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"Sculpting Empty Space": An Introduction to Richard Makin's Poetics

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This essay examines the distinctive poetics of British experimental writer Richard Makin, whose work over four decades has persistently unsettled conventional distinctions between prose and poetry, narrative and linguistic construction. Taking Makin's description of writing as "sculpting empty space" as its point of departure, the essay argues that his poetic practice is characterised by such strategies as non-teleological composition, resistance to generic classification, radical parataxis, recursive repetition, and an understanding of language as material rather than transparent medium. Through close readings of *Dwelling* (2011), *Mourning* (2015), and *Work* (2022), the essay traces Makin's transformation of prose into unstable poetic fields in which syntax, reference, identity, and narrative continuity are repeatedly fractured and recomposed. Particular attention is paid to Makin's treatment of origin, memory, mourning, textual inheritance, and the paradoxical relationship between repetition and erasure. The essay concludes by considering Makin's ongoing *Argot Xeno* sonnet sequence, arguing that its disjunctive syntax, aleatory composition, sonic patterning, and visual fragmentation make explicit poetic procedures already fundamental to his prose. Across his ongoing oeuvre, Makin emerges as a radically materialist writer for whom composition is simultaneously construction and dissolution: a process of making language strange in order to explore the unstable conditions of dwelling, meaning, and presence.

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Please note that this article serves as an introduction to Louis Armand's essay The Interpunct.

Over the last four decades, Richard Makin has been producing *sui generis* texts that, even though written in/as "prose", defy many of its expectations: character development, narrative continuity, and logical exposition, among others. Instead, these texts function as extended poetic fields, where language becomes both the medium and the subject of estrangement. As he recently confided in an interview with Paul Green,

> [m]y method is not to have one. Rather than marshalling words to describe a narrative, the attempt is to make, to build, a sense of being here... Writing feels like sculpting empty space, finding a sequence of words that could not be arranged any other way, a kind of emptiness.[1]

Makin's processual, non-teleological approach to writing treats language as spatial construction, a practice of arranging the void, and not just as vehicle for meaning. This also aligns with his minimalist aesthetics resistant toward narrative closure or structural impositions: "I don't feel that the writing is 'my voice', nor an attempt to conjure anyone else's. I simply work with the materials I find in the world."[2] Rejecting the lyric ego and authorial expressivity in favour of a material engagement with language, Makin pursues the kind of writing emergent from assemblage, interaction, and environment rather than from self-expression.

In a 2022 interview I conducted with Richard for the Equus Press website ahead of the publication of *Work*, such topics as composition, influence and origin(ality), as well as genre resistance were broached. Regarding the first, he observed,

> [t]he starting point is always a small, handwritten notebook, from which a transcription of every word is made, and from there the text expands, spreading like cells in a culture, or mould. I make countless revisions, repeatedly working through the entire composition until it can't be any other way... The attempt is to achieve *a lasting neutrality*, abstaining from writing while paradoxically finding myself immersed in it.[3]

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[1] Paul Green, "Inquisitory: Interview with Richard Makin" (2025). Online: https://www.patreon.com/posts/inquisitory-134698987.

[2] Ibid.

[3] David Vichnar, "A Resistant Absurdism, Which Might Be a Form of Dissent—An Interview with Richard Makin" (2022), emphasis added.
Online: https://equuspress.wordpress.com/2022/03/07/a-resistant-absurdism-which-might-be-a-form-of-dissent-a-bakers-dozen-questions-re-richard-makins-work-forthcoming-with-equus-press-2022/

The evocation of the *notebook*—analogue and embodied—grounds Richard's writing practice in a physical, manual process, which contrasts starkly with the syntactic and semantic complexity of his finished texts, often appearing hyper-mediated. The "mould growth" is a striking simile: organic, infectious, and faintly abject. Rather than conceiving of the text as constructed or composed in any traditional architectural or linear sense, Richard likens it to *biological proliferation*. Mould is not a neat image of creation, but one of decomposition-as-growth, or entropy as generative. The text develops through accretion, drift, and metabolic transformation rather than through premeditated design. "Lasting neutrality" is emphasised as perhaps the most conceptually dense phrase, evoking the stasis of subjectivity, voice, and authorial intent dissolving. The neutrality invoked conveys an *erasure* of hierarchy and will, bracketing artistic agency to allow chance or structure to emerge.

Regarding such notions as "influence" and "originality", Richard had this to say:

> My use of the word origin stems from a fascination with etymology, or rather, the impossibility of determining "source" or "derivation"... It's curious, *the alliance between riotous profusion and repetition*, as if repetition by itself might create a sensation of retreat — writing, like reading, always fading, disappearing at the very moment it flares at the periphery.[4]

With the irony of trying to locate the origin of the word *origin* in the foreground, a fundamental aporia is signalled here: the closer one tries to get to it, the more the "source" destabilises. Etymology is not so much a recovery an originary "true meaning" as a kind of textual archaeology haunted by gaps and misfires. The failure to pin down a true "origin" becomes, for Richard, a generative condition of writing. Emphasised is a critical insight into his stylistic strategy, the paradox of *excess as erasure*. What might seem like excess—the obsessive recurrence of motifs, phrases, and grammatical constructions—in fact serves its opposite, repetition *performing disappearance*. Simply put, the more a word returns, the less it seems to mean, hollowing itself out. The final note on the experience of both writing and reading as fundamentally peripheral, never central, touches on a peculiar phenomenology of the literary moment, in which writing is epiphany and erasure, the text glowing in the margins of attention but defying grasp.

Finally, when prompted about the generic (un)classifiability of his writing, Richard mused on writing as "endless work of digression":

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[4] Ibid, emphasis added.

> My feelings concerning a resistance to classification remain the same, having a tendency to collaborate with every genre... Writing could be said to be *an endless work of digression, never arriving anywhere*, while paradoxically striving to remake *the sensation of being here*. Any ideas that emerge are always abandoned at some point, which seems the best thing to do with an idea.[5]

A central paradox is articulated here, not only of Richard's own writing, but of experimental fiction more broadly: its *resistance to classification* as both a poetics and an ethics — a refusal to be placed or stabilised, to be *about* something in any reductive or teleological sense. What makes the emphasised phrase regarding "endless digression" more than a mere nod to anti-plot is this: while writing digresses endlessly, it still strives to remake *the sensation of being here*. Not being *anywhere*, but being *here*: an abstracted, floating present-ness that resists geographical, narrative or even psychological coordinates, a being-here concerned less with *setting* than with *mood*, *tone*, or *texture.* The closing line completes the kind of heretical epistemology developed here: To abandon an idea is not so much to refuse to develop it, but to *liberate* it from becoming dogma, plot, or polemic.

What emerges from these two interviews is Richard's poetics of unfinalisability and non-*arrival*, his refusal of classification, his celebration of digression, and his abandonment of "ideas." These are gestures of philosophical fidelity: a commitment to language as a medium of instability, excess, and drift, where the text is not simply a vessel of some transcendental truth, but a shifting poetic field in which the sensation of dwelling in the here and now might flicker.

Text as Unstable Dwelling-Place: *Dwelling*

> Poetic language does not submit to the rationality of the Thetic —
> it explodes it, exceeds it, transgresses it. It is an irruption of the semiotic
> into the symbolic.[6]

Richard Makin's *Dwelling* is composed of a series of dense, oblique paragraphs untethered from conventional plot or exposition. Sentences in *Dwelling* are deliberately precarious, often fracturing mid-thought, shifting registers without warning or folding back on themselves in recursive loops. The effect is a continual frustration of narrative

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[5] Ibid, emphasis added.

[6] Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984) p. 133.

momentum: Images, phrases, and obsessions return in altered states, functioning like musical themes or choruses, touchpoints for an otherwise formless world. Rather than building sense through subordination or progression, Makin deploys parataxis, placing discrete clauses or phrases side by side, without explicit connection. So, instead of traditional ordering methods, the tools of poetry (alliteration, assonance, consonance) are used to construct acoustic environments within the prose. To take but two, lengthy passages:

> Everything is abolished. I walk out through the international exit. All the signs indicate a sidereal thing—earthshock—an incomplete mechanism in butterflies and moths. I am at home in whatever abandoned shell I can find. This zone is the much talked of buffer zone. Here, sedation triumphs over malfeasance, love too. In the first vision of this chapter he writes less provocatively. Shell tracers crisscross the sky. A probe is tracking a nerve. We are the rare doing of not. He leads me out of and into myself, away from the ghost we call things. It is dark, not light. He turns against me, attains and touches. He compasses me. Glimpsed in the darkness are creatures driven to alien forms of locomotion. (One counterfeits my death.) A projectile leaves a smoke trail. Greengold lichen or moss clings to the hull of our vessel. Likewise he cordons me about. We have triggered a chain reaction. Crew force broken glass into their mouths, between their lips. It's a kind of game. A chemical substance is used to mark the course followed by the process. He forges a chain for me… Mouths stretched taut by shafts of glass… There are bodies in the water, quick and not, living or dead. Pictures rise up out of the words: I am shout. My voice is shuttered. I gather. No, my voice is gathering. I shout something white rears up out of the water, breaking the surface by the gunwale like a hand. It raises a cloud of sparks. These form a pattern in the air. My path is closed by boulders, felled trees and flytipped mattresses—looming planet at event horizon, at peripheral vision. He is a walking encyclopaedia, recently incorporated within the town museum. I am pulled to pieces.[7]

Here, sentences oscillate between crisp, declarative clauses and longer, turbulent structures where identity and perception blur. The I/He dynamic destabilises traditional lyric identity. "He" might be the narrator's double, captor, lover, or even the Angel of Death himself, shifting roles moment by moment. Rather than a fixed entity, the self is continually "pulled to pieces". In tow, syntax stretches and folds back on itself, abandoning formal logic in favour of emotional and sensory sequencing, thereby evoking a dislocated self, immersed in a semi-coherent world.

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[7] Richard Makin, *Dwelling* (London: Reality Street, 2011) pp. 180-81.

Repetition-with-variation governs the passage. Phrases like "[h]e compasses me… [h]e cordons me about… [h]e forges a chain for me…" are recursions enacting a lyrical refrain, echoing biblical or liturgical cadence, but subverting it with imagery of containment, violence, and dissolution. In terms of Makin's favoured associative sequencing techniques, this passage springs to the eye: "Pictures rise up out of the words: I am shout. My voice is shuttered. I gather. No, my voice is gathering." Here, cause and effect collapse, and so instead of linear development, something akin to semantic tremors is witnessed: phrases connected by mood, rhythm, and vibration instead of logic. This drift is enhanced by the attention to the sonic texture of writing in such lines as "[m]ouths stretched taut by shafts of glass…" and "[g]reengold lichen or moss clings to the hull…," which rely on internal rhyme, alliteration, and consonance to generate lyrical pressure. The sonic density of the verbal sequence "shout… shuttered… shaft… spark… shattered" turns the entire paragraph into a kind of non-metrical chant.

Added to these is some high-voltage symbolic resonance. The imagery here is both surreal and archaeological, in phrases like "[s]hell tracers crisscross the sky" or "[s]omething white rears up out of the water…" These are not symbols in the traditional sense, but emblematic images, *both* physical *and* metaphysical. Their recurrence across *Dwelling* forms an image-generated matrix, like mythic residues from a fractured cosmology. Finally, the phrase, "[p]ictures rise up out of the words," undertakes a metapoetic reflection directly acknowledging the generative capacity of language — an *ars poetica* embedded within the narrative, insistent on words becoming material agents, *producers* of vision and rupture.

The other excerpt from *Dwelling* comes some 300 pages later:

> Beat at the water with their sticks. He says the death in each case is my own. The idea of such food is a symbol. Jammed between their silhouettes, the other woman in the film. (Which?) The man who kills himself is uncredited. Apocalypse, a small antique commode. Extract of pineal. I want things triplechecked. (You don't do grotesque, do you?) A layer of varnish makes the corpses gleam. The corporation is nomadic. All this talk, years of stretched light. We shall meet again at the molten core. Four times I obtained the correct number of raps.[8]

Just as the previous one, this passage is poetic in method: Its structure is recursive rather than progressive, its logic imagistic rather than discursive, its effect lyrical instead of expository. Again, there is parataxis and associative montage galore, violently shifting

[8] Makin, *Dwelling*, 482-3.

between ideas without connective tissue. For instance, there is no explanatory link between "apocalypse", "commode", "pineal extract", and "quality control". Instead, these fragments collide associatively, a poetic technique rooted in modernist collage, summoning the reader/viewer to intuit resonances instead of following a narrative. These resonances, in other lines, are created by means of sonic textures and internal patterns. Phrases like "[a] square of shining substance rushes straight out of my mouth" or "[f]our times I obtained the correct number of raps" contain a subtle internal music: alliteration, consonance, and rhythmic cadence that gives these prose sentences the density and tempo of verse.

Another favoured method of "disorienting meaning" of Makin's is his employment of sudden shifts in logic through semantic dissonance and syntax deformation, as in: "The man who kills himself is uncredited. Nobody demands anything of the graphs," where "uncredited" generates an almost cinematic reference, but is intercut with the clinical detachment of "graphs". By virtue of a few surreal, vivid images ("Apocalypse, a small antique commode," "A layer of varnish makes the corpses gleam"), the text hangs suspended between non-narrative reference and visual art, between metaphor and *anti-symbolism*. Added to these are some reflexive, bureaucratic, deadpan lines that critique the collapse of meaning systems: of data as much as of narrative. The writing here performs a *poetics of not-knowing*, where knowledge systems dissolve into image, gesture, and repetition.

Makin makes his sentences behave rhythmically, syntactically, and unstably in terms of affect. They are rhythmic, recursive, and polysemantic, resisting paraphrase or interpretation in favour of intensified experience. At its core, *Dwelling* is a meditation on language, not just as a tool for thought, but as a fragile construct, a text built as a structure, a place of habitation, a dwelling-place. However, the text is anything but stable. It is a house constantly under revision, erasure, and reinvention, a dwelling that cannot be dwelt in, except in individual acts of (re-)reading.

Language at the Threshold: *Mourning* and *Work*

> Readability bears this mourning: a phrase can be readable, it must be able
> to become readable, up to a certain point, without the reader,
> or any other place of reading, occupying the ultimate position of addressee.
> This mourning provides the first chance and the terrible condition of all reading.[9]

[9] Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael Naas (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003) p. 220.

Mourning and *Work*—two of Richard's books I was fortunate enough to help see the light of print as their publisher at Equus Press (in 2015 and 2022, respectively)—are no less poetic in their operations. Here as in *Dwelling*, prose's most basic unit of sense (i.e. the sentence) is never safe, with syntax treated as a volatile structure, pulled apart mid-thought, grammar short-circuited, and clauses layered into semantic contradiction. Or, as Iain Sinclair has put it in his blurb for *Mourning*, "[t]he writing is that it is. This is prose you must learn to experience before you begin to interpret [...] the pages in their beautiful and delirious abstraction are ordered poetry."[10]

Mourning opens on a note of oblivion and recollection: "I can't remember. We're just below the hospitality hoax at the riverend. By then I was sold: low ebb of gravity hence had already the vision. The things that hatched out of the eggs resembled lizards."[11] Makin's "riverend" parallels but contrasts the opening "riverrun" of *Finnegans Wake*. Where Joyce's Liffey is "running," Makin's "ends" or "rends" instead, its induced forgetfulness and finality invoking the Lethe River.[12] And, insofar as the Joycean / Viconian "commodius vicus of recirculation" of the *Wake*'s first/last sentence brings us safely back to "Howth Castle and Environs,"[13] what first leaps to the eye from the pages of *Mourning* is Makin's steadfast rejection of any proper name.

The *dramatis personae* here are simply personal pronouns: three I's, one outside quotation marks (the narrating subject), the second within quotation marks (the speaking subject), and a third one, belonging to the italicised interruptions: letters, scraps of journal, or "brief notes on how to convert oneself to a visionary state."[14] Then there is a "he," who was (occupying the past tense) and is no more, with passages dedicated to him strewn with intimations of injuries, of physical decay, at one point even reaching a medical surgery bordering on autopsy: "He was dragged screaming into the light he was kicking. He is yet more blissed than I, a thousand times. What grew at the centre until it burst out in what year? My deepest sympathy to you all."[15] There is a "she", the "yes-filterless" performer of the mourning: "She's sometimes seen riding a chariot drawn by horses or dragons, sometimes walking. Every separation is a link [...]. She is yes-filterless."[16] As long as every separation is a link, then finally,

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[10] Qtd. on the publisher's website. Online: https://equuspress.wordpress.com/mourning/.

[11] Richard Makin, *Mourning* (London / Prague: Equus Press, 2015) p. 1.

[12] For more, see my 2017 review of *Mourning* on the Equus website. David Vichnar, "Richard Makin's Work of Mourning". Online: https://equuspress.wordpress.com/2017/08/21/richard-makins-work-of-mourning/

[13] James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber & Faber, 1939) p.3.

[14] Makin, *Mourning*, *p.*4.

[15] Ibid, p.55.

[16] Ibid, p.10.

there are the "we" – a chorus, a collective polyphony of the characters' voices, usually a group of four: "We now intend to give the reader a short description of the century, as far as we have travelled it. A perfect square formed in the very early middle, a sacked enclosure or precinct."[17] This, as should be clear by now, is almost programmatic: the referential anchor of prose is routinely dismantled, leaving characters fluid, settings unknown, identities collapsed. This ontological blurring — between subject and object, human and nonhuman, real and imagined — breaks the contract of conventional prose, the sentence no longer reporting a reality but enacting *a crisis of cognition*.

Makin's prose is again saturated with poetic texture, its words selected not merely for meaning but for their sonic and morphological charge (alliteration, consonance, disruption of morphemes, syntactic suspension), its language made tactile. Together with its obsessive treatment of images of disease, decay, debris, and death, Makin's text keeps mourning other texts, replete with heaps of "dead" language: found texts, quotations, paraphrases, clichés (cf. e.g. "It was an April, the cruelest."[18]), but also invocations of the dead, instances of ventriloquism, etc. There are long catalogues of scientific vocabulary: botanical, meteorological, anatomical, geometrical, numerological, esoteric — the sundry "encyclopaedic voids of the world."[19] Plants form one of the persistent themes, and their obscurity keeps sending the reader to the cemeteries of all words (dictionaries) and textual museums (encyclopaedias), with the most frequently featured plant of all being the funereal lily. Yet Makin's *Mourning* is a fertile textual field upon which such exotic word-hybrids as "moondoggling" and "circumzenithal"[20] bloom. Not all is mere barren recycling and death by repetition, with the activity of mourning for the dead also suggesting the possibility of their resurrection.

For all its introspective reflection, *Mourning* is primarily oriented outward, towards the reader, that irretrievable other without whom it could not exist. Although its focussed, introspective prose involves an intensely personal, almost incommunicable process, the text is punctuated by brackets throughout, each time pulling the reader out of its mesh of metaphors, seemingly addressing them directly. Drifting through abstract notions, meandering through the many underworlds of half-forgotten arcana, *Mourning* is not only a tour-de-force in interior monologue, but also a poignant dialogue with all the past ghosts that haunt the present, and the one major spectre hovering over the writing process: the reader.

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[17] Ibid, p.23.
[18] Ibid, p.28.
[19] Ibid, p.24.
[20] Ibid, p.69, 238.

Work continues the "work" of *Mourning*, its poetic force consisting in its sustained disruption of narrative expectation, syntactic norm, and semantic closure. Instead of these, this text seeks to reckon and come to terms with "the minutiae of the view, the dissenting details"[21] within the processes of passing, disappearance, and death. Every sentence appears carefully placed not just for content but for spatial effect. This is writing born out of "the obsession of the I that wants to die without ceasing to be I."[22] Here, again, one finds the similar pressing, disconcerting, and richly bewildering tone that fills the pages of *Work*'s two predecessors, in which "notes rise and fall in a simple progression, thoughtless minor modes and shapeshifting dissonance."[23] *Work* opens as follows:

> Objects at that time were translucent, held in suspension. The streetlamps shed a faint light into the room; light is the natural agent that stimulates sight and makes things visible.
>
> Anxiety arises from having all paths, and thus no path, open before one (a colony of ants behaves like a single organism). Word order is an allusive presence, a residue.
>
> Dog tonguing water from an aluminium bowl.[24]

This opening can be seen as a poetic manifesto in miniature for *Work*: disjunctive, fragmentary, philosophical, self-reflexive, grounded in both linguistic materiality and concrete sensory imagery. It resists narrative, refuses stable reference, and demands an active, improvisatory reading practice, enacting the very poetics of disintegration that Makin elaborates throughout his oeuvre.

Makin's favoured parataxis is here in service of a semantic layering simultaneous with an ontological flattening: observations regarding "light/sight" and "anxiety" evoke dictionary definitions of conceptual ideas, while "dog tonguing water from an aluminium bowl" provides a counterpoint of sensory-concrete imagery. The objects mostly "held in suspension" throughout Makin's writing are words and phrases themselves, which at times achieve a state of "transparency" or visibility reminiscent of the New Novel. Also of interest is the notion of "allusive presence", in that *Work* is again supremely allusive, replete with residues of other texts. Registers are collapsed: philosophical assertion, zoological observation, theological riddles, and anatomical catalogues — sometimes in the same paragraph. Yet unlike encyclopedism conceived as totality, Makin's is fragmentary and disintegrative, calling attention to the sheer impossibility of completeness. This aligns with his interest in "origin" as a floating, destabilized concept.

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[21] Richard Makin, *Work* (London/Prague: Equus Press, 2022) p.391.
[22] Makin, *Work*, p.393.
[23] Ibid, p.392.
[24] Ibid, p.1.

The word "origin" recurs a dazzling 266 times over the 478 pages of the text, usually in straightforward, yet cryptically signifying copular constructions of "origin is x" (cf. a batch taken at random: "Origin is a prayer of commemoration, whispered too late"; "Origin is the modern intestinal hollow where the brain was dumped"; "Origin is a cordon, both from a knotted rope, hamstrung"[25]). Again, Makin's fascination with etymology, or rather, the impossibility of determining source and derivation is at play here, evoking the paradox of *excess as erasure* (touched upon in our interview above), where repetition "unwrites" presence. To repeat something in language is not so much to anchor it as to *alienate* it, to send it adrift. Thus, Makin's recursive use of "origin" does not fix the word's meaning but liquefies it through rhythmic, ambient pressure.

At the heart of Makin's prose, in *Work* as before, is a poetics of failure — of language failing to carry truth, identity, presence. However, this failure is staged as generative condition rather than as lack: "The work is severed from all previous pasts. Painting's theological crisis began with the first collages, the first readymades."[26] This is not simply philosophical reflection; it is form enacted as thought. Makin's prose is *poetry by other means*. It turns the sentence into a poetic unit, the paragraph into a stanza of thought. He rejects the clarity and linearity of conventional prose not for the sake of obscurity, but in order to dramatise the fragility of meaning itself. *Dwelling, Mourning,* and *Work,* Makin's *Divina Commedia* of sorts—each part of the triptych containing 33 chapters—shows the boundaries between prose and poetry as not so much formal, but philosophical and experiential, with poetry happening anywhere language is made to think, fracture, and feel, wherever meaning is constructed from the ruins of sense.

The Poetics of Estrangement in *Argot Xeno*

> To write is to break the bond that unites the word with myself.
> It is to let language be, to let it speak by itself, in a solitude that resembles silence.[27]

The present overview of Makin's poetics comes at a rather opportune moment — amid his ongoing publication project of a sequence of one hundred sonnets, serialised online by the editor of *Poet Town*, a forthcoming anthology of writers connected with Hastings/St Leonards, where Makin does his building/dwelling/thinking. In the Paul Green interview quoted early on, the composition method for *Argot Xeno,* his first full-fledged poetry collection to date, was detailed as follows:

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[25] Ibid, p.37, 40, 42.
[26] Ibid, p.257.
[27] Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982) p.26.

> The method of composition was itinerant — while walking, travelling on trains, the underground. I carried a packet of index cards and would make random notes on these, shuffling the pack to introduce the element of chance... Obsessive revision is part of the writing process.[28]

While illuminating his peripatetic and aleatory method, as well as evoking a lineage from Dadaist aleatory indeterminacy to Surrealist automatic writing, this quote also reinforces the non-linear, accretive quality of *Argot Xeno*, where fragmentation, revision, and chance are turned into structural principles.

The title *Argot Xeno* signals a poetics of estrangement that permeate this collection. "Argot" denotes a coded or secret language (often associated with marginalized or criminal groups), while "Xeno" evokes the alien foreigner and the condition of being outside. Taken together, *Argot Xeno* suggests a linguistic mode that is both *encrypted* and *estranged*: a private idiom for outsiders, or perhaps the utterance of something other than human. *Argot Xeno* is thus not merely a title but a conceptual framework for the collection's radical aesthetics, constructing a foreign code within English itself, a syntax of disintegration that resists intelligibility, coherence, and possession. *Argot Xeno* eschews generic categories, plot demands, and lyric persona, operating instead in a field of disintegrating grammar, cross-signifying metaphor, and fractured perception. These "sonnets" (callable thus merely on account of their shared 14-line span) achieve their poetic effects through theme or form, to be sure, but also by leveraging the very fabric of language to destabilise meaning itself. Five central strategies are on display in *Argot Xeno*: disjunction, repetition, (meta)physical fusion, parataxis, and sonic/visual texture.

Across all 50 sections, themes emerge not linearly but as semantic clusters, returning in echo and permutation. Makin's syntax often fractures mid-thought, foregrounding disjunction as a poetic engine that makes phrases accumulate, reverberate, and decay:

> numbers are proving redundant
> still, facial tissue has arrived
> despite the high-voltage
> with dark alien underbelly (No. 10)

or again:

> each word unhinged
> for any glimpse of survival
> rust on grey slate
> the impossible capture
> of sense data (No. 40)

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[28] Green, "Inquisitory."

Moments such as these resist continuity, privileging tone and affect over syntactic sense. This continuous self-questioning and shifting voice suggests not only identity in flux, but also the collapse of stabilised meaning.

The collection is haunted by motifs recurring in mutated form, producing an echo chamber of broken signification. Consider the phrase: "to reverse all metaphor" in section 5, which returns in the next one as: "to reverse all the figures." Such recursion performs a kind of semantic erosion, where meaning is suspended and reconstituted through recontextualisation. Strongly present is an awareness of cycles (of speech, memory, decay) and an insistence on the impossibility of final meaning: "remember your last call / I am dead to letters" (No. 22). Repetition is both structural and sonic, enacting uncertainty: "each time I write the date / it should be a future" (No. 48).

In another instance of ontological flattening, Makin's poetry fuses metaphysics and anatomy into a liminal body of text, as for instance here:

> who said this is not
> what I witness
> the disappearance
> of a body minus threshold
> in full view of error (No. 39)

These and other lines treat the body as both site and medium of epistemological collapse, where perception itself is unstable. Makin weaves physical and metaphysical imagery into an unstable continuum, where the body is both a subject and object of erasure and distortion. Words are "fractured," and so are bodily forms: cf. "neck of cordite" (No. 26), "smear of graphite" (No. 46), "marine lung" (No. 47). These are poems about language in decay — biological, textual, systemic.

Meaning in *Argot Xeno* is built through juxtaposition as much as through traditional syntactic hierarchy. Parataxis and ellipsis again reign supreme:

> ghost into rearview
> which means more
> paperwork
> being left behind
> null and undwelt (No. 38)

The lack of causal linkages means that sense emerges from atmospheric accumulation that avoids resolution rather than from straightforward logic. Sentences begin and abandon themselves mid-thought, meaning is left "null and undwelt" in. Logic is

disrupted and grammar unmoored, which shows Makin's poetry to be an accumulative force, not a rational container.

Though largely free of meter or rhyme, his sonic textures generate acoustic density by way of assonance and consonance:

> fingers parting
> a blind appears
> inside the light
> footfall atop the crescent (No. 41)

Likewise, Makin's visual syntax — the broken line, the dropped clause, the parenthetical aside — renders the page a field of semantic debris:

> alias and name collide
> reports of a giant helix
> in the sky
> guttering candlelight
> (I never
> forget an origin) (No. 44)

This is not so much free verse in the casual sense as a deliberate visual-musical architecture of fragmentation. The voice here again is a shifting one — unstable and non-singular. From performative declarations ("withdraw if an object descends" [No. 14]) to confession ("I thought this was never going to work" [No. 50]) to archival detachment ("toward any emblem, such as / I do I am" [No. 31]), the speaker is multiply constituted, possibly nonhuman. Or equally possibly, posthuman: "an ill-starred replicant" (No. 18) or a "factotum to dead cell" (No. 49). This polyphonic tone, bordering on the schizoid, deepens the text's poetic estrangement. The rhythm is irregular but deliberate, more musical than metric, aligning *Argot Xeno* with concrete or post-lyric poetry, where visual disruption operates as semantic force.

The preeminent poetic qualities of *Argot Xeno* are already known from Makin's prose. Makin's poetry again evokes rather than explains, suggests rather than declares, thereby resisting paraphrase; it treats syntax as ambiance, so language becomes a textual construction rather than a meaning-aimed production; despite their eschewal of narrative, verbal sequences build mood, affect, and urgency; their density turns every phrase into a compressed, ambiguous, multivalent semantic unit; finally, Makin treats words as sculptural, to be broken, echoed, reshaped: a materialist use of language

that is a defining trait of 20th- and 21st-century experimental poetry just as his own prose output. Makin's is not poetry that seeks clarity, confession, or closure. Instead, it enacts the ruin of coherence as a site of aesthetic experience. Meaning here is always provisional, identity multiply constituted, and language broken-down and remade.

Throughout his oeuvre, Makin produces prose as a site where formalised thought and language coalesce into radical alienation. In his hands, prose becomes poetic not by mimicking verse, but by intensifying prose's own internal fractures at the level of syntax, rhythm, reference, and epistemology. His texts become sites of trauma, transformation, and transfiguration, their poetics a fundamental mode of *being in language*, of "dwelling linguistically". Makin's writing often engages with the limits of language by pushing close to where words fray, meanings dissolve, and articulation becomes an act of erasure. His is a radical poetics of withdrawal as intensity, striving for a *writing without writing*, a paradoxical process of immersion in language that simultaneously *abstains* from expression, ego, or rhetoric. His writing aligns with traditions of avant-garde experimentation while remaining distinct in its sustained, layered assault on the foundations of reference and grammar. Makin's is a poetics of writing that is *unmade as it is made* — and in that lies its radical force.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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