

# PLATFORM

!

by nasser  
hussain



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The question that this project began with was simple: what are the expressive possibilities of the exclamation mark?

Nearly every source consulted on the exclamation mark, sooner or later, refers to F. Scott Fitzgerald, or Elmore Leonard, or Gertrude Stein – each of them famously derisive of the ‘bang’, or ‘screamer’ (it also goes by other, cruder names, that I won’t reproduce here).<sup>i</sup>

!s are bad style. They are like laughing at your own jokes. They should be used with parsimony to the point of oblivion. They are evidence of a diseased mind. They’re too ‘feminine’, they scream, they yell, they’re hysterical, they’re begging for you to take them seriously, but not too seriously. They are, in Lynne Truss’ distressingly ableist calculus, the ‘big attention-deficit brother who gets over excited and breaks things and laughs too loudly’ (2003, 138). I’m here to disagree.

I prefer to think of the ! as Florence Hazrat does, in her book-length study of the exclamation mark: ‘where there is humanness, there is !’ (2022, 75).

! follows on from my work in *SKYWRITINGS* (Coach House Books, 2018), insofar as it is another instance of observing what might otherwise go unnoticed. Somewhere in this exhibition of my work, you’ll find a space dedicated to *SKY*. What you will see is a map of the world, and a number of airport codes (positioned on their precise geographical location) – but the twist is to note that these are all of the airports that might have qualified for my book. No, I did not use them all, even though the temptation to be ‘exhaustive’ (see my TEDx talk) was acute. Rather than try to leave no code unused, I opted to offer them all to you, the reader, so that you can join in this project. Laying bare the device, as Shklovsky would have us do.

The concept/constraint of *SKYWRITINGS* is simple enough to fit in a sentence – it is a book of poetry, written entirely/exclusively with IATA airport codes (like MAN for Manchester International airport).

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<sup>i</sup> Florence Hazrat’s *An Admirable Point* (Profile Books, 2022), is the best current source of historical information on the exclamation point – one which exhaustively brings together all of the disparate discourse on the subject.



This apparent simplicity can produce a number of effects in a readership: curiosity, or joy, but sometimes it creates dismissal, as it did in this review:

As SKY moved into sound-play, it seemed to assert itself as a project of the various permutations a poet, this one: Nasser Hussain, can make with three-letter airport codes. This book [...] foregrounds the poet/maker, at least as much as the poem/made. Or, does it foreground the making – the process, the experiment?

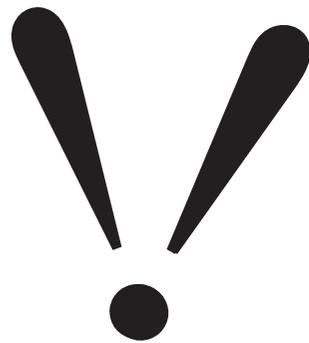
Perhaps not outright dismissal, but it teeters on the brink. The answer to this critic's question is, of course, the latter. If SKY foregrounded 'me', then there'd be far more self-reference, ego, 'flex'. You'd be able to say something about me, beyond 'he's the person who writes with airport codes' – and that's really not who I 'am'. But the possibility that a reader might encounter my work and emerge from it with a sense that it's a surface upon which I am egotistically exhibiting some form of 'virtuosity' is a problem. And it's a problem because, in my work, or in work like this (perhaps loosely labelled 'conceptualist'), there is nowhere to hide – the work is (as much as possible) self-evident. It is, as common parlance has it, what it is. And this self-evidence can tempt readers to think that I 'am' merely that which is there is to be seen (that is, the poems themselves), an assumption that is clearly misguided.

! ! !

I don't get to hide behind my identity, or my background, or my history, in this milieu. I don't get to duck behind bad faith iterations of 'intent'. I am not to be 'found' in these poems – the one thing they are NOT about, is Nasser Hussain. But such is the culture of reception for poetry (and make no mistake, this feeds the production of what some people choose to call poetry), that some critics reach for something like 'this poem BECAUSE it is clever, or innovative, is an occasion to understand the poet as an exhibitionist, inviting us to witness the poet in the act of penning their clever poem'.

How silly. And if I were that narcissistic, I think I'd be a very bad poet, indeed.

Perhaps this is a defensive posture, but it leads me to



think about the nature, the constitution of my chosen art form. What is a poem, anyway?

The obvious answer: 'heightened language, pressed into a variety of verse form(at)s' seems to cover most of it, and I'm not here to suggest that this isn't largely true, but there are some caveats.

Prime among these caveats must be some consideration of just how 'high' language needs to go, in order to be considered 'heightened'. My suspicion is that many readers (if not poets) mistake 'decorative' or 'ornate' with 'height'. I feel safe in this assertion – a great deal of my reading history involves reading what can only be described as 'bad' poetry. The internet is awash with it, certainly. I've read one line, that I won't reproduce here, but offer instead a facsimile – I am replacing every word in the line, but it read something like 'pinch me not, elbows of solitude'. I've also read work that deploys, utterly without reflection, Yeats' 'things fall apart'. The first ornate beyond comprehensibility, the second, deadening an immortal line.

'Heightened language' might be a true definition, but I'm starting to think it's a bad idea.

My skepticism about language arises from the ways in which I'm starting to see it being deployed at its worst. Yes, language is a source of transcendence and beauty and joy, but just as often, in 2024, I see language used by regimes of mis- and dis-information, as propaganda, as crass marketing, as self-promotion, and in the case of poetry, obfuscation and what Wordsworth might have called 'inane phraseology' posing as artistic self-expression.

! ! !

The issue is language: how we use it, how we read it, how we understand it. So, I am going to avoid it. Go straight for the *logos*. The thing that language gestures at in the first place. The poem as referent. The poem as thing-in-itself. As unambiguous as I can possibly be – and to do that, I must abandon language itself, more or less.

The point I am trying to arrive at is to conceive of the poem as a present-referent. This sense of presence jumps off from what Sandeep Parmar incisively isolates in her essay on 'lyric time', where she writes:





when we speak of the lyric form we don't often concern ourselves with lyric time. Its brevity, tempered to the thinness of human perception and personality, escapes our notice. We are sensitive to narrative time in fiction or the epic poem, where the episode deploys multiple viewpoints in a not always linear fashion. If the lyric is short, or the lyric mode is outside of cosmological time (dealing instead in consciousness, a forever distilled into many 'nows') then does lyric time matter? As a poet and as a reader, I see lyric time as a treacherous presupposition of an unknowable future. If, as in Heidegger, time is 'the true principle of individuation' and being is conceived temporally in relation to the other (and death), then the ecstatic nature of individual being is determined by these relations to time, space and object. The self is never itself alone. Its truth is in flux. The typical lyric conserves its energy through closure and a claim to stable meaning and truth. In this way the lyric is conservative, solipsistic; it keeps time.

(Parmar, 2020)

Lyric time reifies a speakerly/poetic 'I', with all of their attentions, recollections and experiences, as somehow emblematic, symbolic, of use to 'others'. I might pause and ask who is really more self-absorbed: the conceptualist, or the lyric poet? In my current work, here, I can say that the poem is not a collection of ornate language that encodes (more or less baroquely) an experience / recollection / feeling / lyrical time of MINE (so that 'you' might realize some 'truth' about our world), but rather, it's just *here*. Present. Radically, equally, and respectfully, here. And so are you.

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I've been reading *Silence* by John Cage – and I've been struck by his use of the word 'immediate'.

He writes:

As I see it poetry isn't prose simply because poetry is in one way or another formalized. It is not poetry by reason of its content of ambiguity but by reason of allowing musical elements (time, sound) to be introduced into the world of words. (xxx, *Silence*)

There are at least two things to note here – first, poetry isn't poetry because of 'content or ambiguity' – each of these criteria are questions of semantics.



‘Pinch me not, elbows of solitude’ depends entirely on semantic value for both its ostensible ‘content’, and its obvious ‘ambiguity’ – which is precisely why it’s not poetry, and kind of irritating for *posing* as poetry. If this line were to be cast as ‘musical’, it would be discordant, to say the least.

Secondly, relatedly: discordant or not, it is possible to think about the sonic elements here – there is rhythm, meter, beat, stress – but my issue with that approach is that it turns the act of composing the poem into a ‘word search’ – within these musical constraints, the poet might ask: ‘what is the “correct” word”? Which one fits *both* the content of my work AND the demands of the ‘musical’? What I am trying to suggest here is that Cage’s invocation of TIME and SOUND isn’t about ‘beats and sonorousness’, but is rather closer to DURATION and NOISE. A poem OCCUPIES time. It doesn’t *use* it. To imagine that a poem uses time means that it stands somehow outside of time, and that approach is, quite literally, the impossibly privileged space of the lyric poet, able as they are, to quite literally *keep* time. (again, see Parmar’s argument above).

So, if we can recalibrate our attitude, and note that a poem is not ‘about’ anything, but is a useful *experience* of TIME and SOUND (released from, let’s say, their instrumental functions), something important emerges. The thing that emerges is US – fully present in the durational span of the poem, *directly* experiencing its physical properties, its material incursions on our time, or bodies, our eardrums battered (or caressed), the literal sound of our brains as they perform their constant electrochemical dance (see Craig Dworkin’s *FACT*, and/or Cage’s thoughts on the literal sound of his nervous system while standing in an anechoic chamber). The poem isn’t quite gesturing at some Saussurean ‘referent’, but is a phenomenological datum *in its own right*, just as we are, just as any other object in our purview.

A poem is not a topic, mysteriously refracted by the poem itself. I wish to keep in mind the prefix ‘im’, as in ‘not’: the poem is *im*mediate.

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and not leverage it (and thereby displacing the audience) as an excuse for simply talking about *oneself* in some aestheticized way.

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I am part of the problem. I've written lyrics. I've got a book of sonnets that I'm thinking of publishing. My recent book, *Love Language*, might be considered lyric poetry (though in this book, I have tried to undermine that, and turn the focus away from 'me', as I hope my readers will see). But it's not enough to be displeased with my work. I have to *change*.

These new pieces are my best effort. I am trying to overturn my writing practice – my first pieces were self-consciously 'spoken word' poems. So, now, I am producing 'unperformable' poems, lest anyone think that I am inserting MYSELF into the Cagean TIME or SOUND of my work. Performance poetry, as I am seeing it now, as of this writing (and may well change again, later) feels like another ego-tistical strategy in the hands of the lyric poet). The un-pronounceability of ! is what brought me to Cage, to SILENCE. Performance might just be the apotheosis of my argument earlier in this essay – the poet becomes the medium and the message and the experience itself, and I mean to de-centre things, in that case.

So too, language – Yes, I 'wrote' these pieces, and I mean to sell them as books, or t-shirts, or art-prints for someone's wall – but they are asemic. They aren't typically 'referential' (though they may be intertextual). And the one thing they do not refer to is 'me', or my experience. I would defy a reader/viewer to look at these works and suggest that they've learned anything about me, or your ribs, or a cloud, or a bunny, or anything. There's just *you*, and the image, total, present, and with as little as possible between both of you. Immediate.

So, that's the impossible (not-possible) point I've arrived at, so distant from where my thinking began with this project. The Anthropocene, in all of its most deadly (or benign) guises, hides at its centre a very special person. Not 'humanity' or 'mankind', but ME (and it does so for each of us, individually). It is the ultimate

geological expression of our individual self-interest. I am to blame for it – and this is a sentence we could all utter. Poetry, as I too often encounter it in 2025 is equally self-absorbed. Which means that the only ethical stance I can take as a writer/artist is to centre YOU, the Other, the not-me, in the vain hope of reversing the trend.

And I mean to do so – with a bang.

## Works Cited

Hazrat, Florence. (2022) *An Admirable Point: a brief history of the exclamation mark!* London: Profile Books.

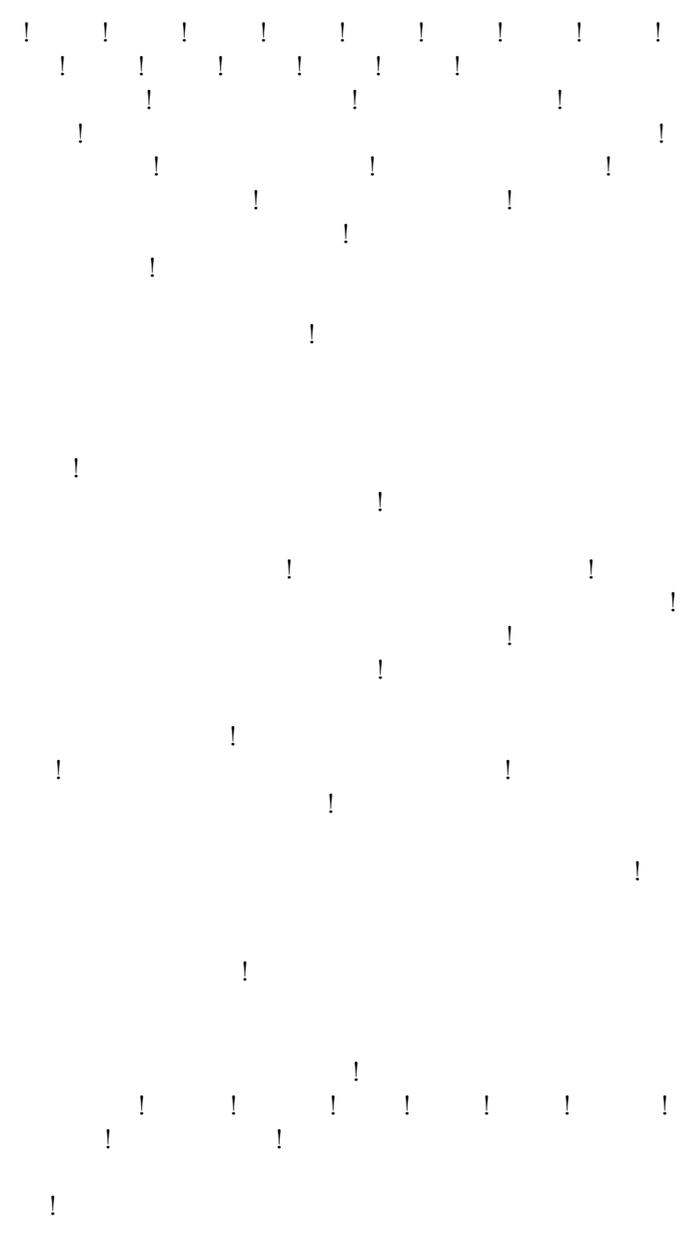
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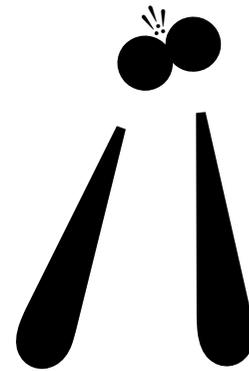
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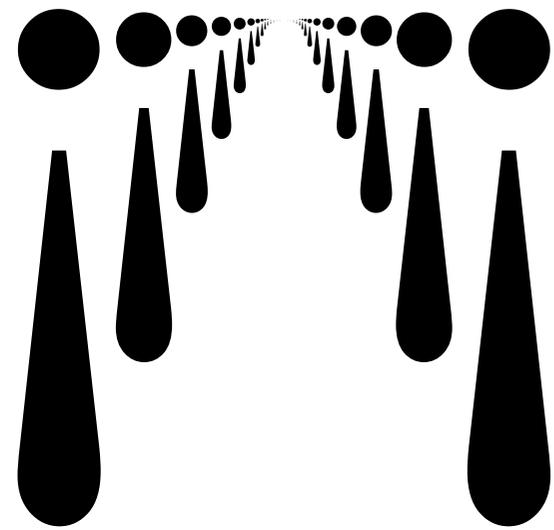
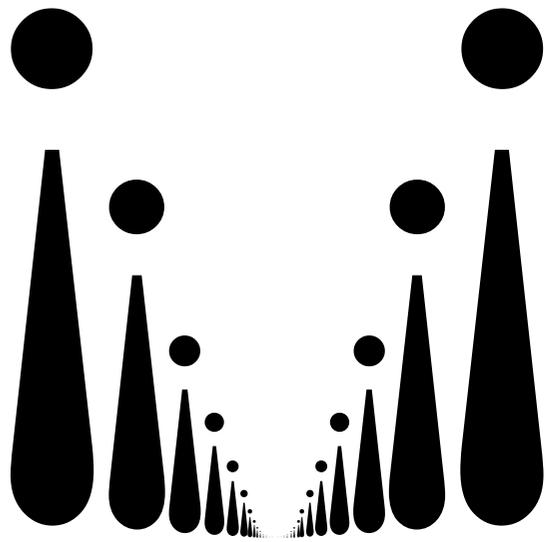






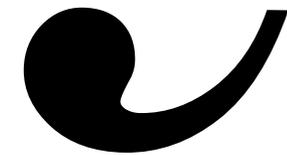




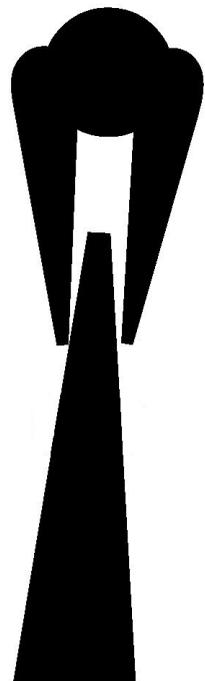


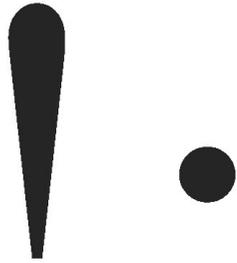
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*ceci n'est pas une virgule*





\*any possible permutation  
of all listed elements

## List of Illustrations

3	big!!!
5	import!!!
6	bunny!!!
9	diagonal!!!
10	disjunct!!!
13	double tilt!!!
14	dickinson!!!
17	semibang!!!
19	keyboard!!!
20	SKY WRI TEI NGS
23	holy!!!
24	upside down!!!
25	rain,,,
26	kiss1!!!
27	kiss2!!!
29	kiss!!!
30	fibonacci2!!!
31	double fibonacci!!!
32	last supper!!!
33	Pi to the first zero!!!
34	scream!!!
35	magritte,,,
36	the complete work!!!

## Thanks and acknowledgements

! is part of my continuing project to explore fun, excitement, and a (seriously) playful approach to writing. I am fortunate to have many friends and colleagues who enable me to do so (perhaps too many to mention) but a partial list (in no order) would include:

Susan Holbrook! derek beaulieu! Gary Barwin! Gregory Betts!  
Nicole Markotic! Ian Williams! Matthew Tierney! Alana Wilcox!  
T Liem! Jordan Abel! JR Carpenter! Kimberley Campanello! Helen  
Mort! Sandeep Parmar! Susan Howe! Vidyan Ravinthiran!  
Stephanie Sy-Quia! Oluwaseun Olayiwola! Christian Bök!  
Michael Parrish Lee! Caroline Herbert! Jude Indigo Herbert-Lee!  
Nick Cox! Julia Banister! James McGrath! Ali Taft! my students at  
LBU! and Kaley Kramer!!!

Special thanks to Mathieu Copeland for the invitation to show this work, and Tom Rodgers for warmth and generosity in producing the prints.

Some of these poems have appeared (in slightly altered form) in Poetry Review (Autumn 2024, Volume 114:3):

holy!!!  
last supper!!!  
scream!!!  
dickinson!!!

March 2025

Designed by Tom Rodgers

Based on an initial design by Fraser Muggeridge

Printed by Pressision, Leeds

Supported by LARC and Professor Rob Shail, Director of Research.

Situated on the Upper Ground floor of the Leeds School of Arts building and curated by Mathieu Copeland, Platform provides a setting for our staff and PhD candidates to share their research.

This exhibition and publication by Nasser Hussain are presented at Leeds Beckett University for educational purposes only.

**PLATFORM**

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