

Teacups, Marble, Integritas:**Form and Negotiation in the Poetry and Criticism of Michael Donaghy**Introductory Note

In my own poetry, I have often struggled with the temptation to wrap up poems too neatly, to tie a bow on them at the end. This is something that owes, at least in part, to the influence of Michael Donaghy's work, especially the early "metaphysical" poems in *Shibboleth*. In many of these pieces, a logical argument is presented, which leads to a revelatory or epiphanic conclusion marked by a formal flourish, particularly an end rhyme. This was a pattern that I followed in much of my own earlier poetry. I was struck, though, by a certain dissatisfaction with this mode, especially in my own work; the conclusions of the poems seemed, not profound, but glib. And I had not really found the words to describe this feeling until I came across a review of Donaghy's *Errata* by Herbert Lomas. In the review, he took issue with precisely those sorts of poems that I had admired and emulated, and criticised the poems especially that were "merely clever, with a slickness he needs to watch."¹ I knew, then, that I had been pinned down with a brutal accuracy, albeit accidentally, but I wasn't sure – and I'm still not – if the same held true for Michael Donaghy.

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Although known primarily for his fine “metaphysical” and narrative poems, the late Michael Donaghy was also a perceptive critic, who, despite a relatively modest prose output, was able to develop an impressively comprehensive theory of the relationship between poet and form. Central to this theory, and to much of Donaghy’s criticism, was the idea of “negotiation”: a tussle between the writer and the form in which she was writing, which he called a ‘resistant medium’². The successful result of such a negotiation was the ‘the alchemical payoff’³, which is to say, ‘true poetry’⁴.

In an interview with John Wall in 1996, Donaghy likened this relationship to that between sculptor and medium: ‘The more resistant the medium – whether marble or metre – the more negotiation is required’⁵. In his later work, however, the metaphor he chooses is a rather more unusual one: ‘of all things, a teacup’⁶. This, he explains, is in reference to the teacup James Merrill used in the composition of his supernatural epic *The Changing Light at Sandover*. The teacup Merrill and his companions had been using as a pointer for their Ouija board was supposedly ‘commandeered by the soul of one Caligula’s murdered slaves’⁷, who used it to tell his story in wandering but perfect rhyme and metre. Donaghy sees this as an explanatory metaphor for ‘the shaping forces of verse technique’⁸.

The two analogies, however, quite clearly pull in different directions. The analogy of the sculptor is about *grain*; the negotiation is between the way the sculptor wants to cut the stone and the way the stone “wants” to break. The analogy of the teacup, on the other hand, is intended to represent the generative and explorative effect of form, the way it seems to *suggest*. Crudely put, the latter negotiation concerns *what* both parties “want” to say, and the former concerns *how* it is said. In both cases, though, the crucial negotiation is present.

As a personal exploration of the way an individual poet wrote, these ideas need not, of course, be taken any further, but as the basis of a truly *critical* theory, the concepts may be useful as a basis for qualitative judgement of writing, or at least writing that has a formal element, which implies both that an “alchemical payoff” is attainable (and, if not measurable, at least *visible*) and that a failure of such negotiation is also possible. What I am interested in, then, is what such successes and failures of negotiation would look like, and whether we can judge Donaghy’s own work using the critical tools he developed.

Tea-Cup

The idea of finding freedom within the constraints of form is hardly a new one. Stravinsky famously said that 'The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self'. But how do we reconcile this seemingly self-contradictory idea with the common-sense belief that formal restraints are restrictive, and free verse is freeing? After all, it seems obvious that, in choosing, say, a word that rhymes with another word, or a phrase that matches our chosen metre, we are restricting our choice to a smaller “set” of available language. Similarly, it makes intuitive sense that we would have more freedom, more scope for original ideas, without these constraints. Certainly, this is one of the beliefs that has driven the opposition to traditional form in all of its many guises, from the American “raw” school to the current *avant-garde*. It has even been said that the untidiness of free verse mirrors the untidiness of real life (or genuine emotions, or the universe). 'A kind of chaos practice,' as Donaghy put it, 'to reflect chaos theory.'⁹

For Donaghy, though, these twin beliefs rest on twin fallacies about the way writers actually write. The first is that we come to our writing without any baggage, that we are not operating with an existing “set” when we write free verse. We are: the set simply consists of our own stock responses and unexamined feelings, which, as Donaghy points out, 'are always more likely to be full of self-deception, prejudice and cliché'¹⁰. Take, for example, the enormous supermarkets that we ordinarily shop in. We have at our disposal tens of thousands of products, and have nearly unlimited choice, but mostly we tend to buy the same few things, the same few brands.

The second fallacy is that a writer, having set up a rhyme or a metre or any other kind of restraint, has exhausted her options; she is bound to close the rhyme or to follow the metre. In fact, what happens is that a poet who finds that the right word is not available within the initial “set” simply *changes* the rules, that is to say, she changes the first rhyme, and looks again, or abandons the set altogether. This is what makes the use of form *exploratory*. Donaghy gives the example of John Ashberry who claimed to use the 'really bizarre requirements of a sestina' as a sort of 'probing tool.'¹¹

Of course, this is not to say that the use of form is not *in some way* restrictive, only that free verse is restrictive as well. As Donaghy said, the counterpart to 'metrical poems...about foreign cities or Renaissance paintings steeped in world-weary irony' is 'innumerable free verse poems about poems. Soul. Wind. Fire. Light.'¹² But the benefit of specifically *formal* restriction is that the “set” of available language is not of your own (unconscious) devising. It is therefore more likely to be interesting. Moreover, this set is visible and conscious, which means that it can either be ignored or changed, a much easier task than changing one's own preconceptions.

How, then, can this relationship be reconciled with the ideas of negotiation and the alchemical payoff? In this context, and if Donaghy is right, the negotiation would seem to be between the admitted dangers of both sides, form and free verse, which is to say, the wandering, perhaps prosaic, clichés of bad free verse on the one hand, and the straitjacket of form on the other. The alchemical payoff is to be found where form is used as an exploratory, inspirational tool, while avoiding the pitfalls either side of it.

Taking free verse first, it should be said that Donaghy was often at pains to point out that he wrote 'an awful lot of free verse, too, you know'¹³, but there can have been few critics who worried that he leaned too far towards it, especially given how unpopular formal verse had become in academic circles at the time he was writing. The much more frequent objection was that he had made a fetish of form.

However, in certain of Donaghy's long, fragmentary pieces, one does find that the attention wanders as, not only the story, but also the form jumps around or disappears entirely. Compare, for example this fragment from 'True', a part prose-poem part-lyric on the folk song *Lady Franklin's Lament*, with the excerpt below it from 'The Palm', another narrative poem that is similarly laid out on the page, but which is held together with strong, if irregular, terminal rhyme.

n 7 (as of a compass bearing) according to the earth's geographical

rather than magnetic poles. True North

vb 15 (tr) to adjust so as to make true.

i. A grand magic lantern entertainment

ONE NIGHT ONLY

illustrated by over FORTY DISSOLVENT VIEWS of a strictly moral
character. Nothing to offend the most fastidious person.

'True', *Errata*, p.104

Rethinking his title, 'For the Masses',
typewriter underarm, the critic passes
in the hallway a trolley of caramelized pears
and a fat man with a string bass case who stares
suspiciously back behind dark glasses.

'The Palm', *Conjure*, p.132

Certainly, there is more attunement in the music of the latter poem than the former, with the internal rhyme and assonance deriving, in all likelihood, from the requirements of the rhyme scheme. There is also a sense in 'True' that the progression from idea to idea is mismanaged, and lacks the characteristic smoothness of a Donaghy narrative. 'Black Ice and Rain' (admittedly only formal in its loose iambic pentameter) negotiates a series of complicated, nested flashbacks far better than 'True' manages even the fairly simple progression below, where there seems, between 'thoughts' and 'She', to be a step missing.

'Please join hands and empty your minds
of all worldly thoughts'.

She summons the spirit of Sir John Franklin.

For the most part though, critical concern has not been with the way a handful of Donaghy's more shapeless poems seem to wander, but rather with the question of whether he has ever been trapped into a corner by his form. Has his hand ever been forced by a rhyme or a metre? The obvious candidates are what Glynn Maxwell calls his 'party pieces'¹⁴. The sestina 'Signifyin' Monkey', for example, is an astonishing piece of work, but does contain more dud lines than one would, or should, expect from a "literary magician" like Donaghy. Take, for example, this formally-necessary but clanging repetition of 'easy'.

...It takes a week to train
on half pay so don't think it's all that easy.
Security's an art. I just make it *look* easy.

'Signifyin' Monkey', *Errata*, p.99

Or the way the missing feet and heavy chime give the last line of this quatrain from 'Deceit' a portentous emphasis that makes it seem rather self-consciously and sentimentally 'profound'.

The wind betrays its empty harvest.
The dead leaves spin and scratch the street,
Their longing for the forest
Forever incomplete.

'Deceit', *Shibboleth*, p.11

For the most part, though, Donaghy's best work has been characterised by an ability to slip out of the straitjacket of form, and wear it, say, as a shawl, or cut off the sleeves and make a pair of gloves. This is from his 'Lives of the Artists':

The clergy, who are prone to vertigo,
 Dictate to heaven with a megaphone.
 And those addressing Michelangelo
 As he was freeing David from the stone
 As much as said they thought the nose too big.
 He waited till he got them on their own,
 Scooped some marble dust up with his tools,
 And climbing loftily atop his rig,
 He tapped his chisel for those squinting fools
 And let a little dust fall on their faces.

He tapped and tapped. And nothing slowly changed
 Except for the opinion of Their Graces.

'Lives of the Artists', *Errata*, p.97

As Michael Dirda points out, this is a formal poem, but 'the rhyme scheme isn't wholly regular'. The word 'changed' 'stands alone, without an echo, the culmination and turning point.'¹⁵ And neither does the form undermine the colloquial flow of the language; the penultimate line, in

loose iambic pentameter like the others, is slowed with a central caesura and monosyllables — the way a comic pauses before a punchline.

A similar effect is achieved in 'Held'. The poem comprises, as Don Paterson explains, 'twelve lines of triple metre, arranged as two six-line stanzas', each consisting of 'three couplets, which themselves are composed of a line of five strong stresses followed by one of four'. The 'beautiful exception'¹⁶, however, is the last line, which has *five* strong stresses and is, itself, *held*.

But as we stood at the window together in silence
Precisely twelve minutes by candlelight waiting for thunder.

'Held', *Errata*, p.63

Poems such as this – and the disguised sonnet 'The Present', the "tetrina" 'Glass', the perfectly anapaestic but strangely lineated 'Guilt Wasn't Why She Was Weeping', and dozens of others – demonstrate that Donaghy never had the quite straight-forward relationship with form his critics, both positive and negative, often wanted him to have. Like Richard Wilbur, whom he quotes with approval, he uses form in an exploratory, *ad hoc* way, and never sets out solely 'to fulfil the rules of some standard form'¹⁷. This is his negotiation, and the strange, formally-innovative poems that culminated in *Conjure*, his alchemical payoff.

Marble

If that was the teacup, what then does the negotiation of marble look like? What happens when one side fails to negotiate, or there is no battle at all? And what, if such a negotiation is successful, is the alchemical payoff? In the metaphor of *grain*, one breakdown of negotiation is for the poet to fail to listen to the form, to the way in which it wants the words to “break”. This “talking over” of the form, in which the poet ploughs indiscriminately through or against the grain, leads to all of the problems that occur when a poet refuses to *listen*. That is to say, wrenched rhymes, ‘metrically woozy rhythm’¹⁸, issues with scansion — in short, incompetent verse.

I think, for example, of the padded last line in the first stanza of Timothy Steele’s ‘December in Los Angeles’:

The tulip bulbs rest darkly in the fridge
 To get the winter they can’t get outside;
 The drought and warm winds alter and abridge
 The season till it almost seems denied¹⁹

Or, worse, the safety poems on the London Underground (“We love those papers you get for free / But, we’re sure that you’ll agree / that love very quickly turns to hate / if they block the doors and make us late”). Technical incompetence, of course, is hardly the first problem we think of when Donaghy’s name is mentioned. The one thing nearly everyone agrees on *now* is his ‘extraordinary technique’²⁰, but when *Shibboleth* was first published, there were a number of critics who took issue with the craft. Peter Robinson, for example, writing in the Durham Review, found ‘Cadenza’, which tracks Mozart’s K258*a* as it appears and reappears in the speaker’s life, ‘grammatically clumsy’, complaining that the repetitions of ‘said’ ‘skew the

rhythm²¹ and the meaning. Pronouns are, of course, where confusion slips in, but in this instance, the meaning to me seems perfectly clear, and the rhythm, that loose five-beat line again, seems hardly strict enough to be ‘skewed’ by the gentle pulling about that Donaghy gives it.

‘I’ve lost it,’ she said, ‘it happens...’ and as she spoke
 Those days in Egypt and other days returned,
 Unsummoned, a tide of musics, cities, voices,
 In which I drifted, helpless, disconsolate.
 What did I mourn? It had no name, no sex,
 ‘It might not even have been yours,’ she said,
 Or do I just imagine that she said that.

‘Cadenza’, *Shibboleth*, p.17

Glyn Maxwell, in a review of the same book, also detects the same supposed technical lapse – rhythm – but he goes further in linking it specifically to Donaghy’s ‘form poems’, which, he says, ‘mix, on occasion, strong masculine rhymes with inconsistent rhythms — iambic, trochaic, nothing-in-particular’²². He singles out ‘Khalypso’ as the worst offender, as it contains ‘two rhythmic lapses’²³, which are all the worse for being in a villanelle. Presumably, he is referring to the lines ‘To crown and claim your sovereignty’ and ‘And make her moan as you make me’, both of which are a foot short of the strict iambic pentameter found in the rest of the poem, which certainly puts Maxwell on firmer ground than Robinson.

But still, there is more to technique, and certainly more to rhythm, than a slavish devotion to regular feet — an error that can be found in Maxwell's poetry as well as his criticism. To my ear, it is the awkward inversion in the following ten-syllable line that does more to throw off the rhythm.

Your eyes are green with oceans and you strain
 To crown and claim your sovereignty,
 You leave me and you leave behind your name

'Khalypso', *Shibboleth*, p.31

And certainly it was the ear – the 'perfect ear'²⁴ he attributed to Wilbur, and which many attributed to him – rather than the textbook, that was most important to Donaghy, both as a poet and a critic. To accept form as a set of rules, rather than an exploratory tool, and to abide by its diktats to the detriment of the poem, was not Donaghy's style. But such a dominance of form over poet is, of course, the other failure of negotiation that can occur.

Such a frustration happens when the form is allowed to “take the wheel” of a poem, and the poet abdicates control. When this happens, it tends to result in the malady Donaghy referred to as “rhyming in your sleep”: the kind of near-automatic propulsion that drives playground chanting rhymes into rhythmically-faultless nonsense. The rhyme equivalent has songwriters on autopilot rhyming “make up” with “wake up”, while, in poetry, we have the fridge-magnet verse of Pam Ayres. In this failure of negotiation, rhymes are made just because they can be made. The end product is pat, almost anonymous and often platitudinous. This is what Shakespeare was ridiculing when he had Mercutio call out to Romeo,

Speak but one rhyme, and I am satisfied.

Cry but 'Ay me!' Pronounce but 'love' and 'dove.'²⁵

And more modern examples are not too hard to find:

Dad took me to our local pub in 1953,

They had a television set, the first I'd ever see,

To watch a Coronation! I knew it sounded grand,

Although at six years old, the word was hard to understand.²⁶

Of course, it is as easy to mock such verse now as it was in Shakespeare's time, but if it has been derided since then, it does raise the question of how it has survived. And the answer, as far as I can see, is that *it sounds good*. Advertisers and, especially, politicians have always known that any old nonsense, expressed with the help of certain well-worn rhetorical and formal tricks, will go down much better than the truth in leaden prose. It is 'the very power that got us [poets] barred from The Republic.'²⁷ It is probably also what gives proverbs their staying power and ring of truth. We all know, after all, that "an apple a day keeps the doctor away." Les Murray wrote that rhymes functions with the symmetry of logic, but, for Donaghy, 'The terrifying truth is that form *substitutes* for logic.'²⁸ It is a little of this verisimilitude and memorability that poets are after when they use the formal tricks politicians have long since pilfered.

Of course, we won't find lines as fatuous as those of Ayres' in Donaghy's work, but there *is* something sing-song, something of the propulsive and automatic, driving poems like 'Fin' and 'Alas, Alice', both of which are pushed forward by an almost-obsessive flowing assonance and

playful internal rhyme — as Jack Underwood put it, 'by a logic seemingly produced by rhythm'²⁹.

When you stand half out of your lives,
 half into your coats, half-heartedly
 reading the foot-high radiant names
 as they slip up and out of your minds,
 watch for mine, misspelled

'Fin', *Uncollected Poems*, p.224

But the difference between the two poets' work – and even the difference between Donaghy's work and that of a respectable poet like A.E. Housman (see, for example, 'Bredon Hill'³⁰) – is control. Donaghy's abandonment to form seems conscious and chosen, as the above poem shows, and there's purpose to it, too. 'I knew it sounded grand'³¹, and for that matter, 'About us in the sky'³², add nothing, but 'up and out of your minds / watch out for mine, misspelled' propels us at high velocity through the poem, and reads like the film credits the speaker is half-proudly, half-shamefully displaying.

In defending Donaghy's use of form here on the grounds that the words are *necessary* and serve a purpose, which is to say, that the message is present as well as the form, we have essentially sketched out the alchemical payoff as it exists within this analogy. This is, essentially, Coleridge's "the best words in their best order", a set of aesthetics that necessarily aims for neatness, even pithiness. And indeed, we do find in Donaghy lines and coinages that seem designed to leap directly into the common bank of expression. As Paterson notes, who, after reading it, can sign

their name in front of a cashier without thinking, 'What is this fear before the unctuous teller?'³³ This perfect balance between the slippery, hypnotic, dangerous allure of form and a compelling message is what characterises Donaghy's most famous lines:

Dearest, note how these two are alike
 This harpsichord pavane by Purcell
 And the racer's twelve-speed bike.

Machines, Shibboleth, p.5

At this point, we are getting closer, though, to the criticism that this essay started with, of 'a slickness he needs to watch'³⁴. This, I believe, is the crux of early criticisms of Donaghy's work.

Ian Samson expressed the concern most pithily in Poetry Review:

'One thinks – doesn't one, just – of Anthony Powell's Peter Templer, 'there was always a slight impression that he was too well-dressed', and there is in Donaghy's earlier poems a slight impression he is too well read: the creases are a little too sharp. He seems sometimes to arrive at profundity by too short a route, or out of context.'³⁵

In short, there is a suspicion of glibness, of taking the easy route, of saying things just because they sound pretty and profound. This, though, is precisely the criticism I have levelled at poetry characterised by a dominance of form over poet. Given that in Donaghy's work there is clearly negotiation – thought given to what is being said as well as how - how do we get such obviously

thoughtless, almost automatic lines by the likes of Housman and Ayre, and famous Donaghy lines like the above written off with the same insult?

The answer, I think, has to do with suspicion. It is true that formal beauty gives the impression of truth to almost anything, but the reverse of the same coin is that people *know* this, and tend to treat such tricks with suspicion. From there, it is easy to slip from the idea that form *can* hide falseness and vapidness to the idea that something in form *must* be false and vapid. Real life, and truth, is messy, they say, and so our poems must be too. *Avant-garde* writers such as Lyn Hejinian reject any such neat 'closed texts' as 'fictions' and 'falsehoods'³⁶.

The usual punching bags for such criticisms are the so-called “metaphysical” poems, especially those in *Shibboleth*. In short: ‘Machines’, ‘More Machines’, and perhaps ‘The Present’. Of ‘Machines’, Peter Robinson wrote that ‘in his clever pieces,...the use of rhyme is self-admiring...and the final rhyme watches itself too smartly’. William Oxley, reviewing *Errata*, suggested that perhaps Donaghy should ‘settle for wit, grace and subtlety’ without hoping to ‘attain to that simplicity of a Blake needful to actually sing in his poetry’³⁷.

To a certain extent, this is simply a category mistake. If we discard both the idea that “beauty” *is* “truth”, and the idea that “beauty” *can't* be “truth”, and accept that relationship as contingent, then we can appreciate both. And when both appear, it becomes (or rather always was) a virtue. This is what Jack Underwood was referring to when, quoting Eliot, he cited Donaghy’s ‘tough reasonableness beneath the slight lyric grace.’³⁸ Gillian Pachter, in her review of *Conjure* seemingly also has this error in mind when she writes ‘A good rhyme in the last line of a poem will always give the appearance of sense, but rare is the poet whose last lines are utterly conclusive and necessary. Donaghy has that gift.’³⁹

Indeed, it is precisely this grace, this sense of unity, which has been most admired in Donaghys work. Don Paterson, probably his most perceptive, if not his most impartial, critic wrote that the poems were always 'perfectly balanced and interlocked constructions'⁴⁰. Katy Evans-Bush praised the combination of his 'direct, clear, calm voice' and his 'dazzling technique'⁴¹. I could go on.

Integritas

But putting aside for a moment the views of others, it is possible to see that Donaghys metaphysical poems – which actually number very few – embody precisely those aesthetic principles he explicitly expressed (as well as those implied by the principle of negotiation), which makes them successes on their own terms, even if one agrees with Lomas and Oxley.

Throughout his critical work, one of Donaghys touchstone concepts, alongside the duende and, of course, negotiation, was Aquinas' tripartite theory of the necessities for art, which came to him through James Joyce⁴². According to this theory, the three requirements were *integritas*, *consonantia* and *claritas*; wholeness, harmony and radiance. For Donaghys, then, 'Enclosure in poetry' (or wholeness) is 'the first step to what Joyce calls radiance'⁴³. This is why so many Donaghys poems seem to shut with a click:

The shape his hand made sheltering the flame
 Was itself a kind of understanding
 But it would never help me to explain
 Why my uncle went to fight for Spain,

For Christ, for the Caudillo, for the King.

Auto da Fé, *Shibboleth*, p.23

Indeed, the 'slam' of something shutting is as much a Donaghy trope as "white noise". In 'The Years'⁴⁴, 'the windows slammed shut', in 'Mine', he's already 'slammed the lift cage shut'⁴⁵, in 'Disquietude', 'the door of sleep slams shut'⁴⁶, in 'A Darkroom', the poem literally ends with 'the door slammed shut behind me'⁴⁷. We may not like the cool internal logic and the door closing at the end, but there's harmony, there's wholeness.

Or is there? It's easy to read the poems and feel that each one is doing what Donaghy accused Updike's work of doing, of 'hurtling towards its closure like a door slamming'⁴⁸. But often the poems are not as closed as we think. My favourite example of this is from the title poem of *Shibboleth*, the collection in which, ironically, he is at his most "metaphysical".

In the poem, a GI in an unnamed war is memorising trivia as a shibboleth, because 'At a sentry point, at midnight, in the rain, / an ignorance of baseball could be lethal.' The final stanza has the young speaker shaving,

Staring into a mirror nailed to a tree,

Intoning the Christian names of the Andrews Sisters.

'Maxine, Laverne, Patty.'

'Shibboleth', *Shibboleth*, p.21

A casual reader will, of course, notice the terminal rhyme, stitching this poem up, closing the door, but perhaps not the misspelling of ‘Maxene’, the kind of telling detail that might just get this young man killed. On a second reading (making this line also the *middle* of the poem) we can also see that it could actually be told from the perspective of a genuine GI *or* an impostor — why, as Paterson points out, would the speaker refer to a GI if he was one himself?⁴⁹

Fast-forward seventeen years and we find yet another take on the same matter. ‘Upon a Claude Glass’, the opening poem of *Safest*, and probably the last clearly “metaphysical” poem Donaghy wrote, is ostensibly about a poem about regret. Over the course of a sonnet in couplets – the same form, tellingly, as ‘The Present’ – Donaghy meditates upon the titular Claude Glass, a small mirror, which gentlemen on country walks used to use to frame the landscape behind them.

Don't look so smug. Don't think you're any safer
as you blunder forward through your years

squinting to recall some fading pleasure,
or blinded by some private scrim of tears.

I know. My world's encircled by this prop,
though all my life I've tried to force it shut.

‘Upon a Claude Glass’, *Safest*, p. 177

In these few lines, Donaghy seems not only to be reflecting on nostalgia, but also to be questioning his tendency to tidy and “frame” moments, and acknowledging the way in which a poem’s ‘unframed nature’ will always try to escape. He ends on a personal tonic note, ‘shut’, but crucially on a *failure* to do so. These, the clinching lines, the same two that wrap up ‘The Present’, are the only two that don’t rhyme. So, is this Donaghy’s last word on the matter? Has he admitted the artifice of the ‘prop’, form, and the impossibility of “closing” a poem? Is this essay over?

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