if the author has shared their source materials as is required of exhumed poems. Knowing something of the author’s research helps to make explicit what is fact and what is fiction, and in this way fulfills the contract described earlier by de Groot: that a writer is using fiction as a tool to try to ascertain the reality of a historical figure or event. As an example, in Kendall’s encyclopedia entry for biographical fiction he mentions two novels by Irving Stone: *Lust for Life* based on the life of Vincent van Gogh, and *The Agony and the Ecstasy*

based on the life of Michelangelo (Kendall, 2019). Stone is actually credited by his publisher with coining the term "biographical novel" in reference to the integration of biographical history with fiction (Penguin Random House, 2021). It was another Stone novel, *Love Is Eternal*, a fictionalized account of the relationship between Abraham and Mary Lincoln, that I remember reading as a teenager. In the Lincoln novel, Stone lists over two hundred sources, including many contemporary accounts (1954, pp. 465–468). So, not only did the author's imagined scenes and conversations keep me riveted as a girl, but reading *Love Is Eternal* was the start of a lifelong passion for research into the Lincoln family as well as the history of the United States Civil War.

"Historical discourse," writes American historian Hayden White, "wages everything on the true … fictional discourse is interested in the real" (2005, p. 147). Here, White seems to suggest that the element of fiction provides important perspectives essential to our understanding of history generally, which brings us back to de Groot's point that writers who utilize fiction in historically based novels are ultimately aiming for realism, attempting to reconstitute quotidian details that are often lacking in the historical record. Without fiction, writes Heilbrun, a biography presents as "the only possible interpretation of the life in question," shutting the door to other perspectives and "foreclosing the possibility of the subject's being seen in a remarkably different light by other eyes, another sex, a different generation, or a different culture." In essence, any notion of confining historical figures and events behind the gates of non-fiction restricts a more imaginative exploration into the historical record and limits opportunities to explore what Heilbrun calls "the subtext of a life" (1993, p. 300).

Exhumed poetry is all about the subtext, but it comes at the challenge from a different perspective. In writing exhumed poems, the poet may focus on the smallest of details, just one thought or emotion that distills the essence of the whole. Instead of

expanding on gaps in the historical record using prose, the often-spare exhumed poem works to fill those holes, not by a process of accretion, but rather by unpicking the threads of historical documents. For example, in *Widow Lincoln* one exhumed poem begins, "I visited the resting place of my husband." The words were selected from a letter Mary wrote describing a visit to her husband's crypt. She speaks of the trip as her "melancholy duty," one which will open her "bleeding wounds afresh." Mary offers to send a lock of her husband's hair to a friend as a remembrance. "I will send you some hair—," Mary writes, "a bunch as large as one of our fingers was saved me. You shall have as much as I can possibly spare you. I wish it was more." For me, Mary's last sentence heaves with a widow's grief. "I wish it was more." Mary writes longing for something of her husband that is tactile, tangible, something she might hold onto. Her physical loss is palpable, and though the original letter covers more ground, the exhumed poem attempts to hone in on this one poignant revelation (Turner & Turner, 1972, p. 311–312).[21]

Both revelatory and collaborative, biofiction and exhumed poetry link history with fiction with the express purpose of summoning the ghosts, as Guy put it. If both have the same mission, how might their discourse be staged? With prose playing the protagonist and exhumed poetry playing the foil? Or vice versa, in a metatextual and intertextual interplay whose examples include the two works of literary fiction noted in the introduction to this study: Ondaatje's hybrid prosimetrical novel, *Billy the Kid*, and Padel's collection of found poetry, *Darwin.* Each offers tangible examples of experimental biofiction in which poetry, including found poetry, plays a significant role.[22]

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[21] *Widow Lincoln* p. 48. *I visited the resting place….*
[22] See appendix for permissions to quote from *Billy the Kid* and *Darwin*.

In *Darwin,* Padel's found poetry is largely collage based and sourced from multiple historical documents. The collection is presented within a chronological framework that spans five chapters, each informed by a distinct period of Darwin's life: his childhood, travel as a young man, life in the city, marriage and fatherhood, old age and death. While the device may at first appear somewhat rigid, it is readily identifiable and allows Padel to span the lifetime of her character. This template proved useful in structuring *Widow Lincoln* which aimed to cover the last seventeen years of Mary Lincoln's life. Further, in a departure from more traditional methods of citation, Padel includes expository notes in the margins of many of her poems, sometimes referencing original texts and in other instances including merely interesting biographical information. This device, a nod perhaps to a naturalist's notebooks, is not only clever, but it also provides the reader with immediate context, while further information on source material is referenced in the author's notes at the beginning of the collection (2009, pp. xiii–xviii). This marginalia justifies the categorization of several of Padel's poems as exhumed. "Barmouth" is one example. As evidenced here, Padel's use of quotation marks to signpost the found element in this poem also makes explicit her original contribution. In the margin of the poem, Padel includes the following note: "In 1819, when Darwin was ten, his family went on holiday to Plas Edwards, or Barmouth, in North Wales" (2009, p.7):

> A child on a beach, alone.
> Grey-eyed, thickset, kneeling to look.
> 'A blowy day. A large black and scarlet
> hemipterous insect. Many moths
>
> including *zygaena*. A *cicindela* –
> largest genus of the Tiger beetle –
> not found in Shropshire.'
>
> Why does every gentleman not

become an ornithologist?
Gulls and cormorants take their way home
at evening on a wild, irregular course.

In “Barmouth” and other poems, found elements together with expository notations suggest to the reader that the pieces have been fairly deduced from the historical record. There is a sense of trust—that contract de Groot mentioned between writer and reader—and a clear intention to create a realistic and reasonable image of Darwin even as it is devised. In *Darwin,* particular attention is paid to the more intimate events of the main character’s life including the courtship of his wife, their marriage, and the death of a daughter. Padel’s portrait of Darwin within her established boundaries is intensely personal and it is perhaps not surprising that the author grappled with her appropriation of the original texts. “It seems to me now,” Padel told an interviewer after the collection was published, “a very impudent thing to do, to bring his voice into mine and so on” (Edemariam, 2009). *Darwin* does not meet the definition of a prosimetrical novel, one containing both poetry and prose, but in its structure and intent, the critic Holmes was justified in identifying it as a new approach to biography. Padel’s found poems evidence a distilled narrative that is arguably just as riveting, and sometimes more so, as one manifested in prose. However *Darwin* is not a novel so, while Padel’s poetic handling of historical source material informed my own practice, I necessarily focused more intently on a work of biofiction which employed both prose and poetry in somewhat equal measure.

Enter Ondaatje’s *Billy the Kid*. Notable primarily for its collage–like layout, its purposely lawless aesthetic (a meandering narrative that mimics the turbulent and potentially psychopathic mindset of his protagonist), and for its creative and strategic use of photographs and blank space, *Billy the Kid* provides a unique example of experimental biofiction in a hybrid prosimetrical form. The novel makes significant use

of both prose and poetry as it evokes a psychological portrait of the American outlaw so convincing that on at least one occasion it was mistaken for historical record. “I’m going to share one funny story,” Ondaatje told me in a telephone interview from his home in Canada. “When the book came out in the States there was one review, I think from Texas, and it said why was he [Ondaatje] allowed to edit the journals of Billy the Kid?” Quite a compliment given that Ondaatje had taken on a character with mythological status in the United States. Still, Ondaatje is clear that accuracy and historicity were not necessarily his priorities. “I just wanted to make up a story,” the author said, “that was gritty and real and believable and almost psychopathic at times, and so I wanted to create…a new kind of version of him that was not the fantasy or the legend.” Integrating original and found poems with prose, Ondaatje’s hybrid novel is fast paced, at times frenetic, often brutal, and laced with examples of the psychopathy that Ondaatje felt had been lost as Billy the Kid’s legend grew. Throwing off the artifice of comic book and dime store novels, Ondaatje instead turns his focus to human nature, “by a choice of language, by a choice of paragraphs, by a choice of an intimate statement,” a practice of deliberate concision, which the author maintains “can reverberate a great deal” (Ondaatje, personal communication, June 28, 2020).

While *Billy the Kid* contains a fair share of poetry, fewer than a dozen poems appear to be found and only seven of those might be classified as exhumed; all of them borrowed from a 1926 novel, *The Saga of Billy the Kid* by Walter Noble Burns.[23] Although Burns was a journalist and chronicler of the American West, it is difficult to judge the historical veracity of the content in his novel. Specifically, Burns includes

[23] Looking at the 1970 edition of *Billy the Kid*, Ondaatje drew text from the Burns novel for the following found poems: “On Her House” (Ondaatje, p.28; Burns, 1926/1951, p. 18); “Miss Sallie Chisum: On Billy” (Ondaatje, p. 52; Burns, 1926/1951, p. 18); “Miss Sallie Chisum: Good Friends” and “A Courteous Little Gentleman” (Ondaatje, p. 87; Burns, 1926/1951, p. 19); “Miss Sallie Chisum: Pat Garrett” and “Billy the Kid & Pat Garrett; Some Final Thoughts” (Ondaatje, p. 89; Burns, 1926/1951, p. 20-21); and the prose poem “Paulita Maxwell” (Ondaatje, p. 96; Burns, 1926/1951, p. 149).

reminiscences of Billy the Kid based on several interviews he indicated he had conducted personally. [24] By mining these purported interviews, Ondaatje creates found poems and uses them to evoke a more intimate portrait of Billy. Are these the transcriptions of interviews that actually took place or is Ondaatje creating fiction out of fiction? While that would be an important question in determining whether the resulting poems fall under the umbrella of exhumed poetry, in the context of Ondaatje's novel it makes no difference. Ondaatje's found poems, regardless of their veracity, have a significant impact on his narrative. Consider "On Her House" (2008, p. 28):

> *The house was full of people all the time*
> *the ranch was a little world in itself*
> *I couldn't have been lonesome if I had tried*
>
> *Every man worth knowing in the Southwest,*
> *and many not worth knowing, were guests*
> *one time or another.*
> *What they were made no difference in their welcome.*
> *Sometimes a man would ride up in a hurry*
> *eat a meal in a hurry and depart in a hurry*
>
> *Billy the Kid would come in often*
> *and sometimes stayed for a week or two.*
> *I remember how frightened I was the first time he came.*

In this example, we appear to have access to a first-hand contemporary account of Billy the Kid that is at once reassuring in its normalcy even as it hints at the inherent dangers of living in the West, where outlaws and law-abiding citizens may find themselves sharing the same dinner table.

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[24] Ondaatje's found poems come from interviews Burns said he conducted in 1923 (1926/1951, p. 18). In a 2012 essay, writer Mark Dworkin quotes a letter wherein Burns mentions the research he did for his novel. "I drove to New Mexico in 1923," he is quoted, "and spent several months collecting my data from original sources. I interviewed many old-timers who knew Billy the Kid and some who had taken part in the Lincoln County War." Dworkin writes that "to be certain readers wouldn't mistake this folklore for academic history, in *Saga* he [Burns] provided no bibliography and no citations. He alluded to this in the book in a quasi-confession of his inability to separate fact from fiction in several instances, writing: 'The foregoing tales may be regarded, as you please, as the apocryphal cantos of the saga of Billy the Kid. They are not thoroughly authenticated, though possibly they are, in the main, true'" (Dworkin, 2011).

Though Ondaatje italicizes the text, which is a common device for indicating found elements, he makes no assertions as to its authenticity. “I mean,” the author said, “I don’t think the book [*Billy the Kid*] was very reliable in terms of historical accuracy.” Then again accuracy was not necessarily the author’s aim. Instead, Ondaatje was looking for a more nuanced version of Billy, one he found in the Burns novel. “I would pick about three or four lines that seemed to go together,” Ondaatje explained, “and suggested, suggested more than anything else, rather than drawing a full portrait. It was more like a haiku. …I think that’s one of the qualities in the intimate detail that can be important if you’re trying to build a larger portrait” (Ondaatje, personal communication, June 28, 2020). [25] Similarly, visual details like titles (such as “Miss Sallie Chisum: On Billy” and “Billy the Kid & Pat Garrett—Some Final Thoughts”) and the previously mentioned use of italics signpost the poems as quoted speech, giving them an air of historicity which they might not have engendered otherwise (2008, pp. 53, 93).

In terms of historicity, Ondaatje’s objective for *Billy the Kid* was, from the start, different from my goal for *Widow Lincoln.* Where Ondaatje wanted to make up a story with a measure of verisimilitude in its portrayal of a historical figure, I was aiming more for veracity, finding it, I hope, in the direct links between the historical record and the found poems. Ondaatje does not give us chapter and verse when acknowledging Burns; he only points us in the right direction. Given the psychopathic nature of the narrative in *Billy the Kid*, this uncertainty is perhaps precisely what makes it work. It was not, however, my intention to ramp up the mental health aspects of Mary Lincoln’s

[25] Ondaatje appears to have revised at least one of the found poems. In an early edition, “Good Friends:” and “A Courteous Little Gentleman” are separate poems (1970, p. 87). However, in a later edition, the two are conflated under the title “Miss Sallie Chisum:” and the final stanza from “A Courteous Little Gentleman” is removed (2008, p. 91). It is interesting to note how Ondaatje reworked the excerpt from Burns into two poems and then revised them again to create another version.

story, so much as to put them in perspective. I hoped that a thorough and detailed accounting of sources might instill more confidence in that representation.

On a final note, Ondaatje's use of blank space is striking. In a departure from more traditional biofiction, Ondaatje employs swaths of empty space to subvert expectations and in this way disrupt and control the pacing of the novel. With no discernible consistent structure, decisions as to the placement and presentation of every piece, whether poem or prose, appears to be handled on an individual basis. This tactic mirrors the "almost psychopathic" side to Billy the Kid that Ondaatje says he was keen to capture. I especially appreciated the way in which the physical placement of text on a page became integral to the way it was read. One example finds five pages of prose followed immediately by a page with a poem of only four lines placed in the bottom right-hand corner (2008, pp. 60-65). The effect will be different for every reader, but I found this experience something akin to a roller coaster in the dark, never sure when I might turn a corner to find a slow climb, or an unexpected drop. Whether the two texts related to each other or not, Ondaatje's integration of blank space kept the pages turning while at the same time providing periodic moments of respite. I decided early on to employ this same device in *Widow Lincoln,* though it was not Mary's supposed unpredictability I hoped to evince. Rather, I wanted to give the reader a sense of the historical record itself as unpredictable, and by the same token potentially unreliable.

Found poetry, as employed by Padel and Ondaatje, also suggested a larger role for the genre in biofiction as a method for creating a more personal portrait of a historical figure. Padel's poems which refer to Darwin's children and the death of his daughter are all the more intimate because they employ his own words. Darwin's grief is already palpable but transformed into poetry there is a painfully lyrical quality added

to the mix that speaks to the ordinary and extraordinary heartbreak in everyday life.[26] In the case of *Billy the Kid*, Ondaatje's found poems zero in on small revelatory details. In the excerpts borrowed from Burns, Ondaatje uses found poetry to juxtapose the portrait of Billy painted by the author's original poems with a picture of Billy as he may have appeared to his close friends. Take, for example, the way Sallie Chisum is reported to have described Billy's natty attire (2008, p. 91):

> *In broadbrimmed white hat*
> *dark coat and vest*
> *grey trousers worn over his boots*
> *a grey flannel shirt*
> *and black four-in-hand tie*
> *and sometimes—would you believe it? —a flower in*
> *his lapel.*

Here is an image of Billy that can get lost in the mythology. The desperado and cold-blooded killer in eastern New Mexico's Wild West is contrasted with a young man who wears a "flower in his lapel," a small yet telling detail placed not in the middle of a larger passage but at the end of a poem which arguably makes it the most important revelation on the page.

As noted in the introduction to this study, prosimetrical novels have a long history, but biofiction that includes both prose and found poetry in somewhat equal measure is more difficult to find. *Darwin* and *Billy the Kid* provided essential prototypes for just such a novel even though neither work can be said to fulfill that goal on its own: *Darwin* because it contains minimal prose and only as marginalia, and *Billy the Kid* because it employs only a handful of found poems based on a historical record that is questionable. In *Widow Lincoln*, the aim was to build on the foundations of *Darwin* and *Billy the Kid* in order to answer the research question posed at the outset of

[26] See these specific poems in *Darwin* pp. 83-99. (Padel, 2009).

this study, namely, how might found poetry, when integrated with prose, inform and impact a work of biofiction?

## Chapter Four—Widow Lincoln: Process and Practice

Focusing on the creative component of this study, this chapter explores the practicalities of writing found poetry for, and integrating found poetry with, a larger work of biofiction. By process, I mean the overarching methodological frameworks that governed the investigation. By practice, I refer to practical methods, exercises, techniques, and challenges explored throughout the writing of the creative component. Taken together, these methodologies and pragmatic investigations help to build the case for found poetry as a potential workhorse in the field of biofiction.

### *Methodologies*

The practice-based approach aims to analyze what works, what does not, and why, from a post–textual perspective. Essentially reflective in nature, this methodology tends to rely on a convention that looks something like this: write, consider, note concerns and/or challenges, revise. In practice, my approach was pretty straightforward. Typically, I printed out drafts of the creative work, made detailed line edits in pencil, noted issues specific to individual pieces and those that appeared to be systemic, and then went back to the word document to revise. In effect, this meant that each draft of the creative component was reviewed and considered at least twice before moving on to the next iteration. On a large scale, this reflective analysis helped to maintain oversight of the creative component and keep the complicated prosimetrical nature of the hybrid novel contained in both scope and in regard to its physical layout. In this way, the practice–based approach was elemental in managing the creative work, however, the metatextual/intertextual nature of the novel, together with the need to consistently analyze the practice, added a layer of complexity that required a more active hands–on approach on a daily basis. For this, I employed the reflexive ruminative framework of auto–ethnomethodology.

Inquiry supported by an auto–ethnomethodological approach includes both method and a little madness. I walked miles and miles using the voice memo feature on my phone to record notes to myself in the form of long and sometimes frustratingly discursive internal dialogues. I can only imagine what my neighbors thought to see me, almost daily, walking down the lanes talking to myself and gesturing wildly. While it may seem to share a common reflective element with the practice-based model, the auto-ethnomethodological approach is intended to take reflection to the next level. As defined by writer and researcher R. Lyle Skains, auto–ethnomethodology accepts the value of post–textual analysis through practice–based reflection, yet it places even more emphasis on concurrent inquiry, or the active analysis of the researcher's process through contemporaneous observations. In other words, reflection in real time. Arriving home, the voice memos recorded during those country walks, reviewing everything from the basic chronological structure of the novel to individual transitions between prose and poetry to challenges with issues as seemingly basic as font style, were quickly transcribed and considered. As Skains explains, this ongoing examination reminds writers of "*in situ* utterances," helping them to recognize insights and to manage them through active reflection. By focusing on reflexive scrutiny, self–observation, and self–analysis, Skains suggests, this method offers a more synchronous approach to practice (Skains, 2018, p. 87).

While the practice–based post–textual analysis looked back on what might be problematic with the content or structure of the creative component as a whole, a consistent real–time analysis tended to revolve around individual pieces, sections, and mechanics—the themes, layout, and structure—of the novel in relation to the larger research question. Together these methodologies supported a process of revision and a method for strategizing which formed the basis for the contextualizing thesis. Later,

after the first drafts of the creative component were completed and work on the contextual component began in earnest, this constant revision and analysis became a reliable back and forth dialogue between the creative and the contextual, each piece informing and clarifying the other while serving to maintain the integrity of the whole.

One additional methodological approach, though not necessarily employed in a textbook fashion, proved useful to the writing of the creative component particularly. In the *Essentials of Autoethnography,* Professor Christopher Poulos breaks autoethnography down in simple terms. The approach, Poulos writes, is a way of "crafting creative narratives shaped out of a writer's personal experiences within a culture" (2021, p. 5). Because this method of inquiry requires writing about the self, it necessarily "acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 274). In practice, I adopted and adapted autoethnography to create a more hands–on, tactile investigative approach to Mary's letters as a preparatory exercise to the writing of the found poetry. While I would not necessarily characterize this type of investigation as autoethnographic per se, the broader concept applies in that my personal lived experiences did play a role in how I perceived the subject of the novel. My autoethnographic approach is explained in more detail in the following section.

### *Exercises in Found Poetry*

Inhabiting a character who was a real person, and one who has been as thoroughly researched as Mary Lincoln, can be a daunting process. Whenever the writing began to overwhelm, I came back to Mary's letters, specifically the exhaustive collection contained in *Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters* as well as more recently uncovered correspondence found online, in various journal articles, and in recent works

of non-fiction (Turner & Turner, 1972). [27] Additionally, initially, my original research plan called for retracing Mary's travels through Europe, but the global pandemic required me to pivot. Because I was using so many of Mary's letters for the creative component, I turned my focus to my own particular version of autoethnography mentioned earlier.

Working with Mary's correspondence, I began transcribing a number of letters by hand using copies of the originals. Equipped with stationery, two pens (one modern version and one antique fountain pen), and a bottle of indigo ink, I worked with mindful focus on Mary's style, word choices, and her use of punctuation. I then wrote letters to my daughters, sister, and mother, who were all weathering the pandemic in America while I was living in the United Kingdom. These seemingly simple practices yielded immediate insights. Rewriting Mary's letters became a poignant exercise and one I highly recommend to the writer working with historical documents. I found transcription, especially of handwritten documents, to be a visceral means of interrogation into the original author's style and idiosyncrasies. Further, when I began to write my own letters, I was reacquainted with a habit that, with the exception of thank you notes, I had all but abandoned in my mid–twenties. It was interesting to note how my moods and levels of energy affected my penmanship; how my attention to proper punctuation varied wildly at times, most often depending on whether I was in a rush; how ellipses and dashes overtook commas and periods as a preference. Gradually, Mary's epistolary habits made more sense to me. "She had the Victorian letter writer's proclivity for elaborate syntax," wrote the Turners, "and a personal addiction to

[27] Examples of Mary's correspondence uncovered after 1972, including letters still unpublished, can be found at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum (ALPLM) and accessed at: https://presidentlincoln.illinois.gov/learn/library-research/library-research-overview . Relevant journal articles include "Unpublished Mary Lincoln Letters" (Schwartz & Shaughnessy,1990). Correspondence significant for its impact on history's understanding of Mary's insanity trial can be found in Emerson's *The Madness of Mary Lincoln* (2007).

commas and dashes; she could write an eight-page letter as a single paragraph" (Turner & Turner, 1972, p. xxiii). The Turners make an interesting observation here. Perhaps an "eight-page letter" written as "single paragraph" speaks less to the correspondent's knowledge of good grammar and punctuation and more to this form of correspondence as a personal communication transcribing thoughts onto the page.

Copying Mary's letters also provided a more thorough understanding of their contents than I had experienced by merely reading them. Very often, in recreating her text, I would begin to pull out key words before I had finished the letter, already finding the rhythm or theme for a poem. It was also interesting to note how writing the letters out longhand created a sense of physical and emotional connection with Mary. Why did she choose specific words, forget to close her quotation marks, cross out or underline a particular phrase? Did her hand cramp like mine after a page and a half of writing? Was it as frustrating for her as it was for me when the fountain pen dripped ink, or when the ink left random spots on the paper? Were her fingertips constantly stained blue or black? Even the pace of writing was affected by the method. Did she blow on the page to hurry the drying process or use a blotter? In addition, these exercises trained my ear to Mary's syntax, and the ways in which she expressed frustration or anger, wit and sarcasm, grief, or despondency. Personal and at times profound, Mary's letters are filled with moments of poignant vulnerability. Transcribing them offered insights into Mary that historical facts alone cannot reveal.

Given that I was working during worldwide lockdowns, these practices also suggested what it may have felt like for Mary to be corresponding with her friends and family from so far away. Letters and telegrams were all she had at her disposal. The additional consolation provided by modern communication methods such as texts, email, facetime, and zoom, was not lost on me and this made Mary's experiences all

the more touching. With the isolation imposed by the Coronavirus pandemic, the political divisiveness that was erupting in my home country, and the distance between me and everyone else in my family, I could begin to imagine something of the life of a single woman, furious and frustrated by the events in her own country, living alone abroad and cut off from the familiar. Though Mary lived in different times and under different circumstances, we have a few shared experiences as middle aged women and mothers who live/lived on our own.

***Techniques***

An important consideration in any prosimetrical novel is the actual integration of the poetic form with blocks of prose text. There will be any number of ways to accomplish this, I am sure, but my concern was to simplify where I could. Found poetry, as evidenced by the collage work of Howe and Fowler noted earlier, can have quite the visual impact. However, in *Widow Lincoln,* given its complex hybrid nature and the various elements involved, I decided early on to stick with two of the more common techniques for creating found poetry, namely erasure and collage. As defined in Chapter Two, erasure deconstructs its source; the poet supplies no new material and his or her contribution is limited to word choice. Whether the poem is left *in situ* or taken out of its original context, the words remain in the order in which they appear in the original text though the poem itself may be altered through the imposition of line breaks, stanzas, or the use of the prose poem format. Alternatively, in collage-based poetry the poet may employ words or phrases taken from several sources and may also choose to contribute original material.

In writing the erasure poems, I first printed several copies of a letter or document and began, one page at a time, methodically circling words of interest using a pencil and a light touch. It turns out there is a lot of erasure in erasure. My general rule

was to take no more than three to five consecutive words at a time. If I felt a poem emerging, I would lightly strike whatever words were not included. If the distilled version contained a focus and a lyrical quality that sounded right to my ear, I set it aside, took up another copy of the same original text and began again. I often created three or four versions for comparison.

Next, I determined whether the poem worked best when left *in situ,* or whether it was better suited to a more traditional poetic form. Interestingly, there were times when I felt (based solely on instinct) that the narrative called for a poem left *in situ* but try as I might, I could not make one work. This might be because the context of the surrounding material confused the narrative, or I simply couldn't find a poem in a particular letter unless I dramatically altered the basic parameters I had set. For example, though my rule was to take no more than three to five words at a time, I might find that the only way to construct an intended message/poem was to build it using individual letters of the alphabet. In these cases, I had a decision to make. Because I had set a rough standard for the size and shape of the *in situ* poems, I felt honor bound to maintain at least a semblance of that in service both to the narrative and to the pacing. In my own practice, I find the use of individual letters as building blocks for a poem requires a studied engagement on the part of the reader and unless I deem it absolutely necessary, I am not interested in making the reader work that hard or tarry that long on one single page.

Interestingly, I found that individual poems naturally seemed most effective in one format over another, *in situ* versus collage for instance, and any manipulation on my part to try and affect a different outcome, more often than not, failed. One more note on the poem left *in situ*: in the case of exhumed poetry and especially that employed as part of a larger work of biofiction, I found it impossible to separate the

found poem from the surrounding text. What I mean is that this approach to biofiction intimates that everything is true even as it suggests that nothing is. More and more often as I was cobbling together the disparate pieces of prose and poetry along a narrative thread, I realized that it was not enough to pull something lyrical from a letter, leave the poem in situ by highlighting it, and then disregard the text that surrounded it. I found that exhumed poetry *in situ* worked best for me when I capitalized on its inherent dualistic nature. By fading the surrounding text to gray, but not obscuring it as I could have done if working with redaction, black-out or white-out techniques, the reader has two ways of engaging with the material. This is in contrast with the work of a literary erasurist like Mary Ruefle who maintains that, outside of basic esthetic qualities, the size and shape of a book for instance, she is not much interested in the tie between the new work and its source (Ruefle, 2010).

In writing the collage poems, I started with the erasure technique in the same way as before, going through several iterations of one letter or document and circling all of the words that stood out to me as particularly relevant. However, the rules limiting the poem to one source, and the number of consecutive words to no more than three to five, no longer applied. A collage poem as defined in this study draws on multiple sources and the poet is free to select any number of consecutive words, phrases, and even entire sentences. These selections are then arranged into a poetic form which may also include, but does not require, the poet's own original writing. As with erasure, several versions were often created for comparison.

Poet Kei Miller provides an interesting example of reworking the same piece of text multiple times. Miller's *In Nearby Bushes* contains a series of five poems based on the same text from a newspaper report. On the first page, Miller exhibits the text as a prose poem. On the following two pages, the text is faded back with only selected

words and phrases highlighted in darker type, revealing a new poem on each page. This is followed by the original text again on the fourth and fifth pages, but this time Miller chooses only one to three *letters* at a time. As noted above, this type of found poem requires more active engagement on the part of the reader in order to piece the words and the poem together. Miller's final poem in this series contains only five words out of the original 160 (Miller, K., 2019, pp.43-47).

For *Widow Lincoln,* the creation of each found poem began with a basic question: What is the intent? The found poems in the novel, and I argue this is true of exhumed poems in general when employed within a larger work, have a job to do that goes beyond some of the traditional tenets of poetry: beyond imagery, beyond concision and distillation, beyond lyricism, tone, and rhythm.[28] Found poems in the context of biofiction, though they may be able to stand on their own, exist to enhance or subvert the scenes around them even as they work to support the overarching theme or themes of the novel. In form, meaning the way poems are displayed on a page, and function, to describe the way in which the poems interact with the rest of the material, found poems used in this approach are specifically tasked with supporting, if not maintaining, the narrative thread.

***Structure and Layout in Widow Lincoln***

From the outset I decided on two basic parameters for the creative component. First, the found poems in the novel would be significantly informed by Mary Lincoln's personal correspondence and other historical documents. Second, many of the found poems generated from Mary's letters would be presented *in situ.* That decided, I

[28] I refer to Professor Liardet's outline of literary techniques which "normally figure in a wholly successful poem." As proposed by Liardet, these include 1. The power of the visual image and the 'telling detail'; 2. The transformation of the commonplace through language; 3. The control of tone and rhythm; 4. The role of the unspoken and the inexplicit; 5. Compression and economy of means (2018). See appendix for a copy of permission from Professor Liardet to reprint this outline.

addressed structure. Already an avid reader of biographies and biofiction based on Mary Lincoln, I began to collect contemporaneous newspaper articles and personal reminiscences of her in order to build a basic timeline of events from the spring of 1865, just prior to Abraham Lincoln's assassination, to Mary's death in 1882.[29] This timeline formed the skeleton for the chronological structure of the novel. Even so, I wrestled with structure throughout the practice. I wanted to maintain the chronological order of things in order to offset the fact that I was combining several disparate elements: prose, original poetry, and found poetry. I don't actually know whether I was prioritizing the reader or myself as the writer, but I felt the novel required a format which could be immediately and easily recognized, so, I began by breaking the narrative into chapters along a timeline, à la Padel, and in this way intended to cover the last seventeen years of Mary's life. The prose pieces and poems in each chapter were then arranged to follow that timeline.

The next consideration was the visual layout of the novel. In Chapter Three, I mentioned Ondaatje's use of blank space in *Billy the Kid*. In that novel, Ondaatje combines original poems (more than forty), short sections of prose (roughly a dozen), a smattering of found poems (fewer than ten), seven photographs, and three illustrations. Because the narrative consists of dozens of short pieces, and because there are sometimes frenetic shifts in points of view, I found Ondaatje's use of blank space an effective device in managing the pace of the novel, creating an intensely focused and yet somehow diffused, disjointed account that encouraged active engagement with each

[29] Mid to late twentieth century biographies include, but are not limited to: Baker's *Mary Todd Lincoln: A biography* and Emerson's *The Madness of Mary Lincoln* (1987; 2007). Biofiction includes *Mrs. A. Lincoln* by Janis Cooke Newman (2006); *The Emancipator's Wife* by Barbara Hambly (2005); and *Courting Mr. Lincoln* by Bayard (2020). Works that might be consider more contemporary to Mary's time primarily include newspaper articles, while those written in the forty to fifty years after Mary's death include Katherine Helm's *The True Story of Mary, Wife of Lincoln* (1928/2018); *Mary Todd Lincoln: An Appreciation* by Honoré Willsie Morrow (1928); and *Mrs. Abraham Lincoln: A Study of Her Personality and Her Influence on Lincoln* by Dr. W.A. Evans (1932/2010).

individual text (2008). Though blank space will almost always factor in a prosimetrical work, occurring naturally in and/or around poems, its impact is worth considering especially in the transitions between prose and poetry.

Initially, this was the extent of the novel's formal structure. Within these parameters, I was looking to create a narrative along the lines of Ondaatje's *Billy the Kid,* not so much in the evocation of the character but in terms of the reader's experience. By the third draft of the novel, however, I began to find all the moving parts a bit overwhelming. The voice of history, at that time, was a character that ran throughout the novel, while the second–person voice of Mary at the end of her life was not yet part of the narrative. Feeling the need for another anchor in addition to the timeline, I decided to implement this second–person narration from Mary's point of view. This voice would be interspersed between each of the chapters following the assassination and taken together would chronical the last few days of Mary's life. The time shift provided an opportunity to write scenes through Mary's eyes instead of the third–person and close–third that runs through much of the rest of the novel. The second–person narration also provided a vehicle for Mary's reflections though I used this tact sparingly because, given my understanding of Mary, I don't believe she was someone who often retraced her own steps in terms of her decision making. It was my hope that the addition of this voice would serve to steady the reader on the diving board before they dove into the choppy prosimetrical waters.

Because the novel begins when Mary is 46 years of age, I also added a reminiscence or two following the second-person passages to evoke a sense of what Mary was like before the assassination of her husband. This was part of the narrative I had previously assigned to the voice of History mentioned earlier. History's take on Mary's life was the first piece I wrote for the novel, but I began to feel that I was using

this voice as a crutch. Anytime I became stuck in the narrative, I brought History in to digress or explain. Though I liked the voice of History, it became evident as the revisions went on that most of it needed to go. Though it had provided early support for the narrative, now it could start to be removed. In the end, I kept only two pieces narrated by History and used them as bookends, starting and ending Mary's story with an unreliable narrator just as Mary herself has been dogged over time by an unreliable historical record. By removing History as a narrator and giving over the floor to more of the found poems and second–person perspective, I felt the novel began to paint a clearer picture of a Mary who was more complex and realistic.

Finally, the challenge that gave me the most trouble sounds simple enough to fix now that I've resolved it, but initially it created all sorts of issues. Because the novel contains found elements not just from Mary's letters but from a number of sources, I needed a simple and clear method for signposting. Ondaatje uses italics for most of his found elements in *Billy the Kid,* while Padel sets found passages within quotation marks, but neither of these writers were using so many disparate sources.[30] From the beginning, I was determined to use italics to denote Mary's historically sourced words; this was my way of ensuring that her voice would project visually above the other found elements generated from historical documents, but this meant that any other voices that came from the historical record needed to be identified differently. In the end, generally, I settled on the use of one font primarily, a second font for poems drawn from newspapers, employed italics when Mary's words came from the historical record, and quotation marks when the words of others came from the historical record. I used an em dash for dialogue whether it was historically sourced or imagined. For the

[30] Ondaatje does have one poem which appears to be sourced from the Burns novel but is not italicized. The speaker is identified as Judge Warren H. Bristol (Burns, 1926/1951, p. 179). This is a departure in *Billy the Kid* where italics appear to be utilized for the other found elements sourced from Burns (Ondaatje, 2008, p. 83).

reader, I added a detailed notes section in which any information taken from the historical record is acknowledged. This not only shares my reference materials for those readers who may be interested but fulfills my obligation to acknowledge sources in keeping with the definition of exhumed poetry.

***Widow Lincoln in Practice***

The poems in *Widow Lincoln* are presented in three basic formats: Traditional (containing lines and stanzas), *in situ*, or as a prose poem. Much depended on the content of the text from which the poem was drawn. In cases where the surrounding text added to the narrative, I left the poem *in situ*. At other times, if the surrounding text added little or nothing to the narrative, or if the original text was too long or cumbersome, I worked to pull the poem away from its source. For example, a poem taken from the Congressional Record during a debate over Mary's pension could have been presented as an erasure with the original transcript intact and accessible to the reader, but it would have covered pages. In considering the options, I felt the narrative of the poem and the point it made was stronger when selected passages were condensed and combined.[31]

The integration of poetic form upsets the conventions expected of a more traditional biofiction. Instead of pages of text which flow one to the next from beginning to end, the narrative may feel piecemeal, disjointed, and choppy. One poem may employ a unique font, another may be placed near the bottom of a page, another justified to the right-hand margin. The use of blank space disrupts the pace of the novel. These devices are intended to engage the reader, though ultimately, they are simply invitations.

[31] *Widow Lincoln* pp. 117–118. "February 1869. The U.S. Senate."

Following are five examples of found and/or exhumed poems from *Widow Lincoln* and a discussion of the role each plays in the novel. The first example is an erasure-based exhumed poem sourced from the front page of *The Washington Evening Star* published the day after Abraham Lincoln was shot. The *Star* was printed, as were most newspapers at the time, in a large broadsheet format, which is to say that the pages contain several columns and a lot of information. Initially, I went through the page gathering words and phrases, but borrowing no more than one to five words at a time. Using these, I wrote a poem that juxtaposed the thundering headlines with other more mundane news of the day including advertisements. Given the physical size of the front page, the poem could not realistically be left *in situ.* Even when condensed, the initial passages I had selected resulted in a poem that covered two pages. In my estimation, neither version worked. This poem needed to come after a fairly long prose piece that recapped the night of the assassination. What I wanted was to highlight how Mary's experience became lost in the larger tragedy, so, I came at the poem from another angle, taking it out of its contextualizing source and winnowing the thousands of words on the page to just over thirty.[32]

The Washington Evening Star
Saturday, April 15
Page One

The screams of Mrs. Lincoln Published daily

The wound
is mortal.

The shock
terrible.

The parting with the dying President too sad for description.

[32] *Widow Lincoln* p. 23. In the novel, poems and excerpts that originated in newspapers are presented in a typewriter font.

By acknowledging the name of the newspaper, the date, and the page number in the title of the poem, the reader knows immediately that this was front page news. The line, "The screams of Mrs. Lincoln Published daily" is a composite created by combining a sentence from one column with a portion of the newspaper's masthead, thereby juxtaposing Mary's shock and heartbreak with a casual reference to daily news. The brevity of the poem is intentional, indicative of the ways in which Mary's experiences, as the wife of the President of the United States and as a woman in the 19th century, were dismissed and diminished. Is this all there is to Mary's story in the wake of the assassination?

The second example is another exhumed poem. "Tremont House" is based on one of Mary's letters. The poem is an erasure left *in situ* meaning that the surrounding text is faded back while the poem stands out in a darker bold font. The reader has access to the original text of the letter and the poem at the same time so that both may contribute to the narrative simultaneously (Turner & Turner, 1972, p. 236).[33]

> Tremont House
> Chicago
> May 29th
>
> My Dear Sir:
>
> We arrived here some days since & I regretted that I did not see you again,
>
> before leaving W. as I had a good deal to say to you. May I trouble you with a message to our friend Mr. Roberts & say to him, that as soon as our boxes can be reached, at the Warehouse, I will send him the promised cane—At the same time, I trust you will accept a slight memento. I am sure, any little relic, of my Beloved Husband, will be valued by you—Life & the future looked to me, wretchedly desolate when we left W—**realizing** as I now do, that **I am alone**, my all, my Husband gone from me, **the agony is** insupportable. If I was not aware, that my precious Boys, depended upon me, for their happiness, I would pray our Heavenly Father, to remove me from a world, where I have been so **bitter** a sufferer. To rejoin my Husband, who loved me so devotedly & whom I idolized, would be bliss **indeed.** I am scarcely able to sit up & fear it will be some time, ere I can summon strength of mind or body either, to receive my friends. And some charming friends, we have here, persons who live

[33] *Widow Lincoln* p. 46. *Tremont House. Chicago.*

> delightfully & honored my darling Husband, always. My health is so miserable, that we may go out on the Michigan Lake Shore for the summer, Robert went out on yesterday to a place called "Hyde Park, a beautiful new Hotel, rooms exquisitely clean & even luxuriously fitted up, seven miles from the city—Cars passing every hour of the day—R. Will come in each morning & return in the evening. It was on Michigan Avenue, that my indulgent Husband—proposed three months since, to purchase a handsome home, this June, so that instead of going North—we might come here at our pleasure—Alas! every thing is greatly changed since then, & we must content ourselves, for the present, with my heavy cross—We cannot make any definite arrangements, until our business affairs are adjusted. My blessed Husband was so noble & generous, that he thought very little of future wants. Yet I would not recall one dollar, that he every bestowed upon suffering humanity—For it was his heart's delight to do good & love all mankind—Remember me most kindly to Mrs. H– and believe me, your true friend
>
> Mary Lincoln

Does Mary's erratic use of commas suggest something of her state of mind? She writes that if her "precious Boys" did not depend on her, she would pray to die. "We must content ourselves, for the present" Mary adds farther down in the letter, "with my heavy cross." Note that Mary writes "my heavy cross," as though she suffers as Jesus did and carries the enormous weight of the assassination and its aftermath alone. See also in this letter, Mary's habit of capitalizing the letter "H" when she writes the word "husband," emphasizing both her recent bereavement (this letter was written a month and a half after the assassination) and the lionization of her spouse. It is not surprising that in her personal letters Mary is often fixated on her own grief, but history's narrative has sometimes used this to support an image of Mary as self-absorbed and entitled.[34]

Following a prose vignette which paints a broad picture of Chicago and placed before another piece of prose that is a scene from Mary's daily life, "Tremont House," as a first–person lament, serves the narrative by putting the reader right back into the

[34] According to biographer Jean Baker, many of the criticisms Mary endured in the press were directly linked to efforts on the part of others to make an icon of Abraham Lincoln, so that every perceived misstep by Mary became fodder for personal and political enemies to negate her role in her husband's legacy (Baker, 1987/2008, p. xii).

middle of Mary's intense grief. While the reader may choose to engage solely with the poem and not the rest of the letter, the content is offered as an additional layer to the fabric of the story. Presented *in situ,* this poem is an example of what interests me most in exhumed poetry: the juxtaposition between the historical record and a modern interpretation, between the words of the historical figure and the poetic distillation imposed by a modern–day writer.

While I have a particular fondness for erasure poems as shown in the examples above, a collage based poem presents an opportunity for the poet to engage with the material more actively. The following poem was devised from the same letter shown above. While this version did not make it into the final draft of the novel, I thought it might be interesting to illustrate how the letter inspired two very different found poems. In this version, I expanded on a phrase from the letter to indicate the increasing pressures on Mary's mental health.

> *Our Heavenly Father,*
> *remove me from a World*
>
> *in which we have been called upon*
> *to suffer.*
>
> Sting of nettle.
> String strung thickly
>
> through my brain,
> in one ear, out my eye.
>
> Burn and twitch
> stitch after stitch
> after stitch

In her letters, Mary rarely addresses her own mental health and then only in general and vague terms. This collage poem was an opportunity to incorporate her words into corollary information from other historical documents, in this case information gleaned

from testimony and news reports during her trial for insanity.[35] This poem draws attention to the headaches that plagued Mary and presages the hallucinations she would later report to her son.[36]

In another example of a collage based poem, I used passages from three different letters written by Mary within fifteen days of each other. The poem comes on the heels of a fictionalized prose vignette in which Mary learns that the convicted conspirators in her husband's assassination have been executed. I made minor adjustments to punctuation, but the capitalization of the word "desolation" and the exclamation mark are Mary's (Turner & Turner, 1972, pp. 258, 260, 263).[37]

> *Never, in my life, have I had the least idea*
> *of the meaning of the word,*
>
> *Desolation!*
>
> *Tell me: How can I live without my Husband any longer?*
> *This is my first awakening thought.*
>
> *As I watch the waves of the turbulent lake,*
> *I sometimes feel I should like to go under them.*
>
> *If it was not for Taddie,*
> *I would pray to die.*

In the novel, this poem is followed by another based on a letter and left *in situ.* So, while the preceding poem is intended to reflect Mary's emotional state after the conspirators are hanged, the poem which follows evidences an emotional realization that time will not heal the grief she feels. The point is that neither of these letters, on the face of them, have anything to do with the conspirators. The historical record does

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[35] In 1875 Mary's son Robert, afraid for her safety, took legal action to have her committed to an asylum. Historians debate the merits of the allegations as well as Robert's motives. Through extensive reading, I have come to believe that Robert acted honestly in the interest of his mother's welfare. For further insights into this period of Mary's life, I recommend Emerson's *The Madness of Mary Lincoln* and Baker's *Mary Todd Lincoln: A biography* (2007; 1987/2008).

[36] Mary suffered from headaches throughout her life, but they appear to have grown worse over time and markedly following an accident in 1863 in which she was forced to leap from her carriage, suffering a head injury in the fall (Baker, 1987/2008, p. 205).

[37] *Widow Lincoln* p. 50. *Never, in my life….*

not tell us how Mary reacted to their trials or their deaths, but by creating found poems from Mary's correspondence, I am suggesting possibilities.

In a final example, I have taken a passage from one of Mary's letters and presented it as a prose poem. The content of the original passage is not altered but only reformatted. Mary wrote the original letter during her first year living in the White House, before she and the country had experienced all that the war would bring (Turner & Turner, 1972, pp. 115-116).[38]

*Bows & loups*

*… I will also get you to make me a real velvet headdress twisted as you did the crimson, the true real velvet bow & strings behind of your richest velvet—also a bow on the top—A bow also on the purple with a loop—in case I take off the flowers—Remember a bow & loup in front on each—To be made in your handsomest style—In front & behind a handsome bunch of black berries—with those peculiar leaves–your richest berries—without they are of the best & most stylish, I do not want them—Remember under the flowers of each—in front & back—bows & loups.*

In this poem, the seemingly mundane task of commissioning a hat becomes a monologue revealing something more about the writer perhaps than the subject of the letter might at first infer. Mary writes to a milliner for a bonnet and we can plainly see the level of detail she insisted upon in her clothing, how she addressed every aspect. In the novel, this poem appears on the same page with a reminiscence from one of the White House secretaries. While the letter upon which the poem is based would seem to have little to do with the narrative in *Widow Lincoln*, the poem gleaned from the letter and placed at this point in the novel is a reminder of how a woman's clothing was evidence of her status, a societal construct to which many women today can still relate. The poem also contrasts the Mary we can imagine hosting galas and state dinners as first lady of the United States with the widowed Mary who only wears black.

[38] *Widow Lincoln* p. 43. "Bows & loups."

***Reflections***

Near the end of this investigation, with lockdowns lifted, I was able to revive some of my original research plan. Pre-pandemic I had made several excursions throughout the U.K. to visit places where Mary is known to have travelled, and now I was able to go abroad to many of the same locations that Mary had visited in Italy and France. After roughly one hundred fifty years, I knew much would be changed even as many of the historic features remained. Initially I anticipated disappointment, but I could not have been more wrong. Despite being surrounded by modern day amenities and crowded tourist shops, I found a personally profound connection with Mary in the presence of the architecture that remains, the landscapes she might have seen from the carriage of her train, the same iconic works of art, the foods, languages, and the familiarity of a handful of specific places Mary is known to have stayed or visited. I could close my eyes and imagine Mary in her widow's weeds as both a tourist and an exile. I even discovered a previously unknown signature penned by Mary in a visitor log held in the archives of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in Stratford–upon–Avon, proof positive of her pilgrimage to that place, a find which adds new knowledge to existing Mary Lincoln scholarship. This signature places Mary and her son, Tad, in England earlier than previously surmised, and poignantly, it confirms her tour through the birthplace of a writer who held special significance for her and her husband.[39]

Between parsing Mary's letters and travelling in her footsteps, I continued to write, accumulating dozens of found poems and prose vignettes. The first draft of *Widow Lincoln* came in at over 118,000 words. Oftentimes, a scene would simply come

[39] I am preparing articles for both the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum (ALPLM) which will include this discovery as well as two others to do with Mary's travels in the United Kingdom. Mr. Daniel Weinberg of the Abraham Lincoln Bookshop in Chicago, referred to me by the ALPLM as an expert, has verified Mary's signature based on his examination of a digital photo of the same.

to me in such a visceral and sure way that I wrote it without knowing whether it would fit in with the narrative or not. This was not a linear process by any means even as I followed the letters in a linear fashion. The winnowing process was tough, but I took heart in Ondaatje's description of his own process writing *Billy the Kid.* After two years "writing poems and prose and imaginary interviews and songs and fragments," Ondaatje writes that he spent another year "rewriting, refocusing, restructuring, and compressing all that material into some newly invented organic form that would contain the story," a process he characterizes as a kind of choreography. "I had all the scenes on the floor," Ondaatje writes, "so I could look down at the movement of it and alter it by simplifying or complicating the storyline" (2008, p. 116).

With so many poems in different shapes and so many pieces of prose of different lengths, *Widow Lincoln* felt much more like a thousand-piece puzzle than a manuscript. Though I had worked on the borders first, to mean outlining the basic structure, fitting the pieces inside was a constant process of trial and error. Of all the found poems and vignettes that made it into the creative component, many more did not. But what stayed, felt true and I took comfort in Ondaatje's experience. "This was the first 'fiction' I had written," Ondaatje shares in one of his author's notes for *Billy the Kid,* "but it did not feel like fiction to me" (2008, p. 116). Nor did it feel like I was making up Mary's story, even though I knew I was. It did feel like a dance, a tango, one move organically informing the next.

## Chapter Five—Conclusion

I like fact with my fiction. I always have. And that is history, isn't it? A mix of verifiable names and dates combined with a muddle of varying perspectives with regard to historical figures and events. If history, specifically biography, as Heilbrun suggests, is only one interpretation informed by the lived experiences of its authors, then fiction is necessary to challenge the idea that historical accuracy exists in the first place (1993, p. 300). Are the terms *historical fiction* and *nonfiction* even appropriate when we talk about history and biography? Perhaps *historical version* is more apt.

And if writing history is really about interpretation, then found poetry can be an important and effective tool. Exhumed poems, whose sources are clearly acknowledged, remain transparent as to where they came from and subsequently clear about whether they are attempting to enhance, embellish or subvert their sources. Yes, the writer is interpreting, but then so is the reader. And yes, this study makes a case for, at a minimum, general references in biofiction, but that is merely a preference. I agree with Mantel that writers of historical fiction have no need to prove their legitimacy (Brown, M., 2017). Writer's write. Readers decide the rest. Historical fiction in general, biofiction and found poetry in this context, stake no claim as to one true version of history but instead concern themselves with the promotion of alternative perspectives.

And Mary Lincoln could use some alternative perspectives. As a foil in efforts to iconize her husband, the former first lady "was configured into a one-dimensional human being, a stereotype of the best-hated faults of all women" (Baker, 1987/2008, pp. xi-xvii). In *Widow Lincoln,* I sought, through the integration of exhumed poetry with biofiction, to redress this imbalance. But meddling comes with a price. By spotlighting Mary's own words, I supplied her with a stage, yet by distilling her letters

through my own subjective filters, I also co–opted her. I will never know how she might have perceived this intrusion, well intentioned or not.

This investigation asked how found poetry, when integrated with prose, might inform and impact a work of biofiction. The companion novel, *Widow Lincoln*, provides one illustration. Meantime, this contextualizing thesis attempted to explain not only the *how* but the *why*. In the simplest of terms, found poetry is another tool in the creative writer's toolbox. Whether embellishing or subverting the historical record, distilling documents, or disrupting the pace of a novel through form, the found poem can amplify a narrative. More than that, exhumed poems, by virtue of their inherent dualistic natures, invite active engagement. These are found poetry's superpowers, its unique contributions. When mined from historical documents, as they are in *Widow Lincoln*, found poems, specifically exhumed poems, are regenerative echo–poetry, reverberations from the grave, inherently imbued with the gravitas of the historical record and yet resounding with new interpretation. Found poetry, as implemented in this study, does not negate what *was,* but aims to explore what *else* through a practice of collaboration between the historical record, the original writer, and the found poet. Whether to subvert or amplify the original text is up to the individual poet, of course, but either way, this is where found poetry and biofiction intersect to ask the same question. How do we imagine these lives played out beyond what is presented in the historical record? When Perloff generalizes that found poetry is "more accessible and, in a sense, 'personal' than was the Language poetry of the twentieth century," it helps make a case not only for found and exhumed poetry but for the compatibility of this type of poetry with the more traditional prose often expected of biofiction (Perloff, 2010, p. xi).

Though I have been studying Mary Lincoln in general for more than forty years, researching the period of her widowhood and poeticizing her letters for this investigation brought Mary into sharper focus. As Ondaatje pointed out with his *Billy the Kid*, at some point *Widow Lincoln* didn't feel like fiction anymore and Mary didn't feel like a character in a novel. As I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, I aimed in this study to explore how found poetry might inform and impact biofiction. What I hoped for was a collaboration, that Mary and I might write some poetry together and in doing so conjure a few scenes that might challenge some of history's long-held impressions of her and evoke a Mary far more complex than the one I had read about in early biographies.

This brings us back to where we started. Exhumation is a metaphor, of course. This investigation did not actually seek to remove Mary Lincoln from her tomb. No. This practice attempted to apply a unique approach to a narrative and in doing so offer an alternate narrative for consideration. Along the way, new knowledge emerged. As a result, this study proposes the identification of a new subgenre within found poetry, namely, the exhumed poem as defined in this thesis. This study also advocates that the integration of found poetry with prose is a unique approach to biofiction which constitutes a new contribution to knowledge in the field of creative writing.

In the end, whether *Widow Lincoln* might be considered to have *successfully* integrated found poetry with biofiction is up to the reader and is, perhaps, beside the point. Rather, success is in the lessons learned and in the hope that this approach will have broader appeal to novelists and poets alike. Though this investigation has necessarily focused on a personal practice, in the exploration of one writer's process there may be helpful insights, suggestions, and implications for others seeking to integrate found poetry into a larger body of work.

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**Appendix–Permissions**

For the contextualizing thesis, poet Ruth Padel and author Michael Ondaatje graciously granted me permission to quote from specific poems while Professor Tim Liardet permitted me to quote from his unpublished handbook for the MA Creative Writing module “A Poet’s Eye” at Bath Spa University. Copies of my email correspondence regarding permissions follows.

**[pages 395-400 have been removed from this digital version]**

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Moose

P.S. …because Mary Lincoln loved a postscript and I wanted to use the word "exegesis" again. TLC