



Robert Maddox-Harle's *Scratches and Deeper Wounds*—an analytical Study

Dr Dalip Khetarpal

Rob Harle, also known as Robert Maddox-Harle, is a poet, editor, artist, and reviewer living in Lismore, Australia. He was born in 1948 in Sydney, Australia, has a background in art, architecture, writing, and psychotherapy. His writing spans poetry, academic essays, and book reviews, with work published in numerous journals, anthologies, and four poetry collections: *Scratches & Deeper Wounds* (1996), *Mechanisms of Desire* (2012), *Winds of Infinity* (2016), and *The Blazing Furnace* (2022). He wrote consistently from 1978 to 1996, and influenced by Zen Buddhism and Japanese aesthetics his primary focus remained sculpture, with his works held in private and public collections and widely exhibited and featured in literary journals and academic books.

Over time, he transitioned back to writing and was studying Comparative Religion and Philosophy at Deakin University. *Scratches and Deeper Wounds* marks his first volume of poetry, though his work had been previously published in various outlets. Living in the Nimbin Valley with his artist wife and elderly cat, Harle explores themes of consciousness, existence, and the nature of reality in his writing. His academic background includes Comparative Religion, Philosophy, Literature, and Psychotherapy, with a thesis on Freud's subconscious and Surrealist poetry.

The anthology *Scratches and Deeper Wounds* is a vibrant mosaic of human experience, woven with threads of raw emotion, profound introspection, and piercing truth. It delves into the intricate, often unpredictable facets of life—directly and indirectly, metaphorically and philosophically, psychologically and ironically, with doses of sarcasm, pain, and an unavoidable inevitability.

To underscore the profound interconnectedness of these themes with human existence, the poet masterfully wields an array of literary and artistic devices, reminiscent of the great scholars and visionaries. Elements of metaphysics, surrealism, philosophy, psychology and existential issues intertwine seamlessly with irony, satire, banter, despair, and sensuality. Spirituality and socio-political exploitation stand side by side with meditations on logic, morality, primal urges, duality of life, and the insidious perils of modern science and religion. Hypocrisy is laid bare, all with an exquisite balance of aesthetic grace and striking subtlety.

While every poem holds a unique allure, I find myself particularly drawn to several that resonate with me most deeply, and each poem analyzed leaves an indelible mark on my psyche.

***Chthonian Vaults*-p. 9**, draws power from metaphysics, symbolism, and vivid imagery, exploring transformation, duality, and transcendence. It portrays a metaphysical journey of the self, intertwining sensuality, desire, and ambition with existential inquiry. Androgyny is depicted as a transformative force, compared to the allure of melting chocolate—symbolizing indulgence and surrender to the subconscious. The poem highlights the balance of opposites, embodied by yin and yang, suggesting harmony without loss or suffering. ***Logic's Thin Disguise*-p. 36**, is a surreal and philosophical exploration of illusion, control, passion, and the tension between beauty and destruction. The poem critiques logic, choice, and morality as artificial constructs that mask deeper existential forces. The idea that choice is merely "*logic's thin disguise*" suggests that free will may be an illusion. The poem is rich with contradictions—shadows "wear lipstick" to mask pity, and beauty both paralyzes and tempts toward destruction. The motif of the altar shifts from ecstasy to artistic sacrifice, highlighting the struggle between passion and intellectual pursuits. The "lost artist"



within the speaker embraces darkness over virtue, questioning moral binaries. As "flying archetypes" collide on the canvas, the poem reaches a climax of existential conflict, with self-expression as the only redemption.

Masks- p. 10, critiques the adaptable nature of human identity, exploring the ever-changing personas people adopt in response to societal pressures and personal insecurities. It portrays masks as facades crafted to navigate the world, offering temporary confidence while concealing vulnerabilities. This mask, however, is not permanent; it exists for the day, serving as a temporary shield against the world. It ultimately questions whether identity is ever authentic or merely a series of shifting disguises. The haunting query, "What will be your next disguise?" invites the reader to consider whether the cycle of masking is inescapable, leaving them to ponder the nature of identity itself—whether it is ever truly authentic or always a series of shifting facades.

Filtered Neon- p. 11, vividly portrays the gritty, atmospheric world of urban nightlife, blending sensuality, despair, and the transactional nature of human connections. Beneath the seductive glow of neon lights, fleeting desires and moral ambiguity define interactions, reducing them to primal urges and hollow exchanges. **Had Things Been Different-p.29**, is a poignant poem that explores themes of despair, alienation, and societal neglect. It follows the struggles of an unnamed boy, symbolizing vulnerability and lost potential, as he endures a harsh existence beneath a freeway overpass. The poem contrasts his quiet suffering with the indifference of the world around him, emphasizing the systemic failures that shape his tragic fate. His dreams of a better life—one that "might have led to university"—are overshadowed by hardship, broken family ties, and substance abuse. The final imagery of him surrendering to the harbor, likened to an autumn leaf, highlights both the devastation of his loss and the serenity of his release. Ultimately, the poem serves as a powerful critique of social apathy, urging reflection on those who slip unnoticed through society's cracks.

Lost Café-p. 62, laments the decline of intellectualism and authenticity in a world consumed by consumerism and superficiality. Set in a once-thriving café of philosophical debate and creative exchange, the poem contrasts the wisdom of Socrates with modern society's preference for profit over depth. The spirit of Socrates looms large—a symbol of the pursuit of truth and wisdom, yet this ideal is juxtaposed against the harsh realities of modern life, where thinkers are "shunned" and "dragged into bondage" by the mundane, profit-driven forces of multinational corporations and fast-food culture. The poem mourns the loss of meaningful discourse, where excellence is reduced to mediocrity and thinkers are cast aside. **Towards A Centre-p. 26**, explores thought, perception, and the merging of consciousness with technology. It captures the disorienting effects of modernity, where intuition clashes with logic, and identity dissolves into the digital realm. While its imagery is rich, rapid shifts between abstract reflections and cyberspace metaphors create a fragmented experience. The poem critiques technology's dehumanizing effects but overlooks its creative potential. Ultimately, *the poem* offers a vivid yet impressionistic meditation on digital existence, blending philosophical depth with rich imagery and philosophical undertones, though its abstract style sometimes challenge accessibility.

The Ultimate Metaphor-p. 16, critiques the commodification of life, death, and art, exposing parallels between consumerism, artistic pretension, and nature's exploitation. It opens in a slaughterhouse, where raw violence is sanitized and transformed into fashionable displays. The poem condemns the art world's aestheticization of suffering, mocking the wealthy patrons who mindlessly consume both meat and art. The "House of Slaughter" is clearly a grotesque metaphor for both the slaughterhouse and the gallery, where the obscenity of life and death is consumed alongside "cheese and crackers" and "wine splashes like urine." This imagery underscores the moral



detachment and desensitization fostered by consumer culture, where art and death are ironically repackaged for profit and entertainment and where Cyberspace offers a false escape, lulling the speaker with the assurance that "it's all right". ***Betrayal-p. 42***, is a scathing critique of political and societal corruption, exposing the hypocrisy of leaders who exploit and abandon the vulnerable and younger generations for personal gain and for pursuing their own self-interest. *It* is a powerful protest against systemic injustice, urging recognition of the humanity of the neglected. Ultimately, the poet challenges readers to confront these failures and recognize the humanity and dignity of the oppressed. A poignant focus is placed on the plight of the young, who are "forced to live in gutters, squats, and cardboard cut-outs." These vulnerable individuals, sharing "the air and blood" of their oppressors, embody a trust and hope that is repeatedly betrayed. The poem explicitly likens these betrayals to that of Judas, suggesting a profound violation of moral and ethical obligations. The "continual betrayal" enshrined in the "Chamber" evokes the systemic and institutionalized nature of this exploitation. ***The Guillotine-p. 53***, is a critique of humanity's self-inflicted destruction, symbolized by the guillotine. It reflects on technological and environmental recklessness, referencing nuclear disasters like Chernobyl. Ultimately, it serves as a warning, urging recognition of these consequences before irreversible global catastrophe occurs.

A Poet's Place-p. 61, reflects on the poet's diminishing relevance in a mechanized, desensitized world. It contrasts a nostalgic past of beauty and vitality with a present overshadowed by pollution and societal chaos. The poet's voice, once powerful, is now "muted" by an unfeeling "technocracy." The fragmented structure mirrors the futility of artistic expression, emphasizing alienation and despair. Ultimately, the poem mourns the poet's isolation and the loss of a society that once valued creativity and insight. ***Sandstone to Ink-p. 64***, explores the transformation of artistic expression as a sculptor, worn by time and physical strain, shifts from shaping stone to written word as physical limitations take their toll. The transition from sandstone to ink symbolizes adaptation, with "boiling blood" representing the unyielding artistic spirit. It also conveys the intensity and power of creative passion that persists, even as the medium changes. Ultimately, it is a tribute to the enduring power of creation, finding new forms of expression while remaining true to the essence of their vision even as the medium changes.

Plastic Cups-p. 15, depicts life as fragmented and uncertain, questioning morality, faith, and the pursuit of meaning. It also illustrates how individuals navigate—or fail to navigate—the complexities of existence while grappling with an underlying existential unease. ***Shooting the Breeze-p. 7***, is contemplative, introspective and symbolic in nature. It presents surreal reflection on existence, human behavior, and the absurdities and paradoxical nature of modern life by weaving together imagery of nature, human struggle, and the absurdities of modern life, simultaneously presenting a kaleidoscopic meditation on the fleeting nature of human existence and the search for meaning. ***Looking Towards Infinity-p. 58***, presents a philosophical meditation on the tension between human limitations and the transcendence found in confronting the infinite. ***Stones-p. 41***, highlights the tension between transience and permanence, as the speaker grapples with an inner compulsion for meaning. Ultimately, the stones become symbols of defiance against mortality, embodying strength and simplicity in contrast to human impermanence. The poem suggests that while human expression fades, steadfastness offers a lasting form of resistance against time.

The Man Who Would Be God-p. 47, critiques the hubris of unchecked scientific ambition, particularly in genetic engineering, portraying a dystopian future of mechanization and loss of humanity. The engineer, likened to a "pyramid," stands isolated in his pursuit, detached from human values. Through stark imagery and a foreboding tone, the poem questions the ethical boundaries of scientific progress, urging a balance between innovation and humanity. ***Doorways-p. 39***, critiques urban transformation, highlighting the alienation and nostalgia woven into city life. The final image



of drifting newspapers underscores the transient nature of existence, emphasizing the tension between history and modernity and also the ways in which history and modernity coexist, often uneasily, in the fabric of city life.

Epitaph for a Car-p. 23, serves as an allegorical critique of materialism, exploring the ways in which possessions can imprison rather than liberate. It critiques materialism, depicting possessions as restraints rather than sources of freedom. The poem advocates for rejecting materialism in favor of self-discovery, simplicity, and true liberation. ***Search for Reality-p. 18***, explores the elusive nature of truth and existence through a fragmented, spiraling structure. It also reflects the simultaneous expansion and dissolution of understanding, moving from abstract concepts to raw materiality. Ultimately, the poem critiques humanity's futile quest for absolute truth, despite its struggle to comprehend the infinite complexity of existence, illustrating the paradox of seeking meaning in an ever-shifting, chaotic reality. ***The Guillotine-p. 53***, is a critique of humanity's self-inflicted destruction, symbolized by the guillotine. It reflects on technological and environmental recklessness, referencing nuclear disasters like Chernobyl. Finally, it serves as a warning, urging recognition of these consequences before irreversible global catastrophe occurs.

Scratches and Deeper Wounds-p.66, is a poignant reflection on human vulnerability, temptation, and life on society's margins. The poem exposes the raw humanity of a group often dismissed by society, as their mourning "stains society's slate," highlighting collective responsibility for their suffering. The speaker's role as a silent observer underscores a sense of helplessness and existential questioning, leaving the reader to confront the underlying causes of this loss. It contrasts simple pleasures, like fresh bread and coffee, with the darker struggles of homelessness and addiction. The imagery of "scratches" becoming "deeper wounds" symbolizes a gradual descent into despair. The overdose of a young woman reveals the raw humanity of the often-overlooked, as grief momentarily shatters hardened exteriors. The poem critiques societal neglect, mourning lives lost to addiction and indifference while urging reflection on the deeper wounds that fuel these tragedies.

To be Human-p. 13, critiques humanity's growing dependence on technology. The poem is a poignant and critical exploration of the digital age's impact on identity, relationships, and autonomy. It warns of the dangers of technological dependence, the dehumanizing effects of virtual reality, and the unchecked power of those who control innovation. It contrasts the natural and artificial, questioning what it means to be human in an era where interaction is reduced to keystrokes and virtual experiences. The poet condemns Silicon Valley elites for fostering dependency and likens technology to a new form of religious devotion. The reference to "The Chip" as "God's new mask" symbolizes the near-religious reverence for technology and its creators. Ultimately, the poem warns against the dehumanizing effects of technology, urging reflection on the loss of authenticity and autonomy, and on what it truly means to be human in an increasingly artificial world. The poet subtly intertwines metaphysical and scientific imagery, and questions reality, likening the obsessive programmer to a god-like creator and presenting the Messiah as a digital entity rather than a physical being. He critiques institutional religion, portraying metaphysically the Messiah not as a physical being but as digital energy moving through cyberspace, thus critiquing institutional religion, particularly the authority of the Catholic Church, highlighting the shift from theological control to a technology-driven search for meaning.

Thus, Robert Maddox Harle has masterfully and poetically depicted the kaleidoscopic realities and vast spectrum of the world's bleakest landscapes with a rare artistic ingenuity that few contemporary writers can match. His keen observation, profound thought, and command over his chosen medium make him truly deserving of the highest accolades bestowed upon poets and writers.



As I conclude this humble review, I must share a personal note: it was both surprising and heartening to encounter someone like Rob Maddox Harle—an exceptional writer who graciously penned a brilliant Preface for my poetry anthology *Convolutions* and gifted me his poetry collection *Scratches and Deeper Wounds* solely for my enjoyment, without any expectation of reciprocation. This generosity is rare today, as most writers exchange books with implicit requests for reviews or critiques to further their own work. Yet Robert, a brilliant, yet low-profile creative genius from Australia, simply wanted me to enjoy his work. However, as I immersed myself in his work, I was so captivated by its depth and brilliance that I felt compelled—without solicitation—to write about it. My hope is to bring well-deserved attention to this literary masterpiece and affirm that a talent of Rob’s caliber unquestionably merits global recognition—even, perhaps, a Nobel Prize.

By,
Dr Dalip Khetarpal,
Author, poet, critic, editor, columnist,
Former academician and administrator,
Email: dalipkpal@gmail.com
And: khetarpal441@gmail.com